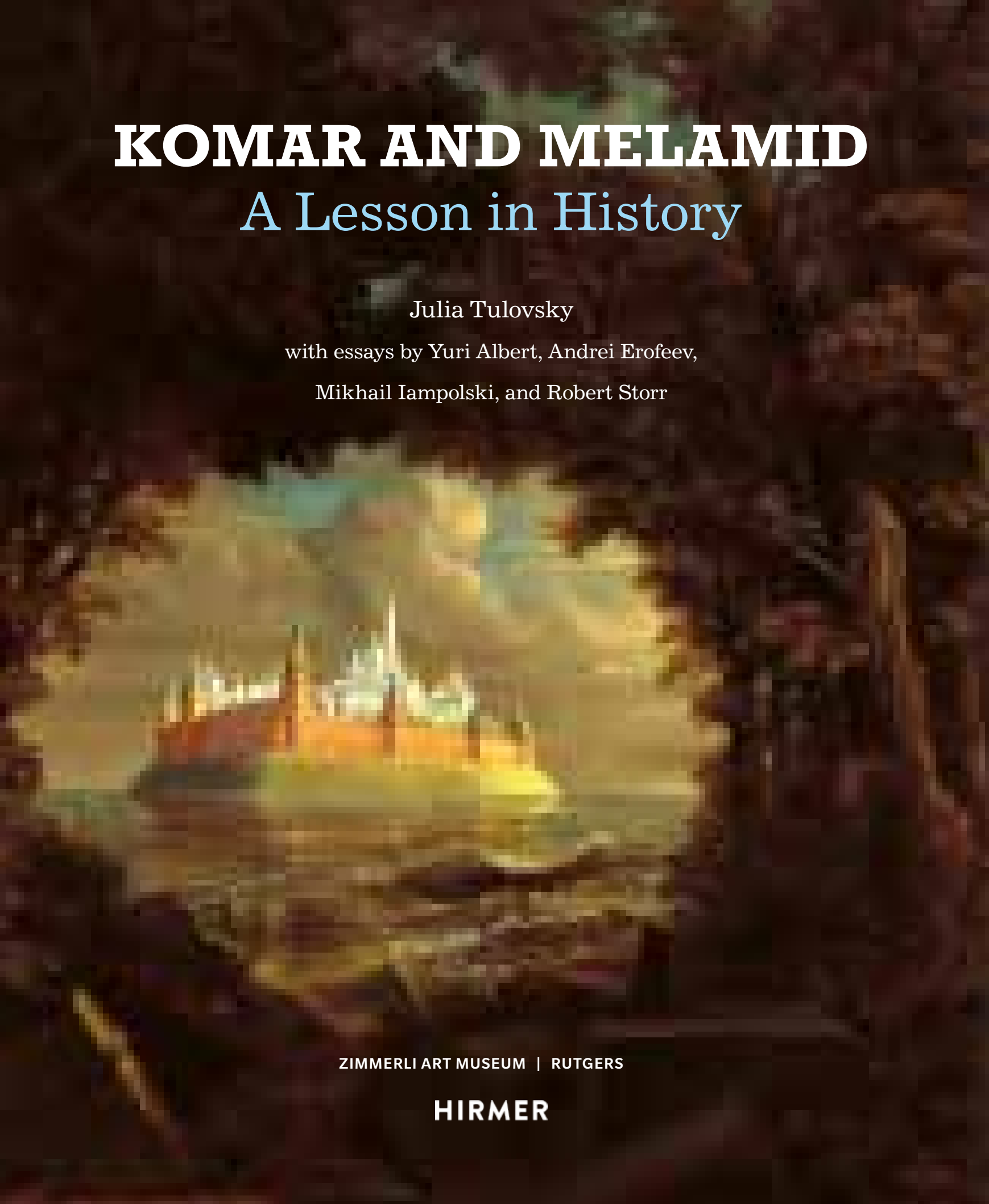








KOMAR AND MELAMID

A Lesson in History

Julia Tulovsky

with essays by Yuri Albert, Andrei Erofeev,

Mikhail Iampolski, and Robert Storr

ZIMMERLI ART MUSEUM | RUTGERS

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

The Zimmerli Art Museum is proud to present *Komar and Melamid: A Lesson in History*, the first museum retrospective in the United States since 1978 to exhibit the joint work of the Russian-American artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. Known for their provocative and political artworks, Komar and Melamid are represented in the Zimmerli's Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union by more than 150 works, making them a logical subject for an exhibition here. Their knack for pushing boundaries and lampooning political and social behaviors make this an appropriate time to share their satirical but deeply meaningful work.

The accompanying catalogue includes the latest scholarship on the artistic duo as well as historically important texts that offer a renewed interpretation of the artists' social and political concerns. Lavishly illustrated with artworks from our own Dodge Collection, as well as key American and European collection loans, the project explores the artists' journey from working under an oppressive regime to finding new subjects in the United States for their shrewd critique. Their work provides an important cross-cultural link between the United States and the Soviet Union that is especially relevant in the current international climate.

Komar and Melamid emerged from the circle of Soviet nonconformist artists who rejected the Soviet government's dictate that limited artists to the propaganda-based style of socialist realism. They were the founders of sots-art, a style that employed an ironic approach to expose the absurdities of official art—and of the regime as a whole. A paraphrase of American pop art's reaction to the overproduction of consumer goods in the United States, sots-art was a reaction to the overproduction of ideology that rendered

Communist slogans and symbols nonsensical. After their immigration to the United States in 1978, Komar and Melamid applied their artistic practices to the American market-driven society, enriching American contemporary art. Among the most compelling artists in the history of conceptual art, Komar and Melamid used humor and satire to lambaste Soviet officialdom and the hypocrisy of Western consumerism. Their work is topical—ridiculing Soviet official culture and American contemporary life—but it is also grounded in history, in the complexities of the Soviet era and their effect on the artists' personal lives. Their art offers ways of dealing with the past and points the way forward in a changing world. This exhibition, then, is a lesson in history.

No project of this scope is accomplished without the contributions of many. First and foremost, a special debt of gratitude is owed to Julia Tulovsky, curator of Russian and Soviet nonconformist art at the Zimmerli, who conceived and organized the project, assembled the extraordinary group of scholars, and contributed an insightful overview of the artists' career and importance.

Ms. Tulovsky was both privileged and fortunate to rely on the valuable advice, counsel, and assistance provided by many individuals. We thank Elaine Angelopoulos, Dianne Beal, Raphaële Bianchi, David Birnbaum, Jeremy Boxer, Marion Brenner, Sennen Codjo, Robert Frey Gilboe, David Glasser, Lily Goldberg, Claude Gruen, Ksenia Gurshtein, Bryan Hilley, Deborah Iskander, Mark Kelner, Tatiana Kolodzei, Natalia Kolodzei, and Anna Kolodzei, Alexander Kronik, Joe La Placa, Carol Burnier Magno, Olga Makhroff, Elizabeth McCoy, Sarah MacDougall, Bonni-Dara Michaels,

Marco Nocella, Burco Oz, Jenny Posten, Neil Rector, Jo Reinert, Natalia Sidlina, David Thickman, Elisa Tosoni, Igor Tsukanov, and Cat Zhou. Jane A. Sharp, research curator for Soviet nonconformist art at the Zimmerli Art Museum, and Donna Gustafson, chief curator, provided collegial advice and support.

We are especially grateful to the scholars whose essays will make lasting contributions to the scholarship on Komar and Melamid: Yuri Albert, Andrei Erofeev, Mikhail Iampolski, and Robert Storr. Ilya Bernstein provided the scrupulous and thoughtful translations from Russian.

All admirers of Komar and Melamid's work are indebted to the late Ronald Feldman (1938–2022) of Ronald Feldman Gallery, who introduced the United States to Komar and Melamid and supported them throughout their joint career. Mr. Feldman championed many risk-taking and barrier-breaking artists and was well known and respected throughout the art world as a passionate proponent of the arts and of freedom of expression.

We would not have been able to create this exhibition without the generosity of the individuals and organizations who have lent works from their collections: Collection of David and Kathryn Birnbaum; Cardi Gallery, London; Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York; The Claude and Nina Gruen Collection of Contemporary Russian Art; Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, Kolodzei Art Foundation; Collection of Vitaly Komar; Collection of Alexander Melamid; University of Michigan Museum of Art; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University; Centre Pompidou; Private Collection, Washington, DC; Collection of Neil K. Rector; Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner; Tate Art Museums and Galleries; Tsukanov Family Foundation, London; The Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art; and Ben Uri Gallery and Museum. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all of them.

As a lasting record of the exhibition, the ambitious catalogue makes a permanent addition to our understanding of these artists. Our

appreciation goes to Stacy Smith, manager of publications and communications at the Zimmerli, who shepherded the book to publication. We thank Kiki Michael, assistant registrar at the Zimmerli, for her excellent work in managing the permissions and photography for the publication, and Peter Jacobs for his customary skill in photographing works for the catalogue. The book has been meticulously edited by Carolyn Vaughan and carefully proofread by Carrie Wicks. We thank Laura Lindgren for her successful and beautiful design of the material. In addition, we would like to thank our partners at Hirmer Publishers, Munich: Elisabeth Rochau-Shalem, senior acquisitions editor; Rainer Arnold, rights and project management; and Thomas Zuhr, CEO, for their professionalism and enthusiasm toward our collaboration. Stepan Lukyanov's exhibition design handsomely showcased the artists' work.

Zimmerli Art Museum staff tirelessly participated in the exhibition's organization. Irene Rybalsky, administrative assistant for Russian and Soviet nonconformist art, served as Ms. Tulovsky's right hand throughout the organizational phase. Elvis Fuentes, Stephanie Dvareckas, and Nikolay Malinin served as curatorial assistants and helped with various aspects of exhibition and catalogue preparation. Waylen Glass, Dodge collection registrar; Margaret Molnar, associate registrar; and Kiki Michael, assistant registrar, arranged the loans, including all logistical and contractual arrangements. Roberto Delgado, preparator; Mark Steigelman, operations manager; Cara Giddens, exhibitions coordinator; and Ryan Stalcup, operations assistant, prepared the works and installed the exhibition. We also thank Claire D'Amato, Barbara Cepeda, Janine D'Auguste, and Rebecca Brenowitz for their support and cooperation in helping to make this exciting body of work more accessible and enjoyable for the public. Theresa Watson, media relations specialist, contributed skills in marketing and publicity to spread the word about the exhibition. Whitney Pendergast, director of development, identified funding

resources and oversaw their use; Bernadette Clapsis, finance and business officer, supervised the budget; and Joyce Szabo provided critical business support.

A word of appreciation goes to our funders, whose support is central to the success of the exhibition and catalogue, as well as many previous projects on the subject of Soviet nonconformist art. Our deepest gratitude goes to the late Norton Dodge, whose aspiration to preserve and share the unofficial art created by artists striving for freedom of expression under the restrictions of the Soviet state was the origin of the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection. The collection now consists of thousands of works of art and is supported by an archive of tens of thousands of documents and other ephemera, providing rare and important research materials and opportunities for study. After their major gift, Norton and Nancy Dodge continued their interest and intelligent advocacy, resulting in a remarkable endowment from the Avenir Foundation. As partners for more than two decades, Rutgers and the

Avenir Foundation now have a history of enlightened support for the Zimmerli's commitment to the Dodge Collection and to its study. On behalf of the university and all those who have benefited and will benefit from the collection and the support of the Avenir Endowment, we express our continuing gratitude.

Finally, and most importantly, we would like to extend our thanks to the artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, for their support and cooperation in the creation of this exhibition and catalogue. From their invention of *sots-art* to their sardonic *People's Choice* project, they have challenged viewers with witty and incisive art. By addressing historical, social, and political issues, their art sheds light on topics that recently have become politically relevant again—principally the censorship of dissident voices and the repression of personal freedoms in totalitarian states. Despite these constraints, Komar and Melamid have demonstrated a lifelong commitment to producing art against all odds, as this exhibition makes abundantly clear.

Maura Reilly
Director, Zimmerli Art Museum



Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid: A Lesson in History

JULIA TULOVSKY

Time is not a line, which is what you have to believe if you accept some big idea of progress. We believe that it is more important to accept the past. . . . We emerge from the sea of certain points, but those points do not form a simple line to carry us into the future. We emerge and we're soaked in history. In our art we wring ourselves out—drip, drip, drip. Drip painting.

—Alexander Melamid

I started to think about an exhibition of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid at the Zimmerli Art Museum a few years back. As I've had the privilege of working with the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, it was a logical choice for a show. The Dodge Collection—the largest of its kind in the world—was gathered by Norton T. Dodge in the midst of the Cold War as a visual archive of the epoch. Representing art that did not abide by the government rules of art making, it contains works from post-Stalin Soviet Russia as well as from the majority of the Soviet republics. The collection, which preserves the art of resistance and dissent, was conceived by Dodge as a monument to free thinking in the most unfavorable and restrictive conditions. Komar and Melamid, who are represented in the collection by more than 150 works, are among the most prominent names in contemporary art that emerged from the Soviet Union's nonconformist circles. The duo, who worked closely together from 1972 until 2003, signing all their works with both names and acting essentially as one artist, has contributed tremendously to the new ways of looking at art both in Moscow and in New York, where they immigrated in 1978.

Their intellectual wit and tongue-in-cheek (dis)obedience to both ossified Soviet rules and clichés in American culture supplied them with a unique place in the art of both countries, as well

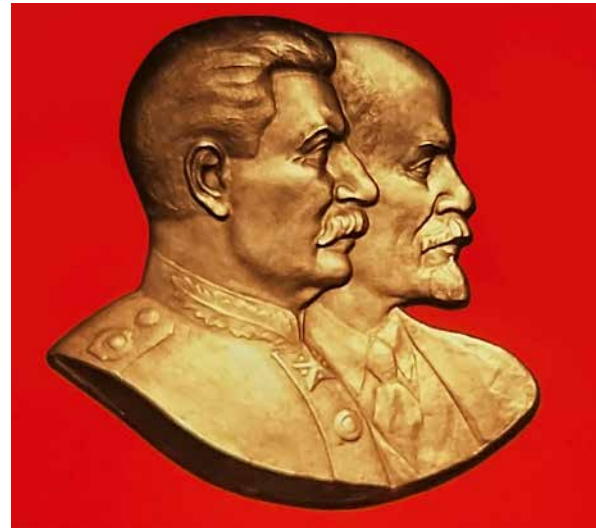
as globally. Ample literature and interviews exist about Komar and Melamid in a number of languages, including English, Russian, German, and even Chinese. Their names appeared on multiple occasions in the *New York Times*, and their own texts were published in such influential journals as *Artforum*. They presented on TV programs and were invited to lecture all over the world. Major museums, such as the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as London's Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou in Paris have acquired their work.

Rich in historical references, the art and writing by Komar and Melamid play with intellectual and cultural values and stereotypes. Mixing and matching elements of different art styles, cultures, or political systems, they unite a variety of often opposite and contradictory phenomena with an enviable ease. This elusive, fluid material of their work is often provocative, sometimes irritating and shocking, but never boring. Humor, satire, and parody seem to be the glue holding this overflowing mixture together. Perhaps that is why their art always roused such vivid interest and strong reactions and gave the artists a reputation of having fun and engaging personas in the Moscow and the New York art scenes.

The effect of humor in their work even went so far that many of their peers did not take them



Double Self-Portrait from the Sots-Art series, 1973



Socialist realism symbol with profiles of Lenin and Stalin, n.d.

seriously, either in Russia or in the United States, and even thought of them as clowns. Melamid remembered: “No one, not one person from Kabakov’s or Rabin’s circle, took what we were doing seriously. ‘It’s a joke, it’s amusing—they’re funny guys—but it’s not art—that was the general opinion.’” Or: “Two weeks after we came to the United States, we realized that we had comedic careers,” Komar remembered.² “It seems, being funny is the main theme. . . . The artist as clown. That’s what we were—clowns.”³

Komar and Melamid’s work, however, is complex and multilayered. It touches upon traumatic historical and personal subjects, and humor is just that spoonful of sugar that helps the message reach the viewer. Their art was born of a negation of the Soviet idiosyncrasies, senseless propaganda, and numbing rituals of the 1960s and 1970s but also of a collective trauma from Stalin’s terror. They were the first among the artists who dared to open up to the reality around them and engage with images of Soviet propaganda. Their collaboration began in 1972, and right away they invented a new and highly influential style, sots-art (*Double Self-Portrait*, above). Sots-art was a reaction to the overproduction of Soviet ideology and visual propaganda and addressed their

abundant presence in people’s everyday lives. It was a style that combined two seemingly parallel realities of Soviet life: official and private.⁴

Life in the Soviet Union was characterized by what George Orwell called “doublethink,” the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously. As the nonconformist poet Dmitri Prigov once noted, “Absolutely everyone in the USSR lived a double life, and it was the right thing to do.”⁵ Even the citizens most loyal to the regime, and even the representatives of the authorities themselves, time and again violated in the private sphere the taboos entwined in public life by the Soviet government since the 1930s. But it was especially true of the intelligentsia, who consciously and consistently sought escape from Soviet reality. As Andrei Erofeev correctly points out:

During those years . . . [Soviet] society not only dreamed but actively worked on escaping from the spell of Soviet ideology and, in a spiritual impulse, moved toward the West (mastering modernist trends) or the East (developing metaphysical, Zen-Buddhist practices). Escapism, running away from Soviet reality and essentially from oneself,



Portraits of Wives (diptych) from the Sots-Art series, 1972

was the main trend of the submissive society. Komar and Melamid on the contrary wanted to deepen self-identification and build a model of a specifically Soviet vision of reality. It was a radical approach which proved to be convincing for a whole range of Moscow artists.⁶

Komar and Melamid were the first to transfer the empirical experience of Soviet “double life” into a cultural text and dared to combine in one work of art the two parts of the Soviet world that everyone else preferred to keep as far apart as possible (see *Portraits of Wives*, above). This was the root of their “conceptual eclectic” style, which they would use widely in their art.

An important aspect of Komar and Melamid’s art is that they were always receptive to their

immediate environment and responded to it in their work. They took little for granted and perceived everything with a grain of salt. The level of tolerance for the falsehood on one side and the detachment from reality on the other was very low. It seems that—by way of humor—they always wanted to get to the essence of things, turn them inside out, and expose the underlying truth. In one of their performances they even fed the newspaper *Pravda* (which means “truth”) into a meat grinder in order to find its essence. (see *The Essence of Truth*, pp. 14 and 152–55). This is why it was difficult for them to accept their peers, who distanced themselves from reality and whose art was detached from it, such as the metaphysical painting of Vladimir Veisberg. Equally, they did not accept the disengagement from reality of their American colleagues. According to



The Essence of Truth (Grinding Pravda), 1975

Melamid: “To this day, there’s a conflict between what we do and did, even already in America, and what was being done around us. Because we’re more like ‘people with common sense.’”⁷

Having arrived in New York at the end of the 1970s, when so-called mainstream American art was in fashion, they, despite the logic of the art market, did not compromise their ways by embracing a single recognizable style. They embarked on a series of highly diverse and unexpected projects, starting with the creation of a firm that bought and sold souls, addressing American consumer culture, and moving to their “dark” classic paintings from the series *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* (pp. 229, 231–32, 234); to using social polls to create the world’s most wanted and most unwanted paintings (pp. 256–67), to the monumental painting *Yalta 1945* (pp. 236–39) and *Anarchistic Synthesisism* (pp. 233, 243). Their art has always reflected the eclectic fabric of life, and following their method of conceptual eclecticism was a principal position:

Yes, because our eclecticism represents a very clear idea: to put everything in the picture, the whole world. . . . The opposite idea, of course, is that less is better. The less paint you put on your canvas, the better.

But we feel that the more you put on, even invisible layers, the better. . . . In New York, the richer the neighborhood, the more pure. The fewer layers of paint on everything. But if you walk down Canal Street or on the Lower East Side, you see millions of layers. . . . We’re doing Canal Street art in this studio—the more, the better. It’s like a letter to God: More.⁸

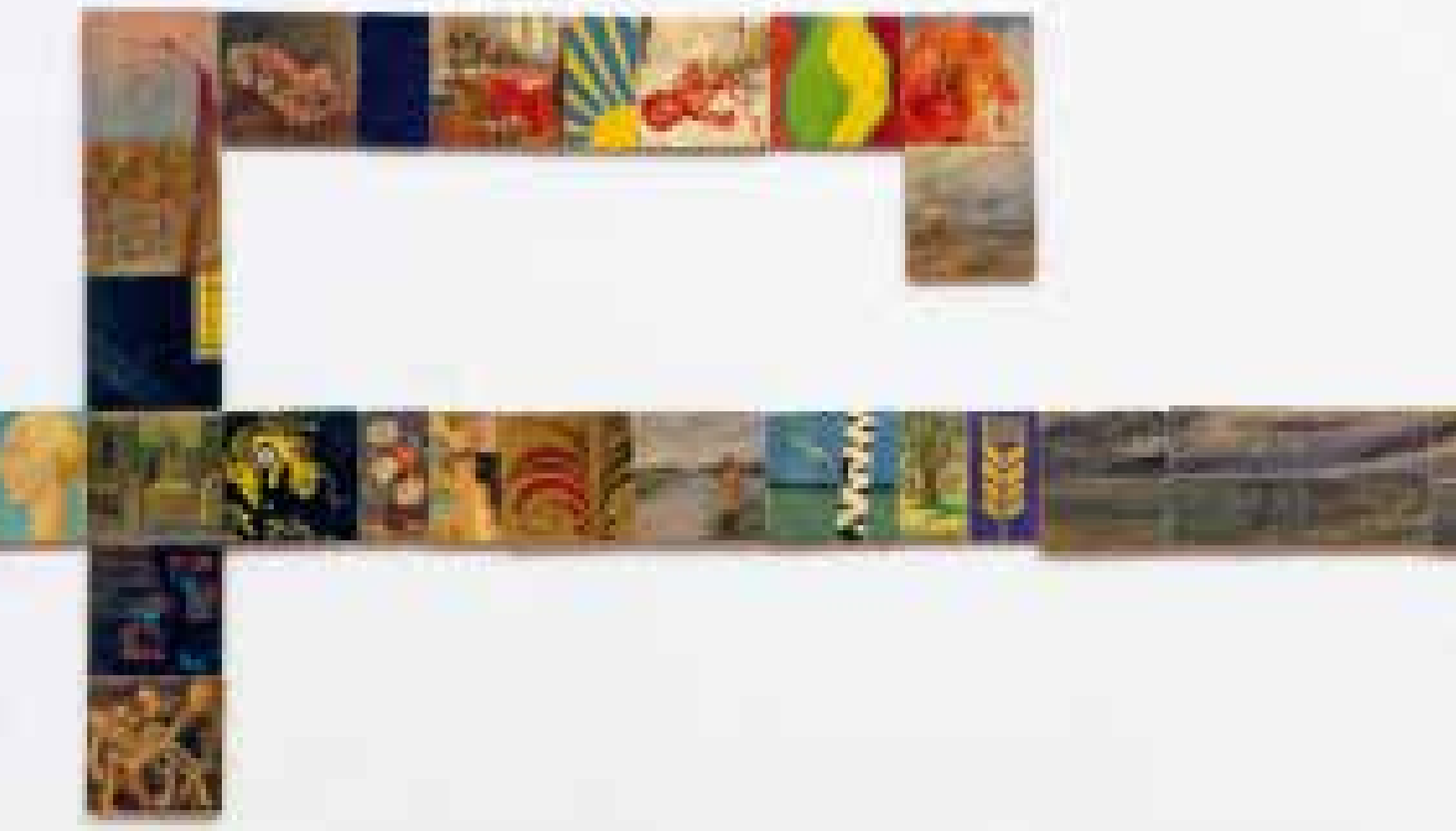
This immersion into the life of the present day—into “the sea of certain points” that they analyzed in their art and that included memories and the past—helped the artists to anticipate many developments of the future. Their deliberate eclecticism, ample use of quotations, irony, and skepticism toward the grand narratives of history and art history and their opposition to any stability of meaning that they practiced in their art from the 1970s on put them in the vanguard of the postmodernist movement. Their art, however, contains features of many more contemporary discourses and concerns. As far back as 1970, they anticipated and addressed many such contemporary issues as fake news—in their claim to have discovered a previously unknown artist, Apelles Ziablov, who invented abstract art in the eighteenth century; art therapy in



their work *Color Is a Mighty Power* (pp. 172); and ecological art activism in *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke* (left) or the elephant painting project (pp. 254–55). Overall, they predicted in the 1970s and 1980s the ways that art would develop and function in a contemporary society. Contemporary art now is eclectic and pluralistic, and it takes more and more of an activist position in fighting for social and political change. The metaphysical and formal reflections that art was concerned with not so long ago gave way more and more to artists' social and political positions, often via personal stories. Art becomes a good tool for activism because of its capacity to move people emotionally and to translate messages through nonverbal means that penetrate directly into consciousness and even subconsciousness. In addition, art allows for a much greater degree of social impunity. Ever since the early 1900s, when avant-garde artists appeared in public wearing colorful, eccentric clothes and with painted faces and an *épater-le-bourgeois* attitude, art became an avenue for probing and introducing to society daring new ideas, looks, and thoughts.⁹ Art is a contemporary tool for pushing boundaries, changing political and social behaviors, and changing histories. Komar and Melamid's art contributed tremendously to changing the social and political landscape of the Soviet Union. Their appropriation in art and mockery of government propaganda (*We Were Born to Make the Fairytale Come True*, p. 98)—a strategy that they initiated, and which then was developed by other artists of the sots-art movement—produced a strong undermining effect on the prestige of Soviet power and advanced its fall.

However, while many contemporary art practices are far too serious in their presentation, Komar and Melamid's art always uses irony and laughter. Their art was born in a country where the government recognized the ideological and emotional capacity of art and heavily restricted

Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke, 1975



Biography of Our Contemporary, 1972-73

art practices for that very reason. It severely punished those who disobeyed. In such confining conditions, humor was arguably the only effective tool for introducing radical, daring, and dangerous art. It helped fight the fear and cut through the borders of stereotypes of both official and unofficial cultures. And although because of their humor Komar and Melamid's art was often not perceived seriously, it got the message through. The poet Lev Rubinstein, who was in the same Moscow circles as Komar and Melamid in the 1970s, and who very well understood the function of laughter in a totalitarian society, wrote on his Facebook page in the spring of 2022:

The ability to laugh is perhaps the last thing we have the right to lose. Because it is not only a life-tested defensive reaction to the powerful pressure of the ominous

absurdity that is happening around us, not only a reliable measure of the moral and aesthetic criteria that have been preserved in us, but also a universal way to talk to each other or at least send signals to each other in the midst of the muddy swamp vapors of the so-called information space. The ability to laugh is the affirmative answer of each of us to the desperate question: "Hey! Is there anyone alive here?" Because laughter is life.

It is also essential to understand the importance and relevance of history, and above all personal history, in Komar and Melamid's art. Contemporary art today relies heavily on the presentation of personal histories, and the cultural and ethical landscape of today's world is changing through drawing attention to individual lives.



