

SPECTATE

09/23/2021 — reviews

Polina Negulyaeva. "Code of Silence": an exhibition-conference in a diachronic cut

Polina Negulyaeva's review of the group exhibition on gender equality and law "The Code of Silence", held at the CTI Fabrika under the supervision of the TOK group.

On September 19, the exhibition " [Code of Silence](#) ", dedicated to the issues of gender equality and law, ended in the space of the CTI Factory . The project, created by the [Creative Association of Curators](#) (Anna Bitkina and Maria Veits), is the first winner of the [apexart](#) international competition in Russia. It brings together Russian and foreign artists and artists not only in statics (installations completed by the time of the exhibition), but also in dynamics: at the opening, performative embodiments of research were presented, and the closing will be marked by an [online discussion](#).with elements of collective reading based on the Israeli archives on the history of feminism and the queer movement. All this is intended to draw the attention of a potential visitor to the mutual influence of state mechanisms and the women's movement, and the appearance of such an exhibition is especially important in the Russian context, where domestic violence is decriminalized, feminist-oriented artists are persecuted, and the constitution is reoriented towards Orthodox and patriarchal values.

The vulnerable points of feminist discourse seem to be performatively emphasized by the vulnerable points of the exposition itself. The factory is located somewhat on the outskirts, the entrance to the exhibition from the outside is not marked in any way, and it itself is located in a dark nook like a hangar. That is, in order to engage in a cultural dialogue, of which the Code of Silence is a part (it is not even necessary to support it, but only to hear voices supporting women's rights), you need to know about this dialogue in advance - it is simply impossible to get into space by accident. Free entrance to the hall and the absence of the usual exhibition infrastructure simultaneously actualize the idea of the availability of art and the lack of the direction of the necessary state support presented within the framework of the exposition.

Sonja Kazowski Scene 5 - Replay, 2019



The installation based on Kazovski's play seems to be the most localized: it focuses on the figure of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta. The scene presented in the performative reading is part of the play "The Battle of Dead and Non-Existent Souls", which conceptualizes the artist's life in the context of art and especially female art. Private life is made absolute: through it, actual common places in the field of art are comprehended, such as the institution of authorship and the practice of organizing museum collections.

The fifth scene chosen for reading reveals the opposition of semantic complexes that have been built in culture around the concepts of masculine and feminine. The first is associated with the idea of genius and ideal, autonomy, stability: male art consists of a heap of lines and planes, money and power are concentrated in it. This is a space of innocence and absolute tranquility. The main word characterizing the feminine principle, on the contrary, is "hysteria". The female role is the role of the mistress and mother, her boundaries are clearly predetermined, although her bearer constantly strives to destroy them. A woman is bound by relations of obligation, duties, and her works are created from blood and soil, that is, they are dirty, destructive and fundamentally bodily, and not spiritual.



Olesya Bessmeltseva and Philip Fenghouse "Leningrad Feminism", view of the exposition "Code of Silence", 2021, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

In addition to the marginality of feminist discourse, the exhibition also exposes its heterogeneity, lack of structure. The visitor is faced with this even at the stage of opening the [curatorial booklet](#) : if you follow the order of objects proposed there, then throwing around the hall can hardly be called anything other than chaotic. And let the authors of this route follow the logic, pay attention to thematic overlaps between installations, each of them is still perceived in a vacuum, apart from others: immersion, say, in a thirty-minute video study completely disconnects the viewer from the context, and surfacing back to the surface of the exhibition even if it reminds of the initially interested circle of problems, then only for a short time - until a new immersion.

The depth of each individual object, described above, in itself is perceived exclusively as the merit of the exhibition, and the impossibility of a comprehensive understanding of the exposition due to the multifaceted discourse and the multidirectionality of those aspects of it that individual artists choose to turn to, including as a natural consequence of an oversaturated information field , which is surmountable when talking about the "Code of Silence" by referring to individual, most notable installations and research results.

