

5 Dissent in art

The performances by the Voina and Bombila art groups outside the Taganskii Court in support of the accused in the trial of the ‘Forbidden Art’ exhibition were part of an evolving phenomenon in Russian contemporary art – an expression of open dissent in relation to the dominant official consensus. In contrast to the more subtle art of the ‘other gaze’, discussed in Chapter 3, dissent art is defined by a pronounced disagreement with the ‘proper order of things’. It is not political in the traditional sense. Moreover, it cannot be interpreted literally. This ambiguity is used by the artist or the curator as a shield against criticism from the authorities, but it can also attract criticism from friends and supporters that the statement is not spelled out clearly enough.

First and foremost, this art plays on phantasmagoria, the absurd and laughter. Dissent art follows the tradition of the ‘ontological anarchism’ of the early avant-garde of the 1910s, and the joke, irony, parody and mockery of the Sots-Art of the 1970s and 1980s. In her study of the early Russian avant-garde, Nina Gurianova defines ontological anarchism as a ‘variant of anarchism . . . inspired not by a notion of social utopia, which inevitably calls for a temporal, epochal ‘closure’, but rather a by-product of philosophical anarchism, namely dystopia, with its paradoxical mixture of nihilism and “openness”’ (Gurianova, 2012: 7). The early avant-gardists sought freedom for creativity and took a stand on breaking down fixed myths, perceptions, concepts and norms. Gurianova describes their views as ‘the politics of the non-political’, in that they took a social and ethical stand without spelling out their political sympathies (Gurianova, 2012: 10). Drawing a clear line between ontological anarchism and political anarchism, she says that, if anything, the political views of the early avant-gardists were closest to an individually based anarchism. The underground Sots-Art of the 1970s and 1980s continued the tradition of the early avant-garde, as do the artists of dissent art presented in this chapter. Like their predecessors, the dissent artists of the 2000s conveyed their disagreement with contemporary society without making political demands.

This art also refers back to the carnival culture of medieval times of jokes, mocking, parodying and laughing at everything sacred and established represented by the authorities, church or state (Ozerkov, 2009). The carnival culture created an anti-world – a world of topsy-turvy – in which the world of the real,

with its pretensions of decency, organization and cultivation, was replaced by its mirror image of a chaotic, unstable world of the ugly, low and indecent (Yurkov, 2003). The contemporary Russian understanding of carnival culture is heavily influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin used the term *carnival* both in the sense of the popular culture of the marketplace, fairs and celebrations and of developments that make use of the carnival spirit. Both senses assume a split between official and unofficial ideologies (Platter, 2001: 55).¹

The risk that a work of dissent art might be interpreted literally and seriously and thereby be misinterpreted was illustrated by Avdei Ter-Oganyan and his Radical Abstractionism series (see Chapter 3). His combination of geometric shapes and abstract statements giving the triangles, circles, squares and lines an anti-constitutional content had an absurd dimension. The contrast between the stated content and the image made it obvious that they could not be interpreted literally, although that is precisely what occurred when the works were caught up in scandal. Commenting on the reaction to his series, Ter-Oganyan explained, ‘A work of art should be seen in the context of art. . . . If one were to take works from my Radical Abstractionism series at face value, I could be accused of a number of charges, from abetting the use of drugs to genocide (actions aimed at complete or partial annihilation of a people). This work is definitively provocative, so if anyone wants to take me to court, please do’ (Ter-Oganyan, 2010: 58). He was proved right – the work became a target of the authorities because they interpreted it literally. In 2010, it was explained that action had been taken to prevent the series from being sent to an exhibition in Paris because ‘there were doubts that the texts would be properly interpreted by a broad, unprepared audience . . . by individual unprofessional or partisan media representatives’.²

A distinction is made below between gallery dissent art and dissent art that was exhibited or performed outside a gallery, such as street art, performances and graffiti.

Gallery art

The group ‘Sinie nosy’ (Blue Noses) has followed from its very beginning in the tradition of the trickster with deceptions, jokes and provocations.³ Created in Novosibirsk in 1999 by Aleksander Shaburov (born in 1965) and Vyateslav Mitin (born in 1962), they showed the series ‘Mask Show: Political Dances’ at the ‘Rossiya 2’ exhibition in 2005.⁴ In photomontages, Putin was shown in bed with various international celebrities, such as George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden and Yulia Timoshenko (see Figure 5.1). The artists claimed that they told the naked truth. Concerning themselves with contemporary art and using the techniques of the twentieth century, they transform the ‘actual visuality’ from the television screen by reducing it to absurdity. Choosing a popular form that anybody can understand, they show the world the way they understand it.⁵ Their pictures gave the viewer a good laugh, although some interpreted them as provocative and irreverent. Sinie nosy belonged to the Gelman Gallery and their works were exhibited there after they were removed from exhibitions at state museums.

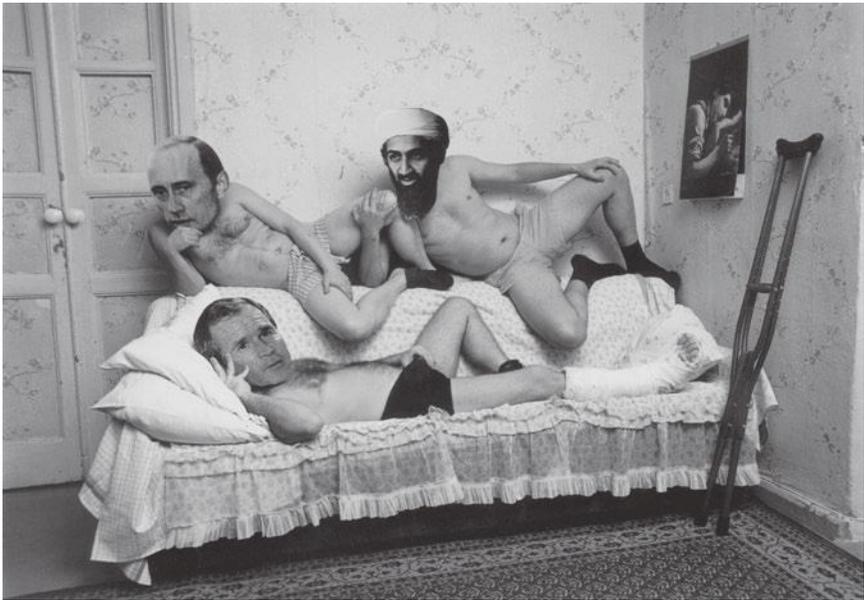


Figure 5.1 Sinie nosy, 'Mask Show: Political Dances' 2001 (colour photography)

Source: Courtesy of Sinie nosy.

A portrait of two male policemen in uniform kissing each other in a typical Russian landscape of birch trees and snow, called 'The Era of Mercy', made Sinie nosy world famous in 2007 (see Figure 5.2). This was very much thanks to the then-minister of culture, who reacted strongly, calling it 'pornography' and a 'shame on Russia' (GiF.ru, 2007). In fact, the work was an homage to the British graffiti artist Banksy, who in 2004 had made his 'Kissing Bobbies'. Dmitrii Golyenko-Volfson explained the minister's negative reaction: 'The censor's indignation towards Sinie nosy was motivated by the circumstance that the artists (possibly unaware of doing so) painted the authorities the way they never want to see themselves – weak, sentimental, desirous, incoherent and merciless, that is, the way they are nonetheless seen in contemporary cultural mythology' (Golyenko-Volfson, 2008).

Sinie nosy also played with the Russian nationalist discourse. The photo collage 'Inno, Nano, Tekhno' (2008) by the group referred to a piece of classical Russian art, 'Three Bogatyrya', the famous painting from the late nineteenth century by Viktor Vasnetsov of three medieval warriors from Russian folk legend. Sinie nosy replaced the warriors with three fat, bare-breasted women on horseback, dressed only in traditional knitted folk headgear (*kokoshniki*). The inscription, Inno, Nano, Tekhno, was an ironic play on the then-President Medvedev's buzz words – innovation and nanotechnology.



Figure 5.2 Sinie nosy, 'The Era of Mercy' 2007 (colour photography)

Source: Courtesy of Sinie nosy.

The group became known in early 2000 and participated in most large exhibitions of contemporary art at home and abroad, such as the 2003 and 2005 Venice Biennales of Contemporary Art. The authorities, however, did not want such works exhibited abroad. Consequently, the 'Mask Show' was confiscated at Sheremetevo Airport in October 2006, when a British gallery owner tried to take it to a London exhibition. Similarly, in May 2007 the Russian customs authorities confiscated another work by Sinie nosy that was on the way to an exhibition in Dresden.⁶ In October 2007 the work 'The Era of Mercy' was seized while being transported to an exhibition about Sots-Art at the Louvre in Paris (Golynko-Volfson, 2008; Artinfo.ru).

Setting an agenda of anarchism

Another example of gallery dissent art was the group PG. The acronym has been variously interpreted as *Prestupnaya gruppa* (Criminal Group), *Protivotankovaya gruppa* (Anti-tank Group) or *Pozharnyi gidrant* (Fire Hydrant) (Degot, 2000). Formed in 1998, the group was invited to mount its first exhibition at the New Tretyakov Gallery in 2003.⁷ By the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it had established a wide reputation in the Moscow art world.

Radical in its artistic gestures and positions, the group took a clear leftist anarchist position in the European tradition, in the sense of being anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist and anti-racist. It opposed the political establishment, the art establishment and the commercialization of art and society, and questioned established norms and concepts. Even so, the group became the darling of the contemporary art scene. In spite of the radical political gestures, PG was perceived first and foremost as an art group (*The New Times*, 2009). The group consisted of Ilya Falkovskii, Aleksei Katalin and Boris Spiridonov, although some of the names used were aliases (Degot, 2000).

