02 2011

On Chto Delat?'s Songspiels

Nataša Ilić

The play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.
Louis Althusser, *For Marx*

Chto Delat? / What is to be done? is a self-organized platform, founded in 2003 in Saint Petersburg, Russia, by a group of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod, who work at the intersection of political theory, art and political activism. Their practice – based on principles of self-organization, solidarity and collectivism, and a method stemming from concrete (materialist) analysis and critical employment of mimetic procedures in a process described by the member of the collective, David Riff, as "collective reconsideration of critical realism"[1] is consistently politically and theoretically articulated in the pages of English/Russian newspapers produced mainly in the context of (Western) art exhibitions or conferences in relation to projects developed by different constellations of the members of the collective. Chto Delat?'s newspapers and video works are published on the web and distributed freely at conferences, exhibitions and demonstrations. It comes as no

surprise that in the depoliticized market glitter of contemporary art in Russia, the source of their authority and (economic) independence is displaced to the West, embedded in the network of non-profit institutions of critical culture. However, their projects aim to act as double agents. On the one hand, they deliver politicized content, appropriately based on the methodological principles of the Russian avant-garde and *soviets*, while on the other, they revive the capacity of speech in the public sphere through a focus on the crucial questions of political and intellectual Russian contemporary life in relation to an international context. At the same time, they question ideological and geo-cultural constellations of art institutions and the institution of art as such. It is not unusual that such an ambitious program is met with criticism on both the local and international terrains, criticism which, simply put, depending on the political leanings and winds of the mainstream artistic conjuncture of a moment basically complains about too little, or too much "art."[2] But more than these conventions, which explicitly political art practices follow and which regularly shape the maneuvering of cultural workers in societies that are deeply burdened by their relation to the West, it is important to stress the proactive processes of political articulation, precise analysis and self-critique which Chto Delat? have been systematically investing into for years. In a series of collective video works, *Songspiel Triptych: Perestroika-Songspiel; The Victory over the Coup*, (2008); *Partisan Songspiel. A Belgrade Story* (2009); and *The Tower: A Songspiel* (2010), an operatic musical drama with aggressive popular song-style is refracted through their relation to the politics and poetics of Bertolt Brecht and a form of *songspiel*, which Brecht developed with Kurt Weill in the late 1920s as a form of social critique.

For some time before these video works, Brecht had explicitly been a theme since the publication of a newspaper in 2006 under the title “Why Brecht?” in which Chto Delat? attempted to draw Brecht out of “Brecht fatigue,” as Fredric Jameson called it in his seminal book *Brecht and Method.*[3] Based on his aesthetic methods, developed through the analysis of a concrete historical situation and “philosophical position in collusion with Marxist anticipation,”[4] their endeavor invested in the question of how to achieve intellectual and cultural action, which could stir radical social transformation in times of cultural imperialism. Brecht was then a starting point for a critique of “subversive affirmation” as a tactical activist method; a critique which does not only shatter an ideology that is spontaneously constructed and blind to the necessity of changing historical social relations. It is a critique that they expressed with delightful clarity some years later, which clearly owes to Master Brecht's succinct style: "It is not enough to make shit look shittier and smell smellier. It is vital to convince the viewer that there is also something that is different from shit."[5] In the video *Angry Sandwich People or In Praise of Dialectics* (2006), local activists theatricalize the protest in public space carrying posters with fragments of Brecht's poem *In Praise of Dialectics*, embodying a process of collective subjectification. Three years later, this dialectical method is analyzed in detail in the newspaper *Great Method*, produced to accompany the second songspiel video, *Partisan Songspiel. A Belgrade Story*. In the meantime, a form of songspiel has first been developed in the film, *Three Mothers and a Chorus* (2007), by women members of the collective, Olga Egorova (Tsaplya) and Natalia Pershina (Glucklya), who also work in another collective constellation under the name “Factory of Found Clothes.” The main feature that they developed was to be carried out further in the songspiels: a narrative is expressed through songs, and like in Brecht's works, this method

re-functions the presentational mode of address. This method has long been a standard convention in most forms of music-theater, but discarded by modern drama after the “fourth wall” had been dismantled by naturalism and realism. Clearly, Brecht is at the center of the collective's procedures as well as the “Brecht” of the 1960s and 1970s that Jameson discusses in relation to the “Brecht fatigue.” Similarly, the title of the newspapers from 2007, *Make Films Politically*, is a direct reference to Godard's “Dziga Vertov Group,” in which it is “not enough to make political films but to make films politically.” This process is not about achieving “Brecht,” or achieving a set of monolithic predetermined principles, but rather a productive adjustment to the dialectical method derived from a concrete articulation of the everyday and their position within it.

