



## THE NUDE IN THE POST-EROTIC AGE

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### Abstract:

Today, when the eye no more looks as it captures and manipulates, everything, the environment in its entirety, has become a "thing at hand". The resources of our desire had been exhausted very quickly. Mass production of pornography first resulted in visual shock, anesthetization, but consequently ended in "demagnetizing" of the sexual field. Now that we live in the "after the orgy" situation, in the age of the so-called "post-erotic", or "post-genital", sexuality, after the culture, which is mass-medial in its form and content, has taught us to view the male/female distinction as a mere schema of representation, we find, to our surprise, that the erotic can reveal itself outside of human body. What turns out to be the most erotic is advertised goods. But the more eroticized objects are, the more lifeless and void of eroticism human body becomes.

### Resumo:

Hoje, quando o olho não contempla mais, à medida que captura e manipula tudo, o ambiente em sua totalidade torna-se uma "coisa à mão". Os recursos do nosso desejo têm sido exauridos rapidamente. A produção em massa da pornografia primeiro resultou em choque visual, anestesiante, mas conseqüentemente terminou em "desmagnetização" do campo sexual. Agora que nós vivemos na condição pós-orgia, na era da chamada sexualidade "pós-erótica", ou "pós-genital", depois da cultura, que é mediatizada em sua forma e conteúdo e tem nos ensinado a ver a distinção masculino/feminino como um mero esquema de representação, nós descobrimos, para nossa surpresa, que o erótico pode revelar-se fora do corpo humano. O que se torna mais erótico

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são os bens divulgados em anúncios. Entretanto, quanto mais erotizados são os objetos, mais sem vida e privado de erotismo torna-se o corpo humano.

*"Vale a pena em certas horas do dia ou da noite observar objetos úteis em repouso: rodas que atravessaram empoeiradas e longas distâncias, com sua enorme carga de plantações ou minério; sacos de carvão; barris; cestas; os cabos e as alças das ferramentas de carpinteiro... As superfícies gastas, o gasto inflingido por mãos humanas, as emanações às vezes trágicas, sempre patéticas, desses objetos dão à realidade um magnetismo que não deveria ser ridicularizado. Podemos perceber neles nossa nebulosa impureza, a afinidade por grupos, o uso e a obsolescência dos materiais, a marca de uma mão ou de um pé, a constância da presença humana que permeia toda a superfície. Esta é a poesia que nós buscamos". Paixões e Impressões - Pablo Neruda "* (Paixões e Impressões - Pablo Neruda )

### The history of the nude

What the phenomenon of the fine arts presents to us is, beside other things, a *visualized* evolution of the comprehension of human body and its functions, of whatever have been thought of its attractiveness and its beauty. We can see the transformation from the faceless "Venus of Willendorf", with its exaggerated fertile forms, to the "classic" Greek and Roman statues, from the suppression of natural body in the remarkably spiritual dialogue of "Madonna with an Infant" to the abstract plasticity of the twentieth century female figures. The history of the comprehension of human body, the history of art, the history of culture and society in general - these three different kinds of history are intrinsically interdependent.





If we take the history of photography, which is quite short in comparison to the history of sculpture and painting, we will also find there an evolution of the naked body imaging, a brief history of the representation of human body in culture. The history of the photographic nude may be easily framed into the overall history of the nude. At first, photography submitted to the laws determined by the traditional conception of the nude, but in time it became more persistent in asserting its own peculiarity; it was to break new ground in the *nu* genre. According to J. Baudrillard's extravagant idea, we believe that with the help of technology we can constrain the world; but the fact is that the world, by means of technology, constrains us, and the effect of this conversion is quite unexpected and remarkable. We consider ourselves as taking a photo of some scene for the sake of enjoyment, whereas in fact it is this scene that wishes to be photographed! We are nothing but supernumeraries in its staging. "The subject is only an actor in the ironical performance of things"<sup>2</sup>. Here Baudrillard attempts to extend the French psychoanalysis theorist J. Lacan's general idea - the idea that the object is genuinely active - to photography. According to another famous interpreter of Lacan, S. Žižek, vision belongs not to the subject, but to the object. Every time the eye singles out some point in an object (in a picture), the one who looks is already looked at from this point - for it is the object that really looks and not the onlooker. The subject, of course, if so interpreted, can no longer perceive a photo from the *purely* analytical, that is neutral, viewpoint. Such neutrality turns out to be nothing more than the subject's *own* indifference disguised by the rituals of scientific usage.

Both (un)willingness of an object to be photographed and (un)willingness of a human body to turn into an object are especially intriguing when we look at a naked human body.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard J. Photographies. "Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité..." A l'Horizon de l'objet. Photographies 1985 - 1998. Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1998.





The stage of human body, the theater of its motions, the strength and weakness of naked man - all those elements constitute a certain symposium, affirming or denying the subjectivity. The fact that epistemological project based on the idea of the subject being active and the object being passive proves to be unreliable in the very situation where its reliability is most expected gives us some hope for purity of experiment in photography.

Let us see what has happened to the nude genre in photography during last century and a half. In Europe, until the early 1930s (and in the Soviet Union down to the eighties<sup>3</sup>), to manufacture (and to distribute) erotic photos was a legally persecuted enterprise. According to historian of photography A. D. Coleman, the latter circumstance was one of the factors that encouraged the invention of the "Polaroid" system. Coleman says that since control over manufacturing and distributing of "photos with erotic contents" was executed on the printing workshop level, the "Polaroid" camera "delivered those enthusiastic about making pictures of naked models from unnecessary tutelage".

When Walter Benjamin wrote about art in the age of its technological reproduction, it was still the *pre-technological* period of art, the time of imperfect art technology, including, in the first place perhaps, the photographic one. Indeed, when art critics discovered that photography, too, was the *art*, the criteria they used were just accuracy and naturalism of the picture. Before the advent of cinema, television and home video, photography was

<sup>3</sup> According to the photography theorist Irina Tchmyreva, the photographic nude had long been banished at official exhibitions and appeared finally at the exhibition called "150 years of Russian photography" (Moscow, 1989). However, in Russian criminal law there has never been any special clause concerning this kind of photography. There was only one for manufacturing and distributing pornography. Even in Stalinist era and during the "stagnation" period this clause was used mainly to intimidate, not to incarcerate. "I know, writes Chmyreva, only one photographer who was put to prison "for the nude": A. Grinberg in 1935 was, as an "especially dangerous social element", condemned for eight years and in fact was released in 1941, two years earlier than had been scheduled". There is hardly any need to mention why, in the twentieth century, the situation concerning erotic photography differed sharply in the West and in Russia.





held to be the only means of fast, "exact" and "impartial" fixation of things and events. Artistic criteria applied to it in purely mechanical way were borrowed from painting. While the images the nineteenth century photographers tried to produce were intended to prove the place of photography among the traditional graphic arts, nowadays it is the last thing for an art photographer to "make a picture", the desiderata being instead his power to accentuate and to see through. Dissected and processed by the actual, modernity lends itself now as a constant change wherein one "atom" of the present is replaced by another one. Each of those integral, indivisible and imperishable atomic moments iterates the structure of eternity. To pick out the one and only atom, to find its semblance, to accentuate its aesthetics, to construct one's own world within it - the more of the unique or, which is the same, of the eternal it be, the more reality it should acquire - this is what to expose the photograph's own quality means in these days.

The short time of photographic exposition coincides with the rapidity of human life. A man is overwhelmed by the tide of visual information, which imposes on him the fast change of anything that corresponds to his sense of time, fashion, style of reasoning and conduct. The new principle of photography supersedes the old ones (likeness and accuracy) - that of recognition of the non-similar in the similar: events and movements are stopped in their flow and there comes a moment for the unknown to be discovered. To concentrate on the real, on something most invisible and unacceptable not only from the point of view of psychoanalysis, but also in the visual universe - this requires some sophisticated, "yoga-like", exercise. The history of photo-image repeats structurally the history of the landscape painting, its birth and death. In the times when all that an individual cared was to perform the functions of the social organism, when he felt himself its integral part, when the area of his everyday practices was no more than things "at hand", when, therefore, he saw the world, as it were, from within, - in those times the natural





environment appeared to him dangerous and hostile. To view nature disinterestedly was not yet possible. Today, when the eye no more looks as it *captures* and manipulates, everything, the environment in its entirety, has become a "thing at hand". And just like the *paysage* genre, which was born, according to apocrypha, in Petrarca circle in 1336, has eventually died - along with God, Author and Man - so dies today the classical *nu* genre.

The resources of our desire had been exhausted very quickly. Mass production of pornography first resulted in visual shock, anesthetization, but consequently ended in "demagnetizing" of the sexual field. Now that we live in the "*after the orgy*" situation, in the age of the so-called "post-erotic", or "post-genital", sexuality, after the culture, which is mass-medial in its form and content, has taught us to view the male/female distinction as a mere schema of representation, we find, to our surprise, that the erotic can reveal itself outside of human body. What turns out to be the most erotic is advertised goods. The inversion is of remarkable purity: it is these goods now that give *almost sexual* satisfaction to their new owner at the moment of purchase. Just like women in archaic societies used the mechanism of encouraging mating with food-bringing hunters, in order to survive and support their children, so the advertisers today use its modern counterpart in purchase provocation: the symbolic mating of the owner with the purchased goods. The modern civilized man's decreasing reserve of vitality is transferred by the advertisement into the idea of possessing erotically appealing goods. But the more eroticized objects are, the more lifeless and void of eroticism human body becomes. Dissolution of sexuality in the world of commodities corresponds to decrease of sexual desire and general waning of the procreation instinct. That is why scientists chose to label our time the age of "post-genital" sexuality.

### The discovery of pornography





Pornography was "discovered" at the dawn of the twentieth century: the Paris police raid in 1900, just before the World Exhibition, found up to 80 000 cards ranked as indecent. It was not the frankness of the pictures that was shocking, but rather the greatness of request they were in. Still, what then was considered obscene today rather makes us smile at the naiveté of those manifestations of the erotic and the sexual. It proves *once again* that the line between pornography and the nude cannot be easily or unambiguously drawn.

Let us get the terminology straight: sex (Latin *sexus*) is a word to designate the distinction between men and women. In biological and medical discourses it refers to the human kind, which, just like any other species, is divided into the male and female individuals. If we are to talk, though, about the ways in which naked body has been represented in the history of culture, it is hard to avoid the important sexuality/eroticism distinction. G. Bataille's discussion of the birth of Eros is all the more relevant in this light. He thought of "simple sexual activity as different from eroticism: the former is present in animal life, and only in human life there is an activity ... that we can define as "eroticism". Eroticism arises when human beings realize their own mortality; it differs from animal sexual impulse in that it, along with labor, essentially consists in conscious pursuing of some aim; it is but deliberate search for the voluptuous, ... for the expense, loss, deprivation. ... Indeed, man, who by virtue of death-awareness had separated himself from the animal realm, was getting the more distanced from it, the more eroticism replaced the blind animal instinct with the desired play - that is, the calculated quest for desire". So, while sexual behavior is something natural, biologically conditioned, straightforward, eroticism is something culturally mediated - it includes a postponement, a play of hints and promises, which is often a value in its own right. Sexuality and eroticism have the same source, but each of them represents a different form - direct and indirect, correspondingly - of the sexual





satisfaction. One needs not to be too smart to put a simple question concerning the *nu* genre in photography: What makes it differ from pornography? In other words, what is pornography *today* and how is it connected with sexuality and eroticism<sup>4</sup>?

