

From an Existential Individualist to Solidarity Collective and Collectiveness in Contemporary Russian Art

Ilya Kabakov's famous work "Plan for Throwing out a Garbage Can" – a schedule of throwing out garbage by the inhabitants of a communal flat, divided into five-year periods, shows us very vividly the artist's understanding of collectiveness. Collective is a derivation of disciplinary society, where an individual is forced into the mass, submitted to some external and absurd laws. Many of Kabakov's total installations remind us of Bentham's "Panopticum" that was favored by Michele Foucault, another famous critic of modernity. However, Kabakov's thinking is closer to the existential critics of modernity: faceless mass is contradicted by subjectivity yielding for transcendence.

The mass comes to something that Kabakov himself (and later many others) called "a communal body", i.e. "a collective body on the stage of primer urbanization when aggressiveness is intensified under the influence of unfavorable environment".¹ A metaphysical individualist resisting to this aggressive mass, lives with scares and obsessions and finally works out various methods of hiding from disciplinary all-seeing.

However, such picture of the world is adequate to the epoch of 30-50s, when the society was forcedly modernized. In the 60-s, when Kabakov's creative work started, the Soviet society differed greatly from military collectivism. Kabakov's works are the best evidence. Since they were created, then there existed some social substance between "a communal body" and an existential individualist! Somebody might consume those works! Kabakov himself accepts the existence of that instance: in his memoirs about 60-s and 70-s he describes a wide community of independently thinking intelligentsia, numerous "salons" and, finally, "a friendly circle" adequate to an individual.² Moreover, according to the evidence of Boris Groys, a close Kabakov friend: "Any Soviet person had his own circle, even several ones".³ In other words, simultaneously with the West, Soviet society had departed disciplinary schemes and disintegrated into the net of self-sufficient communities; later it entered "an epoch of tribes"⁴. According to witnesses "the society consisted of adherents of monarchy, Zionists, orthodoxies, followers of occult sciences, advocates of Eastern religions, postmodernists, hippies, old believers, trozkists, western liberals, moderate Slavophiles, followers of Castaneda, Gnostics, Stalinists and pure epicureans"⁵.

Although Kabakov, insisting upon his role of being a metaphysical individualist, tried to uncrown the idea of "a friendly circle" saying that it was "just the last utopia"⁶. However, Kabakov's works are inseparable from their circulation inside the community of chosen. Thus, his albums presume group performative consumption. The artist, having

¹ See. «Словарь терминов московской концептуальной школы», «Ad Marginem», Moscow, 1999, p. 53

² See. Воспоминания И. Кабакова in: Wiener slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 47, Wien 1999

³ See Boris Groys «О нашем круге» in: "Mein Russland", Wienr Slawistischer Almanach", sonderband 44, Munchen 1997, S. 413

⁴ That was the definition of post-modern time tissue by the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. See.: M. Maffesoli, "Les Temps des tribus", Paris, Meridiens Klincksieck, 1988

⁵ See Л. Лурье «Коммунизм и канарайка», in: «Москва-Берлин. 1950-2000» (catalogue), Moscow, «Трилистник, 2004, p.74

⁶ See discussion between I. Kabakov and Eric Bulatov in: *Eric Bulatov (catalogue)*, Zurich and London, Parkett Verlag, 1988

placed the albums on the reading stand, turned pages and read out loud textual remarks and comments. Kabakov called this “home blow”.

