

David Riff /// It's all about people...

published at Documenta 12 Magazine, 2007

Late last summer, before the schools in Russia reopened, a remarkable beer ad about post-Soviet space aired on Russian TV. Thirty seconds of feel-good Russian classic rock: an active bass and a prominent slide guitar wafted around a voice, always-already middle-aged, slightly flat after working a night shift. Four measure whole notes by the band: the staggered vocal names the brand. Krasny Vostok.

Where the sun rises / the east is red. A new day is dawning / over our land. // How can you resist. Cause' this land is not made of history's pages; it's not made through borders or territorial stages. Our land is made up of people and people are what make our land.

Obviously, the ad wants to mobilize the patriotism of its maturing target group, reminding it of forgotten values: hospitality, friendship, little evening get-togethers on the dacha. The Krasny Vostok commercial is supposedly all about people, but there are no people in the ad. In 2004, new legislation tried to curb the spread of beer as Russia's favorite soft drink. Among other restrictions, it introduced a ban of anything remotely alive in beer advertising, laying off all the cartoon characters, animals, and most importantly people: friendly, slightly crazy fat men, 19th century aristocrats, or teenage hipster heroes about to make it big. These roles have all been taken over by either the beer bottles themselves or their settings. The Krasny Vostok ad is no exception. It personifies (the) "people" as a golden spirit that floats out of the sunrise as a 3D animation: from close ups of fragrant grass, up over dewy meadows and out through the speckled trees, over pine-topped mountains and down a glittering river through a valley, across a suspension bridge into a city, where it reflects in the shop windows of a deserted 19th century Russian street, wafting through lace curtains into a cool, sparkling glass of amber beer standing solitary on a kitchen table. The beer commercial's potential inhabitants are kept out of public by the medium's laws 1.

There is an overwhelming pressure to think of "post-Soviet space" in similarly abstract though far more foreboding terms, all of which present elaborations on a hegemonic notion of geopolitical Lebensraum of a "unified Russia." "Post-Soviet space" is somehow posited as a given that needs to be drained, reconfigured, and filled with something that always returns to the interior. The empty exterior is real estate and ad space: an inhabited ruin of "democratic socialism" about to turn into an unpopulated "sovereign democracy," a land of milk and honey (oil and gas) in which mayonnaise, beer, vodka, and money flow freely, unhindered by any human factor, sweeping away all edifices in their path to be replaced with billboards advertising a vast beer garden.

This brings us back to the real post-socialist city and how its social spaces are defined. When the weather gets warmer, circles of people hang out and drink beer in almost all backyards, parks, boulevards, squares, monuments, and the spaces around metro-stations with their 24-hour kiosks. You constantly hear somebody having fun, passing from one of these places to another. Social space is constructed by the order of consumption (beer, cigarettes, salted nuts, fast-food), in small groups, isolated from one another.

This obviously brings a potential for anomie (competing groups develop new affinities and repulsions) in liminal states of all-night open-air idling that the militia cannot prevent fully. Guitars and fistfights from May to September! The streets are the living room of the collective (Benjamin), and the collective is forever young. Lumpenproletariat, Neo-Nazi nationalists, consumer kids, Goths, headbangers, Lesbian punks, migrant workers, and even the occasional anarchist. Walking through Moscow or Petersburg in the summer, anyone with multitudinous political passions will wonder: what if more kids were not just drinking beer but talking politics? They have already captured public space. "Our universities?" Who knows? Maybe these kids are learning street-smarts on how to make representational space in the alienated intimacy of their encounters, finding something that makes them want to ride their bikes through the city in more tightly knit groups late at night when the traffic dies down? Can one politicize this new sociality? If the educators themselves must be educated (not to think in abstract terms of progressive nostalgia, but in concrete practices, something a text like this can only sketch out), what can we learn in the beer garden of common space, where the first impression of normal childhood is one of spatial awe?

Normal children in awe of space: Soviet town-planners suggested the common as a political potentiality, still empty, waiting to be filled. The conduits of post-Soviet cities themselves are certainly broad enough to suggest the sweep of politicized masses, and not only the flow of a collective subject, self-alienated in a pre-Marxian, young-Hegelian sense. Heterotopia in a vista onto space: radiating from a center that both sucks in and evacuates entire

populations, Ultra-Haussmanized causeways and chthonic cathedrals suggest mass movements (not armies) so large that they displace clouds of dust heralding their advance overhead. The scale of this claim – much more than one sixth of the world – is unprecedented. It dwarves and subsumes real people in a very different way than the skyscraper canyons of Manhattan, or the starry sky in Grand Central Station 2.

