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SISYPHUS HOWLS "OM" AT ZEUS

The Unity of the Absurd and Meaning

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1. Analytical and empirical philosophies are wrong. Meaning is inseparable from the absurd: there is no meaning without the absurd

I create absurd performances documented by photography. These performances or events are absurd, because they are not simply improbable – they are unacceptable in the every-day existence. Arthur Danto, with his full gravitas, is throwing up colourful plastic eggs in his contribution to Damien Hirst's "spot paintings" in the series "People of Art as Objects of Art." People are fighting with plastic and eating plastic in the series "The World is Made of Plastic." A woman is mourning her own death in the series "Double Portraits."

Conventionally, the absurd is separated from meaning and opposed to it. The absurd that I create is absolutely of another kind – it is inseparable from meaning. To start with, I have a completely meaningful purpose for my extreme absurdism: to test major concepts of human civilization. If the result appears to be totally absurd, this has something to say about both the conceptual foundations of our society, and about the established separation of the absurd from the meaningful. In the situations that I create, my actors are confronted with some concept in such a way that they *enact* this concept in an event that happens not only in the continuum of my art, but also in the continuum of their most intimate life. I do not put my actors like mechanical dolls into an artificial setup, as is fashionable now. In my images, the concept is not external and superior to the actors' existence. A super-hero, in my image "Fast and Furious" (series "The World is Made of

Plastic”) fights with plastic with such an intensity that he believes in the importance and meaningfulness of his absurd fight. At the time of the shoot, he believes that he *is* a super-hero. I do not cut off the oxygen to make my actors less alive, more zombie or cyborg-like, but to the contrary, I create extra minutes, hours and years of their lives, extra dimensions, extra spaces for them to live in with the most intense meaningfulness. This meaningfulness is surely of another kind than is commonly believed -- it is inseparable from the absurd.

Commonly, meaning is understood to be a signification that is either empirically evident or analytically self-evident (in virtue of its own definition). Meaning is supposed to be relevant to the accepted systems of empirical experience or rational / linguistic justification. Both of these systems require the regularity / repetitive patterns of meaning. Empirical opinion rests on regularities observed in nature and society. Analytical definitions are regularities that are imposed upon nature and society by language. Every irregularity is considered to be absurd. The absurd is a contradiction, mistake and irrationality. The system ascribes to itself the full authority of being meaningful and expels those who do not comply as being absurd. Meanwhile, a marginal person who is expelled does in return consider the entire system of norm and definition to be absurd. He either creates his own analytical discourse (with new definitions) or changes the empirical reality either collectively or individually to such lengths that the prior empirical regularities apply no longer.

Thus, the established dualism of absurdity and meaningfulness makes them inversions of each other. It simply posits two opposite meanings, and from the point of view of one meaning, another meaning is absurd, and vice versa. The irony of this duality is

that *each* meaning is debased as being absurd from the point of view of an opposite meaning. Thus, in the system, as a whole, meaningfulness is profaned and undermined. By expelling the absurd, both analytical philosophy and empirical philosophy fail to reach the universality and necessity of meaning. They are incapable of expressing meaningfulness – it escapes in opposition and on the margins. And, as a result, analytical philosophy and empirical philosophy do not create a meaningful discourse and experience. Obviously, man can arrive at understanding only when he is capable of combining in one and the same vision both opposite meanings – the absurd with the non-absurd.

2. Camus is wrong. Meaning is inseparable from the absurd: there is no absurdity without meaning

The duality of absurd and meaning, though a profanation, is justifiable in a closed hierarchical system. It provides the security of definiteness: an agent has the ability to clearly define meaning as opposed to the absurd. But, most importantly, he always has a way of escape. The agent can always hide himself in the active opposition to the system or, passively, on its margins – in the domain of his own “ridiculous” meaning. And lastly, though any agent chooses one meaning over the opposite meaning, the system as a whole is the existential collection of all the possible meanings in their opposition to each other. The existential totality of these dualities is a fluid unconscious realization that meaning is inseparable from the absurd. It allows for at least a possibility that someone will become conscious of the system as a whole, i.e., of its hidden unity of the absurd and meaning. That is why when Camus posits that *both* sides of the duality (the absurd vs.

meaning) are *absurd*, that is, meaning is not to be found anywhere, this is a sign of decadence and self-destruction – both of the system as a whole and of each individual. His absurdism is non-existent: when meaning is lost, the absurd is lost as well. The absurdism of Camus is a sheer pretence.