In the 70-s the circle of conceptual artists (“our circle”, up to Groys⁷) started to reflect the very fact of collective group work. The group “Collective Actions” became the most important because of the following reasons:

- Since Kabakov started a group dialogue as an individual author during the “home blow”, then “Collective Actions” presented themselves as a collective one; the content of the group was corrected but the core was always constant: A. Monastyrsky, I. Makarevich, E. Elagina, S. Romashko, N. Panitkov.
- Collective work obtained complex forms: first, there existed a group (“a collective author”) that was doing actions, and, second - a quite permanent circle of the actions’ participants (i.e. “our circle”).
- The relations between the members of the group and actions’ participants were not limited by dichotomy - an author and public, but were dialogical: participants took an active part in the action and then - in the discussion (in this case dialogic character became literal);
- It is also important that “CA”’s poetics, being close to the form of an action and realizing in “doing”, estheticised natural flow of everyday routine and destroyed borders between art and life;
- Finally, in their practice “Collective Actions” focused at the disappearance of disciplinary center by developing so-called “side gaze”, “a zone of indistinguishable”, “ungrounded action”.

Thus, the experience of “Collective Action”, a community reflecting its group nature, is the core problem of new social structure of the late Soviet society, in relation to which the artists wanted to take up, if using their favorite term, meta-position. One might call their appeal both to the forms of action and performance and esthetisation of everyday life, a program. From the end of 60-s individual and group artistic attitude has become routine practice for millions of Soviet people by compensating impossibility of self-realization in civil action. That became legitimization for collective work: in the society where art is dissolved in routine life, pretence for individual authorship was regarded archaic.

“Collective Actions” played a role of an institutional center for a wide circle of Moscow conceptual artists, writers and theoreticians: by periodic actions they set social rhythm, by initiating discussions they helped to form self-sufficient discourse, created para-institutional formations – “MANI” archive, museum, editions, etc. Thus, contrary to the Western conceptualism interested in the analyses of external art functioning, Moscow conceptualists were interested in the organization of its internal circulation so that they can shut off other artistic and social circles. However, while cultivating so-called “ungrounded action”, they always remained in the process of institutionalization and never obtained forms of real institutions. That corresponds with the very core of the Soviet society of those years: having entered the “epoch of tribes” at the same time with the West, it has not got a view of civil society.

70-s and 80-s were the time when art historians S. Averinzev, L. Batkin and Tartu semiotic school headed by Y. Lotman became very authoritative for Russian intellectual life. Not being connected with the French thought, these intellectuals worked out analogue to the concept of “an author’s death”. Actualized theory of carnival culture by M. Bakhtin has become another justification of contemporary art.

⁷ Boris Groys, Ibid

Carnival culture, contrary to irony, romantic irony of Kabakov and Bulatov, does not know an author – it is total collective interaction. Practice of the groups “Mukhomors”(Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Sergei and Vladimir Mironenko, Sven Gundlakh), “S/Z”(Viktor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov) and “Roshal-Donskoi-Skersis” realized in a dialogue with those ideas.

It is the basis for these artists’ special understanding of collective work. Carnival was never fraught with meta-position; it is more a reverse side of social status quo. Consequently:

- Entering an external dialogue these artists were never limited by the circle of chosen ones. Anyone can become their partner – occasional walker (like in the action by Roshal-Donskoi-Skersis “Slogan”) or someone being thousands kilometers apart, on the other side of the earth (like in their action “Let’s become a meter closer”). Like any carnival their actions had total character.
- Having total character, these artists’ actions cultivated straight and focused gaze: they do not have external contemplation, typical for “Collective Actions”. Thus, trying to create alternative language, “S/Z” group is not looking for it in cracks and gaps of the existent language, but tries to create total alternative to it.
- Their art constantly appeals not to esoteric but to obvious senses and associations, to motives of “iron curtain”, to cult figures of Che Guevara, A. Sakharov and A. Solzhenizin.
- Finally, in their actions the artists followed carnival aim for laughing “turning inside out” of social rituals typical for disciplinary society. Thus, in the epoch of mass emigration of Moscow intelligentsia the group “Roshal-Donskoi-Skersis” by parodying Soviet sport feasts, organized a round in the direction “Moscow – Jerusalem” in one Moscow garden.

