

Pushing the Political Imagination: Ideological Disruption in the Practices of Inspection Medical Hermeneutics and Chto Delat

Anastasia Murney

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In an essay discussing allegories of art, politics and poetry, American Poet Alan Gilbert claims ‘politics without the imagination is bureaucracy, but the imagination is never a neutral category.’¹ In reflecting on the events of Occupy Wall Street, he suggests that to demand a coherent political program from the movement is to miss the point. The protests were founded on a widespread frustration with the unshakable capitalist mantra: business as usual.² In considering the genesis and global expansion of Occupy, this essay will address the potentialities of a broad political imagination. I will argue that two Russian art collectives, with periods of activity staggered over the last twenty years, use politically imaginative strategies to engage with moments of social upheaval and the civil backlash against authoritarianism. The Perestroika era collective Inspection Medical Hermeneutics³ (also referred to as Medgerminevitika or MG) and the contemporary St Petersburg-based group Chto Delat each intervene at an *ideological* level. The former group’s height of activity

coincided with the dying days of the Soviet Union while the latter group formed in 2003 and has been working within (and struggling against) Vladimir Putin's Russia. By discarding and manipulating the concrete 'facts' espoused under their respective regimes, these groups demonstrate how the realms of fiction and imagination can offer more fruitful investigations into the notion of truth.

In thinking through the impact of the 2011 – 12 Occupy movement, this event can be credited with drawing attention to rampant increases in socio-economic inequality leveraged in favour of 'the 1%' of income earners. One of the figures attributed with having a formative role in the protests was activist and academic David Graeber. Invoking the anarchist roots of Occupy Wall Street, he describes one of the core values of the movement as refusing to accept the legitimacy of existing political institutions.⁴ The refusal to cohere with the existing political order may also help clarify what political scientist Bernard E. Harcourt distinguishes between as 'civil disobedience' and 'political disobedience,' the latter of which 'fundamentally rejects the ideological landscape that has captured the collective imagination in the United States, at least, since the Cold War.'⁵

There was a small Russian manifestation of the movement that merged with protests responding to the falsification of electoral results in 2011 – 12. 'Occupy Abai' grew around the statue of Kazakh poet Abai Kununbaev at Christoprudny Boulevard in central Moscow.⁶ Like the carnivalesque tenor of the Zuccotti Park experiments in self-organisation, the informal camp attracted heterogeneous groups to protest against state corruption as well as participate in various discussions, music and art exhibitions. However, this anti-hierarchical project was short-lived and was forced to close on May 21, 2012.⁷ Before Putin's controversial return to the presidency, the significantly larger demonstrations staged in Bolotnya Square resulted in violent clashes between protesters and the police. This came to signify the beginning of a more stifling political climate and a hardening of the authoritarian

conservatism espoused by the United Russia party. There is a point of difference to be drawn between New York's catalyst Occupy demonstration and the series of events that unfolded in Russia; that being a protest highlighting the structural limits of democracy in the West and a deeper representative crisis in Russia. This would seem to indicate a failing democracy as opposed to a mimicked democracy.

Chto Delat and Medical Hermeneutics each engage with broken ideologies. Of course, the term 'ideology' has its own baggage and multifarious implications. In the context of this essay, *ruling ideologies* will be understood as those which perpetuate a top-down system of governance, filtering out the subjective experiences that run contrary to a state-sanctioned narrative. As Terry Eagleton explains, the process of legitimating a dominant power involves a suite of strategies:

'promoting beliefs and values congenial to it, *naturalising* and *universalising* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable, *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it, *excluding* rival forms of thought ... and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself (emphases in the original).'⁸

This is not to categorise the concept of ideology as the exclusive domain of those in power but to advance a particular understanding of institutionalised ideology. Eagleton's symbiotic chain of strategies reveals the process of accumulating legitimacy, whittling away extraneous dissenters in order to cultivate a selective vision of reality. Another significant point Gilbert makes is that 'in a world where a fundamental strategy of ruling ideologies is to make themselves appear natural, the absurd can be its own form of critique.'⁹ This idea stakes out the value of the illogical and the fantastical and its direct relationship to social change. We

might also draw in the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, whose ideas have been deployed by a recent generation of art critics, such as Claire Bishop and T.J. Demos, to analyse emerging trends in contemporary art.¹⁰ Tending toward a reversal of the Platonic suspicion of images, Rancière asserts that:

‘politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions,’ that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done (emphasis in the original).’¹¹

In other words, the creative re-configuring of the perceptual order can constitute politics and political potential. By rearranging and recontextualising signs and images that are loaded with ideological significance, *Chto Delat* and *Medical Hermeneutics* undermine the ‘empirical’ reality that is perpetuated by ruling ideologies.

