

CHTO DELAT? WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

IN DIALOGUE

[reader]



1.

OUR PRINCIPLES: SELF-ORGANIZATION, COLLECTIVISM, SOLIDARITY

The Chto Delat? platform unites artists, philosophers, social researchers, activists, and all those whose aim is the collaborative realization of critical and independent research, publication, artistic, educational and activist projects. All of the platform's initiatives are based on the principles of self-organization and collectivism. These principles are realized through the political coordination of working groups—the contemporary analogue of soviets. The projects undertaken by any of these groups represent the entire platform and are closely coordinated with one another. At the same time, the existence of the platform creates a common context for interpreting the projects of its individual participants.

We are likewise guided by the principle of solidarity. We organize and support mutual assistance networks with all grassroots groups who share the principles of internationalism, feminism, and equality.

DV: Everyone has long ago given up wracking their brains over the question of whether it is possible to elaborate precise rules for organizing the work of a collective. It is now quite rare to come across a new manifesto or declaration. The cult of spontaneity, reactivity, and tactics—the rejection of readymade rules—is the order of the day. Tactics, however, is something less than method. Only by uniting tactics and strategy can we arrive at method. Hence it is a good thing to try one's hand at writing declarations from time to time.

DR: But why now this declaration? I think it marks an important point in Chto Delat's evolution from collective to counter-institution. We are trying to translate things we learned to (dis)agree upon over the last years into a broadened context with new constituents; to outline the principles of counter-institutional behavior very different from the extremely hierarchical and exploitative institutions that produce the social relations of the art world today. The main use of such an admittedly utopian endeavor is arguably that it shows us how far we have to go to realize our dreams of solidarity. That, and not the outlining of "rules," is the whole point of writing declarations in the first place.

DV: These are the basic principles of the structure of the platform - I would also call them as ideal structure of work that unfortunately in reality function differently. The main problem is the lack of collective initiative, the growing passivity of the most of the participants. So at the moment the platform functions more as the space of identification, as a kind of identity that marks all people who are openly involved with it with a certain basic position. Also I hope that during the possible change of general political situation from repressive-reactionary towards progressive the platform could play a role of a trigger of different process and facilitate the growing number of its members with the tool for collective work.

2.

DEMANDING THE (IM)POSSIBLE

At this reactionary historical moment, when elementary demands for the possible are presented as a romantic impossibility, we remain realists and insist on certain simple, intelligible things. We have to move away from the frustrations occasioned by the historical failures to advance leftist ideas and discover anew their emancipatory potential.

We say that it is natural for each person to be free and live a life of dignity. All that we have to do is to find the strength within ourselves to fight for this. The first thing that motivates us is the rejection of all forms of oppression, the artificial alienation of people, and exploitation. That is why

A DECLARATION ON POLITICS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ART

on the fifth anniversary of the Chto Delat work group

Comments by Dmitry VILENSKY (DV) & David RIFF made in 2010

we stand for a distribution of the wealth produced by human labor and all natural resources that is just and directed towards the welfare of everyone.

We are internationalists: we demand the recognition of the equality of all people, no matter where they live or where they come from.

We are feminists: we are against all forms of patriarchy, homophobia, and gender inequality.

DV: Another aspect of this paragraph on principles helps to sort out some local aspects of leftist politics in a situation when such a basic things like internationalism, feminism, and equality do not go without saying. It helps to make a clear break with leftist nationalist, some traditional leftist organizations based on hierarchy and patriarchy.

One thing we have decided not to tackle in this declaration is the issue of democratic centralism and the possibility of its reconsideration as one of old fashioned but still very interesting method of collective work combining the principles of participation and representation. Our structure based on the nexus of different initiatives can be consider to certain extend as experimentation with this principle.

DR: In my view, the term "leftist" is too wishy-washy. The (im)possibility at stake here is the emancipative potential of communism under post-communist circumstances. So why this vague "leftism"? I guess we opted to use the word not only because it sounds less threatening than communist, but because even left liberal ideas about the regulation of the workday, basic human rights, health insurance and so are today presented as impossibilities, while feminism and internationalism are expropriated by the ideologues of the new imperialism. It is very important to reclaim all these moments and to find the strength to insist that true gender equality and internationalism are only possible in the frame of a broader change, for example.

3.

CAPITALISM IS NOT A TOTALITY

We believe that capital is not a totality, that the popular thesis that "there is nothing outside capital" is false. The task of the intellectual and the artist is to engage in a thoroughgoing unmasking of the myth that there are no alternatives to the global capitalist system. We insist on the obvious: a world without the dominion of profit and exploitation not only can be created but always already exists in the micropolitics and micro-economies of human relationships and creative labor.

We have to reveal this joyous space of life to the greatest number of people. The historical becoming of this economic, political, intellectual, and creative emancipation is communism.

DR: Yes. There was a consensus in the group to break with the ultra-immanentist totalization of contemporary capitalism, in which all political action is doomed to become little more than an economically profitable performance. We reject that hopelessness. But at the same time, the word "totality" is something we should claim. We need it to explain and motivate the notion of communism today. Capitalism, the current mode of production, is the ensemble of economic and social relations spread out across extreme unevennesses, which it exploits and even creates artificially. It is as if we see many different capitalisms all competing with one another, and miraculously working together to raise the productivity of the system as a whole. At the same time, there are nooks and crannies where atavisms thrive, places that global capital leaves

aside, only to capture them later on, or zones that it develops, fixes, and abandons. We need to work in these "interstices" once capital flees to re-imagine what Marx meant when he says that every old society is pregnant with a new one.

DV: yes, it was the most contested point in our internal discussion and it is important to follow its development. Perhaps we should have spoken of a dialectical totality of contradictions...

4.

THE COMMUNIST DECODING OF CAPITALIST REALITY

The person who is genuinely free, who lives in the fullness of their being, is a person who is alive to various sciences and disciplines, who critically examines themselves and the world. However, the narrow specialization of scientific knowledge in capitalist society places knowledge in the service of the dominant class. Individual research serves private interests, while research of society, research based on the universality of critical utterance, is not supported institutionally.

We affirm that there is only one form of knowledge—knowledge that enables the discovery that the calling of human beings is to be free with other human beings. Critical knowledge should not be a commodity, and its maximally widespread distribution—enlightenment and education—is the cause of each intellectual and cultural worker. This synthesis of theory and practice, knowledge of the world and its transformation, we call the communist decoding of capitalist reality.

We repeat along with Marx: "We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to." (Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843.)

DV: The thesis that there is one knowledge repeats the famous theses of Alain Badiou "There is just one world." We constructed it because we believe that there is hardly any sense in using the proud word knowledge to describe methods for enslaving consciousness. But at the same we should acknowledge that knowledge for the time being consists of many disciplines and we must try and achieve perfection in each of them. For now this is the most important contribution we can make to the cause of emancipation. Also we use a very provocative quote from Marx, which is very important for us because it problematizes the role of the intellectual and his or her responsibility for the oppressed. These quote brings us to the next paragraph which tackles the issue of the avant-garde as a relations between spontaneity of struggles and the position of external agent who supposed to develop a strategy of developing of human consciousness.

DR: About that last quote and the role of "knowledge" for emancipation. One of the biggest problems and blocks to any meaningful reevaluation of communism is the idea that revolutionary knowledge consists of the "wrong" radical social recipe to be applied when the time is right, leading to a maximum of murderous consequences. The quote from the letter to Arnold Ruge says something very different: the intellectual is not to fulfill some Promethean mission, enlightening the masses. Instead, she or he should respect the struggles taking places in society, often in subaltern silence, subcutaneously determining the course of history, articulating themselves through

extreme ideological distortions. "Reason always exists, though not always in a reasonable form," Marx says in the next sentence. The "communist decoding of reality" (a term invented by Dziga Vertov) would mean deciphering these garbled histories of struggle for human freedom; not just explaining the workings and histories of the current mechanisms of oppression, but what we are already doing here and now to make these very mechanisms into the instruments for our emancipation.

5.

FAITHFULNESS TO THE INTELLECTUAL AND ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

We recognize the importance of twentieth-century avant-garde thought for the rethinking and renewal of the leftist philosophical and political tradition. We believe that in order for this renewal to happen we need a maximally open, non-dogmatic approach that presupposes a critical reception of ideas, concepts, and practices that have formed outside the framework of doctrinal Marxism. Our urgent task is to reconnect political action, engaged thought, and artistic innovation.

DR: These affirmations of the avant-garde's importance seem a bit too vague in retrospect. Everyone claims the avant-garde as his or her legacy. It is important to differentiate these claims against other claims. One such point of difference would not just lie on the surface of form (for a figurative avant-garde realism, against an abstract avant-garde formalism), but would go deeper, concerning the modernist ideology of the avant-garde as such. The cult of irrationalism, the tendency of art toward formalist objectification mixed with a near animist relation to the world of things, the cult of art's deskilling, and the celebration of the New, where innovation becomes a means to itself: these are moments of modernism that we might reject, not just historically, but also in our own time. They often serve as an autonomous politics of bohemia, later exhibited as a social alibi. Maybe the more interesting moment of the avant-garde is when it turns its back on modernism, when it turns back to realism, to revolutionary classicism, where it tries to capture idealist aesthetics for materialist goals, when it understands the entire legacy of classical art as the watershed for an "aesthetics of resistance." Maybe this is the most important discovery of the avant-garde: art as means not of critiquing art, but as capturing it by effecting the communist decoding of art history.

DV: yes this is a crucial topic for our group and I suggest to refer to the special issue of our publication *Debates on avant-garde* (2007)

6.

CLASS STRUCTURE

One of the basic problems of theory remains the definition of contemporary society's class structure. At present, when labor relations are in a process of radical transformation, the very notion of classes is changing as well. We can no longer rely wholly on the previous definitions of proletariat and bourgeoisie, or on old forms of organizing the struggle for liberation.

We believe that we have to continue to re-examine class theory by considering the contemporary development of the antagonism between labor and capital. We affirm that this antagonism remains the central one. The transformation of society has not made it disappear; on the contrary, this antagonism has only been exacerbated and therefore needs to be interpreted anew. We are also faced here with the question of rethinking the strategies and tasks of the critical intellectual in a conjuncture where the configuration of productive forces is changing.

DR: The question of class composition in post-socialist societies is a very difficult one, all the more

because we are experiencing the tail end of a momentous transition from obsolete socialist Fordism to some version of post-Fordist resource economy, a normalization after the phase of primitive accumulation. One thing that is very clear already, however, is that the classical image of the white male factory worker that still dominates leftist politics is a reactionary limitation. It leads to clientelle politics and does not include the many disenfranchised groups that do the labor socially necessary to keep capitalism's productivity growing under the conditions of the global economy. This would not just include migrant labor but also unpaid domestic work in a society where traditionalist patriarchal gender relations are being reinstated, wage slavery in service industries, massive "reserve armies" of semi-employed consumers, freelancers, and even office clerks... In this difficult class composition, we must interrogate the role of not only the intellectual but of the intelligentsia: is it a privileged urban elite that represents "creative capital" or a potential "cognitariat" or "precariate"? How can we avoid idealizing ourselves while asking this question as "engaged intellectuals"?

The Tasks of Contemporary Art

Contemporary art that is produced as a commodity form or a form of entertainment is not art. It is the conveyor-belt manufacture of counterfeits and narcotics for the enjoyment of a "creative class" sated with novelty. One of our most vital tasks today is unmasking the current system of ideological control and manipulation of people. The pseudo-creativity of this system is no more than the commodification not only of the fruits of their labor, but also of all forms of life.

We are convinced that genuine art is art that de-automates consciousness—first, that of the artist, then that of the viewer. And because art is an activity open to everyone, neither power nor capital can have a monopoly on the "ownership" of art. One answer to the perennial debate on art's autonomy is the possibility that it can be produced independently of art institutions, whether state or private. In the contemporary conjuncture, the self-negation essential to art's development happens outside institutional practices.

As a public form of the unfolding of each person's creative potential, the place of art during moments of revolutionary struggle has always been and always will be in the thick of events, on the squares and in the communes. At such moments, art takes the form of street theater, posters, actions, graffiti, grassroots cinema, poetry, and music. Renewing these forms at this new stage in history is the task of the genuine artist.

DR: The last paragraph of this part of the declaration was a point of contention, because some members of Chto delat considered it too media-specific and as an exclusion of more traditional, less markedly "open" forms of creative self-realization.

In Russia, however, the affirmation of art in public space has an added dimension, because precisely such practices have been marginalized or even abolished under the current conditions. Contemporary art takes place on the initiative of oligarch and their wives. To meet this hyperbourgeoisie's hunger for representation, artists universalize certain values in a certain sensual form: the truth of art is proclaimed as autonomy in the object boutique and heteronomy in its adjacent wellness room. One can juxtapose to this a very different task for contemporary art, one outside these bourgeois institutions. A shortcoming of this text is that it does not, at this crucial juncture, admit that art creates new institutional practices when it operates outside the bourgeois institution, that it becomes a counter-institution. This counter-institution faces one central task: to ensure that the means of cultural production do not fall back into the hands of the privileged (genuine) artist subject who will then participate in a market economy of cultural commodities.

What Is the Place of Revolutionary Art in a Time of Reaction?

Although mass movements for the transformation of society are temporarily absent, art's place is nevertheless still on the side of the oppressed. Its central task is the elaboration of new forms for the sensual and critical apprehension of the world from the perspective of collective liberation. Art should exist not for museums and dealers but in order to develop and articulate a new mode of "emancipated sensuality." It should become an instrument for seeing and knowing the world in the totality of its contradictions.

The museums and institutions of art should function as depositories and laboratories for the aesthetic exploration of the world. We should, however, shield them from privatization, economization, and subordination to the populist logic of the culture industry. That is why we believe that right now it would be wrong to refuse to work in any way with cultural and academic institutions—despite the fact that the majority of these institutions throughout the world are engaged in the flagrant propaganda of commodity fetishism and servile knowledge. The political propaganda of all other forms of human vocation either provokes the system's harsh rejection or the system co-opts it into its spectacle. At the same time, however, the system is not homogeneous—it is greedy, stupid, and dependent. Today, this leaves us room to use these institutions to advance and

promote our knowledge. We can bring this knowledge to a wide audience without succumbing to its distortion. That is why we need to develop clear criteria for deciding in which venues we can conduct our struggle, which projects should be boycotted and denounced, and with whom and on what conditions we can collaborate.

Our Basic Program

In the current situation, we propose that self-governed collectives use the following basic program as their guide:

- Don't allow external factors to intervene as you develop your ideas and realize your projects. Don't give away exclusive rights to the distribution of your work. Don't directly or indirectly advertise the institutions of power and capital within your projects.

- Economic relations have to be built in a political way. You need to collectively demand that your labor be compensated fairly and with dignity. By entering into a working relationship with the institutions of power, you demonstrate their capitalistic, exploitative nature.

- Don't participate in projects whose results (symbolic capital, surplus value) can be instrumentalized for political ends that contradict the internal tasks of your collective's work.

- As you realize your project you should try to make your work as "non-transparent" as possible. At the same time, you should strive to produce situations whose meaning can be fully manifested only outside the limited frame of concrete relations of production. This means that you should construe the use value of the work in such a way that institutions of power will be hard pressed when they try to convert it into exchange value.

At the same time, we insist on an uncompromising critique of and struggle against all institutions of culture that base their work on corruption and the primitive servicing of the interests of commercial structures, the state, and ideology. We must constantly "slap" these dimwits and prostitutes "on the wrist" and show them their shameful place in history. We will use all the means at our disposal to make this happen.

DV: The one important and practical case of implementation of this ideas see in appendix – "We are not off!" (see below)

The Local Aspect of the Struggle

We demand, as a minimum, the abolition of tacit censorship and an end to all repression of political and cultural activity.

It follows from this demand that we need state and public support for social research projects and critical art practices in Russia that are independent of private interests. Avoiding the traditional choice between "reformism" and "radicalism," we insist on the search for a specific, local configuration of demands and transformational programs. For a start we demand a few concrete things. Public funds should be transparently distributed for the support of research and art in the public space, as well for grassroots initiatives. They should also be used to support work based on the harsh criticism of contemporary institutions of power, both in culture and in politics. On the other hand, this is possible only as part of a radical social transformation that would undermine the entire system of authoritarian capitalism. In order to foster conditions for this transformation, we need new forms of coordination with all other fronts of the struggle—with workers, trade unions, environmentalists, feminists, and anti-authoritarian activists. We have to propagate models of activist self-education and the politicization of artistic and intellectual practices. These are the bases for a future broad consolidation of leftists and the hegemony of our ideas in society.

DV: These are basic demands that reflect the current political conditions of existence of culture and activism in Russia. At the same time we emphasize that a demand for basic democratic rights in our situation is so urgent, because it is a prerequisite for a further step. As at the time of the February revolution of 1917, the working class and all oppressed people could eventually become the main driving force of this typical bourgeois demand.

Also we insist that in formally democratic state where culture is supported by tax payer all people who is not voting for the current power (and even in Russia it is sometimes more than 50%) must have access to public money to express their cultural and political needs.

DR: In reality, the current demands of cultural activists in Russia are even more basic than this. We could demand that the state stop harassing art activists, framing them to demonstrate their muscle. We could also demand that the state stop selling out all cultural institutions and simply evicting them if it is opportune. Another basic demand could be for the state and the elite to stop sponsoring or encouraging proto-fascists, who then become real fascists, who then murder journalists and activists, or fake art world fascists who win art prizes, and so on. Re-reading the preceding section, it sounds more radical than ever: to ask a state that has just evicted its own 20th century art collection for transparent state sponsorship of critical art! To ask the militia who come to round you up on mayday for money! A truly revolutionary demand, as radical as reality itself.

CULTURAL WORKERS—ARTISTS, INTELLECTUALS, CURATORS, AND RESEARCHERS!
 Unite with all working people! Despite everything, they continue their struggle for freedom and human dignity. Only together can we free ourselves from the poverty of daily life, depression, and fear.
 There is only one world—and it will be what we make it today!

WE ARE NOT OFF!

IN LIGHT OF THE DEVELOPING SITUATION AROUND THE SUBVISION PROJECT IN HAMBURG, WE – **CHTO DELAT? PLATFORM** - FIND IT NECESSARY TO MAKE FOLLOWING STATEMENT WITH REGARD TO OUR PARTICIPATION.

ONLY A FEW MONTHS BEFORE THE FESTIVAL OPENED, WE - AND MANY OTHER PARTICIPANTS - RECEIVED PRIVATE LETTERS WARNING US THAT THE FESTIVAL IS A PRODUCT AND INSTRUMENT OF NEO-LIBERAL HEGEMONY AND A MEANS OF ADVERTISING THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF HAMBURG'S GENTRIFIED HAFEN-CITY. WE WERE ALSO TOLD THAT SUBVISION HAD TAKEN MONEY OUT OF FUNDING USUALLY GIVEN TO LOCAL INITIATIVES, MONEY THAT WAS NOW BEING USED TO BRAND HAMBURG AS A CENTER OF THE "CREATIVE INDUSTRIES." OF COURSE, WE DO NOT KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT HAMBURG, SO IT HAS BEEN HARD TO FIND OUT WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON. THE LETTERS WE RECEIVED CONTAINED A GREAT DEAL OF CONTRADICTORY INFORMATION AND PERSONAL DETAIL, BUT THEIR ACCUSATIONS WERE CLEARLY WELL-FOUNDED.

see on the case here: <http://virginworld.blog.de/2009/01/15/subvision-hafencity-art-money-real-estate-5379535/>

<http://www.wirsindwoanders.de/files/demo.php>

<http://www.taz.de/regional/nord/hamburg/artikel/1/off-kunst-von-oben/>

NEVERTHELESS, WE HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE IN SUBVISION

WHY?

Like everything we do, this is a political decision based on our collective's principles in dealing with institutions. What are these principles, and how do they relate at hand?

1.

To begin with, we must say it clearly: Chto Delat? is not an "off" project. True, the conditions in Russia are very repressive. So our resources and visibility are limited. Nevertheless, we insist that self-marginalization is not an answer. In our experience, it depoliticizes and ghettoizes artists and intellectuals in a comfortable non-conformism that lacks any clear articulation. Instead, we feel that it is of the utmost importance to use and contest any space that by weird chance opens up to provide a venue for our uncensored propaganda and art. Participation is not just collaboration, but a struggle for control over means of cultural production. We feel that it is we who produce the values and decisions that are important to culture and society, and not just the institutional frame. This means that we are willing to interact with projects and institutions even if we do not agree with their goals. Because we have goals of our own.

2.

For Chto Delat?, one of the most important points to keep overarching projects from dictating, censoring, or distorting our work. In the case of Subvision, there were no attempts to do any of this directly. If such things appear on site we will protest it immediately by boycotting and leaving the festival. But there is, of course, an indirect distortion that comes with the curatorial framing of the project in its particular location. We are not naive and realize that our contribution - which is about the collective search for alternatives in a highly repressive situation -- is "global protest," and we are highly critical of the way this representation is being handled. We fear that we might be brought in as artistic Gastarbeiter to confront the local "off-scene." But we also think it is very important to create real spaces for solidarity and exchange between initiatives that ARE searching for alternatives, and this, after all, is Subvision's stated goal - and our task is to make it true. When we were shown the list of invited participants, we were not only happy to find that many fellow Gastarbeiter are already our friends and comrades, but also because their presence reflects responsible political choices on the part of the organizers. In particular, we agree with the choice to invite Israeli artists who are searching for alternatives to a nearly hopeless situation of conflict. This decision goes against the unspoken boycott of Israeli artists and intellectuals in Western Europe today, which, unfortunately, is hitting the wrong people. In other words, we hope that actual communication between these different groups will outweigh the inevitable instrumentalization and distortion of our respective positions.

3.

Adequate economic conditions for cultural workers are an important political question. It is important to realize that self-organization should not necessarily mean self-exploitation, and that there is nothing to be gained by refusing payments, as if there was such a thing as "dirty money" or "pure commerce." Incidentally, we did not sign any kind of contract with Subvision, nor did we give them the copyright of our work. The financial conditions that Subvision offers are fair enough in view of the project's scale and allow us to concentrate on fulfilling those tasks that we have set ourselves as artists and writers in this context. Moreover, they allow members of Chto delat to travel to Western Europe and to react to the disheartening context of Subvision directly, with interventions of their own. We are fully aware of the fact that ANY cultural product can be instrumentalized as a commodity against its producers. But we are also sure that it is necessary to fight for the reappropriation of the ideological and material dividends that neo-liberal cultural policies will try to draw from our work. This is only possible by occupying spaces within the object of our critique, and using them to challenge the status quo. Here, we need to practice a fundamentally different politics based on egalitarianism and collective participation. We do not think that we are too weak to resist some diabolical plan that would instrumentalize our work for something we oppose. In fact, we can say it publicly: our politics aim at making sure that places like Hafen City would be a thing of the past not only in Hamburg but anywhere else. If the developers suddenly see the need to bring us in, our goal is to create a situation in which art does not need developers. This contradiction remains fundamental to our participation in the project. Which also means that the real battleground in culture can also be inside such a project as Subvision and not only outside, in the "off." It is here that we can contest the nature of such a project and show it as our strength.

4.

We believe collective political articulation - understood as self-clarification - to be the central goal of our work. We sincerely hope that our presence in Hamburg will help to spark a concretization of the Subvision project's critique. For now, this critique has been influenced by the vagaries of personal correspondence, rumors, and facile judgments, as if everything were "already clear." But the points of consensus remain blurry, and have not been sufficiently articulated collectively or in public. We have a unique chance to meet in person and to discuss the situation. Chto Delat? is more than willing to provide a platform of the critique of Subvision and other festivals and camps like it; moreover, we are willing to do anything we can to make sure that this critique reaches as broad an audience as possible. Thus we invite you to a discussion loosely themed "Self-Organization: Between Repression and Recuperation? Where is the Way Out?" which we will hold during our stay in Hamburg on August 29th., 2009.

Let's use this space. Let's not be "off"! Instead, let's kick out those who think that they can use the dirty tricks of dividing artists, and using art for their shitty purposes of gentrification and promoting inequality!

A CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTION

**September
17–20
2010**



**ALEXEI
GASKAROV**

**MAXIM
SOLOPOV**

IN SUPPORT OF KHMINKI HOSTAGES

On July 28, 2010, hundreds of young antifascists and anarchists spontaneously demonstrated outside the administration building in Khimki, a suburb of Moscow, in defense of the Khimki Forest, which was then being cut down. The demonstration received a great deal of public attention, and authorities responded with a wave of repression. The following day, two well-known activists, Alexei Gaskarov and Maxim Solopov, were arrested. They now face up to seven years in prison for disorderly conduct, although there is no evidence of their involvement. Meanwhile, police continue to hunt down other activists, especially those involved in the antifascist movement.

The campaign to save the Khimki Forest has been going on for past three years. The authorities want to build a segment of a planned Moscow-Saint

Petersburg toll highway through the forest. This would negatively impact environmental conditions in the region. Despite the availability of alternative routes that do not require felling the forest and vigorous protests by environmentalists and residents against the route, the authorities long ignored the voice of society and on several occasions took measures to suppress their critics.

Khimki authorities and the project subcontractor used violence and other unlawful tactics against Khimki Forest defenders. They refused to permit protests, recruited nationalist thugs to break up a peaceful protest camp organized by environmentalists and residents, and illegally arrested journalists covering the story. Nearly two years ago, Mikhail Beketov, editor of the newspaper Khimkinskaya Pravda and a critic of the Khimki administration, was severely beaten by persons unknown;

Sergei Protozanov, the layout man at another local opposition paper, was murdered in similar circumstances six months later.

After the July 28 demo, Russian law enforcement unleashed a dragnet against antifascists. People on the radar of the Center for Extremism Prevention and the FSB for their involvement with antifascism have been forcibly taken in for questioning. In several cases they have been subjected to physical coercion to compel them to give the testimony required by investigators. Illegal searches have been carried out in their apartments. All these actions on the part of law enforcement are violations of Russian and international law.

Frightened by growing protests against the logging of the Khimki Forest, the authorities have finally agreed to review the advisability of the planned route for the highway. But this does

not mean victory. Alexei Gaskarov and Maxim Solopov are still in police custody for no reason at all. They are hostages.

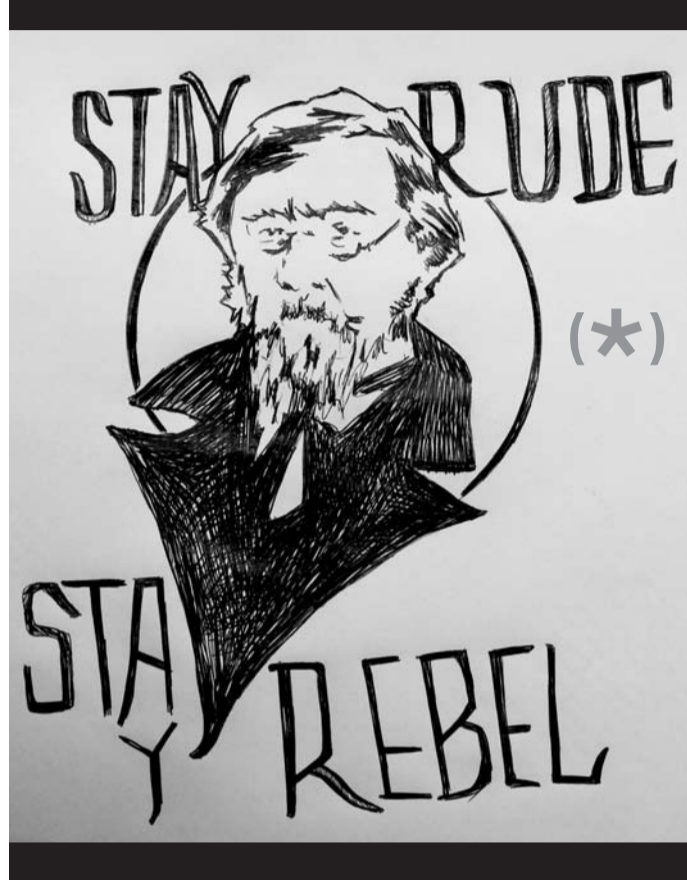
The next hearing in their case is scheduled for late September. A judge will decide whether to keep them in custody pending completion of the investigation and trial. We must do everything in our power to set them free. The Campaign for the Release of the Khimki Hostages calls on people around the world to organize days of action on September 17–20 to pressure the authorities to release Alexei and Max.

We ask you to hold protests outside of Russian embassies, consulates, trade missions, and cultural centers, as well as at events and concerts connected to Russia. We also ask you to send faxes, e-mails, and protest letters to law enforcement officials and the country's leaders.

