

IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG?

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What possibilities are there within new national cultural paradigms for young contemporary artists and curators in and from Central Asia?

I'll begin from far off. My memory has preserved a vague, albeit legible, image of the Soviet baby boom of the 1960s. Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I lived through a period when people were again betting on the young generation. Characteristically, one of the first signs of social change in those years was the documentary film *Is It Easy to Be Young?* When an epochal shift occurs, and undeveloped social and discursive spaces are suddenly liberated (the sixties and the nineties were just such periods), vibrant energy and inspired hopefulness are more relevant than experience and proven methods. And in fact, it was mostly young people who built the new post-Soviet scenes, including in Central Asia. The discrediting and stagnation of the old Soviet institutions gave them a chance to implement a new project, creating their own national cultures. Given the scale of the social transformations, this project was bound to be grand. Everything had to be rethought or, simply put, reinvented – national history, identity, the language of art, institutions, and so on. Moreover, this cult of renewal was then ubiquitous: the end of the Cold War and the emergence of globalization opened up the prospect of a completely new world. New communications tools and new institutions had to be created for art to be able to describe this world and function within it. From my own personal experience I can adduce the example of Manifesta, a new type of international art forum born in that era and meant for that era, and thus naturally devoted exclusively to young artists and curators. I was lucky: I was still relatively young back then...

The subsequent years, the so-called noughties, were a decade of stabilization for all the post-Soviet countries. Of course there is a huge difference among all these countries and their versions of stabilization. Over this period, the Central Asian countries, even Kazakhstan, the most economically prosperous of them, were unable to establish a modernized art system, and in this respect they differ from, say, Russia, with its reliance on a bureaucratic-oligarchic infrastructure, on the one hand, and, say, Estonia, which built the foundations of a European-style public infrastructure. And yet the

so-called contemporary art niche in post-Soviet Central Asia, organized by the nineties generation, has survived and developed. In particular, the Central Asian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which will be showing contemporary artists to the world for the fifth time, is part of this niche.

I think the new decade, the third post-Soviet decade, is presenting us with yet another baby boom. The turn of the decade was defined by the Arab Spring and the wave of protests from Europe and the US to Moscow and China. And everywhere it was young people who were the initiators and active force of these movements. In Russia, the young women from the unknown group Pussy Riot suddenly became superstars and symbols of the time. In Central Asia, where it seems that over the past twenty years the same artists have been responsible for the art process and its representation (characteristically, many of them have exhibited in the Central Asian Pavilions several times, which somewhat contradicts global practice), a new generation has emerged that is advancing new institutional initiatives (STAB in Bishkek, for example) and is ready to take over the pavilion in Venice. And oddly enough, they are pulling it off!

But now let us turn, for example, to the project *Winter*, which lays claim to being a manifesto of the new generation of Central Asian artists. What is curious is how it combines innovatory and critical sentiment with the melancholy of doom. We see the same thing in the work of many new artists and activists. They publicly demonstrate dissatisfaction with the status quo, but the prospects for renewal are extremely short-term for them. After all, even the Occupy movement (which in Moscow set up camp next to the monument to Abai and was thus dubbed Occupy Abai) remakes reality only for a specific time and in a specific place. In this sense, the political imagination of current artist/activists is not as violent as it was during previous youth explosions, when it seemed that what was at stake was remaking the world. Moreover, in the post-Soviet countries, the demands of protesters are sometimes limited to striving after the still-inaccessible Western bourgeois-democratic practices that Western activists themselves find hateful and see as part of the status quo they have to overcome.

But the most important and vulnerable thing about this latest advent of the spirit of youth is how amazingly quickly the culture industry picks up on this largely sincere will to change. And today this is happening more quickly than in the sixties and nineties. So even despite the economic crisis, investment in the young generation remains quite high today. In Moscow,

for example, I see that the rhetoric of supporting young people and their education is espoused in one way or another by almost all the major art institutions, and some of them have declared it their priority. So when I wanted to create the Moscow Curatorial Summer School in Moscow, securing financing for it (moreover, significant financing) and finding foundations interested in supporting this initiative was not such a big problem.

