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From Incoherence to Sustainability: Performance, Activism, and Social Media in the Most Recent Russian Poetry

This article considers the evolution of poetic performance on the basis of several Russian poets of the 2010s. The type of performance in question, which originally implied active absorption in the poetic text, occupied an important place in Russian art of the twentieth century – from the first experiments of the historical avant-garde to Moscow Conceptualism (above all, in the their "Collective Actions"). As such, it has always maintained a closeness to the poetic work and was most often practiced by poets who sought to extend their texts beyond the space of the page and into the "external" world. In the 2010s, however, with the development of social media, the opposite trend is noticeable – poets, while declaring their connection to the performative traditions of Moscow Conceptualism, transfer their performative activity into a textual space organized by social media platforms. The central hypothesis of this article is that all of these poets react differently to the methods of discursive organization provided (and enforced) by social networks and strive in different ways to liberate themselves from the censorship of the algorithm: some emphasize the discursive incoherence of the platform, while others, on the contrary, seek to develop a sustainable manner of uniting private discourses into a new totality.

Keywords: Performance Art, Russian Poetry of the 2010s, Moscow Conceptualism, Moscow Actionism, Dmitrii Gerchikov, Rostislav Amelin, Ian Vygovskii, Vadim Bannikov, Social Networking

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This article[1] is founded on the hypothesis that performative art in Russia in the second half of the 2010s has undergone a transformation that emerged directly from poetry and by the poetic community. In large part, this is due to the present convergence of poetry with contemporary art: poets are looking for ways to reach beyond their usual medium – text – while simultaneously attempting to preserve the tools characteristic of poetry – i.e., to work with words. As a result, performative practices have been incorporated into the text that circulates in the space of social media, garnering reactions from users and transforming them into an audience for poetic performance. Meanwhile, the poet-performer puts him- or herself in a special literary position: by externally continuing to follow the rules of communication accepted in the literary community, he / she confirms his / her existence as a literary phenomenon with vividly expressed performative traits.

Here, we might do well to recall the broad understanding of performance that dates back to the thought of Erving Goffman, according to whom performance encompasses "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers."[2] The space of social networks, with their incredible capacity for documenting and representing everyday life, seems like a living illustration of this understanding of performance and, of course, does not exhaust itself in the examples of the poets to whom we shall subsequently turn our attention. However, what is fundamental to our further analysis will be the argument that all of these poets transform their means of literary existence in its entirety into an extended performative project, which in itself is telling – both of this poetry's relation to the historical avant-garde and of the situation of contemporary Russian poetry as a whole.

Of course, almost all existing literary groups affiliated with the historical avant-garde of the first quarter of the 20th century practiced performative art: this extends to both Italian and Russian futurists, Dadaists, surrealists, and many of their epigones and successors. The participants in these performances were poets, artists, composers, dancers, actors: the improvisational form of such performances itself contributed to their erasure of boundary between various media. At the same time, this type of performance was often viewed as a "preparatory stage" for the development of one or another cultural movement – a relatively simple means of demonstrating one's ideas and obtaining an instantaneous reaction. In the words of performance scholar Roselee Goldberg, the artists and poets of the first half of the 20th century "were still in their twenties or early thirties, it was in performance that they tested their ideas, only later expressing them in objects."[3]

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[1] This article was translated for publication by David Hock at the University of Trier, Germany, with the assistance of Matthias Fechner and the author. All errors and inadequacies in English are mine – D.H.

[2] Goffman (1956: 13).

[3] Goldberg (1988: 8).

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Performance crystallizes into a separate art form aware of its own specificity when artists practice it exclusively and without attempting to produce objects (the textbook example being Marina Abramović). However, in parallel with that development, the literary component of performative art also expands: extensive documentation, manifestos, and interviews with artists are all summoned to surround the work with meta-commentary, defining the mode of its "reading" (as in the extensive commentaries and happenings of the "Collective Actions").[4] Meanwhile, performance evolves in at least two directions – towards a more or less spontaneous event that attracts accidental viewers (the happening) or, on the other hand, towards theater. To simplify things somewhat, one could say that the first of these two avenues has become decisive for so-called Russian actionism, while the latter, contrary movement has found more widespread practice in the experimental theater of the United States.[5]

At the same time, in response to the "literaturization" of performance, there has been a "performativization" of poetry – the desire to "break open" the text to external space, to take it beyond the bounds of literature as such and into adjoining regions. Poets become the authors of performances, assimilating them into their poetic practices. This is reminiscent of Paul Zumthor's thought that performance can be presented as a kind of division of a single poetic text into its component parts, such that each of them acquires a unique performative quality.[6]

This is the direction taken by Andrei Monastyrskii and Dmitrii Prigov, who are in many respects the predecessors of, on the one hand, the art group "Voina" or "Pussy Riot", which include poets among their members, and, on the other, the "Monstrations" of Artem Loskutov or the "Translit" group and its affiliate, the "The Laboratory of Poetic Actionism".[7] In such cases, texts are intended to abandon the space of literature in order to circulate in the "real" world: in deserted fields, on city sidewalks, or, on the contrary, amid mass political demonstrations. The performative practices considered in this article are in many ways the opposite: here, we are talking about authors who remain firmly planted within textual media, yet who transform its means of circulation in such a way that individual texts become part of a complex performative project.

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Before turning our attention to contemporary practices, it is worth outlining the history of the relationship between poetry and performative art in Russia. This is

[4] On the documentation of these performances, see: Jones (1997); Auslander (2006).

[5] On actionism in Russia, see: Ковалев (2007); Drews-Sylla (2011). The contrary convergence of performance and theatrical art has been analyzed, for example, in: Schechner (1988).

