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‘Re-politicisation’.

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will consider the specific performance, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* by the Russian Collective Chto Delat? as an artistic strategy that revises and interrogates the Brechtian conceptual and aesthetic format of the ‘learning play’ in order to re-establish a political dimension in the space of a gallery that can react to the current post-socialist and globalized geopolitical scenario.

Starting with the assumption that the contemporary era is dominated by the hegemony of globalization and neo-liberal capitalism —a political and cultural paradigm that neutralizes the political—I show how it is possible, through the means of art and culture, to reactivate a dynamic of antagonism that constitutes the basis of the political and that can lessen the power of the dominant ideology.

To develop my argument I will consider the notion of ‘de-politicisation’ as investigated by Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* to contradict the usual understanding of this historical phase as the death of the political. The French-Algerian philosopher reads this phenomenon as generative, because it is precisely when the antagonism between two political visions is subsumed under the name of a singular ideology that we can imagine different typologies of politic. I will adopt this ‘de-politicisation’ as a fruitful way to understand the contemporary condition of globalisation as a generative situation for testing other alternatives to it and to reconfigure a new political dimension. This is a method that Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* has named ‘re-politicisation’. He suggested as a tactic, that rather than forgetting the past, or interpreting it through the eyes of the fixed main historical narrative, one has to insist on it even more in order to question and revise it. This re-establishes an antinomy that allows the political to diminish the supremacy of a one singular world without enemies --as for instance the East and West Europe, and the

US.

In considering this to be the conceptual frame through which I will read the on-going geopolitical condition, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the enemy of Communism dissolved, and I will interpret the 'learning play' of Chto Delat? as an action that can react to 'normalisation' as a paradigm that decreed the end of history and of ideologies. Their performance puts into action within the gallery the Derridean 're-politicisation' through recuperating the Brechtian theatrical format of *Lehrstücken*.

In my reading of the 'learning play' as a space in theatre for instigating both the audience and the actors/participants to prove options to a given political situation, I will argue that this specific aesthetic solution can realise a dynamic of 're-politicisation'. Further I will prove that the fact that the Russian Collective, recuperates this model in a gallery space, manifests not only the responsibility to face our past and revise it in order to open up a generative process for different politics, but also tests the 'learning play' itself in order to see how this tactic can be useful for responding to the current death of the political.

In order to develop my argument I will firstly introduce the practice of Chto Delat? in order to draw a dramaturgy that can theoretically contextualise the performance in their entire body of work. Secondly, I will briefly analyse the late and post-socialist phase in order to understand how this leads us into the present moment. According to the reading of that historical moment I will argue that the current 'neutralisation' is at its end, the same phenomenon of imposition of a singular ideology of the kind that occurred during the Soviet time.

Then connecting 'de-politicisation' as a generative notion for the political to return, I will demonstrate how it can be possible to respond to 'normalisation' with a method that Derrida has named 're-politicisation' and that one can possibly find in the Brechtian 'learning play' its aesthetic solution. The reading of the *Lehrstücken* offered by Reiner Steinweg as a never ending learning method is what conceptually allows us

to connect this format to the concept of ‘re-politicisation’.

At the end I will read the specific performance *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* as an aesthetic strategy which recuperates the antagonism that is at the basis of the political and which reactivates a discourse on possible alternatives to the current hegemony of globalisation—that is in the end, a super-imposed ideology of the same kind of Communism before its end.

2. Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?)

Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?) is a Russian collective founded in 2003 by a group of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod. The main goal of the ‘workgroup’—as they used to call themselves—is to merge political theory, art and activism and to create a platform that can function as a parallel infrastructure to the ‘art world’. Their practice includes a homonymous magazine, each issue being devoted to a different theme, and a web platform that gathers all the elements that influence their artistic practice (listed on their website as: ‘newspapers, work material’; ‘text and theory’; ‘networks, partners and friends’), as well as documentation of their artworks (‘art projects’; ‘films and video’; ‘theater and performances’). The group is made up of ten members. Five are artists: Olga Egorova/Tsaplya, Nikolai Oleinikov, Natalia Pershina/Glucklya, Kirill Shuvalov, and Dimitry Vilensky; three are philosophers: Artiom Magun, Alexei Penzin, and Oxana Timofeeva; one an art critic: David Riff; and one a poet and critic: Alexander Skidan.

The collective’s chosen name, Chto Delat?, is a political statement and gives a sense of the conceptual reasoning behind their practice. Even though the title is universally known as the question formulated by Lenin in his famous treatise—and that later became an intellectual obsession for leftist thinkers—the name originates from a lesser-known heritage: it is the title of the novel by the nineteenth-century Russian author Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Mobilising the name of the group towards a political statement the artistic collective declares from the beginning its intentions to revise

and reformulate the fixed parameter of history as accepted until now. They ‘deconstruct’ the shared understanding of Eastern History, both in their local context and in the Western one, not to substitute the ‘common sense’ with another, but rather to disclose another narrative of the history.

As they did with the Lenin inheritance, questioning the origin of the motto ‘What Is To Be Done?’, the group oriented its practice towards challenging the fixed cultural values as narrated by the shared conception of history, art history, political theory and theatre. This methodology became an aesthetic strategy that will be deployed through the course of their activity, and in which the Bertolt Brecht’s influence has become the core material for their pieces of theatre and performance. They not only highlight the symbolic significance of ‘defamiliarisation’¹ but also give the method its own existence in actual artistic practice, continuously referencing past traditions, while questioning and re-contextualising them. As admitted by Dimitry Vilensky, one of the members of the group: “We use Brecht, because what he has done offers us a series of techniques and conceptual frames that we can use for testing our present moment”².

The collective initially used the question as a name for their newspaper, which was first published and available in PDF format online in 2003, when the group started their artistic collaboration. This also coincided with the organisation of their first group art event, which made it clear from the beginning that the group was interested in blurring, or perhaps *reshaping*, the duality of art and life, since the action intentionally merged the aesthetic of demonstration with that of performance (*The Refoundation of Petersburg*, 2003). The fact that they continue to make explicit that the origin of their name comes from the Chernyshevsky novel, rather than Lenin’s

¹ This term comes from an analysis of the estrangement effect made by Frederic Jameson in *Brecht and Method* and it refers to the aesthetic and conceptual strategy in which it becomes possible to detach certain cultural values or narrations of history from the shared and conventional understanding. In this way, then, the common sense is broken down and it opens up a dimension that allows a reconsideration or simply a questioning of the accepted and shared common sense. This method will be investigated later in this chapter as a central influence of Brecht to which Chto Delat? devoted their practice. Further, this ‘defamiliarisation’ will be the praxis of more general deconstructivist approach with particular reference to the Derrida’s methodology. Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London and New York, 1998.

² Conversation held with Dimitry Vilensky in July 2012.

treatise, is significant in describing the goal of their activity: faced with a certain history (which is practically local: the novel is well known in Russia and is still taught to school children), they attempt to transpose their collective history to a global level, making the 'unknown' 'known' for the international community while at the same time interrogating the local historical and cultural inheritance.

An 'expanded dynamic of collaboration', occupies a central role in their activity, both for the formation of the collective as a space for creative production, and for the inclusion of other groups of activists, artists and thinkers depending on the needs of a given project.

Their artistic intention is grounded in expanding and redefining notions of collaboration today, and also in deconstructing preconceptions of political theory or simplifying the inherited history of a particular context. They endeavour to achieve this goal by merging theory (through their magazine for example, which is distributed not only at conferences and on the web, but also during political rallies and demonstrations) with practice (through the concrete visualisation of films, performances, learning plays, and installations).

