

## Independent Culture: A Soviet Phenomene.

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What is called The East in the so-called West produces towards the end of this century a considerable amount of art works which arise interest far beyond the confines of the former Communist world. What are, if any, critical means and instruments to interpret this artistic production ?

The problem of an adequate interpretation, which stands behind this question, is not an easy problem in any case. A stranger does not know the specific background of the Soviet Socialism. This lacune makes one helpless when trying to get behind meanings, to understand underlying mental patterns of a basically non-Western culture, standing apart. A standard education and tourist experience brought together between Athens and New York do not help to cope with the problem.

Reliability of special mediators - art critics coming from Russia - is restricted or questionable for some reasons. The one is the chaotic and volcanic panorama of cultural, as well as social life in USSR about 1990. People wake up after the terrible dream of hard Soviet dictatorship and see themselves between too many ruins left of culture, the arts and moral values (not to speak about technology, consumption or ecology).

People say joking we live already a f t e r the Communist Last Judgement. With many other things, the tradition of cultural studies in Russia is badly injured. Moreover, even in its original and living state it was not very much familiar outside Russia. The thinking of Berdyaev, Bakhtin or Pomerantz is not easy to penetrate for outsiders. The reason for it is perhaps its being "globally local" and its lack of the intellectual discipline of a rational Western type.

The Problem of Russia was and still is the main point of philosophical thinking here but the local appearance of this thinking and its "regionalism" is accompanied by a programmatic universalism. History, psychology, theology, sociology, philology and art criticism never could really separate themselves in Russia and form a differentiated academic system of disciplines. Despite the fact official science and education pretended they are "normal" and "regular" and correspond to the world standards, this was never true. What to the renascent independent humanitarian disciplines they are remarkably non-differentiated in comparison to the Western practices.



The traditional Russian universalism in humanities lacks precision and is not interested in discerning ideas and terms borrowed from sociology, politology, aesthetics and/or psychology. Russian art critics accustomed their colleagues abroad to such terms as "non-official art", "artistic underground" and "independent culture"; but they failed to explain what do these words really mean. Of course this is not merely a terminological question.

How people try to be free in their minds living in conditions of total control and psychological pressure, is not a futile knowledge for the rest of the world. Totalitarianism in USSR and the drama of its desintegration is a meaningful lesson which is given not only to those who happened to get under the wheel. Different forms or "branches" of independent art (socially, aesthetically, radically or moderately oriented) give us opportunity to pose question of independence itself.

First of all, independence in art is a much wider phenomenon than political and social opposition. Even the extremely politicized painting of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid who live in USA since mid-seventies is not directly offensive but rather ironically nostalgic. The so called Sots Art is remarkably "tender" towards the dehumanized reality of the Imperium Sovieticum. More precisely, this is a strange mixture of pity, tenderness and disgust - a complex feeling addressed to the mad, brutal, terrifying but dear mother-land. Mainly, the political position of independent non-official artists is not negation or accusation but enthusiastically ironic play with ideological stereotypes and other clichés of human mind.

During the hard dictatorship no direct political confrontation in art was possible at all. Later on, when it became possible, it had and still has no appeal for artists. Only street painters and mass culture are somewhat interested in anti-Soviet caricatures in the year 1990. The philosophical irony was and is much more influential in artistic world as a mode of creation. This irony has new impulses in graphic works of Gariff Bassirov (which stem from newspaper political drawing) and, on the other hand, in Conceptualist experiments with objects and actions effectuated by Pavel Pepperstein, Sergey Anufriev and several others.

For them, obviously, the principle of independence includes a certain detachment from the immediate political reality.

Even a trace of direct political engagement seems to be suspect and non-welcome to spiritual painting of about 1980 -



1990, for example that of Maxim Kantor and Andrey Cedrik. At the very moment when the reformatory Communist leadership grants the possibility to express dissident views, artists distantiate themselves from this unexpected blessing from above. As Dostoyevsky has put it, they return the ticket.

Clearly, they do not intend to take part in battles between Russian Democrats, Patriotic Forces, and Communists changing a shade of their colour.

