



Installation view, 'Chto Delat: Cuando pensamos que teníamos todas las respuestas la vida cambió las preguntas' (When We Thought We Had All the Answers, Life Changed the Questions), Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), 2017. Photograph: Oliver Santana. Courtesy the artists and MUAC, Mexico City

The Grammar of Collectivity as Experimented by Chto Delat

– Irmgard Emmelhainz

In 1989, Félix Guattari identified the deterioration of inhuman/human individual and collective modes of life. He observed how capitalist relationships had reduced kinship networks to a minimum, poisoned domestic life through mass-media consumption, ossified family life by standardising behaviour and made hostile neighbourhood relations. For Guattari, the problem resided in subjectivity and its exteriority, that is to say, social, animal, vegetable or cosmic relationality, the implications of which political groups had been unable to understand.¹ This situation set a precedent for the current fragmentation of the world and the increasing loss of shared experience; that is with the exception of people coming together in front of screens, or through

Irmgard Emmelhainz traces Chto Delat's experiments with community building and collaboration through their identity as a collective.

moments of national communion where foreign threats deploy hollow sentimentality and where fear justifies the use of state violence.

One of the main concerns for Russian collective Chto Delat (What is to be done?) is experimenting with forms of collectivity and the building of communities. The collective is named after Nikolay Chernyshevsky's 1863 book of the same name, in which the narrative advocates for the creation of small cooperatives based on Russian peasant communities and orientated towards industrial production. According to Chto Delat member Dmitry Vilensky, the situation in Russia in the 1860s was similar to that of the 1990s, in the sense that the main question that needed to be posed concerned 'how to

construct emancipatory collectives and make them sustainable within a hostile society.² Therefore, and along similar lines as Guattari's diagnosis, Chto Delat began experimenting with forms of collectivity through their identity as an arts collective.

Founded in 2003, their practice encompasses theory, installation, sculpture, video, theatre performance, public action and education. Their work is presented through a newspaper published in English and Russian, which deals with current cultural politics. Additionally, in 2013 they founded The School of Engaged Art and continue with their practice in exhibitions and art residencies across the globe. Chto Delat's purpose is to fuse political theory, art and activism in the context of the sociopolitical legacy of Soviet Russia and the ever-thinning veneer of democracy that has accompanied neoliberalisation in the country since the 1990s. The spirit of their work is arguably aligned with the perestroika movement in its aim to reconsider and rebuild socialism, opposing the dismissal and neoliberal takeover of the perestroika itself. Through their work they convey the dead-end situation in Russia under Vladimir Putin's dictatorship, while devising apparatuses for dissidence in a context in which opposition has been met with massive repression. Within the framework of theoretical and cultural production, they explore what democracy and socialism could look like in the Eastern bloc. They do so by searching for and experimenting with new forms of sociopolitical organisation, mainly within themselves as an art collective.

Their practice looks beyond the legacies of the revolutionary takeover and the tendency to fetishise the spontaneity of the working class. They use tools such as Brechtian distanciation, Russian Constructivism,

1 See Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton), London and New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000.

2 Dmitry Vilensky in an interview with Gerald Raunig, 'An Issue of Organisation: Chto Delat?', *Afterall*, no.19, Autumn/Winter 2008, p.6.



What inspired us was Viktor Popkov's marvellous painting "The Builders of Bratsk"



At the same time, we have this need, I don't know where it came from...



Who's our radical Other?



Revolutionary art is that which calls for a non-existing people and a new world



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



But tell us, David, quickly, are we going to change the world?

Surrealism, appropriation, juxtaposition, performance and experimental video. In this regard, Chto Delat's practice is inscribed within the avant-garde ideal of incorporating revolutionary art into everyday life, through expressing new forms of political organisation to change the world. Furthering the tradition of materialist aesthetics,³ they seek to produce 'reflections' or consciousness of the Russian

sociopolitical situation in order to turn the spectator into an active agent.

