

THINGS BY JEVGENI ZOLOTKO. And on the methods of new art criticism*

INDREK GRIGOR, *art critic*
Photos by JEVGENI ZOLOTKO

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On new art criticism

For more than ten years, the term 'new art history' has been employed in the field, dealing with how the transformed discipline of history affects how art history is or should be written. In very broad terms, the shift from a mostly form-based history of style towards the social history of art has taken place in the writing of art history. Unlike art history, art criticism has never had an academic cover, so it has been in an existential crisis almost since its birth, because there is no consistency in dealing with the theoretical problems of criticism that would allow for formulating a problem, let alone a positive programme that art criticism could rely on for its development.

However, there is certainly a need to talk about new art criticism in addition to new art history. The precise essence of this criticism is completely open, which, as I have already indicated, has to do with the fact that criticism lacks the cover of the academic canon. Therefore, the first proposition of the new criticism is the notion that in order to formulate its semantic role and ensure its sustainable development in the future, it must become a separate academic discipline. Achieving this is, above all, an issue of academic bureaucracy and holds no particular interest in terms of the semantic issues of active criticism. What does hold interest is the methodology of the new criticism and even before that, the function of art criticism overall.

The author has claimed with somewhat stubborn militancy that the function of art criticism is not to judge the artwork, which was its task when it was initially born in the 19th century, nor of mediating art to the audiences – a role that art criticism has unsuccessfully attempted to assume since the birth of the avant-garde. Art criticism has an independent role in our art field. But what is it? Boris Bernstein, a grand old man of Estonian art history and one of the few local authors to systematically delve into the role and function of art criticism, wrote in his article 'Art Criticism in Contemporary Art Life': 'A perfectly explainable aberration makes us, critics, place art in the centre of our professional world... However, when questioning the point and aim of everything we do, the 'art centeredness' turns out to be wrong...'. Applying deliberate violence to Bernstein's views, the question of what exactly is the task

of criticism remains unanswered, but the central view that art criticism should be autonomous – even in relation to art – still stands.

One of the methods of independent art criticism that has become more prevalently used thanks to the now completed exhibition project *Artishok Biennale* (www.artishokbiennale.org) is the self-contained monologue, which stressed the role of the critic. The self-contained monologue is a method or genre of art criticism where, in addition to the object, the analysis largely focuses on the analysis itself, relegating the initial object or the artwork to a secondary position.

This method, provocative by its name alone, has an important content and function, which the author will attempt to prove below, but this certainly cannot be the only method on which to build new art criticism. The second possible approach, a methodological one which I introduce here, was vaguely formulated in a public talk between the artists Madis Katz and Toomas Thetloff and critic Indrek Grigor, held on 15 October 2012 within the *Artishok Biennale*. This can provisionally be called a coordinated description. The idea is that the critic works as closely with the artist as possible already during the conception of the idea for the artwork and in the end will attempt to convey the intentions of the artist as genuinely as possible. In other words – instead of ignoring the artist and the artwork on principle and withdrawing into the analysis of his or her autonomous monologue, which is unjustly referred to as unbiased distance, the critic will attempt to convey the conceptual background of the artist as precisely as possible, therefore rendering the question of the critic's independence null and void. In this situation, the critic is not, cannot and must not be independent; instead he or she must always bow to the words of the artist.

However, this description must not remain the only layer; it must be followed by a study in the form of a self-contained analysis, and the reader can then compare its competence in relation to the description. Below, an attempt is made to apply these methods of the new art criticism to the work *Things* by Jevgeni Zolotko.



Things by Jevgeni Zolotko

The six-part work *Things* by Jevgeni Zolotko was displayed in the attic of the Tartu Art House for six months, from 19 March to 6 October 2012. The idea was born after the Art House suggested to Zolotko that he create work for the attic. The proposal was based on the playful but sincere realisation that the attic room, covered with an even layer of grey dust, resembled the monochrome abandoned environment of Zolotko's installations. It would have been appropriate to put a sign upon the door saying 'Zolotko's Office', and the work would thus have been completed. Zolotko, of course, did not agree to this kind of banal, dubious deal, but the idea of undertaking the attic had been conceived, and a year later the first part of *Things* was opened.

Zolotko is an artist who is extremely critical of the vocabulary of prestige language often used while talking about his work. According to the artist, *Things* is not an installation, the work does not examine anything (least of all the room) and despite the temptation, drawing parallels with archaeology is a false interpretation. However, although the artist's worldview is explicitly religious, *Things* does not constitute religious art in the classic sense; instead, it is a reflection of Zolotko's personal worldview.

The combination of Zolotko's art, which is based on a worldview that is contemporary in form, yet at times extremely archaic in its subject matter, and an artist, who has repeatedly refused to discuss his works in public, but is nevertheless very conscious of the meaning of words, is a wonderful case study for introducing the coordinated description mentioned above. Moreover, as the gallery manager of the Tartu Art House, the author of this article has been involved with the work from its conception through all the stages of installation and has talked for hours with the artist about the various aspects – related to the technical, the form as well as the subject – of the work.

