*Evgeny Barabanov*

Alexander Yulikov

One of the indisputable, and perhaps the most important criteria of avant-garde art is its radicalism: radicalism in relation to tradition, the radicalism of its artistic thinking, methods of 'work, and use of materials and concepts. Malevich's "Black Square", Duchamp's work, Flavin's neon lights, Beuy's happenings, LeWitt's objects, and conceptualism's lack of visual artistic embodiment are but a few examples taken from the history of avant-garde radicalism.

Within the mainstream of such a decisive negation of all traditions and the quest for new paths in art, the work of Alexander Yulikov seems archaic: canvas, stretched on a rectangular stretcher; a stable format, the facture of paint; concise geometric forms, plastic constructions or signs that look like pictograms. And although his works undoubtedly fall outside the stylistics developed by the "Moscow avant-garde", a connoisseur of contemporary art would most likely still be able to discern, in their composition and color, something reminiscent of the traditions of minimalism (or post-minimalism). Pop and "sots" art — that is, he or she would be able to discern something "known" and "already done", something that on occasion has already been quite well worked out. This reduction to "the known", which the viewer inevitably enacts, and (more surprisingly) which seems to be supported by the artist him-self, naturally provokes doubts. What is this? Muscovite illustration of the history of Western art of the 1960s? Or is it a continuation of the national tradition of suprematism, combined with contemporary minimal art? To what degree is it possible to speak here about avant-gardism and not about its mainstream, into which just about everything has been pulled by the powerful currents of American-European innovation?

Questions such as these, with which we usually app-roach the works of Moscow or Leningrad "non-conformist" artists, are questions which Yulikov has of course asked himself. In fact, he asked himself these questions long be-fore the possibility of exhibits and discussions existed, and the first critical or theoretical articles appeared. While still continuing work on his own "narrative" paintings, close in style to what is conventionally called expressionism, he completely independently confronted himself with the radical question: how can art be freed from the historico-cultural postulates and stratifications with which the artist and the viewer approach it? Is it necessary to join art with the subjective spontaneity of the artist, with his "self-expression"? Is such a joining just or necessary? This question was the beginning of his independent quest and experimentation. Hence, his interest in Pop and Sots art, minimalism, happenings, and conceptual art, progressing through a successive purging from art of every kind of painterliness, expressiveness, decorativeness, coloristicness, narrative, literariness, and symbolism. However, even here the artist detected a layer of symbolism and allegory, a metaphor of a poetic or philosophical game with meaning, which was too firm, that had not been completely conquered. And so, in order to break through all these layers and shells, to break the spell of conceptual esthetics and in a radical way to demythologize the ties between the artist, the viewer and art itself, he once again turned to the traditions of painting.

But why turn specifically to painting, to canvas, stretchers, and oil paint? Because all these traditional materials and their attributes have long since been destroyed in con-temporary art, because that stage of avant-garde innovation — when an artist exhibited something other than a painting and declared it to be a work of art — has come to a close. Now you can exhibit anything you like and call that "anything" a work of art. Today such actions are in no way innovative since the opposition of traditional and untraditional in the sphere of materials, for example, has lost all poignancy and topicality. The traditional and the untraditional have become equal to a significant degree.

This very equilibrium has permitted Alexander Yulikov to work with the traditional materials, methods, and techniques of painting, in order to return to art that which painting takes away from it. For the objects that Yulikov exhibits are not at all "paintings" or "painterly works". It would be more correct to call them anti-paintings for they are predestined to effect a radical negation of both the esthetics of "painterliness" as well as the very idea of painting. Through a codified system of forms and signs that we call the painting, his anti-painting points to the absence of the painting. At the same time the objects themselves, just as the hyphen in the word "anti-painting" (a line that at once divides and joins the word "painting" and its negation) fairly clearly point to the primary peculiarity of the "provocational" relationships among the artist, the object and the viewer. These relations do not lie in the concept that the work of art or esthetics usually tries to foist on the viewer. Rather, they lie in the fundamental quality of openness and appeal to dialog, in the invitation to an unfettered quest beyond the threshold of known inducements and ideas, in the demand for the independent decisions that we must make when faced with the slippery reality of art.

