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Spiritual Retreat to Self-Determination

*»As a stranger did I move in, as a stranger will I leave again.«
Wilhelm Müller, Gute Nacht, from: Winterreise, 1827*

As is generally accepted, Utopia imposes a rigid ban on melancholy. This already applied to the early social utopias envisioned in Thomas Morus ("Utopia", 1516) and Tommaso Campanella ("The Sun State", 1623), it then was adopted again via the belief in progress of Italian Futurism, and eventually that verdict came to find its most appalling appearance in the form of the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century. Despite the rigorous interdiction of melancholy, in the communist domain the occurrence of melancholy took place as an infiltration of the reality into ideology, as an invasion of doubt of the world-view, as well as a presentiment of the failure of the "big project". The reappearance of melancholy in a state where melancholy was interdicted, is explainable through the paradoxical condition of a society which glorifies itself as an "actually existing" utopia. The gap between ambition and reality – steadily growing in the course of history – produced reasons and material for that melancholic self-referentiality which was once termed as a "Saturnian disease"¹ which Wolfgang Emmerich described as "the psychological condition of the unsheltered, disappointed, hopeless individual with the mark of failure"², thereby virtually diagnosing a "Furor melancholicus"³ as the imprint of the Eastern cultural intelligence. It is this existential experience of a historical grounding based on a depth of melancholic self-determination which the artist Igor Oleinikov bears deep within him as a pattern of his artistic socialisation and which separates him in such an incisive way from the ironic fun- and pleasure societies of the Western European postmodernism. Melancholy as an internalised form of attitude, became a programmatic concept for Oleinikov early on in his youth, comprising the principle of refusing any kind of totalitarian claims. This fundamental difference between melancholic expression in the West and the East – in the former as an attitude of a blocked ideology protected by democracy, in the latter as the vocabulary of a rebellious identity assertion in an environment enclosed by power – has to be taken into account so as not to misconceive Oleinikov's world of images as a sign of passive self-referentiality. The artist's permanently advertised dimension in his paintings of "Aesthetic Mourning" (Bohumil Hrabal) – not as a formal principle detached from the world, but touching the world – may appear as an artistic reaction to the repressive, pincer-like grip of the suggestive "We"-fictions of the state socialism which Oleinikov experienced himself

until the end of the Soviet system. However, at the same time, this attitude continues in Igor Oleinikov's confrontational relationship to an occasionally stupendous faith in progress of a pluralist "adventure society" (Gerhard Schulze) of the West, where again figurations of scepticism, doubt and criticism are considered as marginal positions.

Pathos of the Profession

In the podia of the art world, aiming at pinpointed compatibility with trends and accelerated decryption, this attitude accedes twofold grounds and consistently emigrates to icy territories. Precisely because of the fact that Oleinikov's characters – almost invariably the exemplary figure of the isolated individual – deal with the disputable presence of the "modern artist" in a globalised world, his painting resorts to spheres of a professional claim which, not without pathos, stylizes the artist as the figure of the programmatic stranger and which vindicates the position of the artist as inaccessible. When looking at the face of the painter and at the bunch of paint brushes exhibited in the left-hand fist in Oleinikov's leitmotifly large-sized painting "Maler" (Painter, 2009) from the "Setting Fire" cycle created in 2009, as well as at the historical pose – the artist is unmistakably bearing traits of the Venetian doge Leonado Loredan, well-known from Giovanni Bellini's portrait from 1501 (National Gallery London), a clearly defined artist personality is recognizable: it is about nothing less than defending the truthfulness of the arts compared to other insight systems and it is about the artist's duty to profess that he is assuming a special role in society – which he accepts as an obligatory professional feature – and whose elitist status becomes evident in a mass society. The vow, which the autobiographical figure demonstrates by means of closed eyes and the lifted right-hand arm, is in no way addressed to a community, rather it appears as an expression of a life maxim directed to the inner world. One will not be able to read the words of the avowal from his lips – they remain, tightly closed, a locked gate to a latent, hermetic world marked by obsessions, to which only the truly like-minded, the one who is equally committed to the informal oath, can gain access. The artist appears as a hybrid archetype; half scout, half philosopher with an open coat and march-tested climbing boots, he symbolizes, standing in a zone between concealing vegetation and the pitiless human community, the societal peripheral position of an unsheltered individual, for which the character of "Stalker" in Andrej Tarkowski's 1979 Mosfilm classic represents the basic, visual repertory. Igor Oleinkov broaches the topic of the vision of the subject in artistic Modernism – the commitment to autonomy, conscious of the associated risks of a lifestyle degenerated from any bonds – with artistic mastery. He does so with the rigor of an individualist who is neither bound to

