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Olga Kisseleva: "I see therefore I am."

In Russia, over the last few years, art theory has built on a new concept: the 'post-diaspora' (1), which marks the birth of a type of community that did not yet exist in Russian art of the modern period. The traditional Russian diaspora, resulting from several waves of Westbound emigration following the dramatic collisions of the 20th century, offered several types of "Russian artists in exile" and several types of emigration poetics.

Hence the now abandoned and inaccessible social and cultural context could be turned into theme and myth. It became the mainspring of poetics in the work of several artists, from Chagall to Kabakov. For many others, breaking with the context of their origins, with no likelihood of return, motivated an artistic assimilation to the Western mainstream. This tendency seemed completely natural in light of modernist and neo-modernist poetics, which cultivated the universality of artistic language and was indifferent to the artist's ethnic and national identity. Finally, the polarity of contexts — Soviet - Russian and Western — became an issue in the poetics of *sots-art* (V. Komar & A. Melamid, L. Sokov, A. Kosolapov and others), which was based on reconciling the incompatible attributes of the "two worlds."

The post-diaspora is essentially symptomatic of the era of globalization and the world's new homogeneity — when the "developed world" and the "developing world" start to converge and the "other world" (post-communist), which still exists *de facto*, is ignored. This comes from the undeniable fact that the post-diaspora is not a simple satellite of the Russian art scene but also the experience of many artists from non-Western countries who now work in the main centers of the current contemporary art system. For them, migration in the homogenous world is no longer traumatic, or more precisely, if this trauma occurs for certain individuals, it now results from personal psychological traits rather than cultural and poetic characteristics.

The post-diaspora artist lives at the crossroads of several realities. First, the reality of the country of origin, with which there is no longer any obstacle to dialogue. Second, the reality of the local context in which he/she lives and with which the artist cannot help but interact given that this is where his/her professional destiny takes shape. And finally, the reality of the globalized world, including the globalized art world, in which the flow of information and events as well as the issue of culture is now transnational. This three-way identity distinguishes post-diaspora artists from other international artists, whose identity is constructed only at the crossroads of the local and global.

Reducing the poetics of the post-diaspora to a basic, simple typology is a fairly difficult task: the poetics specific to Russian and non-Western artists working in the West are extremely personal. However, it is obvious that admission to the post-diaspora art community is not just a question of biography but

also of creative and intellectual objectives. The post-diaspora artist is someone whose complex identity is reflected in his/her work and who constructs his/her personal poetics based on this identity.

The fundamental specificity of the post-diaspora artist is the inherent contradiction of his/her local implantation. Over the last fifteen years, ordinary international artists have created many works analyzing the interaction between the local and global. In an apologetic or critical manner they have taken on the exaltation of global reality and its sterile space, or on the contrary, they have accentuated (directly or ironically) the local, ethnic characteristics in their work. These tendencies and their strategic success are the legitimate result of a globalized outlook: the more uniform the world is made, the more indispensable national and ethnic identities become. In turn, the post-diaspora artist, with his/her multiple identities, tends to focus on other types of connections in today's world. Being simultaneously based in several places at once forces him/her into a constant quest for identity as well as a constant quest for the reality in which he/she finds himself. This is why the post-diaspora artist is not especially inclined to establish a diagnosis but rather to ask questions.

In fact, some of Olga Kisseleva's works are expressed as questions: "Where are you?", "How are you?", "What do you think about?...", "Am I different?", etc. Or they place viewers before a dilemma, pushing them to make a choice ("(another) point of view", "Doors", "Border"). Her post-diaspora identity makes Olga Kisseleva extremely sensitive to the world's confusion. As her works indicate, the global is not only the universal hegemony of sterile, urban environments. ("A city"). It is also the universal dissemination of a new archaism. The exotic local with its particular aroma can be found in the center of Paris or Manhattan ("Where are you?"). And nothing in the world around us should inspire blind trust: the street that opens up after a corner in Paris could turn out to be Nevski Prospect ("Connection"), just as we can find a Paris interior in a Moscow attic ("The wrong city").

For the post-diaspora artist who lives between different places in the global world, revealing the deceptive appearance of the world is a daily, existential task and a condition for his/her survival. Consequently, he/she is predestined for an art mission of revealing the illusion of the visible. History focuses on the act of looking, on the experience of visual contact with the world. This is far from common for contemporary art, which is described as "visual", even in Russian. In the specific example of the post-diaspora artist, this focus is absolutely legitimate: faced with the world's plurality and confusion, he/she tries to lean on a few absolute and incontestable principles. The visual is by definition the very essence of art, whereas personal outlook is the very essence of identity (2). This situation reinforces Kisseleva's position. She likes confronting viewers with acts of her visual experience.

This is also why her intellectual analysis of the world today, with its plurality and confusions, lacks any speculative content. It is presented to us in the form of very direct and striking testimonies. For her, the experience of observing is an attempt to decipher the inner world as well as the outer. She began defining her own identity by comparing it with the visual representation of another woman: a photograph of Stephanie of Monaco from the cover of a magazine ("Am I different?"). Eyes and a way of looking at the world are the quintessence of personality and elements of identity: simply change

somebody's vision, make him/her take on somebody else's vision and the change is immediately apparent ("A clairvoyant told me I have a problem with my eyes: that I couldn't see reality").

In Kisseleva's work, cultural or social phenomena take on a visual force. For example, text, with its purely functional tradition in the work of contemporary artists, is transformed in Kisseleva's work into a spellbinding visual image, affirming the "refusal of verbal communication." (3) ("Silence"). She tries to make visible even that which is not visible, such as electro-magnetic waves ("Landstream"). On the contrary, the act of eliminating visibility in the context of her poetics has such a strong significance that when she erases the slogans from demonstrators' banners, making them "invisible", she gives a metaphysical dimension to political protest. Political and social opposition is also a "difference of viewpoints" that is literally manifested in Kisseleva's work. The intransigence of protesters is represented by the presence or absence of outlook: on one hand, we encounter expressions that are full of life and on the other, closed faces behind helmets ("(another) point of view").

