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Outsider Art and Psychiatry in the Late Soviet Period* **

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This article examines the discourse surrounding the Soviet Outsider Art of the 1970s–1980s. The author analyses the characteristics of scientific and scholarly approaches to, and definitions of, Soviet Outsider Art, and the relationship of this phenomena to the contemporary political situation. The research methodology relies on the theory of discourse and discourse analysis, which makes it possible to examine texts and events from highly different fields as parts of an interconnected system. The innovative character of the study lies in the fact that, for the first time, the author considers the discourse of Soviet Outsider Art from the perspective of Soviet policy and international affairs. The lack of specialized works that study Soviet Outsider Art makes the article relevant and innovative. Researchers have not previously considered the connection between Soviet foreign policy, ideology, punitive psychiatry, and the discourse surrounding Outsider Art. In the 1970s, the creative process of the mentally ill became a topic of interest for Soviet psychiatry. The drawings of psychiatric patients were treated as vehicles of their creative impulses and utilized in psychiatric research for diagnostic purposes. Soviet psychiatrists compared the creative abilities of the mentally ill with various artistic movements, primarily surrealism; however, their vocabulary and analytic approach remained strictly psychiatric in nature. The 1980s gave rise to significant interest in this topic by a larger audience, in connection with a rethinking of artistic languages and the creative process. There was a dual attempt to dispel the reputation of "punitive psychiatry" and a growing understanding of the importance of "otherness" in art. Orienting to the discourse of key texts, this article reveals a gradual shift from the language of psychiatry to art in academic and journalistic texts devoted to Outsider Art in the 1970s–1980s.

Keywords: Outsider Art, Art Brut, art of the mentally ill, Soviet psychiatry, punitive psychiatry, Soviet culture

Исследуется дискурс советского аутсайдерского искусства 1970–1980-х гг. Анализируются характеристики существовавших в это время научных подходов и их обусловленность политической ситуацией. Методология

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исследования выстроена с опорой на теорию дискурса и дискурс-анализ, что позволяет рассмотреть тексты и события, принадлежащие очень разным полям как части системы. Впервые дискурс аутсайдерского искусства советского периода рассматривается с позиций влияния со стороны государственной политики и международных отношений. Актуальность статьи связана с отсутствием узконаправленных работ, детально освещающих поставленную проблему. Вопрос о связи советской внешней политики, идеологии, карательной психиатрии и дискурсе ауйтсайдерского искусства не поднимался. В период 1970-х гг. в советской психиатрии актуализируется тема творчества душевнобольных. В исследованиях психиатров рисунки пациентов начинают рассматривать как средство диагностики и феномен, связанный с искусством. В качестве элементов сближения советские психиатры используют сопоставление творчества душевнобольных с различными феноменами искусства, ключевым из которых является сюрреализм; но, тем не менее, лексика и подходы к анализу остаются суверенно психиатрическими. В период первой половины – середины 1980-х гг. в изучении рисунков душевнобольных в поле психиатрии начинают использоваться конструкты искусствоведческого дискурса: понятия, язык описания, «говорящие субъекты» и методы исследования. Это время обусловлено значительной актуализацией темы творчества душевнобольных, что было связано с переосмыслением механизма творчества и языков искусства, попыткой развенчания карательной психиатрии и значимостью концепции инаковости. В ходе дискурс-анализа процессов и текстов 1970–1980-х гг., связанных с полем творчества душевнобольных аутсайдерского искусства, выявлено постепенное дискурсивное смещение от психиатрии к искусству.

