

Я-ХУДОЖНИК!...Я ДАЮ ИДЕИ 🌐 I AM AN ARTIST!...I DELIVER IDEAS



Anton SKY

This Leads to Fire

Russian Art from Nonconformism to Global Capitalism

Selections from the Kolodzei Art Foundation Collection

Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College, SUNY

September 14, 2014 to
January 11, 2015



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This Leads to Fire

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Sarah Warren

Mikhail Roginsky's 1985 painting *Fire in the Kitchen* (fig. 1) roughly recreates the composition of a Soviet fire-safety poster. A small stovetop, both burners ablaze under a teakettle and a spilling pot, seems to have flames erupting all around it. The accompanying text is fragmentary but easily reconstructed and translated as "THIS LEADS TO FIRE." Though it is a banal public service announcement, its message can easily be read in metaphorical terms: in a state where public dissent was prohibited, private kitchens became the center of artistic and political exchange. Created the year before Mikhail Gorbachev announced the restructuring (perestroika) of the Soviet state and the openness (glasnost) of the Soviet Union to the West, Roginsky's spilling pot hints at the fires of social change that were then spreading far outside of the domestic sphere. *This Leads to Fire*, like many exhibitions of both unofficial Soviet art and contemporary Russian art since perestroika, runs the risk of embodying a palimpsest of ironies. Until the onset of glasnost in 1986, Soviet artists who did not follow the guidelines of Socialist Realism were routinely excluded from public exhibition. Though the state did not go so far as to prohibit the artists from making art, authorities were not willing to let unofficial art be accessible to the Soviet public. It was thus exhibition itself—the public display of artwork—that was the primary site of conflict between Nonconformist artists and Soviet authorities. Our presentation of this work is necessarily freighted with the history of these struggles. Moreover, state repression was followed by an ironic reversal—when exhibition of their work was forbidden, the artists drew great crowds and public attention, but with their entrance into the globalized art world, Russian artists have had to compete in a market geared toward both spectacle and speculation.

The Khrushchev Thaw and the Development of Unofficial Art

The generation of artists who came of age after Stalin's death in 1953 was committed to a highly personal, or at least private, artistic vision. From a contemporary Western perspective, it is difficult to imagine the political challenge of Dmitrii Krasnoperstev's *Still Life with Four Pitchers* of 1972 (fig. 2) or Oscar Rabin's *Village of Priluki* of 1970 (fig. 3). Nevertheless, such works did not escape the notice of officials who saw their existence as evidence of a dangerous liberalization. Under Stalin even the creation of such works would have been unthinkable. The culture of Stalinism was one of all-pervasive fear, in which everyone was a potential informant. And since domestic life had been thoroughly collectivized (through collective farms in the countryside and communal apartments in the cities), most people had no private space even for the most intimate creations. It was only after Stalin's death, with the reforms of Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, that artists were able to imagine the kind of personal space that would allow them to make works to show even their closest friends and family. In February 1956, in the so-called Secret Speech to the Party Congress, Khrushchev denounced the former leader's crimes and initiated a program of de-Stalinization.¹ In addition to the rehabilitation of millions of citizens imprisoned, exiled, and executed as enemies of the state, Khrushchev also undertook a sweeping construction plan, quite literally creating the space for private life in tens of thousands of hastily erected apartment blocks, still referred to as *khrushchovki*.²

There were also major changes in the realm of culture. After Stalin's death the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow reinstalled its collection of European art (all of which had been put into storage in 1949 to make room for gifts to the leader on his seventieth birthday). In 1956 the museum mounted a Picasso exhibition, and in the following year Soviet citizens could see contemporary European and American art at the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. The year 1959 brought an event even more unimaginable during the Stalinist period, the American National Exhibition, also in Moscow, with its section of American painting and sculpture.³

This liberal atmosphere encouraged many artists to start working outside of the strict limitations of Socialist Realism. In Moscow the Lianozovo Group—made up of Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Lev Kropivnitsky, Lydia Masterkova, Vladimir Nemukhin, and Oscar Rabin, as well as a number of poets—met regularly to discuss and show their work. Another Moscow group, centered around the painter Elii Beliutin, had a more formal designation, as he maintained a semi-independent studio within the Moscow Institute of Graphic Arts.⁴ Many of the artists around Beliutin were also close to the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, who began using abstract forms in the 1950s and was one of the first unofficial artists to be championed in the West (fig. 4).⁵

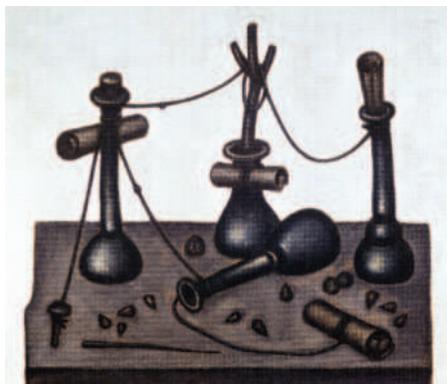
Though they were excluded from public exhibitions (which were controlled by the state through the Union of Artists), the artists in these groups often showed their work in private apartments and developed a devoted public of cultured intellectuals. When some of the artists began to acquire a status that appeared close to official—Beliutin, after all, was an instructor at a state institute, and Neizvestny's essay "Discover the New!" (clearly progressive in its sympathies) was published in the official art magazine *Iskusstvo* in October 1962—conservative leaders in the Union of Artists began to take notice.⁶

