

Just Don't Think About It

Benjamin Kunkel

Introduction to Antiphilosophy by Boris Groys

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Marxism has thrived as a way of thinking about art and literature, especially at times – the 1920s or the 1990s – when Marxist economic and political thinking has gone into retreat. The headwaters of the stream lie in *The German Ideology* (1846), where it seems an oversight that Marx and Engels don't name art and literature, as they do religion, metaphysics and morality, as 'forms of consciousness' to be stripped of their 'semblance of independence'. A historical materialist aesthetics sees in art the distorted reflection of social relations past, present and emerging. The result has often been a somewhat paradoxical model of art-making, in which the deliberate creations of the artist passively transmit unsuspected historical meaning. So in a middlebrow survey like Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* (1951), Balzac could appear, in spite of his titanic energies and avowed royalism, as a cat's-paw of historical progress, 'a revolutionary writer without wanting to be', whose 'real sympathies make him an ally of rebels and nihilists'. And the Marxist emphasis on the basic passivity of the artist, as a sort of crossroads of historical traffic, could be greatest where the account of art was subtlest, as in Adorno.

A broadly historical materialist approach has united so many interesting critics of the past hundred years that its fruitfulness for considering art produced under capitalism can't be denied. It has been less clear to what extent socialist theories of art could also serve as theories of socialist art. In practice, discussions of work by radicals in capitalist societies or by cultural revolutionaries in socialist ones have succumbed too easily to the idealism that historical materialism sought to overturn, as if the conscious politics of an Eisenstein, a Brecht or a Paul Robeson could secure the meaning and effect of his art. Critics have been more bleakly faithful both to materialist philosophy and to any future class-free utopia when they have considered all would-be revolutionary art as itself marked by the contradictions of class society (including socialism, which in classical Marxism is not the absence of social classes but the process of their dissolution). The Marxist critic might therefore prefer ostensibly apolitical work in which these contradictions rage untreated.

Adorno held a position like this. His posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) can be taken as the summit, with a corresponding barrenness and magnificence, of a Marxist aesthetics stressing the artist's receptivity rather than activism. Far from imagining a revolutionary popular art, as Brecht and Walter Benjamin had in different ways done in the 1930s, Adorno elaborated an aesthetics of suffering, in the senses both of passivity and pain: 'Authentic works are those that surrender themselves to the historical substance of the age without reservation'; for the audience, 'specifically aesthetic experience' requires 'self-abandonment to artworks'. As for the substance of history disclosed by true art, it is little short of agony. Adorno meant to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory* to Beckett, and the few other modernists he singles out for praise (Kafka, Schoenberg and Celan among them) give off some of the same feeling of emotional irremediability and formal intransigence. Nor did Adorno craft a waiver for artists in self-described socialist societies, which were simply another department of 'administered life'. East or West, all but a handful of artworks supplied only another dose of compliance and regimentation.

Adorno is worth keeping in mind while reading Boris Groys, who is one of the more interesting philosophical – he would say antiphilosophical – writers on art today. Groys never discusses Adorno, a striking omission in light of his temper and range: *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, Groys's latest book in English, contains essays on Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Kojève, Derrida and Benjamin; and Groys, like Adorno, possesses firm if abstract radical commitments and is a writer of relentlessly dialectical sentences in German. Otherwise they represent two poles of radical aesthetics. Adorno's approach was historical materialist or Marxist yet anti-communist (at least where official Communist parties were concerned). Groys is more idealist in his belief that the radical artist can consciously understand and deliberately convey the meaning of his work – one reason, perhaps, why he has said he isn't a Marxist – and yet more philo-communist. His recent *Communist Postscript* (2010) joins the efforts of other contemporary thinkers, notably Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, to revive communism as a slogan of the left. The differences go further. Where Adorno insisted on the artist's deep passivity and independence from politics, Groys declares the artistic impulse identical to the will to power and advocates an 'art functioning as political propaganda'. And where Adorno's stringent conception of true art narrowed modern instances

down to a few forbidding exempla, Groys's idea of art is extraordinarily expansive: he is especially attracted to art projects that efface the boundary between art and life, and has a puckish admiration for the 'life-building' efforts of Soviet art.

