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Identity as an anti-structure in Russian Performance Art in 2000s

Abstract:

This speech is devoted to the analysis of performer's identity and subjectivity and the process of its formation in the art of performance in Russia in 2000s. We see identity as a process of self-knowledge as the formation of subjectivity.

Our main hypothesis is that the performance art as an art genre that responds brighter and faster to the social challenges in society, in Russia in the current political history in the 2000s in Russia, the main theme was chosen to search for an imaginary community that could act as an alternative platform for social action. Inside the art of performance, identity, as opposed to the existing structure, finds itself as an anti-structure, in the moment of double negativity (not not I.) "Not not I" is the principle forming identity as an anti-structure in the sense in which it was examined by Victor Turner.

This speech is devoted to the analysis of performer's identity and subjectivity and the process of its formation / development in performance art in Russia in the 2000s. We see identity as a process of self-cognition, as formation of subjectivity.

The main hypothesis is that the primary / dominant subject of performance art in Russia in the 2000s was the theme of seeking an imaginary community, as it allows to respond to the social challenges the society faces brighter and faster than other practices. Inside the performance art identity finds itself opposing to the existing structure as an anti-structure in the moment of double negativity (Not not I). The 'Not Not I' notion was proposed by performance studies theorist Richard Schechner. We presume that this concept can be extended to become a constitutive in the forming of the identity of a performer. In case of the actor, double negativity is caused by the need to play a role: so the actor finds himself in the space between himself and the role. In case of the performance artist, the reasoning of double negativity is not so obvious. The key aim of this speech is to make an attempt to understand what identity of a performance artistis, if if grounded in the principle of double negativity, on the base of Russian performance art in the 2000s.

In this report, we adhere to the line suggested by performance historian Amelia Jones: all the material considered is secondary and constitutes performance documentation, primarily publicly available. This material includes photo and video documantation, articles, interviews, lectures and does not include first-person experience. This is due to the fact that performances in Russia in 1990–2000 took place not only in the city spaces, where interaction between an audience and a performer happens face-to-face, but also in mass media and the Internet, where interaction is always mediated. So, after Amelia Jones we treat identity and subjectivity in the performance art as mediated by other people and objects, where some of objects and people exist in virtual space: "subjectivities that are acknowledged to exist always already in relation to the world of other objects and subjects; subjectivities that are always already intersubjective as well as interobjective". (Jones 1997, 12)

What is Performance Art in nowadays Russia?

In the beginning we need to answer the question: what constitutes performance art in nowadays Russia?. The term "performance" has become an umbrella concept for different kind of actions. It has become so universal that has practically lost its meaning, therefore it seems important to us to develop a working definition that this study can be based upon.

Interest in the performance art in Russia began to increase intensely when Russia joined the world scene in the 1990s — the beginning of the 2000s. During this period not only critical publications, but also the first fully-fledged culturological and philosophical attempts to analyse actionism in the USSR and Russia started to emerge. Among all the works it is worth noting the work of art historians Alexandra Obukhova and Julia Aksenova *Cartography of Russian Performance*, where they not only catalogue the performance in Russia from 1910 to 2014, but also offer 'routes' of perception and research for performative practices within the Russian context. Following this work, we can bring into focus the following cultural and social meanings that allow us to define performance in Russia: performance in Russian culture is "an event, fact, gamble, ьmatter, episode and deed" associated with the aesthetic nature of the action (Obukhova 2014, 13-14). Obukhova also notes that the concept of performance is still vague and difficult to conceptualize in the Russian context, which, however, does not contradict its expansion and actualization as a practice within the art.

In Russian context, such terms as performance, actionism, art of action are often used as synonyms. However, we try to distinguish them. Art of action is a broad umbrella concept that includes all performing practices within artistic context. Performance is, first of all, a genre of contemporary art. Actionism is a sociocultural phenomenon closely related to the critical moods that arose in Europe after the end of World War II. Actionism and performance could be used in Russian context as synonyms, however, it is important to state within those terms the difference between political actionism and artistic activity. In this distinction, we follow the philosopher Sueli Rolnik:

> "Activist and artistic actions have in common the fact of constituting two manners of confronting the tensions of social life at the points where its dynamics of transformation are blocked. Both aim at the liberation of life's mobility, which makes them essential activities for the *health* of a society […] But the orders of tension that each one confronts are distinct, along with the operations of this confrontation and the subjective faculties that they involve. The characteristically activist operation, with its macropolitical potential, intervenes in the tensions that arise in visible, stratified reality, between the poles of conflict in the distribution of places established by the dominant cartography within a given social context (conflicts of class, race, gender, etc.). […] Whereas the characteristic operation of artistic intervention, with its micropolitical potential, acts on the tension of the paradoxical dynamic located between the dominant cartography with its relative stability, on the one hand, and on the other, the sensible reality in continuous change, the product of the living presence of otherness that ceaselessly affects our bodies" (Rolnik 2007).

