

**Yekaterina Degot**

**Terrorist Naturalism:  
Art in an Illegitimate Zone**

[4.104 words, 1995-1996]

**Russia**



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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.

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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](http://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.

## Yekaterina Degot

### Terrorist Naturalism: Art in an Illegitimate Zone

1.

Georgy Litichevsky's leader opening the first issue of *Khudozhestvennyj Zhurnal* (Artistic Journal), which started in 1993 as a mouthpiece of the post-Soviet Moscow scene, contained a slogan: "Let Moscow think of herself alone, let her forget that she was once attributed the qualities of a Third Rome or an Olympic capital ... Moscow is by herself bigger than all this. She is a whole cosmos, the centre and the source of existence of her universe". The incredible pathetic element of these words which has never failed to strike my Western colleagues can only be understood if viewed in context: when they started, the current circle of Moscow's actual artists had had almost no chance to avail themselves of the attribute "Soviet", which visibly shows a colossal claim to uniqueness and, most important, a claim rooted in the whole Soviet system which was such a success at protecting its citizens against any comparisons whatsoever.

In order to compare, you need to make explicate your criteria; and the USSR, of course, had a state name which bore neither ethnic nor geographic references. The word *Noma*, coined to denote the conceptualist circle by members of its youngest generation (the Medical Hermeneutics group), was patterned upon the same model of an inexplicit and thus quite safe definition: by failing to give any base for relating *Noma* to anything except, fictitiously, Ancient Egypt, it proclaimed its unlimited resources of self-sufficiency. Characteristically, it was in 1987 that this coinage appeared, when the ground of uniqueness began to slip out from the state, and it felt the need of some extra protective gesture.

With the loss of the USSR and the opening of its border Russia suffered the trauma of contextualisation: she was disfranchised, losing the right to definition of her own criteria, that is to say, the legitimitisation of the

absolute. The new generation of young artists who entered the Moscow scene in the early 90's (having been late for the "Russian boom" in the West), shared this drama with their country. In point of fact, it can be said that performances, installations and other gestures of this circle have been the only artistic development in contemporary Russian culture to reflect the individual-authorities relationship, the economic disaster and the ambitions of the new national ideology – phantasms of a new Absolute.

One cannot help noticing that the rhetoric of contemporary Moscow art makes heavy use of the word true: artists tend to apply this definition to their work that is sharp contrast with the former self-definition of unofficial art which called itself "other". "It is precisely the present day with its absolute chaos and ultimate disintegration which can engender true resistance and true protest, which will in turn bring us salvation" – with its pile of absolutizing epithets Alexander Brenner's statement sounds almost like a parody. Importantly, true in Russian is a negative attribute, being always a rejoinder to and negation of untrue, hence it is repressive. When Brenner and Giya Rigvava proclaim from the cover of one of the issues of *Khudozhestvennyj Zhurnal*, "But they cannot prevent us from observing the slow return of true sex", the medallion quality of their profiles (which is the visual aspect of their project) does point to a totalitarian aesthetics. Their phrase is full of inner overwrought contradiction: sex is coming back, yet too slowly, we are all for sex, yet we wish to be merely observers, but they are trying not to let us observe, yet they are unable to do so ... The word true is the only support and hope in all this chaos: it is easy to see that a dream of order underlines this pessimistic statement of chaos. Artistic gestures of the current Moscow scene, from the most life-building ones (like Vadim Fishkin's "cosmic" installations with planetary orbits and trajectories restoring global integrity) to the most destructive ones (the aggressive performances of Oleg Kulik, "undressed" like a dog and biting passers-by, or of Brenner, flinging raw eggs at the public), have precisely a restorational urge as their theme, which is usually coloured, however, by despair and a sense of inevitable failure, because now there is nothing to support self-sufficiency. It is common knowledge that Russia's position in today's world is regarded inside the country, paradoxically, as a crash of her hopes to be admitted to the world's culture, because to enter it as an equal member has been traditionally considered a defeat in Russia. It is, of course, the drama of comparison, ever present in Russia's historical conscience, that Brenner re-enacted in some of his performances where he maniacally measured his penis, and his recurring failures (which ended both his attempts to copulate with his wife near the Pushkin monument in the freezing cold and his

intention to challenge Yeltsin to a boxing bout in Red Square) are also, of course, premeditated and embody the national psychology myth.

