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Russian Art in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Ekaterina Dyogot

The Russian Avant-Garde and Soviet Art as Historical Background

This essay concerns Russian art in the second half of the twentieth century, yet any such description requires constant reference to the Russian avant-garde and the Soviet art system. The country's isolation made Soviet art such a specific, aesthetic, and particularly institutional phenomenon that it becomes critical to any understanding of art in the post-Stalinist period. [1]

The very expression "twentieth-century Russian art" was rarely used throughout the course of the century, and the phrase "Soviet art," which supplanted it, lacked all geographic and temporal coordinates. Soviet art was perceived as super-historical, synthetic, and unique, incorporating all the best aspects of the world's artistic tradition (except for the parallel modernist movement in the West, to which Soviet art set itself in opposition). Yet this very claim of absolute novelty reveals Soviet art to be part of the worldwide modernist project.

The first steps toward modernism -- post-classical art -- were taken at the end of the eighteenth century, when the previously unassailable ties between art and both Church and the Court began to dissolve. Bourgeois art cautiously claimed its autonomy and occupied a new institutional field, which gave rise to public museums and commercial galleries, exhibits, a viewing public, critics, and the figure of the artist as a lonely innovator, alienated both from tradition and from the consumer. The rise of abstraction in the beginning of the 1910s embodied the modernist idea of artistic autonomy. Modernist art is not merely self-referential -- it criticizes itself and its own media. [2] Modernism is based upon alienation, upon the distance between the means of art and its meanings: it equates art with language, production with text. This "universal language" is most evident in Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square" (1915), one letter on a white background. Thus the twentieth century fulfilled Hegel's prophecy, made in the nineteenth, that art would use up its ingenuousness and come around to reflect itself.

Hegel, however, believed that this signaled the death of art. After his pronouncement, many twentieth-century movements repeated the phrase "art is dead," though with the implication that "only now are things really

getting underway." This thought gave birth to the avant-garde phenomenon, on the eve of the first World War—an art after death, concerned with that death. The avant-garde espoused a strategy of non-art, challenging the boundaries of the artistic. From modernism the avant-garde inherited its critical nature and utopian forward momentum, but now these were inextricably tied to radicalization, art's endless critical persecution of its own self. At the basis of the avant-garde lies disillusionment with the idea of aesthetic autonomy; [3] thus, it strives to abandon the realm of "art only" and emerge into the realm of multidisciplinary "innovation in general," contiguous with the literary, political, philosophical, and scientific fields.

From the beginning, the avant-garde viewed itself as modernism's critic; futurism and dadaism cast doubt onto the axioms of authorship, progress, linear history, elitism, and artistic autonomy. This is especially true of Russian art, which from the beginning of the twentieth century took on the role of criticizing Western modernism. Since nineteenth-century Russia was far removed from urbanism, it appropriated local versions of the modern style, impressionism, and Cézanne's style in the 1890s and 1900s. However, the Russian avant-garde, which began around 1909 as a critique of cubism and futurism, became an original and astonishingly radical phenomenon. The Russian avant-garde provided the source for theories of the world-as-text, which achieved such colossal influence in the twentieth century. International structuralism owes much to the Russian formal school, which shared with futurism a common platform -- the theory of "unintelligible language." However, the specifics of the Russian avant-garde included not only "universal language," but also a mighty utopian will to overcome any attempt at alienation, be it linguistic or social. The avant-garde condemned modernism, particularly cubism, for its negative character and dismemberment of form. The drive to minimize form without using force defined many Russian avant-garde phenomena, such as the organic, non-geometric abstractions of Elena Guro and Mikhail Matiushin, and Olga Rozanova's lack of subject as she dissolved the boundary between figure and background. Other artists imbued their work with colossal ambitions toward synthesis (for example, Mikhail Larionov and Ilia Zdanevich's "everythingness," or the synthesisism of Pavel Filonov). Larionov and Zdanevich's "Yes-Manifesto" (1912), which absurdly answered "yes" to any question, challenged the axioms of negativity and criticism. On the other hand, Russian art explored early on the possibility of criticizing an image without resorting to rejection. Kazimir Malevich's "Allogisms" (1913-14), which featured an arrangement of disparate motifs including illustrative quotes and real objects, all glued to the canvas, were his commentary on figurative painting as a collage of

random signifiers. This reflexive approach to representation was subsequently taken up by Ilia Kabakov.

Beginning in the 1910s, Russian art started to search for a new form which might replace traditional easel painting, and around 1913-15 two options emerged: the super-painting as symbol (Malevich's suprematism) and the manuscript as book, in which image and text coexist as equals (Alexei Kruchenykh). However, the early Russian avant-garde finally reached the radical decision to abandon painting altogether; in 1919 Malevich rejected painting in favor of direct action upon human consciousness, while in 1921 Rodchenko declared that the artist's purpose must be to undertake large-scale ideological projects (which during the 1920s became constructivism).

During the 1920s the reasons for traditional easel painting's unacceptability in Soviet art became clear -- from the days of the Renaissance, easel painting had implied the singularity of the artist as individual and appealed to individual viewers. Soviet art of this period, on the other hand, totally defined itself in terms of collective authors and viewers; that is, it had to be created by a group of artists in solidarity among themselves and with the government, and it had to be designed for simultaneous viewing by masses of people. The first condition was not generally met; the history of Soviet art reveals only a few examples of collective artistic production. However, the second condition engendered several original "anti-painting" forms with the purpose of facilitating simultaneous mass viewing. These included, apart from the fairly obvious monumental painting: art as a giant radio-broadcasting and general media apparatus (Vladimir Tatlin's "Tower of the Third International," 1920); all-encompassing space, which automatically robbed the viewer of individuality (El Lissitzky's "Prouny" of the 1920s and his gargantuan photo-installations of the 1930s); artworks which were immediately circulated among the masses in magazines or as postcards, and which were meant to exist as reproductions rather than in the original form (such were the principles of socialist realism in the 1930s, first put into practice by the "Association of Revolutionary Russian Artists" [Assotsiatsia Khudozhnikov Revoliutsionnoi Rossii, or AKhRR] in the 1920s; the group quickly established its own publishing house). The institutional system of Soviet art, based upon art's hyper-visibility (enormous collective exhibits, mass circulation of reproductions, abundant monumental pieces looming over city streets) at the expense of the private art market created a background in stark contrast with the unofficial (not exhibited) art of the second half of the twentieth century, which stood out as the "other."

Soviet art as it was conceived in the 1920s was a modernist project that did not alienate citizens from one another, art from life, or the viewer from art; [4] its ethical, aesthetic, and institutional workings stemmed from the presumption of solidarity and voluntary rejection of any critical approach to the means and reality of art. On the institutional level, this synthesis was bound to take on the form of a single artists' union, which was established in 1932. On the aesthetic level, the goal was self-knowledge by means of dialectically viewing life, simultaneously from all sides ("unfolding," as Sergei Tretiakov termed it at the end of the 1920s). This synthetic, post-avant-garde aesthetic at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the '30s took on its most striking form in encompassing spaces, generating ecstatic communion: El Lissitzky's photo-installations, Konstantin Melnikov's and Ivan Leonidov's architectural projects, and the cinema. With its potential for grand-scale illusion and boundless resources to induce mass euphoria, film easily became the loftiest embodiment of Soviet artistic ambition. The fine arts of the 1930s-1950s, in the form of "socialist realism," also belong to the late avant-garde; they inherited the aims of "unfolding," simultaneously appropriating the painting style of the nineteenth century. The return to figurative representation was not only a Soviet phenomenon; surrealism did the same, and was accused up until the 1960s of betraying abstraction. The restoration of integrated, unfragmented representation in the 1920s influenced art throughout Europe. Yet this integrity was deceptive, undermined from within; representation appears not as positive expression, but as a critique of itself. In the second half of the twentieth century, this very sort of critical figurative representation would become characteristic of Moscow's conceptualism and soc-art.

The groundwork for Russian art's return to figurative painting was laid by specific conditions as well -- both by synthesism's traditional critique of abstraction and by the country's economy. The avant-garde equated art with consumption rather than creation (the latter was more of a modernist position), but the various kinds of consumption -- mass circulation, manipulation, destruction -- could be quite different. The practice of "ready-made" art, which was initiated by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 and involved mass-produced items, appealed to the market. (In the second half of this century, the practice became as common as landscape painting had been in the nineteenth.) Yet in the Soviet Union mass-produced items were few and the market insignificant. There was, however, a well-developed system for circulating propaganda, which artists took advantage of with ready-made images, ideological and media-filtered neo-icons. From the mid-1920s, the late Soviet avant-garde came to be represented by photomontage (Rodchenko, El Lissitzky), mass-circulated

reproduction (the future socialist realist painters), and representation as quotation (Malevich's portraits of the 1930s, stylized as Italian renaissance paintings).

