

experienced a generational turn which brought artists born in 1960s and 1970s into power – they are professors, deans and so on. In Russia, unfortunately, this generation failed to get into art academies and change them from the inside. There is a growing demand for modern education in the field of contemporary art – education abroad, online materials, and online courses are not for all students. Therefore, we are witnessing the birth of a small number of informal institutions of contemporary arts education. Some of these institutions are initiated by artists – like Institute Baza in Moscow by Anatoly Osmolovsky, other exist for a longer time even with municipality support like Rodchenko school in Moscow.

Yet, in a country of this size, it is ridiculous to even think that the number of these initiatives is not larger than five or six. The School of Engaged Arts is in an even more complex position, because we do not want to teach ‘general’ contemporary art. Instead, we subscribe to the leftist tradition in art, with a strong focus on emancipatory function of art in the society. In order to introduce people into this tradition, we need to develop a very special form of education.

AK & PJ: What is the main difference between art education and education in other fields?

DV: Art education is interesting because no one knows what art is – consequently, it is impossible to know how to teach it. Of course, there are certain conventions. It is easy to teach how to work with different materials, make formal artefacts such as sculpture, develop concepts in media studies and/or visual studies. In the academic world, all these areas are institutionalized. However, it is very hard to teach what it means to be an artist. It is a completely open field, with many different approaches. This is what makes our educational mission so interesting and exciting. We did not want to build a normal, Western art academy – for us, it is too conventional. At the same time, we do want to build a certain structure, an incubator, where people can get ideas about self-development, about politics, about society, and where they can recognize themselves as a singularities which are capable of collective practices within the world of art.

What does that mean in reality? We are coming from a very dissident perspective that art is not a profession – it is something else. Even now, at the age of 51, I can hardly call myself a professional artist. At the one hand, I do not make my living by doing arts. I educate, write, talk, produce, edit... At the other hand, I do contemporary art – so yes, I am an artist. In all these activities, material and immaterial, I am trying to transform reality into something very elusive, what someone else, or indeed myself, can call a piece of art. At the School of Engaged Arts, we experimenting with production of subjectivities which questions all kinds of conventions, including politics. With an important disclaimer: we do not approach this question from some kind of postmodern game of signifiers or similar. Instead, we are deeply imbued into the perspective of radical emancipatory politics.

AK & PJ: Who are your main influences?

DV: We are heavily influenced by the tradition of critical pedagogy, especially Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. We also draw a lot from Bertolt Brecht’s, especially in our concept of learning play. Having said that, I would like to emphasise certain dissident traditions of art practice in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In Russia, we operate in a very hostile public sphere where any kind of critical voice, or voice of dissent, is simply excluded. In places such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom we receive responses such as: “Ah, you are critical: come on, speak!” In Russia, however, the typical response is: “If you don’t like it, go away. Who cares about you and your critique?” Our work provokes very different answers in Russia and in the West, and we learn how to live with them.

AK & PJ: But you do not want to go away...

DV: Exactly! We are not going away! Dissidents always need to choose whether they are staying or leaving. Our cultural spaces and our living spaces are much contested – they are sites of ideological

and political wars – and we see ourselves as front-liners. For us, this position is very important. History teaches us that marginal circles have always managed to influence things. Compared to real politics, science and culture are not about numbers. You can certainly have mega events with billions of people, but who remembers them after two years? Nobody! And some small scene, which maybe consists of five people, or ten people, or twenty people, may in few decades become really important. So the Russian dissident tradition strongly influences our understanding of own ability to change the society. In comparison to Soviet times, these days we have a much bigger space for operation. However, I would say, the spirit has remained more or less the same. We are staying at home, fighting, and building cultural dissent.

AK & PJ: Russia has a very specific tradition of radical education. Typical example is Leo Tolstoy and his school at Yasnaya Polyana...