In the project *Angry Sandwich People or In Praise of Dialectics* (2005), they instigated a protest in the form of a theatrical action based on a poem by Bertolt Brecht, that took place in a public space. In *Activist Club* (2007) they created a further development of the prototype of the unrealised project of the Constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Worker's Club* (1925). These artworks are not just replicas of the past or theoretical references, but rather constitute an attempt to reactivate the utopian vision that historical experiences sought to develop—a vision in which an aesthetic experience in a public space can merge with the Political, thus building a social consciousness.

Central to their practice is also the use of the format of *Songspiel* (from the German *Singspiel*), a term first used by Kurt Weill in the title of his opera *Mahagonny: A Songspiel*, and which consists of a musical drama that intersperses spoken dialogue

with song. A recent Chto Delat? Songspiel film, *Museum Songspiel: The Netherlands 20XX*, 2011, the fourth work in what was previously a triptych (*Perestroika Songspiel*, 2008; *Partisan Songspiel*, 2009; *Tower Songspiel*, 2010), shows in an exemplary way how this kind of format—a contemporary mash-up of musical comedy with classical Greek tragedy—can develop a critique of the transnational societies of post-Perestroika Russia, not only as a local history but as something that can speak to the West and to the crisis of its neo-liberal regimes.

Museum Songspiel: The Netherlands 20XX breaks tradition with the previous three works, which have narratives based primarily on the historical events of Perestroika and post-Perestroika Russia. Embracing the stylistic genre of dystopian films, it is set in a future society with a government that is corrupted or simply paralysed. The dystopian genre, while representing a catastrophic future, sheds light on the perverse mechanisms operating in contemporary society. In this future Dutch society, symbolically represented by the Van Abbemuseum, all immigrants are rejected from the country. The film's opening shot is of a museum guard controlling the galleries and introduces the presence of a group of immigrants who seek refuge in the museum within a display/cage built for hosting street-art. The complexity of the situation, in which the national authorities ban immigrants, is solved by the 'bureaucratic' figure of the museum director, who, after a long discussion with the museum's curator, finds a fictional stratagem in reply to journalists' accusations of illegal behaviour by the museum. The director argues that the institution did not intend to offer them asylum but rather that the immigrants were hired to do a performance. In this way the film addresses some political consideration about what role a museum can play when a populist and nationalist government undermines the legal system of a country. Set in the contemporary Dutch political context, the film offers a universal 'critique' that can apply to other similar situations, and especially to present-day Russia.

By using the format of Songspiel they attempt to build up a trans-national and trans-historical historiography that can be opposed to the hegemonic Western narration. They are not offering us a definitive vision in order to replace the dominant understanding of history but rather they are incorporating into it another possible

vision as part of the same ontology.

The format of the *Songspiel* shares the same methodology of a Brechtian ‘learning play’ and the same spirit of ‘testing’, although its internal dynamic is less open in envisioning the multiplicity of proofs to which a given problem is to be submitted. It is a scripted, pre-staged format of a play with professional actors, that is subsequently recorded as a film, yet is without the impermanency and flexible structure that is the essential character of the Brechtian *Lehrstücken*. In the latter, things can happen *hic et nunc*; the audience is activated, the amateur actors can test the scripts, and possibly change the course of events.

I therefore analyse one of the ‘learning plays’ performed by Chto Delat? as a way to incorporate a pedagogical turn into the space of art—a pedagogy that is not a hierarchical structure, that cannot be seen as an imposition of a given perspective from the top, but rather a pedagogy that allows art to be a test-bed for the question ‘What Is to Be Done?’.

In this respect, a useful signpost for the aim of this chapter is the transposition of the philosophical methodology of Dialectic (the Hegelian trilogy: thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis) as a method for generating knowledge into the realm of praxis, that is to say, according to the context under scrutiny here, into the realm of theatre. A strategy that pervades the entire work of Brecht is the use of the theatre space as the place where theory can marry practice through acting. A methodology that the Russian collective, in referencing Brecht, adopts and expands.

In this way, the Great Method, that is to say the Dialectic, is not only a way of

thinking, but also a way of living, or way of acting.³ It is the point of conjunction between *praxis* and *poiesis*. And further, it is the space in which two opposite realities can be subsumed in the decision to act, or better to play. It is an action that does not represent the end, or a solution that merges the thesis and the antithesis together, but is a space where in the exposure of the thesis, its opposite: the antithesis is revealed to be contained within it. This possibility theatre offers to respond to theoretical dilemmas is clear, and in this case, the problem of the ‘neutralisation’ of the political—which is the object of investigation here—is generative in testing how it is possible to translate the realm of logic into an ontology, and how this live action can comment or inform consequently the political theory.

The work of Chto Delat? as analysed here offers a space for reflecting on the notion of ‘re-politicisation’ as briefly described in the introduction. With this term the French-Algerian philosopher overcomes the binary logic of the dialectic in which two separate entities, the thesis and anti-thesis, will generate a final stage in the synthesis, a phase in which one can read the promise of an emancipatory end of the history toward a future plan. Opposing this is a new logic that can contain horizontally the anti-thesis—the other political project—into the thesis—the current political *status quo* seen as the realisation of that emancipatory promise, sanctioning the end of the history, the end of ideology and subsequently the death of the political. This notion of history is elaborated for instance by the duality of ‘master/slave’ in Marx whose ultimate goal is the Communist State, or by Hegel, that with a different political stance saw the liberation of history into the Sovereign State.

Derrida named this method of reasoning as archeo-onto-teleological meaning, with this a logic based on a ‘utopian’ plan in which all human efforts and actions must be

³ I am referring here, when I talk about the Great Method as ‘not only a form of thinking but also a form of living’ to the passage of Bertolt Brecht, *Me-ti*, cited by Frederic Jameson: “Me-ti said: it is advantageous, not merely to think according to the great Method but to live according to the great Method as well. Not to be identical with oneself, to embrace and intensify crises, to turn small changes into great ones and so forth—one need not only observe such phenomena, one can also act them out. One can live with greater or fewer mediations, in more numerous or less numerous relationships. One can aim at or strive for a more durable transformation of one’s consciousness by modifying one’s social being. One can help to make the institutions of the state more contradictory and thereby more capable of development.” (XVIII, 192-193). Quoted by Frederic Jameson in “Prologue”, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, p. 30.

conducted towards achieving.

In order to overcome this logic of narrating history, and more importantly this method of thinking, Derrida suggests another logic of the political: 're-politicisation'. This strategy consists of a perpetual questioning of what we faced in our the past—as for instance the experience of Communism—in order to test this as an alternative to the current hegemonic geopolitical paradigm, that of Neo-liberal Capitalism.

What is relevant for the purpose of this essay is in what Derrida says as to not renounce the emancipatory promise of a method of building history of the kind that we analysed above, but instead rather to insist even more on 'the very indestructibility of "it is necessary"'⁴ in order to first re-activate the political and secondly to generate other possible plans.

It is on the light of this new consideration of the political that I will read the performance, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* as a strategy that puts into action 're-politicisation'.

3. Late and Post-socialist condition and 'normalisation'

For the history of Europe, the year 1989 was set in stone as the realisation of the end of Communism, or better, the ideological distinctions between the liberal West and the Communist Bloc. The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolises—beyond the actual reunification of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the German Federal Republic (GFR)—a more vast societal, historical and political momentum, that is, a shift towards a post-Socialist reality. It officially ratified the beginning of a new era in which the whole of Europe became free from the phantasms of the totalitarian Communist regimes and more importantly in which the fracture, the liberal West and

⁴ Ibidem 3, p. 94.

the Socialist East,⁵ could be integrated into a unified political and geographical entity in the name of Europe.

