

EMERGENCY

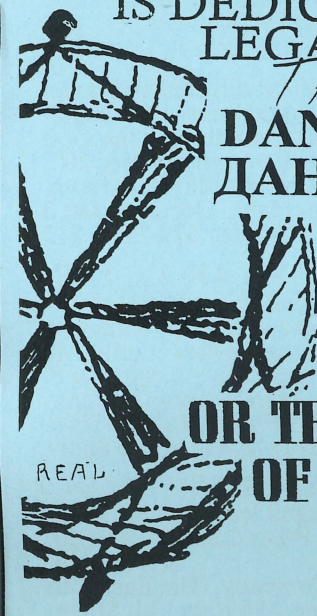
December 29, 2000

happy new year!

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GAZETTE

This double issue of the
EMERGENCY GAZETTE
IS DEDICATED TO THE
LEGACY, ART AND
THEATER OF
DANIIL KHARMS
ДАНИИЛ ХАРМС
(1905-1942)



REAL

RADIX, OR THE ROOTS OF OBERIU THEATER

Before the OBERIU there was RADIX, an experimental theater. This loose artistic collective found shelter at Kazimir Malevich's avant-garde-centric Institute of the Arts and Culture in Leningrad in the mid nineteen-twenties.

In late summer of 1926, Daniil Kharm and Alexander Vvedensky, who would later found the OBERIU (Union of Real Art), were commissioned to write & direct a play for Radix. The young poets began work on the "montage of an unusual play" called "My Momma's All in Watches."

Having already set themselves apart from other literary groups, the two poet friends were interested in forming a coalition that would unite the "left wing" of the arts. Performance became a vital way of provoking interest and creating a name for themselves. The Radix theater gave them the chance to work collectively on a project which would bring them closer to like-minded young artists, playwrights and poets, and kindled their hopes for uniting the most radical figures in the arts.

Rehearsals of "My Momma's All in Watches" took place in the White Hall of GINHUK, the recently revolutionized State Institute of the Arts and Culture on the square at the foot of St. Isaac's Cathedral. Six years earlier, in that same auditorium, artist and designer Vladimir Tatlin staged the spectacular Futurist play ZANGEZI by Velemir Khlebnikov.

The Futurist movements (Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism, etc.) and the 1917 revolution, had created an illusion of freedom and what seemed like rich soil for new ideas and art-forms. The 1920s teemed with young "avant-gardists" banding into groups and waving manifestos like flags in battle. Eccentricity was a sign of "newness" and young artists found intellectual ecstasy in rupturing the boundaries of art and life (following the example of Wildean theater director Nikolai Evreinov). New artistic movements drowned each other out in loud proclamations, attempting to relive the fervor of pre-Revolutionary movements.

The Radix theater drew a fleeting array of performers and hangers-on. Participants included actors from the new

LenFilm studios, and future OBERIU members Sergei Tsymbal, a theater historian, the young writer Doibver Levin, art-history student Igor Bakhterev, and the budding poet Nikolai Zabolotsky.

Having acquired what modern theater artist would refer to as "a space" and the protection and guidance of acknowledged Futurist artists such as Malevich, Mikhail Matiushin, and Igor Terentiev, the Radix collective created a laboratory for ongoing experiments, which included 24-hour marijuana meditations and other mind-altering marathons.

Although the play never surfaced (for "technical reasons"—there was no heat in the auditorium, for instance) Radix found performance spaces around Leningrad to put on shows that were precursors to the infamous OBERIU literary evenings. These theatricalized events, with probably very little set or prepara-

Daniil Kharms

AN EVENING SONG TO SHE WHO EXISTS BY MY NAME

Daughter of the daughter of the daughters of the daughter Pe
foreto the apple you ate of yee
beguiling Adam's heights foreto you
favorite daughter of the daughter of Pe.
Being the Mother of the world and the world itself and the child
of the world being.

open the eye of the soul of grain
open the shores and do not turn yee head about
open the fallen shadows of thrones to the larch
open through Angels singing birds
open the sighing breath in the air of the sown winds
that call you down to them that call you
that love you
that yellow find yee in life.

The steambath of your faces
the steambath of your faces
foreto opening memory's window take a look around what is
situated in the distance

take a count of the moving and the restless
and count out on your hand α those restless ones
those restless ones foreto taking from movement accepting life
long to move and yet still sleep
or quick say: from movement comes life
but in stillness death.

Origin and Power will fit into thou shoulder
Origin and Power will fit into thou forehead
Origin and Power will fit into the sole of thou foot
but you will never take fire and arrow into your hand
but you will never take fire and arrow into your hand
foreto the ladder of thou head
daughter of the daughter of the daughters of the daughter of Pe

O fy lily of mine eyes
fe the inkwell of mine cheeks
trrr the ear of mine hair
quill of happiness reflection of the light of mine things
key of ashes and bosom of flowing pride
take cover in silence people of this mine country
foreto wink number height and horse's ride

Of willfulness shall we sing sister
of willfulness shall we sing sister
daughter of the daughter of the daughters of Pe
name-day girl of your own name
of your own legs the wind and of your own bosom the bee
of your own hands the strength and my breath
uneasyseeable depth of my soul
the light that sings in my city
joy of the night and forest of the graveyard of stillstanding times
with courage come into the world and life's
witness
come to me in my dreams.

