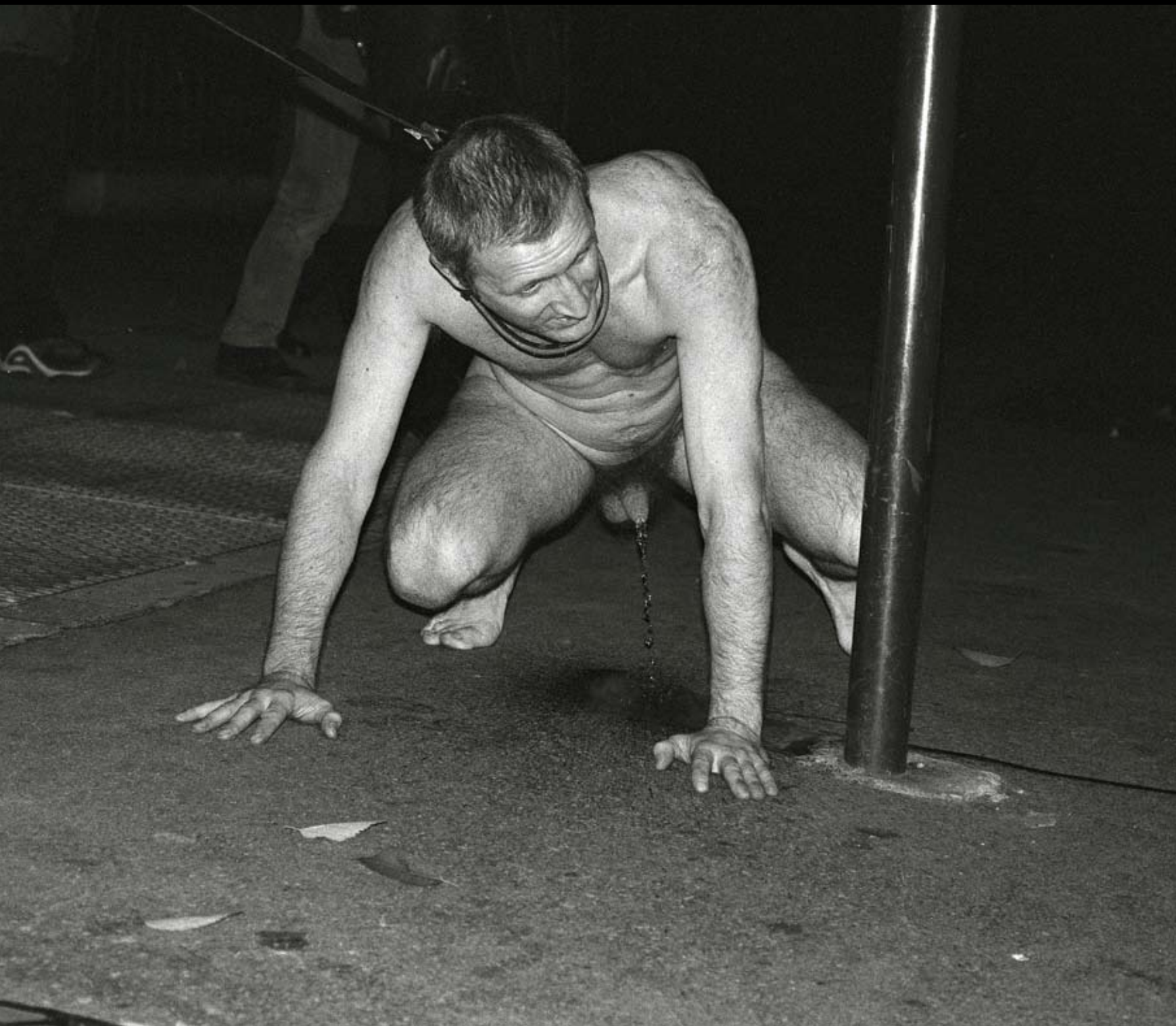


Gestures of an Era, or the Era of Gestures

ANDREI KOVALEV

The phrase “performance in the 1990s” immediately evokes several images: Oleg Kulik slaughtering a pig at Regina Gallery; Anatoly Osmolovsky sitting on the shoulder of the Mayakovsky monument; Oleg Kulik again, this time attacking passers-by like a rabid dog; Alexander Brener masturbating on the diving board at the Moscow swimming pool or calling out Boris Yeltsin to fight on Red Square; the barricade erected on Nikitskaya Ulitsa; members of the Radek group on top of Lenin’s mausoleum; the crucifixion of Oleg Mavromatti; and so on. These stories have become pure myth, retold with breathy excitement and longing for glory days lost to the past, or cited in various criminal court cases.

Artchronika is publishing excerpts from Andrei Kovalev’s book *Russian Actionism, 1990 – 2000*.



1. Oleg Kulik, Alexander Brener, *Rabid Dog, or the Last Taboo Guarded by a Lonely Cerberus*, 1994. Photograph of a performance



Lyric Digressions, Heartfelt Admissions

To start, I ought to define the matter at hand. I believe that performance is the highest form of contemporary art, distilled to absolute and crystalline purity. Hence the inconceivable confusion of terms. Even the dictionary's distinctions among performance, happening and action have lost their principal significance, and all these phenomena fall under the umbrella term "performance," like weak synonyms for each other. One thing is certain: Performance is an extreme form of investigating and testing the borders of art. In this aspect, performance is a peer of modernism, and its chronology should begin with the actions of the Futurists and Dadaists. And yet it remains in a zone of definitive indeterminacy. In fact, liminality and indeterminacy are its working definitions. One thing is certain – performance means an event or an action undertaken by an artist that does not result in the creation of a material object. Performance can be public or it can have no viewers; it can disguise itself as a rock group, a philosophical seminar, a sociological

study or take the form of an everyday activity. Moreover, something that is a performance at a certain moment in time stops being that as it morphs into a nightclub show or experimental music. Whether a particular action will fall within the bounds of art depends entirely on the context and the time. That is why the definition taken as a working hypothesis is so vague.

