

Nikolay Oleynikov & Dmitry Vilensky // Creative Time in Common

Prehistory

Drift: Narvskaya Zastava (Saint Petersburg, 2004)

Aside from researching the urban environment during a two-day walk around a chosen location, an important component of this project was the results of communication within the group, the personal lives of its participants, and the associations that arose in connection with the places that were researched. An objective mapping of the site was organized in parallel with the subjectivity of the community, which gained new experience by jointly living through a certain moment of time in an environment alien to it. The methods developed in *Drift* were a continuation of the Leningrad-Petersburg tradition of strolling around strange places. This culture is directed towards the experience of communities that are based on friendship and aspire to a reclaiming and détournement of urban space, thus demonstrating with their own experience the contrast between what life is and what it might be.

Self-Education(s) (a series of seminars and an exhibition; Moscow, 2006)

In the course of the three days of seminars following the exhibition opening, participants discussed mechanisms of social communication and new means of constructing collective interaction. Aside from the artists who participated in the exhibition, the seminars also involved a number of activists and social researchers. During the seminars, most of the participants lived in the guest rooms of the National Center for Contemporary Art or with friends, and their interactions continued practically nonstop for all three days.

68.08. Street Politics (Moscow, June 2008)

This was a group show dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of May 1968. During the process of working on the exhibition, it became clear that the traditional model for working on an exhibition project, whose outcome is ordinarily a curated (that is, a hierarchically controlled) exposition of finished works, was limited. There thus arose the urgent need to organize a common space with a different density of interaction, with a different intensity of communication within the collective working on the exhibition. It became clear that in order to realize serious political utterances on the territory of art, the egoistic autonomy of discrete works had to be overcome, that this was possible only as a consequence of a joint dialogue on the part of all participants, and that such a dialogue demanded a protracted period of time wholly devoted to collaborative work.

Leftist Art. Leftist History. Leftist Philosophy. Leftist Poetry: An Experimental 24-Hour Communal Life Seminar. (Nizhny Novgorod, May 9, 2009)

The first experimental communal life seminar (then still only twenty-four hours in length), with its self-ironic title, took place in Nizhny Novgorod on May 9, 2009.

Moreover, the task of combining the creative, educational, and political elements in a single time in a single place seemed tempting not only to us, but also to the special police department for combating “extremism,” who as it turned out had been “casing” our seminar from the moment the first information about it was published in blogs. Consequently, at the very beginning of the seminar, during a screening of Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Sympathy for the Devil (One Plus One)*, the seminar space was invaded by an armed police detachment that proceeded to detain all the participants for several hours. Thanks to this incident, which it was necessary to reflect and make public, the idea arose to continue the seminar in the form of a three-day production seminar whose goal was to make a new film, *2+2/Practicing Godard*. To this end, some of the organizers (the screenplay group) returned to Nizhny Novgorod and recruited local people to participate in the filming. Aside from collective development of the screenplay and the shooting of the film itself, we also conducted workshops on editing the film.

Open 48-Hour Congress-Commune of Creative Workers (Moscow, April 29–30, 2010)

On the eve of May Day, we held a congress devoted to the problematic of creative work in current social, economic, and political conditions. Several dozen initiative groups participated in the congress. The attendees not only included artists, critics, university teachers, researchers, publishers, translators, writers, and other cultural workers, but also specialists in labor law, social and political activists, and trade unionists. Thematically, the event was divided into two parts: the changing concept of *labor* was discussed over the course of the entire first day, while the second day dealt with *self-organization*. On the morning of the following day, congress participants joined the red-black bloc (anarchists, antifascists, and socialists) at the May Day demonstration.

Living Politically: A 48-Hour Communal Life Seminar (Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, July 2–4, 2010)

Living Politically was Chto Delat’s first international seminar in the “life” format. Its goal was to pose to participants the question of how they politically make sense not only of their professional work, but also of everyday life. Theorists, artists, activists, and curators from Russia, Belgium, Poland, Germany, Italy, China, and other countries came together at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht in order to discuss in experimental form the heterogeneity of political forms of participation and living. The traditional forms of theoretical lectures and discussions were combined with dance and vocal performances in which everyone present at the seminar participated.

Political Art: From Theory to Practice. A Three-Day Open Communal Summer Camp for Leftist Activists and Theorists. (Kaliningrad, August 23–25, 2010)

At a site outside the city on the Baltic Sea coast, participants discussed the issues of political art and direct action, and held poetry readings and film screenings. The summer camp was organized by the group Verkhotura and Friends as a wholly autonomous project that would launch a consistent series of self-developing initiatives.