August 21 <1930>
translation by Matvei Yankelevich

INSIDE:

Podорога on Gesture—Jakovljevic on
Vertical Theater—Kharms on
Meyerhold—Yankelevich on Kharms—
Notes from a new Kharms play—
and much more, for Kharms' sake!

* * *

Everything happens in the end
and so a sequence is created.
How strange, if two events
all of a sudden happened all at once.

Riddle: And if instead of two events
eight bubbles happen?

Answer: Then we'd lie down of course.

The answer came out short and pure.
A man got wrapped in paper.
The paper's gone. Now winter's come.

13 Jan [1930]
Daniil Kharms

FROM THE DIARIES... <OF DANIIL KHARMS >

On nonsense:
I am interested only in "nonsense"; only
that which has no practical meaning. I
am interested in life in its most awk-
ward manifestations.

Heroism, pathos, daring, moral, hy-
giene, morality, tenderness, adventure—
all are loathsome feelings and words for
me.

But I quite understand and respect: rap-
ture and delight, inspiration and despair,
passion and reserve, debauchery and
chastity, sorrow and grief, happiness
and laughter.

October 31, 1937

In a lengthy list of his personal likes:
Drama (my own).

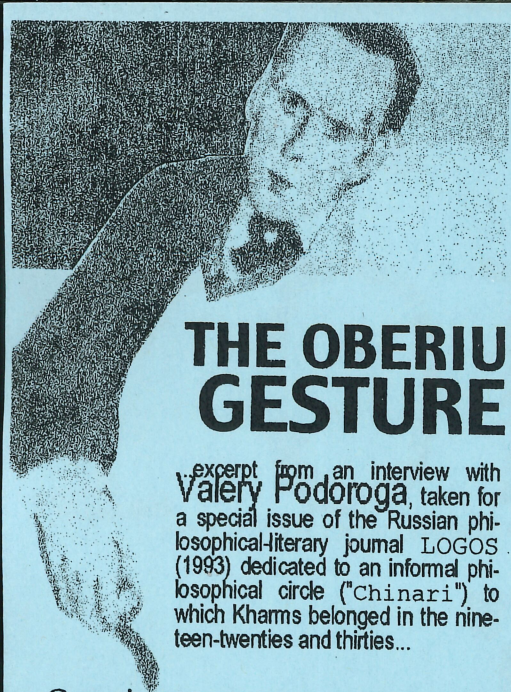
<1933>

On the Purity of Order in Art:
...It seems this poem, having become an
object, can be taken off the page and
thrown at a window, and the window
will shatter. That's what words can do!...
(From a letter to Klavdia Pugacheva, of October 16, 1933.)

their "autonomous" spectacles pieced
together in a collage-like progression in
time. Precisely this understanding of
theater informed the OBERIU as they
wrote their unifying manifesto and be-
came, for a short time, the resident en-
tertainers at The Leningrad House of
Print in 1928.

The name Radix, of course, connotes
"radical", but its antecedent is the Latin
word meaning "root". Although not at
all free from the influence of contempo-
rary theaters and theory, Radix was in
many ways an attempt to get down to
the essentials of theater, the very basic
parts that made theater the artistic form
it is, separate from other arts, function-
ing on its own terms.

The White Hall at GINHUK became
uninhabitable, Malevich came under
political pressure to get with Socialism,
and Radix as such dispersed. In 1928,
continued on page 4



THE OBERIU GESTURE

excerpt from an interview with Valery Podoroga, taken for a special issue of the Russian philosophical-literary journal LOGOS (1993) dedicated to an informal philosophical circle ("Chinari") to which Kharms belonged in the nineteen-twenties and thirties...

Question: Let's now proceed to the question of the Oberiu lifestyle, or rather, to what could be called the "theatricalization of life". Could this be a further clarification of "the star of nonsense" [as Vvedensky referred to his poetic project -ed.]? Sometimes it is easier to "understand" the Oberiuts not in dramatic conflict with their time, but rather independently of time; one can try and see them (in spite of their violent deaths) as jesters, idiots, urban lunatics, and recognize their right to choose their own masks and manner of living.

Valery Podoroga: I would like to problematize your question by posing my own: what is *OBERIU gesture*? In the Duino Elegies, Rilke speaks of the "discretion of human gesture" (i.e. having an inner limit, that doesn't allow the gesture to become violent, too obvious, unconvicted). So, in my opinion, the OBERIU gesture is *indiscrete*, transgressive, it has no inner limit. Being directed towards objects, bodies and events of the world, it never returns to the one who produced it, so it is a non-returning gesture. It's nobody's gesture. After its intrusion into the world, the world changes its appearance, it becomes a different world. Therefore the OBERIU gesture is always destructive (though I can't say that it is violent). We learn about certain individual gestures of the Oberiuts through autobiographical notes, legends and rumors, recollections of friends, girlfriends, and contemporaries, but they are not *physical* enough for us to judge the real power of the OBERIU gesture. The poetical world of Vvedensky or Kharms is a different case. It can only exist while this indiscreet gesture continuously repeats itself. The physical energy of this gesture is impressive, it attracts us from the moment we begin reading. Indeed, we learn about the presence of the gesture through the way bodies and objects connect to form a monotony of recurrent events. Gesture governs the logic of repetitions of the same action for different objects. Gesture extracts an object from its typical surroundings and immediately the object loses its stable forms of existence. We extract the "meaning" of the event not from a set of specifically arranged objects, but from the event itself, which in its nature precedes the object. Gesture, produced by the OBERIU poetic energy, is an event, in which various everyday objects and bodies regain their modality of existence. Old women are always falling, if they are dead, then they are always getting up, and so on. The gesture of *falling* is thoroughly perfected. The OBERIU gesture "lasts" or "continues", it can not be completed, therefore it repeats itself again and again, offering objects and bodies an opportunity to get rid of their former qualities and functions. And there are too many of these gestures, they are "incidents from life": gestures of face-beating, eating, cutting off organs... If you had the patience, you could make an extensive catalog of similar gestures/events. It might be said that practically any work by an Oberiu in some way expresses a gesture kindred to him. The OBERIU gesture is the hearth of nonsense; it is self-contained and eventful, and therefore doesn't require interpretation ("Meaning"). It exists for nothing, it opens new possible forms of existence for objects and bodies stuck in the boredom of time.



