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Essay question:

I wish to show by their example that political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only 'in the mind' and not as a producer.' (Walter Benjamin, 1936). Critically discuss the distinction between 'political art' and 'making art politically' in two examples of your choice, drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay The Author as Producer.

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Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Author as Producer' (1998) discloses an interrelation between the author's political will and position within the production apparatus. The right political commitment should be, as Benjamin formulates it, directed towards 'what will be useful to the proletariat in the class struggle coupled with a 'literary tendency', the former comprises the latter only if simultaneously correct in their tendencies. As for the author's position on production, Benjamin strongly believes that the status of a pervasive intellectualist is dubious and weak in persuasion even if the right political will is present:

Activism tried to replace materialist dialectics by the value, undefinable in class terms, of ordinary common sense. At best, its 'men of mind' represent a certain attitude. In other words: the principle upon which this collective is based is in itself a reactionary one; no wonder then that the effect of the collective was never revolutionary (Benjamin, 1998)

Thus, for Benjamin, a writer who is writing for the proletariat from a position 'a man in mind' expressing his or her solidarity only in words is counterproductive. From this, it can be assumed that to make political art an artist should ask what is the position of the work within the social production relations of its time. On top of that, the artist should abandon bourgeois bourgeois social status, as Benjamin puts it, become a 'betrayal to one's class of origin' (Raunig, 2010). Thus, for an author's political message to resonate with society, he or she must have a set of concrete qualifications and specific political stance (Raunig, 2010). This essay aims to critically discuss the distinction between 'political art' and 'making art politically'. The first section of this paper will provide an example of the "political art" on the Seventh Berlin Biennale (2012). The organisers tried to put the political movement Occupy into the biennale format, unwillingly turning invited activists and artists groups into the objects of curatorial experimentation, much in the spirit of curator Zmijewski's own artistic projects. The presented artworks generally were overly symbolic and ambiguous. Subsequently, they did not have any real stand, whereas activists' practices were turned into aesthetic ones. To be specific, this essay will examine one of the presented artworks on the Biennale (Lange, 2012). The

second section of this essay analyses an organisation *Chto Delat*¹ that is unlike the Seventh Berlin Biennale case, succeeded in 'working politically' with their engaged theatre and activist practice. *Chto Delat* defined themselves as an informal group that produces multiple collective practices. In the second section, the play 'The Russian Forest', 2012 will be analysed on the way it engages spectators in politics.

The Seventh Berlin Biennale (the Seventh BB) took place from April to July of 2012. It was curated by Artur Żmijewski, Sandra Teitge, Igor Stokfiszewski, with art historian Joanna Warsza and the Russian art collective Voina together with Occupy Wall Street movement activists. The latter were invited to occupy the Kunst-Werke Institute. Curators believed that the Occupy movement should be exhibited and influenced only by activists themselves (Loewe, 2015). The information booths were installed as well as the campsite inside the building's gallery, where the art exhibition itself was primarily located, a photograph of the site can be found below.

¹ What is to be done? (in Russian)



KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. A photograph by Marcin Kaliński, provided by Berlin Biennale

(<http://artjournal.collegeart.org>, 14 Jan 2021)

The Seventh BB was backed by the Occupy movement activists, triggered by the governmental shock policies used to revive slowing economies tied by Ponzi schemes, credit addiction, and political speculation in 2011. To begin with, it seems impossible to imagine curating and exhibiting a protest movement. S. Loewe, in his article (2015) on the Seventh BB, believes that a political movement converting to art loses its political momentum in lieu of aestheticism, mainly when curators replace the experience of a social struggle with its representation (Kopenkina, 2013). Secondly, the crucial point is that New York's Wall Street occupants were opposed to economic and political grievances that they believed should be excreted. In contrast, The Seventh BB wanted to promote the protest by symbolically 'squatting' some of the spaces while advertising the movement's righteousness to prolong its lifetime, even though the occupied territory was hosted in a government sponsored art institution. Therefore this action is no longer operating on the anarchist principles of the refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order and governmental

institutions, on the grounds that the people do not have to ask for permission to occupy public spaces (Graeber, 2011).

