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Practice



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by
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Studio Practice: Recent Work by SoVA Faculty
Penn State School of Visual Arts

SEPTEMBER 6 - DECEMBER 11, 2011

Palmer Museum of Art
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Being (*With*)

Artists

In
Memory
of
Anna
Alchuk
and
Oleg
Kireev

IRINA ARISTARKHOVA



The function of a catalogue essay is not well defined. It depends on its purpose, on an exhibition, and ultimately, who is asked to write and why. Therefore, my first question to the artists presented here was: What do you want from me? The answer was more challenging than I expected. I have been asked to write without any instructions or expressed desires. I was given a remarkable degree of freedom in choosing my subject and object of writing.

As I was becoming more anxious about this responsibility and this opportunity, I started meeting with the School of Visual Arts' faculty. Their ideas, their generosity, their ambitions and vulnerabilities, their burdens and responsibilities, have become my preoccupation. I wanted to know how they make choices about their subject matter, how they go about doing their research, and ultimately, deciding on and then making the work that you see here. All of that interested me. I wanted to understand better this pattern of professional openness that is so quintessential to—and challenging in—creative work. Many of the works presented in this exhibition are a testimony to this openness that cannot be easily captured through a text or narrated succinctly. The experimental nature of contemporary art manifests itself in its various forms and processes, where looking at such a diversity of approaches to making, to being in the world, would enable connections to the audience from different walks of life. Thus, larger subjects presented here range from a poetic response to looming ecological disasters to a thought-provoking exploration of popular American culture.

But there is more to being with artists for me personally. From my previous experiences in academic contexts in Russia, where alternative cultural, philosophical, or political viewpoints have been discouraged, it was often the art community that welcomed them without a drive to homogeneity. This essay is written in memory of Anna Alchuk and Oleg Kireev. Seemingly,

their creative interests were not life threatening. Alchuk was an artist, poet, and writer. She was also involved in promoting freedom of expression for all artists through her curating. Anna was dragged into a protracted and public court battle for participating in an art exhibition in 2003 that specifically tried to address freedom of expression. She drowned (which was ruled as suicide) in a river in Berlin in March 2008, at the age of 52. Oleg Kireev was a writer, cultural producer, artist, and activist. He was interested in cultural studies, history of ideas and contemporary anarchism, new media and alternative activist art. Oleg won awards for his writing and creative work. He fell to his death from a window of his Moscow apartment in April 2009 at the age of 33. I do not know if they knew each other well, though most probably they met or knew of each other. They find themselves in this text together, joined by that welcoming space they created for alternative cultural ideas and political viewpoints. They asked me to write for their various publications about subjects dealing with contemporary theory and feminist aesthetics, new media art, and cultural politics in the 1990s, when I did not find much space for that kind of writing in Russian mainstream academia.

The artists and art educators at Penn State have made me think about this personal history, making it clear that they have shared this openness to others' points of view as their modus operandi. The sheer multitude of creative responses to being in the world, and insistence on indeterminability of what is to come, represents a qualitatively important contribution. Being with artists in the School of Visual Arts for the past five years and especially in the last few months has made me realize how important artists and cultural producers have been in making me practice freedom of expression.

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Visual anthropology
Subverting landscape
I've never had a studio – being open to the world
Evidence of others

Healing people from the world which is pretty bad
Creating cultural dialogue
Shows are platforms to speak
Men going to war

Chemistry at the molecular level is a social relation
Atoms are socially interactive
The problem of being interdisciplinary
Academic vagabond
Best scientists love what they study
Accepting evolution is important
I am received more skeptically by artists because I do portraiture

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Art pushed to cultural periphery
Thirty drawings at the same time
Breathing and / in / as art
Athletic body
I felt like a host
Space goes nowhere
Growth and regrowth

Reduction wood blocks
Things that are not verbalized but approachable
Different ways of knowing
Ways of helping us cope with the complexity of life
Landscape as a self-portrait
Camouflaging oneself in a protective layer

Fragility in the paper in relation to the aggressive animal
Meditation on the process, revealing intimacy
Preparation for death
Mourning

Spatial storytelling
Depopulated spaces and walls
Animated objects
Alan Ginsburg: artists, be vulnerable

You don't claim expert knowledge
Found objects in various places
Art work as a thing – I can never be sure what it is
Leaving things around
Hide and seek
I like the fact that I don't know
Studio-based Ph.D.
What does it mean to be an art school in the twenty-first century?

