

## ABSTRACTS

### Avant-Garde and Post-Modernism: Will They Survive After 2000?

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Prognostics is a slippery ground. Comparing what has been said in Europe around 1900 on the future of art, its institutions and infrastructures in the 20th century may be a very sobering experience concerning all human ability to make prognoses in general. This is why I would like to concentrate on some unquestionable parameters of art which have crystallized across the current century.

The history of art and ideas between 1900 – 2000 should have made us more open-minded and less fearful towards the idea that *Our* values (the human, rational, moral ones) are in this or that way related to the dimension of the *alien* ones, as transgression, insanity, biocosmic extra-humanness. The artistic and intellectual research in combining, amalgamating and fusing the two initial "codes" pervade the 20th century.

At its final stage, the State Communism of USSR collapsed, and the Cold War ended. The ironical History supplied the Soviet block with cure which were no less depressing and painful than the malaise itself. In the vast Post-Soviet space evolve strange procedures of washing off the old scab of blood and dirt with fresh blood and dirt of the new-born Clondike capitalism — a sort of historical buffonade not very entertaining for millions of frustrated, robbed, disconcerted people. After losing the clearly identifiable enemy, the political system of the West enters the period of uncertainty, vacillating between euphoric and frightening myths about Russians, Asians, Africans, Muslims, Latinos. They appear in these myths as inspiringly deep souls, terribly wild beasts, Barbarians, refined philosophers, sometimes inhuman, sometimes extremely human. They look like the "better I" and the "monstrous I" of the West.

Once more in their history people faced the idea that people cannot control reality, cannot look into truth, cannot rely on their cognitive and cultural arsenal. Civilisation is a disguised form of animality, of the inhuman "will to power", Nietzsche suggested. Man does not control even his own language; on the contrary, this is the language which defines what one thinks, sees and wants, argued Wittgenstein. According to Freud the conscient Ego does not control the psychic life, and is dependent on energies radiated by

subconscious strata. Methods of deconstructing the human pathos raise to the heights of specialisation and sophistication alongside with developments from Wittgenstein to Derrida, from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Foucault.

The Western civilisation imposes itself to the rest of the world by original means and methods, namely undermining and seemingly destroying the fundamentals of the civilisatory superiority over nature, body, biological forces, and contingency. Its supposed supremacy is no more being expressed by any direct or "literal" means; it is imposed but by the rule of contraries, namely through self-destruction and wasting, through carelessness and intrepidity in the demolition of the Temple of the *Saint Humanus* (Hans Sedlmayr) which was constructed for centuries, and which grew to the stronghold of the political and technological domination of the West in the contemporary world.

Similar to the cutting through a Samurai's own belly, or giving away and wasting of riches by an Indian chief, the new philosophical ideas have the task to demonstrate that there is no force, no power to exceed the force of the Waster of Values. The new thinking taught to maintain the Temple of Civilisation by force of dismantling its pillars. We are supposed to be proud of our participation in human culture because there is nothing to be proud of: pre-human and non-human factors, impulses, realities stay beyond any control. Making this fact clear and demonstrable, declaring our inability to govern language, sign, society, conscience, we enter the mystical dimension of a Waste Land. We "have" the experience of having nothing: instruments do not work, truths are questionable, values are relative. "Having" this idea, we grow over our impotence, and leave behind the hypothetical potentials of the enlightened reason. We have gained a magic formula for preserving the cult of human culture by abolition.

In the language of conservative Orthodox Russians there is a remarkably precise definition of this mentality: *there is nothing sacred for them*. Non-Western traditionalist cultures see it as profanation and sin. In the Western cultural context this approach is seen as a big advantage and instrument of a specific cultural power and aura of the Western freedom. Sacral is Waste and Demolition — a ritual of neglecting Holiness. We are told that the Temple of Man is over, and the cult has fallen. But the way they do it has to convey the message of a new cult of destroying cults, a temple of no-templeness. Negative strategies like Zen come to mind at once when we grasp the paradoxical logic of the *nouveau philosophic*; but how far could such parallels have sense?