The curatorial decision to delegate sociopolitical acts within a curated 'occupation' in a space that was isolated and enriched with restrictions and power relations between the 'owners' of the space and the occupiers imminently made the representation performative and symbolic, thereby destroying the political spirit of the movement (Kopenkina, 2013). Furthermore, as per S. Loewe, the 'protest' at the Biennale felt synthetic to the point where participants became audiences of the art exhibition with no political agenda, as the event's composition could only share knowledge and awareness, not revolution or strike. Although Occupy activists did not intend to display art, they turned their activist practices into aesthetic ones by being the Biennale's programme's dominant element. Eventually, they transformed from actors to a subject of observation. The movement was supposed to underline a political cause, but as a result, it became a subject of aesthetic pleasure despite the correct political commitment (Loewe, 2015). The idea that politics can unfold in any given place and time seems unjustifiable unless it is staged and has no other social function than continually extracting new effects or sensations from the Occupy Movement for the public's entertainment.



Act for Art: Berlin Biennale Zeitung, 2012 (berlinbiennale.d, 10 Jan 2021)

A further reason for the Biennale to fail in 'working politically' was its strive in being overly ambiguous and ambivalent (Lange, 2012). Per A. Żmijewski, the Seventh BB concept is straightforward: 'we present art that really 'works', leaves its mark on reality and opens a space where politics can be performed' (Lange, 2012). In contrast, Christy Lange (2012) does not believe that Biennale's concept is straightforward. This is what she thinks was a problem in the Seventh BB's vision:

Like much of the rhetoric produced by Żmijewski and co-curators Joanna Warsza and Voina, it presumes a false dichotomy between art that 'works' and art that does not, between art 'objects' and art 'actions' – a binary that ignores large swathes of contemporary artistic practice (Lange, 2012)

Following Benjamin (1998) principle, its 'men of mind' represent a definite attitude. The principle upon which the Seventh BB's collective was based on was a reactionary one. It seems that their collective's effect could not be revolutionary. After all, artists indeed demonstrated their social empathy and the power of their critical position in their entirety as the curators had planned it. However, the projects fall flat to work politically. Because the stakes of art on the Seventh BB were allowed to be 'purely symbolic'. According to C. Lange (2012), failed symbolism is far less catastrophic than a failed political campaign. Eventually, 'Forget Fear' restages, reconstructs and reverses some real political struggles into metaphors by not having any real stakes (Lange, 2012).

For example, the four-minute video A. Żmijewski's film '*Berek*, Game of Tag', 1999 (included in the Biennale show) was trying to be politically engaged. The aim of the film was to reinforce the dialogue on the part of history that was treated as 'untouchable'. The screenshot of the film can be found further in the essay. According to *The Independent* (2017), the film shows a group of Poles playing (under conditions Żmijewski dictates) a kid's game. They are running around naked, laughing, flirting but as the description says 'they are also very serious, and they know where they are — in the gas chamber of a former Nazi extermination camp' (Baynes, 2017). As it was found later, it was filmed inside the Stutthof death camp near Gdansk, Poland. In María Muñoz (2012) opinion, *Berek* is about

healing the trauma by engaging with the cruel history by creating a symbolic alternative like laughter and vigour. Whilst, the Jewish community, found it offensive and cynical, as reported by *The Independent* (2017) 'the Organisation of Holocaust Survivors in Israel and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a Jewish research and human rights group, are among those demanding answers from the Polish government and the management at the concentration campsite, which now houses a museum', asking for banning the film from all platforms. The film undoubtedly provoked a discussion, however, only among the Jewish community, as there were no comments or words of critique from Polish official sources regarding the *Berek* neither from Poland's President Andrzej Duda nor the prime minister's office or any other government officials (Baynes, 2017).

Consequently, Żmijewski's symbolism did not create the desired dialogue between Germany, Poland and Israel to discuss the shared memory of the experience of concentration camps. Żmijewski promoted functional art, not specifying for what purposes (Lange, 2012). Notably, the hype around this work did not rise immediately after display on the Seventh Berlin Biennale in 2012, but only three years later (in 2015) after a show at Krakow's Museum of Contemporary Art. Currently, Jewish activists have achieved the complete removal of this film from the website of Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art and the Berlin Biennale archives. Thus, from this piece, it can be assumed that ambiguity and scandalousness do not necessarily allow art 'to work politically', despite its inclusiveness and apparent thrill.



