



**Russian
Actionism
Today**

Maria Mikhaylova

Russian Actionism Today

Maria Mikhaylova

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Tampere, 2020

Actionism is a unique phenomenon in Russian contemporary art. It is a form of Performance Art that emerged in Russia in the 1990s, during a time of political and economic collapse, chaos and the formation of a new state, and started as a radical, contextual reaction of artists to a new, post-Soviet reality. The 1990s started a new era both in art and the history of Russia. Since then, the movement has gone through a lot of development and transition, varying from periods of silence, when it had gradually gone down after years of creative productivity, to a sudden revival within the framework of completely different discourses and socio-political factors. Russian Actionism has drawn a lot of public and media attention not only in Russia but also outside of it, and in the end became associated with the term 'art activism'. It is a transforming and dynamic artistic movement that is in open dialogue with the current political and societal contexts. Therefore, it is important to mention the circumstances surrounding it.

Appearance and the history of development of performative practices in Russia.

The first forms of experimental performative practices appeared in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century, almost simultaneously with the European avant-garde movement. Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism was published in Russia in 1909, at the same time as it happened in Paris, and since then Russian Futurism began. Despite the obvious fact of appropriation, Russia managed to add its own context to Futurism and created a unique artistic movement (Goldberg, R. 2002, 31). The majority of the Russian creative class and intellectuals supported the ideas of the Revolution, greeted Bolshevism with enthusiasm and voluntarily promoted its ideas. Being in a resistance towards the authoritarian tsarist regime, they believed in a new era of creativity, social justice and a progressive, creative future. Such conditions became a fertile soil for various artistic experiments among artists, poets, musicians and creatives of all kinds. The new generation of artists refused to look up to European art and its trends but managed to create an entirely new influential wave in art called Russian avant-garde. This movement affected not only the fine arts but also literature, music, architecture, theatre, design

and cinematography, and was most productive after the October Revolution in 1917.

Avant-garde artists strived to get over the tsarist regime with its bourgeois traditions and everything that was connected to it, including the traditional art forms. They sought to remove the boundaries between reality and art, to invade areas that were previously considered incompatible with art, such as design, construction and mass industrial production, to create a new language of art. This fight against the past and “old art” was often very radical. Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), in his 1919 text “About the museum” published in the arts magazine *Iskusstvo Komunny* (Art of the Commune), proclaimed a new era in art that is inseparable from real life, and suggests for all cultural heritage from the past to be burned (Malevich, K. 1919). This creates an interesting linkage to contemporary art activism, which also merges artistic context with the everyday life.

Russian Futurism, which was later called Constructivism, encouraged artists, poets and directors to work in collaboration with each other. Collective authorship became opposed to the individual and the idea of reorganizing cultural production towards industrialization and labor-like activity was actively promoted by theorists and philosophers of the time (Bishop, C. 2012, 50). Theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1939) was strongly inspired by the ideas of Constructivists. He staged plays with participatory elements and formulated his own principles of Symbolist, avant-garde theatre, as well as introduced a unique system of actor training called Biomechanics, which was opposed to the realistic style of performing. One of the most successful plays that he staged was “Mystery-bouffe”, written by poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) in 1918 (later edited and rewritten in 1921), with the theatrical sets designed by Kazimir Malevich. The audience were allowed to interact and actively participate in the performance alongside the professional actors. Moreover, ordinary people with no performing background got a possibility to be trained into actors.

Generally speaking, most avant-garde creations can be perceived as agitprop

today, as they served as propaganda and an educational tool for raising awareness and class consciousness among the public masses. However, the artists themselves had no political ambition, rather they were in search of a new ontology and means of artistic expression. Their willingness to create politically charged work was voluntary and sincere.

One of the biggest and the most spectacular 1920s performances was “The Storming of the Winter Palace” by Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953), which was staged in three locations around the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg on November 7th, 1920. It was dedicated to the third anniversary of the Revolution and outplayed the capture of the Winter Palace by the Red Guard forces. The number of participants involved in the performance was incredible: according to different sources, it ranged from 6000 to 10,000 people, including ballet dancers, circus artists, professional and amateur actors, an orchestra and even the real witnesses and participants of the “storming” (Goldberg, R, 2002 p. 41-42). The spectacle was staged with great accuracy and military authenticity, and attracted around 100,000 spectators. The historical event behind the performance was a crucial milestone for the Bolsheviks in their victory, and was chosen to be heroized, romanticized and mythologized. Both the historical participants and the critics noted that Evreinov managed to show the events of that October night more heroically, better organized and overall greater than they were in reality.

Mythmaking in the interpretation of historical events is an inevitable phenomenon: when different countries write their favourable version of history, mixing historical truth with exaggeration and even fiction. For a young Soviet government, it was very important to have poets, artists and filmmakers that could work for the creation of those romanticized and heroic myths. Nevertheless, after almost thirty years of fruitful experiments and enormous productivity, the governmental control over the creative production had tightened, which subsequently stopped the experimental performative practices and other types of modern art from developing for many decades. The Revolution in itself didn't bring a cultural revolution, and the liberation of art but took advantage of it and integrated it into a state

propaganda machine.

In 1934, at the First Congress of the Writers Union, the aesthetic and ideological objective of socialist realism was formulated and approved. Since then, it became the only permitted method of displaying reality (Mirimanov, V. 2002). Its main purpose was to show the citizens a utopian image of the communist future they aspired to. In order to be understood by the wide masses with no misinterpretations, it had to be realistic in style and intuitively clear in content. Many creatives who initially supported Bolshevism were disappointed by what the Revolution, and later the Stalinist regime, had brought. Those who had the all-Soviet fame suddenly became irrelevant or were proclaimed as dissidents and as enemies of the Soviet State and its people. Many had to either emigrate or adapt to the new reality and the state directives in artmaking. The main poet of the Revolution, Vladimir Mayakovsky, shot himself; director Meyerhold was arrested, tortured and executed in February 1940; Malevich was investigated for espionage in 1930 in relation to his foreign trips and exhibitions abroad, lost his teaching and institutional positions and was forced to change his artistic activity according to the paradigm of socialist realism.

Through the censorship of the all-mighty control organs that were carefully checking everything that was produced by Soviet writers, artists, poets and filmmakers, Stalinism made it impossible to officially create any type of alternative art. Even after Stalin's death during the Khrushchev Thaw, when repression and censorship loosened their grip, the situation didn't change much for the better. Especially unfavourable was the so-called "formalistic" art, which included conceptual and abstract art. A famous precedent took place in 1962, when Nikita Khrushchev attended the art exhibition "30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union" in Moscow Manege (Manezh). Using strong language, he called the works of Soviet abstractionists filthy, decadent and artless, criticized and insulted the artists and finalized his speech by saying that "soviet people don't need this type of art". His outrage was expressed in a promise to ban artists who paint abstraction.[1] Among other forbidden elements in artmaking were religious themes, political satire and erotic

[1] <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/khrushchev-on-the-arts/khrushchev-on-the-arts-texts/khrushchev-on-modern-art/>

content.

Unofficial Soviet art, known as Nonconformist Art, was forced to remain underground. As a result of its marginalized status, a phenomenon of apartment exhibitions appeared and became common. Private closed spaces, such as apartments, became the only places for exhibiting, representing and selling the works of nonconformist artists who didn't have the opportunity to do it openly and officially (Bishop, C. 2012, 152). By 1970, cautious attempts to penetrate the public space and create critically charged art were made (Johnson, L. 2015, 25), but it was still a long way to go until the liberation of artistic expression, which the 1990s brought. In other words, it was either impossible to create anything political or critically charged due to immediate repressions, or it was impossible to get visibility and recognition due to the impossibility of exhibiting such works publicly.

Taking into consideration those circumstances and the fact that Russia, as part of the Soviet Union, was in an informational isolation from the West, and hence the western artistic practices, it is not surprising that Performance Art didn't develop in the USSR as it did in other countries. Performative practices reappeared in the mid-70s with a group of artists who belonged to nonconformist movements of the time – Moscow Conceptualism (the Collective Actions group) and Sots Art (the Gnezdo art group). Collective Actions, led by Andrei Monastyrsky (b.1949), united artists, poets, writers, critics and even musicians. During different times of the group's existence, which lasted for over 30 years, there were such names as Ilya Kabakov, Dmitri Prigov, Eric Bulatov, Boris Groys, members of the Medical Hermeneutics and Mukhomory art groups and many others.

