

Dmitry Gutov, *Consciousness*, 2007 oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

SYMPOSIUM

# Russian Aesthetics under Capitalism

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Dmitry Gutov, *I look on the bourgeoisie through the eyes of Lenin*, 2007 photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

# Russian Aesthetics under Capitalism: An Introduction

*Yulia Tikhonova*

*This essay on movements in Russian art and aesthetics introduces a collection of essays, interviews, art, and other contributions by Russian scholars and artists and by international scholars. It situates a number of contemporary questions on art, aesthetics, culture, and politics in relation to the realities of post-Soviet Russia, emerging capitalism, and international Marxist currents. The essay briefly surveys the rise of Left practices and cultural movements from 2000 up to the present, and considers the implications of Marxist thought for contemporary art and politics.*

**Key Words:** Russian Neo-Marxism, Marxist Aesthetics, The Left, Contemporary Art, Russia

This collection of essays by Russian scholars and artists addresses the place of Marxist aesthetics in the context of today's post-Soviet reality. Western readers might be surprised that Marx's doctrines continue to hold appeal some eighteen years after the fall of the USSR. It turns out that a Left position is still imperative, whether for an older generation of conceptual artists or for scholars concerned with the rapidly growing consumerism that has overwhelmed Russian civil society. The conditions of capitalism, "which reduces everything to the shadowy abstraction known as money" (Flatley 2002, 14), present contemporary art with important challenges. Art no longer performs its essential function, which is, according to Marx, to represent reality and improve the lives of people. Now, artistic culture is in danger of being swallowed by popular, consumerist culture. But Russian Marxist intellectuals are not passive. They are turning in droves to that heavily bearded, nineteenth-century theoretician as well as to other relevant critics. As the leading theoretician and political activist Vladislav Sofronov (2008) says, "We are now in the wake of a Marxist renaissance."

The following essays contextualize the nascent movement of leftist artists searching for points of historical reference and expressive language within the post-Soviet context. The artists, according to Dmitry Vilensky, are concerned "with developing a common terminology based on the political understanding of aesthetics" (Vilensky and Begg 2007). The project of redefining political art became urgent in the face of the neoliberalism that burgeoned in Russia, fueled in part by oil wealth as it pumped up cravings for Western-style consumption.

Political art in Russia, as it exists today, has been shaped by the democratic hopes and energy that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. At that time, artists left the clandestine studios for performances in public spaces: “they ran through the streets of Moscow naked like wild dogs let off the chain,” they “desecrated” Red Square as they spewed out cusswords and challenged the Russian president to a boxing match. Was it “politics, art, or a brawl of some reckless crowd?” wonders the art critic Herwig Höller (n.d.). Such interactive and socially oriented artistic gestures, it turns out, represented only one way to express the dynamics of history as the country traveled the slippery road toward a post-Communist future.

In this period, the connection between the excitement unleashed by *perestroika* and the high energy of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s seemed a logical segue, one that was enthusiastically encouraged by intellectuals and visualized by artists. Both periods of intensified political struggle had given birth to radical artistic forms. Equally, Moscow’s Actionism of the 1990s, like the earlier Russian avant-garde, sought to perpetuate the revolution in which it had originated. Artists were leaders in this chaotic period as they attempted to create a permanent revolution as carnival. These initial post-Soviet artists hoped to create a cultural sphere that was more guerrilla theater, one played out by marginal subjects endlessly undermining any nascent power center.



Susan Jahoda, *Cinema*, Krasnoyarsk, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

*Perestroika* itself had presented artists with an enormous degree of freedom. They finally could critique and negate long, moribund Soviet ideological codes while expressing their distaste for the last vestiges of socialist realism. The Blue Noses collective, for example, simultaneously uses and subverts the language of officialdom and mass culture in their photographic collages of faces of Vladimir Putin, Boris Yeltsin, George W. Bush, and other top politicians.

This battleground gave birth to a new leftist dialogue, which continued through the disillusionment and political fatigue of the turn of the millennium. One can almost feel the self-confidence and fierce belief in a future for a vibrant political art that comes through the texts from that period presented here.

This youthful energy fascinated me during our long meetings, usually held in rooms full of coffee cups and cigarette smoke. The heated discussions that unfolded around the positions of Left intellectuals facing the already inflamed reality of Moscow were invigorating and even worth the risks of passive smoking. The goal of our visit to Moscow was to discover whether a rethinking of Marxism had germinated among the local artists and intelligentsia as the country lurched toward cowboy capitalism. This New Left, it seemed, was moving from a near curse word into a hip position from which to critique a new post-Soviet society.

The contemporary leftist movement expanded the legacy of previous philosophical traditions developed by Vladimir Podoroga, Mikhail Ryklin, and other scholars. Although restricted and isolated behind an "Iron Curtain," these scholars were able to stay current with major European philosophical movements, including poststructuralism, neo-Freudianism, and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. They also produced Russian translations of major texts by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Theodor Adorno.

Meanwhile, Podoroga, Ryklin, and other nonconformist Marxists elaborated on the teachings of an earlier generation of theorists, including Victor Shklovsky (1893–1984), Mikhail Lifshitz (1905–66), and Evald Ilyenkov (1924–79), who had developed concepts of formal structure, expressive form, conservative aesthetics, and the relationship between art and society. Although Marxists of the Soviet era contributed greatly to the development of contemporary aesthetics, they nonetheless were overlooked and overshadowed by the acclaim given Continental theorists like Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, and Bertolt Brecht. A younger generation announced itself by processing the theoretical legacy of previous scholars through the adrenalin released by *perestroika*. Both scholars and artists, they often hold several degrees and enter international dialogue on the issues of Marxist politics with confidence.

One of the most active groups concerned with Marxist analysis is in the Institute of Philosophy (RAN), led by the academics Podoroga, Ryklin, H. Petrovska, and A. Penzin. In addition, a New Left movement draws energy from Boris Kagarlitsky, an intellectual who organizes political marches and work in unions. As one journalist noted, "Here words like 'strike,' 'action,' 'trade union picket,' and 'rally' have been brought back into the vocabulary of the working class" (see Kagarlitsky 1988, 47). In conversation Kagarlitsky said, however, that the Left movement needs more people and, in particular, strong leaders. It is largely young people who join the movement and, by the time they have reached forty, they tend to leave activism for the

comfortable life style of a middle-class professional. Kargalitsky holds out hope for intellectuals who, like the writers included in this section, maintain connections with the working classes.

With little fresh input, the leftist communities that we encountered are struggling to develop opposition to an increasingly blatant consumer society. In the arts, brand recognition is growing as names like Andy Warhol and Damien Hurst are supplied by the Gagosian Gallery, the powerhouse American marketer that recently opened a gallery in a *nouveau riche* suburb of Moscow. A powerful player on the international modern art scene, Gagosian is moving quickly to control the development of a wealthy art market in Russia—one that has no place for political art.

Nonetheless, political activists in major Russian cities and universities are rethinking the visual language of art to contest an increasingly superficial reality. In the early 1990s, a group of Marxists led by the artist Dmitry Gutov founded the Mikhail Lifshitz Institute. The institute aims to reinvigorate the ideological heritage of the once controversial philosopher, who stood out with his “unorthodox” rereading of Marx’s aesthetics (Mitchell 1997). Lifshitz borrowed his concepts from Lenin’s interpretation of aesthetics, forged to serve the working class’s dictatorship.



Susan Jahoda, *Tapestry, Brezhnev*, Krasnoyarsk Museum Center, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

In 1923, Aleksandr Bogdanov developed the slogan “proletarian culture,” which became the “true” interpretation of Marxist aesthetics. From the mid-1920s onward, a tightening Soviet cultural directive resulted in one of the notable cultural genocides

of the twentieth century, in which hundreds of Russia's best and brightest artists and intellectuals were either executed or expelled. The state, under an increasingly powerful Stalin, murdered, corrupted, or demoralized generations of artists in the USSR and abroad, inventing theories as needed to justify ideological tyranny over art. Slogans such as "proletarian culture" and "socialist realism" were used as covers to suppress individual and creative thinking until the regime's eventual collapse. Lifshitz himself avoided prosecution because of his severe criticism of modern art in his book *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop Art* (1968).

However, in the 1990s, Lifshitz was resurrected as a defender of classical norms, his theoretical work adopted to challenge a vulgar mass culture and entertainment. In a text devoted to Lifshitz's heritage, Vladislav Sofronov (2003) stated that the significance of the philosopher now rests in his resistance to the culture of the petite bourgeoisie. Offering theoretical discussions, presentations of Marxist literature, and new editions of his works, the Institute has raised Lifshitz from the oblivion of a regime's apologist to a prophet raging against consumer-culture artworks. The Institute also created one of the first blogs in Russia, called "Grundrisse" (in honor of Marx's seminal work), as a platform for the exchange of ideas between Russian and foreign Marxists on a range of topics from theory to policy. The group's reach has become international; in 2006, political philosopher Fredric Jameson invited several of its members to Duke University to initiate debates on the state and prospects for Marxism in both Russia and the United States.

Recently, a circle of people within the Lifshitz Institute has reconstituted itself in different form under the name of the Karl Marx School of the English Language (KMSEL). As part of their practice, KMSEL students discuss Marx's key texts, word by word, comparing English, Russian, and German translations of works including the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and the "Theses on Feuerbach." One of the school's prime members, David Riff (2008), has written on the transformative praxis that renders itself through the clarification of meaning of Marx's texts, which have been corrupted through many translations and misreadings.

Artist David Gutov, another founding member of KMSEL, appropriates Marx's gestural handwriting, both literally and metaphorically, following the lines of the scripts to externalize errors and oversights that the philosopher allowed. With portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Lifshitz rendered in a realist manner, Gutov confirms his approach as a modernist but also his understanding of art as a reflexive medium of social consciousness. He takes as his working motto Lifshitz's words: "Art is the strongest critical weapon because it criticizes the wrong relationship of consciousness to the world."

These words could also be applied to the artistic practice of the Soviet émigré artist Yevgeniy Fiks, now based in New York. Guided by an active conscience, Fiks accepts the responsibilities that, according to Jacques Rancière, inhere in one's individual position. He states that he accepts personal responsibility—as a member of the larger intellectual, Left, and artistic sectors of society—for the leftist movements that declined along with the crash of the socialist system. As a matter of ongoing investigation, he has addressed the theme of American communism through a variety



of projects ranging from portraits of members of the CPUSA (Communist Party USA) to a map of New York that pinpoints the locations of their meetings. Fiks is committed to painting and, as a post-Soviet subject, he is also dedicated to sharing his history. The artist says, "What is going on in the post-Soviet space now is a total denial and repression of Soviet history. People live as if the Soviet Union had never existed" (Fiks and Kopenkina 2008). He faces history and makes it visible through the portraits of American communists. It's the Soviet past that haunts him.

Several of the intellectuals and artists from KMSEL also belong to the group Chto Delat (What is to be done? borrowed from one of Lenin's famous rhetorical phrases). Founded in 2003, the group brings together theory, art, and activism with the goal of politicizing all three. In contrast with the tactics of "old" Marxists who delved into theory, this generation of "mlado-Marxists" (young Marxists) engages in a higher degree of action. They publish and distribute a free bilingual newspaper under the same title, initiate public actions, and hold site-specific performances. They contend that art is a vehicle of political activism, having three facets—conceptual engagement, collective creativity, and social intervention—effective for transmitting political ideas.

One of the group's leaders, Dmitry Vilensky, in "The Story of *Angry Sandwich People, or, In Praise of Dialectics*" (2006), challenges the unwillingness of people to change their circumstances, decrying the passivity of low-waged workers, the so-called "sandwich" people (recruits who walk around wearing advertising boards, much like the United States in the 1930s). To set up a precedent of actions and help the workers create change, Vilensky began orchestrating counterdemonstrations. By such conceptual works, including *Negation of Negation* (2004), Vilensky aligns his practice with the traditions of the Russian avant-garde. Appropriating public space, establishing alternative cultural experiences, and aestheticizing the popular have been mentioned by Vilensky and other artists as points of correspondence between both movements.

The artist further proposes to call today's political art "avant-garde" by virtue of its ability to question and destabilize the very notion of the political, social, and cultural apparatus. By borrowing the lexicon of the historical avant-garde (militant research, montage, and realism), Vilensky reinforces the still-budding political art of today (Vilensky and Begg 2007). The discussion of political art as a form of the contemporary avant-garde was expanded in Documenta 2007, where the group was invited to participate in its magazine section.

Possible correspondence between the two artistic periods was explored in the dialogue "You Can't Anticipate Explosions," held between members of Chto Delat and Jacques Rancière (Rancière et al. 2008). The discussants queried the philosopher as to whether political art could be described as avant-garde. However, he considers the avant-garde a historical practice and, instead, states that artistic practices are always already political: that is, "aesthetics is at the core of politics" (Rancière 2006).



Susan Jahoda, *Installation, Krasnoyarsk Museum Center, 2007*. Courtesy of the artist.

This conversation pertains to the larger questions he raises about the depoliticization of art and its turning point to a prereflective, preideological, and affective power. According to Vilensky and Begg (2007), these polemics situate the political potential of art within the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and also within the political context that generates this art. However, Chto Delat's affection for historical references opens up a plausible critique. Could it be that the artists have fallen into the trendy mode of revisionism that infects Russia now? (The rereadings of history with renewed admiration for the Silver Age, rise of imperial sympathies, and

resurrection of interest in the last czarist family, extending recently to canonization, are illustrative of the country's recent slide to the right.) Alternatively, art historian Boris Groys (1993) claims that the Russian avant-garde endorsed the crimes of the Bolshevik state: "The failure of the avant-garde to protest the physical destruction of this cultural layer—indeed, its active propaganda in support of the repressive apparatus—raises serious ethical issues for contemporary Russian historians of the period." Obviously, Vilensky is aware of these polemics when he builds up the links with the avant-garde.

Another group, Vpered (Forward), dates from 2002. The group holds "interactions" with workers and unions, helping them to organize strikes. They have been particularly successful among the outlets of Western companies, including Ford, McDonald's, and Heineken. Vpered works closely with the group New Left, and we hope to see more about their platforms and actions in future issues of *Rethinking Marxism*.

Meanwhile, a member of Vpered, Vladislav Sofronov, predicts that Russian capitalism will grow stronger as "we find ourselves living better lives ... *But this improvement can be achieved only through struggle for one's rights*" (2008). Sofronov outlines his journey to a New Left praxis through a reading of the complexity of recent political events in his article "Why I Am a Marxist." In posing this question he follows the route suggested by Lukács's autobiographical note, "My Way to Marx" (1933), and Lifshitz's pamphlet *Why I Am Not a Modernist* (1966). The similarity of these titles suggests that the urgency to assert one's personal position stands as an essential task for an intellectual, whether then or now.

Sofronov's proposition is that his return to Marxism correlates perfectly with the emergence of capitalism across Russia as well as the thought that truth for Marxism is never a dogma, but a "process aimed at global transformation." He has also developed a series of general questions to evaluate the theoretical legacy of Marxism when reflected through the transformation of a postsocialist world and, in general, to address the conundrums of contemporary Marxism. These questions were responded to, among others, by Fredric Jameson and by Jack Amariglio and Yahya Madra (Sofronov, Jameson, Amariglio, and Madra 2008). Their account of key changes covers a wide range of issues, from historical interpretation to a methodology of teaching Marxism in American universities.

In this short overview I have attempted to sketch a world where politically engaged artists define their historical and formal points of reference. The gradual progression from radical public actions of the 1990s to intellectual, discussion-based art followed changes in the political landscape. These artists' work attempts to resist neoliberal capitalism through an active, Marxist-inspired intellectual practice. A rich treasure of historical and theoretical works guides these artists and intellectuals through the particularity of late capitalism in Russia. The texts that follow touch the pulse of this creative search for new interpretations of Marxism, a study and a practice that continue to evolve.

During my recent trip to Russia, I had a chance to meet many in the Russian New Left community, and to remind myself of the beginning of post-Soviet analysis. At

Moscow's Institute of Philosophy, I noted that Susan Buck-Morss had joined the Institute in 1987; that initiated many years of collaboration and intellectual exchange. Her discussions with above-mentioned scholars—Podoroga, Ryklin, and Petrovska—helped her devise the arguments in her key work *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000). This present collection of essays yields fine examples of the sorts of palpable anguish she expresses on the demise of collective, Utopian dreams in favor of mass consumerism and political cynicism.

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Susan Jahoda, *Yevgeni Fiks, Installation*, Krasnoyarsk Museum Center, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## Why I Am a Marxist

**Vladislav Sofronov**

Translated by Sergey Levchin

*Reflecting on my own Soviet education and past, I argue that Marxism stagnated in the USSR, but has growing relevance to the emerging capitalism of post-Soviet Russia. Thanks to the achievements of the socialist regime, the concepts of classical Marxist theory became abstract and speculative to Soviet citizens. At the same time, Soviet Marxism lost its essential link to democratic debate and independent political action, both necessary to its development and vibrancy. By contrast, post-Soviet capitalism has the potential to invest Marxist thought with newly practical meaning and*

*heuristic value for Russians. Indeed, for post-Soviet thought and change, Marxism, with its search for truth and its transformative capacity, has unique standing in Western philosophy.*

**Key Words:** Marxist Philosophy, Soviet Marxism, Socialism, Russia

In this essay I will try to demonstrate that, first, Marxism is the only remaining tradition of Continental philosophy in today's Russia.<sup>1</sup> Second, of all the theories proffered on the "intellectual market," it possesses the greatest heuristic power to describe today's social and cultural processes. The causes of its current disfavor may be attributed to the unique social processes and "constellations" found initially in the history of the Soviet Union and in the specific nature of the present historical moment: the restoration of capitalism throughout the realm of the former USSR.

But before I can proceed with an objective analysis I must briefly digress for a small biographical note.

In 1985, I enrolled in the philosophy department at the Lenin State University (Minsk, Belarus). At that time, Soviet Marxism was rapidly approaching the lowest point of its decline. Although for the first two years we were actively instructed in the theory and history of Marxism and composed many abstracts of classic texts, that was no more than a swan song.

Marxism remained an authority for the first- or second-year student only up to a certain point. Essentially, the intellectual maturity of a student was indirectly determined by how quickly he was able to move on to contemporary Western philosophy (or Western philosophy in general) or to the history of philosophy. A paper written in either discipline would devote a few opening pages to the "Marxist approach" and then continue with an "objective analysis." Legends circulated among students of heroes who dared to write on forbidden philosophers, like Martin Heidegger, and the difficulties they encountered (including expulsion). I am speaking of the "enlightened" students, naturally, since most of us were merely there "doing time." This majority was largely "studying" Marxism since it was easy and free from conflict.

At the same time, the majority of instructors teaching Marxism were perfectly sincere; they too, however, were merely clocking in their time, and were certainly not burdened by any sort of creative obligations in their field. The age-old Soviet histmat/diamat curriculum (historical materialism/dialectical materialism) was king, and the instructors fell into one of two camps: those who tried to browbeat us in the doctrine, and those who patiently tried to inculcate us with it. I don't remember any of them having anything of note to say about the "other Marxism" (either native—Ilienkov, Lifshits—or Western). In fact, it was perfectly evident that contemporary Western Marxism was even more of a blank with our instructors than Western non-Marxist philosophy.

1. And not only in Russia. However, in the present article I focus primarily on the post-Soviet region comprising Russia and the newly independent states that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Such was the background of my initial encounters with Marxism. I will now try to give a brief list of objective and subjective reasons why, after these initial encounters, I had no interest in Marxism for a fairly long period of time. I believe that only a comprehensive grasp of such reasons could give a more or less full picture; I will begin, nonetheless, with the subjective factor (considering myself a typical representative of my generation in typical conditions).

My “initiation” and insight into what truly constitutes the thrilling adventure and undertaking of human thought that is philosophy came fairly late, with the study of Kant and Heidegger. These strictly personal recollections are only interesting for the peculiar detail that these two philosophers are as far removed from Marxism as possible. The next stage of my philosophical development was perfectly typical for members of my generation: structuralism (primarily the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school) and poststructuralism (of the French variety).

It is hard to deny the tremendous attraction of poststructuralism. The great intellectual gifts of the thinkers associated with this movement, their astonishing ability to discover unexpected and captivating paths of inquiry in the entirely mundane—this, and a host of other objective factors, addressed further on—could not help but draw the interest of a young man interested in philosophy.

And yet . . . there is an astonishing break at the very center of this philosophy, this entire world-view. On the one hand, poststructuralism can reveal a host of profound and widely ranging premises, consequences, signs, and processes behind a single expression or, say, a signature at the bottom of a document. On the other hand, its fundamental principle is that our thought has access to language only, and therefore language is the one and only possible object of its inquiry; Foucault repeatedly emphasized that thought cannot exist outside language. We can never escape the boundaries of language, never reach a reality outside language. In a sense, the concerted inquiry into the limitless wealth of language, however bountiful, is conditioned by the fact that *we simply have nothing else to go on*.

I had recognized this gap fairly quickly and even formulated it for myself as a problem; however, for a long time I simply accepted it as unconditionally given. And yet: there is a most profound break here, not only in terms of world-view, but a break with the entire philosophical tradition (as it had developed before the “linguistic turn” of the twentieth century). Philosophy has always had a claim to the pursuit of truth, even of Truth. It cannot abandon this claim if it is to remain what it has always been (see Korsch 1924). No matter how much I read about the “death of philosophy” or the “end of grand narratives,” the problem of stepping outside the boundaries of language continued to “trouble” me, in the intellectual sense.

The next discernible phase in the philosophical development of a typical representative of my generation was the “philosophy of body.” In the Russian tradition this movement is associated primarily with the works of Valerii A. Podoroga. The tremendous influence of his books on the young people of the late 1980s and early 1990s cannot be denied. Nevertheless, I see now that he inspired us much more with a peculiar manner of *writing*—that is, with his style rather than his conceptual framework. (This is by no means a reproach; it is, at most, a reproach to oneself.)

A more important encounter en route to a solution of the “break” problem (and it is a problem that touches on the very essence of the relation between philosophy and



the world: that is, its most important conceptual foundations and principles of approaching the world) was the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Here is how he “bridges the gap.” Yes, there is a mind/body problem—the problem of the difference of being between the mental and the physical; this problem is fundamental. But there is a privileged, unique place in the universe: the body. On the one hand, as a physical object among a set of other physical objects, the body is as foreign to the mind as some far-off star. On the other hand, there is absolutely no gap between my mind and my body. There is no break between my thought “I am raising my arm,” and my raised arm. I am fully in control of my body; it is a place where the fundamental break “does not exist.” This move, however, fails to solve the problem: it leads us to the understanding that we may escape beyond the boundaries of language yet it imprisons us inside the physical, nonlinguistic object—the body. As it is, the “body” is not a solution to the problem but a formulation of it, another proof that the problem exists.