I argue that Komar and Melamid pioneered this aspect of contemporary art as well, perceiving art as a reflection of their personal histories since their 1972–73 work *Biography of Our Contemporary* (above). Their art was always a personal diary, and the eclecticism of their styles was best suited to reflecting the moods and phases of ever-changing life: “Personal life is really historical life. If audiences think we are just cynical, they don’t realize that our art is our diary.”¹⁰ They perceived their own history as being closely connected to social history: “There is no contradiction between the history of mankind and one’s own story because we believe now that we are history. We are no smaller than history and no bigger. We are history.”¹¹

As part of their personal history, Komar and Melamid looked to their past and addressed their memories of childhood, intermingled with the

trauma of Stalin’s repressions. The memories of Stalin and his cult of personality were deep and profound and affected the entire nation. Tens of millions of people were executed or died in gulag labor camps under unbearable conditions. It was true genocide of a nation by its own people. After Stalin’s death and the famous “secret speech” by Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, about Stalin’s crimes against the Soviet people,¹² Stalin’s statues and portraits placed in all official spaces, squares, and streets were immediately removed from their pedestals and either destroyed or buried. Overnight, Stalin became persona non grata in official as well as unofficial discourse. It was simply too traumatic a topic, both unambiguous and terrifying for the powers and the population alike.

The first generation of nonconformist artists who established themselves at the end

of the 1950s and in the 1960s preferred, as I mentioned, to seek refuge from Soviet reality in highly individualized personal styles. After decades of propaganda about collective values, mass repression, and portraits of Stalin everywhere, finding and reestablishing the individual seemed to be the most important task. The next generation, the other sots-artists, also rarely depicted Stalin's figure but were concerned mainly with the absurdities of Soviet life. Komar and Melamid were the only ones among nonconformist artists who dared to address this trauma and to bring up the ghost of Stalin directly (see *Stalin in Front of the Mirror*, pp. 10, 232).¹³ Their art, as I discussed above, was always finely attuned to the world around them, and they could not fail to address "the elephant in the room" and the persona of Stalin, which was so deeply embedded in people's minds and which constituted a crucial part of their collective history and memory.

It must have taken a lot of courage and even a certain degree of recklessness to turn to subjects that were practically taboo among both peers and authorities. But the most courageous thing that Komar and Melamid have achieved was recognizing themselves as products (or by-products) of the Soviet system, while many other nonconformists have taken a distancing stand. As Vitaly Komar testifies:

Everything, even children's books or decoration of a Young Pioneers' camp, was an important precinct of Soviet propaganda. Sots-art was an acknowledgment of the fact, that all of us, directly or indirectly participated in it. Moreover, sots-art for me personally was a self-purification. Because these idols are in me. . . . Because these idols were implanted into my brain while I was still at school. And I squeezed these idols out drop by drop.

And humor was the only way to deal with this trauma: "It was always self-deprecating irony as a means of self-purification. . . . It was

self-deprecating irony and idoloclasm. Idoloclasm, which used irony as a weapon."¹⁴

As Peter Wollen observed: "The past cannot be denied. Like the repressed it always returns, and when it is foreclosed (as Lacan noted) it returns in the form of madness."¹⁵ In light of recent political events—the war in Ukraine and the rise of new totalitarian tendencies in Russia—Komar and Melamid's art acquires new relevance. The collective trauma that was not sufficiently addressed even by the intelligentsia, not to mention by the state and the nation as a whole, has resurfaced, threatening the current world order. The question that many people ask themselves at this moment is "How could this happen?" Komar and Melamid's art may offer a response to such a question.

There is a point where people mix up what they enjoy, what they think has aesthetic value, with historical value. If they don't like a picture of Stalin or Hitler, they forget about the historical value of such a subject. After all, Stalin and Hitler are the most significant figures of this [the twentieth] century historically. They gave valuable lessons to the century. Not necessarily to the next century, but the lesson is valuable anyway. But history teaches us no aesthetic lessons. On the other hand, maybe art can teach historical lessons.¹⁶

The necessity of openly recognizing the traumas of the past and their effect on our present is currently being discussed by many political and social analysts. Komar and Melamid's art shows a way of dealing with the past while pioneering the future and gives an important lesson in history.

NOTES

1. Alexander Melamid interview with Yuri Albert in Yuri Albert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo* [Moscow conceptualism: Beginning], exh. cat. (Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia: Privolzhskii filial GTsSI, 2014), 112. For English translation, see this volume, p. 82.
2. Vitaly Komar in Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 37.
3. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 120.

4. As explained in greater detail in Andrei Erofeev's article "Sots Art," in *Kollektzia! Art contemporain en URSS et en Russie, 1950–2000*, exh. cat. (Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2017), 221–25.
5. Erofeev, "Sots Art," 221.
6. Erofeev, "Sots Art," 223. Translated from Russian by JT.
7. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 111.
8. Melamid interview, in Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 43. Komar and Melamid's studio was on Lispenard Street, with windows facing Canal Street.
9. There are multiple examples of artists in the 1900s and 1910s changing their social looks and behaviors, including the painted face of David Burliuk, the yellow blouse of the poet Mayakovsky, or the colorful patchwork dress of Sonia Delaunay.
10. Melamid interview in Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 40.
11. Melamid interview in Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 51.
12. This speech was delivered at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, three years after Stalin's death.
13. With the exception of Leonid Sokov, who referred to Stalin as a folklore comical personage of mass culture.
14. Vitaly Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 94.
15. Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 187.
16. Vitaly Komar interview, in Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 40.



Komar and Melamid as an Invented Author

ANDREI EROFEEV

The names Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid are invariably associated with the word “sots-art.” Joining together in a creative duo, the artists indeed gave birth to the style that, under this designation, entered all encyclopedias of contemporary art. Everything began with a modest and nameless series of paintings produced in 1972, which three years later grew into the project for an exhibition, to which Vladimir Paperny gave the name by which it came to be known—sots-art. The exhibition brought together several artists who supported Komar and Melamid. Works were contributed by Vyacheslav Sysoev, Alexander Kosolapov, Alexandr Yulikov, and artists of the group Gnezdo. The contributions were brought to Alexander Melamid’s apartment and were supposed to be exhibited in the building of the local Housing Management Office. But officials from the KGB intervened, as was their custom, and the exhibition did not take place. Instead, there was only a viewing of the works at the apartment and a mock-up for a catalogue prepared by Yulikov. Nevertheless, this exhibition that never opened was seen by a large number of people, and many of the ideas embedded in its conception—ideas about an incestuous union between modernism and socialist realism—turned out to be so contagious that over time they were adopted by hundreds of artists working in the most varied genres and art forms, including cinema, theater, and even literature. As a consequence, for several decades sots-art served as a calling card for Russian art.

On the international stage, it assumed a place alongside such postmodern movements as the neo-expressionism of the German Neue Wilde and the futurist transavantgarde of the Italians. This dissemination was facilitated by the second version of sots-art created by Komar and Melamid in the mid-1980s under the title

“Nostalgic Socialist Realism.” Long before the final collapse of the Soviet world, it marked out the ideological content of the nostalgic imperialist tendency that would go on to define the work of many post-Soviet artists of the 2000s (for example, Valery Koshlyakov, Vladimir Dubossarsky and Alexander Vinogradov, Timur Novikov, Andrei Molodkin, Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt). Sots-art molded the tastes and thinking not only of painters but also of historians, critics, art collectors, museum workers (the best example is the philosopher Boris Groys). The most important curators fell under the sway of its ideas. For sots-art eliminated the universally accepted opposition between modernism and totalitarian academicism, proposing instead their own duality within the structure of the artistic culture of the twentieth century. Thanks to it, socialist realism gained admittance to museums not as a form of kitsch, but as genuine art. Sots-art was called the “mainstream” of an age of changes—the art of the period in which the Communist formation broke down. In this capacity, sots-art stepped into Europe, where in the countries of the collapsing socialist camp it found its first foreign adepts—Jerzy Truszkowski in Poland, Flatz in East Germany. It found an echo in the capitalist camp as well: Hans Haacke, Antoni Muntadas, and Olivier Blauart have produced striking examples of a foreign sots-art that has no connection with any Soviet reality. Yet sots-art made its strongest impact in the East, where it constituted a crucial impetus in the emergence of the contemporary art of China of the 1990s. Today, many viewers know this style from the works of Wang Guangyi, Zhang Bin, and Ai Weiwei. In sum, there are few artists who can claim to have made a discovery as influential as sots-art has turned out to be.

Nonetheless, I will be so bold as to claim that sots-art is far from Komar and Melamid’s main

invention. There is no question that it made them famous. But it was itself a by-product of their creative method. A fitting parallel, probably, may be drawn with Vladimir Nabokov, whose worldwide fame came with the novel *Lolita*, although nymphomania and ephebophilia were hardly the most important aspects of Nabokov's understanding of humanity. Just so, in the overall panorama of Komar and Melamid's body of work over many years, sots-art stands next to subjects that have no relation to it whatsoever—series of eclectic paintings that combine museum art with minimalism, idiotic performances devoted to selling pseudo-paintings, clinical therapy by means of color and light, drawing with elephants, photographing with monkeys, and so on. Considering the whole scope of these disparate subjects, one forms the impression of a chaotic and unmethodical body of work. It is as if the artists, instead of nurturing and developing their main invention, preferred to pursue a multitude of other subjects, jumping from topic to topic, fooling around a great deal, wasting themselves on trifles. This, by the way, is precisely the view of not a few critics and collectors (for example, Olga Kholmogorova, Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, Kirill Svetlyakov). They regard Komar and Melamid's work as a stylistic phenomenon that exists within the general flow of approaches found in contemporary art. The distinctive feature of their style is seen by them to consist in Komar and Melamid's rehabilitation of Grand Art—which had been canceled a century ago by the victorious avant-garde—in the reactualization of painting and in the restoration of the rights of the traditional European genre of large figurative painting. In other words, Komar and Melamid are interpreted almost as anti-modernists or as neo-traditionalists, who have used the technique of eclectic appropriation and allusion to restore to painting its historical tail. If one approaches the work of Komar and Melamid not selectively, but sees and accepts it in its full scope as an artistic construction that is subject to common rules, then Komar and Melamid's main achievement will be seen to be neither movement nor maneuvering within the stylistic flux of

contemporary art but an exit from it for the sake of looking at it from the side. This exit, in other words, this refusal to produce art objects with inherent value, became the birth of Komar and Melamid as an artistic duo.

I will attempt to explain what I mean using architecture as an example. During the 1960s and 1970s, everywhere in the socialist camp individual architectural design was reduced to a minimum. It was pushed out by the engineering blueprints of the technicians of standardized industrial housebuilding. Meanwhile, architects were redirected toward commissions of unique public buildings. Such commissions were infrequent, prestigious, and enjoyed by a small number of seasoned and fashionable architects. So the young people who graduated from architecture schools were left with nothing. The only prospect that was presented to them was to toil away in subordinate roles for the masters, who by that time had lost all understanding of contemporary architecture. It was then that a group of young architects decided to give up their professional careers altogether, quit their jobs, and occupy themselves with free drawing on architectural subjects. Naturally, the first thing they did was to make fun of the large-scale modular or *plattenbau* construction that had cut off their oxygen. They did not think of their fantasies as actual architecture, never turned them into blueprints, never built them. Their drawings remained just that, reflections of flights of fancy. But it was precisely these drawings that prepared the transformation in tastes and consciousness that brought down the modernist school and launched postmodernism.

A direct parallel (and prefiguration) of this situation in the world of architecture in the 1970s and 1980s can be seen in the crisis that exploded in the artistic life of Moscow in the 1960s. Socialist realism had long become thematically and formally standardized. Large deviations from the canons of a thematic painting or a monument to fallen heroes were not allowed. So for artists in this agitational sphere, there was nothing to do. In art that was more alive, meanwhile, stagnation

had set in. The once very lively camp of contemporary art had been banned by the authorities and driven underground, into a life and production of artworks outside the law, which precluded showing them in public. During the liberal times of the Thaw, these artists had been enthusiastic participants in the global movements of abstract expressionism, kineticism, minimalism, surrealism. But the orientation toward the West, the fashion for things American, supported by contacts and the exchange of information, began to weaken. The feeling of involvement in a common undertaking evaporated. Along with it disappeared the feeling of a common “spirit” of the times. And conversely, the notion of profound and insuperable differences between two political systems, each of which existed in its own time, became increasingly entrenched. And if in the West the breakneck alternation of avant-garde styles continued, with mass culture, design, and architecture all running after them and attempting to transform the living environment according to the patterns of the latest aesthetic ideas, then in the USSR no one was rushing anywhere or changing anything. The world had become paralyzed, frozen in normative, standardized, and eternal forms. It was as if history had ended, and all unexpectedness and spontaneity were excluded. Over time, even human reactions to the stagnation became standardized and predictable. All movement was replaced by repetition.

The image of a “frozen world” is the point of departure for practically all variants of the nonconformist art of the late 1960s. Styles received from the West were replaced by a set of individual retrospectively oriented manners, in which the local themes of God-seeking and mysticism sounded ever more loudly. Art that was metaphysical, atemporal, purified of all signs of the present, became the main tendency of this period. Both formalists and abstractionists continued working in these circles, but they too, forfeiting the connection with the present, produced paintings in the spirit of the 1930s. These archaic features were additionally cultivated by an art market that had emerged, after a fashion, in the

underground. To infrequent foreign purchasers, it passed off derivativeness as cultural specificity and local color. On the whole, in comparison to American and European art, which Soviet artists learned about through publications in the Polish and Czechoslovak press, the unofficial Soviet art of the late 1960s came across as parochial and rather archaic. Of course, there remained isolated individuals who had not abandoned the idea of bringing it into line with international artistic trends. People awaited the appearance of a Russian pop art. Concerning these hopes, Vitaly Komar at the time made a clever remark: “In a country with a universal product deficit, there can be no pop-art.”¹

Before radically veering off to the side, Komar and Melamid in fact tested out both of these professional prospects—the official and the unofficial. In the context of fashionable trends of the “underground,” Vitaly Komar tried his luck with surrealism, and Alexander Melamid with expressionism. Quickly recognizing that their works lagged hopelessly behind actual art, they attempted to offer a theoretical foundation for the local cult of retrospectivism—which was how they titled their first joint exhibit. Thanks to it, they naively expected to become members of the Union of Artists. After all, it was this organization—and only this organization—that granted to the aspiring painter the official status of an artist, the exclusive right not to have any additional place of employment, the opportunity to exhibit work and, in general, to lead a professional life. Their first step proved successful. In 1968, Komar and Melamid were granted admittance to the youth section of the Union of Artists. But only a year later they were expelled “for failure to adhere to the principles of socialist realism and for distorting Soviet reality.” This terrible verdict, which went on the record in their “file,” unquestionably meant the end of any legitimate career. Especially so, since all this happened against the background of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, at the very height of the persecution campaign against nonconformity, in which emphasis was placed on the struggle against the

intelligentsia “element” and especially against freethinking cultural workers.

“Vitalik and I made a discovery,” Melamid recalled, “that no god of art existed any longer and that there was no one to worship. The art of nonconformism turned out to be the same kind of nonsense as socialist realism. In the latter, there was still some kind of propagandistic utility, but in nonconformism there was nothing, slimy nonsense, the fecklessness of the intelligentsia.” In this way, banishment from the professional community and a complete disillusionment with the significance of the common cause triggered their decision to distance themselves from existing forms of art.

Renouncing art is a tried-and-tested technique of many avant-garde artists of the twentieth century. Usually, it consists in a transition from producing inherently valuable art objects to creating instruments for changing ways of life and thought. Some went into politics, others into engineering, still others into philosophy. The best example in the USSR is the “industrial art” of the 1920s; in the West, in France, it is situationism. Komar and Melamid chose to give up art without such a decisive distancing from the territory of art. Therefore, while the works of ordinary “refuseniks,” as a rule, cease to be artistic artifacts and become documents of the artist’s activity, in the case of Komar and Melamid it remains appropriate to talk about art objects. Admittedly, they are devoid of inherent value, and, what is more important, they carry within themselves their own negation. They embrace an intentional contradiction between form and meaning. For example, the painterly technique is impeccable, the format chosen is that of a ceremonial painting, but the subject offered is intimately obscene (for example, the act of masturbation in the painting *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, opposite). Or on the contrary, a significant historical moment is daubed onto canvas using an inept and tasteless painterly technique (*Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll at Rostropovich’s Country House*, p. 20). Serious performance art events devoted to important subjects resemble

idiotic pranks. A viewer who attempts to find in the works of Komar and Melamid some form of beauty and harmony (even one that is different from any commonly accepted norm), some form of sincerity, depth, and originality of worldview, will invariably be disappointed. These works contain no profound revelations of any kind. Therefore, if not out loud, then at least in their own minds, many consider the works of Komar and Melamid to be the embodiments of tastelessness and professional degradation. But to evaluate the art of Komar and Melamid in this way is no different from criticizing a parodist for mockery. It is precisely parodying all forms and types of artistic production and stereotypes of painters’ ways of acting and thinking, as well as the persons and institutions that serve them—in short, the art world in all of its manifestations. Such is the task that Komar and Melamid set for themselves. They did not abandon the platforms of artistic life; they continued to live in accordance with the rules of the art world—to exhibit, to give interviews, to paint daily, and so forth. But their profound disillusionment changed them inwardly and permanently in a radical manner. That which they had worshipped previously appeared before them in a completely devalued light.

“All that is not parody is kitsch.” This line from their book-manifesto *Poems About Death* defines their attitude to the surrounding art world.² One might make a cautious assumption that, in this formula, “parody” denotes contemporary art, while “kitsch” refers to official art and folk art. Self-debunking is already latently present in these artistic phenomena themselves, Komar and Melamid believe. One need only bring this aspect of them more sharply into focus, to make it clearly readable for everyone. All of Komar and Melamid’s work is devoted to this objective.

They held an enormous crooked mirror up to the artistic culture of their era, which transformed the features of the surrounding artistic reality. I am partial to this metaphor. A mirror

Girl in Front of a Mirror, 1981–82. Oil on canvas, 72 × 50 in. (183 × 127 cm). Courtesy of the artists



has no inner content, no depth. And if its surface reflects something distortedly, deforming it, then it does so not out of any malicious intent, but due to its own curvilinear properties. Nonetheless, the effect of distortion by itself generates a novel image of a familiar object, as a rule presenting it in a comic and awkward light. I think that the conceit of the Komar and Melamid duo involved such a relation to reality. Working within the framework of their alliance, which lasted from 1972 to 2003 on the artistic stage first of Moscow, then of New York, and then of both megalopolises simultaneously, Komar and Melamid programmatically gave up their independent identities. Each of them renounced his own life, biography, tastes, opinions, gender- and age-based preferences. “The reason we paint together, Komar and I, is in order to rule out the subjective and to demonstrate nothing but the facts,” Melamid has said. “We want to show reality with maximal precision, and in order to do so, we need to give up individual perception.” The duo saw itself as one author in two persons without dividing itself into different spheres of activity, roles, or voices. Therefore, when referring to Komar and Melamid, it would be more correct to employ the singular pronoun “he,” rather than the plural “they.” It is important to note that the Komar and Melamid construct is deliberately free of inner substance. It excludes all personal content of human experience, knowledge, or emotional preoccupations. One must not look in it for any humaneness. Even the irony that colors all of Komar and Melamid’s work has roots that are less emotional than formal.

To serve as a crooked mirror of reality, the duo made use of the genre of the parodic work of art, for the production of which Komar and Melamid mastered two forceful mechanisms—eccentricity and “defamiliarization.” Let me briefly review the meaning of the parodic work of art and the characteristics that differentiate it from a “normal” artistic product. It may be splendidly wrought, splendidly distinguished in some aspect of its formal structure, the beauty of its brushstrokes or the vividness of its rhymes, but it is not



Post Art No. 1 (Andy Warhol), 1973. Oil on canvas, 48 × 35⁷/₈ in. (122 × 91 cm). Courtesy of the artists

intended to become an object with inherent value or an independent statement about the world. Its essence is connected with the source to which it reacts. A parody is not an answer addressed to the creators of the original. It is a retelling of the original using new words. Translated literally, this Greek term means “re-singing,” that is, the repetition of the same song. Without its source, a parody is devoid of content. Therefore, parody may be described as an art about art, which existed long before the appearance of conceptualism. Incidentally, when Komar and Melamid began working together, they knew nothing about conceptualism. Their information was limited to pop art. Therefore, their criticism of art acquired features that were characteristic specifically of parody (see *Post Art No. 1 [Andy Warhol]*, above).

The term “defamiliarization” is a neologism that felicitously combines the concepts of

“distancing” and “strangeness.” It was invented and introduced by the literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, who noted in a number of literary works (Leo Tolstoy’s, for example) a particular effect of refreshing and renewing perception. In order to disable people’s automatic perception of familiar objects and to compel them to look in a new way, authors have used uncomprehending descriptions of such objects, descriptions that seem to have been made by someone unfamiliar with them. In such descriptions, objects appear unfamiliar and are “estranged” from us (a term used by Bertolt Brecht, who also noted this phenomenon). Komar and Melamid employed defamiliarization repeatedly. For example, both versions of sots-art rely on it. In them, Soviet visual and propagandistic culture appears as if seen for the first time and from far away, from the depths of another culture. And therefore, it is read and retold in the logic and language of this other culture. Thus, in the first version of sots-art (1972–73), we behold a story told by a foreigner, most likely an American, who is accustomed to the forms and languages of the latest Western art. In this retelling, an academic painting on the subject of the Great Patriotic War becomes an amusing comic strip à la Roy Lichtenstein (*The Fascist and the Komsomol Girl*); an agitational street slogan, which this foreigner, naturally, cannot read, seems to be something like Neo Geo (*Quotation*, p. 97); another slogan recalls a conceptual textual work in the vein of Jenny Holzer (*You Are Feeling Good!*, p. 100). In other words, Soviet agitational production was seen through the prism of pop art. After moving to the United States, Komar and Melamid made a similar project with a retelling of American life using Soviet discourse. The second version of sots-art, “nostalgic socialist realism” (1980–85), is also built on the mistakes of retelling. Here, the foreigner-interpreter several times makes crude mistakes in his choice of subject. Recalling the “socialist content” of thematic paintings portraying important milestones of Soviet history seen in the USSR, the foreigner offers an example of a historical fact whose mention was categorically



Proletarian and Madonna from the Sots-Art series, 1972

forbidden in Soviet historiography (*Khrushchev’s Plot Against Beria*; p. 231). The realistic basis of the Soviet official style is also misidentified by him as a form of academic *caravaggismo*.

The other signature move of Komar and Melamid’s poetics is eccentricity. This is what makes it possible to draw a parallel between the work of Komar and Melamid and the crookedness of funhouse mirrors. By means of eccentric commentaries achieved through condensations of pigments, compressions, abridgments, hyperboles, and suggestions, objects and images become warped and swell out. Or conversely, they sharply shrink in size, become terribly simplified, turn inside out to reveal their vulgar undersides. Thanks to these eccentricities, the deformation of meanings accomplished by means of defamiliarization is supplemented by plastically expressive



The Artist, 1972. Oil on canvas, 21³/₄ × 47¹/₄ in. (55 × 120 cm).
Courtesy of the artists

distortions of form. The combination of techniques leads to the inevitable discreditation of the source, to its transformation into a comic object.

Komar and Melamid made their first experiments in parodic art using the stylistics of amateur painting. These little pictures (which include parts of the installation *Paradise* as well as the *Sots-Art* series) may be logically categorized (recalling Magritte's "cow paintings") as "bad art." It required no little effort on Komar and Melamid's part to overcome the high professionalism of the traditional painters they were and to produce paintings of such a pitiful and pathetic appearance. Stretched on crooked frames, poorly drawn on cardboard, they are ungraceful in their colors and crude in their draftsmanship. They recall inept specimens from a flea market. At the same time, when examined in detail, they display to us—in clownish guise—the integrated circuit of the artistic creeds of the local culture. Three religions, which the artistic world of Moscow professed at that time, are represented at once: modernism, icon painting, and socialist realism (see *The Artist*, above). To acknowledge such a cocktail of values was an unacceptable proposition

for a representative of the cultural community of those years. No one would have dared to do so. Yet this triad of artistic cults reflected the genuine state of affairs in an authoritarian society in which it was impossible not to bow down before officialdom, while in private life, at home, it was unofficially permitted to adhere to other values. Eclecticism of thought was characteristic of the whole society; this fact lay on the surface, but thinking and talking about it was unacceptable, considered indecent. Here was an excellent instance of a latent parody, intrinsic to the very artistic life of the time, which Komar and Melamid undertook candidly to demonstrate.

The puzzled viewer looks for an explanation for the "bad art" and finds it in the device of mimicry. Clearly, the Komar and Melamid duo this time is pretending to be a naive artist. Only a dilettante, someone from the dark depths of the masses, could have wrought something like this. For the naive consciousness, the eclectic confusion of tongues and styles is a familiar and everyday affair. The illiterate, socially marginalized "man on the street," who has been educated by the street, is accustomed to mangling

the languages used for communicating by high culture, and makes for quite a convincing figure as the imaginary author of this smeared incompetence.

The Komar and Melamid duo broke the rule of the single mediator. This rule states that between the artist and the viewers, there is a certain medium—a painting, an object, a photograph, and so on—that conceals the painter but at the same time conveys to the viewer the painter's voice, thought, feeling, and temperament. In the work of Komar and Melamid, behind the material mediator stands not the living artist, but the second and most important mediator of their project—an invented character. It is the character who is the putative creator of the art. The device of transferring authorship to a fictitious character is well known in world literature. Sometimes, such a character is embedded into the body of a literary work (for example, Martin Eden in Jack London's novel, Yuri Zhivago in Boris Pasternak's work, Ariadne Oliver in the novels of Agatha Christie, the Master in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*). Sometimes, a whole book is signed with an invented name. Kozma Prutkov, who is among the ten most popular authors in Russia, was invented by three classic writers of Russian literature, who even endowed him with a detailed biography. But in the visual arts, the transfer of authorship to an invented person is very rare. There is, of course, Marcel Duchamp, who signed his famous urinal with the pseudonym "R. Mutt."

The case of Komar and Melamid is unique, since their whole body of work, like no one else's, is replete with numerous invented authors. They include personages with names (the one-eyed painter Nikolai Buchumov, the serf master Apelles Ziablov, the icon painter Dmitry Traver-tinov), but more often they are nameless phantoms—a war reporter, a designer, an art collector, a museum worker, an archaeologist, an ethnographer, a gallery owner, a doctor, a card sharp. Repeatedly, the role of the author in the works of Komar and Melamid has been played by entire institutions—the art gallery, the chiaroscuro



Excavations on Crete (The Golden Age), 1978 (installation detail). Mixed media, variable dimensions. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Courtesy of the artists

therapy clinic, the brokerage firm, the law office. Not one project by Komar and Melamid closes in around a single author. A work is composed of the actions of several characters. (Thus, an archaeologist and a reporter participate in *Post Art*, while *Excavations on Crete* [above] features an archaeologist, an exhibition organizer, and a journalist.) Some of the characters are barely hinted at. Others are worked out in detail to such a realistic degree that one begins to wonder whether they might not have actually existed.