Collective Actions' performances unfolded quietly, in privacy and secrecy, either indoors or in deserted suburban areas, and were accompanied by philosophical discourses. There were no accidental viewers, as one had to be invited directly by someone among the participants of the action (Epstein, A. 2018). Their artistic actions were by no means political but addressed existential questions regarding the relationship to physical reality and included



Collective Actions "The Slogan", 1978. Courtesy of Andrei Monastyrsky

theoretical and conceptual studies about coded narratives, hermeneutics and semantics. In form they were very minimalistic and even "empty". Sometimes nothing physically happened at all, which left the participants confused. The emptiness and the void of the deserted landscapes symbolized the contemplation of the invisible and the incomprehensible. Both the group's leader, Andrei Monastyrsky, and other participants wrote highly conceptual theoretical texts about those aesthetic experiments, in which they analyzed the experiences. Documentation of the performances was an essential part of the process. Many art historians and theorists mark Monastyrsky's passion to carefully and meticulously document all the group's activities, which was active until 2011 (Bishop, C. 2012, 159). Thirteen volumes of texts and photo-documentations were published during the group's existence.[2]

Historical overview of Actionism from the time of its inception until today

The phenomenon of Moscow Actionism appeared in the 1990s after the disintegration of the USSR. The starting point that marked the start of the movement might be considered April 18th, 1991 – the day when the "E.T.I. text" action unfolded on the Red Square. It was performed by the E.T.I. art group, whose leader was Anatoly Osmolovsky (b. 1969)– one of the key figures of the movement. A group of young people lied down in front of Lenin's Mausoleum, forming the three letters of the Russian word for "diñk"

[2] <http://conceptualism.letov.ru>



E.T.I. movement "E.T.I.-text". 1991. Photo: MK correspondent. Courtesy of Anatoly Osmolovsky

with their bodies. This was undoubtedly the first artistic intervention that had a big media effect in the early the 1990's that inspired other artists to action. The main representatives of Moscow Actionism, besides the abovementioned Osmolovsky, were Oleg Kulik (b.1961), Alexander Brener (b.1957), Oleg Mavromatti (b.1965) and Avdey Ter-Oganyan (b.1961).

In contrast with the peaceful metaphysical experiments of Moscow Conceptualists, actionist art of the 1990s was anarchistic, chaotic, scatological and aggressive. Being in open conflict with the conceptualists and opposing their long, theoretical and overly conceptual texts, structured hierarchy and an overall complex, systemic approach, actionists had no manifestos or philosophical discourses behind their art. Their radical actions were an attempt to de-sacralize and de-contextualize art (Osmolovsky, A., 2015). Despite being quite autonomous from each other and unorganized they all tended to be as provocative as possible, take place in significant public places such as the Red Square, Lenin's Mausoleum, Lobnoye Mesto etc., get the attention of spectators and the media, and cause discussion. Oleg Kulik states that public space had been a taboo for the artists: everything had to be authorized, under control, peaceful and predictable. Therefore, actionists chose appropriating the public space as a strategy (2018). In the 90s it became possible because of a destabilized political situation and the absence of strict governmental control on creative production. The artists suddenly experienced the freedom of expression at

the extent they had never had before.

The early actions of Moscow actionists may strongly resemble what was done in 1960s by the representatives of Viennese Actionism. However, the actionists themselves claimed their movement to take its roots rather in literary and philosophical movements of the past, both Russian and Western, than the works of their European colleagues. This can be traced in various texts of Anatoly Osmolovsky, where one can see references to Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and the ideas of Situationist International. Alexander Brener addresses Russian Futurism, the avant-garde collective OBERIU and poets like Aleksei Kruchenykh, Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskiy. Other artists also found inspiration in the early avant-garde tradition. For example, Avdey Ter-Oganyan took up the rhetoric of desacralization and profanation used by Russian avant-gardists.

In particular, one can still see certain similarities between the bodily actions of Moscow and Viennese actionists. The bloody, violent and sexually explicit performances of Austrian actionist Hermann Nitsch resonate with Alexander Brener's bold interventions. Brener is probably the most scandalous protagonist among his former associates; among his misdeeds were masturbating at a formal reception, attempting sexual intercourse with his wife under a monument in Pushkin Square, vandalizing a painting by Kazimir Malevich and imitating defecation in front of Van Gogh's painting in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. Besides that, he was involving himself in various scandals with the representatives of the art world: inciting fights, making provocative remarks and destroying other artists' artworks. In his 2016 autobiographical book "Жития убиенных художников" (The Lives of Murdered Artists) he mentions his contemporaries and former colleagues in a very unfavourable, insolent and mocking way.

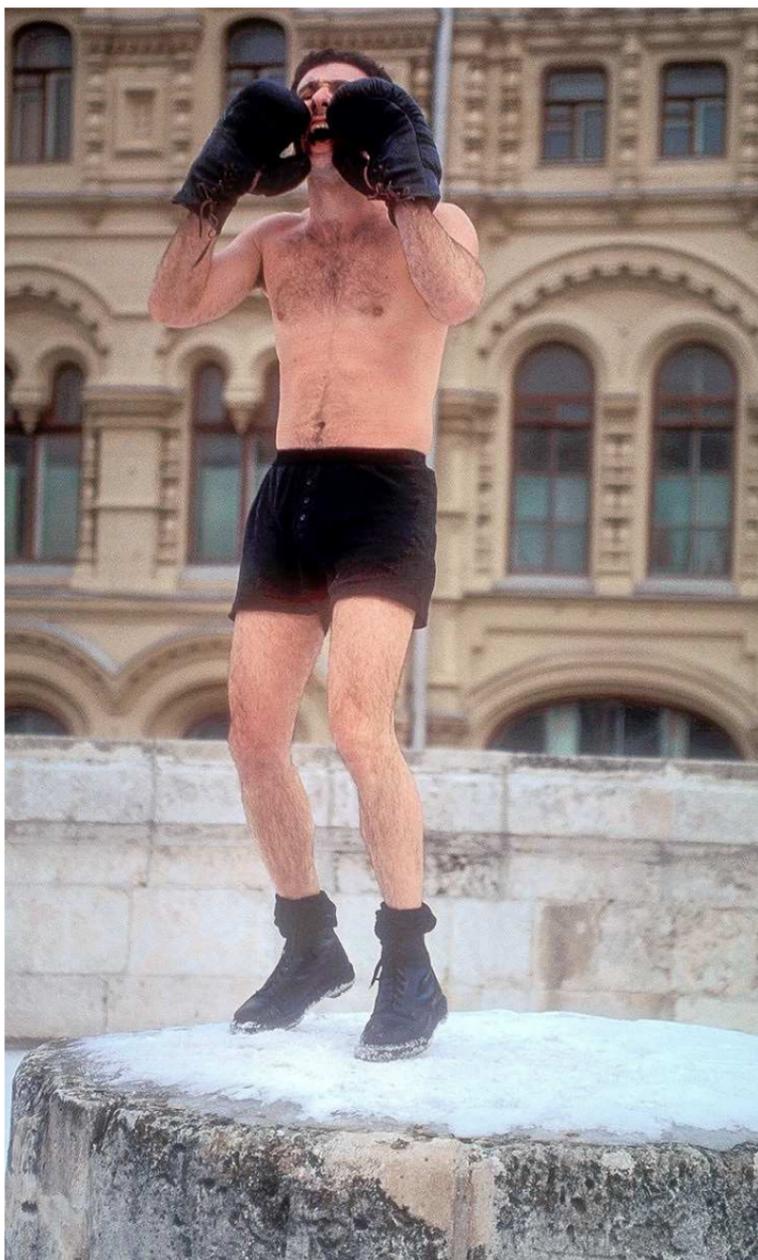
Nudity was also used by another actionist, Oleg Kulik, who was led naked on a dog leash by Brener in 1994 and later made a series of "Mad Dog" actions in other places and different contexts. Those exhibitionist actions juxtaposed the vulnerability of an individual in a world of power where nothing can be



Oleg Kulik "Mad Dog, or the Last Taboo Guarded by Alone Cerberus", 1994. Source: Reuters

done ("It doesn't work" – noted Brener to the accidental spectators of him trying to have sex in public), but also transmitted a political message and represented primal masculine aggression and willingness to fight. In his 1995 action "First Glove", Brener, dressed in shorts and boxing gloves on a cold winter day, came standing at Lobnoye Mesto in the Red Square and shouted to president Yeltsin to come out and fight him. By this he expressed disapproval of the Russian war campaign in Chechnya, which was the main media event of 1995.

The 1990s were about the aesthetics of rebellion, poetics of absurd, astonishment and challenging borders and boundaries. However, the political climate was changing rapidly and so was the art. Lena Johnson (2015, 28) observes that at the very end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, Actionism became more politically charged than earlier. Leaving behind the anarchistic rebellious carnival, the artists started to address the issues that were ignored before. RADEK, led by Anatoly Osmolovsky and the group "Nongovernmental Control Commission" hung a banner from Lenin's Mausoleum with the slogan "Against all" in December 1999. This phrase was used earlier on ballot papers as an election option, expressing disapproval of all candidates or



Alexander Brener "First Glove", 1995. Photo: Igor Stomakhin



Nongovernmental Control Commission and RADEK "Against All", 1999. Courtesy of Anatoly Osmolovsky

parties. Osmolovsky himself points out that the action was not profiteering on a relevant political topic, such as indignation and mistrust at the current government, but expressed a fundamental protest against the methodology of choice and the established system of legitimizing power (2000). In that text he references the political philosophy concepts of Michel Foucault, whose views on resistance and power are ambivalent and relativist. The artist insisted that despite the seemingly political message, there was no intention to steer the public to certain actions, such as sabotaging the election. One can speculate whether this was a sincere statement or a step back.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the insolence of such an intervention and the fact that it took place during the parliamentary elections, three months before the presidential election, and could potentially inspire the voters to choose the proclaimed option "Against all", the action drew the immediate attention of the Federal Security Service (FSB). The banner was taken down after three minutes and all participants were invited to proceed for a conversation with the secret police. Nobody was arrested, but the artist was persuaded to put an end to the politically charged activities of the art group. RADEK's last performance took place in August 2000, three months after Vladimir Putin's first inauguration as the president (Johnson, L. 2015, 28-29). After that, Anatoly Osmolovsky switched to a different type of

artistic activities.

