

George Pusenkoff: Rupture

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In art, only negation can be truthful because it doesn't permit the cessation of motion and exposes any "positivism" as deliberate falsehood.

—Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966)

A fabric tears under your hand, you say yes to a life that strives upward by negation.

—Richard Hülsenbeck, *First German Dada Manifesto* (1918)

1. Pop Art: The Importance of Being Earnest

The work of George Pusenkoff continues the traditions of Pop Art. As soon we put this claim to paper, however, we must immediately make several clarifications and provisos lest we dissolve Pusenkoff's works in the context of today's *amusing* art, which appropriates the idioms of the mass media to glom onto the acclaim mass-market culture enjoys with the public.

Although we are obviously heirs of the sixties, we often ignore the decade's nonconformism and focus only on the comedic, ludic, and commercial aspects of Pop Art. The globalization and post-industrialization (if we can call it that) of contemporary culture make it harder and harder for political thought to find expression in the plastic arts. The uncoupling of a leftist ideology from the formal language of art that has been carried out in our time renders us insensitive to the presence of this alliance in the past. Andy Warhol (especially after he was played onscreen by an aged David Bowie¹) is seen as an eccentric uncle who sometimes delivered rather amusing one-liners. It is difficult to understand how the poor dear could have made Valeria Solanas so bitter. The strategy of Pop Art has been transformed into a series of stand-up acts by performers like Olivier Blanckart, who created a sculpture of Shiva based on Warhol's *Triple Elvis*; Wim Delvoye, who engages in the artistic reduplication of shit; Avdei Ter-Oganyan, who inserts foul language into his cartoon paintings; Paul McCarthy, who outfitted Mickey Mouse with a "manhood" of mammoth proportions; and Zbigniew Libera, who crafted a baby doll complete with pubic hair and other secondary sexual characteristics.

In contrast to this nonstop buffoonery, Pusenkoff's *Space of Strong Feeling* (1994), which is based on a quotation of a Roy Lichtenstein painting, strikes a powerful, classical chord that suddenly resounds amidst the babble of the marketplace. If we focus wholly on the formal and expressive means that Pusenkoff brings into play, however, we are forced to admit that the drama and psychological tension of the image are second-order phenomena, something the artist has provoked rather than stage-managed. Pusenkoff has intentionally not made use of even a single narrative move in order to conjure an emotional reading: only line, color, and composition are meaningful in the work. In this sense, Pusenkoff's painting is quite simple, while nevertheless remaining surprisingly expressive. The local color in the painting has the distinct overtones of a twilight, melancholy state. It is so saturated that you involuntarily feel like renaming the painting "Blue Feeling." We read the silhouette of the teardrop as simultaneously conventional and naturalistic. The tear is both transparent and unusually large, almost palpably heavy. On top of it all, it is also a single tear, *una furtiva lacrima*. In terms of its conventionality, this work should in fact be likened to an opera with cardboard scenery and glycerine tears whose piercing emotions nevertheless crash the scales of real life.

Grüner Wald (1994) is another simple and literal fusion of color and drawing. Pusenkoff doesn't paint his subject here, either. He simply rolls the silhouette drawing of the forest in local color,

¹ In *Basquiat* (Julian Schabel, USA, 1996).

and the simplicity of this move underwrites an unprecedented expansion of the semantic field. The green in this painting isn't naturalistic like the greengrocer's produce, nor does it have anything to do with springtime or youth or any other concrete season. The color here is, as it were, a metaphysical predicate, independent of an object. Any object that fell into the field of this green color would become a "Green Forest." Metaphysics is coupled to mythology, which is also buttressed by the semantic polyphony of the title. Grünewald is the pseudonym of the most mysterious genius of the German Renaissance and the mystical, enchanted realm in which the *belated horseman* rides and rides, Hansel and Gretel get lost, and Hesse's Knulp wanders. However, as in the case of *Space of Strong Feeling*, the scrupulous researcher must admit that the preceding interpretations, were they taken seriously, would be the figments of idle fantasy and personal bias. Pusenkov himself shows no preference for any particular reading of the image. He merely illustrates the fact that as it dominates the subject of the painting, local color becomes for human consciousness a powerful generator of the most varied meanings and moods. We are thus reminded of the well-known quatrain from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*: "At last a crackling frost enfolded / Fields silvered o'er with early snows / (Alright — who am I to withhold it, / The rhyme you knew was coming — ROSE!)." ²

The analytic nature of George Pusenkov's work is the fact that most persuades us he is an heir to the strategies of Pop Art, whose purpose wasn't at all to entertain, but rather to investigate. It was precisely this quality of advanced art making in the twentieth century — its place as an outsider vis-à-vis the culture industry, its search for a metaposition from which to analyze popular art — that served as the basis for describing contemporary art as an *avant-garde* attached to a democratic leftist ideology. By embedding his artistic reflection within the work and, more broadly, by conceptualizing visual art, the *avant-garde* artist erected a barrier between the work and its absorption by commercial salon art.