KHARMS' VERTICAL THEATER

The phrase "vertical theater" is an oxymoron. Theater, the place for seeing, is vitally dependent on the horizontal gaze. It is the gaze that surveys, scrutinizes, and examines; it progresses through links and connections, and it forms networks of interconnected lines and paths of uniform succession. Each knot leads to another juncture, each observation opens the passage to the next one. Horizontality searches for clarity. At any speed, its movement is slow. Horizontality provides continuity and permanence; it makes sure that steps are re-traced, thoughts re-collected. It provides reversibility, remembers in order to predict. Theater is the place of memory.

Pure verticality is a radical break, not a system of connections. Consider Kharms' story *The Falling*:

Two men fell from a roof. They both fell from a roof of a five-storey building. Seemingly a school. They had moved down the roof in a sitting position to the very edge and at that point started to fall.

If horizontality proceeds through a network of logical connections, pure verticality is, more than anything else, a breakdown of this system of cause and effect, a break in logic. In Kharms' story, the two crouching men simply slide towards the edge of the abyss. The fall is unexpected and unexplained. And it is attractive: a fleeting, unfixable spectacle. The two falling men are first spotted by an Ida Markovna, who was "standing at her window in the building opposite and was blowing her nose into a glass." As they continue to fall, they are seen by another girl, also called Ida Markovna. The fall is the only thing that brings together the two Ida Markovnas. They both see the falling men through the window. Positioned vertically, the window facilitates the horizontal view.

The fall as pure verticality is not opposed to ascension, but to horizontality. The two men are falling in a straight line. Their movement is decisive and unstoppable, definite and undeniable. Both Ida Markovnas initially approach the window and then run away from it. Their movements are horizontal and indecisive. The second Ida Markovna tries to open the window, and then, remembering that she had nailed it, runs to take the pincers from the stove located in the far corner of the room. Upon approaching the window, the first Ida Markovna, remembering that she is naked, becomes excessively self-conscious:

... realizing that, perhaps, those falling might, from their vintage point, be able to glimpse her naked - and goodness only knew what they might think of her - [she] jumped back from the window.

If horizontality connects and brings things together, verticality introduces general separation and duality. The two falling men. The two Ida Markovnas. Two time flows: the slow and horizontal and the stealthy vertical flow. Two spaces: the horizontality's proximity and the verticality's distance. Two directions: from the point of view of the two falling men, the naked Ida Markovna buzzes up into the air as swiftly as they fall down. If horizontality clarifies, verticality blurs. There is no reconciliation between these two states. The fall is the absence of thought. It is opposed to contemplation. The two Ida Markovnas deliberate, change their mind, think. The two falling men give themselves over to the vertical movement: no thought, no change of direction, no deliberation. Only the speed.

The gaze pointed into the abyss above or below does not rest on a stable object. Like in *THE FALLING*, in Kharms' story *THE HOLIDAY* two draftsmen are sitting on the roof. Instead of falling from

the roof, they tie a coin in a handkerchief, throw it down, and watch it as it spirals into the abyss. Here, more than in any other of his works, Kharms emphasizes the idea that falling and raising represent the two complementary aspects of verticality. At the end of the story, the caretaker Ibrahim appears on the roof and starts mounting a flag on the chimney. When the two men inquire about the occasion for the flag-raising, he informs them that it is a special day, a holiday, because "our favorite poet wrote a new poem." The two of them, "embarrassed with their ignorance, dissolved in the air." Upward as well as downward movement amounts to a loss. The loss of gaze, loss of control, loss of support. The fall immobilizes, isolates, and de-personalizes. In this light, falling can be seen as an existential stripping, as the reduction of the self to the base materiality of the body. In the manuscript draft of *THE FALLING*, entitled *NEAR BY AND FAR OFF*, Kharms wrote that as they were falling, the two men "whistled." The fall happens in the midst of a strange silence. There are no screams and cries; only the whistle of the falling bodies. Instead of them voicing their terror, their entire bodies resound as they fall.


