



# Art and repression

Actionism and socially engaged practices in contemporary Russia

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BACHELOR'S THESIS  
April 2020

Degree Programme in Media and Arts  
Option of Fine Art

## ABSTRACT

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu  
Tampere University of Applied Sciences  
Degree Programme in Media and Arts  
Option of Fine Art

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Bachelor's thesis 70 pages, appendices 19 pages  
April 2020

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This study presents a research on how societal challenges and political regime have influenced Russian Actionism since the time of its inception in 1990s and how politics affect the freedom of speech in art. The objective is to determine how the agenda of Russian Actionism changed throughout the years and how does it respond to the emerging issues of today. It was of interest to determine the impact of repression on radicality of art and what are the singularities of making art against the backdrop of a conservative political turn and the lack of civil liberties.

The research methods used for this thesis are professional literature review, content analysis and ethnographic method. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with the art professionals, who are at some extent working with social practice art. The study also includes the views of the respondents on the present state and a possible future of Actionism and art activism in Russia, thoughts about current political situations and social trends and how they affect the work of an artist. Full text of the interviews can be read in the appendices.

The findings indicate that despite a relatively small time gap between the emergence of each new Wave of Russian Actionism, there is a significant difference in agenda and tactics of the artists. A shift towards totalitarianism in Russian political system has influenced this change, but also created a unique context for development of this art movement. The results of the study demonstrate two things. One is a general social turn in today's Actionism and another is that political repression and censorship create a discourse on boundaries of freedom of artistic expression, which is relevant not only for Actionism, but for contemporary art in general.

This thesis is an attempt to analyze the present situation in Russian Actionism and the relationship between its development and the political climate. Since it is not an established art movement of the past and, on the contrary, goes through a constant transition, there is room for a deeper continuous research.

Key words: actionism, protest art, repression, art activism

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Russian Actionism is a form of Performance Art that emerged in Russia in the 1990s, during a time of political and economic collapse, chaos and the formation of a new state, and started as a radical, contextual reaction of artists to a new, post-Soviet reality and the state in which Russian contemporary art was at that time in particular. The 1990s started a new era both in art and the history of Russia. Since then, the movement has gone through a lot of development and transition, varying from periods of silence to a sudden revival within the framework of completely different discourses. Russian Actionism has drawn a lot of public and media attention not only in Russia but also outside of it, and in the end became associated with the term 'art activism'. It is a transforming and dynamic artistic movement that is in open dialogue with the current political and societal contexts. Therefore, it is important to mention the circumstances surrounding it.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between political repression and cultural resistance, its influence on a particular art movement – Russian Actionism. Among other research questions there were the following: what are the key differences between actionists of today and their predecessors? How has this movement changed since its inception and what affected its politicization and social orientation? Is it politics that influence Actionism and set a context for it, or is it Actionism that is in power to change the existing political and social structures? How in general should it be observed: as an art form or as a form of civic activism? Do actionists and art activists have a chance to become a serious political leverage in Russia, or their status will remain as enfant terribles and the outsiders of the art world? The overall goal is to pursue understanding in which direction this artistic movement is developing in Russia now and what are the possible predictions for its future.

The research for the theoretical background of this thesis was conducted by studying and analyzing professional literature, which included books about the history of performance and social practice art, Russian protest art, philosophical studies on the discourse of relationship between politics and art, various articles in mag-

azines dedicated to art, social studies and politics, as well as catalogues of festivals and exhibitions. Besides the abovementioned, various Internet sources were used. Expert interviews are also a crucial part of this study.

The interviewees are art professionals, who are at some extent working with art activist practices. Tatiana Volkova is a curator and creator of MediaImpact International Festival of Activist Art, which was the only festival, that represented activist practices in Russia. Ekaterina Muromtseva is an artist, who finds inspiration in social topics and the historical context and combines artistic practice with voluntary activities and community-based work. Ilmira Bolotyan is an artist working with participatory practices. Her projects are executed through a thorough research with a journalistic approach, during which she emerges into different micro-environments and social groups and studies the existing social constructs. She also curated various exhibitions and organized events, related to feminist agendas. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured method, so that the interviewees could talk not only about Actionism, but also about their own artistic practice and experiences and the overall situation in the Russian society and the place of an artist in it. The full texts of these interviews can be read in the appendices.

The Second Chapter is dedicated to the historical background of performance art and Actionism as world-wide phenomena. A particular attention is paid to the overview of the circumstances around the development of performative practices in Russia. Russian Actionism is commonly agreed by art professionals to be divided into three time periods, that are further referred to as Waves. The Three Waves are deeper reviewed and analyzed in the Chapter Three, as well as the most significant actions from each of those periods. Taking into consideration its radical politicized nature, it is important to consider Actionism within political and societal contexts. A brief overview of the political discourses of present-day Russia alongside with the laws that have affected artistic and civil activities, are presented in Chapter Two, Paragraph 2.2.

Some artists, who are working with activism and socially engaged practices today might not identify themselves as actionists or even as artists, however, they are

examined in this context, since their actions and artistic projects have been considered as belonging to the field of art activism and Actionism.

In the Discussion Chapter there are points of view and opinions of different professionals about the essence of Russian Actionism and its current state. Furthermore, this chapter incorporates a general discussion around socially engaged art, which takes its roots in the philosophical discourse on the relationship between the aesthetical and the political and the autonomy of art. Some of the artists' standpoints might be contradictory in relation to each other, however, they give a wholesome image of a phenomenon called Russian Actionism and allow to draw conclusions as well as to answer the research questions stated in the beginning of this study.

## **2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

This chapter includes a historical overview of development of Performance Art and socially engaged practices as cultural phenomena with a more detailed focus on their evolvement in Russia. Certain artistic movements are not covered, while some are highlighted more than the others, since their ideas and concepts had a greater influence on the appearance and development of Russian Actionism and art activism. Those movements, that are of big importance when speaking about radical and politically charged art, as well as some particular events and performances are observed in relationship to the political circumstances of the time and social environment in which they appeared. In Paragraph 2.2 there is a brief overview of the last decade of Russian history, with mentioning and commenting on certain situations, that have affected the society. It also includes description of some relevant laws, that have a big significance in relation to the freedom of artistic expression in Russia.

### **2.1 Brief history of performance art**

Performance art took its start in the beginning of the twentieth century within the Avant-garde movement and is in particular related to Italian Futurism. Since then it has been a way of an artistic expression, that allows artists to address their message directly to a large public audience, as well as to expand the possibilities of established art forms and traditional media, using an interdisciplinary method. Performance art managed to break the boundaries between high and low art, i.e., popular culture and to take art outside of the museum and gallery spaces.

The first Futurist manifesto was written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and published in Paris in February 1909. In this text Marinetti rejected the old tradition as something static, irrelevant and outdated, denounced traditional institutions and glorified brutality, military violence and industry as a basis for building an entirely new culture with no regard to the heritage of the past. Futurist performances caused a lot of scandal and even violent reactions from the audience due to their provocative and destructive nature; media provocation was one of their tactics. Futurism was promoting a strong sense of patriotism and a nationalistic idea,

which became an aesthetic base for ideological foundations of Italian Fascism. (Bishop 2012, 49.) Futurism in Russia also served the ideological purpose of the Bolsheviks, which allows one to speculate on the idea of how art can become a catalyst for a social change and transmission of ideas to the masses.

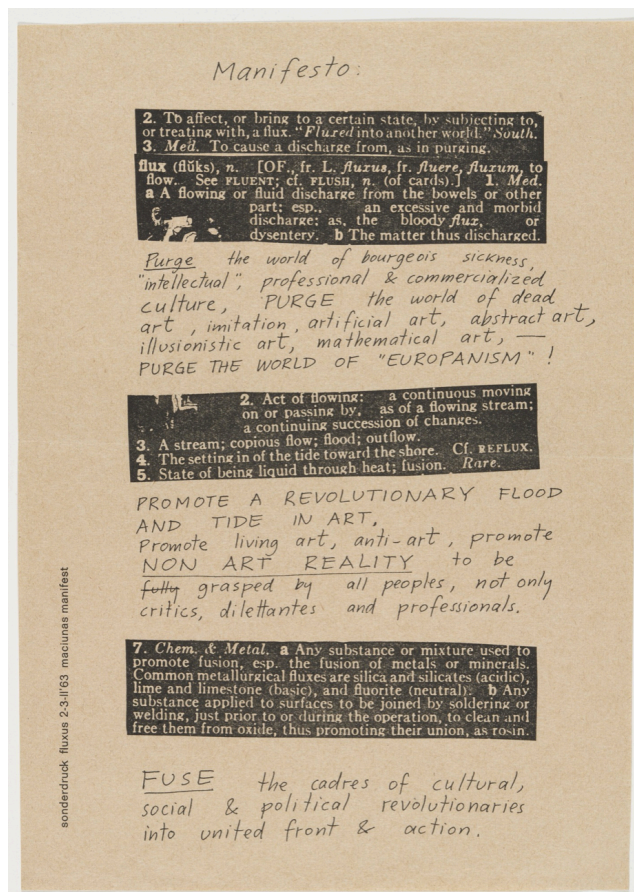
Early avant-garde movements, such as Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism influenced the appearance of Dada in Zurich in 1916. Dada was not only an artistic, but also a protest anarchistic movement, that united artists of different origins, who resided during the World War I in a peaceful and politically neutral Switzerland. Dadaists expressed their protest against nationalism, war and colonialist interests as well as rejected individualism, authoritarianism and aestheticism in art. Marcel Duchamp, who belonged to the movement, suggested the term anti-art around 1913, that was used to describe what Dadaists sought to create. They were questioning and challenging the essence of the art itself, expressing irrationality by working in different styles and media and placing the everyday, i.e., readymade objects in an artistic context.

An important development step was that their performances were brought from institutional spaces of theatres to the streets, straight to the public, directing and initiating a new type of active spectatorship. Zurich based artists produced artistic events in collaboration with each other and invited creatives of all kinds under a name "Cabaret Voltaire". The program included poetry readings and musical performances. (Goldberg 2002, 56.) After the end of WWI, Dadaists relocated themselves in different cities; where the movement developed further in the local contexts of Germany, France and USA and subsequently served a foundation for other artistic movements, such as Fluxus. In particular, Dada philosophy and its questions about the purpose of art, the role of the artist and ideas of challenging the traditional institutions and the society, found continuation in Conceptual Art of 1960s.

Fluxus movement, that was active in 1960s and 1970s, introduced the axiom that art is life. When speaking about the ideas of Fluxus one firstly thinks of a famous Joseph Beuys quote "Everyone is an artist", which means that creativity is not



just a prerogative of artists, but each individual can and should develop his own creativity and apply it in his field of specialization and daily life. It was a broadly international and interdisciplinary movement, that generated and introduced new art forms and consequently extended the notion of what can be considered art. Taking up Marcel Duchamp's concept of anti-art, George Maciunas, who launched the movement, writes in his 1963 Fluxus Manifesto that the goal is to create 'living art', non-art, art for all people and not just some elitist circles and the commercialized art market. The movement was not homogenous, and the artists who belonged to it had sometimes different standpoints and ideas, but nevertheless Fluxus broadened the concept of performance art, introduced events and happenings. Happenings were participatory performances without a planned script, which aimed to erase the boundaries between the artist and the audience, while the event performances, usually music and sound art, didn't presuppose any interaction.



Picture 1. George Maciunas "Fluxus Manifesto", 1963

When speaking about art activism of today, it is important to mention the influence of the ideas of Situationist International (SI), that appeared in early 1950s. This movement was founded and led by a French philosopher and Marxist theorist Guy Debord. In the most significant text of the movement, “Society of the Spectacle” (1967), Debord puts into use the term ‘spectacle’ to describe the relationship between the development of a capitalist society and the consumerist culture with its inherent commodity fetishism. The spectacle represents the idea of a distracting and preoccupying thing, which conceals the oppressive nature of capitalism. In a capitalistic society of the spectacle consumerism is a main driving power. Besides that, Guy Debord reflects on class alienation, overthinking and interpreting the Marxist theory, and cultural homogenization. According to Claire Bishop, SI cannot be considered as a purely artistic, but rather is a conceptual movement. (2012, 78.)

Situationists strived to disrupt the existing systems both in art and the politics, to create democratic art, radical both in form and in essence. Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defines the main idea of SI in overthrowing art from a status of an autonomous and privileged practice and dissolving it into some lived situations and the surrounding life. (2009, 46.) Individual authorship was replaced with collaborative or anonymously authored works – a strategy, which art activists of today have adopted. However, SI was criticized for suppressing the art and the aesthetics in the pursuit of agitational and political aspect. (Bishop 2012, 82.) Among other topics Situationists addressed the issues of racism, Middle East conflicts and colonization wars, as well as criticized the existing political and social systems. One of the methods they used was appropriation of the existing images, objects and works of art in order to subvert their original meanings.

Guy Debord’s ideas directed and controlled the activities of the movement to such extent that in the end the group fractured and fragmented. Despite its revolutionary, emancipatory and progressive ideas, SI was strictly hierarchical and closed: starting with the tight membership policy and the distribution of the performing roles in the outplaying of situations; the situations were intended not for the public, but rather for the group members themselves. (Bishop 2012, 82.) Nevertheless,

SI political rhetoric and concepts were adopted by and served inspiration to many artist collectives and activists of the present time, or at least they are referred to. For instance, Russian actionist of the First Wave Anatoly Osmolovsky quotes one of the ideas of the movement when speaking about Moscow Actionism of 1990s and in particular when clarifying his 1999 action “Against All”, performed by RADEK group and Nongovernmental Control Commission. “We must take over the world and implement the Poetry! – wrote the Situationists. How many more decades shall pass to be understood: genuine art is impossible without power.” (Osmolovsky 2000.) In the end of this quote one may trace a reference to Michel Foucault and his philosophical discourse on power, however SI serves an inspiration and stimulates questions.

Viennese Actionism of 1960s is often considered an antecedent of Russian First Wave actionism. The reason for that is the external resemblance of the artistic actions. The main agenda of Viennese actionists was facing and overcoming the Post-World War II trauma and taking out the suppressed memories and fears. This was achieved through cathartic bloody rituals, sacrifices, and ritualistic orgies. (Goldberg 2001, 163.) The body became an artistic medium and political statement at the same time. Moscow Actionism also emphasized the bodily radicalism as an attempt to overcome fears and phobias as well as to transform a human body into a statement that speaks for itself in the conditions of lack of communication and verbal expression. (Grabovskaya 2013.)

### **2.1.1 Appearance and the history of development of performative practices in Russia.**

The first forms of experimental performative practices appeared in Russia in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost simultaneously with the European avant-garde movement. Marinetti’s Manifesto of Futurism was published in Russia in 1909, at the same time as it happened in Paris, and since then Russian Futurism began. Despite the obvious fact of appropriation, Russia managed to add its own context to Futurism and created a unique artistic movement. (Goldberg 2002, 31.) The majority of the Russian creative class and intellectuals supported the ideas of the Revolution, greeted Bolshevism with enthusiasm and voluntarily promoted its ideas.

Being in a resistance towards the authoritarian tsarist regime, they believed in a new era of creativity, social justice and a progressive, creative future. Such conditions became a fertile soil for various artistic experiments among artists, poets, musicians and creatives of all kinds. The new generation of artists refused to look up to European art and its trends but managed to create an entirely new influential wave in art called Russian avant-garde. This movement affected not only the fine arts but also literature, music, architecture, theatre, design and cinematography, and was most productive after the October Revolution in 1917.

Avant-garde artists strived to get over the tsarist regime with its bourgeois traditions and everything that was connected to it, including the traditional art forms. They sought to remove the boundaries between reality and art, to invade areas that were previously considered incompatible with art, such as design, construction and mass industrial production, to create a new language of art. This fight against the past and 'old art' was often very radical. Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), in his 1919 text "About the museum" published in the arts magazine *Iskusstvo Komunny* (Art of the Commune), proclaimed a new era in art that is inseparable from real life, and suggests for all cultural heritage from the past to be burned. (Malevich 1919.) This creates an interesting linkage to contemporary art activism, which also merges artistic context with the everyday life.

Russian Futurism, which was later called Constructivism, encouraged artists, poets and directors to work in collaboration with each other. Collective authorship became opposed to the individual and the idea of reorganizing cultural production towards industrialization and labor-like activity was actively promoted by theorists and philosophers of the time. (Bishop 2012, 50.) Theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1939) was strongly inspired by the ideas of Constructivists. He staged plays with participatory elements and formulated his own principles of Symbolist, avant-garde theatre, as well as introduced a unique system of actor training called Biomechanics, which was opposed to the realistic style of performing. One of the most successful plays that he staged was "Mystery-bouffe", written by poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) in 1918 (later edited and rewritten in 1921), with the theatrical sets designed by Kazimir Malevich. The audience were allowed to interact and actively participate in the performance alongside the

professional actors. Moreover, ordinary people with no performing background got a possibility to be trained into actors.

Generally speaking, most avant-garde creations can be perceived as agitprop today, as they served as propaganda and an educational tool for raising awareness and class consciousness among the public masses. However, the artists themselves had no political ambition, rather they were in search of a new ontology and means of artistic expression. Their willingness to create politically charged work was voluntary and sincere as for many of them favoured the propaganda machine.

One of the biggest and the most spectacular 1920s performances was “The Storming of the Winter Palace” by Nikolai Yevreinov (1879-1953), which was staged in three locations around the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1920. It was dedicated to the third anniversary of the Revolution and outplayed the capture of the Winter Palace by the Red Guard forces. The number of participants involved in the performance was incredible: according to different sources, it ranged from 6000 to 10,000 people, including ballet dancers, circus artists, professional and amateur actors, an orchestra and even the real witnesses and participants of the “storming”. (Goldberg 2002, 41-42,)



Picture 2. Nikolai Yevreinov “The Storming of the Winter Palace”, 1920

The spectacle was staged with great accuracy and military authenticity and attracted around 100,000 spectators. The historical event behind the performance was a crucial milestone for the Bolsheviks in their victory, and was chosen to be heroized, romanticized and mythologized. Both the historical participants and the critics noted that Yevreinov managed to show the events of that October night more heroically, better organized and overall greater than they were in reality.

