

The Other Gaze

Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World

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The unofficial art scene in the Soviet Union formed as early as the mid-1950s, almost immediately following the death of Stalin in 1953, and from then on developed parallel to the official culture industry. The artists belonging to that scene turned away from the official art of Socialist Realism, attempting to link up with the traditions of Western and Russian modernism. No longer as ruthlessly repressed as they had been under Stalin, these artists were assured of both physical survival and the possibility of continuing to pursue artistic work, yet they were almost completely cut off from the official museum, exhibition, and publication systems, as well as from the possibility of traveling abroad and establishing connections with the Western art institutions. As a result, the unofficial artists built their own scene in major cities such as Moscow and Leningrad, existing in semilegality at the margins of Soviet normality. They could earn a living by turning to applied art, by taking up another profession, or by selling their works to a handful of private collectors. Because of the precariousness of their social status, they felt insecure and threatened, but their social isolation also generated a kind of euphoria. They could practice a relatively independent and often extremely bohemian lifestyle in a country where such a thing was unimaginable for most of the population. Despite the lack of official recognition, their lifestyle was secretly envied, and during the three decades of the unofficial art scene's existence, from the mid-1950s until the opening of the Soviet system in the mid-1980s, many people in Moscow and Leningrad thought it a great and exciting adventure to have an unofficial artist as a friend.

Unofficial artistic circles also included independent authors, poets, and musicians, although these had even less opportunity than visual artists to survive on the margins of the Soviet system. Small exhibitions, poetry read-

ings, and concerts were held regularly in artists' studios in an informal, closely knit social environment. The constant fear of possible repression forged solidarity among artists following very different and even opposite artistic programs. Indeed, the unofficial art scene of the 1950s and 1960s was very pluralistic and heterogeneous, reflecting the plurality of styles being oppressed by the officially dominant Socialist Realism. The unofficial artists adapted and brought into the Russian cultural context all kinds of art practices that were excluded by Soviet censorship, from icon painting through Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and abstract art to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, which had already surfaced in Moscow at the end of the 1950s.

Behind this plurality of styles and techniques, however, there was a shared understanding of the role of the artist in the society: to manifest his or her individual truth in the midst of the official public lie. Most unofficial artists at this time saw their art in terms of a higher mission, as a way of bringing important truths and deep insights into the profane Soviet world that surrounded them. They tried to exhume the radical claims of modernist art in a culture that had forgotten them. The single utopia of Communism was suddenly replaced by myriad private, individual utopias, each of which, however, became thoroughly intolerant of all the others, even if the artists themselves remained on friendly terms. Such artists as Anatolii Zverev, Vladimir Yakovlev, Vladimir Weisberg, Mikhail Schwarzmann, Vladimir Nemukhin, Dmitrii Krasnopevtsev, Vladimir Yankilevsky, and Eduard Steinberg, among many others working in the 1950s and 1960s, embodied the paradigmatic figure of the modernist artist-hero suffering for individual artistic truth and struggling against a cold and hypocritical social environment.¹

This claim to individual truth advanced by most of the Russian unofficial artists at that time appears to be somewhat problematic. Their almost complete isolation from the international art scene meant that they could not produce an innovative art that would give an objective, art-historical credibility to their claims to genuine individuality. After the Soviet system had opened itself to the outside world in the 1980s, they learned that if an artwork does not appear innovative or original in the international art context, it cannot be regarded as having developed out of an authentic inner impulse. This discovery was a painful realization for many of the unofficial artists, who had tended to appropriate and rather naively invest in the radically individualist rhetoric of modernism, above all in its radically oppositional posture, its contempt for all manifestations of contemporary mass culture. So-

viet mass culture elicited from the unofficial artists an especially intense allergic reaction. The Soviet state was seen as an enemy, and Soviet mass culture was seen as an alien culture. Such an unreflective, oppositional stance was, incidentally, easily integrated into the Manichean worldview of the official Soviet ideology, which reserved a special place for its enemies, but not for an outside spectator. One could be for this ideology or against it, but a neutral, analytical position was simply unthinkable, unimaginable, impossible.

However, by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, several unofficial Russian artists had already begun to engage critically and ironically with characteristically Soviet mass culture. They tried to subvert the clear-cut opposition between official and unofficial, Soviet and anti-Soviet, high culture and mass culture. These artists tried to describe the specific Soviet ideological and visual context as neutrally and objectively as possible. They began to thematize Soviet cultural codes and visual clichés, which were completely ignored by most other unofficial Russian artists, who instead were searching for a reality hidden behind them. This attempt to stop looking behind the facade of official Soviet culture and to open the people's eyes to the structure of this facade was undertaken by a small group of artists who became known as Moscow Conceptualists.² This circle included the artists Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Ivan Chuikov, and Andrei Monastyrsky, the poets Dmitrii Prigov and Lev Rubinstein, and the writer Vladimir Sorokin, to mention only a few. At the same time, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid began to develop their own version of the critical, politicized art, "Sots Art." These artists and writers became models for the younger generations of unofficial artists of the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, they redefined the role of the artist in Soviet society from prophet to critical commentator.

To be sure, the artistic practice of Moscow Conceptualism was strongly influenced by the various trends in Western art at the time, from Pop Art to Conceptual Art, which dealt in diverse ways with the cultural codes and visual clichés of Western commercialized mass culture. But the highly ideologized Soviet mass culture was extremely idiosyncratic. Selling ideology is different from selling Coca-Cola—even if there are some obvious similarities. The Western artistic experience of dealing with mass culture could not simply be transposed to the Soviet Union of the 1970s. The artists had to develop new means to deal with Soviet culture, which was based much more on narrative than on images. That is why the art practices of the Moscow

Conceptualists can be seen retrospectively as the most original manifestation of Russian art in the international art context of the 1970s and 1980s. Among the Moscow Conceptualists, Ilya Kabakov and the artistic duo of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid developed the most unmistakably original body of work, and they also exerted the greatest influence on younger generations of Russian artists, including the generation after perestroika that became active in the mid-1980s, when the Russian unofficial art scene slowly began to dissolve under the new conditions of political openness. In what follows I will focus on the work of these three main protagonists of the Russian unofficial art scene in order to characterize the specific strategies of this art in the Soviet era.

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid: Searching for Lost Aesthetic Power

Following Lenin's definition, official Soviet art conceived of itself as "a part of the general Party work." Actually, this art was defined not so much according to political criteria as according to the aesthetic criterion of stylistic unity, which corresponded to the unity of the great Central Plan. The lives of Soviet citizens were shaped by this plan down to the most minute details. Viewed from the outside, the Party's relentless desire to establish absolute aesthetic control over the Soviet state and society appears, at times, to be completely inexplicable. It was, however, an indispensable component in creating the inner unity without which political authority would have lost its legitimacy.³

The relation between art and power may, in fact, be the main theme of art in the twentieth century. But with the exception of Germany in the 1930s, this relation was nowhere else as confused, ambiguous, and telling as in Russia during the Soviet period. The Soviet state understood itself as an avant-garde of mankind on its way into the communist future. Accordingly, the power of Soviet censorship was exerted not in the name of the past, but rather in the name of the future. The Soviet population had to be constantly on the move, constantly mobilized, inspired, and oriented toward utopian ideals. It had no right to stop, to relax, to look toward the past. In this sense, official Soviet art was also utopian, avant-garde art, because its main task was to visualize the communist future in order to inspire the Soviet people on the road to utopia.

The history of avant-garde art is commonly viewed as the history of the symbolic liberation of the individual from the power of social traditions, ideologies, and state institutions. These all have at their disposal a repertoire of visual forms, and the artist's refusal to use these forms and to reproduce them symbolizes the highest stage of human freedom. The avant-garde artist thus becomes the sacrifice/priest of a new religion of individual freedom that opposes all forms of power and that has been canonized as such by contemporary political consciousness. With this canonization, however, the avant-garde itself becomes a new social convention and a new institution and, concomitantly, intricately imbricated with all other power institutions of modernity. While the Russian avant-garde rejected the clichés of the past, it did so only to adopt the clichés of the future. And the majority of the Russian avant-garde artists were ready to integrate their individual utopias into the collectivistic communist utopia and to serve Soviet state propaganda.