One salient characteristic of the present-day Russian art is that while, institutionally, it is a hundred-percent “agent of the West” inside Russia, it simultaneously thematizes Russia’s mental traumas, above all else the experience of disappointment and resentment which the nation (as it tends to think) experienced after it was defeated in the cold war, only to find that the victor lacked any interest in the vanquished. An actionist explosion which is underway in Moscow today, as has been noted more than once, can often be observed following the trauma of military defeat. The aesthetics of recent Moscow performances has been compared most often with that of the Vienna actionism, which was generated by a similar degree of isolation and the same feeling of one’s provincialism; however, what is being thematized in Moscow is not so much physical as moral suffering and humiliation – the experience of Gulag rather than Holocaust. Yury Leiderman who kneeled before citizens of the Western world in Amsterdam in order to unlace their shoes (thereby forcing them to bend down to lace them up) performed one of the most elegant works on the theme of euphoria of humiliation and thirst for revenge. Gestures of violence toward neighbouring objects at an exhibition which have been practised by Brenner since 1995; his heart-rending shouts of “Why am I not accepted for this exhibition?” at a major Russo-French show; the aggression of Kulik who was sitting like a dog at the entrance to a Zuerich exhibition and trying to bite people heading for a place to which he had not been admitted; his other scandalous performance, in a museum near the wax figures of the Russian royal family; all these are gestures of the excluded. The same can be said about the numerous geopolitical phantasms of the present-day Moscow scene, such as Vladimir Salnikov’s project for an Indorussia Federation or a poster series of the AES group which shows what European and American capital cities will look like in the year 2006 when they, according to the artists’ predictions, will be strewn by myriad mosques and Bedouin caravans. Writes Brenner, “The great Western system is coming to an end. A powerful architecture of hypocrisy ... is dying under the pressure of deceitful and deformed newcomers from the East ... Neither the Muslim world nor Russia can become integrated into the gigantic computer. They are incapable of either moving away, in a quiet and dignified way, or joining it with a cry of despair. Hence, they have no other choice but try to destroy it.” This controversial self-identification with the East has, of course, a serious tradition in Russian futurism of the 1910’s, Brenner almost repeating some of its slogans. It probably fell to the lot of the present generation to realise this, heretofore somnolent cultural

component of the Russian avant-garde, its nationalist rhetoric. At any rate, without that “fuel” Russian art seemed to be incapable of moving on.

2.

The dominant theme of talks in today’s Moscow – among artists, critics, even philosophers – is the argument that the West has “failed to understand us”, whereas we “understand all about it” and it fully meets our expectations. It is easy to see that the assertion of “incomprehension” is nothing else but the assumption of an exclusive right to comprehension criteria. It is not hard to see either that in order to “comprehend” you only need some vague feeling, whereas others’ “incomprehension” is tried out by the definitions they give, which from this point of view prove to be certainly false the moment they are uttered. As Alexander Osmolovsky writes, “the comprehension procedure itself should not take on the form of the metaposition of an “uninterested” and “impartial” analyst. The analyst attains true understanding when he is conscious of being a part of the actual process ... It sheds light on the reasons for current outburst – written, oral or physical – of artists’ hostility to critics; it is caused by the latter’s supposed “pinning of labels” (that is, committing acts of definition from an outward position) without the right thereto. Critics, in their turn, are hostile – without, as yet, going so far as fist-fighting – to their older colleagues who emigrated to the West, because they represent Russia and Russian art without, as it seems to the critics, having the right to do so, not being “inside”. The Western interest in contemporary Russian art, indeed, stems largely from its striving to understand: in it, it often seeks to find answers to questions which the Russian (above all political) reality fails to deliver. What does, for example, the artist’s wish to walk around in the nude on a leash and rush at passers-by signify? Or his work in the headquarters of a particular political party? Is the use of Nazi symbols a form or criticism of fascism or its apologetics? In what ways are the artists’ artistic actions related to their political views?

