

Late last summer, before the schools in Russia reopened, a remarkable beer ad about post-Soviet space aired on Russian TV. Thirty seconds of feel-good Russian classic rock: an active bass and a prominent slide guitar wafted around a voice, always-already middle-aged, slightly flat after working a night shift. Four measure whole notes by the band: the staggered vocal names the brand. Krasny Vostok.

Where the sun rises / the east is red. A new day is dawning / over our land. // How can you resist. Cause this land is not made of history's pages; it's not made through borders or territorial stages. Our land is made up of people and people are what make our land. Obviously, the ad wants to mobilize the patriotism of its maturing target group, reminding it of forgotten values: hospitality, friendship, little evening get-togethers on the dacha. The Krasny Vostok commercial is supposedly all about people, but there are no people in the ad. In 2004, new legislation tried to curb the spread of beer as Russia's favorite soft drink. Among other restrictions, it introduced a ban of anything remotely alive in beer advertising, laying off all the cartoon characters, animals, and most importantly people: friendly, slightly crazy fat men, 19th century aristocrats, or teenage hipster heroes about to make it big. These roles have all been taken over by either the beer bottles themselves or their settings. The Krasny Vostok ad is no exception. It personifies (the) people as a golden spirit that floats out of the sunrise as a 3D animation: from close ups of fragrant grass, up over dewy meadows and out through the speckled trees, over pine-topped mountains and down a glittering river through a valley, across a suspension bridge into a city, where it reflects in the shop windows of a deserted 19th century Russian street, wafting through lace curtains into a cool, sparkling glass of amber beer standing solitary on a kitchen table. The beer commercials' potential inhabitants are kept out of public by the medium's laws. [1]

There is an overwhelming pressure to think of post-Soviet space in similarly abstract though far more foreboding terms, all of which present elaborations on a hegemonic notion of geopolitical Lebensraum of a unified Russia. Post-Soviet space is somehow posited as a given that needs to be drained, reconfigured, and filled with something that always returns to the interior. The empty exterior is real estate and ad space: an inhabited ruin of democratic socialism about to turn into an unpopulated sovereign democracy, a land of milk and honey (oil and gas) in which mayonnaise, beer, vodka, and money flow freely, unhindered by any human factor, sweeping away all edifices in their path to be replaced with billboards advertising a vast beer garden.

This brings us back to the real post-socialist city and how its social spaces are defined. When the weather gets warmer, circles of people hang out and drink beer in almost all backyards, parks, boulevards, squares, monuments, and the spaces around metro-stations with their 24-hour kiosks. You constantly hear somebody having fun, passing from one of these places to another. Social space is constructed by the order of consumption (beer, cigarettes, salted nuts, fast-food), in small groups, isolated from one another. This obviously brings a potential for anomie (competing groups develop new affinities and repulsions) in liminal states of all-night open-air idling that the militia cannot prevent fully. Guitars and fistfights from May to September! The streets are the living room of the collective (Benjamin), and the collective is forever young.

Lumpenproletariat, Neo-Nazi nationalists, consumer kids, Goths, headbangers, Lesbian punks, migrant workers, and even the occasional anarchist. Walking through Moscow or Petersburg in the summer, anyone with multitudinous political passions will wonder:

what if more kids were not just drinking beer but talking politics? They have already captured public space. Our universities? Who knows? Maybe these kids are learning street-smarts on how to make representational space in the alienated intimacy of their encounters, finding something that makes them want to ride their bikes through the city in more tightly knit groups late at night when the traffic dies down? Can one politicize this new sociality? If the educators themselves must be educated (not to think in abstract terms of progressive nostalgia, but in concrete practices, something a text like this can only sketch out), what can we learn in the beer garden of common space, where the first impression of normal childhood is one of spatial awe?

