Aliaxey Talstou

SELF-CONTROL
Alixey Talstou
Toward the Self-control project

Aleksei Borisionok, Olga Sosnovskaya
The Crushing of Unity: on the Representation of Power in A. Talstou’s Project “Self-Control”

Tatsiana Silantsyeva
Borderline disorder
While Edward Snowden awaited his fate at the Sheremetyevo airport, for a moment it seemed to me more like a well-written screenplay than a real story. How long did he spend there? About two weeks, I guess. A plotline was developing like some sort of mixture of Air Terminal movie and Cold War spy novel. For sure, if you do decide to leak information concerning the use and abuse of total control technologies, you should be well prepared that big brother may dislike such signs of an autonomous self-will. However, why would anyone actually like an attack on his own business? But by leaking information to the press about PRISM and other programs, Snowden at the same time said nothing new, simply confirming what had been suspected for a long time. Do we actually care about this total control? When former NSA official received temporary refuge in Russia - as Moscow singed the documents with great enthusiasm - information noise surrounding the case gradually declined. Some time now after these events, as journalists continue to publish the materials leaked by Snowden, and governments continue to put pressure on them in turn, we are at the same time getting used to the fact that this control does have a place in our lives. It is no longer news, just a part of everyday affairs.

In the Self-control project, I would like to touch on the issue of social self-regulation and try to make sense of it from the viewpoint of the public and the private. These two levels reciprocally determine each other. On the one hand, no one is free from the social, the other – the social is impossible without correlating with the personal. Submission and protest go together and, generally speaking, are just a reaction to certain social situations. Relationships within a community are yet easy to compare with those relationships between larger social formations, nations or cultures. In any case, all these conflicts and agreements can easily affect the life of the subject, especially if they are usually based on the personal level. I would like to make a few notes on this case below. Though messy and not so well related in certain areas, and though I do not think they have a claim to perfection or to play some kind of programmatic role, somehow I do hope that my notes can give some contour and outline to the discourse of the project.

Today, the velocity at which information is spreading not only enables elites to monitor citizens, but also stimulates communication between citizens themselves, enabling them to self-organize for any kind of activity, including social and political ones. When the protesters at Tahrir Square demanded freedom and the resignation of Mubarak at the beginning of 2011, is it possible that many of them could have foreseen the events of last summer, a new wave of massacres in the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and other cities, and the seizure of power by the army? Tired of the dictatorship and that eternal curfew time, it is unlikely that they – the liberals, Islamists and others - took the thought seriously that they would have to stand up for their convictions pretty soon, to either kill each other in the name of Allah or for good old market values. They gained their freedom, but to date they couldn’t come to terms with it, to accomplish it with a compromising agreement to put in place those restrictions, which would enable peace-keeping between ideological opponents.
A conflict of interests within seven billion population is quite predictable and, of course, inevitable. We have to limit ourselves, otherwise the massacre will be an objective standard, the only normal way to resolve disputes. A public self-control is a thin line between egalitarianism and fascism. To imagine balancing on this line is usually to entertain a kind of utopian fantasy.

The second decade began with unrest. Naturally, there are real reasons for all these events that we have seen during the last few years. But sometimes it seems that the world is just on fire, that wars, riots, and other informational causes tearing the planet apart, explode in the Middle East, in Japan or Norway. Disasters, human and natural, break the familiar world, turning it into a battlefield, with crowds of enemies looking to win. Of course, this is not a feature of our time, but rather a normal historical situation. However, some try to compare 2011 with 1968, a very troubled year as well. The reason for this is clearly the poeticization of struggle. Revolutionary romanticism, which, like everything else, had been successfully appropriated by capitalism. It is enough to recall the image of a revolutionary on the cover of Times Magazine. Culture requires cultural heroes, stories and reference points, confrontations, hot speeches and inspirations.

Modern mythology shares a lot of common with the mythology of primitive communities - the rate of plot changes being slightly different. New myths flash before us like tv-show intros and pop-up ads, the degree of adept engagement is about the same. More than a century after the death of the European God (just as belated, and so premature), we still cannot kick the habit of obeying the abstract authority. Regional features are important and cannot exist unambiguously in the perception of the traditionalist values of various cultures. Despite globalization, and the incredible speed of communication, in spite of all our achievements in the social sphere, people still have something that divides them. When girls with facemasks jump on the pulpit showing nothing but their civic position it still incites a fascist reaction in the supporters of easy understandibility and high rationality. Enemies and methods of dealing with them are due to approximately the same mechanisms that regulated tribal relationships thousands of years ago. However, what are those "thousands of years"? Is this really a serious period of time if we can still today observe manifestations of the decay of the primitive community form? It looks as if even now this decay is as gradual and as traumatic as, for example, the Golden Age of monotheistic authority. Is there really such a big difference between animistic cult rituals and the rites of the free market?

