

## For Computer, and a Little Nervously

Alexander Borovsky

George Pusenkov's behavioral pattern diverges from the ideal-type of the contemporary artist that has taken shape in my mind over the course of many years. Among the rules of the game that this type observes is a slightly cynical, feigned estrangement from his work. Interpret your hearts out, he tells us; just don't discount your own curatorial prejudices and agendas, either.

This manner of self-distancing is absent from Pusenkov's behavioral repertoire. It seems, on the contrary, that he finds it hard to part with his ideas and the works in which those ideas are objectivized. He wants, as it were, to explain or interpret something a bit better, or just hold the works in his hands a while longer. This has nothing to do with the conceptualist genre of self-commentary. There is nothing ludic or cerebral about it. It's rather something tactile and bodily, something drawn from everyday life. Something like the line from the Mandelstam poem: "The senseless warmth of the last streetcar." An archaic hunger for sympathy, for participation.

A hunger for sympathy and participation on the part of viewers, a desire to collaborate in the further life of his work.

Strategic thinking (knowledge of the "secret engines" of the contemporary art scene) and childlike spontaneity (the thirst for sympathy, understanding, for therapeutic and tactile contact with the audience) form the basis of Pusenkov's behavior as an artist and (more important) the poetics of his works. This combination has its own genesis. The fact of the matter is that the artist put in a long spell as a professional student of computer science — that is, he lived in the world of codes, of imaginary and mediated realities. Thus, painting was for Pusenkov an act of liberation, an escape to living reality. It was, in essence, an archaic ritual. If I were to schematize the mental outlook of Pusenkov the artist, then (keeping in mind, of course, the conditional nature of such procedures) I would single out two poles. The first pole would be the interface. The second pole would be the "landscape of mood," whether realistic or impressionistic — but definitely "with a temperature," to borrow Anatoly Efros's phrase.

I've already used the term archaic. (I had in mind the old-fashioned desire for sympathy and the artist's reckoning on the viewer's co-experience of the work, as well as the ritualism of his appeal to the natural as an act of displacing or eliminating something from consciousness.) My choice of words wasn't accidental. I've noticed long ago that the use of electronic and computer technologies in art — for example, the use of computer graphics in cinema — often leads to a revival of the archaic, deep layers of human culture. Take the *Matrix* films by the Wachowski Brothers, which are wholly representative in this sense. It is clear what we're dealing with: cyberpunk; the computer graphics of Steve Skroce, Darek Gogol, and George Hull; the "Flow-Mo" filming technique. It's completely obvious, however, that the overall visual vector of the films is archaic rather than futuristic. The cave-like architecture of the city of Zion draws on Piranesi's arcades. The spiral engineering of the giant drilling machines is based on Escher's graphic fantasies. The battleships in which the citizens of Zion fight off their foes are surprisingly clunky and ineffective, and thus reminiscent of "Heath Robinson" machines.<sup>1</sup> Forget about *budetlianstvo* (futurism *à la russe*), forget about the "look of the future." The computeristic is employed only to evoke antediluvian means of navigation, which is a tactile and sense-based experience. This process is directly thematized in a number of contemporary art's

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<sup>1</sup> William Heath Robinson (1872–1944) was an English cartoonist and illustrator who signed himself "W. Heath Robinson." He is known for his drawings of eccentric, amazingly impractical machines — for example, planes that don't fly and ships that don't float. "Heath Robinson" has thus become a synonym for an unnecessarily complex and implausible contraption.

most serious works. Marina Abramovic presented a TV set in the guise of a single stone block. In his last works, Nam June Paik often used the image of the old-style oriental caravan: camels and elephants wander the desert, bearing twittering TV sets on their backs. The electronic cremates itself in the archaic. Potlatch!

All this has a direct bearing on Pusenkoff's artistic practice. He made his name with abstractions in the Hard-edge painting style. In these works, tactile sensuality clashed with intellection. The latter quality was manifested via geometrical forms, an emphasis on framing, and, sometimes, a "seeding" of the color field with maximally reduced image-citations. Pusenkoff also made a point of configuring his canvases like geometrical-spatial buildings. But even back then the tactile-perceptual vibrations in these paintings also literally set the walls buzzing.

