

The decline and fall of Russian protest art—“Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism”

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“Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism,” Saatchi Gallery, London, November 16, 2017-January 7, 2018

“Actionism appeared as a reaction to the mass depersonalisation and total commercialisation of art, as a reaction to the overload of objects manipulated by curators, gallerists, and collectors—and also the laws of the market. The artist protesting against this makes a striking statement, socially significant and visually spellbinding.”

These strong words from Oleg Kulik, father of post-Soviet actionist art, are quoted in the catalogue for the recent Saatchi Gallery exhibition in London, *Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism*.

On display at the gallery is the protest art of Kulik and other performance artists, including Pussy Riot, Pyotr Pavlensky, Arsen Savadov, Damir Muratov and the Blue Noses Group. The exhibition gives an opportunity to examine how the art of Kulik and his colleagues lives up to his manifesto. How have things proceeded since Kulik first hit the headlines in the 1990s?

As Kulik says, following the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, burning issues demanded striking, significant and spellbinding answers. There was a lot for avant-garde artists to work through—the legacy of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, its degeneration and the Stalinist counterrevolution, the catastrophic results of capitalist restoration.

But the debased social, political and intellectual climate following the liquidation of the Soviet Union conditioned their response, which varied from anarchistic individualism to pleas for a more humane capitalism and the embrace of right-wing anti-communism. The results have been generally atrocious.

The first gallery of the Art Riot exhibition exemplifies this disorientation, with its display of Kulik’s “artist-animal actions” including images from his infamous 1994 “Mad Dog” performance in which he was led, naked and collared like a dog, through the streets of Moscow. Kulik engaged in more bestial acts as part of the “Deep Into Russia” series.

Speaking of his art in 2016, Kulik declared his contempt for any thoughtful progressive response to the Russian tragedy with the retort, “All that is left is the body, which actually never belonged to you. And artists, the first actionists of the 1990s, offered the body, the naked body of a naked person, in the middle of the wild city. It is a powerful image: out of all those endless collectivist myths, endless crowds of the willing and unwilling, groups, bands, and parties a person is set apart, an individual with nothing and no one behind him. He is alone against all, but he is fighting. He simply says: ‘I am! Here I am, I am art!’”

Kulik eventually stopped his performance art, fed up with (paid) requests for him to repeat the dog routine and complaining of

sensationalist treatment (deliberately courted) in the press.

Gallery 2 of the *Art Riot* exhibition is given over to Pyotr Pavlensky who emerged into the public eye in 2012 when he sewed his mouth shut in protest against the imprisonment of members of the Pussy Riot punk band. Subsequent “actions” involved Pavlensky rolling naked in barbed wire and nailing his scrotum to the cobblestones in Red Square in protest at the “apathy, political indifference and fatalism” pervading Russia.

In 2015, Pavlensky set fire to the doors of the Lubyanka building, the HQ of the Russian Security Services (FSB), eliciting the rapturous praise of Western commentators. The UK *Guardian* art correspondent Jonathan Jones, whose anti-communism was evident in his attack on the Royal Academy Russian Revolution exhibition last year, waxed lyrical about the action as “a superbly well-aimed piece of political art” that was “setting Russia’s evil history ablaze.”

To my knowledge, Jones and the others have been silent after Pavlensky, who was granted political asylum in France last May, was carted off to prison in October accused of torching a bank in Paris’s Place de la Bastille. “The Bastille was destroyed by a people in revolution; the people destroyed its symbol of despotism and power ... The Banque de France has taken the place of the Bastille, and bankers have taken the place of monarchs,” Pavlensky declared.

After years of self-imposed pain, suffering and incarceration, Pavlensky seems to have learnt nothing. He declares, “The possibility of liberation, the possibility of rebellion, of a people’s uprising, has been extinguished, of course.”

In the next room, large photographs of Donbass miners by Ukrainian artist Arsen Savadov are on display. Savadov declares contemptuously, “My characters are personalities with a vague understanding of reality. ... I am one of those artists that treat the harsh conditions of the day as myth: I make my work out of the rubble of consciousness.”

In the catalogue, curator Marcel Guelman revels in Savadov’s relentlessly degrading portrayals mocking the poor and the powerless, declaring how he “dresses miners, those manly workers black with soot—those symbols of proletarian revolution—in white ballet tutus or simply undresses them. Funny. Or he bribes Communists on their way to a rally and places them inside a gay parade . Real old men who can’t turn down the money and who pose in humiliation, without looking at one another. Scary or funny?” This is horrible stuff.

Guelman twists the knife deeper, gloating, “What would people do without any means of support, lost in the new capitalist reality, do for money? Marx said that a capitalist would do anything at all for profit, but it turns out that impoverished people are ready to do even more.”

The cul-de-sac into which Russian artists have been driven is shown

by the evolution of Pussy Riot, images of whom dominate the exhibition's fourth gallery.

