

Artists responses to repression, bloodshed and cruel dictatorship

Instead of the more common representations of art glorifying tragedies I am looking at artists that portray the horrors in the most graphic, unflinching, honest manner. Their interpretations, impressions and records of uncomfortable subject matters such as war, poverty and inequality resonate with me personally. These artists have resolved a psychological or emotional reaction to events with their work. In sharing it others could also resolve experiences they have been through and it could be a reminder of how we don't want to live. The powerfulness of some art has struck me to see beyond the grotesque to appreciate someone's honesty.

During the time of the SSSR Russia was a socialist state, any art would have to be approved by the state so any 'rebellious' unapproved art was considered almost illegal, but often they would still find grounds to prosecute the artist on and they would be incriminated. Before Joseph Stalin's death the only state supported art were pieces created by artists employed as propagandists. They had to produce images of the country that Stalin wanted to convey to the rest of the world and Russian citizens. The works would be idealizing the socialist ideology, 'herculean factory workers' and the 'victorious motherland in all its monumental glory'. The strength of the regime kept the population repressed and scared to speak up but once Stalin was deceased non-conforming artists, acts and work became bolder and bolder. The people wanted to voice their suffering and distaste for how things had been run after so long of not having the freedom to.



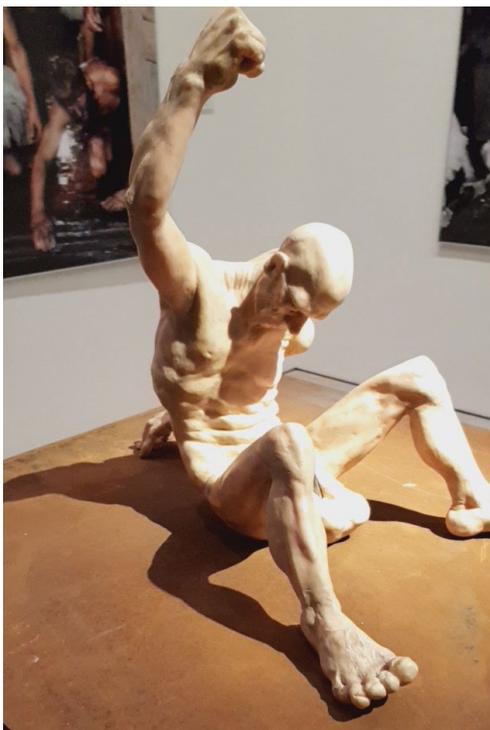
Olek Kulik is a Ukrainian- born Russian artist who pushes the limits of what is considered humanly appropriate. His most notorious work is the performance art he creates by taking on the physical attributes of a dog. He would adopt the method of movement by all fours and would wear nothing but a collar and leash if he was to be 'walked' or attached to various objects or people. His animal personality would be that of a young dog in it's prime, violent, unpredictable but responding to vocal commands and accepting an occasional pat on the head from those who approached him correctly. The aim of this rather radical performance, which could go on for days at a time would be to, as Kulik himself put it, to reach "a conscious falling out of the human horizon". I believe this means for him he wanted to completely lose all connection to human tendencies and separate his mind

from the fragility of a human's complex mind. His intention behind the entire piece is to provoke the widespread radical religious and societal conservatism he believes has taken over Russian society.

He has engaged in multiple forms of 'zoophrenia', meaning the reduction of civilisation that results in a lack of anthropological elements that make up a human. Taking on the various traits of goats, fish, monkeys and then dogs. Kulik took his work incredibly seriously and the depth to which he gave himself to the art once carefully considered and researched is admirable. The mental strength taken to get himself to his point of losing the human horizon compares to recollections of those who engage in deep meditation. Kulik sacrifices the human concept of dignity in order to explore the power each individual possesses to truly control themselves and what they do. The lack of encouragement for individuality in a socialist environment is ridiculed by his obscene actions. He is truly breaking from restrictions put upon him by his country and society. He stated - 'In Russia you have to be either brave or be silent. There is no middle'. Creative minds in Russia had felt deprived for too long and Kulik is a reaction to the oppression he believed he had been victim to. Another quote from Kulik on explaining the dog 'I feel its over-saturation of semiosis as my own tragedy, it's too refined cultural language that results in misunderstanding, estrangement, and people's mutual irritation.' Having restricted 'language' – art, speech, music, etc- creates miscommunication and unrest and the people will be lacking the freedom to truly express their emotion. Suppressing emotion can lead to volatile outbursts which can cause chaos. A harmonious body of people need channels for expression, it's a human right.

