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Fatal Strategies

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Russia



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

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.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

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.

Viktor Misiano

Fatal Strategies

There has been a methodology for describing the latest phenomena in Russian art by correlating them with the Soviet past. Actuality in general was considered devoid of its own essence and only able to acquire it as reflected light: through its opposition to the epoch whose integrity had taken decades to create. However, eventually even this last descriptive model exhausted its resources. The hyper-intensive, catastrophic, convulsive activity of recent years definitively relegated the recent past to the sphere of history, and plunged consciousness into a time continuum that lacked any apparent continuity or a clear perspective. What we have now is a society in collapse, in which the existence of art lacks the slightest *raison d'être*, a culture with broken lines of communication, and an intellectual community in which the props of conventional values are missing. What we have, in fact, is a being who has lost its senses. Russian art today is the sum of individual efforts, rather than a self-articulating process of inner dialogue. Now more than ever, Russian philosopher Nicolai Berdiayev was right when he said many years ago that "to be an intellectual in Russia is a moral feat".

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All the same, if we apply a typological scheme, we can single out three basic strategies that underlie the most marked individual poetics on the Moscow art scene. The first strategy has a deliberately conservative, protective character. It is based on the presumption of a complete divorce between the tradition of the past (that is, the tradition of underground conceptualism) and senseless topicality. As a result, only the facts that exist and are created within the tradition may claim to be meaningful. Consequently, the only possible language is the language of tradition, and, conversely, the only existing tradition is the one described in the texts of the tradition, and the only possible texts are those that serve to maintain and

protect the tradition. Still, the core problem is that the job of preserving tradition is contrary to the essence of the tradition itself. Preserving certain values is a positive and constructive goal, whereas the underground tradition cultivated oppositional values, namely the deconstruction of official ideology and its texts. There are two solutions to this seeming contradiction.

The first solution, suggested by **Vadim Zakharov**, is that the method will become exhausted by the force of eliminating the object of deconstruction. However, this by no means implies actualising the opposite method, reconstruction, for that would mean actualising a positive perspective, that is, reinterpreting the texts of tradition. A new interpretation means placing the texts outside the tradition, and plunging them into the sphere of meaninglessness, while, in fact, significance is inherent in the texts. That is, their value is the mere fact of their existence, and even the process of collecting and storing them is significant. In other words, creative activity is likened to collecting and the artist - to archivist.

This mission is as dramatic as it is doomed. The archives are not being compiled for the future, because the future does not exist: the significance of the archives ends along with the bearers of the tradition. Nor are the archives collected for public access – either in the mass media or at exhibitions, because everything that lies outside tradition, outside the limited circle of followers (the so-called “NOMA”), is deprived of meaning. The poetics of recording is best realised in an authors' magazine with limited circulation (“Pastor”). It is not inclined to use conventional language: communication within the tradition is carried out in a hermetic jargon that can only be understood by those initiated into the tradition. Quite logically, the objects of recording can be facts from both past and present: any event taking place within the tradition has only the reverse perspective. Naturally, the poetics of recording the tradition is the most consistent form of the existence of the tradition: the subject and object of recording are identical.

In turn, the protective poetics of the group “**Medical Hermeneutics**” tried to preserve the method of deconstruction for several reasons. The first was purely pragmatic: deconstruction, which proved so effective in opposing official ideology, could now guard tradition from external danger. It is not enough to simply reduce everything that lies outside the tradition; on the contrary, it is necessary to watch this sphere closely, to analyse it, to prevent the danger inherent in it. Thus, the rationalist civilisation of the West, the aggressive vitality of post-communist Russia, the official art of

the Soviet past and the latest trends on the Moscow art scene are equally subjected to deconstruction. Being able to recognise phenomena from the outside world is a matter of tactics: it helps maintain the authority of the tradition, its influence and power. So it seems expedient not to give up outside representation: special methods have to be devised to make the tradition's texts work in the external environment. They have to be adapted in order to be understood and in conformance with the stereotypes and demands of the profane world. The ability to manipulate the sphere outside tradition helps to veil its sacral meaning even better.

There is also a purely orthodox reason for persisting with deconstructive procedures: they are tradition's holy of holiest, and if they are abandoned, tradition ceases to exist. That is why in this new situation, it is necessary not only to maintain deconstruction, but to make it total and self-sufficient as well. The poetics of "Medical Hermeneutics" then serves to uncover the mere procedure of dismantling the discourse, regardless of what kind of text catches its eye: mass kitsch or orthodox theology. As a result, in the very core of this self-sufficient deconstructive mill, there is a point of absolute rest, the point of "polar inertia" of meaning. Thus, in its innermost core the conservationist poetics of "Medical Hermeneutics" becomes open to the object of its opposition - to the sphere of external meaninglessness.

