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In the Twilight of Postmodernism

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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.

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.

Olexandr Solovyov

In the Twilight of Postmodernism

“Postmodernism is dying - which way to go next?” - this phrase is taken from the preamble to the article by M. Bradberry “The world after funeral repast” published in September of 1990 in the British “Guardian”¹. Such statement, which is quite typical nowadays, may have both adherents and, naturally, opponents. They can be reconciled by the tense in which the verb “to die” is used here - the Present Continuous. It is used as if to emphasize a non-single-instant character, duration of the process of wasting away, disappearance. Indeed, Postmodernism, existing in the visual form in which it has taken shape to date, has lost its topicality, but still, it would be quite wrong or even premature to speak of its exhaustion in respect to methodology. Because Postmodernism is, first of all, a paradigm of artistic consciousness, and in this sense, it cannot perish in a trice. According to T. Kuhn, the author of the concept of “paradigm”, one should always distinguish several stages, related to paradigm, namely: the pre-paradigm stage, preceding formation of a paradigm, the stage of supremacy of the paradigm, and finally, the stage of crisis and change of paradigms, transition from one to another. Perhaps, this last stage endures, is being experienced the present day. That is, there is direct evidence of the situation when Postmodernism “is departing this life”. Decay, coming of decadence, which is being increased - by analogy, traditionally - by the moods of “the end of century”, are becoming some kind of “modus vivendi” of this “life to death”. A Postmodernist situation had arisen in Ukraine with an appreciable delay, when symptoms of a transavant-garde pictorial art, its academization and degeneration into salon manifested in the world art more and more often. When there had already been a reaction to, if it might be put so, a

¹ Misiano V. Underground is yesterday. And what's today? - Dekorativnoye iskusstvo SSSR (Decorative art of the USSR), No.10, 1990, p.22

(neo-)romantic (neo-)expressionist canon by way of appearance of “new geometry” (“neo-geo”), when simulationism had already been formed and wanted to fall out neither with Modernism nor with Postmodernism. This is what renders the Ukrainian situation paradoxical, but this is what renders it naturally determined as well, bearing in mind the eternal confused character of the phased development of our art with regard to the art in the whole world. In the same way, this is what makes its specificity, which is able to give rise to interest in the phenomenon having suddenly come into being. Joining “a new wave” in the new Ukrainian pictorial art was coming about half-blindly, by hearsay, half-deliberately (which gave the Moscow critic A. Kovalev the occasion to call the phenomenon “an accidental” variant of Postmodernism) and coincided, on the one hand, with destruction of Socialist realism, the stratum of which was especially considerable in Ukraine, with liberation, in this connection, of consciousness, its radicalization, also because of disappearance of the former safety-valve, i.e. the possibility to be half-conformist, balancing on the verge between officiousness and “second culture”. The point is that in the 1960s-80s in Ukraine except for Odessa and some names, there was no such ramified non-conformist art, “second culture”, underground as there were, for example, in Moscow or Leningrad. As a rule, those artists, who did not participate in officiousness, concentrated on purely national problems, which had assumed some kind of nostalgic romanticizing colouring. Many things, which attracted interest in the Ukrainian art of those years, existed as though on the junction of the permitted moderate leftism and the forbidden Modernism - such “legal opposition” developed mainly in the channel of the so-called “art of the youth”.

On the other hand, this joining had coincided with decentralization of the world artistic culture, obeying to “the will to cognize the unknown” (J.-F. Lyotard) in the name of its renovation. This resulted in removal of many obstacles, biases, stereotypes in interrelation between such concepts as “center”, “metropolis” and “periphery”, “the provinces”, “marginalia”. However, one should not, probably, overestimate the processes of such decentralization either: a lot of things keep on conforming to the statuses which have already been established, first of all - to the market ones, - and to the same biases. The reason why the Postmodernist orientation towards “radical eclecticism” had found a fertile ground in Ukraine may partially be explained by the fact, that during all their history the Ukrainian culture and art were notable for openness, receptivity to blending of styles, national cultures, artistic languages (true, quite often it was a compelled openness - from non-liberty). That is, it is a matter of some kind of a through national eclectic tradition.

It is necessary to designate a number of other features, departing in their origin both from the general and the specific.