In the span of two years—from late 1989 until the end of 1991—all the socialist States of Eastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia—each with their due differences) moved to a post-Socialist reality, as did the Soviet Union in the same period. This move is now popularly examined by a number of art historians and critics—such as Marina Gržinić, Boris Groys, Viktor Misiano and Aleš Erjavec, to mention but a few—as a period of ‘transition’, a historic phase which would have led the Eastern European states towards to a process of democratisation and liberalisation.

If from one side this condition was seen with enthusiasm—as it would liberate the Eastern Bloc’s population from both the oppression of the Leviathan State and the prison of censorship—from the other, this post-Socialist condition generated an ‘ideological, political and social vacuity of the ruling utopian political doctrine, a doctrine that exceeded plain political ideology, for it held in its grasp the whole of the societal field and hence spontaneously affected all social realms’ (Aleš Erjavec, 2003).⁶

The focus of this essay will be on the political implications that this shift away from a situation of antagonism reduced to a neutral unity provokes, and on the hegemonic consequences it produces in the construction of a new ideology. This thinking, which on one hand, has replaced the old ideology—that of Communism—with a new one—that of the globalised neo-liberal Capitalism—and on the other has the potential

⁵ According to Aleš Erjavec the term socialist is more correct than communism in defining the political situation of the East Bloc since in Marxist terms, the former notion is an intermediate phase that will lead to a future society whose characteristics pertain to not only a ‘classless society’ - an element that one can find in the Soviet Union - but also the ‘distribution of wealth according to one’s needs’, something that wasn’t an element of that political and economic structure. (...) “It was patently clear that the Soviet Union of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s could not be designated as already *de facto* communist. Aleš Erjavec, “Introduction”, in Aleš Erjavec, Gao Minglu, Boris Groys, Peter Gyorgy, Gerardo Mosquera and Misko Suvakovic, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*, University of California Press, first printing edition 2003, p. 11.

⁶ Ibidem p. 2.

to recuperate the dynamic ‘friend and enemy’ at the basis of the Political. The latter is what happened, not accidentally in the realm of art and culture.

Through this analysis it is possible to catch the historical phase that preceded the current momentum. In particular the moment of transition that signals the passage from a moment of ‘normalization’, the reality of Socialism seen as the only world possible, toward a phase, that even though was predicated as the liberation from that ‘normalization’ it felt back to another kind of ‘normalisation’, that is called globalisation. That is to say, again, the end of the political.

An in depth analysis of the social, political and economic phenomenon which occurred in the late 1980s is given by Bojana Pejić in her essay, ‘The Dialectics of Normality’.⁷ Pejić defined the phase that preceded the reunification of the former Eastern Bloc countries as a quest by people for normality. That is to say a desire for a unified world without any ‘crazy monster’ or leader, but in which freedom, peace and singular international identities reigned. To this genuine desire for a ‘normal’ reality she proposes a concept of ‘normalisation’, as a political process wielded by Old Communist gerontocracy and the Western European bureaucrats in order to expand the political plan of a liberal, democratic and eternally peaceful subject: that of Europe.⁸

⁷ Bojana Pejić, “The Dialectics of Normality”, in *After the Wall. Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*, catalogue of the touring exhibition curated by Bojana Pejić and David Elliot, Moderna Museet Stockholm, 1999. The exhibition subsequently travelled to Budapest at the Museum Ludwig (2000) and to Berlin at Hamburger Bahnhof (2000-2001).

⁸ In order to strengthen her argument Pejić used the historical events that characterised the integration of the former socialist countries as the most obvious examples of this process of normalisation, guided by the construction of a series of metaphors, primarily proclaimed in official occasions by politicians from both sides—East and West—whose aim was that of persuading people of the benevolence of the European cause, or better of the creation of one singular ideology, that of the free market and of representative liberal democracies. It is not a coincidence that these metaphors included those of travelling, architecture, or of a ‘Common House’, or allusions relating to a journey and/or a path. They can be read as ideological statements that projected the process toward a future, one of post-nationalist realities—a process that it could easily be associated with the common mechanism of Modernity. “Like Christianity and Marxism, both of which subscribe to an eschatological vision of an idealised society in the distant future or at the ‘end of history’, so the ideology of European integration envisages a future-oriented, ‘supranational’ utopia based on a (so far undefined) post-national citizenship.” She used the analysis conducted by Chris Shore in 1997: “Metaphors of Europe: Integration and the Politics of Language”, in *Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, eds. Stephen Nugent and Chris Shore, Pluto Press, London and Chicago, 1997, p. 131-139

In contrast to this process of normalisation as wielded by the globalised apparatus (we should include here the USA and all the current Western political ideology of neo-liberalism), the art critic prefigures the necessity to consider this normality, as a concept that has its own dialectic.

This consideration in political terms reinforces this process of normalisation because it legitimises the hegemonic order according to which all friends (USA, Eastern and Western Europe) lessen the potential for the political, whose foundation is in the antagonism between the friend and the enemy. It is necessary then to highlight the fact that this political neutralisation is not a liberation from Communism but with due changes is in principle the same dimension: a single option, and for this reason it has to be diminished in order to reactivate a political dimension.

As opposed to this normalisation —intended as the new hegemony— that is to say the end of the History or the end of ideologies it can be generative to think about how it is possible to open up a political discourse by suspending neutralisation and undermining its strength.

It seems that a similar recuperation of antagonism can happen in the space of art precisely because the gallery or the museum has the ability to normalise or neutralise any political dimension through the means of the superimposed globalised canons of aestheticisation. Since neutralisation can exist precisely because of the conditions of globalisation—what Derrida will call ‘de-politicisation’—a reactivation of the political can happen only when a dialectical movement is still possible. So is it precisely the gallery space, seen as a ‘normalised’ space— with this I mean the place that nowadays incorporates and perpetuates the hegemony of globalisation — which one can respond to by showing the other side of the same entity, that is to say, the realm of the political. And further what is the best medium, if not performance, which always contains an unpredictable character, and that has the malleability to generate actions by the means of the live body on stage.

The ‘learning play’ performed by Chto Delat? at the ICA might be a generative example of ‘re-politicisation’. Before analysing it, it is useful to understand what the duality of friend and enemy can mean in political sense through addressing the theoretical discourse by Carl Schmitt and by Derrida. Subsequently, I will articulate some thoughts around the notion of ‘re-politicisation’ in order to understand why this new dimension of the political can be the means through which to respond to the phenomenon of ‘normalisation’ that characterizes the current globalisation—as suggested above. The aesthetic and conceptual strategy of *Lehrstücken* by Bertolt Brecht seems to be the most appropriate strategy for that kind of ‘re-politicisation’ to happen in the gallery.

4. Antagonism: Friend and Enemy.

Jacques Derrida cogently makes an attempt to re-contextualise the realm of ‘politics’ in *The Politics of Friendship*. Here he re-positions the basis of the political in the dynamics of friendship, or what he calls later in his book ‘fraternity’. Following the axiom of Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*, which brought back the *a priori* of the Political in the duality ‘friend/enemy’, the philosopher developed a deconstructive statement that overcomes the reductionist formula according to which the very basis of the political is the unidentifiable enemy, against which a number of friends—or the political subject—wish to wage a war (be it actual, eventual or effective).⁹ To this Schmittian position of the necessary preservation of a duality friend and enemy, Derrida offered a more generative approach considering the collapse of that binary logic as the condition in which one can start to test and

⁹ In a passage of *The Politics of Friendship* it is possible to see the way in which the French-Algerian philosopher approaches the axiom of ‘friend and enemy’ as addressed by Schmitt. ‘[If] the specific political actions and notions can be reduced, is the distinction between friend and enemy?’ asks Schmitt. Derrida reacts: ‘[...] here is the Schmittian axiom in its most elementary form: the political itself, the being political of the political, arises in its possibility with the figure of the enemy. It would be unfair, as is often done, to reduce Schmitt’s thought to this axiom, but it would nevertheless be indispensable to his thought, and also to his decisionism, his theory of exception and sovereignty. The disappearance of the enemy would be the death knell of the political as such. It would mark the beginning of the depoliticisation, the beginning of the end of the political.’ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso, London 1997, p. 103.

experiment alternative politics. He defined the societal stage in which there is no enemy but just friends—I want to put into attention that this is the present momentum in which there is antagonism — as ‘de-politicisation’ but rather than, as Schmitt did, thinking about it as just the ‘death knell’ of the political, he showed the potential that this concept contains. It is precisely when society overcomes the dialectic struggle between enemy and friend that it is possible for the political to re-appear in another form, in order to diminish the strength of ‘de-politicisation’ and reconfigure a new dialectical movement that can respond to the changed situation.