However, in the Soviet Union, especially during the last phase of its history, which coincided with the beginning of George Pusenkov's artistic career, matters stood somewhat differently.

2. Pusenkov and Russian Art in the 1990s: Photoshop as the New Conformism

The enemy of the Soviet *avant-garde* wasn't the market, but rather antediluvian official art, which existed on subsidies from the totalitarian government. On the contrary, romantic qualities were attributed to the market: it was associated with freedom and independence. Thanks to an endless stream of buyers (most of them foreigners), the first perestroika-era art communes in Moscow, on Furmanny Pereulok and Chistye Prudy, were able to survive. The artistic community of those days was quick to conceive a type of painting maximally attractive to its customers. A particular notion of the Transvanguardia or Figuration Libre formed the basis of this type of painting, but it drew its subjects from the realia and everyday life of the Soviet Union. The painted image was often accompanied by an inscription or text placed within the pictorial field: this was regarded as a pledge of allegiance to Moscow conceptualism. The artists also drew on the popularity of military and patriotic symbolism, a move they borrowed from Sots Art.

It is to Pusenkov's credit that in his early work he avoided this newly established canon, although it bears repeating that the word commercial had no negative connotations in those years. Pusenkov was attracted to a different understanding of aesthetic freedom — to a non-citational expressionism as vivid, confident, and categorical as the then-widespread rejection of the entire Soviet legacy. Pusenkov's paintings from the late eighties and early nineties are, as it were, the site of an unmediated emanation of the energy of perestroika — a bloodless revolution whose slogans called not for the construction of the new life, but for the return to the universal

² *Pushkin Threefold*, trans. Walter Arndt (New York, 1972), p. 153.

values of civilization and the search for a “human face” (and, thus, immediate, open human emotions) for Soviet society.

The popularity of the Soviet underground soon came to an end, however. The first half of the nineties was a period of deep depression, which Russian “radical artists” sought to overcome in their own way. Even the label they chose for themselves made it clear these artists were no fans of such forms of visual art as painting.

It was during this period that Pusenkoff moved to Germany, where he devoted himself wholly to formal experiments in painting. He thus took the stance of a double outsider: he fit in neither with the stereotypical “Russian wave” of the late eighties nor with the new generation of “radicals,” who were mainly busy with performances and installations. Pusenkoff’s experiments with color and texture — for example, *Cold Blue* (1994), *Yellow Cube* (1993), and *Red Is Soothing* (1995) — found supporters among such established, well-known artists as Erik Bulatov, who had gone through a period of analogous experimentation during the so-called Thaw, in the early sixties. While it took Bulatov several years to make the transition from non-figurative, modernistic work to the incorporation of society’s visual archetypes into his paintings, Pusenkoff arrived at this shift almost instantaneously. Thus, in 1995, his geometrical abstraction appeared framed in the graphical user interface of a typical computer screen: *Big Pixel 28 KB (1:1)*.

In the history of painterly discoveries, his find might be compared, in terms of its significance, to Roy Lichtenstein’s introduction of Benday dots into his own paintings. But while Lichtenstein’s round dots pointed to the fact that all contemporary images were reproductions, Pusenkoff’s graphical user interface reveals the most important parameter of civilization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: its virtuality. Pusenkoff emphasizes the new quality of the image: unlike the reproduction, the screen image is mobile. It is open to the “user,” to his subjective whims and individual optics. It is thus no accident that the geometrically correct drawing in the cycle *Liquid Geometry* (2001) floats and melts, thus coming into obvious contradiction with its own primordial structure.

If we view Pusenkoff’s computer window through the prism of the modern age, which interpreted painting as a window on the world, then this image — subjective, flickering, malleable, and animated — communicates precisely the simulative nature of our contemporary “Windows.” This, of course, is even more apparent when we compare them to the superficially similar compositions of modernist abstract painting. “Enwindowed,” these geometrical works lose what it is most important in the ideology of modernist art — their artistic positivism. Computer windows and pixilated contours impart instability and a nonfinite quality to these rigid, carefully constructed structures. Instead of serving as the universal theoretical and microcosmic model of the macrocosm, as Mondrian had envisioned, the painting becomes an intermediate link in an iterative process.