“New generation” of the Ukrainian pictorial art is based on the same philosophical and aesthetic premises as the new generations in the contemporary art on the whole. In truth, as it is said in the First Epistle of Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “and all ate the same spiritual food” (I Cor., 10:3). It is certainly existentialism, but more likely, of course, post-structuralism (including its precursor - structuralism) with almost always invariable composition of Frenchmen and Americans, Dzen-Daoist East, J.-L. Borges, mannerism, already mentioned “new expressiveness”, for the Ukrainian artists - less in its North (German) or American variant and more appreciably (which is hardly surprising) - in the Mediterranean, Italian variant (in this respect the artists called into being by A. Bonito Oliva, the father of “transavant-garde”, turned out to be particularly kindred: F. Clemente, E. Cuchi, M. Paladino, S. Chia, A. Longobardi...)

“Text” instead of “work of art”, “Author’s death” (which was documented, as is generally known, by R. Barthes as far back as 1968), “victim of quality”, deconstruction, simulation gesture, mass media, quasi-myth, “break”, emptiness - here are some of the most frequently used concepts of the vocabulary of that special metalanguage, on which there are based the general problems of artistic consciousness of the generation living under conditions of still increasing “semantic catastrophe” (A. Bonito Oliva), in consequence of which the language of arts is doomed to lose its traditional significance.

The main distinguishing feature of the world outlook of the “new Ukrainian wave” seems to be a rather natural amalgam of some kind of heavenly eschatologism and earthly hedonism, where the dominant in this amalgam is sensual-earthy all the same. Hence follows a genetic non-disappearance of the interest in poetic nature of the pictorial plasticity, but as it was noted, with correction for the proclaimed “universal contempt for the category of “artistic quality”. Hence follows a distrust towards framings and implications having a specific verbal nature, towards discourse on which, for instance, the Moscow postmodernist conceptualism is growing. It should be mentioned, that Ukraine neither formerly was nor at present is burdened by conceptual fetters, except for Odessa, natives of which had formed (and it is no mere chance) the main body of the group (at present - the Moscow group) “Medical hermeneutics”. Social art had failed to develop in Ukraine, here its poorly concealed social, or even political appeal

had undergone an unconcealed "reaction of rejection". Performances, actions were not widely spread, and if to take on a broader scale - neither was the life-art on the whole, Up to now such kinds of creative activity (relating more to its "cold line") as object, installation (having crowded picture, plane almost everywhere) had not become popular in the Ukrainian postmodernist milieu. Even if these latter appeared (occasionally) and appear (more and more often), then, as a rule, in the works of the artists having joined the Moscow situation one way or another (I. and S. Kopystiansky, K. Reunov and O. Tistol, G. Vysheslavsky, the same members of "Medical hermeneutics" group). Though the elements of a certain "concept without concept", begotten by the former "conceptual deficit", allusions to the volume which does not break with plane, scarcely spatialness (in the works of O. Hnilitsky, O. Golosiy, D. Kavsan. V. Tsagolov) and even a marshaled, more manifest and impressive system formed of these elements (in the recent works of O. Roytburd, A. Savadov and G. Senchenko) may also be interpreted not only as peculiar hybrid responses to the prevailing tendencies in the art. However, till recently the "transavant-garde Ukraine" attracted all eyes owing to its adherence to the "hot line", being a keeper-bearer of the vital yeast, neo-baroque world attitude (this stratum, side by side with its antipode - a Byzantinizing one - is very traditional in the Ukrainian art very valuable for it), and because of irrational and, at the same time, material-brutal pictorial element, heightened sensuousness, a kind of unusually copious, generous - "meat" mentality (as S. Anufriev, one of the members of the "Medical hermeneutics" group, had figuratively expressed). Another distinctive token is the disposition of the young Ukrainian postmodernists towards a figurative version of painting art, "pictureness" of thinking. Their paintings are endowed with a distinct sense of grand-style, the genesis of which many people are trying to look for in a gala "subject-topical painting" (as its "werewolf"), in which Ukraine was so successful during the long years of prosperity of socialist realism, and not in the attractive (and certainly, more attractive than socialist realism) strength of general tendencies of the world art.