For them, art can have an active role in transforming society.⁴ Chto Delat posit their practice as a 'synthesis of participatory and representational politics', based on the principles of shared initiatives and responsibilities – a form of counter-power grounded in collective planning – and conceive this practice as a new type of

³ Materialist aesthetics are grounded in the Marxist point of view that the role of art is not only to realistically represent socio-economic conditions, but to seek to improve them. This is represented in the work of Kazimir Malevich, Dziga Vertov and Jean-Luc Godard, for example, and theorised by thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Herbert Marcuse and Georg Lukács.

⁴ Chto Delat, 'From the Chto Delat Lexicon', in *When We Thought We Had All the Answers, Life Changed the Questions* (exh. cat.), Seville/Mexico City: CAAC/MUAC, 2017–18, p.151.

Chto Delat, *Builders*, 2005, video, colour, sound, 8min 16sec.
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Courtesy the artists
and KOW, Berlin

institution and building tool.⁵ Although they constantly reflect upon the many ways in which they become community through their work, their projects are not considered ‘social art’ as they do not elicit a participatory response from the viewer. Their work is ‘representational’ not in the sense that they seek to represent a third political entity (i.e., ‘workers’), but because they posit themselves, their bodies and their collective, as vessels containing new languages and gestures for potential political change. Chto Delat is similar to a groupuscule,⁶ with no specific ideological political programme or cause. Instead, through aesthetic-political experimentation the ‘art worker’ is at the forefront of change, as explored in one of the collective’s early video works, *The Builders* (2005). *The Builders* is a restaging of Victor E. Popkov’s *The Builders of*

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Bratsk (1961), a classic socialist-realist painting depicting five workers brought together through their labour and the idea of future progress. Chto Delat’s interpretation of Popkov’s painting is an inquiry into what they, as creative workers, could build on top of the ruins of Socialism in order to foresee a future in common. In the video we see five members of Chto Delat loosely imitating the composition of bodies in the painting. The moving image allows them to decompose the original image while the voice-over leads an inquiry into their own ‘artistic community’. As opposed to socialist collectivities, what brings Chto Delat together are affinities, friendship and disagreement. Their ‘antagonistic closeness’ is what enables their experimentation with new ideas. If their utopia of friendship is the harbinger of emancipation through the creation

of new forms of *the political*, then the collective’s stability and togetherness – at least as expressed by their work – appears threatened only by external forces.

In the first avant-garde (c.1920–30), artists and intellectuals had given themselves the role of accompanying, announcing, representing and imagining the road to freedom for the revolutionary working class. Through transgression of bourgeois values, art was conceived as the catalyst for social change. But once it was understood that ‘working class’ subjectivity as a universal form of life, without attachments or affectivity, had failed to represent political struggles,⁷ along with the figure of the ‘Third World Revolutionary’,⁸ the working class was dismissed and labour disappeared from the horizon of political action. Subjectivity came to be understood as shaped both inside and outside of labour relations, more linked to culture and symbolic production. A sign of this is Chto Delat’s remaking of Alexandre Rodchenko’s *Worker’s Club* (1925) in the form of *Activist Club* (2007–ongoing), in which, along the lines of Relational Aesthetics, Chto Delat invited the public to become activists by watching films, debating in the space and reading.

Palace Square 100 Years After: Four Seasons of Zombie (2017) is a performance lecture in the Palace Square in St Petersburg, which evokes the famous storming of the palace by the Bolsheviks. A hundred years after the revolution, the film’s narrator and a group of performers ponder who could be the driving force of change by storming (even symbolically) the institutions of power, if the proletariat has been transformed into an army of zombies. Zombification is nothing other than the organised impoverishment of subjectivities, a life without community. This is why in *The Excluded: In a Moment of Danger* (2014), the artists posit themselves as a community of ‘the excluded’. If zombies are subjectivity de-realised, the status of ‘exclusion’ is a specific form of subjectivation. In this, they seek to explore through dialogue and a performative search for a new

5 Ibid., p.153

6 Commonly organised in France around May 1968, a groupuscule is a small political splinter group not necessarily linked to a party. Groupuscules would gather around specific political causes, such as, for instance, the Vietnam War, the Palestinian revolution and the Chilean struggle.

7 In the sense that May 1968 is emblematic of workers’ refusal to identify and represent themselves politically through class relations, giving way to the pluralisation of political struggles grounded in gender, ethnicity, restitution claims, etc.

