



IF OUR SOUP
CAN COULD
SPEAK...

MIKHAIL LIFSHITZ
AND THE SOVIET
SIXTIES

MARCH 7—MAY 13

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The exhibition completes the three-year Garage Field Research project of the same name.

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The year 1968 looked very different from a Soviet perspective than it did from a Western one. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces was a fatal event. It put a sudden end to the so-called “Prague Spring,” and with it to the brief but intense cultural and political liberalization of the previous decade. Soon stagnation would set in, or so the story goes.

Only months before the invasion, the Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Mikhail Lifshitz (1905–1983) published a study of cubism and pop art called *The Crisis of Ugliness*. A uniquely detailed and illustrated source on modernist art, it was widely read across the Soviet Union. Very few actually agreed with its author’s views. The Soviet intelligentsia was abandoning Marxism en masse, but Lifshitz came out as its staunch defender in the aesthetic field. To him modern art was “a system of devices for the creation of a moral alibi” for the cultural consumer. The only way forward, he reaffirmed, was realism, rooted in the classical tradition and driven by amateur creativity or “the artistic self-activity of the masses,” as it was called in the Soviet Union.

In 1968, such a position seemed to many like it might be part of the new hard line in Soviet domestic and foreign policy. There are

clues, however, that Lifshitz’s orthodoxy had nothing in common with its government-issue version. His writing is far more subtle and well-informed. It demonstrates a deep, first-hand familiarity with the avant-garde’s devices, its agenda, its problems, and its paradoxes. Armed with this knowledge, Lifshitz demands that the art of the twentieth century be read on its own anti-aesthetic terms, as a historically necessary step. And, in the frame of his polemic, he makes his own radical, communist counterproposal to what we today call contemporary art.

The exhibition *If our soup can could speak...* departs from Lifshitz’s seminal book. The result of a three-year Garage Field Research project, it takes an in-depth look at Lifshitz as a writer with a sense for uncanny contradictions and sublime historical ironies. In a series of rooms inspired by film sets, art historical interiors, and the settings of intellectual life in the Soviet Union, the exhibition delves deep into the Kafkaesque atmosphere of the Soviet epoch. It tells the story of Lifshitz’s notorious attack on modernism, revealing what is at the same time a declaration of love for art.

Visitors are welcome to handle the books and printed materials on display.

Mikhail Lifshitz (1905, Melitopol–1983, Moscow) was a philosopher, cultural theorist, and one of the most influential Russian intellectuals of the twentieth century. After enrolling at the avant-garde art school VKhUTEMAS in the early 1920s, he experienced a creative crisis and turned to the classical legacy. Aged twenty, he was invited to teach dialectical materialism. In 1933, Lifshitz published his key work *On the Question of Marx's Views of Art*, where he demonstrated that Marx had a coherent system of aesthetic opinions. In 1938, this study was published in English in New York as *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* and subsequently appeared internationally in many other languages. In the 1930s, Lifshitz was at the epicenter of intellectual life in the Soviet Union. He lectured prolifically at several Moscow institutions and edited a number of classic works on aesthetic theory. He also briefly occupied the post of Assistant Director for Research at the Tretyakov Gallery and took part in the period's most heated discussions on art. In 1941, Lifshitz volunteered for service at the front. After demobilization in 1946, he fell victim to the unfolding anti-Semitic campaign "against cosmopolitanism." After the death of Stalin, he quickly returned to the spotlight when *Novy Mir* magazine published his article "The Diary of Marietta Shaginyan" (1954), which painted a satirical picture of the Stalin-era intelligentsia. However, his manifesto "Why Am I Not a Modernist?" published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* newspaper in 1966, stirred up controversy: along with the new generation of readers, even those who had admired his boldness in the 1950s now accused him of obscurantism. For decades, Lifshitz remained a symbol of the Brezhnev-era campaigns against the avant-garde and contemporary art. This image was reinforced by the publication of his book *The Crisis of Ugliness*, in which he offered a radical critique of cubism and pop art.

Burning his bridges, in 1976 he published an article titled "The Right Path" on the exhibition of young artists to mark the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Lifshitz's philosophy, centered on his belief in the tragic fate of art in modernity, was only partially explained in the writings he published during his lifetime, and remained largely unstudied in his archive of over 700 files. Most of his books were published after his death, the majority of them in recent years: a period which has seen a dramatic shift in the understanding of his legacy.



Mikhail Lifshitz, 1925
Courtesy A.M Pichikyan

ENTRANCE

"I wish that Kafka, an intelligent but afflicted artist, would rise from the grave to write a bold allegory on the modern worshippers of darkness, including his own," writes Mikhail Lifshitz at the end of his most notorious essay, "Why Am I Not a Modernist?" It is an unexpected vision. In the 1960s, Kafka was the modernist writer par excellence and was finally being published in the Soviet Union just as Lifshitz was writing his essay, which had been commissioned for a journal in Prague by his Czech translator, Vladimir Dostal. In their correspondence, Dostal asks Lifshitz's opinion on the Kafka craze. Lifshitz answers that Kafka is no doubt a great artist, and should be read as such. To Lifshitz it is not Kafka's reflection of bureaucracy or totalitarianism that is important but the "narrowness and pettiness" everywhere as the majority of people become "dependents of a huge centralized force."

THE NOVEL

Before World War II, Lifshitz had been a well-known Marxist aesthetic philosopher. But, he would write, "after the war, many things changed, and times were not easy. After returning from military service I felt completely forgotten. I was somewhere near rock-bottom, and above me was an oceanic mass of rather murky water." He neither published nor taught, but survived through odd jobs. In the late 1950s, just as his fortunes were about to turn, he would try his hand at writing a novel on these difficult years. Its working title, *Moscow Nights*, sounds light-hearted enough. But its subject matter was as dark as it gets. Loosely autobiographical, it was set in the time right before Stalin's death and this room recalls the communal apartments and atmosphere of paranoia of that period.

"At Titenin's..." late 1950s

Quote from from Lifshitz's unfinished novel *Moscow Nights*

Lifshitz's novel was to tell the story of an art teacher and Marxist thinker who dies in the Gulag after he is unjustly blamed for inspiring a group neo-Marxist radicals. The novel was to have been in the form of an apology written by his student, and would have taken the reader on a journey from the world of communal apartments to that of museums and cultural history. Titenin is a crucial antagonist in Lifshitz's cast of characters, a concentrated version of the Soviet petite bourgeoisie and its deep hate for all things intellectual. In his notes, Lifshitz foresees a global Titenin-ism, "from Africa, Asia, anywhere." "Lenin understood (spontaneity etc.). ... Salamanders. Bread and circuses. War, prisons, nationalities."

Isaak Dunayevsky, "Road Song," 1949

Lyrics: Sergei Vasiliev

Lifshitz's character Titenin may well have listened to Isaak Dunayevsky's "Road Song," a minor hit of the postwar period. The narrator is a soldier returning home, and the driving, strangely American bassline imitates the rhythm of the train. The soldier marvels at the wonders of his enormous motherland, its factories and fields. "How much have I traveled, how much have I seen, how far have I come! And everything around me is mine!"

