







The Sąjūdis Reform Movement is organized in Lithuania. The Popular Front is founded in Latvia. In Estonia, several hundred thousand people gather on the Tallinn Song Festival.

Rallies are held in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk under the slogans "Give Us Perestroika!" and "Onwards to a Leninist Understanding of Socialism!"

Elections are held to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, the newly reconstituted supreme governing body of the Soviet Union. There are the first free elections with multiple candidates. Discussion of the candidates is held on television.

Chto Delat,
Perestroika Timeline,
2009, acrylic
paint on wall,
dimensions variable.
Installation view,
Centro Andaluz de
Arte Contemporáneo
(CAAC), Seville,
2011. Photograph:
Chto Delat. Courtesy
the artists and KOW,
Berlin

Previous spread:
Chto Delat, #17,
*The New Dead End
Street. Summer School
of Orientation in
Zapatism*, 2017.
© Chto Delat.
Courtesy the artists
and KOW, Berlin

The End of the Line: Historicity, Possibility and Perestroika

– Simon Sheikh

History, indeed is the Body, but the Chronologie the Soul of Historical Knowledge; for History without Chronologie, or a Relation of things past, without mentioning the Times in which they were Acted, is like a Lump or Embryo without articulation, or a Carcass without Life.

– Alexander Ross¹

A recurrent feature in the work of the Russian collective Chto Delat (What is to be done?) is not only the revisitation of historical ideas and forms of art making

Simon Sheikh presents Chto Delat's *Perestroika Timeline* as an artistic device to produce counter-narratives and alternative histories.

and political thinking, but also the writing of history itself. This includes the ordering of its source material and constitutive events, as in their crucial post-Communist work *Perestroika Timeline* from 2009, that concerns itself with the pivotal, and controversial part of Soviet history that was perestroika, the series of mainly economic reforms undertaken by the Communist Party under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev towards the very end of the Soviet empire itself, possibly even leading to its very demise. As a historical form the timeline is an ideological instrument of representation that *visualises* and *orders* history chronologically. The timeline solidifies and simplifies history through marked events and dates, particularly if there is only one line, but also when there are parallel lines (as in the mapping of the rise and fall of empires and civilisations). Moreover, even if timelines are complex

and lengthy, and engaging with deep time or hidden histories, they imply origins and destinations. The line drawn, at the moment of its realisation and representation, always has a beginning and an end, even if the latter is potentially to be continued at some other time in the future, if not into the future.

One timeline with a clear beginning and definite end could be the history of the Soviet Union, running through a short twentieth century, from 1917 until 1991. It is a history that is as profound as it is (relatively) brief; historian and sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein names it a 'communist interlude' that is nonetheless a spectre still haunting the world and its sense of history!² – a history at once closed by its timeline's beginning and end, and open given its spectral legacy and place within history. As such, this history is a paradoxical one: it signals the end of real existing socialism, through the demise of a specific nation-state (and its adjacent vassal states), and haunts the present as past and unrealised futurity (of equality and social justice, etc.). Such a timeline, in all its apparent simplicity, has another complication: equating the history of the Soviet Union as a nation-state, territory and political project, with that of Communism as idea and lived experience. These complexities are at the heart of Chto Delat's alternative timeline, the *Perestroika Timeline*.

The *Perestroika Timeline* is a partial history of the Soviet Union, focussing only on the period of perestroika and its aftermath(s). It thus has different origins and destinations than that of the Soviet Union, if not of Communism as idea and historical fact. The *Perestroika Timeline* seems to indicate a potential disentanglement of the history of the

1 Alexander Ross, *The history of the world; the second part in six books, being a continuation of the famous History of Sir Walter Raleigh...beginning where he left...at the end of the Macedonian kingdom*, London: J. Saywell, 1652, quoted in Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, p.19.
2 Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Social Science and the Communist Interlude', *The End of the World as We Know It*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, pp.7-18.



Soviet Union from that of Communism, which puts it at odds with most histories and dominant narratives of the country and concept. In order to analyse how the work achieves this we need to first look at the official histories, and even counter-histories, of the fall of Communism. We must also look at the history of the timeline, both within the discipline of history and its use within contemporary art as a trope of historicisation.