The liberal Yeltsin times that were so favorable for Moscow actionists were over. It had become clear that certain statements and actions cannot be left unnoticed without a penalty to follow. Avdey Ter-Oganyan was charged under Article 282 Paragraph 1 of the Russian Criminal Code for his 1998 “Young Atheist” action. Following the traditions of avant-garde de-sacralization of art, he used cheap reproductions of Orthodox icons as the objects of worship and destroyed them with an axe during a participatory performance in Moscow Manege. The artist was accused of blasphemy, satanism and spreading hatred against religion and the believers. The investigation took over a year and had a huge media effect: both local and international artistic communities supported the artist and sent collective letters to the court, while at the same time there were counteractions from different organizations of Orthodox activists and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. A group of people, shouting out threats of physical violence, vandalized a few artworks of Ter-Oganyan at his exhibition at Marat Guelman’s gallery. The artist’s attempt to open a criminal case against the attackers wasn’t successful. On the day of the court hearing in April 20th, 1999 there was a massive invasion of Orthodox activists who started a fight with the press. In September 1999, realizing the high probability of getting a prison sentence, Avdey Ter-Oganyan sought political asylum in the Czech Republic and fled Russia before he was put on a federal wanted list.

Another radical actionist, Oleg Mavromatti, crucified himself in the courtyard of the Institute of Cultural Studies in Moscow while shooting his video art in 2001. The place was chosen strategically – next to the Church of St. Nicholas on Bersenevskaya Quay and in front of Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was visible in the background on the video. After the footage had been released, a strong wave of outrage from the believers and the public followed. Mavromatti had been charged under the same Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code, after which he left Russia to reside and work in Bulgaria and the USA.

Slowly but surely the First Wave Actionism declined. Liberal and anarchistic times of the early 1990s came to an end. It was still more than a decade before the adoption of the law on picketing, the amendment to the law on extremism and the era of political prisoners, but the time of wild actions came to its logical ending. Artists who belonged to the group of Moscow Actionists or were their successors either fled Russia as a result of criminal prosecution, like the abovementioned Mavromatti and Ter-Oganyan, or switched to different types of artistic and professional activities, such as becoming art theorists, lecturers and critics. Most of them still continue their artistic practice, but not in the field of Actionism. Alexander Brener, who was also known as a poet in the artistic circles, wrote a series of books in which he looks back on the history of Russian Actionism and the artistic community of the 1990s, as well as his own artistic biography – some in co-authorship with Austrian artist Barbara Schurz. He is still active as an actionist artist and stays true to his provocative manner but resides in Europe, where artistic expression is not under tight governmental control and his actions are not shocking and troubling the public to the extent they did in Russia. Anatoly Osmolovsky declared himself a “new formalist”; he writes on art theory and founded the independent educational institution Baza, which teaches contemporary art. In Russia, where there is no established tradition of teaching contemporary art practices on an academic level (Bolotyan, I. 2019), this is one of the few examples of artistic initiatives to create a place where students get the needed theoretical and conceptual framework for the process of artmaking.

Actionists of the Second Wave, which arose in the late 2000s, launched a new era of politically charged art which started to be associated with the term ‘art activism’. This term describes the nature of their actions and their agenda quite precisely and is commonly used in various sources. However, some researchers, like actionist artist and curator Pavel Mitenko, still prefer to call it Actionism, pointing out certain similarities with the First Wave Moscow Actionism (Volkova, T. 2020). Those similarities can be seen in the radical character of artistic interventions, often dealing with using methods meant to incite shock and the strategy of using renowned public spaces, which Second Wave actionists had adopted from their predecessors. However, there are



Voina "In Memory of the Decembrists", 2008. Source: <https://plucer.livejournal.com/97416.html>

some differences as well. Despite the fact that some late 1990s actions were more politicized in comparison with the early ones, they could not be considered as activism of any type. The practices that occurred by the end of the first decade of the new millennium were addressing the topics that had never been tackled in Russia before. PG group, whose activity started in the year 2000, is known for its leftist, anti-fascist and anti-racist rhetoric. Voina, who appeared in 2006, also leaned on the radical left spectrum and drew attention to various societal issues, such as homophobia, xenophobia, social exclusion and the superiority of certain groups over others.

The actions stopped being just an anarchistic carnival, a reflection on an individual's boundaries or a philosophical contemplation of resistance to an abstract power. The new generation of actionists became more politically aware and strived to become catalysts of change in social and political systems. Curator of MediaImpact international festival of activist art Tatiana Volkova marks an overall enthusiasm and the expectation of change that were present in 2011 (2020). In the autumn of 2011, the protest movement Occupy Wall Street appeared in the USA, which coincided with the first MediaImpact being held in Moscow and the group Pussy Riot formed by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (b. 1989), previously a member of Voina. The Russian protest movement began in December 2011 and inspired a wave of activity among



Pussy Riot “Punk Prayer”, 2012 Source: <https://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html>

political and art activists as well as an overall increased interest in street and protest art. This interest found expression in various events and art exhibitions, such as “100 Years of Performance” (2010) and “Russian Performance: A Cartography of its History” (2014) in the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art and activities of the abovementioned MediaImpact collective, who also organized regional festivals and smaller events, which they called art expeditions, and held discussions.

Second Wave Actionism is known for loud and direct actions that gave the movement a worldwide visibility and was intended to hit the state power and authorities rather than address a mass viewership. Some researches call it ‘Macho Actionism’, emphasizing its heroic nature within the discourse of power. The arrest of Pussy Riot members after the “Punk Prayer” in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012 activated a wave of artistic political activity in Russia and inspired other dissident artists, such as Pyotr Pavlensky (b.1984), to action. Both the local and international activist society expressed solidarity with the arrested art activists and organized support actions. 2012 became a breaking point, where the authorities took control over art activism and the protest movement in general. A two-year jail sentence for Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich became a shock for the artistic

community and showed that acting in the context of art doesn't protect one from being imprisoned. Moreover, being a researcher or a curator working with activist artists doesn't help either, because from the point one goes out in the street to join a rally, regardless of the motivation and intention, he or she is considered a civic activist by the police and authorities (Volkova, T. 2020).

Since then, art activism has become more dangerous to engage in and more limitations apply on activities of the artists. Against the backdrop of a general conservative political turn and a tightened control over creative production both big and small, art institutions prefer to stay away from politically charged art. People who work there don't want to risk their reputations, job positions and premises, and therefore refuse to let art activists in. Tatiana Volkova remarks that during the six years of MediaImpact's existence they had gone from being an official part of the programme of Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, having sponsors and occupying big exhibition venues, to the point when no institution wanted to host them anymore and to collaborate with them (2020). Their activities were constantly interrupted by attacks and provocations made by right-wing activists, bans from local authorities, police inspections and Cossack raids.[3] The transition to the Third Wave Actionism was smooth, yet the paradigm shift was noticeable. After it had become clear that the lone heroes who call out the state power for fight are not invincible and all loud initiatives will be suppressed, more peaceful and quiet practices came into use (Bolotyan, I. 2019). This paradigm shift brought a feminist discourse into focus, which included, in a broad sense, advocating for oppressed groups, giving them a voice and addressing their needs and problems. However, the obstacles and censorship, including self-censorship, still make it difficult to gain a wide publicity for contemporary Russian art activists.

In 2018, Katrin Nenashева's (b. 1994) private exhibition "Cargo 300. Collage of experiences" in Solyanka Gallery was cancelled one day before the official opening "due to technical issues". It happened three days after the artist was detained during her serial public action "Cargo 300", under which she motionlessly lay in a cage for hours. The action and the exhibition were aimed

[3] The Cossaks of today are a self-organized nationalistic organization that, among other thing, organizes attacks on opposition activists, protesters at peaceful rallies and carries out raids on art exhibitions and theater performances in order to defend the conservative, traditional values and interests of the state and the Orthodox Church.



Katrin Nenasheva "Cargo 300", 2018. Photo: Natalia Budantseva

to draw attention to tortures that regularly happen in police stations, penitentiaries and other closed institutions in Russia. Although there was no official statement from Moscow Department of Culture, the artist concluded that the exhibition was cancelled after a special order "from above". Another activist artist of the Third Wave, Daria Serenko (b.1993), known for her project "Quiet Picket", lost her curatorial position at Gallery Peresvetov Pereulok because of her online activism and active citizenship in autumn 2019.

Even by analyzing the projects that get prestigious awards in the field of Russian contemporary art, such as Innovatsiya (Innovation) and the Kandinsky Prize, one can see the change that has happened since 2012. Between 2008 and 2011 there were many radical artists who were nominated and granted awards, but since 2012 nothing of the kind happened (Epstein, A. 2014). PG group, known for their politicized and critically charged works, was awarded the Kandinsky Prize in the category of Media Art Project of the Year in 2008. In 2011, the art group Voina was awarded the Innovatsiya prize in the category of visual art for its 2010 action "Dick Captured by the FSB". Nevertheless, they ignored the event and rejected the prize from the state organization established by the Russian Ministry of Culture. Voina member Natalia Sokol released a blog post afterwards, where she stated that "Voina never has and never will participate in any awards or money prizes.