[6] Zumthor (1988: 705).

[7] Platt (2016).

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not merely a literary-historical excursion: the type of textual performance that we will consider below often directly refers back to earlier performative practices, incorporating them into itself as a meta-text to which it addresses numerous polemical replies. Properly speaking, the very necessity of developing a new kind of performativity *inside* social media rather than in the "outside" world is dictated by a polemic with earlier practices that have been glorified by art critics and historians alike. Moreover, those critical works that engage performative art in Russia rarely pay attention to its poetic components. Here, I will therefore attempt to sketch a history of performance as a history of its interaction with poetry: as art that largely emerged from within a poetic context and that is ultimately derivative of it. Such a perspective will allow us to show more clearly why it is precisely poets who are currently reforming the state of performance in Russia.

Since its first years, the Russian poetic avant-garde was very close to performance art. The first public appearances of Russian Futurists could even be regarded, in more modern terms, as performances or happenings. The heyday of performance in Russia began in parallel with the rest of Europe – emerging in the 1910s and continuing until the end of the 1920s, when the political situation fundamentally changed.[8] One of the last performances of the Russian avant-garde, «Три левых часа» ("Three Hours from the Left"), was initiated by the OBERIU group (Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, and others) and took place on January 24, 1928, in Leningrad.[9] The evening attracted only a small audience and completely lacked the grand scale of projects being undertaken simultaneously in Germany (e.g., by Oskar Schlemmer) or in France (in the surrealist performances of André Breton, which were set to the music of Erik Satie); in actual fact, it amounted to a poetry reading with a humble splash of theatricality mixed in. However, as a performance, it nonetheless marked a turning point, inadvertently concluding an epoch in which avant-garde practices could afford to be presented publicly. Its continuation and the rebirth of poetic performance would only be possible in the 1970s, by which time unofficial Soviet culture had begun to develop a new artistic language all its own.

The focal point of this latter development was the establishment of «Коллективные действия» ("The Collective Actions"), headed by Andrei Monastyrskii. The group was praised for its «Поездки за город» ("Trips out of Town") performance series, which was launched in 1976.[10] Monastyrskii, as the leader and architect of the group, used his own poems as raw material for the performances and was prone to regard these actions as poetic oeuvres. In other words, in "Trips out of Town", the poetic word obtained a specific corporeality beyond

[8] Goldberg (1988: 31-49).

[9] Jaccard (1995); Roberts (1997: 7-12).

[10] Extensive literature devoted to the "Collective Actions" group considers various aspects of their activity – from their relationship to literary tradition to their place in contemporary art. See Sasse (2003: 53-188); Eșanu (2013: 92-106); Gerber (2018), Korchagin (2022).

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the language of poetry. Such performances strived to reproduce an effect in which the words of poetry exerted force upon their audience by means of other media – the human body or various spatial constructions. In one of the more famous collective actions, «Лозунг» ("Slogan", 1977), a banner that outwardly resembled a Soviet agitational placard was hung in an empty field; however, in place of a party slogan, the banner was emblazoned with text from a long poem that Monastyrskii would publish many years later under the equivocal title «Поэтический мир» ("The Poetic World / The Poetic Peace") and that originally had nothing to do with Soviet propaganda.[11] For later Russian art, this action acquired an iconic status – as a paradigm of "raising" the poetic text to the external world.[12]

The performances of Moscow Conceptualism that Monastyrskiy participated in were also developed by other poets and artists in his circle, such as Dmitrii Prigov and Lev Rubinshtein, who regarded their poetry as a significant component of the contemporary art scene. Prigov, for example, performed his texts as a kind of sound-poetry accompanied by avant-garde music, recited Pushkin's verses as Buddhist mantras, transformed his texts into graphic works by means of a typewriter, etc.[13] Rubinstein would also perform his verses as plays and incite the audience to act them out in real time.[14] Likewise, it can be said that the performative aspect of Moscow Conceptualism gradually became an important source of inspiration for artists in addition to poets: many inside the conceptualist circle simultaneously considered themselves both the one and the other, and, for the younger generation, combining these roles became a calling of central importance, albeit rarely managed with success.

The process of returning poetic performance to literature had already begun with the younger generation of Moscow Conceptualism, including artists like Pavel Peppershtein, Yurii Leiderman, and Sergei Anufriev, who formed the group «Инспекция медицинская герменевтика» ("Inspection Medical Hermeneutics") in the second half of the 1980s.[15] In their case, the border between literature and art was more blurred: the «медгерменевты» ("Medhermeneuts") wrote poetry (Peppershtein), poetic prose (Leiderman), stories, and even novels (the joint novel «Мифогенная любовь каст» ("The Mythogenetic Love of Castes") by Anufriev and Peppershtein); however, the fundamental product of the group's work was an extensive series of auto-commentaries, discussions of art, and debates that simultaneously recall the self-documentation of the "Collective Actions" group and refer back to the philosophical «Разговоры» ("Conversations") held by the

[11] See: http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-4.html [13.01.2021].

[12] In general, the interaction of text and action is the central problematic of the work of the "Collective Actions" group, as demonstrated by Sylvia Sasse (2003: 17-23 et passim).

[13] Skakov (2016).

[14] Messerli (2015).

[15] Sasse (2003: 293-420), Eșanu (2013: 317).

