





Alt Går Bra's *Tout Va Bien Series*, Thomas Hirschhorn's presentation, Bergen Kunsthall Landmark, May 2016.
Photo Bjørn Johansen

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Handmade in Norway, 2016. Photo Bjørn Johansen

KUNSTforum

Alt Gar Bra and Tout Va Bien

Bob Dickinson - 17.12.2015 - English, Essay

Tout Va Bien is a series of live events from the artists' group Alt Gar Bra. The first event involved a presentation and film by the Russian art collective, Chto Delat.



Chto Delat? at Landmark, Bergen. Photo: Hege Eriksen

Contemporary art is nothing if not innovative, but only occasionally does artistic innovation get applied to politics. There is one new example, however, and this can be experienced in the work of the Bergen-based art group, Alt Gar Bra, which is trying to get a debate going in Norway with the launch of Tout Va Bien, a series of live events, accompanied by a new monthly publication entitled Trykksak. Performance artist and co-founder of Alt Gar Bra, Agnes Nedregard, describes the group's latest offerings as "encouraging positive action", enabling people to ask "how I can have a say, and how I can have agency?" and to explore "how art can be used to build a vision of the world we would like to live in." At the same time, there's a wider artistic context that's worth reminding ourselves

about.

Social Turn

Since the 1990s, the contemporary art world has been very much focused on ideas about social engagement and relational art; art that's inclusive, that encourages interaction, and that dissolves the barrier between audience and art. These are all fine aims, frequently associated with the left, although historically they can also be associated with futurism and the far right, as Claire Bishop pointed out in 2012 in her influential book *Artificial Hells*. Here, Bishop observed that this "social turn" in art has brought with it a failure to "accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an autonomous realm of experience," (Chapter 1, pps 39-40), but perhaps the main problem with relational art – resurgent in troubled times characterised by social inequality, financial instability and global volatility – is simply its ambiguity.

Unsurprisingly, some artists have leapfrogged "relational" concerns and are venturing much more closely towards fields of political activism. For several years artists like the Yes Men and the Guerrilla Girls have used mediated interventions to surprise and shock politically. Today, major artists like Ai Weiwei and Hito Steyerl are not simply politically engaged but are actively highlighting the linkages between the contemporary art world and neoliberal economics. And when it comes to linkages there is no shortage. From the power and influence of wealthy private collectors like Charles Saatchi and Roman Abramovic, to the way post-industrial regeneration is stimulated by artists and art biennials, to the art world's continuing dependence on self-exploitation and unpaid labour, the contemporary art-world mirrors the chaotic, global impact of hyper-capitalism.

All Is Well

Launching the new *Tout Va Bien* series at Bergen's Landmark venue, a recent film by the Russian collective, *Chto Delat?* was introduced by founder member Dmitry Vilensky, followed by an opportunity for the audience to ask questions and discuss what they'd seen. It's interesting to think about that series title, *Tout Va Bien*, by the way, a reference to Jean Luc-Goddard's highly political film of the same name, which means "all is well" – as of course does *Alt Gar Bra*. The irony of this phrase was not lost on Vilensky. "I'm not a film freak," he said, "But if I was going to mention any film that's made an impact on me, that is the one. It's been forgotten, it's from 1972, when people were disillusioned after 1968."

Previously exhibited as a video installation, *Chto Delat?*'s film "The Excluded: In the Moment of Danger" succeeds in asking tough

questions about freedom of expression in modern Russia. Directed by Tsaplya Olga Egorova, the film was written and performed by graduates and friends from a School of Engaged Art set up by Chto Delat in St Petersburg in 2013, and which Vilensky describes as “first and foremost a place for intergenerational dialogue,” and “an efficient community-building tool”. Like other Chto Delat? films the performances feature choreography by the person Vilensky refers to as the “grandmother of Russian modern dance”, Nina Gasteva. This choreography is vital because as Vilensky says, “If the film is based on talking heads it’s just noise.” In the film, the act of physical touch involves and connects all participants, no matter what gender, ethnicity or sexuality, emphasising the importance of their collectivity under an oppressive regime.

