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‘Chto Delat?’s What Struggle Do We Have in Common? and repoliticisation: defamiliarising the performative turn in gallery-based events

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In this paper I consider the performance *What Struggle Do We Have in Common?* (2010) by the Russian Collective Chto Delat? [What Is to Be Done?] as an artistic strategy that revises the Brechtian ‘learning play’. The play serves as a critical response to the theoretical and aesthetic at play when performance today takes place in gallery spaces, usually performing a resistance to the dialectical, calling for ‘radicality’ rather than ‘critique’. The ‘performative turn’ in the gallery space since the mid ’90s is a marker for differentiating the use of performance today as a strategy for incorporating contemporary economic procedures (different from performance artists of the ’60s and ’70s when the immateriality of this medium was used as a tool to critique the commodification of art as material object). The new modalities whereby ‘performance’ artists delegate to others the execution of an artistic task are indicators of the mirroring in the arts of the new taxonomies of work increasingly extending the performative capacity of the human body and brain to produce social cooperation, affections and creative values (Bishop, 2012). This trend, for some, including Bishop is ‘critical’ because these artists amplify and mirror the current system of exploitation that subjects our life to the new configuration of capital as an all ‘subsuming machine’. I contend instead that they merely reproduce the prevailing conceptual logic under which we live in today’s capitalism. Reminding us that the dialectical that once existed in performance — in the form of ‘inside-outside’ — is no longer present in a system where the ‘outside’ is immanent within the subject/performer during attempts to free him-or-herself from the system of economic exploitation. This philosophical reasoning — both a conceptual tool for reading performance within the gallery and a theoretical ground that inspires contemporary art’s aesthetic strategies — suggests that resistance consists solely in showing the intensity of exploitation today. Therefore art, and specifically, performance (that has become the very signature of the new mode in which ‘knowledge-based’ capitalism produces

economic values) must abandon the dialectical as a method for reactivating critique.

What follows is instead a recuperation, via Chto Delat?’s learning play, of the dialectical as a viable philosophical approach yet also a performative method in response to the prevailing ‘worldview’ usually offered by contemporary performances within galleries. Chto Delat’s restaging of dialectics transforms the gallery into a place where one can take distance from the actual economic conditions of subjection, a space from where critique can be launched. Under the assumption that contemporary cultural discourse and artistic production perceive the current political and cultural paradigm — i.e. globalization and neoliberal capitalism — as a subsumption of all spheres of our lives that overcomes the old ‘inside-outside’ logic of modernity, I show how it is possible to ‘perform critique’ to reactivate a dialectical approach without succumbing to a single totalitarian vision — the ghost of modern times. The philosophical shift in contemporary art circles occupying key ground in performance discourse — due to the intrinsic and immaterial nature of the medium, mirror the performative aspect of ‘immaterial labour’ (Hardt, Negri, 2001; Lazzarato, 1996) — resides in the post-workerist analysis of the reconfiguration of forms of sovereignty at the end of the Cold War, which bring to the fore the dissolution of the old binary logics that populated modernity. This way of perceiving and inhabiting today’s postmodern world is a cultural barometer for interpreting ‘radical practices’ — forms of resistance to capitalism that reject identification, representation, and ordered totality, without excluding artistic agendas. The social entity, and therefore cooperation in the arts, is, according to this postmodern philosophical reasoning, irreducible to a represented collective identity.

Contrary to practices that use collaboration and performance in today’s performative turn to perform a chaotic cooperation between individual subjectivities or a consensual and frictionless

democracy of multiple subjects, Chto Delat?'s 'learning play' transforms the gallery space into a confrontational terrain between two ordered collective entities: artists and activists. The goal is not simply to re-claim a space of politics within the arts using dialectics, but to problematize this method in the postmodern world by recuperating the Brechtian *Lehrstück*.

This strategy on the one hand brings back the political in its purest form, as a confrontation between fronts, but also defamiliarises the gallery space by showing the habitus by which we usually perceive performance in a gallery, and by exposing a means of orchestrating politically engaged art that differs from those we expect when attending a gallery show—i.e., the aesthetic contemplation of art objects and/or the human body. In these familiar scenarios we read and perceive the performative turn as political *per se* because it reacts through action to the object on display in the gallery, or as democratic when it activates our agency without necessarily problematizing how we perceive the world politically.

Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* (1997) considers the notion of 'de-politicisation' to contradict the usual understanding of the contemporary Western phase of global capitalism as an immutable logic that sanctions the 'death of the political', understood as a dialectical tension between at least two fronts. Derrida reads this phenomenon as generative because it is precisely when the antagonism between two political visions is subsumed under the name of a singular ideology that we can reinvent existing politics. I link 'depoliticisation', as Derrida did, to current Western globalisation as a generative space for testing alternatives to this geopolitical condition and therefore reconfiguring a new political dimension. This is a method that Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) called 'repoliticisation'. He suggests a tactic that, rather than ignoring the past, or interpreting it through the eyes of a fixed, unified historical narrative, insists on questioning and revision. This re-establishes an antinomy that makes room for 'the political', diminishing the supremacy of a unified world without enemies — as for instance Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) or the US after the end of the Cold War (1991).

In considering 'depoliticisation', i.e. the 'end of the political' — the conceptual frame through which I read the geopolitical condition after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the communist 'enemy' dissolved while simultaneously wandering as a ghost around the world (as in *Specters of Marx*) — I interpret Chto Delat?'s learning play as an action that opposes 'normalisation'. Their performance enacts within the gallery space a Derridean 'repoliticisation' that contributes on a theoretical level to the concept of 'the political' today, and on a practical level to the articulation of artistic practices — specifically performative — that challenge the idea that the 'radical' in art must always be nonrepresentational and anti-identitarian, generating instead the 'critical' as an intrinsic tension between two oppositions. However tenuous it might sound to link Derrida to the modern theatrical machine that is Brecht's learning play, Chto Delat?'s performance triggers a revision and re-contextualization of this tool, precisely because the group makes it operative in the

postmodern space of the gallery, in which, by the year 2000, the performative turn was an accepted convention for avant-garde art, akin to the socio-economic shift from a material economy to knowledge-based production. I take the learning play, inspired by Fredric Jameson's interpretation in *Brecht and Method* (1998), as a theatrical model for motivating both the audience and the actors/participants to provide options to a given political situation — not merely to solve the dilemma of choosing one alternative or another, but to unambiguously expose a given decision in order to problematize it and foster thought about all the choices imaginable, with a logic that coincides with Derrida's 'repoliticisation'. Furthermore, the fact that Chto Delat? recuperates this model in a gallery space not only alerts us to our responsibility for facing and revising the past in order to open up political alternatives, it also tests the learning play itself in order to render it available as a response to the 'death of the political'.

2. Chto Delat? [What Is to Be Done?]

Chto Delat? [What Is to Be Done?] is a Russian collective founded in 2003 by a group of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod. The main goal of the 'workgroup' is to merge political theory, art and activism and to create a platform that can function as a parallel infrastructure to the 'art world'. Their practice includes a homonymous magazine, each issue being devoted to a different theme, and a web platform that gathers all the elements that influence their artistic practice (listed on their website as: 'newspapers, work material'; 'text and theory'; 'networks, partners and friends'), as well as documentation of their artworks ('art projects'; 'films and video'; 'theatre and performances'). The group is made up of ten members. Five are artists: Olga Egorova/Tsaplya, Nikolai Oleinikov, Natalia Pershina/Glucklya, Kirill Shuvalov, and Dimitry Vilensky; three are philosophers: Artiom Magun, Alexei Penzin, and Oxana Timofeeva; one is an art critic: David Riff; and one is a poet and critic: Alexander Skidan.

