

Schooling at home and abroad

or: Winter Notes on Summer Impressions

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I visited the “School of Engaged Art”, which is, as Chto Delat, based in Saint Petersburg, at the occasion of a Summer School “abroad”.<sup>i</sup> This summer school took place in the beginning of August 2015 in the publishing house of the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, which is quite an important monument to the architectonic, and up to a certain degree, also to the cultural legacy of the German Democratic Republic. Nowadays the building on Franz-Mehring-Platz, erected in 1969-1974 according to plans of Eberhard Just and Edgar Hofmann, accommodates *Neues Deutschland*, the MEW<sup>ii</sup>-publisher Karl-Dietz-Verlag, and, for the time being, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation, one of the party-affiliated registered societies in Germany. RLS, which is affiliated with the party *Die Linke*, has, for several years, focused on the potentials of the intersection of political education and art in Eastern European Post-Communist societies, with Chto Delat being an obvious choice for collaboration from the start. Still, the contrast between the office atmosphere in the building and the flock of about thirty artists, most of whom were under thirty, was stark. When I arrived, the students, left to themselves by their teachers, were preparing the closing presentations for the following day in several groups. In the case of faces unknown to me, I was trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to distinguish the provenience of the people by listening to the accent in their English pronunciation. A list, given to me later, showed that most of them had come from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, some of course based in Berlin. Only a handful of artists were from Western Europe. This is a good thing – that an artist group from Russia can use Berlin, this cultural hub for Eastern Europe, to deterritorialize the art world this way. For a few of the artists the covering of living and travelling expenses by RLS made it possible to visit Berlin for the first time (the more established artists in the field being well-travelled, of course). Using the nostalgic ever-running paternoster of Franz-Mehring-Platz 1, these most heterogeneous people floated freely through the building, changing between the conference room, assigned to the school, and the courtyard, where, sitting in the shade, one could most easily bear the exceptional summer heat. Later, while the young people were working on their performances together with their teachers, the go-to-person from RLS delivered a message from some of the office workers: that they were welcome guests, but were not supposed to litter in the courtyard. The message was received quietly, and defiantly (as undeserved). Alas, some minor tensions were to be expected. Vilensky had fought hard for the school to take place at Franz-Mehring-Platz 1, the RLS originally wanted to assign a different locale. The event, according to Chto Delat’s wishes, was to have symbolic party-affiliation, to *Die Linke* via RLS. The founding question of Chto Delat – what

is the socialist art today? – was addressed at this summer school by taking a fresh look at the principles of Socialist Realism; and one of those, “partiinost” was used in the school as “party-mindedness”.

This ostentatious willingness, not only to take RLS’s money with a warm handshake, but to assert a meaningful relation between ‘communist’ experimentation in art and a force within Germany’s system of representative democracy, might look a little strange to Western eyes. It makes more sense, however, when bringing to mind that within Russia, with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation being for one nothing short of a nationalist party, and secondly an integral element to Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’, no institution comparable to RLS (with comparable means) exists. Similarly the ambition of a circle of artists and academics to establish a ‘school’ – not merely a colloquium – might nowadays seem to be a thing of the past in the West, but in the Russian context it’s much more appropriate. While the reading of (supposedly leftist) post-Marxist thinkers like Paul Virilio, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, is a common-place in Western art schools, and transgressions of the institution of art beyond recognition are encouraged sure enough, Russian academies of art are very traditionalist and tend to merely pass on craftsmanship – a shortcoming, which will very likely aggravate as the war-leading Russian society will be further brought into line ideologically. Another indication of this shortcoming is, that Chto Delat is not the first artistic circle trying to build an institution for the education of artists. Initiated by one of the internationally most successful Russian artists, former Moscow Actionist Anatoly Osmolovsky, the Moscow institute “Baza” has since 2011 developed a four-semester curriculum for the training of artists and art critics, decisively focusing on the history of the avant-garde and its meaning for contemporary artistic and curatorial practice. Education in Baza-institute is directed much more towards acquiring professional skills for the global art world and market, Osmolovsky’s position furthers an autonomous, yet critical vision of art. (If this vision, in the present political situation, is the most realist, or, on the opposite, all-to optimistic, would be another matter of discussion). It might be interesting to note in our context that in 1996, during his phase as an actionist, Osmolovskii created a “Situation for PDS” in Berlin’s Bethanien. Entering the left Cultural Center in Kreuzberg, the visitor was confronted with the choice to either go to a regular party meeting of the Party for Democratic Socialism – the PDS being the heir of GDR’s state party, the SED, later merging into *Die Linke* – or to go to the gallery, where Osmolovskii’s poster art was displayed and the repetitive blasting of the Sonic Youth song “Youth against fascism” prevented from hearing the political discussion.<sup>iii</sup>