Though the artist's union was plagued by constant squabbles and changes in leadership, a fundamental consensus about core values in art reigned through the end of the 1950s and included visual quotation, collective authorship and viewers, and the rejection of criticism. After the second World War, an alternative to all of this began to emerge, although its more radical elements were censored from 1962 to roughly 1987 and assumed the status of "unofficial," or un-exhibitable art. This art toppled the axioms of representation and collectivization (for example, it revived abstraction in the 1960s) and subsequently lifted the ban on criticism (as in the case of Moscow's conceptualism, soc-art, and minimalism in the 1970s and '80s, which dedicated themselves to textual criticism). Conceptualism -- the last great project of Russian twentieth-century art -- dutifully reflected Soviet art by acknowledging and examining its decisions, particularly its decision to favor total figurative representation. Having settled the score with the Soviet tradition and no longer dependent upon it, Russian art entered its post-Soviet phase in the 1990s.

The Institutions of Unofficial Art

After the second World War, it became evident that the collective Soviet art project would never become universal -- in the Soviet system, this meant total failure. Private art forms proved themselves ineradicable. Private studios (primarily those of Robert Falk and Vladimir Favorsky); collectors' salons posing as home viewing galleries, where one could see works by the early twentieth-century avant-garde which had been removed from official museums (such as Georgii Kostakis's salon); even special library holdings, containing banned and censored books -- one could receive access to any of these if one knew the right people. Amateur studios presented the opportunity to exhibit artwork without membership in the artists' union; after the war, these studios became so marginalized in the art world that they could even exhibit abstract art (for instance, Elijah Beliutin's studio, beginning in 1958). The government used such studios as evidence that the Soviet Union did not engage in artistic censorship. Many artists in the post-Stalinist period (particularly those who had endured labor camps and exile) no longer identified with the government and wanted to dissolve the unspoken agreement with Soviet art, regarding collective authorship, delegation of artistic meaning to the institutions of power, and the requisite figurativeness.

During the brief period of liberalization between Stalin's death in 1953 and 1962, this nonconformist (with regard to socialist realism) art was not banned outright, but held the status of a youthful or "export" phenomenon. At the Youth and Student Festival held in Moscow in 1957 — the first gap in the Iron Curtain — modern American art was displayed, and young Soviet artists could also exhibit their "non-standard" works. However, artistic freedom remained limited; no galleries or museums of modern art were opened, and the shift from tolerated to forbidden status at the end of the post-Stalinist "thaw" in 1962 came as no real surprise. At an exhibit celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Moscow Organization of Soviet Artists, Khrushchev publicly declared a series of artworks which did not correspond with the socialist realist canon to be anti-Soviet. After this, it became impossible for anyone who did not belong to the artists' union to exhibit publicly; joining the union was exceedingly difficult. As a result, art which had been denied access to the public sphere went "underground" and established its own institutional system.

The institutional aspect of Russian twentieth-century art history differs from the European and American standards. Exhibition spaces in the twentieth century -- the "white cube," a neutral display area -- gave rise to the "exhibitory" nature of the artworks themselves, which openly revealed their own sources. [5] However, twentieth-century Russia, where the art market had never fully taken shape, knew nothing of these white cubes. Art did not live in galleries and museums, but rather in workshops, in apartments and country homes. The bonds of camaraderie meant more than the pragmatic, temporary community of an exhibit.

The underground nature of art in the 1950s and '60s reflected the absence of neutral exhibition spaces and outside viewers. Art's environment was not the "white" gallery but the "dark" communal apartment, where art could not be distinguished from life and the public was reduced to a small circle of the artist's close acquaintances. Although many unofficial artworks entered the private market in the 1950s and '60s (unlike the work of union members, for whom this was impossible), this was still a black market, lacking access to the public. The buyer (often a foreign diplomat secretly visiting an artist's home) acquired not a product so much as tangible evidence of suffering; its value was ethical rather than financial, absolute rather than calculable, in a closed culture which lacked any physical or intellectual space for comparison.

The beginning of the 1970s witnessed a change both in the institutional position of unofficial artists in the USSR and in their activity within this

environment. The new generation began to fight for public acknowledgment, but the arena for this acknowledgment was no longer limited to the formal exhibit. On September 15, 1974, several artists led by Oscar Rabin (the group also included the inventors of soc-art -- Vitalii Komar and Alexander Melamid) tried to set up an uncensored display of artwork in a Moscow vacant lot; the authorities blocked their way with bulldozers, but subsequently, after a public outcry, the exhibit was permitted and the government even opened a special, state-regulated exhibition hall for artists who did not belong to the artists' union. Nonetheless, the aesthetic outcome of the "Bulldozer Exhibit" was not so much the establishment of a new exhibition hall — a traditional, institutionalized modernist space -- as the establishment of an alternative sphere where the artists themselves might be in control. The exhibit's organizers, taking their cues from the experience of political dissidents, made sure to disseminate information as widely as possible (via tapped telephone lines to the authorities, via press conferences to the Western press). The key artistic institution for the new generation became neither public exhibition halls nor underground displays or the black market, but rather the open spaces of text, information, the media. This generation came to be known as the conceptualists in the 1970s and '80s.

Conceptualism emerged almost simultaneously in various parts of the world, with its inception marked at "around" or "after 1968." In the West, where the year 1968 witnessed widespread student revolution, conceptualism was the product of a new era hallmarked by political freedom and mobility, an era of rapid and intense shifts among artists and artworks (many of which were now shaped roughly like books or journals and could easily fit into a suitcase). [6] Even in the Soviet Union, where the year 1968 was linked not with freedom but with repression (the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the resulting start of the dissident movement), similar trends could be traced: dissident politics were soundly anti-isolationist and revolved around the idea of world unity, insisting that even the "Iron Curtain" could be penetrated -- if not by bodies, then by ideas. The dissident movement worked to establish real media channels through which to funnel its ideas, while conceptualism recreated this process in the art world. Communication as such (dialogue), its various forms (such as journals and compendia), its participants (viewers, commentators) -- the conceptualist generation of the 1970s invented all of this as its own fiction, objects of introspection, its project. [7]

In the 1970s the unofficial artists of the conceptualist circle created their own print organ, the journal *A-Z*, which was published in Paris between 1979 and 1986. Yet even more importantly, communication was becoming

more and more institutionalized; gradually, the media were replacing the market. Contemporary Soviet art in the 1970s was no longer relegated to "dark" rooms of communal apartments, yet its new space was not the "white" gallery, but rather a well-lit workshop on the top floor of a high-rise (such as the workshops of Ilia Kabakov and Erik Bulatov), whose main function was neither exhibition nor commerce, but discussion, dialogue, and seminars, many of which were documented. This form of artistic "consumption," which also appears to be creative (as collective, self-stimulating introspection), harkens back to the first decade of the 1900s and the Russian avant-garde's first organization -- "The Youth Union" -- which, despite its status as an exhibitory association, aimed its activity not at commerce but at artists' self-education (which might be viewed as the consumption of knowledge -- in itself as valuable as producing artwork), in the form of long discussions held at Elena Guro's summer cottage.

More and more frequently, artwork came to include text, and in 1972, Ilia Kabakov introduced one of the more original creative forms—the album, in which drawings were interspersed with all sorts of commentary, from the earthy and naïve to the lofty and satirical. Dialogues, scholarly presentations, articles by artists and philosophers (art critics had yet to enter the scene), all were collected, typed up, and distributed in several copies, thus destroying the line between art and text about art, as well as the boundary between literary and research text. Andrei Monastyrsky and his circle compiled perhaps the most important "literary monuments" of this sort: stitched-together volumes called "Trips Out of Town" (which documented performances by the group "Collective Action" and began publication in 1980) and the collected files of the Moscow Archive of New Art ([Moskovskii Arkhiv Novogo Isskustva, or MANI], 1982-1988), with original pieces, photographs, and typewritten text. In the late 1980s, the conceptualist group "Hermeneutic Medical Inspection" probed the limits of commentary-as-product with its work, which consisted almost exclusively of dialogue.

This conceptualist "politics of commentary" was a conscious response to the specific Soviet artistic environment. As stated previously, ready-made art had little chance of success with no market in the Soviet avant-garde; however, media-filtered ready-mades -- particularly photomontage -- enjoyed surprisingly widespread dissemination. Post-avant-garde Soviet artists in the 1960s had neither the market, nor any opportunity to reproduce and circulate their work on a large scale, so they began to work outside both market and media with oral "ready-mades" -- verbally expressed opinions, whose institutional space became a space of collective

consumption, circles of friends revolving around endless discussion, description, and mutual response. Moscow's conceptualist artists preferred to see themselves not as a school or a movement, but as an institution with all of the formal (if simulated) symbols of membership, reminiscent of a knightly order or a masonic lodge. Hence the uniformly enigmatic names chosen by this group (at the end of the 1970s it was "Circle of MANI," and after 1988 it became "Noma," a word invented by the "Hermeneutic Medical Inspection" group), as well as the ironically rigid hierarchy among members, depending on their influence and creative input (though the most influential and productive member eternally remained Andrei Monastyrsky). Post-war Soviet society (one might say 'post-totalitarian,' once it became obvious that the totalitarian project would never entirely succeed) arranged itself in constellations of micro-societies independent of the government; the Moscow conceptualists were the first to discover the aesthetic and institutional possibilities of this state of affairs, viewing Soviet life not as a detriment but as an advantage. The institutional project instigated by the Moscow conceptualists (or Noma) fashioned an elite, almost cult status for itself from particularly private material.

