

“Third World Artist”: The Performance Art of Alexander Brener

**Author:** Lisa Nersesova

**Faculty Mentor:**

Jennifer Way, Department of Art History, School of Visual Arts

**Department:** Department of Art History, School of Visual Arts

**Bio:**

Lisa Nersesova's paper originated as a research assignment on performance art for ART 4550: Theories of Contemporary Art during the fall of 2004. In May of 2005, Nersesova graduated with a Bachelor of Arts double major in Art History and Studio. As an Art History major, she found her relationship to the study of Russian art to be unique; coming from a Russian background and being fluent in Russian, she could access firsthand many key works of art and scholarship. While at UNT, Lisa interned at the Texas Fashion Collection and at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Although accepted into several graduate Art History programs, Nersesova has chosen to pursue her M.F.A. at Southern Methodist University, which awarded her a full scholarship.

**Abstract:**

We should expand our understanding of contemporary art by considering it from ideological perspectives other than those of the West. I will show the significance that certain established conventions of Western art criticism and history have for the Russian performance artist Alexander Brener. Western art critics perceive Brener's performances as destructive and perverse, which indicates the existence of accepted conventions and a tacit agreement concerning what is considered art. Art history also excludes Brener, not only because his work is so contemporary, but also because prevailing approaches to understanding art in the West require categorizing art movements and corresponding labeling of artists, which is difficult to achieve in Brener's case. Consequently, I ask, how has Brener emphasized the importance of understanding art as an entity that has culturally specific features? I consider Brener's use of the phrase "third world artist" in relation to the prevailing Western art critical terms "East" and "West." Finally, I examine Brener's controversial performance at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in relation to the Western art world as a system consisting of artists, critics, historians, and patrons.

## Introduction

Controversial works of performance art by Alexander Brener raise important questions about the contemporary art world and about the current understanding of what counts as “East” and “West.” Assuming that there are such definable entities, Brener’s performances question how individuals and institutions of the East and West constitute, make sense of, and participate in the art world. In seeking to address these questions by learning more about the scholarly and critical reception of Brener’s performance art, I was surprised to find only a handful of essays published in America and these only in the context of scandals that his performances generated. Analysis of his method or ideology was virtually absent from the literature. What intrigued me about the scholarly and critical record was the consensus among American writers and critics that Brener does not and should not occupy a respectable position in art. In addition, I noticed that American writers and critics simply dismiss Brener and other Eastern European artists who have similar profiles. The rest of my research and, consequently, the focus of this essay, emphasized a question that arose from my earliest reflections on Brener: Why are Eastern European methods of expression and messages excluded from contemporary art as defined by the West? How can we make sense of Alexander Brener’s art? In response, I want to briefly describe Brener’s performances. What then follows are discussions of four contexts that I propose are useful in helping us make sense of this artist’s work: the political aspect of culture in Russia, performance art, confrontations with culture, and Brener’s own analysis of the evolution of culture in the world.

### Alexander Brener’s Performances

Alexander Brener’s first performances addressed Boris Yeltsin, the Chechen War, and the Orthodox Church. In the winter of 1995, Brener went to Red Square, “stripped down to a pair

of boxer shorts, pulled out boxing gloves, and began going through the motions of warming up for a fight, shouting all the while ‘Yeltsin! Come here! Yeltsin! Come here!’” (Akinsha, 1995). Brener’s protest against the war in Chechnya ended with his arrest, which later became the typical way that his performances ended. Some include Brener’s attempt to copulate with his wife on the steps of the Pushkin monument, pretending to defecate in front of a painting by Van Gogh, masturbating on top of the Moscow swimming pool’s diving tower, and driving staples into his naked back in the middle of an exhibition at the Central House of Artists. In addition to actions in which his own body was the target of abuse (a practice common to performance artists), Brener also engaged works of art by other artists, including paintings and installations by Wenda Gu and Kazimir Malevich (Akinsha, 1995).

#### The Political Aspect of the Historical and Cultural Context

Historically, Brener’s oeuvre belongs to the 1990s when, after the fall of communism, the Russian artistic community experienced significant freedom of expression. This is not to suggest that in post-Soviet Russia artists turned their backs on politics. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, artists in Russia were an important vehicle for building the socialist state and promoting its official agendas. As many artists themselves assumed political office, their role became more prominent in developing artistic conventions along with laws that were to govern the new socialist state. Even today, in postcommunist Russia, close ties with the political arena remain visible in art. This is because Russian artists perceive themselves to be political activists with high aspirations for changing contemporary social conditions through their art. Russian performance artists, or artists–activists, as they call themselves, have developed a unique language of expression that cannot be understood and is often dismissed outside of its politically engaged context.

I argue that Russian artists–activists do not belong to what we consider movements or schools of thought, such as expressionism, minimalism, or feminism. In their place is something that Victor Misiano, a prominent Russian curator, calls “tusovka,” from the Russian “tusovat” meaning “to shuffle.” Misiano (2002) explains tusovka as “a syndrome whose origins lie in the collapse of a disciplinary culture and social hierarchies” (p. 161). Tusovka is not an underground movement nor does it have widespread recognition. Instead, it exists in between, exhibits no established characteristics, has no specific value system, and stands for no specific cause except the destruction of art as an institution and corporation, which, according to the artists, is the product of the West.