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OBERIU group in the 1920s.[16] Against this background, performance itself did not occupy a large space of its own, although, periodically, it still took place: thus, the well documented early action in which Peppershtein used a stethoscope to examine a photograph of a toddler (1988). The materials surrounding this action acquired a mythological reframing and were assimilated into the larger mythological network of ideas and concepts developed by the group. This in itself is characteristic: for the "Medhermeneuts," performance was a kind of medium of transformation in which the boundary between the world of the text and the world outside the text could be suspended or erased.[17]

Such active engagement in the world already belongs to the succeeding era, at the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s, when censorship finally relaxed and then disappeared completely, allowing artists to gradually integrate into the global scene. More so than the earlier Collective Actions group, the "Medhermeneuts" relied on textual genres, and its members eventually came to be seen primarily as writers (Yurii Liederman and Pavel Peppershtein, for instance, were awarded the Andrei Bely prize for literature).

In the post-Soviet era, poetic performance has remained a frequent, though dubious genre existing on the margins of performative art and poetry. The 1990s-2000s was a time when the descendants of conceptual art flourished, as in the case of Moscow actionism.[18] The first steps of that latter group were also inseparable from the poetic context of that time. One of the most controversial of these figures is Aleksandr Brener, who incorporated blatant aggression and defamation into his performances, which he regarded as a supplement to his works in poetry and nonfiction prose. Brener's performances almost always involved scandal: for example, the action in which he drew a giant green dollar sign on Kazemir Malevich's "Suprematism" while it was on display at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Such performances became part of Brener's story about himself as a kind of wayward and tortured soul that could not reconcile itself with an unjust world and was thus prepared to take the most decisive critical action against its status quo.[19] The poems, memoirs, and articles of Brener are part of a larger project to

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[16] Sasse (2003: 382-386). For a detailed description of Pepperstein's literary activities see, for instance, Kusovac (2017). In the 1990s, collections of the group's materials were regularly released, eventually collected in the many-volume "The Empty Canon" («Пустотном каноне»), which, however, was never fully published.

[17] Sasse (2003: 303 et passim). See the commentary: «Знаете, сердце этого малыша, оказывается бьется. Мы сначала тоже в это не поверили, но потом проверили с помощью специального прибора (кажется, стетоскопа) – оно действительно бьется» ("You know, this baby's heart is beating. At first, we didn't believe it either, but then we did with the help of a special instrument (it's called a stethoscope) – and it really beats") (ibid. 304).

[18] Ковалев (2007); Drews-Sylla (2011).

[19] It is equally characteristic and consistent for Brener to represent himself this way in his literary works. For example: "Have I ever been a truly uncontrollable being? Have I ever been a true poet, free from petty self-assertion and complacency? Have I been able to defend the po-

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transform himself into a work of art – a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to use an application of the term similar to that made by Boris Groys.[20] At the same time, however, from the very beginning, Brener developed in the direction of political art: while using conceptualist strategies, his social critique is far more straightforward than, for instance, the play with Soviet slogans made by his predecessors. And this is an important watershed. All later variants of conceptualism build themselves up as political art, constructed as an aesthetic reaction to a political agenda. This is especially clear in the political art of Petr Pavlenskii, which in many respects imitates the work of Moscow actionism of the 1990s but amplifies it intensely with a politically charged content of protest.[21]

What is important to note is that the textual and properly performative aspects of such art begin to exist in parallel: while remaining poets and writers, the actionists of the 1990s–2000s do not attempt to transcend the status of the poetic text or to draw it into performative activity. The text can exist as a commentary – a supplementary and ornamental element – without influencing how the performance is actualized.

Such a state of affairs would quickly trigger a generational response from those seeking to re-integrate the poetic text with performative practice. A recent example of this can be found in the "Laboratory of Poetry Actionism" («Лаборатория поэтического акционизма»), which gathered around the almanac "Translit" in Saint Petersburg in the late 2000s. The participants of the "Laboratory", such as Pavel Arseniev, Roman Osminkin, and Dina Gatina, strived to establish connections between poetry and public spaces, to depict everyday urban locations through the prism of estrangement («остранение», the term of Viktor Shklovskii).[22] The most well-known example of their activity, like many other examples of recent poetic performance, refers back to the "Slogan" action of the "Collective Actions" group, while suggesting its radical re-politicization. The action, which in-

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etic status of a man on earth? In my wanderings, in my confusion, I was subjected to outbreaks of rabidness and powerlessness. I suffered from shameful self-complacency. I was not able to play without overplaying my hand. I was hysterical, I succumbed to anger. And only in the rarest, rarest moments, my 'I' completely disappeared under waves of love" (Бренер 2016: 321). See also: Grabovskaya (2014).

[20] Groys (1988).

[21] Cf. Pavlenskii's distinction: «Политическое искусство. Я не занимаюсь протестным искусством. Политическое искусство и протестное искусство – это далеко не одно и то же. Протестное искусство – это вышел с плакатом. Там ‹НЕТ›, а тут ‹ДА›. Это было бы чрезмерным обобщением. Я исхожу из того, что политическое искусство – это работа с механизмами управления». ("Political art. I don't do protest art. Political art and protest art are very different things. Protest art is going outside with a sign. There is 'NO', and there is 'YES'. That would be a gross oversimplification. I begin from political art – which means working with the mechanisms of power.") Павленский (2016: 21).

[22] See the documentation of Laboratory works on the V-A-C Foundation's website: http://v-a-c.ru/files/pdfs/250/Laboratory%20of%20Poetry%20Actionism.pdf [08.05.2020].

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volved spreading the slogan «Вы нас даже не представляете» (translation below) at the 2012 protests, relied upon the duplicity of its message, which, thanks to the Russian verb *представлять*, could be read both as "you cannot even imagine us" and "you are not even our representatives".[23] It is an example of how the polysemy and ambiguity characteristic of poetic speech can be endowed with the features of a political utterance. Meanwhile, the text reappears at the center of the action, speaking for itself without the need for meta-commentary. This textual turn will only become more apparent in the activity of poets and artists using social media as the primary platform for their performative work.

