

מוזיאון חיפה לאמנות
HAIFA MUSEUM OF ART
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Aesthetics of Violence

Three Solo Exhibitions:

AES+F

Norbert Bisky

Biljana Đurđević

January 24 – June 6, 2009

Curator: Tami Katz-Freiman

AES+F Group

AES was founded in 1987 by three artists – Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich and Evgeny Svyatsky, whose initials form the acronym that is the group's name. In 1995, they were joined by the fashion photography Vladimir Fridkes; the group has since been called AES+F, and is considered to be one of the Russia's most prominent contemporary art groups. Their video works, sculptures, paintings, photographs and multimedia installations are characterized by breathtaking beauty, accessible and communicative imagery and provocative, ceremonial scenes imbued with a glamorous, sensuous Baroque quality.

During the 1990s, the members of AES+F forged their own unique language and identity, while touching upon painful and problematic aspects of international politics and world events. Their *Islamic Project* (1996–2003), for instance, examined the West's phobia concerning Islam from a parodic perspective; by inserting minarets, mosque domes and Arab markets into images of familiar European and North American tourist sites, the work Islamized the West's urban landscape. This long-term project diverged from the norms of political correctness and was marked by a prophetic character when it first appeared five years before the attack on the Twin Towers. The group's project *Suspects* (1997), which was concerned with the disturbing phenomenon of youth violence, featured the group's photographic portraits of seven female juvenile murderers alongside seven portraits of adolescent girls from a prestigious private school in Moscow. The viewer was left to guess which faces were suffused with evil and violence. In their work *Action Half-Life* (2003–2005), AES+F already touched upon the themes featured in the current exhibition – photographing boys and girls dressed in white sports outfits and holding automatic weapons against the apocalyptic background of an imaginary wasteland.

In recent years, the production process characteristic of AES+F has become more complex, and at times includes a crew numbering several hundred participants. Like a cinematic production, this process involves choosing sites, role casting models, designing costumes, managing extras and creating

complex photographs. The subsequent work in the studio involves digitally manipulating a single image and joining it to a kind of multilayered collage, which the group members describe as "digital painting." In the course of this "painterly" process, which is constructed as a panoramic animation work, the individually photographed figures are fused against a virtual background by using effects of condensation and displacement. The high-resolution photographs create a sterile, imaginary hyperreality. The narrative, cinematic format and the monumental compositions called to mind Renaissance and Baroque battle scenes, which describe epic events.

The apocalyptic vision arising from the works created by AES+F reflects the spirit of our time, and raises questions concerning Western values. The use of advertising images, sensationalism and politics, the glorification of youth, and the preoccupation with globalization and cultural differences, are all embodied in *Last Riot* (2005–2007). This video animation, which is considered to be one of the group's iconic achievements, was exhibited at the 2007 Venice Biennale – where it received much international attention – and has been termed a "Requiem for the Modern World." Set against the background of a synthetic landscape devoid of history, identity, or temporal specificity, which alternates between a desert expanse and an alpine mountain range, the work features a cluster of androgynous-looking boys and girls who seem to have emerged from a futuristic version of a Benetton ad. These young rebels or the gods of modern times – members of different races with a self-estranged, post-human appearance – are battling each other in a kind of slow sadomasochistic choreography. They seem to be caught in the throes of a fatal struggle, a battle in which it is impossible to distinguish between victims and aggressors, the victorious and the defeated. These young men and women are dressed in fashionable camouflage clothing; their sexuality is repressed, their faces are motionless, and they do not make eye contact – neither amongst themselves nor with the viewer. In this context, the artists relate that "the work process resembled filming a porno movie." The youngsters' actions are mechanical and monotonous, and have no apparent reason or goal – a *perpetuum mobile* of aggression for the sake of aggression. They carry swords and clubs, yet the blades rubbing against bare necks do not really cut into the flesh, and the clubs

do not really hit against the body. The range of violent bodily gestures is performed in slow motion and is devoid of fear or pain, as if partaking of a symbolic performance or ritual. In the background, planes crash, trucks fly off collapsing bridges, trains explode and missiles are launched – yet there is not a trace of blood, sweat or tears. This is a simulacrum of sterilized violence that has been stripped of a motive, of emotions and of any vestiges of "real" existence in favor of a perfect composition produced by 3D technology.