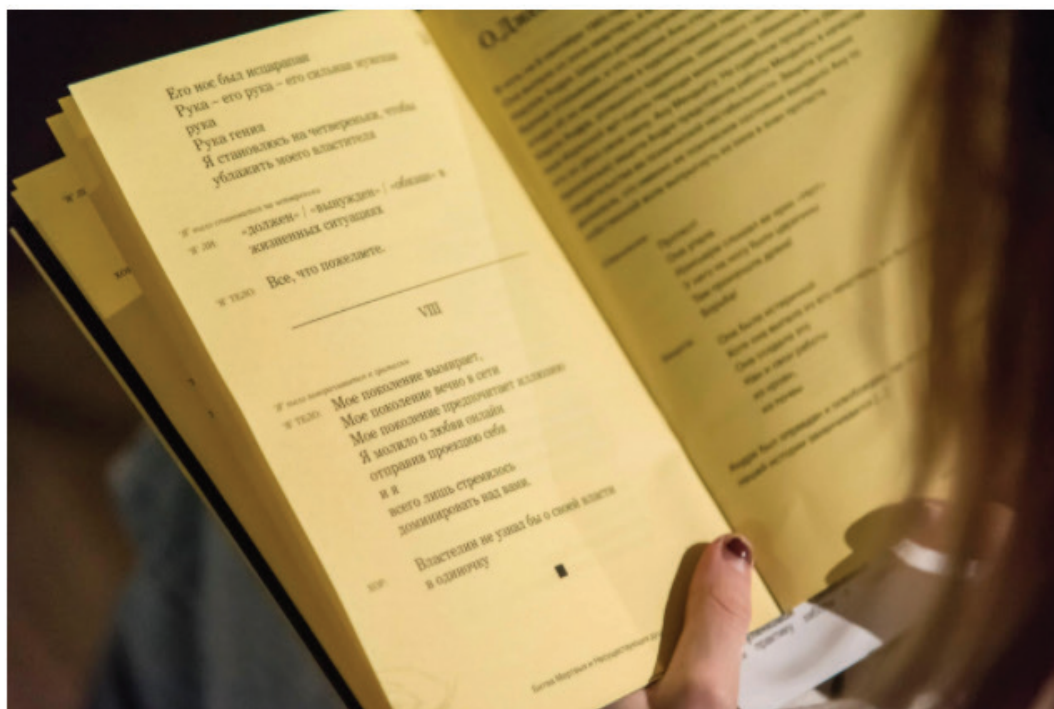
Alevtina Kakhidze "44", 2018



Alevtina Kakhidze, "44", 2018 (still from the video) © apexart

The six-minute video of the Ukrainian artist begins with a riddle: with a seemingly endless series of “no”, uttered now with a smile or light laughter, now through tears, with pain and fear, or even expressed non-verbally - with a nod of the head, pursed lips. It seems as if a woman is trying this word, rolling over its possible meanings in herself, while the viewer wonders what “no” is behind this. The video itself resembles a training session in front of a mirror - as if the camera allows you to rehearse the answer, find the correct way to express it.

Attention to detail is not limited solely to the nuances of the sounding word, it also manifests itself through the appropriating gaze-camera. Close-ups snatch the folds of a red dress from heavy, dense, dark material, gray hairs in a neat square in the French manner, wrinkles on the face and fingers. At the same time, the whole and meaning continue to elude the beholder, remain elusive and inaccessible for true appropriation. Thus, Kakhidze finds a female gaze through the camera, atypical for this medium.



Reading of the play by Sonya Kazowski 'The Battle of Dead and Non-Existent Souls', 'The Code of Silence', 2021, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

The body acts as a mediator between the two oppositions: the neuter gender functions as a barrier to gender attribution, but it is clear from the context that we are talking about the artist's tormented body. It is alienated and exists in a constant rejection of itself, while trying to regain a spiritual dimension, that is, to find romance, love and happiness in seduction and execution of orders; it dreams of asserting its strength, but it is doomed to fail. It is through the body that the main thing finds its way to the reader: the usually inaudible female cry.

The relationship between life and death in the space of the fifth scene is inverted. Let life be initially associatively placed in the male field (the male artist remains), it is female art that is real life, because "life is hysterical". Inversion shocks the viewer and listener, places the paradox in the space - and leaves it there, even letting go of the installation.

Polina Zaslavskaya "Fundamentals of modern home economics", 2020



Polina Zaslavskaya, series of collages "Fundamentals of modern home economics", 2020 © apexart

A series of seven collages, created from magazine clippings, examines the influence of journalism in the 1960s and 70s on the perception of women in society, fashion and the capitalist field. Zaslavskaya's image of an ideal woman (wife, mother, housewife) undergoes a complex of tests: this is an attack of wild birds, and the invasion of everyday life by the conventions of classical art, representing a different ideal, and globalization - watercolor designs on parts of collages resemble large-scale factory premises, in the context of which the yellowed figure of a girl in a coat in the latest fashion, if not completely lost, then it certainly looks very ridiculous.

