CHAPTER 8

Batman and the Joker: The Thermidor of the Bodily

In Russia, where the bodily (the corporocentric) has become synonymous with orthodoxy, artistic acts like public masturbation or bestiality performed by the so-called *telesniks* are affirmative in nature.[1] At a time when the brutal stage of victorious capitalism is exacerbated by widespread physical violence, the autochthonic gesture is read as one of identification, that is, as the desire not to be different from those who call the shots. Although a number of contemporary thinkers find appeals to "the body" endearing, their scholarly meditations remain at a considerable distance from the direct apologetics for bodiliness. In their texts, the search for the "lost body" is conducted in roundabout ways, without advertising the reductionist subtext of this quest.[2] The irresistible desire to "press against the body," characteristic of late postmodernism, allows an analogy with Darwinian doctrine, in which—despite a joyful declaration of humanity, the complete and final separation from the animal kingdom—one still senses, as well, a sentimental longing for the ape.[3]

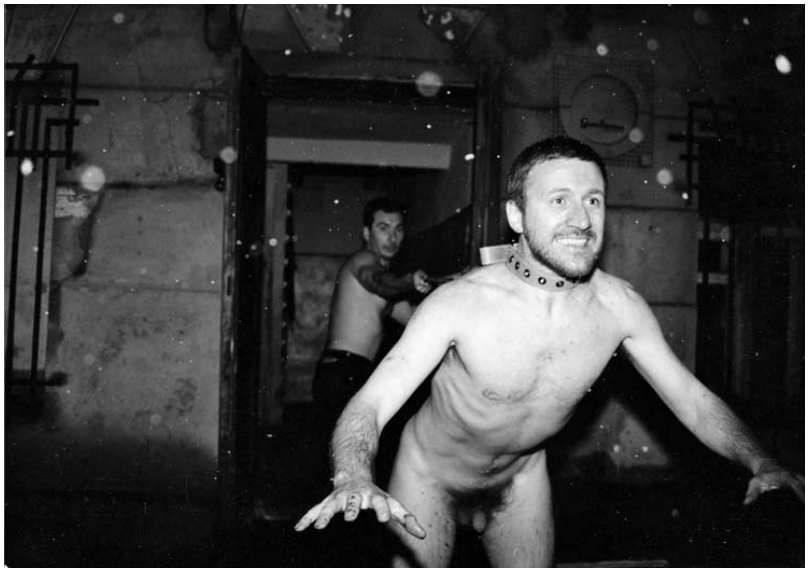
The most consistent of all the *telesniks* grown on Russian soil are Oleg Kulik, Aleksandr Brener, and (to some extent) Anatolii Osmolovskii (fig 8.1).[4] Kulik has become famous by simulating sexual intercourse with domestic and wild animals, by slaughtering a pig in a gallery space, and by outdoor performances in which the artist posed naked, acting the part of a mad dog intent on biting passersby and the audience. Considering the mores of the Russian nouveau riche, as well as the fact that the people making mad money in Russia are mostly those who are involved in criminal or semicriminal organizations (the shadow economy) and for whom violence is a way of life, Kulik's performances are a rather accurate reflection of the present. The problem is that they do not examine it in a critical way. Trying to become even more bestial than the world around him,

