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 unfeathered 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
Further evidence of the importance of tidiness and orderliness in Pivovarov’s aesthetic is his constant use of 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 Rabí, 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 Pivo-
varov’s erudition. His imagination draws on not only a light smattering of details drawn from second-hand sources, but also on a profound study of the entire his-
tory 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, Cra-
nach, 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. Arti-
cles of a Lone Man from 1975 (part of the extensive cy-
cle Projects for a Lone 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 un-
derstand each item. Pivovarov systematizes and trans-
lates into narrative sequence the most intimate and most private aspects of the human being (who, typical-
ly, is not present in the painting).

A similar constructional principle is at work in the order of The Gardens of Monk Rabí, where a cer-
tain part of the space or individual point therein cor-
responds to the schematic, carefully composed spatial symbols for pleasure, fear, solitude or hope (see Plan
for the Imaginary Garden of a Human’s Sorrows, 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 end of the nineties, left the Soviet Union and for vari-
ous reasons settled in different parts of the world, few have managed to enter the host culture as a distinc-
tive and in a certain sense exotic, perhaps not always properly understood, but legitimate and influential participant.

Perhaps Michal 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 Valeri Gorkovenko and Rimma Gorkovenko were success-
ful 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 environ-
ment. Such an approach is completely justified and we find it applied by Ilya Kabakov, Edvard Steinberg, Erik Bulatov, Oskar Rabin, Eduard Gorokhovsky 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 in-
tegration. In 1991, along with his wife Milena Slávická and Václav Stráhl, he founded Gallery Pi-Pa-Art, where he displayed works by Michal Němec, Michal Gabriel, Vladislav Zadrobil, Jiří David and the secret organ-
isation BKS. 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 Angelo. In 1999, he became the first non-Czech to re-
cieve 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 stud-
ies. 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 Czecho-
slovakia in the early eighties. In this he was undoubtedly helped by his previous experi-
ence 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, his path to Václav Boštík, Adriana Simo-
tová, Karel Malich and Václav Stráhl, František Skala and the BKS group and many other artists was by no means a story of socio-political solidarity. In commu-
nication 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 communica-
tion. Art history wears us down with endless lists of influences, teachers and models, while a deeper understanding of the points of intersection remains 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

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