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On Practice and Critique

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AB: It seems to me that we are coming from similar positions. We both use a critical vantage as our professional instrument to make new forms of knowledge. But it is impossible to use a critique as a professional resource on an individual basis, at least not for any extended period of time. Criticism only works when it belongs to a collective. This becomes clear when you look at the group Chto delat, which unites artists, poets, and philosophers, all of whom think critically, but did not have any position in common before the group came together. The same thing happened with a seminar we recently organized for intellectually curious sociology students at the Moscow State University. It started a laboratory to help students grasp critical theories of society, but, as time went by, it demanded a more and more complicated and consolidated organization. So, several years ago, I turned this seminar into a research group called NORI (the Russian abbreviation for Unofficial Association of Working Researchers). Its participants don't just discuss texts but carry out research, using a common critical method. Bringing our work into a more practical and collective regime took away our fear of action, so that NORI joined the struggle against intellectual corruption at the sociological faculty of Moscow State University as part of the student protest initiative OD group[1]. In reality, our new willingness to put up a fight is hardly surprising: intellectual ambition + the presence of a more experienced mediator and organizer + regular meetings and

exchanges + the forming of a common critical competency a collective organization of the method of working. These principles have proven very useful to our work. In how far are they different from what you are dealing with in your practices with Chto delat?

DV: Most importantly, I see our strategy as making spaces where the group can carry out its work, spaces that are largely independent from the system, that attempt to elude the control of institutions and the market. Once you capture this position, it becomes a lot easier to be tough in negotiations. When you talk to institutions, you can demand dignified working conditions and better pay. This is actually where politics begin, as a positioning of forces and a process of negotiation that replaces military action (Foucault has a brilliant description of this somewhere.) In other words, it's important to invent gestures that both reject the traditional institutional situation of dominance and subalternity, and that make a call for solidarity with people who are voicing similar demands; we need to voice our demands together to give them more weight. Basically, we are constantly saying something like “You don’t want to show our work or print our texts? No problem, we will find the necessary resources and do it ourselves by working with different organizations. And you know what? The result will actually be better and will have a much greater resonance, and at some point, no matter how much you hate what we are doing, you won’t be able to ignore us...”
I totally agree with you that it is impossible to develop critical knowledge alone. It’s a collective matter, all the more because critical knowledge needs to have one fundamental quality: it needs to appeal to the truth. And this is already a political question, and, of course, connected to collective forms of finding and taking a position in public space. Without entering into a more detailed discussion of what this truth is, and where we see the possibilities

for its articulation, we should just note that only a collective, even if it is small, has the recognized right (and this is what makes it dangerous) to get up and say: "What's going here is bullshit! It's a bunch of lies!" Even if it is clearly in a minority, a collective still has this right to demand a change, both on the level of the situation's interpretation and on the level of action. In other words, a collective is capable of producing knowledge of another order of things. This knowledge may not always express the absolute truth, but it can be "the pincers of Truth", as Alain Badiou puts it. And what is your definition of criticism? In how far is your notion of critique as a basic procedure connected to such instruments?

AB: I'm a sociologist; so the only definition of critique that doesn't make me suspicious (i.e. a critique with an emancipatory effect) is a precise description of the conditions of inequality and the lack of freedom, and how this works in thought and action. If the description is accurate enough, the realization of its necessities has an emancipatory effect. The most famous historical example of such a critique is the Marxist analysis of exploitation, which has proven itself not only in "theory," but as an accurate practical description of how labor is confined. This knowledge was reworked collectively, and then served as the basis for organized resistance to inequality, such as that offered up by socialist and anarcho-syndicalist workers movements, or more recently, consolidations of the unemployed and disenfranchised. More local examples of this critique would be the sociological research made in the 1950s-80s in France and the USA into the mechanisms of power and recognition. They make it more clear how and why professional, social, and gender interactions always have winners and losers. So, for example, Bourdieu's sociological research is first and foremost an empirical critique of the social conditions of inequality. This knowledge loads the losers with a twofold burden: in this sense,

truth, if it has been established critically, cannot help but become a problem for everyone. But it is only by making such painful experiences that the losers can discover the potential of freedom.

The question is really: which kind of critique could disrupt the general perceptions in today's Russian system of accountability characterized by servility in the face of superiors, dominance of men over women, an ethos of homogeneity, and a deep disdain for politics. All of these things are not just imaginary figures but real social habits...

DV: Also you have to realize that most resources have been taken over by people who don't give a damn about art, culture, history, or knowledge, not to mention any kind of critical position. Universities are being closed[2], and curators from the United Russia Party are being introduced into institutions of higher education to keep an eye on the curriculum. Moreover, the economization of culture in Russia differs fundamentally from that in Western Europe, where it is actually motivated by the corporate optimization of expenditures and revenues. But in Russia, it's all about the rather trivial personal interests of bureaucrats who have grown fat on stolen money. They don't care about improving the actual quality of culture, or building more effective models for education. The most important thing is to gobble up as much as possible here and now, and to boast about it later on. Entire museum departments, like the Department of Contemporary Art at the Russian Museum in Petersburg, are becoming service centers to fulfill this representative demand. The Hermitage has made some strange deal with the Guggenheim, and is already propagating the globalist-glamorous attitude to contemporary culture, promoting actions by Saatchi-artists[3] or other big art dealers who might be interested in converting the Hermitage's symbolic capital into real revenue. They should be ashamed of themselves, but here

in Petersburg, all of this is presented as the height of contemporary culture!