Laughing practice of these artists recognizes itself in such typical phenomenon of the late Soviet society as “double thinking”: when alternative values and way of life builds up parallel to official norms and rituals. The artists of the groups “Mukhomors”, “S/Z” and “Roshal-Donskoi-Skersis” lived in total unification with most of their compatriots, fulfilling power’s orders and concurrently laughing at the foolish government. That meant that, contrary to “CA” that still exists, all those groups terminated their existence in post-Soviet epoch. Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Vadim Zakharov and Mikhail Roshal started their own individual creative work.

Phenomenon of the group “Medical Hermeneutics” (Sergei Anufriev, Yury Leiderman, Pavel Peppershtein) has become possible because of internal contradiction, typical for “Collective Actions”. While escaping total institutionalization, in the process of self-organization, it started to come not only to methodological strictness but also to hierarchy. Thus, the group leader Andrei Monastyrsky calculated contribution of each member into the common business of “Collective Actions”. Building hierarchies had possessed his mind and he created a pyramidal scheme of Moscow art where everybody had military ranks.

Having appeared at the end of the 80-s, “Medical Hermeneutics” immediately decided to use this contradiction and occupied meta-position in relation to “CA” inside the so-called “our circle”. However, in their time “CA” constituted itself as meta-position towards Moscow conceptual circle and to all late Soviet society. “MH” transformed commentary practice peculiar to “CA” into the subject of comment: the main topics and dialogues of the group members were mostly the internal structure and tradition of Moscow conceptualist community. The climax of that commentary activity became introduction and justification of the notion “NOMA”, that was a logotype of “our circle” –

an obscure and mysterious logotype like every logotype of any secret sect and a Masson lodge.

Having appeared at the end of the Soviet epoch, "MH" introduced new legitimization into the inherited practice of collective work. In the situation when Soviet society and art community was exiting isolation, "MH" was becoming an ideologist and analytic of the experience of representation of the Moscow underground at the international art scene. «Our circle» eagerly accepted «NOMA» and in 1993 Ilya Kabakov did a huge installation titled "NOMA", where real artists of underground collective experience became the main characters.

At the beginning of the 90-s post-Soviet society obtained a lumpen view reminding of the one, reconstructed and frightened by Ilya Kabakov. The main difference was in the fact that there were no more disciplinary norms, possible to keep collective transgression, no more "schedule of throwing out of a garbage can" fixed for five years. Moscow philosopher Valery Podoroga describes the atmosphere of those years in the following way: : *«Art of the post-perestroika period, 1990s art, has reflected a state of extreme psychological depression, of lost hope, and has had no place even for nostalgia.... Corporate unities have collapsed, and the Artist can no longer rely on automatic backing, sympathy and recognition. He is on his own ... Disappointed in close and distant friends, colleagues; obliged to earn a living outside the realm of art, disillusioned with the West and not yet turning to the East (not long ago belief in art as truth meant a life of hunger, while the artist was the favorite victim of the Moloch of Production) ... Artists find themselves deprived of responsibility for themselves and for others, and no longer demand more recognition than in the past ... Late autumn, falling of leaves, wind and rain...»⁸.*

These words were pronounced by the philosopher during one group project "Visual Anthropology Workshop", held in Moscow in a fragrant institution "Contemporary Art center" (CAC) that soon disappeared. The project was held from June 1993 to June 1994 and several artists took part in this project together with Valery Podoroga: Vladimir Arkhipov, Alexander Brener, Vadim Fishkin, Dimity Gutov, Nina Kotel, Vladimir Kuprianov, Jury Leiderman, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Guia Rigvava and some others. The main idea of the project was to create a self-developing discussion between a philosopher and artists where the philosopher was offering topics and artists were doing projects later discussed in a group.

The project suggested a new type of group work adequate to the new post-Soviet context. Disintegration of disciplinary norms opened an exit to aggressive individualization: a human being appeared to be placed in an empty, symbolically and socially, space: it hyperbolically grew, rejecting another one.