Few later writers have shared Adorno's anhedonia or snobbish tastes; today, leftist critics are happy to discuss the political symptomatology of Hollywood blockbusters or the shellacked sexuality of pop divas. But a sense that the interest of art derives above all from its unconscious embodiment of history is widespread among academic critics, most of whom share with the general public an aversion to expressly political work. As for work by artists with obvious progressive allegiances, the usual approach is to congratulate it for raising political questions but to fight shy of definite answers. In *Art Power* (2008), Groys mocks the solemn ideological vagueness of so many academic essays, exhibition catalogues and wall captions: "The work is "charged with tension", "critical" (without any indication of how or why); the artist "deconstructs social codes", "puts our habitual way of seeing into question". Such language resembles a debased form of Adorno's aesthetics: art exposes the contradictions of capitalism but leaves them to future history to work out. Apparently a summons to politics, it is in effect an evasion. Frustration with the political nugacity of the progressive-minded art world is the background to Groys's strenuous emphasis on the 'direct connection between the will to power and the artistic will'. At the heart of his work is a desire for contemporary art and criticism somehow to give up the autonomy of the royal fool – whose expressive freedom derives from practical superfluosity – for something more like the autonomy of the ruler, free because in command.

Born to Russian parents in Berlin in 1947, Groys grew up and was educated in Leningrad; at university he studied mathematical logic and linguistics. In 1981 he emigrated to Münster in West Germany, where he gained a PhD in philosophy. Today he teaches art theory in Karlsruhe and New York City. This unusual itinerary has been recapitulated by Groys's intellectual trajectory and shows itself in his distinctive sensibility. After concentrating on Soviet art in *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1989), he has mainly written discrete essays in which he looks, with Eastern eyes, at Western art and philosophy. *Art Power* gathers pieces on the contemporary art world – on curating, the digitisation of imagery, 'iconoclastic strategies in film' and so on – together with backward glances at Nazi art and socialist realism. *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* discusses a dozen or so thinkers – most of them Western European, most of them unsystematic – since Kierkegaard. Only in *The Communist Postscript*, a short consideration of the relationship of communism to philosophy, does Groys return to the USSR, making a new case for a kind of ideally existing Stalinism. Indeed, the rare notes of romance struck in his otherwise unemotional prose are elicited by the idea (an idiosyncratic one) of the communism he knew in his youth, and by the Muscovite *sots* (the name a disrespectfully ambiguous allusion to socialist realism) and conceptual art scene of the 1970s and 1980s with which he was connected. His continual making and unmaking of conceptual unities and oppositions belongs to a German dialectical tradition. Yet there is no Hegelian (or Adornian) heaviness in someone who can write: 'And so, the answer to the question: "How should we conceive the apocalypse?" has to be: "Just don't think about it!"'

Groys's many provocative formulations smack of an international art scene, centred on New York, in which flippancy and militancy can be hard to distinguish. The big question is how seriously he means to be taken, and how seriously he can be taken. The publication of *The Communist Postscript* as a little red book in Verso's 'Pocket Communism' series is enough to suggest that Groys's tonal fluttering between clever complacency and forthright provocation, joke and dare, is shared with others on today's left.

His most substantial book, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, makes a novel argument about an episode of modern art that in most other accounts is either a blind spot or is moralistically dismissed. In the standard account, Stalin betrayed the Soviet revolution in the arts by imposing on artists a regime of servile kitsch. After the avant-garde flowering before and after 1917 – Malevich's and Lissitzky's Suprematism in painting, Eisenstein's and Vertov's collectivist film-making, Khlebnikov's 'transrational' and Mayakovsky's surrealist poetry – so-called socialist realism became the official programme of Soviet art, which was now charged with 'the depiction of life in its revolutionary development'. This closed an era of proliferating movements, manifestos and formal experiments; and Stalinism persecuted many avant-gardists as citizens. Groys denies

none of this. But for him Stalinism succeeds the avant-garde just as a guest accepts an invitation. Far from betraying the avant-garde, Stalin merely scuttled a transitional movement in order to fulfil on the grandest scale that movement's goal of unifying art and politics. Much of the classical avant-garde, Russian and otherwise, had after all demanded, in reaction against the sterile autonomy of *l'art pour l'art*, 'that art move from representing to transforming the world': 'Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of a society was organised in monolithic artistic forms.' These forms, Groys concedes, were 'of course not those the avant-garde itself had favoured'. Throughout he writes about Stalinist cultural policy with a hair-raising mixture of political neutrality and aesthetic appreciation.

