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Petra Rethmann

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Article abstract

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The Melancholy Monument of the Left

Petra Rethmann
McMaster University

Abstract: From November 2017 to April 2018, in Mexico City's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, the Russian artistic-activist collective *chto delat* (what should be done?) exhibited a number of monuments in memory of the Russian revolution. In centring on three monuments, in this article I consider the ability of the collective's monuments to inspire political mediations on historical potential embedded in revolutionary pasts. I argue that melancholia does not inevitably mark historical fixity or unaccomplished mourning, but rather a temporal openness to mnemonic productivity and solidarity. It is in this sense that melancholia does not index a pathological response to loss, but a political alternative to normative mourning. In recuperating melancholia as a potentially productive and critical relation to the past, *chto delat* reframes accusations of left-wing melancholia as being "stuck in the past" as an opening to consider alternatives to what is now.

Keywords: melancholia; memory; art; history; monument; left; Russia

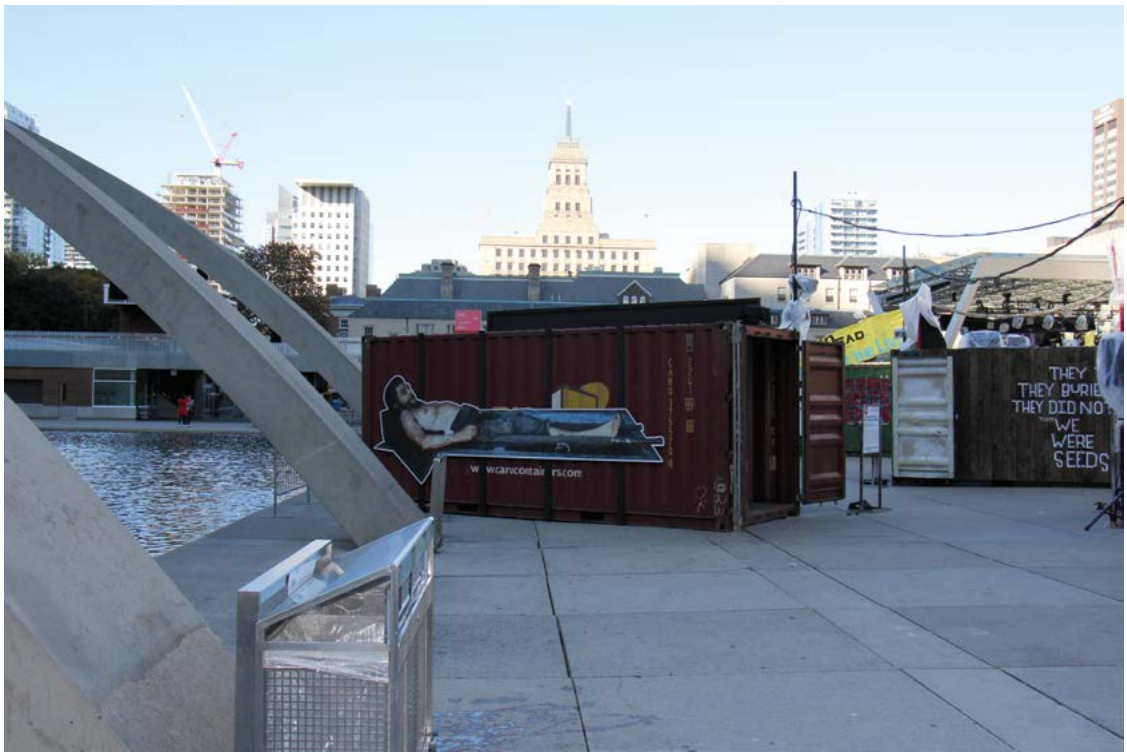
Résumé : De novembre 2017 à avril 2018, un collectif d'artistes activistes russes *Chto delat* (que devrions-nous faire ?) a exposé un certain nombre d'œuvres en mémoire de la révolution russe, au Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo (Musée universitaire d'art contemporain) de la Ville de Mexico. En me concentrant sur trois monuments, j'examine dans cet article la capacité des monuments du collectif à inspirer des médiations politiques sur le potentiel historique, ancré dans les passés révolutionnaires. Je soutiens que la mélancolie ne marque pas inévitablement une fixité historique ou un deuil inachevé, mais plutôt une ouverture temporelle à la productivité mnémonique et à la solidarité. En ce sens, la mélancolie n'indexe pas une réponse pathologique à la perte, mais plutôt une alternative politique au deuil normatif. En récupérant la mélancolie comme une relation potentiellement productive et critique au passé, *Chto delat* reformule les accusations de mélancolie de la gauche « coincée

dans le passé » comme une ouverture pour considérer des alternatives à ce qui est actuel aujourd'hui.