[4] We make free, non-whoring art. Our art is our gift to the world and to each and every person. If reading the reports of our actions makes you feel joy or, on the contrary, provokes deep gloomy meditations, then we become happy. Our art touches people. And no one dares fix a price to it” (Sokol, N. 2011). The same prize but in the category of best regional project of contemporary art went to art activist Artem Loskutov and his project “Monstration” in 2010. Pussy Riot weren’t even shortlisted for any of the prizes, despite their infamous action having become the biggest media event of 2012. Nevertheless, Katrin Nenasheva became a nominee for the Kandinsky Prize as a Young Artist of 2017 with her project “The Punishment”, dedicated to punitive psychiatry methods and mistreatment of disabled patients practiced in Russian corrective psychiatric facilities. However, her project addressed a societal issue rather than including a direct accusation of institutions or the authorities.

Voina members Oleg Vorotnikov and Natalia Sokol fled Russia in 2012 after various criminal charges have been filed against them and are currently confusing, troubling and mocking the European society. Several countries offered them a refugee status; they were invited to participate in various festivals and biennales and were given opportunities to implement their projects, but they caused scandals everywhere they were hosted. Their political stance has become unclear; being considered as the most reckless fighters against Putin’s regime, they suddenly turned into his supporters. Their activities transformed into radical anarchism, including shoplifting as a representation of struggling with the capitalist system. According to Alek Epstein, Pyotr Pavlensky’s emigration to France in 2016 drew the final line under the era of heroic Russian art activism, that had become famous both in Russia and abroad, and brought it back to the state when there were no key protagonists in the field (2018). However, he doesn’t mean that Russian Actionism in the form of art activism is dead and that nothing is done today, but rather notes that the media effect of today’s actions can’t be compared to the publicity of the abovementioned Pavlensky, Pussy Riot and Voina, nor of the first Moscow Actionists, such as Oleg Kulik.

[4] <https://en.free-voina.org/post/3345784429>

The social turn is more relevant nowadays than ever. Although during the Second Wave art activists' actions addressed some societal issues as well, their agenda was to resist and challenge the repressive apparatus of power. Their practice didn't include work with social groups as such. One can speculate whether the paradigm shift was a consequence of repression in Putin's Russia or a following of the global trend in activist art. Strategies of micro-resistance, as defined by Tatiana Volkova, include quiet practices where artists promote their ideas every day (usually in their personal blogs and social media) and engage with social and voluntary work (2020). As an example, she mentions Katrin Nenasheva, who works in different social organizations, such as a psychoneurological ward for children and as a social volunteer in a crisis center for teenage suicides, all while working on her artistic community-based projects. Her artistic activity is bound to activism, for which she implemented the term "psychoactivism". Her goal is to inspire other activists, artists and self-organized communities to address the stigma of mental disorders problem and to promote a wide range of activities (journalistic, artistic, educational, etc.) that would break it.

Artist Ekaterina Muromtseva, who combines artistic practice and voluntary activities, also marks the shift from direct political statements towards addressing the problems of local communities, oppressed and minority groups and even individuals (2019). According to her, among other reasons for this change could be the fact that a direct action today can lead one to an arrest and prosecution, which will close the artist's opportunities for further activity and resistance, while an indirect criticism with no provocation allows the artists to keep up with their activism and influence the social environment around them. Such activity doesn't get a wide media effect; it often remains inconspicuous, but it has its long-term and profound effects (Volkova, T. 2020).

Societal and political discourses of present-day Russia.

Artists can't help but respond to the transformations and changes in the society around them. Therefore, it is important to mention some political

events, social trends and laws that have affected and continue to affect art. Before the financial crisis of 2008 and the election fraud of 2011, Russians generally had low interest in political life. In the early 2000's depoliticized society, the main place for political activity was the internet, with its various online communities and platforms for discussions and debates (Chekhonadskikh, M. 2015). Since December 2011, as people began to realize that they are dissatisfied with the political decisions and the impossibility to influence them, the authoritarianism and opaqueness of the current government, they have become more involved with politics. Artists, as representatives of the creative class, couldn't stay aside. People no longer wanted to continue discussions online, but to go to the streets, initiating a dialogue with those in power. The protest movement of 2011-2012 influenced the following paradigm shift in Actionism and marked the start of the Third Wave.

Among a series of rallies of both bigger and smaller scales, the major one that attracted (according to the Russian opposition) around 150,000 participants, took place in Bolotnaya Square on December 10th, 2011. It became known as the Snow Revolution. Despite being the biggest media event of the day, it wasn't covered on the central television channels and other state-run media. Nevertheless, the event was authorized by the Moscow government and there were no clashes with the police or provocations. The protesters aimed to reach the annulment of the election results to the State Duma [5] and the holding of new, legislative and open elections. Among other demands they requested freedom to political prisoners and registration of the opposition parties. Later, on December 24th, people demonstrated on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow under the slogan "For Fair Elections". The official number of participants ranges from 28,000 to 96,000 people, according to different media sources (pro-governmental and oppositional). St. Petersburg, Vladivostok and major cities in Siberia and the Urals also joined the demonstration and held rallies on the same day.

The second phase of the protest movement coincided with the Presidential Elections on March 4th, 2012 and Putin's presidential inauguration for the

[5] The State Duma is the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia. Its main tasks are adoption of laws and control over the activity of the Russian Government

third term. On May 6th and 7th, 2012 the protesters marched in Bolshaya Yakimanka street and Bolotnaya Square “For an Honest Power. For Russia without Putin”. This event is known as the “March of the Millions”. It led to various arrests and clashes with the police. Several internet sites experienced DDoS attacks [6] or were blocked, including those of radio station Ekho Mosvy (Echo of Moscow), TV channel Dozhd and the newspaper Kommersant. The results of the mass arrests during that rally became known as the “Bolotnaya Square case”. Trials of its participants are still on-going.

According to sociological research, the majority of civic activists and participants of the rallies were young, middle class men with higher education, in particular representatives of the creative class. Initially, the situation looked promising and people were inspired to express themselves. However, the protest movement was decentralized and unorganized, and never became truly large-scale in comparison to similar precedents in other countries. Professor Birgit Beumers marks that when considering Moscow as one of the biggest world capitals, the maximum number of protesters during the Snow Revolution seems too modest. She compares it with the June 1982 peaceful rally in Bonn (500,000 people) and New York’s No Nukes Rally, that attracted one million people (Beumers, B., Etkind, A., Gurova, O., Turoma, S. 2018., 165).

The Russian opposition didn’t obtain consent about its aims and goals and failed to get a leader or a group of leaders that would be able to express the demands of the society and start a dialogue with the authorities. Simultaneously with the demonstrations of the opposition were pro-governmental counter-rallies. Radicalization of the protesting groups, both the left and the right political spectrum, was an inevitable consequence of this resistance. The government was looking for fast and effective ways to suppress the revolt by making changes and amendments to existing laws. The reaction to oppositional civic activities had become harsh. In May 2012 Putin was inaugurated for the third term and took control over the protest movement and activism. Since then, heavy penalties on all kind of unauthorized and unsanctioned public actions have been implemented.

[6] DDoS (distributed denial of service) is an attack on a web server with an aim to prevent the website from functioning correctly and make it unavailable to users

In order to understand the cost of becoming involved with the political life in Russia, some laws ought to be mentioned. There are two codes of punishment in Russia: The Criminal Code for serious offenses and the Code of Administrative Offenses (CAO) for lighter ones. A separate chapter of the CAO is devoted to violation of public order and security and contains Article 20.2 on violations during protests and rallies. In the previous version of the Article, there were only three parts: violation of the organizing process of rallies and processions, violation of rules for conducting them and the organization of uncoordinated actions in the immediate vicinity of a nuclear installation, a radiation source or a storage facility for nuclear materials. The punishments for the first two parts were quite mild – a maximum fine of two thousand rubles. For organizing a rally near a nuclear storage facility, one could be arrested for 15 days. Generally speaking, the legal consequences for the protesters were not very serious.

After the protest rally on Bolotnaya Square in December 2011, Russian authorities hastily tightened the Article. On May 10th a member of the United Russia party Alexander Sidyakin submitted a new bill to the State Duma and one month later, on June 8th, Vladimir Putin signed it. This was the first of a series of laws that tightened the socio-political regime in Russia during Putin's third presidential term.

Article 20.2 has expanded significantly, its maximum fine increased 150-fold and up to 300,000 rubles in present day. Legal grounds to sentence participants of non-violent protests to arrests have appeared, even if the demonstration or a protest march hadn't been conducted close to a nuclear storage facility. The maximum arrest period has increased to up to 30 days. The full title of the most popular part of the Article 20.2 is the following: "Violation of the established procedure for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches or pickets." The maximum penalty is a fine of 20,000 rubles or compulsory works for up to forty hours. When there are many protesters at the same place, the more stringent part of the Article 20.2 is applied. It presupposes punishment for those who interfere with pedestrians and cars, and also impedes access to social or transport infrastructure.

Policemen refer to this part if detainees have to be kept in a police department for a longer time.

In July and August of 2019, during the protest rallies organized by the failed candidates for the Moscow City Duma, the police and officers of the Russian National Guard detained about 1700 peaceful protesters, considering their actions a violent offence against public order. The Moscow Investigative Committee opened criminal cases of planned mass riots and attacks on government officials (referring to Article 318: Use of Violence Against a Representative of the Authority). This precedent became known as the so-called “Moscow Affair”.

