

The Dilemma of “The Victory of the Russian Avant-garde”

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The Russian avant-garde is an art movement that flourished at the beginning of the 20th century and vanished in public on 1930 by the latest. It vanished because of the gap between its goal and the official opinion of the Communist party of USSR about arts and cultures. It had a hard experience of being forgotten in USSR for a long time, but reevaluation of it started in the perestroika period behind the Western countries. Now a numbers of researches and criticisms on an enormous amount of its heritages are appearing one after another. Conclusions have not been reached about the problems when Russian avant-garde started and ended or, first of all, the name of this movement “Russian avant-garde” is really apt for it or not, but they are only academic ones. It has completely restored its honor and won popularity in Russia and other countries as the essence of Russian arts. But we can say this word “popularity” expresses clearly the situation dangerous for the value of the arts of the Russian avant-garde. “Avant-garde” was originally a military term that presupposed enemies to fight against at the front line. Therefore, avant-garde art stops being “avant-garde” and dies when it finally wins and its enemies disappear. The avant-garde arts that make no one feel unpleasant, have no enemies to defeat, are loved by everyone, can’t be “avant-garde” by definition. Facing this dilemma, it even seems that the Russian Avant-garde has already finished its original role in spite of its today’s popularity. Critics and researchers are reevaluating Russian avant-garde art from various points of view both positively and negatively. Disagreements and confusions aren’t dissolved and are barely keeping the Russian avant-garde alive. Of course, this opinion is too ironic for the Russian avant-garde arts and it may sound insulting to its autonomic values. But in fact, we

can't avoid the dilemma of "the victory of the Russian avant-garde" when we talk about actuality of the idea "avant-garde".

The concrete results of Russian avant-garde, which are paintings, sculptures and poems are certainly inspiring artists today. But in this paper, we survey the criticisms on Russian avant-garde in Russia and inquire about the effectiveness of the concept "avant-garde" itself. Is the Russian avant-garde still alive, or is it already dead? Do the enemies that "avant-garde" have to defeat still exist? What does it mean that we want "avant-garde" today?

Hal Foster, an American critic stated in an essay in 1983 about postmodernism. Foster explains that modernism "won" in the 20th century, but "its victory is a Pyrrhic one and no different than defeat"¹, pointing out the paradox hidden within modernist art. This "paradox" means that modernism art turned into the official one loved by everyone, even though it once tried to rebel against the old-fashioned bourgeois standards of arts and sometimes brought uncomfortable feelings to the people who sees it.

His opinion can also be applied to the current theme, the Russian avant-garde. Let's assume we go sightseeing in Moscow and visit to a museum. There we can enjoy the great works of the Russian avant-garde, for example, "Black Square" of Malevich to our heart's content. We may see schoolchildren on excursion in the museum of Mayakovsky. At souvenir shops of Vernissage we can buy the magnets or mug cups printed with the designs of the Russian avant-garde. One of the goals of the artists of the Russian avant-garde was to make it easy and cheap for the proletariat to experience the art and improve the standard of living. Now it has been obtained. But we may feel something uncomfortable because the difference between modern art and the art it tried to defeat has disappeared.

This situation occurs not only in Russia. An advertisement of a Japanese shopping center, an imitation of the poster of a famous Russian avant-garde artist Aleksandr Rodchenko aroused women's appetite for buying clothes. There may be a lot of discussions about the scale and quality

¹ Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), ix.

of the influence of the original poster on the society. On the other hand, it's difficult to think that this Japanese poster plays other roles than to arouse customer's appetite for buying. A Japanese fast fashion brand sold T-shirts printed with the paintings of famous artists in the 20th century including Russian avant-garde's El Lissitzky and Rodchenko last year. Other artists for example, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Kusama Mitsuyo were printed on tiny canvases of T-shirts and were sold for 2500 yen.

Russian avant-garde has turned into a high-quality commercial product. It seems like its original rebellious and disruptive identity has been lost in exchange for its large popularity. If we consider that the artists of the Russian avant-garde who disliked the closed society of arts and were tired of painting beautiful motives on canvases tried to spread their arts in public life by making designs of the daily goods and posters, it is also possible to regard even such a situation as a "victory" that anyone can see the first-class arts not only at museum but also at shopping centers or souvenir shops, and go out wearing them.