However, at the same time self-defense feeling prompted something opposite: in the situation of infrastructural collapse professional identity and an artist's status, is possible only as a fact of collective imitating and performative effort. The discussion between artists and philosopher continuing for a year was the only possible way of constituting discourse and social body of the community. The experience of that and other dialogical projects in the mid 90-s (for example, "Hamburg Project"⁹) were

⁸ See: «Moscow Anthropology Workshop». 1993-1994; quoted from: "Fresh Cream. Contemporary Art in Culture", Phaidon, London-New-York, 2000, p.38

⁹ Viktor Misiano «Das Hamburg-project: abschied von der disziplinaren ordnung», in: "MOSCOW-BERLIN. 1950-2000. CHRONIK", Nicolai, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2003, S. 155-158; another version as: «"The "Hamburg Project": A Farewell to Discipline», in: "Manifesta Journal", Amsterdam, 2005, #5 (in publication).

defined “confidential community”¹⁰. Contrary to underground communities, to “our circle”, constantly working with self-organization, this community, built upon polar positions, supported itself only on the primer level of institutionalization. This community, opposite to the Masson lodge “NOMA” is not realized in the working out of common program, poetics and strategy: every participant of the discussions held in CAC rooted in his unique position and artistic credo. “Confidential society” is based upon the fact of physical presence of its members in concrete time and concrete place. Consequently, of all possible types of social cooperation, business cooperation, common ideas, relational and national connections, etc., friendship is the only one that relates to the experience of these projects¹¹.

Experience of the «confidential communities» «recognizes itself as a part of the problematic of what is now commonly known as bio-politics... - the formation of a new social order that tries to extend its control over the very existence of the individual, her-body and her-consciousness. Society's integrity is no longer simply maintained by systemic disciplinary rules, but by the "administration of life"». As the «confidential communities» shows, «this new administrative order can be rethought in terms of "self-administration", as the constituent co-existence of immanent singularities rather than as a function of the curator's homogenizing sovereignty»¹².

At the time when CAC was the place for dialogical work in progress, Trekhprudny lane with artists' studios was transformed into a gallery, where a one-day exhibition opened nearly every Thursday at 7 p.m. Artists Avdei Ter-Oganian, Konstantin Reunov, Alexander Segutin and a creative couple Vladimir Dubossarsky and Alexandre Vinogradov were responsible for that exhibition non-stop. There were 87 personal exhibitions and collective shows in that tiny space (6x6 meters) during two years, from September 1991 till May 1993. Opposite to “CA” and “confidential communities” practices, that were establishing internal representation, Trekhprudny gallery was turned to external representation. Being the first example of an artists' run space in the post-Soviet Russia, the gallery did not have a status of any alternative but was a center of institutional life, the life that was possible in those specific conditions.

Simultaneously, author's project “Art made to order” by Dubossarsky and Vinogradov was also developing. Identifying themselves with servile artists ready to realize any customer's will, D&V promised “a painting for the hairdresser” to the hairdresser, and to the chancellor Cole – “a picture for a chancellor”, to France – “A picture for France”, and to Britain - “A picture for Britain”. Whether Trekhprudny gallery might be called artists' project not in the sense that it was an artistic project but because its curators were artists, then calling themselves “artists to an order”, V&D did not sneer at their market unscrupulousness but at the fact that there was nobody to use it.

However, very soon there appeared people who wanted to use marketable advantage of V&D's painting. At the same time their promoters activity transformed into Art Kliazma, a festival in a suburban Moscow park, and presently, Art-Strelka – a block of galleries in the center of Moscow.

