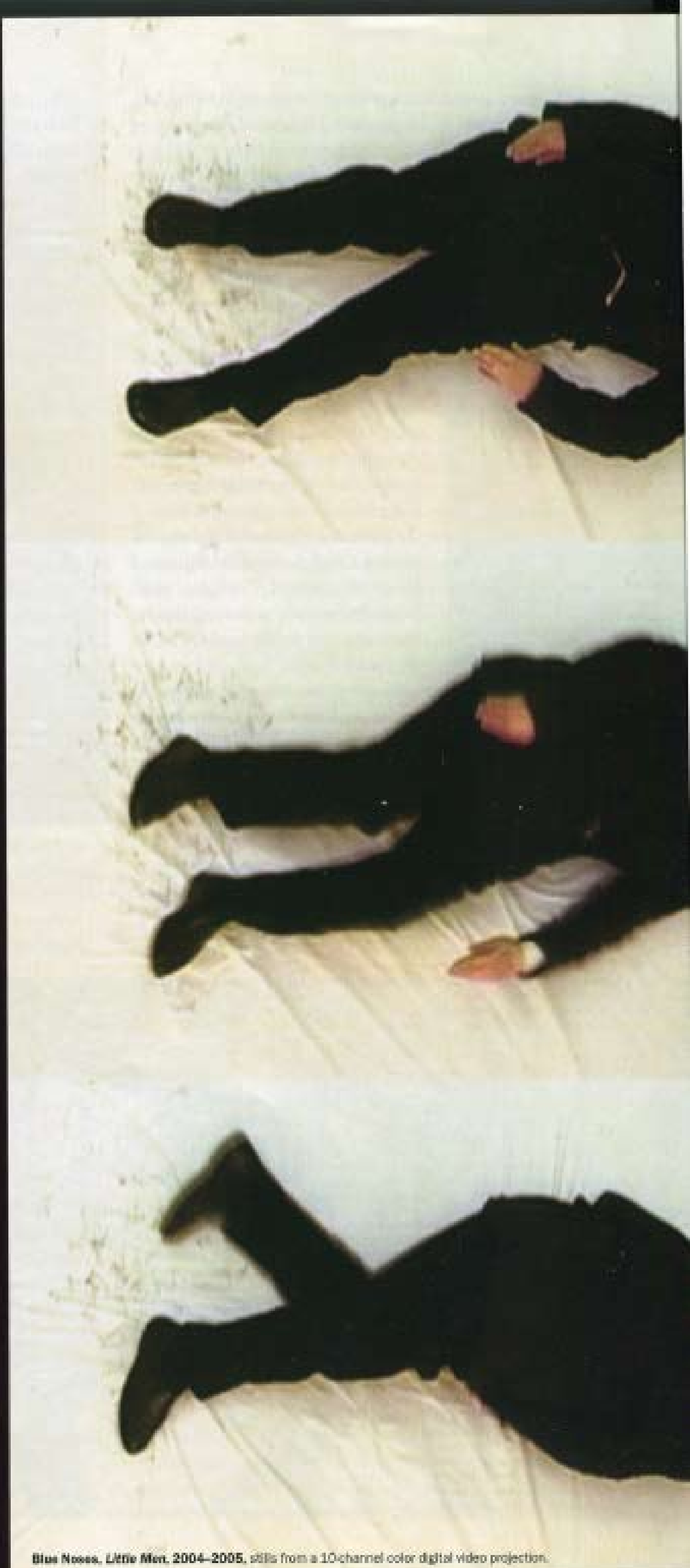
RUSSIAN FRONT



Blue Noses, *Little Men*, 2004–2005, stills from a 10-channel color digital video projection.

I am not complaining about anything and I like everything here, although I have never been here and know nothing about this place.