A photo-nude may well have a sensual origin, but eroticism is adventitious in it and far from essential. The attractiveness here consists not in the eroticism of an aesthetic image, but in certain quality of breakdown, displacement, jumps. As Deleuze puts it, it is in the

<sup>4</sup> As we know from the encyclopedias of the three last centuries, the present interpretation of the word "pornography" is quite recent, and originally it meant something different (in Latin *pornae* meant performances that were given by Roman whores — from Greek *porne*, "a prostitute",  *pornos*, "profligacy", *porneia*, "depravity"). Accordingly, "pornography", which initially meant the description of the prostitutes and their clients' life and manners, has been generalized in the course of centuries and acquired as its import whatever negative aesthetic and ethical evaluation a society held of the picturing of the sexual act. Despite the fact that the products of imagination represented in pornography do not belong to any special historical period, it is only in the context of modern Western society that pornography itself has become an important social problem. In antiquity and, partly, up to the present times in the non-European cultures, pornography, as a means to stimulate not only sexual excitation in particular, but emotional and physical vigor in general, had no negative import. For example, it was considered to be a good antidote against fear. In this quality it was used in the Japanese army during the World War II: soldiers looked at porno pictures before attacking an enemy — as if to confirm Bataille's point about the unity of sexual excitation and fear of death. It was P. Aretino's works in the first half of the sixteenth century that set the fashion for the new genre and interpretation of pornography. His *Sonetti lussoriosi* (Sonnets of Lust) created as inscriptions for some contemporary prints depicting sexual poses, as well as *Raggionamenti* (1533-1536), dialogues written in the mold of Lucian's *Dialogues of Hetaeras*, were translated into a number of European languages. In the seventeenth century they were widely rehashed and imitated, for example, in the then immensely popular *Reviews of Depravity*. The Enlightenment presented itself in the pornographic "libertine novel", which found its ideological basis in Lamettrie's ideas, radical sensualism and les philosophes' egalitarian claim for individual happiness. This latter claim found its extreme antichurch expression in the phenomenon of erotic libertinage — meaning the liberation of sensuality from the constraints of Christian sexual ethics and the emancipation of pleasure from the regulations of morality. Putting this theory to practice was fast to show some characteristic tendencies of pornography further development. Namely, the divorce of love and pleasure; the reduction of the erotic to different sexual techniques, and individual man to his sexual organs; the transformation of a sexual partner into a mere medium of pleasure, in the extreme case (de Sade) — up to his/her complete physical destruction. The development of the mass communication technology in the twentieth century enhanced the rapid expansion of pornography, which, beside other things, provoked feminist criticism for representing woman as a sexual object and as an object of violence.







jump from physical chessboard to logic diagram, or, to be exact, from sensual surface to super-sensual geometrical plane, that L. Carroll - a prominent photographer - experiences pleasure. He uses the desexualized energy of photo-cameras as a terrifyingly speculative eye, in order to represent the sexual object *par excellence*, namely, little girl-phallus.

The power of human body to dictate its own image, narcissist power of its desire to be exposed, collides with the will of an artist, the *re-solution* of a photo-lens and the quickness of a lever. It is not accidental that women are mainly chosen as models for the nudes: woman's body, according to Deleuze, reproduces man's phantasms in its being a territory of the phallic "significance". Taboo on display of woman's body and face is the power of man's *look* manifested. There is, however, something remaining behind the yashmak - the desire, which finds its expression in tons of lipstick. To be more specific: in the year 2000 the UAE women used about 14 tons of it. Lipstick is not visible behind the veil (let husbands think that nobody else knows it is there); lipstick, though, is essentially superfluous since it is not the lips, but the body-awareness that lipstick is put on - through the black clothes it betrays itself in the slowed-down gestures and controlled gait. Besides, it *is*, present even if, in fact, it is not. The lipstick is importunate in reminding us of the *oppression and, by the same token, of the concentration of desire* to please, a desire produced by its very superfluity (to paraphrase Nietzsche's thesis about creativity, there are two sources of desire: either it is its superfluity or its scarcity). Centuries of oppression of *ars erotica* resulted in the metaphor for sexual desire as such: it was considered a *dark* force. On the other hand, according to experts, the gradual baring of human body that took place in the twentieth century Europe has lead to the dissolution of sexual desire. Now we face the enigmatic identity of the absolutely closed and the absolutely open. It is the identity in power that characterizes *the internal hidden desire and the desire for the other's - the naked other's - desire* (was it about this very paradox that V. Rozanov once





puzzled us when he identified the priest and the prostitute in their readiness to answer the appeal?).

"The pornographic body is condensed, it shows itself but does not give; there is no generosity to it" (R. Barthes). All its inner intention boils down to the desire for the other, the desire for his erotic feeling, which it itself lacks. It is but an alienated phantasm of mass consciousness self-visualizing in the neon light (or, nowadays, in the light coming from the TV or PC screen) of diffused desire. Saturated, bright and attractive, the pornographic body turns out to be the psychological space's black hole, which craves insatiably to be an object of the other's desire and inevitably fails any "consumer's" emotional investment. Needless to say, to come across the pornographic body is to touch the absolute emptiness, or, which is the same, its absolute density produced by its indefinite desire-absorbing capacity. A pornographic image is dense since, like a commercial, it is impersonal, i. e. independent of any personal participation and promises no chance for existential adventure. Its aggressive tendency to attract an eye to the naked, but non-productive, body damages the procreation-rooted ecology of the sight. An artistic photograph, on the contrary, is porous and permeable for the beholder's eye; it always secures a blank place for perception, for empathy and understanding.

The erotic is volumetric, while the pornographic has only one dimension; and it is erotic motivation that pornography aims to simulate at the ever increasing price. Both the increasing speed of passers-by, travelers and spectators, on the one hand, and the accelerating competition in the market, on the other, - make it inevitable to overdo every known method of visual seduction, to expose the hidden more and more, to exhaust symbolical resources up to the point where there's nothing in store but mere medical atlas, legal documentation or performance-art photo-documentary. In reducing the whole





event to its final stage, to the point of complete realization of desire, to the very act, what pornography produces is, in the end, nothing but a kind of scientific illustration. And if, for example, unimportant details - the sound, the underlying story - were removed, it would perhaps prove morally harmless to use X-movies for educational purposes. Pornography imitates serial killer: what is important, from his point of view, is not this or that particular person, but some inessential attribute. When the needed attribute - in our case, his unsatisfied desire - is present, the mechanism of attraction and seduction will start functioning without further delay. With its publicly prescribed *frankness*, pornography, as German photographer Juergen Kirchhoff noticed, is too embellished, artificial and, therefore, far from being something real. Its artistic quality is suppressed by its own aesthetic quality<sup>5</sup>. Thus pornography presents itself as a grotesque counterpart of the pleasure-consuming society, a society whose comfort is established by the unity of simulation and ideology. Pornography substitutes the *pleasure-without-efforts* production for the *achievement of pleasure*, guaranteed realization of desire for uncertainty and risk.

Structuralists interpret pornography as an element of the semiotic system: pornography is a "superfluous sign" (G. Deleuze), "certain forcing of signs". It gives an "additional dimension to the sexual space thus making it bigger than reality: it is this that constitutes the absence of temptation". Finally, pornography is a kind of obscenity that "adds (to a sexual image) the beauty of anatomic details"; it "burns down and exterminates its objects. It is viewing from too short a distance: you see now what you have never seen before... Nudity every time is nothing but one sign more".

However, we should be prepared, in attempting to extract the meaning of pornography, to meet the fate of those who have ever tried to define the Beautiful and the Sublime as

<sup>5</sup> Kirchhoff J. "Ansichtssache". ARTfotoAKT. 2000, #1. S. 28.





such, or establish the aesthetic norm, or prescribe the standard of rationality. No abstract definition of pornography is fit to cover every conceivable context: historical, regional, cultural, etc. So, we cannot help subscribing to Ye. Petrovskaya's opinion regarding the dictionary definition of pornography: "The latter is characterized, firstly, as something obscene and, secondly, as something having low aesthetic value. It is easy to see, though, that both characteristics are relative to time and place. The attitude towards naked body is not culturally invariant... Besides, the notion of the obscene is subject to change even within the framework of one culture"<sup>6</sup>. I believe it would be a cold shower for many people - both for those inspired by moral zeal and their opponents, the revolutionaries of life-styles and modes of existence, - if a retrospective exhibition of the photographic nudes were arranged where every item would be some piece of art in its time qualified as pornographic. The possible name is "The Discovery of the Body".

M. Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flint* (1996) is quite significant in this context. The film's subject-matter is pornography, and, on the face of it, it is a straightforward apology of pornography. Larry, the protagonist, is "sick"; his sickness is displayed in everything he does. Still, his *production* is in demand, and the reason why it strikes a certain chord with society is, allegedly, that society is sick and tired as much as the artist, Larry. With, or, more likely, without any purpose, he verifies how much freedom of self-expression society allows for, he defends the right to consume pleasures, no matter how much "non-conventional" they may be. "Nobody has died of it yet" - that is the argument that appears like *deus ex machina* every time there is a need to protect pornography. The second argument is equally irrefutable: the sort of pleasure that pornography provides

<sup>6</sup> Petrovskaya, Ye., "Politekonomija strasti. Obshchije soobrazhenija ob eroticheskikh al'bomakh "Taschen"" (The Political Economy of Passion. General Considerations concerning the "Taschen" Erotic Albums.) in Knizhnoje obozrenije "Ex libris NG", April 1, 1998, p. 3.





does not imply coercion, "you don't have to watch it, if you don't want to". Still, Forman, who speaks for the "heroic period" pornographers, *shows* us their *history* in the totally acceptable, politically correct form of feature film: no *pornography* on the screen, no frank and shocking scenes. We can see that photography is permitted to something which cinematography is not. Is it not for photography's being more esoteric and, therefore, less profitable as an area of art industry?

There is still one further aspect of pornography, namely, the one connected with the documentation of art performances and actions. If we tried to classify the photos depicting Marina Abramovich's performances, or those arranged by Vienna actionists, they, by "normal" ethical and aesthetic criteria, would fall under the "hardcore" category and, thereby, under the jurisdiction of the moral law, to say the least. By artistic criteria, however, the photos themselves are not to be considered as artistic at all (mostly, perhaps, because of their poor quality). They are documents, unique and objective attestations of the art actions, and, therefore, concern *another genre* of fine art. The images those pictures represent are to be defined not as pornography, but as performance art, i. e. an art form typically connected by the public consciousness with exhibitionism, provocative action and sadomasochism. To be sure, there is no artistic rule without exceptions. The work by classic German photographer Juergen Klauke is such an exception, in our case. The tremendous effect of his message is due to the surprisingly natural combination of the *opposite* genres. It is difficult to tell in him a performance artist, who documents his actions with delicacy, exactness and admirable quality, from a magnificent photographer, who has chosen performer's body for his special object, - Klauke is a high-class professional both in the former and the latter.

### Time in photography





How can a naked body tell anything about time? The conventional time indices - clothes, automobiles, furniture, etc. - are not as unambiguous signs as those the nude gives. Why is it so? Why is this confidence about the time of a photograph, when everything I have before my eyes is, literally, a naked body? Why is this indulgence, irony and imperviousness in me when I contemplate the nude? (To register a counter-argument: painted nudes are something different. The point, probably, is not nudity at all. What is the point, then? Perhaps, in dealing with painting we look at the product of an artist, whereas a photograph lets us regard *as though* the pictured person *him/herself*.) Why does our gaze almost every time linger over it, while our face *feigns* more than usual indifference? Why is it so rare that our face opens to it in an involuntary smile, in delight or in rush of inspiration? And what, after all, is this power of self-control in us?