Next came Pusenkoff's "pixilated" period. It was a happy find: the mimesis of the interface, of computer reality. If he'd limited himself to framing the image with the computer grid, his success would have been one-off, on the level of a witty gesture or a good gag. If Pusenkoff had merely imitated the pixilated structure of the image, then his success would have been long-lived but ultimately limited, on the level of an intelligent, easily reproducible device. Pusenkoff went further.

In keeping with the fact that its connotations as verisimilitude have changed over time, Russian philosopher Valery Podoroga has posited three species of mimesis. The first type of mimesis is close to the classic Aristotelian theory of imitation: in one way or another, it bears the signs of a direct reflection of reality and often itself serves as a behavioral model. Immanent to the artwork, Mimesis-2 (the philosopher's term) isn't reducible to the authenticity of the outward, allegedly real world. Mimesis-3, finally, is a whole series of authorial mimeses, which interact both with each other and with conventionally recognized authenticity. Pusenkoff thus creates a visual analogue of Mimesis-3, which is the most complex and rich in content. Strictly speaking, within the realm of pixilated vision the depicted image operates with a dimension that has been "placed" in computer file frames. That is, the image is mimetic vis-à-vis a second-order, computerized reality, which in turn has a particular (also partly mimetic) relation to "real reality." As a rule, this relationship isn't immediately representative; it is encoded and persists in the guise of communicative strategies. But even this isn't enough for Pusenkoff. In the majority of instances, it is "computerized" images of other art that we encounter in his interface-canvas. Moreover, these images have their own "authorial" relationship both with "real reality" and with its computerized hypostasis. Such are the complex interferences that emerge among the aesthetic, informational, and mimetic relations generated by the computer-screen form. Does Pusenkoff, in his pixilated works, succeed in fashioning a *painterly* poetics on the basis of these interferences? In recent times, a strictly computeristic poetics has been actively elaborated in, at very least, the monumental video screen pieces of Bruce Nauman and Bill Viola. It is "handier" for this poetics to make unmediated use of the entire resource of the screen form/reality interferences that I've just described. With his traditional painterly tools, Pusenkoff, on the contrary, can tap into this potential only in a mediated fashion. Unlike the majority of artists, of course, he knows what makes the computer tick, but his primary interest is aesthetic. This poetics begins with the picture of the interface per se — the image slotted in the file frame. This is the most primitive but necessary pictorial plane. Next comes the painterly realization of the file grid. Here we already encounter an allusion to pixilated image-resolution: simple geometric frames and file names tremble as it were on the crest of an electronic wave; within the washes of color we observe a kind of "swarming" of optical components, of basic elements. This is the pixel, the unit of visualization.

Pusenkoff's approach resembles Pavel Filonov's atomism, where form is constructed from micro-particles, from colored atoms. Another point that Pusenkoff shares with Filonov's method

is the focusing and defocusing of the image. Filonov didn't construct the image by moving from the general to the particular. He motivated this process of concentration via points of force, nodes of psycho-energetic activity. Here, the element of focusing and refocusing is realized as a technological metaphor: it is imagined as the passage of an electronic wave, as a demonstration of how (to borrow Alexander Blok's image) "the integral breathes." Pusenkoff makes work with the visualized pixel the signature device of his individual poetics, just as in their day the Pop artists made work with the raster a device of their own poetics. The pixel, however, is the symbol of more complex processes. Strictly speaking, Pusenkoff works with a whole series of mediated and mimetic procedures. He configures painting as an analogue of the digital image, whose "body" consists of conglomerated pixels. In turn, this image is a digital representation of a source image, whether representational or non-objective (from the Mona Lisa to Action Painting.) This source image has its own relation to reality. Navigating the seas of mimesis — this is the basis of Pusenkoff's image making. Without this renewable resource, pixilation as such (I repeat) would strike the viewer as nothing but a witty find.

