A Siren's Song. Notes on *The Melancholy of Resistance*.

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Collecting is a process of narration, which actualizes itself into a new structure each time it is newly presented to the public eye. The story told by an exhibition can be a declaration of one's beliefs or a voicing of one's concerns. The potentiality residing in a collection can bring out voices that astonish not only the authors of particular works, but also the collector. In its two previous editions the *Europe at Large* project emphasized art from Central Asia and the Caucasus with the goal of situating it within a broader idea of Europe. The key to understanding the present is unearthing the past. It thus seems that a contemporary rethinking of the legacy of communism, which remains an unknown subject in spite of many attempts to grant it a voice, is unavoidable.

The mythical Odysseus, a monarch roaming towards the future, ordered the sailors navigating his ship to cover their ears, so that the voice of the Sirens, the voice of the past, wouldn't force them into a melancholic state of fatalism. For Odysseus, who by his own command is tied to a mast, the voice of the sirens contains the knowledge of all past events and is the sublimation of all experience, to which Odysseus no longer has any access. This situation can serve as a metaphor for the functioning of bourgeois art. Knowledge, to which the worker has been denied access, is granted through a song. This song can also serve as a call to join to the ranks.

In *Telling objects: a narrative perspective on collecting,* Mieke Bal analyses the act of collecting as an act of forming a narrative. Bal employs the concept of the fetish[1] and draws from the methodological dictionary of narratology. These critical discursive terms make it possible to regard a collection as a particular representation of power structures, which can be analysed through categories of everyday life critique. They also uncover the process of commodification, which is inherent to the capitalist system and originates in the structure of the narration and fetishism. While these observations are unquestionably important and fitting, they seem to describe only one model of collecting – an imperialist and universalist activity based on domination. On a different note Gilles Deleuze, while considering two ways of thinking about the past introduced by Charles Peguy in *Clio* (1931), describes 'two ways of considering events, one being to follow the course of the event, gathering how it comes about historically, how it's prepared and then decomposes in history, while the other way is to go back into the event, to take one's place in it as in a becoming, to grow both young and old in it at once, going through all its components or singularities. Becoming isn't part of history; history only amounts to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to “become”, that is, to create something new.'[2]

The juxtaposition of the two models of collecting confronts the purely negative and historical vision of Mieke Bal with the explosion of a single event in Deleuze's concept. Where Bal focuses on the issue of capitalistic fetishism and its alienation effects, Deleuze proposes the concept of an event in its becoming, which can substitute narrative and thus open new affirmative possibilities. The field spanning these two notions indicates a complex process of the construction and later deconstruction of an identity through accumulation.

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1 Fetishism in both the psychological and the economical understanding.

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 170-171.

Taking into account solely Bal's perspective, one could say that a project prepared by two Polish curators born during a period of Martial law in Poland, a project built around works accumulated by a Belgian museum, can only construct an illusive idea of art from post-Soviet countries. After all, the politics of collecting is based on subjective choices and unavoidable omissions. Nevertheless the interpretation considering the process of becoming, which one can borrow from Deleuze, offers a rich spectrum of interpretation possibilities and allows one to listen to different voices, which are called upon to articulate their own narrative within the collection.

An artwork binding a number of issues considered in *The Melancholy of Resistance* is Sergey Maslov's performance which took place in April 1998 in a business club in Almaty, where Maslov organized a mixed gathering of representatives of the *nouveau riche* and homeless people. Sheets of paper with *Survival Instructions for Citizens of the Former USSR* were scattered around the room to the sounds of Italian opera arias. The artist, who proudly pronounced himself a visitor from outer space and the last avant-gardist, decided to recreate sites and ideas, which everyone had seemed to have forgotten about – such as a rally or a community – and to address the urgent needs of everyday life. The USSR, of which Kazakhstan had been a part, had collapsed seven years earlier. The progressing social stratification caused by processes of transformation had already become clearly visible. The crowd that gathered to take part in Maslov's performance witnessed an ambiguous statement – the idyllic vocal music was at odds with the peculiar instructions concerning topics ranging from protection against the effects of rape to methods of saving tea. The survival set was conceived for the whole territory of the former empire and contained instructions for individuals, who needed to learn how to answer urgent questions on their own. The dismantling of the USSR is commonly associated with chaos and a bloodthirsty privatization process. If it weren't for the fact that access to the public sphere was highly rationed under socialism, one could speak of the fall of the public man.