Just before the Moscow Affair, in June 2019, the public was outraged by absurd and grossly fabricated drug charges against Ivan Golunov – an investigative journalist who writes, among other topics, about corruption in Russia. The case illustrated how people who are trying to induce change in society are being silenced and exposed to police violence and abuse of power. It attracted an unprecedented media attention and a wave of support from journalistic and other professional communities, creatives of all kinds, human rights activists and even some State deputies. Ordinary citizens went out in the streets in pickets, many were detained. However, the attracted attention to the case made its closing due to a lack of evidence after the inquest and verification possible, and Golunov was released. It was probably the first victory of social justice in present-day Russia.

One can go on enumerating the many cases of activists and ordinary people being detained and sentenced to imprisonment in Russia not only for expressing disapproval of the current regime but even for disagreement with certain decisions made by its representatives. However, the main idea is that any protests and public actions are perceived today as political – as an attempt to undermine the existing political system as a whole. It explains the disproportionate measures of restraint and the harshness with which any activist initiatives are suppressed. Even environmental protests, corporate strikes, financial demands of trade unions and lone picketing are all

suppressed in the most severe of ways. Politically active citizens are accused not only of violating the public order but also for an attempt to destabilize the political situation in Russia. In other words, the authorities made political protests equal to terrorism and extremism and apply laws that usually deal with the latter kinds of crimes. The loudest case presently is the severe sentences for young Russian antifascists and anarchists accused of belonging to the terrorist organization “The Network” and preparing an armed uprising with the aim of overthrowing the current government. Despite the absurd and contradictory nature of those accusations, as well as alleged violation of the arrestees’ human rights such as physical tortures and moral violence, all participants of the case got prison sentences of 6 to 18 years.

The State perceives one as a civic activist even if a person happened to be an occasional spectator or a passerby of a rally. Art, as any other form of public activity, can’t avoid being influenced by such conditions. The arrest of Pussy Riot members in 2012 proved that being an artist in Russia doesn’t give one the exclusive right to express oneself within the framework of art. All political topics in art are either carefully avoided or forcibly excluded from being exhibited by institutions. Curatorial or research activities can also lead to certain penalties: Andrei Erofeev, curator of the 2007 exhibition “Forbidden Art”, was forced to leave his job at the State Tretyakov Gallery and was sentenced to a significant fine as a result of a criminal case on inciting religious hatred (Volkova, T. 2020). Yury Samodurov, Director of the Sakharov Center where the exhibition took place, was the second defendant in the case and in 2008 he voluntarily resigned from his position. Some art professionals, such as art critic Ekaterina Degot and gallerist Marat Guelman, claimed that the accusation and the trial were politically motivated: an attempt to undermine activities of the Sakharov Center – a cultural center that promotes the protection of human rights in Russia. In 2014 the center was labelled a “foreign agent” under Law 121-FZ of July 13th, 2012. This law forces Russian NGOs that receive funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” and regularly provide financial reports and audits to the government, which seriously complicates their activities.

Actionist Katrin Nenasheva is being detained after almost every public action of hers, even if she doesn't have any posters on her and doesn't interact with the public. Nevertheless, despite such censorship and obstacles, art activists can't help but react to the flaws of the current system and societal issues. Being unable to go out in the street with a demand addressed to the government, activists organize various artistic events, such as poetry readings, gigs, closed exhibitions and charity fairs, organize self-run collectives that support and help political prisoners and other oppressed groups.

Some researches see the reason for the politicization and radicalization of art in the generational shift. According to them, young artists of the first Post-Soviet generation, whose early childhood was in the 1990s and who had economically stable 2000s, have grown up more concerned about the society they are living in. They don't want to put up with overall and all-encompassing passiveness and social pessimism. In addition, they use new media as a tool for distributing their work, which gives them opportunities that the previous generations didn't have before. Art theorist and critic Maria Chekhonadskikh states that 2011-2012 protests indicated the importance and necessity of replacing the dissident rhetoric of heroism and individualism in art with new forms of collective protest, set a goal to make society identify itself with the activists and recognize them as a part of a collective "we" (2015).

Tatiana Volkova. Independent curator, researcher and curator of MediaImpact international festival of activist art.

Please tell about your curatorial activities and, in particular, about MediaImpact. This festival is your curatorial project, right? How did you manage to expand it to the scope of an international festival? At what point did your interest in art activism arise?

How did it happen that my curatorial project MediaImpact became not just a

festival, but also a community, as we later called it? My interest in activist art arose in the late 2000s, when I was working at the Tretyakov Gallery in the department of the newest art movements. Our leader was Andrei Erofeev, a well-known curator who fell into disgrace at that very time after he had made the exhibition “Forbidden Art” together with Yuri Samodurov. They were trialed on a criminal code article about insulting the believers, convicted and sentenced to a fine. In the Tretyakov Gallery where we worked, there was a conflict over the exhibition “Sots Art and Political Art”, a conflict motivated by censorship which led to Andrei’s resignation in 2008. Just then, the so-called activist art began to appear in my field of vision. Groups like Voina and Bombily were formed, PG art group had already existed for quite a long time by then. I started working as a curator at the gallery Reflex, and there I began collaborating with this specific circle of artists. In 2009, the gallery owner Vladimir Ovcharenko became interested in what we were doing, and we created a joint project – the gallery of protest art ZHIR. It lasted for two years, and that project transformed into the MediaImpact festival, which became my independent curatorial project.

It was organized for the first time in 2011 as an international festival of activist art; we invited some very interesting participants from other countries. It was my curatorial project; I had a group of co-curators, and the form of the festival was quite traditional in the sense that there was an exhibition with artworks and explications on the walls, but also a series of discussions. It was autumn 2011, the era of Occupy Wall Street had just begun; activists were out in the streets of America. The protest wave in Russia began in December 2011 – the so-called Snow Revolution, protests against the election fraud. This coincided with the fact that we had just conducted the first MediaImpact and had a lot of enthusiasm. There was a wave of protest events in the country, and then Pussy Riot group members were sentenced to jail. We, as an art activist community, supported them, made some actions ourselves and participated in various support actions organized by the other activists.

In the Occupy protests there was one very important feature – horizontalization; there was no single leader, let’s say, a curator, but instead

there was a consensual decision-making system. In a horizontal collective everyone has equal opportunities to influence the process of decision-making, and that served as an inspiring example for me. In summer 2012 I horizontalized the festival: I suggested our participants, artists and activists that this would no longer be my curatorial project, but instead we would form a horizontal community. In this format we made 14 more big festivals, 4 of them in Moscow, 10 in the other regions of Russia, plus we had short trips to different cities which we called art expeditions. In recent years, against the backdrop of a general conservative political turn, the pressure on us during the organization of festivals has increased, especially in the regions. However, we faced attacks of the right-wing activists in Moscow as well: every time various provocations were made, such as false alarms about bomb threats.

What is the condition of MediaImpact now? Does it still exist?

At some point it became impossible to continue carrying out our activities under the festival's name because no exhibition venue wanted to take risks and deal with us. We didn't have a venue of our own, we were just a group of people working out of sheer enthusiasm. We had to contact different organizations and art centers all the time, but in the end, nobody wanted to work with us. Also, we didn't want to let anybody down and expose them to provocations. The decision to cease the existence of the festival was also due to the fact that we all had burnout; against the backdrop of a common socio-political apathy, our team, apparently, also exhausted its resources for activist activity, and so everything gradually went down. In 2016, the fifth and last MediaImpact was held at CII Fabrika. Later we made several other projects, having changed the name for security reasons, because the reaction to MediaImpact had become too strong. For another couple of years our subsidiary projects existed: activist festivals in Samara and Kazan.

Is there an art activist scene in Russia, or is it more like scattered initiatives?

One can talk about its existence, of course, because the disparate initiatives,

one way or another, form a common field together. People who engage in art activism, who are interested in it or explore this topic, are more or less aware of each other's existence. Several large retrospective exhibitions were made on this topic recently. In particular, I made one of them. Two years ago, I was invited to Aachen, Germany to co-curate an exhibition called "Art and Activism in Russia Since 2000". The seventeen-year-old (at the time) history of the movement was traced and presented there. This is the topic I have been working on lately, and also the theme of my dissertation. It's important for me to describe this movement and to highlight its origins that come from the Moscow radical Actionism of the 1990s, to describe the phenomena that were associated with the inception of Russian activist art in the 2000s, to say what is happening to it now and to identify some of its basic features, as well as its paradigm shift.

What, in your opinion, is the key difference between the agendas of contemporary art activists and actionists of the Second Wave?

Some researchers, such as Pavel Mitenko, my colleague in MediaImpact, does not call the phenomenon that arose in the 2000s art activism, but the Second Wave of Moscow Actionism, its continuation. The 2000s were a time of heroic, macho Actionism. Despite the fact that Pussy Riot were feminists – transitional figures in that sense, it was about heroism, where one or several people went to fight with the authorities face to face, showed a middle finger to the power and shouted out provocative slogans. Lone heroes fighting the system. Nowadays, such actions of a heroic, macho nature are not performed any more. The word macho here is used from the point of view of the discourse of power, when a valiant hero calls out the power to fight. Such actions were performed by Alexander Brener back in 1995, when he challenged Yeltsin to battle.

It seems to me that the paradigm of masculine Actionism is being left behind and during the past several years, actions in activist art have been associated with the feminist discourse. This means not only a struggle for gender equality and women rights, but in a broader sense – advocating for oppressed groups.

