

A Declaration on Politics, Knowledge, and Art:

On the Fifth Anniversary of the Chto Delat Work Group

Comments by Dmitry Vilensky (DV) & David Riff (DR)

01. Our Principles: Self-Organization, Collectivism, Solidarity

The Chto Delat platform unites artists, philosophers, social researchers, activists, and all those whose aim is the collaborative realization of critical and independent research, publication, artistic, educational and activist projects.

All of the platform's initiatives are based on the principles of self-organization and collectivism. These principles are realized through the *political coordination* of working groups—the contemporary analogue of *soviets*. The projects undertaken by any of these groups represent the entire platform and are closely coordinated with one another. At the same time, the existence of the platform creates a common context for interpreting the projects of its individual participants.

We are likewise guided by the principle of solidarity. We organize and support mutual assistance networks with all grassroots groups who share the principles of internationalism, feminism, and equality.

DV: Everyone has long ago given up wracking their brains over the question of whether it is possible to elaborate precise rules for organizing the work of a collective. It is now quite rare to come across a new manifesto or declaration. The cult of spontaneity, reactivity, and tactics—the rejection of readymade rules—is the order of the day. Tactics, however, is something less than method. Only by uniting tactics and strategy can we arrive at method. Hence it is a good thing to try one's hand at writing declarations from time to time.

DR: But why now this declaration? I think it marks an important point in Chto delat's evolution from collective to counter-institution. We are trying to translate things we learned to (dis)agree upon over the last years into a broadened context with new constituents; to outline the principles of counter-institutional behavior very different from the extremely hierarchical and exploitative institutions that produce the social relations of the art world today. The main use of such an admittedly utopian endeavor is arguably that it shows us how far we have to go to realize our dreams of solidarity. That, and not the outlining of "rules," is the whole point of writing declarations in the first place.

DV: These are the basic principles of the structure of the platform—I would also call them an ideal structure of work that unfortunately, in reality, function differently. The main problem is the lack of collective initiative, the growing passivity of the most of the participants. So at the moment the platform functions more as the space of identification, as a kind of identity that marks all people involved with a certain basic position. Also, I hope that during the possible change in the general political situation from repressive-reactionary towards progressive, the platform could trigger of different process and facilitate the growing number of its members with the tool for collective work.

02. Demanding the (Im)possible

At this reactionary historical moment, when elementary demands for the possible are presented as a romantic impossibility, we remain realists and insist on certain simple, intelligible things. We have to move away from the frustrations occasioned by the historical failures to advance leftist ideas and discover anew their *emancipatory potential*.

We say that it is natural for each person to be free and live a life of dignity. All that we have to do is to find the strength within ourselves to fight for this. The first thing that motivates us is the rejection of all forms of oppression, the artificial alienation of people, and exploitation. That is why we stand for a distribution of the wealth produced by human labor and all natural resources that is just and directed towards the welfare of everyone.

We are internationalists: we demand the recognition of the equality of all people, no matter where they live or where they come from. We are feminists: we are against all forms of patriarchy, homophobia, and gender inequality.

DV: Another aspect of this paragraph on principles helps to sort out some local aspects of leftist politics in a situation where such basic things like internationalism, feminism and equality do not go without saying. It helps to make a clear break with leftist nationalist, some traditional leftist organizations based on hierarchy and patriarchy.

One thing we have decided not to tackle in this declaration is the issue of democratic centralism and the possibility of its reconsideration as one of old fashioned

but still very interesting method of collective work combining the principles of participation and representation. Our structure based on the nexus of different initiatives can be considered to certain extend as experimentation with this principle.

DR: In my view, the term “leftist” is too wishy-washy. The (im)possibility at stake here is the emancipative potential of communism under post-communist circumstances. So why this vague “leftism”? I guess we opted to use the word not only because it sounds less threatening than communist, but because even left-liberal ideas about the regulation of the workday, basic human rights, health insurance and so on are today presented as impossibilities, while feminism and internationalism are expropriated by the ideologues of the new imperialism. It is very important to reclaim all these moments and to find the strength to insist that true gender equality and internationalism are only possible in the frame of a broader change.

03. Capitalism Is Not a Totality

We believe that capital is not a totality, that the popular thesis that “there is nothing outside capital” is false. The task of the intellectual and the artist is to engage in a thoroughgoing unmasking of the myth that there are no alternatives to the global capitalist system. We insist on the obvious: a world *without the dominion of profit and exploitation* not only can be created but always already exists in the micropolitics and micro-economies of human relationships and creative labor.

We have to reveal this *joyous space of life* to the greatest number of people. The historical becoming of this economic, political, intellectual, and creative emancipation is *communism*.

DR: Yes. There was a consensus in the group to break with the ultra-immanentist totalization of contemporary capitalism, in which all political action is doomed to become little more than an economically profitable performance. We reject that hopelessness. But at the same time, the word “totality” is something we should claim. We need it to explain and motivate the notion of communism today. Capitalism, the current mode of production, is the ensemble of economic and social relations spread out across extreme unevennesses, which it exploits and even creates artificially. It is as if we see many different capitalisms all competing with one another, and miraculously working together to raise the productivity of the system as a whole. At the same time, there are nooks and crannies where atavisms thrive, places that global capital leaves aside, only to capture them later on, or zones that it develops, fixes, and abandons. We need to work in these “interstices” once capital flees to re-

imagine what Marx meant when he says that every old society is pregnant with a new one.

DV: Yes, it was the most contested point in our internal discussion and it is important to follow its development. Perhaps we should have spoken of a dialectical totality of contradictions...

04. The Communist Decoding of Capitalist Reality

The person who is genuinely free, who lives in the fullness of their being, is a person who is alive to various sciences and disciplines, who critically examines themselves and the world. However, the narrow specialization of scientific knowledge in capitalist society places knowledge in the service of the dominant class. Individual research serves private interests, while research of society, research based on the universality of critical utterance, is not supported institutionally.

We affirm that there is *only one form of knowledge*—one that enables the discovery that the calling of human beings is *to be free with other human beings*. Critical knowledge should not be a commodity, and its maximally widespread distribution—enlightenment and education—is the cause of each intellectual and cultural worker. This synthesis of theory and practice, knowledge of the world and its transformation, we call *the communist decoding of capitalist reality*.

We repeat along with Marx: “We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to.” (Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843.)

DV: The thesis that there is one knowledge repeats the famous theses of Alain Badiou: “There is just one world.” We constructed it because we believe that there is hardly any sense in using the proud word “knowledge” to describe methods for enslaving consciousness. But, at the same we should acknowledge that knowledge for the time being consists of many disciplines and we must try and achieve perfection in each of them. For now this is the most important contribution we can make to the cause of emancipation.

Also we use a very provocative quote from Marx, which is very important for us because it problematizes the role of the intellectual and his or her responsibility for the oppressed. This quote brings us to the next paragraph, which tackles the issue of the avant-garde as a relations between spontaneity of struggles and the position of an external agent who is supposed to develop a strategy of developing of human consciousness.

DR: About that last quote and the role of “knowledge” for emancipation: One of the biggest problems and blocks to any meaningful re-evaluation of communism is the idea that revolutionary knowledge consists of the “wrong” radical social recipe to be applied when the time is right, leading to a maximum of murderous consequences. The quote from the letter to Arnold Ruge says something very different: the intellectual is not to fulfill some Promethean mission, enlightening the masses. Instead, she or he should respect the struggles taking place in society, often in subaltern silence, subcutaneously determining the course of history, articulating themselves through extreme ideological distortions. “Reason always exists, though not always in a reasonable form,” Marx says in the next sentence. The “communist decoding of reality” (a term invented by Dziga Vertov) would mean deciphering these garbled histories of struggle for human freedom; not just explaining the workings and histories of the current mechanisms of oppression, but what we are already doing here and now to make these very mechanisms into the instruments for our emancipation.

05. Faithfulness to the Intellectual and Artistic Avant-Gardes of the Twentieth Century

We recognize the importance of twentieth-century avant-garde thought for the rethinking and renewal of the leftist philosophical and political tradition. We believe that in order for this renewal to happen, we need a maximally open, non-dogmatic approach that presupposes a critical reception of ideas, concepts, and practices that have formed outside the framework of doctrinal Marxism. Our urgent task is to reconnect political action, engaged thought, and artistic innovation.

DV: However, many people today see the avant-garde as something discredited by the Soviet experience where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” rapidly degenerated into a “dictatorship over the proletariat”: a totalitarian situation the anti-capitalist movement has explicitly sought to reject. But despite the anti-vanguardist principles of the “movement of movements”—which it must be noted is as much a rebellion against the old left of Stalinism and its universal claims to truth as it is against the neo-liberal new right—, we believe that some of the essential content of the avant-garde is crucial for an understanding of contemporary art. Here we are proposing a return to a discussion of the avant-garde but through a different reading of its composition: a reading which not only locates the political potential of art within the autonomy of the aesthetic experience but also within the autonomy of political practices which overcome the limited field of applied politics. We argue that

to conceive of “the political” in art, without a corresponding commitment to the ideas of the avant-garde would diminish both concepts—as would conceiving of the avant-garde as purely innovation within the “form” of art production alone. The radicality of art, therefore, cannot be reduced to its connection to social or political imperatives nor to formal stylistic innovation but must also be understood through its poetic force; its ability to question and destabilise the very notions of the political, social, cultural and artistic. The avant-garde is a *coup d’etat* against history, making visible new possibilities in both art and politics.

At the current moment the components that historically belonged to the aesthetic of the avant-garde now fall into place in a new composition. Today, we could claim the following taxonomy:

- a) realism as an aesthetic method;
- b) fidelity toward the revolutionary impulse of the avant-garde;
- c) autonomy as political self-organization

DR: These affirmations of the avant-garde’s importance seem a bit too vague in retrospect. Everyone claims the avant-garde as his or her legacy. It is important to differentiate these claims against other claims. One such point of difference would not just lie on the surface of form (for a figurative avant-garde realism, against an abstract avant-garde formalism), but would go deeper, concerning the modernist ideology of the avant-garde as such. The cult of irrationalism, the tendency of art toward formalist objectification mixed with a near animist relation to the world of things, the cult of art’s deskilling, and the celebration of the New, where innovation becomes a means to itself: these are moments of modernism that we might reject, not just historically, but also in our own time. They often serve as an autonomous politics of bohemia, later exhibited as a social alibi. Maybe the more interesting moment of the avant-garde is when it turns its back on modernism, when it turns back to realism, to revolutionary classicism, where it tries to capture idealist aesthetics for materialist goals, when it understands the entire legacy of classical art as the watershed for an “aesthetics of resistance.” Maybe this is the most important discovery of the avant-garde: art as a means not of critiquing art, but as capturing it by effecting the communist decoding of art history.

06. Class Structure

One of the basic problems of theory remains the definition of contemporary society’s class structure. At present, when labor relations are in a process of radical transformation, the very notion of classes is changing as well. We can no longer rely wholly on the previous definitions of proletariat and bourgeoisie, or on old forms of organizing the struggle for liberation.

We believe that we have to continue to re-examine class theory by considering the contemporary development of the antagonism between labor and capital. We affirm that this antagonism remains the central one. The transformation of society has not made it disappear; on the contrary, this antagonism has only been exacerbated and therefore needs to be interpreted anew. We are also faced here with the question of rethinking the strategies and tasks of the critical intellectual in a conjuncture where the configuration of productive forces is changing.

DR: The question of class composition in post-socialist societies is a very difficult one, all the more because we are experiencing the tail-end of a momentous transition from obsolete socialist Fordism to some version of post-Fordist resource economy, a noramlization after the phase of primitive accumulation. One thing that is very clear already, however, is that the classical image of the white male factory worker that still dominates leftist politics is a reactionary limitation. It leads to clientelle politics and does not include the many disenfranchised groups that do the labor socially necessary to keep capitalism's productivity growing under the conditions of the global economy. This would not just include migrant labor but also unpaid domestic work in a society where traditionalist patriarchal gender relations are being reinstated, wage slavery in service industries, massive "reserve armies" of semi-employed consumers, freelancers, and even office clerks... In this difficult class composition, we must interrogate the role of not only the intellectual but of the intelligentsia: is it a privileged urban elite that represents "creative capital", or a potential "cognitariat" or "precariate"? How can we avoid idealizing ourselves while asking this question as "engaged intellectuals"?