Comical confrontation between multiculturalism and traditionalism in Europe, and clearly not only in Europe, can lead to nothing else but the final victory of information technology over reason. Whatever the beliefs happen to be, which lead people to either fight for change or for "ancestral values," their base is an opportunity to separate right from wrong, which will quickly be reduced to a binary code. And it makes no difference whether you announce "Like" for the next radical fundamentalist strapped with TNT or for a highly emancipated preacher of overwhelming transgendered love. To like it is always just a Liking, it is only consent, reaction, and does not involve any reflection. Maybe now is the time to look around and remember this blazing contradictory world, because in comparison with those techniques of other public authorities, informational control really refers to a cyberpunk Matrix by the Wachowski brothers, and promises to be a novelty and a “bestseller”.
There is no principal difference: either we raise the issue of women's rights in Muslim societies, pray for Leitkultur, or call for an end of ethnocide in Tibet - in preference for the restoration of the theistic model of governance - in any case, do not fail to keep in mind that our statements are not only the result of our personal philosophies and beliefs, but also caused by the cultural and social circumstances in which we are engaged. Sometimes excessive confidence in one's own ideals can easily lead to the ethnic cleansing. When the colonists were carrying European values and technologies to the remote "backward" regions, spreading the word of God with love and best intentions, leaving the fires of the Inquisition behind them, and were destroying other cultures, were they sincere, and did they control their actions and aspirations? Naturally, their society required certain standards of behavior, which gave them the values that could not be interpreted in any other way, as the only right ones. Do such well-known historical references share any parallels with today, like exporting liberal democracy and free market values, along with those identical-looking guys from Wall Street sowing it all over the world. Are they controlling themselves when they send mercenaries to defend their national interests in Iraq or Libya? It is unlikely that the citizens they represent, can boast control of them, the control of the elites. The social contract was revised long ago and nobody cares about it.

The issue of public control over authorities seems increasingly like a joke, when the last attempt to hide there, playing the role of a strict but wise father, who at the critical moment, of course, can punish the kid, but while still attempting to keep out of escalations according to the ancient teachings of Lao Tzu. As an anecdote on this subject we can recall the Third World Theory of Muammar Gaddafi, in which he criticizes representative democracy, as divorced from the people, and in fact, very distant from the real interests of the citizens. Indeed, is there any among us who can unreservedly trust politicians and expect them to implement the election program? To some extent, Gaddafi was right, even if he was a kind of dictator. Though his hands were drenched in blood, one must admit that this real hero of modernity, controversial and resolute, did have a style and repeatedly demonstrated to the world his alternative rules for political game. Today, when the Jamahiriya has fallen and no one knows what's going on in Libya, it is interesting to compare the colonel's tent on the White House lawn at the end of 00's and videos of the torture and humiliation of the defeated old man somewhere in the outskirts of Sirte, just a few years later.

It is clear that war, violence, and domination of one over the other is a norm today, which is the one indisputable norm, which many of us refuse to accept. The world is heterogeneous, it is full of different attitudes and opinions. Trade-offs are not always easy. Living within the major social formations, connected with their community through very formal ties is the man doomed to alienation. Embodied in politicians, bureaucrats, and clerks, guarding the society of law and order cannot be interpreted otherwise than something external, other than self, sometimes even hostile, something that one would have to accept. Elites always support such alienation, and in this case the public self-control is largely based on the adoption of the law, but not on challenging it. Practices of submission calling to maintain the order cannot find its reflection at a personal level. A good citizen must first be appeasable. As soon as his or her passive agreement turns to active opposition - at the same time balance is disturbed. Disagreeing, the thirst for change, rebellion - there is always evil. This evil, once enshrined in many mythological systems, is still evil today. The trickster always meets with what he deserves, though his demonization now refers more to the aesthetics of the festival, giving him an appearance of being merely an innocent hero of customs and traditions.
Along with such unserious festivity, our efforts to objectify the Big Other acquire new connotations, primarily due to the growing influence of large transnational corporations, whose management is rarely personalized, and the anonymous nature of the information networks regulators. On the other hand, the involvement of everyone in the global digital field and free access to large amounts of data (so large that the perception of them now depends largely not on external factors, but the possibilities of the human nervous system) leads to the destruction of any authority of knowledge. It is those authorities that on whom all religious systems are based. They can continue to exist only by making sacred certain information and providing access to it for initiated adepts. In the past, the sharing of any information created a society united around its source, personalized or abstract. Now, when there is the Internet, where all are initiated, we have no choice but to observe the fall of the sacred authority, its gradual decomposition, or perhaps the replacing of it by an invisible anonymous authority (that is a separate issue). So, there are no boundaries now, there are no “good” and “bad”, but only “different”.

Despite the current rate of development of social processes, nothing happens, and has never happened in one day. These days, we are still just trying on the freedom that we gained after the "death of God." Depending on various factors, cultural or social, people will be in no hurry to believe that they are capable of contributing to the common cause or to their responsibility for what is happening within their community. Public self-control begins at the personal level, so I think it's important to really feel ones direct connection with it.