This is a question viewers may well ask themselves as they examine the installations that Komar and Melamid have titled *Legends*. These installations are devoted to the phantom artists mentioned above. These personages are

surrounded by works signed by them, as well as various documents, personal belongings, photographs, archival materials. We see their individualities, biographies, philosophies, and working styles. The legend about Buchumov tells of a plein-air painter of the 1920s who putatively fled from revolutionary upheavals to the countryside and spent his whole life painting studies of the same field (pp. 130–35). Buchumov's landscapes recall actual made-at-home art that stayed low and hid itself from Stalinism. Similar mixtures of realism and expressionism were also prepared with inevitable sketch-like looseness by the painters of the “severe style”—the official style of the 1960s and 1970s. Such subjectless, lyrical paintings, carelessly executed with a few brushstrokes, warmed the souls of the Soviet intelligentsia with their detachment from the din of modernity and were considered a standard of high artistic taste. Komar and Melamid parody these predilections, adding juicy and ungainly details to their story. However, the main meaning of the work is by no means criticism of the Moscow Union of Artists. Rather, it is a parable about the escapist essence of modernism, nurtured on the idea of purity and independence from the surrounding world and society's demands.

Another installation in the form of a museum exhibition is devoted to Apelles Ziablov (pp. 118–29). The letters displayed beside the paintings indicate that this was an autodidact painter who was a serf of some member of the nobility in the time of Catherine the Great. He depicted cosmogonic visions that appeared to him in his dreams as divine revelations. In one case, this is darkness—*His Majesty, Nothing*; in another, fire; in a third, light. But a different interpretation also suggests itself. Ziablov's works are consonant with “metaphysical painting” or visionary abstraction—an extremely fashionable phenomenon in the elite circles of unofficial culture. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, this tendency constituted the peak of the search for spirituality. It was a trend that attracted painters of the most varied convictions, from Mikhail Shvartsman, Eduard Shteinberg, and

Ernst Neizvestny to Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, and Oleg Vassiliev. Everyone painted blindingly white or black objectless visions. Theologians and mystics toiled in this field as well, as did the trend's main ideologue, the philosopher Yevgeny Shiffers, who had undergone what he described as a “piercing mystical experience.” The unintelligible paintings of the unrecognized genius Apelles Ziablov were accompanied by an enormous inscription, which resembled an advertising slogan: “The world's first abstract art.” Clearly, the hoax made fun of Russian chauvinistic myths, which had woven a nest in Russian art criticism as well.

The installations from the *Legends* cycle are made to look like window displays from regional ethnographic museums. In such institutions, it is customary to combine works of art with archival documents, reminiscences, photographs, and other information. Consequently, in addition to the main character—the unknown artist—in these installations we are presented with traces of the work of the archivist and collector who collected these materials, as well as of the museum curator who has used them to assemble a window display exhibit. These phantom figures are not named. It would be logical to consider them Komar and Melamid's own masks for role-playing. In this instance, these masks remain outside the picture. But in a whole series of their works, in which installation is combined with live performances or video documentation of them, the Komar and Melamid duo shows us its dual “collective face.” The best example may be found in a series of performance events produced under the trademark of the limited liability company Komar and Melamid Inc. This company was established and registered in 1978 in New York City, almost immediately after Komar and Melamid arrived there as émigrés. Until 1986, it organized marketing campaigns on the streets of the city using paintings, objects, and photographs. The duo itself acted in the role of intermediaries for the company, as publicity agents, disseminating the company's productions, implementing its marketing or sociological campaigns. In this way,



Komar and Melamid, 1990s. Courtesy of the artists

in addition to the art object, the artist himself, with his own voice, face, and body, physically thrust himself into the field of interaction with the viewer. This situation presented Komar and Melamid with the problem of their own public image. Before Komar and Melamid, this problem was confronted by Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, and Joseph Beuys. They became the pioneers of artistic public image construction. The Komar and Melamid duo inaugurated this topic in Russian art. Posing for ordinary photographs was rejected, and so were self-portraitistic clichés of the artist with a palette looking at the world with the seriousness of a wild animal. In such presentations of one's public image, officialdom and the bohemian world were close to each other in those years. Komar and Melamid worked out a new public image-mask of the artist as a comical and self-deprecating person, a cynic who acts in strange ways and fabricates unusual things. Such a public image is best defined by the concept

“idiot,” in the original philosophical understanding of this concept as an “outsider,” an individual “separated” from the masses and not involved in the social contract. Drawing on classic masks from eccentric theater and film, they constructed for themselves the burlesque public image of two hoaxers, one fat and one skinny. American critics noted their clearly not accidental similarity to the famous silent film duo Laurel and Hardy. Taking this pattern for themselves, Komar and Melamid deepened the public image of the ironic artist, added to it their personal particular explanatory gesture, which exposed the essence of their work. This widely used gesture, made by using two fingers on each hand, indicates “quotation marks,” or textually translated, the phrase “as if.” Usually, it is employed as tacit commentary to words, actions, or things when there is doubt concerning their credibility. Using this gesture in their public image, the Komar and Melamid duo emphasizes the conditionality of their status as artists (above).



Collaboration with Renée the Elephant, 1995. Toledo Zoo & Aquarium, Ohio. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

By means of this gesture, they let it be known that they consider their work to be “as if” art.

While in Komar and Melamid’s earliest series the imaginary author usually hid behind the canvas or object, and one could only guess what kind of character he actually was, in subsequent works he came out of the shadows (naturally, in the public image–mask of Komar and Melamid) and stood beside his object. Initially, this took the form of a staged photograph. A good example of this phase of the development of the genre is the installation *Excavations on Crete* (p. 29). Next to the art object—a natural skeleton crowned by an enormous skull with gigantic horns—was exhibited the photograph of two archaeologists with shovels (played by Komar and Melamid) removing the bone remains of the mythical

Minotaur from a deep pit. From there, it took off. The invented author in the same mask of Komar and Melamid went to Thailand. There, in front of a great crowd of people, he conducted a demonstration painting session with elephants, and in this case it was the elephants who played the role of artists-painters, while the Komar and Melamid duo acted as drovers or tamers who brought the elephants their brushes and from time to time encouraged the obedient animals with bunches of dates and bundles of carrots (above and pp. 254–55). If this work can be called a video play, because its target audience saw it as a whole only as a movie, then by the final stage in this genre—the project *The People’s Choice*—the plays were performed live. Of course, this logical progression was not observed too rigidly, but the overall

direction of Komar and Melamid's work was plain to see. It was oriented toward eccentric theater. Indeed, the theatrical component had always been dominant. What changed over time was merely the relative proportion between actual playacting and the "stage props" of paintings and art objects. Already in the duo's very first work—the installation *Paradise*—this theater with an actor and a stage prop was fully manifested (pp. 107–9).

In contrast to the classic performance artist, who casts off all artificial media, all conditioned public images and apparels, in order to bare body and soul in front of the public, the Komar and Melamid duo steps out before the people as an actor onto a proscenium stage—in an invariable, trademarked, wily public image—mask and with a selection of requisite comic interludes, staged actions, and studied gestures. Despite the fact that this actor-character bears their name, he differs from the real living Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid in about the same way that an actor on a stage differs from the same actor in an everyday situation. They seem to be the same person, but what a difference in appearance and behavior! In life, the actor belongs to himself, while onstage, he is wholly subordinated to his role. He is merely a pawn in the script, which was conceived and written by the playwright. He is a function in the game that the director has proposed to the audience. He is an empty vessel, into which another's conception has been poured. And although the director of the play is none other than the same Komar and Melamid duo, their positional differences from Komar and Melamid the actor are ineradicable. For the actor, it is important scrupulously to inhabit the concrete details of his part in the play, the plastic and psychological outlines of the theatrical situation. While playing his part, he frequently creates his own props—paintings or other works of art. He exerts himself to fabricate them using the methods that are indicated in the script. In one case, his role orders him to come across as an academic painter, and this gives rise to nostalgic socialist realism. In another case, the actor is told to be "as if" an amateur who has picked up a brush for the

first time. The role governs the style of the works of art. It is those critics who fail to take this into account who are prone to talk about the allegedly chaotic variability of Komar and Melamid's body of work.

Komar and Melamid's work may be read and fully appreciated on this level of theatrical acting. However, there is also a second, upper horizon—the level of the play itself, which is in the director's control. It is precisely at this directorial level that the main message of a work by Komar and Melamid is conveyed, built as a two-tiered construction with a lower tier of theatrical entertaining, and an upper tier containing the explosive charge of the parody. To illustrate how such a construction functions, let us turn once again to the performance with the painting elephants.

Among museum workers and art collectors, there were people who were sincerely delighted by the abstractions created by the elephants. Several paintings even ended up in museums. However, if one ignores the exotic nature of the context, the unusualness of the master class—brilliantly conducted and splendidly captured on video—what actually presents itself to us is the sad reality of the worthless quality of these paintings. In this case, this is not "bad art" deliberately imitated by a master, but natural artistic waste products. Komar and Melamid's directorial conceit consisted in using living creatures, elephants, completely unsuited for artistic pursuits, to obtain a horrible result and to connect it with their name. Komar and Melamid created a conceptual link between themselves, who by that time had the status of world-famous artists, and a pure and simple hodgepodge of pigments. At the price of their own reputation, they once again perpetrated a discreditation of contemporary art as a whole. A kind of hara-kiri with the aim of dishonoring their whole profession. Such a recklessly clever move represents an extreme form of criticism. It is a genuine insult, a slap in the face—not the face of public taste,³ though, but the face of the professional values of modernism and the principles of its aesthetics. Needless to say, the parameters of the elephants' paint smears

are perfect embodiments of modernist norms—the expressiveness of the free lines and color patches, the energy and vigor of the strikes of the brush, the painter’s temperament—readable in the rhythm of the brushstrokes—the immediacy, impulsiveness, irrationality, spontaneity. The first thing that comes to mind here is the tradition of insulting criticism directed at the art of abstraction. Attributing authorship of this type of art to “animals” has been a time-honored technique for defaming abstraction. In his time, Mikhail Larionov played along with his opponents, who compared his paintings to the paintings of a donkey. He accepted the challenge and called his exhibition *Donkey’s Tail*.⁴ Komar and Melamid have gone much further. They have given reactionary antimodernist criticism indisputable arguments for justifying its position, by using its hyperboles as a basis for exemplary brutish works of art.

The directorial strategic conceit of a discrediting theatrical production is clearly discernible in the series of projects put out by the company Komar and Melamid Inc. In one of them—the installation *Circle, Square, Triangle*, conceived in Moscow in 1976 and realized in New York and many other cities around the world—this company advertises and distributes print-run series of flat, white geometric figures (p. 157–63). They are created in the simplest manner and could have been made by anyone: cut out of plywood with a fretsaw and painted with ordinary white paint. Selling them as works of high art, Komar and Melamid Inc. assures its clients that ownership of these objects automatically cleanses an office, retail space, or apartment of impurities and changes its energy in a positive direction. The object of the irony here is, of course, speculative enthusiasm regarding the spiritual properties of Russian suprematism and American minimalism. Both of these movements were going through a revival of public interest at the time. Malevich’s name was on everyone’s lips. However, it is not so much criticism of the simplicity of geometric art that occupies Komar and Melamid in this project as it is the conversion of its cult into commercial profits. In a parodic light,

Komar and Melamid expose the whole system of institutions and experts of contemporary art, their method of boosting a ludicrous artistic product through meaningless blather, and the deceitful assurances of promoters.

If this project is devoted to the “white magic” practiced by gallerists and curators, then the second project of the institution Komar and Melamid Inc. concerns “black magic.” It unfolds around the mystical subject of “selling the soul” (pp. 210–19). For anyone wishing to sell or rent out his own soul or to purchase another’s, Komar and Melamid offer to carry out the transaction and to supply it with the necessary documents. Like the one before it, this project was conceived in Moscow, where in the mid-1970s the topic of the devil unexpectedly became a renewed focus of interest with the publication of Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel, the appearance of the short film *The Mathematician and the Devil*, and so on.⁵ It is possible, too, that the motivating impulse for this project by Komar and Melamid came from the famous scene in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* in which the painting spurs the protagonist to sacrifice his soul. However, it is neither the devil, nor the deal with him, that occupies the imagination of Komar and Melamid. This, for them, is only a narrative pretext. What they want to demonstrate is that no less a threat comes from the artist, and that no less an evil is disseminated through the world by the institutions associated with art. For it is precisely they that, in Komar and Melamid’s project, occupy the place of the chief tempter of souls—the devil. Both projects touch on the most important topic of all creativity—the demonstration of the danger of art.

If we leave out the trauma of disillusionment experienced by the artists in their youth, what, we might ask, could explain such an insistent, enduring, and multifariously orchestrated orientation toward discrediting artistic approaches, demonstrating the deceit contained in works of art, and bringing to light the insidious designs of artists, gallerists, and other actors in artistic life? Parody is akin to criticism. It is created in order to fine-tune or change the public’s perception

of the original text to which the parody reacts. Parody initiates critical discussion of an artistic artifact, and therefore its value is measured less by the play of its resemblances to and differences from the original than by the force of the impact that its modified images have on the public. All of Komar and Melamid's work is connected with this communicative function. An occurrence of such communication constitutes that unit of Komar and Melamid's work which alone can be called a genuine "work of art" created by them. Such an event is prepared by a notice in a newspaper, a telegram,⁶ a lecture, an exhibition, a piece of performance art, a demonstration. But in order for the conceit of the work of art to be fully realized, these actions must have an active responsive reaction of laughter, argument, indignation, joyous acceptance, support, outrage, and in some cases, even arrest.

The work of Komar and Melamid is sometimes a virtuosically executed academic painting, sometimes a wretched scribble, a postal form, a certificate, a bad photograph. The criterion of the work's quality is not contained in the form. It is measured by the effect produced in the cultural and social context. What is important to Komar and Melamid is noise, the reaction of the press, which they greedily watch. If their performance or painting is compared to a projectile missile, then what is important to them is not the scandal-explosion, but the effect of the destruction perpetrated by them, which pulverizes tradition, habits, and principles, and opens up the possibility of a new view of history and of contemporary art.

In sum, one could say that, thanks to Komar and Melamid, a new type of artist has arisen in the space of contemporary culture, who, without abandoning artistic activity in the most varied forms and genres, acts as a moderator of public taste. By means of parody, he works to change the landscape of approaches and orientations in actual contemporary art. It may be said that his goal is the regulation of culture. The honor of giving birth to and inhabiting the figure of this "invented author" belongs wholly to the duo of Komar and Melamid.

NOTES

1. Here and below, all quotes from Komar and Melamid are taken from their unpublished interviews and conversations with the author during the 2000s to 2010.
2. Komar and Melamid, *Stikhi o Smerti* [Poems about death] (Moscow: Progress-Traditsija, 1999), 13.
3. "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" was a manifesto published by Russian futurist poets (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, David Burliuk, and others) in 1912 in a poetic anthology of the same title; the title of the manifesto, which rejected all prior aesthetic values, became a popular idiom in Russian culture.
4. An artistic group of the early Russian avant-garde formed in 1911 by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova; the group's first exhibition, also named *Donkey's Tail*, took place in Moscow in 1912.
5. Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*, whose central narrative revolved around a dialogue between the devil and Soviet reality of the 1920s, was first published in 1966–67. *The Mathematician and the Devil*, a short film by Semyon Raytburt (1972), in which the devil, played by Alexander Kaidanovsky, appears before a contemporary Soviet scientist and offers to give him the solution to Fermat's famous last theorem in exchange, of course, for his soul.
6. Among their actions, Komar and Melamid sent a telegram to the German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, in which they claimed responsibility for the earthquake in southern Germany on September 3, 1978. They reported that they did it as part of a "terr-art" magical action.



It Takes Two to Tango

ROBERT STORR

So much has changed in the past half century. That convenient but arbitrary number—fifty years—pushes us back to 1972, a crucial period in world history, if one studies it closely in books or can still remember bits and pieces. It was a period that deeply marked our collective consciousness without having ever had an heroic aura or great moment. Rather, it marked the apogee of the postwar doldrums as well as the height of the Vietnam War and the depths of the Cold War—which, of course, provided the rationale for the former. It was a period of anxious anticipation of The Worst leavened by eruptions of giddy, frequently unnerving absurdity which, in so far as vital signs were concerned, was the best one could hope for. Mere mention of the names of the leaders of the two superpowers presiding over it all brings back the weight of pervasive, stagnant imperial statism, and the matter-of-fact brutality required to maintain the stalemate between East and West: Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev.

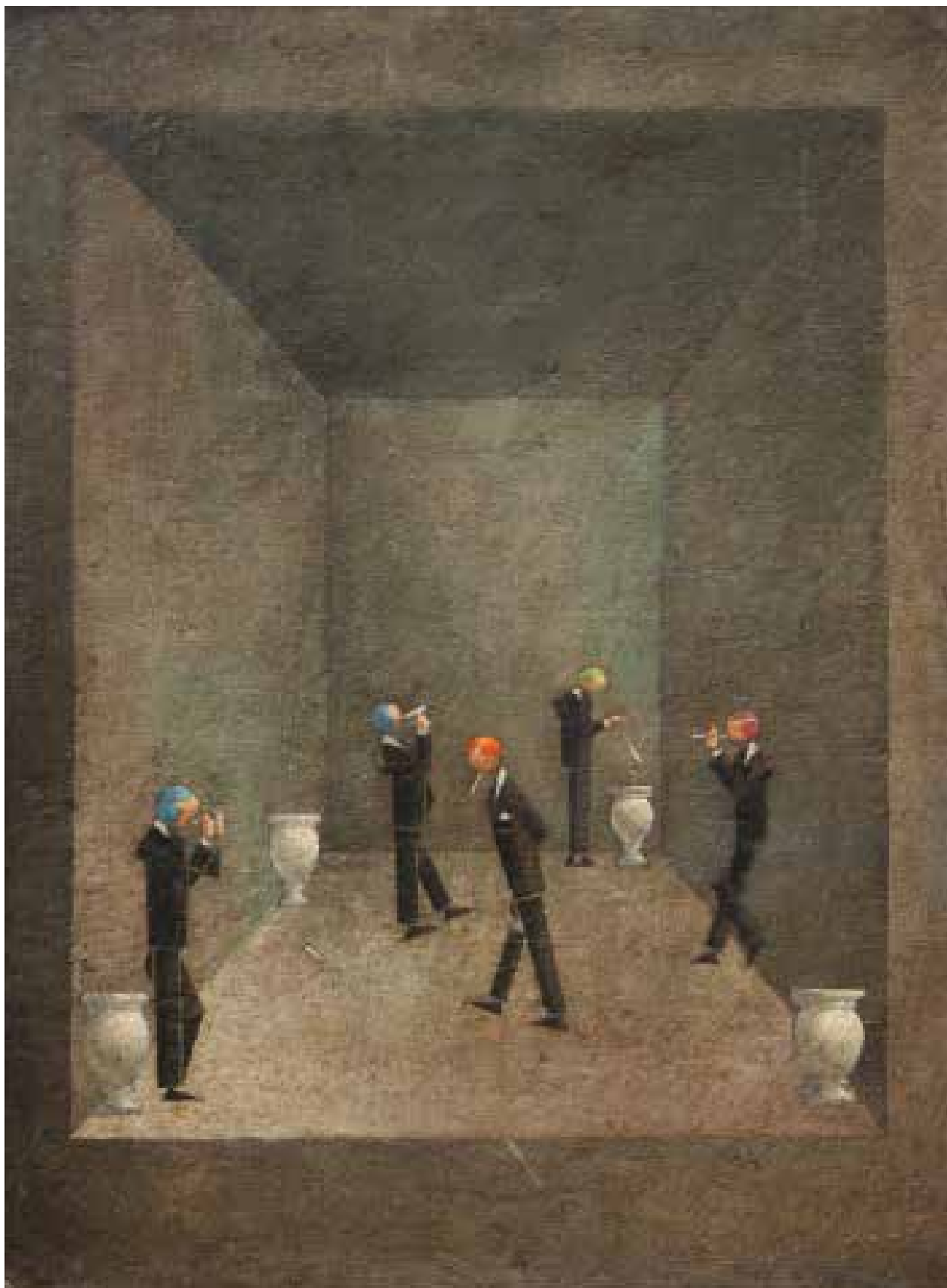
“Free spirits” in both camps sought to leverage whatever agency had been left to them at the margins of the cultural apparatus of the two superpowers—one market driven, the other a creature of government mandates. Those that existed in the East did so due to oversight or shared subversive instincts on the part of fellow traveling insiders, chiefly the editors of journals and artists with steady jobs working within the guilds fostered by the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, in the West, the counterculture that was partly commercial and partly a matter of improvised opposition to business as usual took metamorphic shape. Employed as an importer of Russian books to the United States based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during that era, I observed the trade-offs required to maintain a creative practice on either side of the Iron Curtain. Given the paucity of choices in the East and the frequently

slim yet relatively better array in the West, this correlation might strike some as lopsided. Nonetheless, the oppositional days of the North Atlantic neo-avant-garde predisposed alert members of the American branch of that broad tendency to notice and occasionally take up the cause of their Russian contemporaries and counterparts.

Now, however, the contingencies setting the parameters in the East and the West can no longer be taken for granted on any level or on either side of the equation; neither in the increasingly polarized democracies in the Americas and Europe nor in Putin’s Russia. As renewed aggressive nationalism, conformity of thought, and censorship in this country take hold, we have much to learn or relearn from the example of our Russian comrades struggling to survive and make work in the shadow of authoritarianism—can’t you feel its chill?—and among the first of these lessons is never lose one’s sense of humor when the body politic cramps and spasmodically lurches in dire directions. It is with these in the back of my head that I would like to reconsider the legacy of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, the long-disbanded collaborative team. It may be tempting to consign them to the past given all that has been altered, erased, or rendered obsolete in post-Soviet Russia, but, in truth, they are newly relevant because of the need to rehearse our desperate fight for freedom, and to question and to mock the apparatchiki of liberal democracies gone bad or merely senile.

I will leave it to other contributors to this catalogue to tell the story of the pair’s coming together, and their eventual breakup. Suffice it here to say that reflexive irreverence has always been the key to their impact inside and outside Russia. They were “politically incorrect” in the Soviet context that gave rise to that term, and they are “politically incorrect” in the United States,



Vitaly Komar, *Smoke Room*, 1966. Oil and tempera on canvas mounted on board, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (71.5 × 55 cm). Courtesy of Alexander Kronik



Friendship of Peoples, 1974. Mixed media, 13¾ × 18¾ in. (35 × 47.5 cm). Courtesy of the artists

which appropriated that concept while inverting its Left/Right valences. This is unsurprising in light of the fact that Komar and Melamid are inherently skeptical, mischievous, and, as such, *reactive* talents whose output is neither forward-looking (*avant-garde*) despite its many Dada debts, nor backward-gazing (*arrière-garde*) despite its appropriations of old imagery, dated effects, and depleted conventions, but insistently and, at its best, searchingly and refreshingly provocative. In short, thematically and iconographically disparate, formally multifarious, and in all its manifestations essentially playful, their production is designed, first and foremost, to get a rise out of the viewer, and to tease jaded minds to a sharper appreciation of the idiocy of ideology.

That said, in order to effectively satirize clichés, one must first acknowledge their potential impact and lingering power over the imagination. In that sense almost the entirety of Komar and Melamid's art has been a testimony to the abiding hold that Soviet propaganda has over those raised around it. That is the foundational principle of *sots-art*—a travesty of socialist realism and its mind-and-sense-numbing pieties that Komar and Melamid pioneered starting in the 1970s as the repudiation of Stalinism. That purge was spearheaded by Khrushchev but steadily abated under Brezhnev and his spawn, ending under Putin in a return to Great Russian Chauvinism that incongruously conflates Communism's monolithic style with tsarist tropes.

But that is getting ahead of the story. Taken up by talents as diverse as Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, Vadim Zakharov, and Alexander Kosolapov, the gauntlet thrown down to official Soviet Culture by sots-art and its conceptual derivatives elicited responses to that culture that pivot between love and hate. In the main, socialist realism was all that young Russians knew. And as such, examples of it constituted Zhdanovian rather than Proustian madeleines, talismans of their youth left behind by previous generations of “true believers” in all the Stalinist orthodoxies concerning academic draftsmanship, didactic subject matter, and heroic pictorial rhetoric.

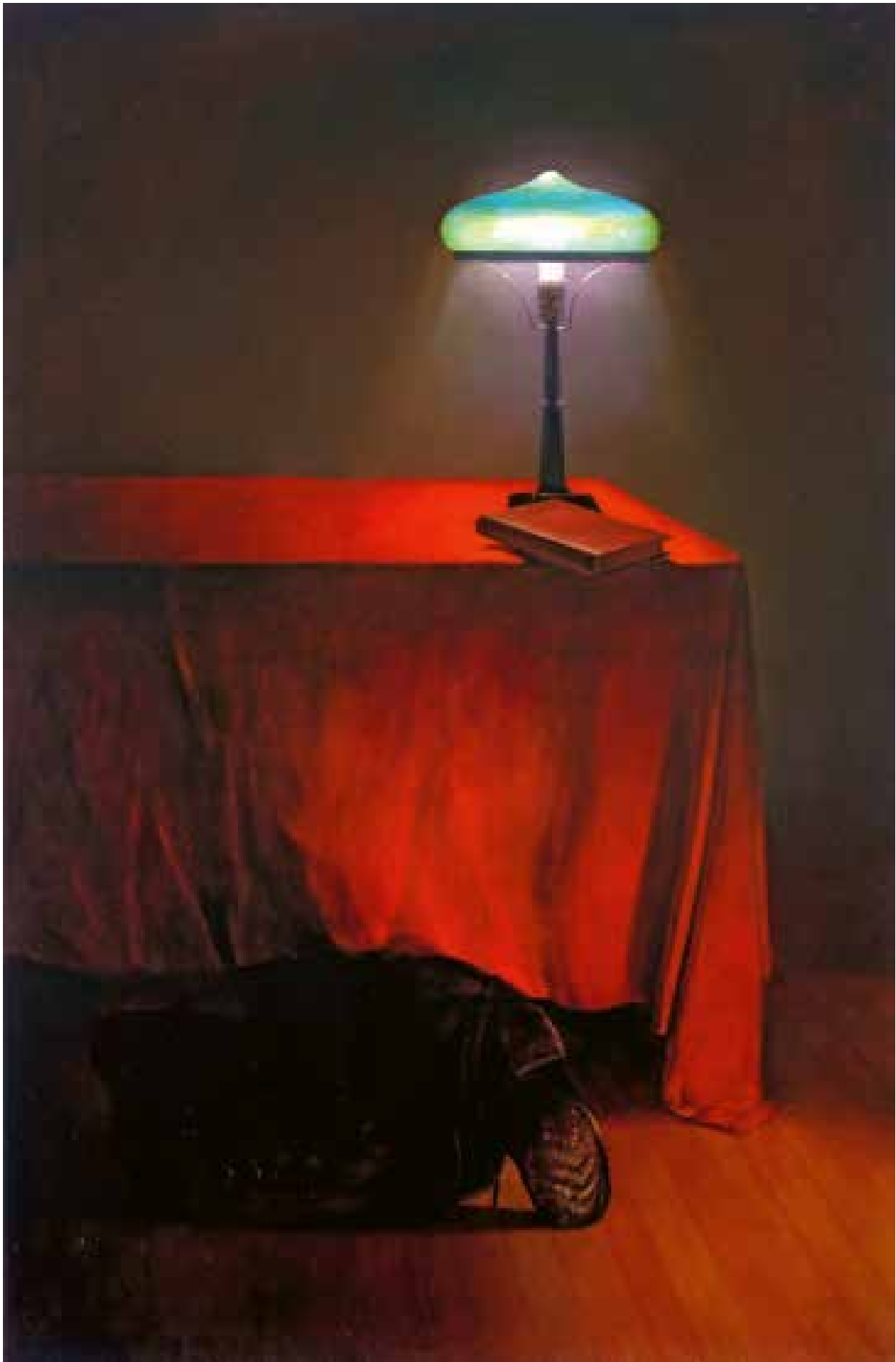
Inevitably some of that belief rubbed off on postwar generations such that their lampoons are saturated with longing and affection as much as loathing for a lost Utopia that never was. Thus the self-betraying declarations on early banners, such as “We were born to make the fairy tale come true,” ring with the fervor of the marching order *Vpered tovarischi!* (“Forward, comrades”) that was regularly declaimed on Red Square by members of the Soviet youth movements, the Young Pioneers and Komsomol. Indeed, in one canvas of the 1980s Komar and Melamid portray themselves in the white shirts, red kerchiefs, and blue shorts of Pioneers saluting and trumpeting the glory of Stalin whose planned famines, police terror, and labor camps killed between nine and sixty million of his own people (see p. 42).

