

Natalya Serkova

Structures and Shredders:

What is the New Static and(or) What It Might Become

What helps us look? What helps us see? We are so used to the fact that we look at things with someone else's help. No, this is not about psychological side of our subjectivity, not about how the people around us influence our perception of reality—that would probably be the most boring thing in this case. It's not about people at all. We look at the world through various devices, and it's been going on for quite some time. In the 1950s in the United States, in the wake of the consumer boom, it was standard for the average American family to have a black-and-white TV. In a short period of time, American society began to view the world through the convex plane of a small screen, showing a distorted version of reality. At first, the distortions only concerned the technical transmission of the image—the picture was black and white, and there were constant glitches in the transmission. Gradually, these distortions began to affect the content itself, which was broadcasted in this way. Political rhetoric, unsolved murders, aliens, advertising, and entertainment shows began to permeate the everyday life of everyday people, constructing their perception of the world on a whole new level of interactive engagement. Emotional interaction with the plane of the television screen began to replace tactile interaction with objects of the world—the American reality expanded unprecedentedly and at the same time collapsed to the size of a shoebox.

It is no coincidence that it was at this time that Abstract expressionism emerged. Its ideologist, Clement Greenberg, with his conservative tone inherent in American society, extolled the flatness of the canvas, beyond which no illusionistic depths were to be sought. Now in art, too, we had before us only a plane—a huge, colorful plane, as if arbitrarily limited in size by the artist, capable of covering all the space around us, if desired. It is also no coincidence that this painting was exactly abstract. Of course, the most logical way to get rid of depth was to deprive the image of its illusionistic essence, but the symbolic meaning of this getting rid of the image was no less important. Abstract expressionism clearly showed that the world could now be disassembled into patches of color, which were now free to assemble and disassemble into a thousand different pictures and, at the same time, were free to remain in complete chaos, without presenting us with anything at all. The American now faced an abyss of arbitrariness—henceforth they had to assemble their own reality, to construct it to the best of their ability, and if for some reason they refused to do so, they faced nothing less than chaos of colored particles. A flourishing liberalism would point its index finger at this American and make them an offer they could not refuse: you are now in charge of your own destiny, and no one is

planning to help you in this endeavor. However, this was perfectly in line with the proclaimed logic of all American society since its formation, so the American had essentially nothing to be afraid of.

Isn't this why Abstract expressionism was chosen as the weapon in the war against the expansion of socialist ideas? To defeat the Soviet Union, it had to be plunged into chaos from within—which happened forty years later, not without the influence of the cultural avant-garde seeping in from the West. But today, it seems, the chaos of colored particles flying all over the plane has turned against those who created it—and Western society itself is already sinking into chaos. The Statue of Liberty melts in the sun and loses, one by one, huge chunks of its metallic flesh, the smaller figures and symbols are deposited by radioactive radiation, the lines of text that were once so carefully written out are erased by the shuffling of thousands of fingers and are gradually covered with new layers of text. Some meanings are replaced by others, and it all begins to waltz in a mad dance that pulls each of us in, regardless of whether we have given our written consent to participate in this movement or have decided not to install this application on our new iPhone yet.

What do we see when the flesh of an image is torn apart? What do we discover in these tears and cracks? We realize that the image is never complete. That it is always insufficient, that no matter how it is put together or taken apart, there will always be a moment of someone else's arbitrariness in it. Of course, this immediately prompts a conversation about the politics of the image: there is always someone who constructs the image for us, someone who gives the image the right interpretation, someone who lets the image and our gaze meet, finally someone who multiplies the image, brings it into trends, finds other images similar to the first... Needless to add, almost all of the above can be handled today by algorithms indifferent to our existence, preferences and viewpoints. It is also obvious that we don't usually think about this chain of image production, and if we do, we feel like we are doing a great, hard and probably useful job for others—because we are uncovering the very existence of the politics of managing our gaze, our feelings and our actions. It seems possible to occupy one of three positions: you can be the one who produces the image, the one who looks at it, and the one who analyzes the behavior of the former and the latter. Unfortunately or fortunately, however, today we are unlikely to find someone who clearly follows only one of the three ways: we both produce content and look at it, and we evaluate other people's content with our user activity.