Consequently, in my attempts to discover a solution to the problem of the “break,” I turned to the writings of Edmund Husserl. Going beyond the boundaries of language, overcoming the break, a conceptual outlook of tremendous breadth (far broader than the “body”)—these horizons of Husserl’s phenomenology may be summarized here with a few attractive features of his philosophy: fundamental aspirations of phenomenology to the status of a comprehensive science; the quest to understand and describe the “lifeworld.” The various components of this conception are held together by the notion of “intentionality,” perhaps the most significant contribution to the study of the object/subject dichotomy (which subsumes the aforementioned break between language and extralinguistic reality) in modern bourgeois philosophy since Kant.

If we intend to understand why phenomenology nevertheless fails to satisfy contemporary intellectual inquiry, we must first examine the causes of the decline of interest in Marxism and of its reemergence.



Susan Jahoda, *Lenin's Monument*, Novosibirsk, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## The Triumph and the Demise of Marxism in the USSR

Up through the second half of the 1990s, such crucial categories of classical Marxist theory as commodity fetishism, exploitation, wage labor, alienation, class struggle, and many others were not given to us in experience but remained strictly in the abstract, speculative realm. This is a dialectical paradox: the USSR had forged a society organized according to principles that were radically different from those of a bourgeois society. In this new society, classical Marxist theory had at once proven its creative social potential and lost its descriptive, heuristic power. (That only to a certain extent! The Marxist method is perfectly applicable to late Brezhnev-era socialism, but it had to be applied under *new* circumstances. For this we lacked the thinkers engaged with living Marxism—why? See below.)

The genesis and dynamic of capital, the struggle for fewer working hours, exchange and consumption value—these notions, formulated in *Capital*, meant nothing to my generation in the 1980s. They had nothing to do with us—and we can thank the USSR for that. Naturally, classical Marxist texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had little relevance for those whose jobs (theoretically) it was to apply what they read in books to concrete phenomena and, conversely, to analyze concrete phenomena with the aid of what they read in books.

The momentum of this “irrelevance” lasted a very long time, even as the “relevance” was beginning to stare us in the face. By way of example: in the very late 1990s, I suggested that the editor of the Moscow philosophical journal *Logos* devote an entire issue to consumerism; I then spoke with my colleagues about contributing to the publication. I distinctly remember their bewildered looks (this in 1999!): What “critique of consumer society”? Enough of these passé, Soviet-era preoccupations.<sup>2</sup> (The meager success of that issue proves the same point: even at the end of the 1990s, the intellectuals were still wearing “Derrida blinders” and living an ideological delusion. This also says something about the lag between social consciousness and social being.)

The notion that “Marxism doesn’t work as a heuristic theory” is to be found strictly among the “always passé Soviet-style.” This is another paradox: those who do not see the relevance of Marxism, claiming that it is out of touch, are in fact the ones stuck in the distant past. Only now, as the Soviet Union rapidly recedes into the past, do we understand how different that society was in comparison with the “normal capitalism” currently digesting Russia. The very difficulty of dismantling the USSR as a distinct world proves my point. It is symbolic that the builders tearing down the

2. A note to the Western reader: critique of consumer society was one of the most cherished topics of Soviet propaganda. Since nobody had believed the propaganda for ages, the instances of truth it contained were likewise rejected. The paradox lies in the fact that by the end of the 1990s, a consumer society was fully under way in Moscow and other major cities, but the intellectuals still failed to see it as a problem.

Moscow Hotel could not meet the timeline; the building's walls proved far sturdier than expected and the work moved much more slowly than planned.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the "irrelevance" (in the sense of our ignorance of the realities of a capitalist society) of classical Marxism for a Soviet citizen, there was another key factor associated with the decline of interest in this doctrine. Once more the intellectual decline here is directly and dialectically linked to social processes.

The USSR, despite all its virtues, possessed a number of major flaws. The nature of the Soviet Union and the balance of its positive and negative characteristics have been fertile subjects for discourses and heated debates for nearly a hundred years. In this article I shall limit myself to what is important for the present, more or less specific context.

From the point of view relevant to this article, we could make the following statement about the state of the Soviet Union: alongside the social transformation grounded in a new economic order (public ownership of the means of production, planned economy, monopoly on foreign trade, and much more), Soviet society suppressed the democratic component which, according to Marx and Lenin, must necessarily complement a socialized and planned economy. Power and control, which should have been "diffused" at the ground level, were usurped by the new bureaucracy. (Why this came about is a subject for more than one heated and lengthy debate. I will only say that no one has examined the failures of the revolution, and their own, more honestly and critically than the Left Opposition within the Bolshevik party and their successors on the international scale.)

Broad democratic discussion and independent public action were an impossibility in the USSR. Meanwhile Marxist theory, by definition, is in its very essence linked to social practice! Consequently, no meaningful Marxist theory could evolve in the transformed Soviet Union where independent action, whether individual or group, was drastically limited. This goes to explain why the last splash of vibrant, interesting Marxist thought occurred in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Subsequently everything sinks into the abyss of bare, abstract models, which essentially make up all of Marxist literature coming out of the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> I doubt that we could find any more than a few grains of living, relevant knowledge in that heap of refuse, though I would love to be proved wrong.

Meanwhile, bare abstraction is to be found among the best exponents of Soviet Marxism (and even among their present-day successors). As usual, wherever the inability to think and act freely fails to annihilate intellectual activity entirely, it displaces philosophical inquiry into the realm of the philosophy of art (the way of Lifshitz) or into historico-philosophical reconstructions (the way of Ilienkov).<sup>5</sup> These thinkers become mere *caretakers* rather than true executors and "actants" of living Marxism.

3. The renowned monument of Soviet architecture (A. V. Shchusev, architect) was dismantled to its foundation and a new, similarly designed building erected in its place—a poor copy of the original.

4. And that is what we "studied" at the university: yet another reason it was so difficult (though not impossible!) to be a Marxist in the Soviet 1980s.

5. Mikhail Lifshitz and Evald Ilienkov were two outstanding exponents of Soviet Marxism.

Reduced to bare models, transformed into dogma, Marxism gained absolutely nothing; its development in the Soviet Union had practically come to a stop. That is why postmodernism sounded so revolutionary in the 1980s. That is why broad democratic discussion, so desperately lacking in Soviet Marxism, had to be absorbed “individually” as we “lived through” the restoration of capitalism and read about it in books. That is why it is taking us so long to rediscover the relevance and the heuristic capacity of Marxism today.

The reality that had formed the basis of classical Marxism (exploitation, commodity fetishism, the market, etc.) was no longer part of the Soviet citizen’s experience, on the one hand.<sup>6</sup> On the other, he was faced with a nonfunctional Soviet democracy. This is no Scylla and Charybdis: it is a hammer and anvil that crushed what was once a living and fruitful union of theory and practice—Marxism—into the platitudes of survey courses.

### The Situation Today

Historical progress guarantees nothing; it merely creates opportunity. The demise of the USSR, the restoration of capitalism: these tectonic breaks could become material for a comprehensive theory (such as Marxism) or blind us with isolated phenomena. When isolated phenomena are seized upon and hypostasized they give rise to ideological illusions, which form the basis of flashy, one-sided theories (e.g., theories of a postindustrial society, a “new class,” etc.). Narrow perception and limited experience are likewise responsible for the slow coming of a Marxist renaissance.

Philosophy was not taught widely in Soviet universities; in consequence, ours was a fairly international department. Today I am still in touch with many of my classmates living in the newly independent states. My impression is that Marxism is even less advanced there than it is in Russia. The reason, I believe, is as follows.

The changeover from Soviet socialism to post-Soviet capitalism is not an instantaneous process. As we can see today, it takes years, even decades. Gradually the market, as a basis of social interaction, displaces the former social structure. In the peculiar post-Soviet version of this process, capitalism initially appears in a strictly seductive guise. My former classmates—today professors or research fellows—have been granted more or less unrestricted access to unlimited sources of information, freedom to travel the world, and, at the very least, relief from interminable shopping queues. At the same time, capitalism has yet to dismantle the last remnants of what was indisputably positive in the former Soviet system: inexpensive housing, comprehensive and (on the whole) sophisticated healthcare and education systems, freedom from the fear of losing one’s job. A snapshot of the present historical moment could lead one to believe that we are moving away from a social order with positive and negative elements to one that is entirely positive. But this is merely a brief historical moment. The logic of emerging social relations under capitalism invariably leads to a system whose main principle is “be useful or die.”

6. We should note that this aspect, among others, demonstrates the error of applying the theory of “state capitalism” to the USSR.



Susan Jahoda, *Krasnoyarsk*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

The market, wage labor, exploitation, total competition, victory (for the few) and defeat (for the vast majority): increasingly these are becoming our day-to-day reality, leaving little room for anything *Other*. At the same time, this is precisely the day-to-day reality that gave birth to classical Marxism. As it gains in strength, we will inevitably feel the increasing intellectual and practical influence of Marxism; we will come to understand its indelible theoretical and practical significance. In other words, the return to Marxism is perfectly correlated with the emergence of capitalism across the former USSR; within Russia proper it will be felt first in Moscow and then in the major metropolises, then spread to the provinces.

Our confidence is grounded in the process that may take one of two possible routes; either scenario, however, shall serve to clear the ideological daze. The first scenario has been described above in general terms: the basic categories and methods of Marxism regain power in correlation with the capitalist restoration. We could draw an analogy here to the ancient figure of Antaeus, who grew stronger whenever he fell to the ground: only this time, there is no Heracles to defeat him. More capitalism means more Marxism. The more people are deprived of the things they need to lead human lives, the more Marxist they become (even if impulsively). (I would not want to simplify the situation: naturally we will also see people fall into despair or grow rabid, as in "I'll get to the top, even if it means destroying those around me." Capitalism also breeds fascism and religious Utopias. The general direction, however, is a struggle for a better life: this is human nature.)

## Scenario Number Two

Suppose that instead of a glaring deterioration, which would lead to a sobering and a “Marxification” of the people, we should find ourselves living better lives. But how? Our everyday social experience has already demonstrated, and the evidence will only become clearer with time, that no such improvement could originate with the capitalist class. The boss will reach into his pocket and hand back to us (higher salaries, social services, etc.) only what we force him to hand back (because in this world you have to work to achieve something). We have to struggle for a better life. (The resemblance here to the capitalist “law of the jungle” is only that, since I am talking about a collective, *class struggle*.) The former Soviet citizen is still generally puzzled by labor strikes in the “fortunate” West (and he barely hears about a fraction of them since it is not a priority topic for the media); to him it looks like “they already have everything; now they got too much time on their hands.” But the situation is radically different: what “they” have is what they had struggled for and continue to struggle for. This historical fact is so basic it requires no evidence.

So, this is scenario number two: things get better rather than worse. *But this improvement can be achieved only through struggle for one’s rights; this struggle will become a school of Marxism.* In other words, no matter how you look at it, Lenin turns out to be right: “Communism ‘grows’ from positively every aspect of social existence; its sprouts are positively everywhere; the ‘disease’ (to use an especially favorite expression of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois police—a comparison that ‘pleases’ them mightily) has penetrated firmly into the organism, it has permeated the whole organism thoroughly.” (Note that I have spoken only of ideological grounds for the emergence of Marxism through the concrete layer of capitalism; there also are purely economic foundations for such a process.)

### “Specialists,” “Traditions,” “Schools”

Now let us return to Husserl. My involvement with phenomenology fell within the years 1994–5. Why did this attraction fail to develop into something more substantial? Imagine a “narrow specialist” in Husserl, at a research institute or a university, in his ivory hovel. What does it mean to specialize in phenomenology in Minsk, or even in Moscow? Something akin to specializing in snow in Africa: it means being a thousand miles and several decades removed from the professional community. I want to stress that this is a matter not of “ambition” but of professionalism and professional fulfillment. A phenomenologist in these parts could only be an educator, a *Kulturtrager*. Since we have no philosophical tradition of our own, in the Western sense, a competent specialist in Western philosophy is prized here as a kind of rarity. His main function is to *understand*, to master his subject. Philosophy, on the other hand, is more than understanding: it is productive *ignorance* and movement beyond the boundaries of what has been understood. This has been the way of philosophy for over two and a half thousand years of its history. *Tradition* is precisely this complex “interplay” of knowledge and ignorance. One could be either a “phenomenologist” or a “specialist in phenomenology”; that is something akin to being a hunter versus

being a person who specializes in the study of hunting methods. They *know* the same thing and they know it equally well, but one of them gets to hunt while the other can only talk about the “proper way to hunt.” Naturally, both the phenomenologists and the specialists may be found in countries with traditionally strong phenomenological movements, but there both types are represented in sufficient quantities and together make up a “school.” We, on the other hand, have only the specialists.

This, however, is not the most important thing; I will speak about that a little further on. If we return to the notion of tradition, we will have to admit that there is only one intellectual tradition that is not strictly local but, while retaining local character, makes up a legitimate branch of the international scene. This is the Marxist tradition. Moreover, I turned to Marxism precisely at the time when I became a resident of Moscow and sensed myself a subject of an explicitly capitalist society. And conversely, experiencing the “charms” of capitalism with my own hide, I could not help but think back to the half-forgotten, half-understood truths from those first years at the university: the truths of Marxism. For the first time they became flesh and blood; they started working. I began to employ Marxist methods consciously and, I believe, successfully. Their success was in that I was able to find satisfactory answers, which were not offered by any other theory. In the process I read up on classical and contemporary Marxist literature. It was a remarkable moment: for the first time I sensed solid ground beneath my feet and a real future before me. Not a palm tree specialist in Yakutsk, but a member of a theoretical tradition with the backing of a major school and, despite only a small number of proponents at this time, an impressively bright future (see above). I want to emphasize again: it is a matter not of “ambition” but of professionalism and professional fulfillment.

Now the most important thing. Marxist philosophy (in spite of the ambiguous relation between philosophy as such and Marxism as such) is the only philosophical tradition that has not renounced the quest for truth; everyone else has abandoned truth, labeling it a “linguistic construct,” outmoded “grand narratives,” and so on. Moreover, for Marxism truth is not an end in itself, but is part of the activity aimed at global transformation. This—once more, in a narrow, philosophical sense—allows Marxism to retain its connection to the entire history of philosophical tradition. As Fredric Jameson wrote,

Marxism cannot today be defended as a mere substitute for such other methods, which would then triumphalistically be consigned to the ashcan of history; the authority of such methods springs from their faithful consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life, this or that subsystem of a complex and mushrooming cultural superstructure. In the spirit of a more authentic dialectical tradition, Marxism is here conceived as that “untranscendable horizon” that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them. (1983, 10)

Not to be a Marxist in today’s Russia is far more difficult than to be a phenomenologist, a hermeneuticist, or a proponent of analytical philosophy. I can more or less understand how it might be possible not to be a Marxist at the Catholic

University of Leuven, which houses the largest Husserl archive, but I cannot understand how one cannot be a Marxist in Moscow today. In some paradoxical sense, Marxism is the only philosophy existing today—in a sense consistent with that of the Greeks, its inventors—since all other traditions have long since regarded themselves as mere “play” or strictly localized, specialized, applied science. In other words, they view themselves as “sophists,” not as “philosophers.” This is why Badiou (1998) today speaks justly of Plato.

In conclusion I would like to say that the problem with which I began—that of the break—has been restated for me, as a Marxist, in a new form: as a problem of the relation of the material and the ideal planes in a broad sense. We can formulate this problem more precisely as follows. For example, Lukács writes that the secret of incomparable majesty and “fantastical realism” in *Don Quixote* lies in the fact that the decline of the Middle Ages yielded an unusually rich and varied display of people and actions. Independence and individual activity could be manifested relatively freely at that time (and Hegel is right when he sees in this the grandeur of Shakespeare). “The prose of bourgeois life was merely a shadow at that time, falling on the multifarious dynamic life, full of astonishing conjunctures and adventures” (Lukács 1935). The rich material for this epoch-making novel could only be found in a period when the atomization of social existence and alienation had not yet become the dominating social factors; this is Lukács’s claim. We have two orders before us: first, the order of the great novel, with all its aesthetic, psychological, and ideal qualities; the other, the order of a specific historical, sociopolitical and, naturally, economic time period. *Intuitively*, we can easily assent to an interrelation of these two orders, as proposed by Lukács. But—how could we conceive of this interrelation not as a metaphor, but as a concrete unity of two perfectly different “ontologies” with all the mediating factors that transform them into a single, concrete, and rational phenomenon? With what shall we “fill” the gap that lies between two such disparate regions? (The example of *Don Quixote* is just one out of a myriad of others. Marxism perpetually moves forward through the juxtaposition and tracing of interrelations between disparate regions; this is its main method.) To answer this fundamental and thoroughly dizzying question I would have to step far beyond the boundaries of a journal article. Let me then merely state that Marxism *has* the answer to the question of the bridge between two ontologies.

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Susan Jahoda, Krasnoyarsk, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## The Theory of Marxism: Questions and Answers

*Vladislav Sofronov, Fredric Jameson,  
Jack Amariglio and Yahya M. Madra*

*Vladislav Sofronov questioned a number of prominent Marxist scholars on the challenges to contemporary Marxism posed by volatile post-Soviet conditions. He seeks a way forward: away from neoliberalism, and toward a leftist consciousness that can be articulated across borders. This article publishes the responses of Fredric Jameson (during a one-on-one conversation that took place in Moscow) and of Jack Amariglio and Yahya M. Madra (on a separate occasion, via email). Jameson's answers reflect his attitude toward contemporary Marxism: its dialectic, the relationship between labor and the theoretical problems of the present. He outlines the challenges that affect Marxism, particularly the disparity between labor and technology and the pressure from postmodernity and culture. Amariglio and Madra stress the enduring significance of the Marxist dialectic, and give a descriptive analysis of the alternations between labor and capital.*

**Key Words:** Contemporary Marxism, Marxist Scholars, Dialectic, Labor

**Vladislav Sofronov:** Which aspects of Marxism's theoretical legacy definitively belong to the past? Which aspects still seem urgent today?

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**Fredric Jameson:** I don't think of it like that, in terms of what's living and what's dead in Marxism, as Croce said. It seems to me that Marxism is reinterpreted at each moment of capitalism, and I believe that we're now in a third moment of capitalism, after Lenin's moment and after the original one, in which Marxism is reinterpreted on a much larger scale than it was in the Leninist period. I do not understand Marxism as Marxism-Leninism. I understand Marxism as the analysis of capitalism, and I'm always amused when people say that capitalism has triumphed and Marxism is dead, because Marxism is the analysis of capitalism. The Marxist economists today are the only ones who are looking at the system as a whole. If you look at bourgeois economists, they're interested in specific local problems of capitalism—inflation, investment, and so forth, but not the system. Marxist economics is the only one that looks at the system, so I don't think of it in terms of anything in Marx being outmoded. It seems to me that Marx made a model of capitalism as a system and that it is still valid, except that capitalism exists on a much larger scale than it did in his day. On the other hand, Ernest Mandel has argued that since Marx is making a pure model of capitalism, a thought model, of which England is only an incidental reference, in a way his model is more accurate in terms of the current global system because this is a far purer capitalism, one from which feudal elements have been eliminated far more thoroughly and in which commodification, wage labor, and so forth are far more extensively developed than they were in the older period.

**Jack Amariglio and Yahya Madra:** It would be nice to think that Marxism had overcome its long-term tendency toward reductionist theorizing. The twentieth-century orthodoxy that had stultified most of the theoretical and political innovations in Marxism, especially in economic analysis, had mixed results. On the one hand, it certainly contributed to handy simplifications that were, in some circumstances, useful to galvanize worker and popular support and opinion; the ever present claims that capitalism was facing a crisis of accumulation worked, at times, to encourage Left activists that the end times were on our doorstep. On the other hand, much mischief was also achieved under the sign of the necessary "laws of motion" of capitalism, and the results were often, in contrast, quietism, repression of contrary views and a demand for homogeneity. So, while we don't think that it is likely that orthodoxy has disappeared, nor do we think it has no role at all to play in the present conjuncture, we do hope that its prominence and its outspoken support for deterministic modes of analysis and propositions for action are relegated to a subordinate place among today's Marxists. What still seems urgent, though, is the analysis of class and the process of exploitation. It has become *de rigueur* to bypass Marxian class analysis in preference for either other social and economic distinctions and movements, or in preference for old and new "sociological" notions of class—mostly connected to income level, or occupation, or property ownership—that continue to function as displacements for Marx's own determination that class, in capitalism, has to do with how surplus value is produced and extracted/appropriated and finally distributed. The hocus-pocus that now surrounds mainstream discussions of the crisis and impending disappearance of the "middle class" badly misses the question of the maintenance and extension—on a global scale—of worker exploitation and the uses and misuses of surplus. Whether or not some so-called middle class

is under attack, it is certain, or at least it should be for Marxists, that the current explosion in income and wealth for capitalists, financiers, realtors, speculators, and others, and the relative decline in the living standards and incomes of “the poor,” has its basis in increased and not diminished exploitation. It seems to us that the analysis of how this increased exploitation has been recently achieved is of the highest order of importance for Marxist thinkers.

**Sofronov:** Which are the main theoretical problems that Marxism needs to solve at present?

**Jameson:** I think there’s a range of theoretical problems. The most obvious one is the labor theory of value and the relationship to technology, the relationship to computer production, and how the labor theory of value can account for the value that’s produced by computers. Then I would say, in our period, the theory of commodity fetishism, which it seems to me was secondary in the Leninist period. It was never absent, but it was not the dominant problem of the Marxism of that age of imperialism. I think that today commodity fetishism is a primary phenomenon of capitalism. And this is why what used to be called culture, or the cultural factor, or whatever, is now really central to all Left politics or at least the Left politics of the first world. So those are some fundamental changes. The way in which one analyzes the image and the relationship of the image to commodification is an important theoretical problem. The way in which the theory of ideology is to be understood today is an important theoretical problem that some writers and philosophers have dealt with.

Then also when one comes to politics—and, of course, *Capital* was never really a politics—the crucial question is the twofold one of organization and unemployment. It seems to me that the political forces that need to be organized today are the forces that are structurally unemployed. Consider how in globalization the whole continent of Africa, for example, is being allowed to go down the drain, or how in almost all the advanced countries the flight of industry and the transfer to information technology have left masses of people unemployed. Of course, in our country, it’s a matter of race and it’s black people, people who will never be employed. How does one organize that? Because classical organization was based on workers, not on the unemployed, and this is a very serious new kind of political problem. And along with that is the question of the party, because nobody seems to want to go back to the Leninist party. If one looks at Lenin’s own time and his own experience, the Bolshevik party was much more democratic, and right up until October Lenin was in a minority in the Bolshevik party, and so there was a lot more argument in that party. But, on the other hand, it was a party that was not representing exactly but was standing in for a class that scarcely exists anymore: namely, this peasantry, who had their own ideologues, of course, but were not really represented by the Bolsheviks. So the question of the party and the ideological resonance that the party has had since Stalin is an important political problem, and I don’t think it’s solved. This is my major disagreement with Toni [Negri] and Michael [Hardt] with *Empire* [2000]. I don’t think that you can just say, “We don’t need the party and let’s just have this explosion of the multitude happen wherever it happens,” “We don’t want to conquer power,” and so on. It seems obvious that the power of capital is so enormous that there must be a counterpower to this, there must be some force that is

capable of standing up to the forces and the immense money that capital has now in a situation where there hasn't been a war in fifty or sixty years, a real world war, that would destroy all this capital and leave the businessmen much shakier than they are now. So the question of organization really is a crucial political question. Marx didn't theorize all that, so this is in a sense not a matter of a part of Marxism that belongs to the past, but it certainly is a major theoretical question of politics and of political action.

