We and the Others

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I / The Other's Other

As the starting point, I will simply use the title of the conference: "We and the Others."[1] The phrase seems to be simple and symmetrical; but as soon as one reads the subtitle ("Russian Artists in the West—Western Artists in Russia"), it becomes clear that the relationship between "us" and "the others" is far from being balanced and equivalent. The title indicates that the contemporary world is basically determined by the experience of "otherness"; in such a world, Russian art is confronted by many "others," such as the art of the Far East (China, Japan), of the Islamic world, of Latin America, and Africa, to mention just a few areas where one can observe considerable artistic activity in recent years. However, the title does not refer to these "others," but to one very special "Other": to the West, the Western art world.

But why is Western art understood not just as one of several, basically equivalent art idioms, but as *the other*, so to speak? The answer is obvious: within the global network of art, Western art seems to hold the position of a "commanding point." Institutions, capital, markets, and concepts are based in the Western world or essentially connected with it. One could say without too much exaggeration that it is the West which actually determines what art is and what it is not. And even the much discussed "transcultural" processes cannot avoid this determinant; a certain regional art phenomenon or idiom is first appropriated by Western interpretations, institutions, and capital, and subsequently "relocalized" or "projected back" into its original context. This relationship, of course, gives a very different meaning to the notion of "otherness." It may be true that Western art is "other" for us, but what really matters is that "we" are "others" for the West.

This relationship is global. South African and Japanese arts are perhaps little known each to the other, and find each other hard to understand, so one could describe their relationship with the notion of "otherness"; however, this is not really important. Much more important is, to what extent they remain unknown, unintelligible and thus "other" for the West. The perversity of such a situation is that "we" in advance understand ourselves as being "others" for the West, that "we" look at ourselves through "the other's eyes," so to speak. This is, of course, a phantasmatic view; but through it, "we" understand ourselves as "the other's other."

Very similar issues are discussed by Ekaterina Dyogot for example, who speaks about the problem of identity and representation in contemporary Russian art. She describes the situation in which an artist is forced in advance to function as a representative in the relationship Russia—the West:

"In Russia, when one is speaking about representation, about the 'inward' and the 'external,' one is inevitably speaking about Russia as opposed to the West, the West being the only reference and place to be represented when the unrepresented is mentioned. When unrepresentable, the reference is unavoidably to Russia." [2]

What Dyogot is describing is a world marked by otherness and demanding representation; but it is also a world determined by one special Other, the West.

II / The Phantasmatic "Other"

It is not only in art that we speak about a divided world, a world built of closed, mutually unintelligible units. As a matter of fact, this view corresponds exactly to the new paradigm in global politics, a model which is supposed to serve as the basis for establishing the "world order." These views are, for example, developed in *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*, the much-discussed book by Samuel P. Huntington[3] this book does not just present a private speculations, as it offers concepts for political interpretations and strategies. It is a paradigm which has replaced the modernist universalist model. Huntington describes the world as a kind of patchwork of civilizations (based on ethnic, religious, cultural, and other similarities). These civilizations are assumed to be in a conflictual relationship with other civilizations. This is essentially a post-cold-war model, but also a postcolonial model. The symmetry of political and ideological oppositions and the classical relationship between colonial capital and colonies have disappeared; instead of this, we now have Huntington's paradigm which, in my opinion, tries to ensure the civilizational unity of the Western world and at the same time to define and ensure its position in a world which can no longer be directly controlled so the West may secure its vital global interests.

Why do I think that one function of Huntington's paradigm is to secure Western identity? We repeatedly speak about the West as a single and coherent unity, but in fact it is very heterogeneous: it has its own centers and peripheries, its own antagonisms and struggles for the dominant position and hegemony (we only have to think of the polyvalent relationship between European and American culture.) A strong evocation of Western identity can be further understood as a symptom indicating that this very identity cannot be taken for granted any more. As a matter of fact, the Western world is itself heterogeneous in the cultural and even civilizational sense, and therefore it is a potential (sometimes even actual) space for conflicts. The role of multinational capital and the development of the new "global cities"—centers of global economic networks—also introduce important new factors.