Further, Derrida contradicted Schmitt in the way in which this philosophical discourse is structured, opposing to an Hegelian dynamic thesis and antithesis —be it the dichotomy friend and enemy, or alternatively the de-politicisation as opposed to the political subject— a more fluid typology of dialectic where the two opposites are part of the same entity which is the political and are in a perpetual movement in redefining the borders between the space of the one and that of the other. This principle of ‘de-politicisation’ can be easily applicable the current state of affairs, that of a post-Socialist reality and of a dominant logic of global capitalism.

Further the Derridean understanding of ‘de-politicisation’ can help to read the phenomenon of ‘normalization’ —as described above—as generative for a future political subject to come, rather than one that just realises the death of the political.

He imagines: ‘[...] a condition of democracy in which returning to a politics of equals, as friends, it is possible to depoliticise the subject’ and he affirmed that it is still possible to speak of democracy when ‘such a de-politicisation is happening’. He concluded: ‘Is it not precisely this kind of de-politicization that allows the emergence of a new political subject, or of a new democracy?’¹⁰

Is not the case then that the normalization that is happening in the current scenario, or at least as perpetuated by the political techno-media machine, can be taken—as Derrida did with ‘de-politicisation’— as an occasion for testing a different kind of

¹⁰ Ibidem 24, pp. 103-104.

politics that responds to it.

If this helps a logical discourse on the political, by offering a conceptual frame for generating possible alternatives to the superimposed political project, I want to interrogate how this logic *modus operandi* can be put into action, in order to experiment with how it can be effectively realised. Which actions can be chosen in order to lessen the power of globalisation, as the new ideology that ‘depoliticises’ the political? And, more importantly, how can art reclaim its political engagement in the current depoliticised scenario, or better, how can some actions challenge the power of that ‘normalisation’ and reconfigure a new dialectic of antagonist entities?

These questions, that we must have in mind in order to understand the ways this notion of ‘de-politicisation’—that from now on we can alternatively call ‘normalization’, ‘neutralisation’, or simply ‘globalisation’—can offer to art the space for developing a critical stance that can reactivate the political through some actions in the gallery.

I will connect the *poiesis*: what Derrida has defined as ‘re-politicisation’, seen in this concept an option to the end of the political, with *praxis*: the theatrical format of the *Lehrstücken* of Brecht. It is evident that the tactics that the method of the German playwright deployed realise the ‘re-politicisation’ in the space of theatre and subsequently, that Chto Delat? extrapolates some strategies by it in order to question how useful can be nowadays to come back to Brecht, not to expose it as it was but rather to interrogate it.

5. ‘Re-politicisation’ and the *Lehrstücken*.

Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* started from the assumption that Marx, in writing the *Manifesto* declared his obsession with a “spectre”, the one of communism: “A spectre is haunting Europe – the specter of communism”¹¹. Derrida then conceptualises the figure of Marx as both a spectre, the one that now, after 1989, is wandering around

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 2. First published in 1993 under the title, *Spectres de Marx*, Editions Galilée, Paris.

Europe – the spectre of communism – and as figure himself obsessed during his life by spectres. The idea is that Marx was a ghostbuster during his whole life, that while giving chase to ghosts and embattled by them, was himself a ghost for the others. This became even more true, at the time in which the philosopher was writing his *Spectres of Marx*, in which the end of communism imposed a techno-media strategy that manifested the obsession with the spectre of Marx, or better, as Derrida pointed out several times in his publication, with the *Spectres of Marx*.¹²

Thinking about Marx in terms of *hantologie* rather than *ontologie* offers a space for rethinking history in the same terms, a consideration that allows for a reflection on the universality of historiography as a false assumption. Time, and subsequently history is ‘out of joint’¹³, a disjunction in which the present is beyond the existing present, the past is to come, and the *time à venir* is irreversibly past. This theme is well linked with the scenario that Marx described in *Das Capital* in which our reality is spectral since it is dominated by a world in which human beings are dead and the goods are alive, that is to say with Derrida: a reality that is ‘out of joint’.

But if this reality is continuously seeking to capture the ghost it is obsessed with, or nostalgically seeking for its resurrection, than the result is that it becomes the victim of this mechanism, ending in reinforcing it rather than proclaiming its death—as what Europe, and the entire World is doing with Marxism, after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This reflection opens up a forceful argument that can enhance the vision given by Pejič regarding the process of the integration of Europe as ‘normalisation’, the one that seems to be liberated from its ghosts, while at the same time these ghosts are still lingering within this space, precisely because it is in their names, or better against them, that that hegemonic order can happen. Either being against the spectres of the past, for instance against the reality of communism, or standing for their return will

¹² As affirmed by the French-Algerian philosopher: “*There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius. of at least one of his spirits. For this will be our hypothesis or rather our bias: there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them (...)*”. Ibidem 22, p. 14.

¹³ Using the methapor that the Derrida used in the book to describe this new approach to a non-linear history that is at the same time linear, ‘it has anyway its delimited borders’. A metaphor that comes from the Shakespear’s Amlet.

manifest the same horrible experience, that of a singular ideology, or of a political hegemony that does not recognise, as in the words of Derrida, that there is not any past, any present, or any future without existing wandering phantoms in a time that is disjointed. “One never inherits without coming to terms with [*s’expliquer avec*] some specter, and therefore with more than one specter”.¹⁴

This mechanism is something that has pervaded history and philosophy, and to which Derrida juxtaposes a necessary rethinking, or moreover a compulsory mandate to escape ‘the end of the history’ (to paraphrase the title of the book by Fukuyama¹⁵) whose ultimate aim is to rebuild an hegemonic power that does not talk with the ghosts of the past but rather seeks to chase them. Fukuyama’s approach is an example of what Derrida was criticising, an archeo-telo-eschatological logic of history whose end is the Christian morality of a unique possible world, the realisation of an utopian project, the ultimate completion of the human being. The end of history is what led us to totalitarian regimes and to the current ‘normalisation’. What interests us for the purpose of this essay is the Derridian overcoming of the binary logic that has characterised the tradition of Western philosophy and that from Hegel became the dominant model of interpreting history.

This interpretation of history, is *telopoietic* (purpose driven), it is driven towards an ultimate stage – the Communist State in Marx or the Sovereign State in Hegel.

Derrida criticises, or ‘deconstructs’ this *onto-teleologic* and *archeo-telelogic* vision of history (we have to note here how this notion of time, and then of history, hides political implications) in favour of a different notion that is neither ontological, nor ideal, but that contains the emancipatory character of a kind of ‘promise’.

To this binary approach that sanctioned the end of the history Derrida opposes a ‘re-politicisation’ as another concept of the Political, or as the Political itself.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 24. First published in 1993 under the title, *Spectres de Marx*, Editions Galilée, Paris.

¹⁵ The Book in question is: *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York 1992.