This relation to power is one source of late Soviet skepticism toward avant-garde art, toward its ability to be an enduringly effective opposition to the Soviet dictatorship and an "alternative" to its aesthetic censorship in the name of the communist future. In the West, one avant-garde movement was succeeded by the next, and no single movement had a chance to attain real power. The cultural and political dominance of the Russian avant-garde after the Revolution of 1917 represents the single exception. This brief period, which had come to an end by the mid-1920s, brought the entire potential of the avant-garde to power, a traumatic experience that even today informs the self-consciousness of Russian art. The Russian avant-garde artists saw in the revolutionary Soviet state a unique historical opportunity to realize their own dreams, and so, to that end, they were ready to accept its politics of terror and oppression. The Soviet state took on the same task as the avant-garde, to reshape humanity, to manipulate and shape the most elementary conditions of human existence, everyday life, the nervous system, and the unconscious. But from the mid-1930s on, the official Soviet art, Socialist Realism, tried to represent the communist future with the means of traditional academic painting, combined with photographically or cinematographically inspired imagery. The avant-gardist, futuristic artistic program thus was realized by official Soviet art with non-avant-gardist means.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Komar and Melamid began to thematize in their works this strange Soviet mixture of avant-garde utopianism and academic tradition.⁴ They called their artistic practices, a combination of "Sotsrealism" (as Socialist Realism was usually called in Soviet times) and

American Pop Art, "Sots Art." First of all, the artists focused on the visual world of the Stalin myth and of Soviet ideological propaganda, which was also easy to recognize visually outside the borders of the Soviet Union. The Lenin and Stalin portraits with white slogans written on a red background, such as "Folk and Party Are One" and "Forward to the Victory of Communism," are just as closely associated with Soviet Russia and assimilated through the mass media and mass consciousness as the pyramids are associated with Egypt or Mickey Mouse and McDonald's are associated with the United States.

Russian unofficial artists had wrestled for decades with the question of how they could break out of their perennial provinciality and reach the international art world, and they initially attempted to do so by turning to "eternal," universal themes and archetypal images. However, around the beginning of the 1970s, they began to understand that the era of tourism and television rewards particular, regional flavors. Only the Soviet artist who could come to see his or her own land and its history with the eyes of an international tourist would be able to make something that could, potentially, be exported. Only such an artist would be able to achieve liberation both intellectually and practically from the state monopoly on culture.

Whereas Soviet culture conceived of itself as a closed totality, as "socialism in one country," a country that embodied the future of humanity and was separated by a kind of temporal abyss from the rest of the world, which supposedly lived in the capitalist past, Sots Art wanted to export itself into precisely this outside world through aesthetic self-stylization. It was therefore able to understand and describe the Soviet myth against the background of what this myth excluded. The moralistic critique of the Soviet system in the name of human rights attempted to demythologize the Soviet ideology by depicting Soviet reality "as it is." But the Sots Art artists saw in such strivings yet another ideological agenda, and they sought to overcome Stalinism by moving in the opposite direction. They wanted to remythologize Stalinism, so to speak, to integrate it into the broad, polymorphic mythology of the present and the past and, in doing so, to subvert the Soviet claim to the historical exclusiveness of the communist project. The Sots Art artist searched for a totality and symbolic power greater than those that the Soviet state possessed.

The work of Komar and Melamid went through several stages, the best known of which is from the early 1980s, when they had already emigrated from the Soviet Union and were living in New York. It featured large

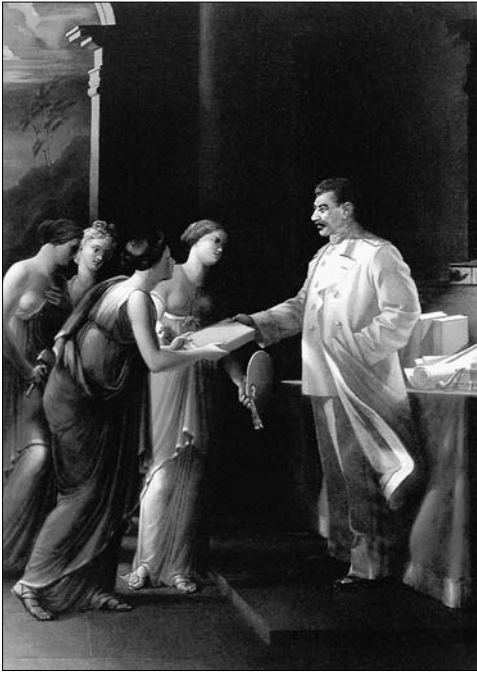


Figure 8 Komar and Melamid, *Stalin and the Muses*, 1981–82, oil on canvas, 183 × 137 cm. Komar and Melamid’s Archive.



Figure 9 Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1982–83, oil on canvas, 183 × 135 cm. Komar and Melamid’s Archive.

compositions in the conventional, classicist manner of nineteenth-century historical salon paintings in which Stalin and his comrades take the place of antique heroes. The iconography of these paintings alludes to extremely diverse mythological traditions and situates the myth of Stalin within the context of a tradition that views art as the representation of power. Stalin appears as the great statesman of his era, as the creator of a great empire, the successor to Rome, and as the protector of the arts and sciences.

Of course, the pseudo-apologetic paintings of Komar and Melamid (Figures 8 and 9) stand in stark contrast to the actual aesthetics of the Stalinist era’s Socialist Realism. Although “authentic” Stalinist art exhibits a proclivity for classicist and academic styles, it could not overcome the mandate to depict reality in realistic forms. The spirit of classicist stylization remained foreign to it. The mottoes of Socialist Realism read: “Paint the Truth” and “The Content Determines the Form.” Soviet painters of the period were supposed to work in the knowledge that everything that appeared in their

pictures was actually happening for the first time. No past era could be compared to Stalin's era with regard to sheer greatness, and the reality of Stalinism therefore needed neither beatification nor stylization. The art of past epochs could serve the art of the Stalinist era only as an anemic model, and only insofar as this art was progressive and life affirming, like the art of the classical Greeks and the art of the Italian Renaissance. Stalinist aesthetics resolutely opposed any kind of formalism and epigonal art. Otherwise put, it opposed any definite style that could be identified unambiguously and could be used as a formal model for Soviet art. This is the reason that classical Socialist Realism seems so murky, inexpressive, and eclectic. Soviet art had to be historically unique in order to be able to reflect the historical uniqueness of the Soviet state, even if, at the same time, it was also supposed to use techniques of pictorial representation developed in the past. The painting of an official Soviet painter had to be an expression of deep enthusiasm for Soviet reality, of gratitude toward the Party and its leaders. Therefore, a purely formal analysis of such a painting in terms of iconography, tradition, or school would seem blasphemous.

In fact, Komar and Melamid's works, which viewers not conversant with Socialist Realism could mistake for the real thing, struck the Soviet consciousness as blasphemous. They made visible the academic tradition of representation of glory and triumph that was concealed under the mask of official Soviet Socialist Realism. Komar and Melamid's paintings abound with complicated cultural historical associations, associations that their heroes, Stalin, Khrushchev, and their men, would not have been able to recognize, even though they half-unconsciously reproduced these archetypal representations of power. And the art of Komar and Melamid not only refers to the historicizing academic style, but also alludes to Magical Realism, Surrealism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art, creating a net of associations and allusions transcending the borders between East and West as they were established by the Cold War.

In a certain sense, one can say that in the period of the Cold War, the border between the conscious and the unconscious, between thought and desire, between the self and the other was almost congruent with the political boundary between the two blocs. Each represented the dark side of the other; each threatened the other with destruction and with the fulfillment of its dreams. We know what kind of temptation the socialist East could be for Western intellectuals, while Soviet citizens imagined the West as, above all, the empire of sexual freedom, of luxury, of seduction, and of sweet degen-

eracy. In this realm of unconscious political and erotic symbolism, shifts in signification occurred constantly. For example, an object whose significance in Western culture was completely neutral could take on, in the East, the significance of a political and sexual fetish. Individual destiny was almost completely lost in this sea of the political-erotic unconscious. The individual dream had to lose its meaning in a world in which the subconscious was politically monitored and the psychological boundaries inside the individual psyche were identical to the military boundaries between the political blocs.

Komar and Melamid expressed through *Sots Art* a fundamental Marxist precept: the impossibility of “separating the personal from the social” and of separating individual biographies from historical processes. Komar and Melamid’s works can be interpreted, to some extent, as the sessions of a psychoanalytic treatment that is supposed to shed light on the political unconscious and its images.⁵ Both went through a double repression in the post-Stalin period in the Soviet Union: repression of the anti-Stalinist opposition and, after that, repression of the image, of the memory, of Stalin himself. While average Soviet citizens in the post-Stalinist period wanted to live out their lives peacefully and “as if it all had never happened,” and while this wish has shaped the face of official and unofficial Soviet art since the last half of the 1950s, Komar and Melamid have evoked the realm of the repressed, foregrounding its dangerous and seductive potential. In their works, they constantly thematize the schism, the bifurcation, the rupture that can be interpreted as the political division of the world. They thematize it as an inner bifurcation, as the rupture caused by emigration, and as the splitting of their own images as individual artists, which they embody together. Together, they construct their own myth, as if they were “one” genius. They style themselves after the pairs Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, and Stalin and Trotsky (Figure 10), demonstrating at the same time the inexorability of the original division: the inner rupture that inheres in the artistic will to power and in the pursuit of “tying down the bands of time,” as well as in the general crisis of authorship that was acutely felt in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, this loss of individual authorship was combined with the loss of a socially and politically motivated interest in art. After the Cold War, there was no longer any need for the public or for the state to support or to contest a certain kind of art for ideological, political reasons. Art was now left alone. But Komar and Melamid never trusted the modernist promise to place the power of art solely in autonomous artworks that are supposed to have an unmediated effect on the soul of the recipient. Rather, these

Figure 10 Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1973, oil on canvas, 91 cm diameter. Komar and Melamid's Archive.

