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Ukrainian Art - the Old People and  
the New People

[2.221 words]

Ukraine



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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

## Oleg Sydor-Gibelinda

### Ukrainian Art - the Old People and the New People

The relationship of succession existing between the art of the Socialist Realism and that of the Ukrainian Postmodernism isn't just of a chronological nature. The last school, born at the decline of the Empire, has also inherited many peculiarities of its official culture. One of reasons for it was the system of academic education which was fated to perform a long session of the *ideological irradiation* for many painters of the *New Wave*. It is not also unimportant for the Ukrainian situation that many of these painters, such as A. Savadov, I. Chichkan, D. Fishchenko, descend from families of the *Soviet art nobility*. It is no wonder that with all pathos of the *new forms* the policy of the contemporary art remains analogous to that of the Soviet time. "On the foreground, there is a name, a status and political abilities..."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, what time is it told about? About the Stagnation? Or about the *Independence*?

Traditional opposing of the Socialist Realism to the Postmodernism according to the principle of final and drastic change of one language for another really and truly suit both parts. For *the Old People*, it is convenient not to notice *the New People* interpreting artifacts of the Postmodernism as a *non-art*. For *the New People*, it is also convenient from time to time and quite symbolically to slight the culture of the *Old People*, which in actual fact gave them strikingly much. It was repeatedly mentioned that the Ukrainian art of the years 1970s and of the first half of the years 1980s which as it was went short of Underground events lacked the Conceptualism and the Soc-art either. Ilya Kabakov, born in Dnepropetrovsk, dissolved very quickly in the cultural context of Moscow (further - that of the West) and never exhibited in his motherland; *Ukrainian* allusions in his creative work

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<sup>1</sup> Stukalova, Kateryna. Art life in Kyiv. Kovcheg (Ark), # 10(21), 1996, P.3.

are extremely incidental and inconsiderable in number. Presence of Ukrainian family names in his famous *The Slop-Pail Taking Out Schedule* (1980) is the same distant from our true reality (though it is in its own way significant) as the landscape of Kanev in his work *Hallo, the Morning of Our Country* (1981)<sup>2</sup>. And the photographer from Kharkov, Boris Mikhailov, who could not avoid neither comparison with A. Rodchenko nor praises for *dismantling the Soviet myth*<sup>3</sup>, was shown to inhabitants of the Ukrainian capital only being already at the zenith of his creative work and with the consent of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art at the end of 1996.

Thus, such a situation obliged the generation of the *New Wave* to speed up creative experiments, urged on to the long-expected appropriation of the formerly ignored heritage of the official Soviet art in the light of ironic preparation. But in Ukraine it happened in a different way than in Moscow; and the reason was not only certain difference in genetic nature. The painters whose program *début* took place during the exhibition *The Youth of the Country* (Kiev, 1987) were fated to create in the time coinciding with the youth of quite another country - Ukraine and not the USSR - that set other *rules of the game*.

Strictly speaking, the images of the Soviet myth were not so numerous in works of Ukrainian Postmodernists (e.g., *The Former USSR Railways System Reconstruction Plan* of Yury Solomko, 1993). It is more frequently that *outsiders* and marginal people (Tartakovskiy Jr., *The Soviet People Crossing the Red Sea*), whose position smacks very frequently of doom and exotic of Perestroika, resort to them. One of a few pure Socialist-artistic gestures was described in Sergey Bratkov's text: the hoaxed epistolary to one of his fellows of the artistic corporation on behalf of the late Zhdanov and Zhdanov's pioneers waiting for a painting to be given as a present was taken adequately, that is to say with fear and quivering<sup>4</sup>.

One can extend the list of examples, but very few of them shall give us necessary *purity of genre*. There was not so much irony in them as one should expect, but still it was. Certainly, Aleksandr Druganov's freakish collage *Mex Mon Veneris* (1997), as the author confessed, was created on the basis of the idiotic Russian-English Phrase-Book prepared for the Olympic games in Moscow (1980); but a bunch of associations it provokes

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<sup>2</sup> Wallach A. Ilya Kabakow. The man who never threw anything away. NY, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Kuzma, Marta. Instigation and Revealmnt: Mechanisms in Boris Mihailov's Photography (Excerpts from Boris Mihailov catalogue printed by the Porticus Gallery, 1995). Booklet of personal exhibition. Kyiv, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> 'Apology' project (manifests, statements, monologues). Kyiv, "Kurier muz", 1996, p.3.

