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CHTO DELAT SELECTED PROJECTS

The collective **Chto Delat** (What is to be done?) was founded in early 2003 in Petersburg by a workgroup of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod with the goal of merging **political theory, art, and activism**.

The group was constituted in May 2003 in St. Petersburg in an action called “**The Refoundation of Petersburg**.” Shortly afterwards, the original, as yet nameless core group began publishing an international newspaper called Chto Delat?. The name of the group derives from a novel by the Russian 19th century writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky, and immediately brings to mind the first socialist worker’s self-organizations in Russia, which Lenin actualized in his own publication, “What is to be done?” (1902). Chto Delat sees itself as an artistic cell and also as a community organizer for a variety of cultural activities intent on politicizing “knowledge production”.

In 2013, Chto Delat initiated an educational platform—**School of Engaged Art** in Petersburg and also runs a space called **Rosa’s House of Culture**. From its inception, the collective has been publishing an English-Russian newspaper focused on the urgent issues of Russian cultural politics, in dialogue with the international context. In 2014 the collective **withdrew from the participation in Manifesta 14** in Petersburg as a local protest against the developing the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and with this act has triggered a current debate on the participation and boycott of art events.

The artistic activity is realizing across a range of media—from video and theater plays, to radio programs and murals—it include art projects, seminars and public campaigns. **The works of the collective are characterized by the use of alienation effect, surreal scenery, typicality and always case based analyses of a concrete social and political struggles**. The aesthetics of the group is based also on heretic unpacking the artistic devices offered by Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luck Godard and Reiner Fassbinder. The collective make a strong focus on the issue of cultural workers labour rights.

These activities are coordinated by a core group including Tsaplya Olga Egorova (artist), Artiom Magun (philosopher), Nikolay Oleynikov (artist), Natalia Pershina / Glucklya (artist), Alexey Penzin (philosopher), Alexander Skidan (poet and critic), Oxana Timofeeva (philosopher), Dmitry Vilensky (artist) and Nina Gasteva (choreographer).

Recent exhibitions include:

MUAC (The Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo), Mexico (solo show 2017); KOW BERLIN (solo show 2017) (2015), San Paulo Biennale (2014); Art, Really Useful Knowledge, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2014); Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789–2013 – Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (2013); FORMER WEST: Documents, Constellations, Prospects,, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2013); 10th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2012); Chto Delat in Baden-Baden, Staatliche Kuntsthalle, Baden-Baden (2011); Chto Delat Perestroika: Twenty Years After: 2011–1991, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2011); Ostalgia, New Museum, New York (2011); Study, Study and Act Again, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana (solo show 2011); The Urgent Need to Struggle, Institute of Contemporary Art, London (2010).

The works are part of the collections:

The Museum of Modern Art , New York; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Museum Reina Sophia, Madrid; Le Centre Pompidou, Paris; MUDAM, Luxemburg; Tretyakov Art Gallery, Moscow; KIASMA, Museum for Contemporary Art, Helsinki; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco; Museum of Conteporary Art, Belgrade and many others.

Chto Delat poster timeline from the catalogue published by Seccesion (2013)

https://issuu.com/dmitryvilensky/docs/catalogue-poster_time_line

Chto Delat catalogue published by Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2011)

https://issuu.com/dmitryvilensky/docs/chto_delat_katalog_fin

Newspapers

<https://chtodelat.org/category/b8-newspapers/>

The main idea which stands behind the publication of Chto Delat newspaper is an attempt to **translate this “old school” rhetoric of party publication into current situation of the artistic production of collective** which deals with different type of constituencies.

Since 2003, the collective Chto Delat has been publishing an eponymous newspaper. Most of newspapers are fully bilingual (English/Russian). **The editorial process draws artists, critics, activists and philosophers into a heated debate, which results in theoretical essays, art projects, open-source translations, questionnaires, dialogues, and comic strips**.

The newspaper is edited by Dmitry Vilensky in collaboration with the collective (till 2008 it was mainly co-edited by Vilensky and David Riff). The newspaper appears roughly 2–5 issues a year. It varies between 16 and 32 pages (A3). Its editions (2,000-10,000 copies) are **distributed for free, as a take-away medium**. Each newspaper addresses a theme or problem related to the current artistic production of the collective. This take-away publication is distributed for free at congresses or exhibitions, social forums and rallies, where it reaches and forms different constituencies. Sometimes **the newspaper is used as a form of intervention into concrete situations** dictated by the urgencies of protests, intellectual provocations or comments.

The graphic politics of the newspaper are based on inviting one artist (often from the collective) who produces the whole set of images which conceptually contribute to the theme of publication.

EXHIBITION AT KOW 2017

More light! Build more lighthouses! Drink phosphorus! As autocrats and neo-feudalists in the United States, Turkey, Poland, Great Britain, and other countries turn off the lights, something must shine the brighter. But what? What should be done? Chto Delat?! That is the signature question under which this collective of artists, intellectuals, and activists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg have worked together for the past fourteen years. In 2014, however, the group ran out of answers—in an EXHIBITION AT KOW, they sealed their hopes that art might offer a critical response to the war in Ukraine and Putin’s neo-nationalism in a time capsule and launched them toward an unknown future. The show was an open admission of their perplexity and marginality. The shock that had agonized the Russian collective has now reached the West. They have worked through it and are coming back to Berlin with a fresh look at their prospects and ours—and, at KOW, they build a lighthouse.