I should take a lyric digression to say that I was an observer – and thus a participant – of many actions; I was subject to countless provocations and pranks and was on several occasions involved in performances. In my defense I can only say that almost all of my colleagues were in the same situation. Performance is an art of direct influence, making it almost impossible to stay on the sidelines. That would be like going to a museum blindfolded. Yury Albert, incidentally, made a performance about that. I did not take part in that particular performance, but I should admit that my intensive involvement created an almost unsolvable methodological task: I was unable to dissociate myself from my critical body, which

2. E.T.I. (with Konstantin Zvezdochetov), action for the opening of "The Day of Knowledge" at Regina Gallery, September 1, 1991. Courtesy of Regina Gallery

stayed there, in the 1990s, freezing outside a police station in anticipation of a favorable outcome to the latest action.

I should also admit that gradually the optics of my research began to mutate and transmogrify. At first I acted as a partisan critic on behalf of Moscow radicals, whom the Petersburgers of the New Academy called “actualists,” and the theorists of Conceptualism called “corporealists.” But as I became less a critic – an advocate and a collaborator – and more an impartial art historian, I quite unexpectedly discovered that the decade of performance could quite organically include the sophisticated charades of Collective Actions, intended to be pure experience, and the elegant jokes of the New Academicians, which revolved around lurid political discourse, the esoteric literature of Yury Leiderman, and even the performances of Svyatoslav Ponomarev and the group Thanatos, addressed to the soul and soil. All these outwardly contradictory phenomena paradoxically fit in the overall context of the time, but, of course, there was ultimately no common style or movement, nor could there have been. However, as I see it, under this expansive approach Time, or Chronos, has a more prominent profile. In a radical age even those who tried to slip out of the age are radicals, and boisterous corporeality is a crystalline text, and refined intellectualism is a dangerous endeavor. And so on, and so forth.

