

## **Russian Performance Art 1990 - 2000**

Performance is a particular sub-category of art which has developed in Soviet Russia (as unofficial art) and in Western Europe and America from the 1960s onwards. The break-up of the Soviet Union and shift from a totalitarian to a democratic form of government resulted in an unprecedented escalation of performance art in Russia. This art form became an artistic emblem of the 1990s. Artists were liberated to explore a wide range of ideas that were suppressed previously. The variety of these participatory actions, many of them conducted on the streets of Moscow and engaging whoever happened to be there at the time, is a testimony to the freedom of expression widely enjoyed by Russian artists at the beginning of the 1990s.

By analyzing performance art of the 1990s I will demonstrate the ways it diverged from performance art produced by Russian underground artists in the late Soviet period (1970s-1980s). These differences encompass issues of content, authorship, collectivity, location and the roles of audience and state, among others.

In my project I am planning to explore relations between Russian performance art of the 1990s and social as well as gender issues. After many years of suppression during the Soviet era, performance art brought back to the center of attention the individual, with all his and her physicality, burden of history, and challenges of an uncertain future. In performance art –

more than in any other artistic medium of the 1990s – an array of political, religious and social taboos as well as latent attitudes and opinions was brought to light.

My still on-going research allows me to formulate only some preliminary findings. During numerous interviews with Moscow artists who in the 1990s did performances as well as art critics and art historians who attended them it became clear to me that the 1990s performance art can be divided in many different types, some easier to define, other less so. Despite these differences many young artists, for example, the group of artists working in studios at Trekhprudnyi Lane and running their own gallery there, voiced their opposition towards older artist generation, such as the artists working within the circle of Moscow Conceptualism. They felt not welcomed in older artist circles. They opposed the exclusiveness of the latter and thus set up their own artistic circles. At the moment it is still difficult for me to judge to what extent, if any, it was caused by the fact that they came from provincial cities (Kiev, Rostov-on Don). This however also speaks about the fact that late Soviet unofficial artist circles were more hermetic than open towards younger newcomers. This situation describes the period of the turn of the decades, i.e. 1989 – 1990.

On the other hand during numerous talks with artists it became transparent that the year 1990 might have been in fact not so important for the art world. In other words many challenging live art events took place before the fall of Soviet Union (before December 26, 1991)

or even during the second half of the 1980s. The ‘thawing’ of the Soviet system was already felt by artists and their artistic manifestations were more open and brave. Here one could mention German Vinogradov’s performances at *Detskii Sad* or performances which took place at *Kashirka* art gallery – both in the second half of the 1980s. The three artists who occupied a vacant building – a former kindergarten – and were officially its guardians for over a year in 1985 – 1986 created an alternative art space (*Detskii Sad*), which attracted not only artists from Moscow but also from St Petersburg and not only young artists but also famous ones like Ilya Kabakov. German Vinogradov’s first musical performances, created within self-made musical installations built from found metal objects, took place at *Detskii Sad*. Several other artists, for example Georgii Litichevskii and Georgii Ostretsov, also made performances in 1988.

I have mentioned that the variety of types of performances is amazing. Any attempt to place these events into clear-cut categories may lead to oversimplifications. A number of artists making performances in the very end of the 1980s and early 1990s were definitely interested in creating a dialogue both with the history of art and with previous generations of artists. Georgii Litichevskii already in 1988 made a performance entitled “Aivazovskii, teach me how to paint”. Ivan K. Aivazovskii was a famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian painter of seascapes. Artists from Trekhprudnyi Lane in 1991 – 1992 began appropriating masterpieces of Modern Art, among them Andy Warhol’s, Piero Manzoni’s, and Marcel Duchamp’s. In some of their performances they appropriated two or three-dimensional modernist works and worked them into

performances, for example, Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain* was the springboard for performance entitled *Not a Fountain* in 1991. In the middle of 1990 Farid Bogdalov ordered copies of paintings by well known Russian artists of Moscow Conceptualism (among them Ilya Kabakov), precisely the so-called 'Noma', and painted them over with white paint. His performance thus falls both into a group of works questioning artist's place in relation to his./her predecessors but also manifests critical attitude towards 'renowned' older colleagues who formed hermetic artist circle.

It has become clear to me that there were artists who created performances which questioned and/or situated themselves in relation to the political past and the political present. This type of performance seems to be more prevalent at the beginning of the 1990s. Valerii and Natalia Cherkashiny organized performance, based on audience participation, which was entitled *Lenin is always alive*. During the event all invited volunteers, whose eyes were blindfolded, were given small busts of Lenin and by touch they were to discern whose sculpture it is. The group called "ETI", with its leader Anatolii Osmolovskii, also addressed the Father of Communism. In 1991 on Lenin's birthday the group went to Red Square and near Lenin Mausoleum they lay down on the cobbled pavement forming with their bodies the three-letter Russian swearword. Although such performances were more typical for the first half of the 1990s the figure of Lenin was to reappear in later years of the 1990s, for example, in performance prepared by Yuri Shabelnikov. He had a huge sponge cake made in the form of cofined Lenin and in the

performance based on audience participation the entire cake was eaten to the last crumb. “ETI” in particular also addressed the present political situation in the country and abroad. In January 1991 they performed in front of the US Embassy standing in a row in complete silence with raised right hands and pointing with their index fingers towards the US Embassy. Osmolovskii continued his commentaries on the state of current affairs in later years (for example in performance *Black Top, White Bottom* created after the burning of the Russian White House). Another artist who also was interested in the current situation, although his *oeuvre* was really varied if we think about the subject matter, was Aleksandr Brener. In February 1995 he appeared at Red Square (un)dressed as a boxer ineffectually shouting “Yeltsin come out!” in performance entitled *First Round*.

A closer look at *oeuvre* of various artists shows that motif of body entered slowly the arena of performance. I would argue however that it is already present in performances of Trekhprudnyi Lane when intoxicated Avdei Ter Oganian exhibits himself lying asleep on the gallery floor in the performance entitled *Toward an Object*. The poetics of this performance however differs hugely from November 1994 action by Oleg Kulik, when for the first time he performed completely naked acting as a dog at a Moscow street. In the second half of 1990s male naked body is often present and/or prominent in works by Oleg Mavromatti, Emperor Vava, Viacheslav Mizin, Oleg Kulik, and group “Novyie Tupyie”. The former two – Emperor Vava and Oleg Mavromatti – often created performances in which they inflicted pain upon their

bodies and Oleg Mavromatti finally crucified himself in 2000. The second half of 1990s also witnesses a more substantial number of women artists and some of them, like Liza Morozova and Aliona Martynova, performed using their own naked bodies.

The theme of gender, which interested me at the start of the project, was never consciously undertaken by these artists in their performances. None of them admitted any conscious interest in the theme and problematic of gender. Sexuality on the other hand appears to be a more common interest in numerous performances. Anton Litvin on March 8 (International Woman's Day) 1994 hung on tree trunks in a park alley a number of bras – one per tree trunk. Petr Karatchentsov hypnotized a woman and a man in order to see – as he claims – how people have intercourse when their consciousness and influence of traditions, sexual education and mass media are not present.

My project may be of value to those who form policies at the region. Performance art in fact mirrors to some extent the changes taking place in the system of social values and expectations. Just as the political fervent situation died out around year 2000 the bravery and transgression of performance art also diminished. Ideas and values that were important for artists in the 1990s do not seem to be of any real importance in the 2000s. The fact that performance art as a genre of visual art does not have any more the *tour de force* which it had in the 1990s is very

symptomatic for the years when art, just as many other things and experiences, became in Russia  
a mere source of money and business.