Coordinated description

The artist had a chance to review the descriptions below and all of his suggestions were taken into account in finalising the text.



Chapter I: Speech

Naming is one of the most archetypal images in the myths of creation. Thus Zolotko's work in the attic also began with naming things.

The thoroughly prosaic attic was realised as an artistic space by the artist who named the things he had found there. The loudspeakers issued a list of things in a monotonous booming voice. The list was long enough to symbolically cover the whole reality, at the same time adding a fascinating layer when, at the end of reading the list, the voice became tired and coarse.



Chapter II: The Loss

Shortly after the world was created, we were deprived of it, which is the central intrigue of the work: man's relations with things. An attic is a strange zone where things have not been thrown away, but equally they do not quite exist, so we can call it a junk room of memory. The artist removed all the things from the attic and filled it with books made of pulped paper known from his earlier works. The essential element of the chapter was a video where a young man sitting at the attic window reads extracts from the Book of Genesis about the genealogy of the human race since Adam (Genesis 5). According to Zolotko, this is one of the most peculiar parts of the Bible, because today it is practically impossible to understand the meaning of the family tree leading back to the first human being. This is a text that connects us to the beginning of everything, but the words have lost their role, symbolically marked by the books made up of an incoherent unreadable mass of text, amassed in the attic.





Chapter III: Things

The title chapter *Things* was visually perhaps one of the most impressive, being a sieve that had sifted out the smallest items from the debris on the attic floor. These items were then placed on two graduated altars for our viewing. These things could not be named and thus constituted the beyond, the underworld of the attic.

The images of Judgment Day in the form of the altars and the sieve are, according to the author,

partly intentional but not completely meaningful. Sieving things is indeed a reference to the beyond, although at the same time it is a purely practical or ethical question: on what basis should the displayed things be separated from the debris and how should they be exhibited? A lullaby for an orphan was playing in the background, stressing the sentimental value of the act. The attic is like a junk room, but its debris holds things that have been forgotten even by the attic itself.



Chapter IV: Dove

Chapter IV begins with the notional resolution of the raised intrigue – the relation between people and things. Whereas the previous chapter contains a reference to archaeology and an attempt to make the unnamed meaningful, the reconstruction attempts have by now been completed. The objects from the first part and the attempts to recreate them were displayed at the attic, its walls now painted white. The central object is the Dove, the only living being, who is shown through a photograph of the found skeleton, the skeleton itself, its 3D reconstruction, and finally the dove in a sculptural form.



