

Factsheet Plug In #51 Activist Club

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Chto Delat, *Activist Club*, 2007 Photo Dmitry Vilensky

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The political and social changes after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 provoked plenty of food for thought and reconsideration. More and more artists are looking for ways of using art to confront topics such as these. Among them is Chto Delat (What is to be done), a collective of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from St Petersburg and Moscow formed in 2003. The group is concerned with topics in the field of tension between art, political theory and activism. Their first joint project was to launch an English-Russian newspaper with the name Chto Delat which is distributed free of charge. The collective engages in a variety of art projects, including videoworks, installations, public actions, radio programs and artistic examinations of urban space and everyday. One of their projects is entitled the *Activist Club*.

The Activist Club has a small cinema, the Kino Club, with a study and discussion area. The Kino Club's programme features three recent video works: *Builders* (2004-2005), *Angry Sandwichpeople or In a Praise of Dialectic* (2006) and *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008). Later this year, the programme will be extended to include guest videos, presentations and discussions. The Activist Club is publishing a issue of its newspaper, *What is the use of art?*, specially for the presentation in the Van Abbemuseum. This is the first colour edition of this newspaper.

The *Activist Club* is a project that started in Paris in 2007 and has since been on show on various locations in Europe. The title refers to a design made in 1925 by Russian artist Alexander Rodchenko for the *Worker's Club*, a room that workers could use for cultural and political activities, meetings, study and discussion. A free interpretation of the design is on display in the Van Abbemuseum until the beginning of September. Rodchenko designed it for L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts) in Paris. His aim was to show how the

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function of art in the Soviet Union differed from that in Western Europe, where art is seen not as a basic commodity but as a beautiful object for displaying on a wall, or as a financial investment.

Chto Delat wondered whether you could transport Rodchenko's model into the present day. "Today it is important for us to have a rethink and realise the utopian potential of creating a different type of public space and a different type of free time. We propose the creation of a space orientated towards an 'active' means of interaction with art, which for us, above all includes a different economy of time – the transformation of time intended for instantaneous consumption into an intensive time for reading, discussion, analysis and for the screening of films." Is it possible to create such a space? This idea is being tested out in the *Activist Club's* projects, as well as here in the Van Abbemuseum.

Apart from the *Kino Club*, this gallery is displaying several paintings from the museum collection, selected by the Chto Delat members. They explain their choice as follows. 'Striving to be realists in the authentic, broad sense of the word, we once again repeat Lenin's half-forgotten thesis: "You can become a communist only when you have enriched your memory with knowledge of all the riches that humanity has created." That is why we have chosen for our installation at the Van Abbemuseum a number of paintings from the museum's collection that represent the twentieth-century realist tradition. For us, these paintings symbolise the aesthetic and political value of this tradition. Socialist realism, which jettisoned the mode of critical engagement with reality, was a distorted continuation of this tradition. By fashioning an alternate expositional and interpretive context for these works, we can establish the dialogue with them that is so vital to us. The insertion of critical realism in the context of the new avant-garde art paradigm finds its basis in the notion of art as an activist-educational practice, as well as in the process of reassessing the role of the museum, which even after its mythical 'death' still remains one of the principal sites for the production of art's significance. The ability to see realist painting with a fresh gaze is not merely a primary component of universal aesthetic experience, but also a powerful instrument of politicization, whose current potential seems more relevant to us than the potential

of modernist abstractions. 'To empower this picture, the walls have been covered with newspapers.'

The Van Abbemuseum has purchased the *Kino Club* and the videos that are being screened for its collection, its aim being to demonstrate that the ideas of constructivists like Lissitzky are still topical and resonate in the minds of today's artists.

Art works

Victor Dolphijn

Oogst, s.a.
Oil on canvas

Constant Permeke

De zaaier, 1935
Oil on canvas

Charley Toorop

Volkslogement, 1928
Oil on canvas

Jean Brusselmans

Le bain des vagabonds, 1936
Oil on canvas