The Spectrum of Underground Modernism in the 1950s and '60s

Postwar art in the Soviet Union tried to create a new kind of modernism, unfettered by the two fundamental requirements of Soviet modernism—collectivity ("socialist") and figurativeness ("realism"). The break could be either total or partial; the most radical artists renounced both collectivity and figurativeness. As in the United States and Europe, the most heroic wave of postwar modernism in the Soviet Union became abstract art, aimed not at constructing a symbolic world order (as in the early avant-garde) but at personal freedom realized through gesture. Abstraction became the banner of individualism; exhibits of American and French abstract expressionism in Moscow between 1957 and 1962 catalyzed the movement. In the early 1960s, Mikhail Kulakov painted his enormous abstract expressionist canvases before an audience, as performance. Even earlier, in the 1950s, Vladimir Slepian used fire and hoses to make abstract art—a concept which seems more radical than the concurrent French tachism movement, which utilized random smudges and splatters of paint. Despite the claims to individualism, this could also be seen as a sort of collective experience; for instance, Slepian and his colleague, Yuri Zlotnikov, held educational sessions and demonstrated their techniques to groups of artists by painting on both sides of tracing paper. Zlotnikov, who strove to rid his art of all "excessively human" expression and clung to the new sciences (principally to cybernetics), began to construct a series of

"signaling systems" -- sheets of paper with infrequent and unpredictable flashes of geometric symbols on a white background. Mathematics and physiology intertwined in abstract art's new conception of rhythm. These "signals" constituted, to a large extent, a critique of Malevich's suprematism (and his outsized ambitions), while their phenomenological nature, examining perception, points up the legacy of Kandinsky, who supplied Russian art with inexhaustible "psychic" themes.

In other cases (though they were actually quite similar), artists retained the notion of collective art but rejected figurative representation, looking instead to the redoubts of the 1920s avant-garde. A commune of young artists called "The Movement" (which lasted from 1962 to 1976) exemplified this trend. Its head, Lev Nusberg, tested out constructivist principles, while the group's other star, Francisco Infanté, engaged and explored the influence of Naum Gabo and Malevich (hence his utopian, "supreme" projects, such as a skyscape remade along geometric lines). The collective proclaimed kinetic art meant for mass, ecstatic viewing, and created in an urban setting various synthetic wonders, with flashing lights, transparent plastics, screens, mirrors, smoke, and noise pouring out of loudspeakers. For the most part, this ideological design remained utopian, unhindered by the authorities. "The Movement"'s "live machines" continued El Lissitzky's later illusionist project, first by aspiring to hyper-individualism, but also in their critique of "dry" and "one-sided" geometry. Quite predictably, these artists rejected Western kineticism as too individualistic and its construction as moribund. [8] The collective performances directed by Nusberg essentially appealed to the senses and sexuality -- reliable antidotes to geometry. The group dissolved after Nusberg emigrated to the United States; beginning in the 1970s, Infanté worked independently, creating conceptual photographs of artificial objects in nature.

The third variation on Soviet art -- rejecting the collective nature of creativity but retaining figurative representation -- enjoyed the widest appeal in the postwar art world. This was, in fact, the quiet pursuit of most of the members of the artists' union. After the country "slipped out of time" in the Stalin era, culture demanded the reintegration of artists into history, and many understood this challenge as an opportunity to fill in the gaps and catch up on missed artistic stages. Artists did not conceal the secondary nature of their projects—here ignoring the original was original in itself, and denying historical continuity recalled the "everythingness" of the 1910s. Many people obsessively collected postcards in their domestic "museums" and symbolically appropriated Western culture by secretly pilfering reproductions from libraries. As far

back as the 1930s, Ivan Kliun, already isolated as a proto-unofficial artist, busied himself with copying reproductions from contemporary Western journals and arranging them with his own drawings, thus shamelessly combining abstraction with figurativeness.

The most radical examples of this appropriation aesthetic originated in unofficial circles. Members of the late-1950s group "The Lianozovo Circle" (named after a train stop on the outskirts of Moscow, where most of the participants lived) first adopted this almost postmodern citation of various styles. The group consisted of the poets Evgenii Kropivnitsky (who was also an artist), Henry Sapgir, Igor Kholin, and Vsevolod Nekrasov, who all wrote in a rough, folkloric tone within the conceptual aesthetic of the quotation. The artists were less radical in their use of language, but radically "unprincipled": the abstract expressionism of Vladimir Nemukhin, Lydia Masterkova, and Lev Kropivnitsky; the personal visions of Evgenii Kropivnitsky, Olga Potapova, and Valentina Kropivnitskaya; and Oscar Rabin's socialist-realist depictions of bleak suburban barracks, all coexisted equally in this group and even in the work of a single author. The artist did not discover, but merely used ready forms; sometimes he even made use of the fragments of another's work, as Lev Kropivnitsky tended to do. It comes as no surprise that by 1964, Nemukhin had introduced his signature motif -- playing cards -- into his compositions, Masterkova had switched to making collages of numbers and church chasubles, and Rabin littered his landscapes with images of the newspaper *Pravda*, Soviet passports, and icons.

It was quite natural for an artist living in the Soviet Union to feel himself surrounded by a world of signs and symbols; the avant-garde generation had gone to great lengths to construct such a world, and the project was completed by the government itself. Like the Oberiuts before them, some artists in the 1960s realized the absurdity of any links between cause and effect, which later gave rise to Russian conceptualism. Its roots might be traced to the end of the 1950s and beginning of the '60s to the so-called "Surrealist Circle"—a group of artists associated with the publishing house "Znanie" [knowledge]. Yuri Sobolev and Yulo Sooster headed the group, and members included the future conceptualists Ilia Kabakov and Victor Pivovarov. Sooster, who had encountered the work of Magritte and Max Ernst in bourgeois Estonia, repeated Freudian symbols and motifs in his paintings—eggs, fish, juniper bushes. Vladimir Yankilevsky, who drew and painted expressive pieces about mutations of humanity and automation, abstraction and figure, also belonged to this group. His furious ecological tirade is resolved by the rehabilitation of the body and sexual reawakening, though in a torturously deformed permutation. In the

1970s, this explosive anthropology led him to mold plaster casts of the human body.

Within the framework of the appropriation aesthetic and the attempt to fill in historical gaps, abstraction inevitably came to be viewed "figuratively," as ready-made image (as Malevich's students had understood abstraction in the 1920s). Artists frequently acknowledged this perception, and their abstract work took on the character of "image" like a quasi-icon. Thus, Mikhail Schwartzmann endeavored to create a new kind of icon in art, which he termed "hierature" (and gave himself the epithet "hierat"). Schwartzmann's hieratures can be divided into "facial" pictures (people's faces at the moment they encounter eternity) and, from the end of the 1960s onward, abstractions, which nevertheless continued to recall certain peculiar gothic spaces. Schwartzmann clearly referenced the tradition of Filonov, sharing his goal of overcoming all accidental humanity in the paintings' endless crystals. Like Filonov, Schwartzmann refused to sell his work, being oriented toward the absolute rather than the relative, and even surpassed Filonov by rarely showing his work, even to friends; this was a radical variation on the anti-exhibitionist strategies of 1960s underground art.

Edward Steinberg, another master of paradox who explored "religious abstraction" in the 1960s and '70s, followed the model of Malevich's suprematism but tried to eradicate the latter's essentially theomachistic, world-building ambitions, and transform his art into quasi-figurative representation. In Steinberg's version, Malevich's objective cross becomes a Christian symbol, a pale blue background replaces the white, forms take on diminutive suffixes, and everything becomes infused with a sentimentality and "pity for the fallen" quite uncharacteristic of Malevich -- rather, seemingly borrowed from Falk's ethics, which played a significant role in establishing unofficial art in the 1960s.

A separate, aloof group of artists in the 1950s and '60s appropriated the language of Soviet daily life. To them, contemporary art did not mean a departure from socialist realism to gather more "artistic" debris from world cultures; on the contrary, they attempted to rid socialist realism itself of its excessive "aestheticism," which they viewed not as kitsch but as an orgy of rampant "imagery" and symbolism. In their critique of "art" as a concept, these artists aligned themselves with the universal neo-avant-garde, primarily with pop-art. The most radical artist of this circle, Mikhail Chernyshov, hit upon the pop-art concept of "bad art" in 1962, when he organized a home exhibit called "Red Truck" and displayed various Soviet ready-mades: a square cut from checkered window

curtains which recalled Mondrian's abstract works (which Chernyshov considered an example of unconscious Soviet recidivism to an avant-garde past), and a framed International Workers' Day poster, among other objects. Another representative of this circle, Mikhail Roginsky, began in the early 1960s to paint monumental portraits of everyday Soviet "heroes" -- primus-stoves and electrical sockets. This exhibit, called "Red Door," was shown at the Zimmerly museum of Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1965. These were the first steps along the path leading to soc-art and engaging the language of the authorities.