Fusion and joke
Love under pressure
Studio as a husband
Something replicated and not made by the hand
Representational systems to divide or bring people together
Sculpture with a capital "S"
Paying myself for most of my materials
Biomorphic form

iture

*Looking at the overlooked
Being a potter is a political decision
Status quo of consumption if being challenged
I don't like most of my work
Teaching a class on crying
Balance between feeling and learning*

*Architectural ability to create power dynamics
I buy my own equipment
University of Maryland anatomy theatre
Medical perception of body and sexuality
Indeterminate work*

*These are to-do lists in painting
Pre-ness: pre form, pre done
Bits of my life, experience and reflection*

*Hebrew burial tradition
The weight of history is metaphorically lifted
Ecological warning
A joyous mourning of remembering and celebrating*

*Putting together cultural objects and mundane things, juxtaposing them
Questioning of power and hierarchies, as well as of value
What we choose to keep or discard
Being unfaithful to whom I am supposed to be
Moving and staying
Visual ethnography of human constructs: gender, race, sexuality
Growing up near Washington and going to the Smithsonian museums three or
four times a month made me think that all museums are free*

*Beauty and decoration cannot be separated
Festivity and celebration of life
Visual pleasure
I cannot paint unless I have a form
Minerals from the earth*

*The painting depicts a melding of public and private symbols
Nepal, Peru, ecological disaster, visions, agit-pop
Cosmic comedy, happy birthday
I was prepared to risk all; I commenced to paint*

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I also asked the faculty to respond to two questions: first, on the role of an art school in a large research university, and second, on the relation between culture and knowledge. These questions, so common and so basic, were prompts—theatre decorations—that revealed and supported the act of art making professionally. What do professional artists say, as peers and therefore the harshest critics of their profession? Following is a selection of their answers:

“For me, art making requires forgetting I am producing culture and knowledge.”

“Culture and knowledge, and theory, too, come after art making. I try to purge my mind of all but the most inchoate notions, in search of a new way of speaking through art. Culture is a byproduct, or residue, of this search.”

“The highest calling of art is to help people embrace their own humanity.”

“I went to a liberal arts college for undergrad and started off as a pre-med student. Because I was required to take a certain number of credits outside of my major and a friend recommended to me a fun sculpture class, the whole direction of my life changed and I found my true calling.”

“Our impact is defined by how active we are at creating bridges with others.”

“We are the epitome of creative thinkers, and as such we can and should lead the way on this in all area—fine arts, science, design, etc.”

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The function of an aesthetic judgment escapes me. It has not always been like this, but now I cannot judge anymore; I am done with the judgment. Someone offers me freedom, and in return, I issue a verdict. Being so ideologically, politically, and culturally implicated, grand aesthetic judgments display little patience. We often rush to conclusions that rely on the traditional concept of rationality, which has always been challenged by the arts. We do not learn when we judge. Thus, artists as cultural producers are, ironically, always at risk of being accused of disturbing ‘the order of things.’ They are under threat of being thrown out, exiled, and punished for their cultural products. And we seem to be used to it, all of us. We accept a stereotype that ‘the art is dangerous’ and should not be allowed to ‘push the boundaries’ too far.

When did we start equating thinking and judging? Certainly, an aesthetic judgment is everywhere, in spaces like the studio, or in the pedagogical practice. However, this experience of being with artists made me wonder where the judging impulse comes from, and situating it more philosophically and historically as a way of approaching art that serves many purposes, but also has its

own limitations and even dangers. One of the most widely used modern anthologies on Western aesthetics might be helpful here. It presents Plato's Republic as the text that frames Western tradition as far as its approach to art is concerned. In this founding text Plato demands that poetry, together with all other "imitative" arts, proves "her title to existence in a well-ordered State" and that those like myself, "the lovers" of art, "shall be allowed to speak" on its behalf in order to prove that not only art "is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life" (1977, 20-21). Thus, this litigation, set up when art needs to be 'defended' in a city-state, has a long history. Aren't we still demanding that artists 'prove their title to existence?' And what would we do if they fail: exile them, reject them, defund them, or sue them if they do not follow 'our' aesthetic judgment? What does it say about us, the judges of art?

