

## Who Is Afraid?

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### 1. Who Is Afraid

The title of George Puskoff's exhibition *Who Is Afraid* contains, aside from direct references and historical connotations, a sense of anxiety. His project deals with the career of abstract art. Born at the dawn of the twentieth century, abstraction has undergone continuous transformation in the hands of neo-avant-garde practitioners from mid-century on. Here, reappropriation (a practice crucial for Puskoff, in whose work the already-readymade forms of contemporary visual culture, a "package" culture, have been articulated on many occasions) yields its place to a question. While the direct indexing of a tradition can serve as a postponed answer to questions once raised by the "original," situating it in a particular historical context and thus closing the temporal circle, the question Puskoff has asked is directed to the future. We hear in it both quotation and silent self-inquiry: *Who is afraid*.

We are gripped by a feeling of unease, by anxiety about what hasn't happened yet but could happen at any moment. This anxiety about what *will be lost* is the manifestation of a more fundamental fear: the fear of losing *the future itself*. Like an incantation, this projection is represented again and again in today's art.<sup>1</sup> It seems this anxiety is directly bound up with the projective nature of the present day. It inherited this mindset from the futurological orientation of modernism and technology, which were united by the ideology of progress. Moreover, anxiety itself can be an engine of progress. For example, nineteenth-century Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov's anxiety about our unresurrected fathers and forefathers was one of the impulses that led to the exploration of outer space.

The anxiety provoked by the future has to do not only with possible losses, but also with a state of indeterminacy. In turn, this indeterminacy or indecision serves to defend us from totalitarian utopias, from belief in "absolutely likely events"<sup>2</sup> (whether the advent of actual communism or the conquest of Mars), which are deferred into a reasonably near-off future. Indeterminacy is already present in the form of the question itself. Puskoff asks a rhetorical question. It is bereft of intonation, of a question mark. Most important, it lacks a direct addressee who would indicate of what or whom we should(n't) be afraid, and thus wouldn't permit us to complete the question as a direct citation: *Who's afraid of red, yellow, and blue? Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Who's afraid of the neo-avant-garde?*<sup>3</sup> The undecidability and incompleteness of the question models and mediates the distance between the individual and the universal, between the tradition

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, it is quite telling that the recent documenta 12 (2007) was to a great extent given over to reflections on the forgotten modernist practices of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. One of the exhibition's stated themes was, "If Modernity Is Our Antiquity?" It is just as telling that the theme was formulated as a question.

<sup>2</sup> In the animated sci-fi film *Interplanetary Revolution* (Zenon Komissarenko, 1924, USSR), this is how the intertitles describe the struggle of the proletariat against international capital, which has escaped to Mars and Mercury. These "absolutely likely events" were to have taken place in 1929.

<sup>3</sup> *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue* is the title of a series of four paintings produced by Barnett Newman in the years 1966–1970. The title alludes to Edward Albee's popular 1966 theatrical staging of his 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and to the equally popular 1966 Mike Nichols film of the same name, which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" is the question asked by American critic Hal Foster in his book *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

(or rather, traditions) of abstraction and the works presented in the current exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Pusenkov does not choose between east and west, between the rival concepts of “abstract” and “non-objective” art, between geometric abstraction and Abstract Expressionism, between Action Painting and Color Field painting. Rather, he tells us a story about abstraction’s return, which is also a story about how one cannot enter the same river twice. Despite titles that speak for themselves — *Who Is Afraid*, *Who Is Afraid of Black and White*, *Digital Action Painting*, *Digital Field Painting*, *Liquid Geometry*, *Erased Painting* — Pusenkov’s pictures do not quote particular works. They remind us of works by Jackson Pollock, Sam Francis, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, and even Kazimir Malevich. At the same time, however, they elude definition, thus symbolizing the rupture in the image, the cut in the order of the Imaginary. What is striking about them is not how they reflect the fate of the image in the age of “mechanical reproduction” or the loss of aura, but rather the diachronic existence of the image. It flickers in a temporal rupture: it is reborn and simultaneously dies in the impossible union of spontaneous artistic gesture and geometric computer pixel, of drawing and erasing.

In *Who Is Afraid*, abstraction is not only form, but also plot. This story of abstraction is a meditation on the career of modernism, on the transformation of monochromatic painting, geometric abstraction, and spontaneous gesture. It also asks what happened to the idea of art’s autonomy, how it was reappropriated by the culture industry, and how creative work was industrialized.