According to Boris Buden our viewing of the Soviet period is distorted by the proceedings of the 1989 revolution and its outcome. It seemed that through the modernizing transformations implemented in the mantras of the emancipation of nations from the domination of communist bureaucrats, the belated bourgeois revolution would finally materialize. These events influenced the contemporary perception of a socialist past shared by the whole European continent. It is difficult to diagnose the whole spectre of communism, which seems to present itself differently to different communities. Instead, in its modalities, we try to search for its distinct features and not the correlations between them. Yet it is not only the experience of socialism and the memories associated with it, which became disintegrated. This process is perhaps most visible in the economical changes, particularly in privatization. The difficult conversion towards a capitalist economy initially based on the domestic model of the *perestroika* drifted later towards neoliberal ideology, which led to a deep stratification of the society and to the accumulation of the means of production in the hands of a narrow elite. These processes had an impact on culture as well. Take for example the Gini coefficient, which is the measure of the inequality of distribution, which when applied to diagnosing culture, grows inversely proportional to its quality in a given country. It thus can be said that a high coefficient leads to a cultural colonization of the weaker structures.

As a correlative of late capitalism, postmodernism supports an illusion of diversity, which is antagonistic to the unifying tendencies of a non-commercial character. As Boris Groys has written, this postmodern logic forces post-Soviet nations to search for their own identities, which were devoured by the Soviet Union or which

never even existed[3]. The current state of politics in Russia seems to be the best exemplification of the process of surrendering to a neoliberal economy and the victory of individual egoist cravings over communal needs. This culturally dominant and most stable player of the former USSR is now searching for its own identity. It thus seems appropriate to take Russia as the example of general tendencies. Alexei Penzin, a member of the *Chto Delat?/What is to be done?* group, describes attempts at finding a "Russian factor" as follows: 'These ideological statements, which indeed adopt and appropriate all external stereotypical views of Russia, or saturated by traumatic feeling of split between global concepts and local reality must be challenged by evoking a concrete and immediate intellectual and political pre-history. We treat this problem dialectically, reformulating it and reserving some theoretical "singularity" for the post-Soviet situation, but in terms of resistance to dominant conformist right-wing politics and ideology. On the other hand, this singularity produces a lot of difficulties when they try to inscribe Post-Soviet space immediately in the discursive field of contemporary theory.'[4] These circumstances may also be behind the discussion of Russia in postcolonial terms, indicated by Ekaterina Degot in her text *Does Russia Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?* Perhaps the legitimization of the claim of Russia to Otherness and to its subjugation by countries of the former first world is indeed tempting and easy to prove. One just needs to call into mind all of the stories and anecdotes reinforcing the notion of exotic savages or to refer to works of Sergey Bratkov, which can be interpreted as screens for Western viewers subconscious desire[5], but one must also remember that not so long ago Soviet Russia was a colonial empire, although in a peculiar meaning of the term. Degot and Penzin address the problem of translating the post-Soviet situation into the language of western critical discourse from a slightly different angle. A lack of understanding of one's own identity triggers confusion in outside observers. Alan Badiou expressed this most radically: 'I do not understand contemporary Russia at all. […] We knew the USSR and understood it, we had time to investigate it, and I'd even say we needed the USSR. Everything that happened there helped Western leftist thinkers even if they were not in agreement with its ideology. Just the fact of the Soviet Union's existence was extremely important for us. And now that it has collapsed, Russia has turned into an extremely mysterious country.'[6] In her text Degot points to an interesting solution, which applies to the conclusions of Penzin, Buden and Groys. Instead of focusing on the differences, one should attempt to destroy the exclusiveness that the Western world exercises over critical discourses and look for new grounds. While this task may seem difficult, especially in the light of Bal's theory of fetishization and exoticism, we believe that drawing on the politics of becoming makes it possible to propose a politics of translation. The main obstruction is the restriction of the experience of communism to a limited territory of countries of the former "second world". Drawing attention to collective practices – a frequent feature of unofficial art made before 1991 – but also the analysis of discursive artistic strategies after the collapse of the USSR, should become the base for a contemporary reassessment of communism.