The Manezh Affair and the End of the Thaw

In November 1962 Beliutin, Neizvestny, Vladimir Yankilevsky, and others managed to organize an exhibition of their work, including many abstract paintings and sculptures, at the House of Teachers, an official institution but not an official art venue. Among the crowds that came to see the show were foreign journalists with a film crew, and soon reports of “abstract art on Great Communist Street” were broadcast around the world. Alarmed by the international attention, officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Union of Artists ordered the exhibitors to move their works into the official Union exhibition at the Manezh Gallery. The ensuing “Manezh Affair” was probably orchestrated as a provocation by conservatives in the Union—chief among them, the group’s president, Vladimir Serov—who wanted to bring the full force of Soviet authority against artists who defied their cultural monopoly.⁷

The artists installed their works at the already opened Manezh exhibition, and the next morning Khrushchev and his entourage arrived for an official visit. The premier reacted violently to the works on display by the Beliutin group, calling them “shit,” and the artists themselves “homosexuals” and “pederasts.” Khrushchev demanded to speak with several of them individually—in each case he personally insulted and threatened the artists, prompting the accompanying officials to ask if they should be arrested immediately.⁸ Yankilevsky, whose works later came under special scrutiny from the state (fig. 5), admitted that he was “shattered” by the experience.⁹

When Khrushchev went to look at Neizvestny’s sculptures, however, the sculptor blocked the door to the gallery and declared that his life’s work would not be subject to such treatment. Khrushchev agreed to hear him out, and Neizvestny gave the premier a tour of his work, emphasizing the difficult physical labor it required and explaining its narrative logic. The premier expressed admiration for Neizvestny and promised him a commission, but the sculptor



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responded that whatever commission he received must also include the painters the premier had just insulted. Khrushchev was enraged, and while all the exhibitors and even the Union of Artists itself were subject to censure, Neizvestny came in for special persecution.¹⁰

Khrushchev's about-face, from reformer to champion of Socialist Realism, was likely motivated by a fear among party officials that his reforms had spiraled out of control. A scant few weeks before the Manezh Affair, the magazine *Noviy Mir* ("New World") had published Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a fictional but highly naturalistic and detailed description of life in Stalin's labor camps. Khrushchev had personally approved the publication of this work, and saw it as part of the process of de-Stalinization. But the novella took on a life of its own, and soon many Party officials began to question the wisdom of allowing such revelations of state brutality.¹¹

Coming on the heels of Solzhenitsyn's literary fireworks, the artistic experimentation of Yankilevsky and Neizvestny, for example, was evidence of the unraveling of Party control over cultural production. Khrushchev's personal approval of Solzhenitsyn's publication is consistent in some ways with his reaction—remarkably intimate for a world leader—to the unofficial artists exhibiting at the Manezh. If we compare this traumatic series of events with concurrent developments in the West, we see a stark contrast in artists' relations with state authority, contrasts that also constitute fundamentally different conditions of production. For example, the years 1962 and 1963 witnessed the first Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden, the founding of the Viennese Actionist Group, and the advent of Minimalism in the United States. It is nearly impossible to imagine the U.S., West German, or Austrian governments taking a concerted interest in these events, never mind having heads of state engage in individual discussions, no matter how contentious, with the artists.

The Bulldozer Show and Renewed Struggle

A similarly perplexing series of actions by Soviet authorities took place twelve years later, in 1974. After more than a decade of being completely shut out of exhibitions, Oscar Rabin, Vladimir Nemukhin, Lydia Masterkova, and several younger artists, including Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, decided that the best chance of showing their work to the public would be an open-air exhibition in a vacant lot. Rabin was perhaps more cognizant of the potential danger than the other participants. In February of that year Alexander Solzhenitsyn, after a lengthy confinement, had been expelled from the Soviet Union, and Rabin remarked: "Now he's off their hands they're free to turn against us."¹² The coming year proved him right.

On September 2, 1974, Rabin and other organizers sent a letter to the Moscow City Council, announcing that they would be holding a one-day open-air exhibition in an empty lot on the outskirts of Moscow. Unable to find legal prohibitions against such an event, the council representatives advised against but did not forbid the exhibition.¹³ When the artists arrived at the site on September 15, however, police dressed in the uniforms of civilian cleaning volunteers began to attack them and their works. The artists fought back, but bulldozers were deployed to crush the paintings



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and menace the participants. When some artists continued to hold their ground, fire hoses were discharged to disperse them as well as spectators, some of whom were foreign journalists and diplomats. Images of artists being run down by bulldozers and sprayed with fire hoses circulated in the international press, and the “Bulldozer Show” became a notorious embarrassment for then-premier Leonid Brezhnev.¹⁴