With this concept he did not mean a desire to re-establish a new order that would neutralise the differences or lessen the antagonism, but a desire that holds responsibility in acknowledging that a given political project has its own entity, or, moreover its possibility to be 'here and now', precisely because of the condition of indecisiveness that 'promise' and 'decision' contain. Also the philosopher did not intend with 're-politicisation' another end of history, neither an a-historicity but rather a necessity to insist more on this emancipatory or utopian project in the present, not to someday realise it, but to question it in order to generate all the possible alternatives it contains and configure other politics¹⁶.

The current situation, that of a Post-socialist reality seems to be well described by what Jacques Derrida criticised in *Spectres of Marx* as a telo-ontological project that neutralises, not only history, or its historicisation, but consequently the Political, thus revealing what he himself has described in *The Politics of Friendship* as 'de-politicisation'. He subsequently made a claim for a responsibility to be taken when this 'de-politicisation' occurs: a 're-politicisation'. A new dimension of the political that does not contain into the answer to the question its political nature but rather that realises the political by questioning the questions.

Therefore, through constantly proving the validity or the invalidity of the older system of values, and through an urgent re-contextualisation of the past, it seems possible – following the philosophical reasoning of Derrida – to contrast to the phenomenon of 'de-politicisation', 'neutralisation' or 'normalisation', a 're-politicisation'. Through this responsibility it is possible to reveal the weakness of the political hegemony, not to let it collapse in order to substitute it with another one (as in the fall of

¹⁶ As in the words of Derrida: "Permit me to recall very briefly that a certain deconstructive procedure, at least the one in which I thought I had to engage, consisted from the outset in putting into question the onto-theo-but also archeo-teleological concept of history—in Hegel, Marx, or even in the epochal thinking of Heidegger. Not in order to oppose it with an end of history or an ahistoricity, but, on the contrary, in order to show that this onto-theo-archeo-teleology locks up, neutralizes, and finally cancels historicity. It was then a matter of thinking another historicity—not a new history or still less a 'new historicism', but another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise: as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design. Not only one must renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indestructibility of 'it is necessary.' This is the condition of a re-politicisation, perhaps of another concept of the political" (ibidem 30, p. 94).

communism), neither to bolster it for ever (as in the present moment of globalisation), but to question the concept of the hegemony itself whose notion contains, as irreducible, the possibility for an alternative.

To draw a conclusion with this paragraph we will look at this space of ‘re-politicisation’ and to analyse the artistic strategies that can be adopted in order to develop a vision of the history, and thus of the political, which can escape the *telological* approach criticised by Derrida. There is a coincidence between this Derridean re-politicisation and the Brechtian *Lehrstücken*. This coincidence is why I will read the recuperation of the ‘learning play’ by Chto Delat as a tactic that can possibly diminish the hegemony of a singular ideology and that can put into action the suggested ‘re-politicisation’.

In this theatrical format something similar to Derrida’s mechanism for the creation of a new history happens, a new form of decision making that is not solved in the answer to a question, the logic that imposes a choice between two irreducible polarities: the Shakespearian formula, ‘to be, or not to be’ but instead into insisting on the question itself in order to re-contextualise it.

The ‘learning play’, as seen by Steinweg¹⁷, realises a process of learning that tests the limits and potentialities which the question itself poses.

In the *Brechts Modell der Lehrstücke. Zeugnisse, Diskussion, Erfahrungen* (1976)¹⁸

¹⁷ As we will investigate in the following paragraph the analysis of Reiner Steinweg of the Brechtian learning play contains a vision that puts emphasis on the fact that this format was not a ‘top-down’ pedagogical method in which someone teaches something to someone else but as space

in which the process of learning was put into question continuously in order to experiment possible alternative to a due real situation. In exposing sometimes a solution to a given problem, Brecht wanted to show one of the alternatives possible and not to educate the audience and the actors that that alternative was the only considerable. Reiner Steinweg, *Brechts Modell der Lehrstücke. Zeugnisse, Diskussion, Erfahrungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1976.

¹⁸ The reference to this text does not come from an analysis of a primary source (as the text has not yet been translated from German) but from an analysis of it made by the Italian critical commentator Cesare Cases in the introduction of the Italian edition of a collection of the Brechtian ‘learning plays’. Cesare Cases, “Introduzione”, in Bertold Brecht, *Drammi Didattici*, Einaudi editore, Torino, 1951; 1961; 1980.

Reiner Steinweg insisted in the distinction between the “Great Pedagogy” and the “Small Pedagogy” referring to a text that he found in 1930 in which the former was described as a whole transformation of the act of playing: the actors are students, the distinction between actors and spectators is abolished in the name of the universal law according to which ‘the interest of the single is the interest of the State’. Thus this form of pedagogy knows only ‘imitative acting’.

In the latter instead, there is only a ‘democratisation of theatre’. The dichotomy between the actors and spectators is still present, despite the actors having to be *amateurs* as much as possible. In this educational system the role of the professional actor is to weaken the bourgeois system of values in the place that *par excellence* represents the system’s values, the theatre, and for which purpose the audience has to be activated. He or she doesn’t have to ‘aesthetically react’, but rather has to take a position. So, the ‘Great Pedagogy’ seems to work parallel to the socialist state, instead the other—which is the one adopted by Brecht, is a ‘compromise’ that serves to battle against the bourgeois class.

The analysis that Steinweg made led him to a consideration that allows us to link the ‘re-politicisation’ to which Derrida was referring and the ‘aesthetic strategy’ adopted by Brecht within the ‘learning play’. “The performers mimic a certain behaviour to learn it, but not passively accepting it: they test it to see if it works in a given situation, and if does not work, they can modify it while modifying the scripts.” (Cesare Cases, 1980)¹⁹.

Steinweg insisted in this ‘proving’ character of *Lehrstücke* and on its potential to modify, thanks to its temporary and impermanent structure. He opposes the dominant reading of the ‘learning play’ as a space for teaching that is imposed by an external ‘teacher’, a vision of the format that considers it as an act of learning itself and as a space for proving, re-proving, testing fixed ‘external values’, including history and political ideas.

¹⁹ Ibidem 24.

It is on this spirit that the recuperation of the 'learning play' by Chto Delat? has to be understood. Despite the plurality of understanding of this Brechtian theatrical format and method, the Russian collective use and test its validity, picking up the real democratic sense of it: they relocate the use of the space of theatre as a place for questioning, proving by means of *Lehrstücke* and they did it in a gallery frame. The fact that traditionally, the gallery is meant to narrate certain histories through exhibiting objects (paintings, installations and sculpture) or showing a performance in which the audience is not a participant but a spectator, is what made the Russian collective's piece particularly powerful. They, as Brecht did, activated the audience, first exposing them to the ambiguity of certain fixed ideologies, as for instance that of Communism or that of the current globalised scenario in which the gallery is also embedded, and secondly, invited them to participate to the discussion that was previously going on the stage. The groups on stage also followed an unpredicted dynamic, they did not receive any scripts for acting, but were learning how to act while they were acting. They used this 'depoliticised' space for realising a 're-politicisation'.

Even though the focus of the analysis here is on the method of the 'learning play' it is fundamental to unfold the whole inheritance of Brecht, as one of the tools that pervades the entire practice of Chto Delat? and specifically the notion of the alienation effect, as a strategy that they revisited in order to facilitate the disclosing of the alter of the fixed cultural and historical parameter. They exposed the audience to a different narration through 'de-familiarising' shared beliefs. Something that they did since the creation of the group, was re-attributing the motto: "What is to Be Done?" to a different root, the Chernyshevsky's novel and not to the most familiar Lenin's treatise. This strategy works supplementary to the 're-politicisation' or better, is the means through which this new political dimension can happen.

