



Images of Political Radiation

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In his treatise “Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting,”¹ Kazimir Malevich proposed the theory of art as produced by infection. He speaks about bacilli that are almost imperceptibly infecting the artist's vision and modifying their art. His own art Malevich understood as being infected by the straight line, which he compared to the bacillus of tuberculosis. Thus, Malevich agrees with many philosophers, artists, and art critics that art is produced in a semi-unconscious way. However, he does not believe in the artist's own subjectivity and subconsciousness as sources of artistic creativity. The unconscious of the artist comes from the outside. Just as a bacillus modifies the body, so, too, are the sensibility and nervous system of the artist modified by novel visual elements introduced into the world by new technical and social developments. And Malevich believed that the good artists are those who let themselves be infected by the bacilli of their time in the most radical way.

Today, we are infected not so much by the bacilli of urban life as, rather, the bacilli of media and politics. And again, the best contemporary artists are those who have let themselves be infected by these bacilli in the most consequential way. Anna Jermolaewa belongs to these artists. She is very attentive to the ordinary, everyday level of human existence. She shares this interest in the everyday with many other contemporary artists. But she is especially attentive to those areas and aspects of the ordinary world experience that only look ordinary but—as we know if we are politically aware—function as a facade behind which certain political forces are operating. In this respect, her images of Chernobyl are especially characteristic.² The radiation that remains after the nuclear explosion is invisible. In this sense, it is different from the bacilli that Malevich had in mind—at least they could be seen in a microscope. Of course, a nuclear

explosion leaves the visible traces of destruction. But we have to *know* that a landscape was, and still is, subjected to radiation to be able—and even compelled—to see this landscape with different eyes. It is this knowledge that makes us experience this landscape and everything inside it as *unheimlich*. Now, Jermolaewa's images of Chernobyl have this *unheimlich* aspect, also for a spectator who never heard of the nuclear explosion that happened at this place. The same can be said about many other images by Jermolaewa that produce, in the spectator, the same impression of everyday life subjected to radiation emitted by violent political forces and events.

Jermolaewa is especially sensitive to this political radiation because she spent the early years of her life in the Soviet Union, where everyday life was politicized to the utmost degree. During the 1930s, all forms of independent economic or cultural activity were completely abolished. The political leadership thus gained the possibility of controlling and shaping the ordinary life of Soviet citizens in its entirety. Every citizen of the Soviet Union worked as an employee of the Soviet state, lived in housing that belonged to the state, shopped in state stores, and traveled through the state's territory by means of state-run transport. Everything in the Soviet mode of life was the way it was because someone had said that it should be thus and not otherwise. Thus, every ordinary commodity became an ideologically relevant statement, just as in capitalism every statement becomes a commodity. One could eat communistically, house and dress oneself communistically—or likewise non-communistically, or even anti-communistically.

This was especially true for Soviet mass culture. It was as omnipresent in the Soviet Union as Western mass culture was, and still is, omnipresent around the world. However, official Soviet culture rejected everything that we usually associate with the 20th century. Jazz and jeans were forbidden as symbols of the bourgeois West. Culturally, the Soviet population lived in the Russian 19th century that was dominated by the pre-bourgeois, aristocratic cultural tradition embodied by Pushkin, Tolstoy, or Tchaikovsky. If, for example, love for the classical ballet functions in the West as a sign of class privilege and belonging to the social and economic elite, in the Soviet Union it was a mass-cultural phenomenon. Famous ballerinas were as popular there as pop singers are in the West.

The ritualized and repetitive character of classical ballet requires a high degree of discipline and professionalism from the dancers. The Soviet public sincerely believed that the Soviet ballet was the best in the world and no other school of dance could achieve the same level of dance technique. Any attempt at innovation was seen as merely an excuse not to dance properly—as prescribed by classical ballet. One can safely say that the Soviet population was accustomed to being proud only of two things:

military and ballet. And, of course, there is an affinity between the two activities: both produce well-disciplined bodies. That also explains why Russian TV famously showed Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* during the coup d'état organized in September of 1993 as an attempt to stop the liberal reforms initiated by Yeltsin's regime. Indeed, the demonstration of *Swan Lake* was the best way to manifest the return to order and old imperial glory that the conspirators planned.

