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## THE CULTURE OF VICTORIOUS DEFEAT.

### Understanding Art Now.

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Judging by artworks and literary creations of the epoch, their authors embraced the "apocalyptic" viewpoint onto history, society and man. Variants and versions could be utterly various. They could be religiously founded or atheistic; they sometimes showed an extreme pessimism as well as farcical intonations. Conservative and leftist approaches contended with each other; imprints of a certain national mentality constantly tainted products of art and literature.

Great and unsurmountable as those differences could appear, there was at least one constant and common feature in all creations of the century. Art and literature most of all spoke of collapses, breaks, dead ends. Creators never could forget the problem of a "failure of civilizatory creation." Sometimes artists or thinkers set out to save the world from this misfortune (as Malevich or Heidegger did). Sometimes, to the contrary, pathos and ethos of position consisted in statement of radical irreparability if the cultural

defeat.

In literary and artistic developments since around 1900 the idea of the "downbreak of cultural values" can be traced in a most visible way.

In the two initial decades of the century, the incipient avant-garde in visual arts of France, Germany, and Russia made a decisive step towards the "Utopia of barbarity and primitivity". This is to say, Fauvists, Expressionists and Primitivists put forward their slogans of the irreparable barrenness of the Museal culture of the past. They turned their eye to the supposed vital force of early and primitive cultures. Artists of the Twentieth century, from Matisse to Baselitz, as a rule, were enthusiastic admirers of early cultures.

Among Walter Benjamin's notes there is a short but significant observation: modernity (Gegenwart), writes Benjamin, is usually seen as a catastrophic process; this approach clearly points to a Messianic attitude (W.Benjamin. "Gesammelte Schriften", Bd.1. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972, S.1243).

Thinking and imagination of humans revolved around the fearful problem of downfall, crepuscule, collapse, final agony of Western cultural norms. But beware God to represent this apocalyptic vision as a way to the bleak and powerless mediocrity. Downfall, crisis and collapse were portrayed as a strikingly impressive and historically grandiose process, as a phenomene of global, and even cosmic, bearing.

It is so terribly wonderful, so consuming, igniting, touching, grandiose, sublime a catastrophe! A delicious catastrophe!

Landscapes of ruins and histories of breakdown fascinated art and literature of the epoch. It might seem that such bitter and terrifying writers as Kafka or Artaud never enjoyed pictures of catasrophe. But one has to remember how Kafka's heroes driven to unbearable situations and hopelessly caught in traps are confronted with mysterious forces which seemingly represent some transcendent Powers. Among them are unknown Judges, mysterious Gates, and the unattainable Castle. Such magnificent Romantic attributes make the life of victimized man, in a way, extremely important. Man is small and powerless, but his life is still marked by the presence of some higher Powers.

Western culture incessantly deals with the idea of the "failure of civilization". But failure in question was seen as sometning much more significant than any success. This was a winning, an appealing strategy.

A strategy which tries to gain souls through self-demasking and destructive self-criticism, not through stories of success.

Idea of a "victorious defeat" is easily traceable in Western thinking and art. Characteristically, Oswald Spengler described processes of decay and freezing of Western civilization under the shadow of the majestic word "Untergang". Spengler meant that Western cultural paradigms degenerate and die, but they degenerate and die in a most majestic way. The term "Untergang" makes one think of grandiose natural calamities, or of the magnificent "Death of Gods" in Richard Wagner's style.

Thus, the cultural system concentrated its efforts on the problem of its own inconsistency, imperfection, or failure. How can it be possible?

Culture deals with crush and defeat, but what is crushed, and who is defeated? It concentrates on the problem if crisis, fault, misfortune,



breakdown, end. What crisis is meant, what fault, what failure, what end are being thought of, exorcised, evoked in this culture?

Obviously, breakdown, crush, crisis and other descriptions of a negative situation point to the central value of culture - its ethical heart. All other values - aesthetic, political and other ones - were in fact additive or obligatory to the central sacrifice of the epoch - the sacrifice of the ethical organ. This way comes literature which feasts the advent of free extra-ethical energies. Its central personage an anti-hero who is either indifferent to ethical imperatives or hateful towards them.

Man as he was portrayed by Freud, Heidegger, Derrida and other minds of the epoch cannot even dream of finding something called "truth" or "good". His cultural means are not fit for that. These means, as they are described in the Modern thinking, are fit and ripe for failure. Culture as it was seen by its innovators was doomed to cherish illusions, to get into trouble, to catch oneself in traps, to live in constant crisis, to fall down. The maximum of what the poor devil man can hope is to believe in Freud, Heidegger, Derrida, and other great captains of thinking vessels, and to acknowledge insurmountable limits of human cultural horizons.

