

Co-operative for creative research "Krasnaya shpana"

To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong?

Malevich Project

2019

The Co-operative for Creative Research “Krasnaya Shpana” is an artist collective and consists of three members: Alexey Markin (Hamburg), Olga Shirokostup and Illia Yakovenko (Kyiv)

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Part 1

Project

About the Project

Since 2016, the **Co-operative for Creative Research “Krasnaya Shpana”** has been working on a project dedicated to the historical avant-garde in contemporary politics. As part of the artistic research on the first stage of the project, **Krasnaya Shpana** collected and analyzed materials from exhibitions and other events and sought out public statements by political and cultural figures on the importance of the avant-garde in Russia and Ukraine. The second stage of the project was the joint implementation of a series of performative acts with the German cultural institution **Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik**.

In February and May 2018, **Krasnaya Shpana** presented the first and second parts of the performance **To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project**. Representatives of the Hamburg Russian-Ukrainian community took part in this work. In the first part of performance, the participants made statements to the public after a week of preparation. The second part of performance was musical, built around a script composed of text fragments proposed by **Krasnaya Shpana**.

Krasnaya Shpana’s artistic research is divided into **cases**. For example, **Shpana** is interested in an attempt to rename Kyiv’s Boryspil Airport in honor of the artist Kazimir Malevich, which was supported by a statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Pavlo Klimkin. Other cases include the use of symbols of the historical avant-garde during mass events, such as on the closing day of the Winter Olympics in

Sochi (2014) or during the draw for the 2018 World Cup. Individual statements can also become cases. Thus, Vladimir Putin’s dialogue with Ilya Glazunov about Malevich’s **Black Square** and “vulgar left shame” during the People’s Front Conference in 2013 or Patriarch Kirill’s statement about the connection between the **Black Square** and Malevich’s soul at the Bishops Cathedral (2015) became **cases**. At the moment, the number of **cases** is confidently growing.

As **Krasnaya Shpana** performed its research, it became obvious that art institutions are actively popularizing the heritage of the historical avant-garde. Thanks to new technologies, museum marketing and official support, attention to the historical avant-garde is maintained at the highest level. Examples include large-scale exhibitions such as **Chagall bis Malewitsch. Die russischen Avantgarden** at the Albertina Museum (Vienna, 2016), **Malevich +**, Myshtetskyi Arsenal (Kyiv, 2016), **Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932** in the Royal Academy of Arts (London, 2017), **A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde** in MoMA (New York, 2017), **Somebody 1917** in the State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow, 2017) and many other held around the world, including those related to the centenary of the October Revolution. We should not forget about other forms of cultural mediation performed by art institutions, such as the cooperation between the Tretyakov Gallery and the Moscow Metro on the project **Intensive XX** (2016–2017), when, among other things, an agitation train

was created, or about the compilation of the **Encyclopedia of Russian Avant-garde**, the multimedia installation **The Golden Age of Russian Avant-garde** presented by Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke at the Manege Central Exhibition Hall (2014), the international conference **Kazimir Malevich. Kyiv Aspect** (2016), and other activities aimed at popularizing the Ukrainian avant-garde specifically.

A separate research topic was the importance of the avant-garde and modernism for Russian and Ukraine foreign policy and the achievement of international political and commercial goals. There are demonstrable correlations between Russian-German gas contracts and the financing of cultural exchange. In 2007, the exhibition **Bonjour Russia**, financed by the German company E.ON, Gazprom's partner in gas production and transportation to Europe, took place in Düsseldorf. In 2006, an exhibition on Malevich was held in Helsinki, which was jointly visited by Vladimir Putin and Finnish President Tarja Halonen.

Over the past 30 years, the historical avant-garde has come to be included in national art history narratives on post-Soviet territory after being cast into official oblivion for a long period during Soviet times. We are now witnessing a new wave of attention to the historical avant-garde, which coincides with the conflict in the east of Ukraine and the rise of national/nationalist attitudes in society. In connection to this, proposals for greater inclusion of iconic avant-garde figures in the national culture have emerged from

the culture industry and the cultural establishment, together with an emphasis on their connection with folkloric and national roots. This has been described by Illia Yakovenko, an artist and a member of the Krasnaya Shpana group in his text **From Suprematism to Nationalism** (published in **Preface**, Method Fund, 2016). In Russia, such aspirations may be confirmed by considering the statement of Zelfira Tregulova, the director of the State Tretyakov Gallery, on the Russian avant-garde as part of Russian identity.

It should be noted that while the heritage of the avant-garde serves as material for constructing **Russianness/Ukrainianness** under the conditions of the gradual disintegration of the post-Soviet self-consciousness, advertising and mass popular content are also retrospectively making use of the pathos of newness and **revolutionism** in avant-garde art. The most well-known cases, noted in the Krasnaya Shpana's research, are the branding of the official Russian tourist agency and the safety video of Ukrainian airline UIA. Thus, the historical avant-garde becomes a part of the culture industry and undergoes a recovery process, while critical art remains either without institutional attention or under direct repression in Russia. The danger of attacks on alternative artistic spaces and left-wing artists by right-wing radicals remains in Ukraine as well.

Krasnaya Shpana's research raises a question about the possibility of using the term **Russian avant-garde** with a purely territorial or temporal designation, and asks whether in the current political situation it is not

becoming a term of confrontation. Justification of the use of “**Russian avant-garde**” to refer to a specific period was made in Russian art historiography by Andrey Krusanov (2010), although this phrase was used much earlier and came to us, according to Gleb Pospelov, from the post-war art history tradition of Western European countries. Andrey Kovalev (1994) wrote about the inconsistencies of the term **Russian avant-garde**, noting that it includes the “specific Western mythology about Russia”.

Confirming **Krasnaya Shpana**’s concerns about the contemporary perception of the phrase “**Russian avant-garde**” as being tainted by Russian cultural expansion, the Ukrainian journalist and writer Oleksiy Radynski points out in his article **Shchors, the Avant-Garde and the World Revolution** (published on the internet portal **Prosto-ry**), the inconsistency of considering the avant-garde as a national phenomenon, since it goes against the international character of the artistic movement itself. In her article **MoMA Can Also Be Wrong, or the Battle for the Ukrainian Avant-Garde** in Art Ukraine, Anastasia Gerasimova reviewed the Russian avant-garde exhibition at MoMA, highlighting what she saw as the erroneous curatorial decision to indicate the nationality of artists, and criticizing Russia’s policy of “appropriation of artists”. The situation around the Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde raises a great number of questions, which undoubtedly require theoretical clarification and public discussion, and at the same time need special consideration in

relation to the tragic ongoing military and political confrontation.

Of course, it is important to understand that the issues described above cannot be considered and understood solely within one discipline, they require an interdisciplinary approach that would not only consider the historical avant-garde and current cultural and political situation from an art-theoretical or art-historical perspective but would also establish connections to a wider field of research into postsocialism/postcommunism and the sociology of culture. In some cases, intersections with theories of postcolonial research would also be possible. In recent years, these theories have often been used to analyze cultural phenomena, including at European universities, but their applicability to the situation of post-Soviet reality still needs to be determined.

I want to stress that **Krasnaya Shpana** does not see this project as a kind of finished work of art and does not try to give quick answers to the questions raised. We are rather driven by the desire to better understand these issues and enliven the discussion for a wider audience.

Project Report

To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project Work in Progress

Direct work with the invited participants began a week before the first part of the performance. At the daily meetings, **Krasnaya Shpana** spoke about the research, debated with the participants, did joint exercises and played. Joint workshops were organized: Anna Semenova-Ganz was engaged in bodily practices, Olga Shirokostup conducted voice exercises, and Genia Odesser demonstrated acting skills. During the discussion **Is Avant-garde National?** with the honorary professor of Eastern European history of the University of Hamburg, Frank Golczewski, the issues of terminology and relations between countries in the post-Soviet space, especially between Russia and Ukraine, were discussed. Anna Vodolina, who came from Moscow especially for the event, organized a game called "We.Malevich", which helped the project participants to get inside their characters. In the K4 hall at Kampnagel, where the February performance took place, wall-screens were installed and three performance zones were defined. The audience could move from one zone to another and take seats. Subtitles or photo and video materials were projected on the screens. At the entrance area, a small exhibition was put up, displaying research materials, items used

in the preparation of the performance and artifacts brought by the participants themselves. On a piece of fabric, the artist Aleksey Shchigalev wrote a quote from Daniil Kharms "**Give me your eyes! I will dissolve the window on my head!**" which became a motto for the whole event. At the beginning of performance, a video was projected onto the screens, showing both clips from the Internet related to our research and documentary footage of the preparatory workshop, put together by Anna Semenova-Ganz into a short film.

The combination of exhibition and subsequent performance created a hybrid situation. It remained unclear whether the performance was part of the exhibition, where the participants and the audience were on display, or whether the exhibition was only a source of additional information that could help to reveal the meaning of the performance. This idea became a kind of experiment: a proposal to find or develop the most successful way to present artistic research. In the end, not only results of the joint work and the materials gathered during the research were presented in space, but the participants themselves with their bodies and thoughts stood in front of the public. Although all the participants

To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project Part 2

included their thoughts on the avant-garde or Malevich in the presentation, it was a surprise for **Krasnaya Shpana** that no one expressed a willingness to work with the specific materials that we had assembled and offered. The cases we distributed in folders remained unclaimed this time.

The situation changed during the work on the second part of the performance. First, only half of the participants remained, and second, by creating a common script, we now wanted to focus on collective actions and return to closer examination of artistic research on the avant-garde in the context of contemporary cultural policy.

After an unsuccessful attempt to write a script online, a different solution was found. As a result, the script was compiled directly from fragments of texts which, according to the group, have become part of the avant-garde discourse. Participants read them to the audience, interpreting the texts as they thought was true. Readings were accompanied by the musical improvisation of the band **Maschin Kaput**.

Translated by Maria Vorotilina

Watching an Alien on Stage

Alexey Markin

The art-project, “**To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project**”, is impossible to look at from a single perspective. This artistic act doesn’t function as a simple sum of statements by several artists, but rather as a collective excess – a quality which lets a collective work be more than just what was said and done by each participant. My understanding of the project, which may very well differ from that of the other participants, is that the subject is an “alien” (ein Fremder) who is being rejected by a government of national unity. The subjectivity of the “alien” is specific to the local context and provides grounds for exclusion: not only from everydayness, but also from the local artistic context. This exclusion shouldn’t be confused with the coercion of a migrant to fit into the dominant national culture (Leitkultur), because exclusion from the artistic world is determined by practical measures and is seen as legitimate. However, this legitimacy is only granted because most citizens don’t identify their nation state with a certain order of things and because they see themselves and their own cultural preferences as a norm, while regarding the culture brought by aliens as a deviation from this norm.

Contemporary institutions are aware of this exclusion and are trying to compensate for this kind of social normativity within the art world, either by creating curatorial teams of diverse ethnic, gender and class backgrounds, or by supporting international projects. This is how greater cultural diversity can be achieved. Many institutions nevertheless cannot make this concept a reality because of insufficient funding or a lack of political motivation; that’s why it was particularly important for the realization of the **Krasnaya Shpana** project to find an institution which would be politically willing to take a certain amount of risk: namely, to let “aliens” embody their ideas – to express themselves. Among the institutions in the Hamburg contemporary art scene which possess the potential to put on major productions, there are only few of this kind, and Kampnagel turned out to be the one that was most open to realizing the project we had in mind.

The concept of the work was for the group to perform an intervention of contemporary art into the theatrical landscape. This made it necessary to turn a body of artistic research into a collective performative praxis. Working together with the Russian-Ukrainian community, we sought to follow two guiding rules. The first was to avoid formal representations of this community. The second was to develop a working process that would open up possibilities for self-realization by artists who don’t have access to the infrastructure of theatrical and artistic production. Those participating artists, invisible to arts management, Gregory Sholette defines as “**creative dark matter**”. In his opinion, they constitute a large segment of

the art world and, adapting Agamben, can be called “bare art.”¹ In the European context, furthermore, the work of migrant artists can be considered even more bare. They find themselves in the doubly invisible zone: invisible as artists and as migrants. The appearance of those artists in the role of active subjects in the emblematic theatrical space is a sanctioned intervention of aliens into the world of the culture industry, “big culture”, where only stars are present, while the creative dark matter of the migrants remains unseen.

A special challenge for the project turned out to be the Russian-Ukrainian conflict within the Hamburg community, which occurred in spite of the distance separating us from the actual theatre of conflict. Over the years, starting from the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbass, protests, demonstrations and humanitarian aid collections involving both sides have been taking place in the city. That’s why our very focus on problematizing the understanding of art as a purely national phenomenon was seen by certain project observers as suspicious. They argued that art can’t exist where there is war. Others, by contrast, welcomed this topic as a means of overcoming mutual alienation.

The metaphor of the avant-garde in art is often understood to stand for a rupture into the future, but the **Krasnaya Shpana** project seeks, in the first place, to address the present of avant-garde. Putin’s Russia doesn’t aim at representing itself on the international arena through the works of contemporary critical artists. For her, the “Russian avant-garde,” together with other fossils such as oil and gas, participates in trade with the West. The art of the historical avant-garde is seen by Western cultural elites as purely Russian and as formerly emancipatory; however, since this view is lacking temporal references, there emerges a totally different, ahistorical framework which represents Russia as a kind of eternal revolutionary, though not one that will undermine the foundations of museums, but instead one who sets a militant exoticism of avant-garde against Western civilizational hegemony. In this romanticized view of the Russian post-Soviet space, “living in a different temporality than the rest of the world,” the avant-garde turns into a merely superficial marker of “Russianness.”

Translated by Polina Sandler

[1] Marco Baravalle: Dark Matter Games. An Interview with Gregory Sholette, Kuba Szreder and Noah Fischer, Art Leaks Gazette, September 2017, pp.103-116.

Part 1 — project



Four Phases of Anxiety

Olga Shirokostup



Frame from a video found on YouTube by searching for «Shot of a signal rocket»

Fragility of association

We continue to choose the “group” for our work – an unstable structure full of controversies. We keep to confine each other to the same anxiety: I cannot be sure whether this fragile formation will persist for several more months until the project is complete, but it is still stable now. At least while this publication is underway, we still represent a group of three participants with different backgrounds that was formed four years ago in Russia.

We did not have the opportunity to meet in person regularly, so the only thing we managed to do at that time (importantly, with no funding available) was start a research project. This involved gathering new material (predominantly from public online sources) and holding regular discussions via skype. At the same time, we shared news and talked about cultural events that we had witnessed. Thus our project “To whom does the avant-garde belong?” began in 2016.

It did not seem possible for us to “establish any kind of truth” against the backdrop of uncertainty and an ideologically charged media landscape in our countries of residence. But our talks always provided insights, and the anxiety subsided. To grasp this fragile “something”, we proceeded to make an archive of our research – as a collage, and not as an analytical guide.

It is probably appropriate to note that dialogue in its various forms became the main “tool” we used in our work – we had always preferred conversations over collective or individual text writing. When interviewing a fellow artist or talking to an expert, we often voiced our opinions regarding the questions being asked and frequently entered into discussions. To refrain from commenting, to stay out of the conversation for personal reasons – this is also an

option which any participant of our group may elect. “Krasnaya Shpana” are not unanimous on most of the subjects we address – we disagree on many things, so the texts in this paper should be perceived as the personal opinions of specific individuals. My view may clash with the invited author’s view, it may not coincide with another group participant, but this is particularly valuable for me. A state of consensus inside the collective would frighten me rather than make me happy.

What is wrong with us?

I was constantly anxious about the research we were doing over the last three years. I was asking myself: “What’s wrong with us?” But I was unable to ask my fellow participants this question (because they seemed so involved). Why do we choose to focus on a theme that is so threadbare? Could we really break new ground in a place where a huge number of people – art historians, artists on both sides of the ocean – had carried out excavations before (and concurrently with us)? My professional experience (in another capacity of mine, I am a curator and museum employee, and, for four years now, have been supporting artists from various countries carrying out research projects in Russia) told me that at least one discovery, if only a minor one, is made in the process of every good art project. Artists try to find an unexpected narrative, expose and describe it, and introduce it in the field of discourse. Of course I wanted us to achieve something. But as time passed, I observed the progress of our process, and this progress was different. In an attempt to deal with the anxiety and be of use to the group, I found a justification: it is important to address “big” topics, pointing out the controversies inherent therein in order to scrutinize and crush them (or at least break off small pieces, to keep to the logic of this metaphor), and subsequently reassemble them. I came to realize that this could well become a part of the artistic strategy (because strategy is always a justification, isn’t it?). I convinced myself and am now trying to convince you that it is necessary to investigate not only things in the shadows but also those which appear right in the spotlight – as with a text where someone underlines a few words or phrases, causing the remaining words, meanings and eventually the context to start fading and disappearing. So what are we doing? We are simply trying to build miscellaneous contexts, irregular and ambiguous, and drafting and presenting them is an energetic performative work, but also research.

Out of focus

I had been worried about our “digressions” ever since the first days of our work on “To whom does the avant-garde belong”. The research came down to collecting more new cases, ideas and opinions extending the context and the range of problems which we could touch upon “as we go”. It was difficult to stop – and now we find ourselves discussing what the avant-garde means today, what avant-garde is in the context of post-colonial theory and so on.

The “diffusion”, the generalizations, the inability to focus irritated me. I later realized that this lack of focus is apparently another method of ours, though not one we have reflected on, of course: a method which we would not have called a method. Even though we conducted the research for several years, discussed the associated materials with a great number of people and have even compiled a book – this book, I am not completely sure what this project is about.

Who “owns” the work?

Our research engaged other people right from the beginning, and I constantly felt the presence of others. The fabric of the research itself consisted of others’ opinions, dissimilar views (mostly different from mine). Thus an archive was being put together, thus the performance scenarios were being written – words uttered by “alien mouths”, “direct speech in quotation marks.” Even now, having accepted the “challenge” of writing my own essay for this paper, I feel ill at ease: I can only speak for myself. And when I describe the experiences of our group and other people who were involved in the project, I am exposed to the risk of being biased and claiming that something which is actually just my own version of the events is an absolute truth.

Working on the first part of the performance (with invited participants) we realized that the collective creation of a space where everyone can talk about themselves using the proposed set of scenarios was becoming the main task. Each of us selected something they could interact with from among the research materials – for example, identifying one’s own experience with the experience of our research protagonists, arguing from a proposed point of view, “playing” a character, etc. It was precisely in this stage that the “creativity” reflected in the name of our collective broke free. Playing with materials, attempting to appropriate them, to find something in common between the dry texts

and the live experience, one's identity, attempts to express oneself "along the lines" of the research. What initially upset us ("Why are the participants not willing to read the proposed books with us, to look up materials?") turned out to be a meaningful and extremely important stage of the work as a whole. But this meaningfulness also proved to be an escape, a capitulation – we could not picture a common work, did not venture to make a convincing joint statement. We did not have the strength to struggle for the result: everyone "agreed to disagree", refused to fight for the common.

As for the second part of the performance, we approached it differently. We worked out a technique to take into account everything that had happened during the research over two years. The key questions we had when preparing the second part and which still trouble me were: how is the research material "translated" into performative material? Is the research performative *per se*?

We managed to single out research stages and consider them as an almost corporeal process which we directly lived out for a long period of time and which engaged various functions – intellectual, verbal, motor functions.

The early stage was about accumulating information, collecting cases – a bare minimum of materials were discarded, everything found was read, discussed and "digested". Our three-headed research creature was willingly fed everything and anything we could find.

Later we went our own ways, I effectively fell out of the common process; Alexey and Illia analyzed and organized the information. Thanks to them, each block in this paper has its major theme, title, key characters. The texts became for a while the key agents in the preparation of the work. One may say that the work had already become performative.

In the next stage of "assembly", the main task was to try and reproduce physically another person's speech, to articulate it with one's own vocal apparatus – i.e. to delegate one's body to animating the found material. Our performance should not be considered the project's final outcome – we treat it as an especially important event because the work is carried to the scene; a classical division between spectators and performers takes place. We did not plan to erase this boundary for the hundredth time – with our bodies and texts having been engaged for so long in such complicated research relations, this issue became irrelevant. Still, the fact that the project was realized in a theatrical institution is very important for us, this encouraged us to create events for viewers. This a further significant issue which I am not able to consider carefully in the essay format, and I am sorry that it has not been given enough at-

tention in this paper for various reasons.
Perhaps, we need to continue our search where the flares are going up, illuminating new ranges for us.

