

IRENE CAESAR**Interview for PERSONA GRATA with Mikhail Gusev
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<http://vimeo.com/14454945>

Mikhail Gusev: Hello, we are the program "Persona Grata" and I have as a guest, Irene Caesar, whom I have a difficulty of introducing. Hello, Irina

Irene Caesar: Hello, Mickail.

MG: People write about you: poet, philosopher, art photographer. You call yourself a mystic, ideological provocateur. Who are you finally?

IC: My activity as a philosopher and a poet and as an artist are interconnected, and constitute a unity. That is to say that I produce the ideological concepts as a philosopher, and then bring them to the visualization as an artist and as a poet, in metaphors.

MG: Well, to which out of these three hypostheses, in which you appear as a an ideologue, artist and poet, what did you go to the school for? Where are you from?

IC: I studied in the class of Mark Tumin in Russia, in St. Petersburg, then, Leningrad. Mark Tumin is a well-known Russian Artist, who is the

head of the College, where come the students from all over the world, including America, and where he continues the traditions of the Russian Constructivist Art of 1920s – the traditions of Malevich and Kandinsky, which got preserved in Russia during the Soviet period under the strict veto of communism as an oral tradition transferred by the word of mouth from a teacher to his student. I got my art education precisely from this kind of a man, and that is why when I graduated from his class, I had no chance to enter any major Soviet art college.

MG: Remarkable teacher: he is in this way cut off the roads to the bad.

IC: Because I despised Social Realism, and was drawing portraits in cubist manner, what was simply forbidden at that time in Russia. That is why I got my education as a philosopher at the St. Petersburg University, specialization in ethics and aesthetics. And since then I remained, strictly speaking, an ideologue. That is to say, I am not an artist. And, in no way, I am a photographer.

MG: But why you, who was holding in your hands a pen, a brush, and the like – the eternal instruments of an artist, by the way, why did you take camera to your hands?

IC: My transition to the digital art is in principle close to the transition to photography by Rodchenko who in 1921 announced the death of painting, as the outlived art.

MG: Let us notice, on the way that the funeral did not happen, and painting is going on.

IC: For me, painting is the slow-down of my creative process. The last time I did a painting, it took me a summer, the entire summer, three months of hard labour. In photography, I can create projects very fast and in high quality, working directly, personally with an actor.

MG: Your art works are not simply staged, they are emphatically, intentionally staged – directed. Direction, even without this, does not look bad in theatre and cinematography. In what then the specifics of the techniques that you use and of your objectives from theatre and cinematography?

IC: The difference is in the compression and minimalism. That is to say, my objective is to compress the situation in such a way, and to do it convincing for the actor himself in such a way that he himself would believe in what he is doing. And when my actors are doing this conceptual performance, they forget about the camera, they forget that they are actors, they are completely consumed by their action. They forget about the artificiality of this situation.

MG: But there is no art for the sake of art. I, of course, agree that inspiration is not for sale, but one surely wants to sell the print. Who is that man, what kind of man is that, who will agree to hang in his home the cycle of your artworks and every day look at them, for the artworks are not very usual.

IC: I create my art work generally for the Museum Collections and for big collectors who do not hang such works in their living rooms. My art works are in three American Museums, very respectable – Zimmerli

Museum at the Rutgers University, the Bayly Museum at the University of Virginia, and in the Art Museum of the Duke University. Also, my art works are in the collections of Norton Dodge, who works with me already for 16 years. This is a very famous, or may be the most famous collector of Russian Avante-guard in America.

MG: When one looks at your art works, one gets an impression that there is without doubt the presence of some influence in your artwork (I hope you will not get offended) – but the influence maybe not even of other photographers, but rather of artists, of literature, of music. Who did really have a serious influence on you? Who did direct your hand?

IC: I am very much obliged to Bosch as an artist, and exactly for his creating the visualized ideological thought-matrices. He created crystals of vision, which were a microcosm of that society, of that historical period in which he lived. In his paintings, we see the ideological maps of the society, all the classes, expressed in the style of symbolic minimalism. Also I am obliged for my art to Federico Fellini. And, in the theory, I think, I am obliged to Bakhtin, about whom I have written a thesis when I was finishing my studies at the St. Petersburg University – his ideas of ambivalence and polyphony, which precisely relate to the understanding that culture is a crystal of vision which shows this polyphony. It gathers all the visions from all the layers of the society together – into one and the same crystal of vision; it concentrates them minimalistically, symbolically, and by the means of this very intense expression, it allows people to see, to realize where their ideas take them, because, in reality, the society develops via ideas. When they get possession of the masses, ideas become the material force,

as Marx said. That is why, ideas are most important – how well they are expressed, how clearly they are understood and brought to the visualization – not simply in words and political agenda, or in the economical and sociological theories, but, precisely, how they are expressed by culture. And this is a very important function of an artist, a very important function of culture.

MG: You are working in series, in cycles. How does it happen for you? You know from the very beginning where you will begin, to where you will arrive and what you will pass through? How does your ideas emerge, or the result is what is most important for you?

IC: I live as a ship in the sea. I dreif along the waves, and wait when the wind will hit into my sails, and when the strong wind hits, my ship starts moving. That is to say, I am waiting for the ideological wind. I collect different information in various spheres of life, not only in philosophy, not only in art.

MG: Speaking of this ideological wind blowing into your sails... I understand that it has already blown into your sails so strongly that you are already moving to the big solo show in Moscow. But what ideas do you have in works today. What wind has hit your sails recently?

IC: I almost finished my project, which I was doing for a very long time, in the studio -- "A New History of Ideas in Pictures," which is precisely a crystal gathering conceptual thought-matrices from all the layers of the society, from all the political parties, from all the ideological forces, which fight in the society for power. And I still continue adding images to this project, because it will be the foundation of this

show in Moscow, which is the epochal show for me, because it draws a line under my 16 years in America. Also I am engaged now in the project of the conceptual portraits of art crowd, which are the portraits of famous artists, art critics, actors, and the objective of this series is to trace the emergence of an art concept, and to evaluate an art concept, what is it worth of. I have already shot many well-known people of art, including Arthur Danto, a world celebrity art critic; the portrait of Vitaly Komar; the portrait of a very well-known art curator Grady Turner, the former director of the NY Sex Museum. And, for example, the portrait of Arthur Danto is very provocative. And the portrait would have been totally grotesque, if not for the expression of the extreme suffering on his face. Arthur Danto is an ideologue of the end of art. He is in constant pain. To oppose pop-art, a roasting pan with the Cheese Puffs of the horrible orange color to his face that expresses the extreme human suffering -- the extreme grotesque and the extreme suffering – this intensifies both of these emotions.

MG: You call yourself besides everything else, a provocateur. After telling us about the portrait of Danto, you opened a bit a veil from what the provocation is in art. Give more examples of your provocations.

IC: One of my most significant provocations is the artwork "Madonna Liberated" which depicts in a characteristic garment of Madonna – red dress and blue cloak – but she holds in her arms not an infant-boy, but an infant-girl. Provocation consists in pointing to the fact that the Early Christianity, before the Nicosian Cathedral, the Gnostic Christianity, did not divide the Divine into the higher divine nature of masculine principle and the lower divine nature of feminine principle. The other

example of provocation is my artwork "Modern Still Life", which depicts a very characteristic lesbian with the sign "Girl" on her chest among cubes, on each of which there is written "bread", "water," etc. Provocation consists in pointing to the fact that when the society puts specific labels on people and puts them into specific niches forcedly, against their desire, it transforms them into objects, things, what is analogous to murder.

MG: We came to the beginning of our conversation that an art photographer Irene Caesar is rather an illustrator of her own philosophical ideas and concepts (IC laughs), which blow into her sails and which, in their turn, first brought her to America, and now are taking her to Moscow. Irina, I wish you a great success first at your show in Moscow. But, since we are living in America, we will be always glad to know where you are showing your art and tell our viewers where to go in order to see the artwork by Irene Caesar. Thank you for our conversation today.

I only want to remind our viewers that today we had as our guest Irene Caesar. And finally we found out that she is a philosopher and an artist, and which instrument is in her hands – a brush or a camera – this is not that important, after all.