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## Blind and Automatic Drawing in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> — Early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries in the Art of Western and Eastern Europe

Historical understanding of blindness as a condition incompatible with artistic activity becomes one of the most powerful barriers to the recognition of “blind drawing” as a method of contemporary art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This method seemed challenging even for connoisseurs. For centuries, blindness was perceived as an allegory of an infinite human imperfection, ignorance, and stupidity. Visual impaired people were seen as someone who could be ridiculed or deceived, or as someone going through an ordeal [14, S. 335], and all of this formed certain stereotypes around blindness. In the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, people with vision loss feature in paradoxical and humoristic plots satirizing the vices of human nature [10, S. 26; 8, S. 98]. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art connoisseurs who were unable to appreciate the real value of art have been labeled “blind.” Particularly, one of the first art critics, Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, known for his conservatism, was granted this epithet [2]. At the same time, educator Étienne Bonnot de Condillac develops the idea of the “blind” meaninglessness of creativity [13], contrasting artistic and scientific activities. Over time, the image of a “blind man” in opposition to the “normal person” was established in the culture as a whole. A “blind man” does not see the obvious. A “blind man” is the perfect “Other” who is disconnected from the well-known and generally accepted [9, p. 79]. Artists who decide to paint without looking are perceived as eccentrics, deceivers, and absurd speculators.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the very idea of “normal” was increasingly questioned, the rejection of visuality in favor of alternative modes of perception in art has become an artistic gesture. In analytical cubism, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso postulate the tactile meaning of the eye. Almost simultaneously, futurists in Italy and cubo-futurists in Russia explore the possibilities of spatial perception. Wassily Kandinsky discovers sounding colors and synesthesia. Surrealists promote synthetic sensations instead of dominating vision. Emancipation from the dictatorship of the vision-centered mind is also connected with the development of automatic writing and drawing by Andre Breton and Andre Masson, who experimented with the flows of the unconscious. Overcoming traditional visuality through the “blind chance” is explored by Dadaists. The first issue of the Dada-magazine, published in New York in 1917, was called *Blind Man*. Among other texts, it presented a poster for the *Blind Men Ball* and a manifesto stating that the author of an artwork is not an artist, but a viewer. Contingency as a creative principle is used by Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, and other authors. Alberto Giacometti artificially achieves fading vision by working non-stop for 48 hours in his studio to find the desired image of a “thin” person [6, S. 24]. Austrian painter Arnulf Reiner and German painter Hans Hartung, both important figures in post-war European art, pioneered blind and blindfold painting.

In the art of the late 20<sup>th</sup> — early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, vision reduction practices experience a rebirth. Post-expressionism, conceptualism, and performance art interpret the idea of non-obviousness in their own way. Bodily rethinking in performance art and a speculative interpretation of the world in conceptualist art have a common objective — distancing from the eye and vision. This distance, among other things, is reinforced by a general distrust of rationality, which governs our worldly experiences. Art in this context refers to fundamentally new principles of constructing an image and its content. Fear, frustration, and panic require new forms of expression. “Inner anxiety” and a “fear of space” (“Raumscheu”) according to Wilhelm Worringer, seek to “stop and divide the flow of phenomena, abstract forms and ensure their permanence” [17, S. 63]. One of the most radical forms of abstractionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century practices the rejection of sight in favour of feelings, perception, and empathy. The artworks are created in a dark room, blindfolded, in bodily contact with paper and canvas. The relationship between psycho-emotional upheavals and artistic experiments is not explored in details in art-research literature. At the same time, a mere biographical comparison of facts is pretty self-explanatory. In 1915, Andre Breton, having barely graduated from the medical faculty of the Sorbonne, was mobilized to the WWI, where he went through a series of extremely stressful experiences. As early as in 1919, Breton and Philippe Soupault published their work *Les Champs Magnétiques*, which was created using the technique of automatic writing. Andre Masson also went through mobilization, fought at the frontline, had an injury, and upon returning from the war, turned to automatic drawing. Automatism is perceived as the only way of escaping the horrors of the real world controlled by the rational thinkers and from the historical, cultural, and intellectual restrictions imposed by the society. At the same time, automatic drawing is intended to reveal key creative abilities presumably embedded deeply in the personality of the artist. Masson’s automatic drawings surprise, frighten, and shock the public, sometimes showing quite incredible images, balancing on the verge of indecency and challenging the sanctimonious premises of the society. Over time, Masson tries automatic painting.