Camus says that man becomes his own master when he realizes the absurdity, meaninglessness of his situation, and of everything else, accepts it and bears it with cheerfulness. This kind of absurdism does not simply leave meaning eternally outside, or in-itself – inaccessible to man, as it is done by a great absurdist Kant. Camus destroys meaning entirely. It is not simply a negative absurdism – it is the absurdism of a gravedigger. It accepts repetition, it embraces the loss of uniqueness, it rejoices at the purposeless toil. “Everything is not that bad”, Sisyphus repeats over and over with full realization that what he is doing is senseless, meaningless and purposeless. The cheerfulness of Camus is morbid in its essence. It is a varnish on the destroyed and rotten reality, with no definiteness and no escape any longer – a scary and repulsive smile of a corpse.

I reject the absurdism of Camus, as well as the absurdism in a closed hierarchical system. Contrary to the latter, my events are self-contained – they contain both opposites at once -- meaning as well as the absurd. They *do not* separate the internalized meaning from the externalized absurd. And contrary to Camus, my images are absurd *not* because they express the loss of meaning. My images are most acutely and intensely absurd because they express the most acute and intense realization of meaning. Contrary to his, negative, fatalistic, and I would say, cynical absurdism, my absurdism emerges not because of the loss or lack of meaning, but because of its excess. The more is there of meaning, the more of the absurd there should be, and vice versa. In my images, the

events acquire the excess of meaning, because the meaningfulness is heightened and stimulated by the absurdity of what my actors are doing. My events are psychological traps – my actors hunt themselves down into these traps and confront the absurdity not as a matter of play but as a matter of survival. The survival concerns their sense of genuineness – how genuine they can be and how genuine their reality is.

My actors do not pose; they are asked to act, and act with the most intensity possible. I do not function as a photographer who takes shots similar to a reflection in a mirror. I function as a producer who locks the doors and keeps the volume of emotional intensity up. My actors make a choice: they can either pretend / lie that they *really* act inside the event, or they can act with such intensity that the event acquires more genuineness than the every-day routine. My actors start with the full realization that what they are doing is absurd. And my purpose as a producer is to make the event as absurd as possible. But they do what is considered to be absurd so intensely, and get consumed by the absurd action to such a degree, that it becomes more meaningful than norm, tradition, code and regulation, which they follow in their daily life. If they pretend / lie, they disintegrate -- they join Sisyphus of Camus in a cheerful grave. If they reach the extreme of purposeful self-expression, they survive as genuine human beings. And the more is there of the absurd for them to overcome, the more of meaningfulness there is for them to realize in their immediate existence.

I argue that Camus was wrong in believing that man becomes free when he looks at the absurdity of his life *from aside* with the *estranged* ironic acceptance – in the moments when Sisyphus goes down to pick up his stone and has time to contemplate his situation. I believe that man becomes free when he becomes one with his situation, one with his

absurd. My actors act on the limit of their abilities. They cannot allow themselves the estranged and relaxed irony. If Camus thinks that what my actors are doing at the moment is *only* the absurd, too bad for Camus: they forget about Camus and his gravedigger's irony. They cannot think about anything else beyond what they are doing in the moment. They locate themselves completely in the present. If they need to recall something from the past or the future, the past and the future become the present for this moment. I call this synthesis "the excess of the present" in a "peak state."

When man completely locates himself in the moment, in the "peak state," he does not divide his existence into the externalized absurd and internalized meaning. The estranged irony of Camus belongs to the past and to the future. But the past and the future are simply the fictions of the mind – only the present *is*. Because man truly exists in the present only when he is in a peak state, the true human existence does not in principle accept the separation of meaning from the absurd and the opposition of meaning to the absurd. Unfortunately, Camus does not reach the ultimate *minimalism* of existence. He has too much time for the past and for the future. On the climax of a "peak state," my actors transcend the duality of meaning and the absurd, and reach beyond meaning and beyond the absurd, each one taken on its own. This synthesis of meaning and the absurd is self-justified, self-aimed and self-contained. The absurd is a necessary stimulation to go beyond routine towards the most intense purposefulness. If there is not enough of meaning, there is simply not enough of the absurd to overcome. I argue that without the stimulation of the absurd, meaning is in principle impossible. I insist: each man is responsible for preservation and recreation of his own absurd. In relation to the dualistic hierarchical system, and outside of art as such, this kind of conceptual action would correspond to

ideological subversion and revolution. In relation to Camus' "cheerful nonsense," this kind of conceptual action would correspond to the situation when Sisyphus turns against Gods and wins. Sisyphus howls "om" at Zeus, and Zeus runs away.