Mythmaking in the interpretation of historical events is an inevitable phenomenon: when different countries write their favourable version of history, mixing historical truth with exaggeration and even fiction. For a young Soviet government, it was very important to have poets, artists and filmmakers that could work for the creation of those romanticized and heroic myths. Nevertheless, after almost thirty years of fruitful experiments and enormous productivity, the governmental control over the creative production had tightened, which subsequently stopped the experimental performative practices and other types of modern art from developing for many decades. The Revolution in itself didn't bring a cultural revolution, and the liberation of art but took advantage of it and integrated it into a state propaganda machine.

In 1934, at the First Congress of the Writers Union, the aesthetic and ideological objective of socialist realism was formulated and approved. Since then, it became the only permitted method of displaying reality. (Mirimanov 2002.) Its main purpose was to show the citizens a utopian image of the communist future they aspired to. In order to be understood by the wide masses with no misinterpretations, it had to be realistic in style and intuitively clear in content. Many creatives who initially supported Bolshevism were disappointed by what the Revolution, and later the Stalinist regime, had brought. Those who had the all-Soviet fame suddenly became irrelevant or were proclaimed as dissidents and as enemies of the Soviet State and its people. Many had to either emigrate or adapt to the new reality and the state directives in artmaking. The main poet of the Revolution, Vladimir Mayakovsky, shot himself; director Meyerhold was arrested, tortured and executed in February 1940; Malevich was investigated for espionage in 1930

in relation to his foreign trips and exhibitions abroad, lost his teaching and institutional positions and was forced to change his artistic activity according to the paradigm of socialist realism.

Through the censorship of the all-mighty control organs that were carefully checking everything that was produced by Soviet writers, artists, poets and filmmakers, Stalinism made it impossible to officially create any type of alternative art. Even after Stalin's death during the Khrushchev Thaw, when repression and censorship loosened their grip, the situation didn't change much for the better. Especially unfavourable was the so-called 'formalistic' art, which included conceptual and abstract art.

A famous precedent took place in 1962, when Nikita Khrushchev attended the art exhibition "30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union" in Moscow Manege (Manezh). Using strong language, he called the works of Soviet abstractionists filthy, decadent and artless, criticized and insulted the artists and finalized his speech by saying that "soviet people don't need this type of art"<sup>1</sup>. His outrage was expressed in a promise to ban artists who paint abstraction. Among other forbidden elements in artmaking were religious themes, political satire and erotic content. Art historian and critic Yuri Gerchuk (1926-2014) who had witnessed the hot discussion around 'tradition vs. innovation' in art marked that the majority of representatives of the Soviet art world wasn't ready to follow and accept global tendencies. (2003.)

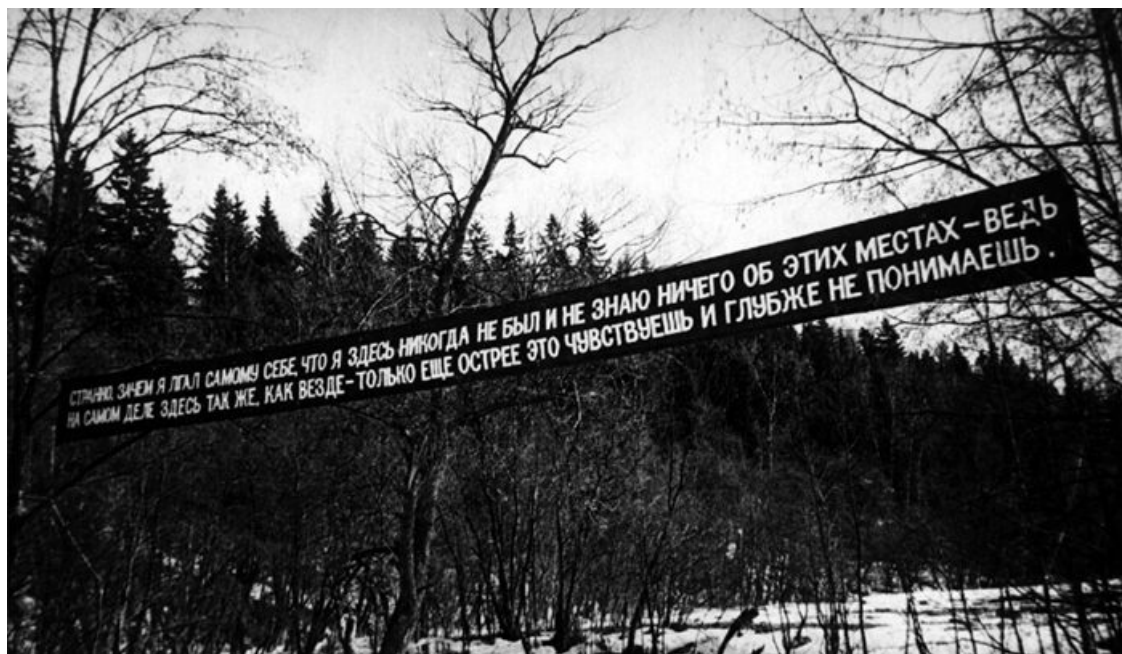
Unofficial Soviet art, known as Nonconformist Art, was forced to remain underground. As a result of its marginalized status, a phenomenon of apartment exhibitions appeared and became common. Private closed spaces, such as apartments, became the only places for exhibiting, representing and selling the works of nonconformist artists who didn't have the opportunity to do it openly and officially. (Bishop 2012, 152.) By 1970, cautious attempts to penetrate the public space and create critically charged art were made (Johnson 2015, 25.), but it was still a long way to go until the liberation of artistic expression, which the 1990s brought. In other words, it was either impossible to create anything political or

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<sup>1</sup><http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/khrushchev-on-the-arts/khrushchev-on-the-arts-texts/khrushchev-on-modern-art/>

critically charged due to immediate repressions, or it was impossible to get visibility and recognition due to the impossibility of exhibiting such works publicly.

Taking into consideration those circumstances and the fact that Russia, as part of the Soviet Union, was in an informational isolation from the West, and hence the western artistic practices, it is not surprising that Performance Art didn't develop in the USSR as it did in other countries. Performative practices reappeared in the mid-70s with a group of artists who belonged to nonconformist movements of the time – Moscow Conceptualism (the Collective Actions group) and Sots Art (the Gnezdo art group). Collective Actions, led by Andrei Monastyrsky (b.1949), united artists, poets, writers, critics and even musicians. During different times of the group's existence, which lasted for over 30 years, there were such names as Ilya Kabakov, Dmitri Prigov, Eric Bulatov, Boris Groys, members of the Medical Hermeneutics and Mukhomory art groups and many others.



Picture 3. Collective Actions "The Slogan", 1978

Collective Actions' performances unfolded quietly, in privacy and secrecy, either indoors or in deserted suburban areas, and were accompanied by philosophical discourses. There were no accidental viewers, as one had to be invited directly by someone among the participants of the action. (Epstein 2018.) Their artistic actions were by no means political but addressed existential questions regarding the relationship to physical reality and included theoretical and conceptual studies



about coded narratives, hermeneutics and semantics. In form they were very minimalistic and even “empty”. Sometimes nothing physically happened at all, which left the participants confused.

The emptiness and the void of the deserted landscapes symbolized the contemplation of the invisible and the incomprehensible. Both the group’s leader, Andrei Monastyrsky, and other participants wrote highly conceptual theoretical texts about those aesthetical experiments, in which they analyzed the experiences. Documentation of the performances was an essential part of the process. Many art historians and theorists mark Monastyrsky’s passion to carefully and meticulously document all the group’s activities, which was active until 2011. (Bishop 2012, 159.) Thirteen volumes of texts and photo-documentations were published during the group’s existence<sup>2</sup>.

### **2.1.2 Historical overview of Actionism from the time of its inception until today.**

The phenomenon of Moscow Actionism appeared in the 1990s after the disintegration of the USSR. The starting point that marked the start of the movement might be considered April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1991 – the day when the “E.T.I. text” action unfolded on the Red Square (Nechiporenko, Novozhenova 2018). It was performed by the E.T.I. art group, whose leader was Anatoly Osmolovsky (b. 1969)– one of the key figures of the movement. A group of young people lied down in front of Lenin’s Mausoleum, forming the three letters of the Russian word for “dick” with their bodies. This was undoubtedly the first artistic intervention that had a big media effect in the early the 1990’s that inspired other artists to action. The main representatives of Moscow Actionism, besides the abovementioned Osmolovsky, were Oleg Kulik (b.1961), Alexander Brener (b.1957), Oleg Mavromatti (b.1965) and Avdey Ter-Oganyan (b.1961).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://conceptualism.letov.ru>

In contrast with the peaceful metaphysical experiments of Moscow Conceptualists, actionist art of the 1990s was anarchistic, chaotic, scatological and aggressive. Being in open conflict with the conceptualists and opposing their long, theoretical and overly conceptual texts, structured hierarchy and an overall complex, systemic approach, actionists had no manifestos or philosophical discourses behind their art. Their radical actions were an attempt to de-sacralize and de-contextualize art. (Osmolovsky 2015.)

Despite being quite autonomous from each other and unorganized they all tended to be as provocative as possible, take place in significant public places such as the Red Square, Lenin's Mausoleum, Lobnoye Mesto etc., get the attention of spectators and the media, and cause discussion. Oleg Kulik states that public space had been a taboo for the artists: everything had to be authorized, under control, peaceful and predictable. Therefore, actionists chose appropriating the public space as a strategy. (2018.) In the 90s it became possible because of a destabilized political situation and the absence of strict governmental control on creative production. The artists suddenly experienced the freedom of expression at the extent they had never had before.

The early actions of Moscow actionists may strongly resemble what was done in 1960s by the representatives of Viennese Actionism. However, the actionists themselves claimed their movement to take its roots rather in literary and philosophical movements of the past, both Russian and Western, than the works of their European colleagues. This can be traced in various texts of Anatoly Osmolovsky, where one can see references to Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and the ideas of Situationist International. Alexander Brener addresses Russian Futurism, the avant-garde collective OBERIU and poets like Aleksei Kruchenykh, Daniil Kharmis and Alexander Vvedenskiy. Other artists also found inspiration in the early avant-garde tradition. For example, Avdey Ter-Oganyan took up the rhetoric of de-sacralization and profanation used by Russian avant-gardists.

In particular, one can still see certain similarities between the bodily actions of Moscow and Viennese actionists. The bloody, violent and sexually explicit performances of Austrian actionist Hermann Nitsch resonate with Alexander

Brener's bold interventions. Brener is probably the most scandalous protagonist among his former associates; among his misdeeds were masturbating at a formal reception, attempting sexual intercourse with his wife under a monument in Pushkin Square, vandalizing a painting by Kazimir Malevich and imitating defecation in front of Van Gogh's painting in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. Besides that, he was involving himself in various scandals with the representatives of the art world: inciting fights, making provocative remarks and destroying other artists' artworks. In his 2016 autobiographical book "Жития убиенных художников" (The Lives of Murdered Artists) he mentions his contemporaries and former colleagues in a very unfavourable, insolent and mocking way.

Nudity was also used by another actionist, Oleg Kulik, who was led naked on a dog leash by Brener in 1994 and later made a series of "Mad Dog" actions in other places and different contexts. Those exhibitionist actions juxtaposed the vulnerability of an individual in a world of power where nothing can be done ("It doesn't work" – noted Brener to the accidental spectators of him trying to have sex in public), but also transmitted a political message and represented primal masculine aggression and willingness to fight. In his 1995 action "First Glove", Brener, dressed in shorts and boxing gloves on a cold winter day, came standing at Lobnoye Mesto in the Red Square and shouted to president Yeltsin to come out and fight him. By this he expressed disapproval of the Russian war campaign in Chechnya, which was the main media event of 1995.

The 1990s were about the aesthetics of rebellion, poetics of absurd, astonishment and challenging borders and boundaries. However, the political climate was changing rapidly and so was the art. Lena Johnson (2015, 28.) observes that at the very end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, Actionism became more politically charged than earlier. Leaving behind the anarchistic rebellious carnival, the artists started to address the issues that were ignored before. RADEK, led by Anatoly Osmolovsky and the group "Nongovernmental Control Commission" hung a banner from Lenin's Mausoleum with the slogan "Against all" in December 1999. This phrase was used earlier on ballot papers as an election option, expressing disapproval of all candidates or parties.

Osmolovsky himself points out that the action was not profiteering on a relevant political topic, such as indignation and mistrust at the current government, but

expressed a fundamental protest against the methodology of choice and the established system of legitimizing power. (2000.) In that text he references the political philosophy concepts of Michel Foucault, whose views on resistance and power are ambivalent and relativist. The artist insisted that despite the seemingly political message, there was no intention to steer the public to certain actions, such as sabotaging the election. One can speculate whether this was a sincere statement or a step back.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the insolence of such an intervention and the fact that it took place during the parliamentary elections, three months before the presidential election, and could potentially inspire the voters to choose the proclaimed option "Against all", the action drew the immediate attention of the Federal Security Service (FSB). The banner was taken down after three minutes and all participants were invited to proceed for a conversation with the secret police. Nobody was arrested, but the artist was persuaded to put an end to the politically charged activities of the art group. RADEK's last performance took place in August 2000, three months after Vladimir Putin's first inauguration as the president. (Johnson 2015, 28-29.) After that, Anatoly Osmolovsky switched to a different type of artistic activities.

The liberal Yeltsin times that were so favorable for Moscow actionists were over. It had become clear that certain statements and actions cannot be left unnoticed without a penalty to follow. Avdey Ter-Oganyan was charged under Article 282 Paragraph 1 of the Russian Criminal Code for his 1998 "Young Atheist" action. Following the traditions of avant-garde de-sacralization of art, he used cheap reproductions of Orthodox icons as the objects of worship and destroyed them with an axe during a participatory performance in Moscow Manege. The artist was accused of blasphemy, satanism and spreading hatred against religion and the believers.

The investigation took over a year and had a huge media effect: both local and international artistic communities supported the artist and sent collective letters to the court, while at the same time there were counteractions from different organizations of Orthodox activists and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. A group of people, shouting out threats of physical violence, vandalized a few artworks of Ter-Oganyan at his exhibition at Marat Guelman's gallery. The

artist's attempt to open a criminal case against the attackers wasn't successful. On the day of the court hearing in April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999 there was a massive invasion of Orthodox activists who started a fight with the press.<sup>3</sup> In September 1999, realizing the high probability of getting a prison sentence, Avdey Ter-Oganyan sought political asylum in the Czech Republic and fled Russia before he was put on a federal wanted list.

Another radical actionist, Oleg Mavromatti, crucified himself in the courtyard of the Institute of Cultural Studies in Moscow while shooting his video art in 2001. The place was chosen strategically – next to the Church of St. Nicholas on Bersenevskaya Quay and in front of Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was visible in the background on the video. After the footage had been released, a strong wave of outrage from the believers and the public followed. Mavromatti had been charged under the same Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code, after which he left Russia to reside and work in Bulgaria and the USA.

Slowly but surely the First Wave Actionism declined. Liberal and anarchistic times of the early 1990s came to an end. It was still more than a decade before the adoption of the law on picketing, the amendment to the law on extremism and the era of political prisoners, but the time of wild actions came to its logical ending. Artists who belonged to the group of Moscow Actionists or were their successors either fled Russia as a result of criminal prosecution, like the abovementioned Mavromatti and Ter-Oganyan, or switched to different types of artistic and professional activities, such as becoming art theorists, lecturers and critics. Most of them still continue their artistic practice, but not in the field of Actionism.

Alexander Brener, who was also known as a poet in the artistic circles, wrote a series of books in which he looks back on the history of Russian Actionism and the artistic community of the 1990s, as well as his own artistic biography – some in co-authorship with Austrian artist Barbara Schurz. He is still active as an actionist artist and stays true to his provocative manner but resides in Europe, where artistic expression is not under tight governmental control and his actions are not shocking and troubling the public to the extent they did in Russia. Anatoly

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<sup>3</sup> <http://artprotest.org/cgi-bin/news.pl?id=295>

Osmolovsky declared himself a 'new formalist'; he writes on art theory and founded the independent educational institution Baza, which teaches contemporary art. In Russia, where there is no established tradition of teaching contemporary art practices on an academic level (Bolotyán 2019), this is one of the few examples of artistic initiatives to create a place where students get the needed theoretical and conceptual framework for the process of artmaking.

Actionists of the Second Wave, which arose in the late 2000s, launched a new era of politically charged art which started to be associated with the term art activism. This term describes the nature of their actions and their agenda quite precisely and is commonly used in various sources. However, some researchers, like actionist artist and curator Pavel Mitenko, still prefer to call it Actionism, pointing out certain similarities with the First Wave Moscow Actionism (Volkova 2020.). Those similarities can be seen in the radical character of artistic interventions, often dealing with using methods meant to incite shock and the strategy of using renowned public spaces, which Second Wave actionists had adopted from their predecessors. However, there are some differences as well.

Despite the fact that some late 1990s actions were more politicized in comparison with the early ones, they could not be considered as activism of any type. The practices that occurred by the end of the first decade of the new millennium were addressing the topics that had never been tackled in Russia before. PG group, whose activity started in the year 2000, is known for its leftist, anti-fascist and anti-racist rhetoric. Voina, who appeared in 2006, also leaned on the radical left spectrum and drew attention to various societal issues, such as homophobia, xenophobia, social exclusion and the superiority of certain groups over others.