According to Rolnik, activism deals with visible reality, which lies on the surface. Artistic activity deals with those layers of reality, which are not always visible and direct. In this study, we only refer to those artistic activities in the context of Russia in the 2000s which can be described as performance, that is, which exist within the genre of contemporary art (such as the RADEK community). Despite the fact that performance in Russia exists in a close connection with political agenda and social activism, the latter activities seem very different to us. We are predominantly interested in the artistic dimension in performance rather than its social orientation. We do not cover political activism and actionism represented by such groups as *War, Pussy Riot*, etc. who directly respond to political situation by interventions in the social space. Their goals lie outside of the notion of aesthetics. Therefore, they are more social activists than artists. It raises an issue of how to distinguish artistic value of a work of art from its social significance and conditionality, and is this possible at all? We think such a differentiation can be made artificially in case of performance. We intend to find an answer to the question: "How far can performers go in their desire to transform the world while remaining artists?" Therefore we intend to distinguish performance artist identity from one of being a citizen and an activist .

Performance Art in Post-Soviet Russia in 1990s: Performances of Singles in Mass

Performative practices of the early 2000s arose in a dialogue with the practices of the 1990s. Researcher Yulia Gnirenko refers to the period of the 1990s as a period of "single-person performances in mass", or "the performance of post-modern neo-baroque." She notes that "1990s artists undoubtedly entered a new layer of communicative art." Thus the major type of creative act for this period was art of action, performances and actions that stopped to be marginal, hidden. It was caused by socio-political changes in Russia: collapse of the USSR and emergence of a kind of "global utopia" — democratic communication. Art historian Andrei Kovalev in his work *Russian Actionism 1990–2000* speaks of this period as the time of "single heroes risking their own bodies" (Kovalev 2007, 8). Moscow actionists of the 1990s instinctively discovered the disintegrating reality. Yet in their efforts they seemed to be more radical than the reality itself. According to Kovalev's remark the new identity of the artist of the new Russia was first and foremost the identity of a lonely person who had right to speak, yet played a role of jester, a fool, in the eyes of society. He posits that the performers of the 1990s were local city "idiots" striving not to explore the world but to change it, to create a new world on the ruins of the old one. The identity of the artist of that time was very individualistic, the artists were not seeking for community that did exist, but tried to go under and critique it. Thus being an artist at that time meant being alone. From this point of view, the key features of that period are the following: presence of a hero, aggressiveness and fear, direct appeal to the viewer, irony, sincerity, messianism, borrowed language, and physicality. "Russian art of the 90's produced brutality, brutal experiments, excessive physicality, complete destruction of the usual flow of artistic process" (Gnirenko 1999).

The artists started to use as their performance stages not the institutions spaces, but the space of urban environment and mass media. The desire to break into the city, to turn out to be public in many respects, can be seen as a fundamental rupture between the artists of the 1990s and their conceptualist predecessors, such as Ilya Kabakov. The intentionality of not being associated with the informal art of the previous decades was manifested through the desire to be in urban space, not in the space of nature, that was usual for romantic conceptualism. In the early 1990s the urban space was a way to differentiate insiders and outsiders, but the 2000s blurred that border. Artist Pavel Mitenko writes about this change: "In 1991

everybody on the street was an insider, by the end of the 1990s very few recognized each other, in the 2000s Moscow was already a city of 'strangers'". (Mitenko 2013) In the 90s artist was surrounded by community of "his friends" for whom he was a man of action who could cause a resonance. For example, performance by Oleg Kulik in 1992 at the festival "Animalistic projects" in Regina Gallery, where he butchered a pig and gave away its meat, caused a great scandal and a lot of protests.

The performer was visible, public, but at the same time had an alibi as an artist. This alibi was made possible by the media. Moscow actionists became new TV stars always accompanied by journalists who created their alibi and made their public utterance to be out of risk zone. Identity of the artist of the 90s was born in the space between "being an artist" and "having right to speak". On the one hand, the artist created a new reality which caused a violent reaction from the society. On the other hand, he was considered to be out of legal system. Such a hero is still a loner, a fool, not part of the community. He is distant from the community, so the community rules do not apply to him. Performances of that period sought to shock, attract attention, ware aggressive towards the society, did not seek integration and unification. This fragmentation and paradoxicality are the key features of the identity of the performer of the 90s and are well illustrated by photo performance "Camouflage" by the Community New Dumb (1996). "The artist covered in various garbage represents the 'birth' of a new man ... entangled ... in the mud of cultural layers." (Miziano 2016, 146). The performer of the late 1990s finds himself drowned into the contexts of consumer society, which he criticizes.