In February 2013, Chris Dorner, a former police officer from Los Angeles, decided to play the hero and rise against the system, which had severely offended him, and not only once. He declared war on the LA police department and made a list of forty persons who he was going to kill to stop the practice of abuse of power among the personnel. In his manifesto Dorner illustrates the circumstances that pushed him into the war against police terror, but at the same time he emphasizes his loyalty to the U.S. leaders and their foreign policy. No challenge of higher authority. This is a very interesting point, because he does not make any parallels between the illegal actions of his former colleagues, and that machine of humiliation, submission and violence with those he can easily see symbolized by himself, like an exemplary Marine, a patriot and a veteran of several military campaigns. Such an error it is to be an angel who rebels against the angelic system and turns into a demon. By loosing control of himself Dorner thereby tried to control the system. Less than two weeks later he was tracked down and shot. He almost immediately disappeared from the information field.

One can endlessly give similar examples and discuss the topic of relationships, both between communities and between their individual members. Engaged in the project, reflecting on the self-control and submission practices, I frequently lost my primary line, lost into the mess. However, I am fully convinced that there can be no uniqueness in the estimates of the social processes in which we are involved, there can be nothing clearly true or false. Carriers of ideas and beliefs, as well as carriers of culture can be the only people directly involved in the situation, and only they can make laws and maintain control. Today man is enough experienced in communications to afford himself a knowledge, instead of a blind acceptance and faith in high ideals. This gives us an opportunity to participate in the improvement of social self-control systems, but at the same time calls for division of responsibility. I deliberately raised the issue of information, for there is no need to be an expert to notice the changes that the combination of
human intelligence and digital code brings to our life. We may think that the delegation of managerial functions in the parliamentary form of government is partly a transparent mechanism, but when it comes to the information society and giving the right of direct programming of citizens to elites, we would do well to ask again: who are these elites and who creates their elitism? Today it is important to realize that in addition to being adequately controlled, we should care about how not to lose the opportunity to influence these control mechanisms, as no one has the right to be the master of the other’s life. Neither God nor the king, nor father, nor any anonymous authority.
“Suspicious smile” oil, canvas. 2013
“Business” oil, canvas. 2012
Aleksei Borisionok, Olga Sosnovskaya
The Crushing of Unity: on the Representation of Power in A. Talstou’s Project “Self-Control”

Aliaxey Talstou’s exhibition poses interest to us as it shows the author’s mode of representation of the mechanisms of power operating in Belarus, of the media rhetoric concerning the social state and the production of the One subject by the state, as well as of the calling of left grass-roots democratic politics and the multitude of corresponding subjects. In our opinion another important goal of the exhibition is an attempt to problematize the understanding of “western” and “European” as homogenous and uniform. In this text we will try to define a philosophical perspective of the regimes of the functioning of power and the modes of its representation. By posing mass media in counterpoint to the artistic practice of Talstou we will attempt to understand whether or not the images of riot, protest and disagreement have the capacity to uncover and invent the Other Left in Belarus.

Using the philosophical perspective of Paolo Virno, which develops an opposition between the people and the multitude in his book “A Grammar of the Multitude,” we would like to stress that according to our view, the subject whose denominator appears to be the One is still developing in Belarus. This is easily demonstrated by analyzing the way in which state power (or its personification in the figure of the president) interpellates the subject as “nation, state, unity” and how state policy is trying to make the Other invisible through political repression and legislation of strict migration and visa regime (Belarusian as well as European), and through the seclusion of the cultural sphere (educational, academic), etc. We can also observe a neutralization of the political Other: on the right as well as on the left. If the right Other is rather loosing the struggle for representation, the left Other is pushed aside by the rhetoric of the “social” state and uncured post-soviet trauma.

On The Myth of Classical Power: Control and Self-Control

The “classical” (to use M. Foucault’s vocabulary) conception of power is still relevant in Belarus. In our context, power is usually understood either to be a struggle for state power or a repressive, negative force, which suppresses and destroys. Classical power, according to Foucault, is embodied in a concrete subject (monarch), who demonstrates his might; it is excessive and spectacular. Indeed, the sovereign’s power seems infinite: law seems to be based on his whim, which inevitably penetrates every sphere. At the same time, spectacularity remains one of the brightest characteristics of contemporary Belarusian power. Numerous examples could be found in city spaces: parades, the festive decoration of the city and fireworks; countless ‘sports palaces’ and the general monumentality of contemporary buildings, such as the National Library and new Independence Palace; the capture of urban advertizing surfaces by the ideological order as well as the general specificity of the visual language of state media.

Though the majority opinion in Belarus is still that power is embodied in one subject, such an opinion is also embedded in the logic of modern power, which Foucault calls micro-physics, because the mythology of the
sovereign's unlimited power and of his figure as the basis of the existing system is, to a considerable extent, an instrument and condition of this system's functioning and of the individual's (self)control within it. Institutes and subjects in power represent it, but to some extent it is only a surface, while actual mechanisms of power remain concealed.