The actions stopped being just an anarchistic carnival, a reflection on an individual's boundaries or a philosophical contemplation of resistance to an abstract power. The new generation of actionists became more politically aware and strived to become catalysts of change in social and political systems. Curator of MediaImpact international festival of activist art Tatiana Volkova marks an overall enthusiasm and the expectation of change that were present in 2011. (2020.) In the autumn of 2011, the protest movement Occupy Wall Street appeared in the USA, which coincided with the first MediaImpact being held in Moscow and the

group Pussy Riot formed by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (b. 1989), previously a member of Voina.

The Russian protest movement began in December 2011 and inspired a wave of activity among political and art activists as well as an overall increased interest in street and protest art. This interest found expression in various events and art exhibitions, such as “100 Years of Performance” (2010) and “Russian Performance: A Cartography of its History” (2014) in the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art and activities of the abovementioned MediaImpact collective, who also organized regional festivals and smaller events, which they called art expeditions, and held discussions.

Second Wave Actionism is known for loud and direct actions that gave the movement a worldwide visibility and was intended to hit the state power and authorities rather than address a mass viewership. Some researches call it ‘Macho Actionism’, emphasizing its heroic nature within the discourse of power. (Volkova 2020.) The arrest of Pussy Riot members after the “Punk Prayer” in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012 activated a wave of artistic political activity in Russia and inspired other dissident artists, such as Pyotr Pavlensky (b.1984), to action. Both the local and international activist society expressed solidarity with the arrested art activists and organized support actions.

2012 became a breaking point, where the authorities took control over art activism and the protest movement in general. A two-year jail sentence for Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich became a shock for the artistic community and showed that acting in the context of art doesn’t protect one from being imprisoned. Moreover, being a researcher or a curator working with activist artists doesn’t help either, because from the point one goes out in the street to join a rally, regardless of the motivation and intention, he or she is considered a civic activist by the police and authorities. (Volkova 2020.)

Since then, art activism has become more dangerous to engage in and more limitations apply on activities of the artists. Against the backdrop of a general conservative political turn and a tightened control over creative production both

big and small, art institutions prefer to stay away from politically charged art. People who work there don't want to risk their reputations, job positions and premises, and therefore refuse to let art activists in. Tatiana Volkova remarks that during the six years of MedialImpact's existence they had gone from being an official part of the programme of Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, having sponsors and occupying big exhibition venues, to the point when no institution wanted to host them anymore and to collaborate with them. (2020.) Their activities were constantly interrupted by attacks and provocations made by right-wing activists, bans from local authorities, police inspections and Cossack raids<sup>4</sup>.

The transition to the Third Wave Actionism was smooth, yet the paradigm shift was noticeable. After it had become clear that the lone heroes who call out the state power for fight are not invincible and all loud initiatives will be suppressed, more peaceful and quiet practices came into use. (Bolotyan 2019.) This paradigm shift brought a feminist discourse into focus, which included, in a broad sense, advocating for oppressed groups, giving them a voice and addressing their needs and problems. However, the obstacles and censorship, including self-censorship, still make it difficult to gain a wide publicity for contemporary Russian art activists.

In 2018, Katrin Nenasheva's (b. 1994) private exhibition "Cargo 300. Collage of experiences" in Solyanka Gallery was cancelled one day before the official opening "due to technical issues". It happened three days after the artist was detained during her serial public action "Cargo 300", under which she motionlessly lay in a cage for hours. The action and the exhibition were aimed to draw attention to tortures that regularly happen in police stations, penitentiaries and other closed institutions in Russia. Although there was no official statement from Moscow Department of Culture, the artist concluded that the exhibition was cancelled after a special order 'from above'. Another activist artist of the Third Wave, Daria Serenko (b.1993), known for her project "Quiet Picket", lost her curatorial position at Gallery Peresvetov Pereulok because of her online activism and active citizenship in autumn 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> The Cossaks of today are a self-organized nationalistic organization that, among other thing, organizes attacks on opposition activists, protesters at peaceful rallies and carries out raids on art exhibitions and theater performances in order to defend the conservative, traditional values and interests of the state and the Orthodox Church.



Even by analyzing the projects that get prestigious awards in the field of Russian contemporary art, such as Innovatsiya (Innovation) and the Kandinsky Prize, one can see the change that has happened since 2012. Between 2008 and 2011 there were many radical artists who were nominated and granted awards, but since 2012 nothing of the kind happened. (Epstein 2014.) PG group, known for their politicized and critically charged works, was awarded the Kandinsky Prize in the category of Media Art Project of the Year in 2008. In 2011, the art group Voina was awarded the Innovatsiya prize in the category of visual art for its 2010 action “Dick Captured by the FSB”. Nevertheless, they ignored the event and rejected the prize from the state organization established by the Russian Ministry of Culture. Voina member Natalia Sokol released a blog post afterwards, where she stated that “Voina never has and never will participate in any awards or money prizes. We make free, non-whoring art. Our art is our gift to the world and to each and every person. If reading the reports of our actions makes you feel joy or, on the contrary, provokes deep gloomy meditations, then we become happy. Our art touches people. And no one dares fix a price to it”. (2011.)

The same prize but in the category of best regional project of contemporary art went to art activist Artyom Loskutov and his project “Monstration” in 2010. Pussy Riot weren’t even shortlisted for any of the prizes, despite their infamous action having become the biggest media event of 2012. Nevertheless, Katrin Nenasheva became a nominee for the Kandinsky Prize as a Young Artist of 2017 with her project “The Punishment”, dedicated to punitive psychiatry methods and mistreatment of disabled patients practiced in Russian corrective psychiatric facilities. However, her project addressed a societal issue rather than included a direct accusation of institutions or the authorities.

Voina members Oleg Vortnikov and Natalia Sokol fled Russia in 2012 after various criminal charges have been filed against them and are currently confusing, troubling and mocking the European society. Several countries offered them a refugee status; they were invited to participate in various festivals and biennales and were given opportunities to implement their projects, but they caused scandals everywhere they were hosted. Their political stance has become unclear;

being considered as the most reckless fighters against Putin's regime, they suddenly turned into his supporters. Their activities transformed into radical anarchism, including shoplifting as a representation of struggling with the capitalist system.

According to Alek Epstein, Pyotr Pavlensky's emigration to France in 2016 drew the final line under the era of heroic Russian art activism, that had become famous both in Russia and abroad, and brought it back to the state when there were no key protagonists in the field. (2018.) However, he doesn't mean that Russian Actionism in the form of art activism is dead and that nothing is done today, but rather notes that the media effect of today's actions can't be compared to the publicity of the abovementioned Pavlensky, Pussy Riot and Voina, nor of the first Moscow Actionists, such as Oleg Kulik. (Epstein 2018.)

The social turn is more relevant nowadays than ever. Although during the Second Wave art activists' actions addressed some societal issues as well, their agenda was to resist and challenge the repressive apparatus of power. Their practice didn't include work with social groups as such. One can speculate whether the paradigm shift was a consequence of repression in Putin's Russia or a following of the global trend in activist art. Strategies of micro-resistance, as defined by Tatiana Volkova, include quiet practices where artists promote their ideas every day (usually in their personal blogs and social media) and engage with social and voluntary work. (2020.)

As an example, she mentions Katrin Nenasheva, who works in different social organizations, such as a psychoneurological ward for children and as a social volunteer in a crisis center for teenage suicides, all while working on her artistic community-based projects. (Volkova 2020.) Her artistic activity is bound to activism, for which she implemented the term 'psychoactivism'. Her goal is to inspire other activists, artists and self-organized communities to address the stigma of mental disorders problem and to promote a wide range of activities (journalistic, artistic, educational, etc.) that would break it.

Artist Ekaterina Muromtseva, who combines artistic practice and voluntary activities, also marks the shift from direct political statements towards addressing the

problems of local communities, oppressed and minority groups and even individuals. (2019.) According to her, among other reasons for this change could be the fact that a direct action today can lead one to an arrest and prosecution, which will close the artist's opportunities for further activity and resistance, while an indirect criticism with no provocation allows the artists to keep up with their activism and influence the social environment around them. Such activity doesn't get a wide media effect; it often remains inconspicuous, but it has its long-term and profound effects. (Volkova 2020.)

## **2.2 Societal and political discourses of present-day Russia.**

Artists can't help but respond to the transformations and changes in the society around them. Therefore, it is important to mention some political events, social trends and laws that have affected and continue to affect art. Before the financial crisis of 2008 and the election fraud of 2011, Russians generally had low interest in political life. In the early 2000's depoliticized society, the main place for political activity was the internet, with its various online communities and platforms for discussions and debates. (Chekhonadskikh 2015.) According to a country-wide opinion poll conducted by FCTAS RAS<sup>5</sup> in 2014, the only type of political activity for 41% of the population was voting in elections, 37% discussed politics with family members and friends and only 1-2 % actively engaged in politics by taking part in the activities of local authorities, political parties or human rights organizations on a regular basis. Around 43% of the respondents stated that they didn't have any interest in politics at all and never participated in any of the abovementioned activities; only 2% of them were intending to change that in the future. (Sedova 2014, 51.)

However, since December 2011, as people began to realize that they are dissatisfied with the political decisions and the impossibility to influence them, the authoritarianism and opaqueness of the current government, they have become more involved with politics. Artists, as representatives of the creative class, couldn't stay aside. People no longer wanted to continue discussions online, but

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<sup>5</sup> Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences

to go to the streets, initiating a dialogue with those in power. The protest movement of 2011-2012 brought the Second Wave Actionism to its peak but also resulted the following paradigm shift in Actionism and marked the start of the Third Wave.

Among a series of rallies of both bigger and smaller scales, the major one that attracted (according to the Russian opposition) around 150,000 participants, took place in Bolotnaya Square on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011. It became known as the Snow Revolution. Despite being the biggest media event of the day, it wasn't covered on the central television channels and other state-run media. Nevertheless, the event was authorized by the Moscow government and there were no clashes with the police or provocations. The protesters aimed to reach the annulment of the election results to the State Duma<sup>6</sup> and the holding of new, legislative and open elections. Among other demands they requested freedom to political prisoners and registration of the opposition parties. Later, on December 24<sup>th</sup>, people demonstrated on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow under the slogan "For Fair Elections". The official number of participants ranges from 28,000 to 96,000 people, according to different media sources (pro-governmental and oppositional). St. Petersburg, Vladivostok and major cities in Siberia and the Urals also joined the demonstration and held rallies on the same day.

The second phase of the protest movement coincided with the Presidential Elections on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and Putin's presidential inauguration for the third term. On May 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 the protesters marched in Bolshaya Yakimanka street and Bolotnaya Square "For an Honest Power. For Russia without Putin". This event is known as the "March of the Millions". It led to various arrests and clashes with the police. Several internet sites experienced DDoS attacks<sup>7</sup> or were blocked, including those of radio station Ekho Mosvky (Echo of Moscow), TV channel Dozhd and the newspaper Kommersant. The results of the mass arrests during that rally became known as the "Bolotnaya Square case". Trials of its participants are still on-going.

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<sup>6</sup> The State Duma is the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia. Its main tasks are adoption of laws and control over the activity of the Russian Government

<sup>7</sup> DDoS (distributed denial of service) is an attack on a web server with an aim to prevent the website from functioning correctly and make it unavailable to users

According to sociological research conducted by Levada Center, the majority of rally participants were young, middle class men with higher education, in particular representatives of the creative class. Around those who had joined the protest on Bolotnaya Square on December 24<sup>th</sup> 60% were under 40 years old, every fourth person held a leading job position or was an entrepreneur, only 12% were students. 70% identified themselves as liberals, 24% said that they supported left wing politics and 6% claimed to be nationalists. (Samarina 2011.) Initially, the protest movement looked promising and people were inspired to express themselves. However, the protest movement was decentralized and unorganized, and never became truly large-scale in comparison to similar precedents in other countries. Professor Birgit Beumers marks that when considering Moscow as one of the biggest world capitals, the maximum number of protesters during the Snow Revolution seems too modest. She compares it with the June 1982 peaceful rally in Bonn (500,000 people) and New York's No Nukes Rally, that attracted one million people. (Beumers, Etkind, Gurova, Turoma 2018, 165.)

The Russian opposition didn't obtain consent about its aims and goals and failed to get a leader or a group of leaders that would be able to express the demands of the society and start a dialogue with the authorities. (Johnson 2015, 221-222.) Simultaneously with the demonstrations of the opposition were pro-governmental counter-rallies. Radicalization of the protesting groups, both the left and the right political spectrum, was an inevitable consequence of this resistance. However, despite the difference in political views, people of different convictions united in a common desire for free elections, political freedom and democracy. (Johnson 2015, 209-210.)

The government was looking for fast and effective ways to suppress the revolt and neutralize the growing threat by making changes and amendments to existing laws. The reaction to oppositional civic activities had become harsh. In May 2012 Putin was inaugurated for the third term and took control over the protest movement and activism. Since then, heavy penalties on all kind of unauthorized and unsanctioned public actions have been implemented.

In order to understand the cost of becoming involved with the political life in Russia, some laws ought to be mentioned. There are two codes of punishment in Russia: The Criminal Code for serious offenses and the Code of Administrative Offenses (CAO) for lighter ones. A separate chapter of the CAO is devoted to violation of public order and security and contains Article 20.2 on violations during protests and rallies. In the previous version of the Article, there were only three parts: violation of the organizing process of rallies and processions, violation of rules for conducting them and the organization of uncoordinated actions in the immediate vicinity of a nuclear installation, a radiation source or a storage facility for nuclear materials. The punishments for the first two parts were quite mild – a maximum fine of two thousand rubles. For organizing a rally near a nuclear storage facility, one could be arrested for 15 days. Generally speaking, the legal consequences for the protesters were not very serious.

After the protest rally on Bolotnaya Square in December 2011, Russian authorities hastily tightened the Article. On May 10<sup>th</sup> a member of the United Russia party Alexander Sidyakin submitted a new bill to the State Duma and one month later, on June 8<sup>th</sup>, Vladimir Putin signed it. This was the first of a series of laws that tightened the socio-political regime in Russia during Putin's third presidential term. Article 20.2 has expanded significantly, its maximum fine increased 150-fold and up to 300,000 rubles in present day. Legal grounds to sentence participants of non-violent protests to arrests have appeared, even if the demonstration or a protest march hadn't been conducted close to a nuclear storage facility. The maximum arrest period has increased to up to 30 days.

The full title of the most popular part of the Article 20.2 is the following: "Violation of the established procedure for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches or pickets." The maximum penalty is a fine of 20,000 rubles or compulsory works for up to forty hours. When there are many protesters at the same place, the more stringent part of the Article 20.2 is applied. It presupposes punishment for those who interfere with pedestrians and cars, and also impedes access to social or transport infrastructure. Policemen refer to this part if detainees have to be kept in a police department for a longer time.

In July and August 2019, during the protest rallies organized by the failed candidates for the Moscow Duma, the police and officers of Russian National Guard detained about 1700 peaceful protesters, considering their actions as a violent offense against public order. The Moscow Investigative Committee opened criminal cases of planned mass riots and attacks on government officials (referring to Article 318: Use of Violence Against a Representative of the Authority). This precedent became known as the so-called 'Moscow Affair'.

Just before the Moscow Affair, in June 2019, the public was outraged by absurd and grossly fabricated drug charges against Ivan Golunov – an investigative journalist who writes, among other topics, about corruption in Russia. The case illustrated how people who are trying to induce change in society are being silenced and exposed to police violence and abuse of power. It attracted an unprecedented media attention and a wave of support from journalistic and other professional communities, creatives of all kinds, human rights activists and even some State deputies. Ordinary citizens went out in the streets in pickets, many were detained. However, the attracted attention to the case made its closing due to a lack of evidence after the inquest and verification possible, and Golunov was released. It was probably the first victory of social justice in present-day Russia.

One can go on enumerating the many cases of activists and ordinary people being detained and sentenced to imprisonment in Russia not only for expressing disapproval of the current regime but even for disagreement with certain decisions made by its representatives. However, the main idea is that any protests and public actions are perceived today as political – as an attempt to undermine the existing political system as a whole. It explains the disproportionate measures of restraint and the harshness with which any activist initiatives are suppressed. Even environmental protests, corporate strikes, financial demands of trade unions and lone picketing are all suppressed in the most severe of ways. Politically active citizens are accused not only of violating the public order but also for an attempt to destabilize the political situation in Russia.

In other words, the authorities made political protests equal to terrorism and extremism and apply laws that usually deal with the latter kinds of crimes. The loudest case presently is the severe sentences for young Russian antifascists and anarchists accused of belonging to the terrorist organization “The Network” and preparing an armed uprising with the aim of overthrowing the current government. Despite the absurd and contradictory nature of those accusations, as well as alleged violation of the arrestees’ human rights such as physical tortures and moral violence, all participants of the case got prison sentences of 6 to 18 years.

The State perceives one as a civic activist even if a person happened to be an occasional spectator or a passerby of a rally. Art, as any other form of public activity, can’t avoid being influenced by such conditions. The arrest of Pussy Riot members in 2012 proved that being an artist in Russia doesn’t give one the exclusive right to express oneself within the framework of art. All political topics in art are either carefully avoided or forcibly excluded from being exhibited by institutions. Curatorial or research activities can also lead to certain penalties: Andrei Erofeev, curator of the 2007 exhibition “Forbidden Art”, was forced to leave his job at the State Tretyakov Gallery and was sentenced to a significant fine as a result of a criminal case on inciting religious hatred. (Volkova 2020.) Yury Samodurov, director of the Sakharov Center where the exhibition took place, was the second defendant in the case and in 2008 he voluntarily resigned from his position.

Some art professionals, such as art critic Ekaterina Degot and gallerist Marat Guelman, claimed that the accusation and the trial were politically motivated: an attempt to undermine activities of the Sakharov Center – a cultural center that promotes the protection of human rights in Russia. (Degot 2008.) In 2014 the center was labelled a ‘foreign agent’ under Law 121-FZ of July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012. This law forces Russian NGOs that receive funding from abroad to register as ‘foreign agents’ and regularly provide financial reports and audits to the government, which seriously complicates their activities.

