

Boris Groys  
**Towards the  
New Realism**

01/06

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Recently we have seen a growing interest in realism, which for a long time seemed historically passé. But the notion of realism is not as obvious as it seems. One often understands “realism” to mean the production of mimetic images of “reality.” One can of course agree with this definition. However, the question remains: How do we initially meet reality? How do we discover reality in order to become able to make an image of it? Of course, we can speak about reality as everything that presents itself to our “natural,” uninformed, and technologically unarmed gaze. Traditional icons seem to us to be nonrealistic because they seek to present the “other,” normally nonvisible world. And artworks that seek to confront us with the “essential core” of the world or with a particular artist’s “subjective vision” are usually not recognized as realistic either. We would also not speak of realism when looking at pictures produced with the help of a microscope or telescope. Realism is often defined as the readiness to reject religious and philosophical visions and speculations, as well as technologically produced images. Instead, realism usually involves the reproduction of an average, ordinary, profane view of the world. However, this profane vision of the world is not especially exciting. The desire to depict and reproduce this profane image of the world cannot be explained by its alleged “beauty,” which it obviously does not have.

We initially discover reality not as a simple sum of “facts.” Rather, we discover reality as a sum of necessities and constraints that do not allow us to do what we would like to do or to live as we would like to live. Reality is what divides our vision of the imaginary future into two parts: a realizable project, and “pure fantasy” that never can be realized. In this sense reality shows itself initially as *realpolitik*, as the sum of everything that can be done – in opposition to an “unrealistic” view of the conditions and limitations of human actions. This was the actual meaning of nineteenth-century realist literature and art, which presented “sober” and elaborate descriptions of the disappointments, frustrations, and failures that confronted romantic, socially and emotionally “idealistic” heroes when they tried to implement their ideals in “reality.” From Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* to Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, European literature of the time described the failure of all attempts to merge “art and life.” As a result, one could see that nothing that the heroes desired or planned could be realized – everything that they aspired to was demonstrated to be “nonrealistic,” pure fantasy. The best consequence of this realist tradition was formulated by the movement of 1968: be realistic, demand the impossible. Thus, the

02/06



Vija Celmins, *Desert*, 1975. Lithograph on paper. 315 x 416 mm. Copyright: Vija Celmins

object depicted by realist literature and art was not reality itself – as described by the natural sciences – but the human psyche suffering from the shock of a failed reality test. Nineteenth-century realism was, in actuality, psychologism. Reality was understood not as a place of “objective” scientific investigation but as a force of oppression that endangered or even crushed the hero.

Modern and contemporary art are, by contrast, products of the long history of depsychologization that many critics – for example, Ortega y Gasset – experienced as a history of dehumanization. Avant-garde and post-avant-garde artists wanted their art to be not realist but real – as real as all the other processes taking place in the world. The artwork was understood as being a thing among other things – like a tree or a car. This did not mean that avant-garde artists did not want to change the world – on the contrary, they radicalized this desire. But they did not appeal to the psyche of the reader, listener, or spectator to achieve this goal. Rather, they understood art as a specific kind of technology that was able to change the world by technical means. In fact, the avant-garde tried to turn art spectators into inhabitants of the artwork – so that by accommodating themselves to the new conditions of their environment, these spectators would change their sensibilities and attitudes. Speaking in Marxist terms: art can thus be seen as either part of the superstructure, or part of the material base. In other words, art can be understood as either ideology or technology. The radical artistic avant-gardes pursued the second, technological way of world transformation. This was pursued most radically by the avant-garde movements of the 1920s: Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, De Stijl.

