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MEMORY RESET: “FORMALIST” EXPERIENCE ACTUALISED BY YOUNG PAINTERS OF THE THAW PERIOD

I am going to discuss a period well covered in recent publications. The 50th anniversary of the famous exhibition celebrating 30 years of the Moscow branch of the Artists’ Union (MOSKh) served as a catalyst of sorts for a host of memoir-type reports. of special value are memoirs of Pavel Nikonov that were in part published, in part shared orally in his report to an Academy of Arts conference in 2012, in interviews uploaded to the oralhistory web resource¹ and in private talks. When collated with archival documents and magazine publications of the second half of the 1950s, this evidence has prompted me to take a look at the well-known events from a different angle.

Let me refresh the events of that period. “Exoneration” in art somewhat outpaced political developments. The “First Exhibition of Works by Young Artists” took place in Moscow in the spring of 1954. Students of Moscow art schools and young artists not affiliated with the Artists’ Union contributed to that exhibition, which was a novelty in itself. Yuri Gerchuk, who witnessed those events, believed that “the self-identification of the new generation of the Thaw period started already with that exhibition”. The exhibition opened in early spring, before the *Znamya* (Banner) magazine published in May Ilya Ehrenburg’s story *The Thaw*, which gave the name to that period of the general liberalization of life in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death.

Nikita Khrushchev was yet to make his report on the personality cult and its consequences at the closed Party session of 25 February 1956 when months-long debates on tradition and innovation in art were launched in January 1956, involving Mikhail Alpatov, Martiros Saryan, Vladimir

¹ oralhistory.ru/members/nikonov.

Favorsky and Alexander Gerasimov, among others. Solo shows of Saryan, Pavel Kuznetsov, Pyotr Konchalovsky, Aristarkh Lentulov and Ilya Mashkov were staged at Moscow exhibition halls. The year 1956 can be characterised as decisive for the evolution of new pictorial art. One could say that all strata of the artistic community came into motion. Practical efforts were made to exonerate "plastic values" branded earlier as formalism. "Formalists" was a blanket term for a wide range of artists who engaged in plastic experiments in their works. To one extent or another, official criticism had accused them of different sins, from "denigrating reality" to directly "abetting imperialism".

The "Second Exhibition of Works by Young Artists of Moscow and the Moscow Region", which was held at several Moscow venues in spring 1956 and had a considerable attendance, was a highlight of that year. It marked the beginning of an open and fierce opposition of polar aesthetical views: conservative, traditionally Soviet and allegedly realistic vs innovative efforts to regenerate art. The exhibition of works of Pablo Picasso staged by the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in October 1956 further aggravated that opposition. The All-Union Congress of Artists convened in spring 1957 stripped the odious Alexander Gerasimov of his leading post and powers.

Scholars have more than once pondered why *pictorial arts proved the weakest link* in the chain of other Soviet arts such as literature, music and theatre. The usual answer is that it was through "neglect of the Party curators", who focused on the arts that were more popular and for this reason required more attention. Furthermore, it was precisely in pictorial art that whatever was not mainstream Socialist Realism was anathematized most bitterly. This applied to both exhibition space and art training. In the late 1940s, even the "cautious" artists such as Alexander Osmerkin were barred from teaching. Art schools focused exclusively on the craftsmanship aspect of painting, enforced absurd ideological restrictions and, more importantly, replaced the spontaneous creative process with an artificial one prescribed from above. Many students felt the grim atmosphere deaden every living impulse and that inevitably provoked a sense of protest.

Let me quote from Pavel Nikonov's recollections of the field studies Surikov Institute students carried out in Vladimir in 1949: "*The years 1948–9 were the worst... But then they developed a sense of protest in us. That was precisely how it started. At first we just didn't want to listen to some Lev Borisovich or Ivan Ivanovich, just didn't want to. And then it arose: he was telling me something like, 'The sky should be painted like that: take yellow gum, ultramarine and lake pigment, lower to the horizon it should be gum and lake pigment, then more of the ultramarine and nothing but ultramarine at the top.' That was the scheme. My foot, I won't do it! Or take our field studies in Vladimir. 'This group will go to a tractor works to paint there, and that one to the automatic tools factory.' Meanwhile, they have such views all around there! Everyone rushed to paint churches. 'Whoever paints churches again will be dismissed from field studies and expelled from the Institute.'* Such were the guidelines, which could not but evoke an incredible sense of protest. Perhaps that was precisely what

raised that feeling of antagonism to everything around.¹ Many artists shared the same memories, including Eric Bulatov and Alexei Kamensky.

