Maria Chehonadskih // 48 Hours of Common Effort: How Cultural Workers and Political Activists Met and Talked

The entire spectrum of problems connected with the condition of creative workers has recently become the focus of fundamental discussions and reflections on the part of the artistic community as well as a number of leftist political and social activists. These discussions have revealed points of convergence between creative workers and workers engaged in nonstandard forms of employment, which have become more and more widespread in Russia. The search for new ways of regrouping radical leftists, trade unions, and social movements makes new forms of dialogue possible. The 48-Hour May Congress-Commune of Creative Workers was the first initiative to task itself with tackling both theoretically and practically the host of problems connected with the nature of the work done by cultural workers and labor relations in the cultural field.

1. Informal Relations and "Protections of Proximity"

Precarity as the norm for labor relations in Russia emerged in the nineties in connection with the transition to the market economy. Shock therapy and a sharp decrease in production led to massive unemployment that was in no way regulated by the state. The first forms of self-enterprise played an important role in forming the new system of nonstandard employment: unemployed people united into groups and networks or operated independently, hiring others as "day" workers. As a system of labor relations, precarity emerged spontaneously and at the grassroots, via family ties and friendships, informal relations between former colleagues, and a broad network of mutual assistance and mutual dependence. Nonstandard employment was not officially recognized for a long time because this kind of (self-)enterprise was a semi-legal form of private business and part of the shadow economy. The situation remained invisible, and the problems occasioned by it were long left unarticulated.

Broad-based creativity as a means of surviving under new conditions also affected the field of cultural production, which had to be renewed and provided with new institutional foundations. The absence of state protectionism in the cultural field has likewise turned cultural production into self-enterprise based on a system of informal relations. Moscow-based sociologist and activist Carine Clément has located the germs of these relations in late-Soviet industrial production. Informal relations are a unique system of interaction between management and workers in which personal communication serves as the basis for generating a more flexible labor system. The positive surmounting of the Soviet bureaucracy's disciplinary forms snowballed into something that fissured work collectives and annulled official and legal statutes.[1]

To understand the informal relations among actors in the field of cultural production and the processes of institutionalization, we should turn to the notion of the *tusovka*, which was introduced in the late nineties by Viktor Misiano. The *tusovka* is a particular type of community that has emerged in the wake of the collapse of official culture and the disciplinary Soviet society. The *tusovka* does not operate on the principle of a "common cause" or "ideological unanimity," consolidating instead around the prospect of commercial commissions and official recognition. In a

situation where hierarchy and status have been destroyed, a dispersed and individualized community is formed. This extreme individualism is matched by a quasi-institutional form – the "one-person museum," the "one-person gallery," the "one-person editorial team."[2] When she founds a publishing house or gallery, the individual aspires to realize herself not only as an entrepreneur, but also as an enterprise: the gallerist simultaneously becomes a curator, PR agent, journalist, and manager, and sometimes she even functions as an artist. A person who works for this one-person gallery never understands what position he has been hired to fill. Individual entrepreneurial creativity excludes concrete goals, overall strategies, and artistic programs, as well as the division of responsibilities and professional ethics. It thus follows that the economy of all such new establishments is based on an ethics of relationships and unwritten laws. The primitive accumulation of both symbolic and real capital by certain members of the *tusovka* was likewise made possible by the archaization of labor relations – for example, it was possible to easily, quickly and cheaply assemble a private art collection through the practice of barter (as when a painting was exchanged for studio space).

This phase of primitive accumulation has ended, however, and now these quasi-institutions have become the dominant model for museums, cultural centers, and publishing houses. The mafia-like stranglehold exercised by cultural veterans of the nineties makes it difficult to realize alternative forms of institutional politics. During a period marked by Putin's "stabilization" and the business elite's long-awaited recognition of art, the old "I am my own director" scheme and the face-to-face model of interacting with hired workers, artists, curators, and critics have continued to develop. The *tusovka* has given rise to a new art bourgeoisie that includes huge numbers of gallerists, art dealers, managers, artists, and functionaries. The rhetorics of friendship and informal relations are reproduced in all production situations. Consequently, the workers who service this system do not consider themselves exploited. The local color of the organic behavior exhibited by both groups reaches such proportions that it resembles an orgy: both groups attend the same roundtables, where they discuss the market and capitalism in a business-like manner.