**WWW.
KHMINKIBATTLE
.ORG**

where to send your protest letters now: <http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/max-and-alexei/>

UNDER SUSPICION



(*)

Nikolay Chernyshevsky.
Russian writer,
philosopher, editor, and
activist of late 19th cen-
tury.

[1]

Of course, the paradigm of securitization is not new. It is more likely a modern excess of state apparatuses that has gradually emerged since the start of the process of capitalist modernization. In his lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–1978) Michel Foucault makes the distinction between the techniques and arrangement of disciplinary power on the one hand, and the mechanisms of “security” on the other. “Security” as a power strategy arises in connection with the formation of notions of the state as a kind of “living” social organism that must be protected from internal and external threats while preserving the “national interest.” As the ideologists of the bourgeois state supposed, police and “police science” (as a field of systematic population registration and computation) were necessary to guarantee this interest.

Alexei PENZIN
(1974)

- philosopher, member of
Chto Delat?

The fragmentary and brief comments below do not claim to be a definitive diagnosis of the current situation. The incomplete and sketchy quality of these comments is rather a part of the problem itself. A fuller analysis will be possible when there is a systematic understanding of the post-Soviet political experience, which for now is a thing of the future.

1. IN MEDIAS RES

It is very difficult to understand what is going on in medias res, from the inside: these are events that are in the process of development, that affect us personally and assail us from all sides without allowing us to assume the stance of a dispassionate observer. These events affect many of us, sometimes in the literal, physical sense. The command “Hands against the wall!” A stunning blow to the head in a bus filled with people nabbed at a demonstration. Or, for example, the indescribably grotesque intrusion of a detachment of armed, shouting men during the showing of a Godard film at a peaceful leftist seminar. For about two years now the solidarity networks have been constantly delivering reports of new arrests, unlawful summonses for “discussions,” and beatings of activists. It is possible, however, that we should not be so focused on ourselves. The bad news concerns not only the minority of activists and intellectuals. The news also comes from those who are not involved in politics, education or research—from “average citizens.” The very texture of post-Soviet society in recent years has been steeped in anonymous, free-floating violence committed by the “forces of law and order.” Violence against civilians has become a kind of collateral damage, an excess of the existing system of political management. Sometimes this anonymous violence takes on personal and transgressive features. For example, in the person of a police officer who shoots at customers in a supermarket with the cold-bloodedness of a character in a computer game.

2. REAPPRAISING THE LOCAL

The pressure of traumatic violence causes an introversion that is common to victims and occasionally forces us to overestimate how exceptional our own experience is. But should we see in these events only a local process dictated by a distant and recent prehistory? Here we immediately conjure up images of some “eternal” despotic Empire that treated its population as subjects rather than citizens who have a legal status and are capable of defending their human dignity. We are reminded of scenes of violence and mass reprisals during various historical periods. Notions of a fatal backwardness vis-à-vis the “west” in terms of a general level of “civilization,” rights and liberties, the public sphere, civil society, etc., are seemingly given fresh content. Such notions suit the liberals, who see post-Soviet society as a result of “failed reforms” or a constantly delayed modernization. They also suit the local nationalists, who think that post-Soviet societies actually are incurably different from the community of “developed countries.” Unlike the liberals, however, the nationalists are in favor of this difference.

Undoubtedly, these notions and positions should be critiqued. They must be historicized. For example, grim imperial images that present themselves as “eternal” conceal experiments in radical revolutionary politics, periods when—at the very least, as during the early twenties in the USSR—major breakthroughs were made in rebuilding society on principles of justice and emancipation. The violence we are witnessing now is at first glance an almost “feudal” holdover. But it appears that this violence conceals a quite modern system of administration that is consistent with the latest forms of capital accumulation that have taken shape throughout the world in the neoliberal age.

So the many arrests on suspicion of “extremist” activity should not be seen merely as inventive tricks of a local authoritarianism (rooted in a centuries-long “despotic” tradition) seeking ever-newer excuses to block all grassroots protest movements. Only post-Soviet intellectual and political provincialism (in the negative sense of a narrow view of the situation) would affirm that this is the case. Progressive post-Soviet leftists must maintain a dialectical position on the question. It is important to understand how the mainstream of global capitalism is transformed in a specific way in our local context.

It is also important to first understand how the process of institutionalization of new activist networks unfolds in these conditions. It is a kind of experimental “testing period” in which the progressive political and intellectual forces that emerged practically out of nowhere after the

shock and rupture of the nineties find themselves. After the collapse of the Soviet experiment and the fierce discrediting of the Marxist language as “ideology,” a very reactionary atmosphere of extreme skepticism and depoliticization of society penetrating all of its strata and rewarded by the propaganda apparatus of the new power gradually has come about. Subjectively, it is experienced as the loss of any hope that something can be changed via collective actions against the powers that be. It is very difficult to explain certain things that happen here to observers from countries in which there was no post-communist rupture and where to this day, despite the crisis of traditional leftists, there is a palpably different balance of forces between resistance and power. For example, the fact that if you attend a demonstration here, the police and the authorities are absolutely certain that your actions have been “bought and paid for.” They simply can’t get their heads around the idea of a disinterested, activist expression of a political stance. Their heads are full of a market ideology reduced to a grotesque form: “You do your work and we’ll do ours!” But, in spite of these very hostile conditions, recently a new generation of activists and intellectuals has appeared, and new methods of coordinating efforts are being tested. We will return to an analysis of these methods at the end of the text.

3. “EXTREMISM” AND SECURITIZATION

One undeniable worldwide tendency in recent times is the politics and ideology of securitization. Under the pretext of imagined or real threats (“terrorism,” military conflicts, migration, environmental catastrophes, epidemics, etc.) and, of course, “on behalf of and for the safety of citizens themselves” ever-newer emergency measures of control and management are introduced. At the same time, the list of “threats” grows longer. Securitization should be understood as a process of the continuous production of the sphere of the “dangerous” itself and, at the same time, of new techniques of “crisis” management. The politics of emergency measures has more and more influence on society, both on the public arena and on private space. In certain situations the action of formal legal institutions (presumption of innocence, civil liberties) is entirely suspended. Consequently, the authorities and law enforcement are given ever-greater powers, as well as technical capabilities for control and surveillance. [1]

The politics of security in its newest form was called into being by societal transformations that occurred under the influence of neoliberal capitalism. First, they are connected with the need to protect investments and the financial sphere in general, especially amidst the current economic crisis. Second, the anxiety of the ruling elites has a direct influence on the initiation of new emergency measures, for they are afraid of mass protests due to the consequences of the global economic collapse. Third, securitization is programmed on a deeper—structural, production or even ontological—level. Increased workforce turnover, the rise of the uncertainty factor in all labor processes, precarization—i.e., the lack of minimum “social security,” stable labor relations, and living conditions—have become stakes in the political game. New conditions of exploitation give rise to particular types of subjugated subjectivity that seek reassurance, the conversion of the anxiety provoked by uncertainty. They cannot recognize the causes of this apprehension, and it is easily transformed into a specific fear that is linked to one or another specific figure of the “other,” the “enemy” (“terrorists,” “migrants,” “extremists”). Whereas classic nineteenth-century capitalism inflicted suffering only on the worker’s body (hunger, lack of sleep, poor housing and living conditions), the modern form encroaches on the entire person, operating on the affects, fears, and cares that capitalism itself creates. Martin Heidegger elaborated an “existential analysis” of this subjectivity during the severe economic crisis of the Weimar Republic and on the eve of the Great Depression. But now it seems that these existential structures are becoming the “fate” of all those who live amidst constant uncertainty and securitization. Government administrations, by introducing additional security measures and conducting ever-newer “anti-extremist” campaigns, propose and effectively use the symbolic compensation of the agonizing real uncertainties engendered by the very relations of production of modern capitalism.

Finally, the governance strategy that makes this politics so popular consists in the fact that from now on, any specific social, political or class antagonism expressed in a grassroots protest movement is presented as a threat to the state and public security and is equated with phenomena of a completely different nature (epidemics, manmade disasters). Hence the particular breadth and vagueness of the term “extremism,” which the authorities use with such abandon in order to legitimize their “special operations.”

4. “MANAGED DEMOCRACY” IN CRISIS

Having outlined these tendencies we can look at the situation from the perspective of how things stand on the local level. In post-Soviet Russia the mantra of “stability” undoubtedly represents the local version of the politics of securitization broadly understood. In official rhetoric, the current “stability” is set against the uncertainty and “chaos” of the nineties as a genuine achievement of the current regime. It represents itself as the conqueror of “terrorism,” “extremism,” “armed separatism,” as well as the political and economic turbulence of the “transitional period.” The mythical narrative of the transition from “chaos” to “order” aspires to structure the popular perception of the historical moment. However, “stability” is an absolutely empty sign that is chiefly supported only by the images and rhetoric of the official mass media. This is the effect of a strategy of limitation that brackets off from media representation all elements that do not fit into the picture of the new order from media representation. Images of “stability” are produced in abundance even now. After all, as the state propagandists say with remarkable voluntarism, “The crisis isn’t in the economy, it’s in our heads.” These images are created via exclusion—exclusion of workers in state enterprises, pensioners, precaritized cultural and educational workers, as well as other “low-income” individuals.

The general political form of “stability” is a regime that, until recently, almost officially called itself “managed democracy.” In this model, the president and his administrative apparatus are seen as “crisis managers” of sorts whose main task is to maintain the manageability of the system by any means, including emergency measures. The managerial model spreads to the whole of the political arena, attempting to manage all political forces with whom it is “possible to negotiate.” Politics is just a “business” that has its own paid administrators and contractors. All other political forces that cannot be managed through “investments” and “projects” and who cannot be “negotiated” with are severely marginalized. How could it be otherwise? After all, those “unmanageable” elements dare to have their own projects for changing society! All situations in which violence is used in this system arise in zones of such “unmanageability.” Everything that cannot be managed, everything that contradicts this consolidated bureaucratic-administrative system causes the state to become aggressive and intervene. All that is unmanageable must be crushed: that is the maxim according to which law enforcement operates. It is possible to negotiate with everyone else.

A consequence of “stability” and “managed democracy” is the politics of normalization, which in recent times has been penetrating to an even deeper social level. There are the “normal people” who make up a homogenous society, the “loyal majority.” But there are also those who are “abnormal.”^[2] These people cannot be managed; they are incomprehensible, they criticize, they are frightening even in their small numbers. They are a grim reminder of the “bad conscience” of “managed democracy.” We can observe the rise of an entire group of new “abnormal” activists of grassroots civic and political movements, young subculture “freaks,” politicized intellectuals who are seen as a dangerous and incomprehensible “bohemian” crowd because of their complex language and way of life. At the same time, they are able to publicly make their voice heard. Their activity clearly doesn’t fit into a business model that a manager can understand. With their behavior they undermine the unspoken rules of loyalty, obedience, and the new, incredibly cynical post-Soviet “realism” and “pragmatism.”

So “stability” is actually only proof of greater consolidation and reinforcement of the “security” apparatus itself. Police interventions are intended to demonstrate a “monopoly on violence” as signs of the ubiquitous presence of a “strong state.” Anyone who disputes “stability” by virtue of their very existence, thinking, and behavior; anyone who openly casts doubt on it; anyone who expresses disagreement with it as the only possible order is potentially suspect. The recently launched campaign to identify “sources of destabilization” was the first reaction of this system to signs of the growing economic crisis and, as its consequence, the narrowing of the zone of manageability.

5. VIOLENCE AS A COMMODITY

The new paradigm of “security” has been established on both the legal and institutional levels. After 9/11, like some other countries, Russia passed a law “On the Prevention of Extremism” (in 2002). However, many distinctive features can be seen in measures related to the institutional support and implementation of the law.

The real start of the active campaign against “extremism” was the creation, on the wave of crisis expectations in 2008, of a special network of “anti-extremist” centers throughout the country. They were formed from armed units previously used to fight organized crime, with all the methods typical of such units. In effect, those who fall under suspicion are treated by these new law enforcement agencies as non-citizens and preventively stripped of any legal status; the new units act against them essentially the way they used to act against the criminal mafia. Recently, independent political and trade union activists, organizers of antifascist

rock concerts, engaged intellectuals, and artists have become objects of suspicion as “extremists.” The transition from the potentially troubling status of “unmanageable” to the status of persons stripped of civil rights during police raids and detention has been shockingly swift.

The operational logic of the “anti-extremist” centers grows out of the overall managerial strategy of “managed democracy.” This strategy creates innovations in the field of police-administrative control in the form of a “project” with a certain budget that has to prove it is “competitive” in a limited amount of time. The “anti-extremist” centers must quickly show the products of their work: inspections, raids, and acts of violence. And these have not been long in coming: in the past six months they can be counted in the dozens. In this situation, violence is a paradoxical commodity in a new segment of the “security” market. As a breakdown of the peaceful institutions of human society, as a brutal exposure of the “real,” and as the production of bare, vulnerable life, violence was always a means of demonstrating the prevailing balance of power without fail. In this case, it is also a sure means of showing the “efficacy” of the new police-administration project, of demonstrating its “competitive” edge over more traditional security services. We may suppose that the logic of this marketization and competition in the sphere of security politics should, in the final analysis, hasten the crisis of the very system of “managed democracy.”

6. RESISTANCE, ACTIVISM, SUBJECTIVITY: WHAT KIND OF “COMMUNITY” DO WE NEED?

When discussing the political contexts of the events of 2009–2010 it is necessary to emphasize the significance of some other events. They had to do with resistance to the administrative “security” and “management” machine, which threw its disproportionately large and armed forces at the small and heterogeneous milieu of Russian leftist activists, intellectuals, and artists. Surrounded by constant news of detentions and beatings of people many of them know personally, the participants in these actions were also asymmetrical in their display of solidarity. Aside from well-known tactics, they were quite inventive in using the capabilities of modern visual and media culture while also circumventing the coarse filters of administrative control over access to the public arena (for example, getting permission for a picket). That is how the interesting experiments in translating political language into the language of engaged contemporary art practices arose—the hunger strike and street gatherings of artists that resulted in quite political works that very wittily unmasked “managed democracy” in action. New tactics for uniting various activist groups without identity slogans were tried, as, for example, at the demonstration in memory of Stanislav Markelov on January 19, 2010. The May Congress of Art Workers (April 29–30, 2010, Moscow) also demonstrated that it was possible to include the artistic gesture in the process of renewing political practices.

Theorists who have turned to an analysis of the leftist movements cropping up amid the ruins of former communist parties and socialist states note the dual nature of their formation, which is at once active and reactive.^[3] On the one hand, there is a moment of identification with the resistance to the blatant violence, abuse of power, brute force, and reckless audacity of the new capitalist “masters.” It has a defensive, protective character. On the other hand, just as important is the moment of transformation of this reactive, defensive movement that arises for particular reasons into an active movement that constitutes and creates a new field of agency that is relatively autonomous and generates both its own universal political projects and specific subjectivities capable of supporting and implementing them.

Here I can also speak on the basis of my own personal experience, including my experience as the person in charge of an unusual discussion of “leftist philosophy” at the educational seminar in Nizhny Novgorod that was raided by the “anti-extremist” center. The seminar was conceived as a “human community,” as a temporary “commune” whose experiment in living could be joined by anyone who came to the seminar. Fully restoring the work of the seminar after this violent interruption was an elementary act of resistance, but it was also the moment that changed the entire situation of what we had been talking about. Thus, in addition to exchanging and developing our knowledge, the very means of running the seminar as a “community” raised the question of the practices and forms of transforming our lives and our own subjectivities. This transformation proceeds through practices of self-organization, self-education, cooperation, and self-valorization, i.e., through those human capacities that no “privatization” or politics of “security” can appropriate or completely control.

Confronted with extremely prosaic and cruel things in the everyday world of post-Soviet managed democracy, which is monstrously distant from the experiments of emancipatory thought and the revolutionary practice of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, activists clearly should not shrink from “high-flown” philosophical formulations. The question of activist subjectivity is directly related to specific and practical things: to expanding the movement, to heightening awareness of its problems, to its political power, to new forms of community, language, and coordination. It is related to a simple question: what kind of life, what kind of larger “community” do we want not only for ourselves, but for others? Given our specific conditions, what kind of cooperative transformation of our lives are we capable of desiring? These conditions often seem distant from the great historical exemplars of revolutionary practice, political texts, and works of “leftist philosophy” that we have inherited. This is not only a question of the programs and arguments of one organization or another, with the language and methods of formulating tasks borrowed from the “eastern” or “western,” “new” or “old” leftists of the twentieth century. This is a question of creating a common life without naïveté, with a critical approach to an unduly emotional, stary-eyed understanding of it, but with a negation of that ostensibly “realistic” cynicism and skepticism in whose deadening language we immerse ourselves on a daily basis.

[2]

We use this term not in a judgmental sense, but in the analytical sense that Michel Foucault gave it in his eponymous 1974–1975 lectures.

[3]

See, for example, Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2004.

IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

Late last summer, before the schools in Russia reopened, a remarkable beer ad about post-Soviet space aired on Russian TV. Thirty seconds of feel-good Russian classic rock: an active bass and a prominent slide guitar wafted around a voice, always-already middle-aged, slightly flat after working a night shift. Four measure whole notes by the band: the staggered vocal names the brand. Krasny Vostok. Where the sun rises / the east is red. A new day is dawning / over our land. // How can you resist. Cause' this land is not made of history's pages; it's not made through borders or territorial stages. Our land is made up of people and people are what make our land.

Obviously, the ad wants to mobilize the patriotism of its maturing target group, reminding it of forgotten values: hospitality, friendship, little evening get-togethers on the dacha. The Krasny Vostok commercial is supposedly all about people, but there are no people in the ad. In 2004, new legislation tried to curb the spread of beer as Russia's favorite soft drink. Among other restrictions, it introduced a ban of anything remotely alive in beer advertising, laying off all the cartoon characters, animals, and most importantly people: friendly, slightly crazy fat men, 19th century aristocrats, or teenage hipster heroes about to make it big. These roles have all been taken over by either the beer bottles themselves or their settings. The Krasny Vostok ad is no exception. It personifies (the) "people" as a golden spirit that floats out of the sunrise as a 3D animation: from close ups of fragrant grass, up over dewy meadows and out through the speckled trees, over pine-topped mountains and down a glittering river through a valley, across a suspension bridge into a city, where it reflects in the shop windows of a deserted 19th century Russian street, wafting through lace curtains into a cool, sparkling glass of amber beer standing solitary on a kitchen table. The beer commercial's potential inhabitants are kept out of public by the medium's laws {1}.

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

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

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The streets are the living room of the collective (Benjamin), and the collective is forever young. Lumpenproletariat, Neo-Nazi nationalists, consumer kids, Goths, headbangers, Lesbian punks, migrant workers, and even the occasional anarchist. Walking through Moscow or Petersburg in the summer, anyone with multitudinous political passions will wonder: what if more kids were not just drinking beer but talking politics? They have already captured public space. "Our universities?" Who knows? Maybe these kids are learning street-smarts on how to make representational space in the alienated intimacy of their encounters, finding something that makes them want to ride their bikes through the city in more tightly knit groups late at night when the traffic dies down? Can one politicize this new sociality? If the educators themselves must be educated (not to think in abstract terms of progressive nostalgia, but in concrete practices, something a text like this can only sketch out), what can we learn in the beer garden of common space, where the first impression of normal childhood is one of spatial awe?

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

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

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

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

Normal children sucked into a historical vortex: Narvskaya Zastava's most famous section is defined by the constructivist buildings on and around the esplanade between Stachek Square and the Narva Gate to the north and Kirov Square to the south. In the mid-to-late 1920s, the area's working class population was "rewarded" for its revolutionary efforts with a model settlement for workers from nearby plants, including the famous Putilov (Kirov) Works. In the mid-1930s, however, the transformation of the neighborhood along constructivist-

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

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

The communal bricolage of gardening pensioners somehow seems Kabakovian. It hearkens back to a time in which Soviet culture was already falling apart into a self-contradictory communitarian structure. As late modernist urban planning moved people out of communal housing to personalized panel block apartments in the satellite cities, the dialectics of urban alienation and communal intimacy underwent a decisive change. Communities took the place of the state, creating nooks and autonomous zones for informal exchange, colonizing parks and boulevards through moving bubbles of privacy. Paradoxically, it is the community of friends that appears as state socialism's gravedigger, as the collective enthusiasm of the Soviet sixties went sour and turned into a campfire repertoire of "songs about what really counts." But at the same time, communal reality continues the project of common space: until it is rendered productive by privatization, its underlying structure is still open, like the courtyard on Traktornaya Street. Even when the pensioners reclaim it, it can still serve as the site for an impromptu episode of knowledge production by a temporary workgroup of leftist artists and philosophers. So much is coded into its arches, until they become the trademark of a gated community.

Through the backyards of another constructivist settlement around the Red Triangle Rubber Factory where Dima Vilensky lived as a little kid, encountering old ladies who began to perform back at the camera, a kind of subalterity in the face of the spectacle's instrument, theatrically trying to throw a drunk off a bench. Frightened children from the Caucasus somewhere near a ramshackle squat, which Vilensky and Tsaplya later entered with a video camera to conduct interviews with admirable anti-fa anarchists. The long haul to the Baltic Railway Station, down the tracks past deserted institutional architecture from the 1970s. Instant coffee in a sad café. Across half-abandoned industrial zones, in search of immediate encounters. Halted production, overgrown with life. Where are the people, where are the workers? Alexei Penzin reports from the empty shop floor of the factory:

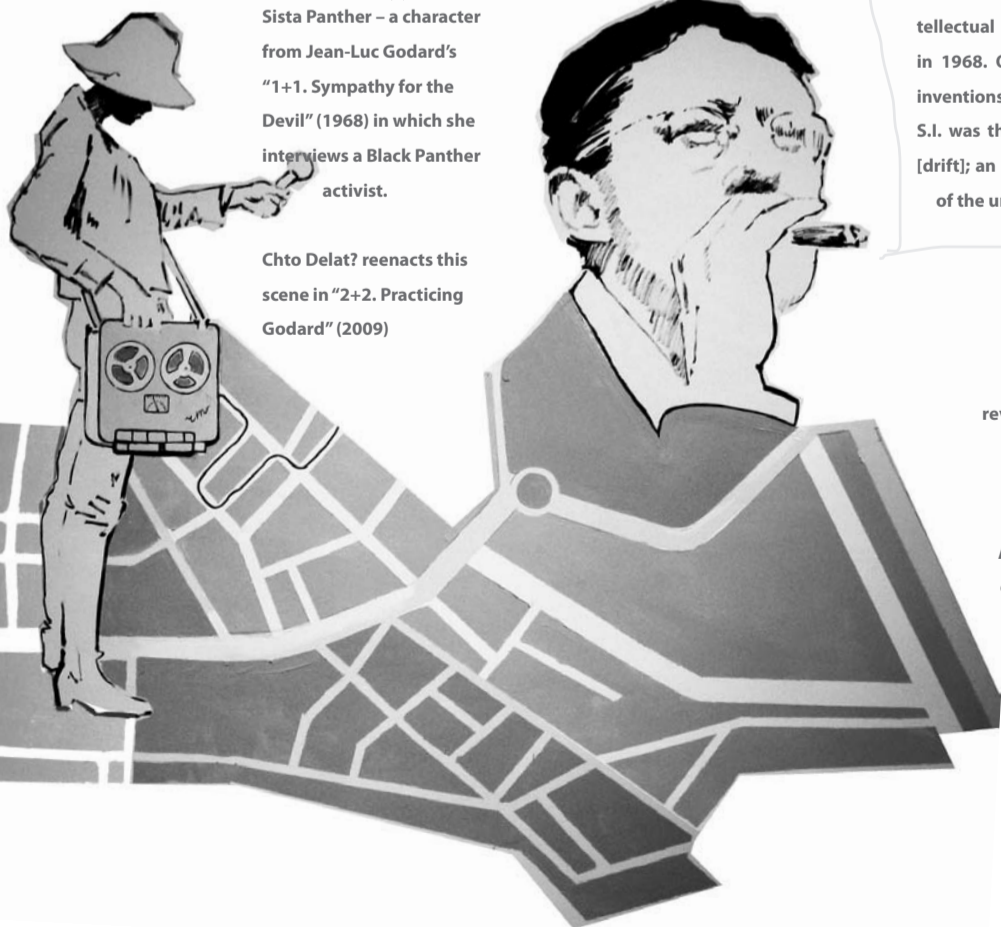
To judge by the discussions that followed, the participants were motivated by a nearly religious search for Contact, Encounter, or Event, for the imaginary meeting of the left-wing intellectual with the invisible specter of the Worker, ascending to the Golgotha of the stopped conveyor. But when we entered the abandoned factory's Cyclopean shop floor, instead of severe workers we found a multitude of colossal phalli (high-quality naturalistic graffiti, sprouting an interweave of 3-4 meters, climbing up the wall), whose exuberantly organic procreation rightfully animated this otherwise empty place of production. [...] But the promised Event never took place as a final point of assembly or coming together. Instead, there were constant displacements, transitions from one environment to another, as well as the realization of one's own position in relation to the position of the others – the impotence of changing anything here and now, in spite of the will that manifests itself in this strange, crypto-religious expectation of an Event, of Redemption... Impotence hangs over all of our confessions and exacerbates our in many ways exuberant stroll with an involuntary feeling of guilt {5}.

At this point, it became clear that our debates were not so much about the absence or betrayal of the proletariat, but centered on the collective non-action of drifting itself. Which collectivity constitutes itself in the process of the drift? What are this collectivity's limitations? And how can one break them? The group moves in its own space, obsessed with its own collective (leftist, neo-modernist, critical, radical, antagonistic) identity, unconsciously fetishizing its own collective autonomy and its friendship while insisting upon the use value of the inoperative activity itself, thus refraining from any genuinely political operation, other than the constitution of the micro-community that spends its free time together (while the fact that the same community produces commodities for the culture industry during business hours as a "start up venture" remains unmentioned). This is basically what I criticized after having a few drinks too many on the second day of the drift. After I said something about "irresponsible slumming through modernity's ruins," our discussion escalated into a shouting match. So I guess I hit a sensitive nerve.

(*)

Sista Panther – a character from Jean-Luc Godard's "1+1. Sympathy for the Devil" (1968) in which she interviews a Black Panther activist.

Chto Delat? reenacts this scene in "2+2. Practicing Godard" (2009)



Basically, I felt that our movement through urban space was carried forward by a speech bubble, which is why I was so critical. But then again, we had an excuse to insulate ourselves through chatter. The reason was on TV, in every café and restaurant, in every shop, on every face. On September 3rd 2004, the first day of our dérive: Beslan. The drama started on September 1st, the first day of school: flower rituals and children's songs. In the light of the tragedy, it seemed tasteless to enjoy the utopian boldness of a school in the form of a hammer and sickle {6}.

The geopolitical abstraction of "post-Soviet space" returned in full force when Putin made a speech on a broken TV in a cheap café with Soviet green minimal walls. He declared something that almost amounted to a state of exception, demanding national unity and new "power verticals." Talking Agamben all the way from the military-store on the canal, we reached Ekaterinhof park, where we parodied an American group-hug. Technopop blared across the empty band-stand. It was the last day of summer. Walking through the park, we eventually reached rusty joy rides: bumper cars and swings on fenced-off territory. There was even a booth with air rifles for target practice.

Swings with wings: a bitter-sweet Soviet children's song called Krylatie kacheli was blaring over the loudspeakers. Most of the others left their stuff in my care on a bench in order to swing more freely, including Artiom Magun, who had been carrying around an elegant black umbrella. Community affects, back and forth. Lover reunited, adulterous embrace. The need for comfort didn't only come from the exceptional tragedy of murdered schoolchildren. Again, late Soviet antiquity was modernity's "normal childhood," a infantile-nostalgic version of the same Taylorized enthusiasm of movement when 20th century communism was still alive; to and fro, back and forth, flying, kissing. It's too bad that the footage in my camera was lost.

At some point, the joyride operators turned off the music and asked us to leave. We started talking about reduction and Alain Badiou. As we were crossing the bridge that separates park from city, Magun stopped in his tracks: "I've forgotten my umbrella." This made me feel very guilty. Leaving the others, Magun and I turned back.

We almost missed the swings: the gates of the little amusement park had already been padlocked. A guard-dog on a long leash was barking violently in order to protect her puppy. A heavysset young man was standing next to the guardhouse. We called to him through the fence. "Umbrella? Yeah. I saw an umbrella." Growing nervous – the umbrella might have been a bomb – Magun and I walked back to the bumper cars.

(*)

Guy Debord (1931-1994) – French philosopher, researcher, filmmaker, activist. One of the Situationist International – a group of individuals who influenced the student and intellectual movement in Paris in 1968. One of a number of inventions by Debord and the S.I. was the practice of Dérive [drift]; an artistic investigation of the urban environment.