No doubt, in determining the time of a photograph a method of shooting, a particular printing quality and technique (hardly discernible, of course, in the uniform album pictures), - all these play important part. Still, the most significance should be ascribed to the expression and condition of the pictured person's face and body, to the cultural conventions about naked body shared by the photographer and the model, to that transgression of constraints, put by society on the naked body representation, that at the same time attracts the artist and confuses the observer's intimate space. It is the representation of the *systematized* body-centered comprehension, the network of eye-catching micro-visualizations, that converts sensual subject-matter into a coherent art *image*. And the source of special artistic quality here is in the attitude toward human body, set alternatively by the moral and the aesthetic canons, in the way in which the norm performs its act in the theater of sense. We are watching the drama of the ethical in the domain of the aesthetic, the collision of man's superstition, having unconscious fear on its seamy side, with woman's attraction, which also has something to conceal, namely,





power. (It would, however, be no less intriguing to reverse the opposition and try to analyze the superstition of a woman contemplating a naked male model. What kind of the strength-weakness dialectics could be found in *this* collision?) What such a drama involves is the play of imagination, which blunts the sharp edges of taboo. It involves the shame and the lust, the desire for the other's desire/reluctance, the law and the instinct of procreation, to defy which is to make an image all the more attractive, - everything here is *im unverborgenen*. It is in this very situation that the eye most prominently modifies the reality of the visible: the spectator's attitude to the image is now under the necessity of being sanctioned by a degree of his comprehension and legitimated by the allowed manifestation of the sensual. Oddly enough, my erotic desire coincides with *the photographer's representation of my desire*, which leads me to attend to the photographer's own point of concentration - to the volume and shape of the body that he built to find his own and, now with confidence, my *vision*. But the latter is of such a rare kind that, just like a choice of intonation to speak of important things and express intimate feelings, it is at once unique and historical.

Just as it once was difficult, in picturing a naked or half-naked woman, to do without erotic component (whose vigor remains tangible up to these days), it is now equally difficult to make a non-erotic photo of a naked man or even a little boy. It is relevant, in this context, to mention the works of St.-Petersburg photographer Evgeny Mokhorev, who shows us the world of a child from within, at the moment when his libido has just awoken, but not taken hold of him yet. The most significant are the pictures of 12-16 year old boys (naked, as a rule, but such is the impression of their inner state that the best snapshots of dressed and naked children merge in my memory). As is well known, in comparison with their female coevals, boys of this age fall back in development. The former already know something that makes them more grown-up, wiser, more confident about their purposes,





desires, gestures. On the contrary, Mokhorev's boys do not know what they want; but through this very *ignorance* the values of an emerging generation can be seen. His images bear something of the street - this common metaphor for the big wide world. To meet with them is to catch sight, at the level of human body, of the ideal and protected world, the world of children's imagination and hidden metaphysical sadness breakdown. By the way, the life of Petersburg *bomzhi* (bums) is imbued with this sadness; one can hear it when listening to those few of them who still know how to speak. Here is an occasional sparkle of wit, a line of poetry, an expression of universal craving for the perfect world. One can find it, too, in Boris Mikhailov's photos of naked bums - but not in the life of *les clochards*, let alone of average European workers, who have exchanged their ability to think for themselves and to rebel against society for the existence that is comfortable and provided for: the house, the car, the evening beer, plus complete list of medicines and tourist routes for the pensioners.

In the broken lines of Mokhorev's images we can see the effect of collision between the world of imaginations, illusions and hopes, and the world of adults. In this latter world there is no place for waifs and strays, for the street Arabs. The social roles nomenclature dictates kids what to do. They are forced not only to tell the truth and to do their homework, but also to learn how to detect cunning, deception and cruelty, how to endure indifference and injustice pertinent to the adult life, which, after all, it is necessary to cope with in some way or another. The rigor of half-infantile aspirations, the black-and-white picture of the world, is being broken by the adult life, with its vast variety of values, wherein to succeed is essentially to concede and to compromise. Mokhorev snapshots teenagers in their spontaneity not yet affected by our conceptual frame. And, as it happens every time, a life full of misery gives birth to art. His aesthetics results not from *imposing the adult vision* on a child, but, which is much rarer, from punctual and earnest







artistic creed: "I am trying to be at the kid's level. When, even in the slightest degree, I put, or feel, myself above him, nothing works". That is how the refined aesthetics of children's photography is established, according to one who knows the best of it.

The sentiments predominant in society breed those appropriate perception stereotypes which encourage suspecting the "not quite innocuous" interest in material and aesthetic aspects of a teenager's body, in his inner world and condition. We could find an answer to the question, why the nude represents its time so distinctly, in the conception by French anthropologist Marcel Moss: the motions and actions of our body, which seem to us pretty natural, are, in fact, socially conditioned. Moss, thus, has provided a theoretical base for decolonization and demystification of human body; he says that body is but a ground for the implementation of social norms, and that is what constitutes man's subjecthood. It is *in body* that we discern cultural regulations that determine gestures, poses, contents of vision and expected reactions of other people. Therein subsists the entire history of body-comprehension and body-representation, the history that frames our sight.

On the other hand, we discern a body through symbolic codes: the institutions of culture force my eye to the point of representation. The object of our contemplation has already pre-determined its optics - be it tender satisfaction with something that is understood beforehand as the time-style, or amateur emulation of the genre masterpieces, or, at least, clumsy and bashful anticipation. What is worth particular attention is the evaluative character of contemplation. It is interesting how this character unintentionally let out in our interpretations of the visible, at once providing a clue to these very slips - to those ever-emerging pointers *by means* of which the archaic ocean of the unconscious, wherein our erotic zones are constantly reestablished and our lust's hidden intentions





materialized, makes itself felt. We see only things that we expect to see, things molded by our interpretative capacity, things determined by our individual experience. We perceive by means of something framed, not the framework itself. And it is only natural for an artist to *exaggerate*, in his turn, the irrational means of influencing the observer, assuming that the latter is equally able to concentrate and make efforts.

There is always a chink between the purposefulness of vision and the unconsciousness of interests and desires. From the perceptual psychology's point of view, any novelty should be presented in portions. Something radically different and unknown, something that is completely unrelated with what is already familiar to us simply cannot be perceived, read or learned. It goes without saying that everyone has its own measure of preparedness for pushing the borders and adding something to that what is already mastered. In this light, the history of the photographic nude can be viewed as an excursion through the wax museum of congealed ventures.

Did Benjamin write anything about the *nu genre*? I cannot remember. Today, if one is interested in photography in the slightest degree, it is hardly imaginable for him to neglect the *nu*. Why, then, is it so popular? Why are reflections on photographic nudes so promising as subject-matter? It is, perhaps, not so much due to visual - non-contact - pleasure, as to the fact that *the dream about speaking from the first person has come true at last*.

What photographers seem to accomplish is the combination of body and space, the welding of the moment of recognition with the moment of comprehension; for, in acquiring shape, body fills space - acquires, or, better yet, indiscreetly and candidly wins it. Shape, in its turn, can be filled itself, or, alternately, dissolved in space (if such be the purpose). Besides, in our age of ephemeral plastic environment, bodies live longer than





things. (The acceleration of production and destruction of everyday environment is complemented by the idea to slow down the aging of body, to prolong its life.) Still, unlike the rest, body is a living thing that pulsates and vibrates in all its unpredictability. Non-static, its dynamics cannot be captured by any rational structure. But occasionally - *as if* occasionally - it opens itself to the artist and to those of us who make an effort to see it through his eyes.

A soul has no better fortress than its own naked body. Skin, as an oft-quoted P. Valéry's saying goes, is deeper than anything. When severing, it secures, when separating, it pulls together, when exposing, it makes both symbolical and existential patterns deeper. Stripped of substantial time-indices, i. e. clothes, the nude, now and then, attests to the character of its time more exactly, than any material evidence can do. We only need to know how to read signs, how to extract an attitude toward human body characteristic of this or that particular period. For in the nude everything - specific angle of sight, posturing, presentation, accentuated details - is seen with perfect clarity. Personal appeal being its distinction, the nude gathers and returns whatever is secret, unconscious and temporary about us. The similar is best learned, as much as it is treated, by the similar.

### Kitaev-nu. A self-portrait

Before turning to the Alexander Kitaev's self-portrait, I shall quote his words: "I believe that today for an artist to make something substantial in the traditional fine arts is first of all to succeed in getting the world interested in *himself*, not in his canvases and sheets. It is to use everybody's language to speak *in such a way* and *of such things* that language itself cedes its positions. In my view, the trouble of many modern artists consists just in this: they "create" a picture to beat their rivals in craft, novelty of technique, "conceptuality", instead of creating themselves - their own sense of the universe".





For me, Kitaev's nude series begin with the hands in his self-portrait that cover bashfully the shame (it is in terms of the Christian ethics that is most pertinent to speak of Kitaev's self-portrait, for they exactly correspond to the ideological and existential credo of the artist). Here I find the key to his works. He, like an old-believer in the Gulag baths, feels ashamed not of himself, but of those looking at him, of those who has lost their faith and sense of compassion. There is something reproachful and inwardly powerful about him. With their flesh restrained, it is only God's saints and God's fools that are strong in their nudity, whereas the rest are *insane*, or, which is all the same here, *brute-like*. Previous to any quest for the rhythm of details, the play of lights and shades, the adventure of lines and shapes, the photographer, in covering his shame, puts, as it were, some asexual filters on the object-lens - thou shall not shoot, if there be a slightest erotic impulse.

His views on body resemble those of British film-director P. Greenaway, for whom body's potential as a writing surface is most interesting - with correction that body itself, on a close scrutiny, turns out to be already inscribed by culture, already bearing its marks. Denying things desire to be photographed, ignoring their aggressive persistence to exist, on the one hand, and tracing that subtle machinery by which they manipulate us, on the other, the artist is shielded from their impulses. This he does by his given promise - a certain visual stroke pre-informing us about the character of the "*Nu-Kitaev-Nu*" cycle and revealed, by the way, in one Ernst Juenger's deep note: "To photograph meant formerly "to take picture of" something. What is being taken off is something external, such as man's *appearance*; to take picture of him is to take off his mask. That is why a photographed naked body is stripped - in contrast with life, as much as with an artwork, - not only of its erotic aura, but also of its sexual appeal. In this respect a corpse and a





photograph are alike - both are touched: one by death, another by look. Both, if needed, can be stored: a photo shelved, a corpse mummified"<sup>7</sup>.

As far as Kitaev is concerned, the "performative" theory of gender proves to be a myth of a lost tribe. However, in de-realizing the indispensable eroticism of female body, his nudes in their own way illustrate the "female and male as culturally constituted notions" talk. Like an alchemist trying his substances, Kitaev experiments on female bodies to achieve the "ideal" composition. Is he right, though, in believing that erotic feelings are a damage when the nude is being created? This question immediately evokes another one: why does a man's body leave Kitaev indifferent? Why is his photo-machismo? Is it because a man's body, for the photographer who knows how to "exempt" bodies from erotic perception, turns out to be something beyond his reach? Is it because man's body is less landscape-like? Or is it that the arch of man's body, its *transcendental* arch is not interesting? Is it that for a man's body to be a caryatid or an original material for selection of fragments is, aesthetically speaking, non-productive? Or maybe it is that collision of expectations or breakdown of attitudes are not to be found therein? Besides, Kitaev is captivated by Orthodox monasticism practiced at the Mount Athos, by the isolated world of men's brotherhood, where women are strictly forbidden to enter. In his artistic cosmos there is only one gender, dressed and personified, the other being a soft substance of art, a pliable material for creative effort.

That is, perhaps, how his generation speaks for itself, how a man of his circle, a man raised in a country where the nu genre has long been under interdiction, "normally" see things. His individual/generation-relevant sentiments about naked body, his imperceptibly old-

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Juenger. Philemon und Baucis. Der Tod in der mythischen und in der technischen Welt. Saemtliche Werke. Bd. 12. Stuttgart, 1979, S. 471.





fashioned and awkward attitude to it, are betrayed occasionally, for example, when he shows the nudes in his portfolio and begins to thumb through it at such a speed that is hardly ever to suit the one who looks. For this is where Kitaev is at his most sensitive. Were sociologists and moral philosophers to undertake an analysis of the ideas of the erotic and the sexual prevalent among the seventies-eighties generation, they could take Kitaev's *nu* cycle in the context of the post-erotic age. In this, ethical, aspect, Kitaev shares the outlook and the destiny of the generation. His artistic outlook is another matter.