Ilia Kabakov and the Conceptual Aesthetics of Text

As the twentieth century progressed, art became less and less dependent upon its physical components for its meaning; instead of easily manipulated shells, such as form and material, art couched its significance in the realm of ideas, strategy, and design. By the end of the 1960s, the artistic project had shifted its focus entirely from creating the future to exploring the present. International conceptualism, whose influence defined the second half of the twentieth century, no longer struggled against art, but simply left the field and entered a "different sphere of activity," whatever that activity might be -- science, sociology, literature, philosophy. The essence of conceptualist activity had mutated somehow, but the form of that mutation was often unclear. Conceptualism presents itself as an investigation of the relationship among symbols; unlike the early avant-garde, it no longer seeks the dramatic transformation of life into text, but rather sees text in every natural or cultural phenomenon, calmly and not without humor. Conceptualism limits itself to analyzing the conditions of perception and understanding, and circumvents the question of "content," particularly "spiritual content" (in accordance with Ludwig Wittgenstein's maxim, "if you can't speak of it, best to keep silent").

At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the '70s, two groups cultivated this "textual aesthetic," both situated in Moscow. The first, headed by Ilia Kabakov, conventionally called itself the "Moscow Conceptualist Circle" and included Victor Pivovarov, Erik Bulatov, various authors, and the "Collective Action" groups in the 1980s. The other group was headed by Vitalii Komar and Alexander Melamid, creators of soc-art. If one generally views conceptualism as a kind of thought process in the examination of a text, and if the text happens to be Soviet ideology and the process involves a parody of self-identification within this text, then soc-art emerges as a conceptualist strategy (even Kabakov made this claim in a few of his works, though generally his circle concerned itself more with

metaphysical universals than with political strategies).

Kabakov, who was born in the Ukraine, received a traditional graphic education in Moscow and worked as a children's book illustrator. However, this work did not challenge him creatively and by the mid-1960s he had delved into exploring the relationship between text and illustration, image and commentary. Kabakov's paintings from this period (the 1960s and '70s) appear to be blank screens (since the paintings are not framed) with a tiny image of some banal object, often crudely drawn and dwarfed by the vast space surrounding it. Sometimes these objects were glued or otherwise physically attached to the canvas (as in "Pipe, Stick, Ball, and Fly," 1965-66, which is now in a private collection). Many drawings and paintings include "opinions" and "commentary" by fictional viewers (as in "Responses from an Experimental Group," 1969, now in the John Stewart collection in New York). Words establish absurd relations among objects, or else these relationships are questioned by unknown persons (for example, the work entitled "Anna Borisovna Stoeva: 'Whose Fly is This?'" who are in turn answered by others ("Nikolai Markovich Kotov: 'This is Olga Leshko's Fly,'" 1965-1968, in a private collection). By the end of the 1960s, Kabakov began making pieces consisting entirely of words and only shaky hints at image -- various lists and menus. Kabakov arranged these commentaries, lists, and replies in a deliberately confusing manner; in the series of drawings titled "Interpretation of Signs" (1968), scenes from daily life are supplemented by a scrupulous "legend" explaining that the lamp represents the artist's "relationship with his wife," while the stretch of wall between the armchair and the sofa is a "big debt owed to a friend." The artist establishes all of these correspondences to delineate the contours of everything they cannot grasp, all that is "inexpressible." In his drawings, this often takes the form of a white background, which may be read as emptiness or as light. The Moscow conceptualists did not easily exchange the visual realm for text, converting one into the other, as did the Western conceptualists (Joseph Kosuth, for example); Kabakov cultivates a sense of loss in the process of translation. Once again recalling Wittgenstein's aphorism, one might say that Kabakov is primarily fascinated by that which one "best keep silent" about. Hence his attention to the metaphysics of emptiness and ineffability, which led Boris Grois, the chief theoretician of Kabakov's group, to define this work as "Moscow romantic conceptualism." [9]

In 1972, Kabakov immersed himself in a new genre of his own invention, the so-called "album" -- boxes containing large, unbound sheets of paper. These works openly bordered on the Russian novelistic tradition of the nineteenth century (in terms of narrative and characters) as well as the

Russian visual avant-garde (in terms of their conceptual relation to form). Like Kruchenykh before him, Kabakov invents a new skin for the new essence of art; his album not only combines text and illustration, as Kruchenykh's book had done, but also presents itself page after page as a performance piece or a sort of "textual theater."

Kabakov's key piece in the 1970s was a series of ten albums called "Ten Characters" (1972-1975, currently housed both in the Pompidou Centre in Paris and in the artist's private collection). Each album tells the story of some odd character, ending with his death or rather, disappearance ("Primakov-Who-Sits-In-the-Closet" mysteriously vanishes from the closet where he spent his entire life; "Arkhipov-Who-Stares-Out-the-Window" dissolves into thin air as he glances outside). Here Kabakov's penchant for spatial metaphor reaches its apogee, particularly in his presentation of authoritative and cultural hierarchical systems in terms of center and periphery ("Suffering Surikov" saw everything as though through a tiny peephole; "Malygin the Decorator" maniacally doodled only along the edges of paper). Kabakov lends spatial form to logical structure; his work follows Malevich in its geometric style, though Kabakov's chatty narrative does not resemble his worthy predecessor's asceticism -- the geometry lies in the words.

The "Ten Characters" albums begin with the textual sequence "He says," in which the main character speaks his piece; this is followed by signed drawings and after that, two postscripts/commentaries—the everyday eyewitness account, and the theoretical interpretation of the story. The same cast of commentators appears in each album: Kogan (the bulwark of common sense), Schefner (the philosopher-mystic), and Lunina (prone to emotionalism). All of Kabakov's commentaries appear, first of all, inevitable (since there is no reality outside of interpretation) and second, incomplete and insipid. After reading these interpretations, it seems senseless for the viewer to come up with his own. The only option is to discuss commentary as such, which involves a radical step back from the situation to a distant observational point.

Kabakov achieves this same *démarche* of retreating to an outside position when he bases his entire system on the concept of the character (rather than the author). This game involving little fictional personages with Gogolian names and patronymics which defines Kabakov's work is a poignant response to the Soviet artistic environment. The fact is that artists in the postwar Soviet Union encountered an institutional structure built in the 1930s; the ultimate author of the political-artistic communist project (Lenin, who could also be Stalin, or the Party) reigned over all,

while an army of "second-rank artists" mediated the space between him and the collective consumers of this project. The collective of Soviet artists and writers had no overwhelming ambition; it was the product of the Great Author, and thereby glorious. One may note that this structure recalls the Russian avant-garde's institutional cells, which were really sects led by teachers. Students of Malevich, Matiushin, and Filonov supposedly produced unconsciously and represented their teacher's creation, his characters (the Russian avant-garde depended upon collective consumption, but these consumers first had to be created by artistic design). El Lissitzky took the next step by inserting photographs of anonymous reporters into his gigantic photomontages of the 1930s, thereby claiming every Soviet photographer, almost the entire Soviet people as his characters. However, this step proved to be the last for the avant-garde; after the 1930s, Soviet artists resigned themselves to their role as characters of a single work called the Soviet Union, with the creative role delegated to the Party. The postwar generation of unofficial artists and dissidents found the role of creator to be tainted with Bolshevik overtones. Thus, the typical figures painted by the "underground" artists in the 1960s remained characters in a vast novel, only far more picturesque than the characters of official socialist realism.

The conceptualist generation produced only a few artists who tore themselves away from this character role without reverting to the mad role of the utopian creator. These artists faced two options: satirically identifying with the Soviet "artist-characters" or describing the very inevitability of becoming a character in the post-avant-garde world, in which an overarching creator had become impossible. Komar, Melamid, and the artists who followed them radically explored the first option, while Kabakov chose the second.

The Conceptualist Picture in the 1970s and '80s

Much as it had been for the avant-garde of the 1910s and '20s, the easel painting was the main object of reference and criticism for the Soviet neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, since several decades of socialist realism had only further entrenched its position. Yet if the early avant-garde had rejected the easel painting, the neo-avant-garde launched a conceptualist investigation of it instead, an investigation all the more subversive since it was often carried out in the same easel format (a tradition which began with Malevich's 'allogisms' of the 1910s). Moreover, Russian conceptualism referenced a very particular type of painting, which prevailed in socialist realism. Soviet art education cultivated a painting style which appeared traditionally academic, or realistic, but which

actually stemmed from the appropriation of visual citations, correspondingly academic or realistic. Such paintings rejected the original and originality in general, instead representing derivative, mechanical gestures or ideological design. These mechanical gestures presupposed reproduction (in magazines, newspapers, posters, school textbooks) more than museum exhibition. Precisely such paintings -- ideological and derivative -- became the main object of conceptualist criticism, much as the traditional nineteenth-century painting was the focus of Russian avant-garde criticism.