In many ways, these groups are radically different, prompting the necessary task of untangling their historical and aesthetic specificities. *Medical Hermeneutics* was formed as part of the third and final generation of Moscow Conceptualism. This underground network of ‘unofficial’ artists is typically characterised as apolitical. In fact Claire Bishop hastens to correct the Western tendency to frame Eastern bloc art as ‘implicitly political’¹² Many artists of this era took their lead from Ilya Kabakov, whose installations were caught between the ‘communal body’, meaning the aggressive mass of an unfavourable environment, and ‘the existentialist individual’.¹³ Alienated by the strictures of Marxist-Leninist dogma and an oppressively monolithic cultural sphere, these collectives sought to carve out alternative spaces for new ideas, dissensus and debate, giving flight to the ‘subjectivity yearning for

transcendence.’¹⁴ This gave birth to a kind of solidarity of individualism, taking shape through a scattering of self-sufficient micro-communities.

Amongst Moscow Conceptualists, the practice of Medical Hermeneutics is the most self-referential as well as the most outward looking. The group rose, in part, as a response to the growing commercialisation of unofficial art during the late 1980s.¹⁵ There is frequently a surplus of theories and philosophies embedded in their installations, enabling a proliferation of possible interpretations. In many ways, the group offers an introspective counterpoint to Chto Delat. Boris Groys aptly describes the myth-making pursuits of the collective by stating:

‘What was formerly the history of the search for truth has (in the best of cases) become an adventure novel, and contemporary art has moved from a claim to the truth to a fictional narrative.’¹⁶

Fiction becomes a means of exposing that there are no stable truths. Or alternatively, we might reflect on Rancière’s reference to Chris Marker’s *Le Tombeau d’ Alexandre* (The Last Bolshevik), based on the life of Soviet film-maker, Alexander Medvedkin. According to him, the film is constructed as a ‘combination of different types of traces... in order to suggest possibility for thinking this story or this history.’¹⁷ As the field of truth is opened to contestation, different types of cultural practice can be seen as fictionalising the real in order to multiply possibilities and inspire new ways of making sense.

Unlike Medical Hermeneutics, Chto Delat is configured as a broader and more explicitly political operation involving an interdisciplinary network of artists, activists and theorists. Their name is derived from the canonical nineteenth century novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (translating into English as what is to be done? and who is to blame?); Lenin later deployed

the name in a political pamphlet published in 1902, calling for the formation of a revolutionary vanguard. In this way, Chto Delat appeals to the utopian foundations of the Soviet Union in order to renew cultural practice that is focused on self-organisation and the politicisation of ‘knowledge production.’ Alongside a string of bilingual newspapers, the group produces socially and politically engaged art as well as running pedagogical projects. Interrogating what it means to function as an ‘institution,’ they aim to renovate art into a more inclusive and internationally engaged endeavour and therefore counter-balance the conservative arts academies of St Petersburg.

In spite of the glaring differences between these collectives – for instance, the activist or counter-public ambitions of Chto Delat versus the private and more ‘conceptualist’ pursuits of Medical Hermeneutics – they have both invested in long-term and small-scale projects. They are also similarly involved in the act of *divesting* power from ruling ideologies and exploiting the spaces between political fiction and social reality. Like the 2011 – 12 Occupy movement, the works that will be discussed refuse to conform to a coherent political program. Working within precarious societies, they cultivate inventive ways of critiquing and destabilising official ideologies. While Chto Delat examines the rich and evolving web of Leftist thought, the political affiliations of Medical Hermeneutics are less clear. In spite of the individualist utopianism of Moscow Conceptualism, the group might be conceived as an ideological ‘Switzerland’, preoccupied with playful and postmodernist methods of redistributing political signifiers.

The Mythology of Political Rhetoric

In regard to overcoming the naturalisation of ruling ideologies, the politics and aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht has long been an important influence on Chto Delat. This modernist

playwright is known for targeting the viewer's capacity for knowledge, severing the divide between the fictional world of the play and the socio-political realities outside the theatre. The group works towards extracting Brecht from a modernist cultural legacy and re-vitalising his work for a contemporary context. We might first ask: how has Brecht stood the test of time? After a period of popularity in the 1960s and 70s, in some ways, he is increasingly relevant to our contemporary situation. Brecht has been revisited by prominent thinkers such as Frederic Jameson as well as providing inspiration for the 11th Istanbul Biennale in 2009, curated by the Zagreb-based collective What, How and For Whom (WHW).

Credited as a pioneer of 'radical' performance, Brecht's co-participatory approach worked against the firmly established relationship between active producer and passive spectator. By advocating a more inclusive model of performance and debunking the idea of a supreme culture-maker, he anticipates the internet age of user-driven content and the democratisation of cultural production we see today. Of course, the Marxist framework of Brecht's theatre, diagnosing the hypocrisies of capitalism, may resonate with a post-Global Financial Crisis sense of scepticism. Brecht may have even filtered into the open-ended exuberance of the Zuccotti Park protests, including many instances of Bakhtinian theatricality punctured with a protest sensibility. Mobilising a political aesthetic in this way connects to the integral 'use value' of Brechtian theatre, which is determined through the ability to *produce* reality rather than reproduce it, to critique certain structures and provoke change.¹⁸

