

## TWO HISTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY ART

This paper was delivered at the annual Punin conference held at St. Petersburg State University in 2000.

A better title of my paper would be *Multiple History of Contemporary Art*. What do I mean by the thesis of the multiplicity of the histories of contemporary art? The previous paper and the last question we heard suggest that some people doubt the possibility of drawing any historical lines through the 20<sup>th</sup> century's art. In fact, one may think that since in the 20<sup>th</sup> century fine arts performed a kind of turn (if not a revolt), the vector of historical investigation drawn into the realm of contemporary art would necessarily deviate from the direction it traditionally takes in art history. However, at the dawn of the century when the very concepts of modernism and avant-garde were still *in statu nascendi* and artists all over the world were searching for innovations in form and content, it was tradition that supplied the artists with mental pabulum. Almost all of them – whether Kazimir Malevich or Nikolay Punin, the founder of the Department of the Newest Trends at the Russian State Museum and the title figure of our conference – were primarily concerned with traditional aspects, though both of them were fervid partisans of innovation. Quite interesting it is that during his work on *Les Femmes d'Alger* Picasso wrote to Severini that he had been mostly interested in the problems of Ingres and Delacroix and had been applying the traditions of these two painters to his new works. Surely, looking at *Les Femmes d'Alger* one would hardly see any direct references to the works of the artists Picasso listed in this letter. One may even think that such vision of his own works (recognition of Ingres's traditions in *Les Femmes d'Alger*) results from the strong influence of the African shamans' objects (various masks and magic instruments) Picasso experienced at that time — as if these objects turned the artist into a zombie incapable of seeing the true meaning of his own works. In fact, Picasso and Malevich as well as most artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were traditionalists in principle and their works may easily be studied by art history without violating its methods and rules.

History of fine arts may tell us of many cases when objects not related directly to painting, sculpture and other traditional techniques were regarded as works of art in terms of art history (e.g. bank-notes, coins, various arms, etc.) In this sense, it was art historians who gave rise to the amplified notion of fine arts. The so called formal school greatly contributed to the maintenance of this amplified notion of fine arts since it allowed for the art-historical consideration of the objects quite remote from fine arts (such as candy wraps, for instance). However, the truly revolutionary step in this sphere was taken after World War II. The last speaker asked where one should draw the borderline that demarcates the realm in which it is no longer allowed to consider a work of art from the point of view of its completeness. In reply, I would say that, temporally speaking, this borderline lies within the period of the World War II. Interestingly enough, already after World War I many artists emphasized in their letters, articles and manifestoes that World War I, with all its horrors and crimes against humanity, enhanced the revival of neoclassicism after 1914. Professor of the Ravenna Academy of Fine Arts and a son of the artist Carlo Carra, Massimo Carra, who recently lectured in St. Petersburg, also stressed the fact that it was World War I that made modernist artists return to the classical traditions because it demonstrated the utter depravity of the futurist approach to art as well as the artistic sterility of modernists' search.

At the same time, art history mentions the cases of abstract art from the earliest epochs of human civilization. Pliny the Elder describes an abstract geometrical picture created by two artists. One of them drew a line while the other painted a finer and a straighter line over the first one. This work was considered to be so wonderful and complete in its beauty that the artists decided to perpetuate it. Pliny the Elder preserved the case for future historians. However, this case is a deviation from the basic line of art history I would like to focus on.

Thus, the period after World War II engendered a different understanding of art. Such artists as John Cage and Josef Beuys opened a new perspective for consideration of art. Their works may well be considered not only from the point of view of art history but also and primarily from the point of view of contemporary art. In fact, the very notion of contemporary art (as well as that of postmodernism, though it appeared later) was coined by art critics directly for the purpose of demarcating traditional art, which also included modernism of the beginning of the century, from the art that appeared after World War II. Here are two examples of the post-war art. In his manifestoes, Josef Beuys declared that everything belonged to art. In fact, the premonitions of this ultimately amplified understanding of art may be found already in Larionov's manifestoes. However, compared to Larionov, Beuys took one step further. Another example is John Cage's practices. Take such of his famous "works" as *4'33* when the artist and composer sat at the piano and did not play anything and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (from the point of view of contemporary art, it may be called an installation, a communicative action and a music composition) that presented 12 radio sets tuned for different waves — the sounds they produced finally constituted Cage's symphony.