DV: I think that *Chto Delat* does not directly refer to Tolstoy... These days, actually, I get references to Tolstoy mostly from abroad. He did play an important historical role, but he is also a very controversial and conservative figure. He dropped out from the church, and built own spirituality... Maybe this is what prevents us from recognizing his contributions in the field of education. Speaking of Russian tradition of education, more generally, we need to mention people from radical revolutionary circles such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky. During Soviet times, we had different types of radical pedagogy such as Anton Makarenko's *Pedagogical poem* (see Budraitskis and Zhilyaev, 2015), then there are different circles in late Soviet Union that tried to compensate the lack in official forms of knowledge production...

The Soviet experience corresponds to the work of Paulo Freire in one important respect. It is only top-down approach, at the level of the state, which can eliminate illiteracy in huge countries such as Russia or Brazil... You just need the state to carry out projects on such scale. In order to speak of more subtle forms of knowledge, you first need a qualitative jump in literacy. In Russia, before the Revolution, 80% of population could not read or write. In ten years, Soviet administration established compulsory elementary school education and then middle school education, because it is only with literate people that you can get further on.

The collective experience

AK & PJ: Collectivity is a prominent feature of your work. Why did you decide to form a collective? What are the ideological underpinnings of such decision?

DV: This question is pretty easy – any form of emancipatory politics must come from collective problematization of ways how people can get together. Why should we form a collective? How are we going to structure it? The issue of organisation is central to all human activities. Unfortunately, in the face of many theoretical speculations, there are just a few long-standing collectives in the art world. In the capitalist world, art – as well as many other human activities – is pretty much individualized. The central claim of capitalism is that everyone is unique. Capitalism celebrates uniqueness. So for us, building a collective is an experiment in creating what Antonio Negri calls “the ensemble of singularities” (Negri, 2003). Everyone is singular, and at the same time we can build an ensemble. If you take a metaphor of music, this is a question of how to tune a big orchestra and create coherent music – how to make collective sense of individual voices. Collective work is important because it is very hard to speak on one's own. Who cares what I think?

AK & PJ: Your collective consists of individuals with diverse skills and opinions – and you have been working together for more than a decade. Therefore, we would like to explore some practical consequences of working within a collective. How do you balance the individual and the collective? Also, what are the limits of individual representation in a collective?

DV: In this interview I speak in my name. At the same time, I also represent a certain constituency called Chto Delat which stands behind, stands with, and stands over my words. We are always corresponding on our own and together – it is always this dialectic between one and many. Of course, members of Chto Delat have many tactical disagreements, but we are always brought together by the common strategy. And then, there are certain theoretical positions that we all firmly share. For instance, dialectical way of thinking. There are many contemporary philosophers and artists who do not care for (or even negate) dialectical approaches. In our group, however, we are all dialecticians. And we understand dialectic as a productive method which helps us to create texts, to make art, to do research...

Of course, we often enter into disagreement about current political events. Looking at the current situation in the Ukraine, some people could be pro-Maidan and others could be more skeptical about its outcomes. In general, we manage to settle such issues very quickly, because we have a shared strategic vision for development for Chto Delat. Furthermore, and this seems quite unusual in artistic collectives, our collaboration is based on strong personal friendship. We nurture a pronounced ethics of mutual respect, which is present in all our interactions. Also, I think we are lucky because we were not young when we founded Chto Delat. I was in my late thirties, and other members were both older and younger than me. Whenever I argue with Nikolay, or with Olga, we all understand that we are trying to search for the truth. Maybe my vision is wrong, maybe their visions are wrong, but these conversations are always friendly.

Art always starts with a certain public presentation. Of course, you need to create artwork in the studio before bringing it out to the public, and you can write a poem that nobody knows about – but right now, what defines art, is definitely public presentation. On your own, you have many doubts – whether to make a film or a theatre play, whether to paint or to sculpt... After resolving these doubts, you finally bring your artwork to the public. Sometimes you get things spot on, and that is great. Sometimes your work is less successful, and who cares? The big advantage of working within a collective is that public life of an artwork starts in the stage of production, and you can get critique in all stages of production. The process may be slower and more painful, but the result and process justifies the effort. During the process of collective creation artwork passes through so many negotiations. If you work alone, you do not have that. This kind of work is really traumatic, but it definitely brings another quality. Unfortunately, very few groups manage to sustain it in a long run.