(*)

Narvskaya Zastava (on the map) is a neighborhood in Leningrad where all Russian revolutions have begun. "Chto Delat?" made an investigation of this neighborhood during the Autumn of 2004. All methods from mobile sociological stations to artistic debordian drift through industrial parts of this neighborhood were used by Chto Delat? This investigation is documented in the video film "Drift" (2004)

It was here that we ran into the other group, which was drifting in parallel. They embraced us euphorically, all chattering at once: "How was it? What did you see? Where are you going?" We couldn't answer them. We were looking for Magun's umbrella. Eventually, the militia-man who was guarding the playground unlocked the padlocks and let us out.

POST SCRIPTUM

Maybe it was this sense of communal impotence that prompted Chto delat to return to the historical center of Narva Square (this time in the smaller ensemble of Tsaplya, Nikolay Oleynikov, and Dmitry Vilensky), with a piece called Angry Sandwich-People (2005). The space of the present text is too small to provide any real contextualization of this piece. I only want to highlight one key difference. While the derive in 2004 attempted to reflect social space through communal collectivity and the abandoning of production, this piece consciously explored the potentiality of social production site as an arena for political manifestation. Against the backdrop of the neo-modernist mural sandwich-people slowly gather, wearing a fragmented political poem on their chests {7}. Like real sandwichpeople, they belong to no definite class or age group, and have no predefined political identity: pensioners, activists, students, and children. Over the course of the slide show, they accumulate line by line, coming together and falling apart in varying constellations of singularity. This looks like a political manifestation but could actually be read as its opposite: a form of artistic advertising. But at the end of the slideshow, after the flow of images is over, one no longer sees bodies but hears their voices reading out their lines. This inner speech – a tragic chorus? – is tentative, threatening, satirical, and violent, full of potential violence, depleted pathos, and fragile hope. Suddenly, a definite negation is possible again.

NOTES:

{1}

Both teaser and ad spot can be found as a Quicktime video at <http://adme.ru/creativity/2006/07/27/7770.html>

{2}

For more speculation on the difference between "Hegelian" and "Kantian" space, see David Riff/Sergei Sitar. "The Re-Discovery of Post-Soviet Space" Chto delat No. 11: (Im) possible Spaces. Petersburg 2006

{3}

The entire project was documented more fully in Chto delat 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. October 2004. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=17&id=131&Itemid=121

{4}

Cf. Mikhail Ryklin. "Hegel in the Spaces of Jubilation" In: Third Text 65, Vol. 17, Issue 4, December 2003

{5}

Alexei Penzin. The Last Temptation of the Flaneur. In: Chto Delat 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. October 2004. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=170&Itemid=121

{6}

Cf. Alexander Skidan. "Derive Protocol." Chto delat No. 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=172&Itemid=121

{7}

Cf. Chto delat 11. Why Brecht. January 2006. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=226&Itemid=126. This issue of Chto delat was also conceived as a contribution to the first question of the documenta 12.

Published at <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/digest-2005-2007/its-all-about-people/>

Artemy Magun:

I think it is important that you and I talk about perestroika. First, because you were an active participant in perestroika and, from the viewpoint of our group, you are one of the few activists who have remained faithful to its emancipatory content. Second, because you and I both basically subscribe to the same assessment of the current conjuncture in Russia, although we part ways when it comes to perestroika. I have argued that it was a kind of revolution; while in your groundbreaking book you call it a restoration.

Twenty years separate us from the events of perestroika. That is a fairly long time historically: it is the same amount of time as separated perestroika itself from the end of the Thaw, in the Soviet Union, and the events of 1968, in Western Europe. However, the specificity of these serious historical events rests in the fact that they don't contain their own meaning. Rather, this meaning is determined gradually and post factum, depending on how history unfolds after the events. Thus, as it fades gradually into the historical past, perestroika appears different today than it did twenty years ago. Its destructive, catastrophic import (something that only hardcore retrogrades insisted on during perestroika itself) has become obvious, as well as the fact that, although they actively helped Russia in the nineties, the western powers had an egoistic stake in weakening the country and returning it to the international "semi-periphery." In their assessment of perestroika, your own works vigorously employ the broader historical context – both the internal history of the October Revolution, which perestroika consummated, and the history of Russia as a "peripheral empire" whose historical legacy was continued by the Soviet Union in its later phase.

Nevertheless, a wholly outside viewpoint on an event would also be incorrect: an event manages to inscribe for the ages its own eventuality and the subjectivity associated with the event. The subject subsequently undergoes a number of alterations, but it remains the same subject. In our case – post-Soviet Russia – this subject is the post-Soviet citizen of the Russian Federation, who has rejected faithfulness to Soviet communism and whose expectations of western prosperity have been disappointed. Perestroika effected a subjectivization that briefly activated and mobilized the subject politically, but subsequently left it with both a taste for freedom and contempt for ideology, a sense of cynicism and alienation from other people. Subjectivity is a significant factor in politics: it is a complement to all socioeconomic transformations. In particular, a socialist or communist society can be built only on the revolutionary subjectivity of the masses, on their will to self-government.

I will briefly reprise my thesis about perestroika's revolutionary nature, which I developed in detail in my recently published book ("Negative Revolution: Towards a Deconstruction of the Political Subject"). All the evidence points to the fact that perestroika and the after-effects it generated in the nineties were revolutionary. As the result of a serious democratic mobilization (albeit launched by the elites) and the opposition's taking power, an existing state was abolished and destroyed. More important, a socioeconomic structure was destroyed and radically altered. This did not happen overnight, of course, but it was nevertheless irreversible. The socioeconomic relations between people changed: they became each other's competitors, and many people entered into relations of mutual exploitation. The state ceased to perform its function as a paternalistic redistributor of wealth, and material inequality grew. Simultaneously, as is the case during revolutionary periods, the level of social mobility sharply increased: some people had dizzying career success and made fortunes. There was not even the hint of ideological consensus, and so diametrically opposed ideas and opinions clashed in the mass media. The predominant style of political commentary was cynical, ironic, and hypercritical towards the authorities, and so society was much more "open" than in the western "democracies." But no less – perhaps, even more – important was what happened on the subjective level: the implosion of political identification. At first it was emancipatory in character: it was directed against the dogmatism and political theology of late socialism. In the nineties, this gave way to political apathy, a negative attitude to politics, and the view that all public activity was a political con game ("political technologies"). It seems to me that the situation of the nineties – which was provoked by the disenchantment and frustration of "revolutionary" subjects – was a peculiar psycho-ideological sequel to the perestroika revolution. While remaining a revolution as such, it was primarily destructive in nature, not futuristic and utopian.

Perestroika and its aftermath are in many ways reminiscent of the French Revolution. In both cases, a newly enlightened intelligentsia, armed with a mixture of the rationalism of experts and idealistic utopianism ("the rule of law" and "universal human values"), got the people behind it and achieved an amazing unity amongst the most varied social groups. After

THE LESSONS OF PERESTROIKA



the victory of the revolution, however, this unity quickly collapsed, and social confrontation with the Third Estate itself emerged into the foreground. The Thermidor had already triumphed by 1794: it rejected revolutionary idealism in favor of the classist, egoistic dictatorship of the haute bourgeoisie.

I am, however, also aware of your position. You view perestroika as the culmination of a historical cycle that began in 1917 (which in turn traces its origins to 1789). Perestroika marks the defeat of the leftist project and the defeatist adoption of the old, liberal model of society and ideology. It really is the case that these events coincided with a wave of conservatism in the west itself (Thatcher, Reagan, Pope John Paul II). This wave used these events to crush leftist forces and ideas, and to establish the hegemony of liberal conservatism à la Fukuyama and Huntington. But this "macroview" doesn't take into account (I repeat) the internal, subjective significance of perestroika and the revolutions in Eastern Europe. They clearly were much too emancipatory to be termed a "restoration": they were accompanied by popular utopian enthusiasm, albeit short-lived. And in Russia itself they brought about the emergence of the chaotic, anarchic society of the nineties. They became a "restoration-for-itself" only under Putin. Moreover, this was also a restoration vis-à-vis perestroika qua revolution, and not only vis-à-vis the international socialist movement. It was only then (that is, now) that the regime became openly conservative and restorationist in its rhetoric. During the previous fifteen years, however, this had not been the case.

Could you explain and elaborate your take on this issue as you see it now, more than ten years after the publication of *Restoration* in Russia? How do the revolutionary and restorationist elements in the history of perestroika and the nineties relate to each other?

Boris Kagarlitsky:

Let's begin with the fact that the objective meaning of a process is nonetheless more important than the subjective experiences of its participants. Even if the masses are sincerely deceived about their own role and the meaning of their own actions, we can still say that they are deceived. On the other hand, however, it is worth asking why the masses have such illusions. All the usual talk about "manipulation" doesn't explain anything: it merely enables us to avoid discussing the problem. However, it is fundamentally important that mass deception or self-deception doesn't have anything to do with emancipation, however you look at it. In fact, the reverse is the case: this is the direct opposite of emancipation. If we see here a transition from one scheme of control (external, based on coercion) to another scheme (internal, based on manipulation), then that means we have gone from bad to worse. The "appearance" of outward freedom is achieved through the effective suppression of inner freedom. It would be inaccurate to speak of this as a phenomenon that is inevitably inherent in bourgeois democracy. At certain stages in its development, bourgeois democracy presumed precisely the conscious (albeit limited) participation of the masses. It is based on a conscious class compromise, but in our case whichever end we come at it we don't see class politics and a conscious playing with this politics.

Why, however, were the masses deceived? Or why did they let themselves be deceived? In the final analysis, it is not that important which of these happened. (We're discussing the motivations of the deceived, not the moral responsibility of the ones who did the deceiving.) I have already written that the events of 1989–92 were an inevitable reaction. This process was objectively reactionary, but at the same time it was historically necessary, including from the viewpoint of future progress. There is only one way out of a dead end—backwards. This reverse motion is absolutely necessary if you want to move forwards. But it is still a movement backwards—a regression, a reaction.

Soviet society was in a historical dead end from which there was no progressive way out. I am not talking about theoretical models, which we can draft – in the guise of beautiful utopias – at every given moment (we ourselves enthusiastically drafted such models back then), but about practical political decisions that are underwritten by popular support, resources, and objective "external" conditions.

The only such possibility was a restoration of capitalism. Moreover, this had to be a restoration in synch with the general world trend of the global reaction – i.e., neoliberalism, the liquidation of the gains made by the worker's movement in the west, the collapse and rebirth of the national liberation movements of the so-called third world, and the total moral capitulation of social democracy. Perestroika was an organic and extremely vital component of this process. It gave the process a new impulse and ensured the triumph of capital on a previously unprecedented scale.

Moreover, this triumph of capital took place in an age when the progressive role of the bourgeoisie had been completely exhausted. During the Victorian Age, the civilizing mission was (like it or not) a reality. Marx, who wasn't infected by the virus of political correctness, took a sober view of this. There is no such civilizing mission nowadays.

The view held by you and Alexander Shubin (as argued in his book "Democracy Betrayed") is that the perestroika movement contained a revolutionary potential that was subsequently crushed by the old and new elites. But the objective historical conjuncture and the sociocultural balance of forces in Russia made this result inevitable from the outset. We might not have understood this in 1988–89. I understood it only in 1990. This, however, doesn't change the state of affairs. The only thing that changes is our assessment of our own role.

It was then that I also came to understand the tragic nature of Marxist political struggle under the given circumstances. We couldn't oppose a process that was objectively necessary (including for the future success of our own cause), but neither could we support it, because it was objectively reactionary: it led to catastrophic short-term consequences for the majority of the people. All that remained for us was to fight on two fronts and to explain the political and social significance of what was happening in conditions where the level of control (which had been relaxed in 1988–89) once again began to rise precipitously. In 1990–94, control of the mass media was incomparably greater than it is today. The liberals strictly filtered every word that was pronounced on air. We couldn't even dream of getting coverage in the serious mass media. In this sense, the Putin regime is much more liberal than the Yeltsin regime.

What typically happens in revolutions is that the elites launch a process which they then lose control over. New forces emerge, and they seize the initiative with the support of the masses. It is telling that Shubin complains precisely about the seizure of the initiative by the elites vis-à-vis the masses. In other words, something happened that doesn't happen during a revolution, something quite the opposite. Imagine that something of the sort had happened in eighteenth-century France or in England. Instead of Cromwell and Robespierre, we would have had a change of dynasties, followed by an attempt to restore the feudal orders destroyed by absolutism. Would we call this (despite the participation of the masses during the early stage) a revolution? Of course not. It wouldn't occur to anyone to call this a revolution.

The movement backwards overdetermined the confusion that was typical of the late eighties and early nineties – right-wingers were called leftists, and vice versa. But the significance of what happened is fairly simple. Liberals fought to secure the reactionary, reverse movement (the "return to the mainstream of history"), and we fought to make it possible to turn around and move forward again as early as we could, at the first opportunity. By the way, notice how the word "return" also implies moving backwards! This struggle continues to this day, only the situation has changed. The balance of forces is different.

Of course, each person finds his own place in this confrontation. By supporting the liberals in their reactionary mission, the intelligentsia adopted an ideologically anti-democratic stance and signed its own death sentence: it rejected the tradition of the Narodniks (Populists) and ceased being an intelligentsia.

AM:

I think that in your "Althusserian" reading of perestroika there is an element of the dismissiveness of the expert. You oppose the spontaneous political struggle of people who find themselves in an open-ended, unpredictable situation to a linear vision of history ("the way forwards," "the way backwards"), and this vision comes with a hefty portion of historical determinism. What I find lacking here is a sense of history's openness and the task of creating free institutions on the socioeconomic base that exists at the given moment.

BK:

On the contrary, I argue that leftists should have fought the capitalist restoration while being aware (or unaware) that this struggle was doomed from the outset. As a participant in the event, this is exactly how I acted myself. By 1991 it had become clear to me that the resistance was doomed. (Although there were moments when it seemed that we had a chance.) On the other hand, the struggle is fought not for victory today, but for victory tomorrow. That is normal. We're often forced to take on a fight knowing beforehand that we cannot win it.

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Artemy Magun (b. 1974), **philosopher, member of Chto Delat? lives in Petersburg**

THESES ON THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

Dmitry VILENSKY

2007

[2]

“We communists,” a nominal precision of “we revolutionaries,” a conception which in turn gave political and subjective weight to that “we” that was thought of as the final instance: the “we” of the working class, “we proletarians,” a “we” that was not always spoken out loud, but whose historical axiom every ideal community considered its origin. Or, to put it differently, “we” who retain fidelity to the events of October 1917.” (A.B.)

Can we, the new left in Russia, repeat Alain Badiou’s oath of fidelity? The problem is that our political becoming and the corresponding postulates of fidelity have a different event structure. Which event demands our fidelity? To honestly answer the political and ethical challenges of this question, each new situation calls upon us to face the emancipatory movement’s history as a whole, both in Russia and in the world, in which October 1917 is only one of many important events. We cannot constitute our fidelity around this one victory without considering our fidelity to the “oppressed,” because it is precisely this fidelity that contains “a temporal index” that allows us to redraw history’s developmental vector.

WHO ARE THESE OPPRESSED?

The Red Army commanders who disappeared into the camps.

The disbanded LEF and the crazy OBERIU who insisted upon the right to invent their own language.

The heroic sailors of Kronstadt who raised their voice against the party’s dictates.

Khlebnikov, Platonov, Mandelstam, and Filonov, who painted “The Formula and Dawn of the Proletariat.”

The members of the Trotskyite opposition who called for world revolution.

The first dissidents who went out into the squares alone; all those who spent their nights typing out the “Chronicle of Current Events” on carbon paper, a news digest of disobedience and hope.

The defenders of Leningrad, and all those who fell in the struggle with fascism.

The workers of the defeated Ryutin platform and the workers of Novocherkassk

who could no longer stomach the bare-faced insolence of the bureaucrats.

And all those who showed that labor could work for the common good in the face of overwhelming odds...

And many others. Why recall this multitude of names? It seems more important to uncover the emancipatory motives of their actions.

They are “those who are lying prostrate”; the ruin of their unrealized potentialities has a claim on those whose “coming was expected.”

They all return us to the values of the early Perestroika, which had not yet quite lost the promise of fidelity to the revolution. In fact, for us, the Event of perestroika gave us our first “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed (Soviet) past,” and not for a comfortable bourgeois future.

Yet this past was spent unwisely, wasted and obliterated by a state-party that proved capable of poisoning everything around it even as it lay dying, rising from the ashes under the control of former KGB officers, party apparatchiks, young sycophants from the Komsomol, who all quickly found a common language with the capitalists of the world.

Dmitry Vilensky
(b. 1964)
artist,
member of
Chto Delat?,
lives in
St.-Petersburg

... to brush History
against the grain.

Walter Benjamin,
“On the Concept of
History”

This text

is based on a polemic with
Alain Badiou’s “A Secret Catastrophe.
The End of the Truth of the State”
(published at <http://sociologos.narod.ru/textes/badiou.htm>) and also draws
upon Walter Benjamin’s “On the Con-
cept of History.” The text contains both
direct and oblique references to both.
I would also like to express my thanks
to Alexander Skidan. Without our dia-
logue, it would have been impossible to
write this text.

translated by David Riff

[1]

“The true picture of the past flits by...” These words by Walter Benjamin have the most direct possible relation to the phenomenon of the Soviet past.

What exactly was this experience? And what does it mean today?

Today, nostalgia for all things Soviet is a popular commodity that is so fluid precisely because its underlying experience has already been hollowed out. As the Soviet experience returns in new capitalist packaging, even the right to interpret its history becomes an object of unabashed speculation.

A host of contemporaries is attempting to construct a comfortable image of the past (Stalin – the might of empire – party dictatorship – socialist realism – avant-garde as surface design) to legitimate a flimsy power and a shabby everyday. To interrupt the din of this choir, it makes sense to turn to the central question that Benjamin asks in his theses on the concept of history: who is the subject of history? For those who take on the task of continuing the struggle for emancipation, the answer to this question is unambiguous: “not man or men, but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge,” a class-multitude that clearly realizes and rejects the status quo that fetters its lives, dreams, and the dignity and strength of constituent labor: all those who still remember the pride of belonging to the human struggle for freedom.

If we resign ourselves to the history of the victors, this will be a betrayal of the Soviet experience. But if we are willing and ready to inherit the Soviet project, we need to rethink it as the history of the oppressed, as a battle for the actualization of the emancipatory potentials repressed in Soviet history. Without this paradoxical gesture, we stand little chance of drawing anything positive from the experience of revolution defeated and popular power betrayed.

One of the meanings of art lies in its capacity for actualizing the potentials of the past, which we rush to “seize hold of a moment of danger,” as they are “becoming a tool” in the hands of the victors. Creativity draws closer the moment in which the actualized elements of the past interweave with what is taking place in the presence of the now (Jetztzeit), leading to the composition of a new Event.

[3]

In the final analysis, our fidelity can be articulated in one compact political slogan. Its appearance heralded the beginning of Soviet history. Paradoxically, it also signaled its closure in those clear days of late autumn sun when the agony of the temporary perestroika soviets reached its tragic apex. This slogan is: “All Power to the Soviets!”

“All Power to the Soviets” is a demand for radical people power whose potentiality is pregnant with the significance and promises of all of Soviet history, becoming its political testament, an appeal to continue striving for the truth, even in the darkest moments of reaction. Forgotten and scorned, this demand is still an unreachable horizon, “the ontological idea of democracy or communism, which are one and the same.” (A.B.)

[4]

In closing, I would like to remember one hauntingly strange document of the Soviet epoch. Written in 1968 (another symbolic year of fidelity) and sealed into a capsule, it was placed in the foundation for the monument to the 50th Anniversary of the Komsomol on Stachek Prospect in Leningrad. It appeals to the coming generation of youths who were supposed to unearth this capsule in 2018. There is no more Komsomol, and the city in which the capsule was buried no longer bears Lenin’s name, but this text is still here. In its time, it blended into the trite, undifferentiated background noise of propaganda. Today, it seems even more inappropriate. But one can hear both Badiou’s pathos and Benjamin’s mystical illuminations reverberating between its lines. It sounds strangely insistent, a tactless outburst interrupting the pragmatism of the contemporary language of capital. Surprisingly, a well-trained ear can discern its melody as the culmination of the entire tradition of emancipatory humanism, a melody that really is the testament of the Soviet promise.

LETTER TO THE YOUTH OF LENINGRAD:

-REMEMBER US ON THE CENTENARY CELEBRATION OF THE YOUNG EARTH, ETERNAL AND FREE, TO WHICH WE TOO BELONG. -REMEMBER! – WITHOUT MEMORY THERE IS NOTHING TO COME. HOLY MEMORY, THE SISTER OF CARE OVER WHAT IS TO COME, DICTATES THESE WORDS TO US. -ALL YOU SEE WAS ATTAINED THROUGH THE WORK AND BLOOD OF HEROES; YOUR BEAUTIFUL LIVES CONTINUE OUR LOVE. -OUR GRANDFATHER AND FATHERS, MOTHERS, SISTERS AND BROTHER IN BLOOD AND BELIEF SET OUT TO DO BATTLE HERE IN LENINGRAD. HERE, THEY EMERGED VICTORIOUS; HERE, THEY DEFENDED THEIR FATHERLAND, JUSTICE, FREEDOM, AND HOPE. -DO NOT MOURN THE LAST CENTURY’S MILLIONS OF FALLEN HEROES. THEIR BRAVERY AND HEROIC DEEDS WERE FULL OF GREAT MEANING. SHOW US THAT THESE HEROIC DEEDS WERE NOT IN VAIN. WE BELIEVE IN YOU. -WE CARRY THE BANNER OF THEIR HEROISM INTO THE TROUBLESOME, PROMISING WORLD IN OUR WORK AND OUR STUDIES. -WE CARRY THEIR HOPE IN OUR HEARTS, REMEMBERING THAT OUR TIMES ARE LINKED, AND THAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE.

THROUGH THE FIFTY YEARS THAT CONNECT US, WE SAY:
MAY YOUR LOVE BE HOT, -MAY YOUR SONGS BE GLAD, -MAY YOUR RECOGNITIONS BE GREAT, -MAY YOUR CHARACTERS BE BRAVE, -MAY THE WORLD YOU SHARE BE BEAUTIFUL. -MAY ALL YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS BELONG TO THE HUMAN BROTHERHOOD OF THE EARTH. -WE DO NOT PITY OURSELVES BECAUSE WE KNOW:
YOU WILL BE BETTER THAN US. -WE DO NOT ENVY YOU. -PLEASE DON’T ENVY US...

THE AVANT-GARDE, OR THE POLITICAL FORCE OF MODERN ART

Jacques RANCIÈRE as a guest of the *Chto Delat group*
in Saint-Petersburg, - May 2007

Magun:

The question we would like to discuss with you today is the connection between aesthetics and politics. Is there a specific type of art that would be both productive and relevant to the contemporary political and cultural situation? Our hypothesis is that the both the phenomenon and the notion of the avant-garde are important for us in this context. This view comes out of our historical situation, which was shaped by the constitutive moment of perestroika – the fall of the authoritarian and corrupt Soviet power, which happened through a considerable democratic mobilization. At that moment, we discovered a form of democratic politics and new forms of expression. There was a major revival of interest in modernist art, in the avant-garde art of the 1920s and 1930s, and in Western Modernism in general (not just Kafka and Joyce, but also Pollock, etc.). Thus, for us, there was a conjunction of this type of art with political emancipation. For me, at least, there still is. Avant-garde art is art that questions the very limits of art, questions the borders between art and action, sufficiently disturbs you, moves you, opens you up to some kind of collective action or to some kind of rethinking of the situation.

Normally today these two things don't necessarily go together. People usually don't see any connection between their artistic practice and political action, the invention of new forms of life, or the political struggle (because the task of avant-garde art is not only to invent but also to oppose). As for our group, though, we don't think that we just sit down and do art, that any way of life is ok. No, one needs to act or at least to explore the possibility of collective action. The post-modernism that reigned in the 80s and 90s was particularly characteristic of the disjunction between radicalism in art and politics. It was the use of modernist or even avant-gardist artistic techniques, of the formal invention, but with the express rejection of any serious political statement, of utopianism, etc.

Now, we would like to ask Jacques Rancière, our guest, if he thinks that the avant-garde is still a notion that is usable. And, since we kind of anticipate the answer, we want to ask how the situation has changed since the 1920s and 1930s and what radicalism in both the arts and politics are like today.

Rancière: What strikes me is precisely that your relation to avant-gardist art was mediated through the democratic aspirations of the perestroika era. This means that it took its relevance in a certain present as a thing of the past. The question is: what thing and what past, exactly? It seems to me that there are two concepts of avant-gardist art and of its political effect. There is the idea of avant-gardist art as an art intentionally designed to create new forms of life. Such was the art of the Russian futurists and constructivists, the art of El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and others like them. They were people who really had a project to change the world, using certain materials and certain forms. In that way, avant-gardist art was destined to create the new fabric of a common, sensible life, erasing the very difference between the artistic sphere and the political sphere. When you mention Kafka, Joyce or Pollock, it is not the same at all. What they have in common with the former is the rejection of standard representational art. But they did not want to create new forms of life; they did not want to merge art and politics. In this case, the political effect of art is something like what you mentioned: a transformation of our ways of feeling and thinking, the construction of a new sensorium. But this new sensorium is not the consequence of a desire to create new forms of collective experience. Instead, it is the very break between the context in which Joyce or Kafka created and the context in which you read them that gave them their "political" relevance. So, I would say, first, the idea of the avant-garde entails two different things, two different ideas of the connection between the artistic and the political; second, that the concept of the avant-garde that you had in mind at that time was a retrospective construction. As a matter of fact, avant-gardism and modernism as they are used in contemporary debates are retrospective constructions that are supposed to allow us to have it both ways: to have both the collective impulse and aspiration to a new life and the separating effect of the aesthetic break.

Magun:

If I may interrupt, maybe we should distinguish between modernism and avant-gardism. Modernism would use these techniques to sublimate art itself, to make an absolute work of art which would really include everything inside it. The avant-garde, however, uses the same techniques to do the opposite: to kind of break up art, to explode art into life, to mix art into life, achieving a kind of Hegelian end of art. So, Modernism would mean life absorbed into art, and avant-gardism would mean art absorbed into life. But their methods are the same and the techniques are more or less the same.

Rancière: It is not clear that the techniques are the same. I wonder whether you can describe a general model of modernism, a general model of artistic destruction and change in the forms of perception and sensibility. In fact, artistic modernism, just as avant-gardism, can be defined either in terms of minimalist subtraction or in terms of excess. Modernist art of the 1910s may mean the creation of pure abstract forms in the way of Mondrian or dynamic explosion in the way of Boccioni. In both cases there is a rupture with the standards of figurative painting, but it is not the same procedure. Literary modernism did the same thing – and this may mean Khlebnikov as well as Kafka – and in the 1940s Adorno still had to oppose a true (Schoenberg) and a false (Stravinsky) musical modernism. So I don't think that there is a kind of general model of artistic invention that can define art's modernism. It has to be defined by a certain connection of artistic practice with the modern forms of social life. Modernism involves a specific impulse, some kind of will to change the world, to connect the forms of artistic practice with forms of life. Let us think about abstract painting: you took the example of Pollock, but if you compare Pollock to, for example, Malevich, it is clear that for Malevich it was a question of inventing new social forms, new dynamics of life. But in Pollock it's absolutely the contrary. With Pollock it was the end of a certain form of activist art, of a certain form of involvement of art in social practice that had been very strong in the United States in the 1930s. The American abstractionism of the 1940s was a return to art and only art, after the involvement of many artists in the Popular Front. So it is not a question of separating autonomous modernism from avant-gardism viewed as the fusion of art and life. The point is that there are two concepts of modernism. The modernists of the 1910s and the 1920s were concerned with an art oriented toward the fusion of art and life, or at least with an art whose forms would match the forms and rhythms of modern life. This is true for painters like Malevich, Delaunay or Boccioni, for architects and designers like Gropius or Le Corbusier, stage designers like Appia, film-makers like Abel Gance, most of whom had no political avant-gardist commitment. That modernism in general was about art fitting modern life. The second concept is the one which was elaborated retrospectively in the 1940s by theorists like Adorno and Greenberg as a consequence of the former concept's failure. They privileged figures of "subtraction" – abstract painting, dodecaphonic music, minimalist literature – because they equated that artistic subtraction with the withdrawal of the "totalitarian" will to merge art into life and eventually with the mosaic rejection of images. That's why Kafka and Schoenberg became emblems of modernity for Adorno. I would call it an after-modernism or a counter-modernism. Ironically, it is that after-modernism that became the target of post-modern criticism.