My dissertation supervisor, Angelina Lucente, calls this a “maternal aspect”, when artists, usually female artists, work with socially vulnerable groups, such as children, people with disabilities, adolescents who have survived suicide attempts, etc. Artists give them voice and visibility, and organize participatory, community-based projects. “Quiet Picket”, which was invented and launched by Daria Serenko, turned into a horizontal community. The artist herself is no longer actively involved in it, but the community exists in many cities and supports the idea of going out into public spaces with an important topic, be it social or political. Political in this sense doesn’t mean that it should necessarily be related to issues of power, but it can be also an expression of support for the oppressed and minority groups.

Even the name of the project, “Quiet Picket”, eloquently illustrates this paradigm shift. Earlier there were high-profile actions, such as the phallic symbol painted on the bridge, the door of Lubyanka set on fire – high-profile in terms of the media effect. The “Quiet Picket”, of course, does not have such an impact. It does not attract the same level of attention from the authorities, the media and the public. Instead, completely different strategies are implemented, strategies of micro-resistance; daily actions in which people promote their ideas every day, sometimes even do social and voluntary work, like people of helping professions such as nurses, daycare workers and so on. When Katrin Nenasheva initiates her projects, she starts working in different social organizations. For example, she worked in a psychoneurological ward, about which she made her project “Between Here and There”. Recently, she also worked in a crisis center, dealing with teenage suicides and helping certain people. This is a much quieter and inconspicuous activity, but it has its long-term and profound effects.

Do you consider yourself an activist? Aren't you afraid to engage in activism and work with activist practices in present-day Russia?

Yes, now all of this is becoming dangerous; the word activist is perceived negatively, and art institutions are wary of activism. When we made MediaImpact, as soon as we had launched the announcement that we were

coming to one city or another to hold a discussion at a university or at some art center, there were official letters, phone calls, police visits and Cossack raids. Yes, of course I consider myself an activist. There is such a concept as “curatorial activism”. Some time ago, I participated in a discussion from which I got to know that there was a dissertation written and even a book published on this topic. Curators who work with activist art inevitably become activists themselves, because when one makes a project related to street protests, supporting political prisoners, for example, one is considered an activist, at least from a legal point of view. If you go out in the street and participate in rallies, for let’s say, passing a law against domestic violence, you are already acting as a civic activist. So, if anything happens, you will not be able to prove that you are a curator or a researcher. However, Andrei Erofeev didn’t call himself an activist, didn’t attend any rallies, stayed within the framework of the exhibition hall and a curatorial exhibition, but this didn’t help him from being put on trial.

Is it fair to say that art activism is a taboo topic that art institutions in Russia prefer to avoid?

All of this is dangerous, unpleasant and restricts one’s activities. Fear takes hold, censorship tightens – there are simply no venues and people willing to risk their positions and premises in order to carry out such a project. It also includes the self-censorship, meaning that people are afraid and do not participate, do not give permission, prohibit, cancel or opt to not invite, all just in case. This applies to both large art institutions and the smaller ones. Everyone values their reputation and doesn’t want to lose the few opportunities they still have left.

How do you see a possible further development of art activism in Russia?

I will not undertake to talk about the future of art activism under such political instability, but in my last article, which will be published in the magazine of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art this spring, I draw a parallel between the Soviet non-conformist art of the 60s, 70s and 80s, which existed

underground, and what is now happening with Russian activist art, which has moved from large exhibition venues to enclosed spaces. Not so long time ago we had MediaImpact at the ARTPLAY Design Center, were a project of the Moscow Biennale, had sponsors – in other words, we were a normal art establishment. And we went all this way to the point where nobody wanted to host us. Everybody was so afraid. Recently, there was an exhibition in Moscow in support of Yulia Tsvetkova, an arrested LGBT activist from Komsomolsk-on-Amur; it was held in a private premise of the LGBT community. In Krasnodar we had the experience of holding an event in the apartment of one of the participants, after we were forced to leave the art center to which the Cossacks and representatives of the local authorities came. Everything returns to some kind of apartments, cellars without a sign, where only those to whom the address was sent in person can come, and the information about the event is spread through word of mouth to trusted people. It means that activist art finds itself in the state of being underground, in closed events and private exhibitions.

However, it's important to mention one fundamental difference: although history repeats itself in once more, art activism is still primarily media activism and is designed for the media as its main transmission channel. I write about this in detail in my new article. And media, or the so-called tactical media: personal accounts created by the participants themselves in various social networks, is becoming the new type of contemporary art museums, where the informing, exhibiting, discussing and archiving of activist art projects takes place.

Ekaterina Muromtseva, artist.

The interview was conducted at the artist's personal exhibition opening in MMoMA, 19.09.2019

The first room of the exhibition is dedicated to the picket summer 2019. It all started with the fabricated drug charges against the investigative journalist

Ivan Golunov and his arrest. I went to support rallies. A strong sense of social injustice was in the air, and after that I came up with the image of people standing with posters in their hands. In the very first version, I painted one very large 5-meter long work with 12 standing figures that I was intending to use as a banner for the next rally. But after Ivan had been released, I decided to modify the idea and created this type of artwork – an installation. Painted images in which there is no specific person that one could easily identify with. These figures were painted from images of certain people who attended the rally, which I found on the Internet. For example, this is Dmitry Bykov. I wanted to install the figures so that they would not hang in the air but “stand” steadily on the floor.

This installation was exhibited for the first time in the windows of Garage Studios. There were 12 windows and I hung the paintings so that they would be facing the street. This exhibition was not intended for the visitors who were inside, but for the passers-by outside. I could not come up with a work title for quite a long time. At first, I wanted to name it “I/We Ivan Golunov”, but then I decided that this work was not really about Golunov, but about all of us in general. I decided to leave it without a title and let the work speak for itself. We are completely defenseless against a policy that does whatever it wants with us. Nowadays, everybody signs petitions; there are official supportive statements from actor communities and other creatives. There is such support and media attention that it gives hope that something might change.

The installation in the second room is called “Quarter to 12”. I created it last year. The starting point for it was Alexander Blok’s poem “The 12”. I re-read it for the first time since my school days and for the first time perceived it on a deeply emotional level. In addition to that, I really liked the poetic rhythm of it. Firstly, I recorded the audio track, and for this audio rhythm I made the drawings. There are many different images in the sequence: allusions to history, images illustrating our present, imaginary futuristic visions, robotic technologies and animals. For example, there is a reference to the Baltic Way – a peaceful demonstration that took place in 1989 on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when about two million people from Estonia,

Latvia and Lithuania went to the streets and created a human chain by holding hands. By this visually and emotionally impressive act, people expressed their fighting for the independence of their countries and their willingness to overcome the long period of Sovietization overseeing their destinies and politics. Then there are also images from our daily lives, such as a church under construction by the Belorusskaya metro station and images from rallies and protests that I attended. Everything merges into one film – a sequence that repeats again and again. It reaches the last frame and loops to the beginning. This visualizes the flow of history – on one hand we are moving forward, and on the other we constantly step on the same rake and repeat past mistakes.

How did it happen that you turned yourself towards social practices and political topics in art?

To me, it seems very difficult to stay away from the political context if one lives in Russia. It is our everyday life, and if you don't engage in the politics – the politics will engage with you at some point, so in any case it will concern you. When one goes to a rally and sees how people are being violently beaten up, chased and arrested for no reason – in any case you become emotionally affected by that regardless of whether you stand there with banners, protest for or against something or just watch. I also see a lot of disturbing things happening in the state nursing homes, where people are treated badly and not always get the help and treatment that they need. People in general don't understand where one's responsibility ends and the others' begin.

In many respects, my voluntary activities related to the elderly influenced my interest in socially engaged practices. Besides that, I live in Moscow, and Moscow is the center of political life in Russia. Well, the Faculty of Philosophy of MSU (Moscow State University) also made an impact on me; we read a lot of Foucault and Deleuze. If one creates something public and political, one needs to think about how it will be connected to the society we live in. But on the other hand, I can very well understand artists who choose to be engaged in traditional art. If the political context concerns you emotionally, then great, but if you are more inclined to formal artworks and traditional

mediums, that is great too. It is an indicator of a healthy society when one can engage in pure art. Everyone has to choose for him- or herself. It's great when people don't shut their eyes to what's happening around them. I'm glad to see many of my friends at rallies or when they support my voluntary trips to the elderly, either financially or by providing me with transportation. We are living in a time when we have to create change and affect something, or at least to make people who don't want to be involved in these things look at them.

Can you be called an activist?

Any non-passive position is activism. There are quite many activists nowadays, it has become quite a common phenomenon. Students of HSE (the Higher School of Economics), for example, are very active; they help foundations, advocate for fair news, participate in social and political life and go to rallies and protests. However, it is not so clear where the boundaries of this concept lie and how to separate social, civic activism from artistic practices.

How is the Russian art activist scene different from what is happening in other countries? How has it changed lately?

Trends have shifted from a direct political statement to quieter practices and socially oriented problems. So, in other words, an indirect conflict with the authorities with no provocation. Problems of local communities, minority groups or even of an individual person are in focus now. For example, the support of arrested activists. It has become dangerous to engage in direct activism. However, we had an action with artist Alya Korchevnik some years ago, who had a serious illness. They planned to close down the hospital where she had been getting treatment, so we stood on the Red Square holding infusion bags while Alya lay on the pavers. The police came up to us after a short while and said that they were going to take us to the police station. We explained that Alya had a very serious illness and that they had no right to do so, and they left us in peace. The fact is that this was about 7 years ago. I

suspect that nowadays, this situation would have escalated differently.