I think it's also the case that this is a transitional period toward the world market, and one of the things that characterizes this inevitably is the uneven development of all these countries. And uneven development means that the working class, such as it is in these various places, is unrelated, so that American workers are fighting things like ecology because ecology means doing things to American plants that will throw them out of work, while in other countries I think the struggle of labor is completely different. I suppose that one of the major labor forces in Korea is the steel industry, which is probably one of the biggest in the world. And the American steel workers are all out of work. So you have an unevenness of labor interests that would have to be somehow overcome for there to come into being a world labor movement. And a real Left politics is not really possible until there's some reorganization of the labor movement on a global scale. And that's not something that we can bring into being by thinking about it. This has to happen and will happen by the way in which globalization flattens everything out and produces crises of a global nature. But it's very ironic that, although globalization is a force in every country in the world, one of its effects is to produce this unevenness of all these countries, which prevents common interests.

The question of the relation of Marxism to postmodernity, including culture and art, I think is an important one. I don't think that we're going back to what political art was in the modernist period. But on the other hand, I think that a lot of postmodern art, which in the beginning we thought was decorative and so on and so forth, is—and I would say that this is also going on here (in Russia)—more and more political, or, I should say, wishes to be more and more political. But how does it do it? That's another one of the main theoretical questions and has to do with the nature of this new culture and what it's meant for art. But that may be another question.

**Amariglio and Madra:** The central theoretical problem with which Marxism needs to seriously engage is the central dislocation that has been structuring its theoretical *practice* since the Althusserian moment in the 1970s: the divide between the subsequent developments within the field of political economy and those within the field of political and cultural theory. In the post-Althusserian period, the Marxian corpus ended up being divided into two distinct fields. On the one hand, there is an unforeseen expansion of cultural Marxism and post-Marxism in the cultural studies, literature, politics, and sociology departments of Western universities and colleges. On the other hand, there is an almost autonomous development of Marxian political economy in various forms (regulation theory in the 1970s, the articulation of modes of production debate in the late 1970s, analytical Marxism in the 1980s, the class-analytical approach of the Amherst school in the 1980s and 1990s, overdeterminist and feminist autocritiques of the *capitalocentrism* in Marxian economics in the 1990s) despite the hostile and marginalizing atmosphere of the academic discipline of economics, dominated by neoclassical and late neoclassical theory. The deep divide that has opened up between these two

tracks within Marxism is such that it is quite possible for a Marxian economist during the past thirty years not to have read a single page that someone like Fredric Jameson may have written, or, indeed, alternatively, for a Marxian literary or cultural critic not to refer, other than cursorily (and anachronistically), to Marxian political-economic analyses written since the 1970s. It is possible to blame this divide on the arbitrary disciplinary divisions that compartmentalize the Western academy and, precisely for this reason, it is imperative for Marxists to speak to each other. Indeed, one of the concerns that motivated the founders of this journal was to construct a platform on which cultural theorists and producers could communicate and create shared projects with political economists and social analysts.

Even though, strictly speaking, this is a problem of theoretical practice and not a theoretical problem per se, it does lead to a theoretical problem: how to articulate



Dmitry Gutov, *German Ideology*, 2006, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

the questions of subjectivity pertaining to power, subjectification, revolutionary agency, and the formation of political and cultural hegemony with questions of an economic nature pertaining to forms of performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value and the current forms of circulation and distribution of value. The challenge, of course, is not only to do so without reducing either set of processes to the other, but also to be able to think about economic value through cultural value and the cultural through the economic. Ultimately, this may be an impossible task. Probably what we need to achieve is the “parallax view,” to use a concept recently elaborated by Slavoj Žižek (2005). Indeed, a conversation between cultural Marxists and economic Marxists can happen only if we engage with this theoretical problem by continually shifting positions and by trying to inhabit both vantage points. Inhabiting such a parallax view will enable us to appreciate the cultural and political constitution of economic formations and to devise concrete strategies to enact communism both against and as an alternative to capitalism.

Finally, let us admit that the problem of elucidating and continuing to experiment on many levels with a viable communism remains a priority as a theoretical and practical problem for Marxists. One aspect of this, for us, is the appropriate lens through which to highlight and then to disentangle communist economic and cultural forms and their conditions of existence, and to be able to connect and also distinguish them from other moments in the past few centuries during which “really existing socialism” was thought to exist. It is slightly disheartening that communism has all but dropped out of sight in recent social theory while, correctly, analysis of the continued permutations of a global capitalism through the current postcolonial, “late-capitalist” stage has continued apace, even feverishly. Communist experiments and sites in which communal production and appropriation occur in the ever growing “pores” of capitalism remain understudied and perhaps even disdained. Some of this is because of the shame Marxists feel in having had communism derailed and misidentified with the Soviet and Eastern European, mostly state-capitalist, debacles, but some of this, as well, is the capitalocentrism that presumes that communism will only be worth talking about again when it looks like something that is as “big” as global capitalism.

**Sofronov:** Who are the most significant Marxist thinkers of the last decades, in your opinion? What is the significance of their contributions to the development of Marxism?

**Jameson:** The significant Marxist thinkers fall into the series of problems [I’ve just described]. Althusser is important, above all as a theory of ideology, which was really a whole new notion of how ideology functions and a kind of setting aside of the notion of true and false consciousness. Which is not to say that false consciousness doesn’t exist anymore. It obviously exists. But since the end of the cold war, ideology has functioned in a very funny way. It’s become much cruder. In the cold war, all kinds of bourgeois ideologies had to appear, had to seem progressive. Now nobody needs to be progressive, and ideology is simply what the crudest vulgar Marxism always said it was—namely, money interests. And what corresponds to that, and I think this is an important unanalyzed theoretical problem, is cynical reason. There Žižek has been

interesting—and that's why I would include Žižek in this list—but not conclusive. How is it that everyone knows what capitalism is today? You don't have to have false consciousness about it; rather, they know it and they do it anyway, Žižek says. So I would say Althusser, Guy Debord and *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the whole notion of the image and the spectacle and the simulacrum. In Germany, the Capital Logic group was very interesting. And they have reemerged; those things have just been reprinted in Germany. That's a kind of application of Hegel to Marx, but I think it means things that weren't really discussed in the old days: the whole structure of *Capital*—the book, as a whole, rather than just looking at volume 1—and its relationship to the Hegelian dialectic. Obviously [Henri] Lefebvre has produced an immense body of work, and the relationship to space is really important. I don't know that any of these people have had definitive responses, but the important thing is that they posed new problems. In Germany, I would say also Robert Kurtz. Is he known here? His is the idea that modernization is over, the third world will never modernize, this whole system is producing a kind of permanent instability that will cause it all to collapse. I think this is a very important and timely kind of idea, but people don't want to hear this message because it's too gloomy. David Harvey, in the United States, has also been important for theoretical stuff, but I think there are a lot of things being done in Marxism today. There's a new group in England, the Historical Materialism group. Do you know that group and their journal? I think they have about ten or twelve issues now. It's probably the only recent one that deals with the theoretical problems of Marxism as such and prints essays on value, and the analysis of dialectics and so forth, unlike *New Left Review*, which is more generally political. I'm probably forgetting a lot of important people, but those are a few from Althusser's generation down to younger people. It's true that, in the United States, there's a lot of competition from a general identity politics standpoint, politics of difference, a kind of anarchism. I would say that in the general Left, the anarchist positions are stronger than the Marxist ones—that is, in general ideological tendencies, I don't mean what you officially adopt. But probably that was always true among intellectuals. And I think there's a new interest in Marx, and, just like you, younger Americans are reading Marx and are very curious about its relevance.

**Amariglio and Madra:** Probably it is necessary to invoke Althusser's name as a marker for a moment of rupture, a break point within the Marxian tradition. The Althusserian intervention, with its insistence on a sustained critique of theoretical humanism, has radically changed the meaning of being a Marxist philosopher (understood in the broadest sense of the term). In a sense, the most traumatic part of Althusser's writings is neither the notion of overdetermination nor the incomplete theory of ideological state apparatuses, but rather, the critique of the essentialist concept of the human that informs much of social theory, including various strands of the Marxian tradition. For us, Marxism as a living tradition continues to exist in the writings of Marxian thinkers who recognize this critique of humanism as their entry points. A very incomplete list would include Étienne Balibar and his work on class politics, Judith Butler and her work on ideology, gendering, and subjection, Ernesto Laclau and his work on hegemony and populism, Stuart Hall and his work on racial formations and modes of production, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff and their

work on the political economy of surplus value and class process, Gayatri Spivak and her work on value as both metaphor and postcolonial reality, Slavoj Žižek and his work on ideology, capitalism, and enjoyment, Fredric Jameson and his analysis of literary and cinematic forms, and J. K. Gibson-Graham and her critique of capitalocentrism. There are also emerging contributions surrounding the perceptions that, with the new capitalist globalization, there are different variations on the process of commodification; that there have been changes in and additions to financial instruments, their creation, and spread that are restructuring both capital flows and older Marxist analyses of “finance capital”; that one can discern the development of forms of production and technology involving “immaterial labor,” “new media,” or “cognitive capitalism” that may rise yet to define a distinct phase of the socioeconomic formation; and so forth. There are many different writers working on these projects, and we’d prefer to encourage readers to find their way through *Rethinking Marxism* and other Marxist journals and texts for longer lists of those taking the lead.

**Sofronov:** How would you describe your relationship to the problem of dialectics in Marxism?

**Jameson:** I’m trying to work on this. It depends. If you identify the dialectic narrowly—with either Hegel or Engels or Stalin, the classic diamat or something—then this all looks very distant. But it seems to me that the dialectic is something subtler or more complicated, and I think anywhere you find interesting thinkers, you find a dialectical process. And that needs to be described, but it’s very complicated philosophically. We need to redescribe what the dialectic is and show its presence at work in all kinds of thinking that would not officially call itself dialectical. One needs a different relationship to some of the thinkers, even those who say they’re antidialectical—that would be Foucault and the poststructuralists generally—because they seem to have a very narrow idea of the dialectic. Most of them associate it with the Communist parties in those countries—Negri, Deleuze, and so forth—and they attack it on that basis. But it seems to me that when their own thought is interesting, and it often is, it’s dialectical, because the dialectic means uncovering these deeper processes and showing contradictions at work. I suppose the most vocal opponents of the dialectic—and here are other theorists I should mention—are Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau has made a beautiful description of the way politics works on a daily basis, but his attacks on the dialectic are not really, in my opinion, pertinent to a philosophical description of the dialectic.

**Amariglio and Madra:** We’re not sure what constitutes “the problem of dialectics.” If you mean the rejection of dialectics as a mode of Marxian philosophical reflection, then we guess we don’t share this position, and this is because we haven’t yet been persuaded that to think in terms of some notion of contradiction (our preference is along the lines of the Althusserian notion of “overdetermination” or, as Marx called it, “a many-sided determination”) is requisite to “saving” Marxism supposedly from



itself. There are notions of dialectics (and its refusal) from which we have certainly learned—from Hegel, of course, to Lucio Colletti—but we don't think that there is a single tradition about dialectics within Marxism that has hegemonized all possible positions on it, and that includes versions of dialectics that see it as a "negative" internal process of sublation and overcoming or, alternatively, as a set of "positive" oppositions, whether in nature, in the realm of imagined discourse, or as a category of the mind. What we are often struck by, though, is the idea that there are constitutive "outsides" to most imagined, internally structured totalities, and that these outsides are, of course, never entirely situated on a terrain in which they can be articulated either externally or independent of the "other." Explicitly relational thinking joined to the concept of that which escapes or is excessive to any initially posited composition is tantamount, for us, to a recognition that the "other" possibility, that which is excluded from the outset, is always lurking and acting, and, in our way of thinking, must be brought to thought by those whose intellectual debt remains largely to Marx. Marx's resort to "tendency laws," for example, in his discussion of the rate of profit within capitalist industries or across an economy dominated by capitalist production, is a prime case where there isn't strictly a "negation of the negation" involved, nor is it only a matter of the proliferation of juxtaposed or alternative "positively" defined outcomes. In this case, dialectical thought requires of us utilizing the initial thesis—the secular trend in the rate of profit—to specify conditions that are the specific "other" (and these may be legion) that can lead the rate of profit in a different direction. Mediations or adding more and more subtending conditions of existence aren't the only aspects that moderate the proliferation of these other paths. In any event, we hope Marxists do not give up on dialectics, however constituted, if only because it provides epistemological, methodological, and practical traditions, with rich histories, that have allowed Marxist work of all kinds to flourish in the best and worst of times. We should add that some of the best work of Marxist writers on class, commodification, subjectification, and political position—Lukács, Adorno, and Gramsci come immediately to mind—have come from those who appear to be self-consciously "dialectical" in their approach. This is certainly true of Fredric Jameson, for example; indeed, if and when Jameson infrequently falters, in our view, it is when he flattens out his exceedingly subtle, sophisticated, and elegant variations on the dialectic in cultural and philosophical matters to fall back into simple, almost unmediated oppositions, often when he is rendering something "economic" as it pertains to capitalism.

**Sofronov:** In the 1990s, there was a widespread opinion that the contradiction between labor and capital was no longer the principal conflict of contemporary societies. Is this something you would agree with?

**Jameson:** If you mean the position of workers, then workers are certainly more exploited than they ever were, because the whole process today in our country is to lower workers' wages and to make them give back benefits. The kind of welfare state that we had, which never amounted to much—the whole effort is to undo that. In



Susan Jahoda, *Pavers*, Novosibirsk, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

most countries in the West, and maybe here, the effort is to do away with the social services, to lower them insofar as is possible, and so forth. The contradiction between labor and capital is certainly the classic way of talking about this, but may not be the best starting point right now. Certainly exploitation is very much present and more and more present in the processes of production today, and that's true whether we're talking about information production, information technology, or industrial. The interest of capital has always been to increase surplus value and profits and to reduce the strength of labor, and this is still very much going on. Clearly that's still the principal conflict of capital, but the other one that's very important, as I said, is structural unemployment. And that's something that does not get dealt with in the labor theory of value. Then of course we haven't mentioned the whole business of what Marx himself called immaterial labor and general intellect. Their idea, their political idea, which was, I think, probably part of the general Italian trend, was to show that it is not just industrial workers who are the proletariat but really everyone who shares in this larger cultivation that Marx called general intellect, in English, in the *Grundrisse*, and therefore that more people have an interest in the revolutionary transformation of society than this dwindling population of factory workers. On the other hand, I think that there are a lot of theoretical problems to be dealt with here, and I'm not sure that this little offhand page or two in Marx is enough to do that. And also I think this is an essentially first-world matter because, in other societies, where there's still production or where the sweatshops have moved from the first world, while there may be immaterial labor, it's material labor that's the crucial thing. Immaterial labor is very much a postmodern concept, and therefore it demands the kind of alert and suspicious scrutiny that any

postmodern concept or analysis demands. That doesn't mean it's wrong; it's just that those analyses are not always made from an economic or political standpoint. But certainly the exploitation of labor is essential to capitalism.

**Amariglio and Madra:** The question is problematic since it presumes that prior to the 1990s, among Marxists at least, the "contradiction" between labor and capital was identified as "the principal conflict" within contemporary societies. First, we think that the shift away from labor and capital, or rather, the reformulation of both categories (that is, of labor and capital) certainly has been ongoing for much of the past century, and this reconceptualization likely speeded up during the 1960s and thereafter in many nations with Marxist traditions. For example, the notion of



Susan Jahoda, *Novosibirsk*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

"labor" increasingly began to encompass issues having to do with reproductive labor (and not just strictly "productive" labor or what others have called "direct producers at the point of production," where point of production was thought to be a factory or an institutional equivalent). The category of productive labor, as well, has been expanded to take account of many sites and processes in which surplus labor is performed, but that have been mostly neglected and even subordinated in the interpretation of "workers" as male, factory labor. So, for example, there are fine analyses, which coincided with the intersection of some parts of the revived feminist movement in the 1960s and Marxism from that time forward, that sought to

expose the forms of exploitation—not necessarily deemed “capitalist”—that pertain to the class processes that characterize household production (a good discussion of these issues can be found in Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff’s *Bringing It All Back Home* [1994]). And class processes, including capitalist ones, that involve the exploitation of workers in capitalist enterprises, have been found to exist in sites as diverse as prostitution rings and seemingly collective farming. What constitutes “labor” or productive labor in the Marxist sense has certainly morphed over time. Something similar has happened with the category of capital as well. Who or what is capital is something that has been transformed, at least in its “obvious” manifestations, and what has been the primary challenge is to maintain a working definition of capital in which the appropriation of the surplus value produced by workers is central to this category. Of course, capital has been expanded to mean many other things as well (hence the extension of the term in the non-Marxist and quasi-Marxist categories that one finds today in sociological and economic analyses and debates, such as human capital, cultural capital, social capital, fictive capital, imaginative capital, and much else besides). What is also true, though, is that the forms of capitalist enterprises—that is, enterprises who, among other things, generate their revenue largely from the exploitation of productive workers and who do so through the wage-labor agreement—have been greatly altered so that, again, private ownership, the sale of commodities, and much else besides no longer line up precisely, if they ever did, with who or what is a capitalist firm. Add to this the problem that capitalist firms often extract surplus in ways that are noncapitalist (they use other exploitative mechanisms, even slave labor, for example, in some sex-trade industries, or they can even be found to engage in communal forms of surplus extraction, sometimes within work teams set up in the tradition of the dot.com revolution), and we see that there is a perhaps welcome weakening of the grand claim that who or what squares off in the realm of “the economy” is labor versus capital, two entities uniquely and wholly self-contained except by reference to one another. Yet it is a terrible mistake, we think, to see all this added complexity as a means to denigrate the importance of the worldwide struggle—now experienced in surprising places—that may exist between productive workers and capitalists over continued or newly invented forms of capitalist exploitation. This struggle is as important for societies in which the sites of capitalist class struggle are less recognizable than in the past, and for societies, perhaps in what used to be called “the third world,” in which the export of capitalist manufacturing is more recognizable to activists and Marxist critics and in which exploitation, too, is more “visible” according to this prior, more orthodox prism through which one sees capitalism and its multiple forms. Finally, we have long had a problem with the concept of “primary contradiction,” but there is no more space to enter into that debate here.

**Sofronov:** Which points of connection between Marxist theory and mass labor movements do you see today?

**Jameson:** The crucial thing is for those involved to build mass labor movements. In the United States, they’re very much threatened. There are always small groups of radical

labor in the larger labor movements, but the American labor movement has been characterized by a general compromise with capital, and this is its tradition. There, I suppose, Lenin's analysis is still valid. That is, Marxism comes to the labor movement from the outside and from the intellectuals, and that means all the good things that it might mean and all the bad things that it might mean. It's obviously not a healthy thing. The labor movement itself is concerned with wages and working conditions and services and so forth, and Marxism is the analysis of the larger system in which this labor is taking place. I suppose, in that sense, Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) is not correct, in that it is not from the standpoint of industrial workers that one really sees the truth of the system as a whole. On the other hand, I think he is right about commodification, but then that's another complicated issue. Now whether the intellectuals see that either is another matter and I think that our motives, our class interests, are always suspicious and always depend on personal histories, and that they are in some sense always linked to the labor movement, because middle-class intellectuals—and that's what an intellectual is—are positioned in such a way that they could be beyond, they could be independent of their own immediate class interests, but they do not, except for personal or ethnic or gender reasons, necessarily have the standpoint from which to see society as a whole. I don't want to say that this is a generational thing, but it is a historical thing, in which intellectuals suddenly realize that a system is not a healthy thing to be connected to, as artists or as thinkers. And they sense that there's something else going on, there's another current going on in parts of society that they should be connected to. And then you get a sort of movement of intellectuals toward these more progressive tendencies. But that's unlikely to happen unless society is changing, and I think there are signs that this is happening. Society must be more evidently in crisis, and there are certainly signs of that in the Western countries.

**Amariglio and Madra:** We take our lead in our thinking about this connection from two brilliant articles that appeared in *Rethinking Marxism* in the early 1990s: one, "Commodity Unionism," by Frank Annunziato (1990), and the other, "Trade Union Isolation and the Catechism of the Left," by George DeMartino (1991), both longtime labor organizers and Marxist theoreticians. The crux of their related arguments is that labor organizations, at least in the United States, need to be subjected to the same kind of Marxist scrutiny (and vice versa) that Marxists extend toward any other institution or organization. The trajectory of labor unions, for example, toward becoming sites of commodity production and dissemination (selling "union representation," as one example, or hawking socially responsible credit cards, as another), and the involvement of labor organizations in broader "shareholder" groups within corporations, necessitate a shift as well in thinking about what constitutes the crucial difference between such organizations, workers' employers and creditors, and other mass organizations. The trade union movement continues to be indispensable in keeping workers from falling ever further into degradation as a consequence of the vicissitudes of global capitalism and its neoliberal expansion in the past thirty years. Yet it is also true, as DeMartino astutely notes, that Marxists and organized labor need to pay particular heed right now to mass social movements that continue to have a strong labor element, and also contain "shareholder" concerns, but ones that are alternatively connected to community and social struggles for equality, inclusion, and

distributive justice. The labor element of these mass struggles—focused on universalizing demands for “fair” labor standards, for instance—is often overlooked if the only understanding of organized labor is that which takes the form of traditional trade unions. One can definitely see in the frequent World Social Forums many different kinds of labor demands, some of which pertain to struggles against capitalism and “its” imperialism but others that, while often using the same language, are directed against other forms of class exploitation and economic oppression. Recent organizations such as Moms Rising, for instance, have the conditions of women’s work and employment as a core element, but if you look closely at the demands and political actions they support, these range from confronting capitalist employers over unequal wages and benefits to transformations in the share and “payments” made to household laborers that are “outside” the realm of the capitalist firm. As one can glean from Gibson-Graham’s recent *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006), what is called the community economies movement, likewise, both in the United States and elsewhere, often takes as one of its central premises either moderating or eliminating a variety of types of labor exploitation, some of which are experienced in capitalist firms, including multinational sweatshops, and others of which are experienced in households, communes, artist/media workshops, NGOs, wind farms, and elsewhere. Marxism should, in our view, be open to revisiting the question of what constitutes a labor movement, and also be willing to compare the differences, as well as the similarities, in labor movements in the socialist past. It is not just that new alliances may need to be built; it is also that Marxists must be alive to the possibilities that such alliances already exist but, as we have said, will be discernible only upon the recognition that struggles against class exploitation are sometimes aligned today according to a different code of activist vision and language. Perhaps this is something over which Marxists and labor activists can take heart; and if no one else is seeing this emerging mass alliance between “laborers,” then it can be the signal contribution of at least some Marxist theorists to provide one type of discursive articulation of this situation (another is being provided not only by participants in these mass movements—Marxists included—but also by politically motivated and inspired artistic producers).

