



## Negativity Mon Amour

1.

American abstract expressionism made its first appearance in Moscow in 1959. Its “return” to Russia took place forty years later, on the eve of the opening of the exhibition “Motherland and Death” (known as MAD), in which many members of the Moscow conceptual school were represented. The occasion for this “return” was the crisis in Yugoslavia. The walls of the United States embassy served as the canvas, while ink, eggs, and canned vegetables purchased in the store across the street were used for paint. On March 27, 1999, while driving on the Sadovoe Ring (on the way, ironically enough, to the MAD exhibition), I felt a renewed love for art when I saw all those yellow, red, black, and violet splashes of color on the embassy walls. My doubts about the political nature or “social bases” of abstract expressionism (the thesis advanced by Meyer Shapiro) were instantly removed (fig. 11.1).

Since I have brought up the story of the return of abstract art from across the Atlantic to Moscow, I will also mention its chief apologist, Clement Greenberg. His assertion that American modernism was superior in value (and in “freshness of content”) to the European kind fits his own definition of vulgarity—that “truly new horror of our times [which] totalitarianism is able to install in places of power.”<sup>1</sup> Since this reproach was directed at Russian art, its current interests and aspirations—the castles in the air that it “installs,” no longer in places of power, but in places of power loss—must be given their proper due.

During my stay in Moscow, I heard a wide variety of responses to the iconoclastic act of Avdei Ter-Oganian, who invited Manezh visitors to chop a paper copy of a Russian Orthodox icon to pieces with an axe. To some extent, this gesture is a scream of power loss in “places of power.”



11.1

View of the American Embassy in Moscow during the protest against NATO's bombing of Serbia, Moscow, March 27, 1999. Photo Igor' Makarevich.

However, upon more serious reflection, one can also trace a similarity between the actions of Ter-Oganian and those of Andres Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* greatly enraged the Congress of the United States, leading to cuts in art subsidies. In other words, the attempt to prosecute Ter-Oganian (which is what the clergy and some citizens' groups are demanding) is reminiscent of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. Congress, not only toward Serrano (or Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*), but also toward Yugoslavia. At least that's what the Moscow artists with whom I've had a chance to talk about this tend to believe. In their view, the moment art stops testing the boundaries of what is permitted, the boundaries of comfort, it inevitably turns into its own opposite (for instance, into the facade of the American embassy prior to its transformation into an "exhibition" of abstract expressionism).

Since the late 1990s, any efforts to globalize and synchronize aesthetics have been extremely unpopular among Moscow artists. They perceive the project of "globalization" as an American invention,<sup>2</sup> while such notions as primacy or secondariness are declared to be imports from the sphere of sports or commerce into culture. In their view, focusing on the aberrations that arise when artistic models are transferred from one context to another is far more productive than pointing out who came first and who came second. The members of the Moscow art world believe that *la différence* (e.g., contextual deferral) is their principal resource and, moreover, an aesthetic phenomenon. As for the "painting" of the walls of the U.S. embassy, it illustrates once again the inadequacy of NATO's political doctrine,<sup>3</sup> based on the presumption of simultaneous and identical perception of events in every region of the world.

As a cultural enterprise, globalization can be equated with an effort to horizontalize the vertical, to line up the truncated and curtailed metaphors in concordance with the museological world order. Because the unconscious mechanisms partake in it, this process is not an easy target for critical reflection, especially when "visual" and "visionary" are treated as mutually deferred phenomena. As for an effort to "horizontalize the vertical" on a worldwide scale, one should mention Documenta in Kassel and the Venice Biennale, which—along with their commercial counterparts (international art fairs, etc.)—aim at presenting an *overall picture* of contemporary art. Even if such a picture were a displayable concept, it would still require a different means of presentation, different from those presently adopted by the museums and exhibition curators. The installation paradigm would have to become reflective of the non-Euclidean nature of *contemporaneity*, a phenomenon that has been hopelessly flattened and sequentialized by both institutions and individuals.