## 2. From Computer to Easel

To paraphrase the title of Nikolai Tarabukin’s book *From Easel to Machine* (1923), we could call Pusenkov’s career a reverse journey, “from computer to easel.” The rejection of art’s previous forms, the industrialization of the artistic gesture, the shift from the individual to the collective, from easel painting to a fusion of art with production — this leading tendency of the twenties, manifested in the art of the Productionists, should have reached (it would seem) its acme in today’s world of new technologies. This hasn’t happened, however. For Pusenkov, the new technologies are not the end product of a post-industrial art, but an instrument and one of its most crucial storylines.<sup>5</sup> On the computer Pusenkov makes a study, which is then transferred to canvas. There it plays the role of a “negative” form, in accordance with the principle of anti-collage. This form is a trace of what might have become a collage. It is temporarily pasted onto the pictorial surface and then torn off so as to open a window into space. Pusenkov literally draws with the background, leaving the contour or geometric figures sunk, as it were, inside the canvas. The relation between figure and ground is reversed: what was ground becomes figure. An effect arises of the figure coming out of the depths, as, for example, in *I Know How You Feel, Yves!* (1994). Or it seems as if the vibrating surface of the abstractions has split into horizontals. Collage once revolutionized twentieth-century art by constructing a new relation to reality. Likewise, the technique invented by Pusenkov alters our optics, generating a sensation of space by shifting our gaze from one space to another.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Since Hamlet, hesitation has been a sign of thinking and humanity for modern thinkers. The time which was wasted represented and mediated the distance between the individual and the general, just as circulation represented the distance between consumption and production in the economy.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 2002), p. 205. I would like to thank Eugenia Kikodze for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> However, the serialism that runs through Pusenkov’s work serves to remind us of the collectivist form of creativity to which artists aspired in the twenties. Serialism was also common among the proponents of such antithetical movements as Pop Art and minimalism.

<sup>6</sup> In 1994, Erik Bulatov wrote an essay dealing with the spatial effect in Pusenkov’s works. The essay is reprinted in the present catalogue.

Bound up with Pusenkoff's meditation on the picture's optical depth, his breakthrough "backwards" into the space of the painting is articulated anew in the series *Erased Painting*. Beginning with the deliberate tautology of erasing Rauschenberg's erased de Kooning drawing (*Twice Erased Drawing De Kooning* (1997)), Pusenkoff then goes on to erase Malevich's Black Square. In *Erased Malevich* (2002), the geometry of "the original" is fused with the spontaneous gesture of erasure. As opposed to the previous period, the method of "subtracting" the background from the canvas is now based on a background that is no longer dark (pencil-black or colored), but white. Pusenkoff draws not with the contour, but with light, with the void. In *Erased Painting*, he combines Action Painting and the Suprematist method of floating objects in a non-aerial space flooded with an even white light. In some works, the drawn line (that is, the erased line) is preserved. In others, the action painting hovers like a net cast over space; it is no longer lines that are subtracted from this net, but geometric forms. According to Pusenkoff, he injects a sufficient amount of white blankness into his pictures. This isn't color, but light; it brightens the color gamut, including the "historic" palette of Action Painting. In *Erased Painting*, white achieves victory through the totality of its immeasurable depth. In 20 meter long painting *Who Is Afraid of Black and White* (2007) we witness this struggle of black and white.

Pusenkovff calls his method the "industrialization of destruction." The industrialization of the artistic gesture is not made to serve production or to create industrial objects, but to generate a productive rip in art's symbolic fabric. A radicalization of form takes place. Like Malevich in his day, Pusenkoff announces his move beyond the zero of forms. This transition revolves around the computer pixel. The fundamental graphic element and building brick of the new digital reality, the pixel also recalls the most important geometric figure in the history of abstraction: Malevich's Black Square. Computer pixels are always present in Pusenkoff's works: in some works, their presence is deliberately underscored; while in others it is barely noticeable. In *Big Pixel 28 KB (1:1)* (1995), the artist composes an *hommage* to the pixel. Moreover, for Pusenkoff the pixel is not a metaphorical figure, but a "unit of action" (to invoke the idiom of the avant-garde) and the sign of a genuine interaction with technology. Everything he does passes through the computer. The drawn (erased) line, the artist's spontaneous gesture, and the movement of his body are all mediated in digital space. Pusenkoff's relation to the digital world isn't powered by the usual notion that the digital is something abstract, but rather by a profound understanding of its processes.<sup>7</sup> He compares the digital (a proximate control system which performs a step-by-step search for the desired solution) to "feeling the world out." He assumes this is where its resemblance to abstraction lies: in its rejection of the object world, which is amenable to measurement. In *Digital Action Painting* (1999), Pusenkoff readdresses the bodily character of Action Painting, but this is a new, digital corporeality "not made by hand." Like Morse code, pixels translate the words and phrases of the twentieth century's "analogical" art into another language, the language of digital reality. Composed of hundreds of pixels, the "graphemes" of Abstract Expressionism suddenly abandon pictorial space and enter the third dimension. In 2007, Pusenkoff creates a group of sculptures *Black Shape*. Simultaneously flat and palpable, suspended between "heaven and earth" along white walls, the sculptures make an ambivalent impression on the viewer. Either this is a simulation of 3D space into which we, inordinately miniaturized, have been inscribed; or it is the entry into a reality commensurate to man, where the traces of the artist's spontaneous gesture have been materialized and enlarged. Like the footprints left on the sand by Friday, which informed Robinson Crusoe of another human presence on his desert island, the sculptures once again signal the presence of abstraction. They might be called an indexical<sup>8</sup> sign of Abstract Expressionism (considering their form) and, at the