A 48-Hour Communal Life Seminar: What Struggles Do We Have In Common? (ICA, London, September 9–10, 2010)

The ICA hosted the two-day event, which aimed to create an intensity of relations between its participants through sleeping, eating, entertaining, performing and discussing together. The event brought together invited cultural workers who are part of collectives from around Europe. This “commune” used the question “What struggles do we have in common?” as a starting point to focus on the problem of how to combine theory and art with a militant political life. Using the model of Bertolt Brecht’s “learning plays” and Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, the discussions over the course of the two-day seminar led to the public performance of a play on the evening of September 10. This play fused the issues tackled by the “commune” with expressive theatrical presentation.

A 48-Hour Communal Life Seminar: To Arts, Citizens! (Serralves Museum, Porto, November 22–24, 2010) ...

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Nikolay Oleynikov: Over the last year and a half we have launched a series of experimental events that were united by a single format – the 48-hour communal life seminars. At this stage it would make sense to summarize the experiences we’ve had and attempt to examine the perspectives for this experiment, which has offered “creative workers” and “workers in the field of cultural production” a direction for making sense of their position in society, given them the impulse to engage in critical self-education at the local level, and reframed the question of a rapprochement between political and creative practices.

Dmitry Vilensky: I think that your initiative, which was immediately taken up by several collectives, has an interesting and problematic genealogy, and we need to have a precise sense of it. It is clear that all this is directly related to the theme of education, but there is also the theme of collectivity. And that was no accident, for each of our seminars had the qualifier “communal life” attached to it. That is, we have arrived at the understanding that genuine creative education/growth is possible only within collective practices. In the history of art we see many examples of artists uniting to share their vision of art’s development and the meaning invested in this notion. This happened when the existing system of art and education did not fulfill, from the viewpoint of these artists, these functions. That is, it was always a matter of something new that was not accepted in the academy and society emerging through the mode of confrontation. We should also note that artists and intellectuals are always in the process of forming their own milieux. The most interesting events take place not at exhibition openings but in studios, kitchens, and bedrooms, where we find an intensive, nonstop dialogue about how to make art, why we make it, who we make it for, and whether it wouldn’t be better to totally reject art as an institutional practice and equate art and life. I think that this permanently present collectivity, which is not formally organized in a determinate way, requires some kind of structuredness and a new degree of intensity from time to time. This gives rise to all sorts of circles, seminars, summer schools, groups, movements, working and non-working groups, and so forth. That is, we’re continuing a certain tradition, and we should try and

understand how our initiative, which has already been going on for over a year, is different from what has been and what is.

NO: You're right. The 48-hour communes initiative is an heir to the tradition of creative associations and experimental educational strategies. Our events, however, are built into a preset time frame (two days). This duration is capable, at first glance, of generating only an instable temporary community that disintegrates as soon as the event is over. But then, perhaps, it would make sense for us to regard this kind of organization not as a series of separate events, but as a consistent movement that unfolds in time in various places and is realized by various participants who seize this initiative.

This approach gives us the opportunity to discuss the very different questions on the agenda in very different ad hoc communities that emerge. Every time out there are different constellations of theorists, activists, artists, critics, curators, members of collectives, and people with a background in individual work. This *instability of collectives* gives us the chance to return again and again to a discussion of key problems while also inserting the acute, urgent issues that arise. A network deployed in space and time thus arises, and a process takes place that dislocates both the notion of the traditional artistic group and activist cell, and the customary schemes for interacting in the artistic and academic milieux. Consequently, we get this picture of an endless nomadic commune where all the people interested in developing certain ideas eat at the same table (at different tables), doze off together in front of a big screen during nighttime screenings of political cinema, and are in constant dialogue. Here, as I see it, is where a phenomenon emerges: the production of *common creative time* and *communal (socialized) learning time*. The question is whether this is really a serious alternative to established relations (commercialized on the one hand; institutionalized, on the other) in the milieu that we customarily assign to creative production.

DV: It's a pretty picture you paint, but it is still reminiscent of a general rapturous movement connected more with consumption than production, don't you think? This makes sense only if we're going to focus on questions of activist responsibility – that is, if we're going to ask questions about the degree to which all this impacts the environment outside our seminars. It is vital for us to understand to what degree our ideas are capable of holding up when they're addressed to an audience that is much broader than a couple hundred privileged people who have access to this luxury of circulating from institution to institution, who have access to the grants and foundations employed for these pleasant ends.