—COLLECTIVE ACTION GROUP, *SLOGAN '77*, 1977

Moscow mixes the surface energies of Las Vegas with pages from Kafka's *Castle*. On the one hand, there is actual wildness and popular images of it: flashy casinos and raging discos, quasi-legal prostitution (the age of consent only sixteen), ever-flowing vodka, and the massive influx of luxury goods (Dior, Chanel, a block-long Rolex billboard across from Red Square), in addition to Russia's mythic oligarchs and gangsters, who put our versions of these figures to shame as far as bling, badness, and influence go. On the other hand, there are unsmiling uniforms at the front desk, overly complex and time-consuming procedures in place of our cheery service economy's efficiency, high prices and police hassles, all of which make the usual touristic aspect of a biennial so awkward and dysfunctional here. Add to this the living memory of a successful revolution turned bad, not quite dormant under fresh layers of rampant renovation and commercialism, and one gets a high-speed, high-contrast montage of nows and thens, a potent and disorienting cocktail for outsiders. In Moscow, the pasted-on newness of contemporary images—whether by artists or by multinational corporations—pops and speeds all the more intensely against medieval and Soviet architectures, broadcasting the city's real-time sprint out of the past into a giddy, ineluctable abstraction.

So how does an international biennial arrive in a context like this? Last-minute, or not at all. Curatorial hirings and firings, venue changes, and all kinds of conspiracy theories and media controversies preceded the event. Artists complained about absurd degrees of bureaucracy, three-day waits for a screwdriver. Sam Durant's work was stuck in customs. Videos by John Bock and others, meant to be projected in a subway station, didn't seem to be functioning. There was no way to see all the art on the schedule with the constant traffic jams and security measures at each venue. Most ominous of all was the disappearance of one of the biennial's Dutch installation specialists, last seen in the presence of two local girls at a nightclub and later found robbed, slashed, and almost frozen to death on the outskirts of the city. None of this, however, could stop 1 Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. At 6 PM on January 27, the Beryozka Vodka blondes were in the lobby passing out free shots; most of the art was up and running; the crowds were pushing in; the thing was obviously happening.

The biggest international art event ever in Russia, 1 Moscow Biennale hit the capital like sudden weather—a contemporary warm front coming in from the West to meet an ice-bound pocket of local product, especially the preperestroika underground art of the '60s through the '80s, which was seen in these few days by its largest audience ever. The constant snow plus the minus-twenty-degree-Celsius temperatures provided a white wall more extreme than that of any Chelsea gallery, and against this backdrop, Moscow was officially and ceremoniously curated into contemporary existence. This magic was performed with the help of an imported team of five European curator-stars—Daniel Birnbaum (director of Frankfurt's Städelschule), Iara Boubnova (cocurator of Manifesta 4), Nicolas Bourriaud (curator of the Venice Biennale's Aperto '93 and codirector of Paris's Palais de Tokyo), Rosa Martínez (cocurator of the next Venice Biennale), and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (co-organizer of "Utopia Station" and curator of contemporary art at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris)—along with a local coordinating curator, former underground impresario and current deputy director of the State Centre for Museums and Exhibitions Rosizo, Joseph Backstein.

Left: Members of artist collective Gelatin with Beryozka Vodka girls, Moscow, 2005. Photo: John Kelsey. **Right: Oleg Kulik, *Armadillo for Your Show*, 2003.** Performance view, Tate Modern, London.

If we had something like a cultural forecasting device, the capitalist front driving the biennial into Russia might be visualized as dense, fast-moving clouds originating in places where most *Artforum* readers live and proliferating as a biennial system that continuously pushes the climate we call "contemporary" across the shrinking globe. Such a

Micol Assaël, *Sleeplessness*, 2003/2005. Installation view, Lenin Museum, Moscow, 2005.

device might also picture the clear, low-pressure zone of Putin-era Moscow, its newly organized wealth and rising art-collector class, and all the no-longer-outlawed local creativity that has nowhere else to go these days but out into the expanding global market. So, from certain very Moscow-centric circles, there was an urgent demand for this event. In a renovated Manhattan-style loft, at a party hosted by the recently formed Club of Contemporary Art Collectors, local investors, gallerists, and artists echoed Moscow's need for this injection of young art from abroad (and the business and attention that come with it). It was said that it was in the interests of certain officials, dealers, and organizers of the event that local artists experience this new weather in order to invigorate and update their own

Mikhail Romm, *Lenin Is Alive*, 1958, still from a black-and-white digital video projection transferred from 35 mm film, 26 minutes.