## 2.

The new wing of the State Tret'iakov Gallery now houses a collection of alternative art from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> The curator of the collection, Andrei Erofeev, was given temporary use of the building for two years. The opening took place on March 15, 1999. A third of the exposition was devoted to neomodernism—"the unfinished project of modernism" (to use Jürgen Habermas's terminology), which was renewed in Russia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Among the institutions that have taken on this function is the Moscow gallery called Obscuri Viri. From the moment the gallery was created in 1994, it has displayed objects of a special kind that—by analogy with the name of the exhibition niche—could be called "obscuritarian." I use this term in order to emphasize their existence apart from their own objectness. They dissuade us, as it were, from acquiring them, from transferring them from the obscuritarian niche into the world of visual consumption where everything is optically processed, itemized, objectified. And that is not because they lack some necessary qualities, but because of their own indifference to the possibility of such a transfer. Each object might as well bear the inscription "Not for sale, admiration, or identification." On the level of day-to-day needs, human passions, and ambitions, the authors of these works, of course, have nothing against fame or money, nothing against leaving the confines of the obscuritarian ghetto. But it is precisely this obscuritarian field that has an incredible ability to create and maintain a sensation of disembodied objectness, or objectness held in suspense.

The objectness discussed here is a fairly unique phenomenon. In the case of Western conceptualists or, for example, of the representatives of Arte Povera, these were Cinderella objects, orphaned objects, foundling objects, secretly or openly yearning to be accepted in "polite" society. By contrast, the obscurity of the objects exhibited in Obscuri Viri is not camouflage; it is the chief distinction between "Moscow communal conceptualism" and other *faktura*-clastic practices.

Discussing this paradigm of objectness, one must remember the 1920s and 1930s in Russia, when the bonds between the communal subject and the communal object were defetishized. I am referring to contact with objects of communal day-to-day life (Soviet-style)—kitchen utensils, clothes, furniture, and similar lowly, faceless things. It is possible that, in some sense, "communal conceptualism" still holds on to these traditions. My own experience of visiting Obscuri Viri has once again attested to the fact that nobody knows what art is, since it presupposes a special, inexplicable consent to "go I know not where and bring [i.e., bring back] I know not what." Attending a show at Obscuri Viri is also reminiscent of a visit

to a nursing home to see a senile relative—a relative who has forgotten his own name as well as yours. What does the view of this unfortunate but beloved creature suggest to us? The phenomenon of obscuritarianism? The impossibility of transcending its boundaries? The hidden but inevitable commonality that binds the subject of visitation to its object—a thing or a character that embodies your own inner obscuritarianism and your own (progressive) oblivion of the self within yourself? And how, may one ask, does one assess the value of the obscuritarian object? To answer this question, here is a story that I heard from a friend about his visit to a hospital. He went to see his dying grandfather, who was known for his skill at making money. Seeing a gold watch on the old man's wrist, the grandson offered him a good price for it. After intense bargaining, the grandfather prevailed and died with a smile on his face.

### 3.

In March 1999, Boris Mikhailov's photographic series *Case History*, which represents homeless people in Kharkov, Ukraine, was printed in a book by Scalò Verlag (fig. 11.2). Unlike romantic negativity—idealistic in nature and subject to the mental eye—Mikhailov's way of seeing the world around him is not simply negative: it is bodily negative. Prior to discussing his book,<sup>5</sup> I would like to remind the reader that the notion of the bodily in its relation to literary practices was prompted by many authors from Bataille and Pierre Klossowski to Barthes and Deleuze. While in Barthes's writings bodily *jouissance* is spelled out as “pleasure of the text,” Klossowski takes it one step further, insisting that “there is nothing more verbal than the excesses of the flesh.”<sup>6</sup> As for Mikhailov, he knows that affirmative images and identity have never existed apart from each other. After all, he was educated under socialist realism, one of the most affirmative of all cultures. To liberate himself, he embraced negativity. Seen from this perspective, Mikhailov's negative vision appears to be his “ultimate identity.” And yet negation negates itself, making the aforementioned “identity” unfit to inhabit. To maintain it, negativity has to be constantly reproduced. If Benjamin's theories apply in Mikhailov's case, then this author is definitely a producer: a producer of negativity. “I think negatively, therefore I am.” Expressed in this form, Descartes's *cogito* teams up well with Mikhailov's photographic production.

