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Roman Korovin: “Fuck to the Flowers,” or “The Way of the Samurai”

“Rock” is the title Roman Korovin gave his book. One of the meanings of this word refers to the world of music, i.e. rock music, while another, a more direct, is that of stone, which recurs, though in plural, in the title of the photo-series included in the book—“In Rocks.” A rigid mountain terrain, rocky peaks, blue sky above, and azure water beneath, foamy laces, and among all this (almost) bare female bodies. Such a visual system explicitly refers to deeply-rooted romantic imaginary, which also includes bushes of lilac, rainbows, boundless sky covered in pearl clouds and an infinite sea plain with tiny cockles. Let us add to this frequent allusions (beginning with the book’s cover and its title) to extraordinary natural phenomena, almost miraculous omens—glow, shining, combustion, visions, etc. In classical aesthetics, images of the world representing its grandeur and infinity are usually described by the category of the sublime.

When thinking of the influence of the sublime, Kant talked about how imagination, impulsively ascending to the apprehension of the world’s immensity, returns enriched to the discreteness of a private life. This enrichment is reduced, in particular, to the acknowledgment of limitations in our claims for our ability to express and comprehend the universal. From here, in his Critique, Kant strips the subject of its Cartesian wholeness and deduces the human lot to a discrete experience of distinct moments and situations. We find this all in Korovin’s book, which successively unfolds before us a range of mundane and apparently casual fragments of reality. Dusty windowsills, footprints on a pavement, a black glove on an asphalted path, teabags in a kitchen sink, broken glass in snow—for the artist, all of this turns out to be humble yet wonderful events. Equally unpretentious and casual are the drawings and captions that Korovin leaves on the pages of his book—they testify for the impulsive motions of his arm and soul.

Such dialectics of the sublime and the everyday, the universal and the individual, which was born in the eighteenth century, acquired at the end of the twentieth century a dimension defined by the experience of globalisation. The experience of the sublime today is also born from the sense of the inability to describe the modern world with its rather difficult and controversial social, economic, and political ties and relations. For a post-Soviet subject, however, this feeling of epistemological helplessness is highlighted by the fact that the solid and clear world that guaranteed the intelligibility of being disappeared in front of our eyes with

inexplicable abruptness, leaving no clear message and still being too complicated for our understanding. This is why it is so common for the post-Soviet art to address the experience of the sublime, mostly eventuating in poetics that tend to intertwine ruins of the past and facts of the present in a dazzling and, at the same time, majestically estranging spectacle¹. Roman Korovin's poetics—and such is the basic premise of this text—can be defined by the poetics of the anti-sublime².

First of all, Korovin quite unambiguously understates all the properties of the sublime. The romantic is mostly embodied in a rather tacky prettyism, and what is more, it is immediately made profane. If the artist presents us with a rose, what smells it is a head of a pig; if we are presented with the splendour of lilac, it is immediately shown a middle finger. And thus he not only expresses his attitude towards the sublime but also towards its dialectical opposite, which has lost wholeness of a private life. If, according to Kant, the experience of appropriating the sublime has to enlighten us morally, then with Korovin the experience of the anti-sublime throws us back—as Bakhtin would say—into a corporeal bottom, where “belly is an ass.”

A reference to Bakhtin, the theorist of the carnival culture, is more than appropriate here. The carnivalesque is the very essence of Korovin's creative actions, with his tendency to subject to risorial understatement and evertion everything that could have hierarchically vertical or morally and aesthetically normative authority. Another term, one that has recently become popular, is appropriate here: a trickster, i.e. a figure that refers to mythology and folkloristics, which mocks conventional notions and rules and avoids them by means of playfulness. One has to admit that Korovin's poetics, in its pursue for overcoming socially conventional forms of consciousness, offers exclusive richness of variously devious forms. Some of Korovin's works amount to unconditional idiocy or senility, while others—to cynical farce; it seems that many of his photographic works—especially in the last part of the book—are born out of psychedelic experience, while still many more—if, at the end of the day, not all his works and his whole book—evoke complete perplexity. What are we really dealing here with? What motivated the author to close the shutter of a camera in a particular moment before a particular fragment of reality? What subjectivity is behind this body of photographs that claims the authority of an artwork?

