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8 Hysteria or enjoyment?

Recent Russian actionism

Jonathan Brooks Platt

In recent years it has become quite common for Russian artists and activists to pronounce the death of actionism. In the late 2000s, the Voina (War) group and their splinter faction, Pussy Riot, achieved international recognition with a number of 'loud' (i.e., high-profile) actions that accompanied the build-up to the Moscow protests of 2011–12. This provocative form of performance art usually traces its origins to the bloody, scatological, and erotic displays of the Viennese Actionists in the 1960s. However, recent Russian actionism also derives from a rich native tradition. Late-Soviet non-official groups like Collective Actions and the Necrorealists often took their practices into public spaces (or at least into the forest), and the Moscow art scene in the 1990s was dominated, on the one hand, by the actionism of Oleg Kulik and Aleksandr Brener (both associated with the gallerist Marat Guelman) and, on the other hand, by the more overtly political actions of Anatolii Osmolovskii and the Radek group.[1] The 2000s also saw the emergence of a vibrant street activism that at times crossed over into performative actions.[2] Now, however, many of the same people who participated in this movement are lamenting its demise.

Still, despite the sombre mood, actions and would-be actionists remain quite prevalent in Russia today. In August 2014, for example, an activist swam the Fontanka River in St Petersburg with a sign reading 'Putin is Eternal/Crippled' (*Putin vechen/uvechen*). The work evoked an eloquent, if somewhat overly literary, set of associations: the lonely river of time (the documentation's soundtrack is 'Que sera, sera') and the inevitable fate of any Ozymandias. The problem was the reaction, or lack thereof. In fact, the stormiest response came from the artist himself, who was deeply disappointed that the mainstream media failed to cover the story. As he reasoned on his Facebook page: the era of loud action ended when Vladimir Putin quashed the Russian protest movement and began his reactionary third term (following the more moderate interim presidency of Dmitrii Medvedev). The activist explained the problem in terms of a typology of political regimes. America has no need for such interventions because its free media make true transgression impossible (a somewhat dubious but commonplace argument). Meanwhile, hardcore authoritarian states like post-Bolotnaya Russia or North Korea (!) can simply ignore them. The only fertile soil for art actions is a 'soft' authoritarianism.[3]

Pussy Riot's Nadezhda Tolokonnikova expressed similar sentiments on her own Facebook page on 8 August 2014, blaming not the state-controlled media but the regime's turn from its original 'stability' paradigm to the aggressive popular mobilization that reached a frenzied pitch with the annexation of Crimea. According to Tolokonnikova, Putin resembles the total-artist Stalin from Boris Groys' seminal analysis, since he seems to have taken up the mantle of the actionist avant-garde himself, far surpassing his teachers when it comes to undermining the political (now geopolitical) order, pushing trigger points and provoking conflict.[4] This argument resonates with the enthusiasm many well-known actionists and performance artists expressed for the annexation of Crimea, including Oleg Vorotnikov of Voina. The suggestion seems to be that when Voina fled the country in 2012, they left the regime to launch its own actionist project, now taking the fight to the smug liberal West in the form of little green men and drunken Cossacks shooting down passenger jets. However one might feel about such claims, Pussy Riot certainly have not been keeping the fight alive, as Tolokonnikova and Mariia Alekhina appear increasingly enamoured with their status as international celebrities, producing MTV-style protest videos and abandoning their original riot-grrrl aesthetic.[5]

Nonetheless, there does remain one Russian actionist still capable of loud interventions: Petr Pavlenskii, who rose to prominence in 2012 with 'Stitch' (*Shov*), sewing his mouth shut to protest the Pussy Riot trial (Fig. 8.2), and went on to produce two more living-pain sculptures with 'Carcass' (*Tusha*) – crawling naked into a cocoon of barbed wire – and, the loudest of all, 'Fixation' (*Fiksatsiia*), nailing his scrotum to Red Square (Fig. 8.3). In February 2014, Pavlenskii and other activists created a burning barricade on St Petersburg's Malo-Koniushennii Bridge with 'Liberty' (*Svoboda*), mimicking the Maidan events in Kiev. With this action, a new turn seemed visible in Pavlenskii's work: 'speaking', as he put it, 'for the first time about freedom and not prison' (Pavlenskii 2014). However, he returned to his self-harming roots in October 2014, when he sliced off his earlobe while sitting atop the infamous Serbskii Institute for Forensic Psychiatry in Moscow (Fig. 8.1). The work was called 'Separation' (*Otdelenie*), a word that can also refer to a hospital ward. Here many a dissident was declared mentally ill for non-conformist beliefs during Soviet times, and Pavlenskii has himself been forced to undergo psychiatric evaluation after several of his actions.

