

Boris Groys

# The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism

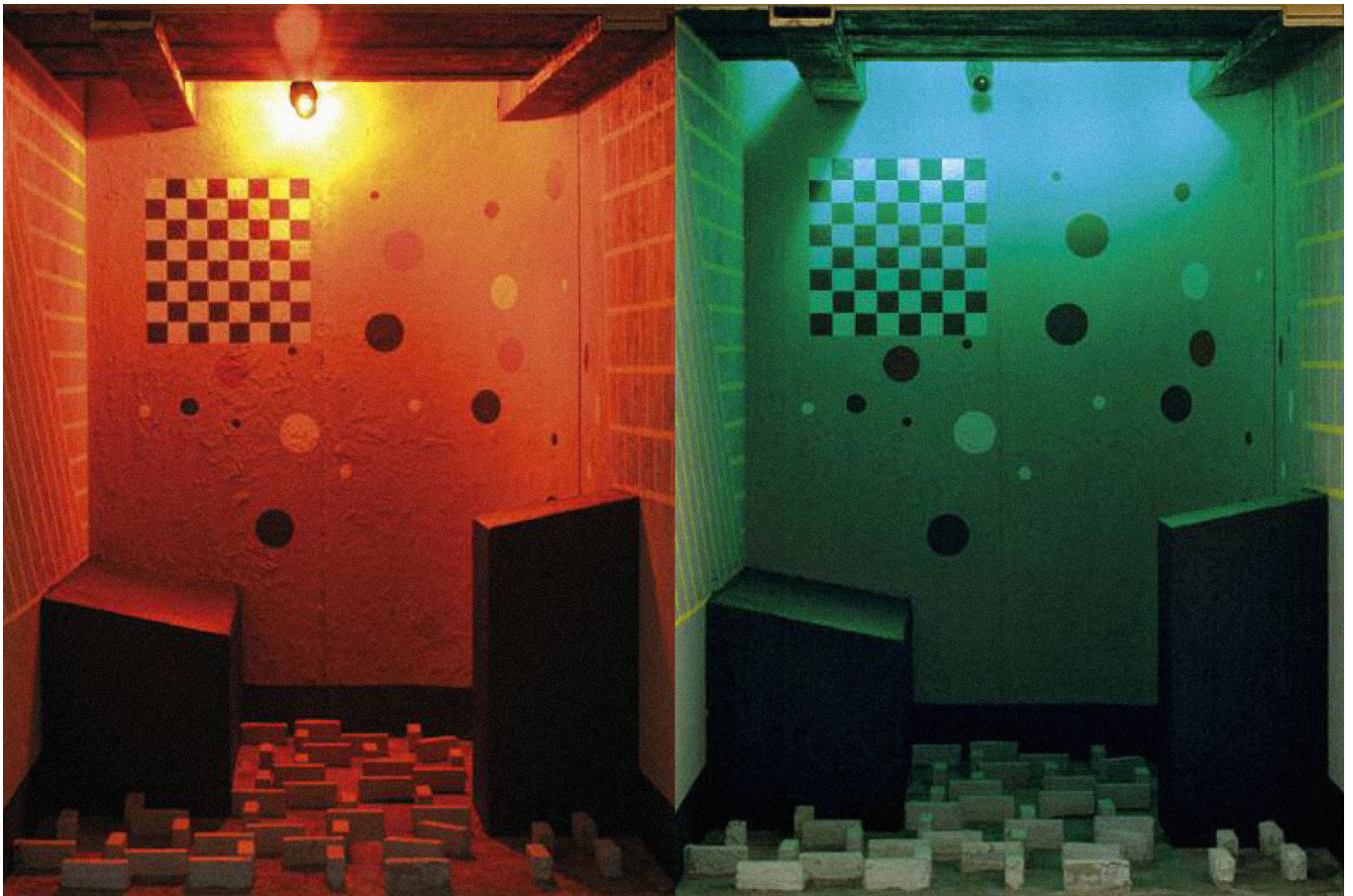
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It is well known that the Cold War was represented in the context of art by a conflict between modernist – or more precisely, abstract – art on the one hand, and figurative, realist – or rather, socialist realist – art on the other. When we speak about the Cold War, we usually have in mind the period after WWII. However, the ideological conflict between abstract and realist art was formulated before WWII, and all the relevant arguments were merely reiterated later without any substantial changes. This essay will discuss and illustrate the genealogy and development of the conflict between the Western and Soviet concepts of art before and during the Cold War.