But after all, we cannot say that in today's situation that their revolutionary arts are consumed merely as cool designs. In the same way as the arts of other countries and eras are is the same as the situation in the first half of the 20th century when one abstract picture makes politicians angry and frightened them. Vil Mirimanov, a Russian researcher on arts, pointed out in his book in 1995th that today Russian avant-garde is appearing on the street again, but in different situation from 1910 to 20, as commercial products in "the monetary system", therefore we should not be too optimistic about the role the Russian avant-garde can play in the present day.² Alexandr Genis, a Russian critic, said in 2000th, that the experiments of the Russian avant-garde were so radical that ended up in a fruitless dream and "lost brilliantly", only leaving café decorated with the designs of the supremacism and causing not a "cosmic", but a "cosmetic" revolution.³ Victor Pelevin, the writer who is skeptical of the ethos of "rebellion" today, ironically writes the T-shirts "Malevich sold here"

² Vil Mirimanov, *Rosia Abangyarudo to 20 Seiki no Biteki Kakumei* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 2001), p86.

³ Aleksandr Genis, *Modernizm kak ctit' XX veka*, <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2000/11/genis.html> 2016/09/30

in his novel.⁴ These evaluations of the Russian avant-garde influenced by postmodernism that became popular in Russia about the same time as the collapse of USSR is on the wavelength of Foster's idea "a Pyrrhic victory of modernism".

There are many criticisms like these that the Russian avant-garde adjusted to the social system and it has also decreased and lost its power to disrupt an art and social order. The most bitter and radical of all is the Boris Groys's one. An opinion that Mirimanov, Genis and Pelevin share is that the Russian avant-garde loses its original rebellious identity when it conspires with the logic of the contemporary capitalism. On the other hand, Groys pays attention to the more fundamental problem whether the original Russian avant-garde was destructive, disruptive and rebellious art. He objected to the simple view that the Russian avant-garde is resistant to the authority in arts and politics. And he tried to overturn the established theory about the Russian avant-garde by somewhat exaggerated one that the Russian avant-garde originally had a complicity with totalitarian power.⁵

As I already stated, the Russian avant-garde was ignored in the Soviet Union and rediscovered in the perestroika period. Strangely, many critics consider the Russian avant-garde as the art of true Russian cultural lineage oppressed by totalitarian ideology of Soviet Union. However it was the movement that attempted to destruct 19th century Russian cultural tradition. The reason why such a ridiculous paradox was born is the dualistic world view deep-rooted in Russia. Some Russian philosophers and critics think that Russian culture has no unique and positive characteristics. Frequently self-deprecating their own country's identity as "differentness" that is provided by the distance from "others". For example, Genis argues that the nature of Russian culture is not a "cabbage", but a "onion", because it has no core. And, paradoxically, this emptiness of Russian culture is the heart of it.⁶ Russian intelligentsia both in the 19th and 20th centuries always suffered from the thought that Russia has not created original culture compared to Europe or U.S. Then they came up with good ideas to define Russian identity as negativity, rebellion or antithesis to

⁴ Viktor Pelevin, *svyashennaya kniga oborotnya* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2008), p376.

⁵ See Boris Groys, *Zenntai Shugi Geijutsu Sutarin* (Tokyo: Gendai Shichosya, 2000).

⁶ Aleksandr Genis, "Ruk i Kapusta" in *Ivan Petrovich Umer. Stat'I I rassledovaniia* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1999), pp123-143.

something authoritative. And this “something” can be anything. It may be a Russian culture of the 19th century, Communist party of USSR, a European or an American culture. This simple and vague identification of Russia led to the strangeness of the unreserved praise for the Russian avant-garde in perestroika period. It seemed to the critics that The Russian avant-garde calling itself the rebellious art that serves nothing and no one is an embodiment of the Russian ideal. Very few people were aware that the rebellion’s target of the Russian avant-garde was replaced from Russian cultural tradition to the totalitarian ideology of communism.

Then Groys argued that the Russian avant-garde wasn’t an art of anti-authority ideal for Russian culture at all, but on the contrary an art of authority that aimed to have a prevailing totalitarian power over people’s lives like social realism, the only official art of Soviet Union. Groys denies by this argument the Russian dualistic world view that simplistically divides authority and anti-authority.

Groys’s theory on the Russian avant-garde exposed itself to many criticisms because he discusses very limited aspects of the art of the Russian avant-garde to justify his argument. But in spite of such disorganization, his discussion has received much attention because it cut to the core of the problem concerned with the identity of Russia.

Groys answers to a question “is next avant-garde possible?” in the interview in 2011.⁷ He says that the idea “avant-garde” can’t organize society politically in the worldwide capitalistic system. Therefore next avant-garde will be possible when capitalism faces a crisis. You’ll find a strange logic in his statement. He says not that avant-garde brings capitalism to a crisis, but that avant-garde will be possible when capitalism faces a crisis. If the art of “avant-garde” don’t have the power to defeat capitalism, the most powerful ideology in present day, can it be called as “avant-garde”? Groys seems not to have trust in the art aiming to overture status quo at a stretch.

