

immediations

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Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, detail of Vitrine. Photograph from exhibition held at the Düsseldorf Städtische Kunsthalle, 1972.

Boris Groys in Conversation

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During December 2006 and January 2007 Boris Groys was Visiting Professorial Fellow of the Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum, where the following conversation was recorded.

Philosophy, Art History and Art

You are a philosopher who works among artists and art historians. What for you is the importance of philosophy for art and artists?

Throughout the twentieth century - the age of Modernism - artists themselves were philosophically motivated. If you consider the history of art of the last 150 years, there is clearly a strong ongoing influence of philosophy on the thinking of artists. Indeed artistic movements are to a certain degree philosophical movements: Suprematism, Neo-Plasticism and Constructivism; Surrealism of course with Nietzsche and Freud and then after 1945 there was a strong influence of Wittgenstein on Minimalism and Conceptual Art. And now there is a strong interest in Foucault, Deleuze, French Post-Structuralism and so on. Artists themselves are very much involved in philosophical thinking and in many cases think about their own work as a philosophical statement. This can't be avoided: even to state that one is anti-philosophical is of course a kind of philosophical statement. So I am comfortable working with artists, because I don't think there is a border at all between art and philosophy.

Does this suggest that philosophers have a naturally closer relationship with artists than do art historians?

We can look at artists in two ways. First, as if we were biologists, trying to construct a neo-Darwinian story of ‘art species’; how artists developed, how they succeeded, failed, survived. In these terms art history is formulated a little like botany or biology. The second way of considering art history is as part of the history of ideas. We have the history of philosophy, the history of science, the history of cultural history, just as we can have the history of art. So the question is whether we define art history more like botany, or more like the history of philosophy – and I tend more to the latter, because, as I have suggested, the driving force of art is philosophical.

Traditionally there have always been those two levels – the scientific, or archaeological; and the philosophic, or interpretative – and they have co-existed quite comfortably. One crucial difference between the two approaches, however, may arise through differing attitudes to historical evidence, in particular the question of anachronism. Historians are terrified of anachronism – of getting the chronology wrong, or of using later documents and knowledge to explain earlier sources. Like a psychoanalytic interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci, for instance. But perhaps anachronism is the basis of the philosophical approach.

If so, anachronism is also the basis for art, because, like philosophy, art is always an unfinished project and therefore fundamentally transhistorical. If you look, for example, at the Suprematist movement, you can say that the works of Malevich document certain periods, or stages of the development of this project. But the development of this project can always be taken up in a different way and further developed. And the same thing goes for Leonardo da Vinci of course – we know of course how his images are continuously used in a very different way. From the *Da Vinci Code*, to the re-use (or reinterpretation) of his technological ideas. It’s an interesting question: are the technical constructions made after his drawings to be considered works of art? What we have now, for example, is Leonardo da Vinci after Duchamp. The same thing happens to Plato, Tolstoy, or Wittgenstein. In this respect, one has the same fundamental problems in art as in philosophy – they are similarly structured in that there is no progress in either. It is a kind of ‘anti-progress’ institution. Both philosophy and art act as checks on the notion of progress: although they may be in dialogue with progress, they are nevertheless fundamentally negative to it. And this means they create a situation in which you don’t have to be afraid

of being anachronistic, because everything is anachronistic. If you don't want to be anachronistic then you would have to abolish the institutions of both art and philosophy ... not a bad idea, perhaps.

Museums and History

Seen in this way art history begins to seem like a utopian pursuit – to understand Leonardo da Vinci you have somehow to forget Duchamp and put yourself back in the late fifteenth century.

Yes, it is of course impossible. On this point it may be important to consider the role of museums in constructing an artificial paradise for objects, giving them a second, vampiric life. Museums constitute an artificial eternity – a heterotopia – as Foucault had it. They are the space of philosophy and art, rather than history. It may be said that history itself is misleading: historical narrative is a narrative of substitution. For example, we have one generation of computers which is substituted by another generation of computers and this substitution forms the basis of a historical narrative. But we don't have this process in art and philosophy; so for me the term history is indeed problematic. In the *Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie* (ZKM or Centre for Art and Media Technology) in Karlsruhe where I work, we use the term 'art science' rather than 'art history'. The term 'art history' is in fact forbidden, because the kind of analysis that I am interested in, and my colleagues are interested in, has little to do with history.

What does it mean to 'forbid' art history? Does this simply mean leaving the work of establishing historical facts to someone else? Or does it imply a deliberate departure from history?