Figure 11 Komar and Melamid, *America's Most Wanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 61 × 81 cm. Komar and Melamid's Archive.



artists always believed that aesthetic power has its genuine source in political power. Thus, Komar and Melamid, after the end of the Cold War, again raised the question of the unity of political and aesthetic power. In their recent project *People's Choice* (which includes the works illustrated here as Plate 1 and Figure 11), Komar and Melamid once more confer all aesthetic power on the people by conveying popular aesthetic preferences statistically. The artists become enablers, servants of the people, since they simply lend visible form to the aesthetic sensibilities of the people.⁶ With this move, Komar and Melamid renounce the greatest political-aesthetic accomplishment of modernity: They renounce individual authorship, as well as the related idea of aesthetic autonomy. The sacrifice is striking, even shocking, almost to the point of unseemliness. Yet we might ask here: Is this sacrifice really as great as it appears to be?

For thousands of years, the artist was above all a menial laborer who served the prevailing taste. In this way, great art was produced again and again. Russian artists who, like Komar and Melamid, lived and worked in the former Soviet Union must have had similar experiences. They were part of a society in which the artist was understood to be someone who worked for the people, the state, the Party. Those few Russian artists who, like Komar and Melamid, emigrated to the West encountered conditions with which they were in many respects familiar. Artist-émigrés who took the ideal of the autonomy of art too seriously would be immediately confronted in the Western art system with a fixed catalogue of demands and expectations that forced them to present themselves as innovative, original, and critical in accordance with relatively narrow criteria for what it means to be innovative, original, and critical. In essence, the idea here was simply to discover and fill empty spaces in the art market.

Not only is the mission of contemporary Western art narrowly defined; it is put forth in the name of a very small segment of the public. One might well claim that if art is to carry out a mission, then at the very least it should be carried out for the state and the whole people, and not for a fragment of the population, not for the institutionalized art establishment. If it must conform to a prescribed aesthetics, then it should conform to a great aesthetics with a broad effect and a long tradition, and not to a small subdivision of modern aesthetics. Above all, an artist-émigré asks, why is an artist no longer permitted to paint classically, realistically, traditionally? After all, the classicist artistic inheritance can be newly interpreted and implemented, as was the case in the Soviet Union. Thus, the artist-émigré experiences all Western institutionalized art prohibitions as irritating censorship, a censor-

ship even worse than in the totalitarian home country. But in the 1990s, one could no longer respond effectively to this difficulty with the kind of appropriation strategy that was so successful in the 1980s and that was also used at that time by Komar and Melamid. It was no longer so important for the artist to assimilate an entire art-historical vocabulary in order to have it available as a way to escape the construction of a definite “personal” style. Such a gesture is relevant only within a modernist tradition and is valued because it takes up a certain possible art strategy that was overlooked earlier. Here the artist as appropriator remains a prisoner of the logic of artistic innovation and institutional demands and expectations.

The question, then, reads as follows: How can the artist become free from all these demands? The answer Komar and Melamid give is extremely simple and, for that reason, very convincing: through the artist’s explicit renunciation of individuality, sovereignty, and autonomy. Appropriation is not the goal. Rather, the goal is self-expropriation: the renunciation of the claim to sovereign artistic individuality. Here one discovers that the power of censorship everywhere is based on a social consensus according to which artists are supposed to pour out their hearts, express their individuality, and be passionate and sincere in their art. It is well known, however, that every society has its own criteria for sincerity in art. In fact, we might ask: How can the question of whether a work of art is inspired by the inner life of the artist be objectively determined from outside? It is a great secret. The power of the art system, its arbitrariness, and its mechanisms of oppression all rest on this secret. Thus, in the West of today, a work of art is immediately rejected as insincere and unoriginal if it is not formally innovative. The artist was actually supposed to be sincere in the Soviet Union, as well, and art was supposed to come directly from the soul. The evaluative criteria, however, were different. Only what was made in harmony with the soul of the people was regarded as genuinely sincere. Here we see something that conjoins Soviet realism and Western modernism: the search for sincerity in art and the censorship of everything that does not seem to be sincere, even if the Soviet criteria for such a censorship seem to be opposed to Western criteria.

The *People’s Choice* project signals Komar and Melamid’s abdication of the demand for sincerity that makes the artist accountable for explaining everything. Komar and Melamid distance themselves from all personal responsibility for what they do as artists. The will of the people is defined and substantiated by written, verifiable, statistical data. The painters simply do their job and wash their hands afterward. What is at issue here is the last

and most subtle freedom that remains available to us as moderns: the freedom of the radically alienated work for which the individual no longer bears any individual responsibility. This freedom is secretly exercised by all the democratically elected servants of the people. In contrast, Komar and Melamid have sincerely declared that they no longer want to be sincere. They have used their autonomy and personal responsibility to renounce both autonomy and personal responsibility. By deciding to mediate the will of the people scientifically and statistically, the artists have torn apart all inner, affective attachments to the people and have forsworn all inner solidarity with them. Instead, they have confessed that nothing binds them inwardly to their public any longer and that their public can no longer expect something sincere from them. Politicians have long known about this inner break with their constituencies. Artists must learn to negotiate it.

It is certainly easy to say here that statistics are misleading and that the servants of the people simply want to manipulate the will of the people. The Hegelian dialectic of master and slave is well known. It would be even easier to say that Komar and Melamid want to ironize public taste and make fun of the people. In my opinion, neither of these statements is true. To be sure, the *Most Wanted* pictures appear to be somewhat shabby, kitschy, and clumsy. But they are at the same time pleasantly poetic. They demonstrate a few of the purely personal preferences of the artists, which one will immediately recognize if one is familiar with their earlier works. The whole *Most Wanted* series is an allegory of fulfilled dreams. Instead of consciously disappointing the expectations of the public, as modern art putatively does, Komar and Melamid attempt to fulfill these wishes. And yet, we seem to be disappointed by the results. Many fairy tales and sagas tell us how difficult it is for us to accept that what we see before us is in fact the realization of our dreams. We have had many such an experience with modern utopias.

In the middle of the American *Most Wanted* picture (Figure 11), which is prototypical for the whole series, stands George Washington, lost and uncertain in the American dream he did so much to create. No one needs him any longer, either as a hero or as a criminal (one American meaning of "Most Wanted"). This figure of Washington evokes the figure of Stalin in several of Komar and Melamid's earlier paintings: also lost, lonely, and uncertain in the middle of a reality that he created. Certainly the artists identify themselves with these creators of reality who apparently no longer know whether they realized their own wishes or the wishes of others, just as one can no longer be certain about this in modern art.

Ilya Kabakov: The Artist as Fictitious Figure

Whereas Komar and Melamid, within the framework of their Sots Art, were primarily concerned with the aesthetics of power, other Moscow Conceptualists of the 1970s were more interested in the aesthetics of Soviet everyday life. In fact, the prevailing official Soviet aesthetics at this time had relatively little to do with the original Socialist Realism of the Stalin era, although an avowal of ideological allegiance to Socialist Realism was still a precondition for participation in the officially sanctioned art industry. The art of the Stalin era was optimistic, forward looking. The Socialist Realism of the Brezhnev era, in contrast, was retrospective, nostalgic. It wanted to take up cultural models of the past and to be worthy of them. The change in mood corresponded to changes in the legitimation needs of the dominant ideology. Stalinist culture always conceived of itself as a new historical beginning. The ideology of Brezhnev's era proclaimed the Soviet Union to be a place where traditional ideals and desires would be fulfilled, ideals and desires that were disregarded and betrayed by Western capitalism and its ruthless policy of modernization. This strategy corresponded to the general mood of the country, which wanted to pick up the thread of the past that had been severed by the October Revolution. At that time, Ilya Kabakov was the central figure in the artistic movement that reacted critically and ironically to this aesthetics of social stagnation.