Thus, the criterion of meaningfulness reveals itself as the unity of the absurd and meaning on the climax of purposeful self-expression. This purposefulness fueled by the absurd is more *real*, significant, memorable than any common sense and common language (analytical or empirical) experience and justification. Meaningfulness does not come as a non-absurd end-result of overcoming the absurd. Meaningfulness is the very manifestation of the absurd in a genuine human being. The *peak states*, when this unity of the absurd and meaning happens, are most ecstatic. To survive as a genuine human being, man should *actively* seek *peak states* in all his emotional and intellectual activities. A *peak state* is necessarily absurd, because it disrupts the routine by an outburst of unique self-expression. A *peak state* is all about *individuation*. Individuation is a necessary ideological subversion and revolution that every man should do every day to locate himself in his own unique spatio-temporal moment. Most strongly, individuation manifests itself in revelation -- the unexpected and sudden realization of meaning that is not commonly accepted and, so, is considered to be absurd by common sense and common language. Secondly, in his personal revolution of individuation, man realizes himself as a cause – a very special case of causation. He liberates himself of determinism, and becomes free. He changes reality. He determines himself. He is no longer a Sisyphus ridiculed by Gods.

3. Individuation with its revelation as the unity of meaning and the absurd

The moment of knowledge-realization is called revelation. Revelation is the strongest manifestation of the absurd. Revelation is the re-veiling or discovery of a hidden meaning -- the revaluation of established values. This newly revealed meaning is not commonly accepted or encouraged. And in his discovery of meaning, man realizes his opposition to the established system of meanings. He discovers himself as a sudden outcast from the common-sense signification. He suddenly and cruelly collides with the absurd. His revelation rejects the established values as absurd. And, at the same time, the system of established values rejects and dismisses his being "right" and "having truth" as absurd. If man cannot cope with the total and extreme absurdity of his revelation, he cannot handle his revelation and arrive at knowledge. The more there is of the absurd, the stronger the revelation is. The revelation makes man fall out of the ordinary to such a degree, that it was attributed to the interference of God. But the "God" here is the Absurd. The Absurd makes revelation possible.

I agree with Aristotle who believed that man acquires knowledge when his mind becomes identical or "one" with the object of his thought. But contrary to Aristotle, I argue that the unity of mind and its object is the unity of a unique mind and a unique object. A typical or generalized object exists only as a fiction of the abstract mind – the mind that has torn its ties with the reality as it truly exists. Reality exists only via individual manifestations. Typology is inability to bear a high-voltage cognitive state of revelation. Even though events and people may look alike or similar, repetition is existentially impossible. There are no two objects, people or events that are exactly the same. In other words, there are no objects *at all*. Everything that exists is a *subject*. Every experience

or manifestation is *subjective*. The mind that has lost its taste of uniqueness is a dying mind – a mind that is lost between hallucination and nightmare. Individuation is the only way for man to exist. Individuation is the only way for mind to think. We know of classes or types only via the difference between classes or between types. If classes do not differ significantly from each other, we call one of them a subclass of the other, rather than a new class. The same logic, overlooked, must be applied to the individuals. Individuals exist only by way of their uniqueness.

The most intense unity of the mind and the object is precisely the realization by the mind of its own uniqueness and the uniqueness of its object. Man claims his right to violate any alleged regularity, change reality and recreate the body of knowledge at his will and whim – after his own unique make. This individual recreation of reality cannot be provided by God -- the alleged great revolutionary -- for all of humanity at once, or by any National Revolution for the entire nation at once -- French, American, or Russian. Every man is divine who creates his own unique world anew every day. Such a man is an every-day revolutionary. Every day, he *makes a discovery* that knowledge is a fiction if it is not individuated and recreated individually. He knows all too well that knowledge is experiential (and contextual) – *my* knowledge, or rather *my* revelation, of infinity is not *your* knowledge of infinity.

A truly knowing mind enters the *intimate* connection with its object – analogous to orgasm, pregnancy and birth. A child that is born is a unique experience that can never be repeated. That is to say, it is necessarily an abnormal experience. It violates and ridicules the norm: the more abnormal it is, the more individuated it is. This abnormality makes man fall out of the routine flow of events. People destroying the norms of behav-

iour, dress codes, sexual norms, for example people dying their hair blue, or having sex with goats, are considered to be abnormal, sick, or marginal. If they are not placed into prisons and mental institutions, then they are simply brushed away as being absurd. But the uniqueness of a sexual act with a goat is completely lost when it becomes a habit. To happen *at all*, the violation of uniformity and normality must happen once in a unique way – individuated to the extreme by this unique individual here and now and never repeated again by anybody else, even himself. Our society is so aggressively opposed to individuation that every strong individual protest against the crowd-driven fashion, norm and cliché immediately becomes fashion, norm and cliché itself. In 1921, Rodchenko created his abstract monochromes to announce the death of painting. But in the 1950s, Rothko stole the rotten bones of abstract monochromes from the stinking corpse of the dead painting. What was an abnormal break-away for a genius Rodchenko becomes a fashionable break-down for a grave-digger Rothko.

