

**The School of Engaged Art (2013–)  
Dmitry Vilensky, Chto Delat**

**Before we discuss The School of Engaged Art, I'd like to talk about the background of Chto Delat. My understanding is that the collective was founded in 2003 in St Petersburg by a group of artists, critics, philosophers and writers?**

To make a long story short, it was initially a group of people in St Petersburg, and soon after we were joined by comrades from Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod. But Chto Delat also grew out of the protest of local cultural workers against the very suspicious celebrations of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Petersburg, celebrations which really demonstrated the very beginning of ultra-conservative guidelines of Putin politics. We planned an action that comprised the mobilisation of about 40 or 50 people who had a long discussion about how we could imagine the local cultural politics outside of conservative and openly reactionary agenda. Out of this, a group of people emerged who built a bond of our collective. We had actually known each for quite a long time, but this was really the first time we felt we had to reclaim something together.

**Was this your piece *The Re-foundation of Petersburg*? This was a collective protest whereby a small group of you founded what you've called a 'new centre' to the city on the outskirts, which you've described as 'a gesture of exodus', an 'attempt to imagine anew the ground for cultural life'.**

Exactly. I am referring to this protest rally which was rather successful – we even got all arrested and police need about 6 cars to catch all of us. And those who protested were a very heterogeneous group of people: poets, artists, philosophers, art and film scholars. We all understood quite clearly that in a new reality of Putin's Russia there will be no place even for modest critical voices and no place for us as professionals. And we were not all young; there were different generations. Some of us were already known in local cultural scenes, so people took it maybe a little more seriously and our protest got more bitter.

I guess that from the very beginning it was clear for us that we need to reclaim a leftist position – there were different personal grounds for it. First of all growing understanding that the histories of local culture belongs to the left, more clear understanding of your own position as a situation of precarious and exploited worker and the need to collective self-organisation and protecting your own space. And you have to understand that to claim a leftist position in Russia was quite a risky gesture - it means that one seriously marginalizes your professional possibilities which otherwise might exist. There were very few left-liberals and most of liberals who those days control a lot of possibilities of cultural production were bluntly anti-communists. So it was quite different from the western situation. In London, you can start something, and while that might be pretty precarious, in Russia the similar positions are criminalised and silenced. And nowadays things are getting worse every month. Luckily we have learned how to work internationally and canalize some resources into local situation. And we've been going for 12 years. I'd say that nothing before ten years counts! *[laughter]* I'm joking, but at the same time it's true. It's only after a decade that something started to happen for us locally: new generation of professionals who grew following our work, more exhibitions chances, more opportunities to run our own initiatives, despite the growing pressure of Russian politics.

**How did international visibility affect Chto Delat's local situation?**

International reputation helps, but in Russia it's not like Europe, where for example you become famous in the US and then you gain a local reputation. Here it's not so direct. While right now we might be the most exhibited Russian artists, and our philosophers may be the most visible intellectual contemporary thinkers of Russia, in the Russian public sphere it doesn't register so much. Here there's significant resentment not just against leftism, but official ban on whatever

internationally acclaimed. I would even say that international visibility seriously compromise you position – bringing into suspicion of anti-state or criminal activity – all this laws prohibiting foreign agents and the list of unwelcomed organisations. Of course in some narrow professional circles it gets its own effect but very limited too.

At the same time, opening the school has slowly moved towards a critical mass of people inside our community. But I really think that you need to work for ten years on a micro-scale. Like we say in Russia, one drop can turn into stone.