The classical (historical) avant-garde of the early 20th century dealt with



the "birth of monsters". The sleeping reason opens their way out of the darkness (as the early Enlightenment thought it does), the vigilant mind forms them in bright light (as the Post-Humanist phase of development is close to believe). The Proto-Avant-Garde art already faced the inevitability of travels to the brink of night as well as shocking discoveries in the confines of reason and morals. Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Michail Vrubel payed visits to dimensions beyond the sane mind, and the sound and rational Luis Sullivan dreamt of purist technological constructions soaring up to the sky.

The fully developed High Avant-Garde offers a rich choice of paradoxical combinations of monstrous, delirious, contingent and other extra-human meanings with erudition, ratio, aesthetic balance, even with a moral pathos borrowed from the altar of Anthropos. Picasso at the time of the *Suite de Vollard*, rationalists and functionalists of the International movement in architecture (Le Corbusier, Gropius and others), masters of planetary and cosmic visions (Tatlin, Melnikov, B.Taut a.o.), extremists of Dadaism and Surrealism, and of course Marcel Duchamp handle in dozens of new ways and turns the very question which was posed from the beginning. They try to formulate the Logos of Chaos, or to diagnose Chaos in Logos, or to turn the sting of Logos against itself, as Nietzsche proposed in his *Untimely Considerations*.

What the Avant-Garde is never willing nor able to do is to forget Chaos and to embrace Logos. (Not need to say that forgetting Chaos is no threat for it.)

Judging by formal criteria (the institutional and financial ones) there were never a time as friendly to avant-gardist art, old and new, as the time point shortly before 2000. Even nations and societies which were until that time categorically unfit for extensive artistic innovations and radical experimentation with fundamental codes (like Russia and China) diligently partake at international infrastructures of the "actual" art (a notion theoretically driving the new art of the late century away from the historical Avant-Garde). The trouble was that the "actual" art had no own ideas, only some inherited ones, and it did as if it had discovered them, and loudly quarreled with "Avant-Garde Utopia". The presumed outstripping of the Avant-Garde was a masterly manipulated illusion. This was a situation of a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of a giant and criticizing the latter for not being high enough. The head of the dwarf was several inches higher.

Influential infrastructures of the "actual art" cared for packing anew the old Avant-Garde ideas and carrying them to the Postmodern consumer. Art magazines like *Flash Art* and *Parkett* achieved considerable results in this development of images. The process gained momentum. It evolved along the lines it should have taken. Everything around us is seen as significations, but they have no signified. Whatever one could wish or desire is legitimately human, but in what sense? Who is the being called *the Human* now, is it the same figure which has been the object of interest in past times? Motifs of the *Different* (extra-human and extra-cultural gestures) are being considered as signs of a universal Book (Derrida) or as naturalistic shadows of omnipresent electronic screens (Baudrillard). This is why the new radical biocosmic matter of the new art which seemingly has totally abandoned human measures is a representational, a signifiatory attribute. Public deals with signifiatory *aliens* and *differe*nts, with virtual realities of digital and verbal dimensions.

Revolt integrated into the system of civilisational loyalty. Experiencing the questionability of their Pyrrhus's victory, artists and thinkers of the late 20th century redundantly float in dreams of a free intellectual without roots nor anchor, of the ecstasy of a global participation in pleasure and desire, and pure playfulness beyond any moral judgement nor rational evaluation. A "drift of pleasure" as a new orientation was stressed by Achille Bonito Oliva.

So, we are going to build a Temple of Wasting, where any truth is possible, questionable and virtual (because no truth goes beyond the Book and the Cover of Maia). Therefore, any word, sign or postulate can be thrown away easily and with no consequences. If protagonists of the Neo-Avant-Garde were strongly committed to messages of important truths as Y.Klein, J.Beuyss, J.Kounellis were, radical experimental artists of the next generation raise their unwillingness to speak of world problems and "absolutes" to the main theme of their art. A priest's solemn gesticulation causes sarcasm. The elegant avoiding of ideology, messianism, pathos is served by slogans like *merry apocalypse*, *amusing to death* and *anything goes*. Running away (with comic grimasses) from any important content plays the role of a new content. This merry escape, among other things, can take on the form of ironic quotations and demonstratively ludicrous cultural reminiscences.