Well, it simply means to go back to the starting point. A starting point is a collection of art objects as they can be seen in an art museum. All these objects are simultaneously on view. All these objects are initially contemporary. Initially they don't tell any history. Of course, we can use these objects to illustrate a certain historical narrative – in fact, a lot of different and contradictory historical narratives. It is completely legitimate. But one can also organise the space populated by these objects in different, non-historical ways.

But does this unchanging, comparative museological paradise really still exist? The idea of the museum has changed a great deal in recent years, in part due to the rise of the temporary exhibition, and also due to the challenges mounted by contemporary art.

I don't think things are changing in that sense. The museum is, in general, an institution of survival. Things that have been thrown on the rubbish heap of history are taken up, literally in the case of archaeological research, or otherwise symbolically, and put in very artificial conditions of survival. How these institutions work – globalised or not, digitised or not – makes no difference at all.

However, if museums began to sell their collections, to go to the market, that would be quite a change. At the moment they function like the black holes of the art market. Something that was put in the museum is removed from the market – indeed, one definition of the museum is as this kind of black hole. But if you begin to sell works placed in this supposed black hole, if you begin to use the collection as capital, that would be something interesting, that would change the whole picture.

But this does happen and is controversial. For some people deaccessioning undermines entirely the purpose of the museum.

The museum is a kind of strange and irreducible institution. That it buys, but does not sell, is precisely what makes it a heterotopia and what creates its artificial eternity, and so on and so on. All these functions are the effects of a one-way relation to the market. If the relationship becomes two-way then the whole structure will be drastically changed. Of course there are some signs in this direction, but in general the system holds ... but you never know for how much longer.

Media, Pop, Nationalism

Following on from your comments on the status of art history at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, why do you think that the study of media – or Medientheorie – is so important in Germany, in comparison, say, to Britain or France?

Well not everywhere in Germany, of course. I could make some kind of comparison, but it would be speculative. To begin with, there is the German situation: in the last few decades the humanities have been generally influenced by the idea that the technical possibilities and impossibilities of certain media is the context that is created for an individual work, effecting both its production and distribution. That is after all what is decisive about a work of art. By this thinking, stress is placed on the impersonal motivations and forces that structures the

individual artwork. The form and content of an individual artwork, and also its reception, are determined not by individual personal projects, or political intention, or whatever else, but rather the general state of technical development, including social systems that support this development. It seems to me that German and French thought is more responsive to these kinds of impersonal, technical and uncontrollable forces. English and American thinking by contrast is much more personal and oriented to psychology, so that people talking about art always begin with the classic question of what this individual artist wanted to say. This is a more traditional, humanistic approach.

But then it may be argued that it was in a British and American context that Pop Art was developed, and that this was exemplary of this type of impersonality. It was also exemplary of the attempt to engage with the media. Pop Art developed very differently in Germany, where figures like Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke were important. You often refer to Pop Art in your writings and have discussed its importance for the unofficial art world in Moscow in the 1970s and 80s.

Well, I recently wrote an essay on Warhol for a show in New York. I think that this shift from Abstract Expressionism and the high-minded attitude of the 1950s, which took place in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a movement that on the one hand was understood as an opening to the wider audiences, to the world of the mass media. It was a way out of the isolation of the academies and the art scene. It was a movement from the particular of the art system to something more universal and general, which is the world of mass culture and the mass media. But there was an element of self-deception in that. American artist tended to identify mass culture solely with their own mass culture: this was a great mistake. As a Soviet spectator, for example, I saw Campbell Soup tins and Brillo Boxes for the first time in art books rather than on the supermarket shelf. All this Pop Art referred to realities that were in fact unknown to the general public in the Soviet Union. What happened in the Soviet Union under the influence of these images was a kind of new nationalism in art. This was a corollary of the obvious fact that Soviet mass culture was very different from American mass culture. So instead of trying to go for the universal, to be open to the international art system, Soviet artists began to concentrate on their own culture.

Which artists are you referring to?