**Sofronov:** How can Marxist philosophy exist in the bourgeois university? Could you tell us about your experience in this regard? How can a bourgeois state agree to the presence of Marxism in the kind of “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser) as is the university?

**Jameson:** I think it very much depends on the discipline that you’re in how your political, ideological, philosophical views are tolerated. Those of us in culture—nobody cares about that. [Laughter.] If business wants to buy some cultural workers, they do it. Just like your shows here, your galleries, and so on. And if they’re interested in intellectuals, then they can buy pieces of your work. But if you are in economics ... In the sixties they hired Marxist intellectuals again because the students wanted it, but they don’t have to do that. Political science is a little bit different because, after all, there was the wave of the sixties and there are older guys now from the generation of the sixties who are in positions of power in some of these

departments, and they resist the Right and right-wing intellectuals in political science and in philosophy and so forth. But American philosophy, I mean analytical philosophy, was never interested in these things. So any kind of left philosophy—philosophy as such—was just as little likely to get a hearing in American philosophy departments as anything else in the history of philosophy, Kant or whatever. So I think, as I say, it very much depends on the nature of the disciplines. Now, we were fortunate in the humanities because, after all, we discovered theory; we propagated, in the United States, French theory, poststructuralism, because structuralism and poststructuralism were unthinkable without a Marxist background. And so we propagated all of that. The philosophy departments didn't teach this stuff so we could teach Hegel, or Marx, or anything we wanted. And nobody was policing us from any other standpoint, except for people who believed in pure art, or art for art's sake, and the greatness of aesthetics, and so on, and we easily confronted them on their own terms.

It's on those kinds of forces that this question depends. The question of how free one is in a specific situation to be a Marxist or to work with Marxism or whatever very much depends on the discipline. And now right-wing movements and right-wing intellectuals have more of a say and more power than they ever did, which isn't to say that they amount to much. I mean people like [Leo] Strauss suddenly reemerge as a potent theoretical force, whereas twenty years ago nobody paid any attention to Strauss at all.

But business is moving into the university more and more. There's a privatization of the university going on, and the university is thus tempted to do whatever business



Susan Jahoda, *Lenin's Poster*, Krasnoyarsk, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

wants. That's important in technology, in the sciences, in agriculture, and so forth, but less for us. Maybe in political science. But, on the whole, I think it is wrong to attack academic Marxism, the way E. P. Thompson did (the antistructuralism stuff, the anti-Althusser stuff, the "poverty of theory" [Thompson 1978]). E. P. Thompson was, from our perspective, nostalgic for a period when nonacademic intellectuals played a role. And I think in the United States today there are very few of those, and most intellectuals are connected, and have to be connected, with the academy. There's no independent journalism. They have to get their salaries from the university system. And the university system was prodigiously enlarged in the 1960s. So really it touches on all classes in society now. That's still the political place in which radical intellectuals have to work, I think. And that also conditions what can be done and what can't be done.

I should add that since 1989 older Western left intellectuals have not been much interested in questions of socialism; while, since the beginning of the anti-globalization movement and the war, a whole new politicized generation has begun to rethink the state of the world in what are as yet unforeseeable ways. So, the historical situation is again fluid and unpredictable, on college campuses as well as everywhere else.

**Amariglio and Madra:** Both of us have been trained as economists, but at different moments of the past thirty-plus years. During the period of the Vietnam War, there was a bit more openness to radical and Marxist ideas in this discipline in the United States; but it should also be said that Marxist economists never were more than a tiny minority in the American universities and that almost none of the major universities, with the most prestigious and influential graduate programs, was willing to risk hiring a single Marxist in economics. This was despite the fact that students—at least then—were clamoring for some approaches in economic philosophy and theory that challenged the neoclassical and Keynesian mainstream in order to question how capitalist imperialism worked (as in the case of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia). The even minuscule adjustments that the bourgeois universities made, at least in our chosen field, during that period quickly evaporated with the resurgence and triumph of "neoliberalism" during the late 1970s, and since then the prospects for Marxists within this field have been slim and gloomy for the majority of those seeking to teach Marxian economic discourses to new generations of students. Our own volatile and unpleasant experiences with job seeking over the past three decades mirror the fortunes, and mostly the misfortunes, of this historical movement. To be a Marxist in the academic field of economics is to be a pariah first, a curiosity second, and an irrelevance mostly. Despite this, we are also a reminder. We represent an "unsaid" that every once in a while escapes, libidinally perhaps, through the pens, keyboards, and mouths of those who would have buried Marxism several times over; one can't help but be struck, for example, by the ongoing employment and development of a class language, with slightly similar economic perspectives, by those elite liberal economists, like Paul Krugman, who are often speechless in the face of explosively growing economic inequality worldwide and in reaction to yet one more insane U.S. war about which the word "imperialism" cannot be easily discounted. Those Marxist economists who have been fortunate to find employment and maintain jobs have also

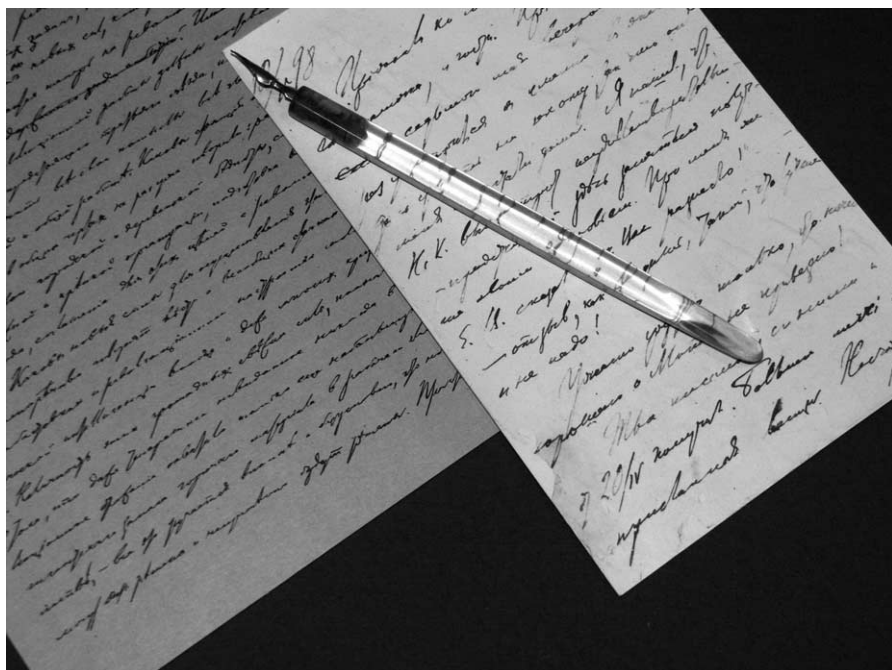


been blessed with students who—despite all the obstacles and hostilities expressed to the continued teaching of Marxian economic thought—are both extraordinarily talented and, even better, committed to keeping Marxism alive and useful in their new political practices. So, in the past thirty years, there have been some brilliant additions and changes to Marxian economic thought that are attributable to the insistence by teachers and students that Marxist economic thought must “keep current” and address questions, such as the changing position of the economic subject in capitalist commodity culture and class processes, that have led to a rethinking and rejuvenation of Marxist theory in light of the transformations in global economic practices.

There is a fundamental mistake, we think, in interpreting Althusser’s work on ideological state practices as suggesting one-sided, and not contradictory/over-determined, sites and outcomes, such as the teaching of Marxian philosophy in bourgeois universities. At least in the United States, there is no other location at present that affords the opportunity to engage and address a very large number of young people, many of whom will consider Marxian ideas and do a range of things with them (or will have these ideas do a range of things to them). The universities, try as they might, and their efforts are always/already confused and contradictory, can never completely control these ideas or their uses; there is always slippage. Nothing short of a total ban would suffice and even this would, of course, set off a new round of underground thinking and the emergence of alternative sites—perhaps the Internet—that would soon make the universities less capable of monitoring and coopting (and dampening) these ideas and diminish the universities’ social power and ability to organize and surveil all ideas that, they insist, make up “our shared culture.” There is no particular method of exclusion or repression at work at present that can or does make it impossible for Marxism to survive in the universities; even the increasing moves toward corporatism, managerialism, and privatization in many colleges and universities have been met with a backlash by professors and students. And, also, these “corporate” universities sometimes promote “difference” in ideas as a selling point of their programs. Marxism has no Teflon coating or magic shield that would ever prevent it from being commodified as an educational (or other) product. The commodification of education, though, has never in itself prevented the contradictions and countermovement within the educational process from leading toward possibly countersystemic challenges. We are not at a moment when there is a huge demand for Marxian economic philosophy in higher education; but we should add that because of the Iraq war and the fraught reactions to continued globalization, students (ours, at least) are increasingly disturbed that “alternative” approaches within economics are not easily available to them in their studies. This disturbance has given rise during the past ten years to the “postautistic economics” movement, led by graduate students in primarily Western universities, and it has also bolstered “heterodox” economics worldwide as a self-understood conglomerate of diverse economic thinking that cannot be situated comfortably in the economic mainstream. These, once again, are moments of disruption—present and potential—and they continue to break open, however timidly, an ever (re)sutured space within which Marxism can exist and develop in this seemingly hostile and unlikely place (the university).

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Susan Jahoda, *Lenin's Letters*, Krasnoyarsk Museum Center, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## The Karl Marx School of the English Language

**David Riff**

*This essay describes the Karl Marx School of the English Language, a reading group of artists and intellectuals based in Moscow. It explores the backgrounds and details of their reading practice, going into particular detail concerning the "Theses on Feuerbach." It also discusses the implications of the reading group's transformation into an art project.*

**Key Words:** Close Reading, Translation, Chto Delat, Contemporary Art, Post-Soviet Russia, Young Marx

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The Karl Marx School of the English Language (Moscow) was not initially an art project, but started as a somewhat perverse internationalist joke I made in December 2005 while a few of us were having drinks in a Moscow bar after an antifascist demonstration. The march itself had been pretty depressing. The damp weather made it seem very cold. We trudged through wet snow from Turgenev Square to the Gulag memorial of the Solovetsky Rock near KGB headquarters on the Ljublanka as part of a procession of about a thousand people surrounded by an equal number of militia. The procession itself mimed heterogeneity: anarchists, neoliberals, social democrats, Jewish youth, gay rights activists, enlightened Russian Orthodox reformers, and old-fashioned humanists all joined voices in the lame slogan, "Fascism will not pass!"

One could, of course, imagine a far livelier post-Soviet multitude: not only independent trade union workers and anarcho-punks, but also columns of African students from Patrice Lumumba University, Vietnamese traders, free-lance American expat grad students, and the ex-leftist yuppie clerks of German investors, alongside Central Asian migrant workers dominating the parade with the orange of construction vests, not the brand of "imported" color revolution. This was not the case, obviously: all the green, yellow, orange, and pink Technicolor was subsumed under a heavy-wet wave of the Russian tricolor. Hardly a protomultitude protesting the new European fascism, this small, heavily guarded demonstration was held together by patriotic gestures. The antinationalist protesters marched to songs from World War Two. There is no internationalist language to talk about nationalism.

Kristin Romberg, Dmitry Gutov, and I were marching together, loudly speaking English. We were discussing Marxist aesthetic problems. Gutov is an expert in the field, a devotee of the Marxist aesthetic philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz, who reconstructed Marx's aesthetics and tried to develop its implications through a defense of classical culture and a critique of modernism.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1980s, Gutov founded the Mikhail Lifshitz Institute, an informal institution that carries out public events and art exhibitions. Gutov is also one of my favorite artists. He is especially interested in "the emancipation of the human senses," the Hegelian end of art, and the Greeks as "normal children,"<sup>2</sup> and holds somewhat unorthodox views on Marxist aesthetics despite his professions of Marxist orthodoxy. So this is what we were talking about as we walked down from Myasnit'skaya Street to Lyublanka Square.

1. Mikhail Lifshitz (1906–83) was a Marxist cultural critic and philosopher best known for his compilation *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* and his introduction to Marx's aesthetic views, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Art* (Lifshitz 1973), which can be seen as a central contribution to the aesthetics debate in Russian and German Marxism in the 1930s. Lifshitz stood at the center of the editorial group of the journal *Literaturny Kritik*, which included, among others, Georg Lukács and Andrei Platonov. After the journal was closed in 1939 for defending a contradictory, altera-modernist realism against both the modernist pathos of the Russian avant-garde and Andrei Zhdanov's rehabilitation of revolutionary romanticism, Lifshitz fell into obscurity. In the 1960s, in the course of de-Stalinization under Khrushchev, he reemerged with a fundamental critique of modernist art that made him notorious among the dissident intelligentsia. In the late 1980s, Dmitry Gutov rediscovered this enigmatic, contradictory figure and founded the Lifshitz Institute in his honor. For more on Gutov and Lifshitz, see Gutov (2006).

2. In this, Gutov looks back to a famous passage in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973, 111), which was central to aesthetics debates in German and Russian Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s.

On our way, we chanced upon an old man with a communist placard that seemed to confirm our discussion's immediate relevance. The old man's front bore a remarkable slogan that read, "See the bourgeoisie / through the eyes / of Lenin," framing a retouched portrait poster along with an unevenly rendered, hand-painted frame that clashed with Lenin's neon pink *décollage* tie. This placard, far more powerful than anything Sots artists of the Soviet seventies ever produced, seemed to confirm the possibility of a gaze that would make "theoreticians of the human senses" who would themselves become "practitioners." But then we started talking to the old man to figure out what his practice was all about. As he told Gutov about communist internationalism, I had a chance to look at the back of his placard. There I saw a strange clipping from the nationalist weekly *Zavtra*: a quarter-page portrait of Stalin with the intact headline, "We Are Stalinists." The old man had clipped out the text of the article, leaving only the headline and portrait and filling the empty space with some obscure Air Force general, presumably some Stalinist leader or election candidate. I listened to everything else he said with mixed feelings. At some point, the militia came and chased him away. We marched on.

When Oxana Timofeeva joined us, we switched to Russian and started talking about the mistranslation of the Western anti-fa phenomenon into wannabe bourgeois revolutionary Russian opposition politics. Gutov wasn't too interested; he wanted to talk about aesthetic enjoyment. But we pressed on regardless. Under post-Soviet conditions, the possibility for retro Bolshevik internationalism is blocked, we said, and attempts to actualize it (for example, through theories of Empire and multitude influential at the opening of the 2000s) exhaust themselves in a critical "speaking in tongues" in the ghetto of left theory. One reason for this ongoing self-isolation is that Marxism itself has become a foreign language, so that its derivative idioms are misunderstood as scholastic gobbledygook not only by a broader audience, but by the debate's participants themselves. At least, this is what Oxana and I were saying.

All this was overshadowed and informed by an ongoing crisis in Chto Delat, a group of artists and intellectuals that Oxana, Lyosha Penzin (who joined us at the bar), and I have been part of since 2003.<sup>3</sup> Chto Delat started out with a strong community spirit, very much in the thrall of postoperaism fused with a generalized yet critical nostalgia for "real socialism," but as we worked together, contradictions emerged; these led us to an agonistic debate on the subjectivizing conditions of current political struggles in Russia in light of the more recent, post-Soviet past. It was this debate that defined the production of Chto Delat's first ten newspaper issues. It would be too far afield to discuss this debate in its nuances here but, roughly speaking, it can be described as a sectarian discussion between shifting positions: some of them more or less neo- or post-Marxist, and others closer to postanarchist *Linkskommunismus*.

3. Chto Delat is a collective platform coordinated by a work group of the same name, which includes artists (Tsaplya and Glucklya, Nikolai Oleinikov, Kirill Shuvalov, Dmitry Vilensky), philosophers (Artem Magun, Oxana Timofeeva, Alexei Penzin), and writers (David Riff, Alexander Skidan) based in Petersburg and Moscow. Since 2003, Chto Delat has been publishing an English-Russian newspaper with a special focus on the relationship between a repoliticization of Russian intellectual culture and its broader international context. Eighteen issues have appeared so far. For more, see [www.chtodelat.org](http://www.chtodelat.org).

Chto Delat had been under extreme pressure all summer from other, more orthodox colleagues, including Gutov, who loved to attack our publication from a Lifshitzian-Leninist position as ultraleftist, speculative, and vulgarly sociological. I had taken at least some of this criticism to heart, so that I began to critique what I saw as an anarchist tendency within the group (see Penzin and Riff 2005).

This internal discussion came to a head, breaking down at a collective excursion to the fort of Kronstadt near Petersburg, where Dmitry Vilensky (often a motor or sparkplug to the group, including as catalyst in Chto Delat's founding) had helped to organize an art event in memory of the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921. Oxana Timofeeva and I protested Vilensky's anarchist-autonomist, anti-Leninist pathos by getting incoherently drunk during the panel discussion. Alexei Penzin, however, was sober. He was writing a paper on Antonio Negri's and Paolo Virno's reception in Russia at the time, and started asking Petersburg anarchists what they thought of new, viral forms of solidarity, networking, and multitudes. It turned out that these autonomists were not interested in any of it, ascribing them to the *maya* of capitalism and the metatheories of contemporary art. Then again, they hadn't read Marx, either, and terms like "living labor" or "surplus value" meant very little to them. By using these terms, we were obviously a part of the state-corporate apparition—ventriloquists of the system, as Jacques Rancière puts it, speaking in tongues (or even just too blasted to speak), a micropolitical UFO, further garbling their consciousness of the wrong totality with the blinking lights of incoherent postmodern theory (that we ourselves only half-understand).<sup>4</sup>

It was in the wake of this alienating experience that I suggested starting a special kind of language practice: we would go back to the beginning and try reading Marx in English. This would, paradoxically, teach us how to communicate with activists. English translation would defamiliarize the texts enough to unlock their meaning. And some of us would improve our conversational English skills in preparation for a hasty departure if all else failed. We were already speaking in tongues anyway. Why not take this to its radical conclusion?

To my surprise, my friends agreed. Our meetings started in January 2006, and continued for about nine months. I was the "instructor," along with native speaker and art historian Kristin Romberg. The "students" were the philosophers Oxana Timofeeva, Alexei Penzin, and Vlad Sofronov, the curator Konstantin Bokhorov, and the artist Dmitry Gutov.

The school's curriculum consisted exclusively of texts by Karl Marx in English translation, downloaded and printed out from [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). We started with the "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845). Next, we read the chapter "Private Property and Communism" from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, interpolated with the famous letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge (1843). Finally, after a break when part of the group traveled to Duke University and New York, we reconvened to read a chapter from Marx's doctoral dissertation (1840). We would meet at Gutov's studio in the center of Moscow. Meetings lasted between three and four hours, with one cigarette-and-tea break, usually ending with a drink or more at a local bar. We went through several intense phases during which we would meet once or twice a week,

4. Penzin (2006) reflected upon this theme himself.

but there were also numerous interruptions whenever our respective work lives became too exhausting. In the summer, we held the meetings at my apartment and often segued into symposia. To keep the discussions lively, we would invite guests like the artists Dmitry Vilensky from Petersburg and Zanny Begg from Australia, or colleagues and friends from Moscow such as Tanya Gutova, Gutov's daughter.

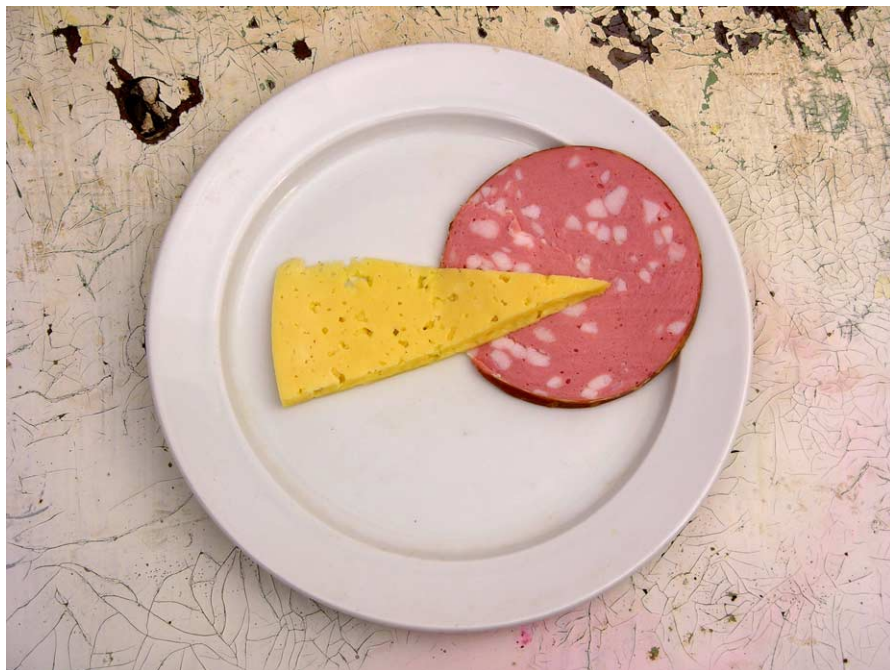
Reading what I have just written, I must admit that it sounds like bad conceptual art already somehow tainted by microcommunal self-staging. I want to assure the reader that this was not the case. In fact, our first meetings were very constructive precisely because we were not intent on producing or performing anything; we were not making art or philosophy in any professional way, but that made our work no less serious. We spent a lot of time developing some kind of methodology to brave both the linguistic and interpretive challenges of the English translations. We would start by reading the texts aloud several times, sentence by sentence, identifying difficult words and working on pronunciation problems. We would then go on to elaborate the meaning of individual terms. Here, we would discover that the English translations of Marx were much more imprecise than those in Russian. This would lead us to a discussion of the terms themselves, and then, to more general discussion of how to interpret and apply them.

In the following, I want to talk about how these discussions evolved or broke down and why they inevitably had to become art to encapsulate, if not to resolve, at least some of the contradictions they revealed. Instead of describing the resulting "work of art" as it eventually appeared at the Venice Biennale, I have tried to remember what the Karl Marx School of the English Language (KMSEL) actually was for me as a practice. In doing so I have, however, unconsciously mimed the structure of the artwork it eventually produced. I hope my coteacher and my students will forgive me this aesthetic privatization.

