

Interview for Colta.ru (translated by Anastasia Osipova). <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/19278>

## ANTON GINZBURG DISCUSSES HIS WORK, VIEWS ON MODERNISM AND THE SYNTHESIS OF THE ARTS

Interview: Maxim Burov



Columns II (Blue version), 2016. Glazed porcelain. Height 3.6 m

We are starting a series of conversations about Neo-Modernism. How can we understand this phenomenon better and what are its underlying rhythms and dynamics? What is the horizon of possibilities and limitations of this form that has become so significant in the 2010s?

Anton Ginzburg is an artist who has been actively engaging with the Neo-Modernist form in a variety of media and across several continents. In this interview, we tried to discover the origins and the inner logic of Ginzburg's stance on Neo-Modernism.

– How would you define the form that you've discovered? Tell about it and how you view the problem of form in contemporary context.

– In the recent years, my art practice has been centered around exploring the framework of the formal-structural method. This method could equally be applied to painting, sculpture, cinema and, perhaps, even to my personal biography. As someone born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), I am familiar and indebted to the Leningrad line of Formalism (GINHUK and OPOYAZ). However, my interest in the works of Matyushin, Shklovsky, Tynianov and in the Formalist analysis of art and cinema is absolutely free of nostalgia. As is well known, Formalists did not approve of stylization. While it is true that I am studying Formalist methodology that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, I am searching for ways of applying and making it relevant for the present. Over the last hundred years, Formalist tradition has passed through many refractions and international interpretations (think, for instance, of American Minimalism or the Brazilian Tropicalia movements). All of these iterations should be taken into the account, not just the historical Russian Formalist art and thought.

The problem of form is definitely crucial for me. However, unlike Modernists, I am not searching for some pure, ideal form. Form in my works is always dynamic. It develops through interaction with the surrounding context, with history, with material properties of things, and with whatever else might shape it. I see my work as analytical system for observing the process of the development of form as it undergoes semantic, material, and historical transformations. And although I do employ the language of modernism, in my case it is no longer the language of universal pure forms. This vocabulary bears the specific marks left by my personal biography and all the historical and cultural processes that shaped this biography: post-communist conditions, emigration, Anthropocene, etc...



Color Spatial Initiative (New York) # 2 (2017) and COEV composition # 4, 3, 5, 1 (2016). 3x6 m.  
Enamel, acrylic, mirror glass (4 sheets 45x60 cm)

– Neo-Modernism is a large process that started much earlier than the 2010s. However, it has really emerged as a recognizable international style only in the last decade. What does this movement mean for you?

– To be frank, the meaning of Neo-Modernism for me remains elusive. As I see it, it is an umbrella term that refers to a broad range of often mutually exclusive attempts to re-think and re-engage with the legacy of Modernism.

There is a real danger that, in the process, historical avant-garde will be reduced to its popular shell: that it will be de-ideologized and that its political attitudes and, most importantly, its structural-formal method will be erased. As a result, we might end up with a mere kitschy decoration.

I am interested in a possibility of a new collectivity and synthesis of the arts. What if we were to resume the experiments, which were interrupted in the 1920s, but do it with the use of contemporary technologies?

As an example I'll describe my experience of collaborating with American modernist architect Steven Holl. The problems of the synthesis of the arts and of the collective labor are central for his practice. Together we worked on a project that involved precisely the interaction of architecture and art at the design stage. This was actually not dissimilar to the practices common to Soviet architecture.

In his educational practice as a professor at Columbia University, Holl also insists on the same principles of combining multidisciplinary perspectives. For instance, to the review sessions of his graduate students' thesis projects he invites not only architects, but also artists and musicians (I too took part in one of these sessions). He does this precisely in order to instill in his students a modernist habit of thinking of all arts as interactive and to always consider more than one way of experiencing space.



In the photo (sequentially): ORRA\_2D\_05, 2017; ORRA\_2D\_03, 2017; ORRA\_2D\_02, 2017; ORRA\_2D\_01, 2017.

Wood, pigment, acrylic. 60x60 cm

- How do you view your work in the context of Neo-Modernism?