A fascinating paradox: students of the Moscow Art School (MKhSh) recalled that in their school library they could find books and postcards with reproductions of works of Impressionists and European modernists from the collection of the Museum of New Western Art and from foreign museums, but they knew practically nothing about the art of their native land from the 1920s and early 1930s. A whole sphere of homeland art was deliberately concealed from viewers, art critics and especially zealously from young artists. The paradox was that all the while "formalist art" and its representatives existed at the periphery of art life, but were off-limits. It is also worth mentioning the fact that many of those who could have served as a sort of "bridge" for young artists to the innovative quests of the 1920s were no longer capable of playing that role: their creative potential had long been suppressed by years-long harassment and fear. For instance, Solomon Nikritin, Fyodor Platonov and Konstantin Vialov continued working in the MOSKh organisations and the Art Fund system, but took no part in "revaluating the past". Pavel Nikonov recalls: "*Kosty a Vialov (that was how I called him, although he was much older, but everybody called him that because he no longer worked and was past fifty or maybe even sixty) in a fit of sincerity... over a bottle once said with irony: 'D'you think you are the first ones? It all already happened earlier?'*"

So, some young artists, with or for some reason without official professional training embarked on their creative careers with a feeling that the official trend of art had been fully exhausted and "antagonistic". Their feeling was aggravated by the realisation that their position as artists in public space was misleading and severed from world culture.

As soon as the oppressive restrictions slightly weakened, art rushed to liberate itself from ideological patronage and simultaneously broke up into numerous streams. Let us focus on those who chose homeland art of the 1920s and 1930s as a relevant tradition. Figuratively speaking, that generation had to wipe out, as it were, the period of Soviet art of the late 1930s and 1940s. Aware of the need to restore cultural continuity, they hoped "to go back and find that point at which the normal course of art was forcibly torn". Several decades of the 20th century were wound back, as if it were a newsreel, and an attempt was made in the late 1950s to reconstruct the "right course" of art history. Works of artists who had been accused of formalist experiments, such as those of the "Knave of Diamonds", the Society of Easel Painters (OST) and other associations, elicited tremendous interest. Young artists knew by heart the works within public reach².

¹ oralhistory.ru/members/nikonov.

² P. Nikonov recalls: "When I still studied at the art school, I got to know Volodya Slepyan, and he organised all those meetings. They had on show that period of the 1910s, and the Kyrgyz steppes cycle. There was a Crimean work of Falk's, *Alupka* or *Alushta*. A very good landscape of the 1930s. And there was a self-portrait of Konchalovsky in a yellow shirt. Their expositions were confined to halls. I liked it that Konchalovsky had one hall, Vrubel another, a hall per artist. While Borisov-Musatov and Pavel Kuznetsov, they were hung all together". oralhistory.ru/members/nikonov

Some of the artists who had been in contact with the first wave of avant-garde art were still teaching at art schools and studios. of the host of names let me mention S.I. Ivashev-Musatov, a disciple and secretary of Ilya Mashkov, who taught at the VTsSPS studio, and M.I. Khazanov of the Imeni 1905 god Art School. Nikonov recalled that young artists used to visit the studios of Pyotr Konchalovsky, Alexander Labas and Alexander Tyshler, as well as those of the artists' heirs. D.P. Shterenberg's studio was likewise open to students and young artists. *"Fialk a Shterenberg received us at her flat on Begovai a and showed works by David Shterenberg, those remaining in her collection that for some reason or other did not make it to the museum... or that she had kept for herself. It was very stimulating because we were more or less familiar with textbook works such as Anis'k a and Herrings, but those kept at her place were very interesting."*¹ Nikonov also remembered visiting Pyotr Konchalovsky's studio: those visits could take place owing to Nikolai Andronov's friendship with Mikhail Konchalovsky, who showed his father's works of the 1920s and even the 1910s to the young artists.