Conceptualist art criticism in the 1970s and '80s followed two channels. First, a painting could be critiqued by radicalizing its textual element -- for instance, replacing the traditional picture frame with a flat text-stand, panel, or screen (as did Ilia Kabakov and Victor Pivovarov). Second, criticism could take the form of reference to classical painting (as in the work of Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vasiliev).

Kabakov's "paintings" of the 1970s and '80s appear as screens (with real objects and texts), stands (with postcards and messages glued to them), and tables (comprised exclusively of text). A series of large, rigid plexiglass tables on a white background ("Taking Out the Garbage," 1979-1980, now in the Art Museum of Basel; "Sobakin," in a private collection in New York) relates characters' stories through a system of excruciatingly minute (and hence awkward) details of their lives. The primacy of text over image is even more evident in the stands, which represent a written retelling of the visual plot ("Is She Guilty?" 1982, private collection). One should note that Kabakov did not rely on the Western tradition of visual reproduction, but rather on the Soviet tradition of reproducing words, particularly the spoken word -- rumor, commentary, retelling, all of which becomes necessary when (as it often happened in the Soviet Union) the original is deficient or totally inaccessible. Kabakov's take on "the world's most famous reproduction," forever derided by the avant-garde (the Mona Lisa), is especially telling: the panel, entitled "Waiting List for the Mona Lisa" (1980, in a private collection), is not a visual reference to a reproduction, but rather a written reference to the original—an outsized offer of hard-to-get tickets to an exhibition of Leonardo's painting, which had been brought to Moscow.

Victor Pivovarov, Kabakov's closest comrade-in-arms during the 1970s, was also an illustrator, which activity had initially led him to question the essence of art, and the author of several albums and panel-paintings. His series called "Designs for the Lonely Man" (1975, Dodge Collection of the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey) includes "Dream

Designs," "Sky Designs," and "Painting Designs" for the "lonely man"—the main character of his work, dubbed "homunculus" in one of the albums. Among the "Painting Designs" one finds both a *nature-morte* in the spirit of Morandi and a square in the style of Malevich; Pivovarov interprets both types of art as art "for individuality" (as opposed to communal Soviet art). Pivovarov resembles Kabakov in his humanistic attention to the "little things," the random, the marginal, which for him bears a more personal and even sentimental character. Pivovarov avoids using the language of the authorities and painstakingly maintains a childlike level of perception, considering all other pretensions both morally and aesthetically suspect.

In his theoretical text "The Broken Mirror" (1977), Pivovarov formulated a plan for the new "open" painting, which is no longer a "precious vessel" but rather, at first glance, appears to be a crude handicraft; its meaning emerges only in the communicative space between itself and the viewer. [10] In this manner, the painting opens up simultaneously to the viewer and (through the viewer's interpretation) to various contexts. One might add that the painting is conceptualist in nature, utterly free of any responsibility to reality, with the right to take on any form so long as it constitutes part of the overall strategy. Yet Pivovarov's text, which goes to great lengths to describe what the new painting lacks (rich shades of color, artistic gestures, singular space, logical links among objects), never supposes the possibility of rejecting figurativeness. The conceptualist generation accepted the representational character of art as the principal tradition which they were given to work with and paradoxically, to justify by their critical relation to it.

Like many artists in this circle, Erik Bulatov received a traditional Soviet painter's education at the Surikov Institute, and realized at a young age both the stultifying hypocrisy of socialist realism's language, which he was being taught, and the impossibility of sincerely pursuing abstract painting. He spent the 1960s in search of a language unsullied by this unbearable pretentiousness. Bulatov understood that "it's best not to disturb the subject in painting" [11] and humbly accepted figurativeness as inevitable. However, the subject also had to refrain from "resistance," that is, the image had to attain a point of absolute, lofty neutrality, which—in Bulatov's point of view -- did not exist in the shamefully "human," feeble painting of late socialist realism. Bulatov developed the spatial scheme for his future work -- a mystical progression through the painting -- in his 1960s series "Tunnels," and the necessary language in anonymous, unartistic railroad signs and postcards.

Bulatov created his first mature work -- in fact, his chef d'oeuvre --

entitled "Horizon" (1971-72, private collection) from a postcard; in it, the horizon (that object of romantic longing, toward which the anonymous figures in the painting are streaming) is cordoned off with a Soviet military ribbon. In accordance with its traditional, symbolic interpretation, the painting represents a mystical space, but in Bulatov's view access is denied because the space is blocked by an "ideological barrier." In all of his paintings, some ideological marker blocks the way (the words "Glory to the KPSS [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]," threatening railroad signs which spell out "Danger," or a sign from a subway car -- "Do not lean against door"). This theme of the insurmountable boundary of flat space referred both to the specific social-geographic situation of the Soviet Union (closed national boundaries) and the specific aims of the avant-garde (to reduce a painting to a state of absolute flatness). The structure of Bulatov's paintings, in which text or emblems are superimposed on the landscape, critiques collage as an image of power. Bulatov views any impersonal sign as an image of power, and thus equates Malevich's "white square" with a sign or a poster; in his painting "Krasikov Street" (1976, Dodge Collection in the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey), Lenin marches right out at the viewer from such a white sheet of paper. The "black square" appears as an emblem of power, a sign of "victory over the sun," which Bulatov underscores in his later work, "Sunset" (1989, Ludwig Collection at the New Gallery, Aachen), where the Soviet hammer and sickle replace the sun, reincarnating the "square." Yet Bulatov always indicates the presence of another, better world behind the picture, a source of light, though the path is always blocked. One can move into the painting's deeper plane only by means of the poetic words, which Bulatov always distinguishes from the words of authority by printing them in white, in the first person ("I Live and See," 1982, private collection in Bern).

Oleg Vasiliev undertook a parallel analysis of painting forms; much like Bulatov, he was influenced by his study with a well-known Soviet graphic artist, a figurative ideologue named Vladimir Favorsky. From Favorsky's compositional theories, Vasiliev gained an appreciation for a painting's energy axes and the interrelationship between center and edge. However, the new generation applied these techniques not to construct an illusion and consequently a myth of paradise (whether it be a Soviet paradise or an eternal one), to which Favorsky was partial, but to explore and question both illusion and myth. Vasiliev's painting "Little Light" (1980, Dodge Collection in the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey) takes a magazine cover with a photograph of a Party congress and criss-crosses it with two rays of light, so that the glowing, "unintelligible" center obscures the face of the speaker at the tribunal. The leader's face—

the face of the painting itself, in the context of Soviet art history — is bathed in white light, the light of shame at the unavoidable figurative representation (an echo of Malevich's post-suprematist period of excised faces).

Yet another artist in this circle, Ivan Chuikov, also emerged from the professional milieu of Soviet figurative painting rather than the alternative (literary or, at any rate, not professionally artistic) world, as did most of the 1960s neo-modernists. This allowed him to avoid wasting time and effort on asserting his right to a personal mythology and get down to the business of exploring visual stereotypes. His first series of this sort was called "Windows" (beginning in 1967); these paintings resembled framed windows with a landscape (often derivative) painted on their surface. In these works, Chuikov demonstratively rejects the mystery of windows, the idea of looking through into the distance which lies at the root of all new European painting. Instead of the illusion of space, in which Bulatov, Vasiliev, and in some sense Kabakov all tried to glimpse an ontological buttress or moral value, these windows can offer only a material tautology and the ethics of a game; here Chuikov comes closer to soc-art than to Moscow conceptualism. His 1970s works from the "Road Signs" and "Panoramas" series all conform with the brightly colored, primitivist sculpture of the soc-art aesthetic.

Soc-Art

Soc-art began as an artistic project dreamed up on the cusp of the 1970s by Vitalii Komar and Alexander Melamid, who were later joined by other artists. The very fact that in 1972 artists invented a name for the new Soviet avant-garde which was internationally comprehensible and "exportable" ("soc-art" was "pop-art" under socialist conditions) bespeaks their ambition to position themselves within a specific context and their aim to criticize radically all absolute categories. These artists asserted that the excess of consumer goods which formed the environment for American pop-art was unknown to Soviet citizens; however, they were flooded with the overproduction of socialist ideology, and could identify with it just as ironically as Andy Warhol identified with a can of Campbell's soup. Unlike the pop-artists, Komar and Melamid worked not only with various visual clichés, but also with verbal, social, and behavioral models, which is why soc-art may be understood as a component of conceptualism, and why Komar's and Melamid's works appeared both as paintings and objects, manifestoes and performances.

By repeating (literally or approximately) Soviet ideological emblems, these

artists used deconstructive criticism "through tautology" -- this approach could be seen in embryonic form in 1920s art (particularly in Malevich's later work and in Kliment Redko's 1925 painting "The Revolt," which depicted contemporary heads of state). The artists demonstrated their subversive identification with the authorities in a theatrical setting as well, with the performance "*Pravda* Burgers" (1975), during which they passed the newspaper through a meat-grinder and cooked up the paper patties to represent the Soviet citizen's banal daily fare.

