

Mona Lisa 500

A Project by George Pusenkov

In this voyage through space and time, which is by no means finished, and is simultaneously imaginary and real, the artist is aiming to explore familiar territory in a new way while discovering unknown corners of space. But it is also a voyage to the creative imagination of the artist, to the depths of his unconscious.

The voyage begins by returning back into the past, to the age when Leonardo painted his Mona Lisa. Leonardo da Vinci is a source of inspiration for Pusenkov's ideas as both are interested in art and science in equal measure. For Leonardo, these two spheres exist parallel (he published his treatise on flight at the same time as he was painting the Mona Lisa), while for Pusenkov, science and art intermingle, merging and giving birth to painting in digits and pixels.

Since Leonardo, countless artists have taken up the image of the Mona Lisa, each time proposing a new reading of the work, which has stubbornly kept her secret despite the manifold interpretations. Pusenkov is the only artist who has recreated the Mona Lisa in the form of a logotype in pixels and, by doing so, has captured her features forever. His "Single Mona Lisa 1:1" is striking because of its square formats, alternating sizes and changing colours. Some artists have identified with the Mona Lisa and even endowed her with their own features, such as Duchamp and Dali. For Pusenkov, the Mona Lisa has become his female alter ego, a symbolic reflection of his own artistic identity. "The Mona Lisa" for Warhol, for example, was merely one of the famous people in his extensive portrait gallery, nothing more than an accumulation of impressions gleaned from the mass media. But for Pusenkov, she is an absolute symbol, an icon, and therefore not subject to any change: like the black or red or white of Malevich's squares. And at the same time, she can be reproduced infinitely, or in other words, cloned, while preserving the painting entirely unchangingly, regardless of its media, material, dimension or colour.

Mona Time Tower 500

For his journey through time, Pusenkov created a gigantic round tower with a diameter of 10 meters, a circumference of 30 and a height of 6 meters. Its interior is comprised of 500 images of "Single Mona Lisa 1:1", each 60 x 60 cm, with ten parallel circles each with 50 Mona Lisas superimposed on the others. This time tunnel plunges us into a space and time dominated by the repetition of 500 enigmatic smiles and 1000 eyes that look at us without seeing us. For the visualisation of the space-time continuum created by this structure, Pusenkov opted for an unfolding rainbow which captures the natural prism of light. He chose 50 different colours, each representing a horizontally positioned circle. This circular rainbow has no beginning and no end and, in turning upwards, could continue into infinity. The tower is empty and it is only the rays emitted by 500 images of Pusenkov's Mona Lisa which visually fill this gigantic round pipe. It is constructed completely of aluminium, the black outline and colours of 500 images of the Mona Lisa filled with bright industrial colours which reflect the world around them, while the floor of the tower is black and shiny. Light floods down from the top of the "Mona Time Tower 500".

Through these creations, Pusenkoff overturns the world of the Renaissance, symbolised by the eternally living memory of Leonardo and his Mona Lisa, into the reality of the visual world of the 21st century. One need hardly mention that just a stone's throw away from this tower there is another, hardly less known one – the tower of Tatlin, symbolising the great utopia of the 20th century. The utopia gaining strength in Tatlin's tower, which is permanently on display in the Tretyakovsky Gallery, is visualised in a diagonally rising spiral while Pusenkoff's "Mona Time Tower 500" moves horizontally and vertically, i.e. is subjected to a dual development, that of space and time, which is crowned by light pouring into the emptiness of the tower. Pusenkoff has created a total environment and entering into it, visitors find themselves in a closed world and the multicoloured phantoms of light and obsessively repetitive logotypes of Mona which form the interior perimeter of the tower impact on their feelings.

All of the leading artists of the 20th century beginning with Malevich and Marcel Duchamp have taken an iconoclastic stance on Leonardo's masterpiece. It was considered good form at the inception of modern art to "kill" the image of this "uncanonised saint" and the Italian futurists even went so far as to place a funeral wreath at her feet. However, such attitudes were ambiguous, as it was not the work itself which was rejected but more what it stood for in the present, i.e. a reactionary attachment to obsolete values, hindering the dawn of a new form of art. Today, however, in the era of post-modernism, an iconoclastic attitude has lost all its meaning and Pusenkoff is well aware of this as he decided to create an absolutely modern Mona Lisa, a universal symbol of humanity in its female hypostasis, its original and authentic form which can be reproduced and diffused into infinity. This is why the image is encaptured in the framework of the matrix format of the computer which gave birth to it. The spatial arrangement of the flat image of the Mona Lisa places it in four-dimensional space and the bright colours allow the surrounding world to be reflected in this image. Pusenkoff's tower hangs at the crossroads of the past and the future. Above all, it is a homage of respect to the universal genius of Leonardo da Vinci who painted his Mona Lisa 500 years ago. And at the same time, it is a polite nod to all contemporary artists who have breathed new life into myth, even through iconoclasts, as over the centuries it has lost its viability to a large extent. And finally, Pusenkoff asks us to look into the future, creating a spatialised, digitalised, impertinent, pixelised and metallised Mona Lisa in a shining spectrum of colour reminiscent of the bodywork paint of a Mercedes. And in all of this, Pusenkoff remains a visual artist, reflecting on the impact of the image, sensitive to every nuance, attracted by the possibilities which new materials open up, attentive to the problems of structure. The tower is the end result of all of these efforts, an important creative stage, following in its development an entirely strict logic and at the same time warmed by a passion for art and an eternally insatiable curiosity.