Mots-clés : Mélancolie ; mémoire ; art ; histoire ; monument ; left ; Russie

From November 2017 until April 2018, in Mexico City's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, the Russian artistic-activist collective *chto delat* (what should be done?) exhibited a number of monuments in memory of the Russian revolution.[1] In walking through the show in March 2018 with Nikolai, a Russian friend who lives in Mexico City but moves in *chto delat*'s orbit, we both noticed that the monuments—an assemblage of different photographs, videos, and installations, including a copy of Vladimir Tatlin's 1919–20 *Monument to the Third International*, a reproduction of Viktor Popkov's 1961 painting *The Builders of Bratsk*, a reverential take on Aleksandr Rodchenko's 1925 *Worker's Club*, filmic performances of Bertolt Brecht's 1951 poem *In Praise of Dialectics*, and a mural of Leon Trotsky as some kind of superhero—appeared in images of mournfulness and sadness.[2] A tragic mood pervaded the show. By using the word *tragic* here I do not simply mean to say that we live in, as Sherry Ortner (2016) has suggested, in morally and politically "dark times," but that historically the horizons for politically radical change seem to be closing. Was this exhibition still capable of recalibrating political value? Entice justice? These were the questions Nikolai and I debated.

Nikolai and I had already seen parts of the show in September 2017 in Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square. Created in conjunction with Toronto's contemporary art festival *Nuit Blanche*, at that time *chto delat* had been invited by Creative Time, a New York-based non-profit organization (Thompson 2017) that builds on art to generate public discussions on equity and justice, to image the memory of the Russian revolution. The years 2017 and 2018, of course, marked the centenary of the Russian revolution, and in left circles much handwringing over how to remember this event was going on. China Miéville's (2017) novel *October* became a favourite among many on the left because it recounted the history of the Russian revolution in present tense, thus refusing to understand it through the temporal prism of inevitable failure.[3] But then, as so many discussions with my Russian friends evinced, the fact that historical catastrophe in the form of labour camps, enforced collectivization, and starvation had followed the "dreamworld," to borrow Susan Buck-Morss's (2002) term, could



A *chto delat* shipping create featuring an image of the dead Che Guevara.
Photo by author

not be simply wished away. Was there, my friends asked, a way to reckon with the past that acknowledges the unresolved tensions between despair and hope without resignedly admitting that these tensions inevitably lead to failure? Was there a way to be in sync with the aspirations of revolutionaries of the past, while at the same reckoning with our distance and difference from them?

In Toronto, *chto delat* had installed five shipping crates, which contained visual fragments of Tatlin's *Monument,* but also of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, Käthe Kollwitz's 1920's woodcut of the dead body of the assassinated German socialist leader Karl Liebknecht, a photo of socialist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin on their way to the 1910 social democratic congress in Magdeburg, and a 1967 image of Che Guevara's dead body displayed by his executioners in the Bolivian village of Vallegrande. These are iconic images and scenes in the annals of a socialist-internationalist left, but set in the middle of Toronto's high-rise and consumerist downtown they did seem strangely out of place. As *chto delat* said when I asked them about the crates, this out-of-placeness had been part of an intended provocation, but now they were no longer sure if the provocation worked. At stake was the demise of revolutionary knowledge and archives, the transversality of socialist

imaginations, and shifting political landscapes that require differently situated answers. How, then, could they imagine art that would honour the creative forces of the revolution without relinquishing its dreams to a rhetoric of melancholia and loss? This ambivalence, I hold, is constitutive of problems of temporality, history, and desire that haunt a number of revolutionary movements (Bardawil 2020; Wilder 2015), and it is an ambivalence that I trace here.

