

Oxana Timofeeva // Living Politically

The idea of organizing a communal seminar in Maastricht came to me in January 2010, when I arrived in the city from Moscow for two years to do research (on animals in philosophy) in the theory department at the Jan Van Eyck Academie. The Chto Delat collective and the Vpered Socialist Movement had already organized a 24-hour seminar in Nizhny Novgorod and were planning a 48-hour May Day forum for creative workers in Moscow. The goal of the Maastricht seminar was to integrate this form – “communal life seminars” – into the international context. Everyone saw this as an important challenge. When two active participants in the Nizhny Novgorod event, Nikolay Oleynikov and Kirill Medvedev, and I were in the early stages of the discussing the project, we asked ourselves a question. What if things that were apparent to us turned out to be completely unapparent to a European audience adapted to different political realities – for example, the meaning of the Soviet-era term obshchezhitie (both “communal living” and “dormitory,” “hostel”), which can hardly be adequately translated into English? But this was precisely the point of the project – to gather people from different contexts and force them to search for a common language of the “political.” A search like this is seemingly in the order of things, but what was really interesting and new was the fact that the premises of our experience, which in our local situation we considered self-evident or axiomatic, here became a barrier to understanding, and this barrier had to be overcome. The way we originally asked the question was: how do we – you and me – make sense not only of our daily lives, but also of professional work in political terms? To put it simply, what meaning do we invest in what we do and how we live? All this established yet another important dynamic of difference, which during the course of the seminar revealed itself, albeit fairly hypothetically, as a productive conflict between art, theory, and activism. Each of these forms of work has its own trajectory of desire, but the question is how, when, and where an intersection of these trajectories is possible, and whether it is possible at all. The title of the event – Living Politically – reflected both this dynamic, which informed the seminar’s content, and a formal moment: this was an event in the experimental format of “life,” that is, it was a matter of combining “life” and “politics” in a limited time and space.

The 48-hour communal seminar in Maastricht took place on July 2–4, 2010. This dialogue is based on a discussion that arose at the end of the seminar. Dmitry Vilensky, Oxana Timofeeva, Pietro Bianchi, Katja Diefenbach, Aaron Schuster, Alexei Penzin, Andrei Berdnikov, and others took part in this discussion.

LIVING POLITICALLY

A hot summer day. An artist, a philosopher, and an activist are strolling in a small park in the Dutch city of Maastricht. The park is not far from the academy named in honor of the famous artist Jan van Eyck. The park is filled with ducks, geese, goats, and other small domestic animals.

Activist: So what does it mean to “live politically”?

Philosopher: It depends what we mean by “life” and what we mean by “politics.” Aristotle, for example, said that man is a “political animal.” Both these things –

politics and life – are already packed into this phrase (moreover, in a fundamental way) because an animal is something that has anima, that is alive. And so this animal somehow lives “politically.” Politics is intelligent life, the capacity of human consciousness to correctly define its place in being and history and draw the proper conclusions. So theory, above all, is vital for politics. Theory makes us vigilant and itself is a kind of practice. **Artist:** I think that conclusions alone aren’t enough here. The political aspect of life has to be expressed and represented first and foremost. There are different forms of politics, after all. Certain people obviously confuse politics and the political intrigues engaged in by capital and bourgeois institutions, which declare that they are concerned about the common good while they’re stuffing their own pockets. But in fact genuine politics is part of human nature, part of the human capacity to create and thus change the world, as Hegel and then Marx put it. That is what practice is. By creating new, unusual forms, we help people avoid false conclusions and free themselves from the ideological mush that is always stewing in their heads.

Activist: But life, political life all the more so, is not only art. It is above all a struggle. Reality doesn’t always bend to our desire to create ever more beautiful forms of reality. It resists us, and we resist it, and complex forms of collective organization are thus required for our struggle and resistance. First of all, politics is the ability to coexist with others. Moreover, it is not only people who live politically, but other animals as well. Look at these geese, how amiably they comport themselves, how delicately they accept food from the hands of children! As Deleuze said, there is no such thing as a lonely animal. They exist only as a multitude, as a flock or herd.

Artist: As if that were politics – a herd! The herd principle attempts to dominate creative individuality. A herd is easy to manage when there is a herdsman. Rancière, for example, was right to separate politics, understood as the free expression of dissent, from the police, understood as administration and regulation by means, for example, of state-sanctioned violence. By turning masses of people into obedient herds, the police rob them of the will to change the world as they see fit.

Activist: There is no point struggling alone. Changing the world requires solidarity and – I’ll venture to say it – discipline. Did you notice the monument to D’Artagnan that we just passed? It’s here in this park because D’Artagnan died in battle for Maastricht. He’s not just a character in a book; he was also a real man. He was a member of a small political group whose motto was, “One for All, and All for One!”

