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The Origins of Moscow Actionism, 1991-1996.

This paper concerns the origins of Moscow Actionism, a violent and spectacular strain of performance art that emerged in the Russian Federation during the early 1990s. Extant scholarship on the movement has focused primarily on the resonance between Actionism's brutality and the traumatic consequences of Soviet collapse. In particular, the transgressive character of Actionist performances has been understood as both an authentic symptom of the degradation of post-Soviet life and an oppositional reaction against Western cultural hegemony following decades of self-determination. Conversely, I examine Oleg Kulik's impersonations of a rabid dog, Aleksandr Brener's displays of autoerotic and bodily functions, and Anatoly Osmolovsky's orchestrations of obstructive rallies in Moscow's public spaces in light of the constraints faced by post-Soviet artists seeking to assimilate into the institutional and discursive structures dominating the global field of contemporary art since the end of the Cold War. My paper posits that the shocking quality of the Moscow Actionists' early performances was a means of compensating for the difficult circumstances of artistic practice in Russia. During the Soviet era, official artists worked within state-run institutions while clandestine networks of production and interpretation enabled unofficial art. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the structures of both official and unofficial art were dismantled as the elimination of Socialist Realism also invalidated any motivation for its alternative. Post-Soviet artists were left with no domestic frameworks for displaying their work and no professional identity within, or against, Soviet culture. At the same time, the lack of local structures supporting the creation, circulation, and legitimization of art resulted in Russian artists' acute social and economic marginalization in relation to the transnational network of urban centers that comprised the contemporary artworld.

Thus, lacking conventional outlets for presenting and validating their art, the Moscow Actionists employed transgression in their performances as a strategy for transmitting their works to as wide an audience as possible through the newspapers and tabloids proliferating in post-Soviet Russia, while concurrently engineering their own cultural legitimization as professional artists. On the one hand, by taking on controversial themes including sex, violence, war, religion, and suffering, Actionist performances incited scandal to vie for exposure within Russia's sensationalist media landscape and to guarantee their own broad distribution among a new mass public. Instead of manifesting the abject reality of post-Soviet

life, the outrageousness of the Actionists' performances made their work extraordinarily mediagenic. On the other hand, their sensational quality also emphasized the status of Actionist performances as relevant and timely artistic gestures within a global artworld that was steeped in scandal and spectacle during the 1990s. Art historians have traditionally rejected the reproduction of performances in mass media as an attempt to commodify and institutionalize live art. Yet, by sharing the look and content of tabloid photos, post-Soviet performances draw attention to art's increasingly close engagement with commercial visual media systems (e.g. fashion, Hollywood cinema, and advertising).

My paper aims to understand the unique conditions influencing the development of Actionism in Russia, while also expanding scholarship on performance art more broadly. In the West, performance art has most often been invoked as a subversive mode that transgresses social norms and opposes art's institutions and markets. However, by creating shocking events primed for duplication, the Actionists not only troubled the typical interpretation of performance art as an anti-institutional refusal of mass reproduction and the concomitant spectacle culture but also shrewdly deployed the medium to conform to contemporary art's hierarchy of cultural values. In this way, the multiple textualities of Moscow Actionist performances enabled Russian artists to address their native context while still demonstrating the specialized knowledge of contemporary art's conventions that is required for productive participation in the international artworld.