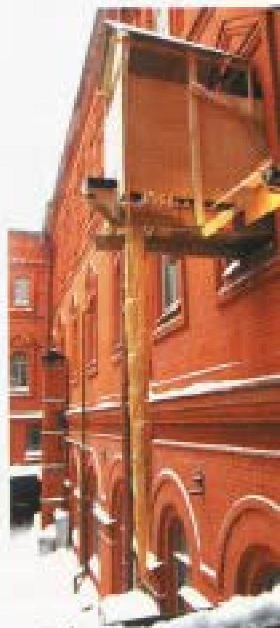
production and thereby make it more internationally integrated and investment worthy. And then there's the city's basic, metaphysical need to make itself visible in this world—a need for a cultural equivalent of the Olympic Games—expressed in optimistic press releases issued by the Ministry of Culture that sold the event as a bold, government-sponsored initiative to modernize the national culture and self-image by opening up a dialogue with international contemporary art.

Along with the biennial's cryptic title, "Dialectics of Hope," the promise of *the contemporary* hung over Moscow like a riddle waiting to be solved. The European curators gave us one version (the main event: forty-one artists from twenty-three countries), while local curators presented another (more than twenty-five special projects showcasing Russian art throughout the city). This encounter between young but mostly known artists—many already well traveled on the international biennial circuit and frequently exposed in magazines like this one—and entire floors in nearby venues devoted to Russian artists (familiar only to their peers and to a few specialists of the region) introduced an unexpected topological twist to the notion of the contemporary. With all the international consensus and expertise backing the biennial's imported product (and the global biennial itself as a format for representing an international today), it would be too much to say that the function of contemporary art was contested or seriously cast in doubt here. But in this particular context its status appeared less clear, less fixed, and this effect—for me, at least—was the dominant product of

the Moscow Biennale. There was a distinct sensation that there may in fact have been more than just one "contemporary" operating within the polymorphous event. Most intriguing of all was how the biennial managed to momentarily unhinge the image of the contemporary from itself, causing it to split and mimic itself from one exhibition to the next.

The biennial's main show took place in the former Lenin Museum, which had been closed for the past twelve years, following Yeltsin's moment and the extreme makeover of the city's Soviet image. But the undead Lenin returned—sometimes nostalgically, sometimes ironically—in numerous artworks by Russians and Europeans alike. In *Little Men*, 2004–2005, a video installation by the Moscow-based Blue Noses group, the embalmed revolutionary—projected into a cardboard box—was shown tossing and turning in an eternally insomniac sleep. As part of her installation *Sleeplessness*, 2003/2005, Italian artist Micol Assaël recovered a portrait of Lenin from the museum's basement and pinned it to the wall (along with an old movie poster for Tarkovsky's *Solaris*). And then there was the curators' decision to resurrect *Lenin Is Alive*, a reverential 1958 documentary film projected nonstop in a majestic room of its own, just as it always had been when the museum was still dedicated to Lenin.

The curators favored young artists and work that was in flux, still in the process of elaborating and testing its own strategies. Indeed, the most engaging work seemed to stumble into the show only half-made, keeping the question of its completion and function wide open. Assaël's very in-progress *Sleeplessness*, for example, was a rough assemblage of humming gas compressors, metal and rubber tubing, smoke, windows opened onto the blizzard outside, stifling machine heat, and slowly accumulating, machine-made frost. The work was a theater of shifting microclimates, a musical arrangement of productive and wasted energies, an animated atmosphere of pure processes. German artist Michael Beutler contributed *Sputnik '05*, 2005, a device that, when cranked, unspooled strips of sheet metal, string, and colored ribbons, winding these into a single mysterious sort of building material, sections of which were cut, bent, and strewn throughout a marble hallway. Also present was the Austrian collective Gelatin, which contributed *Zapf de Pipi*, 2005, a wooden structure that allowed viewers to exit the museum through an upper-floor window into the subzero cold, in order to look at and contribute to a twenty-foot-long pee icicle. If, based on



Gelatin, *Zapf de Pipi*, 2005. Installation view, Lenin Museum, Moscow, 2005.

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these works alone, we had to force a definition of the contemporary international aesthetic (and of the ways it contributes to reproducing the biennial format worldwide), it might be summed up as fascinated by the flexibility of its own frame, playfully self-displacing, as ludic as it is workaholic, spectacular in terms of its own processes, more programmed than authored. And as if poised to sabotage these qualities—or as if contemporary art were also capable of ending itself—there was former Radek Society member David Ter-Oganyan's *It Is Not a Bomb*, 2005: imitiation explosive devices, which ticked disconcertingly on stairway landings and in random corners, uncomfortably close to other artists' works.