Looking closely at Chto Delat's 2012 video-film *The Russian Woods*, it becomes apparent that instead of peeling back the mythic content, the group imposes their own mythology, conceiving of civil society as a fairy-tale. Hovering between a musical and a film, the group interweaves two sides of a production: a live performance and the backstage happenings unfolding simultaneously. Written by Tsaplya Olga Egorova and Dmitry Vilensky, the online version of the work, running at 42 minutes long, documents the theatrical performance as it

occurred in St Petersburg. Typically pared back, there are minimal props and staging; the aesthetic effect might be likened to a rehearsal run in a community hall. The camera work is largely static, occasionally panning across the stage. Towards the beginning of the work, a performer enters the venue and directly addresses the camera. ‘You’re late!’ he says, breaking the fourth wall by ushering in the hypothetical audience. From this point on, there are close-up shots of various participants conversing backstage interspersed throughout the live performance. These participants are the tableau actors, using physical formations to reinforce significant themes and moods. However, the key performers are a chorus of singers. As they shuffle onstage, they fumble through a script and explicitly state that they have been employed to impersonate Chto Delat, who ‘cannot sing themselves.’



Chto Delat, *The Russian Woods*, 2012, video-still, 41:15

In terms of historical specificity, the work is prefaced by a short montage of street protests that took place in Russia on the cusp on Putin’s third term. The 2011-12 demonstrations, responding to perceived flaws in the legislative election process, were cited as a key influence in the creation of *The Russian Woods*. Providing a glimpse into the artist/ activist

experience, Chto Delat document their own involvement in the protests, parading placards and stencil paintings that later return as stage props. Here, and pertaining to political protests generally, there is a visual cacophony of different signs, symbols and slogans. The way histories are distilled into simple symbols and shorthanded ideologies is an interesting (and by no means recent) phenomenon. More interesting is the way in which these icons are corrupted and re-purposed, disrupting habits of hierarchy and our numb consumption of automated meanings. A striking example is the output of Perestroika artist Maria Konstantinova, who produced a number of soft sculptures experimenting with the space between art and propaganda. Her 1989 work, *Sleep Quietly or Rest in Peace*, consisted of a large red star sitting slumped against the gallery wall.¹⁹ The leaking stuffing and drooping points of the star conveys the slackening of a formerly taut superpower. The drunken appearance of this soft sculpture could even be interpreted as an unknowing forecast of the Yeltsin years. Through rendering hard and intangible signifiers into banal furniture, Konstantinova has embraced the *materiality* of an ideological language. Similarly, Chto Delat claims to be ‘intrigued by the huge amount of mythic images and rhetoric’²⁰ that characterises contemporary political life. Through an examination of the way signs and symbols are employed to persuade, *The Russian Woods* stretches visual imagery beyond its ideological affiliation.

As a ‘forest pathologist’ takes the stage, fulfilling the role of a Brechtian narrator/educator, a metaphorical rendering of Russia’s power structure takes shape. This blurring between lecturer and story-teller recalls the various diagnoses and over-serious investigations of Medical Hermeneutics. For instance, art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson recalls a 1988 performance which saw Pavel Pepperstein encouraging viewers to don a stethoscope and examine the ‘beating heart’ of an infant printed on an empty box of Soviet baby food.²¹ Similarly, the forest pathologist diagnoses a ‘sickness’ that plagues Russia, detailing a whole

ecosystem of symptomatic creatures. From domineering dragons representing Putin and his Kremlin cronies, to inferior rats and hares, footage from public life is used to illustrate an animal kingdom of predators and prey. The overall result is two-fold: making reality absurd and revealing the absurdity *of* reality. This resonates with Alan Gilbert's notion of employing absurdity to critique ruling ideologies. Further, to take Rancière's route toward revoking the Aristotelian distinction between 'stories' and 'histories', the restructuring of reality in *The Russian Woods* can be seen as a creative deciphering of historical phenomena; a means of bouncing between different 'traces.' The fantastical metaphors of state power in conflict with the documentary footage of day-to-day life in Russia – two separate trajectories – has the effect of reconfiguring who is speaking, what is said, and to whom. Through drawing out and rearranging these visual codes, the group disrupts the universalising power of bureaucratic wordiness and political rhetoric in Russia.

As *The Russian Woods* unfolds, the group of tableau actors become disillusioned backstage, which confuses the real circumstances of production with 'the performative.' Oppressed by the hierarchy of the play where 'the director calls the shots' and frustrated by the political posturing of the singers ('what do they know of communism?'), they plot a revolt. They become (class) consciously aware of how they are being manipulated. Their role is symbolic of the crisis of representation illuminated by Russia's presidential elections. It also resonates more broadly with the disillusioned mass of the global Occupy movement, occurring around the same time. A tension arises between what Dmitry Vilensky describes as 'what has already been represented and what is struggling to be represented,'²² meaning the performers impersonating the Chto Delat workgroup and their proletariat puppets.

In the case of the would-be revolutionaries of *The Russian Woods*, they continually fail to reach a consensus on what kind of action will be taken; they cannot verbalize their resistance where and when it counts. Finally, they storm the stage and refuse their assigned positions.