Modern (disciplinary) power, according to Foucault, doesn't belong to persons or institutions, it is a complex network of relationships, of anonymous and diffusive techniques; it is carried out not by the ritual, but through the constant mechanisms of surveillance and (self)control. Micro-physics of power are the modern anonymous techniques of power, and they are material insofar as they pierce individual bodies in their everyday activity, and subdue their habits, routines, lifestyles; they rest upon the system of practices and structures, upon the interlacing of prescriptions and models of behavior, models of communication and interaction, that are “embodied in our bodies and objectified in the institutions”. As soon as the individual is socialized and installed in the system – goes to school, to work, marries, interacts normally with others and adopts the notions of a normal way of life – he is included into the network of micro-physics of power. Micro-physics of power imply that “this power exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privelege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions...”.

The field of validity of power that operates through micro-physics “is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces”. Such power not only captures those, whom it reigns, but is also transmitted by and through them, expands due to their position. Power runs through the body of the citizen. Adopting normative behavioral models, through self-control, self-censorship and discipline, the subject reproduces the existing power relations.

One is not necessarily under constant surveillance, because today panopticism, as one of the structural parts of the micro-physics of power, is rather a network of dispersed practices, supported by individuals voluntarily, often unintentionally. To some extent, we may even say that it not so much a network, but a field or space, within which there are always gazes and power relations ready to emerge. At the same time, a gaze is somewhat defocused: in theory, almost any internet user can watch other subjects, simultaneously acquiring some occasional and unnecessary knowledge. The positions of the subject and object of the gaze are unstable. Therefore, this constant possibility of being under the gaze becomes casual and feels less disciplinary. Besides, the subject of the gaze can be the subject of power only nominally, depending on how spontaneous (s)he is and whether or not (s)he intends to use his/her knowledge. But power relations can emerge, can be activated, launched.

To reverse the model of the “classical” repressive understanding of power, whose genealogy begins with Hobbes and is also applied in the theories of the Frankfurt School and in Marxist psychoanalysis (W. Reich, E. Fromm), we could use a colloquial expression, that the people deserve its governor. Meaning, that a political composition is constructed

out of both the power of sovereign (state, president, etc.) and the counter-power of all the subjects. Thus, it is important to understand, that power relations no longer come down to a linear scheme of control and subjection, but are a complex and mobile network of practices; it is crucial to problematize the casual transparency and unambiguity of dispositions in the political and social field.

People and Multitude: Paolo Virno’s Theory of Subject

Within such redistributed power relations new political subjects are formed. We see our task as researchers’ and Talstou’s objective as an artist in the attempt to reveal some of these political subjects and the conditions of their production. We would like to show, how a similar operation, but in a much wider political and philosophical context, can be seen in the work of Paolo Virno, who reinvents a new subject, who is relevant to the world political transformations of the last decades.

Paolo Virno works within Italian post-operaism (a current of post-marxism), where he suggests a heterodox renewal of many analytical tools and key terms of Marxist theory. Many authors, who work in this tradition: A. Negri, F. Berardi (Bifo), S. Bologna, have suggested a new view on post-fordist society and on contemporary forms of labor, based on a radical rereading of Aristotle, Spinoza, Marx and other theorists. The other representatives of this tradition also consider the notion of multitude: for instance, in the well-known book “Empire” by A. Negri and M. Hardt.

We are not going to describe Virno’s theoretical composition in detail, for Alexei Penzin already performed such a topography of concepts in his text “New Social Subjects: version of Paolo Virno”⁵. But we will try to restore a certain political horizon in relation to which Belarus wouldn’t be seen as external to the global political situation.

Virno indicates several principle aspects linked to the transformation of subjectivity. He claims, that already in the political theory of the Early modern period of the 17th century two antagonistic concepts already coexisted: the people and the multitude. So, the concept of a “people” with its “putative father” Hobbes defeated the concept of “multitude” with its “putative father” Spinoza⁶. The very Subjectness of the «people» is characterized by a monopoly over the political decision, which is captured by the One or the state (nation-state). Multitude (or “mass”, as this term is often mistakenly translated) always appeared as something frightening and destabilizing for the stable position of the sovereign. Virno radicalizes the notion of multitude, on one hand, to describe the contemporary conditions of late capitalism (which he labels as post-fordism), on the other hand, he uses it to denote a potential left democratic subjectivity. The reactualization of the notion of multitude itself in the contemporary political horizon has been linked

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by many authors\textsuperscript{7} to the alter-globalist protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999 and to the protests against the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. This topic has also caught Talstou’s attention: the murder of the activist Carlo Giuliani, which provoked a new wave of protests.

However, Virno also states: “the multitude does not calsh with the one; rather, it redefines it”\textsuperscript{8}, a communal language and intellect come to replace the unity as the State. Virno rereads and refreshes the Marxist tradition and Marxist terminology. The post-operaist tradition uses Marx’s term «General intellect» understood as a whole totality of “formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical propensities, mindsets, and ‘linguistic games.’”\textsuperscript{9} Thus, post-fordism unlike fordism or industrial capitalism includes intellect itself and “more general and abstract linguistic structures” in its mode of production.