Proceeding from left to right, several narratives can be traced in the collages. First, there is a gradual loss of light. If in the first composition the sun from yellow plastic penetrates the entire space, and on the next two small pieces of the same transparent yellow color, depicting rays creeping into the windows, remain, then the last three collages are captured by gray and black watercolors, there is practically no clean space on these sheets, sunny yellow is denied altogether.



View of the exposition "The Code of Silence", 2021, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

Moreover, this is a feminine gaze directed at a woman, that is, a gaze full of understanding, as is revealed in the finale, when "no" is replaced by the question "do you have children?" The starting riddle suddenly acquires a solution, although, as in the case of Kazowski's installation, this is an inverted model - first an answer, then a question - and the fact of the riddle is comprehended only in the second half of the video clip. The change of the repeated remark is also set off by the change of the plan: now this is a wide shot, in which the emphasis is not on the detail, but on the whole - on the slightly stooped figure of a woman in the studio, dressed in a black dress and seemingly a little out of place, as indicated by the light swinging bare feet and an awkward smile. This position resonates with the wounded position of a woman who refuses,

But the "no," to which the audience's attention returns when the video starts from the beginning, sounds extremely full-bodied, it fills the entire space of the installation, which emphasizes the woman's unconditional right to such an answer. Given from the perspective of bitterness or pride, he is borne and matured in her like a child. And his birth, going out into the world is also from the category of a miracle, albeit one that does not consist in giving oneself to another, but in preserving oneself for oneself or in accepting one's identity: a woman who does not want or cannot give birth.

Zaslavskaya's artistic statement is dialectical, contradictory, conflicting, but a single narrative thread keeps its integrity, and the sharp intrusion of blackness allows the viewer to experience catharsis and purify himself through suffering.

Nika Dubrovskaya, David Graeber "Never mind us", 2019



View of the exposition "The Code of Silence", 2021, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

The poster with six women attracts not only with its brightness (yellow background and red-pink clothes), but also with its position in the exhibition - they seem to be raised on the podium, looking down at the hall. The uniqueness of this position is emphasized by the fact that a similar staircase with a platform on the other side of the hall is not used at all. Such a curatorial decision reinforces the paradox inherent in the artistic expression: although the slogan calls not to pay attention to the speakers, everything else, starting from the very fact of the slogan's appearance, requires attention.



Polina Zaslavskaya "Fundamentals of Modern Home Economics", "The Code of Silence", view of the exposition, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

Secondly, it is the process of dissolving the truths or conventions declared by old women's magazines. It manifests itself, on the one hand, in the way the clippings are paid the further, the less attention is paid: the first collage presents twelve (according to the number of apostles) figures placed on the entire sheet, the second and third comprehend the images of typical and decent apartments - on each of them a room or a set of furniture is presented as the only center of the composition, in the last three works one small figure is found, all of them are placed in the midst of black and gray or on the edge of the composition, at a fundamental distance either from the center or from the foreground.

I would like to believe that for more than half a century the paradigm has changed, but the reflecting surface of both yellow plastic and glass on collage frames hints to the beholder: do not blame the reflection without looking at yourself. Conventions and the media have changed, while the idea of imposing a woman's domestic and subordinate position on a woman has remained the same. This is practically a religion practiced by most of humanity, as indicated by biblical motives in the compositions: rays emanating from the sky and illuminating the whole world, the apostolic number of figures, the invasion of houses by animals, reminiscent of the plots of God's wrath. The less light, the more confidently the world loses its god, but there is no fear with which blackness is associated, because for a woman in such a world it is synonymous with liberation.

The documentary performance, prepared by Nikulenkova with the participation of girls from the juvenile colony, existed in two versions within the framework of the exhibition. The first is presented in the recording: it was formed in two days of the artist's work directly in the colony. The second was realized at the opening of the exhibition. Although both are valuable in their entirety, the second is thought to be more mature and complex, and therefore deserves a more detailed analysis.

Five girls on an impromptu stage take turns going to the center, while the rest remain in the circle. A step into a circle allows for a rupture of the protective red and white tape that wraps around the waist of each of them, but does not mean liberation: the girl still remains imprisoned in a cage of other people's bodies and a ribbon fence. The very fact of attention to her history, to her personality is the greatest possible approach to freedom.