Nothing less is at stake than the fate of the Enlightenment, an increasingly global state of emergency, and the ruined illusion that liberalism might survive on a few islands. Also at stake is a possible way for art to keep speaking up. The upstairs gallery memorializes men and women who were burned or shot to death or killed by water guns in recent protests. Towering above the five sculptures commemorating the brutal demise of free public expression is a lighthouse scaffold that takes inspiration from Gustav Klutssis’s agitprop kiosks, a historic form of mass communication that effectively publicized progressive ideals after the Russian Revolution. But instead of broadcasting confident messages rallying the masses to build a better future, Chto Delat raise a monument of gloom, a black beacon of mournful uproar, as well as a transmitter mast for the saturnine incantations of recently deceased writers and musicians, from John Berger to Leonard Cohen, who knew about the power of darkness and now chant a requiem for the fallen heroes of freedom.

Lighthouses may illuminate the world around them, but the signal they send is a warning. They mark places that navigators had best avoid. In the downstairs gallery, the lighthouse becomes the symbol of a refuge that has lost its way. In cooperation with ARTISTS AT RISK, a nonprofit that organizes stays in so-called “Safe Havens” in Europe for artists who are under threat, Chto Delat shot the film “It Has Not Happened to Us Yet. Safe Haven”(1) on the Norwegian island of Sula in 2016. Their two-channel video installation tells the fictional story of five artists whom a fellowship enables to escape war and repression for a remote islet. Interspersed in the narrative are documentary shots: in interviews, the islanders explain their solidarity with refugee artists, gladly explain local rules and the conditions for social integration, and sing the island’s hymn. But it gradually emerges that the artists’ hope to leave the world’s conflicts and their own disputes behind for a peaceful exile was an illusion. The story might well become Chto Delat’s own future, or that of many others, and it reminds us of the countless individuals who had or still have nowhere to escape to.

A few steps away is Putin’s reality. In an expansive assemblage of images found on the Internet, Chto Delat document how the new Russia perpetually produces politics and everyday life as performative rituals that proliferate in social media. We stand amid the theater of sometimes utterly absurd gestures and emblems of neo-national identity to observe an experiment: a monitor shows a public square in Saint Petersburg. One after another, three demonstrators appear wearing signs around their necks that read: “Hug me, I’m your enemy,” “Beat me, I’m your sister,” “Pinch me, I’m dreaming you.” Passersby and actors respond in different ways to the quiet protesters’ appeals, revealing, en passant, the surreal nature of public life beneath the banner of the Russian Bear. Who is telling the truth? Who is playing a part? Who speaks for whom? Who is being threatened, and by whom?

up to the Nazis’ rise to power. Each might be matched to a similar figure today, their situation now made worse by a new global condition: the ideas of equality and justice have fewer and fewer passionate defenders—they seem to have become dispensable in the “prolonged twilight of reaction,”(2) as Chto Delat put it in their notes accompanying the exhibition. If some optimistic light nonetheless glimmers in our galleries, it is due to the confidence of a collective of unflinching thinkers and practitioners who, when asked what should be done, would throw in that art at least sees possibility even when the lights go out.

Call it their keen sense of reality. Or in Leonard Cohen’s words, “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” Chto Delat’s exhibition was fabricated in the galleries at KOW and in Petersburg in the weeks before the opening. In 2017–2018, it will travel to various locations and keep growing. New productions are scheduled in which theatrical and documentary forms will be interwoven. The social and institutional staging of reality calls for commensurate choreographies of critique, complemented by poetry, sculpture, and an enlarged repertoire of capacious installation art that translates progressive forms from Russian avant-garde and Soviet culture across boundaries of genre and ideology into a queer popular aesthetic. In the face of a world (and an art world) that is variously dumbstruck, ensconced in elitism, or dissipated in foolish chatter, Chto Delat are committed to a language that stands by its ideals, that seeks to make itself understood, and continue to regard social emancipation as the unchanging mission of their shared work.

(1) “It Has Not Happened to Us Yet. Safe Haven” was curated by Perpetuum Mobile, co-produced by LKV and Chto Delat, funded by URO/KORO

(2) Dmitry Vilensky, Chto Delat, January 2017

Text: Alexander Koch



Chto Delat

Lighthouse (It Is Getting Darker), 2017
 After Gustavs Klutsis' architecture sketches
 Mixed Media
 4,5 x 10,6 x 4,9 m

The Memorials For Weak Light, 2017
 Mixed Media
 Dimensions variable





Chto Delat

The Memorials For Weak Light, 2017
Mixed Media
Dimensions variable

The Running Figure
The act of self-immolation of a Tibetan monk

The Smashed Figure
A protester hit by a water canon



Chto Delat

The Memorials For Weak Light, 2017
Mixed Media
Dimensions variable

The Flying Figure
Based on the image of Galeano - Zapatista teacher killed by right-wing paramilitaries

