

Sarah James on the use and abuse of Bertolt Brecht



BRECHT: REDUX

The art world, it seems, loves to love Brecht. Over the past decade there has been an indisputable rise in artistic projects and exhibitions guided by the work of the playwright, poet, Marxist, practical philosopher and political artist Bertolt Brecht. Chief among the influential aspects of his work still reverberating through artistic practice today are Brecht's laying bare of the mechanisms of representation; the strategies of alienation or what he termed *Verfremdungseffekt*; the often direct address to his audience undertaken by what he called his 'epic' or 'dialectical' theatre, as a means of interrupting narrative and activating the spectators out of their passivity; the materialist critique of capitalism and bourgeois ideology he offered in his work; and the collectivised, collaborative and often pedagogical model of practice he pioneered. What is more, Brecht's model of theatre and his approach to realism and aesthetic experience have proven extremely adaptable across media, from performance to cinema, experimental film, photography, photobooks and installation.

Given the fetish for participatory, political, activist, collaborative and community-based artistic and curatorial practices following art's so-called social turn in the 1990s, perhaps his popularity isn't so surprising. But Brecht's visibility and influence has grown exponentially following the more recent, and now no less fashionable, derision of such participatory, political, activist, collaborative and community-based practices. So what does it mean to use Brecht properly or poorly today? And does Brecht too often provide little more than an easy lingua franca for desperate funding bids or a superficial paradigm for an invested kind of praxis? Both of the former abound at present under conditions when artists and curators are increasingly forced to justify art's social impact and community ties under conditions that even David Cameron no longer bothers to call the 'Big Society'. Is Brechtianism what Deleuzianism became in the art schools and press releases of the late 1990s but for a post-financial-crisis generation of artists and curators wanting an easy frame of reference for a knowingly self-reflexive, seemingly militant, purportedly radical but in reality too often lazy, one-dimensional practice? Or can we still find an unparalleled and invaluable toolbox for affirmative, collectivised and transformative praxis in the vast and variegated political and artistic project bestowed by Brecht?



opposite
Chto Delat?

Partisan Songspiel. A Belgrade Story 2009 video

Chto Delat?

The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger 2014 video installation

Almost 15 years ago, in *Brecht and Method*, Fredric Jameson had already observed a kind of modish fatigue with Brecht – one he attributed largely to the now depleted stereotypical Brecht of the 1960s and 1970s. For Jameson, Brecht had become so popular during these decades – in the French New Wave cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, the short stories, fiction, film and TV of the German author and polymath Alexander Kluge, and in what he called the ‘Brechtian painting and art of Joseph Beuys and Hans Haacke’ – precisely because Brecht enabled a return to an avant-garde art but also a reassuringly orthodox and proper politics. The sense that Brecht had been exhausted by the beginning of the 21st century, Jameson proposed, was also attributable to the problem posed by how to keep on being a Brechtian in the transformed cultural and political context marked by the beginning of the new millennium. This question was for many, Jameson’s book suggested, mistakenly shaped by the same falsely schematised, but equally popularly posed, dilemma of whether one could still be a socialist or a Marxist after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The Russian collective Chto Delat? (What is to be done?) – a self-organised group of artists, critics, philosophers and writers established in 2003 – has become synonymous with the call to arms for an artistic, curatorial and critical practice that attempts to retool Brechtianism for the present political, economic and social context. In contrast to the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chto Delat? now argues that being a socialist or Marxist has become an even more urgent task for any cultural producer critical of the neoliberal world order following the financial crisis – and the ever-increasing gap between the globally wealthy and the impoverished and exploited that it precipitated. Chto Delat?’s Brechtian model of practice has been critically endorsed by the more mainstream institutions of the art world and leftist critics alike because it offers a productive alternative to the now compromised and superficial relational aesthetics that characterised an

earlier moment of participatory practice for which the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal has become shorthand. Chto Delat? positions its understanding of the collective and the collaborative in contrast to the kind of art that pays lip service to participation and enables the fashionable deployment of that term in biennales, private galleries and fairs as a means of cosmetically countering the neoliberal model of consumption such arenas actively enable rather than resist. As Natša Ilić has stressed, in publishing its Brechtian call to arms in 2006 in the form of a newspaper with the essay ‘Why Brecht?’ written by one of its members, Dmitry Vilensky, Chto Delat? remobilised Brecht’s materialist critique of capitalism, his didactic realism and epic theatre in order to interrogate the post-perestroika past and neoliberal present of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. The group pursued this Brechtianism most notably via its well-known ‘Songspiel’ series of videos and performances: *Songspiel Triptych: Perestroika-Songspiel*; *The Victory over the Coup*, 2008; *Partisan Songspiel. A Belgrade Story*, 2009; and *The Tower: A Songspiel*, 2010. These aggressive operatic assaults – extensively researched, often written collaboratively and set on the street, the stage and in the museum – like Brecht’s originals from the 1920s on which they draw, mobilise the collective sung voice as a means of popular address and social critique.

