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The Desire for Freedom

MILAN KUNC
Pravda Coca-Cola

By Max Liljefors

1. The philosopher and art critic, Boris Groys, believes that subsequent generations viewed Prague-born Milan Kunc’s series of works titled East-Pop (1977–1980) as ‘prophetic’. According to Groys, Kunc’s way of combining the symbols of Eastern Bloc communist power and Western capitalist consumerism anticipated the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of communism: symbols and signs, which had previously belonged to rigidly separated political hemispheres, were now thrown together in a shared world. Pravda Coca-Cola (1978) is a painting from this series.

2. The dominant pictorial element is a red banner that unfolds across the entire surface, showing a combination of incompatible signs. The ‘Coca-Cola’ logo, more or less the epitome of the capitalist market economy, is in full view, but each of the instances of the letter ‘C’ is composed of a hammer and sickle, the universally recognised symbols of communism. The entire logo seems to be misplaced in the context of the other motifs. A man has planted himself directly in front of the banner. Dressed in what looks like a uniform, he confronts the viewer with a thoroughly self-satisfied look on his face, his arms spread wide in a triumphant gesture. Behind him there is a crowd that is also holding up red banners. The masthead of Pravda frames the painting’s upper section, to the right of which a stylised, radiant sun can be seen.

3. Before considering Kunc’s picture in more detail, let us ponder Groys’s remark on its prophetic character. What does it mean for a picture to be called ‘prophetic’? Can it see into the future and disclose a world that does not yet exist, but some day will? In my opinion, a picture can only seem prophetic with hindsight – a view endorsed by Groys in his text about Kunc. As prophecy, a work of art is less a mirror of the future than a reflection of the past, in which the present recognises itself. To be more precise: the work becomes a mirror of a past, in whose preconceptions about the future the present recognises itself.

4. Groys’s essay, which attributed prophetic qualities to the ‘East-Pop’ series, was published in 1992, as part of the exhibition catalogue of the first large Kunc retrospective. 1992 was also the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the official creation of the Russian Federation. In the same year, the United States President George H. W. Bush, together with the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, declared the end of the Cold War. One year earlier, in 1991, Yeltsin had dissolved the Soviet Union’s former ruling party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and closed down Pravda – the party’s newspaper, whose lettering crowns Kunc’s picture and whose name is part of the picture’s title. In 1992, the viewer could read in Pravda Coca-Cola the reflections of a defunct New World, as if it were a message that had been sent from 1992 to 1978 and was now moving from the past into the present.

5. But Kunc’s picture bears traces of several time frames, linking historical events to prophetic dicta. The masthead of Pravda dominates the upper section of the picture. It is crowned by the famous last sentence of the 1848 Communist Manifesto, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: ‘Workers of the World Unite!’, followed by ‘Communist Party of the Soviet Union’. To the left of the newspaper’s name, which means ‘truth’ in Russian, we can see three medals, which were bestowed on Pravda at different times: in 1945, the newspaper was awarded the Order of Lenin for its mobilisation of the Soviet People in the Second World War; in 1962, it received a second Order of Lenin for its 50th anniversary; and finally, for its 60th anniversary, it was granted the Order of the October Revolution, which depicts the armoured cruiser, Aurora. The first shots on Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg) were fired from the Aurora, signalling the start of the Revolution. Below the medals stands the date when the newspaper was established: 5 May 1912.

6. The sun in the upper right corner is not part of Pravda’s masthead, but refers to the prehistory and genesis of the Soviet Union. The fragment of a compass, as well as the straight beams of light belong to the geometrical imagery of Russian Constructivism, an artistic avant-garde movement that stood in a close, but complicated, relationship to the establishment of the Soviet Union. Artists like Vladimir Tatlin, Varvara
Stepanova, Lyubov Popova and Alexander Rodchenko sought to put their art at the service of the Revolution and the communist state. They turned away from the ideal of autonomous art and towards the social utility of architecture, product design and propaganda. However, the rational geometry of Constructivism had an element of detachment from the world, which derived from its resemblance to the transcendentalism of its predecessor, the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, and, of all things, the ‘mysticism’ that the Constructivists saw and condemned in Wassily Kandinsky’s Abstract Expressionism. Circles emanating straight lines and rays can be found in the work of both Malevich and Kandinsky. These were the aesthetic elements of all art movements seeking geometrical abstraction in the first decades of the twentieth century, but the movements differed on whether art should act freely and remain detached from worldly matters, or whether art should be put to use in the interests of the Revolution. The sun in Kunc’s painting shines onto tall scaffolding at the picture’s right edge, referring again to a key aspect of Constructivism, since it was precisely through industrial and automated production that Soviet Constructivism – or Productivism, as it was named after 1921 – sought to contribute to the structuring of socialist society.

