

**VLADIMIR KUPRIYANOV'S
SUBLIME HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE**

Viktor Misiano, 2008

Vladimir Kupriyanov.

Cast me not away from your presence

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Historical recollection is an inseparable part of Vladimir Kupriyanov's work, moreover it is a recollection that is simultaneously complex and intimate. Thus, his photographic triptych "The Festival of 57" directs our attention to the legendary World Festival of Youth and Students held in Moscow in 1957 - one of the watershed events of Khrushchev's "thaw". I personally didn't make it to this particular event. 1957 is the year that I was born. However, in my early childhood I do remember being recounted with memories of those euphoric days when the country, after decades of isolation, opened up for itself a whole new multi-lingual, multi-sided and multi-identical world. Later on, I heard many of the artists of the 60's generation refer to these days as being pivotal to their creative lives. They talked about the Jackson Pollock exhibition, the calligraphy sessions held by Georges Mathieu, about the concerts of American jazz that filled the Moscow summer evenings and about many other things. They talked about historical spectres being put to rest, although this never came to pass in reality. However, these events so exactly expressed the essence of what had happened that they could claim the status of historical objectivity. Although I was not witness to these events and did not have this "picture" of the 50's and 60's impressed on me at first hand, I am nevertheless partially acquainted with them thanks to the remarkable Soviet cinema of that period. And "The Festival of 57" is a remembrance of the films of those years, and especially the work of Marlen Khutziev and in particular his film "July Rain", however it was shot ten years after the Moscow Festival when the "thaw" was already over. Incidentally, the heroine in this film has a striking resemblance to the girl in the central part of Kupriyanov's triptych. "The Festival of 57" also brings back memories of the black and white television in my Moscow apartment on which I first saw "Ilyich's Gate" - another of Khutziev's films, which again appeared on Russian TV screens twenty five years later at the height of Gorbachev's new "thaw".

The authenticity of the images in “The Festival of 57” is defined in particular by the fact that they have been borrowed by Kupriyanov from amateur photographs taken by an eyewitness of these events, and preserved by a happy accident as they were justifiably considered to be rejects. And then it also reminds me of my own adolescent interest in amateur photography – so typical of that period - with its smell of chemicals and the resulting silver-grey blotches that stained my fingers...

Narrative, including historical narrative, is the entrenched brand of Russian culture, including its contemporary culture. And it is this very type of narrative that defines the work of the most significant Russian artist of our times, Ilya Kabakov and his concept of the total installation. In addition, the genre of total installation itself – i.e. a certain enclosed environment, which scrupulously recreates a fragment of a world that has passed, a certain totality, which aesthetically reproduces the total nature of the ruling symbolic order – this genre is itself today also a fact of history. It is this very principle that defined the whole tenor of late Soviet society, when the main target of transformation of its unshakeable symbolic order was the system’s internal structure. The structural stagnation of symbolic forms was eventually overcome as a result of the displacement of the meanings that stood behind these forms, first and foremost by exploiting their metaphorical potential. At that time this attitude pervaded not only the work of the cultural imagination but also everyday practises. Assiduously carrying out the entrenched social rituals, Soviet people transformed them, filling them with new meanings. In Kabakov’s complex, multi-layered installations, the reality of the late socialist period is reproduced twice over: Firstly, the ritualised social order is itself thematised and secondly, it is replicated as a metaphor in collective social practise.

However, this unique social reality now no longer exists. Therefore the total installation is, at the moment, essentially a historical reconstruction and Ilya Kabakov, as he himself puts it is: “a displaced person”. What he means is that he is describing the Soviet past by ignoring its distant historical proximity and by using a type of consciousness that was formed in the Soviet period in order to enable its reconstruction. It is precisely in this way that he preserves the power of story telling and narration because the main thing that distinguishes the current consciousness that has been formed after the break up of the Soviet world – is the inability to describe this world and to incorporate it into a coherent narrative. The symbolic forms have disappeared from the hierarchy, they have lost their former context and having been shorn of their seemingly perpetual meaning and metaphorical potential, it is consequently no longer possible to use them creatively. How can one preserve a historical *gaze* in the middle of a crisis of historical story telling? This is the problem faced by the new art of the post-Soviet period that Vladimir Kupriyanov has set about resolving.