Actionist Katrin Nenasheva is being detained after almost every public action of hers, even if she doesn’t have any posters on her and doesn’t interact with the



public. Nevertheless, despite such censorship and obstacles, art activists can't help but react to the flaws of the current system and societal issues. Being unable to go out in the street with a demand addressed to the government, activists organize various artistic events, such as poetry readings, gigs, closed exhibitions and charity fairs, organize self-run collectives that support and help political prisoners and other oppressed groups.

Some researches see the reason for the politicization and radicalization of art in the generational shift. According to them, young artists of the first Post-Soviet generation, whose early childhood was in the 1990s and who had economically stable 2000s, have grown up more concerned about the society they are living in. They don't want to put up with overall and all-encompassing passiveness and social pessimism. In addition, they use new media as a tool for distributing their work, which gives them opportunities that the previous generations didn't have before. Art theorist and critic Maria Chekhonadskikh states that 2011-2012 protests indicated the importance and necessity of replacing the dissident rhetoric of heroism and individualism in art with new forms of collective protest, set a goal to make society identify itself with the activists and recognize them as a part of a collective 'we'. (2015.)

### 3 RUSSIAN ACTIONISM

#### 3.1 First Wave Actionism.



Picture 4. E.T.I. movement “E.T.I.-text”. 1991

E.T.I. (Expropriation of the Territory of Art) movement in their actions implemented the theory of Situationist appropriation of public places as a space for critical expression. According to art historian Olga Grabovskaya, the success of “E.T.I.-text” action is based on an obvious effect of a clash between the sacred and the taboo. (2014.) The sacred in this sense is the Red Square with its symbolic meaning for the whole country – sacred in a political discourse first of all – and the taboo is the word “dick”. At that time using obscenities and strong language in public was a punishable. The artists not only used an obscene word in public, but physically embodied it with their own bodies in the most important public space. Juxtaposing those two symbols and bringing the marginal, forbidden element to an official context caused a scandal, which was the desired outcome.

E.T.I. participants acted like anarchistic and chaotic agents provocateurs; their guerilla actions were primarily made to stir up the Russian art scene, which was,

according to them, either overly conceptual or passive and almost dying. The overall depression and confusion were not only in social life, but also in art. E.T.I. marked the beginning of a new era of street actions and interaction of artists with the mass-media.



Picture 5. Oleg Kulik “Mad Dog, or the Last Taboo Guarded by Alone Cerberus”, 1994

A metaphor for the situation in which Post-Soviet citizens had found themselves after the collapse of the Soviet Union was embodied by Oleg Kulik. The “Mad Dog, or the Last Taboo guarded by Alone Cerberus” action took place in Marat Guelman’s gallery and outside of it in 1994 and was later reperformed multiple times in different environments until year 1998. Alexander Brener held naked Oleg Kulik on a chain leash, while he was throwing himself on pedestrians, cars and occasional spectators, causing traffic jams and inspiring primal fear among the eyewitnesses and the bystanders. A household dog that was unexpectedly thrown out into the street and is perceived by the high-class society as wild, unpredictable and potentially dangerous – that is how many Post-Soviet artists felt having been finally introduced to a European and global artistic community. Uncivilized, uncultured and bizarre, but at the same time causing curiosity as some-

thing exotic and confusing. The artist himself explains that the imagery of an aggressive dog came to his mind when he, starving and penniless, was desperately trying to make a living and therefore jokingly suggested gallerist Marat Guelman to be a loyal guard dog in his gallery. (Kulik 2014.) The action had a considerable media effect and gave the former exhibition technician Kulik recognition. The following year he performed an unsanctioned intervention at an art exhibition at Kunsthaus Zurich, during which he growled, attacked museum visitors and blocked the entrance to the exhibition.



Picture 6. Oleg Kulik "I Love Europe, She Doesn't Love Me Back", 1996

During the "I Love Europe, She Doesn't Love Me Back" action Kulik, in his already known manner, impersonated an aggressive dominant dog while being surrounded by 12 police dogs at Mariannenplatz in Berlin. He barked and growled, pretended to bite the dogs and provoked them to retaliate aggression. In the middle of the lawn there stood a flagpole with a flag of the European Union; the chosen number of dogs was corresponding to the number of stars on the flag. In this action Kulik proposed himself as a symbolic enemy, that would make European countries unite against. (2014.) Joining forces motivated by the fight against an external enemy was the most primary and powerful impetus towards uniting in the artist's opinion.

The same year 1996 actionists Oleg Kulik and Alexander Brener caused an international scandal at a Russian-Swedish exhibition Interpol in Stockholm. The project's curator from the Russian side Viktor Misiano states that overall cooperation with the Swedes during the organization process was poorly conducted at all stages and furthermore complicated by fundamental differences in approaches and intentions, as well as lack of material and other support for implementation of the projects of Russian artists. There was a serious controversy in the interpretation of conceptions and choosing strategies; moreover, European artists preferred not to collaborate with the Russians and chose to create individual artworks. (Misiano 2005.)

Alexander Brener was originally supposed to work with Maurizio Cattelan, whom he personally invited to participate in the exhibition. However, the Italian artist decided to create his own project instead, and Brener chose to express his frustration about the exhibition by tearing down an artwork of a Chinese artist Wenda Gu. According to Misiano, Brener dared to perform such a destructive act because "this work had become a global symbol of autism, of a principal rejection of dialogue, a symbol of the program of dialogue's bankruptcy during the entire exhibition as a whole". (2005.)

Kulik, who was intending to collaborate with Ernst Billgren, also discovered a few days before the opening, that his Swedish colleague had already created his own artwork and is not eager to cooperate. Instead, the actionist was suggested to perform his famous Mad Dog action one more time. At the opening Kulik began to act aggressively: he climbed out of a dog kennel, attacked the visitors and bit one. Jan Aman, the Swedish curator of Interpol, became furious and kicked him in the face. The police came to detain Kulik, however there were no legal consequences or professional problems neither for him nor for Brener, despite the fact that the outraged exhibition participants sent collective complaint letters to various art institutions. Oleg Kulik later said that not only the intended dialogue between the West and East failed to happen as a result of the project, but also communication between the curators and the artists and among the participating artists reached a deadlock.

In 1997 Kulik repeated the Mad Dog theme once again in "I bite America and

America bites me” action in New York. However, some forms of conduct had changed: in addition to his accustomed aggressive behavior, the artist in his role expressed sexual interest to female visitors, sniffing their private parts and letting them pet him. The title of the action refers to 1974 Joseph Beuys’ performance “I like America and America likes me”, under which the artist locked himself in a gallery space in New York with a wild coyote.



Picture 7. Oleg Kulik “I Bite America and America Bites Me”, 1997

The animal theme is traced through the whole Kulik’s artistic path. In 1992 he organized an action “A Piglet Handing Out Gifts”, during which a living pig was butchered in Regina Gallery. The pig had been walking around the gallery, being fed and petted by the visitors; then two professional butchers slaughtered it and fried the meat to feed the audience. The public was shocked and outraged; however, many ate the meat and even took it home with them. The early 1990s were a time of empty counters and deficit; probably that made people cope with their emotional trauma, caused by the view of murder. The artist exposed the hypocrisy of the approach when everybody likes to pet cute animals, but at the same time nobody wants to think where the meat that they are buying and eating comes

from and to face the disturbing fact how it is actually delivered. In “The New Sermon” action in 1994 Kulik, dressed as a figure resembling Jesus Christ, climbed on a cutting table and moaned a preaching in support for all animals, holding a piglet bought at Danilovsky market.



Picture 8. Oleg Kulik “The New Sermon”, 1994

In 1995 Kulik, being naked as usual, impersonated a monkey at the Moscow Zoo during the “Experiments of Zoocentrism” action, climbing on enclosures, eating bananas and throwing peels at the audience. The same year he created a political party of animals, from which he intended to run for presidential elections. The idea to create a ridiculous and absurdist party came from the desire to take away votes from radical politicians. Kulik’s Animal Party even managed to beat off a few percent from other parties. Nevertheless, the artist claimed that politics never

interested him, and the project's idea wasn't motivated by political ambition. On the contrary, he intended to create a metaphor for the time when involvement in politics is motivated by some primal, "animalistic need to stand out, occupy some place and mark the poles". (Kulik 2014.) However, the action revealed inadequacy and inconsistency of the young Russian democracy and fueled the growing scepticism of the citizens that it is possible to seek opportunities in the field of politics (Nechiporenko, Novozhenova 2018.) According to Olga Grabovskaya, despite the fact that his actions weren't politically motivated, they were artificially made so afterwards, under discussions that followed such public statements. (2014.)



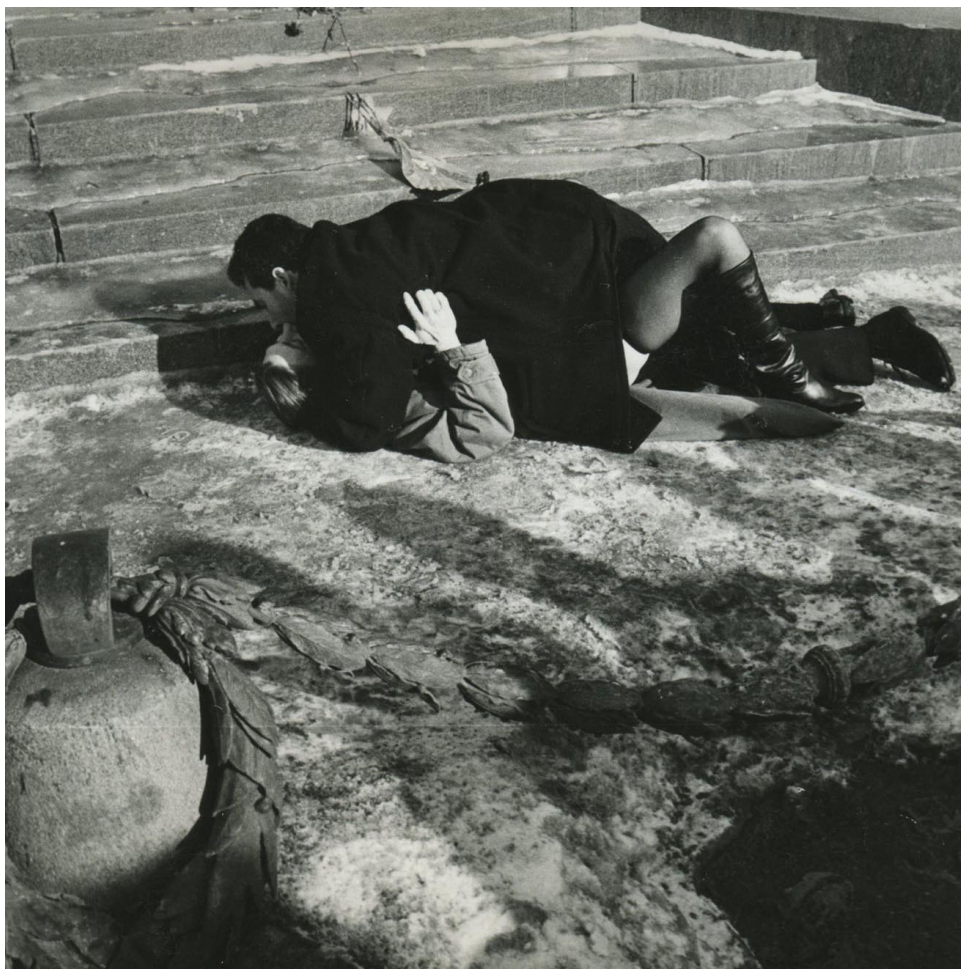
Picture 9. Alexander Brener "First Glove", 1995

When speaking about radical bodily actions it is important to mention Alexander Brener's actions. In the "First Glove" he came out to the Lobnoye Mesto in front



of Kremlin walls and shouted to president Yeltsin to come out and fight him. Expression of a primal masculine aggression was a reaction to the war campaign that Yeltsin had started in December 1994 in Chechnya. Moreover, a challenge to fight can be seen as a demand for an open democracy, when those in power are ready to engage in dialogue with those who have chosen them. Although the artist was eventually detained by the police, he was soon released, and no penalties followed. The earlier mentioned gallerist Marat Guelman, who was present at the site and supported the artist, later commented on what had happened, saying that the police officers had let Brener perform for about half an hour before detaining him (n.d.). According to him, they explained it so that they wanted to let people in Chechnya see that at least someone in Moscow is against that war.

The body of an artist, especially the naked body, as used by actionists, inevitably brings a political discourse to the action. It can be seen as a symbolic clash and collision of private and public, an illustration of vulnerability, defenselessness, impotence and inability to affect things – sometimes literal impotence, as in Brener's "The Date" – or as a representation of animalistic, primal aggression, recklessness and commitment to fight until the end.



Picture 10. Alexander Brener "The Date" 1994



Picture 11. Alexander Brener, 1997

On December 12, 1997 Brener spray painted a green dollar sign on a painting “White Cross on Grey” by Kazimir Malevich in Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam. The act was heavily criticized both by the international and Russian artistic community and caused serious debates. Some, including the director of Stedelijk, claimed that Brener’s action was nothing more than a pointless and brutal act of vandalism and therefore included no artistic statement, others perceived Brener as a follower of a destructive tradition in art and saw reference to Situationism International, ideas of Guy Debord and even the philosophy of Diogenes. Brener, who got to spend several months in a Dutch jail for this misdeed, stated during the court hearing that he had protested against the commercial nature of the art world and art institutions in particular. A painting by Malevich according to Brener was an illustration of how an artist had sincerely tried to change the world through his art, but in the end his works were commercialized by elitist circles and turned into currency and a status object to have. That was not the first case when Brener used works of famous artists to make his own statement: in 1993 he came as a visitor to Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts and holding faeces in his hand stated that he admired Van Gogh’s painting “The Red Vineyards Near Arles” so much that he had shitted himself.



Picture 12. Nongovernmental Control Commission “Barricade on Bolshaya Nikitskaya street”, 1998

On May 23, 1998, Moscow acitonists carried out probably the most spectacular street action of the time – the Barricade. It was inspired by the French 1968 Student Revolution, therefore among other slogans there used were some historical ones in French, for example: Il est interdit d’interdire (It’s forbidden to forbid), L’imagination au pouvoir (All power to the imagination), Soyez realistes, demandez l’impossible (Be realists, demand the impossible). Parisian students took a step forward towards developing a spectacular form of protest, making it poetic and aesthetical. Moscow actionists took up and implemented those strategies in their practice, and even directly cited some statements. Among other demands the artists asked for a monthly salary, legalization of drugs and a visa-free traveling around the world for each participant of the action. Around 300 people blocked the street with empty cardboard boxes, construction trash and paintings and were holding the barricade 20 meters away from the Kremlin. The police waited for about half an hour, asking people to clear the street. As a result, some actionists were detained and later fined.



Picture 13. Avdey Ter-Oganyan “Young Atheist”, 1998.

Avdey Ter-Oganyan's 1998 action "Young Atheist" at "Art Manege-98" exhibition in Moscow Manege problematized the sacralization of cheap orthodox icon reproductions, revealing the connection between sacralization mechanisms in religion and capitalism. (Grabovskaya 2014.) At the same time, the artist expressed his attitude towards the venue itself and the event. The action itself was implemented within the framework of an educational project of the "School of Avant-Garde/School of Contemporary Art" – a collective project and an independent self-organized institution run by the artist himself. The School in itself was a commentary upon the absence of a full-fledged art education in Russia. Ter-Oganyan chose icons as a strong symbol of worship, to illustrate the avant-garde mechanism of desacralization. As it was mentioned before, the action led to criminal charges and forced the artist to emigrate from Russia.



Picture 14. Nongovernmental Control Commission and RADEK "Against All", 1999

Within the framework of the project "Election Campaign Against All Parties", undertaken by the group "Non-Governmental Control Commission" together with the magazine "Radek" and Anatoly Osmolovksy, a series of actions was carried out. The artists appropriated the form of a traditional political campaigning and

combined it with actionist expropriation of public space. Their goal was not articulating a political message but criticizing the existing forms of artistic and political representation and the mechanism of representative democracy (Osmolovsky 2001.) Therefore, elections were chosen as a target, as the main symbol and principle of democracy. According to Osmolovsky, the campaign was an illustration of the rejection of choice. (2001.)

To summarize the abovementioned, actionists of the First Wave directed their criticism not to political systems and the government, but first of all to the unsatisfactory state, in which Russian contemporary art was in 1990s. They were dissatisfied with the void that had appeared in the art scene and the cultural field in general, lack of worthy alternatives and the desired representation. Post-Soviet artists were looking for ways to assert themselves and to overcome the imposed provincialism as well as to comment on the surrounding reality. Much of the criticism concerned art institutions and the system in general. Even if there were political discourses involved, they appeared after the actions had been carried out and weren't in focus of Moscow actionists, who preferred to express and relive existential states and experiences through bodily practices.

### **3.2 Second Wave Actionism**

The Second Wave of Russian Actionism is known for loud, flash-like gigs and bold actions, direct political statements that were aimed to reach a big media effect and hit the current Russian government with criticism. However, the main purpose is seen in achieving a maximum critical effect and highlighting an existing conflict rather than promoting a certain political message. Placing activist activities in social networks has erased a visible boundary between the artist and the viewer, but at the same time it created a new, autonomous territory of art- and media activism. Activist artists of the new generation suggested the term 'artivism' to describe the newly occurred phenomenon. Artist Victoria Lomasko sees the main difference in paradigms: Moscow actionists were reflecting on the state of

Russian contemporary art and the new Russian society from an existential perspective rather than political while 'artists' of the early 2000s radicalized politically and were in opposition to the current government. (2011.)

One of the brightest representatives of the movement, Voina art group was formed in 2007. It was founded by Oleg Vorotnikov (Vor) and his wife Natalia Sokol (Koza), who were subsequently joined by Pyotr Verzilov, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and other activists. Every action of Voina addressed a political issue. Therefore, the dates and places for holding them out were chosen strategically: so that they would contain a reference to certain events of the past, national holidays or dates of elections.