- As I mentioned before, I am a bit weary of the notion of Neo-Modernism. I am interested in the topic of universalism. But the universalism that attracts me is not of a totalitarian kind – the kind that erases all differences – but universalism understood as a pursuit of conjoining threads running between the most diverse and contradictory manifestations of human experience. I am interested in the commonality of conflicts. I am interested in the clashing of different spheres of life within a personal biography as well as in the culture broadly speaking. My goal is not to eliminate or smooth over these tensions, but, on the contrary, to draw attention to the dynamic structures that allow us to link diverse phenomena without sacrificing their internal complexity. Normative models of both Western and Russian institutions of power are equally alien to me.

For instance, my film trilogy “Hyperborea” (2011), “Walking the Sea” (2013) and “Turo” (2016) was devoted to post-Soviet geography and the way it interacts with history in the post-Soviet landscape. In my “Walking the Sea” video I use the aesthetics of fact. The main fact demonstrated here is the disappearance of the Aral Sea. Discussion of this environmental catastrophe during the period of Perestroika for me was one of the first encounters with the environmental crisis (and the manifestation of the Anthropocene on a global scale).

What is significant for me in a work of visual art is its formal grammar and whether or not it succeeds in expressing its own materiality through an economy of expressive means. I agree with Władysław Strzemiński, that “the social influence of art is indirect.”



Color Spatial Initiative (Houston) # 1 (2018) and COEV compositions # 13, 14, 8, 6 (2016). 261x522 cm.

Enamel, acrylic, mirror glass (4 sheets 45x60 cm)

– Your recent works (*Color-Space Initiatives*, *ORRA Series* ) are executed on a wholly new monumental scale. How important are the topics of monumentality and decorativity to you?

– Interpreting these series as purely ornamental is superficial, I am afraid. My work is closer to the Constructivist tradition with its pursuit of *faktura*. I set the emphasis on the material properties of a given work and on the economy of expressive means.

*The Color-Space Initiatives* and the *ORRA* series are a continuation of my Canadian exhibition on the pedagogy of Constructivism. In both series, I applied the space-color experiments of Mikhail Matyushin's "COEV" ("Collective of Expanded Viewing"). The site-specific murals are superimposed with mirrored works on glass. The layered elements of these geometric compositions become environments that can be entered and experienced physically. The format and proportions of the murals refer to video screens, while mirrors reflect the immediate surroundings, incorporating reflections into



the minimal color compositions. These works oscillate between their status as a commodity and as an auratic object.



*Burnt constructions* (2016). Detail. Based on the “Spatial Constructions” by A. Rodchenko. Burnt wood.  
The size of the sculpture: 152x244x205 cm

– What is your view on the current situation in Russian art? Do you see yourself as an international author of Russian origin (like Ilya Kabakov), or are Western and American art context more important to you? Or perhaps you chose a wholly different, third position?

What I see as happening a lot in contemporary Russian art are attempts to extend a literary approach to visuality: forcing a given work into a larger, often didactic narrative. Materiality and sense of construction then become sacrificed to the curatorial narrative and works themselves are reduced to the mere illustrations of the latter.

