Ekaterina Degot

A Text That Should Never Have Been Written?

Timing is everything.

When I was commissioned to contribute to the Manifesta 10 exhibition catalogue[1] *with a text on the political meaning of Russian art, Russian lawmakers had already passed legislation against "homosexual propaganda," but Crimea had not yet been annexed.*

Once the annexation became fact, it was finally clear that it would be impossible to write such a text, as if the Manifesta in Petersburg were just an ordinary exhibition in yet another ordinary country (albeit one with shortcomings). I decided to distance myself from the project.

When Manifesta's curator Kasper König answered public demands to boycott this year's festival by saying he would be upset if Manifesta was "misused by political actors as a platform for their own self-righteous representation," it became clear to me that precisely what I had to do was "misuse" this platform— though not to address the political significance of Russian art, but to rather address the political significance of Manifesta 10, scheduled to open in Saint Petersburg on June 27.

It is still unclear whether it was the right decision to write this text in the moment it was written. Subversive positions are fragile and context-dependent. They are always at risk of turning into legitimations. If and when this text appears in print, the situation may well have changed. Timing is everything.

—Ekaterina Degot

As I write these lines, parts of Eastern Ukraine seem to be following the Crimean scenario of "annexation on demand of the local population," but World War Three has not yet started. Russian officials deploy notions like "foreign agents," "fifth column," and "national traitor," but these figures haven't yet entered the criminal code. None of my close friends have been arrested, at least not yet. A purely Russian equivalent of Wikipedia or an alternative payment system to Visa and Mastercard have not been set up. The Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation has suggested only to support those phenomena in contemporary art that cater to the government's call for patriotism and non-European distinctiveness, but Manifesta's funding has not yet been cut. Manifesta will take place, but it is as of yet unclear whether it will be subject to censorship or self-censorship.

With every passing second, the situation slips further into the abyss and the future becomes ever more uncertain. Only one point is clear: things are very bad indeed.

Are things so bad that Manifesta 10 might be considered a positive, "civilizational" event no matter what its content, by sheer dint of taking place in a country plummeting into the abyss of militarist aggression, obscurantism, and proto-fascist nationalism? Could it be that the fast-paced conservative revolution in Russia will save not just the reputation but also the very identity of contemporary art? Or is this simply untrue? Representations of contemporary art in authoritarian contexts have become more and more frequent since the 2000s. Perhaps they rather call into question the very foundations of the discipline at large. Slavoj Zižek has said again and again that the eternal marriage between capitalism and democracy has ended, but perhaps we must say the same of the supposedly eternal marriage between contemporary art and progressive thinking?

The liaison of critical theory and visual art dates back to the 1990s, and is not without its material motivations, not least through the sheer amount of money circulating in the latter sphere. Art understands itself as an exclusive zone of oppositional thinking, which, after 1989, became a refuge for the idea of communism (an idea that simultaneously lost its contours in reality). Here, every artwork benefits from a "presumption of criticality," and what's more, a criticality from the left. This presumption extends from artworks to institutions, the more contemporary of which were shaped in the 1990s through a system of big international exhibitions usually funded from municipal budgets. Manifesta is a perfect example. The main know-how developed in such exhibitions, one might say, is a certain "opportunism" of critical agency (to speak with Paolo Virno). Critiques are not only tolerated but encouraged and funded by the very entities under criticism.

Although only one of Manifesta's earlier editions took place in a former communist country, it is very much the product of 1989, when there was a simultaneous discovery of new markets and new resources of all varieties, including those of the human and the cultural kind. Manifesta usually works with "developing" artists from "developing regions" (such as Eastern Europe, as well as political problem zones or economically depressed regions of the deindustrialized "old" Europe). Both are developing in the direction of the global market and post-industrial capitalism, if at all. This much is clear for countries, but "development" in this sense also concerns artists. For many, critical, post-objective, "biennial art"—be it "ephemeral" or activist in questioning art's autonomy—is little more than an extended stage for transitioning to the private market of galleries by the age of sixty at the very latest. Critical art corresponds to a "career phase" in the artist's biography and in art at large—the phase that today draws the most media attention. It is followed by a "phase of capitalization," when biennials won't be interested in you anymore (unless you are very old, forgotten, and worthy of being rediscovered) but during which you'll have a relatively comfortable life in galleries and at art fairs—impregnable to curators and critics.