It has been claimed that photographers like Nan Goldin have truly experienced (with their bodies) things they feed into the viewfinders. But do they really transgress voyeurism or engage the referent into metonymic exchange with the signifier? Whereas Goldin positions herself inside of the *what*, Mikhailov is an insider of the *how*. The latter (for him) is



11.2  
Boris Mikhailov, from the series  
*Case History*, 1997.

negativity: he is wholly engrossed with it and has no room left for voyeurism. Therefore, it would be a mistake to say that Mikhailov degrades or abuses the people he takes picture of with his vision. On the contrary, he caresses them. Such is the nature of his optic: affectionate, yet simultaneously negative and panicked.<sup>7</sup> But this panic is not caused by something specific, real, or distinct—for instance, the sight of a beast, a train coming straight at you, etc. In Kabakov’s opinion, “it’s a question of total panic—a perpetual state of panic a person feels in response to everything that surrounds him. Anyone who has spent many years living in Russia is familiar with special safety zones—the bomb shelter, the friend’s apartment—rather than special danger zones.”<sup>8</sup> And yet the opposition between safety zones and dangerous places is what the language of negativity thrives on. Negativity is thus the taxonomy of panic, and Mikhailov’s urban landscapes bear witness to that.

One picture is of a six- or seven-year-old boy and girl in a wasteland, smoking near a utility pipe. These kids are clearly neglected by their parents. In another photograph, a child of privilege wears expensive roller skates with his watchful mother hovering in the background; not far from them a man lies on the ground, either drunk or dead. Once again we witness a play of differences that, regardless of any specific narrative or even contextual frame, highlights the very nature of negativity—its addiction to the language of binary oppositions (dichotomies). Negative optics can also be perceived as a mental grid, imposed on reality a priori, that is, prior to the moment of taking the picture. To dichotomize is to stage; therefore all Mikhailov’s photographs—rehearsed or spontaneous—are staged beforehand.

There are several landscapes here. In one of them red flowers are juxtaposed with an industrial fence, as if separating beauty from ugliness. Sexual organs—both male and female—are in large quantity. Women are shown urinating or displaying their vaginas, men their penises. All are highly disinterested in what is happening. No doubt they pose for money. Most of them are people driven to extreme misery and fallen to the lowest steps of the social ladder. They epitomize alienation: it splashes out of them. Mikhailov wants them to pose naked, as if trying to undress the object of his desire—negativity. The abundance of sex organs in *Case History* is related to the photographer’s desire to convince viewers that they are looking at human beings, not enigmatic aliens from outer space whose sufferings evoke no pity because we don’t know what is and isn’t normal for them. The sexual organ is one of the most universal clichés: when exhibiting it, the homeless (sick, persecuted) person evokes a special, incomparable sympathy, not only mentally but physically.<sup>9</sup>

To comment on Mikhailov's treatment of nudity, I will bring into play the concept of the "post-Soviet uncanny," which yields two different readings. With regard to the naked body, the reading of the phrase "uncanny nude" is equivalent to the assertion that no one has yet known it (the body), and therefore the viewer has the opportunity to be "the first." The explanation for this is in the etymology of the word "canny" (originally from the Latin for "to know"). In addition, "canny" means *heimlich* or "homey," which is why "uncanny nude" refers to a nudity not only *unknown* but (also) *homeless*. Its homelessness can be read as lack of connection to the nuptial bed of knowledge.