The group drastically exaggerated both form and language, and took its messages to the extreme. Ilya Falkovskii explained that irony and jokes were the best instruments for expressing serious ideas. ‘We considered that serious things are better presented through the prism of irony. What is said with pathos, people usually receive badly’.⁸ ‘[A]rt is for us a method to initiate discussion about serious things on topics we find important’. The group’s approach was outspokenly political: ‘We are in favour of an art that is subordinated to goals that are important to us. These are freedom of conscience, anti-totalitarianism, anti-fascism, anarchy and a future society without hierarchies in a national, religious, state or intellectual sense’.

According to Falkovskii, art played the role of a convenient cloak for their ideas.⁹ PG wanted its art to expose myths, prejudices and concepts that were contrary to its understanding of freedom, equality and justice. Russia has always been obsessed by myths about ‘strangers’, he said, and the task of the group was to deconstruct these myths: ‘Russians find Zionists, immigrants, Americans and whoever else to be dangerous enemies in a conspiracy against Russia’. PG exposed these prejudices, myths and fears, and played on them: ‘There is a fear of a “Yellow Threat”, we show it. There is a fear of civil war, we expose it’.¹⁰ He saw the task of PG as a kind of medical treatment for prejudices: ‘When people see their fears, view them from the side, view themselves and their fears – this can have a therapeutic effect’, Falkovskii added with a smile. ‘Art’, he continued, ‘is like a barometer of fears and social moods in the minds of people’.¹¹

Falkovskii’s interest in socially oriented art and his anti-hierarchical approach made the PG group opposed to art institutions of ‘high culture’, or museums and galleries that show contemporary art for a narrow audience. The PG members wanted their art to be understood by everyone, but they were also against mass culture for which the purpose is only entertainment. Declaring that they were trying to find a new language of art, one that could easily be understood by the people outside the galleries, PG spoke of a child as the ideal viewer – someone free from preconceptions. The new language should be cleansed of conventional symbols that build on domination, subordination and intellectual superiority (*Almanakh PG*, 2009).

As radical anarchists in many aspects of life, PG group members turned their backs on the system, including the official gallery world, and urged others to do the same. Falkovskii wanted to see a process of self-organization take place among artists, where they would come together, discuss, organize exhibitions,

make films and act together: ‘The purpose of art is to provide a space for communication’.¹² Therefore, the system of power became an object for investigation: ‘We are interested in the phenomenon of power in any country – and not only the phenomenon of political power, but one person’s power over another person. We are interested in how this power is created, how it is demonstrated in everyday life, and how it is expressed in prejudices – for example, against people of a different religion, nationality, against gays and lesbians. . . . We are against every kind of centralized power and all hierarchies’ (*The New Times*, 2009).

They played a role of artists at the margins of society, but had an established position in the art world, with exhibitions in Moscow and Paris. Their genre became a kind of multimedia comic in which photographs and graphics were presented together with video and the group’s music. They often acted as in a role play, playing the role of terrorists or bandits, or whatever was needed for the project. The contemporary art community did not take their calls for revolution too seriously but found their provocations exciting. Even so, their art had a political edge.

Their art works also met with resistance. The 2003 exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery was closed due to the reaction to one work about the sexual and drug fantasies of a teenager. In the spring of 2007, the group was invited to participate in the Sots-Art exhibition at the Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. At the last minute, however, its contribution, a series of photographs called ‘Slava Rossii’ – a play on words that can be translated as Glory to Russia or Glory of Russia – was removed from the exhibition (Droitkur, 2007: 104–5).¹³ The series included comments on burning topics. Their allusions to corruption and nepotism, and depictions of men in military uniform, dollar bills and naked women made the photographs highly controversial (see Figure 5.3). The photographs were instead shown at the ‘Forbidden Art’ exhibition at the Sakharov Centre in March that year, and thus became part of the scandal that followed. In October, the group became the target of another scandal when the authorities tried to prevent the Slava Rossii series and works on the topic of a Chinese invasion from being sent to the Paris exhibition on Sots-Art (*Art-info*, 2008).

Nonetheless, in 2008 PG was awarded the Kandinsky Prize in the category Best Media Art Project for a work called ‘Mounting Mobile Agitation’, a two-sided installation of lightboxes. The PG group described the work in the exhibition catalogue as combining:

. . . actual and imagined reality. The hero of the installation is the contemporary Russian teenager, despairing of his existence in the closed world of the everyday – he is the little man, the average man, who dreams about another reality in the future. But his illusory reality is aggravated by collective fears, phobias, the fear of the strange and unknown – the individual consciousness is not simply penetrated by clichés of the mass media consciousness but is produced by them, and it is impossible to distinguish the individual himself from the image created by mass communications. So in the imagination of our hero, the hope for liberation turns into the expectation of global warming,



Figure 5.3 PG Group, from the series ‘Slava Rossii’ (text reads ‘Glory of Russia/Glory to Russia’) 2007 (photo collage)

Source: Courtesy of I. Falkovskii.

and apocalyptic pictures of fratricidal war alternate with scenes of a possible Chinese invasion. The assimilation of cognitive space ended long ago, the circle has closed and there is nowhere to break out of it – and, in fact, there is no one to do it.

(Kandinsky Prize, 2008).

On one side of the installation, graphically depicted in comic book form, was the lost hero and his fantasies, mainly of a sexual nature. The other side consisted



Figure 5.4 PG Group, part of 'Mounting Mobile Agitation' 2008 (mixed media)

Source: Courtesy of I. Falkovskii.

of a lightbox showing fantasies of a Chinese invasion of the presidential office in the Kremlin, with Red Square full of Chinese soldiers visible through the window (see Figure 5.4). The Chinese invaders were depicted raping and hanging the Russians in the office.¹⁴ PG had thereby managed to combine and present two works that had previously been removed from exhibitions and have them awarded the prestigious Kandinsky Prize.

At the prize ceremony, the group members mounted the stage wearing balaclavas, to the amusement of an audience consisting of members of the art community and the business elite, as well as art dealers and collectors.¹⁵ From the stage they declared that those sitting in the audience did nothing but live as if they were on an island of stability. Falkovskii recalled his own words: 'We have an ongoing crisis. Unpleasant and deadly boring. Uninvited and unexpected . . . it is there nonetheless. And nobody knows what will come next. In about three to four months. Just imagine, we say that people will take to the streets. People like us. People in masks, people without faces. Those who now return by metro and trains to the suburbs. Just think about that. At least for a minute . . .' As the group members recalled, 'The audience in their chairs applauded. We turned and left the room.'¹⁶

Another multimedia work, 'Purification', exhibited in 2009 at the Krasnyi Oktyabr art centre, was an uncompromising attack on the art establishment (see Figure 5.5). In an installation of lightboxes and a video, the screen at the top showed people gathering for a fancy vernissage of an art exhibition in the presence of well-known figures from the art and business establishment. The mid-level

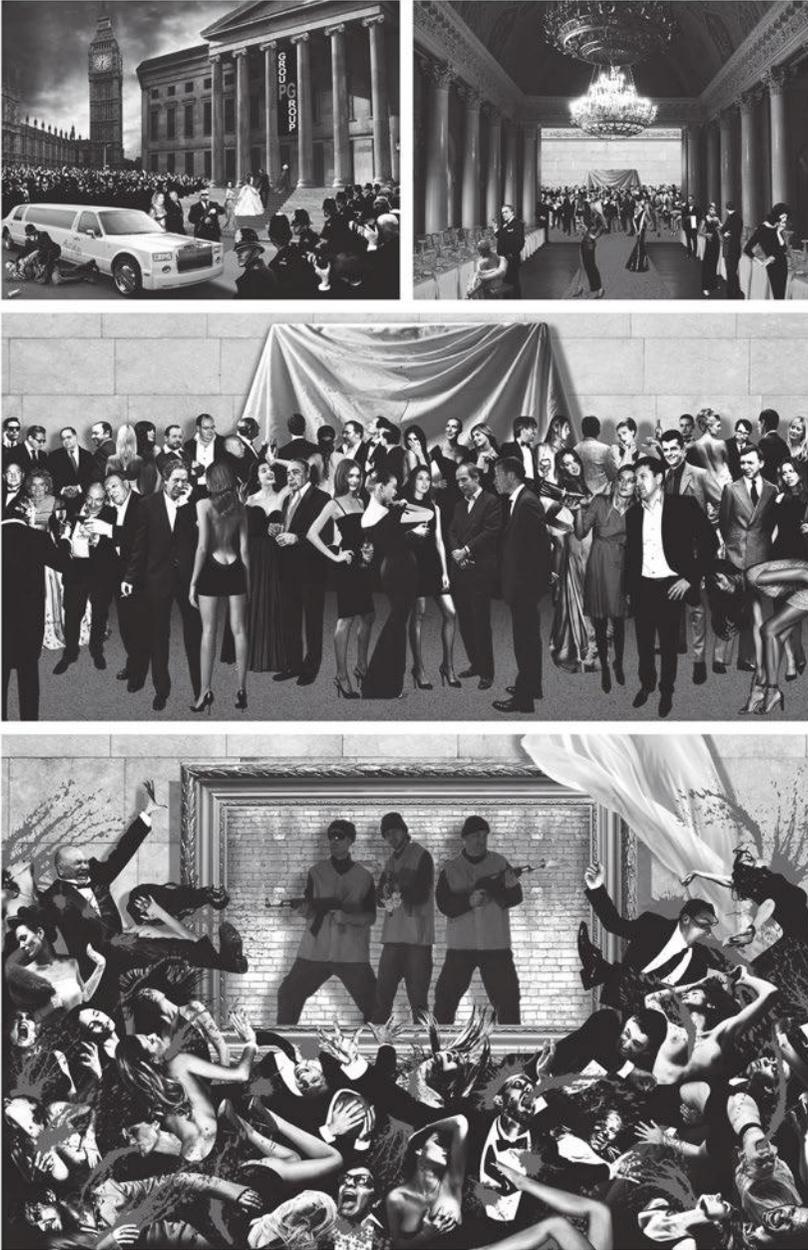


Figure 5.5 PG Group, 'Purification' (Ochishchenie) 2008 (mixed media)

Source: Courtesy of I. Falkovskii.

screen showed people mingling in front of a large painting, waiting for it to be unveiled. On the lower-level screen, a video showed a group of terrorists bursting from the frame of the painting, shooting. Well-dressed people lay dead on the floor in front of them.