Earlier the independence meant in Russia to stay afar from the omnipotent state power. Independents were quite close to underground artists - at least they were much closer to each other than under liberal relaxation. However, a full identification was and is never thinkable. It is a mistake to say that the independent art takes any part in struggles for political domination in Russia. Of course there are artists who try to be oppositional and underground even when they are not forced to be so (for example D.Vroubel). But what to i n d e p e n d e n c e it should not be looked for only there. Even the "conservative"Avant-Garde of Nesterova, Bulgakova, Nazarenko, Gadayev certainly deserves to be called independent art.

The new situation of 1985-1990 proved that independence in art - as a human and artistic stand - is not a synonym to "opposition" or "underground". People outside Russia often think the independent art should be active on the side of Gorbachev and his Perestroika. But the independent art is not. It may be very acid a g a i n s t the Soviet heritage and Soviet reality, but in terms of irony and not propaganda work. Nobody stands in favor of a certain political platform.

No concrete program of official or oppositional nature is to be found there. The non-official - underground - independent art came to life as a clearly political phenomene in Soviet Union (for the simple reason there are no things in a strictly totalitarian state which were not "political"). De-politisation and de-ideologisation is in progress, reminding us of Germany in the fifties or Spain in the seventies, as limited as this parallel might be.

That is why the word "independent" is best when a student mentions this sphere of culture. "Alternative art", "underground art" and "non-official art" mislead our minds by assuming or giving us to think we deal with engaged art defending a program and an ideology. To equalize them all with "independent art" is a gross terminological error and, correspondingly, an expression of a false idea.



The provenience of this confusion is explicable. The Russian unprecision and scaleful operation with non-differentiated terms do not have alone the responsibility for chaos. The suppressed and outcast groups and individuals developed through decades a poetry of isolation, an idealized image of their own exclusiveness, a kind of sectarian mentality. They should not apologize for that because in the given conditions no way was open except one - that is to form a closed circle, or to stay alone, and try to survive against the triumphant officialdom and popular indifference.

People of arts and letters, like Pasternak and Brodsky, Kabakov and Tarkovsky, Voinovich and Tselkov had good reasons to feel themselves isolated and alienated in Russia. But a feeling of a patient should never become a doctors's interpretation aiming at deciphering of inner life. Similarly, a philologist will make a serious error if he sees what a literary hero thinks as a sufficient interpretation. Well, artists are not literary personages, nor critic's patients, but, at last, they are in a sense objects of interpretatory efforts. A student is good if he is careful to what they think and feel, but a self-identification with the object is a finish and failure of a study.

However, this ABC of scientific cognition and philosophical consideration is being regularly violated, as if violence waits to come when Russia is mentioned. Non-official art critics in Soviet Union come mostly from the ranks of closed circles of the former underground. They keep loyalty if not to their groups, at least to the principle of being closed to strangers and, in a sense, esoterically minded. Maybe they are right to describe the underground artistic community under Soviet dictatorship as a heroic and small island of Art and Truth in an ocean of madness, enmity and lie<sup>\*</sup>. But because of chaos in terms and ideas people practically identify underground art as independent culture. The result is an elitarian theory of independent art. Critics say or presume that it is only a small "secret brotherhood" what really has any value. And, symptomatically, the membership of this or that "brotherhood" coincides with the friends of this or that author. Reading a non-official art critic from USSR one might think that only one or two dozens of extraordinary individuals were and are free from the infection and decay of

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<sup>\*</sup>E.Barabanov. Between Times. - In: New Realities in Soviet Art and Art research. Moscow, 1989; B.Groys. Kunst nach der Utopie. - In: Ich lebe - ich sehe. Künstler der achtziger Jahre in Moskau. Bern, 1988



Socialist Realism and the overwhelming psychological press of the state machine. If so, there could not be an independent culture - only a small group of deviant persons. Of course nobody would suppose there were a mass movement of cultural opposition. But the sum total of visual arts, literature, music, and, though less pronounced, certain events in film art and theater make up more than several "dissidents" could ever produce.

Traditionally closed "secret brotherhoods" deliberately overlook each other and are caught in a sort of solipsism. The non-official and independent culture inside and outside Russia is almost unbelievably unable of unification, solidarity or of a simple temporary alliance inside itself. Sometimes it is a touching, and sometimes a chilling spectacle to see - that is to observe a closed "brotherhood" full of messianic pride and sacral fervour. Only they are those who possess the truth!