One by one, they answer questions about their names, age, history of entering the colony. A brief acquaintance is followed by stories about dreams, about everyday life and labor education, about the most traumatic elements of prison experience. The unsophisticated words of ordinary people, brought to the stage and assembled together as if in an almost random way, have terrible weight.



Performance "Captured Bodies" at the opening of the "Code of Silence", Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

This is perhaps the main object at the exhibition, which is impossible to understand without referring to the curatorial commentary. Behind the slogan and poster is a story with a thirty-year tradition: they are dedicated to divorced women from the GDR, whose pensions were cut due to their marital status after the reunification of Germany. They managed to get a UN resolution condemning the decision taken against them, but not its changes. Of the eight hundred thousand women, three hundred thousand remained, and thirty years have passed since the unification of the country, but a new resolution was never adopted.

The art object is a monument to an urgent socio-political problem, because its position in the exhibition space is so important: it not only recreates a platform from which wounded women and their sympathizers speak to the world, but also invites the visitor to the exhibition to join the protest in its anti-protest - brought out of the politically marked space and challenging by rejecting the challenge.

Natalia Nikulenkova "Captured Bodies", 2021





Sarah Brown, "Scientific Torture", "Code of Silence", view of the exposition, Factory © Tatiana Sushenkova

The specificity of the conference is also determined by its diachronic cut. All presented objects and installations can be called relevant, even if they were created in different years. At the same time, some of them respond to the events of the past, such as, for example, the project of Olesya Bessmeltseva and Philip Fenghaus "Leningrad Feminism", built as an additional exhibition within the "Code of Silence" and examining the situation of Soviet feminists in the 1960s and 70s, or the project of Petra Bauer and Rebecca Katz Thor "And still to come. Travel Sketches", which is a response to the contacts between Swedish and Soviet socialists in the 1920s and creates a projection into the future. Others are in direct connection with modernity, like "Never mind us", described above, while others are completely outside of time and space - these include "Wilds of Sleep" by Masha Godovannaya.

The girls are dressed in dark and chunky-knit balaclavas, reminiscent of the masks of criminals at first, but further deceiving expectations. They are colored, each with a tongue, lips, eyes or ears attached. On the one hand, I don't hear, I don't see, I don't speak: balaclavas delimit girls from the world, like prison bars and the idea of a term as such, their truth and truth are closed inside them and inaccessible to the outside world, it is difficult for them to achieve understanding. On the other hand, the senses and perceptions seem to be depicted by a child's hand - they are made in a naive manner and thus reveal sincerity, emphasize the nature of these "criminals", who were often imprisoned by chance or through no fault of their own. Finally, the sewn eyes and ears show how dull due to such a life experience, the girls' ability to perceive the world,

In the final of the performance, the girls dance, as if immersed in a trance, intoxicated, but at the same time physically free, and then help each other to cut off the stripes from the balaclavas in order to collect a portrait on the board next to it. The fragments make up a full-fledged person, light and bright, like in children's drawings - an ideal from the point of view of carelessness that is already unattainable for former and current prisoners traumatized by the system. But the ribbon connecting them has disappeared, the balaclavas too, the portrait remains, symbolizing the stability of the light and good in a person, no matter how cruel life and society are to him.

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An exhibition that provides such a deep immersion in each of the only conditionally combined works, the main part of which is based on socio-political research or archival work and implies a certain methodology, resembles the format of a conference. Speakers gather under one roof and talk about their own from the perspective of their own scientific field, but at the intersection of their statements new meanings are born, problems clash, conflicts are exposed. Scientific rationale, in particular, merges with political, they mutually legitimize each other and reinforce feminist discourse.



Sarah Brown, *Scientific Torture*, 2019 (still from video) © apexart

The uniqueness of each individual statement here is associated with the universality of the problematics. Justified both at the level of scientific fact and at the level of political relevance, it acquires a universal, basic humanistic meaning in the context of the exhibition. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to articulate it for the general public in such a format, the conversation about feminism and wounded groups is still elitist in Russia, unfolding in the circles of the intelligentsia. In part, the logic of the exhibition only emphasizes this distance: knowledge is presented in a less popular and accessible form, familiarization with it is complicated. Nevertheless, the Code of Silence should be given its due as the next step towards an open, honest and well-reasoned discussion of the topic.

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<https://spectate.ru/voicing-the-silence>