8.1
Anatolii Osmolovskii, *Untitled*, performance, 1994.

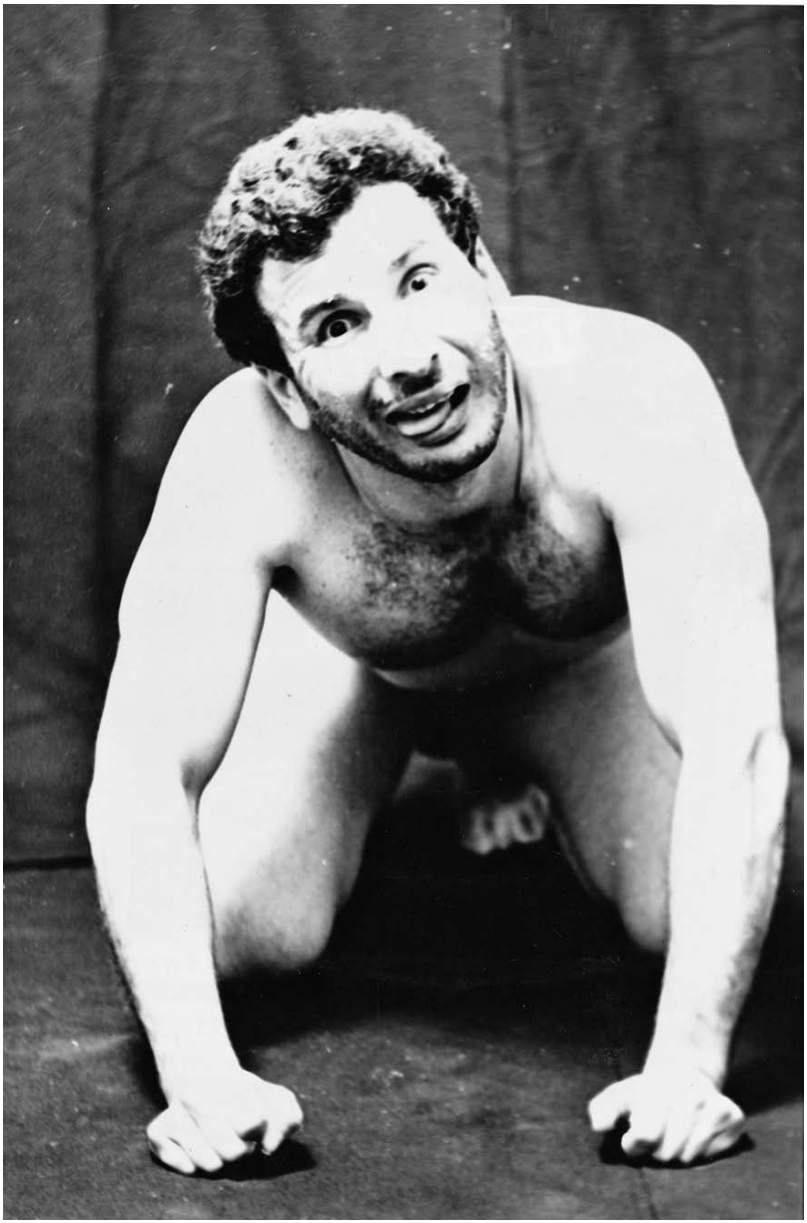
Kulik, at best, lays it bare for deconstruction. However, the deconstructive connotations are not picked up by the "new Russians," who are, more than likely, entertained by these acts. Also, the nouveau riche view the uncritical adoption of their behavior, style, and manners by members of the artistic community as a sign of approval and as proof of their own power, influence, and importance.

On April 16, 1997, by going through customs at the airport in New York in his canine disguise (dog collar and muzzle) and under the supervision of "dog trainer," Kulik performed a reversal of the process described by Mikhail Bulgakov in *Heart of a Dog:* that is, he transformed himself into a dog (fig. 8.2). To give the West a full measure of the delights of a dog's life, the Deitch Projects Gallery on Grand Street in SoHo kindly provided Kulik with a cage specially built for him. *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith wrote that Kulik "looks very efficient as a dog." According to her, the "dog" is a frightening, unpredictable, and territorial animal. The name of the piece—*I Bite America and America Bites Me*—is a paraphrase of Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance piece titled *I Love America and America Loves Me,* involving a coyote at the Rene Block Gallery in New York. The difference is that for Beuys, man and animal remained separate, while Kulik makes them one. In a fax message dated April 18, 1997, the senior editor of *Art in America* magazine, Christopher Phillips, wrote to me that the principal visitors to Kulik's cage were "dog trainer" and Jeffrey Deitch. Phillips attributed the lack of outcry (or excitement) over the piece to the fact that SoHo's streets are filled with crazy people who are no less doglike than Kulik.[5]