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The second of the major strategies on the Moscow scene is defined by the opposite vector: it does not want to preserve the past, but on the contrary, to surrender completely to the convulsive emergence of the present. It is not burdened by the intrinsic lack of meaning in actuality and compensates through an overabundance of vitality and aggressiveness. The sphere of attention of this strategy is confined to a highly archaic notion of "reality", to whose rehabilitation a number of leading Moscow artists have dedicated their efforts.

For two of them, **Anatoli Osmolovski** and **Alexander Brenner**, reality is that sphere of being that was exposed in the course of the disintegration of strict ideological ties. The dimensions of reality are immeasurable, and its ownership is not fixed. That is why it must be taken and privatised with the same aggression and greed as in today's Russia, which is privatising the immeasurable and non-fixed so-called "people's property". Appropriating reality calls for basic procedures, far distant from sophisticated recording and deconstruction. In general, reality cannot be subjected to deconstruction, for its nature is not textual. It existed before text, before

discourse. Followers of reality have nothing to put in the archives: they have no predecessors, no tradition and they have to break entirely new ground.

Realisation in the sphere of the present entails a revival of representation. Moreover, the poetics of reality, representation, is not a means (as it is for "Medical Hermeneutics"), but a goal: this poetics can only realise itself in representation, as its nature is exhibitionist, sometimes quite literally. In this situation, representation takes on "strong gestures" and "shock effects". Since reality lacks meaning, it can only be acquired in the act of self-realisation of a heroic personality. When activity is carried out in the absence of meaning, the only motivation is the valorisation of one's own creation process. This accounts for the characteristic apologists of the future, of anything new, as well as for the cultivation of success and career by its followers. When programmed careerism meets spontaneous vitality, it takes the form of exalted individualism, filled with desperation and paranoia.

This in turn gives birth to continual conflict-mongering, to the impulsive desire for "all-out war", as well as to an instinctive desire to find support in an extrapersonal, unconditional instance. As a result, the poetics of reality takes on the shape of a programme, marked by such ideologemes as "revolution" (Osmolovski) or "people's democracy" (Brenner). These ideologemes are devoid of any objective justification. Who can speak of revolution when there isn't the slightest basis for it? Can one really believe in the spirit of a people that has been subjected to decades of systematic terror? What else can these notions be but recycled products, phantasms, returned from their historic non-being. And the less substantial these ghost-ideologemes, the more obsession and zeal shown by their followers. This obsession does not give birth to a genuine belief, nor does it transform into expanded discourse, but rather shrinks to a character or role: "revolutionary leader" (Osmolovski) or "terrorist" (Brenner). This is why that the more the poetics of reality claims to be strictly ideological, to have a programme of discourse, the more it indulges in its polar opposite: the non-ideological non-discursive sphere of "primal scream" and "affect" (Osmolovski), sexual paroxysm, the pulsation of life and death (Brenner).

In the context of reality appropriation strategy, the poetics of **Dmitri Gutov** is extremely individual, and can be described as a poetics of critical reality. The starting point challenges the protective conservatism of Zakharov and "The Hermeneuts", as well as the vitality of Osmolovski and Brenner. In Gutov's point of view, reality is not meaningless, but pregnant with meaning. The essential is to focus our attention on its thorough compre-

hension, on reading its intrinsic meanings. That is why the central issue for the poetics of critical reality is to acquire the ability to make pronouncements whose reference is not a text but reality. This is where it gets its perception of deconstruction as purely scholastic and its requirement that a pronouncement must have critical clarity and analytical capacity. In artistic practice, this means aiming at the maximal reduction of the language: reality is only visible where language is minimal and transparent. In other words, existence comes into being where art disappears. Such aesthetic austerity betrays, however, an ethic pathos inherent in the poetics of critical reality, heir to the tradition of Russian critical realism in the 19c and 20c. But the ethical austerity of the poetics does not prevent it from imparting singular significance to the act of representation: once an objective pronouncement is found, it must be publicly proclaimed. Thus, is art reduced and then exalted into megalomaniac spectacularly.