Translated by Anastasiia Mednikova

Challenging the State of Nation

Illia Yakovenko

The artwork “To whom does the avant-garde belong” originated from the need of the Co-operative for Creative Research “Krasnaya Shpana” to figure out the reasons for the recent increase in interest in the early 20th century artistic avant-garde in Ukraine and Russia. The collective’s participants witnessed the processes by which the legacy and achievements of the artistic avant-garde are being absorbed into realkulturpolitik – into the domestic and foreign cultural policies of the countries they reside in, i.e. how the avant-garde is being used to serve the interests of the “larger” national policy, or realpolitik. Having observed the forced transformation of a heterogeneous transnational art movement into a homogeneous national cultural heritage stripped of internal controversies and emancipatory potential, “Krasnaya Shpana” set out to identify the motives underlying the ongoing appropriation of culture and art, and to challenge them through the collective production of art.

Today realkulturpolitik is being shaped in keeping with the demands of the nation state that emerged victorious in the international politics of the 20th century and which functions under the conditions of a global neoliberal economy. As noted by Maria Lind, the concept of culture in realkulturpolitik has an authoritarian pathos and is primarily perceived as an instrument for forming identity, which “even in its most up-to-date form of ‘European identity’ is hardly able to deny its origins in the culturalism [community through cultural identity], cultural humanism and cultural essentialism of past centuries.”¹ Maria Lind points out the connections between cultural identity and the old colonial perception of culture as the avant-garde of expansion (or as a marketing instrument for the nation, nowadays), stressing that “cultural identity is popular for all kinds of links between identitary politics and kulturmampf politics.”² Through the medium of culture, the nation state attempts to appear to us as something natural – to make status nationalis appear as status naturalis, or to transition from the state of nature to the state of nation.

We may try and explain this transition by referring to material interpretation of the “ideal” proposed by Evald Ilyenkov. While researching the formation of consciousness and the ideal form of things, he determined that man often “confuses the ‘ideal’ with the ‘material’, assuming that the forms and relations of objects the man himself created are the natural forms and relations of these objects, and that socio-historical forms ‘planted’ in them are their natural inherent properties.”³ For Ilyenkov, culture and the state are the manifestation of the “ideal”, a form of human activity that transforms the material world but is found outside the human, in the form of the thing or, vice versa, a form of a thing but outside this thing, inside the human – in the form of human activity. Ilyenkov’s “ideal” is antagonistic to individual consciousness and describes “physically recorded images of so-

cio-human culture...opposing the individual consciousness and will as a special ‘super-natural’ objective reality.”⁴ He notes that “this ‘external’ force determining the individual is represented by the ‘state’ that protects the system of existing spiritual culture, all the rights and obligations of each citizen.”⁵

Culture and the state appear before us as something sublime, as monolithic phenomena shaping our consciousness. According to this logic, contemporary art, not having become part of the culture yet but found in the contemporary context and capable of meeting its challenges, may destabilize the existing culture. The historical artistic avant-garde is an example of such opposition to the dominant culture of its time, and this very example lets us see quite distinctly how art in the course of its transformation into culture is being cleansed of political and aesthetic controversies today. The project “Whom does the avant-garde belong to?” can be described as a collective effort to research the “ideal” by drawing on the current processes of instrumentalization of the historical artistic avant-garde. Following the lead of the historical avant-garde to some extent, “Krasnaya Shpana” keeps resisting the “ideal” that defines the realpolitik of our times. But instead of shocking viewers, it collaborates with them. The participants in the process investigate the “ideal” alongside the artists, comparing it against their subjectivity, biography and personal experience. Moreover, without their contribution, the research would have been restricted to the artists’ experience, thus limiting the opportunities for mapping and grasping the manifestations of the “ideal”. Grant Kester points out the potential of collaborative artistic practices to offer “the ability of aesthetic experience to transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions,”⁶ i.e. the potential to offer forms which could challenge the state of nature or the state disguised as such. The collective work of “Krasnaya Shpana” is not limited to performances, it continues in the form of discourse generated by the project and continues to engage more people. With this combination of written and artistic work, “Krasnaya Shpana” collectively produces an alternative “ideal” that has the potential to transform everyone and everything involved in this production process: artists, participants, viewers, interlocutors, readers, and ultimately the material reality in which we all function.

Translated by Anastasiia Mednikova

[1] Lind, Maria, Minichbauer, Raimund. European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios on the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in

- Europe. Stockholm: IASPIS, 2005, p. 19.
- [2] Lind, Minichbauer. European Cultural Policies, 2015, p. 19.
- [3] Ilyenkov, Evald. Dialectics of the Ideal. Published in Logos Philosophy and Literature Journal, No. 1 (69), 2009, p. 60.
- [4] Ilyenkov, Evald. Dialectics of the Ideal, p. 32.
- [5] Ilyenkov, Evald. Dialectics of the Ideal, p. 30.
- [6] Kester, Grant H. The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context. Duke University Press, 2011.

Script 1

To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project

Work in Progress

February 8-10, 2018, Kampnagel

Performance participants: Diana Kim,
Alexey Markin, Julia Marushko,
Temur Mehr, Genia Odesser, Semen
Prakhin, Anna Semenova-Ganz, Leonid
Kharlamov, Olga Shirokostup, Michael
Steinhauser, Illia Yakovenko.

The beginning of the performance. The spotlight turns on above the first performance space and Temur Mehr appears with an empty picture frame.

Let's first ask what is avant-garde? Or is it better to ask first "what doesn't belong to the avant-garde"? For centuries, humanity has tried to grasp what it saw in front of its naked eye. Maybe then a portrait was the avant-garde. Maybe the avant-garde is to grasp something that hasn't been seen before? Yes, to whom does the avant-garde belong? (*Temur hands the frame to one of the viewers.*) Hold it! To whom does this frame belong now? Does it belong to both of us? What is art? Does everything become art when it is put inside this frame? If yes, can we then say that art is everything that enters the frame? (*Temur puts the frame on his chest. A part of the pattern of his sweater is visible inside the frame.*) Here is something that looks like Mondrian or Kandinsky. Yes, what is art? Bla, bla, bla. Who are you if I look at you through the frame? Who am I for you? Does the artist start where art ends? Who are you? Who am I? Who is Malevich? Who is that man from Ukraine whose father was Polish and who is considered to be the founder of the Russian avant-garde? Who is this person who painted the Black Square, hung it high and called it "high" art? Does the origin play any role? If not, why then do we posit the question of what a certain movement in art has to be called? Why are art historians doing that? Why do they say "this is the Russian avant-garde"? Why do they say "this is German expressionism"? Why would you claim that someone had walked the same land as you do? (*Temur puts on a traditional Ukrainian costume.*) Who am I? My mother is from Ukraine. Perhaps you wouldn't say so, based on my appearance. My father is from Afghanistan. Perhaps you wouldn't say so, based on my appearance. I was born in Hamburg, Germany. Perhaps you wouldn't say so either. And thus, strictly speaking, is it possible to call what I'm currently doing art? Is this German art, Afghan art or Ukrainian? Or does it make any difference only when one can extract some benefit from it? When I have something important that could be inscribed in history? What does it mean when a guy from a village suddenly rejects a hundred-year-old tradition and identifies himself with something new? What does it mean for a city guy to lament tradition, because he doesn't know what to begin with and he needs an identity? To whom does the avant-garde belong? And if now the origin plays no role, why then do I understand a hundred-year-old letter that Malevich wrote when he was starving in Russia? He wrote to his friend: "There is plenty of food

in Kyiv, people say: cherries and other berry that hangs down to earth. Oh, it would be great to have some varenyki [Ukrainian dumplings] with sour cream or berries with milk and sugar". If you do not understand this feeling of life that exists in these few words, why do I grasp it then?

The spotlight fades. Temur leaves, and Alexey asks everyone to move to the second performance space where Julia is already waiting behind the microphone. She performs surrounded by her paintings.

Malevich and I are Ukrainians. Malevich's house existed in Kyiv until 1982. I was born in 1982, but not in the center, in Kyiv, as Malevich was, but in Lutsk. Malevich's house was destroyed; my house is still standing. I'm from west Ukraine. A war has been underway in the east for four years already. The war between Ukraine and Russia. A silent war, a forgotten one, that makes people into victims, numbers and statistics in the east. I'm doing fine. I live in Germany. I was born in the Soviet Union after the death of Brezhnev, went to school during Gorbachev's time and graduated from school in independent Ukraine. Am I a Soviet child? Am I a post-Soviet community? Or am I a Ukrainian after all? Malevich's father is Polish, his mother was from Ukraine, from the Poltava region, and he was baptized in Kyiv at St. Alexander's Cathedral. I'm from western Ukraine, my parents are from a village. We attended a Russian church all our lives. My father still works as a night guard down there. I, just like Malevich, know the Russian and Ukrainian languages. Malevich wrote letters in the Ukrainian language in such a funny manner, and in these letters, he asked questions about his Ukrainian identity. Similarly, when I was younger and went to kindergarten, my father was the initiator of the first Ukrainian-speaking kindergarten group in the Soviet Union. Kazimir! To whom does the avant-garde belong? Why is the avant-garde Russian? Why isn't it Soviet, East European, Eurasian? The notion of the Ukrainian avant-garde was introduced by the Parisian art historian Andrei Nakov in 1973, thirty-eight years after the death of Malevich. The struggle continues even today. The Russian avant-garde! Crimea is ours! Russia! Ukraine is Europe! Germany look...! Thou art not dead, Ukraine... Kazimir, to whom does the avant-garde belong? In 2013 I moved to Hamburg to continue my studies of Waldorf pedagogy. Back then I had a dream to open a Waldorf school in my hometown in Ukraine. Then I moved to Hamburg, when the revolution started, and became not only a journalist and a teach-

er in a Waldorf school but also a writer, an activist, an artist and the founder of the art association “Art-Maidan”. And what do I do now? I paint, I paint my soldiers. Two years ago, I started to paint my first soldier and all from the photos that belong to my family. Painting reminds me drawings on Eastern eggs. When I finished painting my first avant-garde soldier, “Hello Kazimir!” I said. Malevich lived in Ukrainian villages until he turned seventeen, so he formed his outlook in the Podol, Kharkiv, Chernigov regions. Kazimir and I borrowed a lot from the traditional, village art. It is even possible to say that our artistic vision was formed by the Ukrainian village because I and Kazimir, we grew up in the Ukrainian village. Suprematism, the Ukrainian period, the avant-garde, what is the difference after all? This is not important.

(Asks the audience) Is it avant-garde?

A female voice replies: Yes.

(Asks the audience again) Is it the Ukrainian avant-garde?

A male voice replies: I don't know.

Kazimir! To whom does my art belong? In fact, it makes no difference. But it would be nice to have a personal army! I finished painting the soldiers with a white, celestial graveyard. As Malevich did – with white. (*Julia quotes Malevich in Ukrainian*) “I broke through the blue lampshade of color limits, entered into white, follow me, comrades aviators, swim, I've installed the semaphores of Suprematism. A white free abyss, infinity is in front of you.”

Julia puts on a national Ukrainian headdress and leaves the space. Anna's video appears on the screen.

It may sound weird, but I cannot stand Malevich. I think no one had as much negative influence on my artistic life as he did. Everywhere I go I hear “Oh, you're from Russia, the Russian avant-garde, hello, yes-yes we know.” It's always like this. International curators are always trying to ascribe some avant-garde origins to my works only because I'm from Russia. I'm tired of these squares. Now the state policy is changing, the authorities have also realized that we have the avant-garde, which is well known by everyone in the West. So let's monetize it and enlighten everyone! And soon the whole of Russia will turn into one big black square. In a nutshell, I think that all your Malevich is one big veil for all contemporary Russian art. And it's impossi-

ble to see what is happening there behind this veil. Moreover, Malevich directly influences Russian artists. He forces them to always shape their strategies with references to the avant-garde, even if there are none. What is it for, for God's sake? Honestly, if there were no Malevich in art history, he shouldn't be invented. At least for Russia. It would have allowed artists to properly develop, make art, conduct ethnographic research, develop collective practices, pursue multidisciplinary projects and not to be restricted, not to focus exclusively on squares. I cannot bear them anymore, and I see no way out. Thank you, Malevich!

A lectern appears in the first performance space. Alexey delivers a talk in the persona of an art historian titled “The Russian avant-garde – a historical path to unity and dignity”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I would like to briefly tell you about the **Russian avant-garde**. I divide avant-garde into three types: political avant-garde, avant-garde as a notion in art history, and finally, as a historical phenomenon of the period between 1908 and 1932, which I call the Russian avant-garde. From now on, I will be talking about avant-garde not as a notion but as the name of a historical period in art. Certainly, some would argue that the period of the Russian avant-garde never existed. Their argument is, first of all, based on the assumption that the historical avant-garde took place on the territory of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet state, and was never ethnically Russian but rather imperial or Soviet. Secondly, artists of the Russian avant-garde had a variety of ethnic origins from all over the empire and were only formally working on the territory of contemporary Russia while being culturally connected to their “petit homelands”. Contemporary Russia is the successor of both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, and thus, everything that happened on their territories rightfully and automatically becomes Russian today. The avant-garde has become part of the Russian cultural identity. When we are fighting for the national reconciliation of our country, even such a radical phenomenon as the avant-garde should be inscribed into the common Russian history of arts. The avant-garde doesn't fight and overthrow but organically fits together with other art movements for the nation's common good and to uniformly contradict Western sanctions. “The shock of the new” will become a museumified shock, that it is possible to discuss

calmly from a safe distance. What could be more beautiful? The avant-garde has also become our tradition and we have to treat it traditionally. All our traditions have to peacefully coexist together and not disturb each other. The Russian historical avant-garde not only forms our Russian identity – the Russian soul – but, first and foremost, it opens a window to Europe and another world. (*A page from a Russian tourism website appears on the screen.*) Here you can see a new Russian tourism brand that has just recently won a competition. You could see a map of Russia on it made out of geometric figures from Malevich's paintings. Circles, rectangles and lines become the geographical body of our Motherland. Pay attention to that small brown square in the corner – it is nothing other than Crimea. Our Crimea! The fact that this famous form used by Malevich – the square – has found its place on this map is especially symbolic. Now, to the already existing colors of Black and Red Squares, we are adding a new color – brown. I now give the floor to the cultural diplomat from Kyiv, Illia Yakovenko.

Alexey leaves, and his place is taken by Illia, who gives a speech of a self-proclaimed diplomat.

Dear German spectators and viewers. Why did you come here? Why do you need to see this performance and why do we need to perform it? Why do you, Germans, who live in Germany and the European Union have to think about nation-states? Because after all nationalism has mostly produced calamities and wars and even now it provokes wars in the Global East and South. There is certainly no pleasure in thinking about these things inside one of the most highly developed capitalistic countries in the world, which successfully exploits and perpetuates the ill-being of other countries. Germans feel cozy outside the nationalist discourse, and it's even considered improper to raise this topic once again. This is an arrogant opinion of the privileged towards those allegedly underdeveloped countries where people are still waging wars because of trivial things that were already resolved in Germany and the European Union a long time ago. But what can I do? A person who lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, who is surrounded by talk about nation, national identity and consciousness, about national culture and even the idea that Malevich has to be reclaimed as a Ukrainian. That the Ukrainianization of Malevich is important for the cultural integration of Ukraine into Europe. Politicians are justifying brutal forms of nationalism and saying that national culture and the

nation itself are necessary for Ukraine to become part of the European system and its family of nations. But, on the other hand, it turns out that if one doesn't talk about one's identity, then Europe really sees nothing except for Russia, except for the post-Soviet space that is by default considered a Russian realm, a part of this so-called Russian World. It is you who don't differentiate! It is your gaze, and you're responsible for it, for the gaze that pushes others toward nationalism. Why are these Eastern Other and Southern Other and Asian Other and African Other and any other Other so important for the West? Why does this Other have to exist – the evil Other, totalitarian Other, but who at the same time has its own special culture, special soul, special Russian soul and Russian ballet, special Russian avant-garde? All of this makes it more exotic and makes you fear, and through that fear you define yourself, you define yourself as Europeans in relation to these others. You also need all of these wars, you define yourself as the civilized world in relation to them. You appropriated democracy as a cultural value of Europeans. You even westernized democracy, nationalized it in fact and made it your symbolic capital. It appears that if one won't talk about nation states, and that we are living in the world which is shaped politically by the State of nation (to paraphrase Hobbes) then it's the right-wing nationalists, on the one side, and the neo-imperialist ambitions of former metropolises, on the other, who will benefit from that. But it isn't me who started this conversation! It isn't me who claims that the avant-garde has to be defined through the national. It is the State! The State defines it this way. Culture becomes a commodity, a product, asset and ideology and an instrument, part of politics and economics. Culture is one of the instruments through which nation states manifest their nations as something natural and their borders as something sacred. This is why there is such a big fight over culture now.

The Goethe-Institute – an organization that promotes German culture abroad – is part of this struggle. Even the name, it is so nationally charged, the poet who stands at the foundations of the national genesis, at the construction site of the myth of nation, the German nation! There is an attempt to position the Goethe-Institute as an independent institution, but it is connected to the State, it is financed by the State and money is the way to control. The mere presence of the Goethe-Institute in different parts of the world is a certain claim, a message that Germany is here and that it has Power, the economic and capitalist Power. Thus the Goethe-Institute is the manifestation of the presence of Germany in space, in the geopolitical space, and of its domi-

tion as a nation-state. The manifestation of the economic power of Germany to the outside world, of the so called ‘soft power’ – political power. The Goethe-Institute is a project with a mission to civilize us, militant, underdeveloped nations. “Cultural super power” as Federica Mogherini, The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, calls it. What have you done, citizens of Germany, to transform this national project that is by its nature cultural and political? Only revolutionary culture and art can oppose that. Art and culture can counteract nationalism. Revolution is a cultural transformation! To overcome the State of nation, we must produce as much art and culture as we are capable of. Everyone has to become an artist.

We are living in the State of nation,
Which is an artificial creation.
And culture is the only solution
To produce a revolution.
To overcome the myth of nation
We need cultural transformation.
And with our avant-garde art
Wir bauen einen neuen Staat!
Wir bauen eine neue Kunst!
Wir bauen einen neuen Staat!
Wir bauen eine neue Welt!

The lights go off. Genia walks out of the darkness into a spotlight in the role of Kazimir Malevich.

I arrived in Warsaw at the end of March 1927. There was a big exhibition, and later I went to Berlin for another exhibition. I took all of my paintings, letters, articles, notebooks with me. On April 3, I was called in to the Soviet embassy in Berlin. There they made me understand that I urgently had to go back to Russia. They threatened me, mentioning my daughter. What choice did I have? The next day I left, leaving everything in Berlin. Later I was dismissed everywhere, all opportunities were closed to me. Eventually, on September 20, 1930, I was arrested. Back in those days, it was equivalent to a death sentence. But I was lucky. I was lucky with the investigator. It was Volodya Kichkin, whom I knew from before. We often met in anarchist circles sometime around 1918. Back then it still was allowed to be anarchists.

And now he was leading the investigation, and they let me out eventually. He was less lucky. Two years after I died, he was arrested, sentenced to death and shot dead. And I was able to continue painting, I had five more years of life. Sure, I couldn't make any Suprematist paintings anymore. I had to submit to socialist realism. But I was left with a small piece of artistic freedom. I always signed my late realist paintings with a tiny black square.

Genia leaves. One of Malevich's self-portraits is projected on the screen. The voice of Diana is heard after a while.

Art is the thing that really interests me.

Art in itself, like life in itself.

Outside of any prescriptions and economics.

I say: the immanent order of things and the immanent order of art is what really interests me.

The immanent order in a separate artwork,
the moment of no motion,

a sudden invasion of the airless space where things with their weight are losing their weight.

What really interests me is the immanent order
with its inconsistencies and ruptures.

It is known to me, it is opening to me
as strange laws inside of an anxious dream.

I'm relentlessly looking for the embodiment of this order
until the figures that define the ornament won't lose their equilibrium and the card deck won't be mixed anew.

I'm a resonating body, a guide,
as any other body that might be encountered by me.

The immanent order is what really interests me.