Mikhail Lifshitz, 1941 Mikhail Lifshitz, 1945

Black-and-white photographs (exhibition copies)
Photographer unknown
Courtesy A.M Pichikyan

EDITORIAL OFFICE

"The tasks of the struggle against cosmopolitanism in philosophy." Decision of the joint meeting of the Departments of Marxism-Leninism and Philosophy of the Institute of International Relations, March 23–24, 1949, based on the report by comrade Bakhitzo.

Facsimile
Courtesy A.M Pichikyan

**World War II leaflet
VOKS Bulletin, 3–4, 1943**

Facsimile
Russian Academy of Sciences Archive,
Moscow (Mikhail Lifshitz collection,
no. 2029)

Lifshitz did not like to talk about the war. In 1941, he was sent to the front as a political officer with the Dnepr Flotilla. He participated in the defense of Kiev and was wounded while evading capture behind enemy lines. After recuperating, he was put to work as an editor, writer, and instructor. One of Lifshitz's texts on Nikolai Chernyshevsky appeared in the English language *VOKS Bulletin*—published by the All-Union Society for Cultural Exchange Abroad—in 1943, as his handwritten note on this copy exclaims. Like some of Lifshitz's texts, it was published under a pseudonym.

By the early 1960s, Lifshitz had already made something of a comeback and was once again known as a critical voice. But in 1966, his reputation changed drastically when the weekly newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published his manifesto-like article "Why Am I Not a Modernist?". Its title refers to two famous essays by Bertrand Russell, and its style is reminiscent of writing by the avant-garde which Lifshitz attacks here with unprecedented radicalism. The response was overwhelmingly negative: the majority of the reformist intelligentsia condemned him as a hardliner. This room reconstructs the setting of an editorial boardroom in the mid-1960s, where the ongoing scandal of Lifshitz is under discussion. Visitors are invited to join the editorial deliberations and to examine the books and archival documents on the table.

"Why Am I Not a Modernist?"

Collage
Facsimiles of newspaper clippings and the covers of Lifshitz's working folders

"Why Am I Not a Modernist?" was commissioned in 1963 for the journal *Estetika* in Prague and was also published in the German Democratic Republic in the widely-read cultural weekly *Forum* (№ 6, 1966). It appeared in Russian in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in the same year, followed by a selection of irate responses. Lifshitz answered his critics with an article entitled "Caution, Humanity!," making handwritten and typed additions to the correction sheets even at the last minute. These materials are juxtaposed with a selection from Lifshitz's archive of over 700 folders of notes. "Twentieth-century savage," says one of them. See page 22 of the booklet for a translation of all the folder headings in this room.

**Reader responses
to "Why Am I Not a Modernist?"**

Collage
Facsimiles of letters to the editor collected by Marlen Korallov, various images

Lifshitz's essay was placed in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* by Marlen Korallov (1925–2012), a former Gulag inmate who was head of the section for literary criticism and aesthetics. His portrait, made in a camp shortly before his release in 1955, is reproduced on one of the collage panels. Korallov's editorial office was usually a quiet place. But after the publication of "Why Am I Not a Modernist?" it was flooded with letters. Art historians and artists, physicists, engineers and pensioners, academicians, and school children all had something to say, be it for or against. Korallov recognized the value of the resulting archive, which he took home and guarded jealously for decades, until his death.

On the table:
**Mikhail Lifshitz, Manuscript
of "Why Am I Not a Modernist?" 1963**

**Readers' letters to *Literaturnaya Gazeta*
commenting on the article "Why Am I
Not a Modernist?" by Mikhail Lifshitz,
October–November, 1966**

**Readers' letters to *Literaturnaya
Gazeta* commenting on the article
"Caution, Humanity!" by Mikhail
Lifshitz, 1967**

**L. Kopolev, "An Involuntary Modernist,"
letter to the editor of *Literaturnaya
Gazeta*, November 1966
(indicated as 1964)**

**Grigory Pomerants, "Response to
Mikhail Lifshitz," 1966**

**Marlen Korallov and Alexander
Chakovsky, "Pre-Congress Tribune,"
an Editorial in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*,
1960s**
Facsimile

Russian Academy of Sciences Archive,
Moscow (Mikhail Lifshitz collection,
no. 2029)

**Mikhail Lifshitz, "Why Am I Not a
Modernist," from David Riff's translation
of *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism
to Pop-Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2018)**
Courtesy of Brill, Leiden

**"The Cultural Policies of B. and Kh.,"
December 24, 1964
"Liberalism and Democracy,"
Lifshitz attacks Dymshits in *Problems
of Philosophy*," February 16, 1968**
Radio Free Europe Research Papers
Facsimiles
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Lifshitz's essay—of which both the original manuscript and a recent English translation are reproduced in facsimile here—provoked a public discussion that lasted for over a year. Its contributors included some of the most prominent intellectuals of the time. Shorter responses came from a group around academician Dmitry Likhachev, Czechoslovak Marxist theorist Ernst Kolman, young writer Mark Kharitonov, and art historian and Picasso expert Nina Yavorskaya, to name a few. Longer, no less categorical rejoinders came from future dissidents Lev Kopelev and Grigory Pomerants. The debate was so visible that the research institute of Radio Liberty in Munich prepared partial translations of Lifshitz's article for its internal reports. The Radio Liberty analyst comments that Lifshitz's is a unique position, not to be confused with any official conservative backlash. He rightly puts him in a camp of his own.

Scrapbook on “Why Am I Not a Modernist?”

Collage, mixed media

Scrapbooks throughout the exhibition retell the main points of Lifshitz’s essays, juxtaposing images unavailable to him during his lifetime with central quotes. This scrapbook presents a summary of Lifshitz’s text. Employing an iconoclastic voice to catalogue the twentieth century’s sins, he challenges the standard 1960s interpretation of modernism as progressive or anti-totalitarian. On the contrary, the modernists’ assault on Reason and Beauty helped to open the doors to the violence of the twentieth century. Individual modernists might have been courageous people, but there is no such thing as good modernism. In that sense, “good modernists” are like religious people who join the struggle against oppression: their religion is guilty of historically helping oppression to gain the upper hand.

Copies of *Novy Mir*, 1950s and 1960s

One of the reasons for the overwhelming scandal around “Why Am I Not a Modernist?” was that it looked like a betrayal. Lifshitz had actually been one of the older Marxist intellectuals in the background of the “reformist” camp of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1954, after Stalin’s death, the wartime poet and Lifshitz’s friend Alexander Tvardovsky was one of the first to publish texts in a new critical spirit in his journal *Novy Mir*, including Lifshitz’s “Diary of Marietta Shaganyan,” a broadside against the sycophancy of late Stalinist culture. Lifshitz’s article was one of the reasons Tvardovsky was fired. He was reinstated as editor of *Novy Mir* in 1958 and turned the journal into a mainstay of literary de-Stalinization. One of its most important publications was Solzhenitsyn’s novella *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (written in

1959, published in 1962), only possible after Tvardovsky lobbied for it for a year. Lifshitz, his former mentor and friend, supported him, writing that it would be a crime not to publish this reckoning with Stalinist violence.

