Re-activating language: The work of CHTO DELAT and the logos of the revolution

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It is somewhat difficult to sum up the work of CHTO DELAT in a small text, since the collective has been making it their task to not fit into boxes and frameworks. One thing is for certain, their practice is a carefully crafted collective proposition on the commons as an artistic path, through an embodied politics of care.

The group is involved with realising a lot of (im)possibilities in relationship to the power structures that concern education and its systems. They occupy themselves with the transfer of non-epistemic knowledge and its re-evaluation in relationship to indigenous, feminist and intersectional leftist practices, while aiming for abandoning classical hierarchies within the educational system for the horizontal structures that are familiar in left-oriented communal political ideologies. One could say that CHTO DELAT is a group that operates as an alchemist of embodied knowledge, political awareness and transformative collective practice through the systems of education.What is most important, is that, a priori, for the group the frustrations and errors of left-wing ideology are pushed aside, not out of a lack of recognition for its mishaps or dead-ends, but because of them. These mishaps and dead-ends metamorphose into possibilities for a future in a politically emancipated universe that will be truly intersectional, egalitarian while it will be actively performing the commons.

Working with CHTO DELAT entails being in a constant dialogue about politics, current affairs, life, the neoliberal conditions of the art world and the current turbo-capitalist anthropocene that we inhabit. Embarking on the experiment of working with migrant communities in Greece was an idea organically developed through the conversation the collective had with local artists such as Theo Prodromidis, and after their extended visits to the Solidarity Schools of Athens, run throughout the city by volunteer teachers. These schools have been excelling under the superhuman effort of hundreds of teachers that have been toiling to overcome the immense obstacles of bureaucracy of the Greek state and its slow violence directed towards all migrant subjectivities on one hand, and the increasing racism that comes not only from the official outlets of the state apparatus in Greece but a part of society as well.

The idea slowly came after discussions and enquiries on the power of political writing and the possible outcomes that might arise if such texts were used on students that are learning a new language. CHTO DELAT have been already developing methodologies on performative education, therefore such enquiries were a continuation of an already existing practice. It seems it was the specific conditions of Athens that brought forward the common desire to experiment with the political writings of the Zapatistas, with whom CHTO DELAT have worked in the last years. Through their large body of work with the Summer School of Slow Orientation in Zapatism, that introduced the ideas of Zapatism to various audiences and proposed its philosophy as a model for the “Western” subjectivity to consider, CHTO DELAT are looking into models of the commons from the ground. The idea of “encuentros” the horizontal meetings that Zapatistas aim for with local communities in their region, is also employed in the practice of CHTO DELAT. The “encuentros” for Zapatistas aim to disperse and spread information on the struggles against neoliberalism the world over and link local communities with global struggles. For the current conditions of Greece, with a government that is introducing a police state, has increased extraction and fracking and is abolishing the last remnants of a meagre welfare state, while being openly anti-LGBTQI+, anti-feminist and anti-migrant, the words of the Zapatistas seem necessary. How will they be perceived by refugee subjectivities, migrant communities that struggle to survive in an increasingly racist society? The questions that are proposed through the texts of Zapatistas that CHTO DELAT have been collecting and selecting for their reading groups, are posing pivotal questions in reference to the current condition of contemporary subjectivities living in the anthropocene: how can the Zapatistas way of life be transported and utilised in a non-indigenous experience in a SouthEast European capital that has for a decade been experiencing an extreme financial and ethical crisis?

