



Drifting Through Incomplete Renovation

What is to be done?/CHTO DELAT?

An Urban Examination of Utopia and Everyday Life in Narvskaya Zastava

“The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places - all this seems to be neglected.”

Guy Debord, Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography

In the cities of contemporary Russia, in Moscow and Petersburg, this quote from Guy Debord seems more current than ever. The din of road-work and (superficial) renovation privatizes the population, forcing it back into interiors of office and home, to settle down in front of the TV and to relish the spectacle of new late-capitalist visibility and the old, fading representations of history. Yet, in terms of aesthetics, one could argue that the streets of Russian cities today are far more interesting than any privatized interiors. The reason for this interest is not so much because of the defunct and functional utopias that dominate public space, but for the collective experiences that these utopias modelled and formed, collective experiences currently undergoing great transformation. To limit oneself to representative archaeology would mean understanding the urban space of post-Soviet reality as a ruin; it would mean privatizing and collecting it as a fiction that is defunct and therefore unbelievable. It would also mean exoticizing it as a spectacle of the cultural Other, the distant location, the utopia in the vulgar sense of the word. There must be some other way of examining public space in Russia.

The exhibition project “Drift. Narvskaya Zastava” is an artistic inquiry into one of Petersburg’s most fascinating and contradictory neighborhoods. It was undertaken by the workgroup “What is to be done?”¹ in the summer of 2004 with the support of the “ProArte”-Institute. Its results were presented to the public at the Museum of the History of Petersburg (October 2004) and National Center for Contemporary Art, Moscow (February 2005).

Location

If you look at a map of Petersburg, you will immediately see that Narvskaya Zastava is an isolated zone, surrounded by a ring of factories, railroad tracks and shipyards. Before the revolution, it was part of the city’s proletarian outskirts, an historical hotbed of dissent. The historical decision to begin the October Revolution was made here. During the 1920s, as a symbolic gesture of gratitude for Narvskaya Zastava’s working class, the new government decided to establish the neighborhood as the administrative center of a new, socialist Leningrad. Thanks to this decision, the neighborhood changed completely. The life of the new, ideal worker demanded a radical replanning of the urban milieu, which resulted in some of the most significant ensembles of Constructivist architecture.²

Today, Narvskaya Zastava has taken on some of the qualities of a ghetto, notwithstanding its central location: its buildings are falling apart quite quickly; the majority of its inhabitants live below the poverty line; public space and cultural institutions are undergoing privatization, and even if many of the factories have stopped working, the ecological situation remains dire. The neighborhood has become a “blind zone” in the great megapolis and has taken on the typical traits of an industrial post-Soviet town in the provinces, where the transformation from the old socialist model of society to new market-driven forms of social interaction has been frozen in time. It is this “paralysis” of the state of transformation that provides the observer with the rare historical chance to analyze everyday life in the moment of its painful historical transformation.

Method

In our examination, we decided to draw upon artistic strategies of the past, strategies that were not only geared toward criticizing everyday life, but moved by the desire to change it. First and foremost, these included the traditions of critical realism, productionism, and situationist praxis.

One of the most important means of examining and intervening in social space is the “drift”. The drift makes it possible to see everyday life beyond the framework of utility coded into the projection of an urban environment. In the moment of drifting, the city can be read as a space of desires stimulated or repressed by the architectural and functional planning of urban space. The drift’s participants record how some streets, blocks, or building resonate in terms of emotional state, which feelings they provoke and which tendencies they hide. In this way, the documentation of the group’s communication in the process of drifting becomes an important part of the project, revealing the private lives of its participants, their associations connected to the places of its examinations, their comparative analyses, reflections, disagreements and so on.

In the course of the project, we also applied various methods of charting and mapping the social, architectural, and demographic situation in the neighborhood. We invited architectural historians and sociologists and organized a mobile sociological center with their help. This center was set up at a number of different points all over the neighborhood. The information that we collected in dialogues with the local population was archived through a specially developed questionnaire as well as in video-interviews and photo-documentation. Using this material as a base, the artists of the workgroup made pieces that embodied different ways of interacting with the place through artistic practice. In this way, the objective mapping of the neighborhood doubled the subjectivity of a creative community.

In a sense, our two-day drift through Narvskaya Zastava was a sort of reinterpretation of the Leningrad-Petersburg tradition of cultured strolls through strange places. This praxis that arises from a culture of communities based on friendship, communities that attempt to upturn (*détourn*) urban space. Their experience reveals the gap between what life really is and what life really could be.

David Riff and Dmitry Vilensky

Situationist Sociology In Narvskaya Zastava

Official history can be juxtaposed to the memory of silent social groups. To the official version of the past, this memory is undesirable and even dangerous. Thus, we would like to add a number of missing elements to the official memory of Petersburg and Leningrad, which we find boring in its organicity (and dangerous in its consequences). More specifically, we would like to give a voice to those who do not usually write articles or memoirs about their view of the city, about their city. In today’s spectacular society, it turns out that no one really wants a history of Narvskaya Zastava and its memory of a proletarian area, of social projects, or of the unsuccessful attempts to build communism and to accommodate the disenfranchised.

The territory behind the Narva Gate represents an embodiment of socialism’s homogenizing influence. We can read this space as a system of significance whose meanings are supplied by socialist reconstructions, aesthetically negated by the ideology of young, wild capitalism. This area was meant to typify the victory of the revolution and of social equality, the triumph of the urban way of life over the rural, the supremacy of a worker’s neighborhood over the center, and the privilege of worker’s avantgarde, the industrial administration and the factories’ party elite.