**'Chto Delat' translates as 'What is to be done?', which people often assume to be taken from Lenin, but you've said that Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel of the same name is more important to you. And of course, there's also Paulo Freire and Adriano Nogueira's set of interviews, *What Is to Be Done: Theory and Practice in Popular Education* (1989).**

For us, the main point of reference is not Lenin, but Chernyshevsky, and his biggest novel, *What Is to Be Done?*, which is about self-organisation and education of the self, sustainability of micro-political activists cells, how to survive economically. The book was an education in itself, because it taught so many generations of Russian radical thinkers. That one book built a whole culture of revolutionaries. It's exemplary when you talk about possibilities of radical education. Lenin short pamphlet was also important because in it he pushed the issue of the newspaper as a collective organizer. And this was exactly our case because our collective had started from the publication of newspaper. And looks like you right – the question itself became an important signifier of left position – like in Freire dialogues or in Godard manifesto on “British Sounds” and many other examples. Frankly to say I was deeply inspired by watching German Arte tv documentary on Tony Negri around 2001 which was also named “Was tun” and I started to think that we in Russia should actualize this debate from our side and histories.

**You once remarked, in conversation with Gerard Raunig, that 'Chto Delat is constructed around issues of production of knowledge in the form of a self-organised educational process'. Many of your projects are united by an interest in the histories and current manifestations of self-organisation and self-education. How does The School of Engaged Art connect to your broader activities that you have described?**

The school is an organic development of many educational initiatives which we have started. We did a lot local temporary initiatives, which was completely unsustainable because it was done with zero budget and absence of infrastructure. It was many of them – regular so-called seminars-commune (for 2 days or bit longer), learning plays, summer schools, May congress of creative workers, evening school of critical thinking and so on. All this pedagogical experiences culminates in our school. We got lucky because we managed to get funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Moscow for the first two years. This was in 2013, but there were long negotiations leading up to that point. That funding allowed us to run activities in a more sustainable way. We found a place, we got a community of great educators, manage to pay travel grants for the students – it's very important that people can come to St Petersburg and get accommodation and food. But it's a very modest level of activity.

**How many participants are we talking?**

It's an open call and we accept about 30 people and some numbers of free-attendants. The school actually has quite a conventional structure based on one week intensive modules . Because most of our participants have several jobs, we gather for one week every month. Between those sessions there's a lot of homework and reading. Twice a year, once in the winter and once in the summer, we have two-weeks double sessions and a project in a form of exhibition or the performance – or both.

In terms of the curriculum, certain courses run throughout the year. We believe that young participants should study the history of modernist art, so we have a course led by Andrey Fomenko. We also have a loose course on the history of aesthetics, from Artemy Magun. A very important

course, which is quite unique, is on performing and body practices led by Nina Gasteva, and then Alexander Skidan teaches on critical and poetical writing, where we look at everything from Walter Benjamin to the legacy of the Russian avant-garde. We also have a course called 'English for Artists', because Russian people mostly don't speak English. So we read some texts together in English, and participants start to realise that *an artist who doesn't speak English is no artist*, as Mladen Stilinovic told us.

We call it a school, but maybe it's more like a crash-course in leftist approach to the arts and pedagogy. It's not about producing professional artists, it's about creating a community who become open to new experiences and practices.

### **And where is this community of participants coming from?**

Different milieus – a lot of activists, people from literature scene and performance, dance, sociologist – we experiment with a very open subjectivity of contemporary artist and what engagement in art could mean. For us, most important is their motivation letter. As a double of when Beuys said 'Everyone is an artist'; right now it's, 'Everyone is a *capitalist* artist, producing conceptual art on Facebook or whatever...' We live in a time when everyone is a producer of art and here I totally agree with Boris Groys. So we need a bit to clean up the situation – how certain artistic production manages to find its public – how we constitute art as a public activity which is aimed in changing the status quo.

At the same time, it's very interesting to understand what kind of subjectivity we can really imagine into that old-fashioned idea of 'artist' . What kind of professional skills does one need? And what kind of ways of thinking? What does it mean to be contemporary? Because Russian society was and still is much more conservative and archaic than the West, here we can create a very interesting situation and experiment from a local perspective which is quite unique.