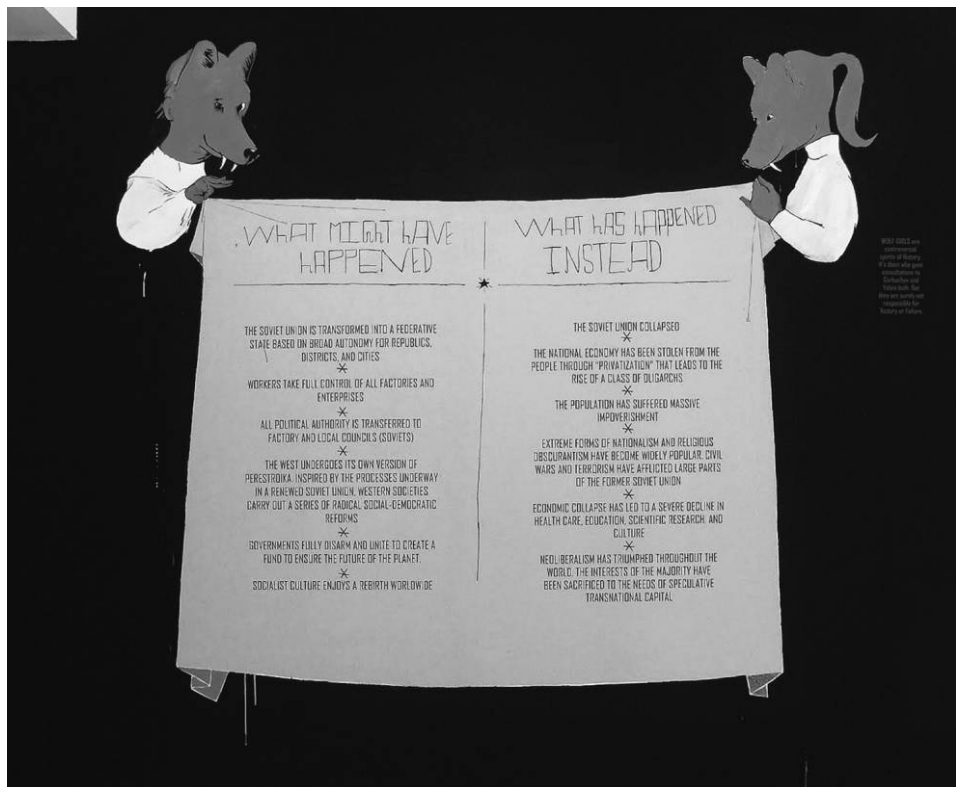
The timeline as visual representation maps the advance of history, or a certain history, and has its own as a form of narrating history. Going back to the Middle Ages in Europe, the timeline was used to situate certain names and events to emphasise their importance within a specific historical development: for example, listing kings, emperors and battles, indicating the rise and fall of specific empires and even civilisations. Such narrativisations are done under the timeline's – or several timelines running alongside each other – basic principle of chronology and its punctuation through names and dates. Time is organised along the timeline as chronological *and* visual, to the extent of being definitive, and even

inevitable, as one event leads directly to the next. Each timeline is a selection of events and proper names deemed significant enough for representation, to the exclusion of other events, and, possibly, developments. The timeline is always authoritative. As historians Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton succinctly puts in their study of the timeline: 'Our idea of time is so wrapped up with the line that taking them apart seems virtually impossible.'³

Now, as a tool to order knowledge and display power, it is no surprise that the timeline as trope has also become the subject of conceptual and critical artistic practice – less as attempts at constructing master narratives than at positing counter-narratives and alternative histories. Take, for instance, the employment of the timeline by another artistic collective in another time and place, the US in the 1980s, simultaneous with perestroika itself – Group Material. Using their main medium of the exhibition, they produced two timelines: the second, famously, the *AIDS Timeline*, first exhibited in 1989; and the first, perhaps less well known and celebrated in art history, *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central*

Group Material, *A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, 1984. Installation view, 'For Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America', MoMA PS1, New York, 1984. Photograph: Dorothy Zeidman. Courtesy the artist and Four Corners Books, London

³ Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, p.19.



and Latin America from 1984. What characterises both is how they are used as curatorial devices, as organising principles for an exhibition rather than as images. Moreover, they each represent hidden or suppressed histories. Whereas the more well-known timeline took place during the height of the AIDS crisis in the US, the core issue of the country's intervention in the Latin American timeline had been largely silenced by mainstream media and ignored by politicians at the time of the exhibition. The long and complicated history of US interventionism in Latin America is still not in the curriculum of most North American schools, nor is it, mostly, recognised as a colonial history of exploitation. Group Material's timelines are in the words of Claire Grace 'as much about exposing the fallibility of historical representation and impossibility of narrative closure as it is about presenting a fixed and didactic account of the past'.⁴

