

The Typewriter of the Illiterate

Interview with János Sugár

GEERT LOVINK



The Hungarian artist János Sugár¹ produced a stunning short video piece about the popular technology of the Kalashnikov machine gun. He used still photos from mainstream news magazines that are displaying the world's conflicts and morphed them into one, with the Kalashnikov gun as its continuous centrepiece. I heard about the video from the Dutch sociologist Johan Sjerpstra who explained to me why such a minimalist, almost non-video might be interesting among such an overproduction of images. Sjerpstra saw the piece for the first time in Mexico City at the Without Emergency Exit exhibition of Centro Multimedia. Sjerpstra was fascinated by the press photos that show the Kalashnikov turning into each other. The centre of the morph is always the gun. He also noted how special the sound is – the work of a famous jazz drummer, Bobby Previte from NYC, who once played a jazz drummer in Robert Altman's movie *Short Cuts*. According to Sjerpstra the

music track of *The Typewriter of the Illiterate* is a perfect mixture: a real sound morphing of the sounds of a machine gun and a typewriter.

>GL: How did you come up with the idea to make a video piece about the Kalashnikov?

>>SJ: I always collected particular images. I call it "collecting analogies". For instance, I take a picture whenever I see a broken shop window, or religious graffiti, or a piece of furniture on the street, etc. I like those series of images, connected only by a similar detail; it represents a special kind of a narrative. For me it is all about the foreground/background issue: what we consider important, the foreground, is only a pretext, and with the passing time the background becomes more interesting. Besides taking pictures with my camera I collect press images for the same reason. Among many other topics since the beginning of the 90s I started gathering images of people wearing or using the AK 47 gun. I was amazed by the fact that sophisticated weapons systems were never used, they were built, and they were carefully dismantled later on. They boosted national economies and the Americans won the Cold War with them.

The development of sophisticated high-tech weapons systems has had an enormous impact on the economies and politics of the world but, thank God, they have never been really used. What has actually been in constant use since the late 40s is the Kalashnikov machine gun. In fifty-five years, approximately 100 million Kalashnikov have been built and have killed more people than the atomic bomb. Its silhouette became the symbol of revolt and the favourite logo of freedom fighters and terrorists. In Burkina Faso, the Kalashnikov for some years was on the national coat of arms. Mozambique has the Kalashnikov beside an open book and a spade on the national flag.

In 1995 I had already a large enough collection, but I had no access to the proper hardware. I started morphing the images, but it looked too clumsy and complicated. Only six years later technology, accessible to me, had developed to such an extent that such a simple work could be realised.

>GL: Could you tell us something about the history of this world-famous machine gun?

>>SJ: The general history of the machine gun is also interesting. When engineering helpfully solved the technical problem of a fast killing machine, it was considered so immorally savage that for a while it was used only in the colonies; just at the end of WW1 was the machine gun used in European battlefields. Analogies of the machine gun to the film camera are also obvious. Paul Virilio writes about this in his famous *War and Cinema* book. Nowadays the infamous AK 47 (later AKM) is a fetish, a cult object, and a successful design piece. Right besides the Jaguar E type, the Kalashnikov should be on display in the New York MoMa's design show; and in an instant with these two objects we depicted the 20th century.

The technical speciality of the AKM is its simplicity and efficiency. It has only a few parts; even a village blacksmith could repair it. But its other speciality is maybe more important: as a part of the Soviet power politics, it was licensed to clone, like the IBM PC; it was produced in twenty countries (including Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Israel, Egypt) and

the Kalashnikov made a bloody carrier as the poorest peoples' master key to history. The Soviets discovered the distribution of unrest. Need a gun? Here you are. Like selling drugs in front of a school. With one loading one can kill twenty people, and in societies where ambitions cannot have other safety valves, it is an option for expressing oneself. In Uganda you can have it for a chicken, in Angola for a sack of rice. It is the Esperanto of aggression. Aggression is a status symbol, even in the poorest countries.