### Linguistic Problems

We started in January 2006 by discussing the "Theses on Feuerbach." This text was somehow the obvious choice, overquoted to the point of oblivion yet somehow still mysterious in its brevity and ephemerality (it was written on the back of a shopping list, on the run). Eager to surpass the Soviet school curriculum, we devoted around fourteen sessions to the reading of the theses alone. The discussion was very involved. For the purposes of this text, I will try to remember two of its more interesting moments.

One of the first things we discovered was that there are big problems with the English translation of the Young Marx. Russian translations of the Hegelian-Feuerbachian terminology are far more adequate. In English, something prevents Marx's language from taking on its immediate, subjectivizing, even sensual relevance when it is applied to social (political-economic) questions. The most typical example is the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*, which, as one knows, means both to 'cancel' and to 'keep'. The variations used in the translation actually have a political meaning, especially in Marx: when Marx writes of the *Aufhebung* of private property, he is not talking about its abolition by edict nor does he mean its metaphysical transcendence. Supersession (as outmoding replacement) comes closer, but still does not capture the



Blue Noses Group, *Kitchen Suprematism*, 2005, c-print. Courtesy of the artist.

complexity of the Hegelian term. It is as if the language itself (its pragmatism, its preference for positivism and analytical logic) rejects all this “Continental philosophy” in favor of something a little more substantial.

When one works with Marx, one can find many examples of such linguistic problems. For honest translators, the only way to solve them is to include the original German terms—making for a clumsy text, especially if you don’t know German and if English isn’t your native language. For example, the canonical English translation of the first thesis on Feuerbach reads, “The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object* [*nur unter der Form des Objekts*], or of *contemplation* [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively*” (1976a).<sup>5</sup>

5. The “Theses on Feuerbach” were written by Marx in Brussels in the spring of 1845, under a heading in his notebook: “(1) *ad* Feuerbach.” The canonical translation is from that original manuscript, which was rediscovered in 1924. The original version was published that year in German and in Russian translation by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in *Marx-Engels Archives*, Book I, in Moscow, and an English translation was first published in the Lawrence and Wishart edition of *The German Ideology* in 1938. It also has been published in Progress’s MECW (Marx 1976a). However, the best-known version of the “Theses” is based on Engels’ edited version, published as an appendix to his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in 1888, where he gave it the title “Theses on Feuerbach” (first published in English translation in 1903). Engels’ version is included in Progress’s MECW (Marx 1976b). A new translation also has been posted by Marxists.org (Marx 2002).



The stumbling blocks in this sentence are not just a matter of linguistic contingency. Even the first problem in this famous first sentence is highly symptomatic. Obviously, there is a decisive difference between the English 'thing' and the German *Gegenstand*. Marx is consciously staying away from the word *Ding*, the Kantian noumenon that underlies the perception and interpretation of reality. This is why an alternate translation renders *Gegenstand* as 'Object', leaving the second 'object' in the sentence in its regular, lower-case spelling (Marx 2002).

This adds further confusion. The difference between *Gegenstand* and *Objekt* is subtler than an orthographic distinction. The two words are *almost* synonyms, but there is a slight divergence: *Gegenstand* has a prehistory. According to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854), *Gegenstand* (from *gegen* 'against' + *stand* 'standpoint', 'position') dates to the fifteenth century and initially meant "armed resistance, opposition, contradiction." During the Enlightenment, this word was conflated with *Gegenwurf*, the eighteenth-century Germanization of the Middle Latin *objectum* (from *ob-* 'against' + *jacere* 'to throw'). Eventually, it became the dominant German translation for this philosophical term, used by Gotthold Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, Johann Georg Hamman, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller in precisely this sense. Later, Johann Fichte would emphasize the word's contradictory connotation: "The word *Gegenstand* indicates what it is supposed to indicate extremely well: every *Gegenstand* of an activity ... is necessarily something opposed to this activity, its *Wider-* or *Gegenstehendes* (i.e. that which resists or stands against)."

Of course, the Russian *predmet* is a far better translation than the English 'thing' (which would be *vesh* in Russian). It, too, is an eighteenth-century translation of the Latin philosophical term into the vernacular. According to Max Vasmer's *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, the word *predmet* came to Russian from Polish via literary Ukrainian in the late seventeenth century; much like *Gegenwurf*, it is a Polonization of the Latin term (*pred* 'before' + *met* from *metit* 'to mark') (Vasmer 1950–8, 357). V. V. Vinogradov's *Istoriya slov* (1994) notes that its usage only really spread in the second half of the eighteenth century, and it was attacked as a loan word whose meaning would be incomprehensible to the people. Unlike the German *Gegenstand*, the word *predmet* had no prehistory in Russian when it was introduced, but it soon generated new meanings beyond philosophical language. Thus, for example, both Nikolay Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin use it in a teleological sense, as an 'object' in the sense of a goal or a guiding vision, a concrete ideal. In the Russian high-society jargon of the eighteenth century, it was used to describe an amorous 'object of desire'. In other words, there are two meanings of the word *predmet*: one objectively linked to the introduction of Enlightenment philosophy; the other autogenerative, teleological, subjective, reflexive of the feedback between material reality and human agency.

The most important thing, in both cases, is that there is a big difference from the word 'thing' and a far smaller difference from the word 'object'. This difference is political: it could be located in the difference between a consensual model of politics, for example (thing/*Ding* originally means 'gathering, confluence, entity'), and a far more antagonistic vision of the world. The most interesting thing, of course, is that English lacks this word altogether, forcing us to invent new terms. At some



Blue Noses Group, *Kitchen Suprematism*, 2005, c-print. Courtesy of the artist.

point in our long discussion, I suggested we use subject/object. That doesn't quite do the trick. But still. The point is that the *Gegenstand* is neither thing nor object: it is reality as conscious practice in real human sensuous activity, *gegenständliche* activity, and our goal became to find out what this actually was. The mistranslation was a marker that prompted us to reimagine contradiction as the locus of *conscious* "objective" practice. What was this contradictory practice? and what would make it revolutionary?

### Virtuosic Fugue

Of course, our own practice was focused not only on the *object* of Marx's mistranslations into English as linguistic artifacts, but on the *Gegenstand* of language practice and translation in a more everyday, politico-aesthetic sense. It became very important to try to explain Marx in our own words. These ad hoc illustrations would lead to more articulate interpretations of Marx's idea of practice in relation to our own disciplines. Perhaps somewhat predictably, the central question was in how far art or philosophy could be considered "theoretical practice," and what would make them revolutionary? The various answers we gave sounded a little too confused. One reason was that we all started to interpolate our previous discussions of Marxist aesthetics and the applicability of postoperaist conceptions, now questioning them as theories that would have to prove themselves in practice by theory. When we reached

the third thesis, I tried to argue that any discussion of the Marxian notion of practice today must highlight the sensual-political consequences of what Paolo Virno (2004) discusses as virtuosity. To me, this was one of the best new insights into what one can call a “theory of practice.”

My basic argument was that, traditionally, practice finds its high point in conscious virtuosity, which reflects the fullest form of human sensuous activity because it sometimes actually seems to fully prove the this-sidedness of thought, as “truth in its sensual form.” Written in concrete code by an increasingly generalized creative intellect, it appears to mold not thought-objects but sensual reality itself, and not through blunt interventions of power but as a more subtle constituent power or “counterpower” of a never-ending practice whose perfection is always only on the horizon as a potentiality. This counterpower is most fully appreciable in aesthetic enjoyment. As far as I remember, I then detailed this somewhat self-indulgent thought in a twisted, pseudo-Hegelian fashion, though using postoperaist terms.

The virtuoso develops a “flexible personality,” as theorist Brian Holmes (2006) calls it, by moving with and against reality, internalizing any number of affects and experiences, which he or she then translates—spinning as a silkworm, as Marx once said of Milton—into a positive multiplicity of concrete, spirited movements and pauses, performed in an interplay so graceful and perfect that it appears to constitute a new, revolutionary mode of life. Marx saw such political work as “unproductive labor” whose core or surplus was like a Bataillian sexcess, impossible to appropriate. The problem is that, today, the virtuosity of such political, unproductive work becomes a measure of its productivity. Capitalism has found a way to appropriate this surplus. As the boundary between social production and reproduction fades, the workday becomes infinite.

This means that the virtuosic product itself turns out to be yet another ephemeral, processual political fiction as soon as it is reified as a serial object in the post-Fordist project economy of parallel investments. Once the dirty work of reproduction is done, even the most virtuosic practice is no longer viable as a revolution in and of itself. Losing its capacity for/against resistance, it ceases to be a real *Gegenstand*. The culture industry has subsumed and objectified it as yet another form of mimetic labor, another false start that refuses to learn; empty, impotent noodling, the equivalent of playing guitar like Jimi Hendrix for bar audiences, with the political as no more than a dormant possibility, fatally blocked and wholly appropriated as a brand, then ultimately thrown into the straitjacket of reactionary yuppie politics or worse.

At the same time, virtuosity is generalized as a paradigm for labor. Everybody plays guitar. Virtuosity no longer affords a privileged status to artist-princes, hyperintuitive businesspeople, or even Marxist translators, but becomes more and more broadly available, subject to and subject of a process of deflation and viral self-learning as it adapts to ultrarapid turnover, drawing upon proliferating technical instruments of engineered subjectification. This process of self-learning, I argued, leads to yet another Hegelian “death of art,” which results in an unconscious self-consciousness of a new, incredible wealth, containing the potentiality for a new state of grace, a new degree of true virtuosity. Once post-Fordist workers realize the counterpower of the mimesis they have mastered, they will step aside from their “general intellect” and realize that they can “make the reality” of their own lives—that they are the



Susan Jahoda, *Moscow Streets*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

subject/objects of the process. So at least I argued, for what it's worth, cross-pollinating Virno with a vulgarized Lukács.

### E-Mail Responses

It sounded a little cheesy and messianic when I said it, and sounds even more banal in retrospect. But OK; it did the trick. The attempt to explain “human sensuous activity” in such argotized, postoperaist terms sparked a heated polemic. I asked the students to do some written homework. The responses I received were virtuosic, to say the least.

Konstantin Bokhorov, who shares Gutov's more orthodox Marxist position, attacked me for resorting to vulgar sociology. He wrote that he could not “conceive of [my] discussion of virtuosity at all” and wanted me or someone else to explain it to him more fully. He noted that “the word ‘virtuosity’ obviously came from ‘virtue,’” which he initially thought was “linguistically connected to truth.” But when he looked it up, he found that “virtus, [in Latin] means the male function conceived in terms of strength or force; hence the power to accomplish.” This reminded Bokhorov of our discussion of power and counterpower, which was too vague, and irritated him because it was not interested in absolute truth. “You remember Marx is saying that man must prove the truth which he defines in other words as the reality and power of man's thinking. From this I conclude that virtuosity can be the virtue of thinking but

its substantial quality all the same should be proven in practice.” The same could be said of “many other forms of unproductive labor including politics. Thieves or hucksters also may be virtuosos of some kind . . . How to understand what is what? Only in practice. In practice, it becomes clear what is true and what is not.”

Answering Bokhorov’s challenge for me, Penzin contextualized virtuosity through the theme of immaterial labor. “The main idea,” he wrote, “is that late capitalism breaks very distinctly with the old hegemony of traditional industrial labor (conveyer, discipline, mechanical operations which mutilate and alienate the worker) . . . Labor becomes more and more “immaterial”—communicative, affective, symbolic, linguistic, virtuosic, intellectual and so on. Its main feature is that it doesn’t produce some material product but rather some action, event, speech. Of course, a brilliant speech can produce some indelible record in our memory, some mimetic reactions, but some immaterial manager’s decisions can have very real results in reality . . . The cardinal modus of such labor consists in practicing some innate human abilities, capacities which are, so to say, not so visible as material things and operations.”

Oxana Timofeeva’s response was more direct. After admitting to some confusion about Marx’s “incredibly tough” thinking, she identified what she saw as a central paradox. Her argument went as follows: “Truth—reality and power—belongs to capital. How can we (but who are we?) get our delicate, beautiful truth from its dirty greasy clutches? The paradox is, however, that, so far as it is, it is not truth. We can grasp the truth as truth, as our own truth and not somebody else’s, through revolutionary praxis. But how can you reach this very revolutionary praxis if not through a theoretical construct? How can you coincide with it? Is it really possible? Is it possible now? That is the question, not the answer here. And the idea of art, of virtuosity, of the performative force of self-change is not enough, if the world itself, including the world of art with its potentials of action, is appropriated by somebody else.” This turned out to be very far-sighted. As for Bokhorov’s note on virtuosity, she answered that it sounded like “some Derridian deconstructivism, like a critique of phallophonologocentrism in which truth, virtue, male function and power are all the same masculine shit.”

Kristin Romberg, my coteacher, corrected these three e-mails and offered some clarifying comments of her own. She made the important point that “any gender identification is very quickly confused to the point of meaninglessness by relating the acquisition of virtuosity to practice, a process that contains both the passive/receptive and the active, the mind and the body.” Noting that this entire discussion was not only relevant to the conceptualization of post-Fordist conditions, but also applicable to her field of interest (she is writing her dissertation on Alexei Gan), she tried to bring pragmatic clarity back to the discussion, which she felt was tending toward idealization.

Kristin reminded us of a central contradiction: it is one thing “to imagine a revolutionary praxis as a transformative process of performing behavior (or thought) that is then gradually made actual,” but the reality of paid labor—including self-changing virtuosity—is exactly the opposite of its ideal: “most often the performance that one is expected to deliver is of exactly the behavior that one finds most alienating and objectionable (this is why they give you money to do it, i.e., make your interests abstract to the point where your best interest coincides with theirs).”

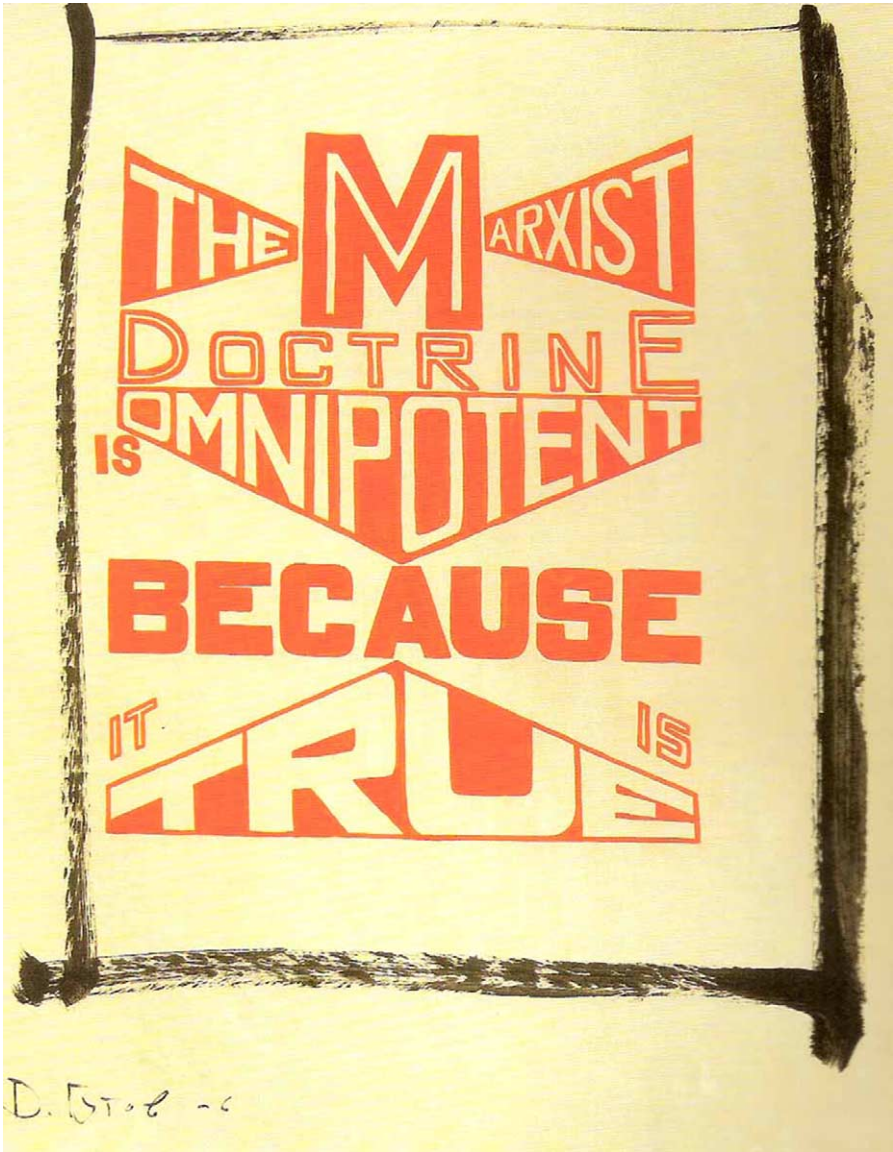
Norms and structures of power thus govern every performance, varying from place to place. Often one only feels “free” to succeed or fail.

## Interlude

This e-mail exchange ended just as abruptly as it had begun, without Dmitry Gutov or Vlad Sofronov saying anything. I left for Berlin to do my taxes. When I returned, I heard that there had been a very heated argument about psychoanalysis and Freudianism, which Gutov and Bokhorov rejected as a “science of lies.” Apparently, it got a little personal. It was clear that KMSEL was becoming more and more of an “immaterial,” biopolitical project: it was reaching the necessary degree of erotic affect, autopoietic virtuosity dissolving itself in inefficient, self-effacing negativity. As the level of affect grew and old polemics returned, it became clear that we were all defending our particular identities and roles and translating these into two “colonial languages,” reproducing the indifferent antithesis between the “critical criticism” of a schoolchild and the authoritarian voice of the educator. Both refuse to yield though they hypocritically declare their friendship. Only “being-together” can break through the tedium of their standoff, including all the exclusions in excess and affect: bursts of laughter, tearful apologies, and, of course, the cool-headed detachment of resignation.

The only thing we could think of to resolve the conflicts was to return our focus to the concrete material instead of going on about virtuosity or psychoanalysis. Reading very slowly, we tried to make sure that everyone really understood every word. We spoke more and more about grammar. The hermeneutic of translation became less and less important as the German original receded as something its English reproduction could never really reach. Strangely, the more we focused on the English texts themselves, the worse my own native English became, undergoing a reduction of its own, eventually turning into a strange post-Soviet hybrid. This went both ways: whenever we talked theory or art in Russian, we would use some of the English terms we had been learning.

The content of our discussions was also undergoing a reduction. The more closely we read the English text, the more our own limited words forced us to leave behind a “classical” body of knowledge and talk about philosophical and artistic problems in the language of the everyday. As we gave ourselves less time for monologues, we became more cautious and at the same time more anecdotal. The texts themselves were first mantras, then mirrors, and now empty resonators. Their re-collection (*Er-innerung*) was a confidential, nocturnal activity, held in the interior of a Marxist monastery. Sometimes it was very romantic in a Hegelian way, especially in the summer, discussing the Paris manuscripts of 1844. Looking out over the grey-in-grey ruins of state socialism from a middle-class window onto a ruddy sunset, patiently waiting for the owl of Minerva to take flight, I told my comrades how my ex-wife turned into an espresso machine. Our polemic came later, on park benches at night, falling apart and gathering before yet another excessive dialectical jump.



Dmitry Gutov, *The Marxists Doctrine Omnipotent...*, 2006, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

### Paintings

As our practice of reading Marx in English evolved from translation to polemic to reduction to renewed affect, Dima Gutov began to make a fresh painting for each time we came together—to “decorate our classroom,” as he put it, resorting to an old school trick of his, “to be exempt from doing written homework.” Many of these

pieces were lost to Gutov's method of erasing work that he does not find satisfactory. But some survived. These paintings reflected the evolution of our work as a group. Beginning with provocations and polemical slogans, such as Lenin's famous quote "The Marxist Doctrine is Omnipotent Because It is True," Gutov soon moved to a reductive practice of his own: the facsimile. Using reproductions of Marx's manuscripts, he began to develop a calligraphic practice that can be likened to meditation, repeated over and over again until it becomes virtuosic in the way I tried to describe above, a reproductive translation that produces its own reality. A piece emblematic for this mimetic mode of working is his set of paintings that repeat the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: the old German text is legible, even though the artist has only repeated its biomechanical contours without understanding the actual German sequence of letters, umlauts, and other marks. Thus forced to perfect the mimesis of outer form, he reproduces Marx's own gestural calligraphy, an expressive handwriting often legible only to Marx's closest relatives and friends. Over 2006, these canvases became more and more ambitious.

Paradoxically, Gutov's painterly self-reduction—he becomes a scribe who does not understand the Greek or Latin he copies—leads to a reappropriation. Marx becomes an artist among other things, perhaps the greatest artist of them all, the Dante of the nineteenth century, whose practices followed a certain system. Can the expressive causality of this persona—a singular Marx with an absolute content—be felt in every line he ever drew? Or is this persona just what Giorgio Agamben (1999) has described as a "man without content," who desperately tries to hold on to the notion of species-being, *Gattungswesen* nevertheless? Gutov interrogates this contradiction through mimesis, subverted and then turned inside out by a stylized lack of understanding, pointing back toward Marx's own polemical, increasingly organized mimetic attack on capital on all fronts, including from the swamp of aesthetics. He achieves this by miming the physical dance of words onto a page, which, as any writer knows, produces a material reality of its own. Can this side of Marx—a Marx saturated with aesthetic meaning—still be the basis for a Marxist aesthetic under the even more adverse conditions of neocapitalism? Who is the Marxist artist today? A producer of fetishist facsimiles? Or a scribe who illuminates the text of a reading group's formation and dissolution?

No matter what the answer is, the appearance of Gutov's paintings faced KMSEL with a serious challenge. Initially, we were not an art project but a discussion group aiming for self-clarification and practicing English. But now, we constantly argued in the shadow of Gutov's virtuosity-artifacts paintings like potential producers, half-bored with the inevitable production that was about to begin. This converted our free time to the anteroom of work. Work is not always a bad thing. As art professionals, critics, or philosophers involved in real cultural production, we realized that we were all too "worldly" to stay in the Marxist monastery for long. Strangely, this is something Gutov proved by making art in which he takes on the role of a scribe.

To make a long story short, we started arguing about how to reproduce the practice as a collective artwork without reifying the practice itself. I suggested that we make a film of a symposium, a consciously culinary celebration, as a way of both binding and sublating our polemic affects, narrating and mediating them as a dish of a neocapitalist reality, to be taken with a grain of salt.



The others didn't like this idea. But they agreed: we should make a film. Because production brings both "being-together" and "self-disciplinary contemplation" to an entirely different level of collective (and perhaps antagonistic) action than blind activism; on this we could all agree. But, like our activist colleagues, we still could not agree on what to produce. So there was only discussion, and not even bad art, undertaken collectively. And, of course, there was Gutov's singular attempt at Marxist mimesis.

## Epilogue

In September 2006, the curator Robert Storr was visiting Petersburg where Dmitry Vilensky, my colleague from Chto Delat, kindly handed him a copy of our newspaper, in which I had published the text that has served as the copying foil for the present essay. The text was accompanied by two of the paintings I have tried to interpret above. Slated to curate the next Venice Biennale, Storr was doing research in Russia and was already interested in Gutov, so the text found a sympathetic reader. When we were introduced, Storr seemed very enthusiastic about our practice. Both Gutov and I had the sense that a transformation of KMSEL into an art project would be inevitable. Guarded enthusiasm was mixed with a sense of foreboding, confirmed when our initiative actually fell apart. Our intense, close reading had turning into an overextended labor of love and seemed only one step away from dirty work in the affect economy, opening the door to endless workdays by unpaid enthusiasts. This, clearly, is not what we had set out to do. Also, the political and personal disputes within the group made it difficult to imagine any productive continuation. While we were in New York, Penzin made his final attack: "You're aestheticizing Marxism. And Marxism is all about *crude thinking*." This was obviously polemical hyperbole, but from there on, further communication seemed impossible. Especially when Penzin and Timofeeva attacked Gutov as a neocon.

The actual invitation to participate in the Venice Biennale came in February 2007. Our initial proposal was to build a replica of Gutov's studio as a total installation. We wanted to make an audio track that would reproduce our language practice and arguments in surround sound at volumes high enough to make the canvases vibrate. We would reconvene the group and try to reenact our conflicts, though working with a new text. And then we would make audio and paintings from that experience. After a while, it turned out that spatial constraints made the construction of a "resonance chamber" impossible, as we were slated to show in the Corderia of the Arsenale. We decided to try to brave this difficulty by making a "radical" ideological gesture in returning to Marx's first philosophical text, his dissertation: "On the Difference between the Epicurean and Democritean Philosophies of Nature." Modernity becomes antiquity: through us, Marx speaks ancient Greek. The resulting audio track is excessive and performative as we stumble through this foreign world of atoms and declinations, either rejecting our metaphysical surroundings or feeling strangely at home, mounting combat with the arms of criticism between Hegelians and Althusserians. But in Venice, over the din of art consumers and a nearby video by Valie Export, similarly naturalistic in its treatment of language, the crackling

soundscape of our arguments was almost impossible to hear. Despite the obvious resonance of our practices with Robert Storr's slogan "Think with the Senses / Feel With the Mind," this "piece" almost vanished: virtuosic jottings on the back of a shopping list. Only its oblique reconstruction in this essay has given it a new lease on life.

Moscow

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Anatoly Osmolovsky, *Hardware*, 2006, bronze, 12 objects, Documenta, Kassel, Germany. Courtesy of the artist.

# You Can't Anticipate Explosions: Jacques Rancière in Conversation with Chto Delat

*Jacques Rancière, Artemy Magun,  
Dmitry Vilensky and Alexandr Skidan*

*Jacques Rancière and members of the group Chto Delat (St. Petersburg/Moscow)—Artemy Magun, Dmitry Vilensky, and Alexandr Skidan—discuss the pertinence of the concept of the avant-garde to the history of art and the present day. Chto Delat members defend the thesis of an essential link between art's political message and its formal features, such as a general "negativity" in relation to the classical canon. They also suggest a distinction between modernism and the avant-garde based on differences in the relation of art to life. Rancière argues against this thesis, returning in detail to the history of art in the twentieth century. He suggests that avant-gardism was a specific, strategic understanding of art that aimed to transform life. The art of the twentieth century was much broader than the avant-garde movement, including a more abstract, minimalist movement as well as an attempt to be faithful to the new forms of modern life. Generally, Rancière insists on his aesthetic theory, according to which the political role of art consists in providing an open and autonomous sensorium for all members of society, allowing them to transform their ways of feeling and acting; it dates not from avant-gardism but from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The directly political understanding of art, for him, comes too close to the outdated "ethical regime of art."*

**Key Words:** Avant-Garde, Modernism, Aesthetics, Perestroika, Theodor Adorno

*In May 2007, during a visit to St. Petersburg, Jacques Rancière met with members of Chto Delat (What is to be done?). Their conversation was conducted in English and transcribed by Adel Cheresnaya and Artemy Magun.*

**Artemy Magun:** The question we would like to discuss with you is the connection of aesthetics to politics today. Is there a specific type of art that would be both fruitful and urgent in its relevance to the contemporary political and cultural situation? Our hypothesis is that the avant-garde, both as a phenomenon and a notion, could be important for us today.

This view comes out of our historical situation, which was shaped by the constitutive moment of *perestroika*. At that moment, we discovered both a form of democratic politics and new forms of expression. As democratic mobilization

challenged the authoritarian and corrupt power of the Soviet state, there was a major revival of interest in both Western modernism (not just Kafka and Joyce but also Pollock, etc.) and Soviet avant-garde art of the 1920s and 1930s; what seemed important was the conjunction of this type of art with political emancipation. For me, for example, this is still true today. But in general, that view seems to be quite unusual: most people don't see any connection of their artistic practice to political action, the invention of new forms of life, or political struggle. The postmodernism that dominated the 1980s and 1990s was particularly characteristic of this disjunction: it used any number of modernist or even avant-garde techniques and principles of formal invention, but clearly rejected any serious political statement, Utopianism, etc. But today, groups like ours feel that we can't just sit down and do art, claiming that any way of life is OK. We need to act or at least to explore the possibility of collective action and, at the same time, to remain aesthetically radical. What do you think? Is the avant-garde still usable as a notion?

**Jacques Rancière:** What strikes me is, precisely, that your relation to avant-garde art was mediated through the democratic aspirations of the time of the *perestroika*. This means that the avant-garde took its relevance in a certain present as a thing of the past. The question is: what thing and what past exactly? It seems to me that there are two concepts of avant-garde art and of its political effect. There is the idea of avant-garde art as an art intentionally designed to create new forms of life. Such was the art of the Russian futurists and constructivists, the art of El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodtchenko, and their like. They were people who really had a project to change the world, using certain materials and certain forms. Avant-garde art, in that way, was destined to create a new fabric of common sensible life, erasing the very difference between the artistic sphere and the political sphere. When you mention Kafka, Joyce, or Pollock, it is not the same at all. What they have in common with the former is the rejection of standard representational art. But they did not want to create new forms of life; they did not want to merge art and politics. In this case, the political effect of art is something like what you mentioned: a transformation of our ways of feeling and thinking, the construction of a new sensorium. But this new sensorium is not the consequence of a desire to create new forms of collective experience. Instead it is the very break between the contexts in which Joyce or Kafka created and the context in which you read them that gave them their "political" relevance. So I would say, first, that the idea of the avant-garde entails two different things, two different ideas of the connection between the artistic and the political; second, that the concept of the avant-garde that you had in mind at that time was a retrospective construction. As a matter of fact, avant-gardism and modernism as they are used in contemporary debates are retrospective constructions that are supposed to allow us to have it both ways: to have both the collective impulse and aspiration to a new life and the separating effect of the aesthetic break.

**Dmitry Vilensky:** Still, maybe we can start by positing some generic features of the avant-garde. For example, what immediately springs to mind is the principle of sublation of art into life. Then, of course, there is the direct connection with political struggle, and the idea that art should and must change the world, on different levels.

Then, there is also a very interesting idea, and a very complicated one, coming from Adorno: namely, that art should keep its own nonidentity. To me, this means that the avant-garde is not about some tangible object of art; it's always about the composition of different things. For example, Malevich was not just about pictures. Actually, most of his paintings were sketches for large-scale public art projects. So I think that the avant-garde is based on the rejection of fetishization into objects that are bought and sold; its main goal is to supply the subject with instruments for self-knowledge and self-realization through aesthetic experience.

**Magun:** Maybe we should begin by making a strong distinction between modernism and avant-gardism. Modernism would use innovative nonrepresentational techniques to sublimate art itself, to make an absolute work of art that would really include everything. The avant-garde uses the same techniques to do the opposite: to break up art, to explode art into life, achieving a kind of Hegelian end of art. So modernism would mean "life absorbed into art," and avant-gardism "art absorbed into life."

**Rancière:** It's unclear if the techniques really are the same. I wonder whether you can describe a general model of modernism, a general model of artistic destruction and change in the forms of perception and sensibility. In fact, artistic modernism, just as avant-gardism, can be defined either in terms of minimalist subtraction or in terms of excess. Modernist art in the 1910s may mean the creation of pure abstract forms in the way of Mondrian or dynamic explosion in the way of Boccioni. In both cases, there is a rupture with the standards of figurative painting or sculpture, but it is not the same procedure. In the same way, literary modernism could mean Khlebnikov as well as Kafka; in the 1940s, Adorno still had to oppose a true (Schönberg) and a false (Stravinsky) musical modernism. So I don't think that there is a kind of general model of artistic invention that can define art's modernism. It has to be defined by a certain connection of artistic practice with the modern forms of social life. Modernism involves a specific impulse, some kind of will to change the world, to connect the forms of artistic practice with forms of life. Let us think about abstract painting: you took the example of Pollock, but if you compare Pollock to, for example, Malevich, it is clear that for the latter it was a question of inventing new social forms, new dynamics of life. And in Pollock, it's absolutely the contrary. With Pollock it was the end of a certain form of activist art, of a certain form of involvement of art in social practice that had been very strong in the United States in the 1930s. The American abstraction of the 1940s was a return to art and only art after the involvement of many artists in the Popular Front. So it is not a question of separating autonomous modernism from avant-gardism viewed as the fusion of art and life. The point is that there are two concepts of modernism. The modernists of the 1910s and 1920s were concerned with an art oriented toward the fusion of art and life, or at least with an art whose forms would match the forms and rhythms of modern life. This is true for painters like Malevich, Delaunay, or Boccioni, for architects and designers like Gropius or Le Corbusier, stage designers like Appia, filmmakers like Abel Gance, most of whom had no political avant-gardist commitment. That modernism in general was about an art fitting modern life. The second concept is that which was elaborated retrospectively in the 1940s by theorists like Adorno and Greenberg as a consequence

of the former's failure. They privileged figures of "subtraction"—abstract painting, dodecaphonic music, minimalist literature—because they equated that artistic subtraction with the withdrawal of the "totalitarian" will to merge art into life and eventually with the mosaic rejection of the images. That's why Kafka and Schönberg became emblems of modernity for Adorno. I would call it an after-modernism or a countermodernism. Ironically, it is that after-modernism that became the target of postmodern criticism.



Chto Delat, Installation view of the Activist Club with film *Protest Match* by Dmitry Vilensky and mural by Nikolay Oleinikov at the exhibition "Progressive Nostalgia" at Prato, 2008, photograph by Dmitry Vilensky. Courtesy of the artist.

**Magun:** Thank you, Jacques, for this broad and persuasive historical panorama. However, I would insist that there is something common between modernism and the avant-garde, or between first and second modernism, in your definition (and, to be precise, between the politicized and depoliticized forms of your "first" modernism as well). I would mention, first, the destruction of form, of figure, the move toward abstraction, toward the elements of this form (and this is true both of the minimalist and of the more ornamental strategies), and second, the constant self-reflection on art and its language, within art and its language. Third, to speak in the terms of your own aesthetic theory, both "modernisms" are pursuing the direct presentation of background and not of the figure, the revelation of the nonthematic layers of perception.

One also has to mention that most of the great art of both types tended toward prosaization, de-auratization in terms of Benjamin (even though the loss of aura can, of course, itself be auratic), use of technology, and so on. Of course, this is more characteristic of the avant-garde (or your “first modernism”), but there was such a trend in (the second) modernism, too (if you take Joyce, Eliot, or the late Pound). In your terms, this profanization and the internal self-critique of art is highly characteristic for both wings of the “first” modernism, but the minimalism of the “second” modernism plays into it as well. Such profane art could no longer offer a return to the original, primordial elements of perception—only to the ruins of technology. And nevertheless, it bears in itself a Utopian force, too—a force of an alien, solitary universe calling up your deepest capacities; think of Tarkovsky’s *Zona* or Martinson’s *Aniara*.

In both modernism and the avant-garde (or in your two “modernisms”), there dwells this strange kind of Utopia. This Utopia is sealed; it is a promise of Utopia, or the Utopia of promise. Even Malevich, politically engaged as he was, made a black, opaque square (the Utopia of modernism) and a white square that is dissolved in life up to the point of disappearance. In any case, this Utopia is not self-transparent; it works through the destruction of meaning and through the manifestation of nonsense. Modernism holds an opaque mirror to the world, and the avant-garde makes the raw texture of life, the meaningless corporeality, burst through the social reality as a sphere of meaning.

**Rancière:** When you designate avant-gardism as an impulse to put art into life, the point is that this definition of avant-gardist art may come down to what I called the ethical regime. When Plato discusses poetry, both Plato and the poets are convinced that poetry is a form of education, and the question is whether it is a good form of education. So, the idea of the intervention of art into life is not something novel or specific to avant-gardism. In a certain way, it is something from the past. The contradiction of the aesthetic regime of art is that the political potential of art is first defined on the basis not of the autonomy of art, but of the autonomy of aesthetic experience. Schiller’s idea of the “aesthetic education of humanity” (and all that followed) is based precisely on the idea that there is a very specific aesthetic experience that is at odds with normal forms of experience. Before this aesthetic turn, which was punctuated by Kant and Schiller, forms of art were always connected with forms of life; art was destined to express religious truth or the majesty of the monarchs, to decorate palaces and enchant aristocratic life, etc. And the aesthetic break means that there is something as a specific sphere of experience of art which has nothing more to do with any kind of social function ... The problem is that the idea of the political potential of art was first defined on the basis of this disruption. This is what I tried to describe when I spoke about workers’ emancipation. I mentioned there that worker’s emancipation was also aesthetic emancipation, and that aesthetic emancipation precisely had to do with the fact that there was something as an aesthetic experience available to everybody. That availability of a new form of experience was possible because artworks were now identified in such a way that they could be seen as works of art regardless of why and for whom they had been created. The Utopian potential of aesthetic experience was first predicated on that “autonomization” of aesthetic experience from the ethical adequation between art and life.



The internal contradiction of avant-gardism is that it is defined on the basis of the potential of the aesthetic experience qua autonomous experience and, at the same time, it tries to stop precisely this separation in order to create a new sensorium of common life. This is why for me it is impossible to give an unequivocal definition of avant-gardism. Avant-gardism may be defined as the transformation of the forms of art into forms of life. And it may be defined as the preservation of the autonomy of aesthetic experience from that transformation. This withdrawal can also be described as a Utopia, as the preservation of a Utopian promise enclosed in the very contradiction of autonomy, in the form of the veil or the enigma as with Adorno. I'd say that both positions have good arguments precisely because they reflect the original contradiction I indicated above.

**Vilensky:** It is very important that you mentioned the autonomy of aesthetic experience. I think it would be interesting to reconsider the idea of art's autonomy in relation to ideas of workers' autonomy that were developed in Italy by the *Autonomia Operaia*. Not separation in the Adornian sense, but autonomy in the sense of the self-organization of cultural production that countermands the market system with a pressure of its own.

**Rancière:** Well, I think there may be confusion about the word "autonomy." I tried to distinguish between the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and the autonomy of art. Defining the aesthetic experience also means defining a specific kind of capacity. Art is about creating a space for unexpected capacities, which means also space for unexpected possibilities. I think that is not the same as the idea of autonomy in the sense, for instance, of the Italian *operaisti*. In a sense, their autonomy meant autonomy with respect to the organization of parties, communist parties and trade unions. This is still a minimal definition of autonomy. The real content of autonomy is equality: it is the recognition and the enforcement of the capacity of anybody. The Italian autonomist movement involved that capacity, but it tied it up with something quite different, which is a view of the global economic process coming down to the idea that everything belongs to the same basis. Then everything is production, and this form of production produces this form of organization, and then there is a complete translatability between working, struggling, loving, making art, and so on. I'd say that this idea of autonomy in fact suppresses precisely the autonomy of the spheres of experience.

And with respect to the relation between art and the market, there has already been a long search for a form of art that would not be marketable at all. Today there is a form of artistic activism that asks artists to make only interventions, to act directly as political activists. But this means, in a certain way, that you keep art as the property of the artist—for instance, as an action of the artist. I'd say that this is a certain form of deprivation because, when you say that art is action, that it must not be made visible and marketable, this means that aesthetic experience is not made available to anybody. Also, I think, it's quite difficult to define artistic practice on the negative basis of doing something that would not be marketable because everything can be marketable. In the 1970s, the conceptual artists said: if you don't create objects you don't create anything for the market, and thus it is political subversion.

We know what happened to conceptual art, right? They did not sell objects; they sold ideas! It's a kind of perfection of the capitalist system, and not at all a break with it.

**Alexandr Skidan:** Maybe I could shift the angle of our discussion a little bit. I'd like to talk about poetry and literature. In the sixties and seventies, in the Soviet Union at least, poetry was a very powerful thing. There was no public politics that could translate and organize discussions of philosophical and political issues so poetry took over this task. Then, in the late eighties and nineties, this collapsed totally; poetry is now something very marginal. So I'd like to turn to this art of words to say that there is a very interesting and special option in language, mainly the negativity of the language which only poetry and special rhetorical devices can uncover and use, in opposition and in resistance to these marketable things. That's why I think Artem is right in referring to figures like Kafka. One could also think of Beckett or Blanchot, whose strategy it was to work directly with negativity—not in the sense of deformation of syntax, words, or normative grammar, but as a special strategy which refuses to bring an expression to fulfillment, which works in suspension and negativity as the inner force of every language. In philosophical or scientific discourse, when we name or give a name to something, we usually think that we open a new meaning or a new space for meaning. But poetry may work in a different way or on a different level—at least, avant-garde and post-avant-garde poetry when it undermines or effaces meaning, questioning the



Chto Delat, Installation view of the Activist Club with mural by Nikolay Oleinikov at the exhibition "Progressive Nostalgia" at Prato, 2008, photograph by Dmitry Vilensky. Courtesy of the artist.

very possibility of making sense as such. So what do you think about this negativity as a force of politicizing the art of words?

**Rancière:** Well, the question is how you would define “negativity.” I prefer to speak in terms of dissensus. “Dissensus” means that you question the legitimacy of the division of things and the division of words, of how they mean or of how they conceal meaning—and this can be done in many ways. This dissensus always refers to a certain dominant state of language. So I’d say that poetic subversion is always referred to a certain consensual type of language, and the consensual or dominant practice of language changes very fast. It is clear, for instance, that surrealism has by now been mostly reintegrated in the dominant language. Surrealism as a kind of uncanny connection between words is today the principle of many advertising slogans. So what I mean is that perhaps there is a too easy idea of subversion, as if there were a power of subversion in the poetry as such—no, I don’t think so. There is a power to struggle against the dominant ways of presenting things, making sense of things, of connecting words, and so on. But I’m not sure that negativity is a good term for this because negativity is one of those terms that precisely anticipate and presuppose a kind of identity between political invention and political subversion. For instance, if we define a way of connecting words with words as negativity, we bestow it in advance with a power that is not that obvious. For instance, speaking of Kafka and Beckett, I’m not sure that negativity is a good word for defining Kafka’s art. You can also think of Kafka as a writer who wants to renew the tradition of the fable. You can inscribe it inside a modernist tradition of the short story, from Maupassant to Borges, which is multifaceted and whose structure has many various, if not antagonistic, implications and uses: social denunciation, nihilistic irony, new mythology, etc. It is something wider and much more complex than the idea of negativity. The same, by the way, is true of the idea of minimalism, as though minimalism were a kind of a guarantee of political radicalism. In France, for the last twenty or thirty years, you know, there has been produced a big bulk of minimalist literature. Yes, it is minimal, but it is generally consensual and bourgeois. It has nothing to do with any kind of political subversion.

**Magun:** So you don’t think that there is some subversion immanent to the work of art; you hold that it depends entirely on the context? You could say that both Eisenstein and Leni Riefenstahl worked for totalitarian regimes, but there is a difference in their poetics. In Eisenstein, even though we see the ideological overdetermination, we still see the avant-gardist impulse, negativity preserved. Maybe there is something in great art that resists commodification, something not appropriable in it. It is an Adornian argument, but I am using it here in a sense that is larger than the Adornian one, because I agree with Dima that we can pass from the autonomy of art or of artistic experience to some kind of formation of political zones of autonomy, of political enclaves.

**Rancière:** The point is to know to what extent you can identify the avant-gardist impulse with negativity. Well, you mentioned Eisenstein as a case of artistic negativity because of his theory of montage and his practice of fragmentation. But it is unclear,



Chto Delat, Installation view of the Activist Club at the exhibition “Société Anonyme,” with mural by Nikolay Oleinikov, “Kids Playground,” Le Plato, Paris, April 2007, photograph by Dmitry Vilensky. Courtesy of the artist.

you know, on what exactly the power of Eisenstein’s movies was predicated. Let us take, for example, *The General Line*. It’s unclear whether the force of this film was predicated on montage or on certain forms of lyricism reminiscent of the Russian paintings of the nineteenth century. They are striking, those huge paintings of people working in the fields! Perhaps the force of this film is related to this kind of lyricism of the gesture of work, you know, and not actually with montage. More precisely, montage has two different uses in his film: there is the dialectical parallel between the old and the new, which is certainly not the most exciting in the film; and there is the “ecstatic” montage in the sequences of the cream machine or reaping in which technical innovation is used to order to provide a sense of collective epics. “Negativity” here eventually means a combination of formalism and lyricism that fell off target. From my point of view, it reveals the tension between aesthetic separation and ethical will, which is inherent in the aesthetic regime of art. But it is not a concept actually able to account either for its artistic texture or for its political implementation.

I don’t say that the political import of art is only a question of context. What I want to say is that the creation of political zones of autonomy is based on an aesthetic experience, which is not the consequence of artistic strategies. The question is: what forms of perception, what spaces of experience are constructed as the result of artistic practice? If we want to contribute to a free space of experience, we have to step back a little from the idea of artistic practice as anticipating the new life.

**Magun:** I have another question. You are saying that art reframes the relationships between what is visible or not, what is acceptable or not to see. But again, isn't there a step or a move that art should do before that, like some more fundamental gesture that has exactly to do with negativity, with the explosion of this border before any reframing takes place? Any reframing relies on some kind of crisis, some sort of destruction. It is the same point with political revolution. If you look into the history of the political and social forms, you can say with Tocqueville that actually nothing really happened in the French Revolution, that there was just a constant process of transformation. But we know that there was something more fundamental which really made a crisis out of this transformation—which brought this slow transformation into an explosion. I wonder if this is not an additional problem and additional level on which we have to consider aesthetics.