political systems nor aesthetic canons. Entirely devoid of any postmodern ruptures or ironic subtexts, for him it is about the position of the individual and particularly of the artist in a hyper-complex world. Blankness of meaning and fruitlessness as depressive, heavy symbols are not connected with this opus – on the contrary, the titles of the last painting series and the exhibition titles (“Tempest”, 2008, “Setting Fire”, 2009, “Forward”, 2010) point to the possibility of a hoped for unfolding of an outcome. In his painting “Wächter” (Guard, 2009), the complementary manifesto to “Maler” in the series “Setting Fire”, it nonetheless becomes apparent that this artistic ideal offensively opposes resistance. With his high collar firmly closed, a physically steeled figure is standing in the concentrated, almost frozen seeming posture of a man who, evidently familiar with Asiatic martial arts, presents his clenched fists, clad in gloves, as hitting instruments. Whether this guard with his mimic reminiscent of a death mask in the midst of a mysteriously illuminated birch landscape, is saving a mythical area or real assets from infiltration, remains unresolved. Merely his glance enwrapped in inner worlds, deducible from the - once again – closed eyes, reveals that the fear of loss which motivates him is aimed at an inner prosperity which cannot be sold at a loss with small money on the markets of vanity. The gazeless guard as a symbolic figure marks a fundamental motif of suspense in Oleinikov’s oeuvre – the paradox between superficial function and cryptic task, between external attributes and inner dimensions, between the allegedly effective and improper efficacy. Nothing appears as it is when the Nietzschean (or as in the series “Tempest”: Shakespearian) analytic gaze turns towards the all-too-human areas of society. The microcosmic arsenal of his love for details remains imperceptible (significantly visible for instance in the oscillating, multidimensional composition of the treetops in the painting “Wanderer”, 2010), when the adopted distance to the painting remains a predetermined rigid relationship. There is nothing which expresses this ambivalence more incisively than the tension between the statics of his figures and the title of the most recent picture series “Forward”, which almost appears futuristic and whose plot only seemingly refers to the protagonists and slogans of the communist guaranteed future and which only indirectly corresponds with Igor Oleinikov’s background, permeated by biographical ruptures. He himself was employed as a propaganda painter for a short time shortly before the breakdown of the Soviet state. The permanent quest, perceptible in the painter’s work, in search of existential self-positioning – which can also be found as a principle artistic motif amongst artists of his generation, such as the Berlin painter Jonas Burgert – in Oleinikov’s work appears perforated through societal distress and the experiences of the change of his country’s political system.

Born in Krasnodar, an industrial city in the Russian South West, as a young artist Oleinikov experienced the end of the communist world in the metropolis Moscow. It was there that he made the move to become a freelance artist in the early 1990s and gained first-hand experiences of the wild years of a tremendous transformation. Then, in 1996, decisively supported by close friends and patrons, he moved to the West, where he started to orient himself in an entirely different cultural area, studying at the Karlsruhe and Düsseldorf Academies in the classes of Jörg Immendorff and Markus Lüpertz by whom he was appointed master student in 2003. Considering this, Oleinikov's move to Berlin where he has a studio since 2007, seems logical – a move to a transitory signification-centre of artistic productivity.