Automatic writing and drawing make it possible for the artist to release subconscious or affective perception. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an opinion that classical art, cultivated in the school, the academy, and the rational vision, failed and led humanity into a dead end, became increasingly popular. This crisis initialized new artistic endeavors [3]. Often the focus of such experiments is not vision itself, but feelings, spontaneous movement, and affect. According to the theory of affects created by Benedict Spinoza, the “adequate knowledge” interacts directly with overcoming, repressing, or experiencing the affect [16]. According to Spinoza, the key affects are the “affects of pleasure and displeasure,” belonging to the class of “experience.” In his famous *Ethics*, Spinoza estimates the power of experience so highly that a person who is unable to overcome it subjects themselves to slavery, dependence, and submission, which are opposed to a rational perception of the world. This obsession, to some extent, activated the experiments of the Surrealists and other artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It will continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when artists started working with sensations and immersion, and will also strive to include the viewer’s experiences into their artistic messages. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define this kind of interaction as a specific form of thinking: “Art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts” [5, p. 87].

Influenced by the early Surrealists, a friend of André Breton, the Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer came to the idea of blind painting after the stressful experience of the German annexation of Austria and its occupation by the allied forces in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

His method is ultimately connected with physicality. He practiced working long hours in the studio exhausting himself to the point when he could not control himself, as well as drawing in the dark. Reiner's "blindness" manifests itself in various forms of spontaneity. First of all, it applies to the picturesque *Redrawings (Übermalungen)* that were performed in one or two strokes, with collage, oil, or acrylic paint overlapping the photographic image and making it invisible, as in a series of portraits of 1960–1970, for example, *Self-portrait with Squinted Eyes (Selbstbildnis mit zugekniffenem Auge, 1969)*. Secondly, it applies to the "blind" drawings ("Blinde Zeichnungen"), made without visual control. In his series of drawings "NN. 034–041" (1951), as well as in the drawing *Central Crucifixion with Blind Overdrawing* (1951), each graphic stroke extends from a point, offering a spectrum of uncertainty, fumbling around, body quivering, as if translating the author's feelings into a Morse code addressed to the unknown. It can be assumed that in these works the creative impulse approaches the Sufi horizon of "deferred meaning," "whose visual and all other coordinates are impossible to detect, since it defies the logic of similarity and equivalence" [15, p. 58].

Many works and texts by German artist Hans Hartung who also transformed his traumatizing experience of emigration and disability into drawings and paintings were created in a dark room without looking. They also offer a critique of equivalence and imitation in art. Hartung's interest is riveted to the "independent expressive power of the form, its ability to contain a message, to communicate emotional content regardless of the storyline" [11, p. 100]. Studying the artist's biography, which included defection from the Nazi Germany, fighting in the ranks of the Foreign Legion in North Africa, loss of a leg, and emigration, we can assume that we are also dealing with the attempts to overcome trauma and affect by means of creativity. Hartung calls his artistic action "gesture painting". The phenomenologic connection of the drawing with the artist's hand particularly manifests itself in such works as *Skin* (1958) or *Untitled* (1948). Just as in his childhood Hartung used to cope with the fear of lightning by drawing books of thunderstorms ("Blitzbücher"), in adulthood he resorted to drawing in order to overcome the horrors of what was happening around him. He did that by literally closing his eyes, or closing up in a dark room. Hartung critically distrusts any visual evidence that is limited to a particular point of view and isolated from other sensations. The artist notes: "Our life experience is not limited to vision. It includes many other things... A blind man, like every person, has his own experience, and it may turn out to be even more profound than others; I think that the perception of the world with the eye is rather deceptive. For example, you look at a landscape and you see a blue strip in the long distance. It is a forest and you know it. But from here you do not get any idea of the forest... You will get a real experience only when you enter the forest, when you run into trees, when you find yourself in their shade, feel the fresh air, when you are surrounded on all sides by intertwined branches, moss, and so on... That's how you know what a forest is. A purple or blue line on the horizon will not tell you anything about the forest. It is always like this. Our sensory experience is formed to a lesser extent by sight than by other senses" [11, p. 115].

Hartung's idea of blind interaction with the world is intertwined with the isolating experience of an emigrant, a person who has lost his country, roots, and relationships. Losing connections is like losing a listener, someone who could understand what you are talking about. Therefore, longing for a universal statement, which can be perceived by viewers regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, and the desire for intersubjectivity become more intense [4, p. 20]. In this respect, there is little that could compare to a line drawn blindly. In

his works like *HH T-1971-R21* (1971), *HH T-1989-L27* (1989) and *HH T-1981-E44* (1981), Hartung focuses on conveying the duration of a stroke, with which an acrylic paint is applied, the weight of a brush, pressure, indentation, and many other sensations that make the perception of painting almost a physical experience. Later when Hartung worked in New York, he would contribute to the so called “action painting,” in which the bodily connection between the artist and his art work is finally formed into a single conceptual statement, which is also often associated with the experience of trauma and isolation.