Komar and Melamid began their joint artistic effort by simultaneously revealing the pretense both of Soviet ideology and of liberal poetics of authorship: their portraits of themselves and their friends mimicked the officious style of paintings of Soviet leaders (for instance, "Double Self-Portrait," 1973, now in a private collection in the United States, parodied a mosaic of Lenin and Stalin in profile). In addition, they signed their own names to anonymous slogans on red banners ("Onward to Communist Victory," 1972, Dodge Collection in the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey), rendering meaningless not only a Soviet slogan (since personal authorship devalues it) but also the concept of personal expression (which is devalued by banality and ideological "lies").

Komar's and Melamid's subversive identification with the language of the authorities was, to a significant degree, conditional upon the dual nature of their authorship. As previously stated, the structure of authorship as it emerged in the Russian avant-garde resembled a pyramid, with the top author as conscious creator who produced a collective unconscious author and a collective unconscious audience. Early avant-garde artists (particularly Malevich and El Lissitzky) identified with this role of chief manipulator to the end, but by the end of the 1920s (when it became evident that the role of chief creator had been usurped by Stalin) the later avant-garde generation began to try on the role of subversive identification with the collective consumer rather than the singular super-narrator. The Oberiut poets followed this plan when they attempted to create a group around Malevich in 1926, a group which would also include an artistic division. During these years, Daniel Kharms wrote: "One man thinks logically, many people's thoughts flow... I may be only one man, but my thoughts flow." [12] The Oberiuts, particularly Kharms and Nikolai Oleinikov, already had an approach to "being characters," which would later be realized in soc-art. Characteristically, other groups (such as "The Nest" and "Fly-Agaric") joined Komar and Melamid in their radical identification with an alien language. Meanwhile, solitary soc-artists such as Alexander Kosolapov and Leonid Sokov gravitated more toward the

pole of authorship than toward the pole of radical characterization.

Soc-art did not aim to contrast truth with untruth, but to acknowledge the unavoidable ideological (untrue) character of all expression. Komar and Melamid constructed an entire series of works around the principle of total signification. Colors were assigned letter values (so that "Ideological Abstraction No. 1" [private collection, United States], for example, encodes the constitutional article dealing with freedom of speech) and healing powers (as in the panel "Color Therapy," 1975, private collection, United States). This last project parodies Kandinsky's color symbolism and the general perception of art as a direct link between means (understood almost in a medicinal sense, as remedy) and aesthetic results. Soc-art reveals the conditional nature of language in everything that aspires to unconditional truth. Its methodology provides a sort of reductionist lock-pick for any culture, ideology, or religion, instantly revealing their active mechanisms. Komar's and Melamid's installation "Heaven" (1973), which they displayed in a Moscow apartment over the course of several years, presented an environment densely and chaotically packed with painted and sculpted symbols of various ideologies, religions, and everyday habits (for instance, drunkenness). Visitors entered "Heaven" in the dark, by the light of an electric flashlight and to the strains of Soviet radio. If the soc-art project was indeed radically reductive, its style certainly could not be called ascetic; on the contrary, Komar and Melamid mocked all asceticism (particularly "white space") as religious pretense. Like the dadaists before them, they managed to achieve purity of method without purity of style, almost totally bypassing art's mystical component (and even its emotional component, which is very difficult to eradicate).

In 1975, Komar and Melamid emigrated from the Soviet Union and settled in New York. After their departure they spent some time on dadaist, absurdist projects (for instance, taking responsibility for the 1979 earthquake in Iran or the "Soul-Selling" auction of 1979, during which Andy Warhol sold his soul to the artists). In their series "Nostalgic Social Realism" (1981-82) they returned to the painting format, this time parodying classical salon painting of the nineteenth century (both in manner and subject matter—Stalin is pictured surrounded by muses) and presenting it as the beautiful, true face of social realism, revealed only to the nostalgic gaze of those who are exiled from that paradise.

In the 1980s, soc-art ceased to be Komar's and Melamid's exclusive artistic province. Several artists close to them in spirit, with whom they had worked before, emigrated to the United States, and the New York curator Margarita Tupitsyn organized a series of group soc-art exhibits,

hoping to present it as a national variation on postmodernism, akin to the well-known German neo-expressionism and Italian trans-avant-garde of that time. [13] This project succeeded, but soc-art's conceptualism remained rather vague. Many artists who joined the soc-art movement were not conceptualists — they did not analyze the all-consuming textuality of Soviet culture and everyday life, but rather relished its plastic character.

Several sculptors who assumed this position, such as Mikhail Roginsky, used the Soviet object as their point of departure — objects which were technologically primitive, archaic, totemic (due to the dearth of objects in Soviet life, they were fetishized and idealized to the utmost), and "warm" (thus, personal). At the end of the 1960s, while still in the Soviet Union, Alexander Kosolapov began to fashion grotesquely naturalistic wooden sculptures of everyday objects (meat grinders, door latches); later, he cut and colored plywood silhouettes (for instance, a schoolboy and a police officer in his piece "Keep Studying, Son," 1975, in a private collection in Moscow). After emigrating, Kosolapov began working with "exported" Soviet symbols such as Lenin, Gagarin, caviar, and suprematism, ironically combining these with symbols of the consumerist, modernized West—Coca-Cola, Mickey Mouse, and Duchamp's urinal.

Leonid Sokov evolved analogously. In the Soviet Union, he satirized various signs and abstract notions in a primitivist-literal, plastic manner -- for example, "Angle of Vision" (1976, Government Collection of Contemporary Art at Tsaritsyno, Moscow) or "The Soviet Man's Glasses" with cut-out five-pointed stars (1974, Dodge Collection in the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey). In the United States, he adopted the theme of folkloric, sculpted apocrypha about Soviet leaders and Soviet art as a national phenomenon. In his composition "A Meeting of Two Sculptures" (1987, in several private collections in the United States), a statue of Lenin reaches out to shake hands with an approaching modernist sculpture by Giacometti. Socialist realism denied Western "formalism" the right to call itself "art" with the same vehemence with which Western modernism rejected socialist realism; thus, the space of soc-art became the only common ground where these two mutually exclusive creative projects could meet as equals.

Two other soc-art sculptors continued to work in Moscow. Beginning in 1974, Boris Orlov created "busts on parade," visual embodiments of imperiousness which combined baroque whimsy with excessive marks of distinction. Rostislav Lebedev, on the contrary, retained the utmost minimalism of style. His objects parodied "things unto themselves,"

underscoring their total lack of "market value" or any meaning at all -- they had to be taken on faith (for instance, a red parallelepiped entitled "Made in the USSR," 1979, Government Collection of Contemporary Art).

Mikhail Rochal, Victor Skersis, and Gennady Donskoi, who called themselves "The Nest," were direct followers of Komar and Melamid. The group got its name in 1975, after they "incubated eggs" by sitting on them in a giant nest at an unofficial art exhibit, which the authorities had permitted in the "Bee-Keeping Pavilion" of the permanent Exhibition of Agricultural Achievement in Moscow (the artists were mocking the "union" of art and agriculture). The group's 1976 piece, "The Iron Curtain" (Government Collection of Contemporary Art, Moscow), was a thundering sheet of metal meant to demystify the ideological metaphor; its literal presence robbed it of its threatening capacity. Some of the group's other projects ("Let's Come One Meter Closer," 1976; "Fertilizing the Earth," 1976; "Race Toward Jerusalem," 1978) pointed up its total nihilism and ability to reduce any ideology -- official, dissident, ecological, nuclear disarmament, and so forth -- to the absurd. The group quickly disbanded, but in the late 1970s the group "Fly-Agaric" picked up where "The Nest" had left off.

Minimalism in Visual Poetry and Performance

The generation of artists immediately following Kabakov considered itself his students. However, they retained neither Kabakov's loyalty to traditional forms such as painting and graphing paper (at least as he had used them in the 1970s), nor his literary narratives, tied with the Russian prose tradition. These artists oriented themselves more toward the tradition of poetry and music, and worked in the realm of visual verse, object, and performance, aiming not only to criticize the Soviet Union's overwhelming textuality, but also to counteract it by creating free, unpredictable spaces. Their aesthetic was based on simple gestures and extremely limited resources, and since they (like Kabakov) engaged categories of absence and emptiness, allowing only "apophatic" (that is, characterized by negative definitions) judgments about the sublime, their art might be termed both aesthetically and ideologically "minimalist."

This minimalism recalls parallels in Western art, but it is more precisely juxtaposed not with American minimalist sculpture of the 1960s (which was geometric and abstract, too aesthetically and technically flawless to be greeted enthusiastically by Russian artists in the 1970s and '80s) but primarily with minimalist music. This is what taught artists the value of a well-placed pause. John Cage greatly influenced Andrei Monastyrsky, a

leader of Moscow conceptualism's minimalist period. Zen philosophy offered another source of inspiration, with its intellectual paradox, rejection of emotion, ideal of non-doing, and refusal to answer "maximalist" questions about existence. This art ignored the creative, plastic modernist tradition, as indeed it ignored all conceptions of a work's visual characteristics "valuable in themselves." The work was merely part of a game being played with the viewer. Instead of a commercial relationship with a consumer, the work was drawn into a communicative relationship with the viewer; this moment of communication (rather than the creative burst) defined the artwork's function.