But the contemporary Russian artist generally denies that art can evidence whatsoever and often repudiates the superficial meanings read into his works and gestures, including political ones. What Russian artists demand in the first place is the right to the lack of general rules, the right to “artistic licence”. Alexander Brenner proclaims the rights to voluptuousness, chaos, and whims; Anatoly Osmolovsky defines the artist as “a person who can continuously free himself of responsibility for any actions he happened to commit”. The gallery owner Marat Gelman, an artist of sorts in the Moscow scene, describes his political and artistic programme as no more,

no less than “the development of mechanisms for sense alteration”, that is, in fact, the upsetting of the cause-and-effect relationship. Kulik’s inarticulate babble – his speech as the presidential candidate from the Animal Party he had founded – was the final phase in this decay of speech coherence and protection against comprehension.

Meanwhile, a system of total tautological representation – both political and artistic representations, which are similarly structured – has evolved in the present-day mainstream art in the West. The legitimisation of a work by its author’s earnestness has been, for the last twenty years, drastically reduced to its formal legitimisation which, unlike earnestness, can be checked and documented: I am making this kind of art because I am a woman, an Afro-American, a German, a homosexual, I have this or that disease, etc. This “tautological art”, to note, is quite unknown in Russia, yet it has served as the main target for critical irony, as has the whole discourse of cultural identity. States Georgy Litichevsky: “Lack of identity is better than imposed identify”.

Faced by the need to name their new identity after the collapse of the USSR, artists initially chose the “Moscow” one as more enigmatic and unique than the “Russian” one which was then – before it became a national identity – perceived not as a mythical but as a geographic, hence relative, phenomenon. But the hopes pinned on Moscow never came true, it failing to become the name of power and might. The Russian, on the contrary, which in a few years’ time recovered all its mythological connotations – which include uniqueness, mysteriousness, and immunity from the jurisdiction of an external court – could well serve as both a name and a model.

New Moscow artists and authors are coming back to the traditional (repeatedly thematized in the 19th century) conception of the Russian which tends to describe the surrounding reality as essentially unrepresentable: the country’s political system cannot be defined; the co-ordinate system described by the words “right” and “left” has been disturbed; clear-cut legitimacy principles are unavailable; what used to be opposites is being perceived as an indiscriminate fusion. Therefore, any reflexive representation of this reality is impossible. The question of how Russia was to be represented, if at all, was addressed by a special joint project for the Russian pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale (Evgeny Ase, Dmitry Gutov, Vadim Fishkin, and Victor Misiano as curator), which happened to be the first project in that pavilion after “USSR” on its front was supplanted by “Russia”. The installation documented in three chapters the story of its

own discussion. In the first room, photographs and newspaper clippings referred to versions of what could serve as an archetypal image of contemporary Russia: Mavrodi's gamble, artist Kulik biting exhibition visitors, the vulgar style of new television, prostitutes, new fascists ... All this seemed so vivid to the authors that suggestions were made (and displayed at the exhibit) that the pavilion be blown up or left vacant, which, however, were not agreed to either. In the second room, the now classical chain of "images of Russia" was shown on film; the Church of Christ the Saviour, the Palace of Soviets, the Moskva Swimming Pool, and again the Church of Christ the Saviour. The film about this dramatic destruction was made into a loop precisely in order to show that the ultimate symbol was not to be found. Inquiry itself can only receive the status of Russia's symbol: in the last, third, room a huge money-box accepted donations for an artificial intelligence, to make the comprehension of Russia possible. The question of whether it was possible to comprehend Russia was thus answered in the negative. However, by way of a headpiece to this multi-part installation, a video screen at the pavilion entrance showed a 1930's archival recording of a whistling act, with the master performer, fingers in mouth, whistling happily Tchaikovsky's Neapolitan Song – this old newsreel turning out to be the only image about whose symbolic potential all the project participants seemed to be in agreement. A bunch of fives in the mouth prevents articulate speech in a very radical way, and the thrust of the project was just that – proclaiming Russia's inarticulateness, nonrepresentability and inexpressability in logical categories and verbal efforts.