Vilensky:

I'd like to problematize the question that you already started to discuss. Do you think that we can posit some generic features of the avant-garde? For example, what immediately springs to mind is the principle of sublation of art into life. That's one of the most important features. Then, of course, there is the direct connection with political struggle, and the idea that art should and must change the world, on different levels. Then, there is also a very interesting idea, and a very complicated one, coming from Adorno, namely that art should keep its non-identity. I think we can find more and more features that really bring together different modes of production in art that really mattered in the history of the twentieth century. As an artist, I think that today we again have a chance to return to a certain composition of a new avant-garde, in some sense. That is because for me an important feature of the avant-garde is that the avant-garde is not about some tangible object of art, it's always about the composition of different things. For example, you can hardly talk about Malevich's pictures, but that's how the market appropriated them. Malevich was not about pictures, but about complexes of things. Actually, most of his paintings were sketches for large-scale public art projects. So I think that the avant-garde is based on the rejection of fetishization, of the reification of art into some tangible object that can be bought and sold.

Magun: I fully agree with what you said, Jacques, that we have to distinguish precisely between the properly avant-garde and, let's say, broadly modernist works such as Kafka's and Pollock's, but there is nevertheless something both have in common. And this is, well, something that could be vaguely described as the destruction of form, of figure, the move toward abstraction, toward the elements of this form. Of course, there is also constant self-reflection on art and its language, within the art and its language. Or, to speak in the terms of your own aesthetic theory, it is the direct presentation of background and not of the figure, the revelation of the non-thematic layers of perception. There was not only the aesthetic revolution of the nineteenth century (on which you focus), but something also happened in the twentieth century which massively brought these techniques or approaches into art, and into life. And then of course they developed differently, according to the avant-gardist or modernist model. In the twentieth century, most of the great art of both types tended toward pro-saization, de-auratization, in Benjamin's terms (even though the loss of aura

can of course itself be auratic), use of technology, and so on. This is more characteristic of the avant-garde, but there was such a trend in modernism, too (if you take Joyce, Eliot or Pound's later works). Such art could not and did not suggest a return to any sort of immediate elements of art and life – only to the ruins of technology. And nevertheless, this bears in itself a utopian force, too – a force of break, a force of an alien, solitary universe calling up your deepest capacities – think of Tarkovsky's "Zona."

What is also interesting with the role of art in politics, both in the case of modernism and the avant-garde, is that it provides a kind of utopia, but a strange kind of utopia. This utopia is kind of sealed; it is a promise of utopia, or the utopia of promise. Even with the Modernist art that does aspire to some sort of Absolute (Mallarmé, for instance) – it is a strange kind of Absolute which is not immediately readable, which always alludes to something else than what it is. This is perhaps what Adorno calls the "non-identical" as the task of art. But the irony, again, is that this strangeness and the promise of meaning conveyed through the destruction of meaning are at work equally in Modernist art, when it holds an opaque mirror to the world, and in the avant-garde, which tries to emancipate everyday practice from the dictates of common sense, of ideology, to turn everyone into an artist, to make people other than who they are, and so on.

Rancière: When you designate avant-gardism as an impulse to put art into life, the point is that this definition of avant-gardist art may come down to what I called the ethical regime. When Plato discusses poetry, both Plato and the poets are convinced that poetry is a form of education, and the question is, whether it is a good form of education. So, the idea of the intervention of art into life is not something novel or specific to avant-gardism. In a certain way, it is something from the past. The contradiction of the aesthetic regime of art is that the political potential of art is first defined not on the basis of the autonomy of art, but of the autonomy of aesthetic experience. Because Schiller's idea of the "aesthetic education of humanity" (and all that followed) is based precisely on the idea that there is a very specific aesthetic experience that is at odds with normal forms of experience. Before this aesthetic turn which was punctuated by Kant and Schiller, forms of art were always connected with forms of life, art was destined to express religious truth or the majesty of the monarchs, to decorate palaces and enchant aristocratic life, etc. And the aesthetic break means that there is something as a specific sphere of experience of art, which has nothing more to do with any kind of social function... The problem is that the idea of the political potential of art was first defined on the basis of this disruption. This is what I tried to describe when I spoke about workers' emancipation. I mentioned there that worker's emancipation was also aesthetic emancipation, and that aesthetic emancipation precisely had to do with the fact that there was something of an aesthetic experience available to everybody. That availability of a new form of experience was possible because art works were now identified in such a way that they could be seen as works of art regardless of why and for whom they had been created. The utopian potential of aesthetic experience was first predicated on that "autonomisation" of aesthetic experience from the ethical adequation between art and life.

The internal contradiction of avant-gardism is that it is defined on the basis of the potential of the aesthetic experience qua autonomous experience, and at the same time it tries to stop precisely this separation in order to create a new sensorium of common life. This is why for me it is impossible to give an unequivocal definition of avant-gardism. Avant-gardism may be defined as the transformation of the forms of art into forms of life. And it may be defined as the preservation of the autonomy of aesthetic experience from that transformation. This withdrawal can also be described as a utopia, as the preservation of a utopian promise enclosed in the very contradiction of autonomy, in the form of the veil or the enigma as with Adorno. I'd say that both positions have good arguments precisely because they reflect the original contradiction I indicated above.

Vilensky: It is very important that you mentioned the autonomy of aesthetic experience. I think it's one of the principal things. I am more and more trying to translate political experience into aesthetic experience and vice versa. Right now I find it very interesting to reconsider the idea of art's autonomy in relation to ideas of workers' autonomy that were developed in Italy by the Autonomia Operaia. You know their idea that politics, in its non-parliamentary forms, happens in some form of autonomist activity. And I think right now we should really start to reconsider art's autonomy. Not separation in the Adornian sense, but autonomy in the sense of the self-organization of cultural production that really opposes the market system and puts pressure on it.

Rancière: Well, I think there may be confusion about the word "autonomy." I tried to distinguish between the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and the autonomy of art. Defining the aesthetic experience also means defining a specific kind of

capacity. Art is about creating a space for unexpected capacities, which means also space for unexpected possibilities. I think that is not the same as the idea of autonomy in the sense, for instance, of the Italian "operaisti." In a sense, their autonomy meant autonomy with respect to the organization of parties, communist parties and trade unions. This is still a minimal definition of autonomy. The real content of autonomy is equality: it is the recognition and the enforcement of the capacity of anybody. The Italian autonomist movement involved that capacity. But it tied it up with something quite different, which is a view of the global economic process coming down to the idea that everything belongs to the same basis. Then everything is production, and this form of production produces this form of organization, and then there is a complete translatability between working, struggling, loving, making art and so on. I'd say that this idea of autonomy in fact suppresses precisely the autonomy of the spheres of experience. And with respect to the relation between the art and the market, there has already been a long search for a form of art that would not be marketable at all. Today there is a form of artistic activism that asks artists to make only interventions, to act directly as political activists. But this means in a certain way that you keep art as the property of the artist, for instance as an action of the artist. I'd say that this is a certain form of deprivation, because when you say that art is action, that it must not be made visible and marketable, this means that aesthetic experience is not made available to anybody.

Also, I think, it's quite difficult to define artistic practice on the negative basis of doing something that would not be marketable, because everything can be marketable. In the 1970s the conceptual artists said: if you don't create objects you don't create anything for the market, and thus it is political subversion. We know what happened to conceptual art, right? They did not sell objects, they sold ideas! It's a kind of perfection of the capitalist system, and not at all a break with it.

Magun: I have another question following this one. You are rightly saying, of course, that art reframes the relationships between what is or is not visible, what is or is not acceptable to see. But, again isn't there a step or a move that art should take before that, like some more fundamental gesture that has exactly to do with the negativity, with the explosion of this border before any reframing takes place? Any reframing relies on some kind of crisis, on some sort of destruction. The same is true of political revolution. If you look into the history of political and social forms you can say with Tocqueville that, actually, nothing really happened in the French Revolution: there was just a constant process of transformation. But we know that there was something more fundamental which really made a crisis out of this transformation, which turned this slow transformation into an explosion. I wonder if this is not an additional problem and additional level on which we should consider aesthetics.

Rancière: Well, the point is precisely that you can't anticipate explosions. Or, if you anticipate an explosion, you risk forbidding it or diverting it from its own law, from its own form of progression. It is true that education can provoke this form of explosion, but it's unclear whether you can predict the form of transformation and the way in which it becomes an explosion. I have the suspicion there is a certain reminder of transcendence in the idea of the radical break. It is true, at a certain time you can see what a radical break is: if you cut off the head of the king then, yes, it's a radical break, if you design a new constitution which gives new rights to the population, new capacities to the people etc., you can say that there is a radical break. But in the field of art it's quite difficult to define the moment of radical break. It is true for the forms of art, and also for their social and political implementation. Let us take the case of abstract art which has often been thought of as the right example of artistic break. As a matter of fact, this break had been anticipated from the nineteenth century by a shift in the way painting was looked at. In the nineteenth century prose of art criticism, you can see this shift of the gaze that makes figurative paintings increasingly viewed with an "abstract eye" which no longer sees in them a story or anecdotes, but events of matter and color. In that way "realist" writers of the nineteenth century, like the Goncourts, created the conditions in which "abstract" painting was viewed. The dismissal of figurative painting is part of a much wider process which may itself be viewed in terms of evolution or in terms of revolutionary break. Abstract forms, as Dima said, were about the construction of new buildings and new settings. At this point, the question is to what extent we can connect the "destructive" moment with a political break. The glorification of "function" in the revolution of architecture and design, from the Werkbund to the Bauhaus and the "Esprit nouveau" was intended as a reaction against the nineteenth century bourgeois imitation of the aristocratic styles. But it led to the achievement of a new capitalistic and Fordist rationality as well as to the idea of a workers' new world. And, in fact, the new architecture conceived for the multitudes very often ended up in the construction of elegant villas for the wealthy. The power of technique could be aligned with the power of the engineers, the power of the workers or that of the "educated" classes. Le Corbusier's book *Toward an Architecture* heralds a "regeneration," a new epoch for Humanity. But it sets it up as a dilemma: "Architecture or Revolution," which means architectural revolution or social revolution.

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Dmitry VILENSKY
Zanny BEGG JULY 2007

If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is... not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures of life to come. This is what the aesthetic avant-garde bought to the political avant-garde by transforming politics into a total life program. The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all the history of this confusion, sometimes complacently maintained and sometimes violently denounced, between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity - Jacques Ranciere

Zanny Begg (1972) –
*artist and activist,
based in Sydney*

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AVANT-GARDE COMPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Over the last few years, a number of artists have succeeded in both realizing and finding the theoretical grounding for a variety of works which allows us to speak of a new situation in art. These projects have found points of connection between art, new technologies, and the global movement against neo-liberal capitalism. The lineages of this interest in political art can be traced back to Documenta X (1997) and coincides with the emergence of the “movement of movements” which erupted onto the political horizon in Seattle in 1999 – an event which, it can be argued, has crystallised a new political subject (named the Multitude by Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* published in 2000). This situation has subsequently been manifested through a variety of cultural projects whose critical stance towards the process of capitalist globalisation and emphasis on the principles of self-organisation, self-publishing and collectivity has evoked the idea of a return to “the political” in art.

But to conceive of these artistic processes simply as “political” would be to seriously underestimate the situation we find ourselves in. There is evidence that what we are actually talking about is the emergence of an artistic movement: its participants are concerned with developing a common terminology based on the political understanding of aesthetics; their praxis is based on confrontational approaches towards the cultural industry; it finds consistent realization in the international framework of projects carried out in networks of self-organised collectives working in direct interaction with activists groups, progressive institutions, different publications, online resources and so on.

From history we know that such traits were once one of the characteristic of the avant-garde. However, many people today see the avant-garde as something discredited by the Soviet experience where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” rapidly degenerated into a “dictatorship over the proletariat” a totalitarian situation the “one no many yeses” of the anti-capitalist movement has explicitly sought to reject. But despite the anti-vanguardist principles of the “movement of movements” - which it must be noted is as much a rebellion against the old left of Stalinism and its universal claims to truth as it is against the neo-liberal new right - we believe that some of the essential content of the avant-garde is crucial for an understanding of contemporary art.

It is interesting to note that during times of heightened mass struggle – for example both 1917 and 1968 – there has often been a corresponding artistic turn towards minimalism and abstraction (such as Malevich or Donald Judd). Both these characteristics have been strongly associated with the avant-garde of its early and mid twentieth century variations. One could postulate that at times of intense political struggle the audience for art feel less attached to indexical images of real life turning instead towards abstract signifiers of social and political realities or congealed moments of formal artistic innovation.

But of course the opposite tendency also co-exists - the rise of documentary film making, realism and photography were strongly associated with both these two periods. We are proposing that we return to a discussion of the avant-garde but through a different reading of its composition: a reading which not only locates the political potential of art within the autonomy of the aesthetic experience but also within the autonomy of art as rooted within the social context. We would argue that to conceive of “the political” in art, without a corresponding commitment to the ideas of the avant-garde would diminish both concepts as would conceiving of the avant-garde as purely innovation within the “form” of art production alone. The radicality of art, therefore, cannot be reduced to its connection to social or political imperatives nor to formal stylistic innovation but must also be understood through its poietic force; its ability to question and destabilise the very notion of the political, social, cultural and artistic. The avant-garde is a coup d’etat against history making visible new possibilities in both art and politics.

At the current moment the components that historically belonged to the aesthetic of the avant-garde now fall into place in a new composition. Today, we could claim the following taxonomy:

- a) realism as an aesthetic method;
- b) fidelity toward the revolutionary impulse of the avant-garde;
- c) autonomy as political self-organization

[A] REALISM AS METHOD

From history, we know that the avant-garde utilised a complex array of artistic strategies while claiming that the authenticity of its representation of revolutionary processes was guaranteed by the constant renewal of artistic languages and their sublation in everyday life.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, the proponents of realism made a similar claim, though their method rested upon attempts at creating realistic works (in film, painting or literature) that showed the image of the revolution and the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat and the party. For example the Statute of the Union of Soviet Writers wrote in 1934 that the true task of realism is “*the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development*”.

Unlike the art of socialist realism or the historical avant-garde, contemporary art necessarily has the negation of capitalism’s totality as its point of departure. At the same time, it strives to connect this negativity with aesthetic methods adequate to the study of the world in which new subjectivity arises, not only as something destructive, but as something that produces new social life. Political art maintains a reflexive attitude toward its own language; it does not try to dissolve into the processes of “the emancipation of life” but sets itself at a distance to life. In the old argument – should artists produce for the proletariat or should the proletariat produce its own art – today’s position is

best expressed through something Godard said in 1972: artists have to speak in their own name while participating in the life of political movements, or to put it another way our goal is not to make political art but to make art politically.

Today realism as a method can be understood as both a continuation and a re-questioning of existing attempts at breaching the gap between the subject and the object, between an indexical relationship to everyday life and the new subjectivities produced by political events. This tension is most obviously played out through the methods of contemporary art which are closely related to documentation, photography and film/video. The ubiquitous introduction of digital technologies for capturing moments in everyday life have opened new possibilities for coming closer to representing life in the forms of life itself, but brought up the issue of media reality and its truthfulness. Here, it really does make sense to return to the aesthetic discoveries of the 1930s, for example, to the strategy of estrangement introduced by Bertold Brecht. Pre-empting any possibility for empathy based on the illusion of authenticity, estrangement allows a process of defamiliarization which uncovers how social mechanisms work, demonstrating not only how and why people behave in a certain way in society, but analyzing the production of social relations itself. Brecht understood how important it was, first and foremost, to keep from mimicking reality or simply trust the medium.

Here, we would like to emphasize a few key methods that are central to contemporary political art.

1 MILITANT RESEARCH

The genealogy of this tradition goes back to Fredrich Engels’ 1844 exploration of the Condition of the Working Class in England. Later, this tradition was continued in research done by the operaists and activist-sociologists close to them. In the Russian context, militant research became a familiar theme through the productionist interpretation of Trotsky’s idea of the worker’s correspondent.

An extremely relevant contemporary definition of militant research can be found in the work of the Argentinean group Colectivo Situaciones: “*Militant research attempts to work under alternative conditions, created by the collective itself and by the ties to counter power in which it is inscribed, pursuing its own efficacy in the production of knowledges useful to the struggles.*” [1] Colectivo Situaciones, *On the Research Militant*. In: *Transversal* (web-journal). <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en>

Such life-practices present contemporary political art with an important aesthetic challenge. The representation of militant research requires a new formal language capable of providing narratives

5

SUBVERSIVE AFFIRMATION

In an apparent break with the more post-modern strategies of pastiche – where incongruous elements were often combined without any sense that the resulting humor, horror or dislocation was revealing of any deeper social truths - we are witnessing a return to parody and absurdist strategies of subversive affirmation which seek to undo the logic of capitalism by slavishly following this very logic to its absurd and grotesque conclusions. By overplaying their identification with the values of capitalist violence and exploitation these parodistic gestures seek to undermine these same values by evoking a deeper sense of morality and social responsibility. This strategy, of course, presents some risks - its position of subversive affirmation binds it within the logic of those it seeks to critique, producing gestures which, if this alternative morality is absent, can be received in a manner diametrically opposite of the desires of its creators.

6

CARNIVALESQUE

With its emphasis on death, symbolic violence, sensuality and excess the carnival poses some similarities with strategies of subversive affirmation but also with some important differences. By breaking down the gap between spectator/participant the carnival opens up a space of embodied politics where people can act of moments of free expression and pathos. The carnival is one of the most important means of intervening and overturning reality - a hypertrophied experience which overpowers the surrounding world with derisive laughter. The carnivalesque introduces irrational methods which break down the symbolic-representative sequence of capitalism. Its aesthetic form is a continuation of the traditions of surrealism and magical realism.

7

RE-ENACTMENT AND FICTION

The formation of new a subjectivity is not only shaped in relation to the current political situation – it also finds its shape in relations to the past. That's why many art works are semi-retroactive - not only challenging the present but also how we understand the past. The past is full with unrealized potential which art can crystallizes into a new form.

Why go backwards? The point in revisiting the past is its inter-relation with the future. As Hito Steyerl commented in a recent article "...the only possible critical documentary today is the presentation of an affective and political constellation which does not even exist, and which is yet to come". The possibility of this "becoming" is located not only in the future but is also rooted in the actualisation of all lost chances. Many recent art works have thus used tactics, reminiscent of Brecht learning plays, such as re-enactments and fictions where the actors and audience must try and distinguish political from apolitical behavior by imitating ways of behaving, thinking, talking, and relating.

The fiction allow us to draw closer the moment in which the actualized elements of the past interweave with what is taking place in the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*), leading to the potential composition of a new Event.

[B]

FIDELITY TO THE REVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Here it is important to consider fidelity as it has been posed by Badiou, that is not as an artistic fidelity to the goals and aims of the anti-capitalist movement per se a position which would be reminiscent of the modus operandi of socialist realism and would reduce contemporary art production to the propagandistic position of cheer-leader or advocate for this movement, but a fidelity to the subjective space from which the movement sprang. From this position the new avant-garde does not conform to the already-mythical subject of revolutionary social change, but seeks out and forms this subject through its own experiments and processes of engagement and new artistic discoveries.

John Roberts has described the promise of the avant-garde as that of the "new" which, as Adorno pointed out, did not mean a consumerist fetishising of the novel or the trendy but the "repetitive and continuous emergence from artistic tradition". The "new" lies not in "formal, stylistic" breakthroughs, but in the possibility of keeping alive art's non-identity in the face of its own institutionalisation and, as such in the face of means-ends rationality of capitalist exchange value."^[2] John Roberts "Avant-gardes After Avant-Gardism"

If we create a mediated relationship between the social and autonomous role of art it is possible to see some of points of cohesion opening up between Badiou's idea of the event and Adorno's idea of the "new." Adorno's idea of the "new" which destroys the traditions which give rise to art finds some purchase with Badiou's idea that an event is a "truth which ruptures the order which supports it".

of direct participation in the transformation of the world that surrounds us, but in practice, it most frequently appears as the space of an alternative archive. Not only the quality and scale of the alternative archive's material itself, but also the mode of interaction with it presents the opportunity of developing entirely new dimensions of protracted aesthetic (co-) experience that lie very much beyond the instantaneous reception of most contemporary art.

2

MAPPING

In this case, we are talking about the creation of maps that reflect the structure that arises in the interweaving of capital and power. The main aim of such maps is to suggest a clear definition of the current moment and to answer a question of crucial importance: how does contemporary society work and which factors shape its subjectivity? What are the possibilities for representing capital and the structures of its dominance? The aesthetic experience one makes while looking at such atlases is one of horror in the face of the totality and sheer force of contemporary capital. This is why such maps should always been seen in parallel to other maps, maps of resistance.

In this case, the main goal is to make maps that show the interaction of various dissenting social movements. This line of mapping is not only meant to reflect the realities of protest, but the potential for a tendency of social development. It is interesting to note that the appearance of mapping as an exploration of the possibilities for visualizing sociological research also began in the "Institute of Visual Sociology" in Moscow during the early 1930s, and continued by Gerdt Arnz and Otto Neurath in their Vienna "Institute of Visual Statistics" (which have been down upon so effectively in the work of Andreas Siekmann).

3

STORY TELLING

If the methods of mapping are impersonal in principle and operate with numbers, quantities and symbol-pictograms, the idea of story telling is based on the old slogan of "politicizing the personal." In this way, the main goal is to demonstrate how personal stories and fates are always produced in relation to the social and political conditions that shape and rest upon this or that form of "bare life." First and foremost, personal story telling reveals the process of subjectivity's formation as a product of historical conditions. In this way, they subvert the "grand narratives" and official histories of power by revealing the contradictions of capitalism operating through the smallest fragment.

4

MONTAGE

Historically montage is connected to the avant-garde theories of film, and their counterparts in literature, painting, and graphics. Today, the most relevant aspect of montage is not its capacity for creating a new experimental language, but the possibilities it offers for working with real materials and documenting the life of society politically. This does not apply to videos and film, but to exhibition space at large. There is a sense in which the "political exhibition" must be understood not as a collection of works by individual artists but as an assemblage or montage of works which must be viewed both in its totality as an exhibition and in connection to its specific locale and social and political surroundings. The political exhibition is not an interchangeable display of socially conscious art but an organic outgrowth of connections which link the participating artists and the local situation within which they are working, the result of which must be considered as art work in itself.

As mentioned earlier Seattle was an "event" which has changed how subjectivity and potentiality is understood. This event, like any event, opens up possibilities for new subjectivities and understandings of reality. Seattle and the anti-capitalist movement, as a critical moment in and against the process of globalisation, has sparked interest in social engagement, new media and communication technology, DIY, deterritorialisation, autonomist revolutionary theory, the breakdown between art and life, carnival and so on, all factors which have been absorbed into the contemporary art making process. Without "muffling" the radical potential of art by saying that it merely reflects these changes we can see that these changes dialectically relate to what being radical on its own terms would mean.

It is precisely here that we see a continuation of the avant-garde's approach to the political problematic and a possibility for fidelity to the idea of revolution under contemporary conditions, which – let us use Badiou's terminology again – is the essence of the possibility for actualizing the event, and not the futile race for formal innovations.

[C]

AUTONOMY AS A PRINCIPLE OF SELF-ORGANISATION

Both in the Soviet Union and in capitalist society, the defeat of the avant-garde was a result of the attempt to sublimate art into life. This attempt was then instrumentalized by the party or the culture industry. The experience of this defeat underwent exhaustive analysis in discussions initiated by Adorno and lasting to the present day. The conclusion drawn from these debates makes it necessary for contemporary political art to rethink its conception of autonomy. But this new project of autonomy has more to do with the experience of political practices of worker's autonomy and council communism than with the modernist project of defending the autonomy of the aesthetic experience.

A more contemporary understanding of autonomy is as a confrontational practice in relation to the dominant forces of cultural production; comparable to the act of "exodus from the factory," and the attempt to create a decentralized network of self-organizing collectives. This understanding of autonomy moves beyond the classic conception of "self-law" and articulates a position of independence and opposition to social relations which threatens to destroy these relations as they are; as Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi argue autonomy is "not only a political project, it is a project for existence."^[3] Lotringer, Sylvere and Marazzi, Christian "The Return of the Political" trans. Peter Caravetta and John Johnson, "Autonomia Post Political Politics", *semiotext(e)*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1980, p8 This collectivist, confrontational, politicised notion of autonomy which exerts such influence in the anti-capitalist movement today presents an alternative interpretation to the individualist and classical one within existing art discourses.

Here, the point is not art's dissolution into life, but its crystallization in life as a constant re-discovery of new places in which there are new possibilities beyond reactionary times can be realised here and now. Conclusion

It is with a certain sense of historical irony, therefore, that we would like to end this article with a quote from Leon Trotsky.

A reactionary epoch not only decomposes and weakens the working class, isolating its avant-garde, but also reduces the general ideological level of the movement, projecting political ideas back to previous historical epochs. The task of the avant-garde in these conditions consists, first of all, in not being carried away by this stream, but of necessarily going against this stream.

USE

ALWAYS MEANS

TO OPEN A NEW

POSSIBILITY

A CONVERSATION

ON

POETRY, LANGUAGE, USE, AND POLITICS

with Giorgio AGAMBEN – March 2nd, 2007

Alexander Skidan (AS):

In Russia today, poetry, on the one hand, is very marginalized; it's off the scene, so to say. At the same time, in the context of new authoritarian steps toward the shrinking of the public sphere, poetry somehow has won back some part of the attention and power that it lost during perestroika when, as you know, what was forbidden before became open and free, and all the hot topics migrated from literature and poetry to the public sphere or into the newspapers. There was a huge gap in the Nineties, when poetry was an absolutely marginal, individual enterprise. Now it's different. Our group sees poetry as one very specific, very strange field where something very important is happening or could happen. That's why we want to ask you how you could define the singularity of poetic expression, poetic language, and poetic subjectivity. So the latter would be the topic of my first question. In contemporary poetry, and by that I mean poetry after Celan, Mandelstam, Brodsky, we can't grasp a strict, homogeneous subjectivity anymore. It's so elusive: self-effaced subjectivity that demands new clarification and new definitions. If I can dare to ask you to comment on this displacement of subjectivity from Mallarmé and Rimbaud's age to the post-modern sense of Lyotard's displaced subject...

AS:

What I mean is probably that this lack of subjectivity was increasingly thematized by poetry itself, and it became part of its auto-reflexive structure, and here, I can see a parallel to philosophical debates about subjectivity and the subject in the post-Heideggerian sense. Can you make a kind of parallel or link to the poetical notion of displaced subjectivity and a philosophical problematization of the subject in post-Heideggerian terms?

AS:

Right.

Alexei Penzin (AP):

I suppose that Sasha's question also has some historical and situational underpinnings. To be brief, I mean here just some "formational" differences in modes of doing poetry, which are obvious. I have in mind also our present condition where poetry here again seems to be more powerful in the living experience of people, as something meaningful and promising. I would even dare to say, as an articulation of their subjectivity or some utopia of subjectivity, or as something which might continue defeated attempts, e.g., of politically colored poetry of the left-wing avant-garde of the twenties.

AS:

Is there any political meaning which we can assign to this fracture with the presence of the "I" and the voice, and the enunciation of this voice in poetic expression? Is there any possibility to think of this structure of distancing and self-erasing as something that has the potential to politically transform the status quo?

** This is a transcription of a recorded interview. Parts of the recording were inaudible and are marked [inaudible].*

Giorgio Agamben
(1942)
*is an Italian philosopher
who teaches at the
Università IUAV
di Venezia*

Giorgio Agamben (GA):

More generally, I would say that the problem of poetic subjectivity is not only a modern problem. It's always the most complicated and difficult thing to grasp. Even if you go back to the poetic tradition of the Romantics, each poet tried to grasp poetical experience and poetical subjectivity. It always implies a kind of desubjectivation. It's like in the negativity of the famous letter by John Keats: the poet is the one who has no ego. The poetical subject is not a subject. This is the gesture "J'ai un autre." Each time a poet has tried to grasp the problem of poetical subjectivity, it has always led to negative subjectivity, non-subjectivity, desubjectivation. The Portuguese poet Pessoa is another incredible example. There is a famous letter I quote in the book where he defines how he writes. When he writes, suddenly another ego materializes and speaks through him. He gives this the name of the heteronym. Even in classical poetry, the problem of the muse is precisely that: it is not the poet who speaks, but the muse. This simply means that poetical subjectivity is a very complicated thing. In the Sixties in San Francisco there was this interesting school called "Dictated Poetry" and they went back to this idea of the muse and the idea that the one who speaks is not the poet. Then, it can take the Hegelian form that it is the language that speaks. This is just to say how big the problem of poetical subjectivity really is. Even Dante says in a very famous description of his poetics that "I is one (third person) that speaks when love inspires him." So this is the banalité du base, as the Situationists used to say. Then, one should begin from this and try to think through the problem. I wouldn't say that it's a modern problem. Suddenly, it has become more intense, but I would say it's a constituent element of poetry.