Hard to accept immediately, it is, nevertheless, equally hard to disagree, on reflection, that any fragment of human body is no less *eloquent* than the face. And if a photographer succeeds in compelling our attention to body-fragment, we are getting, now that communication with it is established, an opportunity to perceive its expression, hear its speech and understand its language; for the language of a body has not yet learned to lie about its condition. In a portrait, for example, hands often live their own life. "Oh, those hands! ..."

The portrayed person, in him/herself, is not (before meeting with the artist) known to anyone. According to conventional wisdom, yawned at by connoisseurs, in portraying somebody, a painter actually portrays himself: inscribes his own figure into the image, represents his own existential experience, his own controllable or strangely uncontrollable relation to his body. Well, what about a photographer? Does he actually express himself when making someone's portrait? "One's own readiness, a self-realization of one's own internal state, is indispensable in creating a portrait", - Kitaev admits.

A photographer has certain power over the visible. Maybe, what a photo-portrait forces us to is, first of all, to reflect on the inequality in position between the photographer and the photographed. These reflections being nothing more than a variation in the familiar





"artist and his model" theme, in photography, we, nevertheless, have originality of *technique*, which we can with confidence pronounce essential. A photographer sees himself *in a mirror* framed by the other's face, and is able, having been reflected in it over and over, to select *his own* felicitous images.

On Anaxagoras, both the visual and aural impressions are accompanied by pain. While, in whatever concerns our everyday sensual experience, we are justifiably reluctant to accept this proposition of an ancient philosopher, it is, nevertheless, proves correct with regard to the process of photographing. Indeed, both the resistance of a material and the limits of photosensitivity are painful things to experience: one sees more than one can do. Different forms of generalization, decomposition of color or shape, lots of other, already known, methods - nothing works here. The model unconsciously resists the image imposed; but the stronger the resistance, the more the moment of the photographer's victory is delightful - when he, not different from painter anymore, has found his own condition, some "selective affinity", and *dis-covered* his own vision. The measure of transformation is different for different artists, but it is the master's distinction to render each transformation precise and reflexive - the master makes (almost) no accidental shots. He eludes a mask-like face, or, as Juenger would put it, a "*die Miene*" - the entire network of countless shades of expression, which is set by both external and internal structure of compulsion. (The latter functions perfectly well when matched by the well-functioning muscles.) A photographer feels other person as much as he feels himself; in the other's perspective he leaves a print of his own personality. And the more significant the photographer is, the more identifiable his portraits are - when put together, they present his artistic self-portrait.





Kitaev says that each time he is penetrated with the person whose portrait he makes. His portraits fix one of the person's states; in *taking* a photo *of* (which act is quite close, as is rare between technical and philosophical usage, to *Aufhebung* - a concept worked out, by now, like the "Mir" station) his model Kitaev transforms him/her into an artistic character. Hegelian *Aufhebung* and *aufheben* never entered the photo-critics' analytical nomenclature. They are as if non-existent, which circumstance certainly betrays a state of immaturity, that is, "the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (I. Kant), a stage when the language of description and analysis has not yet been completely determined. These words bewilder the editors; they are unacceptable as critical terms. Still, when thought over, the fact that a picture is "*taken of*" somebody can be viewed as exemplifying semantic affinity between philosophy and photography. With assistance from photo-language, *Aufhebung*, this vestige of dialectic's olden days, can be given new extension - like any other concept that, according to Hegel, on being "brought under" a new fragment of culture, gets its *resolution* therein.

### The nature of the nude

Cellini once noticed that "in the plastic arts, being able to represent a naked man or a naked woman is most important".

There are artists who, once they have found their own manner, stay true to it and build up their life in the ever-recapitulated mold. There are those, though, who devote themselves to discovering new styles. Despite the market laws, which reduce an artist to the uniform and identifiable, they can afford a luxury of being carried away by new subjects and formal methods. Kitaev, undoubtedly, is of the latter kind. In his new series, the rhythm he sets for the perception of the forms of woman's body is the rhythm of nature; eroticism here is







reduced to the eroticism of rocks, deserts, of earth. His nudes lose their rigidly constrained sexual attractiveness, leaving a place for the converted eroticism: desexualized vital force.

The spectator's look seems to participate in the very process by which the face dissolves and the body disappears. In addition, he is compelled to give up his appropriating pattern of desire. The point is not that Kitaev's photographs are void of Eros, but rather that it is globalized therein, promoted to a vital power that can be rivaled by Thanatos only.

No matter how hard we should try, in Kitaev's photos we will find no erotic phantasms realized, or sexual scenes staged, or any other sophisticated anti-solitude device put to practice. Here there is not a hint of transgressing the border of legitimate image, which, anyway, is guarded by no one. If its vague outline can still be discerned, it is not so much due to some forbidding authority, as to the efforts of those striving to break through, that is, the artists whose style, life and self-realization reestablish it over and over again. They cling to whatever is left of the taboo, to the *memory* of the border, to the archaic terror at that lifeless cosmos beyond which no less metaphysically intimidates modern man, than it intimidated the primitives.

We could, in order to localize a way in which Kitaev's nudes are to be perceived, use the perspective of archaic, mytho-poetic vision where there is no place for the cultivated sensuality. In primordial world everything was body, just as for an archaic man the entire body was face. Face, therefore, was not distinguished as the representative instance of authority, honor, or nobility. Tattoos could pass from face to other parts of the body without damage to their meaning. An un-tattooed body was no human body, was a body of an animal, which bears no marks or symbols (besides, a body of a tamed animal was already being literally claimed, allotted with the mark of appurtenance). Kitaev reminds us about this archaic world-view of the primitive man. What is needed, to resuscitate it, is to





recognize the body in its deserted anatomic landscapes, to render its surface habitable, to experience its shape, to get lost in its hollows and then, with effort, to return the image of a body its native essence.

First of all, one can remind oneself about the *sympathy* of a stone and try to dis-incarnate it: to feel how much reliable its material substratum is, stiffened, fixed by immovable time in a desert. In the all-absorbing, ever changing and staying the same, desert, we dig out some ancient sculpture to learn from it not only its petrification (sometimes, as is with the trees stored in soil, it is conferred by nature), but its corporeity as well - incarnated in the other, "sensitive", appearance. As Diderot said, "a stone screams when stonemason strikes at it". That stone experiences pain was known to, felt and, which is more important, shared by the ancients. The first stone figurines were not just body-symbols, but rather bodies themselves, bodies that could feel - a woman, an animal, a bird. In archaic cosmos a body of the other was not an enemy, or a source of danger, or a competitor in the ecological niche. Neither it was a monster of insatiable desire, a product of the modern sex-industry with its main visual motto's announcement of availability attached: "Buy me and enjoy!". Embodied in the automatic opening of the supermarket doors, the inviting nodding of the mechanical dolls, the salespersons' regular smiling, availability permeates modern culture. It is but an alternate form of the coercion to consume, just like pornography is but an alternate form of the absence of desire. However, when deprived of imagination, the subject loses the taste of life. For what he needs is not pornography as such, but desire. He is lead to connect the latter with taboo - only to feel nostalgic about it.

The accentuation of pre-natural corporeity underlying the entire tradition of world-awareness shows itself in the present-day images - through patterns as old as the myths





of the productive and fertile Mother-Earth are (this latter image can be recognized in such Paleolithic female figurines as the "Venus of Willendorf", the "Venus of Westoniz", etc.). That is the second moment of non-erotic *aesthesis* characteristic for all Kitaev's *nu* series. For him, aesthetics is not a purpose in itself, but, rather, a means to beat his way to a deeper cultural stratum. The artist strives to reanimate the comprehension of nature that does not distinguish in vitality between a plant and an animal, between earth and woman. Such a view has survived, up until now, in Africa, where woman's sexuality is connected with her fertility, and not with orgasm. That is one of the reasons, according to the specialists, why one severe archaic ritual is still operative among tribesmen - clitorodectomy (female equivalent of circumcision).

Aesthetics arises as the discourse of a body whose nudity is sexual, but pre-erotic. The nudity of archaic body has so much innocence to it that it can enlighten even the base and narrow-minded; it is semi-divine in embodying the perfection of life in the earthly paradise. The character of nudity met with in the archaic nudes multiplies interpretations that the historians of primitive art give: "The great majority of Paleolithic figurines represent naked women. ... Obviously, it was not due to the alleged "extraordinary" sexuality of primitive artists, as some authors seem to suggest. Apparently, woman's nakedness was seen by primitive magic to have special meaning"<sup>8</sup>. Again, to understand the reasons of modern interest in the nude has not become any easier. It is probable that people's being insistent in photographing and exhibiting nudes betrays their trying to get insight into the magical; or, perhaps, the reverse is equally right: the fact that up to this

<sup>8</sup> Abramova Z. A., *Izobrazhenije cheloveka v paleoliticheskom iskusstve Evrazii // Khudozhestvennaja kul'tura pervobytnogo obshchestva* ("The representation of man in the Paleolithic art of Eurasia" in: *Artistic Culture of the Primitive Society*), Moscow, 1994, p. 324.





day artists are intrigued by a naked body attests to their having partaken of something sacramental.

"Who is before us?", "Who shows?", "Who looks?" - the rhetoric of these questions makes us face the fact that we are free not to admit that the romantic image of Author is dead. Kitaev's discourse is the discourse of a man with up-to-date sensuality (pre- or post-mythical, post-linguistic, before or after any possible motivation)<sup>9</sup>. That is, of an artist who participates in the world and sympathize with other people, who has challenged the challenging self-determinations of the last centuries man: "an ape gone mad", "a working animal", *homo ludens*, *homo eroticus*, an *autophagus* etc. His attitudes are disclosed in photos taken at the Mt. Athos: quite unexpectedly, a monk's cell appears not as the fortress of spirit, but as a nursery or summer vocations countryside, full of air and sunlight. The "St.-Petersburg Shipyards" cycle forms a complementary series to the one called "Body Constructions": Kitaev's accentuation of sharp body lines makes me think of the defile of the port cranes' dark verticals and aggressive palings of the iron frameworks. They give you an impression of having been to a presentation of a post-erotic-period cutting-edge fashion collection.

The ideal image's "ladder of emanations" leads the photographer to multiple forms of corporeity, which are neither reducible to its proto-image, nor justly represented by the modern one. Kitaev fathoms the depth of metaphysical questioning. Still, the persistence

<sup>9</sup> German sociologist D. Kamper acknowledges two converging possibilities to get through to the other side of the "modern": The dead-end controversy between modernity and myth has to be resolved at last, and there are two simultaneous ways to do that: back-to-pre and forward-to-post. To get some notion of what is to come, what is ahead, we need to turn back to pre-modernity, to pre-history. This means to give up the will to knowledge, the will to will, i. e. to relinquish, i. e. to suffer infinitely more than to act, i. e. to grieve and to mourn. *Znaki kak shramy. Grafizm boli* (Signs as scars. The graphism of pain). St. Petersburg, 1997. p. 164.





with which he is prying a naked body for a confirmation of his intuition results further in something more significant, in the body-landscapes that, strange though it be, carry conviction enough to make us give up our ideas about ourselves in general and about our body as something opposed to nature, something promoted to the high and distinguished position. What we have had previously is a thin apprehension of how trite and lifeless the mass-medial ideal of hyper-erotic body is. And now, in Kitaev's nudes, we can see a possibility for welding the images of natural and human body - a possibility brought about by the identification of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, the act of creation and the created thing, the design and its realization.