In both *THE FALLING* and *THE HOLIDAY* verticality is associated with forgetfulness. The fact that both Ida Markovnas remember certain things emphasize the essential amnesia of the falling men; furthermore, they plunge from the building which is "seemingly a school;" and finally, the two draftsmen disperse into the air when reminded of their ignorance. Falling is irreversible: it can not be retraced nor recollected. It is instantaneous and final: the end is inscribed in the beginning, the beginning is at the same time the end. In pure verticality there is no past or future. Everything is compressed into the immediate present. Falling erases all memory and all knowledge. Mikhail Lampolski asserts, significantly, that Kharms' project is "replacement of memory with ignorance" and "supplanting of the peace of knowledge by the peace of ignorance." The concept of falling and verticality are of central importance for this project.

As the two men are falling, and as the two Ida Markovnas are running up and down their apartments, a small crowd of people starts gathering on the sidewalk. Two characters are singled out from this group: "a diminutive militiaman" and "a big-nosed caretaker." Both of them are the facilitators of the fall's end: pragmatically, they instruct curious citizens to move away so that the two men don't fall on them. In Kharms' work the figures of caretaker, watchman and militiaman, are endowed with specific symbolic meaning. The superintendent stands for years at the gates without being able to conceive the purpose of his endless vigil. As he guards the gate between two worlds, his gaze is hopelessly fixed on the lesser one. In the story *THE YOUNG MAN WHO ASTONISHED A WATCHMAN* from Kharms' anthology *INCIDENTS*, a young man in yellow gloves suddenly appears and asks the watchman for the direction of heaven. After a short dispute, "the young man smiled, raised his hand in its yellow glove, waved it above his head and suddenly disappeared." The confused watchman looks around and sniffs the air, which smells of burnt feathers. In *THE HOLIDAY*, the two draftsmen "dissolve into the air" after their conversation with the caretaker Ibrahim. This escape is peculiar: it is caused by the draftsmen's ignorance, facilitated by the caretaker, and described as dissolution into the air, which connotes lightness and upward movement.

All of this suggests that verticality not only isolates, but also singles out, focuses, and reduces. Vanishing is an instant departure, a leap. There is nothing gradual about it. Disappearance in Kharms' works always happens suddenly, and it always marks a radical change in the ontological status of the subject. It is an ultimate flight. The young man in

yellow gloves or the two draftsmen do not float in the air until they vanish. This kind of disappearance would resemble departure in space and gradual approach to the horizon. It is distance that reduces and shrinks objects, not verticality itself.

Verticality marks vanishing: disappearance of the object from the field of visibility as well as loss of memory and knowledge. This very impossibility of theater becomes one of Kharms' most cherished dramatic devices. His plays are marked by sudden appearances and disappearances of characters, by sudden departures into the air, as well as with catastrophic plummeting. There is no such thing as a banality of the fall: each of them represents a catastrophe of cosmic proportions, a repetition of the original Fall.

 Branislav Jakovljevic

LISTINGS

CAT'S PAW
by Mac Wellman; directed by Daniel Aukin; World premiere with an all-female cast of a "Mediation on the Don Juan Theme". Through January 20th; Wednesday-Saturday at 7:30pm. No shows Wednesdays, Dec 27 & Jan 3 Soho Rep, 46 Walker St., 479-7979, \$15

ROOM TO SWING AN AX, THE ART OF LINGERING, ROOM
Three one-acts about romance, bartenders & goldfish. Closes December 31st, Wednesday at 8. St. Mark's Studio Theater, 94 St. Mark's Place, 212-539-7686. \$12 in advance, \$15 at the door.

JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN
Through December 31, 2000. Tue-Thurs at 8, Fri and Sat at 7 and 10. Sun at 3pm. Classic Stage Company, The East 13th Street Theater, 136 East 13th Street; Call 212-947-8844 and mention the special code: JSDMTA7.

LA BOHEME
The classic opera, specially adapted for younguns & opera virgins. Closes January 7th. Saturday at 7:30pm, Sunday at 2:30pm. Amato Opera, 319 Bowery (2nd & 3rd) 212-228-8200, \$15.


NOW THAT COMMUNISM IS DEAD, MY LIFE FEELS EMPTY
Previews for Richard Foreman's new play starts on January 4th. Among the cast are Tony Torn and Jay Smith. Thurs-Sun & Tuesdays at 8pm. Ontological-Hysteric Theater, St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St. \$15

DIDO QUEEN OF CARTHAGE
David Herscovits and Target Margin Theater Co present their new one. Starts Jan 17. Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster St., 696-8594. \$15.

OPTIC FEVER
Theodora Skipitares, dir. A puppet play about the development of optic systems and philosophies in the Renaissance. Jan 4-21, Thu-Sun at 7:30, Sun at 3. La MAMA, 74 E 4th Street. 475-7710.

UNCLE VANYA IN TIMES SQ.
Even though Aaron Beall's downtown theater, Nada Classic, was shut down by evil landlords, he continues to make stuff in a mid-town porn theater. Now VANYA is running in rep with THE SEA GULL. Starts Jan 4. NADA Show World, 671 8th Ave, 800-965-4827.