Such a perplexing effect before the fact of art allows one to locate Korovin's work in line of many other individual and collective trickstery poetics that so richly inhabit the art of the last two or three decades. Korovin directs the subversive resources of the artistic trickstery not onto the political status quo³, and also not on the means of institutional critique⁴, but, first and foremost, onto the art itself, onto its ontological status. That is to say—before turning art into a means for fighting for freedom, he asks a question: does the art still have a liberating resource? Before attacking artistic institutions by means of the art itself, he asks whether art can have an autonomous un-institutionalised being? Here he acts as a real trickster—because he not only subverts prevailing principles but also points out that the critique of these principles outside art, as well as on its territory, have already acquired its own conventional forms. A trickster's mission has always been to violate and confuse oppositions, ridicule their frontiers, slip away from any conventions and systems of value.

1 See, for instance, my texts on the post-Soviet artists Vladimir Kupriyanov (“Vladimir Kupriyanov's Sublime Historical Experience.” In: Vladimir Kupriyanov, *Cast Me Not Away From Your Presence*, Impronte Contemporary Art, Milano, 2008), Almagul Menlibaeva (“Almagul Menlibaeva: The Female as Excess.” in: *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, London, Autumn/Winter 2012, 31, pp. 119–128), and Koka Ramishvili (“After Ramishvili.” In: Koka Ramishvili. *Change* (catalogue). Georgian Pavilion, 53 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, Venezia, 2009, pp. 7–28). On this matter, see also my related text “Totall Recall: From Acting Out to Working Through.” In: *Europe at Large. Art From the Former USSR*, MuKHA, 2011, pp. 12–31

2 I owe this term to Madina Tlostanova, who coined it based on the material about postcolonial and post-Soviet literature and art. See: Madina Tlostanova, “Postcolonial Theory, Decolonial Option, and Liberating Aesthesis.” Find the Russian original and English abstract at http://e-notabene.ru/ca/article_141.html

3 On trickstery as a strategy in political activism, see, for example, Jean Fisher, “Towards A Metaphysics Of Shit.” In: *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue*, Ostfildern/Ruit, 2002, pp. 63–70

4 See: Jean-Yves Jouannais, “L'idiotie,” *Beaux-Arts Magazine livres*, Paris, 2003

5 See (in Russian): Марк Липовецкий, "Трикстер и 'закрытое' общество" / Mark Lipovetsky, "Trickster and a 'Closed' Society." In: *НЛО*, № 100, 2009

This is why a trickster's poetics is always hybrid⁵; but in Korovin's work, with his interest in ontology, it assumes a form of coupling basic oppositions. In his works, the artificial becomes natural, the dead—alive, the human—objective, the low becomes high, etc. It is hybrid also in the sense of the technological genre. "Rock" includes and mixes together photography, graphics, performing art, etc. Finally, hybridity unfolds on a language level too: conventional levels of meaning of words, notions and images become—for example, in such photographs as "The Cross," "Till the End," "Vodka"—a subject of linguistic manipulation. The language becomes a semiotic practice, a trickstery game, realized by means and the material of significant. As the result, the signifying becomes possible only because of the unfolding space between the significant.

When in a gap between the significant and oppositions, a trickster is always neither here nor there. A trickster is always on the move, on the road. In fact, roads, paths, pavements, rivers are the most perpetual themes of the book; the book itself is build as a linear narrative; besides, it is formed as a mythological narrative—it is a story of being, of the motion towards death and subsequent resurrection; as admitted by the artist himself, the book is divided into two parts: the first one ends on line 159 with an image of a figure that "is either praying, or dying." Everything that follows the page 161 is as if "after death"—"a paradise, melancholy, or Zen dispassionateness"⁶. Therefore even death is not the limit to trickster's liminality, because it is a kind of death; maybe it is not death at all, but a prayer; however, that what comes after it can be defined by almost mutually exclusive notions. Meanwhile, the trickster's playful practice has a certain limit: by definition, a trickster is not able to cross the structural field to deconstruct which is his prime ambition. In this, Korovin is a son of his own post-catastrophic era: unlike the Avant-garde of the previous century, he does not believe that a different world is possible; all he does is try to show that this world is not what it is passed off as—that one can look at it and live in it differently.