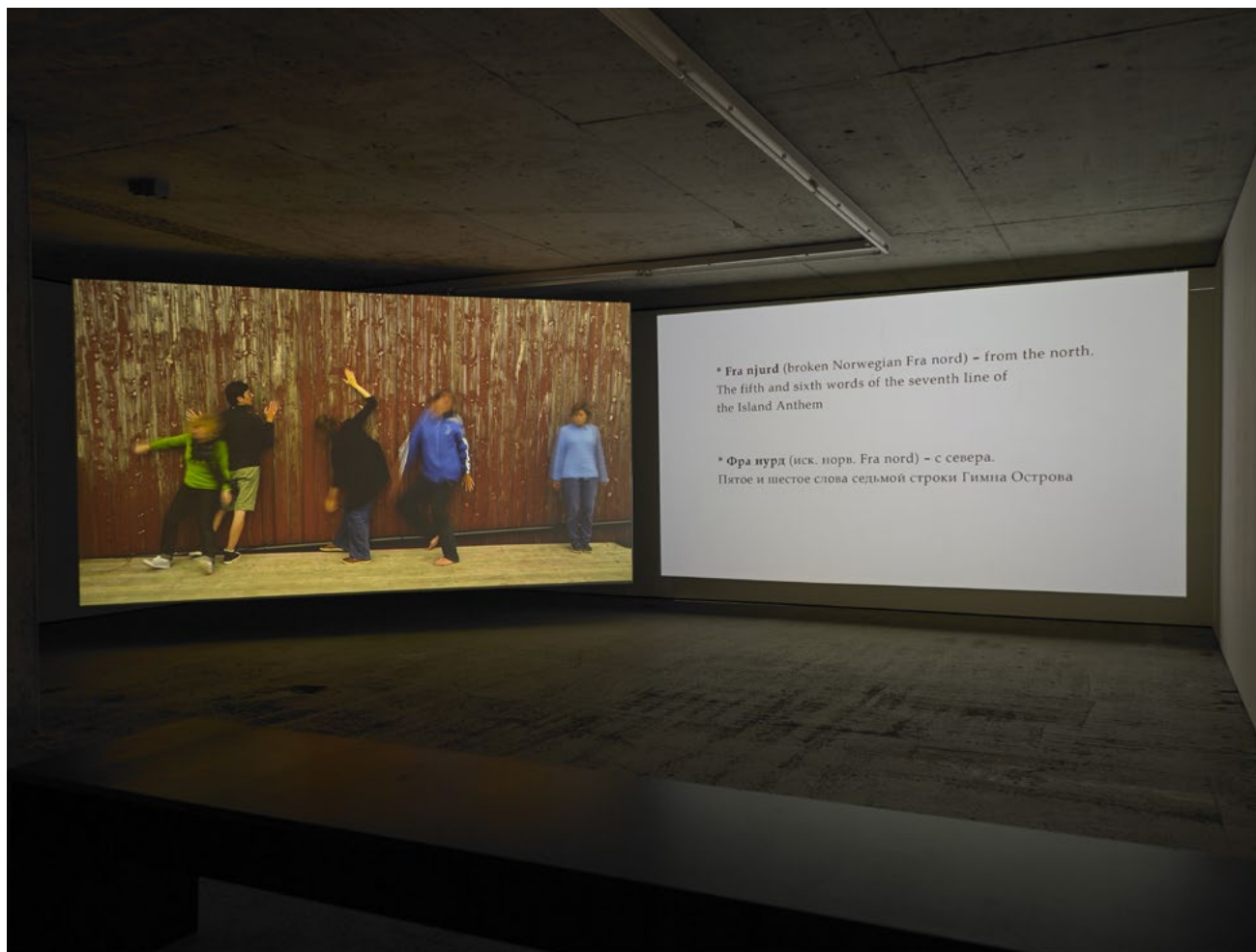
The Fallen
Based on the victims at Maidan and Paris Commune



Chto Delat

Lighthouse (It Is Getting Darker), 2017
 After Gustavs Klutsis' architecture sketches
 Mixed Media
 4,5 x 10,6 x 4,9 m





Chto Delat

It Hasn't Happened To Us Yet. Safe Haven, 2016/2017
Two-channel HD video installation
16:9, color, sound
49:06 min