Falkovskii was both surprised and disappointed when the gallery owner approached him after the exhibition, asking to buy the work for a client. The PG group wanted to make a statement against the commercialization of the art world and to start a discussion. Instead, they were being asked to sell the work to one of those being criticized. Their work had become one more commercialized product on the art market.¹⁷

The liberal intelligentsia regarded PG as avowedly anti-racist and anti-fascist. *The New Times* (2009) called them ‘artists with a civic position’. Ilya Falkovskii was also behind a handbook for anti-fascists, which was published on the Internet and played a significant role in the creation and practical work of anti-fascist groups throughout Russia.¹⁸

In October 2009, the group’s ‘This Is the End’ exhibition was part of the programme of the Moscow Art Biennale at the Vinzavod and the newly opened Zhir Gallery, which specialized in protest art. One of the exhibited works, ‘The Death of Gods’, dealt specifically with the issue of racism and xenophobia. A multimedia video and music lightbox showed two black men walking peacefully through a suburb being attacked and killed by a gang of white racist skinheads.¹⁹ The work was extremely violent, but the message was anti-racist and anti-fascist.

PG produced works of art with a radical anarchist message that at the same time carried complicated layers of meaning and interpretation. They played excessively on symbols of aggression, frustration and violence, directed against the system, the establishment, and their myths and concepts. It is intriguing that the group was so well received in the art community. They were appreciated not only for their professional skill, but also for their irreverent play in which they lived out forbidden fantasies.

In parallel with the art exhibited in galleries, PG also presented works on its website which intended to depict fantasies and the fear of civil war but also reflected weapon fetishism and romanticized violence. The video ‘PG Dreli Vampyre’ shows a young man in a balaclava entering an apartment next to the Kremlin who starts shooting through the window at the presidential motorcade to the background music telling how the former girlfriend had left him.²⁰ In another video, ‘Somalia is Already Here’, group members dressed as terrorists fake an attack on the president’s motorcade and on official buildings.²¹ Other works contained outright criticism of Putin: one photo montage included genitals illustrating the most humiliating Russian swearwords (Quenelle, 2011). Even though people in the Moscow art world knew that these pieces could not be interpreted literally, they gave rise to an intense debate. They would also later cause trouble for Falkovskii. The authorities already had their eye on the group. By then, however, Falkovskii had become disillusioned about the possibility that art could contribute to a serious discussion of societal issues.²²

Against the lifestyle of the establishment

In line with the anti-establishment focus of PG, the Protez art group consciously provoked different aspects of what could be called the conventional bourgeois way of life. The Protez group was formed in St Petersburg in April 2006 by Grigori Yushchenko, Igor Mezheritskii and Aleksander Vilkin. Yushchenko (born in 1986) became the best-known member of the group and was nominated for the Kandinsky Prize in 2008 and 2010.²³ The Protez group declared that its purpose was to expose the ‘total idiocy in the surrounding reality’. They were, therefore, as they explained, carrying out a kind of anthropological study of human life. As early as 2006, in their first large exhibition, the group demonstrated its favourite themes – ‘sex, violence, drugs, madness and war’ (NOMI, 2008). Their genres included remaking advertising posters by painting over what they found in the street. The group became part of the established art world at an early stage, first in St Petersburg and later in Moscow.

In April 2008, Protez caused a scandal in St Petersburg with the exhibition ‘Advertisement for Drugs’. The exhibition consisted of paintings on posters, with the logos of the original advertisement left visible. The paintings and texts were satirical and provocative in both form and content. Most of the drugs were legal products that could be bought at any Russian pharmacy. Acetone, for example, was called ‘an old friend in a new package’. A painting about cocaine had the accompanying text: ‘not on sale everywhere: Ask for it in elite institutions in the city’ (see Figure 5.6).²⁴ The State Committee Against Drugs considered the exhibition propaganda for drugs and an unhealthy lifestyle. The exhibition was closed after a local television channel broadcast details of its content. The paintings were made on old advertisements for pop concerts and similar events. The names of the musicians were still visible, and they were furious about being drawn into the scandal (*Gazeta St Petersburg*, 2008). Works from another of Yushchenko’s projects were nominated for the Kandinsky Prize and shown in Moscow in the autumn of 2008.²⁵

In October 2009, Protez exhibited at the Gelman Gallery in Moscow. This exhibition, ‘Pornoholocaust’, took the group deep into the dark sides of society. The idea emanated from six months of media reports about rape, battery and sexual mutilation (see Figure 5.7). The result was ten large paintings intended as homage to ‘the victims of all the sex massacres taking place daily’. The exhibition got its name from the biblical word for massacre or sacrifice, to which the group added the prefix ‘porno’.

Protez existed in the world of gallery art and their works were exhibited in established commercial galleries. In one interview, its members were asked whether their art could be considered commercial. They answered that art can only be either qualitative or non-qualitative art, interesting or uninteresting, with content or without content (*Chastnyi korrespondent*, 2009).

Against the police

PG early on reflected frustrations in forms and content that were full of aggression. One specific target was the police force (militsiya), and it soon became a target in works by several artists. In 2009–2010, lack of trust in the police reached

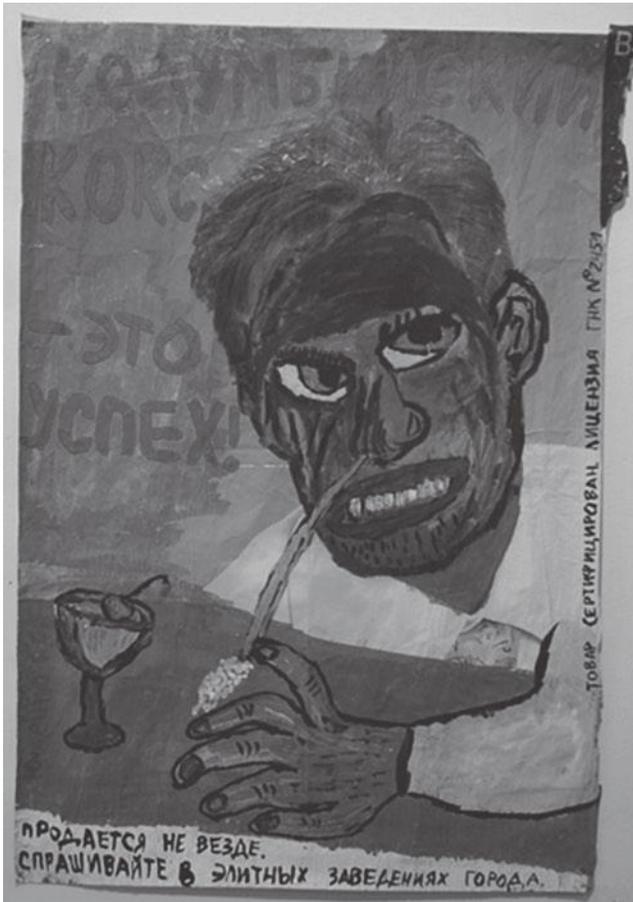


Figure 5.6 Grigorii Yushchenko, ‘Colombian Cocaine’ 2006 (acrylic, paper)

Note: The text is: ‘Colombian cocaine – a success. Not for sale everywhere. Ask for it in elite institutions of the city’.

Source: Courtesy of G. Yushchenko.

a peak in society after several scandals involving policemen.²⁶ The media reported cases of police corruption and cases in which policemen beat detainees to death or went berserk in public places killing innocent bystanders.²⁷ The PG installation ‘A Defeated Policeman’, shown in October 2009 at the Gallery Zhir, therefore came at an opportune time. It realistically showed a policeman lying with his face on the ground and an axe through his uniform cap and head.

The installation was heavily criticized, but was defended by the art critic Andrei Erofeev. He considered that the installation was ‘implemented fantasy’ and argued that art cannot ignore ‘the field of the wild, non-cultivated, “nature”-life, which from time to time flushes up as uncontrolled passions and aggression’. He answered those critics who claimed that PG’s work encouraged hatred in society by claiming that ‘hooliganism in culture, embodied in



Figure 5.7 Grigorii Yushchenko, ‘The Demobbed Gerontophiles’ (Dembelya gerontofily) from the series ‘Pornoholocaust’ 2009 (acrylic, paper)

Source: Courtesy of G. Yushchenko.

illusionary images and playful behaviour, on the contrary sublimates these acute phenomena of human nature. After having experienced a catharsis in front of the grotesque image of the “defeated policeman”, the viewer will leave liberated from the yoke of hostile feelings. He will be open again to friendly contacts’ (Erofeev, 2010). Herein lies the therapy of mass culture, he said. Not everyone in the art community found this argument convincing. Many found the work one-dimensional. When compared with ‘Era of Mercy’ by Sinie nosy, which had upset the Russian Minister of Culture, Aleksander Sokolov, in 2007, ‘A Defeated Policeman’ reflects a shift in the social climate from joyfully mocking the police to frustration and hatred.

Grigorii Yushchenko produced a series of works clearly directed against the police but in a playful, absurdist and grotesque form. The series ‘Magical Psychedelic Police’ was nominated for the Kandinsky Prize in 2010 (see Figure 5.8). It consisted of nine oil paintings and videos. Using his own specific language and bright colours, Yushchenko alluded to the activities of policemen in their offices, high on acetone, mushrooms and drugs. While the effect seemed comical to some viewers, others considered the paintings offensive to



Figure 5.8 Grigorii Yushchenko, ‘The Young Lieutenant Nikolai Anashkin Launches a Paper Aircraft made from a Page of the Russian Constitution’ from the project ‘Magic Psychedelic Police’ 2010 (cardboard, oil)

Source: Courtesy of G. Yushchenko.

the police. Yushchenko’s own text for the exhibition catalogue underscored the irony behind the project:

The focus of the project ‘Magic Psychedelic Police’ is to create a new positive image of Russia and the Russian militsia. Everybody knows that in 2009–10 the Russian police force was a victim of persecution. Every day the mass media told us about crimes in which its men were involved. Russian people now have a picture of the militsia as a vicious, uncontrollable force that kills, rapes and is never punished. I want to offer an alternative vision. In this project I show the militsia as men who are carrying out magical and psychedelic practices. I show that police officers are something like a sainted caste. They are engaging in strange practices and bloody rituals to save us all. Look at their hats – they have an image of a third eye. Policemen are not ordinary men. They are the Magic Psychedelic Police.