So in fact the alienation of young people from the 'old order' is symptomatic today to the same extent, apparently, as the cult of juvenility, such that the old order has begun to preach it. Perhaps behind this is the system's conscious or unconscious sense that its policies and programs of the last twenty years are exhausted, and for a lack of ideas it is simply investing in the young generation as the anthropological vessel of the future. Perhaps this is the result of a so-called split among the elites: various clans begin investing in young people, thus attempting to buy their loyalty and capture potential new areas of creative energy and artistic production. And, by the way, it is easier to deal with young people than with the middle-aged: they do not yet have strong egos, so even when they are headstrong and captious, they are still more docile and manageable. So, most significantly, support for young people can be understood as a means not of developing the state of affairs but conserving it. Who actually said that today is a time for the young? In fact, the situation is not so close to a breakthrough as it once was, and for figuring out its contradictions complex methods and fine instruments are more applicable than youthful enthusiasm and vibrant energy. I thus see the current focus on young people as camouflage to a great extent, and the industrial production of art by young people as reproduction of the status quo.

Hence (to finally answer your question directly), conditions for young artists are today more than favorable, in my opinion. And I think this is also true for the Central Asian countries, despite the weakness of their educational and representational infrastructure. They nevertheless have incomparably more opportunities than artists from the previous two generations had. At the same time, although – or rather, because – conditions are favorable for them, the choice they face is complex and ambiguous. How do you adopt a critical stance without being trapped by the system, without ending up in the messy market for criticality? How do you use the system's reliance on young people without rejecting the imperative to escape the system morally? What are the limits of compromise? What constitutes a reasonable rejection of the system? To solve these issues, however, it is hardly youthful

wisdom, experience, and analytical abilities that are wanted. But no one promised that it would be 'easy to be young,' did they?

How can a practice be culturally specific – let's say, for example, Central Asia – among future generations or artists starting to work now?

Once again I will start with the background. In the 1990s, globalization was primarily economic, and so production and distribution (including cultural and artistic production and distribution) were mainly managed with marketing methods. Representation was based on the supermarket principle, in which the illusion of an endless supply had to be maintained. And since the supermarket was located in the Western countries, just like the marketing experts and its consumers, access to it for peripheral producers was guaranteed, on the one hand, by the art system's desire for exhaustive representation. On the other hand, however, it was limited by a certain quota. This implied two things. First, all of us from the global periphery ended up competitors for the quota; and second, we were all reduced to representatives of our region, that is, we were ethnicized, which was predetermined by the nature of the demand. It is also significant that in response to this obvious disparity in representing the system's different subjects, the periphery got a chance to increase the quota in cases when it was united in victimizing the system and criminalizing its own past and present. Thus, the demand for art from post-Soviet countries increased when it was able to reference the hardships of their communist past and post-communist present. All this, however, is well known and has received the name identity politics. And it was all really experienced by the first post-Soviet generation of Central Asian artists. When they found themselves on the international scene, each of them came face to face with the demand for orientalism and exoticism, and each of them positioned themselves in their own way vis-à-vis this phenomenon. (By the way, the term "positioning" comes from marketing and entered the Russian language precisely in the 1990s.)

The second decade of globalization was marked by the fact that the world's global unity had been experienced and realized, which led to people becoming aware of common problems and interests, and generated numerous social movements. Globalization now was political. Henceforth, involvement in global dialogue would now longer be confined to promoting one's identity; what now mattered was personal testimony of how certain

global issues played out in your region and how this could be extrapolated to common problems. In other words, by the second decade of globalization, common narratives and common structures had been formed, each of them, however, with different perspectives on themselves, and each of which could have been a basis for universalization. In this situation, identity politics gave way to the politics of memory, which was particularly obvious in the post-communist countries. Here, the rebirth of critical discourse has been impossible without clarification of the communist legacy, which is no longer criminalized. It has begun to be examined for something that was overlooked before: an alternative to the western liberal model of modernization or, rather, the second component of the entire project of modernity. Thus, by restoring its involvement in modernity, the post-communist subject has been able to resist its ethnicization in a well-founded way. Likewise, by realizing its involvement in the other aspect of modernization, it has been able to imagine the possibility of a different model of globalization.

Given that the culture machine now operates on this principle, I don't think the problem of cultural specificity you are asking about is productive today. This does not mean it does not exist, but it does mean it is not a point of departure for the contemporary discourse. After all, conditions are not such today that they would incline people to emasculate any utterance's regional specificity or deprive it of its right to universal status. Practically speaking, each region today is stratified into different classes and groups, many of which use the network connections to go beyond their contexts and root themselves a broader trans-regional dialogue. They have the right to speak in this dialogue because they are inscribed in a common narrative, and because their local experience provides them with an original perspective on common problems. All this is fully present in Central Asia as well, and the project *Winter* is eloquent testimony to this fact, as it is entirely based on an attempt, first, to demonstrate a regional perspective on a universal narrative, and second, to test a universal problem's applicability to the Central Asian context. At the same time, the publication and discussion program accompanying the exhibition show that the entire project is beautifully inscribed or attempts to be inscribed in a certain well-defined and competently identified network environment. Hence I find it hard to agree with those elements of victimizing and criminalizing the regional circumstances that are inherent to the concept of *Winter*. Lamenting the flaws and vulnerability of our context only perpetuates them.