From the Western side, the foundational document that formulated and theorized this conflict was Clement Greenberg's famous essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). According to Greenberg, the avant-garde operates mainly by means of abstraction: it removes the "what" of the work of art – its content – to reveal its "how." The avant-garde reveals the materiality of the artworks and the techniques that traditional art used to produce them, whereas kitsch simply uses these techniques to produce certain effects, to make an impression on the primitive, uncritical spectator. Accordingly, the avant-garde is proclaimed to be "high art," and kitsch is deemed low art. This hierarchy within the art system is related to a social hierarchy. Greenberg believes that the connoisseurship that makes a spectator attentive to the purely formal, technical, material aspects of a work of art is accessible only to those who "could command leisure and comfort that always goes hand and hand with cultivation of some sort."<sup>1</sup> For Greenberg this means that avant-garde art can hope to get its financial and social support only from the same "rich and cultivated" people who historically supported traditional art. Thus the avant-garde remains attached to the bourgeois ruling class "by an umbilical cord of gold."<sup>2</sup>

Greenberg believed that the art of socialist realism (but also of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy) was also a version of kitsch. He understood this art as work that addressed the uneducated masses. Thus, socialist realism appears as a low, bad form of art, mere visual propaganda – comparable to Western commercial advertising. Greenberg explains why it is still so difficult to include the art of socialist realism in the Western system of musealized art representation. In recent decades the art system has begun to include everything that used to seem aesthetically different – non-Western local cultures, particular cultural identities, etc. However, if we understand socialist realism as a version of kitsch, then it is not *different* in this sense of reflecting a non-Western cultural