The modernist ideology of the Cold War and the neocolonial era was based on the idea that modern Western forms and values are the universally valid modern forms and values. Certainly, such an ideology can be understood as a tool for dominance and control. As such, modernist universalism was combined with a kind of ethnographic approach to the "other," basically premodern, forms. The model of the "clash of civilizations," on the other hand, corresponds to a world where the West, with its will to power and control, is challenged by emerging new centers of power. According to this model, modern civilization is not necessarily Western and neither is Western civilization necessarily modern.[4] I believe that the intention of this theory is to safeguard the essential interests of the West at a time when the West cannot aim at universal dominance any more. But there may be another far-reaching aspect. Not only is power being redistributed territorially, it is becoming deterritorialized, global, fluid, and abstract. The strong evocation of

identity and differences can therefore also be understood as a reflex of the very crisis and disappearance of such an identity.

All this indicates that “the West” itself, together with its particular “Western identity,” is perhaps just a phantasm—which is also “our” own phantasm, our own “other,” the base on which “we” construct “our” own identity.

The paradigm of “the clash of civilizations,” of a world split into differences and conflicts in “other” civilizations and cultures, is, in a certain sense, deeply Occidocentric. Its function is to ensure the civilizational unity of the West and, at the same time, its political and cultural primacy. The logic we can discover in Huntington’s undertaking is, in fact, very similar to the logic of the title of the conference. In his approach, too, we first have a picture of the world as a patchwork of different civilizations; but, actually, his book is not only written from the position of a Western observer but also with the ambition to establish a system of explanation through which the West will be able to deal with the “others.”

The relationship of the Western world toward these strange “other” civilizations and cultures is exactly the one described by the title of the conference: “we and the others.” As “our” position is not universal any more, it is necessary to “understand” and “explain” other cultures. Very often, these explanations follow the pattern, critically analyzed by Edward W. Saïd in his *Orientalism*.[5] Just like “Orient” and “Islam” (concepts discussed by Saïd), these “other” cultures appear as timeless phantasmatical entities; e.g., as “archaic,” “irrational,” “wild,” “dangerous,” etc.

From such a point of view, one would try to explain contemporary Russia and its contradictions not through an analysis of actual political and economical antagonisms, but through a phantasmatic “Russian essence.” This eternal and unchangeable essence seems to be strange, dangerous and attractive at the same time, and it includes such issues as the Orthodox and mystic traditions, the emotional, irrational, and poetic Russian soul, etc.; it can, for example, also imply the idea that Russians “by their nature” prefer strong, authoritarian political figures to a fully developed democratic system.

III / Western Curators in Africa

The world of “others,” or better, the world of the Other (the West) and (its) others therefore demands “interpretation” and “explanation,” and only these can be the basis for a possible “dialogue.” This relationship implies the construction of a system of identities and representations; the “explanatory” relationship with “another” culture means that all the products of this culture have to be understood as “representing” it and its “identity.” In these intercultural relations, artists are, regardless of their own intentions, forced to function as “representatives” of their strange world. When “we” deal with artists from “other” cultures, “we” search for this “other” in their work; for example, how does a certain Russian artist (re)present the phantasmatical “Russian essence” in his work? This very “explanation” of the “essence” and

“identity” which are “represented” in, for example, a work of art, however, reconfirms our own “essence” and “identity.”

If I return to the above-mentioned text by Dyogot, I can, perhaps, say that one of her main points is precisely that a Russian artist cannot avoid being such a representative:

“The Russian artist perpetually finds him/herself between the Scylla and Charybdis of two representational mechanisms which are switched on automatically and ruthlessly. In Russia […] being a ‘contemporary artist’ means represent Western culture […] In the West, on the other hand, a Russian artist must inevitably represent Russia.”

We could certainly point to a number of examples when the reception (and sometimes also the success) of Russian artists in the West was connected with the fact that they could be used as representatives of the Russian (and earlier also Soviet) essence. The position of Ilya Kabakov, for example, is very interesting in this respect, especially because he has, as a “relocated person,” long talked obsessively about his experiences in the Soviet Union, about reality, ideas, fantasies, etc.[6] In spite of this, he did not want to accept the role of somebody “typical,” of a “representative”; but this was, to a great extent, exactly what was happening to him. His public toilet/apartment at the 1992 Documenta, for example, certainly uses elements taken from the Soviet reality, but it is actually a very personal, poetic, and ironic construction, a network of meanings, of fragments of realities, and, arguably, of references to personal experiences and obsessions. But of course, it could not avoid the equation: living in the USSR was like living in a public toilet.