What is extremely important here is the fact that Kupriyanov has chosen photography as his medium. Unlike Kabakov who uses theatre props, Kupriyanov uses a medium,

which has the status of a historical document regardless of its aesthetic virtues. Moreover, this might be material produced by professional and even well known photographers, but more often than not this material comes from private family archives, deprived of any distracting authorial origins and therefore better able to claim the nature of objective evidence. Kupriyanov also uses his own photographs, but in these also he avoids the affectation of subjective origins by reproducing the established canons of photofixation.

Thematically and typologically this material is extremely multi-faceted. Thus, as mentioned above, “The Festival of 57” directs our attention to Khrushchev’s “thaw”, to a period of democratic hope and a swing towards the modernisation of Soviet society, that to this day, remains an important reference point in Russian liberal consciousness. Kupriyanov also directs his attention to images of village life (“Volga Characters”), the adherents of an anti-modernising conservative frame of mind, who were usually referred to in Soviet times as “backward bumpkins”. Several important cycles of Kupriyanov’s work are linked to the Moscow Metro. Created during the Stalin era, this architectural complex is not just a monument to the art of building but also to a time, which embodied both the heroic enthusiasm of the masses and the Great Terror. This dramatic era was the focal point of the public and secret social arguments and debates of the late Soviet period. It was the battleground on which “the dogmatic Stalinists” collided with the devotees of democratic socialism, the proponents of objective historical analysis with the debunkers of Communism. As a result, at the end of the Soviet era the “Grand Style” of the Stalinist period in which the Moscow Metro was built came into fashion. In addition, in Kupriyanov’s works a lot of the material is concerned with the realia of everyday experience, however he also makes us aware of the discursive layers that lie behind this material. Thus, the typical worker’s scene in “Cast me not away from thy presence” re-establishes in our memories the so called “production theme” that was omnipresent in Soviet culture, which is by no means just a fact of the social mandate of the authorities but also the realm of a frank reprimand to liberate labour and simultaneously an object of social criticism. Finally, there are also many scenes of everyday Soviet life in Kupriyanov’s work - picnics and walks in the country or socialising between friends or family (“To Shostakovich”). But in the Soviet universe this theme is a mass of complex connotations. Private life was simultaneously the realm in which the state’s official bio-politics was applied but also a space that was free of such political intrusion, in which Soviet people could realise their own perceptions of human happiness and create their own alternative models of life.

However, unlike the artists of the Soviet era, Kupriyanov does not work within the framework of one of these discourses that were so peculiar to the time but contemplates them from the sidelines. The thematic allusions that shine through his images are not set forth by means of an authorial rhetorical thrust but are more like the unavoidable traces of time imprinted onto the iconography of the images that Kupriyanov uses.

They are not thrust upon us by the artist but are picked up by the spectator – moreover the greater the spectator's knowledge of the collisions of that era or the greater his experience of that time then the more obvious they become to the spectator. Kupriyanov himself does not place the separate images into any narrative sequences and by manipulating the images does not try to strap them onto any easily readable conceptual nucleus. The task that he has set himself is to preserve for us a historical fact as a document without placing any authorial comment regarding its content onto it. The artist's aim is to show us that time has passed, and our time lacks the resources to pass responsible judgement on that era.

Kupriyanov's concentration on the document, that has been freed of authorial commentary, has numerous precedents in contemporary culture. It is this approach to historical testimony that is inferred in the "moral imperative" of the narration of the Holocaust, which is separated by the many people who have touched upon this theme. Any authorial concoction or narrative only leads to a distortion and profanation of the holy essence of the Catastrophe. Christian Boltansky, is an artist who also follows this imperative in his creative work, and also bases it on photography, including anonymous photo archives and also consequently avoids imposing any external authorial values onto the material. However, in contemporary society there is a current consensus in appraising this event and any authorial interpretation of it, if this interpretation does not proceed from an extremist environment, will only be yet another acknowledgement of its existing perception. Hence, Boltansky's mission is to force the material to speak for itself, so that, having overcome the discourse of tears and accusation that has already become a little bit routine, he imparts to us the horror that has taken place. Therefore, all the artistic devices invented by him are aimed at shocking the spectator and making the spectator empathise with the terror of total destruction.