In the world as we see it, the artificial component oppresses the natural one unyieldingly. Today, naturalness is becoming increasingly unnatural. What is natural now is produced by the efforts aimed at maintaining and preserving the culture's "national park", and is needed where there is some territory not trodden in sight (it is safe to say that where some ground is maintained and preserved in its natural condition the traces of *efforts* are visible in the first place). Such is the plight of an artist in the civilized world: it takes him pains to find a *natural* relief, with its entire native juts and cavities. Kitaev has found it, unexpectedly, in the surface of a man's body; he has found it belonging to someone who is traditionally represented as the civilizer, as the author of all global crises. *Entering into details* is what each time rewards an artist/holder with an access to amazing *natural* landscapes - which is especially pleasing, since it is these very landscapes that have always been perceived as cultural, isolated and opposed to nature. In refusing to see the human being's humanity<sup>10</sup> Kitaev has revealed the nature as such. The microcosm, when the

<sup>10</sup> I. e., individuality. Kitaev achieves an *Aufhebung*-effect in regard to the individuality of a photo-model, to her sexuality and charm, when, for example, he covers her with sand. The body-elements he works on are less subject to cultivation than those staring from the magazine pages: the body's general outline or the muscle-contour. The eye is seeking, as usual, for forms, while what it finds is elements.





rationalism-laden schemes are abandoned and its own relief is carefully inspected, nothing missed or generalized, expands to the scale of the macrocosm - which is not outside of you anymore, it is you who are inside of it, only to find yourself obeying to the flow of its changes.

In the archaic world, man's power over nature was minimal. The only thing he owned and the only domain wherein he could exercise his will was his own body, covered all over by the culture signs (tattoos, ritual scars, rings, etc.) and, thus, opposed to "unwritten-on" nature. Nowadays it is the other way round - there is only one nature-fragment left unwritten-on, and it is precisely human body. (Is it not due to some unconscious tendency to dispose of what is still accessible, non-textual in nature, what can give a sense of life - now, through the pain of inscription, through blood and wound?) Covering a body with sand, Kitaev finds the required sense of the archaic, the emotion of an archaeologist who has just discovered an ancestor's body with its primitive (divine, god-like), - not yet crushed by the civilization's stone tablets, shape. He seeks to find his "other", smooth, body (which is reminiscent of the Japanese legend *Nopperapon* where there figured, instead of the head, a sleek, unmarked sphere). In his works we shall find no painful sensitivity, no exhibitionism or narcissism, no full-fledged erotic feeling, no procreation instinct. They definitely smack of anti-psychologism.

### **The body-fragment**

(An)aesthetic quality of a nude-fragment, be it artistic or pornographic, rules out any eroticism. What is it, then, that effects de-erotization? As to me, it consists in the picture's over-density: there is no place for imagination, whose atoms need some Democritean air, too: some blanks, breaks, intervals. For an erotic feeling to arise, some hindrance, some refraction is called for; still, there is none such. There are only details that make one feel





oppressed by their exhaustiveness, only picture's cold formality whereby *geography*, *pornography* and *photography* are indistinguishable. Art and science have their point of bifurcation, though: art leads to symbolization of the space, to the aesthetics of a concrete form, while science leads to utilitarianism and practical use (sexology, jurisprudence, psychology, biology etc.).

Going into details, wherein the whole is dissolved and abandoned, discovers worlds based on their own principles. That a fragment's aesthetics has ability to organize itself independently of the whole is most evident here. The discrete image's own configuration breaks our habitual attitudes, ridicules the straightforwardness of our expectations and discloses to us the unknown landscapes of the body - unknown, to be sure, not because they have been unnoticed up to this day, but, on the contrary, because now we collide with something familiar. It is not rare that Kitaev visualizes some settled figure of speech: body as a hill, as a stone, as an earth, a desert. However, the enthusiasm about enlarging details has certain limits - the ant's head can turn into a monstrosity. This path is already trodden; it rather pertains to wit and natural history than to art. Kitaev remains somewhere in the middle - in the man-sized world.

The alternatively rational language of body, of which conscious mastering is every secret service's dream, attracts the artist. When looking at the nudes (in recognition of their own ecological expressiveness the bodies here are *disclosed* by the artist to the point where they, once again, begin to appear hidden) we obey the photographer's will and try to read, through the strata of cultural clichés, the body's message.

Translating the body's photo-image into different material, Kitaev makes it somewhat monumental and archaeological. Owing to this, a body loses that individual intonation which, according to linguists, is identical to the body's posture. His bodies are impersonal,





devitalized and void of any erotic idiosyncrasy. Both at the level of signs and that of body as such, Kitaev manages to neutralize the body's vitality even where it reveals itself in full measure - in the nude, - where the rhythms of Eros assert themselves imperiously.

From one series to another, the body's vitality gradually vanishes, dissolves in the desert of eternity. What we have now is only petrified vestiges of desires, feelings and pains hidden in body; for in our post-industrial age the culture of their actual circulation proves to be too superfluous to survive. For us, actual body is but an interstice between the living and non-living, between my ideas and my own disappearing corporeity; it is something claimed by anyone but me: an anthropologist, a surgeon, a physicist and an artist. While they argue, though, a chemist is always there to supply some means to stimulate its self-awareness, to make it feel euphoric when, for example, it is signaling pain.

Here we approach the modern interest in body. Body is where a variety of different impulses collide. And the more it is accustomed to, and fully represented in, civilized forms, the more expressive its alternative language is. (For we do not perceive ethnographic photos of the naked natives as nudes. Their archaic bodies are no more informative for us, than their not tattooed faces for their fellow tribesmen.)

In this light, I would like to mark Kitaev's tendency as an attempt to attract our attention to the seeming dumbness of the civilized, or rather sterilized, body and to bring this dumbness to the degree of unbearable silence. His nudes frequently have no face, so that we are obliged to learn how to comprehend the language of body proper, our own including, how to read those messages which in our culture are perceived as a mere addition to what the eyes, eyebrows, or lips can tell. Concentrating communication efforts on face, which is characteristic of the information-centered society, results, on the one hand, in our deafness and indifference to other body-fragments, and, on the other, in our







forgetting how to appreciate the beauty of a naked body. Concerning the latter H. Taine wrote: "First of all, the things that people of the Renaissance were forced to be interested in we do not know anymore: we do not see them or pay attention to them. By such things I mean human body, muscles and various positions which a body assumes in motion. For back then a man, no matter how noble he was, aspired to be a fighter, who is also skilled enough in wielding a sword and a dagger for self-defense. In his memory, therefore, all forms and poses of the acting or fighting body were unconsciously impressed. ... [These people] were quite prepared for understanding any kind of body representation, that is, painting and sculpture. A stately torso, a curved muscle, a hand lifted, a sinew swelling out - every motion and every form of human body evoked in them some familiar image. Interested just in muscles, they were, not even knowing about it, art connoisseurs. ... Driven to the depth of their bowels by a variety of dangers, their sensuality, for this very reason, was more vivid. The more they exerted or bridled themselves, hiding their emotions under a mask, the more they rejoiced when granted with an opportunity to open their souls. Quiet and blossoming Madonna in the alcove, a vigorous young man's body on the pedestal - they are most pleasing to the eye. ... A contemporary man (it was written in the middle of the nineteenth century. - V. S.) wakes up at eight in the morning, put his dressing gown on, drinks chocolate, spends some time in the library, ... goes out to the boulevard to take a walk, visits his club... When he is on the way back home, even at one in the morning, he knows perfectly well that police is guarding the boulevard and that nothing can ever happen to him. Where can this man observe a body? In a bath, in circus, in ballet... His life is too calm, protected, meticulous". The same, and even justly so, can be said about the twenty-first century man.

The revolutionary, highly pretentious, vehement impetus of the avantgarde, with its characteristic insensitivity to pain, has been replaced, in the post-avantgarde era, by the





distanced manipulations with bodies implemented by means of computers, *plastinates*, chemical substances. A body perceived has gained something of the virtual reality. The chemical nature of the subjective states of post-modern consciousness makes one free, on the one hand, to construct any body-image whatsoever, and, on the other hand, to perceive any kind of pain through the anesthetic "mask", or, if you please, as a phantom pain of a computer-modeled organ. Cyber-wars and Hollywood serials provide a perfect example: after being raped, injured or tortured, a body arises without any loss or damage, just like the body of de Sade's Justine once did. "Chemicals" not only support new myths about the cyber-space immortality of the Self; they also give birth to the miracle-plays staged in the modern anatomic theaters to demonstrate new ways of body-conservation - *plastination* (artistically used, for example, by Van Hagen<sup>11</sup>).

Once the avantgarde and post-avantgarde representation of body is dissected, the following can be diagnosed: the avantgarde body, which asserts itself in denying the "rational animal", has built a "machine" with its "mechanical intellect, sensuality and imagination". The fruit this representation has borne in the computer age - a possibility to dump the tabooed emotions into the Net and to choose whether to be a man/woman, animal, or machine - is influencing now the anthropologists' discussion about the limits of man, its focus being shifted from the man/machine opposition to the problematicity of the human in cyber-space. The erstwhile - pre-avantgarde - attempts to find something

<sup>11</sup> Von Hagen, Gunther. *Körperwelten. Die faszination des Echten*. Berlin, 2001. His Berlin exhibition in May-September 2001 caused unprecedented disputes in press. The main question was whether a dead human body (even though prepared) is permissible as an art object.





non-animal in man turn into the problem of the living body on the other side of computer display. The body disperses and disappears<sup>12</sup>

If we undertook to put a body together from its visual images circulating in the social and mass-medial space, then, notwithstanding its omnipresence in the advertising, press-kiosks, cinema and TV, as well as its exaggerated erotic function, it would come out empty. The steady-going and ages-old mechanisms of desire-reproduction have been outlived by their successful competitors, "new technologies", which rapidly fill up the visual space with erotic images of the "new generation". But the more they multiply, the thinner erotic experience is. Where there are no barriers, the streams of desire are scattered and not running full enough to acquire necessary energy and put the millstones of sexuality to work.

Today the limits of sensuality and lust are reduced to company price-lists and fashion catalogues. Indeed, the fact that the visual space is filled by technologically perfect images of naked bodies is a symptom of the decline of the erotic. The social space is shocked by mass emissions of naked bodies pictured. The reaction is anesthetic: natural body comes off deprived of feelings, eroticism and desire to procreate.

Rules of the mass-medial game - self-value and self-sufficiency - are considered all-applicable by those who have believed that it is the only game possible. Bodies, as represented in the commercial photography, look like they have scorched, melted and then grown cool; they leave an impression of something unbelievable - that the substance

<sup>12</sup> For more on the evolution of the avantgarde and post-avantgarde attitudes to body see: V. V. Savchuk, "Bol' avangarda" // Literaturny avangard v politicheskoy istorii dvadtsatogo veka. ("The pain of avantgarde" in Literary avantgarde in the political history of the twentieth century. The theses by the First International Scientific-Practical Conference, Saint-Petersburg, May 24–28, 1999). Saint-Petersburg, 1999, pp. 8–11.





of the modern body is plastics. We see the decline of Europe, the modern version of the "Abduction of Europe": laughing Europe carries the obedient bull on her back<sup>13</sup>.

Deviation from the real and the mechanized trivialization of the visible - they both increase rapidly. Density and amplitude of visual information compel one to have experiences beyond the scope of one's individual desire. I would compare these experiences to the collector's satisfaction, to his striving to couple his own disinterestedness with aesthetic sense, imponderable states of his consciousness with the body's weightiness. But insight can also occur externally, in the domain of habit: through the relief-shadow effect, or through foreshortening that gives an impression of complex technical structure, or through harmonization of shapes. In Kitaev's works we sometimes find not a human body, but its mere outline: the image has become flat, as if come down from the tapestry; two-dimensional now, it is lying on the sand - impressively, reflecting somewhat enchanted light. Among his photographs I encounter a man's shadow ("The Shadow") similar to those left on the walls of a Hiroshima temple or a Baghdad cellar. Usually, the traces we meet with remain in memory after all others have disappeared. Still, what a photographic technical device can do, in fixing a trace, is break the harmony of theoretical orders. Since forgetting and destroying are parts of memory's functioning, by photographing the very process of disappearance an artist snatches an instant and makes it forever fixed, or at least for the time the "silver" technology permits. In the light of linguistic technologies of the Western culture's eternity-building, and on the background of the Kodak-colored memory mirages (15-20 years is what they are entitled

<sup>13</sup> It reverses the well-known picture: not Europe on the bull's back, but the bull on the back of Europe. The white bull, according to Greek mythology, is Zeus, who abducted Europe to Crete where she gave birth to Minos, Radamas and Sarpedon. Nowadays to feel alive, it is necessary for Europe to abduct the bull, i. e. to appeal to archaic vision, archaic experience.





to last), a silver photo, let alone platinum one, in the neighborhood of clay tablets and birch-cork records, feels natural enough not to look like an upstart.

