

Victor Misiano and George Pusenkoff

On the Image, the Pixel, the Eighties, and High Jumping: Fragments of a Conversation

Victor Misiano: Following your work over the years, I've accumulated a rather large number of observations. I would group them into two overarching themes.

The first theme is this. Throughout your career you've gone through a mass of subjects, cycles, projects styles, and media. Despite your capacity for change, though, I've noticed that you have a wholeness and integrity that is rare among artists. I don't know whether you'll take this as a compliment or an accusation of conservatism, but this is bound up with the fact that your art is rather strongly rooted in your generation. You're attached to the original situation and tasks that a wide variety of artists in different countries confronted at a very specific time. I mean the eighties generation. This is my generation as well. Although my work as a curator is (probably justifiably) more associated with the nineties, I matured in that same climate. I shared the same general and cultural quandaries.

The decade formed around its polemic with the previous period, when countercultural, conceptualist, and self-reflexive poetics reigned supreme. Therefore the issue that the eighties raised was the image: its internal, immanent resources, which weren't subject to deconstruction.

I recall the text I wrote for the catalogue of your first big Moscow show (at the State Tretyakov Gallery in 1993), which was centered on a detailed analysis of pictorial depiction. Your project encouraged me to take just this tack. By covering the gigantic space window in the exhibition hall with a wall made up of pictures, you tried once again to thematize that old problem — the picture as a window on the world, the dialectic of the real and the illusory, etc. It was incredibly easy for me to write that text because by this time I had already worked out a whole bunch of ideas around this theme, ideas I'd already tried out in earlier texts I'd written about other artists, not all of them contemporary artists. And this was the subject of the eighties generation. Hard on the heels of the "art after philosophy" artists, they once again thought deeply about the image's autonomy.

I remember that your early works, from the eighties and early nineties, had a lot of texture, unlike your current works with their print shop finish. They were essentially 3D, and their surfaces were extremely rich in terms of plasticity and color. One had the sense that after the long period of Lent, after a period of pictorial asceticism, the artist had literally thrown himself on the image. It was in this spirit that I wrote about these works for *Contemporanea* magazine when they were first being shown in Moscow. By the way, "Hunger for the Image" is the title of a key book describing the experience of artists in the eighties, albeit on the basis of German art. My mentioning German art here is wholly apropos not only because soon thereafter you moved to Germany, but also because even back then your art was perceived as part of an international tendency aimed at rehabilitating the image.

George Pusenkoff: Yes, I really do subscribe to the notion that art's tactile component is perennial. Each new age has to find the form in which this traditional component of art will come alive.

VM: This is exactly what the main emissary of eighties art, Achille Bonito Oliva, talked so much about: he insisted on art's sensual nature. The conceptual-literary-philosophical approach turns art into illustration, into design. When the sensual aspect disappears, art ceases being art and becomes the periphery of some other genre.

GP: Back then all these things were stated in a very extreme way.

VM: Definitely. It was a violation of the taboo placed on art by the culture, which for years had been mulling over the interaction between word and image.

It's rather telling that you remained true to these creative tasks throughout the nineties. But the directions in which artists evolve can be and really have been very different. After getting a grip on a particular problematic, an artist might leave it behind if it loses its relevancy and turns out to be unproductive. Or he might stay faithful to the problematic but translate it into different media — into the cinema, say, which is what Schnabel and Longo have done. I've had occasion to observe how artists of the eighties generation have made agonizing and unsuccessful attempts to overcome the generation's problematic, and I've also seen artists become stuck in tried and true devices and tactics.

Your path has combined a faithfulness to the problematic of the image and unflagging attempts to inflect it with the new discourses that time has moved to centerstage. Thus, postmodernist citationalism, relational aesthetics (I have in mind your campaign with the Mona Lisa), the new media, and digital technologies have entered your work at different points. It's telling that when the new technologies emerged in the nineties they captured the heart of many artists to such an extent that some of them (Alexei Shulgin, for example) concluded that art was over, that art making was old-fashioned. This didn't happen to you.

GP: It's natural that it didn't happen. I learned about the digital world in 1972, when I enrolled in the Institute of Electronic Technology. I already knew then about things like displays and programming. I didn't completely trust these possibilities because in those days you still couldn't unite the emotional and the cognitive in a convincing way: we lacked the necessary technological tools. All one ended up with were primitive images of chunky pixels — the printouts that engineers, etc., sent to each other. But these motifs — art and math — have run in parallel through my whole life. And they've been asking each other questions my whole life. I sensed that a revolution was underway. However, I couldn't permit myself to work with this until the instruments were developed that would help me realize my faith. That's right: faith. A positively charged faith linked to the body of art.

VM: Moreover, by turning the image towards the world of technological reproduction, you not only conserved art's sensual "warmth," but you also kept faith with its spectatorial potential, which was so precious to the eighties generation, who arrived on the art scene "hungry for the image." And this is where we encounter the second extremely vital aspect of your long years of working with the image.