The questions that arise are very many, but open ended. In my view, we can think of their practice as very much connected to the idea of repair and regeneration. This reading of their work is extremely interesting to me, since it is very much linked to the core of what the Solidarity Schools in Athens do: trying to repair the collapsed thirst for knowledge and education that migrant communities have when arriving in a new unfamiliar place and aiming to regenerate the appetite of participating in collective emancipatory structures while building a community of care, solidarity and empowerment. Because a school is the ultimate paradigm and form of a collective practice, which includes one the one hand a set of rules and regulations, but which also opens up possibilities of different structures and improvisation, it is also a great platform which one can study and then aim to reformulate its model. The idea of schooling in the traditional sense is one that CHTO DELAT are departing from, to instead propose a fully democratic exchange of knowledge that suggests, instead of dictating. One might possibly find echoes of their ideas in the ancient greek academy, which was a model of collective learning, where students and teachers intertwined but also were students taught one another. In the ancient greek academy “ακαδημία” for the cultivation and acquisition of true knowledge, one's condition of success was to walk in the path of virtue (αρετή). These systems of teaching that are based on a horizontal exchange of knowledge, and a circular way of teaching can also be found in more contemporary forms of schools such as in recent examples of the “Escuelas Normales” or widely known as Rural Teachers Colleges, found in many parts of the globe, but specifically in Mexico, were they have been flourishing, educating campesinos and indigenous populations since the 1920s.

How can migrant and refugee subjectivities address the questions posed in the Zapatistas texts, being “guests” in an unknown -and at times inhospitable- land? How can we use the knowledge of Zapatism to imagine our lives and society differently, citizens and denizens alike? What is the meaning of progress in a country that has just exited the IMF support mechanism and is under a government that uses the vehicle of privatisation to perform ecological disaster? And what is the power that migrant communities have in such a society? How can we think of life in a harmonious coalition with land and earth? It feels as if the words of Commandande Marcos: “for everyone, everything. For us, nothing” (Para todos todo, para nosotros nada), resonate incredibly in this geopolitical location.

The biggest question that arises, from the endeavour that we are about to embark on, is what is the role of culture in a process of liberation and how much agency can art have when taking the role of the vehicle (or the toolbox if you will) for ideological emancipation. Is this a romantic idea? Possibly. But it is not an impossible idea. Art has rarely had the agency for direct political change. However, art that is engaged in a direct dialogue with societal struggles, art that is reflecting on the conundrums of contemporary society while transferring the message of ideologically sound theory could hold the answers to this current predicament that we find ourselves in. With an ecological catastrophe around the corner, with neo-fascist ideologies spreading like a virus, with a recorded rise in alienation and apathy in contemporary Western subjectivities- art that unearths, proposes and carries the message for an emancipated politicisized life that walks the path of αρετή, can become a positive propaganda tool through logos (λόγος).

And language here is important. It is with care and attention that texts will be addressed, taught and discussed in the slow readings of the Solidarity Schools. Words will unfold and reveal their hidden meanings and messages. Language is one of the most important factors for autonomy and self-determination, or self-definition, which I prefer as a term since it includes the descriptive element of narration and of language. And the question of autonomy is rather important not only for CHTO DELAT, not only for the Zapatistas, but for all movements that strive for it around the globe, such as for instance the Kurds that actualized it through the Rojava Revolution. Lets for a moment consider carefully this link between autonomy, self-definition and language: autonomy according to the words of CHTO DELAT, is important that is “built on a politics of dignity and equality”. For the teachers in Solidarity Schools dignity and equality is the core of their curriculum. By strengthening the language skills of the students they are enhancing their feelings of belonging. Furthermore, the teachers construct concrete, alternate ways of community life, based on ethics, self-care and care of others. For the Zapatistas, dignity and equality form the core principles of their society. Therefore, the profile of the Solidarity Schools is echoing many of the values of Zapatism. The role of the artist here is to gently and invisibly, connect the threads between two similar forms of a collective micro-society and two different paradigms of the commons, that nonetheless have a shared agenda: to walk in the path of virtue. In today’s terms virtue seems to be a continuous struggle: a struggle against inequality and the influence of capitalist globalization, a resistance against the destruction of traditional forms of living and the environment (which occurs all the more through forms of contemporary land appropriation via fracking or extraction) and the general struggle against repression of indigenous, LGBTQI+, women and all vulnerable communities. If art can bring together people that think alike, then it might possibly regain its political potency.