I think that the practice of small steps is more effective nowadays, because any direct action will lead you to a prosecution and arrest, and by this one action alone you will close yourself from the path to other actions. On the other hand, of course, such stories have a strong media effect. This is a very ambivalent question.

I am personally curious about the situation with art activism and protest art in Hong Kong. I do not particularly follow what is happening there, but I know that there are protests too and the situation is somewhat similar. It seems to me that environmental activism is trending now in Europe, and the less there are political and social problems in a country, the more artists are creating pure art works.

Where do the boundaries lie between art and social volunteering?

I am very interested in finding an answer to this question myself. I lived in a nursing home for a while, working on a project. We painted carpets on the walls with elderly women. It was a social thing on one hand and an artistic process on the other. It was an interesting act in and of itself because these carpets on the walls are a relic of the Soviet Union. Old people associated them with coziness and a feeling of home, and at the same time they were fake, because they were painted. The real carpets could not be hung due to fire safety regulations. It was a participatory performance. The key is the artist's position and self-definition. If it is just a one-time action, then it is probably more of a volunteer activity; if there is an aesthetic part in it and the topic continuously passes through the creative path and becomes a part of the artist's life, then it is art. I do a lot of things, but both my art projects and volunteer work are equally important to me, and deep down I think that volunteering is even more important.

How do you define your role in your volunteering art project for the elderly?

I would call myself a friend. There are many different aspects and dimensions. We have been cooperating and communicating with certain nursing homes for a long time and it seems to me that this experience gives even more to me than they get from it. When I draw and paint together with the elderly, I would say that I am an artist. When I organize field trips to different art exhibitions and discuss with them other artists' artworks, then I would rather call myself a volunteer or a manager. When we are singing songs in the kitchen, we are friends.

I also like it when the work has a documentary part in it. Moving on to the third room of this exhibition, there is a short animated film "In This Country". I asked school children aged 10 to 12 to write essays on how, in their opinion, people lived in the USSR – a country that no longer exists and where they had never lived. Based on their stories, I wrote a myth and then made an animation with a voiceover reading the text. This is an overview of the history and how children perceive it. This a way to talk about history, not from an official point of view but from a marginal, unaccounted one, one that is never taken into consideration. On one hand, their writings were full of clichés, inaccuracies and myths, but on the other hand there was a lot of truth.

Ilmira Bolotyan. Artist, curator.

Can you tell about your artistic path? What influenced your interest in performative practices?

The practice appeared as a result of the practice. Any artist who starts to make art should ideally focus not only on his own wishes and interests but also on the context around them. Accordingly, when I just started to practice art – I started quite late, at the age of 30 – I assumed one thing, but the context corrected me. At the beginning, I was engaged in painting and graphics but felt that the language of expression of these media was not enough for me. It didn't draw attention to what I wanted to say. In addition to that, it was rather

laborious and required a lot of work. I had been involved in the theater as a researcher with a focus on documentary theater, including studying screenwriting and working with scripts, so my interest lay in more narrative and continuous projects than just a single painting or a series of works. If I had understood this from the beginning, my painting could have been a participatory project too – which they actually were, because my interaction with the models was very close. So, I gradually realized that it was more interesting for me to interact with people and only later, in the process of this interaction, to produce material art objects.

Up until now, I can consider three of my projects fully implemented: “Museum Date” from 2017, “Artists Promotion Agency” (APA) and “Immaterial Labor”, which I had worked on for two years and recently presented at my personal exhibition. The APA lasted for year. The “Museum Date” has to do with the topic of a new type of communication between people, related to social networks and dating applications as well as how the museum is perceived by modern people in general. Is this a place for leisure? Could it be a place for a romantic date? APA is fully dedicated to the promotion of artists and my own self-promotion, while “Immaterial Labor” is dedicated to the various practices that women do in order to achieve the external ideal of how they ought to appear. The topics are very different, but most of them concern me personally – otherwise I wouldn’t be interested in doing this. And besides that, there was such a thing as social curiosity – this is how it is for me, but how is it perceived by others?

My practice is based on documentary work. In other words, I don’t plan anything in advance, I just start working on a topic, look very carefully at what kind of feedback there is and react positively to some kind of continuation from people. For example, APA would not have developed to the extent that it had if at some point I hadn’t been invited to different places to speak on this topic, if I wouldn’t have won the contest, and so on. In other words, one clings to another, I am just starting this process, and then people connect.

Did any unexpected discoveries occur during the working process on “Immaterial Labor”? Some things that you did not anticipate before the project started?

Yes. First of all, regarding my real place in this “market”. When we talk about labor in general, we switch to a post-Marxist critique where every person becomes the producer of some product in one way or another. In the case of women, either she herself is a product or her services as a product. My perception of myself in this market have been adjusting towards a more realistic direction. In particular, my own thoughts about the attitude of most Russian women towards beauty ideals. For instance, it would never have been clear to me, if I had been asked before this project, what was wrong in my appearance from the point of view of the majority of society.

I would have never given the right answer, but I would assume that it is my nose with a hump or my hair color, or the shape of my eyes. I would never have guessed that moles and birthmarks are considered disgusting and making a woman look older than her real age, and therefore many women get rid of them, especially if they are on the face. I could not have guessed that a dimple on a chin is considered ugly. Of course, no one dared to tell me this directly, but thanks to various provocations that I had made, I managed to find out what people really think. In particular, I realized how negatively many see short haircuts on women and what strong aversion and prejudice exist in our society. Certain groups of women told me that I should be a lesbian if I have such short hair, that men definitely perceive me that way and that I will be rejected from entering the club because of my appearance (a club where a community of “kept women” gathered). Of course, all of this is nothing more but their stereotypes, but nevertheless they are very powerful. At the same time, I figured out that a certain type of men has a fetish for short haircuts on women. All those things that are not in the field of interest of people, who are engaged in something else in their lives besides their looks, were discovered in the process.

As for the female communities, the most striking discovery for me was that

the group of radical feminists and that of the kept women were very similar after all. Both of them wage their war against men, but the strategies differ. Feminists compete with them through stating their power and competence while the kept women use the most ancient and gender-acceptable way to fight against men – through seduction. Within their closed community they support each other in the same way and even call each other sisters. Some of the kept women considered themselves to be feminists – they discussed different feminist topics that they had read and quoted Simone De Beauvoir in their chat rooms. However, they use those things selectively, when it is in their favor. But so do feminists. Each group uses certain theories to justify their behavioral patterns. This was a real discovery for me, and if only I had the resources, I would write a separate study about it, but for now I don't have them.

Could you, however, call your project feminist?

Without false modesty I would say that “Immaterial Labor” is one of the best feminist projects executed in Russia in the past few years, because it is not as straightforward as is usually the case with feminist art. Feminism is closely connected with activism, and activism is either straightforward or ceases to be activism. It is not my judgement, but the feedback from other art professionals and curators who saw so many layers in my project. The exhibition is just the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, one can already see a lot of dimensions, the main one of which is the irony in relation to all these social constructs that exist. I can say that the project was also therapeutic to me, because I managed to withdraw myself from these constructs. In that sense, it was useful to me as an artist and as a feminist. It was a history of formation, because despite all the feminism, I grew up and still live in a traditional patriarchal society; my motives and needs were quite typical for my inner circle. Now all of this has been somewhat rethought, and I can already look beyond that.

Do you see any difference between Russian Actionism and activist art in Europe?

I know very little about the current situation in European Actionism. From what I have seen, it seems to me that the difference is in the quality of the projects. Activists in art often have a background of civic activism and no art education at all. There is generally no education in the field of contemporary art in Russia, as in the academic one taught at university level, but only a few courses offered by private institutions. There is no tradition, therefore everyone understands Actionism in their own way. I remember one case from 2015, when I curated the project “A-art, F-feminism. Current Dictionary”. A feminist group from Samara-Tolyatti participated in the project; they submitted a work which represented their activity very poorly and unconvincingly. When I started to discuss the problem with them and made a few suggestions, they took it as an offense and censorship. It was an artwork that was by all means created without knowledge of art history, without basic knowledge of how to present and exhibit Actionism at exhibitions and without respect for the audience. It was the form, not the content of the work itself, that was poor. In fact, any action or performance just needs to be embodied at the exhibition and given shape, because there is already a very powerful message in it, so there is no need to invent anything extra.

I still draw and make graphics – it is a part of my practice. It is not actionist and does not address the oppressed groups of people. On the contrary, I work with quite a stable and well-established society. The most oppressed group I have worked with, I would say, were the artists in the project “Artists Promotion Agency”. When I offered them different strategies and forms of presentation, so that more people would get to know about their activities, this was again perceived as censorship, not as an attempt to do better. And I think that for the most part, Russian Actionism is like that. It flaunts the fact that it is dealing with such complex topics and that it burns out, suffers and suffers again; it is clear to everyone that it is dangerous to engage in it. For actionists, this seems to be enough to call it art, but for the art, in my opinion, this is not enough, so working on the art form and presentation would in fact only benefit this movement. Therefore, it seems to me that the problem lies simply in the ignorance of how these things should be presented.

Is there an art activist scene in Russia as such?