The immanent order is what really interests me.

As soon as I find it, I dissolve.

Malevich's quotes are projected, the audience reads them in silence. The light is turned on. Diana enters with a camera in her hands.

Good evening!

I would like to produce a couple of material artworks, something tangible. For this

I brought an instant-print camera. Everything that will appear here will exist in one copy, and I'm looking for a motive in this space, an existing order. Yes, it's clear, I press the button, I'm the artist and I have a certain right to the thing that will be produced. But actually, it's only about the order that you're a part of. You also have the right to something that doesn't belong to you. We can decide it freely. As a sign of this freedom, I will sign these images with a small black square and put them on a small black table in the foyer. You may take the images with you or leave them in place. (*She takes pictures of some people from the audience.*)

The next scene takes place in the second performance space. Olga sits on a high bar chair with a laptop, wearing a t-shirt from the Bosco collection 'the Russian avant-garde'. When Olga begins to talk, Leonid starts to produce sounds into the microphone.

Speaking about our performance, it is directed, in the first place, toward young people for whom the 20th century is interesting because it happened only recently. I'm convinced that everyone is our target audience. When we opened the project **To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong?** at Kampnagel, I caught myself thinking that I haven't seen such a concentration of the intellectual elite for a long time. Nevertheless, we were fully aware that most of those who would visit Kampnagel would have no idea of what Malevich's Black Square is. Thus, our task was to make a project that would be equally interesting for people who are very well educated, used to thinking and reflecting, and for those who would be encountering the material for the first time. It's not less important that **To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong?** won't end on the avant-garde. After that we will show contemporary art, Soviet nonconformist art, art of the '70s and '80s. We are becoming one of the instruments of the formation of cultural consciousness and of human becoming human. We want more young people visiting us, visiting us with their children for the values that virtual reality cannot provide them with. People still don't know and don't understand that Russian art of the 20th century is exactly the thing people could and need to be proud of. The Russian avant-garde has become a national brand in the consciousness of the broad Russian masses only thanks to the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics. I'm

very happy that, since 2014, the Olympics is becoming associated with the Russian avant-garde. This is the way it was at the winter games in Sochi. A sports uniform that originates from concepts of Russian avant-garde artists. Why avant-garde? Because starting in 1917 and 1918, artists of the Russian avant-garde were trying to disseminate its ideas through everyday life, relying on political demand for this type of art. They started projects to produce avant-garde porcelain, fabrics, and clothes, including sportswear. As a result, a mixture appeared that is still in high demand today. I think that the task of the performance is not to replace a gallery visit but to arouse a special interest toward this art by means of a spectacular, vivid and courageous interpretation of ideas and images of the Russian avant-garde. We expect that this exhibition will serve, in a certain way, as a provocation that will intrigue those who haven't yet been intrigued. We are standing on the threshold of a humanitarian disaster, when the values of the Renaissance are losing their primary role. And in this situation, all of this may become a thing that will unite us. I consider the Russian avant-garde part of Russian identity. Statements of the avant-garde celebrate a paradoxical idea, the desire for the absolute, the prophetic utterance. And Russians have always strived for absolute form and the absolute itself. A combination of profound knowledge, managerial education, and experience coupled with a vivid and powerful individuality is the guarantee of success in the development of a creative research collective, which is not headed by anyone. Today there is a widely-held opinion that an energetic, business-minded artist is more important for a contemporary collective. But I am strongly convinced that an effective artist has to be directly connected to the work on the meaningful aspect of the collective's activity, its social work and its interactions with the public space.

Leonid and Michael play noise music in the third performance space. After the music fades away Alexey asks everyone to move to the first performance space again where Semen is already waiting for the audience. Semen is in the role of Unavis.

Semen: The avant-garde and especially Suprematism are color and abstraction, first and foremost. The following story will be told in the same form. (*Illia approaches Semen and imitates an injection into his shoulder.*)

Semen: An ordinary human's limits of perception have been expanded by means of

nanotechnology. This is how Unavis was born. What is it for? Anyone can model a human body. I don't want to. How can I liberate my soul from the material veils?

Illia: What is future?

Semen: A nonexistent object. Only the present moment exists.

Illia: What is future?

Semen: It is my dreams.

Illia: What is future?

Semen: It is covered with fog. If we comprehend the world deeper then we will be able to ask more questions.

Illia: What are time and space?

Semen: Space and time are concepts, they depend on me, this why I'm able to create.

Illia: What new can you bring into this world? Everything is already created.

Semen: Then I'll operate with abstraction.

Illia: You belong to us! You have to fight with our enemy.

Semen: Who am I? To whom can my soul belong? You have expropriated it!

The light turns off and Semen walks to “the stars”. The end of the performance.

Translated by Illia Yakovenko

Script 2

To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project

Part 2

May 12, 2018, Kampnagel Garden

(abridged)

Performance participants:
Diana Kim, Alexey Markin,
Genia Odesser, Semen Prakhin,
Leonid Kharlamov, Olga Shirokostup
and “Maschin Kaput”.

The script consists of fragments of texts and quotes found in open sources together with excerpts from art history, art theory and other materials. The collective Krasnaya Shpana and the performance participants do not share the positions promoted in some texts, nor is their intention to polemicize with them. By being mere mediators of these fragments, the performance participants use their bodies and speech mechanisms to give sound to different voices. In this way, they create a 'sound cast' of the research they conducted, its echo: bizarre, containing in itself many contradictions that could be revealed only by uncertain and confused intonations of the readers. It cannot be an outcome and has no claim of being completed, and it is set against the documentation, which is unable to accommodate in itself the fears, disputes, misunderstandings, failure and success in communication that were present during the work on this two-year collective project.

The beginning:

Viewers gather in the foyer of Kamnagel Kulturfabrik, and, after some time, they exit to the street from a side door of the theater. A banner with the Malevich quotation “I’ is immaterial, only its creativity is material” is unfolded next to the exit.¹ Viewers are invited to carry the banner together with the participants. After turning a corner, a view opens onto an illuminated space with a wooden floor located in the garden behind the theater. Music comes from there. The participants and viewers walk silently toward the space. Upon reaching it they separate: viewers settle on benches while the participants take their seats on the stage.

Introduction

The host reads separate excerpts one by one – the quotes found in open sources during the research:

“During the second all-Russian congress of Komsomol, Trotsky called the communist youth ‘the avant-garde of the avant-garde’. The same title – ‘the avant-garde of the avant-garde’ – was given to the party congress. Next was the Red Army – the combat avant-garde of the global revolution; the special units – the avant-garde of the Red Army; the proletarian columns of Berlin – the avant-garde of the future Red Army; the united international workers front – the avant-garde of the global revolution; Vsevobuch (Universal Military Training) – the avant-garde of the October revolution; the red students – the avant-garde of the working class on the cultural frontline; Rabfak (Workers’ Faculty) – the avant-garde on the frontline of the conquest of science by the proletariat; Leningrad – the avant-garde of the revolution; RLKSM – the avant-garde of KIM (Young Communist International); state industry – the avant-garde of the people’s economy; a party cell – the avant-garde of the village; Komsomol – the avant-garde of godlessness; doctors – the avant-garde of the fighters for the cultural revolution; communists – the avant-garde of the agro-campaign; Shanghai workers – the avant-garde of the Chinese revolution; if a march to science had been stated than the proletarian youth had to be in the avant-garde; Hudpolitprosvety – the avant-garde of the worker class in art. (...) Russian nationalists had distinguished the “Jewish avant-garde”, they called Poles the “avant-garde of the foreigners”, journalists were calling the Chinese who flooded Moscow in the spring of 1913 the “Chinese avant-garde”, that is those who would be “followed by the main forces”, and Russian fascists called themselves the Russian avant-garde when they published a newspaper with the same title in Harbin (1936-1940).²

Andrey Krusanov

“Since August 24, 1991 the Ukraine has been a sovereign state. One of its key priorities has been the de-russification and re-writing of its cultural history. (...) Many of the artists, well known in the West as key figures in the “Russian” or even French avant-garde, have been given back their Ukrainian

names – and their distinctive cultural roots – providing new insights into their work. This is particularly true of one of the key figures of twentieth century art, Kazimir Malevich. (...) The history of the avant-garde in Ukraine is one of the acts of violence and cultural purges.”³

Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker

“In the case of Malevich, even the Russian principle ‘mine is mine, and yours we will share’ didn’t work. They don’t want to share and are trying to take our Malevich away completely. But they won’t succeed. Step by step we are revealing a Ukrainian Malevich, and a lot of unclear things are becoming clear. For example, why during a certain period of his life (when he was living in Russia) was he grey and colorless, and in another period he was vivid and colorful? Everything is simple: he became vivid when he came back to Ukraine”.⁴

Dmitry Gorbachev

The Main Part

The participants pronounce separate phrases one by one trying to drown each other out:

Case: Airport Malevich

Warsaw – Frederic Chopin airport
Rome – Leonardo da Vinci airport
Budapest – Franz Liszt airport
Kyiv – Kazimir Malevich airport
Malevich is the most famous Kyivite in the world
Genius of world art
His name is well known to everyone abroad
Born, studied and taught in Kyiv
Malevich always identified himself as Ukrainian
and clearly indicated it in his autobiography
Millions of tourists will be interested in Ukraine
There is no necessity to invest in the brand of the Malevich airport
It will immediately increase the revenue of Ukraine
Let’s bring Malevich back to Ukraine!

And put Ukraine on the cultural map of the world!
Vote to give the name of Kazimir Malevich to
Boryspil International Airport.⁵

“Culture is the universal language and the universal key to people’s hearts. We are not talking about who is better and who is worse, who did more for Ukraine and who less. It is all about who is more understandable. And paradoxically, Malevich with his mysterious Black Square is better understood by the contemporary Europe than anyone else among the names which are proposed for our airport”.⁶

Pavlo Klimkin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

Case: Russia’s New Tourism Brand

The excerpts are divided into parts and read by the participants.

“Why suprematism? A tourism brand and its symbol need time for people to familiarize with them and for the right associations to begin shaping. Suprematism – one of the directions of Russian avant-garde artistic movement – originated in our country in the early 20th century and represented advanced thinking, not only on the scale of Russia, but for the whole world. This cultural phenomenon stood the test of time to evoke strong associations with Russia, and today serves as its icon in visual aesthetics. The Russian tourism brand’s graphic solution is a stylized map of Russia. The map’s elements represent our country’s specific places and territories, convincingly communicating its character and depth.”⁷

- Well, it says “Krim” (Crimea) in Russian right next to it.
- It occasionally finds itself further up and separated, more like Kalliningrad Oblast, on the bus and the ice hockey banner, but generally, it’s where it points to in the above graphic.
- You’re right – a little disturbing including the Crimea for me too. I guess my geographic orientation was a little askew from a western point of view.
- Crimea is Ukraine!
- Kaliningrad will be used in large sizes. Like a yellow circle, above the Crimea and apart from the main part of Russia.
- Yeah, suprematism shifting to supremacism.

- “Crimea square” is very strange here. it is placed differently on the bus and hockey billboard, which suggest Kaliningrad Oblast, not Crimea.
- They “occasionally” grabbed a part of another country. Crimea is Ukraine.
- Nice try adding a little (Crimea) square on far left.
- That could be Kaliningrad though, right?
- Oh wait, I just had another look and saw the translations. That’s nuts, and bizarrely politically controversial for a tourism logo.⁸

“At the present moment man’s path lies across space. Suprematism is the semaphore of light in its infinite abyss.

The blue colour of the sky has been overcome by the Suprematist system, it has been broken through and has entered into white, which is the true actual representation of infinity and therefore freed from the colour background of the sky.

A hard, cold system, unsmilingly set in motion by philosophical thought. Indeed, its real power may already be in motion within this system.”⁹

Case: Exhibition “Bonjour, Russia”

Two participants animate the texts by reproducing them as a dialog that never took place. Fragments are used from the catalog of the exhibition “Bonjour, Russia” alongside other materials related to this case. The voices are arguing with each other, arbitrarily changing the tone — “playing the fool”.

“Welt am Sonntag: Why do you believe that showing its art in Germany serves the interests of Russian policy?

Wulf. H Bernotat: Russia is using this exhibition as a platform to represent itself in Germany. Russian interest in Germany is huge. As a German company, we feel a sort of attraction towards us. That’s why I also find it regrettable that relationships between European politics and Russia are not so good.”¹⁰

“The company E.ON made an important contribution to the success of this exhibition as its main sponsor and as a company that has a long-lasting relationship with Russia. Therefore, please allow me to add that this year E.ON Ruhrgas is being supplied with 500 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas. We are very happy that this long-lasting and reliable cooperation in the energy sector comes together with a cultural event, which is a win-win situ-

ation for both parties. In general, this exhibition is a symbol of a trustworthy cooperation between Russia and Germany.

This exhibition is the twelfth in the Kunsthalle sponsored by E.ON in the framework of its public-private partnership with the city of Düsseldorf. We hope that all visitors not only enjoy an aesthetic experience but also realize the importance of the continuous cultural exchange between nations."¹¹

Dr. Wulf Bernotat, Chairman of the E.ON AG board

"Nord Stream's business model is to provide gas transportation capacity for the natural gas coming from western Russia for distribution into the European gas grid. The gas transportation system is comprised of its twin, 1,224-kilometre pipelines through the Baltic Sea. Each has the capacity to transport 27.5 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year.

As operator, Nord Stream AG offers gas transportation capacities via its pipelines. This entails the day-to-day technical operation and commercial handling of gas transport (dispatching), the maintenance of all technical systems involved, continued liaison with permitting authorities in the countries through whose waters Nord Stream runs, as well as adhering to environmental management obligations and relevant technical standards (codes) of the respective permitting countries."¹²

"The movement of the new world is divided in two: on the one hand the fighting, destructive avant-garde with the banner of economics, politics, rights and freedom, and, on the other hand, the creative army which appears after it, creating form for the whole utilitarian and spiritual world of things. Creativity is the essence of man, as the highest being in nature and everyone should take up this activity. Creativity changes in the same way as the party's revolutionary attitude. People who were formerly considered revolutionaries have now turned out to be counter-revolutionaries: the same thing happens in art."¹³

"I know that I have to rest, to cure my wife, and besides that, my mother is staying with me – an old woman, also sick. As well as this, I was barely able to keep my job at the Institute that I had created and where I was able to achieve something in relation to the science of art. Its closure means I have to prostitute myself, and now with the business in this state, what will happen tomorrow is unknown, 'the masses don't get it', but when you

say – give me a mass and it will understand me, they are not convinced. A full liquidation is coming. Our guys paint flags for 60 kopeks, to earn enough for a piece of bread. My salary only lasts for a few days, I cannot afford medicine or food.”¹⁴

Case: The Future

The participants are singing the texts in a manner that is pleasing to the viewers. Sweet voices are the most dangerous in their ability to force the viewer to succumb to an affect. But at the same time, the performers have a critical attitude toward the perception of the female voice inside the performance. They are trying to call into question its ornamentalism and its ability to decorate the action by making it more euphonious.

“I consider the Russian avant-garde part of Russian identity. Statements of the avant-garde celebrate a paradoxical idea, the desire for the absolute, the prophetic utterance. And Russians have always strived for absolute form and the absolute itself.”¹⁵

Zelfira Tregulova, Director of the State Tretyakov Gallery

“Back then, Mykola Shchors was part of the political wing of that popular movement, the art wing of which had given to the world the revolution in the arts known as the Soviet avant-garde.

The political wing had already lost at the point when the revolution was bounded by the state border. Thus, the art wing lost at the moment it became called the Russian avant-garde. This is a contradiction in terms, because the historical avant-garde was a transborder, international phenomena by definition. For the same reason, the phrase Ukrainian avant-garde is a contradiction in terms – to the great disappointment of those who think that the promotion of this idea serves a progressive, anti-colonial agenda. The avant-garde as the art movement for the global revolution couldn’t have had a national character – it’s horizon was global. The usage of the term Russian avant-garde serves exclusively the idea of cancelling the avant-garde. The notion of the Ukrainian avant-garde could serve the same goal but it is too early to throw it away. It could still serve to help cancel the idea of the Russian avant-garde.”¹⁶

Oleksiy Radynski

“Political people are moving toward Suprematism and see the way to achieve it as being by the elimination of separate states – elimination of nations, fatherlands, elimination of the fragmentation of humans into different states, which prevents them from seeing and comprehending their own ‘I’ in the panhuman pannation as in one nonfragmented ‘I’.”¹⁷

The End

The host and the participants are reenacting a dialog that took place during the preparation of the performance.

Alexey Markin: Now we are at the end of our performance, but we can't finish it and simply let you go. During our working process we became hesitant as to whether we should finish the performance with this quote of Malevich or remove it.

Genia Odesser: I personally find this wording very problematic “elimination of states, nations, fragmented people”. In one letter Malevich expressed himself less radically. There he wrote: “Art has to liberate itself from states and nations”. For me, there is a huge difference lying between these two phrases like between two different worlds: between elimination and liberation. Liberation implies freedom for yourself and everyone else. Elimination contains destruction, violence, death itself.

AM: In my view, in this situation Malevich appears in front of us as a radical artist. First and foremost it is about whether an artist has to be accountable for his or her words. Or the radicalism in this case has an artistic nature and is a self-representation. Here a question arises for me: would a limitation of an artist be an attack on artistic freedom?

We thought that the best decision is to finish the performance with these two commentaries. We are very grateful for your attention!

Translated by Illia Yakovenko

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Part 2

**Interviews,
Theory, ■
Conversations**

Kampnagel as a “State of the Arts”

Interview with Anna Teuwen

Anna Teuwen is one of the four dramaturges at the “Kampnagel – Center for Finer Arts”, and sometimes a lecturer and freelance culture journalist.

Keywords: heterotopias, cultural diversity

Alexey Markin: What role does Kampnagel play in the German cultural landscape as a neo- or post-avantgarde art institution? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Kampnagel as the largest “culture factory” in Germany, compared to small/medium non-commercial art spaces and theatres in Hamburg?

Anna Teuwen: Kampnagel is the largest and one of the most important independent venues and production houses in the German-speaking world. Since 2016, Kampnagel has been part of the “Bündnis internationaler Produktionshäuser” (Alliance of International Production Houses) supported by the Federal Government – alongside HAU (Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin), Hellerau (Dresden), PACT Zollverein (Essen), FFT (Forum Freies Theater, Düsseldorf), Tanzhaus NRW (Düsseldorf) and Mousonturm (Frankfurt). These seven houses are an “excellence cluster” of sorts. They use their joint expertise to make visible and further develop ground-breaking work, international co-productions and discourse with independent artist groups. Kampnagel is now one of the five major cultural institutions in Hamburg – alongside Thalia Theater, Schauspielhaus, Staatsoper and Elbphilharmonie. Kampnagel is by far the biggest independent, “off-scene” house. There are indeed both advantages and disadvantages to this. On the one hand, we can offer the local artists who work for us important networking opportunities and the chance of international cooperation – this is a great advantage for the local scene. On the other hand, Kampnagel is such a giant machine that it’s almost too big for young up-and-coming artists and smaller, experimental projects; this is definitely a disadvantage. In Hamburg, there are smaller houses for such projects, but they are all pretty tiny and offer young artists less potential; there is hardly any middle ground. We try to close this gap by developing special formats for young creators.

AM: How does Kampnagel work? I mean, it receives support from the Hamburg Cultural Authority, but productions also depend on funding from private and state foundations.

AT: That’s right. Kampnagel has a very complex financial structure. It receives around 6.5 million euros from the authorities, which flows completely into the infrastructure – into the employees’ salaries, marketing, electricity, heating and other running costs. Hardly anything remains

for art. Thus, the actual programme is financed via a wide variety of mechanisms. Sometimes we rent out spaces to events that we do not consider part of our programme and use the income to finance art. There are cooperation arrangements with foundations, universities, etc., which organise conferences and finance artistic programmes that we curate – a win-win situation. There are co-events with the Elbphilharmonie and the Hamburg Theatre Festival, which enable us to hold major concerts and theatre events. We finance a large part of the programme through applications to foundations and cultural funds – locally, nationally and internationally. As partners in various networks, we also co-produce internationally. Apart from that, the artists themselves apply for funds to finance their projects, which then take place at Kampnagel. All in all, Kampnagel attracts third-party funds to the tune of 1.7 million euros annually.