My central question in this chapter is whether it is correct to see Pavlenskii as continuing the actionist project. On the surface, the connections seem self-evident. His work focuses on provoking the police with transgressions that revolve around the body and its limits. His actions are designed for mass media consumption and pay little or no attention to the institutional framework of the art world. Common negative appraisals of his work also link it to his immediate predecessors. For example, in September 2014 at the St Petersburg conference 'No Radical Art Actions are Going to Help Here...: Political Violence and Militant Aesthetics after Socialism' that I organized as part of

Figure 8.1 Petr Pavlenskii, 'Separation'. October 2014
Source: Private archive, courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

the Manifesta 10 Biennale of Contemporary Art, a number of scholars and artists expressed the opinion that recent Russian actionism takes the (ineffectual) posture of the hysteric with regard to power. The actions of Voina, Pussy Riot, or Pavlenskii are not really performed for the mass viewer; rather, their intended audience is state power itself, personified by the police. They challenge the organs of social control by laying bare the 'castration' of society, demonstrating the failure of power on their own bodies.[6] The problem is that such hysterical actionism is vulnerable to Jacques Lacan's famous critique of the student uprisings of 1968 (frequently cited by Slavoj Žižek): 'What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one' (Lacan 2007, 207).[7] From this perspective, the hysteric only performs castration as a demand for the assertion of phallic authority.

There is much to suggest that Pavlenskii is indeed cultivating a version of this hysterical position. However, I argue here that such a strategy in fact represents a significant divergence from the Russian actionist tradition. To demonstrate this thesis I will examine in detail one characteristic Voina action and then highlight its differences from Pavlenskii's practice. My claim is that Voina's strategy (more traditional in the Russian context) is not the hysterical challenge to power but, rather, a staged enjoyment of bare life, cultivating 'festive indistinction' from power by revelling in the abject condition to which modern sovereignty reduces its subjects.

Figure 8.2 Petr Pavlenskii, 'Stitch'. July 2012
Source: Photo by Maksim Zmeev (Reuters), courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

In my view, this strategy reflects one of the most potent trajectories of Russian art – from the Mit'ki and the Necrorealists to the Moscow actionists – a tradition marked by passion for ambiguity and 'zones of indistinction' (a term, by the way, which was popularized by Andrei Monastyrskii's Collective Actions group in the 1970s long before Giorgio Agamben used it to define the juridico-political order of our times in *Homo Sacer*).[8] Occupying spaces between life and death, human and animal, the individual and the collective body, not to mention aesthetic autonomy and activist engagement, these performative practices flourished though emancipatory enjoyment of every category's slippage, every law's emptiness. Instead of Mikhail Bakhtin's public square, these artists worked in spaces at once open and closed, exposed and hidden – whether in a forest, a communal apartment, or the street in front of a gallery, or as a clandestine action displayed openly on the Internet.

Enjoyment leads to a certain deformation in these practices, reducing the subject to what Agamben calls 'bare life' – a life at once lacking and excessive, suspended between the biological and the political (Agamben 1998). As Eric Santner writes, the zone of indistinction is a site of metamorphosis, where we glimpse 'what remains once one's entitlements to enjoyment have been reduced to the minimal one to *enjoy bare life*' (Santner 1999, 47; emphasis in the original). In this formulation Santner uses the term 'enjoyment' (from the French *jouissance*) in the sense of enjoying rights. However,

in the Russian tradition I am describing, particularly in Voina's actions, it is the ambivalent word's other semantic centre that comes to the fore: an erotic enjoyment that is obscene, even traumatic, and which troubles the desiring, disciplined subject.

In a discussion of Alenka Zupančič, Santner also links bare life (or, in his terms, 'creaturely flesh') to the site of castration. Here the two meanings of enjoyment are entwined. The antithetical Lacanian term *plus-de-jouir*, which means both 'more enjoyment' and 'no more enjoyment,' captures how symbolic castration introduces a twofold split in the speaking subject. On the one hand, the subject comes to enjoy symbolic rights and entitlements that do not naturally belong to it. These 'phallic' prostheses are 'castrating' because they introduce a gap between the subject's being and social role. On the other hand, erotic enjoyment emerges as the retroactive effect of our division into sexed beings. Here again castration doubles as lack and surplus – the mythic loss of some pre-Oedipal capacity for enjoyment is retroactively produced by the appearance of its remainder as something autonomous and separate from the subject – not an 'amputation' but an 'appendix', as Zupančič puts it (Santner 1999, 79–80; Zupančič 2008, 192).[9]

If Pavlenskii's works revolve around the neurotic, hysterical display of 'amputations', Voina and their predecessors in the Russian tradition more perversely seek out castration as a site of enjoyment. Traumatic reduction to bare life is recast as an explosion of bare enjoyment. This reversal often looks like a carnivalesque identification with power, laying bare the creaturely flesh that both the sovereign and *homo sacer* share. From this perspective, Voina practises a tactic of subversive affirmation, ironically over-identifying with power to expose its injustice. But subversive affirmation assumes a meta-position from which the artist or activist observes and performs his/her critique (see Zaitseva 2010). Voina may hint at the existence of such a position, but they never leave it uncompromised. Instead, they cultivate an elusive irony, protecting the site of festive indistinction from the dialectic of transgression, which always threatens to divert the action into something much more predictable. This irony can also be linked to the non-official Soviet practice of *stiob*, a widespread form of deadpan irony that Alexei Yurchak has associated with the Necrorealists and Mit'ki, as well as the poetry of Voina's mentor, Dmitrii Prigov. *Stiob* often takes the form of over-identification with ritualized official language, suspending performance between seriousness and irony, making it 'impossible to tell whether it [is] a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two' (Yurchak 2006, 250). In its more everyday articulation, this uncertainty is usually either partial or temporary; subtle 'winks' or a final burst of laughter give the game away. However, the more radical *stiob* that Voina and their predecessors practise never fully surrenders uncertainty, never lays down its cards. Moreover, since over-identification is also directed at the contexts and characters the artists themselves create – the Mitek, the Necrorealist 'non-corpse' (*netrup*), Kulik's dog-man, Brener's coprophilic idiots, the great poet Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, Voina's heroic outlaws, and

so on – this uncertainty means that the viewer can never catch the artist in a distinct subject position, especially not a political one. Pavlenskii, as I will show, is much more serious.