The Tasks of Contemporary Art

Contemporary art that is produced as a commodity form or a form of entertainment is not art. It is the conveyor-belt manufacture of *counterfeits* and narcotics for the enjoyment of a "creative class" sated with novelty. One of our most vital tasks today is unmasking the current system of ideological control and manipulation of people. The pseudo-creativity of this system is no more than the commodification not only of the fruits of their labor, but also of all forms of life.

We are convinced that genuine art is art that de-automates consciousness—first, that of the artist, then that of the viewer. And because art is an activity open to everyone, neither power nor capital can have a monopoly on the "ownership" of art. One answer to the perennial debate on art's autonomy is the possibility that it can be produced independently

of art institutions, whether state or private. In the contemporary conjuncture, the self-negation essential to art's development happens outside institutional practices.

As a public form of the unfolding of each person's creative potential, the place of art during moments of revolutionary struggle has always been and always will be in the thick of events, on the squares and in the communes. At such moments, art takes the form of street theater, posters, actions, graffiti, grassroots cinema, poetry, and music. **Renewing these forms at this new stage in history is the task of the genuine artist.**

DR: The last paragraph of this part of the declaration was a point of contention, because some members of Chto delat considered it too media-specific and as an exclusion of more traditional, less markedly "open" forms of creative self-realization. In Russia, however, the affirmation of art in public space has an added dimension, because precisely such practices have been marginalized or even abolished under the current conditions. Contemporary art takes place on the initiative of oligarchs and their wives. To meet this hyperbourgeoisie's hunger for representation, artists universalize certain values in a certain sensual form: the truth of art is proclaimed as autonomy in the object boutique and heteronomy in its adjacent wellness room. One can juxtapose to this a very different task for contemporary art, one outside these bourgeois institutions. A shortcoming of this text is that it does not, at this crucial juncture, admit that art creates new institutional practices when it operates outside the bourgeois institution, that it becomes a counter-institution. This counter-institution faces one central task: to ensure that the means of cultural production do not fall back into the hands of the privileged (genuine) artist subject who will then participate in a market economy of cultural commodities.

What Is the Place of Revolutionary Art in a Time of Reaction?

Although mass movements for the transformation of society are temporarily absent, art's place is nevertheless still *on the side of the oppressed*. Its central task is the elaboration of new forms for the sensual and critical apprehension of the world from the perspective of collective liberation. Art should exist not for museums and dealers but in order to develop and articulate a new mode of "emancipated sensuality." It should become an instrument for seeing and knowing the world in the totality of its contradictions.

The museums and institutions of art should function as depositories and laboratories for the aesthetic exploration of the world. We should, however,

shield them from privatization, economization, and subordination to the populist logic of the culture industry. That is why we believe that right now it would be wrong to refuse to work in any way with cultural and academic institutions—despite the fact that the *majority* of these institutions throughout the world are engaged in the flagrant propaganda of commodity fetishism and servile knowledge. The political propaganda of all other forms of human vocation either provokes the system's harsh rejection or the system co-opts it into its spectacle. At the same time, however, the system is *not homogeneous*—it is greedy, stupid, and dependent. Today, this leaves us room to use these institutions to advance and promote our knowledge. We can bring this knowledge to a wide audience without succumbing to its distortion.

That is why we need to develop clear criteria for deciding in which venues we can conduct our struggle, which projects should be boycotted and denounced, and with whom and on what conditions we can collaborate.

Our Basic Program

In the current situation, we propose that self-governed collectives use the following basic program as their guide:

- Don't allow external factors to intervene as you develop your ideas and realize your projects. Don't give away exclusive rights to the distribution of your work. Don't directly or indirectly advertise the institutions of power and capital within your projects.
- Economic relations have to be built in a political way. You need to collectively demand that your labor be compensated fairly and with dignity. By entering into a working relationship with the institutions of power, you demonstrate their capitalistic, exploitative nature.
- Don't participate in projects whose results (symbolic capital, surplus value) can be instrumentalized for political ends that contradict the internal tasks of your collective's work.
- As you realize your project, you should try to make your work as "non-transparent" as possible. At the same time, you should strive to produce situations whose meaning can be fully manifested only outside the limited frame of concrete relations of production. This means that you should construe the use-value of the work in such a way that institutions of power will be hard pressed when they try to convert it into exchange value.