This Sado-Masochistic self-love stands in a direct connection with the main instinct of living organisms - the instinct of self-preservation. This instinct, in all its range and might, is needed not at the moment when humans feel good and safe, nothing being able to put in question their bodily, psychic and social welfare. Self-preservation as the moving force has to actively grip around for solutions when Hosapi feels beaten, driven to a corner, and standing on the brink of an abyss. At this moment one often tries to imagine that you are driven to a magnificent corner, and the abyss you will now fall into is great and universally significant, and being beaten you look much more important and attiring than being unbeaten.

What thinkers spoke of artists represented and mirrored in what they did with their hands.

Cubists, Futurists, Abstractionists, and masters of Surrealist art in various modes demonstrated impossibility of truth, discontinuity of reality, lapses and collapses of Museal aesthetics, delirium of ratio and common sense, and other arguments in favor of the supposed failure of cultural creation.

Art critics and historians of art were highly interested in those matters. In fact, they predominantly perceived art and literature of the last decades of the century from the point of view of deficit of some value or meaning. As soon as art students faced works of Bruce Naumann, Cindy Sherman, Edward Kienholz, Kiki Smith, Jeff Wall, Sigmar Polke, or some other star of radical art, there was the theme of disappearance, crush, decomposition, loosing of coordinates, lack of authenticity, denial of meanings. Some form of absence took precedence over any form of presence of values and meanings.

For example very common was the talk of the absence or disappearance of human body which has played such a huge role in cultures of the past. Body, as they say, is getting progressively non-authentic, virtual, it suffers mutations, mutilations and other monstrous transformations. It sometimes comes to be entirely artificial, a "Kulturprodukt". It is then mechanical or



mannequin-like. Sometimes, to the contrary, body returns to nature and forgets about its cultural links and components. Then it turns to be a piece of flesh living a life which does not differ from animal life.

In both cases, artists (as seen by critics) state loss, fall, abolishment, failure, deficit, or crisis of values defined earlier as "soul", "reason" or "morality".

The theme of bestialisation of man has deep traditions in Russian art and literature of Modern and Postmodern times. At the line where the 20th century yielded its rights to the next one we can closely observe "bestial" projects of Oleg Kulik. His activities gravitate towards the common center - that is the idea of "humans returning to animal world". This is why Oleg Kulik presents, or represents in various techniques such things as sexual relations of human bodies with animal organisms, the animal Utopia of family life of humans and dogs, and other subjects known in the chronicles of Moscow art and its Western travels.

The general idea of photographs, drawings, installations and performances by the new radical culture is quite clear. Homo Sapiens has failed, so we have to draw or conclusions from this fact. Let us renounce to strange ideal constructs known as family, religion, State, politics, museal art, etc. The whole big enterprise of culture has suffered a fiasco. Let us see this real fact face to face. This idea looks indeed more convincing in Russia than anywhere else in the period of Troubled Time of 1990 - 2000. One cannot help thinking that not any single group, class, or ideology fell through in Russia but the human project as such has suffered a fiasco here.

If the effacement of human being predicted by Michel Foucault took place indeed, it happened in Russia of course.

Thus let us - the new Bestialist art tells us - get busy with our normal animal business, that is sexual intercourse, feeding, playing and other occupations of bipede animals living in close interrelations with other species. Oleg Kulik treats this central problem of his with pathos, gusto, and ironical alleviation. He lets us feel a kind of "lamenting self-adoration".

This is to say the artist indicates not just failure but a portentous failure bringing losses and defeats worth victories and successes. Philosophical and psychological conceptions of the 20th century stood far away from Christian or Antique theories of human inconsistency. With pathos and admiration thinking and art saw either the allegedly hopeless stand of the "human project", or their own radical demystifications of this project. The Western self-criticism was done in the name of self-assertion, not in that of self-annihilation.

Sado-Masochist pleasure of contemplating the sublime collapse has found its ways into cynical and idealist systems, into the Left and into the Right.

Literary works and anti-literary subversions, films and architectural constructions of the late 20th century give expression to this ambiguity. Suffice it to remind the reader of such an iconic architectural monument as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bilbao (Spain) projected by Frank Gehry and finished in 1999. Covered by a shining titanium "skin", it clearly displays the idea of a "splendid destruction". It partly seems to explode,



partly makes the viewer think of melting away. Though, it does not grow irreparably formless nor senseless; it just alludes to destruction and disruption, but never arrives at the stage of ruins and carcasses. The building (anti-building?) points to the idea that contemporary art and artistic vision is busy self-destructing, capitulating to floats of subconsciousness, and transgressing all transgressions; but as clear and sovereign sounds the mute voice of Power and Richness. The opaque luminiscence of the "cosmic" cover hypnotically makes believe that this destruction is a sublime and awe-commanding phenomene.