Snatching Chicken

Let us consider one of Voina's typical actions, first as the vast majority of its viewers experienced it, i.e., through online video documentation. The setting is St Petersburg, July 2010. A young woman with shoulder-length blonde hair is walking down Nevskii Prospekt. She seems relaxed, even a bit hunched, as she ambles along, dangling a white handbag. Off camera, someone gets upset about something, 'What do you mean, "sorry"?', and the woman's lips curl into a sardonic, almost devious smile. She turns into the supermarket of the high-end 'Passage' Shopping Centre, and we cut to her pushing a trolley towards the back of the shop. 'Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?' plays over the speakers. The woman asks a shop assistant if they have any chickens, and she is pointed in the right direction. She examines the cling film-wrapped birds with enthusiasm – 'Fucking amazing little chickens' (*Okhuennye tsypliata*) – and fills her basket. Next she is joined by several companions, and together they start asking some bemused security guards about the quality of the poultry and the different options on offer. 'Are they fresh?' 'Is this for making soup?' 'This is for cats, right?' They sniff at the chickens and compare sizes. When asked how they plan to cook the bird, a second woman in the group answers, 'We want to stuff it' (*Khotim zapikhivat'* – not the usual culinary term for stuffing, which is *farshirovat'*). A little boy with a shaved head pulls some chickens off a shelf and treads on one triumphantly.

Then things begin to get tense. The group splits up among the aisles, carrying large signs with letters painted on them in a clumpy, brown substance that looks like excrement. The shop assistants are getting upset, shouting at the group to stop filming and leave. Meanwhile, the woman with the handbag has removed her panties and is trying with great difficulty to stuff (*zapikhat'*) a raw chicken up her vagina. After some help from a male companion, she gets the bird part-way inside, puts her panties back on, and fixes her dress. The rest of the crew now has the signs in place, holding them up in different parts of the shop, one group of letters for each of the four security cameras: *bez*, *blia*, *d*, *no*. The letters come together on the guard's monitor to form the word *bezbliadno* (a play on *besplatno*, 'for free', that replaces the root *plat*, 'payment', with *bliad*, 'whore'). They hold the signs for 15 seconds and then fold them up. The woman with her secret galline cargo walks calmly past a security guard and out of the shop. Once outside, she lets the stolen carcass drop with an audible gasp: 'Opa'.

This action – usually titled 'Why Did They Snatch the Chicken?' (*Poshto pizdili kuru?*) – was not Voina's most scandalous (the orgy in the Moscow Biological Museum holds that honour), nor their most confrontational (the 'Palace Coup' action, in which they overturned a police car, earned them jail time), nor their most successful (they won the prestigious Innovation Prize for the giant phallus painted on Liteinyi Bridge, which stood through the night opposite the local headquarters of the Federal Security Service (FSB)). Indeed, the chicken action has only achieved the renown of these others because of a false rumour (which any viewing immediately disproves), namely that the young woman is Tolokonnikova. Although the idea of her having had intimate relations with a chicken suited the smear campaign against Pussy Riot very well, Tolokonnikova in fact had nothing to do with the action, having split to form her own Voina faction with Petr Verzilov in 2009.[10]

Still, despite its reputation, the chicken action is much more than a crude piece of shock-art. First, it illustrates Voina's core principle of rejecting the use of money in favour of stealing. The photographic documentation is even presented as part of an instruction manual titled (in English), 'Voina DIY Handbook. Section 1. How to Snatch Chicken'.[11] This mock didacticism is then repeated at a linguistic level, as the action realizes the metaphor behind the slang word, *pizdit'*, a verb form of 'cunt' (*pizda*) that means, 'to steal'.[12] Voina is thus not only teaching us how to steal; they are also explaining the logic behind this magic name for the thief's practice. And this is no cold pun like the titles of so many artworks from the 1990s (think of Damien Hirst's bisected cow and calf, titled 'Mother and Child Divided'). In the Voina action, the dead metaphor explodes into life, as the taboo word contributes its sacral power to the group's mythic self-presentation as an outlaw underground, at once joyously vulgar and nobly righteous.

Like nearly every Voina action, 'Why Did They Snatch the Chicken?' revolves around a confrontational encounter between the group – the militant band of heroes – and a disciplinary apparatus. While the usual target is the police, the chicken action focuses on Voina's second favourite enemy: the supermarket. As an institution, the supermarket dazzles and taunts us with its cornucopia of food, but then restricts consumption by charging money. At the simplest level, the chicken theft calls this disciplinary authority into question and thwarts it. Indeed, the surface intention of most Voina actions can be described in a similar way. As the DIY manual suggests, the group's triumphant defeat (disturbance, duping) of the apparatus is intended as a model for emulation, teaching us how to resist.