But how referential are the objective pronouncements of the critical reality poetics? They are nothing but installational variants of works dating back to the recent and not so recent past. Put another way, the reference of Gutov's works is artistic reality rather than reality itself. Self-reduction of language is not the uncovering of reality, but merely a tautological exercise, i.e., the language closes in upon itself, turning severe critical realism into refined aestheticism. Symptomatic of this poetic is its laying bare the collisions that accompany the rise of the new critical consciousness. The philosophy of Gutov's poetics proves to be born-again Marxism, the so-called "Leninist theory of reflection", the theoretical heritage of Mikhail Lifshits. Although logical in its movement towards analytical, rational opposition to the sphere of meaninglessness and entropy, new criticism nevertheless failed to construct a methodology and became the product of recycling. Gutov professes his new orthodoxy with a zeal that equals that shown by Osmolovski and Brenner in calling forth the demons of power and chaos.

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Finally, the third of the leading strategies on the Moscow art scene embraces the most varied individual poetics. However, they are in concord on the most important point: the attempt to adequately evaluate the state of things as well as to acquire a new positivism. For these poetics, the end of the underground conceptual tradition is obvious, but they banish with equal fervour the ideological ghosts generated by reality. It is also obvious to them that the mere category of reality is only a ghost, an ideological phantom.

Oleg Kulik has dedicated himself to the problem of communication, to the construction of a language that suits actuality. His communication poetics does not pretend to have given name to chaos, that is, to identify it with certain recycled ideologemes. Rather it tries to teach chaos to speak, to give it a language. He does not share Gutov's logocentric illusion that the present post-catastrophic era is waiting to be described by a new Tolstoi and that its problems may be resolved by a new "War and Peace": the nature of catastrophe is not epic. His poetics cannot be expressed through the destruction of texts (unlike that of "Medical Hermeneutics"). He wants to find positive features in the mere substance of the restructured entity.

Kulik starts with the rejection of traditional institutionalised places of representation - degraded sociality only simulates the presence of institutions - as well as a rejection of the traditional addressee of art - the public - for it disappears together with the crisis of institutions. The sphere for realising communication poetics is the street, the square, and its new address is the crowd. To speak the language of the crowd means to accept the discreteness of the statement, i.e. to give up the causality of narration, which is so essential for the doctrinal poetics of reality. No less essential for the communication statement is its obviousness. Only by being obvious can it be understood by such a diverse community and rudimentary consciousness as the crowd; only an obvious pronouncement may claim to be universal after the end of metaphysics.

Thus, it follows that the new communication takes the form of corporeal communication, for the body is an unconditional and available bearer of the universal experience. Typically, corporeal communication can not resort to logocentric arguments for its authenticity, as its only argument is the obviousness of bodily functions. This sort of communication cannot be called subjective, because individuality also disintegrates with the crisis of institutions and rationality. To speak through body language suggests that the body cannot be divided into mine and yours. With the crisis of logocentrism, the category of objectivity is equally devalued as being alien to bodily experience. Corporeal communication opens a new sphere, that of inter-subjectivity. Finally, Kulik's discrete open corporeality is acutely emotional, which distinguishes it from monotonous isolationist corporeality like that of Marquis De Sade. Indeed, communication poetics rehabilitates the possibility to speak of emotions and passions, and at the same time, to speak through emotions and passions. It returns the right of freedom and artistic expression to the artist and gives the histrionic communicator to the crowd.

Addressing itself to ethical problems, **Vladimir Kuprianov's** poetics faces the same task as Kulik's communication poetics: the necessity of giving up descriptive discourse. In this case, the problem is solved via the technique of photo-fixation, yet it has nothing to do with art photography, which has been subjected to sophisticated aesthetic procedures. This is photo documentation of every-day life, and in avoiding all language mediation, is planted directly in being. Documentary fixation constitutes a type of language, which has no dimension other than that exposed by the intrinsic value of the object of representation and that exposed by its obvious technical means. In other words, the substance from which this poetics derives is pure being, i.e. death. Accepting the positive character of death is the only possible prerequisite of ethics in a post-catastrophic era.

The language of such poetics is marked by two contradictory features. The first is that when transcendence shows through a depicted fragment of reality, its inimitable uniqueness also transpires (almost literally in Kuprianov's works: he puts emulsion on transparent glass). Such device mobilise perception to the utmost, attracting it to the fragment, compelling us to examine minute details. This fragmented and discrete language becomes uniquely suited to describe entropic actuality. Yet at the same time, and here is another characteristic of the language of new ethics – when plunging into existence to document its time spans, it inevitably reveals the flow of the hidden inner order of days, the fact that its emergence is supported by sacred rituals. For what else is the photographer's traditional business if not taking photos at funerals, weddings and baptisms, taking shots of loving couples, newborn babies or bosses? In other words, in the new poetics of new ethics, chaos and order, fragment and wholeness, entropy and epic, birth and revival coexist and penetrate each other. What this poetics eventually reveals is the phenomenon of life as such, restoring the right to its valorisation, the right to pathos.