Art and criticism build up a strange quasi-religious mentality which minimalizes the distance between human values and transgressive experiences. At earlier dates we can observe direct interactions of the "unthinkable" and the anthropomorphous; world religions have readily interpreted moral and rational judgement as results of some higher revelations. However, after the



break of utopias and the spurt of communication technologies we can see a strange new mysticism of connecting "miracles" to human values by way of relativity, significativity of any mental or cultural act. Gods, spirits, insanity, absurd, otherness, cosmic outlooks loom large at any step, always possible and expectable, and as relative as the more prosaic entities. If they belong to some *other* side, this is the other side of some page of the Book. They will not open our eyes to the Truth, they will just enlarge our dictionary and give new turns to the grammar of culture emprisoned in linguistic games.

As Valery Prokofiev has put it, after centuries of more or less loyal adherence to the anthropocentric principle, art made in the 20th century an attempt to exist again at the borderline of human and extra-human meanings, and to be a mediator. It got involved in manifold experiments searching for new ways of transmitting some irrational, impossible, prohibited messages into cultural languages. It seemed to search for paths to reach the "double realm", *Doppelreich*, mysteriously hinted at in Goethe's visionary second part of *Faust*. Goethe obviously meant a dimension in which enlightened man of culture contacts experiences which stay beyond imperatives of civilisation. The Avant-Garde art invented, in its course, an extensive set of methods to combine the cultural discourse with demonstrative travels to *different* dimensions having no social, moral, logical nor axiological coordinates.

Art projected and erected a "double temple" as if ignoring oppositions and taboos of the humanist and Christian tradition. Probably, the Avant-Garde art (seen from the epistemological point of view) was about this fundamental move, this challenging problem: how to penetrate the "double realm" and then come back, how to formulate an experience of the unthinkable Chaos in terms of the organized Logos? How to be, in part and for some time, *diferent* beings, but stay with people on this side of the clasm, that is not going mad, not leaving for good to the world of crime or suicide?

The theoretical thinking is not able to utter this idea openly and loudly because a direct talk of fundamental questions makes fear in society, and thus it is being censored by the majority. The direct thinking of Nietzsche and Bataille was and is a scarecrow for many people. Metaphors are being invented which could be socially acceptable: West and East, centre and periphery, innovation and tradition, Europeism and ethnocentrism. Or: rhizome, nomadic thinking, representation, simulation. Art and literary critics, together with the allied thinkers discuss these topics in their theoretical meetings. As a matter of fact, they metaphorically deal with quite another things, they are simply not ready to confess to themselves what are their real

preoccupations.

Art critics are enthusiastically absorbed in discussions about the "new German Renaissance", "Russian boom", or "new London situation", as if these problems really are *the* problems of art around 2000. They are trying to detect the points which concentrate, as contemporaries would like to think, the key problems of the period. These problems are there indeed: the peculiar German combination of aggressive brutality with metaphysics and philosophy of history in works by Kiefer and Immendorff; efforts to bring together a Neoplatonic mysticism with an anarchistic total revolt in Kabakov's installations; the "new Dandyism" of Damien Hirst and other British artists showing a kind of refined anti-social gesture. Should not an art historian feel that behind these facts there are questions posited in the "heroic" period of Nietzsche, Freud, Dostoyevsky, James Joyce, Kandinsky, Picasso, André Breton?

For those who are studying the patterns of vision and mind there is not much sense in the fact that the German money and organisation made the German artists soar to highest places in international game of prestige around 1980. Similarly, not much importance there is in the fact that Russians turned for a short while fashionable in the world of images around 1990 thanks to Gorbachev and "Perestroika". Students of patterns will appreciate the strategy of finding Logos in Chaos, and that of Chaos in Logos — the inner moving force of Avant-Garde.

There are reasons to think that at the end of the century we are facing not a new stage, not a revolution of fundamentals, but rather a weakened version of the older Avant-Garde — something like a vaccination with an abated virus in order to mobilize mechanisms of interiorisation of those "profane illuminations" which gave society chocking experience and travels to the other side of being. All this, as Walter Benjamin suggested, were vitally important for strengthening the survival potential of a civilisation. We are not in a very promising position for a new stage of art as message. But we are in a good position for curating, exposing, conserving, studying and even understanding the giant Avant-Garde and the dwarfy Post-Modernism sitting on his neck.