My current project explores bodies of humans emerging from trees. The bodies

blending into the bark as the bodies convey physical shapes associated with struggle. Often in the pieces an arm will be raised in feeble defiance as if reaching to wrench themselves from the roots of the tree. These images are metaphorical representations I decided portray the difficulty some people may experience in detaching themselves from the restrictions and rules of the place they originate from. They branch out as far as they may reach but they are eternally bound to their origin. Kulik in relation to these works breaks from the tree trunk and grows legs. He is not the humans I am shedding light on but a person also bringing attention to the tragedy I wish to show. All people deserve the freedom to create their own self. They should not be the controlled products of a larger power. I believe an individual has the right to become whatever they wish which is an idea I believe myself and Olek Kulik both shares. My way of

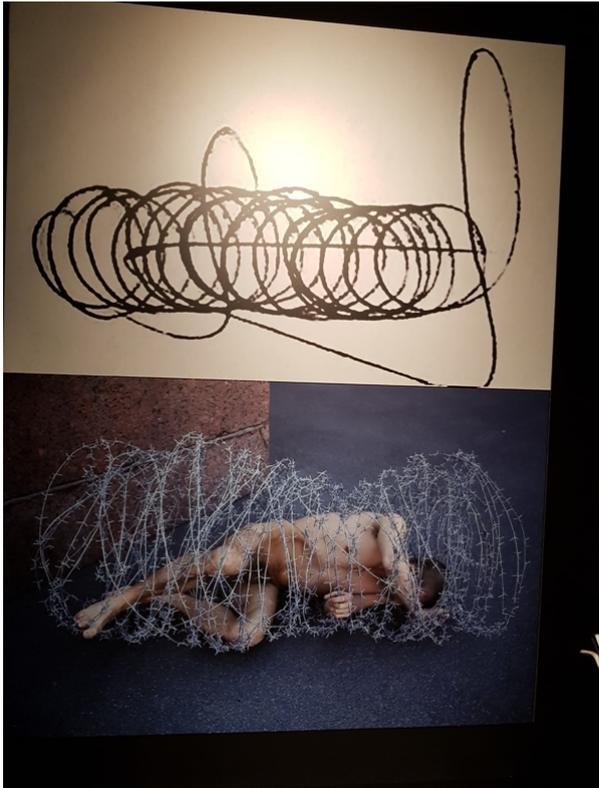


translating this visually may be demurer than Kulik's but both mediums are carrying the same theme as inspiration.

Another artist who rose from the fall of Soviet rule to express himself was Petr Pavlensky. A radical artist in every way he developed this approach after attending a Pussy Riot trial. Pussy Riot being a self-proclaimed radical feminist group which became active post SSSR. He said "Their trial affected me more than many things in my own life. I started looking at other people and wondering why they were not

doing anything. And that is when I had the important realisation that you should not wait for things from other people. You need to do things yourself." This reaction to seeing the persecution of the women expressing their beliefs inspired him to take a very hard approach to reflecting the anguish he felt at the state of the society he resided in.

Pavlensky's most recent work was him nailing his scrotum to the paving of the red square, a square thought to be the central point of Moscow. The significance of it is it separates the Kremlin, a former royal building and the current residence of the president of Russia. This act was not a rebellious act of defiance but an expression of anguish and misery. He said it was "a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of modern Russian society". Pavlensky feels the country has lost any touch with human abilities to forgive and the application of sympathy.



The red square piece was developed when he was in prison for a previous performance called the carcass. A prisoner recalled his time in the Gulag- a Soviet forced-labour camp- where prisoners sometimes would nail their scrotums to trees in an act of protest at the inhumane conditions. The prisoners were so distressed about the lack of consideration for their humanity they were driven to these extreme acts. "I didn't think much of it at first but then, when I began thinking that the whole country is becoming a prison system, that Russia is turning into a big prison and a police state, it seemed perfect." And where better to apply this than in front of the leader of the government's 'home'.

Carcass was a work in which he put himself, naked, inside a cocoon of barbed wire. "When I did the Carcass piece with the barbed wire, I was not just saying how wonderful our legal system is – people are inside this wire, which torments them, stops them from moving, and they feel pain from every movement. I was also saying

people themselves are this barbed wire and create the wire for themselves." This was a piece commenting on the Russian society itself instead of the government. He is calling out the people for building the restraints that contain them and harm them. This translates to me that Pavlensky believes the people, the society, allowed themselves to be ruled by such a repressive government due to not standing up for themselves and removing the barbed wire that was beginning to entangle them.

