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**On the Question of the Political Exhibition**

*A selection of names given to political exhibitions and conferences over the past five years: Who If Not We?; Collective Creativity; First What We Take is Museum; How Do We Want to Be Governed?; There Must Be an Alternative; Space of Conflicts; The Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds - 20 Proposals for Imagining the Future; RAF show, Taking the Matter into Common Hands; Disobedience; Ex-Argentina /die Wege von Arbeit zum Tun; An Ideal Society Creates Itself; If I Can't Dance - I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution; Documenta X; Documenta XI; Communism; etc.*

“A specter is haunting Europe,” the specter of the political exhibition. Once in a while, it appears on traditional terrain, in the space of internationally recognized artistic institutions, but more often than not, it arises in an entire slew of new places unknown to most, existing in a variety of contexts, without any substantial financial support, on the strength of the enthusiasm of its participants.

Some people say that this is yet another trend of artistic fashion, while others speak of the birth of a new avant-garde, but for the vast majority of cultural agents involved in more traditional forms of exhibition praxis, this tendency provokes aggression and irritation. This is especially the case in Russia, where we have practically never been faced with the phenomenon of the political exhibition in its contemporary Western European sense. In Russia, the political dimension of culture is usually understood as something that either caters to the power of the state, or designs some new corporate identity, or engages in yet another “political-technological” game played by spin-doctors and opinion-makers, an “artistic” project to decorate another carded election.<sup>1</sup> True, Russia’s tradition of political struggle reaches back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and allocates an extremely important place to cultural production; true, this tradition remained viable throughout the first post-revolutionary decade; but today, this tradition is perceived as something that belongs to ancient history. From the mid-1930s onward, politics and culture in the Soviet Union progressively lost their emancipatory character, becoming completely subordinate to the existing order of things, which continued to legitimate itself through the revolution or the political system of Soviets on a purely rhetorical level, having lost any and all potential for self-renewal. In this sense, the hegemony of the single-party state led to the total annihilation of the political and fostered a cultural industry that propagated the Soviet “way of life.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most major exhibitions and festivals of contemporary art in Russia during the 1990s were realized in the form of hastily compiled displays, positioning themselves as the entertaining part of liberal candidates’ election campaigns. They were perceived as something equal to the concerts of pop musicians and open-air merrymaking for the electoral masses.

<sup>2</sup> The limited framework of this article does not permit any detailed analysis of the processes of transition in Soviet cultural policy under the climate of reform under Khrushchev and the stagnation under Brezhnev. Suffice it to say that the “nonconformist” art that developed during these periods supplied Soviet culture with a viable potential for self-renewal and the return of political

At this point, it becomes necessary to note that contemporary culture, in speaking of politics, usually refers to the philosophical dimension of this notion, a meaning that lies far beyond the widespread image of politics as the ideological justification of administrative power. For example, Alain Badiou speaks of the essence of politics as “the question of collective emancipation.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, political action begins with the reconstitution of public spaces in which it can undergo further development. Such an understanding of politics is connected to the development of democratic processes, but here, again, the notion of democracy differs quite radically from the parliamentary-political screen of a “democracy” that obscures the power of capital over society. Instead, it entails a re-thinking of democracy as a political system that is not constructed upon the forcible unification of a minority with the majority, but upon the problematization and exposure of its own antagonisms, which constantly call the entire existing order of things into question and shed doubt upon the nature of power itself.

Ever since the time of the avant-garde, art has positioned itself in society as a political project. Today, even if politics in its ideal sense has almost disappeared completely, its possibility remains alive in the public space of thought, culture, and education. Since they are at the avant-garde of “immaterial labor,” these fields still permit the critical exposure of antagonisms that are usually repressed or neutralized through the normative language of power. As such, they can serve as a platform to assert the interests of all those excluded from the public sphere. In this sense, the goal of progressive thought and culture is to retain a public space for society, open for anyone who is willing to participate in its active (re)construction, a space that could become the basis for other principles of social formation, beyond the total dominance of private property.

So what does the political exhibition mean today?

The experiences accumulated in many of the political exhibition projects held over the last five years – some of their titles supply the epigraph to this text – already allow us to attempt a generalizing analysis of what the political exhibition actually is and what it could be. In the following, I would like to sketch out these potentials in the form of points to initiate further discussion.

01. The political exhibition produces new models of communication and positions itself as a form of public space.

02. The political exhibition demonstrates an activist approach to art. In this sense, it continues the philosophical tradition expressed in Marx's 11<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” In this sense, the political exhibition needs to avoid the purely contemplative at all costs; in fact, such passive aesthetization represents a fundamental danger. Instead, the political exhibition demonstrates the possibility for aesthetic and social change, revealing the difference between what the world is today and what it could become.

