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DYEING MINSK

fig. 065

Photo of a Wall painting.

Minsk, 2012.

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Kirill Mazhai

On weekdays I usually do quite the same number of things. After a couple of failed attempts to get out of bed I finally put my feet on the floor, then I take a shower and have my breakfast slowly. After finishing it I put some clothes on, grab my things and leave my house. I have to run down some stinky flights of stairs, as I live in an old brick apartment building and the elevator is always out of order. Only after doing so I'm finally out and can get some fresh air. The first thing I see is a rectangle. Nothing else but a rectangle. There's another dull brick building just in front of the entrance with a neon yellow rectangle painted on its wall. What is this odd piece for and why is it here? I'm afraid there's no answer. But, sure, early in the morning, out in the street, this rectangle is the first thing that catches my attention. Seems like this ridiculous and disgraceful pattern wants to show off on the completely plain wall of bricks, made in strict order and particular sequence, and turns this uniform structure into something more messy and abnormal. Uncontrollable coarseness made by cheap paint.

But the thing is, that this rectangle is not such a rare occurrence. I see at least five or six of those colorful shapes on my way to the nearest bus-stop. They can be seen literally everywhere, especially in those old parts of my city with five-story Soviet buildings at every turn. Freakishly painted geometric shapes are on playgrounds, fences, embankments, on the walls of new buildings, on cemetery gates, and sometimes even on road signs. There's no place in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, where you won't see any of those geometric figures, maybe except some rare well-secured government buildings. City dwellers have grown so used to them that practically no one pays attention. When you have something like this beside you, something you have to look at every single day of your entire life, the lines of what was at first unusual and mysterious begin to blur, and these geometric shapes just turn into something ordinary and common. It's almost like an extremely loud ticking wall clock, whose sound becomes less and less noticeable with time and finally melts into surrounding reality and becomes a part of it.

But, again, where do those shapes come from? At first it all may seem quite mystical and enigmatical to you. Without thinking properly or just looking at them attentively the origin of these geometric shapes is not even a bit clear. Seriously, there's hardly anyone who needs to run up and down the streets with a pot of paint in hand and paint those odd squares and rectangles on fences and walls, which occasionally are arranged into compositions, sometimes impressively huge ones. There's neither sense, nor use in doing it. The answer is quite simple, this straightforward street art is created by a bunch of city council workers or just cleaners. They have to paint out unwanted words or pictures drawn and written on different surfaces of the city. They can be anything, including a couple of words written on a wall with a marker, tags made with spray paint or full-scale graffiti and street art in the form of stencils, stickers and so on. Those people remove all of these, they just have to, replacing attempts to create artwork with commonplace geometric shapes. Curiously enough, it is their job.

Frankly speaking, Belorussian street art is in a very deplorable state. I'm not saying there isn't one at all, we have a lot of talented people who do their best and try to draw as often as possible. But the real problem is that their art is almost immediately removed from where it was created, thanks to city cleaners who turn deliberate and messy street art into undeliberate and well-ordered geometric shapes. It is like street artists are held as hostages by short timing. And instead of receiving some street art experience, passers-by just see obscure chaos consisting of oddly shaped colorful blocks which do not match what is around them at all. Sure, this will hardly stop a really devoted artist, but there is nothing pleasant in watching your work disappear under the tasteless paint of government. But the real problem and hitch hides somewhere else.

fig. 066

*Photo of a Wall painting.
Minsk, 2012.
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What is the reason in doing this? Why does the city council paint over that harmless street art? Let's think about it. The answer is in their almost maniacal intention to maintain order and stability, even on different surfaces like walls or fences, that must be plain, mono-chromatic and attract no attention. But that is done by people whose regular job is to clean streets and collect garbage, so that intention we are speaking about gets somewhat awkward and completely chaotic. Because of the lack of governmental funding or poor range of cheap paint colors – or it is just those workers' fecklessness that is to blame – but these geometric shapes get inappropriate and often kitschy colors. So blue rectangles appear on a white wall, a gray one gets its red squares, on an old brick fence they spear a whole pot of white paint and a pink wall gets green shapes painted on it. That is why city council workers turn into anonymous street artists, who love suprematism and psychedelia, undeliberately adding their touch to the streets of Minsk. Sometimes it really does look like a massive work of art, especially with lots of shapes of different colors combined together on one plain wall and turning into hypnotic composition, minimalistic, but yet really absorbing, though a passer-by's eye is blind to it, as it seems way too common. Belarusian street art is replaced by a gap of anonymous fake art made by order, which is trying to match the usual state of things.

There is so much irony in this situation, as street artists turn the regular order into a mess, but any attempts to work it out just end up a bigger complete mess too, sometimes quite awkward and abnormal. The color or shape of those figures not really matter, the thing is, that there are too many of them almost everywhere and it all does not make any sense, sequence or use at all. It makes us think of all the uselessness of all of these attempts to put everything that surrounds us in a proper and usual order. But, really, everything is no more than chaos, even if some things are not as messy and accidental. All that work is completely useless, order can exist only in chaos, in its initial state and any attempts to change it just make it worse. There's no use in trying to find that 'proper' order of things, as sooner or later it will crack.

Each of my weekdays starts quite the same way. I wake up, get out of bed, take a shower. Sometimes I don't have breakfast at all, forget my things and leave the house. I go down some flights of stairs, as the elevator is always out of order. And when I'm finally out, the first thing I see is a rectangle. Nothing else but a rectangle. There's a dull brick building just in front of me with a neon yellow rectangle painted on it, just to make the reality more ordinary and common, but in the same way it turns into something special, some unwanted piece of art. A piece of order in a mess.

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