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<sup>7</sup> Pusenkoff is a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Electronic Technology, where the first Soviet computers were assembled.

<sup>8</sup> I have in mind the tripartite sign typology of Charles Peirce: icon, index, symbol.

same time, of geometric abstraction, as incarnated in the pixel's square shape. Through them, the artist makes his escape into the beyond of the screen's surface, which is a logical sequel to his work with computer pixels and computer frames.

### 3. From the Last Painting to the Aesthetics of Interface

The computer interface is one of the most common motifs in Pusenkoff's oeuvre. Freestanding computer symbols (which for some reason are called icons), the signature graphic shell of the Windows operating system, even the square shape of his pictures — all these screen elements appear constantly in the artist's works. If Malevich's Black Square is the “icon of the twentieth century,”<sup>9</sup> then Pusenkoff's images are the iconic signs of the computer interface. The program's graphic design has become the painting's subject and central image. Enlarged and transferred by the artist onto the “screen” of the canvas, it paradoxically refers us to the historic emergence of geometric abstraction, without which this later resignification of the world would have been impossible. It was necessary to decompose the visual image into its constituent parts — primary colors, line, form — so as to gather it together again, decades later, in the universally comprehensible symbols of the digital world. If we might say that abstract art is a kind of alphabet of the user interface and that our knowledge of this alphabet conditions our perception of the program's shell, then Pusenkoff's turn to Windows, which has replaced the traditional notion of the painting as a “window on the world,” testifies to one more twist of the plot. It involves rethinking the painting's historic fate and the once-declared end of painting.<sup>10</sup> Pusenkoff's strategy of reappropriation, which combines aesthetic artifacts and the computer interface, has often prompted scholars of his work to reflect on the end of painting. It thus seems legitimate to turn this idea around and show how Pusenkoff has furthered avant-garde traditions by investigating the limits of the means available to art

Attempts to paint the last picture coincided with the conception of abstract art. Malevich's contemporaries (supporters and detractors alike) recognized the Black Square as the end of the former world. But it is the name Alexander Rodchenko that we associate with the declaration of painting's end and the demise of representation. Announcing, in 1921, that “[e]verything is finished. Primary colors. Each plane is a plane and there need be no representation,”<sup>11</sup> Rodchenko produced the monochromatic paintings *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow*, and *Pure Blue*.<sup>12</sup> It is abstraction that singles out the set of primary colors as a primordial element of painting. In 1920, Piet Mondrian reduced painting to the primary colors (to which he added black, white, and grey), the flat plane of the canvas, and horizontal and vertical black lines.<sup>13</sup> Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (to which, in turn, Pusenkoff appeals in the title of his exhibition *Who Is Afraid*) is a rethinking of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. While Newman had earlier rejected the limitations Mondrian imposed on painting as a manifestation of unfreedom, in this

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<sup>9</sup> This metaphor, which has persisted into our day, arose immediately upon the Black Square's first appearance, at 0.10. *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* (Petrograd, 1915), where the painting was hung in the “red” (icon) corner.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, in her article “A Pilgrimage to the Land of Authenticity and Back” (2002), a discussion of the end of painting, Ekaterina Dyogot touches on Pusenkoff's treatment of the image of the Mona Lisa.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Alexander Lavrentiev, “What Is Linearism?” In: *The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), p. 295.