Post-fordism is characterized by mobility, the absence of the feeling of home, anxiety, unstable employment and wage: so-called precarity. It means that the extraction of surplus value from the products of immaterial labour becomes a very important issue again. Virno talks about the erasure of the usual division between labour (poesis), action (praxis) and intellect in European culture, described by Aristotle and afterwards by Hanna Arendt.

In Belarus these processes, probably seem invisible, but they already take place. For example, there is an increase in the share of immaterial labour. A good example of hidden post-fordisation could be seen in the work of IT and design: as conveyer-belt workers from Asia produce goods for the First World, Belarusian programmers or designers produce intellectual products for European, American or Russian corporations, while earning indeed not very much money in comparison with these markets. At the same time, in post-fordism work time and leisure time is blurred. While industrial capitalism was only concerned with the working day of a proletarian, contemporary capitalism extends working time over the whole day (one can’t turn off a mobile phone even during holidays or weekends, one is compelled to use his free time and creative skills, etc.). While in discussions about higher education we can see the unwillingness of most Belarusians to accept these new relations of flexibility and instability, there is still a solid belief that (successful, normal) young people should get higher education immediately after school and work according to the acquired profession afterwards. Whereas actually neither diploma, nor even current employment can guarantee a stable future. Resistance to the new unstable relations could also be found in the necessity to somehow confirm one’s status as an artist through the bureaucratic apparatus, i.e. being a contest laureate or a Union member.

To sum up, we would like to highlight once again, that multitude is a “form of existence”\textsuperscript{10} and it is ambivalent. It means, that multitude becomes a dominant type of subjectivation while transitioning into post-fordism, but it can both maintain and modernize capitalist relations, as well as overcome them.


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, p. 21.
Displacement of the Left Other from the Political Map

THE OTHER

Another important area of problematization, which we find in the works of Talstou, involves the position of the Other. A dominant vision of Belarus held by its population, which is also supported by the authorities, is its isolation and hermiticity, an illusion that the world cataclysms and crises don’t reach us, and “we” and “the western world” are distant and alien to each other. Talstou’s works, as a dense field of styled media images of events taking place in different space and time, remind us that we are actually included in these processes. It is both inappropriate to claim the detachment of Belarus from “western” reality and a possibility of individual escape from it, as a traditional opposition and separation of the public and private spheres today is overturned, which Virno also mentioned: “That which was rigidly subdivided now blends together and is superimposed upon itself. It is difficult to say where collective experience ends and the individual experience begins. It is difficult to separate public experience from so-called private experience”11. Thus, the works of Talstou represent the entry of the Other into our everyday life, which shakes it. Even visual stylistics, his use of blots, conveys instability and mobility. A range of paintings also conceptually or narratively problematize the intrusion of the Other: Tibetan monks burning themselves as a sign of protest against Chinese ethnocide, Muslim women emigrants presented within the context of western\capitalist normative gender models, western culture interweaving into the mythology of pacific societies through cargo cults. West is the Other for Belarus, homogenous, schematic, unambiguous. Authorities and official media insist on the negative image of “Europe” as of a zone of conflicts, vice and instability. Neoliberal opposition is charmed by the idea of welfare and democracy, which the European Union seems to embody. But both positions create a somewhat mythical “Europe”, while this notion itself is a highly problematic construct, as there isn't any one homogenous space, especially in the context of the economical crises of the recent years.

The radical Other is represented as the Satan lighting up a Molotov cocktail as a symbol of resistance to the One. But Talstou doesn’t demonize the Satan, which would bring us back to one of the fundamental oppositions of the Christian religion: the power of God (One) and counter-power of a fallen angel, Satan.

LEFT

Talstou works with an image of Europe through the representational matrix of Belarusian media. So there is no principle distinction between the usages of the theme of protest by the media and in the art practice of Talstou. Some paintings work with the issues of left grass-roots activism and terrorism. They are painted in the media-aesthetics of comics, but with oil and some of them refer directly to the classical medium of painting, for example, the ceremonial portrait (Gaddafi) or biblical tropes.

But if the visual flow of media tries to overlap one image and another to manipulate the spectator’s attention and memory, the medium of painting presupposes the preservation of some composition for a long-lasting scrutinizing and investigating.

Talstou works with such a representational composition of the One, as well as with the inclusion (absorption, neutralisation) of the Other into it. Here we mean (self-)representation of Belarus as a stable social state. On one hand, in the content of images Talstou reproduces critiques of eurocentrism and of the neoliberal politics of Western countries, similar to the new left critique which was activated again in the 1990-s in the context of economic globalization. Generally it also raises the value of the exhibition’s message in the European-oriented gallery. On the other hand he moves further, trying to overturn this representational matrix of Belarus, pointing out the appropriation of left discourse and rhetorics by the state and the marginalization and smearing the key meanings. Appropriation of the rhetorics conceals the work of empty ideology, which supports the clannish-bureaucratic regime. A good example of the work of such an empty ideology and of using “critical” rhetorics in the exhibition mode could be seen in an exhibition in one of the biggest shopping malls in Minsk: “Neoliberals Against Humanity” 12, which tries to co-opt left rhetoric and make it convenient for an existing order.

