

Individuality as Citation

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George Pusenkoff was formed as an artist in the milieu of the Moscow independent art of the nineteen-seventies and -eighties. The phenomenon of independent art arose in the Soviet Union almost immediately after the death of Stalin in the middle of the nineteen-fifties. The term "independent art" refers here to those artists working outside the official Artists' Union. Participation in the Artists' Union presupposed conformity with the principles of socialist realism and complete submission to the control of the party, the state organs, and the official censor. Independent artists had no access to exhibitions, publications, or criticism in journals. Their works were not purchased by the state and their social situation was extremely instable. At the same time the independent artistic milieu in the big Soviet cities grew rapidly in the period of the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, and it soon found a relatively wide audience capable of supporting the artists. In the years of perestroika, it was precisely the independent Soviet artists who began to receive a certain recognition in the West, although in the Soviet Union their work continued to experience some obstacles as before.

In the decades of its development, Russian independent art underwent substantial aesthetic evolution. At first it set itself the task of reviving the traditions of modernist art in Russia and the traditions of the Russian avantgarde in particular, which it contrasted with the conformism of Soviet official art. At least by the beginning of the nineteen-seventies, however; the traditional modernist ideals began to be cast into doubt. The reason for this postmodern mood was definitely, not however, the commercialization of the artistic devices of the avantgarde as this took place in the West. Here, instead, the decisive role was played by a disillusionment with the utopian ideals of the Russian avantgarde. In their time the artists of the Russian avantgarde supported the socialist revolution in Russia, from which they expected the fulfillment of their hopes for the creation of a new society, a new nature, and a new man. But toward the beginning of the seventies the collapse of "real socialism" had become sufficiently obvious - and this collapse invariably also affected the faith in the utopias and the aesthetic projects of the avantgarde. In this situation, ways of relating to the aesthetic of the historical avantgarde could only have a retrospective, nostalgic, and citational character. And similar citational - work with the historical avantgarde could no longer be juxtaposed against the citational and retrospective official Soviet art as unambiguously as before.

As a result, many independent Russian artists of the period -including, in part, V Komar and A. Melamid, I. Kabakov, or E. Bulatov -, moved in their works from an orientation toward the authenticity and utopianism of the artistic gesture to a complicated citational game in which they combined references to the very different aesthetic project of the modernist epoch. This game had the character of an active critical commentary, and the corresponding artistic direction acquired the name of "sots art". "Sots art" undoubtedly also had a substantial influence on Pusenkoff, who paid clear tribute to it in his early works. Moreover; the second generation of Moscow artists who came after sots art, to which Pusenkoff also refers, began to move away from sots art at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties: above all, socialist ideology itself gradually ceased to play the role of a constantly present referent for Soviet art. For Pusenkoff, the definitive role is to a certain extent played not by an ideological but a purely aesthetic side of art -reference not to the defined social artistic codes, but to the great examples of the artistic past that preserve their immediate attraction beyond the limits of any "critique of ideology" (Ideologiekritik). But at the same time, for Pusenkoff the reference to art of the past does not mean resurrecting the prior indirect relationship to the object of representation. Pusenkoff works with quotes from the art of museums in order to give his work a more universal character. But this very technique of quotation and the specific dilemma of Pusenkoff's works attest to their link with the Moscow art of the previous generation.

The structure of nearly all of Pusenkoff's paintings thematizes the relationship between figure and background. This relationship is actually, in the familiar sense, central to the European artistic tradition. The dominance of a certain

figure - and the human figure in particular - over its background symbolizes for classical European art above all else the dominance of the subjectivity of the artist over the world surrounding him. It was thus no accident that, in the epoch of the avantgarde, precisely this juxtaposition of the figure and its background was subjected to the most radical criticism. Malevich and Mondrian, among others, made it their task to create a single field of the painting, in which the juxtaposition of the figure and the background would be entirely overcome. The overcoming of this distinction means the dissolution of human subjectivity in the world, the confluence of the personal and the collective, the creation of a total, impersonal space. The liquidation of the distinction between figure and background is thus a true indication of avantgarde, total utopianism. In this respect the works of Pusenkoff, in which the distinction between figure and background is sharply emphasized, resist the totalitarian orientations of the avantgarde and resurrects the dilemma of classical, humanistically oriented art.

At the same time both figure and background are depicted in Pusenkoff's work not as direct reality, but only as quotes from art of the past. Usually the figure is not taken from the same historical period and style as the background. In this way the figure and the background no longer lead either to natural juxtaposition or natural unity. Their differentiation within the painting is neutralized on another level - on the level of the awareness that both figure and background are quotes in equal measure. As a result the resurrection of individuality and artistic subjectivity are threatened by that very tradition which made them possible. The correspondence of figure and background, or the correspondence of artist and world, become elements in an endless citational game which can no longer guarantee either their stable distinction nor their full simultaneity. The overcoming of the avantgarde, total project thus does not unconditionally signify the resurrection of the classical humanism of the past, which is revealed to be an illusory product of the artistic tradition itself.

In this respect the art of Pusenkoff belongs entirely to our own age. It rejects the collectivist projects of the modernist epoch, but simultaneously continues to recognize the relativity of any claims to the uniqueness of the individual artistic gesture. And at the same time this skepticism toward the possibilities of contemporary art does not reject art as such. Thus his critical stance toward the traditional categories of beauty, the picturesque, and purely visual attractiveness does not prevent Pusenkoff from turning to these very categories for orientation in his own work. This ambivalence in Pusenkoff's works is simultaneously the source of their internal tension, by not allowing them to become merely the simple nostalgic reference to the heroic past of European art.