Forced by international pressure to grant concessions to the artists, authorities allowed them to organize an unjuried, open-air exhibition at Moscow’s Izmailovsky Park on September 29. Though it lasted only four hours, nearly 15,000 people attended the exhibition. As Alexander Glezer later said: “Four hours of freedom at Izmailovsky Park demonstrated the pointlessness of persecuting the opponents of Socialist Realism and proved that public opinion in Russia had not yet been thoroughly cowed.”¹⁵

As with the Manezh Affair over a decade earlier, the Soviet authorities involved with the Bulldozer Show paid an extraordinary amount of attention to contemporary art. In the United States, by contrast, 1974 marked a peak of artistic license—with Chris Burden crucifying himself on a Volkswagen Beetle (*Trans-fixed*) and Carolee Schneeman reading from a scroll she pulled out of her vagina (*Interior Scroll*). Even in Yugoslavia Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (in which she subjected herself to the will, and abuse, of her audience) yielded almost no response from authorities. Considering the all-encompassing efforts made by Western governments to suppress such political-opposition groups as the Black Panthers and the Red Army Faction, the freedom afforded to Western (and Yugoslav) artists implied that art was so separate from public life as to be completely inconsequential.

On the one hand, these contrasts emphasize the well-traveled understanding of a backward and repressive Soviet state. On the other, they also highlight the degree to which, in the Soviet Union, art was still considered a necessary and consequential part of public life. Indeed, many Western artists saw the aesthetic autonomy of Western art practice as the sign of a profound disempowerment in the public sphere. In other words, Western authorities paid no mind to artists because they believed that art was “harmless.” The unofficial Soviet artists, on the other hand, were subjected to grave violations of civil rights and there was no mistaking their position as empowered. Even the concessions granted to the artists—the Izmailovsky Park exhibition, entrance into the Moscow Graphic Artists Union, and two exhibitions at the VDNKh (Exhibit of National Economic Achievement) in 1975—were accompanied by continued state harassment. Several artists were threatened, some drafted into brutal military service, and Oscar Rabin was deported and exiled as an enemy of the state.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Moscow Graphic Artists Union informed the artists that there would be no more open exhibitions, only juried shows in the Union’s exhibition hall, subject to standard Soviet censorship.¹⁷

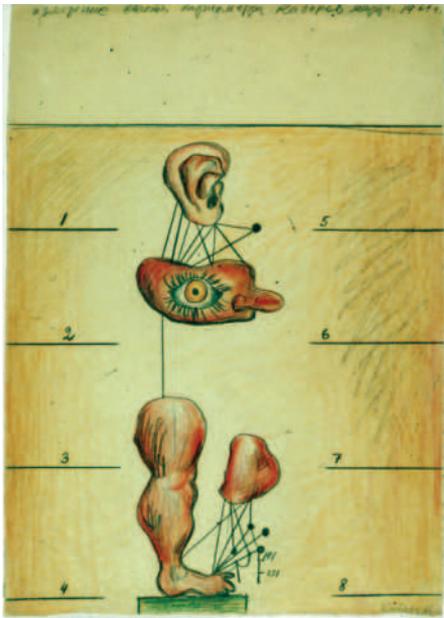
The one major officially sanctioned exhibition of 1975 (with 145 artists at the House of Culture at the VDNKh, organized in part by Tatiana Kolodzei, who later founded the Kolodzei Art Foundation) was an additional occasion for police harassment of artists and various other dirty tricks—nearby cafés and toilets were closed; entry was denied to artists installing their work (fig. 6); and spectators were made to wait on seemingly endless lines (fig. 7).¹⁸



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Toward Conceptualism

In the midst of the intermittently heated conflict between Soviet authorities and unofficial artists, a significant shift could also be perceived in the methods of unofficial art practice. The first generation of unofficial artists—Krasnoperovtsev, the Lianozovo Group, Neizvestny, and others—prioritized freedom of expression and, as Victor Tupitsyn observed, “fantasized [Western art] as a cathedral of eternal harmony, unsullied by politics and not subjected to decay.”¹⁹ To these artists freedom of expression was associated with abstraction.

However, it was the Sretensky Boulevard artists (named for the street on which they had their studios), a group significantly less interested in Western art, who moved unofficial Soviet practice much closer to contemporary tendencies in the West. Instead of seeking “a cathedral of harmony, unsullied by politics,” such Moscow artists as Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vassiliev, Leonid Sokov, Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid, and Vagrich Bakhchanyan sought to integrate the ideological imperatives of Soviet life into their work, partly as a means of disarming it. According to the critic Sergei Anufriev—later one of the founding members of the conceptualist group Medhermeneutics—for the Moscow Conceptualists “artistic pathos was replaced by investigative pathos. . . . A curiosity of thought made for a shift from the results of expression to the means of expression and from that to the very question of expression as such.”²⁰ In this way the Moscow Conceptualists evinced a greater affinity with their international contemporaries, who by the 1960s had largely turned away from the expressive function of abstraction.