(*Kandinsky Prize*, 2010)

When Yushchenko’s works were exhibited at the Perm Museum of Contemporary Art later in 2010, the head of the police in the region took the exhibition to court, but the only criminal charge he could come up with was misuse of the Russian flag. Yushchenko had painted the Russian flag on the wall of the police

station in all the paintings, and Russian law forbids the non-sanctioned use of the state symbol. In February 2011, however, a magistrate concluded that Yushchenko had not violated the Criminal Code and closed the case (*Lenta*, 2011).

Thus, criticism of the police had become a theme in the gallery world. Criticism of the police would, however, be taken to new heights outside the galleries in the art of the streets by a new wave of Actionism (see below).

Against the authorities

As is noted above, the most radical anarchist works directed against the authorities were produced by the PG group. Their works demonstrated frustration and desperation, as well as a kind of romanticism of rebellion, aggression and violence. They played with symbols from a globalized world but also from Russian reality. Konstantin Latyshev mocked the authorities and the system but from a different position than that of PG and Protez. His pictures of Russian life were made as if by an observer using techniques from advertisements, such as distinct lines, bright colours and cogent texts. They were ironic and sad commentaries on Moscow life. In his personal exhibition at Gallery Aidan in October 2011, two works stood out. The first, a view of Moscow with a multi-lane highway in the foreground and a Stalin-era skyscraper in the background, reflecting a heavy authoritarian atmosphere, was accompanied by the text ‘This is not the Third Rome, this is the Third World’ – a play on the words *Rim* (Rome) and *mir* (world).

The second painting, in the tradition of Sots-Art, showed two identical Lenin mausoleums – one dedicated to Putin and the other to Medvedev (see Figure 5.9)

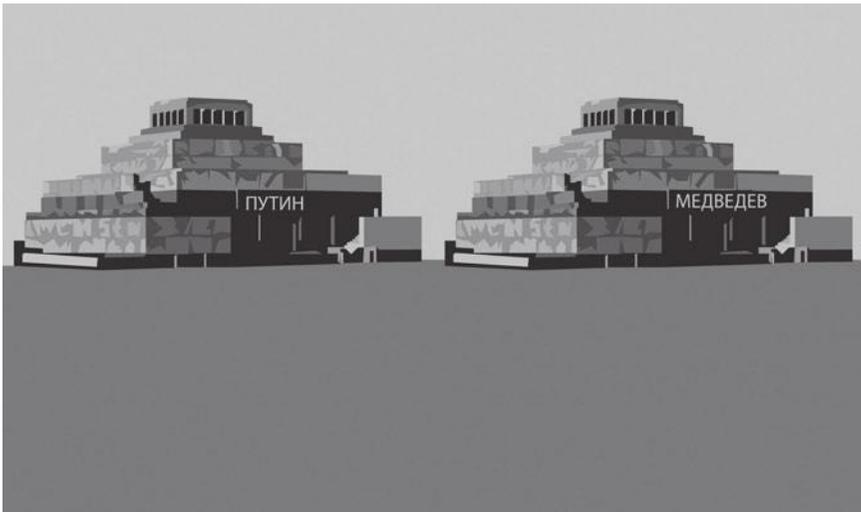


Figure 5.9 Konstantin Latyshev, ‘The Mausoleums’ 2010 (oil on canvas)

Source: Courtesy of K. Latyshev.

(Tolstova, 2011). The painting conveyed a strong feeling of stagnation, a stagnated state power system and leaders far beyond the reach and influence of the people.

A more subtle political gesture directed against the authorities was made by Yurii Albert in his work 'Moscow Poll'. First exhibited in 2009, it achieved a breakthrough in 2011 when he won the Kandinsky Prize in the category Project of the Year. Albert, a leading figure of the middle generation of Moscow Conceptualists of the 1990s, never engaged in any kind of politicized art. This piece referred to the world of art but had a clear political subtext that targeted Russian political life. It consisted of a series of posters with questions to the onlooker on contemporary art. Among Albert's questions were: 'Do you believe that the quality of a work of art depends on your opinion of it?'; 'Are you certain that you can distinguish a good work of art from a bad one?'; 'Does the intensification of censorship and self-censorship affect the quality of contemporary Russian art?'; 'Do you believe that a good work of art can change your life for the better?'; and 'Would the fact that no Russian artists protested against the war with Georgia cause you to change your attitude towards contemporary Russian art?'. Each question was followed by the request: 'If "yes", please place your ballot in the left box; if "no", in the right box' (Yurii Albert, 2011).

Writing in the catalogue for the 2009 exhibition, the art critic Ekaterina Degot argued that contemporary art usually asks questions but is seldom interested in the responses, and the viewer remains passive. When a 'political artist' asks questions, most viewers consider it their right not to respond. Therefore, it is extraordinary when an artist is able to break these unwritten rules. She gave the example of the artist Hans Haake, whose contribution to an exhibition in New York in 1971 had been a public poll on political topics. Haake's purpose had been the provocative act of asking a direct political question on the sensitive issue of US involvement in the Vietnam War, but the answers from the visitors were less interesting to him. Yurii Albert, on the other hand, asked for answers, and Degot said that it would be interesting to know the answers to his intriguing questions. While Haake, said Degot, knew that questions critical of the government were perceived by the viewer as a political act because in the West art exists in a public space, nothing similar existed in the Soviet Union, and the artists of the 1970s and 1980s could not hope to ask questions or receive responses. She rhetorically asked: 'Can Russian art today hope for this?' (Degot, 2009).²⁸

Haake was a relevant reference. To Albert, Haake represented an interesting kind of political art because the latter's works functioned in two directions. According to Albert: '... politics becomes a metaphor for art, and art becomes a metaphor for politics' (Albert, 2011a). And he added that he doesn't like works that function only in one direction, asking political questions from the territory of art but without functioning the other way around.

Albert's work was first exhibited during the Moscow Biennale of 2009 against the background of the Moscow regional elections that year, which were criticized by the non-governing political parties for numerous violations, although the public did not react at the time. His piece was nominated for the Kandinsky Prize in the autumn of 2011, just before that year's parliamentary elections. In his speech

at the award ceremony, about ten days after the elections, he referred directly to them and said that art consists of a dialogue among artists and between the artist and the viewer. ‘My installation “Moscow Poll” is an imitation of elections or a public opinion poll. I had in mind that when we are standing in front of any artwork, we are always in the situation of choice. The ballot box in my installation was a metaphor. The conditions turned out such that my metaphor gained direct meaning, and the question of imitation of the elections arose’ (Albert, 2011b).

Albert’s work had an intriguing structure of perceptions and understandings. In the politically heated atmosphere of December 2011 it was read primarily as a political piece of art and even a political act. His work demonstrated that even the conceptualist artist not normally interested in political art had now entered the field of dissent in art.

Beyond the galleries

Russian performance art was revived in the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, as a new generation took over. The Moscow Actionists of the 1990s disappeared as the new millennium opened and Vladimir Putin became president in 2000. While in the 1990s the police had to a great extent tolerated the Actionists because they were artists, the Putin regime did not tolerate any unsanctioned street activities. The common denominator of the new socially oriented art developing outside of galleries was the way this art sometimes wildly exaggerated and at other times calmly underlined the absurdity of real life. While not always directly addressing the authorities, the authorities indirectly became the target of this art.

In an analysis comparing the Actionism of the 1990s with the Actionists of the first decade of the new century, Viktoriya Lomasko and Anton Nikolaev (2011) claimed that the new generation was more politicized than its predecessor. The Actionists of the 1990s had been strongly influenced by the heritage of Soviet non-conformist art in the sense that they did not want to intervene in politics. Their main purpose had been to defend art. Osmolovskii had made statements in the 1990s in which he claimed that the territory of art had vanished and the political field lay open for the artist, but this did not result in artists’ involvement in politics (Lomasko and Nikolaev, 2011). The new generation of Actionists is different in this regard, since they ‘make politics’: ‘[I]f previously we saw an artist whose statements give rise to social and political thought, we now see groups of politicians and social consultants in disguise, using artistic means’ (Lomasko and Nikolaev, 2011). Lomasko and Nikolaev called this new phenomenon ‘artivism’. Although their words seem to better apply to art of engagement (see Chapter 6), they also provide a key to dissent art activism.

The contemporary activists searched for tactics and techniques that would help them attract public attention. In contrast to the Actionists of the 1990s, the new generation actively strove to go beyond the narrow art community and reach out to a wider audience. They found a language that allowed them to be both political and non-political at the same time, an ideal combination for working under the conditions of the Putin era – and they knew how to work with the Internet.



Figure 5.10 'Monstratsiya' in Novosibirsk, 1 May 2013

Note: The text of the banner is 'Forward to the Dark Past'.

Source: Courtesy of A. Loskutov.

