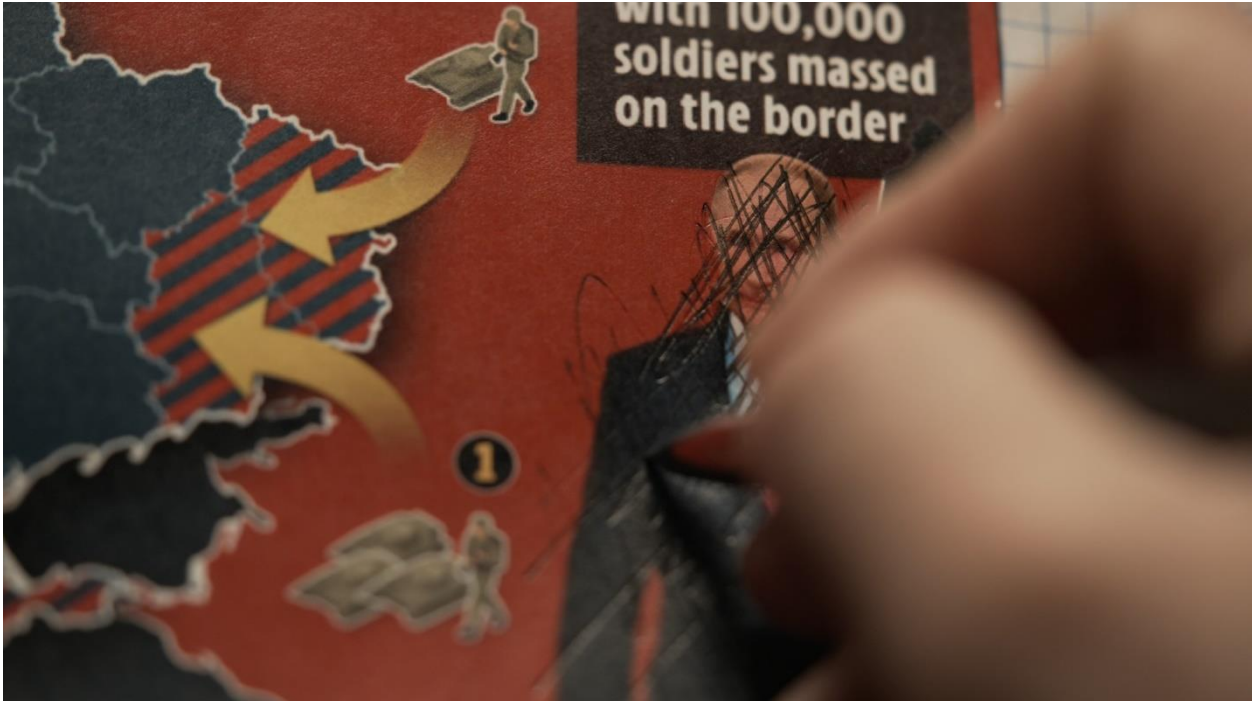


“\*\*\* \*\*”

<https://umbau.hfg-karlsruhe.de/posts/oxana-timofeeva-in-conversation-with-anastasiia-bergalevich>

Oxana Timofeeva *in conversation with* Anastasiia Bergalevich



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Dmitry Vilensky). Mixed media installation, 2022.

*It's March 2022. I travel to Berlin for the rare privilege of a conversation with Oxana in person. She is here with Chto Delat to display their recent artwork The Canary Archives, begun during the first lockdown and radically altered by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The dreams of Chto Delat members were recorded with the intention of analysing the mechanism of premonitions, but the war played the role of the very catastrophe which brought this work to its logical conclusion.*

*The day before the interview, there was a symposium panel entitled Burning the Archives of the Earth at HKW. Dima, Tsaplya, and Oxana carefully explained why there would be no performance that day, as the discussion of planetary catastrophe had been interrupted by the need to talk about the war. A very logical solution: because these days it seems impossible to think or talk about anything else. After, we had lunch together. Chto Delat as usual gathered a huge community of artists, performers, curators, theorists, and filmmakers—all united by the Russian language and their radical leftism. We all sat around a big table in a cafe at HKW. I've always called Chto Delat my "art family," but this time the feeling of intimacy was especially strong because we were all united by the same trauma. Lunch lasted about four hours.*

*It is Day 32 following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. We meet in Oxana's apartment for the conversation reproduced here. She tells me that these houses were built on land that was between the Berlin Wall—which is to say neither in the east nor the west. She compliments me on my handwritten "Fuck War" T-shirt and shows me a dress that the girls from the Shvemy Cooperative made some years ago especially for her. A La Petite Robe Noire with an embroidered chest-piece depicting a witch on a broomstick and a "No War" inscription. "Now I have a reason to wear it," she tells me.*

**ANASTASIIA BERGALEVICH:** In a new work by the Chto Delat group at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), *Canary Archives: Files of Dreams and Other Matters*, all the members of the collective share their dreams. You collect an archive of premonitions of disaster. This sense of foreboding war is perhaps the very mystical collective experience that everyone affected by these events now shares. Why do you think this feeling is so important, and why is it so necessary to share and talk about it?

**OXANA TIMOFEEVA:** As one of the participants—Alexei Penzin <sup>4</sup>—points out in this video installation: the truth of a premonition comes *in hindsight*. He phrased it in other words, but he was referring to the concept of *retroactivity* in psychoanalytic theory and philosophy: “we only realise in hindsight that everything was proceeding towards something. To some extent this divides the situation into a “before” and an “after.” This structure of engagement (confirmation of presence) is dialectical, so to speak. For, when we anticipate we do not know what it is that we feel.

In general, premonition is a non-human thing, it is something animalistic. It is an instinct. In addition to this, we have a text in the newspaper by Alexei Sergienko (he is a student and environmental activist who deals with the subject of animals).<sup>5</sup> He refers there to the ability of animals to anticipate disasters. Many others have written about this, such as [Friedrich] Schelling. He concludes his book *The World Soul* by describing the heaving chest of animals: how animals anticipate that there’s going to be an earthquake, thus demonstrating that the world is a kind of wholeness. That, at the level of the living, there is an interaction of the most diverse elements: the connection of everything to everything. This is what Schelling called “the world soul.” It allows us, like animals, to anticipate. And it is in this connection that the *canary* appears to us, which here becomes a sign, a signal, and a symbol of impending imminent disaster.

The film itself is arranged according to a “before” and “after” structure. And this structure could not have been conceived in advance. That is, everything did not go according to plan. But now it seems that this is how it was carried out, according to another scenario that was unknown to us—a bad script (one not written by us). But somehow, in an ominous way, we were all held hostage to this script. And the catastrophe we foresaw had no name: we didn’t know what it was. We were thinking something that everyone else was also thinking. We were traumatised, shocked, and confused by two years of the pandemic and by thinking about how the environment was being destroyed and the climate was changing and what it was all leading to: what future terrible catastrophes.

But we didn’t want to make alarmist claims.

There was a foreboding of a terrible disaster that we thought might happen. Or which had already happened. That is, we thought it was possible to imagine ourselves in a post-apocalyptic future where some kind of disaster had already happened, like a nuclear explosion or a climate catastrophe. And we were picking up, bit by bit, the signals that had been sent to us from the past. We tried to develop not so much a scientific as an artistic system of micro-signals. We were sending our signals into the future.



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Alexey Penzin). Mixed media installation, 2022.

**AB:** So, am I right in thinking you saw the process of talking about premonition as a political gesture?

**OT:** I would say that if it is politics, it occurs on a global scale. That is, we didn't have overly political ambitions at the time. Rather, we were looking at the whole complex of the ecological and humanitarian catastrophe in which we find ourselves. This global crisis and its various vectors: here's the pandemic, here's climate change, here's the clampdown in Russia, which only now can be technically called a "terror." Back then [before the war] it was just something gray and gloomy without a name.

It manifested and visualised itself in unexpected ways. For example, in December–January of this year in St. Petersburg they stopped cleaning up the garbage. And everywhere was just littered with garbage: bags were piling around; spontaneous dumps began to form in the city; rats were appearing. And everyone was asking the public services when the garbage was going to be taken out. It was the same with the snow: there was a lot of snow, and the utilities stopped doing anything about it. Or they tried, but it didn't work. As a result, quite high, icy (brown and black, snow and ice) mountains began to form in the city—almost cliffs. Then they began to melt, and puddles appeared—in general, some kind of devastation. There was a sense of war even before it started. And news was already coming in that Russian troops were pulling in to the Ukrainian border. It was as if St. Petersburg was already rehearsing the devastation, as if it was preparing for war. That was my feeling. I thought: *what is it? Why?*—I mean, it was like a rehearsal of a bad scenario. And it was also as if the city was losing its color, becoming so gray-black and white. There were many such signs.

**AB:** The argument: "where have you been for 8 years?" is now very much used in Russian propaganda.<sup>6</sup> It's also a question of foreknowledge and how such foreknowledge is being manipulated. What do you think about that?

**OT:** Well that argument is fair to those who have really been silent for eight years. And maybe it helps a lot of people to actually ask that question of themselves. We really have to ask it: Where have we been for these eight years?

Although if we think not about the essence of this argument, but about how it functions, then a great deal will become clear to us about the propaganda machine. That is, it is not an argument in which there

is any rationality, but one that is simply mechanically reproduced. That is to say, this question simply spreads virally.



Chto Delat, *The Canary Archives*. Installation view at HKW, Berlin as part of *The Whole Archive: Archives & Imaginaries*, March 24, 2022–April 18, 2022. Photo: Laura Fiorio.

**AB:** So, the propaganda machine in your interpretation works so that it simply articulates an issue that is already present within the collective and uses it against the collective?

**OT:** No. I think someone just asked that question and it spread out to the masses—like a virus. Because people don't always think by themselves—that's a big effort. It's much easier to repeat what is in the air, what is voiced everywhere and what is repeated everywhere. So, repetition is this ominous vinyl record that someone began, and no one can stop, it just keeps on repeating itself *ad infinitum*. I don't know how many times I've heard this question from different people. And those who haven't had time to ask it yet will surely do so. So, it's a mechanical process: it doesn't make sense to me—it's just on shuffle.

