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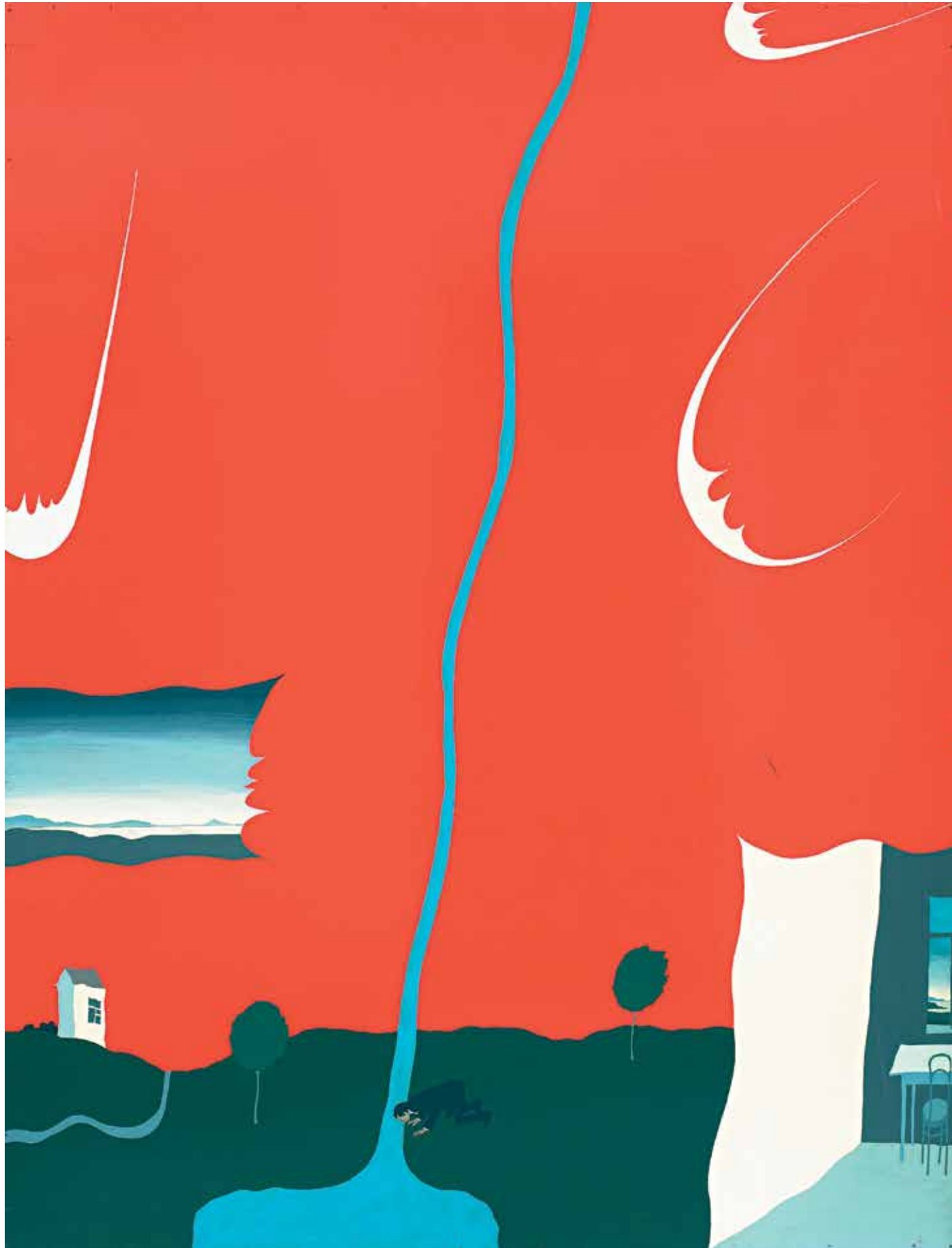
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## Viktor Pivovarov, An Orderly Artist

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# Viktor Pivovarov, An Orderly Artist

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Viktor Pivovarov weighs his words carefully and knows their power. He has written several books about his paintings and the stories behind them (*Agent in Love*, 2001, reprinted 2016; *Grey Notebooks*, 2002, new edition 2017...), and he also writes poetry. The verses he wrote last year about the room in which Dostoevsky denies the existence of Dante and Pushkin weeps because he is afraid of death have just been published by the Israeli journal *Zerkalo*.

In a recent interview, this artist with such a cultivated relationship to language said that he disliked chaos. In Pivovarov's case this is no idle boast but an important intellectual and aesthetic statement. One of the hallmarks of whatever he turns his hand to is tidiness and order.