So on formal level in Belarus there is certainly less corporate property and more “common”, but access to these resources, management and administration is extremely limited, while private capital often melds with a state one. Yet such a cooptation, as well as a non-reflexive, unexamined attitude towards the Soviet past is highly repressive in relation to the grass-roots left forces, whom we understand not as parties and trade unions, but as various radical activist communities, who are trying to attack both the authoritarian regime and the possible neoliberalisation of the political sphere and the economy. In this framework the forming of left subjectivity seems to be highly problematic. One can also recall artistic practice of Marina Naprushkina, who consistently, in cooperation with human rights organizations works on similar issues: (self)representation of power (also appropriating and overturning the language of state ideology), activist communities and institutional critique; what can be called an exception for the Belarusian art scene.

THE LEFT OTHER

The main question, which we pose to the author is: if the content of the paintings is similar to that of official media, then is there that point of convergence in Talstou’s project in the representation of the other capable of shaking up and overturning this dominant scheme of concepts of Europe and of a left subject? In this sense for us it is unclear, why the author avoids discussions relating to the Belarusian context, as even a single image of this kind could become a key for the whole exhibition.

12 See for example http://eot.by/neoliberaly-protiv-chelovechestva-otchyon-ob-uchastii-aktivistov-dvizheniya-sut-vremeni/
Here, we mean the hailing of a new revolutionary subject of history and of an invention and renewal of a revolutionary subjectivity. According to Virno “[the multitude throws] the theory of proletarianization out of the mix” ¹³, so we offered the perspective of the transition to the post-fordist society to describe the conditions of the appearance or invention of a new subjectivity (Marx also in a way invents the proletariat). The banalisation of post-operaist theory can give a ready answer: such a type of revolutionary subjectivity can become precariat – a particular subjectness and disposition of labor relations, which unites the workers of immaterial labor. However Belarus in this sense is an interesting space, which enters the general course of neoliberal politics (though subterranean and hidden, but soon, undoubtedly, undisguised in the fall of the regime), nevertheless it has its strange forms of a social state, which should be taken up not by private capital, but by left activists, cultural workers, urban communities and new forms of political and social organization.

Talstou with his paintings tries to splinter the subject of Unity into the multitudes of subjectivities. He hails the left subject, whose presence on the Belarusian political map is very unstable, to carve it from the flint of a One subject and to ignite the fire of a left grass-roots democratic policy.

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"Offer"

oil, canvas. 2013
In our obsession with the eternal fires and memorable dates of dubious and unhappy events, the historical lesson of Belarus has been turned inside out. And this reverse side, which we have been proudly wearing as the mask of a local cultural movement, is fairly unflattering. We are unworthy of what happened to us, unworthy of our own wounds and have never learned either how to accept or to express them. The only truth of historical lessons is simple: an immediate and straightforward affirmation of everything that is. In the perpetual return of Belarusian art to its historical traumas, there are obvious symptoms of ill will. We accept and affirm the pervasive social complexes (which could be generally diagnosed as the inferiority complex of a marginal in relation to an abstract center), but then fall back into neurotically scratching them again. We suffer from hypochondria. Just as the hypochondriac stalks others with his fictional diseases, Belarusian art exposes its marginality and incompetence, as though they were incurable disabilities inherited from history. These complexes, together with the traumas that caused them, have long ago secured their place in our Marxist textbooks. Why wouldn’t one already hope for a speedy recovery, ready to air out the room after so many harsh years of struggling with this illness? A cultural marginal, however, cannot stop torturing himself and his own doctors in the search for historical excuses to warrant his confinement to bed. In this cultural paralysis, it is hard not to notice an ill-disguised pleasure and sham tragedy. The Good and Interesting Life is unreachably hovering on the horizon, while the intelligentsia mourns over its own immobility. All cozy with flies buzzing around, we mindlessly stomp all over elementary rules of mental hygiene. The one who is happy is the happy one, and the one who desires is the desirer. When we explain our lack of happiness, of desire or of interest through their lack, we in fact scan our subconscious and consciousness for their presence to dispose of them, like a provincial policeman chasing out lovebirds necking in a park. Who else knows better than us – those who love to doll up for Independence Day, for City Day, for Victory Day – that desire is inseparable from a concrete aggregate of people, objects and events, from a landscape, which desire itself desires. We always desire within something, but this something cannot desire for us.

If one is willing to engage in justifications of the marginality of Belarusian art then he is welcome to jump into a fight with a policeman who will explain readily and in practical terms why we are banned from the park: at some point, some historical amputation of something cultural had to have occurred to a cultured nation, which has led to our expulsion from a cultivated landscape. The paradox of illnesses and injuries, which so easily became a weapon in the hands of our own masters of arts, consists in rendering an illness or an injury into a medium through which and by which what was previously unthinkable, unacceptable and inexpressible can acquire its own form of thought, its affirmation and expression; for, it remains true that it is “better death than the health which we were given”. Paradoxes have their own voice. It is indeed a very strange voice – the voice of everything unshaped and vibrating, overflowing the habitual categories of consciousness. Frightening characters, forms and sounds, the absurdity and at the same time honesty of grotesque images – this is where that thin surface lies, which distinguishes language and art at the margins of being, at the margins of humanity and culture, from language and art as the jugglers of the
predictable. To constantly remain on the periphery, at a distance that carries the danger of disappearing from the field of perception entirely is to explore that very field of cultural opportunities, which cannot be observed from the smoking room of the Union of Writers. To exist (or, more precisely, to glide) on the film between cultured and uncultured does not mean: to be excluded.