This tension, in which there exist both provocation and destruction, seriousness and the demand for intellectual honesty, and its understanding, which comes in the intervals — is in some ways like psychoanalysis with its broadening of the field of consciousness through the observation of another's meaning. But, since this meaning is not given as an object or something symbolic, but only proposes its presence through questioning and demythologizing, art completely loses the "peacemaking" or "narcotic" function which has been foisted on it. It becomes a reality principle and not a pleasure principle or the duplication of life. Here the initial decision of the viewer himself, the unpredictable existential dialectic, the psychology of a real situation, of a real person, of a concrete moment in time, is opposed to the illusory psychologism of "the work of art", "the game", or "the concept".

Indeed, canvas, stretchers, paint, the relationships of colors — all of these require the viewer to expect and demand from Yulikov's objects that which he expects and demands from any exhibited painting. The viewer expects that he will see, if not a narrative, then at least an image that proposes color, composition, coloring, values, technique, etc. The viewer expects the artist to fulfill his expectations: if not highly significant symbols and meaningful constructions, then at least to produce the manifestations of spontaneous moods, states of being, or tribulations. Nevertheless, there is none of this in Yulikov. There are no symbols, no self-expression. That which occurs on the canvas speaks only of the absence of events: the image points to the absence of image; the paint to the absence of painterly space; the color to the absence of color; the composition to its fundamentally incomplete openness; form to its disappearance. Nothing can be said about these objects. They exclude the possibility of any interpretation whatsoever. They demand the impossible: to leave behind the firm shores of taste, knowledge, caution, and comparisons — and to step into emptiness. For here, we stand before the call of emptiness. "There's nothing to see", "it's empty", "cold", "uninteresting", — the viewers' complaints are completely just. But if you forget everything you know, if you turn away from justifying arguments and take up the challenge of this emptiness — there is a chance to enter into direct, unmediated dialogue with art and to experience on your own the discovery that art exists not so much thanks to painting, as much as in spite of, or independently of it, that art is not identical with its objectification, that the commandment "do not create idols" possesses an absolute-indisputable meaning, not only for monotheism, but for art as well.

This logical destruction of every kind of idol in the name of a primary Biblical commandment reveals the religious dimension of Yulikov's radicalism. However this is not a religiosity of literary-romantic symbolism and metaphysical speculation, but a religiosity of a persistently pursued apophatism, a religiosity of radical demythologizing that can be seen, for example, in Lev Shestov, Martin Heidegger, or Rudolf Bultman. In relationship to art this demythologizing means that the "objects of art" to whom sacrifices are made, and which can be manipulated and possessed (the sado-masochistic functions of art objects) are not primary, nor are the "meanings", metaphors and thoughts attached to them, but that instead it is the courageous "openness", the confiding "givingness", or art itself that is primary. It is for this very reason that Yulikov is interested not so much in objects or structures that exist outside of events in which the viewer has a role no less important than the object. What is essential is that even in their execution these objects have nothing "professionally artistic" about them. Anyone could make them according to the designs and sketches. Such a method of execution does not render them any less individual simply because the artist didn't see them or sign them, (it must be noted that Yulikov never signs his work). But this execution turns out to be destructive of myths relating to the myth of the artist-demiurge.

Of course, Alexander Yulikov's creative stance conceals an indefinite and perhaps, insurmountable necessity: apophatic negation, taken to an extreme result in the extinction of an "un" or "anti", — in silence. But silence itself can become an idol — something that has happened more than once in the course of history. Is this a contradiction? Yes, but it is upon this very contradiction that belief in the liberating power of radical disagreement depends.

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