KATHIE LEE & THE LEGION OF GOOD MEET RICKY MARTIN & THE LOCAL POWER TEAM
Superheros posing as some very public figures go on a secret mission. Closes January 20th. Sat's at 11:30pm. Upright Citizens Brigade Theater 161 West 22nd Street, 212-366-9176, \$5

Bros. Lumiere, eds.
Send all post, submissions, listings, reviews and requests to:
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A THOUGHT ABOUT RAYA

<production notes>

A THOUGHT ABOUT RAYA was created and performed by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen. It was performed on April 27 and 30, 2000, in a squash court as a Senior Project for the Experimental Theater of Vassar College's Festival of New Work. It was written and created by trial and error using Kharms' text and original works based on the style, themes and images of his work. It was not a theatricalization of his life but rather a theatricalization of life in general... only with a Kharms twist. Characters climbed walls, transformed into forks and knives and were violently smashed against the glass. The incidents that were selected from Kharms' original texts and our original material meshed together creating a collage of images and bits of stories of the magical and the mundane.

scenes from the script for A THOUGHT ABOUT RAYA

Kharms: (crumples the paper) All right, so there's already a story about a king and a story about a blacksmith. I'll write a story about myself. (Begins to write, reading out loud) "Once upon a time there was a man named Daniil."

Ignavia: There's also a story about Daniil. "Once upon a time there was a man named Daniil, and one day he--"

Kharms: No! Stop! I am writing a story about me, Daniil!

Ignavia: I know. A story has already been written about you.

Kharms: That's impossible. This is a NEW story, that I am writing right now, and it's about me.

Ignavia: No, it's an old story. You wrote it five years ago.

Kharms: What are you talking about?

Ignavia: The story you're acting out right now.

Kharms: All right, so there's already a story about a king and a story about a blacksmith. I'll write a story about myself. (Begins to write, reading out loud.) "Once upon a time there was a man named Daniil."

Ignavia: There's also a story about Daniil. "Once upon a time there was a man named Daniil, and one day he--"

Kharms: No! (Throws pen at the window.) Stop! I am writing a story about me, Daniil!

Ignavia: I know. A story has already been written about you.

Kharms: That's impossible. This is a NEW story, that I am writing right now, and it's about me.

Ignavia: No, it's an old story. You wrote it five years ago.

Kharms: What are you talking about?

Ignavia: The story you're acting out right now.

(Kharms looks at his hands—they are a knife and fork.)



Paul: We were hoping that would make interesting theater.

Hannah: We also wanted to stick to the words on the page. We tried to make the whole piece become one incident, for all the collisions to work up to one big feeling of something.

Paul: I don't think we were doing an OBERIU play. We wanted to do a Hannah and Paul play ... We were looking for any place to do it, and Hannah said, how about the squash courts. I think it was effective, with the glass there [a wall of thick glass between the actors and the audience], though we were worried about echo.

E: It was good that you didn't try to cure that problem. The voices were affected by the glass and you could hear that difference.

Hannah: We knew we didn't want those microphones.

E: Microphones would have been redundant as a distancing effect, since you already had the glass wall. And they would have made your voices closer, actually.

Paul: It's nice to make people lean in and listen to every word.

Hannah: We also liked people seeing their own reflection on the glass. We didn't want a have a screw-the-audience kind of play, but we knew we had to address the issue of censorship, I'm going to write what I want and I don't care about the consequences. I think it's important, I feel like Kharms didn't let anyone effect his writing.

Paul: We tried to use different recipes for each jolt. We wanted it to be 99% acting.

Hannah: We also had a \$50 budget.

Paul: We did everything, light design, sound design, programs. We directed it, wrote it. It was tough. My car was the prop room. It wasn't until the last four days that we got to be actors.

Hannah: We had a lot of writing rehearsals. We had lists and lists of what we liked and we'd pull out little sentences that we wanted to use. There are a few words we didn't get to use that we probably still want to stage whole plays about. ... We wanted to do a starvation rehearsal. We did some rehearsals just bringing in pictures and showing them to each other instead of talking. ...

INTERVIEW: STAGING KHARMS

W/ HANNAH BOS & PAUL THUREEN, creators and performers of A Thought About Raya

Paul Thureen: So, really, after reading ten lines of it we both agreed that we wanted to do it.

Hannah Bos: We didn't want to do a play about his life. We did want to do something with the feeling of the INCIDENTS stories. Even though it's a fragment, it's a very complete fragment.

Paul: We're not very good talkers, so we did things with it instinctually, we tried to play around with his words and tried to figure out why they did what they did with us. When we talked to Branislav [Jakovljevic] about it... he said that people who do plays and movies about Kharms always want to do something about his life, but really everything that's important you can find in the INCIDENTS. He also talked about the collisions in his work, setting up a narrative and then subverting the narrative, and the connection between DADA and OBERIU.

...We also talked about anti-symbolism, about rejecting symbolism. We always loved the idea of the machine that didn't work. Kharms had a machine in his house that didn't work, and it was just a machine. We asked Branislav about it, and he said, it's probably true, but the machine could have just been a teacup with a spoon in it. So we decided to use that in the piece and have the machine on stage, but we didn't reference it or talk about it.

EMERGENCY: It's good that you didn't use the machine, because then you would be making it a functional piece. It remained what they call an OBERIU OBJECT, a useless object.

Hannah: We based a lot of the play on the poem to Ignavia. Kharms named his melancholy "Ignavia" and to ward off this sadness he wrote a poem to her. It was in the beginning and at the very end of the play. And then we were like, you know what, we don't need it. So the structure we built the play around we removed in the last week.