The Russian messianic heritage and the repeating reproduction of messianic mental patterns have been studied, eulogized and criticized repeatedly; a "brotherhood" claiming to be only right amidst the common decadence and depicted by Dostoyevsky, Berdyaev, Frank and some other connoisseurs of Russia appear again at the moment when prohibitions imposed on social activity are lifted. Big "brotherhoods" of liberals, anti-Marxists, Stalinists, chauvinists who want no less than to save Russia are copied in miniature by artistic brotherhoods of underground biography. They have no doubts that nobody except them can save - if not Russia, then the Russian art.

A "secret brotherhood" is alternative and non-official by definition; but its adherence to the independent culture is a problem. To develop an independent mind being on a war position and enclosed by infidels against whom the truth has to be defended, is not easy. Can a mind be independent if it is full of a feeling of an evil world around and a necessity to preserve a Message? Tension, alertness and battle readiness are attributes of underground, of a suppressed messianic group. To insist and accentuate on every step one is different, one is exceptional, is a sign of anything but certainty and inner freedom.

When a certain possibility of a new and more relaxed independence appeared in 1985, with beginning reforms, the old oppositionary underground turned out to be unprepared for a new mode of existence. Their main theoretical preoccupation since then is the question of

identity in more open conditions. They recognize the necessity of new models of existence and artistic activity. But, still, the deeply interiorized messianic mind does not go away. In a programmatic article about the Moscow Conceptualists the critic Victor Misiano repeated again that the "secret brotherhood" of the underground is the only art in Russia worth mentioning<sup>\*</sup>. He argues that the meaning and message of the underground culture is its philosophical reflection on its own alienation amidst the inhuman Soviet galaxy.

Artistic independence of one who is pondering over his solitude in the Evil Empire; independence of a hunted at, of a besieged; this is the case. I cannot but consider this point of view a very limited one.

With time going on this romanticized self-portrait of "underground aristocracy" goes less and less satisfying. One or two dozens of names beginning with Kabakov, Bulatov, Komar, Melamid, and followed by Filippov, Zakharov, Bruskin, Albert, Mironenko etc. cannot give us a sentiment of successfully coping with the problem of the independent culture, the presence of which is felt strongly everywhere art and literature enter the scene.

To cope with the problem some other premises are needed. First of all, the I.C. must be seen as a vast multiplicity of arts and genres. In the West they are much more differentiated - maybe, because of more rational mentality and more normal course of history. Of course, contacts between poets, painters, musicians, film makers take place everywhere. But, supposedly, the Russian sphynx is quite unique in culture: that is, the living organism of arts which did not go through differentiation and retained some features of previous, archaic system of arts to see in the past.

In the orbit of the visual arts alone the diversity is much greater than critical essays pretend it is. Maybe just the recognition of this diversity marks a step towards more ample and more independent thinking about art free from elitism, superiority complex or victimization syndrom. So, the romantic image of a few solitary pioneers and martyrs who challenged the Empire of Soviets, will wane sooner or later from serious art history, but probably will live in popular critical journalism: it is so simple and moving ...

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<sup>\*</sup> V.Misiano. Ten Moscow Artists in the Tradition of the Soviet Avant-Garde. In: 10 + 10. Contemporary Soviet and American Painters. New York - Leningrad, 1989



This is not the place to try even an abbreviated outline of a culture's body. Shortly, there are at least three magistral directions in artistic developments in 1970 - 1990. Alongside with the universe of Conceptualism favored by Western public and press there is a Neo-Constructivist movement of Infante, Koleychuk, Zlotnikov, Konik who stay loyal to the lessons of Malevich's cosmic vision.

But perhaps the most followed, stable and developed tradition at the end of this century in Russia is the relatively realistic painting and sculpture with strong spiritual, mystical and moral intentions. About 1960 this line of development was begun by Weissberg, Krasnopevtsev, Plavinsky and others. Nikonov, Popkov and Zhilinsky pushed this vehicle to the side of more populist vernacular. The next generation came in the seventies with Nesterova, Nazarenko, Baranov, Sitnikov, Bulgakova. The movement is still strong enough and lives through transformations and rejuvenations, with Naumova, Kantor, Cedrik, Ganikovsky, etc.