In his essay, Vilensky paid tribute to other recent reinterpretations of Brecht, including those made by the late

WHW performing at the 11th Istanbul Biennial press conference in 2008 | to r Sabina Sabolović, Nataša Ilić, Ivet Ćurlin and Ana Dević

Karen Mirza & Brad Butler

The Exception and the Rule 2014 performance



German theatre director and artist Christoph Schlingensiefel. Vilensky singled out Schlingensiefel's *Please Love Austria*, 2000, which mimicked *Big Brother*-style TV by incarcerating refugees seeking political asylum and asking viewers to vote on their individual deportation, producing a grotesque spectacle critiquing the anti-immigration policies and right-wing populism of the Austrian government. Yet for Vilensky, Schlingensiefel – like many other artist activists – failed to register what was at the heart of Brecht's project: an understanding that gaining distance or alienating capitalism itself should not be based only in scepticism, irony or even mimicry, but in 'responsible intellectual action' which could gravely proclaim that 'another world is possible after all'. For Chto Delat?'s arguably unfashionably utopian proposition, Brecht's current relevance is concretised via his work's guiding question: 'How is it possible to take intellectual action within the alienating system of capital?' And, furthermore: 'How can that action force society's radical change?'

Brecht has cast an equally long shadow over recent attempts to develop a more militant and politicised form of exhibition practice. The most well-known and well-received of these is the 11th Istanbul Biennial (Reviews AM330), organised by the Croatian collective What, How and for Whom (WHW) in 2009, and taking as its title 'What Keeps Man Alive?', the closing song of the second act of Brecht's famous *Threepenny Opera* of 1928. The latter was the result of a collaboration with the composer Kurt Weill and the writer Elisabeth Hauptmann. Set in Victorian London, the play told the story of an anti-hero criminal Macheath (a comic adaption of Shakespeare's own villain) and was both a damning critique of capitalism, bourgeois ideology and authority, and had been his call to arms for an agitational mode of theatre which could facilitate social and political change. Perhaps playing down a growing preoccupation with a new kind of neo-Brechtianism, WHW argued that Brecht's utopianism was still predominantly understood as dated, and took his unfashionable status as symptomatic of the failure of contemporary art under neoliberal hegemony to mobilise real change.

Brecht enabled WHW to inflect a critically self-reflexive position in relation to the biennale's implication in the neoliberal regime that produced and reproduced it at local, national and international levels. Attempting to recuperate the biennale model from its current role as an instrumentalised and empty form of cultural tourism, like Chto Delat?, WHW learned from Jameson's Brechtian method and connected the historical conditions of the 1920s to the present deregulated totalitarianism of neoliberalism. But from a cynical perspective, the appeal of Brecht as a model of activist and critical practice for both Chto Delat? and WHW could also be understood in his proffering not a solution but a means of constantly dismantling and reassessing – which, while productive, might also be seen as having equally dangerous disempowering consequences under contemporary capitalism ('Against Political Art' AM376).

However, since the attempts made by Chto Delat? and WHW there has arguably emerged a new kind of fetish followed by a fatigue with Brecht. Writing in this magazine in 2011, Maria Walsh chastised the flat Brechtianism of many contemporary artists, mostly those working in film ('Believable Fictions' AM342). For Walsh, Brecht is too often used generally and in a hackneyed manner indebted to the structuralist experiments of the 1970s and 1980s. These earlier works had compellingly made the viewer aware of their own consciousness as being embedded in the wider social and media structures that interpolate us. Walsh criticised both this recent insipid Brechtianism and the intellectually

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burdened essayistic work of artists such as 2014 Turner Prize winner Duncan Campbell. Walsh saw the latter's work as representative of a general trend within which historicity was mobilised as a means of producing a problematic kind of appropriated or 'gestural' political agency. Instead she called for a greater appreciation of a kind of artistic and filmic practice that didn't feel obliged to engage didactically, shock its spectators out of passivity or constantly underscore its own filmic construction. Walsh located such refreshingly less-Brechtian strategies in the work of figures like Isaac Julien precisely because it wasn't frightened of engaging in the Hollywood-style pleasures of cinematic illusion, fiction and the subjective experiential space of the subject.