Pavlensky's views on his right to perform such radical acts are very clear "It was a very important step for me – to understand what happens when a person becomes an artist, when a person becomes stronger than their indifference and overcomes their inertia. I don't think an artist can exist without this and just be isolated and contemplative. An artist has no right not to take a stand." Inertia meaning - a tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged, which describes how Pavlensky feels the people of Russia have behaved precisely. They suffer in silence for fear of raising their voice. He managed to overcome this form of self-preservation in order to make a stance, rebelling against the regime in hopes that he might shed light on the vile existence he, and many others, resided in.



Spanish artist Francisco de Goya also expressed disgust at the way society approached a miserable experience. Goya witnessed horrific scenes as a deaf man which gave him a different experience than an average person. Goya was existing in a quiet world filled with scenes of disaster and aggression, this allowed him to focus in purely on what he saw without being distracted by noise.

War and conflict- since cavemen painting on rock walls- had been idolized and beautified by artists. They would paint soldiers as brave warriors and proud gentlemen but with The Disasters of War – Goya's 80-piece series- Goya was highlighting a side no one had wanted to record and dwell upon before. Aldous Huxley put it in 1947 "All Goya shows us is war's disasters and squalors, without any of the glory or even picturesqueness". He was exposing the inhumanity in man's war against man. The series is unapologetic, and Goya appears to have created the images as a protest

against the animalistic behaviour of those creating the destruction. Goya expresses a nihilistic viewpoint of war. War cares not for the individuals fighting and ultimately it is highly likely they will die in combat. A morbid reality that would not be broadcasted by any generals or leaders trying to encourage soldiers to fight for them.



Enterrar y callar

Bury them and keep them quiet



The same

Like with Pavlensky, Goya is exposing the truth of the people blindly following their leaders. By creating these stark images presumably for the people, Goya is inviting them to adapt their mindsets to rebel against this destructive practice and choose peace or at least have an awareness for what they are entering into. These prints in the time Goya was living were just as radical and obscene as Olek Kulik's dog performance piece. He never publicised the Disasters of War as the government of Ferdinand VII returned to Spain as King in 1814.

The Disasters of War are in three groups, the first being created during the Napoleonic Invasion of Spain- Goya's response to the scenes of war. The second group were pieces developed from the famine in Madrid during 1811-12, a catastrophic period in which 20,000 people died. Then there were the final pieces he produced under the repressive leadership of Ferdinand VII. Juliet Wilson - Bateau an Art Historian explained Goya's inability to publish the works "Under his repressive and reactionary regime" (Ferdinand VII) "there was no way that Goya could have published his set of prints that so clearly denounced all violence and abuse of power". If Goya had publicly exposed the prints it was highly likely he could have been executed.

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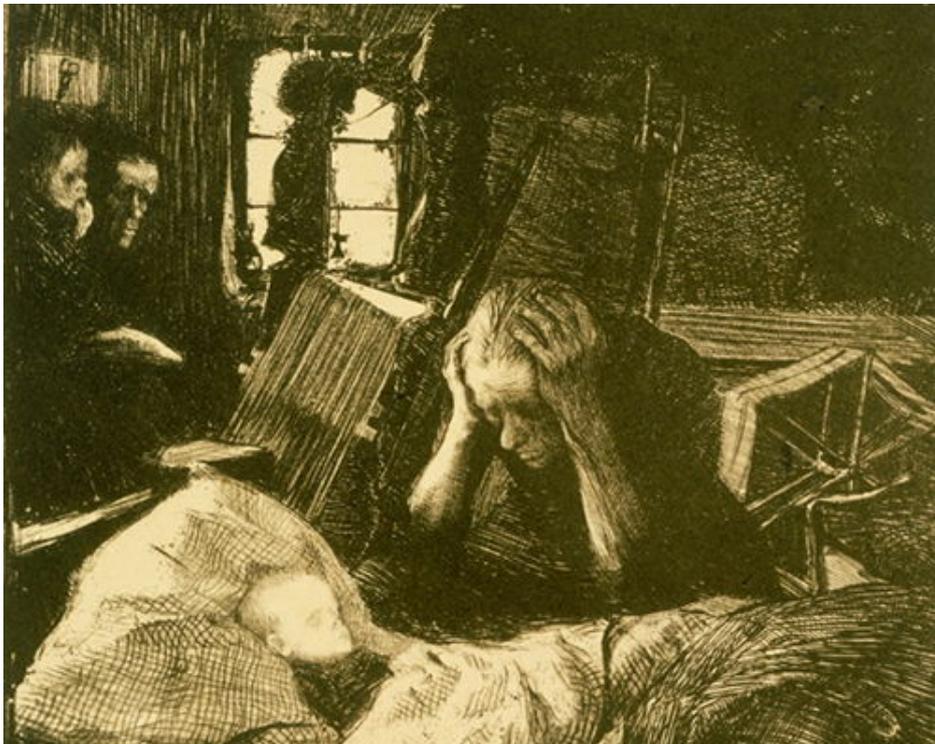
The Chapman brothers, Jake and Dinos are two modern artists particularly enthralled by Goya's Disasters of War. The brothers admit their great aim is to create work of 'Vertiginous obscenity' and find inspiration in Goya's prints. In Goya's time he could never have openly shared the Disasters of War, but the Chapman brothers were set on making the images even more disturbing. They reworked the pieces calling them 'The Disasters of Everyday Life'. The project is a real moment for contrasting the time of Goya with the modern day. The Chapman brothers exploring their outlandish ideas and views and then offering them up for exhibition in 2017 proudly. Goya hiding the prints in order to protect himself. Similar ideas, similar views of the world but exerted in two completely different manners.