The Total Art of Stalinism mounts a sort of triptych: the post-revolutionary avant-garde; then Stalinism; then what Groys calls Soviet 'postutopianism'. The brief, happy career of the avant-garde ended on 23 April 1932, when a decree of the Central Committee disbanded independent artistic groups and conscripted all 'creative workers' into unitary professional unions of writers, painters, architects and so on. Groys, who pays little attention to literature and film and virtually none to music, dwells particularly on Malevich, whose abstract canvas *Black Square*, as Groys sees it, abolishes the cultural past so that a demiurgic unity of artist, engineer and politician can sweep into the resulting void. Not that Groys evokes the work of Malevich or other artists in detail; an art theorist with a limited plastic sensibility, he is interested mainly in art's ideological charge. Malevich once described the state as 'an apparatus by which the nervous systems of its inhabitants are regulated', and for Groys the goal of the Soviet avant-garde was for artists to gain 'absolute power over the world'.

If the avant-garde was unknowingly daydreaming of Stalin, then Stalinist socialist realism can no longer be considered a case of cultural regression marked by the rehabilitation of mediocre popular forms and the truncation of modernist experiment. Expanded to its proper dimensions, the concept of the avant-garde includes Stalinist 'total art' as its next and, so far, final embodiment. The Soviet Union, a new kind of society chartered not only to 'provide greater economic security' but also 'in perhaps even greater measure meant to be beautiful', could answer to aesthetic criteria in a way that chaotic capitalist societies in thrall to the profit motive could not. Groys summarises, apparently with approval, the argument of a critic writing in 1949 in the 'ultra-officious' journal *Iskusstvo (Art)*: 'In different forms adequate to the age, Soviet socialist realism preserved the vital modernist life-building impulse that [Western] modernism itself lost long ago, when it entered the academies and prostituted itself to its arch-enemy, the philistine consumer.'

Groys presents the formal staidness of socialist realism – the forced retreat from abstraction in painting, for example – as a paradoxical sign of its true vanguardism. 'The radicalism of Stalinism is most apparent in the fact that it was prepared to exploit the previous forms of life and culture,' whereas the avant-garde had 'respected the heritage to such a degree ... that they would rather destroy' than preserve it. What remaining need, in other words, for modern artists to make it new when a historically original society guarantees the novelty of all it contains? Besides, modernist representational dilemmas tended to fade away as the USSR turned to more projective forms: 'Just as the avant-garde had demanded, architecture and monumental art now moved to the centre of Stalinist culture.'

The third panel of the book's triptych deals with Soviet art after Stalin. When Khrushchev repudiated what he called a personality cult in 1956, Soviet citizens could acknowledge that Stalin's artistic career had also entailed, as Groys says, 'a chain of demoralising atrocities'. These enormities (which Groys, who in an afterword to the 2010 edition of *The Total Art of Stalinism* says he 'did not want to write another body-count book', neither discusses nor disputes) don't lead him to disqualify Stalinism as an achieved utopia of total art: he has claimed it only as a singular, not a beautiful, instance of the form. But with the recognition that utopia overlay a dungeon, Soviet art couldn't go on as before. One response, in fiction by the so-called village writers, was a retreat from socialist realism to narratives wistful for 'traditional Russian values'. This nostalgic current found more favour with the apparat than did *sots*, the 'unofficial or semi-official' variety of post-Stalinist art that Groys himself admires.