AB: But still, to see these failures clearly, you have to leave the narrow focus of your domestic truth, and head out to a broader, more saturated horizon. By mentioning your experience of Europe, you've addressed a key point. Professional critical work can never be a purely local, homegrown project. Under Russian conditions, the orientation toward the international context and the application of the European experience with critical reflection are not just necessary preconditions for productive research, but also organically mean that you have to break away from "authoritarian" views or reactionary pseudo-criticism.

DV: This orientation isn't really what's most important, but of course, we belong to those few people in Russia who are oriented toward European emancipatory traditions on an everyday level, on the level of personal habits, and so on. So if you translate a lot of the work we do into an international context, it could be described with the old feminist term of "consciousness raising practices." But at the same time, you can't compare these practices to their Western version, because in Russia, such "innocent" activity constantly faces sanctions from a repressive state, which takes all critical claims very seriously and works to destroy them through traditional despotism. This gives critical work a different intensity and highlights criticism's meaning as the truth about power, revealing it to be a grey, untalented machine of repression that produces nothing itself but strangles everything alive. When people are jailed, persecuted and sometimes even killed for being too critical, the critique itself takes on a new meaning. I think few people would be willing to make sacrifices for the right to be critical, or to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the truth. Here, it makes sense to remember Lenin's newspaper, called "Pravda,"

which means truth in Russian... By the way, I went to the last "March of Dissenters", and all the speakers kept saying that the "truth is on our side" and so on. But sometimes I think that the resources of this heroic-romantic position are running out... But what do you think, how effective can such practices be, when the majority of people is so passive?

AB: The effectiveness of intellectual critique in Russia is a very serious question. And the answer is pretty disappointing most of the time. It is symptomatic, that, unlike our European colleagues, we are asking the same questions that were crucial to late 19th century radical thought in Russia. And this isn't because we haven't heard of more recent approaches, but because our situation of a broadening social gap firmly separates "domestic interests" for the "the truths of critique." Culture, understood as a creative reappropriation of the world, is only available to an absolute minority, since the majority's basic education simply does not foster critical attitudes, but only cultivates the desire to conform. The majority of people have lost so much, but the most important thing they lost was a creative connection to the world. So it is very hard to get up and to shout "Basta! That's it! I'm done!" Only people who have already gained something are willing to protest, because they see scholarship and contemporary art as a resource for personal emancipation, and have a personal stake in taking it over. So education becomes very important. By the way, I was recently surprised to discover how important education is to social democratic structures, traditional trade union, and the parties of the left in Europe. The "big" trade unions in France put a lot of time into educational work: they don't only run schools, seminars, and evening courses, but finance historical and sociological research. In fact, they even organize excursions to the landmarks of revolutionary history. So a traditional trade union does not just

have the function of keeping salaries high, but also of educating the workers. A critique of the activities and basic ideology of these unions from a more radical position is justified, of course, at least in part. But in principle, in the European context, it is an inalienable minimum for a fragile and versatile system of alternatives that the Russian situation just doesn't have.

DV: I would like to draw your attention to the fact that unlike a traditional workers struggle, the fight in culture or academia is very different in principle. Workers today can only demand an improvement in working conditions, but they can't say "Your Ford Fiesta is a piece of shit, this isn't the car I want to build." Our situation is different. Of course, we can and should call for an improvement of our working conditions (this is a very basic demand), but the main thing we are saying is that we need a completely different kind of knowledge. The knowledge we have now does not correspond to the tasks that society faces. It has nothing to do with the truth in science or art, and moreover, it is completely detached from the real contradictions that take place between the sphere of work. That is, we need to critically rethink the materiality of a new world, a world undergoing deep transformation, and to join all the oppressed in making an applicable theory that is capable of unifying a fundamental critique with a new form of practice.

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[1] The OD Group is a protest network that became active in 2007. Consisting largely of students, it has put forward demands for better education and acceptible conditions, as well as a ban on ultra-rightwing propaganda at the Sociological Faculty of Moscow State University (www.od-group.org). The medialization of their conflict and the search for allies in academia led to the formation

of an investigative commission, which has had no practical effect because of the resistance of the university administration and the passivity of the sociologists.

[2] The activities of the European University in Petersburg were recently put to a halt for political reasons. For more, see Yelena Biberman, Ousting the Ideological Enemy (More on the Closing of EUSP), http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=Politics&articleid=a1204212722

[3] The ambitious project "Hermitage 20/21" opened with an exhibition of the Charles Saatchi collection called "America Now."