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3 Boris Groys, *Beyond Diversity*, in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 156.

4 Alexei Penzin, *Post-Soviet Singularity and Codes of Cultural Translation. Some stories, preliminary theses and variations around one enormous problem.*

5 "Mikhail Ryklin: I think the Western European viewer finds something in your photos that goes back to the idea of displacement. Do you think your art perhaps brings the Western person closer to his own unconscious, helping him realize his voyeuristic desire?

Sergey Bratkov: Yes, I think it's like that."

Anna Alchuk and Mikhail Ryklin, *The Picture Hunter. A conversation with Sergey Bratkov*, in *Sergey Bratkov. Glory Days. Works 1995 – 2007*, ed. by Thomas Seelig, (Fotomuseum Winterthur: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008), 59.

6 Marusia Klimova, *Abroad #16: Alain Badiou*, *Topos*, http://topos.ru/article/4113.

Living in a forcefully designated communal space could be considered as a metaphor for the Soviet Union, a fictionally constructed space of co-existence between different republics and nations. One could actually view the whole Eastern block from this perspective. It is also crucial to consider the context produced by everyday life in this type of space and the peculiar community it produced. Victor Tupitsyn pointed to the communal speech typical for residents of communal apartments. The uncomfortable and strained living conditions of communal apartment residents could have resulted in two opposite archetypical outcomes: chaos or order. The first results in a discord, the latter in a harmony of voices. These two oppositional images constitute two terminal points, between which one can discover a whole mythology of countries of the former USSR, of which the principal voice belongs to Russia. Art created in the circle of Moscow Conceptualism is often interpreted through concepts related to communal apartments. These are the surroundings of the most famous artist of the former USSR, Ilya Kabakov, the pioneer of Soviet installation, who at the Documenta IX in Kassel in 1992 presented a complete reconstruction of a Soviet toilet. The sordid space, devoid of intimacy and privacy, caused an immense scandal. The installation was a shock to Kabakov's compatriots, who accused him of betrayal, but also to the viewers, who stumbled upon the artistic installation while looking for "real" toilets in the Fridericianum building. The interior design of the installation resembled a standard two-room flat. Inside, one could find a set table, dresser, bed and a black hole meant to serve as a toilet, situated in the centre of the room. Kabakov's *In the closet* presented at *The Melancholy of Resistance* is based on a similar premise – the figure of the *homo sovieticus* described by Tupitsyn: 'His installations can be interpreted as acoustic structures through which one may listen to the author's inner voice (which in Bakhtin's opinion, acts as a surrogate of the unconscious). This "voice" is possessed by a passion for telling stories of an autobiographical nature, impersonating, through these narrations, legions of characters and populating a labyrinth of both personal and communal memory.[7]

