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PERFORMATIVITY OF DEATH IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: THE PARTY OF THE DEAD'S GROWING MEMBERSHIP

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Performativity of death is made visible in the rituals, mourning attire, parades and spaces of death and dying. These are human-made performances that protect the threshold that separates those that are living from those that are not. What is beyond that border is a continuation of biological life through the decomposition of human form. After death, there is no performance. The performance collective Party of the Dead challenges this human-made divide, bringing performance—with all its philosophical and corporeal associations of materiality, visibility, politics, action and speech—into the domain of the dead. "Party of the Dead is the largest political party, because its members include all of the dead. Recently, and strangely, some living members have decided to join their ranks," says Maxim Evstropov, the founding member of the Party (NBC Left Field 2018). Despite the universal connotation of death, there is something deeply specific about the evocation of death in Russia's post-Soviet context, to which the St. Petersburg-based Party of the Dead speaks.

In the Russian post-Soviet context, there is, on one hand, the obsessive glorification of death on May 9th Victory Day, which occurs annually through the mass mobilization of the incomprehensible numbers of human lives lost into a single affect of sublime glory over (what now appears as the ceaseless) war against fascism, launched from Moscow since 1941; and on the other hand; the total erasure of individual life-death through geopolitical "special operations" that deny the fact of human life loss, routinely abandoning the unclaimed dead bodies of soldiers on foreign territory. While these are old conditions, they have been dramatically enhanced in the present situation.

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After the beginning of full scale Russian necroperformance throughout the whole territory of Ukraine, it became clear that artists anticipated this "reality" in many ways. Since February 24, 2022, the Russian state has been turning many hundreds of Ukrainian neighborhoods into cemeteries, adding countless members to the Party of the Dead prematurely. With a resurrection of Soviet era-machinery and a bouquet of recycled slogans, the performance of the Russian state in Ukraine exemplifies what Achille Mbembe (2019) calls *necropolitics* in both dictating who must die—exemplified in Bucha—and in creating of *deathworlds* from cities such as Mariupol. The power and the horror of this necroperformance erases the ability to perform the necessary rituals of death: to mourn individual lives, to bury individual bodies, to realize the conventional performativity of death. With unclaimed bodies of soldiers and unknown numbers of individuals buried under tons of rubble on the precipice of extinction, the border between life and death becomes unclear, a life-death.

One of the important slogans of Party of the Dead is "The dead don't fight." We—Agitatsia—are a collective dedicated to agitation for the Party of the Dead. With consideration of the precarity of some of our members, we cannot, as a collective, make a statement on the necroperformance here. "The dead don't fight," is our statement. The following text is a presentation of important performance-actions by Party of the Dead through the consideration of space, time, body and language. We examine the philosophical implications of conceptualizing performativity of death in relation to these terms.

Space

Death has a strong association with certain places. Sites of battle, execution and other violence are often reflected in architectural landmarks of the nation state, creating symbolic spaces of power and public memory. At the same time, according to social norms, individual physiological death should be hidden from public space. Hospitals, morgues and cemeteries execute the functions of this removal. There, death is demarcated with special signs, specific materials are provided to hold the remains of the body, and other borders are signified to contain the pollution of death into the spaces of life. Physiological death should not be visible to others, and if it suddenly appears in public space, it is immediately perceived as something unusual, scandalous and abnormal.

This divide was notoriously transgressed in the late-Soviet/post-Soviet period by the Necrorealists, an art movement aimed at engaging with the theme and aesthetic of death and dying in film and performance. The Necrorealists, like other unofficial art groups in the 1970s and 1980s in the USSR, preferred the suburban territories, such as fields and forests, to the visibility and symbolic connotation of urban squares and public spaces for their performances and actions. In the 1990s, the locations became more varied for artists engaging with death: urban territories, where death was either a trigger (Nezeziudik group, *Harakiri Street*, spring 1994; see image 2) or an event (Factory of Found Clothes, *In Memory Poor Liza*, 20 June 1996; see image 3); suburbs (TANATOS, *Chosen Path*, May 1992; see image 4); and specific spaces of death. The first Russian groups to make actions in the cemetery were the Sect of Absolute Love (performances using graves such as *Love Me to Death*, 3 June 1995; see image 5) and the *TANATOS* group (using the burial site of Kazimir Malevich in Nemchinovka, near Moscow).