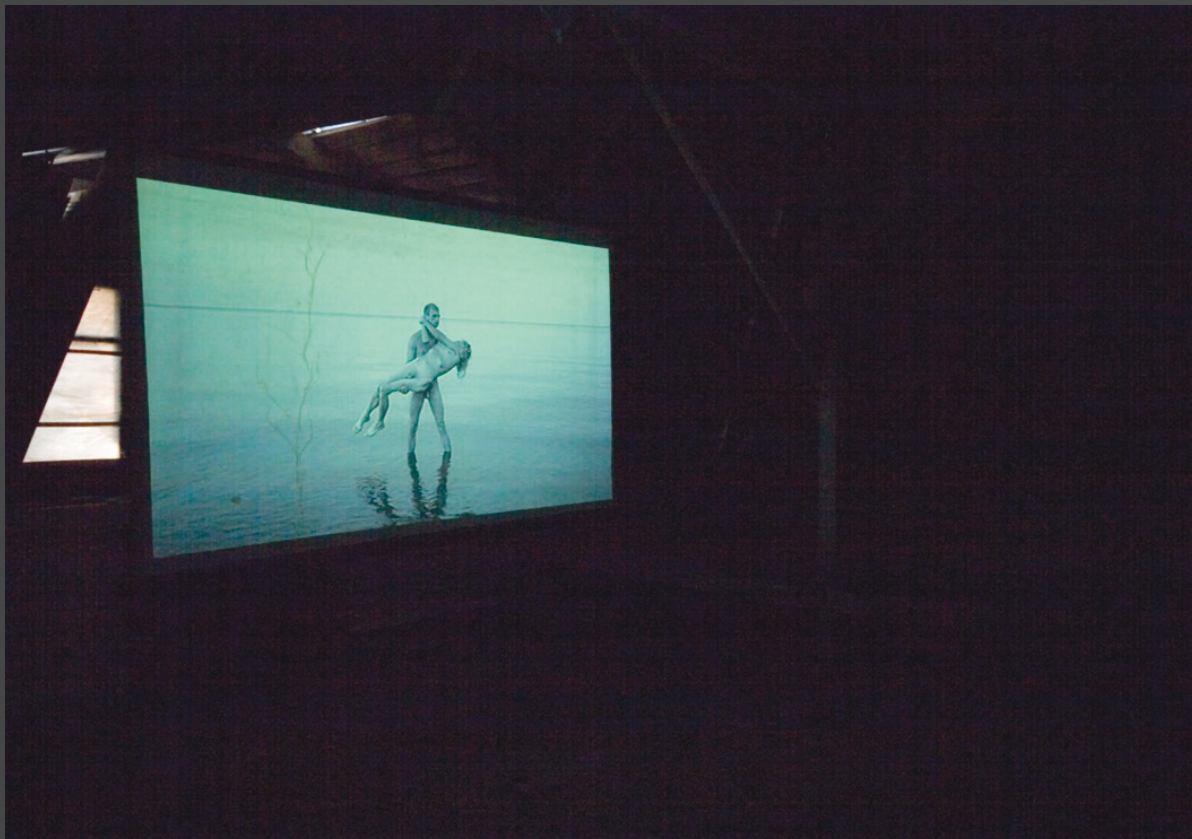
Chapter V: Ecce Homo

The static Ecce Homo is both a semantic pause and the resolution of the intrigue. In the second part, a large-format projection depicts the young man reading the incomprehensible genealogy while emerging from still water, carrying his father, who he had brought back from the land of the dead. Man is defined by remembering his roots. It is no coincidence that the title indicates man in the singular, but the photograph shows father and son; a human being is a human being only in relation to others.

The key text of the chapter is an excerpt from Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* about the layers of things in the Plyushkin manor house, which all too figuratively describes the normal state of things in the attic. At the same time, it presents a moral judgment: the way we relate to things reflects back in our human relationships.

'On the floor lay a heap of coarser articles unworthy of a place on the table. It was difficult to make out precisely what was in the heap, for the dust lay on it so thick that the hands of any one who touched it at once looked like gloves; the most conspicuous objects in the heap were a piece of a broken wooden spade and the old sole of a boot. It would have been impossible to say that a living being was inhabiting this room, if a shabby old skull-cap lying on the table had not testified to his existence.'

– *Dead Souls* by Nikolai Gogol





Chapter VI

Every single thing, to the last detail, has been put back in place. The soundtrack is Helena Tulve's *Stella matutina*, where the lyrics are the Litany of Loreto, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Chapter VI does not have a title, but leads us from the relations between human beings and things to the universe. Zolotko does not agree with the opposition between the spiritual and the material world. The Virgin Mary was the purest part of the material world through whom God became material. However, against the backdrop of the litany dedicated to her, the attic is still the same as it was: nothing has changed. Nothing is disgusting, and everything is equally noble. This brings us to the work's epigraph:

'Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things.'

– Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, from the conversation with the old wise man Zossima.



Self-contained monologue

Whereas the above was a coordinated description, an attempt is made below to briefly sketch an analysis of the same artwork in the form of a possible self-contained monologue.

Leaving aside the religious undercurrents of Zolotko's work, it stands out that the artist is interested – not just with *Things* but more generally – in the relationship of the material world to the linguistic world, which also probably explains his heightened sensitivity to the concepts used when discussing his works.

The linguistic world carries a potential of meaning, but it has lost its communicative capacity. This was demonstrated in *The Loss*, the second part of *Things*, in the form of a Biblical text that has lost its semantic contact with the reader and has therefore lost its significance.

According to the author's words, and it seems justified to trust them, the material world entails both the objects of the environment as well the potential man. The latter is potential because the absence of man is one of the most notable characteristics of Zolotko's work, and despite the intentions of the author, it tends to dominate the field of meaning of the artwork, allowing one to introduce dystopia and abandonment, while the artist's starting point is the isomorphism between things and people. In Zolotko's work, things do not signify man symbolically, but instead in an inseparable relation to man. This relationship can be called the key to the poetry of Zolotko's work.

Using as a case study the Köler Prize-winning installation *One Day Of The State Archivist Life*, it must be said that although the central event of the artwork is the disappearance of the archivist, the essential message of the work is the archivist's renouncement and escape from the booth lined with a mass of text into a pre-linguistic world. However, again, this is not a renouncement of the world, but of its textual image that has become non-communicative: the metamorphosis of the archivist into a sparrow.

This is what a brief attempt to apply the method of the self-contained monologue to Zolotko could look like. Whether and to what extent these two methods of new art criticism – the coordinated description and self-contained monologue – complement each other, is for the reader to decide. However, it must be said in the way of excuse that this is a first attempt in the genre and its potential and boundaries are yet to be discovered by the author.

1. Photo series of One Day Of The State Archivist Life can also be seen on the pages through the current U number.



'Ah! I - to you, Petrovich, this -'
It must be known that Akaky Akakiyevich expressed himself chiefly by prepositions, adverbs, and scraps of phrases which had no meaning whatever. If the matter was a very difficult one, he had a habit of never completing his sentences, so that frequently, having begun a phrase with the words, 'This, in fact, is quite -' he forgot to go on, thinking he had already finished it.
'What is it?' asked Petrovich...

The Overcoat by Nikolay Gogol

Jevgeni Zolotko
One Day of the State Archivist Life (EKKM, 2011)
Installation from substance produced in the course of
decomposition of different printed text materials
5 × 9 × 3.5 m