

Larisa Solovyova

Olga Kisseleva, a clearing between East and West

One day the famous physicist Thomas Edison was invited to a party at his friends' home. He arrived and almost the same instant felt a strong desire to leave because of too many unknown faces and too much empty chatter. Taking advantage of the moment when no one paid attention to him he headed for the door when one of the guests stopped him with a question:

"Mr. Edison, what are you working on now?"

"On the exit."

The artist Olga Kisseleva has been working on the same problem for many years now. True, she is look and at an exit not only for herself but for all of us as well. Or rather for those who think that Entrance and Exit is the same thing. Occasionally they may, indeed, coincide but in most cases they don't.

Sometimes there are many entrances but there is a need to find one common exit or otherwise a conflict may flare up, bringing the world to the brink of disaster.

However, there may develop a different situation when there is one entrance open to everyone but each has to find an exit on one's own. People seem to be aware of it but not everyone manages to find it at all times. And this is true not only about Russia. It happens everywhere. Olga Kiseleva saw evidence of it as she staged her simple and elegant installations in different countries around the world.

"How are you?" is the title of her first big action staged in 1999. In English this is not even meant as a question but as a standard greeting not requiring an answer, and yet practically all the people whom the artist greeted with this friendly phrase started talking about themselves. They did it in different ways, naturally: some just said a word or two while others broke out into a passionate monologue about their life that suddenly was of interest to someone. It happened the same way at the World Trade Center in New York and at a Buddhist monastery. Does that mean that people are in need of a dialogue after all? That they wish to be heard out and understood? Then whence this universal lack of communication?

To find this out Olga Kisseleva asks people chosen at random her second and main question: "Who are you?" Take yourself, for instance: do you know who you are? What exactly would you like to tell the world about yourself? This is one of the most difficult tasks, in my opinion, one can think of. Who are you? Who am I? Who are we all??? The more unexpected the answer the more accurate is this large-scale artistic research. Incidentally, Olga Kisseleva was practically the first to employ this creative method of interactive media-installation, which made her part of the world contemporary artistic elite.

At the Dakar Biennial she surprised everyone again with the naïve question: "What's wrong with your eyes?" Her own answer was exceptionally witty: she changed the eyes of the participants in the installation (Africans in that particular case) giving them all the kind of eyes she has herself: bright blue and pure as the sky itself sometimes. That was an exit in a way: learning to look at the world with different eyes. Quite different from yours but still similar in many ways.

With the project "Where are you?", presented at the 49th Venice Biennial, Olga Kisseleva

succeeded in involving the viewers in an exciting media-experiment when the borderline between the real and the virtual practically disappeared. She displayed photographs of samples of alien cultural reality such as “Odessa” and “Shanghai” in New York, The French “Smolensk” and the Paris “Africa”. Some of these doubles look so much alike that we can’t distinguish between them whereas the media conceal the reality instead of spotlighting it and presenting the truth to the world; and thus they confuse our minds compelling the question: “What is better, facts or fiction?” Is it really so important to know where you are. Perhaps other questions are more important, such as “Whose side are you on?” “Who is on your side?” “Who is against you?” “Are you capable of entering an unknown space without destroying its visible and invisible limits?”

Olga Kisseleva again offers an unorthodox solution entitled “Doors”. The idea of this video-installation is simple: scenes from the sessions of the European Parliament in Strasburg and the life of an Afghan village are shown on both sides of a large screen. East and West thus find themselves in close proximity, which is dangerous and attractive at the same time. It was Kipling who explained a long time ago and, it would seem, once and for all that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...” They will in fact if a contemporary artist makes them. Moreover, no super-medial technologies will be required for this. The viewer himself cuts the door through to the other world as he is placed in the shaft of light from the torch. The person’s shadow serves as a clearing through which we witness the rapprochement of the two worlds. We are only a few steps away from an Afghan home where people are sitting around the table drinking tea or simply talking. They won’t invite us inside – it’s not done in those parts – but we do not really wish to get in because we respect other people’s traditions. To enter the hall of the European Parliament you have to go round to the other side of the screen. That’s the whole technical trick.

However, it’s only a physical clearing, a gap, to be more precise, which has not yet become an Entrance. It will become one only if we enter it carrying our own light, either a spiritual or an inner light, depending on what one has at one’s disposal. And then a clearing occurs, one that Olga Kisseleva, a Russian artist living in Paris, is looking for so intently. We could have done without the detail about her residence had it not been for one circumstance which has to do with Russia’s role in the East-West relationship. Many political scientists believe that today’s Russia, located geographically and psychologically between the two worlds, is capable of identifying with both of them and bringing together these two cultures, two world views, two parallels, which cross from time to time striking fire.

Hundreds of monographs have been written on the subject of East and West. There are not so many monographs on doors and gates. However, many poems were devoted to them, explaining what is absent from the textbooks.

Traveler, arriving from afar,
The gates are open wide to you.
Only one step to the entrance,
But you won’t pass through
Unless you leave behind
The unwieldy load of the past
You’ve carrying with you everywhere.

Someone's shadow covers the screen again and again so that the clearing between East and West that has been found by the artist does not disappear.