Normal children in awe of space: Soviet town-planners suggested the common as a political potentiality, still empty, waiting to be filled. The conduits of post-Soviet cities themselves are certainly broad enough to suggest the sweep of politicized masses, and not only the flow of a collective subject, self-alienated in a pre-Marxian, young-Hegelian sense. Heterotopia in a vista onto space: radiating from a center that both sucks in and evacuates entire populations, Ultra-Haussmanized causeways and chthonic cathedrals suggest mass movements (not armies) so large that they displace clouds of dust heralding their advance overhead. The scale of this claim much more than one sixth of the world is unprecedented. It dwarves and subsumes real people in a very different way than the skyscraper canyons of Manhattan, or the starry sky in Grand Central Station. [2]

Normal children in awe of themselves: in the late summer of 2004, the workgroup Chto delat made a collective study of the Petersburg neighborhood of Narvskaya Zastava. It intended to probe the possibilities for militant investigation and political involvement in this space, and tested a variety of methods ranging from quite traditional sociological evidence-gathering to the psychogeographical technique of the Situationist *dérive*. I participated in this part of the project. Armed with cameras and logbooks, we set out to map the neighborhoods psycho-geographical zones and to document our impressions. [3]

Normal children everywhere: the social space of the *derive* is a non-spectacular production site. But sometimes it looks like a spectacular stage set. The abandoned 19th century tenements to the north of the neighborhood on Shkapin Street served as romantic ruins for a really stupid German war movie that showed how human Hitler was. Here, we found a flower growing toward the sun, its secret heliotropism photographed by other people drifting and drinking beer on a Sunday stroll without theory.

Normal children, fixing fidelity on a historical point of departure: you arrive at Narvskaya Zastava on Stachek Square, dominated by the Narva Gate, a triumphal Palladian arch celebrating the Russian victory over Napoleon. It stands in the shadow of a house-sized fresco from the late 1960s that commemorates the site's central location in Russia's revolutionary history. It was here that the first shots were fired on a protest procession of striking workers, marching to present the Czar with a petition of demands on January 9th 1905. In November 1917, the square served as the place d'armes for the Bolshevik forces that stormed the Winter Palace. Now, another beer garden.

Normal children sucked into a historical vortex: Narvskaya Zastava's most famous section is defined by the constructivist buildings on and around the esplanade between Stachek Square and the Narva Gate to the north and Kirov Square to the south. In the mid-to-late 1920s, the areas working class population was rewarded for its revolutionary

efforts with a model settlement for workers from nearby plants, including the famous Putilov (Kirov) Works. In the mid-1930s, however, the transformation of the neighborhood along constructivist-functionalist lines was abandoned. Its architectural endpoint is marked by the council building on Kirov Square, built in an increasingly domineering Stalinist style. The buildings on and around the esplanade express a collective industrial production cycle: house of culture, training center, collective homes, public baths, council building, municipal park, school (in the form of a hammer and sickle to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution), public kitchen/messhall. A metro station was added in 1952, giving Stachek Square a triumphant dominant, and essentially destroying its function as an agora, making it into what the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin calls a space of jubilation. [4] This breakup of the agora at the historical center of the neighborhood prepares the constructivist settlement for participation in a neo-capitalist consumer economy: the former factory-kitchen has housed a department store since the Soviet epoch. In the ground floor, there is a new theme restaurant with Russified dishes from around the world, which are not exactly cheap either. But the theme restaurant retains a cafeteria look as a part of its décor, which imitates that of an IKEA restaurant.

Normal children on the run: in socialist architecture, the Euclidian Ultra-Hausmanized avenues represent more or less successful rationalizations of the industrial production cycle. Their communal flipside is the courtyard. Soviet architecture consistently tried to innovate residential courtyard architecture, doing battle against the tenement light shaft well as the epitome of alienation. So the worst inhuman micro rayon apartment blocks contain generous green spaces with playgrounds, paths, and benches, open intimate spaces in which communal life is more than plausible. This terrain is ideal for drifting: having fled the broad streets and traffic, one moves from one courtyard to the next through intricate systems of arches, coming to rest in pockets of unexpected peace, as behind the 17 residential buildings on Traktornaya Street off Stachek Prospekt. Painted an unusual persian red, they open to the street with over-dimensioned half-arches, bringing in the sky with late summer cirrus clouds in a mad Leningrad sunset. In the 1920s, they served as communal workers dormitories. Once these communes (ideally governed by neighborhood councils) fell apart through the states repressive neglect, the living room of the collective was abandoned, overgrown, crisscrossed by footpaths, and covered with empty beer bottles and cigarette butts. But now, the old ladies who live in the buildings chase away the drinkers, lay gravel on footpaths, plant shrubbery, and install fountains, constituting their own Soviet Biedermeier version of imaginary-intimate community space. Its not just a personal project in vernacular garden architecture that installs the garden gnome of bad ontology. Instead, its all about people, a didactic projection of social space as it should be, with plenty of benches for the old ladies to gossip on, and a fancy playground for the kids.