There is nothing more foreign to Korovin's poetics than an attempt to assimilate new forms of representation, which so infatuated many artists of his generation who were trying to break through to bare reality, to social and political activism, to the experience of pure living. He is always willing to comply with the format of traditional museum-gallery exposition, but when in, he allows himself to transgress all the inherent expositional conventions. A good example is his exhibition "Meatballs and Snow" (2011), where photographs formed irregular blocks, hung on different levels, while the easel works were shown from a stretcher placed on the floor, or the radiators, thus leaving a sense of blatant expositional sloppiness. Similarly, in his work, he is not at all trying to say that the old hammer and the chisel are vegetables; he just wants to show that one can discern a paradoxical similarity to a cucumber ("Hammer, cucumber"). He's not saying that there is no death; all he wants to say is that it is not where everything ends, that after death something unalterably continues. All his trickstery activities have one tactic aim—to regain, by detecting controversies and gaps, short yet heady, and at times obscene, moments of liberty.

6 From R. Korovin's email correspondence with the author of the present text

This very possibility of altering ontology is predetermined by the fact that it is performed within its borders and bears a status of a certain relative possibility. As relativity one should primarily understand artistic relativity, because all Korovin's liberating gestures are intentionally performative—they lack any sort of pragmatism; they are self-sufficient, i. e. subscribe only to an artistic effect. By the way, many who have studied trickster practice, beginning with Bakhtin, have pointed towards their tendency to create a special chronotope around themselves, a certain aesthetic space⁷. In fact, this is what Korovin's "Rock" is—an evidence of the existence of a permanently intimate theatre of everyday things and gestures. It's an evidence of life that resembles performance and that cannot exist without it, because for it the existence coincides with the taken role.

Here, however, is where the hybridity that brings together oppositions comes through for Korovin. In coupling performance and life, he cares not only for artistic relativity but also for real life experience behind it. The artist's interest in experience is more than logical. In the era of the so-called biopolitics, when human existence becomes a subject for authoritative modelling, the problem of experience and its authenticity becomes one of the crucial. As we know, in premodern cultures and societies experience was constructed through repetition, through everyday reproduction of basic principles. In modern times, however, the humanity began to lose firm authorities—experience came to being through an exposure to the extraordinary. Therefore, while in the Middle Ages travelers' notes and bestiaries presented the extraordinary as something beyond human experience, in modern times collecting touristic trophies and travel descriptions became a way of acquiring experience⁸. In recent decades, which have declared themselves the era of globalisation, the borders of experience have rapidly expanded, having turned into immensity of the extraordinary. By capitalising the extraordinary, tourism and the cultural industries subject it to strict nomenclature and intensive production, thus fabricating the sublime of the globalisation from the conversation that this text begins with. A neo-fundamentalist take on the local (national and regional) turns out to be an alternative, i. e. an attempt to return to authoritative agency and subject's wholeness by means of its submission to a strict hierarchy of values that limit the extraordinary through its exclusion.

Meanwhile, the poetics of the anti-sublime in which Roman Korovin sees himself tries to point to the everyday as to a sphere that is free from fundamentalist dogma, pregnant with genuine and unfabricated revelations. For some of these artists the concept of *flânerie*, formulated by Walter Benjamin, is still important: the idea of purposeless wandering in anticipation of "profane illuminations"—an unexpected view on a mundane object that is presented in a new, previously inconceivable light. Such an encounter indeed possesses an extraordinary quality, but it is hard to subdue it to the industry of the sublime: this is because it is rooted in personal subjectivity and individual mythology⁹. There is also another distinctive practice—that of meditative contemplation of an everyday object, as a result of which all its established meanings are reduced, and it becomes fascinatingly polysemous. Similar experience is also hard to seize by the subliminal enterprise, as it is not acquired

7 See: Mark Lipovetsky, op.cit.

8 See: Giorgio Agamben. "Infanzia e storia. Distruzione dell'esperienza e origine della storia", Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1978 e 2001, p. 6