Soviet Literature on Modernism

A full bibliography for each room in Russian and English is available as a PDF at www.garagemca.org

Under Stalin, modernism was condemned as foreign culture harmful to the Soviet people and, most of the time, buried in silence. But after 1956, this attitude changed dramatically, eventually giving rise to a wave of publications both for and against. Lifshitz felt that most of these were not worth the paper they were printed on. Marxists in western Europe were also reevaluating their outlook on modern art. A key publication in 1963 was *D’un réalisme sans rivages* [Realism Out of Bounds] by Roger Garaudy, then a Communist parliamentarian, later a holocaust denier and pioneer of political Islam. Garaudy claims that Kafka and Picasso were twentieth-century realists. Lifshitz spent much of the 1960s and 1970s arguing with this idea.



LA MAISON CUBISTE

“The scene of the action is Paris on the eve of the World War One. As the curtain rises, we see a crowd of philistines on the rampage, we hear jeering and mockery. But what is causing such a stir? The arrival of a new movement in art.” These lines from the beginning of Lifshitz’s essay on cubism refer to the scandalous Salon d’Automne of 1912. It prominently featured some of the cubists both in its main exhibition and its decorative arts section, where the public could enter one of the first examples of cubist architecture, La Maison Cubiste (The Cubist House). Cubism’s visibility at the Salon prompted a debate in France’s National Assembly, and Georgy Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, also wrote about it, founding a Marxist anti-modernist tradition that Lifshitz continues but also critiques.

Reconstruction of the Cubist Portal to *La Maison Cubiste*, 1912

Mixed media

This is a mock-up of a proposed Cubist maisonette shown in the decorative arts section of the Salon d’Automne of 1912. Its portal and facade were designed by sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp’s older brother. He was one of the leaders of the so-called Puteaux Group of Cubists. Its members contributed all of the artworks and objects to *La Maison Cubiste*. Future decorator André Mare was responsible for the overall design. Everything was for sale. It was one of the first “photographable” installations, featuring in a photo reportage in the Paris magazine *Excelsior*. Ours is a free reconstruction of two of its parts.

Embroidered cushions with works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Robert Delaunay

André Mare designed the interior of La Maison Cubiste with the agenda “to make above all something very French” while returning “to lines that are simple, pure, logical, and even slightly cold.” This statement certainly applies to the pattern used for the current installation, taken from a later fabric design by Mare, and it confirms Lifshitz’s view of cubism’s intellectual backdrop. The cubists thirsted for “geometrical constructions of the human pneuma, where there is nothing but commands and blind obedience,” and in that sense they anticipated “the veneration of blood and soil [. . .] and petit bourgeois routine,” Lifshitz writes. By the middle of the twentieth century petit bourgeois routine had triumphed. Works by the Fauves or the former cubists—in this case works seen and described by Lifshitz—were made into embroidery patterns for mounting onto cushions or handbags. Today, the entire process can be done by machine.

Canvas prints of illustrations from *The Crisis of Ugliness*, 1968

Canvas print

La Maison Cubiste included canvases by Fernand Léger, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, and Marcel Duchamp. Here, they have been replaced by a selection of enlarged illustrations from *The Crisis of Ugliness*. These poor quality black-and-white reproductions made Lifshitz’s book very attractive in a country where illustrated publications on modernism were few and far between. The selection here includes works mentioned in Lifshitz’s argument. Léger’s *Woman in Blue* (1912) was attacked by Georgy Plekhanov as “Nonsense cubed!” Lifshitz disagrees. “One cannot say that Léger is [. . .] spoiling canvases because he simply cannot draw. [. . .] he is happy

and considers his painting a job well done.” Another central figure in Lifshitz’s text is Jean Metzinger. Lifshitz is fascinated by his mix of banality and metaphysics as a theoretician, and one can see that same mix in his paintings.

Wallpaper based on André Mare’s “Draperies” textile.

André Mare,
Carnets de Guerre, 2000

Model of World War I Transport Ship in Dazzle Camouflage

Chris Barton, *Dazzle Ships: World War I and the Art of Confusion*, 2017

Photographs of Guillaume Apollinaire, Georges Braque, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and the Futurists during World War I
Facsimiles

The constellation on and around the mantel explores the cubists’ relationship to the onset of the World War I. Some, like Guillaume Apollinaire, fought and were wounded. Others, like André Mare, worked directly in the new Department of Camouflage, where they applied their cubist ideas. The most famous example of quasi-cubist camouflage was used by the British. When Picasso saw such patterns he remarked, “it was us who did that.” To be fair, the cubists never openly advocated for war, as did Futurist poet Marinetti, who later served as Mussolini’s Minister of Culture and died shortly after a visit to the Eastern front in World War II. Lifshitz reminds us that “Cubism is a sibling of Marinetti’s Futurist aesthetic.” [. . .] “It would be a simplification to link the cubism of 1907–1914 to totalitarian ideas,” he writes in *The Crisis of Ugliness*. “There is no direct link, of course, but the ambivalences are obvious.”

John Golding, *Cubism: A History and Analysis, 1907–1914, 1959*

Christopher Gray, *Cubist Aesthetic Theories*, 1953

Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 1960

“There are many exultant books on the cubists, printed on glossy paper with illustrations of the highest technical quality. Understandably, the average person cannot remain indifferent to this landslide of enthusiasm,” writes Lifshitz in his essay. He goes on to look at how the same phrases migrate from edition to edition. These are “the unprovable formulas of a new faith,” ones that “rich proprietors with big collections share with people of the most progressive mindset, as if they were members of one and the same community of believers.” They are all convinced that cubism is a Copernican turn in art and, in a sense, Lifshitz agrees. “Disgust and boredom with [the] colorless, senseless movement of forms, marketplace attractions, and cheap imitations of beauty” prompt the avant-garde to put an end to painting. That, according to Lifshitz, is the crux of cubism’s entire “Copernican turn.”

Scrapbook on “Myth and Reality”

Bowl with marble whiskey cubes

Bottle of Suze

The scrapbook on the table recounts some of the central moments in Lifshitz’s study of cubism. Even if it sometime looked refined, the cubists’ art was an assault on what painting used to be. Cubist painting was no longer about depicting the visible world of objects. Painting itself became an object,

expressing the desire that Georges Braque voiced when he said that he wanted to become a thing. It is not a long, winding road but a superhighway that connects this dream with Warhol’s desire to become a machine, says Lifshitz in the second, shorter essay of his book.

Robert Lebel,
***L’Envers de Peinture*, 1964**

Pablo Picasso,
***Portrait of Wilhelm Uhde*, 1910**
Canvas print of illustration
from *The Crisis of Ugliness*, 1968

Cubist canvases, reverse

Mockup of Kurt Schwitters’
***Merzbau*, reverse**

One of Lifshitz’s most valued sources was a book by Robert Lebel, an art critic close to Marcel Duchamp, called *The Other Side of Painting*. Lebel’s book provides some insight into the financial and affective economies behind modernism, revealing “the mores of the tableauistes.” Lebel’s title is apt, as a painting’s value is measurable by the provenance markings on the back of its stretchers. The exit from La Maison Cubiste is through another reconstructed reverse. It approximates the back or outside of the *Merzbau* installation by Dadaist artist Kurt Schwitters. He was one of the first to develop an (anti-) artistic critique of modernist painting’s commercial flipside.

