

Deltagelse

## Equal in inequality: true art knows how to wait

March 26, 2016 | Dmitry Vilensky



Dmitry Vilensky questioned by Ana Kuzmanić, Petar Jandrić. Edited fragment from the forthcoming book by P. Jandrić: *Learning in the age of the digital media*. Rotterdam: Sense, 2017

**Chto Delat** (What is to be done?) is a collective that includes artists, critics, philosophers, dancers and writers, merging political theory, art, and activism. The name reflects seminal works of Chernyshevsky, Lenin, and Freire, situating the collective "to a radical education of the oppressed". The collective was founded in Petersburg in 2003, with the following core members: Tsaplya Olga Egorova (artist, Petersburg), Artiom Magun (philosopher, Petersburg), Nikolay Oleynikov (artist, Moscow), Natalia Pershina/Glucklyia (artist, Petersburg), Alexey Penzin (philosopher, Moscow), Alexander Skidan (poet, critic, Petersburg), Oxana Timofeeva (philosopher, Moscow), and Dmitry Vilensky (artist, Petersburg). In 2012, the choreographer Nina Gasteva joined the collective. In their projects, Chto Delat often collaborate with other artists and researchers.

Chto Delat work across various media and disciplines. They publish newspapers, record radio plays, create theatrical performances, make films, produce graphics and murals, organise conferences, publish books, engage in philosophy and art theory. In Petersburg they run The School of Engaged Art, which also runs shorter workshops and educational programmes throughout the world. In this conversation, the collective Chto Delat is represented by one of its main driving forces and founding members, Dmitry Vilensky.

#### The irrationality of the rational

**Ana Kuzmanić & Petar Jandrić:** In a recent interview with Gerard Raunig (Vilensky and Raunig, 2008), you situated influences of Chto Delat at the intersections of three important books, stating that the collective was originally named by Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), but it draws equal inspiration from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), and Paulo Freire's and Adriano Nogueira's *Que Fazer. Teoria e Prática Em Educação Popular (What Is to Be Done: Theory and Practice in Popular Education)* (1989). These works span more than a century and function in different ideological frameworks – most importantly, none of the authors are amongst us anymore. What does it mean to ask Chto Delat? in the early 21st century? Which lessons can we learn from the past, and what are the unique challenges of the present?

**Dmitry Vilensky:** To ask What is to be done? In the early 21st century means a very simple and modest thing – to position yourself on the side of the leftist tradition. We can draw many lessons from the past, such as the confusions of self-organization and party politics, the collapse of real socialism, and the disasters linked to dire crimes committed in the name of the left. Today, the most acute challenges are related to how we can keep thinking and practicing life outside of subjugation to capital and profit, and how we can create new types of organisations that could effectively combine horizontal and centralist structures. The underlying issue in these challenges, in my opinion, are the complex relationships between unity and difference.

**AK & PJ:** *Perestroika Songspiel* analyses the complex relationships between freedom, democracy, repression, capitalism, communism, and human nature. Another film of yours, *The Lesson Of Disconsent*, critically reads texts produced by the anti-psychiatry movement, and explicitly links questions of social organisation to human nature. What, in your opinion, is the relationship between capitalism, communism, and human nature?

**DV:** I would say that human nature is very ambivalent – we are all kinds of angels and devils, and often at the same time. I think that the desire for communism is very generic for human beings, inasmuch as we are all naturally inclined towards mutual support, respect and justice. Right now there are many speculations which demand the rejection of old-school models of politicisation based on the idea of human subjectivity. It looks like we need to finish the Anthropocene period and move on to a new political composition of all non-human phenomena. It is a very poetic idea, but practically speaking very difficult to imagine in terms of its realization in a time of growing conservatism – when possibilities of post-humanity is completely obscured by sheer violence of archaic forces. But human nature is not given, it is constructed and reshaped: to me it looks like we live in a period when this reconfiguration touches on the anthropological base of our life. And this is a central struggle of our time lies: how do we envision and construct this change together with trees, animals, earth and all that new stuff coming from technology, like robots, artificial intellect and so on.

**AK & PJ:** In the project *Activist Club*, you insist on a temporary character in your school. An early issue of your newspaper is dedicated to autonomy zones (2003), and in the Chto Delat's exhibition at Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2011), you exhibited a book on anarchism right next to a book on Leninism. What is the relationship of your work to anarchism?

**DV:** There are many forms of anarchism. Anarchist traditions are based on the idea that the State should wither away, and that people should unite through local communities of neighbours and producers, coincide with (and reinforce further) the basic ideas of communism. Therefore, Chto Delat comfortably sits within these traditions. Having said that, we strongly disagree with certain traditions of anarchism that situate human beings and human societies outside of power relations. Instead of trying to understand the nature of power relations, and instead of working towards transforming the existing power relations into something that would be less destructive and oppressive, these anarchist traditions coincide with (and further reinforce) capitalism.

#### How to be equal in inequality?

**AK & PJ:** Education is one of the main elements of your work. The concept of learning play, for instance, heavily relies on the radical educational traditions of Paulo Freire (1972) and Augusto Boal (2001 & 2008). Obviously, these traditions were born in significantly different contexts of the late 20th century Americas. What are the main challenges of aligning these traditions with the current situation in Russia and Europe? What does it mean to be a radical educator in your context?

**DV:** Being a radical educator in the current repressive situation of Putin's Russia means to create spaces where all possible issues excluded from the general public sphere can be pronounced and practiced. It also means to introduce another generation into various (radical) ideas, that are mostly secluded from them. The challenge is not just to preserve and protect a certain type of knowledge, but to find ways for this space of knowledge production to grow, despite obvious repression. And, of course, it means to run experiments in equality, and to believe in people's universal ability to learn despite different backgrounds, experiences, and levels of mastery. In conclusion, being a critical educator means to be equal in inequality. We try to build a very specific confidential community within our school – it is based on a certain form of mutual trust and respect and, a lack of fear in demonstrating your own vulnerability.

**AK & PJ:** Your personal educational trajectory is a bit unusual. In a recent interview, you said:

*I work outside of proper academic settings. I have never studied, neither art nor theory, I have no degree. In short, I feel like a bastard who always comes in from the back door, because I am too loud. And I was never afraid of doing different things that I never learned but felt the urgency to do. (Buden and Vilensky, 2010)*

What are the main pros and cons of working outside of formal educational systems? What are the consequences of such an approach to your personal life, and for Chto Delat? projects at large?

**DV:** I think that this situation is very historically constructed. In the Soviet Union, people of my generation had no access to academic systems of education in the field of contemporary art. Actually, contemporary art did not exist within the Soviet academic system at all! Therefore, we are all

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