stands opposite to its genealogical source. An entirely different matter is the classic picture of the Kyiv Postmodernism - Oleg Golosiy's *The Psychedelic Attack of Blue Rabbits* (1990) - whose composition is based on that of the episode called *psychological attack of the White Guard officers* in the not less classic film of the brothers Vasilyev *Chapayev*<sup>5</sup>. Only at first sight, one may claim libertarianism of its picturesque image: irony here neighbors secret reverence for the myth. And the last, most likely, prevails.

An assumption that is not very risky: *the New People* (the Postmodernism) maintain traditions of *the Old People* (the Socialist Realism). But, first, *the Old People* were not eager to hand down anything; so, the act was an odd combination of initiation for one party and expropriation for another. Second, *the New People* could not hold it on: as soon as at the beginning of the years 1990s, a new process began in the *New Wave* art; the critic Olexander Soloviov was very much to the point to call it the *Depicturezation*. But at the beginning - since the middle of the years 1980s - the Big Picture was rehabilitated and legitimized by *the New People*, and tenth of brilliant canvas of A. Savadov, G. Senchenko, O. Golosiy, O. Hnilitsky, V. Trubina, P. Kerestey, O. Roytburd were born. It is much easier to give up the spirit of Soviet emperiality by word of mouth than to do it actually. Covering with images of the old culture, Yury Solomko repeated (without knowing it) the gesture of the Soviet money-masters who joined the two Hemispheres with the sign of sickle and hammer.

The group exhibition *Bred in the Bone* (1996) held in the Gallery of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art was relevant in the context of cultural reflections from the Soviet art of the years 1930s through 1950s, and another exhibition held in the same year in the Ukrainian House - *Commodity Fetishism* - openly took its name from *The Capital* of Karl Marx. The Heroic Canon was once (in 1988) declared by O. Hnilitsky, and genealogy of the famous *Cleopatra's Grief* (1987) of Savadov and Senchenko can easily be traced to the images of Velásquez and as well to those of the Soviet (including Kiev) monumental and propagandist sculpture<sup>6</sup>. There is only one step between the great and the little, the giant and the chamber: it isn't quite accidental that in his well-known text the critic Konstantin Akinsha draws a parallel between Oleg Golosiy's frights and drawing at the Soviet magazines *Murzilka* and *Koster*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Sydor-Hibelynda, Oleh. Death of the Hero. Art line, # 2, 1997, P.25.

<sup>6</sup> Sydor-Hibelynda, Oleh. Zaratustra's Sorrow. Art line, # 7-8, 1998, P.72.

<sup>7</sup> Akinsha, Konstantin. Wreath on Grave of the Ukrainian Postmodernism. Typescript, 1990

The Postmodernism of Ukraine exploited even more gladly not the Socialist Realism as it was but the reality it generated and supported, beginning from the Soviet way of life up to the Soviet mass culture. The last proved to be especially attractive. Oleg Tistol and a group of his comrades-in-arms (in certain times - Konstantin Reunov, Marina Skugareva, Mykola Matsenko) were carrying out the thesis of the *struggle for the beauty of stereotype* on the territory that was earlier in Moscow chosen by the Soc-art but without any feeling of due delight and naïve neophyte's joy. A packet of cigarettes *Kazbek* or interior of a provincial snack bar could serve as a material.

In this way, the juvenile and infantile sexuality, that is a core of most of Olexander Hnilitsky's canvas, can be better understood in the context of the desires of a teenager subjected to sexual repressions who is at the same time possessed by the aggression of experiment.

But besides arbitrary and too demonstrative parallels, cardiogram of the new art development has repeated in a distorted perverted manner the Socialist Realism Nome design. One couldn't see here full synchronism, but problems were similar. Monumental projects of Tistol-Matsenko correlate with practice of monumental propaganda in the first years of revolution. Outburst of the *Luccul's feasts* held by painters (a cake shaped as the Tower of Babel - Vasyl Tsagolov's performance *One May Eat What One Can Eat* (1993), *Secrete Supper*, organized in 1995 by the Blank Art Gallery on account of the gallery owner's birthday where 12 authors participated) makes remember I. Mashkov's *gastronomic still lifes* created in the lean years 1920s. Conceptual collages of husband and wife Kopystyansky illustrate non even the Social Realism but the art of the first years of the Soviet Power : "spoiling of ... product (the Classic Art - *O.S.-G.*) results in origin of something new, that, nevertheless, still is an art"<sup>8</sup>. The same processes were in progress in the years 1918-20s in monumental sculpture and in agitation placards where expressiveness means of works of the past were used.