8 See Irmgard Emmelhainz, ‘From Third Worldism to Empire: Jean-Luc Godard and the Palestine Question’, *Third Text*, vol.23, no.100, September 2009, pp.649–56.



Chto Delat, *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger*, 2014, four-channel HD video installation, colour, sound, 58min.
© Chto Delat.
Courtesy the artists and KOW, Berlin



language that could adequately express their living and political situation under the perils of the Russian sociopolitical present. The status of exclusion implies the disappearance of political life and their lack of political influence as citizens. They ask: how do we articulate the danger? What are their demands?

In parallel to their experiments of collectivisation as art workers, Chto Delat have also inquired into processes of 'national' collective formations and their current fragmented status. In Russia, protesting alone has become the only possible form of legal protest. *Dream of a*

Protestor (2016), sees a video screen placed on the floor facing three photographs of solitary protestors who are at the entrance of a shopping centre in St Petersburg, discussing with passers-by matters of public concern in Russia. *Performative Practices of Our Time* (2017) is a gallery of images gleaned from the internet that represent the current Russian collective imaginary built upon idiosyncratic, ritualistic performative practices disseminated by social media.⁹ While some images might have awoken collective interest through a shared sensibility and thus become 'viralised', others depict emblematic

9 Images include soldiers in a heart formation for St Valentine's day; an organisation of young people against the consumption of industrialised Russian foods; a patient in the intensive care unit who has run away from the hospital wearing only a sheet in 16 degrees Celsius weather, and then proceeds to go a mall to buy a beer; an image of tomatoes confiscated at the border between Russia and Belarus in 2015 about to be destroyed; the winner of a body art contest; a photo session with Stephan, a bear raised by a Russian family; a playboy bunny doll; children having their picture taken with a monkey; the Olympic flame transfer in Lake Baikal in 2013; and many images documenting Victoria Day celebrations and decorations throughout Russia.



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

events, in the sense that they are eloquent about the Russian state of affairs or elicit indignation. This collection of images attests to the fact that hegemony is dead: meaning has been singularised and a general order is no longer expected, except for when there is a foreign threat, giving leeway to the oppressive social imaginary that characterises current fascist forms of power. *Face to Face with Monument* (2014) is an installation that comprises a study of Soviet Russia's monuments and their obsolescence. It addresses the issue of the collective imaginary, but from the point of view of writing history. *Light House (It Is Getting Darker)* (2017) and *The Memorials for Weak Light* (2017) are installations in which lamps are gathered around a

lighthouse. Each of these installations is devoted to a particular event in recent Russian history, or a hero who died in battle, thereby proposing new forms of monumentality as a way to recall means of struggle.

Arguably, Chto Delat's work is about the *form of politics*, in the sense that they not only explore the signs that hold collectivities together but also examine the current state of affairs of collective fragmentation, which can hold the potential to create new communist arrangements. The *content* of their politics includes 'creative emancipation', and a concern to decode the capitalist reality, to redistribute the commons, to realise emancipatory promises embedded in historical failure and to struggle against alienation and exploitation. In a way, their practice is a political position that materialises not as a statement – because it is currently impossible to express political demands globally – but that expresses itself through experimental language, processes and bodies. Yet in light of the fact that radical thinking and aesthetics have been tamed to become 'progressive' politics for institutions of power worldwide, many questions arise from their work around how to escape the culturalisation of politics, and transform the leisure time of the privileged art consumer/producer into the learning time of the oppressed. Beyond the fact that freedom of expression by creative workers may lead to political exile in the future, is there a way to express solidarity with *real refugees* worldwide *now?* Clearly, some degree of self-reflexivity is lacking (I am not vouching for a return of Institutional Critique, but for an awareness of one's own position in the process of production). Currently, the Soviet legacy in Russia is largely seen as an impediment to market liberalisation. Perhaps that legacy also maintains Chto Delat's practice as insular, proto-global and thus to a non-Russian, somewhat exotic. 'The artists' posit themselves as the illuminati with the mission to enlighten and emancipate the zombies around them. Some of my concerns with their work are their dismissal of labour (especially as it has been rendered precarious and scarce by neoliberal policies) as a category for political organisation, as well as the fact that they oversee the current division of labour into cognitive, reproductive and productive. Most notably, they interpret







the role reproductive labour plays in constructing and building a community. They thus fail to posit economic relations as linked to material forces and human labour, and reveal how social relations and the investment of desire – the ingredients of communities – are actually the raw matter of contemporary absolutist capitalism.