The actual breakthrough and the discovery of his own artistic problematic came at the beginning of the 1970s for Kabakov, with the series of albums entitled *10 Persons* that he created between 1971 and 1976 (Figure 12). Each of these albums looks like a book with loose pages and tells in words and images the history of an artist who lives on the margins of society and whose work is not understood, or recognized, or even fully preserved. The images in the albums are meant as the inner visions or artworks of the artists-heroes. All these images have captions in which friends and relatives of the artists comment on their work. The final image in each album is a white page that announces the death of the hero. Each album also concludes with general commentary on all the works of the artist, spoken from the perspective of fictitious commentators, who, one should assume, represent the opinions of the educated class that has posthumous control of the artist's work and definitively evaluates it.

The private visions with which the heroes of the albums are obsessed refer in many cases to the glorious history of modern art in the twentieth

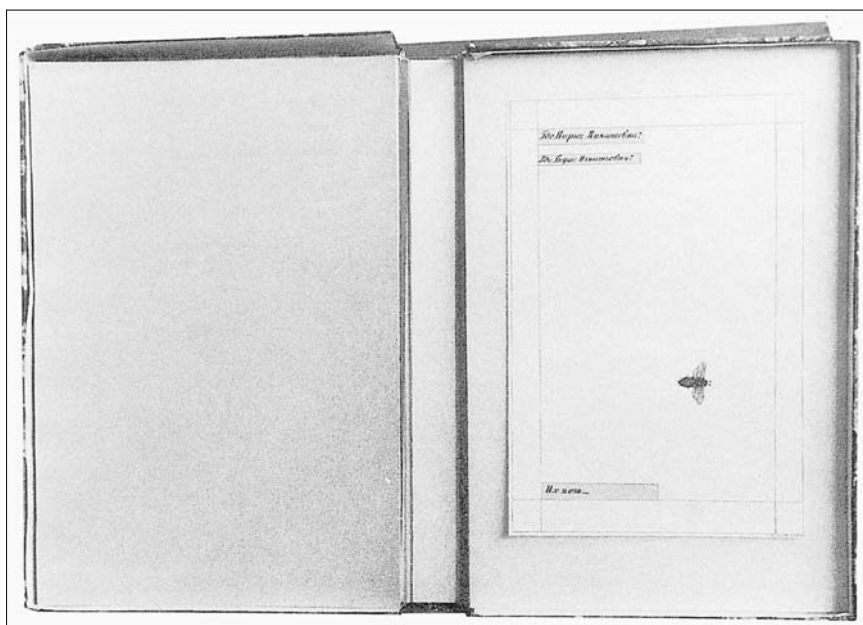


Figure 12 Ilya Kabakov, a view of an album, 1980.

century. The artistic execution of the albums themselves is performed, in contrast, first and foremost with reference to average Soviet children's book illustrations, which perpetuate the nineteenth-century tradition of drawing, a tradition over which Kabakov, who was active as a book illustrator in the official art industry, had a good command. The internal "avant-garde" visions of the heroes are largely discredited by the trivial visual language in which they are made manifest. In addition, the outsiders' commentaries on the visions of the heroes bear witness to the diverse misunderstandings to which all art is exposed. At the same time, these albums, admittedly, are wonderfully poetic, suffused with earnest artistic pathos, and the minute and precise execution of the illustrations is impressive. In this way, the albums aestheticize the limitations and anonymous failures of their heroes, so that their stories acquire a seductive aura. For the most part, it is an apt and fascinating as well as ironic depiction of the myth of modern art, whose resurrection did much to inspire the unofficial Moscow art scene.⁷

Furthermore, Kabakov created an imaginary audience for his artists-heroes through the accompanying commentary. This imaginary audience compensated him for the absence of a real audience for unofficial Russian art. Yet the imaginary recipients, as Kabakov sketches them in his albums,

do not display a very deep understanding of art. The opinions of the recipients diverge radically. Their interpretations could accrue endlessly, and their sensitivity to artistic creation gets lost in this process of infinite interpretation. However, this circumstance results not in a pessimistic disposition on the part of the artist, but rather in profound optimism. The artist wants attention from the recipient, but not interpretive control, and the endless commentary promises endless attention.

In *10 Persons*, Kabakov tried for the first time the technique that would become the defining feature of his art: “personness” (*personazhnost*). Kabakov began to invent fictitious artists, and authors and to provide them with just as fictitious biographies, ascribing to them authorship of definite artworks. This technique enables Kabakov to take up the most diverse artistic attitudes, positions, and histories of development and to investigate their effects without fully identifying with any of these positions. In this way, the focus shifts from the production of individual works of art to the context in which they are produced. Individual artworks are shown by Kabakov to be projections of the hopes, self-deceptions, and disappointments of his heroes. He shows them to be the results of certain psychologically motivated artistic strategies that the heroes pursue. In doing so, Kabakov holds these strategies up against the background of a larger social and art-historical context, throwing the strategies into question without completely negating their force.

Instead of waiting for an interpreter steeped in art history who believes he or she can uncover the intentions and strategies that lie hidden behind an artist’s works by contextualizing them, Kabakov himself thematizes the context of his works by telling the stories of the fictitious artists who are supposed to have created these works. To some extent, these stories can be trusted insofar as the heroes can certainly be understood as pseudonyms for or alter egos of Kabakov. Nonetheless, the distance and irony with which Kabakov describes these fictitious authors is not simulated. Kabakov identifies with the heroes of his stories only partially and, from the very start, takes certain of their artistic positions with ironic intent. Kabakov constantly stages a game of identification and nonidentification with his heroes. He often lays bare his own strategies by describing them as the strategies of his heroes, and he conceals them at the same time through this kind of description.

This strategy puts Ilya Kabakov in a special position, even within the Moscow Conceptualist circle with which he was intimately involved in the 1970s and 1980s. He does not believe that a certain art context can be de-

scribed completely and objectively. On the contrary, Kabakov sees the context of art as an endless play of signifiers that can be neither described nor surveyed, so that his art evinces many similarities with poststructuralist theory. But Kabakov's primary interest is not in proving the impossibility of both completely mapping context and stabilizing authorial intention, because he regards authorship as fictitious. Rather, by introducing the fictive authors and the fictive art context in his albums, he wants to thematize explicitly the fictional character of all art. The real author is dead, as has often been asserted, and for just this reason, a fictive author can come alive.

The common mistake of a positivistic-sociological description of an art context and of authorship is that it overlooks the fact that art is created in the expectation of a different recipient, a different reception, and a different social context from the ones that, here and now, lend themselves to such a description. Art lives on the promise of its durability, which enables it to transcend the boundaries of the context in which it is produced. Works of art are produced with the expectation that they will outlast the context of their production, that they will be viewed in times and places that we, in the here and now, cannot predict, let alone describe, but can only imagine. Even commercial art is produced in the hope that it will be internationally enjoyable and profitable for a relatively long period of time. Thus, the context within which art orients itself is always utopian, fantastic, and impossible to describe positivistically. One cannot respond concretely to this other, phantasmatic context, which does not present itself in the here and now, but which announces itself only with insight. One can respond to it only with hope or fear. The context of art is never real, but always fictional, just like art itself.

Kabakov constantly thematizes the mixture of hope and fear that is characteristically exhibited by those who want to cross the borders of their world. This crossing creates hope, because artists want to believe that, in the new world, future recipients will perhaps understand their work better than their obtuse contemporaries, and that these future recipients will perhaps show these artists the respect, love, and admiration that all authors have lacked at all times in their immediate environment. At the same time, artists become anxious when they think about how foreign or future recipients might neglect their work or deem it utter garbage that might simply have possessed some sentimental meaning for the author and his immediate environment but is otherwise meaningless.

The first album in the *10 Persons* series, *Primakov Sitting in the Closet*, has remained, in many respects, paradigmatic for Kabakov's work. It is above

all about the artist disappearing in a foreign place. The first pages of the album show the black square that evokes Malevich's *Black Square*. From the commentary, however, we learn that this black square is seen by a small boy who sits in a closet and, for the time being, refuses to come out. The child begins gradually to open the closet. First, he sees his family in their apartment, then his city, then the region, then the whole area, then the entire earth and the different levels of the sky, where objects and words begin to fall apart, as in modernist paintings. Then comes a white page that tells us that the boy disappeared out of the closet and was never seen again. The birth of the world is here equated with death.

The boy flies farther and farther in search of greater perspective, a greater horizon. The farther he flies, the more everything falls apart, until there is nothing more to see. At the end of the album, the consciousness of the hero is a void, a white piece of paper, a neutral surface. One could say that here, the definitive defeat of the hero is recorded. But the thoroughly banal commentary that follows the death of the hero is written on the white page that symbolizes the empty consciousness of the hero. One can therefore say that the death of the artist creates the space in which commentary becomes possible. However stupidly insensitive and foreign to the work the commentary may be, it does belong to the work, for it is written on the white piece of paper that belongs to the work.

