

THE STATUS OF THE POLITICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

KLARTEXT!

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Chto delat?/What is to be done?

Statement

In Russia, the state has been reasserting its sovereignty, not only over its own subjects but over the other countries on its periphery. In doing so, it seems that elements of an (undeclared) "state of emergency" have become indispensable means of bio-political control. After effectively eliminating the liberal opposition and engineering the rise of new nationalist movements, the state is using the argument of the "war on terror" to reinforce its "power-vertical" by abolishing regional elections and introducing laws that drastically cut civic rights. In this situation, measures commonly associated with the "state of emergency" – travel-restrictions, surveillance systems, media-censorship, passport controls, and the persecution of political opponents – become a strange new "norm" that goes unquestioned, a grey background of the everyday, affecting all areas of life.

This situation may sound remote and even reminiscent of the totalitarian regimes of the last century, but is actually very revealing: Russia and other post-Soviet countries are undergoing processes of global neo-liberal "development" that are, in fact, taking place almost everywhere; the "state of emergency", commonly associated with fascism, is inherent to this global order (Agamben). In this sense, one could describe these countries as "testing grounds" for "emergency" technologies employed to create proto-fascist societies that legitimate themselves with populist slogans like "unity in the name of democracy, law, and order".

Under these conditions, art and culture face a fundamental challenge. Artists and intellectuals must realize that culture retains its uncontrollable potential for emancipatory autonomy. In continuing to generate new strategies of disobedience to both the dominant aesthetic traditions and to the discourses of power, art demonstrates the "counter-sovereignty" of culture, uncovering and usurping the state's meaningless declarations, revolutionizing them. However, this real emergency cannot simply consist in a declaration of sovereignty, a compensatory placebo with no real result, momentarily satisfying aesthetic desires before being neutralized. Instead, cultural workers must continue to find new ways of awakening historical consciousness in the sense of Walter Benjamin. In his "Theses on the Concept of History", he writes: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."

Sadly, the need for this recognition continues to be as relevant today as it was 68 years ago.