

## **George Pusenkoff's language of art**

Ulrich Heimann

Unless I'm mistaken, it was Jacob Grimm, the eldest of the Grimm brothers (publishers of the world famous fairy tales collection), who in view of the historicity of the human language, observed that language changes all the time, but dogs bark exactly as they did in ancient times.

The idea that art like language must be considered in terms of its communicative functions, while not an absolutely indisputable, is still a starting point of reflection for many formidable art theorists and philosophers. This approach is also apparent in current discussions about the nature of art. Consider Reinhold Schmucker's interesting statement describing works of art as a media of discontinuous communicative actions. In this perspective, the initiator of such a communication, i.e., the author of any work has at his disposal a particular language allowing him to formulate a message, which then, and conceivably hundreds of years later, a recipient will try to understand.

Like language, music and various forms of visual arts are historical. In any epoch there are artists who make the historicity of their works the subject of their reflection, whereas others, on the contrary, remain indifferent to it. The latter don't care whether their works are accumulating the experience of modern times, they merely 'bark' just like countless generations of their predecessors.

In 1863 Charles Baudelaire appealing to the artistic experience, and in particular, to painting, defined himself for the first time as a painter of modern life. Baudelaire starts with the idea that in every era beauty is marked by fundamental duality. "Beauty is made up of an eternal and invariable element, which is extremely difficult to determine, and of a relative circumstantial element. Without this second element ... the first

element would be unpalatable, inaccessible and unacceptable to human nature”.

In one word, if we want modernity to be accepted one day as antiquity, a mysterious beauty should be identifiable, which human life unwittingly acknowledges in that modernity.

Here is an historical example. Long ago (almost a 1500 years) before Baudelaire's enlightened conception of himself as a painter of modern life, the Western world faced a similar and just as unavoidable question: how should art, with its visual idiom, react to cultural transformation invading the medieval world, this special and temporal unity enclosed in its own historical and geographical borders, in whose place a new world was being created, a seemingly endless continuum in relation to man?

In response to this, modern artists of the time, from Alberti to Leonardo and Dürer , developed their own plastic language combining the system of linear perspective, which offers the sensation of space extending endlessly before an imaginary spectator, structured in accordance to rational rules, and with the sfumato technique, and applying such a blending of colours that they gradually fade, and become cooler as they recede into the distance.

Thus, the central element of the modern artistic production of that time, created in the strictest spirit of mimesis, was the system of linear perspective an aesthetic quintessence of the new time, a peculiar sign of that epoch whose mastery demonstrated the artist's understanding of which questions are relevant and who owns instruments for their resolution. Dürer, for instance, distanced himself from his colleagues who worked strictly with the acquired artisanal tradition, unaware of the historical revolution unfolding under their eyes and ignoring the

innovations of the Italians. He did not consider them as artists, they were still 'barking', rather than speaking.

Another example. Some 400 years after Dürer, Picasso became the groundbreaking artist of modern life. Werner Spies assigns to collage, one of art languages invented, the role of paradigmatic idiom of the 20<sup>th</sup> century .

In the first place, collage requires the artist to use new media; next, he is revealing the breaks and dissonances of his age; thirdly, he is displaying maximum freedom from obligations and rules. In Picasso's collages anything is seem as possible and everything is put into question. The world's heterogeneity and the experience of the expanding mass media, which humanity encountered first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – all of this is found in the collage. All Picasso's art can be summed up with the notions of collage and heterogeneity containing the idea of unifying the ununifiable. The rejection of the linear, casual, consistent, even predictable progress found in in Picasso's work is in line with the twilight in which the idea of progress in culture, technology and history of the past century immersed itself.

The explicit formulation of the thought, under which the work of art should bear a clear sign of its time, originates with Baudelaire. The fact that Baudelaire allows the appearance of such trace at the same time, as the eternal, unchangeable element of art may appear strange nowadays: in modern times, only a few artists dare tackle eternal unchangeable themes. Yet, this combination of the eternal, unchangeable element, and an element conditioned by time, typical of the Baudelarian comprehension of art, even in a modified form, may serve as key to George's Pusenkoff's language of art.