Soviet minimalism was performative in nature. But while the Western "happening" (to use the 1960s term) and performance (as it was called in the '70s) constituted a form of quasi-theater, with the artist as actor, in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and '80s, an entirely different set of cultural traditions and social circumstances bound performance inextricably to literature, with the artist as writer.

This link can be expressed in two different ways. First, Russian performative minimalism could take on the form of poetic text in action (a poetic object to be manipulated and played with). Second, the performance served as a pretext for its literary description and documentation. Many authors became involved in both. In both cases, the crucial aesthetic question lay in the boundary between text and non-text. The responsibility both to define the boundary and to understand the impossibility of the task was laid upon the readers of poetic texts (one found it difficult to recognize them as poetry -- more as snippets of everyday conversation) and the audience at performances (they had to deduce what the authors had intended for the action and what was merely happenstance).

The first, poetic strain of Russian minimalism presents a wide spectrum of objects-as-texts, which erase the boundary between literary and plastic art. On the literary side of this spectrum one finds visual poetry, which retains the traditional two-dimensional form — homemade brochures and sheets of paper executed in the "fourth copy" style of the typewritten samizdat (having just recently appeared on the scene, samizdat was already appreciated as a specific aesthetic). This poetry might be termed visual because the text is organized not only internally, but also spatially, sometimes by means of slits and rips in the paper. Vsevolod Nekrasov, Henry Khudiakov, Vagrish Bakhchanian, and Dmitri Prigov, with his "Poem-a-grams" of the 1970s and '80s, all practiced this sort of work. These objects continued the early avant-garde's tradition of handwritten

poetry, but moved away from an author's unique script and toward mass production (even as early as the late 1910s, Kruchenykh had switched from handwritten books to a manual typewriter). For many, the aesthetic goal was to create "nobody's" text, majestic in its anonymity; for example, in Dmitri Prigov's "Newspapers" series of 1987, reading literally between the lines revealed black or red words, decontextualized and enigmatic, like ancient writings (as in many ancient languages, the words were written without vowels)—Idea, Gorbachev, Women's Conference, Glasnost.

Somewhere in the middle of this objects-as-text spectrum we find poetry that rejects the book form. In 1974, for instance, Lev Rubinstein began to write poems on library catalog cards, which he later used in his performances. In 1974 and '75, Rimma Gerlovina put together a series of "Cubes" with text on the outside and inside, creating a sort of aphoristic narrative (in the cube called "The Soul," the outside reads "Don't open; it will fly away," while the inside reads "There it goes"). Finally, in the category of objects free of any words or text, we find works which may be viewed as poetic because they are made from and meant for games. In the 1970s, Rimma and Valerii Gerlovin made pieces from dried bread and metal constructor-sets. Around this same time, Andrei Monastyrsky created a set of "interactive" poetic objects. "The Finger" (1978, in the artist's collection) was a box into which one stuck a finger and appeared to be pointing at oneself -- its theme being the conceptual motif of signification and its profound paradox. "The Cannon" (1975, artist's reproduction in the Government Collection of Contemporary Art) defied expectations: the caption invited the viewer to peer into the barrel and pull the string, but while nothing could be seen, a loud bell rang out. These objects embody the main principle of all of Monastyrsky's work -- ritual, almost mystical practice completely coincides in time with its cold, analytical study. These functions are absolutely simultaneous and just as absolutely at odds with each other. This became the basis for Monastyrsky's performances with his group "Collective Action."

Performative minimalism also had two sides. In search of the anti-logos, an antidote to the totality of text, an indeterminate realm, an artist could turn either to the sphere of the human body or to the spatial sphere of nature. Rimma and Valerii Gerlovin embodied the first, "anthropological" tendency. They were interested in man as a biological entity, inseparable from nature (during their 1977 performance piece "Homo Sapiens," they sat naked in a cage), as well as the game-like determinism which underscored the unpredictability of life and the impossibility of conceptualizing it (for example, the "Victorina" project in the 1970s,

wherein viewers were invited to study a group photograph and determine, based solely on this evidence, the order in which the people in the photograph would die). The Gerlovins emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1979, and continue their "games" in the United States.

The group "Collective Action" (1976-1989) manifested the second, "metaphysical" side of performance art, building upon Kabakov's tradition of absence and engaging not the human body, but human consciousness. Their "actions" unfolded in the most neutral space possible in the Soviet Union—on the outskirts of town, often in a snowy field. This was original compared with Western performance art, which usually took place in an urban environment; in the Soviet Union, artists needed nature as a space outside the law, free from social and ideological determination.

"Collective Action" was founded by Andrei Monastyrsky, Nikolai Panitkov, Nikita Alekseev, and Georgii Kizevalter (later joined by Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina, Sergei Romashko, and Sabina Hensgen). Actions were staged for the benefit of a specially invited audience, mostly friends; the social alienation from the audience that often motivated Western performance art was entirely absent here, and thus the group had to cultivate intellectual alienation instead. Viewers had to ride the train to the outskirts of the city, walk a certain distance on foot, and meticulously obey the artists' strange instructions in an anxious state of expectation and confusion (this state was termed "empty action"). The viewers actively experienced existential ennui and, at the same time, intrigue, since the boundaries of performance remained unclear both spatially and temporally right up to the end. These performances were painstakingly documented and the resulting commentary comprised several volumes entitled "Trips Out of Town." [14]

"Collective Action"'s early performances appeared purely minimalist and presented everyday yet ontologically weighty situations: receiving visual information ("The Appearance," 1976, during which a man appears coming out of the woods); effects of the unexpected ("Liblikh, 1976, in which a bell rings from under the snow); awaiting the end ("The Time of Action," 1978, during which the audience spent hours pulling a long rope out of the woods, not knowing why or when this would end). Part of the performance was theatrical, yet the point was not in the spectacle, but in the expectation and perception of the audience and even chance passers-by, who might later stumble upon strange objects in the woods. Like many Russian avant-garde and neo-avant-garde phenomena, "Collective Action" explored and manipulated psychological categories.

The group's later performances revolved around an almost cinematographic montage, temporarily destroying continuity and creating tension between immediate existence and its recording. In "The Stop" (1983), as audience members walked to what they believed to be the performance site, two performers followed them inconspicuously, tape-recording their description of what they saw—as it became evident when the group "stopped," this had been the performance itself, with the encounter with the audience as the finale. At the first "hello," the tape-recorder was shut off. In the performance "Ten Appearances" (1981), the audience was instructed to walk from the center of a field deep into the woods and then return, at which point each person was handed a photograph of his "appearance" coming out of the woods (the photographs had been taken beforehand, of other people).

The desired category of freedom came to be seen as a struggle against text, against exact recording. However, Zen philosophy, with its mystical atheism, liberates the work of Monastyrsky and "Collective Action" from the gnawing sense of textual incompleteness which hovers around Kabakov's work. This also distinguishes Monastyrsky's individual projects created in the 1980s — texts and installations in which he discovers curious correspondences between the Agricultural Exhibition pavilions, biographical details about "Collective Action" members, hexagrams of the I Ching, and various other aspects of his personal mythology. These works demonstrate his immersion in "interpretational ecstasy" as a shamanistic practice, which does not allow the possibility of regretting the absence of anything. Here minimalism becomes a sort of intellectual mannerism, characteristic of the younger conceptualists of the 1980s as well.

The Art Scene of the 1980s and the Beginning of Post-Soviet Art

By the 1980s, Russian art had begun to experience a gradual "de-hermetization." The end came in 1986, when liberalization finally rendered the concepts of clandestine exhibition and "unofficial art" obsolete. At the Sotheby's auction held in Moscow in 1988, works by formerly unofficial artists found themselves on the legitimate market for the first time, their value now expressed in economic terms. Myriad exhibits of Russian art abroad followed, and artists were forced to confront pressure from the market, which in the 1980s was almost universally neoconservative, fetishizing traditional forms and artistic "quality." In response to all of this, young Russian artists tried to cultivate their own exoticism and inability to dissolve their identity within the Western exhibitory context. They viewed their "difference" either — in the spirit of soc-art — as their "Soviet" poverty and the deliberate shoddiness of their work, or — in the tradition

of Moscow conceptualism — as their enigmatic, esoteric aura. Both of these tendencies emerged even before the Western market had become a factor in Russian art, for the artists had been contriving their approach to the international context in advance. Precisely because they were not yet "plugged in" to a stable art market, these artists could allow themselves total freedom in their choice of genres; paintings, handwritten albums, performance art, and objects (often ready-made) all coexisted as equals, not commercially made.

