

Vladimir Seleznev

ARTIST

My name is Vladimir Seleznev and I am an artist and a curator. Right now we are in my workshop which is located at the NCCA (National Center of Contemporary art). I entered an art school when I was 24. Before that I was a worker at a factory, a welder at a metallurgical complex in Nizhniy Tagil. Well, in general I am a universal artist. I work with traditional forms of art, such as painting and drawing. But apart from all the rest I am interested in video art, installations, performances. From the very beginning, we had a group that was called "Zer Gut". We organized this group back in those days when we were students at the art school. After graduating, we existed as an artistic group a few more years, four or five. Then everyone turned to their own business and I was the only one who stayed in art. I became an artist who works with individual projects. Apart from that I often make use of the others' help, because there are many things that I can't do or that someone does better than me. Sometimes there are freewill helpers, who want to help, or normal people whom I collaborate with, as, for example, elderly ladies who work as museum keepers. In general, I try to make something that is called, if I am not mistaken, aesthetics of interaction: to interact with people and by doing so, to create mutual projects. As a result, it is my project, but made with participation of different people.

ARTWORK

In different years I would answer it differently, but now I would answer that an artwork is a sum of an artist's thought, will and skill that results being expressed in an object, an action or a gesture. It is something that an artist does, so to say, to establish a contact with a spectator. My art for me is not just an object, but an example of communication with the viewer, or not a viewer, but with certain person, like, for example, the elderly-lady museum keepers. It is an excuse to address the people who are inside of art, but at the same time nobody ever asks their opinion on this art, what they see, what do they call art. Or another example is my installation "Metropolis". When I arrive to a city, I make an installation from trash. I create a city from trash, but there is a trick with a special paint, that accumulates light. When the light is on, you see trash, when the light is off – you see a city. The people from this city recognize the places. They always feel flattered when they realize that this installation is about their city. Some people say that it is exactly as the reality: a trash whole during the day and a beauty at night. A lot of people agree. Some people see it as a miracle. In my opinion, it is a multi-level work that can be understood by people with different background. Someone sees it as a beautiful trick; someone sees the philosophical layers that the artwork contains. I always try to make my artworks understood by all the different types of viewers, with different backgrounds and esthetic preferences. Actually it is the first artwork in the style or genre of video art. Back then we were students and it was a part of our graduation project. The video is the following: there are three images, three passport photos, the faces of the three members of the group "Zer Gut", on the snow. The birds come and pick away gradually the images. The meaning that we put into it – actually we realized it back then when we were students – is that art is another product that can be consumed and we wanted to visualize this process, by making an artwork that will be really consumed by birds. Later on I found out that Dieter Rott made his image from chocolate and sunflower seeds, and birds also ate it, but we did not know about it at that time. Visualization of domestication, or an anecdote on modern ornithology.