¹⁰ Viktor Misiano «The Institutionalisation of Friendship», *Transnacionala (catalogue)*, Ljubljana, 1999, pp. 182-192; and also: “L'amitie comme engagement. Europe de l'Est: projets confidentiels”, *L'engagement. Actes du symposium de l'ASSOCIATION Internationale des Critiques d'Art (Les Abbatois, Toulouse, 15-16 juin 2000)*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002, p.81-93

¹¹ «The Institutionalisation of Friendship», idem,

¹² See: “The “Hamburg Project”: A Farewell to Discipline” in: : *“Manifesta Journal”* (in publication)

D&V's activity is symptomatic because they realized the recourse of cooperation and creative substance, present in classic capitalism both in their creative duet and in their producers work. This duet and its activity are unique because in reality Russian capitalism has become neither cooperative, nor creative, but was aggressively individualistic and corrupted.

Tension of confrontation polemics assigning dynamics of "Confidential projects" strengthened because every participant was using a reductionism gesture as a basis for his individual poetics, a gesture of total rejection and reconstruction. New Russian state was being created in accordance with the same reductionism gesture – total rejection of seventy years' experience and an attempt to begin everything from the starting point (or return to the "Genuin Russia").

Anatoly Osmolovsky made conclusions out of this new social situation – if vanguard ideology is precipitated in this country (and Soviet experience was its political part), then it is necessary to devote oneself to its resurrection. In case Soviet type of society turned out to be absorbed, if to use a term by Elias Kanetti, by "inflation crowds", then it is senseless to reconstruct some hermetic "our circle". That very event transformed into the form of "NOMA", a solid group of influence, seemed both to him and to many others, to be discredited. One should not appeal to the group of chosen but to the new social subject of post-Soviet society, to the crowd. Consequently, the first creative expressions by Osmolovsky were realized with the language of provocative street actions. Later Osmolovsky recognizes himself in the situationists' ideas, and the book "Society of the Spectacle" by Guy Debord is coming out in Russian by his initiative and with his own design.

Reconstruction of vanguard can't be an individual project as vanguard as a notion is artistic and social movement. Consequently, Osmolovsky's artistic way cannot be separated from group foundation. He debuted as a member the group "ETI" ("Expropriation of Art Territory"), then "Revolutionary Bearer", "Nezesiudik", and «Non-governmental Control Commission». The groups that were founded by Osmolovsky were not net communities: being a member of CAC net projects, he himself understands a group as a shock-brigade. Leadership understanding of group solidarity led Osmolovsky to curatorial practice, to the main role in the journal project "Radek", to teaching in the School for contemporary art, created by the artists. This following disciplinary principles in internal organization of communities, recognizes itself also in their external strategy and tactics. Nearly always Osmolovsky's groups cultivate modernist ideas of innovation, generations' conflict¹³ and "competing programs"¹⁴, etc.

Together with the transformation of post-Soviet chaos into Putin's "power vertical", and the appearance of art system contours, Osmolovsky started to correct his aims.

Street actions were substituted by curatorial projects, where his pupils and collaborators (from "Radek" community) mostly participated. Strategy for revolutionary attacks was substituted by critics from inside art system. As a result, in 2004 he focused at individual creative activity.

While performing his reductionist gesture at the beginning of the 90-s, Dmitry Gutov made the whole modernist project of the XX century the subject of revision. He gained methodological basis for this critics in the philosophic heritage of Soviet aesthetologist

¹³ See: A. Osmolovsky "Generation Kills Generation", "Khudozhestvenny Zhurnal", #3, 1994, p.2

¹⁴ This notion, borrowed from Paul Feyerabend, was constantly used by A. Osmolovsky in the middle of 90-s

Mikhail Lifshits, who gave legendary definition of “crisis of ugliness” to the Western modernism. We are speaking about the return to the basis sense of Enlightenment, its tutorial and educational values. Such aims are appropriate for Soviet Marxism focused at constructive building of the country of real socialism; that is how it differs from the Western Marxism aimed at the critics of capitalism. Consequently, Western modernism, and after it, Gutov’s opponent, Osmolovsky, put forward the ideas of “art death”, language destruction and deconstruction. At the same time truthful Enlightenment (contrary to the “dialectics of enlightenment”) sanctions straight creative communication. Consequently, Gutov finds his reference points in the classical European painting, in realistic tradition, in the Soviet painting of the 20-30-s and 60-s.

