

Merlin Carpenter, "Burberry Propaganda Tour 2013", ARTPLAY Design Center, Moscow

#### **MERLIN CARPENTER GOES EAST**

**On Merlin Carpenter's "Burberry Propaganda Tour 2013" at ARTPLAY, Moscow, and other venues**

Moscow's art scene knows all about big touring exhibitions of the blockbuster kind; those that contribute to the spectacle culture of art. But what happens to a touring exhibition when it has neither extensive publicity nor openings at well-known art spaces?

With planned stops at peripheral locations, his truck loaded with fake Burberry fabrics mounted on canvas, Merlin Carpenter traveled the former Eastern Bloc. Oleg Frolov writes about Carpenter's stop at Moscow's Artplay Design Center. Among other things, the logics and logistics of the art machine are mocked in this cultural exchange of East and West.

Imagine a ubiquitous television scene of a victorious athlete waving a national flag while doing a lap of honor past the cheering crowds on tribunes dotted with sponsors' logos. Merlin Carpenter (born 1967) used the same all too well-known cultural framework of celebratory movement and quantitative achievements, nationalism, and consumerism to stage a greatly sweeping logistical show. A large part of the former Eastern Bloc territories was his arena; his banner counterfeit Burberry fabrics (the artist wittily points out the similarity between the checkered Burberry blankets and the Saint George's Cross flag of England); and the lap of honor undertaken to reevaluate the Western art world's expansion and victories in the context of historical events and

world politics surrounding and following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The project, titled "Burberry Propaganda Tour 2013", grew out of the artist's "Solo Show", which took place during winter 2010–2011 in Miami. "Solo Show II – All Power to the Factory Outlets" opened in spring 2013 at Temnikova & Kasela gallery in Tallinn, and then the exhibit went on tour in Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Poland, Lithuania and Germany – with one-day stop-offs at art galleries and exhibition halls and improvised shows at less common venues, e.g., a lifeguard station at a beach, and a cemetery.

Rented in Tallinn, Merlin Carpenter's white van entered the territory of ARTPLAY design center in Moscow around 8pm on Friday, July 19: the artist and his tour organizer Alina Astrova had driven straight from Latvia, nonstop except for a forced break at customs, where they spent 17 hours declaring the contents of the promo tour – 36 identical frames of about 1.8 by 1.3 meters in size with fake Burberry checked fabric stretched onto them. In the next few hours after his arrival, the artist himself unpacked and placed the "paintings" on the windowsills of the exhibition hall facing outward to the balcony, so that the viewers inside could see the cross of the frame and the title of each work – the latter the sole distinguishing feature of the pieces, which were made from nearly identical fabric patterns. Each title corresponded to one of the chapters of British science-fiction writer J. G. Ballard's novel "Kingdom Come" (e.g. "Snakes and Ladders", "Neon Places", and "The Old Man's Quest"), which tells the story of a consumer society welded together by violence and nationalism. A concert by Inga Copeland took place parallel to the project's presentation – in fact, a couple of hundred people who came to hear the music were the only witnesses

of the exhibition. The paintings were packed up the same day, and on Saturday, Carpenter headed to Saint Petersburg. The posters glued up around the grounds of the design center remained the only reminder of this fleeting event. In a few days the tour ended in Berlin, where the paintings were hung on a remaining section of the Berlin Wall.

Even though the absence of an audience motivated solely by Carpenter's arrival in Moscow was an accidental factor (related to suboptimal notification on the Russian side), it was totally in line with the artist's objectives. The main stated objectives of the tour – namely, propaganda and promotion – were left to chance. Carpenter refused to purposefully work with the audience, having decided to organize the event outside of the usual establishment schemes. Such an approach points to the central analogy on which the project is built. The practices of the art system are juxtaposed with the automatic, purposeless flow of goods, seemingly no longer designed for consumption – only at first glance do they appear to be dependent on new markets while, in reality, they are circulating in a closed system. The tour's main symbol, Burberry fabrics, carried a more elusive reading. Despite the luxury brand's market positioning, its clothes (often counterfeited) were easily appropriated and became closely associated with a part of the United Kingdom's lower classes, creating an unwanted image problem for the brand. This case allows Carpenter to describe the process of importing Western art for self-promotion as "high art in the wrong hands for the wrong reasons". Deciding to bring even more capitalism to Eastern Europe, as he puts it, Carpenter was taking the promotion of goods on the market and stimulation of demand to absurd