The expanded art context reveals itself here to be purely phantasmatic. The reality of death alone corresponds to it. Death ironizes everything present and positive, everything that can be described, bringing it to dissolution. However, at the same time, death gives our hopes the chance to reach out over the narrow horizon of the living. The insight that everything present must disappear is sometimes disquieting. Yet it is also comforting, above all for someone who suffers under the conditions of the present and whose only hope lies beyond the immediate context of his life. This mood is very palpable in the Russian literary classics of the nineteenth century, in which, incidentally, Kabakov's work is much more deeply rooted than in the history of the plastic arts.

Kabakov's installations have their origin neither in performance nor in post-Minimalist, site-specific art, as is the case with most Western installations, but rather in narrative literature or, more precisely, in the novel. Characteristically, the first large installation that Kabakov made, in the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, after his immigration to the West was called *10 Characters* (1988).⁸ In this installation, works that Kabakov had for the most

За чистотой!		Расписание выноса помойного ведра по дому № 24 подъезд № 6 улицы п.л. Бардина ЖЭК № 8 Западное р-на.							
		Выборы Федоры	Ларь Ларзы	Май Илья	Илья Алевист	Светлана Викторовна	Николай Демидов		
1979 г.	1	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин Е.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Литман В.В.	Сорокин И.В.	
	2	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	Лопин И.С.	
	3	Литман И.В.	Зубова И.В.	Литман И.С.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	
	4	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	
1980 г.	1	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Литман В.В.	
	2	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	
	3	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Зубова И.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	
	4	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	
1981 г.	1	Литман И.С.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	
	2	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	
	3	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Зубова И.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	
	4	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	
1982 г.	1	Литман И.С.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	
	2	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	
	3	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	
	4	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	
1983 г.	1	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Зубова И.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	
	2	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	
	3	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	
	4	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	
1984 г.	1	Лопин И.С.	Лобчук С.	Литман В.В.	Литман И.С.	Прохоров И.А.	Солод Е.С.	Лопин И.С.	
	2	Зубова И.В.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	
	3	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	
	4	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Сорокин И.В.	Воль С.И.	Зубова И.В.	Акимченко И.	Свиной И.	

Figure 13 Ilya Kabakov, "Schedule of Slop Pail Dumping," 1980, enamel on masonite, 150 × 210 cm.

part created in Russia during the previous decades were attributed to ten different fictitious authors, whom he depicted as lonely, isolated people who practiced their art in the seclusion of their small rooms. Each such installation by Kabakov tells a story, and it is almost always the story of a lonely artist in unpleasant, threatening surroundings (see Plate 2). They are Baroque installations that distance themselves programmatically from the "white cube" of Minimalist-Conceptualist installations and stage a play of shadow and light obscuring the perspective of the viewer, thus thematizing the difficulty of looking into the private sphere, of gaining insight into the intimate refuse of a strange life, while at the same time thematizing the attraction of such a voyeuristic look into the dark, hidden, and intimate. Not by accident was the whole space of the installation *10 Persons* staged as an average Soviet communal apartment in which previous tenants left refuse that should have been cleaned up. The Soviet communal apartment is also the theme of many other of Kabakov's works (Figure 13). All the tenants of a Kabakovian communal apartment are immersed in their personal dreams, and yet they all live in one apartment. At issue here is communication without communication, a crowded everyday coexistence coupled with complete inner isolation.

The communal apartment represents, no doubt, the general structure of life under the conditions of Soviet Communism. This life was forged by the fear that to express oneself would be to betray oneself. At the same time, people lived in extreme physical and spatial proximity to one another. The combination of inner isolation and external intimacy was certainly very disturbing. Yet, as always in such cases, Kabakov is out to discover in this unbearable combination a universal human condition, and even a utopia.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy attempts to define the communal by distinguishing its constituent properties from those of society and community.⁹ His attempt is astoundingly close to the Kabakovian interpretation of the communal apartment. Nancy's theoretical construct can be described, needless to say, only cursorily here. Society, for Nancy, as it is for most theoreticians, is communication among autonomous individuals who enjoy certain rights, above all the right to anonymity, to a kind of protection against the public. Often counterposed to this society of individuals is a community—a community of love, of strong ties, of unity, whether seen as a family, an ecstatic religious community, perhaps a folk community, or a class-based community. The subject in a community, like the subject in a society, rules over its self-images. It is the subject's domination of its self-images, of its own aesthetic representation, that community and society have in common.

On the level on the communal, however, we produce images of ourselves that we cannot control. Others have an excess of vision, a visual advantage, over us. The communal is above all, for Nancy, this other, uncontrollable side of communication. Accordingly, Nancy defines the communal as "être exposé," as being exposed. He means: Even before I consciously produce images, I am always already on display on the level of the communal. One can therefore interpret the entire human pursuit of creating images as an attempt belatedly to correct the pictures others have of us or, at the very least, as an attempt to play with these pictures.

The Soviet communal apartment is, at bottom, such a place for Ilya Kabakov. It is a place where one is always already on display, exposed to the gaze of someone else. Here we no longer experience the private sphere, which stands in opposition to or is at least separated from the social sphere, as an area of private emotions in contrast to the coldness of society. The communal apartment is the place where the social is at its most terrifying, appearing most intrusive, where the individual is completely exposed to the mostly hostile gazes of others, who consistently exploit their visual advantage in

order to gain temporary victories in the endless communal apartment war. In the extreme intimacy of the communal apartment, the whole visual field becomes a battlefield on which the war of gazes rages. To be able to observe others is just as important as to be able to conceal oneself from and protect oneself from the strange gaze. And even if Soviet Communism is no more, communal life remains the same. The others always have an excess of vision and power beyond ours, an excess that we want to protect ourselves against, but that we can also enjoy. Now that God, the intimate and all-seeing observer, is dead, only the communal remains as an observer interested in our intimate sphere. We know how many people have missed the excitement of being observed since the decline of Communism, the excitement of being the object of a stranger's constant interest, even if that interest was hostile.

The communal situation thus makes everyone an artist, and also an artwork. Not by coincidence, then, are all the tenants of Kabakov's communal apartment artists. The communal apartment serves as a metaphor for the "art community." And, indeed, what is a museum or a large exhibition, if not a communal apartment in which different artists, who, perhaps, have never even heard of one another and who pursue very different goals and interests, are pressed together by the will of a curator whom society has appointed? Thus, artists find themselves again and again in the forced intimacy of a common context, with strange, if not hostile, neighbors. At issue here is not the question of whether this context can be described, controlled, and articulated socially, politically, and institutionally. At issue, rather, are the remains of an uncontrollable communal being on display, something that cannot be consciously captured, articulated, and sublated by any such description.

In particular, Kabakov thematizes the tension between a private and a public place in his installation *Toilet*, which he built for the *Documenta 9* exhibition in Kassel in 1992.¹⁰ He built this toilet as a separate building in the courtyard of the Fridericianum palace, where the majority of the *Documenta* works were shown. Through its structure, it evokes the common, primitive, hardly comfortable public toilets that can still be found in the south of Russia. Inside this toilet, Kabakov created private rooms that looked like a normal family apartment. What we had here was a family that lived quietly and undisturbed in a public toilet, without any dramatizing of this fact. The installation is at the same time a clever commentary on the *Documenta* exhibition. The interplay between private apartment and public toilet that Kabakov staged in this installation corresponds to the familiar structure of

a contemporary large public art exhibit. Every viewer had the right to visit the private space of an artist in order to relieve his or her aesthetic need there. Of course, there is a certain tension in this metaphor, and it suggests that it is not without nostalgia that Kabakov thinks back on the time when he would receive the visitors who wanted to see his art in his atelier or apartment as a host who had the chance to dictate the conditions under which they could see his art. In the installations he made in the West, Kabakov attempted to win back this missing artistic control through purely aesthetic means, through direct or indirect instructions that steer the viewer's attention in this or that direction, establishing the sequence in which his installations should be seen.

Kabakov often labels his installations "total installations."¹¹ By this he obviously means that when he builds these installations, he does not simply place his artistic productions in an already existing space, but completely alters this space visually and makes it into his private exhibition place, if only temporarily. At the same time, however, these installations invoke a greater, totalitarian, project of omnipresent control and a system of direct and indirect orders that is reminiscent of the deceased Soviet Union. This impression is reinforced by the frequent application of Soviet-looking materials and spatial design. Here, Kabakov's relation to this totalitarian project seems to be divided and ambivalent. On the one hand, he sees this project as a kind of sinister oppression that was justly condemned to failure by history. But, on the other hand, he cannot overlook the fact that his own artistic drive to control and steer the gaze of the observer is intrinsically related to the totalitarian political project.