While for the member of a corporate association success was bound up with professional achievement, and for the underground hero it meant the personal embodiment of authenticity, for the representative of tusovka success is determined by the intensity and originality of his manipulation of other’s identity. To be a success, one must develop a great capacity for internalizing another’s obsession, accepting all that is different and even contrary. In this way, tusovka operates as nothing less than the personalized production and the redistribution of an obsession. Tusovka is a network, a social entity composed of points of energy, between which currents move in dynamic and random fashion. Nothing is more archaic and outmoded to tusovka than the category of public opinion. Tusovka is the most obvious symptom of a post-ideological culture. (Misiano, 2002, p. 165)

The self-image of tusovka artists is complex and contradictory. The artists–activists perceive themselves as Eastern European artists fighting a faulty Western value system. Of course, as Misiano observed, the East exists as an essential part of the West. The two do not exist separate from each other and cannot be studied as isolated concepts or cultures. Responsible discussion of one must rely on an understanding of the other in the context of the postmodern twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, this is not the current situation. Instead, art historians and critics approach art using Western conventions. This is problematic. The East is not an outcast of the West, neither is it inferior nor wholly different. In the future, in discussing

Alexander Brener and Eastern European methods of expression and message, it should be a priority to develop a critical framework cognizant of both Western and Eastern traditions.

### The Challenges of Performance Art

I will turn to performance art as a possible context within which to make sense of Alexander Brener's art. In the West during the 1960s and 1970s, performance artists sought to redefine art by way of the physical body. Through masochistic acts, artists such as Vito Acconci and Chris Burden tested their own bodily limits as well as the limits of what could be accepted and understood as art.

Acconci began his public performance career informed by Kurt Lewin's notion of "power fields." In his book, *The Principle of Typological Psychology*, Lewin describes how "each individual radiated a personal power-field, which included all possible interactions with other people and objects in a particular physical space" (Goldberg, 2001, p. 156). During his 1971 performance called *Seedbed*, Acconci constructed such a power field as he masturbated underneath a platform in the Sonnabend Gallery and communicated his fantasies to visitors through speakers. The performance crossed the established, known boundary regarding expectations about art that is shared among the visitor, the work of art, and the artist. Such expectations include, for instance, the absence of the artist from the gallery, the understanding that viewers would be able to study his works of art in silence, and that certain activities would not occur or even be thinkable in a public space associated with high culture, which tends to suppress references to bodily functions. Chris Burden also challenged expectations associated with Western art in his *Shooting Piece*, in 1971. For the performance, Burden asked his friend to shoot him in the arm in front of an audience. The artist's body, used as a target, became an object to be harmed.

Not only did Acconci and Burden use their own bodies and bodily actions as art, they also challenged prevailing Western expectations of decorum, personal space, privacy, and security. Their performances made visible a common set of expectations and values. Alexander Brener's performances have similar effects, yet Brener uses a method of expression that is unfamiliar to Acconci and Burden and carries a great deal of culturally specific meaning. Therefore, while critics compare Brener to Burden, very few consider Brener's performances as important as Burden's. Nor do they attribute to Brener's performances a legacy in the history of performance art that is as significant as Burden's. As shocking as the performances of Acconci and Burden were at the time, today they are a part of the canon of performance art (Goldberg, 2001). On the other hand, Brener's actions fail to be taken seriously.

#### Confrontations with Culture

One afternoon in 1996, Brener entered the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, approached a painting by Kazimir Malevich called *Suprematism 1922–1927*, and spray-painted a dollar sign across its white surface. Brener remained in the museum until he was escorted out by the police, jailed, and eventually put on trial. The museum accused Brener of damaging its property, which resulted in the loss in value of the work. The museum required Brener to pay the difference between the monetary value of the painting before and after Brener defaced it. Brener's defense consisted of arguing that what he did was an artistic expression. In other words, it was performance art. Even the curator of the museum admitted to comprehending Brener's actions as a work of art. Nevertheless, the trial resulted in Brener being sentenced to 2 years in prison (Sokolov, 1997).

During the same year, Brener destroyed "Interpol," a group exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in Stockholm, Sweden. "Interpol" was intended to explore the physical and

psychological separation that remained in Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall (Gu, 1996). Artists from Russia and Sweden were invited to participate and express their own struggle with the current cultural situation. Wenda Gu, a Chinese artist living in the United States, contributed a work to the exhibition and acted as a mediator between the Russian and Swedish artists. His monumental hair tunnel was made of Russian and Swedish hair and was meant to “stand as a referee of cultural confrontation” (Gu, 1996, p. 102). On the night of the exhibition reception, Brener tore down Gu’s installation as a protest because he thought that it dominated the exhibition. According to Brener and several other artists, instead of allowing every artist to have equal representation and attention, Gu’s work violated the original premise of the show: to foster an open dialogue among Eastern European artists. In response, Gu saw Brener as the “reflection of Russian reality today: degenerate, chaotic, frustrated” (Bad Hair Day, 1996, p. 70).

