

Cargo 300

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Cargo 300 was a short-lived collective of artists and musicians who produced two works of socially-engaged participatory performance theatre in Russia in 2019. The first work was of the same name, *Cargo 300*. The second work was titled *Rave No.228*. Over the course of the year they performed these works a number of times in different cities across Russia. Broaching taboo social issues that were politically dangerous under the increasingly authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin, these works challenged the political status quo whilst simultaneously experimenting with form. Pushing the boundaries of participatory performance theatre, the Cargo 300 collective presented a radical challenge to the spectator as much as to the political system.



Fig. 1. A poster for *Rave No.228* affixed to an urn outside a police station on Bol'shaia Dmitrovka Street in central Moscow, 2019. Photo by author.

Led by performance artist Katrin Nenasheva, along with a revolving team of like-minded artists, musicians, documentary makers, and social activists, the Cargo 300 productions drew heavily from the experimental participatory works of German theatre makers Rimini Protokoll, which had become popularized in Russia in the preceding years. Additionally, the influence of celebrated Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović was evidenced in their works, as the creators tested their spectators and challenged their tolerance for violence and danger. Nenasheva is primarily known as an important figure within the so-called “third wave” of Russian Actionism. According to its theorists, Pavel Mitenko and Sylvia Chassaing, the ‘third wave’ seeks out a longer, quieter form of public performance than its famous predecessors (such as E.T.I., Aleksandr Brenner, Voina, Pussy Riot, and Petr Pavlenskii). The Cargo 300 collective forged new ground between Russian Actionism and contemporary theatre, which they labelled “actionist theatre.” Other forays had been made by contemporary theatre makers in Russia to bring in participatory and other experimental performative modes into the space of the theatre, some of which had already become commercialized by the time of the emergence of Cargo 300. The uniqueness of Cargo 300 was the way in which it brought together two traditions — Russian Actionism and socially engaged participatory performance theatre, the latter of which had been imported to Russia a

few years previously. The resulting works displayed both of these traditions — attention-grabbing performances in public space that made bold statements about controversial socio-political topics on the one hand, whilst simultaneously reflecting global trends in contemporary theatre for audience participation, theatre of the real, and immersive experiences on the other.



Fig. 2. A performance of *Cargo 300*, Moscow, 2019. From left to right: Stas Gorev, Katrin Nenasheva, Sasha Starost. Photo by Natalia Budantseva.

The group's eponymous first work tackled the subjects of torture in the Russian penal system, complicity in institutional violence, and the invisible burden of psychological trauma suffered by a large portion of the Russian population. It achieved this through a combination of documentary techniques and role play between pairs of randomly chosen spectators. *Cargo 300* caused some controversy amongst audiences, some of whom were unprepared for the radical challenge to the concept of spectatorship that the show made. In particular, issues arose around its complex treatment of violence and the incorporation of the spectator into a psychologically challenging role play exploring violent power dynamics between people. In spite of its shortcomings, *Cargo 300* made a bold new attempt to broach an important social issue in a way that broke away from theatrical convention and challenged the expectations of the spectator.

In its second work, *Rave No.228*, which followed the collective's first work later that same year, a more conciliatory approach was taken in relation to the spectator, who was no longer the subject under examination. The show was a city promenade exploring the well-known problem of the planting of illegal drugs on unwitting citizens by the police and the falsification of criminal cases against the victims by the corrupt Russian legal-justice system. The spectator was guided around the city by an interactive chat bot and an accompanying audio track accessed via their smartphone, which utilized materials from court cases, testimonials, and recorded interviews. Although this show was less controversial than its predecessor amongst audiences, it carried greater risk for the spectator due to its subject matter and location on public streets in city centres. As with their previous work, in *Rave No.228* the creators successfully engaged their audiences in an important socio-political issue, whilst the show itself carried an element of real danger that did no harm to its appeal.



Fig. 3. The *Rave No.228* poster on a Moscow street lamp. The text reads 'WANTED. A person for planting narcotics on. Maybe it is your neighbor. Reward: 100,000 Rubles. Ministry of Interior, Tverskoi District'. Photo by author.

The Cargo 300 collective showed signs of being a genuinely original new movement in socially engaged performance theatre. Their shows were as exhilarating and unpredictable as they were thought-provoking, employing startling methods to effectively engage the spectator in social issues. Unfortunately, they appeared on the cusp of a global pandemic and a cataclysmic war that would accelerate authoritarian forces within Russia and all but silence public dissent. Cargo 300 did not survive these events, and yet it deserves to be remembered for its valiant attempts during its short lifetime to drive forward social change in Russia through the medium of participatory performance theatre.



4. The *Cargo 300* team, Moscow, 2019. From left to right: Stas Gorev, Katrin Nenasheva, Sasha Starost, Polina Ustinskova, Artem Materinskii. Photo by Natalia Budantseva.