7. Defamiliarisation and the Verfremdungseffekt.

Frederic Jameson in *Brecht and Method*²⁰ underlies that this *alienation effect* has a multiplicity of layers and interpretations and can be read as a *distancing effect* in itself, as a process that not only distorts the shared perception of reality, but has itself been the subject of a distortion. “Sometimes it is evoked in terms of the effect itself that names it. To make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes, implies the antecedence of a general familiarity, of a habit which prevents us from really looking at things, a kind of perceptual numbness (...).”²¹ In this way the ‘V-effect’ allows for a recuperation of the perception.

From another angle, it can be read as the apparatus through which Brecht deployed a series of theatrical techniques (citing quotations, make evident the distinction between the character that the human being behind the actor was suppose to play and the human being itself through a method of acting in which the actor can modify and subsequently take distance from the scripts, using music or other scenic stratagem such as hanging up placards). Furthermore, it can be also described as preventing identification with the character, a strategy to which it contrasts the distance of the actor on stage with the character that he or she is supposed to represent.

But most importantly the fourth description that the author gives to this effect is its political connotation. It is a political weapon that can react to the idea that the social order, as it is built, as it manifests itself to us, is natural. It is this spirit that the alienation effect contains that reinforces my assumption that Brecht, and more specifically the ‘learning play’ is the tool through which ‘re-politicisation’ as a new narration of the history can be achieved.

The *alienation effect*, as described by Jameson, helps us to read what the Russian collective Chto Delat? is doing. While questioning the universality that is behind the Leninian question “What Is to Be Done?”, they de-familiarise it, recuperating the *alienation effect* in its elementary form and simultaneously applying to the necessity of a ‘re-politicisation’ that Derrida had hoped to happen.

²⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, New York 1998.

²¹ Ibidem 26, p. 39.

Furthermore, what they did with ‘What Struggles Do We Have in Common?’ is to combine the conceptual discourse, ‘de-politicisation’/ ‘re-politicisation’, with the operational strategy, a revision of the ‘learning play’ itself.

8. *What Struggle Do We Have in Common? as a strategy of ‘re-politicisation’.*

What Struggles Do We Have in Common? took place on September 10 2010 and was orchestrated by the collective together with other local collectives of artists and activists. The Russian group wanted to share ideas on the theme of struggle between factions of these groups when an event takes place inside an institution—the common enemy of left wing advocates. They attempted to create a singular unified voice in which the distinctions between each group would be unified under the question: ‘What struggle do we have in common?’ Further, if by means of this question they were to become ‘friends’—a community that can share ideals and goals, or suffer the same kinds of exploitation by the current system—they might additionally be able to articulate a response to the question: ‘What strategies should be undertaken?’

For the outcome of the performance, the group expanded their collaborative platform to other collectives with whom they had not previously worked: Carrot Workers Research Group (London), Ultra-Red (London), Turbulence (London), Historical Materialism (London), Parachute Artists Nomad (Amsterdam), Freee (London), Iguana Dance (St. Petersburg), Vlidi (Belgrade) and the non-profit art organisation no.w.here, also based in London. There was one exception: Factory of Found Clothes, a collective that works on choreography, had previously collaborated with the Russian collective.

It is precisely this embodiment of other communities in the creative process of the piece that enables the ontological unfolding of a collaborative dynamic that is altogether unknown and unpredictable.

In order to develop the play together, the group organised a ‘48-Hour Communal Life Seminar’ two days before the staging. The groups were invited to meet at the ICA,

where they planned to spend a day and night together—sleeping, eating and carrying out a series of activities together in order to build a communal consciousness.

Participants were engaged in physical activity, body movement, voice exercises, and other leisure activities in which the main goal was to generate a certain trust between each member. The goal was for participants to get to know one another, and in a sense to become ‘friends’. They played a ring-a-ring-of-roses; they formed pairs and took turns spontaneously and genuinely touching each other, they took turns carrying a member as they lay horizontally, they created moments of collective discussion; and so on. The debates they stimulated were principally focused on the conflict between artists and activists, which was seen as a dialogical struggle that can open up more politically engaged scenarios for art and more imaginative possibilities for activism.

The piece started in the auditorium of the ICA with a curator describing to the audience what the creation process was in order for the performance to take place, focusing the attention on the improvisatory aspect of the play: ‘[...] For practical reasons I hope you appreciate the improvisation of the play’. Racks hung with casual clothing were wheeled onto the stage in order to structure the scenography of the piece, whereupon a woman in a black smock came onstage and proclaimed:

‘Welcome to our learning play. Now we start!’ Then the groups of people who were part of the Life Seminar populated the stage and assumed central roles in the play. A girl wearing a white smock and holding a laptop took her position standing on the stage. Her role, as the performance continued, was to type into the laptop whatever emerged in the group discussion. These typed sentences then appeared live on a main screen positioned to the right side of a central podium. Again the woman in the black smock, or the ‘moderator’ of the debate and also the presenter of the ‘show’, announced: ‘Chorus on the stage you can start!’ This referred to a group of men and women standing on a higher podium at stage left. Wearing white spacesuits, the only part of their bodies that was visible was their faces—an aesthetic strategy that, while grouping them together, as a literal chorus, also focused attention on the most important aspect of their live performance: the voice, which became the meaning through which they created a unified subjectivity. The first act then began with the chorus singing a composition of socialist tradition but with a libretto specifically

written for the occasion of the play. Three children wearing animal masks that almost covered their entire faces presented a placard at the beginning of the first act, an action that would be repeated before each subsequent act.

A question (the first) to which the group was expected to react and whose aim was to stimulate a discussion between the participants of the performance was projected onto a screen. The moderator read it aloud to the audience and to the group onstage: 'First question: What are you struggling for?' Immediately the group on stage began to react. One said, 'I want everything for everybody'. Another said, 'Maybe it sounds a bit clichéd, but the meaning of life.' Another person said, 'I am struggling for life, and to be alive'. Another said, 'Against capitalism'. One said, 'For a strong political left-wing revolutionary movement,' which was met by audience applause and responded to with: 'I am struggling against all the anti-communist discourses predominant today' and 'I am struggling against the rise of the EDL [English Defence League]' and so on in a growing climax between tragedy and hilarity until the moderator announced a new question that simultaneously appeared on screen: 'Second question: Whom do you represent?' Dimitry, a member of Chto Delat?, replied, 'Russians from the 70s till nowadays.' Another said, 'A radical queer community called Radical Fairies,' followed by, 'the politics of representation, which is too complex to engage with this microphone'. Another followed: 'I represent no one'. The dynamic continued with further questions to structure the discussion: 'To whom are you accountable?' and 'Are you revolutionary?' The latter question quickly became paradoxically comic with reactions such as: 'I tend to be...' 'I am revolutionary in my kitchen', 'On the weekends', and 'I am anti-capitalist so I must be revolutionary'. The question 'Do you belong here at the ICA?' was met with 'What is the ICA?' to which another person suggested, 'International Communist Association!' Two other provocations then characterised the discussion: 'What are you risking?' and 'What is your power and/or your weakness?' After multiple replies from the group which, as seen above, oscillated between a serious political consciousness (what it is expected in reality) and a humorous sense of instigation (what is delegated to fiction, or more aptly theatre), the moderator proclaimed: 'They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society!' and she invited the group to celebrate this moment with the

festive exclamation: ‘Hurrah! Hurrah!’ As the group chanted ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!’ it then physically lifted and carried each member of the group as an exercise of trust. After this action, the presenter invited the community to sit and the chorus began to sing: ‘They are sacrificing themselves and they did it for practical reasons [...].’