Chto Delat

Performative Practices Of Our Time, 2017
Digital prints
Dimensions variable





Chto Delat

Performative Practices Of Our Time, 2017
Digital prints
Dimensions variable



Chto Delat

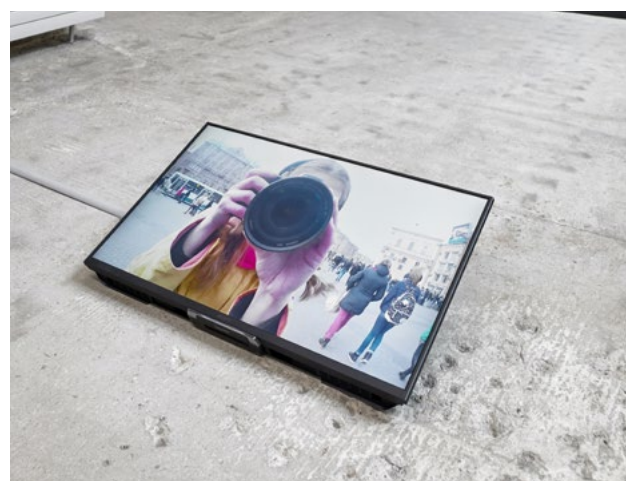
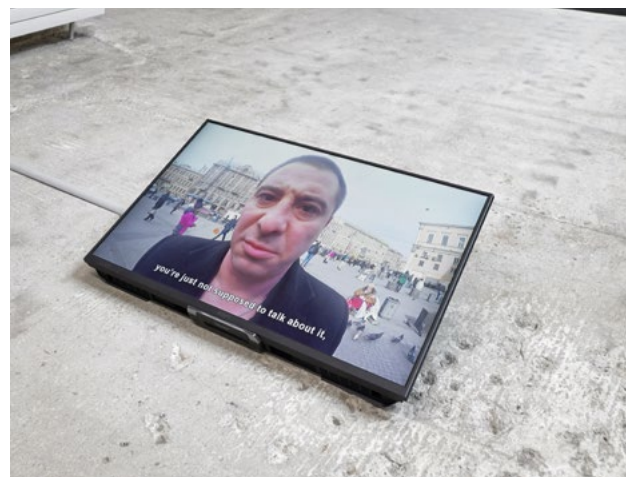
Performative Practices Of Our Time, 2017
Digital prints
Dimensions variable

A Protester's Dream, 2016/2017
HD video, 16:9, color, b/w, sound
14:33 min
Digital prints, 100 x 50 cm each



Chto Delat

A Protester's Dream, 2016/2017
 HD video, 16:9, color, b/w, sound
 14:33 min
 Digital prints, 100 x 50 cm each



EXHIBITION AT KOW 2015

The events of recent months have confronted the Russian artist collective Chto Delat with a changed reality: “A new Cold War atmosphere, an escalating search for enemies, ever-tighter repression of all dissent, and an open military confrontation with Ukraine leaving thousands of dead on both sides.”¹ Now the Saint Petersburg-based Chto Delat (the name means “What Is to Be Done?”) explore “what art could be at a moment when familiar politics and everyday life start falling apart (...) audiences vanish, activist groups implode and actually getting anything done becomes impossible.” They conclude: “We lost. We are excluded from this society, in which 80 percent of the population supports the war.” In their first exhibition at KOW – a modified version of their earlier project at the Secession in Vienna – Chto Delat report from a cataclysmic present that struck their ability to imagine an alternative, a future. With a view to the current situation in Russia and beyond, they paint a picture of widespread resignation in the face of today’s economic as well as military imperialism, resurgent nationalisms, and the return to confrontational postures on both sides of the former East-West conflict.

Someone is burning. Burning up from the inside. First his senses fail, then his heart catches fire, and finally the flames consume hope itself. It is the key scene of the exhibition: a text on the mutilation of a self – his body, his perception, his ideals – penned by Chto Delat as the inner voice of their anti-fascist sculpture *Our Paper Soldier*, which was destroyed by arson on June 24, 2014. The 20-foot monument was created for the Vienna Festival and then traveled to Berlin for the Berliner Festspiele. One night, unknown perpetrators doused it with gasoline and put a match to it. “I did not expect I would be attacked by mistrust in the power of art,” the artists have their charred soldier say, and then, “after I lost myself, after catastrophe was there forever, right within me, I realized – I became something else.” What was he becoming? The gutted work returned as an undead combatant. Resurrected in the fall as a queer zombie monument for the Vienna Secession, it has now come back to Berlin for our exhibition. Headless, its chest torn open, one wing dangling lifelessly, it looms in the gallery space like a battered angel of history. A shattered Phoenix, it rises amid toylike sceneries, including a miniature stage set of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as visual fragments from past film productions and scraps of personal recollections compiled by Chto Delat; the artists have added several new pieces to the arrangement.

It is almost as though the Russian collective’s artists, intellectuals, and activists sought to reassure themselves of the distinctive language they have developed over the years in numerous films, performances, images and objects, events and publications – to reassert their aspiration to a forward-looking thinking that can imagine a future different from the one that is charted for us and supposedly without alternative. Then again, this language seems to surrender, its aspiration to articulate a public voice in a time of war blasted. In KOW’s downstairs gallery, the calamity unfolds in its full global reach. Blown-up newspaper imagery turns it into a labyrinth – Syria, Ebola, and ISIS, military convoys and rutting Russian oligarch bears. At the center sits a four-part video installation called *The Excluded, in a Moment of Danger*. Activist friends and graduates of the School of Engaged Art that Chto Delat operate in Saint Petersburg take stock of where they stand: orphaned agents of history, they recount their own history. They discuss the events until, in mid-speech, their voice loses all meaning; they crack up, stand up, become bodies, and come together: a community of people who are awake and perplexed, afraid and alert, who need each other.