Both timelines achieve this exposure of fallibility by undoing the format's inherent authority through focussing on an alternative history and being anything but straightforward. The AIDS project purposefully mixes the personal and

the political. Popular culture references are installed alongside contemporary artworks, all used to illustrate and punctuate the timeline. *Timeline* employs three different timelines in its lay-out, preventing any possibility of a singular reading of events. Their projects use the timeline as a divider, with dates, events and images placed above and beyond the line itself, again breaking with any unitary approach, and providing as much lines of flight as the deterministic line of history with clear beginnings and ends, causes and effects. In this sense, Group Material's approach to history can be termed revisionist: revisiting certain events and narrating them differently, as well as excavating what is buried and concealed by official histories. It is also an alternative history, that is, another history of a time period, and concerned with other and people's lives and stories than those included in master narratives.⁵ In contemporary terms, this could of course be described as a decolonial reading of history, in the sense that it speaks 'from the perspective of the spaces that have been silenced, repressed, demonised, devaluated by the triumphant chant of self-promoting

4 Claire Grace, 'Counter-Time: Group Material's Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and South America', *Afterall*, no.26, Spring 2011, p.56.

5 As such, this is closer to Michel Foucault's ideas of genealogy as a form of counter-memory.



modern epistemology', to use the words of Walter D. Mignolo.⁶

In Group Material's practice, then, the timeline is employed to circumvent the authority of the format, and instead open it up to allegorical readings, and a questioning of the linearity of history that the timeline insists upon. The timeline is also invoked due to its finality as a format, though, in connecting the abstract sweep of history with actual lives and experiences of loss: both the subject of military intervention and the AIDS crisis are imbued with death, with the loss of lives through violence and silence, and with lives literally reaching the end of their line. The line is a limit. These features – history and eschatology, revisionism and truth, alternative narratives, and the politicising inquiry of historical methodologies – are also at play in Chto Delat's *Perestroika Timeline*, but with crucial differences. As with the study of the 1980s AIDS crisis, the *Perestroika Timeline* concerns itself with a small, and by now often overlooked, period in the history of the Soviet Union, the era of perestroika in the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence, the 1980s. The timeline does not centre on the history of the Soviet Union or of

Communism as a political movement, but on the demise of that nation and so-called real existing socialism and the beginning of what is now termed the post-Communist condition. Chto Delat looks at the period of perestroika and its aftermath. While perestroika tends to denote the (failed) political reform accredited to Mikhail Gorbachev, it is here important to take its literal meaning in Russian into account: *reconstruction*. Chto Delat cleverly use the term to reconstruct Russian history at the end of the Soviet Union. Their reasons are not merely historiographical, but also political and philosophical; concerned less with failure and historical inevitability than the unrealised and potential. It does not bemoan or celebrate the end of real existing socialism, but rather points to its possible rejuvenation at the very moment of its demise, which puts it at distinct odds with the dominant, Western narrative about the fall of Communism and the end of history, and the retro-communism of leading Leftist philosophers of our times, and its theories of fidelity, lost causes and the *Event*.

Chto Delat is not only an art collective, but also a group of philosophers, publishing in their occasionally published

pp.81-84:
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6 Walter D. Mignolo, 'Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking', in *Globalisation and the Decolonial Option*, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2009, p.2.

In May, Pamyat, a Russian ultranationalist organization, holds its first (unauthorized) demonstration in Moscow.



newspaper, and partaking in public political discussions. As I have written elsewhere, Chto Delat has a quite different understanding of the concept of the event than the more celebrated theory from Alain Badiou. Badiou would claim it a necessity to pledge fidelity to the event of the Russian Revolution, despite later historical developments and mishaps (infamously dismissing perestroika as mere reformism, even betrayal of the original revolution). Chto Delat's Artemy Magun rather argues for a theory of the event that, following Walter Benjamin, does not stem from an actual historical event, but from an unrealised and a suppressed event – that *which could have happened* rather than what happened (for better or worse).⁷ This is a philosophical argument that enables the group to conceive their timeline radically differently in the art production itself, allowing for an alternative history of events and a speculative history of the unrealised, the roads not taken. This is also where Chto Delat's timeline coincides with and diverts from the historical practice of Group Material. Like Group Material's timelines, the *Perestroika Timeline* mixes political events (within and beyond the

Communist Party) with popular culture references (such as the death of rock singer Viktor Tsoi), allowing for the contradictory undercurrents of history to emerge and for alternative readings to take place. These contradictions take the form of alternative routes towards a different historical outcome; they present an alternative history and a *speculative* one.