The collective's chosen name, Chto Delat?, is a political statement offering a sense of the conceptual reasoning behind their practice. Even though the title is universally known as the question formulated by Lenin in his famous treatise, *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) — and which later became an intellectual obsession for leftist thinkers — the name originates from a lesser-known heritage: it is the title of a novel by the nineteenth-century Russian philosopher, journalist and literary critic, Nikolai Chernyshevsky. The main character of the novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) is a woman, Vera Pavlona, who escaped her family's conventional traditions and arranged marriage to dedicate her life to the cause of the Russian revolution. This novel was highly influential for generations of Russian radical revolutionaries long after its publication in the mid-nineteenth century, eventually becoming a Soviet classic. The legacy of the title *What Is to Be Done?* is conventionally attributed, especially by people outside of the Russian context, to Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov's (better known as Lenin) homonym pamphlet (1901-1902) that gains recognition in Western Marxist

discourse for his revision of Marxist thought adapted to fit the conditions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia (under a Tsarist autocracy and as an underdeveloped society whose economic stability was dependent upon its agricultural production (serfdom)). The unique conditions in Russia led Lenin to acknowledge, like Marx, that the proletariat is the only revolutionary class, but in his un-industrialized Russia he would have to somehow adapt the Marxist model to his contemporary Russia. He further recognized the distinction of a 'rural proletariat' within the proletariat class as distinguished by the ownership of land — those without land being exploited.

This discovery became central to Lenin's work who, unlike Marx, did not believe that capitalism was a necessary historical phase and that the proletariat will spontaneously develop its political consciousness, but instead that the proletariat needs outside support: the communist party. Lenin stressed that the party must be composed of 'professional revolutionaries' and must bring political consciousness to the working-class movement (by every strata of Russian society as subjected to exploitation by the Tsarist autocracy). While Marx believes that the revolution would come about because of capitalism's collapse, Lenin claims that the revolution would cause the bourgeoisie's defeat and the proletariat could use the state for a transition to socialism — avoiding the capitalist historical stage, that Marx sees as inevitable. Lenin's main points — albeit usually conceived of as the result of his adaptation of Marx in a Russian context, which exerted great influence (explaining why Lenin's ideology is commonly called 'Marxist-Leninism') — were framed upon Chernyshevsky's writings. Lenin's title *What Is to Be Done?* re-evokes Chernyshevsky not only in order to expose the main source of his ideas (such as the necessity of 'professional revolutionaries', a small group of people within a society dedicated to the social revolution to help Russian 'common people' to arise, what as defined in the novel through the character of the 'new man' i.e. Rakhmetov), but also because he believed it necessary to insist that "true" revolutionaries are those who sacrifice every aspect of their lives for the revolution.

The 'new man', Rakhmetov, depicted by Chernyshevsky, is wholly dedicated to the cause, giving up all vices, except cigars. He becomes celibate so as not to be distracted from his goals, he learns gymnastics to increase his physical strength, even once sleeping on a bed of nails to "harden" himself. In short, his entire life is dedicated to training for the revolution. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* focuses on the men of Russia, specifically the 'new' (revolutionary) man and his role in inciting support for the revolution. Therefore, Chernyshevsky himself is a 'new man' stirring intellectual activity to the cause of the revolution.

The novel also sheds lights on the importance of culture within social struggles, serving to educate and elicit greater support of the revolution, explicitly stating what one must do to become a revolutionary (like Vera Pavlona and Rakhmetov). For Chto Delat? to recall Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* is not only to trace the genesis of Russian radical revolutionary thoughts, one that historiographical conventions from the West

attribute to Lenin, but to also denote a specific conception of art and culture within society and the desire to effectively transform it. The first major work of Chernyshevsky, 'The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality' (1853), focuses on the role of art as representative of reality. A realistic approach in art depicts life as it is in order to critique it. Chernyshevsky applies a political and utilitarian approach to art in order for it to serve the struggle of the masses. He did not only seek to use art as a means of critique but also as a space for seeing how things should function in an ideal 'emancipatory' world that the revolution would bring to existence. The philosophy of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* serves as a theoretical ground for Chto Delat? and as an inspirational model to develop aesthetic strategies insistent upon the transformative potential of art when thought of as the space in which a critique of reality can be launched creating a training ground for the revolution. Chto Delat?, in having lived through the transition from a communist Russia to a capitalist state, confronted in their contemporary Russia new exploitative labour conditions similar to those of the Tsarist period and system of primitive accumulation that Chernyshevsky experienced and resisted. Due to the gross similarities of the Russian state in the '90s and in the mid-nineteenth century, Chto Delat? felt that Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* could serve as a relevant guide invoking the novel's emancipatory promises to share, via art, a tradition of radical Russian thought. Chto Delat? oriented its practice towards challenging fixed cultural values as narrated by shared conceptions of history, art history, political theory and theatre. This methodology becomes an aesthetic strategy that they deploy throughout the course of their theatre and performance activities, consistently referencing Brecht as a core influence. They not only highlight the symbolic significance of 'defamiliarisation' — a method that makes conventions look unfamiliar — but they also explore the method in actual artistic practice, continuously referencing past traditions while questioning and re-contextualising them. 'We use Brecht because what he has done offers us a series of techniques and conceptual frames that we can use for testing our present moment.' Chto Delat? thus explicitly cites its main conceptual inspiration while acknowledging the importance of mobilising Brecht's method today, revising it according to new historical, socio-economic and political conditions.

The method that Chto Delat? usually invokes is one that while insisting on Marxist dialectics in which two opposite realities (thesis and antithesis) fuse into an harmonious totality (synthesis) feels the urgency to problematize the results as they unfold when the binary opposition is resolved into a unity without conflicts. The latter vision re-evokes Theodor Adorno's criticism of Marx's methodology in his *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Adorno's main concern with the Marxist dialectical method was that if reality is represented with its elements under scrutiny, they form 'side-and the other-side' of the same elements, would cause the resultant tension to merge into a unified totality (a synthesis) which will continue from one synthesis to another. This mechanism, for Adorno does not allow transformation of the existing capitalism since it follows



Photo 1: Photo documentation of Chto Delat?, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?*, 2011, learning play at ICA Auditorium, London, 2011. Courtesy: the artists

its same logic: the representation of a reality as an undisputable single entity (again, a synthesis). The Adornian logic brings to the fore the autonomy of art as a site to see reality as an irreconcilable tension between opposition.

Today, re-evoking dialectics in dual forms (Brechtian Marxism and Adorno's negative dialectics), as Chto Delat? does, means that while we should recognise the irreducible tensions within the different social subjectivities that populate postmodernity (to which the Marxist model of the working class as the privileged agent of transformation of society is untenable) we should simultaneously acknowledge that this social stratified world is also a world of contradictions (struggles). These contradictions are only available to us if we re-interrogate the dialectical method for deciphering our flattened postmodern world. As taught by Brecht, art, when it makes operative dialectics, has the capacity to reduce the complexity of the world into a dual contradiction that, while as Brecht's Marxism aspires to be eventually dissolved in a unity (communism), simultaneously renders available this unity as the ever present possibility to be again fragmented in dual opposition (along with Adorno). Oscillating between the desire to resolve social struggles for a better world where differences (inequalities) will form a unity (equal social and economic conditions for all) and the irresolvable tensions of the social that exists in the post-modern world, Chto Delat?'s works restage dialectics to problematize such a method. That is to say to do not renounce to art's capability of making things appear contrary to their worldly representations, i.e. to insist on art's autonomy. Chto Delat? contrasts the prevalent reasoning that reduces art, among other spheres, to capitalist production and reproduction according to post-operaist philosophy. This

philosophy suggests that today's art can only shape new forms of resistance when it happens outside of the traditional art frame, or when it becomes something other than art (as in a protest or a socially-engaged practice). Also in retaining economic-reductionism reduces art and culture to mere tool of economic productivity, dismissing the capability of these fields to produce critique. For post-operaism the symbols and values that art might create today are crucial for advancing the production of values and symbols that 'semicapitalism' demands. Such prevailing mode for interpreting our contemporary world overcomes the emancipatory promises that philosophical and artistic projects of modernity (such as Brecht and Adorno) brought to the fore through an adaptation of Marxist dialectics.

In acknowledging what is at stake when we consider today's art and culture, in concordance with post-operaism, as exclusively an economic machine subject to capital and active in producing capital itself, Chto Delat? cites instead its transformative potential if one considers that the socio-economic transformations of a society are not primarily driven by technological progress but also by shifts in power for the circulation of symbols and values within a society, effecting then the moral and intellectual leadership of that society. Institutions are then, not places to desert because they perform an authoritative power (the dominant) that subsumes any actions we might take within them to its advantage (its prescribed political plan), but instead are, for Chto Delat?, sites where the dominant capitalist order articulates and executes its vision of the world to make its particular interests appear as general interests of the whole society. For such reasons, art institutions are also sites of ideological articulation. While this articulation exists as a reflection of a dominant (one might say, hegemonic)

class and/or social order, it might also be the framework for elements of that ideology, on the same site where they traditionally support the prevailing order, to criticise them — when we have the chance to deconstruct them (as Chto Delat? did in exhibiting their pieces in contemporary art institutions).

3. Late and post-socialist conditions and ‘normalisation’

In Europe, the year 1989 will be remembered as the end of communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall stands for an overarching societal, historical, and political momentum, that is, a shift towards a post-Socialist reality. It officially ratified the beginning of a new era in which the whole of Europe became free from the phantasms of totalitarian Communist regimes. More importantly, the fracture between the liberal West and the Socialist East (Erjavec, 2003) could be integrated into a unified political and geographical entity in the name of Europe. In the span of two years — from late 1989 until the end of 1991 — all the socialist states of Eastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia, each with their due differences) moved to a post-Socialist reality, as did the Soviet Union in the same period. This move has been examined by a number of art historians and critics — such as Marina Gržinić, Boris Groys, Viktor Misiano, and Aleš Erjavec, to mention but a few — as a period of ‘transition’, a historic phase that could have led the Eastern European states towards a process of democratisation and liberalisation.

If on the one hand this condition was seen with enthusiasm — as it would liberate the Eastern Bloc’s population from both the oppression of the Leviathan State and the prison of censorship — on the other hand this post-Socialist condition generated an ‘ideological, political, and social vacuity of the ruling utopian political doctrine, a doctrine that exceeded plain political ideology, for it held in its grasp the whole of the societal field and hence spontaneously affected all social realms.’

This section considers the political implications of this shift away from a situation of antagonism toward a neutral unity, and on the hegemony it produces in the construction of a new ideology. The replacement of the old ideology — that of communism — with a new one — that of globalised neoliberal capitalism has the potential to recuperate the dynamic of ‘friend and enemy’ that is at the basis of ‘the political’ as elaborated by the political philosopher Carl Schmitt (1932). Schmitt states that the concept of ‘the political’ exists when two fronts, like communism and capitalism, confront each other, and, conversely that this concept ‘dies’ when the dialectical tension is flattened in the name of a unique political project, therefore assuming the character of a hegemonic, and in some circumstances totalitarian, regime. While Schmitt states that the replacement of one ideology with another removes rather than creates the possibility of a recuperation of a politics of antagonism, I cite Derrida’s reading of Schmitt because it considers that, as in historical phases such as the one we are experiencing through globalization and neo-liberal capitalism today, it is precisely when one ideology is superimposed that one should reclaim the previous supplanted ideology. Not to

bring it back as it was but to question and revise it — a process that might generate alternative politics to the politics we have known until today.

Through this lens one can link what Eastern European thinkers — such as those mentioned above — saw as ‘normalisation’ of the end of ‘the political’, and in particular one can draw attention to the phase of ‘transition’ from one economic socio-political condition to another. The moment of transition signals the passage from a moment of ‘normalisation’, the reality of socialism seen as the only world possible, toward a phase that, even though predicated as the liberation from that ‘normalization’, fell back upon another kind of ‘normalisation’, which is called globalisation. That is to say, again, the ‘end of the political’.

In her essay “The Dialectics of Normality”, (1999) Bojana Pejić defines the phase that preceded the reunification of the former Eastern Bloc countries as a quest for normality. That is to say, a desire for a unified world without any ‘crazy monster’ leader, but in which freedom, peace and individual international identities reigned. She suggests that ‘normalisation’ as a political process was a response to this genuine desire for a ‘normal’ reality on the part of a communist gerontocracy and Western European bureaucrats seeking to expand the political plan of a liberal, democratic and eternally peaceful subject: Europe.

In contrast to this version of ‘normalisation’ as wielded by the globalised apparatus (we should include here the US and the current Western political ideology of neoliberalism), Pejić insists upon the need to consider this normality as a concept that has its own dialectic. In distinguishing between the aforementioned ‘normalisation’ — understood as the ideological process of integration of the Eastern block into the West, after the fall of their communist regimes — and ‘normality’ — as instead a ‘living and working condition’ in which people from the former East had to reshape their lives according to this new East-West duality; she acknowledged that the ‘state of normality is not one you just reach and keep’, in concordance with the logic of ‘normalisation’, but it is instead a living praxis ‘invested with both inner and outer contradictions’. Normality then is for Pejić a collective midway state between the desire to retain the emancipatory ideals communism ingrained into their collective consciousness and the will to reject the nightmares of their communist past. Although Pejić, via her concept of ‘normality’, finds dialectics in the process of integration of the European communist countries into Western ‘Europeanness’, I argue that such an analysis does not give centrality to the concept of ‘the political’ in its strictest sense. I acknowledge that normalisation, and not only ‘normality’, contains the potential for showing the duality that exists when we think of processes of normalisation as a homogenizing ideology. Via my reading Derrida on the political project of globalisation in the post-socialist Europe, normalisation might be taken generatively for recuperating antagonist politics. It is exactly when reality is made available in the reconciled form of a community of friends, that one can tactically oppose an enemy. Pejić’s consideration about ‘normality’, when scrutinized in political terms, reinforces

this process of 'normalisation', rather than trying to contrast it, because it legitimises the hegemonic order according to which all allies (US, Eastern and Western Europe) reduce the potential for the political, whose foundation is in the antagonism between 'friend' and 'enemy'. It is necessary then to highlight the fact that this political neutralisation is not merely a liberation from communism but, with due changes, is in principle the same dimension: a single option. For this reason it has to be diminished in order to reactivate 'the political'.

A similar recuperation of antagonism can happen in the space of art precisely because the gallery or the museum can normalise or neutralise any political by means of the globalised canons of aestheticisation, especially through the dominant postmodern discourse associated with the 'performative turn' in the gallery space since the mid '90s. The 'art world' operates under the rhetoric of the global through which contemporary art institutions build up their international reputation. Mainstream international museums and large-scale events, such as biennials, function as machines for 'performing' the irreducible mobility of art workers (artists, curators and art critics) as a symptom of the hybrid multinational subjectivities theorised by postmodern thinking, including post-workerism among other strands. The mobility that such events demand of artists, curators and art critics parallels the forms of resistance of the new political subject — such as the multitude, unquantifiable by the narration of a single identity. Therefore, being 'contemporary', both as an aesthetic canon and a philosophical convention, equals the embodiment or 'performing' of globalization. This scenario, which does not provide any space for resistance if not within the same apparatuses and within the same socio-economic, political and cultural paradigm (the principle of 'immanence' tells us that there is 'no outside'), might be challenged through the recuperation and interrogation of the dialectical logic of 'inside-outside' or politically through the rehabilitation of a political alternative to globalization and capitalism.

The way in which the contemporary art apparatus works could be considered an exemplary model, in concordance with the post-operaist view, of the multitude as the new subjectivity that populates postmodernity. The multitude, (aptly represented in the art world by the artists, curators and art critics travelling globally) through the mobility that an open 'frontiers' world allows, resists representation as a stable identity. This mobility enables different subjects from numerous countries to exist as a multiplicity of hybrid identities because they are constantly self-generating. Thus globalisation on one side restructures mechanisms of power over the social — no longer through the nation state of modernity but through the conjunction of different international organisations rhizomatically composed — while also rendering available the conditions through which the social might resist its power — through the amalgam of heterogeneous subjects that globalisation itself creates. This current state envisions a social resistance no longer in need of politics, understood as social struggles between one stable identity over another, but that instead resistance is already contained, paradoxically, within the same conditions of

exploitation that one tries to fight. It comes to the fore that such a vision — key today for interpreting social struggles and as theoretical inspiration of many art practices and discourses intended to deal with postmodern politics — denies the existence of an 'outside' because everything, even opposition to the dominant order is within this order itself. Therefore the art world under its globalized aspiration realizes this philosophy of 'non-politics', as the inherent and spontaneous capability to resist of the multitude. Consequentially the art world stages, often, the impossibility of an outside, that is to say the very condition of critique as essentially a dialectical logic between an inside and an outside; that is to say it denies the existence of a place from which critique might be launched. However, while acknowledging the current situation as a condition in which any entity from the outside is captivated within the inside and being agreed in principle with the shift from a world of nations to globalization or even with the economic changes that occurred in the global West — as elaborated by the post-operaist *welthanschauung* — one might also think about this neutralization of politics in positive terms. That is to say, not as if post-Fordism and globalisation are the end of history to which some day the multitude will spontaneously create the conditions for changing this capitalist mode (a strategy which implies waiting for this future to come without taking any action of resistance in the present: immobilism), but instead to take post-Fordism and globalisation, exactly because they neutralise 'politics', as resourceful ground for re-claiming 'the political'. Since neutralisation exists precisely because of the conditions of globalization — what Derrida calls 'depoliticisation' — a reactivation of 'the political' can happen only when a dialectical movement is still possible. Thus, it is precisely within the space of the gallery, seen as a 'normalised' space that one can respond by showing the other side of the same entity, that is to say, the realm of the political. Performance appears in this scenario as the most appropriate site for collectively testing and rehearsing 'utopic' alternatives to the dominant logic of global capitalism because it contains, as a medium, an unpredictable character, and further, it has the malleability to generate actions by the means of the live body on stage. Furthermore, performance is the privileged medium chosen by contemporary art institutions to perversely subject the social body to 'knowledge-based' capitalism while simultaneously, in some cases, trying to liberate this collectivity from the same. Performance, because of its ability to mirror the forms of post-Fordist work ('affective labour'), in the gallery, activates on stage the philosophy of immanentism; it shows from one side, how intense today's capitalism is and rarely offers examples of how we could free ourselves from it (although even when it does so, it still mimics that resistance to capitalism will spontaneously emerge from within). So, the the performative as the 'staging of post-workerism' enacts within the gallery an instance of the neutralisation of politics. However, paradoxically I ask whether performance — precisely because it is the very medium that has become the signature of the neutralising of the gallery — can be the form in which resistance, opposition, place of

critique can be recovered, rediscovered, reactivated. However, paradoxically I ask whether performance — precisely because it is the very medium that has become the signature of the neutralising of the gallery — can be the form in which resistance, opposition, place of critique can be recovered, rediscovered, reactivated. The learning play performed by Chto Delat? at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London [ICA] is exemplary for exploring modes in which this medium, exactly because its encapsulation within this capitalist milieu, can contrast the vision of performance as ‘immanent’ and therefore is useful for representing in the gallery space the ‘depoliticized’ conditions of our postmodern age. Rehabilitating a dialectical tension while investigating its efficacy today, the learning play is a generative example of Derrida’s ‘repoliticisation’. Even though the focus of the analysis here is on the method of the learning play, it is fundamental to embrace the entire inheritance of Brecht as a tool that pervades the entire practice of Chto Delat? — specifically the notion of the ‘alienation effect’ as a strategy that they revise in order to unlock fixed cultural and historical parameters. They exposed the audience to an alternative narrative by ‘defamiliarising’ shared beliefs. Furthermore, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* uses the aesthetic tools contained in the Brechtian ‘alienation effect’ to estrange the contemporary art institution, the space of the ICA, turning it into a political arena or a ‘social laboratory’ for rehearsing politics. Brecht’s theatre today, when revised and interrogated, might transform spaces of cultural production (both the theatre itself and the gallery), distancing them from their common usage as places for aesthetic contemplation and synesthetic pleasure in order to reinvigorate them as primarily social institutions for orchestrating collective desires without forcing a purpose-driven political plan.

4. ‘Defamiliarisation’ and the Verfremdungseffekt

Fredric Jameson in *Brecht and Method* (1998) notes that the alienation effect has many layers and interpretations and can be read as a ‘distancing effect’ in itself — as a process that not only distorts the shared perception of reality, but has itself been the subject of a distortion. ‘Sometimes it is evoked in terms of the effect itself that names it. To make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes, implies the antecedence of a general familiarity, of a habit which prevents us from really looking at things, a kind of perceptual numbness [...]’ In this way the ‘V-effect’ allows for a recuperation of perception. From another angle, it can be read as the apparatus through which Brecht deployed theatrical techniques (citing quotations; making evident the distinction between the character that the human being behind the actor was supposed to play and the human being him-or herself through a method of acting in which the actor can modify and subsequently take distance from the scripts; using music or other scenic stratagems such as displaying placards). Furthermore, it can also prevent identification with the character, further highlighting the distance of the actor on stage with the character that he or she is supposed to represent.

The description that Jameson gives of this effect has a political connotation. It is a political weapon that can react to the idea that the social order, as it is built, as it manifests itself to us, is natural. It is in this spirit that the alienation effect reinforces my assumption that Brecht, and more specifically the learning play, is the tool through which ‘repoliticisation’ can be achieved. The alienation effect, as described by Jameson, helps us to clarify Chto Delat’s intentions. It is a ‘repoliticisation’ not only for the realm of ‘the political’, but also within the sphere of artistic production that today ‘performs radicality’ through immanence. To this principle of ‘immanence’ the Russian group contrasts the dialectic as a method that needs interrogation and without which we lose the imaginative ability to see things as they might be or as they are. Their attempt to perform dialectics confronts collaboration and the ‘social turn’, performing an immanent logic vis-à-vis the learning play and devising instead a friction between two polarities. Furthermore, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* combines the conceptual discourse of ‘depoliticisation/repoliticisation’ with an operational strategy: the revision of the learning play itself.