Groys's post-utopians – 'Stalin's best pupils' – have learned the lesson of art's necessary entanglement with politics. Yet here he shifts the emphasis from Stalinism's effective wielding of art power to the abstract meditations on 'the aesthetico-political will to power' of artists who lacked either a mass audience or a

receptive ear in the Politburo. Groys remains an associate of Vitaly Komar and Aleksander Melamid, an artist duo who in the late 1970s moved from Moscow to New York. In the chapter on postutopianism they assume the central role earlier accorded Malevich, then Stalin. Komar and Melamid's illustrated parable *A. Zyablov* (1973) parodies the recruitment of pre-revolutionary artists into the socialist realist pantheon: Zyablov – a fictional serf who anticipates abstraction in painting – becomes, in the duo's sarcastic officialese, 'a lodestar to all representatives of the creative intelligentsia seeking to achieve a typical reflection of reality in its revolutionary development'. A local moral could be drawn from this about Stalinism's capricious canonisations and excommunications of artists.

But Groys has a more universal case to make. Equipped with 'the fundamental intuition that all art represents power', Komar and Melamid appropriately give up 'the search for a form of art that can resist power, because they regard such a quest as itself a manifestation of the will to power'. Groys discusses (but, typically, doesn't describe) Komar and Melamid's sardonically sumptuous oil painting *Yalta Conference* (1982): Stalin in military uniform and Spielberg's homesick alien E.T., dressed in FDR's suit and overcoat, sit together, their hands and faces gleaming like rose gold against the Venetian murk of the background, while Hitler looms behind them from the parted slit of a red Turkish tent and, undetected by the figureheads of state socialism and Hollywood capitalism, places an index finger to his moustache in a gesture of conspiratorial secret-keeping with the viewer. 'The figures of Stalin and E.T.,' Groys writes, 'which symbolise the utopian spirit dominating both empires, reveal their unity with the national-socialist utopia of vanquished Germany.'

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Groys is a provocateur and the value of his work lies in its capacity to unsettle rather than convince. Despite encouraging critics of Soviet art to ground their findings in 'attentive study', *The Total Art of Stalinism* is light on documentation and empirically dubious. There is good evidence, whatever Groys says, that Soviet artists before 1932 were more often preoccupied by pictorial questions than by the artist's ideal political role. Just as questionable is his presentation of Stalinism in the arts as a top-down phenomenon, without populist origins: 'Socialist realism did not seek to be liked by the masses – it wanted to create masses it could like.' The neat formulation contradicts Vladimir Paperny's classic *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (2002), which describes how socialist realism emerged from the Soviet people as much as was imposed on them. And there is no reason to believe that Stalin chiefly thought of himself as an artist; his pretensions to being a first-rank Marxist theoretician, on the other hand, are unmistakable. Finally, why accept Stalinism as a realised utopia, however dire, when Stalinism itself – in line, to this extent, with classical Marxism – considered the Soviet Union a socialist and therefore transitional society, where no final communism had yet appeared?

Logically, too, Groys is prone to shortcuts to nowhere. One of his major difficulties lies in distinguishing Soviet postutopianism – he praises it above all other art of the last four decades – from the Western 'anti-utopianism' he rejects. The apparent blank irony of *sots* art, whereby Stalin can be likened to E.T. and both of them to Hitler, has made it seem a Soviet counterpart to pop art, which could treat Marilyn, Mao and Coca-Cola as interchangeable icons. Among leading *sots* or post-utopian themes, Groys identifies the complicity of culture with power; the irreducibly ideological texture of experience; and the basic fictionality of all narratives. Each of these is also a basic article of the postmodernism he calls anti-utopian. He resolves the problem by convicting postmodern Westerners of a 'neutralising and transideological' – thus futile – attempt to disclose a world of teeming difference irreducible to universal projects or stories. 'Russian postutopianism does not make this mistake' because it recognises campaigns against utopianism or meta-narratives as instances of the totalising ideologies that the postmodernists would refuse. 'To summarise this distinction it might be stated that Eastern postutopianism is not a thinking of "difference" or the "other" but a thinking of indifference.' The question is whether this indifferentism – a flat principle, clearly Groys's own, of the inescapability of politics for all art – itself makes for an important distinction between late Soviet and contemporary capitalist art.