Having come to the idea to create Lifshits’ Institute at the end of 80-s, that might become a center for discussion and investigation of ideas, close to this Soviet thinker, Gutov was not worshiping collective work. Collectivity naturally was born out of democratic character of his ideal: Soviet social structure was alien to the category of subject in its Western understanding. Being the main propagandist of Lifshits’ ideas he was naturally open to the discussion of these ideas in a lively dialogue and common work. At the same time Osmolovsky, seeing his aim at the deconstruction of “the society of the spectacle” appearing in Russia, was pushed to the integration into the system, and, consequently, to inevitable acceptance of game rules – to the acceptance of subjectivity and individual authorship.

However, this initiative is internally contradictory because Lifshits’ Institute is not included into the Russian social way of life. Opposite to Osmolovsky’s deconstructivism and to D&V’s creative business undertakings, whose art is realized in present, Gutov’s tutorial pathos, getting inspiration in the past, might be realized only in the future. Consequently, his democratic constructiveness is inevitably transforming into melancholy¹⁵.

“Escape” program appeared at the end of 90-s, when first reductionist gestures had already been done in art but is managed to do the last one at the end. The program counterpoints communicational intimacy to globalist openness and mass-medial spectacularity. This intimacy is brought to personal appeal: This intimacy is reduced to personal orientation: most of their performances are addressed to one spectator. They want to bandy about, to hand art over personally. However, they do not pretend to be elite like “our circle”: moreover, it is ministerial readiness to carry God’s word to any suffering.

In case Lifshits’ Institute resembles first marxist circles, then “Escape” program – is a return to the catacombs of first Christians.

Collectivity was appropriate to this program: by individual cultivation of communicational intimacy, they inevitably came to consolidation: suffering souls found each other. Their unity became both guarantee of their work and a topic for their activity. The major part of their works, i.e. external communication, is dedicated to their internal relations, i.e. internal communication.

While creating projects that presume an individual and not mass contact, the artists involuntarily impart more attractiveness to their work; the work transforms into an exclusive product. Their gentle reductionism, focusing at moralizing distance and internal hermeneutics, proved to be required by present spectators – in the moment of fatigue of scandalous and radical artists of the 90-s. They escape formal confessionalism and create a sect, however, their dwelling place is distinguished by

¹⁵ See Gutov’s text on A. Durer’s “Melancoly” in: “Khudozhestvenny Zhurnal”, #1, 1993

perfect design. The more this group works, the more exposition of their internal reference looks like self-sufficient narcissism.

“Escape” program’s collectiveness is a symptom of social disappointment in all Russian utopias of the XX century including the last one – utopia of capitalism with human face. Artists of the group “Escape” work together because they are comfortable together, and public, each spectator likes them because he feels badly being alone.

The group “What is to be Done?” is the first phenomena of the new decade. It is free from reductionist pathos. They inherited what seemed appropriate to them: ethical motivations – from the program “Escape”, interdisciplinary structure – from Lifshits’ institute, political activism – from Osmolovsky. While accepting, they include their predecessors into creative and intellectual dialogue. It is absolutely reasonable as their main goal is to consolidate critically thinking artists and intellectuals. Consequently, they are alien to reductional gestures, their pathos and analyses of concrete events. There are not interested in Marxist thinking of the 20-s and 30-s but mostly Marxism today, in Russia and in the whole globalized world. Ethics is not realized in internal dialogue but in external one. Consequently their dialogue is not confrontation of obsessive neurotics of the middle of 90-s but common work, united neither by a sect or “our circle”, but solidarity. Their ambitious aim has a chance to be realized. Contrary to so obvious differences, there is something common between consolidated communities and individuals: they all suffer of the eternal question “What is to be done?”

Viktor Misiano, Moscow, February 2005