

## Rejection of Museums! Contemporary Art Here and Now

Anatoly Osmolovsky

*In 1995, Russian artist and theoretician Anatoly Osmolovsky founded the magazine Radek, to draw attention to developments in radical art that were suppressed by official politics in Moscow. The initial letter-format and eventual online magazine sought to interpret the activities and motivations of radical artists and artists' groups in order to engender an atmosphere of artistic and intellectual dissidence within the greater Moscow art community. Between 1995 and 1999, when art critic Oleg Kireev assumed editorship of Radek, Osmolovsky published dozens of 'epistles' of which the following is an example; it was originally self-published by the author and Chudozestvennyj Zhurnal, no 16, 1995.*

Artists, gallery owners, critics, and the public throng to wherever 'something is happening'. But the reality of this 'something happening' is the reality of money. In the absence of aesthetic criteria, it is possible and useful to determine the value of works of art on the basis of their profitability. This reality reconciles everything, even the most contradictory tendencies in art, provided that these tendencies have purchasing power.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally recognised that contemporary art is in a state of crisis, and that it is becoming more profound every year. The infrastructure created in the 1980s is being destroyed, and there is a dearth of new ideas in the artistic community. It appears that the visual arts that used to be the standard by which experimentation and innovation were measured in the past are yielding to other forms of expression. In reality the general cultural setting has changed so radically that the basic functions of contemporary art are no longer relevant. At the same time it must be recognised that the contemporary visual arts in many years of development have garnered considerable strategic experience in interacting with society. No other type of human activity can make this claim. The contemporary artist is acutely aware of the function and structure of contemporary society and is an expert in communication. With very limited means he is able to maximise the dissemination of information.

1. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Reply to the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in *Ad Marginem*, Moscow, 1994, p 323.

Art today has become a platform for developing the most shocking, the most paradoxical, and the most fantastic forms of representation. Representation itself is never neutral and carries within itself a certain way of perceiving reality, which has continued without interruption throughout the twentieth century; and there is no indication that any other area of the humanities has taken this function upon itself. In actual fact it is not modern art that is in a state of crisis, but the outdated model of art revived in the 1980s. This model contains at least three stereotypes: (1) a claim to innovation which created commodified art in the art market; (2) reliance on the market system of production and redistribution of art as the main determinant of its reliability and universality and, as a consequence, the tendency towards the creation of high-quality 'art products'; and (3) obligatory achievement of museum status as a guarantee of historical worth.

What all of these points have in common is the conviction that art has an intrinsic value outside of the communicative event. Whereas the post-modernists accused classical modernism of being excessively ambitious without any basis in reality, and criticised the position of the 'genius' who made the works appear out of nothing, as well as classical modernism's claims to independence, the new art can also criticise the postmodern culture of contemporary art as being concerned with its preservation and monetary worth. In reality, the only value that art possesses is within the confines of the process of its creation. Outside of this event any artefact (work of art) must be seen only as the documentation of this event, outside of any relationship with a preceding artefact and works of art. Art that is valued in this way is truly 'contemporary', as its main goal is to provide for maximum communication.

This contemporary art is not a commodity, nor is it an innovation or a universal value that deserves to be conserved. How can it be defined?

In order to be contemporary, art must be specific to the utmost and functional, ie, it must relate to the real world – politics, show business, music, analytical practice, medicine, etc. I do not mean that art should be subservient to the above-mentioned activities; what I am referring to is their mutual transgression. When art encroaches on politics, we save art from art and politics from politics. When art diffuses itself with some sort of analytical practice, a new type of activity is the result.