The notion of "uncanny sex organs" echoes, to some extent, Nobuyoshi Araki's monstrous representation of the vagina in his serious *The Parts of a Love* (1987). Here, the idea of homelessness is associated not with the ejection of a nude body from the house to the street but with what Freud described as "displacement" when, in his essay "The Uncanny" (1919), he wrote about the displaced effects of castration anxiety.

Mikhailov once said that a good photographer is like a street dog, a mutt. He is willing to spend three hours at the train station in anticipation of the moment when the wind lifts the skirt of a woman sitting on the steps. A moment like that (a "punctum," in Barthes's terminology) is captured on a photograph: the cunt is caught off guard. According to Mikhailov, the fact that he suspected the absence of underwear is due to his mutt's intuition. This print is particularly striking because it attains a symbolic level. Negation caresses itself, confusing its origin with the vagina—an aberration that fits the notion of *méconnaissance*. There is, of course, nothing new about this: in 1866, Gustav Courbet painted a vagina and called the work "The Origin of the World." The painting had been lost for years (it was last heard of in 1945), and then resurfaced in the collection of Lacan's former wife, Sylvie.<sup>10</sup>

Mikhailov is an exceptionally gifted artist, but speaking of him in these terms is the same as saying that a shark is an exceptional swimmer: this is self-explanatory because it lives in water. A similar argument applies to Mikhailov's bodily swimming in negativity. For as long as he stays there, his artistic competence is hardly in question. What is at issue here is the itinerary of his journey.

#### 4.

One of the most questionable utopias is the utopia of kinship and mutual support between intellectuals, and in particular, between intellectuals of East and West. The confessional intensity found in texts printed in Moscow, Sofia, Belgrade, Poznań, Zagreb, or Ljubljana—in reference to

East European identity—suggests that these texts appeal to some higher (if not transcendental) criteriological authority—to what one could call (paraphrasing Husserl) the collective “I-presentation” of the intellectual élite. However pointless, such appeals are never out of fashion.<sup>11</sup> It may be that impassioned calls for identification, combined with the visionary projection of identitarian constructs, create the only possible “ecosphere” that identity can dwell in.

The specificity of intellectual identity is the absence (or denial) of this identity, for identification and intellectual reflection are largely incompatible. Their contract is a result of affectation.<sup>12</sup> To equate them would be imprudent, since identity is an affirmative (*positive*) concept while intellectual reflection is a *negative* one.<sup>13</sup> For some intellectuals, identity is a “necessary evil”—a way of resisting oppression with regard to race, ethnicity, sex, gender, religious and human rights, as well as professional or political belief systems. It can also be based on a mutual anticipation of something yet to come—an ultimate identity (communalist, global consumerist, apocalyptic, transcendentalist, etc.). To other intellectuals the identity principle is not sustainable unless it involves emotions and passion.<sup>14</sup> In their opinion, one needs to *feel* identity, not to *think* it. But doesn’t that imply an instant conversion into a confessional-cathartic being, which for an intellectual is analogous to the loss of negativity? And isn’t it true that to fear such loss (or to passionately and emotionally mourn it) would be the same as to admit that negativity can actually be viewed as intellectual identity? This can be avoided only by adopting a totally different image of the intellectual—as an evasive *de-framer* of identity who is capable of quickly switching gears from distancing to cathartic merging with what he or she criticizes.<sup>15</sup> What makes such intellectuals somewhat *identical* to one another is that their identitarian dreams are libidinally mediated. As an example I will point to the United States, where the image of the intellectual remains unclaimed, in the sense that he or she cannot be seen in movies, newspapers, magazines, or on TV. And yet at the same time, the intellectual ghetto (university professors, scholars, theorists, etc.) reflect on pop culture and the mass media with vigorous passion and craving.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari identify negativity (regardless of its political inclination) with an oedipized way of thinking and living, that is, with paranoia.<sup>16</sup> Another sobering pronouncement comes from Derrida, for whom the meaning of any text—negative or affirmative—is indefinitely deferred. This gives way to a suspicion that the critique of false consciousness may well be as false as what it criticizes. Insightful as they are, neither schizoanalysis nor deconstruction takes into account that negativity is, at times, inseparable from the pleasure of being negative

