

A Contemporary Perspective on the Future of Art in the Baltic countries, Finland and Russia

John Peter Nilsson and Viktor Misiano in Conversation

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Time is the thematic interface in the Faster than History: A Contemporary Perspective on the Future of Art in the Baltic countries, Finland and Russia exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, January 31 through May 2, 2004.

For the exhibition twenty artists or groups have been invited to discuss their own relationship with the near past and, in particular, with its reflections in the present. The core of the exhibition consists of works by artists born in the 1960s and 70s, from a geographically definable area that spans different cultures, histories and survival strategies, which only now, in the midst of the recent far-reaching changes, can unfold in all their diversity.

The curator of the exhibition, Jari-Pekka Vanhala, points out that 'faster than history' is a term that has entered the lexicon of international politics and economics in the past few years. It reflects the need for ever more rapid development. Also underlying the current period of transition is a redrawing of borders and territories, a redefinition of society, culture, language and religion.

Framework invited Viktor Misiano from Moscow and John Peter Nilsson from Stockholm to discuss the exhibition. Both have been significant actors on the Northern European art scene as critics, curators and Editors-in-Chief of art magazines - Misiano of Moscow Art Magazine and Nilsson of NU: The Nordic Art Review.

Nilsson:

When I first saw the title "Faster than History" I thought it was brilliant. Now I have started to think about that title. What is Faster than History?

Misiano:

It (somehow) deals with the post-Soviet decade, actually more than a decade (one and half), the subject of catastrophic transformations. This was a time when the speed of change became a problem, since it was beyond comprehension. It was a decade when history became irrelevant: we were focused on the present. The necessity of survival rooted us in the everyday. I recognise in that title my life, my experience and myself.

Nilsson:

I would think it deals with the identity of the relation to history, with national and personal identity. Actually I understand it as like catching up with history.

Misiano:

It's true; there were a lot of references to the historical past in the art of nineties, as we were experiencing at that time an incredible shift in conditions, dealing with history and

memories. An example: Anatoly Osmolowsky in Moscow, most of whose works were directly related to the history of the Russian and European avant-garde and revolutionary political movements. But I would still like to ask: What avant-garde? What revolution? That art practice was a pure gesture of dependence, it was a "political hallucination", the term that another artist of the 90s, Pavel Pepperstein, introduced. It was a history without substance, without foundations...

Nilsson:

Ten years later, The Blue Noses Group make an ironic and almost absurd comment on Osmolowski's attempts - Osmolowski to Blue Noses, this is Faster than History. But still, when I see the exhibition, I am surprised how many artists seem to be obsessed by their own fate, or at least, they are struggling to find new identities after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Maybe not so strange, but I can't help sensing a strong ambition to deal with history, and not to escape it. But also not to rely too much on influences from the West. What I want to call the second generation after the wall, is in between two systems, they don't feel at home in either of them. At least that is my impression. Many of the post-Soviet artists today could easily become part of the Western art market, but there seems to be no interest? Or the other way around.

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Take, for example, Dmitry Vilensky's installation at the show. He says labour is not yet emancipated, neither in the West nor in the East. I see his work both as a warning flag against the future when cheap labour in the East will shake the new EU, as much as it is directed at post-Soviet society itself; I had no idea that Henry Ford paid for the car factory at Gorky in 1929, as shown in one of Vilensky's videos!? As in the capitalist West, there were lies behind the propaganda in the communist East. It seems like the post-Soviet nineties want to reveal these lies, or at least, contradictions. It was artists of all kinds that used to both confirm and make history. Sometimes I wonder if this is true anymore?

Misiano

The nineties were a decade obsessed with individual success. Look at the results of the neo-liberal reforms in Russia - the country and its economy belong to a few people, to the so-called oligarchy. The same in art: no institutions, no serious reforms, no programmes of support, but only a few brilliant international careers, art-oligarchs. I was all the time told: You are making Russian Art and Russian Art will be as you want it to be! That was an ideology, if you want, an ideology of the new power. Presenting the reality "faster than history" was not only collateral damage of the reforms, but was its cynical strategy. History as a phenomenon was neglected: because history is a value system, an ethos, which blocks wild privatisation. Not by chance was official ideology insisting: the 70 years of the Soviet age were a black hole, because declaring that age outside of history presumed that the goods and properties created in that age are also outside of value and price. It could be given for free (to the right people, of course...). That's why the sharpest personalities, like Osmolovsky, were insisting on the historical dimension, even in the form of a gesture of dependence. To confirm that the past exists was to fight for the present. But the times have changed over the last 15 years. There is now a different kind of context. The old oligarchy system is disappearing. The economic

situation has also changed. There is a need for a systematic view of the past, a need for History...

Nilsson

If we look at the art world in the West, in the last decade one sees a newborn interest in collectiveness, social awareness, utopian thinking etc. Not being myself part of the revolutionary sixties, and that also goes for many of the artists, there nevertheless seems to be a nostalgic retrospection to that era. Of course, it is a reaction against neo-liberal individualistic thinking, but on the other hand it might also be a rethinking of socialist goals and methods, and with the collapse of the wall there is a mutual search for what is left of socialism - from both so-called Eastern and Western artists.

Misiano:

The need for History that I mentioned before inevitably presumes a new view of the Soviet past, a new valorisation of socialism. Without nostalgic apologies we have to recognize an obvious fact: socialism was experienced as modernization. Please note: in the 90s, that fact was ignored not only in the East, but mostly in the West. Because, by depriving the East of History and modernization, the West was ethnicising it, as an excuse for its colonization. By ethnicising the East, a power group in the West wanted to relate socialism exclusively to the Eastern part of Europe, ignoring the obvious fact that socialism is, in fact, what we had in common. In reality the world became global, not in the 90s, but before. We have to keep this in mind today, when defending the democratic version of globalisation. Dmitry Vilensky - I agree his is one of the most symptomatic works in the show - definitely kept it in mind when doing his work for the show...

Nilsson:

The Social Democratic movement has changed a lot during the last decades in many Western countries. It has become a liberal movement, especially when looking at Tony Blair in the UK. In a way, time travelled faster than history in the West as well, after the collapse of the wall, especially in Germany. But I seldom see an explicit political agenda among artists today, let's say a socialistic ideological approach. Many refer to it, but the approach is more that of an underdog that sniffs out problems with a very low-key attitude. But a lot of young artists are engaged in social structures and there is a strong wish to create a new kind of a dialogue.

Misiano:

You are right in that diagnosis. For me it's confirmed in the recent Eastern art by the disappearance of irony. For a long time, inside the Soviet system independent artistic minds avoided direct engagement. They fought using ironic deconstruction of the official symbolic order, but later in the 90s - as we mentioned before - irony turned to cynicism. Today I note in the attitude of young artists a kind of new seriousness. Theirs is a direct engagement. Vilensky versus "Blue Noses" is an example of how the new seriousness and political engagement are confronting the ironic, carnivalesque attitude...

John Peter Nilsson and Viktor Misiano, January 30, 2004