Through the description of this first act it is evident that the conceptual frame in which the performance is embedded is the philosophical and political implication of ‘dialectics’ seen as a discourse that we inherited from our philosophical, political and historical past, it also has something that in the present globalised European scenario needs to be tested and proved even more.

The moment when the presenter invited the group to split visualises the logic investigated by Schmitt as the basis of the political: the dynamic ‘friend and enemy’. This act on stage symbolically represented the reverse notion of considering the political as a structure that functions as an *a priori* to the natural affiliation of human beings, an affiliation that can be seen within the performance as necessary to collectively produce something: a task, strategically orchestrated by Chto Delat? This logic is traceable in the work’s inception, when the artists, with their fictional ‘Life Seminar’ stratagem, invited other collectives to do something together, even though it was not clear how a group of artists, each interested in producing a collaborative artwork within an institution, would interact with a group of activists whose fixed position in society is always ‘against the institution’ and to whom the label ‘revolution’ is often attached by shared cultural parameters.

But rather than dismiss this binary logic that organises our mindset—the mindset that sees the artist as ineffective and creative, and the activist as more effective and politically engaged, or, put differently, the former as unproductive for social change and the latter as a combatant for a better world—the piece achieved its subversive character in exposing the audience and the participants to past ideologies showing sometimes their current rational uselessness, sometimes their historical relevance. It achieved it for instance through opposing the serious left-wing replies to the

question: ‘What are we struggling for’ (‘I want everything for everybody’, ‘Against capitalism’, ‘For a strong political left-wing revolutionary movement,’), the hilarious responses to the subsequent ‘Are you revolutionary?’ (‘I am revolutionary in my kitchen’, ‘On the weekends’). In this way the participants started to ‘deconstruct’ the fixed mindset according to which those relevant questions one would expect to have two types of positions: ‘Yes, I am revolutionary!’ or: ‘No, I am not revolutionary!’.

A reductionist formula that would suit the understanding of the political of Carl Schmitt to which Chto Delat?, and the participants, opposed a new dimension that, as Derrida theoretically suggested, needs to overcome that binary logic as the hegemonic way of thinking that has dominated since now the political and philosophical discourse. But rather than dismissing to reduce the two options, ‘yes’ or ‘no’, they considered the two alternatives as part of the same ontology: that of the political. They used for reaching this goal a strategy that is present in the ‘learning play’ of Brecht, and in a broad sense in all his methodology, that of taking a position in showing: ‘this’ (the Communism as the right answer) ‘rather than that’ (the wrong one) in order to instigate a generative reflection on what that ‘rather than that’ may contain.

They insisted on the radicalism of Communism— ‘They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society!’ —in order to show the option to the contemporary neo-liberal capitalism, but at the same time to interrogate it thus moving the space of the gallery toward a test-bed of all possible alternative to the current situation—‘I would like to promote ambiguity rather than any political agenda’ and ‘Ambiguity *is* a political agenda’.

They interacted in a state between hilarity and seriousness—or between reality and fiction—in order to contaminate the artist’s convictions with clichés coming from activism, and the activists’ convictions with the prejudices of artists. The desired outcome was to expose the perversion of both new and out dated ideologies. This exposure was achieved not only through the clichés uttered by the group, but also by

the physical structures on stage: a cardboard installation with Leninist combatants that framed the stage of the chorus; the masks worn by the children; the placards announcing the acts—strategies that they recuperated from Brecht.

Through this dynamic of exposing the audience to what they expect to hear, while breaking down the moral duality of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the ‘learning play’ facilitates a state of confusion—a state in which the political subject is estranged while at the same time recuperated. It is in this movement between the ‘depoliticised’ and the ‘politicised’ that the ‘learning play’: *What Struggle Do We Have in Common?* mobilised the space of the gallery towards a dimension of ‘re-politicisation’.

They achieved ‘re-politicisation’ through insisting even more on the old dichotomies rather than dismissing them—something that Derrida did with Marxism. The performance recuperated the past not in order to prefigure a peaceful future, the end of the history or ideologies, what we have called, recalling Pejic ‘normalisation’, but instead to come back to it as a question. A question that becomes even more necessary nowadays, when a post-socialist and globalised reality is wielding its power through the realisation of one only possible political project.

As the *Lehrstücken* of Brecht, or at least in the Steinweg reading of it, *Chto Delat?* restaged two ‘familiar’ opposite alternatives in order to disclose other possible alternatives and to claim for an urgency to interrogate them. It is the dynamic of showing ‘this, rather than that’, that can instigate a question on which alternatives that ‘that’ contains. This is the most important strategy that the Russian collective extracts from the Brecht methodology.

Frederic Jameson²² insisted on the fact that the ‘duality’ between an affirmation and a negation is the most elementary form of the Brechtian theatrical practice while is also the most innovative character of his method. This ‘duality’ to which one can connect the dialectical way of thinking, is what opens up a reading of each gestures in the Brecht theatre, not only as what we can see happening in front of us as audience—that is to say the decision between two alternatives—but also as what could not have been done or as something that is complementary to the showed action—what

²² Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, New York 1998.

has not been decided on being done or, what has been omitted. In this way the actor on stage next to what he or she does puts emphasis or makes deducible to the audience what he or she does not do in order to make manifest the series of other possibilities and to show that the gesture he or she made was only an option among the others.

This way of understanding the ‘duality’ in the method of Brecht offer us the possibility to strengthen the argument, that I have announced above according to which there is clear connection between this strategy of acting in the ‘learning play’ and the vision of the political as suggested by Derrida. Through ‘re-politicisation’ he claimed that we do not have to renounce to the possibility of Communism, but that we have to insist even more in it, while revising, questioning, proving it, according to the changed conditions of the World.

What Struggles Do We Have in Common? through exposing for instance the audience to the socialist propaganda music of the chorus, or through the motto announced by the moderator: ‘They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society’, or further by the installation in cardboard by Leninist combatants, puts the Communist ideology on a test-bed which is the space of art. The performance achieved this goal through explicitly insisting on the questions, leaving it open to reactions which, as described above, were not controlled but were left open in order to generate a variety of responses in contradiction between each other.

Even though these paradoxes and contradictions were the most evident outcomes of the play, in certain moments the performance—as the moment in which the group of artists and activists were reunited for ‘the communist future of the society’—the classical antagonism was reconciled in a unified entity whose effort is driven to a future plan. It is in those moments that the play entered the dimension that Derrida has called ‘de-politicisation’, a reality that allows the performance in moments—for instance, when the questions appeared on screen in order to instigate an open discussion between the participants—to ‘re-politicise’. As Derrida suggested it is

necessary to face a phase in which everyone is friend of the other in order to oppose to that an antagonistic plan that can reactivate the political. It is important nowadays to persist on a future political project, not to replace the hegemonic current globalised Capitalism with Communism as it manifested itself in the history, but to re-install a dialectical movement in which the other alternative is always possible, among others. So if the 'learning play' as in the reading of Steinweg is the strategy through which is possible to continuously test options and possibilities, it seems and now is clear, that it is this character that realises the Derridean 're-politicisation'.

In the beginning of the second act, after the alleged reconciliation between the two factions in the first, the classic oppositional struggle between artists and activists was restaged. The second act indeed started with the presenter inviting the group to split in two: 'Now our group will be divided. The first part will be artists and philosophers. The second group will be activists'. Then she explains to both groups that the artists have received a letter (projected on the screen), an invitation by an art institution to participate in an exhibition devoted to the theme of democracy and freedom with the title 'Revolution and Communism Now'. She invites them to read the letter collectively. The letter encourages the participation of artists interested in large-scale projects, and encourages participation by politically engaged artists, as a socially responsible association financially supporting the exhibition. The invitation also addresses practical issues such as the costs that will be covered for artists, which includes travel expenses and accommodation. The letter justifies the fact that it will not pay for the work of artists because of its fundraising ethics—which forbids the institution from achieving a bigger budget. The group of artists were clearly suspicious, despite the fact that the moderator encourages them to be excited about this opportunity, and the audience could read the expressions on their faces.