But the interesting thing is that this question exists, and you can ask it yourself. Try to figure out what you were doing this time. For example, I found out that there was a war going on in '14, and I tried to write and talk about it. I wrote one little essay and published it.<sup>2</sup> This text was about the economics of death and what happens to the bodies of dead soldiers. Now, when I reread that text, I realise that I am shocked by the topicality of what I read there. Because society has so displaced the trauma of 2014 that it's already hard to imagine—that, for instance, that's actually when the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia<sup>8</sup> was declared a "foreign agent"?<sup>9</sup> Why? Because soldier's mothers were active and were looking for information about dead people. And this information was carefully hidden by our state and never came out. And the state was faced with a problem usually encountered by a homicidal maniac in a film: where to dispose of the corpses. Somehow it solved it successfully—by hiding them somewhere. But in 2014 there was a leak. And, in general, this conflict on the Russian–Ukrainian border was resolved. Not settled, but hushed up and hidden from public view, so to speak. Nevertheless, from time



to time something could be heard from there. In 2015 again, with the Donetsk Airport and constant shelling.

Although it was very difficult for me to make sense of the internal dynamics, the fact remains that an undeclared war has been going on in the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics since 2014. And at some point this war became something that could no longer be concealed. The hidden became revealed. If you imagine a painful boil that matures, matures, matures, and then bursts—then there is already a sea of blood, and you already have to admit your losses. The Russian army has had to acknowledge a lot of things, some of which it could no longer hide. Not just the dead, but the people who have been maimed by the war. Today, they were giving medals to people who lost their legs—there was a large group of soldiers without legs, and each of them was given a badge—an order that they were heroes.

**AB:** This story about the inability to acknowledge violence on a material level makes me very disgusted. Because it's a horrifying fact that state officials have so far only twice made an announcement as to how many Russian servicemen have actually died (March 4 and here on the eve of March 25) of which only the March 25 statement from the Russian Defense Ministry can be considered official. But after all, as we didn't have an official declaration of war,<sup>10</sup> there are no dead bodies either. And no one really knows where these corpses are, whether someone is going to transport and bury them or whether they are still lying and rotting in the streets or in the fields. And that causes horror. The fact that the Russian authorities still believe that these symbolic badges on an ideological level are equal to the bodily losses that these soldiers suffered.

**OT:** Yeah, there is an interesting kind of badge swap for body parts it turns out.

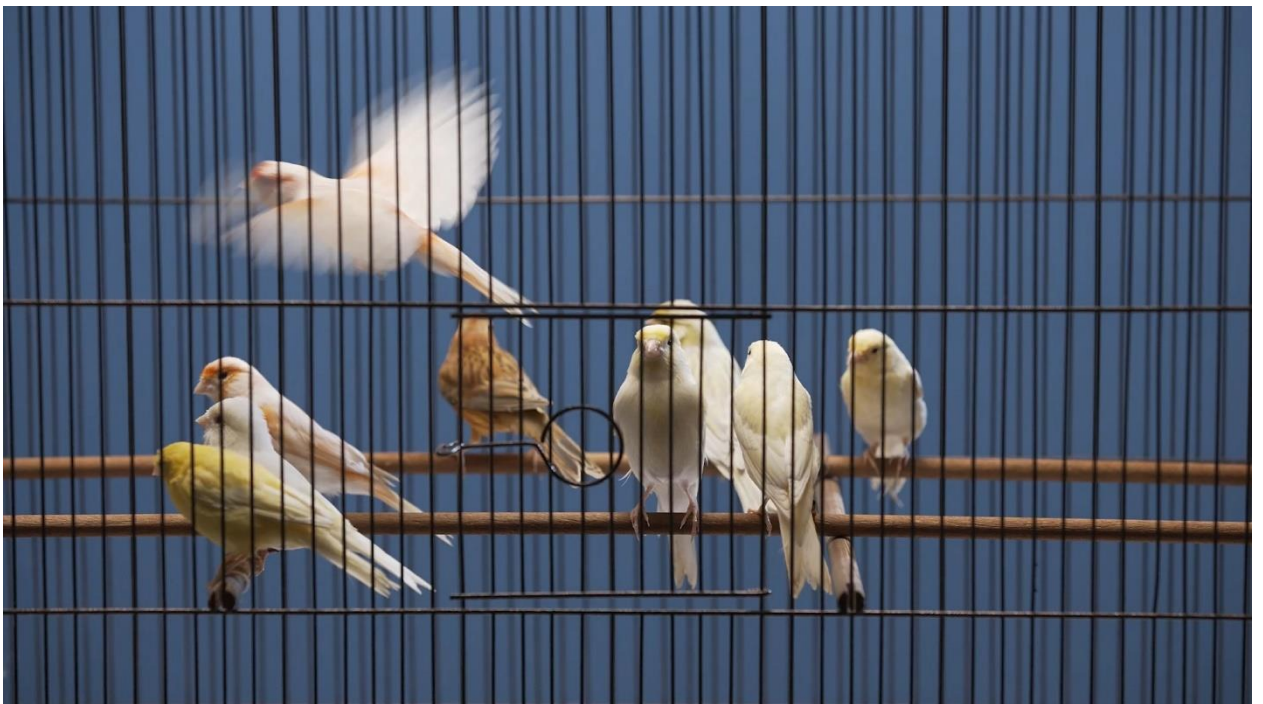
Here I think the very mechanism of negation, which I approach psychoanalytically, has something to do with it. After all, even now, when losses are already being acknowledged, even though they are very much overdue according to official sources (these are losses that were in fact a week, two weeks old). Even in this situation, while acknowledging a thousand or two thousand dead soldiers, the war is not called a "war"—and this is a panicked negation, a trend that began back in 2014. This compulsive repetition that this is not war, this is not war, this is not... war is reminiscent of the psychological mechanism that Freud described in relation to dreams. When the patient said to him, "the woman in the dream is not my mother," no one had actually asked whether it was his mother or not. But in this way the patient himself articulated the word that was needed.

In relation to this phenomenon, Freud said that there are things that are so traumatic for our consciousness that it is not ready to accept them. But nevertheless, it should, and these things try to make their way into consciousness through an internal censorship. And to do this, our psyche uses denial. So this "no" is simply a marker that a displacement has occurred. So, in this sense "no" means "yes." If they say it is not war (and forbid calling it "war"), then it is war, as Freud would tell us. But since Freud no longer says anything, I try to articulate it for him.

**AB:** It's not just you. A lot of other protesters, too.<sup>11</sup>



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Group photo). Mixed media installation, 2022.



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives. Mixed media installation, 2022.

**OT:** Yeah. Hegel has a good text (one of his best), called “Who Thinks Abstractly?”<sup>12</sup> It ends with a market trader accusing an old woman of saying that when she says that her eggs are rotten, the woman reminds her of all her sins and replies, “You yourself are rotten.” This is abstraction—transference and thinking in big entities, which are detached from concrete reality—these are cartoons. Cartoons about the Olympic gods. There’s a huge NATO aggression, but somewhere in there is “Russia” resisting it. “Russia” is also a cartoon. The material reality of war is legs torn off, dogs abandoned in bombed-out cities, bomb shelters, blood and cold. Refugees. These are concrete experiences, lived subjectively, and they need a different approach—not a geopolitical one.

For geopolitics, which our ideologues love so much, land exists solely as territory. As territorial units, which should be someone’s property and should belong to someone—“*gosudarev zemlja*.”<sup>13</sup> And which one wishes to own more of. This is where colonial greed grows from: to seize, liberate, occupy, and identify this territory. And the land is seen precisely as a territory, regardless of who or what inhabits it. And it is inhabited by all kinds of creatures, not only human beings.

**AB:** Yes, I agree completely. I really liked how Dima<sup>14</sup> said yesterday during the panel:<sup>15</sup> “we’re not going to discuss this, because obviously the actions of the Russian government are pure death drive,” which is impossible to talk about because it is absurd in itself. So the question I have is: how **do** we talk about it now?

**OT:** We actually just haven’t had time to talk about it. Because Dima was right, and he said that phrase to polemicise my attempt at connecting Putin’s war in Ukraine and the climatic pandemic planetary catastrophe that preceded it. That is, to link these two levels: the local-political and the general planetary-ecological. And I tried to present this connection as a wholeness.

I was saying that the world has overheated. That the mechanisms by which the human economy now functions are pernicious.

I said that, partly, from my own experience. I’ve observed it with almost everyone: my colleagues and my friends in different fields: artists, activists, those in business, everywhere. People have become so productive, so turned themselves into machines working non-stop that they couldn’t help but overheat. Or as we say: “burn out.”

The great quarantine was preceded by a great burnout, which a lot of people complained about. For example, you probably know people who work even when they are sick and in the hospital. They keep doing something there because they have deadlines, because they have a pile of projects, they multitask. It’s a steam locomotive that’s going downhill. And the further you go, the faster it accelerates. And that acceleration also heats up the air, because more and more energy is required for this work. The production of Bitcoin alone requires an incredible amount of energy. It also takes incredible amounts of energy to make our entire digital economy move forward, not just the hydrocarbons we use for transportation.

Why this diversion? I want to relate it to the death drive. When I put forward this thesis, Dima said that he disagreed with it, that it was impossible to rationally explain Putin’s attack on Ukraine, because it was pure death drive. But, in fact, the death drive can be explained rationally. This is precisely the whole adventure of Freud and psychoanalysis. There is always **a death drive** in each of our desires. Each of us has this death drive and it is a background for any drive at all. That is, everything else is based on this death drive. And it has positive and negative effects. For example, revolution is also a death drive. In what sense? In the sense that we want to destroy everything in order to start anew, normally. That is, we want to go back to the point when all this horror did not exist. In order to do this, we try to destroy everything and then start again, without repeating our previous mistakes.

The mechanism of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is also connected to this. Why do we keep coming back to a traumatic reminiscence? Something happened, a psychic trauma occurred, and we dream about that moment at night—we go back, we go back, we go back, because we like it there. Because we want to go back to the point where it hasn't happened yet and stay there. And from there to go the other way. Here we went straight then, and on that path, we met the rapist, and if we had gone right or left, we wouldn't have met him. We try to go back in our dream to where we could have turned left, and we're dragged straight again in this sinister scenario that we unconsciously produce all the time. So, we every time go back to the same trauma, and this is the death drive. In this sense, war is precisely this return, this attempt to come back to the place where it had yet to happen—to start over again in a new way. But we still return exactly to the place where this sinister scenario occurred.