The Total Art of Stalinism retains its interest today because of Groys's audacious effort to break the post-Cold War taboo on utopias by welcoming the very accusation – Stalinist! – most effective in maintaining

that taboo. Yet by the end of the book, he has inflated the notions of utopia (some version of which all aesthetics and ideologies are said to imply) and art-making (which under Stalin could extend to all activities of the state) to such dimensions that they lose as concepts the sharpness still clinging to them as rhetoric. For just as libido could be said to be the taproot of all sexuality but not sexuality itself, merely to say that all art draws on some universal reservoir of desire that may as well be called utopian is neither political nor utopian. This means that when Groys praises his postutopians for illustrating in different ways the indifferent law that art seeks power, he is avoiding any politics of art except perhaps of the most preliminary kind.

The tendency to aggrandise his ideas to the point of emptiness is Groys's besetting vice as a writer, and it undermines the conceptual oppositions vital to his dialectical arguments. But when he holds out against his mania for generalisation, he has suggestive and disturbing things to say not only about Soviet culture but about contemporary capitalist art. Inattentive to individual artworks, he is best at conjuring the spirit of entire institutions and movements. In *Art Power* he shows a surprising appreciation of contemporary museums, after characterising them in *The Total Art of Stalinism* as mausoleums of the avant-garde. Today museums offer 'practically the only places we can step back from our own present and compare it with other historical eras'. This is a nearly a truism; it's more typical of Groys's willingness to offend when he argues, in an essay on 'Hitler's art theory', that we would possess an ampler sense of history if we honoured Nazism as possessing a genuine aesthetic. 'The ultimate art work', for the painter manqué Hitler, was 'the viewer whom heroic politics make into a member of the heroic race'. Groys is clearly attracted in principle to art that heroically takes the viewer for its medium.

Groys's inclination towards an art that merges with its public shapes the most interesting essay in *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, 'A Genealogy of Participatory Art', where he makes good on the allusion to Wagner in the title of the Stalin book. The composer's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he explains, is not to be understood as a multimedia spectacle, but as a forerunner of participatory art. It aims to effect, for audience and artist alike, what Wagner called 'the passing over of egoism into communism'. (Groys is alive to the irony of Wagner renouncing the ego: 'One might also claim that ... this self-abdication ... grants the author the possibility of controlling the audience.') Groys's lineage of participatory art, defined by incidental resemblance rather than direct ancestry, also threads together Bakhtin's theory of carnival; the free-form 'happenings' of the 1960s; Warhol's Factory; and the situationist *dérive* through the streets of Paris. The varieties of participatory art matter less than their common effort 'to devalue the symbolic value of art' through the surrender of 'personal individuality and authorship to commonality'.

As Groys has swung his gaze from East to West some of his critical values have also changed sides. His praise for Western museums is one such reversal; another has to do with the world outside museum walls. Various left-affiliated 20th-century art movements, from surrealists to situationists, sought a mutually transformative encounter between art and daily – especially urban – life. That dream is now dead, Groys implies, thanks to the petrification of contemporary urban life by 'the Medusan gaze of the romantic tourist'. 'Cities originally came about as projects for the future'; therefore 'a genuine city is not only utopian, it is also antitourist.' Tourism imposes 'a homogeneity bereft of universality'. Cities become identical in spite of their cherished differences; their sameness consists in having equally abandoned the universal project of utopia to which they once gave so many local habitations and names. Thus the tourist-citizen finds wherever he goes 'the indifferent, utterly privatised life of postcommunism'. (Groys might have pointed out that in medieval Europe a city of free citizens, without lords or serfs, was a *commune*.)