As an integral part of a Russian new left (Rethmann and Budraitskis n.d.; Yurchak 2014), the collective is usually the first to acknowledge that politically it can find itself at odds with contemporary artists who—including in Russia—do not imagine their work in anti-capitalist but rather in anti-governmental and liberal ways (Jonson 2015; Lomasko 2011; Raunig 2007; Roberts 2015).[4] Founded in 2003 by visual artists, philosophers, and writers from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Nizhni Nizhni Novgorod, *chto delat* draws its name from social revolutionary Nikolai Chernichevskii's 1863 novel *What needs to be done?,* written while he was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul fortress in St. Petersburg, Tolstoy's 1886 essay *What then must we do?*, and Lenin's 1902 tract also entitled *What needs to be done?*[5] I have known the collective since 2007 when in St. Petersburg I first participated in printmaking workshops with them.[6] Since then I have spent time with *chto delat* in workshops in Toronto, Berlin, and Split, and in their homes in Moscow and at protest actions. In looking at three monumental installations—Activist Club, a walking tour through the El Museo Casa de Leon Trotsky in Mexico City, and an installation that shows Zapatista fighters being carried off by faceless angels—that emerged within the context of the Universitario Arte Contemporaneo show, in particular, I trace *chto delat*'s struggle for mnemonic solidarity in conditions in which revolutionary memory can no longer be taken for granted.

A brief caveat is in order before I begin: I have struggled with the writing of this article for many reasons, one of which is related to the fact that this piece centres on art installations. Everything I know about these installations I know from long conversations with *chto delat* in Moscow, Mexico City, and Toronto. If I do not quote members of the collective verbatim here, then this is because the collective does not speak in an individual voice, and because it imagines the installations as "thought-images;" that is, as images designed to open up historical meditations. If the entombment of images in crates or hermetically sealed installations marks the best way to achieve this is debatable—as *chto delat* commented, the artistic entombment of the revolution in sealed containers is intentional, given that in 1917 in Zurich, Lenin, together with his wife and

thirty companions, boarded a sealed train to steam into Russian revolutionary history—but it is the form *chto delat* has chosen. In following their cue, this article is written in a meditative mode in which I engage with the question of and how *chto delat*'s mnemonic monuments can do the work they are intended to do. I review their historical politics in the end.

Melancholia and *Chto Delat*

It is its insistence on Soviet revolutionary history's unrealized potentials that collectively can make *chto delat* look like a first-rate melancholic, especially if by melancholia we mean an unaccomplished mourning of the past (Flatley 2001; Traverso 2016). Yet as a multilayered tangle of time that seeks to keep the dead speaking and alive, *chto delat* insists on melancholia's often disavowed potential to bring occluded histories to the fore.[7] This hope for retrospection, perhaps even retroaction, is also what animates the collective's monumental installations. As a number of scholars (Boym 2002; Çelik 1997; Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo 2018; Grant 2001; Marschall 2017; Nadkarni 2000; Verdery 1999; Young 2000) have remarked, too often the monument marks a historical form that indexes the stone doubles of military, national, or political leaders. But as much as the monument is able to confront not only the victories but also the complexities of the past, *chto delat* hopes that the monuments can invite reflections on memory and mourning. It is *chto delat*'s skepticism against Marx's maxim "to let the dead bury their dead" that incites the collective to ask questions about the status of the dead and also in Marxian thought.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*, Marx (2005 [1897], 3) claims that recycled images of a heroic past can revive "the spirit [*Geist*] of revolution" and inspire social and political movements, but are more likely to mystify with mere ghosts (*Gespenst*). Skeptical about the revolutionary usefulness of glorious precursors, whose borrowed finery disguises the timidity of contemporary moments, Marx asserts: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future." Yet, as scholars (Mrázek 2010; Taussig 2006; Wilder 2015) have shown, the past can offer more than the "poetry" of revolutionary success. The utopian potential of the past's unrealized future and even the afterlives of failure can revive "the spirit of revolution" as effectively as memories of victory. Hopes frustrated in the past can motivate action in the present: the spirit of resistance is nourished by justice for the dead. Instead of leaving the dead to bury the dead, the living can be driven to action by their suffering and actions.

The figure who most builds on Marx's ambivalence and conceptually informs *chto delat* is Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's work defies easy systematization, but circles around questions of temporality, memory, history, and interpretation. Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 49-50) proposed that we understand Benjamin "as the philosopher and practitioner of possibility," moved "by the spirit of rebellion against history as a graveyard of possibilities" yet nonetheless aware of the vulnerability of questions of historical possibilities. Like Marx, Benjamin attends to the ambivalent relationships between historical oppression and redemption. *Chto delat*'s use of Benjamin derives less from Benjamin's (1996 [1931]) earlier account of melancholia as conformist and conservative, than from his later reflections. Benjamin's sense of "a revolutionary chance in the fight for an oppressed past" in which "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (Benjamin 2003 [1940], 393) raises the crucial question of whether the dead can speak or be heard. In examining *chto delat*'s monumental installations politically, while holding a sense of historical failure (or inevitability) in abeyance, I seek to understand how they speak to issues of revolutionary memory and redemption.

