

Jakob Schillinger

Suspension of Disbelief: Chto Delat and the Theme Park of Political Struggle*

Not unlike *Jurassic Park* recreated a world that is long past and brought to life creatures that are long extinct, artists, curators and critics often conjure up the communist project after its proclaimed death, in the so-called post-communist situation. *The Urgent Need to Struggle*, an exhibition by Russian group Chto Delat mounted at the ICA in London in 2010, is a case in point.¹ The walls covered with the counterfeits of Lenin, Debord, Mao; the room occupied by a number of booths like the *Activist Club*, a movie theater and seminar space designed after Rodchenko's *Workers Club*; at the center a big red star, functioning as a pedestal for five video works: in its literalness this exhibition brings to the fore a problematic that underpins much of the current activity and self-understanding within the field of art.

As *Jurassic Park*, the movie, demonstrates, it is essential to the functioning of a theme park that the world it (re)creates be dead—that it either no longer exist, or never have. The thrill of encountering a T-Rex is a form of aesthetic pleasure, possible only on condition that I know that the last T-Rex died 65 million years ago, and that what I'm really encountering is only a simulacrum, a replica made of steel and rubber that may function as a canvas for me to project my idea of a T-Rex onto it, but surely won't bite. Once the T-Rex is real, however, the aesthetic pleasure is gone. It is simply incompatible with my real interest to survive. Instead of paying an entrance fee to come visit, I would run away and call the police, who would deploy immediately, and make sure that the T-Rex stays dead. Now, what makes the narrative of *Jurassic Park* exciting, of course, is precisely that the creatures from the past are brought back to life. And so we might ask ourselves whether and how the communist project might be revived, and what role art exhibitions like that of Chto Delat at the ICA play with regard to such an endeavor.

Ever since the decline of the Eastern Bloc and the proclaimed "end of history"—ever since communism was officially testified dead—the question of its potential resuscitation has caused a lot of debate. There have been many attempts to conjure

* This text was originally published in *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine*, No. 26, November 2010. An altered version is published here with kind permission of *Mousse*.

¹ *Chto delat? (What is to be done?) - The Urgent Need to Struggle* at ICA London, 9 September - 24 October 2010.

up the specters of Marx again, while others have assured us that communism has found its final rest. A child of this “post-communist condition,” Chto Delat (formed in 2003) raise the same question again: what is to be done in order to revive the communist project?

The specific form in which they pose this question references a long history. Communism, as has been pointed out, started out as a specter. In what one might call the pre-communist condition, it made its first appearance as a ghost: communism wasn't really present, but it was haunting the present—communism wasn't present as a social order, but as the promise (or threat, depending on one's perspective) of a different social order. This promising threat had as its concrete material base the revolutionary struggle of an organized class. From the beginning of its career, the specter of communism thus divided the world into those trying to exorcise it, and those conjuring it up through organization and revolutionary struggle. While some were horrified by this ghost, others wanted it to acquire a full presence in flesh and blood, and abandon its spectral status. The latter accordingly asked themselves: what is to be done in order to transform the communist specter into a permanent installation? *Chto delat?* (Russian for: “What is to be done?”) was the title of Vladimir Lenin's famous essay, written in 1901, in which he develops the concept of the vanguard party. (Lenin himself took this phrase from Nikolay Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel of the same title.) The vanguard party, consisting of professional revolutionaries recruited from the working class, was conceived to guide the masses beyond mere trade unionism—beyond aiming to merely improve their economic position within the system—to a revolutionary overthrow of the system at large. This “party of the new type” was to be one step ahead of the proletariat, to provide intellectual clarity and the technical know-how of revolutionary practice. At the same time, it was to be only *one* step ahead, so that it would be guiding *their* struggle. The role of the party and its relation to the struggle, as Lenin conceived it, is comparable to that of a staff to its army. The tactics are invented by the soldiers at the front, in the thick of events and under the threat of death. The staff has to recognize the best tactics and generalize them. The party, in other words, mediates between history (the process of class struggle) and the working class (the subject of the historical process); it is the medium through which the empirical working class (the working class-in-itself) becomes aware of its social position and its place in history (becomes the working class-for-itself). The revolutionary experience itself can only be generated through class struggle; and the party delivers the struggle with the necessary technical know-how, which it itself derives from this very struggle. The party can be seen as the

medium that records and processes the struggle's history and feeds it back to it, thus constantly actualizing it in the present.²

Updating the question “What is to be done?” from a pre- to our post-communist situation, Chto Delat also propose an updated answer. Instead of Lenin's vanguard party of professional revolutionaries, Chto Delat propose an avant-garde art collective composed of *professional artists* as the agent of whatever is to be done.