There is one more element in Pusenkoff's poetics: his work with color. We are dealing, of course, with a particular, digital color, the product of electronic technologies; a reduced color that is also unique and recognizable thanks to its uniform illumination. Color here behaves like a readymade, as it once did in the monochromes of Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland. It is curious that, whereas in this instance Pusenkoff constructs his poetics by appropriating the expressive possibilities of electronic visuality, later on he will do the same thing by overcoming the limits of the digital. Thus, in such monumental anti-collages (*anti-* because he first places relief strips on the surface, paints around them, and then tears them off, thus creating the effect of rarefaction, of tonal pulsation) as *Screen Impressionism*, he achieves nuances inaccessible to digitalized color resolution. Moreover, within this same technotronic regime, we find the geometric arrangement of planes, a dauntless "machinic" acrylic wash, orderliness, and a uniformity of color temperature and illumination. The series *Who Is Afraid* (an allusion to Edward Albee's famous play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue*, a series of paintings that Barnett Newman produced in the late sixties) moves from this impersonal regime of techno-painting into more impulsive outbursts: the color-tone grid is imposed on a stormy expressionistic painterly gesturality. I confess that I find the first, technicized regime more sympathetic. In this case, Pusenkoff triumphs on enemy territory.

At the beginning of this essay, I discussed Pusenkoff's nervous concern about the viewer's reaction, how he strives (albeit somewhat naively) to guide and nudge the viewer toward the right interpretation. Naturally, this element of articulated perception can't help but make itself felt in the structure of his images. In the past several decades, the history of vision and the phenomenology of perception have been the constant focus of the adepts of cultural studies (from Michel Foucault to Mikhail Yampolsky). It would be wrong to say, however, that an explicit reflection on the content and transformation of forms of seeing was extraneous to the art of the past. Isn't Tolstoy's "mental telescope" (in *War and Peace*) an image of that synthesis, in the context of the providential, of the mental and the perceptual that Yampolsky calls transcendental apperception? Or there is the Mandelstam's line "I love military binoculars / With their usurious field of view." Isn't this an early manifestation of the current scholarly attention to optical machines — to the panopticon and the camera obscura, to panoramas, kaleidoscopes, and so forth? Does the computer, as it figures in Pusenkoff's representations, belong to this series of optical machines? The computer has, of course, objectively transformed the modes of vision. Among other things, it has introduced new strategies of materialization and de-realization, which Pusenkoff extrapolates to a certain degree in his pixilated painting. In any case, as I have attempted to prove, it is these processes that Pusenkoff draws on for support as he elaborates his own poetics. What other contexts does the artist offer for his pixilated painting? I think that sacrality is important here. Let's recall the theme of archaization that we touched on earlier: for

the contemporary individual, the glowing computer screen plays the role the hearth did in the dwellings of the ancients. And Pusenkoff takes this into account, at least in the endless visual sutras and mantras of his multi-part *Who Is Afraid*.

What about the anthropological context, the body? They are undoubtedly important. They're the source of the insistent tactility and handmade quality of the paintings. (I've already described Pusenkoff's method of anti-collage.) Hence, also, the application, fitting, and extension of the work (for example, the versions of *Single Mona Lisa*) to various physical environments: the Russian countryside, the city, outer space. To this context we should add the problem of involving the viewer in direct action, in a particular kind of operability.

Recent art does everything it can to shake the viewer loose from his mode as observer, to involve him in the event. Among such strategies, the early video art of Bruce Nauman seems to me the most effective: something like the yelled commands we might hear in a Marine boot camp resound from screens arranged opposite one another. In essence, Nauman was the first artist to base his work on the theory of speech acts as developed by Thomas Reid and J. L. Austin<sup>2</sup>. According to this theory, the command (like other kinds of speech acts) presupposes an addressee and a reciprocal action. In a word, the speech act provokes a reaction of some kind, some kind of action. To paraphrase Austin, words aren't adjusted to the shape of the world; rather, the world is made (or not made) to fit the shape of words. Nauman has shown us the performativity and behavioral activeness of language at its most aggressive. His visual form was adequate to the spoken component of his works.