The Failed Renaissance of Activist Club

Once you have passed *chto delat*'s revolutionary timeline, which begins with Spartacus, moves on to the Commune, and ends with the death of Che Guevara, you encounter Activist Club, the collective's first installation. Exhibited in 2007 for the first time in the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, Activist Club was designed to intentionally mimic Alexander Rodchenko's 1925 installation Worker's Club. Created by the Constructivist artist for the Konstantin Melnikov Soviet pavilion at the Paris fair Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, Worker's Club had been designed with the specific goal of showcasing the supposed values of proletarian-revolutionary culture.[8] Envisioned as a public space where workers could relax and study, the installation had areas for chess playing and other games, reading, viewing films, and listening to talks. The material Rodchenko used—primarily wood—was hard and resistant. He overpainted the wood to deemphasize its natural quality in favour of its more utilitarian value. The strong linearity of reading tables, chairs, and publication shelves conveyed directness, clarity, sparseness, economy, and organization—each of them indexing qualities that easily contrasted with those of the more excessive and bourgeois interiors of other pavilions. Neither the form nor the objects exemplified advances in Soviet

industry, nor did they serve as examples of products available for consumption. Instead, they demonstrated to viewers the idealized qualities of revolutionized action through which Rodchenko wanted to characterize Soviet life.

The fact that *chto delat* seeks to recuperate Rodchenko's artistic-revolutionary energies is not accidental. Born in 1891 in St. Petersburg, in the early 1920s Rodchenko was an integral part of a group of filmmakers, artists, poets, and architects that aimed to inscribe the values of a new revolutionary culture in artistic objects and designs. When, in 1922, Rodchenko became deputy head of Metfak (Metalwork Faculty) at VKhUTEMAS, the Soviet design school in Moscow, he embarked on a number of experimental projects in which he pursued the question of whether new forms could embody or create new forms of consciousness. In imagining the artist as an artist-constructor he not only discarded the idea of craft—which he associated with making decorative objects—but also of an aesthetic that was bourgeois and devoid of ideological and practical factors. Besides creating traditional objects such as spoons, door handles, and pots, he showed a particular interest in the design of multifunctional furniture by demonstrating their potential for action. Rodchenko's opposition to a non-utilitarian aesthetic was evident in Worker's Club rejection of, for example, the objects in Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann's French pavilion, which had a decorative approach. In seeking to make a strong statement about hard work, dedication, simplicity, and collective self-improvement, Worker's Club refused its aesthetics of hand-crafted furniture of rare woods, enormous chandeliers of cut glass, ornate wallpaper, heavy rugs, and other luxurious styles.

Activist Club does not seek to eclipse Rodchenko's installation, but rather builds on it to recover and affirm the political militancy of art. Produced at a relatively low cost, *chto delat*'s installation features an open-frame construction, cheap, lightweight wood, and a stark colour palette of red, white, and black. Instead of including a space for chess-playing and other games, it features a speaker's rostrum and a screen for films. Graffiti on the walls of Activist Club insists that "we need our own cinema" and "cinema, for us, states the importance of art." More than a visual reminder of film as an important medium of the revolutionary imagination as in, say, the documentary cinema of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, it also points out the significance of film for the collective. Since the collective's inceptions, film has been one of the marked media of learning, and central in arguments that the left needs images that foster critique and hope. When I spoke with *chto delat* while I was in Toronto, they mentioned

that for the collective, no significant revolutionary films have emerged out of the end of socialism (see also Budraitskis 2017). Films like Aleksei German's (1998) *Khrustalyov, My Car*, Alexander Sokurov's (2001) *Taurus*, Wolfgang Becker's (2003) *Good-Bye Lenin*, and especially Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's (2006) Oscar-winning *The Life of Others* may humanize more brutalizing imaginations of socialism by presenting its ending in either comic or in tragic ways, but they do nothing to inject possibility and hope in its understandings.