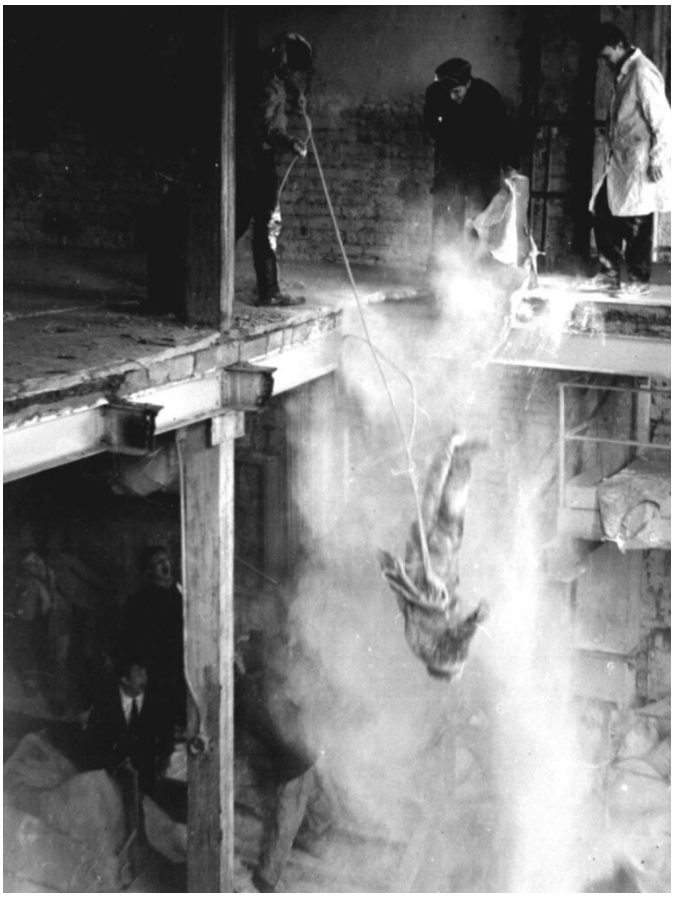

Image 1: *Necrorealists*. Dropping the Zurab. *Documentation of the preparation of the performance art. St. Petersburg, 1980s.*

Image 2: Nezeziudik group, Harakiri Street, Moscow, Spring 1994. Photos by Igor Stomakhin.

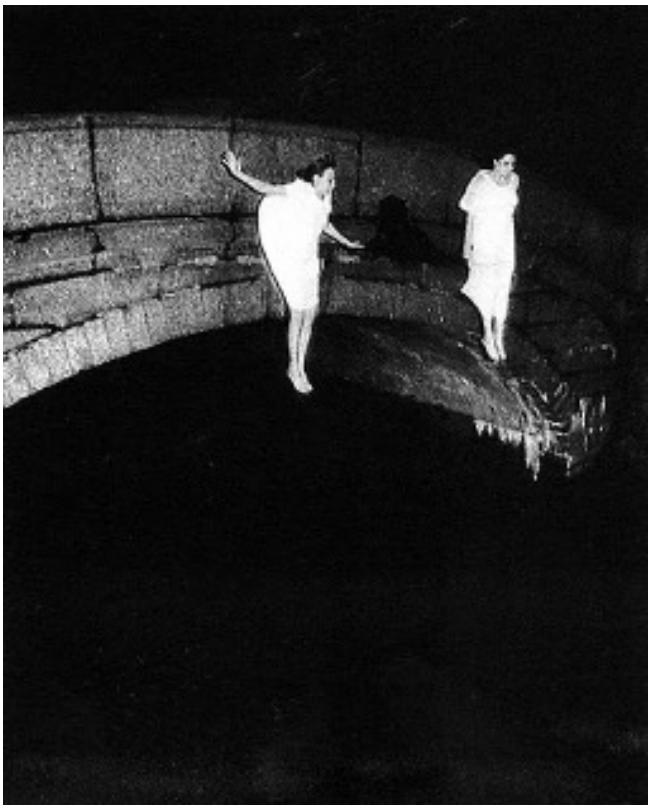

Image 3: *Factory of Found Clothes,* In Memory Poor Liza, *St. Petersburg, 20 June 1996. Photo by Sergey Panteleev.*

Image 4: TANATOS, Chosen Path, *May 1992.*

Image 5: Sect of Absolute Love, Love Me to Death*, 3 June 1995. Photos by Ekaterina Sotnikova.*

