STRUCTURES
Stas Shuripa, 2008

Uni A1

The work consists of about 150 paper sheets of the Uni A1 format that are folded and installed into a semi-ordered structure. The paper is lit from the bottom and with UV-lamps from the top.

Form and Medium: Format

Uni A1 is the name of the paper's format. The title of the work corresponds to what the work is physically. The work does not rely on metaphor, or on any kind of problematic outside of art. It is all about form.

Traditionally, form was understood as a spiritual entity that descended onto matter; it expressed the transcendental power of the ideal over the natural. Today, we must admit: form is just a border between any two arbitrarily chosen sides, the difference between any conventional "here" and "there." Form is thus not significant as such; it is only a starting condition for a relation between sides born from the mere decision to draw that border. *Pure form is a zero degree of meaning*. Form is nothing exterior to matter, or at least no more so than punctuation marks are to words in writing. Form is the grammar that organizes matter into situations that can be the points of departure for the production of meaning. And so also, neither form nor meaning can exist without the figure of observer, be it artist or spectator.

The more art is based on immaterial production, the more matter matters to art. But what is matter, or the medium? It is possible to see the evolution of art as a process of forms becoming matter. Time and again, initially unique forms multiply into ubiquity and, eventually, insignificance: epochs of culture become layers of natural history. Every old medium becomes a new message, like labor becomes capital, like being becomes existence, like language becomes communication.

Matter is not opposed to form because both can turn into each other. At present, the material base of culture and society are digital communication networks. In times past, theology and later history were major frameworks for the self understanding of society and culture. Divine law comes from above, the law of history is defined in the fight against the nature, but the law of communication comes from within the human interactions.

Matter (or medium) can be defined as a realm of multiple elements that are loosely connected with each other, but can be connected in a stricter way to produce forms. The materiality (what is given by default) of the rules of communication is manifested in so-called formats, or standardized, massively reproduced forms. Genres or rituals, templates or roles — all of these are formats. They are condensed expressions of the systems of the production of knowledge, of skills and algorithms — the basic elements of human reality.

The medium as such is not understandable from the level of the messages or the forms that are made of it. If the formats are becoming the law for daily life, and for many other arenas of communication, then art should see formats as its object. This is art's task: to make visible what is otherwise invisible. Or, in other words: the equivalence of the medium and the message, or context and content, is form.

Uni A1 between Context and Content

White paper sheets of the format Uni A1. They could carry images or words, but they don't, and they won't; they will remain empty. Still, we know that they were made to transmit meanings: it is as if they bear witness to the world of the possible. They are not situated in the way that is proper for them: they do not lay, but stand. Every sheet is folded and thus brought into three-dimensional space; that is how the possibility to carry messages is lost forever. Form is always a certainty, or what remains after all the possible is excluded. That is why form is a disaster.

Format is a massively repeatable universal form. Uni A1 serves as matter for the work, but

what can be done to make it present in the work? If it bears any graphic information, then we will see not the format, but only the image. That is why the sheets are folded, with one simple movement that is multiplied. This folding is the elementary artistic gesture and makes no distinction between the figure and background, the valuable and the superfluous. The fold does not depict anything, does not add or subtract; it is just something between the bend and the break. It brings forth the format itself.

All possibilities are left: there are no special effects, no narratives. It is almost an empty environment, though it is able to generate associations — virtually, i.e. in the regime of the "as if possible." The very seriality of folding results in visual semblance, hints of some imagery. Together, the Uni A1 sheets look like an urban landscape. It is not merely a superfluous semblance: architecture is the incarnation of formatted social conventions, the way urban areas look is conditioned by social relations as they are defined by today's technical possibilities; society's life always transforms the cities.

The life of paper expresses the conditions of social life. Like a good employee, paper is easily transformed: when folded, its resistance becomes the force that helps to position it properly. Contemporary reality is the flux of data flows, high tides and low ebbs of construction and destruction. Ambiguity: the flickering of values, standards, and scales. Minimal artistry, minimal reference, and resistance to recognition: one moment it looks like a scale model, the next second it seems to be just a bunch of paper.