In the West, it's another problem, where whatever goes. I am guest teacher at many academies in the West and I can completely understand that students are lost; they don't feel an urgency to be an artist, because they're lost within the enormous opportunities to do whatever. In Russia, the situation is much clearer. It's an ideological fight, where the attempt to establish something contemporary clashes with conservative positions.

### **Where is the school hosted?**

In St Petersburg, but the first year was very nomadic. We started in one trendy creative cluster where people transform industrial building into some kind of studios and show places, so we rented a space quite cheaply. Then this space has collapsed, and we moved to very special location of unique anti-fa bar, which closed too soon but now (from September 2015) we are very proud that we have managed to establish our new space project – Rosa's House of Culture. The Rosa's House of Culture is about constructing counter-public at the moment of closure of publicness. This project is questioning the legacy of Soviet tradition of Houses of Culture which was a well-spread state supported infrastructure for leisure and educational activities of people in Soviet Union. What can we learn from that experiences and how can we imagine a new model of House of Culture in composing a counter-public sphere? How this places could “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and/or as training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Nancy Fraser).

The core of the activities of our “D.K. Rosy” are different initiatives which we welcome from different field of activism and alternative educational initiatives such as an grass roots unions of IT workers, the union structure of educational workers (профсоюз «Учитель»), some self-organized feminist theater groups, sewing educational co-operative “Shvemy” and our School of Engaged Art

D.K. Rosy has started its activity with the support and in the framework of the international project Draft (<http://www.draftprojects.info/home.html>) – initiated by Institute for Contemporary Art Research IFCAR Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK

### **And you're just about to start a summer school in Berlin?**

Yes, though we've been doing the summer school for a long time, and they've been quite different. Sometimes we've had a special guest. For example in 2013, we had a whole five-day summer school in Moscow **at the Center for Contemporary art** and in St Petersburg **at the European University** with Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar - there were seminars, lectures, picnics. What we're doing in Berlin is again supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, whose headquarters are there. We want to test our educational methodology which we have learned in our local situation with international participants mostly from ex-socialist countries, from Yugoslavia to the Baltic republics.

### **Why the focus on participants from former Soviet states?**

It's not closed, but at the same time it's a little like positive discrimination! *[laughter]* For us, it's a very special task to work against anti-leftist resentment in these countries. A new generation of artists and cultural workers should know how to resist the anti-communist hysteria in the Eastern Europe. For us, it's really important that these people can share their experiences and their approaches to art. But the school is quite well balanced right now. We have people from Greece, Spain, the UK, while the participants from Eastern Europe have a different range of backgrounds.

The question for the summer school in Berlin is 'What is socialist art today?' We take as a point of departure Maxim Gorky's 'Declaration of Socialist Realism', from the 1932 General Assembly of Soviet Writers, a really interesting document that is almost totally unknown and see if there is something to rescue there. I am quite sure that we can learn a lot from this attempt to reformulate such things as what peopleness means today? What about party mindness? What to do with realism and is it fruitful to draw a line of differentiations between realist and modernist devices? Who are the new people today and what art can do for their formation? – there are many important issues which opens up through this weird approach.

### **Many of your participants were born after 1989. You have asked prospective participants to write a short essay giving an example of what socialist art is today. So what does 'socialist art' mean for them today?**

Hard to generalize but it is mostly about some practices in which they think that cultural production is not subjugated to the logic of capital. Of course they somehow admit that there is no outside of capital but at the same time they look for some practices which subvert the power in this or that way.

### **I'm interested to know more about the state of art schools of Russia.**

It's very helpless. We have a system of Russian art academies, which are aggressively conservative. For example, in terms of painting, the whole education doesn't go any further than – in the best cases – post-impressionism. Russian art academies are not academies at all. They're something completely different. In Russian society right now, there is no demand for critical or analytical art. There are only the demands of oligarchs, state and churches, who want icons painting and official portraits. Most people who study in the academies make their living by copying pictures; the main of production for that is China, but Russia is now the second.