AM: What is the institutional policy at Kampnagel? Why do you support experimental art projects by migrants and refugees?

AT: Kampnagel sees itself as a “State of the Arts” – you know, “state” as in “country”, but beyond all national borders. We see the task of the arts in creating heterotopias, i.e. (art) spaces in which other rules and laws apply than in the world outside. These can be experiments and models of social togetherness. “Art as camouflage” is another way to put it. For us, Kampnagel is not (only) a temple of art but also a place that represents the diversity of society, and that desires to be open to all people. This is a productive area of tension between bourgeois (high) culture and community work; between a large institution with its indispensable bureaucracy and a certain freedom, a certain resistance. The latter arose back in the 1980s when Kampnagel was a squat, and we continue to defend it.

AM: What role do the dramaturges play in German theatre and dance institutions? Who makes the decisions about the programme, about inviting certain performance and theatre groups to Kampnagel? What gives an artist the chance to work here? Can visual artists or multidisciplinary projects find a place at Kampnagel?

AT: The Kampnagel dramaturgical team and the artistic director Amélie Deuflhard are responsible for the programme and the profile of the centre

as a whole. Decisions are made jointly, with specific topics and artists having their own contact person. We have flat hierarchies, and everyone in the dramaturgical team has a great deal of freedom to suggest content, plan the programme, travel and network, contributing their respective perspectives, enthusiasm and expertise. In principle, there are no specific conditions for artists to work at Kampnagel. It's just a matter of matching our profile – in terms of working methods and aesthetics, content and the quality of the artistic work. Of course, ultimately, financing options also play a role. Visual art can be shown at Kampnagel if it makes sense within the overall structure of the programme. We do not (yet) have an exhibition space, so not every work can be shown advantageously here – especially since, as a theatre, Kampnagel is only open in the evening. For this reason, we only hold exhibitions with a thematic connection to the performative programme. But the programme increasingly includes media artists and visual artists who work together with performers, design stage spaces, etc.

AM: There are dozens of events at Kampnagel every month – over a hundred every year. Why was our project chosen for realization?

AT: Well, Alexey, you live in Hamburg and are therefore a member of the local artist scene – an active member, since you are not only a regular guest at Kampnagel but have also participated in various projects. We follow the activities of the local scene, are in touch with many artists and feel responsible for showing, promoting and supporting their work. So when you contacted us, we were interested. Of course, as I said, the working method and topic must match our profile. And this was the case: we value you as an international trio with a very political approach; we find the issues you work on important. We also appreciate the approach of working with and “into” communities. That is why we supported your application, which was fortunately successful and made your work possible. Actually, we didn't know exactly what we were getting into, because we weren't really familiar with your work before. Now we know you better, and I have a better idea of how to contextualize your work and what kinds of funding make most sense.

AM: Nowadays, directors and artists often work with actors and volunteers who “perform their own social-economic category” (says Claire Bishop). How do you see the participants in our project?

AT: I don't see your work as a "social" project but rather as a community project: it mattered to you that the participants came from the Russian-speaking communities of Hamburg or had a specific interest in the political relationship between Russia and Ukraine. When I followed your working process, I also found the approach conceptually strong: the way you let the participants act and appear followed your artistic concept – you never forced your opinions on anyone; nobody directed the performance.

AM: What does this kind of visibility of the "post-Soviet" or Russian-Ukrainian community in Hamburg mean to you?

AT: I think it's very important for different communities to be culturally represented, to have a voice. We don't believe in a Leitkultur, a "proper German culture". Rather, we think that there should be a common cultural system that is open to all and that represents everyone living in this country. We, the dramaturgy team, are not (yet) as culturally diverse as our audience, and our audience is not (yet) as diverse as the urban society. But we're working on that, and it changes more and more. What we can and must do is open doors, dismantle barriers and facilitate exchanges. It's not easy to make a place like Kampnagel attractive for certain communities if they are not represented there. Some communities are very shy of outsiders. The path to change this is long and takes a lot of perseverance. That's why we find projects like yours very important.

Translated by Alexandra Berlina

Part 2 – Interviews, Theory, Conversations



Avant-Garde and Modernity: Kazimir Malevich Between the Scylla and Charybdis of Geopolitics

Natalia Smolianskaia

Natalia Smolianskaia is a curator, researcher and artist living and working in Moscow. She curated the 2018/19 exhibition **IT'S FORBIDDEN TO FORBID** at the MMOMA¹, which was dedicated to the events of May '68 in Paris. From 2007 until 2013 she supervised a research program and seminars on practices and conceptions of the Russian avant-garde and on languages of art at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris.

Keywords: modernity, critical geography, Malevich, agent of modernization

Our time is the time of analysis.

K. Malevich

These words became an epigraph to the book on the “-isms” of art² which was published in 1925 by El Lissitzky – Malevich’s colleague from Vitebsk and a disseminator of his ideas in Europe – in collaboration with the artist Hans Arp in Germany. The book presents various art systems which originated in the previous decade and became symptomatic of modernity. “Dadaism” and “cubism” were already well-known back then, but it is possible that suprematism, constructivism, and prounism only became known thanks to that book.

What is modernity? Why do its symptoms often cause irritation and indignation, but continuously attract young and curious people? And furthermore, can we actually associate Malevich with modernity? His language is obscure and unclear, but also revolutionary, just like the new forms of his art. “Instead of this nature, I want to create a suprematistic nature built on the laws of suprematism,” said Malevich to Osip Brik.³

If we understand modernity as endlessly exciting possibilities of communication and information in the 21st century, as the embodiment of speed, simply as movement, we would probably not be surprised at the discussion surrounding the proposal to name Borispol Airport in Kiev after Malevich. Indeed, the artist who invented “*planits – houses for earth dwellers*” (*planity – doma dlja zemljanitov*) which resembled real space stations, would not be an entirely arbitrary choice for an airport name. But I would like to discuss two aspects of this situation: the first relating to the reasons for renaming as discussed in the media, the second concerning what kind of audiences endorsed this open discussion.

Here we should take a step away from Malevich as an artist and researcher, as a person capable of persuading and teaching, to the ways his name is being invoked and to what kind of references it evokes. Among them are the Black Square, the concept of “the avant-garde,” mystical, nihilistic and anarchistic motives; one could also mention here the motif of national identity.

Reporting on the idea of renaming the airport, the Polish online newspaper Kresy24 starts by announcing the artist’s Polish background, proceeds to his prominent position in the artistic sphere in the Soviet state, and only then talks about his significance in the international context, albeit somewhat indirectly – by mentioning the high demand for his paintings in museums throughout the West. In other words, the discovery of the new artistic approach, the famous Black Square, and the creation of an artistic system lacking references to nature, which are among the most important discoveries of Malevich, are not even mentioned here. In this way,

one creates a construct of “Malevich as a prominent representative of the Soviet system.” This construct is based on two types of viewpoints – conservative and paternalistic. The idea that “Malevich” is a Pole by blood and, moreover, an aristocrat of noble name (which is specifically mentioned), is typical of the conservative view. On the other hand, he occupies high positions for which he is officially acclaimed – in other words, his artistic authority in the institutional field is emphasized, thus illustrating the authoritarian foundations of such constructs. While Malevich himself had always strived for the new art, he wanted to be modern:

“The technical aspect of our time is quickly moving forward, while art is being moved further backwards.

That’s why those people who keep up with their time are better, bigger and more valuable.”⁴

The second question arises with regard to the fact that although the nations’ claims on Malevich’s name don’t cause open disagreements, they nevertheless create a certain field for discussion. Malevich’s name is strongly associated with the Russian avant-garde, which can be illustrated by the multiple titles of the exhibitions and publications of recent years. For instance, the 2018 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou was called “Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevitch... The Russian avant-garde in Vitebsk” and the one at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2013/14 was named “Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde”. Works by Malevich were among the first included in the MOMA exhibition “A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde” in 2016/17 in New York. Encyclopedia of the Russian avant-garde – from the most ambitious and all-embracing project of Dmitry Sarabianov to various more modest collections – all of them necessarily include Malevich’s name.

Why is his name so important today in Ukraine and Poland, considering that in Russia it’s firmly associated with the “Russian avant-garde”? What is certain is that we are dealing with a construct inscribed into the geopolitical image of modernity. That’s why these conversations about roots, background and language have the same political nature and appeal to a specific audience. But the discussion doesn’t take place because all the players apparently occupy different fields.

Critical geography: Malevich and the Russian avant-garde

This situation can be regarded from the point of view of critical geography.⁵ In an article by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, art history is seen as a matter of “framing,”

that is, focusing attention on the point of departure of this very history: we can look at the works of Balka or Kabakov either from the inside, as if having gone through the experience of the communal flats and the poor life of a Polish province, or through the lens of a certain normative institution which, without actually thinking of itself as “normative,” offers a “universal” view on things. This happens, as Piotrowski shows, because seeing a unified cultural geographical continuum in fact presupposes not a unity, but a split between the ideologically progressive center, i.e. the USA or Western Europe, and the periphery, represented by the “backward” countries of the former Communist Bloc and Russia, for example. The “backwardness” of the Eastern European countries comes from the fact that at the right moment some circumstances hindered their development, such as the lack of Western-style democracy, or draconian measures used for the eradication of “bourgeois” movements in the USSR and so on.

Such a view is not just popular among art historians; rather, it represents a Foucauldian system of power, the “order” of the discourse of power which is also supported by the artists themselves. Under conditions of cultural isolation, Russian artists often see Western artists as exemplary; this is not only applicable to Russian artists, but also to Polish and Ukrainian ones all the way through the late 1980s. A confined cultural space creates a disproportionately strong tension in relations between those who represent the most modern tendencies in art and those who aren’t yet aware of them or are only poorly aware. In this sense, the example Piotrowski gives of neo-constructivist art in Romania and Czechoslovakia in the 1960 and 70s is a convincing example of resistance – in contrast to the view of critics like Rosalind Krauss, who sees in the modernist “grid” only limitation and a lack of development.⁶ This understanding of the “grid” works for the history of Western art; while in Eastern Europe, the modernist grid would be a symbol of resistance to socialist realism.

In the 1980s, Polish artists still looked up to the West, but soon after the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact, on the wave of the imminent dissolution of the Soviet system, the general interest in the avant-garde started growing. Avant-garde exhibitions were migrating around the Western world, exploring not the past, but a present full of wonders. In the discovery of the avant-garde, they found a possibility of confronting a system imposed by the West that discriminated between “center” and “periphery” (in the geopolitical sense) artists and their representatives.

The avant-garde and the possibilities of resistance

Piotrowski sees possibilities for resistance to the imposed system of Western cultural geopolitics in avant-garde art.⁷ Occupying the space between European art of

the Western countries and the Russian “perestroika” and “post-perestroika” art, Eastern European countries were lost to the agents of Western culture, because of the discovery of a gigantic field of Soviet or ex-Soviet art, and consequently of the avant-garde from the USSR. Avant-garde art became newly accessible and popular after the appearance in the 50-60s of the “Neo-avant-garde” in the West, when artistic forms were revived and art entered our everyday lives. At the same time, a theorisation of the avant-garde took place. In the 1970s, Peter Bürger distinguished between the concept of avant-garde and the historical avant-garde movements, and thereby developed a theoretical apparatus which is necessary for the analysis of the socio-historical function of art.⁸ At the same time, the very historical tendencies of avant-garde were being left in the past together with the last of the avant-gardists, the heirs to surrealism – the situationists. What is the current situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe?

If we return to the Piotrowski article, he writes that during the existence of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR-dominated Communist Bloc, “there, where there was no local tradition of avant-garde, where artists lacked historical support, the artistic forms resisting official aesthetics asserted themselves significantly later.” So, the avant-garde, on the one hand, marks or delineates the artistic territory which is developing its own critical field, as is necessary in the condition of “modern art”, where “art” and “non-art” are quite vague and defined by conventions. On the other hand, it follows from Piotrowski’s text that each historical avant-garde movement develops on its own terms in each local case.

The Ukrainian avant-garde and the Russian avant-garde: symbols of unity and division

Malevich, as a symbol of kinship between the Polish and the Ukrainian peoples, gave his name to the Polish Award granted to Ukrainian artists living in Poland; this and the campaign to rename the airport in Kiev after him – these are not simply examples of his belated recognition, but rather of Polish and Ukrainian self-identification as a “center” in a period of tense relations between the Western “center” and the “Eastern” periphery – to use Piotrowski’s critical geography.

The very terms “Russian” and “Ukrainian” avant-garde appeared independently in different historical contexts and they rarely stand together. In Lissitzky and Arp’s book on the “-isms” of art, there are no ties to nationality, country, or culture to be found. The “-isms” exist outside of the political geography – they themselves represent political geography. The very term “avant-garde” in the Soviet artists’

vocabulary had political connotations: the word “avant-garde” was too narrowly connected to Lenin’s understanding of “partisanship” (partijnost’); that’s why it was only imported from Western sources later.

Defining Soviet art as “avant-garde,” as was already pointed out by A. Kovalev⁹ in 1994, was made common by the Western scholars in the 50-60s, when interest in the avant-garde started growing both in artistic circles and more generally. At certain times, the avant-garde has become a necessary means of searching for new modes of artistic production and understanding the changing position of art in society. In Robert Motherwell’s 1952 book on Dadaist art, for instance, he invokes a period of “Neo-Dada” in American art, stretching all the way from Rauschenberg and Oldenburg to Andy Warhol. Almost at the same time in the Soviet Union, we see people begin to collect art from the first third of the 20th century. We didn’t use to call it “avant-garde” back then, but instead searched in it for something that was in line with the present, and it is then that Malevich becomes a meaningful figure. Having found his texts in the Lenin Library, the artists of that time, who were already influenced by existentialism, initially saw in Malevich the possibility of a religious escapism, understood in the existentialist sense. His artistic language will be appropriated much later – there was no reason to do that yet. Malevich seems to have resonated wherever there were similarities with the local context, such as the neo-plasticism of De Stijl, the Polish unizm and cubism, and the monochromes of Yves Klein.

The Russian avant-garde, or the phase of it that came after the Revolution, enters Bürger’s list of fundamental avant-gardist practices in 1974. The term was barely used before the 90s: the famous book by Larisa Zhadova, whose English title was Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910–1930, came out in the USSR in 1978, while Camilla Gray’s The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922, was published in 1962. In 1971 the latter was rereleased under the new title The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863–1922, emphasizing the national roots. In comparison with Dadaism or surrealism, such an emphasis on the national attribution of art comes in the first place from the heterogeneity of material (instead of one single movement there are many), and secondly from the fact that nobody knew any other Russian art. The discoveries made by such figures as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Lissitzky, which influenced the entirety of 20th century art, allowed one to see not only the political achievements of Russia, but also to connect them to the portrayal of revolution in art.

The Ukrainian avant-garde was mentioned for the first time in 1973 by Paris-based art historian Andrei Nakov, writing on the London exhibition “**Tatlin’s Dream**”.¹⁰ It was the first time that works by Vasyl Yermilov and Oleksandr Bohomazov

had been exhibited in the West. In a collection published in the 90s in Zagreb, the representatives of the Ukrainian avant-garde were meticulously studied. The material became available as a result of shifts in the political geography, which allowed the emergence of other artistic movements alongside the Russian avant-garde, and this required new theoretical approaches.

The situation with the re-thinking of the past grows out of the present, and for contemporary artists, the same critical geography plays its role. “International context isn’t homogeneous. If you come from the less privileged areas on the world map, your reputation remains doubtful and fragile,” says one of the most famous Ukrainian artists, Nikita Kadan. For plenty of artists from the 90s the association with a brand of Russian avant-garde became in this sense a point of departure for leaving this doubtful state.

Modernity

So what is the debate between the Ukrainian and the Russian avant-garde? Where will Malevich’s ship sail? How can he avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary geopolitics? It is clear that Malevich belongs to the international avant-garde movement, but using his name and the title “avant-garde” reminds us of postcolonial discussions and of the opposition of center and periphery.

In their article “How can we re-approach the question of modernity?”,¹¹ the French sociologists Cyril Lemieux and Pablo Blitstein discuss three types of oppositions suitable for a model of modernity. The first covers the period from the late 19th century through the 1960s; it sets an evolutionary approach against miserabilism, which connotes the poverty of rejection. This model is connected to a belief in progress and to the birth of the social sciences. At the same time, it acknowledges only one path of development, that is, the Western way. The second model was in place until almost 2010 and was based on the opposition of exclusivity and populism. This model’s framework does allow criticism of the universal scale of assessment, although one party is still considered to be incomplete, and to this incompleteness, culture autonomy and self-sufficiency are attributed. This model can also be used to describe the relationship between intellectuals and “regular people”, in which the latter are also granted their own culture, which intellectuals seek to understand. This is the context for the emergence and practice of postcolonial studies.

And finally, there is the third model, in which modernity is understood in relation to the present as a continuously self-establishing model. In this context, no ideology can change the future on its own by simply changing existing social practic-

es, while art (and culture) can participate in the organizing and re-organizing of society. The avant-garde, in this context, acts as a modernizing project. From this point of view, there is no opposition between the Ukrainian and the Russian avant-garde, and Malevich, as an agent of modernization, acts in the present without being involved in the opposition. In order to see how modernizing projects operate, it would probably be useful to study more carefully how avant-garde practices work, how they fulfil the function of rejecting the past, and how they constitute a model of the future, but we shall perform this study some other time.

Translated by Polina Sandler

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“We Create Space for Collective Creativity”

Conversation with the ZIP Group

November 23, 2018

The ZIP Group was created in 2009 in Krasnodar and consists of Evgeny Rimkevich, Vasily Subbotin and Stepan Subbotin.

Keywords: self-organization, collectivity, mock-up

Illia Yakovenko: Could you tell us more about the role that self-organization plays in your art practice? What role do the audience and the participants play in your works of art?

Stepan Subbotin: Here at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg (Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, HFBK) we have been informed that Western artists mostly concentrate on their own careers rather than collective art practice, which tends to take place only in times of crisis. Our intention to stay in Krasnodar where our art group was founded made us cooperate, since individual artistic activity was a complicated thing to launch. The ZIP plant with its history of blockades and calls to action, institutional contests and prizes, inspired us to try working collectively. It's where we felt the efficacy of our work.¹ Besides that, it's much easier to cope with a lack of any external support. The skills of collective art practice and the familiarity with avant-garde practice – they were acquired much later. The local context of the factory where we acquired practical skills had a huge impact on our work.

Olga Shirokostup: Does that mean that your collectivity has somehow been dictated by simple need?

IY: And another question, how has the fact that you are so in demand, so relevant in the West impacted that collectivity?

SS: I could somehow extend the question. At this juncture, our collectivity has evolved into an institute, a more or less official organization with many more participants. It includes not only the art group ZIP itself but the participants who are in charge of management, supervisory control and educational projects. The attempt to institutionalize our work group has led to a natural expansion of the collective body of our ideological allies.² Answering your second question, I would say that we have participated as designers and constructors in every project of ours held in the West except for the project in Graz.³ Actually, we work as installation fitters and create every piece together. Sometimes it may look weird, but I assume that collective art groups like ours could be a specialty of the Russian cultural area.

IY: Would you say that the West is actually in need of such a post-Soviet community vibe?

Alexey Markin: This question seems to be pivotal for Krasnaya Shpana.

SS: The audience in Hamburg somehow associated our collectivity vibe with romantic ideas of the avant-garde and the period of the 90s when the German alternative art scene was being institutionalised.

IY: What role does the avant-garde play for you personally?

SS: In our view, the avant-garde enables a blurring of the distinction between reality and art. For us, the essence of the avant-garde resides in “Worker’s Club” by Rodchenko. While we were at university, it was possible to submit a work in the avantgardist style. You would just paint three triangles using three different colors. It was our intention even as students to work with content rather than just to manipulate visual forms of expression.

OS: Is it possible that the aesthetic power of your installations could give an impetus to the political potential of the avant-garde?

SS: We create space for collective creativity, and the political potential of our work manifests itself via cooperation and collective utilization of the objects.

IY: In terms of Russian cultural policy, avant-garde practice cannot be reduced to a mere form of expression. The form conveys the meaning or political appeal of the Russian so-called “Kulturträger”.⁴

OS: Every state which has got its “own” authentic avant-garde starts to fill the form with symbolic characters which transfer a certain ideology.

IY: How important is the role of art in the process of formation of a nation state?

