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**Contemporary Moscow Art:
Restoration of The Artist's Body**

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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Contemporary Moscow Art: Restoration of The Artist's Body

The latest exhibition season in Moscow was notable for its endless stream of artists showing their genitals. Given the entire context of Russian art, this should be considered a novel phenomenon. On several occasions, Alexander Brenner exhibited photos of his naked body in various attitudes, and he later used a number of brutal manifestations of corporeality in his performances (for example, he defecated in a museum; gave himself a blow job in a night club while exposing his haemorrhoids; and offered "penis measurement", "hawking and spitting", etc. as part of the programme in his series of performances). Activists (including Brenner) from NETSEZIUDIK- a "Radical Concurrent Revolutionary Programme" -posed for the cover of their catalogue by mooning against the backdrop of the Moscow White House after the fire damage in 1993, following political unrest. The cover of their catalogue for a show in the XL Gallery features them collectively displaying their penises in the shower. Finally, NETSEZIUDIK leader Anatoli Osmolovski published a personal message in *Khudozhestvenny Zhurnal* (the most interesting publication on contemporary art in Moscow), accompanied by a photo showing him with leather jacket but without trousers. Another Moscow figure, Oleg Kulik, who along with NETSEZIUDIK claims the title of the most radical artist (as a curator, his provocative art projects have been attracting attention for several years), put a photo on an invitation to a show that featured the artist and a male and female critic, all naked, with the woman supporting the men's genitals, like Pomona with her apples. All of these works were almost aggressively polemic in character.

In Moscow art, the work of an artist that involves his/her body is being interpreted as an antidote to conceptual tradition, against which young artists today are defining their identities by rebelling. They reproach the classicists and followers of Moscow conceptualism (first of all. Ilia Kabakov, Andrei Monastyrski and Medical Hermeneutics) for being too contemplative, claiming that their art has no body and that the artists merely "play a role" and shun responsibility.

20c art is full of scepticism about the possibility of depicting reality and has thus redirected itself towards criticising representation. And since the human body has always been the major focus of art globally, 20c art can be considered a continuous criticism of the depletion of the body, which looks like a severe criticism of the body itself, as it has been subjected constantly to abuse, distortion and torture in the paintings and sculptures of artists in this century.

Eventually, *the* body becomes not so much the object of criticism as its tool, particularly if it is the body of the artist or if he/she identifies with it. Step by step, the art removes the body from the object of representation and gives it to the artist. The artist turns to the incontestable reality of the irreducible body in order to criticise art as such as being unauthentic and studied. Performance and body art often look like the final gesture of desperation on the part of the artist, who only has one means at his disposal: to risk his own body, to break with everything that smacks of art. Naturally, such a move is easily recognized by the viewer as specifically artistic. Nonetheless, the body retains its Utopian status as the panacea for art.

Thus, it is the "live and immediate" body that criticizes representation as "studied and dead". However, in order to qualify as a body in the works of contemporary artists, the body must be dead – fragmented, sick or rotting. (It is no coincidence that in one of his performances, Alexander Brenner declared that he had AIDS.) Erotic scenes such as *Made in Heaven* by Jeff Koons offer nothing physical to the contemporary eye, because they are associated with the non-corporeality of the media. It is primarily in hospital that today's individual is reminded that he has a body. Although, given the power of modern medicine to expand the limits of corporeal potential (it is the feeling of insuperability that provides the sense of one's body), it is getting more and more difficult to feel one's own corporeal reality. The body is transformed into an artificial construction to which the culture of the post-humanist era reacts. In this situation, the only corporeal reality is death: the moment at which modern man is forced, perhaps for the first time in his life, to subjectively experience his body.

Thus, an artist who works with the body is trying to equal Death in each of his works. His opportunities for success are limited naturally, making art a heroic but hopeless effort. Such heroic-tragic nature underlies almost all the works with the artist's own body, and the actions of Brenner and Osmolovski are no exception. But what is special about unofficial Russian art in the 1970's and 1980's is that the right to an individual body and the subsequent tragedy of its irretrievable loss had yet to be won – in the totalitarian world of collective bodies.

In his well-known performance, Chris Burden spent five days in a narrow locker in the locker room of a sports club; in the Russian art of recent decades, this corporeal experience correlates with the famous hero in Kabakov's collection from the beginning of the 1970's, in the story of *Primakov-Sitting-in-the-Closet*, which, however, only unfolded on paper. Primakov's experience, being the experience of a character in story, is narrower than Burden's, although Burden only spent five days in the locker, while Primakov stayed for his entire life. The author's own existential experience is incorporated (and also embodied in his later works), and it is far more radical than Burden's dramatization. However, Russian art seems hesitant about literal realization. Instead of hypertrophied corporeal presence, the body is only there in the mode of its absence, felt in every metaphor.