As the most prominent member of the Sretensky Boulevard group in the Soviet Union, and now the most recognized Russian emigré artist in the United States, Ilya Kabakov looms large in the narrative of Moscow Conceptual art. In the grids and nonsensical measurements of the small drawings found in *This Leads to Fire*, we can see Kabakov’s tendency to investigate Soviet methods of quantification and rationalization. *Measuring the Weight of Varnometer* of 1961 (fig. 8) is the visual rendering of an obfuscating bureaucracy. He is probably best known, however, for his works that examine private and idiosyncratic Soviet experience, in particular the blending of the banal and hallucinatory that arises in a culture of both private and public repression. Despite the inherently political nature of these investigations, Kabakov himself resisted engagement with the political struggles of unofficial art. He refused to participate in the Bulldozer Show, for example, because, as he stated simply, “I was afraid.”²¹ Kabakov also declined to participate in the officially sanctioned Izmailovsky Park exhibition, reportedly telling Komar and Melamid that “participation . . . is a position of a normal person, and I am not normal. All of my life I have behaved as a slave.”²²

Fellow Sretensky Boulevard artists Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vassiliev were similarly engaged with the imagery and experience of Soviet life. Like Kabakov, both Bulatov and Vassiliev avoided direct confrontation with the authorities, but at the same time they subtly challenged Soviet orthodoxies. In Vassiliev’s *White Skiers* of 1990 (fig. 9), we see a pristine Russian winter landscape, while the skier is characteristic of Soviet ideals of athleticism and the rugged mastery of nature. However, Vassiliev’s use of a glowing white silhouette defamiliarizes both figure and landscape. Bulatov is also

known for landscapes that borrow the anodyne naturalism of Socialist Realism, but with scenes rendered uncanny and figures in vaguely menacing relation to each other. The drawings by Bulatov in the current exhibition, however, demonstrate a different approach. In *Woman Watching Vremya* of 1981 (fig. 10), the most quotidian of domestic scenes—a woman asleep in front of her television—also delineates the complex relations between private life and Soviet propaganda. The woman is dutifully watching the state-controlled news program “Vremya,” but by falling asleep she articulates her true engagement with the information conveyed. Though *Woman Watching Vremya* functions through straightforward narrative rather than visual estrangement, we can see in the works of both Vassiliev and Bulatov the clash between ideology and everyday life—between the socialist vision of landscape and the actual experience of nature, between the requisite capitulation to official ideology and the indirect assertion of private belief.

Performances, some existing primarily through documentation and others intended for an audience, were another important tendency within Moscow Conceptualism. Given the authorities’ reaction to paintings displayed in an empty city lot in 1974, however, the artists staged most of the performances in relatively isolated locales. Collective Actions’ group performances, the Gnezdov group’s *Help to the Soviet State in the Struggle for the Harvest* of 1976 (fig. 11), Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin’s *Summer Winter* of 1976–77 (fig. 12), and Francisco Infante’s *The Life of the Triangle* of 1977 characteristically took place in rural or exurban sites. The Collective Actions album of performances is even titled, appropriately, *Trips Out of the City*. The rural setting and often antidramatic tenor of these actions is reminiscent of the land art that was then current in the West. But while Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Michael Heizer may have shared with their Soviet counterparts an interest in troubling pastoral myths, the Russian artists also focused on the countryside for more immediate reasons: to avoid the attention of police and state art officials.

It is no surprise, then, that the political critique embedded within Moscow Conceptualism put several of the artists in conflict with Soviet authorities, and led many of the most important figures to immigrate to the United States. Vagrich Bakhchanyan came to New York in 1974, Komar and Melamid in 1978, Leonid Sokov in 1980, and Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin in the early 1980s.²³

Immigration provided these artists with new ideological frameworks to investigate, and Komar and Melamid’s *Soul of Norton Dodge* of 1978 (fig. 13) is an early demonstration of the potential benefits of this cultural synthesis. Materializing the soul of a noted American collector of unofficial Soviet art into a certificate and box, the work was the product of a larger project called *Corporation for Buying and Selling Souls*, in which the pair established a corporation and actually engaged in the marketing and trading of souls. The title refers, of course, to Nikolai Gogol’s nineteenth-century novel *Dead Souls*, and the artists slyly appropriated this canonical critique of tsarist Russia’s moral bankruptcy into a parallel with the inhumanity of Soviet communism. But the *Corporation for Buying and Selling Souls* also functions as a challenge to the crude imperatives of capitalism, in which anything, even a soul, has an exchange value. Indeed, the artists conceived of the project while still in Moscow but did not execute it until they came to New York, reasoning that “it [had] to be carried out here



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in America because it is the land of capitalism.”²⁴ The humble materiality of the box and certificate, however, additionally calls to mind attempts by such contemporary American artists as Robert Morris and Robert Smithson to deny the commodity status of art by eschewing objects altogether (as in Morris’s *Document* of 1963).