If the institutional stability of the Baza-institute is yet to be achieved by the “School of Engaged Art”, recent history shows that, given the repressive cultural climate, this might prove very difficult in the case of an ostentatious politically-emancipatory project like this. Beginning in 2013, the School of Engaged Art, the curriculum of which relies on a modular structure with short and intensive periods of learning and working together, has unfolded an impressive level of creative activity. The students have performed a surrealist ‘learning play’,<sup>iv</sup> called “Bystree! Ostree! Appetitnee!” (Faster! Hotter! Ever more yummy!) in January of 2014 in the Moscow Art Space Fabrika. This ‘Olympiad of Foodstuff in the Restaurant “Nevrossija”’<sup>v</sup> satirically criticized the spreading of a hypocritical and masochist patriotism at odds with the personal experience of ever worsening

living conditions. The first student exhibition realized at the same time was ambitiously dedicated to the subject of violence. For the graduation show the students carried out another long collective performance, “Atlas is tired”, at the Entrance of the State Hermitage Museum and later some graduates of School were involved in the production of the Chto Delat’s four-channel-video-installation “The Excluded: At a moment of danger”, which is in my mind the best filmic work, the collective has ever put forward. In the meantime several art groups and co-operatives had evolved, among them a “Laboratory for the research of feminist pornography” – which must seem quite courageous, given the current crackdown on ‘non-traditionalist’ sexual life forms in Russia. Another collective, a seamstress’ coop, obviously has taken up the thread, which the Factory of Found Clothes had dropped, as the duo dissolved (Olga “Tsaplya” Yegorova and Natalya “Glyuklya” Pershina-Yakimanskaya are both members of Chto Delat). All of this activity circled around the newly established Dom kul’tury Rozy (Rosa’s House of Culture). DKR rented space at Artmuza, a big complex of creative workrooms, galleries and various other cultural institutions on Vasilyevsky Island. Unfortunately Artmuza showed hardly any resistance when hearing of the FSB’s wishes. Preliminary Rosa has not yet been thrown into the channel, but she has been kicked out onto the street. Though she has found a new place of lodging quickly, her situation must seem precarious, given the political situation.

Reading the statements of Chto Delat about education, I had the impression that they have realistic notions of it and that they grapple with philosophical ideas (those of Jacques Rancière in particular), according to which radical equality between teacher and pupil are presupposed<sup>vi</sup>. Rightly so, because if this was truly the case, society would not be in need of teaching at all. Like Chto Delat, I too think that teaching is inevitably linked to the establishing of rules of the game by an ‘authority’. Furthermore, my own teaching experience has shown me clearly enough, that students don’t want to be my equals, but that they want guidance, so they can enhance their capabilities. Establishing a framework for this, which takes the needs and present-time capabilities of the students into account, can actually be an almost terrifying responsibility, and if you don’t take up this responsibility, you are either a “stultifying taskmaster”<sup>vii</sup> or indeed teaching ‘to your equals’ (leaving others behind, who are ‘not as equal’).

