

VERTIGINOUS ACEDIE, CIRCA 2013



The preternatural beauty and equipoise of the post-war Alexander Calder mobiles at Pace Gallery, Burlington Gardens, London, are more than offset/countered by the vertiginous acedie of the exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, Sloan Square, London, entitled “Gaiety is the Most Outstanding Feature of the Soviet Union: New Art from Russia.” Foremost in the latter instance is the series “The Neighbors” by Vikenti Nilin (born 1971). This series of ten images, all black-and-white giclée prints of the exact same size (165 x 110 cm.), is absolutely stunning – and chilling.

Image (left) – Vikenti Nilin, “The Neighbors,” Saatchi Gallery, Sloan Square, London

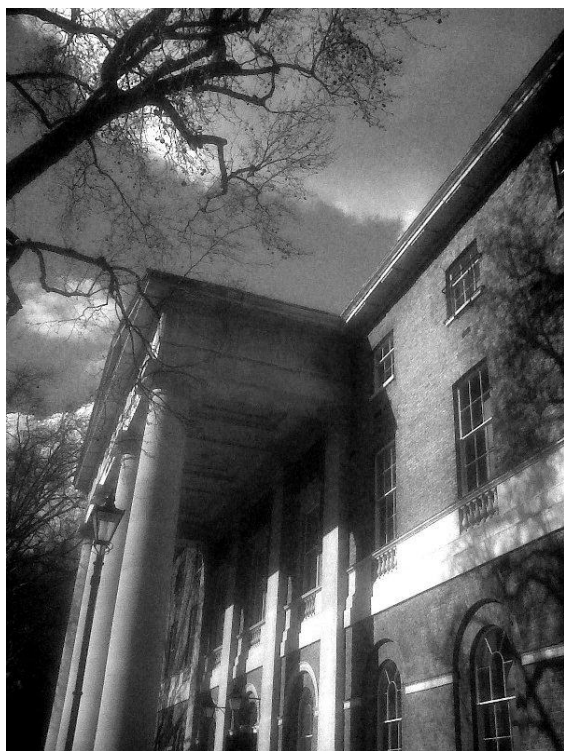
One needs to walk the length of Green Park, Hyde Park, and Kensington Gardens to properly prepare oneself for Calder (“Calder After the War”) versus the new Russian photography at Saatchi. (In preparation, one could even stop at the Natural History Museum in Knightsbridge for “Genesis,” semi-objective documentary photography by Sebastião Salgado, if crowds and entrance fees are acceptable.) The Calder mobiles are all installed on two floors in a classic, modernist white gallery at the north end of the Royal Academy, the whiteness of the spaces a tribute to the extreme austerities of the Calder mobiles and stables – the path to abstraction

fully developed by 1945, the works shown covering the years 1945 to 1949. Curiously or not, Calder’s ascendance also coincides with the slow decline of the modernist avant-garde, which by 1927 was more or less over. This is a contentious issue, but it is more than borne out by the commoditization of modern art well underway by the mid-1920s and the peculiar turn by Joan Miró into the repetition of his previously anarchic canon principally for the emergent modernist art market – a similar practice that beset Moholy-Nagy, Kandinsky, and others, primarily while in Germany. It is illustrative, then, of Calder’s acute derivativeness that his mobiles are said to originate in the early 1930s and that Miró was a major influence, as was Mondrian. Calder did not betray the avant-garde; he missed it entirely. The beauty of these “floating” abstract objects today (including several miniatures in vitrines) is, nonetheless, a measure of the distance we have traveled since the utopian values of the first half of the twentieth century became fossilized versus remained dynamic. This also explains the odd resonance of the mobiles that are not permitted to move (all under the watchful eyes of at least three immaculately dressed security guards at Pace).

Thus the walk west across London’s royal parks from Mayfair prepares one for the Saatchi collection positioned between upscale Knightsbridge and Belgravia. It is uncertain what the reverse path might yield. The spare, beautiful royal parks are the landscape-architectural equivalent of the modernist aesthetic project – only they are green rather than white. They have no content other than what they are, which oddly makes them “white” anyway (as in chaste).

They are simply what they are, just as Jean-Paul Sartre described Calder's mobiles. They "signify nothing, refer to nothing but themselves: they *are*, that is all; they are absolutes."¹

Upon entering Sloane Square, after passing south from Kensington Gardens (bypassing the currently closed Serpentine Gallery), the glitz of Central London re-appears, whereas the half-forgotten glitz of Mayfair seems a fair representation of art as merchandise, even if it's not for sale per se in the case of Pace.



Thus, Saatchi's palace of contemporary art (at the Duke of York Headquarters) is certainly not out of place. It sits where it should sit. And the current two installations, which include a rather feeble attempt to re-start the YBA phenomenon, an exhibition entitled "New Order: British Art Today," are not without merit. But the Russians ... They are on the move again. Within this typically uneven exhibition of new Russian art there are two major revelations, both photographic revelations. The first is Nilin's portraits of "neighbors" (1993-Present) sitting on the high window ledge of their respective apartments ready to jump. The second is Boris Mikhailov's (born 1938) photographs of utterly destitute Russians of all ages. They are almost impossible to look at. And in Mikhailov's case the images are large color prints, many sexually explicit, supplemented by an enfilade of smaller prints. The result is vertiginous acedie; that is, abject horror at the abject human condition, and horror at what has become of the Russian utopia – arguably the origin of avant-garde modernist art proper. Acedie (a form of extreme ennui or world-weariness) is said to be a cardinal sin. To experience vertiginous acedie is to be plunged straight into Hell, somehow complicit in the horrors of the world simply by seeing them. Yes, somehow we are all guilty. Such is the ethical underbelly of universalism.

Note the ages of the artists, one born in 1971, and the other born in 1938. "Father and son" so to speak ... They both understand. The math tells the story, covering WWI to the present. Yet the true measure of these two artists is the two portraits of the artists that Saatchi supplies on the credits wall, whereby the various artists in the show are identified. Nilin and Mikhailov both have incredibly sad eyes. Could it be otherwise for photographers who have revisited the subject of Susan Sontag's great book *Regarding the Pain of Others* decades later – revisiting the irreducible problem of human suffering as index of the state of things.

GK/AGENCE 'X' (DRAFT)

Image (above) – Saatchi Gallery, Sloane Square, London

¹ Sartre's comments; cited in Brian Sewell, "Space Invader," pp. 46-47, *Evening Standard* (Thursday, April 25, 2013): p. 47. According to Sewell, Calder became an artist as a result of simultaneously seeing the sun on one horizon and the full moon on another while passing through the Panama Canal in the early 1920s. This cosmological vision might be said to "explain" the strange equipoise and various asymmetries of his subsequent works. His interest in astronomical instruments such as "the orrery and the armillary sphere" might also be said to account for what is, in fact, the hidden symmetries of the asymmetries. *Ibid.*, p. 46. Calder first painted, before taking up sculpture. Numerous of his Miró-esque paintings from the 1940s are included in the Pace exhibition.