However, Voina actions also indulge in a level of irony that makes such a straightforward reading problematic, rendering the action's relation to any conceivable 'reality' of struggle decidedly ambivalent. The call to emulation feeds off the action's authenticity – the fact that the risk, the conflict, and the chickens are all exhilaratingly 'real'. It is this authenticity that grounds the imperative to resist: Voina steals chickens, why don't you? But, at the same time, the scenario of the action – the literalization of the word *pizdit'* – renders this very reality absurd, showing no concern for actual conditions or tactics. The would-be militant viewer is thus faced with two distinct versions of the imperative. The outrageously literal version urges us to 'follow instructions' and 'snatch' our own chickens. Behind this call (and dependent on its

disavowal as mere allegory or metaphor) is something more abstract: 'Live for free! Don't die a whore!' (*Zhivi besplatno! Umri bezbliadno!*).[13] Taken together, the two imperatives suspend the viewer in a zone of indistinction between authenticity and utopia, absurdity and the call to action, far removed from the stark dialectic of law and its transgression.

The ultimate effect of this ambivalence in the action is to render the question of power – and thus any relation between hysteric and master – undecidable. Despite the call to conflict and resistance, it is in fact impossible here to settle the old Leninist question of *kto kogo?* (literally 'who, whom?', i.e., who is the active subject and who is the passive object).[14] The action may seem to be about antagonism. On one side, there are the supermarket employees, mere *obyvateli* (everyday people, much like the police in other Voina actions) who are dehumanized through their incarnation of the disciplinary apparatus. On the other side, there are the heroic activists, who invade the site to lay bare the disciplinary logic that marks its borders (both internal and external). But the encounter also involves a third party: the young woman, who mediates and brings together these two worlds.[15] Her attire marks her out from the group of activists, who are all in clothing appropriate for making mischief on a hot day: T-shirts, jeans or shorts, and backpacks (Vorotnikov is shirtless). By contrast, the woman is wearing an elegant brown dress and carrying a snakeskin bag. When she appears alone in the first scene, there is no reason to suspect she is any kind of activist at all. She seems like a normal consumer, perfectly equipped to pay for her chicken.

However, when she finds the chickens and exclaims that they are 'fucking amazing', a transformation begins: the Russian word she uses – *okhuennye* – is an adjectival form of *khui* (cock), and this sets the sexual charge that goes off when the word *pizdit'* is later brought to life. In between, the engagements with the shop assistants and security guards – which are quite amiable, if a bit wild and aggressive – serve to emphasize the chickens' corporeal presence. As the Voina activists poke at the birds, step on them, press their noses against them, and so on, the relationship between consumer and commodity increasingly comes to resemble something closer to predator and prey, or lover and beloved.

When the woman finally pulls the wrapper from the chicken she intends to 'snatch', this relationship becomes even more complex and over-determined. The mad effort to stuff the chicken up her vagina evokes, first of all, a carnivalesque fusion of eating and sexual reproduction. Both processes involve the openness of the body, and the woman revels in their grotesque hybridization. At the same time, this revelry merely lays bare the supermarket's own extravagant luxury. As the phallic moniker given to the chicken suggests, the supermarket aisles offer, as it were, 'a smorgasbord of cocks for orgiastic cunt stuffing' – so many signifiers of desire calling us to enjoy. But, as any seasoned consumer knows, the appropriate response to this call is a castrated one. I will only enjoy what I can afford, waiting patiently in line with my safely wrapped chicken, disavowing the abundance all around me. The alienating process of monetary exchange mediates my encounter with the supermarket, as I accept the meagre pleasure my purchases bring. The woman, by contrast, responds as if there are no obstacles to fulfilling the supermarket's call completely. 'Yes, thank you, I will enjoy! I will stuff it up my cunt right now!'

So, who is the victor in this encounter with disciplinary power? It is impossible to say. The supermarket has been forced to reveal its hidden obscenity, but the consumer, however captivated by Voina's outlaw spirit, still submits to the call to enjoy. As a result, one cannot say that the action articulates a hysterical demand for the law to come and put things right. The supermarket and the outlaws come together, mediated by the willing consumer, in a single scene of festive enjoyment.

A similar effect occurs with the signs the actionists hold up, spelling the word *bezbliadno*. The Western-style supermarket with all of its aisles, racks, displays, security cameras, and so on, has only existed in Russia for 15 years or so, slowly replacing the old Soviet system. In the old system – the dominance of which only began to fade in the late 1990s – one had to scurry back and forth from the counters of different departments, quizzing shop assistants, getting things weighed, taking tickets to the cashier's desk, and only then returning to collect one's goods. Shopping for food used to be much more about negotiation, argument, jostling for places in line, and so on. The alienated rationality of the Western system, founded on an economy of abundance rather than Soviet deficits, swaps (often unpleasant) intimacy with one's neighbour for a closer connection to the items on sale. Now you can hold them, squeeze them, read their labels, return them to the shelves or drop them in your basket, all silently, unmolested, making your way through the labyrinthine space towards the checkout. The only thing to worry about in a capitalist supermarket is either how much money you have in your pocket (if you are honest), or where the lens of the security camera is pointed (if you are not). When Voina brings the word *bezbliadno* together under this gaze to protest against its alienated 'whoring', it stages a reunification of the fragmented space. And yet, all the while, the process of reunification is intercut with the theft of the chicken, hidden from view in a way that is only possible with just such a capitalist floor plan. Which is it, then? Are we meant to enjoy the crevices of invisibility or claim the right to unify the space under our own gaze? If the goal of the action is to liberate 'cunt' (*pizda*) from 'whore' (*bliad'*) – replacing alienated buying and selling with theft, as a more 'organic' form of acquisition – why does this mythic unity remain so dependent on fragmentation and the interstices of the alienated space?