The resulting constellation deserves and needs further considerations (but not here, of course). Some artists mentioned here are consequently radical in pursuing an underground program, while others adopted a more neutral position on behalf of the new officialdom which is involved into changes, too (for the first time since Lenin's rule when Lunacharsky was responsible for art policy a true man of art occupied in 1988 the official position as Minister for Culture: this is N.Gubenko, a known theater director, film maker and actor). Few tolerance and a lot of confrontations is a rule in I.C. as elsewhere in boiling Soviet life. Like theologians who suspect each other of concessions given to the Hell, our independents often suspect and accuse each other of concessions to Soviet dogmas and authorities, of some form of conformism, or alliance with the Red Star Demon.

The real diversity in I.C. demands for an Ariadna's thread unless it retains its present incomprehensibility. In art and literature the Soviet Union is something more than a single country - it has to be compared to a continent. Even if an encyclopaedic survey of its cultural production is made it will leave in obscurity the inner mechanisms of independent thinking as such.

As is well known, artistic mythology and imagery grow on the soil of mentality. This is a key problem for a culture historian. An independent mentality in a totally controlled society is not an ordinary thing, and some curiosity for it is justifiable.

Somebody created it - I.C. - in conditions less appropriate for



independence than anything. The problem of a mind which created art and culture most unlikely to exist in those conditions, is a "last problem" of art research. Indeed, our vision of Renaissance, Medieval or Modern art depends on how the corresponding mind structure is being interpreted. So, art research is no less indebted to the theory of the mind (that is, a specific historical species of the mind) than to professional instruments of purely critical appreciation and definition.

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At the end of the 20th century the human cognitive apparatus seems to be better prepared to look into the mental world of the Post-Modernist West than that of the Soviet independent culture. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, Neville Wakefield drew a portrait of a civilisation. What strikes one immediately at observing it is a strong contrast of this portrait to a possible outline of a mind coming from the totalitarian East. One might think two civilisations, two mind species followed two paths not to have anything in common.

The Western thinking is literally hypnotized by the "anthropological crisis" and the "erosion of fundamentals" supporting humanism, rationalism and moralism. The famous "loss of human self" and ensuing inability to pronounce something really certain concerning man acquired a central position in philosophical and humanitarian studies. Thinkers describe the One-Dimensional Man and "Mensch ohne Eigenschaften".

Almost obsessively critics and theoreticians stress the disappearing of oppositions and differentiations in art. They say art avoids or destroys the rational model of the world preserved and inherited from the Enlightenment despite the serious blows given to it by the first and second Avant-Garde and by the new non-classical science. Old and new, tradition and innovation, sense and nonsense, the true and the false appear equal to each other or completely identical. No good and no bad are possible in the new dimension of Post-Modernism as it is depicted in recent French and American theory of contemporary mind and culture. Things as being "official" or "non-official" are not possible, either.

The principle of oppositions grounded on Kant's "practical reason" never met with such a fierce abolition. Reality is not a cognisable thing in terms of this approach, but rather a non-décipherable enigma and a mixture of everything possible. Baudrillard put forward the famous



formula and image of "agonizing reality". Man is hardly able to behold or create anew a consistent mental structure helping to see himself if not a master of this world, but at least an inhabitant of a "normal" dimension.

The new stage in art inaugurated by Josef Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski gave enough reasons to think of a labyrinth (as Achille Bonito Oliva does), of a never attainable and elusive sense, always slipping out of hands if we try to get closer to the meaning of an art work; Martin Kubaczek, among others, knows how to transmit this feeling<sup>\*</sup>.

The imaginary library of Post-Modernism is already so big that even a short outline of its content is unthinkable now. Though, the main point is not difficult to extract. When thinkers and art critics touch the problem of the "anthropological crisis" and that of the Post-Modernism they stress the role of the new reality itself which is the reality of the developed "first world" with its abundance, openness, informative flow of images and data, its high technology. They say, all of it leads to the syndrome of omnipotence and permissiveness in human souls. Choosing one's values between oppositions and defending one's principles is not a behaviour needed by information and consumption society.