The absurd is nothing else than this abnormality of individuation. *Every* kind of uniqueness is absurd from the point of view of uniformity, typology, regularity, tradition and fashion. *Self-conscious* absurdness is individuation in its highest and best manifestation. The absurd is the ultimate destruction of uniformity, typology, regularity, tradition and fashion. To say that men exist only through individuation is to say that they exist only through the absurd. It is precisely because revelation is nothing else than the strongest realization of this abnormality of individuation, that it is the most ridiculous manifestation of the absurd. Man realizes that he himself and anything else that exists do not belong to any class, category, type, and norm. This realization is analogous to the world-creation. Unique, non-shareable objects materialize out of the Word – out of the repeat-

able and shareable abstract concepts, called Language. It is precisely because the abnormality of this world-creation is so out-of-ordinary, so necessary and sublime that it is attributed to the interference of God. But the “God” here is the Absurd. The Absurd makes the world-creation possible.

Being completely unique, experiences cannot be expressed by language, and are essentially non-transferrable from a subject to a subject via linguistic units precisely because language operates with *repeatable* structural units. Only visualization can express uniqueness, and only when it reflects the moment / the event of revelation. Genuine experience is a flow of absurd moments and events. When experience stops being absurd, it stops being an experience. When man does not experience his life as being ridiculous and abnormal, he fails to live. He becomes an object of “culture” – of social and political manipulation. He becomes a fiction inside an illusion. The destructive nature of “culture” lies in the fact that it inculcates norm, repetition and typology. Culture cannot in principle assist a unique man in his uniqueness. It deprives him of the only existence that he can have – his individuation.

Culture is the biggest lie. Anything that culture appropriated was initially created against it. Culture kills. Culture is the most abhorrent monster. Its most effective and horrific instruments of murder are: the fascism of fashion making unique individuals look and behave the same; economics that operates via hording unique individuals into the fictional aggregates of classes; politics that manipulates unique individuals via rigid political divides like parties and movements; religion that makes God fit into the procrustean bed of cross and coffin and deprives the divine itself of expressive freedom; science that puts the regularity and conformity of genera and species above the freedom of unique in-

dividuals; and art that castrates creativity by schools, tendencies, and styles. If an individual complies with uniformity, conformity, norm, regulation, code, he enters the grey zone of non-existence, illusion, and self-destruction. When he repeats words after somebody, he does not speak at all. If he wears fashionable clothes, he does not wear anything at all. If he tailors his opinions after the established tradition or consensus, he does not have opinion at all. Repetition is mechanization. If man sacrifices his individuation, he becomes an automaton programmed from the outside. He has no face, no freedom, no voice.

Common sense – this *modus operandi* of “culture” -- attributes meaning to something that can be shared, and absurd – to something non-shareable. The very expression “*common sense*” implies that sensibility is of shareable nature. Common sense makes meaning the currency in circulation. It forces individuals to exchange their unique gold nuggets for paper money. But, contrary to common sense, only becoming unique can separate man from the hive mind, and acquire his and only his own existence – the meaningfulness of the self. Self-realization is necessarily the estrangement from the common, from the shared. To truly exist, man should live in constant realization not only of his *unrepeatable* value, but also of his *non-shareable* value. Because I am after this unrepeatable and non-shareable value of this or that man, the estrangement of the situations that I create is complete. Not simply are they the atypical situations, they are unique. They are my revolt against regularity, repetition and typology to such a degree that I will never be able and will never want to repeat the situation that I created once. But they are more than that – my images are my refusal to share everything with everybody. They are

my revolution against the manipulative “culture” with its paper money of pseudo-expression that is not backed up by human gold.

Indeed, language can only vaguely express this uniqueness not only because it operates with repeatable units, but also because it operates with *shared* units of expression. Linguistic expressions belong to the shared “culture” more than they belong to the non-shareable individuated mind, which is the only way mind can exist. Only the contemplative or intuitive mind can in principle be individuated, because, in opposition to the calculative and abstract mind, only the contemplative mind is capable of mental visualization, that is, of having experiences in the individuated way. That is to say, only visual art can in principle touch on the minds of men -- or, more precisely, the visual art of absurdism. The creations of visual art have value only when they are absurd, that is, when they express the non-shareable value of an individuated “peak state.” Because every mind is unique, it can only playfully tune to the uniqueness of another mind and marvel at the non-shareable value of its own uniqueness and non-shareable uniqueness of another mind. “Common sense” is existentially impossible. It is a fiction. Man arrives at the realization of his freedom only after he fully realizes the non-shareable value of his uniqueness. That is to say, after he embraces the absurdity of his existence.

4. Freedom of the will with its causation by the self and self-causation as the unity of meaning and the absurd. Absurd art as the highest manifestation of the freedom of the will.