The scene exemplifies how breaking character is akin to breaking an illusion, specifically the illusion of a politically cohesive and neatly categorised community. This Brechtian mode of stepping out of character breaks the totality of the theatrical form which is premised on the assumption that the lead actors are working in harmony with their supporting cast. The work is designed to capsize, signifying what Artemy Magun describes as the revolutionary moment when society ‘steps out of character’ and turns against itself.²³ But we might ask, to invoke Slavoj Žižek’s cautious commentary on Occupy Wall Street: is this a revolt or a revolution?²⁴ There is no regime change, which is integral to a conventional understanding of revolution. The work has been torn at the seams but there is no new order ushered in. As the tableaux actors take the stage, they announce their revolt and halt the performance thereby withdrawing their labour. On the cusp of this final action, one performer insists: ‘if we revolt, they’ll drag us into their game anyway.’ This would seem to warn against simply recycling the means of power and the cyclic trap of overthrow-and-oppress. A revolution – as the product of civil disobedience – would exist within the parameters of the aesthetic and political enterprise that has contained the proletariat performers. However, at the conclusion of *The Russian Woods*, there is a refusal to acknowledge these parameters.

Evading Interpretation and Destabilising Perception

In working through the temporal and ideological uncertainties of their newly post-Soviet era, Medical Hermeneutics erodes the distinction between reality and fiction, history and mythology. Boris Groys describes the group’s activity as calling into question ‘a basic distinction integral to the modern artistic practice: the distinction between the production of art and its interpretation.’²⁵ Engaged with the precariousness of signification and the weight of categorical meanings, the line between art and theoretical enquiry is barely discernible.

Introspective and analytic, it is as if Medical Hermeneutics are constantly critiquing themselves in a schizophrenic or self-subsuming way. The group described Glasnost as akin to a psychedelic experience, a moment when ‘the sky opened up ... when a rupture between systems brings anxiety as well as the promise of renewal.’²⁶ From 1987 through to 2001, the practice of Medical Hermeneutics might be thought of as a prolonged rupture. In terms of historicising the group as working both ‘during’ and ‘after’ the fall of the Soviet Union, Octavian Esanu explains a lack of critical separation that has occurred between the group and the Russian actionists, such as Oleg Kulik and Alexander Brener, whose practices entailed provocative and sometimes violent actions. These incompatible artistic movements were commonly mixed amid the fervour of ‘Soviet vanguard art’ entering the Western art world during the nineties.²⁷

The mixed media installation *Amber Room* featured in the 2010 exhibition ‘A History of Irritated Material,’ curated by Lars Bang Larsen, exemplifies the way Medical Hermeneutics operates as a laboratory of overlapping ideologies, simultaneously invoking and undermining claims to truth. Significantly, this work has been exhibited under the alternative title *Side Space of the Sacred*, firstly at the time of its production in 1992 at Vienna’s Galerie Grita Insam and secondly, in Larsen’s 2015 exhibition, ‘t:h:e r:e:a:l’, at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius. In any case, the broad aim of Larsen’s 2010 exhibition was to examine the relationship between art, politics, and the archive, provoking thought as to how political art can be ‘reactivated.’²⁸

The title of this installation refers to the Amber Room of the summer residence of the Russian tsars, The Catherine Palace. As legend has it, Tsarina Catherine II used the room as a hiding place.²⁹ However, unlike the decadent jewelled panels of its namesake, there is a stark emptiness to this installation.³⁰ The panels in question were stolen when the Nazis raided the palace during World War II and have never been recovered. The restored Amber Room was

completed in 2003, after a reconstruction period of twenty four years. Like the questionable democracy of contemporary Russia, this kind of verbatim restoration or historical fabrication might be identified as another level of mimicry. Medical Hermeneutics' incarnation of the room stripped bare may also be symptomatic of a postmodern loss of the referent. According to Jean Baudrillard: 'history is our lost referential, that is to say our myth.'³¹ He goes on to say that anything serves to escape the void of declining referentials, stating that 'all previous history is resurrected in bulk – a controlling idea no longer selects, only nostalgia endlessly accumulates.'³² Like Baudrillard, Medical Hermeneutics share a loss of faith in objective reality and the narrative enchainment of events. Their position tends more towards intersecting stories and trans-historical wandering. And as with some of their other works, there is an excavation of the pre-modern and the pre-Soviet through allusions to ancient folklore and imperialist Russia.

Although the performances of Medical Hermeneutics were quite rare and discreet, many of their installations carry the stamp of their presence. Paralleling the number of group members, sets of three are a recurring feature of their work. For instance, *Amber Room* incorporates three large white balloons, virtually dominating the space, each painted with a human face. In addition to these floating heads, there is a series of framed photographs of icons against the walls, each guarding a wrinkled apple on cushion, which is modelled as an Orthodox domestic shrine. The arrangement of these little household altars demonstrates a wilful disregard for convention. As Pepperstein explains, 'the icons have been recorded sideways instead of frontally, thus demonstrating perspective, a Western invention which is usually denied in Orthodox representations.'³³ In this way, the group invents their own pseudo-religious brand of 'holiness,' substituting one superstition for another and pushing the limits of the interpretable.³⁴ Although this work may not deliver the kind of provocation we have come to expect from political art, it may satisfy Rancière's understanding of 'suitable

political art', which ensures '... the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.'³⁵ The practice of Medical Hermeneutics can be seen as creating ideological fissures – reorganising materials in order to obstruct an anticipated meaning while simultaneously eliciting new meaning. The way they interrupt the associative logic that binds things together can be read in accordance with Rancière's distribution of the sensible; referring to a certain framing of space and time 'in which a social destination is anticipated by the evidence of a perceptive universe, of a way of being, saying and seeing.'³⁶ Through drawing on established ideologies to construct their own mythologies, Medical Hermeneutics seeks to undo these behavioural knots, uprooting what is deemed factual in the perceptive universe.