The existing barriers could be overcome through friendship or kinship ties, through chance or persistence. Illarion Golitsyn and Vladimir Favorsky happened to be next-door neighbours; Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vasiliev came to Favorsky and Robert Falk for guidance; Vladimir Nemukhin found an older friend and teacher in Pyotr Sokolov because his father knew him. Much has been written about the artists of the so-called "Lianozovo Group" and the role of Evgeni Kropivnitsky. Nevertheless, in the 1950s those contacts between representatives of different generations were of an intimate nature. By the late 1950s efforts to extract the names of artists and their works from oblivion became more open and purposeful, encompassing a wide range of people. Yuri Gerchuk published archive documents about preparations to mark the 25th birth anniversary of MOSKh. The entire MOSKh history was to be retraced in a book that was expected to be published. Although it failed to materialise, work on it at the inspiration of the art critic Vladimir Kostin paved the way to revaluation of one's own past². It should be born in mind that the objective was feasible at that moment: the professional union had been formed a mere 30 years previously and witnesses who remembered the events in art life of the 1920s and 1930s were still alive. Many of the so-called "formalists" were still quite active. Some of them had fallen into obscurity and engaged in "art for themselves", others fulfilled themselves in applied fields, as did G. Rublev in monumental art and Tyshler in stage design. Still others, such as A. Kuiprin and P. Konchalovsky, continued taking part in art life and exhibiting works of the past decade already "adapted to Socialist Realism".

When MOSKh elected young energetic people to its management board in 1961, real steps were taken to liven up art life. The programme

¹ Hereinafter quotes from the interview granted by P.F. Nikonov to me in February 2012.

² Gerchuk Yu., "MOSKh Haemorrhage", or Khrushchev at Manege. Moscow, 2008, pp. 33–4.

of "bringing back forgotten art" acquired a systematic character. Several groups of enthusiasts were formed and started visiting studios to meet artists' heirs. One such group visited the studio of Boris Golopolosov, an artist expelled from MOSKh in the 1930s. There was an indicative episode: Pavel Nikonov and Pyotr Smolin found a rolled up canvas at a Soviet Army Museum storeroom. It was the picture *An Offensive Launch Order* by Pyotr Shumikhin. Step-by-step the Tretyakov Gallery storerooms were opened up and one could see works by David Shterenberg and Pavel Kuznetsov. Meanwhile, abstract art remained under lock and key. That might have been responsible for the extent of rejuvenation in the works of artists of the Thaw period. However, the magnetism of "post-avant-garde generation" painting with its combination of existential drama, lyrical mood and sophisticated colorism was fully appreciated.

The painterly experience of artists of the 1920s was being mastered actively. Plastic dynamism, generalised shapes, the intricate colour palette remote from the natural one, and harshly energetic rhythms were signs of continuity between the works of A. Deineka, D. Shterenberg, P. Kuznetsov and R. Falk on the one hand, and the Thaw period paintings on the other. When exhibited, those works provoked a poignant response. Heated debates arose among art critics and historians: the above continuity was obvious to both fierce critics and advocates of the new trend. Conservatively-minded critics directly accused it of being secondary and the denunciation of formalism flared up anew. Even well-wishers reproached artists for stylisation and imitation (for instance, Pavel Nikonov was reprimanded for imitating P. Kuznetsov). Even works meeting official requirements as far as themes were concerned but executed in a new style came under bitter attack. For example, P. Nikonov's painting *Our Workdays*, which now comes across as a very timid departure from the accepted "norms", was rejected by the Exhibition Commission for "formalism". It took the artist much effort finally to show it at the "zonal" exhibition of 1961, the fact he considered a victory. N. Andronov's *Steeplejacks* and Mikhail Nikonov's *First Steps* were shown at the same zonal exhibition.

This continuity of "new painting" became especially evident at the famous exhibition marking 30 years of MOSKh. Formalist works were retrieved from oblivion and displayed next to those of innovative artists. The minutes of the Manege exhibition debates held on 20 November, two weeks after the exhibition opened and prior to Khrushchev's visit, quote D. V. Sarabianov as saying: "The young art of today and the old art of the recent past seem to shake hands here, as if restoring the direct line which has been destroyed deliberately"¹. The same minutes preserved a tell-tale pronouncement by A. Gastev: "a branch just the same starts growing where it had been cut off..."²

¹ Minutes of Discussion of the Exhibition Organised by the MOSKh Section of Critics. RGALI. F. 2945.

Op.1. Ed. Khr. 2966.

² Ibid.

Art critics voiced similar thoughts decades later. Thus, Marin a Bessonova was among the first to suggest that artists of the 1960s sought to bring art back within the framework of its modernist paradigm. “They had to find the point where the autonomous art of self-reflection came into being and which Late Impressionism and Expressionism had left behind...”¹ Some felt they were direct descendants of the Russian avant-garde, others believed they were heirs to French art, Late Impressionism and Postimpressionism. The situation was indeed unique: young artists could choose their own past. V. Mirimanov, a culture theorist, echoed Bessonova: “Heretical works traced painting far back to the first half of the 1920s, the moment when traditions had been violently cut short and the crossroads where Russian art had dropped out of the world artistic process”².