What Is To Be Done?

Chto Delat? – meaning “What Is to be Done?” – was the name of a political pamphlet written in 1901 by Lenin, echoing the title of a novel from 1863 by socialist philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Founded in 2003, the Chto Delat group has worked with other artists and performers on a series of projects throughout Europe and Scandinavia, as well as exhibitions worldwide. I first encountered their work at the exhibition Art Turning Left, at Tate Liverpool, in 2013, where Chto Delat? worked with the local left-wing bookshop News From Nowhere on an installation: a temporary library of useful reading matter. Also showing was their earlier film, Partisan Songspiel: Belgrade Story, a Brechtian-style musical performance, again with choreography, made in Belgrade and commenting on the displacement of the local Roma community to make way for speculative housing development schemes. When I interviewed Vilensky at that time in Liverpool, it was shortly before the 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi, and he believed repression in Russia would increase after the games had finished, as it did after the Soviet Olympics of summer, 1980. Since Sochi, the situation in the Ukraine has moved from revolution to civil war, Crimea has been annexed by the Russian Federation, the Malaysian airliner MH370 was shot down by a missile, and thousands have died in the continuing conflict. In 2014, Chto Delat? withdrew from Manifesta 10 in St



Alt Gar Bra logo

Petersburg stating “neither curator (Kaspar König) nor institution are capable of rising to the challenge of a dramatically evolving political situation”, specifying “the Russian government’s policy of violence, repression and lies.”

Much of the despondency evident in Chto Delat?’s new film shown at Tout Va Bien comes from a feeling of pessimism in the face of an ever-deteriorating domestic and global situation. In Russia, furthermore, the government seems to receive the full support of the majority of people. But Chto Delat? is determined to keep voicing their opposition. More than that, Chto Delat? prioritises collective action as essential means of survival in the present. Regarding the new film, a quote from this month’s edition of Chto Delat?’s newspaper (#38), says it all: “At first glance, it could seem like we are trying to use collectivity as a powerful tool in the creation of art. But unfortunately that is not the case. We used to think that collectivity is necessary in order to be strong, but now we realise it is necessary simply to maintain one’s sanity.”

Thought-provoking

Chto Delat?’s appearance at the launch of Alt Gar Bra’s Tout Va Bien series was certainly thought-provoking, as was the arrival of Trykksak – a free publication that is intended to appear monthly. It’s not so much a magazine as a collection of documents, held together in a paper folder. You can treat it as one collection or take pages out and use them as posters. At the bottom of each page there’s a strange phrase: “printed on our secret press,” echoing the words used by Edvard Munch on his hectographic prints. In fact, everything has been printed on old mimeograph machines, from the 1960s, using stencils, in the same way so many insurrectionary leaflets were printed in Paris during the 1968 student uprising. As a result, every page differs in some subtle way from its equivalent in another copy of Trykksak. The pages reproduce texts from a variety of sources, including George Maciunas’s Fluxus Manifesto, Karl Popper’s essay *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and an excerpt from Peter Singer’s *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now To End World Poverty*. Several texts are decorated with photos from October this year, of Air France executives having been stripped of their clothes and trying to climb a fence to escape furious employees protesting against low wages and layoffs. The effect of reading Trykksak is both exciting and amusing, and I look forward to the next editions.

Alt Gar Bra’s Tout Va Bien series continues at Bergen’s Landmark venue, featuring the Irwin/NSK group from Slovenia on December 3rd, and the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn on May 19th 2016, both events promising provocative opportunities to discuss and debate the role of contemporary art in politics and the possibilities for anyone and everyone to find political expression through art. Alt Gar

Bra is also negotiating with a venue in Paris to present Norwegian artists in a parallel series of live events in 2016.

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Alt Gar Bra is co-founded by artist Agnes Nedregard.