Ключевые слова: аутсайдерское искусство, ар-брют, искусство душевнобольных, советская психиатрия, карательная психиатрия, советская культура

The earliest studies devoted to the creative process of the mentally ill analyzed the discursive connection between psychiatry, its theory, and its practice in connection with the emerging phenomenon of Outsider Art [Prinzhorn]. The relationship between psychiatry and Outsider Art at various historical stages has already been analyzed in detail [MacGregor]. In Soviet Russia/USSR, the study of art produced by the mentally ill was first conducted in the 1920s [Карпов] and then later in the 1970s–1980s [Болдырева; Вачнадзе, 1972; Вачнадзе, 1975; Вачнадзе, 1979]. Pavel Karpov's (1926) study "Творчество душевнобольных и его влияние на развитие науки, искусства и техники" ("The Creativity of the Mentally Ill and Its Impact on the Development of Science, Art, and Technology") was innovative and, notwithstanding its marked resemblance to an earlier book by Hans Prinzhorn (1972), constitutes a highly original study of the nature of creativity among the mentally ill. However, already at the turn of the 1920–1930s, Karpov was subjected to ideological pressure and, as a result, his research in the late 1920s took on a strong ideological character.

During the USSR's totalitarian period, study of the artwork of the mentally ill was not conducted with few exceptions.

In the era of Brezhnev's "stagnation" in the 1970s, several articles and books by Soviet psychiatrists appeared, in which the drawings and creativity of the mentally ill were presented as a diagnostic tool for various mental illnesses. Here one may perceive some convergence between the fields of psychiatry, outsider art, and the artwork of the mentally ill [Болдырева; Вачнадзе, 1972; Вачнадзе, 1975; Вачнадзе, 1979]. It is of particular importance to analyze the texts of Erast Vachnadze, who most clearly demonstrates the convergence of the fields of art and psychiatry. Even the titles of his articles and books — «К вопросу сходства патологического художества с современным декадентским искусством» ("On the issue of the similarity of pathological art and decadent modern art") [Вачнадзе, 1978] and «О некоторых особенностях художества душевнобольных и сюрреалистического искусств» ("On Some Characteristics of the Art of the Mentally Ill and Surrealist Art") [Вачнадзе, 1979] — bear witness to the connection between modern art and the creativity of the mentally ill.

The Drawings of Psychiatric Patients Versus Surrealism

Erast Vachnadze compared modern art to the artwork of the mentally ill. It is essential to identify the main approaches to Soviet art criticism within the discourse of modern art in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s. Some of the Soviet texts about modern art professed a radical ideology. These texts call for the "renunciation of ideals" and declare the "non-value" of Western culture [Крючкова, с. 5], referring to the destructive effect of modern art [Там же, с. 6]. Various art movements, such as cubism, were called the "fruits of decay" [Куликова, с. 167] or interpreted through appeals to the writings of Vladimir Lenin [Крючкова, с. 50] and Karl Marx [Куликова, с. 173]. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these publications seemingly aimed at criticizing and "exposing" modern art at the same time provided a functional analysis of artistic movements, including illustrations, facts, descriptions of artworks, artistic manifestos, and critical theory. For example, Valentina Kryuchkova's book, «Антиискусство: теория и практика авангардистских движений» ("Anti-Art: The Theory and Practice of Avant-Garde Movements"), contains an extensive review of the theoretical basis of surrealism and quotes from surrealist manifestos and texts by Andre Breton, Salvador Dali, and Rene Magritte, as well as by other artists and theorists. Overall, books about aesthetics and modern art in the late Soviet period were often constructed in quite a strange and clever fashion: their introduction and conclusion, and sometimes the conclusion of chapters, included ideologically "correct" thoughts condemning the logic and aesthetics of Western art, while the main text was written neutrally without any distortion of meaning.

The fundamental issue posed in the article «К вопросу сходства патологического художества с современным декадентским искусством» ("On the issue of the similarity of pathological art and decadent modern

art") [Вачнадзе, 1978] is whether a relationship exists between "pathological artistic production" (i. e., the creativity observed in psychiatric patients) and the art of "decadent artists" (mainly, surrealists). Therefore, the study includes a general overview of surrealism. Vachanadze demonstrates good knowledge of the contemporary issues surrounding surrealism at that time; this includes reference to manifestos and other texts by Andre Breton and Salvador Dali, as well as an understanding of the phenomenon of "mental automatism". All of this was broadly in line with the discourse of later Soviet scientific research on modern art.

