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A Pseudo - palindrome in the  
Monographic Style

[3.613 words]

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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](mailto: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](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.

## Vladimir Levashov

### A Pseudo - palindrome in the Monographic Style

#### 1.1

The intrigue of the following text lies in the fact that the hero of the story - Alexander Roitburd is an artist living not in New York City or Rome. He even does not live in Moscow, he lives in Odessa.

#### 1.2

The Creative work of a provincial artist might (according to a widely-spread stereotype) present some interest to the public only in the modernism age. Modernist aesthetics is known to be based upon the still romantic view of an artist as a genius, whose unique individuality is correlated not with his specific location but with eternity transcending the world and its history. By expressing his ego, by making his original interior open to the outer world, the artist, together with his work, breaks out of history, out of the limits of a single piece of space/time toward the timeless, eternal field. In this sense modernism can in general and on accordance with its intentions be called a period which is absent in history. With the post-modernism age comes a radical change of views about a creative subject. The above views as such, as well as the New-times view of the individual, are proclaimed to be a myth of the past. The subject falls from the heights of eternity, this unique individual is being dissolved in the anthill of culture. The only chance to preserve its own and justly illusionary simulated individuality means to get into the area of intensive cultural communication, that is a big cultural centre. The individual preserves himself by means of constant reproduction as a collage of the Different proclaimed to be his own. Contemporary "genius" lives only in the energetically rich field, in a cultural centre. Provinces do not call him into life. And, if the modernist attitude to creative work may be described by a Russian proverb "IT IS NOT THE LOCATION THAT ADORNS THE MAN, BUT THE MAN WHO ADORNS

THE LOCATION" in post-modernist times the actual situation is when "IT IS NOT THE MAN WHO ADORNS THE LOCATION , BUT THE LOCATION THAT ADORNS THE MAN".

### 1.3

According to the above logic our hero has no chance to enter the area of contemporary culture by himself. Though he may have hopes that his works will be represented by this text if the latter somehow enters the powerful culture's energy zone and starts living there gaining new meanings. But, alas, the very text is in the monographic style, usually associated with modernist epistemology, since, in its frame an artistic individuality (impersonified in the leading hero) is correlated with the totality of culture, with an eternal Unity. That is why our hero, even represented by a critical essay, turns to be of a fake (if not a negative) value in culture, just a human unit on the surface of the Earth. As for the text about him - it turns to be a sum of printed signs, a mere fraction of a per cent of the world's daily printed matter. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the hero as seen in the form of this text is doomed to be written off in the first inventory of the World Library. As to the title of the text and the author's name, they are doomed to be removed from its catalogue.

### 1.4

The above-said, to our view, sounds justified, regarding the Western culture or, at least, its present beliefs and hopes. Nevertheless, since we are speaking about an artist located in a Soviet city who belongs to this cultural sphere, we must make some corrections. "Soviet" (and "Russian" in general) and "Western" are not a pair of opposites. One cannot present them as a world and an anti-world. Our cosmos keeps an unshakable belief in the unique "Russian path", that is in the a-systematic formation of slowevolutionary pieces, their cuttings and sudden accelerations, slow-downs and overlaps-repetitions, the formation of different chronological steps. At the same time the Russian cosmos goes on while constantly correlating its way with the "Western way". Therefore, it cannot live without the latter. The "Russian path" is actually not a path, since it does not have an immanent logic and presents a strange projection of the "Western path". Our cultural space is a transcendental image of Europe, the image she does not recognize. Anyway, this space here is a nice testing area for Western ideas and Utopias. What the West adopts in the historical process and transforms into social experience becomes here a supreme power that governs the history and devours it.

### 1.5

It means that the local cultural space is out of history's bounds. The Utopian modernist theory of falling out of history's bounds had its chance only here, that is why the Modernism stage is absent in the Soviet culture. Preserved and ripened in its absence modernism levitates over the history of culture, flying in the ideal space of eternity, being in the unknown location. As a testing ground, local space is somewhere at the backyard of the cultural territory. One cannot imagine such space, since one can imagine here only something vague and borderless. It is hard to say whether is it outside the borderline or inside it. It is a pure A-topia where Utopia is being realized. It is a province. Russia is a European province, and as such it has A-topian (and Utopian) nature.