**Rancière:** Well, the point is that, precisely, you can't anticipate explosions. Or, if you anticipate an explosion, you precisely risk blocking or diverting it from its own law, from its own form of progression. It is true that education can provoke this form of explosion, but it's unclear whether you can predict the form of transformation and the way in which it becomes an explosion. I have the suspicion that there is a certain reminder of transcendence in the idea of the radical break. It is true: at a certain time, you can see what a radical break is. If you cut off the head of the king, then, yes, it's a radical break; if you design a new kind of constitution, which gives new rights to the population, new capacities to the people, etc., you can say that there is a radical break. But in the field of art, it's quite difficult to define the moment of radical break. This is true for forms of art, and it is also true for their social and political implementation. Let us take the case of abstract art, which has often been thought of as the right example of artistic break. As a matter of fact, this break had been anticipated from the nineteenth century by a move in the way painting was looked at. In the nineteenth-century prose of art criticism, you can see this shift of the gaze that makes it so that figurative paintings are more and more viewed with an "abstract eye," which sees in them no longer the story or anecdotes but the events of matter and color. In that way "realist" writers of the nineteenth century, like the Goncourts, created the conditions of visibility of "abstract" painting. The dismissal of figurative painting is part of a much wider process, which may itself be viewed in terms of evolution or in terms of revolutionary break. Abstract forms, as Dima said, were about the construction of new buildings and new settings. At this point, the question is to what extent we can connect the "destructive" moment with a political break. The glorification of "function" in the revolution of architecture and design, from the Werkbund to the Bauhaus and l'Esprit nouveau, was intended as a reaction against the nineteenth-century bourgeois imitation of aristocratic styles, but it led to the achievement of a new capitalistic and Fordist rationality as well as to the idea of a workers' new world. And, in fact, the new architecture conceived for the multitudes very often ended up in the construction of elegant villas for the wealthy. The power of technology could be aligned with the power of the engineers, the power of the workers, or that of the "educated" classes. Le Corbusier's book *Towards an Architecture* heralds a "regeneration," a new epoch for Humanity. But it sets it up as a dilemma: "Architecture or Revolution."

**Skidan:** This makes me think that there is a mixture of two different logics at work. We have been trying to find this disjunctive connection: connection through the rupture between aesthetics and politics. But at the same time, I am haunted by the feeling that there is actually an immanent logic of art itself, an artistic development that picked up speed, as you note, somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. According to this logic, each next step must be a break with earlier rules and norms. We can see that artistic ideas that were full of political meaning soon become products that write themselves into the frame of an immanent aesthetic logic, which has no relation to the transformation of the existing order of things. This is the double bind of contemporary art. As a result, aesthetics takes on the role of a double agent: on the one hand, you do something that addresses the outside and demands “a change of the world” but, at the same time, it is a finite product, evaluated within aesthetic space and its criteria.

**Vilensky:** I think, Sasha, that both art and emancipatory politics always have a surplus that cannot be appropriated by the institutions of power. Another thing is that we should think not only of the market’s totality, but also of the emancipatory practices that constantly break this totality. I think that the avant-garde is indelibly connected to political events or movements that prepare its way. But if we look at these movements, we can see that their form is historical and that it changes. For example, the new “movement of movements” that arose after Seattle has basically transformed its subjectivities and the forms of their political representation. This is a moment of dynamism, or rupture, in both politics and art.



Susan Jahoda, *Moscow*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## Profanation of the Profane, or, Giorgio Agamben on the Moscow Biennale

*Alexei Penzin*

*This essay outlines several points discussed during Giorgio Agamben's visit to Moscow in 2006. Among these were the problems of contemporary genealogy and the economy of power, in which capitalism operates as a religion. This is discussed in connection with a Russian cultural scene that has been fueled by petroleum dollars.*

**Key Words:** Giorgio Agamben, Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Russia, Contemporary Culture, Profanation

During a talk in Moscow, Giorgio Agamben noted that, as a rule, “machines of power” capture “good things” and use them as a kind of “fuel.” One could say that he himself appeared first as such a “thing,” having been invited to give a lecture at the opening of the Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. As a “big project” supported by the state and having ideological and representational functions as the cultural “face” of the “new Russia,” the biennale was definitively one such machine.<sup>1</sup> Agamben arrived in Moscow just as his latest book, *The Power and the Glory: Toward a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (2007), was being published in Italy. He acquainted the Moscow audience with materials from it.

He was supposed to have come earlier, in the fall of 2006, to present a paper at the symposium “Thinking Worlds,” also a part of the biennale program. Among the participants were Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and other academic stars. Agamben, who is known for his dislike of respectable conference assemblies, played solo in March 2007.

The lecture of the internationally known philosopher took place in the unfinished building of an elite shopping center in front of a huge gathering, mainly representing the art world. The biennale itself, which opened right after Agamben’s lecture, was more likely neutral—to such an extent that it left the thinker with the status of a magnificent thing or fetish. At first it was almost impossible to communicate with this “thing.” It was, rather, possible only “to touch” it with a movement of an excited mind, so that is what everyone who publicly asked him questions did. This status of “thing” was emphasized in a sharp critical note by the Russian curator and theorist Viktor Misiano, who compared his position with a familiar domestic practice of the 1990s when “new Russians” ordered luxury Italian furniture by random pointing their fingers at a designer’s catalogue (Misiano and Riff 2007).

This “furniture question” has a broader context than the biennale. So far, aside from several journal publications, nothing from Agamben’s book has been translated into Russian. Strangely, Agamben is one of the few important contemporary thinkers neglected by Russian academic publishing houses, unlike others such as Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Antonio Negri, whose books have been translated. Naturally many from academic and artistic milieus have heard his name, but it is rather an effect of “glory,” a part of an intellectual “power,” which forestalls any clear and reasonable reception in societies saturated with media representations that reduce whole bodies of work to mere labels.

### Philosophy in the Age of Show Biz (Or, To Be Polite, the Creative Industries)

I would like first to offer some brief notes about the context of the event. The lecture was given in an elite shopping center that was still under construction. That probably was meant to secure both a new image of Moscow, in the epoch of Mr. Putin’s

1. See Riff’s (2005) thoughtful comments on the First Moscow Biennale.



“stability,” and the desired legitimization of contemporary art in Russia through nearness to the calming phantasmagoria of commodities. This constellation obviously implied that contemporary Moscow is a city with many construction sites at which large rooms for office activities and consumption are being built—a city “warmed over” by the ecstatic circulation of petroleum currencies. The new urban phenomenology in question simultaneously resembles the revolutionizing moment of capital to which the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* first paid attention and some kind of new, perverted and reified ‘*perestroika*’. This ironic historical echo is an effect of the substitution of the human and political relations of the late 1980s with reified relations in the production processes of massive architectural constructions, which have recently been called on to glorify the modest and hidden “achievements” of the new Russian bourgeoisie in the accumulation of capital that started right after *perestroika*.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a kind of “deferred action” (*Nachträglichkeit*) connects the historical *perestroika*, a political effort to reform stagnant Soviet socialism, and the contemporary ecstasy of “rebuilding” the historical center of Moscow, which is based on extrapolitical incentives, market demand, and a favorable economic conjuncture. Instead of reforming socialism, *perestroika* became the beginning of a total changeover of the social order, which now, after a decade of “chaos,” has begun to be embodied in architectural symbols of “petroleum capitalism.” The political exaltation and public rise at the end of the 1980s were followed by a farcical prolongation in the reified, material, absolutely depoliticized, and cold “rise” of today’s skyscrapers, private palaces, and shopping centers.<sup>3</sup>

At Agamben’s opening lecture, this strange touch of *perestroika* in the larger context induced a feeling that the language of critical theory was merely decoration for this construction site without borders, which made itself present with undue familiarity through the fresh smell of paint and plaster and the sharp sounds of drills and hammers. It could even seem that all these details were small tricks or a performance designed before the event. These “inglorious sounds,” as the lecturer said jokingly, playing with the theme of his presentation, arranged an atmosphere of simulated tension and dynamics recalling the tiny inventions of the good old *Kulturindustrie*, which devised so many ways to make an exotic spectacle of every thing in the world.

As Paolo Virno notes, *Kulturindustrie* becomes more and more a paradigm for all spheres of human activity in our times (2004, 56–60). Communication, virtuosic behavior, cynical and ironic attitudes started to take on immediate, productive qualities at all levels of production under late capitalism (or, post-Fordism). For today’s Russia, this conceptualization is not just another abstract and intriguing

2. A symptomatic example is the ironic epithet “the architect of *perestroika*,” which the Russian press invented for the well-known architect Norman Foster, who was invited to take part in the recent Moscow town-planning process.

3. However, this literal, architectural *perestroika* could become an impulse to politicization. For example, one reason for a recent “March of Those Who Disagree” in Petersburg was to protest the building of a skyscraper for the new headquarters of Gazprom (the most powerful oil and gas corporation in Russia).

theoretical motto, but rather, a statement of a tangible and locally specific fact. The forms that the culture industry takes here are very “advanced” in the sense of audacity and inventiveness. I do not mean *Kulturindustrie* in the narrow sense (as a machine of mass culture and media products), but also the sphere of politics that is saturated by virtuosic and intellectually invested propaganda as well as so-called black PR technologies.<sup>4</sup> This fact contrasts sharply with the present state of the entire underdeveloped economy of a country whose main income is based on natural resources, along with general social insecurity, precariousness, and poverty in many layers of society.

One should add to this account that the extension of the *Kulturindustrie* paradigm can descend (from cultural superstructure to economic base) but also can ascend: a colonization of “higher” spheres of human activity like philosophy, theory, science, or contemporary art. Such strata, which seemed to be the most exclusive, cultivated, and deprived of mass interest and therefore of commercial potential (philosophy, the “avant-garde,” and contemporary art), begin to be included step by step in the “big machines” of a systematic cultural industry with all its attributes and effects.

It may be that a kind of “political economy of concepts” exists here, to put it in Marxist terminology. Let’s talk about the use value and exchange value of concepts in theory. Sometimes we have a situation in theoretical debates where the exchange value of a “fashionable” concept predetermines its real use value (where, say, a quotation from Walter Benjamin in a conference paper functions like a garnish for a less tasty dish). And it happens, of course, not for individual reasons, but as a result of the systematic, objective condition: commodification of critical theory itself.<sup>5</sup> For example, Slavoj Žižek’s new book has as large-scale an advertising campaign at Amazon.com and other booksellers as commodities like a new Ferrari car in other media spaces.

The question here is how this visible incorporation of contemporary philosophy in the machine of the *Kulturindustrie* influences its communicative form, political strategy, style, and statements. Of course, we cannot be purists here; this industrialization involves philosophy in an experiment with unpredictable results, which cannot be directly decided as something bad or good. That would be the same as condemning the novel of the nineteenth century because it was called into being by the rise of the bourgeoisie and connected with the general democratization of literary

4. In Russia, “black PR” is the name for a set of tiny and inventive tricks, semilegal manipulations, and simple lies used in election campaigns and in media now controlled by the state administrative apparatus.

5. To give just one example, at the autumn 2006 Moscow Biennale conference, there were many talks on the commercialization of contemporary art and how philosophy could help art critics and curators in this situation. I asked eminent speakers like Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe, “Why talk so much about ‘commercialization of art’? It’s so obvious; let’s talk about commercialization of theory, of philosophy. And, if consumption and the market ‘kill desire,’ as Bernard Stiegler said in his presentation, it might kill the desire to be engaged in philosophy finally!” After this question the speakers revived, and it was an interesting discussion (for example, Rancière said that competition among academics is not a contemporary phenomena but an ancient Greek tradition of *agon* as a kind of rhetorical struggle).

genres. I think it could be compared with the situation at present in cinematography: after great director-auteurs (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ingmar Bergman, etc.), an area of cinema appeared that is not experimental, not uncompromisingly avant-garde “serious” cinema or mainstream, Hollywood-type, production. This “art cinema” is also, perhaps, an image or allegory for contemporary philosophy after Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and others.<sup>6</sup>

Agamben, who in his youth played the role of Apostle Philip in Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and who, as he says jokingly, declined all offers to act in “biblical” films promising him a Hollywood career, holds a special position in these conditions. The form of his books, which are fascinatingly written almost on the model of detective stories, obviously plays with canons of popular literature (e.g., *Homo Sacer* [1998] promises to reveal *arcana imperii*, or the secret of power). On the other hand, his work, with all its radical claims and force, obviously maintains fidelity with the great philosopher-auteurs of the twentieth century.



Susan Jahoda, *Art Fair*, Moscow, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

6. Perhaps these observations are commonplace in the West, but for us (I include friends from my generation and post-Soviet countries who witnessed in their early childhood a Soviet society without any kind of intellectual market), these effects we can observe in an international academic space seem remarkable and symptomatic.

## Thought As Continuation

Agamben modestly claims that his work in philosophy is just a continuation of the work of his favorite authors—from that place at which they stopped or seem to be insufficiently full and radically thought over. This approach is based on the constant motif of his meditations: namely, “potentiality” shaping a special ontological dimension, the idea first formed in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (see Agamben 1999). Potentiality is not separated from actuality for the sake of an ascetic statement of an eternal and abstract Utopian opportunity or chance “beyond reality,” but rather, means a different actualization, *another use* of our capacities.

Thus, for Agamben, “another use” of his favorite authors’ concepts is not a populist and artistic liberty, but rather, basic strategy. Of twentieth-century authors, those important for him are first of all Benjamin and Foucault. From Martin Heidegger, whose seminars he attended at the age of twenty-four, he takes not only several key themes, such as interpretation of Aristotle’s concepts of *dynamis* and *energeia*, but also a visible passion for techniques of etymologization, searching for meanings of well-known terms erased by modern usage.

Yet, Agamben obviously does not “continue” the right-wing thinking of Carl Schmitt. More likely, he reorganizes the political-theological prospect of the analysis, transforming it in a critical genealogy of our present. The sovereign is not simply the representative of God on earth but an element of a complex system of relations that develops in the grid of basic Christian texts and their political interpretations. During his lectures and conversations in Moscow, Agamben repeatedly emphasized that he does not hold any nostalgic, crypto-religious, or conservative interest in theology itself. For him, the body of these texts is only that place in which the genealogy of modern political establishments and rituals comes to light. The polemical aspect of this genealogy is directed against some contemporary political thinkers like Alain Badiou or Jacques Rancière, who find a source of present politics in Greek antiquity and who reread Plato’s and Aristotle’s texts to emphasize the erased structures of our ideas of the political. Agamben claims that the theology of the Medieval Ages completely changed our *dispositif* and that ignoring Christian political theology deprives us of access to understanding modern arrangements of power.

His latest book, *The Power and the Glory*, makes a significant step forward, even in comparison with his already classic *Homo Sacer* (1998), in which the “state of exception” is problematized as a “zone of indistinction” between law and fact (of life) and where key phenomena of power are revealed. This approach allowed him to connect and develop the Foucaultian problematic of biopower and the Schmittian analysis of legal and political-theological relations of sovereignty, deploying an original analysis of the “bare life” that is produced by these relations.

Agamben’s lecture was, undoubtedly, open to the general public, but it was not simplified for that audience in popularizing style. Notable features of the Italian philosopher’s language are clarity and laconically condensed statements. He himself speaks about a style of “decision,” interruption of an endless statement’s

deployment, which contrasts with the way of *Darstellung* dominating recently as infinite differentiation and observation of nuances (in familiar Derridean fashion).<sup>7</sup>

### The Lecture: Angels and Ministers

Agamben says that, in trying to resolve the question of contemporary forms of power, he has come to a theme he has named “theological genealogy of the economy and government.” The main direction of his recent studies is to show how much contemporary models of government (*governo*) are saturated with political-theological relics of a Christian era. Despite the criticism and interpretation of this heritage in political terms, which occurred in the nineteenth century (Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche) and continued in the twentieth century (for example, Foucault’s concept of “pastoral power,” Schmitt’s “political theology,” Derrida’s late works, etc.), Agamben states that this area is not studied fully enough. Very few scholars in medieval theology can find a living connection to what happens today and, on the other hand, contemporary thinkers simply do not know this extensive archive from a textual point of view. Consequently, the project of criticism of contemporary power and government should be continued and radicalized through analysis of the political-theological *dispositif*.<sup>8</sup>

For example, the words “minister” and “ministry” appear for the first time in the texts of medieval theologians who tried to imagine how the divine management of the world is arranged. These “ministers” were *angels* who were a sort of “executive power.” The medieval representation of angelic hierarchies became a paradigm for bureaucracy. By this initial paradigm, a division between the executive power and legislature is already presupposed. God is discharged from the world, entrusting management to angels as officials. Following theological dogma, this management of the world is finite; it should end after the last judgment, when the angelic ministries will be unnecessary and should be abolished. (For fun, Agamben compared this condition to contemporary Europe with its structural unemployment.)

The problem here is how to think of this inactivity, this “eternal Sabbath” of God before and after creation. It was the most crucial and unbearable problem for sophisticated medieval thought. After all, an inactive God abdicates from the government of the world, which is a scandal for adepts of Christian belief. Here appears the second function of angels: the glorification of God. After the end of government, angels just sing eternal glory, embodied in the ceremony of a liturgy. Thus, glory is “the form in which power survives itself.” In European Christian iconography, this condition is usually represented by the image of an “empty throne.” This state of divine inactivity after Judgment Day reveals the “secret of power” that permanently remains at its center, and glory produced by angels singing should mask this “unthinkable emptiness.” That is why the ceremony of glorification is so important for power relations. Needless to say, contemporary public political

7. Of course, the following text is my personal short summary with comments. It may need to be corrected and made more precise.

8. Agamben (2006) devoted a special work to the concept of the *dispositif*.

rituals (“summits,” the appearance of officials in the media, and so on) follow the same model of liturgical glorification rooted in ancient theology.

But this inactivity (*l'inoperosità*) of the Christian God is only a metamorphosis of human inactivity, Agamben warns. Liturgical ceremonials “capture” human inactivity, attributing it to God through the code of glory. It is human life, which is initially inactive and aimless, that is paradoxically the ground for unprecedented human activity and labor. Agamben refers here to a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle states that the human is born inactive. From this point, it is clear why all carnivals and festivals are so ambivalent. On the one hand they express specific human inactivity but, on the other hand, they passed through Christian theological coding and now represent waste products, *scoria* of this machine of power.

Agamben understands inactivity not as simple passivity, laziness, or “idleness.” Inactivity is more like deactivation, suspension of all acts—that is, a very specific activity. It’s a kind of “contemplation of the possibilities of acting” in Spinoza’s sense. This argument runs close to the context of contemporary French thought where the operation of “suspension” is important. Agamben makes more pointed this principle. For him, poetry is a suspension of the communicative and informational activity of language.<sup>9</sup> It is a kind of “contemplation of language.” Art is a suspension and transferral in the plane of contemplation. Our gestures and actions, and eroticism, are founded in the suspension of the standard biological functions of a body. Deactivation is not a simple stopping; it is, rather, an opening or opportunity for *other use* of a word, gesture, or body.

This astonishing anthropological capacity is parasitized by “machines of power,” which place this phenomenon of inactivity at the center of sovereignty. And, probably, it is necessary to draw this human capacity out of the political-theological sphere and into the profane world, thus to subvert machines of power. However, Agamben is rather cautious here. He does not give simplistic answers to the inevitable question, “What is to be done?”<sup>10</sup>

### Capitalism As Religion

Another public event during Agamben’s visit was his seminar at the Sector of Analytical Anthropology in the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This department, headed by outstanding theorist Valery Podoroga, is one of the few in Russia that has rich international connections. Guests of the Sector have included Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Fredric Jameson, Susan Buck-Morss, Gianni Vattimo, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt.

Following a rather loose and ad hoc definition, philosophy as praxis is a kind of deactivation of common sense, detaching from its automatisms and, in that way, opening possibilities for new use of day-to-day and elementary powers of apprehen-

9. A similar thesis was developed by Russian formalists in the 1920s. They counterposed “poetic” to “practical” language.

10. Ironically, he was advising us in the group Chto Delat (What is to be done?) to rename our collective “How not to do.”



Susan Jahoda, *Moscow*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

sion peculiar to everybody. Very few thinkers have the capacity to produce such a “deactivating” atmosphere.<sup>11</sup> Agamben conducted a fruitful and intensive session. Suffice it to say that it lasted about four hours with a break and was a true academic “liturgy,” if we can allow ourselves an ironic use of theological terms.

During the seminar, Agamben continued his consideration of “government” and also acquainted colleagues with other themes of his recent studies. First, he addressed the topic of “profanation” in view of the same problematic of a theological genealogy of the present.<sup>12</sup> This research continues the anthropological and philosophical thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (from Émile Durkheim to Georges Bataille), which analyzed relations between the “sacred” and

11. In philosophy, there is undoubtedly another tradition that, by contrast, opposes to a paradoxical and “aristocratic” philosophical thought, abusing common sense, a certain vulgar evidence of profane material life (as once, according to a legend, cynic Diogenes brought to Plato a plucked cock in response to the definition of humans as “featherless bipeds”). In the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht named this strategy *plumpes Denken* (“crude thinking”) and connected it with the political and philosophical tradition of Marxism. For me, “crude thinking” is a principle of openness of thought, not in the sense of “pluralism” but as a permanent crossing of borders between empirical reality and “pure” categories and ideas of the human mind. In this perspective, it is also a principle of innovation. See in this respect Paolo Virno’s (2005) thematization of wit.

12. In preparing an account of the discussion, I have also relied, for a supplement, on the German edition of essays devoted to this topic (Agamben 2005).

“profane” poles in archaic and modern societies. A new shade brought to this field by Agamben consists in revealing mutual transitions and “zones of indistinction” between two designated poles or spheres, and also in revealing effects of these transitions in our present.<sup>13</sup> Separation of the sacred from the profane is inherent in any religion, and any structure of separation can hide in itself some religious meanings. Transitions of things, animals, and people from one sphere to another are regulated by ritual practices (sacrifice, dedication).

Profanation is a ritual that returns to daily use what has been extracted from human circulation and use (for example, what was sacrificed to the gods). An example of its primitive form is touching (when people touch something sacred, a desecration occurs). More complex examples are the games that serve as inversions of religious ceremonies, although the games that saturate the sphere of contemporary entertainment culture and media are more likely deprived of the ability to emancipate humans from the sphere of the sacred, and, on the contrary, are more likely to be latent religious ceremonies.

Therefore, the question of a Russian colleague as to the distinction between profanation and the secularization usually referred to in modernity was precise and correct. Agamben’s answer was that secularization is rather *suppression* of the sacred, whose powers still act in politics and everyday life (so sovereign power is a continuation of theology in the organization of mundane life). Profanation means the *neutralization* of what is profaned and the return of all things and bodies confiscated by the powers of the sacred back into human life.