However, the situation that Kupriyanov is engaged with is different. And the point here is not the fact that the Holocaust is an undoubted fact of the past, while the Soviet reality to a large extent continues to live. The Holocaust fact, albeit huge in terms of its monstrosity is nevertheless localised in time, whereas the experience of Soviet Socialism is incomparably more protracted, complex and ambiguous. There is every reason to believe that the experience of the Holocaust also continues to live and even today the experience of it – the experience of "bare life" as Giorgio Agamben puts it – is the basis for our contemporary perception of life. Perhaps the main difference between Kupriyanov and Boltansky's work is that they define different traumas. The traumatic experience that Kupriyanov shares with those who have been labelled "*the last Soviet generation*" is reduced to a sudden, inexplicable and irrevocable loss of the apparently unshakeable life-world. And indeed "*everything was forever, until it was no more*". In addition, this world disappeared without leaving us any message, any legitimate last testament or any assessment of itself (apart from those that are now being hurriedly peddled in the current political environment).

In addition, the absence of any reference points caused by this loss is compounded by the fact that by casting a retrospective gaze, we understand that having lived in that world, which appeared to us to be eternal and “forever”, we have in actual fact witnessed – and Kupriyanov’s work bears testament to this – its swift, if not quite yet accomplished demise. It is not enough to use the shock therapy of bringing back very real sensations of the past in order to resolve this trauma of loss. Because this life-world that is no more is not just about total terror (although there is a theory that this exactly how it should be represented). The most important problem lies – and this is the main way that the Soviet experience differs from the Holocaust – in the fact that this experience has not been defined in any way.

However, the traumatic inability to insert historical facts into a neat narrative is not just a problem faced by Kupriyanov and his contemporaries from “*the last Soviet generation*”. Indeed, contemporary historians are faced with the very same problem - with several historians and historical schools declaring a shift from History to Memory. Many scholars are today not so much engaged with learning the objective notion of historical development as attempting to become familiar with what might be called historical experience, which has no objective dimension and which perceives and lives in subjectivity. The issue is not so much about the construction of a historical narrative but about the comprehension of “the past as it was”. The comprehension of historical experience is the very task that Vladimir Kupriyanov is working at.

In order to understand the artistic methodology that Kupriyanov uses in order to resolve this task, one first needs to pay close attention to how he works with the photographic image. Unlike Boltansky he is not trying to transform human images to the extent that they lose their personal features. He does not need to reduce the individual into a statistic of the faceless human mass in order to let the “bare life” show through. On the contrary, his characters – Nadyusha in her various age specific guises (“Nadyusha”), the enchanting female image of the woman at the festival of youth (“The Festival of 57”), the young soldiers and the girls (“The Central Russian Uplands”) - retain that vivid tremulous presence that only photography is capable of providing.

At the same time Kupriyanov is trying to avoid the *punctum* effect inherent in photography, to which Roland Barthes devoted so much attention, i.e. the unavoidable dialectic between life and death that hovers behind any photographic image of a real person. This effect that has played such a large role in the work of many serious artists such as Gunter Ferg and Thomas Ruff among many others is not so fundamental to Kupriyanov. Because the dialectic between life and death is an existential and universal category and is thus alien to the historical experience, which is always collective and specific. Therefore, Kupriyanov avoids exhibiting photographs in the traditional form of a print on photo paper, which is surrounded by a mount and frame.