If, as some Western viewers apparently assume, sots-art is just a variant of pop and this image is just a “gag” painting, it is also a painting that could make one choke on the monstrous enormity of the criminal being “celebrated.” Indeed, another early banner work proclaims, “Thank you Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood!” (pp. 104–5), which can only be a counterintuitive expression of “gratitude” for having lived in fear of persecution and death. These words are not impishly cavalier, but deeply felt. Humor in this case is not cheap thrills but cheekiness and bravado fully paid for in advance—as well as a way of processing childhood trauma by means of grotesque tomfoolery.

At which point Komar and Melamid definitively diverge from the example set by Andy Warhol and his Mao portraits. True, Komar and Melamid got to know Warhol through their common dealer Ronald Feldman and subsequently, publicly laid claim to his soul—which many doubted he had—signaling direct transmission of Warhol’s impudent spirit to them. However, they had created their distinctively sardonic personae on their own in the Soviet Union without Andy’s patronage. In any event, Warhol’s camp treatment of the Chinese Communist tyrant as the ultimate celebrity was radically different from Komar and Melamid’s need to shrug off Stalin as he appears in numerous paintings, not the least being one in which he is the man peering through the back window of a retreating limousine like a pervert cruising a playground. “Thank you Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood!” indeed! Furthermore, the man hiding under a table beneath a reading light and abandoned book in *A Knock at the Door* (opposite) brings the panic induced by a police state home as a slapstick pratfall, yet the humor curdles almost instantly, leaving the spectator to think about what such a life must have been like.

Still, the two boyish revolutionaries dutifully paying homage to Stalin in *Double Self-Portrait as Two Pioneers* (p. 42) have adult faces, and boast, in Komar’s case, a beard equally worthy of Stalin’s toady Mikhail Kalinin or his archnemesis Leon Trotsky, adding significant subtexts to this painterly “one-liner.” Further enriching the semiotic sleight of hand that undergirds their collaboration is the fact that the profiles of the two artists slip seamlessly into a medallion emblazoned with the label sots-art and executed in the manner of the mosaics in the Moscow subway designed by the socialist realist master Alexander Deyneka (see p. 102). To this degree tinged with nostalgia, Komar and Melamid’s ironic pastiches of socialist realism have always had the effect of teaching “Western” audiences the nuances of a style usually considered monolithic

A Knock at the Door, 1982–83. Oil on canvas, 72 × 47 in. (183 × 120 cm). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York





Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers, 1982–83. Oil on canvas, 72 × 50 in. (183 × 127 cm). Courtesy of the artists

and devoid of intrinsic interest, and still less capable of engendering “new” art of any inherent value. To the contrary, sots-art demonstrated just how fertile and how varied satires of standard issue propaganda art could be. Starting with text art of the early 1970s and followed a decade later by pastiches of old-masterish chiaroscuro history paintings and portraits, Komar and Melamid kicked things off and worked through many but not all of those latent possibilities.

In between they experimented with a wide range of neo-dada options, including “Bad Painting” likenesses—or in their own rubric “Rong Portraits”—of culture heroes from Pushkin and Dostoyevsky to the Young Marx (see pp. 146–51), riffs on geometric abstract painting of the 1920s, photographic conceptual pieces

dedicated to “thought”—*We Are Thinking of You* (1975, p. 173)—to the purely textual paintings of the same year, one of which, in Cyrillic characters, boldly reads *KGB* (another sly invocation of State Terror), on through documentation of a performance *Questions: New York Moscow New York Moscow* (1976–78, p. 192–93) highlighting their sense of stateless estrangement after immigrating to Israel from the Soviet Union in 1977. According to the Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, alienation or *ostranie* is an essential ingredient of art no matter whether the tone is tragic or comic.

In 1980 the pair resolved their dilemma—in reality their triangulated dislocation—and moved to New York, then the center of the art world, doing so just in time for the Eighties Boom. It would be difficult for anyone who was not here at that time to imagine the sense of expectant, vertiginous flux that swept over the scene. New York City was still recovering from its low point in the early 1970s, and tensions among camps within the art world were at a fever pitch, with the emergence of deconstruction but also with neo-expressionism and the return of figuration in general stampeding previously hegemonic styles of conceptualism and abstraction into ever more conservative versions of themselves, while none of the new tendencies were strong enough to entirely dislodge them or prevail outright and coalesce into a new “mainstream.” In sum, an anxiety-inducing pluralism took over from the evolving ideological certainties of several generations of the postwar New York School.

Creation is only half the story of art history. The other half is reception. In the early 1980s, Komar and Melamid scored big with their parodies of Soviet history painting. In part this was because Ronald Reagan’s vow to defeat that Evil Empire revived and activated Cold War anxieties about the inscrutable Other behind the Iron Curtain (see opposite). And, it must be admitted, teased sensibilities openly or covertly responsive to the power-infused and -inspired codes of socialist realism and other forms of totalitarian art. In part the success of this body of work is owed to their more than proficient command of

the conservative formal techniques of academic representation routinely taught and practiced in the Soviet Union, which, in turn, responded to a hunger for “return to order ‘mastery’” among many in the West who had become weary of the austerities of art indifferent to or overtly hostile to mimesis.

All told, it can fairly be said that these table-turning riffs on Stalinist aesthetics are the team’s satirical “masterpieces” in every sense of the term. Why? Because the realization of each example contains alchemical moments of “fresh” insight in a “stale” idiom—gold extracted from lead—as did Melamid’s chiaroscuro portraits of hip-hop stars such as Kanye West, 50 Cent, Russell Simmons, and Snoop Dogg done after the pair parted ways, with Komar continuing on his own to make nostalgic socialist realist works minus the aura of nostalgia.

In Melamid’s latter-day deployment of academic conventions there existed a readily perceived social and cultural foil for the grandiloquence of antiquated style. After all, hip-hop was the street music of “minorities” rather than a classical mode. In the earlier instances when Komar and Melamid were still working together, that foil was the generally ahistorical taste of a “Western” population mostly ignorant of the Soviet past, a middlebrow consensus that professed a preference for artists such Rembrandt and Velázquez but in the main barely knew their work, thereby leaving plenty of room for the pair to creatively misuse their legacy. Jokes about Stalin peering into a mirror like Georges de La Tour’s definitive icon of regret *The Penitent Magdalen* (ca. 1640) (see p. 232). Both the artists and the “average” viewer know just by looking at him that the mustached man is closer to Narcissus than to an archetypically repentant fallen woman, on top of which even Westerners will be aware that the author of the Soviet purges never expressed a minute’s regret for his crimes.

That Komar and Melamid’s send-ups of socialist realism appeared several times in London auction houses catering to émigré oligarchs of the Yeltsin era and after, oligarchs eager to possess tokens of the revolutionary and prerevolutionary



Portrait of Ronald Reagan as Centaur, 1981. Oil on canvas, 91 × 63 in. (231 × 60 cm). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Russian past, signals that the ironies ingrained in their insincere imitations of sincere socialist realism weren’t entirely lost on a clientele that instantly recognized them for what they were. But in the fashion spelled out by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) they allowed the most disabused spectators to have their cake and eat it too, to mock their habitually favorite fare and savor it at the same time.

From the mid-1980s onward Komar and Melamid faced an increasingly uncomprehending public and their gambits tended to misfire as often as they hit the mark, but, as had proven to be the case even before their breakthrough, never for lack of trying or for lack of wit. Thus the exhibition of *Ancestral Portraits* (1980, see



America's Most Wanted, 1994. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 × 32 in. (61 × 81 cm). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 230)—dinosaurs “posed” in front of classical architecture and drapery—that immediately preceded their *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* cycle of two years later introduced certain key formal devices and mannerisms crucial to the mise-en-scène of the latter group without scoring any iconographic or painterly bull’s-eyes (pp. 229, 231–32). The *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series marks the pinnacle of the arc of their work in the United States followed by a series of basically one-off projects centered on the soft underbelly of aesthetic taste and implicit ideological buy-in. In keeping with the worldwide turn toward populism, two of these endeavors jump out in particular. First, the *People’s Choice* series (above, opposite, and pp. 256–67), which involved a referendum on what different groups wanted in terms of imagery in their art. Enlisting the services of pollsters working for the *Nation*,

Komar and Melamid asked a random sampling of Americans, Russians, Germans, and “ordinary” citizens of other countries what subject matter they liked most and what they liked least. In the process Komar and Melamid linked their project to Warhol’s famous 1964 World’s Fair series of enlarged FBI portraits *13 Most Wanted Men*, while going the neo-dada master one better by creating “an art flavor” the way Campbell’s concocted one-brand-suits-all soups. The result was a suite of fourteen landscapes of identical overall format filled with divergent elements reflecting national enthusiasms. Thereafter Komar and Melamid attempted to bring *Proletkult* art to the American “heartland,” by inventing their own rustbelt Barbizon under the rubric of the School of Bayonne—as in Bayonne, New Jersey, which is as far from a bucolic idyll as one is likely to find immediately outside of New York City, though



America's Most Unwanted, 1994. Tempera and oil on canvas, 5½ × 8½ in. (14 × 21.6 cm). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

on par for desolation with the Meadowlands and Newark. Eventually, the team made their way to Thailand, where they tackled the shibboleths of elite aesthetics by handing the task of caricaturing abstract expressionism à la de Kooning and Pollock and *informel* à la Klein over to elephants living in a wildlife refuge (pp. 254–55). Their zoological delegation/collaboration was partially underwritten by sales of the Joan Mitchell-like *oeuvre* that resulted, prompting the team to re-create the experiment using domesticated chimpanzees to the same end, thereby reprising an age-old canard about how art “apes” reality.

Insofar as these were Komar and Melamid’s culminating projects, where do they leave them—and us? In a no-man’s-land and free-fire zone in the midst of the culture wars. With the stakes for social cohesion and tolerance in jeopardy as never before in our recent history, even comedy

can be a *casus belli*, especially comedy that makes light of patriotic emblems and chauvinistic verities. We have reached a point where right-wing Republican *siloviki* have gotten in bed with the Russians, and left-wing Democrats pillory OR CENSOR others for failing to show sufficient deference to the self-image of this or that particular person or group that sees itself as beyond reproach, and above laughter. These extreme positions have made our political compass spin wildly, but, at the risk of mixing metaphors, let me conclude by saying that Komar and Melamid have been following their own compass as they moved from East to West and through the world, whistling past graveyards full of memorials to dead ideas and spent hopes. If only they could be persuaded to rejoin forces, now would be their moment. But maybe it is too rich in contradictions and ironies even for them.



On the Question of Style: Between “Eclecticism” and the “Grand Style”

MIKHAIL IAMPOLSKI

Komar and Melamid is an artist composed of two people endowed with different visions of the world and involved in a common artistic biography. Komar is more inclined to self-reflection and to a theoretical understanding of what has been done in categories developed by contemporary art—pop art, conceptualism, postmodernism, and so on. He is interested in the “method” of art. Melamid is much more anarchic in his views and regards this whole intellectual tool kit with mistrust and ridicule. The art of these two masters, who were long inseparable, in large part grew out of self-reflection and its anarchic rejection.

The history of their work has been set forth in numerous interviews and texts inspired by them. This is a certain stable narrative, and I would like to begin by briefly recalling it. Komar and Melamid met during the 1960s at the Stroganov Academy, where they received a solid academic grounding. Their first joint exhibition, *Retrospectivism*, was held at the Blue Bird Café in 1967. In 1972, they invented the “sots-art” movement, with which their names are largely associated. During this early period of sots-art, they were especially interested in slogans, which they interpreted as conceptual socialist realism. At the same time, the artists formulated for themselves the principle of endless innovation in directions, methods, and styles. As Melamid recalled in conversation with Yuri Albert:

A.M.: We were constantly changing ideas. We could come up with new concepts all the time and change all the time. We would always say that this was what set us apart from everyone else. This was one of the ideas that we firmly followed.

Y. A.: I vaguely remember that you had the idea of starting four new directions each year.

A.M.: We did, yes. We knew that we had to regulate it somehow, because you can't keep working with the same thing all the time. You have to keep inventing things. So I said, “Why don't we make four seasons, you know, the way dresses change?”¹

Sots-art appears within the context of this orientation as *one among many* approaches. Komar recalled how they came up with “retrospectivism” and nurtured the “wish for a tendency.” Why the idea of endless changes in directions, which were often identified with styles, should have arisen in the first place is far from a simple question. In part, it probably had to do with the education the artists had received at the Stroganov Academy, where the discipline of “styles” remained in force: “We not only had to study the history of art as the history of changes in style, but also to copy examples of different historical styles. Thus, individual style was understood as part of historical style.”² Komar recalled how he personally copied Byzantine mosaics and Islamic tiles. Carter Ratcliff writes that while they were still students, Komar and Melamid analyzed a collection of prerevolutionary medals and described them using a stylistic classification system of their own invention.³ But what was most important about style, of course, was its function as a link to the tradition and history of art understood as a history of styles.⁴ And connection to tradition constituted the legitimization of art. Melamid formulated this problem as follows:



Blue Bird Café, Moscow, 1967 (?) . Left to right: Alexander Melamid, Joseph Backstein, Ekaterina Arnold, Zinovy Zinik, Vitaly Komar. Courtesy of the artists

“We had to prove all the time that [what you were doing] was a continuation. Today, this problem doesn’t exist. But at the time, it existed: if it isn’t art, then it’s nothing at all. It has to be hallowed by tradition, so to speak.”⁵

Endless change in directions and styles radicalized this problem. Direction or trend is something essential to the history of art. Komar speaks about the “primitive faith in progress” that they espoused at the beginning of their career, because it seemed to them that after each trend a new one arrived, and that they therefore were upholding the continuum of the history of art. But if styles replaced one another three or four times a year, then their merry-go-round itself problematized the legitimizing power of style.

In order to grasp the essence of this stylistic merry-go-round, it is necessary to recognize

that unofficial art in the USSR in the 1970s still saw itself in terms of an opposition between debased Soviet official art and “genuine” art that belonged to a tradition—to which Western modernism, its rejection of the figurative notwithstanding, unproblematically adhered. Probably Komar and Melamid’s most revolutionary gesture in the 1970s was the *rejection of the cultural tradition* that made it possible for artists to see themselves as part of a continuum going back to the Renaissance or to ancient Greece. To be sure, this rejection was somewhat contradictory. And it is precisely around this contradictory aspect, in my view, that a productive divergence can be identified between Komar and Melamid. Komar readily thinks in terms of stylistic trends and tries to localize his and Komar’s own position in moving between conceptualism, pop art, and

postmodernism, whose precursors he considers himself and Melamid to be.

Melamid is inclined to regard all these trends as cultural fictions that produce the imaginary values of tradition and cultural capital. Melamid speaks about his “hatred of semiofficial art,” with its characteristic cult of “spirituality” and, consequently, continuity. Komar, on the other hand, attaches greater historical importance to the stylistic *eclecticism* invented by him and Melamid, and in principle considers it to be the main invention of their partnership, referring to it as “conceptual eclecticism” or “anarchistic synthesisism.” This stylistic eclecticism, in his view, played a “role in the genesis of postmodernism. Therefore, I was disappointed that we weren’t being mentioned.”⁶

An endless replacement of styles may amount to their radical rejection, but it may just as well amount to their affirmation, since eclecticism itself postulates the category of style or trend as a central one. It seems to me that, in the end, Komar and Melamid never decided on the meaning of their eclectic strategy. On the other hand, I am always inclined to consider an unresolved contradiction as a virtue rather than a shortcoming.

Reflecting on the matter, Komar goes so far as to describe stylistic eclecticism itself as a *style that harmonizes* heterogeneous components. He compares this approach to using a mirror, which “can transform any garbage into harmony. In a reflection, everything becomes symmetrical.”⁷ Or, “And in general, I see everything I did before and everything that I continue to do now as attempts to put together this salad in my head.”⁸ Thus, *sots-art* is a putting together of official and unofficial art. Of course, any phenomenon, in essence, is multistylistic and anachronistic. George Kubler wrote about the Gothic as a style that makes it possible to put together into a unified whole Romanesque circular windows and pointed arches, which appeared much later.⁹ The Gothic style, in his understanding, is a harmonizer of the heterogeneous.

Melamid, on the other hand, sees eclecticism more as a manifestation of nihilism than as a



Skyscraper, 1986–87. Mixed media, oil on canvas, 72 × 60 in. (183 × 152 cm). Courtesy of the artists

harmonization: “That was a mockery of the system. We had a whole theory that this hodgepodge of ours was a critique, an analysis of the consciousness of the intelligentsia, against which we fought. It was an important problem for me: to show what nonsense that hodgepodge was, in which spirituality, cubism, realism, and icons were all jumbled together.”¹⁰ It was precisely this position, in his view, that accounted for the general lack of recognition for their work in the Soviet Union, where even in oppositional and avant-garde circles they were perceived as “clowns.”¹¹ For Melamid, eclecticism or postmodernism in his understanding amounts to a break with the whole tradition of art and values: “This was something deliberate, that we came up with something new all the time,

that there shouldn't be any style, that an artist is not a style, that that was a fiction. I always say in my lectures that style is a prison. It was a problem of liberation, too."¹² It was an emphasis on the value of only the first spontaneous gesture, a value that vanishes as soon as this gesture starts being repeated and the freedom associated with spontaneity evaporates. As Melamid says about the discovery made by Jackson Pollock, his rejection of brushes and brushstrokes:

The example of Pollock is a very good one, because when he first opened up a can of paint and spilled it out—I can understand, as an artist, that this was fantastic, this feeling when the paint flew up into the air. I can imagine what it was like. But the problem is that when this paint plopped down on the floor, everything changed, because the next morning he had to get up and again open up many cans of paint, and spill them out again, and the morning after also . . . And that's how it begins—one, two, three, four, five, and that's it, that's the end of any kind of freedom, he has nowhere to run. This is the horror of the twentieth century, when you have to paint stripes your whole life. There's no way out of it, you can't avoid it. This is already the end of freedom.¹³

One of the key problems in the art of both Komar and Melamid, as I have already pointed out, is the ambivalent wavering of "polystylistics" (as they initially described their eclecticism) between the idea of a new direction and the feeling of being free from any direction or style. Ultimately, this wavering never found a definitive resolution.

Initially, sots-art sprang up as one of many directions as part of eclecticism. Komar recalled its origins: "It was the beginning of conceptual eclecticism. In 1973, our sots-art became just one among many elementary particles, in the context of our historically unique multistylistic diptychs, triptychs, and polyptychs."¹⁴ This was sots-art's first period, which, in accordance with the artists' deliberate orientation toward altering their

approach, did not last long: 1972 to 1973. It was followed by an extraordinarily successful exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, emigration from Russia, and a return to sots-art in 1981 in the series *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* (pp. 000–00).

This second sots-art period lasted about as long as the first. The success of the "dark paintings" (to use Melamid's expression) that made up "nostalgic socialist realism" was very great, but most importantly, it was they that became the artists' calling card, becoming forever linked in the minds of art lovers with their art. In a Google search of their names, most of the images that come up belong to this cycle. These canvases brought fame to their duo. As Melamid quite soberly remarked:

We're remembered here for only two things: *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* and *People's Choice* (pp. 256–67). Well, sometimes something else is mentioned as well, but we've done so many different things that they're really not going to fit into anyone's head, unless you're studying them deliberately. We had two high points in our career, which we're remembered for. We had very many shows, and our first shows were fantastically successful, but this has faded away somehow, it's no longer there. If one sees us as you see us, we're simply different artists. That's why no one remembers those works of ours.¹⁵

In recent years, even the memory of *People's Choice* has grown dimmer, mainly giving way to *Nostalgic Socialist Realism*. Of course, in part this is connected with the fact that an artist who does not have his own recognizable style cannot become a successful participant in the art market or be "assimilated" by institutions associated with art.

The resulting situation is essentially paradoxical. Artists who regard "conceptual eclecticism" as their main achievement, in the cultural memory of modernity turn out to be first and foremost carriers of a certain "high style," to which they have "elevated" socialist realism. Komar



What Is to Be Done?, 1982–83. Oil on canvas, 72 × 72 in. (183 × 183 cm). Courtesy of the artists

and Melamid early on recognized themselves as forerunners and even discoverers of postmodernism and viewed “nostalgic socialist realism” as postmodern art, as an art of *quotations*. Komar calls sots-art the “quotationing of official art,”¹⁶ while defining postmodernism simply as “quotation marks.”¹⁷ Melamid is no less unequivocal on

this subject: “you can see now that what we did was postmodernism, absolutely.”¹⁸

At the same time, to some penetrating critics, Komar and Melamid’s self-interpretation as postmodernists does not appear altogether indisputable. Peter Wollen, for example, wrote in 1993 that Komar and Melamid’s main challenge

in New York was “how to escape the omnivorous maw of postmodernism.”¹⁹ He very accurately describes the decay of postmodernism, which quickly overcame the legacy of the avant-garde with which it had been initially linked, and the decomposition of this confused approach into a “plethora of neostyles and mini improvements feeding off the heroic past.”²⁰ Wollen agrees with those characteristics that Komar and Melamid quite approvingly ascribe to postmodernism: he, too, sees in it a predilection for quotation, translation, “deconstruction,” and neoclassicism (Komar even characterizes the kitsch of Jeff Koons as “kitsch in quotation marks”). That which is described approvingly by the artists, however, in Wollen’s eyes constitutes the main threat that they were able to avoid. In Wollen’s highly significant diagnosis:

The strategies Komar & Melamid brought with them could easily be assimilated into the conceptual field of postmodernism. Their use of pastiche and parody, their doctrine of “anarchic eclecticism,” their diaristic polyptychs could all be glossed as signs of the new postmodern variant, albeit one with an exotic “Russian” feeling for kitsch. . . . For Komar & Melamid, socialist realism might be kitsch but it was kitsch that carried the weight of fifty years of Russian history, and its reworking can hardly be dismissed superficially as comedy.²¹

Seen in this light, sots-art appears as something that goes beyond the framework of conceptual “quotationing,” a definition that easily fits paintings that imitate cubism or abstraction. History, regarded from this point of view, selects in the art of Komar and Melamid mainly that which resists the method which they themselves wish to espouse. This resistance, in my opinion, is connected with the fact that, by contrast with cubism or abstraction, socialist realism was not “art” in the full sense of the word, either realist or avant-garde, despite the genealogical connection with the avant-garde that Boris Groys has tried to

establish for it. Therefore, its “quotationing” did not elevate quotations from it to the history of art.

Melamid relates how he struggled to find a way out of the dead end of the endless reproduction of the artistic tradition, and how he finally found a solution in socialist realism:

For me, socialist realism was better, more human somehow, than this [Vladimir] Veisberg, than all those famous underground artists. For me, that was horrible. I simply couldn’t stand it physically. It was an aversion, a protest against all that: all those “pictures for the soul” and so on. . . . I just sat and thought: “What can I do? What? Just go ahead and draw. Draw what?”—and naturally, I drew the way my social circle told me to draw. That was natural. You’re not going to draw Stalin, are you? And then it turned out that maybe Stalin was precisely what you needed to draw, because this was a way out of the vicious circle.²²

In other words, Stalin here figured as a wholesale destroyer of the history of art—but to my way of thinking, a destroyer of an altogether different nature than the avant-garde. The avant-garde rose up against the tradition from within this tradition, by which it was swallowed up in the end. Stalin, on the other hand, could not be swallowed up by the artistic tradition. The proof for this is the art establishment’s sustained resistance against the normalization of socialist realism as a form of art.

The interest of nostalgic socialist realism, in my view, consisted precisely in the fact that it was a fully deliberate attempt to imagine what socialist realism would have been if it had succeeded in entering the muses’ temple. Komar describes his impressions of this series: “In 1981, we came back to an ‘elitist’ nostalgic sots-art. We imagined how socialist realism might have evolved. This ‘might have’ is always important. That is, what socialist realism might have been like if Stalin had lived longer and had permitted the ‘coexistence’ of his own image with the muses, like Napoleon.”²³ In 1983, Jamey Gambrell responded to nostalgic



Stalin and the Muses (study), 1981

socialist realism while it was still fresh, shortly after the artists had presented it to the public. Her response is curious for its ambivalence. On the one hand, she sees in these works a revival of painting, which had been rejected by the latest manifestations of the avant-garde, such as pop art: “Here was real painting—though of course clichéd, not on a par with the Old Masters. Real painting that isn’t in the least bit expressionist.”²⁴

In talking about expressionism, Gambrell has in mind the then-recent meteoric rise of Julian Schnabel, whom she regards as one of the followers of this approach.