2

Allow me to define the key principles of poetic performance in the 2010s. Earlier Russian performance tended to go beyond words and letters, to abandon the bookshelf's wooden planks, to move out into the "real" world. As we can see in "Trips out of Town", poetic meaning was performatively embodied in the search for a medium outside the zones in which verse was routinely circulated. This kind of performance requires a transfiguration of poetic language in human bodies or spatial constructions in order to obtain a specific corporeality to which literature is not normally given access. Lines and stanzas of poetry, therefore, are embodied in performers and their actions. I would suggest that the machinery of more recent poetic performance is fundamentally different: it involves the total elimination of the performer's body and turns back to words and letters. One meanwhile observes the following paradox: the poet as a vehicle for performance strives to *return* to the world of literature, but he or she does so by means of performative art. This impasse bears a resemblance to the reverse situation of early performance, in which performativity demanded a way out of the text by paradoxically returning to it.

The reason for this turn can be found in the specific nature of the contemporary public sphere in which the poet-performer exists, although it seems to bear no relation to the new political censorship in Russia. Young Russian poetry is disseminated primarily on social media, and it is thus obliged to submit – from the perspective of ordinary users – to startlingly obscure search queries used by their sorting algorithms. I would prefer not to look further into the mechanisms of Facebook here but would rather point out the following: the evolution of social media has diminished the freedom of information with which the early internet was associated.[24] Instead of the flower-powered anarchy of yore, today's social media offers strict regulations that inevitably affect the poetry spreading through its channels. Therefore, the question becomes how to reclaim the former space of freedom from the algorithmic machine. My hypothesis is the following:

[23] Platt (2016).

[24] Contemporary studies of the early internet show that the bias towards total censorship can be traced from the first steps of this technology, cf.: Levine (2018).

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many of the (historical) performances I have mentioned presuppose that artists can gain freedom only when the act of writing is embodied extra-textually. The new poets, however, hold much more pessimistic views, according to which there is no escape from or "outside" to the textual world of information circulating on social media. The new performative poets, therefore, are in search of "islands of freedom" where they are able to produce words and signs that information flows cannot consume and metabolize. The (computational) system must be broken – this is a new manifesto to which many digital artists might subscribe.[25]

The case of the young poet Dmitrii Gerchikov provides a suitable illustration of this phenomenon – all the more so as he is, in many respects, associated with the Moscow actionism of the 1990s–2000s and, in essence, should be viewed as a reaction to it. Gerchikov was born in Smolensk, and lives in Moscow; his poems were promptly recognized by literary circles after he moved to the capital. One of the reasons for such rapid recognition apparently consisted of his multiple attempts to "relativize" the space of social media by other means. Notably, his first and most recent book is titled "Make Poetry Great Again" in English and refers to Donald Trump's controversial campaign slogan.[26] Gerchikov, who identifies himself as a left-wing poet, mocks the authorities, both in government and in literature, and mounts different images from popular culture to show the need for the dismantlement of any social hierarchy therein. His address to performance art may appear as an occasional addition to his poetry, yet one of his recent appearances captured more diverse media attention – for instance, of the prominent liberal website "Colta.ru", which broadly observes the goings-on of Russian politics and culture and which published a lengthy conversation with Gerchikov.

For several weeks, Gerchikov walked around the center of Moscow wearing… a Putin mask. The poet published detailed reports of the action on a specially created Facebook page where he described the reactions of passers-by as well as his own emotional responses: whether he was afraid of potential aggression directed toward him from his randomly encountered audience or whether he was content with unexpected meetings and conversations. It seemed like a very brave action and included very impressive reports. Although, just a few weeks later, the young poet confessed that there had been neither a Putin mask nor any walks around Moscow: he had performed nothing at all. Or, rather, his reports on the non-existent walks constituted the performance itself:

> Лучшее, что я мог сделать с маской Путина, – это создать миф, иллюзию, написать роман, сменить лицо президента на лицо художника: намного

[25] On the history and development of digital poetry, see Funkhouser (2007); Rettberg (2018). A close parallel to digital poetry is found in practices of working with found or other speech – see, for example, Perloff (2010). The present article is only concerned in passing with digital poetry as such; for the poets considered here, it is sooner simply the context in which their work exists.

[26] Герчиков (2018). Books of satirical verse bearing the same title and using quotes by Donald Trump have been published by Felt (2017) and Ortiz (2016).

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> интереснее сделать акцию о том, как делаются акции, чем сделать еще одну из акций, – вспороть существующий алгоритм и увидеть каркас, на котором он выстроен… Весь эффект акционизма производится медиа, а не смелым жестом художника, который является только его трансгрессивным опытом и еще, может быть, нескольких людей, которые эту акцию видят.[27]
>
> The best thing I could do with a Putin mask was to create a myth, an illusion, to write a novel, to replace the president's face by that of an artist. It was much more interesting to make a performance on how performances are made, instead of making just another routine performance. To split the current algorithm and to observe the framework it is based upon… All the impact of actionism is produced by the media, not by an artist's courageous gestures. Action is only about an artist's transgressive experience, his experience and maybe that of several other people who watch the action.

Thus, this action only took place in the space of social media. Gerchikov mocks the political actionism of art groups like "Voina", "Pussy Riot", and Petr Pavlenskii by demonstrating that their actions are nothing but fuel for the media machine. He further notes that the art created by Pavlenskii & Co. produced a heroic aura through its head-on clash with the authorities and that this aura consequently spread to the artists' own persons and representations in media. In his action, Gerchikov shows that it is possible to produce performance art by resorting exclusively to media attention without any direct conflict (or even contact) with representatives of the executive authorities. On another level, he also reveals the internal constitution of actionist art – its *raison d'être*. A final pivotal question that his action poses is how to "cheat" or circumvent the mechanisms of media. This, indeed, presents the task of discovering "an island of freedom" in the boundless space of online platforms.