AK & PJ: These days, collective work has become increasingly popular in the world of arts. What do you think of this trend?

DV: This trend exhibits a certain consistency with the popular themes – if you are talking about politics, if you are talking about the relationships between art and science, you just need to work collectively. That is why there is a lot of focus on collectiveness, and such focus is completely legitimate. I always tell our students: Guys, you sit alone in your studios, your chances to get visibility are really low. But if you get out of the studio, and if you start a collective, then you will reach a completely different level of visibility. Unfortunately, many of them are just unable to do that. I recently taught at the Arts Academy in Stockholm. When we started to talk about collective issues, some people directly expressed their concerns: I cannot work in a collective, because I will be traumatized – and I am afraid of that. What can you say then?

AK & PJ: So would you connect collectivity to the so-called Slavonic spirit of Russia and Eastern Europe?

DV: I imagine that you are partially right, but that is obviously not the whole story... For instance, in 2005, the curatorial collective What, How & for Whom (WHW) from Zagreb, Croatia curated

an exhibition called Collective Creativity at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany (E-flux, 2005). It was a great show! Recently, I took the reader that accompanied the exhibition and looked at the list of participants. And you know what? Very few of these collectives survived for more than one project or few years. Capitalist individualism exerts a certain kind of psychological pressure, which makes it very hard to sustain an artistic collective. Within the world of bureaucratic mediation, it is so much easier to work as an individual... This is a big problem of leftist politics.

AK & PJ: All around the world, the Right organizes more effectively than the Left. Why does that happen?

DV: Your question can be answered on many different levels. First, I would say that right wing ideas are typically much less complex than left wing ideas. Second, there is the level of duration – collective programs, strategies and decisions require a lot of time, energy and involvement. Third, leftist politics is so obsessed with truth. Just look at the number of Trotskyist groups around the world – they are all Trotskyists, but they manage to read Trotsky very differently and fight with each other.

Fourth, global neoliberal capitalism demands a type of efficiency which is not inherent to the Left. The Left is mostly against leadership, yet the easiest and the most efficient way of aggregating people is around a single leader. In the elections, right wing is always about one leader. Look at this guy! He is cool, he is strong, he can resolve anything. So the guy kills a bear, takes a topless picture... like Putin. Does he have a program? But why are you asking that? Look at him – he does not need a program. He can solve everything... In the left, we first develop a program – and if everyone will follow this program, things will be fine. Leaders are not important – the main thing is the program. However, people do not buy this approach at all. They do not read. Instead of looking at programs, they prefer to look at leaders. Old school leftism, for instance Lenin and Bolsheviks, had both programs and leaders. But they also lived under very different political and economic circumstances, and they had a level of militancy which is today impossible. In respect to your question, I am quite sceptical – it is indeed very hard to organize the Left.

AK & PJ: We find this interesting, because your school is organised in a quite militant way: you wake up, do physical exercises... How does it work?

DV: Our organisation is far from militant, yet we do insist on a certain discipline and curriculum. For instance, in any progressive art school in Scandinavia, no one is obliged to attend anything and many informal initiatives in education deny the necessity of proper curriculum. We see this in a different way. If you do not participate in our program, we simply understand that you have no interest in them. And if you have no interest to work with us – then we have no interest to work with you. This is very simple... Of course, we do make exceptions – students are not punished for being 5 minutes late. There are many chances to talk things through, and to find the way of working that fits everyone. But the principle is simple – if you attend our school, then you are obliged to participate in the life of our school. This is not militancy – this is discipline.

AK & PJ: There are many levels of discipline... What do you achieve with the physical exercises?

DV: Our exercises are very gentle, even spiritual. They are about touching each other, about breathing, about self-improvisation, about elimination of border between people, about overcoming borders. Our exercises are focused to collective practices. We are not interested in bringing up a lonely genius – for us, it is about how people inside the school can build a community. Before arriving to the School of Engaged Arts, students typically do not know each other. Through body exercises, they can quickly and efficiently overcome individuality and develop a body in between each other. Human body is related to brains and consciousness in very complex ways. And for us, such manifestation of body is not limited to rationality.