But if we are to speak of the truly radical gesture, then it would appear that the chronological spread of performance in the 1990s quite neatly fits in the decade’s chronological bookends. It all began with members of E.T.I. lying down on Red Square to spell out a dirty word in 1991, just a few months before the Soviet Union was disbanded. The barricade of Nikitskaya Ulitsa was erected not long before the economic crisis of 1998. On New Year’s Eve, 2000, Boris Yeltsin handed his authority over to Vladimir Putin. The breaking point in art came exactly in 2000, when Oleg Mavromatti actually crucified himself on a cross in the courtyard of the Institute of Cultural Studies and was accused of inciting religious hatred, whereupon he absconded to Bulgaria. The regime ceased to be performative, and jesters and clowns had to hide in the realm of art, i.e. in studios and galleries.

There is no doubt that artists’ rejection of the raucous corporeal practice of the 1990s and their haste toward a new utopia to some degree reflects the condition of contemporary Russian society, which is sinking ever deeper in *post coitus tristia*, the amnesia-inducing stability that has obscured everything we lived through. This state is accompanied by very acute feelings. Unexpectedly, we found ourselves in a world described by Jean Baudrillard (in *The Transparency of Evil*, in the chapter “After the

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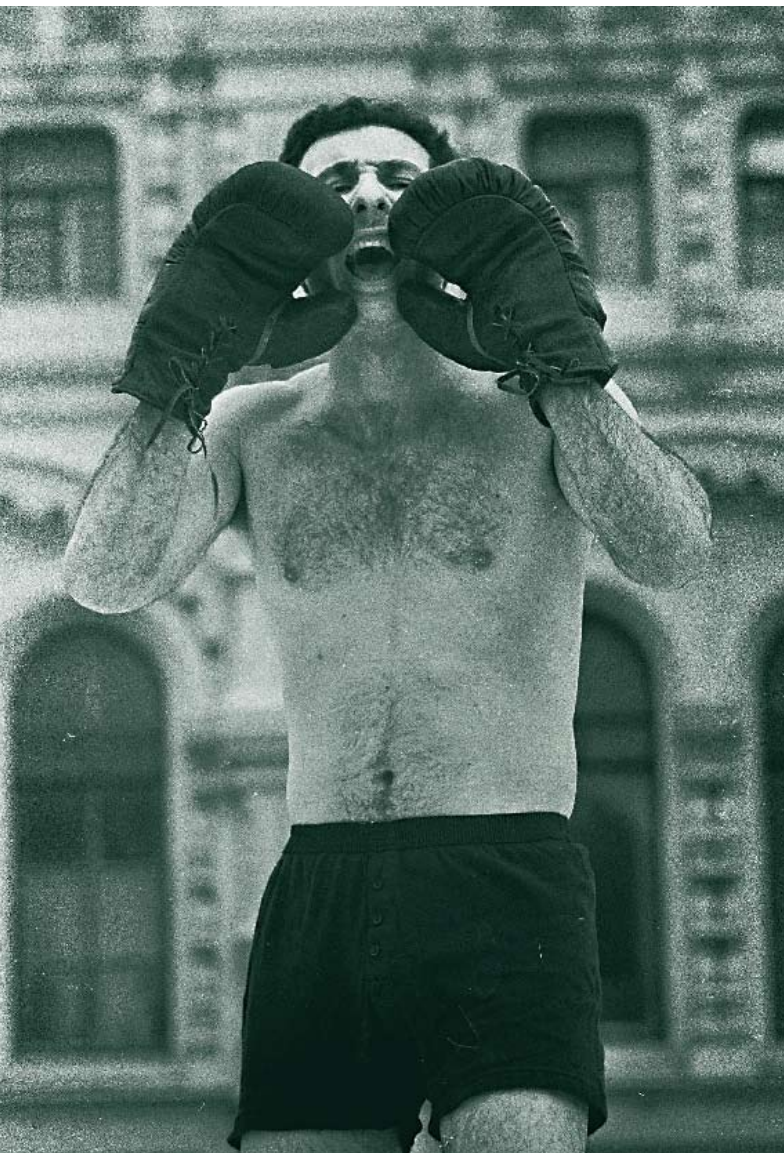
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Orgy”): “There is no longer a political or an artistic avant-garde able to anticipate or critique in the name of desire, in the name of change, in the name of liberating forms.” The French philosopher said these unpleasant words back in 1990, on the cusp of the “time of change” that struck all of European civilization. But Russians, as a result of well-known geopolitical events, had a handicap of almost 10 years, and only at the beginning of the new millennium started to – quite acutely – experience that which other Europeans already felt as a “normal trauma.” If we are to believe Baudrillard, art often outstrips the immanent economic development – if art underwent a stage of transaesthetics between 1916 and 1924, then the world economy only experienced such a crisis in 1929. Interestingly, the problem is not at all new – in the late 1920s and the early 1930s Soviet Marxists, including Georg Lukacs, actively discussed the issue of whether the artist creates because of his political and economic environment or in spite of it. The trouble was that the Russian economy and politics →

