

The Creation of Brainstorms and Other Destructive Aims

Cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder.

Futurism aims to destroy by the machine myth....

Dadaism aims to destroy by ridicule.

Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane....

Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm.

Surrealism aims to destroy by denial of reason....

-George A. Dondero From a speech given in the United States House of Representatives, 16 August 1949. Published in Congressional Record, First Session, 81st Congress, Tuesday, 16 August 1949.

Yevgeny Fiks' exhibition at Temple gallery, Communist Conspiracy in Art Threatens American Museums, Sept. 8-Nov.9, 2010 centers on the rabidly anti-communist and conspiratorial ravings of the Michigan congressman George A. Dondero, who in the late forties, amidst the hysteria of McCarthyism, publicly likened modern art to 'germ carrying vermin,' claiming that it was 'communist inspired and communist connected.' This foreign disease, Dondero opined, had infected various public institutions and aimed to destroy the very fabric of American culture.

Rather than treat Dondero as a ludicrous abomination, a laughing stalk fit for satire or mockery, as one might expect, Fiks reinvents him as a corrective to the dominant and depoliticized reception of modernism, most notably enshrined at the MoMA. By taking his claims seriously, Fiks approaches the exhibition as a lawyer building a case that legitimates rather than discredits Dondero. The paintings that reproduce 'damning' quotes by Marc Chagal, Stuart Davis, Frida Kahlo, Magritte and Picasso and the drawings that reproduce portraits that Picasso and Fernand Léger did of members of the communist part of France are not supposed to be read aesthetically, but rather considered as evidence. As is didactically rendered in Flag Drawings, the signatures of Max Ernst, Gottlieb, Jacob Lawrence and Jackson Pollock, etc.—and thus the very historical identity of their painterly experiments—are reduced to exhibiting nothing other than a political commitment: an allegiance to the hammer and sickle. By actively repoliticizing these canonical representatives of modernism, Fiks pits himself against the efforts of Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of the MoMA who, at the time, had actively sought to depoliticize modernism.

This is particularly evident in Stalin's Directive on Modern Art, 2010: a vitrine that presents

a photographic history of the ties that figures such as John Heartfield, André Breton, Marc Chagal, Paul Eluard, and Picasso had either to the Russian avant-garde or the communist party (should communist party be capitalized?). The title alludes to a directive attributed to Joseph Stalin in the early 30s by Eleonor Jewett in the article Modern Art as a Tool of Propaganda published in the Chicago Tribune in 1955. The directive reads: 'create confusion in art and literature, promote the juvenile, the primitive, and the insane, and to further the perverted and the aberrant.' Fearing the consequences of such a directive and suspicious of its apocryphal status (considering Stalin's official endorsement of Socialist Realism), Alfred Barr set about to disprove the historical veracity of the attribution and thereby neutralize any relation between modernism's formal radicality and the political radicality of Marxism. By reaffirming the highly dubious truth of this directive, Fiks

perverts Alfred Barr's reactionary strategy that serves to conceal these artists' political commitments, exposing how institutions such as the MoMA continue to actively repress this history through their commitments to a formalist interpretation of modernism. We are thus invited to consider more than a serendipitous historical connection between Tour of the MoMA with Congressman Dondero and the modified catalogue, Communist MoMA highlights. The formal history that such a catalogue constructs retains the imprint of Dondero's reactionary ideology, subtly and not so subtly serving to distort the historical record. By exposing the truth of Dondero's paranoia, he touches upon the mechanisms through which repression is historically accomplished.

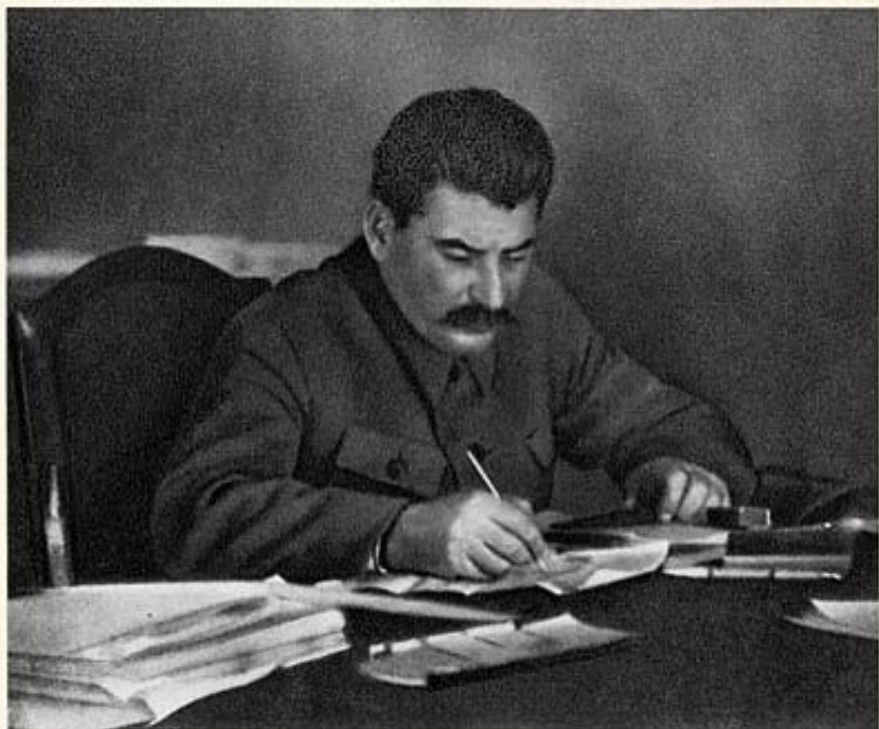
However, there is a sense in which Fiks' identification with Dondero does not go far enough. For although he accepts Dondero's conspiratorial hypothesis—the collusion between modernism and emancipatory politics—the exhibition strips Dondero's argument of its hyperbole and bombast, and its reliance on metaphors of degeneracy. Fiks chooses to adopt the non-aesthetic 'aesthetic' of the document, and thus the style of 'conceptual art.' He thereby distances Dondero's rhetoric from all of the fascist tropes that thoroughly saturated his discourse. He separates Dondero's hypothesis from the form of its presentation and thereby emphasizes the biographical and personal commitment that these artists had to communist ideology. This is an interest that one also finds in his paintings of members of the American Cold War Veterans Association or American communists in Moscow. As a result, he risks reproducing the very thing that he sought to resist; like Barr, he effectively separates the political commitment of these artists from their aesthetic commitments.

However, for Dondero, the destructive dimension of the various 'isms' of Modernism (and thus its nefarious political commitments) could not be separated from their form. Fiks thus risks missing the crux of Dondero's paranoia that consists in linking the formal destructiveness of the modernist artistic gesture to a destruction of bourgeois culture itself.

In reply to a letter by Charles Plant excoriating President Eisenhower for attending an event celebrating MoMA's 25th anniversary, Dondero writes, "Modern art is a term that is nauseating to me. We are in complete accord in our thinking regarding this subject and its connection with communism. No one is attempting to stifle self expression, but we are attempting to protect and preserve legitimate art as we have always known it in the United States."

The truth of Dondero's paranoia does not consist in a "real" connection between modernism and historical communism, but in the fact that the negativity of modernism (its aim to destroy) reveals the effective absence of a legitimate American art. This is precisely the Real that induces Dondero's nausea.

-Alexi Kukuljevic



The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY