

A Moment Outside: A Study of Alexander Brener's Daring Escape from the Dictates of the Western Art Market

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ABSTRACT

In the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam in 1997, Alexander Brener defaced one of the art world's greatest treasures. The target was Kazimir Malevich's *Supremetism* which in great part marked the birth of the Russian Avant-garde. Immediately after being apprehended by security guards, he loudly proclaimed that what he had done was performance art and a dialogue with Malevich about corruption in the commercial art world. Unlike Tony Shafrazi, Brener was not opportunistic about his vandalism and remains an elusive figure in the Russian art scene—managing to pen his manifesto while imprisoned for modifying Malevich's masterpiece valued at \$7.5 million. What most critics overlook are the complexities of the context within which Brener and Malevich are embedded. The trajectory of a former Soviet Peoples' art object to proprietary traded commodity leaves much to be explored. This paper identifies and explores three concepts central to developing a nuanced understanding of Brener's work as art: The legal response to art vandalism; a qualitative comparison between Brener and Malevich; And Brener's situation within contemporary art context with an emphasis on post-Soviet culture and the international political economy.

In 1997 Alexander Brener walked into the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam, though his intentions were quite different from the other individuals interpreting the art at a socially suggested distance, with hands respectfully clasped behind backs or perhaps supporting the weight of a chin below calibrating eyes. While most of the people surrounding him were consumers of artistic production, Brener occupied the space as a performance artist. A canister of green aerosol paint left a concealing coat pocket only for a brief moment before scrawling a dollar symbol with two vertical lines against the entire width and height of Kazimir Malevich's famous work of art, *Supremetism*.

It didn't take long before security guards confronted him as he loudly proclaimed that what he had done was performance art, and a creative protest against corruption and commercialism in the art world. Unfortunately for him, Dutch authorities didn't share this notion and sentenced him to ten months in prison and a hefty fine. The value of the painting dropped from approximately \$7.5 to \$5 million USD in the wake of these modifications.



figure 1 - Malevich's *Suprematism* after Brener's modification

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There are a handful of key factors that need to be dealt with in order to formulate a nuanced understanding and critical acceptance or denial of Brener's work as art. In the proceeding pages I will explore the following concepts: The legal response to Brener's actions and art vandalism in general; Similarities between Brener and Malevich—culturally, historically, and artistically; And Brener's situation within contemporary art context with an emphasis on Eastern European and Western art practice and international political economy.

I. Legality and Art Vandalism

In what way should we proceed in interpreting Brener's actions? Legally speaking, he has vandalized a valuable piece of private property, but “vandalism” is a culturally constructed term laden with relativity. It would seem that most people, for example, don't view the work of Banksy as culturally detrimental, but as an improvement upon an an existing surface. The language of legal response to so called “Art Vandalism” is yet to be fully realized, though an attempt is currently underway. In 2009, M.J. Williams published a paper in the *Brooklyn Law Review* seeking to create just such a logical framework for instances of “violence against works of art,” arguing that “no adequate recognition exists for the harm caused by vandalistic attacks on objects which, unlike other tangible property, are valued both for their uniqueness and for their public significance.”² Yes, works of art are valued for their 'public significance' and also qualify as 'tangible property' but these are two distinct notions which the law seeks to conflate.



figure 2a - Banksy placing art at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art



figure 2b - a photograph of the work

The work of Banksy originally held no monetary value. It was done at the expense of the artist who risked penalty in his endeavour to create public art and stoke critical discourse. People protest the removal of his work, as well as other public murals (whether legal or not), not because they have monetary value (although for Banksy this has certainly changed), but because these art works possess a profound social significance. They represent the possibility of a truly public space in which citizens are artists with the autonomy to inhabit the visual environment in a manner that best suits their desire and aesthetic disposition. Whether or not this process is recognized as illegal is only relevant in artistic terms as a medium of expression. Public art dissolves the arbitrary border between art and everyday life, and lest we forget, this was the mission of the Avant-garde. If we are to defend art's social significance, it follows that legal trials regarding art vandalism ought not to take place solely in courts devoted to property law. But they do, and in this way one may consider that exchange value and cultural significance do not play equal roles within our political economic paradigm. In fact, a common expression of the term 'cultural significance' today is 'cultural capital'³ which has eclipsed the former and points to the conclusion that cultural capital is used to reinforce exchange value in the Western art market.

² Williams, M. J. (2009). Framing Art Vandalism. *Brooklyn Law Review*, 74, 2.

³ Barker, C. (2004). Cultural Capital. *The Sage dictionary of cultural studies* (p. 37). London: Sage Publications.

