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Parodying (case of curatorial strategies of Kazimir Malevich)

Recently at a symposium on Gustave Courbet in Munich,¹ Michael Fried remarked that enquiries on works of art have to start from a “motivated description.” It does not mean that one has to omit cultural history or any other para-pictoriality in his analysis. Indeed, it does imply the birthright of subject’s vision, that imperfect potentiality which is the eye, in the process of looking at art or at every visual expression *per se*. Your eye suggests you the motivation for describing an object.

Through this perspective, I think that not only art history but also curatorship deal with the “motivated description” brought up by the subject’s imperfect eye, and that logocentrism has to be put on other, subsequent, lanes. Both the art historian and the curator start from observation – this observation is informed by the subject’s background –, then they make a choice, then they are found by a frame, then they conceive and write a book or an essay, or conceive and install an exhibition.

In doing this, one has several options. The most obvious one is *epigonism*: you catch and follow the flow and the various mainstreams. On the other pole of the spectrum, there is the radical one, which I would like to call the *parodic*.

Please do not be disturbed by the term *parody*, which seems nowadays to have been vulgarized again and confused with terms as “mocking,” “spoof,” or “farce,” after been precisely described and evaluated by structuralists and post-structuralists. Moreover, it was recently argued by Marion May Campbell, Dominique Hecq, Jondi Keane, and Antonia Pont,

» 1 *Gustave Courbet and the Narratives of Modern Painting* (27-29 March 2019), Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, Munich; organized by Stephanie Marchal (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) and Daniela Stöppel (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München); funded by the DFG and the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung.

that the term parody needs to be enquired again.² Of course, not all parodies are radical or subversive: among them you have plenty of gradations.

Still today it seems to me that the most fascinating treatment of the notion of parody lays in two essays by Russian formalist Yuri Tynjanov (1894-1943), “Dostoevsky and Gogol (For a Theory of Parody),” 1921, and the unfinished “On Parody,” 1929. In the latter essay, Tynjanov has an interesting point, splitting parody into parodic *form* and parodic *function*.

We should clarify our terms regarding an important point – the problem of the *formally parodic* [parodicheskii] and the functionally parodic [parodiinyi]; in other words – the problem of parodic form and parodic function. Formal parody, or the formally parodic, is the application of parodic form to serve a non-parodic function. Using an existing work as a model for a new one is a very common phenomenon. But if the given works belong to different (say, thematic and lexical) environments, then something emerges that is formally close to parody while having nothing functionally in common with parody at all.

It is clear, meanwhile, that the fact of a work being directed toward another one (and even more so, against another one), i.e. its functionally parodic nature, is intimately connected with the significance of the other work in the literary system. [...] This is why functionally parodic works are usually directed toward phenomena of contemporary literature, or toward contemporary attitudes to old phenomena; a functionally parodic relationship to half-forgotten phenomena is hardly feasible.³

Thus, parody-as-parody does not belong to a form, it is not the quality of an object. A formal parody is what we might define as pastiche, in which the elements constituting the object are clearly recognizable, because part of cultural history: a today’s parody of a Raffaello painting is a formal parody which does not serve a parodic function. What should be

» 2 “Collectively we see the contemporary moment as being in urgent need of an enquiry into parody’s relation to the revolutionary impulse, and to examine the degree to which violence inhabits the heart of parodic practice itself.” Marion May Campbell, Dominique Hecq, Jondi Keane, and Antonia Pont, “Art as Parodic Practice”, *TEXT*, no. 3 (October 2015), p. 11. I am indebted to Prof. Marta Smolińska for suggesting this publication. The mentioned article also gives a glimpse into scholarship on parody in the 20th century.

» 3 Yuri Tynjanov, “On Parody [1929],” in: Yuri Tynjanov, *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film*, translated by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), p.235-236, 240. I am indebted to Prof. Ainsley Morse for having me handled in advance the final version of her edited and translated edition of Tynjanov’s writings (with Philip Redko), especially because it includes “On Parody,” to my knowledge translated into English for the first time.

motivating the reworking of such an old work of art? That is why Tynjanov identifies the parodic function as directed towards or *against* the chronologically proximate parodied object: the function becomes a weapon of contemporary criticism.

Parody has to do with the recognizable, but at the same time it engages the notion of the unexpected. The level of expectedness or unexpectedness involves the attitude of the subject towards the object, i.e. of the observer towards the exhibition and the works of art: if the object meets the expectations of the subject, then the object may be qualified as epigonic. On the other hand, if it does not meet the expectations, and furthermore it disturbs the subject, laying bare his system of values, then the object may be qualified as parodic.