Perhaps it would also be possible to understand the extremely negative reactions to the recent “scandal” with Alexander Brener and Oleg Kulik in Stockholm (and to Brener’s action with Malevich’s painting in Amsterdam), as well as the subsequent incredibly fast integration of these two artists into the “business as usual” of the contemporary art world through these relations. The Stockholm project was (explicitly) about the East-West dialogue and (implicitly) about the dominant position in this dialogue. The *Open Letter to the Art World*, denouncing Kulik, Brener, and Viktor Misiano as being against art, democracy, and women (can a “politically correct” mind produce more terrible accusations?) because they did not take the proposed terms of the “dialogue” for granted, as “natural,” was just a symptomatic “slip.” Very quickly, both Brener and Kulik were recodified and the role and meaning of their actions was determined. The art world found their place inside its normal discourse—precisely as representatives of “the other,” in their case, of the wild, destructive, dangerous, naively critical, but also strangely attractive “Russian essence.” Now they are supposed to behave aggressively, to break windows, etc. The paradox here is not only that by understanding them merely as representatives of the phantasmal Russian essence, we overlook precisely the dimensions that make their art interesting as art,[7] but also the fact that two strategies we often meet in contemporary Russian art (violence on one side and a highly private, almost unintelligible language on the other) and which can be, among others, understood as an attempt to act against the system of representation/explanation,[8] are eventually appropriated by the very same system, and acquire a “representative” value.

Dyogot also speaks about a contradictory double mechanism of representation: Russian artists are supposed to represent Russia for the West and, at the same time, the West for Russia. This insight turns our attention to the fact that there are other structures besides the game of representation active in the contemporary art world. One of them is the idea that Western modern art is, in fact, *the* modern art, that modernization (in the visual arts as well as in other areas of cultural and social life) means Westernization. Other social and cultural forms are asssumed to be essentially premodern, and have primarily a folklorist value. So, in the world of contemporary art, we meet at least two systems. The older ("modernist") one claims that the history and development of Western modernist art has a universal value and is, as a matter of fact, the history and development of modern art as such; the more recent ("postmodernist") one admits that, in contemporary world, very different "modern" cultures exist, that Western forms are not universal and that cultural products, such as works of art, function as "representatives" of their respective cultures and civilizations.

Let me illustrate this very general issue with a small anecdote. In the mid-1980s, when not only Eastern European art, but also art from Africa and Latin America was becoming interesting for the West, a group of curators went to Africa to select some artists for an international show. After they had made the selection, however, they were surprised to hear from the local art experts that they had left all the really important artists out and selected only the most horrible "African" kitsch. How could this have happened? (After all, the curators must have been professionals …)

I believe that the explanation could be roughly the following: in Africa, these curators encountered two kinds of art. One was the product of Western-influenced intellectual elites (often called "modernizers" or "Westernizers") who considered Western forms not only in art but also in society and the economic sphere to be universal. The curators from the West, however, were hardly able to see "authentic" art in these works. Most probably, they understood them as provincial copies of Western originals; for them, they were inauthentic not only because they were copies, but also because they showed signs of the loss of roots, traditions, and thus identity itself. To put it simply, they were not "other" any more, and this "other," this "difference" was exactly what the curators were searching for. It is not surprising, then, that they preferred artists who were openly using "indigenous" traditions; for them, this was the genuine, real African art. Local intellectuals ("Westernizers") were, of course, shocked; for them, these works were extremely bad, nonauthentic, folklorist art, a false, nostalgic image which does not correspond to the reality of the developing, modern Africa any more.[9]

IV / United Colors of Multiculturalism

I believe that this parallelism between the position of the Second and Third Worlds in their relationship toward the First World is no coincidence. In both cases, basically the same strategy is active: "permitting" the "cultural differences" (against the background of the idea of primacy of Western cultural forms). In his criticism of so-called multiculturalism, for example, Rasheed Araeen discovers exactly the same structure. The West, in his opinion, uses multiculturalism "as a cultural tool to ethnicize its nonwhite population in order to administer and control its aspirations for equality" as well as "a smokescreen to hide the contradictions of a white society

unable or unwilling to relinquish its imperial legacies."[10] Araeen's description of the strategy of "cultural difference" corresponds almost literally to the problem of the "representational" role of Eastern (especially Russian) artists.