Yet the mainstream art world's thirst for a fashionably Brechtian-inflected practice seems to have continued unabated – particularly in the UK. Only last year, Oliver Chanarin & Adam Broomberg won the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for their explicit appropriation of Brecht's 1955 photo-essay *War Primer*, with their limited-edition book *War Primer 2* ('Thatcher: The Legacy', AM367). Brecht's book was originally conceived as a critique of the fascism and capitalism that had culminated in the Second World War, as well as a brutal and dialectical interrogation of the mediated world of photojournalism and the mainstream press that had mobilised and materialised such ideologies. It took the form of 85 photographic fragments from the press accompanied by what Brecht termed his 'photo-epigrams' – short, searing poetic verses, their address and content often aggressively incongruous with the images. Broomberg & Chanarin's version took Brecht's book and layered Googled images of a post-9/11 world – many images documenting the West's War on Terror – on top of the originals. The project received an unusual amount of celebration and critique. Its detractors argued that it simply quoted Brecht, or rode on the tails of his acerbic, visually and textually radical and intellectually sophisticated project without properly retooling it or engaging with it in a suitably dialectical fashion. Perhaps such a direct homage could only ever be a pale imitation. Despite the attempt to democratise the highly collectible book as a digital download, and the duo's restaging of a video-based version of a Brechtian opera at The Photographers' Gallery, the collective, collaborative, activist Brecht of the popular address seemed profoundly absent in Broomberg & Chanarin's reworking. Their VIP-style choreographed performance involving 18 army cadets at Tate Modern in January – with tickets at £20 and including a private view of 'Conflict, Time, Photography' – based on Brecht and Hanns Eisler's unfinished opera project around *War Primer*, seems to do little to counter any scepticism as to the safe and fairly elitist nature of the pair's Brechtianism. Arguably the neo-Brechtianism in the UK of the 1970s and 1980s has more significant lessons for us than the structuralist formal strategies which continue to dominate discussions by those fatigued with Brecht and those still fetishising him alike. For example, the community-driven and socially activist projects of cultural workers like Jo Spence and Terry Dennett or the Berwick Street Film Collective – all of whom combined formal strategies of estrangement with committed, collaborative and anti-hierarchical ways of working.

Another arguably more Brechtian use of the photobook – one based on an affirmative, activist understanding of Brecht – is found in the work of Mark Neville. Despite not explicitly claiming any Brechtian framing for his work, Neville has developed a documentary practice that, since around 2004, has sought to reposition the photographic series and the photobook as a public artwork, or as a means of activist intervention which also deliberately attempts to circumvent or refuse its immediate recuperation by the art world. Neville's approach to his photographic and filmic production is embedded in the need to collaborate and complicate the relationships between artistic authorship and art's audiences while maintaining a belief in the transformative effects and affects of the aesthetic experience peculiar to the image. For his *Port Glasgow* project, following a year's residence in the Scottish town of that name – once famous and prosperous as a result of its shipbuilding and now suffering from unemployment and decline – Neville produced and gifted a 'coffee table-style' photobook to the town's 8,000 households. Containing Neville's characteristically theatrical photographs of the community – the dance floor of the Christmas party at the Town Hall or the tatty exterior of the local newsagents – the book proposed a form of public art from below, and a reappropriation of a normally middle-class commodity (the coffee-table photobook) for the often marginalised hands of the subjects depicted in it. However, that this relationship – its politics and specific renegotiation in a finite aesthetic object – remained a highly fraught one is clear from the fact that, despite the artist's attentive and balanced approach to the two religious communities within the town, many copies of Neville's book were publicly burned by Protestant members of the community who perceived a pro-Catholic bias in Neville's final selection of images.

In *Deeds Not Words*, 2010-12, a similarly community-driven and long-durational project, Neville exploited art's use value and its activist potential, this time focusing on the town of Corby in Northamptonshire, and specifically with a group of families whose children had been born with birth defects due to the toxic waste produced by the now defunct steel works in the 1980s. Neville's dramatically lit yet intimate photographs of the everyday life of Corby's community were produced as a similarly glossy photobook. This time Neville also refused commercial distribution