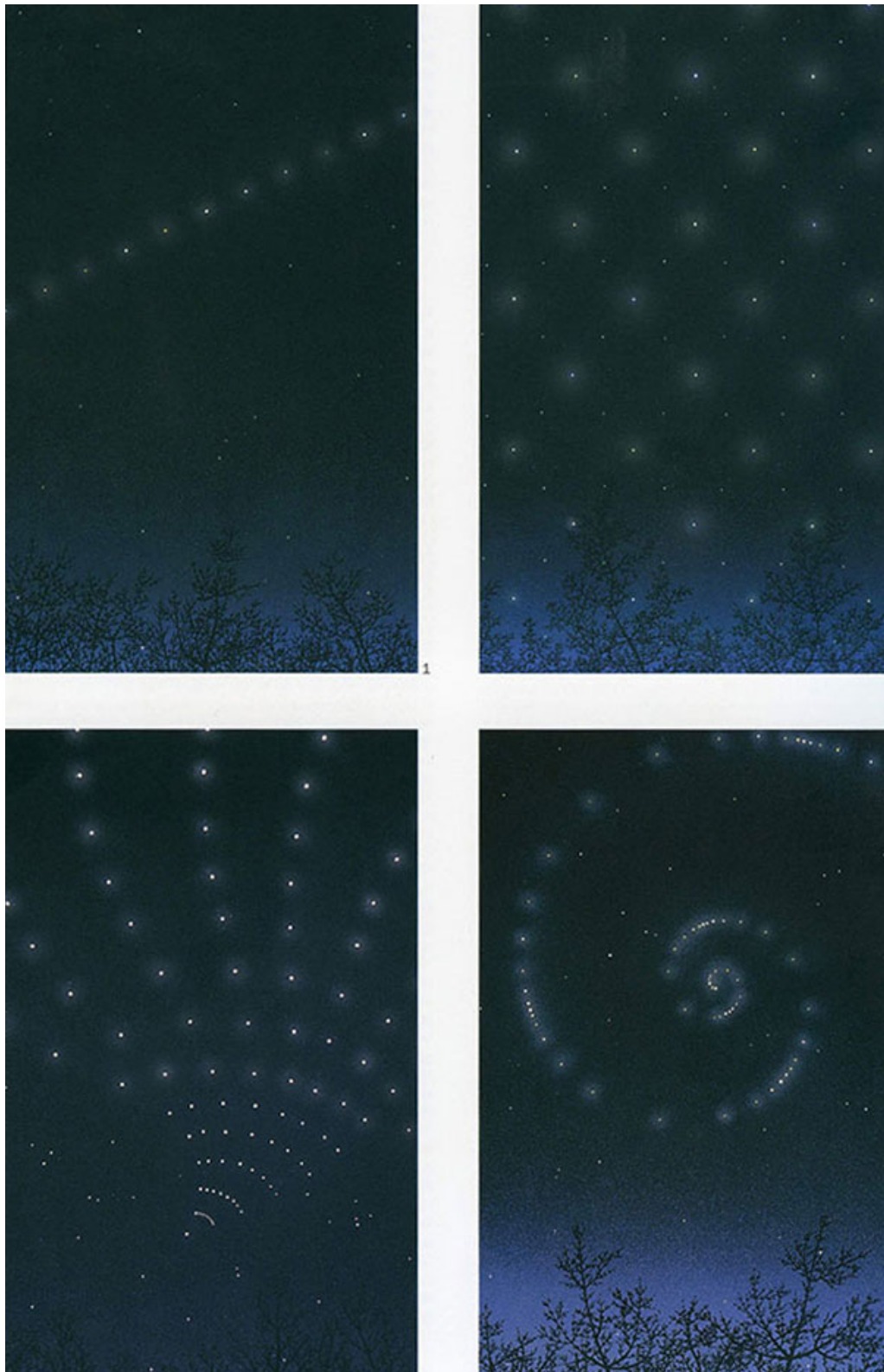


In 1938, Alphonse Larencic designed cells for captured Francoists that inspired disorientation, depression, and deep sadness. Photograph: Archivo Fotográfico del Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain. Published in Pedro G. Romero, *Silo: Archivo F.X.* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009)



On October 23, 1940, Himmler visits the detention center on calle Vallmajor in Barcelona. Archive of *La Vanguardia*. Photo: Carlos Pérez de Rozas. Image from Pedro G. Romero, *Silo: Archivo F.X.* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009).





Francisco Infante, *Projects of Reconstruction of the Star Sky*, 1965–67. Gouache.

identity, such as Soviet identity. It is simply aesthetically low, aesthetically bad. Thus, one cannot treat socialist realism in the usual terms of difference, cultural identity, inclusion, and aesthetic equality. In this sense, we are still living in an artistic situation informed by the Cold War: the war between good and bad, between the dispassionate contemplation of the medium and the use of this medium for the propagation of messages and affects – the war between the medium and the message.

However, the interpretation of modernist, and particularly abstract, art as purely autonomous art manifesting human freedom from all utilitarian goals is an ideological illusion that contradicts the real history of the avant-garde and the goals of avant-garde artists. Avant-garde artists also wanted to influence their audience, including an uneducated audience, but they did it in a different way compared to traditional artists. They understood their artworks not as representations of so-called reality, nor as vehicles for ideological messages, but as autonomous things – as real as cars, trains, and planes. Not accidentally, avant-garde artists mostly refrained from using the term “abstract”; rather, they spoke about their art as “real,” “objective,” “concrete” – in opposition to illusionistic traditional art. The avant-garde returned to the ancient Greek definition of art as *techne*, as the production of artificial things. Speaking in Marxist terms, the avant-garde operated not on the level of superstructure but directly on the level of the material base. It did not send messages but tried to change the environment in which people lived and worked. And avant-garde artists believed that people would be changed by this new environment when they began to accommodate to it. Thus, the artists of Russian constructivism, German Bauhaus, and Dutch de Stijl hoped that the reduction, simplification, and geometrization of architecture, design, and art would produce rationalistic and egalitarian attitudes in the minds of the people who would populate the new urban environments. This hope was reawakened later through Marshall McLuhan’s famous formula “the medium is the message.” Here McLuhan professes his belief that the technology of information transmission influences people more than the information itself. One should not forget that McLuhan initially explained and illustrated this formula using examples from cubist paintings.