Among the biennial's twenty-five off-site special projects was "Starz" at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, which gave slick, celebrity treatment (and an entire floor) to each of four still-active "elephants of art" who emerged here in the '90s: Oleg Kulik (appearing in a video as a human disco ball), drag-impersonator Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, staged-narrative photographers AES+F, and mock–Socialist Realist painters Vinogradov & Dubossarskiy. Moscow's own YRA generation, these media-savvy artists came up at

David Ter-Oganyan, *It Is Not a Bomb*, 2005, mixed media, dimensions variable.

a time when money, fame, and exposure were fresh options for a Russian artist, when Saatchi-esque sensations seemed to grow on trees, and though they may burn a little less brightly today, they will probably continue to shine here until the next big bang.

Then there was the exhibition "Russia 2," whose curators proposed something like a parallel universe (contemporary Russian art) positioned at a self-declared distance from what they called "Russia 1" (meaning power, the law, official society). The most demonstrative of the biennial's efforts to produce a local view of the contemporary, this show relied for its effect on a dubious splitting between the official and the underground, as if to resurrect the old division that once fueled all postrevolutionary dissident artists in this country, from the Collective Action Group to Ilya Kabakov. Included here were *This Work Has the Purpose of Stirring Up Religious Hatred*, 2004, by Advei Ter-Oganyan (David's son)—a superflat, candy-colored painting that cites Suprematist abstraction via the banality of contemporary

Oleg Kulik, *Madonna with Children* (detail), 2004, mixed media, 12' 2" x 4' 8" x 8' 3".

How can we differentiate between a sanctioned and timely aesthetic gesture
and the potential threat of a more viral antiaesthetic, and at what point do our

graphic design—and Kulik's *Madonna with Children*, 2004—a readymade city bus stop and vitrine, which instead of the usual advertising image displays a faux fashion photograph of a Chechen suicide bomber (Madonna) strapped with explosives (children). Employing slick promotional strategies in the service of shock tactics (and vice versa), such works take direct aim at social issues that the biennial would probably prefer to smooth over, but in the end they mostly declare and illustrate their intentions, making us wonder whether there might be something less readily consumable, something like a "Russia 3" around the next corner.

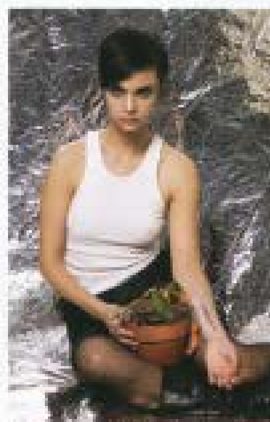
Yevgeniy Fiks, *Hacker's Cubicle*, 2004, still from a two-channel digital video installation.

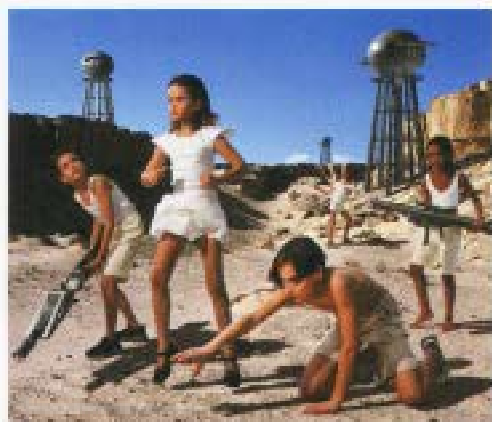
Why did I lie to myself that I had never been here and knew nothing about this place? Actually here is just like everywhere. Only one feels it more sharply and misunderstands it more deeply.

—COLLECTIVE ACTION GROUP, *SLOGAN '78*, 1978

Joanna Malinowska, *Untitled*, 2002/2004, stills from a seven-channel video installation.

In Moscow, there was a constant refrain among visiting curators and journalists that contemporary Russian art is "derivative," "nothing new," or even the occasional "looks like an SVA graduation show." Glancing through a local review of the international main event, however, one might hear a Muscovite writer critiquing the imported art for its "sleazy, low-format appearance" and "poor communicative abilities." Beyond their simple reflection of differences in taste, such statements can also be read as symptoms of a lingering incommensurability, even as a positive sign that the biennial's format is not its only message and that, no matter how neutralizing (or utopian) the imaging of a global contemporary may be, it can still provoke gut-level reactions, clashing sensibilities, and debates over image, form, and strategy.