Mona Lisa Goes Russia

Pusenkoff, accompanied by his female alter ego, felt a desire to return to the place where he was born, spent his childhood and his youth. But it was not a nostalgic return, rather a need to verify his memories, compare them to the perceptions of the artist he has become, to his present perception of the world. His Mona Lisa is a product of a dialogue with the West and like many Russian artists of the twentieth century, he would like to unite these two worlds whose dialogues have considerably enriched modern art.

Starting in 1997-1998, armed with his camera and his yellow “Single Mona Lisa 1:1” (70 x 70 cm), he made a series of trips to urban and rural Russia, taking photographs and confronting his Mona Lisa with the reality of everyday life in Russia. His undertaking bordered on the absurd and even the artist himself did not know what would come out of it: he found himself in unknown terrain in which, unlike within the confines of his studio, he did not have control over his own work. However, an inner voice urged him to continue the journey and he took pleasure in the unexpected encounters, in the artistic merging of the work of art and the environment, one which at first glance seemed completely alien to it. Without being aware of it, in a certain sense he was pursuing the alogical principle which Malevich applied in his paintings in 1913-1914: this principle of juxtaposing within the framework of one painting elements of reality which have nothing in common. Pusenkoff gradually began to understand better how these images can interplay, how a banal external reality can gain new meaning in confrontation with a portrait of the Mona Lisa and how the Mona Lisa herself absorbs new content and, together with that reality, enters into a dialogue with the person beholding the image: initially the artist-photographer himself, and later an unrelated beholder.

However, before proceeding to a closer examination of these creations, it is important to note that in them Pusenkoff calls into question the very functioning of the artistic image and consequently the image per se in the context of our culture. By placing his Mona Lisa in a landscape, he rejects the principle of the museum-based existence of the work of art, metaphorically driving it out of the secular temple intended for it by society. Until now, artists have included elements of reality in their work, and now the work of art is being introduced into real space in order to change it and give it new meaning. The alter ego of the artist is to leave the museum framework to gain a new *raison d'être*: it is to seek new horizons, and it is this new imagined space that is captured by the camera lens. Regardless of the size of each photograph, the key to it will always be the look and smile of the yellow Mona Lisa who is found among the greenery near the freshly washed sheets printed with kitsch, naïve patterns hanging on the lines; or on the easel next to the icons hanging on the wall of a museum, or leaning against the base of a pillar topped by the head of Gagarin; or dispassionately looking at us with an immobile glance, while live on the television screen we see the World Trade Center being destroyed. And each time two conflicting fragments of time, two spaces, two thoughts open up in front of us. And what catches our eye is the surreal image, the creation of the artist's imagination. And the strength of this image creates an internal tension, which arises through a juxtaposition of objects which occur exclusively according to Pusenkoff's will. When he places his yellow Mona Lisa on a wall covered in torn posters and notices, a number of interpretations come to mind. We can read this as a confrontation with degraded urban reality, but we can also see in this image an illusion to the artists of the “New Realism” of the sixties, such as Hains¹ and Rotella², who collected and exhibited torn posters giving them the same status as works of art. In this case, this status symbolically confirms a kind of icon of Western art which joins the posters at the very place they are found, on the wall, even sparing them the possibility of ending up in a museum.

And if the gap between both visual worlds still seems difficult to overcome, let us remember that Leonardo himself appealed to artists to look closely at walls and find sources of inspiration in their cracks and blemishes. And let us not forget that Rotello once created a torn Mona Lisa.

¹ Raymond Hains was a famous French artist, a “poet of the streets”, born 9 November 1926 in Saint-Brieuc who lives and works in Nice and Paris.

"Mona Lisa Goes Russia" is a conceptual project of Pusenkoff's which demonstrates a surprising diversity of possible interpretations of such icons of painting as the Mona Lisa. And like any icon, she is a symbol of identifying unification which transforms any environment and for some time now Pusenkoff has been thinking about the possibility of her confronting not only Russia but other territories. In particular, he dreams of sending his Mona Lisa into space, accompanied by a message worthy of her status symbol. And only those who don't know Pusenkoff well might think that this dream is still far from being fulfilled. His project is at a very concrete stage of realisation, although even when it has been realised it will remain a utopia in view of the current state of humanity. In order to surpass itself, art needs such utopias which lend the imagination wings and give creation an engine.

² Mimmo Rotello is a well-known artist of New Realism, born 7 October 1918 in Catanzaro, Calabria who lives and works in Milan.