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THE ARTIST AS IDIOT IRINA ARISTARKHOVA

Question: 'Why do you want to become an artist?'

Answer 1: 'To make pretty things for the rich folk.'

Answer 2: 'Through making art I learn about life, and I want to share these experiences with others. Then see Answer 1.'

Conversation in an Art School, April 2008

The simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities; or selling in order to buy. But alongside of this form we find another specifically different form: M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital.

Karl Marx, *Capital*, from the section 'The General Formula for Capital'

WHERE DOES A RESIDUE RESIDE?

An idiot is someone who operates outside of the capitalist mode of production. Not out of refusal, but simply because she is an idiot. An idiot does not know *real value* of things, people or situations. This idiotic ignorance of the difference between the valuable part and the useless residue does not strive to become a part of a grand movement – for example to subvert Capital and its empires. It just happens, accidentally.

The thoughtless nature of idiotic action is irritating, especially its stubborn lack of reasoning. You cannot blame idiots for mixing rich folks with ordinary mortals: they do not know better. This is what Lisaveta Prokofievna learned when she called a house where hospitality was extended in equal measure to the 'leftovers of society' (otbrosy obschestva) and 'decent people' (poryadochnye lyudi) a 'mad house,' and hospitality 'complete idiocy,' in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*.

Contemporary art, together with a renewed political, intellectual and scientific interest in waste management, the recycling of leftovers, and trash re-purposing of all kinds, makes residue valuable once again. By trying to extract more value from residue, whether aesthetically or not, one returns to *The General Formula for Capital*. Unless one is an idiot. Extending hospitality to residual things and creatures, though an idiotic thing to do, is to understand that its origins are the same as those of 'residence'. Residue needs a residence: it is by definition residing, resting. It is left somewhere, thrown away – to find residence in another, more appropriate place. Or at least, someone who would take it in, since it is a thing out of place, without value.

Those who are left by others, often find sentimental value in residue. It reminds them of the loved ones who are no longer with them or of the good old days. Residue is a memory builder, and serves as more than just a substitute for the real thing - a fetish. Residue can be immaterial, like those memories themselves, preserved through the habit and pleasure of

recollection. We are embarrassed at times to confess that we hang onto such residue. It designates the value of what it refers to, and therefore makes us vulnerable to the potential blackmail of desires.

In modern societies there are groups of people who were encouraged to live off residue long before the current bourgeois environmentalism ever became a new Hollywood project: the poor (especially urban homeless), mothers, wives, and children. They know the true value of leftovers and thrown away things, and often find themselves competing with birds, animals and decay.

In the world of contemporary art, residue is called 'found objects'. From the world of ready-mades, with their emphasis on *not having made it*, or even *not having bought it*, we move towards *having found it accidentally*. Artists have become scavengers of humanity. Every kind of residue is looked upon as a potential element of an art installation: objects found here and there, or non-stop digital images of whatever comes along (essentially, other people's lives). Artists are becoming repositories of residue and they are therefore making themselves more vulnerable. They keep our leftovers, they make art from them. *Artists love us like mothers!* Things have not been transformed into residue yet, you are still drinking this can of Pepsi, but look – there is an artist, waiting for you to finish, and make it a part of her sculpture. Here it is, take it.

Providing residence to leftovers is not the same process as collecting. Gleaning, scavenging, repurposing are not the same as being a collector. What turns up from this process is fundamentally accidental, just like in the 'lost and found' office. Collecting, on the other hand, though it contains the pleasure of wandering among things, is essentially accidental-less, intentional in its drive. Providing refuge for residue does not necessarily transform it into value. Things will make sense (probably) later, but even if not, they have value in how they are. Rejected - this is what artists want, competing with those who are paid to remove rubbish.