The band shot to international attention in 2012 when two of its members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, were imprisoned on charges of "hooliganism due to religious hatred." Their performance of a brief "punk prayer" criticizing Vladimir Putin in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow is exhibited in a gold shrine.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemned the prosecution of Pussy Riot as an attack on basic democratic rights and a sign of the Putin regime's intensifying offensive against the country's liberal opposition and moves towards an explicitly religious basis for its rule.

We also warned that support given to the group by leading Western imperialist politicians, including US President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel was "cynical to the core"—by leaders quite prepared to ride roughshod over democratic principles when it served their reactionary policy objectives.

In the catalogue, Tolokonnikova confirms that Pussy Riot was really all about enlisting the support of such figures to put pressure on the Russian ruling elite to reform, insisting, "Unlike the old Left, we can't just reject capitalism out of hand—we'll get further by playing with it, teasing till it's been perverted. Perverted, I mean, in the sense of being turned to face us, enlisted in our cause."

Tolokonnikova calls for a more enlightened Christianity, revealing her belief that former Marxist turned anticlerical Orthodox Christian-existentialist Nikolai Berdyaev is "Russia's greatest political philosopher."

In 1909, Lenin already had the measure of Berdyaev, writing how the set of essays including that by Berdyaev called *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) expressed "the unmistakable essence" of the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets), the party of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie, which was pursuing a "war on materialism and the materialist interpretation of positivism, restoration of mysticism and the mystical world outlook."

Berdyaev was one of around 160 intellectuals and their families exiled on "philosophers' ships" by the new Bolshevik government in 1922, as a precaution against them acting as a rallying point for those seeking to restore autocracy or impose a fascist dictatorship. It was revealed in October that Tolokonnikova's Pussy Riot jailmate, Alyokhina, is in a relationship she deems "complicated" with the fascist activist Dmitry Enteo, founder of the Russian Orthodox movement "God's Will."

In the exhibition's last room, works by artists less well known in the West are displayed, including Damir Muratov's flags for a hypothetical separatist United States of Siberia. The flags have been adopted by a variety of reactionary movements calling for autonomy or secession of Siberia, backed by local business interests accusing Moscow of plundering the region's vast natural resources. Muratov has been subjected to surveillance and detention.

Also lining the last gallery walls are a series of cartoonish pictures of world leaders cavorting in their underwear, produced by the Blue Noses group (Alexander Shaburov and Viacheslav Mizin) who employ puerile humour in their "hooligan improvisations" to subvert hallowed traditions and famous icons. Elsewhere the duo use lightboxes to show Lenin "turning in his grave" at the thought of what has befallen his creation.

The catalogue ends with the paragraph "there are no more art-activists and actionists working productively [in Russia], who could have a significant public resonance; some have gone silent, others have emigrated, replacing their intentions of overthrowing the regime

with concerns on how to survive in foreign countries. Some continue trying, without any opportunity to discuss their work anywhere."

This observation reveals what has happened to Russian protest art, but not why. In the end it proved incapable of appealing to the "masses" as the Soviet Union collapsed—indeed the working class was often written off as a philistine mob, which had accepted or even welcomed repression and dictatorship.

Without a perspective that could raise the political consciousness of broad layers of the population, many of the protest artists inevitably became co-opted by Russian oligarchs and Western politicians or actively participated in their campaigns against the Putin regime, as it sought to re-establish Russian bourgeois interests.

The tragedy that has befallen Russia cannot be resolved on a progressive basis except through the re-emergence of the working class, armed with a revolutionary socialist and internationalist programme, inspired by the political heritage of October 1917 and utterly hostile to both Stalinism and capitalism.

One could not think of a more ignominious outcome for the products of post-Soviet protest art than to end up in the opulent surroundings of the Saatchi gallery in London's West End.

The Saatchi brothers remain best known for the advertising campaign that backed Margaret Thatcher in the Conservative's successful general election campaign in 1979, ushering in a neo-conservative programme of privatising the welfare state, union-busting and deregulation of the City of London—a model for what was to be imposed even more brutally in post-Soviet Russia.

Equally ignominious is for the exhibition's organisation to be in the hands of Russian émigré banker Igor Tsukanov, who attempts to equate the revolutionary Bolshevik period with Putin's Russia, declaring, "Many of the issues that artists face in post-communist Russia are comparable to those faced in 1917."

Seeing the exhibition as a springboard for further shows of the objects—many of which are owned by his "foundation—that will see a rise in their value," Tsukanov said, "We have plans to bring the exhibition to other places and it should be easy because most of the art has been commissioned by me, so it will be kept in London in storage and can be shipped to wherever there is demand for it."

As for Guelman, the exhibition is in part a cover for his own rotten role in the disaster that has engulfed the Russian working class. He was a former Kremlin spin-doctor turned art dealer, who oversaw Boris Yeltsin's re-election campaign in 1996 and helped Putin secure his first presidential term in 2000. Guelman became a member of Yeltsin's bogus consultative Public Chamber and did not finally end collaboration with the regime until 2012, claiming Pussy Riot made him see the error of his ways!



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