

## An interview with Dmitri Gutov

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*Dimitrii Gutov is a Russian artist and art theoretician. Born in Moscow, 1960, he is one of the most widely known and charismatic artists of the post-Soviet era. His works are stored and exhibited in leading museums of the world: the Tretyakov Gallery, the Russian Museum, Russian Icon Museum (all in Moscow), the Louvre, the Guggenheim (New York), Kiasma (Helsinki). Gutov participated in the Venetian Biennials of 1995, 2007 and 2011, at Manifesta (1996), Documenta (2007), Volta (New York, 2009), the Biennials in Istanbul (1992), São Paulo (2002) and Shanghai (2012).*

*The theoretical interests of Gutov focus on the philosophy of Marx and the heritage of the Soviet aesthetician Mikhail Lifshits. In 1994 he founded a creative group named “The Lifshits Institute” in Moscow.*

*Despite the fact that Gutov has become famous thanks to his avantgarde paintings and installations, he has always applied himself to exploring the forgotten and “non-modern” phenomena of the art. Hence his interest in the painting of the “Peredvizhniki” group, Rembrandt’s sketches, orthodox icons, and the design of Soviet journals of the “thaw” epoch. Lately he has worked especially with metallic materials and organised expositions on Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, on erotic motifs in antique Greek vases and Picasso’s graphics. One of his first metal works was a 3D manuscript page of Marx’s and Engels’s The German Ideology.*

*AM and VO: Dear Dmitri Gutov, there have not been many translations of Lifshits’s works in other languages, maybe with the exception of some anthologies. Which text of Lifshits would you, above all, recommend for translation?*

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DG: There are some publications of Lifshits in the good old German Democratic republic, but in English there exist practically no translations. Even the anthologies containing texts of Marx and Engels on art have not been published according to his plan, with the exception of the GDR edition of Marx and Engels *Über Kunst und Literatur* (Berlin 1948, with several later printings). In English there exists only the text Lifshits wrote when he was 27 years old, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, published in New York in 1938 (Lifshitz 1938). The translation is not very good and contains many cuts. In addition there exist some articles lost in American journals of the 1930s. At present, the Lifshits Institute is working intensively on translating Lifshits' works into English.

Of the shorter and forceful texts which contain the quintessence of Lifshits' aesthetics, I could mention the letter to Fridlender on Pushkin, written April 8, 1938.<sup>1</sup> To this letter one can apply what Lifshits once said of himself in a note: "There remains the hope that some day a future Cuvier will reconstruct on the basis of one bone fragment from my skeleton the entire antediluvian animal". This letter contains in concentrated form the reflections of a man at the very centre of a universal cataclysm at such a tragic and intense moment of history which humanity has seldom experienced. Compared to those times everything which later generations had to cope with looks like duck soup. It is exactly this fact which hinders us from understanding what was said in the 1930s. Every word in this text requires a comprehensive commentary, which, to boot, cannot be only historical. It is kind of a *Tao-te Ching*. I do not doubt that such commentaries will be written.

*Have you worked in the Lifshits Archive? Have you seen Lifshits' drawings, and if so, what do you think of them?*

Yes, I have been working on the manuscripts of Mikhail Aleksandrovich and have studied for hours both his drawings and the few remaining paintings. They contain a very forceful paradox, a real drama. At the age of 19, Lifshits made a decision to abandon his aspirations to become an artist. Despite this, he was drawn to artistic activities throughout his entire life whole his life, as we learn from his letters. One has to understand what kind of choice this was. It permeates all his writings and in many respects determines their energy and problematics. Not incidentally, Lifshits was so interested in that moment of the life of the young Marx when he abandoned poetry. The theme of the end of art, its death and future resurrection belongs to the core of Lifshits' views. In the above-mentioned letter to Fridland there is the phrase: "Art is dead!—Long live art!". One must know well the first half of this sentence in order to avoid turning the second part into empty babble".<sup>2</sup> The first half of the sentence distinguishes Lifshits from all official Soviet aesthetics (which, according to his definition, was but pure babble), the second half from Western aesthetics. Thanks to this, his position is quite unique in the twentieth century. This sentence contains the essence of Lifshits' ideas and that which determined the movement of his wrist when he painted landscapes and portraits. His drawings are like an electric arc between these "Dead" and "Long live!".