THE FACTORY

The second, shorter essay in *The Crisis of Ugliness* is called “The Phenomenology of the Soup Can.” It was first published in issue 12 of the journal *Kommunist* in 1966. The title is half-ironic, mixing Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), widely known as one of the most impenetrable works in the history of philosophy, with Warhol’s soup cans, then often derided as a new peak of banality. The readymade’s simplicity is deceptive, says Lifshitz. It is actually promoted from the upper floors of consciousness by seasoned professionals, former advertising executives, and commercial artists who have now come to replace their kerosene-drinking artist predecessors. Warhol was the perfect prototype of such an artist. Our exhibition takes the visitor into a mockup of his Factory. Warhol famously transformed an ordinary New York City loft by completely covering the walls with industrial grade aluminum foil. Elements of the Factory’s interior frame a small selection of Warhol’s works and a picture by Roy Lichtenstein. An audio installation of two speaking soup cans provides commentary, and there is also a selection of scrapbooks and magazines.

Roy Lichtenstein, *Two Apples*, 1972
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Andy Warhol, *Hammer and Sickle*, 1976
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas
Private collection

Andy Warhol, *Jackie*, 1964
Synthetic polymer and silkscreen ink on canvas
V-A-C Collection, Moscow

“Why do you think a hill or a tree is more beautiful than a gas pump? It’s because you’re conditioned to think that

way.” Lifshitz quotes these lines by Roy Lichtenstein in his essay, noting how close he comes to the iconoclasm and relativism of the classical avant-gardes. “Just wait a little, we will teach you that a soup can is no worse than the Venus de Milo, you yourself will admit that it’s true! All too obviously, pop is a product of the ploys and bluffs of advertising and has a close inner link with the era of consumption,” he writes. To put it differently, pop renders everything consumable, including the idea of a still life, the emblems of the Cold War opponent, or the grieving widow of an assassinated president. The line between original and fake is blurred, as one sees in these paintings, some of the few authentic artworks in the present exhibit.

Disco ball

Reconstruction based on photographs

The Velvet Underground & Nico, “I’ll Be Your Mirror”, 1966

Music and lyrics: Lou Reed
Verve/Universal Music

Andy Warhol’s Factory produced silkscreens and films, and it also served as a music production company, most famously promoting its own rock band, The Velvet Underground. Warhol hosted the band as part of his Exploding Plastic Inevitable, an ongoing multimedia jam session during which the band’s most famous works were written and recorded. He also produced their first album, offering creative input that the band only took up in part. One of his ideas was to put “I’ll Be Your Mirror” first and to loop the song with an artificial scratch in the vinyl, turning it into an audio-object. The song perfectly expresses Warhol and Nico’s willingness to become machine-like and blank, to move from reflection as self-analysis to a different kind of

mirroring. That empty reflection, one could say, is a central theme in Lifshitz’s pop art essay.

Scrapbook on “The Phenomenology of the Soup Can”

Newsweek, April 25, 1966
America journal, 1960–1977

In a situation generally starved of information, Lifshitz offered Soviet readers a brief history of pop in an intricate digest-collage of French-, German-, and English-language press clippings, up-to-date with happenings and performances. Here, he almost gleefully narrates pop’s ascendancy over abstract expressionism, from the price crisis of abstract painting in 1962 to the Venice Biennale of 1964 and its sprawl into the grey zone between high art and mass culture. Lifshitz’s is a view at a remove: he never traveled to the West. Yet having lived through the 1920s, he is not scandalized by pop. In fact, he ironically and gleefully draws up an evocative narrative where “the lovely Ingrid,” Batman, and Warhol’s factory of superstars all beckon from across the sea.

Speaking soup cans

A central moment in Lifshitz’s essay on pop art is when he gives the word to Warhol’s soup can. Officially a reference to speaking objects in Hans Christian Andersen, this also recounts Marx’s idea of listening to the language of mute commodities, as expressed in *Capital, Volume 1*. “To be done with this hell on earth, with all these ideas and all this responsibility, that is the ideal of modern man. Be as simple and irresponsible as the stupid piece of tin from which the machine made me,” says the tin can, when it is taken from the shelf and placed into a museum. Here, two replica Campbell’s soup cans repeat a prayer-like incantation to consumerist oblivion, as imagined by Lifshitz, in English and in Russian.

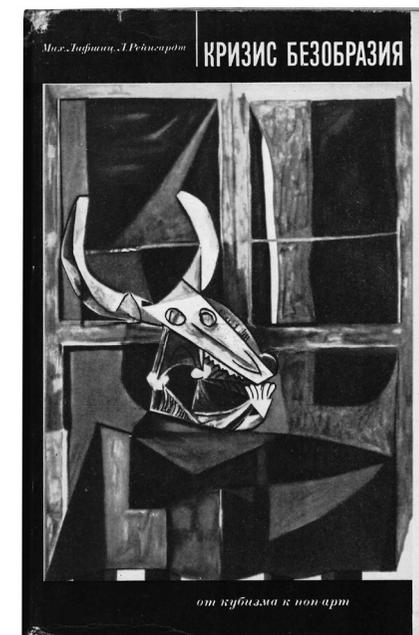
THE CRISIS OF UGLINESS

The name of Lifshitz’s book is rich in meaning. It is a quote from Georgy Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, who took it from the art critic Camille Mauclair’s essay “Trois crises de l’art actuel” (1906). “Bezobrazie” in Russian means ugliness, nonsense or foolishness, and literally “without (an ideal) image,” as in lacking ideals. This lack of images also applies to how modern art was seen in the Soviet Union. That is, much of it wasn’t seen at all. The idea of modernism was immensely popular, but remained “imageless,” largely composed of literary myths, artists’ legends, and theoretical ideologies, lacking visual experience of the turbulent developments of modern art from the mid-1930s onward. By the late 1950s, modernist masterpieces began to reappear in Soviet museums, and there were a few landmark exhibitions that exposed Soviet audiences to Picasso or Pollock, but even pro-modernist curators remained reluctant to show too much modernism. Lifshitz argues against this cautious attitude in his articles. Soviet audiences should see for themselves. This never happened. Both general audiences and professionals had to rely on reproductions, the best and most sought-after of which were slides.

Slide show of *The Crisis of Ugliness*

High-resolution slides, quotes, clicking noise, 13’ 54”

The present slide show fulfills the dream of finally seeing the modern classics under contemporary conditions. In a stylized Soviet outdoor cinema, it retells key moments in *The Crisis of Ugliness*, accompanied by the click of a slide projector, using the best possible high-resolution images of modernist masters available on the internet, and juxtaposing them with quotes from Lifshitz’s book.



VKhUTEMAS

The Crisis of Ugliness showed that its author knew the logic of the avant-garde: its iconoclasm and its one-upmanship of innovation. Moscow's radical art school VKhUTEMAS was the place where Lifshitz gained this knowledge. Lifshitz came here in 1922, from the wartorn south Ukrainian town of Melitopol, and enrolled at VKhUTEMAS a year later. He initially studied art, but was soon drafted into teaching Marxist philosophy. In the end, Lifshitz would break with his teachers and co-students. Surrounded by the most daring modernist experiments of his time, he dreamed of reviving precisely those classics that so many of his contemporaries were rejecting. He argued that Lenin and Marx had been principled defenders of classical art. At the time of the proletarian cultural revolution (1928–1932), this sounded like heresy and earned Lifshitz the stigma of a rightwing deviant. This installation takes us to the heart of Lifshitz's dream of a new Renaissance.