SS: It is of the utmost importance. Contemporary art in non-metropolitan areas goes underground, since most towns and most museum projects are fairly conservative. At the current moment, contemporary art would be capable of providing space for common reflection and engagement, but in the end, this happens exclusively in Moscow. Centralization in art and what’s more – in medicine and business – disconnect non-metropolitan areas and big cities. As a result, these evolve heterogeneously. For instance,

the Kovalenko Krasnodar Regional Art Museum has a tremendous collection of avant-garde art pieces at its disposal, but these are never displayed. Copies of paintings by Titian and Caravaggio are exhibited instead. For us, withholding pieces of avant-garde art means taking a certain position on political issues. For Krasnodar such art seems to be too resonant.

OS: Does it mean that the avant-garde can only represent the country as progressive in museums such as the Tretyakov Gallery, while in the provinces the avant-garde as a national idea is not really accepted?

AM: Could that happen in Ukraine?

IY: I don't think so. They are mostly busy with trying to suppress pieces of art in the style of socialist realism at this juncture.

AM: Apropos your works of art, in my opinion, these are permeated with irony. You often refer to certain elements or even works of earlier periods of the avant-garde. The installation "Zero Object" is reminiscent of an enlargement of one of Malevich's architektons, but at the same time serves as an amusement ride for children.⁵

SS: It never came to my mind. I mean, the irony issue. We simply use the simple forms and materials as it's easier to create communication via simple forms. This simple work always opens perspectives for negotiation. It always stays somehow incomplete, open. Put it another way, when plywood stays unpainted, it means it is open to further amendments. You can reflect upon the possible color of the paint, how the plywood could be adjusted so that the material remains somehow incomplete, open to amendments and interpretations. When a work of art looks like a mock-up, it means it is not something solid, completed once and for all, but something which is created at the present moment the way we like it and could be altered at any moment. The avant-garde, from this perspective, is represented by simple forms of expression which can be easily altered, rearranged, extended. Speaking of this "pot of gold" at the end of the rainbow, we are creating works of art devoted to the future. We reflect upon its possible forms and realities. If we paint and finish an object, it will break the link between present and future.

AM: It's interesting that you make mention of a mock-up (maketnye sostoyania). Some three-dimensional avant-garde works of earlier periods

were mock-ups of a kind, too, but were really complicated to implement, for instance, Tatlin's Tower. You, in turn, somehow get rid of that technological panache by bringing to life simple hand-made designs which are closer to remonstrative activist constructions (tree-sits) used in Germany to stop eviction and destruction of the Hambach Forest. This is a construction in use rather than just a utopian symbol. The political project called "The district of civil resistance" that your group produced in 2011 reminds me of forest protests against clear cutting.⁶ The tree designs and the so-called "booth for individual picketing" turned into an act of disobedience.⁷

SS: In my view, the avant-garde has become more available to a wide audience, more comprehensible, more public. Black square is somehow a national sign. In terms of local politics there are some "court" artists, so to speak, who are depicting the Cossacks on 5x2m canvases. Certain museum halls are being remodelled to accommodate these paintings. It has nothing to do with museum administration but merely with decisions made by the authorities.

Translated by Marina Pototskaya

- [1] Translator's note: The ZIP plant has given its name to the art group headquartered in the premises of the Factory for Measurement Instrumentation in Krasnodar, "ZIP" for short.
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<http://typography-online.ru/kisi/>
- [3] Installation "Avrora" 2018, Festival Steirischer Herbst in Austria. URL:
<https://www.steirischerherbst.at/volksfronten/artists/zip-group>.
- [4] Translator's note: Kulturträger – people who transmit cultural ideas.
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“Malevich Is Common Property, Belongs to Everyone”

Conversation with Dmitry Vilensky

November 17, 2018

Dmitry Vilensky is an artist, a member of the working group “Chто Delat” and co-founder of “The School of Engaged Art”. He lives in St. Petersburg.

Keywords: universality and hegemony, decoloniality, internationalism of the margins

Alexey Markin: Nowadays notions such as the “Russian avant-garde” and the “Soviet avant-garde” have become part of the modern Russian culture industry. At the same time, in the West the avant-garde is associated with anti-fascism and left-wing movements, and thus the “Russian avant-garde” is automatically categorised as a left-wing anti-hegemonic project, which conflicts with the Post-Soviet reality. For example, in Ukraine today there is an absolutely obvious demand for a Ukrainian national avant-garde, which, in my opinion, is tinged with anti-imperialist struggle against Russia. What do you think about this?

Dmitry Vilensky: The trajectory of struggle for the avant-garde is clearly discernible, but the opposition you mention is false. I don't see any specific attempts to nationalize the avant-garde in Russia as a result of the prevailing conservative agenda. This means that the avant-garde can't be a weapon in the struggle for national identity and it is excluded from debate for objective reasons. The avant-garde is feared as a declaratively radical international project, since it offers little on conservative-nationalist issues. For me it is hard to say what is happening in Ukraine.

The notion of the Russian avant-garde is not a Russian problem, but a problem of international studies. I think there are a number of reasons why this happened. First, it is right to trace the avant-garde back in its genealogy to pre-revolutionary events, when there was such a thing as “Russia”. Because after 1917 Russia no longer existed, and the notion of “Soviet” appeared, but nevertheless the origins lie in the Russian, therefore, formally speaking, the Russian avant-garde captured all the avant-gardes that arose in the territory of the Russian Empire, and this concept is nominal and well-established. I am not an art historian, but it is worth mentioning that all former Soviet republics have their own avant-gardes: Belarusian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, etc. which they consider part of a common and interconnected movement, and as part of an international movement.

AM: We are conducting our research on the basis of information that became available after 2014. There appears to be a new surge of debate, and the historical avant-garde is going through strong institutionalization. In this case, I don't quite agree with you that the avant-garde in Russia is not being nationalized, there are still qualitative changes in the events and in the rhetoric of officials and cultural figures.

DV: Where? In which exhibitions?

Illia Yakovenko: For example, the exhibition “Someone 1917” in the New Tretyakov Gallery on Krymsky Val, tried to combine the avant-garde with artists such Nesterov and others who were searching for religious, sacral sources of “the people” in their paintings. The exhibition was presented as evidence of continuity in the Russian art tradition.

Olga Shirokostup: Or when the Tretyakov Gallery Director Zelfira Tregulova declared to her colleagues at a meeting: “I consider the Russian avant-garde part of Russian identity. Statements of the avant-garde celebrate a paradoxical idea, the desire for the absolute, the prophetic utterance. And Russians have always strived for absolute form and the absolute itself.”¹

DV: It seems to me that today the avant-garde is not playing any noticeable role in contemporary cultural politics, because of contradictions – everyone can interpret anything the way they please. I haven't heard about this exhibition at all, maybe because I don't live in Moscow. When we talk about the Russian avant-garde, there are a lot of other opinions. Recently I was in Germany, there they have the history of “degenerate art”, where the avant-garde is associated with Jews, cosmopolitans, Poles. Perhaps such an attitude is possible, and the logic behind it is clear to me. But I do not see a hegemonic line here, rather there is a hegemonic line that excludes the avant-garde. Moreover, there are two interpretative schemata: the first says that the Soviet period is a deviation from Russian history, the second (Stalinist one) says that Soviet period, on the contrary, was the culmination of the Russian imperial spirit. I wanted to offer you a different angle to look at this issue, through Groys. He constantly insists that the avant-garde is a very unpopular project, i.e. in Russia the perception of the avant-garde and the European bourgeoisie backing it always caused rejection. “Well, what garbage!” – people think, looking at it, not understanding why this art is necessary. Avant-garde is difficult to translate into grand cultural policy. Often people only respect what is expensive. If it is expensive, it deserves respect. Why is it expensive? Probably some kind of Zionist conspiracy.

Another issue we have in Russia after a long Soviet period which put the avant-garde out of sight is that there are no collections; you could see a couple of paintings by Kandinsky and Malevich here and there, but

almost everything else is hidden in the storerooms. The thing is that in Russia there is no “post-avant-garde culture” i.e. mass communication between society and the avant-garde, which was happening in the West. Thirty years later this “post-avant-garde culture” is still in the making in our country. In addition, there is no European bourgeois class in Russia, therefore the reach of this whole phenomenon to the wide public is problematic, the avant-garde and its perception remain narrowly cultural, professional, marginal themes. But when you are in the West, it becomes clear that the avant-garde is the most intimate and understandable art, exactly what is needed to be exhibited abroad. For example, the exhibition “Utopia” in the Guggenheim.² You can exhibit Repin, and this is not so convincing, but there are no artists to exhibit except for Repin, and no luck with either Aivazovsky and Shishkin, nor with socialist realism. Avant-garde is the universal currency, the common language which everyone speaks. But a great deal of the “stock” in this enterprise happens to be held in this specific geographic region, so everybody understands that such exhibitions are legitimate.

Until now, the Russian academies (from what I know of the academy in Saint Petersburg) have a terrible view of the avant-garde. Teachers learn that there was a great realist school, which then was screwed up by foreign influences. I can’t imagine how a person in the process of studying in the “official” academies could encounter the avant-garde. It is still hard to generalize the concept of “avant-garde”, since it is very dispersed – there are different artists, different positions. It is necessary to decide whether we are talking about the meta-cultural policy of states, or about the policy of national communities. Let’s say I communicate a lot with the Jewish community, and they have an emphasis on the “Jewishness” of the avant-garde, that the avant-garde, both within Ukraine and within Belarus, is a production of Jewish communities. It also depends on how the artists position themselves, whether they make statements that they are engaged in building a universal project, or a national one. How did Malevich, Rodchenko, Stepanova and others position themselves?

AM: The theorist John Roberts used a subtitle “Chto Delat and the Third Avant-Garde” in one of his articles. So he includes you in some ordinal and ongoing avant-garde tradition. What do you think about the “death of the avant-garde”? Is it still appropriate to use this name and category today?

DV: It is very difficult to answer this question. There is John Roberts, there is Mark Leger, a Canadian researcher who writes a lot about the avant-garde, trying to establish the genealogy of modern political art and to problematize our practice, to understand whether it looks like avant-garde or not, and to decide which artists should be attributed to the avant-garde tradition in general. I myself, and we, as a part of the “Chto Delat” Collective, also did a lot of speculating around this topic at one time, and it seemed to me important to insist that there is a possibility of the emergence of new “avant-gardes”.

Now, after ten years (probably the last time we debated it was 2007), I don't have such a clear stance. It seemed to me important then to rethink the situation. Now I would talk about this through the concept of hegemony and in the context of a return to universalism, through an attempt to establish new universalist criteria. Even before Roberts, the concept of the “neo-avant-garde” was coined in October magazine, and speculation on these terms constantly arose here and there. It is clear that the genealogy and the history of the avant-garde are two different things whose relationship is conditional. The historical composition of the avant-garde and the events of the October Revolution were unique. If we talk about the basic tenets of the avant-garde, then a universalistic aspect arises, an attempt to create a hegemony of truth that will be unequivocal for all historical and geographical contexts – this approach looks problematic and, of course, is denied by all. This is already the road to the “Gulag” [laughs].

If you think about it, some kind of hegemonic relationships continue to be created in the modern art world, and these hegemonic relationships – they are somewhat similar. Say, I write about the composition of the three methods, but it remains marginal. I wrote about realism, it was important for me to establish a completely radical mimetic narrative line – it also sounds very doubtful for many.

The avant-garde was discovered in the West in the 60s, but this involves terminological confusion, because drawing lines on the definitions of what is avant-garde, what is modernism, where they converge, where they intersect is clearly impossible. There are a lot of materials in our “Dialogue with Rancier”, and Artemy Magun expressed our common position very clearly, which “Chto Delat” collectively agreed with, and I don't think that anything has changed since then.³ I find it interesting to problematize universality and hegemony, but this is not exactly about the avant-garde. Hegemony is

a wider historical bloc and the formation of coalitions, and the avant-garde is a radically advanced military movement – it's rather a minority.

I currently like the term “internationalism of the margins”, which describes how private geographical marginality turns out to be inscribed in a large international picture based on the subject and the similarity of situations, and not on territorial proximity.⁴ A group from St. Petersburg may feel closer to and have much more in common with another marginal group from Argentina than with artists from their own city who do some other form of art.

IY: What do you think about the Ukrainianization of the avant-garde? The “Ukrainian” avant-garde is not an end in itself but rather serves to abolish the hegemony of the “Russian” avant-garde.

DV: I insist that the “Russian avant-garde” should be used for the territory that was under Russian imperial rule. The word “Russian” scares you, well, the “European avant-garde”, “Dutch avant-garde” are technical markers, there is nothing nationalist about them. As in Ukraine, they are trying to create a national art, but it seems to me that this is politically limited. Working on common projects is fascinating, and of course, Nikita Kadan says that this is an imperial privilege. They are creating a lot of “small” avant-gardes, and then...

IY: Don't you see this as an attempt to seize the agency?

DV: There is a demand for agency from the nationalist Ukrainian government and from international networks – these are normal processes, but I don't really understand what could arise from them. I find it really interesting to understand that there is a post-socialist experience that is truly unique, but remains undeveloped.

IY: It is interesting how you talk about technical terms, but it is obvious that the ideology is hidden and invisibly present in technical terms too, and the term “Russian avant-garde” is no exception. You are right, it was introduced in the 60s when Camilla Gray was engaged in reopening the avant-garde and consulted with Barr and wrote the book “The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922”, and it is clear that at

that time the entire Soviet territory was designated from the outside as “Russia”. Today this is a problem that is still present for many.⁵ The post-Soviet is indistinguishable and implies Russian first. In 2015, we did a performance about Mazeppa in Germany at the Nordwind festival, which had a focus on Russia. “Chto Delat” also took part in the festival. And we noticed that in spite of the fact that the art represented there was from different countries within the post-Soviet space, the post-Soviet apparently became synonymous with Russia and the Russian Federation.

I would also like to underline that you are talking about denial of hegemony – which makes me think about universal reason. On the one hand, the legitimization of the term “Russian avant-garde” occurs through its historization, through inscribing it in History as simply a reality with certain prevailing circumstances. On the other hand, if we consistently deny the universal reasoning which considers historical temporality as an exclusively linear sequence of events which is universal for everyone, then we could also deny the version that seeks to historicize the avant-garde as Russian. No matter if we rationally localized it historically as a part of Russian Empire, then it was some kind of colonial History, and we may not want to have anything to do with it or be inscribed in it.

DV: The important word that we have missed above is colonial. We already understand how the decolonial turn in the United States and elsewhere has been made, but the problem of Soviet decoloniality – it has not yet been solved. Moreover, it is very differentiated – the decoloniality in Central Asia will be different from the decoloniality in Belarus and Ukraine. Here people could take two positions: one is that postcolonial studies give us a methodology that is fully suitable for the description of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (well, with a few corrections that can be processed and used to apply for grants). But the other position is that Russian and Soviet colonialism is fundamentally different from English and Spanish colonialisms and has a fundamentally different relationship to indigenous people. If we do not understand these issues, we will not understand anything.

AM: “Chto Delat” often reiterate their method of realism (the triad: realism, avant-garde revolutionary impulse, autonomy), but I also noticed that, at the same time, you often use the figure of Malevich. What does he represent for you? After all, it is still impossible nowadays to call Malevich a critical artist.

DV: I am surprised. I certainly did not expect to hear about Malevich. Malevich for me is not a very interesting artist, it just always seemed to me that I had more affiliations with Rodchenko and El Lissitzky. For me Malevich was always a fucking mystic; I was far from him aesthetically and in texts, too. On the other hand, as with the notorious “Russian avant-garde”, Malevich became a marker for the entire avant-garde. If someone speaks about the avant-garde, first of all he has Malevich in his head, and not some more complicated field of constellations and figures. In this regard, he is a very strange figure. On the other hand, watching his later transition to a figurative artist, I notice an affinity. Roughly two years ago, an exhibition of twentieth-century art opened in the Russian Museum, a lot of late Malevich works were exhibited there; for some reason all of them turned out to be in the Russian Museum.

IY: Not in Ukraine though!

DV: Well, of course. You know where he died – in St. Petersburg, in Leningrad, then the coffin was taken to Moscow. Malevich belongs to us [laughs]. Malevich belongs to nobody. The most correct position is that Malevich is common property, belongs to everyone.

OS: Now the question of the future. What is to be done by an artist today? What are the most anti-hegemonic practices now?

DV: Now we are facing a very big problem with use value. What is the use of art? I appreciate the way that art creates other communities around itself, which are commonly called “unalienated forms of life”, and where other types of relationships are produced. Maybe conflicted, maybe non-conflicted, but you feel some other space for people and new relations ignited between them. Sometimes they might fetishize it. I mean, I see a certain autonomy of the artwork, say, in the works of Hito Steyerl; they produce a community even though she does not do any activism: the community is produced mainly through texts and films.

I am now writing a long-read about universalism, a theoretically rigorous piece, and a fragment has already been published in Moscow Art Magazine. In this article, I analyse the changes associated with the new ethical turn, identity politics, decoloniality, and I try to understand that although this is

all wonderful and necessary and has been ongoing for many years, we are nonetheless in a dead end, as we were with the socialist movements decades ago.⁶ I am trying to grope towards an understanding of why all these concepts are not working and, moreover, why they are driving us in a completely opposite direction.

Nowadays there is so much art. The big question is what to do about it. Even here the problem is democratization. I found a very good example – imagine a film festival that always existed on the basis of an open-call, and directors applied themselves. There used to be 300 applications before, after the digital turn there were several thousand, and now there are tens of thousands. And it is clear that in five years there will be a hundred thousand applications. Thus we face the question – who could sort through all of them? The result is that no curator will be able to carry out research anywhere close to the level of thoroughness that is currently possible.

Now we are facing completely different quantitative problems that we used to think had no significant influence. Previously, the curator could carry out research, go somewhere to see everything, and there was some kind of transparency. Now, due to the growing amount of art, opacity is increasing, and the internationalism of marginality is also rising – with issues being highlighted always in respect of specific territories. In this regard, you could also view “Russian” as just a designation, a territorial marker, not linked to the nationality. Here we encounter what Latour described as a class composition and a territorial composition, which includes a lot of actors (including non-human actors: natural factors, network factors). Nowadays there are many artists working on such issues; it is very interesting. Returning to what was said before, I see some slippage in the Ukrainian situation, there is too much problematization of the national question, and now it turns out this is not interesting to anyone. That is, people are doing other things, and this territorial issue is more likely to be supranational. And if we consider it to be national, we immediately regress.

Translated by Mikhail Gribodov

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“One may not Leap from a Colonized State to Universalism”

Conversation with Nikita Kadan December 24, 2018

Nikita Kadan, who lives in Kyiv, is a Ukrainian artist and sculptor and a member of the R.E.P. group (Revolutionary Experimental Space) and the Hudrada Curatorial Group.

Keywords: universalism, deconstruction of imperial narrative, nofuturism

Illia Yakovenko: We cannot avoid the “elephant in the room” of the war and martial law. The first attempt to have a Skype conversation between the three of us failed due to the *casus belli* in the Kerch Strait and the ensuing military tensions. I panicked and wrote: “let’s postpone”. It was not clear how we could hold a conversation when a new phase of military conflict appeared imminent. But regardless, our Russian-Ukrainian-German group continues with its collaboration and I think will further continue against the odds. Overall, what prospects do you perceive for building relations between artists from Russia and Ukraine today?

Nikita Kadan: Starting from 2014, it has been about “wartime art”. Most artists in Ukraine and Russia have to perform various forms of “ideological service”, and the war has created a great demand for this. Accordingly, there is art which engages itself in deconstructing the techniques of ideological service, breaking down the propaganda into its components, demonstrating how it all works. On the other hand, there are practices that involve ignoring the war, turning a blind eye, and there is also space for this kind of art. Wartime calls for transparency in artistic practices, motivations and relations.

The ways art history is written are also affected by the war. The intense “nationalization” of the avant-garde is nothing else but a product of wartime. Until recently, only a small group of art historians, with the key figure being Dmitry Gorbachev, paid attention to this issue. But achieving recognition for the definition “Ukrainian avant-garde” was not considered a matter of national importance. Now, however, it seems to have become another military campaign on the ideological front. At the same time, what we call “the Russian avant-garde” is a completely imperial construct uniting under the same roof miscellaneous artistic practices observed across the Russian Empire and Soviet republics. Including all this art under the label of “Russian avant-garde” conceals and denies extremely important differences and makes the particularities of local contexts indiscernible. Developments in Tiflis, Vitebsk, Kharkiv, Moscow and Petrograd are mashed together and all the various avant-garde practices become less distinctive in their relation to regional political contexts.