In recent years, Manifesta has become one of the main stops in the "career phase" for artists and curators—a showcase for a new, defetishized art market whose clients are no longer private collectors, but rather a non-buying public. The money is almost never only private but also federal, municipal, or corporate, and works are no longer sold as unique objects but are more often than not made on commission and as a part of a series or edition. Self-referentiality is displaced by a thematic and didactic principle, upholding the image of art as something socially necessary (at the very least for getting municipal funding, one might add). This is also a zone where the autonomy of art has been, if not overcome, then at least given a new critical meaning, since the majority of biennials are based on some form of site-specificity. It is a strange market whose own ideology and practices have incorporated the critique of art's autonomy and even the critique of the market as such, working under the oblique influence of Soviet experiments from the 1920s, albeit seen through the European and American neo-avant-gardes after 1968.

However, it is precisely the market and its ideology that stands at the center of the biennial system, notwithstanding its non-commercial status.

The object of fetishization is no longer the commodity, but one of the market's most central self-proclaimed features, namely freedom, understood primarily as the freedom of choice from a plethora of offers and options. This is precisely why all biennials always present a diversity of something (diverse media, diverse artists, diverse countries and continents, and never a monographic exhibition, for example), relegating the idea of "multiculturalism" to a market ideology of culinary choice. Just as biennials fetishize consumer choice, they also enshrine a form of entrepreneurial freedom on the part of the producer. Big exhibitions create executive jobs for independent (free) curators, who are free to choose venues, titles, and a team of collaborators. In other institutions, all of these elements are usually stable and given in advance, but in biennials, they belong to the zone of curatorial authorship. Free curators personify the holy cow of free choice, and it is a principle they follow as the highest ethic of their profession.

The dominance of the ideology and rhetoric of freedom in Manifesta and analogous biennials raises the question of how such freedom manifests itself in un-free or insufficiently free contexts. When bureaucrats prevent curators from deciding upon creative questions themselves, they inevitably fail to understand the rules of contemporary art and fall prey to ridicule; even during the earliest stages of preparations for Manifesta, the foundation made a point of releasing a special statement assuring that the Hermitage "understands" the idea of a curator's creative freedom. But the fetishization of free

choice also fetishizes the process far more than its result; if the curator made an original choice but then was prevented from presenting that choice through an act of censorship, the choice itself (which can always be announced in the press) becomes all the more significant. This whole system of mutually beneficial relations between several social and political groups is based on a mutual understanding shared by all sides involved of the rules of the game.

Russian gallery and a smattering of Russian artists here or there. But institutional curatorial careers in Russia have never been and are still rarely recognized abroad, even with a drop of several rungs in the career ladder.

In post-Soviet Russia, contemporary art has been legitimized differently than elsewhere—not through its critical function or its social rhetoric, but in a more traditional way, as an exclusive commodity—strengthening the logic of inequality

The two-headed imperial eagle presides over the gate of the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Initially, the assumption could have been that this machine of harmless, opportunistic subversion would work in Petersburg just like anywhere else. Indeed, that would have been the case, had the Russian state agreed to tolerate harmless criticism in return for economic benefit. In many senses, that is how things were until very recently, and Russia seemed to be one of the many possible territories of contemporary art. In fact, as it turns out, the country's inclusion was very fragile and hardly existed at all. The aforementioned "career globalism," as typified by Manifesta, has included Russia even less than the international market. Until recently, Art Basel included one

constituent of this country. Its most naive version is literally an expensive commodity for rich collectors. Its more sophisticated variant is exclusive knowledge for an intellectual elite: to appreciate a socially oriented work of contemporary art, you have to belong to a sophisticated international community.