Thus, nostalgic socialist realism is “real painting,” that is, painting that belongs to the history of art; yet its historicism is not artistic. It is oriented first and foremost, thanks to its abundance of clichés, toward the memory of the

masses, that is, toward social memory, which cannot be separated from the history of terror and totalitarianism. It is precisely these elements, as Wollen noted, that prevent the transformation of the “dark” canvases into simple kitsch. As Gambrell formulates the nature of this memory: “It is a memory free of much of the constraint of access that was the lot of other centuries.”²⁵

Gambrell finds it difficult to formulate the difference between the memory invoked by nostalgic socialist realism and the memory that is crystallized in the history of art. This difference is difficult to define, but it is fundamental. Meyer Schapiro (along with many others) once distinguished, in artistic style, between a *group* component and an *expressive* component, which embodies the choice of the individual artist. Of course, the group style is also expressive in its own way, while the individual style relies on reproducible clichés that are characteristic of the group.²⁶ But in classical art, the one is almost unthinkable without the other. The style of the age is expressed in the works of its artists.

In the situation described by Gambrell, the expressive and the individual are given to Schnabel, while Komar and Melamid are seen as working almost exclusively with group clichés, even if the artists themselves invented them. Roland Barthes, as is well known, regarded style in general as a purely individual manifestation of the author, the embodiment of his personal history, while the group component, including group history, was entirely relegated to *language*: “A language is therefore on the hither side of Literature. Style is almost beyond it: imagery, delivery, vocabulary spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art. Thus under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author’s personal and secret mythology.”²⁷

Nostalgic socialist realism operates with a style that does not possess individual expressiveness, but addresses itself directly to an imagined repertoire of *ostensible clichés*. Komar and Melamid compose their unique paintings as if their subjects

and stylistics possessed a broad and impersonal currency. They develop a specific style, which presents itself as stylelessness. It is therefore logical that in Gambrell’s eyes, the works in which Komar and Melamid pursue this approach break completely with individual memory and remain situated on the plane of “no one’s” or collective memory, the memory that fundamentally serves politics. This is memory without memory. One of the memorable paintings of nostalgic socialist realism is titled *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child* (opposite). But this is, of course, a frank travesty of individual memory, of which there is no trace in the painting whatsoever.

This rejection of individual expressivity, style, and memory recalls that direction in American art that appropriated advertisements, comics, and other products of mass culture. Komar acknowledges his kinship with this movement:

I felt I was close to those who introduced irony as a device, in particular, of course, to Marcel Duchamp. Among contemporaries, this included, first of all, the idea of monumentalizing the banal, which is closely related to sots-art. This means, Oldenburg—gigantic hamburgers or buttons. This means, Lichtenstein—the idea of magnifying a fragment from a comic strip borders on the idea of magnifying fragments from a political poster. We felt that pop artists were close to us when they put quotes from mass culture between ironic quotation marks. And of course, Andy Warhol, who worked with images from advertisements, which are analogous to images from propaganda. Not with products, but with advertisements themselves.²⁸

Of course, to separate the advertisement from the product does not seem possible. Both point to the

I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child, 1981–82. Oil on canvas, 72¹/₈ × 54¹/₄ in. (183.3 × 137.6 cm). Helena Rubinstein Fund (00265.83). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY



commodification of culture and human beings, and reduce art to a market-oriented function.

Such Western postmodernism and sots-art undoubtedly have something in common, but there are also important differences between them. Both of them herald the end of the age of the strong subject (not only the author, but also the spectator) along with the affectivity characteristic of it. Everything becomes shallower and more superficial. Fredric Jameson, commenting on works by Warhol such as his images of Coca-Cola and Campbell's soup cans, noted that in expressing the spirit of late capitalism and product fetishism, presumably they "ought to be powerful and critical political statements,"²⁹ which ultimately they are not. At the same time, and this is indicative, he points to the disappearance of satire from such works (I would add that irony itself gradually disappears from them as well):

In this situation parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the "stable ironies" of the 18th century.³⁰

Komar and Melamid's *eclecticism* undoubtedly contains elements of pastiche, which Jameson understands in terms of categories associated with the imitation of style. But it is precisely the impersonal social memory of Stalinism that prevents pastiche from taking over nostalgic socialist

realism completely. Style, as I have already said, is virtually the most important category of nostalgic socialist realism. But here it possesses a configuration that is altogether different from its configuration in American postmodernism. Nostalgic socialist realism imagines a certain "grand style" of Stalinism, which possesses frankly academic attributes, and which socialist realism itself never established in its pure form. The question of a grand style of Stalinism on Russian soil has been posed by Boris Groys, who attempted (following Walter Benjamin)³¹ to interpret Stalinism as an aesthetic phenomenon, a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, which unified through a common aesthetics all aspects of Soviet reality. But even as he interpreted socialist realism as a direct continuation of the avant-garde, Groys placed it in opposition with the avant-garde of the 1910s to 1920s, which was marked by a powerfully visualized "broad panorama of artistic styles."³² Against the background of the stylistic purism of the avant-garde, socialist realism appears as an eclectic movement: "The paradigm of socialist realism is less repressive and more pluralistic than, for example, the paradigm of suprematism, since socialist realism allows for the use of a much richer lexicon of artistic forms, including forms borrowed from historical traditions."³³ Several pages later, Groys again comes back to the question of the stylistic unity of socialist realism, but now from a different perspective:

Where socialist realism differs from these is above all in its radical methods and a monolithic style that nowhere (with the possible exception of Germany) was applied with such consistency across all areas in the life of society. Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favored. The gradual disintegration of these forms after Stalin's death resulted in the undecided and insecure Soviet culture of today.³⁴

The contradiction between these two judgments is not as deep as it appears. In the first statement, the subject is artistic style; in the second, it is something else—the manifestation of a unitary will. And this contradiction arises whenever the subject of the “grand style” comes up. It is well known that in the nineteenth century a unitary style in art was lost and that it has never been found again. Hans Sedlmayr wrote about this century’s stylistic chaos: “It is, indeed, at feverish pace that one [style] now takes over the primacy from the other. This happens not, as previously, at intervals of several centuries, but at intervals of a decade or two.”³⁵ This proliferation of styles is in some ways related to Komar and Melamid’s eclecticism, to their stylistic leaps. Sedlmayr explains this proliferation by arguing that art as a whole has ceased to obey common principles and that different forms of art have become isolated from one another in their development. In other words, the collapse of stylistic unity is the result of the history, evolution, and differentiation of the arts. Sedlmayr also notes: “A unitary style, in the full sense of the word, only exists where art places itself in the service of a common task, while wide fields of constructive effort are allowed to remain wholly outside the sphere of art as such. It was this state of affairs that produced that glorious unity of styles shown by all the great cultures in their early stages, when vast composite sacramental works of art drew all the individual arts—and not those of painting and sculpture alone—into their service and acted in regard to them as an ordering and coordinating force.”³⁶ In former ages, the church was such a unifying center. Today, this role is played by totalitarian government. The only difference is that in former ages, *government did not stand in the way of the historical development of styles*. At the same time, in Sedlmayr’s view, which coincides with Groys’s, the weakening of this unifying center of style reflects a general decline of culture. Sedlmayr writes about the symptom of the “aging” of cultures (“the final stage of aging cultures”), while Groys, as we have seen, points

to the “undecided and insecure”³⁷ character of post-Stalinist culture.

The difference between totalitarianism (at least of the Stalinist variety) and church culture consists first and foremost in the fact that the church allows stylistic evolution, that is, historical evolution, while totalitarianism pretended to establish a definite and unmovable stylistic canon. Totalitarianism, if one accepts the view of Groys, attempts to impose its will on all manifestations of life, which cannot be incorporated within a unitary stylistic historical flow. This is the source, in my view, of the pluralism of styles that is characteristic of Stalinism, as noted by Groys.

Political will is likely capable of creating a certain symbolic unity, but stylistic unity remains outside its reach. Komar and Melamid accomplish that which was inaccessible to the will of Stalin. Shortly before coming up with nostalgic socialist realism, they wrote an extremely curious study, “The Role of the War Ministry in Soviet Art,” in which they traced the origins of totalitarian art to the establishment in 1918 of the Agitational-Educational Section of the All-Russian Office of War Commissars.³⁸ In their view, Soviet art was initially organized on the model of a war ministry. Komar later pointed to the biographical sources of *sots-art* in his own military service: “I learned to paint slogans and portraits of leaders in the army, when during my second year at the Stroganov Academy I was pulled away from drawing plaster Apollos and living Venuses and sent to serve in the Turkestan military district. There, I spent a whole year decorating an army sports club. When I came back to Moscow, I couldn’t yet imagine that the army had been the school of my *sots-art*.”³⁹ The paradox of this genesis consisted in the fact that the war ministry, in Komar and Melamid’s words, “had been destroying far longer, and much more efficiently and effectively,”⁴⁰ than avant-garde artists, even if it did exhibit a degree of uncertainty when it came to stylistic gestalts.

The paradox of nostalgic socialist realism consisted precisely in its achievement of that idealized totalitarian style that the Soviet government

had been unable to develop. In nostalgic socialist realism, socialist realism found that completion that it had been unable to achieve in real life. In some sense, only Komar and Melamid were able to achieve a harmonization between a political program and a visual style. The paradox of this phenomenon consists in the fact that it is “real painting,” as was noted by Gambrell, which at the same time in essence has no relation to painting. This duality is what facilitates the convergence between the political and the aesthetic. We have before us a phenomenon that exhibits all the characteristics of painting except one: it stands utterly *outside the history of painting*, while yet showing signs of being related to it. That is why these works appeal to a strange memory—a *memory that is collective, but does not know any tradition*.

The style chosen by the artists is a conspicuous pastiche of academicism. After academies first appeared in Renaissance Italy, where they played an important role in the growth of the prestige of painting and painters, they were gradually included within the state system (art academies almost everywhere in Europe appeared as state institutions). Academies established technical and aesthetic standards that accorded with the general standardization that characterized absolutist states. Thomas Hess writes that in the academies, “the art bureaucracy was a microcosm of the State’s organization and expressed similar aims.”⁴¹ But for various reasons, nowhere did academic painting come as close to the spirit of the barracks and the bureaucracy as it did in Russia. Students at the Academy of Arts wore uniforms and were part of the general system of education that included elementary and secondary schools. As Nikolaus Pevsner wrote in his classic history of painting academies, a “distinguishing feature of the St. Petersburg academy is the amount of State interference exercised. It is unparalleled in the eighteenth and, it may be added, also the nineteenth centuries. To seize a boy at the age of six, put him through a State-controlled school and State-controlled workshops or a State-controlled academy and not release him until he is fit to become a court-artist or a master in a trade”⁴²—this

is the distinguishing characteristic of the Russian system. It is evident that this system was oriented toward a complete suppression of artistic individuality and freedom, which was fundamental for the whole Western mythology of art. But this suppression possessed its own distinctively bureaucratic, quasi-governmental character. Stalin’s state, however, was not a classic bureaucracy, and indeed this state could only nominally have been called a state.⁴³ It was based on the personal will of the leader, which could not be easily formalized within the framework of an impersonal academic canon. Komar and Melamid, however, make a choice precisely in favor of academicism.

Academicism implemented the aesthetic of breaking all ties to time and reality, while in some sense simultaneously suppressing its own sources. The utopias of antiquity, the harmonization of all contradictions, made it impossible to see these sources in the forfeiture of freedom by the artist and his subjugation to the state. Michel Thévoz describes academic style as a means for repressing the neuroses that afflict an artist who has been deprived of freedom.⁴⁴ Seen in this light, the impersonal brainchild of academicism could even refer less to the personality of the leader than to the deeply personal traumas of the artists.

Komar recalled how a conversation with Andrei Sakharov helped him to understand that, under any circumstances, “all of us are accomplices or silent abettors of the Soviet state.”⁴⁵ To whatever degree he may abide by the impersonal directives of the state, the artist is always individually involved in this process: “Sots-art was an acknowledgment of the fact that all of us, directly or indirectly, participated in it. Moreover, sots-art for me personally was a self-purification. Because these idols are inside me . . . these idols were implanted into my brain while I was still in school. I squeezed these idols out drop by drop. That’s why using the word ‘mockery’ to describe sots-art is a terrible oversimplification. It was always self-deprecating irony as a means of self-purification. . . . For me, ‘sots-art’ was a self-parody—like a sublimation of suicide.”⁴⁶ This psychotherapy of sots-art, according to Komar,



View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape, 1981–82. Oil on canvas, 72 × 87 in. (183 × 221 cm). Courtesy of the artists

arose from questions that the artists asked themselves about socialist realist work-for-hire: “‘Here we are, scoundrels, basically, scumbags, doing this hackwork for money. But could there be some artist who would do it as a labor of love, for the soul? What might his works be like?’ In this way, the image of an imaginary travesty-like figure led us to the idea of sots-art.”⁴⁷

Nostalgic socialist realism represents the full realization of such a perverse stance—the sincere and quite personal creation of artworks that are based entirely on impersonal clichés and enforced norms. Precisely because of this, the memory

toward which this sots-art is oriented is not the memory of art, but the memory of traumas and neuroses, repressed by the timelessness and illusion of “real painting” that characterizes this approach. That is why I consider nostalgic socialist realism to be more complex at its roots than conceptual eclecticism. The personal here is interwoven with the ideological, the spirit of barracks with the anarchic and the nihilistic, the expression of a specific historical moment with the timeless, and so on. In essence, we have before us the outwardly self-consistent image of a bundle of irresolvable contradictions. And on top of that, the

academic painting style brought this contradictoriness into the realm of neurotic fantasies.

Kirill Svetlyakov has noted that the dark tones and light effects of these paintings did not have anything in common with socialist realism, whose world is permeated with light and joy. Nor do the “dark paintings” have any thematic relation to the canon of socialist realism: “Most of the subjects of the paintings of ‘Nostalgic Socialist Realism’—fantasy, eroticism, mysticism—were almost taboo in the canons of genuine socialist realism.”⁴⁸ Personal phantasms acquire the traits of a pseudo-official “grand style.”

Academicism, evolving a system of effects (including the use of theatrical lighting and staging), created a rich canvas for experiencing different types of “affects,” which left no room for the “reality effect.” The visible here ceases to be a source of knowledge about the world and is autonomized into pure *visibility*. This transformation of realism into illusion is directly connected with the theatricalization of the spectacle, which was emphasized by Komar and Melamid through the repeated use of stage curtains and stage scenery. But the narrative of this play is entirely folded into the painting here—a *tableau* that does not know time. It is precisely this model that makes it possible to repress history, both the history of terror and coercion, and the history of individual neuroses. But it, too, makes it possible for the representation of the “real” to pass into the register of the *symbolic*. Reality here disappears in the space of conventional signs.

These characteristics of the “dark paintings” make me think of their nearness to rhetoric, which often (by contrast with logic) operates in the realm of affects, persuasions, and illusions. Among the various rhetorical tropes, there is one which is especially close to the grand theatrical antiquitizing style of this cycle. This trope is *hypotyposis*. According to Pierre Fontanier, “In *hypotyposis*, the object is depicted so vividly that it seems to be right in front of our eyes: in some sense, the original here is passed off as the copy.”⁴⁹ A modern scholar explains that in *hypotyposis*, a description becomes autonomous of its author, as

it were, becoming the simulacrum of the object (compare this with Komar and Melamid’s love for mirrors), which becomes separated from the narrative and lays claim to an “independence from will.”⁵⁰ Subjugation here begins to act like freedom. According to Kant, in *hypotyposis* an undetermined concept presents itself so vividly, appears so much like an object to our inner gaze, that it endows the Object with the properties of a symbol in a *painting*.⁵¹ The rhetorical persuasiveness and vividness of *hypotyposis* takes a representation beyond the bounds of “realism,” theatricalizes and symbolizes, and establishes a regime of endless self-presentation.

I think this rhetorical regime characterizes many works of art that are often associated with postmodernism. It is the rhetoric of removing contradictions through a kind of simulated cohesiveness, which within its boundaries is read by us precisely as a *style*. And it is precisely rhetoric that ultimately makes it possible to unite stylistically the themes of state power, history, and artistic neurosis.

NOTES

1. Alexander Melamid, interview with Yuri Albert in Yuri Albert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo* [Moscow conceptualism: Beginning], exh. cat. (Nizhnyi Novgorod, Russia: Privolzhskii filial GTsSI, 2014), 115. For English translation, see this volume, p. 82.
2. Vitaly Komar, interview with Yuri Albert in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 83.
3. Carter Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 15.
4. Heinrich Wölfflin wrote that the aim of art history is to describe the style of the individual, “the school, the country, the race.” Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. Mary Hottinger (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1950), 6.
5. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 112.
6. Oksana Dvornichenko, “Soedinenie dvukh kartin vzryvoopasno, eto borba v mashine vremeni.” *Vitalii Komar o svoei roli v zarozhdenii postmodernizma* [“Uniting two paintings is explosive.” Vitaly Komar on his role in the formation of postmodernism] <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/20724-soedinenie-dvuh-kartin-vzryvoopasno-eto-borba-v-mashine-vremeni>.
7. Dvornichenko.
8. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 94.

9. George Kubler, "Style and the Representation of Historical Time," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138, no. 2 (February 1967): 854.
10. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 114.
11. "The artist as a clown. That's what we were: clowns." Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 119.
12. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 119.
13. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 119.
14. Khudozhnik Vitalii Komar: "Nezavisimost dorozhe svobody." [The Artist Vitaly Komar: "Independence is more valuable than freedom"] <https://www.mk.ru/culture/2020/07/07/komar-bez-melamida-rabota-poshla-bystree.html>.
15. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 118–19.
16. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 86.
17. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 88.
18. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 117.
19. Peter Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 183.
20. Wollen, "Morbid," 184.
21. Wollen, "Morbid," 183–84.
22. Melamid interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 110.
23. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 92.
24. Jamey Gambrell, "Vitaly Komar—Alexandr Melamid," *A-Ya*, no. 5 (1983): 12.
25. Gambrell, "Vitaly Komar," 13.
26. Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, ed. A. I. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 308–10.
27. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1970), 10.
28. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 86.
29. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 8.
30. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16.
31. In Benjamin's view, humanity's "self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*" Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 270.
32. Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (Moscow: Ad Marginem Press, 2013), 14.
33. Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, 14.
34. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9–10.
35. Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), 60.
36. Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 63.
37. Hermann Lübke considered Nietzsche to have been the first writer who "noted the consequences of pluralization and the tendency of additional self-historicization by the dynamicized civilization of modernism, but rejected it with repulsion as decadent and consequently called for its new cultural-revolutionary unification with respect to style." Hermann Lübke, *Im Zug der Zeit: verkürzter Aufenthalt in der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Springer, 1992), 81. For a comparative look at the conceptions of Groys, Sedlmayr, and Lübke, see M.A. Kolerov, "Bolshoi stil' Stalina: Gesamtkunstwerk als Industriepalast," [Stalin's grand style] in M.A. Kolerov, *Stalin: ot Fixte k Beria* [Stalin: From Fichte to Beria] (Moscow: Modest Kolerov, 2017), 57–108.
38. Komar and Melamid, "The Role of the War Ministry in Soviet Art," *A-Ya*, no. 2 (1980): 50–53.
39. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 79.
40. Komar and Melamid, "War Ministry," 51.
41. Thomas B. Hess, "Some Academic Questions," in *Academic Art*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 8.
42. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art, Past and Present* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 182.
43. Here I rely on Franz Neumann's analysis of the Nazi regime: "Germany's political power rests in the Leader, who is not the organ of the state but who is the community, not acting as its organ but as its personification. He utilizes the party, the army, and the state as his tools only because he cannot do everything personally." Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), 383.
44. Michel Thévoz, *L'académisme et ses fantasmes: Le réalisme imaginaire de Charles Gleyre* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980).
45. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 94.
46. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 94.
47. Komar interview, in Albert, *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 82.
48. Kirill Svetlyakov, *Komar i Melamid: Sokrushiteli kanonov* [Komar and Melamid: Destroyers of canons] (Moscow: Breus Foundation, 2019), 119.
49. Pierre Fontanier, *Manuel classique pour l'étude des tropes, ou éléments de la science du sens des mots* (Paris: À la Librairie classique de Maire-Nyon, 1825), 358.
50. Yves Le Bozec, "L'Hypotypose: un essai de définition formelle," *L'Information Grammaticale*, no. 92 (2002): 3.
51. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 59 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225–28. On hypotyposis in Kant, see Rodolphe Gasche, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 202–18.



A Brief Encomium on Famous Artists of the 1970s, Moscow

YURI ALBERT

When I came to Komar and Melamid's studio for the first time, in 1975, I was struck by the sign hanging on their door: "Famous Painters of the 1970s, Moscow." At that time, such a sign with gold lettering on black glass could be seen only at entrances to government agencies. On the seventh floor of a residential building, it looked very odd. It was clear that the people who worked in the apartment were not simply artists, or even not quite artists from my perspective at the time.

Usually, texts about Komar and Melamid begin by mentioning that they are the creators of *sots-art*—the first and most famous movement in unofficial Soviet art. In my view, this is a significant underestimation of their contribution to the history of art. It would be much more accurate to say that they are artists who were the first in our country to make specifically contemporary art, as we understand it today, transforming Soviet nonconformism, which was quite conservative by world standards, into radical contemporary art. In fact, almost all techniques and methods that are used by Russian artists to this day—from photo documentation of performances to invented authors, and from "total" installations to collaborations with animals—appeared for the first time in the practice of Komar and Melamid.

What do I mean when I say "contemporary art"?

First of all, the transition from individual works of art to the project method. Komar and Melamid were the first in our art to make not separate works but models or algorithms, based on which series of works could be made. Each of their projects is, as it were, a potential direction in art. Consequently, the works themselves become by-products of conversations about art, or experimental confirmations of theoretical models.

From this, other innovations follow:

1) The rejection of any personal, unrepeatable language and style: all their projects are done in different styles and techniques—from classical painting to social surveys.

2) The rejection of the criterion of the quality and unrepeatability of the authors' execution of the work: it is possible to imagine almost all of Komar and Melamid's works being executed by other people. Aesthetic criteria are almost inapplicable to them.

3) The rejection of authorship and personal expression. Moreover, personal expression becomes impossible in principle when there are two personalities involved.

4) All projects/works are constructed with a self-debunking mechanism built into them.

In fact, from the list given above, it is clear that this is not just contemporary art and not even simply conceptualism. How does this conceptualism differ from classic conceptual art? The conceptual artists of the 1960s had one model of art (each artist had his or her own: art as tautology, as theoretical work, as the investigation of a language, or as institutional critique), on which they insisted and which they developed. This was the last modernist movement, the logical conclusion of an era.

Komar and Melamid invented many such models/concepts, and consequently, many "conceptualisms." If we needed more new terms, I would call what they did "polyconceptualism."

It might be said that they were two of the first postmodern artists in the world. How did this become possible? The fact is, by the early 1970s, Moscow underground artists worked in the context of three traditions: official socialist realism, unofficial conservative modernism,

and contemporary Western art, which existed somewhere far away and was accessible only on the pages of accidentally obtained catalogues in incomprehensible languages. It is clear that these traditions were not simply different or hostile to one another: they were absolutely incompatible. Choosing one meant rejecting the others. Nonetheless, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid did not choose: their works refer simultaneously to all three traditions, without giving any one of them preference, but debunking and demystifying each one in equal measure. They are not only or specifically a parody of official Soviet art: they are a parody of all art in general. Socialist realism, in such an approach, turns out to be no better or worse than cubism or than Caravaggio and Lorrain, and ideal Platonic shapes prove no better or worse than portraits of Soviet leaders and model workers. Such deliberate juxtaposition of incompatible representations leads to their annihilation, and in some sense, to stepping outside the boundaries of art. In one of the first Western publications about the artists, Melamid is quoted as saying: "We work not with art, but with ideas about art. Art for us is only an instrument."¹

As is well known, sots-art was invented in 1972, when the artists Komar and Melamid, decorating a Young Pioneer camp for the fiftieth anniversary of the Young Pioneer organization, had the thought that there could be an artist who might paint these dismal Soviet slogans from the heart. Who would paint Lenin as his own father, and who would paint his own father as Lenin. Who would pronounce the words "Communism Will Triumph!" and "The Economy Must Be Economical!" as declarations of love, and who would pronounce a declaration of love as "Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union!" In fact, Komar and Melamid invented many other projects that could have become movements. I remember, for example, their invention of abstract conceptualism (now reborn as the allegorical abstraction of the "King of the Hill" group). The very idea of inventing new hybrid directions is natural for artists who work in collaboration, and above all, for artists whose main

material is not paint or marble, but different models of art. But the authors' profound skepticism and merciless logic led to each of these potential directions in art immediately being driven to its self-debunking and inglorious conclusion, just as if an autopsist rather than a midwife were helping to deliver a baby.

Sots-art would have appeared anyway (although most likely without this name)—almost at the same time, similar things were being done by Leonid Sokov, Alexander Kosolapov, Rostislav Lebedev, and Boris Orlov. The difference was that these artists all came to sots-art in a traditional way—by developing their visual language—and each of them worked out his own recognizable formal techniques. Komar and Melamid, on the contrary, showed that all techniques and language could be engineered, and cast doubt on the artist's claim that truth spoke in the language of his personal style. Their energy was aimed not at the debunking of Soviet power, Soviet ideology, or Soviet art, but at the debunking of art as such. Their sots-art is not a hard-won style but an invented method (just like socialist realism itself, incidentally). Komar and Melamid's work of art was the method of sots-art itself, rather any works of art that were executed in accordance with this method. This displacement of the status of the work of art seems to me an important and unappreciated contribution to contemporary art.

Another one of Komar and Melamid's important innovations was their refusal to involve the spectator emotionally in the work of art. This, incidentally, is the reason for Komar and Melamid's relative lack of popularity among spectators: there is no one to sympathize with in their works and nothing to identify with.

Despite all the innovativeness of such an approach, and seemingly contrary to it, the works of Komar and Melamid contained absolutely nothing of deliberate incomprehensibility, esotericism, or hermeticism, of which it is customary to accuse the "Moscow conceptualists." Their works are fundamentally open to explanations and interpretations. They contain no secrets. Theirs is



Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid in Moscow, 1970s.
Photo: Valentin Serov

a very democratic art, which may be compared to jokes and explained like jokes.

And that is the most important thing of all: Komar and Melamid showed that one could make funny art or present art in a funny light. This is something very rarely encountered in the history of art in general—only the Dadaists come to mind—while in Russian and Soviet art, I believe, it has never existed at all. Melamid has said in an interview that no one in artistic circles took what they did seriously: “‘It’s a joke, it’s amusing—they’re funny guys—but it’s not art’—that was the general opinion.”² It must be said that, to this day, funny art, even among the professional public, receives much less recognition than the most self-mutilating practices of the actionists. The problem is that laughter appeals not to the soul, but to the intellect. Laughter is social. It has

nothing intimate or personal about it—we always laugh “from the side,” even if we are laughing at ourselves.

And this is the respect, incidentally, in which the art of Komar and Melamid differs from “real” conceptual art—both its Western and Moscow varieties. The “Famous Painters of the 1970s, Moscow” do not let us forget that even the most serious art is, in essence, a funny and ridiculous pursuit, which has no rational basis.

NOTES

1. Herbert Gold, “In Russian ‘To Be Silent’ Is an Active Verb,” *Playboy*, October 1974, 200.
2. Yuri Albert, “Interview with Alexander Melamid” in Yuri Albert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo* [Moscow conceptualism: Beginning], exh. cat. (Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia: Privolzhskii filial GTsSI, 2014).