Moreover, I would once again caution you against this sweeping use of the word *production*. Of course everything produces something: even the refusal to produce produces the quite palpable forms of the economy of refusal. But this word often very imprecisely describes the plenitude of what goes on. You can talk about the production of love all you like, but everyone knows there are many other things involved in love that cannot be described in terms of relations of production. It's the same with creativity, which is the basis not only of art, but all other forms of activity. As we've already said, this is a certain surplus that breaks out of the calculated logic of production. Life is not something that can be calculated and that is why it's

interesting. You're planning a project, and then you up and die. Or you become ill or fall in love. And then there's no project.

NO: Of course we're only at the beginning of our experiment, and there are many things we'll have to organize from scratch and interpret directly during the process, but I think that the makeup of the participants is an important argument in this conversation, for from the very first seminar it was vital to bring together in a single venue practitioners with work experience in different fields. It is these people who become agents of the ideas developed during the course of our 48-hour sessions. And there's an additional category that we're dealing with – *time*. We need to understand what we're doing with time, whether we're creating it or destroying it, producing it or spending it.

DV: Here you've touched on the quite complicated question of how time is produced. I'm not much of a philosopher and I don't really understand what we're doing with time. The most plausible answer, I think, is that we're spending it, and in this cooperative expenditure, on the basis of these efforts we produce something – obviously not a product, but some kind of experience. This *experiencing together* now seems to me the most interesting thing in the evolution of the 48-hour seminars. It is right here that the desired political subjectivation that everyone loves talking about now might emerge. But it doesn't emerge automatically. Of course you can herd a certain number of people from more or less creative professions into a room and begin loading them down with propaganda, but in the end everyone will either doze off or run away. The chance of having a new experience is always minimal, and so it's vital to get everyone genuinely involved. That is, *dwelling* together assumes that there already exists the *desire* to be together, a craving for adventure, for transformation. We assume that the division between art (that is, a set of more or less established conventional practices) and the educational process should be eliminated. Art is important first of all because it is one of the capacities (a very important one!) that people have for transforming themselves (the educational process), and artistic education can serve as a kind of studio for the cooperative production of art.

NO: However, aside from the adventure of cooperative creative living, the aspect of self-definition is key for us. For, over the past twenty years, in the post-Soviet context, it was simply awkward to recall the notion of “creative” or “intellectual” labor. We should probably seek out the causes for this awkwardness in post-perestroika frustration, in general political apathy. Moreover, everything somehow got caught in the cracks of circumstances beyond our control, which succeeded one another in the following well-known sequence:

Perestroika > hunger > Yeltsin > privatization > Chechnya > Putin > oil > relative prosperity against the backdrop of the permanent “war on terror” and the “fight against extremism” (a category that now encompasses almost all attempts to think or do something independently) > Medvedev > crisis, etc.

And so in this latest wave of rethinking reality, forgotten terminology manifests itself again after a twenty-year hiatus. But, as we understand, both this terminology and actual questions of labor, production, and action have become relevant again only for a fairly narrow circle of people, whereas the majority of artists and theorists

emphatically reject attempts to interpret their activity in terms of economic relationships and, correspondingly, to regard their activity as labor.

DV: I think that here what's making itself felt is the general rejection of everything that is reminiscent of the counterfeit rhetoric around labor in the late Soviet period. What happened was the inevitable protest that had long been festering among the intelligentsia, who were often called the "creative intelligentsia" (rather than "labor intelligentsia") even in the official Soviet rhetoric. But all these inherited problems around the contradiction between labor and creativity were suppressed at a certain moment to the benefit of the capitalist management of labor resources, both one's own labor and other people's. It became somehow indecent to even hint at the presence of certain forms of labor, almost in the same way as it became indecent to mention certain forms of exploitation.

In Russia, the figure of the manager became central during the emergence of capitalism. It quickly became clear, however, that in this game there are many more managerial types who lose than win and, as in a card game, the winners take practically everything.

I think that our situation is in many ways more brutal than in the west, where the remnants of the welfare state prevent people from hitting rock bottom for the time being, and investment in culture is on an incomparably higher level than in Russia. During the congress, it was important to get together and talk about the possibilities for resisting specific forms of exploiting workers and making them vulnerable, and to think about what to do about this.

At the same time, it seems to me that most attempts at uniting and defending one's interests are doomed to failure because they run up against a structural problem. And here we return to this perpetual contradiction between labor and creativity, between work and mission.

