

PONOMAREV: SEA CHANGE

'Ponomarev: Sea Change' Alexander Ponomarev: *Subtizioso*, Venice Biennale, 2009
(English and Russian)

*Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange....* Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Ponomarev's sea-beast noses and dips in the Venice canals: one brave mariner at the helm down below. No military dazzle: the beast is striated like the most mysterious fish: striped, spotted, brilliant, a self-declared art vessel. And Ponomarev is the captain: 'the first submarine-man in the history of art'? Yes, but the taming of a vessel in Venice, beached in the Russian pavilion or browsing and bobbing gently in the water, is the literalisation of a metaphor for art itself.

A voracious reader of Jules Verne and Camille Flammarion, Alexandr Rodchenko inscribed a dark torpedo on his *Black on Black* of 1919; signalling the human explorer in his constructivist/metaphysical cosmos.¹ In 1933, the young Alfred H. Barr, envisioning art itself pushing through the flux of time into the future, drew a blunt-nosed torpedo driven by the propellers of European and non-European forms from the past. Fusing art's slow move into the modern with its container, his museum, he said 'is a torpedo moving thought time, its head, the ever-advancing present, its tail the ever-receding past of fifty to one hundred years ago'.² New York's Museum of Modern Art would be consecrated to his modernist idealism.

Ponomarev, then, not only brings the torpedo into art, he takes art back to the torpedo: from metaphor to its massive materialist realisation. The missile becomes a carnival. Yet there is a message in his medium, and, as with Bakhtin, his Soviet compatriot, there is message in his merriment. *Homo viator*, Nicolas Bourriaud's migrating art-animal, follows the flight paths from city to city and from fair to fair, from biennale to biennale.³ In contrast, Ponomarev reminds us by implication, of the more covert operations that continue beneath the sea. Espionage, military and industrial surveillance, weapons systems - or the politics of piracy, and the dealings behind the multitudes of drowned boat-people that people the sea between Italy and Africa - never so topical as today. Weak versus strong; strong versus weak. The carnival signals the missile. The 'real' submarine - a ready-made - charms us with its obsolescence; the fascination of still-functioning machinery, the steering, the periscope, the rusting poetry linked with a Cold War almost forgotten - to quote Barr, the 'every-receding past of fifty years ago...' But the superannuated monument is a warning: behind every decoration, behind every stripe may still lurk the symbolism of punishment.⁴ The Soviet submarine man is a master of dialectics.

¹ Thanks to Alexander Lavrentiev, Rodchenko's grandson for his lecture at Tate Modern, March 28th, 2009 and permission to use these images. Rodchenko read Camille Flammarion's *Voyages aériens* Paris, 1869, translated into Russian.

² Alfred H Barr, *Diagram of Ideal Permanent collection*, 1933, Alfred H. Barr Junior Papers, 9a 7a, Museum of Modern Art, archives, New York, SCALA art resources.

³ See Nicolas Bourriaud ed., *Altermodern*, London, Tate Triennale, 2009.

⁴ For the long history of the malevolent stripe see Jean Clair, *Le Nez de Giacometti, faces de carême, figures de carnaval*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