According to the manifesto, *Chto Delat and Method: Practicing Dialectic*, written by the member of the collective, Dmitry Vilenksy, under the motto “Mixing different things,” with a good dose of humor but free of cynicism and in an almost aphoristic form, the main methodological task is to “find the right proportions” between the contradictory determinations of the relations to the totality of capital, art, institutions, financing, universality, division into disciplines, self-education, compromises, leaders, classes, and many other points to which their work refers. He thus proposes a flexible openness that arrives at a precise positioning within the specific conditions of each situation. As Vilensky writes, "Master Bertolt and Master Jean-Luc demonstrated that art is something that arises from difficulties and rouses us to action."[6] This ambition, which comes to life as dialectical critical realism preoccupied with the present from the position of a presupposed future within a transhistorical idea of communism, is the red thread which represents the method.

***

The first songspiel, *Perestroika-Songspiel. The Victory over the Coup*, deals with the moment of the triumphant victory of democracy that won over the restorationist coup in August 1991 through a popular uprising, when the road to a more just society seemed to be wide open and only a few – and probably for all the wrong reasons – thought that it might end up in an unjust, inefficient, anti-egalitarian, fraudulent, and hypocritical system hardly superior to its predecessor. The script is based on the research of documents and witness accounts of the time. One result of this research is another film, Dmitry Vilensky's *Chronicles of Perestroika* (2008), in which b/w documentary material kept in the Saint Petersburg Studio of Documentary Films has been edited with music composed by Mikhail Krutik, the composer of all the songspiels. In this film, music still has the function of charging heroic events with emotion and pathos.

What Brecht called "*Gestus*," that which expresses basic human attitudes, not merely "gesture," but all signs of social relations and social attitudes in clear and stylized ways, is formed in *Perestroika-Songspiel* as a typology of protagonists that emerged at the time of perestroika – a democrat, a businessman, a "revolutionary," a nationalist and a feminist – and all of the elements of narrative structure following Brecht. They are divided into distinct episodes, designed to break the seamless continuity of naturalistic theater and the illusion of a natural order and are designed to show the significance of the basic "Gestus." Sakharov and Yeltsin's portraits are displayed in a democrat's room, Western consumerist goods in a businessman's room, portraits of Stalin and Nicholas II in a nationalist's room, a banner with a call to general strike in a revolutionary's room, and some episodes take place in the open

public space of the city, “under the stormy sky.” The heroes' proclamations, plans, hopes, and dreams are commented on by a chorus in a story, announced by the chorus as the story “of hopes that didn't come true.”

The chorus speaks from the comfortable position of the present moment, with the hindsight that makes it all too easy to blame the actions and thoughts of the “five heroes of perestroika” for the fact that an end to egalitarian state redistribution was not tantamount to liberty and that the experience of real masses of people involved in political thinking was not destined from the onset to end up in capitalism as the only possible outcome of perestroika. The story invites moments of empathy for the actions that partook in the expression of collective hopes in the unprecedented surge of popular uprising, which forced a topping of the repressive regime. Soon to see its power appropriated, split and channeled into a depoliticized performance of democracy and in the polyphony of its voices, the film claims perestroika as the expression of genuine emancipatory impulses suppressed by the Soviet state as well as by its capitalist successors.

In the next film, *Partisan Songspiel. A Belgrade Story*, a critically reflected memory of the communist past takes as its starting point the concrete situation of oppression of the city government over the Roma community living in the fancy nearby settlement, Belville, prompted by the effort to retouch the city before the spectacle of the summer Universiade 2009. The script is written in collaboration with the artists and activists, Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle, and based on the precise analysis of the situation. However, Belgrade could be any post-communist, post-conflict city struggling with its status of being a semi-periphery through the production of mega-events that promote tourism and promise an investor-friendly climate that should enhance its position on the