Williams' reasoning holds that privately owned artworks should have extended legal protection to uphold the "public interest in art."⁴ However, as many Marxist philosophers have pointed out, the very framework of private property is based on "negation, on exclusion—something can be mine only if it excludes others who might otherwise own it."⁵ Should art enjoy the privilege of being privately owned and traded as a commodity while also having extended anti-defacement rights in the order of a public monument? If so, then we simply cannot view a work of art as an entirely private commodity. And if works of art are to be considered in neoliberal terms as a commodity *as well as* a public monument, then the law must necessarily reflect this. However, no art critics or citizens were called to the stand to defend or indict Brener for his modifications to Malevich's work of art. Clearly this enhanced protection is merely an extension of private property rights. If one desires to uphold the 'public interest in art' there are more effective ways to accomplish this than by offering millionaires the opportunity to further punish art vandals who transgress their property line.

Of course Williams' argument is also premised on the assumption that all unlicensed modifications of art are inherently bad—leading to decreased property value and damaging the public investment in the artwork. There is no shortage of counter-examples, however. In 1974, Tony Shafrazi spray painted "KILL LIES ALL" atop Picasso's legendary *Guernica*. He now owns a gallery in which he buys and sells original Picasso works.⁶ His modifications amounted to an alluring layer of context which did not decrease exchange value of the painting and broadened its social significance. I have few reservations in saying that Shafrazi's justifications don't hold a candle to Brener's motivations, but it does serve as a historical example to the contrary of Williams' position. Perhaps the most seminal example of contemporary vandalism is the famed and anonymous Banksy, who once hung his own work in four separate New York museums without permission. The work was meant to blend in with the surrounding paintings of regally clad royalty and their army generals at first glance, but modern cultural attachés such as Krylon paint cans and a gas mask prompted a double-take from spectators.

In an interview with the New York Times, Banksy asked to be referred to as a "quality vandal" rather than an artist, saying that "These galleries are just trophy cabinets for a handful of millionaires. The public never has any real say in what art they see."⁷ He is at once re-appropriating the label of vandal as well as the privately owned museum space for his own ends. One can hypothesize what is meant by the term 'quality vandal' which seems to describe a process of usurping the cultural authority of the museum space to erect artwork that reflexively calls this authority into question. He asks: What might museums look like if they were in line with public concerns and ideas, and why is there such a wide distinction between this potentiality and present reality? Though Banksy and Brener share a certain sentiment regarding the art world, the principal difference between the two in terms of execution is perhaps precisely why the art world has accepted one with open arms while rejecting the other; though Banksy modified the gallery setting, he did not alter the property of most concern and value—the individual art object itself. Creating original works, no matter how subversive they might be, enabled easy commodification by the art institution. This is evidenced by the fact that the Brooklyn Museum removed the painting from the wall only to promptly place it in the vault.⁸

In the case of Brener and *Suprematism* it is unclear which subject is being protected against vandalism; is it the original author of the painting that we are to protect from a sort of *art libel*, the current owner of the painting as protection of private property, the autonomous art object itself, or the public that supposedly benefits from a work of art's imperforate existence? Williams' writing supports the latter, stating that "Art vandalism indeed is more than a property crime: it is a violent act that targets objects the public holds dear."⁹ The problem with enlisting popular sensibility here is that the synthesis of Malevich and Brener has created something new, that had critics lauded with approval, might have required protection as a new art object entirely (such as Banksy's street art in Park City, site of Sundance, which is now shielded by plexiglass and boasts a wooden nameplate). A handful of critics did in fact come out in support of Brener's modification, such as Flash Art editor Giancarlo Politi, who called it a "mouth to mouth resuscitation" and commented on how it enhanced the painting with a new layer of significance.¹⁰ In the next section I will address why it is conceivable that the work required 'resuscitation' and how we might reframe his actions as historically

⁴ Williams, loc. cit.

⁵ Simon, J. (2010). Neo-Materialism, Part I: The Commodity and the Exhibition. *e-flux*, 20. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/neo-materialism-part-one-the-commodity-and-the-exhibition/>

⁶ Saltz, J. (2008, June 23). Two Coats of Painting. *New York*, 64-65.

⁷ Kennedy, R. (2005, March 25). Need Talent to Exhibit in Museums? Not This Prankster. *New York Times*.

⁸ Kennedy, loc. cit.

⁹ Williams, op. cit. page 2.