The state of internal emigration is central to the art of Soviet non-conformism, when isolation from the international community and the hopelessness of social and cultural life leads to escapism. On this path, artists make multiple discoveries, including those telepathically consonant with the international artistic processes. Sculptor Andrey Krasulin is often characterized as a representative of the Russian *arte povera* (Italian for “poor art”). As an artist, he searches an artistic value in fundamentally unaesthetic things — boxes, debris, chips, packaging, — what most people would call garbage. Many sculptures and objects of the 1960s and 1970s bring to the foreground exactly this multisensory circuit of “a touch and a gentle touch, inhaling and exhaling, without feeling the resistance of the surface” [12]. After his forced emigration to Berlin, Andrei Krasulin turns, among other things, to drawing with his left hand, which, according to the author, came as a “sudden awakening”. In a recent conversation, the artist noted that “this [appearance of drawings] was associated with certain internal processes, but I do not write them down and do not translate them into a verbal form”<sup>1</sup>. In a series of drawings on bread bags, the artist works with a spontaneously drawn line that appears unpredictably for the author himself. “Why did you choose this paper?” “I am a coward. I’m afraid of fresh, clean, artificial paper. I love paper that has traces of life on it. I did almost no drawings on blank paper. Despite the fact that overall I am not a messy person, it seems. But I really like bread paper, though sometimes the advertising text on the other side can be seen through it. It was like I heard a voice saying: “Try it with your left hand” — “Good gracious! Why not trying the left hand?..” — and then I saw those bags of bread nearby”<sup>2</sup>.

A similar principle of material randomization is used by the artist Iosif Ginzburg. In the last years of his life, he turned to automatic and blind drawing on the spines of found books. Ginzburg is a semi-mythical figure of the Soviet underground, who had no opportunity to exhibit, experienced loss of housing and multiple hospitalizations in mental health clinics, arrived to the idea of automatic drawing after making a series of portraits of medical personnel. One of the first official demonstrations of Iosif Ginzburg’s drawings was the group exhibition *Athanos. The Haptic Eye and Non-Visual Perception* at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts on August 29 until November 20, 2022. Ginzburg’s drawings on book spines, magazine covers, and fragments of cardboard sheets were displayed in the Pushkin State Museum next to the art works by Hans Arp, Andre Masson, and Hans Hartung. Iosif Ginzburg practiced automatic and blind drawing for the last twenty years of his life from 1995 to 2015. Having no place to live, no property, no audience, and no habit of addressing his messages to anyone, the artist simply covered with drawings any surface he could find. It almost looks like performative drawing when the appearance of a line on paper becomes a continuation of the author’s everyday life. Like Arnulf Reiner, Ginzburg in his drawings starts from a dot, or rather from two dots resembling eyes, from which a spontaneous composition of the drawing evolves.

<sup>1</sup> Andrei Krassulin. Conversation recorded on February 1, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

From a technical point of view, it would be interesting to compare this experience with the art works created in 2020–2022 by the Russian-Ukrainian artist Sergey Katran. Katran practices artificial reduction of perception: he draws with closed eyes, closed ears, and maximum breathholding. The time of sensory deprivation is counted and recorded on each of the work sheets. It works as a reminder that the impetus for creating the drawings was the pandemic period, when epidemiological safety considerations became the reason for multiple restrictions prescribed and controlled bureaucratically. In Katran's drawings, the behavior of the line is absolutely spasmodic, it reflects hand cramps when the body is deprived of air, hearing, and vision. This practice essentially means that the artificial construction of a stressful situation helps live through the original trauma.

In the art of the post-war period, bodily interaction with the canvas often becomes a form of declaration of vulnerability. In their performances, Viennese actionists, Gutai Art Association, Polis Miervaldis, Oleg Kulik, Sani Ivekovich, and many others used bodily motions, affect, and shock, including leaving imprints on any surface with their body parts. Such art works included not an imprint as such, but the act of its creation and emotions of viewers at that very moment. The artist Artyom Loskutov captures on his videos the blows on the canvas with a police baton covered with white and red paint, as an artistic reflection on the protest movements in Belarus. The technique of these semi-performative art works was called “club painting.”