And this is where he demonstrates a remarkable technical inventiveness, for example by applying the photo image onto a transparent film or glass, or placing conventional colour backgrounds underneath this image, or leaving the image unmounted or framed in an untraditional manner. All these devices have their own purpose to deprive the human image of its self sufficiency or to incorporate the human image into a vivid although semantically opaque system of communication and thus divest it of its direct and exclusive dialogue with the spectator.

As a result the spectator's attention is switched from the representation as such to the very fact of the representation. Having shuffled off the magic of the *punctum* and the entrancement of the gaze directed from photography, the spectator is able to devote his attention to the linguistic specifics of the image – to the type of photographic representation hovering behind the image that is determined by time. Thus in the amateur photographs of “The Festival of 57” the characteristic style of that era is clearly evident to anyone acquainted with the finest examples of that period – from the photographs of Robert Frank and the films of the “*Nouvelle Vague*” to the more local cinematographic example of Marlen Khutziev. In its own way the photographs of Nadyusha remind one of the photographer's parlour portrait that was so typical of its time and has survived so resiliently for decades even to this day in numerous family photo albums of “*the last Soviet generation*”.

Naturally, these forms of representation have not only a formal but also a symbolic status. Essentially, they are what the classic sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called “symbolic frameworks of the memory”, demonstrating that memory is a fact that is not so much subjective as social. Kupriyanov takes a lively interest in this aspect because no matter how multi-faceted the images employed by him are, including his own photographs, they never step outside the boundaries of the established type of image, therefore they are all capable of being the bearers of a collective experience as well as that of the individual author's. However, Kupriyanov chooses not to go any further down this road. The unmasking of systems of cultural, social and power attitudes hidden behind one or another type of representation – which defined the work of many artists, especially American artists, is of no interest to him. There is nothing more alien to Kupriyanov than the “critique of the representation”. The establishment of a scholarly critical basis would only distract him from his main task – the comprehension of historical experience. Kupriyanov is not so much interested in the knowledge of history as the restitution of a vivid experience from the past.

In this respect, it is again very important to pay close attention to the methods employed by Kupriyanov to manipulate the image in his work. What is important here is not just the marriage of the photo-image with a certain abstract formal order but the artistic logic that this order takes. What is significant is the crude striding rhythm used to dismember the image, which he uses in “Cast me not from thy presence”.

Significant also is the game that he plays with multi-coloured geometrical two dimensional surfaces in his “Shostakovich” cycle. Likewise, the way that the images of the chandeliers from Moscow Metro stations in his series “All twelve” are distilled into rhythmic dotted lines of purely formal motifs and the way that the monochrome dots in “The Festival of 57” stream in a horizontal rhythm or the way that the stretched out landscapes of his “Volga Facades” are organised horizontally out of a sequence of photo-images are all equally significant. In other words, in Kupriyanov’s works formalism is not just insinuated onto the photo-image but even leads a certain self-sufficient life of its own. Essentially the self-sufficient rhythmic life of these abstract forms is nothing more than ornament.

The main feature of classical ornament, what is even more obvious, regardless of whether it uses motifs that have a real reference, is the reduction of their conceptual significance in favour of a purely formal game. Both of these fundamental elements – the purely artistic exercises that have no real reference and the semantically loaded images that have a real reference can also be found in Kupriyanov’s works. A similar encounter between the photo-image and ornamentation can be found in the work of the Polish artist Sophia Kulik. However, the difference between these two artists is extremely illustrative here. The Polish artist’s photographic images are completely subordinated by the rhythm of the ornamentation, which itself is constructed out of fastidiously organised photographs, whereas Kupriyanov’s photographic images and ornamentation overlap each other, creating two resonating but nevertheless autonomous surfaces. The spectator is thus required to vibrate between these two different surfaces, switching from one to the other. Moreover, another crucial element is that both these planes are polar opposites of each other and that each of them anticipates completely different modes of perception. The photograph relies on a thematic interpretation of its content, whereas the ornamentation is open to a pure visual game of the imagination.