What has made *chto delat*'s reanimation of Rodchenko's design so controversial, even among the collective and its friends, is that Activist Club does not acknowledge that the hopefulness of Worker's Club gave way to political disillusionment, catastrophe, and tragedy. In 1930, the VKhUTEMAS, which in 1927 was renamed the VKhUTEIN (Higher State Art-Technical Institute), was closed. Although some of its programs were relocated elsewhere, Rodchenko's metal and woodworking facilities did not continue. It was at that point that his vision of the artist as a constructor—as the engineer and builder of new forms of life—started to fall apart. Under pressure from artists and party officials in the All-Russian Organization of Proletarian Photographers to visit industrial buildings and sites, in 1931 Rodchenko began to document the construction of the White Sea Canal in Karelia, which required the extensive use of prison labour. The photographs taken by Rodchenko in this context do not portray labourers' suffering, but show men hard at work: drilling, pushing wheelbarrows, digging, and building water locks. The photographs give the impression of masses of workers dedicating themselves to a project which held great value for the country and enormous social redemption for them. In *chto delat*'s own self-critical appraisement, this was the question that emerged: Is there not a more complex way to celebrate an artist whose own dreams of possibility were brutally destroyed, and whose own artistic practice presumably ended in political disenchantment?

In One Tomb of the Revolution

It is not clear if Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky ever met Aleksander Rodchenko, but it is certain that he knew of him. In his 1924 book *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky praises *Lef* for its ability to bring together social problems, politics, and art.[9] He also praises the artistic combativeness of Rodchenko, who did not write for *Lef*, but designed a series of the journal's covers.[10] It was for this reason, as well as for Trotsky's acquaintance with Russian revolutionary-artistic circles and open enmity with Stalin, that *chto delat* wanted to know if Trotsky

could still inspire revolutionary emotions. Inspired by Collective Action, a 1970s Soviet artistic movement that drew on walking as a way of performing gestures and impressions barely visible to the eye, in March 2018, *chto delat* asked Nikolai and me to walk through the Casa de Leon Trotsky on Avenue Rio Churubusco 140 to photographically document the house in which Trotsky spent the last sixteen months of his life.[11] In particular, *chto delat* imagined our photographic documentation as a vital form of documentation and performance that should also become a vital part of the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo show. Below I describe why Nikolai and I were unable to do this.

In 1938, when, together with his wife, Natalia Sedova, Trotsky started living in what is now El Museo Casa de Leon Trotsky, he was already an old man. Before 1917, when he became the leader of the Red Army and one of the key organizers of the Bolshevik seizure of power, he spent long years in exile in London, Geneva, Paris, Munich, Vienna, and New York, surrounded by intellectuals and often isolated militants. After Lenin's death in 1924, a protracted power struggle ensued between Trotsky and Stalin, and in 1927 Trotsky was forced into exile in Alma-Aty in Kazakhstan, far away from the cosmopolitan discussions and strategic deliberations taking place in Moscow. Accused of counter-revolutionary activities by Stalin, and ultimately of being a traitor in league with fascist intelligence services and forces, in 1928 Stalin expelled Trotsky from the Soviet Union. Exiled and stateless, Trotsky took up abodes in Turkey (1928–29), France (1933–35), and Norway (1935–36). When he arrived in Mexico City in 1937, he initially lived with Riviera and Kahlo in Kahlo's home *La Casa Azul,* which boasts brightly-painted terracotta walls and lush gardens. In 1938, with help of Rivera, he moved into the house on Avenue Rio Churubusco, where he hoped to battle Stalin's terror and move forward socialist-internationalist agendas. The house's four watchtowers and steel-barred doors and windows speak of Trotsky's exile and fear. On August 20, 1940 he was assassinated with an ice axe by Stalin's agent, Roman Mercader.

History museums often seek to induce the realism of a bygone era, and the Casa de Leon Trotsky is no exception. The supposed authenticity of history builds on Esteban Volkov's (Trotsky's grandson) claim that the house was "preserved in much the same condition as it was on the day of the assassination." The museum does not provide much context about Trotsky's history—say, in the form of chronology, labels, commentary, guides, tours, catalogues, or booklets—but there are photos by the Norwegian painter, Konrad Gustav Knudsen, a leading figure in the Scandinavian Socialist Federation, fishing

with Trotsky. Then there are photographs of Trotsky and Riviera walking, and images of Mexican police on guard in front of Trotsky's home. There is also a film: Trotsky in the Mexican countryside, with a white cap, blue jacket and white trousers, smiling, looking jovial. And then there are the pictures of his funeral, when thousands in Mexico City spilled into the streets. There are no pictures of Trotsky as Commander of the Red Army, violently suppressing the sailors and workers' Kronstadt revolt against the hardships of the revolution, and the army's brutal reprisals. In his memoirs, fellow revolutionary Victor Serge (2012, 152) called the Red Army's squashing of the rebellion a "ghastly fratricide," with corpses scattered across blood-splattered ice.[12] The images in Casa de Leon Trotsky do not speak of Trotsky as a master of cruel actions, but as a tragic victim of Stalin.