Two homonyms ensue: the Russian word *poryadochnyy* means not only tidy, but decent and upstanding in the sense of civic and human honour. Art theory's return to the question of authorship in recent decades has reopened the issue of the political or civil approaches of an artist in the corrupt and brutally market-driven environment of contemporary art. This is especially true of Russia, where cultural politics has acquired an ever more compelling urgency. In all of these respects, Pivovarov, one of a generation of canonised, renowned peers pampered by success and interest, displays an uncompromising *poryadochnost* in the sense referred to above on both the Russian and Czech art scenes.

Czech homonymic semantics offer another meaning of the word *pořádný*: genuine, intensely present, unambiguous, strong, "echt" (authentic). After fifty years of intense work spent mostly in Prague, in this respect too Pivovarov is without doubt a "genuine artist" who maintains an uncompromising approach to the production of thorough, consistent, ongoing work.

At first sight his orderliness might appear anti-art. According to the ideas favoured in romanticism or symbolism, the creative gesture is born of Dionysian unfettered chaos, and order is therefore the kiss of death.

True, there exists the Apollonian pole connecting the muse with harmony. Exercising the caution that must accompany every generalisation, we might claim that, not only in the case of Pivovarov, but in (Russian) conceptualism in general, as well as in the avant-garde, the principle of order predominates over the principle of uncontrolled emotion, randomness, and spontaneous inspiration. Nevertheless, it is obvious that in reality both principles mutually complement each other. Even

*Viktor Pivovarov*  
Daughter of Troll, from the  
cycle Children of Gods, 2012,  
oil on canvas, 85 × 70 cm.

Opposite page:

Stream, from the cycle Seven  
Conversations, 1977, enamel  
on hardboard, 170 × 130 cm.

Photo: the artist's archive.



in Pivovarov's works we find a wild, ferocious fertility, an animalism and physicality, and many manifestations of hybridity (e.g., in the cycle *Children of Gods*, 2012). However, these qualities are always overarched and overseen by the element of order.

Looked at from this perspective, it is no wonder that the flagship of Pivovarov's work during the seventies was the album. The performative aspects in the unofficial venues for which the albums of Soviet conceptualists were composed have already been described in detail: narrative linearity accompanies the processuality of page-turning, narration emphasises the text as the supporting strength of the whole – all of this is well known. However, the album is characterised by yet another feature, namely its organisation. It is an art form consisting of a number of parts all coming together to form an integral whole. The album is not only a story, but a mosaic or secularised version of the way of the cross, upon which no stop can be added, skipped or randomly improvised. While its realisation is individual, its framework is a set of strict rules.

Further evidence of the importance of tidiness and orderliness in Pivovarov's aesthetic is his partiality for graphs and diagrams, gardens, parks and atlases (e.g., *Atlas of Animals and Plants*, 2015). Recent exhibitions and publications include his *The Gardens of Monk Rabinovich*, a project undertaken for the Gallery of the Czech Centre, Berlin, and the book of the same name published by Arbor Vitae. The project reveals Pivovarov's erudition. His imagination draws not only on a light smattering of details drawn from second-hand sources, but also on a profound study of the entire history of art, from antiquity to the works of his younger contemporaries. In terms of place, he seeks inspiration from illustrations for Russian fairy tales, Bosch, Cranach, the symbolism of Japanese names, and Chinese painting of the seventeenth century.

Orderliness is not simply the cognitive discipline informing Pivovarov's perception of art history, but forms the coordinates of his works. One example would be the well-known *Project for the Everyday Articles of a Lonely Man* from 1975 (part of the extensive cycle *Projects for a Lonely Man*). The most banal, everyday objects such as lamp, chair and glass are conceptually depicted and encoded several times over by means of captions suggesting how we might deal with and understand each item. Pivovarov systematises and translates into narrative sequence the most intimate and yet depersonalised microclimate of the individual, the most constrictive environment of his solitariness, permeated by an idiosyncratic and plaintive humour and distance. The result is a painting of a painting, which is formed by the framing of the inscription "painting" on the wall of this stage of the human being (who, typically, is not present in the painting).

A similar constructional principle is at work in the order of *The Gardens of Monk Rabinovich*, where a certain part of the space or individual point therein corresponds to the schematic, carefully composed spatial symbols for pleasure, fear, laughter or hope (see *Plan for the Imaginary Garden of a Hermit's Sorrow*, 2012).