Let's compare, for example, art making and war making to clarify the 'placelessness' of this 'always potentially dangerous' art within a state structure. War is often considered to be a driver of scientific and technological progress, and many professionals who work for the 'war effort,' are respected, and often appropriately compensated. War making has even been hailed as one of the drivers of human history and human kind, 'objectively.' If an activity that destructs and kills can be considered not only useful but also progressive and constructive, it is even more surprising how harshly we judge art. We remind artists of the precariousness of their acceptance in a society through various means, often equating them with other 'undesirable elements.' Is it, I ask, because of this trust and openness? Do we really want to know what it means to be free? Are we ready to defend freedom of expression not with weapons, but with art? I believe that we have to insist on asking ourselves these elementary—even naïve—and basic questions.

. . .

I had to empty myself out before each meeting with an artist. I visited studios, which could be in basements and attics, in computers, in various cities and nowhere, in the living rooms, in the corners, on the floors, on the walls. The main lesson that I've learned from the last two months is that 'I have no idea' what will be coming my way, and this is the only way to proceed, through the unknown. One needs to be open to that. It is not something that comes easy and I am still learning how to remain open (minded).

To listen, to be, to experience, to share, and to learn: Thank you for your time. As Raqs Media Collective writes, when considering contemporary art schools (based on a Greek word for "a pursuit or time of leisure"): "It is necessary to dwell on this conflation of duration (time), gathering (a forum), and site (a place for learning). Of these, time is the most important, because a gathering that does not endure or a place that disallows the transformative, accumulative inscription of exchange and discourse cannot by itself, or even in combination, generate a context for learning" (2009, p. 75). Having time, taking time, giving time, are thus important for art education and art appreciation. I would also add: suspending aesthetic judgment. Keeping that 'placelessness' of artwork alive, rather than sorting it out, classifying, managing, and ordering. The peer review process in art is as strong as in any other professional community, and understanding it takes time

anthologies on Western art frames Western tradition demands that poetry, well-ordered State” and on its behalf in order to “live” (1977, 20-21). Thus, a long history. Aren’t we asking ourselves these

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and learning, which is no guarantee that art will not move on to a new ground just as we settle into our comfort zone in understanding it.

The openness with which I have been presented, that trust that art bestows upon our ‘human lives’ is, I believe, more difficult to handle than a fear of artists as imitators of reality, or of their creative power to stir our passions and emotions, thus undermining an ‘orderly state.’ Artistic ability to call upon our own freedom of expression (and its ensuing responsibility?) is dangerous only if we cannot handle multiple truths—that is, democracy, even as we find it more and more difficult to not build new hierarchies of the right ‘order of things.’ What can we learn from artists who know what it means to wake up every morning and remain open? How do they achieve this ‘forgetting’ that they produce culture and knowledge, to make art? In fact, the path to innovation and discovery is through not knowing what one will do next, and being in a constant state of research and exploration. If you know what you are looking for, you will eventually find it or not, like a purse or an umbrella. However, you will not ‘discover’ it, as it comes out of this ability to open oneself to the unknown, to respect not knowing.

This ‘forgetting’ is crucial. As a result of my encounters, I have been consumed, and no longer am just a consumer of art. Art made by people who are so open to the rest of us that they put this trust in us, people of other professions and walks of life. After all, I’ve learned that artists—arguably more than any other occupation—acknowledge our degree of freedom, and therefore, of responsibility. They are presented by, through, and in their work, and entrust it to their audience, visitors, readers, and writers. Do we still, in return, need to ask, like a statesman does, that art proves its title to existence? In other words, how I give and take freedom.

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