Landscape, Sculpture, Installation

It is literal space where the sheets of Uni A1 is located. And an imaginary urban landscape that flickers through it. This double space is not made by representation, since there is only a vague semblance; but it does open up an aesthetic energy of space. The image of the city is abstracted and the paper is deprived of its functionality: both the literal and the imaginary are reduced to elementary traces, so that what steps forward are the primary forces that make us perceive the space. "Architectonics" in the language of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde.

There is also spatial duality of environment and sculpture, an oscillation of two laws for the gaze. Modernist art separated sculpture and environment as interior and exterior. Installation, with its inherent totalizing character, tends to eliminate its "outside": mostly it is perceivable only from within. Uni A1 keeps the quality of sculpture through the folding of the paper sheets, but because it is the work that forms the environment, it still preserves the character of installation.

There is a quality of landscape in Uni A1: it should not be seen in one moment, like a pictogram. Landscape, like installation, works with the space perceived, with mental space that can be illusionist, allegorical, or schematic. The encounter with such space can be spoken of through the metaphors of "window" or "text." But every window hides the presence of the wall; every text hides the materiality of its carrier. And every landscape contains the message of how to surpass it, thus generating its own temporality of seeing.

No landscape is fully accessible, otherwise it could not look back at the spectator. And to look back is its way to keep the spectator's body within the energetic field of landscape. After all, the nature of landscape is a network of interacting images, symbols, or data. Paradoxically, the highest point of landscape art can be seen in Sol LeWitt's "Modular Structures"—because it opened space that was a set of data streams.

Plastic Structures

The objects consist of plastic pieces the size of standard banking cards. Each of them is cut in the way that expired banking cards are usually cut. They are connected through these cuts.

Object: the Border of Autonomy of the Work of Art

The object can be seen as the proper form of the contemporary art work, a manifestation of autonomous art. The object, unlike representational painting or sculpture, is what appears to senses, not the depiction of something else. The object is the frontier that has allowed art to stay aloof from functionalization within design and the creative industry — because objects are just what they are.

Against the background of the communications culture, objects may look like waste, like monsters or apparitions, because according to the logic of design, the only place for them is on the margins of visual culture: they mark the limits of the drive for the industry of beautification. The object is excess, a *memento mori*. This points to the generic quality of the work of art: objects within the practices of Dadaism, Minimal, or Poor Art all were border marks of the realm where the cultural production of meaning at given historical moments ceased to function. The object in contemporary art echoes those megaliths that for prehistoric societies marked the end of human understanding and the beginning of the domain of the unknown and sacred. "Plastic Structures" consist of elements sized exactly like standard banking cards. Why not real cards? Because the character of the ready-made would relate the work directly to non-artistic reality.

The connection of art and life should be mediated by the specifically artistic formal inquiry. However, within formal experiments, a link, the naval of vague semblance with the phenomena of the outside world, may remain. Credit card, transport card, telephone card—all these are means of connection. These means are temporary: expired plastic cards are cut in the banks, and while expiration is their symbolic death, the cutting is their physical end.

Every end is a beginning. In "Plastic Structures," these cuts are used to connect elements into structures. Cards are cut and connected in looped chains according to the simplest possible rule: two cuts per card, on opposite or the same side of cards, depending on their position in the chain.

Standard form or format as such does not have to mean anything; it is redundant because it is the condition of possibility of communication. It marks the beginning and end of the message, the frame that gives form to the meaning. When taken into art it becomes a general sign of all these ways of production of meaning. This double abstraction, link-through-rupture, allows developing the language of autonomous art.

Structure as Object

The object and the thing are not the same. The thing as "thing-in-itself" is totally unintelligible, and therefore uncanny. It is primary chaos embodied and it is perhaps what lies just behind the object. Being an excess, the object should not have the fixed hierarchical composition that the traditional work of art should have. Being different from the thing-in-itself, the object is not only a chaos, since it presents itself to the senses as something relatively stable. Both composition and chaos are extremes of what can be called structure. So what is structure? It is form that includes a set of interrelated components. Structure is the complication of form.