Normal children in awe of themselves: in the late summer of 2004, the workgroup Chto delat made a collective study of the Petersburg neighborhood of Narvskaya Zastava. It intended to probe the possibilities for militant investigation and political involvement in this space, and tested a variety of methods ranging from quite traditional sociological evidence-gathering to the psychogeographical technique of the Situationist *dérive*. I participated in this part of the project. Armed with cameras and logbooks, we set out to map the neighborhood's psycho-geographical zones and to document our impressions 3.

Normal children everywhere: the social space of the *dérive* is a non-spectacular production site. But sometimes it looks like a spectacular stage set. The abandoned 19th century tenements to the north of the neighborhood on Shkapin Street served as romantic ruins for a really stupid German war movie that showed how human Hitler was. Here, we found a flower growing toward the sun, its secret heliotropism photographed by other people drifting and drinking beer on a Sunday stroll without theory.

Normal children, fixing fidelity on a historical point of departure: you arrive at Narvskaya Zastava on Stachek Square, dominated by the Narva Gate, a triumphal Palladian arch celebrating the Russian victory over Napoleon. It stands in the shadow of a house-sized fresco from the late 1960s that commemorates the site's central location in Russia's revolutionary history. It was here that the first shots were fired on a protest procession of striking workers, marching to present the Czar with a petition of demands on January 9th 1905. In November 1917, the square served as the place d'armes for the Bolshevik forces that stormed the Winter Palace. Now, another beer garden.

Normal children sucked into a historical vortex: Narvskaya Zastava's most famous section is defined by the constructivist buildings on and around the esplanade between Stachek Square and the Narva Gate to the north and Kirov Square to the south. In the mid-to-late 1920s, the area's working class population was "rewarded" for its revolutionary efforts with a model settlement for workers from nearby plants, including the famous Putilov (Kirov) Works. In the mid-1930s, however, the transformation of the neighborhood along constructivist-functionalist lines was abandoned. Its architectural endpoint is marked by the council building on Kirov Square, built in an increasingly domineering Stalinist style. The buildings on and around the esplanade express a collective industrial production cycle: house of culture, training center, collective homes, public baths, council building, municipal park, school (in the form of a hammer and sickle to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution), public kitchen/messhall. A metro station was added in 1952, giving Stachek Square a triumphant dominant, and essentially destroying its function as an agora, making it into what the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin calls a "space of jubilation." 4 This breakup of the agora at the historical center of the neighborhood prepares the constructivist settlement for participation in a neo-capitalist consumer economy: the former factory-kitchen has housed a department store since the Soviet epoch. In the ground floor, there is a new theme restaurant with Russified dishes from "around the world," which are not exactly cheap either. But the theme restaurant retains a cafeteria look as a part of its décor, which imitates that of an IKEA restaurant.

Normal children on the run: in socialist architecture, the Euclidian Ultra-Haussmanized avenues represent more or less successful rationalizations of the industrial production cycle. Their communal flipside is the courtyard. Soviet architecture consistently tried to innovate residential courtyard architecture, doing battle against the tenement light shaft well as the epitome of alienation. So the worst inhuman micro rayon apartment blocks contain generous green spaces with playgrounds, paths, and benches, open intimate spaces in which communal life is more than plausible. This terrain is ideal for drifting: having fled the broad streets and traffic, one moves from one courtyard to the next through intricate systems of arches, coming to rest in pockets of unexpected peace, as behind the 17 residential buildings on Traktornaya Street off Stachek Prospekt. Painted an unusual persian red, they open to the street with over-dimensioned half-arches, bringing in the sky with late summer cirrus clouds in a mad Leningrad sunset. In the 1920s, they served as communal worker's dormitories. Once these communes (ideally governed by neighborhood councils) fell apart through the state's repressive neglect, the living room of the collective was abandoned, overgrown, crisscrossed by footpaths, and covered with empty beer bottles and cigarette butts. But now, the old ladies who live in the buildings chase away the drinkers, lay gravel on footpaths, plant shrubbery, and install fountains, constituting their own Soviet Biedermeier version of imaginary-intimate community space. It's not just a personal project in vernacular garden architecture that installs the garden gnome of bad ontology. Instead, "it's all about people," a didactic projection of social space as it should be, with plenty of benches for the old ladies to gossip on, and a fancy playground for the kids.