As for the dominant discourse, it is so obsessed with cultural difference and identity, to the extent of suffering from an intellectual blockage, that it is unable to maintain its focus on the works of art themselves. The obsession with cultural difference is now being institutionally legitimized through the construction of the "postcolonial Other," who is allowed to express itself only so long as it speaks of its own otherness.[11]Araeen concludes his analysis with an alternative vision:

"The prevailing Western notion of multiculturalism is the main hurdle we now face in our attempt to change the system and create an international paradigm in which what takes precedence is art work, with its own set of rules for production and legitimation in terms of aesthetics, historical formation, location, and significance, rules not necessarily derived from any one or originary culture."[12]

Araeen's analysis introduces the very broad field of "multiculturalism," which, however, exactly corresponds to the system of representation/explanation I have tried to discuss above. But, since his criticism also indicates the issue of cultural imperialism, I will mention here a different document: the *Letter of Support for Alexander Brener*, written by Eda Cufer, Goran Eorevij, and the IRWIN Group on the occasion of Brener's trial in Amsterdam.[13] Among other things, the letter connects Brener's action and his activity in general with criticism of the Western strategy of "maintaining cultural, symbolical supremacy through economic supremacy" by appropriations (in Brener's case, appropriation of the paintings Malevich left in Berlin after his exhibition in 1927); I believe that this "symbolical supremacy" is exactly the dimension which distinguishes the West from other "Others." The *Letter*then asks: "Is it true that global capitalism is a new definition of the cultural colonization by the Western world of all the rest of the world?"

The systems of power and domination as seen by Araeen and by the *Letter*, however, are not completely the same. Araeen's criticism describes multiculturalism as a tool of imperial ambitions which still exist, but are not universal and open any more. The question of global capitalism, however, indicates a different system of domination.

Here, I will refer to Slavoj Žižek, who has developed an interesting argument regarding multiculturalism and global capitalism.[14] For him, multiculturalism is "the ideal ideological form of global capitalism." As the power of this global capitalism is not located in the colonial metropolis any more, the difference between the colonial state and the colonies has disappeared; capital now treats all states as regions which are to be colonized.

The ideal ideological form of this global capitalism is, of course, multiculturalism, an attitude which, from some kind of empty global position, treats every local culture the same way the colonizer treats the colonized nation—as "indigenous people" who need to be researched and "respected." In other words, the relationship between the traditional imperialistic colonialism and global capitalist self-colonizing is exactly the same as the relationship between Western

cultural imperialism and multiculturalism: just as global capitalism includes the paradox of colonization without the colonizing state, so multiculturalism includes the Eurocentric distance and/or a paternalizing respect for local communities without being rooted in a particular culture.[15]

"Very often we meet the idea that multiculturalism is not neutral, that this neutrality is nothing but a mask of an Eurocentric and Occidocentric position," Žižek continues; this idea is, in a sense, true, but he offers an interesting explanation. For him, this "Eurocentrism" is just a kind of blind spot which hides the obvious truth: that there is no local position any more, that the subject is abstract and universal: "The horror is not the (particular living) spirit inside the (dead universal) machine, but the (dead universal) machine in the very heart of each (particular living) spirit."[16] Here, we are confronted with two opposite assumptions: that the West, through global capitalism, culturally colonizes the rest of the world, and that global capitalism as a completely delocalized system colonizes the whole world, including the West.

In the contemporary world, we do not meet just one system of power and domination, but different systems which may also be in conflict. These conflicts also take place on the symbolic level. The struggle against hegemony in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. indicates a fight between an older, patriarchal, and colonial system in which these differences were functional, and a more recent one in which the differences are not useful any more and can even be an obstacle. We can also assume that this shift corresponds to the shift toward global, multinational capitalism. Through this shift, we can understand the difference between multiculturalism as described by Araeen (a tool to ethnicize and a "smokescreen") and by Žižek—i.e., a multiculturalism which indicates that all such differences are eventually inessential.

The famous Benetton slogan, *United Colors of Benetton*, and its advertising campaigns are a clear example of this process: regardless of their haircut or the color of their skin or their sex (or the culture they belong to, one might add), all the different people on Benetton's posters are basically identical, the same. It is interesting to note how closely Benetton's advertisements follow contemporary critical art—i.e., art which questions systems of dominance based on territorial, racial, cultural, and gender differences. I believe that this connection is not purely accidental and that Benetton only offers an especially clear example of how new global structures of domination can even explore critical art in their struggle against those symbolic and ideological structures which are in their way.