Overall, the upper half of Kunc’s Pravda Coca-Cola depicts several powerful symbols of the Revolution, going back to the time when the Soviet State came into existence. Like the myths of Creation, the symbols seem to derive power and creativity from formative moments: the Revolution’s opening shot from the Aurora, the founding of Pravda, and the canonical motto ‘Workers of the World Unite!’. These historical references are presented as the mythical source of a power poised to change the world: truth – Pravda. In Kunc’s picture, it is the sun of truth that rises above the communist dawn and shines into the future, signalling the promise of a coming communist society.

Turning our attention to the picture’s lower half, below the divide of the red banner and towards the crowd and jubilant man in the foreground, we are taken back to a time when this utopian society had become real. At least that is what the picture suggests. A joyous crowd has gathered in the streets, not in protest, but jointly to approve of the present conditions. The slogans on the small banners at the left of the picture exclaim ‘Peace for the World’, ‘Honour to Lenin’s Party’ and, on the right, ‘We approve of the Soviet Union’s Foreign Policy’ and ‘We will fulfill the Tenth Five-Year Plan’. These are no longer the days of heroic pioneering, this is the Brave New World that successful proletarian struggle has created, in which the prophecies of its visionaries have been turned into reality. The happiness achieved is sustained by constant, joyful labour, in accordance with the directives of an enlightened government. The man bearing the red ribbon of communism on his chest and jubilantly throwing up his arms radiates supreme confidence in the prevailing utopia. The portrayal complies with the norm of ‘Socialist Realism’, which Joseph Stalin had declared the official doctrine of Soviet art in 1932 by a decree banning all independent artists’ and writers’ associations and putting an end to the avant-garde’s role in serving the Soviet State.

The purpose of Socialist Realism was to glorify the working class struggle and communist society. Stalin called the art workers and writers who provided artistic education ‘engineers of the human soul’. The sentimental and idealising flock of happy subjects, who worship the communist idea, praised Stalin’s authority and carefully avoided all aesthetic challenges. The lower part of Kunc’s painting reproduces this fawning, servile imagery, so characteristic of Eastern bloc totalitarianism, while simultaneously illustrating the importance of the masses for modernity as a political force, an aesthetic motif and a material from which a nation, a people and a future can be formed.

In comparing Pravda Coca-Cola’s two halves, its upper half displays Socialist ideology, evoking foundational symbols that announce, like a prophecy, the world’s deliverance from the yoke of capitalism and class struggle, whilst its lower half depicts the promised world: a communist society freed from all internal conflict.

The main pictorial element, spanning the dividing line between the two halves of the picture like a shining curtain, is the red banner with the Coca-Cola logo and hammer and sickle. The banner unites the two halves, yet also conceals possible rifts and discrepancies between them. It does not, however, belong to the same reality as the rest of the picture. The creases in the banner and the contrasting areas of light and shade in the red fabric are used to create an explicit contrast with the graphic use of black and white in the rest of the picture. This increases the three-dimensional effect, because the rest of the picture seems flat like a photograph, or the open page of a newspaper, and this effect is further enhanced by the faint yellowing of the white background. Does the banner have the same degree of reality as the rest of the motif? On the one hand, the red fabric, partly covered by the man, appears to float freely across the picture space, fluttering in the breeze. On the other hand, it appears to rest on the picture, as if on a flat surface. The text of the banner – the Coca-Cola logo with the hammer and sickle – is held in a colder shade of white, fostering the impression that it is an alien element, obeying a
Perhaps the banner belongs to the same time as the work itself, the historic moment at the end of the 1970s when Kunc painted it. A specific detail anchors the picture in that period. The Tenth Five-Year Plan, mentioned on the small poster in the lower left-hand corner, was carried out between 1976 and 1980. Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States were once again heating up, after a brief cooling in the early 1970s. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, along with the confrontational strategy and increased armaments of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, had contributed to this overall decline in relations. The U.S. and other countries boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and, in turn, the Soviet Union and other member countries of the Warsaw Pact, including Czechoslovakia, boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The amalgamation of the symbols of capitalism and communism in one sign was an exceedingly explosive mixture at this high point in Cold War tensions.

Kunc’s gesture, in unfurling a red banner in front of a motif relating to the Eastern Bloc prompts the reflection that, at the time when he created Praha Coca-Cola, he had been living in the West for almost a decade. One year after the Soviet Union’s occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, in reaction to the reforms of the Prague Spring, Kunc had travelled to Italy, to study the Renaissance masters he so much admired. The Czechoslovakian borders were closed before his return and Kunc stayed in the West as an ‘involuntary émigré’. He studied with Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter in Düsseldorf. Together with his German friend, Peter Angermann, and Czechoslovakian friend, Jan Knap, he founded the artists’ group, Normal, in 1979. Pop Art was the only tendency in contemporary art that met with Kunc’s approval, so he decided to create his own variant of it, which he called ‘East Pop’. In the pictures and posters that he went on to create, he developed a kind of jigsaw technique for combining the logos of Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and Pepsi with communist symbols and slogans. He used these objects in street performances in the Federal Republic of Germany, but also on Red Square, in Moscow. Viewers could not be sure whether they were witnessing an extremely clever ad campaign or the founding of a new communist party.