The communal bricollage of gardening pensioners somehow seems Kabakovian. It hearkens back to a time in which Soviet culture was already falling apart into a self-contradictory communitarian structure. As late modernist urban planning moved people out of communal housing to personalized panel block apartments in the satellite cities, the dialectics of urban alienation and communal intimacy underwent a decisive change. Communities took the place of the state, creating nooks and autonomous zones for informal exchange, colonizing parks and

boulevards through moving bubbles of privacy. Paradoxically, it is the community of friends that appears as state socialism's gravedigger, as the collective enthusiasm of the Soviet sixties went sour and turned into a campfire repertoire of "songs about what really counts." But at the same time, communal reality continues the project of common space: until it is rendered productive by privatization, its underlying structure is still open, like the courtyard on Traktornaya Street. Even when the pensioners reclaim it, it can still serve as the site for an impromptu episode of knowledge production by a temporary workgroup of leftist artists and philosophers. So much is coded into its arches, until they become the trademark of a gated community.

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Through the backyards of another constructivist settlement around the Red Triangle Rubber Factory where Dima Vilensky lived as a little kid, encountering old ladies who began to perform back at the camera, a kind of subalternity in the face of the spectacle's instrument, theatrically trying to throw a drunk off a bench. Frightened children from the Caucasus somewhere near a ramshackle squat, which Vilensky and Tsaplya later entered with a video camera to conduct interviews with admirable anti-fa anarchists. The long haul to the Baltic Railway Station, down the tracks past deserted institutional architecture from the 1970s. Instant coffee in a sad café. Across half-abandoned industrial zones, in search of immediate encounters. Halted production, overgrown with life. Where are the people, where are the workers? Alexei Penzin reports from the empty shop floor of the factory:

To judge by the discussions that followed, the participants were motivated by a nearly religious search for Contact, Encounter, or Event, for the imaginary meeting of the left-wing intellectual with the invisible specter of the Worker, ascending to the Golgotha of the stopped conveyor. But when we entered the abandoned factory's Cyclopean shop floor, instead of severe workers we found a multitude of colossal phalli (high-quality naturalistic graffiti, sprouting an interweave of 3-4 meters, climbing up the wall), whose exuberantly organic procreation rightfully animated this otherwise empty place of production. [...] But the promised Event never took place as a final point of assembly or coming together. Instead, there were constant displacements, transitions from one environment to another, as well as the realization of one's own position in relation to the position of the others – the impotence of changing anything here and now, in spite of the will that manifests itself in this strange, crypto-religious expectation of an Event, of Redemption... Impotence hangs over all of our confessions and exacerbates our in many ways exuberant stroll with an involuntary feeling of guilt 5.

At this point, it became clear that our debates were not so much about the absence or betrayal of the proletariat, but centered on the collective non-action of drifting itself. Which collectivity constitutes itself in the process of the drift? What are this collectivity's limitations? And how can one break them? The group moves in its own space, obsessed with its own collective (leftist, neo-modernist, critical, radical, antagonistic) identity, unconsciously fetishizing its own collective autonomy and its friendship while insisting upon the use value of the inoperative activity itself, thus refraining from any genuinely political operation, other than the constitution of the micro-community that spends its free time together (while the fact that the same community produces commodities for the culture industry during business hours as a "start up venture" remains unmentioned). This is basically what I criticized after having a few drinks too many on the second day of the drift. After I said something about "irresponsible slumming through modernity's ruins," our discussion escalated into a shouting match. So I guess I hit a sensitive nerve.

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Basically, I felt that our movement through urban space was carried forward by a speech bubble, which is why I was so critical. But then again, we had an excuse to insulate ourselves through chatter. The reason was on TV, in every café and restaurant, in every shop, on every face. On September 3rd 2004, the first day of our *dérive*: Beslan. The drama started on September 1st, the first day of school: flower rituals and children's songs. In the light of the tragedy, it seemed tasteless to enjoy the utopian boldness of a school in the form of a hammer and sickle 6.