Among the many genres of contemporary art, the most current are those that are the most functional and communicable. The following is a list of the more important ones: performance, posters, strategic planning of representational activity, different types of design, club, and institutional activity. The main task here is to synthesise the different artistic genres into a unified system and to introduce this entity into another sphere of human activity. By functionality I do not necessarily have in mind the positive 'utility' of art as it was understood by the Russian Constructivists, but finding another mode for its existence. The introduction of art into real life could also be destructive, malignant, chaotic, and confusing. The Italian artist Oliviero Toscani provides one of the best examples of this approach. His ads for United Colours of Benetton are a synthesis of art and advertisement intended for a mass public. Toscani is not dependent on museums, galleries, or curators, nor does he define himself through the existing system of modern art but demonstrates a specific approach to the functioning of

art. His images are ubiquitous in all the Benetton stores and on Benetton products where they fulfil a certain function (advertising, in this case), but bear a direct relation to art. Seen from a broader perspective, Benetton itself has become Toscani's artistic project. The most important aspects of this approach are the interaction of art with other types of activity and an attempt to build non-traditional relationships with society.

In this respect Jeff Koons is the culmination of one of the most important stages of modern art. He made use of the aesthetic of kitsch and camp, and brought to a dazzling conclusion the orientation toward the creation of high-quality long-lasting artefacts. Another key figure of the 1980s, in my view, was Cindy Sherman, who used photography to create classical paintings for museums. The ideology of the Museum was implicit in the works of these artists. The 'current' Russian artists depart from this implication, because the success of their work is tested by their inclusion in social processes and their ability to synthesise the creative milieu.

If we were to attempt to formulate the activity of the current artist by assigning it to a certain 'genre', the most elementary form of this activity could be characterised as a Situation. This term, as used by the Situationist International, refers to the construction of some sort of social event. Situation is not a performance or a happening; it is rather a hooligan prank, a provocation touching not so much on the aesthetic sphere of functioning within the system of art as on the sphere of political (in the broad sense) legitimacy. In the Moscow art community, the ETI movement (Expropriation of the Territory of Art, founded by Osmolovsky in 1989) and Alexander Brener worked in this genre. One of the situations created by Brener, which received some notoriety, was performed at the European biennale, *Manifesta*, in Rotterdam in 1996. During a speech by the main sponsor of this event, Brener came up to the microphone and began commenting on the speech by using such words as 'this is a lie, this is true', demonstrating on one hand the absurdity of such 'accusations', and on the other their appropriateness precisely because of their absurdity. I believe that one of the most important elements of this gesture was its suddenness and spontaneity. Precisely this factor makes it possible to categorise this gesture as a situation rather than a performance. The gallery manager Marat Gelman works in a more complex and approximate version of this 'genre'. His project involving new Russian money was actually a situation rather than just an ordinary exhibition.

Another distinguishing characteristic of this situation is that it is located within the framework of larger projects. It is not a succession of unrelated works but an extended project, within the scope of which different works by many other artists and documentation may be incorporated. Leading examples of this approach are Oleg Kulik's *Consignment of Animals* and Dimitri Gutov's *Lifshitz's Institute*.

Finally, the most complex 'genre' in current art is one in which a 'milieu' is created, which encompasses the activities of several people united in a 'disjunctive synthesis'. The best-known current artist of this type is, of course, Quentin Tarantino. His main task is to create a milieu where it does not matter to the participants of the process what forms their flows of desire and creativity are channelled through, whether

literature, performance, objects, posters, exhibitions, film, theoretical articles, reviews, etc.

The task of this type of current art practice is initiating processes of positive disjunctive synthesis, intertwining different forms of activity, and taking part in events that completely differ in essence from each other: musical, political, theatrical, analytical, editorial, curatorial, etc. The topos of the current practice is to encompass practically all areas of the humanities. This type of work has turned from a creator of visual images into a creator of milieux and situations. This type of activity was well known in the past; one need only recall the activity of André Breton and David Burliuk, among others, but it was never considered as 'creative'. On the other hand, the process of creating situations and creative milieux is linked to political activity as it concerns the economic and political basis of society and the state. This process cannot help but enter into conflict with the laws and rules of late capitalist society, which essentially have not changed since the time of Marx's *Das Kapital*.

We may add the following points in addition to the above-mentioned ones relating to the 1980s: (1) communication instead of innovation; (2) synthesis of social processes, milieux, and situations instead of creating products for the market; and (3) a maximum of social functionality as a guarantee of historical and social viability. In rejecting the museum, current art stakes out a claim in favour of situation and communication in the present, and thus aspires to become a permanent event in art rather than a recollection of an event stored in a museum.

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