This "quasi-institutional" system in itself is an example of fundamental instability, insofar as it is strictly dependent on private capital whose flow might be cut off at any moment. Both at its top and its bottom, the system experiences this "fundamental instability" as a common existential condition. To defend its own interests, the art community unites according to the principle of "protections of proximity," whose basis is not class identification, but territorial and professional community.[3] For a long time it was not mechanisms of state regulation that defended people from social risks, but networks of mutual aid and support formed among friends, colleagues, and relatives. Today, this system accounts for the fact that the art community survives and maintains its own reproduction. This art community (*Gemeinschaft*) thus renders itself indifferent to the outside world, for its territory is limited both mentally and geographically (the center of Moscow, making the rounds of exhibition openings).

Given this highly developed system of informal ties and practices, it is precisely medieval means of social defense that are operative in the art community today. A homeless artist lives with an art critic buried under rush jobs. The critic seeks new work for himself and the artist, while the person who commissioned one of the articles from the art critic is interested in obtaining an editor's position from the art

critic. This circle can be multiplied to infinity: the editor that the art critic hired is now himself looking for assistants to work on a new commission and he recruits the homeless artist, who is now interested in finding new lodgings. More people in need of something plunge into this chain of work-and-lodging in the search for a landlord from within "their own" milieu. Working without a contract, wage delays, and nonpayment of fees are standard finales in such ventures. Relations of this sort, in which everyone is bound by a thick ring of obligations and responsibilities, sometimes leads to the fact that the real employer remains unknown to the majority of people participating in a particular chain. This mechanism is foolproof: it never malfunctions. Moreover, the dialectic of "feast today and fast tomorrow" makes it possible for the participants in the chain to agree to any wage conditions.

The "inner circle" principle likewise generates within the art community whole "families" or "family relationships," in which more hidden and intimate forms of cooperation exist. The art community replaces the family for many cultural workers uprooted from their places of birth. Their condition is thus wholly comparable with the condition of immigrants.[4] Hence the forms of "family business" and the welfare administered by the art elite, who feed "starving" cultural workers with odd jobs and protectionism. At the May Congress, one could observe a series of such "family reunions" within a single space.

The Congress: The "Commons" Fights the "Community" (Gemeinschaft) with Its Own Means

The idea for the congress was closely bound up with the emergence in recent years of a whole host of grassroots initiatives focused on an analysis of new forms of employment and the political mobilization of workers. The people behind these initiatives (Vpered Socialist Movement, Chto Delat, Street University, Educational Film Group, etc.) set themselves the task of creating a common platform for involving cultural workers in political struggle. Theoretical discussions of atypical forms of labor, of precaritization, on the one hand, and the practical experience of activists in trade union work, especially the campaign against temporary employment, on the other, were meant to encourage an exchange between the various initiative groups.

The May Congress was organized via a series of debates over the course of many months. As the organizer, Nikolay Oleynikov from Chto Delat united these discussions around a single concept, the "commune-congress." Its artistic impulse inherited the traditions of May Day, while the idea of the "commune" (*obshchezhitie*) itself harkened back to the Soviet experience of communal living. The content of the congress was organized around the performativity of its form. Consequently, it was decided that the greater part of the theoretical, conceptual and practical discussions would be shifted into a nonacademic format. As conceived by the organizers, the May Congress was to be run as an uninterrupted marathon, part of which involved not only preparations for a May Day demonstration, but also sleeping together at the venue and common meals. This nonstop commune-laboratory was accompanied by artistic actions, poetry readings, and film screenings.