The Hermitage plays a special role in all of this with its orientation toward "high art" and its collection of treasures. The museum's identity was always based on gold, be it that of the Scyths or of the tsars, and in that it was special. In terms of class, it stood in opposition to the

typical Soviet museum with its documents and its ideological pictures, a space both didactic and anti-fetishistic by nature. In Soviet culture, the Hermitage and other palaces in Petersburg were rare zones for "the rhetoric of wealth," which the conservative logic of public opinion conflated with the zone of "high art." As a "museum of wealth," the Hermitage could and still can afford to look down upon the uneducated, including uneducated politicians.

The initial assumption was that the Manifesta in Petersburg would take place in such an enclave of autonomy founded on real and symbolic wealth, and all political calculations were made accordingly. The Hermitage's authority would serve to shield attacks on contemporary art, whose source was not yet the state, but last year largely originated from Russian Orthodox fanatics and Cossack activists. This calculation differs at the root from all previous editions of Manifesta, which usually preferred to work with "interesting poverty" rather than "interesting affluence" (when actually there is enough poverty in Russia and Petersburg to go around).

Actually, it may well be that the choice of the Hermitage, with its legendary wealth, as the location for the tenth anniversary edition of Manifesta seemed like an even more interesting challenge than Manifesta 9's former industrial hangar in Genk. This is a bit like the question radical leftwing Soviet artists and theorists posed themselves in the 1930s when they felt that their paradigm of militancy had exhausted itself. As they formulated it, what was at stake was the search for the humanistic basis of the classics of art, and their search for universality and truth as opposed to tendentious political tasks. One might imagine a similarly risky conservative turn with a goal of unearthing the true roots of contemporary art before and beyond its instrumentalization through creative capitalism in the context of Manifesta 10. Its curator Kasper König's creative biography makes him an important figure of contemporary art "before Manifesta," a protagonist of the heroic "Western" autonomy of art from the epoch of the Cold War.

Such a reading of the conservative "Old Masters" through the conservatism of modernist practices of artistic autonomy might have given weight to a productive self-criticism of Manifesta and its routinized "progressivism." However, unfortunately for all involved, the Russian state has undertaken its own ultra-militant conservative turn in both domestic and foreign policy, and they have discredited or at least problematized the artistic dimension of transgression in that direction, running the danger of instrumentalization from the Right. To explore the underestimated emancipatory and humanist potential of classical museum heritage might be a bold gesture in a context where a certain type of black-and-white and conceptual documenta-art is considered mainstream, but it takes much greater boldness and political *doigté* in a country where the heavy authority of classical painting is invoked as an argument and a weapon against everything contemporary, even against the once contemporary and political meaning of those very same paintings.

Admittedly, Manifesta has always been part of neoliberal urban transformations with the silent consent of all parties involved, and its curators are usually very good at maneuvering and defending their interests and those of the participating artists. But is Manifesta ready to mirror that situation when an experimental "conservative" exhibition suddenly begins to resonate all too harmonically with ultraright-wing cultural policies initiated by the state? Is there something available to describe this, like the language invented by non-conformist artists of the Soviet Seventies, indicated by the untranslatable term *nevlipaniya*, which roughly means "how not to put your foot in it"? Over the last years, Putin's Russia has unexpectedly turned to realizing a project of perverse decolonization and liberation from Western influences, including that of modern art and even more post-modernism (with the latter term constantly used as an accusation by the authorities). In official documents from the Ministry of Culture, full of sympathetic quotes from Max Nordau, the author of the term "degenerate art," such work is now presented as a mix of "black humor, cursing, porn, and mediocre shamanism under the slogan of innovation."

While earlier editions of Manifesta often declared their social engagement, they were rarely able to engage a local public in the broadest sense, imagining that critical art would find its audience in the new precariat of a post-industrial age. In reality, the "career" art of Manifesta addresses the instances of that career; it caters to curators and institutions. The Hermitage edition of Manifesta is a clear departure from this model, but the audience it addresses—tourists from the Russian provinces and foreign passengers from Baltic cruises who usually visit the Hermitage—will be hard to mobilize for critical thinking, let alone resistance. Such an audience is far too deeply stuck in the register of enlightened nationalism and the admiration of wealth that the Hermitage evinces. In the new political configuration, a turn toward this audience does not come dangerously close to the populist context, but rather threatens to "put its foot into" the triumphalist aesthetics of the opening ceremony at Sochi. The tenth-anniversary Manifesta, planned as a transgressive aesthetic gesture, may well prove full of such political pitfalls.