### 1.6

Any subject of the local cultural text is in an unknown location. He cannot find out from his stand whether this text is written off the World Library funds or simply lost somewhere in its depository. Being in the unknown location, one cannot approach the library catalogue, and therefore cannot locate oneself in the surrounding world. One is not even aware of the means with the help of which he might be able to locate oneself. B. Grois says: "a Russian artist must first outline the space, and only then make a gesture inside it", must locate himself and mark the outside things. I think, both actions are identical in essence. Artistic gestures determine not only the strategy but describe a subject's location and neighbouring space as well. Existing in an unidentified location in condition of complete abandonment, without any out-coming revelations, the subject himself creates his space, extending its borders further and further, or, precisely speaking, forms this absent space by his own size. In other words, location in Atopia, which bears only absent qualities, takes the subject-object opposition away, and puts into its place a private-impressional homogeneity, where the subject is the very "private space" (The term is by "Med. Germenevtika" group) that exists by means of self-description, goes on by itself.

Subjective orientation every time is an individual (or group-individual) attempt to catalogue the Library, an attempt made by each subject of the local cultural text. As a result, periphery space brings into life a number of separate catalogues, each of which brings the existence of a World Library of its own. Thus local (periphery, Atopian) cultural conscience, being split in a schizoid way into an infinite and permanently changing number of

separate consciences-spaces (every one of them constantly produces illusive classifications) is deprived of integrity. Each of the consciences-spaces has its own hierarchies: own sources, own ground, own "interior heaven".

### 1.7

Both the peripheries space in general and all of its components equally belong to Atopia and have the same indefiniteness of qualities. In this indefiniteness they have an isomorphous structure. Therefore, every private artistic space does not know and does not have the borders of its own. It is a kind of a field with a distinct energetic centre spreading its influence over the unfixed territory. Out of this comes a logical conclusion: there is nothing alien to the private space; it takes under its own protection any other private space by its own choice considering it as a part of its own space. All exterior data coming from there are considered as its own interior qualities. That is why any articulation from the centre of the private space is based on the image of a single-centred structure of Atopia as such. With a multitude of centres in a peripheric space, a multitude of centres, - the artistic text as usual considers the centre of its own as the only one for the whole zone of Atopia. There is no idea of the copyright here, everything rests on plagiarism. Consistent plagiarism makes private space richer complex and perfect.

### 1.8

The conclusion from the above-said is that we cannot include the description of local culture into the Western system of classification as well as properly characterize local artistic accomplishments as modernist or postmodernist. From the one side any private space is filled with pioneer enthusiasm of its own subject, his belief into reality of the discovered. It has emanational nature, since it reproduces itself as external and out of itself as internal. By doing that it removes opposition between the former and the latter. From the other side, any subject of peripheric culture forms his own space in the form of collage of other private spaces, from top to toe a structure of foreign parts. But due to the very absence of subject-object opposition, these contradictions are taken away, they appear to be non-contradictions. One cannot say about this culture either that here the man adorns the location, or the location adorns the man. They rather adorn each other or are adorned in the same way. Local space can most precisely be described with the help of a kind of a half-finished product, half-finished

proverb with no fixed connection between separate words or superiority of one word over another: the man, to adorn, the location.

### 1.9

This formula means taking away the modernism - post-modernism opposition, but not necessarily at a higher level, that is in the chronological zone of the future. Atopian culture throws away the chronological principle and replaces it by a topographical one. Since it is located out of history bounds, history is compensated by geography. In its turn the geography is also a biography. Travelling inside himself (inside the space created by himself) the subject creates the geography, presenting it to the outer look as a creative autobiography.

### 2.9

Creative biography is first of all a sum of personal data. It is composed of events, circumstances, concepts, influences and borrowings, different chronological stages, etc. That determines the artist's position. Such data are the dots than make up a contour limiting the personal creative body (volume, occupied by the artist in the socio-cultural whole). This border contour is reminiscent of the body's presence and location, by doing that, it preserves the interior of the body from the socially exterior's expansion. The location of our hero, Alexander Roitburd is rather complex. One can only conditionally locate him by imagining him as the centre of several concentric circles that present traditions of different levels correlated with his creative work.