geo-cultural map of Europe. The story propagates a universal political message, based on the idea of class struggle. War profiteers, city officials and corrupt businessmen clearly stand in opposition to the oppressed representatives of identitary groups (a worker, a Romani woman, a lesbian activist, and a disabled veteran), while the chorus composed of dead partisans comments on their confrontation and expresses the real message of the film: the need to overcome identitary politics in the united struggle for social justice. The film ends in a kind of dead partisans' lament over the current disunity, but their call to "Look for new partisans!" still leaves the hope that a universal emancipatory struggle is possible in the future. In the next songspiel, *The Tower: A Songspiel*, whose story is composed around the conflict over the planned construction of Okhta Center in Saint Petersburg, a new building of the local branch of the infamous Gazprom corporation that is to ruin the famous low-rise skyline of Saint Petersburg with the construction of a 403-meter high skyscraper, the collapse of resistance is total. In their declamations of clichés, the characters induce no sympathy. In that respect, the group of powerful decision-makers – for whom the construction of the tower is a chance for profit and social affirmation, which consists of bureaucrats and toadeaters (a PR manager, a politician, security chief, an Orthodox priest, a gallery owner, and an artist) – does not differ much from the chorus composed of those whose opinions on the tower are not considered (intelligentsia, pensioners, workers, clerks, migrants, civil rights activists, etc.). The register of the film changes from clearly satirical to tragic in the last scene, in which all the characters suddenly freeze in a *tableau vivant*, with a red cord that stretches from the telephone – simply the life cord of the networks of capitalism – mutating and entangling their stifled and immobile bodies. Whereas in the *Perestroika* and *Partisan* songspiels the failure is conceived as a lesson and intended course

of action for the future, *A Tower* paints the picture without the horizon of historical consciousness and without the antagonisms related to a progressive "enclosure" of the commons, which are not necessarily tied to the question of social justice in contemporary capitalism. Thus they collapse even when they are not completely inefficient in the realization of their particular goals.

Chto Delat?'s films are often criticized for "preaching to the choir," shameless didacticism and sloganeering, but their films theatricalize and instigate the very act of constituting an audience in which divisions converge and the space opens for a re-appropriation of the alienated substance through a radical transformation of inter-subjective social relations. And this phantom "choir" certainly cannot avoid facing its complicity if it is to arrive at what Brecht called the "truth of our situation." The principles of Brecht's "epic theater" were subjected to a constant reworking that should perfect what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which Darko Suvin describes as the "tension between utopia and history" through which events are presented in their historical and thus changeable character. Contemporary neo-liberal capitalism, although increasingly displaying symptoms of its legitimacy (not to mention its performance) being in crisis, is still not washed away from its contended protection of "naturalness." In the songspiel trilogy, the V-effect is achieved through the laying bare of the contradiction of social mechanisms on the basis of the concrete historical materials that the films deal with, along with the consequences of a declarative reference to Brecht which is done without subtlety, reserve or roundabouts. This takes place through the flexible and consistent application of directly applied formal procedures of Brecht's "epic," or as he later preferred to call it, "dialectical theater" (the direct addressing of the audience through songs, choir commentaries, political slogans, usage of props, etc).

Something is almost irritating and inappropriate in this brutal appropriation of the “Brecht complex," as if communist regimes did not collapse and decades of “progress” do not separate us from the times in which his political slogans called for an end to capitalism in light of the fascist threat. It is also as if art, as we have constantly been convinced since then, did not leave behind every ideology it may have had. But it is not only about Brecht, nor about a general unwillingness to call things by their name, or the sense of multiple temporalities that Chto Delat?'s films invoke opposing the time of capital that is measured solely by the commodity and whose only language is money. It is also about a contradictory, namely, dialectical position which allows a critique of liberal “civil” society in the social-political complex of Putinist Russia, supporting it through the very act of critique. Chto Delat?'s approach never slips into a lamentation over the underdeveloped institutions of “civil society,” which is supposed to be the true subject of democracy, whose effect would arouse smugness on the victorious side of the new power relations of post-communist transition. Rather it shows that the liberal option can only be criticized from the *radical* left position today, and furthermore, that this critique is one of the tasks of the radical left. It also means, as it were, that only the radical left can defend it.

---

[1] David Riff, “Criticality or Truth?”; http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/riff/en

[2] In a recent article “A New Order. Reports from Moscow,” Ekatarina Degot explains how among the younger generation of critical artists, Chto Delat is criticized for insufficiently radical

artistic politics and opportunism: "When Chto Delat? stresses its commitment to critical art, it might set the accent on critical, but art is what young Russian artists hear first." (Ekatarina Degot, *Artforum*, November 2010, pp. 107-110). On the other side of the spectrum, in a review of their solo exhibition in ICA, London, last fall, Michael Glover writes in *Independent*: "I'm careful not to call these things artworks, because they are not artworks." (http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/chto-delat-what-is-to-be-done-ica-london-2086845.html)

[3] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London, New York, 2000, p. 18

[4] Darko Suvin, "Uvod u Brechta," *Školska knjiga*, Zagreb, 1970, p. 275

[5] Dmitry Vilensky, "Chto Delat and Method: Practicing Dialectic," in the newspaper *Great Method,* 2009

[6] Ibid.