5. What Struggles Do We Have in Common? as a strategy of ‘repoliticisation’.

What Struggles Do We Have in Common? took place on September 10, 2010, and was orchestrated by the collective together with other local collectives of artists and activists. (see: figs. 1; 2) Chto Delat? wanted to share ideas on the theme of struggle between factions when an event takes place within an institution — the common enemy of left-wing advocates. They attempted to create a unified voice in which the distinctions between groups would be subsumed under the question: ‘What struggles do we have in common?’ Further, if by means of this question they were to become ‘friends’ — a community that can share ideals and goals, or suffer the same kinds of exploitation by the current system — they might additionally be able to articulate a response to the question: ‘What strategies should be undertaken?’ By making an attempt to create a single horizontal entity, the performance mirrors the archetype of collaborative practice today, performing a democracy of equals without antagonism. At the same time, it also reveals this type of collaboration to be an impossible task when, within the scope of the performance, the group of friends is forced to take positions as either artists or activists. For the outcome of the performance, the group expanded their collaborative platform to other collectives with whom they had not previously worked: Carrot Workers Research Group (London), Ultra-Red (London), Turbulence (London), Historical Materialism (London), Parachute Artists Nomad (Amsterdam), Freee (London), Iguana Dance (St. Petersburg), Vlidi (Belgrade), and the non-profit art organisation no.w.here, also based in London. It is precisely this engagement with other communities in the creative process of the piece that enables the unfolding of an unpredictable collaborative dynamic. To develop the play together, the group organised a ‘forty-eight-hour communal life seminar’ two days before the staging. The groups were invited to meet at the



Photo 2: Photo documentation of *Chto Delat?*, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?*, 2011, learning play at ICA Auditorium, London, 2011. Courtesy: the artists

ICA, where they planned to spend a day and night together — sleeping, eating, and carrying out a series of activities together in order to build a communal consciousness. Participants engaged in physical activity, body movement, voice exercises, and other leisure activities where the goal was to generate trust between members, for participants to get to know one another, to become ‘friends’. They played a ring-a-ring-of-roses; they formed pairs and took turns spontaneously and genuinely touching each other; they took turns carrying a member as they lay horizontally; they created moments of collective discussion; and so on. The debates they stimulated were focused on the conflict between artists and activists, which was seen as a dialogical struggle that can open up more politically engaged scenarios for art and more imaginative possibilities for activism. In this collective seminar in preparation for the performance on stage, *Chto Delat?* produces an improvised attempt to coordinate the chaotic subjectivities that form any collective identity, while simultaneously creating a rupture within the social body as soon as they force people to think dialectically about themselves as either ‘artists’ or ‘activists’. This dynamic pervades the whole play; it calls for an organised collectivity of equals while at the same time engendering an antagonistic social formation and therefore a dialectical as opposed to immanent dynamic. The piece started in the auditorium of the ICA with a curator describing to the audience what the creation process was in order for the performance to take place, focusing the attention on the improvisatory aspect of the play: ‘For practical reasons I hope you appreciate the improvisation of the play’. Racks hung with casual clothing were wheeled onto the stage in order to structure the scenography of the piece, which began when a woman in a black smock came onstage and proclaimed: ‘Welcome to our learning play. Now we start!’ Then the groups

of people who were part of the ‘life seminar’ populated the stage and assumed central roles in the play. A girl wearing a white smock and holding a laptop took her position on the stage. Her role, as the performance continued, was to type into the laptop whatever emerged in the group discussion. These typed sentences then appeared live on a main screen positioned to the right side of a central podium. Again the woman in the black smock, or the ‘moderator’ of the debate and also the presenter of the ‘show’, announced: ‘Chorus on the stage you can start!’ This referred to a group of men and women standing on a higher podium at stage left. Wearing white spacesuits, the only part of their bodies that was visible was their faces — an aesthetic strategy that, while grouping them together, as a literal chorus, also focused attention on the most important aspect of their live performance: the voice, which became the meaning through which they created a unified subjectivity. The first act then began with the chorus singing a traditional socialist composition but with a libretto specifically written for the occasion of the play. Through this musical reinterpretation of classical socialist songs, the play confronts audience expectations for a theatrical event in a gallery space, where music might typically be used as an aesthetic device that contributes, together with other aesthetic tools, to a ‘synesthetic’ situation (akin to the contemporary ‘post-Brechtian’ forms of theatre described as ‘post-dramatic’ (Lehmann, 2006)). The anachronistic sound shifts the gallery experience from one of aesthetic contemplation to a discomfited experience of superimposed political propaganda, socialist in nature, conventionally perceived by the logic of the contemporary as mere rhetoric. The audience, the actor, and the whole gallery apparatus are forced to face these paradigms and to further question both socialism’s past and the present state of contemporary capitalism, along with their associated cultural

logics. A question (the first), to which the group was expected to react and whose aim was to stimulate a discussion between the participants of the performance, was projected onto a screen. The moderator read it aloud to the audience and the group onstage:

‘First question: What are you struggling for?’ Immediately the group on stage began to react. One said, ‘I want everything for everybody’. Another said, ‘Maybe it sounds a bit clichéd, but the meaning of life.’ Another person said, ‘I am struggling for life, and to be alive’. Another said, ‘Against capitalism’. One said, ‘For a strong political left-wing revolutionary movement,’ which was met by audience applause and responded to with: ‘I am struggling against all the anti-communist discourses predominant today’ and ‘I am struggling against the rise of the EDL [English Defence League]’ and so on in a growing climax between tragedy and hilarity until the moderator announced a new question that simultaneously appeared on screen: ‘Second question: Whom do you represent?’ Dmitry, a member of Chto Delat?, replied, ‘Russians from the 1970s till nowadays.’ Another said, ‘A radical queer community called Radical Fairies,’ followed by, ‘The politics of representation, which is too complex to engage with this microphone’. Another followed: ‘I represent no one’. However because of the unpredictability that the format of Brecht’s learning play enables it is difficult to say if these exchanges between participants are solely scripted or improvised. The different way in which Chto Delat? revises the original Brechtian learning play renders such deciphering even more complex. While Brecht’s *Lehrstück* begins with a clear plot and only later makes it available for transformation by ‘actors/amateurs’ (in this method, if these plays were public, one could theoretically distinguish between Brecht’s and participants’ voice), Chto Delat? invites players, from the first rehearsal, to interpret and develop the plot as they choose leaving the public audience later unaware which parts of the play are scripted or improvised. Even though, the play might appear to us as ambiguous because of its constantly evolving nature, the presence of Chto Delat?’s members as active ‘audience/participants’ within the play gives the chance to the collective to re-direct conversations and actions towards their intentions and/or beliefs. So, in the section that engages with the politics of representation, as described above, it is certainly a direction that Chto Delat? wanted to give to the play for engaging with the politics of representation (it is indeed Dmitry Vilensky, a core member of Chto Delat? who poses the question of representation to the actors/amateurs on stage), but the group’s replies cannot be determined to be improvised or scripted. However, as these scripts function well together within Chto Delat?’s worldview - and particularly within the politics of representation that this learning play aims to show (problematize them while simultaneously proving their efficacy) - it suggests that these group’s exchanges were the results of material that Chto Delat? selected from previous rehearsals. These comments by the actors/amateurs directly engage the play’s core object of interrogation: the politics of representation. Despite the reductionism of ‘artists’

and ‘activists’ as identities, *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* aspires to rehabilitate representation in contrast to today’s more accepted anti-representational practices. It problematizes (‘the politics of representation, which is too complex to engage with this microphone’) or it rejects (‘I represent no one’) representation itself. The dynamic continued with further questions to structure the discussion: ‘To whom are you accountable?’ and ‘Are you revolutionary?’ The latter question quickly became paradoxically comic with reactions such as: ‘I tend to be...’ ‘I am revolutionary in my kitchen’, ‘On the weekends’, and ‘I am anti-capitalist so I must be revolutionary’. The question ‘Do you belong here at the ICA?’ was met with ‘What is the ICA?’ to which another person suggested, ‘International Communist Association!’ Two other provocations then characterised the discussion: ‘What are you risking?’ and ‘What is your power and/or your weakness?’ After multiple replies from the group, which, as seen above, oscillated between a serious political consciousness (what it is expected in reality) and a humorous sense of instigation (what is delegated to fiction, or more aptly theatre), the moderator proclaimed: ‘They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society!’ and she invited the group to celebrate this moment with the festive exclamation: ‘Hurrah! Hurrah!’ As the group chanted ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!’ it then physically lifted and carried each member of the group as an exercise of trust. After this action, the presenter invited the community to sit and the chorus began to sing: ‘They are sacrificing themselves and they did it for practical reasons [...]’. Through the description of this first act it is evident that the conceptual frame in which the performance is embedded is the philosophical and political implication of dialectic as a discourse that we inherited from our philosophical, political, and historical past. The play started with the presentation of oppositional fronts that are usually invoked when one thinks about the relation that might exist between art and politics: artists versus activists to contravene the increasing overcoming of this opposition, as for instance with the new mode of art-as-activism (a paradigm that defines practices that supplant the aesthetic domain with concrete interventions either for the amelioration of the social through ‘socially-engaged projects’ or with interventions in the public realm in the form of protests). The first act immediately announces to the audience the core material of the learning play: dialectics in the form of thesis and anti-thesis (the artists and the activists) but also the attempt to reach a synthesis (when the group is temporarily reconciled into a community of friends before getting divided again).

In re-evoking dialectics — as a theoretical model and a method for theatre that helped to shape emancipatory political and artistic projects in the past — *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* feels the urge to reactivate its legacy (both in an Adornian sense as an irreconcilable opposition of thesis and anti-thesis and in a Brechtian Marxist way as a duality which will bring a synthesis) to test its validity in the present day. It is precisely when the paradigmatic shift of a European society to a global one has occurred, and when the new logic that postmodern

philosophy elaborates for interpreting, and sometimes resisting this scenario to overcome the dialectical method, that Chto Delat? activates dialectics to prove how transformative this way of thinking could be in testing globalisation and its associated philosophical reasoning. Dialectics are for Chto Delat? a way of thinking to be made operative within the globalised European scenario in claiming that globalization must be assessed and verified. The learning play wavers between an effort to perform a unified collective identity — like that which modernity sought to achieve, for instance — and the actualisation of parodies for that political project — as when leftist slogans are reduced to clichés, revealing the complexity of postmodern politics. However, through those strategies, as the analysis of the performance that follows will show, the play does not entirely dismiss old ideologies, and neither does it renounce a liberal political plan. Instead, it seeks to cross-examine these notions. It conspicuously manifests the ‘slogans’ we usually relate to liberal political plans, communism, or socialism. Sometimes they are framed as clichés; sometimes as ridiculous; sometimes as jokes; but also sometimes as significant philosophical and political ideas. The moment when the presenter invited the group to split visualises the logic investigated by Schmitt as the basis of the political: the ‘friend and enemy’ dynamic. This act on stage symbolically represents the reverse of the notion of the political as a structure that functions as an a priori to the natural affiliation of human beings, an affiliation that can be seen within the performance as necessary to collectively produce something: a task, strategically orchestrated by Chto Delat? This logic is traceable to the work’s inception, when the artists, with their fictional ‘life seminar’ stratagem, invited other collectives to do something together, even though it was not clear how a group of artists, each interested in producing a collaborative artwork within an institution, would interact with a group of activists whose fixed position in society is always ‘against the institution’ and to whom the label ‘revolution’ is often attached by shared cultural parameters. But rather than dismiss this binary logic that organises our mind-set — the mind-set that sees the artist as ineffective and creative, and the activist as more effective and politically engaged, or, put differently, the former as unproductive for social change and the latter as a combatant for a better world — the piece achieves its subversive character by exposing the audience and the participants to past ideologies showing sometimes their current rational uselessness, sometimes their historical relevance. It achieves this, for example, with a range of replies to the serious question ‘What are we struggling for?’ (‘I want everything for everybody’, ‘Against capitalism’, ‘For a strong political left-wing revolutionary movement,’); and hilarious responses to the subsequent ‘Are you revolutionary?’ (‘I am revolutionary in my kitchen’, ‘On the weekends’). In this way the participants started to ‘deconstruct’ the fixed mind-set according to which those relevant questions would demand one of two positions: ‘Yes, I am revolutionary!’ or ‘No, I am not revolutionary!’. To this reductionist formula, which would suit the understanding of Carl Schmitt’s concept of ‘the political’, Chto Delat? and

the participants engage a new dimension that, as Derrida theoretically suggested, deconstructs ‘depoliticisation’ as an ‘un-generative’ condition, a hegemonic way of thinking that has dominated political and philosophical discourses. But rather than dismissing two options, ‘yes’ or ‘no’, they consider the two alternatives as part of the same ontology: that of the political. To reach this goal they use a strategy that is present in the learning plays of Brecht and, in a broad sense, all his methodology: taking a position that illustrates ‘this’ (the right answer) ‘rather than that’ (the wrong answer) in order to instigate a generative reflection on what that the latter may contain. They insist on communism — ‘They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society!’ — in order to show this as an alternative to contemporary neoliberal capitalism, but at the same time to interrogate it and thus move the space of the gallery toward a testing ground of all possible alternatives to the current situation: ‘I would like to promote ambiguity rather than any political agenda’ and ‘Ambiguity is a political agenda’. They interact in a state between hilarity and seriousness — or between reality and fiction — in order to contaminate the artists’ convictions with clichés coming from activism, and the activists’ convictions with the prejudices of artists. The desired outcome was to expose the perversion of both new and outdated ideologies. This exposure was achieved not only through the clichés uttered by the group, but also by the physical structures on stage: a cardboard installation with Leninist combatants that framed the stage of the chorus; the masks worn by the children; and the placards announcing the acts — all strategies borrowed from Brecht. Through this dynamic of exposing the audience to what they expect to hear, while breaking down the moral duality of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the learning play facilitates a state of confusion — a state in which the political subject is estranged while at the same time recuperated. It is in this movement between the ‘depoliticised’ and the ‘politicised’ that the learning play *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* mobilises the space of the gallery towards a dimension of ‘repoliticisation’; although it presents ‘depoliticisation’ as the current geo-political state of affairs, its ‘productive’ side is disclosed when we bring to light the ghosts that the same ‘depoliticisation’ seeks to neutralise, to ‘hunt’ in order to critically address. Chto Delat?’s *Lehrstück* achieves ‘repoliticisation’ by insisting even more on the old dichotomies rather than dismissing them — something that Derrida did with Marxism. The performance recuperates the past not in order to prefigure a peaceful future, the end of history or ideologies, what we have called, recalling Pejić, ‘normalisation’, but instead to come back to it as a question. A question that becomes even more necessary today, when a post-socialist and globalised reality wields its power through its self-identification as the only possible political project.

Like the *Lehrstück* of Brecht, or at least in Steinweg’s reading of it, Chto Delat? restages two familiar, opposite alternatives in order to disclose other possible alternatives and to claim a space of urgency in which to interrogate them. It is the dynamic of showing ‘this, rather than that’ that can instigate a process

of illuminating the alternatives that the latter contains. This is the most important strategy that the Russian collective extracts from the Brecht methodology.