It is obvious to everyone – and here I like the precise statement of this made by Negri – that *art refers us back to this creative act that constitutes labour in its originary essence, that artistic work is the index of man's inexhaustible capacity to turn being into excess and to free labour*. It is clear that the vulnerability of "free creative labor" immediately makes itself felt in a world ruled by profits. I don't think that we can find an overall solution to this contradiction. It is obvious that it is impossible to reduce creative work to the observance of a contractual agreement. All these trendy conversations about self-exploitation conceal the understandable and forgivable desire for a normal work life within capitalism. It's like, I've done exactly what you paid me to do, so leave me alone; if you have any complaints, send them to my trade union council. It's likewise obvious that just giving away your labor or your mission to the capitalists of whatever stripe is just wrong.

My working proposal is simple: you always have to weigh your goals (strategy) and work tactics in various situations, without trying to formalize this with strict rules. That is, it is better to approach the problem from the other direction: it is not institutions of power and capital that exploit your creative potential, but your own creative tasks that require the seizure of certain means of production and knowledge distribution. You enter as it were into a conscious struggle, rightly assuming that you

have the necessary resources to win or withstand this confrontation. Of course, you can also lose and get into some shit, but that is the risk of the struggle, which there is no sense in rejecting.

Here I'd like to raise my voice in criticism of the Western European approach to the problems of so-called precarity. Precarization means precisely a form of borderline, unstable existence where nothing is guaranteed. That is, it turns out that all of us have been ejected from settled social, class, gender, and national frameworks. We ought to regard this condition primarily as a challenge, not as a threat against which we should all close ranks with the demand to bring everything back (that is, the guarantees of the social state, which are based on a dubious compromise between the classes). Even if we confine ourselves to the pragmatic logic of the development of productive forces, it seems more important to me to demand decent pay for temporary contracts instead of trying to revive long-term or lifetime contracts for the "aristocracy" of immaterial labor.

I'm trying to understand why flexibility and the demand for the capacity to function in unpredictable situations provokes such a panic not only amongst "simple people," but also amongst creative workers. As I see things, they should realize that precarity is a chance, that it is precisely the pre-condition of hope. Once upon a time, in the nineteen-sixties, young Italian peasants from the south didn't want to work themselves to death on the old assembly lines, and so they refused to submit to the normalizing machine of exploitation and walked out of the factories into a new, unknown world. And this provoked a positive reaction from many leftists. Nowadays, I always have this sense that the motive for all these "correct" discussions of precarization is some kind of implicit fear of insecurity. What is implied is that people (or, rather, the "golden billion") deserve the quiet life won by the generations of their fathers and grandfathers through harsh class struggle, as well as through the monstrous exploitation of the rest of the world. But it seems to me that now we should demand not "stability," but rather more openness to the new, the radicalization of the struggle to reappropriate the commons produced by the "general intellect." We should remember that hope for salvation appears where there is danger.

NO: In our seminars, conferences, and conferences, this aspect of insecurity, vulnerability, and instability is defiantly heightened, because during the two days of communal living the individual creative worker is ripped from his or her insular ("normal") everyday life and opened up to the dynamic of collective experience. This shift of register from the personal to the collective gives us cause to turn to communal housing and creative projects in the Soviet Union. As we remember, there was this organization known as the Union of Artists in the Soviet Union. We won't dwell on this trade-union-like bureaucratic structure, which controlled exhibition spaces, the allotting of commissions and studios to the union's member artists, and so forth. We're only interested in one phenomenon: the so-called summer creative dachas of the Union of Artists, which were a kind of creative commune with studios, common dining rooms, etc. An exciting, interesting, and rich communal life must have taken place there.

It's also important to mention the housing projects in the early Soviet Union. After all, the very term *obshchezhitie* ("communal life" and "dormitory") as it ties in to all our experiments arose rather as an index of precisely this social aspect. (It is no accident

that elements of cooperative (communal) living – morning calisthenics, cooking food, common meals, music and poetry evenings, joint sleeping accommodations – have always been included in the structure of our seminars. In this instance, this term doesn't even refer to the post-revolutionary phenomenon of "residential consolidation," but precisely to the early Soviet utopian housing projects. As an example, I could cite one of the masterpieces of the communal architecture from the late twenties and early thirties – the Cultural Revolution "residential combine" (*zhiloi kombinat*) in downtown Nizhny Novgorod (V.V. Medvedev, architect). I won't refrain from describing it here. The residential combine was meant for workers – construction workers, garment workers, printing plant workers – and consisted of five wings joined by skyways on the second and fifth floors. Four wings were residential, and the fifth housed a "children's nursery" (a nursery school and kindergarten). The aim of this communal house was to socialize domestic life by maximally liberating female Soviet workers from domestic chores. There were communal kitchens and utility and service rooms on each floor, as well as "red corners," where literacy classes, lectures, and assemblies were held. The ground floors contained shower rooms and laundries. Students, young workers, and single people populated the one-room flats, while the two- and three-room flats were given to families. The flat roof was designed to house a solarium. There was a cafeteria in the central building.