Thus, avant-garde artists shifted the work of influencing from the conscious to the subconscious level – from content to form. Form influences the psyche of the spectator especially effectively when this spectator is not well trained in aesthetic analysis: the impact of form is at its

greatest when it remains subconscious. A good example of this strategy is the famous treatise by Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). For Kandinsky, every artwork influences the spectator not through its subject matter but through a certain choice of colors and forms. Later Kandinsky states that “brainwork” needs to “outweigh the intuitive part of creativity,” ending, perhaps, with “the total exclusion of ‘inspiration,’” so that future artworks are “created by calculation” alone.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Kandinsky sees “high art” not as the thematization of a neutral medium but as having its own operational goal – irrational, subconscious influence on the spectator. The biggest part of the treatise is dedicated to how particular colors and forms can influence the psyche of spectators and produce specific moods in them. That is why Kandinsky was so interested in the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). Here the individual is placed not outside the artwork, or in front of it – but inside the artwork, and totally immersed in it. Such an artificial environment can create a powerful subconscious effect on the spectator, who becomes a visitor to, if not a prisoner of, the artwork.

Let me now cite an interesting historical example of this strategy. In 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, the French-Slovenian poet, artist, and architect Alphonse Laurencic used the ideas in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to decorate cells at a prison in Barcelona where Republicans held captured Francoists. He designed each cell like an avant-garde art installation. The compositions of color and form inside the cells were chosen with the goal of causing the prisoners to experience disorientation, depression, and deep sadness. To achieve this, he relied on Kandinsky’s theories of color and form. Indeed, later the prisoners held in these so-called “psychotechnic” cells did report extreme negative moods and psychological suffering due to their visual environment. Here the mood becomes the message – the message that coincides with the medium. The power of this message is shown in Himmler’s reaction to the cells. He visited the psychotechnic cells after Barcelona was taken by the fascists (Laurencic was put on trial and executed), and said that the cells showed the “cruelty of Communism.” They looked like Bauhaus installations and, thus, Himmler understood them as a manifestation of *Kulturbolshevismus* (cultural Bolshevism). In fact, the military trial against Laurencic took place in 1939, the same year in which Greenberg wrote his seminal text, but it tells a completely different story than a Greenbergian interpretation of the avant-garde.

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The story is somehow ironic because it took place after Soviet art and ideology turned towards socialist realism. And it is even more ironic because this turn was caused by the struggle against fascism. Greenberg interpreted this turn as an accommodation of the tastes of the masses. But Soviet power was never hesitant in its will to reeducate the masses if it was deemed necessary from a political standpoint. This standpoint changed after 1933. After the Nazis seized power in Germany that year, Soviet cultural politics came to be guided by the struggle against the fascist, and especially Nazi, revolution. Indeed, the revolutionary attack came now from Germany and not from Russia – from the right and not the left. The success of this revolution was explained by its irrational, subconscious influence on the masses. One spoke about the Nazi meetings, marches, and rituals, as well as the allegedly magnetic, charismatic personality of Hitler, as sources of the power of fascist ideology over European populations. Here the analogy with the avant-garde becomes obvious. One could say that in both cases rational analysis was replaced by subconscious impact; the message was replaced by mobilization through the medium. Walter Benjamin spoke of the aestheticization of

politics as being genuinely fascist – referring precisely to the irrational character of the self-staging of fascist movements. Here one should remember that Italian futurism was a movement closely connected to the Italian fascist party and also concentrated on the self-staging and glorification of the irrational forces of vitality and will to power.

In the Soviet Union, the journal *Literaturnyi kritik* (Literary Critic, 1933–40) played a decisive role in formulating the critique of modernist art as fascist. In his famous essay on German expressionism (1934), the most prominent contributor to the journal, Georg Lukács, diagnoses expressionist “activism” as a precursor to National Socialism. Lukács stresses “irrational” aspects of expressionism that later, according to his analysis, culminated in Nazi ideology. In a footnote to the text added in 1953, Lukács states that the persecution of expressionist artists during the Third Reich does not contradict the correctness of his analysis.<sup>4</sup> Instead of irrational influence and manipulation, Lukács and his closest collaborator Mikhail Lifshitz propagated the rational Marxist analysis of society in the tradition of the Enlightenment and great European realist literature and art. Whereas earlier the communists were ready to