Post-Modernism, as theory and practice of art, let us think that the problem of uncertainty, confusion or ambiguity of meanings is the main problem of culture at the end of the 20th century. We are told that the quest of humans after discerning of what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is meaningful and what is absurd, what is good and what is bad is merely a futile pretension of a reason which still remembers the slogans of anthropocentrism and Enlightenment.

The "developed" world won most severe and pitiless verdicts not from the side of the Communist ideology caught in the circle of mental stagnation but from the side of Western thinkers themselves. The Soviet-born mind who never experienced an existence with such attributes as abundance, ample choice, information exuberance not to speak about "permissiveness" can hardly understand why do the leading Western minds speak so severely against their social order and way of life. Homo Sovieticus must be puzzled by it.

He thinks he is the being who really can speak about distress, confusion and desintegration of mental structures. It is not easy to

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<sup>\*</sup> M.Kubaczek. Winking, Scepticism, Passion. In: Moskau - Wien - New York. Eine Ausstellung der Wiener Festwoche. Wien, 1989



to explain to a Soviet mind (independent and open as it is) why did Michel Foucault argue that the human nature is degrading and perishing, or why was Baudrillard so insistent about the human criteria being presumably lost in this "best of worlds". For Russians, traditionally, an idea or a conviction must be founded by life experience: an idea should not be thought out, it must be suffered out, according to this view. A certain incredulity towards the Western thinking comes as no surprise. Russians cannot take seriously indeed what the West affirms on the "anthropological crisis". Theoretically, it may be correct - but being not really suffered out it is a deception, or a symptom of a "comfort depression". A Russian hardly can imagine that comfort, openness, free choice and abundance can produce or enforce the massive desintegration of personality. It is rather a propagandistic myth or a fantasy of an idle intellect for him. He knows for sure what leads to desintegration: millions of victims, camps and psychiatric jails, repressive mode of life for everybody even if one is outside cells and wires. That is why the independent mind in Russia seems to be at least hesitant on behalf of Western thinking.

There is a tragicomical vice-versa in ideas of East and West. Soviet innovators in politics and culture fought for liberalisation, openness, effective market economy and free information. At the same time the Western thinking mercilessly discredited these same dreams and goals. It is being demonstrated how an abundant, choiceful and permissive life brings an anthropological crisis together with its achievements. For example, decay of human values in the post-industrial informative society is a problem discussed quite impressively in Jean Baudrillard's book "The Ecstasy of Communications" (1987). Jameson compared the relevant state of mind to schizophrenic desintegration of personality. Wakefield, lately, spoke of the breaking of the "immune system" in culture. The formerly helpful protective mechanism against chaos, dissociation and the realm of insanity is supposed not to work any more<sup>\*</sup>.

For a truly independent mind in Russia it was a hard task to solve. Not to give credit to the slogans of Communism is not at all difficult in the end of the Soviet epoch. To be free from Utopia (including the new proposals of a "Socialism with a human face") does not mean to be independent - it means a minimum of common sense. Independence of mind, as before, is psychologically and socially dangerous. This time it is dangerous for its representatives because it is sceptical and critical towards modernisation and liberalisation of the slavery

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<sup>\*</sup> N. Wakefield. Post-Modernism. The Twilight of the East. London, 1990.



regime. An independent mind cannot be against freedom, but it is against illusions and dreams connected with attaining freedom.

Independent Soviet writers (Venedict Yerofeev, Evgueny Popov, Ludmila Petrushevska) describe the everyday life of presumably "free" people in USSR as a sort of GULAG existence, as a life in a concentration camp grown to a sixth part of the globe. They represent what I use to designate as the "everyday repressivity" of the Soviet life. At the same time, about 1980, the American thinker Ihab Hassan who probably never heard about Russian contemporary writers neither about my sociological terminology said the life in the prosperous West is something like existence in a comfortable concentration camp. Apocalyptic vision of contemporary history is a theme in E.Canetti's "Human Province".

Man is seen as a being which can be lost in freedom as well as in slavery. Uncertainty about values and meanings is perhaps the main topic of the independent spirit. Clearly, it cannot be welcome to any government - democratic or dictatorial. Like reason and conscience, independent thinking is a very uncomfortable thing to live with.