Inspection Medical Hermeneutics, *Amber Room*, 1991, mixed media, exhibited at Raven Row Gallery for 'A History of Irritated Material', 2010, photo: Marcus J Leith

The balloons represent a recurring character that goes by the name of *kolobok*, a perfectly round ball of dough featured in an East Slavic fairy-tale. The adventures of kolobok frequently involve meeting various creatures who conspire to eat it, and its subsequent escapes. Contrary to its fairy-tale innocence, there is an implication of 'escape' situated in context to the theft of the amber panels. This cunning character has also been used as a metaphor for the evasive artist, who has a tendency to disappear when aggressive interpretation sets in.³⁷ It was originally used in connection with Ilya Kabakov, who writes of kolobok as 'an apt image of one who doesn't want to be recognised, named, assigned some specific role, to some specific place, and instead slips away from all this.'³⁸ In light of its wider symbolism within Moscow Conceptualism, kolobok is representative of the dawning of a different kind of art world and the border between privacy and a more hesitant publicity. As well as symbolising ideological amorphousness or an unwillingness to explain, this wider art world predicament is similarly relevant to Medical Hermeneutics. In some ways, the slippery nature of kolobok resonates with the Occupy movement's refusal to issue a set of dictates, consequently resisting the formation of political subjectivity. Drawing on W.J.T Mitchell's essay, the strategic refusal to speak – and to elude a specific role or place – demonstrates the aim 'not to seize power but to manifest the latent power of refusal'³⁹.

There may be an interesting parallel between Medical Hermeneutics' denial of conventional modes of interpretation and a frustrated sense of post-Soviet voicelessness.⁴⁰ For example, the Radek Community, active between 1997 and 2004, staged a series of actions under the label, *Manifestations*. These consisted of artists and participants waiting at a cross-walk during Moscow's peak hour, and when the lights turn green the surrounding mass of people are inadvertently channelled into a political procession. Part authentic and part

fabricated, this creates the illusion of a physically and ideologically united movement. There is only a momentary sense of solidarity before the crowd disperses. In an actionist adaption of Situationist strategies, the Radek Community opted to find and attempt to steer a collective body, rather than build one from scratch. Further, the banners held by participants are printed with absurdist and anarchist slogans, some with scratched out letters, for example, one reads: “An**her W**ld is Poss**le.” Referring to the slogan coined at the inaugural World Social Forum in 2001, one may detect a yearning to express solidarity with the counter-globalisation movement unfolding at the time. The punctured legibility of this phrase exemplifies how the group simultaneously invests in language and acknowledges its inadequacy, broadcasting optimistic statements shot through with nihilism. In fact, the group describes their demonstrations as ‘defined by our disappointment with and our hope for the prospects of finding a new language.’⁴¹ It is as if they are contemplating something lost, intensifying gaps and sifting through fragments, all the while in search of a group identity. With further references to Karl Marx and *The Sex Pistols*, they are channelling a post-punk moment in which the action bears the frustration of its own emptiness.⁴² In a retrospective essay on the Radek Community, David Riff concludes ‘... all (the group) could do was to mark the vanishing possibility for the aesthetic expression of political subjectivity in social space.’⁴³ This bleak idea of vanished possibilities speaks to the socio-political milieu of the time, but it also resonates with the way Medical Hermeneutics intensifies the holes and misunderstandings that quickly twists history into fiction.

The idea of ‘filling the gaps’ is integral to the artistic rationale of Medical Hermeneutics. The group colonises these empty ‘elliptic’ spaces and symbols. By inserting their own playful and private meanings, they seem to be more preoccupied with the process of meaning-making itself. To draw in the Moscow Conceptualist experience of life in the Soviet Union, there seems to be a continuation of the idea of a journey without a destination. This certainly