The common demands articulated by congress attendees can be boiled down to the need to legitimate the labor of cultural workers and for practitioners of traditional creative professions (philosophers, artists, poets, writers) to show solidarity with

workers engaged in nonstandard forms of employment and with other workers involved in cultural production (journalists, critics, designers, publishers). The participation by congress members in the May Day demonstration was to have been a first step towards overcoming this gap by creating a common field of solidarity and political struggle.

It would have seemed that Nikolay Oleynikov had devised an appropriate form for conducting the congress. Arguably, the idea of a 48-hour nonstop discussion that involved everyone sleeping, eating, and, at the end, going out to demonstrate together fit the traditions of the "Gemeinschaft spirit" that I have described above; this "communitarianism" might have opened up towards new social and political experiments. But in contact with local realities the idea of collective habitation that would in turn encourage solidarity began to burst at the seams. The forty-eight hours of collective living simply were not a success. Because the congress was held in a factory building (now occupied by the art center Proekt_Fabrika), where the ravaged, dirty interiors imparted to the proceedings a particular aftertaste of marginality, only the most radically minded attendees agreed to sleep on the cement floors. However, the marginal, impoverished setting was not the main factor that prevented participants from engaging in collective sleep, just as the absence of such sleep cannot be considered the reason that the congress was unsuccessful. We should instead focus on the fact that both participants and guests were unable to recognize themselves as a single political subject.

The word "precarity" was not simply alien: it proved to be nonfunctional as a marker of collective identity. The joint seminars involving political activists, artists, and theorists laid bare the fact that participants did not understand one another. The congress thus revealed class differences more than it did class resemblances. The activists did not recognize either the artists or the theorists as an oppressed class, identifying those assembled as a mob of bohemians, while the artists ignored both the activists and the theorists. As it turned out, professional identity dominates even within a politically engaged milieu. Finally, the art crowd accepted the artists and theorists as "their own kind" and showed up only for the theoretical round tables, regarding the event as yet one more artistic action or exhibition.

The political content of the congress was for the most part displaced by the majority of attendees. During the first day's main round table, art workers regaled each other with cases illustrating the burdens of precarity: complaints and examples from the speakers' personal lives poured in from all corners of the room. However, attempts to articulate a complaint and raise it to the level of a political problem were ignored. Participants were unable to push the community towards political common ground, and that, perhaps, is why its members did not come for the second day of practical seminars, and so trade union activists were forced to give each other practical advice.

The "community complaints" were undoubtedly a form of parrhesia: the hushed-up, suppressed problem of precarity found its affective outlet. Perhaps it is only in this way that the art community will gradually arrive at an understanding of its situation and find new political tools for combating it.

The division of participants into groups was the main paradox of the congress: after all, its concept consisted in organizing an open, common space. Intellectual dialogues,

preparation for the demonstration, and consumption of food all happened at one and the same time in one and the same place – the large hall where the congress was held. The seminars and discussions were held in the center of this hall, while the small handfuls of artists who were preparing their actions congregated in the corners of the room.

The art group Verkhotura and Friends organized a sewing workshop in the hall in preparation for their action "Tailoring Clothes for Daily Resistance," which involving making and refitting clothes for the May Day demonstration. Shirts, dresses, and jackets abounded with slogans like "Many People, One Subject," "Dissent Is Primary," and "Singularity, Not Identity." The wording of the slogans was clearly marked by the sixties-era spirit of romanticizing and poeticizing resistance, but the artists isolated themselves from other congress members. They worked intently throughout the proceedings without uttering a word. The noise they generated with their sewing machine irritated participants in the round tables, who would ask them to take a break and join the discussion. But the round tables were likewise ignored by the activists, who crowded around the tables with food and literature and talked amongst themselves. From time to time the situation was reminiscent of scene from a Kira Muratova film: all three groups would begin talking simultaneously.[5] The first day also included poetry readings and a video program followed by discussions. The performative nature of the way the poets read before the audience went the longest way, arguably, towards generating solidarity within the group. The evening of the second day saw the premiere of Chto Delat's new film, *The Tower: A Songspiel*, which likewise animated the crowd and provoked lively debates. The nonstop congress-commune, in which too many events took place within a single space, alienated participants even further from one another, whereas the centralized readings and joint film viewings proved to be more effective ways of uniting people.