By and large, we felt that the political life once lived inside this house came to us as a domestic still life. In the kitchen, larger kitchen cookware and other related objects—pans, pots, and bowls—were carefully arranged on wooden shelves. Each of these objects was set within a zone of familiarity and comfort. We could imagine Trotsky or somebody else walking through the kitchen, using the pots. We could imagine him reaching for a bowl to serve himself some soup or cutting a slice of bread. The books in his study—Tolstoy and Brecht, Willie Münzenberg, Jack London, Albert Aftalion, Andre Gide—were a who's who of socialism, and Trotsky's wide-rimmed eyeglasses rested on his desk, along with papers, pens, ink pots, and a magnifying glass. An Edison dictation machine sat nearby, and so we imagined him speaking into one of the cylinders to dictate notes. Set in the tranquil garden abundant with the flowering plants and cacti Trotsky had collected on his rare excursions out of Mexico City, a concrete bloc showing an engraved hammer and sickle marked his grave. This was not Benjamin's dialectical image which casts temporal standstill as pregnant with historical potential and unrealized hopes, but rather, standstill as historical impossibility and death.

If the purpose of our walk was to perform the commemorative work of historical recovery, commemoration in the image of salvage or reclamation became an impossibility. Not all dead are able to evoke mnemonic solidarity from the living. Burrowed away in enclosed rooms, and in touch with only a limited circle of contacts and friends, Trotsky no longer appeared as the protagonist of his own story. His study's pock-marked walls were saturated with bullet holes from an earlier assassination attempt, and may have amplified his fear of attackers, endless persecution, and the reality of imminent death. In the

Trotsky's studio. Photo by the author.

El Museo Casa de Leon Trotsky, remembrance was a war between tragedy and cruelty, not the ground for historical possibility or conciliation. To the extent that a contemporary left can choose its own ancestors, how can affiliation with the cruel—not only, but also—dead be reconciled with revolutionary dreams of justice? Nikolai and I decided against photographically endorsing such genealogical ties.

Struggling with the Angel of Democracy

Chto delat's final installation in the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo show is perhaps also the one that is most provocative. Consisting largely of papier-mâché, it depicts faceless angels wrapped in white sheets carrying Zapatista fighters wearing white cotton trousers, red shirts, and black balaclavas towards an imaginary sky or ceiling. Clearly an allegory on Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis on the Concept of History, in which Paul Klee's 1920 enigmatic watercolour *Angelus Novus* becomes the flashpoint for Benjamin's conceptualization of history as a vast heap of ruins that grows incessantly higher with the passage of time, this monument struggles to keep possibilities open. Klee invested his angel with fearsome teeth, and Benjamin invested Klee's angel with the desire to redress destruction, albeit blown away against his will. Yet in *chto delat*'s interpretation, Zapatista fighters seem to have lost the potential

to become a pictorial possibility for a revolutionary imagination. Presumably blown away by a storm, they neither possess teeth nor other means of action. If like Klee's angel, they are figures of witness, they appear to be witnessing their own destruction.

Since the image was shown in Mexico, Nikolai and I wondered if it should be taken as a nod to a significant part of Mexico's most recent political history, but as *chto delat*'s perhaps saddest monument, it also disavows a significant part of a left-utopian imagination. When on 1 January 1994, in the Mexican province of Chiapas, Zapatista rebels emerged out of the Lacandon jungle to protest against the locally devastating effects of NAFTA on Indigenous farmers, they also galvanized a new chapter in the annals of the left by positing new political imaginations (Juris and Khasnabish 2013). The 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, the 2001 creation of the World Social Forum, and 2011's Occupy Wall Street (OWS) encampments in New York's Zucotti Park all cited the Zapatista uprising as a reference. In activist circles, anarchist concepts of horizontal assemblies (rather than vertical party structures) and prefiguration began to blossom (Graeber 2002, 2009). But by the end of the 1990s, the Zapatista increasingly began to retreat to the jungle, and anarchist circles entered what OWS activists (McKee 2016) now call the post-Occupy condition. Somewhat similar to *chto delat*'s struggle over socialist memory that reveals the eclipse of socialist-revolutionary hope and its horizons, the imagination once opened up by the Zapatista may be in danger of disappearing. *Chto delat*'s installation of receding Zapatista and angels is sad because it seems to suggest an easy defeat of the revolutionary imagination.