Studiolo from *St. Jerome in His Study* by Antonello di Messina (c. 1475)

This mockup of the studiolo furniture from a masterpiece of the Italian quattrocento visualizes Lifshitz's reaction to the battle cry of the productionist left during his time at VKhUTEMAS: "From art to production, from the easel to the machine!" The resulting "sitting machines" had more to do with the "afterlife of painting" than with the "real needs of people," Lifshitz would later remember. But he had other ideas. He dreamed that the victory of the working people over their oppressors would lead not to a new Middle Ages but to a rediscovery of realism in the spirit of the Renaissance.

Archival documents on Mikhail Lifshitz's time at VKhUTEMAS

Mikhail Lifshitz, "Marxism and Pragmatism", 1924

Digital documents on file reader

Lifshitz enrolled at VKhUTEMAS on his second attempt, after a year spent unlearning his skills as a realist draughtsman and "drawing all kinds of circles and squares." After his orientation year, he studied under printmaker Vladimir Favorsky, a major figure at VKhUTEMAS, who known for his woodcuts and their combination of modernism and neo-traditionalism. It was Favorsky who invited neo-Orthodox polymath Father Pavel Florensky to give a course of lectures on his theory of reverse perspective, which Lifshitz attended. In 1924, he wrote his first major philosophical paper, a Marxist critique of William James' religious philosophy of pragmatism. Soon after writing this paper, Lifshitz took on teaching duties, becoming an instructor in dialectical materialism.

Strokes Toward a Portrait of Lenin, part 4: The VKhUTEMAS Commune, 1967

Director: Leonid Pchelkin. Produced by TO Ekran
Excerpt, 7' 51
Courtesy FGUP "VGTRK"
VO "Sovteleexport"

Lenin visited VKhUTEMAS in 1921 and had a long discussion about Futurism with its students. This scene is reenacted in this excerpt from the fourth and final film of a miniseries on Lenin's activities after the October Revolution. Shot in 1967 for primetime TV with an all-star cast, it was never shown in full. The series is based on historical documents that Lifshitz would later often quote, citing Lenin's skepticism at the

"fanatics of 'the modern' who are ready to drown anyone in a teaspoon of water if they refuse to worship the new as a god."

Mikhail Lifshitz, "Dialectical Materialism and the History of Art", lecture transcript, 1927

Manuscript facsimiles, Russian and English

Mikhail Lifshitz, "On the Aesthetic Opinions of Karl Marx", 1927

Manuscript facsimiles, Russian and English

Books and pamphlets from the mid-to-late 1920s

Lifshitz developed his own singular position as a thinker very early on, as can be seen in his earliest publications. The revolution itself led beyond the simple negation of art to the negation of negation, he argues in his lecture "Dialectical Materialism and the History of Art" (1927). There was an alternative to the avant-garde's aesthetics of iconoclasm and innovation, and it was to be found in Marx himself, claimed Lifshitz. At a time when Marx was generally read as a hardnosed economist, Lifshitz became the first author to outline Marx's hidden aesthetic philosophy in 1927, in an article published in the in-house magazine of the Social Science Faculty of VKhUTEMAS, which had been renamed VKhUTEIN in 1926.

Mikhail Lifshitz's article on the artist Grigor Vagramyan, 1929

Facsimile
Russian Academy of Sciences Archive, Moscow (Mikhail Lifshitz collection, no. 2029)

The Vagramyan Affair

Collage. Reconstituted student newspaper, reproductions of paintings, document facsimiles

In the late 1920s, the political climate in the Soviet Union quickly began to change. Calls for intensification of the class struggle accompanied a fierce struggle within the party with the right opposition. Intellectuals and artists assumed the role of party militants engaged in a cultural revolution against the holdover of the old bourgeois culture. Lifshitz's position proved more and more incompatible with this militancy. In 1929, he publically defended Grigor Vagramyan, a student of figurative painting, for turning to the traditions of the Renaissance. Perhaps he was remembering his own work from two years before, an oil painting of his grandfather in the style of the quattrocento. A scandal ensued when Lifshitz pointed out that Lenin had been an aesthetic conservative. A special issue of the student newspaper appeared, branding Lifshitz and others as rightwing deviants. The reconstituted versions of two of its pages here were pieced together from many different photographs.

THE COMMUNIST ACADEMY

"The Thirties are a time of deep contradictions, and whoever speaks of this epoch in general while avoiding the bitterness of its inner conflict is only reproducing the worst of its dogmatic monotony," Mikhail Lifshitz would write. As a "man of the Thirties," he was very much a product of these contradictions. Demanding a return to classical aesthetics through Marxism just as the first purges were shaking the intellectual world, he rose to prominence in its new institutions, such as the Communist Academy, that parallel institution for the humanities and social sciences founded in 1918 to compete with the Academy of Sciences and its prerevolutionary scholars. This installation recreates the atmosphere of one of this institution's reading rooms, tracing Lifshitz's efforts as an essayist, editor, lecturer, and museum professional over the tragic decade. Upon closer inspection, many of Lifshitz's ideas were fundamentally at odds with the dominant ideology. Along with world famous Marxist philosopher György Lukács and writer Andrei Platonov, he stood at the center of the group around the journal *Literaturny Kritik*, forming a precarious Hegelian Marxist opposition on the minefield on art and literature.

On desks:

Mikhail Lifshitz, Drafts, sketches, and manuscripts, 1930s

Facsimiles
Russian Academy of Sciences Archive, Moscow (Mikhail Lifshitz collection, no. 2029)

Mikhail Lifshitz, Educational programs for the State Experimental Theatrical Studios: plans and conspectuses for courses on social sciences, Leninism, historical and dialectical materialism, 1924–1933

Mikhail Lifshitz, "Marxism and Art," lecture, May 7, 1933

Aron Gurstein and Meer Viner, "A Revisionist Concept (On the Theories of Mikhail Lifshitz)," 1930s

Facsimiles

Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, Moscow

The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx and Other Writings

Collage series of facsimile prints, mixed media

In 1929, Lifshitz took a position as a researcher at the Marx-Engels Institute, the most important international center of Marx studies at the time. His proposal to open a Cabinet of Aesthetics was denied, but he continued his project of reconstructing Marx's hidden aesthetic, nonetheless. The collages here explore this aesthetic, mixing public domain classical drawings with manuscripts and notes by Lifshitz, and quotes from his texts. One of them looks at Lifshitz's work on Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1933) and Giambattista Vico (1939). The final table is devoted to Lifshitz's battle against "vulgar sociology" and proletarian class chauvinism, and looks at his controversial article "Leninism and Art Criticism" (1936).

Volumes with contributions by Mikhail Lifshitz

From the early-to-mid 1930s, Lifshitz emerged as a prolific scholar and editor. The first version of his programmatic work on Marx's aesthetic views was published in volume 6 of the *Literary Encyclopedia* in 1932, and then as a standalone publication in 1933. This book was later translated into English in 1938. Lifshitz's anthology *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* appeared in 1937 and was later translated into many languages. It was followed by an analogous anthology of Lenin, centering on his theory of reflection. Lifshitz also edited and introduced books on Giambattista Vico and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. His articles are bookmarked.