What other subjectivities need to be articulated, and why is it difficult for them to be heard?

Maybe you are right. Even today, not all social and regional subjectivities are equally represented, which was also the case in the 1990s and has always been the case, but as I have already said, the main node of problems today lies elsewhere. What should cause particular concern now are articulations of subjectivities that have received access to representation. The rapid consumerization of critical discourses, which we have already discussed, leads to these articulations becoming detached from their subjectivities. They become abstractions, dead formulas, and cognitive brands, which feed strategies of individual and group success within the cultural and intellectual industry. More specifically, whereas earlier the threat emanating from the global world was confined to the reduction of subjectivities to external manifestations of their local specificity, the risk today is that they will withdraw into an intra-network exchange of universalities, detached from the real forms of life that generated them. It follows that now more than ever it is vital not to lose sight of the fact that discourse is part of the project of life, which is rooted in specific circumstances of habitation, as well as in personal and group biography. Hence also the fact that today, amidst the endless pseudo-intellectual chatter or, as Martin Heidegger, not the most progressive philosopher, would have said, *Gerede* (idle talk), the voice of those subjectivities that neglect network rules and conventions and speak for themselves, from out of their own selves, is not heard. Leibniz's term monad and his entire theory of monadology are more relevant today than ever.

Given the fact that the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of its modernizing and internationalist ideology, opened the doors for counter-modernization and a regressive return to 'true national values,' artists find themselves squeezed between this, economic liberalization, and the promised openness to the globalizing world. Where, however, is social emancipation of individual subjects? And how is that addressed among younger generations of artists who grew up with the rule 'First the economy, then democracy'?

In his critique of Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism, Antonio Negri argues that there is no such thing as a totally unfree regime. Even in the most inhuman conditions, people carve out a space for themselves that

is free from power and oppression. This is also true of the current situation in Central Asia. Because freedom is what people make for themselves when they overcome the resistance of circumstances. No one gives democracy to anyone: it is the outcome of a flexible and constantly revised social compact born of civil wars and revolutions. The main problem with the political culture of post-Soviet people is that here liberal values were passed off as democracy, but liberalism, as we know, is a different political project. The idea that democracy is the rule of the demos, i.e., the people, smacked too much of Soviet rhetoric to be taken seriously during the mindlessly joyful farewell to communism. Today it seems that many young people are ready to tear up the unwritten agreement with the authorities that has defined the status quo during the post-communist stabilization – freedom to consume and travel abroad in exchange for corruption and bogus democracy. Perhaps the authorities will be able to renegotiate this agreement by making them an offer they cannot refuse. Or maybe they will find the strength and determination within themselves to begin the long, difficult work of building democracy. It is during this collective labor that the social emancipation of individual subjects will in fact come about, and the simultaneously fashionable and dead formulas of critical discourse will take on real content and become rooted in authentic forms of life.

What layers of symbols can be used and how? Is poetics a possible solution? Or post-art and activist art?

If we are saying that politics and aesthetics should today be rooted in forms of life, that also means the creation of new forms of life is the task of art and politics, as well as the fact that neither of these practices contradicts the other. It is also important that this combination of life, politics, and art is happening at a time when, as contemporary social thinkers claim, public life is immersed in intensive communication and subject to aesthetic codes. So it is hard to imagine politics or any other activity being closed to art, just as it is hard to imagine art shutting itself off from communication and other practices. But this does not mean that the concept of art's autonomy has exhausted itself. On the contrary, when everything becomes art, the definition of art becomes particularly relevant. Since aesthetic codes today are so pervasive, the field where they are produced should possess a heightened self-reflexivity. Hence, I would not be hasty in accusing artists who deal

with issues in which programmatic political commitment is not legible of escapism. For if art is the production of forms of life, then so it remains even when it reflects not on life but on the language of its artistic production. And the new life is always a matter of politics.

Hence, too, my answer to your question about effective symbols. Art in itself is not politics; it becomes political when there is life between it and politics. And that is because if art is not mediated by life when working with politics, it produces dead forms that are unlikely to be effective symbols. I find it easier to believe in the political effectiveness of art that give us back the feelings and experiences that disappeared from our lives as a result of the neoliberal revenge and the forms of life it imposed. I think that if, for example, art were able to give us back a sense of genuine ease and happiness, instead of the mantras of efficiency and success, that would be a truly political event. As Negri and Hardt have written, “This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist”.