John Cage's performance «The Water Symphony» in the S. Bugayev's studio.  
S. Bugayev, J. Cage, t. Novikov,  
I. Shumilov, S. Kurekhin.  
St. Petersburg, 1988

Such practices of postwar art suggest the rupture of tradition since even the artists themselves do not consider their practices as the works of fine art.

Interestingly enough, many historical facts and various aspects of historical persons' conduct may be set up for art works from the point of view of contemporary art. However, they were never considered as such by the contemporaries. My favorite example in this sense is the Gordian Knot, a famous object of conceptual art. This knot was considered an object of curiosity and was shown to tourists and foreigners, including very important visitors. As all of you know very well, when Alexander the Great on his march through Anatolia reached on the capital of Phrygia, he was shown the chariot with its yoke lashed to the pole by means of an intricate knot. After he was invited to untie this knot, Alexander sliced through it with his sword. In fact, Alexander's action may well be considered belonging to the practice of contemporary actionism. Considered in the historical perspective, Alexander Brenner who used a spray can to destroy a work of Kazimir

Malevich at the Stedelijk Museum clearly continues the tradition of Alexander the Great and that of Herostratus who burnt the temple of Artemis at Ephesus.

In this sense, the title of my paper *Two Histories of Contemporary Art* is not exactly precise. Art history and the history of contemporary art are not parallel. These two historical lines cross at a certain point and then diverge. The question is whether we can consider these divergent paths as belonging to one and the same historical line. In terms of contemporary art, each and every artist is preoccupied with the problems of self-expression. Self-expression appears to be the basic notion of contemporary art. What role did it play in traditional fine arts? Were Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Poussin, Ingres and impressionists ever concerned with self-expression? Was the problem of self-expression pressing, say, for Claude Monet in his impressionist period? Hardly so, since the impressions he was trying to render on his canvases were, as it were, objective impressions that could belong to other people as well as to himself. By contrast, self-expression of contemporary art pedestals an artist's personality and individuality. If we change our perspective and look at the history of culture in general, we would find a similar idea of self-expression in the early religious cults. It makes sense to look for these parallels while studying the works of contemporary artists. In his statements and manifestoes, Joseph Beuys often highlighted the fact that his art was very close to the practices of ancient Siberian shamans. African Shamanism was applied by many artists already at the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Surrealists were extremely interested in various magic cults. I chanced to see a large exhibition of Andre Breton's collection at the Pompidou Center in Paris. The founder's of surrealism collection included African masks, various devotional articles and magic objects as well as a number of things I would qualify as sadist and masochist. For instance, there was a metal instrument bearing the characters *de Sade* and designed to fire a body of a tortured person. Such objects of contemporary art are akin to the instruments belonging to the ancient cults of Satan, Beelzebub, Lucifer and so on. It is the idea of self-expression that makes contemporary art similar to these cults and it is this idea that puts privileges the artist above the world (should we call it Creator or Nature or otherwise).