Käthe Kollwitz an artist born in 1867, Kalingrad Russia followed Goya's example in creating graphic work exposing unsightly areas of life. Kollwitz focused in on poverty and rebellion. She was committed to portraying the dire lives of workers abandoned by the upper classes. Her way of working would be highlighting an individual's struggle which when viewed now jerks an emotional reaction from the 21st century viewer. Like Goya she wanted to share an unvarnished view of war. She used printing to create raw images of peasants succumbing to be the sacrifices

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of the disputes. Her compassion for the subjects of her work is prominent throughout. Kollowitz was considered to be a leading artist of her time and is still revered to this day. She believed the treatment of peasants was entirely unjust and unfair so depicted their repression in raw mediums such as print, which is by no means as easy to control as a graphite drawing or oil painting.



Peter Howsen who was a certified war artist during the Bosnian war has created deeply harrowing paintings from the disasters he witnessed. His work produced after the early 1990's faced controversy when shared with the wider world. Howsen was so affected by what he saw he has spent time in psychiatric units suffering severe mental health issues. He says of it 'That experience changed me for the better in a lot of ways. I went through my own kind of hell which took several years'. Despite the effects of his experience he decided to paint the Bosnian scenes again. His reasoning for revisiting the horrors was to show the world the despicable things that still occur in war in the recent times. He wants people to realise 'life is not about the mundane things which most people think are important'. Like Goya and Kollowitz he wants to highlight unsightly, unattractive real situations and devastation that they will have never encountered before. A poignant statement by Howsen 'We've got to look at the darker side of our human nature. We can be good but what happened in Bosnia made me believe that underneath it all we are not really' 'Underneath this thin veneer of civilisation is anarchy and bloodshed and terror and horror'. The natives were utterly dominated by the army and all of their human rights were stripped from them. Like Kollowitz, Howsen deeply sympathised



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with the human beings that were being treated the same way we treat animals and worse than. His work is powerful because he is portraying honestly the true brutality of the army's wish to obliterate and silence the Bosnians.



There may always be disaster and war caused by human nature but alongside that there appears to be an artist looking at it all with a clear view. Exposing the wrongs that are overlooked by the many and expressing compassion and acknowledgment for the few. These artists all have individual ways of representing the sufferers of repressed situations, but they all are seeing the people. Seeing the 'truth' and

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reacting to the injustice through their chosen mediums. I have realised that no matter how far the world 'develops' there will always be controversy surrounding artwork exposing the reality of an inhuman situation. Goya facing death for his work. Pavlensky and Kulik being threatened with the SSSR gagging them and throwing them in jail. One clear factor which shows development is how much braver artists have become over time, their causes becoming so overwhelmingly enraging they sacrifice themselves for their concepts. I respect the outspoken, unforgiving and brave work of the creators.

I believe in order to truly represent repression a certain shock factor has to be used as repression develops from a lack of human empathy. If you show the public the truth in its most gruesome form, then they will react and attempt to act on the horrors they have been shown. Pavlensky and Kulik used brazen methods to gain attention to their struggles depicting their feelings symbolically. Goya, Howsen and Kollowitz all made more obvious work highlighting the injustice in black and white so to speak. The Chapman brothers working off Goya were mocking the general public and society with the gruesome twisted ways of their work as if to say you cause all of these horrors now look at them.

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