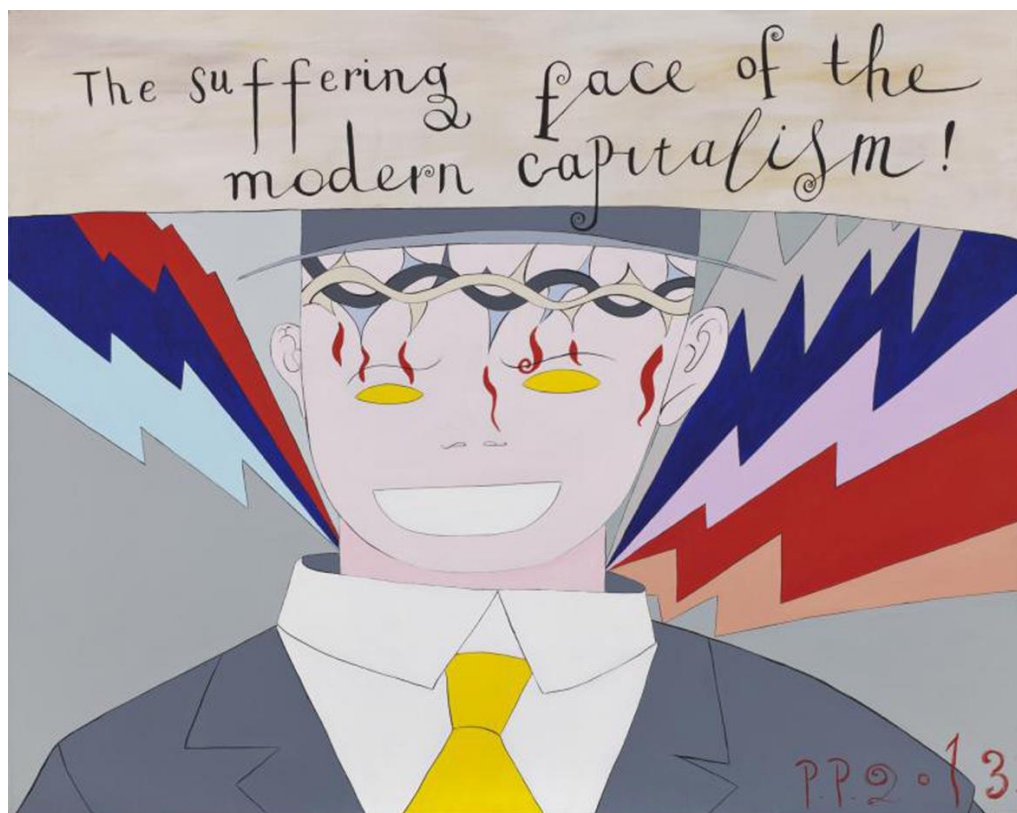
resonates with the Radek Community's *Manifestations*, which are initially charged with revolutionary spirit. However, the fragmentation of the crowd reveals the action to be superficial, turning it into a pointless political meandering – it is almost as if the group is able to glimpse the revolutionary energy of Occupy Wall Street on the horizon but unable to muster sufficient momentum. The way Medical Hermeneutics composes interactions between objects, charged with ideological significance, undermines their status as what Rancière might refer to as 'perceptible givens,' consequently thwarting their social destination.

Religion and Resistance

Reflecting on Russia's tense political climate post-2011, we can perhaps detect a more explicit politicisation of cultural practice. Younger artists such as Pussy Riot, Voina and Petr Pavlensky – though active prior to 2011 – have roused significant global attention. Of course, it is necessary to contextualise this claim by acknowledging the obstacles faced by many artists. In particular, Dmitry Vilensky describes the repressive conditions as stifling publication, teaching and exhibition opportunities for *Chto Delat*.⁴⁴ In terms of the evolving character of state nationalism, an ideological collaboration has solidified between church and state. For instance, in 2012, a section of the presidential administration was dedicated to the 'strengthening of spiritual-normative foundations.'⁴⁵ The Orthodox Church has formed an integral part of United Russia's patriotic program whereby 'non-believers' have become synonymous with 'enemies of the state.'

To extract the solo career of Pavel Pepperstein from Medical Hermeneutics, his 2014 exhibition, 'Holy Politics', at Moscow's Regina Gallery can be seen as an insightful commentary on politics and religion as the twin poles of ideological domination in Russia and Europe. The show consisted of a number of richly coloured dreamscapes populated by a

host of cartoonish characters. Scattered with various flags and nationalist icons, there is an implication of both menace and play. These paintings are a child-like insight into contemporary politics, or perhaps a geo-political version of *Alice in Wonderland*. Each painting is captioned with a calligraphic slogan – some exhibit a tension between riddle and polemic, or enemy and ally, while others are outright condemnations. While Pepperstein’s Suprematist-inspired vocabulary has softened into looser forms there is a hardening of political sentiment. To focus on the ‘Holy’ counterpart of the exhibition, it seems as if ideology, mythology and religiosity are wrapped up into one dystopian bundle. For instance, there is a corporate-looking character wearing a crown of thorns and dripping blood, accompanied by the words: ‘the suffering face of the modern capitalism!’ Although there is no specific reference to a Russian Orthodox backdrop, a sense of ironic worship is conveyed throughout the series.