The spectacular, pseudo-mythological compositions and poses are based on an eclectic synthesis between classical art and popular art. They include reference to Christian iconography in the style of Verrocchio or Bernini, pastoral Baroque scenes in the style of Poussin and Claude Lorrain and social realism inspired by Soviet propaganda paintings – as well as advertisements, fashion layouts, comics, computer games and Hollywood films in the style of "The War of the Worlds." One may also relate the sterilized violence and aesthetic seductiveness to the alienating fashion-show scenes staged and photographed by the Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft. Here too it seems that the narcissistic display is shaped by its own rules; in the case of *Last Riot*, these rules are based on a pathology of violence that we have already become indifferent to. It seems that in this work, the AES+F members have distilled their "aesthetics of violence" to its most powerful essence. War scenes, horrifying images of torture, murder and suicide seemingly borrowed from an image bank of catastrophes, and processed with pathos and eroticism into a futuristic fantasy. They form a kind of mesmerizingly beautiful choreography, which amplifies – as if under a magnifying lens – the neuroses and fantasies of our world.

AES+F: Tatiana Arzamasova was born in Moscow (1955); she is a graduate of the Moscow Architectural Institute (1978). Lev Evzovich was born in Moscow (1958); he is a graduate of the Moscow Architectural Institute (1982). Evgeny Svyatsky was born in Moscow (1957); he is a graduate of the department of book graphic arts, Moscow University of Printing Arts. Vladimir Fridkes was born in Moscow (1956); he has worked as a fashion photographer for Vogue, Marie Claire, ELLE, Cosmopolitan and other fashion publications. The members of AES+F all live and work in Moscow.

Last Riot, 2007

HD video, single-channel projection, 22:30 minutes, sound

Courtesy of Doron Sebbag Art Collection, ORS Ltd., Tel Aviv

Last Riot is exhibited courtesy of Doron Sebbag Art Collection, ORS Ltd., Tel Aviv

Norbert Bisky

The personal biography of Norbert Bisky – a prominent member of the new German Expressionist wave – is essential to understanding and interpreting his controversial art work. Bisky was born in Leipzig in 1970, and was raised on the socialist values of East Germany. He began his career as an artist following the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1994, he enrolled as an art student at the Berlin University of the Arts, where he studied with Georg Baselitz. His paintings reflect the cultural conflict stemming from the unification of the two Germanies, and the rapid transition from a communist regime to a capitalist consumer culture. As a member of both worlds, who is familiar with the Western clichés about the communist culture of "oppression" and with communist clichés about Western "enlightenment," Bisky responds ironically to optimistic messages and promises for a better world, and to the inevitable disillusionment they entail.

Bisky's early body of work, from the years 2002–2005, was influenced by social realist propaganda images and by the aesthetics of East German youth movements. These works mainly feature golden-haired, muscular boys, who are mostly busy with sports activities against the expanse of a light-filled, blue-skyed German landscape. It was impossible not to associate these extravagant paintings, which were suffused with an idealizing, heroic atmosphere, with an Aryan ideology charged with homoerotic undercurrents. Indeed, some art critics reacted to these works with reservation, detecting in them allusions to East Germany's neo-Nazi scene. Many of them overlooked Bisky's critical approach, which related Nazi folklore and Soviet nostalgia to neo-pop images culled from the Western advertising world. The same pathetic formulaic combination of superficiality and sex disguised as a promise of happiness, which characterized East German propaganda rhetoric, recurs in a different guise in Western

advertising. Bisky's paintings attempted to expose this rhetoric as the fake taboo of democratic society.

Yet in contrast to the politically engaged art of Stalinist Russia and the celebration of youth sanctified by Nazi propaganda, Bisky's athletes are the distressed victims of a social utopia. They hover, ungrounded, throughout a painterly expanse in a world that is cracked, torn and oozing strange liquids. The disintegration of the painterly sphere is especially noticeable in the later series (2005–2008), such as those included in this exhibition, in which Bisky abandoned the bright youth movement scenes in favor of a more dark and surreal universe. In this series, it is already clear that the promised paradise is inherently faulty, and that the social utopia it embodies is in the process of collapsing. Drugged and drunken youths, wearing identical sports outfits, float about like cloned figures that cannot be distinguished from one another. Inhabiting a world shaped by alienation and various provocations, they call to mind sickeningly familiar images of violence and disaster. These youths appear tormented and self-involved, and their different body parts seem to be melting in the bright sunlight.