A. Żmijewski film 'Berek, Game of Tag' (<https://www.inkl.com>, 10 Jan 2021)

The Chto Delat offers an alternative example of the art that 'works'. This collective is a non-institutional association of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod that has been producing videos, installations, public actions, radio programmes, artistic studies of urban spaces (*Narvskaya Zastava* in 2004), and publications of an English-Russian newspaper with substantial leftist ideas, political theory and activist emphasis (Chto Delat, 2008). Their distinctive features are the rigidity of their political demands and production conditions denoted in their 'Declaration on Politics, Knowledge and Art' (2008), that embodies: discovering new emancipatory potential, demanding internationalism and feminism, advocacy of culture and education of all, distribution of enlightenment and a re-examination of the 'Russian intellectual culture and the broader international context', by regarding the modern development of the antagonism between labour and capitalism (Chto Delat, 2021). Besides, they take a stand in local political struggles like censorship and repression of political and cultural activities in Russia. The true characteristic of the political event, pursuant to Alain Badiou (2005), when there is an actual political event, the State shows its excess of power, the oppressive nature. Dmitry Vilensky (one of the founders of the collective) stated that they are in an endless ideological fight with the authoritarian

Russian State, where their attempts to establish 'something contemporary clashes with state's conservative positions' (Vilensky and Thorn, 2017). Referring to Walter Benjamin's concept, this point indicates their 'correct' political commitment to the proletariat in the class struggle. The other important point is that the *Chto Delat* collective avoids working with large organizations, whether State owned or privately owned, as they believe that neither power nor capital can control ownership of the freedom of art. As stated in their declaration:

We insist on an uncompromising critique of and struggle against all institutions of culture that base their work on corruption and the primitive servicing of the interests of commercial structures, the State, and ideology (Chto Delat, 2008)

Notwithstanding *Chto Delat*'s reluctance to work with cultural and academic institutions is not a complete rejection, unless it is possible to use these institutions to advance and promote their knowledge to a broader audience without misrepresentation. This perfectly correlates with Benjamin's principles of the importance of an author's political will and status within the production apparatus. This idea is supported by Theodor Adorno when he writes:

Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous (Adorno, 1997)

Considering what Adorno has stated, Marina Vishmidt (2013) amplifies his idea to the matter of art being a 'channel of empowerment, governance, and even accumulation—if only of 'social capital'—for specific communities and in specific contexts', under the condition that art will be reformed with new means for its formal and social reform. To be specific, a play *The Russian Woods* represents what *Chto Delat* works on: contributing awareness of Russian' the socio-political structure and suggestions of the possibilities of its transformation, critique of the consumerism and

criminality of Putin's regime. The staged play *The Russian Woods* (2012) was performed on the 25th of March in a framework of the festival 'Speaking and understanding' in Saint-Petersburg now can be seen as a video film *The Russian Woods* in Russian with English subtitles on *Chto Delat*'s website (Vilensky et al., 2012).



The Russian Woods (chtodelat.org, 15 Jan 2020)

The video begins with footage of protesters on the street with red flags and cross-out symbols (from the play). First, the performance seems to be about the deforestation of the Khimki forest (Moscow region) as participants of the play on 4:04 are mentioning it. However, later it becomes more evident that Russian Wood is an allegory of the Russian society's collective unconscious. The invited professional singers dispute in mythic forms both about the government and the protesters (Vilensky et al., 2012). Namely the former—oil rigs, propaganda and repressive violence apparatus like police and so on and the latter the protest activity on Bolotnaya Square (36:40), which was against massive fraud in the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011. Descriptions of the characters are accompanied by clips from the Web, showing real events and people in Russia to illustrate their symbolism. The Brecht's approach to play production uses a 'montage technique of fragmentation, contrast and contradiction, and interruptions.' Most of the characters appear to the Russian public very straightforward. For instance, the Oil Derrick Dragon represents the authoritarian Russian State, 'according to legend, its historical mission is to protect and serve the Russian woods' populace', as stated in the play (Vilensky et al., 2012).