As the follow-up to their phallic masterpiece, 'Dick Captured by the FSB', described above, the chicken action arguably tests whether a vaginal approach to such confrontations can have a similar impact. In terms of desire, the effect is indeed the same. Just as the eroticized chicken theft both revolts against the supermarket and acquiesces to its most basic command, at once transforming the supermarket site and appropriating its logic, the cock-bridge simultaneously stands in opposition to the secret police and erotically responds to

their power, rising in admiration. The manifestation of this duality is arguably the fundamental effect of Voina's practice – surface antagonism delivers the inner secret of festive collusion. When the site of antagonism gradually opens as a zone of indistinction, and there is no clear answer to the question of *kto kogo?*, the power of the outlaw ceases to be one of simple transgression. Instead of breaking the law – an act that only reaffirms the law's authority, thus fulfilling the hysteric's demand – Voina erodes and effaces it, revealing the heterogeneous spaces in which the law also seeks to enjoy. And it does so by enjoying along with it.

Pavlenskii's Law

As I have argued, Voina's strategy of enjoyment lends their actions a markedly festive quality, and, on the surface, this festiveness has much in common with Bakhtin's well-known concept of carnival. The 'material-bodily lower stratum' is paraded everywhere, while symbols of authority are overturned and debased (Bakhtin 1984). However, the effect is different. If carnival turns the world upside down in order to maximize the dialectical tension between high and low, closed and open, the beautiful and the grotesque – harnessing the energy of transgression – Voina's festive world revolves around an enjoyment that collapses distinctions and undermines the very logic that enables us to tell up from down in the first place.

In the chicken action, for example, one can argue that the target of Voina's over-identification is not just the supermarket's injunction to enjoy but also the group's own militant rejection of money, framed as an injunction to steal. They subversively exaggerate adherence to their own law. The logic of radical *stiob* also extends beyond the content of Voina's self-presentation and into its form, contaminating the actions' authenticity with distortions in the documentation. Aleksei Plutser-Sarno's decidedly carnivalesque LiveJournal reports are always deeply discordant with the visual record of the action. Sara Stefani, for example, has noted that in his reports of the chicken action and the orgy in the Biological Museum, Plutser writes of wild, intoxicating excesses of bodily enjoyment, while the visual documentation shows something much more awkward and nervous (Stefani 2013).[16] Although the young woman in the chicken action clearly struggles to get the poultry stashed away, Plutser describes her genitals as 'The Sixteen-Feet Wide Gates' (*Semiarshinye vrata*) and the 'Bottomless Pit of Hell' (*Adskaia bezdonnaia propast'*) (Plutser-Sarno 2010).

The video documentation of the action engages in inflation and narrativization in its own way as well. There are at least four different supermarkets in the video, and at least two different scenes of chicken snatching (only one of which is successful). The *bezbliadno* display appears to have occurred at an entirely different time from the chicken theft. Even the chicken used in the successful snatching seems suspiciously smaller than those handled in other parts of the film; it is very limp, as if more skin than bones. But through the magic of montage, the viewer is encouraged to ignore the subtle evidence that the action's authenticity is quite removed from the mythic narrative on display. In other words, the action is at once staged and authentic, theatrically overblown and utterly serious – the hallmark of *stiob*.

Turning now to Pavlenskii, let us first consider the argument that his actions resemble those of Voina as a hysterical form of protest. To paraphrase Keti Chukhrov's remarks at the above-mentioned 'No Radical Art Actions' conference, actionism's focus on transgressive, hysterical self-exposure forecloses any real engagement with society and the spaces it inhabits. The actionist may display extreme courage in his/her confrontation with power, offering a heroic example to others, but s/he also turns his/her back on these others, caught up in narcissistic self-display. In this sense, Voina's chicken snatching is little different from Pavlenskii's living-pain sculptures. Each hysterically lays the body bare to the violence and obscenity of power. And, in this way, each begs the master to come and put them in their place.

However, as I have shown, Voina does not limit its practice to transgression – the sovereign decision to transgress is too immersed in festive indistinction – and exposure is always combined with concealment. With Pavlenskii's actions the hysteria argument is a better fit, although it still requires modification. Pavlenskii made a number of strong statements in the press after his recent actions. Along with the dramatized transcripts of his interrogations after *Liberty – The Interrogation of Petr Pavlenskii: A Play in Three Acts*, from which I quoted earlier, Pavlenskii also gave three long interviews, first to *Ukrainian Pravda* after his visit to the Maidan in December 2013 (Lan'ko and German 2013), and then twice to Dmitrii Volchek (2014a and 2014b) of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, once after the publication of the *Liberty* play and then again after 'Separation'. In these texts the artist calls for preserving at all costs a strict divide between art and the state, referring, for example, to Manifesta 10 as political prostitution (mere decoration for the regime) and broadly defining art as any and all emancipatory practice. Maidan is the true festival of revolt that artists should look to for inspiration.