The Ukrainian avant-garde has connections with the 1920s “Ukrainization policy”. The Ukrainian avant-garde involves avant-garde practices which evolved under conditions specific to Ukraine during this period;

moreover, the Ukrainian avant-garde is not limited to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, it is also, for example, associated with the Artes group in Lviv that is associated with the Polish interbellum context.¹ Thus the definition “Russian avant-garde” can no longer include Ukrainian avant-garde art practices.

The London exhibition Postponed Future showcased works of the Ukrainian avant-garde and of three contemporary artists from Ukraine: Lada Nakonechna, Mykola Ridnyi and me.² It was important for us, on the one hand, to insist on the complete relevancy of the definition “Ukrainian avant-garde”, but on the other hand, a manifesto by Oleksiy Radynski titled “Against National Avant-garde” was one of the key exhibition texts.³ My curatorial text expressed very clearly that the definition “Ukrainian avant-garde” represents a tool for breaking, splitting the construct currently going under the name of “Russian avant-garde”. We are splitting imperial values, not for the sake of creating “national” histories of art, restricted and isolated territories of description for a universalist avant-garde project, but in order to arrive at a new instability of definitions. In order to put questions before those who rely on state power, on various mechanisms of centralized ideological control of history, or on the penetrating force of the Russian avant-garde market brand. “Ukrainian avant-garde” for us represents a category for destabilizing the history of the arts as “the history of winners”.

IY: Is not this kind of destabilization dangerous, seeing that it relies on the category of the national? The Ukrainian avant-garde, building its “Ukrainess” by ascribing qualities based on romantic and essentialist notions about the nation – this is what Gorbachev, for instance, does and what largely predetermines the new surge of interest towards the avant-garde in Ukraine, reinforced by the war. I identify with the destabilization and deconstruction of the imperial narrative, but I am also wary of referring to the national.

NK: Saying “Ukrainian avant-garde”, we link art to the political circumstances of its emergence. Any national essentialism is alien to us. All the stories circulating about the “use of national embroidery colors in suprematist compositions” are a surrogate of art history meant to be used in the ideological battle. No, we are aware that Malevich and Yermilov or

Kosarev also drew upon “vulgar” village culture. But this is about prioritization, and talking today about the universalist and communist meaning of the avant-garde means prioritizing a territory that is problematic for the currently prevailing narrative. We should also remember that avant-garde artists were able to implement the “folk” in the communist narrative.

Another stratum of this agenda is how the image of the Ukrainian avant-garde is now used in political propaganda – a political propaganda that does not offer any aesthetic innovations in its techniques (although those aesthetic innovations could be discovered through research) – and how the avant-garde was also a tool of political propaganda in the early part of the last century, when artists painted campaign trains and factory clubs, and took efforts to approach their audiences with a language that was both innovative and understandable, to enable their messages to gain wider support.

If we “unglue” the Ukrainian avant-garde from the conditions of the time, it is not clear what it was all about. But talking from a viewpoint which rules out nationalism and national essentialism, it becomes evident that we are dealing with a practice that is universalist in its intentions, but was implemented in rather peculiar local conditions, and that is why the locality needs to be included in the definition of the practice.

Alexey Markin: Given what you say about deconstructing the notion of the “Russian avant-garde”, how important is it today to use the word avant-garde per se?

NK: We know that avant-garde was not an endonym. However, the authors of the time relied very much upon the category of avant-gardism, the political avant-garde and attempts to find its equivalent in the artistic domain. The Kharkiv magazine “Avantgarde” and the group around it used the very specific rhetoric of political avant-gardism, which united the artistic movement with the revolutionary political movement.⁴ In the 1920s, this group had participated in a number of movements which were later equated with the “avant-garde”, these movements competing and openly feuding with each other.

When we say “avant-garde” today, we retain the option of going back to the political meaning – avant-gardism of further historic struggle. What is different is that the words are uttered unthinkingly, and here we are dealing with ways of writing the history of art, a history that depoliticizes

definitions and detaches them from the contexts of their emergence. Nowadays, when many things are guided by so-called “decommunization policy” in Ukraine, we witness Soviet propaganda and art products being destroyed and vandalized with the sanction of the government. This also applies to a multitude of visual materials that are not propaganda-related but simply of Soviet origin and are destroyed as a by-product. What is happening to Soviet neomodern architecture and its decorative design, which is free of any ideological charge? The same thing that is happening to the products of propaganda. “Decommunization” is quite sensitive to the foreignness of the modernist form *per se*. Yet, the Ukrainian avant-garde is spoken of favorably, treated as an important part of the national cultural heritage – but only provided that its communist content is ignored. And – provided that we do not return to the original intentions of the authors of the avant-garde – and its communist form.

In the meantime, Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine Kirilenko, the former Minister of Culture, says that Prime Minister Groysman has demanded an investigation from the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINR), an organization that acts as the “architect of decommunization”. They wonder: why restore the monument commemorating the “Bolshevist terrorist and separatist” Artem? Ivan Kavaleridze’s creation is one of the key pieces of the Ukrainian avant-garde and just about the only public monument dating back to the 1920s preserved on the territory of Ukraine. Top public officials are calling for the destruction of one of the major Ukrainian artworks, while, according to the books and museums, the avant-garde is now “our everything”, at least for a time. But this is only about “nationally understandable” avant-garde. The result is a major controversy. They are attempting to unstick the form from the political content, however the word “avant-garde” itself is a ticking bomb, both in terms of the imperial construct of “Russian avant-garde” and all national and patriotic connotations inherent in the contemporary definition of “Ukrainian avant-garde”. This word itself contains a promise of liberation. The avant-garde tilts towards post-national life, it tilts towards the universalist communist [being]. On the other hand, the avant-garde’s connections were by no means limited to the Bolsheviks; it had links to a number of other political forces which had been suppressed by the Bolsheviks – to organized anarchism, for example. The avant-garde employed ideas of communism which were extremely remote from those established in the later Soviet period. And the political intentions of the 1920s avant-

garde often prove to be simply indiscernible in the lens of “decommunization”.

AM: Could you talk in more detail about the exhibition at Grad Gallery?

NK: Since I had worked on the Ukrainian avant-garde and the early Soviet avant-garde in general, I was invited to curate this exhibition. It was held in London, and the pieces by Vasyl Yermilov, Boris Kosarev, Maria Sin-yakova-Urechina and other avant-garde artists originated from two local private collections; I do not think that Ukrainian museums would have consented to something like that at this stage. I engaged another two authors who were dealing with the same range of problems: Lada Nakonechna and Mykola Ridnyi. The works created by Lada, Mykola and me answered the question: how should we perceive the avant-garde art in a time of war? The division here was evident: the avant-garde is the art of revolution, and what we have is the art of wartime. And this war does not involve a transition to another state, it is hopeless. What we do is called nofuturism. These days there are obviously no projects that seek an essentially different future, and artistic practices resonate precisely with this age of no projects. But we are trying to keep open the very opportunity of the future. Using the term “avant-garde”, we refer to the possibility of a revolutionary policy per se. However, all we have in us in terms of revolutionary politics lies within the domain of protecting a pure potentiality: the possibility “of keeping the window open”. The works of the three authors are about wartime and the destruction of habitat, about survival practices but also about attempts to redeem history and memory, i.e. prospects for the future.

IY: What opportunities does this nofuturism present us with?

NK: Postponed Future was preceded by the projects Into the Dark and Referendum on Withdrawal from the Human Race, which were responses to the wartime and essentially came down to staying stable in negativity. These projects detached us from the propaganda, from serving various groups in power during the wartime but also provided for a refusal of neutrality, of a safe meta position.

There was also a campaign titled Night in the Forest by the Moscow movement Night (Dvizhenie Notch). The movement proposed to do something together in connection with the current military situation – as a kind of

statement of solidarity on the part of Russian and Ukrainian artists against Russian and Ukrainian militarism.⁵ I suggested to all participants that we go to a forest on the outskirts of Kyiv at midnight, walk several kilometers directly into the depths of the forest, and then part in different radial directions and spend the night alone. At dawn we would start finding our way out. When the military activities began, it seemed essential for us to reconsider our own sensory apparatuses. As it turned out, it was impossible for us to use our former findings. We had a deficit of sensory experience matching the epoch. This is nofuturism – the courage to go into the dark, to move without forecasts and guarantees. No doxa can support us in this, or provide confidence. Nofuturism is about changing the intonation and changing the manner in which one lives one's life.

No conflicts before the Crimean annexation and the war in Donbas could undermine the post-Soviet, but now I keep hearing about the end of the post-Soviet *per se*.⁶ And here, when the “post-” is finished, it is necessary to align oneself to the new conditions.

Ukrainian art largely relies on reconstructing the path from the past to the future; it is looking for a place where it can make Benjamin's “tiger's leap into the past”, looking for the source of revolutionary power. When the image of the artistic avant-garde is employed in the propaganda of both Putin's Russia and by Ukraine, we should refer to the proper intent of the avant-garde. At the same time, comparing oneself with this intent, “measuring the present with the future”, may provide a more realistic understanding of the scale of today's processes and the scale of the possible.

AM: What do you think about coloniality in the relations between Russia and Ukraine?

NK: One of the questions whose response enables self-identification regarding the current processes is: “Is it possible to consider the post-Soviet through the post-colonial?” There are researchers in Ukraine who give an unambiguous “yes” to this question. Our position is more complicated.

The forced proximity and suppression of national life had been determinative in the pre-Soviet period. But after that it was about the affiliation to the common communist project and independent communist subjectivity. On the other hand, starting from the curtailment of the “Ukrainization policy” (and the Ukrainian avant-garde along with it), the old coloniality was restored in

periodic phases of backsliding under the auspices of the communist project. An artwork may be divided into parts perceptually – here's local political and cultural subjectivity, here's colonial impact, and here's universalism. Our intent is focused on revealing the grain of universalism, but it is impossible without consideration of local specifics. We will not break forth to universalism until we make up for the repressions inflicted on account of ethnic descent. One may not leap from a colonized state to universalism.

Translated by Anastasiia Mednikova

- [1] The Artes group existed from 1929 until 1935.
- [2] The exhibition Postponed Future was held at Grad Gallery in London on 26.04.2017 – 24.06.2017. URL: <https://www.grad-london.com/whatson/postponed-futures/>
- [3] Postponed Futures, Exhibition Catalogue, London, 2017.
- [4] "Avantgarde" magazine (1928-29), publishers: V. Polishchuk and V. Yermilov.
- [5] Kadan, Nikita: Into the Dark. About Three Gaps. Moscow Art Magazine, p. 95, 2015. URL: <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/10/article/128>
- [6] Chukhovich, Boris: Disintegration of the Post-Soviet Plus Turkmenization of the Whole Country. Moscow Art Magazine, p. 100, 2017. URL: <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/51/article/1033>

“The Avant-Garde has Been Captured”

Conversation with Lada Nakonechna

December 23, 2018

Lada Nakonechna is an artist, a member of the R.E.P. group of artists and the curatorial collective “Hudrada” and co-founder of the project “Method Fund”. She lives in Kyiv.

Keywords: militancy, destruction, Creating Ruin

Alexey Markin: In 2014 in Petersburg we took part in “Between The Hammer & The Anvil” a meeting of Ukrainian and Russian cultural figures organized by the collective Chto Delat within the framework of The School of Engaged Art. The event was conceived as a critical gesture towards Manifesta 10¹ Polish curator Kuba Szreder calls this kind of protest practice “productive withdrawals”, when social interaction is intensified through a boycott or a strike by cultural workers. What do you think about the self-organization of artists in situations of military conflict? Should communication between cultural institutions be interrupted?

Lada Nakonechna: The role of the artist can be understood in different ways. For example, during Maidan, artists were documenting events; art can give a fresh perspective on what is happening. As for communication, there is no need to interrupt it, but no one should imagine that friendly relationships could end the war. Cultural relations, participation in exhibitions and boycotts, should be considered separately each time. We, for example, refused to exhibit in Garage, but made a point of publicising our reasons for doing so; there were also other refusals, which were not as visible and have not reached the public field.²

AM: I have a feeling that in the current political situation it has again become relevant to talk about the militancy of the avant-garde. Recently, the Russian Ministry of Defense published a video, where a winged “Avangard” rocket flies over the Earth. It appeared to me like a 3D version of the poster by El Lissitzky “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” (1919).³ This rocket is a new “miracle weapon” to threaten the West. It is surprising that military marketing is guided by national cultural trends, but it is also obvious that propaganda draws its strength from the avant-garde. An interesting discussion about art and responsibility arose during our performance in Hamburg, when one of the participants protested against Malevich’s quotation, which includes a line about “elimination of nations and fatherlands” which interrupt “cognition of one’s Self in the “panhuman”.⁴ What can you say about the pathos of destruction present in the avant-garde, and, in some cases, the participation of “avant-garde artists” in war directly?

Illia Yakovenko: Militancy is manifested not only in individual cases of participation in military action, but also at the social level, for example

in the war with the bourgeoisie. The avant-garde is charged with negation, and it will keep up the struggle until total destruction.

LN: The avant-garde is connected to the search for novelty and a break with tradition, and the military rhetoric has leaked through this into the aesthetic sphere. In his manifesto in 1914, Kharkiv panfuturist Mykhailo Semenko, who in the late 20s published New Generation magazine, symbolically destroyed Taras Shevchenko's book of poems Kobzar. He desired to eliminate the tradition of honoring Shevchenko as a founder of Ukrainian literature.⁵ I have recently read Oleg Ilnitsky's research on Semenko, which describes how Semenko was criticized and misunderstood back then. His actions were considered through the perspective of events which were happening at a time when people were really being killed. With the "destruction of nations" it is easy to get into another discourse and be misunderstood.

IY: During our conversation, Dmitry Vilensky commented that the avant-garde project as a modernist impulse aiming at progress and universality is being criticized and rejected nowadays. I understand how a westernized epistemology or paradigm is being imposed on the whole world as the only correct one. It can be said that Malevich did not mean physical destruction, but rather elimination of the category "nation", but nowadays, from the perspective of postcolonial theory, destruction (erasure) of manifestations of national culture is also terrifying.

LN: I am currently studying the modernist educational paradigm. Destruction can also be understood as paying attention to basic structures: color, shape, movement. Destruction as reduction to something that unites everyone. Not an equation, but precisely the destruction of structures and superstructures, as when the lights go down at the opera, and everything disintegrates. We can think of how a new society can be constructed from these elements. All elements are initially common, and the avant-garde can be reconsidered from this perspective. Not to make everyone equal, but rather to find something initially inherent in everyone.

AM: Recently, a book on ethnofuturism under the editorship of philosopher Armen Avanesyan has been published in Germany, in which

futurisms from different parts of the world are considered: afrofuturism, sinofuturism, Gulf Futurism etc.⁶ He develops the idea of the Time-Complex.⁷ In his opinion, the idea of futurisms opposes the linear model of European modernism (avant-garde), which today is considered to be discredited.⁸ Your exhibition in London is called Postponed Futures, which also refers to the idea of time.

LN: Yes, there is a trend towards modernisms now. Dmitry Gorbachev promotes his idea of the uniqueness of avant-gardes. From the beginning of the past century, all modern art in Ukraine was called futurism – the art of the future which changes reality. At the exhibition Postponed Futures, it was possible to talk about Ukrainian art in general and how to look at the art of the avant-garde from a contemporary perspective.

Many artists in Ukraine are interested in the remnants of the art of the past, of what was created. On the website Creating Ruin we collect artists who are engaged in archival and documentary practice, who want to feel the “fragments of the past” and reassemble them.⁹ Nowadays, few people talk about the future, everyone talks about the present. It is difficult to even think about the future, until you understand where you currently are.

IY: When you speak of a ruin, I have an association with Kostiantynivka, a town which I have recently been to, and where out of almost three dozen enterprises only a few remained. All other enterprises are abandoned and stand as industrial ruins that violate the urban structure, since these former Soviet enterprises were located between two residential areas. The inscription “Our goal is communism!” remains on one of the industrial buildings. I agree that many people work with the past, but such an appeal to it also implies an appeal to future, to a failed future. There is a longing for a utopian project in the ruin which failed, but the utopian impulse for communism remains within it. Of course, the monolithic centralized party communism of the Soviet Union is not what we imagine today, but is it possible to conceive the future without the communist idea in general?

LN: The avant-garde problem is the uncritical attitude and cooperation with institutions of power. The paradox is that the avant-garde has been captured, as has the belief in artistic potential, its strength and

creativity. Now we can see how this uncritical attitude to creativity is used in the new discourse of creative industries. Recently, during the forum “Creative Ukraine”, Prime Minister Groysman said that Ukraine has every chance of becoming a creative hub in Europe and turning our aesthetic taste into a valuable resource.

AM: I would like to return to the exhibition and ask in detail about your work *Merge Visible*, which visually references suprematist compositions. As far as I understand, photographs documenting the destruction caused by the war in Donbas were used in the work.

LN: I have not traveled to the East but observed everything via the internet. My works are about the information you receive sitting at home. I watched the images of destruction circulating online, and I had a feeling of complete powerlessness in the face of war. My work has become my recognition of my impotence as opposed to a belief in the potential of art. I pursue a meditativeness in cutting out parts from a photo and, as a result, creating a “nice” composition that refers to the avant-garde. To the avant-garde, because the avant-garde artists believed in their potential, they were strong. I was comparing myself with an artist who participates in changing social reality but is so self-confident that they are exposed to mortal risk. *Merge Visible* is a function in “Photoshop” editor, when you can merge all “layers” into one image; I removed from the visible everything that I did not want to see and presented the result.

There were also two more works of mine with the name *Grad* at the exhibition. One consists of screenshots of the word “grad” entered into a search engine. The search engine generated photos of military equipment mixed with photos of hailstones, a natural phenomenon. On the wall, beside the hung screenshots, I placed children’s counting rhymes that I had written out. I had chosen the tougher ones that include phrases such as “get out” and “with the knife”. The “Grad” rocket launcher has a large kill zone, so whoever got in will not get out.

The second performative work could be fully seen only during the exhibition opening. At first, the audience could watch me on the screen in their safe zone, as I walked down the street and pointed at passers-by with my finger, filming them with my phone and counting. People on the street were frightened. The culmination of the performance was when I walked

into the room from the street and continued counting the spectators in the gallery. I showed my power in relation to them; people have a fear of being put on someone's list, being counted, categorised and left without subjectivity. Then I counted through the phone screen, which was much easier than looking at the person. It's like shooting from a hideout, without a directly view of the person you are killing.

IY: Why did you eventually exhibit in the gallery in dialogue with the avant-garde artists, but not with social realists? A contemporary art exhibition together with the avant-garde looks quite organic, but with social realism, though not really problematic, it is definitely harder to articulate.

LN: The exhibition is part of a general look back on the culture that formed us, so social realism could well have taken the place of the avant-garde. Of course, we are the products of both the avant-garde and social realism, and it should not be thought that we perceive ourselves only as followers of the avant-garde tradition. Right now, we just want to sort out what kind of futures the avant-gardists have created.

IY: Could you please also comment on the inclusion of the avant-garde in the rhetoric of the Ukrainian political establishment and their popularization of the avant-garde?

AM: I would add, is the national avant-garde a geographical concept or a concept of struggle for you?

LN: This is paradoxical, but the modernist movement of the 20th century is associated with universalism, national liberation and anti-colonial struggle. In Ukraine, modernism was perceived as offering a potential for the creation of a Ukrainian style. Terminological war is also a feature of Ukrainian politics, but I would still not use the phrase "Ukrainian avant-garde", but rather "the avant-garde in Ukraine", even given the current situation. Independent Ukraine is still strongly attached to Russia, as if there were no other source of energy. We should not repeat manipulations from the media and remain always in tandem – real liberation will take place when Ukrainian culture stops looking back at "big brother". I am rather negative about the popularization of Malevich, since it does not shed light on what he was doing, and everything eventually comes

to the Black Square. Or when in the academy some external graphic elements are simply dragged from the avant-garde, and flatness of painting is considered as some kind of decorative art, like a carpet pattern. Popularization is also dangerous because the avant-garde is often known only for easel paintings, but at that time easel forms were considered a place for experiments, and artists thought of their major works in terms of monumental forms. There are few people who are speaking about the production of art of that time and its content.