The ancient Greeks were normal children, while the communal bricollage of gardening pensioners somehow seems Kabakovian. It hearkens back to a time in which Soviet culture was already falling apart into a self-contradictory communitarian structure. As late modernist urban planning moved people out of communal housing to personalized panel block apartments in the satellite cities, the dialectics of urban alienation and communal intimacy underwent a decisive change. Communities took the place of the state, creating nooks and autonomous zones for informal exchange, colonizing parks

and boulevards through moving bubbles of privacy. [5] Paradoxically, it is the community of friends that appears as state socialisms gravedigger, as the collective enthusiasm of the Soviet sixties went sour and turned into a campfire repertoire of songs about what really counts. But at the same time, communal reality continues the project of common space: until it is rendered productive by privatization, its underlying structure is still open, like the courtyard on Traktornaya Street. Even when the pensioners reclaim it, it can still serve as the site for an impromptu episode of knowledge production by a temporary workgroup of leftist artists and philosophers. So much is coded into its arches, until they become the trademark of a gated community. In the backyards of another constructivist settlement around the Red Triangle Rubber Factory where Dima Vilensky lived as a little kid, we encountered old ladies who theatrically threw a drunk off a bench, perform back at the camera in a kind of subaltern abreaction.

The derive ended in the evening, in a shouting match. The argument centered on the collective non-action of drifting itself. My criticism was as follows: the group is like a feel good rockband, singing songs about what really counts. It moves in its own space, obsessed with its collective (leftist, neo-modernist, critical, radical, antagonistic) identity, unconsciously fetishizing its autonomy and its friendship while insisting upon the use value of the inoperative activity itself, thus refraining from any genuinely political operation, other than the constitution of the micro-community that spends its free time together. The fact that the same community produces commodities for the culture industry during business hours as a start up venture remains unmentioned. Once, I said something about irresponsible slumming through the ruins of modernity, our discussion escalated into a shouting match. So I guess I hit a sensitive nerve. Was there any place that we could intervene? Nobody really knew. Standing on an abandoned factory floor, surrounded by phallic graffiti, we felt more than impotent.

Post scriptum

Maybe it was this sense of communal impotence that prompted Chto delat to return to the historical center of Narva Square (this time in the smaller ensemble of Tsaplya, Nikolai Oleinikov, and Dmitry Vilensky), with a piece called Angry Sandwich-People (2005). The space of the present text is too small to provide any real contextualization of this piece. I only want to highlight one key difference. While the derive in 2004 attempted to reflect social space through communal collectivity and the abandoning of production, this piece consciously explored the potentiality of social production site as an arena for political manifestation. Against the backdrop of the neo-modernist mural sandwich-people slowly gather, wearing a fragmented political poem on their chests. Like real sandwichpeople, they belong to no definite class or age group, and have no predefined political identity: pensioners, activists, students, and children. Over the course of the slide show, they accumulate line by line, coming together and falling apart in varying constellations of singularity. This looks like a political manifestation but could actually be read as its opposite: a form of artistic advertising. But at the end of the slideshow, after the flow of images is over, one no longer sees bodies but hears their voices reading out their lines. This inner speech a tragic chorus? is tentative, threatening, satirical, and violent, full of potential violence, depleted pathos, and fragile hope. Suddenly, a definite negation is possible again. [6]

Notes

- [1] Both teaser and ad spot can be found as a Quicktime video at <http://adme.ru/creativity/2006/07/27/7770.html>.
- [2] For more speculation on the difference between Hegelian and Kantian space, see David Riff/Sergei Sitar. The Re-Discovery of Post-Soviet Space Chto delat No. 11: (Im)possible Spaces. Petersburg 2006
- [3] The entire project was documented more fully in Chto delat 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. October 2004.
- [4] Cf. Mikhail Ryklin. Hegel in the Spaces of Jubilation In: Third Text 65, Vol. 17, Issue 4, December 2003
- [5] Robert Argenbright. Remaking Moscow: New Places, New Selves Geographical Review, Vol. 89 No. 1 (Jan., 1999), 7
- [6] Cf. Chto delat 11. Why Brecht. January 2006. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=226&Itemid=126. This issue of Chto delat was also conceived as a contribution to the first question of the documenta 12.