Party of the Dead continued with the uncanny exploration, reappropriation, and transgression of the spaces of death of its predecessors. Since its emergence in 2017, the Party has held several performance-actions in city cemeteries. The cemetery serves as a stage, which enhances the highly curated image of the group, as they document their performance-actions and circulate them as images online. On the other hand, the cemetery is also a (relatively) safe space, devoid of the police control omnipresent in public spaces in St. Petersburg during recent years. The not-quite-public quality of the cemetery is not obvious: it is not a closed or forbidden area, but it implies a certain intimacy. Considering that the Russian Actionist movement thrives on direct intervention into public space and the reaction of the passersby and the police, the cemetery is an unconventional choice of space due to the absence of both spectator and police. (In the actions of the 1990s, this lack of visibility was dealt with through invitations, thus creating a small audience and maintaining the "intimate publicity" of the cemetery.) For the Party of the Dead, in contrast, there is no such problem: as it is a party that includes all the dead, therefore the immediate audience and participants are present in the cemetery. Cemeteries—mainly cemeteries within St. Petersburg—are used by the group as specific places for their target audiences—the dead. The "living" get the documentation, as in the case of the *Crosses for noughts* action held in the summer of 2020 at the Krasnenkoe cemetery on the city's territory (see image 6).

Image 6: Party of the Dead, Crosses for noughts*, St. Petersburg, June 2020. Photo by David Frenkel.*

Time

In 2017 Party of the Dead predecessor, group *{rodina}* (motherland), released a 1 min. 42 sec. video titled *Pre-election*, posting it on Facebook. The video shows Maxim Evstropov, the group's founder, dressed in the signature "death style"—corpse paint makeup, a black jacket and a earth green button shirt. He is sitting in a semi-lit room, adorned with tan wallpaper and a plant. Speaking directly to the camera, Evstropov mimics the oratory style of political campaigns in summoning viewers to vote for The Party of the Dead, "because the dead are more than the living. The dead are faster, taller and stronger. 107 billion dead against 7 billion alive," says Evstropov (Party of the Dead 2017).

Image 7: Party of the Dead, Pre-election video*, April 29, 2017. Screenshot by Dasha Filippova.*

In 2018, an online platform NBC Left Field featured a clip from this video in a short documentary about Party of the Dead. The video was titled "Meet Russia's 'Party of the Dead' free-speech activists." As the title implies, the video was narrating the Party's engagement with death through a liberal set of values: symbolic death as the lack of freedom of assembly, symbolic death as the lack of freedom of speech.

The 2017 video and its "western" reincarnation in 2018 open the question of time that animates Party of the Dead's performance. Viewing Party of the Dead through the prism of a lack (of liberal values) places them on a temporality that has been imagined by the victors of the Cold War: the former socialist is always that, which is late on arrival to the "happy" neoliberal present. (The neoliberal present, of course, is not so happy, and is a state of catastrophe without the capacity to imagine a future.) Such a conventional reading erases the complex and looped temporal evocations that death preserves in the post-socialist context. Boris Groys (2008) offers an

alternative reading of post-socialism in relation to time in proposing that: "[t]he post-Communist subject travels the same route as described by the dominant discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history.... [b]ack to historical time" (155).

In its relationship to time, the death in Party of the Dead speaks to this peculiar *loop* in time, where the post-socialist is both the return to pre-revolutionary time and, in some other sense, that what comes after socialism—communist utopia. The temporal progression of life into death become destabilized through the unfulfillment of the teleological progression of socialism into communism. Thinking through the temporality of the loop, one wonders whether we are, as global post-socialist neoliberal subjects, in a sense, dead, or are we not yet born into historical time. Posing as the largest political party, death becomes the stillborn, the undecayed, the buried alive material harbors of dreams that animated the future that had arrived—as time—but not materialized—as historical promise. To the contrast of the desire for freedoms of assembly and speech, the death in Party of the Dead evokes the ghost of the Biocosmist revolutionary promise to conquer time and death, and that utopia would come as the resurrection of those who had died before its advent. They appear now, as members of Party of the Dead, demanding not liberal freedoms, but the justice of time they were promised.

Body

The body has always been one of the important artistic tools of art-activist practices. The body in public space can become a sign of protest or a gesture of solidarity. Inserting the physical body into the public or contested spaces of the city is a political gesture and an eventful potentiality. At the same time, it is important to note that in the case of Party of the Dead, and more broadly when it comes to the performativity of death, the body acquires a specific ambiguity: it simultaneously acts as an object and a subject, an instrument and an action.

