



"WE DON'T LEAVE OUR PEOPLE BEHIND (ONLY THEIR BODIES)" - AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FOUNDER OF "PARTY OF THE DEAD"

Posted on 15. März 2022 by Yelizaveta Landenberger, Natalia Grinina,

Philine Bickhardt

Das russische Kollektiv "Party of the Dead" (russ. Partija mërtvyh) im Interview bei novinki. Wir sprachen über die Zeit "vor" und "nach" dem Krieg, die jetzigen Protestbewegungen und darüber, was wie "Toten" zu sagen haben.

Das russische Kollektiv "[Party of the Dead](#)" (russ. Partija mërtvyh) im Interview bei novinki am 11. März 2022. Wir sprachen über die Zeit "vor" und "nach" dem Krieg, die jetzigen Protestbewegungen und darüber, was die "Toten" zu sagen haben.

novinki: Thank you so much for spontaneously agreeing to this interview. Recently there have been many re-posts of content from the Russian artist collective [Party of the Dead](#) (*Partija Mërtvyh* on social media networks like Instagram and Facebook), and we wanted to talk to you personally about your work and the war. To be honest, we weren't really sure what awaited us today, if we would talk to people who are living or dead.

Party of the Dead: Well, you are talking to someone who is half-dead...or half-alive. Or to someone who is neither alive nor dead.


novinki: How long has your collective existed for?

PD:The collective has existed since the beginning of 2017. It began as just a joke, and then it slowly turned into something real.

novinki: Were there any political signals, or why in 2017? Is this year connected with the peak of civil resistance?

PD: It just happened that easily. In 2017 the collective [Irodinal](#) still existed, and *Party of the Dead* appeared under their influence, stressing and amplifying themes that had existed before in the art of *Irodinal*, like the connections between death, politics, and despair. *Party of the Dead* just extended these tendencies to their logical conclusions.

novinki: Where did *Party of the Dead* originate?

PD: There are two main locations, Saint Petersburg and Tomsk. Saint Petersburg is the core location of *Party of the Dead*. We mostly do different kinds of actions in Saint Petersburg, and in some way we organically fit into the local necrophile context of the city. The other place, which in my mind is actually more meaningful for *Party of the Dead*, is the Siberian town of Tomsk, where the [Immortal Regiment](#) emerged. Our idea about the walk with skulls, our first action, was a reaction to the *Immortal Regiment*. 

novinki: So there seem to be layers of different discourses here, such as the [9th of May](#) with the Immortal Regiment, as well as art movements like the Necrorealists of the 1990s. What is your connection to the [Necrorealist](#) movement, other art collectives like the Israeli project [Buried Alive](#) – which was supposedly founded by Russian emigrants – or the older [Russian cosmism](#) movement from the end of the 19th century?

PD: The Immortal Regiment originated in Tomsk at the initiative of local journalists and the media station TB-2, and within just one year it grew into something big. Then it was appropriated by the state, the Immortal Regiment was taken away from the initiators, TB-2 was destroyed and an [alternative version of the origins of the Immortal Regiment](#) appeared, mentioning Tyumen instead of Tomsk as the place of origin. According to this version, it was a policeman who had a dream of starting it.

Now, about Necrorealism: we do sometimes refer to Necrorealism, as for us it is a meaningful phenomenon of the past. We are not continuing this tradition, but it is surely connected to Saint Petersburg as a cultural topos. One could maybe say that we push the political radicalization of the Necrorealists forward, something that at one point I started calling Necroactivism. It is an alternative to Necrorealism, which merely records the state of death and decay. Necroactivism doesn't just record that state, but politicizes or even revolutionizes it.

Additionally, the ethical dimension of Cosmism is really important for me. That feeling of guilt before the dead and necessity of justice, not just for the living ones, but also for the dead. I developed the following formula: *Party of the Dead* is cosmism with a minus symbol. For *Party of the Dead*, there is no resurrection, no immortality; on the contrary, we propagate a free, universal death.

Concerning *Buried Alive*: I encountered them relatively recently, in 2020, as we took part in the same exhibition. Our work was placed in the same room, and we complemented each other. On one side, there was *Party of the Dead*; on the other side, *Buried Alive*.

novinki: Wow, that is fascinating, we didn't know there were such direct ties. The other point of reference we were thinking of when seeing your work is obviously [Russian conceptualism](#), which also operated with actions, slogans and posters. Are you referring to conceptualism?

PD: Well, yes, there is of course a lot of conceptualism in what we are doing, in the constant use of text, the preparation of political text. But I wouldn't say that we have direct ties or a direct relationship to conceptualism. On the other hand, though, there recently was [an exhibition in Siberia](#), where there is the phenomenon of [Siberian ironical conceptualism](#), and as I mentioned previously we are connected to Siberia and the Siberian context. But we have a different version of Siberian art.

novinki: Why do you think death is such an important topos in Russian culture? It seems that there has been a long tradition of this – and now some sort of culmination point has been reached.

PD: Yes, the culmination point of all of this is the war that Putin started. Because Russia is death and the destruction of the world.

novinki: Party of the Dead itself illustrates an end of any freedoms, rights, and political attempts. How did the 24th of February, the first day of the war, change your art? Does this day mark a turning point or even a point of no return for your collective?



