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Russians Take Lessons From Film on Gay Activism

By Ian Bateson

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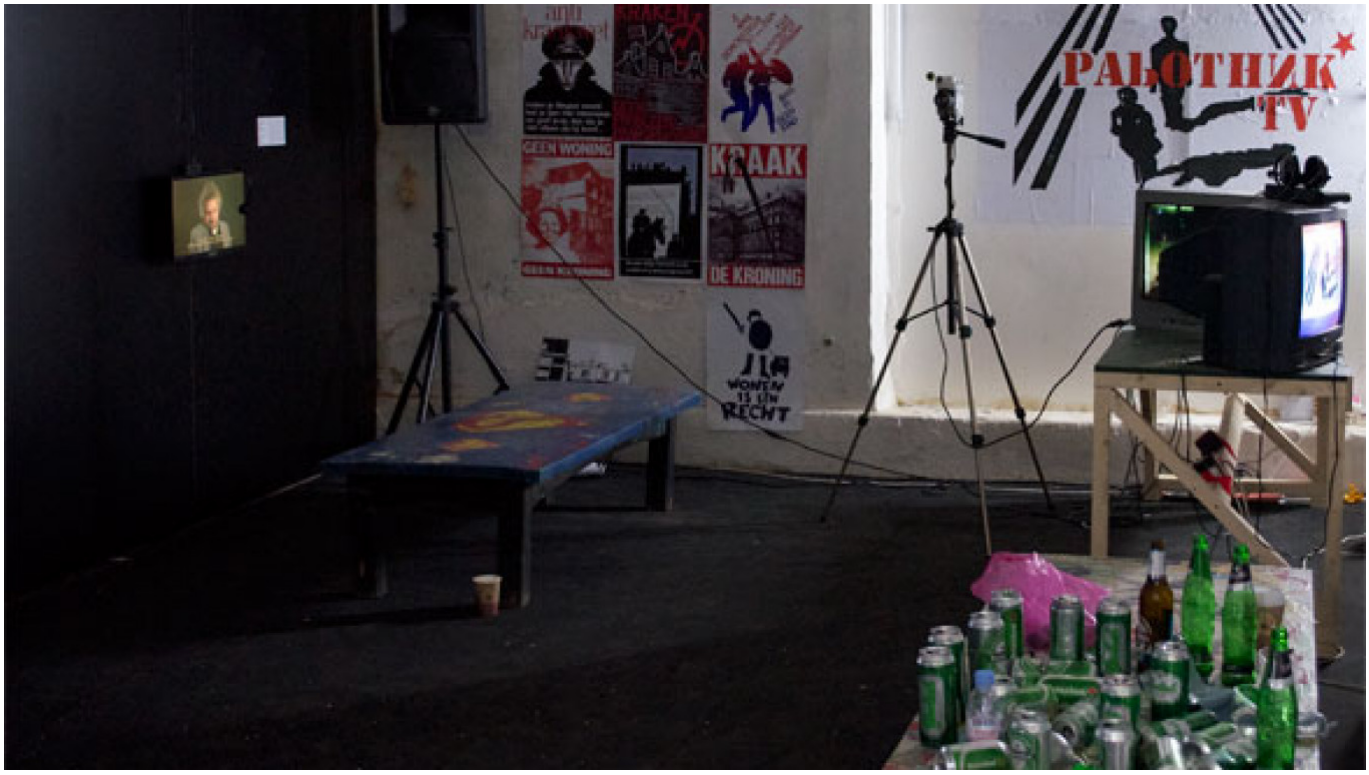

After a week of workshops and performances, the Festival of Activist Art closely resembles an Amsterdam squat. **D. Garrison Golubock**

"At the beginning the bodies were symbolic and at the end the bodies were real," American writer and activist Sarah Schulman tells a hushed Moscow audience.

She and filmmaker Jim Hubbard have come to Russia to show their documentary film "United in Anger: a History of ACT UP" at the MediaImpact International Festival of Activist Art.

Using archival footage and excerpts from more than 1,000 hours of interviews collected by the two, the film traces the history of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP. ACT UP staged protests in front of the New York Stock Exchange, the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration, and the White House to demand the development and speedy distribution of affordable AIDS-fighting drugs during the height of the AIDS crisis in the '80s and '90s.

The film shows the energy of the early protests where people blocked roads by laying in them with tombstones that identified government inaction as the cause of death. The footage from 1992 shows a more somber protest as people took the ashes of some of the thousands of people who had died from AIDS and reached through the metal gates in front of the White House to spread them across the White House lawn.

The film pairs ACT UP's actions with its results, showing how the number of drugs increased, the time it took for them to be approved was sped up and people infected with AIDS were given a voice in the process.

Hubbard and Schulman were uniquely situated to make the film not only as people who lived through the events, but as people who participated in ACT UP's protest actions.

At a festival dealing with LGBT themes, however, and with a sign on the door saying "18+" to avoid falling foul of Russia's ban on "propagandizing" homosexuality among minors, the story does not end there.

AIDS was a disease that disproportionately affected the gay community and continues to be associated with it in the West. As a result, ACT UP was always a predominantly gay organization and the gay makers of the film, Hubbard and Schulman, have brought their awareness for LGBT issues with them to Russia.

"We were told not to come to Russia because we would be beaten up. They were wrong. What do we tell them when we go back?" Schulman asks the audience. "Do the protests help?" she asks after a silence.

One man answers that even when they do not affect change, they help morale.

Another women woman retells a story about a British comic artist who refused to come to Russia because he thought everyone hated gay people. She encourages people abroad to differentiate when boycotting between state sponsored and underground events.

The audience's response to the film itself was positive.

"I began to cry when they threw the ashes in front of the White House and when they showed the date the person talking died," said designer Olgerta Kharitonova, 54. Viewers, however, struggled to take away lessons from the film that could be applied to Russia.

Seeing the thousands of protestors that attended ACT UP protests when Russian LGBT protests are usually attended by no more than a few dozen people was a common point of frustration. "You are always outnumbered and surrounded here," said Kharitonova.

Generally, however, the audience was curious and eager to see something not shown on Russian television. "It was really interesting," said Dima, 25, an administrator at a clinic. "They would not show this on the documentary channel. They do not show anything about gays."

The MediaImpact Festival of Activist Art where the film was shown has not been without controversy. After two Orthodox activists failed to disrupt the festival they called the police telling them there were people under 18 attending. The police came but failing to find anyone

under 18, they left, festival organizer Pavel Mitenko said.

This is the second year of the annual activist art festival, which is taking place at Moscow's Artplay Design Center and includes workshops, performances and exhibits about a wide range of topics related to protest art of all kinds. This year's festival also includes an exhibit of Dutch protest art organized as a special exhibit of the Fifth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art.

From Moscow, Hubbard and Schulman now head to St. Petersburg where they will have three more showings of their film. Their trip comes at a sensitive time after two people were hospitalized in St. Petersburg on Sunday after armed men entered the office of an HIV prevention organization holding an LGBT event.

The MediaImpact Festival of Activist Art will last until Nov. 6 at the Small Hall of the Artplay Design Center at 10 Nizhnaya Syromyatnicheskaya Ulitsa, Bldg. 7. For more information, check the festival website at mediaudar.net.

Jim Hubbard and Sarah
Schulman will also be screening United in Anger: A History of ACT UP in St. Petersburg on Wednesday, Nov. 6th at 5:30 p.m. in the reading room of the Mayakovsky Library.

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