Left: **Anton Ginzburg, *totemdoppelganger*, 2004,** color photograph, 60½ x 39".
Right: **AES+F, *Action Half-Life (AHL)*, 2003–2005,** ink-jet print on canvas, 58½ x 73⅞".

In a 2003 catalogue essay local curator and critic Constantin Bokhorov writes that Russian artists really don't care about being original or providing the world with any special knowledge. Flipping through his text on my way to another opening, I began to imagine that the secret genius of the Russian artist might be to clown the contemporary, to mimic or pirate it. If we assume that the status of international contemporary art relies to a large extent on both financial investment and institutional legitimization, perhaps a "derivative" contemporary practice could be a kind of black-market tactic, a dispersion strategy, a termitelike hollowing out from within of the values and representations that the international biennial system tends to affirm. There may be a fine line between the contemporary art of appropriation, for example, and a local art of pirating or fronting contemporary culture. How can we differentiate between a sanctioned and timely aesthetic gesture and the potential threat of a more viral antiaesthetic, and at what point do our institutional antibodies decide their host has been infected? At this groundbreaking biennial, the contemporary moment sometimes seemed crowded with impostors.

"Post-Diasporas" was an exhibition featuring Russian- and Eastern European–born artists currently living in places like Paris and New York. All the work engaged multicultural issues such as translating national and local identity in a global context, border crossings, etc. There was Daniel Bozhkov's hysterical overconsumption of IKEA culture and a project by Joanna Malinowska in which the artist assumed the identity of a Polish cleaning woman in Manhattan, exchanging her performance of an immigrant stereotype for (equally stereotypical) highbrow cultural services from her clients (philosophy lessons, piano recitals, etc.). Yevgeniy Fiks's two-channel video installation *Hacker's Cubicle*, 2004, presented interviews with prisoners enrolled in a Rikers Island computer-programming class alongside footage of the "cubicle," a combination computer workstation/prison cell, a sort of digital crime-and-punishment apparatus. This work continued the artist's ongoing exploration of what he has described as an unconscious symbiotic relationship between immigrant computer programmers pursuing their dreams in corporate America and the burgeoning criminal cyber-underground of provincial Russia. Taken as a metaphor for the local artist operating in a global market today, the anonymous hacker suggests an ambiguous aesthetic that's indifferent to intellectual property, formally deceptive, parasitic in relation to originality, impossible to trace but no less proficient or industrious than its host.

If posing, pirating, and other mimetic tactics are so operative in Russia today (media piracy is rampant here), and if such processes put pressure not only on recent official images of national identity but also on the mechanisms by which contemporary art is globally distributed, then isn't it possible that an "unoriginal" Russian version of international art in fact harbors a potential subversion of the culture market that's poised to absorb it? In a world where everything is just as "contemporary" as everything else, questions of legitimacy and authenticity might have to give way to new, more complex ideas of duplicitous cohabitation or perhaps antagonistic worlds. At 1 Moscow Biennale, these ideas seemed to be right there on the table, blending in with everything else.

And if a group exhibition like "Gender Trouble," for example, can be summarily dismissed by an American journalist with "Haven't we been here already?" I wasn't sure how to dismiss the blindfolded, stark-naked performance artist with a video camera taped to her head who cornered me and other random spectators at the packed opening, blindly groping and filming us at the same time. When *was* this contemporary, and where was this *now*? Yes, there was something a bit familiar about it, maybe early-'90s SVA via '70s shades of Valie Export. Still, I suddenly had the feeling that here, for a fleeting moment, a discrepancy between simultaneous contemporaries was not merely possible but literally embodied. In Moscow, examples of "legitimate" contemporary art were vastly outnumbered by works that no European curator would give a second glance, and the

Valery and Rimma Gerlovins, *Homo Sapiens*, 1976, black-and-white photograph.

TOTART (Abalakova & Zhigalov), *White Globe*, n.d., color photograph, 7 ⅞ x 11 ¾.

View of "Spring Apartment Exhibitions," Leonid Sokov's studio, Moscow, 1976. Photo: Valentin Serov.

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real question wasn't which version was most adequate or timely (it's all too obvious anyway) but how we might think about this discrepant simultaneity in a less-neutralizing, less-programmed way. . . . If only a biennial could elaborate this gap, expand on and into it.

