



February 1<sup>st</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 - 6 passage des Gravilliers, 75003 Paris

Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev

## **FREEWORDS**

Curated by Fabrizio Donini Ferretti

Events in the presence of the artists:

Preview	Wednesday January 30	6 - 9 p.m. by invitation only
Press lunch	Thursday January 31	11 a.m. - 1 p.m.
Public opening	Thursday January 31	6 - 9 p.m.
Visits by app.	Friday January 1 & Saturday January 2	

Exhibition from Tuesday to Saturday 2 - 7 p.m. and by app.

FREEWORDS is the first exhibition where the work of Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev is shown in France. The artists, born respectively in Ukraine and Azerbaijan and who reside today in Moscow, are already well established on the Russian art scene. Here are two individuals who artfully complement each other and respond to each other, using a wide variety of media including painting, graphics, ceramics and installations. They question in a singular manner the evolution of freedom of thought - and perhaps even of soul – in present times, glancing perhaps to our future. Here is a work, here are lives, where the political, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions intertwine inextricably.

If cubism was the first to deconstruct visible form with a view to rebuilding objects on the basis of the formal categories of the mind, Russian constructivism exacerbated this feature so as to give form to a conceptual narrative related to social reconstruction. The work of Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev manifests this inheritance. The exhibition presents a new step, centred on the dialectic of freedom and confinement.

Taking stock of the writings of Russian writers who suffered imprisonment in tsarist times, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, or during the Soviet regime, such as Ossip Mandelstam or Joseph Brodsky, or more recently such as Kirill Serebrennikov, the film and theatre director, the artists are reflecting both on the experience of captivity as the *condition* of an authentic liberation or emancipation of man, and on the means to escape from the jails built by concepts, by the categories of language.

For artists who were born in the Soviet Union, a long – and partly enduring - Russian tradition of addressing political disobedience by imprisonment probably contributed to the choice of exploring the question of captivity, this classic metaphor of man tied by the trappings of reality but aspiring to a higher condition, through the words of imprisoned writers. Seclusion – actual as well as metaphoric – can be understood as the very forge where the struggle for liberty is cast; throughout Russian literature, and beyond, it is also a substitute for a sacrifice by means of which man dies to its present condition to re-emerge free of his burden.

Giorgio Agamben rightly insists on the distance which should exist between the *contemporary* individual and the time in which he lives, so that he may preserve his clear-sightedness. Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev are by such standards eminently contemporary, as they explore present forms of captivity by resorting to the prism of the jail, while extending their enquiry to the walls risen by those categories by means of which the mind apprehends the world, shaping themselves into explanatory myths.

The writings of Dostoyevsky, Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn or Brodsky, but also the video of Ludmila Ulitskaya, are but breadcrumbs on the path of *freedom through elevation*. The words chosen by the artists are not mere compassionate comments on the fate of political prisoners; they point to the will of any artist, this representative of humanity without a mandate, to maintain a tension with his times, a principled refusal which designates what is human, insofar as *humanity* relates to the urge to experience a “beyond”, an “above”, ultimately the possibility of an ethic. Art is also the place where ethics becomes perceptible by the senses: the artist boldly looks at his time in the eye, and confronts it, as stated in Mandelstam’s poem *Vek*.

The reason why it is justified to postulate the innocence of poetry, its liberating power, is that poetry abhors what is univocal, while the words of ideology – the same words which establish categories – enclose and alienate by their semantic rigidity.

It is therefore through the words of poetry that Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev have undertaken to explore this innermost transmutation experienced by the captive, a path all the more difficult to walk that, in cultures which use Latin alphabet, neither calligraphy nor gesture have any role and all is left to abstractions. In his *De Magia*, Giordano Bruno interpreted the crisis of the world as a crisis of language from which ancient Egyptians were sheltered by the use of pictograms. Indeed, in our culture there is a clear divorce between the universe of form and that of language, as if the disassociation between matter and spirit was at its apex, and could only be abolished through the blazing formal demands of poetry. Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev have thus taken words themselves as their graphic material. And here it is that such tools which structure thought, conscience, and therefore society,

become pure form, freed from their speaker's face. They become *portraits* of the figure of internal freedom. Portraits of this *blessed part* of the onlooker, to paraphrase Bataille.

Contemporary art is of course not shy of painted or sculpted words, under many different guises and from many different semantic perspectives. By *morphing* words into images, however, the pieces of Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev do not trigger the same immediacy of reading. *At first sight*, one cannot tell if here is poetry, or a mere alignment of letters; one is taken away from textuality by the image. The painted word is not construed as visual seduction, as a trap ready to capture and enhance our projected desires, but rather as an invitation to a form of freedom perhaps understood as this *remnant* that separates us from the *artificial being*. « Poetry » designates this instrument of *passage* evoked by René Char: «A key will be my dwelling».

From a formal perspective, the pieces on show are more akin to a *strip* of text than to a painting; the energetic *load* of the lives where they took birth bestows upon them a quasi-iconic character. These strips are organized in horizontal bands of capital letters without any interspace, but where some syllables or graphemes are either blacked out, or highlighted by a streak of colour, or simply obscured by a darker background which conceals them: they appear more as a code than as a text; the poem *is* this code, this key which opens the blinds onto a more luminous landscape which hope might describe as human.

With their sparse letters behind a grating, perhaps out of a *scrabble* which it has become impossible to reshape into proper words, the artists seem to warn us that, although the tool of the alphabet remains, the possibility to use it in an architecture of meaning is not so obvious any more. These disjointed letters threaten more than they enlighten. The annihilation of man *as such* at the end of History, its coming back to the state of post-historical animal as prophesized by Kojève, would imply the disappearance of language and therefore the possibility of wisdom and freedom; the reverse is just as plausible. Scattering of letters, erosion of language: foreboding of ruins to come or premonition of reestablishment? *Ergastulum* where utopia agonizes, dead end of the post-historic Hegelian man, or barricade on which poetry watches, which “lives of unending insomnia”? Oleg and Olga Tatarintsev carefully avoid to answer the question.

Fabrizio Donini Ferretti



Olga & Oleg Tatarintsev, No title, installation view, 2018, porcelain, metal, paper, curtesy of the artists