lengths. It is worth noting that the goods on offer are literally fakes; according to the artist, he was initially responding to the request of a Miami gallerist by offering to exhibit something ridiculous and, to an extent, to parody the very idea of an exhibition. One prank (the exhibition) morphed into another (the exhibit on wheels); but to call this project merely a successful parody on what has become a familiar mode of touring existence for blockbuster exhibitions and star artists alike, would be a simplification.

In fact, Carpenter staged a process of delivering art from the center to the periphery, but filled it with a specific economic and historical content. Mundane vehicles (a speedboat as part of a show in Vienna Secession, jet skis and snowmobiles at Bergen Kunsthall; a van that he drove to Portugal and exhibited there as a sculpture) are frequently featured in Carpenter's projects, both moving and merely on display, enabling the artist to consider the current art system's mechanistic nature, to mimic it but let it run on empty. If the movement of art from the producer to the consumer is still often perceived as a gesture of goodwill and selfless cultural exchange – it is most definitely presented as such in the statements of most cultural institutions – then Carpenter is placing it among a number of other types of movements specific to contemporary cultural economy. The artist challenges the claims of these types of movement – the promotion of an ideology wrapped up as humanitarian activity, the pirate distribution of information through half-legal channels, large-scale international educational projects.

This political propaganda of capitalism and consumption confirming the existing world order appeared rather bleak against a backdrop of abundant riches of modern city life offered at

the ARTPLAY center. Alternative, outside-of-the-system forms of culture's existence and distribution with their bet on amateur performance, faith in the subversive potential of technical innovation (Internet euphoria), cult of horizontal relations and communication (social networks), are refuted by the fact that Carpenter's subversive objects, a mocking example of cultural smuggling, went through a thorough customs inspection, were photographed, weighed, and declared to have the humiliating status of low-value decorative art objects. International cultural exchange did not occur: The tour took place in the shortest possible time so that the wider audience had no chance at all to get acquainted with the project, while the artist himself pointedly ignored the rules of cultural diplomacy. Such dethronement of one's own actions carries an important ethical meaning. The irony and problem of Institutional Critique's existence today is related to the fact that often freedom of speech is possessed only by successful Western artists, who take advantage of their position and criticize the system in which they certainly do not occupy the lowest level.

Being one such artist (and not hiding it), Carpenter deliberately created a situation in which neither the ceremonial procession of art, nor any alternatives, were possible. Through cities and countries, the Propaganda Tour carried the scum of ideological and political production, which has already inundated the markets of Eastern European countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Historically, Carpenter argues with the kind of optimism of the late 1980s and early 1990s as, for example, epitomized in his compatriots', The Pet Shop Boys', 1993 anthem "Go West" (its video joyously fusing Soviet propaganda with Western symbols). Carpenter now initiates a reverse