Independent theoretical deliberations on man and culture are a far cry from "positive" programs or "constructive" propositions. This is one of the reasons of their absence in new political structures. They illustrate a statement of Alexander Herzen - a "dissident" of the 19th century - who said in response to the demands of "constructive help" to the society: "We are not a medicine, we are the pain".

There are several thinkers in contemporary Russia who keep loyalty to this program. Perhaps the most traditional line of thinking connected with the historiosophy of Dostoyevsky and Gogol has been taken up by Mikhail Epstein. Shelterlessness and lostness of humans in the surrealist geography, history and everyday life of Russia - a new version of Heidegger's "Verworfenheit" - is what he writes about very sensitively.

The psycho-sociology of Vladimir Kormer and Leon Rzhevsky is exclusively dedicated to the problem of the Homo Sovieticus. Inner conflicts and destructive, insoluble contradictions of this psyche are studied by Kormer. The second, Rzhevsky, aboards the same problem from another point of view stressing an effect of "underdeveloped personality" and its eternal juvenalism, i.e. non-maturity of a person under totalitarian rule<sup>\*</sup>.

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<sup>\*</sup> Voprosy filosofii, 1987, Nr.6; Syntaxis, 1987, Nr.17 (in Russian)



Particularly important in this context is the existential ethics of Maxim Kantor. He is not only a known painter but also a man of letters and author of several unpublished writings of philosophical and literary character. His main point is the problem of dehumanization in the contemporary world. He is one of those truly independent spirits who are worried by the fact that both historical itineraries (the Communist dictatorship and the Western democracy based on market economy) produce similar types of a conformist, survivalist personality with effaced feeling of what is good and bad.

So, the independent mind in Russia describes an anthropological catastrophe and a psyche which lost its basis and is not able to set a borderline between reality and fiction (as Epstein shows), between responsibility and irresponsibility (Rzhevsky), and between human values and moral decay (Kantor).

More examples would find a place in a book and not in an article. What is to mention here is a deduction of what had been said. Two important problems must follow this presentation and serve it as a sum total and as a perspective for future moves.

Firstly, there is a remarkable and until now completely obscure parallelism between definitions of anthropological situations on both sides - East and West. Nobody gave any attention to this problem until now. However, the perspective is promising if scholars begin comparing the western post-structuralist and post-modernist theory of man and culture with the independent thinking in Russia.

Secondly, there is a problem of the hypothetical correspondence between the philosophical image of man in Russia, on the one hand, and the human image in art produced nearby or in the orbit of Russian I.C. The already classical Conceptualism of Komar & Melamid followed by Neo-Conceptualist experimentation in Moscow up to Guerman Vinogradov and the group "Medical Hermeneutics", is only a part or a wing of the artistic panorama which demands for comparisons with philosophical ideas and imagery. The "conservative" Avant-Garde of Nazarenko, Nesterova, Gadayev etc. is clearly dedicated to the problem of "real irreality" and "irreal reality". One has the right to say that reality and fiction lose their opposition in this art.

Canvases by Kalinin, Ganikovsky, Naumova express dramatic feelings of pain, danger and evil sweeping this divine, eternal and excellent world. Among artists of new generations who entered the lines of the "alarmed anthropologism" in painting, Maxim Kantor is very significant. What to the sculpture, the names of Baranov and Gadayev



occupy the avant-scene. If they needed a motto, nothing would fit them better than the ancient formula "coincidentia oppositorum". Frailty and monumental bulkiness, reality and fiction, meaningfulness and meaninglessness do not exclude each other.

In a sense, art poses the big problem of our time - the problem of man who lost himself and has a big trouble trying to discern oppositions and build up a firm mental construction of the world (which needs oppositions).

Independent art and thinking in Russia have their mutual repercussions and common themes, like their counterparts in the West. Art critics in Europe and America cannot overlook theories and propositions of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida, Jameson. Probably art criticism in Russia is entering a similar stage and is ready to exchange ideas and images with the thinking of Kormer, Rzhevsky, Mamardashvili, Karashev.

Art research and philosophical anthropology are facing new perspectives, and common actions could bring us nearer to them.