EMILY SILVER AND MITHU SEN: OPENINGS

Emily Silver and Mithu Sen have both worked at various points with 'residue'. While Silver has been interested in found objects ranging from road kill to her signature material, cardboard packaging, Mithu Sen has explored the concept of the 'accidental' in relation to precious personal things. They are very different artists, of course, but something has brought them together here. Their strategy could be summed up as an aesthetic of idiocy. Emily Silver and Mithu Sen represent a new generation of artists (and non-artists), whose work represents an alternative, but non-engaged, impulse within the art market (neither properly buying into it nor fighting it heroically). Idiocy - risky and authentic Dostoevsky-style idiocy - is a new strategy in contemporary art and should not be mistaken for irony or satire. This latter, ironic, resistance is framed mostly by what has been called *prank art*. Alike the famous reality show *Punk'd* (MTV 2003-2007), many artists find irony (either through mimicry or satire) to be the

only remaining critical strategy today, especially with regard to capitalist art. The 'idiotic' aesthetic, I argue, is another alternative which cannot be easily replicated (unlike irony). Idiocy is different from irony as it does not operate within a complex rhetoric of tropes and styles, and it can be dead serious (un-ironically). Moreover, irony as one of the tropes is seen as reaching beyond realism and therefore claiming a higher intelligence: 'I play a prank on you because I am smarter than you, an idiot'. While an idiot does not claim any intelligence at all, be it realistic or figurative, she can easily be taken in by ironic art. Idiots do not judge but neither do they neutrally observe and record 'the world's evils as they are'. They are too much into themselves, by definition isolated, private, dis-integrated from contemporary society and its phallogocentric intelligence.

While artworks might not themselves reveal much about the level or quality of the artist's aesthetic of idiocy, their openings surely do. Mithu Sen (*It's Good to Be Queen*, Bose Pacia, New York, 2006) left her exhibition before the opening to wander wandered alone in the rain, and then sent her audience a letter apologizing for her absence:

'dear, i am sorry for not being sorry about my physical absence in my opening night... i am sad but not sorry for my act... it was a conscious decision. i know it was announced in the invitation card of doing an artist's discussion during that evening with my viewer... AND i was away. (i did not escape or run away)... i just took my physical presence off from that very gallery site on that evening... i will try to meet u before i leave. i promise. i again hope that u did not miss me that night coz i was really with you... thank u for bearing with me. i love you. yours and only yours, mithu.'

Without heroism and redemption, there remains a framing of the polis with its fortified walls and laws. Lonely, shy, kind and generous, an idiot insists on her way of doing things, while fully accepting public opinion and the law, refusing nothing, challenging nothing. In her attempt to host residue (Sen presented a number of found objects and photographs among her own drawings and personal paraphernalia) she goes to completely unnecessary extremes, rightfully idiotic and foolish. Without claiming an exceptional place in the public eye, without visibly seeking recognition, rewards or inclusion, an artist such as Mithu Sen claims to be queen. The word 'idiot' derives from the idea of someone selfish and distant from a community, a residual subject who ultimately defines our rules and regulations through not being concerned with them (the same rendering of an idiot one finds in Aristotle).

Emily Silver invited magicians to her exhibition opening (*Cannavillastic*, Zoller Gallery, Pennsylvania State University, 2008). Outside the gallery doors, they performed tricks. A large crowd watched while chewing on amusement park (rather than art exhibition) food served nearby. The author of this text volunteered to tend a hot-dog stall, giving away free hot-dogs. Emily Silver's opening fitted well with her work's questioning of what is valuable and what is residual in art making. Her ability to stage our stuff and our moment in her (un)balanced installations without judgment but also without forgiveness, feels at times unbearable.

Just as in Mithu Sen's aesthetic, this fundamental passivity of aesthetic statement today carries undeniable strength. There is a difference between passivity as accusation (earlier performance art comes to mind) and passivity as a *modus operandi*. In Mithu Sen's and Emily Silver's openings there is no catch. Their actions do not reveal any important truth about the inherent violence or goodness in man, neither do they ask to be remembered as a well-prepared and documented spectacle. The artists, probably, will protest my interpretation of their work through their openings. After all, openings do not make it into an artist's portfolio, they do not have value as art, there is, really, no-thing to buy and sell later (Money-Commodity-Money). But it is exactly at the openings, those events outside of the work proper, where transactions happen, where value is being established or being denied.

When Dr. Evil (in the 1997 movie *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*) demanded one million dollars for not destroying the world, his team member recommended that he increase the amount. What he asked for was too little, and incongruent with the world's current value. No fool, Dr. Evil quickly corrected himself by asking for one hundred billion dollars. When artists find themselves in similar situations, they are not sure how much to ask for so as not to look like a fool (from asking too little or too much). Being called an idiot is nothing new to an artist. Now it is an aesthetic: artist represents herself as an idiot, sentimental, vulnerable and crazy protector of what is left.