


DMITRY GUTOV
GDANSK, POLAND

One of Russia's most significant contemporary artists, Dmitry Gutov rose to prominence in the early 1990s by embracing a cross-disciplinary practice that yields surprising approaches to painting, photography, and video. Profoundly influenced by the mid-century philosopher of art Mikhail Lifshitz, a critic at odds with the Soviet system but committed to a Marxist-Leninist aesthetic program, Gutov's efforts frequently revolve around a half-serious devotion to resurrecting the core of tenants of Marxism just as his country, and seemingly the world, has left them behind.

In *Selected Video Works* (Gdańska Galeria Miejska, May 12–July 8, 2012) curated by Maria Sasin, four pieces that capture the range of Gutov's forays into the medium were on view in a snug gallery space that lies in the heart of Gdańsk's Old Town. Gutov's videos employ music and texture combined with a painter's eye for composition to touch on the past's power to condition our experience of the present and our inexplicable need to reenact, reimagine, and reconsider prior events in order to make sense of them.

Thaw, a 2002 video work set along the rutted byway of some long-forgotten passage through the wilderness documents the actions of a man—played by Gutov—who is seen stumbling and falling over and over into the icy waters of the early spring melt. Clutching at his glasses, which he drops repeatedly, and accompanied by the heart-rending tones of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Five Romances on Texts from Krokodil Magazine*, 1965, the scene is comic and then tragic and finally disturbing.

The multivalent scenario suggests numerous interpretations. Is this a man struggling to find his way after the end of the Cold War and subsequent pillaging of the Russian economy or just some drunk flailing around on his way home? Gutov's frequent use of levity to undercut his earnestness makes it difficult to tell. But the video closes with a translation of Shostakovich's libretto, which describes a beating delivered by the "hooligan Fedulov." It seems that Gutov has been reenacting a fight, portray-

ing the victim receiving blows from an invisible perpetrator. Perhaps he is Russia after all.

These reenactments, at the heart of much of his work, can lead to moments of near-transcendent beauty.

From *Flat to Flat*, a 12-minute video that recreates Gutov's experience of a camera obscura witnessed in the storage section of a moving van, is a subtle evocation of place and time, memory and meaning. As upside-down Moscow landmarks edge in and out of view and traffic casually passes by in the -25 degree cold, the viewer is led to consider his or her own relationship to time and distance. Unlike *Thaw*, however, *From Flat to Flat* is not tempered with humor and its imagery continued to haunt me long after I left the gallery.

And Gutov's humor can lead to dark places. The artist has a penchant for surreptitious documentation whose apparent voyeurism borders on exploitation.

In *Eroica*, 2006, Gutov's camera has captured a young boy playing soccer outfitted in full uniform; a fitting inclusion for an exhibition in one of the Euro 2012 tournament host cities. The piece, which makes pointed use of a majestic score and slow motion, is a perfect send-up of society's projection of heroic virtues onto sports figures. Reenactment here too is a critical component of the work. Throughout the 5-minute and 47-second duration we watch the boy juggling, taking shots, and facing down imaginary opponents. We even view him lying on the damp spring ground writhing in agony over a fictional missed goal.

But when the boy finishes his performance and begins to change out of uniform, a sense of unease descends upon the video. As he checks to make sure no one is watching before removing his shorts, it becomes clear that this boy may not be aware that he is being filmed. In this case, the humor is undercut by something more insidious.

Gutov seems to enjoy this kind of provocation. His *Moscow Summer*, 2000—not present in the show but mentioned in the press release—features a parade

of clandestinely filmed up-skirt shots of attractive young women riding the escalator while exiting the Moscow underground. It would be a simple (and perhaps appropriate) matter to dismiss these works as mere titillation. Yet for all their haphazard appearance, Gutov's videos are carefully considered works. Facsimiles of an authentic experience, re-created to draw attention not only to the ersatz nature of the medium, but to so much of our daily lives.

—Alan Pocar