This position has a distinguished ancestry in political theory. From Georges Sorel, who argued that the proletariat should answer all gestures of compromise from the bourgeoisie with 'black ingratitude', to Frantz Fanon's celebration of violent conflict with the colonizer as a means of political subjectivization, many have argued that a resistance movement must maintain the force and ferocity of its dialectical encounter with the oppressor to the bitter (or ecstatic) end (Sorel 1999, 77; Fanon 1963, 56–58). Otherwise, the dynamic of contradiction fails, leaving us stranded in yet another frozen conflict, 'fixated' by defeat. Still, it is not difficult to see how the proletariat and the colonized in these arguments might fail to emerge as revolutionary subjects and instead drift into the position of either the hysteric, forever exposing the impotence of power, or the *homo sacer*, persisting in bare life in anticipation of some messianic moment to come. Neither of these positions offers much in

Figure 8.3 Petr Pavlenskii, 'Fixation'. November 2013
Source: Private archive, courtesy of Petr Pavlenskii.

the way of hope. The first easily suggests the idea of resistance's futility (simply waiting for a real master), while the second often seems to encourage an infinite deferral of revolt.

Even without these dangers, the efficacy of such an antagonistic strategy requires taking account of objective conditions. Who is the oppressor in Russia today? A number of interesting diagnoses have recently been proposed to explain the psychology of the regime's aggressive turn. Alexander Etkind traces its roots to the hyper-extractive oil and gas economy, which leaves the state wholly independent of the population and promotes a 'petro-macho' posture, ignoring the needs and subject positions of artists, intellectuals, and women (Etkind 2013a). Artemii Magun, by contrast, offers a diametrically opposed argument, likening Russia to a neglected wife, smashing dishes in a hysterical outburst. The modus of Putin's new foreign policy agenda desperately exposes the global order as castrated (hypocritical, empty, based on double standards, etc.), all in the hope of getting a little attention from the West (Magun 2014). Pavlenskii himself interprets the situation in a more idiosyncratically Russian way, according to the old saying: 'the problem isn't that my cow died, but that my neighbour's cow is still alive'. In other words, no one thinks of lamenting the failure of the 2011–12 protests in Russia, but it is humiliating that the clashes with police in Kiev did not fail in the same way. And so Pavlenskii offers his actions as a call to resist. If the state is alternately macho towards the populace and hysterical towards the West, and the people themselves wish only for everyone to share in the 'happiness' of being subject to such maddening vacillation, perhaps radical art actions can be deployed to force the enemy to show its true face and the people to remember they have one.

What is peculiar about Pavlenskii's position, however, is his identification of such radical non-cooperation with the autonomy of art. In the dramatized transcripts of his *Liberty* interrogations, the character 'Pavlenskii' takes an exceedingly defensive posture, resisting all attempts by the 'investigator' to blur the lines between the actionist's practice and his own (at one point the investigator even calls himself an 'artist of justice'). At every turn Pavlenskii seeks to uphold and protect the authority of art's autonomous law from that of the state. If the cop wants to be an artist, he must enrich art's symbolic codes, conceptualize his work within the narratives of art history, and communicate his message to an audience, particularly the fact that he is engaged in producing art. He must overcome himself like any true artist by doing something others find impossible. Meanwhile, the investigator gradually moves in the opposite direction, admitting that the law he embodies is empty, that he is only an instrument, that his own moment of historical accountability is coming (he resigned from his job soon after the drama was published),[17] that he has no idea what forces are behind the investigation, and – the best bit of all – that 'everyone says: we have capitalism. But in America they have democracy [...] But it's actually a lot stricter there. Really, a lot stricter and more brutal' (Pavlenskii 2014).

Caught in the maw of power's unintelligibility, the sentimental cop still wants to believe in a soft authoritarianism that might protect him from the coming flood. Pavlenskii, by contrast, wants something harder. He decries the compromises of contemporary Russians – particularly oppositional artists who participated in Manifesta – repeatedly diagnosing such behaviour as 'schizophrenic' (Volchek 2014a). But is this not a call for the same kind of disciplinary clarity – the segregation of the insane from the sane – that he critiques in 'Separation'? Choose sides, no compromises – *enough madness*. Though cutting off his earlobe clearly involved an homage to Vincent Van Gogh, Pavlenskii's call for clear boundaries is quite antithetical to the painter's own use of the gesture. Van Gogh famously gave his ear to a prostitute, saying 'guard this object carefully', thus passing the artwork (the ear) from one place of segregation to another – from madness to illicit desire. But Pavlenskii passes his ear from art's place of power to that of the police: you have your law, and I have mine. And the object itself is lost: 'I didn't get my knife or my earlobe back', Pavlenskii wryly commented after the action (Nikulin 2014). Despite such moments of humour, Pavlenskii has clearly abandoned the tradition of festive indistinction. Even his *Liberty* – meant to imitate the great 'festival' of Maidan – seemed a rather gloomy affair, its flaming tyres and rhythmic pounding of sheet metal only momentarily disturbing the winter morning's quiet darkness before the fire brigade dutifully arrived.[18]