I will further consider several poets below who seem to have found a similar way to circumvent social media's discursive machine. They camouflage themselves as internet bots, social network sub-products, and products of artificial intelligence. The poetry of such golemic bots has become a remarkable part of the young poetic scene in the later 2010s. The poets considered below exploit information flows among literary and artistic social media clusters in order to produce a new kind of performative art, transforming the space of public communication into that of art and poetry.

The first case presented here is that of Nils Kjeldsen. No one knows whether he is a real person, an automatic algorithm, or a weird combination of both. His profile on Facebook, which was created in 2014, contains several photos and describes him as: "Aalborg, public enemy number 1, poet, dentist."[28] He posts myriad comments across the walls of Facebook's artistic strata with similar content, in which he expresses agreement or disagreement with someone in a lapidary manner, praises the beauty of young women (primarily poets or artists) de-

[27] Герчиков (2019).

[28] See: https://www.facebook.com/nils.kjeldsen.37. [08.05.2020].

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picted in photos, and sometimes publishes his own poetry. Although he always writes in very simplified English, his comments appear only in the Russian-language segment of Facebook. Any public conversation Nils Kjeldsen participates in continues under the sign of irony and transforms into a performative artistic space (Fig. 1).

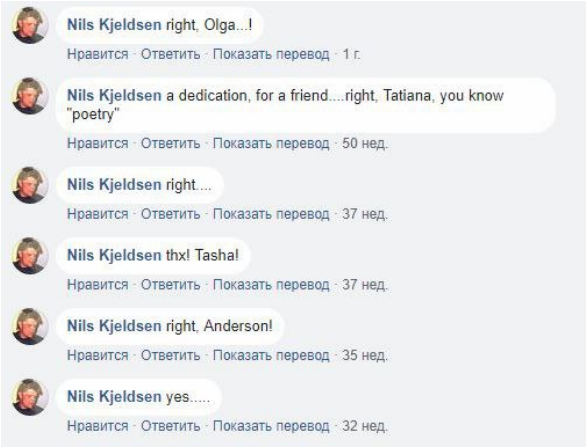

Fig. 1. Nils Kjeldsen's dialogue in Facebook[29]

For several young poets, Nils Kjeldsen has become an example of precisely how to fight (with) the social media algorithms in a manner reminiscent of Moscow Conceptualism, whose official ideological statements flooded the public spaces of the time. Such never-ending actions in the social media space might recall Prigov's work, with all of its overproduction and desire to fill the tiniest gaps in public discursive space with poetry and art. It seems to be the only possibility left open to transforming contemporary media: to contaminate them with the virus of poetry and then observe the total breakdown of their machinery.

The same logic of overproduction is at the heart of Vadim Bannikov's poetry. Bannikov was born in 1984 in Tynda, a small town in the Amur Oblast, a region in the Russian Far East, and moved to Moscow in the early 2010s. Presently, he is regarded as one of the most controversial living Russian poets, even as today's Prigov: he strives to snowball the space of social networks with myriads of poems published on his Facebook profile. These poems usually respond to a social, political, and artistic agenda; but every fragment of this agenda presents itself through the prism of absurdity and estrangement. Bannikov's poems depict how words, references, and meanings blend and melt under the pressure of information flows: his poems reproduce the effect of social media algorithms by mixing incompatible information without understanding it.

By way of example, almost any of Bannikov's poems could be selected: they all employ characteristic "leaps" between incompatible situations, contexts, and

[29] Сунгатов (2018).

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discursive markers – sudden breaks in flow that recall automatic writing. These poems reflect the experience of a person forced to exist within discursive polyglossia; amid a multitude of voices circulating on social networks, the speaker is unable to recognize a voice with which he can identify:

читать газеты на скачках боэция
и было первое, что я пишу на полях книги
или то, что писатель в настоящее время
является великим писателем[30]

to read the papers at the races of Boethius
and it was the first thing I wrote in the margin of the book
or that the writer at the present time
is a great writer

(word-for-word translation)

The first line is constructed around the paronymous play of "papers" (*gazety*) and "Boethius" (*Boetsiia*); such associations by consonance were typical of Russian modernists (for example, Osip Mandel'shtam and Velimir Khlebnikov), who thereby attempted to locate resemblance between unlike concepts – although here, clearly, it is used to a different purpose.[31] It is reminiscent of someone quickly scanning through a Facebook feed – words blur with each other, "stick together" in unusual combinations, and produce bizarre clusters of meaning. It seems as if the poem could simply continue in the same manner, but, further on, it breaks: here, a fragment emerges that outwardly appears more coherent, recalling a citation from an academic article. Still further, it again breaks off, leaving the reader in confusion as to what the text is about and what has just taken place.

The organization of the poem could similarly refer to the way in which search engines organize queries, extracting and combining words and phrases from independently meaningful contexts in order to generate suggested (spam) results. Many fragments from such texts contain surprising combinations of words that readers might interpret as poetic. Reproducing such a discourse, the poet begins to imitate the machine, masking himself between the algorithms that lie at the heart of social media and thereby presenting a critique of the flow of meaning (not just information) with which a modern person is forced to cope.

Here, I could pursue an analogy with Prigov's art. His students have pointed out the key role of the typewriter in his text performances, and suggested that, in fact, the typewriter's technical capacities defined the horizon of his art, helping Prigov find new means of expression.[32] Bannikov's "typewriter" is the interface of Facebook: he explores the opportunities offered by social media in order to

[30] Банников (2016: 15).