In our conversation today, you've mentioned the notion of paradox several times. In particular, you evoked this notion when describing your latest works, in which the image is first presented and then subjected to erasure. I might add that violation of the presented image's stability is one of the methodological principles at the basis of all your works, not just the latest piece. In that text of mine about your Tretyakov Gallery installation that I've already mentioned, I discussed how you problematize the image's illusoriness. You apologetically affirm its illusory authenticity while at the same time exposing it as a convention. But it seems to me that you've continued this approach right through to the present phase of your career. Thus, you affirm the image — its power, its erotics, its seductive pull on the viewer. On the other hand, you've remained a man of your generation. The outlook of that generation was expressed, for instance, by Baudrillard, who spoke of the image's seductive power as a terrible force that has to be subjected to

analysis and doubt. Hence what you define in your work as paradox fulfills the function of intellectual doubt. If I understand you correctly, you're inclined to accept seduction insofar as it is part of life's fullness. Simultaneously, though, you're inclined to distrust it because we know that the aesthetically charged image can be used for very different ends — say, as a part of advertising or propaganda. Therefore, when one appeals to the image, one has to constantly incorporate its critique and its annihilation.

Strictly speaking, this entire project of yours, *Who Is Afraid* — the flashy dramaturgy of an enormous corpus of work unfolding over several floors of the museum — presents us with an exhibition conceived as a single work, as a single utterance. In other words, as a single image. On the other hand, the project presents us with a deconstruction of this work. The image interiorizes, as it were, the anxiety and instability that are such essential elements of contemporary consciousness.

GP: Hence the title of the project: *Who Is Afraid*. The times are such that, because of the excess of information and self-reflection, this is how the phrase is heard in society. Moreover, it has become harder to figure out who is afraid and what they're afraid of — everyone is afraid of everything. To locate and name the enemy is difficult. Everyone is afraid of himself, afraid of responsibility and making decisions, afraid to exit the vicious circle.

The project's title contains a reference not only to my own earlier work, but also to *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, by the classic modernist Barnett Newman. The axis of the project is the idea of using the abstract works as a move to bind together my many years of work. In order to make this happen, I've almost completely excluded narrative: it is present only in the way that the exposition logically unfolds. But there is no figurativeness in these works. As a result, we end up with a history of painting's evolution as I've experienced it and the plastic structure that was actualized at the point (twelve years ago) when I first articulated the zone of working with the pixel. Which is the simplest abstract form, a new Malevich square of sorts.

VM: And this touches on the second heading under which I've grouped my observations of your career. I regarded it as significant that you'd decided to construct the current show exclusively around abstract painting, thus referring the viewer to the traditions of modernism.

Nostalgia for the modernist legacy and modernity is one of the aspects of the current mindset. *Is Modernity Our Antiquity?* was one of the leitmotifs of documenta 12. We even did a special issue of *Moscow Art Magazine* on this topic. The attractiveness of this age has to do, in particular, with the fact that it didn't experience the social fears and sense of total uncertainty that, as you've just noted, are characteristic of our time. It was a time with a clear, constructive view of the future. This clarity was manifested in art as well. As the Russian architectural historian Selim Khan-Magomedov has put it, the plastic system of constructivism was the second system of orders to appear after the classical orders of antiquity. Humanity has thus known only two universal systems of plastic and spatial organization. It is true that modernism was able to give definite answers to all artistic questions. There should be right angles, geometric forms, a continuous strip of windows across the entire façade, etc. The Black Square — the “royal child,” as Malevich called it — was likewise an absolutely universal module from which a basic set of plastic forms was derived. Its capacity was total. This was the source of its strength. In the face of entropy and chaos, this is what causes so much longing nowadays. One wants to bow down before it, to seek repentance and a safe haven in its shade. Or draw on its power. As you know, this desire to restore modernity's relevance is present on the Moscow scene as well.

Your recent works and your project *Who Is Afraid* are at home in this tendency. You yourself just compared the pixel with Malevich's square. For you, it is also a universal plastic module for the age of the digital production and distribution of images.

It's no coincidence, however, that *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* was Barnett Newman's last series of works. Because this entire idiom of high modernism —

GP: — which was also spoken by Mark Rothko: I feel a kinship with these artists.

VM: They exhausted the modernist idiom, as it were, and exited life. To a certain degree, *Who Is Afraid* is a conversation about the colossal danger within this idiom, about its inner drama.

And here, I think, is where your gesture of erasure once again becomes extremely important: you attempt to destroy the totalitarian component. You thus reveal the skepticism of a man of the eighties, your inclination to subject everything to doubt, to inject into everything that inner entropy which acts an anti-virus against totalitarian, reductionist thinking. In this way, you're really true to yourself.

GP: Moving towards the absolute while recognizing the limits of the possible: I really do recognize myself in this act. In the seventies, I was a high jumper and dreamed of becoming world champion. The world record was then 2.28 meters. It was set by Valery Brumel. My personal best was only 2.08 meters. Then Javier Sotomayor cleared 2.45 meters. For a human being, this is almost impossible. And he did it. But he's a man with the brains of a chess player, the speed of a sprinter, and the agility of an acrobat: only this combination allowed him to set the record. Which has remained unbroken for over twenty years.

In the piece I did for the *I Believe* show I erected a high jump bar at the height of 2.45 meters and put an open grave beneath it. People asked me, Why the pessimism? This isn't pessimism! It's the limit of human ability. Whether the bar is raised depends on us. We're like the frog that beats the milk into cream to avoid drowning: we have to keep jumping. As long as we're jumping, we're alive. As soon as we stop jumping, that's when everything ends.

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