The Russian Woods (chtodelat.org, 15 Jan 2020)

Moreover, dancers-participants (cheerleaders and black-clad dancers) show at the stage from time to time, whose task is to convey the meaning plastically, called 'Gestus' when an actor 'takes on the physical embodiment of a social commentary' (wikipedia.org, 2021). They play multiple roles, rearrange the set with the paper shorthand moving in and out at specific acts. Following that, on the 33rd minute, there is an open public discussion with the audiences. That is another attribute of epic theatre called the 'alienation effect', where the 'fourth wall' falls by appeal to the audience (wikipedia.org, 2021). This move erases the fairy tale's elusiveness that has been told by the narrators-singers, making it a collective reality. This makes the story play inside the spectator's mind, not just in front of his or her eyes and, by doing so, *Chto Delat's* art intervenes in history. The stage-techniques are socially engaged and unlike A. Źmijewski's film *Berek, Game of Tag* demands real things: publicity, freedom of movement and protest, fair elections as per the play *The Russian Forest*. The play does not just have demands but also operates in Russia within an oppressive political situation, the walls of which are shrinking every year (Vilensky and Raunig, 2009). In consonance with A. Badiou (2005) the state shows its excess of power, the repressive dimension.

But it also shows a measure of this excess which in ordinary times does not let itself be seen because it is essential to the normal functioning of the state that its power remains without measure, errant, unassignable. In consonance with A. Badiou (2005), the political event interferes with 'the subjective errancy of the power' of the actions of the repressive State'. The political performance constructs the state of the situation. Following the A. Badiou (2005) the aim of political event is to put an end to all that by assigning a visible measure to the State's excessive power' or in other words to 'measures its power'. Thus, the Seventh Biennale political statement's strength in the liberal Berlin cannot compete on equal complexity with the political statement's strength of artists and activists located within the authoritarian Russian state.

Shock policies and cuts in the cultural sector around the European Union are used to revive slowing economies. Thus, countries like Greece, Ireland and Portugal continue to suffer from ongoing impoverishment and downgrade of social conditions on behalf of corporate profit (Blejer, 2011). Cuts in the cultural and educational sphere represent politicians' wish to have a less educated society, which is easier to administer (Vilensky and Raunig, 2009). The continuous economic stagnation and impoverishment of Russian citizens under the irremovable power is a depressing moment for Russian activists systematically dismantled by state authorities. As Loewe (2015) put it, the global economic turbulence made the 'world powers fight for the endurance of their capitalist economy, the validity of their currencies and ruthlessly compete for declining business on their respective home turfs'. Similar to any other sphere of production, contemporary art depends on socio-economic order. W. Benjamin (1998) believed that the author's political will and position within the production apparatus play the most crucial role in making it politically productive, in mind of social status for the benefit of 'the hardened and alienated'. This essay discussed the distinction between 'political art' and 'making art politically' with the examples of the two artistic events, that both aimed to work politically, yet both of them did not. The first section disclosed how the Seventh BB went wrong. The main reason for that was that the art context of Biennale transformed the essence of the protest into an aestheticised subject, that at the particular point of time and place did not have any political stand just like Żmijewski's film *'Berek, Game of Tag'*. In the opinion of the Loewe (2015):

Instead of migrating to the art world and partaking in international biennials, activists should analyse the systemic, antagonistic foundations of inequalities, damages, and grievances to prevent moralistic criticism (Loewe, 2015)

The second section of the essay denoted the Russian art collective Chto Delat, which provides a positive example of the art that 'works politically'. They create art that develops new forms of sensory and critical perception of the world in the liberation of oppressed' (Vilensky and Raunig, 2009). They are rigidly guided by their moral and political code, which allows them to work ethically in the capitalistic cultural and academic institutions, avoiding exploitation and commodification by state their art. The examined play *The Russian Forest* (2011), vividly illustrates how Chto Delat artistically responds to the massive electoral and presidential fraud that happened in Russia that year. It can be concluded that politics is a dissenting voice that asks questions such as what is to be done, what needs to be changed? Contemporary art does not necessarily ask such questions or address anyone, unlike political art. However, such art may work politically unless its commitment and socio-productive relations correspond with its productive apparatus within its time and place on the side of the oppressed.

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