Places and Constellations

When looking at the pictorial coordinates of his work, one notices that the fictive, yet, at the same time always autobiographical characters in the form of lone fighters (an earlier painting was programmatically titled "Bilderkämpfer", (Picture Fighter, 2006) struggle for a footing and orientation in life on crooked planes or revolving discs. Afar from the crowds, far away from everyday life and the hectic hustle and bustle, his heroes traverse, with somnambulant knowledge of places, like in the painting "Vorwärts" (Forward, 2009,) the routes of a "nomadic seeker on the quest for meaning" (Karin Thomas) or as lonesome wanderers conquer landscapes which are often displaced of real space- and time references. Generally, the culture-symbolic metaphor of the 'wanderer between worlds' appears as an access motif: on mazy paths, experienced loneliness alternates with the challenging and questioning of life, the power of revolt collides with nightmares and feelings of hopelessness – all signs of artistic selfassertion in the midst of a cold and heteronomous world of stage sets. In the mid-2000s it was, above all, depictions of exterior landscapes – in most cases doing entirely without human beings – that, in a powerful and opulent palette, dominated his aesthetic approach. In contrast, in Igor Oleinikov's more recent work it is inner topographies of the mind that sustain his position since a few years; this break became evident for the first time in the exhibition "Tempest" at Galerie Döbele in Dresden. Since then the thematic focus of his artistic production has shifted in allegoric exaggeration towards human figuration – initially set in complex warpings of spaces, later in exemplary man-nature-constellations where Oleinikov now places his characters in birch tree landscapes, swamplands for glaciers ("Felsen", 2010) rather than morbid rooms. The continuum in this transformation is the artist's compass which

remains hidden and which leads him through the cartographic premises of the latently interconnected scenes, subjects and situations.

The dynamic of his paintings, supported by an artistically accomplished thematic suspense between outer calm and inner virility, is further endorsed in his more recent paintings through a technique which previously the artist only used to deploy in his suggestive works on paper. The conceptional intertwining of brush, chalk and pen, simultaneously applied together with oil paint, oil pastels, coloured crayon and pencil can now also be seen in his large scale works, without them losing their expansive character of space filling paintings. In this duplicity of painting and drawing the mentioned, paradoxical thematic suspense emerges in a particular fashion: delusive countershapes are hidden behind the network of lines and the hatchings of the graphical parts of the works and only manifest themselves upon closer inspection of the painting. Only upon contemplation of the figure carved into the stone in the right-hand corner of the painting "Grotte" (2010), for instance, does the protagonist, depicted in an alpine grotto and apparently just awaking from a nightmare, become distinguishable as a sculptor who, during a break, indulges in the imaginations of his fantasy. It is this kind of academic dual imprint, which is quite rare to find in the contemporary art world – technical solidity and a radically asserted, autonomous attitude which determines the specificity undeniably at hand in the work of Igor Oleinikov. This dual imprint serves as a solid foundation for the path raising that enervating tension to the productive basis of an artistic conception. "A far cry from any kind of fashionable attitude" – as renowned art historian and long-time chief lector of DuMont publishers Karin Thomas accurately observed – "in Oleinikov's asphalt-tinted pictures one encounters a pictorially perfected sublimation of self-analysis and perception of reality."⁴

1 Regarding melancholy cf. Jean Clair (ed.) *Melancholie. Genie und Wahnsinn in der Kunst* [Cat. for the correspondent exhibition at Galeries nationales du Grand Palais 10.10.2005 – 16.1.2006, later in Berlin], Ostfildern-Ruit 2006, especially the essays of Yves Bonnefoy (p. 14-23) and those on the topic of "Melancholie und Moderne" by Jean Clair (p. 434 – 495).

2 Wolfgang Emmerich: *Status melancholicus. Regarding the transformation of utopia in the literature of the GDR.* In: Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.): *Literatur in der DDR. Rückblicke* [Text+Kritik, Sonderband], Munich 1991, p. 232 – 245, p. 232.

3 Wolfgang Emmerich: *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, erw. Neuausgabe, Leipzig 1996, p. 460.

4 Karin Thomas: *Expeditionen eines Bilderkämpfers.* In: Galerie Döbele (ed.): *Igor Oleinikov.* Sturm, Dresden: Sandstein Verlag 2008, p. 7– 9, p. 7