Under current capitalist neoliberal relations, seen from the point of view of the Mexican situation (but I think the Russian situation is very similar, as neoliberal policies came to be implemented also in the 1990s), collectivity is systematically undone by individual concern with physical security and survival. What predominates is a short-term marauding mentality that prompts individuals to take as much as they can, while they can and only for themselves. At the same time, the emergence of an oligarchy erected not only on top of the privatisation infrastructure but on all of the commons, parallels the de-centralisation of authority and collectivities breaking away from it. In this panorama, the market society derives meaning from individual self-creation and the projection of subjective idiosyncrasy onto the new ‘public’ sphere built on the erosion of the social bond.

This evident societal collapse makes

the attraction of collectives grow and posit community as solution. According to the Invisible Committee, however, collectivities constitute merely a temporary escape for those whom the world rejects and who reject the world.¹⁰ Our main challenge goes beyond constructing or maintaining collectivities and concerns how to effectively end capitalism and spread the desire to live in the world differently, exercising politics as an adjective or a substance.

Some of the shortcomings of Chto Delat’s aesthetic and collective experiments become evident in their engagement with the Zapatistas. Last year, they were invited to take part in the Zapatista School in Chiapas and their installation *The New Deadline #17 Summer School of Orientation in Zapatism* (2017) deals with what they learned in Oventik and with their efforts to share their knowledge with students graduating from the School of Engaged Art. The installation comprises of a three-channel video about a plot of land given by ‘an other’ Russia for a Zapatista embassy as a gesture to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. This is juxtaposed with a second screen on which a puppet show starring ‘Durito’ (the beetle who was often Subcomandante Marcos’s interlocutor in his

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¹⁰ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, New York: Semiotext(e), 2017, p.153.

writings)¹¹ explains Zapatismo to two Russian students. On the third screen, we see members of the collective and students from their school in a *dacha*, a Russian cottage, sharing their experiences in Chiapas and testing, through performance, self-organised art politically and socially inspired by the Zapatista logic of indigenous autonomy. At the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, in the context of their solo show 'Chto Delat: Cuando pensamos que teníamos todas las respuestas la vida cambió las preguntas' (When We Thought We Had All the Answers, Life Changed the Questions, 2017–18), the video was shown alongside *Mapa de una orientación lenta sobre el zapatismo* (Slow Orientation Map About Zapatismo), a diagram in which Chto Delat conceptualises political material and social practices (or the life and work) of Zapatista autonomy. This was hung in front of a collection of anonymous paintings by Zapatistas that depicted how they have appropriated the means to negotiate their own historical and current representation.

The Zapatistas seem to represent for Chto Delat an ideal ethics of organisation with the potential to renew collectivities of European ways of building communities. However, they seem to have missed the

colonial background against which the Zapatista autonomy was constituted. Colonialism is why, for the Zapatistas, community is not united through common symbols and myths but through participation and community work – why political decisions are taken not through democratic antagonism but through consensus. Their community is aligned through group identity and has a unanimous political front. The Zapatista's rejection of government power and modern development, however, is an instance of their politics of decolonisation; decolonisation implies doing away with the tenets of modernity, such as the ideal of progress, and the dichotomies of nature/culture, female/male. In a way, Chto Delat's leap forward occurred not from interactions among themselves or experimental aesthetics but from the external force of the Zapatista experience. And Zapatismo is nothing other than the opposite of the rule of the economy (which means hostile relationships) and a process of learning to devise unheard of uses of our time and our lives.

11 Subcomandante Marcos is the battle name of Rafael Guillén, a main ideologue, spokesperson and military leader of the Mexican armed group National Liberation Zapatista Army (EZLN).