Founded in Saint Petersburg in 2003, Chto Delat has sought to revive the tradition of the Russian avant-gardes and their contribution to the revolutionary optimism of the period. The group has taken a stand against Vladimir Putin’s regime and championed a



Chto Dealt

Face To Face With Monument!
Wiener Festwochen, 2014

What Is Monumental Today?
Berliner Festspiele, 2014



Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

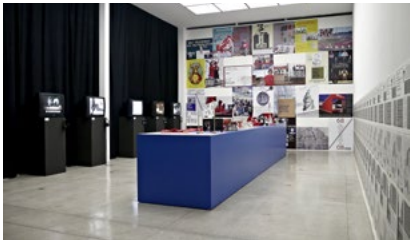
Exhibition view, KOW, 2015

communist alternative to capitalism. Its repertoire has included Brechtian songspiels, participatory theater, learning murals, public actions, and propaganda designed to counter the authorities' management of public opinion; in a newspaper, of which 38 issues have appeared to date, they have interwoven their artistic praxis with philosophical and political discourses. Chto Delat has steadfastly held on to the utopian idea that another life is possible and used art to limn its outlines. Yet after numerous exhibitions in multiple countries, their show at KOW marks a turning point. Some Operaists and Accelerationists believe that all we need to do is give capitalism a little push toward the cataclysm that is its inevitable fate. In her *Manifesto for Zombie-Communism*, the Chto Delat member Oxana Timofeeva counters: We are already surrounded by a full-blown cataclysm, and it will never resolve itself. To keep on living as we have, she argues, is not a viable choice – yet for the time being the question “What Is to Be Done?” is left without an answer.

“Until there is no hope, true revolutionary action is postponed,”² Timofeeva writes, rejecting both the wait-and-see and the accelerationist variants of optimism. “Forget hope: revolution starts in hell.” And hell is the now, a place where we can neither live nor die and burn in eternity amid the consequences of past deeds. In a paradoxical twist, Chto Delat conclude that they wish to step outside the course of history itself. Under the eyes of a headless angel of history, they suspend their hope for change to make room for an inconceivable change, an unknowable revolution that may come one day or another and with which history will recommence. A display case in the gallery contains a paper heart fused to an ear; inwardness inextricably bound up with awareness of the outside world. It is a time capsule in which the collective’s members dispatch personal objects into a nameless future, deferring the possibility of a different life to another day. The ear is stopped up with a red plug inscribed with “Chto Delat?”. A self-willed sensory deprivation to shield them against the noise of an insane contemporary world?

Can an exhibition convey this deeply skeptical view of hope – and of art? KOW’s curatorial approach in adapting *Time Capsule. Artistic Report on Catastrophe and Utopia*, Chto Delat’s first monographic show at a gallery, is guided by the impulse to balance the production on a threshold of uncertainty. The gallery space becomes a theater cluttered with props. Elements from the exhibition at the Secession such as a 125-foot-long wall painting created in response to Klimt’s Beethoven Frieze appear in fragmented form. No longer unambiguously works of art, half presented on the forestage, half stored backstage in a waiting loop between two performances, the objects on display find themselves in doubtful terrain; their function and status have become questionable. Representation is cracking.

Text: Alexander Koch



Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

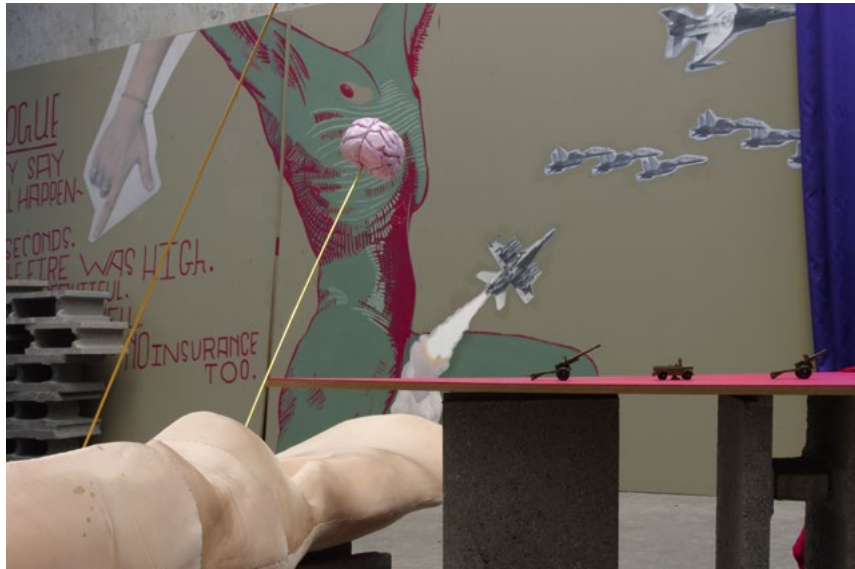
Exhibition views Secession, Vienna 2014



Chto Delat

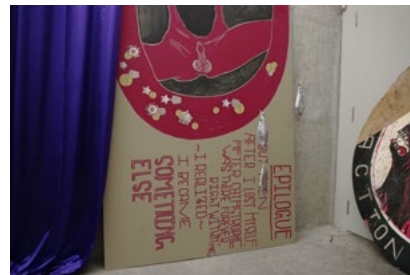
Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015



Chto Delat

Four Lost Battles of Paper Soldier , 2014
Acrylic, collage on MDF (14 parts)
approx. 207 x 280 x 0,16 cm each



PROLOGUE

They say it all happened in seconds, that the fire was high, that it was beautiful, not much damage, well, and no insurance. So i fell.