The analogy of artist and revolutionary is quite common within the discourse of contemporary art. In order to understand the structural parallels between their respective functions and how they actually relate, however, we first have to specify what exactly it is that is to be done after the death of communism. The soul of communism is class consciousness; its living body is the revolutionary class, the proletariat. Now, this body admittedly looks rather dead today: while a mass of wage laborers empirically exists, despite all the recent restructuring of work especially in the so-called Western World, what does not seem to exist is a self-consciousness that would constitute this mass of bodies as a class. The working class may exist *an sich* (in-itself) but not *für sich* (for-itself)—a body without a soul: the corpse of communism. Thus the question: is it dead for good, or can it be reanimated? And if so, how?

To *reanimate* a body is to give it back its *anima*, its soul. The question of how to reanimate the corpse of communism is that of how to produce class consciousness. This problem of the production of a revolutionary subjectivity is itself a technical one—the problem of mediation. Chto Delat similarly understand their art as “an instrument for seeing and knowing the world in the totality of its contradictions.”³ Art, as they conceive it, would be integrated with the revolutionary struggle: “The place of art during moments of revolutionary struggle has always been and always will be in the thick of events.” As part of its ideological apparatus, art would be a central element of the struggle—the functional equivalent of, and counterpoint to, the culture industry, that central organ of the production of false consciousness and passive, pacified, atomized individuals. According to this conception, “genuine art is art that de-automates consciousness” and one of its “most vital tasks today is

² This is one way to conceptualize the vanguard party. One could of course question the actual relation between party, historical process and working class at different historical moments. See for example: Slavoj Žižek, “Georg Lukács as the Philosopher of Leninism” in Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (London/New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 158-160.

³ Here and all following citations: Chto Delat, “A Declaration on Politics, Knowledge, and Art,” retrieved in August 2012 from http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=766%3Aa-declaration-on-politics-knowledge-and-art&catid=212%3Aa-declaration&lang=en

unmasking the current system of ideological control and manipulation.” Art thus understood would indeed be a medium for class consciousness.

Even without their many programs and manifestos, Chto Delat’s revolutionary pathos is immediately visible in the works themselves—both in their subject matter and their aesthetics. In terms of subject matter, most of Chto Delat’s works do indeed process the concrete experience of specific social conflicts: their trademark *Songspiels*, for example, examine the process of Perestroika (*Perestroika Songspiel*, 2008), the situation in postwar Belgrade (*Partisan Songspiel*, 2009), and the conflict around plans by Russian energy giant Gazprom to build a monstrous high-rise building in St. Petersburg (*Tower Songspiel*, 2010). This latter work exemplifies the formula that, in slight variations, also structures the others: a group of purposefully amateur-, or “working class”-looking actors enact the conflict in an agitprop fashion. They are divided into two groups defined by class interest. One group, “the people,” itself patently split up into various typified sub-groups (workers, veterans, migrants, petit bourgeois...), make up the majority; above them, on an elevated platform, reside the minority ruling class (leading politicians, CEOs of corporations) and their auxiliaries (artists, secret service, the church). While the ruling class are unified in their interest of preserving their privileges and power, “the people” are hopelessly divided by their individual interests—or by what it is they mistake for those, not recognizing their collective (class) interest as their own best interest. The narrative consists primarily of the unfolding of an analysis of the situation and its contradictions: representatives of the ruling class negotiate and plot amongst each other and take turns speaking to the people assembled down below. Their speeches alternate with different factions of “the people” addressing the viewer, commenting on the situation and their own position in it. The contradictions thus laid out find their resolution in complete stasis, in the final petrification of both groups by an ambiguous third element (red tentacles slowly growing out of a giant telephone, winding around and strangling the bodies of all the actors in the case of the *Tower Songspiel*).

Applying the methodology of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* to present-day social conflicts of the former Eastern Bloc, the *Songspiels* perform precisely the function of mediating experience described above: they record, analyze and generalize lived experience—only this experience is not that of a unitary revolutionary struggle, and in lieu of a struggle to feed it back to, they cater primarily to a specialized art world. The suspicion of a certain disconnect between this revolutionary spirit and its body accordingly haunts Chto Delat’s work. It manifests most clearly in some (mostly earlier) works that reflect back onto their own social role as artists, and the differences between the (pre-)communist and post-communist situations. *Builders* (2004-5), for example, intersperses a view of Viktor Popkov’s socialist-realist painting *The*

Builders of Bratsk (1961) with photographic re-stagings of the same motif, in which the artists assume—in openly tongue-in-cheek fashion—the role of the workers portrayed by Popkov. This slideshow is accompanied by an audio recording of the artists discussing and trying to define their own position and social role against the foil of Popkov and his Builders: “We want to capture the mythological impulse, the point of departure, the impulse that formed socialist realism... An attempt to renew a pathos.” Towards the end, one of the artists raises the decisive question: “There are thousands of workers behind *The Builders of Bratsk*, but who’s behind us?”