The *Perestroika Timeline* ends both with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ascendancy to power of Boris Yeltsin, and a double panel flanked by the spirits of history in the form of two Wolf-Girls (rather than Benjaminian angels!), that briefly outline 'what might have happened' and 'what has happened instead'. It offers another possible outcome and future for the Soviet Union and a socialist project on a global historical scale. It is significant that the rather depressing developments that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union – privatisation, mass impoverishment, nationalism, religious fanaticism and civil war – is not just mentioned as what has happened, but as what has happened *instead*. Chto Delat are clear this was an option, a specific road chosen at the crossroads – not historical necessity and

⁷ Artemy Magun, Alexandr Skidan and Dmitry Vilensky, 'A Conversation about Possibilities, about Power and Powerlessness', *CHTO DELAT? / WHAT IS TO BE DONE?* # 16, March 2007, p.3.



1989

Elections are held to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, the newly recreated supreme governing body of the Soviet Union. These are the first free elections with multiple candidates. Discussion of the candidates platforms, which includes tevised debates, are an unprecedented manifestation of free speech and a real challenge to the Communist Party's monopoly on political power.

An exhibition of works by KAZIMIR MALEVICH opens at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. This is the first public viewing of his works since 1930.

The journal *Navy Mir* begins publishing SOZHENITSYN's The Gulag Archipelago in serial form.

Nonconformist artists in Leningrad open the famous squat at Pushkinskaya, 10.

inevitability. This stands in contrast to the speculation on what could have happened, that things could always be otherwise, implied in the words of Chto Delat. They suggest there could have been a return to Soviet power and worldwide rebirth of

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socialist culture. Intriguingly, they even propose the West would have undergone its own reconstruction, its own variant of perestroika. Rather than the triumphant narrative of the West, with democracy and capitalism, defeating Communism and the transformation of the Communist bloc into a former East, we can instead imagine the West reforming itself, and becoming, in effect, the former West. As we know this did not happen. The democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, as brought about partly through perestroika, were to remain half-way revolutions. The West did not reconstruct itself, truly missing a historical opportunity.⁸ If the West could indeed *formerise* not only the East, but also itself, it could also have contributed to a de-linking of the global North-South divide – but that is another story (and many other imagined timelines).

Instead there was the grand proclamation of the end of Communism as the end of history, and the creating of a spatial and temporal zone of transition that was post-Communism. Eastern Europe was forced into a new historical category of so-called catch-up modernism (indicating that Communism was, in fact, not modernism, but an arrested historical development). However, as the *Perestroika Timeline* states, the emerging state of Russia not only followed the global trend towards inequality and necropolitics, it actually led it. If the Soviet

Union did indeed lose the Cold War, we could now question whether it was won by the United States, or by the resurgent nation-state of capitalist Russia.⁹ With the end of history comes the end of futurity – for Communism and the world. We can learn from the *Perestroika Timeline*, and its history of an end, in grasping what it means to imagine the future after it has passed (but not come to pass). In response to the historical argument of an end of history, Mikhail N. Epstein has commented succinctly on the particular conundrum of Russian postmodernism in placing subjects after the future in a peculiar inversion of time itself, shifting the places of past and future, and almost erasing the present:

The ‘communist future’ has become a thing of the past, while the feudal and bourgeois ‘past’ approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future. The historical perspective, once so confidently described by Marxism, has been turned inside out, not only for Russia, but for all of humankind, insofar as it had been drawn into the communist project in one way or another, even if only to oppose it.¹⁰

These lines written in the early 1990s have only become more prescient with a general loss of any sense of future and horizons of possibility, and with political visions mostly directed towards the past or some religious sense of suspension in an everlasting present. The *Perestroika Timeline* reminds us how to think historically at the end of the line: that there not only once was a future, but that it could have been otherwise. The possibility is then made available to reimagine the future, maybe ‘not with an exclamation mark this time, but rather with a question, to which there is not and cannot be a known answer’.¹¹

8 For more on this argument, see Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (ed.), *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

9 At the time of writing, the American president has just lifted sanctions on Russia suggested by his cabinet, further fuelling the suspicions that Russian intelligence not only meddled in the American presidential elections of 2016, but even decided its outcome!

10 Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism & Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, p.xi.

11 *Ibid.*, p.331.