EPISODE 1 : AIR

I was on a guard that night, it was a warm summer night, and the wind blew gently at first. Then i began to feel the heat in my toes, then the wind started to get stronger, then i detected three of them approaching from the air : Low-frequency Unawareness. High-pitch Dogmatism, and Super-sonic Official News. Shit! They were too fast, i couldn't even regroup. But in the next moment, I realized I couldn't hear anymore, just emptiness, plus I almost lost my sight.

EPISODE 2 : LIQUIDS

Then, almost immediately, i felt thirsty, and at the same time it was like all my blood was boiling, and it seemed to take forever. Then I think I just got burned out, and then felt nothing anymore. Like I was drained out. And then, only then, I understood that it was an attack of the famous liquid vampires called Implied Laziness and Applied Hopelessness. They were covered by Imperialist Formalism on their right flank. And I lost that battle, too.

EPISODE 3 : FIRE ITSELF

Still my heart was beating with hot-hot love, you know. So I was ready to face any struggle, against whatever. But I did not expect I would be attacked by Mistrust in the Power of Art.

EPISODE 4 : WORMS AND SPIDERS

And that was basically it. All these gnawing, chewing, slurping, greedy creatures like Under-chopped Neonazism, Creeping Horizontality, Neoliberal Qualunquismo, Domestic Pride, Obsessive Homogeneity, and whole that approached my smoking ashes. And only then the fire brigade arrived, but by then it was way too late.

EPILOGUE

But then, after I lost myself, after Catastrophe was here forever, right within me I realized - I became something else.