Mikhail Roginsky, *Door*, 1965. Oil on wood, door handle, 160 x 70 x 10 cm.

accept leftist avant-garde artists as their allies in the anti-bourgeois struggle, now revolutionary art was identified by Soviet communists as an ally of the fascist revolutions. Accordingly, after 1933 the belief in a combination of technology and the creativity of the masses as a path to a new proletarian culture began to decrease – after all, fascism was also a combination of a belief in technology and mass enthusiasm. As a result, the human individual and their ideology and political attitude took the central position in Soviet culture. The individual human soul was understood as a place of dramatic struggle between rational, humanist communist ideology and irrational fascist seduction. One should now be able to differentiate between dedicated communists and hidden traitors (*dvurushniki*, *vrediteli*). This kind of differentiation was basically a psychological one and could be treated only by means of realist literature and art, with their concentration on the deep analysis of individual psychology. Thus, traditional bourgeois realism was equated with humanism, whereas modernist art was understood – together with fascism – as anti-humanist. Soviet culture began the process of its re-humanization, or rather it re-psychologization – after almost two decades of ignoring individual psychology and the tradition of psychological realism.

In these years the Soviet Union, looking for allies in the non-fascist West, began to present itself as a defender of the European humanist tradition against fascist barbarism. The main argument was this: the bourgeoisie had become incapable of defending the heritage of classical art, it had capitulated to fascism and its destruction of culture – so the Soviet Union remained the only true defender of this culture. In his text “On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right” (1935), Andre Breton analyzed precisely this change in cultural politics as manifested through the 1935 “International Congress for the Defense of Culture” in Paris, which was organized by Soviet authorities and political and cultural forces in the West sympathetic to the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Already the title of the conference made clear its defensive, culturally conservative or even reactionary character. Breton relates this cultural turn to a declaration from May 15, 1935 in which Stalin stated his full support for the French national defense policy – thus, according to Breton, betraying the old communist goal of turning the war between nation-states into a civil war. In the same text Breton quotes a series of letters published by the newspaper *Pravda* under the general title “Respect your Parents.” This restoration of “family values” had immediate ideological consequences. Breton quotes what

Ilya Ehrenburg wrote at that time about the surrealists: “For them a woman means conformism. They preach onanism, pederasty, fetishism, exhibitionism, and even sodomy.” At the end of the text Breton notes that the glorification of fatherland and family that Stalinist culture began to practice could easily lead to a restoration of religion and maybe even private property.

So before WWII the fascists saw modern art as an ally of communism, communists saw it as an ally of fascism, and the Western democracies saw it as a symbol of personal freedom and artistic realism – as an ally of both fascism and communism. This constellation defined postwar cultural rhetoric. Western art critique saw Soviet art as a version of fascist art, and Soviet critique saw Western modernism as a continuation of fascist art by other means. For both sides, the other was a fascist. And the struggle against this other was a continuation of WWII in the form of a cultural war.

The main terrain of the cultural Cold War was, of course, Germany divided between the two blocs. After WWII the American administration of Germany started a program to reeducate the German population. Art played an extremely important role in this program. The prewar economic and social structures remained basically intact, and thus commitment to modernist art took on the character of an official religion in West Germany – as a visible sign of a rejection of the Nazi past. But at the same time, this commitment was directed against East Germany’s socialist realism. This was made obvious by the launching of Documenta in Kassel in 1956 – still the greatest exhibition of contemporary art today. Kassel is a provincial town with no prominent cultural tradition. But it was situated close to the border with East Germany – and thus perceived as a frontier town. In the first period of its existence Documenta was focused on those modernist and especially expressionist trends that had been associated with the exhibition “Degenerate Art” – and served as a kind of rehabilitation of these trends. But the neo-avant-garde wave of the late 1950s and ’60s changed the artistic landscape in the East and West.