Performance in the provinces: The Monstratsiya

In 2004 the artist Artem Loskutov and the group of artists known as Babushka posle pokhoron (Grandma after the Funeral) organized an event in Novosibirsk called Monstratsiya (*Regnum*, 2004). It was something between a demonstration and a carnival.²⁹ Acting like a flash mob in carnival dress, and spouting absurd slogans, they joined the Communist Party May Day demonstration. Over the next few years the Monstratsiya gathered momentum; more people either joined in or carried out their own demonstrations. By 2009 it had spread to other cities, and in 2010 the Monstratsiya took place in cities throughout Russia, such as Moscow, St Petersburg, Volgograd, Omsk, Perm, Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Novorossiisk and Belgorod (Loskutov, 2010) (see Figure 5.10). The absurdity of the slogans was reminiscent of the Russian Futurists of the early twentieth century. Against the background of the authoritarian trend of the Putin regime, the poetry of nothingness of the Monstratsiya slogans was full of meaning.

'He died for 'Y'' (On umer za 'Y')

'Know your place!' (Zdes vam ne tut)³⁰

'Vera, don't drink!' (Vera, ne pei)

'I have crocodiled, I am crocodiling and I will crocodile'
(Krokodil, krokodilyu i budu krokodilit)

‘So what?’ (Nu i chto)

‘Contract is evil’ (Kontrakt – zlo)

‘I don’t know what to shout’ (Ya ne znayu, chto orat)

(*Chastnyi korrespondent*, 2010)

Loskutov explained the purpose of Monstratsiya as: ‘an effort to get hold of some autonomy, an autonomous statement to say that we are not interested in political games. It is an effort to not play according to their rules, to work neither for the authorities nor against them but to create a different system of mutual relations, and gather people for whom this is important’ (*Chastnyi korrespondent*, 2010).

After starting out as a group in the Communist May Day demonstration, Monstratsiya later convened separately. In both 2007 and 2008 they applied for permission from the authorities. Permission was reluctantly granted. The Novosibirsk authorities were deeply concerned about the Monstratsiya demonstration held in their city, and in 2009 tried to deny permission by claiming that another rally was scheduled to take place at the same place and time. The authorities’ fears were reflected in the words of a local official, quoted on one of the banners, ‘If everybody starts to march like this it will end up in anarchy’.

In an indirect and non-political way, Monstratsiya exposed the authorities’ restrictions on the right of assembly and to hold public meetings as well as the unprofessional handling by the police of cases of supposed extremism. The local police – in particular its new anti-extremist unit, Unit E, set up in 2008 – soon had its eye on Loskutov and began to harass him (*Grani*, 2009). The police found it difficult to understand the kind of activities he was carrying out. They were mystified by a slogan like ‘Don’t teach us how to live, or else we’ll teach you’ (Ne uchite nas zhit, a ne to my nauchim vas) (Golunov, 2009). In 2009, Loskutov was arrested and accused of ‘preparing organized mass disturbances’. In police reports, he was described as ‘a leader of a criminal group of young people with the purpose of organizing mass disturbances, destroying shops, offices and preparing arson’ (Machulina, 2009). In an attempt to understand and explain why the local authorities were so strongly against Loskutov, Diana Machulina wrote:

In Loskutov’s actions there is an element of Sots-Art, a deconstruction of the language of ideology, when an absurd action by some people demonstrates the absurdities in the actions of others. The slogan ‘Y’ hardly threatens the existence of the centre ‘E’. And there is no official edict that ‘it is forbidden to crocodile in the streets’. The arm of the law, however, suspects that behind these actions there is a hidden, incomprehensible threat. It is possible that the tough penal measures against Monstratsiya this year were taken for some ridiculous reason. When the mayor’s office refused to give permission to the ‘monstrants’, the youth came up with the idea of carrying out single-person pickets: every participant was to go to the mayor’s office and with the strength of their thought try to levitate the building 100–500 metres, and hold it up there for some time while the Monstratsiya took place on the

liberated territory below. Obviously, the joke was interpreted as a genuine action comparable to the seizure of railway and telegraph stations. It is nice that official structures believe to such a degree in the power of thought, but the fact that they consider thoughts to be extremism and want to control them is hardly honourable for a state which calls itself democratic.

(Machulina, 2009)³¹

In the end the authorities did not succeed in taking legal action against Loskutov for preparing illegal acts, but instead convicted him in 2009 for the possession of marijuana. Loskutov was fined 20 000 roubles, but denied the accusations and, with his lawyer, appealed to a higher court.

In April 2011, Loskutov won the Innovatsiya Prize in the category Best Regional Project. The National Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) citation stated that:

Monstratsiya is a playful act without a prepared scenario, close to a happening, a mass artistic act in the form of a demonstration with slogans, which the participants in the project come up with. . . . Monstratsiya as a form of public art is located in the space between artistic activities, social activism and political gesture. By making doubt and travesty 'serious' political demonstrations, Monstratsiya becomes a distinctive protest against the lack of public politics in the country, and not only demarcates the borders of civil liberties but also broadens these borders, thereby becoming a school of solidarity, creative activity and civil liberty.³²

Performances at the centre: The Voina group

Throughout this period, a number of small groups of art activists were becoming established in Moscow and St Petersburg. The 'Bombily' group (2005) and the 'Trade Union of Street Artists' (2007) were set up by Anton Nikolaev (known as Bezumets, Madman) and Alexander Rossikhin (known as Supergeroi, Superhero). They were both familiar with the history of Moscow Actionism from their previous work with Oleg Kulik.³³ Nikolaev contributed to the formation of the Voina group in February 2007, but the groups went their separate ways in 2008.³⁴

One of the best-known actions by Bombily was a performance action in April 2007, 'The Auto Race of the Dissenters' (Nesoglasnykh). A small Zhiguli car was driven slowly through the centre of Moscow at night with a mattress tied to the roof and a naked young couple on top of it. While stopped at a filling station, the young couple started to make love. The idea for the project had come after a March of Dissenters (Marsh Nesoglasnykh), in which they had participated earlier in the day. The action was considered a continuation of the demonstration and a kind of break away from the control of society, symbolized by breaking society's control of sexuality. Recalling this action a few years later, Nikolaev said that demonstrating sexual freedom 'is the only possible protest which will not be engaged in a political paradigm'.³⁵ A video of the action rapidly spread on the Internet. Nikolaev continued to write about performance art and to carry out

actions, including the Femida action outside the Taganskyi Court in protest against the trial of the organizers of the 'Forbidden Art' exhibition.

Formed in February 2007, Voina (War) initially consisted of a core of former and current students of philosophy. The group developed into the most successful art group at raising public attention and transgressing the sphere of art. At first highly controversial within the art community, Voina became a recognized part of it. Nonetheless, the group members repeatedly stated that they were not artists.

Voina's actions were intended from the start to create a shock effect in order to attract the attention of the media. With Oleg Vorotnikov and Petr Verzilov as front figures, one of the first actions consisted of throwing cats on the counter of a McDonald's restaurant in central Moscow in May 2007.³⁶ The group managed to break the wall of silence created by the mainstream media. Their action at the Timiryazev Biological Museum in Moscow in March 2008, a few days before the presidential election, was the big breakthrough for the group with the Russian media. With this action Voina began a new era of political art provocation. Everyone knew before the presidential election that Dimitrii Medvedev, the appointed candidate of Vladimir Putin, would win. The action 'Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear' (Ebis za naslednika medvezhonka) was a clear reference to the upcoming elections and to Medvedev as the presidential candidate. Medvedev's surname is derived from the word for bear (*medved*), but a bear is also the symbol of the pro-Putin political party. Five young couples, among them a young woman in the late stages of pregnancy, copulated or faked copulation in one of the museum halls. The action was filmed and uploaded to the Internet for all to see.³⁷ Part of the context of the action was that Putin had recently launched a national programme to raise Russia's birth rate. The performance can be interpreted in various ways, but it was obviously a mockery of the upcoming election.

The action created a scandal. The criticism centred on what was considered the amoral behaviour of the group rather than the implicit political criticism of how the elections were being carried out and the way the presidential candidate had been selected.³⁸ The patriotic Orthodox organization Narodnyi sobor, under the leadership of Oleg Kassin, tried to take Voina to court, but without success. Kassin wrote, 'I consider the actions of those who organized an orgy in the Biological Museum an act of hooliganism unprecedented in its cynicism, which seriously violates the social order, offends the morals of society and has been carried out by an organized group with direct intent and by previous concert. I am seeking to initiate a procurator's investigation and to bring the organizers of the orgy in the State Biological Museum to trial'.³⁹ Supporters of Kassin saw the performance as a great conspiracy: 'Exactly this "contemporary art" is continuously propagated in our electronic media. The purpose is obvious – to bring up Russian youth to be a generation of idiots for which "mass copulation" is the same as drinking a bottle of "Cola" or "eating Snickers". It is already obvious to everyone that a fully functional ideological machine is at work . . . and that "liberal standards" of "cool" daily behaviour are being hammered into the heads of children and

teenagers' (Ievlev, 2008). The prosecutor's office, however, found no legal basis in the Criminal Code to initiate legal action.

The University Council, which initially planned to expel the student members of the group, backed down because they feared the media attention on the university.⁴⁰ The university dean decided not to take any further action, and he was criticized for this in the media. In subsequent years Voina continued to carry out regular performances, which the group carefully documented and uploaded to the Internet. Thus, although only a few people actually witnessed the performances live, the documentation on the Internet allowed hundreds of thousands of visitors to view them. In this way, the Voina group became well known in wider circles.

Voina started as an art project with a general anarchist ambition. Their action 'Cop in a Priest's Cassock' (*Ment v popovskoi ryase*) was conceptually more sophisticated, although also scandalous in content.⁴¹ Vorotnikov, dressed in a priest's cassock on top of the trousers and shirt of a policeman's uniform and a fake police cap, walked from the headquarters of the United Russia Party to a nearby supermarket, filled a basket with food and alcohol and left without paying. No one in the store stopped him, probably perceiving him to be a representative of the authorities. Voina thus found a way to mock and point the finger at the authorities on burning social issues. As one analyst wrote: 'The activists of Voina clearly felt the wider need to express hatred in relation to the authorities – and responded to this' (Epstein, 2012: 101).