The object is a fragment that is cut out from a pattern or a flow by the gaze of the subject. The artistic effort can often be described as seeing structures as objects. Taking a dynamic multiplicity in brackets, estranging it from reality with its causal chains and demand for the meaning, such is the elementary act that allows the distance between the work and the world, and hence forms the situation of art.

The object as structure problematizes its uniqueness. On the one hand, it is an example of itself, since it does not represent anything else. On the other hand, its identity is not entirely equal with its presence. Every visible structure can be stretched further in mental space.

Thus, objects as structures are always partial. The locus of such an object is not just a simple place: it generates the space of confrontational balance between integrity and dissipation, the limited and the infinite, capacity and possibility — in other words, again, "space as medium."

The hierarchical unity of the work of art, or composition, comes out of the old idea of the immortality of the soul and her autonomous interior world. Later, Kantian philosophy transformed this quality into the mind's capacity to synthesize sensory data in the act of apperception. The work of art was analogous to the transcendental subject and it filtered the flow of visual pleasure that fueled and supported the hierarchical, center-oriented construction of this subject; here, by the way, lay the ethical, i.e. political, function of aesthetics.

Today, visual pleasure has become ubiquitous, heterogeneous, and ornamental, and its production and consumption much more intensified and interrelated. In medialized and formatted reality, the integrity of the artwork thus becomes a crucial problem again: what other form can the work of art find if not that of the subject-centered composition or of a flow of evanescent imagery? Structure as object becomes an experiment, research on the conditions of the production of visual pleasure, or an assemblage of misrecognitions.

The age of immaterial labor and information capital dissolves integral commodity forms. The integrity of the artwork becomes a knot that binds together heterogeneous data flows and associations between them. In short, the composed unity of the work of art is replaced by networks of flows, but if autonomy remains valuable for art, structure-as-object can be a possible response.

Mute Form and Modernism: Aesthetics of the Disastrous

The black "Plastic Structures" may be reminiscent of Modernist spatial constructions. This semblance is not an extraneous part of the plan; it grew out of the conditions of the work, and it is important to understand the link between contemporary object-as-structure and the intentions of Modernism. There were two filters through which Modernist visual poetry conceived the world: the universalism of utopia and the totality of disaster. Eventually, as Theodor Adorno once put it, modernism had to recognize utopia as impossible, as a great failure and permanent catastrophe that happened to human history. The end of the Modernist utopian project meant the end of the poetic production of meaning through art. Here, in this subliminal conflict between utopia and disaster, lies the crux of the modernist mystery: the Unspeakable. The end of the poetic line had a name in ancient Greek: "catastropha." The end of the line is what gives the form to the verse, what finishes it through defining rhythm and style. Again, form is a disaster.

Today, the utopian impulse is splashed throughout the networks of communication culture. The inexpressible is submitted and distributed by language cast in channels and formats, through the very architecture of communication. Utopian energy is transformed into entertainment, corporate spirit, and ideological manipulation. If the interior became exterior, the inexpressible became the special effect, an element of consumption of culture. The rise of control means the growth of resistance: Utopian comes back in the form of the rejection of the given, in the dysfunctional and meaningless interconnections of objects and signs, through generative miscommunication, through a new appeal for the formal after the lessons of modernism are learned: purity of the medium and sacrality of the spiritual are the camouflage of control. Thus, "Plastic Structures" can be seen as negative monuments to the failure of the power of communication networks.

Sucking structure

This work consists of 191 tin cans painted black. The cans are grouped so that they resemble a map of the world. On the top of them, there is a structure made of straws.

Abstraction vs Emotion: pictogram of totality

The Sucking Structure is made from ordinary materials that are taken from daily life. The optical form, or the image, is not very artistic, either. The shape of the world map is one of the most widespread pictograms: it is immediately recognizable, one of those basic visual forms that recognize you before you recognize it. This pictogram does not have fixed meaning. Rather, the contour of the continents refers to the global power of humankind; it is a pictogram of global pride and power of technology, because we are only able to perceive this shape of the world through optical media. This meaning is dissolved: it is both too big and too small at the same time, it refers to the pathos of belonging to the corporation humankind, and it's abstract since this pictogram is produced by science and technology. Therefore, it can be called emotional abstraction.