¹⁰ Politi, G. (1997, May - Jun.). Freedom to Breathe. *Flash Art International*, 30, 88.

relevant, rather than categorize them as unfettered hooliganism.

II. Malevich and Brener

Throughout the legal process Brener maintained that his addition to the famous *Suprematism* was in fact a “dialogue” with Malevich.¹¹ A literal conversation is impossible, so the only way he might communicate with Malevich—or to his representation through the spectre of his work—is by placing another layer of paint over the original piece. In this way, Brener has fulfilled a dying wish of the late Malevich, who wrote that “Everything has vanished, there remains a mass of material, from which the new forms will be built.”¹² Whereas Malevich is referring to the emergence of geometric shapes over natural forms—trees, people, etc.—our hyper-referential, post-modern world positions famous paintings such as *Suprematism* as said mass of material, ready to be assembled into new forms in order to generate a discursive sphere appropriate to our own sociopolitical context. And much like Brener seeks to inject aura into an object depleted by capitalism of such a metaphysical characteristic, Malevich likewise constructed a revolutionary art practice in response to the objectification of his idols. To borrow a position from artist and critic Ane Hjort Guttu:

One could ... compare Malevich's relationship to Rembrandt and Rubens with Brener's relationship to Malevich: he despairingly watched his beloved works of art reduced to commodities by the art market and the museum institution. While Malevich chose to establish 'his own art', Suprematism, as a response, Brener took action directly against the museum. As opposed to most other historical cases of vandalism against art, however, Brener was not provoked by the work of art itself, only by the physical and economic context in which it was located. Brener identified with Malevich and sought to 'blend his paint' with the artist's. Spray-painting the work of art was Brener's way of taking it seriously.¹³

Who, then, is guilty of vandalizing the work of art? Brener may have painted a green dollar symbol atop the facade, but the art institution retired the passion of the Avant-garde in favor of folding it into the body of capitalism. The logic of globalized commerce transformed Malevich from a Russian symbol of ingenuity and passion into an international commodity, a trope inflicted upon many artists throughout the 1990's in Eastern Europe. Many of Brener's peers “aimed at reclaiming the former symbols of socialist culture that after 1991 became the privatized territories of the new Russian capital.”¹⁴ Modifying the work was a means of reclaiming it for the people who had appreciated it in a manner more closely affiliated with the intentions of its creator, i.e. untainted by the Western economic paradigm.

At the time Malevich was painting some of his most acclaimed works, the USSR was pushing an entirely disparate aesthetic known as Social Realism, which displayed workers with heroic posture and had a limited, straight-forward interpretation which made it ripe for the purposes of propaganda. Malevich and much of the avant-garde derided this style and were scrutinized but allowed to continue their craft by the ruling Communists.¹⁵ For many state officials, the Avant-garde was seen as an extension of bourgeois ideology. Some went so far as to propose the violent removal of such works of art, though Lenin vocally criticized this perspective.¹⁶ The critical consensus is that the Avant-garde was seen as antithetical to the goal of the state, which saw art primarily as a vessel for propaganda. Though proponents of Social Realism saw the Avant-garde paintings as inaccessible to citizens without a working knowledge of the history of art, Malevich described the Suprematist movement precisely in contrast: “To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.”¹⁷ So, in the eyes of Malevich, the Avant-garde in the USSR sought to liberate the populace from the didactic genre of Social Realism, inviting workers to participate in what he describes as the “primacy of pure feeling.”¹⁸ Brener likewise discusses his desire for a more primal engagement with art and politics in his book, *Obosani Pistolet*, in which he promotes a form of self-expression involving “simple, funny, fast, clean hearted, naive actions” and envisages “a mass of people

¹¹ Guttu, A. H. (2008). Dialogue with Malevich. *Moderne Kunst*, 1, 12-14.

¹² Malevich, K. S. (2003). Part II. *The non-objective world: the manifesto of suprematism* (p. 174). Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications.

¹³ Guttu, Ane Hjort, op. cit.

¹⁴ Chukhrov, K. (2011). Art After Primitive Accumulation: Or, On The Putin-Medvedev Cultural Politics. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, 26, 127-136.

¹⁵ Sopot'sinskii, O. I. (1978). *Art in the Soviet Union: painting, sculpture, graphic arts* (p. 21). Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers.

¹⁶ Pipes, R. (1993). *Russia under the Bolshevik regime*. New York: A.A. Knopf.

¹⁷ K. Malevich, op. cit.