In September 2008 Voina carried out an action 'In Memory of the Dekabrists' at the huge Ashan department store in Moscow. It took place on Moscow City Day and the group members went there under the pretext of filming a gift for the Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov. They brought with them five people, three posing as Central Asian migrant workers and two as Russian gay activists. As they entered the store with their equipment, security personnel and representatives of the store approached them to ask what they were up to. The group had fake documents from the mayor's office that showed that they were allowed to film inside the store. As part of the action, Voina faked a legal process in which the Central Asians and Russian gay activists were 'sentenced to death'. The five men climbed a ladder, had a rope put around their necks, and were hanged with their bodies going into spasms as if dead.⁴² The representatives of the store panicked, not knowing what to do. In the video, the group cut and edited the material as if the store representatives were part of the 'court', and verified that the five were dead. The action was framed as a commemoration of the failed Dekabrist revolt of 1825 against the authoritarian rule of the tsar, which resulted in the execution of five officers. Members of Voina carried a transparency with the text 'Nobody gives a fuck about Pestel'. Pestel was one of the executed officers, and the slogan was meant to show that today no one cares about the democratic values these officers once stood for. The film was dedicated to Mayor Luzhkov, described by the group as a violator of the rights of both migrant workers and gay people. Although the action was said to be directed against the xenophobia and homophobia of Mayor Luzhkov,

the way the group repeated the language of homophobia and xenophobia in the action raised questions.⁴³

A central tenet of Voina was not to recognize the authorities but instead to demonstrate a lack of respect towards them. In the action ‘Storming the White House’ (Shturm Belogo Doma) of 2008 (see Figure 5.11), the group managed to put a huge laser light projector on the roof of Hotel Ukraina, in the neighbourhood of the White House, the government building in Moscow, and direct laser beams on the facade of the building in the form of a skull and crossbones.⁴⁴ The action took place on the night of 7 November, the date that commemorates the October Revolution. The use of a laser cannon, which is expensive and difficult to get hold of, raised questions about who was supporting the group.

Voina’s actions were statements in the political realm, but the interpretation of the message behind the group’s actions varied. Aleksei Plutser-Sarno, a self-appointed ideologue of the group, who cooperated with the group until early 2011, said that the action against the White House could be interpreted as a warning to the government that anarchy might result from its policies. He also explained the action by saying that ‘contemporary art cannot paint canvas but needs to find a new language’ and that he found the White House to be the best ‘canvas’ for the artist – and laser much better than oil paint. At the same time, the action against



Figure 5.11 Rostislav Lebedev, ‘Homage to Voina: View of the Government Building of the Russian Federation the Night between 6 and 7 November 2008’ 2013 (oil on canvas)

Source: Courtesy of R. Lebedev.

the White House was ‘empty’ and ‘open’ to each observer to interpret, he said, and thus a mirror of the opinions and understanding of the onlookers.⁴⁵ The Voina group never explained their actions, however.

Due to its consistent artistic invention and demonstrable lack of respect towards the authorities, the group managed to take contemporary art out of the narrow world of the gallery and bring it to the attention of wider groups of the population. Voina won the respect of the art community and was represented at the 2009 Moscow Biennale by a portfolio on its actions. The group received support from leading figures on the Moscow art scene, such as Andrei Erofeev. After a confrontation between Voina and members of Orthodox–patriotic organizations at an open hearing about the trial of ‘Forbidden Art’, Erofeev wrote that the Voina group involuntarily involves people in its engaged actions and demonstrates ‘the responsibility of the artist in a situation when a majority of citizens don’t give a shit’ (Erofeev, 2008).

However, Voina was also heavily criticized. One of its most prominent critics was Anatolii Osmolovskii (2010), a leading Actionist of the 1990s, who considered Voina’s actions, in contrast to the actions he had himself carried out more than a decade earlier, not art.

In May 2010, Voina carried out the Blue Bucket action in Moscow, which brilliantly expressed the feelings of many citizens frustrated by the blue flashing light on the cars of senior officials (see Chapter 7). Misuse of the blue light was the cause of many traffic jams in the city. Leonid Nikolaev, who had a background in the liberal and democratic Solidarity movement, walked with a blue bucket on his head, symbolizing the blue lights on the roof of expensive VIP cars at traffic lights and crossroads in central Moscow.⁴⁶ The action, documented and shown on the Internet, was viewed by hundreds of thousands in only a few days.

With its actions, the Voina group tried to transgress art, taking it beyond its traditional sphere. This raised interesting questions about the confines of art. Leonid Nikolaev said in an interview that the task of an action is not to reduce options but to increase them. In this sense, the Voina activist is ‘both an artist and a politician at the same time’.⁴⁷ As is mentioned above, at other times members of Voina refused to identify themselves as artists. They did not recognize museums and galleries, although they did agree to participate in exhibitions. In spite of this inconsistency over the identity of the group, it was as artists that they were judged, evaluated and supported by the arts community when the group ran into difficulties in November 2010.

The action that would bring the Voina group to the attention of people throughout Russian society was carried out in June 2010. Called ‘Prick: Prisoner of the FSB’ (Khui v plenu u FSB), it consisted of a 65-metre-high phallus drawn on the asphalt of the Liteinyi bridge in the neighborhood of the FSB building just before the bridge opened for night traffic on the river in central St Petersburg (see Figure 5.12). In a well-organized action, the group members managed to draw the phallus on the bridge in only 23 seconds. As the bridge opened, the phallus was raised high.⁴⁸ Although Voina never explains its actions, this one was perceived by many as a gesture of ‘fuck you’ directed against the FSB (Galperina, 2010).⁴⁹ One

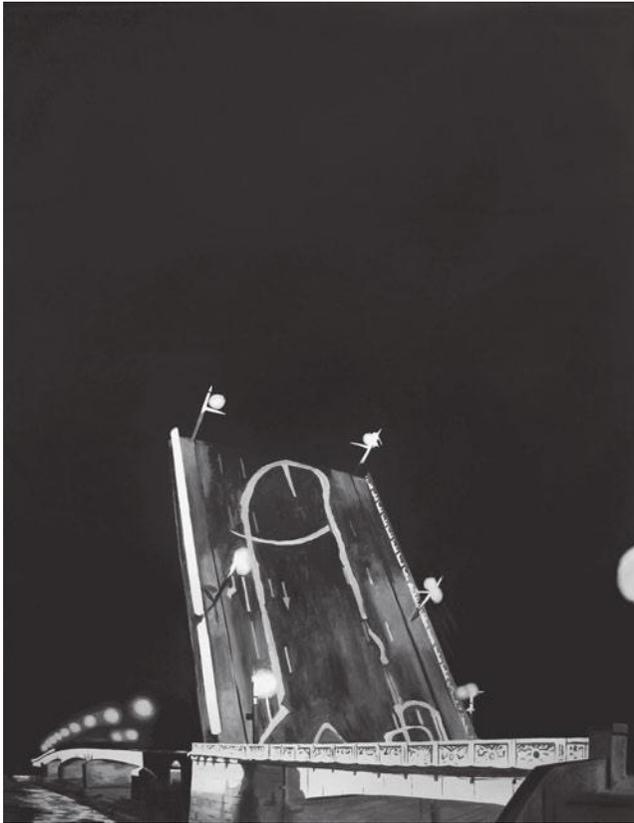


Figure 5.12 Rostislav Lebedev, ‘Homage to Voina: View of the Liteinyi Bridge in St Petersburg the Night between 15 and 16 June 2010’ 2012 (oil on canvas)

Source: Courtesy of R. Lebedev.

group member was detained by the police for two days, accused of vandalism and minor hooliganism, but he was later released.⁵⁰

In September 2010, Voina ended its series of successful actions with ‘The Palace Coup’ (Dvortsovyi perevorot) at Mikhailovskii Castle in St Petersburg. The action, directed against police corruption, took place outside the building that over 200 years before had been the stage for an attempted coup d’état. The action was intended metaphorically to illustrate that the reform of the police force announced by President Medvedev needed urgently to be carried out. As part of the action, the group overturned a police car (*Rosbalt*, 2010). Waiting outside the castle until the policemen left their car and entered the building, members of Voina locked the gate and turned the police car upside down. The message seemed clear – in order to reform the police, you need a radical act. On the Internet, however, the action was presented as if a child had lost his ball under a police car and, as an act of

kindness, group members had turned the car over and politely handed the ball back to his mother. The group therefore played with different pretexts.⁵¹

In November 2010, Oleg Vorotnikov and Leonid Nikolaev were arrested for the 'Palace Coup' action and were detained until late February 2011. Many members of the contemporary art community, who had criticized this action believing that the group had violated the law and overstepped the borders of art, now saw the action in a different light. They opposed the arrest and detention of the two for something that had been mainly an artistic action. Thus, many in the contemporary art community now supported Voina. The art website *Open Space* interviewed people from the arts community about whether they supported Voina in this new situation, and they all confirmed that they did. One artist among the respondents explained: 'In general I am positive about the activities of the group although I have a lot of aesthetic and ideological questions for them. I think it is necessary to demonstrate solidarity first of all with the critical and protest impulses, which I want to believe is the basic content of their actions; and with the effort (successful or unsuccessful) to break out of the boundaries of the intellectual ghetto of contemporary art. Finally, with the utopian hope that art may be accessible to everybody as an instrument for overcoming restrictions dictated by the social order' (*Open Space*, 2010). A video was made in support of the two, with statements from several well-known people in the cultural sphere (*Grani*, 2011a; *Grani-TV*, 2010).

Vorotnikov and Nikolaev were accused of 'hooliganism followed by the use of violence or the threat thereof and damage to property', according to article 213, part 1, of the Russian Criminal Code. Such an accusation presupposes a 'crude lack of respect for society and violation of the social order'. Their detention was prolonged in January 2011, which caused a strong reaction from people in the arts community and human rights organizations such as Memorial and the SOVA Centre.⁵² Marat Gelman expressed the concern of many in the contemporary art community when he declared that the penalty had to correspond to the misdemeanour: 'We are afraid that instead of an objective sentence for minor hooliganism there will be a monstrous trial, a revenge and we simply give notice that the art community will be absolutely on the side of the Voina group . . . ' (Radio Svoboda, 2011a).