Pavel Pepperstein, *The Suffering Face of the Modern Capitalism*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm, exhibited at Regina Gallery, Moscow, 2014, photo: Regina Gallery

Another unforgettable union of politics and religion is Pussy Riot's 2012 *Punk Prayer*, performed in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ our Saviour. Skyrocketing to stardom, the slick aesthetic of the group has become one of the most easily digested forms of contemporary rebellion and feminism. To elaborate on the significance of their chosen performance venue, like the reconstructed Amber Room at the Catherine Palace, the cathedral is a near replication of the original which was built in 1889 and demolished in 1933 in order to make way for the colossal Stalinist centrepiece, The Palace of the Soviets. As a consequence of funding failures, the foundation hole was transformed into Moscow's biggest open air swimming pool until reconstruction took place in 1995. Groys appropriately characterises Moscow's architecture as restorative: 'a programmatic rejection of the contemporary international idiom.'⁴⁶ In this way, the future brought a return to the past: a capitalist, folklorist and pre-feminist Russia. Pussy Riot's performance engages with the idea of counter-cultural facades and the brittle pretence of a separation between church and state. They performed on the site of a stamped-out history: the stitched-up wound between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first. In choosing this architectural beacon of traditional values, they occupy a space that deliberately excludes them.

Of course, it is crucial to recognise the vastly different audiences intended for these respective works; Pepperstein is creating for the art market while Pussy Riot is performing to challenge the political system. Nevertheless both artists utilise the fertile superstition that permeates civil life in Russia to create work that undermines the authority of 'holiness.' Exhibiting a fierce aesthetic energy and carnivalesque grotesquery, they revel in the absurdity of ideologies that have been oppressively naturalised.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In thinking through the timeline of post-Soviet Russian art, Gleb Napreenko outlines an important difference between early Moscow Conceptualism and the approach of contemporary artists to Putinism. He claims this is ‘the difference between the study of rhetoric hollowed out and robbed of truth, and a rhetoric that consists of lies to begin with’.⁴⁸ In spite of their political, aesthetic and historical differences, Medical Hermeneutics and Chto Delat engage with destabilised ideologies. Attuned to persuasive function of these ideologies – perpetuating a ‘normalised’ reality or ‘the natural way of things’ – they manipulate modes of expression that are conducive to domination. It is the aesthetic reorganising of political languages that binds them together in this instance.

Perhaps the primary aesthetic method favoured by Medical Hermeneutics is re-purposing the material shards of ruling ideologies in order to construct their own obscure mythologies. In fact the group coined the term ‘ideo-technique’ to refer to ‘the science of ideological production and ideological creation.’⁴⁹ In a different way to Brecht, they break the totality of the form, not through undermining the presumption of social cohesion (and obedience), but through isolating, deactivating, and *reactivating* the individual parts that make up the whole. This, in part, is why Rancière provides a unique means of unlocking their practice; the way he examines the portioning of parts and positions within ‘the perceptive universe’ leads toward a more radical theorising of political potential and emancipation.

On the other hand, Chto Delat’s use of Brecht’s political and aesthetic theories injects ideology into the closed sphere of fictional story telling. Incidentally, this is not dissimilar to Rancière’s assertion that writing histories and writing stories – testimony and fiction – come under the same regime of truth.⁵⁰ Through blurring the distinction between reality and

performance, actor and character, and producer and consumer, Chto Delat challenges the implicit hierarchies driving cultural production in a typical Brechtian way. The conclusion of *The Russian Woods* is particularly important in terms of exhibiting how ‘stepping out of character’ and breaking the aesthetic form is akin to the revolutionary moment when ‘society turns against itself’.⁵¹ Analysed within a global framework, this can be interpreted as a theatrical analogy for the sense of political disobedience underpinning the Occupy movement.

It is the disavowal of conventional modes of expressing political subjectivity that links these collectives to the Occupy movement. It may be significant to consider Rancière’s interpretation of fiction in *Film Fables* not as feigning but as forging.⁵² In this sense, ‘feigning’ ignorance in regard to how a revolution is enacted, how a set of demands is formed and issued to a government, how a worker should revolt against his or her master or even how sacred objects should be positioned in a domestic space amounts to a kind of ideological assault. More importantly, it can also be a means of *forging* a new path and broadening the spectrum of possibility.

In thinking about the legacy of the Soviet Union and carving out spaces for political dissidence, Vladimir Sorokin relates an anecdote regarding a 1991 demonstration in Moscow’s Lubienskaya Square.⁵³ A huge crowd ready to topple a KGB monument was halted when a Yeltsin associate warned through a megaphone: ‘it might crash through the pavement and damage important underground communications.’⁵⁴ Surprisingly, the crowd patiently waited for a crane to arrive in order to methodically disassemble the monument. Sorokin suggests that this kind of ‘polite’ dismantling actually conserved the ideological potency of Soviet power. Perhaps a necessary moment of disobedience was downgraded to a more restrained moment of civil co-operation.

Medical Hermeneutics and Chto Delat do not sidestep ideology, as if such a thing were possible, they occupy and manipulate ideological languages in order to assert their presence within society. Through diluting the solidity of ruling ideologies – as Konstaninova sets out to do with her soft sculptures – we can understand the ‘truth’ of political power as a certain material arrangement that can be rearranged.