At the same time, we insist on an uncompromis-

ing critique of and struggle against all institutions of culture that base their work on corruption and the primitive servicing of the interests of commercial structures, the state and ideology. We must constantly "slap" these dimwits and prostitutes "on the wrist" and show them their shameful place in history. We will use all the means at our disposal to make this happen.

DV: For an important and practical case of implementation of this ideas, see in appendix below, "We are not off!"

The Local Aspect of the Struggle

We demand, as a minimum, the abolition of tacit censorship and an end to all repression of political and cultural activity.

It follows from this demand that we need state and public support for social research projects and critical art practices in Russia that are independent of private interests. Avoiding the traditional choice between "reformism" and "radicalism," we insist on the search for a specific, local configuration of demands and transformational programs. For a start we demand a few concrete things. Public funds should be transparently distributed for the support of research and art in the public space, as well for grassroots initiatives. They should also be used to support work based on the harsh criticism of contemporary institutions of power, both in culture and in politics. On the other hand, this is possible only as part of a radical social transformation that would undermine the entire system of authoritarian capitalism. In order to foster conditions for this transformation, we need new forms of coordination with all other fronts of the struggle—with workers, trade unions, environmentalists, feminists and anti-authoritarian activists. We have to propagate models of activist self-education and the politicization of artistic and intellectual practices. These are the bases for a future broad consolidation of leftists and the hegemony of our ideas in society.

DV: These are basic demands that reflect the current political conditions of existence of culture and activism in Russia. At the same time, we emphasize that a demand for basic democratic rights in our situation is so urgent, because it is a prerequisite for a further step. As at the time of the February revolution of 1917, the working class and all oppressed people could eventually become the main driving force of this typical bourgeois demand. Also, we insist that in a formally democratic state where culture is supported by tax payers, all people who are not voting for the current power (and even in Russia it is sometimes more than 50%) must have access to public money to express their cultural and political needs.

DR: In reality, the current demands of cultural activists in Russia are even more basic than this. We could demand that the state stop harrassing art activists, framing them to demonstrate their muscle. We could also demand that the state stop selling out all cultural institutions and simply evicting them if it is opportune. Another basic demand could be for the state and the elite to stop sponsoring or encouraging proto-fascists, who then become real fascists, who then murder journalists and activists, or fake art world fascists who win art prizes, and so on. Re-reading the preceding section, it sounds more radical than ever: to ask a state that has just evicted its own 20th century art collection for transparent state sponsorship of critical art! To ask the militia who come to round you up on mayday for money! A truly revolutionary demand, as radical as reality itself.

Cultural workers—artists, intellectuals, curators, and researchers!

Unite with all working people! Despite everything, they continue their struggle for freedom and human dignity. Only together can we free ourselves from the poverty of daily life, depression, and fear. There is only one world—and it will be what we make it today!

Appendix:

We are not off!

In light of the developing situation around the Subvision project in Hamburg, we—Chto Delat platform—find it necessary to make the following statement with regard to our participation:

Only a few months before the festival opened, we—and many other participants—received private letters warning us that the festival is a product and instrument of neo-liberal hegemony and a means of advertising the creative potential of Hamburg's gentrified Hafen-City. We were also told that Subvision had taken money out of funding usually given to local initiatives, money that was now being used to brand Hamburg as a center of the "creative industries."

Of course, we do not know enough about Hamburg, so it has been hard to find out what is really going on. The letters we received contained a great deal of contradictory information and personal detail, but their accusations were clearly well-founded.

(For details about the case, see:
<http://virginworld.blog.de/2009/01/15/subvision-hafencity-art-money-real-estate-5379535/>

<http://www.wirsindwoanders.de/files/demo.php>

<http://www.taz.de/regional/nord/hamburg/artikel/1/off-kunst-von-oben/>)

Nevertheless, we have decided to participate in Subvision. Why?

Like everything we do, this is a political decision based on our collective's principles in dealing with institutions. What are these principles, and how do they relate to the situation at hand?

1. To begin with, we must say it clearly: Chto delat is not an "off" project. True, the conditions in Russia are very repressive. So our resources and visibility are limited. Nevertheless, we insist that self-marginalization is not an answer. In our experience, it depoliticizes and ghettoizes artists and intellectuals in a comfortable non-conformism that lacks any clear articulation. Instead, we feel that it is of the utmost importance to use and contest any space that by weird chance opens up to provide a venue for our uncensored propaganda and art.