Vorotnikov and Nikolaev were released in late February 2011, still waiting for the legal process to start, after the world-famous graffiti artist Banksy intervened on their behalf to post bail for their release. The procurator closed the case about six months later. However, in the spring of that year the situation deteriorated for Vorotnikov when he was accused of violence against the police in another case. Wanted by the police, he went underground (*Grani*, 2011b).

Voina had split in late 2009.⁵³ The phallus on the bridge and Palace Coup had been carried out by the St Petersburg faction. Thus, while leading members of the Petersburg Voina were on the run, the Moscow faction continued its activities. They continued the theme of opposition to the militsiya, and ridiculed the reform of the police introduced by President Medvedev. In one action female members of the group took a number of female policemen by surprise, embracing and kissing

them in public places such as the metro.⁵⁴ In another action, in August 2011 they peacefully mocked the police by offering policemen food and drink at a traffic post. Voina members stopped passing cars to beg for money to help the families of the low-paid police.⁵⁵ This was a new strategy of non-aggressive offence.

The split in Voina was serious. Just before the Fourth Moscow Art Biennale in September 2011, the St Petersburg branch sent an angry letter to the organizers of the activist art exhibition ‘Media Impact’, which was part of the biennale, accusing the Moscow faction of being fake and a traitor to the original Voina. As the split deepened, the Moscow Voina more determinedly entered the political arena, politically supporting the liberal democratic opposition.

In early 2011, Voina was nominated for the prestigious Innovatsiya Prize for Contemporary Art by the NCCA. The NCCA is a federal state institution, and had tried to avoid the controversial nomination. Several hundred people from the Moscow art *tusovka* attended the award ceremony at the trendy Garazh art centre. Most were convinced that, for political reasons, Voina would not win the prize. However, the group enjoyed strong support from among the art experts on the jury. The audience was pleased but surprised by the announcement that Voina had won in the main category, ‘Project of the Year’. The art critic Ekaterina Degot, a member of the jury, later explained that she saw Voina as a representative of all those who were not allowed a political voice in society. By the time of Voina’s and Monstratsiya’s nominations, however, two members of Voina and Artem Loskutov of Monstratsiya were under arrest and threatened with legal action (Radio Svoboda, 2011b).

The satisfaction at Voina’s award was not shared by everyone in the arts community. Many were not happy that Voina represented the pinnacle of Russian contemporary art of that year. Conservative groups were most shocked. They saw the award as an offence against the state and its ‘honourable institution, the FSB’. Some members of the Public Chamber, an advisory body of well-known people from social and cultural life, appointed by the president, issued a statement in the name of its Council. It called the granting of the prize to Voina ‘a slap in the face of common sense’, and the Ministry of Culture was criticized for not preventing it.⁵⁶ The pro-Putin youth organization Rossiya Molodaya held a demonstration outside the ministry, demanding that the ministry’s budget should not be spent on Innovatsiya in the future.⁵⁷ The minister, however, stated that the ministry was not ‘a censoring organ that questions a decision by professionals concerning laureates – which is the prerogative of experts – and [the ministry] by no means influences this process’.⁵⁸ While conservatives accused Voina of representing everything from the evil of post-modernism in general to a breakdown of all the norms of a decent, civilized cultural life, liberal critics of Voina highlighted the storm of conservatism that Voina had evoked through its actions. Voina members did not attend the award ceremony, and they donated the prize of 400 000 roubles to an organization that provides support and assistance to political prisoners in Russian jails.⁵⁹

After the ceremony, there was much discussion about whether Voina’s actions could be considered art. Boris Groys compared its art with Western political art

and, while still regarding Voina's actions as art, saw the group's activities as different from what is considered 'socially politically engaged art' in the West (*Kommersant Vlast*, 2011). Groys argued that in the West, social-political art includes democratization of the process of artistic production and wider participation in the project by the audience. What Voina does is different: 'it is by its nature an elite gesture, and it is directed towards creating an alternative social space. That is why the alternative Russian audience, which is an elite phenomenon, loves Voina. However such a marking of the alternative space is not the dominant strategy of contemporary social-political art. Quite the contrary' (*Kommersant Vlast*, 2011).

Institutionalization of activist art: Gallery Zhir

An important factor in the development of protest art after 2009 was Gallery Zhir, which was created in May 2009 from the small gallery Refleks at the Art-Strelka art centre.⁶⁰ Gallery Zhir was given its permanent physical space at Vinzavod in early 2010. Its chief curator, Tatyana Volkova, a former colleague of Andrei Erofeev at the Tretyakov Gallery, opened the gallery with support from the Ridzhina (Regina) commercial art gallery. The declared task of the new gallery was to create a non-commercial space for protest art – exhibiting and supporting it and providing a platform for discussion about art.⁶¹ The gallery declared that it wanted to support a young alternative art environment in opposition to the mainstream art world. It would provide space for discussion by young artists and critics, to test new ideas free from the norms of society and the art world.⁶² Volkova began exhibiting the work of Moscow activist artists as well as artists from the provinces. In September 2009 the gallery hosted an exhibition by the PG group within the framework of the third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (the exhibition 'This Is the End'). Other exhibitions hosted the art group Bombily (Svinateka) in December 2009 and the Agenda group in January 2010. In April 2010, the exhibition 'Lawlessness' showcased several art groups and artists. In the 'Lawlessness' exhibition, the gallery asked the questions: How do you look on contemporary society? What would you like to change? How should it be?⁶³ The answers were formulated in an anarchist spirit.

Gallery Zhir was the organizer of the large 'Media Impact' exhibition in 2011. In October 2013 it held a festival of its own on protest and media art,⁶⁴ including first and foremost seminars and discussions, but also the exhibition 'Feminist Pen' (Feministskii karandash) (see Chapter 8).

Conclusions

The dissent art of the early 2000s demonstrated direct disagreement with the official consensus, and did so mainly from an ontological anarchist tradition. The efforts by the regime to create a consensus based on its version of a new Russian identity was answered by dissent art. As the social atmosphere changed during these years, such art was perceived as emphasizing the distinction between 'we'

and ‘those in power’, that is, as reflecting a widening gap between the leaders and the led. Dissent art played with political gestures and symbols. Under increasingly authoritarian conditions, in which public forums and the media could not conduct open political debate, dissent art – especially direct street art actions – replaced ordinary political protest.

Ekaterina Degot’s explanation of why the Innovatsiya Prize jury voted unanimously to reward the Voina group is illustrative in this regard (Degot, 2011). She wrote that the performance ‘Prick: Prisoner of the FSB’ was successful because it expressed a mental state in Russian society at that moment: ‘. . . it seems that everyone is now in favour of Voina. Around Voina an unprecedented consensus has been formed in society, in contemporary art, and – I am sure – the authorities laughed. I believe they laughed out loud . . . before they officially condemned it’. Degot explained that, in a situation in which people’s political rights were restricted and hatred of the authorities and senior leadership had reached such a pitch, the drawing of a phallus on a bridge became a sign of frustrated powerlessness and disagreement. The act became a political gesture that people loved.

‘What can console millions of people who have been deprived of all political liberties? A phallus several metres long, which slowly rises as if it was the whole country, can give them comfort, that’s what it is. . . . This strange situation reflects the [feeling] that has seized our political sphere’. The situation is paradoxical, she continued, when an official award is given to an anti-government group. ‘It only shows that in Russia an individual has no possibility for legal political action . . . other than to be cunning and give the prize on behalf of the state (although not fully in its name)’. She concluded that ‘Voina is art and nothing else’ and added ‘[S]urprisingly this art is fairly conservative as it creates a kind of compensatory niche. Voina exists not in the political sphere, but *instead* of politics’ (emphasis in original).

What followed in 2010 and 2011 was a wave of art activism that expressed the anti-establishment approach that was spreading among young artists. The general level of interest in performance and street art grew. The Garazh Centre of Contemporary Culture opened an international exhibition, ‘100 Years of Performances’, which presented the international experience. Seminars and lectures on this topic were held at both the Garazh Centre and the NCCA. At the Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, the ‘Media Impact’ exhibition was dedicated to performance and street art with famous groups from Russia and elsewhere. This new interest clearly reflected a change in the atmosphere of Russian society. Debates intensified within the arts community. Taking an ethical position became more important.

Thus, art intervened in life. This was a highly relevant dimension for all art activists. Artists not only allowed life to influence their own activities but also wanted art to become a trigger for things to start happening in society and a movement to take off. Falkovskii, for example, had expected the provocative works of PG to initiate a discussion on the issues that he considered most relevant and topical. He was disappointed when people did not discuss the content of the works. The group tried hard to provoke a discussion but the serious issues went unnoticed. Voina’s

phallus performance came later, when the time was ripe for such an act of outrageous frustration. Voina received a stronger response from society than any other art group in Russia at the time. Many came to the conclusion that since 2008–2009, individual art interventions had replaced the non-existent public political sphere. In the vacuum of a non-existent agora, art activists took over politics.

According to the poet Lev Rubinshtein in September 2011, that was why a group like Voina had to be supported: '[W]hen basic categories like dignity, conscience, empathy and honesty disappear . . . art takes on those functions of the social organism which are prevented from working'. This, he said, is sometimes done consciously but more often subconsciously, intuitively as the artist feels responsibility. This responsibility is taken as a question not of personal bravery, but of intuition, personal disposition and professional obligation. These artists fill the non-existent political life 'with content'.

That is why I am so interested in radical forms and genres of contemporary street art, which I consider very important. This art works not only with things that society got tired of and rejected. It persistently and not always tactfully puts large mirrors in front of society from which the latter is not always able to turn away. Society usually does not like this, which is understandable, but therefore such art cannot but be persecuted as hooliganism or anti-social behaviour. Sorry, but art cannot behave differently. And it should not. If it did, it would no longer be art but design at best, just joy for the eye and a fondle for the ear.