3. Yury Albert, *Self-Portrait With Closed Eyes*. Action in conjunction with the exhibition “Privatization,” Munich, 1995

4. Timur Novikov and New Academy. Memorial action for the 500th anniversary of Girolamo Savonarola’s birth. Fort Kronshtadt, Leningrad region, May 23, 1998



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of the 1990s cannot be described in a logical manner, and continue to be the object of violent discussion. But it is this political and economic chaos that engendered the artistic situation that many currently see as a flowering. Paradoxically, society at large experienced the same period as a concentration of endless trauma. In the strangest way, all social circles – from senior citizens to young tycoons – are now remembering that life under Brezhnev was not so bad. Yet memories of the period starting in 1985, for most post-Soviet subjects, are buried deep in the subconscious.

Word and Body

The artist's new identity protected him from the real danger that he himself produced. Up to a certain moment, the artist was seemingly excepted from the sphere of the normal; he was permitted that

which was impermissible for others, even when he infringed on other people's property and personal space, like Kulik, who damaged passing cars in his collaboration with Brener, *Lonely Cerberus*, or Brener, who destroyed kiosks belonging to petty retailers in his action *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. Moreover, once Brener began working in a different social dimension – painting a dollar sign on a Malevich in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum – he was also identified by a Dutch court as an artist, a person with a right to make a statement. And thus he received a relatively mild sentence.

Alexander Brener, who went to Red Square's "Golgotha," opposite the Spassky Gate, waved boxing glove-clad hands, shouting: "Yeltsin, you coward, get out here!" and was not acting on behalf of the opponents of reforms who screamed "Investigate Yeltsin's gang!" at demonstrations. Brener demanded much more than overthrowing →

5. Alexander Brener,
First Glove. Action on Red
Square, February 1, 1995

6. Vladislav Mamyshev-
Monroe, performance as
Marilyn Monroe in Moscow,
March, 1996



7. Anatoly Osmolovsky,
Mayakovsky-Osmolovsky.
Action as a part of the
Dutch-Russian project
“Exchange. Art in an Urban
Environment,” Moscow,
September 1993. Interview
with Osmolovsky read
on p. 62



8. Alexander Brener,
Date. Action in front of
 the Pushkin monument,
 Moscow, 1994

the unjust regime and returning to the old order; he demanded a dialogue not merely with the ruler, but with Power itself.