Participation is not just collaboration, but a struggle for control over means of cultural production. We feel that it is we who produce the values and decisions that are important to culture and society, and not just the institutional frame. This means that we are willing to interact with projects and institutions even if we do not agree with their goals. Because we have goals of our own.

2. For Chto delat, one of the most important points is to keep overarching projects from dictating, censoring, or distorting our work. In the case of Subvision, there were no attempts to do any of this directly. If such things appear on site, we will protest it immediately by boycotting and leaving the festival. But there is, of course, an indirect distortion that comes with the curatorial framing of the project in its particular location. We are not naive and realize that our contribution—which is about the collective search for alternatives in a highly repressive situation—is "global protest," and we are highly critical of the way this representation is being handled. We fear that we might be brought in as artistic *Gastarbeiter* to confront the local "off-scene." But we also think it is very important to create real spaces for solidarity and exchange between initiatives that ARE searching for alternatives, and this, after all, is Subvision's stated goal—and our task is to make it true. When we were shown the list of invited participants, we were not only happy to find that many fellow *Gastarbeiter* are already our friends and comrades, but also because their presence reflects responsible political choices on the part of the organizers. In particular, we agree with the choice to invite Israeli artists who are searching for alternatives to a nearly hopeless situation of conflict. This decision goes against the unspoken boycott of Israeli artists and intellectuals in Western Europe today, which, unfortunately, is hitting the wrong people. In other words, we hope that actual communication between these differ-

ent groups will outweigh the inevitable instrumentalization and distortion of our respective positions.

3. Adequate economic conditions for cultural workers are an important political question. It is important to realize that self-organization should not necessarily mean self-exploitation, and that there is nothing to be gained by refusing payments, as if there was such a thing as “dirty money” or “pure commerce.” Incidentally, we did not sign any kind of contract with Subvision, nor did we give them the copyright of our work. The financial conditions that Subvision offers are fair enough in view of the project’s scale and allow us to concentrate on fulfilling those tasks that we have set ourselves as artists and writers in this context. Moreover, they allow members of Chto delat to travel to Western Europe and to react to the disheartening context of Subvision directly, with interventions of their own.

We are fully aware of the fact that ANY cultural product can be instrumentalized as a commodity against its producers. But we are also sure that it is necessary to fight for the reappropriation of the ideological and material dividends that neo-liberal cultural policies will try to draw from our work. This is only possible by occupying spaces within the object of our critique, and using them to challenge the status quo. Here, we need to practice a fundamentally different politics based on egalitarianism and collective participation. We do not think that we are too weak to resist some diabolical plan that would instrumentalize our work for something we oppose. In fact, we can say it publically: our politics aim at making sure that places like Hafen City would be a thing of the past, not only in Hamburg but anyplace else. If the developers sud-

denly see the need to bring us in, our goal is to create a situation in which art does not need developers. This contradiction remains fundamental to our participation in the project. Which also means that the real battleground in culture can also be inside such a project as Subvision and not only outside, in the “off.” It is here that we can contest the nature of such a project and show it as our strength.

4. We believe collective political articulation—understood as self-clarification—to be the central goal of our work. We sincerely hope that our presence in Hamburg will help to spark a concretization of the Subvision project’s critique. For now, this critique has been influenced by the vagaries of personal correspondence, rumors, and facile judgements, as if everything were “already clear.” But the points of consensus remain blurry, and have not been sufficiently articulated collectively or in public. We have a unique chance to meet in person and to discuss the situation. Chto delat is more than willing to provide a platform of the critique of Subvision and other festivals and camps like it; moreover, we are willing to do anything we can to make sure that this critique reaches as broad an audience as possible. Thus we invite you to a discussion loosely themed “Self-Organization: Between Repression and Recuperation? Where is the Way Out?”, which we will hold during our stay in Hamburg on August 29th, 2010.

Let’s use this space. Let’s not be “off”! Instead, let’s kick out those who think that they can use the dirty tricks of dividing artists, and using art for their shitty purposes of gentrification and promoting inequality!

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