'A homogeneity bereft of universality' also sums up Groys's view of the international art world, which artists, critics, curators and the authors of press releases more often describe in terms of its irreducible pluralism. Modernism was driven by the continual conquest of new formal territory and the abandonment of trampled battlegrounds; beginning perhaps with the extinction of avant-gardes around 1970, art in general and the visual arts in particular have more and more been defined by an omnidirectional spinning-out of styles and tendencies, with the cyclicity of fashion rather than the forward charge implied by the term *avant-garde*. Yet it's precisely the contemporary art world's ostensible pluralism, Groys argues, that constitutes its secret homogeneity:

Postmodern taste is by no means as tolerant as it seems ... [It] in fact rejects everything universal, uniform, repetitive ... And, of course, the postmodern sensibility strongly dislikes – and *must* dislike – the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of communism ... Communist aesthetics confronts the dominating pluralist, postmodern Western taste with its universalist, uniform Other ... What is the origin of this dominating postmodern taste for colourful diversity? ... It is the taste *formed by* the contemporary market, and it is the taste *for* the market.

There's something attractive about this Hegelian romancing of totality: don't 'eclectic', uncoordinated tastes in art often serve to rationalise a reluctance to think things through in matters of culture? But Groys's argument that the exclusion of Communist drab from the postmodern kaleidoscope gives the lie to neoliberal 'diversity' is more impressive as rhetoric than logic. There's nothing contradictory about a pluralist aesthetic disfavouring the idea of an aesthetic dictatorship: every principle is hostile to its own negation. Nor is to 'dislike' something necessarily to ban it; the market can include for sale Groys's book admiring the total artistry of Stalin. What he says is perfectly consistent, except in tone, with standard apologies for liberal capitalism: the marketplace – of art as of ideas – should be unrestricted, and the minimal universalism contained in this sole tenet is the condition of pluralism, not its self-contradiction.

Still, there will be something persuasive to many gallery-goers in Groys's sense of the paradoxical uniformity of an art world that still rewards the unique style above all else. If we glimpse a lurking void behind the busy surfaces of contemporary art, Groys's best explanation for it lies in *The Communist Postscript*, which barely mentions art. Here Groys attempts to vindicate Soviet communism as philosophy as his earlier book recognised it as a total artwork. By the word *communism*, Groys understands not necessarily common ownership of the means of production but 'the project of subordinating the economy to politics in order to allow politics to act freely and sovereignly. The economy functions in the medium of money. It operates with numbers. Politics functions in the medium of language.' Thus 'the communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.' Capitalism, on the other hand, performs the same operation in reverse, converting all would-be signifiers into mere price signals. The hush of commodification falls over even the most contrary utterance. 'Discourses of critique and protest' can 'in no respect' be 'distinguished from other commodities, which are equally silent – or speak only in self-advertisement'.

The meaning of art notoriously exceeds paraphrase. But art has enough in common with language that artistic expression today presumably faces the same empty choice between silence and self-advertisement. The deprivation, by universal commodification, of art's capacity for transcendent meaning would then explain why the bright palette of contemporary art should seem to pall into common blankness. But what can it mean for Groys to say that 'so long as humans live under conditions of the capitalist economy they remain fundamentally mute'?

In recent years, Žižek and Badiou have argued that a society dominated by a runaway economic process is inhuman: humans, after all, are distinguished from other animals, in the classical conception, by our capacity for speech and correspondingly political nature. To subordinate politics to economics is therefore an abdication of humanity. Such an understanding lies behind Badiou's declaration, in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010), that capitalism 'reduces humanity, as far as its collective becoming goes, to animality'. Groys makes the same deduction from Aristotelian premises, and in *The Communist Postscript* offers a utopian complement to Badiou's dystopian picture. Only with the thoroughgoing 'linguistification of society' by communism, he writes, would humans 'truly become beings who exist in language'. The redemption of language through politics would at last permit society to become philosophical, philosophy being the highest and most capacious form of speech.