The practices of "informal relations" (commune and communality) prove to be the least effective tools for mobilization because they encourage the members of different groups to close in on themselves. Therefore, there is a need to formalize such events precisely in order to make these groups open up. Formalization should not be understood as a procedure for arranging regulated and official forms of relations. Instead, this procedure should be understood as way of generating critical distance.

Finally, what does the struggle against precarity mean for an artist who travels from museum to museum, from conference to conference, and for a worker who migrates from job to job? Can workers and artists in the end unite in a common struggle? Does "artivism" encourage these social groups to unite? In Russia, the paucity of the leftist movement is definitely a motivation to join forces. A positive aspect in the political practice of the movement against precarious labor is the attempt to reinvent classical political action and the recognition that the actions of a particular heterogeneous group is today simply not sufficient to effect specific changes either locally or globally. The experience of the May Congress encourages us to continue discussions about the forms of political participation, as well as about the problems of the "commons" amongst atomized, precaritized subjects.

The congress attempted to overcome narrow professional communitarianism. However, the form of the congress itself preserved all the traits of "communitarian" ideology, and its outcomes thus seemed contradictory to participants. Communal

living and communalism were always connected with the whispering of dissidents in a kitchen, with secret conversations about politics, but only people who trusted one another could take part in such conversations. The art milieu, which shared its "complaints" with congress participants, was not able to convey them in dialogue form to the activists, insofar as the latter were unable to relate themselves and their own political experience to the artistic context. The problem of the "inner circle" and opening it up to political identification is a long-term perspective for the leftist movement in Russia. The efficacy of "communal living" can be imagined only in the context of a small, close-knit milieu. Which is exactly what happened: on the morning of May 1, several small, close-knit groups marched out to demonstrate.

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1. Carine Clément, "'Fleksibil'nost' po-russki': sgibaemye i nesgibaemye rabotniki" ['Flexibility à la russe': bendable and unbendable workers]; accessed at: http://www.isras.ru/files/File/publ/Flexibeln_po_russki_Kleman.pdf

2. See Viktor Misiano, "The Cultural Contradictions of the *Tusovka*," accessed at: http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/cultural-contradictions/.

3. Robert Castel's genealogical analysis of wage labor has revealed the principles of "communal" insurance against risks that was practiced in medieval society. Here, Christianity, with its doctrine of brotherly love for one's neighbor, played a vital role. Thus, before a system of patronage and charity for the poor emerged, there existed a broad network of mutual aid and solidarity among peasants within particular villages. These forms of cooperation also extended to large village families. Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*, trans. Robert Boyd (New Brunswick and London: 2003), pp. 9–46.

4. In order to reside legally in Moscow, people from other cities are required to officially register with the local authorities. Without this registration (*propiska*) it is impossible to receive free medical care. The *propiska*, however, functions more as a mechanism of biopolitical control, sowing fear and a sense of rootlessness amongst new arrivals.

5. Kira Muratova is a Russian filmmaker famous for her aural innovations. The rhythms and intonations of speech have a central importance in her films. The superimposition of phrases, polyphony, inaudible speech, and the repetition of the same words by her characters make the conversation scenes in her films resemble the musical forms of the canon and recitative. In this sense, the scene in the film *Chekhovian Motifs* (2002) where a family argues over dinner is indicative. The characters speak simultaneously, trading affirmative remarks. This peculiar form of collective monologue underscores the absence of mutual understanding among the interlocutors. It is also an example of the communal type of discursivity, with its characteristic "kitchen squabble."