During the first and second Five Year Plans, an attempt was made to break down the boundary between the city center and its outskirts, changing the faces of the *sloboda* (=settlement outside the official city limits) and the *zastava* (=outpost), turning them into socialist areas that could compete with the center directly. New industrial complexes were built alongside the old factories of Narvskaya Zastava; a steam of peasant-migrants flooded into the city in order to become factory-workers. The construction of new residential areas and their infrastructure were called upon to create comfortable living-spaces for these workers. One important component of this new infrastructure consisted in “hotbeds of culture”, distributed across the



entire city, established with the goal of bringing the “cultural revolution” to the population at large, which had been deprived of any possibility for cultural consumption up until that point.

In the framework of the art-project “Dérive through Narvskaya Zastava”, we decided to conduct a sociological survey at several point of the area in order to find how people feel about their neighborhood and which changes they have been able to observe throughout the last decade. In organizing our survey, we did not only follow traditional sociological methods but also allowed ourselves to be inspired by Situationist practices of examining urban space. These practices rest upon the principle of exploring situations by adding new elements and gaining insight into reality by turning it upside down (detournement), which leads to the discovery of symbolic meanings in ordinary everyday life.

We advertised our presence by identifying our stand as a “Mobile Sociological Station” in big letters. Over the period of a few days, we set up this stand at different points in the neighborhood. This extravagant stand attracted the curious and repelled the timid. The environment that gradually grew around us changed from passive to active: eventually, we were joined by people who spent their time in the area, either out of habit or through the nature of their work (newsagents, sunflower-seed-salespeople, pastry-vendors, people waiting for friends or taking walks, idlers and loafers, drinkers, militiamen, and pensioners). The mobile sociological station was staffed by four girls with questionnaires as well as several cameramen.

Despite the fact that our primary method of collecting data consisted in a questionnaire, this examination differed from our accustomed method in that we were hardly striving to undertake a representative mass survey. While we were happy to listen everyone in full, it was our goal to pull people into our orbit so that they would help us to examine this territory, becoming our guides into the unknown neighborhood, “closed” to us because of our lack of knowledge concerning the area. We needed intuitive psychogeographers, people who traversed these paths on a daily basis, people who were ready to share information on where and how to spend our free time, to relax, to have fun, to meet and hang out with friends. We also wanted to know which places were unpleasant during the daytime and dangerous at night.

The French Situationists of the 1950s criticized modern capitalism and its consumerist society for attempting to embody capitalism through images, stamping it onto urban space while homogenizing it, opening the same kinds of shops in different neighborhoods, “grooming” the city in order to hide its flaws and its secrets. The population of Narvskaya Zastava has not yet encountered capitalism in full; they are still waiting for “necessary” advertising and for the openings of cafés or stores that already have franchises elsewhere. On the whole, the influence of capitalism still remains largely insignificant, although the neighborhood’s population is waiting for its advent impatiently. Spectacular society without consumer society appears as a sneer or a smirk of the haves against the have-nots. People are ready for the triumph of capitalism, having armed themselves with extremely liberal consciousness, with the lack of empathy for their neighbors (bums, alcoholics, junkies and Southerners), wishing to edge out anyone who finds him-herself in a difficult existential situation; they are ready to build a capitalist paradise on their own territory.

So what did we gain by examining the neighborhood of Narvskaya Zastava, a place that has survived the transformation of the Soviet urban utopia to a trivial place of bazaar capitalism as a typical post-Soviet experience? Narvskaya Zastava is valuable in that it remains a potential place of passive resistance, in which the human being has not yet become a glossy consumer of market products, services, and beautiful bells and whistles, but still remains in a space of interaction, tension and conflict.

Sofia Tchouikina

Notes:

¹ “What is to be done?” is a group of artists (Tsaplya and Glyucklya, Nikolai Oleinikov, Kirill Shuvalov, and Dmitry Vilensky), philosophers (Artem Magun, Oxana Timofeeva, Alexei Penzin), and writers (David Riff, Alexander Skidan). It formed around the newspaper of the same name. For the members of the group, it is important that this historical question calls for a critique of capitalist society and a reconsideration of the arts as forms of socially responsible action. The group is



concerned with returning the social problematic to the context of contemporary Russian culture. While it is firmly rooted in its local context, it is also focused on joining an international debate on the perspectives for alternatives in cultural work today.

² These buildings include the residential blocks on Traktornaya ulitsa (1925-1927), the School of 10th Anniversary of the October Revolution (1925-1927), the M. Gorky Palace of Culture (1925-1927), the Factory-Kitchen and the Kirov Department Store (1929-1931), the Kirov Municipal Council (1930-1934) etc. As Alexei Levchuk writes in his "Architectural History of Leningrad": "This was a reward of sorts for the special contributions of Narvskaya Zastava's proletariat in the revolution, and also bore witness to the fact the newly installed Soviet city-council was dominated by natives of the neighborhood. The victory of the outskirts over the center and the establishment of the "first milieu of equals" in Narvskaya Zastava can be found in the dismantling of the garden-enclosure around the Winter Palace (R.F. Meltzer, 1899-1901) and its installation around the public gardens of the Narvskaya district, which were renamed to the Park of the Victims of January 9th (R.G. Katzer, garden-master, 1924-1927).