By doing this Kupriyanov takes another step away from a narrative description of history and his inherent belief that artistic language can capture the object being described. By splitting the image into two mutually contradictory and incompatible planes it is as if he is ripping his own tongue out, thus announcing his inability to present the represented object in its entirety and completeness. The spectator is given to understand that the image does not end at the visible surface of the picture and that its ultimate essence dwells in a different dimension – to which the spectator’s gaze is being lead by the ornamental game, i.e. in the sphere of the imagination. And indeed unlike History, historical experience has no relationship with objective truth, it can only be approached by a flight of fantasy. As Walter Benjamin put it, the past is of interest to the present not so much in the way that it actually was, but more in the way that it might have been, or, in other words, in the way that we are able to imagine it. It is worth noting, however, that rhythm, which is a feature that organises the ornamentation – is also a musical term. Music also plays an important role in Kupriyanov’s work. Hence, the title of his work “To Shostakovich” and also allusions to Wagner and other musical objects in some of his other works.

Essentially, the element of ornamentation that exists in each of his works bears a certain melody peculiar to that work, which is not repeated in other works. Kupriyanov learned this subtle mastery of the organisation of ornamental elements from one of his teachers, the leading designer Yury Kurbatov who is famous for his extremely artistic approach to graphic design.

Indeed Kupriyanov's professional past is rooted not only in design but also in theatre. His basic schooling was in theatrical direction. The combination of design and stage design can be seen in his exhibitions. Although the idea of the total installation is alien to him, he does not however, just hang his works in a traditional manner. Each of his exhibitions is an independent statement that is organised by means of the meticulous selection of his works, the choice of their format and the technique employed, the complex system of spatial organisation - on the walls and in the space of the exhibition premises. In the final analysis, his exhibitions are not only defined by the theme of the works chosen by him but also the rhythm and musical harmony of their organisation. Huizinga has written about the link between music and "historical memory" providing a theoretical explanation to the term introduced by him. Because music is not perceived rationally but via experience, mood, feelings and this is exactly the way that we can emotionally identify with the experience of a past that is no more.

In this respect, a performance entitled "Spatial hexagram" carried out by Kupriyanov in June 2007 in Athens is extremely typical. Kupriyanov invited the well known jazz musician Sergei Letov to take part in the performance, in which he improvised on stage next to a video recording of his own music that had been recorded the day before and that was projected onto two large stereoscopic screens that had been set up on the same stage that he was now playing on. As a result, the spectators saw in the semi-darkness on the stage the figures of three identical musicians playing in harmony with each other, except that two of them actually had the status of a historical document (albeit of no great antiquity), and by being present on stage *in persona* Sergei Letov was holding a dialogue with himself by means of this musical trio but only by means of a shift in time, i.e. by means of his own personal past. Thus Kupriyanov succeeded in staging the effect of an emotional dialogue with the facts of the past, which is what he is trying to achieve with his photographic works. By means of this music a single continuum is created out of the past and present, where there is no division between the past and the present, between the subject, i.e. the real Letov *in persona* and the object, i.e. his documental image.

Hence, we come to yet another characteristic feature of Kupriyanov's art. Namely, his works based on his own photography such as his latest Volga landscapes ("Facades of the Volga"), and also his earlier rural village series such as "Sergievskiye" for example. In these works the signs of time are pared down to a minimum, there is nothing in these images that might indicate the exact chronological affiliation of these photographs. In this instance, as with the archive photographs that he uses, certain types of photo-representations protrude

through the photo-images, i.e. the social framework of the memory. Thus, by striving to so spectacularly present the effect of a time continuum in Athens, in which the past and present are co-mingled, Kupriyanov not only brings documents of the past closer to us but also by printing the facts of the present today, he reduces the features of their immediacy.