PRODUCTION

Since we have this artwork in front of us, I will tell how I came to this form of artwork, painting the real people and putting them into the expositional space. It happened for the first time last year. By the way, here is a poster from the exposition that we had in the city of Köln, in Germany. It was called "Quarantine". We were invited to do a website, or to be more exact a special project site for the city of Köln, by several Russian painters. There is this neighborhood "Garden", which is multi-cultural, where Russians, Turks and Arabs live. A little bit of everyone. The administration gave the painters an old store, which went bankrupt. It was called "Schlecker", these stores stay empty now all over the country. So the local administration gave the artists a room of this store and asked them to do something there to attract the locals' attention to art. We arrived to participate in this project. There were drunkies by the entrance of the store, who came there every day like if it was their work. We came to the art gallery at 9 in the morning and they were there already, at the corner of the store. All day long they looked at us, like we were doing something, through the glass of the window, and we looked at them, how they drunk all day long until six and then went home. I asked the local artists, who invited us, if we can get these people, these drunkies that look at us, enrolled and they said that we can try. We talked to them and I offered to paint portraits of all the participants of "Quarantine", these drunkies, and place them in the fore-window of the store. When the dark part of the day came, the fore-window was illuminated, and, since the portraits were drawn on thin paper, they were equally seen from the street and from the inside of the gallery. These drunkies were very happy to participate. Moreover, for the first time during the existence of the art gallery they came to see the exposition, brought their wives, children and pets. They were glad to participate. Until the end of the exposition they stayed at the space, talked to us. What is funny is that I received several orders from their friends, who also wanted such portraits. So it was their first experience. Lately, there are a lot of projects, that are investigational for me. I arrive. For example, I had a project that I did in the region of Krasnoyarsk. There was a small residential area, the miners' town Borodino in the region of Krasnoyarsk. There is the biggest surface mine in Russia there. Throughout the whole history of this town, actually, it appeared thanks to the exiles. All its history is the history of exiles: first – from tsarist Russia, then – from the Soviet Union. Now it is a more or less normal city, but all the ancestors of the modern citizens are, actually, exiles. For example, arriving there I started working very closely with the local history museum, we looked up the people's stories, how they got there. Then, these stories of the people formed a part of my installation. I had an interest to make an installation about these people. A lot of times I myself do not know, how successful the artwork is going to be. Usually, when I finish all of my artworks they either seem unsuccessful or unfinished to me. It always feels that something better could have been done. Like the saying goes, there is no limit to perfection. On the other hand, I always look at the reaction of the people I work with. It is important for me how people value the artwork.

MATERIAL

Depending upon the project and the medium that I work in I choose the materials that will help to open the idea. Usually, if I do some sort of portrait work, I do it on the basis of the photos. I take photos with my Canon camera or even with a cell phone. The quality of the picture itself doesn't matter to me, because I paint the details later on. I try to catch what the person looked like, but it is not academic painting, where all the details have to be precise. For example, a year ago I have been to Vladivostok and discovered Chinese rice paper. It is used especially for hieroglyphics. I liked it a lot as a material. All of my last portrait sessions were made with tint on this paper. The tint and the special brush for this paper are also Chinese. If we speak about painting, I usually use oil paint,

sometimes acrylic. For installations, for example, I use this special light accumulating paint. Recently I became interested in recycling. I often take some things that have already been thrown away and bring them back to the material world. And even turn them into artistic objects. For example, one of my installations from trash was bought by the Moscow Center of Contemporary Art. I think it is amusing, that a center of contemporary art bought the trash that I painted.

MEDIUM

It is my goal in each project that obliges to choose a certain medium. I often combine, for example, video and pictures. This project that I made in St. Petersburg included video interviews, so it consisted of video, pictures plus some other objects. Therefore each project leads to choosing a certain media. In general, I believe that modern artists, which I, humbly speaking, belong to, are ought to be able to do almost everything. In other words, they have to know how to make videos, take pictures, at least at a basic level, and have to know how to process the pictures. They have to know basic software for working with videos and pictures. Apart from that it would be quite good if they had received a special artistic education. I won't say that I paint academically, but I do know how to make some things with my hands. I know how to draw, and I can do everything by myself without inviting additional people.

PROCESS

I would like to answer using "Metropolis" as an example, because for me it is one of the most important recent works, because I have done it a lot of times, maybe 15, in different cities. I will start with the moment when I came up with this idea. It was back in the year of 2008. I was on a night flight from Yekaterinburg to Moscow. When flying over Moscow at night, I was amazed by the view from the airplane window. I thought: "Cool, I need to do something with that in the real life". I had to think for a long time to make it real. A year passed before I found out that there is a paint that works like phosphorus. Maybe it existed before and I just did not know about it. Here is when the pieces of the puzzle started to come together. I thought to myself: "Khm, there is this paint". The answer to the question "What the material will be?" came by itself. A modern city and the trash are both products of the human activity. Therefore, it was logic to choose the trash as the material. For the first project I picked the trash from the streets by myself. And when all the pieces came together, I made this project for the first time in Perm. I realized how well people reacted to it, how differently they perceived it. They could perceive it as social criticism, an ecological project, as I mentioned before. Children, for example, understand it like a sort of magic trick. Depending upon the city, where I did the project, the reaction was always different. It is the process that is stretched through time. For example, then I've made the project in Samara. It is a city, which historic center consists of ruins. It is very old and bad preserved. The government can never find time for its reconstruction, and because of that the citizens have conflicts with it. I made the installation just before the elections to the local government and many people wrote about my installation as if it was aimed to criticize the ruins in the center of Samara.