¹⁸ K. Malevich, loc. cit.

gathering on the Red Square and silently picking their nose, then the fat, boring government would shake and fall.”¹⁹ Both Soviet Communism and Western capitalism, then, seem to stand in opposition to the primacy of immediate emotion—of ‘pure feeling.’ The former is intent on propagandizing the populace with ‘realistic’ imagery, while the latter transforms even revolutionary art into passive commodities by re-contextualizing them within the white wall art market paradigm. In art vandalism Brener found an uncommodifiable process with which to challenge the contemporary art world.

III. Situating Brener

It’s easy to forget—for some more than others—the former Soviet Union’s status as major world superpower only decades ago. Beginning immediately after World War II, the United States and USSR were thrust upon the world stage as leaders of the so-called First and Second World. Commonly this is thought of as an arms race, and to a lesser extent an economic and technological determination. It seems certain, however, that cultural producers felt a sense of urgency concerning their place in the unfolding determinate global politics during this period as well. The adjusted monetary value of Kazimir Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition* (a different artwork than *Suprematism*) is just over \$65 million USD, and represents the most expensive Russian artwork to ever be traded. In contrast, the most expensive American painting produced is Jackson Pollock’s *No. 5* which has an adjusted value of nearly \$161 million USD. Perhaps more poignant is the fact that both of these paintings were privately traded under the same roof within the span of two years at Sotheby’s in New York City.^{20 21} Had the Soviet Union emerged victorious in its competition with the United States, one must consider the possibility that these values would be interchanged and the place of sale could have been *Southbov’s* in Moscow.

Until the fall of the USSR the fate of Russia as global centre of technological and cultural significance was uncertain. I assume that most artists weren’t anxious about losing their importance in the global cultural sphere when Russia beat America to the exosphere, for example. But now that history has been written one can detect a residue of frustration among Russian artists as their voices in the international art world have been largely marginalized following the climax of that historical moment. In the *Oxford Art Journal*, Pat Simpson states that Brener and his peers:

seemed to locate the source of their alienation in experiences of marginality relative to the Western art world, as a specific aspect of post-Soviet economic conditions, and to place their art practices in a critical relation to these conditions ... Brener defined the Eastern, and particularly the Russian artist as having been relegated to ‘Third World’ status.²²

There is a certain elite identification that comes with being a cultural producer from a world superpower, the loss of which I think many Americans are beginning to see on the Eastern (read: Chinese) horizon. It’s possible that what motivates Brener and his peers is a sense of entitlement that dates back to the promises of a boastful Soviet empire. This sentiment is shared by Victor Misiano, longtime spokesman for artists like Brener and Kulik, who once famously curated a group show in which Kulik was naked on all fours, chained at the neck like a dog and partially restrained by Brener. Kulik attacked some American spectators and completely destroyed Gu Wenda’s installation of woven hair. At a press conference after the event, Misiano told attendees that:

It was a long time ago when Dada artists destroyed art works as symbolic protest, and they destroyed their own works, not those of others. He attributed the aggressive and criminal behaviour of these would-be Dadaists to post-communist frustration with Russia’s fall from great power status into a state of subservience to the West.²³

If Brener and Kulik are simply reacting from a place of ‘post-communist frustration,’ I question whether that ought to delegitimize their work. It seems that they are most concerned with the site of the museum or art

¹⁹ Alexander Brener Artist. (n.d.). *Way to Russia Guide*. Retrieved September 17, 2012, from <http://www.waytorussia.net/moscow/artist/alexanderbrener-artist.html>

²⁰ Impressionist & Modern Art Evening Sale. (n.d.). *Sotheby’s*. Retrieved September 22, 2012, from <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/impressionist-modern-art-evening-sale-n08485/lot.6.lotnum.html>

²¹ Vogel, C. (2006, November 2). A Pollock Is Sold, Possibly for a Record Price. *New York Times*. Retrieved November 17, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/02/arts/design/02drip.html>

²² Simpson, P. (2004). Peripheralising Patriarchy? Gender and Identity in Post-Soviet Art: A View from the West. *Oxford Art Journal*, 27(3), 389-415.

²³ Croizier, R. (1999). The Avant-garde And The Democracy Movement: Reflections On Late Communism In The USSR And China. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51(3), 483-513.

gallery, which ferry cultural productions to a globalized art market rather than stoking a debate about late capitalism. Given the dilemma that Eastern European artists now face, post-Soviet artist Oleg Kulik raises the question, "To Bite or to Lick?" which Simpson translates as asking "whether to seek easy incorporation into the Western art market, or to refuse this and stay on the margins, seeking a separate artistic identity."²⁴ In all fairness, why should Russian artists be asked to passively assimilate into the Western art market—why should anyone?