In this sense, today, while reconstructing an image, we inevitably produce another, not yet deconstructed (like Derrida, who once got into this cycle by producing a text). And even in the process of direct analysis of what we have produced, there always remains something beyond our analysis—

some permanent visual and semantic residue that cannot be fully dissolved and digested. In deconstructing the image, we find ourselves producing something beyond our control. And here, in my view, is where the most important drama of any political gesture unfolds. In the attempt to uncover the mechanisms of an image, a look, a gesture or a statement, in the attempt to structure a chaotic and anarchic or, on the contrary, extremely centralized and oppressive movement of meanings, we ourselves produce something that inevitably joins the economy of this movement and begins to live its own life, independent of our control. Paradoxically, this is where the meta-level of utterance encounters its own limits—*paradoxically* because we are used to thinking that meta-levels are, in fact, always protected from external constraints. This limit is something that refuses to be meaningful, refuses to play the game of levels and layers of understanding, something that can at any moment jump out from around a corner and run in an unknown direction, something that can be used against you.

The producer of meaning may suspect it. He or she may even try to use it to his or her advantage. For example, it is possible to declare at the threshold the existence of such uncontrollable residue, to declare that the author is well aware of its existence and, moreover, that it is this residue that he or she ultimately wants to present. All this undigested, hard, solid and stable edge of sculpture, this trash that remains after all that could be put through the shredder. All these mechanisms, gauges, sub-frames, descriptions... But this can also make the author a pronounced neurotic—one who will strive at all costs to reduce the uncontrollable residue to zero. Is it worth reminding them that this is impossible? I'm afraid it would have no effect on their actions. They, at least, vaguely guesses it, which is why they is stubbornly trying to shred everything they has done, to the point where it fits neatly into a predetermined, prearranged structure. We should not feel sorry for such a neurotic, each one of us is neurotic enough already.

Structure... This word can make you feel both warm and anxious at the same time. When I think of structures, I always recall Deleuze's discussion of the so-called empty cell. For a structure to live, it needs one empty cell, an empty signifier ready to be filled at any moment with absolutely any content. If there is no such empty cell, the structure cannot function. Stable, vital structures without empty cells simply do not exist. Chaos, randomness and uncontrollability are sewn into any structure, and our decision in this case is not how much chaos we will let into our coherent narrative, but what we will do with the chaos that inevitably joins everything we produce. Although structuralists rebelled against division into structuralism and poststructuralism, it seems today this distinction became more evident than ever. It seems to lie among other things in our attitude toward chaos. For the structuralist of the

second half of the XXth century, chaos turned out to be something that eventually could and should be built into the structure, thus reviving and actualizing it. For modern man, in turn, chaos itself turns out to be a new structure—constantly mutating, elusive, uncontrollable and redundant. As soon as we try to put things in order in one place, in another things immediately begin to bubble up and go over the edge. Just when we think we've read the map correctly and now know how to navigate, the map begins to change before our eyes and the terrain suddenly becomes rugged. We can wring our hands and bang our heads against the wall or learn from the chaos of navigating the terrain by learning the hard-to-read rules of the game.

So what are the ultimate rules of the game? Or, returning to the questions posed at the beginning—how can these rules written against all rules, help us look and see? How does this relate to our perception and analysis of the image? Keeping in mind the empty cells, the reigning chaos, the irreducible residue, it might be worth approaching the answer to these questions from a new angle. What if it is precisely that which refuses to fit into the framework of one structure or another, that is today what makes the object and meaning truly visible to us? What if, in unraveling and analyzing the object, we are simply letting the chaos manifest itself more vividly? What if we only see the Statue of Liberty because it has melted down and broken apart? And what if we only see an object because its matter has been put through three shredders, pierced, cut, and stripped of its original charms? Stability and recognizability of an object is no longer what sets it apart from its peers and forces us to spend several minutes of our precious time getting to know it. In this sense, the various technical devices that pass an image through before it is in front of our eyes, contribute to the process of increasing ambiguity and uncertainty. And perhaps this is exactly what we need today in order to reacquaint ourselves with the familiar objects of the world and rediscover their true properties. Die neue Statik (the new static) is movement, the new structure is genuine and fruitful chaos.