PRESENTATION

When I am invited as a painter I have a list of requirements to be fulfilled for the works to be exposed as I see them: the materials I need, how much space do I need, and what space do I need. Usually, I discuss it from the very beginning, during the step of negotiation with the institution, where the work

is going to be exposed. As I have already said, the reaction is different, works **are** different. I try to make every artwork multidimensional, so that viewers would understand it according to their background. For example, in case of those drunkies, it just felt nice to them, that they were invited to participate. They liked the fact that they became art objects and it produced their positive reaction towards the projects. As a consequence, there was a positive feedback not only from this micro-group, but also from the citizens, who came there. It was pleasant for them that someone paid attention to the people who were never paid attention to. How do I check if my works are ok? I often try to do it with my mom. I show her some of my finished works or tell her about them. She is the woman who does not have an artistic or even humanitarian education, she worked as an accountant or a cashier all her life, and because of that she has her own vision of art. If she understands whatever I am trying to say with my project, I realize that in general it will be clear not only for her, but for different levels of society. Since even I used to be a factory worker, I worked with the people whom I also want to contact through my art; I realize that some simplifications have to be done so that they would understand it.

INTENTION

Why? For me being an artist means living, and my artwork is a constant meditation of what life is, what am I surrounded by. What for do I do it and how can it help people? I don't know. I believe, that I add some additional meaning to our life. Maybe I clear up some aspects of life for someone. At least I hope so.

METHOD

I believe that the first aim for me as an artist is to catch the viewer's attention. If the viewer has seen something attractive he starts to think about it, and that is how he starts to realize everything or a part, of what I wanted to say. Maybe he will just see a beautiful picture, but it is not important. The most important thing is to attract attention. When my mission as an artist is accomplished? When the viewer's attention is caught. Later on the work continues in the head of the person, and, depending upon the type of the person, it will work differently. It is the viewer's work already. If we take my installations as an example, from the first sight the viewer can enter and see nothing more, but piles of trash, but when the light is off... I believe that my works have a certain element of unexpectedness, a trick that permits me to catch people's attention. Or the works done by me for Koln: the works hanging in the windows. From distance they seemed like the "Wanted" posters, black-and-white drawings. It's unusual. People were attracted by that already. When they came closer they saw, that there were normal people on the paintings. These drunkies, who engaged in conversations with them immediately, explaining what the posters were, since they were present there constantly. I always think of a mechanism, which would be responsible for grasping the viewer's attention.

ART

I have already said that my understanding of art is meditation of what life is. Apart from that, around ten years ago I met a famous artist Ulay and we had a conversation. I learned one important thing from this conversation. Ulaysays, that aesthetics without ethics is cosmetics. It is just a decoration. I always think that art is really apart from aesthetics, the ethics should be present. In my definition of an

artwork – no matter if it's mine or not – if apart from aesthetics there is an ethic part, then it is art, if not – it's decoration, wallpaper, a simple cover paper.

Bio

*1973 in Nizhny Tagil, Ural region. Vladimir works as an artist and a curator. He graduated from the Art and Graphics Department of the Nizhny Tagil Pedagogical Academy (2002). He was a member of the "Zer Gut" art group (2001-2005), was nominated for several art prizes, took part Moscow and Krasnoyarsk Biennials and exhibitions in Poland, Germany and USA. He also acts as a curator of art programs in the Ural Branch of the National Center for Contemporary Art since November 2006. Media: painting, graphic, photo, video, installation. Vladimir lives and works in Ekaterinburg.
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Credits

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