The strong presence of Soviet-era underground art, much of it produced collectively in small, local circles between the '60s and '80s, introduced an extra tension within the resolutely contemporary format of the international biennial: Surveys such as "Accomplices" and "Apartment Exhibitions. Yesterday and Today" unearthed entire secret histories of Moscow art, exposing intensified creative life-forms that once thrived at the risk of their proponents' imprisonment and without an official gallery support system. Such collectives demand to be understood in different terms than, say, "relational aesthetics," which proposes a model of "collaboration" between the artist, curator, and spectator by opening a supposed space of social interaction within the elastic confines of the institution and the marketplace. Both models elaborate ideas of ritualized participation, scripted situations, and play, as opposed to the production of complete objects to be passively consumed by interested though separated viewers. But there were no spectators of Soviet-era underground art: If you were there, you were necessarily a direct participant; you, too, were making it. A manifesto by the Collective Action Group (founded in 1975) states: "Our activities are spiritual practice, but not art in any commercial sense. Each of our actions is a ritual with a purpose, namely to create an atmosphere of unanimity among the participants." At first this may not seem all that different from a curatorial statement by relational-aesthetics frontman Bourriaud, but there is a crucial distinction between contemporary projects based on professional collaboration and the unofficial group actions, total installations, and spontaneous, friends-only quasi institutions that characterized the apartment exhibitions, readings, and debates of the '60s through the '80s. For unlike the designer art hangouts and romanticized open networks of today, these earlier activities were in no way oriented toward creating standardized models adapted to external systems of reproduction and distribution. Documentation of such collectively inhabited entities as Mukhomor (Toadstools Group), TOTART, and APTART (in "Accomplices") presented something much closer to an antiprogram, precisely a refusal of what we mean by collaboration these days. The experience of viewing this compiled evidence in a museum filled with biennial spectators, or on a curated tour of re-created apartment exhibitions throughout the city, only increased the feeling of a nagging disconnect between these seemingly aligned models.

Conceived as a genealogical extension of those earlier groups, the more recent work of the Radek Society was presented at a ramshackle nonprofit space called France Gallery. Video documentation of Radek actions such as *Demonstration*, 2002, attempted to translate a collective ethic to present-day Moscow, where free expression and critical intervention in the public domain are ostensibly authorized options. Filmed from across the street, incognito Radek members waited for a zombielike mass of rush-hour pedestrians to form at a Moscow crosswalk and then, as the light turned green, hoisted commie-red banners over the unsuspecting crowd of "protesters." Co-opting the programmed rhythms and docile bodies of the metropolis, this action hallucinated a revolutionary moment where it was least possible and least expected and momentarily confused an image of the contemporary with the untimely return of a radical collective desire. The overloaded slogan SEX MARX KARL PISTOLS swims in one's eyes for a few seconds, refusing to cohere as a message in the same way that the "demonstration" resisted settling into an image of either protest or civil obedience—or, for that matter, art.

Radek Society, *Demonstration*, 2002, still from a color video, 5 minutes.

There were some real protests—notably by the movements currently organizing around the issue of government pensions—and a heightened police presence on the occasion of the biennial, which in the eyes of many locals was largely a symbol of the new Russian elite. Why, for the first time ever, is the Putin government so interested in developing a relationship with young, contemporary art? The biennial and the liberal values it communicates, it is said, are being used as a public-relations tool by the right-leaning state in order to soften its own image and to disguise an increasingly fractured Russian society. International contemporary art is a highly instrumentalized system, and by its own playful strategies easily lends itself to the kinds of collaborations and displacements that facilitate both social control and market efficiency. In Moscow, the limits of this tendency were exposed in the unexpected moments when the temporal plenitude of the contemporary didn't seem to agree with itself. Here, this first biennial—a sort of test balloon and a fresh node in a proliferating system that spreads the positive values of interconnection, dialogue, and mutual exposure—didn't exactly coincide with a city that hasn't yet managed to synthesize its present and past into a coherent image. If the first Moscow Biennale gave us something to hope for, it's that future installments will take their cue from this one's multiple gaps and slippages, and build not toward a more efficient negotiation of cultural differences but rather unbuild a little, through a heightened questioning of the biennial's very format and function. New sparks seem to fly from colliding, not-yet-synchronized speeds. A biennial can show up anywhere, but it doesn't have to show up on time. □

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