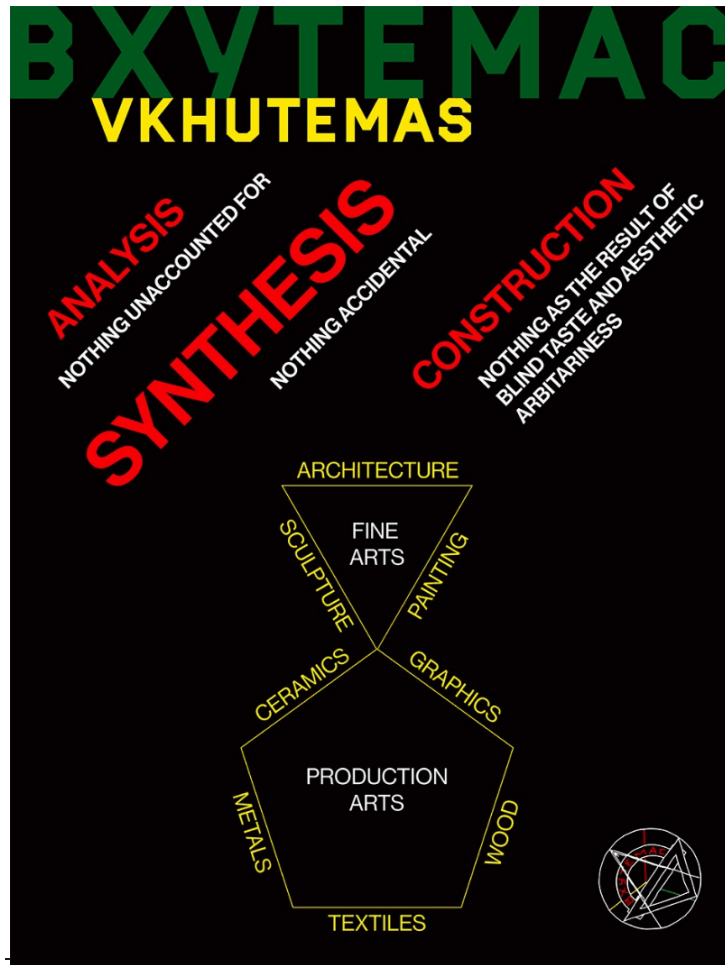
Of course, I am a New York artist and am more active in the West than in Russia. I’ve lived in New York for most of my life. I’ve received my college education here. Mine is a position of trans-national subjectivity (a hyphenated identity, if you will). On the one

hand, I have an intimate understanding of Russian culture and language, and on the other, I sense a kind of distance —a result of emigrating in the 90s and having to adapt to the Western context. Nevertheless, I maintain a strong and living connection with Russian culture through language, imagery and history. I have both a keen interest and a keen understanding of the trajectory that contemporary Russian culture is assuming. Many of the processes that I observe in the new generation of Russian artists and poets occupy me as well. I strive to overcome Western normative cultural-colonial position, when non-Western artists are allowed to cross the barrier of alienation only through self-exoticism and “exporting” local themes. I want to overcome the typical to the post-war Modernism hierarchical attitude to Eastern European art and the infantilization of East by the West began in the post-communist period.

- What Russian artists are important and relevant for you? (Francisco Infante certainly comes to mind.) What separates you from these figures?

I feel a special connection to Yuri Sobolev, as well as the “Dvizhenie / Movement” group and particularly Francisco Infante. I have a photograph from his “the Life of the Triangle” series hanging on a wall at home. In my “Walking on the Sea” project about the Aral Sea, I use the mirror construction as a link between Infante and “The Man with a Movie Camera” by Dziga Vertov. The mirror serves as a metaphor of a camera suffering from amnesia, a camera that is unable to record images, but that reflects them back to the viewer. However, unlike the the 60s sculptures of the Francosco Infante or Robert Smithson and Dan Graham, my artworks appear in the landscape only temporarily, they never remain in it forever, do not turn into land art.





A series of posters "MetaConstructivism" (2016).