That era of security ended in 2000 when performer Oleg Mavromati, as part of the performance "Do not Believe Your Eyes", crucified himself in the yard of the Institute of Cultural Studies and was accused of inciting religious discord. Then he was forced to flee to Bulgaria. The artist no longer retained the duality: being an artist and having a free right to speak.

With the end of the 90's era, a new wave of young performers appeared. It is worth noting two important points before turning to the analysis of the performer's identity of the 2000s. First, the artistic field of the performance of 2000s turns out to be heterogeneous. Nikolai Oleinikov points out, "the generation of artists […] is difficult to call a phenomenon as integral as Moscow conceptualism and Moscow actionism: it looks like a disjoint, atomized structure consisting, for the most part, of former participants of former groups, duets, collectives" (Olejnikov 2008). Second, the artists of the 00s are no longer in confrontation with the legacy of the 90s. However, as artist Maxim Karakulov points out, performance of 00s tries to become an alternative to the performance of the 90s: "something quiet, unprovoked, friendly" (Interview with RADEK community 2014). Art of the 00s begins where the city of "insiders" ends that causes to disappear the communities who were ready to protect the artists.

Performance Art in Post-Soviet Russia in the 2000s: Performance Art in Attempt to Reach New Forms of Communality

Performance of the 2000s arose in small communities, "collectives of young sociophobes" (Olejnikov 2008), who often were not even aware of each other. They tried not to transform reality, but to investigate it. The art of the 00s semed more politicized only at first sight. The rhetoric of the 2000s was more politicized, however, in the absence of the community, the art lost its truly political significance. The loss of formal communities, the proclamation of nominally new structure, the era of "Putin's stability" became the starting point for the Radek group, the main one on Moscow stage. Maxim Karakulov in one of the interviews describes the main question of paerformance art of that time:

"I think our collaboration in Radek group put out one big common question: How can people stay together? How can friends, lovers, brothers or even nations and civilisations keep together? For me, out attempts to understand something revolved around these questions. Our main object was an individual, or rather a group of individuals. I think the motion of an individual-as-a-crowd had something to do with a particular historical period. We were born in time of total disintegration. The country collapsed, the economy caved in, people were driven apart and became enemies. That's why the question 'What is the unity we are losing?' was highly topical."
(Interview with RADEK community 2014)

The search for common was based on the basic premise that a group was stronger than an individual. Maxim Karakulov speaks of this provision as an axiom: «It was an axiom. We tried to understand how a group could act» (Interview with RADEK community 2014).

Artists formed groups and those groups became units of not only artistic life, but ordinary life as well. Establishment of the absence of differentiation between artistic and everyday practices is an important feature of the artist's identity of the 00s. Pavel Mishchenko writes: "Such art is realized not in its institutional representation, but in the lines of force of informal relations TO/INSIDE the community" (Mishchenko 2013). The artists' search is the search for an unformalized common, which can give them an answer to the question of who they are. Thus creating a community is the way to discover one's own

identity. Such community could be interpreted in Victor Turner's notion of communitas or antistructure. Absent formal society is a disintegrated structure, which can be understood and explored only by creating informal general structures.

Turner reveals the meaning of transformation through the opposition between structure and anti-structure. By anti-structure Turner means both communitas and liminality. Structure and communitas are two major types of social organization. Structure as a model describes society as a "system of social positions" (Turner 1969, 131), whereas in communitas individuals are engaged in a "direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities" (op.cit p. 132). Communitas is the integral group of participants of the ritual bounded by their collective experience. It allows all the community to share collective experience. It describes relationships "between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals". (ibid.) It liberates "human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses" (Turner 1982, 44). Communitas provides an intense community spirit and togetherness. As a result, there is no difference between participants (except that of neophytes and sacrificers). They have nothing that can bound them with previous structure: nor status, nor property, nor kinship position, neither sex or clothes. Nothing can demarcate them structurally from each other.

Turner tells about communitas between three different types (ibid.): spontaneous communitas ("approximately what the hippies today would call "a happening") (ibid.), normative communitas, ("where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources and necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of those goals") (ibid.), and ideological communitas ("utopian models of society"). The types of communitas are phases, not permanent conditions:

"Communitas breaks in through the interstice of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency" (op.cit p. 128).