The project to construct a socialized domestic life was met with enthusiasm by young workers in the young socialist state in the late twenties. This full domestic production cycle in the Fordist spirit could have quite naturally also been organized as an artists' commune.

However, the obvious difference is that communal houses were built as permanent residences, but without taking the growth in people's needs into account, while our seminars are more like two-day adventures in *cooperative living and creativity*. On the one hand, our events have the obvious traits of "communal life." On the other, forty-eight hours is not enough time to turn our unstable commune into a full-blown *kommunalka* (communal flat), and the connective tissue here is the process of cooperative creativity, like the theater production that capped off our London seminar.

DV: The term "residential combine" is quite symptomatic: it frankly reveals a notion of life and reproductive work as a kind of manufacturing cycle. Here you immediately sense a certain limitation in all forms of "communalism." It's quite curious that all historical attempts to overcome the nuclear family through the organization of various forms of communes ended badly. There is something sadly realistic about the fact that people aren't prepared to share their daily lives with one another. And coercing people into cooperative everyday living is the model exemplified by the "residential combine," the communal flat, the camp, the prison, the barracks, and the hospital – all images that immediately provoke a rejection reaction. We should also not forget that various models of communalism were cultivated not only in the history of communism, but were also quite successfully exploited by fascism. It is now fairly clear that these models don't have an unambiguous emancipatory content: politically, they are open to fundamentalism, to fascism, to communism – all systems that oppose the individualistic capitalization of life.

But I would like to emphasize one other aspect of these forms – a certain fundamental discomfort. We have to admit that a collective is not something that is definitely

pleasant, but is rather the reverse – a quite tense and uncomfortable experience of being together. The problem is that human beings by nature are neither collectivists nor individualists: they combine these qualities. And now, at a historical moment when individualism and egotism have triumphed, it is quite important to insist on this uncomfortable community. But we should realize that such attempts will naturally provoke rejection and antagonism. Like everyone else, I find it hard to be in a public space all the time without having the chance to be alone. But I'm consciously prepared to accept this tension because it also opens up new possibilities for being oneself with others. The time frame – those infamous forty-eight hours – leads our seminars not towards daily life, but rather towards a peculiar violation of it. We share the excess of overcoming a comfortable individual or family existence. And that is why the seminars are important. But forty-eight hours is probably the limit for me.

I wanted to ask you: what have we learned at all these seminars? How should we move forward so as to avoid turning into a cheap (in the sense of employment) intellectual traveling circus?

NO: I agree that future events should not go much beyond the 48-hour time frame. That is the value derived from the excess of the cooperative creative experience. But you know, Dima, I see precisely the *circus* more as a positive and fairly organic model for developing our practices. It is one of the possible models. I have in mind, of course, the circus as understood by the early Brecht, who included routines by the clown Karl Valentin in his theater productions. In his famous utterance about the most important of the arts (made during a conversation with Lunacharsky), Lenin also talked about the circus. He had in mind its potential for combining elements of entertainment and education.

We've already talked about the fact that our experiment is unstable and nomadic in nature. And in some way our seminars are in fact a circus of political, educational, domestic, and creative excess. The circus as a party that arises only in conditions of collective creative living. A party that is made possible, among other things, by relentless, daily, off-the-clock work, by self-discipline and total commitment.

And this party is paradoxically bound up with our recent references to the Stakhanovite movement. Despite the contradictoriness of Stakhanovism itself as a phenomenon, the spirit of worker enthusiasm is something that is worth recalling in our age of slackness and melancholy. For, in the final analysis, exhibitions halls are our shop floors and pit faces (but not offices!). I'm not trying to compare the work of the miner and the artist now. Creativity is not industrial labor, and our work does not involve "output quotas" measured in precise figures. I would also like to draw a line between our joy at being engaged in the hard work of creativity and the corporate enthusiasm of the manager, who believes in individual success and is willing to put up with self-exploitation and unpaid overtime to advance his career.

But there is something that unites us with that period of labor heroism – our confidence that we're working not for a wage that can then be spent on some personal petit-bourgeois pleasure or to feed one's family. We are working to build a new society. The instability of our situation and the endless expanses of what remains to be done still fill us with enthusiasm.