Literaturny Kritik Journal

In 1930, when Lifshitz was working at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, he shared an office with philosopher György Lukács, who, although twenty years older, would later credit Lifshitz as a lasting influence. Together they would develop a Marxist realist aesthetic counter posed both to that of the avant-garde and the more "heroic" Socialist Realism. Their platform was the monthly journal *Literaturny Kritik*, whose regular contributors included friends such as Elena Usievich, Vladimir Grib, and Andrei Platonov. This display of what was then a crucial source for debates on the theory of art comes from the library of the historian Galina Belaya, who specializes in Soviet literary politics of the 1920s and 1930s.

Display counter:

Bound volumes of Pravda, 1933–1935

Legal Report on the Case Against the Anti-Soviet Rightwing Trotskyist Bloc, March 2–13, 1938

A tide of terror was rising just as Lifshitz was formulating his most important ideas. No source shows the intensity of the approaching storm better than the daily newspaper *Pravda*, whose declarations against saboteurs, foreign spies, and ideological deviants would rise to a fever pitch after 1935. In 1934, the newspaper published an article by Lifshitz on his study of Marx's aesthetics. This helped to establish his reputation as an important young expert in a crucial field, which protected him, but also made him a target in the tragic years ahead.

A Man of the Thirties

Collage, mixed media. Reproductions, document facsimiles

These panels look at Lifshitz's experience of the 1930s in four major episodes. The first was a campaign against "Menshevizing idealism" that engulfed the Marx-Engels Institute, where Lifshitz had been employed since 1929, in 1930–1931. Lifshitz played a role in this campaign, for which he was fired by the director, David Ryazanov, later one of the many victims of a purge that claimed more than half of the Institute's staff. Lifshitz was reinstated and allowed to continue his work. He also began to teach at the Communist Academy in Moscow, eventually gathering a following of students and colleagues, including his later collaborator Vladimir Grib, who congratulates him profusely and ironically in the personal letter on display here. Yet his popularity also made him the target of attacks, as seen in an article by two critics from Leningrad, accusing him of revisionism and Trotskyism. In the summer of 1937,

just as Moscow was proudly celebrating the centenary of Pushkin's death, the terror reached its apogee. Lifshitz fell ill with fever and had a vision of NKVD units clearing out the student dormitories of the Institute of Red Professors—a subdivision of the Communist Academy charged with training new communist academicians—with flame-throwers. This image of terror reminded him of Pushkin's lines on the rage of the Sultan's janissaries from the poem "Now do the gjaours extol Stambul..."

Rotating stand for works on paper, 1898

All-Russia Museum of Decorative, Applied, and Folk Art, Moscow

Archival materials and images related to Mikhail Lifshitz's time as Assistant Director for Research at the Tretyakov Gallery

Facsimile prints
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

In 1938, art historian and critic Vladimir Kemenov became director of the Tretyakov Gallery. Two years before he had made his mark by writing ruthless articles in *Pravda* against formalism, using vulgar versions of Lifshitz's more sophisticated arguments. Kemenov invited Lifshitz to be his Assistant Director for Research in 1938. His tasks included lecturing to museum pedagogues and helping to reorganize the permanent exhibition, set up on sociological terms some years before by Alexei Fyodorov-Davydov. As can be seen in the before and after photographs, Lifshitz's display included a rotating stand much like the one in the current exhibition. In 1941, Lifshitz left his post and reported to the front for active duty. When he returned, it was to a small apartment in one of the Tretyakov Gallery's technical buildings.

ON THE RIGHT PATH

Lifshitz was never associated with any particular group of artists. His defense of realism was universal and applicable to art across cultures and times. The only example of his focusing on realist art by Soviet contemporaries was in a 1976 article "On the Right Path," about an exhibition of young official Soviet painters produced in the run-up to the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In it Lifshitz responds to attacks by influential Soviet art critics against naturalism in Soviet painting. He enthuses over the return to genuine realism at a time when Soviet painting was lurching into its final crisis, along with the country as a whole. Lifshitz seemed to realize where history was heading, but he stuck to his guns. "We will have to hear idiot judgements and see the philistines rejoice at our predicament, and they might call us dogmatic and conservative. But as long as the voice of helpless infantile passion or snake-like opportunism in relation to changing circumstances finds a counterpoint in living Marxism, not all is lost. People cannot be deaf to words of conviction, public honesty, and scientific truth." This installation, which features three paintings mentioned in "On the Right Path," delves into Lifshitz's defense of Soviet painting in the setting of a typical studio of the "stagnant" 1970s.

Larisa Kirillova, *Girls from the Village of Chernoe*, 1974–1975

Oil on canvas
Perm State Art Gallery, Perm

Valery Khabarov, *Self-Portrait*, 1976

Tempera on cardboard
Udmurt Republican Museum of Fine Arts, Izhevsk

Oleg Filatchev, *Self-Portrait with Mother*, 1974

Oil on canvas
Irkutsk Regional Art Museum, Irkutsk

Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia*, 16th-century copy

Copper etching
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Official painting from the late Soviet Union has a quality of its own, and one can see its contradictions in these three examples from Lifshitz's article, on loan from regional museums in Russia. Artists produced work that tried to recapture lost traditional techniques and pathos formulas, often fully aware that they could never achieve the proficiency of the Old Masters. This produced a peculiar type of melancholia, best summed up by Oleg Filatchev's self-portrait of an unhappy artist, mirroring the stagnant climate in the country as a whole. By the 1970s, established art critics like Andrei Chegodaev were condemning such figurative painting, claiming there was no way forward to be found in imitating the ancients. Lifshitz's answer is to repeat the same ideas he had already articulated thirty-seven years before, while defending Grigor Vagramyan, but under radically different historical circumstances.

Reproductions of official Soviet painting from the 1970s

Reproductions of Old Masters and classical art

Young official art from the late Soviet Union is an artistic continent waiting to be discovered. Beneath the surface of canonical motifs and anniversary occasions for big group exhibitions, there is a growing resistance to the politics of Soviet art, an embrace of nationalist tradition and religion. Some of the young stars of Soviet painting, such as Ilya Glazunov and Alexander Shilov would become the grand academicians of today. Others would fade into obscurity. A collection of catalogues of young official

Soviet art from the 1970s complements the wall display, whose saturation with pictures is typical for an artist's studio of the time.

Books from the 1970s by Mikhail Lifshitz

Scrapbook for "On the Right Path"

The Crisis of Ugliness (1968) and its sequel, *Art in the Modern World* (1973)—which was republished in 1978 with the addition of the article "On the Right Path"—established Lifshitz's reputation as the most principled Soviet critic of modernism. It was only after their publication that he ever received an academic degree or official recognition. The continuation of his theoretical work still fascinates contemporary philosophers, several of whom have rediscovered his late work in recent years.

"At the 25th Congress of the CPSU," Special issue no. 3, The Great

Construction Program (1976), part 1

Digitized film, 10' 31"

Courtesy Gosfilmofond, provided by net-film

In the Soviet seventies, the public sphere was saturated with political propaganda, to which the population grew increasingly numb. Even the party's ideologues no longer invested much meaning in their Marxist-Leninist phrases. The 25th Communist Party Congress received daily coverage, but produced no surprises, only the same dead triumphant rhetoric constantly repeated. It took place under the shadow of repressions against dissidents, in protest at which the French Communist Party candidate departed the congress.