For many years Pusenkoff has been exploring possibilities connected to the combined references and allusions to digital

technologies of image production with evidence of enduring and eternal relevance (and advantage) of traditional analogous art methods. Moreover, it was vitally important to Pusenkoff, born and brought up in communist Russia, that he reassert the interrupted idiomatic connection with the culture of painting - the achievements of the Russian avant-garde of 1910-1920s, and Western language trends that have taken great strides during the seventy years of Soviet power, and thus to start 'speaking' an international visual language before moving even further. However, most of Pusenkoff's Russian colleagues have remained on the level of modified socialist realism.

Painting and painters have been an inherent part of the history of humanity over the centuries. Even before the appearance of writing, imagery heralded the transition from a natural to a cultural state. This is truly one of the (relatively) unvarying (figuratively eternal) constants of human culture.

Mind, heart and body of artists, whether inspired or agitated, attentive or aloof, filled with warmth, passion and love (but also, at times, or resentment) act together to turn life into a pictorial, musical or literary text through a complex process of appropriation, dedication, spirituality and materialisation.

What did change through the centuries starting with the stone age were external forms, scale and the depth of reflection involved with the transformation process. Meanwhile, we are living in an age that follows the peculiar 'pictorial shift' in which an omnipresent and constant accessibility of images, largely digital, surrounds us on all sides, disguising reality itself. This in itself appears banal and merely factual. And the fact that certain things appear obvious does not always encourage us to ask questions.

Yet Pusenkov's images raise a whole series of questions, such as: what happens to inspiration in the present situation of production and consumption of digital images - images which, like vampires, deprive us of ingenuousness of life experience. What happens to agitation, love and passion, which guided the hand of the artist throughout the millennia and up to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What are the consequences of the 'absolutized visual seizures' (according to Beat Wyss' expression), the reduction of our sensuality, which results in a visual monoculture of the digital image? What happens to our bodies when they are reduced to the condition of visual prosthetic devices? How is one to preserve the human analogous sources of production and reception of images, which alone ensures that digital technologies serve man and not vice versa? How can we avoid negating or disguising the digital nature of modern visual images?

No visual language pretending to be the language of the digital epoch, no artist who sees himself as a painter of modern life can fail to acknowledge these questions and try to answer them.

As we know, Pusenkov combines digital and analogous means of creation and expansion of images. Thus, 'Single Mona Lisa' 1997, one of the most famous works of Pusenkov, represents an image of Leonardo's painting downloaded from the Louvre's site, which was then subjected to a fragmentation motivated not as much by the digital process as by the history of the reception of the famous image, which then was transformed through a plotter producing masks for different purposes. And in this way, a painting painted in oil on canvas in many layers, an analogous object, can travel across Russia in a car, plane or train or into space in a rocket instead of circulating around the world by Internet. This project could be characterised as a kind of conceptual performance, which includes photographic documentation.

Another example of Pusenkoff's multi-layered art of language are his 'digital action paintings', which bear traces of a brush – a tool of analogous painting, on which layers of paint are interspersed with traces of digital image processing tools.

The problematization of the flow of digital images practised by Pusenkoff is consequently part of the general concept of painting of the digital era, a concept, which due to its reflective character simultaneously contributes to the philosophy of art of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Reflectivity is apparent in interventions made by Pusenkoff in the sphere of the modern art with a view to understanding its initiatives and adapting, modifying or rejecting the solutions found by this art.

Roy Liechtenstein and Andy Warhol (in his best works) found creative solutions allowing them to thematize new experiences connected to our perception of the world, and how our thoughts and feelings are increasingly affected by the mass media. They can undoubtedly be counted as George Pusenkoff's predecessors, his masters who were looking for a creative language capable of providing an adequate expression of their times .

