

nina getashvili

## the power of a curator, or the discreet charm of a murderer

● *What is good for a certain person, is evil for another one. To prefer a thing is - in a sense - to destroy an another one. Hence, you must have the courage of surgeon - or, if you wish, of murderer - to take upon you your part of guilt and then to carry it decently. (Pablo Picasso)*

A short foreword: though the cultural processes are for the most part of international importance, my paper concerns only the specifically Russian phenomenon.

During the last decade, the idea of the 'death of art' has been uttered in Russia especially frequently and loudly. The idea itself is not a fresh one. Yet, if in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the 'death of art' was discussed mainly by artists, now art is declared 'dead' by its curators. This is a radically new viewpoint, revealing some new and important problems.

Curator in Russia is not an incomer; the personage in question is of native and, above all, of recent origin. His ways of arriving at the 'curatorship' are different. I'm not especially interested in those who, combining the functions of art dealer, art critic, and art manager, have labeled themselves curators and have tried, more or less honestly and successfully, to render their services to the demonstrational field of art on a large scale. I'm not interested in art merchants, either. My attention is concentrated mainly upon those heroic intellectuals, who from the very outset were fully aware of what they were doing (their activity was fed by their creative claims as visionaries and controllers, rather than by any organizational energy) and, hence, were realizing their mission with full competence.

Their advent took place against the background of a certain confusion in the field of fine art studies in Russia. 'Today, our art studies are in a difficult situation. We, the specialists, feel embarrassed in the face of the contemporary art, of the achievements of other humanities and Western fine art researchers'. These words by our leading scientist, academician Dmitry Sarabianov, have opened the discussion on 'some methodological questions of art studies in the situation of historical boundary'. Almost 30 years ago the same highly respected scientist did express the same healthy jealousy in the face of the achievements of literary criticism, philosophy, etc. It seems that such a prolonged 'embarrassment', such a lingering 'crisis of

genre' (curiously, it has encompassed both the 'prosperous' Soviet period and the present 'transitional' one) testifies rather the stability of the situation and, hence, allows to suppose that art studies in Russia are inherently prone to 'crisis'. As regards the absence of comprehensive methodology, it seems to be a harmless phenomenon, since just the permanency of changes provides a place for uncertainty about the last truth and about the competence of those who claim to own it.

Thus, irrespective of the real state of affairs, there is the problem of looking for an adequate scientific apparatus. Therefore, without referring to theoretical and methodological problems, let us make now some observations of 'ontological' nature.

Indeed, the realities of Russian life have changed. The 'change of decor' didn't take place in the framework of a lengthy performance consisting of several acts. On the scene, there is a quite different performance, and the radical change of context compels us to draw a special attention to the position of art researcher and art critic in the contemporary society.

According to another specialist in fine art research, Nikita Goleyzovsky, 'the last decade, full of long-awaited changes and unexpected disappointments, turned out unfavourable for scientific research... When the ground slips away from under your feet, when habitual reference points disappear one by one, the instinct of self-preservation impede people to concentrate upon abstract matters. Earthquake doesn't dispose to contemplation. In such times, it is hard to write and it is still harder to bring out what you have written'.

To an extent, such sad remarks are not unfair; and yet, it cannot be said that the fate of native art studies in 'the last decade' was unambiguously tragic. Now, the specialists face an unprecedentedly large field for application of their forces. Serious scientific conferences are convoked around the most diverse topics.

It is not easy to determine one's position with respect to the process of 'multiplication' of the so-called creative unions, including the Unions of Artists. Taking into consideration the 'white-hot' character of relations between those who are dividing the unions' property, it is rather impossible to appreciate this phenomenon in unambiguously positive terms; on the other hand, the former 'solidarity of ranks' would seem

now a sheer anachronism. The increase in number of creative unions manifestly leads to an increase in vacancies for art critics and researchers.

The rise and flourishing of art galleries of every sort and kind also provide art critics with further possibilities to apply their professional capacities.

In terms of real opportunities, any comparison of 'yesterday' and 'today' seems utterly inappropriate. Ten years ago it was almost impossible to imagine such a broad field of literary activities available to any art critic or researcher. The diversity of periodical press in contemporary Russia results in the growth of chances for anyone who wants to publish his or her writings (it seems irrelevant now to complain about the deplorable level of a good deal of such writings).

Such an immense expansion of limits reveals a fundamentally new circumstance, whose consequences are not easy to forecast. The question is of the loss of a common information field. Before the Perestrojka, the situation was more clear: the bulk of artistic intelligentsia was united around some not numerous journals and newspapers, and any more or less remarkable publication would immediately become familiar to many people. Now, it is rather impossible to keep an eye on the torrent of printed output. The communications within the guild have broken. And in our field, there is no *Reader's Digest*. In such a context, curious things happen, returning us back to the primordial mysteries of human soul. For instance, in former times it was hardly possible to imagine that a text, characterizing the creative work of a painter and published in a respectable album, might be rewritten and re-published - without reference to the source - in a magazine, only the name of the 'characterized' painter being changed.

Needless to say, now, in the conditions of the art market 'boom', the expert in arts is especially in demand. Yet, even the experts working on behalf of such respectable State organization as the Tretyakov Gallery, may set diametrically opposite 'diagnoses' to the same work.

All such particular cases return us to the forgotten world of real ethical values.

Now, let us examine one more new aspect of the activities of art critic and art researcher in Russia, namely his or her role in the articulation of the problems of the so-called actual art. Moreover, I suppose that

the very forms of the latter are conditioned just by this kind of activity.