Reproductions of newspaper articles (1973–1974) denouncing Alexander Solzhenitsyn, collected by Marlen Korallov

In the early 1960s, intellectuals like Lifshitz had defended Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a realist intent upon revealing the tragic abuses during the time of the personality cult. After 1968, Solzhenitsyn was unable to publish any of his works, despite the efforts of his supporters. In 1973, Soviet newspapers started deriding him as a reactionary and a literary representative of Vlasov's army (the Soviet General who was a Nazi collaborator and whose name was synonymous with betrayal), and in 1974 Solzhenitsyn was arrested and deported from the Soviet Union. Most intellectuals and creative professionals read him and other forbidden authors anyway, either in typed manuscript copy (samizdat) or, more rarely, as Russian-language books published abroad.

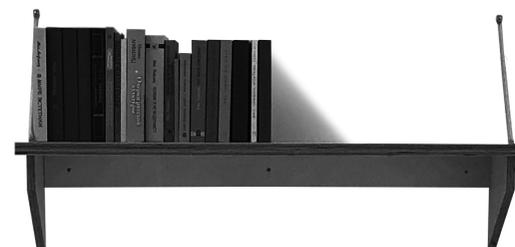
INSIDE THE WHITE CUBE

"It could be that this sad experience is something art requires before the transition to a new social content can clearly bring the old forms back to life."

Lifshitz died in 1983, just before the Cold War reached its final phase. Only a few years later, the Soviet leadership placed the country on the path of reform, successively abandoning any pretense at Marxist orthodoxy. Lifshitz was forgotten, to be rediscovered by a new generation of artists and scholars who now operate inside the "white cube" of contemporary culture. Even if many of his insights prefigure those of postmodern art criticism, it should be said that Lifshitz was aware of "postmodernism" and rejected it vehemently. Today, he remains as out of step with his time, as he often was during his life. He is in clear opposition to contemporary theory, whose anti-essentialism and post-universalism cannot tolerate his insistence upon an art of apprehensible truth and its return after the "end of art" as being both necessary and inevitable.

Shelf of posthumous publications of Mikhail Lifshitz

In nearly sixty years of scholarship, two anthologies by Lifshitz and seven of his books were published in the Russian language: two of them in the 1930s, one in the 1960s, and four in the 1970s. Since his death in 1983, twenty-three of his books have appeared, six of them in the Soviet Union and seventeen in post-Soviet Russia. Until recently, the only book-length translation of Lifshitz into English was his brochure on Marx, published in New York in 1938. In February 2018, David Riff's translation of *The Crisis of Ugliness* was published in English by Brill as No. 158 of the *Historical Materialism* series, with the support of Garage.



APPENDIX

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Collage “Why Am I Not a Modernist?”

Archive folder cover labels

103 – 20th-Century Savages
The Concrete (True and False)
The Devil
Deformation
Conversation with the Devil
Evil
Brutality
The Demagogy of Modernism

Newspaper headlines

Why Am I Not a Modernist?
Analysis Against Schematics
Careful, Art!
Caution, Humanity!
For and Against
Who Seduced Caliban?

Selected Reader Responses to “Why Am I Not a Modernist?”

“Your article is another stone thrown at those who have already lost their mounts. If the object of its attack isn’t on the ground, it has almost fallen, in any case. And the attack is brutal. You have talent, no doubt.” Mark Kharitonov, writer.

“Until today I knew nothing about you. I didn’t even know there was such a person as Mikhail Lifshitz. And of course, I didn’t care whether you were a modernist or why. I think the majority of *Literaturnaya Gazeta’s* readers are absolutely indifferent to who you are or how you feel about modernism. I’ll tell you even more! You don’t know how you feel about it, which is why you have made so little sense of what you have written about so extensively.”

“Marlen, honestly, considering that our relationship has hardly ever been

characterized as close, I found the humor of your message somewhat strange. I must confess, I am surprised.” Igor Vinogradov (literary critic and literary historian)
Note by Marlen Korallov: “Igor Vinogradov said he was borrowing the folder for a month. He didn’t give it back for two years. I sent him a note that said ‘I’ll smash your face. There was no humor there.’”

“Dear Editors. It has been a while since I have read such passionate and honest words. Like true art, this article is a bundle of spiritual energy. I am keeping it to read again and again.” E. Anuchkin, Leningrad

“Dear Editors. I am neither a literary scholar nor an art critic, neither historian nor philosopher, neither publicist nor critic, but only a simple reader. Nevertheless, I can’t help but respond to the discussion of Mikhail Lifshitz’s article ‘Why Am I Not a Modernist?’ Let me say straight out that I do not like Mikhail Lifshitz’s article, neither the first one nor the second (“Caution, Humanity!”), most importantly because there is a sense of arrogance, abandon, insistence, and even a dictatorial tone, all of which provoke a certain antipathy toward the author and consequently do not allow you to trust his words. . . .”

“Dear Comrade Chakovsky. After listening to a radio program dedicated to Picasso’s 85th birthday, I felt a rising irritation at having read Lifshitz’s article “Why Am I Not a Modernist?” in no. 119 of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*.”

SELECTED TRANSLATIONS

VKHUTEMAS

The Vagramyan Affair Collage. Selected Newspapers

BEAT RIGHT DEVIATIONS IN PRACTICE

Don’t let them juggle Lenin’s words for idealism.

IDEALISM UNDER THE MASK OF
LENINISM AND MARXISM

What happened? Lifshitz, a scholar, Komsomol member, and instructor in historical materialism spoke at the thesis defense as a delegate of the Faculty of Social Sciences (OBKON) in favor of works by the student Vagramyan, resorting to one of Trotsky’s demagogical tricks.

Lifshitz mixes the lines of Lenin and Klara Tsetkin, obfuscates the question of class struggle in art using the authority of the Faculty of Social Sciences in the interests of idealism, stunts the growth of the right Marxist-Leninist outlook among students and stunts the further growth of the Faculty of Painting, which recently has been trying to toe the line of proletarian class art.

Béla Uitz

BE ON YOUR GUARD

It is no coincidence that there was applause for Lifshitz from some individual Komsomol members: this indicates that petit bourgeois ideologies of art have infiltrated our Komsomol organization. Its individual cells are already infected and require treatment. In supporting Lifshitz, Komsomol members are supporting the reactionary and regressive part of the faculty at a time of intense struggle with class enemies on the ideological front of artistic culture. The enemy never sleeps, it is infiltrating

all of our civic, political, and academic organizations.
L. Starkov

THE KOMSOMOL
CONDEMNS COMRADE LIFSHITZ’S
STATEMENT

The active members and the Komsomol assembly have clearly ascertained to whose benefit Comrade Lifshitz really defended Vagramyan’s work. The comrades showed concrete instances of where reactionary professors used Comrade Lifshitz’s words for their own purposes, to implement their ideology. [. . .]
The assembly and the active members declare that they will continue fighting against any deviation both to the right and to the left, fighting for the proper Leninist attitude of the party and bringing it to life in practice, while defending the order of proletarian ideology in art.