Picture 15. Voina "Feast", 2007

The least political might be called a 2007 series of actions "Feast", executed in subway cars of Moscow and Kiev Metro. A "feast" was a traditional wake in the memory of a poet and conceptual artist Dmitry Prigov, who was a close friend, collaborator and inspirator of Voina. "Fuck for the Teddy Bear Heir!" action gave Voina wide publicity and made them media figures. It was carried out two days

before presidential elections of 2008 in Timiryazev State Museum of Biology in Moscow. Five couples participated in a staged orgy and were publicly having sex in front of display cases with stuffed animals. For most of the people the result of the election was obvious: Dmitry Medvedev will be chosen to be the next president of Russia, as an officially approved successor of Putin. According to Voina's official 'media officer' and spokesman Alexey Plutser-Sarno, what was happening during the action portrayed the pre-election fuss: everybody's fucking each other, and the Teddy Bear (a wordplay on Medvedev's last name) is looking at it with disgust. (2008.) The action was mocking the meaninglessness and fakeness of elections in Russia. At the same time there were many other interpretations and layers of symbolic meanings revealed. The action's documentation, published on Plutser-Sarno's Livejournal blog, collected thousands of comments and was spread in various media.



Picture 16. Voina "Fuck for the Teddy Bear Heir!", 2008

In some cases, actionists appropriated the already-existing social phenomena in their practice. An example for that is an action performed by Voina member Leonid Nikolaev (1983-2015), that took place on 22 May 2010. Nikolaev, with a plastic blue bucket on his head, jumped on a Federal service car and ran across its



roof. The event drew an immediate attention of media and was discussed in the press. The Society of Blue Buckets, a self-organized movement, stated that they weren't aware of Nikolaev's action and have nothing to do with it. The artist, who had appropriated the external symbol of the movement and their agenda, stated that he had given it fame and visibility, and showed an example of how a protest action should be carried out. (Nikolaev 2010.)



Picture 17. Leonid Nikolaev (Voina) “Fucked-up Lyonya Roofs Federal Agents”, 2010

The Blue Buckets movement draws attention to a common problem in Russia – a misuse of the blue flashers on cars, that gives senior officials, civil servants, law enforcement and emergency vehicles privilege in road traffic. A flashing blue light has become a symbol of a higher cast of people, who get away with the most serious violations of traffic laws: endangering the lives of pedestrians and other participants of the traffic and even causing fatal car accidents. In many cases the blue flasher is used unreasonably and even illicitly. The misuse of it causes serious traffic jams in the center of Moscow and frustrates the citizens.

A visible resemblance with a toy bucket inspired people to organize flash mobs, putting blue plastic buckets on roofs of their cars and going picketing in the streets. Nikolaev was arrested and accused of hooliganism; however, he ignored the court hearing and stated that the real hooliganism and lawlessness is the fact that there are people in Russia who do whatever they want, run over people and violate traffic laws, but nothing is ever done to stop them. (2010.)

The topic of inequality and class distinction in Russia had interested Voina since the very beginning. It is traced through many of their actions; for instance, in 2008 Oleg Vorotnikov, dressed as an Orthodox priest, defiantly filled a few bags with food at a big supermarket and paraded through the counter without paying. Other group members were documenting the process; while neither cashiers nor a security guard dared to stop him or even ask something. They were presumably confused by seeing the outfit of a person, who represents authority, even if its spiritual authority. After the Pussy Riot case, everybody learned the true power of Russian Orthodox Church and its close connection to the State; but even at the time when Voina carried out this action everybody knew that members of the clergy are the ones who belong to the highest cast of citizens and therefore cannot and should not be stopped from doing what they want.



Picture 18. Voina “In Memory of the Decembrists”, 2008

“In the Memory of the Decembrists” refers to a military uprising against Russian Emperor Nikolai I in 1825. The aim of the Decembrists was abolition of serfdom and autocracy; everybody who had participated in the revolt, were either executed, imprisoned or exiled to Siberia. The leader of the dissidents, Pavel Pestel, was executed through hanging, therefore Voina staged a mock hanging of two homosexual men (performed by activists) and three real migrant workers from Central Asia in a big department store, while some group members held a banner where it was written “Nobody gives a fuck about Pestel”. By this, actionists presumably protested against homophobic and racist statements of Moscow Mayor of that time Yuri Luzhkov.

Surprisingly, the action was interpreted in different ways: many right-wing activists and people who are sympathetic with nationalism and homophobia saw it as a demonstration of what has to be done with ‘non-white’ immigrants and representatives of LGBT, and therefore approved it. (Epstein 2011.) Some people found such postmodernist play with checking the boundaries inappropriate and unethical, because it was dealing with too dangerous and serious topics and had to do with the real violence and hatred to certain social groups. Epstein notes that lack of articulated ideology and specificity in the group’s statements provoked different speculations and revealed Voina’s desire for all encompassing fame (2011).



Picture 19. Voina “Dick Captured by the FSB”, 2010

Beyond comparison, “Dick Captured by the FSB” is the most famous action of Voina, that made them well-known worldwide, even among people who were previously not interested in protest art and activism. A giant phallus, painted within 23 seconds after closure of the traffic and before raising of Liteiny Bridge, was erected in front of the local FSB building in St. Petersburg and remained there for hours. As it was mentioned before, the action was awarded a money prize from the National Center for Contemporary Arts in 2010, which Voina rejected. Documentation of the project got millions of reposts and comments on social media.

“How to Snatch a Chicken” is another scandalous action of Voina that is often mistakenly attributed to Pussy Riot. It continues the topic of shoplifting, which interests Voina. A female member of the group entered a supermarket, took a chicken from refrigerator and arduously tried to stuff it into her vagina in order to carry it out from the store, while other activists were documenting the process and holding letters that formed a word “bezbyadno” (“without whoring”). The slogan rhymes with the Russian word “besplatno”, that means “for free” and refers

to the group's anti-capitalistic grounds for shoplifting. Accordingly, the chicken was snatched from the store and later presumably eaten by Voina members.

Voina's lifestyle is shocking for the majority of people not only in Russia but also in Europe. Since Vorotnikov and Sokol had fled Russia and reside in different European countries, continuing to shoplift, initiating scandals with artistic and anarchistic communities and raising their three children without any legal papers, their activities, aims and political stance are raising more questions than giving answers. Alek Epstein notes that the group never formulated any suggestions and ideological doctrines, neither shared their visions of how they would like Russian society to develop. (2011.) He assumes that such open-end nature that leaves room for interpretation, together with addressing the general hatred of the repressive power apparatus and corrupted governmental structures arouse sympathy and interest to the group among a wide range of people. They couldn't offer anything constructive, while destruction and hate are more powerful triggers with a stronger impact. However, their achievement was making Actionism visible and interesting not only for a small society of those who are interested in contemporary art but to heterogeneous masses. (Epstein 2011.)

Pussy Riot, their former colleagues, who had split from Voina (in the person of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova) because of disagreement on artistic strategies, are mostly known for their music videos, punk-rock gigs and guerilla performances in public places. The main difference from direct provocations and violation of public order of Voina and calibrated, minimalistic and masochistic actions of Pyotr Pavlensky was a carnival-like, bright and musical character of their actions. Documentation and publication of the works online was a crucial part of their practice, and they often used editing of the videos; in fact, the notorious "Punk Prayer" that got them in the dock was carried out without the sound. (Gapova 2012.) The audio track "Mother of God, Please Chase Putin Away!" was added later during the editing, as well as the video sequence was extended.

Pussy Riot lyrics brought in focus feminist rhetoric, LGBT and human rights violation in Russia. They openly demonstrated their direct opposition to Putin as a

totalitarian dictator and Russian Orthodox Church in the face of its main representative Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. In their Livejournal blog the band members wrote that they are tired of state-controlled media spreading lies and propaganda, corrupted and biased systems of distributing titles, positions and regalia among a closed circle of people (president's friends), and hint on Patriarch Kirill's former connections to the FSB and his alleged profiteering on cigarettes importation. Russian Orthodox Church as a whole is seen by Pussy Riot activists as a traditional patriarchal oppressive institution that spreads misogynistic and sexist ideas and justifies inequality in family-, social- and working life. They argue that "even the Mother of God wouldn't have had access to the altar", as for women in the Orthodox tradition are not allowed to approach it as well as they can't hold a prayer service, and therefore they as feminists intentionally break this rule<sup>8</sup>.



Picture 20. Pussy Riot "Punk Prayer", 2012

The arrest of Pussy Riot influenced Pyotr Pavlensky's "Stich" performance: he sewed his lips together and was standing during the trial outside Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. The sewn lips quite obviously symbolized lack of freedom of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html?page=18>

speech in Russia. Starting from that action, Pavlensky was taken to mental health facilities multiple times, and every time the expertise showed that he was fully sane. Self-mutilation became his recognized style; he repeated it later in “Fixation” and “Segregation” actions. The body of the artist was his main artistic medium. His actionist strategies included not only publications of documentation and manifestos online, but also the detention and interrogation protocols, recorded conversations with his investigators. In fact, the following legal procedures are considered by the artist himself as continuation of his actions. As in the case with Pussy Riot, Pavlensky was driven by political statements.



Picture 21. Pyotr Pavlensky “The Carcass”, 2013

“The Carcass” was the artist’s protest against suppression of civil liberties and repressive policies in Russia, that include laws complicating and limiting activities of NGOs, legislation against homosexuality, censorship laws and arrests on political grounds. He lay naked wrapped in a barbed wire in front of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg until the wired coil was cut by the police and he was taken out. The same year he performed “Fixation”, which claimed to be a metaphor for political indifference, social pessimism, fatalism and apathy of the modern Russian society. The artist nailed his scrotum to paving stones of the Red

Square on 10 November – Police and Internal Affairs Servicemen’s Day. Action’s documentation went viral and made Pavlensky a media figure. When analyzing Pavlensky’s thoroughly planned actions one can here the same strategy of using memorable dates for carrying out artistic actions as Voina had.



Picture 22. Pyotr Pavlensky “Fixation”, 2013

During the 2014 “Segregation” action, naked Pavlensky cut off a piece of his earlobe while sitting on top of Moscow’s Serbsky Institute (State Scientific Center for Social and Forensic Psychiatry) and was sitting with the blood running down his neck until police removed him from the building. By this act of self-mutilation at a symbolic and well-known among all Russian people site, the artist drew attention to the issue of political abuse of psychiatry. During the Soviet times dissidents were forcibly treated in closed facilities in connection with fabricated psychiatric diagnoses. In present-day Russia such punitive methods are still employed, according to human rights activists. That influenced Pavlensky’s choice of the location, the Serbsky Institute is seen by him as a symbol of a representative tool of oppression.



Besides self-mutilation Pavlensky practiced vandalism at public places. The “Freedom” action was executed in connection with Euromaidan<sup>9</sup> in Kiev and took place on February 23<sup>rd</sup> – Defender of the Fatherland Day (former Soviet Army and Navy Day) in St. Petersburg. Pavlensky and other activists set up an installation from car tires and flags on Malo-Konushenny Bridge and set it on fire, then continued the action by beating metal plates with sticks. In his manifesto, that was later published online, the artist stated: “Burning tires, Ukrainian flags, black flags<sup>10</sup> and the rumbling of iron – this is the song of liberation and revolution. Maidan irreversibly spreads and penetrates the heart of the Empire. The fight against imperial chauvinism continues. The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood is the place where Narodnaya Volya<sup>11</sup> members committed a successful assassination attempt on the emperor, who had brutally suppressed the liberation uprisings in the Right-Bank Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Belarus. We fight for our and your freedom. On this day, when the state encourages us to celebrate the Defender of the Fatherland Day, we urge everyone to stand for the Maidan holiday and to defend their freedom. The bridges are burning and there is no turning back.”<sup>12</sup> (Pavlensky 2014.)

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<sup>9</sup> A wave of pro-European Union protests in Ukraine, that led to riots and the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014 and the following resignation of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and his government.

<sup>10</sup> The black flag is one of traditional anarchist symbols

<sup>11</sup> Narodnaya Volya was a 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary political organization in the Russian Empire that consisted of radical intellectuals who strived to overthrow autocracy and considered terrorism to be an efficient method of a political struggle. Its members performed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dS88c9-KSM>



Picture 23. Pyotr Pavlensky “Freedom”, 2014

Another act of vandalism was setting on fire the door of Lubyanka Building<sup>13</sup> in 2015. Traditionally, the video documentation of the action and a new manifesto were published online shortly after the action had been executed. The criminal case was opened, resulting Pavlensky being declared guilty of vandalism and ordered to pay a fine. The abovementioned criminal case coincided with the allegations of sexual assault against the artist and his civil partner Oksana Shalygina. Pavlensky claimed the accusation to be slander, and his family fled Russian to seek political asylum in France, escaping both the prosecution and paying the fine. In 2017 the actionist performed a similar action in Paris, setting fire to the entrance of the office of the Bank of France. The artist chose the bank located on Place de la Bastille because of the historical connections with the French Revolution. The Bastille fortress was destroyed by French revolutionists as a symbol of the oppressive power of monarchy. Pavlensky wanted to initiate the “rebirth of the French Revolution that would transform into a global process and therefore steer Russia in the direction of liberation.” (Pavlensky 2017.) However, this artistic statement didn’t find understanding among the French officials, who considered it to be a dangerous vandalization and destruction of property. The artist

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<sup>13</sup> The headquarters of the FSB

was sentenced to three years in prison (from which two were suspended), his partner got a milder sentence. In addition to that, they were ordered to pay a fine as a compensation to the Bank of France. Since then, Pyotr Pavlensky has neither performed any artistic actions nor produced other types of art but involved himself in a dirty political scandal and even faced new criminal charges for violent behaviour and invasion of privacy.

The Second Wave of Russian Actionism addressed relevant political issues and became a symbol of the Russian protest movement of 2011-2013. The above-mentioned actionists used the strategies of direct actions and provocative, daring statements, calling out and mocking politicians (for example, Pussy Riot song *Putin Zassal* (Putin Has Pissed Himself)), expropriation of public spaces and misuse of public property, including vandalism. Their use of the internet as a tool for promoting their artistic statements was limited with publishing documentation of the actions and discussion on forums among quite closed groups of people, who were interested in protest art and the protest movement in itself. Publicity and making the actions big media events were reached primarily thanks to the scandalous nature of those actions. Despite addressing some social issues besides the political topics, Second Wave actionists' practice didn't include working with the oppressed groups and drawing attention to their needs. The heroic nature of their actions left aside the humble, socially and human-oriented part.

When looking at today's activities of the above examples of artists one can see that this era is over. Pussy Riot group stopped existing; its founder Nadezhda Tolokonnikova switched from art to pure activism and defending human rights. Pyotr Pavlensky with his questionable acts resembles today more of a criminal than an art activist. Voina members have changed their political stance and produced neither any new statement nor developed their old ones, except for continuing to shoplift and brawl with European anarchists. At the same time the paradigm shift has happened and marked the start of the Third Wave of Russian Actionism.

### 3.3 Third Wave Actionism

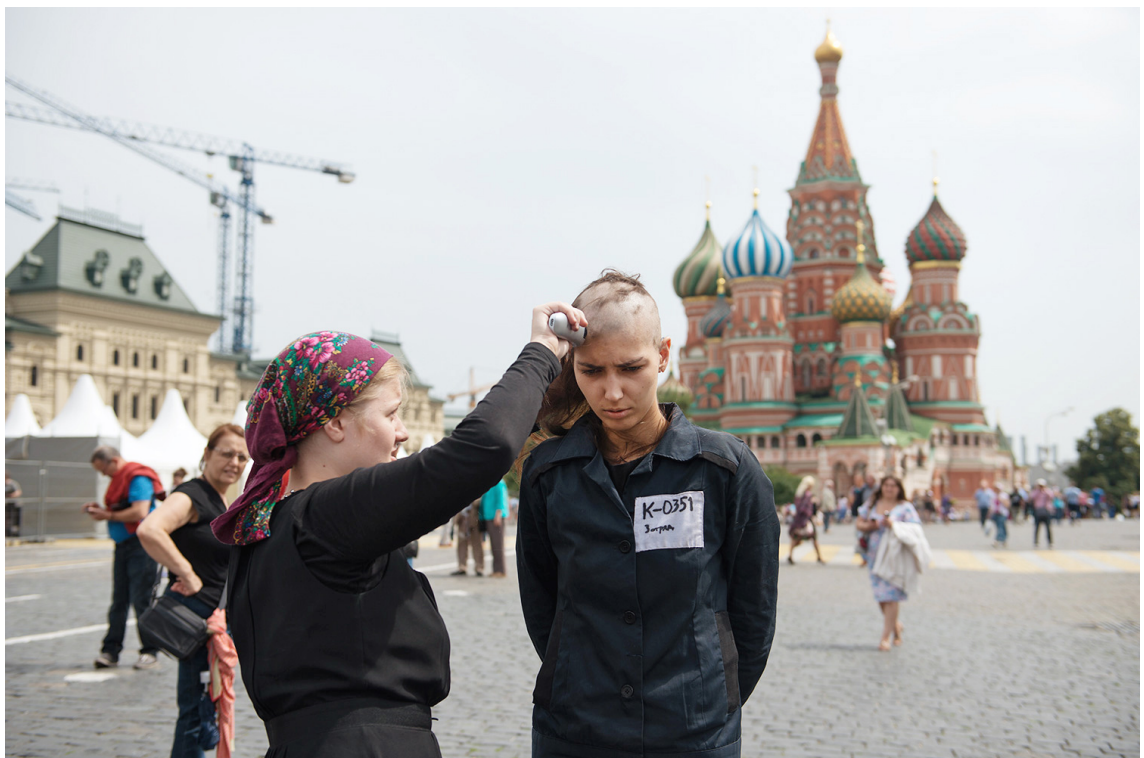
As mentioned before, the Third Wave Actionism can't be compared to the previous ones in terms of media effect. The strategies of today's actionists include quieter practices and therefore they don't get such coverage in media as actions of their loud predecessors. Artists of the new generation actively use mass and social media as the main channel of promotion and distribution of their ideas, often work directly with the oppressed and socially vulnerable groups, address feminist agendas and reflect on the current situation in Russian social life and legislation. (Volkova 2020.) Their attention goes where there lies a social issue: for example, they are fighting domestic violence and lack of legal protection for women in Russia, picketing in support of political prisoners, helping crisis centers, etc.