Social changes can be interpreted within the terminology of the British anthropologist, where the structure is a formal state, while informal groups of artists are the space of spontaneous communitas with no linkage to social positions. Thus, the performance of the 00s turns out to be asocial, yet, struggling for a common space, for publicity.

Identity of the artist appears an antistructure, through the search for a common, which makes each member of the community equal, both in art and in life. The question of what we have in common can be reduced to the question of who I am, what makes me part of the whole. This way of self-identification through 'I' becomes the basis for performance artists of the 00s: "self-identification through collective categories begins where pre-specified conditions for group existence (choice and declaration of common positions) begin to work, acquire reality" (Bystrov 2001). A good example is the performance "Skotch-Party" by Radek (2000-2002), where the members of the group declared the program collectivity. They postulated "the rejection of individualism, authorship", so that there could appear "something like a community, a collective body" (Bystrov 2001). The artists not only rejected individualism, but also proclaimed that "to become somebody would be a defeat", to have a personal identity meant to suffer an intellectual defeat (Interview with RADEK community 2014). The only possible strategy becomes the loss of personal identity. It leads to identity as an antistructure, where the only way to identify oneself is through collective body, through the common. The artists reject everything, except the search for an answer to the question: how to be together.

This situation is reinforced by intendeddesire of artists not just to create art, but to live. The boundary between art and everyday life becomes insignificant. Artist Nikolai Oleinikov notes, "uncompromising devotion to art, up to the transfer of art attributes into private life, devotion postulating refusal to distinguish personal and public life, dissolution of art in personal life, totalization of artistic gesture and its integration into private" (Olejnikov 2008).

Identity as Double Negativity: Not I, Not We

Identity of the artist of the 00s arises, first of all, as negativity in relation to personal identity. First step is not to be oneself while trying to reach personal identity. This identity antistructure can be analysed through performance studies theorist Richard Schechner and his proposed identity structure of the performer "I vs not I". According to Shechner the concept of double negativity "not I — not not I" is a forming structure for the subject at the time of execution. He assumes, referring to Erving Goffman's formula "belief in the part one is playing", that this principle forms the identity. The performer who plays Hamlet is not himself, that is, he is not "I". On the other hand, he is not Hamlet, that is, "not not I". Thus, by denying the self and then denying the negation, the subject is in a liminal state "between", where there

are no fixed social parameters and identities. The artist needs to distance from himself by double negation in order to transform, and yet, to remain himself, understanding himself. "At the time of execution, the performer no longer has 'I', but has 'not I', and this double negation shows us how the reconstructed behaviour is both private and social. The performer covers himself only with that which comes out of himself and meets others, entering the space of performance, which is social" (Schechner, 1985, 112). Thus, "not not I" is the principle that forms execution as an anti-structure in the sense it was studied by Victor Turner.

In this case the role of Hamlet for artists plays We, communality, which they are trying to reach. Communitas becomes the part which artists should believe in, that they are part of something, that they have something in common, however, this communality does exist only in the moment of performing, and so does not exist in ordinary life. Thus, this communitas is a kind of imaginary temporal community in the moment of face-to-face interaction, but not the real one.

In case of an artist the negativity is a negativity, on the one hand, of himself as a carrier of individual identity, and on the other hand, of we, of collective body, as artists are only looking for a common, however, the answers to their questions are not universal. The formula of double negation for an artist of the 2000s sounds like a negation of "I – not I (WE)", where he is in "between".

Attempts to find oneself through a common WE are very different. They are search for a common biological basis (Kuzkin "The Phenomenon of Nature" 2010), a common external basis (Radek "Scotch Party", 2000–2002), common past (Elena Kovylina "Waltz" (2001), common in the existence of human being (Kuzkin "Circle-Wise" 2008), common politics (Radek "Manifestations" 2002). However, all these attempts lead nowhere, because each time this commonality turns out to be fleeting, temporary, unreliable, personal. One example is performance "The Disappearance" (2000) by the ESCAPE group, where the performers avoid any attempt to communicate from the audience. A new foundation is needed but it has not been found yet. With the performers of the 2000s, we can talk about identity as an anti-structure, the principal of non-reinforcement of the artist in his subjectivity, which lies between the denial of oneself and the search for a new basis for the common.

WE is also given in negativity. The performer balances between the denial of his personal identity and endless search for collective identity that is different from the self. An attempt to find an identity turns out to be a double negation for the performer: denying oneself and denying WE as a consequence. The artist turns out to be in constant search for "between." This search for a common is a way to identify the artist, the search itself is its essence.

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