PD: There were no substantial changes in the actions of the collective. But of course the events are absolutely catastrophic. We just try within our capabilities, which are quite limited, to react to what is happening. The most important recent actions were probably the ones we organized on the 22nd of February as a reaction to the recognition of independence. We felt the approach of war and the necessity to react to it. We did [an action on the Piskaryovskoye cemetery in Saint Petersburg](#), a cemetery that not long ago was visited by Putin. It is the cemetery for the victims of the Leningrad blockade. By being there, we in fact fulfilled a magical action of clearing the place from Putin's blasphemous visit and returned the cemetery to the dead. Then we had another action about Russian soldiers called [z200](#). From inside Russia, one of the most monstrous things about this war is the vast number of dead soldiers that nobody is picking up. Not only are they silenced, but they are actually lying there and decaying. That is really a new extent of Putin's necropolitics.

novinki: You said that your artist collective was established in 2017. Was there also an urge to respond to the war that started earlier, with the annexation of Crimea?

PD: Yes, we previously had other anti-war actions. For example, in 2018 we had an action in Siberia on the 23rd February, when we invented slogans like 'The Dead don't go to war'.

novinki: How does your artist collective function? Are there any hierarchies? How many people are involved, and do the participants change?

PD: The composition of our group changes over time, and the concept is not developed solely by myself, but also by the other participants, as we are trying to avoid any hierarchies. The problem is that most of my comrades have to stay as anonymous as possible, as this is really dangerous for them.

novinki: You are talking as if in the name of the dead, but at the same time you have a very peace-loving and life-affirming tone.

PD: Well, it somehow turned out this way, that death for us is rather liberating, that it is a circumstance that allows you

to say the truth and not be scared of anything. We are opposing the ones in power on one hand, and on the other hand there is a very strong message: 'Peace to the graves. Death to the palaces.' My political position is radically left, something like anarcho-communist. But we have all sorts of people with different political positions in our collective.

novinki: Do you have hope for the future?

PD: Yes, of course there is hope. Somehow protest is being formed, because the current situation is very critical. When there were protests for the liberation of Navalny last year, I think society was not really consolidated, it was in fact quite polarized. But now that the situation is getting darker, graver, it seems that a larger number of people are willing to do something against the war.

novinki: Well, from outside of Russia it looks like the opposite: it looks as if the number of protests is decreasing, as if there is a lot less resistance now.

PD: The population is much less organized. In fact, all organizational structures have been completely destroyed in the course of the past year. Many people have left, many were imprisoned, and so on. And people who are going out on the streets now are doing this against a huge, huge number of factors like persecution, and then on top of this there is this [new phantastic law](#).

novinki: From here, with our heart being torn apart, we are observing the changes of Russia 'before' and 'after' the war, which has been going on for 14 days now. How was it to suddenly find oneself in fascist Russia?

PD: Not a very pleasant feeling, I'm telling you. There were many indicators for this, all of this has been going on for more than one year. In principle, there is nothing too surprising about what happened. The only shocking thing about it is how far it actually went, nobody expected that. Of course, there is a feeling of heaviness and anxiety when you find yourself within a mad, actually fascist government. Many people, even those who are far away from protest and politics, have this feeling that everything they were trying to build for the past 15, 20, 30 years has been destroyed, that everything just collapsed. This is really an information war. Fascist Russia is spending a lot of resources on leading this war, while the opposition cannot even directly call it a war. The other day this big campaign with the letter 'Z' was started. In the Saint Petersburg metro, for example, there are billboards with this letter everywhere now, composed of the [ribbon of Saint George](#). It really seems that this fascist society evolves further and further every single day. People in Russia are very flexible, they have been taught to be this way, they just get used to the position of those in power. They don't listen to their conscience, unfortunately.

novinki: Is it somehow possible for you to open people's eyes?

PD: Well, at the same time there is also something positive about this mentality, with its primary feature being flexibility. If all of a sudden the power structure would change, these people would also adjust to this situation.

novinki: Do you intend to continue your actions? Are you eager to continue your work in the artistic field?

PD: Yes, I have the wish to resist.

novinki: The form of your protest and activism fits the condition under which you have to work. You are wearing

skulls and taking pictures of your actions, which can later be put online anonymously. This form that you established long before the beginning of the full-scale war is now obtaining new relevance. Do you have an idea to cooperate with your colleagues in Ukraine?

PD: I really hope that this will work out. I have recently been in contact with [Nikita Kadan](#), who is from Kyiv, and he suggested that we take part in some exhibition. But I don't know, it is very difficult now to make any forecasts for the near future. Maybe something is going to work out.

novinki: Is there a demographic factor in the protests?

PD: Yes, there is a pattern: the older people are, the fewer of them there are who think reflectively. Mostly young people are going out to protest the war — the 'Putin' generation. This is a sociological observation. But of course there are examples of resistance among older people as well. For example, there is this wonderful Saint Petersburg artist, [Elena Osipova](#), who also participates in the protests.

novinki: Is there maybe a favorite slogan of *Party of the Dead* with which you would like to conclude this interview?

PD: I just remembered our old poster: 'We share one Earth.' This poster really gains additional layers of meaning when being held by a dead being.

Bildquelle des Beitragsbildes: "Своих не бросаем (только их трупы)" am 07. März 2022, © Party of the Dead.

conducted by Philine Bickhardt, Natalia Grinina and Yelizaveta Landenberger

translation by Yelizaveta Landenberger

translation editing by Patrick Kurth