Principally Komar and Melamid, Ilya Kabakov and Eric Bulatov. They were the first to generate a strong interest in Soviet rather than Western culture. They turned their backs to the West under the influence of American Pop Art. The same happened to German artists, who reacted to American Pop Art with a kind of nationalist programme of German Pop, based on everyday life in Germany, but also on images of the Nazi past, and later with images of the German terrorists and so on. What this type of reaction creates is a new artistic nationalism – this was certainly the result of American Pop Art in Eastern and Central Europe. It produced a strong awareness of the specific configuration of their own mass culture. Yet on the other hand we can say that this kind of reflection on their own mass culture was made to be sold on the international cultural market. That means that it was obvious for a Russian artist, for instance, that he could not be successful with an image of Elvis Presley – even if he knew who Elvis Presley is – because nobody was interested in an image of Elvis produced by a Russian artist. But everybody was interested in the images of Stalin and Lenin produced by the Russian artists and many other things that are easily recognisable as being Soviet. This strategy was very well received on the international art market. So we can say that the universal aspirations of Modernist art were substituted by the commercial aspirations to be successful on the international art market and in terms of universal art institutions such as Biennales, the Documenta, and so on. The purpose of these universal art institutions is to provide an overview of what is happening in the world, so that every part of this world is compelled to represent itself in its specific terms, if it wants to or not. There is no original will to represent oneself in this manner; it is more the case that there is a compulsion to accommodate the international art institutions and to accommodate the international art market. This is universalism on a different level.

Moscow had its first Biennale last year. What does this say about attitudes to contemporary art in Russia?

There is a growing interest for contemporary art in today's Russia: a lot of galleries, events, exhibitions. There are also some important collectors. But one does not have a feeling that the contemporary Russian artists are very much interested in the international art scene. They are mostly interested in the local Russian art scene.



Ilya Kabakov, *Incident at the Museum*, or *Water Music*, with sound composition by Vladimir Tarasov, wood, board, paint construction, 2 rooms, oil paintings in the style of fictitious Socialist Realist painter of the 1920s and 1930s, Stephan Yakolevich Koshelev, chairs, plastic sheeting, water, buckets, sound installation. Dimensions variable, installation at the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1991.

Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, oil on canvas, 182 x 134 cm. Collection of Ronald and Frayda Feldman, New York.



On the same note, the National Art Museum of Ukraine opened last year – in New York. There is currently an exhibition called Crossroads. Modernism in Ukraine, which contains works by David Burluk, Alexandra Exter, Malevich as Ukrainian artists. Is this a second wave of nationalism: reclaiming earlier avant-garde artists for the purposes of the new post-Communist nation states? Kiev and Kharkov become in this schema as important as Moscow and St Petersburg for the history of avant-garde art.

Well yes, retrospectively you can nationalise art history in this way. Of course, the Ukraine was a part of the Russian Empire at that time and these artists thought of themselves as Russian artists – but you can redefine that if you want. I think, however, we have to differentiate between the practice of nationalising the universal – which is to say Malevich is a Ukrainian artist – or universalise the particular – which is what Komar and Melamid were doing by selling Stalin on the international art market. And what Andy Warhol was doing in exactly the same way.

Could you say a little about the research project ‘The Post-Communist Condition’, which you directed? As most of the research publications from this were in German, it is little known in the non-German-speaking world.

Well I must confess that in the first place it was an attempt on my part to do something a bit nostalgic. It was a reaction against the type of nationalism that is now rampant in Eastern Europe. Almost everybody is involved in building their national identity, or discovering their national identity, or something like that, which seems to me not to be a very challenging task. So I was interested rather in the internationalist, universal and utopian aspirations of Communism: how and in what forms it has survived these waves of nationalism. Of course it has survived in almost all former Communist countries, especially amongst intellectuals and artists connected with the international art scene. Many of them are very interested in referring to the Communist period. The problem is that this nationalist wave is to a certain degree reactionary – literally reactionary – as it erases forty, fifty, seventy years of history as being a mistaken history, because it was Communist history. For many countries it was precisely in this period that they emerged into the modern world. What actually happens is that under the pretext of ideological struggle against Communism something like erasure of modernism in general takes place. There is the supposition that one can go back to the time before Communism to build national identity anew, which usually involves a regression to a pre-modern or early modern time. This is something very irritating. So the project was about that: reinterpreting Communism as a project of modernisation; asking what was specific about that that has survived; how are artists dealing with that now; and how on the discursive level we can reflect on that. The outcome was three volumes. One was about projects for achieving personal immortality which were formulated at the beginning of the Soviet period.¹ There was a party, which is not very well known, called the ‘Immortalists-Biocosmosists’.

Is this where Nikolai Fedorov comes in?

Nikolai Fedorov was a precursor and his ideas were used by the Immortalists-Biocosmosists, but they were moreover a political party that were represented in St Petersburg and Moscow. They promoted immortality, the right to free movement in cosmic space as fundamental human rights and wanted to compel the state to contribute to

¹ Groys, B. and M. Hagemester, *Die Neue Menschheit. Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005.