GA:

I would suppose that the analogy is very strong. But I suppose you know this very famous essay by Michel Foucault on the author...

GA:

GA: So in that essay, of course, he distinguishes the author as a function, as a social and juridical factor, but then he states very clearly that the place of the author is empty in the text. So, subjectivity is on the one hand a juridical function; you can define the author from the point of view, as he does, of the law, as a center of speech, a center of responsibility, so you can persecute the author because he writes. He shows that the origin of copyright is the possibility of punishment. That's obvious. Copyright is just a huge falsification. (I don't like copyright. It should not exist.) But then he says this very beautiful thing, and we could go on from this Foucauldian discourse: what we could call poetical subjectivity is not a biographical individual that we could assign and name, and it would then be taken by law as a center of imputation. Then, we should begin to think that the poetical subjectivity begins from this empty space, from the fact that the place of the author is empty. And then, it seems to me that the poetical subject is something that in the text, in the act of expression, remains unexpressed. So that's why Foucault says that it's empty and the fact that it's empty does not mean it's not important. The fact that this active space is something that remains unexpressed in the act of expression is precisely what makes reading possible. How can we read a poem? If there were not this empty space, how could we have the subjectivity of the reader, which is again the same structure, which will stay empty and take at the same time...

GA:

Of course, history is something that makes differences, but it seems to me that each time the poet tried to think about this problem of poetical subjectivity, you would always have a structure of that kind. Only an idiot would say that "I am the author of this poem." There is a nice lecture by Ingeborg Bachmann on the poetical ego. Here, again, the poetical subject is something that must be produced each time, only to disappear. If you see this from a more philosophical point of view, of course, from the point of view of language, who is the one who speaks. You know the work of the great French linguist Emile Benveniste. He shows that what we call subjectivity is produced by the experience of enunciation in language. So, the subject is only the one who now says "I" in the present act of enunciation. You cannot identify him as a substance. Also, there is this fracture between living and speaking. The one who says ego is a shifter, a pure personal pronoun, and there is nothing else existing. This is very important when you speak of Mallarmé. But then, there is a voice which will say "I;" how else can you have a shifter? The possibility of the shifter goes back to something in the voice. But again, this voice is not a natural phenomenon, because this voice really describes the language. It's not the voice of the word. The word does not say "I." Again, the voice will be something erased and cancelled, and always inscribed in language. This is just to say that there is an ontological basis for the assigning of this subjectivity; it is structurally quite clear.

GA:

If we say that poetry is a place where, par excellence, this experience takes place as an experience of the fracture between living and speaking, then of course it is a really central experience. It is not something you can leave at the margins. It's a very fundamental human experience. The very constitution of the human takes place there. So of course it is political in this aspect, but it is also more fundamental: poetry is a kind of anthropogenic experience. This is why poetry has been so central in every tradition. What is really interesting is why this experience, which is obviously really central, is marginalized.

AS:

In Italy also? [Laughter]

AS:

Yet with Heidegger's turn to poetry, this experience became central to thinking, while at the same time, it became more and more marginalized in a cultural sense. So when we are speaking about poetry in the sense of thinking, it's a crucial experience. We can apply to this experience as the real center of political debate. But at the same time, while gaining this more and more philosophical meaning, poetry is losing what we could call immediate response or immediate meaning. Because even in the age of Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire, poetry was not something only for philosophers and poets, but for others as well.

Dmitry Novikov (DN):

Turning to Blanchot, who did a lot of work on this subject, we could state two things: poetry is a space for the production of subjectivity, and the opposite, a space for the abolishment or destruction of subjectivity.

DN:

Blanchot would say that it is a double: subjectivity and non-subjectivity. His example is Kafka.

AP:

I would like to ask a more political question. Maybe not about subjectivity so much as about the action of poetry, as something capable of transforming another subjectivity. . .

AS:

We need to make some bridge between the topic of subjectivity and de-subjectivation and the notion of togetherness. Up to now, we have been speaking of the notion of this cut-out subjectivity which has no otherness, no community with which his-her words resonate. But when poetry resonates, when it presents itself, there is always-already some kind of community involved. Or when we speak to God directly, something unimaginable for me right now. . . So when I was speaking about the potentiality of transformation, I was also thinking about the power of the poetic word to involve the other into my subjectivization and simultaneously in my de-subjectivization. This is a very singular, very unique way of communicating without communication. I would suggest that it's a very potentially political thing.

DN:

So you agree with Hölderlin and Lacoue-Labarthe. This very innocent thing which is poetry is in fact very grave in its political consequences. We should seek the crucial problems of modernity in its poetical thinking of modernity. Do you think that this is the case? [Actually longer, but inaudible].

DN:

If I understand you correctly, this new usage should be something opposed to consumption. Consumption is not usage; it is an appropriation. . .

DN:

And use is a kind of openness.

DN:

But to be precise, poetry opens language not only to new usage, but also to new consumption. What does it mean that language is so open to use?

AP:

But this is our situation. We live in a world that is totally useless, reduced to consumption. This is why poetry has lost its power. . .

GA:

Everywhere. I mean, in Italy now, there are poetry readings with three thousand people. There is some kind of cultural festival in Rome, and the writers and poets come, and there are three thousand people there, but that's another thing. The real fact is that poetry is marginalized. Then it can suddenly be spectacularized, but that's another story.

GA:

Mallarmé is really the first instance of an intentional journey to the margins. There is a big distance between Baudelaire and Mallarmé in that sense. Baudelaire was really the last poet who was really read, and has had a kind of lasting success. Mallarmé intentionally goes to another place, but again, mixes this with the reflection of subjectivity and the structural relations of this situation. I don't know about Heidegger's reading of poetry. This is just a normal thing. If, as we said, in poetry such a fundamental experience of language and subjectivity takes place, it would be absurd if philosophy did not cope with this. Philosophy is a radicalization of the same experience. But then again, Heidegger's readings had a bad effect; they produced a lot of bad, academic, and really annoying poetry-philosophizing, texts that criticize thinking and the relation [poorly audible]. Somewhere, Wittgenstein says that philosophy should be poeticized, only poeticized. Then, the reverse is also true: poetry should be philosophized. But this should be the same gesture. To me, poetry and philosophy are just two intensities that run through the field of language. I see language as a field, again, like in physics, where you have an electromagnetic field and you have intensities and tensions. There are two opposite tensions; one is philosophy, the other is poetry. One goes from sound to meaning, the other goes from meaning to sound, but they cannot exist alone. It's impossible to have only one. One intensity goes with the other; a good poet is somehow thinking, and a good thinker is somehow producing poetry.

GA:

I like very much something that Deleuze says: "I write to become impersonal." I think it's true. It is, in a way, going beyond subjectivity, but it will have to do with subjectivity. It is something that will remain as a testimony of what is happening to it. There is that very beautiful letter of Pessoa. First, he becomes another, and writes thirty poems as another, but then, he goes back to himself, to Pessoa, and he has to write another poem to witness, to make a testimony to this alienation or impersonalization – sorry, depersonalization. I will agree with Deleuze that we write to become impersonal. If anyone writes to affirm their ego, that's a really bad writer.

GA:

I will tell you a secret: each process of subjectivation implies a process of desubjectivation. They are always together.

GA:

Now we spoke a lot about the subject because you began with the problem of poetry under the perspective of poetical subjectivity. But we could also speak of poetry beyond this experience of subjectivity, and so on. I don't think that we could today reaffirm something like the idea that the poet speaks to the people or the community. Now – and this would be a historically modern phenomenon, historical and not general – we are in the position of a poet with no people. One hundred years ago, that would have seemed absurd, but now, we are more in that position. This does not mean [inaudible] that we cannot talk about the poem's action. The other day [at a lecture given at the 2nd Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art] I was speaking about the writing of a poem as an example of this inoperativity, as an operation on language that will make language inoperative, deactivating all the common functions of information and communication, opening it to a new possible usage. This is an incredibly important collective experience. The possibility of making inoperative the social, economical, biological operations and opening them to new usages is really the most fundamental social experience, and if you say social, it is something you can do...with others and for others. It's not a personal usage; never.

GA:

Like we just said before, I think it's something essential, with all we said about subjectivity, it is a field where – par excellence – something is opened to a new possibility. There is the language, but what is more important than to open the language to a new possibility? If you lack this, you can do almost nothing. That's why it is so terribly politically important that language, on the contrary, today is completely taken into the spectacularization and the manipulation of the media. This is only because people are less free and more easily controlled. But, also, you cut out the possibility of opening something new. If the language has already lost this capacity for freeing itself from the national and communicative usage, then you cannot open a new dimension. Nothing has happened. The first possibility of opening something new is to open language to a new usage.

GA:

Consumption is the impossibility of usage. The consumption of language is the real impossibility of using language.

GA:

Yes. Use always means to open in this a new possibility... It's like the tourist. The tourist is the human being who makes an experience of an absolute impossibility; he can use nothing. [Laughter] But often we are reduced to being consumers of our cities. And today, the mass of humanity is strung up in the impossibility of using anything. Someone goes to the supermarket and experiences the impossibility of using things. Someone goes up into the city and experiences the impossibility of using public space. But then, to open up to a new use...

GA:

What does it mean to use language in this sense? It's just taking back the possibility of this opening. If language is always-already reduced to its informational and grammatical meanings, you cannot do anything. As I have already said.

GA:

But there is one risk when one says this, like you said, that everything now is reduced to consumption. This happens. Men are always somehow in this situation. This is just an extreme situation we are in today. When I say usage in this interview, I don't mean that we should go back to something original, to the natural, original use. It's like the commodity. We don't overcome the commodity because we go back to the original use of the thing, of course, [chuckles] that's the whole point. What I call use is something that can happen only in the relation to the dispositif, to alienation, to consumption. It's a fight with this. You have access to a new usage when you liberate it. So it's not something original. You don't go back. You have access to a new thing because you had to cope, to fight.

D.V.: *In your article "Art and the Ethics of In(ter)vention", you speak of the need for new configurations of collective action against what is perceived as accelerating alienation, not just of labour but of the spirit. Of course, for us as a group this is very important. We come together to reclaim collective agency. It would be good if we could talk a little in this direction. How do you see the relation of this agency to the dominant power? How can they dissolve its dominance? Which means of production do they have in their hands?*

J.F.: I waver between pessimism and optimism on this issue! In recent times we have witnessed violence committed between communities struggling over conflicting national narratives – Northern Ireland, the Balkans, various African states, to name a few – undoubtedly fuelled by state economic and political interests. Nonetheless, there has been a move towards some 'resolution' of these problems, in part because globalisation itself has changed the stakes, such that 'local' issues are now seen to be part of the 'global' landscape – ecologically, politically and economically – and have to be reconfigured accordingly. When one thinks of collective action against the 'dominant power', however, one is immediately faced with the question, where is this power located? Up to the 1980s one could still identify state institutions and elected officials as targets for political activism; but the power exercised through invisible, transnational corporate interests in collusion with some sectors of the media is rather less easy to confront. Part of our impotence and ethical outrage is witnessing the blatant hypocrisy of the state, which is perceived as acting as a buffer zone for these interests rather than attending to the welfare of citizens.

However, there was an optimistic moment at the turn of the millennium with the mobilisation of collective action like the Mexican Zapatistas, Anti-Capitalism and Reclaim the Streets, which seemed to confirm Hardt and Negri's thoughts on the mobilisation of the 'multitude' or Agamben's identity-less 'community' that would by-pass the rigid structures favoured by the state. An interesting facet of these actions is that they took advantage of the communications technologies of power (as did later, of course, Islamic 'terrorists'). I was also interested in how these movements were conducted in the spirit of Bakhtin's popular carnivalesque, but unhappily this approach to change has been overshadowed by an escalation of atrocities, which feed into now overt state promotion of fear. We are all now hostage to two quasi-religious fundamentalisms.

Have there been signs of such mobilisation in artistic practice? Yes, insofar as only the market clings to the myth of the transcendental artistic subject, and more artists are willing to form collaborations with non-artists and address public issues, as Documenta11 was bold enough to show. The question is, as you say, can artistic political intervention lead to collective agency? In itself, I would say no. At best it can inspire a new vision of reality. The difficult part is how to translate insight into action. Under technological-capitalist hegemony, organising the Big Revolution seems no longer an option, so we are left with the hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare. If there's to be resistance, it has to happen from the more 'local' level by processes of diffusion. There is also the question of how to change people's consciousness in the face of the power of the media. As we saw in Britain this year, even the more ethically aware news media can be silenced when they challenge state policies, so that they are finally forced into 'self-censorship.'

D.V.: *It's the same situation in Russia. But for us, for an example, the point of our optimism could be formulated as follows: we are a small group of people, but at the same time, we have control of our independent media, in some way; for us, it's important to construct a situation at least in the cultural field. [...] Let's take Petersburg. We have a community of six or seven people who can produce a 'zine, make public actions, exhibitions and other things. Now imagine if we had not one just a one community but six or ten, each of them with about six people, who would maybe develop in their own fields. I'm sure then we could stop many things or do them differently. The real question is how to stimulate the growth of more communities of this kind...*

J.F.: I think for art now it's also a question of inventing new social spaces or imaginaries. That was why I was interested in the Peruvian "Wash the Flag" action, which activated the downfall of Fujimori's corrupt government, and which I think inspired Francis Alys's collaborative action, "When Faith Moves Mountains", which in its absurdity was a 'carnavalesque' action. It was an action performed outside the institution, but nonetheless in part funded by it. The art world contains many art worlds, but its public face is controlled by the interests of the institutions. So inevitably the more critical art is almost always on the periphery, or with those artists who seem to be doing one thing but are actually doing another. When we ask whether there can be an art of resistance, and by that I mean a resistance to the exclusive instrumentalizing languages of hegemonic discourse, I think about earlier strategies. For instance, with the historical avant-garde, or political activism from the 1960s through the 1980s, the attitude was invariably oppositional. There are many reasons why I think that oppositionality is no longer a viable strategy. I've mentioned the problem of locating power, and also the question of reinventing language. Resistance has to happen in a more subtle way to try to penetrate institutional structures and undermine their claims to truth. Local networks need to make alliances with greater networks to form an internationalized 'community'.

DIALOGUE

ABOUT

COLLECTIVE AGENCY, HOW TO INVENT

NEW SOCIAL SPACES, RADICAL PUBLIC

AND

NEW POSSIBILITIES OF LIFE

D.V.: *But don't you think that there's a big problem with some of these groups? Some of them are really internationally known but locally marginal. Of course you can play around with local cultural institutions, but then you see that it makes no sense – now they can swallow any type of message, especially when it is packed into a seductive visual form...*

J.F.: Yes, this is true, but we have to acknowledge the limitations of the institution – its physical structure, its ideological framework, its sources of funding, etc. But for artists, it's still a question of inventing new social spaces and forms of public engagement, as the institution is still an inadequate structure for any art that wants or has any kind of social or political consciousness. This is why it is important that artists build more fluid networks that do not depend wholly on narrow local interests, but through which the local concerns can be brought into a dialogical relation with the global. It's a question of connecting local singularities that might become a 'multiple' on an international level. In any case, as the saying goes, one is never a prophet in one's own country! I have to make alliances with those with whom I can have a conversation, even if they're globally dispersed, as a way of sharing experience and knowledge.

D.V.: *But how far the role of the institutions has changed? In Scandinavia last year, there was a lot of talk about the institution's power, and Scandinavians are very much concerned with rethinking the institutions as the most powerful means of production for the artists who engaged with social texture of local communities. Taking into consideration these rather progressive case, how do we trace the difference between collective and institution?*

J.F.: I can't see any change in institutional power or structure without a genuine change of consciousness, or will to do so. The art institution has undergone changes, but only under pressure from changing forms and requirements of art practice. I teach a class in the construction of 'otherness', multiculturalism and postcoloniality to curatorial students, and I am happy to say that some awareness of these issues has crept into their projects. However, they still all want to be curatorial 'stars' in prestigious institutions! My hope is that maybe they can function like Gramsci's "organic intellectual", someone who comes from the community but is able to visualize and actualise possibilities for change. Likewise, Michel de Certeau's 'shifter' (in *The Capture of Speech*), or Deleuze's 'minoritisation' of language by dislocated communities seeking to reinvent their subjectivities. Now, I think artists potentially can perform this function, since to change consciousness of a given situation is to reconfigure community, which admittedly demands time and patience. It is true what you say that any grassroots group can become a fixed structure; the question is, how do you encourage flexibility and openness given that there are always 'interests' at stake? Other than insisting that any structure is subject to changing conditions, and this is precisely what art can reveal, I don't know the answer.

Jean FISHER &
Dmitry VILENSKY
OCTOBER 2004



D.V.: *Do you think that art can be considered as a tool for empowerment of those who are normally excluded, who have no voice in this new global order? Can art be one of the most important tools for empowerment through creative engagement?*

J.F.: Disempowerment is being deprived of individual and collective subjectivity, of imagining new possibilities of life. This was the problem of imperialist subjugation. For dispossessed peoples, the issue has been to reclaim selfhood and cultural renewal through and against the alien ideological structures imposed on them. An example here is James Joyce who exiles himself from Ireland because he could find no place for himself as a speaking subject under English colonial rule. Joyce 'resolves' this in *Finnegans Wake* by contaminating English by, among other things, Irish orality and the scriptovisual labyrinths of the *Irish Book of Kells*, which forces it to mean 'differently'. At the same time he reinvents literature! One could also quote the emergence of African American culture through the reinvention of musical and literary idioms that play across European and African traditions. The influence of African America on global popular music means that its political messages to some extent also get carried across. Art, alas, doesn't possess the same capacity for diffusion, but it is still a valuable tool for self-representation.

D.V.: *Yeah, I agree, right now it is somehow in the air that many people have simultaneously started talking about the idea of the radical public. We should also imagine another level of public, not a passive consumer, but people who actively participate in the process of art's production by permanently reinventing art. I think this is one of the most current questions: how do we activate the public? In an ideal situation, this public will be split into some different communities which has their own task and their own configuration, but can join each other at one point of the Event.*

J.F.: I would agree that has to continually reinvent itself and its relation to the public sphere. One of my problems with activist art is its tendency to think a critique of the status quo is sufficient; it is valuable to give public awareness of social injustice, but activist strategies tend to end up looking too much like sociology. For me, art is also about imagining a reality that isn't necessarily the reality one lives in, that is, it's about enabling new insights on contemporary existence and how we might inhabit the world differently. I think that one of the main problems for artists goes back to Adorno and Benjamin's debates on mass media and information culture respectively, and the extent to which they condition both our idea of reality and our capacity to transmit experience. Or, indeed, that under industrialised capitalism the worker was not in control of his or her own means of production. Perhaps the new audiovisual technologies and home computers can alter that aspect and enable people a more creative relation to work? De Certeau considered it was too facile to assume that consumers passively absorbed what was given to them. That, in fact, like the bricoleur, they selected and combined what they needed, often in ways that subverted the intentions of producers. More recently, in speaking of current trends in art, Nicholas Bourriaud has called this 'post-production' and attributes it to the influence of the Web and the pop culture of 'cut-n'-mix'. However, I would say that this tendency is predated precisely by the survival tactics of dispossessed cultures under colonial regimes. They present lessons of hope that people can still take the power of invention into their own hands.

In thinking of art and its social efficacy, we might reconsider Benjamin's question about the transmissibility experience; experience not as something that 'belongs' to self-presence but that connects us in a shared existence. Here I'm also thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy's insistence that Being is not a self-enclosed, self-generating entity, but always and at its inception a 'being together with'. In this sense, what is important in art may be less what it says than what it does at an intersubjective level. It is this that distinguishes it from most mediated forms of representation, which, as Benjamin pointed out, don't transmit experience but information. In Britain art has to an extent been incorporated into the entertainment industry (*vis-à-vis* the popularity of Tate Modern, blockbuster shows and the Turner Prize). Rather than lament this, we should encourage this non-connoisseurial viewing public as a new collective experience. Against instrumentalising technologies, is it not experience and its transmissibility that must be reclaimed? We can only ask that art be capable of touching an unrealised aspect of our own experience of the fragility of the human. These are the conversations we need to have – and this is how I understand Bakhtin's popular carnivalesque!

The FACTORY OF FOUND CLOTHES
(Fabrika Naydenykh Odezhd in Russian,
or FNO)

are Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya (1969)

and Olga Egorova (1968),

respectively known as Gluklya and Tsaplya,

both members of the collective *Chto delat?*

Founded in 1995 in St Petersburg.



Manifesto of
Factory of Found
Clothes 2003

THE PLACE OF THE ARTIST IS ON THE SIDE OF THE WEAK. WEAKNESS MAKES A PERSON HUMAN, AND IT IS BY OVERCOMING WEAKNESS THAT HEROES ARE BORN. WE DO NOT EXTOL WEAKNESS, BUT RATHER APPEAL TO KINDHEARTEDNESS AND HUMANITY. THE TIME HAS COME TO RETURN COMPASSION TO ART! COMPASSION IS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WEAKNESS OF OTHERS AND A JOINT VICTORY OVER THAT WEAKNESS. YOU CANNOT CALL IT SENTIMENTALITY. IT IS FREEDOM STANDING ON THE BARRICADE WITH NAKED BREAST, DEFENDING THE CHILD IN EACH OF US! YOU SAY THAT ART IS ONLY FOR THE VERY SMART, THAT IT'S AN INTELLECTUAL GAME? THAT THERE IS NO PLACE LEFT FOR TRUE IMPACT, THAT STRONG EMOTIONS BELONG EXCLUSIVELY TO HOLLYWOOD? IT'S NOT TRUE! BECAUSE IN THAT CASE, ART WOULD BE MEANINGLESS, COLD, AND INCAPABLE OF EXTENDING A HELPING HAND. ART IS NOT AN ABSTRACT GAME, BUT AN ADVENTURE; NOT COLD RATIONALISM, BUT LIVE EMOTION. THE ARTIST IS NOT A MENTOR OR TUTOR, BUT A FRIEND; NOT A GENIUS, BUT AN ACCOMPLICE. RATHER THAN ENACTING DIDACTIC SOCIAL PROJECTS, WE MUST HELP PEOPLE TO STOP FEARING THEMSELVES, HELP THEM TO ACCEPT THEMSELVES AND GROW BETTER. SOCIETY IS MADE UP OF PEOPLE. ONLY BY HELPING THESE PEOPLE FOLLOW THE PATH OF SELF TRANSFORMATION DO WE CHANGE SOCIETY. THERE IS NO OTHER WAY.

THE THEORY OF MARXISM: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

There is no need to present as something new the importance of theoretical work for a Marxist organization. The unity of theory and practice was rooted in Marxism from Marx onwards. However the history of organisational crisis has meant that disproportionate attention was devoted to one or other of these interconnected elements of Marxism at the expense of the other. It is obvious that today both practical work is required in our everyday lives and activity as well as theoretical preparation and development.

In the framework of the project "The theory of Marxism: questions and answers" we will approach thinkers from different countries and organizations to find out about the diverse trends in Marxism that they represent. The aim is both to clarify contemporary developments in the field of theory and to stimulate a wide discussion internationally in order to straighten out the current situation in Russia, where theoretical work does not find its application in practice and where practical tasks do not exert any influence over theoretical research.

David Harvey is the Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). He is the world's most cited academic geographer, and the author of many books and essays that have been prominent in the development of modern geography as a discipline. Consistently Marxist, his work has contributed greatly to broad social and political debate; most recently he has been credited with bringing back social class as a serious methodological tool in the critique of global capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal form.

Full interview see here at <http://vpered.org.ru/index.php?id=530&category=1>

This questionnaire was developed by Vladislav Sofronov, member of Vpered Socialist Movement



Which aspects of Marxism's theoretical legacy definitively belong to the past?
Which aspects still seem urgent today?



Which are the main theoretical problems that Marxism needs to solve at present?



This first question is difficult for me. Though most of my work has concentrated on Marx's texts, I've never considered myself a great expert on the history of Marxism or the currents of thought in it. But what I drew theoretically from the study of Marx's texts was that a good historical and geographical materialist has to confront the realities of his or her time and place and do an analysis of what is happening now, finding categories that help explain what is happening.

Good Marxist theoretical work always has to start with the situation as it is, and then find the conceptual apparatus that helps to unravel and unpack that situation. I have read many of the classic Marxist texts like Lenin or Luxemburg to see how they went about doing that. But I get very impatient now with 'learned debates' as to whether Luxemburg or Lenin was right. I think this habit of rerunning all the debates that went on 100 years ago is a waste of time. I want to come up with an analysis of what is happening now, because the world has changed. In one of the introductions to the Communist Manifesto, Marx wrote that this is now a historical text and should be seen as an historical text of its time. And he said if we were writing something now, we would go about it quite differently. I think one of the big problems in the history of Marxism is a tendency to not be fluid and adaptable to the present situation. I think this is particularly important because one of the big theoretical insights I get from Marx and his understanding of capital is how fluid and adaptable capital really is. That is, if you cannot make a profit this way, you will do it that way. If there is a blockage, then it will go here...I have extended this analysis to my own work to say that there is also a geographical dimension to this, that if capitalism is having problems in Britain then it flows to North America, and if it is having problems in North America, it flows to China or India.

As Marxists, we have to be very much more adaptable in our theorising and in our construction of our theoretical apparatuses. We can't go back and say "Lenin said this and this was right." Even if it was right at time, and sometimes it was not, it almost certainly is not right today. I think that this spirit of inquiry is terribly important if we want to be good historical, geographical materialists and we are constantly searching for the theoretical insight that is going to illuminate the underlying problems of a capitalist social order.

To that end I teach Marx's Capital every year and I have to say that I find it very illuminating, particularly over questions like fetishism, the disguises of capital, how fetishism works, how alienation works and yet is disguised. But again, I find it important to reread it every year, and to reread it every year in relation to what is happening now. I teach Volume I every year and have taught it every year for the last 37 years. Every now and again, I teach Volumes II and III. This next year, I'll be teaching the Grundrisse as well. The way I have taught it over these 37 years has changed because the situation has changed. I can orient the text towards what is happening now. In so doing, you see something about the text that you did not see before. So this is how I approach the theoretical legacy: I would like to keep as up to date as possible in relation to what is happening in my time and my place, which is mainly United States, Europe and Latin America. These are the places I am familiar with. So if I were reading here in Russia, I would start to see other things that I don't currently see.

Again, I'll go back to Volume I of Marx's Capital. Much of that book is constructed as a dialogue with classical political economy. One of the surprising things to students when they read it is to find that Marx actually accepts the vision of a perfectly functioning market as laid out by Adam Smith or Ricardo. In a sense, he wants to show us that the closer you get to a perfectly functioning market situation, the greater the degree of class inequality. He wants to prove that Smith's argument that the market would work to the benefit of all is wrong, that the market actually works to the benefit of the capitalist class, full stop. And the freer the market, the greater the returns to the capitalist class. So by the time you get to Chapter 25 about the general law of capitalist accumulation, you see an accumulation of wealth at one pole and an accumulation of degradation and toil and misery at the other pole on the part of the labourers that produce the wealth. This is a very important proposition, because after 30 years of neoliberalism in the West what you see is an uneven geographical development of the neoliberal line, and those countries which have gone very strongly neoliberal and have experienced exactly what Marx was predicting.

Mexico is one of my favourite examples as it went strongly neoliberal between 1988 and 1994. Mexico is a very poor country, but by the time you get to 1996 you find that 14 Mexicans are on the list of the wealthiest people in the world. The third wealthiest person in the world is a man called Carlos Slim who came out of the whole privatisation. Thanks to the neo-liberal project in Mexico in the 1990s and again in the US, the concentration of wealth at the top has become absolutely astonishing compared to the fact that wages have remained completely flat for the last 30 years. What you see in all of this is a theoretical argument that is extremely relevant to explaining the dynamics of capital at large.