Please allow me to make an example from a little known story, about a Kazimir Malevich's lecture in 1913. Speaking at a debate on contemporary painting at the Troitsky Theatre on March 23, 1913, in St. Petersburg, organized by the avant-garde group of artists *Union of Youth* [Soyuz molodezhi], Malevich tries to explain to the audience the difference between "new" and "old" painting, between his version of Cubo-futurism and what he calls imitative painting, i.e. naturalistic painting. Let Aleksei Kruchenykh, the poet more affine to Malevich at that time, speak for him:

Malevich, in presenting his paper, was harsh. [...] Then, as far as I can recall, the following occurred: 'You don't understand the Cubists and Futurists?' said Malevich. 'Well there's nothing surprising in that, if Serov shows ...' and he turned to the screen on which at that moment appeared a picture from a fashionable magazine. An unbelievable roar arose from the audience, the police demanded that the meeting be stopped, we had to announce an intermission.⁴

Malevich here offers a typical parodic practice, because in the frame of a lecture, which is expected to be consequent, consistent, and explanatory, he *substitutes* a picture (a slide of a Valentin Serov's painting) with another one (a slide of a commercial photograph), whilst announcing the former. Using parody as a functional device, thus deconstructing the form-lecture, Malevich does not meet the expectations of the audience, provoking uproar and maybe some laugh. The performance is almost a parodic example by the book,⁵ but it is so radicalized, that it becomes a fierce

» 4 Aleksei Kruchenykh, "On Malevich," in: Irina A. Vakar, Tatiana N. Mikhienko, eds., *Kazimir Malevich. Memoirs, Criticism*, Vol. 2 (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), p. 113.

» 5 According to Gérard Genette: "I propose therefore to (re)baptize as *parody* the distortion of a text by means of a minimal transformation [...]" Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, tr. Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln/London: University of

weapon of criticism against the notion of imitation in art. This kind of provocation, in my opinion very consciously planned by the artist, has also extra-artistic – if not even beyond good and evil – motivation, because Serov, the celebrated painter, passed away prematurely in 1911: Malevich's parody has not even respect for those who rest in peace.

Not by chance, Malevich extends his range of activities into curating. His curatorial choices are fundamental in shaping both *Tramway V. The First Futurist Exhibition* (March 1915) and *0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition* (December 1915 – January 1916) in then Petrograd. Malevich scholar Aleksandra Shatskikh states that Malevich considered exhibition making an “ideological matter” and that he “took their organization very seriously”.⁶ For the sake of the exhibitions' integrity and unity, and in order to advance the proposal for a “conceptual” vision of curating, Malevich does not invite some friends (Aristarkh Lentulov, Vladimir and David Burluik to *Tramway V*, and the latter to *0.10*), who are at the time not so radical and ideologically functional as him and others. Malevich makes choices and takes the risks: who are the artists whom I respect, and who deserve to be shown in an ensemble, in order to render an exhibition a unity? Not out of friendship but out of vision. That is what the experience of the historical avant-garde still teaches us today: in the process of curating there has to be a choice, motivated by vision and description, and every other contingency has to be discarded as unuseful and mostly counterproductive.

Shatskikh advances further interpretation on Malevich as curator (of himself) in *0.10*:

The organization of the wall plane according to the collage principle, the posters with numbers word, and sentences, the presence of a single intent, and the conscious reinforcement of this intent in the hierarchical segmentation and value topology of the exhibition space reveal the innovative nature of Male[vich]'s exhibit at '0.10.' It was an independent concept, not the sum of the pictures presented. The Suprematist would be a pioneer in a type of art that in just a few decades would come to be called an installation.⁷

The two walls dedicated to his Suprematist paintings offer possible interpretation of Malevich's parodic attitude to practice. The “free” han-

Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 25. Orig.: Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982)

» 6 Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square. Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, tr. Marian Schwartz (New Haven, CT, & London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 23.

» 7 *Ibidem*, p. 107-108.

ging of the paintings as part of one unitary installation responds to what later Malevich addressed regarding the question on the identity of Soviet museums: “[...] I think that a museum’s walls are planes on which works should be placed in the same order as the composition of forms is placed on a painting plane.”⁸ But, if we accept Malevich’s auto-mithopoiesis that Suprematism is strictly connected with the events of the opera *Victory over the Sun*, 1913,⁹ and that the piece is a fierce parody of Symbolist theatre, drama, costumes and set design, one might advance the idea that, in order to break the bridges with the “old” world, Malevich does actually functionally parody museums’ hanging, i.e. the so-called “Petersburg Picture-Hanging Method”, whose model was, fair enough, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

More radically, Malevich does hang his “royal infant,”¹⁰ the *Black Square*, in the corner usually dedicated to the religious icon in domestic environment, that is like to say, he *substituted* the “old” icon with a “new” one. It is an aspect which, of course, *Mir iskusstva* artist, stage designer, and writer Aleksandr Benois immediately recognized in its provocative set:

Mr. Malevich depicting a black square framed by white, unnumbered but hung in the consecrated place high in the corner, just below the ceiling. Undoubtedly this is the ‘icon’ that Messrs. Futurists propose to take place of madonnas and shameless venuses; [...]. The black square in its white cover is not a mere prank, not a simple challenge, not a random minor episode that, through pride, through arrogance, through the flouting of everything that is loving and tender, it will lead everyone to their doom. This is no longer the hoarse cry of the barker, but the chief ‘trick’ in the booth of the newest culture.¹¹

To which Malevich answers privately with a grain of *Witz*:

And you will never see the fair Psyche’s smile on my square.
And it will never be a mattress for lovemaking.¹²

» 8 Kazimir Malevich, quoted in: Shatskikh, *ibidem*, p. 106.

» 9 Kazimir Malevich, “To Matiushin [27 May 1915, Kuntsevo],” in: Irina A. Vakar, Tatiana N. Mikhienko, eds., *Kazimir Malevich. Letters, Documents*, Vol. 1 (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), p.65.

» 10 Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. The New Realism in Painting [1915-16],” in: Troels Andersen, ed., *K.S. Malevich. Essays on Art. Volume I*, tr. Xenia Glowacki-Prus, Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), p. 38.

» 11 Alexandre Benois, “The Last Futurist Exhibition [January 9, 1916],” in: Vakar, Mikhienko, Vol. 2, op. cit. p. 517.

» 12 Kazimir Malevich, “To Alexandre Benois [May 1916],” in: Vakar, Mikhienko, Vol. 1, op. cit.p. 87.

Hazardous as it might be, the question arises, if Malevich exerts self-parody too, as a curator, in different times and locations, when he exhibits his suprematist paintings. Following Rainer Crone's and David Moos' hints, I was able to trace at least eleven works which were hanged and rotated differently in those exhibitions for the sake of which we have photo documentation.¹³ This specific curatorial practice by the artist cannot be casual and it has fruitful implications:

[...] Malevich [was] able to break with a habit that centuries of repetition had turned into an unquestionable norm: the painting as a direct metaphor of a framed window, opening onto the external and referential world. This conception presumed a necessary – and often hierarchical – orientation toward a designated top versus bottom, and a left side versus a right side. In Malevich's work [...] the elements that constitute a picture are dealt with autonomously and individually within the same painting.¹⁴

It is possible to compare photographs depicting the following exhibitions: *0.10, Petrograd (1915-16)*; “Kazimir Malevich: His Way from Impressionism to Suprematism”, *16th State Exhibition, Moscow (1919-20)*; *Kazimir Malevich*, solo show at Hotel Polonia, Warsaw (1927); solo show, *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, Berlin (1927)*. Could the different hanging of eleven paintings, rotated 90°, 180°, or 270°, being interpreted as functionally self-parodic? Even if the idea is fascinating, it is here complicate to substantiate: I stated above, that parody has to play with expectations, in order to work. The fact that two of the above mentioned exhibitions were staged in front of two separate West European audiences (Warsaw and Berlin), and that the other two took place in Petrograd and Moscow, excludes the possibility that the audience could had perceived the different hanging. However, this does not entail the possibility that Malevich wanted to experiment his curatorial practice, in order to verify himself, and only by himself, the “objectlessness”, autonomy, and self-reflectivity of his paintings.

We have seen how modernist curatorship grows up from artistic

» 13 Rainer Crone, David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich. The Climax of Disclosure* (Munich: Prestel, 1991), p. 156-158. Crone and Moos traced five paintings, all very famous: *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Color Masses of the Fourth Dimension*; *Suprematist Painting: Aeroplane Flying*; *Suprematism: Self-Portrait in Two Dimensions*; *Suprematist Construction*; *Suprematism: Supremus No. 50*. I also found: *Suprematist Painting (1915-16, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen)*; *Suprematist Painting (1917-18, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)*; *Suprematist Painting (1915-16, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)*; and three other paintings I still have not traced in collections.

» 14 *Ibidem*, p. 157.

practice, and that the parodic function of the curatorial practice had its role in defining some principles. I could give you more examples of groundbreaking exhibitions curated by artists in the age of modernism, with more or less degrees of functionally parodying the notion of exhibition: the *Dada Messe* in Berlin (1920, curated by Georg Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield), the *Raum der Abstrakten* in Hannover (curated by El Lissitzky and Provinzialmuseum Hannover's director Alexander Dorner, 1926-28), or the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris (organized by André Breton and Paul Elouard, but curated by Marcel Duchamp, 1938). But another time maybe. ●

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