On a manifest level, the image may be about the Zapatista, but *chto delat*'s issue is really with the anarchist movements the Zapatista have inspired, including Occupy. When a few encampments began to emerge in October 2011 in inner-city Moscow, they did not receive a great deal of support. Neither from Moscow's citizens, *chto delat*, or the Russian left. From the perspective of Moscow's protest movement that in December 2011 began to rally against Putin's presidency and his pending re-election (Gabowitsch 2017), the encampment just seemed strange. From the perspective of *chto delat*, its politics seemed too performative and liberal in the sense that it demanded "more democracy," and not economic distribution and "more bread." This is always *chto delat*'s key demand (or charge): the left needs to posit capitalism as its determined target. This is not to say that *chto delat*, at least not in Russia, disavows democracy as a key site of serious political struggles.[13] But it is to say that from *chto delat*'s

perspective in Russia, questions of change boil down to questions of whether liberal democracy works or not, like a car, so that in the case of collapse, everybody's main concern becomes how to fix it. The problem for *chto delat* thus is that democracy all too easily attaches itself to capitalist visions, endorsing individual (and not social) responsibilities and engorged financialization. Alternatives to individualism, privatization, and the market are no longer encouraged to be imagined. The weakness of the Occupy movement in Russia (and beyond) was its attachment to democracy: an attachment that ultimately makes it hard for the left to break out of financial bondage.

It is true that in the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo show it may have been hard for any viewer unfamiliar with *chto delat* to recognize such a critique and interpretation. Although I am fiercely in agreement with *chto delat*'s calls for economic justice and redistribution, in discussions with the collective I have made it clear that I consider their uncompromising rejection of Occupy unfair. It is a critique unable to facilitate struggles across political imaginations and lines. Forging solidarity with the dead may facilitate acknowledgment of unredeemed pasts, but if ongoing, future-oriented engagement is the goal, then disparaging the political icons of left others may not lead to effects of possibility and justice.

Beyond the Monument

In walking through *chto delat*'s Universitario Arte Contemporaneo show, and in looking at monuments variously marked by revolutionary ambivalence, compromise, and sadness, it is easy for viewers to agree with *chto delat*'s self-assessment of its politics as melancholic. There is, after all, the collective's sadness that acknowledges that socialism's potentialities have remained unfulfilled and that its dead have remained unredeemed (Morris 2002; Scott 2004; Traverso 2016). There is also the aesthetic fact that some installations—for example, Activist Club—appear in a realist mode, as mimetic figurations that pursue realism's socialist agendas at the level of artistic technique and imagination. Perhaps too corralled by particular temporal periods and borders, such installations appear as anachronistic: as curios of a historical past worthy of contemplation but ultimately as too autotelic as to politically inspire. And third, too many of the revolutionary figures *chto delat* seeks to bring out of the historical closet are European, male, and white. These are no longer figures readily able to inspire. Even Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin remain stuck in a crate, and Alexandra Kollontai—a highly prominent Bolshevik leader

who worked hard to improve the status of women—is not even mentioned. In discussions with me and internally within the collective, *chto delat* commented to itself that such elisions are no longer excusable.

At a minimum though, the monuments mark the preservation of a wish that the dead—and specifically the revolutionary dead—should not be obliterated and forgotten. *Chto delat* represents the dead, both in once again making them figuratively present, and in assuming the historical legacy of fighting for their desires. Such a project cannot succeed in the literal aim of realizing the desires of the dead, but its uses may be elsewhere: in recognizing the need for mnemonic solidarity. Instead of performing historical forgetting, of becoming gravediggers of the past, *chto delat* seeks to forge a political relationship with the past, one in which the vanishing of generations is not facilitated by linear conceptions of time. To paraphrase Benjamin, whose own complex practices of remembering serve as a guide for *chto delat*, without the preservation of the refusal to forget the dead would die a second time. *Chto delat*'s recuperation of melancholia as a potentially productive and critical relation to the past reframes mnemonic questions of forgetting by not sharing in injunctions of socialist history's political closure. If and how we should distinguish between a past that is best mourned and forgotten and a past that must be remembered is part of *chto delat*'s challenge. The conflicts at stake are not merely artistic, but also historical and political. Although conventionally understood as a pathological response to loss, for *chto delat*, melancholia can offer a political alternative to normative forgetting or even amnesia. This recuperation of melancholia as a productive and even critical relation to the past reframes accusations of left-wing melancholia (Brown 1999) as being "stuck in the past" as an opening to consider alternatives to what is now.