Interviews

YURI ALBERT

Vitaly Komar, October 14, 2010, Paris

Yuri Albert: You called what you and Alik Melamid did “conceptualism.” Why? It could have been called something different.

Vitaly Komar: Yes, it could have. From the point of view of a Western historian of the 1970s, my and Alik’s sots-art could be seen as a variety of “conceptual pop.”

Y. A.: How did you find out about conceptualism and when did you call yourselves conceptualists?

V. K.: In the old encyclopedic dictionary, “conceptualism” was defined as a movement in theology. In the lexicon of contemporary art, it was a term introduced by Joseph Kosuth, when pop art had already appeared. I found out about conceptual art from Soviet publications that criticized decadent Western movements. There was a special genre of literature in which many critics who were quite knowledgeable and in their hearts even liberal criticized the West. They had access to the original manifestos of movements in Western art and philosophy. I think deep down they understood perfectly well that this was a way for them to circumvent the censors and acquaint artists and people interested in contemporary art in general with some distillation of what was then fashionable in the West.

If I’m not mistaken, the first critical mention of conceptualism appeared in surveys of German exhibits. It was called “conceptionism.” This was in the late 1960s, I believe. The term “conceptualism” appeared later. I remember a review of an exhibit of the work of Jean Le Gac and Christian Boltanski in Paris in the magazine *Tvorchestvo*. It said that they called themselves “souvenirists.” But it also mentioned that many see “souvenirism” as part of conceptualism, that this was

simply the French name that these two artists had given themselves. What they called “souvenirism” was exhibits of objects that had been left over from their work. These might have been checks, candy wrappers, and so on. In their exhibits, they were accompanied by texts. This was a particular, individualized form of conceptualism. So we found out about conceptual art quite early on, but specifically in a negative context. This negative attitude, in my opinion, was very useful: we developed in ourselves the same quality that was vaunted by Cuvier, the famous paleontologist. He said: “Give me the tooth of a prehistoric animal and I will reconstruct the whole skeleton.” We, too, reconstructed the whole based on scattered quotations from Joseph Kosuth or Lucy Lippard, who was a very fashionable critic. When I arrived in New York in 1978, I asked her: “Do you know that you were criticized in the Soviet Union?” She wasn’t very happy about that, because all her life she had been a leftist. To be right-wing was considered to be in poor taste. Everyone connected with art criticism was liberal and left-wing.

At first we naively recognized conceptualism as the movement that came after pop art. As a new chapter in a continuing series of histories. We had the somewhat outdated notion that after each movement comes a new movement. It was a primitive faith in progress. We didn’t understand that pop art was to a certain degree already a reflection on itself.

This was the beginning of postmodernism—the “quoted” repetition of anything that exists. Kitsch in quotes, the avant-garde in quotes—everything acquires quotation marks. Everything is permitted, but only in quotes: “post-Soviet,” “post-ethical,” and “post-cetera.”

As I now understand, pop art was the first in this series. Of course, one could say that it was



Vitaly Komar. Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

all there already in Marcel Duchamp. He had pop art and conceptualism, postmodernism and work with the classics: the famous mustache on the Mona Lisa. And of course, his conceptualism was a continuation of the partial replacement of image with text in the advertisements and theatrical posters of the nineteenth century. If we go further, then I would even say that the first conceptualist was Leonardo da Vinci: his manuscripts and sketches of imaginary machines, which, maybe, could not have even been built.

Conceptualism was losing whatever constraints it had had at the outset. It is clear that this word emerged from Joseph Kosuth's circle, but I didn't see where the boundaries of this circle were. At one conference, Kosuth disagreed with me and argued that a painting could not be conceptualist. Like many others, he forgot that in the 1970s there was a term—"conceptual

pop"—which was quite close to Soviet visual propaganda, to the street agitprop of the Russian avant-garde. For me personally it was very important to reinterpret Soviet visual propaganda as official "sots-conceptualism." The creators of this style/genre did not describe themselves in this way, but did the painters, sculptors, and architects of Romanesque art know that their art would be called "Romanesque"?

When I began working in New York, I came to the understanding that early conceptualism could be found not only in Marcel Duchamp but also in the Russian avant-garde. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they dispersed the delegates of the Constituent Assembly, who had come from all of Russia, and banned all opposition parties, newspapers, and magazines. In response, the labor unions declared a nationwide strike. The artists' union also started a

strike. Therefore, when the Bolsheviks said: “We’re going to celebrate the first anniversary of the revolution!” the painters associated with the *Mir Iskusstva* movement and the realists refused to make decorations for these festivities. But the avant-garde artists became scabs and did it. This was how the phenomenon of Soviet official art was born, whose role was initially played by the Russian avant-garde. What was born was this very “sots-conceptualism,” which prior to sots-art no one had understood in the conceptualist vein.

Those white letters, those red slogans, as a part of the city . . . Do you remember: “The streets are our brushes! The city squares are our palettes!”? Those avant-garde artists replaced the old commercial signs with the red rectangles of slogans—commercial “proto-pop-art” gave way to ideological “proto-conceptualism.” Instead of “Tobacco” or “Bar,” they wrote: “Who Doesn’t Work, Doesn’t Eat!” “All Power to the Soviets!” At first, these slogans were carried in demonstrations. Then they stopped moving, lost their dynamism, and froze on the walls.

Since my childhood, I had been surrounded by slogans and the busts of leaders. In addition to texts and exclamation points, they also contained simple graphic elements: sometimes profiles of Lenin/Stalin, sometimes a simplified hammer and sickle. But as a rule, it was texts: white letters on a red background. In Russian, “red” is the same word as “beautiful.” Red slogans were a simple way to embellish boring gray streets, where soldiers and frightened people in dark gray clothes wandered about. The Bolsheviks won because they had promised a celebration. The government was ideological and—precisely because of this—conceptualist. And what is interesting is that this “sots-conceptualism,” this street-level branch of the avant-garde, survived in Stalin’s time also. It was simply not paid attention to. The Moscow liberal psychologically blocked out these red slogans, repressed them into his own self. The official became part of the subconscious. And *mat* [vulgar language] assumed the place of the superego.

I learned to paint slogans and portraits of leaders in the army, when during my second year at

the Stroganov Academy I was pulled away from drawing plaster Apollos and living Venuses and sent to serve in the Turkestan military district. There, I spent a whole year decorating an army sports club. When I came back to Moscow, I couldn’t yet imagine that the army had been the school of my sots-art.

Only in 1967, when Alik Melamid and I graduated from the Stroganov Academy, did I again begin to notice these slogans. That year witnessed a momentous historical event: the fifty-year anniversary of the Soviet state. Enormous resources were allocated from the state budget: the event had to be celebrated—and how was it to be celebrated? Even more slogans! Slogans once again renewed their offensive: they hung in barbershops, in trams, in the meat departments of grocery stores—everywhere! They became a part of nature, like the moon, the clouds, or the stars. They were the tiresome art of the streets, which plagued people everywhere. Every holiday—May 1, November 7—the first page of the *Pravda* was filled with recommended slogans. This was the same kind of paganism as Lenin’s mummy inside the step pyramid. When the religious instinct isn’t satisfied with the developed forms of monotheism, it’s satisfied with forms of the most primitive variety. It was assumed that the text “Increase the Grain Supply!” possessed a magical power, and that it would actually result in more bread.

Painting another slogan was cheaper than building another tractor. It was cheaper to hire an artist. He mixed tooth powder with glue and painted with a little brush on red canvas, and red canvas was produced in infinite quantities. This was ephemeral art. In bad weather, the slogans lost their brightness. In the sun, they faded. They perished from changes in the political climate too, from changes in plans, from changes in leadership. Today, it was one minister of agriculture; tomorrow, another. Yesterday, Stalin; today, Khrushchev. The names of leaders and heroes changed. History was regularly rewritten. No one collected these slogans. Not one authentic slogan from that time has survived. The paradox consists in the fact that the only slogans that have

survived from the Soviet period are slogans that are signed “Komar and Melamid.”

Each year after the revolution, the Soviet government produced something very important. In 1968, there was a momentous new anniversary—this time it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet army. Then—the anniversary of the unification of the Soviet republics into the USSR. And so on! In 1972, the whole country celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Young Pioneer organization. It was precisely then that an acquaintance of Alik’s wife found a lucrative commission for us—decorating a Young Pioneer camp.

It was precisely in the 1970s that the Soviet Union achieved the overproduction of ideology and ideology’s advertisements, since generally speaking advertisements and propaganda are mutually interchangeable. You can say “Coca-Cola propaganda” and you can also say “an advertisement for Communism.” In the same way, the name of God was replaced in the USSR by the “Laws of Nature,” although this explained absolutely nothing and proved nothing. It was pure semantics.

In the West, there was also a division of art into elite/museum art and street art/art for the masses. In American museums, in those temples of art, hung abstract expressionist canvases, while if you took a look outside, you would see Coca-Cola or Campbell’s soup cans. The same was the case in Russia: in museums, you had paintings of Stalin, landscapes, collective farm workers, laborers, while if you looked on the street, everywhere you would see these red rectangles and white exclamation points. But this could not have been called pop art, because it was not “popular.” Prior to the appearance of sots-art, Soviet art lovers tried not to notice this. Just as in the West there was an overproduction of consumption goods and their advertisements, in Soviet Russia there occurred an overproduction of ideology and its propaganda. Slogans were that visual part of Soviet ideology which sots-art recognized and saw as conceptual pop-art. At that time, no one had yet understood this or seen this.

Jumping ahead, let me say that in 1974, after the famous “Bulldozer Exhibition,” we met a

“living conceptualist” and pioneer of video art. This was the American artist and critic Douglas Davis, who came to Moscow as a correspondent for *Newsweek*. We got into a long conversation during our interview about the “bulldozers,” emptied a bottle of whiskey, and decided to collaborate on a joint project. Today, it’s in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Douglas slightly disoriented us—he said that our “conceptual pop” was close to what Robert Indiana was doing. I later met Indiana, but he didn’t see sots-art as “conceptual pop.” He saw it as conceptual art. Particularly our early slogan pieces.

Therefore, when Boris Groys came up with his term “romantic conceptualism”—for me, this was a second step. I understood that the Russian avant-garde had been the foundation of what in retrospect could have been called conceptualism. In general, terms live a very strange life. When the term “sots-art” first appeared, we saw that certain pieces in the history of Soviet art could already have been called sots-art, if they possessed a certain kind of self-consciousness —“a representation of a representation.” For example, *The First Slogan* by Nikolai Terpsikhov, which represented Pavel Korin painting a slogan against a background of ancient plaster casts. To me, this is “proto-sots-art”—an unfinished slogan in a studio at an art academy. Korin started out as an icon painter and was a big patriot of Russian culture. He began to paint slogans because he realized that the Whites would not be coming back anymore. And we started painting slogans with Bulatov when we realized that the Reds would not be coming back anymore either. The détente had begun. In 1975, Brezhnev was forced to sign the Helsinki Accords. The dissident movement sprung up. The struggle for human rights was beginning. The authorities started allowing people to leave for Israel. From there, people started sending more books and magazines about Western art.

Y.A.: Did you regard your sots-art as conceptualism at the same time from the very beginning?

V. K.: Absolutely. That's just how people are made—they want to come up with a new term. And we understood perfectly well that we had come up with something completely new, though we did see a connection with Kozma Prutkov. The idea was born in the cold, snowed-in club of the Young Pioneer camp that we were decorating. We started in December 1971 and went on until February 1972, in order to be done by the summer, before the children arrived. The club wasn't heated—there were just two reflectors of some kind—it was cold. We kept ourselves warm with dreams of payday and vodka. And so, we were drinking and blaming ourselves: "Look at what we're forced to do for money, God damn it!" And we were already considered "underground" and "unofficial" "nonconformists"; we were already trying to start a new movement: "retrospectivism." That was the name of our first exhibit, in 1967, at the Blue Bird Café.¹ But we weren't yet signing our works together. Sergei Volokhov had also been part of "retrospectivism."² He later moved to Belgium. But even just two people—Komar and Melamid—is a movement. That is, we had a dream of a movement.

A movement—that was the most forbidden thing of all. Like the creation of another party. To dance individually within certain restricted boundaries could still be permitted, but a movement—that was too much. "Cliquishness," so to speak. And there was another thing that I understood also: a movement was the highest form of coauthorship. It was the overcoming of the frightening loneliness that had always haunted me and, I think, Alik as well.

In that Young Pioneers' club, we warmed ourselves together, blamed ourselves, and fantasized: "Here we are, scoundrels, basically, scumbags, doing this hackwork for money. But could there be some artist who would do it as a labor of love, for the soul? What might his works be like?" In this way, the image of an imaginary travesty-like figure led us to the idea of sots-art.

A year later, in 1973, we invented two characters. These were imaginary artists: Apelles Ziablov³ (the world's first abstract artist, who

lived in the eighteenth century) and Nikolai Buchumov⁴ (a unique one-eyed landscapist, who always saw his own nose and painted it in the foreground of his paintings). There was also Dmitry Tveritinov, an actual historical figure. An iconoclast, who during the age of Peter I replaced images on icons with the text: "Make you no idols." Generally speaking, all figurative art can be understood as a breaking of the second commandment, which prohibits image-making. So the first Russian conceptualist was Dmitry Tveritinov. Later, we made a reconstruction of a lost work by him.⁵

And so, we kept drinking and imagining how and what our imaginary figure would paint—this sincere "hackworker for the soul." Probably, he would depict his wife and children—in the style of a Soviet propaganda poster. He would paint slogans as if they were personal cries of the soul. The official would become the personal. That was something very important. There emerged a certain image, a Soviet Kozma Prutkov.

And we realized that our idea was the idea of a movement. It wasn't just a character-person, but a character who was a collective, a character who was a movement, and that this movement had to be given a name. If we had been politicians, we would have immediately called it "conceptualism." We would have simply taken the Western word, like the forerunners of the Russian avant-garde: they took cubism from France, futurism from Italy, and said, "cubo-futurism." We, however, decided to come up with a new term. We talked about three at the same time. "Sov-Art"—Soviet art. But "Sov-Art" sounded like *sovat'* [to shove in]—there was something obscene about it or even owl-like [*sova* is Russian for "owl"]. Then, "Kom-Art"—Communist art. But Alik immediately said, "That sounds too much like your last name." That's why we ended up with "sots-art." This entered into the Russian language very smoothly, because it was *sotsarstvie* [co-tsardom, co-sovereignty], like "coauthorship." Of course, "cubo-futurism" also sounds good. Later on, Malevich came up with "suprematism." *Supermat'* [super-mother], *supermat* [super-vulgar

language], *sverkhmat* [trans-vulgar language]: in other words, *mat* [vulgar language] that can no longer be articulated, so to speak, *mat* that is visual. In my opinion, “sots-art” sounds just as good. It became a new word, entered into the dictionary.

Y. A.: When I met the two of you in 1975, you used the word “conceptualism” much more often than “sots-art.”

V. K.: In reality, we always understood that what everyone called visual propaganda was state conceptualism.

Y. A.: And your knowledge came from the library?

V. K.: Yes, from the library. By the way, have you noticed that all sots-artists are people who graduated from the Stroganov Academy in 1967–1968? With certain exceptions, such as Rostislav Lebedev. Or Vladimir Paperny—I think he spent a whole year being filmed in a movie and finished the Stroganov Academy later. Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Sokov, Boris Orlov, Dmitri Prigov—all of them are from our year. We were lucky: we were the children of a time of troubles. After the death of Stalin, and after the removal of Khrushchev too, there were continuous reforms at the Stroganov Academy. The names of departments changed constantly, as did the teachers. One would show up—an alcoholic, who yelled: “We have to study Raphael and anatomy.” Then another would arrive, take out a little old magazine that smelled of old yellowed paper, and say: “This is Bykov the constructivist. This is me, this is my youth. Not academicism, but constructivism—that is the pride of Russia!” In addition, at the Stroganov Academy the discipline of “styles” remained in force. We not only had to study the history of art as the history of changes in style but also had to copy examples of different historical styles. Thus, individual style was understood as part of historical style. These relics of late nineteenth-century eclecticism, along with the eclecticism of Soviet culture, helped us to understand the

“conceptual eclecticism” of sots-art long before postmodernism.

But we had access not only to the past. The Stroganov Academy was transferred from the purview of the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education. What consequences did this have? The Surikov Institute was under the Ministry of Culture, which censored Western influences, for which reason they had not a single Western magazine in their library, because that was enemy propaganda. At the Stroganov Academy, on the other hand, all of these art magazines ended up in the collection of professional literature for future specialists. Our library received *Studio International*, *Design*, *Apollo*, *Domus*, and other magazines, in which we saw reproductions and surveys of exhibitions outside the Iron Curtain. And the foreign language department even added inserts with brief translations, annotations.

In the year of Marcel Duchamp’s death, Soviet tanks entered Prague. Soviet bureaucrats at once prohibited everything that went the Czech way. Beginning in 1968, subscriptions to almost all Western art magazines were terminated. They left only *Design*, I believe. The regime started to become more rigid. The strike against Czechoslovakia was also a strike against Russian culture, because processes that were dangerous for the government were also beginning in Soviet Russia—a search for socialism with a human face.

In August 1968, the Moscow Artists’ Union was preparing its eighth exhibition of young artists. The committee had selected our works, which had earlier been exhibited at the Blue Bird Café. The youth committee was chaired by Dmitry Zhilinsky. At the Moscow Artists’ Union he was considered a liberal and admitted us to the youth division. The exhibition was to take place in October, but after the invasion of Czechoslovakia our works were pulled. Zhilinsky was dismissed. Everything went to hell. Under him, the seventh youth exhibit had included works by Ilya Kabakov, and Erik Bulatov, and Oleg Vassiliev, and Viktor Pivovarov, and Vladimir Yankilevsky, and Misha Grobman, and all the other *iZnaSilniki*—that was what the artists who illustrated the

magazine *Znanie–Sila* were called. Its art director was the wonderful and still underappreciated conceptual artist and creator of film installations Yuri Sobolev. He was also a member of the board of the Blue Bird Café. My and Alik's exhibit there had taken place in November 1967. After us, at the beginning of 1968, Kabakov, Vassiliev, Bulatov, and Misha Odnorlov exhibited works there. But after that awful August 1968, exhibits at the Blue Bird were closed down also. We were being driven underground.

Alik Melamid and I weren't yet working "in tandem" at the time. When sots-art first began, we made and signed our works individually. But we wanted to exhibit them together, as a movement. Only at the end of 1972 did we agree to sign everything together. For example, Alik drew his father. My own father's whereabouts were unknown at that time, but I made an image of my wife and child in poster style. Alik depicted his own wife in the same style, but without a child. And we signed the diptych together: *Portraits of Wives*.

By 1974, no one even hoped to get an exhibition hall. Therefore, the search for an alternative location began, which led us—Oskar Rabin, Zhenya Rukhin, Vladimir Nemukhin, and others—to come out of the underground into the outside world. If we couldn't exhibit our work—as all galleries belonged to the state, all art magazines belonged to the state—then we could go to a park. The result was the famous "Bulldozer Exhibition," at which, along with the works of other artists, the authorities destroyed many of our sots-art pieces. This was a historic event. After the "bulldozers," Moscow conceptualism's "trips out of town" began. I don't know if Andrei Monastyrski understands this, but chronologically it is a fact. The "bulldozers" were the first step out of the room. After that, other forays began: Infante, and the Collective Actions group, and the Nest group. And conceptualism began to gain fame.

Y. A.: You brought up Kabakov, Bulatov. During the Blue Bird period, was there any recognition that you were doing the same thing?

V. K.: Well, all of us were considered underground, unofficial artists. The thing is, Alik and I were trying to create a movement, while they wanted just the opposite, variously avoiding it. After all, this was group resistance, practically a criminal offense. I was prepared to put my name on Oskar Rabin's *Passport* and on his *Ruble*. Oskar had elements of sots-art. And we had a performance with a passport, in which the rules for using a passport were set to music. I saw certain pieces by Rabin as conceptual works. I met him in 1972. In his work, I saw some things that were very close to me. And I understood at once that something in his work possessed an unconscious kinship with sots-art, a kind of "proto-sots-art."

As for the work of Kabakov, Vassiliev, and Bulatov, I first saw them in 1968, at an exhibit at the Blue Bird. And I don't recall having a feeling of kinship at that time.

The only piece that was close to sots-art was by Oleg Vassiliev. It depicted a woman at a May First demonstration. There was this swerve in it: she was carrying bouquets of flowers of some kind. I don't know where this piece is, and he doesn't remember where it is now. Bulatov at this time was making completely different things: grates of some kind, skiers. Sometime in 1972, we met Kabakov, visited his studio; he visited ours. That was a very important moment, the beginning of a dialogue that was never finished. Ilya immediately invited us to present slides publicly in his studio. I remember Alik said, "Listen, we're being supported by a person who's actually very important." For some reason, Alik thought that he might get us some work. We made books—although not illustrations, but covers with texts. In the end, Kabakov invited a ton of guests, and we showed slides in his studio. So when Bulatov says that he didn't see sots-art, that's his memory playing tricks. He didn't see the originals, maybe, but he saw the slides. Kabakov always senses the appearance of something new. Later, he started going to the Collective Actions events. His intuition is absolutely brilliant.

That evening, we showed a filmstrip in which a monkey, Socrates, Stalin, and Einstein, wearing

masks, drank vodka. Then Einstein was killed. Socrates was a Russian peasant. Stalin was played by a young woman. Then a drunk Socrates screwed Stalin. It was a good evening. And Ilya was disposed in a very friendly way. Wariness appeared (or showed itself) a couple of years later, when Oskar and the two of us invited him to the “bulldozers”—he refused, and said with disarming candor: “You, Oskar, occupy the position of a human being with common sense who stands on his own two feet; they (meaning me and Alik) stand upside down, like the dadaists; and I, all my life, have been on all fours.” Well, sure: no identical people exist. That’s obvious. But it wasn’t about that. It was about support. About solidarity. But actually, how could we *not* have distanced ourselves from one another, and how could we have come together? If all of us had placed ourselves completely in opposition to the official art—but sots-art was a quotationing of official art. Sots-art for the first time combined unofficial, alternative culture with official culture.

I remember Steinberg connected us with Kabakov, considered us negative phenomena of the same variety. He contrasted irony with spirituality. Didn’t see how it was possible to create an ironic self-portrait. We weren’t influenced by Kabakov, but independently of our will or his, we had many things in common. I remember what a strong impression our *Paradise* made on Ilya. This was the first installation made in Russia. Ilya had invented characters too. But an artist-character first appeared in his work after he saw the artists we invented—Ziablov and Buchumov—in 1973. They were exhibited in the apartment of the mathematician Andrey Pashenkov. Along with paintings, this exhibit included documentation: biographies, correspondence, the article of a certain hypothetical art historian in a monograph-book that we put together, and so on.

I do not by any means think it was we who came up with the idea of working with invented characters. Art is not a horse race. In the history of avant-garde art, the *Donkey’s Tail* was invented long before any of us, at the beginning of the last century, in Paris. That famous work

was exhibited as the painting of an artist with an Italian last name, unknown to anyone at the time. Too bad that it hasn’t survived. But we don’t look at legends; we listen to them.

Y.A.: It seems, then, that there wasn’t any special sense of commonality. Artistic commonality, I mean, not social.

V.K.: What do Rabin and Kabakov, say, have in common? Not much, of course. Both opposed themselves to socialist realism. Oskar liked the textured painting of the expressionists, while Ilya liked Soviet artists like Konashevich. During the Brezhnev years, everyone was united by their critical attitude toward the Soviet regime: liberal democrats, and genuine Marxists, and criminals, and fascists, and religious fanatics, and Christians, and Muslims. People were against the intrusion of Soviet slogans into their kitchens. But when sots-art appeared, these slogans were brought into dissident kitchens. Consequently, there were initially very many negative reactions, both from the left and from the right. In those years, artists’ studios played the role of discussion clubs and were venues where people drank and flirted. Therefore, when Kabakov, because of his intuition, decided to support us in some way and organized an evening for us—this was a big surprise. Unfortunately, the “bulldozers” for a long time wiped out the closeness that could have become established between us.

Y.A.: And until the Nest appeared, you felt pretty lonely?

V.K.: Yes. If it hadn’t been for them, we would have left the country even earlier, right after the “bulldozers.” And also I was very fond of Misha Chernyshov. I felt that people like him—these were the avant-garde artists, locked into their own ideas and frozen definitions. If he’d been born in the 1920s, he would’ve been running around with a Browning gun. I also liked Slava Sysoyev, a depressive person, but a caricaturist of genius. Under Brezhnev, they put him in

prison. After his sentence, they let him move to Berlin, which is where he died. And I also felt a lot of sympathy for Ivan Chuykov. In his work, there was conceptualism and there was sots-art. I remember that Alik and I brought him issues of *Artforum*. People would gather. Vanya read and translated. Everyone discussed.

Y. A.: Did you see any Western artists as colleagues?

V. K.: I felt I was close to those who introduced irony as a device, in particular, of course, to Marcel Duchamp. Among contemporaries, this included, first of all, the idea of monumentalizing the banal, which is closely related to sots-art. This means, Oldenburg—gigantic hamburgers or buttons. This means, Lichtenstein—the idea of magnifying a fragment from a comic strip borders on the idea of magnifying fragments from a political poster. We felt that pop artists were close to us when they put quotes from mass culture between ironic quotation marks. And of course, Andy Warhol, who worked with images from advertisements, which are analogous to images from propaganda. Not with products, but with advertisements themselves. In New York, he took part in our project “Souls,”⁶ which included advertisements for a “spiritual product.” In Moscow, this project was presented by Donskoi, Roshal, and Skersis. The auction of “souls” took place in the studio of Misha Odnorlov—he saw it as a performance that forced people to “think about the soul.” By the way, Misha had a sots-art still life with the Palace of the Soviets. In general, I don’t know any Russian painter who didn’t feel the influence of sots-art at least once.

Y. A.: What about the conceptualists—Kosuth and others?

V. K.: Kosuth—of course. Conceptual art during that period, at the beginning of the 1970s, was the coexistence of photo and text. In the context of Russian art, I believe the first phototext was our work *Circle, Square, Triangle*. An advertisement for geometric ideals. And formally, it was close to

Kosuth’s conceptualism: white letters on a black background. I’m talking about the form of the presentation, because conceptually everything there was connected with the ideas of the “production artists” of the 1920s.

V. K.: This was a very important work. The sizes of these geometric figures were connected with absurd calculations: the proportions of the human body with respect to the diameter of the moon. The invisible magic of numbers. This brought *Circle, Square, Triangle* close to the conceptual geometry of Ad Reinhardt and Sol LeWitt. I considered them geniuses of minimalist aesthetics.