In 1978 Federico Fellini directed a film that tells the story of an orchestra rehearsal taking place in a renaissance chapel. The orchestra is accompanied by a television crew, who constantly disturb the work of the musicians, preventing them from finding the harmony so essential to their work. During the interviews conducted by the television crew, conflicts and repressed antagonisms become apparent and hostility towards the conductor grows. Anarchy sneaks into the disciplined ranks of the orchestra. A coup d'état takes place, accompanied by unexplainable throbs and a slow collapse of the edifice. Through an extremely powerful image Fellini was able to construct his most political film. Enclosed in a common space the musicians form a metaphorical nation and different social groups, which are forced to negotiate their own interests. There are more examples of the relationship between music and social order, such as the destruction of Luigi Russolo's *noise machine* by the audience of Buñuel, Dali's *The Golden Age* or the political activities of the creators of the Tropicália movement in Brazil. But perhaps the most famous example of this is the reaction to the arrest of the members of an avant-garde musical group called Plastic People of the Universe in 1977 in Czechoslovakia. The noise-like music and alternative life style of the band members had long been a source of interest for the Czechoslovakian regime police. It was this event among others that provoked Vaclav Havel to write the famous Charter 77, which rapidly became a foundation for the oppositional movement of people, who had been up until that moment active only in the art sphere. An inquiry into participation models in music must also acknowledge

7 Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious. Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2009), 58.

the year 1968, when politically involved composers ventured to achieve change through music in order to inspire social revolution. And so in *Paragraph 7*, part of the composition titled *The Great Learning* by Cornelius Cardew and intended for amateur performance, we receive an enactment of the procedure of tuning, leading to the harmonious consonance of voices. In the beginning each of the performers sings in his or her own rhythm and pitch, regulated by the pace of breathing. However each next word of the score has to be intoned in accordance with the pitch of a neighbouring singer of the "orchestra". The initial chaotic vocal multiplicity is transformed gradually over the one and a half hour of the performance into a splendid unison. The musical score becomes an image of utopian social relations, which are based on the harmonious coexistence of all members of the social organism. Writing about the process of improvisation, Cardew remarked: 'Two things running concurrently in haphazard fashion suddenly synchronize autonomously and sling you forcibly into a new phase. Rather like in the 6 day cycle race when you sling your partner into the next lap with a forcible handclasp.[...] the subtlest interplay on the physical level can throw into high relief some of the mystery of being alive. .'[8] Cardew's personal devotion to "the social" certainly facilitates the transcription of his words into a field of political relations. The model described by Cardew can be easily applied to *tusovka,* a typical practice of the Russian art scene. According to Viktor Misiano: '*Tusovka* brings together the totality of people originally consolidated not by means of concrete structures – institutional or ideological – but through the prospect of their gaining. *Tusovka* is a type of artistic association, which considers itself as pure potentiality. *Tusovka* is an artistic social project.'[9] A spontaneous arrangement becomes a platform for exchange and for creating common politics. Yet the bonds, which hold the project together, are considerably loose for facilitating an easy disentanglement when the agreed upon goals had been achieved or when the enterprise runs into insurmountable obstacles. Andrey Monastyrski's everchanging *Collective Actions* group or Sergey Bratkov and Boris Mikhailov's *Fast Reaction Group* functioned similarly. A day-to-day communal practice led also to the establishment of organizations based on stricter regulations such as *Radek Community*, *Chto Delat?/What is to be done?* as well as communities set up only for achieving specific goals, such as projects like the *Hamburg Project* or the *Visual Anthropology Workshop* by Victor Misiano. In one of his *Slogans* Anatoly Osmolovsky describes the importance of reviving the idea of the community in defiance of the value of the individual promoted by the capitalist and postmodern logic. This is what Osmolovsky wrote on the wall of a gallery using only dust: 'In contemporary art, there is no place for the private and the personal, to the contrary, it is an elaboration process of the impersonal.'

The Melancholy of Resistance. Works from the M KHA Collection constitutes an attempt to acknowledge the voice of various private mythologies. The exhibition presents a number of works of artists whom one might think of as parts of a social orchestra, but who adopt a strategy of individual expression rather than carry out an enforced order that envisions history after the fall of totalizing narratives. Through its distinct construction and dimensions the main space of the show became the author of the exhibition. The construction of the immense square-shaped room with a cubic capacity of over eight thousand meters slightly resembles that of a temple. Four massive pillars situated in the centre of the room support both the roof and the suspended ceiling, which conceals a lamp imitating an oculus. The gigantic windows make it impossible to isolate the works from the