This brings us back to the idea of the collective. We build a certain type of organisation which is based on thrust. Not delegation, but thrust. Thrust may look similar to delegation – I thrust you, so I delegate you to do this or that. However, thrust is more informal than delegation, and it reaches much further – it means that I thrust your capacity to do something. For example, we cannot make a play without a director. Who will be the director? We have a person here in this room, Ana, who can actually do the job pretty well. But the whole collective should thrust Ana's capacity to direct our play, before we delegate her to become the director.

AK & PJ: This is a very Freirean approach... personal and collective empowerment based on thrust.

DV: Good to know! Theoretically, our approach is nothing new. However, in the political culture of the Left, it is often not acceptable. According to these approaches, there should be no director – we should all collectively direct. But, sorry guys – it will not work. This is clearly related to the mode of production. There must be someone who will say: camera rolls, camera stops, take done. You cannot say collectively: No, no, don't stop! Please record a bit more... Why did you stop it? That is clearly a one person's decision. The frame is settled – no 1 millimetre to the right or to the left. For us, that is very important. Our collective is pretty small, but it is built on thrust and the will to make things precisely. I will give this interview, someone else will write a text for our catalogue, someone else will direct the next show... Of course, we discuss things. For instance, my answers in this interview are very much based on ideas that we deliberated collectively.

AK & PJ: Alongside Paulo Freire and the tradition of critical pedagogy, your work often refers to anarchist writers such as Peter Kropotkin. What is the relationship of your work to anarchism?

DV: There are many forms of anarchism. Anarchist traditions based on the idea that the State should wither away, and that people should unite through local communities of neighbours and producers, coincide with (and reinforce further) the basic ideas of communism. Therefore, Chto Delat comfortably sits within these traditions. Having said that, we strongly disagree with certain traditions of anarchism which situate human beings and human societies outside of power relations. Instead of trying to understand the nature of power relations, and instead of working towards transforming the existing power relations into something that would be less destructive and oppressive.

AK & PJ: In the Activist Club, you insist on temporary character of your school (Jablonskiene and Vilensky, 2009). Furthermore, an early issue of your newspapers is dedicated to autonomy zones (Chto Delat, 2003). Can we say that your educational practices create temporary autonomous zones in the sense described by Hakim Bey (1985)? What are the main advantages and disadvantages of such approach?

DV: Our educational activities are countercultural; they create zones where many things are possible. In a broader sense, and I find this particularly interesting, art is a temporary phenomenon. Artistic projects are like human lives – they have beginnings, duration, and ends. Of course, if you are an artist, then the duration of your project is your whole life. In this sense everything is temporary – as humans, we are temporary beings, we are born and we die. Temporality is also related to ideas about education. During 2010 and 2011, for instance, we were drifting from one project to another: symposia, seminars, summer schools... And we thought this was great! It allowed us to build some integrity – as a collective, we took responsibility to build a certain lineage between these projects.

These days, I would say that our collective is more concerned with sustainability. This issue can be approached on (at least) two different levels. At the first level, that of social influence, projects that last less than ten years simply do not count. People just do not take them seriously! Therefore, a socially engaged collective should think in middle and long terms. For instance, the School for Engaged Arts in St. Petersburg is now in its third year. If we stopped the school after the first year, it would still be great.

But when we do it for the second time, when we do it for the third time, people take our efforts much more seriously. At the second level, prolonged educational engagement can incredibly grow one's pedagogical capacities. In our school, there is a huge difference between the first and the second generation – we understood our mistakes, we changed many things, and managed to create a much improved educational experience.

AK & PJ: Arguably, your collective work heavily depends on information technologies. Your writings and projects can be found on <http://chtodelat.org>; a lot of your collective work is supported by digital technologies. What is the position of technologies in your work? Do you see technologies as tools, or as something more than tools?

DV: I think, for us, that technologies are mostly tools. We use cameras, we use sound recorders, we use computers, we use free and open source software, but in general – we use technologies as tools. We are not directly concerned with technology, but we do care about methodology. Of course, we understand that methodology develops in relation to technology, but our work is simply not focused to technology.