But then what Marx does in the last part of Capital is to talk about the processes of primitive accumulation as if they largely occurred during the origins of capitalism, in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the enclosure movements, in the destruction of the peasantry and so on. It seems to me, however, that those processes did not stop, that they continued. This is something that Rosa Luxemburg pointed out. For me, it became a very important argument in trying to interpret what the new neoliberal imperialism is all about. Because neoliberal imperialism is very much about new rounds of primitive accumulation that violate the market entirely. The section on primitive accumulation is talking about violence, some of it extra-legal. But then it talks about how state violence and legal violence become one of the major means of primitive accumulation. Then you look again at what happened in Mexico in 1988 where they took and enclosed the common lands of indigenous populations. The same thing happened in the 18th century. So is this primitive accumulation? How should we really think about it? Even in the US, common property rights were suddenly being taken away. Take pension for an example. People thought they had good pensions, but then a lot of corporations suddenly got rid of their pensions. They did this by declaring bankruptcy, which just means that you operate under a court order rather than go out of business. So big airlines like United Airlines would go to a judge and say, "We can only come out of bankruptcy if you allow us to get rid of all of our pension obligations." And the judge says "Fine, OK." So suddenly all those United Airlines employees who thought they had a pension suddenly don't have one anymore. There is a state insurance scheme that is supposed to pick up the pension, but it only does so up to a certain point. So people who thought they would retire on \$90,000 a year and were living on \$90,000 a year suddenly found themselves living on \$30,000 a year and couldn't do it. So they found themselves rejoining the labour force at age 60 or so, basically re-proletarianised.

Do you call this primitive accumulation, or what should we call this? I decided to call it accumulation by dispossession. It is the taking away of assets, the destruction of assets. But as UA employees are losing their pension rights, people on Wall Street are earning \$52 million a year. If you are head of Goldman Sachs you got \$1.7 billion. So I started to think this category of accumulation by dispossession and then asked questions about how much of that is going on around the world right now. All of this includes issues like environmental degradation, loss of common property rights, and the privatisation of water supplies. It turns out there are vast struggles going on all over the world, as people try to resist accumulation by dispossession. Slum dwellers in Mumbai are being forced out of slums, if they are on high-value land that has suddenly become interesting to property developers. You have a similar situation in Russia, as entire areas are gentrified and are people forced out from various locations.

I thought it very important to include these struggles under the general topic of class struggle. This is a different kind of class struggle than the one that goes on in the factory. I think for me one of the big theoretical issues is to take up an idea I found in Rosa Luxemburg, of trying to talk about the organic link between these two kinds of struggles, and asking what the theoretical link between these two types of struggles would be. Was there a way to start to think politically about the unification of those struggles rather than what sometimes happens where people in the Labour movement say oh they are irrelevant, and people in environmental movement say the Labour movement struggle is irrelevant? Could there be some unification of this struggle on both theoretical and practical political levels?

When I started to look more closely at the kinds of struggles that have been central to the World Social Forum movement in last few years, many of them are about accumulation by dispossession. Some of them are quite hostile to the traditional labour movement as they feel the traditional labour movement has not supported them or taken them seriously. At the same time, you can see the possibilities of very real coalitions emerging. Just as Gramsci used to talk about coalitions of northern workers and southern peasants, we could now speak of coalitions between northern workers and many of the movements in the economic south. This is one area of theoretical and political analysis that I think needs a lot of attention.

I will say in passing that some of my traditional Marxist colleagues have not liked the fact that I have changed the language from primitive accumulation to accumulation by dispossession. They objected. Why change Marx's language at all? Part of the answer was this: if I started about primitive accumulation to people in a farming community somewhere, nobody would know what I was talking about. But if I talked about accumulation by dispossession, they would know. Because many of them have lost their farms, and know what that means. They also know who has benefited. This is one of the areas where we need to change our language and shift our conceptual apparatus to embrace a different political situation and draw people to the politics we want to develop...

That is also why one of the main theoretical problems is that there is indeed a huge cultural gap. The languages are very different. One of the things academics can work on is to forge more of a common

language. In my last two books, I was trying to pull together labour struggles and accumulation by dispossession by putting them in the same framework. But there is a tremendous amount of work to be done, and a lot of latent hostility. I have been to some of the social forum meetings, not the main ones, but the European ones, but people from labour unions were sometimes treated with tremendous hostility by the others and vice versa. When you ask yourself who the common enemy is, then that is the neoliberal form of accumulation. And if we want to replace that with something else we need an alliance of forces that say we don't want that system, we want something else.

1.

Which aspects of Marxism's theoretical legacy definitively belong to the past?
Which aspects still seem urgent today?

I don't think of it like that, in terms of what's living and what's dead in Marxism, as Croce said. It seems to me that Marxism is reinterpreted at each moment of capitalism, and I believe that we're now in a third moment of capitalism, after Lenin's moment and after the original one, in which Marxism is reinterpreted on a much larger scale than it was in the Leninist period. I do not understand Marxism as Marxism-Leninism. I understand Marxism as the analysis of capitalism, and I'm always amused when people say that capitalism has triumphed and Marxism is dead, because Marxism is the analysis of capitalism. The Marxist economists today are the only ones who are looking at the system as a whole. If you look at bourgeois economists they're interested in specific local problems of capitalism, inflation, investment, and so forth, but not the system. Marxist economics is the only one that looks at the system, so I don't think of it in terms of anything in Marx being outmoded. It seems to me that Marx made a model of capitalism as a system and that it is still valid, except that capitalism exists on a much larger scale than it did in his day. On the other hand, Ernest Mandel has argued that since Marx is making a pure model of capitalism, a thought model, of which England is only an incidental reference, in a way his model is more accurate in terms of the current global system, because this is a far purer capitalism, one from which feudal elements have been eliminated far more thoroughly and in which commodification, wage labor, and so forth are far more extensively developed than they were in the older period.

I think there's a range of theoretical problems. The most obvious one is the labor theory of value and the relationship to technology, the relationship to computer production, and how the labor theory of value can account for the value that's produced by computers. Then I would say that in our period the theory of commodity fetishism, which seems to me was secondary in the Leninist period. It was never absent, but it was not the dominant of the Marxism of that age of imperialism. I think that today commodity fetishism is a primary phenomenon of capitalism. And this is why what used to be called culture, or the cultural factor, or whatever, is now really central to all left politics, or at least the left politics of the first world. So those are some fundamental changes. The way in which one analyzes the image and the relationship of the image to commodification is an important theoretical problem. The way in which the theory of ideology is to be understood today is an important theoretical problem that some writers and philosophers have dealt with.

Then also when one comes to politics – and, of course, Capital was never really a politics – the crucial question is the twofold one of organization and unemployment. It seems to me that the political forces that need to be organized today are the forces that are structurally unemployed. Consider how in globalization the whole continent of Africa, for example, is being allowed to go down the drain, or how in almost all of the advanced countries the flight of industry and the transfer to information technology has left masses of people unemployed. Of course, in our country, it's a matter of race and it's black people, people who will never be employed. How does one organize that? Because classical organization was based on workers, not on the unemployed, and this is a very serious new kind of political problem. And along with that is the question of the party. Because nobody seems to want to go back to the Leninist party. If one looks at Lenin's own time and his own experience, the Bolshevik party was much more democratic, and right up until October Lenin was in a minority in the Bolshevik Party, and so there was a lot more argument in that party. But, on the other hand, it was a party that was not representing exactly, but was standing in for a class that scarcely exists anymore, namely this peasantry, who had their own ideologues of course, but were not really represented by the Bolsheviks. So the question of the party and the ideological resonance that the party has had since Stalin is an important political problem, and I don't think it's solved. This is my major disagreement with Toni and Michael with Empire. I don't think that you can just say "we don't need the party and let's just have this explosion of the multitude happen wherever it happens," "we don't want to conquer power," and so on. It seems obvious that the power of capital is so enormous that there must be a counter power to this, there must be some force that is capable of standing up to the forces and the immense money that capital has now in a situation where there hasn't been a war in fifty or sixty years, a real world war, that would destroy all this capital and leave the businessmen much shakier than they are now. So the question of organization really is a crucial political question. Marx didn't theorize all that, so this is in a sense not a matter of a part of Marxism that belongs to the past, but it certainly is a major theoretical question of politics and of political action. I think it's also the case that this is a transitional period towards the world market, and one of things that characterizes this inevitably is the uneven development of all these countries. And uneven development means that the working class, such as it is these various places, is unrelated, so that American workers are fighting things like ecology, because ecology means doing things to American plants that will throw them out of work. While in other countries I think the struggle of labor is completely different. I suppose that one of the major labor forces in Korea is the steel industry, which is probably one of the biggest in the world. And the American steel workers are all out of work. So you have an unevenness of labor interests that would have to be somehow overcome for there to come into being a world labor movement. And a real left politics is not really possible until there's some reorganization of the labor movement on a global scale. And that's not something that we can bring into being by thinking about it. This has to happen and will happen by the way in which globalization flattens everything out and produces crises of a global nature. But it's very ironic that although globalization is a force in every country in the world, one of its effects is to produce this unevenness of all these countries, which prevents common interests.

The question of the relation of Marxism to post-modernity, including culture and art, I think is an important one. I don't think that we're going back to what political art was in the modernist period. But on the other hand, I think that a lot of post-modern art, which in the beginning we thought was decorative and so on and so forth, is – and I would say that this is going on here – more and more political, or I should say wishes to be more and more political. But how does it do it? That's one of these theoretical questions and has to do with the nature of this new culture and what it's meant for art. But that may be another question.

Fredric Jameson
philosopher, literary critic and Marxist political theorist. Jameson's best-known books include *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, *The Political Unconscious*, and *Marxism and Form*. He is currently the director of the Institute for Critical Theory at Duke University, USA.

Full interview see here at <http://vpered.org.ru/index.php?id=534&category=1>

2.

Which are the main theoretical problems that Marxism needs to solve at present?



Alexander Skidan (1965),
poet and translator,
editor,
member of *Chto Delat?*

Alexander SKIDAN

When they tell you in plain Russian, in the dry language of numbers that in terms of political freedoms and civil rights Russia occupies 158–159th place—somewhere between Pakistan and Togo, — what do you feel, a person of the era of centralised Moscow conceptualism, of the futures and marketing of sovereign democracy? Insulted for your nation? For the great and powerful Russian language, the language of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov? Oh yes, after all it was none other than Pushkin who wrote to Chaadaev (and everyone reads this poem in school) about the debris of despotism. We can recall others of his sterling works as well, for instance, the ode "Liberty", or the last chapter of "Eugene Onegin", all sorts of stuff, where the sun of Russian poetry speaks out unequivocally on the subject of political freedoms and civil rights.

Lermontov, also in the purest Russian, bade farewell to the land of slaves and masters, heading off for active duty in the Caucasus. His bitterness- and rage-filled lines on the death of Pushkin—you remember, all of you, of course you remember—make your heart and fists clench, as if they were written only yesterday. And Tolstoy, excommunicated from the Orthodox church, tearing all and sundry masks from the ruling ideology, Tolstoy—mirror of the 1905 revolution? And Dostoevsky's axe, thrown into circumterrestrial orbit, that same one, from "Brothers Karamazov" that maids in the deep frost give their lads to kiss? And Chekhov, Chekhov with his gallery of melancholics yearning for a beautiful life lovely depoliticised intelligentsia befuddled, disappointed, toiling away or losing their minds?

You, looking into trips to Togo or Tunisia, Pakistan or Thailand, reading in your spare time about the standard of living and civil liberties in developed capitalist countries and Third World countries, feeling insulted for your nation, which gave this world Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, have you ever asked yourself what their heroes are doing? What are they doing — those badly-paid country doctors and teachers? What are they doing — the convicts from Sakhalin Island? What are they doing — the students in the brothel? What are the ones attending them there doing? What are the well-bred officers in "Three Sisters" doing? Soon they'll all be sent off to the front, to the imperialist slaughterhouse, where they will die honourably for the tsar and the fatherland, in other words, for the sales outlet, the colony and other geopolitical and financial interests, and where they will undoubtedly be wanting their irreproachable great powerful noble — though in part already grown common — Russian language, but also the dry language of numbers.

WHY BRECHT



*That's great art:
nothing obvious in it—I laugh
when they weep, I weep when
they laugh.—Bertold Brecht*



If we try replacing the word “opera” with culture or art in Brecht’s text “**OPERA - WITH INNOVATIONS!**”, it paradoxically becomes clear that Brecht’s analysis of the situation more than 70 years ago is more than relevant today. Of course, many things have changed, such as the notions of power, class, labor, the means of struggle. But still, anyone who is still capable of considering the necessity of connecting thought and action now hits upon the same problem that was so obvious then: how is it possible to take intellectual action within the alienating system of capital, an action that might force society’s radical change? Arguing with Adorno, we continue to ask “how the right is possible in the wrong”, that is, how to gain a clear historical consciousness of the moment, and how it is possible to act correspondingly.

In fact, Brecht, following Marx, began to examine intellectual action as an important element of struggle connected to economic and political action. The variety of aesthetic methods that Brecht developed always responded to the challenge of this or that concrete historical situation; his methods were based on the Marxist understanding of subjectivity, which is not formed by the spontaneous course of events, but by an awareness of history’s occurring. Brecht clearly understood that dialectic mechanisms are at work in creativity. Constructing his work on their basis, he described reality as a process of constant changes that arise due to the conflicts and contradictions that make the transformation of society possible. He wrote that “...true progress consists not in being progressive but in progressing. True progress is what enables or compels us to progress. And on a broad front, at that, so that neighbouring spheres are set in motion too. True progress has its cause in the impossibility of an actual situation, and its result is that situation’s change.”

Brecht’s method clearly embodies the idea of politicizing cultural production through a process of collective subjectification, which sets the common goal of transforming the entire system that produces culture and knowledge. In this process, even the differentiation between audience and producer loses its meaning. This is how Brecht described the process that is supposed to take place in the spectator’s head: “I’d never have thought it - That’s not the way - That’s extraordinary, hardly believable - It’s got to stop - The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary - That’s great art: nothing obvious in it.” (Is that the way things are? What produced this? It’s terrible! How can we change things?...). But for a reaction like this to become possible, the same questions need to arise in the entire collective, which is involved in the intellectual action, which can no longer rest complacent in the production of autonomous objects for passive contemplation. Brecht places an accent on creating a situation that might involve anyone who wants to become a party to it. Thus, another key aspect of the Brechtian aesthetic theory is the idea of collective creativity, based on the principle of soviets or councils. Brecht’s ultimate goal was to “convert the institutions of culture from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication”. In many ways, this view was formed by close contact with his friend Karl Korsch, one of Weimar Germany’s leading Marxist thinkers. In his article “Brecht’s Marxist Aesthetic”, Douglas Keller writes: “Brecht’s theory of aesthetic production is congruent with Korsch’s model of the workers’ councils as the authentic organs of socialist practice. For just as Korsch urged a democratic, participatory activity of coproduction in the spheres of labor and politics, Brecht urges the same sort of coparticipation in his aesthetic production. [...] Such a revolution in the concept of creation, rejecting the notion of the creator as the solitary genius, was intended to alter aesthetic production radically, much as the workers’ councils were intended to revolutionize industrial and political organization, thus providing an anticipatory model for socialist cultural organization.” <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell3.htm>

The most famous aesthetic method that Brecht introduced was the “alienation effect.” Rejecting any possibility for empathy, based on the illusion of authenticity, the “alienation effect” laid bare the social mechanism, not only by demonstrating how and why people behave in a certain way in society, but also calling for an analysis of the very mechanism that produces social relations themselves. In many ways, this aspect of Brecht’s work anticipated the main tactical method of contemporary activism known as “subversive affirmation.” But if we begin to compare Brecht’s work and contemporary praxis in more detail, we will find that there are fundamental differences. Brecht understood just how important it was to reject any mimicry of reality and not to supply the spectator with the possibility for any obvious interpretations. The most important thing was to give form to the position of a participant observer, which make it possible to play out a multitude of situations, and to choose the most accurate, intellectually approbated reaction from their dialogue and conflict. In this way, Brecht exposed the general nature of things and offered convincing proof of the fact that the greatest master of over-identification is the political self-representation of capitalism itself, which always takes place in a hypertrophied form.

This becomes more understandable if we turn to one of the concrete and more striking examples of the contemporary praxis of “subversive affirmation”, namely the performance “Please love Austria”, realized by the German theater director and artist Christoph Schlingensiefel in 2000. Schlingensiefel appropriated the format of the television series “Big Brother”, but incarcerated refugees seeking political asylum in the observation container. Following the rules of the game, he provided the spectators watching the broadcasts from the container over the internet to vote for the deportation of those participants they did not like. This performance was obviously aimed at subverting the “normalcy” of rightwing-populist governments. However, in my view, the most necessary gesture in this piece could have become the gesture of this government when it tried to install a completely “Brechtian” sign near the container: “Attention! This is a theatrical performance!” Though Schlingensiefel protested against this intervention in his piece adamantly, it is, in fact, this gesture that could have provided an effective means of distancing the spectator from the hyper-realistic pornography of the action, thus allowing its genuine political meaning to come to the fore.

Unlike Schlingensiefel and many other contemporary artists and activists, Brecht clearly understood that capitalism is never shy about demonstrating its extremity. And the question of gaining distance or alienating capitalism is not a question of skepticism, irony, or even mimicry, but a question of responsible intellectual action, gravely proclaiming that another world is possible after all.

THE QUESTION
OF THE
COMMON
AND
RESPONSIBILITY
OF THE
UNIVERSAL

Jean-Luc NANCY
in a dialogue with
Artem MAGUN and
Oxana TIMOFEEVA

Jean-Luc Nancy
(1940) is a French
philosopher

EDITORIAL NOTES:

(1)

In 1986, there appeared the book by Jean-Luc Nancy, "La communauté désœuvrée" (in English translation: The Inoperative Community). In this book, relying on the philosophical tradition of the twentieth century, mainly Heidegger and Bataille, Nancy attempted to show that all being is by definition dispersed, shared together, and therefore cannot be appropriated. It is this irreducibly multiple mode of being that Nancy calls the "common."

(2)

City in the sense of *civitas*: a republican political space.

(3)

For Heidegger's notion of *Gemeinigkeit*, the irreducible singularity of the human mode of being, see *Sein und Zeit*, par. 9.

(4)

Aufheben, "sublate" – the key term of Hegel's philosophy that means both "to annul" and "to keep."

(5)

A key term from Spinoza's *Ethics*, which signifies the internal force that makes humans love activity, to live and act only for the sake of living and acting.

(6)

"*Eigentlich*," for Heidegger, is such a mode of a human being's relationship to his/her own being that freely recognizes death as his/her "possible impossibility."

Also *Sein und Zeit*, par. 52-60.

Artem Magun (A.M.)

Dear Jean-Luc! How much has the community changed, in your view, since 1986? Among other things, we might speak of the world's repolarization and repoliticization. In this landscape, there arises not only the question of solidarity and being-in-common, but also the question of collective action, of action that would be both constitutive of the community and effectively realizing it. Can we imagine action, common praxis, that would not be "work" (in Arendt's sense), production, oeuvre?

Jean-Luc Nancy (J-L.N.)

The community changed before 1986. I think that it started to change when the collective relationship to the active transformation of history shifted. Instead of aiming at a community produced in the praxis-type action, one shifted attention to a community of gestures or symbols, a community of expressions or manifestations, rather than of action: this, in fact, corresponds to a community of existential, spiritual, or aesthetic testimony. This is true, for example, of the Lettrist international, then the Situationist international. This is also true of the process of weaving discrete, loosely organized relationships among people with a similar feeling of the world, but without a program. (This kind of group has always existed. It was precisely the community defined by action and program that was a new phenomenon, emerging with the French Revolution out of what had earlier been a political faction. But in this "faction," the "cause" was usually the coming to power by a person or by a group, and not a general intention related to society and the world. At the same time, the national and international communities reached a point of disaggregation, where they were once strong, and the smaller infra-national communities reidentified themselves as defending the cause of "minorities." Speaking globally, the general and generic being-together of the approaching "communism" dissolved at about the same time, because it had either dispersed or recrystallized into many discrete elements. Hence, there appeared the necessity of thinking being-together as such. The "collective" became problematic because of the very large numbers involved (these numbers have perhaps never been truly thought through). A humankind with a perspective of soon numbering 10 billion people, and with the intensification of communication all over the world – both change the entire mode of "being-together" as such, a mode that had previously been posed in a very determined fashion.

To say this in slightly different words, manifestation or performance replaced operational activity. But, at the same time, the question of the nature of relation came to the foreground: if the "common" is no longer dominated by finality ("total man," "society without classes"), in what does it consist? We are not finished with this question... Action that is not work and does not produce an oeuvre is political action, in the sense of Arendt, indeed, in the sense of exchange among citizens. This presupposes the city (2): but where, today, is the city? Citizenship has partly vanished during this very same transformation, to be replaced by the new "communitarian" identities that block the political being-together for the sake of a fusion or of an essentiality of the "common"...

A.M.

Should we return to the notion of an acting collective (would this be a subject in the Hegelian sense?), or do we need perhaps to revise the cult of action and to return to the "autonomous community" or the "inoperative" community, to use the formulations of Bataille and yourself? What is to be done with communities (like Bataille's "communities of lovers" or simply groups of friends) that are vibrant and ready to share and to "impart," but who also share the refusal of all universality, that is, of politics?

J.-L. N.

These communities of lovers or friends are not communities, from my point of view. They are rather unions or, if we can experiment with the word, communions. Community, on the contrary, is ordinary being-together, without any assumption of a common identity, without any strong intensity, but exposed to banality, to the "common" of existence: it is egalitarian in the sense that our existences are all equivalent, thus making the existing inequalities even more salient. The responsibility of the universal is the responsibility of this equality – of the common (banal) – of the equality that we need to think, given all the necessary disparities of places, roles, etc. Egalitarianism is a flagrant abstraction, but its concretization has yet to be thought through: how to think a differential equality, if I dare say so...

A.M.

If the community is not a subject, but a place, and if the expansion of the subject signifies the bureaucratization and technologization of the world, what is to be done of the expansion of places? Isn't this reminiscent of empire and imperialism?

J.-L. N.

Why don't we turn these terms around? The expansion of places, in the sense of the indistinction and general connection among places, is precisely what technicization means. On the contrary, the "place" as a locality of "someone," like the "there" of Heidegger's *Dasein* that is "always mine" (3), this place, precisely, is the "subject"! Not the subject of a self-relation, but rather the subject of the finite infinity of the relationship to this presumed "self." Community is the connection of relationships to self that pass through the Other and become infinite in the Other, as far as s/he is the Other as such. To think this, we have to abandon the model of the "individual": yet today, the individual suffers so much that s/he has been placed into the foreground. The individual is glorified in his/her success, in power and money, and s/he suffers in the isolation and deprivation of sense. It is not the question of alleviating his/her destiny, but of the "aufheben" (4), of sublation in a being-in-common that would however not be a collective super-individual.

A.M.

Community finds itself in liberty as extasis, in the transcendence of people and things toward the sharing of what is impossible for them to share, of the unshareable. But what is this liberty:

is it the decision to transcend oneself toward the indeterminate unity, to the negative of the common? Or is it, on the contrary, the negativity of the opening, of the indifference? Where is the free community between the militant democracy and hospitable liberalism?

J.-L. N.

Liberty is neither an opening toward an indeterminate unity, nor indifference: on the contrary, it is liberty for difference, for the difference of each "one" who can only differentiate oneself in a relation. This is why, in a relation, liberty always meets with the unshareable of being-oneself – this self, as far as s/he is just self, is insubstantial and impossible to situate. The task is to hold on to the unshareable as the reason (in the senses both of ratio and of foundation) for sharing. How do we share the obscure knowledge of our own finitude? In fact, we have been always already sharing it, and it is this "always-already" that makes communities, families, societies, all sorts of connections, subsist and insist. We need to grasp again this knowledge that has already been there. The effacement of religions both hides this knowledge and makes it more necessary. Religion used to supply us with the common reason of existence. Today, the one who exists should not give himself his own reason and account, but should rather learn that he has had it already: that he "possesses" this knowledge, as far as it is impossible to possess.

A.M.

The last decades have seen a spectacular intensification of terrorist politics. This terrorism, when it definitively transcends the limits of civil or partisan war in the traditional sense, largely relies on the media, on the spectacle. Thus, the nostalgia of a "community" that you have criticized in your book led to the nihilist theatricalization of community, to a pornographic parody of community and sovereignty. Thus, again, in a new sense, there is a return to a certain fascism, a fascism that is openly desperate and suicidal this time around.

In affirming their sovereignty, terrorists sacrifice themselves and others. These deaths have a spectacular effect, they make people express their solidarity, but this ends quickly, and the "solidarity in the face of terror" remains little more than a state ideology. Terror burns out the common, in the very place of the common. Thus, we return to a question posed by Bataille, by you, by Derrida: how and where do we find the common and the sovereign, if not in death? How and why to search or to practice community, if, perhaps, it cannot even be "founded" or "constituted"?

Oxana Timofeeva:

The ontological need for community is animated by the desire to reject the suicidal logic of the contemporary individualist societies. Is it possible to transform this desire of not producing death any more, into some sort of political exigency? The familiar political languages do not satisfy this exigency because they hide the mortal truth that lies behind the presumed immortality of the absolute and isolated subject. Do we need, perhaps, to invent a new "politics" based on the thought of community – a political language that would correspond to the ontology of the being-in-common?

J.-L. N.

One needs, in my view, to start by distinguishing between the being-together and politics: we should not confuse them. Politics is the sphere of the distribution of functions and roles, the maintenance of equilibrium. But politics does not absorb everything: community exists in multiple ways (i.e. in aesthetical, affective, religious, economical, technological ways). Maybe one even has to say that it is no political community, but a politics in general that opens and makes possible the various singular exercises in the different orders of the "common" (e.g. literature or literatures, arts, sports, sexuality, etc.). Of course, this presupposes that politics has this openness for its principle (such is democracy) but not that it pretends itself to fill in the opening (democracy remains without identity).

But the opening toward the common, shared in different modes, does not open only towards death!!! This is important: death only exposes the renewed suspension of sense. But there is also life: there is the *conatus* (5) of the living-existing, the perseverance in being of the one who does not commit suicide. Why do we continue living? Why do we make works, make children? Why do we go to the doctor to receive treatment? What is this obstinate insistence to live and to make sense, even in an imperceptible way? Here is the "common" in the sense of "banal": this banality may also be presented as an incredible, permanent heroism of humans – and this heroism is always in common, never strictly individual. So far as the individual is only busy with the "self," s/he is lost, because this "self" does not exist. The "authentic," Heidegger's "*Eigentlich*" (6), is always of the order of sharing (sharing language, speech, affect). Death, for its part, may only be understood as a suspension of the exchange – and we also exchange this suspension. But as a voluntary, productive gesture that aims at accomplishing a meaning, it is rather the denial of death... The core of the question is this: either a superior "cause" is worth voluntary death, that is, it is worthy of putting oneself into the place of death itself, of its contingency and of its character deprived of sense – or death can only represent the senseless and the meaningless, which we should leave to err and to occur. Of course, risking one's life to save someone – for example – makes sense: this is precisely the sense of a community in being exposed to death, and this sense remains "senseless..." But to die to "save" humankind or any given society suggests, on the contrary, that this "salvation" would have a sense that would not be meaningless, that it could be represented and assigned...

Voices were recorded by different group discussions and include the participation of:

Gluklya
Nikolay Oleynikov
Alexey Penzin
David Riff
Alexander Skidan
Oxana Timofeeva
Tsaplya
Kirill Shuvalov
Dmitry Vilensky



SOUNDTRACK OF THE "THE BUILDERS"

Workgroup Chto delat' / What is to be done?

* Alexey Stakhanov is a legendary Soviet shokworker, miner from Donbass. There was a whole workers movement of "stakhanovites" named after him. Became a symbol of overproductive fordist labour.

...So let's celebrate the anniversary of our first meeting, first speech, etc. We could have easily frozen up in this kind of pose, but no, we immediately begin to argue, and the argument ends with Dima lying there like a Pietà, and it's completely unclear what to do with him, but then, some drunken assholes come and start to discuss one thing or another heatedly, and some kind of new, exciting life starts up again. I think that there's something extremely important in this...

The community is a-capitalist in the sense that it doesn't sell itself as a product. You could say that we don't have a quality of exchange for one another, but a consumer value; one could say that we are consuming one another, but in the good sense of the word...

It seems to me that the effect that arises when we do something is far more important than any personal career matters. And this effect seems to consist in...

The project came about because we wanted to move the boundary of art: art is clearly separated from life and doesn't actually see anyone but itself, so it's necessary to call up new people...

Bullshit...

Why bullshit? I don't think that it's bullshit...

I also don't think that it's bullshit...

...Revolutionary art is art which calls for a non-existing people and a new world. It yawns with the absence of this people and this world. But it is implicitly and covertly directed toward that boiling-point, that flaming-point, that inner pathos; its vector is directed at the creation of that people, maybe on a small scale, to become your co-creator...

...so you're saying that art could be something that can actually change something in life, are you?

Actually, we don't want to capture the fallacy and fakeness of socialist realism; what we want to capture is the mythological impulse, the point of departure, the impulse that formed socialist realism...

An attempt to renew a pathos, which is...

There are thousands of workers behind "The Builders of Bratsk," but who's behind us?