Their activism includes everyday activities, that are often referred to as the practice of small steps. It includes, for example, posting on social media about the important topics, holding discussions, participating in charity events. They intend to be catalysts for social and political change in Russia but have to perform their activities carefully and cautiously, because any direct action today will lead one to arrest and prosecution, making it impossible to keep up the resistance, and furthermore, helping others, whose voices are left unheard and uncounted. (Muromtseva 2019.) Many of today's actionists and art activists cease to call themselves artists or at least don't consider it to be a primal matter and combine their artistic practice with social work, journalism or political activities.

Actions of Katrin Nenasheva illustrate the Third Wave Actionism's social orientation. One of her artistic methods is voluntary work within closed environments of socially vulnerable people. (Volkova 2020.) In 2015 she performed "Don't Be Afraid", drawing attention to the necessity of rehabilitation and social adaptation for female prisoners, their reengagement with the society. For almost a month the artist was walking in the streets of Moscow wearing a prison uniform, attended different public places and job interviews, tried to interact and communicate with people. On the last day she got her hair shaved bold on the Red Square and was detained shortly after that. Placing herself in the clothes of a prisoner the artist experienced intolerance, hostility and sometimes open aggression. The project

exposed how the society is not ready to accept those who had been in places of confinement, how stigmatized and therefore vulnerable they are. In an interview to Afisha Daily, Katrin said that for the most people were silently staring at her with scorn and disrespect and avoided social contact, which made her feel even more uncomfortable. (2015.)

The action also showed how the governmental system (being represented by prison administration and police) is not ready to deal with such artistic projects and doesn't know how to react to them decides to forbid and restrict 'just in case' (Volkova 2020.) Nenasheva's original idea was to do a photo project with the real prisoners, but during the action's implementation, when the artist started wearing a prison uniform herself and attracted attention of police, several prisons refused to collaborate with her. (Nenasheva 2015.) She was detained twice, while sewing a Russian flag on Bolotnaya Square (together with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova from Pussy Riot) and after being shaved on the Red Square. The reason for detainment in both cases was not clear, except for a vague clarification that the performance on the Red Square attracted 30 viewers and created obstacles for pedestrians. The artist and her activist friend who had shaved her hair got three days of arrest.



Picture 24. Katrin Nenasheva "Don't be Afraid", 2015

“The Punishment” series of actions (2016) was dedicated to the issue of mistreatment at orphanages, in particular, forced placement of orphans in mental wards and different forms of humiliation and violence that exists not only from the personnel’s side towards children, but also among the inmates of children’s homes towards each other. Violence that is raised by violence. For 21 days the artist was walking in the streets of Moscow with a metal bed strapped to her back. The length of the action was not a random number of days – for such period of time the orphans are kept in mental hospitals as a punishment for their misbehaviour.

Those public interventions highlighted not only the global problem but brought in focus stories of certain people. In a Facebook post Katrin Nenasheva wrote a tragic story of two orphan brothers who suffered violence and indifference of the system. One of them became physically disabled after an unsuccessful suicide attempt. With the help of the artist he wanted no longer to hide his story, but to make it public, to expose it as well as his crippled body with bedsores, to make problems of Russian orphans visible. Here again the artist raises the question of tolerance, inclusion, non-discrimination and social adaptation. Besides various traumas from an uneasy childhood, those children, when becoming young adults entering ‘the real life’ and starting to live on their own, suffer from a sudden isolation, loneliness and lack of basic social skills, which leads to their incapability to fit into society and potential exposure to antisocial behaviour.

She notes that children, who are accustomed to punishments and mistreatment among other violent pedagogical methods used in orphanages, bring the same violence into life and use it on others. (2016.) By making people look at the side of life which they prefer to ignore, such as shocking and repulsive for many acts of dressing wounds and treating bedsores the artist brings in focus reflection “on the boundaries of bodily, political, and, above all, human.” (Nenasheva 2016.)



Picture 25. Katrin Nenasheva “The Punishment”, 2016

The topics of social exclusion and misuse of psychiatry were continued in Nenasheva’s project “Between Here and There”. For three weeks the artist was walking around Moscow wearing VR goggles. They hindered her ability to see what was around, so she had to move cautiously, with her arms stretched forward trying to grope for support. In the VR goggles there were videos and photographs from psychiatric hospitals: corridors, staircases and other everyday surroundings of the patients, who are isolated from the outer world. Many of those patients are mentally capable, have sufficient intellectual skills for living on their own and even working, but totally lost their social skills under years of forced isolation. Some found themselves in mental wards straight after orphanages, especially those with mobility disabilities, some became victims of fraud, often in their own families, and had been intentionally falsely diagnosed as mentally disabled. In the existing bureaucratic system one can get deprived of legal capacity quite easily, while it is almost impossible to get it back.



Picture 26. Katrin Nenasheva “Between Here and There”, 2017

The artist described her experiment with temporarily erasing her personality as devastating. She said that at some point people started to perceive her not as a human, but as an object: some even violated her personal space and tried to touch her. (Nenasheva 2017.) A blindfolded person without physical support is a symbol of helplessness. Patients who haven’t left the hospital walls for 10 and more years and probably never will, would also feel helpless, lost and without support if they were placed in today’s world. Katrin describes the phenomenon of ‘learned incapability’: when a person is being continuously told that he or she is incapable of doing something, they finally believe it and become indeed incapable and helpless. (2017.)

The action ended up with the artist being detained by police on the Red Square and sent to a psychiatric evaluation test. The policemen said that it was forbidden to be in a virtual reality on the Red Square and expressed a general lack of understanding of what Nenasheva had been doing. Once again, the state power was confused when meeting Actionism face to face and didn’t know how to react to such type of activities – whether they should be considered a potential threat for the existing order of things and therefore must be prevented and stopped, or



those actions are a strange behavior of an individual or a group of individuals whose sanity should be checked because their motivation is otherwise unclear.

This misunderstanding of the artist's activity as well as other things that were discovered during the process of action's implementation, revealed a global for Russia problem of discrimination of people with various disorders: both physical and mental. Ordinary citizens prefer to have them invisible: people have generally little tolerance, knowledge and concern for their social inclusion and respect for human rights, and for the government it is easier to make them lifetime prisoners behind hospital walls instead of providing proper support for their special needs and ensuring their normal functioning and well-being in the society. Katrin Nenasheva continues to work on breaking the stigma of mental health conditions together with other activists, calling it 'psychoactivism'. Their main goal is to make people not to be afraid of sharing their experiences and speaking of their health conditions, as well as to facilitate communication between people, who are "here" and those who live "there" – behind the walls of psychoneurological wards.

In 2018 Nenasheva suffered tortures in self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. This personal traumatic experience made her address the problem of abuse of power and tortures. She performed series of actions under which she lay in a cage wrapped in cling film. On the cage there was a sheet of paper with a printed statement: "There is a body in this cage. The body that was tortured. Torture takes place in Russia every day – behind the closed doors of prisons, police stations, psychoneurological boarding schools, psychiatric hospitals. When I was tortured, I felt as if I were in a cage: lonely, powerless, lost and shrunken. I was absolutely helpless, but most importantly, I was invisible. There are hundreds of such 'invisible' ones in Russia. After experiencing the trauma of torture, it is very difficult to integrate into reality. Torture becomes a burden that you carry in yourself, on yourself, with you. Right now, at this very moment and second someone is being tortured in Russia." (Nenasheva 2018.)



Picture 27. Katrin Nenasheva “Cargo 300”, 2018

The artist’s field of interest is how ordinary people react to violence, be it an unfolding scene or its consequences. Some look away and pass by, others wait for someone else to step in (usually representatives of power) but there are also those who are willing to help. Many people were confused and astonished when seeing her lying motionless in a cage and after having read the text. They felt uncomfortable and didn’t know how to react; many were worried for the artist being cold or not having enough air to breath, but for some reason people didn’t dare to release her, despite suggestions to do so from Katrin’s friends, who were assisting and watching her. (Nenasheva 2018.)

Nenasheva was supposed to have a personal exhibition at Solyanka Gallery, where she was going to present collective reflections on how tortures affect one’s perception of their own body and their further life. For the exhibition she collected the real stories of victims of abuse of power or their close ones, who had also suffered from PTSD<sup>14</sup>. There were planned to be participatory performances under which the viewers could undergo from empathizing with other people’s emo-

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<sup>14</sup> Post-traumatic stress disorder

tions and pain to acceptance of trauma with the help of an invited narrative therapist. However, the exhibition was suddenly cancelled one day before the opening and never took place.

In 2019 the project has expanded into an immersive actionist theatre “Cargo 300”. Katrin, together with other artists and activists, continues the topic of abuse of power that includes police violence, fabricated drug charges, use of physical and moral violence, etc. The theatre is organized as a horizontal community, meaning that there is no director in a traditional sense but instead its members are working together on creating the content. The content is based upon real life experiences of people who had suffered police violence. Performances take place in different locations, that are announced shortly before the date in closed Facebook events, and presuppose active participation of the audience, not just silent contemplation.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 2019 I watched the performance in one of the central districts of Moscow, at a symbolic for all Russians and Muscovites site – the memorial in the memory of the victims of 3-4 October 1993<sup>15</sup>. Those viewers, who had voluntarily expressed willingness “to play a game” before the start of the performance, were later invited to come out in pairs to impersonate a victim and a tormentor. The roles were decided by lot, but some people swapped them. Some were almost paralyzed with confusion and reluctance to abuse someone even in a playful form, others seemed to be going too far in employing methods of humiliating the other. Those who couldn’t stand the view or action were urged to leave the space.

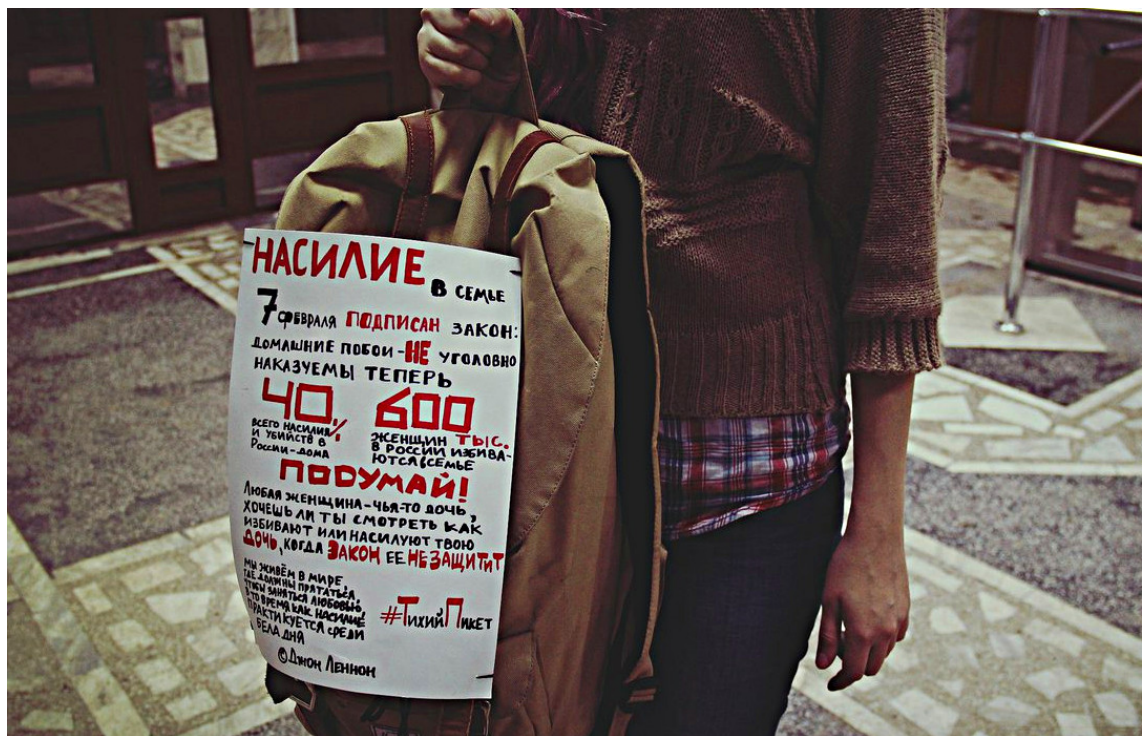
Being placed in front of an uneasy choice where there is no correct and desired option, people become numb. One either stays to silently contemplate the scene and by that supports violence and allows it to happen, or attempts to stop it, which very few people would actually dare to do. Exiting the space and refusing both to participate in the game and to watch it becomes the third option, which I had to choose as for the whole thing was getting me too stressed. There are no right and wrong conclusions one has to draw from watching this performance, or at

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<sup>15</sup> In September-October 1993 there was a constitutional crisis in Russia, a power struggle between president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament. Yeltsin deployed the army; military forces attacked the White House. Around 200 demonstrators who were protecting it, as well as accidental passers-by were killed, over 400 were injured.

least they remain personal. Provoking mixed feelings, confusion and further reflections in the audience are the intended goals of the artists. We have to rethink how we cope with violence and injustice around us and to decide ourselves what we are ready to do about it. Those who were traumatized by what they had just seen had a possibility to talk to an invited psychologist and discuss how they were feeling.

Actionist artist and poet Daria Serenko is mostly addressing feminist agendas and problems of domestic violence. In 2016 she launched a project “Quiet Picket”, which became a perfect example of an activist initiative that has become international and continues to exist even without the artist’s participation (Volkova 2020).



Picture 28. “Quiet Picket”, 2016

As it comes from the name, is about quiet forms of protest, when addressing social and political issues and expressing solidarity with the oppressed groups is otherwise impossible. The artist with her own example encouraged people to create posters and go out in public places with them. The topics may vary from personal or global, but they commonly address some existing social problem. During the action its participants are usually moving around the city, making their daily routines. They are not supposed to initiate a conversation themselves but have

to be ready to maintain it if passers-by become interested and express willingness to discuss the problem.

Daria Serenko wanted to make speaking about 'difficult topics' easier and people to be able to initiate and facilitate a constructive dialogue about such topics not only with like-minded persons but also with the opponents, to promote critical reflection and dispelling of myths. (2017.) People who took part in the project share the action's documentation and their experiences on social media with a hashtag #тихийпикет (quiet picket). Starting in Moscow, the action spread all around Russia and 8 other countries. The artist herself is not currently involved in it, but the created community continues to operate and to promote what they find important on a daily basis.

Art activists of today are more accessible to their audience, ordinary people. They prefer to work directly with the selected social groups in a form of an open dialogue, not positioning themselves as opinion leaders, by creating mystifications or working on a certain image and character. They expect the audience to interact with them, unlike their predecessors who didn't see it as a goal. Their artistic activities are often combined with social volunteering, journalism, civil activism, curating, teaching, etc. Social media becomes their new type of museum, where the results of their activities are exhibited and opinions are shared.

## 4 DISCUSSION

At what extent art can and should involve itself in a political discourse is still a subject to debate. For actionists of the First Wave non-violation of the Criminal Code was an important matter despite of a provocative and radical character of their actions. (Osmolovsky 2015.) According to Osmolovsky, when an artistic action is followed by a criminal prosecution, its artistic value becomes difficult to evaluate objectively. “If you say it was good, everyone will think that you are biased and are trying to justify a person or at least give him hope that he is in prison not in vain. And if you say that the action was bad, then you kind of denigrate a person. In both cases, the artistic statement becomes impossible.” (Osmolovsky 2015.) In that interview, he reasons that political engagement makes it generally difficult to separate the artistic, aesthetical part of the action from the message, that it articulates, and therefore makes it almost impossible to determine whether what was done is art or a political struggle.

By the abovesaid Osmolovsky hints at Pyotr Pavlensky with his politicized actions and intentional violation of laws. Despite the criticism of Pavlensky, who initiated a direct conflict with the authorities, he supports Pussy Riot admitting that the reaction of the authorities to their infamous performance and the following penalty were inadequate, because formally there wasn't any violation of the law. However, speaking about whether art should be involved in politics or not, he stays quite resolute, saying that “if one engages in social activism, then this should be a political activity, not artistic.” (Osmolovsky 2014.) Even back in the days, speaking about his 1999 action “Against all”, he states, that there was little of the artistic content in it, and therefore its aesthetical value is doubtful. (2000.) However, it was ideological and conceptual. He says that it was political to the extent of “politics before politics” and artistic in the sense of “art after art”. (Osmolovsky 2000.) In other words, according to him, art should remain an autonomous zone and should be separated from the social context and remain beyond the politics.

Pyotr Pavlensky has a completely different standpoint and sees the political context inseparable from art. “Art and its forms directly depend on the political context

in which it (art) is carried out, so it's not art that chooses whether to be like this or like that, but the context that sets the artist's some problems, which have to be solved. I think that the more challenging the political climate in the country is, the more politicized and radical the art forms become." (Pavlensky 2013.) He writes and publishes manifestos for each of his action on the Internet, making it an essential part of his practice.

Criminal prosecutions, interrogations, trials and psychiatric evaluations become a consequent logical continuation and extension of his actions. The most vivid example, which illustrates Pavlensky's attitude was his reaction to when the prosecutor, who had been working on his case, resigned from the investigative committee and became an advocate: the artist wanted him to become his defense attorney in court. Although that was not possible from a legal point of view, the whole situation had a big media effect and proved that Pavlensky perceived it as an artistic activity. The artist published the text of his interrogation and titled it as a "play in three acts"<sup>16</sup>.