A sharp flair for modern subjects inherent to Liechtenstein, his ironic play with screening, his way of organising the pictorial plane, in which the quasi-cinematographic construction of the image originating in the comics is combined with the rules of classical perspective, thus mixing the high and the low - all this undoubtedly qualifies his paintings as a vivid example of his work as a painting of modern life.

This is also applies to Warhol, who by his choice of technology (silkscreen prints), motives (illustrations from daily newspapers) and methods of art distribution also revealed himself to be a representative of his times, a man of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century appealing to the aesthetics of the mass media and distancing himself from the traditional

notion of a tragic figure of the artist-creator and painter - a medium of the absolute – a figure whose ultimate manifestation was abstract expressionism. Yet both Liechtenstein and Warhol in varying degrees drew upon Picasso's experience. Pop art and object art did originate, after all, in Picasso's collages who problematised painting by introducing newspaper cuttings and other everyday materials.

Gerhard Richter, who should also be counted among the painters of modern life in his masterful paintings, rehabilitates painting as language. This is particularly important for Pusenkoff. This distinguishes Richter, who in the sixties was described as the German pop artist, from Warhol and Liechtenstein. His dissociation with the art of the fifties was even deeper and, precisely for this reason, he could easily return to a form of painting remotely reminiscent of abstract expressionism, though he did in fact use randomness, instead of presenting himself as a spokesman of the absolute. Richter's painting can be viewed as language of art, which summed up the experience of the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Paintings, according to Richter, are deceptive, they pretend to reflect reality, about which we do not and cannot know anything. In this respect paintings are similar to the world as a whole: they are essentially an unfathomable reality. Everything visible, Gerhard Richter believes, is an appearance as all that exists reaches our consciousness as a reflected appearance and visual perception.

Even more deceptive is the connection with reality mediated by computer interface and virtual communications. One cannot answer the question, is there an objective reality beyond *our* reality? Quests for reality or truth are futile. Agnosticism, which permeates Richter's and Pusenkoff's paintings is typical for our times. It leads us to the conclusion that to insist on the notion of a painter as a medium of reality is meaningless. Pictures from illustrated magazines, advertising booklets

or an Internet component used as a source attract artists by their lack of any pretension to genius, craftsmanship and style. The source samples have the character of ready-made objects.

Soft outlines and grey colour schemes are characteristic features of many of Richter's paintings. According to the artist's comments, this grey colour indicates unconcern, indifference, refusal to express this or that opinion about the realities represented in his painting. Smudged contours on Richter's early grey paintings based upon black and white photos are not a simple reproduction of technical particularities of source samples related to the photographic process specifics. Richter simultaneously exaggerates and tones them down, and haziness transferred into painting like a grey colour scheme marks the distance separating the painting from an inaccessible reality.

Thus, Gerhard Richter's works, to a considerable degree, turn out to be studies of vision and visual image. Self-reflective character of his works allows one to call them an important comment on the twilight of language as the leading cultural medium. Their intellectualism and their quality of painting make Richter's painting a reference to Pusenkoff's artistic idiom. George Pusenkoff comments visually on a new phase of human existence – a life in front of the computer screen, while also reflecting on the new digital instruments existing subconsciously in the behavioural stereotype of a computer user (for example, erase, save, delete, undo ...).

However, Pusenkoff is not alone in his work dedicated to the possibilities of modern life after 'the pictorial coup'. He believes that analogous explorations are being conducted by several American artists who are equally concerned with the following problem: how can one save painting falling into the camp of those who 'bark' by ignoring the

requirement implicit to the language of art as formulated by Baudelaire. How can one remain in line with the times.

Jonathan Lasker's paintings are an example of this development, which according to Georg Im Dahl's characterization reject the requirement to be done with the object, to reject the ideal of early abstractionism and return to the idea of imitation and mimesis in the form of self-reflecting thematization and quotation of typical signs of abstract painting.

Lasker uses the abstract repertory both in its expressionistic and its constructivist form, taking a cool and distanced position and exposing the pathos of a spontaneous gesture and the ethos of pure form as a pose, which he reproduces with perfection.