*The Depicturezation* of the years 1990s repeats almost verbatim the ideology of the *industrial art* of the years 1920s. "As a matter of fact, artist is going to ... dissolve in the stream of industrial production"<sup>9</sup> - these Vasiliy Tsagolov's words quite could be repeated by any young radical from the circle of Rodchenko, El Lisitsky or L. Popova (comp.: "A painter became an

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<sup>8</sup> Tupitsyn M, V. Interview with S. and I. Kopystyansky. Flash Art (russian issue), #1, 1989, p.119, 120

<sup>9</sup> Tsagolov V. I am not the artist anymore. 'Mazepa'. Project's booklet. Kyiv, 1995, p.5

organizer of spontaneous activities... he became in his own way industrial..."<sup>10</sup>.

As to the thematic picture of the years 1930-50, the Postmodernism didn't come to it at all, but began with it having later on declined it for new technologies, video and performances.

At the same time, Illya Chichkan in his series of photographs in 1998 resorted to the athletic pathos of the years 1930s and to the theme of body training (and not its dissolution and disappearance as in the Vanguard of the years 1920s or in the early Postmodernism). The process of *the new man* creation was fixed by the psychedelics Ivan Tsupka and Natalya Golibroda (the themes of health-improvement gymnastics, wonder airplane). *The Perfect Happiness* - this could be not only the name of Golibroda's picture but of all the Soviet mythology of the years 1930-50s, where the palm-tree environment was equivalent to subtropical side-scenes of a Crimea health resort that was nearly a picture of the Eden for the Soviet man. Finely, *Deepinsider* (1998) of Arsen Savadov and Olexander Kharchenko synthesizes and at the same time discriminates against two fundamental Soviet myths - the myth of *the best in the world ballet* and that of *the most industrious in the world miners*, a mixture of famous Soviet films: *The Big Life* and *Anna Pavlova*.

In conclusion, we can add only the following: there is no more of succession between two cultural tendencies (one being a fact of history and the other - an uncertain present) than of distinction. The Postmodernism is drawn even not to the Cosmopolitanism but to the pro-Westernism - the Socialist Realism always condemned *cringing to the West*. The Postmodernism is individualistic a priori (though it manifests itself in the form of collective actions) while the majority of personal exhibitions of Social-realistic painters look like links of one large chain and the word *collective* is noted down to their *Church Calendar*. The Postmodernism in its Ukrainian variant tried to be ironic. The Socialist Realism wasn't able to achieve it. The Postmodernism makes no secret of its eclecticism, the Socialist Realism disguises it thoroughly. The Postmodernism is importunately erotic - the Socialist Realism has sublimated its own sensuality into other spheres.

But as one can distinguish traits of the father-patriarch in those of his prodigal son so *the young wolves* are recognized heirs of the Socialist-realistic dynasties right off. It is queer, but even opponents of the

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<sup>10</sup> Arvatov, B. Art and Classes. Moscow-Petrograd, 1923, p.83

conception witness it: "Now is ... spread such a point of view that the Kiev painters' Transvanguard picture is none other than a werewolf of a Socialist-realistic picture, while one may admit something like this only having admitted Freudian *patricide*"<sup>11</sup>.

And the last counter-quotation: "Ukraine's liberation of the depressing Oedipus complex"<sup>12</sup> - confirms that it is the very thing *the new people* fight making every good use of *the old people*: as a raw material, as a push for meditation, as a topical motive... Only not as a cause of anxiety.

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<sup>11</sup> Solovyov, Olexander. On the ways of depicturization. *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* (Art magazine), # 1, 1993, P.15

<sup>12</sup> Podolchak, Igor. Art-liberation. 'Kiyiv art meeting' exhibition's catalogue. Kyiv, 1995, p.38.