8 Cornelis Cardew, *Towards an Ethic of Improvisation*, in *Cornelis Cardew. A Reader*, ed. Eddie Prevost (Copula, 2006), 126.
9 Victor Misiano, *The Cultural Contradictions of the Tusovka*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/cultural-contradictions/

outside world. Quite on the contrary, the view of the housing projects situated close by, allows one to contextualize the artworks. Needless to say the selected space becomes a site of communal experience and gathering. The displayed exhibition provides the collection with a space, through which its potentiality comes into play revealing the differences between presented artistic strategies and attitudes. An excellent example of a tactic undertaken by at least a few of the displayed artists is the work titled *1 m²* by Vyacheslav Akhunov. The artist subtly intervenes in a material, which is the source of both inspiration and comment. Let us demonstrate this through analysing a series of water-colour paintings titled *The Doubt* – a collection of miniature replicas of propaganda posters, which differ from the originals only by a question mark added at the end of each slogan. Akhunov's overuse of the aesthetics of Soviet propaganda is a subversive gesture, one which challenges the power of the propaganda and deconstructs the language of political rhetoric. Also Sergey Bratkov takes up the topic of a particular type of language – the communal speech. His *Kuzminki* visualize the social body in a very literal sense. Bratkov conducts short interviews with locals about a park in Moscow, showing the local cultural life of people, who had spent most of their lives in collectives and councils. An affirmative understanding of the phenomenon of the collective is put forward by the Russian neo-avant-garde group *Collective Actions* (Kollektivnye deystviya), which was founded in 1979 by Andrey Monastyrski, Nikolai Panitkov, Nikita Alekseev and Georgy Kisewalter. Since the start of their activity, till the present day, the group organises collective performances under the common title – *Trips Out of Town*. The participants are invited to follow specific instructions. The goal of these performances is to provide participants with the experience of an empty action in space, a state which, because it was frequently filled with snow, resembled a white unwritten sheet of paper. The dislocation from socialist Moscow reality was supposed to result in the abandonment of perceptual habits, and a focus on new spontaneous conditions of artistic exchange, as well as experiencing one's subjectivity both through a collective and on its peripheries. *Trips Out of Town* constitute a radical attempt at creating a site of exchange and dialogue outside of a metropolis. An entirely contrasting attitude, that of a glorification of individual practice can be found in the work of Hamlet Hovsepian, an artist briefly associated with the Moscow avant-garde movement (1978-80), who returned to the town of Ashnak in Armenia with an abundance of collected experiences and where he currently lives and works constantly drawing inspiration from his home town. When still in school, Hovsepian came to hear about the films of Andy Warhol. Soon afterwards he created a series of works showing the activities of everyday life and practices, which weren't particularly meaningful, pleasant or even obscene. According to Susanna Gyulamiryan, the films *Thinker* (1975-76), *Yawning* (1975), *Itch* (1975), *Head* (1975) and *Untitled* (1976) celebrate anti-heroism and commonness.

The title of the exhibition was adopted from the title of László Krasznahorkai's novel. *The Melancholy of Resistance* tells the story of a small Hungarian town, visited by a travelling circus. A massive container enclosing the world's biggest stuffed whale is placed in the middle of the town's main square. The protagonist of the novel, a postman named János Valuska whom the townspeople consider to be a half witted klutz, becomes fascinated by the whale, which is seemingly the main attraction of the circus. The key figure is that of the so-called Prince, a part of the circus freak show. He speaks an unintelligible language and exercises an inexplicable power over people, who follow him from town to town. An obtuse and vicious crowd travels with the circus vandalizing the neighbourhood and terrorizing the townspeople. The words of the rambling mob, (which tramples over and destroys everything that it encounters, as if in a state of madness) are terrifying: 'we had

nothing to lose, everything was horrible, insufferable, unbearable, houses, gardens, bill-posts, electric tractions, shops, post offices and the bland smell of bakeries, the neatness and orderliness were unbearable.' Another key character of the novel is a man named György Eszter, a retired music teacher, who renounces social life and never leaves his house. He gives a monologue propounding a theory that Andreas Werckmeister's harmonic principles are responsible for all aesthetic and philosophical problems in music, which need to be undone by a new theory of tuning and harmony. Immersed in melancholy Eszter searches for new ways of mending the dislodged time by changing the rules of harmony.