<sup>1</sup> The letter was published in *Pushkinist*, vol. 1, Moskva: Sovremennik 1989, pp. 403–14.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 404.

Furthermore, Lifshits acquired a phenomenal formal education in the VKhUTE-MAS. The covers of self-made binders, in which he preserved his archive of manuscripts, are visible evidence of this.

*In a recent program “Tem vremenem” of the TV channel Kul’tura you mentioned a room dedicated to Lifshits at an art exhibition in Madrid. Could you say more about this project?*

In 2012, I was invited by Boris Groys to participate at the Shanghai Biennale. There I had at my disposal a big hall where I exhibited 28 stands with collected materials on Lifshits: photographs, document copies, manuscripts, marginal notes to books, book covers, and so on. It was a cross-section of what had accumulated during the last 25 years, a kind of a tacit research, a little reminiscent of Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas. Alongside the exhibition there was a 45 min film devoted to Lifshits and the small group of artists interested in him. The film had been produced ten years earlier by appointment of the Zentrum für Kunst und Mediatechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe. During those ten years it was shown in several places throughout the world. The Shanghai exhibition aroused interest among the professionals, and we decided to stage it in some places in Europe, in particular at the Vienna Secession of 2013 and, in Autumn 2014, in the main Spanish museum of modern art, the Reina Sofia in Madrid.

*Which should to your mind be the main direction for future studies of Lifshits’ philosophical heritage?*

The study of Lifshits should go through two phases. The first is, simply, to read and attempt to understand what is said in his texts. This is an elementary level, but even it has not yet been carried out in a satisfactory manner. More serious work on Lifshits begins where one encounters most profound ideas, which the author himself did not strive to make public; or, to state the point in a more complicated manner, one encounters situations in which the ideas were expressed in an inverted manner, *v obratnoj forme* as Lifshits himself said. “A valuable cargo can be exported only under this flag at those times”, he sometimes said.

Here is what he writes about the problem of the rationality of the world in Hegel: “In Hegel’s formula ‘Everything real is rational’ is contained the assertion of the irrationality of reality—in the only form which was possible for him and, generally, for the epoch” (Lifshits 2004). Or about Dostoevsky: “He directs curses to that which is for him the most valuable, the highest good” (Besedy 1988).<sup>3</sup> Or about Diderot: “The anger of Diderot against Boucher: he quarrels with his own bread and butter. This is an element of protest against libertinage and demonic materialism. But the fools think...” (Lifshits)

Every thought can be read literally, but it can be read even in another, deeper manner, which Lifshits called “the inverted gesture” and “the error of great men”.

“The error of great men: they think that they are understood not only by denotation, but even by connotation, to use medieval terminology. However, they are constrained to speak not at all about what they have in mind, but in such and

<sup>3</sup> “Iz avtobiografii idej.

such manner, and the readers and listeners—especially posterity—who are not aware of the intellectual folklore of the epoch nor of the real situation of the times, take their words literally. Such was the fate of Hegel with his Prussian police ideal, such was the fate of Chernyshevsky with his paradoxical simplifications. Such is the fate of all great conservatives of mankind who must necessarily express their curious and progressive thought in a lopsided and even contrary form. But if great men had to commit this mistake, if they are guilty without guilt, so for us, the ordinary men who read their works, there is no need to follow them and repeat their mistakes”.<sup>4</sup>

Lifshits never wearied in repeating the following in several of his texts: “I have to give an account of some details of our intellectual life in the Thirties above all because I myself was aboard, and my works of that epoch, which are now presented to the reader, need specifications, especially in places where they may understand this epoch too literally and externally, and do not understand its ‘inverted gesture’ and the real, valuable content of the epoch”.<sup>5</sup>

*Well, what about Lifshits’ critique of modernism? Should it, too, be understood as an “inverted gesture”? If the answer is positive, then what is the “real, valuable content” of modernism?*

In making an anathema of modernism, Lifshits was merciless to the extreme. In his texts there is not a word about the valuable and real content of modernism. For him, modernism reflected a monstrous historical situation and was in itself a contribution to its consolidation. He never compromised on this view.