[31] On Mandel'stam's paronyms, see, for example, Brinkley / Kostova (2003).

[32] Skakov (2016).

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feel out their limitations and to transform Facebook while simultaneously transcending it. He underscores this moment in one of his interviews:

> С развитием соцсетей связан новый виток модерности, пространство соцсетей само по себе влияет на письмо как таковое и на производимую потоком ленты информацию. При этом соцсети являются своего рода символом не отступившего еще назад времени с его приметами.[33]
>
> With the development of social networks associated with the newest round of modernity, the space of social networks itself affects writing as such and the information one is able to produce through the flow of the feed. At the same time, social networks are a sort of symbol of our time and its omens, which have not yet receded.

In a sense, Bannikov's mission is the liberation of public space from the restrictions enforced by social media. The poet shows that the coherence and density of Facebook is a kind of morbid delusion that must be dispelled. The text, which recalls the work of a combinatory algorithm, in this sense provides an excellent cover: beneath it, any lyric expression may be contained, just as Prigov could say anything and conceal it beneath the guise of official Soviet discourse. Such a strategy, we will recall, was what the conceptualists called «мерцание» ("shimmering"), and, in Russian political art of the 2010s, it has become a defining feature.[34]

In recent years, Bannikov's poems have appeared often in poetry magazines, although such a conventional medium seems inappropriate to his work. Several books have also been published, with one making it on the short list for 2018's prestigious "Poetry" award. His poems, however, thrive primarily in the milieu of social media, where their references and allusions to a real-world (political) agenda remain clear:

> после прихода к власти консервативного крыла
> перформанс был запрещен даже в армии
> два острова из трех
> были отданы террористической
> организации и
>
> всех людей оттуда вывезли
> на скалистый берег третьего острова[35]
>
> after taking power, the conservative wing
> banned performance, even in the army
> two of the three islands
> were given to a terrorist
> organization and

[33] Банников (2018: 44).

[34] On "shimmering" and Moscow Conceptualism, see Leiderman (2018); on how it used as a strategy in new Russian political poetry, see Korchagin (2018).

[35] Банников (2016: 12).

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all the people were shipped
to the rocky shore of the third island

(word-for-word translation)

In every Bannikov poem, the crucial feature of his writing remains transparent: its total incoherency. The shimmering of meaning in this poem has a goal – to uncover the deceptive intersection of information flows that affect the poet's mind and to transform routine reality into an enigmatic, uncanny space in which familiar words no longer mean anything.

Such fluid and shimmering flows of meaning can congeal in a new kind of sustainable manner. I will consider two such attempts by the younger generation of Moscow poets. The first case is Rostislav Amelin, the son of the widely recognized alt-conservative poet Maksim Amelin. While his father aspires to continue Russian baroque and classicist poetry of the 18th century, Amelin the younger positions himself as the ultra-innovative author of a new (post-)digital epic. Among other things, he composes voluminous narrative poems with a host of characters governed by a complex plot, and he seems to believe that his oeuvres express the philosophy of a new era – that of video games and internet memes. In contrast to Bannikov, Amelin emphasizes that his poems are semantically transparent and, thus, "democratic" in a genuine sense, although he composes them by means of text blocks reminiscent of Bannikov – using phrases and clichés picked up from internet dialect.

One of Amelin's recent oeuvres is the self-proclaimed "poetry blockbuster", «Мегаполис Олос» ("Megalopolis Holos"), from the Ancient Greek "ὅλος", meaning "whole". It is a verse novel constructed as a complex cosmological narrative evocative of certain video games (for instance, the "Final Fantasy" role-playing series). Unlike Bannikov, Amelin is a poet inclined to comment upon his own work, constructing a series of possible interpretations grafted on top of it. I asked the poet to comment upon how his long poem is constructed, and this is what I received in reply:

> Действие разворачивается в ‹Империи Света› – гипотетическом государстве будущего, объединившем весь мир. Империя Света представляет собой невероятно развитую и прогрессивную столицу, Новый Рассвет, окруженную бескрайним Темным Царством, которое производит блага для столицы, загрязняя окружающую среду. Хотя политическое устройство Империи Света крайне архаичное – там есть типичные для монархии сословия, она при этом сверхразвита в информационных технологиях. В этом кроется причина того, почему Империя не пытается решать проблемы экологии – правящее сословие, высокие, грезят о ‹Небесах› – проекте, который позволит сохранить всю информацию человечества, включая личности, на облачном сервере… Империя Света гордится тем, что она победила насилие: стены, улицы и все инфраструктуры империи пронизаны Информой – системой контроля, позволяющей тайно наблюдать за гражданами.[36]

[36] Amelin's personal communication to the author, 5 November 2019.

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> The action of the poem takes place in the 'Empire of Light', a hypothetical future state that unites the entire world. The Empire of Light is governed from an incredibly advanced capital called New Dawn and is encircled by the boundless Dark Kingdom, which produces goods for the capital while polluting the surrounding environment. Although the political regime of the Empire of Light is very archaic and has features of a typical monarchy, it is hyperdeveloped in the field of information technologies. This is why the Empire has no desire to address its ecological problems – instead, the authorities dream from on high about 'Heaven', a system that would allow all existing information about humanity to be stored and preserved on a cloud server, including entire human personalities… The Empire of Light is proud that it has conquered violence: its walls, streets, and infrastructure are all laced with Informa, a monitoring system that secretly surveils the citizens of the state.