and the rarefying and reifying reception of the art world, and instead sent it to 433 local authorities in the UK and environmental agencies around the world. Chronicling the dismantling of the working-class culture of the town, as well as his relationship with it, Neville's photographic series also deliberately rejected a clichéd social-documentary realism or photojournalistic veracity for artificially lit, tableaux-like scenes utilising the almost unreal depth of field enabled by his camera. Neville sees his images as the product of a long and often profound relationship with a specific community. Once in the gallery, however, the relationship between artist and subjects, the nature of collaboration and the position of the audience become further complicated. In his most recent exhibition 'London/Pittsburgh', 2014 (Reviews p26), which stages two photo-essays documenting the gross inequalities in wealth that now characterise these two cities within the gallery context, Neville attempts to negotiate some of the dilemmas posed by the more conventional and institutional reception of his work. For instance, copies of the accompanying photobook will be sent to the 50 biggest pension fund companies in the UK and the US in a bid to put his art to the activist work of promoting or affecting real social change in relation to the current climate of austerity, the widening gap between wealthy and destitute, and the campaign for the living wage. Neville's practice attempts to remap and subvert the relations between audience and cultural producer, and to engender an ethical form of practice embedded in specific communities and bent on producing tangible, social results, while inhabiting both the popular and mass-cultural space of the newspaper (Neville's photo-essay on London was commissioned by the *New York Times*) as well as the museum. It does so without wearing Brechtian theory on its sleeve.

In contrast, the work of Karen Mirza & Brad Butler has taken a different, and more self-consciously and self-reflexively Brechtian approach. Since 1998, the pair have worked in an interdisciplinary manner – engaged in filmmaking, drawing, performances, radio shows, installations, street interventions, publishing, workshops, curating and collaborations – and since 2007 they have collaborated under the banner of the Museum of Non-Participation (MNP) (Profile AM336). Conceived as a kind of mobile and nomadic site of praxis, and clearly engaged in an interrogation of art's social turn, the MNP occupies the presently precarious space between the state and the market, and claims London as its post-Thatcherite, post-conceptual, neoliberal training ground, while collaborating and claiming solidarity with artist and worker collectives around the world – from Karachi to Cairo. For Mirza & Butler, art commerce and art education have separated art from the people, and the MNP enables them to re-engage with art's social and transformative potential, collectivising and reinventing their practice and its agency with each specific collaboration undertaken. For example, they formed an experimental performance workshop called Implicated Theatre which worked with the Anti-Raids Campaign and the Latin Americas Workers' Association, utilising theatre to help the participants know their rights in response to increasing raids, checks and the detention of migrants by the UK Border Agency. Defending the status of the artist as cultural worker, they have developed one of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (Teaching plays), *The Exception and*



Port Glasgow's football team delivering Mark Neville's book, which documents the town, free to all 8,000 residents

the Rule of 1929-30. Originally devised to be taken on tour and performed in schools or in factories to educate the people about socialist politics, MNP staged the play at the Walker Art Centre in 2013, and most recently in Cardiff in 2014. On each occasion, it has produced a site-specific, durational and collectivised practice, aiming to produce real pedagogical and affirmative experiences for its participants. MNP's Brecht is reframed via the Brazilian activist Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed. Developed in the early 1970s, Boal positioned this as a democratic means of empowering people to learn ways to fight back against oppression in their daily lives.

Rejecting the hierarchies between artistic authors and participants and the all-instrumentalising privileging of the finite artistic product demanded by today's art funding systems, MNP's projects have attempted actively to negate: they engage in processes of unlearning, deschooling and the decolonisation of knowledge. The pair interrogate the visual and linguistic conditions enforced by our neoliberal culture to articulate real means of lived resistance. They value the precarious status of a work of art as unproductive labour, involving risk, process, research and the potential for failure. Arguably their approach also tackles head-on one of the greatest challenges faced by Brechtians today: how to figure the proletarian subject after the dismantling of the working classes. In relation to this dilemma, the seasoned Brechtian Kluge and his long-time collaborator the German sociologist Oskar Negt arguably offer one of the most radical means of continuing to deschool and retool Brecht for the present. Best known for their 1970s work on 'the proletarian public sphere', in their 1981 *On History & Obstinacy*. This epic text has only been recently translated and made available to an Anglo-American audience for the first time in a version slightly reframed and updated in light of the recent financial crisis. For them, labour power engenders social relations and develops community. Exigently, they move beyond the essentialist conception of the proletariat as the humanist individual. Instead, they use the word 'proletarian' to embody all those repressed human traits (behavioural, psychic, embodied) that work against the capitalisation and productivity of labour and behaviour: the skills, drives, capacities and acts that stubbornly resist being instrumentalised under capitalism. It is here that the proletarian emerges, and can be located and recuperated in a Brechtian manner, in the precarious but no less revolutionary potential of the social and collective imagination and body. ■

Karen Mirza & Brad Butler are at Whitechapel Gallery, London to 16 April. **Bloomberg & Chanarin** are part of 'Cross Section of a Revolution' at Lisson Gallery, London to 7 March.

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