⁷ Boris Groys, *Vozmozhno, segodnyashnyaya ekonomicheskaya situatsiya privedet k glubokomu krizisu kfpitalizma, i togda avangard poluchit novyi shans (interview with Elena Martynyuk)*, <http://artukraine.com.ua/a/boris-groys-vozmozhno-segodnyashnyaya-ekonomicheskaya-situaciya-privedet-k-glubokomu-krizisu-kapitalizma-i-togda-avangard-poluchit-novyiy-shans/#.V-5p8K1SFer> 2016/09/30

Mirimanov, Genis and Pelevin feels complicity not between communism and the Russian avant-garde, but rather between the idea of “avant-garde” and the totalitarian orientation of capitalism aiming to control all kinds of things and thoughts. A symbol of “rebellion” like the Russian avant-garde becomes commercial product to emphasize the difference of a sense of value in capitalistic system and help it to rule people. Such a cynical situation has arisen not only in Russia, but also in Japan and U.S. That is to say in developed capitalist countries. “Rebellion” is a merely romantic dream there.

At the beginning of 20th century the relationship between arts and the market wasn't drawing as much attention as today. We can't avoid this problem when we discuss the value of the Russian avant-garde in present day and the possibility of the idea “avant-garde” itself. If we unwillingly admit the logic of market completely spoiled the Russian avant-garde today, then is new “avant-garde” art that can compete with capitalism or holds up outside of it possible? Is it true that arts can't organize society politically and become “avant-garde” today, as Groys says?

Russia gives us the plentiful hints about these questions. Fortunately or unfortunately, the importance of the connection between contemporary art and politics are increasing in Russia. The incident that the artists against Putin's strong-arm politic were arrested because of their extreme performances attracted public attention even in foreign countries. The all-female punk rock group Pussy Riot showed a performance without permission in a Moscow's famous cathedral in 2012th, condemning Russian religious community for its cozy relationship with the political power. They were arrested and received a life-time sentence. Pyotr Pavlensky, Russian contemporary artist, voiced an objection to the arrest of Pussy Riot by sewing his lips. His other performances including arson and self-injury in public also shocked people. He also was arrested and sent to a mental hospital.

Compared to the Russian avant-garde, these artists are still antisocial. It is interesting and very important that they always “lose”. They disturb public order, hurt their bodies, their reputations and

their lives, and are found guilty. Nevertheless, their activities economically don't pay. They are too risky as self-promotion.

Of course, we shouldn't recognize them as "new avant-garde" only because they are antisocial. We can't decide now whether these Russian artists is just political instigator or embody some new aesthetic in Russia. We surveyed the history of evaluations of the Russian avant-garde and found that resistance against something, at worst, helps the object it resisted to extend its power. We have to keep the fact in mind that simple figure "authority and anti-authority" and exaggerated performances following it can play a complementary roll for the establishment. Pelevin is skeptical of the struggle of Pussy Riot and make fun of them in his novel.⁸ In the novel "Batman Apollo" (2013) he describes vampires who take control of the history of humanity. They use methods such as "protesting", to manipulate people. According to a vampire, protesting to political power by marching demonstrates is a "reality show".⁹ It is one of the entertainments like movies or video games. Pelevin is one of most successful writers in postmodern trend after collapse of USSR. His ironical opinion to the relationship between art and politics can be understood as warning to the pollution of modern idea "avant-garde" by capitalism.

For Russian anti-establishment artists, probably, the critics who don't believe in the rebellious power of art are corrupted and reactionary pessimists. It seems that they risk their lives to express that there still remains the "outside" where postmodern nihilism "we can't be free from the logic of capitalism and political power" is nonsense.

I asked some questions at the beginning of my paper: "Is the Russian avant-garde still alive, or already dead? Do the enemies that "avant-garde" have to defeat still exist?"

The Russian avant-garde is still alive. But, in a sense, it lives happily in its old age just like a veteran does. Perhaps, we should celebrate the current situation the Russian avant-garde doesn't show its aggressive character and lives leisurely on the posters at shopping centers or on T-shirts.

⁸ Victor Pelevin, *Batman Apollo* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013), p190, p456.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p183.

There are enemies to defeat. But if we hope “the next avant-garde” to defeat them and change our society, we should learn how the Russian avant-garde or eastern counter-culture developed and declined and begin to seek new connection between art and authority, art and market and art and “victory” right now.