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- ² Gilbert, “Allegories of Art, Politics, and Poetry”
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- ⁴ David Graeber, ‘The Anarchist Roots of Occupy Wall Street’ in Gregory Scholette and Oliver Ressler, eds, *It’s the Political Economy, Stupid!*, Pluto Press, London, 2013, p 114
- ⁵ Bernard E. Harcourt, ‘Political Disobedience’ in *Occupy: Three Enquiries into Disobedience*, University of Chicago Press, London, 2013, p 46
- ⁶ Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin’s Russia*, Routledge, New York, 2013, p 207
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, Verso, London, 1991, p 5
- ⁹ Gilbert, ‘Allegories of Art, Politics, and Poetry’
- ¹⁰ Similar to the thematic scope of this essay, T.J. Demos uses Rancière in his 2013 book, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, to examine post-Enlightenment paradigms of truth and the political use-value of documentary forms.
- ¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2006, p 39
- ¹² Claire Bishop, ‘Zones of Indistinguishability: Collective Actions Group’, *e-flux*, journal 29, November 2011, accessed 3 June, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/zones-of-indistinguishability-collective-actions-group-and-participatory-art/>
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- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, University of Chicago Press, London, 2010, p 230
- ¹⁶ Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p160

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- ¹⁹ This work was shown as part of the exhibition *Glasnost: Soviet Non-Conformist Art from the 1980's*, held at the Haunch of Venison gallery in London, 2010
- ²⁰ Chto Delat, 'The Russian Woods,' *ChtoDelat?*, 2012, accessed July 14, 2014, http://chtodelat.org/category/b8-films/v_3/fa_2/
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- ²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, 'Occupy Wall Street: what is to be done next?', *The Guardian*, April 24, 2012, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/apr/24/occupy-wall-street-what-is-to-be-done-next>
- ²⁵ Groys, *History Becomes Form*, p 153
- ²⁶ Pavel Pepperstein, 'Inspection Medical Hermeneutics', *Raven Row Gallery*, 2010, accessed August 18, 2014, <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/19/>
- ²⁷ Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*, Central European University Press, Budapest – New York, 2013, p 37
- ²⁸ Interestingly, Larsen draws upon Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics, who describes irritability as something that is not necessarily negative. It can involve frictional heat or excitement, or other ways of pushing tolerance (Lars Bang Larsen, 'A History of Irritated Material,' *Raven Row Gallery*, accessed May 20, 2014, <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/16/>)
- ²⁹ Pepperstein, 'Inspection Medical Hermeneutics'
- ³⁰ Much has been written on 'emptiness' as the aesthetic *modus operandi* of the Moscow Conceptualists. The definition of the term in the abridged translation of 'The Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism', edited by Andrei Monastyrsky, reads: 'an extraordinarily active "negative" space directed entirely toward everyday reality, which it constantly seeks to "swallow," sucking and feeding its energy.' (Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art*, p 317)
- ³¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1995, p 43
- ³² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p 43
- ³³ Pepperstein, 'Inspection Medical Hermeneutics', <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/19/>
- ³⁴ According to Groys, Medical Hermeneutics' pseudo-religiosity is typical of the older artists of Moscow Conceptualism who created their own 'personal but at the same time all-encompassing ideologies designed to guarantee – at least for themselves – the objective significance of their artistic production' (*History Becomes Form*, p 155)
- ³⁵ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p 63

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- ³⁶ Jacques Rancière, 'Thinking Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics' in Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds, *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London – New York, 2011, p 7
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- ³⁹ W.J.T Mitchell, 'Image, Space, Revolution' in *Occupy: Three Enquiries into Disobedience*, University of Chicago Press, London, 2013, p 103
- ⁴⁰ Irina Aristarkova, 'Beyond Representation and Affiliation: Collective Action in Post-Soviet Russia' in Blake Stimson and Gregory Scholette, eds, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p 254
- ⁴¹ David Riff, 'Radek Retrospective (Part 2)', *Moscow Diary*, January 24, 2008, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://driff.wordpress.com/2008/01/24/radek-retrospective-part-ii-where-the-community-got-its-name/>
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- ⁴³ David Riff, 'Radek Retrospective (Part 2)' *Moscow Diary*
- ⁴⁴ Dmitry Vilensky and Artur Zmijewski, 'Fucking Winter Outside' in Marta Dziewanska, Ekaterina Degot and Ilya Budraitskis, eds, *Post-post Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade*, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2013, p 101, Vilensky states: 'We're already paying a price by being seriously excluded from local public life. I cannot teach in Russia, despite the fact that I am teaching in leading art academies around the world. And all our exhibition proposals are rejected.'
- ⁴⁵ Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia*, p 219
- ⁴⁶ Boris Groys, 'Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Postcommunist Other' in Okwui Enwezor et al., ed, *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta11_Platform1*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 2002, p 317
- ⁴⁷ See Eliot Borenstein's essay analysing the appropriateness of Pussy Riot's performance, unfolding on the site of so much historical and architectural revisionism, he claims the 'prayer becomes the poltergeist phenomenon for which this site has waited for decades' (Eliot Borenstein, 'Holy Appropriate: why Pussy Riot and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour are a match made in heaven', *The Calvert Journal*, January 22, 2014, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://calvertjournal.com/comment/show/1983/christ-the-saviour-moscow-pussy-riot>)
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⁵³ Vladimir Sorokin, 'Let the Past Collapse on Time!', *The New York Review of Books*, May 8, 2014, accessed September 11, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/may/08/let-the-past-collapse-on-time/>

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