(Rubinshtein, 2011b)

Those people, he said, who take to the streets in order to make statements, risking their own health and personal safety, need everybody's support – in contrast to those who demonstrate under the aegis of the mighty state (Rubinshtein, 2011a). Clearly, by now, art activism had entered a new, more visible and openly expressive stage.

Notes

- 1 See Mikhail Bakhtin (2007).
- 2 Taken from the website of the NCCA, which was responsible for the exhibition, by Bode (2010: 68). However, it seems obvious that the NCCA had been told to make such a statement.
- 3 The name Sinie nosy (Blue Noses) is after the Soviet revolutionary acrobatic brigade of the 1920s – Sinyaya bluza (Blue Blouse).
- 4 A number of other artists have contributed to the group over the years, among them Dmitri Bulnygin, Evgenii Ivanov and Konstantin Skotnikov.
- 5 'Blue Noses, Naked Truth/the History of Our Times Seen with the Eyes of a Philistine. The "Shame of Russia" is now in Russia!', Material prepared for the exhibition at the Gelman Gallery, 12 December 2007.
- 6 The work 'Burn, my Candle, Burn' was confiscated by Customs when it was due to be sent to Germany for an exhibition (Aisenshtadt, 2007).
- 7 The 2003 exhibition was closed due to strong reaction to a work about the fantasies of a teenager.

- 8 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 9 Interview with Ilya Falkovskii (2010), <http://62.84.102.40/item.asp?id=151>. Accessed December 2010.
- 10 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 11 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 12 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 13 The series mocked the slogan (Slava Rossii), which had been coined by Russian fascists and was later picked up by the Putin regime. Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 14 When exhibited separately it is called 'Zapreshchenoe'.
- 15 See 'Borba za znanya: Nazvany laureaty Premii Kandinskogo' on the website of the Kandinsky Prize, www.kandinsky-prize.ru/hronika/ceremoniya-nagrajdeniya/2008.
- 16 'Konets kriticheskogo diskursa', 16 December 2008, www.pop-grafika.net/news/theend.html, accessed through www.pop-grafika.net/news/.
- 17 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 18 This work can be found as 'Dat pzdy': Istoriya antifa dvizheniya Rossii i Anglii 1994–2004, Podgotovil Ilyos Falkaev. Pri uchastii Aleksandra Litogo i Revy-Korovy 2004, at <http://pop-grafika.net/pglitra/pizdi>
- 19 The work can be viewed on www.pop-grafika.net/kunst.
- 20 PG Dreli-Vampir. The work can be viewed on www.pop-grafika.net/kunst/ and on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBJzWEPoYZo.
- 21 'Somali uzhe zdes' can be viewed at www.pop-grafika.net/kunst.
- 22 Author's interview with Ilya Falkovskii, Moscow, 29 September 2011.
- 23 See his works at <http://picasaweb.google.com/g.yuschenko>.
- 24 See <http://picasaweb.google.com/g.yuschenko>.
- 25 The project 'Ukusy nasekomykh' (Insect Bites), *Kandinsky Prize* 2008. Yushchenko's works can be viewed at <http://picasaweb.google.com/g.yuschenko>.
- 26 Opinion polls by the Levada Center showed decreased public trust in the police.
- 27 An infamous case is Denis Evsyukov, the head of the police department in a Moscow district, who went berserk in a supermarket in April 2009, shooting nine people. See, for example, 'Vmeste s maiorom, ustroivshim boinyu v supermarket, na vmenyaemost khotyat proverit vsekh moskovskikh militsionerov', 27 April 2009, www.newsru.com/russia/27apr2009/evsukov.html.
- 28 Ekaterina Degot, 'Iskusstvo pravilno zadat otvet', September 2009, material for Yurii Albert's exhibition 'Moscow Poll' at the Paperworks Gallery, Moscow, 25 September–25 October 2009. See also the interview with Albert (2011b).
- 29 See 'Za neskolko dnei do pervomaya v inete nachali povlyatsya slukhi o nekoj Monstratsii', 1 May 2004, www.monstration.narod.ru/monstration.html.
- 30 This was one of the aphorisms of the late prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, www.aphorism-citation.ru/index/0-375.
- 31 Loskutov (2010) told how his action was an homage to a famous event in art history which took place in the US in October 1967. This was an action called by the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies, whose leaders included Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, to encircle the Pentagon building in order to levitate it – through chants led by Allen Ginsberg and songs by the band the Fugs – in order to exorcise the evil spirit of the war machine. See Macphee et al. (2010: 202).
- 32 See the NCCA website, www.ncca.ru/innovation/shortlistitem.jsp?slid=69&contest=6&nom=4&winners=true.
- 33 'Moskovskii infantilizm', 8 July 2008, www.artstrelka.ru/galleries.page?exhibitionID=426&menu=3&id=6.
- 34 On this conflict in and the internal life of Voina, see Epstein (2012). Epstein followed the Voina group for four years and his book is based on private letters, emails, interviews and documents.

- 35 Interview with Anton Nikolaev by Denis Mustafin, Vimeo, 16 August 2010, <http://vimeo.com/14173329>.
- 36 Many of the group's actions are described in Plutser-Sarno (2009).
- 37 'Ebis za naslednika Medvezhonka!', <http://plucer.livejournal.com/55710.html>.
- 38 See, for example, Danilin (2008). In the otherwise liberal newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Daniel Danilin wrote: 'With regard to issues of ethics, the situation looks more serious. Pornographers, brutalized in their efforts to become like animals, have trampled on all norms and morals of society. In recent decades we have become much more "politically correct", in the sense of "tolerant" to all kinds of filth. Yes, many now have nothing against homosexuals. Yes, there are many that consider pornography to be no sin. However, these are a minority. Basically, Russian society is healthy. Our society is moral. Morality is still highly esteemed. Unfortunately, in the media, on television and in other means of communication the situation is the opposite. The rules that feast on depravity, lust and adultery dominate. Any word about morals is met with laughter. He who talks about morality will be accused of being a holy fool. In the media coming together, vices are the norm. But feeling itself an unworthy part, a syphilitic in an environment of blossoming health, the media tries to infect society with its amorality applying the logic: if I am filthy, you also have to be filthy'.
- 39 Oleg Kassin in a letter to the Procurator of Moscow (see Ievlev, 2008).
- 40 Author's interview with Petr Verzilov, Moscow, 22 September 2011.
- 41 'Aktsiya 'Mento-Pop'! Art-anarkho-pank gruppa Voina – opasnye provokatory, sotrudnichayushchie s organami', <http://plucer.livejournal.com/94884.html>.<http://plucer.livejournal.com/94884.html>.
- 42 'Genotsid v Ashane. Chudovishchnaya aktsiya art gruppy Voina', 10 September 2008, http://nnm.ru/blogs/mobbi5/genocid_v_ashane_chudoviwnaya_akciya_artgruppy_voйна.
- 43 See the discussion in Epstein (2012: 114).
- 44 See the action on <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/124449.html#cutid1>.
- 45 *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* No. 73/74, <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/73-74/plucer>. Plutser later used fragments of aggressive statements by Orthodox-patriotic activists about Voina's action, which he compiled in a 'manifesto against contemporary art' read at the Art Moskva fair in 2008.
- 46 *Russia Today*, 'Blue Bucket-head attacks VIP-car opposite Kremlin walls', 24 May 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae5O0U96CY4.
- 47 'Glava art-gruppy "Voina" dal intervyyu', 4 August 2010, www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/21149.
- 48 See <http://plucer.livejournal.com>.
- 49 See also 'Khudozhniki ebut, FSB khuem, 19 June 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw-rx6JqQIE&feature=player_embedded.
- 50 Told by Leonid Nikolaev. 'Novaya aktsiya gruppy "Voina": 65-metrovyi fallos nari-sovali naprotiv zdaniya FSB v Peterburge', www.newsru.com/russia/16jun2010/piter.html.
- 51 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue_Wd2AjKAI.
- 52 'Press-konferentsiya "Chto poluchit art-gruppa Voina" – gosudarstvennyyu premiyu ili tyoremnyi srok?', 21 February 2011, www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2011/02/d21026.
- 53 Author's interview with Petr Verzilov, Moscow, 22 September 2011. See also Alex Epstein's book on Voina, where he describes in detail the inner tensions of the group (Epstein, 2012).
- 54 'Gruppa Voina zatselovyvaet mentov', 28 February 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0A8Qf893cs.
- 55 'Gruppa Voina i bespredel mentovskikh semei', 11 September 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eV2Vwji7k1c.

- 56 'Zayavlenie Soveta Obshchestvennoi palaty RF', 12 April 2011, www.oprf.ru/newsblock/news/3865/chamber_news.
- 57 'Art-piket "Kh*i v nagradu Minkultu"', *Rossiia molodaya*, 14 April 2011, <http://rumol.ru/news/7538.html>.
- 58 'Minkultura ne budet osparivat pobedu art-gruppy "Voina" na "Innovatsii"', www.erzia-museum.ru/dannue/&view=Minkult-ne-budet-osparivat-pobedu-art-gruppi-Voyna-na-Innovacii.
- 59 "'Voina" otdala dengi za "Innovatsiyu" pravozashchitnikam', www.hro.org/node/11514.
- 60 Art-Strelka was established as a temporary art centre in part of Krasnyi Oktyabr in the latter years of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Among the curators at Art-Strelka, one should be singled out as important for the development of contemporary art in general and young activist art in particular – Olga Lopukhova, who died suddenly in 2009.
- 61 'Intervyu s kuratorom galerei aktivistskogo iskusstva "Zhir" Tatyanoi Volkovoi', 15 March 2011 at <http://zhiruzhir.ru/cat/vistavki-zhir>.
- 62 See www.zhiruzhir.ru.
- 63 'V nastoyashchee vremya v galeree Zhire prokhodit vystavka BESPREDEL', www.zhiruzhir.ru/post/1116.
- 64 Mediaudar.net.

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