How are these two things connected? On the one hand, there is a global planetary overheating, on the other hand, there is a general death drive. George Bataille separated two economies: one limited, the other general. The limited economy is the whole human economy. What is now called "capital": that is, the continuous accumulation and growth of productivity and consumption; constant inflation; all economic activity; technological progress. And the other economy is called the general economy, and it is a non-human economy; it is a planetary scale according to which compensation occurs and everything is balanced out. To all the efforts made by mankind, nature responds with destruction: let us say a volcano explodes—forests burn, and thus the overabundance of accumulations is destroyed. And war is just such a paroxysm: that is, humanity accumulates too much and begins to destroy itself, acting unconsciously. That is, it builds a structure that would be totally destructive—and this is the war.

In some place, too much wealth is accumulated, which its owners do not want to share with anyone. In Russia, everything in this sense is very symptomatic, because we have a whole class of incredibly rich people whose wealth has grown in proportion to the fact that the rest of the population has become poorer, with a growing economy that is totally dependent on the exploitation of nature (that is, an extractive economy). Accordingly, there is an explosion. People are too rich, need to spend, do not want to share, and war occurs. War acts as a chance to simply waste everything that has been accumulated.



True, these controlled dreams carry some danger.

Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Oxana Timofeeva). Mixed media installation, 2022.





Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Aleksander Skidan). Mixed media installation, 2022.

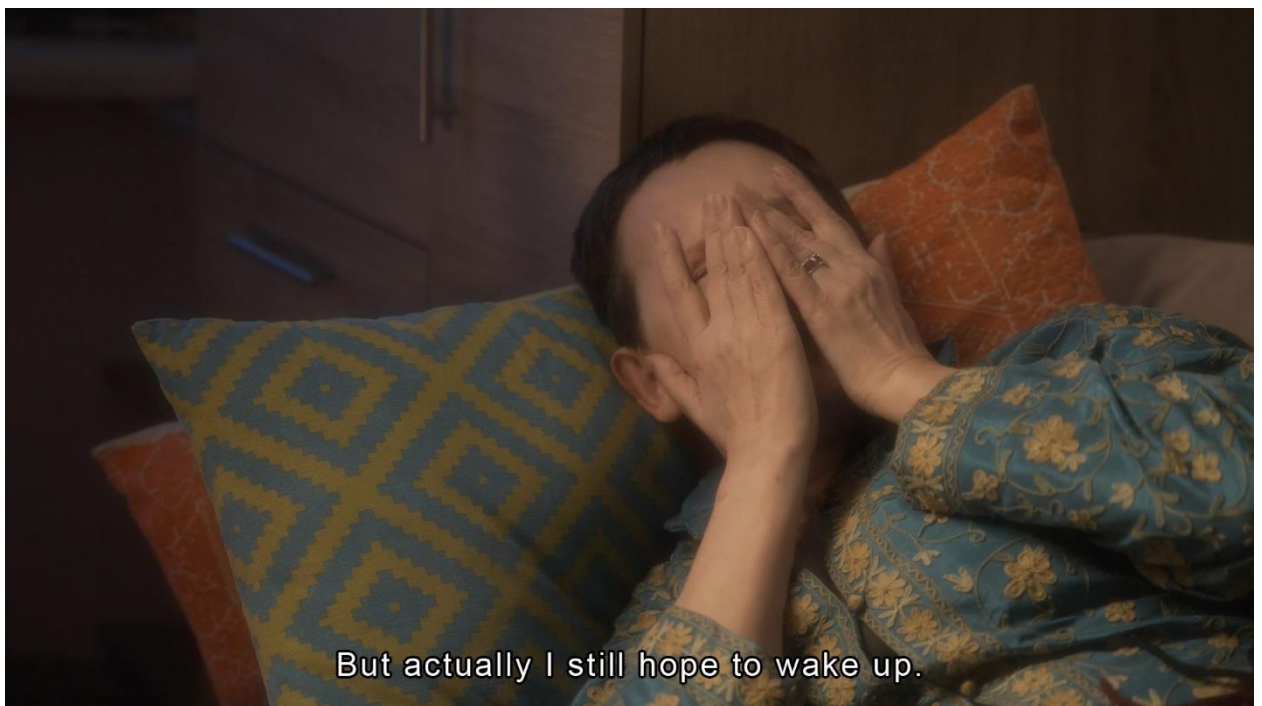


Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Natalia Pershina Glucklya). Mixed media installation, 2022.



Rolling heads, the grass turns red

Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Nikolai Oleynikov). Mixed media installation, 2022.



But actually I still hope to wake up.

Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Tsaplya). Mixed media installation, 2022.





Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Artemy Magun). Mixed media installation, 2022.



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Dmitry Vilensky). Mixed media installation, 2022.



Detail from Chto Delat, The Canary Archives (Nina Gasteva). Mixed media installation, 2022.

**AB:** I think there was a little misunderstanding here. I took this phrase as an attempt to indicate that it is impossible to talk about these events in the abstract. That is, when we speak of the *death drive*, it cannot be spoken of in the abstract. It is impossible to speak of the death drive in geopolitical categories.

**OT:** Yes. That's true. Geopolitically, one cannot speak of the death drive, because there are entities operating there that have no subjectivity. That is, for example, NATO or Russia are not subjects, they don't have their own drives—they are not living beings. To have drives it is necessary to possess a concrete body—this body must be alive, it must have desires (erotic above all)—then it will also have the death drive. That is, a living body is a human thing whose movements are connected with two differently directed vectors: Eros and Thanatos. And our behavior, our love, our enmity, and so forth, all depends on their balance.

But, it is possible to speak *geophilosophically* about *the death drive*. How is geopolitics different from geophilosophy? Geopolitics deals with territory rather than land; with countries rather than peoples or cultures; with the human (in the legal sense) rather than the non-human. That is, it is more of a legal order than anything else: it is then about the redrawing of borders; about property rather than habitat. Whereas the geophilosophical perspective speaks of the land not as a territory, but as an inhabited space with different peoples, cultures, and species. And not about borders, but rather about possible connections, transitions, channels of interaction, and so on. But *also*, about such a thing as the unconscious. So, the death drive can be discussed in this perspective.

For example, Kathryn Yusoff, a decolonial philosopher, spoke on a panel here yesterday. She talked about *geotrauma*, which is a concept in contemporary philosophy. Geotrauma is an interpretation of Freud's notion of trauma that transcends human experience. What does Freud say? Suppose someone encounters violence as a child—they experience trauma, this leaves an imprint on their psyche, and they develop pathological symptoms. Consequently, some psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, when working with such patients, try to coax the memories of childhood out of them. And this concept of geotrauma extends not only to humankind's past, but in general to the past of the entire Earth—its childhood. In essence, planetary things like the Big Bang act as a first such instance of trauma. But these are not abstract things, they are concrete things. And according to the theory of *geotrauma*, we, with



our own psychological traumas (including childhood traumas), are the material trace and the carriers of that earlier—pre-human and non-human—trauma of the Earth. That is, we unconsciously implement such an apocalyptic scenario ourselves, as earthly beings.

Here is a very interesting point, related to what you asked at the beginning, speaking of the premonition of a catastrophe. It turns out that geotrauma<sup>15</sup> also appears only retroactively. We can't anticipate it either, but we can say that it happened. Catastrophic time is arranged in this way: the repetition retrospectively of what has not yet happened. We rehearse the Apocalypse. On the one hand we repeat it, but on the other hand we rehearse it. That is, we prepare for it this way. And it turns out that the death drive forms a loop of ominous repetition. It turns out to be a loop ominously repeating something that hasn't happened yet—but that we somehow live over and over as though it has. We are repeating a future Apocalypse or rehearsing the Big Bang.

I realise that it sounds quite metaphysical, but we can again give an example of war. I remember that in 2015 I watched a parade celebrating another anniversary of Victory Day (May 9th). It was in St. Petersburg. It happens directly under the windows of my house, so I observe this parade all the time. And so, at first, a very intimidating military materiel, about the same kind that now riding through the streets of Ukraine, was solemnly moving by. In it sat soldiers, dressed in uniforms from World War II, fighter jets flew overhead (though they did not bomb St. Petersburg, of course, but they flew very menacingly, roaring)—it was terribly unpleasant. A huge crowd of all kinds of people came, some of whom were also smartly dressed in World War II uniforms, children were dressed in soldiers' caps, women waved white shawls and cried, and men everywhere wore St. George's ribbons.<sup>16</sup> There was no letter Z—the half swastika—but there were just ribbons of St. George. And they all carried slogans: "We Can Do it Again!"<sup>17</sup>

**AB:** Were these slogans already in place at the time?

**OT:** "We Can Do it Again"? Yes. That slogan has been around since 2014. And it's still unclear what it means (well, we all know that right now it's not clear what ideology means at all), but everyone was very enthusiastic. And there was a dark passion in the air and a desire to see war: to see soldiers shooting, to see death with your own eyes, to be caught up in the tragedy that was already there. This is the death drive becoming a collective symptom, with which this mechanism of ominous repetition is involved.

**AB:** In your text "Nightmare,"<sup>18</sup> you describe how you see Soviet films about the "Great Patriotic War" on the train on the first day of the war. Everyone, perhaps, now has an analogy with that war. It is an amazing paradox to me how the Russian authorities are now actively manipulating the historical memory of World War II for propaganda purposes. It is paradoxical that they are playing with this trigger and turning it upside down. This trigger becomes in turn a justification for violence. They have recreated the story that the Nazis are in Ukraine and we, the nation that has already defeated fascism, must defeat it again. And so, we allow ourselves violence, which we will not call "violence," which (as you said) we will reproduce through denial—we will not wage war but peacemaking. This is an amazing and very terrible paradox of how Russia has preserved its historical memory, and how this historical memory has become a tool in the hands of a totalitarian state.

**OT:** I think there was a very interesting twist here with historical memory and war. Because my generation, for example, always celebrated Victory Day and for us it was really a big bright holiday "with tears in our eyes."<sup>19</sup> Then something went wrong. Even earlier than 2014, when the leadership of our country (by then already Putin's Russia) began their appropriation of the victory celebrations, it was turned toward militarism and imperial discourse. It was as if this holiday had been stolen from us. From "us," I mean, from the people. The state forcibly took this holiday from "us" and appropriated it for itself. And began to give it its own meaning. Then they stopped inviting veterans to the parades, and began to invite all sorts of other people: some glamorous rich partygoers, friends and relatives of high

officials, etc. And they made it an ideologically-loaded ruling party holiday. Thus, they cut it off from it a fairly large number of people who do not support the course of this party. And then some people stopped liking or celebrating Victory Day altogether.