Actually, viewers are invited to embrace a sacral attitude to destruction and decay.

Art criticism at the end of the century was not as simple-minded as to cheer at this new art. Talks of crisis, disappearance of art, and dramatic situations in art never cease in criticism. But criticism around 2000 relishes the well-known ambivalent strategy: self-adoration in the process of lamenting faults, deficits, and defeats. Language and thinking in criticism are revealing enough. Reading in texts of such known critics as Thomas McEvilley, Norman Bryson, or Kim Levin, or remembering art-critical texts by Arthur Danto we cannot avoid the idea that their cultic stance towards the system of art and art criticism directly grows from their lamenting of cultural downfall.

They deal with final, disturbing, even lethal processes in art and culture. But means and methods of Postmodernist criticism combine dramatic tension, academic erudition and discipline, deconstructive relativism, and ironic stance of a charismatic entertainer. If the reader of this critical production tries to visualise his impressions, and to imagine who is the author of criticism, a strange figure will emerge before his eyes: a serious Academic who, bringing forth his obscure and enigmatic learned talk at the same time in a grotesque and obscene way dances on ruins he describes.

Language, style, modus of criticism acquired the status of a notable artistic phenomene of the century. Criticism plays a special role in art and literature since Hyppolite Taine, Matthew Arnold, Julius Meier-Graefe. Critical interventions by Apollinaire and Clement Greenberg were actually a part of the philosophy of culture. Then the latter smoothly grew to the "diagnostics of civilization". The ambivalence of the "lamenting self-adoration" blossomed in this border area.

Civilization has lost its way but its very fault and failure is historically important and, paradoxically, a great success. Thanks God it has lost its way, and chose not to be dully correct, and drably conformist. Something like this is to read in Western thinking, if one sees it from axiological perspective.

As a fact of cognition, or gnoseological phenomene, Western culture gives a strange picture as well. Messages of cultural distress and decay (in aesthetics, rationality, religion, technology, human relations, history etc.) are brought to our attention in the guise of a culturally valid argumentation. This is the strangeness noticed by observers since the beginning of the century. Ideas of barbarity, destruction, wildness, revolt exist in culturally developed, fine artistic forms. Artists and thinkers do



not just howl and bark when they defend their anti-values. They appeal to advanced civilizational means.

Artists of the 20th century have constantly and in various ways put in doubt basic values of culture. But doing this they resorted to basic values themselves. They readily involved in their methods and works some aspects of philosophies or psychological theories; Freud, Bergson, Sartre, Structuralists and Post-Structuralists were seen as "natural allies" of artists.

Artists went for inspiration and help to esoteric teachings and occult doctrines, to mystical contemplation, esoteric cults, optical schooling, sociological studies, historical reminiscences. Matisse and Paul Klee, A. Breton and Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and many others were quite remarkable virtuosos of cultural languages and values. Neo- and Post-Modernists had this peculiar duplicity, too. Only some Americans, as for example Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, swaggered with their mistrust towards Europe, and with their elementary and "natural" approach to contemporary life.

Those challenging gestures soon dispersed into thin air. Western artists of around 1950 - 2000, including Americans, came to be "masters of culture" - but such masters which in most masterly ways and with high cultural spirits waged wars against culture.

To struggle against culture with the help of methods of culture - does it mean to act "pro", or to act "contra"? Neo-Modernism and Post-Modernism were, in this sense, champions of ambiguity. They acted along the principle of "procontra". Magistral works of Land-art and Conceptualism can corroborate this supposition.

What could be done with artistic and thinking practices of the epoch? Probably some special approaches are needed. Finding contradictions is not enough. Contradictions are striking indeed. We observe art and thinking which again and again, in different ways and from different angles refer to the end and destruction of cultural universe - but their referring to it evolves in languages of culture. But what exactly could mean this apparent contradiction? To begin with, understanding art and thinking of the epoch needs special methods and approaches.

How to approach a valid interpretation of art and thinking as they were in the 20th century? What terms and procedures may help us "sine ira et studio" consider art which denies art with artistic means? From what side could a student aboard such ways of thinking which put in doubt or totally reject the mental depot of civilization - but, doing it, eagerly take up instruments from this depot?

What are perspectives and chances to deal with this strange culture of this strange epoch? Describing a victorious defeat, an open dead end, a successful collapse is an occupation which hardly corresponds to any linear logic. What is left is embracing a non-linear strategy.

I am not sure that Academic approaches, on the one hand, and Post-Modernist relativism, on the other hand, will help a lot in understanding art now. I only put my hope to perspectives of new cultural studies.