This ambivalent combination of negation and affirmation of the language quoted is highly characteristic what is apparent in Pusenkoff's 'erased paintings' and makes it unstable and vague. The combination of fragments and debris and the concentration on their contradiction creates a new tension. Jonathan Lasker wants this ambivalence and contradiction to be viewed as signs of our time. we are chained to our bodily life, he says , and at the same time we lead a cybernetic existence. We have already discovered the same idea in the foundations of George Pusenkoff's reflection and art language.

In the course of the last twenty year, Pusenkoff's art underwent a strong transformation, sometimes expressing itself, for instance, as in the case of Brice Marden, in multi-layered monochrome pictures. From the mid-80s Marden creates works by painting over canvas with heavily diluted paints, which then are almost completely scraped off, after which pulsating, semitransparent paint layers and linear patterns inspired by far eastern calligraphy are applied one by one. Like Jonathan Lasker's works these paintings are determined by the interrelation between affirmation

and problematization of painterly actions referring to post war experience, but above all, to American abstraction. This reflection combines both criticism and deference – such a position is close to that of Pusenkoff.

Peter Halley was born in Lower Manhattan, where in a once residential area of the 60s a real architectural Moloch appeared, consisting entirely of office towers. He perceived geometry, on the one hand, as an abstract impersonal scheme structuring public space, on the other hand as a language of modernist painting, the critique of which Halley, above all, develops in his works.

In the first place, Halley distances himself from the geometric mysticism of Mondrian or Malevich asserting the contradiction of substantial truth articulated by pure geometric form (for example, a square), and some accidental factual reality. Secondly, he distances himself from formalist geometrical abstraction in the spirit of Frank Stella, which upholds the idea of the autonomy of art. From his point of view, both currents – mystical and formalist – disguise the real context for using geometry or, at least, distract our attention from it. And to Pusenkoff, the 'Big black pixel' only looks like a square but is in fact only a computer frame and the palpable multi-layered relief contradicts the smoothness of the screen glass.

Halley suggests a critical-socio cultural version of geometrism as a manifestation of social estrangement. In his 'Walls' and 'Prisons' elementary geometrical forms are saturated with reminiscences of the world of urban architecture which controls our lives. Moreover, in his 'Cameras' and 'Pipelines' Halley interprets the omnipresent power of geometrical structures in terms of Foucault's and Baudrillard's texts. In 'Cameras' he hints at Foucault's idea regarding rigid, disciplining geometry of architecture of prisons, factories and schools and his

'Pipelines' evoke thoughts on circulation, communication, distribution and consumption, which are viewed by Foucault as a 'soft' version of geometry.

In some of Pusenkoff's works, such as 'Inhuman blue' and 'Inhuman orange' emotional relation to colour merges with its virtual existence beyond the screen. As a result, engaging themselves in the reflection of tradition of geometrical abstraction Halley and Pusenkoff in their geometrical paintings are simultaneously concerned with finding new, unexpected interrelations of geometrical painting with an politically engaged discussion of the social context in which this art was formed.

Pusenkoff's interest in 'tactile geometry' or 'fluid geometry' (names of his abstract series) is determined by the fact that he himself behaves very much like Halley –Malevich's, Mondrian's and Albers' squares, frequently thematised in Pusenkoff's paintings, are contaminated with references to the pixel and as a result the idealism of early geometrical abstraction confronts the real - i.e. the social role of the square as the atom of global cultural practice of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Baudelaire drew a very clear line between two types of artists: one is simply a technically skilled specialist who fusses around with the attributes of his craft like a child over a new toy. Such an artist, says Baudelaire, is no more than a skilled hack whose horizon is not wider than that of a peasant. Another type of artist is a man who considers the whole world his home. The whole world interests him, he would like to experience, learn and evaluate all that is happening on the surface of our planet. Those who claim to be painters of modern life must ask themselves whether their language is functioning as a sign of their times. They cannot simply 'bark'.