Eric Bulatov, *New York*, oil on canvas, 2004/5. Courtesy of the Artist

these rights. The Soviet Space Programme was born out of this movement – initially the rockets were designed to take immortals to other planets. Only later did it take some kind of military turn. There are two other volumes: one about the politics of the Russian avant-garde and one very thick volume which is the contribution of contemporary Russian and Eastern European authors to the contemporary situation in Eastern Europe.² And then I organised an exhibition, *Privatisations*, which was about the appropriation, or privatisation of the Communist myth that took place in Russian and Eastern European art parallel to privatisation in the economic sphere.³

Is it easier to be post-Communist outside of the former Soviet Union? It seems that all the artists you are interested in moved to Manhattan as soon as they could. Does this imply that Communism is finished only in as much as individuals have the chance to physically escape?

Oh, no. The Russian artists living in Russia also work a lot with the Soviet material. This material is very rich, pretty exotic and still interesting for the international public. That is what I describe as ‘cultural privatisation’: individual, artistic appropriation of the collectivist Communist heritage.

Utopia and the sacred work of art

Utopia is a central concept in your work. Originally it was a concept oriented towards egalitarian ends and an ideal of equality. Only later, around the turn of the last century, did it become less about making the world better and more about making people better, which led inevitably to the dystopias characteristic of the twentieth century, the type we are likely to read about in Orwell or Huxley. This raises the question of the role of suffering, which stands in between real human life and many utopian visions. In your essay Der Tod Steht Ihr Gut you discuss the ‘suffering’ artwork, and have argued that it is precisely through physical degradation, perhaps even martyrdom, that during the twentieth century the work of art has become a historical object.⁴

The work I did on the concept of iconoclasm, understood as a kind of productive method, is relevant to this question of suffering. We can say that the modernist artwork is produced by the same procedure, by the same tortures to which the body of Christ was subjected. This is obvious if you consider the physical humiliation and derision, and so on, to which the modern artwork was subjected. So we can describe Modernism as a transposition of the tortures that were applied to the

² Groys, B. and A Hansen-Löve (eds.), *Am Nullpunkt. Positionen der Russischen Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005; Groys, B., A. v.-d. Heiden, and P. Weibel (eds.), *Zürück aus der Zukunft. Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005.

³ *Privatisations. Contemporary Art from Eastern Europe*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2004.

⁴ Groys, B., ‘Der Tod Steht ihr Gut’, in: *Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, Munich, 1997.

body of Christ to the art object itself. This is precisely what makes modernist artworks sacral. Thus, every modern and postmodern artwork is a place where art is sacrificed in one way or another: for instance, through ugliness, through the use of profane objects, through a lack of artistic skill, through being incapable of any kind of perfection, and so on. Postmodernism is the space then where the aspirations of modernity are burnt. In this sense there is no difference between utopia and dystopia, because they are two different aspects of sacrifice.

There was a famous Red Army song the words of which were ‘we all go into this last battle for the Soviet power, ready to die’. Of course if they all died there would be no Soviet power, as there would be no population. This is a typical paradox of modern thinking – we have to demonstrate our incapability of doing something for it to be of value. Such a demonstration in itself is what saves us. Lenin said of the Soviet Terror that it makes clear the hypocrisy of the terror endemic to capitalist society. So what is interesting about art and heretical politics in the twentieth century is that they are against hypocrisy. They accept everything that is not hypocritical and reveals itself. Greenberg said that painting should not cover a canvas, but reveal a canvas. Likewise, the Soviet Union reveals terror as the basis of society. This revealing of the inner mechanism, showing how things really are, is a sacrifice, in the Christian sense – Christ showing that he is only human, destroying all pretences. It is precisely this self-destruction which creates his divinity. This is the same ritual by which radical art and radical politics are constituted in the twentieth century. Have you seen the film *Borat*? It’s very funny, because he summarises this idea. Borat is a sort of Russo- ‘natural man from the East’, but instead of being beyond all prejudices, he is a museum of all these prejudices. Thus at the beginning he seems to be bad, but by the end, because he demonstrates his prejudices and every other person in the film conceals them, he appears better than anyone else. It’s precisely the same thing – the point is to reveal your own ugliness and evil and if you do this you are automatically good. *Borat* shows that if you are bad, but not hypocritical, then you can still ultimately be good. And this is what all radical politics and art is about. Evil which is not hypocritical is good – that’s the rule!