The method Pusenkoff uses to dissect contemporary visuality sets him off from the cohort of Russian painters who have come to fame after the crisis of the late nineties. The return of painting to the Russian art scene in the new millennium has once again taken place within the postmodernist paradigm, albeit in a new arrangement. In the paintings of such artists as Alexei Belyaev-Gintovt, Alexander Vinogradov & Vladimir Dubossarsky, Alexei Kallima, Valery Koshlyakov, Arkady Nasonov, and Alexander Pogorzelsky, the psychedelics, illusionism, and stylistics of the fantasy genre are clearly legible. Narrative, which is still what the international market expects from Russian art, now appears in the form of variations on the themes of advertisement, glamour, and commercial cinema, which actively employ the digital treatment of images. This technology gives a new (sometimes, literally fantastic) quality to the physical

appearance of characters and their environments. While contemporary Russian painters use these special effects for almost the same ends as mass art, Pusenkoff's analysis and deconstruction of the digital image in his own works undoubtedly shows a qualitatively different attitude to the same problem. His careful attention to the contemporary world's visual idiom logically led him to his next artistic discovery. In 1997, Pusenkoff repeated on the computer Robert Rauschenberg's famous gesture of 1953: he performed his own erasure of Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.

3. Pusenkoff's Paradox: The Tear in the Screen

The repetition of another artist's gesture, which Pusenkoff specially underscores in the title of the work (*Twice Erased De Kooning* (1997)), testifies to his desire to affirm his own membership in an avant-garde tradition that has centered on the image's destruction. Nothingness, emptiness, and rupture are among the terms used at various times to designate this extremely important, if not defining, strategy for the art of our day and age. Its trajectory passes from the first Dada Manifesto to René Magritte's *Decalomania*, from Yves Klein's *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* to the "Emptiness Canon" of Moscow conceptualism, from John Cage's *4'33''* to Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*. Despite the obvious kinship among these works, each of them exists, of course, in its own time and context, which were the specific targets of each particular act of negation.

Foisted on us by mass culture, today's image of reality should be termed a shimmering invariability or an animated stasis. The sham space we assume is behind the interface is, nevertheless, a widespread model for thought and reality. The digital aesthetic defines architecture, fashion, and design.³ Even in their best instances, mass-market literature and cinema are composed by recounting the peripeteia of the tool bar and program menu (disguised as plot twists). The popularization of science has provoked multitudinous homegrown accounts of contemporary civilization. Pseudo-intellectual theories, however, are no match for the persuasiveness of fictitious digital images. Mobility and openness to alteration, as suggested by the picture on the screen, are qualities purposely created as it were to inspire our contemporaries with false ideas about reality and their own role in it.

The counterfeit digital word is becoming total, thus eclipsing the average man's mental horizons. The membrane of reality created by today's mass media assembles a nearly complete set of traditional ethical and philosophical notions about high and low, heaven and hell, good and evil: digital graphics make it possible to create wholly "objective," "realistic" representations of the supernatural. In other words, our contemporary is supplied with a painstakingly drafted and animated 3D color model of the world. This world has only one limitation: it is situated wholly within a plane accessible to ordinary consciousness.

Having chosen this imaginary reality as the object of his investigation, Pusenkoff treats it strictly in the spirit of formal analysis. He depicts on his canvases the process of digital incursion into the image. Moreover, this process has become ever more acute for painting. Like a third-degree burn, it penetrates deeper and deeper, finally reaching what doctors call the "regeneration" layer.

In the first works of this series, the intervention still unfolds on the surface. In *Twice Erased De Kooning* (1997), the black field, framed by the computer window, has almost completely disappeared beneath the white tracks that imitate the path of the computer mouse. In this case (as

³ Michel Houellebecq has described contemporary architecture as the "velocity vector of locomotion," by analogy with the design of the computer interface, which is characterized by a transparency of construction and a speed of movement supplied by textual, visual, and iconic links.

in *Erased Malewich*, 2002), the color white appears as the “conjugate” of black; their opposition is played out only in the graphic dimension. The collision of white and black takes on a social resonance since the black field bears the semantic load of the work’s “body,” of its historic uniqueness, while the white “voids” signify destruction. This destruction is not linked here to time, but rather to the process of digital intervention.

In the subsequent color versions of erased painting (*Abstract Digital # 4*, 1998; *Digital Action Painting*, 1999) Pusenkoff rejects citation. The pattern of the colored trail shows the illusory layeredness of painted matter, and the composition takes on depth. It unfolds, however, in parameters to which pictorial thinking is unaccustomed. The paint layers that the artist exposes are not linked to one other, as the various stages of a single painting would be. They look like scraps of wallpaper, pasted one on top of the other in defiance of logic. And although each of the trails represents the fragment of a full-fledged abstract painting, their collage annuls the very notion of the artwork as a unique, integral phenomenon.