However, the avant-garde never fully succeeded in its quest for the real because the reality of art – its material side, which the avant-garde tried to thematize – was permanently re-aestheticized; these thematizations were subjected to the standard conditions of art representation. The same can be said for institutional critique, which also tried to thematize the profane, factual side of art institutions. Like the avant-garde, institutional critique remained inside art institutions. However, this situation has changed in recent years – due to the internet, which has replaced traditional art institutions as the main platform for the production and distribution of art. Now the profane, factual, “real” dimension of art is thematized by the internet. Indeed, contemporary artists usually work using the internet – and also put their works on the internet. Artworks by a particular artist can be

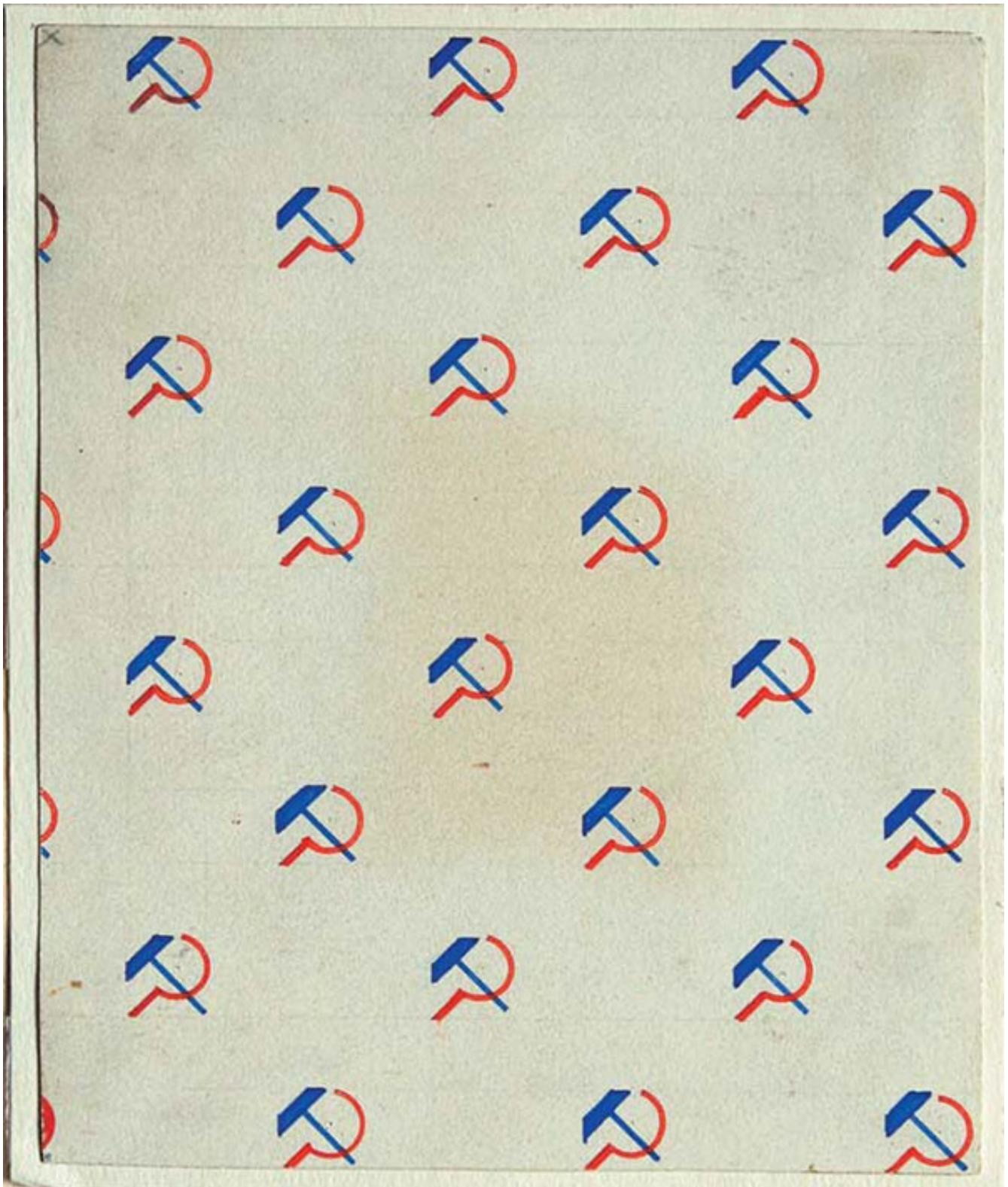
found on the internet in the context of other information about the artist one finds there: their biography, other works, political activities, critical reviews, personal details, etc. Artists use the internet not only to produce art – but also to buy tickets, make restaurant reservations, conduct business, etc. All these activities take place in the same integrated space of the internet – and all of them are potentially accessible to other internet users. Here the artwork becomes “real” and profane because it is integrated with information about its author as a real, profane person. Art is presented on the internet as a specific kind of practical activity: as documentation of a real working process taking place in the real, offline world. Indeed, on the internet art operates in the same space as military planning, tourist business capital flows, etc. Google shows, among other things, that there are no walls in internet space.