What happened next? Russia attacked Ukraine, rather repeating the scenario of the German attack on the Soviet Union: at exactly the same time—early in the morning, when people were asleep. And they started using seemingly anti-fascist rhetoric, but gradually introduced fascist symbols. For example, the easily remembered “Z” sign, which is rightly called a “half-swastika.” Its purpose is the same as that of the swastika: that is, to create a sign that anyone could easily and quickly draw and stick somewhere—and which thus expresses a whole unnamed range of different feelings, which you have well described as the death drive. It’s a sign that, just like the swastika (which has a stipulated Aryan origin, said to be an ancient symbol that means “sun”), is an ancient Slavic letter, which also means the beginning and the end of all things. That is, a mythology is created around it. And the anti-fascist rhetoric gradually introduces a fascist symbolism, and this symbolism begins to play the role of a trigger, which triggers the mechanism to change the rhetoric itself.

Yesterday or today, the Russian official TV channels suggested that the slogan “fascism will not pass” is extremist, just like the slogans “no to war” or “no to fascism.” That is, through anti-fascist words, fascism comes. The same logic of negation applies here as in Freud—it’s not my mother, it’s not war, it’s not fascism: we are fighting fascism. Through this “not,” through this negation, the essence of this phenomenon emerges, which, I believe, can rightfully be equated with fascism. It is clear that fascism has an even narrower historical meaning when associated with Italian politics. But there is also a broader meaning associated with the mobilisation of society around the figure of the leader and an aggressive militaristic strategy of attack. That is, fascism is an ideology of war. I did not make this up, it was also said, I think, by Bataille.

I wanted to say something else in this connection. Look, there is a circle. It turns out that this memory of the war is mobilised. Here we have a common memory and, from historical oblivion, the memory of the war is obtained, and it is turned over in such a way as to sink the experience of the Great Patriotic War into utter oblivion. It is nullified. Everything. What the current Russian government is now doing is completely cancelling the victory of the USSR over fascism, completely leveling this act of bravery of the Soviet people. It is turning it into its opposite in such a way that it turns out to be a repetition. There is an idea, which is being talked about in the Russian army, that the war (or rather, the special operation) must be finished by May 9th. This is precisely the full circle that would cancel the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War.



The inscription "Net Voyne," (No to War) inscribed on the ice of the Mokya River in St Petersburg, March 6, 2022. SOTA: <https://t.me/sotavision>.



The attempt to cover up the inscription “Net Voyne,” (No to War) inscribed on the ice of the Mokya River in St Petersburg, March 6, 2022. SOTA: <https://t.me/sotavision>.

**AB:** Let’s talk further about what we’ve already mentioned—anti-war protests. There is now a word ban in Russia: instead of “protests” it is “*progulka*” (a walk) instead of the word “war” it is “peacekeeping” or a “special operation.” Videos of people being detained for any kind of inscription (be it “two words” or “\*\*\*” or even a blank banner) have circulated online. At some point, it became obvious that all words were banned, and language was no longer an effective tool for expressing dissent in the same way that the generally accepted corporeal means of expressing protest—the demonstrations—were. So then the question arises: is protest even possible in a police and totalitarian state, and how can it be carried out?

**OT:** Possibly. We have de facto state terror. But it is not Stalinist terror. We don’t shoot people without trial; we don’t send them masse to the Gulag.<sup>20</sup> Terror is just horror and fear: people are kept in fear. Let’s say 5 thousand people go out to protest, of these 5 thousand people, let’s say 2 thousand are detained (I don’t know what percentage is usual). People come out for a big *progulka* to the central squares of their cities. And then mass arrests take place, people are put in a police van and taken to a police station. Every year, new protests, respectively, new rules. Now the rules are as follows: let’s say they keep you overnight, then the next day you are released on trial and fined. And so, you can be detained two times, and the third time you face a criminal offence, that is, you have to take a document and flee—if you can.

But at the same time, how does everything work? What does it mean to be detained? For some students, it may mean that they could be expelled from their university. But students don’t doze off, students are very active, and they are trying to challenge these practices. And this is creating some movement—there are results. Not all teachers at public universities are zombies. Some universities don’t expel students. In particular, in the case of students at St. Petersburg State University there was a positive outcome. There are different variants: people, for example, can lose their jobs, but people don’t lose their lives. And not everyone loses their job or their studies, but statistically only a few people have done so far. So, this mass process is based purely on fear: **everything** is forbidden in our country now. However, you can still do it **all**, and sometimes it is necessary.

Imagine being banned from breathing. But you breathe, and nothing happens to you: nobody arrests you. You constantly go to rallies. I have acquaintances who have never been arrested. It’s already embarrassing: how can that be? But the main thing is that it doesn’t happen to everyone, and there’s no logic to it. That is, everyone is breathing anyway, and the authorities, having banned breathing, in this way ensure their image as something infinitely loyal. And people think: fine, but look how nice our government is, just like if we were forbidden to breathe in Germany, then tried to breathe. That’s what our government is constantly telling us: look, we’re telling you, of course, “you can’t,” but “you can.”

This mechanism was described by [Slavoj] Žižek in relation to the totalitarian state. It is well known: to ban everything, and then not to punish, or punish only a little, or punish selectively. That is, sometimes you take one: they arrested all of them and the next day they let him go, but they arrested one and started torturing him, and then he disappeared. This produces fear, and this is a totalitarian state. In this sense, the success of the protests is only possible if the anti-war generation (let’s call it that) is born with a desperate fearlessness.

Chto Delat, The Factory of Found Clothes. A Triumph of Fragility, 2002. A still from the video documentation of the performance. Courtesy of the Press Service of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art.



Another thing is that the street protests themselves will not lead to an end to the war. It is clear that for the Rosgvardiya,<sup>21</sup> or the country's leadership, the slogans that are brought to a street protest are not seen as statements that should be listened and responded to, but as crimes. It's like at the psychiatrist's, no matter what you say, it will all just be a symptom of your illness. The doctor looks at you as a patient, and your speech is objectified. That is, it is not seen as reasonable: not utterances, but simply delirium. So here I am talking now, and you're a psychiatrist, and you look at me and say, "Well, I guess we have schizophrenia here." A person demonstrates an interest in mathematics—schizophrenia. Likewise, the government is a repressive psychiatrist. And no one will listen to our protests, in the literal sense—that Putin will see a man with a "no war" poster and think: Indeed! Or with a poster "Putin go away"—he'll really think: people don't like me, I guess I should leave! (laughs) No, he sees them as paid for by the [US] State Department people. That's what the cops think, too. They seriously think that protestors are paid and that they are all clowns who prevent people from living normally, prevent the passage of citizens. Therefore, in addition to street protests, some additional work is needed, there must be more factors, so that our political situation can change. Besides a civil movement, a workers' strike movement, is also possible. Political life consists of many varieties of self-organisation.

**AB:** I want to talk more about the Quiet Picket.<sup>22</sup> There are so many different forms of quiet picketing and actions that have emerged. For example, action with green ribbons<sup>23</sup> or "women in black" or anti-war slogans written on banknotes. What do you think about these?

**OT:** I think it's a very good alternative form of resistance. The other thing is that a quiet picket is not read by everyone. Here, for example, "women in black" is something to be aware of. It's a cultural code for recognising one's own. I, for example, wear black because for me it's a symbolic gesture: in this way I stand up for my human dignity and my right to speak out in a safer mode. Although a quiet picket is not safe either. Nothing is safe. Everything is forbidden here. A silent picket is also forbidden.



Dmitry Reznikov, a protestor on Tverskaya Street in Moscow, holds up a banner reading “\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*” (for which he was subsequently arrested), 2022. SOTA: <https://t.me/sotavision>

**AB:** I think your metaphor of dreams in the work with Chto Delat is very accurate. It seems to me that a lot of people have now, because of recent events, lost their sense of reality and have found another reality. And part of that has to do with propaganda; for some it has failed, while for others it has become the only way to explain this reality to themselves. And I wanted to talk a little more about this sense of loss of reality. The text “Nightmare” is important to me in this sense, because you describe there how you lost track of the nightmare in which you live, and of the unconscious.

**OT:** Yes. That we each sort of wake up in a nightmare. Also, in *The Canary Archives* there is a wonderful dream where Tsaplya<sup>24</sup> describes real events and says that she would like to wake up.

**AB:** Yes, we were just watching this work together, and her friend came up to us and asked: is this a real dream? To which Tsaplya replied that, unfortunately, no—it’s a reality from which she can’t wake up.

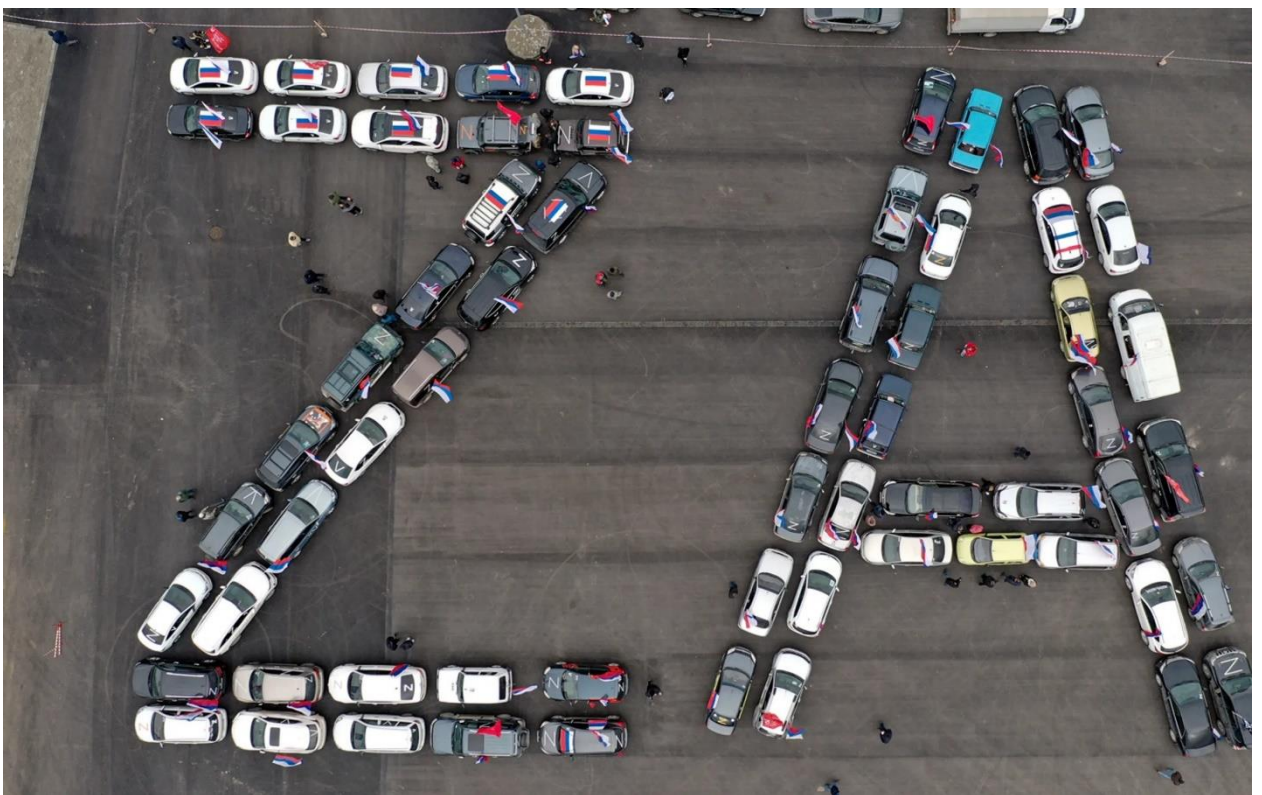
**OT:** I have a micro-theory (all my theories are micro; I have no macro-theories) that there is the so-called *reality* and there is *the real*. It’s not really mine, Lacan also has this theory. He has the *real*, *the symbolic*, and *the imaginary*. And what I am saying is that there is *reality* and there is *the real*. And our *reality is* a collection of disparate interpretations. *Reality* is always presented to us in some way, we have an interpretation and a construction of it. However, this is not the only thing we have. There is also *the real*, which is not given to us in itself as something visible, but can be the matrix by which these interpretive constructions, on the one hand, are actualised, and on the other hand, are hidden from us.