Before they left Moscow, Komar and Melamid had also been central to the development of Sots art, one of the most recognizable aspects of Moscow Conceptualism. Sots art and works conceived in its legacy occupy the very first section of *This Leads to Fire*, a pride of place given partly for the works’ visual power, but also because Sots art is exemplary of the hybridization of Soviet and American cultures. Adopting the appropriation strategies of Pop art, Soviet artists such as Leonid Sokov used the style and iconography of Socialist Realism (hence the name Sots—from *Sotsialisticheskii*) as a nearly endless source of the readymade. Just as American Pop art was an attempt to recuperate the actual visual landscape of American life—that is, advertising—Sots art transformed “the redundancy and overabundance of ideological propagandistic graphic production” into an explicitly decorative and fantastical form.²⁵ Sokov’s screenprint *Marilyn and Stalin* of 1989–90 (fig. 14) makes this equivalence explicit—both figures are fantasies of desire and identification, but their juxtaposition makes it impossible for a viewer to incorporate the images into an experience of everyday life.

Perestroika and the International Art Market

Soviet authorities persisted in obstructing exhibitions of unofficial art until 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev mandated perestroika and glasnost, the restructuring of Soviet society and openness to the West. But even as late as 1986 and 1987, authorities threatened to block an exhibition—one intended to demonstrate this new openness—if works by Grisha Bruskin and Vladimir Yankilevsky were not removed. The risk of a boycott by other exhibitors (and the international embarrassment that would have resulted) convinced the minister of culture to allow the two artists to remain in the show.²⁶ In July 1988 Bruskin’s painting *Fundamental Lexicon* sold at the first Sotheby’s international auction in Moscow for an astounding \$416,000—the highest price ever received by a living Soviet artist.²⁷ As Bruskin was a relative newcomer to the Moscow Nonconformist circle, his triumph did yield some bitterness. But it wasn’t just Bruskin’s greater profitability in relation to more established artists such as Yankilevsky or Bulatov that created instability in the world of unofficial artists. As curator David Ross observed two years later, “Moscow in July of 1988 had a smell of land-rush fever to it, as a literal horde of American and European art dealers, collectors, journalists and carpet-baggers descended on Moscow for the auction.”²⁸ Sotheby’s itself had not foreseen the degree of speculation that would occur. The auction house had believed individual works of art would not sell for more than \$70,000; and while they had estimated total proceeds would reach \$900,000, they actually came to \$3.4 million.²⁹

To the generation of artists who had seen Khrushchev’s entourage threaten and insult their peers, who had seen their own works crushed by bulldozers or confiscated by the censor, this reversal of fortune must have seemed like a trip

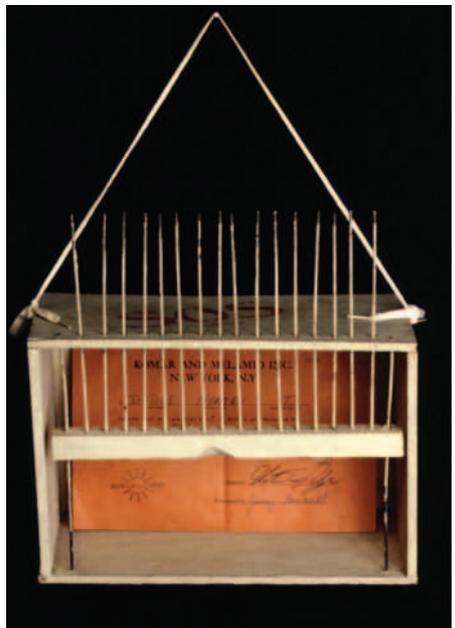
through the looking glass. "The fact that a heavily hyped Sotheby's auction would mark the opening of this world as a 'market,'" Ross mused, "was a symbolically perfect event to introduce Western collectors to the land of irony, and vice versa."³⁰ Indeed, the Sotheby's auction was a traumatic experience for many of the artists. Yankilevsky, who had also been subject to Khrushchev's personal attacks at the Manezh in 1962, found the Sotheby's auction "devastating and demeaning... the most shattering experience of my life." As he explained, "Before the auction, we knew everything about everyone, who was the better artist, who belonged where in our hierarchy. All of this was completely changed in one hour."³¹

As Yankilevsky's comments indicate, the upheaval of the Sotheby's auction elicited nostalgia for the period before perestroika, when unofficial artists were "unified like the early Christians."³² Many artists feared that the "carefully constructed defenses born of generations of living underground lives would wither and the supportive close-knit communities... would be shattered by the lure of fame and material wealth."³³ From their vantage in the United States, Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin observed the ultimate irony—that the pre-perestroika persecution of unofficial Soviet artists "[had] at least one positive side: forbidden fruit is sweet."³⁴

The artists' trepidation was not unfounded—the global art market is a double-edged sword. Whereas before perestroika, the very fact of an exhibition was enough to draw a large public, as well as the censor, many of the Western art dealers who attended the Sotheby's auction hoped to capitalize on the artists' novelty and dissident status, but did not value the works aesthetically or conceptually. Victor Tupitsyn claimed that the works were highly overvalued, and decried the auction as both a potlatch and "a post-industrial paradigm of the Orient," noting that "the demystified historical East, saturated by tourism, ceased being associated with the idea of 'adventure' and intrigue a long time ago." It had been replaced, he said, by the USSR under glasnost.³⁵



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The utter transformation of their circumstances created a distinct crisis of interpretation for unofficial artists and their audience in the West. Many of the works were intensely personal—the artists actively avoided politics—and yet were “sold” to the international art market as political. To some degree the same interpretive conundrum exists today. How are we to understand the work of such younger artists as Tatiana Antoshina (fig. 15), Alexandra Dementieva, Anton Kandinsky (cover), Marina Koldobskya, and Valery Yershov, who came of age during perestroika and after the breakup of the Soviet Union?