Chto Delat

The Resurrected, 2014
Wood, metal, paper, polystyrene
approx. 500 x 230 x 150 cm

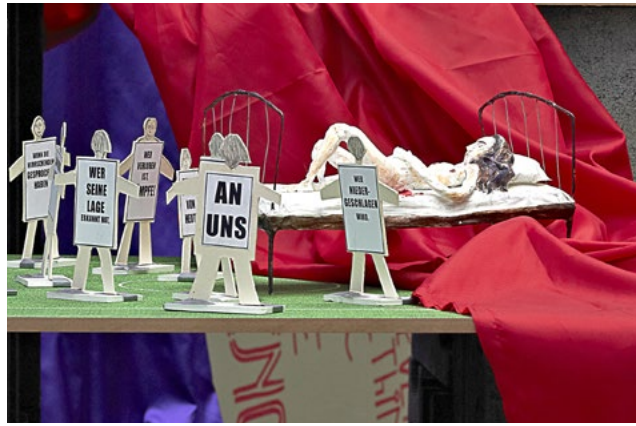


Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015

Time Capsule, 2014
Papier-mâché, mixed media
60 x 33 x 65 cm



Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition views, KOW, 2015



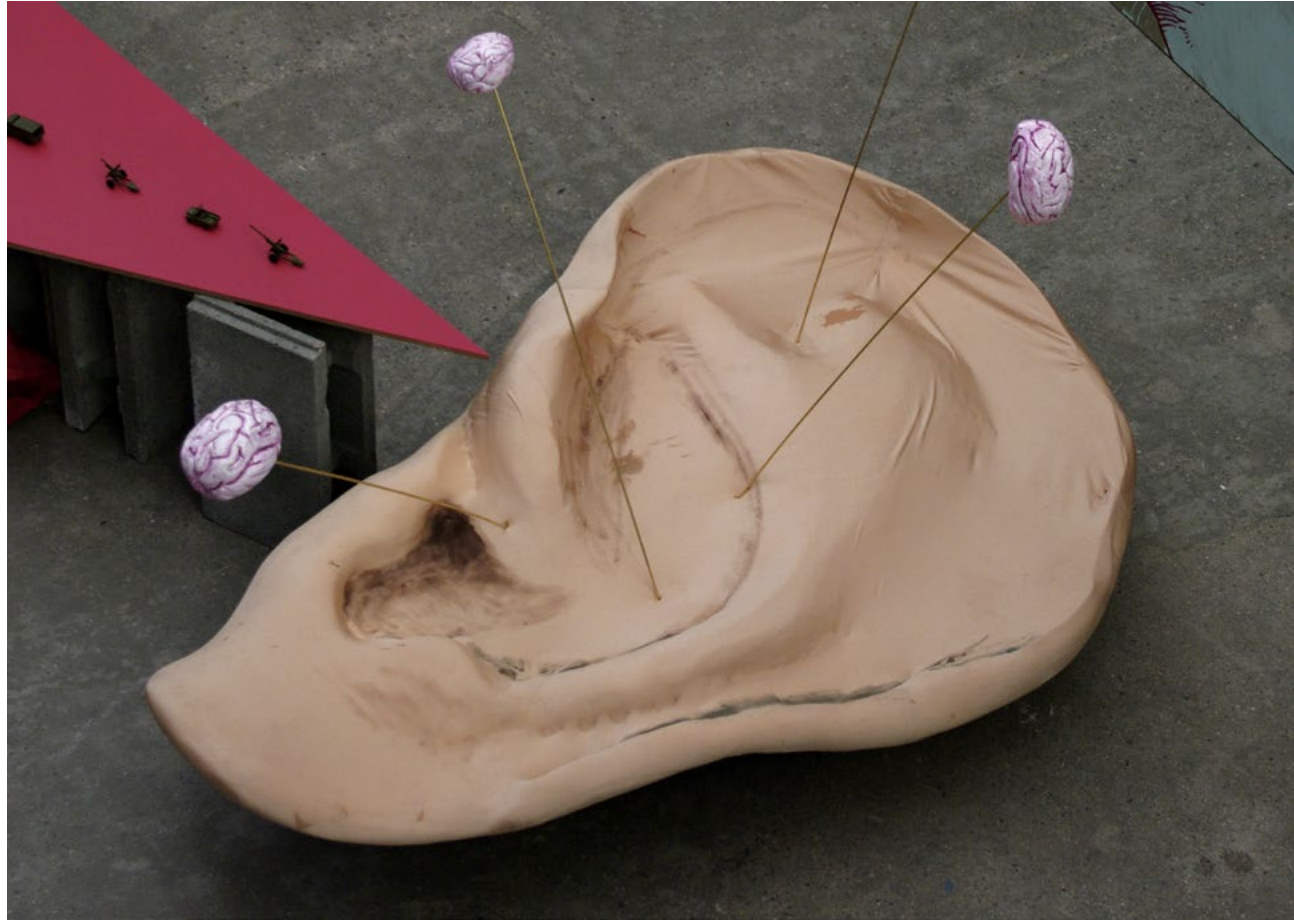
Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition view, KOW, 2015



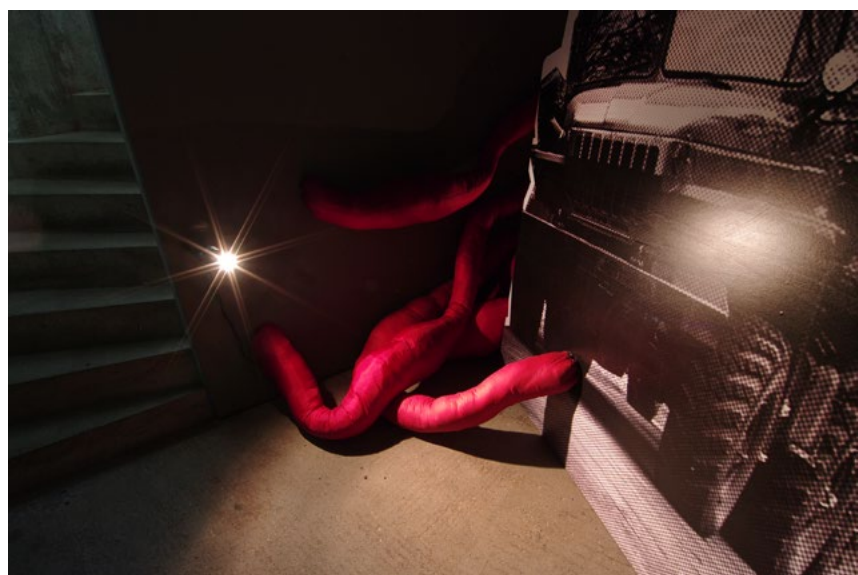
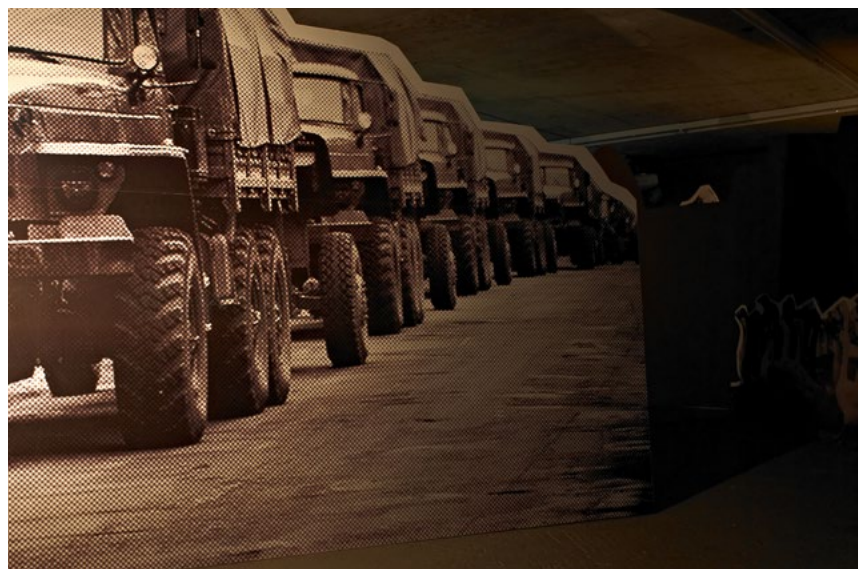
Chto Delat members Tsapiya Olga
Egorova, Nikolay Oleinikov and Dmitry
Vilensky