The death of Stalin in 1953 transformed the cultural situation in the Soviet Union. The most obvious change happened in architecture. Stalinist architecture was historicist; it wanted to be grandiose and spectacular. This desire for grandiosity and spectacularity was subjected to harsh critique and rejected at the beginning of the Khrushchev era. Post-Stalinist Soviet architecture was a somewhat cheap version of Russian avant-garde and Bauhaus architecture. Now one wanted to build not for visitors and

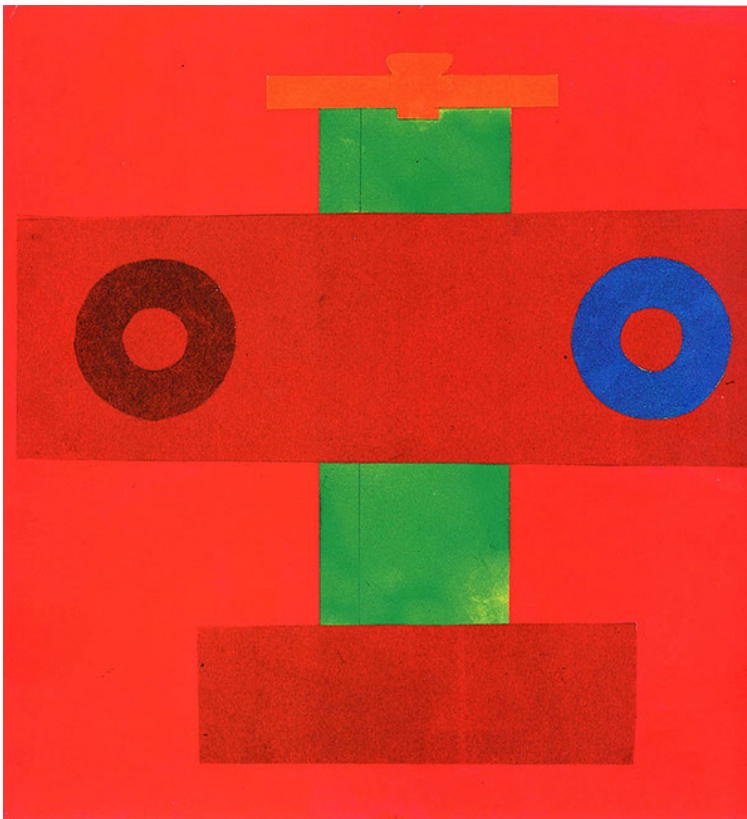
tourists, but rather for the masses, for ordinary people, in contrast to the palace architecture of the Stalin period. One began to erect on a mass scale the so-called panel houses that were not “built” in the traditional sense of this word, but constructed from blocks produced at a panel factory. This method suggested the zero-point of tradition – a starting point for a new era. The panel houses of the Khrushchev period aesthetically translated the egalitarian, communist promise; they offered an image of universal equality, bare of any signs of privilege and aesthetic distinction. It is interesting that many critics in the Soviet Union and in the West characterized this architecture as “inhuman” because it was monotonous, standardized, and egalitarian. This reproach of inhumanity was, actually, already directed by the German right-wing press against the first projects of panel houses proposed by Mies van der Rohe in the second half of the 1920s as, in his words, “the final solution to all social questions.” However, many Soviet artists of this period manifested the same neo-constructivist, neo-avant-garde will to reduction, minimalism, and geometrical abstraction – combined with faith in technical progress and a desire to conquer cosmic space. At the same time one could also see a growing

interest in pop art as it shown by Mikhail Roginsky’s *The Door* (1965).

However, the situation of neo-modernist, neo-avant-garde art began to change in December 1962 after Khrushchev’s visit to an exhibition of new Soviet art. The exhibition presented a range of styles, including traditional socialist realism, a kind of neo-Cezannism, surrealism, symbolism, and pure abstraction. Enraged, Khrushchev insulted the artists and demanded a return to “normal,” healthy, positive art. This very public scene of indignation dashed all hopes for official recognition of an art committed to the heritage of the avant-garde, or even moderate modernism. Again, modernist art became the face of the ideological enemy, namely, Western capitalism culminating in an art market that betrayed traditional humanist values.