The qualities of tidiness and orderliness also relate to a question that has received little interest, and that is Pivovarov's relationship to the Czech art scene. Of the artists who, beginning in the seventies through to the start of the nineties, left the Soviet Union and for various reasons settled in different parts of the world, few have managed to enter the host culture as a distinctive and in a certain sense exotic, perhaps not always properly understood, but legitimate and influential participant.

Perhaps Michail Grobman, some of whose work is concerned with Jewish and Hebrew motifs, managed to integrate in Israel, while Komar and Melamid or Alexander Kosolapov drew on American ideology and Valeriy Gerlovin and Rimma Gerlovina were successful within certain segments of the New York scene of the eighties. The more frequent model of emigration saw a Russian artist take her world with her and con-

tinue to develop it regardless of her surroundings or with only a superficial acceptance of the new environment. Such an approach is completely justified and we find it applied by Ilya Kabakov, Eduard Steinberg, Erik Bulatov, Oskar Rabin, Eduard Gorokhovskiy and many others.

Pivovarov brought tidiness and orderliness from Moscow with him, but exhibited it in collaboration with the local art scene. Leaving aside a few exceptions, he did not work as a book illustrator, his specialisation in the USSR. However, he explored the Czech art scene thoroughly, as evidenced by the external signs of this integration. In 1991, along with his wife Milena Slavická and Václav Stratil, he founded Gallery Pi-Pi-Art, where he displayed works by Michal Nesázal, Michal Gabriel, Vladislav Zdrobčilek, Jiří David and the secret organisation B.K.S. The culmination of these activities was the group exhibition *New Intimacy* (1991). In the late nineties, Pivovarov was one of the first living artists to have a solo exhibition at the prestigious Rudolfinum Gallery in Prague. This was his large project *Sonya and Angels*. In 1999, he became the first non-Czech to receive the Revolver Revue Prize. To date the only other foreigner to have received the prize is the Canadian Paul Wilson, a member of the legendary band Plastic People of the Universe and a lecturer in Czech studies. Pivovarov also organised a large exhibition for the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

Far more influential than these very public successes were the close ties he struck up on a local level soon after arriving in Czechoslovakia in the early eighties. In this he was undoubtedly helped by his previous experience with semi-official art. His first exhibitions in this country were held at the Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry and the Railway Workers' Cultural Centre (1984), plus a more extensive exhibition organised by the forward-looking Opatov Cultural Centre (1988). However, the path to Václav Boštík, Adriana Šimotová, Karel Malich and Václav Stratil, František Skála and the B.K.S. group and many other artists was by no means a story of socio-political solidarity. In communication with his Czech colleagues, Pivovarov was able to reveal the rules of aesthetic connections that are one of the most poorly accessible phenomena of artistic communication. Art history wears us down with its endless lists of influences, teachers and models, while a deeper understanding of the points of intersection remain largely unknown. Pivovarov descends into the creative coordinates and finds in Václav Boštík, for instance, an independent, bold spiritual minimalism, different from his own *Garden with White Compositions on a White Background* (1976) and from the paths to the void known from Moscow studios (think of Vladimir Weisberg), while establishing a close relationship based on mutual interest and respect.

In the case of Karel Malich, Pivovarov discovers another fascinating dimension that then reappears in his own work (see for example the album *Seven Conversa-*



tions), namely an attempt to get beyond the boundaries of the empirical world by means of the aesthetic object. Pivovarov views this intention in connection with several works of one of his closest companions, Ilya Kabakov, who travelled a similar path in his own album *System for Depicting Everything* (i.e., the fourth dimension). Upon Pivovarov's instigation, Kabakov met up with Malich – a rare realisation of Jindřich Chaloupecký's otherwise problem-ridden project of trying to bring together Russian and Czech underground artists.

It would be possible to continue analysing the intersections of different art worlds in the interest of communicating their individual aspects in relation to Viktor Pivovarov and his Czech colleagues endlessly – even more so since Pivovarov has not restricted himself to his own or the following generation, but continues without regard for age or generation in the direction of younger and younger artists.

*Viktor Pivovarov (1937) is a Russian artist who has lived in Prague since 1982. He is one of the leading representatives of the Moscow Conceptual School. In his paintings, drawings and objects he creates cycles with an expressive narrative element and often combines the image with textual accompaniment. He is the author of many works of literature.*

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*Viktor Pivovarov  
Untitled, from the series  
Czech Pivovarov, 1982–84,  
assemblage, 15 × 37 × 5 cm,  
photo: Ondřej Polák,  
courtesy hunt kastner, Prague.*

*Viktor Pivovarov  
Grandson of Dionysus, 2012  
oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm,  
photo: the artist's archive.*