This text can itself be considered the implementation of a performative strategy: in it, we find Amelin, the poetic demiurge, immersed in reflection upon the fate of the world. This is an important aspect of his public persona: a poet-polymath who feels at home in the space of social media or video games, using them as a transparent medium for connecting with his audience. It must be added that this text as a whole exists in an intermedial space; Amelin illustrated it, developed special apps for it, recorded songs composed from character dialogue, and even used it as the basis for a small theatrical production, etc. It's not for nothing that the poem's title refers to Greek *ὅλος* – it is an attempt to create a total work of art, against the background of which all other works will seem partial and inadequate.

A typical fragment from the novel demonstrates the abundance of heterogenous realities that the poet introduces into the text. This makes the poem itself difficult to cite – almost every line here contains a reference to the cosmological matrix that the poet has developed:

> Тысячи нитей
> сплетаются в сферу.
> Света?
> Царевна?
> Где твое тело?
> Шепот, шепот
> в Информосфере.
> По каждому кабелю,
> в каждую стену:
> ПУСТЬ БУДЕТ ТОЛЬКО
> ТО, ЧТО БУДЕТ
> Я БУДУ ЗДЕСЬ ВСЕГДА
> БУДУ ПИТЬ ВАШ СВЕТ
> БУДУ ПИТЬ ВАШ СВЕТ[37]

> Thousands of threads
> weave themselves in a sphere.
> Sveta? [NB: a Russian name that literally means "light"]

[37] Амелин (2020: 119).

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Princess?
Where is your body?
Whispers, whispers
in the Informa-sphere.
Through every cable,
in every wall:
LET THERE BE ONLY
WHAT WILL BE
I'LL BE HERE ALWAYS
I'LL DRINK YOUR LIGHT
I'LL DRINK YOUR LIGHT

(word-for-word translation)

But in the attempt to create a total work of art, the paradoxical nature of Amelin's project begins to manifest itself. Taking on the role of the creative genius, he immerses himself in a performative context; yet this posture has itself been so thoroughly assimilated by romantic culture that any attempt to reoccupy it can only be perceived as a game, a sort of *acting-out* of a ready-made role. And here once again one could point to the performative role played out by Prigov – a poet who presented his own oeuvre as a total work of art. At the same time, the strategy of mythologizing one's own image, as practiced by Amelin, is constructed around the language of social media, reworked, as it were, into a new, totalizing discourse.

This is noticeable, in part, in a fairly straightforward didactic quality that runs throughout many fragments of the poem. The communicative message of such fragments is self-evident and almost tautological, recalling in that sense the fragments from Bannikov cited above:

Оригинальное,
дикое, странное,
то, что не может быть
частью Рассвета,
тонет на Дне,
покрывается мусором
и вымывается
тоннами в реку.[38]

The original,
the wild, the strange,
that which could not be
part of Dawn,
sinks to the Bottom,
covered in trash
and is flushed out
by the ton into the river.

[38] Ibid., 45-46.

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But in place of the principled schismatism and incoherence of Bannikov's language, here we encounter an outward semblance of meaning motivated by the same semiotic imperative to be found in the flow of heterogenous discourses on social media. That is, in contrast to Bannikov, who reveals incoherence in its "raw" form, Amelin attempts to rework these discourses into the universal and neutral language of a new art.

This transformation of poetics via social media brings us to our last case study – that of the young Moscow poet, Jan Vygovskii – who strives to break the endless circulation of meaning in which both Bannikov and Amelin operate. He borrows words and texts from social media as well but, in contrast to Bannikov, scrubs them of all external references and, in contrast to Amelin, does not subordinate them to any overwhelming plot. Vygovskii's enormous poem, «Стихии против капиталистов» ("Elements Against Capitalists"), which was published in his first book, «ranit odnogo, zadenet vseh» [title given in author's transliteration – sic; in English: "To Wound One Is to Injure All"], can be regarded as an example of a new linguistic totality that intends to replace that of social media.

Genealogically, Vygovskii's poetics reach back to Moscow Conceptualism and its montage-like appropriation of other works and texts. The difference is that the conceptualists, as a rule, worked from texts whose provenance was immediately apparent to the reader: Prigov took from Soviet propaganda, Monastyrskii from phenomenology and Zen, the "Medhermeuts" from Freud and psychoanalysis. Vygovskii's sources, on the other hand, are difficult to place, as if they were disguised. This hiddenness again recalls automatically generated texts (as in the case of Bannikov) or how heterogenous texts and discourses comingle in the space of social media.

However, unlike Bannikov, Vygovskii does not emphasize the internal discontinuity of the discursive space but rather attempts to create a text in which these heterogenous elements may be abstracted and generalized. In this sense, he is similar to Amelin if the latter were to search for the simplest, most universal sense already present in the polyglossia of his material – piecing together a puzzle of unlike parts and painstakingly gluing them together where the edges don't quite fit. The result is a homogenous whole composed of parts that still show the recognizable features of their original heterogeneity. A characteristic side effect of this process is that the montaged work begins to sound like a shrill existential lyric:

> #чего не излечивает склейка, излечивает кадр, чего не излечивает кадр, излечивает огонь, чего не излечивает огонь, то надо считать неизлечимым
>
> #во многой мудрости много печали; и кто умножает познания, умножает скорбь, и при съемке иногда болит сердце, и концом радости бывает печаль, шок от просмотра фильма ничего не понятно в конце фильма голос: ничего нет[39]

[39] Выговский (2018: 49).