Nevertheless, Pavlenskii's insistence on autonomy may not be as rigorous as it seems. In fact, his statements on the relationship between art and politics often verge on their own kind of schizophrenia. Maidan is a total installation, he tells us. This could mean the distinction between art and politics no longer exists, but it is also a strangely contemplative act of aestheticization, lifting the revolt out of the immediacy of struggle. The signature of one of his investigators uncannily resembles the swirling form of his 'Carcass' (see Lan'ko and German 2013). Perhaps this is evidence, as Pavlenskii claims, that he is unmasking the hidden codes of power. But the gesture also falls into line with his virtuoso ability to pull the police into the frame of his artworks and 'recode' them in his own way. Volchek compares Pavlenskii's work to the end of Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (and the artist approves), when Cincinnatus realizes his prison and jailers are only a poorly constructed illusion and the true 'reality' is a higher-level work of artistic imagination (the novel itself). But does such a radical retreat into art not contradict Pavlenskii's own references to Kazimir Malevich, who defined art's truth as a power and mastery (*gospodstvo*) possible only through the rejection of autonomy, creating the forms of nature directly? All of these contradictions seem to escape Pavlenskii's notice. Perhaps there is some slippage behind his iron law of art after all.

It is significant, however, that these signs of ambivalence have very little to do with the undecidability of radical *stiob*. Rather, the confusion seems largely to be a side-effect of a more fundamental vacillation in Pavlenskii's practice, which is quite similar to the diagnoses of the Russian state discussed above. After all, in Chukhrov's comments, it is not simply hysterical self-exposure that defines the political inefficacy of actionism; the artists' 'extreme courage' also serves to foreclose true engagement with the other, now in the form of a 'macho' display of strength and endurance.

In the 2009 action, 'Cock in the Ass: A Punk Concert in the Taganskii Courthouse', which provided the model for Pussy Riot, Voina invaded the trial of Andrei Erofeev over his 'Forbidden Art 2006' exhibition. Launching into an impromptu punk concert, they screamed over their guitars: 'All cops are bastards, remember this'. But when the cop-bastards rushed in to stop the show, they ended up joining it, forming a mosh pit with the artists (and if you look closely, they are clearly enjoying themselves) (Plutser-Sarno 2009). Following Voina's example, Pavlenskii's actions always hinge on the moment the police arrive – a moment of great festive potential. This is when we lose our bearings regarding the question of *kto kogo?* – asking who the real 'victim' is in the action, the self-mutilating artist or the baffled police who have to decide what to do with him.

However, Pavlenskii always remains deadly serious at these moments. No doubt he is too preoccupied with remembering who the bastards and the whores are to join them in the dance. But, at the end of the day, the dance is the site of emancipation, where revolutionary action confronts the bastard and whore in each of us, and where we all must question our lineage and the cost of our desire. Instead, both the artist and the state oppose one another, each vacillating between two equally phallocentric postures: the obscene enforcement of an empty law and hysterical declarations of its emptiness. Perhaps a new slogan is needed: 'All laws are castrated, remember this'. But, then again, the lesson of Voina is not so much about memory as enjoyment: 'Enjoy your place of indistinction before the empty law'.

Conclusion

As Yurchak has shown, the late socialist period was marked by a suspension of the political, as creative practices occupied the abandoned conceptual spaces of the necrotic Soviet state (Yurchak 2006). To thrive in such conditions typically required a *stiob* ethos, practising an irony that, in its most radical form, refrains from announcing itself as such – a carnival that forgets what is up and what is down. These cultural practices did not disappear after 1991, but continued to evolve in the new context of triumphant neoliberalism. Now that the post-Soviet order has been solidified under a newly invigorated authoritarianism, it is no accident that artists and activists are wondering if the traditions of the past have outlived their usefulness. Pavlenskii clearly understands his actions in different terms, articulating their meaning from a distinct meta-position and insisting on his autonomous law. Despite the links between his practice and the earlier actionist tradition, he is serious to the core, uninterested in the festive potential of the encounters he stages with

power. Many find the clarity of his work inspiring and certainly not as politically problematic as that of Voina.

However, it is precisely Pavlenskii's seriousness that makes him susceptible to vacillation between hysterical displays of castration and macho-heroism, making his practice into a mirror image of the regime itself. Neither side is a pure hysteric. Each desires a master, but neither has any hope he will come, and so hysteria must double as heroism. By contrast, Voina's strategy – the *stiob* enjoyment of bare life – sought to liberate our castrated modernity from such quashed hopes, remaking it as a site of festive indistinction. Voina was never in the business of forming the militant subjects of a more traditional revolutionary movement à la Sorel and Fanon. Rather, it worked to erode the structures of ideological interpellation that prop up the repressive social order from within.

Nevertheless, when the state began to take notice of Voina's actions and pursue them in the courts, they also seemed to forget how to enjoy the place of indistinction. After Elena Kostyleva's presentation on Voina at the 'No Radical Art Actions' conference, the artist Dmitrii Vilenskii asked about Vorotnikov's support for the annexation of Crimea, raising doubts about the group's earlier oppositional position. Kostyleva responded that Voina came up against an invisible wall in their practice with the 'Piss on the Pigs' (*Musor-obossysh*) and 'Cop Auto-Da-Fé' (*Mento-Auto-Da-Fé*) actions of 2011, after which the next step could only be violence without artistic pretentions. Unwilling to take this step, they fled and eventually abandoned their antagonistic stance towards the regime, instead targeting the self-righteous liberalism of their new European hosts. But this is no longer actionism; it is simple posturing.