### **Nu-Kitaev**

Several Kitaev's *nu* series that I shall single out differ in photo-technology, as well as in the shooting and printing technique. All the same, such formal attributes are hardly a basis for any classification.

It is always a superfluous thing to talk about the photographic nudes as being "directed". Nevertheless, all Kitaev's works are such. In order to seduce the observer, he imitates those Christian missionaries who, in the sermons made for Latin American Indians, suggested the elephants as an example of abstinence - back then they believed that elephants mate once a year. Kitaev compels one to grope for new intentionality, undetermined by the sexual dichotomy of vision, free from the sexual certainty that the feminists, borrowing their technique from their self-proclaimed colleague J. Derrida, is now busy deconstructing. He stays true to himself in not seeking to find in the model the theatrical gesture that should betray beauty's workings. The man he is interested in must be calm, the body's natural lines must be *unconstrained* in their association with natural landscape. With his help we see things differently, like we would do if, all of a sudden, Dikhavichus finally convinced us to view sand, water, trees and a body *with equal intensity*, instead of viewing a body *on the background* of everything else. Actually, the more insistent the Lithuanian photographer is in trying to convince us of their homogeneity, the easier it is for human body to come to the fore.

### **Photogramms**





However, we shouldn't be deceived by the seeming hands-down victory that the optics of Kitaev's vision gained over the erotic. Just as much as he succeeded in expelling it from a woman's body, eroticism is present in his *photogramms* (pictures made directly, without the negative, on photographic paper, by certain manipulations with things). We simply cannot help correlating them with Kitaev's nudes: it is by these two poles that the whole - the artist's vision - is pulled together and maintained. If the *direct* representation of a naked body rules out any eroticism, in photogramms, which, according to art critic Yu. Demidenko, "are absolutely free from real images", there is "an erotic drama" made present.

The erotic peristalsis of his photogramms is very involving. Still, after being involved, the observer is free to pass from the evident sexual associations to the *disinterested* contemplation of rough surfaces: these alternations of fur and leather, hair and glass, the organic and the geometrical. Unlike the rest, this series' sheets are homogeneous: it is difficult to consider one sheet as independent or abstracted from others. The effect of Kitaev's art consists in that the measure of the observer's sight is not dictated by any norm pertinent to some stiffened genre: when creating, he omits reflection. This, however, has a side-effect, too. He comes to the edge of novelty, keeping abreast, or, occasionally, ahead, of the times in his formal quest; he finds in the images of things an equivalent of the language of flesh; he shows, by his careful disclosing, the inside of the long dislodged desires. Nothing in the full-fledged photographic quality of his photogramms - the extension of semitones, the accuracy of framing, the tinting of surfaces - prevents one from perceiving them as thoroughly psychological and unconstrained. His surrealistic identification of ordinary things with the man's intimate world, his anthropological, or, better yet, erotic reception of form, makes clear how much tactual his vision is. For we *get special* kinds of erotic pleasure where, according to formal characteristics, we should find





none. And if we do, it will be weird to try to forget about them. Was the author counting on this? Perhaps not, in the beginning, but in the end, after seeing what he had done, sure he was - one evidence is how he chose to call one of his series: "Ero-Shadow". We are getting them from the accentuated physiological quality, or, else, from animation of things, such as when the light is let through a simple bottle and there are left, on the photographic paper, the traces of another worlds, making us imagine a reptile skin, or some dense organ-like substance, or, sometimes, a lifeless lunar landscape. Aggressive and centrifugal phallicity evident in some of the pictures is matched by the vaginal ones, nocturnal and centripetal, dragging one's look into the flow of life, death and pleasure. Unreality of the *object-free* eroticism negates the aesthetics of pure form. Kitaev's photogramms compel one to experience an immediate visual contact with the zone of the erotic, which contact alters, in the course of the sensually persuasive performance, the mode of the visible. Caught unawares, the spectator gets a glimpse of the erotic "interior", captures the aesthetics of a physical body-fragment pulled out of pornographic conventions. We are given a chance of returning to where there is no lust for commodities, where to exist is to be engaged in the mutual touching that proceeds according to the organic rhythm of cellular culture's evolution.

### **Vested in stone**

There is a piece of petrified wood on the table before me. Paleontologists say that it took millions of years to replace each molecule of wood with inorganic compounds. In Kitaev's photos this happens before our eyes: perception of living body is replaced, in each "quantum", by perception of stone, which (Kitaev's self-portrait comes to mind) rules out eroticism as a mode of perception. Kitaev has the gift of seeing a statue as "a living body





vested in stone" (M. Serr), and a body as a statue<sup>14</sup>. Recasting body in different material, Kitaev registers that the living and *filled-up* body, so manifest in ancient sculpture, is no longer culturally present. Again and again, we are compelled to revive it from the depths of the ground, memory and experience. Kitaev's "Sand Series" looks like some storage of primitive sculptures recently discovered by archaeologists and kept half-dug out.

One of them I would like to single out. Here a human body, living and non-living nature, are dissolved in the image of a desert, common to them all. On the foreground we have forms and volumes, their interrelations. The eye slides across the surface, not hindered or irritated by anything, - just like a Bedouin in the desert, or Kazakh in the steppe, or Yakut in the tundra, when they do not come across a plastic bottle or a track left by some cross-country vehicle. However, sudden discomfort sets in, and develops into anxiety. Little by little it localizes itself in hardly, but later quite distinctly discernible, source. Finally, I am catching sight of what has broken the rhythm of my contemplation: an insignificant detail indicating the intrusion of some other - human, hand-made - form. I am examining the irritating object's complex, snail-like pattern, its domed top, only to recognize in it an ear with an earring, which is especially out of place here, since earrings is something alien to the values of a desert dweller. The plastic execution of the whole, the sense of calm, the camel-like rhythm of my contemplation - are now irredeemably injured.

Two photos, "Torso 1" and "Torso 2", are united in my view: in them I see a triumph of repose over moving, immovability swallowing the figure - the latter is captured at the highest point of an expressive turn of shoulders. Figure's vertical impetus tumbles down, falls on its back and is covered by a cultural stratum. What we see now is not a

<sup>14</sup> "Living as non-living, non-living as living" is one of the basic philosophical principles of the new avantgarde in 1940-1980s American photography: from Aaron Suskind and Nathan Lyon to Ernestine Ruben. Kitaev finds his own way in the dialogue with the evolution of Western photography.







momentarily stopped motion, but an ages-old petrified figure, with its clothes worn out and turned into ashes. However, I can notice a mark of our times: a golden ring in the ear, with its fresh polish and "perfectly" round form unattainable for the ancient jewelers' hand-work.

In a series called "A Desert Beach", my eye was caught by the sheet No. 2, whose composition involves the gradual decrease of volumes and light. What is it here that irritates, teases and does not let me off, what hooks my eye in, or, better, what does my eye hook on, not yet gathering the visible into some distinct image, not yet appearing on the screen of consciousness? Where is the visual adventure, the point of misunderstanding here? Is it the straight line that forms a triangle in the corner? For it is this line that interferes with the *natural*, i. e. persistently non-rectilinear, order. No, it rather underlines the whole, as the author of a picture underlines his signature. There is something else that irritates me. What is it, then? Back to the sheet again, I am checking myself. Well, that is it - a thumb, or, to be more exact, the nail of a thumb. Richly illuminated, this nail claims my attention, contending with other conspicuous spots: the knee, the shoulder, the breast. Its shine gives somewhat unjustified emphasis, produces a breakdown. But it is this breakdown that puts life into something lifeless by definition - the form's perfection, the geometrical circle. It is like the secret of charm that our classic once discovered: "As much as ruby lips that do not smile, I cannot like the Russian speech that does not err". Here the error is in composition: a minute detail contends with the large ones, breeds discord, destroys the whole - this, according to the art canons, is a defect, and is subject to correction. But here the disappointment is left unrecognized, concealed in the imperishable reality that resists any ordering and strictly rational action. This is what I take to be Kitaev's conscious aesthetic response to the canon of artistic





representation, to the conspiracy of professionals whose "normative" activity has resulted in giving up "the imitation of life" for "the imitation of classic examples", or "ideals".

### Photo-act

Series "Photo-act", sheet called "Profile". The infinite line of a teenager's back that determines the center of the sheet's composition - one simply cannot pass it by. Here the body, as if spotted by a living light, gains weight. Still, an attentive look makes one understand that the opposition between up and down, between the straight line of the back and the smooth curve of the belly and breast, is not the only thing disturbing. There is some breach in this sheet, something troubling and prompting to seek for a compositional error, which, when found, must be reflected on. And then we find it: a triangle-shaped fist, staring from behind the chin, contradicting the nose, redoubling it on the face. A painter would probably remove it. But how, and where to, can one take it away from a photograph? If only in imagination.

A photograph called "Sleep". The tucked hand/wing of a sleeping man, the plane of a shoulder/wing which is so unnatural, yet so angelic, the huge sleeping body with its head outlying (and, because of this, so alien to the body). The picture's perfect contrast makes the question about its *essence* all the more pointed: is the angel fallen down or fallen asleep? Is that an angel? What gender? - I am asking in imitation to the scholastic doctors. And can the angels be sleeping? With Lisippus' remark in mind - that the ancient artists portrayed people as they are, while he portrays them as they seem to be - I proceed to examine the *seeming* image. I see two parallel lines leading away to infinity; the foreground, distorted by optics, breaks the umbilical that connects me with the habitual, ordinary, corporal. No attribute of the supernatural can ever be as obvious as the size of this shoulder/wing (intimidated one is nevertheless quick to imagine its stretched-out





measure) their strength and firmness combined with the lightness that a touch "of His wing" has. Darkness surrounds the sleeping figure and immerses it into nothingness, which is synonymous to eternity - the eternity of battle between light and darkness, good and evil.

Evening meditations are complemented by the morning contemplation, during which I suddenly notice a hardly discernible fold of the buttocks... My interpretation - I got so much used to it - requires some correction. But the new discovery, made in broad daylight, does not ruin me - my visual impression from what I experienced perseveres.

There is one more theme appearing in the daylight. Far out on the plateau I see a Tibetan monastery surrounded by the citadel walls. Considered in this context, the image symbolizes the vanity of human efforts, both the humility and the coldness of beauty.

Is it possible, in examining the nudes, to get sight of the inner world, to feel the warmth of mother's womb, to resurrect prenatal security and peace? That I have just used the interrogative mood is justified by the desire to share my amazement with others; for I am amazed at the possibility to enjoy visual effects, to relish the inner body's sculpture. Getting inside, but not realizing it yet, I feel certain discomfort - here my visual consumerism is denied. Kitaev's nudes have this weird effect: they reduce the intimate space to the remnants of humanity (to emphasize which in other cases is as desirable as it is impracticable), and, through frequent repetition, make one accustomed to such "landscape" treatment of the body's surface. Still, this effect fails in the "Inner Space" series, once again forcing me to give up the mode of perception just acquired. Now I seem to understand how the archetypal protective space - a cathedral, a house, a shelter - is arranged.





It has been some time since the thesis about impossibility of wholly undressing a woman was established as indisputable - that she is always dressed in our cultural applications in the system of our significations, is now a conventional wisdom among intellectuals, who are disciplined by the post-structuralist paradigm. Consistently amplifying the *obvious*, Kitaev leads us to revise the historically successful constructions of an art image. He makes us think of Kantian interpretation of aesthetic feeling as mediated intellectual activity. He reminds us that in different times image was viewed as the absolute idea's sensual embodiment (Hegel), as internal form (A. Potebnya) or a consciousness' projection (the theory of empathy, phenomenology), as abandonment of the narrative and subject-matter or, finally, as a way to de-visualize the artistic gesture, which is the basic intention of the fin-de-siècle cutting-edge art.