In his article, Vachnadze illustrates that, despite the apparent similarity between patient drawings and surrealism, these phenomena emanate from a different foundation. As one stage in the defense of his argument, Vachnadze published the results of an experiment with 40 students from the Russian Academy of Arts, in which the researcher analyzed the process of image agglutination: the reunification of parts or whole objects into one image. Based on his observations, the author notes that the test subjects attempted to complete the task as stated, in accordance with their initial intentions, displaying active and volitional effort to do so and demonstrating an interest and willingness to create a complex reunification of images in as original and imaginative a way as possible. But at the same time, the experiment participants were able to maintain their objectivity and critically evaluate the illogical nature of the associations they made between the images they conjured up [Вачнадзе, 1978].

In the same experiment, Vachnadze described the process of drawing that he observed in psychiatric patients as being more uninterrupted, impulsive, and indiscriminate. Nevertheless, given that Vachnadze presents the main argument of his article as supporting the similarity between drawings by the mentally ill and those of surrealists, it is essential to understand the basis for this comparison. On the one hand, the very process of legitimization and institutionalization of artwork by the mentally ill, or 'the Art Brut', took place in the 1920s–1940s and was associated with contemporary movements in modern art, such as expressionism and surrealism. On the other hand, within the context of ideology-laden Soviet art criticism of the time regarding Western modern art, surrealism, expressionism, and abstract art were predominantly decried as "decadent".

In his personal reflections, Vachnadze appears to write in defense of surrealism, emphasizing the importance of the inherent essence of creativity. In the case of professional artists, the artist in a state of "creative inspiration" can suspend his or her impulsive behavior and to subordinate it to his or her will and to produce "creative objectification" [Там же]. According to Vachnadze, a surrealist consciously chooses mental automatism and paranoia as the mechanism to express his or her creativity and tries to carry out the representational process "at the lowest level of mental activity" [Там же]. Therefore, in fact, a certain degree of evidence is provided for the rehabilitation of modern art, even within the context of Soviet ideology.

In the late Soviet period, comparison between the creative process in psychiatric patients and professional artists is also an essential component of the discourse on outsider art and the art of the mentally ill. This comparison was similar to that which took place during the formation and legitimization of the artwork of the mentally ill and 'the Art Brut' in Europe during the 1920s–1940s. Thus, this phase of discourse in late Soviet culture lagged behind European discourse.

"The Spectators Asked in Amazement, 'Did they Leave the Door of the Psychiatric Hospital Open'"?

Vachnadze delves deeper into the connection between the art of the mentally ill and surrealism in his book «О некоторых особенностях художества душевнобольных и сюрреалистического искусства» ("On Some Characteristics of the Art of the Mentally Ill and Surrealist Art") [Вачнадзе, 1979]. From the standpoint of discourse theory, the language utilized in his publication is of the utmost importance. The author uses much of the ideologized Soviet rhetoric about modern art: terms and phrases such as "decadent art" with regards to expressionism and surrealism, and "modern decadent stylization" (a crucial substitution for the word "art") [Вачнадзе, 1979]. On the very first pages of the book, Vachnadze employs the typical cliché often used in ideological criticism of contemporary Western art: "More and more often a voice was heard at the exhibitions of decadent artists about the need to place them in a psychiatric clinic. The spectators asked in amazement, 'Did they leave the door of the psychiatric hospital open?'" [Там же, с. 6].

In what specific terms does Vachnadze characterize the work of psychiatric patients? Here, as in his earlier article, Vachnadze notes the long history of juxtaposing surrealism and other movements in modern art with the artwork of the mentally ill. The author explains the unique character of these drawings in an evolutionist paradigm, drawing an analogy with the linearity and flatness of images from primitive and ancient Egyptian art. Vachnadze finds another direction of historical analogies in the artwork of Hieronymus Bosch and the Mannerists, El Greco and Luis de Morales. These comparisons emphasize the similarities between the subjective perception of artists (their deformation of reality, intense expression, and exaltation, etc.) and the subjective experiences of the mentally ill, reflected in their "deformed, mutilated, elongated, and exaggerated forms" [Там же]. Over the course of the text, a kind of cultural foundation for the phenomenon is laid out, which, due to its persistence throughout cultural history and the "approval" it received within Soviet ideology, serves to legitimize the creative work of psychiatric patients.