Reriger

COMMUNIST ACADEMY

A Man of the Thirties. Selected Documents

Protocol of the Commission Meeting for the Party Organization Purge of the Institute of Literature, Art, and Language of the Communist Academy, November 9–December 5, 1933
Central Archive of Socio-Political History of Moscow

Questions

Q: Do you see any mistakes in your literary work?

A: No.

Q: How many correspondents have you organized for the wall newspaper?

A: Of 30 employees, 15 have worked on the wall newspaper, 5 of them actively.

Q: What kind of educational work have you carried out with them?

A: We haven't carried out any special work as yet. We are planning a special editorial report for the general meeting.

Q: Did you attack Deborin before the campaign?

A: I did not publish any statements in print, but within the Marx-Engels Institute I belonged to the group that fought with Deborin.

Q: Have you fulfilled your production plan?

A: With great effort, but in a satisfactory manner.

Q: When you taught at VKhUTEIN, were you ever under the influence of Sarabyanov?

A: Never [crossed out and replaced with handwritten "No"]

Letter from Vladimir Grib to Mikhail Lifshitz (excerpt)

Congratulatory Speech Given on the Occasion of the 29th Life Anniversary of the Maitre of the Lakes School Typescript copy, 1934

Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts

Dear Maitre

In the name of the broad future masses of the Lakes School, please allow us, its oldest representatives, your first admirers and students, to extend our greetings.

On this historic day, we all—brave Denisova and fearful Reingard, Kemenov, protean and changing as activity itself, and the unchanging Pinsky, ecstatic Wertsman and deliberative Grib—have joined together in

the present missive, whose unity can be found in our individual differences, thanks to which there is a correspondence of the general and the particular, quod erat demonstrandum (handwritten).

In your person, dear Maitre, we honor a man who discovered Marx's aesthetic just as James Macpherson once discovered Ossian, a man who has uncovered the back of the Venus de Milo, showing that even a bad artist is cleaner once he has washed with the soap of civilization than a good artist who doesn't wash at all in his patriarchal simplicity; that all aristocrats are democrats and all democrats aristocrats, that the camisoles of Watteau's cavaliers are made of better stuff than the jackets of Hogarth's helpers.

In your person we honor the indelible links of the Lakes School with the immortal academy of Laputa, once so faithfully described by Dr. Swift. It is only with this circumstance in mind that the great achievements of the Lakes School can appear in their proper light. [. . .]

Mikhail Lifshitz, Reminiscence of 1937, dated August 4, 1980

Handwritten note

Russian Academy of Sciences Archive, Moscow (Mikhail Lifshitz collection, no. 2029)

I recently remembered a conversation with Volodya Grib. We were walking home from EF's (Elena Felixovna Usievich) across Kamenny Most and talking about the arrests. It was autumn 1937. He said of Yezhov: "He is a madman. We are in the hands of a psychopath." Volodya, I said to him, do you really think that the September killings of 1792 or the mass executions of 1793 somehow depended upon the will of some psychopath? That was social slaughter. We are witnessing a slaughter of the aristocracy. He didn't understand me

any more than Tvardovsky and Kazakevich would after Stalin's death.

In late 1937, I fell ill with typhus with a very high fever. In my delirium, I thought that a special unit in green caps (like the one worn by the unit that carried out the search in the Marx-Engels Institute in 1931) was using a flamethrower to burn down apartment after apartment on Usachev Street, in the dormitories of the Institute of Red Professors. This was like in Pushkin, the wrath of the janissaries. ("Allah is great, a persecuted janissary to Stambul has come"). [Lifshitz refers to the second half of a poem inserted by Pushkin into his prose text "The Journey to Azrum." The prose text and the first half of the poem have been translated into English, the second half is only present in the Russian edition.]

ON THE RIGHT PATH

Mikhail Lifshitz, Introduction to Art and the Modern World (excerpts)

Chernyshevsky saw Lessing as the most gifted philosophical personality in Germany before Kant. "Yet at the same time he never wrote a single word about philosophy proper. The fact of the matter is that the time was not yet right for philosophy to become the living focus of German intellectual life, so Lessing remained silent on philosophy. His contemporaries' minds were ready to be inspired by poetry, but they weren't ready for philosophy, so Lessing wrote dramas and interpreted poetry."

[. . .]

It's high time to realize that Chernyshevsky was an intelligent writer with a fine, sometimes almost indiscernible sense of irony, pretending to be a simpleton for the sake of truth, like Socrates, or provoking his contemporaries with harsh judgement to wake them from their protracted slumber. This quality or, if you like, this

device of literary naivety runs through all of Chernyshevsky's work and can even be found in his letters.

[. . .]

For people who take everything so literally, there is no such thing as Chernyshevsky's inner position; they don't see his games with the reader, themselves the result of very serious convictions.

[. . .]

Of course, there is no comparing the time of Lessing, who lived by the good graces of the Duke of Brunswick, with our own socialist reality. I am only using this example to show that sometimes, in the course of a society's development, those objects more distant from the "principle laws of human life" are closer to them due to the particularity of history's dialectic.

[. . .]

Lessing never broached such topics and he was right, though it hardly follows that he was happy. On the contrary, as Goethe put it, Lessing was extremely unhappy due to the paltriness of the objects he had to work with and because this activity was connected to constant polemic. If such a person lived in our time, he would have no doubt succeeded in "contemplating the principle laws of human life" without putting off that much-needed contemplation until tomorrow. But you'd need to be Lessing for that. We ordinary human beings—and I must underline this three times just so that nobody thinks I want to compare myself to Lessing—should be grateful to art and literature for providing the opportunity to touch upon life's principle laws in a more accessible form. And let the reader judge the measure of our success in this endeavor.

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Perm State Art Gallery, Perm
Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive, Krasnogorsk
Udmurt Republican Museum of Fine Arts, Izhevsk
Irkutsk Regional Art Museum, Irkutsk
Russian Academy of Sciences Archive, Moscow
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, Moscow
Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow
Central Archive of Social-Political History of Moscow, Moscow
Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, Moscow
V-A-C Foundation, Moscow

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GARAGE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART is a place where people, art, and ideas connect to create history.

Through an extensive program of exhibitions, events, education, research, and publishing, the institution reflects on current developments in Russian and international culture, creating opportunities for public dialogue, as well as the production of new work and ideas. At the center of all these activities is the Museum's collection, which is the first archive in the country related to the development of Russian contemporary art from the 1950s through to the present.

Founded in 2008 by Dasha Zhukova and Roman Abramovich, Garage is the first philanthropic organization in Russia to create a comprehensive public mandate for contemporary art and culture. Open seven

days a week, it was initially housed in the renowned Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage in Moscow, designed by the Constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov. In 2012, Garage relocated to a temporary pavilion in Gorky Park, specifically commissioned from award-winning architect Shigeru Ban. A year later, a purpose-built Education Center was opened next to the Pavilion. In June 2015, Garage welcomed visitors to its first permanent home. Designed by Rem Koolhaas and his OMA studio, this groundbreaking preservation project transformed the famous Vremena Goda (Seasons of the Year) Soviet Modernist restaurant, built in 1968 in Gorky Park, into a contemporary museum.

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