In the Moscow art of the 1970's and 1980's, we first encounter the body at the moment of its disappearance. Many performances of by the group Collective Actions dwelt on the motif of appearance (*Appearance, Ten Appearances, The Third Variant*), but appearance was a mere pretext for "dis-appearance", a metaphor for death. Even in the action known as *Excavations* (by a group called Death Angel [the mushroom]), in which the hero dramatically appeared from underground, where he had been staying, his appearance was followed by his immediate disappearance into the nearby forest. The most cherished dream of Kabakov's characters is to rid themselves of their bodies, because only by surrendering their corporeal ties can they escape from the confinement of a communal apartment. Freedom requires pure spirituality, proven once again by *A 30-minute attempt to materialize Komar and Melamid*, undertaken by a group called The Nest, in which the two artists were only present in photographs, having crossed the Soviet border by that time, the border understood as the boundaries of their bodies.

Here the absence of the body is also a form of criticism of the ever-present collective body. Totalitarian art from 1930-1950's created a multitude of monsters of corporeal rhetoric. Simulacra of the inflated muscles of

sportsmen in painting and sculpture masked disastrous abysses of physical danger for actual bodies that had fallen out of the collective body. The art of the Stalin era implies a death threat to everyone, and this art cannot be adequately understood outside this very concrete feeling. Rhetorical corporeality stole not only the individual's right to his own space, but to his own body as well.

If the collective body is all pervasive and total, then it is only possible to break away by parting with one's own body (like Kabakov's characters). The coarse and literal corporeality of Moscow art is not sensitive to the limits of the body, since it coincides with social limits, imposed from the outside. All that is left for the individual body is that which is not occupied by communal corporeality; art denies any responsibility for the body, since it cannot influence its limits and delves into the process of consciousness. The context in which Chris Burden challenges the limits of his body (in another performance he allowed himself to be shot through the hand) is the mad respect for private space and keen sense of personal responsibility inherent in Western culture, which allows him to also challenge the limits of art. Russian artists were forced to explore very different transgressions – mental ones. Early Soc art attempts to identify with Soviet artists were examples of just such "obscene" acts of transgression, not unlike a kind of secret mental prostitution. Soc artists conceived of something forbidden, and that mental gesture was more important for culture than a physical one. Individual consciousness replaced the individual body as the only and final authenticity. Andrei Monastyrski. pointing to himself in his 1978 work *Finger*, makes his body an object, yet still proclaims the absolute priority of individual thinking, in which integrity is only acquired through action. In another well-known work by Monastyrski, *I breathe and hear*, 1981, the artist, who hears his own breathing from the outside, gives back to himself what he has just given away, doubling his hermetic experience as a result. Here, breathing moves from spontaneous incoherence to a certain communicative language; however, it is a personal language, addressing only its bearer. The art of the 1970's and 1980's knows no better monument to hermeticism. Here the Utopia of the unofficial culture is realized: to hide the body inside the mind, to soar above the body, thus asserting one's right to it.

The communal body is a phenomenon of rhetoric, of total speech, and devoid of any real foundation: "a flood of text". It is no coincidence that the Soviet period became prime-time for the widespread proliferation of obscene words into normal Russian speech, thus functioning as both repression and compensation for a repressed individual. Mat, obscene

language consists of words designating genitalia yet still an empty rhetorical figure of speech. They are the genitals of the communal body, a way of repressing the body and, at the same time, a way of existing in totalitarian culture. I once called this body "the mysterious Russian body", alluding to an anecdote. A foreigner, taking an obscene Russian idiom literally, is surprised at the strange anatomy of local men. What he thought to be a body was, in fact, a phenomenon of non-profane text, a rhetorical monster born from the language. In this anecdote, obscene Russian language is revealed as classic simulacrum, akin to communist ideology. This was precisely the deduction of Soc artists, and this anecdote clearly belongs to the era of the 1970's. The frustrating lack of agreement between language and meaning, typical of Soviet reality in this period, was interpreted ironically by culture, at least the critical, conscious part of it. As it is known, obscene language rubbish was used widely by Kabakov in his installations. For him, it was a manifestation of the power of the unconscious, a form of total repression of speech. In Kabakov's works, obscenities are never to be read literally, but are always "parasitical", used to create additional tension.

In 1991, a group known as ETI put on their first performance, virtually the first public declaration by Anatoli Osmolovski, the then leader of the group. The members of the group used their bodies to form a commonly known obscene word for penis on the-Red Square. With this action, for the first time in the history of Russian art, they claimed corporeal and judicial responsibility for "no one's body" or the communal body, i.e. for the word. From there it was just one step to asserting individual corporeality. Thus, when Alexander Brenner demonstrates that after kneeling down in front of a Van Gogh painting in the museum, one is not limited to raising one's arms to heaven as is expected – one can defecate, for example – he gives us corporeality in purely cultural gestures. The artist is akin to a hero of a romantic legend, in that he is deprived of the right to simply blow his nose or hiccup. Brenner literally uncovers the "dirty" reverse side of art, and it is making it public that is so "obscene". But the reverse side of art is nothing other than lyrical private emotions. So along with measuring the length of his penis and coughing up mucus, Brenner introduced a loud recital of his poetry as one of the acts in his endless performance. Such is the position of lyricism in art at the end of the 20c. Brenner acts the tragedian, and his role as a "no good" is quite distinct from the comfortable position of "non artist" favoured by Moscow avantgarde artists until recently, in order to avoid comparisons with art whatsoever. In contrast, Brenner painstakingly compares and measures. His aesthetics is the aesthetics not only of failure, but also of payment and

punishment for it. This is the aesthetics of the AIDS era, in which the illusions of safe sex and safe art have been undermined equally. In his actions, Brenner seems to be paying off a heavy obligation to culture, honestly and corporeally, for example, by standing motionless on a podium for three hours on end.