Somalians have a familiar proverb: "I and Somalia against the world, I and my clan against Somalia, I and my family against the clan, I and my brother against the family, I against my brother". Around 50 Million AKMs are in use around the globe.

>GL: What do you know about Mr. Kalashnikov himself? Do you see it as a symbol of Soviet power?

>>SJ: I have seen him a couple of years ago in a German documentary. My impression was that he is a rather nice person. He said it is the Germans' fault that he became a weapon designer, the Germans had such a machine gun and the Soviets didn't. He comes from a peasant family of 18 children, he went to the war (to the Great Patriotic War, as they called it) and in 1941, as a 22-year-old wounded tank commander, made the first sketches of a new weapon in a military hospital. Later, his first prototype was refused by the experts but he was sent to Moscow to study. He did not mention there that his parents were exiled by Stalin, and one of his brothers was in a forced labour camp for nine years. And he spent most of his life as a weapon designer living in anonymity in a closed-off military area. In some of the early interviews he gave after 1990 he speaks about his concerns about being a weapon maker, feeling somehow guilty; but as he became later a celebrity he consciously avoids those issues. With his son he produces mainly hunting weapons, and useful goodies, like lawnmowers, fire extinguishers, sprinkles. And the newest, NATO compatible, 5.56 mm AKM.

>GL: The title of the piece, *Typewriter of the Illiterate*, is amazingly precise and tells half the story. Where did you find the title?

>>SJ: I found it in a German newsmagazine. Der Spiegel used it as a motto in an ad for a book of Barry Sanders, professor of English at Pitzer College, author of *A Is for Ox*, *The Collapse of Literacy*, *Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age* and *The Private Death of Public Discourse*. He says "The gun is the typewriter of the illiterate", or something like this, because I had to translate back from German to English, since I couldn't find the original source. I like the poetical absurdity of this extremely simple and precise definition. Sanders claims that the contemporary erosion of our interior space – where the reflective life occurs – accounts for the decline of private ideas and decent public discourse. Why has our culture become increasingly violent? The falling apart of evidences of identities creates aggression, and literacy supplies not just criticism, but empathy too.

>GL: Would you relate the widespread use of the Kalashnikov with the rise of a global civil

war, a conflict of all-against-all? Do you see any use for the machine gun type of art? I'd relate the Kalashnikov somehow with remote conflicts. But then it was used extensively during the nineties' Yugoslav wars. How near is the Kalashnikov?

>>SJ: Maybe the gun itself not, but the concept of the Kalashnikov is very near. In the western hemisphere we have a broad choice of handguns, Kalashnikov is only the solution for historically unbalanced places, as one has to use a Landrover in Africa, not a Ferrari. The interesting thing is that the Kalashnikov fits into the process of a once special and expensive product getting cheaper and cheaper through mass usage. The watch was a rarity and now you can have it in every corner. In this sense the Kalashnikov, as the ultimate attention generator, is a similar consumer product, an element of a certain lifestyle. We live much more in an all-against-all situation, because the final frontier of all the consumer products is the single individual. Everyone has to have one photo/video camera, telephone, etc. on his/her body. We are individually fragmented communication centres, and a gun is a possible direct communication accessory.

Geert Lovink conducted this interview with János Sugár after a private screening of his work in Sydney.

NOTES

1. János Sugár studied in the Department of Sculpture at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest from 1979 to 1984. Between 1980 and 1986, he was actively involved in the exhibitions and performances of Indigo, an interdisciplinary art group led by Miklós Erdély. His work includes installations, performances, as well as film/video. He has exhibited widely throughout Europe including at the Documenta IX, Kassel (1992) and Manifesta I, Rotterdam (1996). Since 1990, Sugár has been teaching art and media theory in the Intermedia Department, Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest. He completed an Artslink residency at the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1994, and fellowships at Experimental Intermedia, New York (1988 and 1999). His films were screened at the Anthology Film Archives in New York in 1998. He can be contacted at: sj@c3.hu.

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