The reception that Moscow's artistic community accorded to Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's project, *The People's Choice*, to create a nation's simulated "best loved" and "most hated" pictures on the basis of sociological surveys was characteristic. "Looking at the situation from within it seems obvious that this coalescent, incoherent and degraded society cannot be analysed by an instrument as fine as the sociological survey, whereas Kulik with his mooing achieves the ultimate political authenticity in the analysis of the political reality", Dmitry Gutov writes. It should not come as a surprise that he assesses the analysis in terms of "authenticity", for Gutov believes that the reality "has reflected itself" in the form of life itself and proclaims the exhaustion of the hermeneutic procedure vis-a-vis the present-day reality, which, he feels, opens up the possibility of pure figurativeness, something that art seems to have long since lost.

However, it is not naturalism but realism that should be our concern here. The reality of today's Russia is perceived by artists as a total project to which they can only capitulate, this capitulation manifesting itself in the capitulation of language itself, which is getting thinner and disappears, to give way to the "spontaneous" babble of Kulik, the "belching and hawing" and simply breathing which are thematized by Brenner, or the heart-rending shout of Osmolovsky (You Can Only Shout After Modernism Project, 1992). This naturalistic programme presupposes primarily an attempt to eliminate the medication to which aesthetic and political representation is inevitably reduced: "Art is a love affair with reality, which politics tries to replace by some surrogate", writes Giya Rigvava. While the aesthetic position of the new Moscow art consists in its "transparency" with regard to reality, in the destruction of "sham codes" (Kulik), its ethical position, quite logically, consists in authenticity, in expressing every contradiction, all the chaos and all the unconscious of its time. Such art sees itself as a kind of social symptom and the artist feels himself to be a medium. Brenner crying "Chechnya ...!" at the top of his voice from a church altar, or Rigvava enacting in one of his video performances a Freudist slip of the tongue, "they are all lying – they will eat it all up" are trying to be the mouthpiece of the masses.

3.

But there is another meaning to the question "Can Russia be represented?" which was also recognised in the project for the Venice Biennale, namely, whether or not such representation was permissible and legitimate. The tentative text for the Biennale installation posed the question, if any single individual or group had the right to assume responsibility for representing the nation. In the Soviet period, the authorities still held the political representation levers and first-generation unofficial art preferred to leave the representational territory for abstract painting; the second generation, Moscow conceptualists, on the other hand, seized its opportunity to thoroughly reflect the aesthetic representation system itself, the very principle of total coding.

All this had changed with the perestroika when Russian unofficial art suddenly had to represent the USSR on the international arena. The present generation of artists, on the other hand, appeared in the Moscow scene in the early 90's, at a time when art seemed to have outlived its representational usefulness to the state. The authorities had lost interest, and not merely in art but in the idea of a good international image, in the representation idea itself. Today's Moscow art, no longer invested with any

agency powers, perceives the fact almost tragically. Therefore, when an artist assumes responsibility for representing Russia, the reality or anything that lies beyond his personal mentality, this is perceived as a venturesome, lawless act. The very structure of total and automatic representation which was developed by the Western mainstream in the 80's modelled itself, of course, upon parliamentary representation. On the other hand Contemporary Russian art, which dwells in a completely different political context, thematizes the structure of the sign in which the significate and the significant are not legitimately related – an extraparliamentary statement which easily turns into an extraparliamentary act, i.e. the seizure of power; this has been, of course, the Communist idea of politics.

