

# Activist Club or On the Concept of Cultural Houses, Social Centers & Museums. What is the Use of Art?

**Dmitry Vilensky**

The legacy of Socialist Houses of Culture, the recent experiences of social centers and the progressive politics of some museums and art institutions, with their focus on participatory projects and new forms of publicness have moved to the fore issues related to the use value of art practice and aesthetic experiences.

In my view, the most crucial issue is what is art's emancipatory role in society? How can we find a way today to continue not only the project of *Bildung* —the process of individual development via aesthetic education (despite all the obvious sympathy for it) —but also find a new continuation for the project of art and thought as tools of a radical transformation of people's collective consciousness?

Since Schiller's time, the goal of art as aesthetic education was the harmonious development of the individual, the formation of a mature person capable of creativity. This concept, however, was oriented toward the individual bourgeois subject: it led to the formation of the egoistic individual. It is clear that a return to this concept today would be reactionary. At the same time, I think that there is a general consensus about the statement that today's decisive battle is shaping up around the production of subjectivities.

## Activist Club

Seven years ago, in trying to answer this question we have produced the project "Activist Club." Its genealogy is obviously rooted in the process of the development of so-called Workers' Cultural Houses in the Soviet Union and in general



Chto Delat, Rosa's Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

to the ideas promoted by Soviet Productionism, which in the starkest form posed the program of “life-construction.” As Boris Arvatov declared in his book *Art and Production*: “Art as an immediate and deliberately employed instrument of life-construction: such is the formula for the existence of proletarian art.”<sup>1</sup>



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Can we share these sentiments today? And where can we find a way to continue the project of “proletarian art” today? On the one hand, we are living during the prolonged transition to post-Fordism and knowledge capitalism. The farewell to the production line frees our hands — but where is that factory the Productionists dreamed of today? What once upon a time was a source of hope for progress and emancipation turned out, historically, to be a reactionary phenomenon that had to be overcome. The formation of “new political subjects” whose analysis Italian operaismo undertook in the sixties, is the complete opposite of what the Productionists hoped for. The natural exodus of workers from the factory began, and along with it the “assembly line/collectivist” model of subject formation and the forms of its political organization also began to collapse.

Where can we find that factory today, or those means of production, whose seizure would supply us with an emancipatory impulse as precise as possible? Today this factory is nowhere and everywhere. The development of capitalism allows us to see the production of false subjectivity in the totality of capitalistic practices, which are now realized everywhere: in the thick of daily life, in institutions of culture, in the very networks of social interaction. It is this understanding that opens up new zones of struggle, not simply for non-alienated labor and knowledge, but also for the break with labor and production.

In this new situation, although I have a clear sense that many activists might not agree with me, I think that we need another kind of knowledge and art as never before. We need it as we need fresh air: we need it to produce “oxygen” in an atmosphere totally polluted by the byproducts of the “creative industries.” But what should this knowledge/art look like? Where is the place where it can be useful and meaningful?

### **Political art vs. Avant-garde**

Let’s look at the current situation with the development of art practices that merge aesthetics, art and activism.

Over the last decade, a number of artists and writers have succeeded in both realizing and finding the theoretical grounding for a variety of works, which allow us to speak of a new situation in art. These projects have found points of connection between art, new technologies, and the global movement against neoliberal capitalism and austerity measures. The lineages of this new interest in political art can be traced back to Documenta 10 (1997) and coincide with the emergence of the “movement of movements,” which erupted onto the political horizon in Seattle in 1999. This situation has subsequently been manifested through a variety of cultural projects, whose critical stance towards the process of capitalist globalization and emphasis on the principles of self-organization, self-publishing and a political understanding of autonomy – as the realization of political tasks outside the parliamentary system of power (and outside the comfortable realm of art institutions) – all these factors have evoked the idea of a return to “the political” in art.

But to conceive of these artistic processes simply as “political” would be to seriously underestimate the situation we find ourselves in. There is evidence that what we are actually talking about can be interpreted as the emergence of an artistic movement: its participants are concerned with developing a common terminology based on the political understanding of aesthetics and autonomy; their praxis is based on confrontational approaches towards the cultural industry. This finds consistent realization in the international framework of projects carried out in networks of self-organized collectives working in direct interaction with activists groups, progressive institutions, different publications, online resources and so on.

From history we know that such traits were once one of the characteristics of the avant-garde. However, many people today see the avant-garde as something discredited by the Soviet experience, where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” rapidly degenerated into a “dictatorship over the proletariat” – a totalitarian situation that most activists and artists explicitly reject. But despite the anti-vanguardist principles of the “movement of movements,” I believe that some of the essential features of the avant-garde are crucial for understanding contemporary art.



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As Jacques Rancière once mentioned (and I fully agree with him): “If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is [...] not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation, but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures of life to come.”<sup>2</sup> But at the same time, today there is an enormous problem for any kind of revolutionary thought and aesthetics, which has limited opportunities to verify these “forms and material structures of life to come” in practice.