Given the choice I would prefer rather to learn from Borat than from the Soviet Terror. But it is clear that your views of modern art go against many traditional views, particularly in the emphasis you place on a theological interpretation.

I think that theology is very instructive for us in thinking about our culture. It is a culture defined by theological problems, in particular the notion of the 'Death of God'. Christianity itself is defined by this notion of the death of God, because it begins with the death of Christ on the cross. And so our culture is a certain type of modified Christianity. If you are interested in the history of ideas, then of course there are a lot of ideas derived from mathematics, the Enlightenment and so on, but if you are interested in more general mechanisms of art and politics, then these mechanisms are in my opinion theological, not philosophical. We are living through the repetition and shifts of fundamental theological figures, and even rituals. Particularly rituals of self-sacrifice, symbolic acts of self-sacrifice as in the case of contemporary art and media where one has to look stupid, uneducated, incapable and ugly to be successful; or a 'real' self-sacrifice as in the case of a suicide bombing.

This makes much traditional religious imagery seem a little redundant. Many well-known modern artists made religious images at some point in the career, particularly Crucifixion scenes. One thinks of Beckmann, Nolde, Dalí; the list goes on. I suspect you would see these as moments of hypocrisy – that the truly religious aspect of a modern artwork was that it displayed physical signs of suffering and martyrdom.

What is interesting is the repetition of the failure. Christianity begins with a failure – with the incapacity of Christ to establish himself as a leader, so to say, and at the end of his suffering his abandonment by God. And that is precisely what modernism is about. Abandonment is then the strong religious theme of modern art – the Brillo Box is the Christ of our time: it is discarded and thrown away as a mere package – and then returns in its full glory as a work of art. The urinal is abandoned and despised – and then revered, etc.. That's where the fundamental figures of Christianity reappear – not in the iconography. It's the problem of how I produce an artwork and I produce an artwork by letting that artwork suffer.

Religion and Repetition

You often link the words 'religion' and 'repetition'. Why do these terms have so much resonance for you?

What is transcendental and what is really unchanging about religion is that religion does something that nature doesn't do, which is to repeat. Nature is about differences – people who are interested in nature and

the materiality of the world are interested in differences. But I am more interested in identities – not in terms of hidden identities, nor in terms of subjectivity (which I don't believe in), but in terms of mechanical replication, in the way that Walter Benjamin has described it. Religion introduces the ritual into the world: literal repetition of the same. If I am participating in the ritual I am automatically immortal and eternal, because I am participating in something that repeats itself beyond the possibilities of nature and evolution. That is why it is important to be fundamentalist, which means never allowing any change and never allowing any interest in the spirit – only the letter should be of interest.

Every factory is a church because of this mechanical repetition and also because it produces suffering – the suffering of workers. It is precisely because of this ritual of mechanical work that the working class was sanctified during the nineteenth century. The intellectuals were never sanctified, because they always do something different and you cannot sanctify someone who is doing something different all the time. You can only sanctify someone who always does the same thing. But now I think that more and more intellectuals and artists are in fact repeating the same, which is a very positive step in their development. Art is more and more a ritual and thinking is more and more a ritual, repeating the same process. Nobody is interested in the root reasons why an artist is making art and nobody is interested in the product; the beginning and the end have become irrelevant in comparison with the middle. Those involved in art and discourse are repeating certain fundamental forms of inner and outer behaviour which have thousands of years of precedents. For a very long time artists and thinkers were not very interesting because they were too creative – and now they really begin to be interesting in their behaviour and the way in which they are living their lives under the sign of repetition.

You seem to be very optimistic about this possibility.

It is optimistic in every aspect. The act of thinking itself is a repetitive act, independent of the content, independent of the context, independent of the beginning, independent of the end. Plato recognised this, but it is still an overlooked concept.

*How would you square this set of ideas with the concept of narrative that you describe in your account of Ilya Kabakov's *The man who flew into Space from his Apartment*? You talk about the importance of reading narratives into works of art as a way of countering autonomous interpretations. Surely in a ritual*

⁵ Groys, B., *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, London, 2006.

situation there is no narrative development – a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end.

In fact they do go together. In my account of Kabakov, I describe the repetition of a movement, the movement towards cosmic space, which fails every time. It failed politically, technically, in terms of artistic imagination. But if we take this attempt plus failure plus attempt plus failure we suddenly see the light of the end of the tunnel, so to say. Repetition itself is the story – not how it was made, or what it leads to, but the fact that the impulse to escape was repeated – and we can also repeat it. At the moment when we repeat it we live the same life as Kabakov's heroes, as Russian cosmonauts, as Fedorov and so on. At this moment we are sanctified and saved.