Fredric Jameson (1998) insisted on the fact that the ‘duality’ between an affirmation and a negation is the most elementary form of the Brechtian theatrical practice as well as the most innovative aspect of his method. This ‘duality’ to which one can connect the dialectical way of thinking is what opens up a reading of each gesture in the theatre of Brecht: not only what we can see happening in front of us as audience — that is to say, the decision between two alternatives — but also what could have been done as something that is complementary to the presented action — what was decided upon or enacted, what has been omitted. In this way the actor on stage, in addition to what he or she does, places emphasis on what he or she does not do, in order to set forth a series of other possibilities and to show that the gesture he or she made was only one option among others. This way of understanding the duality of Brecht’s method offers us the possibility to strengthen the argument stated above, according to which there is clear connection between this strategy of acting in the learning play and the vision of ‘the political’ suggested by Derrida. Through ‘repoliticisation’ Derrida claimed that we do not have to renounce the possibility of communism, but that we have to insist on it even more, while at the same time revising, questioning, and proving it according to the changed conditions of the world. *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* exposes the audience, for instance, to the musical socialist propaganda of the chorus, or to the motto proclaimed by the moderator: ‘They are ready to work collectively for the communist future of the society’, or, further, to the installation in cardboard by Leninist combatants. These all place the ideology of communism on examination within a symbolic and physical space for experimentation through learning. The performance achieves this goal by explicitly insisting on questions, intentionally leaving them open to a variety of contradictory responses.

Even though these paradoxes and contradictions are the most evident outcomes of the play, at certain points the performance — for example the moment in which the group of artists and activists are reunited for ‘the communist future of the society’ — reconciles classical antagonisms in a united entity whose efforts are consigned to a future plan. Such moments drove the play toward ‘depoliticisation’, a condition that allows the performance in other scenes — as for instance when the questions appeared on screen in order to instigate an open discussion between the participants — to ‘repoliticise’. As Derrida suggests, it is necessary to face a phase in which everyone is friend of the other in order to reach an antagonistic plan that reactivates the political. Today, a future political project might not be in keeping with our preconceived model, i.e., to replace the current hegemony of globalised capitalism with communism as it was manifested in the history we know, but rather, to engage a dialectical movement in which, once we have taken a position, its alternative is always possible, among others. So if the learning play — as in the reading of Steinweg

— is the strategy that continuously places options on trial, then it is also the aesthetic machine for realising ‘repoliticisation’. In the beginning of the second act, after the alleged reconciliation between the two factions in the first, the classic oppositional struggle between artists and activists was restaged. The second act indeed started with the presenter inviting the group to split into two: ‘Now our group will be divided. The first part will be artists and philosophers. The second group will be activists’. Then she explains to both groups that the artists have received a letter (projected on the screen), an invitation by an art institution to participate in an exhibition devoted to the theme of democracy and freedom with the title ‘Revolution and Communism Now’. She invites them to read the letter collectively. The letter encourages the participation of artists interested in large-scale projects, and encourages participation by politically engaged artists, as per a socially responsible association financially supporting the exhibition. The invitation also addresses practical issues such as the costs that will be covered for artists, which includes travel expenses and accommodation. The letter justifies the fact that it will not pay for the work of artists because of its fundraising ethics, which forbids the institution from achieving a bigger budget. In response, the group of artists are clearly suspicious, despite the fact that the moderator encourages them to be excited about this opportunity. The audience can read the dubious expressions on their faces. Here again the play clearly shows the reactions that artists might have when dealing with the ‘great’ opportunity (represented by the figure of the moderator who encourages them to accept the invitation) to show their works and the fact that this opportunity does not respect their work because it does not pay for it (represented by the disappointment of the artists). The forceful confrontation that this action incites notes that it is the result of Chto Delat?’s previous rehearsals from which the players’ spontaneous interactions offer them guidance in how to perform these parts to a public audience. Putting the audience and the actors/amateurs on stage in a given situation — for example, by inviting them to an exhibition of a learning play by Chto Delat? — is a strategy at the very heart of the Brechtian format, which reduces the action and the gesture to a minimum set of possibilities. The situation itself is restricted to a choice between two possible decisions: to be an artist or an activist, to participate or not to participate in the exhibition, that is to say, the Brechtian ‘nicht/sondern’ (‘not this, rather that’). In this way the learning play of Chto Delat? shows us a reduced set of possible alternatives in order to instigate both the audience and the participants to open up and generate through discussion a series of choices potentially opposed to every decision that each member of the group is taking. One member of the group of artists reacts: ‘I have two problems: my practice does not match the institution’s intention, but I have to confess that this is a tremendous opportunity’. Another says, ‘I am still not sure if I wanna promote freedom and democracy.’ Yet another says, ‘I would like to promote ambiguity rather than any political agenda’, to which a female artist replies, ‘Ambiguity is a political agenda’. This dimension that the play realises is

opposed to the same archeo-onto-teleological vision in the realm of politics as investigated by Derrida, and rather than offer a unique response to the invitation, as the only alternative possible, and as the right one, it questions the invitation itself and opens a realm in which different choices are shown, questioned, and tried. The analysis of the Lehrstück made by Steinweg is, as a format, basically what we call today a seminar in which, thanks to the inclusion of the audience and thanks to the turnover of the actors who play different roles, infinite proofs can be made and all alternatives can be tested over time and discussed endlessly (Jameson, 1998). As the main characteristic of the learning play, it is clear that this process of testing and proving is the concrete visualisation of what Derrida suggested in order to reactivate 'the political'. Does 'repoliticisation' thus provide the possibility to reclaim past ideologies in order to test them continuously? Is it a method in which there will always be a way to imagine an alternative to the present status quo? And further, is it a dimension in which — precisely because of the on-going situation in which a minimum set of choices are available, specifically two — one can engender other replies or questions, or, as per Derrida, numerous political alternatives? Reading in this way the aesthetic of the learning play unequivocally connects it to the notion of 'repoliticisation'. I argue that this theatrical method is a space in which the very basis of 'the political' — as an irresolvable tension between two fronts — can be realised through testing, questioning, and revising our past in order to generate multiple possible actions in response, without ultimately arriving at a universal future political plan. The fact that the Russian collective adopts this format in order to rehabilitate its validity corroborates my reading of *What Struggles Do We Have in Common?* as an action that articulates 'repoliticisation' in a postmodern gallery space — a place that today deals with performance in a quite different way, staging a collective body for the execution of an artwork ruled and scripted (i.e. 'delegated' according to Bishop, 2012) by an exclusive artist, one that, to invoke Brecht, is a 'bourgeois' theatre director. Although performances and participatory artworks in galleries and museums today, in the majority of cases, use aesthetic means toward a political agenda (to be reductive, sometimes only considering the human body or collaboration between subjectivities as 'political'), they simultaneously perform an amount of relationality and cooperation that serves a knowledge-based production that extrapolates economic, social, and cultural values, indissolubly bound to each other. Theories such as 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato, 1996) and 'multitude' (Hardt, Negri, 2001) function as the speculative ground not only through which the recent 'performative turn' is conceptualized, but also as inspirations for artists and the like to feel, look, and be 'contemporary'. We have learned from such theories that to resist is to 'be within', meaning to adopt the same creative force, i.e. cooperation between a plurality of subjectivities, that contemporary capitalism (semio-capitalism) uses to wield its power upon the social in order to liberate society. It is a mode of resistance that spontaneously embeds a messianic promise.