Many of Kabakov's "Soviet" installations make visible this ambivalence. Consider, for example, the structure of his powerful installation *The Great Archive* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1993). The first visitors were asked to fill out hundreds of different forms. Then they entered a room that looked like a Kafkaesque courtroom, where they apparently received some kind of sentence that sent them either to the garbage can of oblivion or to the archive of collective memory. The room evoked Soviet bureaucratic spaces: shabby, boring, depressing. The questions on the forms were so contradictory, inconsistent, and confused that the whole mass of forms seemed to be ready for the paper shredder and the wastepaper basket. The archive has collapsed because in claiming to be able to understand humans in all aspects of their lives, it accepted no criteria that would have allowed the essential and relevant to be distinguished from the inessential and irrelevant.

Without any sort of differentiation, the closing judgment can only be arbitrary and absurd.

This absurdity is reinforced by the fact that the installations are temporary and, after they are taken down, they remain only as vague memories in the minds of the visitors. In the best case, they are preserved in catalogues. Kabakov thematizes again and again the transience of his installations, whereby the demise of the Soviet socialist order functions repeatedly as a metaphor for transience of every civilized order. Thus, visitors entered the installation *The Red Wagon* (Düsseldorf, 1991) through a pseudofuturistic entrance that was evocative of the famous Tatlin's Tower, Vladimir Tatlin's 1919 *Monument to the Third International*, a projected 1,300-foot-high tower commemorating the Russian Revolution. They proceeded on through a room in which the dreams of Stalin's era were represented by a huge fresco and then at the exit found themselves at a landfill. Through the installation *The Red Pavilion* (Venice, 1993), Kabakov transformed the Soviet exhibition pavilion in the Giardini into something between a construction site and a storage shed. He also built a small provisional pavilion next door that remained off-limits to visitors, out of which the optimistic music of the Stalin era blared incessantly. One could not really enter either pavilion. The old pavilion was falling apart, and the new pavilion was merely a voice. And in the gigantic installation *We Live Here* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1995), the deserted construction site of a mighty palace of the future was suggested. Only the ruins of the construction project and of the workers' provisional and shabby housing remained.

All of the installations in which Kabakov explicitly engages with the vanquished dreams of socialism constantly thematize the brisk transition between construction and decline, the moment between genesis out of garbage and dissolution into garbage (Figure 14). Civilization as such reveals itself to be a ruin in progress, a temporary installation that does not guarantee its own longevity and can vanish without a trace at any moment. Soviet civilization is the first thoroughly modern civilization that died before our eyes. All the other famous dead civilizations were premodern. The Soviet Union dissolved so completely and landed on the garbage heap of history so irretrievably because it left behind no unmistakable monuments comparable to Egyptian pyramids or Greek temples. This civilization simply fell apart and became the same modern garbage out of which it, like all modern, ready-made civilizations, was made.

Again and again, Kabakov stages the dissolution of Soviet civilization

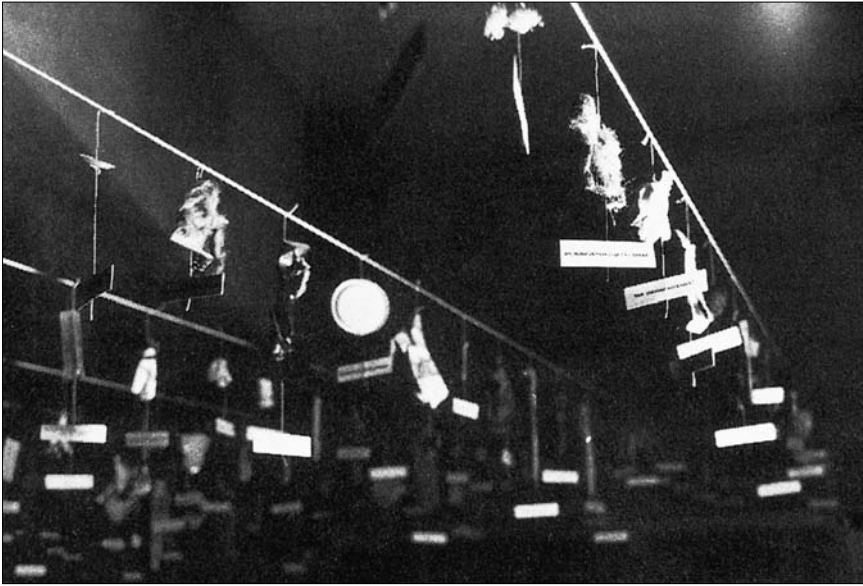


Figure 14 Ilya Kabakov, installation of garbage in his Moscow studio, 1982.

into extrahistorical garbage. Again and again, he shapes this sight as painful, cheap, repulsive, and, at the same time, sublime. The more radical and inexorable this decline is, the more exalted the image of this decline appears to be. The Communist utopia announced at its beginning the highest possible historical claims, undertook the greatest possible exertion in order to save humanity from its historical needs, only to collapse in poverty, squalor, and chaos. Its history offers the most extreme case of a historical defeat and, therefore, it may also offer an exalted historical image. Notwithstanding their heavy emphasis on Orwellian shabbiness and quasi-bureaucratic ugliness, Kabakov's installations, which thematize the fate of Soviet power, exhibit a kind of fascination with all the monuments of past glory.

It is not only utopian-messianic strivings that are transient for Kabakov, but all civilizing strivings. The museum is transient for him, as well. Kabakov may erect his short-lived installations inside the apparently stable institution of the museum, but he does not let his viewers forget that the museum itself is merely an installation, and that, in the end, it, too, will dissolve into garbage. Thus, in his installation *Incident at the Museum, or Water Music* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1993), Kabakov staged the dilapidated room of a provincial Russian museum in which the paintings of an unknown and extremely conventional Soviet painter were preserved. The

ceiling in this museum was crumbling. Water dripped from above, and pots were arranged on the floor to catch it. As usual, Kabakov presented here the demise of civilization and its decomposition into refuse. And, as usual, this demise gave occasion for hope. The fall of the water was modulated by a special apparatus so that its dripping into the containers suggested a certain melody. Art survives every catastrophe, every falling apart, every decline, for what matters, in the end, is the ability to see everything with which we are confronted as art. This ability, we should note, does not have to do with total "aestheticization," which would anesthetize, dulling our sense of "reality." Rather, it has to do with the opportunity to create art under all possible circumstances. Art functions as a privatization of a social dream that transforms itself from a political utopia into an inner utopia after historical reality has failed. The utopian dream is no longer realized in the territory of a country but, rather, is constructed as an artistic installation on the grounds of a museum.

Privatizations: Strategies of Unofficial Soviet-Russian Art

The individualist privatization of a collectivist Communist utopian dream has been characteristic of all late Soviet Russian art since the beginning of 1970s. These artistic strategies of privatization announce in a very peculiar and telling way the strategies of economic privatization that were put into effect after the long-awaited but nonetheless sudden abdication of the Soviet powers in 1991, which transformed the gigantic territory of the Soviet Union politically and legally into a propertyless, empty space. One could argue that the old Leninist-Stalinist "dialectical" doctrine about the disappearance of the state as a result of an unlimited expansion of its power, which so many commentators treated ironically for so long, had, in the end, proven to be correct. The incessant domestic and international growth of the Soviet Union's power led, in fact, to its historical sublation. Here, in a certain sense, the October Revolution reached its completion: the death of the state as the last and only property owner left behind a society of the propertyless.

Of course, immediately after the demise of the Soviet state, individual citizens began to privatize everything that they could find. But this process of privatization should not be understood as the road that leads from a propertyless country (back) to a country of private property. Post-Soviet

privatization is not a transition, but a lasting condition. At issue here is the condition of fundamental uncertainty about what belongs to whom and what belongs to no one. Otherwise put, what is at issue is the question of where the private begins and where it ends. The private thus reveals its fatal dependence on the public: Private spaces are necessarily formed out of the remains of state property. What is being played out is a violent picking apart and private appropriation of the dead body of the Soviet state, which evokes archaic, sacred festivals at which the members of a tribe have eaten the dead totemic animal. Everyone receives a piece. However, on the other hand, this festival is grounded in the supra-individual community of the tribe, which by far exceeds the bounds of the private.