From the geographical point of view postmodernism in Ukraine is concentrated mainly in Kiev (A. Savadov, G. Senchenko, O. Hnilitsky, O. Golosiy, V. Trubina, D. Kavsan. V. Tsagolov, L. Vatryvanov, V. Rayevsky; artists, having joined the group "Volitional verge of the national post-eclecticism": K. Reunov, O. Tistol, Ya. Bystrova, O. Kharchenko) and in Odessa (O. Roytburd, V. Riabchenko, S. Lykov, Ye. Nekrasova, S. Martynchik, I. Stepin). And in some manifestations - in Lviv (I. and S. Kopystianskiys, R. Zhuk, I. Golikov), Uzhgorod (P. Kerestey), Mykolayiv (A. Markitan, V. Pokidanets).

One of the peculiarities of the creative thinking of contemporary artists - and the Ukrainian ones are not an exception - is conception of the art as a mirror of art, resulting in an extensive reference to the quotations: "Our destiny has left us nothing but quotations" (J.-L. Borges), and to tokens of the world artistic practice, to the play with cultural meanings and values, which represents them not hardened, but prone to "eternal fluctuations" (F. Nietzsche), rerecording, other reading. In many respects such quotationness is based on the central concept of Poststructuralism - deconstruction, which displaces meanings, makes their understanding extremely complicated, calls in question any truth being contained in any statement, gesture, token, in one word - which opens the temptation of abyss of liberty, the intoxicating prospect of never reaching the bottom. It is noteworthy that the contemporary artists use or, as it is accepted to say, appropriate not so much separate elements, fragments, structures of one or another work of a classic or a contemporary (though it is often played up as before), as the whole work or several ones at once, as I. Kopystiansky often does. Of course, such appropriation requires a certain compensation for the seeming "parasitizing", "vampirism" in the form of at least some part of author's "participation as unconcern" (since according to the conditions he ought to remain dead), for which purpose, in this case, serves the found, but well-hidden counterpoint.

Thus, in the painting "Cleopatra's sorrow" which was painted by A. Savadov and G. Senchenko in 1989 and from which, in many respects, the counting of the postmodernist time had started in Ukrainian time zone, the ironical distancing in respect to the "Portrait of Prince Carlos Baltasar" by Velasquez, though its absurdization and simulation cannot fail to point out the intertextual nature (J. Kristeva) of a new space having come into existence, when the inevitable presence of previous texts does not allow any new text to consider itself to be autonomous and its functioning is possible only in the conceptual-associative field of culture, nevertheless there and then they provoke and forget about the primary source, dooming to seek for (but never to find) some sense outside the bounds - on the other side of the obviousness.

On the face of it, G. Senchenko uses in the painting "Sacral landscape of Peter Bruegel" a usual Postmodernist method, when he transfers (as it may seem - without any shadow of confusion) the small Bruegel's drawing "Bee-keepers" onto the canvas of a big size, but even if there is a deeply hidden irony here, it is not the clue, however, the clue is concealed somewhere else. Therefore, it seems to be worth listening to the author's

opinion on that score: "In this picture the classical problem of deconstruction is solved not in the traditional way of establishing of a new boundary of meanings through demolition of the existing one. I was rather possessed by the desire to experience the boundaries of existence through description of meanings. To feel - at the cost of revealing the limits of experience - the birth of the permanently enduring moment of transgressive transfer to "the different", the cyclic recurrence of which is connected with the doom of discursive attempts: through the author's simulation to profanation of a graphic gesture, self-removal of the image, and then - to the very source of the expressive act. To the non-objective reality, where, properly speaking, any discursive possibilities are broken, to the place, where such less reliable values as firmness of spirit, taste for risk, noble trust in nobility come into force".

Nice and terrifying debility of the so-called "childish discourse", "a toy" flatness of as if fragmentary and as if integral spatial look, and aloof quasi-pictorial art, where "paint by yourself" principle and reproduction pseudo-colouristic deepness get along together, - these are the means of "displacement of meanings" in the works of O. Hnilitsky, "Vatto. Children's dance".

Many canvases of D. Kavsan ("Am I Susanna?", "Heraldry of sound", "Dwarfs", "Curtsey") in which, as it befits "a orthodox" postmodernist, he quotes the paintings of rococo, Boucher, Delacroix, bear an echo of some profaned retro-colourism, when as if genuine "antique" and "beautiful" painting masks the absence of the true meaning.