Paul: We ended up in the end just getting rid of everything that wasn't essential.

E: It was neat to see you just stop a story in the middle, so you didn't have to go on with it.

11th bit:

(Khniu is sitting on a table looking into the river. Water is laying down on his back watching her.)

Khniu:

I'm alone.

Branches stretch from within me.

Rough hands cannot pick up the

needles.

When I look into the sea my eyes

soon water.

I sit in the boat, but the boat sinks.

I jump onto the shore.

The shore shakes,

My legs crumble.

Nothing can be done.

(Water slowly trickles his fingers between her toes.)

Khniu: Where are you rushing to Water?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND NAMES

OBERIU - An acronym for Union of Real Art: Ob'edinenie Real'nogo Iskusstva, with an extra U thrown in at the end for sonority. The members of this post-futurist movement referred to themselves at times as Oberiuty (sometimes anglicized as Oberiuts). The most prominent Oberiuty are considered to have been: Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, Konstantin Vaginov, Nikolai Zabolotski, & Igor Bakhterev. Several philosophers very close to Kharms in the '30s (Iakov Druskin, Leonid Lipavsky, and poet Nikolai Oleinokov) are often referred to as Oberiuty, though they were not part of the group which was effectively shut down at the end of 1931 with the arrest of Kharms, Vvedensky and Bakhterev as "anti-Soviet children's writers". The most talked about OBERIU event was its first: "Three Leftist Hours," an evening of performance, theater (Kharms' staging of his famous play, ELIZABETH BAM) poetry, film, juggling, theatrical discourse and magic tricks at the Leningrad House of Print, on January 24, 1928.

(She leans over to look at her reflection and Water mirrors her gestures of dampening her hair. She stands and faces the water. She dips a toe into the water and falls into him. Water pulls her face into the water and there is a struggle with Khniu trying to swim and Water pulling her deeper into the water. Khniu drowns in Water.)

12th bit:

Kharms: No! Stop! I am writing a story about me, Daniil!

Ignavia: I know. A story has already been written about you.

Kharms: That's impossible. This is a NEW story, that I am writing right now, and it's about me.

Ignavia: No, it's an old story. You wrote it five years ago.

Kharms: What are you talking about?

DANIIL KHARMS - Born in Petersburg in December 1905, Kharms was the son of Ivan Yuvachev, a member of the People's Will movement. In the early twenties, he began writing poetry and performing the works of his favorite poets in various literary clubs. From this time on he called himself "Daniil Kharms". (This name came from Sherlock Holmes, whose manner, dress, and pipe-smoking habit Kharms affected, as well as the English word "charm" which he understood in its connotation of magic and spells.) He penned "Kharms" into his passport, and applied to the Soviet Writers' Union also under this pseudonym. Except for half a year spent in exile (in Kursk, in 1932) Kharms lived and wrote in Petersburg, which had also changed names to Petrograd and then to Leningrad. His multifarious attempts to organize several "left wing" artistic movements finally developed into the OBERIU (1928). Kharms made a living as a successful children's writer until his arrest in 1931 in the so-called "Case of the anti-Soviet children's writers group." After the arrest, it became increasingly difficult for Kharms to publish. He lived in poverty and near starvation for most of the later 1930s. In 1941, as WWII began, Kharms was arrested on account of his prior record. He died in the psychiatric ward of a prison hospital in February 1942.

company, they did mostly the INCIDENTS. Their main prop was this enormous book, and they did lots of gags with it, like someone coming out of the book. And there was a guy playing drums in the corner with a death mask on. And it kind of sucked. It was sort of like they were doing the idea, but they weren't doing the THING. Sort of vaudevillian, supposed to be funny but it wasn't funny. It wasn't so interesting.

The other one, from Croatia, was sort of interesting and began with a guy coming out from behind the audience, looked like he just flew in from Russia, and he welcomed the audience and said his name was Daniil Kharms. It was a beautiful beginning, he said he wasn't dead and that it was just a rumor, etc. And it went on from there to some stuff from ELIZABETH BAM and the stories. But the play fetishized Kharms, was very much about his life, very self-reflexive. —Like all the films made about him. —It was very dark but at the same time simplistically sentimental, in a way that doesn't fit. —Somehow sentimentalizing this tragic fate. Which it was, but...

Paul: We started in that realm, thinking we were going to do something in a prison, and about his death. But that's not what it's about, and not what excites us.

Hannah: At first, we were afraid at first of just sticking to the work, but then we realized the Kharms is his work, it's really about his work, and about his writing—that's where his self is. It would be easy to personify this character, we didn't want to make just a stock character of this amazing person, but we'd rather use his work to show him.

interview conducted by Yelena Gluzman & Matvei Yankelevich at Vassar College, summertime 2000

Sign up for the Kharms Email List to receive news of further Kharms related publications, to banter about translation problems and join fervent philosophical discussions of OBERIU literature. Simply e-mail ugly.duckling@pobox.com and ask to be added to the Kharms List. Scholars, poets, artists, natural thinkers, all welcome.

E: What attracted you to Kharms' writing?

Hannah: We're both very physical actors, and somehow the writing is very physical writing, very gutty, it rips, it rips things apart.

Paul: It's very juicy. Juicy like food, and juicy women, and juicy like ripping kids apart kind of stuff. Kids, oozing women, and food.

