In situ

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Everything remained incomprehensible
Hermann Broch, The Sleepwalkers

In the text for the great retrospective of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich in the New Tretyakov Gallery, Igor Makarevich spoke of the question of personal identity as the most important impulse for the work of both artists. In its richness and consistent development, their oeuvre represents an encyclopedia of problems that Russian artists have, and had, to face up to due to their own history. Again and again in the pictures, objects, and installations of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich we come across signs which, like doors, lead into different, sometimes non-pictorial spaces of meaning. Works of other artists are quoted, copied, and varied, utensils of a poor everyday life transform into precious objects in the installations, and over and again, motifs are included that direct our associations to the era of Nazism and Stalinism, such as the torch runner of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Getting a full view of this labyrinth of meanings and allusions is not easy, let alone describing or comprehending it. Particularly a Western trained gaze may tend to give in soon when trying to fulfill the claim that it will have to reconstruct the different areas of meaning in order to come to an understanding of the artistic self-expressions of Elagina and Makarevich. On a closer look, however, we will discover familiar signs that may serve as indicators in approaching the motifs and laws of construction that are operative in these works. If Makarevich creates a painterly repetition of Malevich's

Black Square and then accommodates it in a folkloristic wooden cabin or makes variations of paintings by Rembrandt and Braque only to populate it with Buratino, the Russian Pinocchio, we suddenly find ourselves on familiar ground. It is the works of the two artists which in themselves define the thematic and art-historical context that they have to be placed in. For us, this provides a horizon in which it is possible to make an approach to the oeuvre of the two artists.

This is particularly true in the case of the reference to Malevich, and this also puts us in a position to question certain stereotypes in our way of thinking about classical modernity. After all, the influence of Malevich on art in the West art is undeniable, beginning, at the latest, in 1927, when a group of his works was shown at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1927 and the programmatic text *The Non-Objective World* was published as a Bauhaus book. A part of the works shown in Berlin stayed there, as did a comprehensive body of texts. Both survived World War II and thus remained accessible. Artists in the West again and again invoked Malevich. Examples to be named here are Donald Judd and Blinky Palermo and also the exponents of Neo-Geo, a style that was in full vogue in the 1980s. In the then Soviet Union, however, the works of Malevich were inaccessible as they could not be exhibited for a long time due to the ruling art doctrine of Socialist Realism. However, the strand of this tradition was not completely broken. A number of artists survived the Stalinist persecution and preserved the tenets and relics from the time of the Russian avant-garde. Access to them was a matter of personal fortuity and often also arbitrary. Elena Elagina can be counted in with

this line of tradition. She was a pupil of Alisa Poret, who in turn was a pupil of Pavel Filonov and later, being a friend of Daniil Kharms, was close to the OBERIU association. They, being the last exponents of Russian modernism, covered, considered, and concluded the full range of its movements, from the mystically minded Symbolists to the avant-garde left-wing Futurists. But even with this personal contact, access was not easy. Elena Elagina describes Alisa Poret as traumatized and shy when it came to providing information about the "condemned" past. Against this background, Makarevich's variation of the *Black Square* and other Suprematist motifs appears in a new and different light. Reading it along the familiar lines of appropriation art only will, it seems, not be enough. While, in the case of the latter, the copy or variation of an existing work mainly is a reflection about the status of author and authorship, the copy in the case of Makarevich also means throwing a bridge to one's own lost Modernist tradition. However, this historicization confronts Makarevich with a new problematic phenomenon. The work comprehended as an object shows traces of time. Anybody who has ever stood in front of the *Black Square* at the Tretyakov Gallery will have noticed that the black surface has got cracks in it with a ground shining through. It is precisely this phenomenon that Makarevich renders in his variants of the painting. The *Black Square,* that "fundamental Suprematist element" as Malevich calls it, is no longer black. Which, logically, raises the question of the validity of the Suprematist program. Malevich attacked objectification for blocking out the true being, although he makes no precise distinction between the notions of being, nothingness, and nature. Suprematism as a guiding principle was supposed to reveal to humans its liberated "nothing-

ness", which includes its liberation from any objectified forms ever constructed. The *Black Square* was supposed to represent the sensation of non-objectiveness and also to induce it in the viewer. It does not seem altogether implausible to associate Heidegger's thinking at this point. The fact that Heidegger's *Being and Time* came out in 1927, in the same year when *The Non-Objective World* was published in Germany, of course is a coincidence, but a charming one. Malevich's denouncement of the object as a deception, in contrast to the concealed being[1], appears to have so much affinity to Heidegger's philosophical undertaking that we may well speak of an ontologization of art in the case of Malevich. Heidegger moves philosophy and art in close proximity. Truth incarnates itself in the work of art, quite in contrast to science which is not an original happening of truth.[2] Malevich seems to take this dignity ascribed to art at face value. For him, the undertaking of Suprematism entails consequences that are supposed to have effects even beyond the realm of art. Thus considered, the *Black Square* would be the sign neither of a formal program, nor of a transformation, but in fact the very beginning of that transformation. A transformation, that is, which was supposed to seize all "which is". Now if Igor Makarevich perceives the vulnerability of this work and depicts it in his variations, he also demonstrates his insight that the utopian concept of transformation has in fact not materialized. The *Black Square* is just one object in his world and is perceived and represented as a co-presence. The artist builds a house as a shelter for it. However, this affectionately ironical approach to the work of the "hero" Malevich cannot be read as a deconstruction. It indicates a reflective way of dealing with the Modernist program whose limited efficaciousness is recognized; yet the