V. Tsagolov in the work "Millet has nothing to do with it", which consciously retains generic signs of the painting, and at the same time loses them in the name of some, as if conceptualized "unidentified object", managed, while combining two quotations from the Millet's paintings "Gatherers of ears" and "Angelus" into one situation, to make its appearance both self-sufficingly evident, corporeal, and sufficiently chimerical, false, and managed to let the quotations be imperceptibly transformed into the quality, different from the quotational. Recognizable - not simply borrowed quotations, called to accustom to the cultural-eclectic manipulation - but the proper body of the painting which seems to be open to the visual text-archives, but in fact - making reference to nowhere.

As truly remarked by V. Miziano, for some time past many Soviet artists of postmodernist orientation "concentrate on the personal artistic universums, created by them. Exterior problematization turns into the principles of interior structuring. Now, every creative gesture turns out to be burdened by realization of its initial course. Construction of a new level of a personal

universum is, at the same time, coming down to its fundamental's principles. Its natural orientation to self-disclosure assumes concentration on itself - self-reflection and self-unmasking. In other words, existence of these personal universums comes from and comes to acknowledgement of its own relativity. There, existence becomes firmly established through non-existence. Obviously, such creative prospect is both a symptom and outcome of the state of weightlessness. It conditions, in particular, a corresponding "poetics of weightlessness"²

Something similar is observed in the Ukrainian postmodernist milieu as well. Here are the sources of necro-aesthetics having its "Hippocratic face", which bears no resemblance to the Leningrad necro-realists, though, and beginning of V. Tsagolov's idea of profanation, self-disappearance. Here are the motives of O. Hnilitsky's wish to go away, as he says "to a soft death, green, pleasant", and not in regard to the final strategy in general, but in regard to the permanent apocalyptic character of each concrete work. But there is something different in the air. The same O. Hnilitsky, preferring "a slight gesture" in his recent works ("To feed the kitten", "Flowers-murderers", "Birth of Pinocchio"), is already integral - in his self-destroying motion he manages to create the very personal universum of existence, self-valuable integral "milieu of ruins", which seems to be reposing, but it is stuffed with an inner in bomb of absurd. The similar things occur in the recent projects of A. Savadov and G. Senchenko, who are prone, on the contrary, to "a fundamental gesture", and naturally, to a greater quantity (hence a different quality) of a hidden "trotyl". In the process of language destruction these artists, going different ways, come very closely to realization ... of the necessity of language. And what is more - the necessity of style.

In conclusion, it seems very important to draw attention to the following idea of B. Groys, concerning interpretation of postmodernism, more precisely - to its misrepresented essence: "By many people, particularly in the Soviet Union, postmodernism is falsely understood as a free, easy and ironical play with ready styles and quotations, as eclecticism, as giving up the clearly formulated aesthetics, etc. However, the essence of postmodernism consists exclusively in formulation, in theory and by means of the art, of scepticism with respect to the avant-garde scepticism, that is, in the scepticism of the second degree, being expressed in the reflection concerning exterior cultural conditions of socratic-avant-garde position. All the rest

² Groys, B. About use of theory for art. - Literaturnaya gazeta (Literary gazette), No.44, 1990, p.5

serves only as means for such reflection. Nowhere else, but here lies the boundary between the avant-garde and post-avant-garde"³.

In this context the following question looks quite natural: Is the third degree scepticism inevitable? Or, as the same B. Groys writes in his other article, what we come across more often is that a classical problem of opposition and difference is replaced by the problem of a fundamental indifference, and we enter a really pluralistic epoch, where it is extremely anachronistic to speak of artistic process (modernistically linear or post-modernistically cyclic), since instead of this we have no process as such, but a system of art so much dynamic as metaphysical. Things being as they are, the same postmodernism is, so to say, no longer the latest word of the world art (the word which everybody has to say sooner or later), but it is only one of the elements of that distotalized system, when, in truth, "everyone gets one deserts", when indeed, nothing new amazes any longer, because nobody is waiting for this new in the form of some global will, mentality, submitting to and determining the tastes, by definition - state of lack of will, and at the same time - will, as an absolute liberty, will suit everybody. Will it?

Miziano V. Underground is yesterday. And what's today? - Dekorativnoye iskusstvo SSSR (Decorative art of the USSR), No.10, 1990, p.22

³ Groys, B. Eternal return of novel. - Iskusstvo (Art), No.10, 1989, p.2