Such questions have become increasingly difficult to answer in the last fifteen years, a period in which the rise of Vladimir Putin has dashed the hopes of a Western-style democracy in Russia. The Kolodzei Art Foundation, in its continued and intensive engagement with these artists, provides a forum for investigating the hybrid condition of post-Soviet Russian art. These recent works in the Kolodzei Collection distinguish it from others of unofficial Soviet art—Norton Dodge, by contrast, stopped collecting unofficial art after the onset of glasnost. The concerns of the current generation of Russian artists are more closely related to those of their international peers than to those who matured in the insular environment of the Soviet Union. Still, many are haunted by the visual and ideological power of Socialist Realism. The renewal of artistic repression under Putin, particularly of activist and openly gay artists, as well as the newly unstable relationship between Russia and the West, leaves their situation more volatile and ambiguous than ever.

Notes

- 1 Alla Rosenfeld, "Soviet Nonconformist Art: Its Social and Political Context," in *Soviet Dis-Union: Socialist Realist and Nonconformist Art*, by Maria Bulanova and Rosenfeld (Minneapolis: Museum of Russian Art, 2006), 22.
- 2 Victor Tupitsyn, "Nonidentity within Identity: Moscow Communal Modernism, 1950s–1980s," in *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956–1986; The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection* (New York: Thames and Hudson in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995), 85–86.
- 3 Rosenfeld, "Soviet Nonconformist Art," 22–23.
- 4 Tupitsyn, "Nonidentity within Identity," 82.
- 5 See John Berger, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
- 6 Albert Leong, *Centaur: The Life and Art of Ernst Neizvestny* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 122–23.
- 7 Alexander Glezer, "The Struggle to Exhibit," in *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union*, ed. Igor Golomshtok and Glezer (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), 108; and Leong, *Centaur*, 125.
- 8 Leong, *Centaur*, 126–27.
- 9 Vladimir Yankilevsky, interview, in *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews After Perestroika*, ed. Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 216.
- 10 Leong, *Centaur*, 127–28.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 12 Glezer, "The Struggle to Exhibit," 112.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 114–15.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 116–20.
- 17 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, interview, in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 275.
- 18 Irina Alpatova, ed., *"Drugoe iskusstvo": Moskva, 1956–1988* (Moscow: Galart, 2005), 321.
- 19 Victor Tupitsyn, "East–West Exchange: Ecstasy of (Mis) Communication," in *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, ed. David A. Ross, exh. cat. (Tacoma, WA: Tacoma Art Museum; Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 84.
- 20 Elisabeth Sussman, "The Third Zone: Soviet Postmodern," in Ross, *Between Spring and Summer*, 63.
- 21 Ilya Kabakov, interview, in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 145.
- 22 Komar and Melamid, in *ibid.*, 271.
- 23 Kabakov, Bulatov, and Vassiliev also immigrated, but after perestroika.
- 24 Komar and Melamid, in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 275–76.
- 25 Sussman, "The Third Zone," 64.
- 26 Grisha Bruskin, interview, in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 319–20.
- 27 Philip Taubman, "Soviet Art Auction Brings \$3.4 Million," *New York Times*, July 8, 1988.
- 28 David A. Ross, "Provisional Reading: Notes for an Exhibition," in *Between Spring and Summer*, 6.
- 29 Douglas C. McGill, "Western Dealers Rush to Sign Soviet Artists," *New York Times*, May 19, 1988.
- 30 Ross, "Provisional Reading," 6.
- 31 Yankilevsky, in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 216.
- 32 Solomon, "What in the World: Andrew Solomon on the Art of Perestroika," *Artforum*, November 1988, 10.
- 33 Ross, "Provisional Reading," 8.
- 34 Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, "Samizdat Art," in *Russian Samizdat Art*, ed. Charles Doria (New York: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1986), 69.
- 35 Tupitsyn, "East–West Exchange," 91.



Interview with Tatiana Kolodzei

Collector and co-founder of the Kolodzei Art Foundation

Interview conducted by Sarah Warren

How were you first exposed to unofficial art?

I consider myself a follower of the famous collector George Costakis. When I was only seventeen, I first met Costakis and saw his private collection in Moscow and “caught the collecting bug” for life. His collection, and those of several other private collectors (such as Yakov Rubinstein and Abram Chudnovsky), contained works by artists that could not be seen anywhere else in Russia: Lyubov Popova, Gustav Klucis, Marc Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, Vassily Kandinsky. . . . Their works were not displayed in any official museum. They were kept in storage facilities, which were closed to the public. These facilities were treated as if they were secret military sites, like silos with atomic weapons. One could not even say the word “abstraction” out loud: it was a term employed only by hostile ideology. The atmosphere at Costakis’s home was warm and friendly. Many artists frequented his place, and their visits influenced them greatly. Costakis’s collection was, quite simply, priceless. It enabled many people to see the originals and to grasp the significance of the Russian avant-garde in the twentieth century. The collection also contained many works by such artists as Anatolii Zverev, Dmitri Plavinsky, Dmitrii Krasnopevtsev, and Oscar Rabin—that is, nonconformist artists of a later generation.