Just as, after it expired, the Soviet state left behind a gigantic territory for private acquisition, so too, after the death of Soviet ideology, which had occurred much earlier, in the 1960s, the gigantic empire of desire, its legacy, was made available for private, psychological acquisition. The Soviet state invaded the souls of its subjects directly and manipulated their impressions, feelings, and experiences very effectively using the most modern propaganda tools. The traumatic experiences to which people in the Soviet Union were constantly subjected were incomparably stronger than all the individual traumas with which traditional psychoanalysis is concerned. This manipulative power of the Communist state was always stronger than all the powers of the personal unconscious. Thus, a huge reservoir of conscious and unconscious experiences formed that could not be attributed to individual souls in the traditional psychological sense and whose single subject was the state. In the Soviet era, every private psyche was subordinated to the official ideology and thus nationalized.

Soviet ideology was grounded in a particular desire: for a communism that signified the arrival of cosmic redemption and universal happiness. What was at stake was not simply a particular interpretation of world history. World history itself looked different within the Soviet Union. It had other names, dates, events, and patterns of narration. If Soviet history had been merely a national and regional history, it could easily be reintegrated into unified universal history with a few small changes. Soviet history, however, was a different narration of universal history, which, because of its claims to universality, could not be subsumed under neutral and scientifically conceived Western historiography.

This different, Soviet, universal history represents the territory on which the empire of state desire, or the nationalized psyche of Soviet citi-

zens, was territorialized. With the death of the Soviet ideology, which actually occurred soon after the death of Stalin, the constitutional subject of state desire was dissolved. The empire of national feelings had lost the sovereign who had governed it earlier. Thus, this empire became rulerless, subjectless. Otherwise put: What had been the nationalized realm of feelings and experiences was transformed into the subjectless, nameless unconscious, into a psychological desert that could be appropriated and privatized by every single individual. The phantasmatic historical vision produced by the Soviet state was dissolved through the strategy of privatization and psychologization into the personal mythologies of individual artists who looked very modern, very up-to-date indeed. So-called totalitarian forms of culture are just as modern as liberal, democratic modernity itself. At issue here is another modernity, and not simply the survival of premodern identities. In fact, this totalitarian modernity is in many respects even more modern, because more radical, than liberal, democratic modernity. With it there emerges a rivalry that does not allow for the sentimentalizing of the other that represents the main artistic device of today's art for dealing with cultural identity politics.

Beyond Kabakov and Komar and Melamid, some other Moscow artists began the (re)privatization of the Soviet soul as early as the 1970s. By doing so, they tried to subvert the clear-cut border between the individualistic, Existentialist pathos of unofficial art of the 1950s and 1960s and the whole territory of the collective Soviet experience that was ignored or excluded by this pathos. One of the leading Moscow artists of the 1970s, Erik Bulatov (Figure 15), combined in his painterly practices the official symbols of Soviet power with the portraits of his personal friends and his wife. His paintings look in many respects like ordinary three-dimensional realistic representations. But in his works, Bulatov develops the device of combining the illusory "private" three-dimensional space of the realistic picture and the "social" two-dimensional space of the ideological propaganda poster. Bulatov achieves this goal by introducing into the space of the painting texts like "Glory to the CPSU," which he inserts into the painting with the same title (Figure 16) (1975), or ideological signs like the ribbon of the Order of Lenin that he inserts into *The Horizon* (1972). Thus, even as he uses the techniques of traditional, realistic painting, Bulatov demonstrates that he no longer trusts its immediacy or "naturalness" (Figure 17). In a world saturated with ideology, immediacy becomes impossible: *Lebenswelt* proves to be an ideological sign. But, at the same time, all ideological signs can become part of a painting. The tradition of painting opens for the artist the possibility of pri-

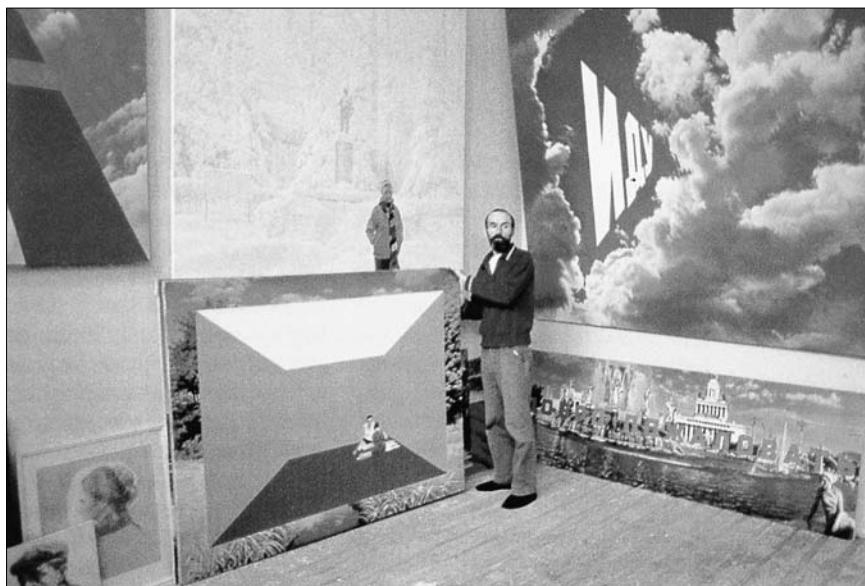


Figure 15 Erik Bulatov in his Moscow studio, 1970s.

vatizing all visual signs, of using them artistically, even the most ideologically dangerous ones.¹² The power of the painterly tradition also was demonstrated especially clearly in the works of Ivan Chuikov, which were made in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³ In these works, quotations from the Soviet visual world were fragmented and integrated into the complex interplay of all kinds of other quotations taken from different periods of art history. As a result, the signs of Soviet ideology lost their symbolic power, because that power was based on their claim to absolute historical uniqueness.

It was not only by means of traditional painting, of course, that the artistic privatization of the Soviet cultural space was practiced. Artistic performances that were organized in the 1970s and 1980s by Andrei Monastyrsky, the leader of the group Collective Actions, were especially characteristic in this respect (Figure 18). These performances took place, as a rule, during the winter in a wide, snow-covered field on the edge of Moscow. The white surface of the snow evoked the white background of Malevich's Suprematist art or of Kabakov's early, quasi-Minimalist paintings. At the same time, it was a typical Russian landscape that could also often be seen on the paintings of the official Soviet artists: just the snow, the sky, and the woods on the horizon. The performances were extremely Minimalist and enigmatic: short fragments of strange, unfamiliar rituals. Here, the main interest of the



Figure 16 Erik Bulatov, *Glory to the CPSU*, 1975, oil on canvas, 220 × 220 cm.



Figure 17 Erik Bulatov, *I Am Going*, 1975, oil on canvas, 220 × 220 cm.



Figure 18 Collective Actions, *Pictures*, 1980, performance.
Boris Groys's Archive.

organizers, as in the earlier work of Kabakov, was not so much the event itself as the process of interpretation that followed it. Instead of asserting the worth of their own work, they wanted, first and foremost, to provoke social commentary on this work. The individual performance only created the social space in which the discussion that followed among the participants and the viewers could take place. The commentary, conversations, and reactions were collected afterward and integrated into a multivolume work in progress entitled *Travels Outside the City*.¹⁴

The main characteristic of the commentary process inspired by Monastyrsky and his group was that it applied either exotic or purely private models of interpretation. The *I Ching* and Russian Orthodox mysticism were coupled with private memories, premonitions, obsessions, and associations. This did not have to do with any "actual belief" in the laws of the *I Ching* or any actual mystical epiphany. These were used, instead, to relativize the postulates of social normality and "realism." The mystical commentary was offered as one possibility among many of distancing oneself from the pressure of the quotidian. Andrei Monastyrsky's long-standing engagement with Chinese and, above all, North Korean Communism, as well as with the narrative structures of the classical Chinese novel, also served to thematize difference and otherness within international Communist discourse. Thus, Monastyrsky evaded the oppressive Soviet narrative, which conjoined the Russian realist novel of the nineteenth century with the nineteenth-century Marxist narrative, putting the familiar signs of Communism in a fully alien, Orientalized context.