The word “documentation” is crucial here. In the wake of recent decades, the documentation of art has increasingly been integrated into art exhibitions and art museums – alongside traditional artworks. However, art documentation is not art: it merely refers to an art event, or exhibition, or installation, or project that we assume to have really taken place. On the internet, art documentation finds its legitimate place: it refers to art as its “real,” external referent taking place in “reality itself.” One can say that avant-garde and post-avant-garde art has finally achieved its goal – to become a part of “reality.” But this reality is not one with which we are confronted, or in the middle of which we live. Rather, it is a reality of which we are informed. In the contemporary world we are de facto confronted not with art but with information about art. We can follow what is going on in art milieus the same way we follow what is going on in other spheres of social life: by using contemporary social networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

It is this positivist facticity of contemporary art that produces a nostalgia for realism. If art becomes a real practice – a legitimate part of reality – then discontent with reality turns into a discontent with art and all its institutions: the art market, exhibition practices, etc. And this discontent, this conflict with reality, calls for a new description: the New Realism. But why can such a description only be an artistic description? The answer to this question is obvious: discontent with the reality – insofar as it does not manifest itself through violent protest or revolutionary action – remains hidden, and is thus always under suspicion of being fictional. If I hate my job but nevertheless do it, there is no possibility to objectively prove my discontent with the reality of my existence. This discontent

03/06

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Liubov Popova, *Textile Design*, 1923-4. Gouache on paper, 115 x 92 mm.

remains “fictional.” As such it can be described by literature and art, which have traditionally been regarded as domains of the fictional, but it cannot become a subject of serious scientific study.

For a very long time the origin of a given artwork was sought in the psyche of the artist who created it. This was the time of psychological realism in literature, art, and the humanities. The revolt against nineteenth-century psychologism, which determined the fate of art in the twentieth century, was provoked by a very obvious methodological observation: the origin of an artwork cannot be found in the psyche of its creator because it is impossible to access this psyche. An external spectator cannot penetrate an artist’s subjectivity – but nor can artists themselves discover their inner psychic life by means of introspection. It was concluded that the “psyche” itself is purely fictional – and as such cannot serve as an explanatory term for cultural history. Accordingly, art and literature began to reject psychologism. The human figure came to be dissolved in the play of colors and forms, or in the play of words. The reality of image and text became autonomous from representations of psychology – be it the psychology of the author or the psychology of his or her characters. Of course, this strategy of depsychologization seems perfectly legitimate. Indeed, the psyche cannot be accessed and scientifically investigated. However, this does not mean that the assumption that there is a psyche – i.e., that there is an internal discontent with the reality that cannot be diagnosed externally – can be rejected as purely fictional.