When contemporary Russia's president rejects "Western values," many in the West misread this as a radical critique of capitalism and reacted with professions of sympathy. However, the point is that the negation of West in this case also negates the inner critique of the West. That is, both critical thinking and post-classical art find themselves beyond the law. If we are dealing with a fundamentalist cultural revolution, isn't the reference to the Old Masters and the classical museum context a "step toward" the

Russian state, as it demands that artists comply to standards and taboos of "high art" as opposed to contemporary culture? From the perversely poignant perspective of this new Russian ultraright-wing conservativism, the critical character of contemporary art's gestures embodies the "propaganda" (of homosexuality, the Western way of life, tolerance, and multiculturalism), while classical art embodies their aestheticization. In general, the state has no problem with the "aestheticization" of LGBT clichés (for example, in pop music) or of "Westernness" in design or architecture, and the Russian avant-garde was also successfully domesticated (and instrumentalized as a symbol of Russia's eternal glory) in the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics. On the other hand, isn't today's allegedly "progressive" art producing too formalist a language (even if it is a critical language with a left-wing vocabulary) to be immune to instrumentalization? Today's soft dictators wear Armani suits, watch American sitcoms, tolerate some nice contemporary art, and even, why not, read and assimilate Slavoj Zižek's critiques (or at least their adherents do).

In a way, the Russian cultural authorities who suddenly became archaically and ridiculously anti-modernist and turned Manifesta, no matter how it would appear, into a heroic deed, made things look simpler than they currently are. Since Vladimir Putin goes so far as forbidding state employees to ride foreign cars and take their holidays abroad, why not just ban any foreign art outright? Under aesthetic censorship (that agrees to make some exceptions for "export" situations), international contemporary art is a protest act by definition. But in a broader context it is not, and has not been for decades. The world we live in is more complex than that. There is no guarantee of emancipatory potential in contemporary art, and neither are there specific forms that would assure us of the correct political behavior of their creators, let alone their owners. Increasingly, we hear of such a thing as a left-wing rhetoric (and maybe not even just a rhetoric) of the right wing, and we see contemporary-looking (and maybe even contemporary-thinking) art that embraces nationalism and dictatorship. There will be such examples—from the Russian context—at Manifesta, although it seems through an oversight rather than programmatically. There are no rules anymore, and each case has to be taken separately; the relatively safe common ground of contemporary art is shifting. And this incredible complexity is the only hope left.

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Translated by David Riff

Ekaterina Degot is an art historian, art writer, and curator, and is currently the Art Director at the Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne. Since 2008 she has been a senior editor of **www.openspace.ru/art**, an independent online magazine of art news, art criticism, and cultural analysis. Her books include: Terroristic Naturalism (1998), Russian 20th-Century Art (2000) and Moscow Conceptualism (with Vadim Zakharov, 2005). She teaches at Moscow Alexander Rodchenko school of photography and media art. Shows she has curated or co-curated include: Body Memory: Underwear of the Soviet Era (St Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, and Vienna, 2000 - 2004); Moscow - Berlin 1950 - 2000 (Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, and the History Museum, Moscow, 2003 - 2004); Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art Between Trotsky and Stalin (New Manege, Moscow, 2008), Citizens, Mind Yourselves: Dimitri Prigov (Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, 2008), Kudymkar - Engine for the Future (Perm Art Museum - Winzavod Moscow, 2009), and If. Ukrainian Art in Transition (PERMM Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010). Between 2010-11, she co-curated the first Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg under the titleShockworkers of the Mobile Image (with David Riff and Cosmin Costinas) and Auditorium Moscow, in Belye Palaty, Moscow (with Joanna Mytkovska and David Riff). She recently co-edited Post-Post-Soviet?: Art, Politics and Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade (with Marta Dziewanska, et al.), 2013, and with David Riff convened the first Bergen Assembly, Bergen, 2013.

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Deliberately or unconsciously, the text was never delivered on time.