As a matter of fact, what we have here is a complete system of art which resembles its “parliamentary” counterpart, but which relies on violence rather than representation. Illegitimate, extraparliamentary representation will take the shape of an exhibitionist gesture which was popular for a few years in the early '90s in Moscow's radical art circles (Brenner and Osmolovsky repeatedly resorted to it, the latter using it also on the covers of volumes produced by his Netse-Zyudik group and Radek magazine. Exhibitionism is a form of communicational violence, a sort of conclusive argument in a discussion, the collapse of a dialogue and a representational trauma: “to show” turns into “to show them what's what”. Osmolovsky names “the slogan, aphorism, and paradoxical thought” as “instruments of utmost communicativeness and ultimate publicity” , i.e. position-of-strength forms of communication in an age – which has indeed arrived – of the victory of suggestion over logical proof. Illegitimate identity, then, is nothing else than ambitions which mainly become evident, of course, when they are crashed (the central theme of most of Brenner's actions). The language of desire speaks an illegitimate language too. Realism, viewed in the desire modus, turns into naturalism, a Utopian claim to surpass convention. The “naturalism” and “desire” controls seem to be turned fully on in today's Russia. The presumption of naturalism is felt not only in the official cultural policy or as mass preferences of taste but also in the choice that the art market has made in the issue of national pictorial tradition (Shishkin and Aivazovsky have acquired a wholly new cultural and ideological significance which cannot be ignored), and not least in that most members of the actual scene believe that reality is far fuller, richer and stronger than art is. On the other hand, we are witnessing a tremendous explosion of desire – of passions, envy, fierce ambitions on the psychological level – which can be extended to the whole nation, as well as keen interest in the problem area of psychoanalysis, Eros, corporeality and desire, both on the mass-cultural level and on the philosophic-discursive

one. It is common knowledge that what is published primarily in Russia is erotic novels, books by Freud, Jung and de Sade, and if there is anything to unite contemporary Russian culture it is these authors.

If these two aspects are thematized today, it is precisely in the milieu of young artists whose two dominant themes are the will to naturalism and libidinous “drive”; the latter can be interpreted as hopeless ambition (in Brenner’s performances and poems) or business erotica (in the mock paintings of Vladimir Dubosarsky and Alexander Vinogradov). Gutov’s installations made in the Peredvizhniki tradition, Kulik’s performances which illustrate the terrors of the New Russian’s subconscious, Fishkin’s fake “models of the Universe”, Valery Koshlyakov’s empty fire walls upon which the artist plans to place illusory silhouettes of great but remote architectural monuments; all these are symbols of frustrated naturalism. Incidentally, it is in the representation of these frustrations and complexes that new Russian art has found, quite unexpectedly, its longed-for expositional and commercial identity in the West, since Russian chaos and Russian suffering are quite intelligible and acceptable for the West. Contemporary Moscow art is oscillating between non-Utopia and radical scepticism, between positivism and criticism. An artist would think nothing of entitling his work *I Hate the State* and in his printed statements speaking against subjectivism and “the hermetically sealed mind with a small artificial world of its own”, swinging easily to the totalitarian age rhetoric. In a certain sense, all this duality stems from the uncertain position of the present-day Moscow art: while it is not wanted by the establishment and actually has many attributes of unofficial art it is unwilling to take that position because “centrality” holds more attraction and “reality itself” has more importance than a critical attitude to it. From the two traditions of Russian culture, official vs. unofficial, “big” vs. “small”, “authentic” vs. “critical”, and “communalist” vs. “dissident”, contemporary Moscow art chooses, paradoxically, the former while being in more than one way a part of the latter. This, however, is as it should be if art in principle chooses the position of the collective’s mouthpiece rather than that of the distanced critic. True, this is interpreted as a kind of tragic duty of the artist. “What we are talking about is how to use that chance given to us by the gigantic boil, as ethical as it is social, that is opening before our eyes and with our participation, and we must not only bear this sight and not only take part in the operation, but actually join the forces responsible for this process”, writes Brenner and makes a plea in another place to live through “the development of a new ideology” as a “grandiose merry task”.

The authors working today in the Moscow scene resolved at some point not to emigrate (something that most artists of the previous generation had done), and to them, the view of developments “from within” is more defensible, both ethically and aesthetically, than the distanced and reflexive attitude to the authorities that was typical of dissident period authors. It is for that reason that they choose direct action in art, rather than observation and ironic commentary. However, things are moving quickly, including one’s wish to stay or not to stay in Russia. Against the officialism of the “Russian” artist, being a “Moscow” one will actually spell being in opposition, and Moscow artists once again will be identified, not with the Russian version of representative democracy and aesthetics (wholeness, that is, the primacy of the big over the little), but with its Western version (the autonomy of the detail and protection of minority rights). In a different social context, even their old statements could be reinterpreted in quite a different way.