and that ideology (i.e., false consciousness) can, in fact, be enjoyable. The difference, however, is that for as long as the negative remains less clichéd than its counterpart, our ability to collectively rejoice in negativity by turning it into a pastime is limited. This is especially true in the United States, which is indeed the “society of entertainment.” Intellectuals who seek notoriety in such a “society” might as well learn how to promote negativity as an entertaining feature—a source of enjoyment, a leisurely item of mass consumption, and so on. Along this path, an effort should be made to spectacularize negativity, instead of trying to de-spectacularize society.<sup>17</sup> Given the specificity of American cultural tradition, it seems unlikely that the vacancy of an *entertaining* Other will ever be filled by intellectuals. The most effective way for them to be visible is to become (or remain) an eyesore. As for the postmodern cultural environment with its artificial leveling of all differences and dichotomies, intellectuals can only benefit from derailing this process, that is, from radicalizing their negativity, rather than subduing it (fig. 11.3).

Despite the ghettoized status of the adherents of negativity within “positive” (affirmative) culture—be it the culture of France, the United States, Russia, or Yugoslavia—they are not only pressured from the outside by the mainstream, but also divided internally. Alliances between intellectuals are either defensive or expansionist in nature.<sup>18</sup> In the latter case, the alliances can be compared to NATO jets whose purpose is to seek more and more places where they can drop their discursive bombs and subsequently return to their prior (moralizing or melancholically detached) image. And thus, we are back where we started—with the war and the events in Yugoslavia (fig. 11.4).

The war analogy that I have used and the reference to the aggressiveness of discourse are not excuses for sitting out the conflict in a bomb shelter. Intellectual wars are usually bloodless. The spoken (or printed) thought is not identical to the subject of expression or to its addressee. The abolition of the subject and the entry into the sphere of “collective utterances” automatically confers the status of totality (universal identity) upon text. Because of their universality, textual strategies resemble carpet bombing, which in turn becomes a reason to retaliate, to feel guilt, or to demand compensation for injured pride. In other words, these strategies can serve any purpose except the construction of a “new subjectivity.”

There have been cases of Moscow intellectuals teaching at Western universities who rejected offers of tenure. And this occurs despite the fact that the situation in Russia remains extremely unstable, both economically and politically. Apparently, stability and protection from the vicissitudes of fate are factors that can be perceived as either pluses or minuses. To



11.3  
Andrei Iakhnin, *Das Kapital*, 1989.

11.4

Oleg Vasil'ev, *We're at War*, 2002.



back up my assertion, I would like to cite the writer Vladimir Sorokin. He says that life in Western Europe seems too anaesthetized: “Being there, one gets the impression that no one dies of cancer, no one fears old age or loneliness, no one feels inner torment.”<sup>19</sup> For myself, I will add that the ritual of silence Sorokin talks about also extends to the war in the Balkans and the problem of refugees.

The Russian intellectuals are attracted only to “apocalypse” or, at the very least, to catastrophe.<sup>20</sup> They value moments of disaster because of the opportunity to rejoice in the experience of pain, to suffer and to feel empathy for the suffering of others, to breathe the air of tragedy and dark premonition, and to be on the edge between hopelessness and deliverance. A secure, “well-tempered clavier” of existence is not to their liking. They are apocalyptic creatures who feel *good* only when they feel *bad*. Daily life, as they understand it, is a carnival of contrasts. A good example of this is Kabakov’s comment, “Life has to be pretty—like roses around a body in the morgue.”<sup>21</sup>