07 2002

Art and Politics in Moscow: A Politically Ambiguous City

Oleg Kireev

The Moscow context, having become extremely politicized in the early 90s and gradually depoliticizing since Putin's election in 2000, saw the birth of numerous artistic and activist interventions in official politics. The contemporary political scene was created by the efforts of an artistic public, made up of journalists, political consultants, advertising makers and TV people, who, paradoxically, belonged to the very same Moscow intelligentsia, which had entered the public sphere during the Perestroika period. Have they simply outdone themselves in serving the new power and shaping its image? Is it true that all that remains are mere power-battles between lucky conformists and a new alternative, underground bohème?

In the 90s we acknowledged the establishment of two oppositional camps: On the one side the critically thinking, ironical, postmodernist media-elite and on the other the disillusioned, anarchist, underground artists-activists who challenged them. Throughout the decade, this opposition was quite intense. Especially because the members of the first camp still belonged to the powerful intelligentsia and could openly operate in the public sphere and influence political decision-making.

All the media of that period were liberal and open. The public and the politicians were not alienated from each other; on the contrary, in Yeltsin's era they were on quite familiar terms. TV functioned as a disinterested distributor of information instead of forming people's opinion. The Russian Internet was just beginning to develop. Let me start with a comparison:

- In March 1991, a group of 13 young, actionist artists, called "E.T.I.", carry out the first radical artistic action, writing an obscure word on the Red Square with their own bodies;

- in August 1991, the so-called "communist putsch" takes place, in which artists and future political image-makers defend "freedom and democracy" at the barricades. (There is even a professional myth that the flag raised on the Moscow White House was brought from the Contemporary art center).

- In 1993 many new galleries emerge, an art market starts to function, artists enter the political PR campaigns;

- in October 1993, the second *coup-d'état* takes place, when the parliament was "democratically" shut down by the intervention of government tanks.

- In 1996, Boris Yeltsin wins an extremely propagandist campaign for election; connected to these elections, the first Chechen war begins;

- in the same year, Alexander Brener carries out his provocative actions dedicated to Yeltsin, the Chechen war and the Orthodox church;

- in May 1998, members of the "Radek" magazine circle (dedicated to culture, politics and theory), together with young, leftist political activists, erect an "art" barricade (consisting of artworks) on a central street in Moscow, thus celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Red May events in Paris;

- throughout the autumn of 1999, a parliamentary election campaign takes place, in which extremely brutal methods of political propaganda, info-wars, and media speculations are used;

- in December, diverse groups of anarchists, artists and other protesters inspire and engage in a counter-campaign, called "Against all parties", which raises its collective voice against the new propagandist media and the political class as such;

- in Spring 2000, Putin becomes President and the open era of Yeltsin comes to an end. Since that time, the public sphere has contracted and oppositional views are less often voiced. Artistic opposition has gone underground. Alternative views can be publicly presented only in a mild, indirect form; therefore the voice of the social opposition is tamed, calmed, allowed to express itself only indirectly, "culturally".

***

How can a critical art survive when there are no longer arts institutions, no governmental sponsorship of critical artists, no support from Western foundations, or even more or less autonomous zones for artistic jobs? Paradoxically, in Russia it can. Throughout the 90s it has been surviving on a voluntary basis, due to a socially open atmosphere. Because Russian society was mobile and fluid, an active person could easily find many cultural vacancies, or niches. That is how political PR appeared as a

specialization: the former unformals and the late Soviet dissidents created political consultancies and persuaded the politicians to believe that their work deserves payment. Referring to Ulf Wuggenig's article in the same issue of this journal, it was a Russian variant of the appearance of a "Wirtschafts-Kuenstler", a sign of an "dedifferentiation" between Culture and Politics.

A politically engaged activity doesn't need to be explicitly political, nor does it necessarily have to be presented as an artwork. While a truly public sphere existed in Russia, it could be affected by many different means, from a scandalous action to a challenging political statement, from a protest or demonstration to a terrorist act. But now such a sphere doesn't exist at all. In 2000, journalists, not even being threatened by power, but rather, trying to be accepted by it, gave up all their "freedoms". The media-intelligentsia openly demonstrated its abandonment of the liberal values and professional ethics it had once fought for.

***

But in comparison to the well-established, cynical and elitist media-intelligentsia, underground art has deeply entrenched itself. Since 1996, we've seen a strong evolution of styles and methods, clear and focused internal debates between radical groups; we've even seen a few generations of protesters, who step by step improve their political effectiveness. Let me start with the first pioneers.

Alexander Brener now lives in Europe and repeats *cliché* truths of leftist ideology - accusing everyone else of corruption, integration and whatever. He was not like that when he first came to Moscow, after the Israeli emigration in the mid-90s. Brener's actions were simultaneously confessional, offensive and masochistic. Performing

a lonely act of protest he would show himself as a hero-martyr. I bear witness to the fact that there was no meeting or discussion in Moscow art circles from 1995-1998 without Brener's name being mentioned. His work, situationist and actionist by genre, let us reformulate a definition of that genre: a situation is something which consists of two parts - the first is the artist's action, and the second is society's reaction to that action.