It turns out that the place where they stand and look to the future has been vacated and that we have the same right to look to the future and hope...

We aren't going to adapt to this world; this world needs to adapt to us...

That's really true... But tell us, David, quickly, are we going to change the world?

There's no question that we will...

Are you sure?

I'm absolutely sure that we are going to change the world...

Super

Our group meets quite rarely and this piece was the result of one of those rare meetings...

Actually, we've been wanting to make a piece about our community for quite some time, to tell about who we are and what we are doing.

A kind of self-analysis, in other words.

What inspired us was Viktor Popkov's marvelous painting "The Builders of Bratsk."
But we didn't try to imitate the heroes of this painting.

This is why we called it "Builders." For us, the feeling that we're building something is important, so we have tried to identify what exactly we are building...

Basically, this is Viktor Popkov's only commonly known painting; everything he did later on is just more of the usual intelligentsia fluff.

There are people standing there, monumentally, tiredly, standing and thinking of what they have done so far and what they will do in the future. But we're in a different situation...

I understand that I can derive some aesthetic pleasure from this painting, but it doesn't move me socially...

We aren't those people who Popkov depicted, and we're living in 2004, not 1961.

Socialism left behind a bad impression; it may have become fashionable again today, but the paintings of the time were boring...
...That's right, fashionable, but on the whole, things really sucked, and now whenever anyone hears about the social problematique, they all immediately imagine themselves in that silly painting...

I'm interested in the question of what we can do today with this brutal monumentalism
Because our interpretation isn't very brutal. It's a very unbrutal style.

Shit! What the fuck are we doing here?
...The image falls apart into chaotic actions that mean something completely different, because we're not a collective of Yuppies hanging out after work, but an artistic community...
...which falls under a completely different order of relationships, in which we can develop our civic position.

What is a community? Let's try to answer this question.

I don't like the word "community"; in my opinion it's reminiscent of something like...

The most excellent revolutionary movements in art took place through communities; the surrealists, dadaists, and our futurists were groups of people that were pretty vibrant, different, and conflictual...

Our friendships are constructed on the basis of conflict, on encounters with the Other, the radical Other, even...

Who is our radical Other?

Well, for example, you and I are radical Others; we are radically different people...

Why are we radically different, if we have so many things in common?

Everyone agrees in some way that there is a closeness between people who aren't producing knowledge or ideology, but are actually searching for something new...

At the same time, we have this need—I don't know where it came from, but it's a part of the work process, in which the most productive moment arises through conflict.

Conflicts show what actually holds people together, what makes them overcome whatever... It's easy to say, "Why don't you all go fuck yourselves." I might leave and you might leave at some point in time, but later, you'll come back, and this is a really important moment, because you can ask yourself, "Why exactly did I return?"

This is why the community can become a kind of laboratory, a synchrotron in which we help ourselves to accelerate ourselves, using provocations to accelerate ourselves to the state of some critical mass, which can call one's own experience into question, one's own earlier achievements, in order to move on and to keep one's ears open.

Maybe there's also a feeling of weakness, when you understand that alone, you can't actually...

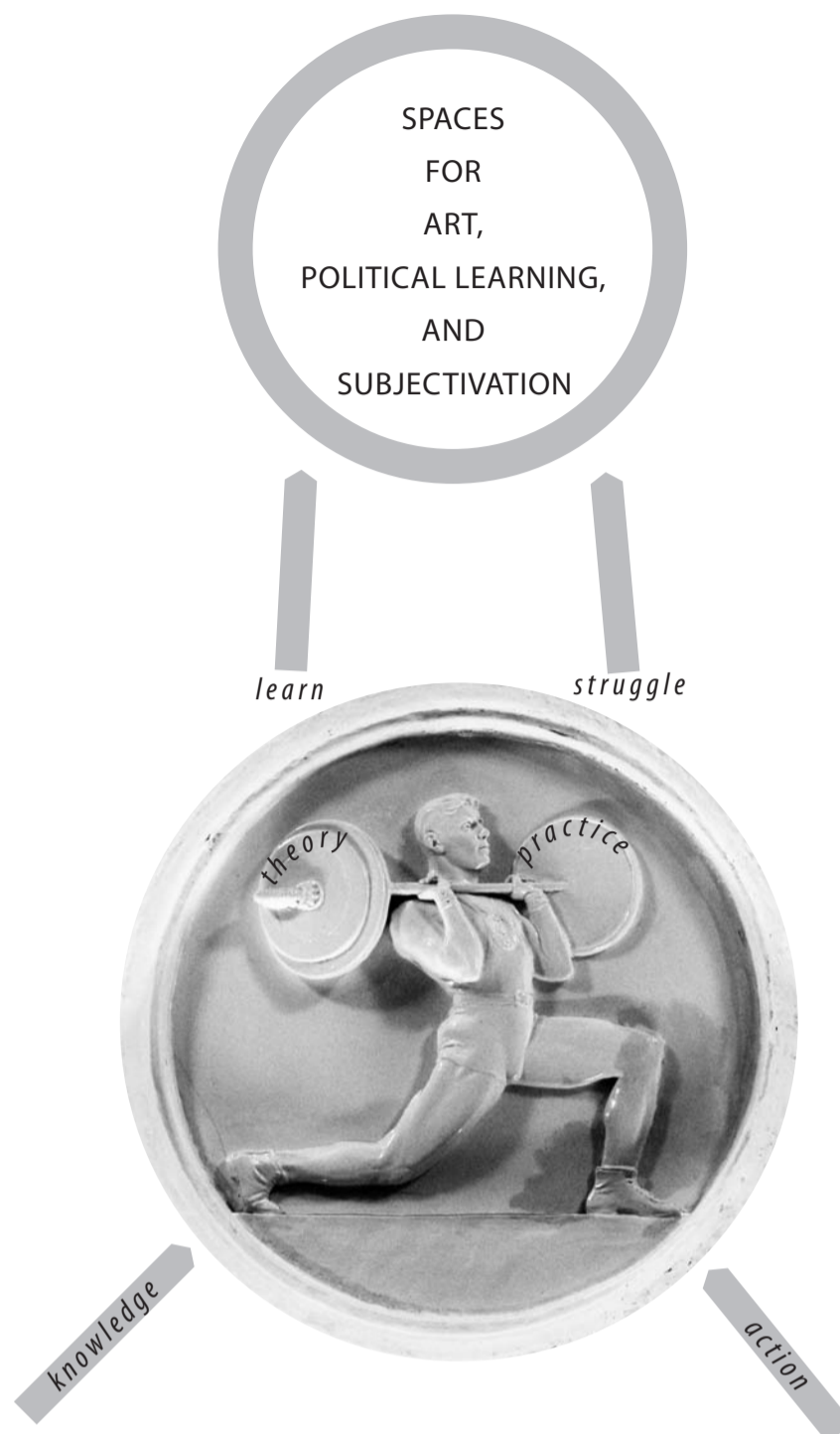
Denisov keeps coming to my mind. He once said that it's much easier than anything else to flock together...

...I have some strong inner resentment of communities, especially artistic communities, which usually are made up of some kind of assholes...

For me, it's always a great joy to work on a project. I think that working in a group is more productive, because it supplies everything that happens with a completely new kind of energy, a completely different feeling of self...

The utopia of friendship is the most important utopia.

This is something completely different; it isn't about seminars; it isn't about drinking with friends; it isn't performance, but something in between: in between art and literature, between literature and philosophy, between philosophy and actionism, between actionism and sociology, and it's this inbetweenness that seems so exciting...



Lolita JABLONSKIENE in conversation with Dmitry VILENSKY

L.J.: I WOULD LIKE TO START OUR CONVERSATION WITH A HISTORICAL NOTE, TAKING A GLANCE AT ALEXANDER RODCHENKO'S WORKERS' CLUB. AFTER ALL, YOU CHOSE TO REFERENCE ITS TITLE IN THE NAME OF YOUR PROJECT. I KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SOME INTERESTING AND RARELY PUBLISHED MATERIAL ON RODCHENKO'S CLUB? WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT APPEAL TO YOU?

This text first appeared in Printed Project, Issue 10, edited/curated by Lolita Jablonskiene, chief curator at Vilnius's National Gallery of Art (www.printedproject.ie).

D.V.: The idea of the Activist Club diverges from the original concept of the Workers' Club introduced in the USSR in the mid-1920s and represented by the famous piece made by Alexander Rodchenko. Created in 1925 for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, it was never produced in real life. So it was a sort of a model of how such a place should be organized. The piece introduced a western bourgeois audience to the completely different method of staging cultural activities in workers' free time in the USSR (such as "Lenin's Corner," a space for gatherings, or the performance of "Live Newspapers," etc.) The task of the workers' club was to orient the workers in issues of political struggle, and introduce them to a different type of aesthetic experience. It critically undermined the obsolete idea of the idle consumer, who, through the experience of the art object in the museum, could elicit pleasure and "emancipate" herself from shabby everyday existence. It was about building a space based on educational methodology and creativity. When we were preparing our first approach to the concept of an activist club, in Paris in 2007 (actually, this was imbued with an intriguing symbolism because Paris is the place where the original Rodchenko Workers' Club disappeared after being given to the French Communist Party), I came across a publication by bookstorming.com and Galerie Decimus Magnus Art Editeurs (www.michelaubry.fr/livres.html) which was a meticulous documentation of the reconstruction of Rodchenko's Workers' Club done by the French artist Michel Aubry. It was very inspiring to see one of the most famous works of the Russian avant-garde in an amazingly detailed reconstruction. Also, it shed light on many details of the composition that were not visible in the historical photographic documentation of the project. Of course there have been several recent attempts to reconstruct this piece. Christiane Post attempted something at the 6th Werkleitz Biennale; there was an installation by Susan Kelly, "What is to be done?"; and a reading room at the exhibition Forms of Protest, at Van Abbemuseum. I was not interested in reconstruction but in a process that I would call the "actualization" of the concept of the workers' club, how it could be fitted into the space of a contemporary art institution with all its limitations. So this self-imposed challenge was almost the same as the one the Soviet government had once given Rodchenko: namely, to show the bourgeois public another means of producing the space where art—and aesthetic experience—can come together with political learning and subjectivation. Or, to put it another way, how the artist can claim the true value of art. Another aspect of my inspiration was the current discussion on the concept and role of social centers. This was

one topic of discussion at the recent conference at MACBA in Barcelona, "Molecular Museum. Towards a New Kind of Institutionality," which tackled the relation between museums and social centers. I think that for all of us who consider art works to be more than objects of pleasure and entertainment for the rich, but as an important experience that can transform a person's subjectivity and make them feel more free and human, the concept of the social center, as a place where we can reveal the pure use-value of art and ignore its exchange value, is more important than the concept of the museum. The museum emerged in an epoch when the new bourgeoisie was the revolutionary class in society. Now the new social centers strive to serve a broad caste of oppressed people and give them a chance to appreciate culture within a framework of fighting for their rights of recognition. The discussion about the future of social centers can be connected with the concept of the workers' club developed in the Soviet Union because they share an approach to the value of art and the people that participate in its production. Today, the situation is more confusing, what with all the changes in class composition and the placement of the factory inside society as a whole. So I think that there is a desirable space where we can imagine and demand the hybridization of museums and social centers.

L.J.: SHARING A COMMON EXPERIENCE OF THE SOVIET PAST, WE BOTH KNOW THAT RODCHENKO'S PROJECT WAS A SEMI-UTOPIA. IT WAS NEVER INTRODUCED INTO LIFE, HOWEVER. WORKERS' CLUBS OR WORKERS' CULTURE HOUSES, POLITICAL CORNERS ET AL. DID EXIST IN THE SOVIET SYSTEM OF ORGANIZING THE POLITICAL EDUCATION AND LEISURE TIME OF WORKERS. HOW WOULD YOU ACCOUNT FOR YOUR CHOICE OF RODCHENKO'S CLUB AS A PROTOTYPE OR ARCHETYPE INSTEAD OF SOME NEARBY CULTURE HOUSE THAT STILL BEARS SIGNS—AND THE MEMORY—OF WORKERS' BODIES AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF SUCH PLACES? HOW DO YOU MEASURE THE EFFECTIVE BALANCE BETWEEN THE UTOPIAN AND THE PROSPECTIVE IN YOUR ACTIVIST CLUB?

D.V.: Perhaps I would be more inspired if I was trying to develop a functioning social center, rather than working in the institutional art framework. I share Charles Baudelaire's inspiration, as embodied in the passage, "*It is an immense joy to set up house in the middle of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.*" Once, for me, there was a moment when it sounded almost achievable, when, after an exhibition in Dresden, there was a chance that my construction-module could be moved to a place where it could serve its intended function. Unfortunately, it never happened.

In reality, such things are hard to implement because there are very few resources for their realization and, frankly, the Russian social and political situation is incomparable with the Western European one: chances for non-institutional work are very limited. So, Rodchenko's Workers' Club is impossible to imagine without the whole post-Revolutionary situation—it is deeply rooted in the context of its time. That's why the idea of a workers' club is useless today. For me, the shift from worker to activist is important. Historically, the worker's identity had a marked political position, but I doubt that it does now. Today, political subjectivity is shaped inside and outside labor relations, and the position of the political subject is determined more through one's stance as an activist. But the idea of the transformation of the privileged art consumer's leisure time into the learning time of the oppressed is still worth attempting to actualize. And in this way I am very inspired by the situation that has emerged recently in different social centers in Europe, where activists are building their own environments for self-educational activities, centered on cinema, and on reading and discussion spaces. But I am often disappointed by the trashy imagination of the spatial production that is normally realized in such centers, squats, and protest camps. I personally feel good inside them and of course prefer them much more than the over-hyped lounges that are so much adored by the new "creative class," which are so disgusting in their cozy hedonism. I think that such spaces should be organized differently. As my friends from Universidad Nomada postulate: For quite a while now, a certain portmanteau word has been circulating in the Universidad Nomada's discussions, in an attempt to sum up what we believe should be one of the results of the critical work carried out by the social movements and other post-socialist political actors. We talk about creating new mental prototypes for political action. (<http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0508/universidadnomada/en>) The same approach should be developed in relation to spatial practices. In this particular installation of the Activist Club, which was realized for an art institution, we were trying to demonstrate how these "spatial prototypes" could be realized. And I hope that is one of the possible ways in which art can be developed today.

L.J.: WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITIES HAVE YOU BEEN ORGANIZING AT THE ACTIVIST CLUB? TALKS, DEBATES, AND EXHIBITIONS? ANYTHING ELSE?

D.V.: First, in the institutional framework my constructions serve as contextualization modules that provide viewers the chance to experience the artwork produced by our collective in a proper setting. These are spaces where we screen our film and video works, distribute newspapers and other printed materials, where it is possible to accommodate seminar activities and discussions or run sociological research involving the public. These are spaces for contact with the public and their feedback, and the structure of the spaces is organized to serve these needs. Also, I call them "take-away spaces"—we welcome any collective in need of a place for gathering and screening something. They can use them for their own purposes.

L.J.: "ENGINEERING" (SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC) WAS A KEY CONCEPT FOR RODCHENKO. HOW DO YOU RELATE TO IT IN BOTH ITS SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC AMBITION? I BELIEVE THAT, FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVISTS, BEING AN "ENGINEER" MEANT BEING IN THE AVANT-GARDE OF THE NEW AGE AND THE ART REVOLUTION. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE IDENTITY OF THE TEMPORARY ARTIST-ACTIVIST?

D.V.: I am not sure about "engineering." I think in our post-Fordist time it is even more confusing to talk about "engineering" than it was in the days of the mass Fordist mobilization of labor forces. As such, it is not engineering but the process of self-organized education that enables a new class sensibility—that is, new skills that facilitate a new subjectivity. Currently, in this time of the crisis of political activism and the growing pressure exerted by the capitalization of culture, it is still could consider in a wake of old discussions. Should artists produce for the proletariat or should the proletariat produce its own art? I think we need to reconsider the role of the avant-garde artist as a historical figure and try to analyze how this role relates to the contemporary figure of the artist-important for us to demonstrate our fidelity to the history of human emancipation. For me, this struggle lies at the core of aesthetics and art. Also, the idea of the transversality of the struggle (see Gerald Rauning's important book *Art and Revolution*, published recently by Semiotext(e)) is something that should shape the position of the activist. Defining an "artist-activist" is a difficult and ever-returning task that we should consider in a wake of old discussions — should artists produce for the proletariat or should the proletariat produce its own art? I think we need to reconsider the role of an avant-garde artist as a historical figure and try to analyse how this role relates to the contemporary figure of the artist-activist.

I think that this definition is really important. As Jacques Rancière once mentioned (and I fully agree with him): If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is [...] not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures of life to come. This is exactly the main concern of the activist-artist, who is not

trying to dictate to the masses what art should be, but works in close connection with resistance movements and tries to find a form of representation for the vitality of struggle and social transformation and disseminate it back into the movement. I think it is about constructing an organic exchange between art and the everyday experience of people. Art can gain experiences from the everyday and at the same time penetrate the texture of people's consciousness and life, helping them to understand their place in history and deepen their process of becoming.

L.J.: I AM DEEPLY INTERESTED IN YOUR CONCEPT OF "SELF-EDUCATION," BOTH ITS TRADITION IN RUSSIA AND ITS FUTURIST AMBITIONS. YOU RELATE IT TO THE ACTIVIST POSITION, DON'T YOU?

D.V.: Yes, I really do. The theme of self-education flows from the notion of self-organization. What do we mean when we talk about this notion today? Self-organization is a collective process of taking on political functions and addressing tasks that have been excluded from the field of real politics or pushed out of public space. Thus, the process of self-education is inseparable from the positioning of collective dissent within the existing order of things. It demands the transformation of the status quo. Self-organization searches for a form through which it can express the voices of dissenting subjectivity. Since self-organization demands something lacking in a concrete historical moment and a concrete local situation, its most important characteristic is the lack of knowledge. At the same time, the lack of knowledge does not entail the rejection of cognitive approaches that are already known. The state of a creative lack-of-knowledge is the point of departure for action. Practices of self-education have been extraordinarily important in Russian history. Often semi-illegal and in opposition to official institutions of power, such intimate circles were able to formulate some of the most striking phenomena in Russian thought and culture. Notwithstanding their marginal position, they made an invaluable contribution to the historical victory over the repressive state structures that in Russia always intertwine with capital. Their experience still inspires us today, as we once again look for ways to educate ourselves in the current atmosphere of growing coercion, state violence, and direct repression.

L.J.: YOUR ACTIVIST CLUB HAS BEEN INSTALLED ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS ALREADY. DOES IT CHANGE EACH TIME? AND, IF SO, HOW SITE-SPECIFIC DOES IT BECOME? RODCHENKO'S PROJECT, I BELIEVE, WAS BASED ON A UNIVERSAL CONCEPT THAT COULD BE "EXPORTED." THUS, IT WAS NO COINCIDENCE THAT IT WAS DONATED TO THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY AFTER THE PARIS EXHIBITION. FINALLY, HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE DIDACTIC AND THE PARTICIPATORY ELEMENTS OF YOUR PROJECT?

D.V.: For our group and for me, the participatory moment is very important. So what we are building are the spaces where the viewer can encounter the work of art in a proper and (as we understand it) educational setting. I do not think that this necessitates a universal "concept," but we should try to develop a method, an approach to the production of the space that can have a universal dimension. And I think that these claims for universality are sometimes misunderstood as something totalizing or exclusive of any difference. But you do not have to be a philosopher to recognize that is not the case. True universality is built upon singular, local, and differentiated experiences, exactly as Marx noted (in *The Communist Manifesto*): "From the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature." So all realizations of activist clubs in different contexts are different but they share a universal approach.

L.J.: IN ONE ISSUE OF THE CHTO DELAT NEWSPAPER THAT YOU PUBLISH (THE ISSUE ON "CRITIQUE AND TRUTH"), YOU EXPLAIN YOUR STRATEGY AS "MAKING SPACES WHERE THE GROUP CAN CARRY OUT ITS WORK, SPACES THAT ARE LARGELY INDEPENDENT FROM THE SYSTEM." WHAT ARE THESE SPACES AND WHAT IS THEIR POTENTIAL? IN THE OUTLINE OF MY PROJECT FOR THIS ISSUE OF THE PRINTED PROJECT I HAVE POINTED TO THE HYBRIDITY OF SPACES THAT SURROUND US. I WILL GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE. WHEN I WAS WORKING IN MOSCOW IMPLEMENTING A SPECIAL PROJECT FOR THE 2ND MOSCOW BIENNALE AT THE WINZAVOD CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE, I HAD CONSTANT ENCOUNTERS WITH MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS WHO LIVED AND WORKED IN THE SAME COMPLEX. THEIR HUTS WERE ACTUALLY SCATTERED AROUND THE BIENNALE VENUES, AND ONE COULD NOT AVOID THE FEELING OF BOTH BEING TOGETHER WITH THEM AND DELIBERATELY IGNORING THEIR PRESENCE AT THE SAME TIME. HOW DOES YOUR ACTIVIST CLUB FUNCTION IN REGARD TO THE HYBRIDITY OF SOCIAL SPACE?

D.V.: It could be anywhere, but the issue of space and its potentiality should be considered alongside the issues of the possibility of the situation that might arise in the space. Regarding your experience, if by any chance you encountered a strike or a protest by the migrant workers that would block the opening of your show, what would you do? Stop working in solidarity or hire other workers who would help you make your deadline? My answer to this challenge would be to produce a space of the exhibition that maintains the potentiality to be transformed and welcome a different sort of activist activity: the workers could take it over if they felt the need for it. Such spaces could be useful in a crisis situation. Or you could imagine another situation where these workers would have an organization, and they needed a place where they could gather and share their experience and meet activists who support their struggle. If we consider art spaces to be truly public spaces, then they could serve these needs and at the same time maintain uncompromising aesthetic quality. That would be for me an ideal model of what you called hybridity of space



ON PROPAGANDA IN ART

N.O.

When I think about the art worker's place in contemporary reality, unexpected pictures flash before my eyes: a poet torching an ugly office building in the city center or an artist, his face covered by a bandana, being arrested by seven cops at a demo. I like these pictures. Boring is the artist who has convinced himself that his place is in the studio from eleven in the morning to seven in the evening. And fine is the poet who doesn't merely rock the Internet or club slam with his words, but devotes himself to activism.

There are many artists who come to mind here – impressive artists who saw that full creative realization was possible only within a political or workers movement. This includes not only the entire spectrum of pre-Revolutionary Russian and early Soviet art, but also, of course, Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier (among the revolutionary artists of France), the politicized Berlin Dadaists, Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists, and Emory Douglas, the Black Panther Party's minister of culture and a brilliant graphic artist. These artists were not afraid of forfeiting their artistic identity by fusing with a political movement, of losing themselves in activist work, of being stripped of the supreme, righteous lack of bias that, allegedly, alone makes the artist's gaze infallible in the court of art history. Is that the case? For, if you recall, all these artists shouldered the burden of administrative work and distinguished themselves as organizers, recognizing the importance of their mission and mercilessly expending their talents in the daily struggle.

Gustave Courbet, one of the greatest artists of the nineteenth century and a founder of Realism, was active in the Paris Commune. He didn't hesitate for long when the revolutionary committee offered him an important post in the new government. Here is what he wrote his family:

Here I am, thanks to the people of Paris, up to my neck in politics: president of the Federation of Artists, member of the Commune, delegate to the Office of the Mayor, delegate to [the Ministry of] Public Education, four of the most important offices in Paris. I get up, I eat breakfast, and I sit and I preside twelve hours a day. My head is beginning to feel like a baked apple. But in spite of all this agitation in my head and in my understanding of social questions that I was not familiar with, I am in seventh heaven. Paris is a true paradise! [...] The Paris Commune is more successful than any form of government has ever been.

We could also cite the Berlin artists of the twenties who were inspired by the Russian Revolution. George Grosz drew political caricatures for the proletarian newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*. John Heartfield, inventor of the photomontage technique, designed the clenched fist motto of the Red Front and produced an endless number of collages for leftist publications.

No one would dare to say that these artists "sold out" or "frittered away" their talents, that they sacrificed art for the sake of vague political goals or got mixed

up in a pointless struggle when they should have been practicing pure art. All the artists I've mentioned did a lot for the history of art: their works are genuine masterpieces, the common property of humanity, and landmarks of world culture without any qualifications. And I still for the life of me cannot see any justification when a creative person argues that art should be unbiased, objective, subjective, suggestive, aloof, autonomous or however you like just as long as it's not political, as long as it doesn't seem tendentious, too red, too leftist. This last set of terms is suspect amongst artists. They insist on ambiguity, believing that this is the only way art can exist.

K.M.

Nik, I share your general sentiments, but we should nevertheless distinguish different modes of engagement. Administrative, activist or creative work by the artist in revolutionary organizations or institutions is one thing, but agitation on behalf of a movement that is still engaged in the struggle or has won that struggle is another thing. The third mode involves singing the praises of revolutionary or post-revolutionary regimes. Of course when a revolution is on the upswing, all three modes can be combined. This is the happiest moment, but it has never lasted for long. What is to be done when the revolution is on the downswing or (more relevant for us) during a period of reaction – that is, when revolutionary passion alone is not enough? There is the case of Mayakovsky, for example. We know the tiresome traditional interpretation: he was a terrific poet who later wasted his talent on Party agitprop, leading to his death as an artist and his suicide. And the equally tiresome conclusion: don't get mixed up with politics, artist – stay independent. The source of this notion is clear: a quite peculiar understanding of "independence" and a general disenchantment with politics. Why be involved in politics if the idealists will lose all the same, and the cynics will triumph via their dirty methods? Why should the artist invest in collectivity, when individuality is the only valuable and palpable thing he has? How can we as Marxists respond to this? We are against determinism: we know that history is not foreordained, that it could have turned out differently. And if we assume even a little that the fate of the Revolution could have been different, then we understand Mayakovsky's fate was determined not by his choice (the only choice worthy of man and poet like himself), but by the fact that the Party in the end was transformed from a vanguard into an obstacle to social revolution in our country. It's another matter to what degree Mayakovsky's own position was capable of impacting the overall political dynamic. Given the example of Victor Serge, who wholly associated himself with the Revolution and worked for it but nevertheless (or rather, precisely for this reason) criticized various aspects of Bolshevik policy and Party life, we can say that, yes, it was possible to fight for the Revolution and thus fight for one's poetry and for one's life. Of course it's hard for us today to judge this properly. What should be obvious, however, is that engagement does not rule out an internal critical vector but demands it.

N.O.

As for engagement as a whole, it's clear that you and I have decided this question for ourselves affirmatively. There is the opinion, perhaps wrong, that this damages one's reputation, and even goes against the logic of creative development (which I would counter with the argument that one grows continuously within the constant process of activist self-education). But here's another thing that worries me. From being engaged, i.e., from the given political constant, it is impossible for us not to take the next step forward, where the artist serving the movement becomes an agitator and propagandist. And here's where we see a tight bundle of contradictions. This bundle needs to be untied; otherwise we'll all end up in the hell of art history, whereas we'd like to get to heaven, of course.

So propaganda artists do not doubt their political choice. They don't just share the movement's values but fully equate their own values with the movement's task, meaning that they universalize them. But what if the artist has made a historically incorrect choice? After all, there are different kinds of agitation. It was agitation that led the students of the Sorbonne to the barricades in 1968 and agitation that entices young people to join the armed forces. The Soviet totalitarian machine used propaganda, and Hitler constantly insisted that agitation was of extreme importance in the Third Reich and in the occupied territories. The Cold War between the USSR and the USA was, among other things, a propaganda war. In this situation, the artist, poet and art worker are turned into tools by a political force. But choosing sides, choosing that force is the job of the artist. In the end, Brecht chose one side and Riefenstahl the other. But who, in the final analysis, will absolve Riefenstahl? She was so talented. Or who will bury Prokhanov (or Limonov or Gintovt)? They're so engaged. Who put Mayakovsky, Heartfield and Victor Serge, who sold their souls to the Movement, on the express train to Art History heaven? And what as a result should we do with Rodchenko?

You are right that there is no engaged art outside the mass movement, but at the same time all political forces use propaganda and agitation, whether emancipatory, totalitarian or fascist, regardless of their relative weight. At the same time, the choice of a movement, the will to sober criticism from within, the form of interaction with movements and the public, and the question of artistic realization and self-development are always on the artist's agenda.

K.M.

As for Riefenstahl, she was neither an engaged nor a political artist, and she never made a political choice, for example, between fascism and anti-fascism. She was apolitical, young and talented, and she craved self-expression. The Nazi regime gave her the opportunity to express herself. In the same way that, in its refined, intellectual dimension, fascism brought the slogan "art for art's sake" to its logical conclusion, so Riefenstahl took the paradigm of the apolitical artist to an extreme. It is precisely for that reason that Riefenstahl is so popular today among apolitical decadents of every stripe. For them, she is an unattainable example of radical apoliticalness.