9 On similar experience, see my texts on Olga Chernyshova and Andrei Roiter—"Motion Studies," In: *Art Forum International*. March 2010. Vol. XLVIII, No. 7, pp. 226–231; ("Интимная онтология Ольги Чернышевой" / "The Intimate Ontology of Olga Chernyshova." In: *Художественный журнал*, М., 2009, № 77–78); "The Enchanted Wanderer or Andrei Roiter's Journeyman Years." In: *Time Capsule* (catalogue), Impronte, Milano, 2010

10 See: <http://www.romankorovin.com/pdf/roman-korovin-statement-en.pdf>

through industrial, but rather ritual temporality. Among the founders of this practice is obviously Giorgio Morandi—the artist who, according to Korovin, has come to be a certain “foundation” for him¹⁰.

Although Korovin’s practice does offer a fresh look on things, it shies away from purposeless *flânerie* in anticipation of unpredictable “illuminations.” His actions are performatively active and efficient: he himself evokes situations in which things open up to an extraordinary point of view. That is why, with all his entrancement with the metaphysics of things, his aim is not to devoid it of its significant but, as already mentioned before, detect its new meaning in the space between its significant. Hence, Korovin’s gaze neither slides on the surface of reality in search of a one true object, like in Benjamin’s *flânerie*, nor does it fixate meditatively on one certain fragment of reality, like for Morandi. His gaze can be called “scenographic,” as it tends to keep an endless number of objects in his sight in order to draw his attention not to a particular object, but to their relations. In fact, it becomes apparent why, for Korovin, apart from Morandi there are two other fundamental figures in the history of contemporary art—Paul Klee and Cy Twombly¹¹—since their mounted works unfold sophisticated compositional and plastic structures on their surface—which is also a certain intimate theatre of things and gestures.

But what is more—many of Korovin’s works in order to fully unfold the “scenography” of the everyday show the same fragment of reality from various points of view or in different moments in time. As the result, we can see that Korovin’s “scenographic” gaze not only tries to penetrate the depths of the visible but rather acutely experiences the very process of seeing, i.e. constantly retains in sight the figure of the beholder. In other words, the gaze of the director and the actor of the intimate theatre of things and gestures is a reflexive gaze that is also directed back at itself. In Korovin’s work it appears literally—many of his works imply if fragmentary, yet still unmistakable presence of the artist. A trickster cannot fully dissolve in an act of contemplating reality that is contradictory to him, because since he is always here and there, he is responsible for coordinating the undergoing of an unfolding event. If we try to trace back the trickstery alternative presented by Korovin, we can find it in dadaist and surrealist use of the everyday in the Theatre of the Absurd, with which André Breton associated his “*gaité moderne*.”

However, for surrealists as well as for Georges Bataille the element of laughter possessed a transgressive sense. Everything that was tried to be endowed with, or given back a status of sublime or even sacred, was subjected to transgressive ridicule. The intimisation of a subject with the world was viewed as the basis for the sacred, its freedom from the power of materiality, i.e. from the dependence imposed by the contemporaneity on material objects, and the transformation of a human being itself into one of the objects. This exact return of the sacred sense to human experience is the inner aim of Korovin’s theatre of things and gestures. It becomes possible by means of invoking the most archaic mechanisms of intimisation. The most important of these mechanisms—as now known because of Marcel Mauss—is the potlatch ritual. Sacrificial squandering pulls a person out of the material wretchedness to return him to a sacred order.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Also from R. Korovin’s email correspondence with the author of the present text