However, the extreme artistic tactics of the 1990s, raised to an extreme degree of intensity, still lost out to the performances of Boris Yeltsin, the great spontaneous performance artist, who drunkenly conducted the outgoing regiments of the Soviet army – and thus stole the joy of victory from the victorious West. Nonetheless, Yeltsin's performances had one formal aspect in common with those of the Moscow actionists – they

advocated, consciously or not, an idea of individual heroism as a throwback to early modernism. Just as Boris Yeltsin attempted on a symbolic level to realize the function of a democratic president elected by popular vote, the radicals each personally tried to realize their own concepts of ideal and absolute art. This work with the absolute was the only form of identity accessible to an artist living in a society of endless transgression. The situation on the artistic front fully corresponded to the situation in post-Soviet economy, which was a sum of individual projects. The ambiguous term “oligarchy,” chosen to describe this system, happens to describe the extensive economic and political monad, virtually self-sufficient and dependent only on a certain invisible source of wealth. External manifestations of this monad were quite confused and chaotic, and therefore the artist, from a position of critiquing social languages, was forced to resort to maximally intensive practices. To the outside observer, his chaotic activity blended with the external environment and did not appear to be an analytic gesture.

The artist dreamed to be more radical than the environment itself – not to study the world, but to transform it. As for the methods of violent provocation that are ascribed exclusively to radical Moscow actionists, then the matter was not quite so. Take a closer look, and the heated indictments by the St. Petersburg New Academy of the Moscow actualists were essentially a manifestation of extreme radicalism.

If Anatoly Osmolovsky and Alexander Brener operated within a fully legitimate leftist rhetoric, then Timur Novikov and his followers acted in the name a right-wing discourse, undoubtedly more palatable to liberal society (it would suffice to recall the fundamentalist manifestos that came from this circle, particularly the manifesto for the action *Savonarola*). This violent and subtly sly provocation unexpectedly revealed that, in actuality, Russian society is not as liberal as it might seem at first glance and not disinclined to proto-Fascist discourse. But Novikov and the New Academy, acting from the position of defenders of “pure culture,” even engaging in direct contact with radical right-wing political forces, with their characteristic sophistication maintained an ironic distance from them. Yet no serious polemic between artists with ultrarightist opinions (Thanatos) and the self-appointed leftists ever took place in the 1990s. Within Moscow art the political opposition, while not very distinct, could be observed between conceptualists – most of whom adhered to the ideals of liberal society in the civil sense – and Osmolovsky's group. But this polemic was not quite political in nature; rather, it was founded on ordinary divergences between generations of artists. It stands to mention, however, that the

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young artists' labels of "left" and "right" had almost no social reality. They were pure simulation, while the artistically apolitical conceptualists aligned themselves with a real, but politically weak force – the liberal intelligentsia. That is why the left and right of the 1990s had virtually evaporated as artistic trends by the start of the new millennium, while Collective Actions, which in the early 1990s seemed adrift, acquired new energy by that time.

The depression that overcame the Moscow radicals at that time is largely connected with the surprising efficacy and applicability of their

absurdist techniques to real politics. Many artists were actually hired to work on election campaigns. They themselves do not like to recall this episode, and print sources are not very reliable, so we cannot indicate specific results of the activity of art's masters in this sphere with sufficient confidence. One thing is clear – political technologies in the hands of the dealer Marat Guelman and the artists he hired for his political commissions became exaggeratedly grotesque. This is the source of the ethical irresponsibility of which conservatives now accuse contemporary artists. When the vertical

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9. Maxim Ilyukhin, *Half-Made (Almost Ready)*.
 Action at Art Manege Fair,
 Moscow, December 2000



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of power began to coalesce at the turn of the millennium, the artist lost his absolute innocence that allowed him to nurse the dream of being an absolute politician. Then it finally became clear that politics itself has irreversibly mutated, turning into pure simulacra and senseless politesse.

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The main arena for the performance artists of the 1990s was not the city streets but the mass media. That was where the big events took place. And if for performance artists of the previous generation (i.e. Collective Actions) the most important part of performance was pathologically meticulous documentation, then the only records of the gestures made in public space are reports in the press. Here I ought to remind readers that in the early 1990s the “fourth estate” acquired an incredible amount of power, and even government agencies thought that the actions covered (or better yet, consecrated) by the press had already achieved public legitimacy.