Views on protest art of the former actionist Anatoly Osmolovsky don't find support among art activists of the new generation, who are critical about his remarks about the imprisoned actionists and the rhetoric around whether what they are doing can be considered as art. Some accuse him of political conformism, betrayal of his own ideas and critical stance and converting himself into a pro-Kremlin artist. In 2010 he accepted an invitation to give a lecture at a pro-Putin youth forum Seliger, after which this criticism intensified.

The difference between art- and political activism is an important factor to distinguish, and it seems that it lies in the general approach. According to sociologist Anna Zaitseva (2010.), the protest in itself is the main focus for activists, as well as a clear statement of their political views, while actionist artists strive to identify and highlight the problem without directly evaluating it and taking sides, or at least their political expression becomes a secondary thing. Actionist artist and the founder of Bombily group Anton Nikolaev points out that if one can call Voina and

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<sup>16</sup> <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/77648/>

Bombily activists, then it is that kind of activism, which does not put forward political slogans. He remarks that their actions never contained any direct accusations and criticism but drew attention to the topics and facts that were silenced or mythologized. (Nikolaev 2010.)

Civic activists address a common viewer by a clear and direct message, that aims to be understood by every person who sees the action, while actionists make their interventions open for interpretation, but at the same time self-sufficient and complete artistic acts. Going back to Pavlensky, he claims thinking in the paradigm of executing actions, that should be liked and understood by masses to be populism (2013.) Leaving the viewers space for interpretation and rethinking what they had seen with time is what defines an artistic action. Art historian and curator Nina Felshin also claims that art activism should avoid preaching and directing people to certain conclusions, which might push them away from this type of art, but instead use gentle and poetic ways to draw them in. (2011.)

The discussion around socially engaged art is often complicated by the discourse on the relationship of the aesthetics to the political, which includes the question of autonomy of art, that was articulated by philosopher Jacques Rancière in 2004 in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*. The concept of autonomy becomes a precondition for political and social equality, democratic forms of organization, while in the artistic context it emancipates art from functionality and heteronomy. Autonomy includes an important question whether art can be interpreted outside of a social context and at what extent art and life can interpenetrate.

Rancière speaks about the definition of the political and the artistic, pointing out the complexity and the oppressive nature of categorizing and assessing. He implements the term 'police', juxtaposing it to the politics. (2009, 90.) Police in this context is used not as a definition of a punishing or control body, but rather to describe the essence of the social order in itself, which carries out the "distribution of the sensible". (2004, 89.) In other words, it determines the identities, roles, the placement of things and concepts in hierarchical and evaluating systems.

Politics, on the other hand, means no distribution of any roles, but a total equality and inclusion. "To define things that are properly political, distinguishing them for



example from that which is social, is the point of view I refer to as 'police'." Yet political action starts when this distribution is called into question, when collectives use this or that "social" issue to define a capacity for thinking and acting that pertains to all. With art and with politics, inventions and subjectifications constantly reconfigure the landscape of what is political and what is artistic." (Rancière 2009.)

When speaking about socially engaged art he points out that when the artists decide that their work should push forward a certain message, it can as a result undermine the autonomy of art. "This is precisely what presupposes a split between the two domains, a necessity to de-neutralize art by making it articulate messages about the social world, or to withdraw it from its exclusive sphere by turning it into a direct instrument of intervention, from agitprop to contemporary forms of intervention in deprived neighborhoods or to the participation of artists as such in the big alter-globalization demonstrations." (Rancière 2009.) If the "contestation of the dominant order" and the open-ended alternatives are taken away, then the artists are consequently drawn into political activism. Claire Bishop summarizes his paradoxical idea of art being an autonomous zone and yet bound to the promise of a social change with the thought that the aesthetics doesn't have to be sacrificed to the purpose and message because art in itself presupposes this promise. (2011, 29.)

Totalitarianism and political repressions affect art just like any other form of a public social activity. Control and censorship set limitations on artistic activities, but also inspire people to find indirect ways of transmitting their message and keeping up with their struggle. Russian art activist scene, which includes contemporary Actionism, still exists as a community, but is forced to choose quieter practices and follow the strategies of micro-resistance. (Volkova, T. 2020.) The bound between civic activism and social practice art has become so strong, that those borders often become blurred. Artistic activities of a certain individual can intersect with his or her social volunteering and vice versa. The difficulty of defining and separating one from another is illustrated by how the artists themselves speak about what they are actually doing, how they define their own role and how they want it to be considered.

The social turn in Actionism is a common trend that can be seen in the topics that the artists are dealing with today. Working with the oppressed groups and addressing problems of local communities makes Actionism a political tool, that draws attention to certain issues and raises awareness in social environments around the artists. In a certainly challenging situation, when civic activity makes one liable to punishment, and institutions refuse to be a channel of distribution and representation of activist art, the strength of contemporary Actionism is in its media-oriented nature and a global digitalization. Social networks are becoming a new type of museums, where the announcing, discussing, exhibiting and archiving of contemporary activist art take place. (Volkova 2020.)

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Picture 2. Nikolai Yevreinov "The Storming of the Winter Palace", 1920 <https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/8212-russkaya-revolyuetsiya-vo-sne-i-nayavu>

Picture 3. Collective Actions "The Slogan", 1978 <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-8.htm>

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Pyotr Pavlensky “The Freedom”, 2014. Uploaded by Dmitry Sergeev 27.06. 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dS88c9-KSM>

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview with Tatiana Volkova.

Independent curator, researcher, curator of MediaImpact international festival of activist art.

**Please tell about your curatorial activities and, in particular, about MediaImpact. This festival is your curatorial project, right? How did you manage to expand it to the scope of an international festival? At what point did your interest in art activism arise?**

How did it happen that my curatorial project MediaImpact became not just a festival, but also a community, as we later called it? My interest in activist art arose in the late 2000s, when I was working at the Tretyakov Gallery in the department of the newest art movements. Our leader was Andrei Erofeev, a well-known curator who fell into disgrace at that very time after he had made the exhibition “Forbidden Art” together with Yuri Samodurov. They were trialed on a criminal code article about insulting the believers, convicted and sentenced to a fine. In the Tretyakov Gallery where we worked, there was a conflict over the exhibition “Sots Art and Political Art”, a conflict motivated by censorship which led to Andrei’s resignation in 2008.

Just then, the so-called activist art began to appear in my field of vision. Groups like Voina and Bombily were formed, PG art group had already existed for quite a long time by then. I started working as a curator at the gallery Reflex, and there I began collaborating with this specific circle of artists. In 2009, the gallery owner Vladimir Ovcharenko became interested in what we were doing, and we created a joint project – the gallery of protest art ZHIR. It lasted for two years, and that project transformed into the MediaImpact festival, which became my independent curatorial project.

It was organized for the first time in 2011 as an international festival of activist art; we invited some very interesting participants from other countries. It was my curatorial project; I had a group of co-curators, and the form of the festival was quite traditional in the sense that there was an exhibition with artworks and explications

on the walls, but also a series of discussions. It was autumn 2011, the era of Occupy Wall Street had just begun; activists were out in the streets of America. The protest wave in Russia began in December 2011 – the so-called Snow Revolution, protests against the election fraud. This coincided with the fact that we had just conducted the first MediaImpact and had a lot of enthusiasm. There was a wave of protest events in the country, and then Pussy Riot group members were sentenced to jail. We, as an art activist community, supported them, made some actions ourselves and participated in various support actions organized by the other activists.

In the Occupy protests there was one very important feature – horizontalization; there was no single leader, let's say, a curator, but instead there was a consensual decision-making system. In a horizontal collective everyone has equal opportunities to influence the process of decision-making, and that served as an inspiring example for me. In summer 2012 I horizontalized the festival: I suggested our participants, artists and activists that this would no longer be my curatorial project, but instead we would form a horizontal community. In this format we made 14 more big festivals, 4 of them in Moscow, 10 in the other regions of Russia, plus we had short trips to different cities which we called art expeditions. In recent years, against the backdrop of a general conservative political turn, the pressure on us during the organization of festivals has increased, especially in the regions. However, we faced attacks of the right-wing activists in Moscow as well: every time various provocations were made, such as false alarms about bomb threats.

**What is the situation with MediaImpact festival today? Does it still exist and operate?**

At some point it became impossible to continue carrying out our activities under the festival's name because no exhibition venue wanted to take risks and deal with us. We didn't have a venue of our own, we were just a group of people working out of sheer enthusiasm. We had to contact different organizations and art centers all the time, but in the end, nobody wanted to work with us. Also, we didn't want to let anybody down and expose them to provocations. The decision to cease the existence of the festival was also due to the fact that we all had burnout;

against the backdrop of a common socio-political apathy, our team, apparently, also exhausted its resources for activist activity, and so everything gradually went down. In 2016, the fifth and last MediaImpact was held at CII Fabrika. Later we made several other projects, having changed the name for security reasons, because the reaction to MediaImpact had become too strong. For another couple of years our subsidiary projects existed: activist festivals in Samara and Kazan.

**Is there an art activist scene in Russia, or is it more like scattered initiatives?**

One can talk about its existence, of course, because the disparate initiatives, one way or another, form a common field together. People who engage in art activism, who are interested in it or explore this topic, are more or less aware of each other's existence. Several large retrospective exhibitions were made on this topic recently. In particular, I made one of them. Two years ago, I was invited to Aachen, Germany to co-curate an exhibition called "Art and Activism in Russia Since 2000". The seventeen-year-old (at the time) history of the movement was traced and presented there. This is the topic I have been working on lately, and also the theme of my dissertation. It's important for me to describe this movement and to highlight its origins that come from the Moscow radical Actionism of the 1990s, to describe the phenomena that were associated with the inception of Russian activist art in the 2000s, to say what is happening to it now and to identify some of its basic features, as well as its paradigm shift.

**What, in your opinion, is the key difference between the agendas of contemporary art activists and actionists of the Second Wave?**

Some researchers, such as Pavel Mitenko, my colleague in MediaImpact, does not call the phenomenon that arose in the 2000s art activism, but the Second Wave of Moscow Actionism, its continuation. The 2000s were a time of heroic, 'macho' Actionism. Despite the fact that Pussy Riot were feminists – transitional figures in that sense, it was about heroism, where one or several people went to fight with the authorities face to face, showed a middle finger to the state power<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Voina action "Dick Captured by the FSB", 2010

and shouted out provocative slogans. Lone heroes fighting the system. Nowadays, such actions of a heroic, macho nature are not performed any more. The word macho here is used from the point of view of the discourse of power, when a valiant hero calls out the power to fight. Such actions were performed by Alexander Brener back in 1995, when he challenged Yeltsin to battle.

It seems to me that the paradigm of masculine Actionism is being left behind and during the past several years, actions in activist art have been associated with the feminist discourse. This means not only a struggle for gender equality and women rights, but in a broader sense – advocating for oppressed groups. My dissertation supervisor, Angelina Lucente, calls this a ‘maternal aspect’, when artists, usually female artists, work with socially vulnerable groups, such as children, people with disabilities, adolescents who have survived suicide attempts, etc. Artists give them voice and visibility, and organize participatory, community-based projects. “Quiet Picket”, which was invented and launched by Daria Serenko, turned into a horizontal community. The artist herself is no longer actively involved in it, but the community exists in many cities and supports the idea of going out into public spaces with an important topic, be it social or political. Political in this sense doesn’t mean that it should necessarily be related to issues of power, but it can be also an expression of support the oppressed and minority groups.

Even the name of the project, “Quiet Picket”, eloquently illustrates this paradigm shift. Earlier there were high-profile actions, such as the phallic symbol painted on the bridge, the door of Lubyanka set on fire – high-profile in terms of the media effect. The “Quiet Picket”, of course, does not have such an impact. It does not attract the same level of attention from the authorities, the media and the public. Instead, completely different strategies are implemented, strategies of micro-resistance; daily actions in which people promote their ideas every day, sometimes even do social and voluntary work, like people of helping professions such as nurses, daycare workers and so on. When Katrin Nenasheva initiates her projects, she starts working in different social organizations. For example, she worked in a psychoneurological ward, about which she made her project “Between Here and There”. Recently, she also worked in a crisis center, dealing with

teenage suicides and helping certain people. This is a much quieter and inconspicuous activity, but it has its long-term and profound effects.

**Do you consider yourself an activist? Aren't you afraid to engage in activism and work with activist practices in present-day Russia?**

Yes, now all of this is becoming dangerous; the word activist is perceived negatively, and art institutions are wary of activism. When we made MediaImpact, as soon as we had launched the announcement that we were coming to one city or another to hold a discussion at a university or at some art center, there were official letters, phone calls, police visits and Cossack raids. Yes, of course I consider myself an activist. There is such a concept as “curatorial activism”. Some time ago, I participated in a discussion from which I got to know that there was a dissertation written and even a book published on this topic.

Curators who work with activist art inevitably become activists themselves, because when one makes a project related to street protests, supporting political prisoners, for example, one is considered an activist, at least from a legal point of view. If you go out in the street and participate in rallies, for let's say, passing a law against domestic violence, you are already acting as a civic activist. So, if anything happens, you will not be able to prove that you are a curator or a researcher. However, Andrei Erofeev didn't call himself an activist, didn't attend any rallies, stayed within the framework of the exhibition hall and a curatorial exhibition, but this didn't help him from being put on trial.

**Is it fair to say that art activism is a taboo topic that art institutions in Russia prefer to avoid?**

All of this is dangerous, unpleasant and restricts one's activities. Fear takes hold, censorship tightens – there are simply no venues and people willing to risk their positions and premises in order to carry out such a project. It also includes the self-censorship, meaning that people are afraid and do not participate, do not give permission, prohibit, cancel or opt to not invite, all just in case. This applies to both large art institutions and the smaller ones. Everyone values their reputation and doesn't want to lose the few opportunities they still have left.

## **How do you see a possible further development of art activism in Russia?**

I will not undertake to talk about the future of art activism under such political instability, but in my last article, which will be published in the magazine of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art this spring, I draw a parallel between the Soviet non-conformist art of the 60s, 70s and 80s, which existed underground, and what is now happening with Russian activist art, which has moved from large exhibition venues to enclosed spaces. Not so long time ago we had MediaImpact at the ARTPLAY Design Center, were a project of the Moscow Biennale, had sponsors – in other words, we were a normal art establishment. And we went all this way to the point where nobody wanted to host us. Everybody was so afraid.

Recently, there was an exhibition in Moscow in support of Yulia Tsvetkova, an arrested LGBT activist from Komsomolsk-on-Amur; it was held in a private premise of the LGBT community. In Krasnodar we had the experience of holding an event in the apartment of one of the participants, after we were forced to leave the art center to which the Cossacks and representatives of the local authorities came. Everything returns to some kind of apartments, cellars without a sign, where only those to whom the address was sent in person can come, and the information about the event is spread through word of mouth to trusted people. It means that activist art finds itself in the state of being underground, in closed events and private exhibitions.

However, it's important to mention one fundamental difference: although history repeats itself in once more, art activism is still primarily media activism and is designed for the media as its main transmission channel. I write about this in detail in my new article. And media, or the so-called tactical media: personal accounts created by the participants themselves in various social networks, is becoming the new type of contemporary art museums, where the informing, exhibiting, discussing and archiving of activist art projects takes place.

## Appendix 2. Interview with Ekaterina Muromtseva.

Artist. The interview was conducted at the artist's personal exhibition opening in MMoMA 19.09.2019

The first room of the exhibition is dedicated to the picket summer 2019. It all started with the fabricated drug charges against the investigative journalist Ivan Golunov and his arrest. I went to support rallies. A strong sense of social injustice was in the air, and after that I came up with the image of people standing with posters in their hands. In the very first version, I painted one very large 5-meter long work with 12 standing figures that I was intending to use as a banner for the next rally. But after Ivan had been released, I decided to modify the idea and created this type of artwork – an installation. Painted images in which there is no specific person that one could easily identify with. These figures were painted from images of certain people who attended the rally, which I found on the Internet. For example, this is Dmitry Bykov<sup>18</sup>. I wanted to install the figures so that they would not hang in the air but “stand” steadily on the floor.

This installation was exhibited for the first time in the windows of Garage Studios<sup>19</sup>. There were 12 windows and I hung the paintings so that they would be facing the street. This exhibition was not intended for the visitors who were inside, but for the passers-by outside. I could not come up with a work title for quite a long time. At first, I wanted to name it “I/We Ivan Golunov”, but then I decided that this work was not really about Golunov, but about all of us in general. I decided to leave it without a title and let the work speak for itself. We are completely defenseless against a policy that does whatever it wants with us. Nowadays, everybody signs petitions; there are official supportive statements from actor communities and other creatives. There is such support and media attention that it gives hope that something might change.

The installation in the second room is called “Quarter to 12”. I created it last year. The starting point for it was Alexander Blok's poem “The 12”. I re-read it for the first time since my school days and for the first time perceived it on a deeply

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<sup>18</sup> Russian writer, poet, literary critic and journalist

<sup>19</sup> The art residency of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow



emotional level. In addition to that, I really liked the poetic rhythm of it. Firstly, I recorded the audio track, and for this audio rhythm I made the drawings. There are many different images in the sequence: allusions to history, images illustrating our present, imaginary futuristic visions, robotic technologies and animals. For example, there is a reference to the Baltic Way – a peaceful demonstration that took place in 1989 on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when about two million people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania went to the streets and created a human chain by holding hands. By this visually and emotionally impressive act, people expressed their fighting for the independence of their countries and their willingness to overcome the long period of Sovietization overseeing their destinies and politics.

Then there are also images from our daily lives, such as a church under construction by the Belorusskaya metro station and images from rallies and protests that I attended. Everything merges into one film – a sequence that repeats again and again. It reaches the last frame and loops to the beginning. This visualizes the flow of history – on one hand we are moving forward, and on the other we constantly step on the same rake and repeat past mistakes.