In a famous pamphlet called *Why I Am Not a Modernist* (1963), Mikhail Lifshitz (who was a close friend and collaborator of Georg Lukács’s in the 1930s) reiterated the main points of the standard Soviet critique: modernism is cultural fascism because it celebrates irrationality and anti-humanism. Lifshitz writes:

So, why am I not a modernist? Why does the



Michail Chernyshov, *Airplane with Circles*, 1961. Gouache, pencil, and collage on paper, 46 x 60 cm.



slightest hint of such ideas in art and philosophy provoke my innermost protest? Because in my eyes modernism is linked to the darkest psychological facts of our time. Among them are a cult of power, a joy at destruction, a love for brutality, a thirst for a thoughtless life and blind obedience ... The conventional collaborationism of academics and writers with the reactionary policies of imperialist states is nothing compared to the gospel of new barbarity implicit to even the most heartfelt and innocent modernist pursuits. The former is like an official church, based on the observance of traditional rites. The latter is a social movement of voluntary obscurantism and modern mysticism. There can be no two opinions as to which of the two poses a greater public danger.<sup>6</sup>

In a more expanded version of this manifesto published in 1968 under the title *The Crisis of Ugliness*, Lifshitz argues that the goal of avant-garde art was to abolish the artwork as a space of representation and to make it a mere thing among other things.<sup>7</sup> This analysis is, of course, correct – and Lifshitz has no difficulty in proving its correctness by using examples from French cubism. The strategy that he chooses is, of course, pretty clever. It gives Lifshitz a chance to undermine Picasso and Leger's claims to being communist, Marxist artists – and thus also to criticize Roger Garaudy's book *D'un réalisme sans rivages* (*Realism without Borders*, 1963), which was used by Soviet defenders of friendly, pro-communist modernism.

But Lifshitz goes further in his analysis. He compares cubism to pop art, which became influential in the 1960s. Lifshitz argues that pop art followed the road opened by cubism: cubists produced extra-ordinary things that at the time were unlike any other things in our civilization, but pop artists aestheticized the commodities that dominated contemporary mass consumption. Lifshitz concedes that this aestheticization had an ironic character but states that, even so, pop art became a part of contemporary capitalist commodity production. This is, of course, also correct. And one can argue that ultimately it is the seductive power of Western commodities – and the accommodation of the Soviet population to these commodities – that brought down Soviet socialism. In this sense the avant-garde's belief in the superiority of accommodation over propaganda was proven to be true.

Of course, at the time when *Crisis of Ugliness* was published it was perceived not as a prediction of the future but as a symbol of a return to the darkest days of Stalinism. This

return, as we know, did not take place. Soviet neo-modernist art of the 1960s disappeared from public view but was not radically suppressed. It survived in the form of the so-called “unofficial art” practiced in private spaces, below the radar of Soviet mass media. One could say that during the late 1960s and '70s the Cold War was internalized by the Soviet art system, for inside the Soviet Union art became divided into official and unofficial ideological camps. Official art was identified as being truly “Soviet.” Unofficial art was considered to aesthetically represent the West at a time when political representation of Western positions and attitudes was impossible. That is why Soviet unofficial art was “more than art.” It was the West inside the East. And that is why today many contemporary Russian artists sympathize with the Soviet critique of modernism. One reads Lukács again – and even more, Lifshitz. In Moscow a well-known artist named Dmitri Gutov even organized a Lifshitz Club with the goal of struggling against Western modernism.

If at the beginning of the avant-garde, artists saw in the thingness of art a chance to liberate it from the obligations of representation, today one has the feeling that the things produced by an individual artist drown in the mass of contemporary commodity production. Thus, many artists turn back to the content, to the message – in the hope that it still will be heard in our overcrowded and saturated public space.

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1  
Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture* (Beacon Press, 1965), 9.

2  
Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 8.

3  
Cited in Max Bill, introduction to Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Benteli Verlag, 1952), 10–11.

4  
Georg Lukács, *Essays on Realism* (MIT Press, 1980), 112–13.

5  
Andre Breton, "On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1977), 243ff.

6  
See  
<https://garagemca.org/en/exhibition/i-if-our-soup-can-could-speak-mikhail-lifshitz-and-the-soviet-sixties-i-materials/pochemu-ya-ne-modernist-why-i-am-not-a-modernist>.

7  
Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness* (Brill, 2018).

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