artist stays with it. The motif of transformation that originates from this program remains operative in the work of our two artists. At one point in the late 1980s, Igor Makarevich declared that he had discarded any personal style. This would subsequently allow him to adapt existing foreign artistic forms for his purposes in every new project. Working with found forms reminds us of Velimir Khlebnikov's poetics which he expounded in the introduction to his last text, *Zangezi*.[3] The aspired Supersaga thus is a construction that builds up from already existing narratives. In the case of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, the use of different stylistic forms, found literary motifs and different art techniques produces sculptural structures whose construction threads also lead into spheres of literature or history. These large installations frequently revolve around a narrative center. The artists take some of their inspiration from sometimes obscure publications. For their 1990 *Closed Fish Exhibition,* it was a catalogue of a lost exhibition initiated 1935 by Gosrybtrust, a fishing company in Astrakhan. The source of inspiration for the *Life in the Snow* series was a brochure – later classified as "defeatist" – issued by the Young Guard for scattered Red Army fighters and civilians on how to survive in the extreme Russian cold. In *Homo Lignum,* Igor Makarevich puts a self-written fictitious diary in the center of the installation. Historical facts and literary invention are equivalently used as building materials which then become structural parts of the meta-narrative. The factuality of history, however, is thus suspended for the viewer. This is an experience that the two artists afford us through the order of things that they implement in an exhibition. Visitors find themselves in a museum exhibition, amid a tableau of relics and fragments of absent stories. This musealization, how-

ever, transforms the objects exhibited, even the most trivial ones like a shoe or a piece of shower pipe. For the museum as a dispositive effects the disobjectification of the items, first by removing them from their world and original context, and, second, by removing them from use, turning them into objects of sheer visual contemplation instead. So this "aesthetic distinction", as Gadamer[4] calls the phenomenon, divorces the work from its place and the world it belonged to and incorporates it in the aesthetic awareness. And by raising to the level of simultaneity everything it incorporates, the aesthetic awareness also defines itself as a historical one. What matters is no longer the work of art belonging to its world; rather, the aesthetic awareness is the center of experience from which everything considered as art takes its measure. Maybe Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich started developing this musealizing dimension because they belonged to the unofficial art scene. Artists who refused to conform to the aesthetic principles of Socialist Realism did not have a public in the Soviet Union. They could hardly exhibit, were not officially discussed, and of course had no "market". This plight gave rise to a counter-world. One of its centers, aside from the studio of Ilya Kabakov, was that of Igor Makarevich. The founding of the "Collective Actions" group that Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich have belonged to since 1979 marked the height of this movement. Starting with art actions held at regular intervals on the outskirts of Moscow, a counter-public emerged with documentation and publications of its own. This practice of self-institutionalization remained to be an essential element that informed the oeuvre of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich even after Moscow Conceptualism had long been historicized. This circumstance makes the present exhibition at the Vienna

Kunsthistorisches Museum particularly fascinating. After all, the works are embedded here in the conceptual matrix of a classical national museum.

So the idea suggested itself to use the museum as a medium and not as a neutral exhibition space, and the decision of integrating the works of the two artists in the given museum setting was quickly made. Only empty and in-between spaces were used to set up the exhibits. The exhibition thus is in keeping with one formative principle of the museum. While older collections, courtly or bourgeois, had always represented a specific taste, the museum brought these together into a whole, thus obscuring its own sources of origin and growth. The possible absorption of the "collections" of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich in the cosmos of the Kunsthistorisches Museum is also addressed in a piece especially created for the occasion. It is entitled *Disappearance*. Attentive viewers will of course notice the difference between the works that were present here before this exhibition and the newly added installations. They may also notice the presence of the two artists that makes itself felt in the works. For in the absence of any individual style in the works exhibited the question arises for the place of the artist personality. Here again a principle of classical modernism shows to be operative. It seems that the "uomo moltiplicato" of the Italian Futurist Marinetti is at work here: according to Marinetti, an authentic self was experienceable only at the moment of the event in the intersection of time and space, inside and out, subject and object. What this leads to is the necessity of creating this artist self anew in every work and every work experience. On a closer look, we will then be able to detect the presence of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich behind

all the masks and names, whether it is Olga Lepeshinskaya or the "homo lignum". And they invite us to explore their worlds with them, on canny and uncanny paths.

1 "Not every object is a being, it is only a mirage of it, while the being itself is always concealed and not recognizable as form."; Kasimir Malewitsch, *Suprematismus: die gegenstandslose Welt,* Du Mont Schauberg, Cologne, 1962, p. 213.

2 "… but always the cultivation of a domain of truth that has already been opened." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art (1935–36)". in M. H., *Off the Beaten Track,* ed. and transl. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 p. 37.

3 "What serves as material to the artist is not the word, but the narrative of the first order." Velimir Khlebnikov, "Zangezi", in *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov,* vol. 2, Prose, Plays, and Supersagas, ed. by Ronald Vroon, transl. by Paul Schmidt, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 349.

4 Cf. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode,* Mohr, Tübingen, 1975, pp. 77–84.