Putting the audience and the participants/actors in front of a given situation—as for instance, through the invitation to an exhibition of the 'learning play' by Chto Delat?—is the strategy at the very heart of the Brecht format, which reduces the action and the gesture to a minimum set of possibilities. The situation itself is restricted to a choice between two possible decisions: to be an artist or an activist, to participate or

not to participate in the exhibition, that is to say the Brechtian “Nicht/sordern” (‘this, rather than that’).

In this way the learning play of *Chto Delat?* shows us a reduced set of possible alternatives in order to instigate both the audience and the participants to open up and generate through discussion a series of choices as opposed to every decision that each member of the group were taking. One member of the group of artists reacts: ‘I have two problems: my practice does not match the institution’s intention, but I have to confess that this is a tremendous opportunity’. Another says, ‘I am still not sure if I wanna promote freedom and democracy.’ Yet another says, ‘I would like to promote ambiguity rather than any political agenda’, to which a female artist replies, ‘Ambiguity *is* a political agenda’. This dimension that the play realises is opposed to same archeo-onto-teleological vision in the realm of politics as investigated by Derrida, and rather than offer a unique response to the invitation, as the only alternative possible and as the right one, it puts into question the invitation itself and opens a realm in which different choices are shown, interrogated and proven.

The analysis of the *Lehrstücken* made by Steinweg as a format that is basically what we call today a seminar where, thanks to the exclusion of the audience and thanks to the turn over of the actors to play different roles, gives us the possibility to consider this format as method in which infinite proofs can be made, and in which all the alternatives can be tested by time and discussed endlessly. (Frederic Jameson, 1998)²³.

Considering the main character of the ‘learning play’, it is clear that this process of testing and proving is the concrete visualisation of what Derrida suggested to do in order to reactivate the political. The ‘re-politicisation’ is not then the possibility to reclaim it for past ideologies in order to test them continuously? Is it not a method in which there will be always a possibility to imagine a possible alternative to the present status quo? And further is it not the dimension in which, precisely because of

²³ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, New York 1998.

the present given conditions the one in which the minimal set of possible responses are on offer for a given situation that one can generate other possible reactions, or, in the case of Derrida numerous alternative politics?

Reading in this way the aesthetic of the 'learning play' unequivocally connects it to the notion of 're-politicisation'. I argue that this theatrical method is the space in which the very basis of the political, the antagonism, can be realised through testing, questioning and revising our past in order to generate multiple possible actions that can respond to it, without ending with a universal future political plan.

The fact that the Russian collective adopted this format in order to re-contextualise the validity of it, strengthens my reading of *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* as an action that made that 're-politicisation' happen.

The strategy to show on screen the invitation to participate in a supposed radical exhibition to the group of artists and activists, and subsequently to the audience, avoids the reification of the typical language of works and objects of art, but rather includes discussions, revisions, and alternatives.

The paradox for instance expressed by one of the artists: 'My practice does not match the institution's intention, but I have to confess that this is a tremendous opportunity' clearly highlights the contradictions that a definitive response of a 'yes' or 'no' would manifest, declaring a formula in which one hates the system but simultaneously likes the opportunities it creates. In this way the play highlights how any sort of final decision you can take corresponds to another possible alternative.

Another element that the performance recuperates from the strategies of Brecht is the possibility for the 'actors' to change their roles. The play in fact oscillates—as described above—between one role and the other, artist and activist. The piece does not realise at long last, a peaceful dimension in which everyone is a friend of the other, i.e. 'de-politicisation', but visualises this phase just for a short time,

subsequently, opposing to it again the antagonism between 'friend' and 'enemy'. Doing this, the performance materialises the idea that is precisely when a 'de-politicisation' is happening in the moment in which it is possible to reinstall certain politics, and to respond to the dead of the political, through 're-politicisation'. This dynamic is what happened during the act in which the letter was presented to the participants. After a moment in which the group was divided, an artist suggests to her colleagues to invite the activists to participate in the decision to reply either 'yes' or 'no' to the letter. 'We should ask activists to participate'. She further justifies her idea by saying, 'In the first place, I don't like the division between artists and activists; I wanna sleep in the space between the two groups.' She continues: 'We need to find another space'. This moment translates the third dimension previously invoked by an activist into an actual act, an action by a member of that artist's group who positioned herself in the middle of the stage. The woman in her in-between space was immediately joined by another participant, thus realising a third political dimension that posits a new political subject that is yet to come.

This dynamic concretizes what the French-Algerian philosopher suggested when he said the we need to insist even more on a possible emancipatory plan that can overcome our obsession with the binary logic of one or the other. The play exposes the audience and the participants to this third dimension, without suggesting an alternative, but instead provoking them to think about it, question it and test it. The play 'defamiliarises' through the means of the alienation effect, the way in which our mind-set is built that is to say: the artist that would accept the invitation, and the activist on the contrary that would react to this with a political campaign or demonstration. This movement between 'de-politicisation' and 're-politicisation' is never ending, securing then the space of the gallery from the risk of offering a vision of history as an archeo-telo-logical, or, from the risk to end with 'normalisation' as the end of ideologies.

An activist reacts to the invitation from an artist to merge the two groups together, saying, 'They want to promote democracy and freedom? We are doing activism. Do you want to join us to do the daily activity, activism rather than doing an exhibition in

an institution like ICA?’ From this moment on the audience began to participate in the discussion. Then the two groups decided to form a singular collective subject in which activists and artists can share a space, thanks to some very persuasive reasoning made by an artist. To whom someone else responded: ‘You are fucking liberal!’ At this point the third act began: ‘Leave the stage!’ With the invitation to the group to vacate the stage, the play incorporates the audience in a more deliberate way. After the chorus sang, ‘The beautiful that have terrible conflicts helps us to find a solution [...]’, the presenter addressed the audience: ‘Do you have a suggestion? What Struggles do we have in common?’. A member of the group on stage closes the sequence by saying, ‘Coming from Russia [...] we should leave individualism and do something collectively’, and adds, ‘[But] it involves sacrifice!’

Until the end of the play, a dynamic unfolded of showing the other side of a singular plan, that of Communism for instance: ‘[But] it involves sacrifice!’ in this way reactivating the political dimension ‘neutralised’ nowadays by globalisation. The claim for ‘re-politicisation’ as a possible strategy through which we all together can learn how we can possibly respond to the current status quo is deployed, first in the space of the gallery, but also take this experiment as an exemplar process for future actions to happen elsewhere.

The re-exposure again at the end of a dialectical movement between an option and the other, is what can lessen the strength of ‘normalisation’ that we are experiencing. The play ‘defamiliarises’ the ideology of communism — a propagandistic left-wing song — through a subsequent song that communicates to us that at the end what we ‘need is love’.

The last act concludes with a chorus that started singing a very traditional leftist song and some members of the group joined them, singing and holding up their left hands, the traditional symbol for leftists and socialist supporters. After this socialist rhetoric in the form of straight propaganda, the Beatles’ iconic, ‘All You Need Is Love’— a more internationally known and less propagandistic song— changed the mood. The

song reconciled the groups into an original community of friends—a community that even the audience joined. Again a situation of ‘de-politicisation’, or ‘normalisation’ left the audience and the participants with questions in mind: What Struggle Do We Have in Common? What Is To Be Done? Questions to which now one can respond with the method offered by the ‘learning play’: ‘re-politicisation’.