Pusenkoff's pixilated painting couldn't have been so radically aggressive (or, for that matter, so linguistically oriented): it didn't extrapolate the command function. It was undoubtedly, however, performative and response-oriented. As has been mentioned many times, its idiom was oriented towards the structuredness of the interface (not only towards its ephemerality or sacrality or something else). In any case, it "turned on" the factor of viewer involvement as the kind of reaction it was seeking. Even the average user who doesn't go beyond conventional operations in his interactions with the computer has to perform certain actions, designated by menu commands and icons, in order to enter cyberspace. And then there are hackers, who violate those conventions.

In a word, Pusenkoff has felt his way to the strategy of inclusion and navigation that characterizes the pixel form. (We see an analogy with classical academic painting, which employs the strategy of optical-semantic navigation: the foreground and compositional diagonals are articulated so as to guide the eye into the interior of the canvas.) And while this strategy had been present earlier more as potential and as a supplementary resource of image making, then in the series *Erased Painting* it is enacted in the most unmediated fashion. True, before this the artist had produced the series *Digital Action Paintings*. The motor principle had been activated in these works as well: the movement of the computer mouse represented the "gestural strength" (Yuri Tynyanov) of Abstract Expressionism. The viewer shared these exertions as it were, thus feeling like a co-participant in the creative act. I don't think that provoking this "action event" was the only meaning of this series. Recently, it would appear that Pusenkoff's own "gestural strength" and impulsive emotionalism can no longer be contained by the frames on the "screen." For the present exhibition in the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, he has produced monumental panels in the spirit of Action Painting whose very scale and recklessness of movement clearly exceed the computer's capabilities. In general, the "anthropological dimension" of Pusenkoff's painting — that is, its second-order tactility, sensuality, tangibility —

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<sup>2</sup> J. L. Austin *Three Ways of Spilling Ink*, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.75, No.4, (October 1966), pp.427-440.

has been constantly increasing. In a number of recent works, the pixel has swollen with color and taken on flesh: it is already like a fly or bumblebee that buzzes and attacks the retina. (Pusenkov visualizes the dead “ophthalmologic” metaphor of “seeing spots.”) In *Liquid Geometry*, the anthropological dimension becomes an element of instability: it “gnaws away” at geometry and, more generally, at structure and regularity in the same way that a trickle of water erodes a house’s foundation. It is one step from this to self-destruction, self-erasure. Pusenkoff takes this step in the series *Erased Painting*. It is with this series, perhaps, that he achieves the highest point of contact with the viewer: the viewer is no longer user or observer, but a witness to the collapse of the pixilated building constructed by the artist. Co-participation is in this instance genuinely eventful, eventful. Whole conglomerations of pixels spectacularly and solemnly collapse. This collapse is linked to significant civilizational undercurrents. There is also undoubtedly a specific “aesthetics of ruins” in this tactic: as it is erased, the pixilated image becomes especially expressive.

I detect something similar in Roy Lichtenstein’s famous series of temples and ruins: the image is maximally reduced — to the raster grid and printer line. A new classicism is born in these ruins of the image. Pusenkoff pursues the same effect. Only instead of the raster, he uses the pixel.

What motivates Pusenkoff’s use of erasure? Why he is so insistent about involving viewers in the event? There are many possible directions we can follow in search of an answer. For example, the eternal quarrel between the original artwork and its media copy in the “age of mechanical reproduction” (Walter Benjamin). Or the problem of art’s indestructibility, the inevitable presence of the cultural archive. (Manuscripts don’t burn, as Bulgakov put it: versions of the image are preserved somewhere in the depths of the computer.) Or the ludic factor: the computer hacker’s “breaking” unshakeable metaphysical constructions (say, Malevich’s). I find the “civilizational” explanation most persuasive: behind the collapse of Pusenkoff’s pixilated architectures we see world-historical dramas unfolding. It is not by chance that the World Trade Center is faintly perceptible in the title of one of Pusenkoff’s works.

Pusenkov’s use of erasure, however, always goes hand in hand with the expansion, extension, and accumulation of new meanings and new forms of corporeality. In his new exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art Pusenkoff has created a visual metaphor for this expansion. His pixels have broken loose, as it were. Freedom has gone to their heads and they’ve spread helter-skelter over the walls and ceilings of the museum.