How did you come to acquire your first work?

The first work was a gift in 1967 from the artist Boris Kozlov: *Nun* of 1963.

What kind of relationships did collectors of unofficial art have with the artists? How would you characterize your relationship with the artists you collected?

As the Soviet Union was a closed country at the time, few realize that a vibrant art scene existed behind the Iron Curtain from the 1960s, parallel to the Western art world, with its own movements and heroes, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in isolation. There were no galleries at that time, so most of the collectors, including me, knew the artists personally. Artists, musicians, poets, writers, and collectors were in one circle.

How did you get involved with the exhibition at the Hall of Culture at VDNKh (Exhibition of National Economic Achievements)? What was it like working with the authorities to organize the exhibition?

After the infamous Bulldozer Show of 1974 and the second open-air exhibition [at Izmailovsky Park], there was much coverage in the Western press, and as a response the Soviet government allowed an exhibition on the grounds of the VDNKh, which was open to all artists (as long as they had a Moscow residency permit). In August 1975 several artists approached me, and Leonid Talochkin, asking us to help in the organization of an exhibition and to work with its installation at the VDNKh, dedicated to the anniversary of the Bulldozer exhibition. On August 29, 1975, the permit from the Central Administrative Board of Culture of the Executive Committee of the Moscow Council was issued, allowing an exhibition from September 20 to September 30, 1975. Originally, the only condition was that artists could not violate the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic regarding insults to the symbols of the Soviet state (to the coat of arms and the flag, or to national heroes), and the prohibition against pornography.

A total of 146 artists, working in various media, participated and 546 works were showcased. The administration created intolerable conditions for organizers and participants of the exhibition. While delivering the artworks artists experienced hours of delays because the authorities demanded that participants show their Moscow residency permit before being allowed entry. Each badge was numbered and had to be signed by a senior police officer. The administration delayed distributing admission badges; eventually I received the badge with the number 1. During the installation all the windows of the recreation center where the works were to be displayed were tightly closed, even though it was very hot outside. Artists and workers who left for their lunch break had long delays to get back into the exhibition. The same policy applied during the exhibition—the participants had constant problems getting in and out of the show—and the number of complimentary tickets was less than promised. On the evening before the opening, the censorship commission of the State Department of Culture, without any explanation, removed 38 works from the show. In protest all of the artists removed all of their works. The exhibition opened and then immediately closed, and the artists who gathered around the exhibition were surrounded



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by police mounted on horses. After several hours of debate a compromise between the artists and authorities was reached, which allowed for the removal of 16 works.

On September 21, the exhibition finally opened to the public. But the struggle with the authorities continued daily until the end of the exhibition; many representatives of the authorities were physically well prepared and dressed in densely fitting knitted suits and identical footwear. The peak of controversy was the work *Hippie Flag* by the art group Hair and the installation *Hatch Out Eggs!* by the Roshal-Skersis-Donskoi group, later known as Gnezdo, or “Nest,” for its installation. Despite the fact that, at the request of fire fighters, the nest from green willow branches had been impregnated and almost floated in a fireproof structure, the installation was thrown out by “firemen” because of its supposed flammability. The censored works were confiscated for the duration of the exhibition and returned only after the exhibition was dismantled. Despite there being no public announcement and lasting for less than two weeks, there were long lines of people wanting a glimpse of non-official art. Exhibitions like that created a venue to see the alternative social and political context for looking at works by selected non-conformist artists.

What were your criteria for inviting or accepting artists into the exhibition?

I began organizing art exhibitions in the late 1960s. The criteria in selecting works were the individuality and talent of the artist, and the quality of the work; the particular movement any given artist belonged to was of less importance.

Did your relationships with artists change during and after perestroika?

Perestroika gave artists opportunities to travel and work around the world—New York, Paris, Berlin—but no matter the distance I am always happy to meet with the artists and keep long-time friendships.

What do you see as your role for Russian artists today?

As a mentor to a younger generation. During previous generations the houses of collectors such as Tretiakov, Morozov, Shchukin, Costakis, and others became centers of cultural life. They were visited by artists, musicians, and writers, and fostered for them an understanding of contemporary art and influenced the younger generations greatly. Without collectors who have passion for art, artists of the late twentieth century may slip into oblivion. It would truly be a pity if the art and the artists represented in the collection did not outlive our own history. It is for this reason that we continue to collect and to promote the work of these individuals.

List of Illustrations

All images courtesy of the
Kolodzei Art Foundation

Cover Anton S. Kandinsky. *Post-Soviet-IsM*, 2012. Oil on canvas. 60 x 40 in (152.4 x 101.6 cm). Photo: Jose Smith, Neuberger Museum of Art.

Fig. 1 Mikhail Roginsky. *Fire in the Kitchen*, 1985. Oil on canvas. 34 x 52 in (86.4 x 132 cm).