Later, Pusenkoff begins to construct his pictures (for example, *Erased Action*, 2000) on the dissonance between the abstract painting created by the brush and the white pattern of trails created by the mouse’s “eating through” the paint. Abstract Expressionism, the manner Pusenkoff works in before he allows the electronic eraser take over, is firmly bound up with such notions as the genuineness and utter sincerity of the artistic gesture. It is precisely as an underwriter of truthfulness that mass culture uses the stereotype of the “wizardly flourish of the hands.” Inherited from Jackson Pollock, nowadays this gesture is endlessly repeated wherever “creativity” is invoked — from depictions of contemporary artists (as in films like the above-mentioned *Basquiat*) to “culinary masterpieces” in TV advertisements. It is obvious that the musical origins of the gesture suggest the idea that the artist (or, for that matter, the cook) is a mere performer, albeit a talented one, whose work is in fact guided by the score or the recipe. The second meaning, esteemed especially in the showy gesture, has to do with its resistance to language and, on the whole, to art’s cognitive function.⁴

In George Pusenkoff’s canvases, the lightning flashes of Abstract Expressionism meet the computer eraser, which stands in for the reality outside the painting. Their encounter is paradoxical, like water cascading from a sewer pipe that has burst over the head of a dancing ballerina. It is right at this moment that the aggressiveness of digital technologies, like the acid terrorists and madmen use to disfigure both paintings and the faces of their victims, is felt with particular force. In the places where the eraser has done its work a pure-white, virginal surface opens up, as if there had never been a painting there in the first place. This one-hundred-percent sanitization of Abstract Expressionism is, of course, the most profound and catastrophic incursion into the aura of painting.⁵ The rapid, thorough sterilization of the authorial gesture is effected, however, by means of a gesture no less artful and effective: the artist moving the computer mouse with his hand.

⁴ Roland Barthes has written about this in connection with gangster films: “[E]ach man regains the ideality of a world surrendered to a purely gestural vocabulary, a world which will no longer slow down under the fetters of language: gangsters and gods do not speak, they nod, and everything is fulfilled.” Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1997), p. 45.

⁵ Walter Benjamin’s description of the aura’s disappearance in his landmark essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was, as later history proved, more an instance of brilliant foresight than a strict statement of the facts. The paintings of Yves Klein and Ad Reinhardt are convincing illustrations of this. In our time, however, Benjamin’s prophecy has no doubt come to pass.

In Pusenckoff's hands, the computer mouse becomes a scalpel with a two-edged blade. He debunks the myth that the artwork is something woven from genuine human emotions⁶, while also dissecting the now-popular image of the world as something filmy and filmic. Visible in the places where the canvas has been ruptured, the color white is a sign of the technogenic nature of the colored surface, a literal index of the monitor's glowing void.

Nowadays, mass culture makes an enormous effort to veil the digital nature of the image or, at very least, to romanticize and humanize technology — for example, by combining the notion of the “matrix” with the face of Keanu Reeves.⁷ Pusenckoff shows us a completely different aspect of digital technology: as rupture and caesura, as an abyss bereft of human presence.

The theme of man's end — *vanitas*, as it was called in classical culture, or a “face drawn in sand on the edge of the sea,” as Foucault puts it⁸ — is quite vital for understanding the phenomenon of the “human” itself. The imminent end imparts a particular poignancy to what is being perpetrated right now; it confers a particular responsibility on the present. While outwardly imitating an inheritance of the canons of classical art — figurativeness, genre, narrative — mass culture of course performs a powerful diversion precisely by way of “canceling the end.” In mass culture, death is interiorized under the guise of an event governed by logic. It is always the death of *others*: the death of losers, villains, and infidels, but never our own death. Likewise, an absence of human control (say, in the far reaches of outer space) is imagined as a temporary state of affairs: one day, of course, the entire universe will be humanized. The demonstration of the power and totality of humanity's impact on reality serves to mask the fact that the “inhuman” begins at home — at our desks, on the screens of our laptops.

George Pusenckoff unravels this theme of the end in the “body” of his works. He does this by destroying what he has just created with such an effort of will and feeling. Look: it was here just a few seconds ago, but now it's gone, gone forever. The question posed by the artist, “Who is afraid?” should be understood to mean: Who is afraid that everything — everything we do, everything we think, we ourselves, finally — might come to an end? The answer is: it is we who are afraid of this. It is we who are afraid.

⁶ We should note that here Pusenckoff even cites his own artistic credo from fifteen years earlier.

⁷ *The Matrix* (Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999, USA).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1973), p. 387.