However, is it not dangerous to root creative work so deeply in the past, subordinating it to the symbolic frameworks of the memory, of a lost creative autonomy. Because Nietzsche, who is highly venerated by Kupriyanov and to whom Kupriyanov has dedicated a number of his works, asserted that movement forward is only possible via oblivion. In addition in oblivion it is possible to detect a therapeutic effect capable of releasing “*the last Soviet generation*” from the trauma of the loss of their past. There is, also, yet another tried and tested therapeutic methodology: we know from psychoanalysis that healing takes place when the patient is capable of placing his trauma into a story of his life related by the patient. Thus, the historical narrative is also the story of the life of a collective and could play a therapeutic role by reconciling the present with the past. Both of these methods were used in Russia in the post-Soviet period. The first defined the mentality of the 90’s and the second defined the last decade. It is only too obvious to Kupriyanov that the temptation to consign oneself to oblivion, which in psychoanalysis is termed repression, i.e. ignoring the trauma by banishing it to the depths of the subconscious only deepens the destructive effects of this trauma. It also obvious to him that historical narratives that have been hastily created are incapable of capturing the historical experience of the past. The more one-sided their presentation of the past then the more glaringly it contradicts their claims of historical truth and the more obvious is the continuing traumatic nature of these narratives. Kupriyanov presumes that the trauma is a historical fact, that it is essentially the insurmountable basis of the experience of his generation – “*the last Soviet generation*”, therefore one must not ignore the trauma but reveal it to the greatest extent possible and to use the potential that lies within it to the maximum. Herein lies the main value of a trauma that has been survived – it is an opportunity or chance given to this generation, because the next generation will inevitably experience the past differently. And it is this very openness to the trauma and its potential to open up the possibility of realising creative autonomy. It is well known that one of the characteristic psychological consequences of an individual trauma is an estrangement from one’s routine way of life. That which was indecipherable by virtue of its being built into the life-world, suddenly becomes alien and turns out to be an object of extraneous and indifferent contemplation. This is the phenomenon that a whole generation has experienced, having passed through the trauma of the unexpected loss of an established life-world. Being privy to this experience has also allowed Kupriyanov to see his material – earlier indecipherable or strictly built into the hierarchy of the life-world – by means of a view from the sidelines, outside of any sort of system of communications. Kupriyanov’s methodology is directed towards holding back, through this unique experience of viewing from the sidelines, facts that do not belong to contemplation and simultaneously to restore an emotional link with these facts.

In addition, as soon as an emotional link is restored even to the extent of dissolving the boundaries between the object and the subject into a single time continuum, the individual participation in these contemplative facts vividly bursts through. Put another way, it turns out to be the subject of the contemplation of the topic at various stages of its past life. This is exactly what happened to Sergei Letov, when he observed his own musical partners in the trio in which he was playing, i.e. himself from the recent past. This is exactly what happens to Kupriyanov when he reveals in his own personal photographs the symbolic social boundaries, which the author usually leaves beyond the boundaries of his perception. This is exactly what happens to the spectators of his work, when they begin to sense their deep complicity to scenes from a different life that has sunk into oblivion.

However, in order that this complicity does not become an identity, and contemplation does not snowball into self consciousness, Kupriyanov also employs the devices of endowing the image with ornamental rhythm and immersing it into a tremulous musical environment. Historical experience is revealed by Kupriyanov as an artistic spectacle that is at once repelling and exciting. To be more precise we begin to hear the past – depending on the specific work presented by Kupriyanov – either as a symphony, a polyphonic chorus or as a violin solo. Thus, the trauma that continues to live in us as a phantom pain is expelled and becomes an aesthetic fact. The effect of this contemplation of the spectacle from the sidelines, which raises us beyond our individual condition, is traditionally defined as Sublime. Therefore, the essence of Kupriyanov's work can be defined as the recovery of a sublime historical experience.

This term itself – sublime historical experience, like the setting for the recovery of historical experience via its subsequent anaesthetisation has been the subject of serious discussion in the philosophy of history. Ankersmith asserted that historical experience should be perceived as the sublime and that it should be understood as a work of art. Unlike historical scholars Kupriyanov is not moving away from history towards art but from art towards history. But for the rest, both he and historians are motivated by a common impulse – to neutralise the trauma, not by changing but by accepting it like a fate that is capable of bestowing us not only with pain but also freedom and meaning.

Viktor Misiano, Moscow, August 2008