Translated by Maria Vorotilina

[1] "...the most important subject of our discussions at the School was the situation surrounding events in Ukraine, which again, and in the harshest way, was restructuring our understanding of the political role of art. Thus, this issue of the Bulletin consists of topical writing that speculates on the development of political processes in our countries and their impact on poetics and the possibility of engaged art. It became not only our top priority, but also our answer to the pseudo-relevance and cheap, colonial pathos of huge, mainstream, corporate projects like Manifesta."

The Bulletin of The School of Engaged Art, June 2014. URL: https://issuu.com/dmitryvilensky/docs/rosa_full

[2] Discussion "Between Participants and Witnesses in Garage Museum", 22.01.2015. URL: <https://garagemca.org/ru/event/discussion-between-participants-and-witnesses>

[3] Avangard complex with hypersonic paragliding winged block, YouTube-Video: Russian Ministry of Defense, published on 01.03.2018. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=o-5UEq32-wc

[4] "Political people are moving toward Suprematism and see the way to achieve it as being by the elimination of separate states –elimination of nations, fatherlands, elimination of the fragmentation of humans into different states, which prevents them from seeing and comprehending their own 'I' in the panhuman pannation as in one nonfragmented 'I'.

Kazimir Malevich: World as Nonobjectivity, 1922. (further read the second performance scenario of Krasnaya Shpana).

[5] Here we mean the last line of the manifesto "Sam [I Alone]: "I Burn My Kobzar!" Mykhail Semenko "Sam" from the collection Derzannya: Poezy. Kyiv, 1914.

- [6] Avanessian, Armen and Moalemi, Mahan: Ethnofuturismen, Leipzig, 2018.
- [7] Armen Avanessian, Suhail Malik: Time-Complex, Moscow Art Magazine, 98, 2016.
URL: <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/31/article/542>
- [8] Miller, Simone: Philosoph Armen Avanessian über „Ethno-Futurismen“. Wem gehört die Zukunft? Deutschlandfunkkultur, 22.07.2018. URL: https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/philosoph-armen-avanessian-ueber-ethno-futurismen-wem.2162.de.html?dram:article_id=423436
- [9] Website of the art project Creating Ruin. URL: <https://creatingruin.net>.

“The Space of Broken Connections”

Conversation with Mykola Ridnyi

February 18, 2019

Mykola Ridnyi is an artist, curator and publicist. He is a co-organiser of the SOSka gallery-lab in Kharkiv and a co-editor of the Prostory web portal. He lives in Kyiv.

Keywords: Kharkiv, mythologisation of the national, anarchism

Alexey Markin: How do you see your film in the context of the Postponed Futures exhibition in London, where works by contemporary Ukrainian artists and the Ukrainian avant-garde from private collections were displayed?

Mykola Ridnyi: There are no direct parallels with the avant-garde in Grey Horses. It is more like a method of interaction with the past, the historical narrative and the ways of addressing it in the present. Lots of people do it. For example, politicians often address the historical narrative in order to transform it, turn it upside down, and make a construction that conforms with their current agenda. As for the method employed in the film, it is not a direct parallel between the past and the present, even though you can find both in the film. There is a third dimension where the past and the present blend and, ultimately, you have no idea where you are. The stories about the 1920s anarchists and present-day anarchists are intertwined in the film. Anarchy is a blind spot in the historical narrative, both Ukrainian and Russian. This subject is poorly explored and good for no one. For the Russian historical narrative, it is an inconvenient movement because it is in conflict with the mainstream (if we call bolshevism the mainstream of the civil war period.) Likewise, anarchists do not really get along with the classical paradigm of the Ukrainian fighters for freedom. Well, they are now trying to fit them into it, forgetting in the process the leftist ideology of anarchism. So we can talk about the national instrumentalisation of anarchism. In this sense, this political and historical phenomenon is associated with the phenomenon of the avant-garde. The national competition for the avant-garde, Russian or Ukrainian, is taking place. But, the art of the avant-garde is, in essence, supranational and conveys an explicitly international message.

Illia Yakovenko: I would like to ask you about the international substance of the avant-garde. What do you think about Oleksiy Radynski's standpoint, as articulated in a post on Prostory¹ and mentioned in the text about the Postponed Futures exhibition?² He writes that, nowadays, the very existence of the concept of the Russian avant-garde shows that the avant-garde project of the early 20th century has failed, as national ideologies, borders etc. have not been abolished. It is important to

accentuate the Ukrainian avant-garde but in order to discredit the Russian avant-garde concept and, hence, the cultural and political hegemony of Russia in the former Soviet states. Do you think this is a productive strategy for achieving a goal?

MR: I am not sure if it is possible to discredit it... but there could be two scenarios. We can either talk about the avant-garde as a Ukrainian phenomenon or, conversely, give the avant-garde and Soviet art to Russia. National appropriation seems like a problematic strategy to me but quite productive under the current circumstances.

IY: In Grey Horses, you talk about time and how the past and the present implode so you cannot understand where you are. It is an interesting approach – by means of disrupting temporality, you disrupt the dominant historical narrative behind the development of standard, universal temporality. The national differentiation of avant-garde trends that existed on the territory of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union can also be regarded as one of the strategies for discrediting the imperial historical narrative and its hegemony over the present. But looking at how they are nationalising Malevich in Ukraine, on a larger public scale, we can see how problematic this strategy can be. Dmitry Gorbachev, a Ukrainian art historian, is a voice of the populist Ukrainianisation of Malevich. Appropriating the artist, he uses his ethnic, romantic and, at times, quite essentialist perception of the nation, which is, by the way, congruent with contemporary mainstream nationalism in Ukraine. In your opinion, how dangerous can such national mythologisation be? How can one pursue decolonisation, differentiate history and resist the dominating historical narrative as well as temporality, on the one hand, and avoid processes related to essentialisation, mythologisation, and populism, on the other?

MR: There are two extremes. Blatant nationalisation of Malevich is one of them. However, there are also situations similar to the conflict around Kavalieridze's Artem monument. Even though it is an avant-garde monument, they are impeding the efforts to restore it and want to demolish it. For the bureaucrats, it is an enemy object of Soviet propaganda. So the avant-garde nationalisation process does not refer to all names and works. In this sense, the example of Ukrainian avant-garde cinema seems

fascinating to me. In the 1920s, the main film board of Ukraine (VUFKU) was located in Kharkiv, which is now called the Bolsheviks' "puppet capital". Nevertheless, VUFKU was somewhat independent from Moscow and only started to report to it upon the relocation of the board to Kyiv in the 1930s. The Dovzhenko Centre in Kyiv is currently exploring this period in art history. The case of cinematography is more complicated, because here the confines of Soviet propaganda are more tangible. However, in many films we can see how their creators tried to dodge these confines and include critical statements. Nowadays, lots of people refuse to see the more complicated and complex structure of films behind the stamp of propaganda. So, not only Kavaleridze with his sculptures but also a lot of Dovzhenko's films, such as *Arsenal*, are becoming controversial. Copying this Soviet agitprop film, the modern Ukrainian State Film Agency (Derzhkino) is releasing *Kruty 1918*, a film dedicated to the same subject but from a different political perspective. But I believe that in the end, Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* will remain an important work in the history of the arts, whereas *Kruty 1918* will be regarded as a poor imitation and mere propaganda.

AM: When we were talking with the ZIP Group, they pointed out a very interesting aspect of the difference between Moscow, the capital, and the provinces. In Moscow, they are trying to show their westernisation by popularising the Russian avant-garde, while, for example, in Krasnodar, they claim the historical avant-garde is hardly ever exhibited even though there is a large collection of avant-garde works at the Kovalenko Art Museum. Is there a similar relationship between Kyiv and Kharkiv in this respect today?

MR: When I was studying at the academy in Kharkiv, I didn't feel the presence of the avant-garde tradition. For academic art education, the early 20th century avant-garde was too cutting edge, hence, an enemy movement. However, the situation in Kharkiv has changed a bit. Now, the YermilovCentre has opened, a contemporary art centre named after Vasyl Yermilov. Graphic designers often reference the avant-garde. Yermilov worked with graphics and fonts, he also designed clothes. The Boychukist phenomenon shifted away from the classic avant-garde, but it has visibly affected the Kharkiv school of monumental painting.

As for me, there is an obvious relationship between the avant-garde and the school of social photography, which emerged much later, in the 1970s, and was viewed as a dissident phenomenon. Boris Mikhailov and other authors of the Vremya Group talked about “blow theory” (blow as in impact) in relation to their praxis. This theory corresponds with the objectives of the 1920s avant-garde and the way it was to work with the audience in terms of emotions. To my mind, influence is not just about recreating some obvious aesthetic shapes, e.g. squares, lines and triangles, it is about the approach to art, interaction between art and society, the audience.

AM: Talking about the theory of the avant-garde, a British theorist John Roberts believes that there is a contemporary artistic avant-garde. He sees it as an international countermovement of marginalised groups that stand against global capitalism. At the same time, the artistic mainstream says that today there is no avant-garde but rather a critical art. Chantal Mouffe, in particular, writes about it, proclaiming the idea of art as an agonistic intervention in public space. Going back to Kharkiv, what is the role of YermilovCentre in the city? What is its connection with the avant-garde? When I was in Kharkiv last year (in 2018), there was no contemporary art there, the centre was closed for the summer. The art scene was barely visible in the city compared to Kyiv, where events and exhibitions take place every day.

MR: You were just unlucky. Summer is always quiet, not only in Kharkiv. And do not idealise Kyiv – its art scene is not always lively, though often livelier than in Kharkiv. YermilovCentre is not a research platform for Yermilov’s work, it is a contemporary art centre. It can hold both good and mediocre exhibitions. As a matter of fact, in Kharkiv, there is no differentiation between art and culture. They mix social and critical rhetoric together with “salon” art and interior design. Major exhibitions or art festivals in Kharkiv are aimed to attract big audiences, therefore, they tend to be quite entertaining. The problem is in the lack of critical initiatives and research projects at the institutional level.

IY: I can recall the City of Kha exhibition that was held at the National Art Museum of Ukraine. When you got to the exhibition, one

of the first things you saw was a large map on the wall depicting the art movements in Kharkiv. The map showed correlations between various movements from the Kharkiv avant-garde to the artists whose works were exhibited. This could easily be interpreted as the process of associating yourself with a certain art tradition, i.e. the avant-garde. What do you think about that?

MR: I published a text titled ‘Avant-garde and Sham’ in relation to that exhibition on Prostory. The map you are talking about is mentioned in it.³ The whole exhibition was an oversimplification and an attempt to connect generations – just like in the Bible, i.e. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob and so on. But this is not how it happens in art. Such parallels and connections can often be made across one or two generations, between unrelated artists. But the exhibition comprised very different artists not based upon their relationship to the avant-garde. The unifying principle was collaboration with the same institution in Kharkiv – the Municipal Gallery, which organised the exhibition. The avant-garde was just a formal brand called upon to combine things that did not belong together. The curators’ idea was that the avant-garde was art that used text. So they decided to narrow it down to a formal technique – let’s just use this map to bring together everything that happened in Kharkiv as well as artists from different periods of history, and serve it all as “local flavour”. It was purely an advertising and entertaining trick disguised as research.

AM: A country’s second city always competes with its capital. Whenever there is a discussion of the local cultural policy in Hamburg, they necessarily raise the question of underfunding of the arts and remark that artists, performers and theatre professionals move to Berlin or other German cities with better funding. Hamburg is a tourism-oriented city with special features that come with this – e.g. huge cruise ships. What is the funding procedure in Kharkiv? How do the local art communities sustain themselves? Sociologist Alexandra Nenko conducted research on creative communities in St Petersburg. I was astonished by the fact that each art community struggles to elaborate its own survival strategy, as the government does not provide financial support for the local art scene. The research is focused on three artistic commu-

nities in St. Petersburg – “Kukhnya” (The Kitchen), “Paraziti” (The Parasites), and “Chto Delat” (What Is to Be Done?).⁴ Based on your experience in Kharkiv, what are the survival strategies there? You say I am exaggerating the importance of Kyiv but I think it is a global problem. Well, Hamburg is, probably, richer than Kharkiv but they are similar in size.

MR: But tourism is not essential to Kharkiv. The lack of funding is everywhere, including Kyiv. Some public grants have emerged now – e.g. the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, the Ministry of Culture, etc. Generally, any institution from any city or town can get funding. The opportunities for creative professionals in Kharkiv are roughly the same as in Kyiv. But the main problem is in the level of intensity of the art world, the lack of intensive discussion, some laboratory process. We tried to do it for a long time. But eventually, there was no more energy to organise the whole process continually. There are no grassroots initiatives that could systematically underpin artistic activity. That is the main problem. That is why I moved away from Kharkiv.

IY: Could you tell us about the self-organisation of the SOSka group and why it was disbanded?

MR: It was not actually disbanded, it just dissolved into other processes. There were three of us in the beginning. Anya Kriventsova left the group in 2009-2010. Thereafter, Sergey Popov and I continued working together for a while. Then our individual projects started to take up more and more time so there was less time for group projects. Nowadays, it is obvious that we are doing very different things – I am making politicised films, Sergey is focused on abstract painting. But, until 2012-2013 we both were actively involved in organisational work. After the SOSka gallery-lab, new self-organised spaces started to emerge in the city, such as Alina Kleytman’s “U Rozi” (At Rose’s) gallery. We wanted to combine two initiatives and groups so we organised days of flat exhibitions. These were not necessarily exhibitions in flats but they could take place in studios or garages. There were also trips to Kharkiv region, to the symposium in Zeleny Gai and lots of other things.

But Kharkiv is a transit city and possesses the corresponding characteristics. People do not stay there for a long time and usually move to big-

ger cities. It used to be even more tangible, because a lot of people would come to Kharkiv from the Donbas and Crimea. I mean young people who would enter art schools and then move on to other places after graduation. Nowadays, there are a lot more migrants from the Donbas because of the war but a lot fewer in the cultural sector.

When I lived and worked in Kharkiv, the art being produced by our group of like-minded people was closely connected with activism practices and political theory. I first met left-wing activists in early 2010, and there were very few of them. Later, the anarchist movement expanded. Its main social manifestation was the Autonomy squat. It was a real squat, they regarded themselves as a social and cultural centre. It was a symbiosis of politics and the arts, they organised exhibitions and concerts. But nowadays, nothing of this kind remains there. And new young artists in Kharkiv mainly view themselves as indifferent to politics.

IY: Do you think dialogue with Russian artists is probable and what form of collaboration is possible? Also, what do you think about what is generally happening in the post-Soviet states or, more specifically, in Russia, Ukraine and, probably, Belarus? What is your attitude towards the concept of the “post-Soviet”? Do you think it can adequately describe today’s situation?

MP: Nikita Kadan, Lada Nakonechnaya and I were supposed to be the authors of an exhibition at the Garage, but we had to cancel it when Crimea was annexed. We insisted on having a discussion about this decision and the problem that led to it. It took place a year later. We found out that, if we had not cancelled the exhibition, the Garage would have come to the same decision itself. Our reaction was quicker. Then, there was the Postponed Futures exhibition in London. The three of us participated and Nikita was the curator. The exhibition dedicated to the Ukrainian avant-garde was organised in a Russian art gallery. So the context of collaboration is important. Collaboration with Russian artists is not a problem for me. On the contrary, I find it interesting. I have no taboo about participating in projects in Russia. But, of course, there would be a problem if the project was funded by the government, because the Russian Federation is waging war against Ukraine. But this is not the only problem. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, I was an active

participant in the Moscow art scene. But, after approximately 2012, the space of freedom of speech started to contract. Now, it is almost non-existent within Russian art institutions. I mean, the problems started before the war, the war has just enhanced them.

Things are not perfect in Ukraine either, but currently there is more free space there. If you participate in exhibitions and organise events, you know the risks of being attacked by the far-right. However, exhibitions can be supported by public foundations. I am not really aware of what is going on in Belarus and not sure how the situation is different from Russia. But generally, I can see that the post-Soviet space is a space of broken connections rather than collaborative and evolving projects. There are a few initiatives, though. They are grass-root, self-organised and, despite political circumstances, are aimed at communication and collaboration among different authors. One such event in Belarus is “WORK HARD! PLAY HARD!”, which comprises participants from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. We can say that the shift to the right is happening both in the post-Soviet sphere and in European – and international – politics. It is just that everywhere it is happening in its own way, with its own set of difficulties. In some countries, conservative control comes from the government, or from the church that supports the government, or from right-wing extremists.

Translated by Maria Ivakina

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Aesthetically Deviated Liberation

Conversation with Pavlo Mitenko January 07, 2019

Pavlo Mitenko is an artist and researcher. He is working on his thesis dedicated to Moscow Actionism at the State Academic University for the Humanities. He was a participant in the Radek Community, the Rally Research Institute group, and the MediaUdar festival team. Currently, he is a member of the Union of performative interdisciplinary group “Recovering People”. He lives in Moscow.

Keywords: political performance, Moscow Actionism, revolution, originality, Gesamtkunstwerk Putin

Alexey Markin: Before we start talking about political performance, I would like to ask you something. In your opinion, what is the relationship between the historical avant-garde and Russian Actionism of the 1990s? I have always wondered what lies behind the status of an avant-garde artist recognised by the artists of that generation.

Pavlo Mitenko: The 1990s were loaded with the avant-garde search for the authentic. I mean, in the first instance, the Moscow actionist scene. It was a closed-ended question – there was real or ‘radical’ art as they used to call it (this is how the actionists themselves referred to their art before Ekaterina Degot suggested the term actionism) versus craftsmanship or conformism. I know that Alexander Brener, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Dmitry Pimenov and Avdey Ter-Oganyan were inspired by this archive and used to reflect a lot on the avant-garde and Dadaism. However, it was actually they who suggested the original version of both the avant-garde itself and its originality.

As far as I am aware, in the 1990s, there was no Russian translation of “The Originality of the Avant-garde”, an essay by Rosalind Krauss. But she pointed out the difference between postmodernism and the avant-garde, which reflects the nature of the situation in Moscow quite accurately – a tension between conceptualism and actionism.¹ Moscow ‘avant-garde’ artists of the 1990s were indeed looking for originality by appealing to ‘sources of life’ and autopoiesis, collective experience, unconscious states, and ‘naivety’. This avant-garde impulse of a release from ‘being smirched by tradition’ can be seen not only in alcoholism and excesses of the artists of the 1980s and 90s, but also in the post-human utopia hailed by actionism. Moscow postmodernists working in conceptualism, on the other hand, talked about the banality of the original. They moulded structuralist reflexivity into their favourite ‘we have already had it’ formula.

However, historically, it was the actionists’ turn, and they suggested the imperative of ‘sinking’, which was a developed and deliberate procedure. ‘Being in my right mind I am rejecting my right mind’, wrote Dmitry Pimenov in his novel “Mut’revoluzia”. Actionists were too familiar with poststructuralist theory to think their ‘originality’ was implicit, they never used this word. When originality was the case, it was about the originality of desire and establishing a connection with the energy of the new epoch perceived through political codes. The

originality of 1990s radical art was opposed to the conceptuality of the late Soviet underground just as revolutionism was opposed to political apathy. However, the revolutionism had Deleuze's micropolitical form instead of Lenin's ideological one.