First, A. Roitburd was born and grew up in a Jewish family. One cannot explain his specific mentality, specially coloured feelings, a combination of demonstratively fleshy materialism with ineradicable thirst for abstractness, and finally grotesque-mythological images without mentioning the Jewishness of the artist. Second, Roitburd is a native and a resident of Odessa, which is one of the oldest cultural centres of the Southern Russia with a colour all of its own. Nevertheless, his location inside the local culture is not quite typical since he sides with the two traditions simultaneously: plastic modernist-spiritual painting and local pseudo-conceptualism of a new Weiver type. For all that he, firstly, is a stranger to the dust-bin aesthetics of the latter, though not declining to create in the style of expressive easel painting, and, secondly, he inclines too much in favour of a cynical-relativist reflexion that is practically non-existent among Odessa "plastic modernism" artists. Thirdly, for a number of years Roitburd has been linked with the "hot post-modernism" of Kiev artists, which was

developed from a mixture of permanently baroque Ukrainian aesthetics and ideas of South-European transavantgarde, formulated by A. Bonito Oliva. And fourthly, he is linked via the Kiev artists with the very trans-avantgarde tradition, which is now faded under the pressure of "cold" post-conceptualism. This outside, provincial location of the artist's creations in the cultural common sphere informs as we see it, the complexity-and-richness of his position. The above numerical description of it is naturally not complete since understanding his position as located inside a series of concentric circles we cannot at the same time specify their mutual positions. For example, the Jewish constituent is the real base for the individual work of Roitburd. At the same time, it is his furthest (in space and in time) horizon, as well as the self-limit set by a transavantgarde demonstratively inclining to the deep roots. If we go on with this kind of analysis we cannot but conclude that the individual creative activity of our hero is so vaguely located in the general cultural cosmos and is so lost inside it that the artist is completely able to be under no surveillance and free to make "abuses". In this way, the influence of outer fate-determining for the creative body factors diminishes to nothing. The art turns out to be alone and in the unknown place. For itself, in itself the body becomes a private space, the biography - a geography. As a live phenomenon, the creative body is constantly changing in its attitude to the outer space, as such it takes a temporal dimension. The private space is a space for itself with its back to the outer space and its time. Everything temporary takes here spatial, geographical features, becomes a never-ending landscape consisting of a multitude of places.

## 2.8

When individual creative work is discussed only as a creative body then it sinks into the cultural process, turning into definition without the defined thing, a text between other texts. One can always find and predict its location and evolution. If the same creative work is seen as a private space then the definitions become transparent, and the defined (meaning) - the only noticeable thing. This point is a result of expression (a creative subject's emanation, when he is both a free master and a parent of his own space). The first idea, as we see, belongs to the post-modernist view, the second one - to the modernist. In the first case, it is the location that adorns the man, in the second, it is the man who adorns the location, or, better - all the locations of his private space. When individual creative work is viewed with the intense cultural medium as the background then an objective view must dialectically conjugate both ideas. But when such creativity is completely lost then opposition of the type "modernism - post-modernism"



is taken away, since there remains only one private-anonymous space: both object and subject are sticking completely together (as the location and the man) and therefore adorn each other.

## 2.7

If the private space ignores the outer time, then you still cannot say it is completely out of the fourth dimension. Time comes here together with an introspective outlook of a foreign traveller. It does not belong (as we say above) to the exterior, does not belong to the interior proper, which is above the time (as it is eternal), but it belongs to a traveller, his view as a point in description (that is a view of the space by itself). When we imagine somebody's creative work as the sum of influences and borrowings, we determine it in an outward appearance. For the given private space that consists of borrowings, all of them are his pre-history, pre-start. It knows itself only as a composition of them. The artist while creating his space plagiarises with the innocence of a child who forgets the accomplished in a minute. It is due to a similar (forgotten) artistic effort that the space receives its horizon. And A. Roitburd is not an exception here, of course. What we called a correlation of his creative work with different traditions can be called a simple borrowing as well. Here he acts in complete accordance with the logic of the post-modernist age. When marking the horizon of his space he borrows the outward side while stocking the "robbed treasures" in his artistic estate. Odessa's plastic manner, Kiev-Ukrainian vital-absurdist motives, trans-avantgarde expression and format, pseudo prophetic Jewish pathos and plots, etc. - all that lie here in the vicinity. But the artist claims that the "raid on the mythogeneous zone" is done not to get the booty, but to use the opportunity of commenting the booty.