We would have said today that the MOSKh 30th anniversary exhibition was a grandiose project “to graft the cut branch back to the tree trunk”. Much has been written and published about it and the events and intrigues around it. In addition to the political aspect, it is hard to overestimate the role played by that exhibition from the purely aesthetical point of view. Those who happened to attend it cherished the memory of a sense of discovery for years on end. Many I managed to talk with about that event could remember nearly half a century later even the works which had impressed them the most. One can say that that exhibition prompted many people to realise the value of Russian art of the 1920s-1930s. For instance, Yuri Shchukin’s canvas *The Attraction* displayed at the MOSKh 30th Anniversary Exhibition produced such a strong impression on the critic and art historian Olg a Roytenberg that she addressed the theme of the “forgotten generation” and started working on a book about Yuri Shchukin³. That was the beginning of her years-long studies to resuscitate the memory of forgotten names. For Igor Savitsky, too, that exhibition served as an impulse to create a museum of Post-avant-garde art in Nukus.

I am convinced that to understand the development processes in 20th-century Russian national culture, it is of fundamental importance to realise that for decades the artistic experience of Russian avant-garde artists and the “Post-avant-garde generation” had been deliberately concealed from the public, art critics and the younger generation of artists. Fear of “raising ghosts of the past” blocked access to the experience of a creatively vibrant generation steeped in romantic enthusiasm.

¹ Bessonova M. “Mozhno li oboitis bez termina avangard” (Can We Do Without the Term Avant-garde) // Bessonova M., Selected Works, Moscow, 2004, p. 165.

² Mirimanov V.B., *Russkii avangard i esteticheskaiia revolutsia 20 v. Drugaia paradigma vechnosti* (Russian Avant-garde and the Aesthetical Revolution of the 20th Century. Another Paradigm of Eternity). Moscow, 1995, p. 49.

³ Roytenberg O., *Neuzheli kto-to vspomnil, chto my byli...* (Could Anyone Have Remembered that We Were...), Moscow, 2008, p. 9. The book about Shchukin was published by Sovetsky khudozhnik in 1979.

Over the past decades the historians' community has stepped up attempts to consider memory as a multilayer phenomenon. Even though the fundamental principles are yet to be formulated, beyond doubt, the field of collective research into the nature, forms of manifestation and functions of group memory have been defined. of special interest for our subject is the discovery of the medievalists, which has largely transformed views of the formation of groups. Studies of religious groups and kinship groups have shown that "a decisive factor in the choice of kinship is not the real genealogical ties, but the human mind: who man feels kindred to is a question of not blood, but self-identification"¹. I think that this holds true of the formation of groups in the Thaw period. The ability to assimilate and memorise knowledge of the past manifested itself in social actions, including appropriating traditions and forming daily experience. The natural conclusion is that active and creative memory is an indispensable factor of the self-identification of the personality.

As it is impossible to pay adequate attention to the philosophical aspects of the memory phenomenon, let us consider its psychological aspect. Modern psychological science defines the function of memory as grasping and using earlier experience in one's current behaviour. From this point of view memory is a crucial basic factor of man's conscious activity. The memory of a healthy human being necessarily has so-called blind spots. These include infancy zones, repressed episodes and forgotten dreams. Furthermore, significant zones of memory can be *blocked* under the impact of fear, anxiety or pain. The blocking of significant zones leads to neurotic states. The more extensively zones are blocked, the more unbalanced the psychological state. What is forcibly repressed does not disappear, but causes constant unconscious worry. There appears a sense of ataxia and divorce from one's genuine self-consciousness, which is painful for a psychologically wholesome personality.

Blocking that prevents neurotics from perceiving and absorbing meaningful experience can be removed through psychotherapy. What the person feels then is something like euphoria. Something similar is observed when "collective memory is blocked". P. Nikonov recalled that young artists who discovered for themselves the "under-the-sof of a paintings" when preparing an exhibition were overwhelmed by a euphoric feeling. They had come in touch with something genuine and real. "Those who have extricated themselves from an ideological trap experience a 'moment of truth,'" Vladimir Mirimanov wrote².

The Thaw period generation of artists made it possible for a galaxy of names and significant number of artworks to be recovered from oblivion.