For me, the photograph called "Geometry of Body" is especially significant. I shall remark first that the word *geometry* here takes us back to its original meaning - geo-metry: an image of the spherical Earth comes to mind, with its meandering rivers and coastlines. Kitaev's line - and this he himself notices - "has no angles, it turns now into an outline, now into a border, a feature and a contour, a track, path, fate..."

The sophisticated rhythm of recurrent features, the accurate doubling of curves make us carried away by their pure play, as much as sober us down, in effect relieving us from that pathological automatism with which we consider every *frank*, anatomically detailed display of naked body as "vulgar" and immoral. The nature of *limit* always plays a trick on the moralists; for this is where opposites coincide: the small and the big, the threshold of pain and the peak of pleasure, erotic and death. The spherical form of labia reiterates the form of buttocks as if to confirm what Anaxagoras once said: "Every thing in every thing", or, in full: "There is a part of everything in everything". We participate in the aesthetic





preponderance of the visible over the ethical taboo put on display of certain parts of body. Looking through Kitaev's asexual filters is a promise of unexpected discoveries, such as that a part lives by the whole, or that different shapes are in dialogue, or that the changes that different figures undergo are subject to the strict laws of topology.

### Body Constructions

The photograph No. 1 of the "Body Constructions" series emphasizes how much de-eroticized a body can get by means of appropriate framing and scaling. In exposing the "workings" of constructive, carrying, adjoining parts of a body, the photographer represents them in so "stand-offish" a manner that in effect they win our emotional neutrality. If Blossfeld contrived, through enlargement of fragments, to discover plant architectonics for Europeans, to introduce them into the aesthetics of organic "microworld" and make them view familiar things differently. Kitaev chooses to move in the opposite direction: by de-eroticizing the body he discovers an inorganic world concealed therein, the world of aesthetic landscapes of nature. Strictly speaking, his aesthetic experience is neither positive, nor negative. He denies us any ethical evaluation - to give us a chance to catch sight of the natural. Disinterestedly.

Sheet No. 2 ("An Arch"). Notwithstanding the same utterly concretized display of genitals, the image now is grand and disproportionate, ascetic rather than pornographic - similar to the Stalin-era or Third Reich architecture in its imperial spirit and power parade, it rather suppresses and repels than attracts or arouses erotic feelings. "An Arch" is one of the most provocative shots in this series. Another photograph that definitely belongs to the same *architectural* style is No. 3 ("A Window"). The fullness of space and plastically precise image of the stately caryatids, their static tension, refer to the mythical proto-images of Heaven and Earth - Egyptian Nut and Greek Gea. The pleasure now is of different quality:





it is an irony about the commonsensical opinion that human body sets a measure for outward things. The reason why the visible is "comfortless" here is not that my body is compared with the world of things (for man is really a measure of all things), but rather that the body, sublimated and inaccessible in the visual space, is compared with itself: it surpasses all our capacity for adaptation. Something anthropocentric crosses my mind when, placed by the photographer in the point of his view, I envisage myself standing on the horizon line, throwing back my head, wishing to investigate the belly-arch from inside. Erotic reality is here annihilated by the retrospection: we are recapitulating the mythological situation of the world's birth, whereby the act of birth becomes cosmically transcribed. Not seduction, not caprice, not desire for desire's sake, but ritual solemnity of the actions on which everything depends: the harvest, the season change, sunrise and rain - this is the basic sentiment of the series.

### **The four seasons**

The artistic images of seasons that we know are plenty. Now I am looking at the photographs that bear the seasons' names, but, suddenly, are no landscapes at all. The seasons' characteristic moods are expressed through unexpected pose and condition of a body. Unsupported by illustrations, we intuitively and instinctively begin to revive the minute muscle motions that are caused by seasonal change of weather: heat and cold, rain and sun.

Spring is the season of sun-thirst, the time when body is filled to the brim - with waiting for warmth and comfort. This starving for the first spring sunbeams is what St.-Petersburgers know all too well: their pale bodies basking in the sun against the walls of St. Peter and Paul fortress is a usual March subject for the Petersburg press photographers. Kitaev expresses the aspiration after sunlight somewhat differently -





through the almost perfect ellipse of a young man's neck, reminiscent of the symbolic chalice of the firmament, of radar that is ever ready to catch a signal, of the cupped palms under a jet of water. We are as touched by the trustfulness of the bliss-yearning youth, as the face is touched by the first beams of the spring sun. In *summer* I register the omnipresence of warmth, the abundance of life-forms, the feel of repose.

Autumn is not only the time of diminishing daylight, piercing wind, mire and unexpected low temperatures, all of which is accompanied by the characteristic sad mood. It is also the time of the countryman's pleasures: the crops are ripe, the poultry and animals fed up to the maximum. Unaffected by wit, illustration or easily decipherable clues, the aesthetic effort pays with completeness of surprise. The image of autumn here is something *select* - like grain, like Sasha Sokolov's metaphor or like an item from the State Hermitage gatherion. The hand-made quality of autumn and its fruits enters into conversation with winter. Here I cannot help stressing the parallel with a photograph called "A Fruit", whose figurative style matches precisely the autumnal mood. By invisible yet meaningful threads the ripeness of the fruit is linked with flesh. Flesh and blood are the basic symbols; they are indissoluble in the metaphorical sphere of language. As to the visual metaphor, it is grounded in its earnestness, its own ineradicable materiality. Ripeness is the time for harmony between the sensual and the rational, the completeness of realized desire and the borders of its realization. The ripening fruit is like the dam that gathers and holds water. And as much as a dam is forsaken and useless without water, so flesh is empty and useless without life, without plenitude, without desire. Ripeness, or, in other words, *acme* - is a peak, a crisis, readiness to give birth, to survive winter, to hold and to keep. It endows the image of woman with the meaning of cosmic force and dismisses all our vain thoughts.





*Winter* is a folded summer: the legs are pressed to the belly, the knees are braced tightly, the body coils up like a cat. And looks for the warm days to come.

## Metamorphoses

It is only conventionally that we can classify the photographs of this series as nudes. The images here are not sensual, rather *supersensual*; they are more concealing than denuded. In the *sheets* (this series is associated with drawing more than any other) there is no perspective, no volume: what we see is just planes variously illuminated and lines that have lost all legibility. In effect, there are vague and fluid images, similar to those that we meet in dreams - arising and vanishing all at once. But it is not something that *has not yet come*, that we usually meet in dreams; rather it is something that *has already occurred*, something disappearing at the very moment of meeting - forever, as it seems. The artist's camera impassively fixes the dying of the certain type of sensuality and its representation in culture. His silhouettes catch one's eye by the certainty with which corporal tensivity is depicted - the kind of tensivity that my body is in when I am watching a victim taking shower and not knowing about the danger behind the plastic curtain. There is a compensation for the absence of cinematographic sequence: my utter anxiety. Full of symbols, the image is not merely a representation of violence in some restricted space.

Symbolical depth of the image is not achieved here by portraying the desperate struggle in some locked space along with the advent of plastic civilization from which we are already too weak to escape. Rather, it consists in representation of the vanishing archetype of female beauty - the archetype that aroused our imagination in the last century and kept it operative. The gist of the series is a nostalgia about the romantic girl image, irrevocably gone by now, about the unresolved and unclear secret, about unrealized sensuality and unavailable luxury to be weak in the situation of all too permissive, but currently approved







standards of sexual behavior. The conflict between a profile of the upturned face, an active movement, as if breaking through the illusory wall, and a confident stride, on the one hand, and the lightness of figures, on the other, is not executed in harsh forms. The generalization of the female nude conveys the bittersweet feeling of loss that the man has with respect to his illusions about a fragile and graceful stranger, and, at the same time, expresses the power and independence of those new species of the female gender who are about to come. "They are coming" (H. Newton). Dim light of the "Metamorphoses" is a sign, indicating not the absence, but the diversity, almost lost for us, of the vanishing epoch's world.

It is worth attending to the vertical format: marking the abandonment of the narrative composition, it refers not to linear course of events, but to everything vertical and existentially significant: initiation, death, resurrection.

Collisions of the "Metamorphoses" are not internal in character. Inwardly, the series, in its representation of the illusory world, achieves somewhat uniform intonation; it is stylistically homogenous and well-done, and this fact makes it different from the rest of the *nu* photography. However, we can agree that this technique has resources enough to make a personal exhibition, and that author's subversive representation of body in the visual (and, as we have seen, other) space of modernity is made coherent by his world-awareness, by the thorough unity of his style - the unity that the art critics would call "ideological, figurative and emotional".

Kitaev conveys to us the solemn and yet perfectly articulated feeling of an archaeologist who discovered a female sculpture of some unknown (*already unknown* would be more precise) civilization. And the active - physically and psychologically active - movement of the figures in the "Metamorphoses" looks all the more contrasting with the softness of the





images, the more these images are reduced to a flat shadow. The visions are not static, but cinematographic: independently of my will they unfold a representation of consecutive events - here is not a state, not a stop to experience "the moment of eternity plug-in", but some recognizable phases of movement, be it desperate struggle or quivering aspiration.

In this series the artist, consciously or not, is making free with all common laws of the visible. The distinctive feature of his nudes, once again, consists in archaeological or sculptural monumentality, in denial of psychologism. The body in photographs possesses certain fullness, and the movement is not so much emotional, as it is symbolical, or even metaphysical - this latter word could be the right one, if only it didn't refer so ostentatiously to the pathetically confined critical language and to the special type of negation that consists in "being inarticulate", in alluding indulgently to certain authority which is of such a sort that to point it out in premonition entitles one to remain unthinkingly in the visual world, the world of sensual images.

In the whole nu cycle the photograph called "Caryatid" has special place. Credulity with respect to the woman's world is the subject as much recurrent in art as it is archaic. Here, the sublime female image is so obviously convincing that it is hard to find something equally impressive, something to make a series of: you cannot expect success to be serial.

As usual, a critical eye seeks for attributes of a genre in which the artist works. Specialization is a mark of our time; but it doesn't gather various arts in the mysterious whole; and not only that: it also deprives us of the unity of experience. Different traditions had their own way to prepare man for the encounter with art: he had to be cold and fasting, or wait in some unlighted place, or have some complementary experience, for example, corporal punishment, pain or shock. Now, this image before us requires





loneliness. Deprived of optimism and trust to other people, with our corporal experience, according to the widespread opinion, being not acute anymore in the civilization of comfort, the image of man erased (as is shown, for example, in the pictures of Francis Bacon) and photography made "the art of disappearance" (Walter Benjamin), we are quick to notice each time the trustfulness with respect to the world of a woman - to the "cosmologically intended" world. The emotional upward movement - to the sky and light - sets the rhythm for the hands thrown up, for the upturned head, for the tensivity of the neck muscles. What surprises and holds our attention is the contrast between the visible work of Caryatid - the work of hands and neck - and the state she is in: morning freshness, joy, kindness and pleasure hiding in her smile.

Everything is harmonized in this photograph. The *contre-ajoure* illumination effect (used in photography for a long time) is so fresh that it seems to be a latest technical achievement. By the sharp line, the model takes volume and density away from the surrounding light. The space being forcibly reduced to the locus that the figure occupies, the latter seems to be sculpted by light. The counter-illumination helps to chisel from the body its sculptural connotations. However, "Caryatid" captures one's imagination not only by its multidimensional symbolism, but also by its composition: in due course I notice how, by organizing my view, the frame's inner movement converts massive into imponderable, dense material body into air.

Notwithstanding the obvious sculptural character of "Caryatid", one can hardly miss the image's psychologism, which is rooted in the open-heartedness of the figure, in her kindness manifest in the look and pose. This is a look without an eye, but yet directed up there, towards the sky. The effect is unexpected: where are the eyes? Are they really





necessary? We see by means of her overall condition, we feel through her feelings, we experience through her experience, we are touched by her corporal impulse.

Everyday life, like the gray autumn sky, weighs down any emotional impulse, but at the same time, draws the high nearer. Both our resistance to this and our quiet acceptance have some reason. If one is serious about the productive power of imagination and about its capacity not only to awake associations, but also to direct us at certain aims, if one, at the corporal level, aspires for harmony, then he will definitely recognize the unique harmony of the internal world that reflects sincere involvement in the life's plenitude. Sublime experience is not achieved here through some ecstatic condition; it is a product of sensitivity to the life's logic paving its way through the age crises and stages: the image of "Caryatid" is an individual summary of achievements - maturity, power, confidence. It reflects the transition from pleasures to duties, from youth to maturity, the transition *unaccompanied* by the dramatic abandonment of the youthful selfishness. "I accept you, life..." Not woven from the signs of coquetry and attraction, the image speaks to the world about the readiness to maintain the female cosmos, the cosmos of family and home.

Does the artist here objectify himself, dissolved in the bright light that flows round the model's body, feeling this light together with the model? I admit that the condition of the artist is reflected in the model and is returned to us in her image. Artistic encounter can be very influential at times: the actor or model can retain its traces until the end, or even something tragic - to think of the famous models of Rembrandt, Picasso, Modigliani - can happen. Here openness and self-confidence, multiplied by certain benevolence, result in the amazingly accurate psychological picture of a woman. This proves the special place of "Caryatid" among the rest of this cycle's photographs. And just like any powerful image, it





ignores the genre restrictions: with equal right "Caryatid" could be included in the portrait cycle - "An Eyeless Portrait".

It is quite instructive to analyze the image of the sublime and beautiful. In depriving the whole of its components (each of which is imperfect as such), we should pay attention not only to the airiness and ease, but also to the weightiness that is inherent in the body's bottom half and endows the whole with architectural monumentality and equilibrium of a sand-glass. The image is fed through the terrestrial roots. If the top part were cut off, we would get a fragment as impressive by its fullness and weightiness, as the photograph called "A Fruit".

From its first beginnings photography has always sneered at our habit to create the image ontology, that is, to take the image of reality for reality as such. Owing to its reflecting capacity, photography demonstrated first the technical, and then the artistic possibilities of reality transformation - through fixation of this or that particular vision. By the way, F. Nietzsche, ever sensitive to the cultural semantics of an image, noticed it: "Photography is the conclusive proof against the rough form of idealism". However, there are limits to the transformation of reality: it is determined by genre standards, resources of photographic technology and, finally, by the particular artistic language. This becomes evident when we compare the photographic and the artistic images. An artist, in order to achieve expressiveness in the same subject, would make his picture generalized and, most likely, remove the nose. And what would a photographer do? In photography one cannot get rid of the actual situation: a photographic image is not built from our comprehension of reality, but from the real world fragments, its imperfect parts, states, lights, etc. Photographer is compelled to use just what he has got. Here is before us the thickness of an elbow, its extension - one of the imperfect elements, one of those discrepancies that





we have to put up with, since, on the one hand, they cannot be hidden, "swept under the rug", and, on the other, it is by them that the whole composition is held: remove one such and you will destroy everything. Here, the seeming discrepancy constitutes "imagehood". In understanding this fact we are able to ignore this particular "breakdown", this "unnecessary" and "unnaturally" extended mass. Had it been a less convincing photograph, some less significant discrepancy, or breakdown, would be enough to certify its failure. The photographer, and, after all, the observer himself, has to restrain his itch to manipulate reality and admit that it is subject to the photographer's manipulation only up to a certain point (and it is not clear how much certain it is for us and for him). If we are to get a photograph, let alone a good photograph, reality is something irremovable, something you cannot "frame" or "clean".

Here is one more curious thing about this photograph. When making the cards of "Caryatid" in the USA, one lady, an art critic, noted an interesting detail: the black body "works" perfectly on the white background. Their context makes itself clear in the judgments about the image of Afro-American woman's body, which is absent in our consciousness and rare in the works of our artists, by now at least.

By the way of conclusion I would like to notice one common feature of all Kitaev's *nu* series. In the age when art is not only technologically *reproduced*, but also technologically *produced*, we read a huge amount of information from the screen, the newspaper sheet, the book page, the billboard, etc., and our skill of "all-body perception" (A. Maillol) is either lost or not even developed. In this process photography also participates. Because of the fact that our perception of the world has become flat, sculpture, which requires spatial comprehension and imagination, is out-of-date now. Towards the middle of the twentieth century people mostly lost their interest in it. It was with that in mind that





Barnett Newman said in those years: "Sculpture is what you dash against when making a step back in order to take a good view of a picture".

However, the fact that body in photography is now an interesting subject confirms that "sculptural images are bodies, too" (M. Heidegger). Kitaev, with his abilities to make a living body out of a sculpture and *to depict a body as a sculpture*, gives us a lesson of volume contemplation, gets us interested in the space-restricting forms. In denying that photograph is doomed to be a flat construction and opposing it to the realized corporeity of sculpture, Kitaev, to defend again my original thesis, gives us the sculptural image of a body. Besides, once again we return to the aesthetic underpinnings of a photo-image, to the special character of photographic language and, finally, to photography's (in)ability to overstep the bounds set by the technologically limited nature of its expression. One of the important things that the current theory should do is to take up a search for arguments with which the criticism of a photograph as an objective image can be overcome. The most articulate argument that even opponents agree on is, perhaps, following: the sensual world is infinite in its manifestations and states, indefinite is the number of its expressions. And since any image is some selection, its accuracy consists in its own typical character - in its license to squeeze the variety of situations, gestures, states into one, and, with all doubts cast away, find *in an individual and concrete photograph* the most general and, therefore, exact image.

In assimilating the nude to the landscape, to the still life, to the architecture photography, Kitaev confirms his reputation as an artist seeking for a fruitful dialogue about the genre limits and, ultimately, about the nature of photography. Now and then art requires that our notions about it be reestablished, old forms abandoned, and accepted methods revised. Those who care about the fate of the artistic representation of body should be





truly inspired by Kitaev's individual vision, concurrent with the real changes that *body* undergoes in the Western civilization, in our shared (do we have any choice?) culture. His studio nudes are no visual experiment for the experiment's sake. Here, the main object is not an anatomy of the man; it is the image of the body deprived of humanity that the artist is preoccupied with. Lamettrie's man-machine is superseded by the man whose body is dissolved in a chemical or virtual reality. His compatibility with the mental, spiritual and symbolical body disappears, and he is left to us as an archaeological item.

In the phrase "obnazhennoje telo" ("naked - literally, "bared" - body") our culture stresses the adjective, the *act* of baring. In this respect we seem to be close to the German culture where the *nu* genre is called "Akt". Kitaev's cutting-edge art belongs to the direction in photography that sensitively registers symptoms of the loss of body in the informational society. His objective impassively separates the body from the man, leaving just character and inner world to be portrayed. Such an anti-psychological view corresponds to our premonitions about the sterilization of the social space. The involuntary line of landscape is imprinted on the body, while we, caught unawares, hardly realize that man's organism-awareness is snatched away by *anaesthetic* medicines. Just like a city without people reveals to us the character of the place, so his faceless nudes nevertheless retain *personality* - due to the fact that each generation, gender, individual has its own characteristic pose communicating something without looking at you, or even without demonstrating its *inner world*. Artist's ability to see a woman in the piece of marble is supplemented by the ability to discover a statue in the living woman.

The way of generalization of the female beauty that gains its power from the trustfulness to the world Kitaev so far has passed. At least, he has come as far as it is allowed by the times when people can only trust an insurance policy, a lawyer or pharmacology. In being







historically tired of culture and, even more, of *the recurrent thought about our tiredness*, we are like St. Francis of Assisi who had permanently oppressed his body, calling it "my brother-donkey", until he came to understand, in his old age, that it was his *brother* still, and begged brother's forgiveness for treating him so badly.

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### Personal Exhibitions (selected)

- ☐ 2001 - St. Mount Athos and Its Dwellers - Tikhvin Historico-Memorial Museum of Architecture and Art, Tikhvin, Russia
- ☐ 2001 - Tra la Neva e l'Adige - Galerie Foto Forum, Bolzano
- ☐ 2001 - Bilder aus Sankt Petersburg - VHS-Photogalerie, Stuttgart
- ☐ 2000 - Involuntary Line of Landscape - 3-d Moscow Bienalle, The Central House of Artist, Moscow
- ☐ 2000 - Between Sky and Earth... - Yaroslavl Art Museum, Yaroslavl, Russia
- ☐ 1999 - 10 Years with Saint-Petersburg - State Museum of the History of St.-Petersburg, Saint-Petersburg
- ☐ 1998 - Views of the St. Mount Athos - The New Academy of Fine Arts, Saint-Petersburg
- ☐ 1997 - Photograms - Goethe Institute, Moscow
- ☐ 1997 - Studies in the studio (Fotofair '97) - The Central Exhibition Hall (Manezh), Saint-Petersburg





☐ 1996 - Images of St.-Petersburg - "Photosynkryria '96", 9th International Meeting, Endos ton technon, Thessaloniki

☐ 1996 - ST.-PETERSBURG as seen by Wubbo de Jong, AMSTERDAM through the eyes of Alexander Kitayev - Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, Netherlands; The Central Exhibition Hall (Manezh), Saint-Petersburg

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#### **Group Exhibitions (selected)**

☐ 2000 - Icons of the Russian Ballet - The Royal Opera House Studio Covent Garden, London

☐ 1999 - The New Movements Section. Last Entries - The State Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg

☐ 1999 - Photo-based Art from St.-Petersburg - pARTs Photographic Arts Gallery, Minneapolis, USA

☐ 1998 - The Breakthrough. New Russian Photography - Bayer AG, Leverkusen, Germany

☐ 1997 - New Photography from Russia - Gary Edwards Gallery, Washington DC, USA

☐ 1997 - Photoestafette: from Rodchenko until Today - "A-3" Municipal Gallery, Moscow

☐ 1997 - Photography and Modernism - The Armory, New York, USA

☐ 1996 - Pushkinskaya 10: Avant-garde from St.-Petersburg - Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus Ohio, USA





- ☐ 1996 - Russian Photographers: Renewal & Metamorphosis from the Late Soviet Era to the 1990's - The MIT Museum, USA
  - ☐ 1995 - The Latest Photo Art from Russia - Frankfurt-Dusseldorf-Karlsruhe-Gannover-Gerten, Germany;
  - ☐ 1994 - Self-identification. Positions in St.-Petersburg Art from 1970 until Today - Kiel-Berlin-Oslo-Sopot; State Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg, Russia
  - ☐ 1993 - Photopostscriptum - State Russian Museum (The Marble Palace), Saint-Petersburg, Russia
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## Collections

- ☐ The State Russian Museum; Russian National Library
- ☐ The State Museum of the History of St.-Petersburg
- ☐ Yaroslavl Art Museum
- ☐ Museum of Photographic Collections, Moscow
- ☐ Dostoyevsky Museum, St.-Petersburg
- ☐ "Nabokov's House" Museum, St.-Petersburg
- ☐ Museum of the Institute of Russian Literature ("Pushkin House")
- ☐ Collection of the "Free Culture" Foundation, St.-Petersburg
- ☐ The Harry Ransom Center of Humanities, Austin, Texas, USA





- ☐ Museum of Russian Ballet Photography e-Onegin.com, London
- ☐ The Navigator Foundation, Boston, USA
- ☐ The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection, The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art
- ☐ Museum, Rutgers
- ☐ The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
- ☐ Mendi Kaszier Foundation, Antwerpen, Belgien
- ☐ and other state and private collections.

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