AM: You are talking about originality and I am thinking of outsourcing authenticity, a tendency described by Claire Bishop.² According to her, at about the same time, in the West authenticity became a kind of resource for delegated performance. The discussion between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester shows different views on the character of such performance. Artists like Santiago Sierra are important to Bishop. They create art politically and reveal the mechanics of capitalist pressure. Kester, on the other hand, criticises her for the lack of trust in activist artists, who are directly involved in the political process.³

PM: Santiago Sierra is more complex than people usually think he is. He is mainly known for his provocative actions, such as tattooing lines on the back of poor people or shaving lines on the heads of heroin addicts. However, he has other kind of works, for example, "The Corridor of People's House" (Bucharest, 2005) or "The Trap" (Santiago de Chile, 2007), where he mostly undermines the regime. In "The Trap", people in power walk through a corridor and suddenly turn up on a stage in front of Chilean workers.⁴ Unlike Sierra's provocative works, here we observe the creation of a social situation and not its representation. But the 'creation of situations', even the shocking ones, has little political power if commissioned by art institutions. If we want to see the art becoming political, we should look at the organisational level and infrastructure as well as the level of representation. As far back as the 1970s, Michel Foucault showed that discourse is not a mirror reflecting power but a mechanism connecting power and knowledge. The same discourse can serve opposing functions depending on the situation ("The Will to Knowledge"). But it is not easy to draw practical conclusions from these observations because one needs to perform perceptible actions related to the fight against the hegemony of capital and bureaucracy. Art becomes truly political only when it changes or builds from scratch its own infrastructure and collides with power by joining a political movement, for example. It can take place during major political events, such as the

Arab Spring, by inventing new forms of public action, participating in assemblies or occupying the Ministry of Culture (as was the case during Euromaidan in Ukraine). It can also happen during more stable periods, within some major movement, such as feminism. In the catalogue of the “A – Art, F – Feminism” exhibition, Ilmira Bolotyan describes forms of participation of female artists in Russian movements. These comprise all sorts of activities – from taking part in street actions to creating educational initiatives and studios that give girls opportunities for professional growth, self-education and self-organisational skills development.⁵ Actionism is different because it creates its own scenes and infrastructures. They are so intensive and charged with criticism that we can easily relate it to the avant-garde. It creates a radical breach in the prevailing way of things in order to establish something conceptually new, for example, nonrepresentative community policy.

As for the performance by Krasnaya Shpana, in my opinion, it is not really delegated performance, as delegated performance does not imply any creative involvement of the participants. In Santiago Sierra’s provocative works as analysed by Bishop, the participants are alienated to the fullest extent. You, on the other hand, did something in between, all the participants had an opportunity to make their own statement. I feel that your pathos is investigative rather than political or avant-gardist.

Olga Shirokostup: I would really like to discuss it in order to understand what type of performance we do. I agree that our performance is not essentially delegated. However, “Krasnaya Shpana” has a great deal of influence over what we get in the end, because we suggest a topic and want our participants to become involved in our research. Basically, the participants can add their own ideas, but the initial outline is crucial. Our two performances in Hamburg were very different from each other. The first one was based on the participants’ personal material. Telling something about themselves was essential for the participants, who were mainly from Russian and Ukrainian communities, and the avant-garde was just a cause to gather and talk about their own identity. The second performance was mainly based on our research, it was a research-based performance. Some participants got things off their chests and left but those who stayed agreed to greater instrumentalisation.

PM: Do you identify yourself with the avant-garde?

AM: In my opinion, it is difficult to identify oneself with the avant-garde today because both state cultural policy and the culture industry are openly appropriating avant-garde ideology. Speculating and adapting Groys's theory to our days, I wonder if it is possible that the art impulse of the avant-garde artist of the 1990s materialised in Putin's 'performances' of the 2010s? Or, to what extent the 'Russian avant-garde' has not become a part of the myth of the nation state?

PM: Groys's paraphrasing of Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals" holds both critical and cognitive potential. But, in my opinion, it does not reveal itself through the community of artists' and politicians' ideas. Boris Groys tried to show it ingeniously but not quite convincingly. Violetta Gudkova demonstrates another version in her book "The Birth of Soviet Plots" about Soviet dramaturgy between 1921 and 1931. This community of regulators and cultural workers is socially mediated. In those years, theatre became a public movement – people eagerly acted in plays and nearly every village had its own theatre company. According to Gudkova, theatre was the main sociocultural media in Russia before the age of radio and TV and it attracted the government's attention. 'Stalin's canon', as she refers to the cultural situation of the early 1930s, was not introduced by Stalin but by the playwrights of that time. Stalin's role was that of an editor rather than an author. Talking about censorship is even more relevant in this respect though Stalin's role is also documented. The censorship office often demanded that texts be rewritten, elements be added and the endings of plays be adapted. The analogy with Putin seems relevant if we consider censorship today as well as the fact that the regime returned to ideological government in the late 2000s. The National Institute for the Development of Modern Ideology was established at that time. Its website is utterly incomprehensible, though it was meant to become United Russia's 'ideas factory'. I can recall the speech Putin gave at the party congress when United Russia won the parliamentary elections in 2007. It looked as though the speech had been written in accordance with a pattern introduced in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", a famous essay by Louis Althusser, and its objective was to establish a symbolic unity between

the president, the party, and the people. I remember that the translation of Althusser's essay was already available at that time. Vladislav Surkov might have read it and composed the speech. It is just a mere guess but the fact is that the government was ideologised in the late 2000s. The ideologisation process is more extensive now, today's rise of censorship comes from the government's inclination to control public information and ideas.

It is curious that today citizens are again suffering from ideological discourse, even though the Soviet ideology no longer exists, as if the old structures were still there waiting to be filled in with new national patriotic content. Until recently, they tried to bring these structures back to life in the field of politically engaged art as well, although in that case the content was primarily leftist. In order to break this endless return to ideology, it is necessary to find a new understanding of the connection between art and politics. I dedicated my research into actionism to this.

OS: In my opinion, it happens in a different way – by means of the distribution of funds, mostly. In a context where it is difficult to get an independent grant, some projects flourish, others disappear without support.

PM: The state does not impose a style on artists. It pays more attention to managing history, and, first and foremost, 'the history of Victory'. But your project points out the return of ideological interfluence between the state and the arts in relation to the development of historical narration. In the case of actionism, we talk about a version of the avant-garde as praxis, movement, whereas in your project, there is a double interception of its historical forms. In the beginning, art critics and artists read the avant-garde, revolutionary impulse as a purely artistic style within some historical frames, and then the government instrumentalises it for its own purposes. Thanks to your efforts we are able to see the forms once accepted by the grand internationalist liberational utopia being used in national policies – Ukraine's domestic policy, Russia's foreign policy, its branding and the establishment of economic links.

AM: It is important to ask what interpretation of the avant-garde

is relevant today. If we look at the theories of the avant-garde or the history of perception of the historical avant-garde over the decades, we will see that the debates have never ceased. There is a demand for criticism or even the abandonment of avant-gardist procedures as well as the endeavour to develop a new theoretical approach to this subject.

PM: Discussions of the avant-garde still possess both affirmatory and critical potential. Your project is an example of the latter. Let's talk about criticism first. In the mid-2000s, when the political events of the 1990s were fading away, actionists and artists in general displayed an interest towards the historical forms of the avant-garde. Avdey Ter-Oganyan created a series of printed works "Radical Abstractionism" (2004) using the visual language of abstraction to make an intellectually rigid political message. David Ter-Oganyan and Alexey Buldakov, participants in the Radek Community, used the language of suprematism in "Satisfactory" (2005), David Ter-Oganyan and Ilya Budraitiskis created a series of black and white paintings "Quotations" (2007) with statements by Lenin, Trotsky and other revolutionary writers. In 2006, Anatoly Osmolovsky in his text about the avant-garde suggested regarding it as ancient ruins.

Generally, even where Russian artists took an offensive position, appeals to the archive of the revolutionary avant-garde were melancholic and manifested the loss of the revolutionary drive of the 1990s. The appeal to the past was the answer to the international demand for utopia. It emerged when 'the end of history' was no longer able to fill the emptiness. But, the thing is that the response was purely artistic. During that period, Osmolovsky abandoned his revolutionary intentions and made a depoliticised statement claiming that an artist should do art instead of trying to grab power like the actionists. Here, switching from politics to art and giving up on the idea of gaining power are accompanied by melancholy. Separating politics from art leads to the end of the avant-garde.

Continuing to compare the revolution and the 1990s I can say that there is no post-revolutionary alliance between the state and contemporary artists. The impossibility of fulfilling the avant-garde impulse of the 1990s becomes the lack of it. Some artists did start to have a vague desire to unite with the people and state. I can recall Pavel Pepperstein's "City of Russia" pastiche (2007). It is project of a utopian city presented as

an art series, which uses the language of the avant-garde and is accompanied by an open letter to the government. And, of course, there was a blockbuster exhibition “I Believe” (2007), which was inspired and curated by another actionist, Oleg Kulik. But unlike the Soviet situation, private funds dominate now and are more influential in the arts than is the state. I think the government is just not interested in contemporary artists, it cannot see how it can use them and so it’s only role is to increase the number of bans.

As far as the affirmatory potential of the avant-garde is concerned, it emerges when big artistic ideas resonate with big political ideas and erase the aforementioned separation between art and politics, as it was in 1917, 1968 and Russia’s 1990s. The avant-garde is an element of the revolutionary process and it is loaded with the anticipation of the opportunity to implement utopian ideas uncompromisingly.

Nevertheless, affirmation of the avant-garde is problematic for two reasons. First, this word is far too closely associated with totalitarian politics. Here, Groys’s criticism echoes Jacques Rancière’s criticism. Rancière superposes the paradox of the ‘autonomous form of life’ on art, wary of its submission to political institutions and their goals (“Aesthetics and Its Discontents”). According to Rancière, art should keep its distance from politics as it loses its liberating dissensual drive when dominated by political structures. Second, there is no avant-garde without a revolution, its emergence does not depend on somebody’s intentions. Therefore, attempts to revive the avant-garde in non-revolutionary times often resemble weak ressentiment or transgressive psychosis, as John Roberts put it.⁶

At the same time, actionism allows us to look at this problem from a different angle. Actionists implement the avant-garde impulse by creating forms of ‘micro-revolution’ (Dmitry Pimenov). They do not wait for new global political storms but develop radical critical and transformational intensity within small groups. Their revolution is not Marxist as such, i.e. it does not imply a proletarian uprising lead by the party. It is rather Nietzschean because it is striving to find the community spirit, which keeps from both the perils of ecstatic self-concentration and imperial horrors within the transgressive and tragic scene. The community, as viewed by the French intellectual tradition, is solidarity gained in separation, and an implementation of

dissensus. Michel Foucault, who was highly influential on actionists, wrote in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's "Anti-Oedipus", 'It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.' Political representation also turns out to be cast aside. Actionists implement the avant-garde impulse without linking it to authoritarian politics because they address the issues of institutional integration. Actionism is very important to me as it revives the connection between art and revolution or art as a part of revolution. According to Rancière, this connection was initially a Romantic idea, which still defines art practices, the connection between art and politics, and related reflections.

Finally, in order to highlight the key points in this complicated subject, I would like to refer to the distinction that can be traced back to the Romantics. In one version of Romanticism, this alliance was regarded in terms of state cultural policy and the search for unity via a foundation in artistic mythogenesis. This refers to the ideas of "The Oldest Systematic Programme of German idealism". Another version is reflected in Schiller's "Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of a Man". It puts an emphasis on establishing small clubs that deviate from social standards in order to achieve easy interaction within the clubs. Schiller referred to such easy interaction as aesthetic. I believe actionism implements the second line of the Romantic project, which connects liberation with aesthetic deviation. Putin's 'performances', on the other hand, relate to the first line, which seeks to achieve unity by incarnating avant-garde ideas in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Translated by Maria Ivakina

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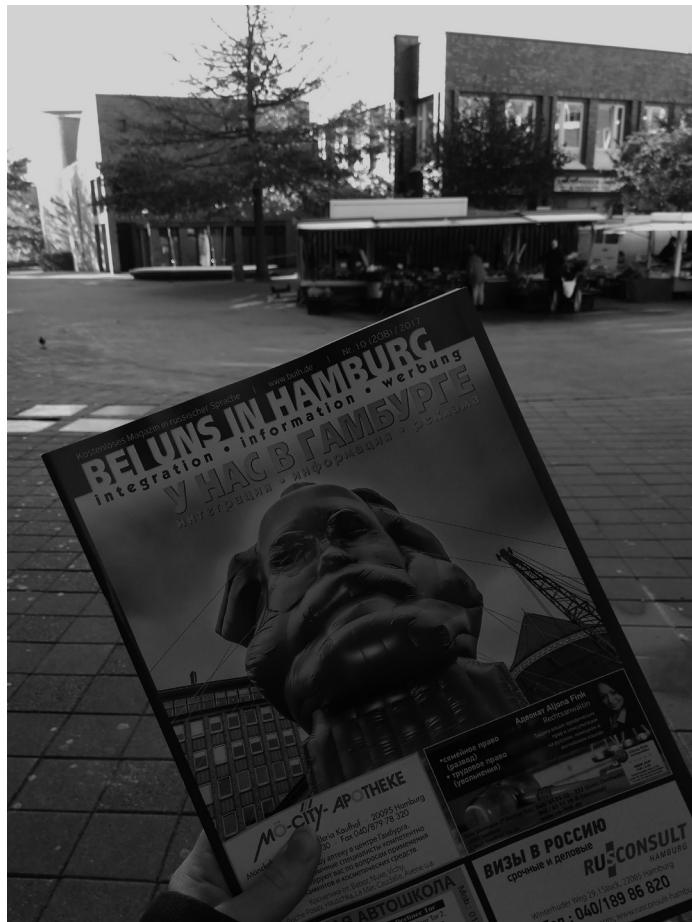


Part 3

Documentation of the ■■■■■ Performances

Preparation for the Project.

City exploration



Local magazine of the Russian-speaking community »Bei uns in Hamburg«



Advertisement for the project in the store "Mix Markt"

Preparation for the Project. City exploration



First week of the work. A planning session



Discussion “The national avant-garde?” with Professor Frank Golczewski



First week of the work. A planning session

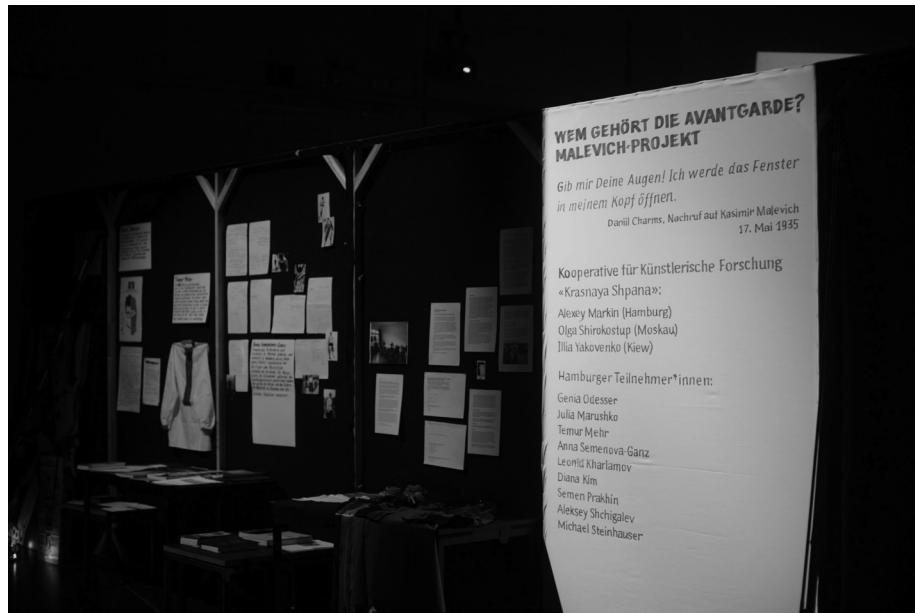


Game "We. Malevich" by Anna Volodina

Performance “To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project”

February 2018

Part 3 — Documentation of the Performances



Exhibition space in front of the performance area

©Anastasie Bjalkovskaja



Collection of books on the avant-garde

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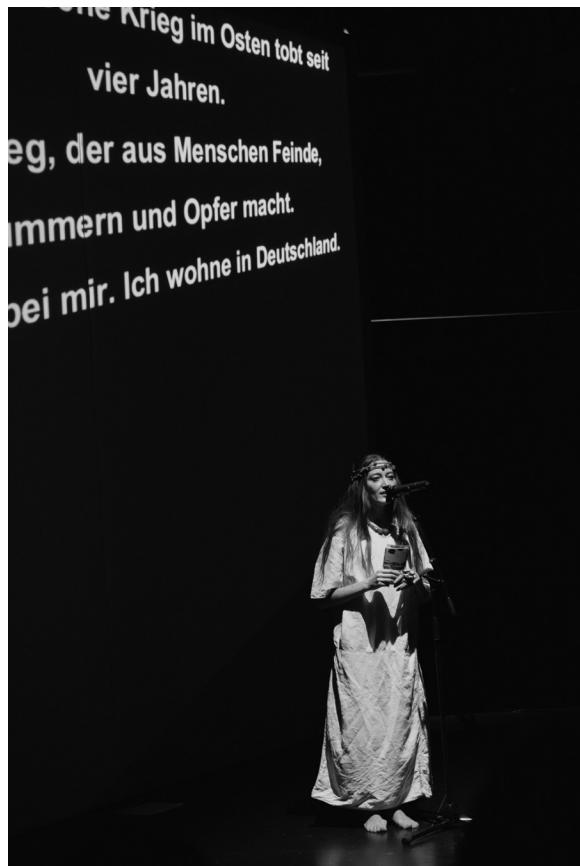
Performance "To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project"



©Wassily Zittel



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Julia Marushka's performance
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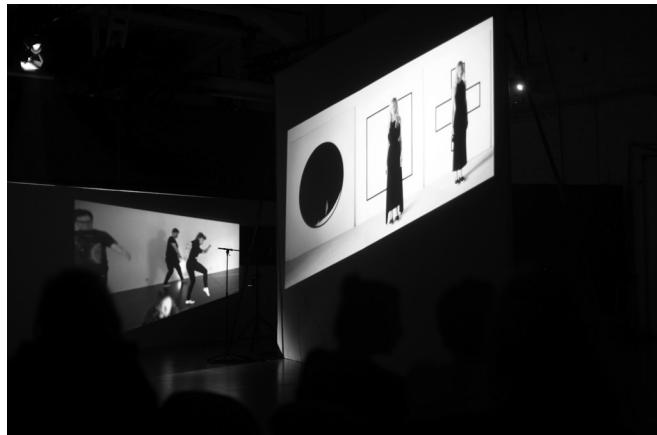


Foyer
©Wassily Zittel

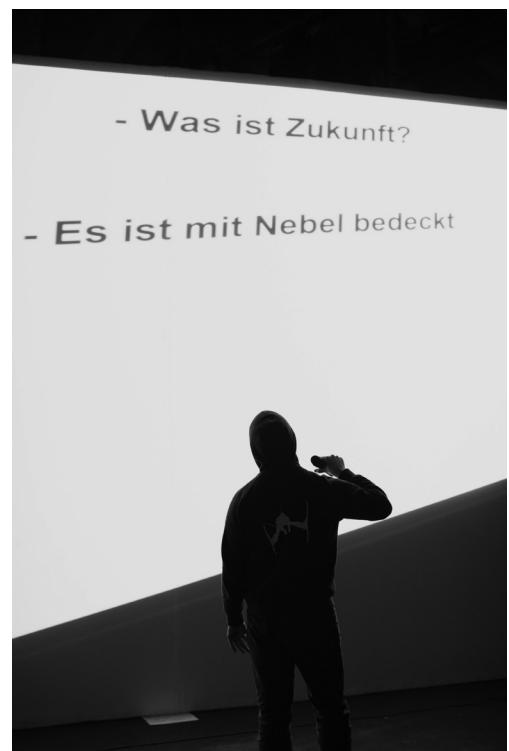
Performance "To Whom Does the Avant-Garde Belong? Malevich Project"



Illia Yakovenko, a self-proclaimed cultural diplomat from Ukraine.
©Anastasie Bjalkovskaja



Projection of videos found online before the start of the performance
©Anastasie Bjalkovskaja



Semen Prakhin — Unavis, the hero of the future.
"What is future? It is covered with fog"
©Wassily Zittel

Part 3 — Documentation of the Performances



Diana Kim takes pictures of the public during her part of the performance
©Wassily Zittel



Olya's performance
©Wassily Zittel



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Alexey Markin performing the part of an art historian
©Wassily Zittel

KRASS Kultur Crash Festival.

Kampnagel May 2018

Part 3 — Documentation of the Performances



Preparation of the score (script) for the second performance



Infographics “The historical avant-garde in the cultural policies of Russia and Ukraine”

©Anastasie Bjalkovskaja



Rehearsal before the music performance



©Anastasie Bjalkovskaia



“Maschin Kaput”



The performance begins
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Genia Odesser reads text during the performance