The bodies of Party of the Dead's members often have this double connotation. They refer to the understanding of the body as a corpse, where the body exists as an object of power through the biopolitical mechanisms. At the same time, in the Party of the Dead's actions, the body retains its agency, subjectivity and protest activity. This dual understanding of the body can be clearly seen in many of the Party of the Dead's actions, in which participants take on the role of an animated corpse. For example, the action *We Don't Say Goodbye, We'll See You Soon*, which took place in St. Petersburg on the Field of Mars on May 31, 2020, is a gesture in which the body of the artist Maxim Evstropov, wrapped in polyethylene (a material used to dispose of corpses) simply lay motionless in the urban space as an object (see image 8). Later, the artist was arrested for violations of covid restrictions and lockdown, becoming a subject of the law.

Image 8: Party of the Dead, We Don't Say Goodbye, See You Soon, *St. Petersburg, June 2020. Photo by David Frenkel.*

Particularly in present-day Russia the bodily presence of the artist in public space creates a force field that has the potential to protest, or at least the potential to resist and disagree. However, in Party of The Dead's action, the immovable body is a corpse—a body that, as a rule, is completely excluded from the urban space, holding no more power to manifest a space of appearance. Corpses are taken to special institutions: the hospital, the morgue, the cemetery. The presence of a corpse in the city—especially during the pandemic, and especially in Russia—makes visible not only the scale of the pandemic, but also exposes the mechanisms of power at the bodily level. As in many cities around the world, the authorities in St. Petersburg banned the farewell of relatives to the deceased. However, Covid restrictions were practically not observed (bars, restaurants, public places were open), and only the city administration strictly controlled the ban on saying goodbye to relatives. Thus, the body as a corpse turns out to be not just an immovable object, but an object of biopower, whose work continues even after death.

This necropolitical component of the Party of the Dead's actions was reflected in the series of action against the war, which the group has been conducting since February 24th. The slogan "Russians do not bury Russians" at one of their cemetery actions shows how the dead body of the military apparatus becomes an inconvenient object, evidence of the war and the defeat of Russia. In his February 26, 2022, post, Evstropov notes: "Mobile crematoria are just destroying the 'biological traces' of the war, solving the problem of huge cemeteries with nameless 'biomaterials.'"

Language

The Party of the Dead raises an explicit ontological problematic in the simultaneous existence and non-existence of the dead. Evstropov (2020) notes that "the deadmen belong to all these registers at once". We are aware that the dead don't speak, at the same time we're looking at people with masks or "death" make-up to transmit the dead's message. This ontological paradox is echoed at the level of language. A signature aesthetic of the Party is the use of hand-made posters with statements of the dead speaking in first person, such as "I'm dead" or "We're dead," held by living members of the Party. This kind of first-person statement falls out of the conventional system of language, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida (1973, 97). As a matter of fact, not only the dead but *their discourse* is both absent *and* omnipresent. Furthermore the Party enters an ethical plane, seeking to establish justice towards the dead. The use of the first person manifests inclusion. When the Party says "We are dead," it is certainly "I + you", i.e. the speaker plus the ordinary citizens who read this sign. Some statements of the Party even demonstrate the fusion of singular and plural in the first person, i.e. by starting with "I/We" (similar to the "I are" and "We am" found by Émile Benveniste [1974]).

Image 10: Party of the Dead, 12 June 2020. The poster inscriptions are: "I/We are dead", "Which Russian doesn't feel himself as dead?", "Russia is a dinosaur". The inscriptions on the skulls say "I/We". 12 June is a Russian national holiday which commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

For the pioneer of linguistic pragmatics, J. L. Austin (1975, 60), the performance of a *speech act,* in the case of inscriptions where the speaking subject is absent, can be provided by appending a signature. The signature, in other words, is a substitute for the speaking subject. However, with Party of the Dead we won't find a signature, but the presence of a substitute speaking subject. So how can we be certain that the words uttered really belong to the dead? Therein lies the fundamental difference with ordinary political slogans, which may appropriate the speech of the dead referring to ancestors, fallen veterans, historical figures, victims of repression and past generations—like for example the reference to the ancestors "who passed on to us their ideals and faith in God" found in one 2020 amendment to the Russian constitution. For the Party, the very presence of an individual holding the poster in his or her hands becomes essential for the performance of a real and complete speech act, which paradoxically does not need any signature.

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AGITATSIA is a research group of five members (D. Filippova, P. Mitenko, A. Spirenkova, A. Stebur, V. Zamyslova) dedicated to political performance art practices, actionism, and art activism. In 2021 Agitatsia won the *Russian Art Focus* prize for the best research paper on Russian contemporary art.