The history of the Soviet ballet is a good example of the political radiation that I discussed earlier in this text. The technique of ballet had remained the same since the Tsarist time. *Swan Lake*, especially, was a symbol of this cultural stability because it was created by the leading French-Russian ballet master of the 19th century, Marius Petipa. However, the ideological and political use of Russian ballet tradition during the Soviet time shifted its meaning and perception: from an upper-class entertainment it became a symbol of the political stability of the Soviet regime. Now, in her *Rehearsal for Swan Lake* (2024), made for the Venice Biennale, Jermolaewa plays precisely with this political symbolism of the ballet. She shifts the attention of spectators from the canonical form of the ballet to its rehearsal—with all the unavoidable imperfections and tentative approaches that this shift implies. The traditional form of the ballet as a demonstration of technical perfection by bodies totally subjected to discipline and routine becomes broken. Its plot— an ancient fairy tale—is now substituted by a new plot: an effort by the dancers to save the cultural tradition severely damaged by the Russian invasion of Ukraine that put this tradition into question. This effort is motivated by a hope that *Swan Lake* can signify not only a continuation of its old captivity by political powers but also a possible change for the better. After all, the hero of the ballet— after having been spellbound by the demonic Odile for a while—finds his way back to his beloved and suffering Odette.

However, not only the cultural traditions but also the everyday rituals and artefacts that Jermolaewa uses in her art reveal their political connotations. Thus, ordinary-looking bouquets refer to the so-called “color revolutions” that used certain flowers as their symbols (*The Penultimate*, 2017). The search for an optimal pose for sleeping reflects the experience of political refugees who search for the most appropriate positions that their bodies and souls are supposed to take in the new world—all these positions, though, feeling equally uncomfortable (*Research for Sleeping Positions*, 2006). But the uncanniest example comes from the Soviet unofficial cultural milieus in which X-ray images of human bodies were used as material to produce underground records of Western, as well as Soviet, jazz and rock music that was forbidden in the Soviet Union (*Ribs*, 2022/24). The combination of light music and images of human skeletons on the records that produced this music illustrates one more time—and

almost literally—the hidden presence of radiation behind the surface of normality. This time the radiation is half-physical and half-political.

Ribs is uncanny but also nostalgic. It reveals once again the absurdity of the Soviet way of life, but at the same time it keeps memory of the ingenuity with which the ordinary Soviet citizen dealt with this absurdity. Nostalgic is also Jermolaewa's *Untitled (Telephone Booths)* (2024). This work keeps memory of the time before the emergence of mobile phones. To call somebody from outside of one's own home, one had to find a telephone booth, and the telephone inside this booth had to be in working condition. Looking back, one sees to what degree the introduction of mobile phones changed our relationship to the place from which we are calling. Today, to call somebody from a public space means to completely isolate oneself from this space. Speaking on a mobile phone, one moves through urban spaces in a state of self-oblivion—totally ignoring the position of one's own body in the real, offline environment. On the contrary, in the time of telephone booths only a few things so sensibilized one to his or her immediate surroundings as a wish to make a call from a public space. It was quite a problem to find such a booth in a non-familiar environment. Often enough, the telephone apparatus was dysfunctional, the telephone book lacked half of its pages etc. And if everything was OK, one had to stand in a queue waiting for other people to end their conversations. Especially for a refugee who—without having an apartment with a telephone—had to call from a public telephone booth, the experience of calling was another way to learn and understand the way of life in the host country. One learned to cherish and love telephone booths not only because they were the most important connection to the country that one left behind, but also because they opened a way into the life of the country that one has entered. And this caring attitude to telephone booths was characteristic not only for emigres but also for the inhabitants of poor areas in which they could not allow themselves to have private telephones. I remember how impressed I was by the state of telephone booths in South Bronx in the 1980s. Everything looked damaged and out of order, but the telephone booths functioned perfectly.

Jermolaewa's works are very personal. That does not mean that they are somehow "expressionist." They are always based on the experiences that she shares with others. Now one can ask: Who are these others? In our time of identity politics this question seems almost inevitable. Of course, Jermolaewa's art reflects her Soviet origin—her being a part of the Soviet alternative, underground scene. And, of course, it also reflects the art education she got in Austria and, more general, her Austrian socialization. However, her artworks and performances refer to the political events, cultural attitudes, fears, and hopes that are spread by contemporary media all around the world and affect almost everybody.

And, in the first place, Jermolaewa's works appeal to many of our contemporaries who came from different regions of the world to the West with the hope to find a better life—including the artists and writers who hoped to find a social milieu more responsive to their art and writing. Unavoidably, all these artists and writers have what one can call a double gaze: they see their original cultural milieus from the Western perspective and see the West from the perspective of their native cultures. But if this double gaze is, indeed, characteristic for many, there are only a few artists who sincerely and openly manifest it. Anna Jermolaewa is one of these artists—and this makes her art especially valuable for our time in which migration has become the central social and political factor.

¹ Kazimir Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. 1 (New York: George Wittenborn, 1971), 147ff.

² "Chernobyl Safari," in *Anna Jermolaewa: Number Two* (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2023), 26–33.