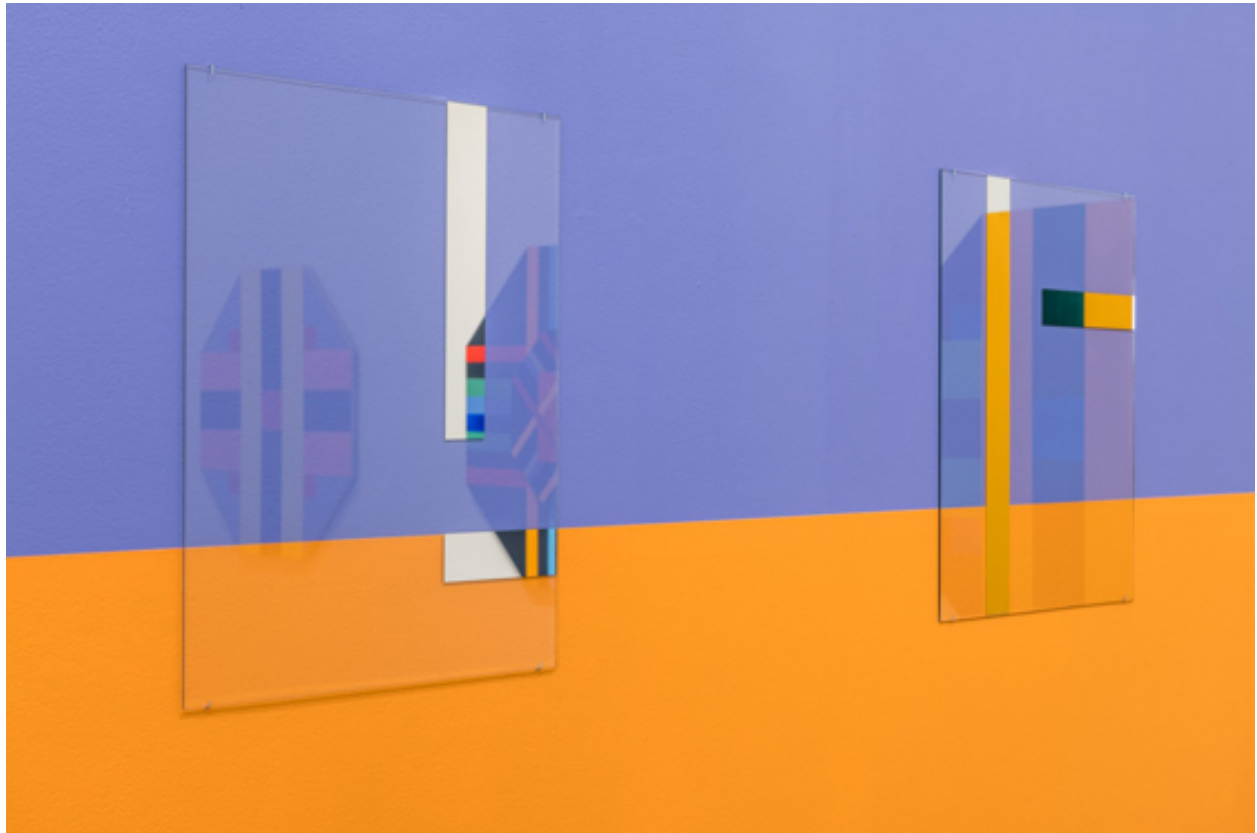
In the photo consistently: *VHUTEMAS, Construction / Composition, Culture League, Esperanto*. Digital printing, 92x122 cm

- Please tell us about your recent work.

- This year I installed a public-art sculpture at the US Embassy in Moscow. It was commissioned in 2014 during the Obama administration by Art in Embassies organization. The installation was postponed several times due to the political tensions that ensued in the recent years. *Stargaze: Orion* explores the human bond with cosmos through the act of contemplating the sky. The sculpture features a vertical structure whose colored planes frame and direct the gaze, while its mirror-polished surfaces reflect the surrounding and the viewer. The base – a black bronze pentagon – represents a stellar map of the Orion constellation. For me, it was a rather complicated project due to its clearly political role and location, and I deliberately tried to create an instrument of “observation,” rather than an ideological fetish.



*Stargaze: Orion* (2016). Stainless steel, bronze, patina, paint. 678x244x335 cm



*Color Spatial Initiative (Houston) # 2 (2018) and COEV Compositions # 7, 10 (2016). Detail. 261x261 cm.  
Enamel, acrylic, mirror glass (2 sheets 45x60 cm)*

At the moment, I dedicate a lot of time to my painting practice. I spend a lot of time in the studio, where I prepare everything on my own: from wooden panels for painting to the gesso and paints. I mix them with pigments myself, and by focusing on the studio work and once again see how true Karl Marx's statement is in the case of visual art that "practice is a criterion of truth".

Other works of the artist can be seen [on his website](http://www.antonginzburg.com). [www.antonginzburg.com](http://www.antonginzburg.com)