In its opposition to determinism, freedom of the will is how individuation -- the unity of the absurd and meaning -- manifests itself as a special causal force in the world. Determinism is how regularity manifests itself as a causal force. The point of determinism consists not simply in the belief that everything is *caused*. Indeed, freedom of the will does not really mean that if I do something, I am not the cause of it. Determinism rather states that when something is caused, it is always caused by the same cause. It posits the regularity of causes. Determinism does not reject the freedom of the will as an ability to cause events. It rejects freedom as an ability to break the regularity of causation and produce a unique cause every time. Determinism rejects individuation. It opposes individuality, and destroys individuals.

A free man who *passively* refuses to comply with the regularity of causation is ridiculed as being more than childish -- he is despised as being absurd. His refusal to respond to causation is diagnosed to be simply another case of determinism. Nonetheless, he himself is his own and only cause of refusal to comply with determinism. He, as a completely unique individual, is a completely unique cause of his own. Even if there are external causes, his own individuation is always a non-alienable cause of his own existence. As long as he exists as an individuated being, man is a cause of himself *nonwithstanding* the external causation and *contrary* to external causation. Self-causation is the very essence of individuation. The inability of determinism to accept the freedom of the will is the refusal to accept individuation. As long as men are individuated, they are free. Only when man fully realizes that he himself is the highest cause of his own existence -- a *free self-cause* -- can he play any causal role in the world. Only as a unique self-cause, he can cause unique objects to appear in the world, because the world consists *exclusively* of

unique objects. Freedom of the will is the individuated causality. Freedom of the will is man's ability to embrace the absurdity of his existence.

The more a man accepts the absurdity of his individuation, the more he is conscious of it, the more he becomes capable of the active manifestation of his free will. A free man who *actively* violates the status quo of determinism via the willful creation of unexpected and uncontrollable causes is feared as being dangerous. He is feared precisely because he is unpredictable. Nobody can predict from the outside the determination of his own free will. If man persists in his violation of the predetermined causality, he is taken to be a criminal or a radical undermining the very foundations of establishment – a revolutionary, terrorist, or a magician. This kind of man never belongs to “culture.” He freely moves through all the cultures, epochs, schools, styles, and tendencies. He becomes Leonardo -- an enigma. The inability to explain and fully grasp the enigma of Leonardo is precisely the inability of men to share the non-shareable value of individuation.

Leonardo was too much individuated, self-caused, free-willed to become an object of “culture” – the product of political and social determinism. There will be always something in his creations that is not fully expressible by language, resistant to “common sense,” illusive to the selves of others – and this something is precisely what attracts us to him as an irresistible magnet. This magnet is a magic power of the fully individuated self that refused to share everything with everybody, and in this reticence, became free -- forever desirable, and never possessed by anybody or anything. This resistance to explanation is the resistance to “meaning” as it exists in the deterministic “culture.” Leonardo's openness to any contextual, or rather individuated, re-interpretation -- his escape from

any final, “deterministic,” interpretation -- is the most refined laughter of the absurd. Men feel a fatal attraction to Leonardo’s laughter precisely because Leonardo lures men into the absurd of individuation – he grants men the freedom of the absurd.

As individuation, as revelation and as freedom of the will, the absurd is inseparable from any manifestation of man’s life – it is its very core. The most enchanted manifestations of religion has the unmistakable quality of absurdism. One is forced to admit that religious men are unconsciously looking for the very uncommon, or rather, most ridiculous ways of dressing up and behaving in order to approach the free and the revelatory. But unfortunately, religions belong to “culture,” and can go only this far in their absurd ways. Too bad the Russian Orthodox priests will not sit in crowds on the floor howling “om” into the painted face of the murdered God. That is why any man who can joke around at his will and whim is more free and revelatory -- more god-like -- than any religious man. Joking is the simplest practice of the absurd. As a conscious self-caused laughter, joking is an immediate escape for a man who cannot violate determinism in any other way. Joking is the key that locks the door into the individual mind for any external causes – it has the undefeatable power to transform in a second any grand deterministic cause into nonsense. Revelation is inseparable from laughter even if it comes through tears. Revelation is the joking that does not need laughing sounds – the joking that laughs even via tears.

Art is more absurdist than even religion. And the more *culture* unwillingly gives way to individual freedom, the more ridiculous art becomes – to the degree that we are offered to enjoy, as the most artsy pieces of art, how an artist paints with menstrual blood on a canvas, or packages his shit in metal cans. But the machine of “culture” still works too

well, and even such “menstrual and shitty” art is forced to decorate or convince according to the fashion or agenda of the moment. Nonetheless, if art is created for something beyond itself – for the pleasure of decoration or for the utility of political agenda -- it becomes self-destructive. It becomes a product. As “the product of culture,” art is a deadly weapon for eliminating individuals. That is why, the most important concern of an artist is to remain ridiculous as long as it is possible. An artist who succeeds in this is an Absurdist. He drives the absurdity of art to the extreme, resisting a persistent inclination of “culture” to define absurdism as simply *another* style, school, or tendency of art.