For Korovin, the most obvious form of potlatch is his outright ridicule of conventional values and an affectation of negative values: disrespect, indifference, “chavsterism,” quoting his own words¹², which, in fact, his poetics of the anti-sublime is built upon. Along with this in the present book the ritual of squandering is rooted in its very compositional formation and rhythmic mode. The entire first part, which stops at the line 159, amounts to—again, according to him—an irrepressible “binge-drunk inflation”¹³ of images. This is what the book’s title refers to, or, more precisely, to its most essential connotation, going back to ecstatic and transgressive world of rock music. Bataille called such a method of endless and convulsive build-up of implications and emotions “high water” (“la crue”). For him it was actually one of the possible forms of squandering, since the end result must have been an abolishment of sense, i.e. a triumph of nonsense. Finally, the fact that, in the last part of “Rock,” which begins on page 161, we end up in the sphere of coveted intimisation is revealed by a means of reddish twilight, in which he immerses his imagery. This lends them a phantasmal nature—as if coming from a different time, or, to be more precise—from the sacred timelessness of death. In addition, what is remarkable is that this very twilight is not the original property of the reality captured by the shot, but an expositional defect (while taking or printing the picture). The double-exposure effect in the body of pictures found in the final part of the book is similar—because it is the same technical failure, although definitely intentional. The result of this is distinctive overlapping of images that have been created in different times and places; and here we observe a disruption of the linear flow of time, which is inherent in the sphere of the sacred. For Korovin, it is important to show that the experience of intimisation cannot be presented literally as photographic documentation; it is a result of technical manipulation. The sacred is thus represented through dissection of relativity of the artistic language, through the act of ridiculing and squandering the very means of art.

13 Ibid.

In the end, this potlatch practice, rather characteristic of Korovin, allows us to clarify another important aspect of his auteur position. Described above was the author’s reflexivity of the “scenographic” gaze, his ability to retain in the attentional field not only the whole cluster of objects and situations, but also the beholder’s gaze. But if we ask a question of what social experience is behind such an artistic position, the most obvious answer is a reference to characters like a social nomad, a refugee, a migrant, a member of an ethnic or other minority, etc. For all these figures are natural tricksters, because circumstances assign them with escalated watchfulness, an ability to read other identities, adapt and mimic them by constantly holding reality in the field of different perspectives. Emigration, as Bertolt Brecht once said, is the true school of dialectics; an emigrant is essentially a natural dialectician; and there is no need to appeal to the authority of the postcolonial theory in order to admit: a migrant’s subjectivity nowadays bears a paradigmatic character; for migration, hybridity, homelessness are essentially existential conditions of the modern world. But, at the same time, trickster’s practice with its apologetics of flexibility, artistry of action, and affectionate cynicism recognizes

itself in no less pragmatic, for the modern world, neoliberal subjectivity, with its emphasis on individuality, rejection of disciplinary norms and the supremacy of the aesthetic over the moral.

However, the present neoliberal ideology by sanctioning cynicism as a legitimate norm never acknowledges it as its final destination; to the contrary, it constantly justifies it by high moral ambitions (human rights, etc.). Meanwhile, Korovin, by subjecting the sublime status of art to ritualistic ridicule and irrepressible squandering, transforms cynicism into his own programmatic goal. Such a subversive procedure—to follow an ideology with more consistency than it tends to lend itself to—Slavoj Žižek called “over-identification,” but Boris Groys referred to as “subversive affirmation.” By the same token, Peter Sloterdijk called such a position *kynisme*, associating it with an ability to break the vicious circle of the instrumental mind in which good goals are pursued by way of cynical means. A cynic emancipates himself of morality in order to indulge into impetuous capitalistic accumulation of material and symbolic values, while a kynic is he who by act of squandering elevates cynicism to the level of artistic unselfishness.

At the same time, the potlatch ritual signifies a difference between Korovin’s position and experience of a migrant who has nothing to squander in his struggle for survival. In the modern world, a migrant deprived of rights is a figure who is the closest to what—as Giorgio Agamben reminds us—in Roman law was called ‘*homo sacer*’, i. e. a subject who can be killed without subsequent punishment, but who, for this very reason, cannot be sacrificed. On his part, Korovin, it seems, involves himself in art, because it by possessing a high status of sublimity is one of the priority objects for sacrifice.

“The rest,” the artist assures us, “is silence.” Or “Zen dispassionateness.” But for him to come by “the way of the samurai,” he must overcome heavy obstacles; for Korovin’s poetics of the anti-sublime is built upon the ambivalent dialectics of life and art. It ultimately intensifies the resources of art up to an ecstatic spectacle of its demise. At the same time it remains open to the wholeness of life that offers not only an irrepressible joy but also the other side of it—depression, vexation of spirit, and moral suffering.

Ceglie Messapica, March 2013