Some contemporary writers reproach Russian art critics and researchers with being somewhat old-fashioned. According to Aleksandr Yakimovich, the principal 'mischief' consists in the fact that the 'Russian art studies still follow the old German line represented especially by Heinrich Wölfflin. In other words, the style - either of painting or of writing - constitutes the very essence of what a painter or a writer is doing. It seems rather strange and paradoxical that the *idée fixe* of one of the forefathers of modern art science has so firmly established itself in the consciousness of Russian university professors who, after all, are well informed about the methods and views of all the other forefathers and fathers of the contemporary art science'. Yet, we are examining the processes taking place in the life of those who have escaped the 'tragicomic rupture between the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose development was modelled on Nietzsche, Picasso, and Duchamp, and the art science remaining on the righteous and rationalistic positions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (A. Yakimovich, *The Magical Universe*, Moscow, Galart, 1996, pp. 28, 47).

In the late '80s and, especially, in the first half of '90s all those who did not specialize in the so-called actual art<sup>1</sup> felt outmoded, if not archaic. Both the private grantors and the Ministry of Culture supported just the actual art. The distinction between the 'old' and the 'new' seemed especially sharp. Naturally, the 'new' culture regarded the 'old' one not without a certain contempt. It is worth mentioning that while being discussed with journalists, sponsors, grantors, the actual art - following the Western usage - is usually characterized as 'non-commercial'. The these about the 'death of art' is being uttered by various artists and theorists, in various contexts, and with an enviable persistence. And yet, if one has enough strength for discussing such matters, one is a living being. The very 'biological' process of life needs a financial support. To maintain several contemporary art centres, to organize exhibitions and artistic actions at home and abroad, to prepare and publish texts concerned with these exhibitions and actions - such undertakings are very often as expensive as any commercial project. The control over the 'non-commercial' flows of money is exercised just by curators. And this is quite

<sup>1</sup> The word combination 'so-called actual art' has nothing in common with a wish for mocking. Rather, it has its origin in the absence of clear definitions. Here are some statements: 'The criteria of actuality are set up by collective will, although in a rather subjective manner... More often, the term 'actuality' acts as an offensive weapon, guarding the zone against foreigners and inspiring fear to allies' (G. El'shevskaya, magazine *Iskusstvo*, 1996/97, p. 66); 'Obviously, we are approaching to a new wave of polemics about what in this art is the most important and what is but fashionable - and about whether the fashionable (i. e. the actual) is, indeed, more important than everything else' (E. Degot', magazine *Itogi*, No. 24 (54), September 30, 1997).

normal - though only as far as such a control doesn't assume a total character.

Everybody knows the role of Stasov in advocating the Russian *Peredvizhnik* school, the role of Benois in establishing the *Mir Iskusstva* circle, the role of Apollinaire in propagandizing cubism and surrealism. Among the most recent instances one could mention the role of 'new philosophers' in defining the sense of contemporary tendencies in art. And yet, nobody of them could be compared with the today's (maybe, already yesterday's?) 'actual' intellectual critic as regards the degree of influence upon the current processes. An educated art critic, well-oriented in the contemporary art techniques, possessing the skill of playing with scientific concepts and terminology, as well as a flair for organizational activity, has become a central figure of the 'actual art'. Such a critic functions not only as commentator, expounder, polemicist, prophet, but also as a curator, i. e. as a scenario writer, director, and producer at a theatre where artists appear merely as actors.

The system 'curator-artist-society' functions in a rather elementary way. The deeper essence of this cultural phenomenon can be understood in the light of a basic anthropological/psychological model explaining the origin of power: the 'eater-bread-grantor' model (cf. the works by rationalist and analyst Elias Canetti, as well as by visionary and mystic Terence McKenna). Within such a model, artist appears as an 'eater' fully dependent on the curator exercising his or her power, rather than on the notorious and hateful 'society' (either 'bourgeois' or 'communist'). Having voluntarily renounced the right of assessing his own works, being ousted from his or her position of creator, artist becomes similar to a puppet.

Let us inquire into some aspects and mechanisms of the behaviour of the characters in the play. Let us neglect cheap 'skits' and petty provocations. Let us dispense with jealousy: indeed, in our time of 'boundary' (in Karl Jaspers's terms) experiences, it is rather comforting to realize that there still are creators who have no doubts as to the rightfulness of their chosen path. Let children amuse, if only they don't cry. It turns out, however, that the amusement is fraught with tears.

Recently, the State Institute for Art Studies, Moscow, has organized a meeting of the art researchers with the chairman of

a Centre of Contemporary Art - a talented intellectual who, moreover, functions as chief editor of an art magazine. The atmosphere was cordial and amicable. The audience was intently listening to the speaker's report. Those who were familiar with his activity as curator during recent several years, haven't heard anything new, except the final self-evaluation. It is worth mentioning that the majority of his projects haven't been fulfilled. The history of his own failures has inspired the 'director' with edifying conclusions. First, he has decided to give up the role of curator and mediator: in his opinion, such a figure has become obsolete, since art today can at best repeat earlier discoveries without presenting anything new (thus, the 'death of art' is announced once more). Second, he has declared the end of the 'Russian wave' in the West. Characteristically, he has carefully avoided to touch upon the question of his own responsibility in this 'death' of Russian art.

The same way of thinking is shared by other influential 'puppeteers' working in behalf of 'actual art'. At the same time, nobody is seriously preoccupied with advertising the fact that the real creator has been replaced by the peculiar figure of 'actual' critic-curator. Hence, nobody has measured the real degree of creative, intellectual, and personal responsibility of curators in the process of moulding the 'chronicle of the declared death' of Russian art. One may only trust that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ethics will become a priority for every power, including the 'power' upon art. ●

→ Nina Getashvili - is Professor of Art History at the Russian Academy of Painting, and at the Russian Humanitarian State University in Moscow.