

E. Drobysheva /// The trial, or, is there life according to kafka?

This is an abridged text. The full version (in Russian) can be found at: www.ikd.ru/node/9926

The case of Novosibirsk artist Artem Loskutov, arrested on May 15 of this year, is now widely known outside of Novosibirsk. It has given us serious cause to pay particular attention to the work of the law enforcement authorities, particularly the Department for Extremism Prevention (the so-called Center “E”), which took such an interest in Artem’s art. On the other hand, it should cause us to reflect on the methods and forms of resisting what should be characterized as Kafkaesque absurdity rather than growing idiocy.

It would appear that the heightened interest in the Loskutov case is connected not so much with his activism. And not only with the fact that the charge of “possession of a large quantity of narcotics” or the efforts of Center “E” to uncover Loskutov’s involvement in the organization of an international criminal group seem totally ludicrous. It is rather that the absurdity of the charges and the obvious partiality of the judges, who unexpectedly and harshly remanded him to police custody, were perceived by many people, including those who have nothing to do with politics, as a challenge. A friend of mine, an apolitical photographer, noted that for the first time he had an acute sense of the difference between “us” and “them.”

The Loskutov case has clearly indicated that there are two different groups on opposite sides of the barricades and that they operate with different forms of logic. The image of the barricade arises because those who are on the other side clearly intend to fight, and their victory would mean that Artem would be locked up for a minimum of three years. If the Center “E” version of the story were proved, that term would be even longer.

It is interesting that various kinds of absurdity often characterize those who work “on the other side.” We have grown accustomed to law enforcement acting harshly and often illegally. We are gradually becoming accustomed to the apparent absurdity and paradoxical nature of their actions, as well as the workings of the courts that hear the cases prepared by those law enforcement agencies. The dispersal of the innocent Monstrations and 500-ruble fines for the “anti-globalist” slogan “Y-y-y-t!” have long existed side by side with extortion of money from immigrants, the well-known methods of the traffic police, and beatings in detention facilities. Jokes about how the law enforcement agencies operate circulate in society along with hair-raising stories on the same topic. At least it can be said that no one thinks those stories impossible or even isolated anymore.

The case of Artem Loskutov is the most publicized, but at the same time it fits ideally into an entire string of recent cases, into an eerily absurd overall scenario.

The great number of absurd and strange aspects in the work of the law enforcement agencies, which are reinforced by the just as perplexing (to put it mildly) work of the judges, gives rise to many questions. For example, where does the jurisdiction of the now so active Department for Extremism Prevention end? (The May 1 demonstration in Petersburg, the history/poetry/art seminar in Nizhny, and the Monstration are not instances of organized crime or extremism.) How many other arrests have gone unnoticed by the public? Can we hope to place them under public scrutiny, or at least be informed about what is happening? How can we put an end to the increasingly frequent arrests by plainclothes officers? What can you do if you are a witness or an unwilling participant in such an arrest, etc.?

Returning to the Monstration, we should remember that at one time it was done as our own native form of leftist political art. For us it was an experiment and a challenge. Back then, the Monstration did not fit into any rules or traditions. Consequently, it forced everyone to have some kind of opinion about it. It was a game and, at the same time, a challenge. Something absurd and wholly undefined, it issued a challenge to everyone, including those within the System. It was precisely for this reason that the actions of the police, the charges of anti-globalism, and the 500-ruble fines just seemed to be absurd and, for that reason, amusing manifestations of the System.

At first the odds were clearly in our favor. What has changed since then? Thanks in part to Artem, the Monstration has become a tradition. It seemed that the game continued, although the scenario had become quite predictable. This year, Artem probably sensed that and decided to step aside. But things didn't go according to the usual scenario. On May 1, a smaller, withered and displaced Monstration went ahead, while Artem voluntarily discussed the future development of art at the Center for Extremism Prevention. This fact didn't keep Center "E" from later giving investigators a statement that Artem had committed unlawful acts at that time. Then the Center for Extremism Prevention (!) conducted "a routine raid to counter illegal drug trafficking" (!); then there was the possession "of large quantities," the text messages sent by law enforcement officials at the custody hearing, the disproportional pre-trial detention ruling, etc. (All of this has been written about many times.)

Isn't this a worthy response to the Monstration? The System got into the game by using the logic of the absurd that had once defied it. Doesn't this remind us of Kafka's *Trial*? If so, then Artem really is in danger. They might release him, but then again they might not. Or they might release him and arrest him again (or claim that while in pretrial detention he harassed someone and pin another charge on him). But, unfortunately, this isn't just about him. The problem is that in this game anyone could wind up in his shoes.

So what conclusions should we draw from the situation we have described here? There is still the need for an asymmetrical response to the System, but now, given that it has mastered the logic of the absurd so well, the only possible asymmetrical response is the return to simple, intelligible forms of civic engagement. As the saying goes, might makes right. It is pointless to plant marijuana in the pockets of people marching in a thousand-strong demonstration. You can machine-gun them or crush them with tanks, but that is no longer Kafka's world, but Pinochet's. That world has another logic that is cruel and bloody but at the same time more clear-cut. No matter how Artem's trial ends, it has already produced one important outcome. Now, many more people are prepared to march not under the slogan "Y-y-y-t," but under a more prosaic slogan that, as it turns out, is more painful to the System: "Down with police abuse of power!"