Absurd art, which I have outlined, is the highest degree of the necessary and inevitable absurdism of individuation. It drives individuation to the extreme via conspiring the peak states on purpose. It creates context and continuum for a peak state, in which man fights with the absurd for the genuineness of his existence. It makes individuation self-conscious. It is the strongest manifestation of the freedom of the will precisely because it is most self-intentional: it does not posit any causes or any purposes beyond itself. It is its own most complete and final cause and purpose. The contrary is true as well: as soon as art accepted the motto “*l'art pour l'art*,” art became thoroughly absurdist. Fovism, cubism, dadaism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, pop-art, op-art are simply more or less self-conscious manifestations of absurdism, with absurd art as such being simply the most self-conscious of them all. And the difference between the absurd art I defend and the kinds of art above is precisely the degree of self-containment. Non-absurd art, even when it is created as “*l'art pour l'art*,” takes some of its context out of itself into the context of its art theory. It is not immediately self-explainable and self-justifiable. The true absurd art has the immediacy of laughter – it has its meaning completely in-itself, encap-

sulated in the absurd that it overcomes. Laughter does not need an art critic to justify itself. Absurd art collects and concentrates all the spontaneous manifestations of laughter in its absurd individuation, and perfects them. Via the laughter of absurd art, man creates his own analytical discourse (with new definitions) *in the most radical way*, and changes the empirical reality to such lengths that the prior empirical regularities apply no longer *in the most unrecognizable ways*.

5. On the roots of my own absurdism

Now, let me talk in more detail about my own absurd ways: the origins of my absurdism and my practice of absurdism. Being Russian to the marrow of my bones, I always tell my actors that I continue the tradition of the theatre of Stanislavsky, which makes actors cry and laugh on the stage with real tears and real laughter. The psychological theatre of Stanislavsky belongs to the tradition of the 19th century critical realism in Russia. In this tradition, an artist is speaking not only from his own name – but also from the society as a whole. He speaks not only with his own voice – but also with the quasi-voice that is the polyphony of different and opposite voices. These voices belong to men who either express only this or that class of the society, or are capable of moving through the social hierarchy and away from it – thus becoming individuated and free. Among the latter, the social realist is most able. A critical realist is hovering on the height of a bird's flight -- seeing the entire human cosmos at once; and his plays, novels and paintings are the ideological maps of what he sees from that height.

In critical realism, the polyphony of opposite voices is irreducible to one, dominating voice of an author, as it happens in the literature, painting and theatre of the dualistic hierarchical system, from classicism to romanticism. In its thorough unity of space, time and action, classicism transforms live people into types and characters – the representatives or, rather, prisoners of a certain class within the rigid social hierarchy. A romantic hero revolts against this prison of *culture*, but, in reality, represents simply a type of his own – locked in his character as in a prison. He is but lost among all these Arlecchino and Piero, Susanna and Count Almaviva, who, all of them, are simply the animated dolls of a manipulative “culture.” Because they are just “dolls,” they cannot cry or laugh with real laughter or real tears.

The art of any social hierarchy is a thoroughly monological art. Its “pointing hand” opposes meaning to the absurd in the most categorical manner, creating a role, type and character of The Fool. The Fool is the lowest character. The author is opposed to The Fool, as Camus’ Sisyphus is opposed to Zeus. Everybody under Zeus is simply the greater or the lesser Fool, going all the way down to the Complete Fool. Thus, the sublime airs -- deductive or romantic -- of the social hierarchy are completely deceptive. Either classicism or romanticism are more profane than the most vulgar cursing of a slumscum. They transform free men into the different manifestations of the Sisyphus’ character. In this sense, the thoroughly “meaningful” hierarchical system is simply the flip side of the thoroughly “nonsensical” absurdism of Camus. Both degrade men to the level of marionettes manipulated by a higher power. Both make men inferior to Gods of this or that kind. Both deprive men of the ability to be self-determined, i.e., independent from the hierarchy of meaningfulness. In one word: both transform men into slaves. “Sisy-

phus” is simply a polite expression to designate a slave – a Fool that cannot revolt against Gods even in his mind.

The Russian critical realism of the 19th century is an ideological revolt of Fools against Gods, which culminates in the actual political revolt in the 20th century. It is precisely the art that becomes conscious of the system as a whole with its existential totality of all the dualities. It expresses the existential collection of all possible meanings, that is, of the unity of absurd and meaning, otherwise hidden in the hierarchical system. It does not operate with one “dominant” culture, but rather with the plurality of sub-cultures. Because each man is entitled to his own truth, opposite meanings co-exist next to each other, all fully justifiable in virtue of their individuation. This acceptance of opposite meanings is a contradiction, sacrilege and the absurd from the point of view of the *analytical* system of hierarchy, norm and regulation. Thus, the Russian critical realism of the 19th century is one of the strongest manifestations of absurdism, which has simply one more step to make to become “absurd art.”

Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are the elder brothers of Beckett and my own. In his theory of a hive mind, Tolstoy expresses the shock of individuation and the passionate rejection of the historical class-and-type-determinism, that is truly absurdist. His concept of the hive mind defines, for the first time in human history, the existential totality and fluidity of all the dualities in the human *cosmos* – trans-historical, trans-political, trans-cultural, and trans-religious. Pierre wanders through all the layers of society -- from the Masonic top to the lowest bottom, finally arriving at the revelation that the simplest wisdom of the most humble peasant, who is all-loving and all-accepting, being himself unattached and most minimalist in his life, is all that he, the count Pierre, needs to survive as a free man.

Platon Karatayev – a peasant – is most free precisely because he accepts and loves all – all the individuals contradicting each other in their opposite beliefs. He shares himself with everybody and with no one. A humble Platon is more individuated than the educated but egocentric members of the upper class, because, in his all-acceptance, he possesses this universal, cosmic vision of the society – from the height of a bird's flight. Only because Platon placed himself in the loving distance from all the other human beings, he can be his own.

This distanced all-acceptance, thoroughly absurdist, immediately separates him from the peasant-type, or any type or class of the society, and from the crowd -- as a unique individual. In Platon Karatayev, the hive mind acquires its own self-consciousness. What a scandal: it is a peasant who arrives at this cosmic vision. His acceptance of each man is the unique, contextual experience that is non-shareable via analytical discourse of science or politics. This acceptance is love. Platon proves that individuation, revelation and freedom are all based on love, and that love is the absurd inseparable from meaning. I take from the 19th century Russian critical realism this truly absurdist polyphony with its rejection of uniformity, of hierarchical divides, of conventional wisdom, of norm and regulation. I admire its ability to accept and love all men in their contextual, individuated and only partially shareable absurdism. My series "A New History of Ideas in Pictures" is precisely the encyclopedia of human ideas expressed in the individuated, i.e., absurd experiences.

I believe that human society is analogous to a crystal, with each facet representing an opposite vector of power. Creator, be he an artist or a politician, can become an individual force -- a Caesar -- and influence the crystal of society, only if the crystal of his vision

coincides with the crystal of the society. Any crystal shines because it refracts light, focusing light in its center. Crystal is capable of refracting light precisely because all the opposite vectors of power are simultaneously present and interlocked in the same continuum. The focus in the center of the crystal – its shining – is the unique vision of a Caesar, an individual creator. A Caesar can change the entire crystal of the society via changing the crystal of his own vision. The critical realist approaches the power of a Caesar. Only one step remains for him to become a Caesar – a complete absurdist.

6. On the methods of my own absurdism

I do not do photography per se. I create experiences. These experiences are individuated, meaning that they are absurd. My actors act for the sake of acting – their own experience, and not simply for the sake of creating still photographic images. Because individuation is possible only in a peak state of revelation, all my images are highly dynamic. And dynamism here has the nature of not simply the physical expression, but also of emotional and conceptual expression. Action acquires the meaningfulness of language. Every image is an enacted linguistic unit, pronouncement, confession, message. Participants act for the sake of saying something very important about themselves. They act in front of my camera not because I asked them, but because they have a need to express themselves, to reveal, to communicate some truth they treasure. For these performances, I have chosen photography over video precisely because of the shocking effect the still representation of the most intense action produce. The still representation of concep-

tual action resembles written language in comparison with spoken language in the sense that it acquires more meaningfulness and intensity in its inherent need for compression.

I never force upon people my preconceived social and political ideas. I simply offer my actors some continuum to bare themselves, in which they feel compelled and comfortable to go naked. To be compelling, this continuum should be very intense and refreshing. That is why I create fictional situations in which I use objects and locations in an unusual, counter-ordinary and extra-ordinary way. I define my style as “if you have seen my photograph once, you will never forget it.” As a kind of shock therapy, my methods of imaging help my actors get out of the stereotypical, forgetful and deceitful modes of consciousness that are accepted in everyday life, more as a way of concealment than as a way of expression and revelation. Also, my way of using locations, objects and situations are very ambivalent. Not only because they do not create new stereotypes and dogmas instead of old ones, but also because they aim at showing any event as embracing both sadness and joy, the profane and the sublime, ridiculousness and seriousness, good and evil. Essentially, my interpretation is an absurdist, open-ended interpretation which allows for contradiction and creates more questions than answers.