Our collective has its own position: we need to institute our own structure, and Chto Delat sees itself as a new type of institution based on the principle of crystallization. What does that entail? It means that we are not trying to dissolve our works in life, but do something just opposite to it – we are trying to crystallize some art practices in a variety of different situations – inside and outside the framework of cultural institutions.

### **Workers' Club and social centers**

We also find ourselves closer to these issues, because in Russia we had to withdraw (and being aggressively pushed out) from the beginning from art territory and remain active in the other fields, mostly realizing and representing our works in a framework of different activists groups, civil society NGOs, social forums, universities and the Internet.

The project Activist Club started in 2006 from my workshop with young Italian art students and activists – organized in the framework of the project “Common House,” curated by Marco Skotini at Teseco Art Foundation in Pisa.

The idea for this project obviously originated from the concept of the Workers’ Club introduced in the USSR in the mid-1920s and well known through the famous piece made by Alexander Rodchenko. Created in 1925 for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, it was never produced in real life. It was thus a kind of model of how such a places should be organized. The piece introduced a western bourgeois audience to the completely different method of staging cultural activities in workers’ free time in the USSR (such as “Lenin’s Corner,” a space for gatherings and seminars, or the performance of “Live Newspapers,” etc.)

The task of the Workers’ Club was to provide workers with orientation on issues of political struggle and to introduce them to a different type of aesthetic experience and practicing art in the form of seminars, lectures and workshops. It critically undermined the obsolete idea of an idle consumer, who could derive pleasure and “emancipate” himself from shabby everyday existence through the experience of the art object in the museum. It was about building a space based on educational methodology, creativity and participation.



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There is a growing interest in this concept and even direct reconstructions of workers clubs. Of course there have been several recent attempts to reconstruct this piece. Christiane Post attempted something like this at the 6th Werkleitz Biennale; there was an installation by Susan Kelly, “What is to be done?”; and a reading room at the exhibition Forms of Protest, at Van Abbe Museum just to mention a few.

When we were preparing our first approach to the concept of an activist club in Pisa in 2006, I came across a publication by bookstorming.com and Galerie Decimus Magnus Art Editeurs, meticulous documentation of the reconstruction of Rodchenko’s Workers’ Club done by the French artist Michel Aubry. It was very inspiring to see one of the most famous works of the Russian avant-garde in an amazingly detailed reconstruction. Also, it shed light on many details of the composition that were not visible in the historical photographic documentation of the project.

But we were not interested in a reconstruction, but rather in a process that I call the “actualization” of the general idea of what the concept of the workers’ club is about – actualization in a Benjamin-sense, as the process of reclaiming its missed chance today.

For historical materialists history develops through the chain of events – revolutions (moments of popular mobilizations) and catastrophes. Each of them is the culmination of revolutionary struggle for emancipation and its temporal collapse. It is quite important to conclude that the formation of a new subjectivity is not only shaped in relation to the current political situation, but also finds its shape in relation to the past. Why go backwards? Because the possibility of “becoming” is located not only in the possibilities of the present, but is also rooted in the actualization of all lost opportunities in the past.

So we have decided to concentrate on working on the concept of an activist club. And we keep believing that it makes sense to realize it in the form of an art project. With the idea of the activist club we are talking about a self-imposed challenge that is, to a certain extent, comparable with that once placed by the Soviet government on Rodchenko: namely, to show the bourgeois public another means of producing the space where art can come together with political learning and subjectivation.

Another aspect of our inspiration was the current discussion on the concept and role of social centers. It is important to notice that there is a move from the side of progressive museums to reconsider their public role. This was one topic of discussion at the recent conference at the MACBA, “Molecular Museum. Towards a New Kind of Institutionality” (2008), which tackled the relationships between museums and social centers. I think that for all of us the concept of the social center, as a place where art might be able to reveal its pure use-value and ignore its exchange value, is very important.



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The new social centers strive to engage a broad caste of oppressed people and give them a chance to encounter culture and combine it with fighting for their rights of recognition. The discussion about the future of social centers can be connected with the concept of the workers' club developed in the Soviet Union, because they share an approach to the value of art and the ways in which people can participate in its production.

But let's look more closely at the concept of the Workers' Club and its late implementation in the everyday life of the Soviet Union in the form of workers' cultural centers – or “Houses of Culture.” What was the meaning of that project?

There is unfortunately very little research on this topic – carried out during the Soviet era and later when the whole system had practically collapsed – but we should take into account the dimension of these developments. In 1988 there were over 137,000 club establishments in the Soviet Union. And I think that everyone of my generation had some positive experiences of these places.



The House of Culture (Dom Kultury) was an establishment for many various recreational activities and hobbies: sports, collecting, arts. The Palace of Culture (this term was very often used as well) was designed to have room for all kinds of projects. A typical Palace contained one or several movie theaters, halls, concert hall(s), dance studios, various do-it-yourself hobby groups, photo and film studios, painting and drawing courses, amateur radio, and a public library. All of these groups were free of charge until most recently. These houses usually were built and run by the trade union organization of one factory, but they were often established by local authorities – the local soviets – and served the general public. They especially focused on children’s after-school education.