And with dreams, there’s an interesting thing, Freud called it *the dream’s navel*. There is, for example, some scary thing that twists you into this dream. It’s a detail that connects you directly to this *real* (Freud didn’t use the word *real*) and to the truth of your self. That’s why we have nightmares. And then there is the famous dream that Freud interprets of the burning boy. A man’s son died, and he sat up all night at the coffin and fell asleep (and there were candles burning). And he had a dream of the boy saying to him, “Father, can’t you see that I’m burning?” He woke up and saw that indeed a candle had fallen, and something had caught fire. There were different interpretations of it. In particular, one of the interpretations was that the father preferred to wake up from this nightmare because what he saw was *real*, which constitutes his own attraction to death. What is my point? That awakening turns out to be a multilayered phenomenon. It is possible to awaken not to *reality*, but only to *the real*.





Car rally in support of the Russian “special military operation,” Krasnodar, March 2022.



Car flash mob in Crimea in support of the Russian “special military operation,” March 5, 2022. Getty Images ©



The letter “Z” on the façade of the Zabaikalsky Krai government building, 2022. Courtesy of the Press Service of the Government of Zabaikalsky Krai.



OMON (“astronauts”) in St. Petersburg, March 13, 2022. Photo: Protest Russia





Russian military equipment with the letter “Z” emblazoned on it, in the village of Bugas, Ukraine, March 2022.

And so, when I, for example, spoke of lucid dreams,<sup>25</sup> I meant waking up to *the real thing*. That is, the situation where you wake up not in a waking state, but in some kind of limbo. (Well, I described that in “Nightmare,” too.) You’re a little short of waking up in a real waking state, but you wake up directly in the matrix: you fall into some gap and see that there’s a war going on. And it’s really as if we woke up in such a limbo. But not all of us do. Someone wakes up to so-called *reality*, and there is NATO, there are brave soldiers getting medals. Somebody wakes up, and there is Europe with its values, suffering without Russia sending it hydrocarbons. That is: different cartoons.

Someone is in them [these dreams/cartoons], and someone wakes up in the gap between these narratives, between these interpretative constructions of reality. Somebody wakes up in the gap of *reality* and finds themselves in a bomb shelter, or somebody wakes up in that gap before the alarm goes off and sees that their friend is in a bomb shelter, or just sees these pictures of war. And war does create a situation where some of us wake up in this matrix and suddenly receive this terrible picture, and it turns out that what we had seen before was a lie. That this war has been going on for eight years.

In a sense this war has indeed been going on for eight years. But it has now acquired the scale of casualties and destruction that has thrown so many people into *the real world*. Some people say they’re going crazy. Because, indeed, this *real*, this matrix, is not rational, unlike other constructs—it is an affective field. And to explain it to yourself means to calm down, to invent for yourself at least some legend. Or to simply distract oneself: to engage in practical activity, including anti-war activism not to see that happening, otherwise it becomes impossible to exist. You can also drink.

**AB:** I’m very concerned about the issue of escapism right now; I’ve noticed for my part an aggression towards people who are avoidantly reacting to current events. Because it seems to me that this behavioral pattern is what triggered this political situation. And, in connection with this, I am currently asking myself a great deal of questions in terms of how much art can be done at all in this situation, how much writing can be done, and how much engaging in any activity that provokes a withdrawal into escapism is possible. Something that takes you away from *the real* and provokes the creation of these cartoons (as you described it). That’s the big question I’m thinking about. Because, unfortunately, Chto Delat’s activity: an activist, political art, has now failed. It has, it seems to me, gone through a major crisis, precisely because it has found itself unable to prevent catastrophe.

**OT:** I’m generally not inclined to make such unequivocal statements—that you can’t make art when there’s a war going on. Or categorical statements [in general]. Art is a thing that can always be practiced. And what is more, practice and experience suggest that it is precisely this that can help you to survive: not in the sense of leading a miserable existence, but in the sense of finding your place at this concrete moment in history.

I went to shoot our video for the installation on March 5.<sup>26</sup> We had a collective shoot planned even before the war, because the process is not quick. We had to dance; to make some movements in yellow bedspreads. Which has a consonance with canaries, which are on the other screen. It was a planned group shoot. But on March 3rd it was rumored that the borders of Russia would be closed, and a general mobilisation would be announced. And, within two days everyone, or rather almost everyone, just got on a plane and flew wherever they could: to Yerevan, to Tbilisi, even to Azerbaijan, to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan. With the exception of Istanbul, they scattered to the former republics of the Soviet Union, which had suddenly turned into bastions of free life.<sup>27</sup>

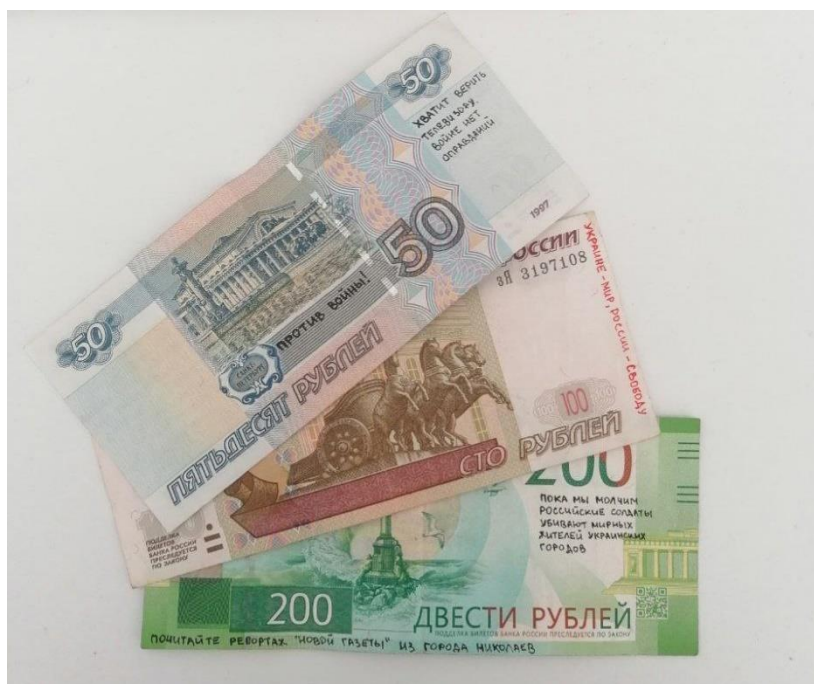
The mood was desperate. I was also very, very scared. Just that night there were mass searches under some article (which had been invented) about telephone terrorism. And a lot of activists were searched very early in the morning. Including one of my very good friends. And I woke up at 6 a.m., and, as usual,

rushed right away to read the newsfeed in fear and hope. And I saw a message from her saying, “I’m being searched. What to do?” The message was at 6 a.m., everyone was still asleep, and no one saw it. They started to answer her later, but there was no reply from her. As it turned out later, her phone was taken. All of our messages had already been read by Comrade Major.

Not only that, but it was also just very, very scary. My legs were even shaking, my knees were shaking, and I couldn’t eat breakfast properly. Nevertheless, after gathering myself into some kind of unity, I went to the shoot. The other members of Chto Delat were there, but unfortunately not all of them. Some of us also left. We were very scared and hurt, we cried all together, we hugged, we didn’t know what to do. But we remembered what we had done before, what we wanted to say and what we ended up saying. And our task was to make some movements, individually and together. And these movements embodied all of our pain, horror, and at the same time the incredible trust, the collectivity that was with us that day. This film is a shot of that desperately terrifying day when some of us felt literally on the verge of suicide, on the brink of insanity. And being together and working—turning that wordless animal affect, horror, and despair into a bodily statement—was, for us personally, an incredible healing practice.

Not one that will make our lives better, but one that transforms this affect into an articulated artistic form. Now this form—it cannot be removed from the symbolic space of art. It takes on a life of its own in this space; it will remain there. It has already taken on a life of its own. This statement will surely be useful to someone. I have never considered art as a therapy, but I admit that in such moments of collective illness and madness, it is art that can be one of the main loci of healing. This is why the theme of war is not silenced. Take for instance the artist whom Dima told us about yesterday.<sup>28</sup> We are not the only painful and sensitive group of artists in St. Petersburg who try to cry out about our pain. We about ours, Ukrainians about theirs. There is total destruction going on: war, and art is a creative activity—it’s like planting a tree.

So, I am on the contrary in favor of continuing to do the substantial instead of succumbing to everyone’s stupor: professional activism. It is really hard for me to do anything on the job right now. Rather, I feel that my mind is in strike mode, and does not want to fulfill my professional obligations. Because time is out of joint. I feel that the Russian I speak is much more useful now at the train station in Berlin to help refugees. because they often don’t speak English or German. So I go out to volunteer to help people transfer from one train to another, get something to eat, buy a free SIM card. And in those practical things, too, I find a use for myself, so I don’t go crazy leafing through the news or trying to work as if nothing is going on. That’s the kind of work that is inappropriate.