Regarding the closing performances of the Berlin Summer School on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August in front of a quite big audience, I had the impression (based on my limited insight into the school), that more guidance – not less, as some participants would have had it – would have been needed. The students had had a full time table with several guest lectures (David Riff, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, Boris Buden, Konstanze Schmitt and Marina Naprushkina) as well as presentations of their own work among themselves. I can recognize the importance of an opening of the event to the public, especially towards the interested people within the supporting institution of RLS. However, letting the students, who had split into groups according to certain rather abstract themes, develop just ‘anything, they wanted’ for the finale, might have been a misleading or inconsequential approach. Even if a group may be chosen according ‘to your own interest’, this format can be extremely limiting, because individuals are dissected from their own identity (in this case: the

way they work as artist, with whom, their driving desire, etc.). The result is that a big number of promising artists with very different experiences – among whom ‘talents’ are also unequally distributed – ‘are made equals’ in an alienated experience, where they produce something which has the feel of a performance at a high school prom. I am quite sure, that Chto Delat will agree that the development of a collective sensuality actually needs a lot more time, so why put people through something like this at all?

As to the question about the meaning of Socialist realism for contemporary engaged art, I have to say, I am quite skeptical, and I was not surprised that only one of the groups produced a positive project – about “Feminist Realism” (the presentation of which was also very interesting because there were performative elements highlighting the materiality of ‘drawing up’ a manifesto). Anti-totalitarian sentiment prevailed, the students understandably did not know, what to do with “Socialist realism”.

So why then Socialist Realism? Did it not propose a theory of transformation – the pouring of the raw passion of the pupil (‘stikhinost’) into the ideological vessel of the mentor – which the pedagogic experiments of Chto Delat are diametrically opposed to? Of course you can break down Socialist Realism into certain abstract principles and try to fill them anew, but what’s the need to do such? As the Russian Formalist Jury Tynyanov once said, “one must not judge a bullet by its color, taste and smell. It should be judged according to its dynamic”<sup>viii</sup>. First of all, there is no dialectical picture here – the post-revolutionary situation of Russia is certainly not echoed in the present historical moment. Teaming up with Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is certainly not comparable to the avant-garde’s (mostly tragic) commitment to a party which it believed to embody the historical agent which would accomplish communism as history’s goal. Secondly I have to agree with a dusty document from the Cold-War-Era, Andrei Sinyavsky’s *What is Socialist Realism?*<sup>ix</sup> in that Socialist Realism *never existed*, but only Socialist Classicism, insofar as teleological thinking and true realism are irreconcilable. The dynamic of the bullet of Socialist Realism was, what finished off the Russian avant-garde, but the avant-garde’s quest for a collective sensuality (as proposed by Walter Benjamin) opposed to the ritual value of propaganda- (and commercial) aesthetics remains today as the only viable form of ‘realism’. Yes, and it may be, that *this* ‘realism’ is even ‘socialist’ somehow.

Matthias Meindl is research assistant at the Slavic Department of Zurich University, Switzerland. His PhD-thesis on political positions and strategies in art and literature in Post-Perestroika-Russia will be published next year.

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<sup>i</sup> A slightly longer version of this text has appeared at *Art Margins*,

<sup>ii</sup> MEW = Marx-Engels-Werke: the popular ‘blue edition’ of the works of Marx and Engels in German.

<sup>iii</sup> See. “Situaciia za PDS”, at: *Anatoly Osmolovsky Studio*, [http://osmopolis.com/situaciya\\_dlya\\_pds](http://osmopolis.com/situaciya_dlya_pds)

<sup>iv</sup> Chto delat’s use of the term “learning play”, meaning the Brechtian “Lehrstück”, is rather (counter-)intuitive, but this is not the place to get into that.

<sup>v</sup> This, of course, is a play of words with “nevroz” (“neurosis”) and Rossiya (Russia).

<sup>vi</sup> C. “What does the teacher learn? The tutors’ experience in the Chto delat School of Engaged Art, 2015”, in: *A Chto Delat Reader on Performative Education*, [9].

<sup>vii</sup> Ibidem.

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<sup>viii</sup> Jurij Tynjanov: "Literaturnyj fakt", in: Juri Striedter: *Texte der russischen Formalisten. Bd. 1. Texte zur allgemeinen Literaturtheorie und zur Theorie der Prosa*, München: Fink, 1969, p. 402 f: „Нельзя судить пулю по цвету, вкусу, запаху. Она судима с точки зрения ее динамики“).

<sup>ix</sup> Abram Tertz: *On Socialist Realism*, NY: Pantheon Books 1960.