Chto Delat

Ear with Brains, 2014
Mixed media
176 x 118 x 100 cm

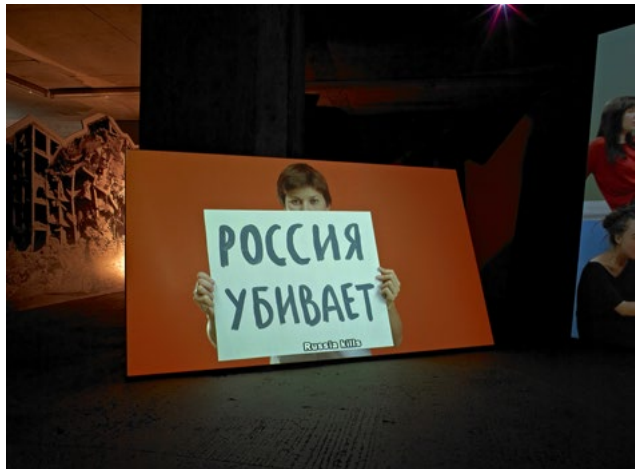




Chto Delat

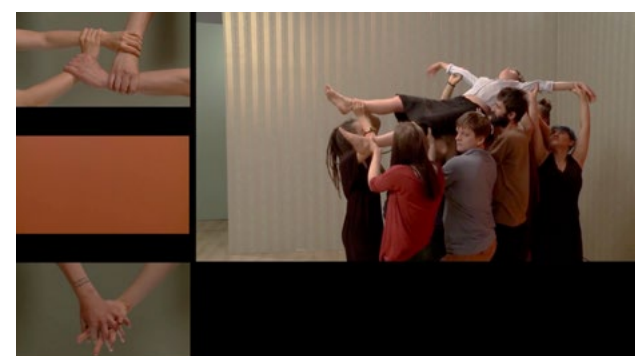
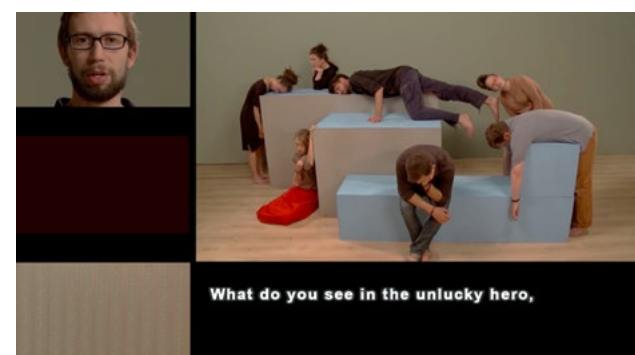
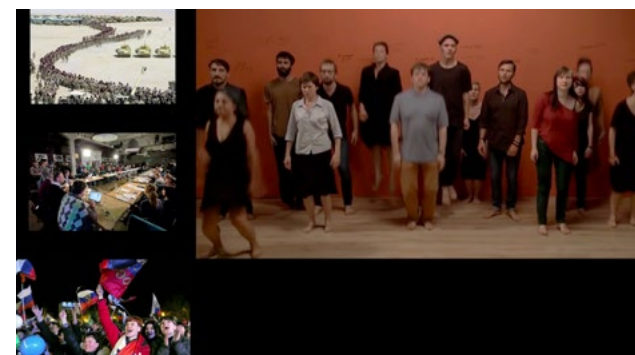
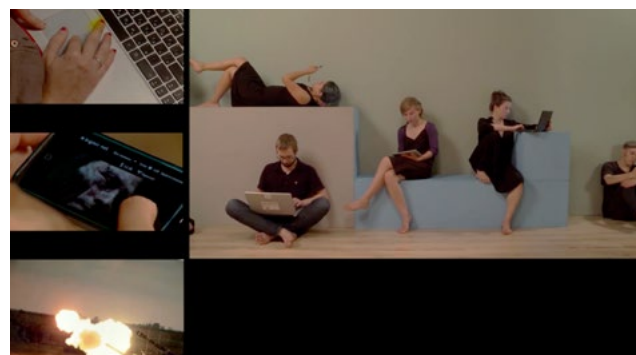
Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition views, KOW, 2015



Chto Delat

The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger,
2014
Four-channel HD-video installation,
color, sound, 56:46 min



Chto Delat

The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger,
2014
Four-channel HD-video installation,
color, sound, 56:46 min



Chto Delat

Time Capsule. Artistic Report on
Catastrophes and Utopia

Exhibition views, KOW, 2015





Chto Delat

The Catastrophes, 2014
digital print mounted on MDF (14 parts)



Chto Delat

The Catastrophes, 2014
digital print mounted on MDF (14 parts)