¹ Arnautova Yu. E., MEMORIA: "TOTALNYI SOTSIALNYI FENOMEN" I OB'EKT ISSLEDOVANIYA (MEMORIA: "TOTAL SOCIAL PHENOMENON" AND OBJECT OF INVESTIGATION). Obrazy proshlogo i kollektivnaya identichnost v Evrope do nachala Novogo vremeni (Images of the Past and Collective Identity in Europe prior to Modern History). Moscow, 2003, pp. 19–37.

² Mirimanov V.B., Op. Cit., p. 48.

The return to the real space of culture was attempted largely through psychological reconstruction. The recovery of memory applied not only and not so much to experimental plastic thinking. Along with that, the entire complex of world outlook that pervaded the art of the 1920s rose from the past and became tangible. It also entailed qualities, such as enthusiasm, faith, naivety, and political inexperience.

The understanding of the mission of art was restored. Debates focused on formal objectives, however, with the very term “formalism” having such negative connotations that it was evaded and replaced with the term “professional”: “professional problems” in fact implied formal plastic aspects. Debates of that period were peppered with terms like the specifics of graphical means or “painterliness as such” and colorism. The right of the personality to individual vision of the world was being upheld. Narrative minimalism went hand in hand with the complication and expansion of perception. The specifics of every kind of art, be it painting or drawing, were assigned a special role of a nonverbal language in conveying those new sensations. Numerous publications of that period dealt with this problem of the relationship between style and method.

Artists were concerned not only about regaining the regenerated language of art, but also about expressing with its help something innermost, independent and personal, something to which many of them still lacked access but longed so much to attain that independence. Let me quote from a 1929 article “On Realism” by S. Romanovich, which was hardly known during that period and which sounds in unison with the creative slogans of the art of the Thaw period: “They usually call a work of art realistic if it has something in addition to the correct representation of nature and a manner, or rather style characteristic of every artist. Let us call that something a sense of love of reality. in our opinion, love is that hidden fire and warmth which we unexplainably feel... Agreeing that love of reality is the main thing in a work of art, they may ask how it is to be expressed. To this end it is necessary to find a corresponding and free language, such that reality could pass through without being tarnished by lies or disfigured by clumsiness...”¹ in a pithy way Romanovich expresses the essence of an artistic attitude that the artists of the Thaw period upheld through metaphors and allusions. It is not by chance that the “Thaw generation” was so much concerned with the problems of self-identification.

Restoring what had been “forcibly forgotten” to the space of history and the space of culture had not only therapeutic importance, but to a certain extent was attributed “magical” features: the “right” past was being restored and was to influence and amend the present. Was that pronouncement heard? I suppose the powers that be realised and correctly estimated precisely the *magical* component of that process: it had to be stopped and rendered innocuous. Their response was the resolute refusal “to dig into

¹ Romanovich S., “O realizme” (On Realism). *Makovets*, No. 2, 1922. Cit. Roytenberg O. *Neuzheli kto-to vspomnil, chto my byli...* (Could Anyone Have Remembered that We Were...), Moscow, 2008, p. 67.

the past". Obstacles were constantly raised and resistance mounted to "re-collecting" the experience of the 1920s. Let me cite two episodes of a multitude of similar cases: Miud a Naumovn a Yablonskaya, who had invited a group of artists to look at the works of Kandinsky and Malevich at the Tretyakov Gallery storerooms, was forced to leave the museum. After his picture *Geologists* was criticised for "formalism", Pavel Nikonov had to file in an application "I request my picture to be regarded as a creative failure" (so as to avoid giving back the advance money, which had already been spent). in fact, nothing changed: an order had been given to leave illusions behind and continue living, working and thinking in accordance with instructions from above. However, the mechanism of "memory reset" was already at work.

I am aware that bringing a psychological component into an art study discourse calls for greater theoretical substantiation. in my constructs I tried to draw on the methodological principle of integral knowledge (*tselnoye znaniye*) that D. V. Sarabianov championed consistently. Integral knowledge is a concept borrowed from the Russian philosophical tradition to denote knowledge which combines scientific, intuitive and emotional knowledge. The principle of integral knowledge makes it possible to reveal the link between "world outlook" and plastic ideas; the artist's professional fulfilment in painting proves inseparable from his life and spiritual experience, and hence from the wholesomeness of his memory.

Let me conclude with a quote from an article on existential psychology. According to this trend of psychology, a part of man's mental sphere as represented by the person spontaneously strives after psychological integrity, the integration of the conscious and subconscious material, the elimination of blocking caused by fear and eventually self-healing. Life is understood as movement, a striving after completion and integration. The same can be said about every individual, healthy or not. Unfortunately, for an unhealthy individual his strivings turn out fruitless.