Vachnadze also defines certain properties of drawings created by psychiatric patients, specifically patients with schizophrenia:

1) Artwork is characterized by an impulsive, indiscriminate representational system;

2) Patients automatically perceive and obsessively create serial drawings;

3) Images are incoherent, congested, and chaotic, depriving the overall work of form and structure;

4) Artwork contains numbers, neologisms, and symbols;

5) Neomorphisms created according to the laws of agglutination (a disfigured body, a skinless face, isolated limbs, etc.) occupy a special place in these works;

6) Proportions are violated and displaced, there are unnatural spatial relationships, and the characters perform unnatural roles;

7) Symbols are used to violate the logical relationship between the objects depicted, which makes interpretation impossible from the point of view of traditional symbolism [Вачнадзе, 1979, с. 14] (see fig.).

Illustration by a psychiatric patient from the book *On Some Characteristics of the Art of the Mentally Ill and Surrealist Art*. N. d. [Вачнадзе, 1979]

Psychiatric discourse is also partially referenced in the publication. In describing the drawings of the mentally ill, psychiatric terms were used, such as: "pathological production", "agglutination", "neomorphism", and "oneiroid state" [Вачнадзе, 1979]. Later in the text, Vachanadze provides several additional examples of the artwork of schizophrenic and paranoid patients in supplemental illustrations to reveal these characteristics, while he also provides extracts from the patients' medical histories. It is important to note

that in this case, of primary importance are the medical histories of the illness and the specific manias and phobias of the patients, and the drawings are used as confirmation for the diagnoses. Thus, the psychiatric discourse is dominant; this is manifested through the vocabulary and logic of the exposition. The drawings are not analyzed like self-sufficient objects with a specific content and style, but rather in the opinion of the authors, diagnoses are developed through the logic of images and in the formal language of drawings.

The theoretical basis of this approach was expounded in the text as follows: "a pathological individual bears a close resemblance to the art that he or she produces in that it reflects the intimate experiences and attitudes of the diseased individual... an artwork bears the imprint of the artist's pathological state, reflecting the pathological experiences of a creative personality" [Вачнадзе, 1979, с. 22]. That is, in the opinion of the author, "artistic production" is a function of disease.

The general conclusion of the book "On Some Characteristics of the Art of the Mentally Ill and Surrealist Art" is entirely predictable: "The kinship between the art of the mentally ill and surrealism seems to be evident. After all, the origin of the surrealists' creativity is the unconscious and their creative forms are inherently characteristic of delirium. Therefore, despite the absence of pathological properties, surrealists created artworks similar to "pathological artistic production", and inevitably the question of their relationship arises" [Там же, с. 18–19].

Punitive Psychiatry and Outsider Art Discourse's Formation

Soviet psychiatry also participated in repressive ideological processes. For Western intellectuals, Soviet psychiatry was embodied in a speech by Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, who stated that "only the mentally ill can disagree with the bright prospects of building communism. Moreover, since such dissenters existed, and they were mentally ill, there appeared a new need for a 'quiet' extrajudicial reprisal against them – through psychiatry" [Карательная психиатрия, с. 40]. In the late 1970s, thanks to investigations by human rights defenders, this situation became public.

Nevertheless, the ideological processes of the era of stagnation were also oriented towards creating a favorable picture of life in the Soviet state for Western society, and, moreover, towards creating a positive image of Soviet psychiatry. This situation was further aggravated by the adoption of a resolution condemning Soviet political abuse of psychiatry at the Sixth Congress of the World Psychiatric Association, held in Honolulu in 1977. In the late 1970s, the USSR Ministry of Health developed a draft plan of necessary measures, ratified by the KGB under the USSR Council of Ministers; the USSR Council of Ministers State Committee for Publishing, Printing and Book Trade; and the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The document also comprised a clause on the preparation of publications, including ones for Western intellectuals: "The USSR State Publishing House shall prepare and publish scientific publications in Russian and foreign languages on the organization of psychiatric care for the population of the USSR and forensic

psychiatric examination for referral to national associations of psychiatrists and major scientists of foreign countries" [Карательная психиатрия, с. 107].