The first tendency, toward humorous, "dirty," and "uncrafted" works in the neo-kitsch style, centered around the young Moscow artist Nikita Alekseev and his apartment, where from 1982 to 1984 one could view exhibits entitled "apt-art" (apartment art). [15] Apt-art's aesthetic parodied the "serious" apartment exhibits of the 1950s and '60s. The work actively and unflinchingly quoted any and all colorful material, whether Soviet, folkloric, or Western. The apt-artists did not want to obey the metaphysical and intellectual imperative upheld by the conceptualists and yearned for a more lively, expressive, and primitivist art, which corresponded to the vital aesthetic of New York's "new wave," but with a local, Soviet twist. This was primarily true of the "Fly-Agaric" group, which existed from 1978 to 1984 and included Sven Gundlakh, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Vladimir Mironenko, and Alexei Kamensky. The group came about when several young artists reanimated the futurist gesture by storming an authorized exhibit of older nonconformists and, on the spur of the moment, hanging up their own works. These artists rejected the concept of property and hence, the concept of plagiarism; they perceived art not as the creation of this or that artwork, but as a way of life. In their escapades they primarily identified with pop-cultural heroes (for example, the photo album "Blitz," 1982, in the Government Collection of Contemporary Art). One of their actions ("Metro," 1979) involved the artists spending twenty-four hours in the subway without emerging. In 1982, "Fly-Agaric" released a samizdat record album called "Gold Disk," on which they read their own verses over the sound of official radio broadcasts. While they did not inherit the ascetic side of Kabakov's aesthetic, they did carry on his narrative progressions.

Zvezdochetov made the most characteristic piece, in this sense, called "Novel-Refrigerator" (1982, Government Collection of Contemporary Art)—a real refrigerator, brightly painted, covered with the "novel"'s text and filled with "illustrations" (handmade and real objects). The material inside the refrigerator described the characters' inner lives, while the outside depicted their outward circumstances. Later, the author of the "Novel-Refrigerator" demonstrated his unrestrained penchant for

apocrypha and pseudo-folklore in his painting series "Perdo" (1987-88), in which he presented in painted form a new Soviet epic about the mythical land of Perdo and the abduction of a magic watermelon. His stylistic sources consisted of Soviet "visual rubbish": civil defense posters, postage stamps, and greeting cards. An analogous "new wave," though almost exclusively centered around painting, blossomed in Leningrad beginning in 1982, in various groups of "new artists" -- neo-expressionists, led by Timur Novikov, and "necro-realists," such as Evgenii Iufit, whose work followed the anecdotally macabre narrative of a zombie's life. Timur Novikov, who became the head of the Leningrad art scene, went on to develop his aesthetic from the idea of representation to the idea of beauty, from expressionism to "neo-academism," in which he saw an identity specific to St. Petersburg. Novikov's work generally consisted of collages which combined scraps of satin, parchment, and odd photographs of neo-academic cult figures (particularly Oscar Wilde). His followers often referenced various kinds of neoclassicism in their work, including Soviet neoclassicism. With its demonstrative conservatism, neo-academism merges with a universal tendency to criticize modernism which became especially apparent in the 1980s and '90s.

The second tendency which prevailed in Russian art during the 1980s, oriented not so much toward bold "shoddiness" as toward an evasive "incomprehensibility," was best represented in the work of Yuri Albert, Vadim Zakharov, and the group "Hermeneutic Medical Inspection." In a series of paintings called "I'm Not. . .," Albert successively appropriated the manner of this or that artist, always declaring that this was "not he" ("I'm Not Jasper Johns," 1981; "I'm Not Kabakov," 1982). Zakharov achieved this self-obfuscation in an opposite manner, by taking on multiple guises and images in his paintings and performances (the One-Eyed Pirate, the Pastor, etc.), all reflecting the artist's own private fantasies. Zakharov's work on the border between literature and visual art even rivaled Kabakov's tradition.

Finally, the group "Hermeneutic Medical Inspection," the most original phenomenon on the young conceptualist scene of the 1980s and '90s, achieved a radical effect of random associations which they proclaimed as "Schizoid-ness" (really nothing more than that sphere of freedom so important to Moscow conceptualism). The "Inspectors" (who from 1987 to 1991 included Sergei Anufriev, Yuri Leiderman, and Pavel Pepperstein; later, after Leiderman's departure, other co-authors joined the group) produced pseudo-scientific articles in which they interpreted ("inspected") various everyday phenomena through a plethora of random texts (from Marx and Freud to *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*). Thus they erased

the boundary between art and interpretation completely. Furthermore, many of the whimsical terms, metaphors, and images in these articles (such as "orthodox hut," "the principle of mincing," a small round loaf of bread that slips through everyone's fingers, much like the authors themselves slip away from any incontestable interpretation of their texts) were illustrated as objects and installations, often in the form of books, toys, and icons. The artists perceived the Russian cultural context surrounding them through their own infantile, Orthodox, and textual sources. This had nothing to do with "hermeneutics," or understanding—understanding was immediately countered with "medical," therapeutically pacifying confusion.

While the younger generation of 1980s artists realized their "private" ambitions — art as leisure or a world of personal visions — the older generation, particularly Kabakov, underscored the "communal" ambitions which had defined the Russian twentieth century. For this they required the installation format, which would become extremely popular in the Russian art world of the 1980s and '90s. One of the reasons was that it ensured the social and aesthetic possibility of a personal exhibit space, independent of any space designated by the authorities (whether these were Soviet political authorities or arbiters of the international art world). Irina Nakhova made the first installations in Moscow — in 1984 she began her "Rooms" project, covering the walls of an empty room in her apartment with illusory architecture.

The most significant contribution to the Russian (and, as it became evident afterward, worldwide) art of installation was made by Ilia Kabakov. His installations drew upon his own designs of imaginary exhibitions, comprised solely of notes and commentary ("Fly with Wings," 1982), as well as spatial works, which featured bits of trash (empty cans, old brushes) hanging from strings, each with a scrap of paper scrawled with a similar "throwaway" phrase ("Sixteen Strings," 1986). While installations first appeared in the United States in the 1960s as objects left over and collected after a physical action (a "happening"), Kabakov's installations emerged from a sea of words, a chorus of voices which flooded the viewer from all sides (sometimes the artist even used sound). "Everything is laced with everything else and reflected in everything else" [16] -- this super-aggregate, according to Kabakov, does not allow opinions to separate themselves and self-consciousness to emerge; it prevents understanding. Hence the "neurosis of endless talking." Kabakov referred directly to El Lissitzky's synthetic photo-friezes, which combined utopian images of unity with "endless signification," in one of his first three-dimensional room installations, built in his workshop and entitled

"The Man Who Went to Outer Space" (1986). [17] Kabakov plastered the walls with a collage of Soviet posters and placed a homemade "catapult" in the center of the room; the "ceiling" was broken through by an unknown person who had managed to escape this "sea of words." In 1988, Kabakov recreated this work in New York's Feldman Gallery for the installation "Ten Characters," where the principle of the communal apartment corridor was first applied, allowing the viewer to walk along and experience each unfolding "artwork." From this point onward, Kabakov worked with what he called "the total installation," that is, one which transported the viewer into another dimension, expanded in time and appearing as a plastic metaphor for a certain universe -- for Kabakov, the universe of the former Soviet Union.

Kabakov perceives the social problem in the Soviet Union (the difference between the façade and the reverse side of life) as an aesthetic problem. His first "total installation," called "Red Train-Coach," was exhibited at the Düsseldorf Kunsthall in 1991. The viewer passed through a space seventeen meters long, which began as a lively construction in the spirit of Tatlin's "Tower of the Third International" but then became a train-car painted in drab tones, with socialist-realist paintings in place of windows—here the viewer awaited the start of the performance, in a state of heightened agitation but becoming more and more bored. Upon leaving the train-car after a fruitless wait, the viewer encountered a broken staircase, chaos, and garbage, symbolizing the catastrophic collapse of constructive energy.

During the 1990s, Kabakov garnered worldwide fame for his theatrical installations of this sort, satirizing all of the illusions and dramas of totalitarian space on a purely artistic level, without crossing over into social commentary (which Kabakov saw as the Russian avant-garde's chief mistake). The "Great Archive" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1993) recreated a Kafka-esque bureaucratic universe, while "We Live Here" in the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1995) poked fun at the grandiose modernist utopia. Much like the albums he had constructed in the 1970s, Kabakov's total installations appear to be a new synthetic art form, integrating temporal categories and the concomitant effects of storytelling and unpredictability into spatial art.

The post-Soviet generation of artists attempts to critique the entire tradition of art reduced to text, of form impoverished for the sake of ideological glory, of the artist's alienation from the public. In Petersburg, where the 1990s art scene came to revolve around Timur Novikov's neo-academism, this critique of modernism rests upon a neoconservative

position, justifying the beautiful form. In Moscow, the critique of modernism stems from a need to rehabilitate reality, direct action, undiluted communication with the viewer, and political gestures. Thus the most remarkable aspects of the Moscow art scene in the 1990s became performance art, the art of brutally exhibitionistic action which actualizes those categories which had previously been displaced from the realm of "logocentric," textual art -- sensuality, physical danger, ethics (for example, Oleg Kulik's performances, in which he impersonated a dog, sitting naked on a chain, sometimes lunging at passers-by). Rejecting art as a document memorializing reality, and seeing it rather as an integral part of that reality, happening concurrently, points up the overwhelming influence of film, and once again poses the question of art as an autonomous sphere of aesthetic practice -- a question asked more than once over the course of twentieth-century Russian art.

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