So it was a structure that embraced all kinds of so-called creative developments of a person. Rodchenko’s room was a quite modest proposal for designing just one module-space, but a few years after his Workers’ Club, it became the biggest challenge for many famous architects to construct entire huge buildings that could serve all these purposes.

It is clear that the concept of social centers is rather close to the idea of People’s Cultural Houses, and I think that these experiences should be more closely studied and continued in the form of constructing a counter public sphere. So right now – at a moment when the possibilities to address society at large are more and more limited we need places where the crystallization of certain excluded communities and positions – can happen and we need to focus on the long process of learning and find an alternative ways of distributing the knowledge. These places could “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and/or as training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.”<sup>3</sup>



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I think that right now, at a time with very limited opportunities for the development of a culture of the oppressed, we should rethink the old question posed by Paulo Freire: “[I]f the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution? This is a question of the greatest importance; one aspect of the reply is to be found in the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them.”<sup>4</sup>

Why this quotation? The grammar of this quotation quite precisely poses the question about processes of organization. “Them”: this is obviously all those people who, by virtue of their class status, acutely experience the injustice of the world, but who at the same time do not possess sufficient knowledge to be aware of the strategic tasks of their own emancipation. In other words, according to the old, universally accepted model, there are certain privileged external agents who develop these practices of emancipation – that’s why discussions about the figure of the educator played such an important role in the Soviet Union and Latin America. In previous times, these were people connected to God and the Church; they were followed by revolutionary parties and psychoanalysts. After the obvious downfall of these mediators, the question remains: is education possible without a teacher? Today it is the figure of the teacher/pedagogue—as the figure of repression under the sign of education — who is rightly and seriously under suspicion.

But it might make sense to dialectically reconsider this figure as someone who stays in the process of an exchange of knowledge – someone who knows something, but is ready to be in a process of learning all the time and return this knowledge transformed.

So back to our topic – I would say that the idea of a workers’ club is useless today on the level of the formation of subjectivity. For me, the shift from worker to activist is important. Historically, the worker’s identity had a marked political position, but I doubt that it does now. Today, political subjectivity is shaped inside and outside labor relations, and the position of the political subject is determined more through one’s stance as an activist.

### **From worker to activist**

A research paper was published recently in Russia by Carine Clément, the French sociologist who heads the Institute for Collective Action in Moscow. She presented the findings of her research on the new social movements in Russia, entitled “From Citizens to Activists: Social Movements in Contemporary Russia.” It was interesting that in her analysis of the processes by which the new movements are formed, she used a schema whose poles were two stances: that of the “philistine” (the pas-



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sive, apolitical citizen) on the one hand, and that of the activist on the other. This, in essence, is a particular variation on the subjectivity formation schema. Clément cited the testimony of her activist-respondents, who described their experience of moving towards activist stances. They talked about how they had begun to see their lives from a new perspective, as being connected to the social whole. They said that they had gained a sense of self-worth, confidence, strength, and collective solidarity, the readiness to defend their positions. The transformation of the subject causes the person to see the world from the universal perspective of the whole and gives them a sense of personal strength and fearlessness.

So for us was important to address these people first of all – but we do not want to separate them into straightforward examples of the right type of behavior from the wrong one. Instead we focus on the demand that everyone can be an activist and assert that these experiences are open to anyone. Inspiring experiences have also emerged recently in different social centers in Europe, where activists are building their own environments for self-educational activities, centered around cinema and reading and discussion spaces.

As our friends from Universidad Nomada once postulated:

“For quite a while now, a certain portmanteau word has been circulating in the Universidad Nomada’s discussions, in an attempt to sum up what we believe should be one of the results of the critical work carried out by the social movements and other post-socialist political actors. We talk about creating new mental prototypes for political action.”<sup>5</sup>

I would suggest that the same approach should be developed in relation to spatial practices. In this particular installation of the Activist Club and its further social development in the form of “Rosa’s Cultural House,” we were trying to demonstrate how these “spatial prototypes” could be realized and what they might look like bringing art out of white cube institutional situation and at the same time framing it via direct interaction with variety of politicized publics which usually stays outside of encounters with artistic practices and milieus. I hope that is one of the possible ways in which art can function today in order to fulfill the promise of its liberating power.

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#### Endnotes

1 Boris Arvatov, *Art and Production: Sketch of a Proletarian Avant-garde Aesthetic (1921-1930)*, (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1972), pg. 100.

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill tr, (New York: Continuum, 2005), pg. 24.

3 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the public sphere,” Simon During ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pg. 519.

4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 1, Myra Bergman Ramos tr., (New York: Continuum, 2005), pg. 10.

5 Universidad Nómada, “Mental Prototypes and Monster Institutions: Some Notes by Way of an Introduction,” in Alan Moore and Alan Smart, eds., *Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces*, (Barcelona: Other Forms, The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2015), pg. 24.

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