And I wouldn't compare Gintovt to her. I'm prepared to respect Gintovt as a worthy enemy to the extent that he is seriously prepared to work for the Eurasian movement. The problem is that he waffles between atomic orthodoxy and the Moscow/Petersburg art bazaar. What if that whole black-gold mirage fades? Who besides art speculators in the two Russian capitals and their critical lackeys will take him in then? It's fear that eats away at today's propaganda artist from within and forces him to orient himself toward bourgeois history, a history of lone individuals who rose above the dumb collectivity.

It is understandable that a stance on propaganda is inseparable from the general neoliberal backdrop. For example, an artist working in advertising, and the merging of art and the banking system are taken as givens, although this is engagement in the worst sense of the word. For the artist who advertises a product with which he has no connection is one hundred percent alienated from the results of his labor, in contrast to the artist who sincerely propagandizes ideas. There is nothing humiliating or manipulative in such agitation, as opposed, by the way, to the political spinmeistering on which practically all of political life is grounded. If you see the merger of the market and parliamentary politics as a total atrocity, then the question of propaganda on behalf of non-parliamentary groups, self-organized collectives and social movements takes on an entirely different meaning. The leftist artist or his collective client ceases to be merely the subject of manipulation, and the public to whom he addresses himself ceases to be merely an object.

I also personally need to be agitated. I need someone to inspire me to do something with a clear, powerful statement or image. Recently I saw on a Soviet photograph the slogan "Deeds, not words; action, not criticism!" It had hung over a tram depot. I'd give my eyetooth to have such a slogan greet me in the morning when I leave the house, instead of some advertisement or other. And when I got used to it and stopped noticing it, I'd want a new one to appear.

The same can be said of Mayakovsky: he'll be canonized by those who are able to create a powerful art of agitation and, at the same time, work in a deeply universalist key by appealing (as is characteristic, in principle, of the artist) to everyone, not only to potential supporters. But the most important thing is the ability to connect those realms (including these), to link them via your life, your blood, and your political choice. To make that connection convincing. When you tell yourself, "I'm just a propagandist" or "I'm just a philosopher," or "I'm just an independent critical artist," or, for example, "I'm just a father who feeds his family and is forced to give himself over entirely to the system," you shift responsibility from yourself, you entrust your political choice to certain external factors, authorities, whether it's politics, science, art, morality, etc. And you continue to exist according to their criteria, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. This choice is personal, professional, existential or whatever, but it is not the choice of a Human Being. And it is not a political choice. Even "to be or not to be a propagandist" is not a political dilemma. A political choice is precisely how you connect those various modes in your life. How you connect your analytical, contemplative function, your understanding of all the complexity of this world and society, in a word, the optics that gives birth in the intellectual to the practical apathy with which everyone is familiar; how you connect all of this with agitational, activist work, with the need to suddenly reduce all of this wealth of possibilities to an agitational flyer and then, for example, to go and hand it out.

N.O.

Another difficulty is that propaganda is not only a question of personal political choice and loyalty to the movement. It's not just a statement subjected to party logic but also a type of speech, a clear choice of a semiotic system that is related to those to whom the movement appeals through the artist. In other words, for an artist, agitational work is always the solving of a formal problem. Everyone must hear the message relayed by the agitator in a work of propaganda as clearly as possible. For example, the American leftist activist Abbie Hoffman said,

"Always use the symbols, props, dress and language of the people you are working with. [...] If you are working on the street do not talk of imperialism, participatory democracy, or affinity groups. Save that for college seminars. Talk to the guys about getting fucked by the boss, having a say in things. [...] How would you like to be known as the kid who got kicked out of your affinity group?"

This doesn't mean lowering the intellectual bar when talking with the public. On the contrary, simple speech needs to be full of meaning and make the substance of any complex matter accessible. This is a transition from the detached, alienated "autonomy" of the artistic practice of seeking the "new" to the practical search for generally accessible, maximally democratic and extremely convincing formal means. It is a search that, in the end, also expands the boundaries of art. This may sound like a paradox, but it is this kind of linguistic and formal asceticism, dictated by the needs of the party as it were, that leads the artist to a firmer connection with reality and, at the same time, sets the direction of the formal search, often leading that search onto the plane of real action. And when the poet stops being just a poet, when he goes out onto the street, picks up a fuse or a banner with his own hands and at that moment becomes an actual poet, when the creative person gets involved in political action, that's when politics will again have a chance of becoming art.

K.M.

What is important is the degree to which you are able to organize that organics of the transition to action, which is always a limitation, even a form of violence against thought and ornamentation, which want to twist according to their own intrinsic laws. If you manage to grasp, implement and express it precisely as a transition and not as a refusal or break, then it goes without saying that this boosts the status of the activist, propagandist and engaged artist – a person who invests his singularity in a different, collective project for reality. This is incredibly important. After all, the status of the activist is incredibly low in society right now; in fact, it doesn't exist at all. But the status of artist, poet and philosopher remains high. Even a person who knows nothing about art understands what the artist is fighting for: for the happiness of self-expression, for the free creative life, for success or, on the contrary, for romantic rejection and, in the final analysis, for a place in history, in the history of the masters, next to the politicians, scientists and military leaders, and even higher than them. Hardly anyone understands what

the activist is fighting for. That's a sign of a very grave crisis. A crisis of social creativity, if it can be put that way. For example, if you say, "The world is ugly and people are sad," that is perceived as the anguished and disillusioned expression of an artist, but if you say, "The world is diverse and people are still capable of self-organization," then you automatically become a propagandist. However, the first statement has long been a non-obligatory banality, while the second can become a serious political or artistic platform, the basis for a new thoughtful, heroic existence.

If a person is hopeless then, of course, the most he strives for is to objectify part of himself in a work of art or text in order that, alienated from him, they turn from objects into subjects of history, the history of art. But the subject of history is the human being as such, in all his positive complexity, not in some alienated part of him. Just as the history of art is part of human history, not the other way around. [As Maxim Gorky said,] Man! That has a proud ring to it.

Artist-man, agitator-man, activist-man, worker-man, intellectual-man – all of them together have a proud ring to them. But breaking them down is artificial: it's a crisis of a system that strives to reduce the artist, along with everyone else, to an economic function. But that's not just neoliberal ideology; it's reality itself. A reality in which it is truly very difficult to connect different things – theory and practice, reflection and agitation – with one another; you have to tack them on with thread, and the threads often stick out and don't look very convincing. But that's the only way that reality changes. And I believe that's the only way to return and retain that universalist, humanist horizon created by our predecessors, including the agitator artists – the socialists, anarchists, and radical democrats, in the twentieth century and earlier. They created it not only at the cost of their efforts and death, but at the cost of their own reputations.

N.O.

As we resist Nazism from the left under neoliberalism, it is appropriate for us to draw historical parallels with the thirties and attempt to understand how art workers should carry out agitational work under the new conditions. What tools do we have in the current conditions that are outside the realm of the big parties/corporations? Can we organize a dialogue with people, appeal to humanity? Are there any new methods of propagandist struggle? Is there a potential for reinventing new emancipatory propaganda? After all, if we look closely, there are quite a few tools for democratic struggle in our daily arsenal: grassroots theoretical and practical conferences, demonstrations, pickets and other forms of public protest and street-level self-organization, exhibitions and film clubs, and autonomous publishing projects. We already have all of that. What else is there?

K.M.

Kolya, talk about various kinds of "reinventions" and novelty most often remains just that: talk. We can simply recall what exactly you and I did, for example, over the past year and what we will probably do in the future: produce art objects and texts, design newspapers, translate and produce books, exhibitions, readings, go to meetings and organize committees, organize seminars, protests and pickets – some of which are successful, some of which are passable, and some of which are failures. We combined one thing with another, sometimes sacrificed one thing for another, and this caused misunderstandings among other people. There is nothing new in any of those types of activity as such. When you have to make a flyer and you want as many people as possible to read and understand it, you don't have much space for "reinventing," do you? For me the possibility of something new, the possibility of utopia consists precisely in combining all of this. It is this combination that generates (or doesn't) new motivations, new relations, new ways of life, and new stakes that are different from those of the artist or intellectual striving to gain a foothold in an already existing professional field, or the politician who dreams of coming to power and rebuilding society from the top down. This is the field of personal revolutionary utopian struggle (to which I belong as well). And the figure of the propagandist (allegedly, historically compromised) is necessary in that field, so that it is charged and generates new meanings beyond the limits of hypocritical liberal-conservative mindsets.

N.O.

Then it is obvious that the figure of the artist-fighter should exist in that field constantly. It shouldn't glimmer and flash somewhere on the horizon but be constantly manifested, intensely, every minute, and obviously through the regular practice of the common struggle. I want to say that it is a great joy to expend oneself in the struggle. That perhaps is what life in art is. Because inspiration is an awesome state, when you are guided by outrage and joy. Outrage at the realization that there is injustice and crap in the world. And joy of the kind that makes you stand up straighter and fills your hands with strength.

Nikolay Oleynikov
(1976)
*artist, activist,
member of "Chto delat?":
Lives in Moscow.*

Kirill Medvedev
(1974)
*poet, activist,
member of
"VPERED!" [forward]
Socialist Movement, trans-
lator, publisher, founder of
FREE MARKIST PUBLISHING
HOUSE.
Lives in Moscow.*

THE ROSY DAWN OF CAPITAL

DMITRY GUTOV
(D.G.)

DAVID RIFF
(D.R.)

The KARL MARX SCHOOL
of the ENGLISH LANGUAGE

2009

*This transcript is a excerpt of a workshop during which the reconstituted Karl Marx School of the English Language read the second to last chapter on primitive accumulation in **Capital Vol. 1**. An audio installation with paintings by Dmitry Gutov was shown in the framework of the exhibition "Principio Potosi" at the Reina Sofia Museum for Contemporary Art.*

D G :
The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation... **DR:** ...extirpation... **DG:** ...the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment... **DR:**...entombment... **DG:** ...entombment in mines of the aboriginal population... **DR:** ...the aboriginal population... **DG:** ...aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins... **DR:** Can you say "black-skins"? **DG:** Black skins? **DR:** Black-skins. **DG:** Black skins. **DR:** ... **DG:** signaled the rosy of dawn of the era of capitalist production. **IB:** These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. **KB:** On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. **KC:** But they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. **TOGETHER:** Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power. **DR:** What does it mean? **DR:** Put the manuscript away. Kostya... **KB:** Okay...Retell this phrase, yeah... **DR:**...in your own words...**KB:** Colonial system use force to get the goal it wants, and it uses the force of the state for its purposes, to hasten, to hothouse the process... **DG:** I think that the meaning of this sentence is much wider...**KC:** Broader **DG:** Broader? **DR:** Broader. **DG:** Broader **KB:** Broader, because force is an economic power. **DG:** But, you see, here we've got pure violence as a form of greed. **DR:** Greed? **IB:** I don't understand what greed is. I understand what greed means, but I don't think this is a question of that capitalism is just greedy. Capitalism at every moment of its growth need to destroy... **DR:** Needs... **IB:** Needs to destroy and need to intervene in the areas... **DR:** NEEDS... **IB:** Needs to intervene in the areas where there are possibilities for capitalism to grow. I think that every normal capitalist crisis and every strategy of every capitalist company in a capitalist crisis is the best example for this kind of violence. **DG:** We remember it so well, all of us. The Nineties in this country were the epoch of primitive accumulation in its purest form, and I remember when I was reading this chapter in the Nineties, I re-read it maybe once a week. It was the best illustration of what was going on in the streets. **KC:** Murders. **DG:** Murders, violence... **KC:** Clashes between...**DG:** Absolutely in the same form. We KNOW... **KC:** We saw primitive accumulation. **DG:** It's not history that was five or three hundred years ago. We remember: it was and it is part of our lives. **KB:** And I as an adult person think that this process was not primary accumulation **DG:** Primitive **KB:** Primitive, because it didn't change the mode of production, it did not change the character of the property. **KC:** Since today's capitalism is globalized, it always has interconnections with wild capitalism, the places where the new money is coming from. The places of the new money are China, Latin America, and if you talk about Russia, it is still not refined capitalism. **DR:** Primitive accumulation is still going on. **DG:** Friend, friends! I think what is really important. We have to find a way to connect all these theoretical problems and these historical problems... **KC:** With our lives **DG:** With our own lives. And for an example. Yeah it's ok. With painting. It is absolutely impossible to deal with these pictures in painting. It's the self-destruction of art. **KC:** So being ugly... **DG:** When we deal with this horrible violence... **KC:** Can you de-

scribe?

KB: Is it undescr-
able... **DG:**...it is... **KB:** Ordowe

just stop our ability to see the world... **DG:**

So. The instrument of painting is not enough. **KB:**

But it can depict the whole picture of what is going on...

DG: Of course, you can depict some aspect... **KC:** But what

about Goya!? When I was a child and I saw the paintings of Goya, it

was the horror...**KB:**...and it was the great painterly manner...and I

would like to emphasize that this private property is the flipside of slavery

and serfdom. **DG:** You have to stop... **KC:** Let's remember Viennese Action-

ism which I don't like at all. **DG:** You have to change your profession. **KB:** Mar-

quis de Sade: the famous thinker of violence. **DG:** It is... **KC:** And Dostoyevsky.

DR: Institutionally **DG:** Institutionally art. **KB:** Homer describes the violence of

the fight. **DG:** But in mirrors, mirrors... **DR:** But it hasn't attained. **KB:** Private prop-

erty can exist under slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. **DG:** Comrades, comrades. **KB:**

This is what Marx is writing about. **DG:** Any kind of virtuosity...looks like shit...in front

of this subject. So in this case, it's better not to be an artist, it's better to be Marx and to do it

directly. **DR:** It's not art? **DG:** It is art but... **DR:** It's art! **DG:** It is only art because Marx

didn't do... **DG and KC:** ...art. **DG:** If you are trying to do art, the result will be like this

artist. You will be lying on the floor and waiting for an angel. **KC:** So, what are you insisting on.

You are insisting yourself on going beyond art's limits? So you want to stop to be an artist? **DG:**

No, no, you see... **KC:** Or you yourself want to remain within the limits of this artistry? **DG:**

Yeah, absolutely. You have to make your decision. If you are going to be a painter... **KC:** What is

your decision? **DG:** You see... **DR:** You have an idealistic dispositive of art. **DG:** Yes. **KC:** This

is the point of our argument. **DR:** It's what, it's God? **KC:** Yeah, it's God! **DG:** No! The law... **IB:**

But we are talking about society. About human society. **DG:** Human society? **IB:** Human society!

We are now talking about human society. **KB:** Human society is also the subject of gravity. **IB:**

We are talking about productive forces. **DG:** Absolutely. **IB:** We are talking about property. We

are not talking about... **DG:** No. **KC:** ...he begets, but in a very **DG:** You see, your strategy...

KC: ...longer perspective. It's like when the second coming will be. **DG:** No, not the second

coming... **KC:** So if we don't persevere in its coming. **KB:** Dima, it will be. **DG:** No! It says

here. **IB:** It's a basic understanding what a social formation is about. **DG:** The workshop

of Verocchio. Verocchio had a workshop... **KC:** Ты как то в социуме живешь. Ты не можешь

просто где то жить на кулачке земли. **DG:** In English. **KC:** I can tell you what I think.

DG: I like it. This is my idea. Why do you look at me like that? I can look at you like that!

IB: I... **DG:** You see, this phrase...**KC:** But what precedes this phrase? **DG:** A

law of nature. **KC:** It's torn out of context. **DG:** Comrades! **DR:** The only thing

that is interesting to you is this metaphysical structure. **DG:** It's not metaphysi-

cal. It's a very practical question. **KC:** You sound as a justification of oppor-

tunism. **DG:** I know all this accusations. **DR:** It's worse. **DG:** My

justification of opportunism is a hundred times closer... **DR:** You're

sitting here, reading Marx. **DG:** Okay. **DR:** You have this text

in front of you. **DG:** You can't change... **KC:** Dmitry, this

is the phrase... **DG:**...you can't change the laws of na-

ture. **KC:** What is revolution then? Why revolu-

tion is needed? **IB:** It is a part of this

law. **DG:** Of course!

ILYA BUDRAITSKIS
(I.B.)

KETI CHUKHROV
(K.C.)

KONSTANTIN BOKHOROV
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Keti
CHUKHROV

2009

THE

NOMADIC THEATER

OF THE

COMMUNIST:

A MANIFESTO

RECENTLY I UNDERSTOOD CLEARLY that art couldn't help but be communist. This is not at all a manifestation of ideology, as it would seem to some. Nor is it dogma. It is just that suddenly it became obvious that all art – from Ancient Greece to the present day; that art which has overcome the egoism and conceit in itself – contained the potential to be communist. Regardless of its pessimism or optimism, such art is dedicated not to some social group but to one and all. This is not some kind of propaganda trick. That's what happens with an artist whose art is not afraid of people. Often art is either afraid of losing itself in the crowd or, the other extreme, it attempts to be artificially populist so it isn't suspected of being refined or subtle, or is addressed to an in-crowd of discerning connoisseurs and experts.

WHEN I SAY COMMUNIST of course I have in mind not membership in a party but a worldview. It is this breadth of worldview, which exceeds the boundaries of a single state, nation, class, artistic school, and the private or even spiritual interests of a specific individual, that pre-determines the communist potential in a work of art.

THIS MEANS THAT THE ARTIST HAS THE STRENGTH to be not just one person, but many – the strength to not merely observe life and the multitude of living beings but to be or become them by means of art.

THIS MODE OF ART WHERE THE ARTIST can be "many" exists. Dostoevsky was able to be many people at once. Shakespeare, Beethoven, Vvedensky, Khlebnikov, Brecht, Mozart, Mayakovsky, Platonov and Beckett are other examples. The mode of art I'm speaking of is the so-called theater. I certainly don't mean repertory or genre theater. Ninety-nine percent of repertory theater is just cultural entertainment. What I call theater is a kind of anthropological and political mode that arises as the capacity to artistically perform the transformation itself.

FOR ME, THIS INEVITABLE SHIFT to the theater occurred on the one hand from poetry and, on the other, from contemporary art. The limiting factor in poetry was its monologism, the fact that it condemned one in a way to acmeism and lyricism, i.e., to in the end being preoccupied all the time with oneself even when one speaks of the world, and often to castrating the heritage of both the avant-garde and modernism. Contemporary art is in a certain sense the direct opposite of poetry. It is not psychological nor is it subjective. By and large, it continues to operate according to the modernist canon of reducing the world to its own artistic idioms.

HOWEVER, CONTEMPORARY ART'S constant reference to its own territory and innovations in technique had already exhausted itself in the seventies and was forced to either dwell on the reproduction of languages, concepts and commentaries, or on eternally reproducing estranged spaces as modes of the optical unconscious. In any event, even when contemporary art attempts to come close to the event, it doesn't succeed in doing this because it immediately negates its attempt. Contemporary art's spaces of representation, exposition and commentary are organized in such a way that no matter what contemporary art concerns itself with, it is inevitably and in the final analysis concerned with itself and its own boundaries.

Even performance (or actions), despite its procedural nature and its unfolding in real time, is essentially the installation of a concept in space and time. It is a static, exhibited art object. It is forced to be this way.

THEATER, ON THE CONTRARY, IS DYNAMIC. It represents the experience of performing, not performance. In the mode of action that has not yet become but is becoming, it appeals to that which does not yet exist, whether in society, life or art. It not only lives through time, but performs time, i.e., it is capable of dealing with the present as if it were the future.

EXHIBITION SPACES, EVEN when they thematize certain social or political issues, remain bound by the politics of things and spaces. The theater presupposes politicization between people. The theater is experience that leaves things behind. It is the experience of consciousness becoming immaterial. If in contemporary-art performance the participant a priori conceptualizes themselves as a performer, then in the theatrical performance becoming-performer occurs thanks to the fact that the performer (actor) becomes a person and that person's political destiny. In other words, the performer becomes an artist thanks to the fact that he performs a human being in the play.

THE THEATER IS A SPACE FOR HUMANS, not a space for artists. But the paradox is that becoming-human needs to be performed, while the artist must naturalistically and physiologically inhabit the conceptual art-space of the performance while remaining an estranged individual. Even when it is a monologue, theater is a dialogue and starts with the number two.

THE THEATER IS CAPABLE OF SPEAKING AND ACTING out an idea without reducing it to bare form or neutralized concept. This is because, in the theater, the idea is acted out as the living substance of relationships, in the mode of unreduced multi-humanity and polyphony.

IN POETRY, FOR EXAMPLE, IT IS DIFFICULT to overcome being fettered in the habitat of self. There's nothing bad about the habitat of self. There's also nothing bad in observing the subject beyond reality, beyond people, beyond society. But this is the perspective of a single point of view, a single consciousness.

VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD COINED THE TERM cabotage, which he considered one of the most important features of the theater. Cabotains are nomadic players who perform anywhere. In other words, they are not bound to a room, space or time, but create both space and time out of their performance of worlds, ideas, people, and so forth.

THEATER IS IMPLICITLY PUBLIC, but often the concept of being public is identified with the audience who watches the spectacle, i.e., the contemplation of action as entertainment. But the fact that it is public means that the theater has the potential to be about everyone, about how the world is for everyone, about how to be with the world, if it is not for everyone; and what to do with those who for one reason or another have been left without a world. The theater assumes that it will no longer wait for money, prosperity, education or beauty, but it turns waiting itself into action, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

IN THIS SENSE, THE THEATER'S CAPACITY to deal with politics exceeds the capacity of the idioms of contemporary art, no matter how numerous they may be, and even the capacity of poetry, no matter how existentially profound or socially critical it may be. This is because in the theater the political is not a theme or an issue, but is clarified between people when those people are not just documented objects or observed characters, but speaking politi-

cal subjects. The essence of dramatization is that it is never reduced to the representation of a single idea; rather, many ideas or ideas/people come into conflict with one another in such a way that the solution or conclusion to that conflict flows from the action itself without being predetermined.

THE VOICES AND DISCOURSES OF THEATER are not just the sounds, opinions and narratives typical of many video works and documentations within contemporary art. They are not interviews with victims who recount how they suffered or accounts of an event. The theater treats suffering differently than do the media, contemporary art, literature or poetry. It incorporates a performance of this role by the victim themselves or the so-called oppressed person (an awful word that is humiliating and degrading) that would be a (artistic) performance of their own victory over circumstances. Herein lie the political, aesthetic and communist potentialities of theater.

TO BE ABLE TO LEARN TO SPEAK not only for oneself but (as in the case of the author and the actor) to speak instead of many others: this has to be done if only to understand or clarify what happened or is happening among us, in our country, in our state, in the world; in order to understand how to go on living within it. (Isn't that Hamlet's purpose in launching his "theater"?)

THE HARDEST THING IS TO IMAGINE not only one's own development and self-improvement, even if it achieves great heights in viewing the world, but to discern the development and self-improvement of others. In other words, to understand the universal dynamically, multitudinously, as an action that happens "alongside" (one), rather than conically, spiritually.

I RELY ON ONE ASSUMPTION: artistic achievements don't count, and the spiritual quest for the transcendental is not worth anything if they occur only because they don't take into account the great majority of people on this earth, who have neither time nor place nor elementary living conditions, the freedom of existence that makes it possible to think, create, love and live. No personal connection to the sublime counts if we do not understand that all people, no matter who they might be, are potentially artists, scientists, engineers, philosophers, interlocutors, comrades in arms, and just people. Without them it is impossible to achieve the fullness of the world and life. And potentially they are also capable of thinking the same way. Nothing more. This is the communist assumption in simple terms.

ACTUALLY, THERE IS NO COMMUNISM and there never was, but there is the project of communism. It cannot help being just as humans can't help being as long as they are, as long as people exist in their multitude.

MANY RESIST THE COMMUNIST in themselves, in reality, in art and in history. This is out of fear for oneself, for one's well-being, for what little power one has; for one's success, and, finally, for one's education and culture, acquired through such long, hard work. Everyone without exception

has this fear. It is a bodily fear. But so what? It can be overcome. It is quite possible to think of oneself as if you were thinking about others, as if you were not thinking about yourself. This is very difficult, but it becomes easy when these thoughts take on flesh in the situation of artistic performance.

THE NOMADIC THEATER OF THE COMMUNIST is in a certain sense the opportunity to temporarily (artistic time is temporary, although it lays claim to immortality) create the relations of political Eros using the means available now, to introduce (albeit temporarily) this artistic communist space into the existing environment in spite of the circumstances. As many people as want and are able to do it right now do this, in the place they have found for it now and for those who are ready for such an encounter now.






















IN THIS CASE, THE THEATER IS NOT a genre but a method of emergence for the territory of the "artistic." Here the "artistic" borders on the poetic, and poetry emerges in the performance of an impossible situation, not in writing. The artistic becomes human and the human becomes artistic, because the entire person is engaged in the process of performance: her body, mind, thoughts, desire, and not just individual capacities or qualifications.

THIS DOESN'T AT ALL MEAN THAT SUCH "THEATER" presumes nothing more than creative improvisation, that it happens somewhere, somehow and is about something, in a spontaneous situation among spontaneous participants. It is also not an illustration of some story or plot on the theme of communism or the political struggle.

THE NOMADIC THEATER OF THE COMMUNIST is connected with a special type of metanoia that doesn't just beget a desire to create, but requires the world and other people in this world. This metanoia is an event and it presumes a desire for the universal and universality, making the person as it were a "communist" and an artist at one and the same time. It makes them an artist because it must repeat, "rehearse" this inescapable event of metanoia, which is realized in the repetitive practice of performance. And it makes them a communist because each time the performance makes it possible to experience, understand or create a co-presence with others, to examine the bases of such co-presence, and to perform the fulfillment of the universal.

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- 2, 3  *CHTO DELAT?*
A DECLARATION ON POLITICS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ART
[2008]
- 4  *CHTO DELAT?*
WE ARE NOT OFF!
[2009]
- 5  A CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTION
IN SUPPORT OF ALEXEI GASKAROV AND MAXIM SOLOPOV
[Poster.2010]
- 6, 7  *Alexei PENZIN*
UNDER SUSPICION
[2009-2010]
- 8, 9  *David RIFF*
IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE...
[2007]
- 10  *Artemy MAGUN and Boris KAGARLITSKY*
THE LESSONS OF PERESTROIKA
[2007]
- 11  *Dmitry VILENSKY*
THESES ON THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE
[2007]
- 12, 13  *Jacques RANCIÈRE as a guest of the CHTO DELAT group in Saint-Petersburg*
THE AVANT-GARDE, OR THE POLITICAL FORCE OF MODERN ART
[May, 2007]
- 14, 15  *Zanny BEGG and Dmitry VILENSKY*
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AVANT-GARDE COMPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY ART
[July, 2007]
- 16, 17  *a conversation with Giorgio AGAMBEN*
USE ALWAYS MEANS TO OPEN A NEW POSSIBILITY
[March, 2007]
- 18  *Jean FISHER and Dmitry VILENSKY*
DIALOGUE ABOUT COLLECTIVE AGENCY, HOW TO INVENT NEW SOCIAL SPACES,
RADICAL PUBLIC AND NEW POSSIBILITIES OF LIFE
[October, 2004]
- 19  *FACTORY OF FOUNDED CLOTHES*
A MANIFESTO
[2003]
- 20, 21  *Fredric JAMESON and David HARVEY answers to Vlad SOFRONOV (VPERED! Socialist Movement)*
THE THEORY OF MARXISM: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
[2008]
- 22  *Alexander SKIDAN*
poem "FROM A REPORT BY A. ILLARIONOV ON RUSSIA'S PLACE IN FOREIGN RATINGS"
[2009]
- 23  *Dmitry VILENSKY*
WHY BRECHT?
[2005]
- 24  *Jean-Luc NANCY in dialogue with Artemy MAGUN and Oxana TIMOFEEVA*
THE QUESTION OF THE COMMON AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNIVERSAL
[2005]
- 25  *work group CHTO DELAT?*
soundtrack of the "BUILDERS"
[2005]
- 26, 27  *Lolita JABLONSKINE and Dmitry VILENSKY*
SPACES FOR ART, POLITICAL LEARNING, AND SUBJECTIVATION
[2005]
- 28, 29  *Nikolay OLEYNIKOV and Kirill MEDVEDEV*
ON PROPAGANDA IN ART
[2010]
- 30  *The KARL MARX SCHOOL OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE*
THE ROSY DAWN OF CAPITAL
[2010]
- 31  *Keti CHUKHROV*
NOMADIC THEATRE OF A COMMUNIST (manifesto)
[2009]



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