But not even the global structures of power are completely deterritorialized, completely "virtual." It is especially important that one effect of globalization is the centralization of controlling and managing functions, and in this centralization, major cities in the highly developed countries (and their networks) gain a special importance.[17] Global power is thus not only connected to the West, but, through the importance of its major centers inside this global network, the West has redefined its crucial role inside the global power system. The new centers are certainly not only abstract points; being, as Saskia Sassen notes, "command points in the organization of the world economy," they are connected to the economic, political, and symbolic structures. (Here, we could mention a very recent example of how corporate economic power succeeded in

constructing an important center of symbolic values using exactly the same strategy of appropriation as was mentioned in the above quoted *Letter of Support*; I am thinking of the new Getty Center near Los Angeles.)[18]

However, one could probably not say that the West is really the "subject" of global capitalism. Through new global centers, the deterritorialized and abstract global power system is somehow "anchored" in territory, although not necessarily completely integrated into it.[19] Around these points (and perhaps also in connection with locally existing power structures) new cores of domination are coming into existence.

This vision of impersonal global capital colonizing the whole world and collecting symbolic values in its "command points" sounds very pessimistic. Is it in any way possible to approach a new "international paradigm" in art of the type indicated, for example, by Araeen?

We all secretly assume that the multicultural world of Otherness is just a surface and that there is the Other, which is different from others in the sense that we are all different from it. But is there a chance to stop understanding ourselves as the "Other's others" and to take the idea of globalism literally? Russia especially—with its position, its political power, and its artistic and intellectual potential—has perhaps a very real chance of establishing a different, alternative international cultural network. But such an endeavor would demand a concentration of energies, and, in the first place, escape from the game of representations, from the position of being the "Other's Other."

NOTE

1 / This text is the revised and partly extended version of a paper I presented at the conference We and the Others (Russian Artists in the West), the Others and We (Western Artists in Russia), organized in the context of the Moscow International Art Fair ART MANEGE 97 on December 6 and 7, 1997.

2 / See Ekaterina Dyogot, "The Revenge of the Background," *Zonen der Ver-Störung*, ed. Silvia Eiblmayr, Steirischer Herbst, Graz 1997, p. 44.
3 / Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1996.
4 / Ibid., p. 69.

5 / Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, Penguin, London 1995.
6 / Ilya Kabakov, "A Story about a Culturaly Relocated Person" (presented at the XVIII Congres de AICA, Stockholm, Sweden, 1994), reprinted in *M'ars*, Ljubljana, 1996, no. 3–4, p. 35–45. See also Dyogot. op.c.
7 / In the paper he presented at the We and the Others conference, "We and the Different," Alexander Jakimovich indicated an approach to Kulik's work which is essentially more interesting than the stereotype of the "Russian dog"; he understands his actions as a part of the effort to reach beyond not only humanist, but also human art.

8 / In his paper at the conference Living with Genocide, Ljubljana 1996, Viktor Misiano spoke about the two strategies (used by Alexander Brener and Yuri Leiderman, respectively) which are a response to the artists' position in Russia (the proceedings of the conference will appear in *M'ars*).
9 / See also the reactions of the British reviewers to Chinese avant-garde art, as decribed in: Hou Hanru, "Entropy: Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions, A New Internationalism," *Global Visions*: *Toward a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher, Kala Press, London 1994, p. 83–84.
10 / Rasheed Araeen, "New Internationalism, or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans," in *Global Visions: Toward a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher, Kala Press, London, 1994, p. 9.

11 / Ibid., p. 9–10.

12 / Ibid., p. 10.

13 / The letter is available on the Internet at http://www.heck.com/nsk/nsksupport.html.

14 / Slavoj Žižek, *Kuga fantazem,* Drustvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, Ljubljana 1997. Also see Slavoj Žižek, “Multikulturalizem ali kulturna logika multinacionalnega kapitalizma,” *Razpol* 10 (1997), p. 95–123.
15 / Slavoj Žižek, “Multikulturalizem ali kulturna logika multinacionalnega kapitalizma,” p. 114.

16 / Ibid., p.116.

17 / Saskia Sassen, “The Topoi of E-Space: Global Cities and Global Value Chains,” *Politics-Poetics.* Documenta X—The Book, Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997, p. 736–745.
18 / Martin Filler, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” *The New York Review of Books*, December 18, 1997, p. 33.
19 / Sassen, “The Topoi of E-Space,” also the article Peter Noller and Klaus Ronneberger, “Metropolis and Backcountry—The Formation of the Rhine-Main Region in the 1990s,” *Politics-Poetics. Documenta X—The Book*, Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997, p. 708–714.

SOURCE

Igor, Zabel, “We and the Others,” *Moscow Art Magazine* 22, 1998, p. 27–35.