## 2.6

It is here where the travel begins for the first time. Since there is no separate traveller or separate space for a travel, but a united space, then the travel-description becomes a self-description; as to the private space it infolds into self-description. In other words, the mentioned "booty" is valuable not due to its physical properties (left in the pre-history, in the eternity), but due to the possibility to comment on it, that is to become a self-description, turn the nature into the culture. The self-description is possible only due to the memory, possible in the memory of the forgotten things (after the borrowing are done). And here the artistic traveller following the memory loses consciousness and finds landscapes of both

the borrowed locations and the new ones. Thus, he extends the private space by means of its description (self-description). With Roitburd the original and inward (private space as such) is rather constantly represented by its colour atmosphere (hot-dark red-brown colours). The atmosphere marks the eternal stability of these slies and ground, that have constant in-between transmutations of pictorial substance. The fused-pastel early manner with one dab next to another dab comes into motion. In the process of self-description, it watches itself, analyses itself. By breaking their connections, the dabs either fall to pieces or overlap each other, making thick long lines and planes. The forms and figures behave in the same way: bifurcate, multiply themselves, merge, try to fall to pieces. By becoming deep in the look inside itself, the private space widens. The hidden depth becomes open as a sum of planes, as the aggregate of spaces for future travels, as again and again new landscapes. The art become an ever-changing landscape without familiar figure lines of one or another sense. The transformation process engulfs the whole body of the art: from its pictorial tissue to the names. The names do not have to call interior for the exterior anymore. The exterior is as if absent, the nominations do not name anything, are a part of the interior, by themselves widen its borders. They are not names for separate paintings, but names for the single space, or, more precisely, parts of its landscapes, certain locations. Under the interior laws the nominations become a meeting and a painting, incoming and outgoing forms, a pure presence without any hidden meaning, not a sign of the other; every time it opens an intriguing newness.

The private space as the interior one devoid of the outward opposition is bound to include it, fixing itself as a two-part system. This quality is expressed in two-part names as well as in the obtrusive repetition of similar forms (two faces, two heads, two figures, either stuck together, or facing each other, or directed into different sides). As a matter of fact, such doubleness is a sign of subject-object unity, a unity of the describer and description, reproduction (directed towards the past, toward the memory) and production (as an aspiration to the future). Production and reproduction are united in a single act, being a unity if the space, unfolding, and description, of the catalogue making. This catalogue making presents itself as a form of the space unfolding and, in general, existence. The private space is a space-catalogue of itself.

## 2.5

If the space description is its transition from the nature to the culture, then the unfolding is a reverse from the culture to the nature. Being the nature, it does not demand anything outward, as if selfexistent. Thus, the private

space, becomes identical to the world. But during the process when appearing every time in a single act of catalogue-making it appears as such not any other quantity as one place, as the only new landscape, created from all previous ones and not in the least correlated with them. We have mentioned that the individual space is located in an unknown place, one must add that in essence it is A-topian, a place every time not surrounded by different places.

#### 2.4

Roitburd's art is a purely Soviet cultural phenomenon. Its originality comes from its provinciality, its abandonment, its rejection from the thick cultural cosmos, from the World Library.

#### 2.3

Here it preserves its identity, has an opportunity to be described in the monographic style, mistreated by the world-librarians for its non-actuality. Nevertheless, the very style, impossible inside the Library, can be realized out of its bounds in that strange place of absence where and only where it has a chance to survive. Survive, but in the changed form, since it now rests not on a drama intrigue of the relations between the individual and the general but on their identity.

#### 2.2

In this sense it is the location that adorns the man, since it gives the man an opportunity to adorn the location.

#### 2.1

By the way, the main intrigue of the text is that its hero - Alexander Roitburd is an artist living not in New York City, or Rome, or even Moscow. He lives in Odessa(...)