That is why I get embarrassed when people refer to me as a photographer. I am a conceptual image-maker. And image-making is simply my most intense way of thinking, my most conscious and charged way of living – my own way of arriving at the peak states of individuation. Every time I shoot, I wish that I and my actors forget about my camera, about the artificiality of the setup, and live through the shoot in a more intense way than they do in the ordinary way of everyday existence. Usually, it takes ten to fifteen minutes for warming up, and, then, the magic moment happens, and everybody in-

cluding me become completely overwhelmed with action. My actors cry or laugh with real tears or real laughter, and not for the camera. Not only once had it happened that I cried behind my camera so hard that my vision was completely blurry from tears or I laughed so hard that my camera was shaking, and I was thankful that I used automatic focus.

In other words, to create, I do not rape reality and my actors. My creations are born as a result of a consensual act of love between me and my actors, culminating in the state of ecstasy similar to orgasm. *That is way* I feel as if I give my actors a few extra years of life, or another life, which they live in front of my eyes. And it is so powerful, that when they live in this super-real way in the lightings of my strobes, I feel as if I am a God who creates a new world, beautiful and meaningful, out of nothing. From my early childhood, I noticed that my mind is similar to the studio set; that my mind has the ability to produce, collect and then emit with lighting speed the strobe-like pumps of light that illuminate people and objects from all the sides, good and bad, funny and sorrowful. These strobes in my mind get reinforced with the light emitted by the mind of my actors in our mutual coincidental and condensed revelation of something vital for us both – as intimate as coitus. I lived all my life with a strong conviction that people emanate more light than heavenly bodies. That is why, when I painted, I never worked with shadows. In my paintings, subjects and people look not as if they are illuminated, but as if they illuminate the world around with their own intrinsic light. Now, when I do photography, shadows for me are the sign of the light fall-off in the sense of losing life energy, the sign of destruction, suffering and death.

This act of love happens not only on the individual level – with this or that actor, but also on the social level. My art is my way of connecting with people. I would never be interested in so many people if not for my being a conceptual image-maker. My own life energy depends on my camera, as if I sail the waves, and wait for the wind. And alas, here it comes, and fills my sails with its unstoppable impetus, and pushes me forward by its overwhelming energy. Money and popularity have never inspired me to the degree I am inspired by this raw grandiose force that fills me and drives me to ecstasy when I hold my camera as my third eye, and my actors see it as my sacred mask, or my true face. My art is reducible to my ability to build devices for catching the ideological or conceptual winds in society.

My devices go beyond my technical knowledge of camera-use and studio lighting, and beyond my ability for cheerleading. I can define them precisely as stage sets. Nonetheless, my stage sets are extremely minimalist. Because my images are highly emotional and dynamic, for me, the elaborate decorations are impossible and repulsive. They would symbolize the dominance of objects over people. Usually, I use only one object or prop. I call it “a symbolic object.” Here is my concise theory of a symbolic object. There is a commonly spread belief that a “portrait” which expresses the most inner core of a person should represent this person in a repose – in a still position, as if a person is an object in a still life. The person is taken out of any intense context and left to himself and the painter. This goes back to painting, which is in principle capable of catching the constant flow of a psyche only via turning the subject into a sitter. You look at all these Raphael’s portraits on the walls of the Pitti Palace, and you see how many hours the subjects were sitting for their portraits, sinking into senseless boring stupor. My art is a re-

volt against modeling for a viewer, against the transformation of people into objects. I believe that when a person is overly conscious of the viewer, he or she unwillingly or willingly transforms him or herself into an object. And I think that often photography with its fixation on modeling or reportage plays a cruel role of aiding the society of mass consumption in transforming persons into objects that are sold and bought, consumed and disposed of, when they are not useful anymore as means for utility and pleasure. I believe that American preoccupation with models and modeling and with repostage and documenting is the sign of the infantilism of the American culture that still plays dolls and learns the alphabet.

In my images, the symbolic object plays two roles. My actor starts manipulating with an object in a conceptual way, as with a linguistic unit in a language, the proposition. The object symbolizes the very essence of what the actor strives to communicate. Secondly, the symbolic object efficiently takes the actor's attention away from the camera. The symbolic object creates the intoxicating situation of aesthetic estrangement first for the actors, and then, for the spectators who see the images. When my actors need to do something meaningful with an object, not only do they forget about the camera, but they also forget about the very idea that they might be represented and documented, i.e., consumed as objects. I reinforce the effect of estrangement by choosing a symbolic object that did not yet become a cliché. Moreover, I always prefer the unexpected, and even absurd symbolic object. I hunt for absurd setups, which reveal more meaning and, thus, give more impetus and hunger for life than the inculcated and inert ideas of politics, science and religion. I was told that my art is my way of laughing. Yes, I thirst for the catharsis of real tears and real laughter, merged together.