I am not sure whether all of you are aware of the contemporary art extreme practices. I am not sure whether you know what the latest contemporary art journals look like and what such contemporary artists as Orlan, Stelark, Schwarzkogler (he was famous already in 1960s) and Hermann Nitsch are preoccupied with. Their artistic work mostly consisted in the deformation of their own bodies and the bodies of other people. You may remember Schwarzkogler's famous action that included the abscission of his privy parts and Orland's practice of decorative surgery that deformed her face (she made two ugly hemispheres on her forehead, changed the shapes of her nose and lips and now looks as a real monster). Stellark implants various microchips in his body that allow for taking him as a cybernetic machine; thus, he turns over the regulation of his own body to a computer. One may multiply the examples *ad infinitum*. My general idea I tried to illustrate is that contemporary art requires and deserves its own history and this history will in no way a continuation of the history of traditional art. Searching through the data on Renaissance artists and the artists of other epochs one will certainly find the facts that bear affinity to the works of contemporary artists. Take the case of Guiseppe Arcimboldo, the inventor of the merry-go-round. His invention is very close to contemporary installations and object art. However, his expertise for illusionistic trickery had nothing to do with his work as a painter. Arcimboldo did not mean his merry-go-round to be a work of art. Similarly, Leonardo's fanciful military implements (such as the air-chute, the helicopter, the tank and the other inventions he made in addition to his paintings when he was employed as a military engineer) — despite the fact that we

have Leonardo's drawings of them — do not belong to the history of art. Rather, they constitute a part of the history of military technique. Thus, however directly does the very word-group “contemporary art” refer to fine arts, development of contemporary art lies beyond the history of traditional art. To insist on their affinity is to make a serious epistemological mistake. In this sense, those looking for historical parallels with contemporary art in the history of traditional fine arts fall into a trap laid by the historical turn of the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century (though some of its signs became visible already at the beginning of the century) that changed historical perspective absolutely.

However, reconstruction of the history of contemporary art poses another problem. As I have already said, each and everyone among contemporary artists is an extreme individualist. I would say that everyone is idiosyncratic in his or her insanity. In contemporary art, individual insanity and individual self-expression of one artist has nothing in common with the individual insanity of another. Moreover, individuality and uniqueness is necessary for consecration in the history of contemporary art. Every contemporary artist wishes to affirm his or her absolute individuality and difference; every artist wishes to overthrow the whole of pre-existing tradition or, at least, to create his or her own branch, trend and deviation that would guarantee him or her a secured place in art history. Thus, the main problem one will face while reconstructing the history of contemporary art is the ultimate diversity of facts that can be regarded as belonging to it. To take an extreme example, Suetonius' famous *Lives of the Caesars* may become a book of no less importance for the history of contemporary art than, say, the texts of Pliny the Elder for the study of ancient art. In fact, the stories of Nero, Commodus and Heliogabalus often strike with their similarity to the practices of contemporary artists. Moreover, the very notions of “installation”, “performance”, “happening”, “environment”, “interactive project”, etc. refer to something ultimately remote from the traditional art historical notions of “painting”, “sculpture”, “graphics” and “architecture”. It turns out that the history of contemporary art would have to embrace the infinite number of perspectives since every artist refers to a different historical perspective. For instance, John Cage — due to his interest to Zen — would make a contemporary art historian consider the practice of the Ch'an monks whereas Josef Beuys' works would necessarily refer to the practice of Siberian Shamanism. The Moscow actionists, namely the famous Mavramaty who has recently crucified himself and the no less famous Emperor Vava who used to sew up his mouth during his actions (in its collaborative actions this couple pierced their tongues), clearly refer to the practices described by Marquise de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Most of us admire van Gogh and his painting. At the same time, most of us are aware of the fact that van Gogh is not primarily a painter from the point of view of contemporary art. What is most important in van Gogh for contemporary art is the fact that he cut his ear, put it into the envelope and sent it to his girlfriend. It is this gesture that makes van Gogh close to contemporary art in general and to the practice of Orlan, Hermann Nitch and Damien Hirst in particular. What's the pitch? Why is it so that contemporary art critics are not interested in van Gogh's colorism, his composition, his inventions in plastics, his deliberations on the sun of Arles, etc? Why are they emphasizing, instead, his insanity, the fact that he could eat up the paints from his palette and the fact that he could suddenly kick a hospital attendant in the head? This shows that contemporary art is focused on the historical perspective totally different from the history of fine arts. As a phenomenon, contemporary art has other origins. Its history includes, for example, a famous Renaissance object *Chess Player* that is often mentioned by historians as the first robot – a huge hollow dummy of a chess player with a person inside it to make the moves. Although it implied a deceit, this object was the first attempt at creating a robot with artificial intellect. From the point

of view of contemporary art, this interactive installation was ahead of its time and anticipated contemporary practices. Similarly, van Gogh may be considered not only as a figure significant for the development of fine arts but also as an important forerunner of contemporary art.