Artist: We would never have remembered this if an artist – or, in this case, a sculptor – hadn’t sculpted this monument and thus immortalized this man, and a writer hadn’t written a book about him. We immaterial creative laborers also have a notion of discipline, but it’s important to distinguish it from the discipline that leads to leveling and repression, to the castration of uniqueness. In my opinion, the political consists in the search for freedom, and “being together” is justified only when it brings joy.

Philosopher: I’m skeptical about the idea “One for All, and All for One,” what with its tendency to party-mindedness, authoritarianism, and insularity, as well as to the euphoric, ecstatic state of “being together,” which ends with the marginalization of the group, its transformation into some kind of youth subculture. In the second case, the political vanishes like sand running through the fingers, literally becoming the

micropolitical, a liberal politics of identity, whose defense hinders people from recognizing their common interest. The contemporary leftist movement's appeal to community and collectivity contains, it seems to me, a dangerous potential because collectivity is often limited to one or another group narcissistically fixated on itself and sure that it is right and everyone else is wrong. This is how capital levels us: by multiplying differences.

Artist: So what do we end up with? That all of us – artists, philosophers, scholars, and social movement activists – are so different and interesting that we have nothing in common? What a sad picture! Nevertheless, I always ask myself what sort of common struggle we could have. It is clear that the world has changed greatly over the past fifty and even hundred years, that political forms of subjectivity have themselves changed, but the question remains. What unites us? How can we avoid disintegrating into all these micro-groups that defend their own autonomy, for example, within stagnant academia or bourgeois contemporary art institutions? On the other hand, how do we avoid lapsing into individualism, thinking only about our own careers, while the world is obviously going to hell in a handbasket?

Activist: I think that the lesson of our generation is that we have to combine the experience of previous struggles and the challenges of the present. What I mean here is two completely different types of collective organization. The first is the classical model of party building with its passion for mega-projects and its totalizing effects. A mass movement creates its own power, which then crushes that movement, and so in the end one group of people is again living high on the hog while everyone else is leading the miserable existence of passive masses. The second is the model of micropolitics, the multilevel democratic struggle waged in the second half of the twentieth century by various “minorities,” a model that was recuperated by capital. And so it divides and conquers by suggesting to the worker that he or she is first of all a gay or a woman and, therefore, should struggle against heterosexuals or men instead of uniting with everyone else and carrying out a general strike. But we shouldn't compare these two models and figure out which of them is better and more correct. We have to move from small things to bigger things, from social work in our communities to developing an overall strategy. We need to be stubborn about combining differentiation and homogenization in order in the end to destabilize the system of repression and violence.

Philosopher: How do we develop a common strategy without understanding the logic of historical development? I think there is yet another contradiction here – not only between the micro- and macropolitics of collective action, but also between the private and universal, between the temporality of my own being and the temporality of history as such. If we don't wish to understand how people work, what relationships exist between labor and capital, and how private subjectivity relates to the totality of capitalist exploitation, then we are doomed to wage a marginal struggle, a struggle that will fail in the strategic sense. So we constantly have to relate the private with the common, the abstract with the concrete, and the local with the global.

Activist: When I read the biographies of Italian worker activists written fifty or so years ago, I'm struck by how the existential dimension of individual life coincided with history. It was impossible to separate these two levels. People made personal decisions – they moved from one city to another, married, had kids, changed their

jobs and names – based on what was happening in the world, what the political situation was like, and what the common struggle required from them. Where is all that nowadays? Everyone is saving their own ass, and then the theorists bawl because yet another philosophy department has been closed in London and the professors fired because of the economic crisis and because the department was not profitable.

Artist: There's nothing to cry over. If you ask me, philosophy departments, if they haven't been closed already, should have eliminated themselves a long time ago, because academia is something completely obsolete, something medieval in its essence. The entire system of academic hierarchy is organized in such a way that the individual is driven into the clutches of scholarly monotony, and his individual career path is strewn with book dust. Philosophers don't even invent new forms, and they could care less about collectivity. Some of them give long lectures, while all the rest are supposed to listen and keep their traps shut instead of everyone drifting together in an open discussion. Here the young suck up to the old in order to get their dissertations (about someone who died long ago and should stay dead) accepted and check off another box on their CVs. And then they're invited to all these big philosophy conferences that change nothing about capitalist reality, even if they vehemently critique it. It is obvious that politics isn't made in the critical theory department at some Duke University or other. We have to break the monotony of these endless conferences with fun, powerful activist/artistic interventions like our communal seminar.

Philosopher: What's the point of producing new forms if content gets forgotten? It actually makes me sad that philosophy departments are being closed. For this is part of an overall process that affects more than just the universities – the process of particularization, the fragmentation of the social fabric, the transformation of the subject of history into an atomized bourgeois individual, an obedient low-ranking employee. For what is the university as an idea in the Hegelian-Humboldtian sense of the word? It is an authority that is meant to impart a universal scope to human life, to teach humans to think critically by familiarizing themselves with the most varied fields of science and knowledge. It is no accident that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the universities were one of the main breeding grounds of resistance and struggle, and students were a tiny (in the sense of young) revolutionary force.