The true value of *chto delat*'s monuments, then, is that they keep socialist history open as a field of struggle. In emphasizing the open-endedness of melancholia rather than the closure of mourning in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, the collective works to keep the past alive in the present. At the very least, mindfulness of the past can deepen the left's commitment to justice in the present, so that what has remained unfulfilled for the dead can find future political effects.

Petra Rethmann
McMaster University,
rethman@mcmaster.ca

Notes

1 Following the Library of Congress transliteration system, *chto delat* should be transliterated with a Russian-language soft sign as *chto delat'*. Given the frequency with which the collective's name appears in this article and to facilitate readability, here I use the more anglicized *chto delat*.

2 Between approximately 1917—1928 Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, and Leon Trotsky (born Lev Davidovich Bronstein) were an integral part of the Russian political and artistic avant-garde. The term avant-garde is habitually used to refer to an individual or a group with an anti-institutional attitude, producing stylistically innovative work that often situates them politically against previous generations or against tradition more broadly (Bürger 1984; Foster 1996; Perloff 1986).

3 In Russia the Putin regime, also not quite sure what to do with the centenary of the revolution, used the occasion to parade tanks, soldiers, and weapons on Moscow's Red Square, Soviet-style.

4 While this critique has a long-standing history in critical art history (Bishop 2012; Kester 2011; Werckmeister 1999), for *chto delat* an insistence on art's autonomy assumed a particular significance when in the 1990s in Russia it became clear that Western democracy did not release the "blocked energies" of Soviet art (Jackson 2010), but rather devoured them in the name of capitalism. As Russian artists increasingly began to show in international galleries, museums, and other institutional venues, the critique of art was transformed into aestheticism.

5 The configuration of the collective is somewhat fluid, but by and large *chto delat* consists of a given number of female (3) and male (6) participants.

6 Nationally and internationally, *chto delat* is perhaps best known for its literary production, a paper pamphlet published in the collective's name, about which I have also written (Rethmann 2016).

7 Since the period from 1989 to 1991 when Communist governments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union ceased to function, anthropologists and others (Boyer 2006; see also Nadkarni 2020; Oushakine 2007; Rethmann 2008; Scribner 2003; Todorova and Gille 2010) have diagnosed a longing for the recognition of socialist economic and social achievements. *Chto delat* embraces what Svetlana Boym (2002) has identified as reflective nostalgia; that is, the kind of nostalgia that is aware of itself and of the historical ambivalences on which it dwells.

8 For example, Kiaer (2005), Margolin (1997), and Gough (2005) have written eloquently about this.

9 *Lef* was supported by the Communist party and was brought out by the party publishing house Gosizdat.

10 *Lef* was edited by the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and supported the new documentary cinema of Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein's radical theories of theatre directing, and the art of Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Liubov Popova. What united these artists was their strong opposition to art as individual creative expression and its promotion of the artist as a cultural worker with technical mastery of a particular medium.

11 Collective Action begins its activity as a group in 1976, when Monastyrsky and other members begin organizing day-long out-of-town trips from Moscow to a meadow called Kievogorskoe Field. There, the group conducts an action in the field in front of a number of invited guests who have accompanied them on the train out of Moscow. Appearing on the horizon, members of group walk towards the distant audience, performing a range of sparse and minimal gestures. When they reach the audience the performers hand out a sheet of paper to each audience member asking them to record their impressions and thoughts on the action and the surrounding environment. These written impressions are collated back in Moscow, forming an interpretive community and text.

12 Located on Kotlin Island, Kronstadt is separated from St. Petersburg (then Petrograd) by the Baltic Sea, and the rebellion was largely fought and quashed on frozen ice. The revolt of Kronstadt was the last major revolt against the Bolshevik regime on Russian territory during the Russian Civil War.

13 Part of the issue here is that in the *perestroika* (restructuring) era of the 1980s, liberal and reformist groups successfully began to set the terms for historical or political debate—with these terms being overdetermined by a sequence of diagnostic oppositions such as pro-democracy: anti-democracy; pro-reform: anti-reform; pro-Yeltsin: anti-Yeltsin; pro-Putin: ant-Putin; and so forth.

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