The geopolitical abstraction of "post-Soviet space" returned in full force when Putin made a speech on a broken TV in a cheap café with Soviet green minimal walls. He declared something that almost amounted to a state of exception, demanding national unity and new "power verticals." Talking Agamben all the way from the military-store on the canal, we reached Ekaterinhof park, where we parodied an American group-hug. Technopop blared across the empty band-stand. It was the last day of summer. Walking through the park, we eventually reached rusty joy rides: bumper cars and swings on fenced-off territory. There was even a booth with air rifles for target practice.

Swings with wings: a bitter-sweet Soviet children's song called *Krylatie kacheli* was blaring over the loudspeakers. Most of the others left their stuff in my care on a bench in order to swing more freely, including Artiom Magun, who had been carrying around an elegant black umbrella. Community affects, back and forth. Lover reunited, adulterous embrace. The need for comfort didn't only come from the exceptional tragedy of murdered schoolchildren. Again, late Soviet antiquity was modernity's "normal childhood," a infantile-nostalgic version of

the same Taylorized enthusiasm of movement when 20th century communism was still alive; to and fro, back and forth, flying, kissing. It's too bad that the footage in my camera was lost.

At some point, the joyride operators turned off the music and asked us to leave. We started talking about reduction and Alain Badiou. As we were crossing the bridge that separates park from city, Magun stopped in his tracks: "I've forgotten my umbrella." This made me feel very guilty. Leaving the others, Magun and I turned back.

We almost missed the swings: the gates of the little amusement park had already been padlocked. A guard-dog on a long leash was barking violently in order to protect her puppy. A heavyset young man was standing next to the guardhouse. We called to him through the fence. "Umbrella? Yeah. I saw an umbrella." Growing nervous – the umbrella might have been a bomb – Magun and I walked back to the bumper cars.

It was here that we ran into the other group, which was drifting in parallel. They embraced us euphorically, all chattering at once: "How was it? What did you see? Where are you going?" We couldn't answer them. We were looking for Magun's umbrella. Eventually, the militia-man who was guarding the playground unlocked the padlocks and let us out.

Post scriptum

Maybe it was this sense of communal impotence that prompted Chto delat to return to the historical center of Narva Square (this time in the smaller ensemble of Tsaplya, Nikolai Oleinikov, and Dmitry Vilensky), with a piece called Angry Sandwich-People (2005). The space of the present text is too small to provide any real contextualization of this piece. I only want to highlight one key difference. While the derive in 2004 attempted to reflect social space through communal collectivity and the abandoning of production, this piece consciously explored the potentiality of social production site as an arena for political manifestation. Against the backdrop of the neo-modernist mural sandwich-people slowly gather, wearing a fragmented political poem on their chests ⁷. Like real sandwichpeople, they belong to no definite class or age group, and have no predefined political identity: pensioners, activists, students, and children. Over the course of the slide show, they accumulate line by line, coming together and falling apart in varying constellations of singularity. This looks like a political manifestation but could actually be read as its opposite: a form of artistic advertising. But at the end of the slideshow, after the flow of images is over, one no longer sees bodies but hears their voices reading out their lines. This inner speech – a tragic chorus? – is tentative, threatening, satirical, and violent, full of potential violence, depleted pathos, and fragile hope. Suddenly, a definite negation is possible again.

NOTES:

1. Both teaser and ad spot can be found as a Quicktime video at <http://adme.ru/creativity/2006/07/27/7770.html>.
2. For more speculation on the difference between "Hegelian" and "Kantian" space, see David Riff/Sergei Sitar. "The Re-Discovery of Post-Soviet Space" Chto delat No. 11: (Im) possible Spaces. Petersburg 2006
3. The entire project was documented more fully in Chto delat 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. October 2004. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=17&id=131&Itemid=121
4. Cf. Mikhail Ryklin. "Hegel in the Spaces of Jubilation" In: Third Text 65, Vol. 17, Issue 4, December 2003
5. Alexei Penzin. The Last Temptation of the Flaneur. In: Chto Delat 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. October 2004. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=170&Itemid=121
6. Cf. Alexander Skidan. "Derive Protocol." Chto delat No. 7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=172&Itemid=121
7. Cf. Chto delat 11. Why Brecht. January 2006. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=226&Itemid=126. This issue of Chto delat was also conceived as a contribution to the first question of the documenta 12.

Published at <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/digest-2005-2007/its-all-about-people/>