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Groys's vision of communism as the kingdom of philosophy is not only utopian; it is also nostalgic for Stalin's Soviet Union, which 'understood itself literally as a state governed by philosophy alone'. (This

contradicts the idea that the USSR was organised principally along aesthetic lines – unless art and philosophy are, as sometimes seems the case in Groys, two names for the one thing.) The reigning Soviet philosophy was the revision of historical materialism that Stalin called dialectical materialism, and for Groys Stalin's intellectual advance over his predecessors consists of two moves: first, dialectical materialism puts language above both society's economic base and the cultural superstructure to which language might appear to belong; second, dialectical materialism can better grasp the world in its totality than other philosophies thanks to a unique tolerance for paradox. The defect of ordinary formal logic is to rule out paradox, while the traditional or pre-Stalinist dialectic 'temporalises paradox', seeing what Engels called the unity of opposites as produced over time: two contradictory propositions can't be equally true at one and the same instant, but the dynamic totality of history may grant them both their momentary truth. Dialectical materialism by contrast holds that life is defined by 'the figure of paradox', in the sense of the simultaneous validity of contradictory propositions. This means the Stalinist 'revival of the Platonic dream of the kingdom of philosophers' didn't require in theory the totalitarian rule it excused in practice. Communism, 'distinguished from a Platonic state insofar as it was the duty of every individual to be a philosopher, not just the duty of the governing class', doesn't ideally compel 'any quieting of conflicts; on the contrary, it promises to intensify them.'

It's impossible to know why Groys has stubbornly upheld Stalinism as the model of a society that grants art its due power, or redeems for language a philosophical significance today cashiered by capitalism. Trotsky, for one, imagined, more explicitly than Stalin, a comprehensive aestheticisation of society. 'The wall will fall not only between art and industry,' he wrote in *Literature and Revolution* (1924), 'but simultaneously between art and nature.' And if Stalin's dialectical materialism implied, as Groys says, that socialism should foster rather than restrict the expression of conflicting views, Trotsky was again more forthright: 'the powerful force of competition which, in bourgeois society, has the character of market competition, will not disappear in a socialist society, but, to use the language of psychoanalysis, will be sublimated, that is, will assume a higher and more fertile form. There will be the struggle for one's opinion, for one's project, for one's taste.' Trotsky's chapter on a 'communist policy towards art' includes a proviso later contravened by socialist realism: 'the domain of art is not one in which the party is called upon to command.' The total art foreseen by Trotsky – in which art, no longer 'merely "pretty" without relationship to anything else', becomes 'the most progressive building of life in every field' – resembles that described in *The Total Art of Stalinism* except that it's so much more democratic in spirit, with an aesthetic signature of complexity and variety rather than uniformity. Groys never mentions Trotsky's vision. Bukharin likewise goes unnoted in his book on Soviet philosophy. Their fates are two of many to suggest that the basic rhetorical 'figure' of the Soviet Union wasn't philosophical paradox so much as tragic irony.

Some of Groys's peculiar attachment to Stalin may come from his childhood in Leningrad. But the logic of his work invites another explanation. If it's true today that 'every protest is fundamentally senseless, for in capitalism language itself functions as a commodity,' a book asking you to buy the idea of Stalinism as the pinnacle of modern art or philosophy nevertheless stands out a little from the rest of the wares in the museum gift shop. Groys's appreciation of socialist realism and dialectical materialism as formal advances – almost heroically perverse in light of Stalinist denunciations of decadent 'formalism' – has been, if nothing else, a momentary stay against the incorporation of his own work into the glut of distinctions without a difference that for him constitutes the contemporary art world.

Even so, Groys's work ultimately reproduces the logic of unmeaning sameness he ascribes to capital. His most representative modern artist, after Stalin, is Marcel Duchamp, who shared with Stalin, if nothing else, the impulse to blur the boundaries between art and non-art. Duchamp's readymades – whereby a urinal has only to be mounted on a wall to become an art object – inspire the 'ready-made (anti)philosophy' proposed in Groys's latest book, which produces 'truth effects' in 'the same way in which "aesthetic experience" is produced in the case of artistic ready-mades: it can be attached to any possible object.' For Groys, the virtue of (anti)philosophy, with its tellingly optional prefix, is that unlike traditional 'command-giving' philosophy it opens up 'an imaginary perspective of limitless life, in which all decisions of life lose their urgency, so that the opposition between carrying out and rejecting a command dissolves in the infinite play of life possibilities'. This sounds less like politics – a zone virtually defined by ineluctable decisions and sovereign commands – than like clinical descriptions of catatonic schizophrenia, in which complete

inaction is the condition for simultaneously holding incompatible ideas of one's self and the world. The aesthetics of Soviet 'life-building' and the Duchampian readymade – one an exercise of power, the other a trick of perception – can be reconciled only at the expense of the distinctive properties of each. Groys's way of rhyming Stalinism with solipsism, as when he writes that 'the death of totalitarianism has made us all totalitarians,' is the sort of thing to make you wonder whether his work isn't an elaborate prank.

