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Theatre of Envy: Commentary to
“Terrorist Naturalism”

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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.

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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Theatre of Envy: Commentary to “Terrorist Naturalism”

*It is not in faint-heartedness or reverie that intellectual despair reaches its peak,
but in violence.*

Georges Bataille

There is talk of revival of the performance all over the world today. Even if so, the performance is no longer an anti-establishment practice of the lone hero (or a company thereof) as was the case in the '60s; it is more like a perfectly institutionalised activity, almost an occupation, at any rate a job. Practices of this kind are often referred to as “operational projects”: Marie-Ange Guillemino massages feet to all comers; Felix Gonzales-Torres hands out sweets; Fabrice Hybert proposes putting on slippers and relaxing; Rirkrit Tiravanija offers exhibition visitors Thai food or enacts in the gallery his cosy little New York flat where you can even take a shower, or stages a puppet show for neighbourhood kids.

Gestures like these, notable for their directness, kind attitude to one's neighbour and real or sham ingenuity, were termed by French critic Nicolas Bourriaud as “the aesthetics of friendliness”. By contrast, contemporary Russian art looks like a parody on the above mainstream: Oleg Kulik bites visitors' calves, Alexander Brenner tosses raw eggs at them or, worse still, appeals to them in his loud sermons, Vladimir Salnikov makes a nuisance of himself as a video prophet, Giya Rigvava arranges a television interview only to rudely cut people short. The beginning of Moscow actionism dates from Kulik's curatorial practice in the Ridzhina Gallery in the early '90s, when he committed gestures of violence against spectators' wills and moral values by forcing them to step upon a picture, or organising the slaughter of a piglet in the gallery and making the spectators its witnesses and accomplices. He terminated his curator's work by a monumental project, On

Transparency, the whole idea of which was, primarily, to take several busloads of arty public to the countryside, promising a banquet, then leave them there freezing, hungry and very angry.

The idea of turning art's functions over to pure action (as it happened in the '90s) is, of course, predicated on the critique of the work of art as a commodity; nevertheless, this aesthetics in its Western version is still based on the principle of commerce and economy; it is not without reason that these interactive projects often include the development of realistic or mock institutions or businesses, Fabrice Hybert producing now soap, now some sort of sweet; Marie-Ange Guillemino turning out some articles of clothing; and Peter Fend seems to be putting seaweeds to some good use. It is rather hard to visualise this kind of art in Russia: the Russian artist will do a project which is more likely to be quasipolitical than quasicommercial, Kulik organising an "Animal Party", Anatoly Osmolovsky setting up left-wing radical circles or conducting opinion polls, and Dmitry Gutov founding an institute to study Marxist aesthetics.

Indeed, Russia never had any economic identity and its relationships with the rest of the world were those of power pure and simple. And because language, too, is perceived exclusively as an instrument of power in Russia, the critique of logocentrism which after decades of theory assumed practical forms in the art of the '80s (in the spirit of the slogan "Leave off talking, let us work!") fell on already prepared ground. However, the Russian artist stays much more in the language space than does his Western counterpart (the role that *Khudozhestvennyj Zhurnal* and its artist contributors' texts play in Moscow is but a very superficial confirmation of the fact), spending nobly his creative efforts on demonstrating the inability to go beyond the limits of language. And whereas the most recent trend internationally is a bored and blissful indifference to the representation issue, in Russia it assumes the form of hatred of it.

The fight against representation opens up possibilities for at least two programmes: a critical programme and an ecological one. The former aims at exposing the mechanisms of power and violence in logical structures, conventions, "privileged images", simply in artistically complete products, in any representation; examples include Osmolovsky's installation at the 1993 Istanbul Biennale which was devoted to the subject of "chef-d'oeuvre" and showed a huge human figure whose head was cut off at the height of the ceiling, or Kulik's 1997 action *A Sandpiper Doesn't Peck Out the Eye of*