The potential of art today lies in its ability to exist outside of capital and the exchange of commodities. When art becomes commodified, it loses the potential for external evaluation of culture, of capital. Just as in semiotics the fact that language lacks the ability to communicate clearly about itself, if art is completely subsumed into commerce, it will possess the language of commerce and therefore lose its ability to communicate clearly about the current capitalist paradigm. Brener rescued Malevich from this configuration with his addition. Brener could have, on the one hand, painted an original image that clashed ideologically with commercialism in the art world as Banksy did, among many others. Such a painting could have enjoyed a lengthy stay at a renowned gallery, in fact. On the other hand, his work would have been quickly subsumed by the institution he set out to rebel against; only by positioning himself completely outside the dictates of the art world was he able to subvert it. How could the commercial art world commodify violence against itself, after all? Althusser claimed that culture does not reflect society, but produces it. Following this logic, if Brener chose to be a reactionary artist by painting an original work in response to commercialism in the art world, he would simply be *re*-producing culture. In an interview with O-1, Brener delineates himself from other art-agitators, stating "I am convinced that repetition is always anti-revolutionary."²⁵ He elected to be revolutionary in this regard, which I believe aligns him particularly well with the ideals of the Russian Avant-garde. The aspirations thereof were not limited to high exchange value. To quote Malevich himself:

Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without 'things'²⁶

The fact that he mentions the 'state and religion' as opposed to capitalism is important. Given his situation within a socialist historical context and his insistence on ridding art of objects, one should view the State as an analog for American capital. This stands as evidence that art is not limited by the political dualism we've constructed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The fringes of art tend toward a liberatory ethos, whether from within the borders of an authoritarian communist state or a market dominated capitalist West. One should not mistake this for a seeming contradiction in which art is engaged in a pendulaic process which oscillates politics and culture between economic binaries, but that artists parse culture and act accordingly in order to expand the realm of the possible to include another piece of that which we have not yet considered. For Malevich, this meant defying the expectation to create Social Realist artwork. He instead presented Russians and the world with an alternative to a sermonic form, inviting us into 'pure feeling.' For Brener and Kulik, resistance means questioning the authority of the Western art market which seeks to declaw a radical art history in favor of a zoological exhibition of art geared towards generating wealth. This task is increasingly difficult as the market expands to include radical art practices; Banksy's work is now ripped from walls and sold for millions of dollars, and Tony Shafrazi is shaking hands with the art financiers. Brener simply took radical art to its present logical conclusion.

If we are to follow Marx in his claim that the commodity is a materialization of social relations, we must ask what exactly was bought and sold when *No. 5* and *Suprematist Composition* traded hands behind closed doors. More than canvas and pigment; what was traded is the whole of social relations surrounding the work of art, not the least of which being the status of owning a work that marks the advent of a revolutionary technique, and of course—a revolutionary historical context. Perhaps the commercial transaction of social relations is a twisted manifestation of Malevich's prophecy of an art without 'things', though I think these might be better understood as commodities, to which many contemporary Eastern European artists situate themselves in critical relation. Brener and his peers exist in a volatile state; the old order of the USSR is merely twenty years expired, and the memes originating from the collision of Western market values in post-Soviet Russia will continue to manifest in art. This is not dissimilar to the revolutionary state that prompted the Suprematist movement in Malevich's young Soviet Union. And what was the famous Russian Avant-garde but the result of an awareness of the sociopolitical context it was embedded within? In a revolutionary state,

²⁴ Simpson, op. cit. Page 398.

²⁵ Brener, A. (interview conducted by Franco Mattes, June 4, 2009)

²⁶ K. Malevich, op. cit.

novel ideas leaven and the old establishment collapses.

There will remain a healthy debate about the merits of Brener's actions, and perhaps over time this discourse will come to sympathize with the philosophy of art vandalism in the same way the Russian Avant-garde gained significant traction in art discourse posthumously. For many artists and critics the absorption of art into capital is witnessed with a heavy heart. This configuration ensures that cultural works conform to the logic of market values, which seek to apply the laws of scarcity and individual ownership of cultural works to all objects, regardless of historical origin. It is for this reason that I believe we owe a debt of gratitude to Brener and his time spent in prison. He sought to extract Malevich's painting from its capitalist context in order to gain an external critical perspective. The vandalized painting was removed from the marketplace—if only for a moment—due to its damaged condition, instead occupying a different conceptual site defined by Brener. For a moment, it was interpretable and communicable in a manner that was outside the constructs of Western capitalism.

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