With Brener, it would be enough to mention his masturbation in the Moskva public swimming pool, the pile of shit he wanted to leave in front of the Van Gogh painting at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts,[6] and his attempt to challenge President Boris Yeltsin to a fistfight (Arthur Cravan-style) (fig. 8.3). One could leave it at that, were it not for Brener's last "action" in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the trial stemming from it. In late fall of 1996, Brener painted a green dollar sign on a Kazimir Malevich canvas, for which he was arrested and sentenced to five months' jail time.[7] Brener chose the Stedelijk because of the mildness of Dutch laws: at first, he had planned to carry out this action at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, but a lawyer advised him to select another, more "suitable" place: "In the United States, you can get ten years for it." Afterward, at his trial, the defendant made a statement: "There is a crisis of culture comparable to the greater disaster of the twentieth century, World War II. We distinguish only the voices of people who make machines and the voices of those who have



8.2
Oleg Kulik, *The Last Taboo,*
Gelman Gallery, Moscow, 1994.



8.3
Aleksandr Brener, *Chimeras, Join Me!*, Gelman Gallery, Moscow, 1995.

power. I am speaking in the name of culture which has retained a human voice."[8]

According to Brener, the modern artistic elite has slammed the doors on the new worlds that Malevich opened for us. Though his action at the Stedelijk was an expression of "well-tempered" right-wing fanaticism using the cover of rhetoric about the democratization of culture, Brener's "initiative" deserves commentary.

The value of works of modern art is a fairly relative concept linked to the modernist "myth of originality" and, in particular, to the way this "myth" is converted into fiscal denominations. In such situations—that is, when it comes to the relationship between value and price—Marcel Mauss and Jean-Joseph Goux might have used the term "potlatch," defined as the modus operandi of symbolic exchange.[9] But my interest is in something else. It is clear that, as an art object passes from owner to owner and becomes the property of an individual or of secular institutions, it loses its symbolic value. And there are two possible attitudes we can adopt toward the museum: either we recognize it as a religious institution and, accordingly, believe in retaining the symbolic ingredient of art within its walls; or we regard it as a secular institution and, to some extent, as an instrument of the abolition of the Symbolic. This abolition or, as Brener would put it, usurpation of the Symbolic is what troubles him most. In order to prevent it, he acts in the name of tribal, totemic traditions, in the spirit of what some of his like-minded allies describe as "the sacral path." But Brener's "sacral path" is the course of an individual (a singular transgression), whereas the symbolic exchange is mediated by the psychosomatics of the collective body. Therefore, anyone who opposes the convertibility of symbolic values into semiological ones (for instance, monetary signs) has to determine the measure of transgression in agreement with others like himself, in accordance with a tribal consensus. Brener's actions were not sanctioned by a collective body; therefore, they must be classified as individualistic, and hence in contradiction of the symbolic law's creed. The only "bodies" that could have shown solidarity with his action in Amsterdam are the "bodies of violence" spawned on the ruins of totalitarianism, which prefer economic to political terror. It is clear to many of us that a museum is a well-lit safe, whose functions include not only the preservation of culture but also its suppression. The museum is precisely where, despite "free" access to works of art, we feel the bottomless depth of our alienation from them. The question is, Would we be unable to recognize the gravity and urgency of all these problems without Brener and his ilk?

In Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman,* the Joker and his goons break into a museum and spray-paint works of art. In doing so, they become the co-creators of these paintings, or, as Brener's attorney put it at the trail, they "raise the price of the artwork." This implies a symbolic injection in the form of, or in the disguise of, defilement. What happens is a rupture that raises the plank higher: the archaic raises the bottom of discourse, and its surface is clouded over with an ecstatic foam. Freud, arguing with Jung, called this "black mud." Should we limit ourselves to a disinterested analysis of the events, identifying the conditions conducive to the manifestation of this or that phenomenon, or does the critic's role presume something more than that? The danger is that, in becoming the Joker's opponent, the critic risks becoming an apologist for Batman (which is no less problematic, considering the authoritarian tendencies and the conservatism of the zealous defenders of good and beauty). The solution is to refrain from giving preference to either "actant" in the binary opposition by classifying their actions as affirmative.[10] The exception is when the actants do it themselves, that is, prove capable of a critical analysis of their role functions.