### **How did it happen that you turned yourself towards social practices and political topics in art?**

To me, it seems very difficult to stay away from the political context if one lives in Russia. It is our everyday life, and if you don't engage in the politics – the politics will engage with you at some point, so in any case it will concern you. When one goes to a rally and sees how people are being violently beaten up, chased and arrested for no reason – in any case you become emotionally affected by that regardless of whether you stand there with banners, protest for or against something or just watch. I also see a lot of disturbing things happening in the state nursing homes, where people are treated badly and not always get the help and treatment that they need. People in general don't understand where one's responsibility ends and the others' begin.

In many respects, my voluntary activities related to the elderly influenced my interest in socially engaged practices. Besides that, I live in Moscow, and Moscow

is the center of political life in Russia. Well, the Faculty of Philosophy of MSU (Moscow State University) also made an impact on me; we read a lot of Foucault and Deleuze. If one creates something public and political, one needs to think about how it will be connected to the society we live in. But on the other hand, I can very well understand artists who choose to be engaged in traditional art. If the political context concerns you emotionally, then great, but if you are more inclined to formal artworks and traditional mediums, that is great too. It is an indicator of a healthy society when one can engage in pure art. Everyone has to choose for him- or herself. It's great when people don't shut their eyes to what's happening around them. I'm glad to see many of my friends at rallies or when they support my voluntary trips to the elderly, either financially or by providing me with transportation. We are living in a time when we have to create change and affect something, or at least to make people who don't want to be involved in these things look at them.

### **Can you be called an activist?**

Any non-passive position is activism. There are quite many activists nowadays, it has become quite a common phenomenon. Students of HSE (the Higher School of Economics), for example, are very active; they help foundations, advocate for fair news, participate in social and political life and go to rallies and protests. However, it is not so clear where the boundaries of this concept lie and how to separate social, civic activism from artistic practices.

### **How is the Russian art activist scene different from what is happening in other countries? How has it changed lately?**

Trends have shifted from a direct political statement to quieter practices and socially oriented problems. So, in other words, an indirect conflict with the authorities with no provocation. Problems of local communities, minority groups or even of an individual person are in focus now. For example, the support of arrested activists. It has become dangerous to engage in direct activism. However, we had an action with artist Alya Korchevnik some years ago, who had a serious illness. They planned to close down the hospital where she had been getting treatment, so we stood on the Red Square holding infusion bags while

Alya lay on the pavers. The police came up to us after a short while and said that they were going to take us to the police station. We explained that Alya had a very serious illness and that they had no right to do so, and they left us in peace. The fact is that this was about 7 years ago. I suspect that nowadays, this situation would have escalated differently.

I think that the practice of small steps is more effective nowadays, because any direct action will lead you to a prosecution and arrest, and by this one action alone you will close yourself from the path to other actions. On the other hand, of course, such stories have a strong media effect. This is a very ambivalent question.

I am personally curious about the situation with art activism and protest art in Hong Kong. I do not particularly follow what is happening there, but I know that there are protests too and the situation is somewhat similar. It seems to me that environmental activism is trending now in Europe, and the less there are political and social problems in a country, the more artists are creating pure art works.

### **Where do the boundaries lie between art and social volunteering?**

I am very interested in finding an answer to this question myself. I lived in a nursing home for a while, working on a project. We painted carpets on the walls with elderly women. It was a social thing on one hand and an artistic process on the other. It was an interesting act in and of itself because these carpets on the walls are a relic of the Soviet Union. Old people associated them with coziness and a feeling of home, and at the same time they were fake, because they were painted. The real carpets could not be hung due to fire safety regulations. It was a participatory performance. The key is the artist's position and self-definition. If it is just a one-time action, then it is probably more of a volunteer activity; if there is an aesthetic part in it and the topic continuously passes through the creative path and becomes a part of the artist's life, then it is art. I do a lot of things, but both my art projects and volunteer work are equally important to me, and deep down I think that volunteering is even more important.

### **How do you define your role in your volunteering art project for the elderly?**

I would call myself a friend. There are many different aspects and dimensions. We have been cooperating and communicating with certain nursing homes for a long time and it seems to me that this experience gives even more to me than they get from it. When I draw and paint together with the elderly, I would say that I am an artist. When I organize field trips to different art exhibitions and discuss with them other artists' artworks, then I would rather call myself a volunteer or a manager. When we are singing songs in the kitchen, we are friends.

I also like it when the work has a documentary part in it. Moving on to the third room of this exhibition, there is a short animated film "In This Country". I asked school children aged 10 to 12 to write essays on how, in their opinion, people lived in the USSR – a country that no longer exists and where they had never lived. Based on their stories, I wrote a myth and then made an animation with a voiceover reading the text. This is an overview of the history and how children perceive it. This a way to talk about history, not from an official point of view but from a marginal, unaccounted one, one that is never taken into consideration. On one hand, their writings were full of clichés, inaccuracies and myths, but on the other hand there was a lot of truth.

### Appendix 3. Interview with Ilmira Bolotyan.

Artist, curator.

**Can you briefly tell about yourself as an artist? How did it turn out that you turned to performative practices? What influenced your choice?**

The practice appeared as a result of the practice. Any artist who starts to make art should ideally focus not only on his own wishes and interests but also on the context around them. Accordingly, when I just started to practice art – I started quite late, at the age of 30 – I assumed one thing, but the context corrected me. At the beginning, I was engaged in painting and graphics but felt that the language of expression of these media was not enough for me. It didn't draw attention to what I wanted to say. In addition to that, it was rather laborious and required a lot of work.

I had been involved in the theater as a researcher with a focus on documentary theater, including studying screenwriting and working with scripts, so my interest lay in more narrative and continuous projects than just a single painting or a series of works. If I had understood this from the beginning, my painting could have been a participatory project too – which they actually were, because my interaction with the models was very close. So, I gradually realized that it was more interesting for me to interact with people and only later, in the process of this interaction, to produce material art objects.

Up until now, I can consider three of my projects fully implemented: "Museum Date" from 2017, "Artists Promotion Agency" (APA) and "Immaterial Labor", which I had worked on for 2 years and recently presented at my personal exhibition. The APA lasted for year. The "Museum Date" has to do with the topic of a new type of communication between people, related to social networks and dating applications as well as how the museum is perceived by modern people in general. Is this a place for leisure? Could it be a place for a romantic date? APA is fully dedicated to the promotion of artists and my own self-promotion, while "Immaterial Labor" is dedicated to the various practices that women do in order to achieve the external ideal of how they ought to appear. The topics are very dif-

ferent, but most of them concern me personally – otherwise I wouldn't be interested in doing this. And besides that, there was such a thing as social curiosity – this is how it is for me, but how is it perceived by others?

My practice is based on documentary work. In other words, I don't plan anything in advance, I just start working on a topic, look very carefully at what kind of feedback there is and react positively to some kind of continuation from people. For example, APA would not have developed to the extent that it had if at some point I hadn't been invited to different places to speak on this topic, if I wouldn't have won the contest<sup>20</sup>, and so on. In other words, one clings to another, I am just starting this process, and then people connect.

**Did any unexpected discoveries occur during the working process on “Im-material Labor”? Some things that you did not anticipate before the project started?**

Yes. First of all, regarding my real place in this “market”. When we talk about labor in general, we switch to a post-Marxist critique where every person becomes the producer of some product in one way or another. In the case of women, either she herself is a product or her services as a product. My perception of myself in this market have been adjusting towards a more realistic direction. In particular, my own thoughts about the attitude of most Russian women towards beauty ideals. For instance, it would never have been clear to me, if I had been asked before this project, what was wrong in my appearance from the point of view of the majority of society.

I would have never given the right answer, but I would assume that it is my nose with a hump or my hair color, or the shape of my eyes. I would never have guessed that moles and birthmarks are considered disgusting and making a woman look older than her real age, and therefore many women get rid of them, especially if they are on the face. I could not have guessed that a dimple on a chin is considered ugly. Of course, no one dared to tell me this directly, but thanks to various provocations that I had made, I managed to find out what people really

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<sup>20</sup> The Fabrika Workshops Award, the project “APA, or Adventures of Marketing in Contemporary Art, 2019

think. In particular, I realized how negatively many see short haircuts on women and what strong aversion and prejudice exist in our society. Certain groups of women told me that I should be a lesbian if I have such short hair, that men definitely perceive me that way and that I will be rejected from entering the club because of my appearance (a club where a community of “kept women” gathered). Of course, all of this is nothing more but their stereotypes, but nevertheless they are very powerful. At the same time, I figured out that a certain type of men has a fetish for short haircuts on women. All those things that are not in the field of interest of people, who are engaged in something else in their lives besides their looks, were discovered in the process.

As for the female communities, the most striking discovery for me was that the group of radical feminists and that of the kept women were very similar after all. Both of them wage their war against men, but the strategies differ. Feminists compete with them through stating their power and competence while the kept women use the most ancient and gender-acceptable way to fight against men – through seduction. Within their closed community they support each other in the same way and even call each other sisters. Some of the kept women considered themselves to be feminists – they discussed different feminist topics that they had read and quoted Simone De Beauvoir in their chat rooms. However, they use those things selectively, when it is in their favor. But so do feminists. Each group uses certain theories to justify their behavioral patterns. This was a real discovery for me, and if only I had the resources, I would write a separate study about it, but for now I don’t have them.

### **Could you, however, call your project feminist?**

Without false modesty I would say that “Immaterial Labor” is one of the best feminist projects executed in Russia in the past few years, because it is not as straightforward as is usually the case with feminist art. Feminism is closely connected with activism, and activism is either straightforward or ceases to be activism. It is not my judgement, but the feedback from other art professionals and curators who saw so many layers in my project. The exhibition is just the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, one can already see a lot of dimensions, the main one of which is the irony or post-irony in relation to all these social constructs that

exist. I can say that the project was also therapeutic to me, because I managed to withdraw myself from these constructs. In that sense, it was useful to me as an artist and as a feminist. It was a history of formation, because despite all the feminism, I grew up and still live in a traditional patriarchal society; my motives and needs were quite typical for my inner circle before this project. Now, when all of these things have been somewhat rethought, and I can already look beyond that.

**Do you see any difference between Russian Actionism and activist art in Europe?**

I know very little about the current situation in European Actionism. From what I have seen, it seems to me that the difference is in the quality of the projects. Activists in art often have a background of civic activism and no art education at all. There is generally no education in the field of contemporary art in Russia, as in the academic one taught at university level, but only a few courses offered by private institutions. There is no tradition, therefore everyone understands Actionism in their own way. I remember one case from 2015, when I curated the project “A-art, F-feminism. Current Dictionary”. A feminist group from Samara-Tolyatti participated in the project; they submitted a work which represented their activity very poorly and unconvincingly.

When I started to discuss the problem with them and made a few suggestions, they took it as an offense and censorship. It was an artwork that was by all means created without knowledge of art history, without basic knowledge of how to present and exhibit Actionism at exhibitions and without respect for the audience. It was the form, not the content of the work itself, that was poor. In fact, any action or performance just needs to be embodied at the exhibition and given shape, because there is already a very powerful message in it, so there is no need to invent anything extra.

I still draw and make graphics – it is a part of my practice. It is not actionist and does not address the oppressed groups of people. On the contrary, I work with quite a stable and well-established society. The most oppressed group I have worked with, I would say, were the artists in the project “Artists Promotion



Agency". When I offered them different strategies and forms of presentation, so that more people would get to know about their activities, this was again perceived as censorship, not as an attempt to do better. And I think that for the most part, Russian Actionism is like that. It flaunts the fact that it is dealing with such complex topics and that it burns out, suffers and suffers again; it is clear to everyone that it is dangerous to engage in it. For actionists, this seems to be enough to call it art, but for the art, in my opinion, this is not enough, so working on the art form and presentation would in fact only benefit this movement. Therefore, it seems to me that the problem lies simply in the ignorance of how these things should be presented.

### **Is there an art activist scene in Russia as such?**

While the MedialImpact festival of activist art existed and operated in Russia, there was a feeling that such a community exists; there were about the same people participating and running things. Activists, artists and feminists united and organized festivals, exhibitions, working trips, research and other projects, held discussions, etc. It was quite a small group of people, after all. I heard that nowadays there is a strong emerging activist-feminist scene in St. Petersburg, considerably bigger and more active than in Moscow – they are constantly producing something. But I would generally say that it is still a small community, not a movement and definitely cannot be classified as a subculture.

### **Is there a tendency for art activism to become more popular among artists, or is it vice versa?**

I don't think that this is the case now, as it is becoming more dangerous to engage in such things. But those artists that still do are ardent and passionate about it; it is such types of persons that are invincible, persistent and unstoppable. Those people either truly believe that they can change everything, or they just can't be silent. There are also those who believe that they will get recognition and fame faster by working with activist practices, which they will. The thing is, of course, that it is not as simple as it might seem in the beginning.

**If you compare today's Actionism with actions of the late 2000s, what is the main difference?**

It seems to me that the era of lone heroes has gone with Pyotr Pavlensky, who had fled Russia and turned out to not be a hero at all, but a criminal. This era is gone, and now there are no such bright personalities who are ready to reinforce this myth and play an unstoppable crazy artist. Pavlensky has already done everything for creating this myth and becoming its living embodiment, in the sense that he had clearly and thoroughly thought it all out. So nowadays, the artist groups prefer more peaceful practices, especially the feminist groups. They make something locally, but in one selected topic or in one selected environment. We see a theory of small steps in action. Art activists rather address the message to smaller environments around them. They are working with the local context and addressing the local environments and communities, working with the inhabitants of a certain area or city. Either that or they work with pure art, such as poetry, and do something in that field.

**Do you think that actionists can induce changes in this society to solve its problems? Do you believe that through art and artistic practice, one can make people think about important things?**

I agree to some extent, but I don't believe that this could be a massive impact. But, for instance, when one theatre critic writes that political theater has no influence, I strongly disagree with him, because who can measure it? No one knows what happened to a particular person after he had watched even the most innocent political performance. For one it is an innocent and a non-radical performance, and for another it is a big revelation. In fact, people who say and write such things are not able to see how everything affects them. I started to notice it a long time ago, and this is how I became a feminist. Many small influences by other people on me, and then it led to life choices. Just as small are the influences of exhibitions – they affect the life of a particular person who saw them. Therefore, I believe that art can't have a massive influence simply because of a lack of resources. No media channels, not a lot of money for its promotion, and so on.

The “Museum Date” was such a project, where the person was forced to look at the exhibition and listen to me. Surely it did affect them somehow; either they realized that they don’t want to look at this type of art anymore, or on the contrary – this experience was interesting for them and they became more interested.

**During your work on this project, did you encounter a lack of understanding and rejection of your activities?**

Yes. People reacted differently, but still – those who were more or less interested and considerate came to the “date” to meet me. With those who were not considerate at all, it all ended up with arguing and swearing in text messages. There was a moment when one person came and began mocking everything, but I ended the communication with him fast because I am also a living person. I have my own emotional resource, and it is not endless. Art affects, of course. That’s why I’m into participatory art practices, because through that I can at least, to some extent, evaluate the degree of this influence. My art projects often start from my journalistic investigations; the practice of a participatory artist is similar to that of a journalistic work, after all.

A participatory method is also able to discover and reveal some problems as well. For example, “Immaterial Labor” helped proving that none of us is born with the construct of femininity, it is the upbringing, social norms and expectations that form it. For some reason it did not work out for me and I never obtained in a natural way, so I had to try these constructs on myself during the project. I had to play and pretend a little bit here and there, which led to burnout and exhaustion because this is a construct that doesn’t feel natural for me. However, I also enjoyed and had some fun during the process, otherwise I couldn’t have been able to make it through. It is self-inflicted violence, and we joked with other artists that, in principle, a contemporary artist is partly a masochist. But in my case, I’m a masochist who can withstand it for a long time (laughs).

**You probably had to meet and communicate with people of all kinds, whom you would have otherwise never come across in your ordinary life?**

Yes, you're absolutely right. This is especially true when speaking about the "Museum Date" and particularly the "Artists Promotion Agency", where anyone can become my follower and write to me. After that project I gained some haters from the world of Russian contemporary art professionals, which was not very easy to get over. For almost a year I had to communicate with people who only had dreams of becoming artists; it was very challenging and energy consuming. As my project was purchased by the Anna Radchenko Academy, I am going to work on it for another year as a hired expert. As a result of this activity, I am going to curate and organize an exhibition.

A big business has swallowed a small one; here again starts a conversation about how I, as an artist, need funds. All the money that I earned from APA was spent on "Immaterial Labor", and I even have debts because I happened to buy some expensive things for myself and hire professionals to whom I owe money. In fact, I work for this online academy now to be able to pay back. This is a weird circulation of money for a contemporary artist, who works and then spends all her salary on new projects that only bring in new debt, and as a result sells herself to a more successful online institution.

**It is interesting how your projects are related to the study of the role of the artist.**

Both the curator and I immediately saw similarities in the relations between the artist and the gallery, the artist and the museum, the artist and the biennale and the relation between models and agents. Therefore, these parallels and comparisons immediately arose by themselves. Both the artist and the model must be able to sell themselves. For models it is enough having an appearance that is currently in demand by modelling agencies. Besides that, they should be taking good care of their natural talents. For the artist, this is clearly not enough, although it also affects their careers to some extent.

All successful artists are, in addition to their talent, also charming people – both in looks and in communication. This is what I am lacking and what I tried to work on during the APA project, and this is a very big "immaterial work" on myself. All these small talks at events, writing in time to congratulate upon this and that,

attending all the exhibition openings – all of this is a must do, but most artists don't feel like doing it. It is a very exhausting and energy-consuming thing that does not suit everyone, so not all artists are engaged in networking, not all fit into this environment, or at least it takes them longer to fit.