Anti-war slogans on Russian rubles, 2022.

**AB:** I think it's also very important to talk about the bodily reactions to protest that you also described. I've noticed, for example, that my hands are shaking. Or problems with sleep, feelings of dread and constant anxiety. I think it's very important to talk about these, too, in order to avoid this normalisation.

**OT:** You know, what's interesting is that I had problems with sleep right when the war started. After a few days, however, under the influence of this constant stress, I started falling asleep very quickly and sleeping soundly and having good, interesting, deep dreams and waking up with regret, that is, having trouble waking up from sleep. So, it turns out that I am hiding from reality in my sleep. I—my body and my brain—are looking forward to the evening, when I can quickly crawl under the blanket, immediately crash, and have good dreams. I began to dream about peace, I dream about beautiful nature, I dream about the sea, very good things. Such a contrast. I invented a bomb shelter in my dreams. In the depths of the dungeon of my own unconscious.

**AB:** The last thing I want to discuss is your book *How to Love a Homeland*.<sup>29</sup> In this book you try to grasp what a homeland is. And this question is very problematic because what I observed in the artistic community close to me is that nobody understands what Russian culture is and how to relate to it. But after the war, I became more concerned not only with the question of how to love and accept my homeland, but also with the question of how to keep this love.

**OT:** Yes, I've heard that some members of the last Russian wave of emigration, the sudden emigration, took this book with them as pocket reading—an emigrant's library. Because this book is also about how to deal with your homeland from a distance when it spits you out. Or when you're forced to flee. Or when you stay, and she's taken over by very greedy other people. And for me the key figure there was [Bertolt] Brecht, who emigrated [to America] from Nazi Germany and from there wrote a wonderful text, "The Five Difficulties of Writing Truth," addressing his German comrades who had stayed behind in Germany. [In this text] he says many things and explains that one must write between the lines. About how patriotism is not about war or the state. If the state wants to wage war, then, says Brecht, you have to understand who the oppressors really are. It's those who put their hand on the land and said: this is mine, I want more—that's the kind of greed.

And that's pretty much what I'm working from. I try to be very specific about the homeland and talk about specific material ties to a place. Some things, such as Proust's Madeleine, the taste of which brings back his childhood—that is, he is transported by the taste of that pastry into his endless memories of childhood. For me, there are some signs that connect me to my "small homelands."<sup>30</sup> A homeland is not singular, it is fundamentally plural. I have a concept that has to do with putting down roots. That is, you don't grow, but you take root somewhere. I put down roots in St. Petersburg, so I don't want to go anywhere [else]. I don't want to leave this place at all. Not St. Petersburg specifically, just because it's a beautiful imperial city, but several of my places there: the beaches of the Kamenny Islands, or the place where my house is, the place where my windows look out. That house is the locus that binds me to the land. And so, the thought that one of my relatives, acquaintances, friends, or neighbors (Ukraine is primarily my neighbor) no longer has a home stupefies me.

That is, I'm writing about some of my small homelands and the homes I lived in as a child, which I returned to as an adult; it was as though I had found them again. I have found them [small homelands] in the materiality of concrete things—which is to say, I brought something back from there, some small thing as a memory that always connects me to that house. Such as yellow tulips, which (even when I see them in Berlin) every time take me back to my childhood in Kazakhstan. To the steppe—to its ringing infinity and the fullness of the blue horizon.

[In this book] I also write about the fact that, for me, the construction of a large homeland has always been problematic. Russia, for example, or the USSR—the country where I come from. Russia for me has always been an incomprehensible abstraction, which is not mine. It was difficult for me to identify with it. I don't consider myself Russian, I don't consider myself anything. I have always been a cosmopolitan. Any policy of national identity is deeply alien to me. Nationalism is born out of it anyway. And any nationalism involves the potential for war. And yet, at some point I suddenly realised what patriotism means in another larger sense.



The shaman Alexander Gabyshev. Still from the film *Shaman in Yakutsk*, directed by Beata Bubenets, 2019.





The shaman Alexander Gabyshev. BBC Russia ©

This happened to me twice: the first time when the shaman Alexander Gabyshev<sup>31</sup> traveled from Yakutsk to Moscow on foot. At first, he had a very small group of his associates with him, and then this group grew larger and larger and the whole country learned about him. So much so that even the administration of our country found out, and he was repeatedly subjected to the most brutal repressions. In the end he became a victim of punitive psychiatry. He's a courageous man, I've always admired him very much. I think he's a real hero. I believed in him from the very beginning.

Why was it such a trigger when I realised that it was possible to love the large homeland, too? To feel part of something very, very big and whole, and to somehow also feel happy about it? I imagined, in fact, what would have happened had Gabyshev not been stopped in Buryatia, where he was arrested and prevented from moving on. This movement would have expanded. That is, it would have become a wider and wider movement that potentially, as it moved deeper into Russia from the far east, would have grown and grown. The far east of Siberia, the Urals, and central Russia would have joined in. "Russia" represents a figure that kind of expands from this area. And people coming out from the other side, from the western regions of Russia, starting with Kaliningrad. And I suddenly thought there would be so many of us. But who's "us"? I don't call it "Russia" myself—it's something else. This is a movement that is far superior to Russia (in its symbolic and political sense), a fundamentally decolonial movement. It is not Russian, it is not even Eurasian, but a decolonial movement, which should replace this Russki movement.

The second time it happened [that I realised it was possible to love a large homeland] was in 2021, when [Alexei] Navalny was jailed.<sup>32</sup> In January there was the first big all-Russian march. I woke up very early one morning and saw the first report. It was just a picture from Yakutsk (which is to say, Yakutia, a charged place which averages -50°C, or even lower temperatures). It was foggy and a group of people in warm unts,<sup>33</sup> in warm clothes, was disappearing in this fog. A small group of protesters, maybe fifty people, were standing and some cops had come out to harass them. And then Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Sakhalin, began [to protest]. Then gradually, gradually this movement was repeated from Yakutsk through the far east, then through all of Siberia (the Siberian cities: Novosibirsk, Omsk, Tomsk, then Tyumen) into the Urals, and everyone came out with the same slogans: "Down with the Tsar." And by evening, already the southern districts. All this moved together with the time zones. An amazing space-time continuum emerged, and one felt: are there really so many of us? Wow. Even though the

police crushed this protest, one could still appreciate the power of these popular marches and the insignificance of the military machine that confronted them. The variety of live human faces and the monotony of these robot-like armed and helmeted “astronauts”<sup>34</sup> who confronted them. The variety of unarmed humans.

So peaceful protest can have incredible power. Amazingly, our state has managed to stifle this protest for a number of reasons. Yet this movement is not “another Russia”—it is a broad popular movement for which I can find no other word than “liberation.” It is an attempt to free a man who is in prison. It is both his liberation and our liberation. All the same, we failed, it still fails. However, the large homeland, in my mind, has defined itself in this way. Visualised itself in this way. And I thought that this kind of homeland can only be decolonial. That is, it is against the state, against empire—these are peoples who suddenly reassemble themselves: as if into such an independent autonomous people consisting of absolutely different cultures and identities. That is a large homeland. And Russian, or not—it’s all identities, it’s like a cage in which you are driven. I feel cramped in such a cage.

I think that nationalities are something to be overcome, and cultures are something to be preserved.

**AB:** You write at the end of “Nightmare” that “we have raised fascism.” I think that we have instead raised a form of insidious nationalism. A nationalism that we didn’t notice. Because all of a sudden with the outbreak of the war we found ourselves surrounded by people who believe in the Russian Idea,<sup>35</sup> in Russia as a nation. Neither of us may understand it, but somehow this propaganda model works, and somehow this constant opposition to the West works. The idea that there is a bright Russian nationality that will defeat a decadent Westernness. And this is surprising to me, among other things, because I’ve always been convinced that national sentiments are actually not so strong in Russia. I had never seen them. It was only during this war that they were exposed to me. I don’t understand at all how it happened.



Avdey Ter-Oganyan, *The Young Godless One*, performance, 1999.

**OT:** I've been watching this process since 2000. In fact, not all of a sudden, of course, there's nothing surprising about it. Indeed, nationalism—unlike imperial consciousness—is actually alien to Russian culture: it's an alien phenomenon. But all of these things are not essential characteristics of the people—they are ideologemes that appear in a certain period of history. And nationalism is also an ideologeme.

In the 90s, society was ideologically very liberal and tolerant of everything possible: quite multinational, gender diverse, and so forth. Nevertheless, a movement in a more conservative direction began to be outlined as early as the mid-90s, whilst [Boris] Yeltsin was still in power, [when] on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church the first, seemingly mild, repressive crackdowns on contemporary art began. We saw the first art that fell under the crackdown. It was Ter-Oganyan's action "The Young Godless One."<sup>36</sup> after which he was forced to emigrate. It was the exhibition "Beware of Religion!," which was trashed by believers—its participants were forced to emigrate and it all ended very tragically. And other such movements on the behalf of the ROC.<sup>37</sup>

However, after Putin came to power in 2000, some very striking and strange cultural phenomena came to the fore: for example, [Alexander] Prokhanov's novel *Mr Hexogen*,<sup>38</sup> which was published by the then-fashionable publishing house Ad Marginem, which had previously published all kinds of very good intellectual and progressive literature. This novel became a bestseller and won the National Bestseller Award. Before that Prokhanov, and the patriotic milieu to which he belonged, had been a rather marginal phenomenon against the background of the generally liberal society. It [this patriotic milieu] had tendencies that one might say were "postmodern" (although this is just a label). But in the sense of "postmodern" that [Viktor] Pelevin described back in the 90s in his novel *Generation P*, [*Generation P* is Victor Pelevin's postmodern novel about a generation of Russians who grew up and were formed during the political and economic reforms of the 1990s.] that is to say, the universal conviction that there is no reality—and everything is just a joke. So, nothing should be serious. Everything is a little bit of a joke; everything can be laughed at. Any statement is a quip, and only as a quip can it be legitimate. Mockery—you can and should mock anything. You mustn't be sincere. That was the cultural fashion of the 90s.