There is only really one municipally supported option for education in contemporary art in Russia, which is Rodchenko School in Moscow. They sometimes produce very good young artists, but they have more or less traditional approach to education process and still not acknowledged as BA.

There are also a few initiatives run by artists, which are very informal. For example, there is

Institute Baza, run by Anatoly Osmolovsky, there is the Institute for the Problems of Contemporary Art, which is run by Stansilav Shuripa – both are most interesting and the only initiatives in the field of contemporary art. While I sometimes don't agree with the aesthetic or political views of their founders, I have big respect that people really invest in these situations. Unfortunately, though, that's really it for the whole country.

**You've written that, 'We are rather sceptical about the “academicization” of art education taking place in Western institutions of higher learning (perhaps because we – the artist-initiators of the school – never when through the mill of an academic education).'**

I talk once with Claire Bishop, who said to me, 'Dmitry, you can't be about “de-schooling” because you were never properly schooled!' And it's true! I'm more interested in how to make a proper school in an emancipatory way than in *de*-schooling of western professionals who are obviously over-disciplined. And this is a central issue – of course there is obvious “academic turn” in art because art is losing its social legitimation (that's why there is a desperate demand for any socially relevant projects). The discourse of *de*-schooling also becomes a key professionalised discipline of progressive Western academy which allows to keep the possibilities of developing certain discipline outside of stultifying routine of professional conventions. But there is a huge world outside the western academy standards which is not yet colonized in a proper post-colonial way. And I think that what is at stake today with all this educational/academic turns is how we are able to get rid of subjugating to the western normalisation of abnormal. Of course being located in fucked up reality of Putin's Russia where nothing is normal this could be also a tricky game but we should carry it on. And I keep believing that emancipatory schooling could be one of the alternative where the affluent world could join the poor countries which did not follow the normalities of western modernity.

**How did The School of Engaged Art's collaboration with the Art School in Kyiv come about?**

We did it in a very dangerous moment, when Russia started the war with Ukraine and Crimea was annexed. At our school were a several participants are Ukrainian, so we started to think about what we could do. Chto Delat withdrew from the participation in Manifesta as a protest against the war and we thought that we need to do something which could legitimize our political position. We settled on a simple but very important gesture: let's meet between two schools, ours in St. Petersburg and one educational initiative of our artist friends and colleagues who run it in Kyiv (run by Lada Nakonechna). We managed to raise some funds (mostly from Rosa Luxemburg Foundation) and invite 23 people from Ukraine to Petersburg. I guess it was the most risky adventure I have ever made in my life. I was quite sure that inside of four days which we spent together in St Petersburg police would raid us at any moment as a secret gathering of Maidan supporters but luckily they had something else to do. That was very important meeting for both sides and I believed that we could develop this desperate initiative further in Ukraine but there weren't the resources, and then I think in a process of development of local situation in Ukraine there were less and less interest to communicate with Russians in any form. And this course in contemporary art Kiev lost its existence soon.

**What are your thoughts about large-scale exhibitions and biennials, and their capacity to engage adequately with education? I'm thinking about Manifesta 6 or about Documenta 12, to which you contributed a 'self-education' project to the magazines initiative, through to this year's Venice Biennale, which is hosting the Creative Time Summit which is themed around 'The Curriculum'. You've written that, 'radical thinking and aesthetics are tamed into the “progressive” politics of the institutions of power'.**

In general I would say that it could have a positive effect on professional communities which are involved. There are two types of public at any biennial: the general public, which probably mostly doesn't even know that the Creative Time Summit is happening, in the same way that 99% of the

people who visited Documenta 12 would never have heard about the Journal of Journals. But then there is a professional world, which engages completely differently. But a lot of these education projects don't function because they're essentially top-down initiatives which conceived by tired curators who rarely have enough time to proper research anything and have no time to build any relations among participants. For example, Documenta's journal of journals project completely collapsed even before it had started. But we could use this experience in rather fruitful way by building our own queer relations inside the prepared frame. The same with Summit – it help one to reflect a certain situations in the world which one could hardly get otherwise and then you can go your way. It literally OK for net-working if you care about it but hardly can run into more substantial things. I really believe that something should be cooked very slowly, from the bottom to the top. We need a serious projects with a time span double as long as Documenta - but who cares about it and can afford it?