While the MediaImpact festival of activist art existed and operated in Russia, there was a feeling that such a community exists; there were about the same people participating and running things. Activists, artists and feminists united and organized festivals, exhibitions, working trips, research and other projects, held discussions, etc. It was quite a small group of people, after all. I heard that nowadays there is a strong emerging activist-feminist scene in St. Petersburg, considerably bigger and more active than in Moscow – they are constantly producing something. But I would generally say that it is still a small community, not a movement and definitely cannot be classified as a subculture.

Is there a tendency for art activism to become more popular among artists, or is it vice versa?

I don't think that this is the case now, as it is becoming more dangerous to engage in such things. But those artists that still do are ardent and passionate about it; it is such types of persons that are invincible, persistent and unstoppable. Those people either truly believe that they can change everything, or they just can't be silent. There are also those who believe that they will get recognition and fame faster by working with activist practices, which they eventually will. The thing is, of course, that it is not as simple as it might seem in the beginning.

If you compare today's Actionism with actions of the late 2000s, what is the main difference?

It seems to me that the era of lone heroes has gone with Pyotr Pavlensky, who had fled Russia and turned out to not be a hero at all, but a criminal. This era is gone, and now there are no such bright personalities who are ready to reinforce this myth and play an unstoppable crazy artist. Pavlensky has already done everything for creating this myth and becoming its living embodiment, in the sense that he had clearly and thoroughly thought it all out.

So nowadays, the artist groups prefer more peaceful practices, especially the feminist groups. They make something locally, but in one selected topic or in one selected environment. We see a theory of small steps in action. Art activists rather address the message to smaller environments around them. They are working with the local context and addressing the local environments and communities, working with the inhabitants of a certain area or city. Either that or they work with pure art, such as poetry, and do something in that field.

Do you think that actionists can induce changes in this society to solve its problems? Do you believe that through art and artistic practice, one can make people think about important things?

I agree to some extent, but I don't believe that this could be a massive impact. But, for instance, when one theatre critic writes that political theater has no influence, I strongly disagree with him, because who can measure it? No one knows what happened to a particular person after he had watched even the most innocent political performance. For one it is an innocent and a non-radical performance, and for another it is a big revelation. In fact, people who say and write such things are not able to see how everything affects them. I started to notice it a long time ago, and this is how I became a feminist. Many small influences by other people on me, and then it led to life choices. Just as small are the influences of exhibitions – they affect the life of a particular person who saw them. Therefore, I believe that art can't have a massive influence simply because of a lack of resources. No media channels, not a lot of money for its promotion, and so on.

The “Museum Date” was such a project, where the person was forced to look at the exhibition and listen to me. Surely it did affect them somehow; either they realized that they don't want to look at this type of art anymore, or on the contrary – this experience was interesting for them and they became more interested.

During your work on this project, did you encounter a lack of

understanding and rejection of your activities?

Yes. People reacted differently, but still – those who were more or less interested and considerate came to the “date” to meet me. With those who were not considerate at all, it all ended up with arguing and swearing in text messages. There was a moment when one person came and began mocking everything, but I ended the communication with him fast because I am also a living person. I have my own emotional resource, and it is not endless. Art affects, of course. That’s why I’m into participatory art practices, because through that I can at least, to some extent, evaluate the degree of this influence. My art projects often start from my journalistic investigations; the practice of a participatory artist is similar to that of a journalistic work, after all.

A participatory method is also able to discover and reveal some problems as well. For example, “Immaterial Labor” helped proving that none of us is born with the construct of femininity, it is the upbringing, social norms and expectations that form it. For some reason it did not work out for me and I never obtained in a natural way, so I had to try these constructs on myself during the project. I had to play and pretend a little bit here and there, which led to burnout and exhaustion because this is a construct that doesn’t feel natural for me. However, I also enjoyed and had some fun during the process, otherwise I couldn’t have been able to make it through. It is self-inflicted violence, and we joked with other artists that, in principle, a contemporary artist is partly a masochist. But in my case, I’m a masochist who can withstand it for a long time (laughs).

You probably had to meet and communicate with people of all kinds, whom you would have otherwise never come across in your ordinary life?

Yes, you’re absolutely right. This is especially true when speaking about the “Museum Date” and particularly the “Artists Promotion Agency”, where anyone can become my follower and write to me. After that project I gained some haters from the world of Russian contemporary art professionals, which

was not very easy to get over. For almost a year I had to communicate with people who only had dreams of becoming artists; it was very challenging and energy consuming. As my project was purchased by the Anna Radchenko Academy, I am going to work on it for another year as a hired expert. As a result of this activity, I am going to curate and organize an exhibition.

A big business has swallowed a small one; here again starts a conversation about how I, as an artist, need funds. All the money that I earned from APA was spent on “Immaterial Labor”, and I even have debts because I happened to buy some expensive things for myself and hire professionals to whom I owe money. In fact, I work for this online academy now to be able to pay back. This is a weird circulation of money for a contemporary artist, who works and then spends all her salary on new projects that only bring in new debt, and as a result sells herself to a more successful online institution.

It is interesting how your projects are related to the study of the role of the artist.

Both the curator and I immediately saw similarities in the relations between the artist and the gallery, the artist and the museum, the artist and the biennale and the relation between models and agents. Therefore, these parallels and comparisons immediately arose by themselves. Both the artist and the model must be able to sell themselves. For models it is enough having an appearance that is currently in demand by modelling agencies. Besides that, they should be taking good care of their natural talents. For the artist, this is clearly not enough, although it also affects their careers to some extent. All successful artists are, in addition to their talent, also charming people – both in looks and in communication. This is what I am lacking and what I tried to work on during the APA project, and this is a very big “immaterial work” on myself. All these small talks at events, writing in time to congratulate upon this and that, attending all the exhibition openings – all of this is a must do, but most artists don’t feel like doing it. It is a very exhausting and energy-consuming thing that does not suit everyone, so not all artists are engaged in networking, not all fit into this environment, or at least it takes them longer to fit.

References:

- Beumers, B., Etkind, A., Gurova, O., Turoma, S. 2018. Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia. New York: Routledge
- Bishop, C. 2012. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London: Verso Books
- Bolotyan, I. Artist, curator. 2019. Interview on 18.09.2019. Interviewer Mikhaylova, M. Moscow.
- Chekhonadskih, M. 2015. Mifologiya litsa: publichnaya sfera, dissidentstvo i politicheskoye iskusstvo. (Mythology of an individual: public sphere, dissidence and political art), Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal (Moscow Art Magazine) #93, 57-63
- Epstein, A. 2014. Art-aktivizm non grata (Art activism non grata) Access: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25334980.html>
- Epstein, A. 2018. Art-aktivizm tretyego sroka Putina. Nasledniki moskovskogo kontseptualizma i sots-arta v XXI veke (Art activism of Putin's third term) Neprikosnovennyi Zapas (NZ) #1 (117). pp. 219-237
- Goldberg, R. 2011. Performance art: From Futurism to the Present. Third edition. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Johnson, L. 2015. Art and protest in Putin's Russia. New York: Routledge
- Kulik, O. 2018. A mog by layat' do kontsa: intervju s aktsionistom Olegom Kulikom (He could have barked until the end: interview with actionist Oleg Kulik) <https://birdinflight.com/ru/portret/a-mog-by-layat-do-kontsa-intervyu-s-aktsionistom-olegom-kulikom.html> Lena Kovalchuk, 1.08. 2018.
- Malevich, K. 1919. O muzee (About the Museum). Iskusstvo Komunny (Art of the Commune) #13. <http://www.k-malevich.ru/works/tom1/index31.html>
- Mirimanov, V. 2002. Posle avangarda: psevdorealizm (After the avant-garde: pseudorealism). Iskusstvo, #23. <https://art.1sept.ru/article.php?ID=200202301>
- Muromtseva, E. Artist. 2019. Interview on 19.09.2019. Interviewer Mikhaylova, M. Moscow
- Osmolovsky, A. 2000. Bez iskusstva i bez politiki – v 21 vek (Without Art and Politics – into the 21st Century). Khudozhestvennyy Jurnal (Moscow Art Magazine) #30-31 <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/80/article/1738>
- Osmolovsky, A. 2014. V sovremennoy Rossii nevozmozhno zanimatsia aktsionizmom: Anatoliy Osmolovsky o zhivopisi, nezavisimoy kritike i pank-roke (In contemporary Russia it is impossible to engage in actionism: Anatoly Osmolovsky on painting, independent criticism and punk rock) <https://syg.ma/@furqat/v-sovremiennoi-rossii-nievozmozhno-zanimatsia-aktsionizmom-anatolii-osmolovskii-o-zhivopisi-niezavisimoi-kritikie-i-pank-rokie> Furkat Palvanzade. 8.12.2014
- Osmolovsky, A. 2015. Anatoliy Osmolovsky: Schitaju put asketizma absolutno

repressivnim (Anatoly Osmolovsky: I consider the path of asceticism to be absolutely repressive)

<https://www.colta.ru/articles/ostrov90/9597-anatoliy-osmolovskiy-schitayu-put-asketizma-absolyutno-repressivnym> Natalia Kostrova. 16.12.2015

Volkova, T. 2020. Researcher, founder and curator of MediaImpact International Festival of Activist Art. Interview on 20.01.2020. Interviewer Mikhaylova, M. Moscow.