*Another Sandpiper*¹ in which he pierced with a huge beak the eye in his own likeness, sensing, in his iconoclastic zeal, danger in any image. The ecological programme (which has been carried out notably by Kulik in his grotesque fight for animal rights) gives the floor to all that is oppressed and repressed, to all Others, like Reality, Subject, Woman, Body, Chance, or Background. This, incidentally, is bound to lead to the privileging of Failure and Weakness. But, apart from this, ecological aesthetics exonerates imperfection inside the representation mechanism itself, breaking its self-reference and detautologizing it, by proclaiming indefinite multidimensionality, "diminished responsibility", "immaturity" and "idiocy" as pseudonyms of the broken link between significate and significant. At the same time, all this is merely the masking of tautology (even, we may say, a form of self-deceit) which is the inevitable outcome of proclaiming immanent values. Ecology, as we have long since learned, never can stay at the point of criticism and will turn to the production of new absolutes. One of them, very opportunely surfacing out of oblivion, is the mythological image of Russia, which is the oppressed member par excellence in the representational framework (according to the 19th century notions, there was no place for this country in the Hegelian world picture); and to activate this chain of national associations we do not even have to state explicitly, as Kulik does in one of his performances, "I love Europe and Europe does not love me!"² The specific character – and of course, the problem as well – of contemporary Russian art is that it finds itself in two contexts at the same time, one being the international scene, the other the centuries-old Russian culture. In the latter, the question of identity and its representation necessarily brings with it a bunch of unnecessary meanings as it inevitably evokes the "Russia and the West" controversy. Any representation of Russia is her representation to the West; any discourse on the inexpressible and incomprehensible, if it takes place in Russia, is a discourse on Russia. The struggle for inexpressibility is a fight for the right to remain unfathomed, i.e. for power, therefore the crisis of logocentrism may take almost bloody forms in Russia.

The thing is, Russia has traditionally considered herself not only excluded from representation, but a victim of forced representation, which is a

¹ This is a paraphrase of the Russian proverb "A crow doesn't peck out the eye of another crow".

² It is worthy of note that the first time the motif one's own "exclusion" was thematized in the present-day Russian scene it was by artists of the unofficial gallery in Trekhprudny Lane, who organised weekly openings of mainly collective projects in 1991-1993. The project *Modest Pupils of a Great Master* appealed to the notorious work of Pier Manzoni, *The Artist's Shit* (the artist's faeces in several cans), but the Moscow authors, lacking the necessary canning machinery available to an advanced civilisation, did not can their faeces and urine but merely displayed them in a refrigerator, thus failing to either archive them or include them in a global Museum of Modern Art (whose absence in Moscow is an essential point in the self-awareness of the current scene) and leaving them in some interim state of waiting.

Western mechanism the keys to which are in the West's hands. Yury Leiderman, reproducing this discourse, writes that Russia lacks identity, the West, on the other hand, tends to attribute to it "the position of . . . being rooted in its own soil of which we are supposed to talk incessantly to them". In the present-day Russia an artist practising the so-called radical art acts as an agent of the West (the values of modern art, connected as they are with European individualism, having proved alien to Russia), whereas when he exhibits in the West he almost inevitably represents Russia, because the Western curator seldom takes an interest in him as an individual but only as a typical representative of the Moscow scene as someone who, in turn, represents a dangerous country in the east, namely helps determine the degree of the danger it poses. The artist thus finds himself between two representation machines; it is here that he experiences (as he thinks) the true "death of the author", crashed not so much by determining external influences and conventions as by the signs of himself. The artist has no other choice but a new Luddite's gesture, which is the destruction of the whole representation machine. We can now make out the sense of Brenner's sensational action, destroying a Chinese artist's installation at the Interpol exhibition in Stockholm (1996). What he was out to destroy was a conventional representation system as such, in that case an artistic-political and institutional one allocating national representation. So, apart from a critical programme and an ecological programme, contemporary Russia an art is waging a loner's purely terrorist struggle against representation as such.

However, the contemporary Moscow artist, as it was already noted, perceives himself as a symptom of reality, that is to say, its representative. And his simultaneous hatred of the representation mechanism makes the artist a sort of kamikaze of representation: the more he is angry with it, the more he hates himself.

But then, the Luddite artist in this case breaks a machine which is supposed to be broken anyway, representation being above all rupture and mismatch. Thus, what the Luddite is after is, in fact, not destruction but restoration, for he wants to fill the split, to have it overgrown with fragments of Nature. His yells, for instance, serve just this purpose, but not they alone. Another Brenner's Herostratean gesture to gain notoriety, his spoiling of a Malevitch picture in Stedelijk Museum (1997), was one more attempt at destruction of a perfect conventional system – one of the most perfect systems! – this time an aesthetic one. By drawing upon Malevitch's cross a green dollar sign Brenner, sure enough, "branded" Malevitch, equating his

universal sign with a banal one; however, in doing so he devalued its uniqueness, dissolved its heroic emblematicity, and tried to force the filling of the void (it was not by chance that Brenner had chosen a "white" Malevitch) by whatever. The green dollar (Malevitch hated the green as the colour of life) posed in the white context as "green plant life", indeed, paradoxically reminding of the maniacal wish to "fill all with drawings" so characteristic of Filonov's paintings (Brenner, in explaining his action, contrasted Filonov, a true Russian as well as an avant-garde artist, with the Westernised and "flat" Malevitch).