Anatoly Osmolovsky was not such a heroic figure, but his work might be considered to be much more effective. While Brener stood mostly within the art context and referred to art and theory topics, Osmolovsky inspired a movement away from an art-centered ideology. Remarkably, the most successful of his actions, a "Barricade", became the first meeting point between the artistic-theoretical activists, the Foucault-Deleuze admirers, and those who had never heard of them before - the marginalized political activists.

The "Against all parties" campaign was the first instance of an action where protesters could not any more be satisfied with only artistic results. They insisted that art had to act politically. The campaign aimed at subverting official politics by voting "against all". (There is such an option on Russian voting ballots. If "against all" gets more votes than any of the candidates, the elections arecanceled and none of the previous candidates can run in the next election.) But the time of open dialogue and free media was coming to an end. The Duma elections in 1999 highlighted a whole decade of democratic disillusionment. The campaign activists must take their places in history as more heroic, even more than Brener was, because they defiantly struggled without a chance of winning. A idealistic group of volunteers had found itself before the state info-war machine and all the arms of the media mobilized against them. It was exciting; one group of them succeeded in

taking a position on top of Lenin's mausoleum and raised a banner "Against all", and another one went to the State Duma building and threw bottles of red paint at it- marking it with blood- as a protest against the elections and the Chechen war.

Since Putin's elections everything has changed. Leftist counter-culture has lost its main target - the state, which had previously been weak and precarious, and which now became stable, visible, omnipresent. Leftist culture had to give up its direct subversiveness; the age of the lonely martyr-heroes has gone. Now it is time for more collective, subcultural, diverse, rhizomatic activities, activities which are more realistic - comparable to the utopian, idealistic protesters of the previous decade. In hindsight, this decade seems really utopian and highly non-realistic. What is essential is that we've experienced something really utopian. When living under new conditions, let's not forget this vision.

It is of significance that a new pattern of resistance appeared immediately after the new president's elections. It is called the "SVOI 2000" movement, which means something like "OUR OWN 2000" or "OWN 2000". Its first manifestation took place on May Day 2000 - a holiday when crowds of people take to the streets to celebrate a Day of Spring and Labor. May Day was traditionally privatized by the communists, by an official opposition which doesn't want to change anything but only to imitate a revolutionary image. "SVOI 2000" activists sought to revive this sense. They formed a column at the tail of a demonstration of communists. Unlike the serious Red pensioners, the young people carried orange flags, dressed like clowns, armed with trumpets and whistles, dancing and proclaiming absurd slogans in slang.

In Brechtian terms, they accomplished an *estrangement* of the communist procession. But paradoxically, the Russian term for an

estrangement coincides with a very Marxist term for *alienation*. Thus their estrangement was simultaneously a dis-alienation of the Moscow streets invaded and taken over by the new-Russian capitalist, alienated advertising, by official architecture and so forth. Intervening in and occupying space, at least for an hour, the column's participants were taking the streets back, or bringing a lost familiarity back to them. That's what the name of the movement derives from, on the organizers' leaflets it said: "*In 3000 … all the world will become our own*".

Let's conclude with some observations on Russian leftist politics in comparison with its parallel, the neighboring leftist movement of Belarus. The authoritarian regime of Lukashenko made it difficult for such politics, though an unprecedented, anti-Lukashenko source of financial funding has supported and enlightened it. Thus did the two ends meet, and a great tension between two opposite things inspired a new generation of radicals to invent an enormously rich leftist activity. The Minsk "Navinki" newspaper is a unique example of a truly leftist extra-parliamentary political factor on former Soviet Union territory. With a circulation of more than 10 000 copies, this outstandingly absurdist-dadaist-nihilistic-artistic publication estranges the whole world of an officially established order of things, reverses the basic definitions of that field, makes people laugh at all that was previously considered important and valuable. "Navinki" does not take any one side in the official political struggle, and thus avoids compromising itself; rather it rejects both sides as implicated and corrupt. In Belarus, opposition-aligned rhetoric seems even more awful than the usual official government lies; at least the liberals don't play any games. In 1998, after a hysterical, pro-Serbian campaign which stated that they had an invisible Air Defense system, "Navinki" published an exclusive photograph of an eliminated invisible NATO "Stells": an

empty rectangle. And after the panic about post letters with the Siberian plague virus in October 2001 they published material about a letter sent to their office containing a "Novosibirsk diarrhea" virus.

***

The generation I belong to has been growing up in extremely politicized times: it was 1991 in Russia when I was sixteen, and 1993 when I was eighteen. Therefore we had to become politically engaged. The point is that our political illusions and optimism were ruined by the events to come afterwards, and in 1993 we were already seeing the beginning of them. To borrow some good old Freudian truths, we have got an adolescent psychological trauma. But no generation could avoid such traumas, the point is - how it will deal with them. Our aim now is to overcome this trauma by making these illusions and optimisms work, to bring them back into reality again. In some sense it means to re-construct history in an improved way.