Where did it come from? When I was in school (as I describe in the book) there was a breakdown. I was in fourth grade, and then we had sixth grade all at once. In the summer there were large-scale political events—the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and [in the new school year] we found ourselves in "Russia," in a completely different state. That is, we went on vacation in the spring, and at school we were still pioneers and walked around with red badges and ties. We sang the anthem of the Soviet Union, and we were taught that Lenin was great; the revolution had liberated mankind and nations and it was all very good. Then we came back to school and there were no more badges and ties, and the same history teachers told us that Lenin was a bloodthirsty madman, a sick man who only craved blood (for some reason there was not so much on Stalin as on Lenin) and that Bolshevism was a terrible thing, communism was a terrible thing. And that now we would live in a new democratic country, which was now called Russia. There was no Soviet Union anymore.





The exhibition Ostrozhna, Religion! at the Sakharov Center, 2003, before the desecration.

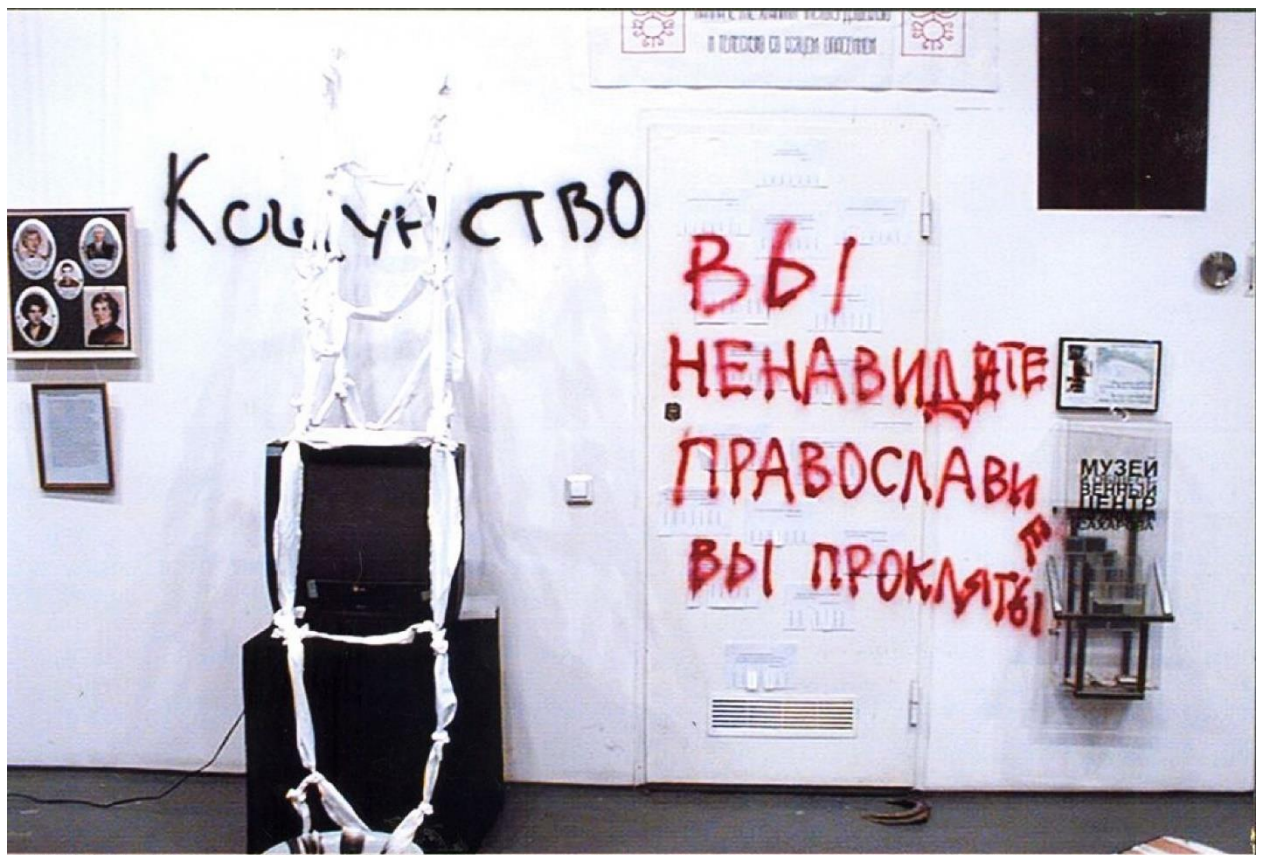


The exhibition Ostrozhna, Religion! at the Sakharov Center, 2003, after the desecration.





A performance at exhibition Ostrozhna, Religion! at the Sakharov Center, 2003, before the desecration.



The exhibition Ostrozhna, Religion! at the Sakharov Center, 2003, after the desecration.

The exhibition Ostrozhna, Religion! at the Sakharov Center, 2003, after the desecration.

That is, many people of my generation experienced this kind of switchover: you seemed to be in one reality, and then suddenly you were in another. And all the same people said the opposite things. They put down their party membership cards, they believed in the Lord God Jesus Christ, and now they all walked around carrying other democratic values. Accordingly, our generation of 40–50-year-olds is a generation of cynics. People who make their money cynically, who have given up on their children.

These people began to build a new ideology in Russia. And with Putin's arrival, they now had a job. They could finally tell some real jokes and make fun of themselves. There were people like Prokhanov and [Aleksandr] Dugin. Back in the 90s, it seemed like they were freaks, marginal phenomena. Some people who believed on the one hand in the Soviet Union, and on the other hand in the Russian Idea, and wanted this great state. It was all kind of funny; ridiculous. And then they said, let's make nationalism not only funny, but also trendy in general. Thus, nationalism became very popular in the early 2000s. A former well-known glamour journalist<sup>39</sup> wrote a high-profile article "How I Became a Black-hundredist"<sup>40</sup> in which he describes the break—once we used to be such liberal fools and weaklings, but now that Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] has come to power, we understand that we can really take everything in a firm fist and build a strong state.

Then they switched to a strategy of moderate conservatism and came up with the concept of "sovereign-democracy."<sup>41</sup> This concept was invented by people with far-right sympathies, cynical intellectuals who were very fond of Carl Schmitt. I could name them, but I won't. They wrote texts for the ideologues of this era. "Sovereign democracy" means a democracy in a separate country, which is limited and not oriented toward Europe, but toward its own values.

Gradually this tendency towards closure developed, when Russia began to build this wall, as described by [Vladimir] Sorokin,<sup>42</sup> a wall by which Russia gradually began to separate itself from the West. The foundations were constructed by the hands of these ideologues. [Vladislav] Surkov<sup>43</sup> then became an advisor, people like Konstantin Krylov<sup>44</sup> unexpectedly turned into opinion leaders. In general, fascism did not establish itself in Russia immediately, but did so gradually, surreptitiously, through these more cunning moves and through the appropriation of Victory [in World War II] and the broader universalist desires of Russians, which turned into revanchism. Now, all of a sudden, it has taken on such radical forms. That is, the fascization of the population occurred abruptly, but not out of nowhere. It took a long, long time to mature in this soil of cynical manipulation, which was born out of the denial of objective reality and a culture of mockery.

I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but I've been observing this phenomenon since I was twenty years old, and the first texts I wrote and published were a series in which I tried to make sense of what fascism is and why what was then happening in Russia had something in common with this phenomenon. That is, I felt that some kind of brown cloud was creeping in, and I tried to talk about it.

Now Russia is being destroyed and dying: its aggressive outward behavior is a symptom of its internal destruction.

**AB:** Last question. It's obvious that there is now a coordinated effort to proscribe Russian culture. And the idea is already emerging—among Russians critical of national jingoism, and jingoistic Western cold warriors alike—that Russian culture is toxic in-and-of-itself. This is why for me, as a twenty-five-year-old person, it is completely unclear how it is possible to relate to it. Because you start to ask questions, and what you thought was normal is now perceived as toxic, etc. And that's a very scary experience. On the other hand, you wonder: how adequate is this policy and political strategy on the part of those same Western countries?

**OT:** I agree with some of my colleagues that there's one very big problem with cancel culture in general, which is moralism. I hate moralism. I think moralism is evil. It consists in blaming the other without noticing the log in your own eye.<sup>45</sup> In fact, it's very simple, it's always easy to say that the other is evil, the other is to blame for something. Putin, for example, let's all hate Putin. In principle, of course, we all hate Putin, but there's moralism in that too. Because somewhere inside each of us little Putin is rejoicing while we hate someone and demand to urgently kill them, cancel them and think that life will become better. Indeed, as Yegor Letov rightly sang [we should]:<sup>46</sup> *Kill the state in yourself!*<sup>47</sup> First and foremost, we need to cancel ourselves.

And this self-rejection, that is, self-criticism, <sup>is</sup> the overcoming of oneself as a representative of Russian culture; as a moralist; as a representative of the cancelled culture; as a representative of whatever. At least this is my conviction: that these identities, which are based on the idea of I = Self (that is, this identity)—must be fought. Because people are, first of all, *other* to themselves, an enemy to themselves, we never coincide with ourselves, not in any particular moment.

And so, the question is, what will you do with this *other* in you, what use will you find for your inner villain? Will you personally bargain with him, or will he submit to you? Will you make a deal with your conscience? Of course, it's easy to kick someone if they're doing something wrong—even if it's an entire nation doing something wrong, or the state. Those who are in the majority can participate in this process of abolition: attack it; say, yes, go ahead and beat this thief, this criminal. Because when you are in the majority you will not be touched (when you are in the majority among those who attack). There is a rotten side to any position of moral superiority or position of power. It is a bottom-up movement.

In this sense, a decolonial or feminist gesture would be to uproot this position of power in ourselves. Then the little Putin or the moralist or the authority figure who passes judgement can [truly] be questioned or abolished.