Building Carthage

There is a rather widespread opinion that artists were driven to the streets by cruel fate, or the lack of institutions. But the most famous performances of the 1990s happened either in galleries or the Center of Contemporary Art. In other words, they happened inside the “scene” and for it. At the moment the scene functioned as the only real institution. Processes of structuring this indefinite and fickle social phantom became the object of special study in the gallery on Tryokhprudny pereulok. Although, frankly speaking, the main issue that concerned the founder and ideologue the most famous artist-run space of the 1990s, Avdei Ter-Oganyan, and his cohorts had much wider resonance. The main point of the aesthetic

program in the gallery on Tryokhprudny was art as such, the conditions of its existence and realization. Even the action *Mercy* directly asked the question: “What happens with any randomly selected phenomenon from the surrounding world when it is placed in the special space of the gallery?” Take a real wedding acted out in the space of the gallery – does it become an instance of art or does it stay a part of life (Yury Babich’s action)?

But presumptions about the death of modernism that Ter-Oganyan was working with were deeply premature. The modernization project of the 1990s that allowed the artist to conduct his activity in the loose creases of social reality began to fold. The game was over. Ter-Oganyan meant for his pupils at the School of the Avant-Garde to perform the action *Young Atheist*, but he had to chop up cardboard icons himself, in their place. In the course of the matter the professor had to experience all the trials that his syllabus scheduled for classes in the course on “Ostracized Avant-Garde Artist”: Legal investigation, secret escape, life in exile.

In fact, Ter-Oganyan’s entire artistic project was dedicated to the unanswered question of the fatal insufficiency of art, the hopeless crisis of representation – the study of that what contemporary art can be, and what its role and function are. In principle, it was the same problem – and the same utopian plane – of Collective Actions. But if Ter-Oganyan had no inclination



10. Collective Actions,
Scene of Action. Field near
the village of Kiev Gorki in
the Moscow region, March
31, 1999

11. Anatoly Osmolovsky,
Avdei Ter-Oganyan,
Barricade (dedicated
to the events of 1968 in
Paris). Action on Bolshaya
Nikitskaya, Moscow, May
1998

for complex intellectual constructs, then in the Studio of Visual Anthropology organized by Viktor Misiano, editor of Moscow Art Magazine, the idea of contemporary art as an endless discourse about art, was brought to the absolute. But that was where the direct clash of word and gesture took place. Anatoly Osmolovsky announced that he would fight to blood with anyone who would say a word; Anton Olshvang, a participant in the discussion, answered the challenge. After the brawl was broken up, those present continued the discussion of the ontological possibilities of art and the crisis of representation.

But this attempt at constructing endless communication encountered unsolvable problems during the project Interpol in Stockholm. Misiano, a co-curator of the project, has admitted his naive faith in the possibility of positive collaboration. His endless faith in the “Westernness” of the Western art world was the cause of the most notorious scandal with Russian artists in Europe. Immediately after that event Alexander Brener declared an irreconcilable vendetta against art institutions, and Oleg Kulik fixed his image as a rabid Russian dog in the minds of Western viewers. But questions of the essence of art, the place of the artist and identity, asked with the maximalism of the Russian actionists, gave only one answer – negative. That, in fact, is the entire historical value of the actionists of the 1990s. They did everything they could to get answers to unanswerable questions. ■



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12. Emperor VAVA, Oleg Mavromati (The Sect of Absolute Love), *Stitching Lips*. Closing action at the “Divide Providence” exhibition, Center for Contemporary Art, Moscow, November 15, 1995



13-15. Oleg Kulik, Nikolai the Butcher, *Piglet Gives Gifts*. Action in conjunction with the “Animalistic Projects” festival. Regina Gallery, Moscow, March 11, 1992. Courtesy of Regina Gallery

16-18. Alexander Brener breaks glass on works by Dmitry Prigov. Action at Art Moscow Fair