In his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek touches upon our desire for the real, which involves a simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from violent scenes. He analyzes the desire to rub up against death in its most repugnant and demeaning form, as is most often the case in the realm of popular culture. According to Žižek, the representations characteristic of this culture – images of pornography, sanctity and death – attempt to touch upon extreme experiences in order to satisfy this human need.¹ Indeed, the spectacular visions of violence in Bisky's more recent works involve sadistic acts, brutal cannibalism, slaughter, executions, amputations and bodily excretions – an orgy of dark, chaotic and violent forces, bloody initiation rituals and battlefields in which everyone has turned against each other. This imagery is characterized by a seductive and polished form of beauty, dramatic lighting and color and an overall theatricality. The palette of these works underscores the artificiality of

the narrative, to the point that it becomes almost impossible to discern the horrors they depict.

This overwhelming flood of stimuli – which goes hand in hand with sensory desensitization – is perhaps the source of critical stance expressed in Bisky's works, and of their relevancy to the postmodern discourse. The flood of sensations addressed in these works may be thought of in relation to the terms "anaesthetics," which is used by Susan Buck-Morss to describe a state in which the eyes are bombarded by fragmented impressions, while taking in nothing at all.² One may also examine the disintegration of the painterly sphere by using the terms applied by Fredric Jameson to the mutation in the postmodern meta-space. This postmodern orientation is especially prominent in the countless quotations and sources of influence combined in Bisky's paintings into a pastiche devoid of hierarchies, in which allusions to old masters (such as Tiepolo and Goya) appear alongside images from the worlds of advertising, cinema and fashion. To these one must also add Bisky's attraction to Baroque ecstasy, especially in terms of his charged relationship to the body as a site both sacred and profane, noble and abject.

Bisky's works are featured as part of a cluster of exhibitions whose common denominator is the representation and visibility of violence through the prism of art making. One image whose metaphorical resonance is especially relevant to this context is *Schwarzmalerei [Painter of Darkness]* (2008), which portrays an artist painting a flame that seems to be erupting out of the dark sky. This quintessential image of capturing a catastrophe, while paying attention to the aesthetic values used to portray violence – composition, color, distribution of paint, the rhythm of the brushstrokes and so forth – calls to mind age-old concerns about the affinity between ethics and aesthetics, morality and beauty, horror and pornography, as well as their use in totalitarian regimes. This charged image of the painter of dark horrors, thus embodies the essence of contemporary art making.

1 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso, 2002.

Norbert Bisky was born in Leipzig, Germany (1970). He is a graduate of the Berlin University of the Arts, where he studied with Georg Baselitz (1990–1994); he received a scholarship to study at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Complutense University of Madrid (1995). He has been awarded the Künstlerdorf Schöppingen scholarship. He lives and works in Berlin.

The works included in the exhibition are all courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin, with the exception of *Extase*, which is exhibited courtesy of Museum Junge Kunst Frankfurt (Oder), and *Lichterkette*, which is exhibited courtesy of Leo Koenig Inc., New York.

Craving, 2008

Oil on canvas, triptych, 200 x 150 each

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin

Übergepäck [Excess Luggage], 2008

Oil on canvas, 200 x 275

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin

Extase [Ecstasy], 2008

Oil on canvas, 130 x 100

Courtesy of the artist

Collection of Museum Junge Kunst Frankfurt (Oder)

Sputum, 2007

Oil on canvas, 275 x 200

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin

Aufmacher [Opener], 2008

Oil on canvas, 150 x 100

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin

Lichterkette [Fairy Lights], 2005

Oil on canvas, 190 x 270

Courtesy of the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Schwarzmaler [Painter of Darkness], 2008

Oil on canvas, 130 x 100

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Crone, Berlin

Biljana Đurđević

The violent themes characteristic of Serbian artist Biljana Đurđević's works reflect her development as an artist during the horror-stricken 1990s – a decade when violence in her country peaked following the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern Europe. Đurđević belongs to the young generation of Serbian artists who experienced the political disintegration of Yugoslavia and Serbia's isolation under the rule of Slobodan Milošević. The works of these artists bespeak a spirit of protest against Milošević's tyrannical regime, and respond in a satirical, critical manner to the horrors of war and waves of violence brought on by outbreaks of nationalist and chauvinistic sentiments. The body of works included in this exhibition features a selection from several series created by Đurđević between the years 1999 and 2007 – series in which she gazes directly into the darkest abysses of the human soul.