The cans are painted black. The form is thus cleaned from commercial imagery, because no packaging information should be the part of the work. When painted, they are estranged from their role as sign in the economy. Thus, another quality is accentuated: they are incarnations of 20th century functionalism; their geometric form is what the logic of exchange and consumption made them be. The aesthetic dimension of pragmatic thought is stressed, but in a way that is opposite to design: through discarding meanings rather than through producing them. In this process of estranging the familiar (which is another

way of speaking of structure as object), it is important to avoid simulation or irony; the work, therefore, should not consist of ready-made. It should deal, instead, with fragments of reality in the tradition of Poor Art. Its heritage becomes all the more important today, with power's increasing capacity to produce illusions, images, situations, and meanings through communication networks. Black paint is important for other reasons, too. It is the sign of color's irrelevance, but not of its absence. Black is the matter itself. It is the mute color, the non-communicative one. Why does all of this matter? Once more, the above mentioned totality of disaster that happened to human history.

Space as Medium

"The Sucking Structure" is a imaginary and non-working model of global exchange networks. The straws are intended to suck the content from the cans, but the cans are empty. It is too weak to be a metaphor, but it clearly is a metonymy of mass production and standardization. Let us focus on this: the drink in the can, say cola, is an example of the utopian drive that fuels globalization. Generally, the market strives for the unification of the profit rate, i.e. the same cola should cost the same in different places. That is why the number of cans in "The Sucking Structure" corresponds to the number of globally recognized independent countries.

A can of cola is one of the most ubiquitous and standardized commodities; it can be seen as a dose of the energizing substance of liberalism. The straw, by contrast, is a deeply intimate thing: it is the extension of the body of consumer, the artificial organ of sucking that makes contact with the consumed drink more precise, that helps the consumer regress into childhood. The connection between the straw and the can is in fact an elementary drama, the collision of the personal and the regular, demand and supply—the meeting of inside and outside, channeled technologically.

Inside and outside, Here and There — these are the parameters of the space that came to replace the Cartesian, grid-like space of modernity. Let us call it the space of flows: it is the space brought forth by communication networks, the space that cannot exist independently of things and forces in it, or, as conceptual artists of 60s put it, "space as medium." Distances in this space are inversely proportional to the intensities of the interaction between places. Inside the same flow, all distances strive towards zero, but distance between points located in different flows tends towards infinity. Just as, for example, liberal and wealthy communities globally are much more intensely connected between themselves than they are with their physical neighbors, those who do not belong to the "free world."

The metrics of this space of communication is defined by polar coordinates: it consists of "here," "there," and "orientation" vectors. Network of localities connected through intentions: this metrics can be found in all major theories of the interior human world, from Augustine to Freud. That is how space of flows becomes an extension of the so-called soul.

The Autobiographical

What impresses me most as an artist is space as such. The very existence of space was for me always a mystical fact, the cause of shock and awe. Since my childhood, which I spent in the Far East, on the island of Sakhalin (close to Japan and Korea), I have felt this encounter — both traumatizing and invigorating — with an endless space that washes over the borders of my interior world like an ocean of unknown possibilities. My hometown of Juzhno-Sakhalinsk is built of standard Soviet buildings and planned as a grid, but the air contains the smell of the Pacific ocean, the very wind a witness of the presence of infinity knocking at the threshold of my perception.

These conditions were not typical for a Soviet person. I made my ways through physical and social spaces that were very clear manifestations of Soviet modernism, but intuitively I sensed the presence of another world, and had occasion to see messages from there: Japanese cartoon movies. In fact, the manga called "Ghost Ship," which I saw when I was 6 years old, was my first aesthetical shock; I understood later that it was the first call for me to become an artist. The atmosphere of manga, with it megapolises sublime in their fragility, civilisations that exist to be destroyed in the sudden disaster, that atmosphere gave me one of the first and strongest artistic impulses—and all this against the background of what at that time seemed to be the eternal order of Soviet life.