### **And maybe that's something that the biennial form isn't so adapted to sustaining?**

Most of biennials are kind of a transient zone which usually fails to have a sustainable effect on a local level. Sometimes they try their best but as I said there is some structural problem – they are too much depending on local cultural politics which even in progressive version can hardly care about sustainability of some organic forms of local cultural work. I mean here “organic” in a way Gramsci was talking about “organic intellectuals”. But there is another format of sustainability – the displaced community of cultural workers who push into commissions by the confused logic of turbo capital, perverse tourist marketing and city branding – which usually does not work well but this waste of small money (up to 2-3 millions) allow the progressive international community reproduce itself with great speed. I believe that one can dig some sense out of it if use it in a proper way and not follow this logic.

### **Speaking of Manifesta, what were your plans for the St Petersburg edition in 2014, before you withdrew?**

We had agreed to exhibit a very important film “Tower Songspiel” and installation which we did about the resistance to the construction of the Gazprom Tower in St Petersburg in 2010. But after the annexation of Crimea, and when the war escalated in the east Ukraine, there was a really bad situation. We publicly addressed Kasper König that in a new political situation we need to rethink the whole project and hoped on the dialogue but his answer left no chances for any discussion and was pretty obvious that there was a censorship for what we plan to make. Given this situation, we decided that we couldn't participate in this senseless show.

But at this moment, Manifesta's curator of public programmes, Joanna Warsza, wanted our School to participate in the public programme. For me and our tutors, this was quite controversial. On the one hand, we'd decided not to collaborate with the grand exhibition at the Hermitage. But on the other, we saw this invitation as a possibility for our school. The constituency of the school is very intriguing and it is different from constituency of our collective. Who is making decisions, how are they realized and who takes responsibility? We saw that our students did not want to boycott the public programme and it could be wrong from our side to ban them from the participation. So at the end we developed together a conceptual protocol: we had refused to use a “fake” space of apartment show provided by Manifesta and invited public to come to our place where student final exhibition and series of discussions took place in an old fashioned anti-fascist basement bar. So anyone who wanted to come to meet our school were redirected to another address. Also we use a Manifesta opening situation for realising our school performance “Atlas is tired” – it was done illegally, breaking heaps of regulations and laws on manifestation in public space and I guess that we calculated it right because big amount of public came to the performance protected us from being arrested.

### **Where do you see the interesting spaces for self-organised education or platforms for critical**

## **pedagogy?**

Hard to say now. Very strange but not so many initiatives – of course Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, or – Open School East in London, but there is an interesting trend that most of artist and artistic institutions are organising some educational platforms which do not address art or artist. Instead they focus on this or that unprivileged group of people trying to empower them through different temporary self-organised courses in whatever useful for them.

May be in the West the whole issue of artistic education is completely colonised by the academy which are pretty open to critical pedagogy and in the East there is no resources for making it happen?

**To follow on from that, to talk about possibilities, where do you see the school as being a few years from now? What happens next?**

Actually we have a serious potential to grow but I hardly want to transform our informal initiative into proper certified academy. We need to keep its confidential nature but at the same time secure its proper sustainability and provide our students better opportunity for realising their work. So we need a bigger space, infrastructure and budget but it is hardly imaginable in a current political and economic situation but we definitely try to work in this direction.

Also on the content level I think we need more time for developing experiments with our methodologies and see how they work. Right now it is too quick and too improvised but I hope that we gain the best out of it.