Stanley Mitchell, the best connoisseur of Lifshits in the English-speaking world, who valued him unusually highly and wrote a couple of important publications devoted to him, once said to me: “Conceal everything that Lifshits has written about contemporary art and try to make it that no one ever sees it, if you want to make sure that he does not lose his reputation for all time”. Actually, on a literal reading, what Lifshits says is but the usual Soviet rubbish. Dreadfully reactionary, only executed in a considerably more rigorous manner and developed *ad absurdum*. What should one, indeed, think about one of his declarations in the programmatic manifest from 1963, *Why I am not a modernist?*: “Faced with such a program, I opt for the most mediocre, the most epigonic academism, because it is the lesser evil” (Lifshits 1978). The Dadaists in Zürich of 1916 could not have invented a better phrase with which to startle the philistine, who from the end of the 1950s had already begun to worship the newest forms of art.

In his pamphlet *Why I am not a modernist?* Lifshits attempted to express his main ideas in a hyper-concentrated form. Compared with the letter to Fridlender, this text is even more complicated from the point of view of its reception, since it is constructed as an open challenge, as a poetics of shock.

Lifshits views modernism as the new religion of educated philistines of the twentieth (and now the twenty-first) century. Whereas in earlier times, a cathedral stood in a city centre, now there must be a museum of modern art. Essentially,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

Lifshits projects on modernism the analysis of religion conducted by Marx in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. This is an art which assists in reconciliation with the existing order of things. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, this time only in ultra-modern packing. The uncompromising critique of this art is criticism of that vale of tears of which it is the halo. Every compromise with it means for Lifshits a compromise with the world where human relations have been turned upside down.

But the matter has a reverse side, too. Twenty years ago I attacked at a private meeting the book by Professor Viktor Arslanov, *Mif o smerti iskusstva*. The book concentrates on a critique of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt school. I was especially displeased by the title of the book, which indicated that the death of art was but a myth, an invention of intellectuals who had not been consequent enough in their thinking. Attempting to crush me, Arslanov said: "But the book's title was conceived by Lifshits". I began to reflect on this. To me, it seemed that Lifshits' idea of a coefficient of the ability to reflect the world, as well as his thesis that there are situations in which reality cannot be grassed in aesthetic form, both make up a radical and original conception of the death of art. And then one of the listeners of our dispute remarked: the concept of myth has yet another sense, for example, the myth of the dying and resurrected god. If I am right, this second sense was not relevant to the content of Arslanov's book, but it was important as regards Lifshits' ideas. He views modernism like an antique tragedy, where the artist cannot avoid the role prepared for him, the tragic guilt: "This must be, this doleful experience is necessary for art" (Lifshits and Reinhardt 1968).

The concept of a 'doleful experience', *pechal'nyj opyt*, is one of the most important in his system of ideas. It refers to the "doleful experience of the stages of Being through which solar systems, biological species, and civilizations develop". Such are the nuances that distinguish Lifshits' critique of modernity from outwardly kindred phenomena. One must very accurately understand the overtones of meanings which Lifshits does not think need to be amplified. He sees very well the insurmountable obstacles facing artists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Exactly for this reason he writes about their *tragic* guilt; he does not mean 'guilt' in the meaning the criminal law gives to it. There was simply no other way out from the *cul-de-sac* in which the European culture had ended up. But the most important trait that distinguishes Lifshits from his epigones and from the Soviet critique of avantgarde art is the intonation with which he writes about modernism: "It is possible that in this process of decline one can discern the curse of Nemesis, or a protest against the slavish imitation in the art currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; it was a surrogate for real regeneration. I do not know. [...] I remember the superstitious awe with which we looked at Kazimir Malevich's painting *The Black Square*, which was later so praised and included in all encyclopedias of modernism. It seemed as if the author challenged the satiated philistines of the model year 1913: 'This is what I can show as evidence in this case. All that remains is but illusion or lie'" (Lifshits 1979).

Commenting the words of an artist who declared the Earth to be the biggest work of pop-art, Lifshits wrote: "Nastily said" (Lifshits and Reinhardt). This expression, "nastily said", contains the core of his attitude to the matter in question. Lifshits

entered the VKhUTEMAS at a moment in the 1920s when modernism was at an impasse, as it had already some years earlier reached the limits of its possibilities. It reached its conscious creative maturity at the moment, when all was, basically, already done. There remained only the possibility of varying the theme. Hegel, when he spoke about the death of the art, stated: We will never again kneel before it. Lifshits in 1923 might have similarly said: We are never again going to be startled by the new anti-art. One must distinguish Lifshits' position from those who not only never rose above modernism, but did not even reach it.

*Lifshits characterised himself on several occasions as « the man of the 30s » . In the article you published in the book edited by Boris Groys et al, Zurück aus der Zukunft, you write that « the Soviet Thirties are one of the darkest and opaque in history. The key to them is so far lacking » . Do you think that studying Lifshits' thoughts and writings we are able to decipher this enigmatic and terrible period of history, or at least find some hints as to how to proceed in deciphering it?*

Not only do I think so, I would add that Lifshits' texts have a key significance for understanding the drama which began to evolve in the 1930s. Of course, we have many reliable sources that recount the inner life of those years of music, prose, poetry, and the art of painting. But they all are in need of translation into the language of thought. Lifshits offers us a unique possibility to get in touch with the self-consciousness of the times, not in its figurative, but its literal form. All of his writings, whatever they may have been about, are dedicated to the theme of the tragedy of the revolution. All his subsequent intellectual activity consists of reflections on this theme. The fact that in 1937 and 1938 he published in his anthology, *Marks i Engel's ob iskusstve*, which was intended for a broad public, fragments on crude and levelling communism from Marx's 1844 manuscripts, is very telling for those who can understand. By the way, I do not know anyone who would have taken any notice of this nuance. The experts on the history of Marxism have to this day believed that these texts of Marx became accessible to the Soviet reader only in the period of Khrushchev's 'thaw'. A significant crop of lectures, which Lifshits read in the IFLI<sup>6</sup> in the years of the Great Terror and in the first years of the 1940's, is awaiting publication. They are preserved only in the form of incomplete stenographic notes which the author himself had not edited, but they reveal that "grief of inner rupture" which characterized the epoch. For me, it is simply incomprehensible, how one could talk about the pre-war decade without referring to such a programmatic concept as "man of the 30s". And, of course, this all surpasses the boundaries set by simple historical interest. It is the quintessence of the already mentioned "doleful experience".

*Hegel says in the Foreword to his Philosophy of Right, that it would be as silly to believe that a philosophy could surpass its present world as to believe that an individual could go beyond his time. Hegel's device is, on the contrary: hic Rhodus, hic salta! which means that every thinker must reckon with his circumstances and*

<sup>6</sup> That is, the Moscow-based Institut filosofii, literatury i istorii imeni N.G. Chernyshevskogo (MIFLI, often abbreviated as IFLI), which existed from 1931 to 1941; later incorporated into the Moscow State University.

