

The Collision of Self-Importance and Despair

BY

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In the United States today, as in 1990s Russia, for a lot of intellectuals, total nihilism seems more plausible than hope for even modest reform.

If you want to sift for clues as to what the cultural fallout of the United States' current meltdown might look like, you could do worse than to look to Russia in the 1990s — the *other* Cold War superpower that self-destructed. In art, the movement that characterizes that time is Moscow Actionism.

You may already know some latter-day “actionists.” The late aughts saw international press for the art group Voina, which performed guerrilla stunts that involved group sex in a museum as an anti-government protest (*Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear!*, 2008), drawing the outline of a huge cock and balls on a drawbridge facing Saint Petersburg's secret police headquarters (*Dick Captured by the FSB*, 2010), and overturning a cop car as performance art (*Palace Coup*, 2010). The latter earned two members hooliganism charges.

The anarchy-feminist art collective Pussy Riot sprang from the side of a Voina splinter group. They became an international cause célèbre in 2011 after members were arrested for their chaotic *Punk Prayer* performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, protesting the Orthodox Church's support for Vladimir Putin. A Pussy Riot solidarity action by another artist, Petr Pavlensky, made its own headlines when he sutured his mouth shut outside Kazan Cathedral in 2012. He became more famous still — and the subject of many jokes — when he nailed his scrotum to the pavement in front of Lenin's tomb to protest political apathy in 2013.

You can interpret such actions through the lens of Western punk and performance art — but their particular combination of go-it-alone offense, bodily taboo-breaking, and moral mission leads straight back to Russia's '90s calamity.

The outline of that decade's disastrous transition to capitalism is well known. Epic fortunes were accumulated, with explosions of nouveau riche consumption and ecstatic nightlife, off the back of

let-'er-rip privatization. The result was millions of “excess deaths” due to dispossession and despair. This wrenching reform program is often called shock therapy — the goal was to break the state so badly that there wouldn't be anything for socialist holdouts to go back to. It's no coincidence that art in that moment pitched itself as a sort of shock therapy of its own.

The names most associated with Moscow Actionism are Alexander Brener, Oleg Kulik, and Anatoly Osmolovsky. An April 1991 work by a group that included Osmolovsky, *Expropriation of the Territory of Art*, saw members spell the word “khui” (cock) on Red Square with their bodies. Given what was going on at the time — the USSR in economic paralysis, waves of street protests, labor unrest, Mikhail Gorbachev banning demonstrations and then being forced to pull troops from Moscow, a coup attempt brewing — this human graffiti was both timely and strikingly anti-political.

At decade's end, such was also the tone of Moscow Actionism's most well-remembered action, again associated with Osmolovsky: *Against All Parties*, waged in the thick of the 1998 ruble crisis that brought Russia to its brutal post-transition low. For one year, the artists calling themselves the “Non-Governmental Control Commission” led an election campaign to rally the public to vote “Against All Parties, Groups, and Candidates,” an option on Russian ballots. Conceived of as an anarchistic “critique of political representation,” the campaign involved erecting a street barricade as a sculpture and scaling Lenin's mausoleum to unveil a banner reading “Against All Parties.” It had little effect on the elections, which ended up being the occasion for Putin's arrival at political center stage.

The public outrages of Moscow Actionism were fed by the combination of thin art institutions and a newly hungry and frenetic capitalist media. Kulik butchered a hog in an art gallery in 1992 as a commentary on the carve-up of the state, drawing violent protests. Brener stood in Red Square and futilely demanded that prime minister Boris Yeltsin fight him in 1995. In '96, for *Minute of Silence*, artists Oleg Mavromati and Emperor Wawa drove needles through each other's tongues on live radio and then sat in silence, as a protest against empty talk. Mavromati nailed himself to a wooden cross in 2000, declaring that “self-sacrifice and pain” were the only true art. The Orthodox Church charged him with inciting religious hatred.

Clearly, in some ways, this art is extremely Russia-specific. Without US-style consumerism, the Soviet Union never truly had its ironic '60s pop art moment. Communism preserved bourgeois culture's sense of importance better than actually-existing bourgeois culture. Russian artists in the '90s retained a deep seriousness of purpose, but they were set adrift in a gangster capitalist context where art couldn't even pretend to play its traditional role as a civilizing wrapper around mercenary materialism.

In 1994, for a performance called *Plagiarism*, Brener went to the Pushkin Museum and shat his pants in front of a Van Gogh painting, crying out “Vincent! Vincent!” — taking the idea of being moved by art so seriously that it became grotesque.

Nevertheless, what might make Moscow Actionism resonant with our own fallen US context is what Russia Without Putin author Tony Wood calls the central defining contradiction of Russia’s post-’90s identity: the mismatch between a sense of historic importance and newfound impotence. This climate is another way to read Actionism’s particularly intense combination of self-importance and self-destruction. Brener, again, is the prophetic figure.

In a legendary scandal in 1996, Kulik and Brener were invited to participate in an art show in Sweden dubbed “Interpol.” A very ’90s affair, the curatorial conceit was all about creating new dialogues between West and East, Swedes and Russians; the former opening up their social democracy to the European Union, the latter coping with the bitter fall of communism. Meant to inspire cooperation, it instead showcased incommensurable ideals.

On the opening night of “Interpol,” Kulik assumed the persona of a rabid dog, attacking and bloodying visitors, until police were called (he is the basis for “Oleg,” the performance artist who becomes a brutish ape in Ruben Östlund’s 2017 art satire *The Square*). Brener tore apart another artist’s installation, declaring its destruction his art. Afterward, the Western participants circulated a letter warning the art world that the Russians represented “hooligan and skinhead ideology” masked as art.

In the new millennium, Russia was incorporated into international finance as the R in the BRICs grouping of “emerging economies,” and into the international art circuit as well. Most of the Moscow Actionists, including Kulik and Osmolovsky, went on to normal gallery careers, following the pattern of Western performance artists — most of them, except, notably, Brener.

After “Interpol,” Brener decided he was too big for decrepit Russia, and he embarked on a career of vandalizing art spaces as art. Most notoriously, in 1997, he entered the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and spray-painted a green dollar sign on a painting by Kazimir Malevich, the Russian Suprematist associated with the heroic age of Russian avant-garde art. Brener spoke earnestly about this action as a protest against the debasement of art by modern society: “Mine is a human scream against the extent to which failure prevails in our culture,” he told *Flash Art*. “It is a crisis comparable to the other great crises of the 20th century, the World Wars. The human voice has ceased to be heard within culture.” He was sentenced to five months in prison.

In the late 2000s, Voina began the fresh cycle of actionism, getting their start based out of Oleg Kulik’s studio. Brener, meanwhile, was known on the London scene for unauthorized acts of

defecation in galleries and at art events, sometimes writing the words “Sold Out” in his feces.

The debasement of artistic ideals by capital is beyond question. You might, of course, look for social movements that change the economic calculation — but in the United States today, as in 1990s Russia, for a lot of intellectuals and ordinary people alike, total nihilism seems more plausible than hope for even modest reform. The collision of self-importance and despair turns to spectacular petulance and willful self-immolation, and that seems prophetic of a certain cultural pathology that we should get to know.

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