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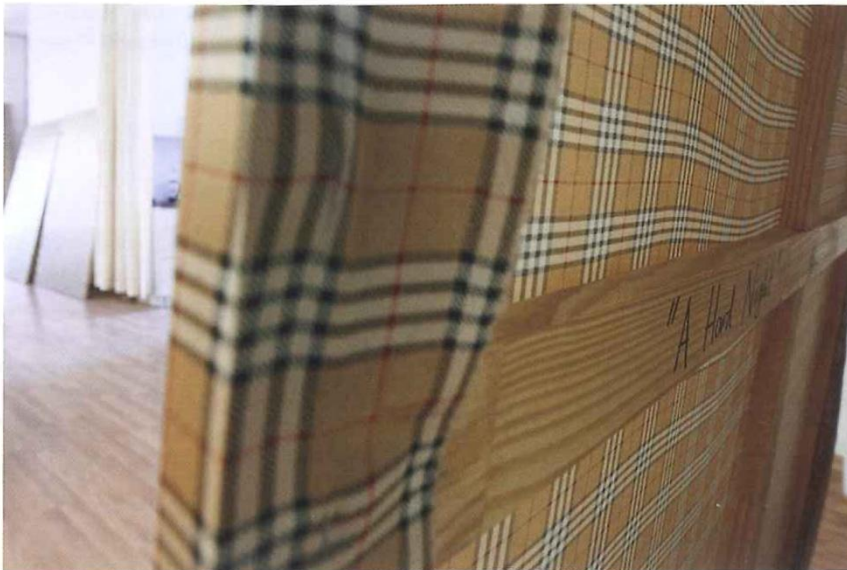
motion to explicitly point to the fact that complicated processes of cultural exchange between Western and Eastern Europe are returning to the realities of the colonial system. Traveling the former Eastern Bloc, Carpenter resurrected memories of the end of the 1980s revision of the borders and relations of nation-states that predetermined the expansion of the art system into new territories, a process that has by now become automatized and is devoid of any meaning except its own movement.

In a sense the accusations that assign contemporary art the role of a (pseudo-)intellectual amusement park, and the gatherings of bored wealthy citizens, would have still almost counted as achievements in the context of Carpenter's mischievous criticism: At least the vanity fair is impossible without the relationships between people, without the social needs and the thirst for communication. In his project it suffices that art exists as a logistics spectacle. Yet, each stop on the Propaganda Tour gave birth to a short-lived microsystem in which the clichés of the practice of art consumption, ridiculed in the overall

project, transformed into situations fraught with substantive experience. The works functioned less as objects whose value was assigned by institutions (cognitive, monetary, symbolic); rather, they served as necessary props, helping the artist to visibly state his message through showing them right on the spot. After the initial puzzlement, the awareness of art being shown in the here and now without any chance of repetition, created an intense atmosphere that is rare at the average opening, and the event, which was hard to find out about, was bound up with a feeling of inclusion in art as a reciprocal exchange: An undeniable personal reward for an actively expressed curiosity for art.

Considering Carpenter's critique, it is necessary to remember that the Propaganda Tour highlights two positions that reflect the polarization of the art world presented as a colonial system of circulation of cultural goods. While in this system Carpenter's position is that of a successful English artist "from the other side of the Wall," it would be useful for us viewers to understand which problems the project points to "on this side of





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the Wall." For the mobile Western artist, the only memory and result of this tsunami of exhibitions in exotic places will perhaps be a mere entry on her or his CV. Thus the project demonstrates the ambiguity of the idea of mobility – a quality that is a default necessity for uninterrupted work in the contemporary art world. It denotes the Eastern European sphere as immobile, submissively receiving the expansion of the global art system.

Surprisingly though, it turns out that in certain situations art does not lose anything through the absence of an art crowd, professional promotion or event management. I am inclined to interpret the disregard for public etiquette and the indifference, conventionalism, and automatism included in the project, among other things, as a hidden call to take the production and distribution of art into one's own hands, as the artist did, and what the local public on this side of the Wall (I am talking about Moscow) turned out to be unable to achieve, having left their audience rights to the mercy of cultural officials. By mocking the logic of big imported exhibition projects, Carpenter achieved an artistic effect that does not

work out for most of such exhibitions (again, I am talking about Moscow). Unafraid of the usual paradox of Institutional Critique – a project that criticizes the economic foundations of the art establishment, while being forced to additionally advertise the actions of the institutions and copy their behavior, even if as parody – Carpenter temporarily escaped the custody of the culture industry and offered the viewer a problematic experience of art, nearly free of institutional mediation.

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