As a matter of fact, we are living through another wave of fighting against representation and language generally. The global crisis of the artistic marketplace and the whole system of institutionalised art of the '90s led to a revival of anti-institutional, antirepresentative ideas of the 1968 avant-garde and a resurgence of interest in ideas of the early Godard and Guy Debord (though representation and logocentrism have since been criticised with perhaps more brilliance and depth). Viewed in this context, representation is politically repressive because as it delegates it usurps the rights of the represented; it is a commercialising phenomenon which inevitably turns everything into a commodity, and it is aesthetically deficient because it is nothing more than a cheap ersatz for authenticity. The democratic art project of the '90s divests representation of its hierarchic, power structure, the ambition of new aesthetics, already well articulated primarily in curatorial projects for large exhibitions, being to build art upon a different platform, communicative instead of representative. Representation must be replaced by juxtaposition, and "either-or" by a friendly and tautological "both-and". Communication, therefore, is regarded as dialogue which imposes a ban on one-sided rightness. The content of an utterance is thus taken well beyond the limits of communication, which often proves to be merely procedural, hence narcotically interminable. Communication is then more parallel than content-based; art is eventful primarily in the sense that it juxtaposes several units of being.

The Utopian will to overcome the rupture within the sign has been reproduced in art repeatedly and with varying degree of awareness of its Utopianism. While most current projects show perfect forgetfulness in this regard, it was Antonin Arthaud's "theatre of brutality" which illustrated one of the most conscious attempts at this kind of Utopianism. Arthaud wrote, "And if confusion and chaos are the sign of the age, I see its underlying reasons in a rupture between the things, words and thoughts that represent this age." Arthaud questions the very mechanism of the statement "poetry is anarchistic to the extent it questions all relations of an object to another

object, likewise the relation of form to what it signifies." "Brutality" is not sadism on the stage, it is a new language structure which denies representation and relies on transparency, it is in the first-place necessity, directness, stern spontaneity: we need to "destroy language to be able to touch life".

All the quotes in the previous paragraph are Arthaud's; almost all of them, however, can be found in Brenner's *The Last Languor* (Moscow, 1994) signed by his name. Brenner alternates numerous hidden quotations from Arthaud's preface to his book *Theatre and its Double* with fragments of his own writing, repeatedly shifting from reading aloud to writing, and back again. The ambition of contemporary Russian art is, indeed, the destruction of representation in the spirit of Arthaud's aesthetics, but this art continuously comes to repetition, something that Arthaud strongly opposed in the first place. To Brenner, this unmarked quotation is part of his avowed "strategy of plagiarism"; thus, theatre of brutality turns into theatre of envy.

What I refer to as envy is not only a psychological but also an aesthetic phenomenon, an indestructible mimetic drive. It may well be that the mechanism of Russian art is essentially mimetic, which means non-Oedipal, i. e. non-emancipative, its foundation being not patricide (which has never occurred in Russian culture) but inaccurate repetition actuated by wish. We should rather refer to "influence anxiety" in the spirit of Harold Bloom, "incorrect understanding" or deliberate distortion of the image – but only as a craving for that influence,³ as a mimetic passion which is always realised through failure and dissatisfaction alone.

"Theatre of brutality" is one of the most important and felicitous theoretical foundations of the aesthetics of the '30s which could only be fully realised under totalitarian regimes, and for that reason it is generally called totalitarian. Arthaud called upon the theatre to turn to the staging of mass-scale, total pageants, in which the spectator would be involved in the action and the show would unfold around him. Theatre, according to Arthaud, should touch on "urgent anxieties of the masses", "open collectively the giant boil" (this image, by the way, was picked up by Brenner too) and to reveal the "inner brutality" as it is done by the plague – another one of Arthaud's pseudonyms for theatre. It is to be understood that the reference is not to dramatic forms but to the mechanism of the spectacle which would act "not simply as reflection but as a force", which would destroy the

³ Sarah Pratt, who published the Russian translation of excerpts from Bloom's book, is quite right to pose the question whether Bloom's theory is applicable to Russian literature, and whether it does not tell something about Russian literature and on literature generally, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, No. 2 (1996), p. 13.

dispersing duality in the structure of representation. In the "theatre of brutality" this inescapably broken structure must be concentrated into a powerful double statement where there is no difference between significate and significant, where all borders have been destroyed by the power of a totalizing will. This explosion, which Arthaud planned, does not occur in today's aesthetics: the European "aesthetics of friendliness" operates with juxtaposition, its Moscow version, "theatre of envy", introduces the will for orgiastic concurrence which, however, never comes about.

Current Moscow art, at any rate, does not ignore its totalitarian connotations, either in collective exhibition projects where works merge into common chaos and authors' names are not mentioned, or in Kulik's forcible curatorial experiments. The Russian artist knows only too well that criticism of abstraction leads to the exciting edge of the totality experience – and, time and again, peers over that edge.