Fig. 2 Dmitrii Krasnopevtsev. *Still Life with Four Pitchers*, 1972. Oil on fiberboard. 14 x 15 1/2 in (35.7 x 40 cm).

Fig. 3 Oscar Rabin. *The Village of Priluki*, 1970. Linocut. 16 3/4 x 21 in (42.5 x 53.3 cm).

Fig. 4 Ernst Neizvestny. *Dissected*, 1966. Etching. 11 1/4 x 9 1/2 in (28 x 24 cm).

Fig. 5 Vladimir Yankilevsky. *King of Darkness*, 1975. Etching with charcoal. 19 1/4 x 25 1/4 in (48.9 x 64.1 cm).

Fig. 6 Side entrance a day before the opening of the exhibition at the Hall of Culture at VDNKh, 1975, Moscow. Tatiana Kolodzei is on the far right. Archive of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

Fig. 7 Line of visitors to view the exhibition at the Hall of Culture at VDNKh, 1975, Moscow. Archive of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

Fig. 8 Ilya Kabakov. *Measuring the Weight of Varnometer*, 1961. Colored pencil and India ink on paper. 16 x 11 3/8 in (40.6 x 28.9 cm). © 1961 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Fig. 9 Oleg Vassiliev. *White Skiers*, 1990. Oil on canvas. 51 x 39 1/4 in (129.5 x 99.7 cm).

Fig. 10 Erik Bulatov. *Woman Watching Vremya*, 1981. Colored pencil on paper. 13 3/4 x 17 1/2 in (34.9 x 44.5 cm). © 1981 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 11 Gnezdo ("Nest") Group (Mikhail Roshal, Gennadii Donskoi, and Viktor Skersis). *Sowing, Help to the Soviet State in the Struggle for the Harvest*, 1976. Action in the vicinity of Novokosino (Moscow region). Silver gelatin print, 11 1/2 x 15 5/8 in (29.2 x 39.7 cm)

Fig. 12 Rimma Gerlovin and Valeriy Gerlovin. *Summer Winter*, 1976–77. Silver gelatin prints, each. 16 x 12 in (40.6 x 30.5 cm).



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Fig. 13 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. *Soul of Norton Dodge*, from the project *Corporation for Buying and Selling Souls*, 1978–79. Wood, metal, white string, and certificate on red paper. 6 3/4 x 10 1/8 x 5 1/8 in (17.1 x 25.7 x 13 cm).

Fig. 14 Leonid Sokov. *Marilyn and Stalin*, 1989–90. Screenprint, 22 1/2 x 31 in (57.2 x 78.7 cm).

Fig. 15 Tatiana Antoshina. *Dolly*, 2004. Staged photograph, C-print. 41 1/4 x 29 1/2 in (104.8 x 74.9 cm).

Fig. 16 Installation view of the exhibition at the Hall of Culture at VDNKh, 1975, Moscow. Archive of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

Fig. 17 In front of the work *Hatch Eggs!* by the group Gnezdo at the exhibition at the Hall of Culture at VDNKh, 1975, Moscow. Archive of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

FROM RUSSIAN ART
TO NONCONFORMISM TO GLOBAL CAPITALISM

THIS LEADS TO FIRE

SELECTIONS FROM THE KOLODZEI ART FOUNDATION COLLECTION

This Leads to Fire: Russian Art from Nonconformism to Global Capitalism includes the following artists:

*Alena Anosova
Tatiana Antoshina
Valeryi Ayzenberg
Vagrich Bakhchanyan
Leonid Borisov
Erik Bulatov
Irene Caesar
Genia Chef
Mikhail Chernyshev and Star*

*Group
Group Collective Action (Andrei
Monastyrsky, Nikita Alexeev,
Nikolai Panitkov, Georgii
Kizevalter, Igor Makarevich,
Elena Elagina, Sergei
Romashko, Sabine Haengen)*

*Alexandra Dementieva
Alla Espovich
Anna Frants
Rimma Gerlovina
Valeriy Gerlovin
Dimitry German*

*Gnezdo (Nest) Group (Mikhail
Roshal, Gennadii Donskoi, and
Viktor Skersis)*

*Eduard Gorokhovskiy
Francisco Arana Infante
Ilya Kabakov
Anton S. Kandinsky
Dimitri Kantorov
Konstantin Khudyakov
Marina Koldobskaya
Vyacheslav Koleichuk
Vitaly Komar*

*Dmitrii Krasnopevtsev
Valentina Kropivnitskaya
Yefim Ladyzhensky
Leonid Lamm
Rostislav Lebedev
Lydia Masterkova
Alexander Melamid
Artem Mirolevich
Mikhail Molochnikov
Ernst Neizvestny*

*Vladimir Nemukhin
Natalia Nesterova
Alexander Ney
Shimon Okshteyn
Oscar Rabin
Mikhail Roginsky
Samuil Rubashkin
San San (Alexander Karasev)
Alexander Sigutin
Anatolii Stepyshv
Eduard Shteinberg
Leonid Sokov
Alexei Titarenko
Alexei Tyapushkin
Oleg Vassiliev
Sergei Volokhov
Julia Winter
Vladimir Yakovlev
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