Brener has earned a reputation as a naughty artist, and the art critics and historians who write about his performance art describe it as perverse, naïve, primitive, masochistic, and even fascist. They scold Brener, but not for flouting the traditions of performance art because performance artists such as Acconci and Burden have similarly engaged in shocking activities involving the body. Rather, art historians and critics direct most of their outrage about Brener’s performances toward those that specifically involve other works of art. Perhaps the performances seem to attract the greatest attention because Brener’s destruction of and tampering with other artists’ work defies the Western understanding of the function of art in contemporary society, which is that art is a unique expression of a unique artist and, as such, it is worthy of being preserved, admired, and passed down through history. Brener proposes a different relationship to art and at the same time makes Western insecurities visible. As he “destroyed” Malevich’s work by painting a dollar sign on it, he was attacking the related values that Western art’s historical

traditions have taken for granted as inherent in a work of art, especially a work of art vested through ownership by an internationally renowned art museum. Those values include monetary, aesthetic, historical, and cultural.

As Brener deploys them, works of art are available for new functions and new ways to make meanings that perhaps had nothing to do with the original artist's intent. The action itself becomes art while the object loses its previous importance and turns into a by-product. No one individual voice is more important than the other is; all exist in constant friction. Works of art lose their prestige and become a point fostering dialogue between artists outside of the institution, which Brener believes would bring to life the intended meaning of art. In addition to challenging the role of art and its ability to produce meaning, Brener confronts the status of art as a commodity. He claims that art is not an independent cultural entity but has become another type of commodity that is governed by the contemporary capitalist economics. Art institutions—galleries, museums, and universities—function as businesses and are concerned with profit and prestige. As a result, what the public views as true art (i.e., the art found in galleries and museums), is a product of a series of transactions between institutions that obscure the intended function and meaning of art.

### Conclusion

Much of Brener's own writing reads like a manifesto in which he describes his performances as waging war on the current art establishment. Furthermore, he vows to continue what he is doing until there is no future in it. In his letter entitled "Third World Artist," which refers to what the artist considers is his own status, Brener explains that the third world was produced by two others: The first world being advanced and capitalistic, and the second being a socialist world that "collapsed and vanished into thin air" (Brener, 1998, p. 4). He claims that he

“belongs to something else—a pitiful shout of helplessness, good-for-nothing lyrics of the abandoned, hopeless cry for help, hoarse yell of indignation” (Brener, 1998, p. 3). He writes, “It is [the first world] who explained [to] the poor third world kid that culture is a great power and force, that art does not only reflect reality, but also transforms it, that art is a brutal war, and its banners read: ‘Negation! Freedom! Analysis! Revolution! Resistance!’” (Brener, 1998, p. 5).

Brener’s letter demonstrates a belief in two distinct yet interrelated systems that he thinks corresponds to “East” and “West.” His notion of “East” is the Eastern world as a third world that exists at the mercy of the whims of the “West,” the first world, the advanced, capitalistic world. About the third world he asks, “What can you expect of a faintly educated third world artist, except for childish tricks, terrible yells, and cursing? What else can an ill-bred, wriggling teenager offer? Nothing he can offer” (Brener, 1998, p. 6). This ironic, rhetorical question cuts to the heart of Western expectations for non-Western artists. It is a question Brener engages by waging war on the contemporary art establishment in the West. In his view, Brener does this by embodying the stereotypes of Russian and Eastern European artists as backward and naïve.

In response, the Western audience has fulfilled Brener’s expectations by excommunicating him from what is considered high art. Perhaps Brener does not care about being included in high art as much as he desperately wants to be noticed. To be sure, the discomfort and outrage that his actions cause ensure that he will not be dismissed completely. Nevertheless, Brener’s proposition about what art should or could be, and work by other Eastern European performance artists, is far from being considered legitimate in the West, where what counts as prevailing, important art is often already defined for the world. However, here the definition of contemporary fine art, and our understanding of what it is, is still too limited and far

too dependent on a long-established value system. The result is that most of us are not ready to consider the kind of art Brener proposes; perhaps we never will be.

### References

- Akinsha, K. (1995). Three from Moscow. *Art News*, 94, 167.
- Bad Hair Day. (1996). *Art News* 95, 70.
- Brener, A. (1998). Third world artist. *Moscow Art Magazine*, 22. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from <http://www.guelman.ru/xz/english/XX22/X2214.HTM>.
- Goldberg, R. (2001). *Performance art: From futurism to the present*. New York: Thames and Hudson World of Art.
- Gu, W. (1996). The cultural war, a specter in Europe: Part II. *Flash Art* 189, 102.
- Misiano, V. (2002). An analysis of 'Tusovka.' Post-Soviet art of the 1990s. In G. Maraniello (Ed.), *Art in Europe 1990–2000* (pp. 161–177). Milan: Skira.
- Sokolov, A. (1997). Alexander Brener: Chronicle of a trial. *Flash Art* 192–194, 86–89.