Who in this case is 'we'?

Everybody who subjects himself to this ritual.

But are you suggesting that artists somehow lead the way? Is there some special clerical role being ascribed to artists? Or is it more something about the way artists are as individuals? Harold Bloom once described artists as being distinguished from ordinary people as they more instinctively rebelled against the fear of death.

Yes I know this quote. But... I think it's a bit too psychological. It's too much an individualistic, psychological approach. We cannot, for example, answer the question as to why there is this repetition by saying there is some kind of eternal desire that manifests itself in this repetition. We don't need the claim that there are some eternal or trans-historical powers or desires or institutions that guarantee this repetition. It is enough to say that there is this repetition. If you begin to argue by constructing transhistorical powers, like reason or nature, you immediately enter into a very problematic metaphysical realm. And these things were fully deconstructed in the 1960s and '70s and we don't want to go back down that path. We don't need this kind of eternal, transhistorical, substantial bearer of the repetition. We can speak about the repetition without necessarily asking or answering the question: what is repeated, why it is repeated, what kind of power is behind this repetition and so on. It is enough to say that there is this repetition, for instance the repetitive gesture of the painter who just paints and paints and paints. Independent of why they do this, or what comes out of it, we have this process which is fundamentally repeti-

tive and we can speak about this process, the role and function of this process in our culture, without ever asking the questions why, who, what and so on.

This deconstruction, as you say, took place in the 1960s and 70s. It was also the theme of those Pop Artists who wanted to escape from style and meaning and simply repeat the world they found around them. Would you accept Richard Rorty's association of the terms contingency, irony and solidarity, as a way of describing the ironic relation to Stalinist Socialist Realism of Kabakov and Komar and Melamid, and others?

Not really. Because I'm not sure that this kind of repetition is contingent, ironical, or has anything to do with solidarity. I would say that certain types of repetition could be made under the pretence of irony – like painting Marilyn Monroe, for instance, pretending that it is an ironical gesture. But it's probably not. And technically it is not an ironical gesture, because even if you spend five minutes doing this, this is five minutes of your life. It brings you five minutes nearer to death. It is nothing to do with solidarity because the artist does not want to establish solidarity with his subject, Marilyn Monroe; and it has nothing to do with contingency because by doing so you believe you come to a point where you remain eternally successful.

There is a hope in all this artistic practice that through the process of repetition you in fact transcend contingency, irony and even solidarity. The latter because everybody dies and repetition just goes on. The hope is rather to get into contact with some kind of impersonal processes, processes that are transcending your actual existence. French structuralists believed that it was enough just to speak to get into this practice, for language is already a matter of repetition. Levi-Strauss thought that by speaking you are already participating in a process that is fundamentally non-psychological, because it is a repetition of grammatically pre-formulated sentences. Such a process has nothing to do with your psychology, whatever that could be. There is a very fundamental gap between what people are thinking and what they are doing, what their reason for acting is and what actually transpires. What's interesting for me is not what people are thinking, but what they are doing.

The 'discovery' of the façade of Stalinism by the artists you are interested in is part of this, as you have written, as is the discovery of the work of Duchamp. To bring those things together is quite extraordinary.

Although I can see the attractions of discerning difference, what I have always tried to do is draw the attention of the reader towards the moment of repetition.

How far can an aesthetic category based on a religious, essentially Christian premise, reach? Particularly when so much of twentieth century art was shaped by non-European currents.

Well I think art is a very recent phenomenon. It appeared at the end of the eighteenth century; before then we had only design, or the production of religious objects. Art appeared in the context of European culture, but it soon became widespread. Airplanes are also recent, but everybody uses them. Art appeared after the French Revolution in the context of the pillage of other countries through colonialisation by European powers, who asked themselves – what is common in all this garbage? And what is common is art. So art emerged from the beginning as a globalised notion of what was common in all these things that are heterogeneous, that are taken partially from Egyptian culture, partially from Italy, partially from Inca culture, partially from your own locality. It was an interesting assumption, which is absolutely absurd in itself, but this assumption seemed to be effective, and now everyone goes along with the idea of art. I don't see anything wrong in that, just as I don't see anything good in it. It's just useful – like it's useful to use airplanes without asking who invented them, where, and under what circumstances. We simply believe in the fact that they will fly. We get into the habit of using them without asking questions, just as we get into the habit of making art without asking questions.

Boris Groys, thank you.

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