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## The possibility of communication

The art of Olga Kisseleva is concerned with communication. More precisely, with the possibility of communication between human beings. So what, you may ask? Is not this one of the main themes of the twentieth century art in general, from expressionism to existentialism? Yes; but every generation has to answer this question anew, for itself -- for the possibility to have communication, as well as miscommunication, emerges in a different way in each period. In the case of Kisseleva's generation, its formation was shaped by two most amazing events, the events which, together, came to define the end of the twentieth century.

The first event, taking place in second half of the 1980s: the end of Communism, the dissolution of the Soviet block, the disappearance of the Big Other of this century. The result: communication chaos. What looked like a unity, a single code, a single message, breaks into a multitude of codes, messages, channels in the East: new nationalism in the former Soviet block; co-existence of old Soviet style culture with new Western and capitalist based culture; new gap between rich and poor.

The second event, taking place in the first half of the 1990s: Internet. New communication utopia. New universal language: all media being translated into a digital code. Instead of the old "proletariat of all the countries, unite!" -- new slogan: "computers of all the countries, connect!" And now, that you have connected to another human being in Japan, Hungary or in a building across the street from you, what are going to say to him? What, and why?

It has been a remarkable century, but its end is even more remarkable. Indeed, think about: first, a gigantic social event, the end of one utopia which defines the beginning the century. And, immediately after, within couple of years: a technological revolution. And, with it, the beginning of another, new utopia. Within a few years, those who were discussing the possibility of the third way, the advantages and disadvantages of socialism and communism, are talking about the advantages and disadvantages of Netscape and Microsoft browsers. Instead of "the land to the workers" -- "we want more bandwidth."

What has been artist's response to these events? A response to new communication chaos and new communication utopia? Both -- one social, another technological -- promise to make communication easy, but in fact they make it even more difficult. In the case of new East, it now thinks it can become the West but more often than not the two, still separated by different histories, misunderstand each other. In the case of the Internet, communication becomes more difficult because it is now assumed that its problem is purely technological in nature: all that is needed is to establish the connection.

In "How are You?" (installation and a Web site, 1996) the artist asked this question of people in different countries. She entered the received answers into a computer and created hyperlinks between them. The answers came to form a single text. A collective answer, which assumes a collective subject. But this collective subject is created by the artist. She attempted, in other words, to create a whole, a utopian unity out of fragments, the fragments of individual minds, individual beings, pieces of TV news, memories, languages, customs, pop culture memes, and so on. The resulting communication utopia

has a distinctly late twentieth form of hypertext. Maybe this is the only kind of unity possible today, or at least the kind of unity which is true to the mosaic nature of fragments it brings together?

In "Why am I Here?" (installation, 1997) the artist forces the viewer to question her or his identity. But not in a sense in which "identity" often functions in today art and criticism: a coordinate on the axes of language, class, gender, etc. No, she means identity in a much more basic and threatening way. First, the viewer is made comfortable: nice cozy room, a teapot, comfortable light. And then, slowly, she or he made to wonder: why I am here, in this room, this town, this country, this planet, at this time? The viewer, in other words, is asked to check the workings of the communication channel between her and the society -- the channel which is her own identity whose stability makes possible reliable transmission and reception of messages.

"Cinderella" (video, 1993-1994) is a modern fairy tale. Its subject is the impossibility of communication between the artists, the intellectuals, and the rest of the society which "takes them for fools." Why? Why do people who create communication codes which the rest of society uses are cut off from social communication by the users of these codes?

In "Chameolinism," (installation, 1995) the viewer reads the text reflected in a mirror. The mirror itself reflects the absurd word outside. Here, the only way to have communication (to be able to read the text) is to open oneself to the world, to make oneself vulnerable to its absurd and surreal structure, to let the world contaminate the code and the message. In short, the only way to get more of the message is to let more noise in.

"Hourglass" (video, 1994) includes a wonderful scene where the hand (which refers to the famous close-up of a hand in "Le Chien Andalou") contains not ants but letters. The letters, however, behave like ants: they move around, here and there, trying to make a message for us -- but they can't. Communication is refused. Of course, we recall that ants do have a language, that they actually communicate between each other by making paths, by creating certain trajectories in space. We also recall that strange as it was, the language of surrealism was indeed a language; in fact, following psychoanalysis, surrealism was also an attempt to make rational and transparent, make communicable what was not communicable previously -- dreams, unconsciousness. So, although in contrast to more optimistic and utopian movements of the 1920s such as constructivism or "New Vision," surrealism does talk about the darkness of human nature unveiled by the War, about instincts and drives, it also has a reconstructive, a purely Utopian component: rationalizing the unconsciousness, letting it speak, interpreting its language. But now, at the end of the twentieth century, after a whole series of new mis-communications (another War; than Cold War; and now, the new misunderstanding between the West and the East, and a new naive utopianism of the Internet), Bunuel's image no longer communicates. Ants became letters but they can't make any words. One again, the artist is creating a situation where communication can take place; she sets up the right structure, only to refuse full communication at the end. Why? To remind us that it is only the dream, that all we can have are some rare moments when the signal does get through, the moments than the letters do gather into words, soon to become noise once again.a