Nonetheless, the post-diaspora artist does not at all have blind faith in the act of perception, just as he/she does not trust the world's visible surface and does not believe in objectivity. This is not only because reality itself is more complex than it seems, but also because somebody is always manipulating our way of seeing. Being an essential element of identity, seeing becomes the arena of the struggles and whims of power: somebody can intentionally force us to see terrorists where there are none and present as terrorists those who are not ("Image-makers"). The "fabrication of images" is the most important industry in the world today and the post-diaspora artist sees how they are produced with no real effort ("Instrument flying rules", "Ex-stream"). He/she learned to recognize manipulation of outlook during the ideology era, when suspicion of the powers that be and of the reality built to its orders was a general state of mind ("Hybrid Space").

The post-diaspora artist retains this state of mind today, in the post-ideology era. And this perception concerns not only mass media productions, commonplace among critically-minded international intellectuals, but also — and this is much more radical — his/her immediate surroundings, the very basis of his/her private and professional life. Hence, "presenting oneself" in the social sphere, i.e. the "fabrication of images of oneself" is an inherent characteristic of modern man the typical symptom of the total mediatization of life ("Your-self portrait"). Unlike many European artists of the 1990's, Kisseleva is unwilling to believe in the dolce utopia of narrow societies or the harmony of "aesthetical relations" (4). Thanks to her double identity, given that she is not entirely integrated in the habitus of any local communities, neither the one she left or the one in which she lives and works, i.e. in invariably retaining a distance from them, she sees from outside: every community is based on reciprocal manipulation and on the maintenance of a conventional lie ("Lie detector").

Furthermore, revealing this systemic manipulation can only be done by a new manipulation accomplished by the artwork's maker ("Lie detector"). This is why the post-diaspora artist's language is often fundamentally similar to that of mass communication. Showing how current images of the world are like computer games, Kisseleva herself creates complex interactive installations that work like computer games ("DG-cabin", "Ex-stream").

Belief in the authenticity of artistic language is inherent to the local artist who has retained the sense of his/her roots or tries to construct them. This nourished certain projects in the Russian art scene in the 1990's (5). The post-diaspora artist strips back the conventional aspect of this approach, revealing that it is based on manipulation.

Most of Kisseleva's works, especially those of recent years, represent scenes of social and political resistance. We see the masses versus power, or, to use more contemporary terms, the multitude versus the Empire. However, the post-diaspora artist is unusual in that he/she retains a certain distance. Remaining in the position of observer, he/she is witness to the political division of the world, neutralizing the slogans of the masses ("(in)visible"). It is not just slogans that oppose the world of the Empire: it is also individual ("Border") and collective ("Another point of view") vitality and strength that stand up to the instrumentalist rationalization, which is the grounds for the globalization of economy and power. But passion is a local resource: it is foreign to the diaspora, whose identity is complex and whose approach is analytical. This is why the emotional energy of Kisseleva's poetics is nuanced by distance and intellectual analysis. Her poetics are less carnivalesque and less grotesque than that of the local Moscow scene, just as they do not contain the standardized oomph of the Euro-American globalization mainstream that Paolo Virno defined as "[a] cheerful resignation"(6).

The post-diaspora artist's resistance is personal and contemplative. Thus, in the video performance "Plane", Kisseleva presents three episodes: the artist throws a paper airplane from a Stalin-era skyscraper in Moscow, from the top of the Grand Canyon in Arizona and from the summit of mountain in Tibet... Here, instead of passion, there is abstraction and concentration; instead of the solidarity of the masses there is solitude in the abyss of space; instead of instrumentalist rationality, there is the pure symbolic of action. These three scenes could have been created virtually but Kisseleva really carried them out, traveling thousands of kilometers to do so. Doing in real space what would more rationally be done on a computer screen, spending time and energy on something that has no rational explanation, or seeing in reality what will be taken for fiction: this action is radically distinct from predominant behavior, both in the Empire and in resistance to the Empire. According to Alain Badiou, action flying in the face of all expectations can be described as an "event": a pacifist revolution free of superficial pathos and rhetoric.

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(1) See Evgenij Fiks, "Postdiaspora: konstatacia i predvoskhišenie" in *Khudožestvennij žurnal*, n° 56, 2004, p. 55-58 (<http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/56/13/>); also published in English (Yevgeniy Fiks "Post-diaspora: "Statement and Premonition", *Moscow Art Magazine, Digest 1993-2005*, Moscow, 2005, p.80-83 (<http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/>)).

(2) I have observed a similar focus on visual contact with the world in the work of another young post-diaspora artist, Anastasia Khorochilova, See "Rossija, kotoruju my terjali", in Anastasia Khorochilova "Bežin lug" (catalogue), Moscow, Trilistnik, 2005.

(3) Lev Manovitch « The possibility of communication », dans : « Communication-identification », Paris, France, 1998.

(4) See the book of French critic Nicolas Bourriaud "Esthetique relationelle", Les Presses du Réel, Paris, 1998; extracts have been translated into Russian, "Estetika vzaimodejstvija", in "Khudožestvennij žurnal", n° 28-29, 1999, p. 32-38.

(5) See my article "Fatalnye strategii" in "'Drugoj' i raznye", NLO, Moscow, 2004, p. 43-66.

(6) See Paolo Virno "A Grammar of the Multitude. Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life", New York, SEMIOTEXT(E), 2004, especially p.84-94.