*with how others might receive his message. In this light, Lifshits's stubborn non-conformism seems very un-Hegelian. He does not follow the current of his time nor mind what others think of him...*

It seems to me that Lifshits is simply literally following the ideas which are put forth in this famous Foreword. He does not grow weary in repeating that he himself is the voice of a definite historical situation, literally a function of the 'circumstances' that had emerged at the time. On this he builds his entire theory of reflection. There cannot be, in the head of a man, anything which does not exist in reality itself. "What was is Reason", wrote Hegel in the Foreword. But he does not say here or anywhere else that "every thinker must reckon with his circumstances and with how others might receive his message". Why should one reckon with this? Everybody is, anyway, the child of his age. The already cited most important thesis of Lifshits is that everything can be read in two principally different ways. You have to seek the contraries—that is how you might formulate the essence of his approach. If Lifshits moved against the current of his time, that means that there was another current, deeper and more powerful, and not superficial. That is why in the thirties Lifshits' popularity was actually off-scale.

*Lifshits edited in the 1930's works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and wrote an extensive introduction to them. Do you see any affinities between the aesthetic programs of Lifshits and Winckelmann? As is well known, Winckelmann insisted that imitation of the Ancients is the best way to greatness and to the flourishing of culture. Of course, he meant by « imitation » (Nachahmung) something other than mere copying. Lifshits, for his part, dreamed of a resurrection of the art of classical antiquity.*

Winckelmann built up his aesthetics in a very peculiar manner: if you want to be modern, so follow the Ancients; if you want to be inimitable, then imitate antiquity. But what does this mean? You have to imitate the Ancients in the first instance because they themselves imitated no one. Open your eyes in order to investigate Nature in its immediacy. All this has nothing to do with attempts to force-feed people with classicistic academic schemes (although such a meaning may of course be deduced from the idea of imitation). We can once more remind ourselves of the Foreword to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Philosophy does not tell the world *what it should be like*—and it would as senseless to tell this to art. Behind the achievements of antique sculpture there was a phenomenal level of personal freedom. In the present conditions of wage labour it is impossible even to dream of it. Talk about the resurrection of ancient art boils down to the idea that, in more benevolent circumstances, Man can move the weight of the body on one foot as freely as Polykleitos's Doryphoros did. And the artist gets visual material to create a classical figure. When Lifshits speaks of Russian icon painting of the fifteenth century and connects its achievements with the epoch when the peasants had not yet become serfs, he, too, is relating to Winckelmann. A harmony which is achieved by abandoning all that is organic or plastically natural constitutes the other focus, the focus of our days. The Mondrian Grids. Lifshits calls this the "crazy tyrannical utopia of straight lines".

Thus, the Greek ideal of Winckelmann, Hegel, Marx, and Lifshits—which of course must not be understood as an abstract idealisation, but as a doctrine of political freedom, which endows art with excellence, too—maintains its energy. As we know from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* of Marx, only those should deck out in antique togas who want to conceal from themselves the real sense of their restricted agency.

*Could you, please, say something about the Lifshits Institute. What are you preparing at the moment?*

To understand the intent of the Lifshits Institute, it is important to be aware of the conditions under which it emerged. The idea of the institute was conceived at the end of the 1980s, in the hectic days of the Perestroika, when Marxism and everything connected with it was condemned by just about everyone. It was a radical protest against what happened then, but of course it did not aim to defend that which in the USSR was known as “Soviet power”. Finally, in 1993, in conditions which now were not at all favourable, my friends and I decided to create the Institute. We began to have more or less regular meetings, to read and discuss texts, to organise exhibitions now and then and sometimes even to publish. Well, those times when almost everyone put his forefinger to his temple and twisted it, when hearing that someone was interested in such matters, are now gone.

Today our activity has a more profound character. Thus, recently the publishing house *Grundrisse* published five of Lifshits’ books, in association with the Institute. A significant part of these consists of archive materials which are published for the first time. Another part is composed of republished articles from old and forgotten journals. There is a kind of paradox with these publications: they are all financed by the sale of just those works of modern art against which Lifshits fought. But this is in line with the character of his unusual life. In like manner I and my friend David Reef have succeeded in delivering lectures on this theme in the academies of different countries.

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