It is important to always realize that despite the proliferation of contemporary art, traditional fine arts do also exist. In fact, there are a huge number of painters and sculptors all over the world who keep up the traditions of fine arts. Unfortunately, due to the historical turn of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, art historians – while starting their accounts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's developments with the traditional fine art – finish them with the analysis of the so called contemporary art. The problem is that contemporary art, which is not related historically to fine arts, appears to be in focus whereas traditional art of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century remains untouched. For instance, *Trilistnik* Publishing House in Moscow has recently released its three volume edition of the history of Russian art. The first volume is devoted to the ancient Russian art, the second one analyzes Russian art of 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the third one, written by Ekaterina Degot', is focused on the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Russian art. Interestingly enough, Degot' considers fine arts from the point of view of contemporary art and it turns out that the further a work stays from traditional art, the more she likes it. According to her reconstruction, Russian art that had started with the works of Dionisy, Rublyov and Theophanes the Greek ends up finally with the heroic deeds of Avdey Ter-Oganyan, Vladik Mamyshev-Monroe, and Oleg Kulik. You know that Kulik is famous for his imitations of a dog and particularly for his bites; Vladik Mamyshev-Monroe is renowned for his shifts of clothes (he can dress as Marilyn Monroe and Adolf Hitler); finally, Avdey Ter-Oganyan is distinguished by his conceptual activity of hacking the icons to pieces. Thus, Degot's new history of Russian art that traces it from the hacking of icons back to the painting of icons appears to be a perfect illustration of the epistemological errancy I have already mentioned. This errancy changes the true tasks of art history to such an extent that further historical investigations become barely possible and the whole undertaking comes to a dead-lock.

Division between traditional fine arts and contemporary art is necessary not only in the sphere of education. It is also indispensable in the practice of exhibiting. Why do art critics are so keen on looking for a conception at fine arts exhibitions? The answer is simple: they mix over the venues. What they wish to attend is contemporary art exhibitions and when they come to the shows of painting and sculpture they have difficulties with understanding. At the same time, one and the same exhibition often demonstrates the works of both traditional and contemporary artists. In this case, it is visitors and artists who get perplexed. They find themselves in the situation of the Jaloilddin Rumi's<sup>1</sup> bird that had left its nest in search of food and after having failed to find it has turned back and failed to find the nest. In other words, some artists have abandoned the canons of traditional fine arts but cannot enter the realm of contemporary art because it requires a totally different attitude instead of the mere modernization of painting and sculpture.

I could have multiplied my examples of contemporary artists, curators and art critics who would perorate for hours about contemporary art referring to a number of psychologists, ethnologists, historians of various cults, etc. but failing to ever mention a single investigation of traditional art with regard to their topic. To dissociate myself from them, I'd better finish. I appeal to you to realize the difference between traditional art and contemporary art and to create a demarcation line between these belligerents. This line should be drawn in the consciousness of art historians who must admit that a person whose art consists in imitating a dog does not continue the traditions of fine arts, however persuasively this might be demonstrated by such authors as

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<sup>1</sup> Jaloilddin Rumi (1207-1263) Persian poet and mystic

Ekaterina Degot' and Ivan Chechot. I also appeal to you to realize that it is art historians who are responsible for the preservation of both art history and art itself. Thank you for your attention.

Timur Novikov, 2000