Paul: We wanted to do a play that people could see if they knew nothing about Daniil Kharms. Something that could stand on its own.

E: You said it wasn't the most fulfilling acting experience.

Hannah: I don't think it was about acting, I think it was a lot more than acting. Maybe because we wrote it and were such a big part of it. But, it was more about throwing ourselves against the glass and using the characters to do that. Before this week we weren't actors. Then we said let's be actors and we couldn't drop the energy and we couldn't drop the stories until we broke the cup, at the end. So I think that acting wise it was a real push to get the texts off the page and to get an audience which knows nothing about Kharms to connect to it somehow.

For example with the transitions, we couldn't half-ass a collision or use a light change to do that or drop the character. I guess it was a great acting exercise. It was more challenging than sticking with one role. It was like—be a million people and a million different voices.

Paul: It was about us wearing a thousand different hats. We were sort of creating an event, an interesting moment, so acting was just a piece of the pie.

Hannah: We also wanted to be storytellers, we didn't want to be like "I'm acting, I'm acting." ... We were like let's not make a play, let's make an event.

E: More Kharms?

Paul: Maybe when I come back from Russia and Hannah comes back from Grad School. I feel like we still haven't acted together.

Hannah: I feel like we ran a relay race together.

E: I saw two Kharms productions at the 1999 Edinburgh Fringe. Both were very problematic. The one from Poland, this very popular

Radix/Roots of OBERIU Theater
continued from page one

Kharms, along with other Radix members, founded a new group called the OBERIU, an acronym meaning Union of Real Art. The ideas that moved this collective came directly from experimental research that Radix had made possible. Part of the OBERIU manifesto was devoted to its "theater wing" and explains the "root" of theater as follows: "If an actor who represents a minister begins to move around the stage on all fours and howls like a wolf—that will be theater, that will interest the spectator without any relation to the dramatic plot." This attitude can be seen even in a play like Kharms' ELIZABETH BAM, which has a cast of characters, and charts out what seems like a plot. Elizabeth Bam is accused of murdering Pyotr Nikolayevich who has come to arrest her for this crime. The plot is negated by static progression and circularity, leaving only the situation and characters which change and transform with no meaningful consequences.

It has been the mistake of many scholars to understand ELIZABETH BAM as a "reader," where as the text is merely a plan of what is to happen on stage. The stage directions for the style of each scene were added by Kharms in the process of rehearsals and were not intended for a reader's scrutiny. The intent of the play is not to show the viewer a life-like reality, but to detach the artistic world from the rules of everyday living.

Kharms played with performing each "bit" in a different theatrical genre or generic stylization, like "realist melodrama bit" or a bit titled "realist genre of the situation comedy". In this way Kharms deconstructed genres to show that they had no connection to life or reality. For Kharms, genres were only a standardized and long-meaningless reference to a kind of perception of how to portray life or create the "illusion" of reality on stage. The sections titled "Radix-bits" were musical and rhythmic and included drum and piano accompaniment, corresponding to what was assumed to be ancient musical theater, a theater of ritual and dance.

In ELIZABETH BAM, the tool for dismantling each genre is more than the typical 1920's "making strange" popular with the formalists. The OBERIU theater, following Radix's example, discarded the rationale behind any act occurring on stage, thereby making each scene autonomous, a scene for its own sake.

All views founded solely on reason, sensibility, and rationale, seemed to the OBERIU to be destructive in art. Paraphrasing their manifesto, art has its own rules which are not the rules of what is called "reality". The rules of the Radix and OBERIU theater, and of the internal world of a play like ELIZABETH BAM, are "not rational because art is not life, and the logic of art is different from the logic of life."

Kharms-scholar Jean-Phillipe Jaccard has suggested that the OBERIU theater, which sprouted from Radix, was completely unlike the Futurist theater (Khlebnikov's ZANGEZI, Mayakovsky's TRAGEDY, Kruchenykh's VICTORY OVER THE SUN) that was its direct predecessor. Instead, he compares it to the work of Ionesco and Beckett in the 1950s. Philosopher Iakov Druskin (a close friend of Kharms and Vvedensky) also saw similarities between the fifties' THEATER OF THE ABSURD and his friends' attempts, yet he saw the OBERIU's breakthrough, unlike absurdism, as pertaining to "non-representative [non-objective] art". He credits them with the discovery of an "abstract theater", an art dependent on art and independent from "reality".

Perhaps the purity of art, which Malevich proposed with Suprematism's iconic geometrical figures, was what Radix was looking for in "the root" of theater, and what the OBERIU sought

by abandoning reality as a model for everything from syntax to staging. Kharms' understanding of art, as Druskin suggests, came from a basically religious attitude, and this was most evident in his belief in the importance of "purposelessness". A miracle was for Kharms a true miracle if it was purposeless; and the perfect gift was a purposeless one: "celluloid lizards" for instance, or "a stick to the end of which has been attached a wooden sphere and to the other end a wooden cube. Such a stick can be held in the hand or, if one puts it down then it doesn't matter at all where. Such a stick is no use for anything else."

Such was the OBERIU object and its presence in the theatrical event: autonomous, perfect, useless. Purposelessness was at the root of the new theater, inside the very act of performing, ingrained in the events of Kharms' abstract plays and provocative outdoor performances.