A more generous, not to say historical materialist, reading might see in Groys's particular combination of stridency and vagueness something of the general predicament of art and criticism these days. How can the artist or critic provoke a reaction when he finds himself surrounded by the jaded inhabitants of the art world? More clearly than any ideological alteration or formal dynamic, a basic change of social situation marks off postmodern (or anti-utopian or neoliberal) art from the modern art of socialist or capitalist countries. The world of so-called high art is more than ever separate from the lives of the governed or the governing classes, and art's gain in autonomy has come at great cost to any political relevance. In Moscow in the 1980s, the poet Vsevolod Nekrasov wrote some lines rhyming Groys's surname with that of the German artist Joseph Beuys and an imperative form of the Russian word for 'fear'. In Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich's English rendering:*

don't oh boy Beuys
but if you gotta fret
forget Beuys, get
fed up with gross Groys

It seems that Nekrasov felt that Groys had betrayed artists like himself by defining them as 'conceptualists' in his 1979 essay 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism'. In New York or Moscow today it's much harder for the art critic to inspire fretting or fear: a difficulty that may account for both the froth of outrageousness and the undertow of emptiness in Groys's work. Reading him, I sometimes thought of an exchange between the comedian Will Ferrell and his co-star in the Hollywood male figure-skating film *Blades of Glory* (2007), a mostly boring comedy occasionally startled into wit at its own and its viewers' expense. When Ferrell's character insists on choreographing a pairs routine to 'My Humps', the anatomically puzzling hit song about 'lady humps' by the Black Eyed Peas, his partner complains that he has no idea what the song means. 'No one knows what it means,' Ferrell replies. 'But it's provocative.'

Is something like this the secret motto enfolding the art of neoliberalism together with the work of its desperate critics? Not long ago I was at MoMA, where I paid \$25 to see, among other things, half a dozen Malevich canvases. I also saw hundreds of people surrounding the actress Tilda Swinton, asleep in a glass box. No one knew what this meant, but it was provocative – unless its apparent meaninglessness was just the reason that it wasn't.

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It marked one kind of dead end for left art criticism when Adorno argued that modern art constituted the sole remaining preserve of radical politics. For him, modernism testified at once, in its agony, to the badness of existing society and, in its very abstractness, to the enduring possibility of a good society whose blank potentiality was all that could be known of it. Today it's clear that, blessed with official approval, even the most refractory modernism could just as well ornament the existing order as prefigure a different one: Adorno glimpsed this possibility when he noticed Kafka's novels among the customary furnishings of the middle-class household. Groys, faced with a capitalist art world liberated from the rest of society into splendid irrelevance, has tried in different ways to imagine, not an art autonomous from society, but an art through which society itself becomes autonomous: a participatory total art. But the effort arrives at its own dead end, from a direction opposite to Adorno's.

A theoretical communist with a more materialist outlook would see that a substantial socialisation of art must accompany any worthwhile – that is, democratic or participatory – aestheticisation of society. For now, Groys's eccentrically communist vision of a 'new sensibility for radical art' can only ratify the gulf between the specialised art world and the general public that he would like to see closed. His work is

nevertheless an occasion to remember, amid the tentative revival of Marxism over recent years, that a revolution in culture was also part of the socialist project. Even today the experience of art continues to radicalise many sensibilities more decisively, if obscurely, than any political argument. Groy's favoured word 'power', however, used with any connotation of force, is the wrong one for this or any other effect of what we call powerful art: the essence of pity and terror, or mirth, recognition, gratitude or indignation, is to be unavailable to compulsion. As for the aesthetics of a utopia worthy of the name, it's impossible to say what the art of an economically just, politically free and ecologically viable social formation might look like. It would be interesting, not to say beautiful, to find out.

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