Belarusians like to push these questions to their dialectical edge: is there or is there not? If there is or if there is not, then what would it be? This cultural swing of presence and absence throws the local art from a bureaucratic and vulgar obsession for all that is homemade and native to a total rejection of both. Inclusion and exclusion – our domestically produced historico-cultural switch – continues its uninterrupted operation. And, hiding behind this flickering between clarity and obscurity, the Belarusian will diligently continue slinking away from his or her own uniqueness, marginality, and formlessness, while restlessly trying on evolutionary stereotypes and resenting that his size has been phased out of production due to a fundamental lack of demand.

Overcoming the complex of marginality begins with the affirmation of marginality as a field of opportunities. According to the Belarusian Myth #1, expressed, as it often happens here, in the form of, perhaps, the almost exclusively female genre – lamentation – the local people are cultureless and tongueless. Lamentations, which became the norm of Belarusian expressivity, merged into our artistic and political discourse, and indeed, merged so tightly that the disease, over which the lamentations originally began, eventually grew into our consciousness like an implant. In fact, “cultureless” and “tongueless” can only have negative meaning within an existing cultural form, and precisely for this reason cannot be excluded from the matrix of intelligibility and recognition within the same cultural form. Marginality is that field of experimentation, which should frighten and disturb – due to the inapplicability of the dominant norms and sanctions. Or, following Judith Butler, we should admit that it is no longer possible to isolate the repressive from the productive function. If the object of a supposed cultural repression were a peasant wife lamenting the death of her husband, and the subject exercising that repression were an imperial inspector (dandyish nobleman, soviet worker), then it would be this woman, who in her “tonguelessness”, in her indifferent wholeness, in her terrifying howling becomes that moment of sub-sense which waves a telling fig sign at the rigidity of a given historical configuration. This fig is always waving at the groomed face of the center, the locus of sedimentation and consolidation of the dominant and sanctioned expressivity, civility, inclusiveness. It was precisely in this opposition to the refined culture, which was artificially re-injected into the slow bloodstream of peasant life, where the Belarusian intelligentsia had persistently sought its own formula of difference. Out of lamentation, vulgarity and ponderous poetics, the local cultural landscape had crystallized: landscape as the object of desire.

The petticoat and the marginal had always recognized themselves in one another in contraposition to the masculine identity. Imitation and bohemian promiscuity, affordable but low quality metropolitan culture, was exactly the force, which perpetuated the movement of the flows of matter and products to reach increasingly distant and backward regions. Ironically enough, provincial serf status never stood in the way of progress or cultural identification. From the point of view of creativity, copying, imitating, the desire for metropolitan life – as the landscape of diversity, within which individuality matters – should and is able to stimulate a sense of self-reliance and independence from the center. A serf, however, is always balancing on a dangerous edge: not only at the edge of intelligibility and inclusion,
but, what poses an even bigger risk, also at the edge of falling into an obsessive pursuit of identity. The serf’s manner of constructing identity – not as a multiplicity of singularities, but as indiscernibility and assimilation, grouping, - inevitably gravitates toward the Nietzschean formula, i.e. deducing one’s identity through the juxtaposition of two negations which cancel each other in a false positive statement: I’m not a Pole, I’m not a Russian, therefore I’m someone third. I am Belarusian. These are the conditions of the bigotry, which comes to replace artistic and linguistic multiplicity. It is a false identity, built upon a false truth and a false unity. National identity, as a desire to distinguish oneself, should always be ready for a punch from the Big Neighbor, precisely because a given cultural environment represses not the abstract desire for exclusiveness (on the contrary, the environment serves as a shaping factor for these abstract desires, as a desire for a piece of land, an apartment, foreign perfumes), but the very concrete, active desire – the desire for diversity, difference, destruction, which is able to displace the seeming commonality and necessity of the repressive and dominant forms.