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> #what does not cure the gluing cures the frame, what does not cure the frame cures the fire, what does not cure the fire should be considered incurable
>
> #in much wisdom there is much sorrow; and he who multiplies knowledge multiplies grief, and when shooting, sometimes the heart aches, and at the end of joy is sadness, the shock of watching the film nothing makes sense at the end of the movie a voice: nothing.
>
> (word-for-word translation)

All the references in this poem seem to occur by accident: the poet borrows fragments from different texts circulating on social media (including fragments from the Bible [Ecclesiastes 1:18]) in order to arrange them anew. Deracinated from their original sources, these text pieces turn into material for a new world beyond human reality – the world of words without readers. Vygovskii offers to exclude the human from a space in which social network algorithms exchange information on different subjects. For the poet, the best way to avoid painful contact with texts and meanings is to leave them to themselves:

> #незнание ни единого факта об этих местах, несмотря на то, что здесь ничего не происходило: оказался пейзаж в отсутствии картографирования, лишь склейка за склейкой
>
> #состояние сонастройки наступает при умении перемещать и удерживать точку сборки, при этом точка сборки при сохранении частотной характеристики перемещается на объект исследования: учение о запоминании ощущения от структуры различных предметов, набор библиотеки образов; следующая точка при движении вглубь стихии – это восприятие связей структур: точка сборки при этом находится на уровне выше, а сознание начинает воспринимать нити, из которых состоит структура; мир на тонком плане воспринимается состоящим из нитей; манипулируя этими нитями можно оказывать определенное влияние на объекты, например, связывая их друг с другом или активизируя нити, придающие то или иное качество; на этом уровне можно попробовать сплетать из нитей сознанием узоры.[40]
>
> #not knowing any fact about these places, even as nothing has happened here: it has appeared to be a landscape with no cartography, only splice by splice
>
> #a state of the mutual customization comes when there is a skill of relocating and holding the assemblage point, while keeping frequency response, the assemblage point shifts to the investigated object: doctrine of memorizing the sensations of the structure of various objects, a set of the library of images; the next point while moving deep inside nature: the perception of the coherence between the structures: the assemblage point is then located at the upper level and the consciousness starts to perceive the threads the structure consists of; the subtle plane of the world is apprehended as consisting of threads; while manipulating these threads, one can affect objects, for instance, binding them with each other or activating the threads holding a particular quality; on this level one can try to weave patterns by means of consciousness
>
> (word-for-word translation)

[40] Ibid., 50.

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The first line of the poem above, however, points to its origin with the old performative tradition of the "Collective Actions" group. Again, the reference is the famous performance of «Лозунг» ("Slogan"). Vygovskii cites the prescriptive phrase emblazoned by the group on their banner:

> Я НИ НА ЧТО НЕ ЖАЛУЮСЬ И МНЕ ВСЕ НРАВИТСЯ, НЕСМОТРЯ НА ТО, ЧТО Я ЗДЕСЬ НИКОГДА НЕ БЫЛ И НЕ ЗНАЮ НИЧЕГО ОБ ЭТИХ МЕСТАХ
>
> I AM NOT COMPLAINING ABOUT ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING PLEASES ME, EVEN THOUGH I HAVE NEVER BEEN HERE BEFORE AND KNOW NOTHING OF THESE PLACES

This performance shows an attempt to extend the space of poetry to the space of corporeality, understanding it as an area in which the mutual interaction of human bodies occurs. In Vygovskii's poem, written some 40 years later, poetic performance returns from the corporeal to its origins in the world of letters (where it had immigrated before, in the 1970s). The second stanza from Vygovski's poem partially proves this point: it seems to be an extract from a mystical treatise that reminds us of Carlos Castaneda, who introduced the term "assemblage point".[41]

This fragment reads as a sort of manual for contacting the "the subtle plane" of spiritual, non-human essences – although this term in Vygovskii's work refers to nothing other than the power of social media to consume all external frames of reference. At the same time, it seems to promise a new freedom. Following the logic of the poem, this freedom can only be obtained in the spaces beyond the totalizing control of social media. A new poetry by means of digital performance strives to escape from social media in the same manner that the Collective Actions group evaded the embrace of official Soviet ideology. Perhaps soon, we will witness the emergence of yet another performance poetry in Russia: performance without media representation as such.

Thus, each poet considered here presents his own working strategy for coping with the informational space of social media. All of these strategies, however, arise from the single strategy of "shimmering" («мерцание») developed by Moscow Conceptualism. This manoeuvre allows the poet or artist to construct his or her own position from fragments of the surrounding "discourse of noise". New poetry follows from this performative idea, while at the same time remaining in the textual space and refraining from intervention in the outside world. This, in turn, is due to the fact that the space of social networks and the interactions that take place on them turn out to be a space in which it is possible for performative action to occur – that is, a social space presented to the eyes of a

[41] Cf.: "When the sorcerers of ancient Mexico *saw* the *assemblage point*, they discovered the *energetic point* was transformed into sensory data; data which were then interpreted into the *cognition* of the world of everyday life. Those shamans accounted for the homogeneity of *cognition* among human beings by the fact that the *assemblage point* for the entire human race is located at the same place on the energetic luminous spheres that we are […]" Castaneda (1969: xvii; italics: K.K.).

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large audience, the very presence of which, again to recall Erving Goffman, is what makes the public performative.

Poets interact with this space differently: attempting to underscore its heterogeneity or, conversely, to reduce its diversity to a new hybrid totality. For all the differences between their concrete strategies, they remain performative – oriented towards an audience and only able to generate meaning through contact with it. One might say that the circle of history with regard to poetic performance has closed: born from poetry and created by poets, it crystallized into a specific form of contemporary art that has now been swallowed anew by poetry as a textual practice. This latter development has occurred as a consequence of the fundamental restructuring of text media by the vast reach of social networking. New poets sense the totality of social media as a gauntlet at the feet of poetry that demands reply with new modes of performance: while remaining within the textual, they are attempting to subvert the mechanical logics governing informational spaces and reframe them as zones in which poetic utterance will again be possible.

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