A politicization of this analysis is important, as is its connection with the state of late capitalism in our times. Agamben refers here to a small but improbably dense and interesting draft fragment of 1921 from Walter Benjamin’s heritage under the title “Capitalism as Religion” (1985, 100–2), which has recently drawn the attention of many researchers.<sup>14</sup> The basic idea of this fragment is that religion is not simply one of the conditions of Western capitalism (Protestantism, according to the well-known thesis of Max Weber); capitalism also *is* religion itself. It is “*a pure religious cult, probably, the most extreme [die extremste] of everything that’s come previously.*” Capitalism as a cult, according to Benjamin, is characterized by four features: (1) absence of theology and dogma, except for practical principles like “utility”; (2) continuity of exercise of the cult, because there are not workdays and holy days in it, but the solemn ceremonial of the market and money circulation continues permanently;<sup>15</sup> (3) unlike all previous cults, capitalism does not promise final

13. In the opening pages of *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman (2000) provides a brief but insightful remark on “profanation of the sacred” (tradition) as a grounding gesture of modernity.

14. See an interesting collection of essays devoted to commentary and theoretical development of the fragment’s ideas (Baecker 2003).

15. The text reads, “Der Kapitalismus ist die Zelebrierung eines Kultes sans (t)rêve, et sans merci” (Capitalism is a celebration of cult without pity and respite). In the text of the original manuscript is the French *sans rêve*. It may mean ‘without dream’ or may even be ‘without sleep’ (a break in this cult activity), but most commentators believe that Benjamin meant *sans trêve*, ‘without respite’. I was especially interested in this term because my last research involved a projected book about a kind of biopolitics of sleep under capitalism, and this tiny and precious Benjamin misprint (from *sans rêve* to *sans trêve*) sounded appealing.



expiation and reunion, an integration, but only aggravates a feeling of guilt (or a debt: the word *Schuld* is both “guilt” and “debt” in German, which includes economic meaning) that turns into despair and constantly widening division, isolation, or separation; and (4) the function of guilt also captures God, depriving him of transcendence, plunging him in the immanent history of humankind.

Benjamin’s position is ambivalent in this draft fragment. On the one hand, the capitalist cult is recognized as a “parasite” of Christianity, fully sharing its fate. On the other hand, Benjamin presents it as nothing other than a mutation of pagan polytheism and its rituals (the word “cult” itself points in this direction). As Michel Löwy (2006) comments, Benjamin lightly contradicts his thesis on Christianity, comparing this “religion” with paganism, which was immediately pragmatic and deprived of “transcendent interests.”

In this constellation of ideas, Agamben emphasizes a principle of separation. Capitalism is a pure, formal cult in which a structure of separation is important, and it is indifferent to what stands apart (sacred against profane, things and people against each other, etc.): “*Absolute and indefatigable profanation now coincides with the same empty and perfect sacralization*” (2005, 79). This pure separation also forms a specific area of *consumption and show* in which things and bodies are separated from themselves and cannot be used as the procedure of profanation is suspended. Agamben names this condition of things and bodies “means without end”: that is, without use or application. It also concerns some supreme human capacities like linguistic ability. The modern power machine no longer uses language as a means of propaganda; rather, it isolates linguistic productions in the sphere of media spectacle, neutralizing the capacity for criticism: that is, desacralization, profanation. More likely it leaves to language only the function of glorification. One important consequence is criticism of hope for a free public sphere, in the sense put forth by Jürgen Habermas, whom Agamben has called, with biting irony, “the thinker of glory” (as we remember, “glory” is understood as a liturgy, the glorification of power hiding its inactivity, stolen from the human).

There is no doubt that the actualization of an inspiring fragment of Benjamin’s heritage is one more way of diagnosing the present. Neoliberal capitalism, having gotten rid of its “Other” (the Soviet project) and permanently insisting on the absence of an alternative, becomes isolated in itself in the absolute, pure figure of a cult. This cult has its own minimalist dogma and sacrament (“the *invisible* hand of the market,” “the *sacred* right of private property”), its temples (supermarket or museum), its rituals, icons, liturgies, and pilgrimage (advertising, pop stars, media spectacle, tourism). If we could develop Benjamin’s and Agamben’s points, a certain critical genealogy of “the sacred right of private property” would arise here. In this representation, the first “proprietor” of all things would be God (from here follows the “sanctity” of nature in ancient times). Then secularization occurs as a transfer of “the sacred right of property” to a minority of humans. Thus, in this secularization of property there is an “unconscious” that keeps (a shame for liberal-bourgeois progressivism!) all religious values in this political-legal complex. Communist expropriation of property should become its true *profanation* instead of secularization (as in the USSR where the theological structure of property, similarly, was kept in the state).



Blue Noses Group, *Mask-Show*, 2001, c-print. Courtesy of the artist.

A remote consequence of this constellation of capitalism as “pure religion,” of a zone of indistinction of sacred and profane, is probably the notorious figure of *Homo sacer*. It is “naked” or “bare” life that can be neither sacrificed nor profaned (i.e., transferred to the realm of casual daily existence). This pure separation is at worst close to the practice of physical extermination. The structure of “capitalism as religion,” if I may risk such an interpretation of Agamben’s idea, gives the historical opportunity for Auschwitz as a monstrous machine of mass extermination.<sup>16</sup> In discussion, Agamben has rejected the identification of Auschwitz and the Gulag to which, as one might expect, his Russian colleagues of an older generation resorted. Following Agamben, Auschwitz is not an abstract and general model, but merely gives us a *paradigm*: a singular “example” that makes cognizable a certain class of phenomena, according to the Greek etymology.<sup>17</sup> Methodologically, one should refrain from generalizations equating the camp practice of Stalin’s epoch and Auschwitz, as theories of “totalitarianism” usually do.<sup>18</sup>

16. As contemporary German philosopher Ruediger Safranski notes, after World War II, Theodor Adorno fully shared Benjamin’s program. According to Safranski, Adorno’s position was that “one should understand capitalism as a true religion, which is globalizing in the contemporary world and which expressed itself in various political forms. Fascism was one of the first of such forms.” (See Safranski’s interview in French at [http://archives.arte-tv.com/fr/archive\\_348596.html](http://archives.arte-tv.com/fr/archive_348596.html).)

17. See Agamben’s (2002) methodological lecture where he compares Foucault’s and Thomas Kuhn’s approaches with his own.

18. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy wrote with inimitable humor in “The Nazi Myth” (1990), fascism was a real “scandal” for the West, but Stalinism was obviously less scandalous in its local context.

An interesting critical debate on Agamben's use of Benjamin's concept of *aura* should be mentioned here. Certainly, besides special points connected with contexts and the use of concepts, it is possible to criticize Agamben's oeuvre for his "contemplative" and "pessimistic" position (or maybe its visibility, from which it is difficult to get away). Sometimes, in his analysis, power appears so complexly and beautifully arranged, and has so respectable a genealogy, that one starts to think that *power is in itself much more significant than any resistance to it*. Perhaps Agamben's study implicitly contains a glorification function.

## Lessons

One of the lessons that can be extracted from my semitheoretical—or rather, perhaps, witnessing—narrative is that "another use" of the "good things" captured by big machines of money and "glory" becomes possible during rare moments. This singular, euphoric, and paradoxical "profanation act" sometimes offers a chance to get even with the neoliberal management of culture hated by so many. Even if we agree that the organizers wished to bring an outstanding philosopher for the imaginary legitimization of the "big project," as a result they also brought him for those to whom he was really interesting. Agamben's pathos of "profanation" may be a promising critical strategy.

*Translated from Russian into English by the author*

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Chto Delat, *Angry Sandwich People, or, In Praise of Dialectics*, 2005, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

## ***The Story of Angry Sandwich People, or, In Praise of Dialectics***

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***David Riff and Dmitry Vilensky***

*This essay introduces Angry Sandwich People, or, In Praise of Dialectics, a slide show and audio staging of a poem by Bertolt Brecht that Chto Delat made in collaboration with local activists and lay actors to commemorate the centenary of the Russian revolution of 1905. The text details the context of this artwork and its possible meanings.*

**Key Words:** Contemporary Art, Performance, Bertolt Brecht, Activism, Chto Delat

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This piece emerged from a group discussion on how it might be possible to make an artistic statement in memory of the centennial anniversary of the first Russian revolution of 1905.

In 2004, we, the work group Chto Delat (What is to be done?), carried out an extensive artistic study of the contemporary urban environment in a working-class neighborhood in Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> Having been the center of the workers' uprising in 1905, this neighborhood later became the site of one of the most ambitious and comprehensive constructivist projects in building a new, socialist Leningrad.

In 2005, we decided to return to the neighborhood to carry out an action and to shoot a video that might be capable of expressing our relationship to the history of this place. But, even more important, our goal was to examine the potential for a new, antibourgeois subjectivity as well as how this subjectivity might emerge and what problems its emergence might involve.

Actually, we had already worked with the phenomenon of "sandwich people" in 2003. In Soviet propaganda, these walking advertisements, sandwiched between two placards, had always served as a symbol of the utmost exploitation of a person's living labor. It is ironic that, in post-Soviet space, working as a sandwich man has become a preferred mode of unskilled, low-wage labor.

We made an action in the winter of 2003 called "Stop the Machine!" We shot a video with interviews of sandwich people in which we tried to find out about some of the most important aspects of this "profession." What amazed us most in these interviews was how passive people today really are: thrown into a struggle for bare survival, they are completely oblivious to any form of struggle or resistance against the system of exploitation and alienation that victimizes them in such a striking manner. In fact, you could say this about the majority of the population in Russia today: there is no meaningful form of mass protest whatsoever.

In this new piece, we decided to try to imagine protest in the form of a theatrical happening in urban space. This action was carried out in close collaboration with two local activist groups: namely, Workers' Democracy and The Pyotr Alexeev Resistance Movement. In fact, these activists have a great deal of experience in street politics; they participate in demonstrations and picket lines, and hand out fliers. Hence they have retained a basic form of grass-roots political culture that has an entire aesthetic of its own.

Together, we defined the goal of the piece. Here, we wanted to visualize "In Praise of Dialectics," one of Bertolt Brecht's most striking poems, which the Workers' Democracy group had published on their Web site ([www.1917.com](http://www.1917.com)) in Russian translation. The site of this visualization would be Stachek Square, from where the striking workers of 1905 had marched on the Winter Palace (*stachka* means 'strike' in Russian). We decided to bring Brecht's poem out into this urban space, line by line, carried by "engaged" sandwich people.

1. Chto Delat is a collective of artists and intellectuals in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Members who contributed to *Angry Sandwich People*, or, *In Praise of Dialectics* included Tsaplya, Nikolay Oleynikov, and Dmitry Vilensky. The work of the collective can be viewed at <http://www.chtodelat.org>.

Brecht's body of work is an important point of reference because it contains such a broad variety of aesthetic methods to answer the call of a concrete historical situation. In his work, there is a clear understanding of how dialectical mechanisms are always at work in creativity, describing reality as a process of constant change that arises as a result of conflicts and contradictions that make the transformation of society possible.

In our piece, we tried to imagine how this dialectic might work today. Silently bringing together and reconfiguring their body-signs to the soundtrack of passing cars, these sandwich people demonstrated the potential of new representational constellations between protesting singularities from a broad variety of backgrounds and age groups—pensioners, activists, children—thrown into a dialectic of constant change. At the end of our piece, we asked our participants to read Brecht's poem out loud. The effect was very strange, and might be described as what Brecht called the *alienation effect*: the silent motility of political potential erupts into decisive poetic speech, distancing the spectator from the action's reconfigurative flow. Recited in a "Soviet" mode, the poem now resounds with the depleted pathos of a revolutionary past, a re-collection (*Erinnerung*) of the very language that new forms of protest aspire to negate.

We hope that this will allow the spectator to step back and consider the range of problems that we were trying to address: the historical problem of *failed revolution* and the political potential that rises on its ruins, at the site of its origin, one hundred years after its first defeat.



Susan Jahoda, *Novosibirsk City Fathers*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

## Legally Soviet: A Conversation

### *Yevgeniy Fiks and Olga Kopenkina*

*This conversation between Moscow-born, New York-based artist Yevgeniy Fiks and curator Olga Kopenkina raises issues pertinent to Fiks's work since the early 2000s, which has been focused on the legacy of the Communist movement in the West. His practice is informed, on the one hand, by the legacy of late-Soviet visual culture and, on the other, by developments in contemporary Western, left-leaning art. Fiks's post-Soviet diasporic subjectivity is revealed in a series of projects devoted to the legacy of the Communist Party USA, which signal the "return of historical memory." Pursuing a critical reexamination of twentieth-century political history in both East and West, Fiks proposes a notion of "critical nostalgia" in stark contrast to the nostalgic melancholy of the 1990s.*

**Key Words:** Yevgeniy Fiks, Post-Soviet Diasporic Subjectivity, Memory.



*Since 2005, Yevgeniy Fiks, a Moscow-born, New York-based artist, has pursued the legacy of Communist and Leninist ideas after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The artist has realized a number of projects, ranging from a series of paintings portraying members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in their New York office, to making a guide to Communist sites in New York City, to small personal actions like custom producing, through licensed USPS vendors, 39-cent stamps with the images of eight historical leaders of the CPUSA and using those as postage for his monthly bills, to mailing Lenin's book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* to one hundred global corporations as a donation to their libraries.*

**Olga Kopenkina:** You have been engaged with the questions that redefine Soviet and post-Soviet identities, by addressing the Communist/Leninist heritage in your artist's practice. What does it mean to be a post-Soviet artist living in the West?

**Yevgeniy Fiks:** I've been trying to define the position of a post-Soviet artist living in the West by evoking a notion of *responsibility* as formative in cultural production and I've been doing it rather stubbornly—with full understanding, in fact, that responsibility and commitment are not categories of art, as Jacques Rancière has noted.<sup>1</sup> To me, being a post-Soviet artist in the West is a strategic and tactical position of criticality today, a criticality toward both the West and post-Soviet space equally. It is a position of “self-imposed exile” from the crude, post-Soviet, retro-capitalism, and yet, disengagement from mainstream Western contemporary currents. So, being a post-Soviet artist living in the West means being responsible for Soviet history. It means scrupulously and critically engaging the Soviet past, trying to understand the relationship between the totalitarian forms of communism and Communism as a political thinking. It's also a critical look at both the post-Soviet present and Soviet history—without discriminating, equally. It also means being responsible, if you will, for the Western leftist, especially Communist, movement in the West, its history, and especially its legacy today. And of course, being a post-Soviet artist in the West, one cannot avoid dealing with the legacy of the cold war since, at least in the context of the States, the relationship between the cold war and Communism is almost always a single narrative.

**Kopenkina:** Just to be precise, commitment, according to Rancière, indeed is not a category of art; however, an artist can be committed.<sup>2</sup> You are describing your commitment as the responsibility of a post-Soviet artist for the Soviet past and future of Communist ideas. That means that your art directly addresses ideologies, irrepressible by nature, rather than dealing with the actual politics of today. In this sense, can your practice provide a link to the Western left as a part of a common plan to recuperate it as a powerful ideology?

1. See Rancière (2004, 60).

2. “It can be said that an artist is committed as a person, and possibly that he is committed by his writings, his paintings, his films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art” (Rancière 2004, 60).

**Fiks:** My appeal for such a responsibility was caused by my deep frustration with the current situation in mainstream Russian art, especially in Moscow, which, since the 1990s, has been cynicism and blunt affirmation of Russian neoliberalism. I do not necessarily mean that we should feel responsible for the communist ideology per se, but rather, for history under or in relation to communism. I'm more interested in communism and socialism as an actual experience of the Soviet bloc, rather than the history of socialism/communism in the 20th century; for history of the twentieth century is much broader than just the narrative of twentieth-century communism. I actually care very little about communism in general and about its future in particular but, as a post-Soviet artist, I feel that I must address it. What is going on in the post-Soviet space now is a total denial and repression of Soviet history. People live as if the Soviet Union had never existed. So I'm committed to the subject of Soviet history and this is my politics of today.

I feel that there is a disconnection between my work and the contemporary Western left. I understand that it's perhaps easier, or even healthier, to be in denial or to reject the Soviet experience altogether in order for the Left to move on and effectively engage in the politics of today. There is actually a whole new generation of leftist activists even in Russia today who work side by side with Western activists, as if there had been no interruption in Russia of the "natural" development of the Left. But personally, I'm unable to make this transition to the "politics of today" as such as of yet. I feel still trapped in this post-Soviet condition, unable to move on. My position is that I indeed want today's Left to recuperate itself for I believe that truly effective criticism of current situations in the East, West, and elsewhere is only possible from the Left.



Yevgeniy Fiks, *Communist Guide*, New York, installation view, 2007 Krasnoyarsk Museum Center. Courtesy of the artist.

**Kopenkina:** In regard to your comment that Soviet history was rejected and thrown out in the dumpster of European history, I want to remind you that the late 1990s were marked by the proliferation of individual artists' projects and exhibitions, books, films, and discussions of Soviet times: a sort of nostalgia for Eastern Europe, especially in Germany, the country that was physically divided in East and West. As Charity Scribner wrote, the feeling that something was missing from the present was at the core of those nostalgic discussions, and this is what probably relates to the state of modernity we live in now. Is it the Soviet ruins' utopian potential that makes us feel so nostalgic? Given that you now live in the West and approach the Soviet past from the perspective of Westerners, what explains your commitment to Soviet history? In other words, what is so important in the Soviet past that makes one keep on looking back?



Yevgeniy Fiks, *Dan Margolis*, 2006, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

**Fiks:** Nostalgia for Soviet times indeed began right after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, but this nostalgia could be described largely in terms of mourning. It was a passive and numbing nostalgia in that a lethargic state was triggered by the shock of collapse. The art informed by this was almost always the aestheticization of ruin and, as a result, tons of projects in photography and video were produced that glamorized the ruins. However, the nostalgia to which I refer is of a different kind and it entered my work after over ten years after the collapse, in the

2000s, after a relatively long post-Soviet period. It can be called “progressive nostalgia,” using the title of Viktor Misiano’s recent exhibition in Prato, or, better still, “critical nostalgia.” It’s a nostalgia that becomes a tool of critique of excesses not only in the post-Soviet present, but in the Soviet past as well. So I’d like to draw a line between the first phase of nostalgia for the Soviet era in the early 1990s, and projects that have been coming out more recently. I think now it’s much less about aestheticization of ruin, absence, or death or Utopia. I think mourning has been replaced now with anger, an anger that is directed toward ourselves—first of all, for our own weakness and lack of political agency during the Soviet period that allowed Utopia to die; for giving way to the crude and corrupt Socialism that existed during the Soviet era.

**Kopenkina:** But I cannot help seeing nostalgic melancholy in your portraits of members of the Communist Party USA—in their obsolete technique and compositions that you learned in Soviet schools. Does this melancholy present a perception of the history of communist movements as a “modern antiquity” we are so obsessed with now?

**Fiks:** I think it’s easy to confuse these days a distanced, detached approach with one of melancholia. At the same time, I do realize that when I go to the offices of the CPUSA in New York carrying a paint box and canvases, and paint from life there, I’m perhaps impersonating a conformist Soviet painter sent to New York by the All-USSR Artists’ Union on a mission to paint American communists.<sup>3</sup> The only difference is that in my case, I was sent, metaphorically speaking, by a country that no longer exists, and not for the purpose of creating propaganda fodder but, rather, to evoke its repressed history. So if there is melancholy in this project, it’s in my evocation of the figure of a “Soviet painter” exiled from the now defunct USSR—a painter who is trying to read the present in terms provided to him by the Soviet version of modernity.

By the way, I asked people at the CPUSA headquarters if, during Soviet times, any Soviet artist was sent to paint their portraits and they said no, which was surprising to me because I would have assumed that it would have been a logical thing for the Soviet Artists’ Union to do. So it looks like I was the first one—during and after the Soviet Union. So, to your question as to how my art skills received in the Soviet Union helped me to adapt to Western conceptualism, I have to say that the irony is that my training in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Soviet art schools had apparently one purpose: to enable me to paint portraits of American communists in New York in 2006. Everything that I was taught back then felt outdated and irrelevant: the perpetuation of socialist realist aesthetics in constant appeals for the “correct reflection of everyday life,” for the “search for types” (the necessity to reveal universality in the particular) and its manic attachment to and emphasis on figuration. But for this particular project, suddenly, fifteen years later, my skills and knowledge were of use. It is as if I had been trained by my professors so that, in the post-Soviet era, I could

3. The All-USSR Artists’ Union was a creative union of Soviet artists and art critics embracing the official government aesthetic of socialist realism.

redeem the legacy of late-Soviet art. I'm realizing it with total clarity now. This is both sad and ironic.

And one more thing. When I was working on this series, I was thinking a lot about the so-called austere, or rigorous, late-Soviet painting style, a quasi-official art style that many at the time, especially the avant-gardists, believed to be a storm in a cup. It was a painting style that was much closer to officialdom than underground, and yet, it was an honest attempt to modernize late Soviet art without totally rejecting socialism. But it failed in the end. So I think in this project of the portraits of American Communists that I'm invoking this failure of late-Soviet aesthetic modernization. Here a desperate attempt to return to late-Soviet visual aesthetics equals an attempt to return to the USSR, to fix things, to see if Socialism can survive. I guess this project is about the unrealized potentiality of late-Soviet modernization, including *perestroika*.

**Kopenkina:** Going back to the context from which your works are derived and in which they exist—and this is the context of world (not just Western) contemporary art and modern conceptualism—I see your art in line, for example, with Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (a reenactment of the famous miners' strike in England in 1984), or Ana Torfs's *Anatomy* (based on the 1919 case of the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in the main courtroom at the Berlin Criminal Court), and others who refer to the past in which communist ideas and class struggle played a significant role, rather than seeing connections in your works with late-socialist paintings or Komar and Melamid's Sots art style. What do you think can be a "regime of identification" in which your works can be perceived by Western viewers? If we agree that art exists within a certain politics of aesthetics that creates the forms of communities, to which communities do you address your works?

**Fiks:** I realize that my constant appeals to Sots artists as formative to my work are often exaggerated and perhaps nostalgia-driven, and yet, I'm holding on to the legacy of Sots art as the only clearly articulated and conscientious political art practice in Russia in recent decades. I feel that any post-Soviet political art practice must be read in relation to Sots art. But there is no question that contemporary Western artists doing research projects, historical reenactments, and radical education projects that address the twentieth-century historical context, workers' movement, etc.—like Jeremy Deller, Susan Kelly, or Lin + Lam—are more important to my work, in fact, than Sots art.

I think my work can be understood in the context of recent developments in international conceptual and political art—an art that is left-leaning/off-center, and that is preoccupied with critical reexamination of the "return of historical memory," etc. Besides, the post-Soviet community is an inclusive one. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted, we are all post-Soviets—Easterners and Westerners alike. We all lived through the twentieth-century experience together.

*New York*

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Anatoly Osmolovsky, *Bread*, installation, Winzavod, Moscow, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.