Brenner and Osmolovski's exhibitionism was instantly rebuked for lack of originality. Indeed, the body is not only limited in time and space, but also in its originality: there is nothing more trivial and boring than a body, and nothing more repetitive than physical gestures, unless it is erotic gestures, which are even more banal.

Brenner and Osmolovski may be justifiably reproached for being repetitive, but today plagiarism almost dominates elitist art: in order to enjoy an implied quotation, one must have a great deal of erudition. So, in subjecting himself to physical abuse, the artist manages to maintain his position of being intellectually superior to the audience.

With its acute sense of the drama of the individual in society, which they probably promote, the work of both Brenner and Osmolovski, although clearly a departure from the Moscow conceptualist tradition, shows that they are its successors. In contrast, Oleg Kulik's strategy targets impressive large-scale manifestations of collective proto-creative corporeality. We could call it "cameval-esque", after the famous definition devised by Mikhail Bakhtin, Soviet philosopher, in his book on Francois Rabelais, which, written in Stalin's Russia, talked about the triumph of the collective body. One of Kulik's still unrealized projects is to organize a public birth in the Regina Gallery (which could be watched by the public through its big glass front windows). As an artist, he is fascinated by *Deep into Russia*, a project that consists of photo documentation of acts of zoophilia and other close physical contact with animals, staged by the artist (for example, Kulik attempted to thrust his head into the vagina of a cow).

The primary difference between Brenner/Osmolovski and Kulik is not only that the former experiment with their own bodies, whereas Kulik manipulates alien bodies, but that while Brenner and Osmolovski are heirs to the feeling of corporeal loneliness and tragedy inherent in alternative Russian culture, Kulik is trying to pursue the tradition of totalitarian art, seeking authentic "exaltation" in the confluence of the one with everyone. For Kulik, Russia represents "everyone", which, in keeping with Russian tradition, is personified by a female image, a vagina.

In his work as both artist and curator, Kulik constructs a sadomasochistic complex that is probably the basis of totalitarian culture. By defining

himself as a "state artist", he simultaneously expresses the desire for the avantgarde gesture is usually interpreted as liberation from restrictions, and as such, can be easily accepted by society, since for contemporary culture, freedom is a top priority. In fact, however, what the avant-garde is looking for is not freedom at all, but new strict boundaries, provided by working with the body. A human being is capable of much more mentally than physically, which provides the drama necessary to remind the audience of their own limits, i.e. death. Thus, in one of his actions, in which he is tied to a cross and blows loudly into a police whistle, Brenner provides the public with a *memento mori*.

Power, his terrifying complex about it, and the exaltation of a vassal. What seduces the viewer in Kulik's large, provocative projects is the intoxicating sensation of belonging to a collective body, which provides a feeling of protection. as well as the artist's denial of any basis for tragedy. For Kulik, corporeality is the new uto-pia of deliverance from not only art as such (as in the work of Brenner and Osmolovski), but from all mediation and differentiation as well. The animal represents the ideal of the non-speculative absence of individual consciousness. During his latest action, instead of the anticipated flaming oration in favour of animal rights, Kulik gave out a loud moo.

Kulik works in the context of Russian culture, swinging back and forth between totalitarian and anti-totalitarian models (as is well known, both yielded brilliant results in Russian art). However, in general, "corporeality" (unlike "body") harbours considerable totalitarian temptation. Contemporary thought would have the body proper preceded by the idea of the inseparability of the psychic and the somatic, the inner and the outer, meaning that corporeality becomes total; and if we follow this thinking further, there is nothing beyond it. Almost any depiction of the body or its fragments, clothing, any spot of undeterminable character, any bottle that can be perceived as a medicine bottle, is interpreted as a manifestation of corporeality, that is, of the boundaries of art.

Contemporary thought tends to interpret any work as the body of the artist (Derrida refers to Van Gogh in these terms), to which, we might add, viewers take part as in the ritual of Communion. For the culture of today, "touching the artist's body" is the unique and probably last opportunity to speak of artistic subjectiveness (believed to be lost). However, to all appearances, this opportunity seems in fact inexhaustible. It is impossible to avoid the body of the artist, if one sees it in a work of art. When the artist criticizes art with his own body, he is bound to assume a privileged role,

which he denies to art. The artist, despite all rumours of his death, turns out to be the most imperishable element of the art system. Moscow artists continue their struggle for artistic rights, but there is probably no need for them to strip in order to confirm their corporeality.