It was Julia Kristeva who attempted to recount the mysterious paradox and terminological confusion, which can be observed in writings on the concepts of melancholy and depression. She writes: 'if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated.'[10] Her main thesis in *Black Sun* is that both melancholy and depression are results of a disturbance in symbolical relations with the world and that only a return to the rules of symbolization can save a subject from the abyss of silence. Kristeva describes the strange, alienated, sedate or scattered speech of the melancholic, which places the person in an unstructured time. As Kristeva writes: 'Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future... .'[11] The difference between melancholy and nostalgia or mourning lies in the type of loss. It is the feeling of losing something one is not yet aware of. Kristeva also points to the fact that times when either religious or political gods are toppled are times in which one is especially prone to dark spirits. Periods of transformation with their state of insecurity result in a type of social aphasia, in which no coherent norms and values necessary for individuals to function can be produced. This may lead to the emergence of such behaviours as rebellion or withdrawal. Resistance is born when an individual, terrified by the unpredictable character of reality, creates his/her own space according to new rules. The individual trains his/her voice to provide testimony for the possibility of the existence of a different world. Just like Eszter, when he locked himself in his own house to search for a new social and musical order within the confines of his space, who believed that discovering new rules of harmony, different from those of Werckmeister would lead to the birth of a new community.

In the preface to the German edition of *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* we read: 'According to Marxists the cause of melancholy lies in the inability of the bourgeois to bear the contradiction between the sphere of possibility and the merciless historical reality. That is why the first congress of Soviet writers decided that the goal of literature is to influence social relations in order to diminish the cause of melancholy.'[12] The exhibition at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Torun proposes its own, original “method of music-therapy”. As Dmitri Gutov writes in a text accompanying his *Revolution Opera*: 'when you are singing your thoughts are improvising, it is not quite the same as talking. The idea is formulated

10 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 9.

11 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 60.

12 From the preface to the Polish edition. Raymond Klibansky, *Przedmowa do wydania niemieckiego*, in R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn i Melancholia. Studia z historii, filozofii, przyrody, medycyny, religii oraz sztuki*, (Kraków:Universitas, 2009), 8.

in a different way. Its rhythm is based on the outside logic. Thus, sometimes a thing that would never come out in a prosaic statement slips past lips spontaneously.'[13]

Centre of Contemporary Art *Znaki Czasu* in Torun, Poland

on view: 6.11.2010 – 3.01.2011

works in the exhibition:

Vycheslav Akhunov, *1m²*, installation, 2007

Victor Alimpiev and Marian Zhunin, *Ode*, video, 2001

Sergey Bratkov, *Kuzminki*, video, 2002

Collective Actions, video documentation of *Lieblich*, 1976; *The Balloon*, 1977; *The Slogan*, 1978

Hamlet Hovsepian, *Yawning*, video, 1975; *Untitled*, video, 1976

Ilya Kabakov, *In The Closet*, installation, 1998

Ilya Kabakov and Emilia Kanevsky , *August 20th, 1968*, installation, 2000

Rustam Khalfin, *Pulota* (reconstruction by Yelena and Viktor Vorobyev in 2010)

Sergey Maslov, *Survival Instruction for Citizens of the Former USSR*, 1998 (reconstruction by Yelena and Viktor Vorobyev in 2005)

Andrey Monastyrski, *The Circle of CA*, installation, 1996

Anatoly Osmolovsky, *Slogans*, installation, 2003

Koka Ramishvili, *Change*, video, 2005; *War from my Window*, photographs, 1991

13 http://www.gutov.ru/video/revopera_eng.htm