Yuri Leiderman's poetics may be defined as negative ontology. More than anyone else on the Moscow scene, he is polemically opposed to conservative strategy. A former member of "Medical Hermeneutics", he is convinced that the underground tradition and its values are exhausted and that it is senseless to reanimate the tradition by collecting its texts or reproducing its procedures as a goal in itself. One must give it the status appropriate to any tradition, i.e. acknowledge it as a fact of history. However, he realises that as tradition is reduced, the last system capable of giving ontological status to being will also disappear. This makes the

poetics of reality chimera ingenuous and even dangerous. The game is lost before starting, for a long time or even forever.

Yet this negative ontology is quite global in its historical pessimism. If ontology is impossible due to lack of meaning (here in the East, in Russia), it is equally impossible (in the West, in Europe), because of the superfluity of meaning, because meaning is defined and ordered a priori, making it flat and exhausted. The only possible escape is negative ontology, i.e. dedicating one's efforts to generating new models of ontology. The point of this position is that, firstly, in an ontological crisis, the mere process of its recovery is essential. Secondly, the crisis makes this process relative, since all these models are mutually contradictory, and each of them, being extremely sophisticated and logical, disagrees with the others at some point or is based on obvious nonsense. Thus, Leiderman's poetics builds on the reconstruction of ontological values and their simultaneous dismantling.

Finally, the centrepiece of negative ontology is the valorisation of these contradictions, discords and nonsenses: it is precisely through these points that an other-being of meanings starts to leak, the potential of other meaning. In the context of global symbolic exchange, however, the place for this disconnection of meaning, this disintegration of the logic and emptiness of meaning is precisely where negative ontology was born. The world scene, full of blind assurance of its own absolute value, is incapable of seeing itself from the outside. Only the zone of post-catastrophic reduction, unable to generate meaning on its own, is pregnant with pure and therefore absolute vision. In other words, post-catastrophic identity acquires its own negative positiveness.

The positivism of **Vadim Fishkin's** position is that it insists on constructive values in the midst of crisis. This allows us to classify his work within the poetics of reconstruction. Starting on the ruins a new circle of creativity, the poetics of reconstruction reproduces acts of primordial creation: the constructions created according to its principles are basic and archaic. They explore basic mechanical law, similar to the machines of Archimedes. Like any other act of proto-creation, the products of reconstruction possess rudimentary universality and embrace all: up and down, light and darkness, angels and hell. In other words, Fishkin's machines are *rnachinas rnundi*.

What is essential is that the reconstruction appropriates the past; its machines comprise text fragments of the past. Therefore, it is obvious that reconstruction is not performed in the primordial vacuum, but in a certain

unconditionally designated context – that of art. This fact is of primary importance for Fishkin; it helps him to rule out the risk that his poetics claims to be more than it is, that reconstruction turns into re-ideologizing. Unlike Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, designed as a model for a building meant to be erected (but impossible to erect), the products of reconstruction are able to be fully realised as models. As much as the acts of reconstruction are models of universality and of the absolute, they absolutely pretend to be Utopian: they never become normative and repressive, because they never pretend to be universal and absolute models.

Finally, all of this has predefined a totally original time structure in the poetics of reconstruction. Rather than reducing or recording the past, it appropriates it, dismissing all contradictions. Avoiding the danger of becoming ideological, reconstruction also refuses to lay claims to the future: its positivism is fully realised in the present, in the idea of providing amenities for its reconstruction. Despite the Utopian perspective of this poetics, it does not rule out future horizons. However, it is not the "near future", but the "distant future" that is concerned, and this future must be wonderful or need not bother to exist.

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This panorama of the Moscow scene, described above, is remarkable for the polarity and brightness of its individual approaches. Each of the three strategies balances the other two; each of the author's poetics complements the others. In the present context, each is an "intellectual feat". The ever-present entropy of the organism of the culture is generated by the exclusive hermeticism of the poetics, by the extreme aggressiveness of these strategies, by conflict-mongering as the existential norm of the cultural subjects. The organism in its entirety lacks the inner integrity possessed by each of the artistic positions. In other words, the Moscow art scene is waiting for a new strategy, that of dialogue; for a new poetics, that of the Other.