In contrast to this immanent vision, performed in sites of contemporary cultural production as 'radical', Chto Delat? stages the collective body in order to reveal the necessary rivalry (reduced to two fronts, symbolically by 'artists' and 'activists') that must exist in order to think about 'the political' as 'critical', and for disarticulating alienating modes of participatory art that satisfy the frictionless democracy formed by heterogeneous subjects, irreducible to a unified collective identity. The strategy of showing on screen an invitation to participate in a supposedly radical exhibition, first to a group of artists and activists and subsequently to the audience, avoids the reification of the language typical of works and objects of art. Rather, it fosters discussions, revisions, and alternatives. There is the paradox, for instance, expressed by one of the artists: 'My practice does not match the institution's intention, but I have to confess that this is a tremendous opportunity'. This clearly highlights the contradictions that a definitive 'yes' or 'no' type of response would engender, declaring a formula in which one hates the system but simultaneously likes the opportunities it creates. In this way the play highlights how any sort of final decision corresponds to another possible alternative. Another element that the performance recuperates from the strategies of Brecht is the possibility for the actors/amateurs to change their roles. The play in fact oscillates — as described above — between roles: artist and activist. The piece does not realise a peaceful dimension in which everyone is a friend of the other, i.e. 'depoliticisation', but visualises this phase just for a short time, subsequently placing it again in opposition to the antagonism between 'friend and enemy'. In this way, the performance materialises precisely when the phenomenon of 'depoliticisation' occurs; one might revise past ideologies and respond to the death of 'the political' through 'repoliticisation'. This dynamic is what happens during the act in which the letter is presented to the participants. After a moment in which the group was divided, an artist suggests to her colleagues that the activists should participate in the decision to reply either 'yes' or 'no' to the letter. 'We should ask activists to participate'. She further justifies her idea by saying, 'In the first place, I don't like the division between artists and activists; I wanna sleep in the space between the two groups.' She continues: 'We need to find another space'. This moment translates the third dimension previously invoked by an activist into an actual act, an action by a member of that artist's group who positioned herself in the middle of the stage. The woman in her in-between space was immediately joined by another participant, thus realising a third political dimension that brings to light a new political subject yet to come. This dynamic concretizes what Derrida suggested when he said that we need to insist even more on a possible emancipatory plan that can overcome our obsession with the binary logic of one or the other. The play exposes the audience and the participants to this third dimension, without suggesting an alternative, but instead provoking them to think about it, question, and test it. The play defamiliarises, through the means of the alienation effect, the way in which our mind-set is constructed; that is to say, the artist who would accept

the invitation, and the activist who, on the contrary, would react to this with a political campaign or demonstration. This movement between ‘depoliticisation’ and ‘repoliticisation’, being never-ending, secures the space of the gallery from the risk of offering a vision of history as archeo-telo-logical, and from the risk of ending with ‘normalisation’ as the end of ideologies. An activist reacts to the invitation from an artist to merge the two groups together, saying, ‘They want to promote democracy and freedom? We are doing activism. Do you want to join us to do the daily activity, activism rather than doing an exhibition in an institution like ICA?’ From this moment on the audience began to participate in the discussion. Then the two groups decided to form a singular collective subject in which activists and artists can share a space, thanks to some very persuasive reasoning made by an artist. To whom someone else responds: ‘You are fucking liberal!’ At this point the third act begins: ‘Leave the stage!’ With the invitation to the group to vacate the stage, the play incorporates the audience in a more deliberate way. After the chorus sings, ‘The beautiful that have terrible conflicts helps us to find a solution [...]’, the presenter addresses the audience: ‘Do you have a suggestion? What struggles do we have in common?’ A member of the group on stage closes the sequence by saying, ‘Coming from Russia [...] we should leave individualism and do something collectively’, and adds, ‘It involves sacrifice!’ Until the end of the play, a dynamic unfolds that shows the alternative to a singular plan — that of communism for instance (‘It involves sacrifice!’) — in this way reactivating the political dimension ‘neutralised’ by globalisation.

The claim for ‘repoliticisation’ as a possible strategy through which we collectively can learn how to respond to the status quo is deployed in this case in the gallery space, but as an experiment or model it can be taken into consideration elsewhere. The play transforms the gallery into a place for rehearsing actions and articulating discourse accordingly, useful for thinking about societal struggles to come. The re-exposure at the end of a dialectical movement between one option and another is what can lessen the strength of ‘normalisation’ that we experience. The play ‘defamiliarises’ the ideology of communism — a propagandistic left-wing song — through a subsequent song that communicates to us that at the end what we ‘need is love’. The last act concludes with the chorus singing a very traditional leftist song. Some members of the group join them, singing and holding up their left hands, the traditional symbol for leftists and socialist supporters. After this socialist rhetoric in the form of straight propaganda, The Beatles’ iconic ‘All You Need Is Love’ — a more internationally known and less propagandistic song — changes the mood. The song reconciles the groups into an original community of friends — a community that even the audience joins. Again a situation of ‘depoliticisation’ or ‘normalisation’ leaves the audience and the participants with questions in mind: What struggles do we have in common? What is to be done? They are questions to which now one can respond with the method offered by the learning play: repoliticisation. This study of Chto Delat?’s collective performance offers a

space for reconceptualising the contemporary conventions that Bishop (2012) or Jackson (2011) have identified as the gallery-based ‘performative turn’ of the mid ’90s and early 2000s. Even though their positions vary greatly (Jackson identifies a cross-pollination between visual arts and theatre as part of the ‘social turn’ in the arts, and Bishop posits a manipulation of the social through aesthetic means) they both acknowledge that the ‘theatricality’ of these experiments, to be reductive, resides in the mobilisation of the human body by the artist in order to perform a socio-politically engaged project without necessarily naming or giving meaning to ‘the political’.

This mode is akin to what Hans Thies Lehmann theorises as ‘postdramatic’ theatre (1998) meaning the set of theatrical practices that since the 1960s have no longer necessitated conventional performances by skilled actors playing out a scripted text, but have included a variety of non-textual and experimental forms. These new theatre modalities show that avant-gardist forms — or what we typically identify as political theatre — are not necessarily in line with the works of Brecht. That is to say, they do not make explicit reference to political themes or a narrative plot keyed to aesthetic conceits, but rather are merely an ensemble of aesthetic strategies for realising a synesthetic dimension of mixed art forms, i.e. specifically visual art and theatre. Thus, contemporary canons, postdramatic theatre (Lehmann, 1998), and visual art performances (Bishop, Jackson), which privilege aesthetic forms over political content, have become synonymous with ‘post-Brechtian’ theatre (David Barnett, 2013). In its very different way Chto Delat? not only responds to the contemporary lexicon of performance in gallery spaces, recuperating the dialectic tension between form and content, but also proposes a literal take on theatre, one that perceives it through Brecht as a social institution for seeing things as they are or might be (the V-effect) and endlessly rehearsing our desire to resist capitalist society. Estranging the gallery space as theatre in this sense, i.e. a social institution, they make the institution itself more contradictory and therefore more capable of development. Furthermore, Chto Delat?, by staging a dialectic, ‘defamiliarises’ the hegemonic discourse currently at play within the whole contemporary art apparatus — one that performs ‘radicality’ and ‘anti-institutionality’ as the only emancipatory practices of resistance to knowledge-based capitalist production, as theorised by the Italian post-operaists. They contrast this tendency by not simply restaging identitarian politics within institutions but instead drawing attention to the collective effort we should put into today’s struggles to problematize, and not necessarily renounce, our desire to be a social entity, an organisation, an institution.

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