Age 13, when I moved to Moscow, I was struck by its gigantic suburbs, the so-called "sleeping districts": endless labyrinths of 16 and 22 storey buildings, mostly white like paper. For me, as a newcomer, they exuded some superhuman power and dictated very different measurements of space: the way to our Moscow grocery store was almost as long as the road that led through the entire center of my hometown. It was not like manga, because it was real; and I felt the character of this space sharper than did local kids. I could not communicate that feeling to anyone, and I started to draw the cityscapes. I make images of these cities until this very day, either two-dimensional with canvas and paint or three-dimensional with paper. And these cities are always empty, because they are structures of the space; I could call it interior space.

Epistemological Aesthetics

Roughly, since the 1960s, art has gone through two stages, namely those associated with the theories and practices of Conceptual and Post-Conceptual art. One of the names linked to the first of these stages was "Epistemological Conceptualism," which can be seen as the production of artistic allegories of the management of knowledge, as the avant-garde of contemporary cognitive capitalism, or as research on what may be called the administrative utopia. Post-Conceptual art, which had its acme in 90s, applied general rules and procedures discovered by conceptualism to local contexts and explored particular concepts in action. Today, the situation seems to have changed again. Contemporary art neither exists in some unearthly, absolute, sacred space (as it did before conceptualism), nor as a special effect of the creative industry. Its environment is the general intellect, or the space of communicating multiplicities.

This environment is characterized by the growing density of cognitive processes. The most abstract intellectual relations, or "common places," are moving to the very forefront of life. These common places, or, as the philosopher Paolo Virno defines them, the most generally valid logical forms, are: the opposition of opposites, the relation of reciprocity, and the connection between 'more' and 'less.' If art is turning from localism to universalism, then these forms are becoming basic for contemporary experiments with aesthetic pleasure. After conceptualism, art is increasingly working with objects that are not immediately given to the senses, with objects that are cognitive structures. But art is not an activity intended to give uncontroversial answers. Common places (folded sheets of paper, plastic cards connected through cuts, empty cans with straws) are exposed and pushed into a nonfunctional existence. The result is some "vague clarity," some flux of knowledge and non-knowledge; this is exactly the definition of aesthetics. Thus the aesthetic, the generic quality of art that defines its autonomous, non-instrumentalizable character, returns in the medialized environment.

The relation of art to non-art as it was generally conceived by modernist and earlier art is based on a maxim that can be implicit or not: every work of art is able to define some possible or imaginary world. Today, the shape of reality is the flux of data streams; it refracts inside art into the aesthetics of cognitive forms; thus conceived, aesthetics opens a way for art to produce autonomous values through the juxtaposition of the work of art to the world as whole.

Epistemological aesthetics is neither a style, nor an ideology. It can be manifested in whatever medium, by whatever kind of representation, or by its absence. Perhaps the following qualities can be named as loosely defining it:

a)   An appeal for plastic values through polyvalence of language. We know: the world can not be described, for it exceeds any discourse. The forms and values, are not consistent; but this does not mean that the formal drive should be rejected. The world, and hence the artwork, is a network of conflicts and tensions.

b)   Form and aesthetics come only after the lessons learned by the failure of modernism. The most important of these lessons is that no medium or language is transparent. Any purity hides the failure of autonomy. Hence, attention is turned to what escapes purity, to those small perceptions that are flowing beneath the ability to read and understand meanings.

a)   No form exists outside of communication and optical media. Every representation has a technological nature, is or will be digitalized.

Today, computers allow people to forget mathematics. If 20th century modernism discovered the "optical unconsciousness," then present network society is influenced by what can be called "digital unconsciousness." It contains a massives of small perceptions that have a numerical nature, those calculations, estimations, and algorithms that are not processed by the mind but flow through society and define the behavior of its members. In may have structure of language, but its syntax is based on seriality; every formation of the digital unconscious tends to exist as a multiplicity. The forces that form it can be named, following Mel Bochner's 1967 text, "Serial Art Systems. Solipsism": permutation, recombination, progression, and rotation of sets of homogeneous, loosely connected elements, or numbers. Technical progress deprives science from the monopoly of the production of knowledge. One of the consequences of this is that knowledge is not always certified by truth. Another result is that cultural processes become an explicit manifestation of what Hannah Arendt called "the life of mind"—life and thought becoming each other.

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