In the theater, Kharms promoted the incomprehensible hand in hand with the purposeless. In this way, art could detach itself from daily life in which (as Druskin notes) everyday "existence determined by phrases like 'everyone does it like that,' oppressed Kharms, who awaited the possible miracle he believed would come of "intense living." Thus, the basic Radix theatrical formula was in agreement with Malevich's belief that "true art is independent of reason and causality."

Tatiana Nikol'skaya reminds us that the movement towards illogicality in OBERIU performance may have had Western roots, such as Dadaism, or the Italian futurist Marinetti, who had come to Russian and published a manifesto calling for "the destruction of logic in performances, and for the domination on the stage of the implausible and the ridiculous." "The ridiculous" may have toppled the towers of Russian Futurist theater, saturated as it was with heavy future-gazing pathos. But the post-futurist Radix collective embraced the ridiculous at the core of theatrical performance.

Nikolai Zabolotsky, upon attending rehearsals of the Vvedensky/Kharms play, saw in Radix an ideal theater "with the brave conventionality of the stage." At Radix rehearsals he witnessed a pot-pourri of manic activity and theatrical elements ranging from "the reading of abstract poetry, appearances of unexpected characters, murder and resurrection, circus tricks and dance, moving stage constructions, contemporary French music." It even inspired him to imagine a play, "an unheard-of theater of masks," specifically for Radix, which he never wrote—"who would stage it?" he later said.

It was to be a truly "abstract" theater that Zabolotsky had in mind: "smooth color backgrounds," the likes of which one might see today in the works of director Robert Wilson; the cast would include "thoughts, atoms, people, rocks"; the dialogues and monologues of plants, animals, objects would be portrayed by actors, the people among them not needing masks.

This talk of masks, of circus tricks, of condition and conventionality speaks to a certain detachment, a distancing from the attempt to represent reality, or to recreate it on stage as Stanislavsky might have liked. Certainly Vsevolod Meyerhold was closer to Radix's idea of theater. At that time, Meyerhold, creator of bio-mechanics and Constructivist stage-design, was forging ahead in the theater His effect on the theater and all younger "left" artists of the '20s was indelible, and Radix was no exception.

Meyerhold's great achievement for theater was a complete abandonment of Naturalism in both acting and stage-design. Without depending on the external appearance of the set, Meyerhold's actors would designate realistic areas ("the miller's house," "Stella's terrace", etc.) through gesture and minimal props. A system of signifying was re-born in Western theater, by which the audience took an active role in "reading" the various "signs" on stage. No longer did the stage designer have to build or draw a mill in order for the audience to "read" or see a mill and understand that the play was taking place in a mill. This manner of suggestion gave new meanings to objects which in themselves carried no meaning.

Meyerhold's Constructivist sets resemble the open back-side of a clock. Thus, in Meyerhold's MAGNIFICENT CUCKOLD (1922), the Naturalist stage is reversed—the inner workings of the theatrical mechanism are laid bare. But, if Meyerhold found delight in constructing meaning in the empty spaces of THE MAGNIFICENT CUCKOLD's vacuous stage, the OBERIU and Radix were interested in displacing or deconstructing meaning itself. Through a "collision of independent sequences" (a method Sergei Eisenstein employed in montage to build meanings), objects which had meaning in the context of everyday life, would be rendered "unrecognizable."

In the OBERIU manifesto Kharms is described as a poet and dramatist "whose attention is concentrated ... on the clashing of a series of objects, on their interaction. At the moment of action the object acquires new specific outlines, full of actual sense..."

Kharms' "actual sense" is the fleeting meaning of an action or a gesture come and gone. Meaning accelerated and split open could reveals the raw event.

In Kharms' poetic world as in his theoretical project, objects collide with each other and find themselves suddenly floating outside their usual context, liberating the signified from the signified.

Matvei Yankelevich

A certain lady, wringing her hands in sadness, said: "I need an interest in life, not money. I seek enthusiasm, not prosperity. I need a husband who's not a rich man, but a talent, a director, Meyerhold!"

<circa September 28, 1935>
Daniil Kharms

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A hundred minutes. The koker struck.
The bull was broke. The foker jumped.
Out came Kika. Stove's no more.
Hello Kika. Here you are.

K i k a :
Nadya made us all some tea,
Answer me! she said to me.
So I answered: knot of hair.
The door fell in. The wizard's here.

W i z a r d :
Give me knife and give me bread.
I've a cold, my body shakes.
I'm contused, I'm old and gray,
Have you met my neighbor yet.

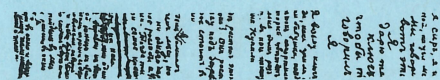
N e i g h b o r :
Hello, Kika, my old man.
Hello Nadya. Pass a glass.
Hello, kettle. Hello, home.
Hello, lamp. And hello, gnome.

G n o m e :
In my dream I saw a bean.
I woke and then I croaked.
Then I thought: oh, what a dream!
Enters Koka. Here he is.

K o k a :
Water flowed. The wind blew high.
The birds sang. The years went by.
Struck the koker.
Up jumped the foker.
That's when I came walking by.

All in chorus:
Then let us begin our supper!

enough.
January 24, 1930.
translation by Matvei Yankelevich



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