Activist: The problem is that the contemporary university thinks of itself more as a corporation. The current university reforms, which affect all levels of education, are designed to create a situation in which young people shell out their own money for a limited set of professional skills that they can successfully sell on the market. If I go study to be a crisis manager who fires workers, then that is what I'm going to end up doing, and not the other way around. The university emerged along with bourgeois society and has evolved in parallel with it. It is no wonder that they're closing philosophy departments. Such is the internal logic of the university now that liberalism, with its claims to the universality of democratic values (with which philosophy, critical theory, and Marxism could still somehow get on), yields to the intolerant neoliberal contagion. That is why we activists need to seize the initiative and organize alternative educational spaces, work with students, and give them the knowledge they won't be able to get in their departments.

Philosopher: There is another contradiction here. On the one hand, yes, the university is another corporation, and in league with the other corporations it produces not a critical, creative subject, but an obedient work force, and in this sense it is wholly dependent on the capitalist system and the state. On the other hand, among academics themselves there is this persistent consciousness of their own exceptionalism, a kind of elitism or, simply put, academic snobbery, which is justified by what they call “the principles of academic freedom” or “the autonomy of the universities.” We scholars, they say, are beyond politics, and no political authority can influence the educational process. There is ideology, they say, and then there is objective knowledge. The university claims that unblemished objective knowledge resides within its walls.

Artist: You said it! It’s one thing if a student is not interested in politics because he wants to get his diploma, land a good job, lead a quiet little life, and not burden himself with extra problems, but it is an altogether different matter when he imagines that he’s smarter than the average guy and his ambitions make him stay in academia and climb the academic ladder. However critical he might be in his research, he is essentially satisfied with life and the privilege he has to hold forth about this life from a bird’s-eye view.

Philosopher: I agree. In both cases the university is a relic of the bourgeois world. But we too are quite far from living under communism. The world we live in is its own relic. Whatever institution you take – I mean institutions that imagine themselves as progressive – it all comes down to the idea of autonomy. We, they say, are in fact that selfsame little island of freedom amidst an ocean of slavery and that spark that will ignite the flame of revolution. Take, at the very least, the art market, which has been criticized upside down and sideways. Artists tear their hair out trying to get shown at the latest biennale or in a hip museum, and all their works are about how they’re subverting the system from within. But meanwhile the system is in fact constituted by these subversive affirmations, is fueled by them. One biennale after another is successfully held, but what do we have in the end? A profusion of works in which artists and curators endlessly discuss their own relationships with museums and galleries, the vectors of financial flows, the financing of critical projects, and so on. And yet they pay no attention to the mechanism for the production of value themselves. But the question of value is the question of form per se. Art produces a pure commodity form, irrespective of its use value.

Artist: I can’t agree with you here. Like theory, art produces knowledge all the same. It is an alternative form for the cognition of reality via the production of form. And we have to adhere to this imperative without lapsing into the feverish creation of senseless, pretty baubles for the amusement of rich bourgeois. In this sense, art has an inner will to overcome itself, including its so-called autonomy, its professional boundaries. It’s the same with philosophy, which long ago should have become something greater than mere contemplation. In fact, as I see it, knowledge is one, but it has various modifications. Badiou said that the one divides into the two, and that’s already a classic statement. But I would argue that the one divides into the three. There are three of us here right now – an activist, an artist, and a philosopher – and nevertheless we share some kind of common knowledge and a common struggle. If each of us insists on the superiority of his or her own position, we risk losing this common nerve of communist sensuality.

Philosopher: Of course the one divides into the three. Plato had already said, in the *Timaeus*, that the world is made from triangles. And the Christians also believed that God is one in three persons, although ordinary folk had a hard time imagining how this was possible. And Hegel's entire system is based on triplicity: first there's the subjective, then the objective, and then both of them together – that is, the Absolute.

Activist: I nevertheless believe that the one divides into the two, not into the three. Instead of the Hegelian trinity, I see what Marx called antagonism in everything. For example, when they tell us about “national unity” (we have a national holiday by that name in Russia), we should always remember that there is no unified nation, because the nation still contains, conventionally speaking, those who work and those who eat, the oppressors and the oppressed. And where we're told about unity and totality, we always have to distinguish these two levels of conflict and understand clearly whose side we're on. If you find the right side, then you also philosophically recognize your place in the world and find “your own” people, whom there are more than a few of, and you unite your life with history. It's good that there are three of us now, but if there were, say, seven of us – an artist, a philosopher, an activist, a student, a worker, an immigrant, and a housewife – on the same side of the barricades, that would be even better. The one divides in two, and what belongs to us in that two is divisible by infinity. Numbers must also be liberated!