To implement this plan, a three-volume edition of books was published in the beginning to mid-1980s dedicated to artwork of the mentally ill. For Western intellectuals at the time, who perceived Soviet psychiatry as punitive, the publication of three books dedicated to the representational language of the mentally ill was unexpected.

The status of Soviet psychiatry before the Seventh Congress of the World Psychiatric Association (1983) was extremely low; several national psychiatric associations sought the exclusion of the Soviet All-Union Scientific Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists from the World Psychiatric Association due to political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR. In the same year, the All-Union Scientific Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists voluntarily left the World Psychiatric Association [Abuse of Psychiatry in the Soviet Union].

The authors of the three-volume edition [Бабиян и др., 1982 и посл.] were authoritative Soviet psychiatrists and art critics, although the latter were not included among the official authors of the books. Among the authors is Georgi Morozov, the director of the Serbsky Central Research Institute for Forensic Psychiatry from 1957 to 1990, and one of the most infamous representatives for the practice of using psychiatry for political purposes in the USSR [Abuse of Psychiatry in the Soviet Union]. Soviet books about the "representational behavior" of the mentally ill were published in Switzerland with rich illustrations and parallel text in Russian and English, intended for distribution abroad; already at the time of their publication, the books quickly became a bibliographic rarity in the USSR.

The first volume, "The Pictorial Language of Schizophrenic Patients", was programmatic, with the preface describing the discursive limits of the phenomenon of mentally ill patents' artwork [Бабиян и др., 1982]. First, it noted that the work of the mentally ill had not yet received an accurate terminological definition. Moreover, it indicated the range of concepts that describe this phenomenon in the Russian language literature: "artwork", "representational behavior of the mentally ill", "pathological stylization". The use of the word "stylization" was reiterated from Hans Prinzhorn's studies of the early 1920s, "Artistry of the Mentally Ill" (Bildnerei der Geisteskranken). In a text from the early 1980s, the authors use the term "representational language", which is associated with the discourse of art, as opposed to the term "representational behavior of the mentally ill", which was also used at that time. At the same time, the word "art" is programmatically avoided in Soviet books, in contrast to the terms "Art Brut" and "Outsider Art", which were already used in Western studies of that time.

The authors of the book carried out a review of existing approaches to the artwork of the mentally ill, which testifies to their knowledge of the topic. They distinguish the following approaches: 1) exclusion of the mentally ill's works from the field of art, 2) recognition of the similarities and differences of the work of the mentally ill and healthy artists,

3) the absence of a fundamental difference between the "artistic self-expression of patients" and modern art, such as in expressionism, abstract painting, and surrealism. In describing their analytic approach, the authors emphasize "regularities within the dynamics of the pathological process," which manifest "despite the different levels of giftedness and professional training of patients, and differences in the genre and depicted images..." [Бабиян и др., 1982]. Without directly revealing their position, the authors suggested the images were manifestations of a mental illness that belong to the discourse of psychiatry.

Notwithstanding this initial indication of their approach, the text contains elements of the discourse of art criticism. Thus, the authors proposed to classify the work of the mentally ill in accordance with the nature of representational language as follows: 1) the disintegration of pictorial form, 2) natural pictorial form, and 3) conventional pictorial form [Там же].