The bodily connection of the psychoemotional domain and the search for visuality is manifested in the art of Eastern European and post-Soviet regions overcoming the trauma of colonialism. The “scratches” and collages by Babi Badalov, an artist of Azerbaijani origin who fled to France, are close in their motifs to the trauma-overcoming drawings of Hans Hartung and Arnulf Reiner. Physical and linguistic uniqueness, the impossibility of breaking a language barrier or transmitting visual cultural codes — the inability to express oneself and be understood — becomes the central theme in Badalov's works. His art addresses directly the wounds of post-colonialism. At the recent group exhibition *Love, Death, Life, and Justice* at the Yapi Kredi Culture and Arts Gallery in Istanbul, dedicated to the insoluble crises of social and geopolitical interaction, Babi Badalov took part with his art works dedicated to the culturally insurmountable language barriers and the impenetrable art images: “You go through many traumas throughout your life. The trauma of the language is very long and sad.” Badalov believes that language and writing are more universal than the language of art, therefore an artist disconnected from his culture is doomed to isolation. “We know that art is visual, but it is only understood by art enthusiasts. But with the language, the way you speak and write in it, people who are not so much into arts can read and understand it” [1]. Here we can recall the famous work of the Yugoslav conceptualist Mladen Stilinovic *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is No Artist*, 1992. Like Mladen Stilinovic, Badalov considers himself a victim of the language. During the years of emigration, he lost the opportunity to speak his native language and could not learn a single foreign language. As if trying to take revenge on someone, Badalov splits the texts with almost Dadaistic methods and turns words and phrases into clumps of visual barbs. Badalov makes collages from scraps of newspapers, public transport tickets, his diaries and notes, as well as automatic drawings, but not in the way Andre Breton did it. Badalov's method is familiar to every schoolchild who used to draw on the cover of a notebook during a long lesson, when most of what a teachers says is not clear, but you can draw to stay awake. All these methods of blind contingency and automatic drawing in the works of Badalov are merged into

a single extended text that is impossible to read. This text, as a single canvas, extends an ironic comment over the reader and the artist's attempts to be heard.

Comparing the works of contemporary authors with the methods of blind and automatic drawing, contingency, deconstruction experiences of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and exercises for emancipation from the influence of classical techniques, it is impossible to ignore the general desire for affective perception and focus on emotions. We live in the age of psychotherapy where any experience is viewed through the lens of possible trauma and its depreciation. This desire is largely determined by social and political contexts and focuses on the search for alternative imagery. Most of these experiences reveal in different ways the new qualities of an art work, far beyond visibility and narrative.

**Title.** Blind and Automatic Drawing in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> – Early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries in the Art of Western and Eastern Europe

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**Abstract.** Drawing with eyes closed and other non-visual art practices in the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries clearly resonate with the avant-garde critique of rational vision and the post-war tradition of overcoming collective trauma. Being affected by current personal or geopolitical events, contemporary artists are often ready to close their eyes. This paper aims at tracing the origins of non-visual techniques in the art of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as at comparing them with the methods of the Dada, Surrealists, Futurists, and other experiment groups of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us trace how drawing reveals a connection with tactility and bodily interaction in different periods, how blind and automatic drawing becomes a method of exploring a non-obvious, deferred meaning. These practices allow multiple interpretations of the art work and such polysemy becomes a part of the artistic statement — there can be no certainty about what exactly we see and how we relate to it. The article provides examples of different artistic strategies for using blindness as a creative method in the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, when rethinking of traditional creative techniques, among other things, leads to the rejection of visual control and dominance of one sensory channel.

**Keywords:** automatism, blind drawing, dada, surrealism, action painting, trauma, non-visual perception

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**Название статьи.** Слепое и автоматическое рисование во второй половине XX - начала XXI века: искусство Западной и Восточной Европы

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**Аннотация.** Рисование не глядя и другие не визуальные техники создания искусства во второй половине XX – начале XXI вв. отчетливо резонируют с авангардной критикой рационального зрения и послевоенной традицией преодоления коллективной травмы. У современных художников, переживающих аффект в связи с личными и геополитическими событиями, нередко возникает желание закрыть глаза. Данный текст имеет своей целью проследить истоки возникновения незрительных способов работы с образами в произведениях художников начала XXI века, а также сопоставить их с методами дадаистов, сюрреалистов, футуристов и других экспериментаторов начала XX века. Мы предлагаем рассмотреть, как рисунок обнаруживает связь с тактильностью и телесным взаимодействием в разные периоды, как слепое и автоматическое рисование становятся попыткой проблематизации неочевидного, отложенного смысла. Эти практики в большей степени ориентируются на многозначность зрительского прочтения, когда нет уверенности в том, что именно мы видим, и как к этому относиться. В статье приводятся примеры разных художественных стратегий использования слепоты в качестве метода создания искусства в конце XX – начале XXI вв., когда переосмысление традиционных творческих техник в том числе реализуется посредством отказа от визуального контроля и доминирования одного из способов восприятия.

**Ключевые слова:** автоматизм, слепое рисование, дада, сюрреализм, живопись действия, травма, не визуальное восприятие