This becomes clear when one goes back to Hegel’s description, in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, of the moment when self-consciousness – and the assumption of the self-consciousness of the Other – initially emerges. In this moment we experience the other as a danger – even as a mortal danger. Of course, we are subjected to many “natural” or technologically produced dangers. But these dangers do not aim at us personally; we experience them as accidental. However, we cannot experience as accidental somebody’s attempt to kill us – by, for example, shooting us. We tend to ask ourselves why someone would want to do this to us, and our attempt to answer this question produces a series of fantasies, conjectures, and projections concerning the psyche of the potential killer. These projections never lead to any final result, but at the same time they seem unavoidable. Today, we can observe this phenomenon almost daily when the media offers psychological explanations and speculations regarding this or that terrorist act. In other words, post-factum, after the violent terrorist excess has happened,

external observers are ready to accept the assumption that the subject of this violent act lived in a state of discontent with the reality of his everyday existence – even if at the same time the news coverage almost always stresses that this subject seemed quiet and satisfied with his social environment. In other words, before the violent act happens, the inner psychological discontent seems fictional, but after the act takes place, it becomes retrospectively “real.” Time and again in his novels, Dostoyevsky made fun of these retrospective attempts to psychologize a crime. But these very novels present nothing less than Dostoyevsky’s own attempts to do the same. The entirety of psychological literature is basically crime literature. It treats human beings as especially dangerous animals – dangerous precisely because they are “psychological” animals.

The return of realism means a de facto return of psychology and psychologism. And, indeed, one can see this return in the new popularity of the psychological novel, psychological cinema, psychological theater, and, in a small circle of contemporary art, the increasing presence of photography and video works that thematize the psychology of the artist who created them and/or the protagonists who inhabit them. The reason for this return is obvious. The interpretation of art as *techne* was closely connected to the expectations of avant-garde and many post-avant-garde artists that art would give a certain direction to technological progress, leading it towards a utopian telos, or at least compensating for its destructive aspects. In our time, these hopes seem to have been dashed. The dynamic of technological progress has resisted attempts to impose any kind of control on it. It is this resistance to being controlled by any “subjective” artistic project that has made technological progress into “reality.” It is very telling that contemporary post-Deleuzian, neo-Dionysian, accelerationist, and “realist” admirers of technological progress explain their admiration in exclusively psychological terms: as the ecstasy of a self-annihilation that produces extreme intensities in their psyche.

Realism describes reality not “as it is” but as it is psychologically experienced by artists. That is why Marx, and Lukács after him, liked Balzac and other French authors of the realist school so much. Whereas science described social, economic, and political reality as a “system,” these writers described it “psychologically” as the place of antagonistic conflicts and despair. In this sense they thematized the revolutionary potential of the psychological discontent produced by capitalist society – a discontent that was covered up by

05/06

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“objective” statistical data and that had not yet broken through the surface of everyday life. Fiction becomes reality when it enters reality – when the psychological conflicts described by art lead to revolutionary action. Before this revolutionary moment, “realist fiction” remains a fiction.

Thus, the return of realism is the return of the psychological – and the return of a discontent with reality experienced as an oppressive force. Let me make one last remark here. Realism is often misinterpreted as an art form that depicts the realities that lie beyond the art system – “simple people,” or the “working class.” However, the art system, as previously noted, is already part of reality. Realism is needed not for its description of the outside of the art system, but for the revelation of the latter’s hidden inside – of the discontent with the realities of the art system that its protagonists experience. Only when writers and artists begin to feel like failures in their conflict with reality will they ask themselves what it means to conform to reality, to live a simple life like everybody else allegedly does. An inner, psychological problem is projected towards the outside. In his *A Confession*, Tolstoy wrote that he was curious why “simple people” do not commit suicide but instead go on living, even when they must know that life has no meaning or goal. This question led him to take an interest in the way of life of people living beyond privileged literary and intellectual circles. Here one can ask, of course, if this assumption that “simple people” are internally, psychologically in conflict with their way of life and experience their life as meaningless is not a pure fiction – Tolstoy’s projection of his own inner conflicts onto the psyches of others. However, the violent explosion of the October Revolution posthumously confirmed Tolstoy’s diagnosis. Thus, writers and artists, if they want to be realist, have to learn to live with the suspicion that their descriptions of the human psyche are pure fiction – until history confirms the realism of their work.

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06/06

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