Đurđević's paintings are characterized by a cruel and dramatic narrative realism, which has been termed "necrophilic realism" due to the multiplication of dead bodies and the sterile atmosphere of the public showers, operating rooms or morgues that recur in these compositions. The terrifying human figures represented in these paintings offer no possibility of mercy. Although these figures appear real, the artist insists that they do not build upon a concrete reality. The nightmarish painterly space that characterizes most of these works resembles a stage, and the depicted action seems to have been frozen against a series of flat decorative backdrops. The freezing of the scenes seems to hint to the "before" or "after" of a violent occurrence, and thus increases the tension and charges the works with a dramatic quality. So, for instance, in the work *Summer is Over* (2005), which is displayed at the entrance to the exhibition, three men with shaved heads and naked torsos, who are all wearing white butcher's aprons, appear alongside five terrifying dogs tied to a metal rail. The dogs' bloodthirsty appearance is amplified by the red wallpaper in the background, which creates the impression of an airless, claustrophobic space. Although nothing is actually taking place, the image is suffused with the premonition of an impending disaster.

This work is part of the series "Paradise Lost" (2005–2006), which also includes *Systematic Examination* (2005) – another painting featured in this exhibition: five girls wearing nothing but underwear and red Mary Janes are seated on a wooden bench, set against a backdrop of colorful tiles in a sterile space. Their wide-open eyes stare at a point on the horizon, and they seem overcome by terror and fear. The innocent appearance of these girls, and the physical hints of budding sexuality, together with the work's title, call to mind scenes of pedophilia and violence towards children.

Đurđević's paintings are suffused with allusions and quotations related to the history of art, and especially to Renaissance and Baroque art, Christian iconography and historical paintings – from which she culls the charged materials she uses in her works. In some of her paintings, one may detect themes, gestures or motifs that can be clearly identified with paintings by Ucello, Caravaggio, Da Vinci, Hals and Rembrandt. Đurđević uses the history of art in a functional and at times even cynical manner, which is due to the inverted meanings produced by her expropriation of images from their original context. The painting *Dentists Society* (1996–1998), for instance, is reminiscent of 17th Dutch group portraits that portrayed various professional guilds. Yet the figures' demonization and transformation into characters resembling butchers in a slaughterhouse, distance this painting from its point of reference, and relate it to male violence and to the politics of power that ruled Serbia in the mid-1990s. In the painting *The Last Days of Santa Claus* (2001), which is based on Andrea Mantegna's famous painting of the foreshortened dead Christ, the artist has replaced Jesus with Santa Claus, who is portrayed without his pants in a mysterious context.

The work *Saturday Evening Out* (1999), which is also included in this exhibition, similarly belongs to a body of works that feature violence and death in sterile spaces. Here too, a lifeless male figure is seen lying in a space that resembles a men's room. The man is dressed in black pants and a white shirt, and is wearing gloves on his hands – a detail that characterizes him as a murder suspect rather than a victim. *Gluttony-Crucifixion* (2004), which is part of the series "Seven Deadly Sins," similarly makes use of distorted

perspective. The figure of a corpulent middle-aged woman – whose appearance is entirely conventional – is being crucified for the sin of gluttony; her body, which is bound with black leather straps, seems to be about to fall off the cross straight onto the viewer's head.

The tension embodied in these figures, emotional intensity, dizzying perspectives and contrasts between dramatic action and decorative background transform the observation of Đurđević's works into a disturbing experience, which leaves the viewer feeling deeply uncomfortable. This feeling is amplified by the precision and detail invested in articulating an aesthetics of violence. Yet more than anything, it seems that the entire brutal history of the Balkans is reflected in these images. As if submitting a dry and pragmatic post-mortem report, these paintings bespeak the politics of fear haunting a society that has experienced too many images of dead bodies.

[Biljana Đurđević](#) was born in Belgrade, Serbia (1973). She is a graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade (2000). She lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.