The kind of apocalyptic rhetoric found in the speech acts and performances of the Russian *telesniks* betrays their kinship with the pro-life movement in the United States. As a rule, the anti-abortion activists are men who question—sometimes violently—a woman's right to be in charge of her own body and destiny. The core of the movement consists of Protestants from rural areas. Surprisingly, in Italy, where the Catholic church and abortion are incompatible, there is hardly any terrorism against "certified killers" of embryos. For an ordinary Catholic in Europe, the responsibility for this matter is—to a large extent—yielded to the institutions (both religious and secular), whereas the way of thinking peculiar to Protestants in North Carolina or Nevada is not institutional by nature. Their congregations are fairly autonomous: each of them has their own line of communication with the Lord, whose will is mediated through various charismatic leaders. Due to their efforts, the provincial sectarian teleology with its appetite for moral judgment and worldwide imposition of (American) good and justice is kept alive not only inside the country, but also in geopolitics. This maximalism is what America shares with Russia.

The opponents of the Moscow *telesniks* accuse them of lacking the artistry of their predecessors, both in the West (Beuys and the Viennese actionists) and in Russia (Vladimir Sorokin and, to a certain extent, Kabakov). When viewing their videotapes, one begins to suspect that Kulik

and Brener are zombies, so artificial and lifeless do their actions appear. But there may be another way of looking at it: clumsiness may be an attribute of artless authenticity, whereas grace is the carnival costume of death. This feeble and fairly stale argument is the only thing I can find to say in defense of the *telesniks*.

In April 1997, on the way back from Naples, I decided to spend a night in Venice. In the morning, taking a stroll through the half-empty city, I stopped by a magazine kiosk. The cover of the Italian edition of *Flash Art* caught my eye. It was graced by a depiction of Brener standing in a romantic pose next to the Malevich painting. The artist who did the cover didn't know, of course, what his hero looked like, and made him resemble the young Tony Shafrazi, who gained notoriety many years ago by defacing Picasso's *Guernica*. At the Frankfurt train station, I was met by the artist Eduard Gorokhovskii. He was waving a fresh issue of the English-language *Flash Art* in which the publisher, Giancarlo Politi, declared his love and respect for Brener. According to Politi, Brener is "far more alive than the static Malevich" and must therefore be released from prison. In Brener, Politi has finally found an ideal that reminds him of himself. Before Brener, his ideal was usually his opposite, for example Tony Negri, Félix Guattari, or me.[11] However, this flirtation with intellectuals never turned out well, as Politi's enthusiastic interest in them inevitably gave way to antipathy, antipathy to hostility, and so on. In all likelihood, in identifying with the physical (bodily) act of "creative violence" performed by Brener, Politi applauds the Thermidor of the bodily in Russia, hailing the "masters of life" of whom he is one.

For Kulik and Brener, the bodily is linked, first, to the choice of form—the texture of the gesture, the system of mediation and filiation—and second, to the fact that significations are inspired and controlled by the peristalsis of the referential body. The signifier is corrupted by flexions to such an extent that there is no possibility of reflection. The similarity between these "politics of the signifier" and the behavioral norms of the new bourgeoisie is so great that "finer" motifs and modulations, if they exist at all, are indistinguishable. They are like the buzzing of a mosquito trying to compete with a choir. One such "finer" motif (apparently) is the entirely justified discontent of Russian artists with the way they are treated abroad. But isn't the unkindness of the other something to provoke efforts to revive culture at home? In the West, we often disparage modern art museums, and they certainly deserve it. But when one doesn't have them, the deficit of the energy needed for the reproduction of culture is keenly felt. The fact that the alternative Russian art of the three previous decades is not on permanent display in museums primarily hurts the

artists of the 1990s. As Margarita Tupitsyn points out, "it's like a house with several stories missing."[12]

I remember how bewildered I was by the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin's question about Kulik's chances of repeating the success Kabakov had had in the West. Strangely, our reaction left Ryklin equally bewildered, which, in a way, impelled me to break the "rules" (until recently, I had staunchly refused to make any public comments about Kulik and Brener). I recall, too, the trip to the Ligurian coast we made with Politi and Helena Kontova in 1989. Politi bought a huge bottle of olive oil in one of the seaside towns. On the way to back to Milan, the bottle burst, and the four of us spent over an hour cleaning up the interior of the publisher's favorite Mercedes with tissues. "Well, that's all right," he finally said. "It's not a Malevich, after all."