This posture is also characteristic of the younger group Medical Hermeneutics (Pavel Pepperstein, Sergei Anufriev, and, earlier, Yurii Leidermann), which occupied an important place in the Moscow art scene of the 1980s and has programmatically inserted itself into the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism (Figure 19). Commentary on art and literature occupy more space in the activities of this group than so-called actual artistic production.¹⁵ The interpretive practice of Medical Hermeneutics exhibits Kabakov's influence, as well as a fascination with psychoanalysis and a familiarity with the poststructuralist interpretive practices of Lacan, Deleuze, and Derrida. The readings that the Medical Hermeneuticians develop have to do with the basic relation of a work of art to its context. Every artwork, for Medical Hermeneutics, is always already contaminated by its context and is therefore sick, even half-dead. According to the discourse of Medical Hermeneutics, the artwork contains its context immanently, like so many bacte-



Figure 19 Medical Hermeneutics, *Orthodox Suckings*, 1990, installation (photo: Natalia Nikitin).

ria or viruses of which it can never completely rid itself, so that a liberation from contextual sickness is not possible. At the same time, one does not know whether the artwork's sickness is real or imagined, for its "inner context" emerges out of readings that do not possess logical necessity and that are of a purely private nature. The distinction between health and sickness, and thus between text and context, becomes impossible. The practice of Medical Hermeneutics consists in diagnosing the inner sickness of the artwork, with such a diagnosis regarded as being already a cure. An artwork is only actually sick when it regards itself as healthy.

Characteristic of the method of Medical Hermeneutics is a text by Pavel Pepperstein in which he describes, among other things, the following fictional situation: A grandfather watches his beloved granddaughter participate in a demonstration in Red Square in Moscow. As was customary, the young pioneers form the letters "CPSU" (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) with their bodies, and he discovers the beautiful body of his granddaughter somewhere near the bottom of the last letter. Afterward, writes Pepperstein, whenever the grandfather sees the letters "CPSU," he thinks lovingly and longingly about the small point at the bottom right where his

granddaughter's body was. The story's references to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derrida's theory of writing are easily recognizable. At the same time, the text alludes to a picture that is well known in Russia, Erik Bulatov's *Glory to the CPSU*¹⁶ (Figure 16).

But above all, the story suggests that the old grandfather will still love "CPSU" after the repressive character of Soviet power has been exposed and the crimes of the CPSU have been revealed, because the reason for this love lies elsewhere and cannot be criticized. Since this love is not rationally, socially, or politically motivated, but rather is motivated by private reasons, it cannot be destroyed through political argumentation. This love, we should note, has not been determined by an "aestheticization of the political" or a "fascination with power." The grandfather is in no way fascinated by the demonstration as a demonstration. He sees only his granddaughter. The pleasure he takes in her body is of a purely private nature, and it has nothing to do with the official festivities. This private character of love for the CPSU renders every critical analysis at once impossible and superfluous. The letters "CPSU" are not changed in appearance or meaning by the fact that one of the points out of which they are formed was once a warm, beautiful young female body. The private sphere is not made political and public here. Rather, the public is privatized and thus made safe from foreign, critical, judgmental interventions. After losing its historical power, "CPSU" survives as this private, hallucinatory vision.

There are, then, no scientific, analytic means by which to describe completely the context of the letters "CPSU." Every such description will overlook the meaning they have for the old grandfather. The story can thus only be recounted narratively. It therefore undermines all claims to an objective description of context, for one can imagine that those who claim to be able to reconstruct the meaning of "CPSU" scientifically and politically are in some cases such grandfathers themselves, grandfathers who are pursuing private obsessions. Context exists only in art and literature, not in reality itself. Every "realistic" description of a context is merely a description of an image or a text. There will be in this description private truths that cannot even be guessed at. These private truths cannot legitimate the artwork, as Romantic or early avant-garde aesthetics would have it. However, these truths are legitimate perspectives within a context that cannot be arbitrarily reduced to a small number of positivistic, sociopolitical perspectives. For this reason, every context that is conceived "realistically" is internally infected, sick, in need of medical hermeneutics.

The strategies of privatization through personal memories are also characteristic of other artists of the 1980s who belong to the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism. Vadim Sakharov makes the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism itself into the object of his art, reinventing it in his one-man journal *Pastor*, as well as in the installations that serve as illustration for the journal. Thus, Sakharov functions as the chronicler of a group that is extraordinarily ephemeral. It is not defined as an organized art movement. Its practice is bound together by hardly any exhibits, publications, or collections. Moscow Conceptualism, at bottom, is nothing more than a rumor, a supposition, a suspicion. To create an archive for such a movement and to document it is to invent it. Sakharov's works move in the spaces between documentation and production, archivization and creation, remembering and inventing.¹⁷

The works of Yurii Albert, which also belong to the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism, offer ironic commentary on the rituals of discursive emptiness that his friends perform. He confronts their Mannerist, esoteric, ideological languages with, for example, the languages of deaf-mutes and blind people, or with professional languages, like the language of seamen. In doing so, he ironizes the incomprehensibility of much of contemporary artistic discourse that separates initiates from the uninitiated—the uninitiated are, obviously, those who are waiting for a higher meaning. At the same time, however, Albert shows in one of his installations how van Gogh's unpainted pictures, which van Gogh described in letters to his brother, suddenly become visible to blind people when these descriptions are reproduced in Braille. Imagination allows the blind person to see pictures by van Gogh that remain concealed for the seeing.¹⁸ This disbelief in the capability of the ordinary public to see reflects Albert's experiences as an unofficial artist in the Soviet Union. And these experiences belong by no means only to the past.

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Meanwhile, though Ilya Kabakov and Komar and Melamid have achieved considerable international success, and the younger generation of Moscow Conceptualists, as well as other groups of the new Russian art, are becoming part of the international art scene, they remain marginal in the context of the post-Soviet Russia. At least as of today, the end of the Soviet Union has not resulted in any great domestic changes for advanced Russian art.

The Russian public, upon being suddenly confronted with the success of their own, formerly unofficial, artists, artists of whom they had not known earlier, tend to interpret this success as dictated by the West, which wants to impose foreign criteria on Russian art. Various conspiracy theories circulate. Far from embracing the international successes of a few Russian artists, many Russian observers receive these successes as a personal insult. The sudden opening to the outside that today's Russia has experienced and that has bolstered its financial dependence on the outside world frequently elicits a nationalistic reaction. The Russian domestic art market orients itself toward the new ruling class of entrepreneurs, bankers, and political functionaries who have only a vague conception of "Western" culture of the twentieth century and who prefer an art that revives the atmosphere of Russian life before the revolution. Russia was not especially happy in the twentieth century. That is also one reason why the Russian public does not like any art of this century, whether Western or Russian, realist or avant-garde. In this post-Soviet time, as the majority of Russians try either to forget that unhappy century altogether or to glorify the Soviet past without actually remembering it, the unofficial art of the Soviet era functions, paradoxically, as the only cultural space where the private memories from the Soviet era are still kept.

Translated from the German by Paul Reitter

Notes

1. For the history of Russian unofficial art, see *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956–1986*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), *Non-Konformisten: Die Zweite Russische Avantgarde 1955–1988. Sammlung Bar-Gera*, edited by Hans-Peter Riese (Cologne: Wienand, 1996), and *Ich lebe—ich sehe: Künstler der achtziger Jahre in Moskau*, exhibition catalogue (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 1988).

2. For the history of Moscow Conceptualism, see Boris Groys, "Moskovski ro mantičesky konceptualizm," *A-Ya* (Paris), no. 1 (1979): 3–11, and Ilya Kabakov, *Noma, oder der Kreis der Moskauer Konzeptualisten*, exhibition catalogue (Hamburg: Kunsthalle Hamburg, 1993).

3. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

4. See Carter Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988).

5. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

6. *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, edited by JoAnn Wypijewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

7. See Ilya Kabakov, *Am Rande*, exhibition catalogue (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1985).

8. Ilya Kabakov, *Ten Characters* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, 1988).

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, edited by Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al., *Theory and History of Literature* 76 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 9ff.
10. See *Documenta IX*, vol. 2, catalogue of the Kassel *Documenta IX* exhibition (Stuttgart: Cantz Verlag, 1992), pp. 248–49.
11. Ilya Kabakov, *Über die Totale Installation / On Total Installation* (Stuttgart: Cantz Verlag, 1995).
12. Boris Groys, *Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Moskau: Von der Neo-Avantgarde zum Post-Stalinismus* (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1991).
13. Ivan Chujkov, *Werke von 1966–1997*, exhibition catalogue (Moscow-Leverkusen, 1998).
14. Collective Action, *Poezdki za gorod* (Moscow: Ad marginem, 1998).
15. See Medical Hermeneutics, *Binokel und Monokel: Leben und Werke* (Zug: Kunsthaus Zug, 1998).
16. See Boris Groys, “Der ein-gebildete Kontext,” in *Kontext-Kunst*, edited by Peter Weibel (Cologne: DuMont, 1993), pp. 257–82.
17. Vadim Zakharov, *Der letzte Spaziergang durch die Elysischen Felder: Retrospektive 1978–95*, catalogue from the exhibition in Kunstverein Köln (Stuttgart: Cantz Verlag, 1995).
18. See *Kräftmessen*, catalogue of an exhibition in Munich (Stuttgart: Cantz Verlag, 1995), pp. 91–93.