

Frederic Bougle

Olga Kisseleva - revolution of the look

The expression 'virtual reality' is absurd since all reality is virtual. We all carry around our own version in our head".

David Cronenberg

Fax from Olga Kisseleva (November 2000)

Hi Frederic,

Here's some pell-mell information about the project whose initial title was "Clones". I was invited to Dordogne to carry out in situ my "How are you?" project which you know about... but people were so suspicious! Especially when they learnt that I had been to Tibet to ask such a "disturbing" question! They were constantly telling me: "Here you are with all your new technologies. Don't forget it's still the Middle Ages here!" So my first idea was just to "get a foot in the door", try and show them the world through my eyes and, conversely, put myself in their place. But as I shaped the images, I realized that I was making clones. After they had borrowed my eyes, the three different people formed a "virtual family". A mother came up to me and said: "I would really have liked my daughter to have blue eyes just like on the photo!" So it was like I was temporarily doing something "virtual" that you could soon order for real!

Then something happened to me at a preview in Paris. At the time I was working on the project when someone came up to me and said: "You have a problem with your eyes!" The person didn't know me and was unaware of the project. I answered: "There's no problem with my eyes. I've never worn glasses". He insisted: "I'm sure you find it difficult to see reality". It was then that I realized he might well be right and that sometimes I had to borrow other people's eyes in order to perceive reality better...

Reality? Which reality? What is that sole and unique reality which imagines itself to be multivision consciousness? Olga Kisseleva has come up with a quite out-of-the-ordinary project in the form of a strategem which she has presented in a disused butcher's shop in the heart of Excideuil, a charming Perigord village, where she was invited within the framework of the "Art Residences in Dordogne" project. Located on the church square, the small shop marks the divergence between high and low village, between a chemist's and a baker's, between the sanctuary for prayers and the covered foie gras market. She has staked her work in the very crack of this no man's land, between herself and the world, between artist and others - with the following rules of thumb: her presence as an outsider

located in a defined space, French Cartesianism and Russian mysticism, the local and the global, movement and fixedness, crystallized in a blurred, fade-in fade-out look...

The tattooed face of the butcher's shop still bears the lettering which testifies to its former function and, even if the word "boucherie" on its sign has to be decrypted, the façade is scored by its past. Two shopwindows are separated by a mirror in which the visitor can still reflect on his image. Such divergence serves to split the passer-by/visitor in two, simultaneously avoiding and prising out the look that takes place, avoiding the act of looking, prising out the process of looking and seeing oneself seeing. The artist's face is projected onto one of the windows with the eyes of other people from the village. The faces of these other people are projected onto the second window but with the artist's eyes, a mechanism which is disarmingly efficient.

Such a device could be viewed as disturbing, as putting people ill-at-ease or as something simply fascinating. It might also arouse Freudian or Lacanian problems, in particular the nature of the looker and the looked-at. By projecting her face with the eyes of people in the village and the emblematic faces of a few local personalities with her own look, the artist, through such hybrid and appeasing icons, has succeeded in drawing together the looks cast upon her as an outsider. Her Slavonic quest for the absolute and the universal may well reflect the myths and utopias of her native Russia (1), but the problem she raises also stems from the transfer of subjects, including herself and those subjects which represent a problematic stumbling-block to others, and vice-versa, always guaranteeing a way back to the central function of the look. Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarked that, even though we are looking beings, we are, on the world stage, above all looked-at beings. In psychological and even Sartrean terms, this situation either satisfies or frustrates us. In any event, something does happen when we are subjected to the looks of others. These looks are all around us and, in Lacan's words, transform us into looked-at beings, despite the fact that some of us do not wish to be so. It also has to be said that Olga Kisseleva is an adept of the new technologies of communication and is interested in their causality, what such means of communication hold for us and the nature of the individual who will use them(2). Veiled by the iris of the screen, a retinal soul restlessly stirs, diffusing its complex desires. Hypermedia such as Internet confirm our belief in all-pervasive telepresence but, nonetheless, such media are cut off from our subtlest means of perception... smell, taste, touch. In Lacanian terms again, the world may be "all-seeing", but such voyeurism is not exhibitionist; it does not arouse our look and, "if it does begin to arouse it, it also unleashes the feeling of strangeness". Contemporary communication tools make it possible for us to observe whoever wants to be observed on the other side of the world, in every room of his or her apartment. We can follow rallydrivers across African deserts... on the screen! What of it? Like ocelli, the interchangeability of individuals testifies to this new aspiration to all-seeingness, as does Olga Kisseleva's work. Seeing with the eyes of others, being the other but without experiencing what the other incurs, seeing without experiencing, a situation which in some respects may be a prelude to understanding subjects, provided that such subject accepts the differences and that he doesn't impose his idealized "I-the-model" scale on others. Seeing one's face with the eyes of others (even if others look at it in a different way) or seeing the faces of others with one's own eyes (even if they are brown), these are ways of resolving the new universal awareness of the overmediatized being, whether he be from a French village in the Perigord or live in Rechnoye Volkzhal in Moscow. Whatever he may say or do, his monolithic structure as a subject, his autonomous, identified mass will tend to be pulverized by the live concertinaing of life-boat information. However efficient the psychoanalytical yoke may be, it is no longer possible to harness it on an individual who has been fragmented and multiplied, politicized and cinematized, TVed and

televisionized and who is both videotext and Internet surfer. The cinema industry, video clips and Internet sites feed our eyes with what they imagine we are expecting to see and we all either ignore it or take delight in the fact. Formatted in his conscious and digitized in his unconscious, Mr Everyman loses grip on his spatial and temporal fixedness. He imagines that everyone thinks like him. Otherwise, he becomes even more isolated and cut off. He only sees himself through the eyes of others and the thing he dreads is that others cannot see him any more. The subjective eye is metamorphosed into multifaceted, misted-up fly's eyes, unable to resist the onslaught of signs which fascinate him. He sees himself as an object of fantasy in the illusion of other looks. This is his way of avoiding self-disillusionment. Angel-like, he nails himself to his keyboard, safe in the knowledge that no look can violate him. It is quite possible that what Olga Kisseleva is offering us overshoots the problems raised. When we are face-to-face with the look in revolt, who can say what form such revolution will take?

(1) Russia wanted to celebrate the year 2000 with an immense firework display in space, a vast "hi there!" that everyone could have seen.

(2) "How are you?" is a project which began in 1996 at the Gallery 21 in Saint Petersburg. It consisted of asking people from different countries this simple question with the aim of sounding out their state of mind, an exercise in soul-searching. The answers went to make up a hypertext made available on the Web.