This absence of a revolutionary struggle in the post-communist present is compensated for aesthetically. Every single one of Chto Delat’s works cites from the historical canon of artistic positions associated with communist struggle (in both its Soviet and its Western variants): from Rodchenko and the Russian avant-garde to the Socialist realism of a Viktor Popkov, from Brecht to Agitprop to Godard and of course Debord. These aesthetic references are much more prominent than any individual narrative content; they define Chto Delat’s practice as a whole and distinguish it from other (especially from Western) contemporary positions. Chto Delat’s insistence on a continuity between their own practice and a long tradition of artistic positions associated with revolutionary struggle takes the form of an over-confident one-to-one application to present day social conflicts of the aesthetic procedures and formal devices to which they claim to be heirs. Some of their works, such as *2+2 / Practicing Godard* (2009), present a more playful and more reflexive approach that is attentive to the non-equivalence between the original context of the artistic position in question and that of its current evocation. But all of them, even where the differences between the (pre-)communist past and the post-communist present are staged most dramatically, emphasize their continuity. In *Builders*, for example, the response to the central question “Who’s behind us?”—no longer adhering to the principle of a sober analysis of concrete situations but instead making way for pure projection—goes: “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...”

There are thus indeed structural analogies between the function Chto Delat perform within the realm of contemporary art and the function of the vanguard party within the political realm of revolutionary struggle. Just as the party records and processes the lived experience of class struggle, relates present to past experience, and feeds it back to that struggle in the form of an ideological framework and technical know-

how, Chto Delat process their own lived experience as activist-artists vis-à-vis contemporary social conflicts, relate it to art-historical precedents, and feed it back to the art world. But despite this structural analogy, there is an important difference between the two. While both operate with symbols, slogans, and gestures, they each install fundamentally different perspectives onto them; they may use the same signs, but the ways in which viewers relate to them (and thus ultimately their meanings) are fundamentally opposed.

Within the context of political organization and revolutionary struggle as was occurring in Europe and Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, the red star forces any “viewer” to position her- or himself with regard to it: either for or against it. If, in the midst of insurrection, I encounter a bunch sporting the red star, I either join them, or I flee. In this context, the red star marks a difference and demands a decision. This difference is that of a political antagonism; my relation to this difference is based on interest and takes the form of identification/disidentification.

In an art context such as the ICA, the red star also marks a difference, but one that is aesthetic in nature and exerts no force over the viewer: I can simply walk past it and never mind. The aesthetic difference is the expression of an authorial decision, but it doesn’t demand a decision from the viewer. For while within the realm of politics my relation to the red star is defined by interest, within the context of an art exhibition it is defined by disinterestedness. (A case in point is that while Chto Delat’s newspapers have been distributed within an art context many times, the whole print run of issue 19 was confiscated when found outside this context, during a raid of the Saint Petersburg printer.)⁴ In both realms, the red star is a marker of difference, but this difference functions in fundamentally different ways: by identifying with a difference in the political realm, I position myself with respect to an antagonism; as the author (or recipient) of an artistic difference, I position myself on a market structured by innovation. The meaning and function of a sign do not lie within the sign itself but are defined by its context: a market of artistic differences in one case, a political antagonism in the other. Since the precondition for an artistic difference is the disinterested perspective, in order for a difference to circulate on this market it has to be politically neutralized. The circulation of red stars, Soviet iconography and Lenin slogans on the market of artistic differences thus demonstrates that it

⁴ In fact, not all of Chto Delat’s activities are clearly contained within the art world. The group has been engaged in activism, and has for example reported on political events in Russia on a regular basis on their website. The political efficacy of such activities, which would have to be considered within the specific context of contemporary Russia, is not the subject of this text. Instead, it examines the social function and conditions of a particular use of political iconography and rhetoric within the legitimized and institutionalized contemporary art world, which is epitomized by Chto Delat’s 2010 exhibition at the ICA in London.

is possible to assume a position of disinterested pleasure with regard to them. It confirms the death of communism.