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*This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Translation from the Russian by Anastasiia Bergalevich.*

#### Footnotes

1. Dmitry Vilensky is an artist, writer, and one of the members of the group Chto Delat ("What is to be done?"). [↑](#)
2. Olga Egorova "Tsaplya" (Russian: Цапля) is an artist and a member of the group Chto Delat. In the past together with Glucklya (Natalia Pershina) was a member of the art duo Factory of Found Clothes Group/FFC (Russian: Фабрика найденных одежд/ФНО) 1995–2014. [↑](#)
3. The artist activist Russian-Ukrainian project based on horizontal principles and created in May 2015. Its field of activity: sewing, using clothes and fabrics as medium to convey their ideas. At this moment the group consists of four people: Olesya Panova, Anna Tereshkina, Maria Lukyanova, Antonina Melnik. [↑](#)
4. interpretations of Marxist thought, continental philosophy and critical theory, contemporary art theory, and Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual and cultural history. Penzin is one of the founding members of the group Chto Delat ("What is to be Done?"). [↑](#)
5. *The Canary Archives—Files of Dreams and Other Matters* project also includes the publication of a [newspaper](#). [↑](#)
6. The armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine began in April 2014 and preceded Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The question: "Where have you been



- for the last eight years?” was actively used in the first days of the war by the Russian propagandists against the anti-military resistance. [↑](#)
7. The text “И мёртвые не уцелеют” (‘And the dead shall not survive’) was published on [Open Left](#), September 14, 2014. [↑](#)
  8. The Public Organisation “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia” is engaged in educational and human rights activities in the field of protection of rights of conscripts, servicemen and their parents, veterans, and bereaved families. [↑](#)
  9. The Russian “foreign agent law” requires non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media, and individuals that receive donations or funding from outside Russia to register and declare themselves as “foreign agents.” Once registered, organisations and individuals are subject to additional audits. The law is actively used to liquidate (deprive of funding) and weaken organisations that are unwanted by the pro-Putin authorities. The phrase “foreign agent” (Russian: иностранный агент) in Russian has strong associations with Cold War-era espionage. [↑](#)
  10. In the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russian troops entered the territory of Ukraine. According to the official nomenclature of the government, on this day, Russia did not initiate a “war” but started a “special military operation in the Donbass.” The goals are “protection of the population, demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.” [↑](#)
  11. In general, anti-war protests are peaceful. As a rule, people are detained and accused of shouting anti-war slogans calling for peace: “No war,” “I will never forgive you for this war,” “No war with Ukraine,” etc. [↑](#)
  12. See: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/se/abstract.htm>. [↑](#)
  13. The expression “gosudarev zemlja” (“sovereign land”) in the sixteenth–twentieth centuries refers to the land that the state assigned to servicemen as estates according to the duration of their service and depending on the nature of their service. The phrase in Russian is now associated with the popularisation of imperial discourse in the last twenty years. [↑](#)
  14. Dmitry Vilensky is an artist, writer, and one of the members of the group Chto Delat (“What is to be done?”). [↑](#)
  15. Congress panel at HKW “Borning the Archive of the Earth. Human and Non-human Labor in Extractive Capitalism” which took place on March 26, 2022. It was timed to coincide with the exhibition [The Whole Life: An Archive Project](#). [↑](#)
  16. The St. George’s ribbon (in Russian: георгиевская ленточка, “georgiyevskaya lentochka”) is a Russian military symbol consisting of a black and orange bicolor pattern, with three black and two orange stripes. In the early twenty-first century, the ribbon came to be used as an awareness ribbon for commemorating the veterans of the Eastern Front of World War II (known in post-Soviet countries as the Great Patriotic War). It is the primary symbol used associated with Victory Day. It enjoys wide popularity in Russia as a patriotic symbol, as well as a way to show public support for the Russian government. [↑](#)
  17. “We Can Do it Again!” is a slogan that appeared in 2012 as a response to statements by Sergey Lavrov and Vladimir Putin that Nazism and militarism were again returning in Europe. The slogan implies that Russia is ready to confront Nazism again, (as during World War II). In 2022 the slogan was also used by the anti-war resistance in a détournement to “We [can’t](#) do it again!” [↑](#)
  18. The text is published in Chto Delat’s [Canary Archives](#) emergency [newsletter](#). [↑](#)
  19. “With tears in ours” is a fragment from a well-known song dedicated to the Great Patriotic War. The song [“Victory Day”](#) (Russian: День Победы) was written by poet Vladimir Kharitonov and composer David Tukhmanov. [↑](#)
  20. The GULAG (Russian: ГУЛАГ, ГУЛаг, an acronym for Глáвное управлéние лагере́й, “chief administration of the camps”) was the government agency in charge of the Soviet network of forced labor camps set up by order of Vladimir Lenin, reaching its peak during Joseph Stalin’s rule from the 1930s to the early 1950s. The word “gulag” also became used to refer to all forced-labor camps that existed in the Soviet Union. [↑](#)
  21. The National Guard of the Russian Federation (Russian: Федеральная служба войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации) or Rosgvardiya (Russian: Росгвардия) is the

- internal military force of Russia, comprising an independent agency that reports directly to the President of Russia Vladimir Putin under his powers as Supreme Commander-in-Chief and Chairman of the Security Council. [↑](#)
22. A “quiet picket” is a popular form of political activism that became popular in Russia in the ’10s. With the strengthening of the dictatorship, actionist practices were largely interiorised by political movements and activists. Vivid artistic actions with political overtones were replaced by numerous interactions organised by art activists using artistic means. Artists in this new wave realised that broad mass protest in Russia was impossible in the near future, and instead of the exclusive monological figure of the lone hero and single actionist gestures, proposed project-based thinking and artistic-activist subjectivation along a horizontal line of dialogue, engagement, and collaboration. The Chto Delat collective also belongs to the list of artists who use Quiet Picket tactics in their artwork. [↑](#)
  23. An action of anti-war resistance introduced as a response to the appropriation by war propaganda discourse of the St. George ribbons. Anyone who wears a green ribbon on their clothes (or anywhere else) expresses solidarity with the anti-war resistance. [↑](#)
  24. Olga Egorova “Tsaplya” (Russian: Цапля) is an artist and a member of the group Chto Delat. In the past together with Glucklya (Natalia Pershina) she was a member of the art duo Factory of Found Clothes Group/FFC (Russian: Фабрика найденных одежд/ФНО) 1995–2014. [↑](#)
  25. Meaning her monologue in [The Canary Archive](#). [↑](#)
  26. Meaning [The Canary Archives](#). [↑](#)
  27. A number of countries which do not require a visa for Russian citizens, and that therefore became especially popular among Russians who do not have a foreign passport or residence permit for Europe. [↑](#)
  28. Referring to Vlada Ralko. See artworks: <https://www.facebook.com/vlada.ralko>. [↑](#)
  29. Oxana Timofeeva, [How to Love a Homeland](#) (Beirut: Kayfa Ta, 2020). [↑](#)
  30. The “small homeland” was a concept used during the Soviet era. The concepts of the larger and smaller homelands were actively used within Soviet ideological discourse and were part of the national policy of the USSR. Whereby a “small homeland” meant the place where a person was born, spent their childhood, and youth, their native land, and a “greater homeland” meant the USSR. [↑](#)
  31. Alexander Gabyshev is a Yakut shaman and anti-Putin political activist. In March 2019, he started marching from the Republic of Sakha in far east Russia with the goal of reaching Moscow some 8,000 km away, where he planned to perform a ritual to cause President Vladimir Putin to resign, stating that he wished to “drive the evil spirit of Putin from the Kremlin.” [↑](#)
  32. In August 2021, the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was immediately detained upon returning to Russia after having been sent to Germany for treatment following his poisoning the previous year. [↑](#)
  33. [Unts](#) (from [Evenki unta](#)—“footwear,” “boots”)—are a type of fur shoes, boots for cold and very cold climates. They are widespread among the people of the far North and far East of Russia. [↑](#)
  34. “Astronauts” is a popular slang way of referring to the OMON (Special Police Force) police officers because of their huge black helmets [↑](#)
  35. The “Russian idea” is a set of concepts expressing the historical uniqueness, special vocation, and global purpose of the Russian people (including on the unification of east and west). It is supposed that the Russian Idea was formed in the sixteenth century and was expressed in the idea of Orthodox Christian monarchy (the idea of Moscow being the Third Rome by Philotheus of Pskov). The term “Russian Idea” itself was introduced by F. M. Dostoevsky. This term was widely used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by such Russian philosophers and revived in the early twenty-first century by pro-Putin ideologues. [↑](#)
  36. Shortly before the opening of the [Art-Manege-98](#) exhibition in 1998, Ter-Oganyan informed his acquaintances that he was holding an action in Moscow Manege. On the evening of December 4, 1998, two hours after the exhibition had opened, Ter-Oganyan hung up religious icons and instructed people who had paid 10–20 rubles each to desecrate them. No willing participants were found, so then the artist began to chop up the icons himself with an axe. [↑](#)

37. Russian Orthodox Church. [↑](#)
38. *Mr Hexogen* is a novel by the Russian writer Alexander Prokhanov. The novel presents the events of Russian history in 1999 (in particular, a series of bombings of apartment buildings) as a result of a conspiracy by those in power. The protagonist of the novel, the former KGB general Beloseltsev is invited by his colleagues to participate in the operation, the purpose of which is the coming to power of the Chosen One. [↑](#)
39. Dmitry Olshansky. [↑](#)
40. The “Black-hundredists” is the collective name for representatives of conservative and extreme right-wing organisations in Russia in 1905–17, who spoke under the slogans of autocracy and orthodoxy. The name apparently arose from the Medieval concept of “black,” or common (non-noble) people, organised into militias. The Black Hundreds included reactionary, counter-revolutionary, and anti-Semitic groups that, with the connivance of the authorities, carried out attacks on revolutionary groups and pogroms on Jewish people. [↑](#)
41. “Sovereign democracy” (Russian: суверенная демократия, transl. suverennaya demokratiya) is a political concept formulated in 2005–7 by Vladislav Surkov as a characteristic of the Russian system of government under President Putin. According to Surkov, sovereign democracy is the pattern of society’s political life according to which the authorities are chosen, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its diversity and integrity for the sake of the material well-being, freedom, and justice of all the citizens, social groups and peoples that comprise it. [↑](#)
42. Vladimir Sorokin is a contemporary postmodern Russian writer and dramatist. The “wall” refers to his novel *Day of the Oprochnik* (2007), in which a “Great Wall” of Russia enfolds the country from Europe through the Caucasus to the edge of China. [↑](#)
43. Vladislav Surkov is a Russian politician and businessman. He was First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration from 1999 to 2011. [↑](#)
44. Konstantin Krylov (1967–2020) was a Russian nationalist writer, journalist, and philosopher. [↑](#)
45. Matthew 7:3. [↑](#)
46. Igor Fedorovich “Yegor” Letov (1964–2008) was a Russian poet, musician, singer-songwriter, and conceptual artist, best known as the founder and leader of the post-punk/psychedelic rock band Grazhdanskaya Oborona (Russian: Гражданская Оборона, lit. “Civil Defense”). [↑](#)
47. “Kill the state inside yourself” (Russian: УБЕЙ В СЕБЕ ГОСУДАРСТВО!) from the [song](#) “Государство” (“State”) by Yegor Letov. [↑](#)