In 1985, the same psychiatrists published a second volume, "The Pictorial Language of Schizophrenic Patients with Delusional and Overvalued Formations", which was not previously mentioned; apparently, a series was not initially planned [Бабиян и др., 1985b]. The foreword was written by Andrey Snezhnevsky, who in this period was Chairman of the Scientific Council on Psychiatry of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, Director of the Institute of Psychiatry of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, and a psychiatrist and honorary member of the World Psychiatric Association until 1983. The introduction by Snezhnevsky was indicative of the publication's political character. The attitude of Western psychiatrics towards Snezhnevsky was negative. While speaking as a witness in the case of Yakir and Krasin in August 1973, Snezhnevsky said that "a very unpleasant situation occurred at the Psychiatric Congress in Mexico City in 1971, when copies of the English editions of The Chronicle of Current Events and Zhores' and Roy Medvedev's book A Question of Madness? were distributed among the delegates" [Карательная психиатрия в России, с. 83]. The international psychiatric community strongly condemned the practice of punitive psychiatry in the USSR and called for the obstruction of Snezhnevsky and his Soviet colleagues. Thus, the introduction by Snezhnevsky was an attempt to preserve the status quo within Soviet psychiatry.

In the preface to this edition, it is noted that an art critic, Doctor of Philosophy Evgeniya Zavadskaya, took part in its preparation; as indicated in a footnote, she was also a consultant for the first part of the series. Another significant innovation was the reference to works of foreign researchers — Hans Prinzhorn, Walter Morgenthaler, and others—which indicated the deeper knowledge of the authors and their desire to demonstrate an appeal to "Western science", but also their understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the artwork of the mentally ill and the impossibility of considering it only from the point of view of psychopathology. The preface underscores that the book presents many works by professional artists but stipulates separately that the analysis of these works as a pictorial form of expression

of psychopathological disorders is from a "strictly clinical standpoint." This inclusion of the work of professional artists that exhibit a higher artistic quality testifies to the desire of the authors and psychiatrists to interpret the publication not only as a psychiatric but also as an aesthetic study. It is also noteworthy that the book examines the artwork of one of the iconic nonconformist artists, Vladimir Yakovlev, who was known abroad and had been under psychiatric care since the mid-1940s.

Probably the most significant passage penned by Snezhnevsky was his theory that the analysis of figurative language in the artwork of the mentally ill not only expands diagnostic capabilities but also "contributes to a deeper understanding of the entire mental structure of delusional patients, their peculiar worldview, their unconventional vision of the external world, and the new social orientation that emerges as the pathological process develops" [Бабиян и др., 1985b]. That is, along with psychiatrically discursive pathology, the context of otherness manifests through his use of philosophical and aesthetic phrases, such as "special worldview" and "unconventional vision."

The third part of this series, "The Pictorial Language of the Patient with Paranoia", emphasizes the rarity of mental illness, such as paranoia [Бабиян и др., 1985a]. In the foreword by Snezhnevsky, the specific character of drawings by paranoid patients is expounded, and in his description, the author uses elements of the discourse of art criticism: "Highly valuable ideas are expressed by the patient through the materials and techniques of fine art (painting, sculpture). In this regard, the analysis of the case of paranoia is not limited to a clinical analysis but is supplemented by the analysis of the patient's pictorial language" [Там же]. The interpretation of this "visual material" was accomplished with the assistance of the art consultants Georgy Nikich-Krilichevsky and Elena Yureneva, which also testifies to a recognition of the contiguity and interdisciplinarity of the described phenomenon and the literature's discursive shift [see colour inset].

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Thus, in the 1970s, the theme of the creative work of the mentally ill became topical in Soviet psychiatry. Patients' drawings began to be analyzed in studies not only as a part of the diagnosis of their mental illness, but also as a phenomenon associated with art in and of itself. Soviet psychiatrists also employed this comparison between the creative work of the mentally ill and various art movements, above all with surrealism. Nevertheless, the vocabulary and analytic approach remained those of the psychiatric discourse.

In the early to mid-1980s, there began the gradual process of the legitimization of the creative work of the mentally ill as art in its own right. However, this process also had a political character that was conditioned by the desire within Soviet psychiatry to restore its former prestige in the world community, which had been lost after the revelation of its practice of punitive psychiatry. The main purpose of publications of this time was

to contribute to psychiatric discourse, but there was also a noticeable inclusion of art criticism within this discourse in the reference to art experts, the use of marker concepts, and specific methods of analysis. All of this led to the emergence of a significant number of public initiatives, exhibitions, and publications devoted to Outsider Art and the work of the mentally ill in the 1990s.

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