Y. A.: Can one say this was an influence?

V. K.: Yes. And of course, the influence of coauthorship with Douglas Davis.

After that, we collaborated on a work with another Western artist, a member of Fluxus, Charlotte Moorman. In 1974, we invented a color code, using an article from the Soviet Constitution about freedom of speech and assembly, which was transformed into abstract painting. It was a kind of color alphabet, in which each letter was a color. In 1976, at the Feldman Gallery, with this canvas for a background, Moorman performed our music on her famous cello. In it, each letter from *Rules for Using a Passport* was encoded into a note. The music of bureaucratic language. In this way, we became the only Russian artists to have made a work with Fluxus. Simultaneously in Moscow we organized a performance of *Passport* at Sasha Yulikov’s apartment. His wife, Natasha, is a talented pianist.

Y. A.: What about the Gerlovins? Did you know them?

V. K.: They appeared after the “Bulldozer Exhibition.” In the summer of 1975. We vacationed together in Estonia, in Kasmu. Rubinstein, and Monastyrski, and the Gerlovins, and Patsyukov were there also. We even almost produced a joint work with Lev Rubinstein. It was a transparent

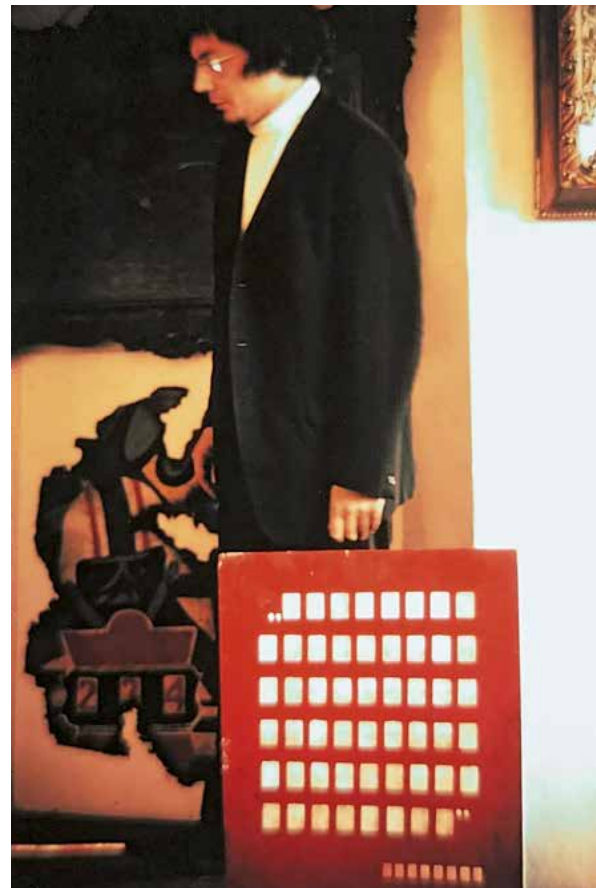
summer. We were recovering. After the “Bulldozer Exhibition,” according to rumor, a fight had begun on high, and it’s still a secret which of the bureaucrats used the artists in the fight with other bureaucrats.

Possibly because of this, after the “bulldozers,” an officially sanctioned exhibit took place in Izmaylovo. There, we exhibited “Post Art.” These were imaginary artifacts from the future—how the works of Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, and other stars of pop art would look in the future: after earthquakes, volcanoes, nuclear wars, and the work of restorers. The result was “Pompeii frescoes.” We scorched them with a blowtorch, covered them with some kind of dark varnish, tried to make craquelures.

That was at the end of 1973, but after the “bulldozers,” the ruined paintings acquired an added resonance. In general, 1973 was a super-productive year. First, the installation *Paradise*, which we had begun in 1972. In the spring of 1973, we completed *Paradise* and began *Biography of a Contemporary*—a strip composed of over a hundred miniatures on wood. This polyptych was composed as a chronological sequence. We based our thinking on a notion of socialist realism as “conceptual eclecticism.” Then, in that same year, *Post Art* and *Legends/Biographies*: Buchumov and Ziablov. Besides the scorched canvases, *Post Art* included a series of views of ruins of contemporary museums, such as the Guggenheim Museum. We’d never produced such a quantity of different projects, series, and works in the course of a single year—neither before nor after. It was the “honeymoon year” of our collaboration. We were young, energetic, worked our butts off.

Y. A.: *Paradise*—that was somewhere on Profsoyuznaya Street?

V. K.: No, it was not far from Kolomenskoye, in the studio of the father of my first wife. Vladimir Degtyaryov, honored worker in the arts, painter, and director of the popular cartoons *A Little Locomotive from Romashkovo*, *Who Said “Meow”*?, and so on. A wonderful guy. For a few years,



Vitaly Komar in the artists’ studio in Moscow, 1970s. Courtesy of the artists

Paradise remained on display. But after the “bulldozers,” the first difficulties began: he started getting calls from the Artists’ Union, being told that foreigners were visiting his studio without the government’s permission. And *Paradise* had to be dismounted. Sometime at the end of 1974.

By contrast with American conceptualism, the last modernist movement, so strict and severe, our conceptualism was postmodern from the first.

That is very precisely put. Postmodernism as quotation marks. For example, our *Quotation* is essentially abstract art in quotation marks. This was a postmodernist move, of course. What Jeff Koons is doing now is kitsch in quotation marks. But quotation marks had started being used already by Marcel Duchamp and the pop artists.

Lichtenstein's magnified scale—that's already the reflection of a reflection.

Y. A.: I was once astonished by the fact that you were making art that could be retold. You said, "We are artists of the conversational genre."

V. K.: Of course. There's a great deal to say about that. To be a spectator, one needs talent too—gifted spectators and art historians are capable of giving good descriptions of one or another work of art. If Leonardo had been a student of Kosuth's, he would have simply said, "Woman with an enigmatic smile." Many can talk badly about art that they think is good, and not many can talk well about art that they think is bad.

I've always been concerned with the invisible line between word and image. Especially when I show my slides during a lecture at some museum or university.

Probably, this is an attempt to return to what I might call "animal syncretism."

When we painted with elephants,⁷ I felt the warmth coming from them and for a moment knew this animal syncretism.

Several times, I've watched footage of two lions devouring a doe. Her eyes don't express anything. There's no suffering in them, no rage, nothing. Possibly, she doesn't separate pain and dying from the overall process of her life and the lives of others. In the same way, I've always wanted, recognizing my own human duality, not to separate word from thought, thought from writing, writing from images.

It may be that primeval people also possessed a syncretic consciousness. People have always encountered geometric shapes like the circle in nature. Everyone saw the sun, the moon, the circumference of the horizon. Adam saw Eve's eyes. Cain saw Abel's eyes. Circles, circles, circles. But cubes and rectangles are shapes we see extremely rarely. Triangles are altogether outside our experience. The nameless genius who first drew a triangle and gave it a name created a new object and a new concept and a new word at the same time. I believe that during the times

of this primeval genius, visual language mingled with cries, speech, and singing. Probably, Kandinsky's writings about the spirituality of the triangle are connected with his need to combine all this once again into one syncretic pile. To mix science and religion, words and images, on a palette.

Y. A.: I'm talking about something slightly different: your works don't have to be seen. They can be told. Did your practice involve producing works at a distance?

V. K.: Yes. When Ronald Feldman started putting on our exhibits. He sent us an invitation to our opening in New York, but we weren't allowed to go. Therefore, willy-nilly, we were forced to prepare certain pieces and projects "at a distance"—by phone from Moscow. This was a very important aspect, I agree.

The idea of "I can tell you about it/you don't need to see it" was based on the traditional study of the history of art. The history of art at the Stroganov Academy was taught by the famous Professor Sobolev,⁸ who had published his articles even before the revolution in the famous journals *Mir Iskusstva*, *Apollon*, and so on. We began the study of history with legendary painters whose works have not come down to us, and maybe never even existed. We learned that "Phidias was a great sculptor." But not a thing has survived from Phidias, only fragments. You can be told about it, but you can't see it. And this conceptualism of the history of the arts as it was understood in the nineteenth century is the source of that which so attracted you in our conceptualism.

Sobolev really did believe that Apelles was a great painter. But he couldn't appreciate his own faith as a manifestation of conceptualism. All of it was mediated in a very complex way. That's why we gave our Ziablov the name "Apelles." Because he, too, was an ephemeral painter. That's where the idea came from that sometimes it is more important to hear about something than to see it. Because the legend is always pure.

Y. A.: This was the radical practice of minimalists who commissioned their works to be made at factories. I think you were one of the first in Russia to use such a method.

V. K.: In New York, photographs were printed from our negatives—first of all, *Super Objects for Super People*. Our second commission involved the production of white geometric shapes—the project *Circle, Square, Triangle*.

Interestingly, Carl Andre, when I tried talking to him about this topic, started to explain his art in a way that made his whole leftist phraseology vanish. He talked about ideal beauty, Platonic shapes. At first, my jaw just dropped. From him, of all people, it wasn't something I had expected. It turned out that we in Moscow hadn't fully possessed Cuvier's gift after all, and that many of our reconstructions had been false. That is, Andre didn't have the pragmatic idea of the necessity of using the labor of others, but the idea of an ideal not made by human hands. It turned out that Muscovite and American artists were much closer to each other than I'd supposed. Ideal shapes—*Circle, Square, Triangle*—that was an important work, the first work that was purely conceptualist in form. From it was born the idea of the healing power of art: the artist as a physician, art as medicine. The photographs contained texts that said that contemplating these ideal geometric shapes cures neuroses and reduces stress. This text led us to "color therapy," to our other work: *Color Is a Mighty Power*.

The physician of today isn't an alchemist or a pharmacologist. He doesn't personally prepare medicines. He writes out prescriptions and orders them, as Donald Judd orders his constructions. The combination of the idea "art/medicine" with the ideas of design or methods of manufacturing art by commission seems to me very important and symbolic.

Y. A.: Probably, the two of you were the first who started regarding the work of art as the by-product of some invented method?

V. K.: Of a method and of a process—that is very important. We had a criterion: that a work was interesting if it was a method. In other words, the embryo of a movement. In every work of ours, the seed of a movement is planted. For example, the project *Soviet Constitution, Freedom of Speech Chapter. Ideological Abstraction*: to each letter, its own color. Using this method, one artist can paint the whole Constitution. Another, all of Dostoevsky. A third, the Bible. That would be a monumental group exhibit. We proposed a universal method, which any artist could use. A good idea is an idea that can become a method for a whole movement. Not all of our works are of this kind, but the best ones are at this level. You can come up with different "legends/biographies" of different painters forever. You can make up utterly banal figures, not necessarily brilliant discoverers of abstract art.

"Method" is the key word. You can keep "aging" the masterpieces of contemporary art forever, turning them into "post-art." The next participant in "post-art" must begin transforming Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami into the ruins of Pompeii frescoes. It might turn out good.

But sots-art actually did give rise to a movement, whose method is used by many.

Y. A.: If I remember correctly, you had the idea of coming up with a new movement every three months?

V. K.: Yes, the fashion of the season. Mayakovsky had this poem: "One season, our God is Van Gogh, another season—Cézanne." We had the idea of making such a wheel. A new season—a new movement, like a new fashion. Seasonal changes in art. This winter you are warmed by abstract expressionism, while last summer the coolness of minimalism was in fashion.

Y. A.: And then you had something like hybrid movements, such as abstract conceptualism?

V. K.: Yes. *Quotation, Ideal Slogan, Color Code, Soviet Constitution, USSR* is a polyptych in which, from 1917 on, each year is a canvas. In this polyptych we used only three archetypal colors: red, black, and white. And then as the end of the world came nearer, everything became more and more mixed up, grew dimmer. . . . And everything became washed out, as it were, into ideological dust.

Interestingly, the title of a part of a series sometimes outstripped the title of the whole project. Because you have the title of the concept or the project, you have a term that denotes the cycle, a term that denotes the series, but you also have the title of the individual canvas. And sometimes they overlap. For example, there were the Coded Works (see pp. 176–81), but in those there was ideological abstraction. It sent us back indirectly to suprematist squares and sots-art quotations. It, too, was abstraction, and it, too, was of an ideological variety. The MoMA collection has Malevich's famous painting, *Black Square and Red Square*.⁹ For those who know Malevich well, it is obvious that these are flags: the anarchist and the Communist. For him, the interaction between these two ideas was an important problem. But this is something no one writes about, because it would be a kind of primitivization of Malevich. No one wants to reduce his square to a geometrical allegory of the political and psychological problems of an anarchist painter. But all the same, you and I remember. The black flag is the banner of the anarchists. While the red flag was the symbol of the Communists. The red flag returned into Garibaldi's hands directly from ancient Rome. The red banner is the blood of the sacrificial horse, in which the fabric was dipped. When Rome waged wars, this red fabric was hung up above the temple of Mars. Moscow really is the third Rome. In the Moscow Kremlin, in Soviet times, a red banner always waved above the building of the Supreme Soviet. Of course, in Malevich, this was ideological abstraction.

Y. A.: We started talking about the Gerlovins: Did you feel they were doing something similar?

V. K.: I think that in terms of the refinement of their images, they were closer to Western conceptualism and to Fluxus. In some respects, they are also close to Monastyrski. But his work—although not as often as our work or Bulatov's—also contained elements of Soviet visual propaganda, such as a slogan between the trees or the VDNKh fountain. It is harder to accuse this kind of conceptualism of imitating the conceptualism of the West.

We exhibited with the Gerlovins and Monastyrski for the first time at apartment exhibits organized by Misha Odnorlov and others.¹⁰ Monastyrski and the two of us—in the apartment of Gena Donskoy on Leninsky Prospekt. And the Gerlovins, Sasha Yulikov, and Vanya Chuykov—in Sokov's studio. From the exhibit at Donskoy's house, I remember one of Monastyrski's works well, which was called *Pile*. It had a white mast standing on a little board, and tied to it was a writing notebook. Visitors could put whatever they wanted on this little board—a candy wrapper or a cigarette butt, or a match, or a piece of glass. And to write down in the notebook: "Fragment. Glass. Placed by so-and-so." And the date. And this pile grew. I wrote down: "This notebook." And placed this notebook on the very top of the pile. "Concluded" this work, so to speak. I don't know if he has kept this note, this document of our coauthorship. But in principle, that was a logical conclusion. A kind of ouroboros.

That work was close to me. When he exhibited part of the *Super Objects* there, we were searching for this commonality. I think that when Monastyrski made objects with a certain "schizo-function," we were close to each other. The search for an alternative field of action, for something beyond our four walls, led at first to the "bulldozers," and then to the "trips out of town."

Y. A.: My sense is that for the two of you, sots-art was just one among many conceptualist projects, while for other sots-artists, it was precisely a movement, into which they were completely immersed.

V. K.: As I said, a method can turn into a movement. Sots-art is still alive today, alive in the works of many good artists.

Melamid and I called our pieces “sots-art” only two times in our lives.

1972: slogans, portraits of friends and relatives. It also included poster-type pieces: *Don’t Blab!* and others connected with visual propaganda. After that, we turned to conceptual eclecticism. *Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll*—that’s the end of 1972, after which *Paradise* begins. That work was multistylistic, with sots-art as one of the styles. Our *Paradise* contained all styles. There were both icons and Soviet posters. Eclecticism had begun: the “Strip,”¹¹ which contained all of art history, different styles as different intonations. And we considered sots-art finished—done.

But in 1981, we came back to an “elitist” nostalgic sots-art. We imagined how socialist realism might have evolved. For me, this “might have” is always important. That is, what socialist realism might have been like if Stalin had lived longer and had permitted the “coexistence” of his own image with the muses, like Napoleon. We called the exhibit of these works once again *Sots-Art*.¹² But the title of the idea intersected with the title of the series. The series was called *Nostalgic Socialist Realism*. In art, terms are also layered over one another and show through other words.

Vito Acconci believes that any title that’s longer than a simple description is dishonest. He’s said this to me several times. My response was: “There’s a Chinese tradition in which poetry and hieroglyphics are part of a work.” In this sense, Avdey Ter-Oganyan has clever works. I could easily imagine myself and Alik doing something like that at one time. It is the antithesis to what Acconci says. A big contrast between the title and the image. We had a series called *The History of Russia in Meetings*. At first, three little figures discuss the annexation of some principality. Then, the annexation of Poland to Russia under Catherine II. And so on. And at the end, the Yalta Conference. These were empty canvases, in the center of which were the minuscule figures of

participants in fateful meetings. And in each case, an extremely long title that listed all the participants’ names. Or there were the “Rong” portraits. Some hopeless alcoholic in a sailor’s shirt—and the title: *Socrates*. And the dates were all mixed up, with all the wrong years of birth and death. The inadequacy of the image and the title.

Y. A.: I remember they included Akhmatova and Karl Marx.

V. K.: It looked scary. Karl Marx—as a blond youth in an embroidered Russian peasant shirt. So skinny. Then, also, Pushkin—horrible, bald, against a red background. A man with a mustache who looked nothing like Pushkin. Imposers. They’re in the Norton Dodge collection.

Y. A.: And now—about the journal *Metki*. What was it? And did it have any connection with you?

V. K.: Of course, of course. Gribkov and his friend Volodya Petrov. Volodya even performed at our first exhibit at the Blue Bird. He used statistical methods to study the history of art. To some degree, similar to our project *The People’s Choice*. For example, he made a diagram of changes in painting sizes over time—how they coincided chronologically with various historical events. He was a very interesting kind of poststructuralist. He and Vitaly Gribkov published the journal *Metki*. One of its issues featured both the Gerlovins and one of our conceptualist projects, *Circle, Square, Triangle*. *Metki* came out, probably, in 1974.

Y. A.: In other words, the term was already current at the time in unofficial artistic circles?

V. K.: The term was current among everyone, even among designers. In the 1960s, they were called “constructor-artists.” On Old Arbat Street, in a charming ancient mansion, there was a Center of Design. It was overseen by a person who was very progressive for his time, Yevgeny Rosenblum. He lectured at the Stroganov Academy about

contemporary Western art, including conceptualism as well. But he would say not “conceptualism,” but “conceptionism.”

Y. A.: What about writers—was there any connection with them? Or was that later?

V. K.: Well, Petrov, and Gribkov, and Prigov, and Rubinstein, and Sasha Sokolov had always painted and worked with texts.

Zhenya Barabanov for the first time used the term “sots-art” in print in the *Vestnik RKhD*,¹³ which was published in the West, when writing about art news from Moscow. Zinovy Zinik published the first Russian-language article about our “sots-art” in Sinyavsky’s magazine *Sintaksis*.¹⁴ This was a major distinguishing feature of Russian conceptualism, of course: words, words, words. In no country in the world are writers called conceptualists. Sorokin is a conceptualist, Rubinstein, Prigov . . .

In Russian, the word “to write” can mean not only “to work on a text,” but also “to work on a painting.” Probably, this is an echo of the conflict with the iconoclasts, an attempt to equate the icon not with “the making of idols,” not with “representation,” but with “writing.”

This is a very Russian phenomenon. Like the “Naryshkin Baroque.” There is the baroque in general, but in Russia there appeared the “Naryshkin Baroque.” This is exactly like “romantic conceptualism.”

Y. A.: Don’t you think the word “romantic” refers to a different branch of Moscow conceptualism, to which you don’t belong?

V. K.: It’s not even that. In socialist realism, there is also an element of revolutionary “romanticism” and a “romanticism” of labor. From this angle, “romantic” conceptualism must be close to sots-art. From another angle, one can see the art historical term “romanticism” in the light of the everyday Soviet understanding of this term. The German romantics had a different, not quite Socratic, understanding of irony. How tragically

all of it became intertwined. There is also, for example, the criminal “romanticism” of underworld songs. These are purely semantic issues.

Sots-art has a different “romanticism.” The turn toward socialist realism could have been seen as pop art cynicism. For many of my friends, socialist realism was an enemy. The intuitive understanding of the fact that all of us are accomplices or silent abettors of the Soviet state became rooted in me after a conversation about this topic with Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov. After the “bulldozers” [“Bulldozer Exhibition”] he came to the apartment of the mathematician Pashinkov, where we exhibited our works. He said, “But I’m the inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb.” The leader of dissent understood that he was part of the Soviet Union and that, by criticizing society, he was criticizing himself as well.

Everything, even children’s books and the decorations of a Young Pioneers’ camp, was an important precinct of Soviet propaganda. Sots-art was an acknowledgment of the fact that all of us, directly or indirectly, participated in it. Moreover, sots-art for me personally was a self-purification. Because these idols are inside me. I’m criticizing not Ivan Ivanovich, the director of the Young Pioneers’ camp. I have the same thing stuck in my soul as Ivan Ivanovich does in his. Because these idols were implanted into my brain while I was still in school. I squeezed these idols out drop by drop. That’s why using the word “mockery” to describe sots-art is a terrible oversimplification. It was always self-deprecating irony as a means of self-purification. Today, it is already difficult to reconstruct in retrospect. But in principle, it was self-deprecating irony and idoloclasm. Idoloclasm, which used irony as a weapon. For me, sots-art was a self-parody—like a sublimation of suicide.

Y. A.: It destroys itself like an idol.

V. K.: This is an absolutely romantic model, by the way. There was Schlegel’s idea that irony is fragmentary genius. Because in self-deprecating irony, the subject rises above himself and everything else alike. But Groys hardly used the word

“romantic” specifically in this sense. Terms are so terribly intermixed. . . . Especially today, when everything is changing. In the old encyclopedia, the line between synthesis and eclecticism was very clearly drawn. Today, after having lived half my life in Russia and half my life in America, for me this line no longer exists.

And in general, I see everything I did before and everything that I continue to do now as attempts to put together this salad in my head. And not just in my head—in the heads of many. People usually don’t pay attention to it. And perhaps they’re right not to. But if you ask yourself how you can believe both Darwin and the Bible, and how you can simultaneously believe all kinds of contradictory things, you have the feeling that your skull is a bowl filled with salad. And you start trying to put it all together. And again you come back to the idea of conceptual eclecticism. Sometimes it seems to me that everything we did consisted of attempts to combine incompatible things. Extraversion and introversion. My public lectures and my contemplation while working. And in everything I find a need to harmonize this, this . . . I don’t have the words. The censorship is gone, but the muteness has remained. When I was two years old, my parents had to leave for Germany and left me in Moscow with my grandparents. Probably, this became a psychological trauma, and until the age of four, until they came back, I stopped talking. To this day, from time to time, I feel convulsions of muteness and loneliness. Most often they pass, calm down, only through meditative work. The recognition of this many-faced duality and the desire to express it, to harmonize it, is the only thing that unites us all. Both the sots-art circle and the circle of “romantic conceptualism.”

Translated by Ilya Bernstein from Yuri Albert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo*. [Moscow conceptualism: Beginning], exh. cat. (Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia: Privolzhskii filial GTsSI, 2014).

NOTES

1. The Blue Bird youth café and jazz club opened in the fall of 1964 in Moscow on Malaya Dmitrievka Street (called Chekhov Street at the time), 23/15. Its opening was timed to be part of the World Forum of Youth and Student Solidarity, which was then taking place in Moscow. In addition to jazz concerts, the café hosted art exhibitions.
2. Sergey Alexandrovich Volokhov (b. 1937), nonconformist artist, participant in many apartment exhibitions. Resident of Belgium since 1991.
3. *Apelles Ziablov*, from the *Legends* series, 1973. Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection, Zimmerli Art Museum.
4. *Nikolai Buchumov*. From the series *Legendary Biographies*, 1973. Collection of Neil K. Rector.
5. The project *Make You No Idols (the History of Dmitry Tveritinov)* was presented at the Marat Gelman gallery in 2002 and is now in the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
6. In 1978, Komar and Melamid established a corporation, Komar and Melamid Inc., whose business was buying and selling souls. An auction of American souls was organized on May 19, 1979, in Moscow, by the Nest group.
7. *Ecollaboration* 1995. A collaboration with the elephant Renée from the Toledo Zoo, Ohio. In 1999, Komar and Melamid founded the Art Academy for Elephants in Lampang, Thailand.
8. Nikolay Nikolayevich Sobolev (1874–1966), head of the art history department at the Moscow State Academy of Industrial and Applied Arts (formerly the Stroganov Academy).
9. *Black Square and Red Square (Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension)*, 1915. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
10. Series of apartment exhibitions in Moscow, May 1976.
11. *Biography of a Contemporary*, 1972–73. Wood, oil. 197 panels, 4 × 4 cm each. Robert and Maryse Boxer collection.
12. The series *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* was shown in the exhibition *Sots-Art* at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in the fall of 1982.
13. Yevgeny Barabanov, “September Exhibition of Moscow Artists, 1975,” in *Vestnik RKhD*, no. 116 (Paris, 1975): 232–45.
14. Zinoviy Zinik, “Sots-Art” in *Sintaksis*, no. 3 (Paris, 1979): 74–102.

**Alexander Melamid, February 12,
2012, New York–Moscow**

Yuri Albert: I first came to your studio in 1975. And the first word I heard was “conceptualism.”

Alexander Melamid: I’ve already forgotten this word.

Y. A.: So I’d like to know where you found out about it.

A. M.: Hard to say. We didn’t read foreign languages. There were people who went to the Library of Foreign Literature and read some materials there or at least looked at them—you could go in there freely, there were no restrictions. We didn’t, so we didn’t know anything. Probably, it was the world spirit.

Y. A.: We read books that criticized Western art, and I think we learned the word “conceptualism” from there.

A. M.: We had no connections with any artists, and when we made our first works, we decided to make connections. We went to see Kabakov, those important people. Maybe they told us about it, because they knew better. They were connected with foreigners.

Y. A.: I’ve already asked some people about it, and it appears that the two of you were among the first who learned this word.

A. M.: Yeah? Us? [*Laughs.*] By the way, that’s a great thing—to learn a word, no? Sometimes that can be the most important thing of all.

Y. A.: I still have your copy of Ursula Meyer’s *Conceptual Art*.¹ It’s a little black book.

A. M.: I wonder who gave it to us. Probably, it was Melvyn Nathanson.

Y. A.: Exactly. There’s an inscription from him in it, from 1976.

A. M.: He was a friend of my third cousin, Alik Goldfarb. An American, who was at the Moscow State University math department on student exchange.

Y. A.: When you made *Paradise* and started making sots-art—that was a pretty unexpected and radical cataclysm in unofficial art. How did you come to it?

A. M.: How did we reach that point, yeah? That was genius, there’s no other way to explain it. Actually, there were no precedents of any kind. I mean, we’d read something, heard something. And moreover, as I said, we didn’t understand English. We looked at *Conceptual Art*, but didn’t understand anything. And Melvyn Nathanson didn’t speak Russian well, couldn’t translate anything clearly. It was in the air, it seems, and there was also the idea of radicalism. The central idea of radicalism was—a great aversion, or even hatred rather, for semiofficial art, for all those things that were loved by the intelligentsia. One of our first works was a portrait of my father on a red background, but already the next one was *Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll at Rostropovich’s Country House*. Because, probably, socialist realism didn’t bother us personally, while bourgeois art and the intelligentsia bothered us a great deal. To this day, when I hear the word “Shostakovich,” I feel sick.