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oppositions, even if by the 1970s most “nonconformists” tended toward the absolute negation of the stagnant Soviet order, including the political aspect of art. Under the conditions of the late Soviet period, any overt redefinition of politics through art was simply unthinkable.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *Tainaya katastrofa. Konets gosudarstvenoi istinny* (The Secret Catastrophe. The End of the State's Truth), published in Russian on the site <http://sociologos.narod.ru/>.

03. The political exhibition strives to address an audience that differs from the traditional audience of an art exhibition in terms of social origin and class composition. It mobilizes the spectator to find himself as a political subject. In actualizing the political potential of the “prospective spectator,” it approaches everyone with the challenge to become a critical coauthor by participating in the actions and discussion it will provoke, calling for solidarity through action taken in common.

04. The political exhibition searches for alternate spaces to undertake its representations. Today, it seems as though the tactic with the most potential is not the infiltration of existing structures but the invention of new public spaces, not entrisism but exodus. The tactical effectivity of the political exhibition’s actual strategy is defined by local situations, but the true meaning of both approaches lies in the desire to create/invent/imagine new places for the common.

05. The political exhibition arises in the process of interdisciplinary interaction. This process is not based on predetermined knowledge, limited by the traditions of preexistent disciplines (i.e., sociology, economics, philosophy, urbanism, etc.). Instead, art becomes the spark and the catalyst for encounters between these fields, presenting them with new challenges and goals. This leads to the erosion of the dogmata of knowledge (*savoir*) and the narrow approaches of professional guilds and brings about a process of knowing (*connaissance*), a creative cognitive process based in the micropolitics of interdisciplinary dialogue. It is in this sense that we can speak of the production of emancipatory counter-knowledge and aesthetic experience, which is the political exhibition’s main result.

06. The political exhibition aims at achieving cultural hegemony. However, this striving toward hegemony has nothing to do with the old models of party dictatorship in cultural policy or the dominance of one political discourse or one unified aesthetic style. Instead, it entails the strategic construction of the hegemony of subjectivity, critical and irreconcilable to any and all forms of sovereign power.

07. The formal-aesthetic practices of the political exhibition create a new temporal mode of existence through the dialogue with the spectator-participant. As an immediate embodiment of public space, it uses the creation of social architecture to erode the boundary between art and life. In doing so, it employs the aesthetics of cinema and is subject to the logic of participation,<sup>4</sup> becoming an open multimedia archive or a library, existing on foreign territory as a sit-in.

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<sup>4</sup> The logic of participation – based on the discursive-political involvement of the public with the creation and operation of the exhibition – should not be confused with interactivity, which is so fashionable in almost all branches of the exhibition industry today. The latter does little more than supply the spectator with an illusion of endless possibilities for intervening in the process of the artwork’s creation. More often than not, however, this is

08. The political exhibition erodes the traditional autonomy of individual artworks by placing them into the public space of the exhibition. In this way, it works as a resonator for the differentiated political contexts that singular artworks will entail, bringing about a form of subjectified polyphony.

09. The political exhibition actualizes the idea of Soviets or revolutionaries. It is only logical to radicalize the logic of curating that underlies the political exhibition through the creation of "Temporary Artistic Soviets," which would be involved in the making of the exhibition from its earliest phases onward and which would render repressive notions such as curator or institution null and void. It is the Temporary Artistic Soviet that could serve as a prototypical social model, capable of formulating and realizing its goals independently, taking on the function of an alternative power, an open system for interaction with society at large.

10. The process of creating political exhibitions is self-critical with regard to its possibilities and the legitimacy of its power.

It goes without saying that these points for discussion have a certain ideal quality, but their postulates are little more than an extrapolation of the possibilities that existing exhibition practices already provide. It is this new experience that allows us to speak of realism – and not of utopia – when we talk about the repoliticization of art. To confirm this idea, I would like to draw the reader's attention to an important observation by Paolo Virno:

I have the impression that to speak about utopia today in positive terms is a little like living beneath one's means. That is, all of the things are today within arm's reach, beneath our eyes, and within here and now in which we live. Looking more deeply at the things is as if the elements of this utopia were all visible, but hidden under the slab of ice, like something that participates in some way in our present and that is part of the visible order. The difficulty is rather in acting with a kind of fullness of the times where everything is expanded, where, however, some forces rather than some others prevail. Everything is localized, even if poorly guaranteed. In the exodus, you go elsewhere, with actions, praxes, and initiatives. No longer an ideal in itself of unobtainable utopia, we now live in a time in which if we ever collide with an absolute reality of the ideal and its tangibility.<sup>5</sup>

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nothing but a purposive development of the consumerist relationship to the product. Interactivity is always under rigid systemic control, based on the sophistication of the newest technologies, usually advertising its sponsors in a more or less overt form.

<sup>5</sup> Quote taken from a conversation between Paolo Virno and Marco Scotini, published in the catalogue to the exhibition "Disobedience", Kunstraum Bethanien, January 2005.