Yet Groys points to an important difference between Kunc’s ‘East Pop’ and American Pop artists. While Pop Art turns the objects of the consumer society into icons and exhibits them at the museum for aesthetic contemplation (one need only think of Roy Lichtenstein’s comic strips and Andy Warhol’s soup cans), the political and commercial symbols in Kunc’s work are still connected to their original contexts, in which they still function as ordinary signs. Thus, these improbable combinations are more than a fusion of contradictory icons on an abstract ideological level. In Eastern Europe, says Groys, where at this time only a few people knew what Coca-Cola or a hamburger at McDonald’s actually tasted like, these brands did not only represent specific products, but stood for the entire capitalist world, resembling a mythical zone of forbidden pleasures and satisfied desires. In psychoanalytical terms, the commercial symbols functioned less as geographical references and more as a fantasy of the West, and of a condition in which the pleasure principle is not inhibited by a repressive super-ego. In Praha Coca-Cola, the symbols of authority and consumerism coalesce like infant fantasies, free of prohibition and restraint. In this interpretation, ‘East Pop’ seems like an artistic, archaeological excavation of the collective subconscious of citizens in a socialist society.

The geopolitical coordinates behind this psychosocial fantasy have been scrambled by the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. It did not take long after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War for the free market economy to provide all the promised pleasures and wealth to the people in the Eastern Bloc who had been isolated from them. The image of the West, as a zone of unattainable temptations, was almost instantly replaced by the diktar of the consumer society’s super-ego: ‘Enjoy, now!’. Seen in this way, Kunc’s Praha Coca-Cola is less a moulded fantasy of the forbidden pleasures emerging from the restraints of totalitarianism, and more the image of an economy of desire, defining post-modern consumer society. This is a reference to the heady experience that the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, has called the ‘ecstasy of communication’: the enjoyment of a world that has delivered all signs, symbols and identities from the gravity of reality, and thus from any obligation and guilt.

Here, the signs are offered as commodities, or more precisely, as souvenirs of a form of mutating tourist consumerism, constantly on the move in search of authentic experience, yet simultaneously in denial of any form of geographical or historical fixity.

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Praha Coca-Cola does not appear as the picture of a communist universe that fantasises about subsuming the temptations of capitalism. Rather, the picture seems to give shape to the seemingly unlimited capacity of the market economy to co-opt what is respectively ‘other’ and give it its own face. An anecdote from the Soviet history of Coca-Cola in Russia provides a clear illustration of this: during the Cold War, when the distribution of Coca-Cola was banned.
for the entire Eastern Bloc, the traditional Russian soft drink, kvass, was often contrasted with Western colas, as ‘the people’s drink’. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992, however, Coca-Cola expanded rapidly into Eastern Europe, reaching substantial market shares (at the expense of, among others, its competitor, Pepsi, which had signed a contract with the Soviet regime as early as 1972). In 2008, Coca-Cola launched the distribution of its own variant of kvass in Russia. When the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, visited the U.S. in 2010, the company introduced the same product to the American market as ‘original Russian kvass’. There was nothing left of the beverage’s former, ideologically impregnated, symbolic opposition; there was just the frictionless interplay of two pliable symbols in the context of global marketing strategies.

It is sometimes useful to be able to illustrate the meaning of one painting with the aid of another. In conclusion, I should like to compare Kunc’s Pravda Coca-Cola with another work of art: Self Portrait at Buchenwald. It’s The Real Thing from 1993, by the Israeli artist, Alan Schechner. Schechner’s work makes use of a famous photograph, taken in 1945 by the American photographer, Margaret Bourke-White, of former prisoners after the liberation of Buchenwald. In the digital collage we can see the artist, posing as a prisoner. He is holding a Coca-Cola can in his hand – the only pictorial element in colour – which is reflecting either sunlight or a camera flash. Schechner’s montage shows both parallels to Kunc’s picture of fifteen years earlier and differences from it. Both works – different as they are from one another – start out in a genre that lays claim to a degree of truthfulness. Kunc’s picture refers to the authoritarian idyll of propaganda, Schechner’s to the revelatory nature of documentary photography. They both refer to the totalitarian regimes of 20th century Europe. And both pictures are pervaded with signs of a consumer society bathed in a fetish-like glow that seems hallucinatory, yet still more real than the black and white historical background. Schechner’s irony is merciless. In his photograph, we see the artist clutching a can of Diet Coke (the low-calorie version of the cola) in front of the prisoners, with their emaciated bodies, as if in a diet commercial. The title, The Real Thing, refers to Coca-Cola’s commercial slogan as well as to both the historical authenticity of documentary photographs (this one having been digitally manipulated) and the short-lived promises of consumer society. In Kunc’s work, as much as in Schechner’s, the logo is but a small detail of the image field – an artificially applied trademark that does not exactly meet the demands of historical accuracy and truthfulness. Still, these signs control the entire picture, and more or less frame it from within.

Notes

4 The given date refers to the Gregorian calendar and equals 22 April in the Julian calendar, which was used in the Soviet Union until 1918.