Since both art and politics operate with signs and gestures as markers of difference, however, the argument has been made that there are *different kinds* of art that correspond to a political antagonism: on the one hand the culture industry (including a big portion of the commercial art world), on the other the critical art of groups like Chto Delat. It is no surprise that Chto Delat themselves repeat this argument, drawing a sharp distinction between “genuine” art and art “that is produced as a commodity form or a form of entertainment, [...] the conveyor-belt manufacture of counterfeits and narcotics for the enjoyment of a creative class sated with novelty.” Chto Delat themselves, however, make clear that such art would have to be “produced independently of art institutions” and “happen outside institutional practices.” Such “genuine art [...] that de-automates consciousness” clearly cannot be the art that is exhibited in museums and biennials, taught at art schools, and circulated on the market. For such a genuine, revolutionary art would be defined precisely by the fact that it operates with signs in a political *not* an artistic way, that it occurs outside the legitimized realm of art.⁵

In order to maintain their claim to be engaging in genuine, revolutionary art even when exhibiting at major art institutions, Chto Delat then have to project an essential difference onto the institutionalized field of art itself and proclaim that “the [art] system is not homogeneous.” Accordingly, they present “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”—criteria ranging from “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” to “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.”

Chto Delat thus project a difference onto the field of art that could have its real basis only in its alignment with a political force conscious of the antagonism structuring the social body—just like a century ago when the realm of bourgeois art and its institutions was effectively opposed by constructivism, agitprop, and other

⁵ cf. Philipp Kleinmichel, “The Unknown Artist,” in: *Landings*, no.1 (April 2009), pp. 6-15. While Kleinmichel elaborates on the possibility of an ontological notion of art, I am in this text using the term “artistic” in an institutional sense to only refer to activities within the legitimized realm of art.

non-bourgeois artistic projects corresponding to a broader political antagonism. Rather than examining the field of art as a specific sector of society at large and rather than following from an analysis of the material reality of this sector, Chto Delat's criteria are admittedly based on belief and assertions: "We believe that capital is not a totality" and "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 microeconomies of human relationships and creative labor." To see art—even if one calls it "creative labor"—as detached from society, however, is precisely the principle of bourgeois art. Paradoxically, Chto Delat have to reproduce the ultimate ideological operation of bourgeois culture—fetishizing the field of art—in order to then be able to project the functional difference between "dimwits and prostitutes" and critically-minded artists onto it.

Though mere projection, this projected difference does have concrete effects nevertheless: it produces further differentiations for the art market—and it produces the aesthetic pleasure and excitement that the art world holds as a *Jurassic Park* of class struggle. Within the art world, and when supplemented by assertions of the likes cited above, artworks indeed begin to function in ways quite similar to signs situated within a political antagonism. They signify the artist's "position" to be further elaborated in artist statements and discussions; they elicit arguments and lead to the formation of camps and cliques. But the supposedly "political" difference—around which so many debates and arguments are held, camps and cliques formed—is fully contained within the art world, or even only within the "critically"-minded segment of it. Belonging to this segment, one may feel urged to position oneself with regard to this difference, to choose sides; but this very sensation is based on the same suspension of disbelief that is required in order to enjoy a movie or a visit to a theme park. The precondition for this pleasure is the disinterested perspective.

Despite their "revolutionary" content, Chto Delat's readymades of Soviet iconography, Marxist slogans, and the canon of communist art do not reanimate communism; they display its corpse. For whether art functions as a "conveyor-belt manufacture of counterfeits and narcotics for the enjoyment of a creative class sated with novelty" or as a medium for class consciousness depends not only on the literal content of the work, but on whether and how it is linked to a political antagonism structuring the whole social body.

While the detachment from real world interests and thus from the realm of politics is the structuring principle of bourgeois art, there are always limits to what can be accommodated within that realm. These limits vary depending on their historical context. For example: when—commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller to create a mural

on the theme of “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future”—Diego Rivera included a portrait of Vladimir Lenin on the Rockefeller Center’s ground floor wall in 1933, it was immediately draped over and subsequently destroyed. Or to return to the Jurassic Park analogy: the moment I realize there is no more need for suspension of disbelief because the T-Rex is real, my interestedness kicks back in and the aesthetic pleasure is gone. Now, if I make it out of Jurassic Park alive, it is very unlikely that I would find much pleasure in visiting another dinosaur theme park. Only once I am absolutely sure that the threat posed by reanimated Carnivora from the Cretaceous Period is neutralized might I accept dinosaurs as a suitable subject matter for aesthetic contemplation.

In the absence of a driving political antagonism that is concretely and consciously acted out in the political realm, all that the circulation of signifiers of communist revolutionary struggle within the realm of art—however well-meaning—can conceivably achieve is to turn the art world into a simulacrum of politics, a theme park of revolutionary struggle.