Again, I do not think this means we can say that the hysteric found her master. Tolokonnikova is wrong to paint late Putinism as a new form of actionism, just as Vorotnikov is wrong to praise the Donbass insurgency from the safety of his Italian exile. Both should know that the Russian regime is not involved in the dramas of subjectivization, whether promoting a new militancy or undermining the law of castration. 'Corporation Russia' is only interested in protecting and, if possible, increasing its market share in the global economy. And, indeed, this is the level at which the Russian actionist tradition might again become useful, occupying spaces within the necrotic body of global capitalism.[19]

Author's note

This chapter reflects the state of Russian actionism in 2014 without consideration of subsequent events or developments.

Notes

1 On the Viennese Actionists, see Brus et al. 1999; on Collective Actions, see Bishop 2012; on the Necrorealists, see Yurchak 2008; on the actionism of the 1990s, see Kovalev 2007.

2 A notable example is the Petr Alekseev Resistance Movement (*Dvizhenie soprotivleniia imeni Petra Alekseeva*). See http://dspa.livejournal.com.

3 The artist has asked that his anonymity be preserved. The action's documentation can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jzas98dPV8. For the RFE/RL press report of the action; see www.svoboda.org/content/article/26555226.html (both accessed 18 September 2015).

4 Tolokonnikova is referring to Groys 1992.

5 See their conceptually muddled, over-produced response to the murder of Eric Garner by police officers in New York in 2014: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXctA2BqF9A (accessed 18 September 2015).

6 See documentation of the discussion after the 'Art and Activism' panel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pj7D024Wl2A (accessed 18 September 2015). Among the participants in the discussion were the poet and philosopher Keti Chukhrov, philosopher Artemii Magun, artist Dmitrii Vilenskii, political theorist Jodi Dean, Croatian curator Antonia Majaca, and political scientist and activist Maksim Aliukov.

7 For more on the theory of hysteria and castration, see Lacan 2006.

8 See Monastyrskii 2011. For a discussion of the Necrorealists and the Mit'ki, see Yurchak 2006.

9 Alexander Etkind has called for caution in using the term 'bare life' in discussions (like those of Yurchak and Santner) of works of art and literature, arguing against the possibility of aestheticizing the incommunicable experience of this condition. Instead, he sees practices like those of the Necrorealists as mnemonic performances or 'victims' balls', in this case commemorating the reduction of Soviet citizens to bare life in the Gulag. While this logic is in principle sound, one should note that the condition of bare life is always linked to representation and its blind spots. One can viciously reduce human beings to bare life – and one can commemorate this trauma – but one can also find it in the place of contradiction between life and power or between real and symbolic bodies, and this is certainly within art's area of competence. See Etkind 2013b, 97–98.

10 For example, as recently as February 2014, Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were met in Moscow's Vnukovo airport by a group of pro-Putin activists waving American flags and wearing chicken masks. The group also brought raw chickens as gifts for the artists. See www.ridus.ru/news/155135. After the 2009 split Tolokonnikova and Verzilov remained in Moscow, while Vorotnikov and his wife Natal'ia Sokol moved to St Petersburg.

11 www.imagebam.com/gallery/j2uu100acnkwnpr4g3xlsx4blbm3ot18/ (accessed 18 September 2015).

12 The verb *pizdit'* (perfective: *spizdit'*) is the most common Russian slang term for stealing. It can also mean to hit someone (similar to the English usage 'to twat someone'), but in this case the various perfective forms take different prefixes. *Pizdit'* should not be confused with *pizdet'*, which derives from the same root but means to talk nonsense or to complain.

13 Aleksei Plutser-Sarno cites this slogan in his *LiveJournal* documentation of the action (Plutser-Sarno 2010).

14 In her presentation on Voina at the 'No Radical Art Actions' conference, the poet and journalist Elena Kostyleva argued that the core question of Voina's practice is 'Kto kogo ebet?' (Who fucks whom?). Kostyleva has never officially claimed participation in any of Voina's actions.

15 This mediating role appears in many of Voina's actions, especially ones involving food. Consider, for example, the cats thrown across the McDonald's counter in 'Mordovan Hour' (*Mordovskii chas*) and the hanged homosexuals and migrant workers in 'We Don't Need Pestel', He Didn't Fall on My Cock!' (*Pestel' na khui ne upal*).

16 Plutser-Sarno – a linguist known for his multi-volume dictionary of Russian swear-words – refers to himself as the 'ideologue' of Voina, although this is largely a misdirection.
17 According to recent reports, the investigator, Pavel Iasman, has since been studying law and even attempted to represent Pavlenskii in his court case over the *Liberty* action. See Nechepurenko 2015.
18 Documentation of the action can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dS88c9-KSM (accessed 18 September 2015).
19 For an idea how such practices might be on the rise (albeit far less radically so) in the West, see Boyer and Yurchak 2010.

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