10 2004

Russian Flash Mob

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In Russia the flashmob was first regarded just a new hip, but what was essential is the speed with which we got to know about it, the sweet taste of commonness attained due to communications. It became clear, that the ideas can be transmitted with the speed of an internet connection, and these are not the ideas concerning politics or corporate business, but public space, actions, urban environment. For many of the young people - most of whom got their mobiles and PCs just within recent several years, in the course of the continuing hi-tech consumerist boom - this was a refreshing sign of a global net inclusiveness. But very rapidly that tendency had been tested, appropriated and applied in a domestic way.

Here's a case to say a few words on the genre of actions in the Russian grassroots politics. Unlike Western countries, where actionism and street happenings have been more or less well experienced since 60-s, for us it was new, and in the 90s we witnessed a real triumph of radical street actions. Artists of a group "Radek" at May, 1998 have done a barricade of artworks blocking the traffic at one of the central Moscow streets (this was a celebration of Paris'68 30th anniversary), than at 2000 and 2001, 1st May, the "SVOI 2000" youth movement did street-parties with a column of clowns, following the huge demo of official protesters (communists, nationalists, socialists, reformists...). The "SVOI

2000" column participants were dressed in orange, with drums and trumpets, raising entirely absurd slogans, and had a common idea of "appropriating the city space" (actually, in Russian it sounds "osvoenie" - something opposite to "alienation"). Flashmob became a logical continuation of an action genre, simply for its functionality: instead of going to a risky political protest, under the threat of being beaten and arrested by cops, now you could go to a hip and trendy technologized event, sharing its sweet taste with other anonymous participants, and you could also discourage any cop with an insolent reply: "Protest? Politics? Man, it's a FLASHMOB!" On the other hand, being a tool for people's self-organization through the net, the flashmob could spread possibilities of an indirect political participation much wider, than any pre-internet times action.

As is known, the principle number one of the flasmob is its staying away from politics. But just as soon as the Russian flasmob appeared, it became central for those who liked "osvoenie". If it wasn't from the very beginning straightly poiliticized, it necessarily had to have political implications. When taking place in a context of a severe consumerist & militarist authoritarianism, any open space action does necessarlily become politicized implicitly. It refers to what was formulated at the next5minutes4 (September'04) festival in Amsterdam under the title "Urban interventions".

The first FM action marked in our annals is dated by September 7, 2003, and was entitled: "Hard to live without TV". A mob of several dozens of people had gathered in front of a huge street advertising monitor at Pushkinskaya square with remote control devices and started to push buttons as if they were going to switch channels on it. It has to be added, the square is marked by many public manifestations, for example, a year ago it was a site of

protests against the closure of the last state-independent NTV channel.

The FM websites (www.fmob.ru, www.flashmob.ru) have been from the very beginning filled up by multiple fans, and did not stand aside from intellectual and culturologist discussions. The "Articles" section contained texts dealing with the art actionist tradition, referring to Susan Sontag's text on happenings, etc. Probably that's because of some young non-spectacularists FM-involvement. The "non-spectacular" artwave had appeared at Moscow at 2002 and its core concept insisted, that the art must become hidden, invisible. Escaping representation, anonymizing the authors, it soon had to disappear from a space of galleries - into a space of streets and metros. And nothing could be more fruitful for a new incarnation of a non-spectacularism than secret manipulations in a city space, the self-organizing intellect of a mob sensible in time but not in space, momentarily appearing and then fading away into traffic and flows of an overcrowded, overcapitalized Moscow.

Unfortuantely, one action scenario had never been realized: an author proposed to find a cop doing an everyday routine for today's Moscow - observing the street moving crowd in order to extract someone from it and check this someone's documents - and to gradually gather around him so that the cop would find that he himself becomes an object of observation. But the mobbers succeeded in doing an action "Hails to Big Brother" when dozens of people showed their passports to a surveillance camera in a long and crowded metro corridor.

The other such action took place not long ago - a "Raid". During the militsia raid at the market, for example, people are obliged to take position faced to a wall with hands under the back of the

head, feet set ap broadly; or lay on the ground, face down. We can see such pictures daily in the criminal news reports or in special militsia news. So that position was chosen by the mob for the next flash action (October, 17, 2004). And the participants have all agreed, the 3-minutes action gave a sense of solidarity for much longer.

Regarding the political use of the FM, I will tell another one action which had broadly resonated across the country. But here we must clearly stress that an FM action is the one organized anonymously through the coordination website, chosen by an online voting and conducted by the people who might not know each other (or, in the definition of Wikipedia, *a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, do something unusual or notable, and then disperse. They are usually organized through the Internet or other networked devices.* - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashmob). And when the action is pre-planned in some political headquarter, and aimed at propagating views of a certain political party, it's not precisely an FM. The justification of such a name is that it's using an FM label to avoid sanctions for doing something illegal without permission from the authorities. Such a trick had been used at late February 2004 by a modernizing Communist party (on which I have already reported to KulturRisse # 04/03). A group of people who weared masks of Putin and banners signing various catastrophes of Putin's time ("The submarine drowned", "The metro exploded"...) came to a house of our president's former S.-Pb. residence and started crying: "Vova go home!" ("Vova" is diminutive from "Vladimir", and the cry imitated the mother's order to a child). The action became famous also because of its quick and violent stoppage by the militsia.

Being a news worldwide in mid-2003, by some activists in Russia the flashmob was even regarded a revolutionary "know-how" before

the elections: parliamentary - at December'03, and presidential - at March'04. The one just told had a great pre-electoral effect, and maybe it was the one which triggered the further process. In Vladimir, people have gathered at the square around a coffin celebrating the "death of democracy" - a quite flat idea in artistic sense, but it resulted in a comic show of militsiamen who took the coffin and ran away with it. The mobbers of Khabarovsk did a much more inspiring action when surrounded a high water tower and started throwing snowballs at it crying: "Vova get down!".

The history of Russian flashmob is far from being finished, but we witness that finally the cops have learned a new word - what makes further actions a little more difficult. Plus, since the American military order continues, the intelligent services of the world will stay equalizing at their super-technologized, cyber-surveilling, electronic and biometric US colleagues. It means, the FM can soon become a target for monitoring, threats and preventive actions (and there were some hints it's already monitored). OK, if the past had proved that mobs can self-organize, will they find a way to self-develope, in the conditions renewed? (: However, an FM social laboratory is at work. As one fmob.ru site article had argued, *"noone ever knows how much people will come to the action. But it's ever exciting to think that all people will come. What is the most interesting, is to imagine an FM- scenario for all people in the world. Because for sure there must exist some very simple actions to be simultaneously conducted by everyone - and then the world will change completely, will become different in a moment..."*