In its oppressed, marginal, illegitimate form, an active desire – a desire whose agent is the one who desires, as opposed to the structures that define it – is able to demolish, as if in a ritual debauch, the centers of consolidation of dull truths and bleak realia. We tend to mobilize, like neighborhood watch-guards, curtains between what is “before” and what is “during” culture, and with the sick pleasure of a blockhead, watch cultural opportunities crumble to lifeless ash. Here lies the difference between a village Fool, who nibbles at sunflower seeds while peeping at his neighbors, and an Idiot, who is enchanted by orgies, where he finally can ask his strange delicate question. What separates these two is a subtle metaphysical surface, which isolates corporeal obscurity from sense. The sense of everything that is, the affirmation of everything that is, even in its impossible forms. And this is not the affirmation of the real as the highest aim and limit of perception. The Fool is a glutton, a cultural tourist. For him the real – is itself affirmation and confirmation of the truthfulness of his experience, he cannot resist the lure to try, to touch (even when he is not allowed), to poke with a stick. He is incapable of perceiving art, of artistic encounters in the form of an impersonal affect, as a vibration of the absurd that seeps down into the very roots of perception. He demands that a frog turns into a princess, ice crystals into diamonds. He cannot survive without a first-aid kit of those habitual tools that habitually relieve the pains of the evacuated subject who is thrown off the boat of history. The Fool is unable to disappear, to dissolve as a viewer into his own affect. He has to look in mirrors and shop windows, search for the queer in his books in order to feed his own weakness or to reassure his trivial reasoning. For him everything represents the real, a sort of experience, some twilight of the soul. The Fool favors domestic and native but will swallow and tap everything offered to him. He will digest and photograph everything and anything, everywhere he will leave his carved signature. He is a slave with an identity, Nietzsche’s ass, the one who has no guts to say “I”, or “Yes”, or “No”. Yet, he will be found amongst the first willing to sign a complaint. He will reject all that is domestic and native in the wink of an eye if it appears in opposition to the center, that abstract signifying machine churning out interpretations. Marginal, his own marginality, exclusion and deprivation seem to him vile and unfair. He interprets them as the consequence of his own inadequacy, but in relation to the adequate, robust, tangible – that which was made properly. The Fool was born and raised by the wrong parents, he was educated by the wrong teachers. Nothing is right in the Fool’s life: he has the wrong closet, the wrong house, the wrong art too. He wants them to be like those of his neighbor’s, but cannot explain to himself why.
We do not like fools and cannot respect ourselves when we act like them. We are very well acquainted with historical idiots. It never comes as a surprise that the Idiot always glides on the edge, on the surface between physical and ideal objectivity. Not only in the sense of the edge between sense and nonsense, normal and abnormal, but also between the human and the animal, where the obscure murmur of bodies acquires its strange language. The Idiot will not wait until the marginal becomes smeared by the voracious, promiscuous gaze of the Fool and begins to slide down into the crater of indifference buried beneath the seed shells piling up from the village hang-abouts. He will eat and drink in public with unembarrassed gluttony, shocking it to the point of catatonia, and afterwards show a virgin's propriety and chastity. Just like a drug addict, the Idiot cannot be and is not terrified either of his own destructive desires or even of the complete loss of his desire which dissolves in the moment of leaping out of his own “I” along with “Yes” and “No”. He craves these leaps and microleaps. As a matter of fact, the moment of efficacy for him consists in a constant running from and scattering about: from the center to the margins, between the points of intensity, edges and thresholds. For the Idiot, marginal is not monstrous and is not the product of the center. The ability to disappear as a viewer, to quietly sit down on the stool while the house goes up in flames during the epochal divvying up of valuables, is what distinguishes him from the Fool who shamelessly inspects the public at the town fair. He is not hesitant to touch or poke, but would prefer not to touch and just watch. For him the borderline - is not the border, he is himself a border guardian, and knows the ambiguity of such an enterprise. What matters for the Idiot is this moment of non-recognition when the surface has to stretch, bend or even rip apart, as in the case of two liquids dissolving into each other, in order to break the fall of the impersonal affect as it plummets into the depth of whispering bodies. Otherwise, the intellectual gluttony of the Idiot would be inverted into the physical promiscuity of the Fool. And, it is not rare when both of them having recognized in one another superficiality - though of a different nature - head all chummy to the nearest dive to celebrate this miracle birth of kinship.

Both the Fool and the Idiot share the same desire: to overcome marginality. The difference consists in how this desire desires. Margins and limits become vile and pathetic only in opposition to the center of power when the negation of the center of power becomes the premise of activity, whereas a truly creative force only negates the center as a mere consequence of, not as the premise of, its own ambition. The master of art, and of the art of life as such, negates the center as a consequence of his own creativity, of his own premises. It is a pure affirmation - of one's own power to create and of the product that is created. Not in opposition to mass culture, but in opposition to the norm, to the imposed desires, imported cabinetry, the master finds that strange aggressive tone by which he ruthlessly knocks down a lumpenhead impotently whining out of the passions tearing him apart. This is exactly where the negative and aggressive acquire the power of the affirmative.

Nourished by the marginality complex, the critic of the marginal preaches out of denial as ressentment and hostility towards everything allegedly crippled and sick, as if towards a patient in need of a nurse. Aggression, as a positive destruction of the established and reactive, simultaneously carries both an affirmation and negation of the impotent as the impossibility to desire. In this sense, the marginality complex is a complex of tearful destruction, tearful tragedy, of desire as a lack. Only when space and time concentrate around the center of efficacy, not activity, will desire cease to be the abstract object of itself and start to desire here and now.
"He will come" oil, canvas. 2013
“Have some respect” oil, canvas. 2012
“Burning enemies” oil, canvas. 2012
“Commentators” oil, canvas. 2013
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