<sup>12</sup> These three paintings (from the series *Smooth Boards*) were exhibited in 1921 at the Rodchenko-curated group show 5 x 5 (so called because each of the five participating artists entered five non-objective works). They symbolized not only the end of easel painting, but also the beginning of a new (constructivist) phase in Rodchenko's evolution.

<sup>13</sup> *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Grey* (1920) launched Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, which purported to articulate the “basic” elements of painting.

series he uses the primary colors for the first time. The artist's question (posed to himself, to Mondrian or to the history of abstract art) might be rephrased as, "Who's afraid of limitations?" Newman thus shifts the focus from a critique of art's traditional means to a critique its institutional aspects. As theme and content, the primary colors already make their appearance in Pusenkoff's oeuvre in 1994 — for example, in *Between Today and Yesterday*, *Yellow Nostalgia*, and *Red Is Soothing*. Aside from the primary colors, in this series the artist turns to such vital components of abstraction as monochromism and geometry. Pusenkoff returns to painting via the very same artistic means that should have led, as it seemed in the twenties, to the death of painting.

In the late nineties, Pusenkoff begins articulating the "aesthetics of the interface" in his works. The painting not only tells us the tale of the new computer world that has become its subject, but it also introduces a new style. According to the artist, instead of the frames of Alberti, we now see the world through the computer frames of Windows. While Pusenkoff at first employs the computer interface to frame the history of art,<sup>14</sup> in later works he mostly abjures such direct analogies. Thus, in the series *Liquid Geometry*, he combines the computer frame, the traditions of Op Art, and special software (the "liquid" computer filter). As in *Digital Action Painting* (1999), there is no direct reference to a particular work here, although there is a recognition of the interconnection between visual forms. The computer frame isn't necessarily wholly preserved in Pusenkoff's works. In *Digital Field Painting* (2002) symmetrical, gridded into vertical segments, and painted in vivid primary colors, the fragments of the frame recall Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. In this case, Pusenkoff doesn't resort to citing specific works (as, for example, in the much earlier work *Green Mondrian* (1997) thus permitting the aesthetics of the interface to dissolve in avant-garde traditions. Pusenkoff makes not only the computer interface a formal element of painting, but also the scan line — for example, in the series *Who Is Afraid* (2007), in which square picture-modules combine to form a large-scale composition. Enlarged multiple times, these identical computer frames contain horizontal stripes painted the same shade, which are evenly interspersed with white spaces. By precisely calculating the proportions of color and white ground, Pusenkoff achieves a luminescence on the painting's surface that reminds us of the computer screen. This is an image of the computer monitor's scan line: the flickering is the trace of the electronic beam that produces the picture. At the same time, the intensity of the color and the shimmering effect send us back to the painterly experiments of the twenties — in particular, to Mikhail Matiushin's experiments and the principle of *Zorved* (seeing-knowing) that he proclaimed in 1923. By throwing open the habitual boundaries of perception via so-called expanded viewing (in which the angle of vision could reach 360 degrees: Matiushin believed we can see with the back of our heads), Matiushin discovered how color behaves in the environment as well as how it becomes more intense when in motion. "A Guide to Color," which he published with his students in 1932, features color tables in which two colors are conjoined via a third, which gives them an unusual brightness and glow.<sup>15</sup> But whereas Matiushin discovered the norms of color perception through his observations of the phenomenon in nature, Pusenkoff from the very beginning deals with the digital environment. The image of the screen's scan line is the starting point, in the series *Who Is Afraid*, of his own meditations on color perception. The new technologies lead him to the discovery of this color effect, and he then transfers his observations to canvas. The future of abstraction is reflected on the computer screen in order to return in the guise of formal painterly experiments. Pusenkoff

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<sup>14</sup> Pusenkoff reflected on the strategy of direct quotation (the inclusion of art-historical artifacts in computer reality) in the project *Simply Virtual*. This practice reached its apogee in the projects involving the image of the Mona Lisa.

<sup>15</sup> Matiushin's career and his theoretical achievements have been the focus of a number of studies by Alla Povelikhina. See, for example, Alla Povelikhina, "World As Organic Whole" In: *The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915 – 1932*. (Galart, Moscow, 2003).

fuses abstraction and the computer interface, the virtual and the real. He performs a loop in time: he goes back into the past in order to meet himself. The glow on the computer screen frames his rhetorical question, *Who Is Afraid*. He returns to us from out of the past in the words of Barnett Newman, who once asked the question *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*: "They say that I have advanced abstract painting to its extreme, when it is obvious to me that I have made only a new beginning."