Y. A.: The two of you were probably the first to propose such a view of art from the side, and I don’t understand how you yourselves changed your point of view.

A. M.: I grew up in that kind of intelligentsia family, with all of its loves and prejudices, so to speak. For me, that was enemy number one. I don’t know if it was for Komar, because he grew up in other circumstances, he has a different understanding. But for me socialist realism was better, more

human somehow, than this [Vladimir] Veisberg, than all those famous underground artists. For me, that was horrible. I simply couldn't stand it physically. It was an aversion, a protest against all that: all those "pictures for the soul" and so on.

Y. A.: As far as I know, you yourself did something of the kind too.

A. M.: Sure, of course, since there was nothing else. The problem was that there was nothing else, and this was a way out of a hopeless situation—not to do what they do. But the fact that there was nothing else tormented me. I couldn't understand what to do and how to do it. I just sat and thought: "What can I do? What? Just go ahead and draw. Draw what?"—and naturally, I drew the way my social circle told me to draw. That was natural. You're not going to draw Stalin, are you? And then it turned out that maybe Stalin was precisely what you needed to draw, because this was a way out of the vicious circle.

Y. A.: But you did have some notion of pop art, of other movements, didn't you?

A. M.: I did, of course, but a very vague one. Komar looked more. He's always been that way. He tries to study things. But I, in general, knew little. In reality, maybe that was a good thing that we had no understanding. I mean, it was as if we saw it as a whole, from the side. Not only saw ourselves from the side, but Western art as well. It was very funny when we would get together and Chuykov would translate *Artforum* for us from the page. Melvyn Nathanson, when he left, started sending me *Artforum* by mail. That's when I realized that neither we nor the authorities knew the boundaries of what was permitted. There were no clear boundaries of any kind. People themselves determined these boundaries from below. Every month, we received *Artforum*, and there was no censorship. All the issues arrived, and Chuykov would translate for us. I remember that we listened intently but did not understand anything. *Artforum*—at the time,



Alexander Melamid. Courtesy of the artist

especially, but still now too—was such gibberish that it was hard to understand even in your native language. In translation, it was simply nonsense. It didn't give us anything.

Y. A.: Apart from the knowledge that something existed?

A. M.: Something existed, but it was something absolutely incomprehensible. To this day, there's

a conflict between what we do and did, even already in America, and what was being done around us. Because we're more like "people with common sense." We never dug deep down into Baudrillard or Lyotard.

Y. A.: You say that the two of you didn't know anyone, but you did study together with artists of the unofficial circle, didn't you? Alexander Kosolapov, and Leonid Sokov, and Francisco Infante, I believe, were all at the Stroganov Academy.

A. M.: When the word "sots-art" was invented—at the end of 1972, I believe—I remember running around and shouting that it was the greatest discovery of the twentieth century, and I tried to put together an exhibit of sots-art, to make a movement. The idea was to make a movement, because how could you be without a movement? Just us—that was too little. So we started saying that there had to be an exhibit, tried to gather people, recruit them, promising them—I remember it clearly!—immortality. It was like a bolt of lightning. When the word appeared, everything fell into place, and it seemed that that was as far as you could go, that everything had been said.

Y. A.: I mean that you had people you could turn to, that some kind of community did exist.

A. M.: No, there was absolutely no one to turn to, I'm telling you: that came later, after we had come up with everything already. No help could have come for those people, that's for sure. We were doing it in absolute isolation. Melvyn Nathanson appeared later, but when we were coming up with it, there was no one. I mean, we had certain bits of information from the criticism of Western art, but we didn't even have any idea of the West. This was a homegrown movement.

Y. A.: But nonetheless, you oriented yourselves toward the West?

A. M.: We oriented ourselves toward the West, that's a fact. We decided that over here, no one

would ever get it—that such blockheads as, I don't know, Birger or Veisberg or whatever, would never understand it, that these were enemies in perpetuity—and that we had to make connections somehow. We found out through friends that Kabakov was apparently a famous artist. I had no idea what he did. And Komar also didn't know, but he said, "He's famous. Rabin is also famous. We have to go there and make connections somehow and exhibit something, show something."

To show where? To show how? I remember trying to enter the youth section of the Artists' Union. I brought my works, the old ones plus there was already sots-art of some kind. There was a committee there, and I displayed something for them. They took a look, and then someone said, "What's this? For the sportorama?" I said, "What sportorama?" It turned out that in the next room, they were putting together an exhibit on sports-related topics. And I understood that there was simply no way to come to any agreement, to reach any understanding. What sports show?! What sports? There was nothing connected with sports in what I had brought them. They didn't even understand what it was. It wasn't good or bad—it was a different universe. But these weren't socialist realists any longer—these were those same Weisbergs, by that time. The youth committee—these were all "colorists" and "idealists."

Y. A.: What about moving from painting to strange texts, objects—was that easy?

A. M.: No. It was clear that this was a different kind of practice. There's a view that art is all one. But, on the one hand, there's Claude Monet, and on the other, say, John Baldessari, or even Pollock, or Vito Acconci: this is simply a different kind of practice. Maybe from an outsider's point of view, it's art all the same, but from an internal position, if you paint a landscape, that's one thing, but if you cut something out and paste it—that's something completely different, a different psychology. Yes, we recognized it as a different practice. Not a continuation, but simply a completely different thing.

Y. A.: But you still have constant references to traditional art.

A. M.: Yes, because we had to prove all the time that it was a continuation. Today, this problem doesn't exist. But at the time, it existed: if it isn't art, then it's nothing at all. It has to be hallowed by tradition, so to speak. Once it had accumulated, once it acquired a context, there were no longer any problems on that score.

Y. A.: Speaking of context: even with the lack of information, what context did you see yourselves in—local or international?

A. M.: Neither—neither the one nor the other. We may have hoped that our context was international. We hoped that somewhere, on the other side of the border, there were people who existed in the same context. The people on this side were complete idiots, all of them, while over there, there had to exist some smart people, they would understand, and we would end up inside that world, so to speak. We had no hope of being understood on this side. That was out of the question. And therefore, to work “for domestic consumption” was absolutely pointless. I remember someone—I think, Paperny—saying: “This is just fun and games . . .” No one, not one person from Kabakov's or Rabin's circle, took what we were doing seriously. “It's a joke, it's amusing—they're funny guys—but it's not art”—that was the general opinion. I don't know what they say now—if you asked them. At the time, it was clear.

Y. A.: Apart from your direct followers Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis?

A. M.: Misha Roshal and I lived in the same building. I knew him. I started teaching at a children's art school, twice a week—they paid 55 rubles. I think it wasn't my main class, but some kind of supplementary class. Donskoy and Skersis were in it, and then Misha came in as well and joined them. They didn't need to reconfigure anything,

they were very young. How old were they then? Thirteen, maybe? This was material out of which you could mold the future: they didn't have any special feelings for Veisberg.

Y. A.: Do you see them as followers?

A. M.: They were simply pupils. They came to our house all the time. I taught in school for only two or three years. Yes, of course, they were the only ones we had. They got the gist. They understood what it was that we were doing.

Y. A.: What *was* the gist?

A. M.: It's not clear what it was. It's hard to say what the gist was, but they understood that it was a different practice. It was easier for them. They were young, and without any attachment to those circles. You see, for me it was always a problem that I was part of that world. Boris Slutsky said that I was very talented, my parents were proud—in general, it was very important, you understand? That's why I had to leave it.

Y. A.: And at some point you recognized yourselves as conceptual artists? Because I remember that you always called yourselves conceptual artists, not sots-artists.

A. M.: Yeah. Probably . . . For us, conceptual art to this day is such a “Western” term—it sounds very good and so on. In reality, we didn't understand what it was. When Goldfarb tried to find a place for us—he went around to all the galleries—no one wanted us. Everyone said, “That's still not quite it, exactly. That is, it *seems* to be it, but it's still not quite it.” We were different even in the Western world. In reality, we never did understand Western conceptual art. Our conceptual art was homegrown. That's how I would put it.

Y. A.: As I understand it, sots-art is more like one of your conceptual projects.

A. M.: Yes, probably because 90 percent of our works are in no way connected with sots-art or with the Soviet government.

Y. A.: How did you define it to yourselves?

A. M.: It was a different practice. That's very important. It was physically not what we had been doing previously. One didn't have to sit in front of an easel, nothing like that. . . . Well, you get it, you painted too. How to describe it? One had to cut out something, paste something, come up with something. One didn't have to look at a model intently, sit for five hours, and concentrate on smearing something on a canvas.

Y. A.: How did you explain to people what you were doing?

A. M.: I don't remember. I think we didn't explain it. We were never taken seriously in that circle, that's a fact. We were funny, amusing guys. It was all fun and games, as they called it: yes, it was funny, amusing, but it wasn't art.

Y. A.: Alik, you're talking about how the two of you were seen from the side, in your view. But how did you yourselves define yourselves?

A. M.: We understood that we were completely different and had no relation to the world in which we circulated, and that we had to get away from it. That's why most of our conceptual works—I mean, the textual ones—were done in English. We knew a German woman, who translated for us. In other words, we didn't even expect that there would be anything in Russia. We didn't expect that we would be understood. We were doing something different, something completely different.

Especially because I had experience, I made books—the most primitive work, textual covers. You had to cut out letters from photo paper. The Kolos publishing house had a photographer who worked on the side—designed fonts. And I continued going there and making these texts, pasting

things. It was the same thing as making a cover, the same kind of work. I knew how you had to paste it, how you had to cut it out, and I used that knowledge.

Y. A.: At one time, I was struck by the fact that, first of all, your works could be retold, and second of all, that they could be made again, that there was nothing unrepeatable in them.

A. M.: Well, yeah, conceptual art, yeah, idealism.

Y. A.: What if someone had asked you: What is conceptual art? What would you have said?

A. M.: I wouldn't have said anything. Back then, I didn't know what it was.

Y. A.: Well, as far I remember, the two of you were pretty self-confident. You would have said something for sure.

A. M.: We were terribly self-confident. We simply rambled on about whatever came into our heads. I loved to argue, to offend people, to harangue them, but this was just talk, because I just considered all other artists to be complete idiots. There was nothing to talk about! I couldn't even talk to Kabakov, because then he would say something about "spirit," about Shvartsman² and Shiffers.³ He would talk absolute gibberish, in my opinion. His works were separate from that, he wrote something on them, and that was great. He's a very good artist. But he kept going on and on about all that, about some kind of spirit or whatever . . . We didn't discuss anything. What is there to discuss when someone's telling you about spirit? Berdyaev or whatever . . . utter crap. Basically, this was the very nonsense against which all of conceptual art had been conceived.

Y. A.: In other words, you were possessed by anti-spiritual ideas?

A. M.: I would say so. It was clear that this was human knowledge. If you started with God, so

to speak, then I felt that this was the limit of the intelligentsia's idiocy, in which there was nowhere to move. This was the atmosphere in which I had been raised, in which I lived. We were already sufficiently old by then. I was almost thirty already. Komar was already thirty when we started, so what came before that had a lot of significance.

Y. A.: How about the idea of eclecticism? What can you say about it?

A. M.: That was a mockery of the system. We had a whole theory that this hodgepodge of ours was a critique, an analysis of the consciousness of the intelligentsia, against which we fought. It was an important problem for me: to show what nonsense that hodgepodge was, in which spirituality, cubism, realism, and icons were all jumbled together.

It was the same in the West too, in the 1960s: cursing the elders, saying that everything had to be changed radically. For me this was a genuine problem, because I felt that the world in which I was living was very wrong. I still feel sick when I hear the word "Fellini." I saw the movie *8½* practically when it was made. In my opinion, it's impossible even to imagine anything worse. It's an intelligentsia nightmare. This was the culture of the intelligentsia at the time, this surrealism, this spirituality, this deep significance, this Tarkovsky . . . oh my God . . .

Y. A.: I think you were the first artists who chose not to search for a personal language.

A. M.: Well, I don't know about that. Just the opposite, in my opinion. For us, this *was* our personal language, because it was a language in which no one, not one person in Russia, talked. In the Russian context, it was an absolutely new language. "You see, it's a joke. No, no, it's not at all that . . ." Well, and then, of course, the idea is so carnivalesque, that everything has to be amusing and all. It has nothing of the sacred about it. It's a completely different kind of pursuit.

Y. A.: What I mean is that you don't have a recognizable plastic language.

A. M.: That was something important from the very start, because we were constantly changing ideas. We could come up with new concepts all the time and change all the time. We would always say that this was what set us apart from everyone else. This was one of the ideas that we firmly followed.

Y. A.: I vaguely remember that you had the idea of starting four new directions each year.

A. M.: We did, yes. We knew we had to regulate it somehow, because you can't keep working with the same thing all the time. You have to keep inventing things. So I said, "Why don't we make four seasons, you know, the way dresses change?" Do you remember a work of ours called *Letolet* ["Flierfly"]? That was a good piece, but no one recorded it. I remember I put together a strange construction out of a construction kit. We invited people and said that this construction would fly up into the air by force of the artist's will. Everyone gathered, you know, people were standing around, concentrating—and it didn't fly, son of a bitch. We said, "Oh, there was a mistake. . . . Next time you'll come, and we will fix the construction, because there was some kind of mistake in the design." We did this twice. The idea of an artist of genius who can influence gravity. It was a fantastic piece!

Y. A.: Whom did you invite?

A. M.: I don't remember. Various friends of ours showed up. There were about ten people, probably, and we concentrated. Then we drank a lot, naturally, and so on. There was a large number of works that no one remembers, but very amusing ones. Sometimes I feel the urge to repeat something—it was just so good. "Why don't we repeat the *Letolet*? We can assemble the construction, and it will fly! It depends on the will and genius of the artist. Last time, there wasn't enough genius, that was the problem."



Alexander Melamid in the artists' studio in Moscow, 1970s. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Y. A.: But now enough has accumulated, maybe.

A. M.: Enough has accumulated, soaked in. And afterward, you can blame it on mistakes in the design again. But even so, it'll be progressive. In principle, this is something that we should've been doing our whole lives—inviting people, and maybe, it would end up flying someday.

Y. A.: In other words, you saw your activity as consisting in methodically coming up with different new ideas?

A. M.: Yeah, we did. That was something deliberate, that we came up with something new all the time, that there shouldn't be any style, that an artist is not a style, that that was a fiction. I

always say in my lectures that style is a prison. It was a problem of liberation too, and you can see it precisely in abstract art. A square, a square, a square, and only and always a square—and that's it—you can't make it better, you can't make it worse. There's no progress, no regress, no movement—that's it, the end. You can't do better than Pollock—there's no better or worse here. There's just a square: black square, gray square, black square—that's it. You're a victim of art.

This is a problem of the twentieth century, when in the struggle for individuality, for freedom, people came to the most frightening—to unfreedom. And the example of Pollock is a very good one, because when he first opened up a can of paint and spilled it out—I can understand, as an artist, that this was fantastic, this feeling when

the paint flew up into the air. I can imagine what it was like. But the problem is that when this paint plopped down on the floor, everything changed, because the next morning he had to get up and again open up many cans of paint, and spill them out again, and the morning after also . . . And that's how it begins—one, two, three, four, five, and that's it, that's the end of any kind of freedom, he has nowhere to run. This is the horror of the twentieth century, when you have to paint stripes your whole life. There's no way out of it, you can't avoid it. This is already the end of freedom.

Y. A.: What about when you came to the West—did you come to people who thought like you did, or still to strangers?

A. M.: The first thing that struck me was that artists looked the way they did in Russia, that the artists themselves were the same. Artists are like a separate breed, as it were, and physically they are very similar to each other. Not 100 percent, but you can clearly tell: this person is an artist. And it turned out that the criteria were much closer to what we had been fighting against in Russia—that you needed quality, that you still had to do something well. No, Vito Acconci and others were trying to fight against this too, at the time. They tried, but we lost this war, everything came full circle. It had to be well drawn, the angles had to be clean. In other words, things that we didn't understand and considered simply wrong. This group of people, conceptual artists, were doing more or less the same thing as we were, but you couldn't sell it, it lasted a very short time, and quickly turned into "normal" art, so to speak.

Y. A.: But did you find like-minded people when you arrived, or not?

A. M.: No, no, we were very isolated. Quite quickly, maybe five years after we came, we made our "dark canvases"⁴ and became very famous. And we were then one of the main artists of the 1980s in New York.

We were received well, but with suspicion, because back then Marxism-Leninism was a central topic, and the magazine *October* and all the most important critics were Marxists. Against Stalinism, of course, but Marxists. Therefore, when we painted Stalin, that was still all right, because everyone already understood that Stalin was bad. But when we did Lenin, they became mildly suspicious. It was still uncomfortable for us to say anything against the Soviet regime. We made very few things about the Soviet regime. We had better works before that. But it was these "dark canvases" that really made us famous.

Y. A.: But when you were putting on your first exhibits at the Feldman Gallery, how were you seen and whom were you identified with?

A. M.: We weren't seen, and that was the whole problem. They couldn't see us, because the problem of the Russian painter is that, by contrast with the Yugoslav, Serb, or Czech painter, to American eyes neither Czechs nor Serbs represent any special . . . There's no Czech art, no? There is Russian art—that's an enormous, so to speak, atom bomb. Leo Tolstoy, Shostakovich, and so on. Therefore, if you come as a Russian, you automatically become part of this *Doctor Zhivago*. You're never by yourself, and you can never become like the others, because you have to represent all that—*Doctor Zhivago* and Leo Tolstoy. In some respects, this makes it easier to make a career. But then it becomes harder to advance, because people don't see you as one of them.

Y. A.: Well, the two of you certainly didn't represent *Doctor Zhivago* and Leo Tolstoy.

A. M.: Of course, but we're still Russian painters. Since everyone knows Russia for this, that, and the other thing, you're placed in the same context. You're against *Doctor Zhivago*, but you're permanently inside this system. By contrast with a Czech painter, where there's no system,

and therefore no one places you anywhere. If you came from Bulgaria—who cares, fine, go ahead and work. But if you came from Russia, you're a Russian painter. You have to understand that this is a different thing entirely. And it was right when we came that this whole process began, very slowly. Because now, you know, a "Black" painter, a "white" painter, a homosexual—that is very important, and they always represent their minorities. If you're a Jewish painter, it's the Holocaust. We could have gone into the Holocaust vein, since when we came out of Russia, we first moved to Israel.

Y. A.: But you didn't represent your minority, but immediately betrayed it.

A. M.: Yes. But when we came, it wasn't like that, yet. It was by the end of the 1980s that the idea of representing different ethnic groups appeared in the West, you know, the way it used to be in the Soviet Union.

Y. A.: As in all-Union exhibits at the Manege?

A. M.: Yes. When we came, it was easier. No one knew yet that there would be "Black painters," and "homosexual painters," "red-haired painters." We had an idea in the late 1990s to make an exhibit of red-haired painters. If there are red-haired painters, why not exhibit them? Red-haired people are different from blond people in some ways too.

Y. A.: But you yourselves would not have been chosen for that exhibit.

A. M.: The curator didn't use to be red-haired. But now the curator is red-haired as well: the red-haired curator chooses from his own circle, as it were.

Y. A.: In my view, Western conceptual art is the last modernist movement, whereas you somehow became postmodernists right from the start.

A. M.: Yes, of course, you can see now that what we did was postmodernism, absolutely. Because it contained painting, eclecticism, quotes from the old masters. *Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll* is a classic postmodern work. I wouldn't have said so at the time, but now it's obvious. But there were no postmodernists in Russia, that was the problem. Kabakov was never a postmodernist. He painted those signs—that was classic conceptual art. Well, not classic, because it was still done by hand, but in general, something very, very close to it. There's a real similarity.

Y. A.: It's interesting that you define it formally: if the writing is done by hand, it's not quite conceptualism.

A. M.: Of course, how else? No, it's very similar, it's practically the same thing, only with certain specific characteristics of its own. There's nothing wrong with that.

At first, we became friends with Hans Haacke. That was radical. It was unimaginably precise, the way it was printed. That kind of thing is easier to do now, but then it was still difficult. But we made several pieces like that too—posters. *Color Is a Mighty Power*, for example. The way that was done was not ideal, of course, but it was the best we could do.

In reality, of course, we were postmodernists—one of the first in the world, apparently. And that was what motivated us, because as conceptual artists, we could not have come forward and presented ourselves. And the "dark canvases" were classic postmodernism, when no one yet knew what it was. We called it "Post Art." We understood that this was something different, yes.

Y. A.: Tell me about *Color Is a Mighty Power*. That was such a romantic notion of the magic power of art, wasn't it?

A. M.: Well, that was plain mockery, irony. We thought it was obvious that color could not be of any use as a means of contraception, but who

knows . . . There are people who believe in this. I'm developing this theme now.

Y. A.: The "Ministry of Healing"⁵?

A. M.: Yes, because this insanity about health, yoga, these mystical teachings—all of this came from a Russian woman, from Blavatsky. The idea of modernism, in reality, is one of the inventions of the nineteenth century. Along with Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, Freudianism, Marxism, crazy ideas that became transformed into life. They're gradually fading away—Freudianism has died, Marxism has been debunked, maybe even modernism will someday . . . But all of this was invented together. In reality, everything that Kabakov and others said, that was Blavatsky, that was genuine modernism.

Y. A.: When you made *Post Art*, with burned paintings, why did you include only Western art?

A. M.: We were addressing the West. We weren't talking to Soviet people. We were talking to other people, whom we had constructed, and we tried to speak in the language they understood. The posters were done in English, which we didn't know at all. And we took images from over there. We could've burned something socialist realist, but we knew that over there people wouldn't understand it, and over there was where we wanted to be.

Over here, there was no one to talk to about it at all. The only person who was close to it, despite everything, was Kabakov, of course. But he would talk nonsense about Shvartsman, so there was no one to talk to, no one understood anything. There were never any points of discussion.

Y. A.: If you were asked to put together a list of artists close to you, whom would you include in the same company as you?

A. M.: Vito Acconci is an amazing artist. Hans Haacke. Some of his works are very close to us. But on the other hand, he has a great number of

things that are completely different. This is hard, because we're Western artists, but since we're from Russia, there's something very specific about that. It's hard. Here, we're remembered for only two things: *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* and *People's Choice*. Well, sometimes something else is mentioned as well, but we've done so many different things that they're really not going to fit into anyone's head, unless you're studying them deliberately. We had two high points in our career, which we're remembered for. We had very many shows, and our first shows were fantastically successful, but this has faded away somehow, it's no longer there. If one sees us as you see us, we're simply different artists. That's why no one remembers those works of ours, which were done at the same time as the works of Haacke or Acconci. No one remembers this.

Y. A.: What about among Russian artists—is there anyone close to what you were doing?

A. M.: Back then, of course, the "Nest"—they were direct disciples. There weren't any others. Our work began in 1972, and in 1977 we left. The last year we were waiting for permission to leave and basically didn't do anything, because we knew that we wouldn't be able to bring our work out with us. In other words, we were in Russia for four and a half years.

Y. A.: What about such people as the Gerlovins—did you know about them?

A. M.: We found out about them later. Rimma made a good piece, *Cubes*. Conceptually, it was very good. We liked it very much. But it was something different. Our concept was a concept of change.

Y. A.: What about Lev Rubinstein, Andrei Monastyrski—did you know them?

A. M.: When at the very beginning of 1976, we had our first exhibit at the Feldman Gallery, we were still in Russia, and we had an enormous success

there. Even the Voice of America reported something. Before that, no one had taken us seriously, whereas now, something had come from the West. Therefore, crowds of people appeared. But very many of them I simply don't remember. Many tell me: "Yes, of course, we came to your house." You know, there, on Leninsky Prospekt. That was as if in a fog: we were waiting to leave, there were people coming and going constantly. The "Bulldozer Exhibition"—there was that too, of course. But now we became important magnitudes. Because you can't go against the West.

Y. A.: Tell me about the *Catalogue of Super Objects for Super People*.

A. M.: That was how we penetrated into Western culture, it was done for the West. But how we managed to penetrate it, I don't know: I haven't seen any other catalogues like it, I don't think. It was some kind of epiphany. It's a wildly anti-bourgeois work, which unexplainably was born in Russia, a critique of bourgeois society. Meaningless things, for which we came up with funny names, which here, in the West, is very common. Today, probably, it is common in Russia as well, but back then there was nothing even remotely like it. Russia was a pretty grim and dark country at that time. But the time itself was quite cheerful.

We had another wonderful work—a little machine for passport rotation. We made it out of a fan. It existed only in order for you to insert your passport, push a button, and make it rotate.

Y. A.: Some kind of optical effect?

A. M.: Yes, an optical effect. Nothing. Simply a different perspective on the everyday. But only for passports, you couldn't insert anything else. When we came to New York, Ronald Feldman was selling Jasper Johns prints, and I proposed to him that we would make a machine into which you could insert Jasper Johns, and it would rotate. He refused.

Y. A.: What can you say about the work *Circle, Square, Triangle*?

A. M.: That's also in some sense a mockery of spirituality.

Y. A.: All right, I'll go back one more time to the beginning: Did you, at bottom, see yourselves as conceptual artists?

A. M.: If you say that we called ourselves that, that means we called ourselves that for some time. That means you met us during the period when we called ourselves conceptual artists. We called ourselves sots-artists, we called ourselves different things. Over those four and a half years, there was no one name, that's for sure. There was no structure, there was no unity of any kind.

We also came up with "*kheppening*" ["happening" transliterated into Russian]. When we came here, we said "*kheppening*." It turned out that the word "*kheppening*" was no longer used: what was used was "performance." This was a word we hadn't heard. But we'd known about "*kheppening*," with Allan Kaprow. We didn't understand the meaning of the word "performance," the meaning of the word "*kheppening*." These were abstract names.

Y. A.: But all the same, you did know about Kaprow.

A. M.: No, that's something I know now and am saying now. Probably, we did know, but I doubt that we remembered the name. Yes, probably, we knew. It was described somewhere, definitely. But I don't think we remembered his name. Although, who knows.

Y. A.: Alik, a final attempt. Could you explain, in a few words, what the two of you were doing at the beginning of the 1970s? Imagine that you have to talk to students and explain what you were doing during that period.

A. M.: From that point of view, we were doing postmodernism.

Y. A.: No, not to label it, but to describe it.

A. M.: If you're talking from that point of view, we didn't have any precise idea. But the main idea that was born when we first began was the idea of eclecticism, that we had to change all the time, that we must not repeat our works. And that to repeat a work was shameful. That was a radical idea we had. It was an idea that we repeated over and over, an idea that sank into our minds, and we believed that it was the right thing to do.

Y. A.: Can we formulate it as follows: that your product was the idea, not the work?

A. M.: Well, probably. Although we still made things of some kind anyway. I don't know. But in retrospect, it's obvious that it was postmodernism. You know, there are certain periods in life? We were on a roll. Ideas would come into our heads. We would laugh, it was always funny. Actually, that's another fundamental thing: it has to be amusing and funny. About some of our work, we've even been told: "That's *too* funny. It's too much." In other words, if it's funny, it's not art. That's one of the radical themes. It had to be funny. The funnier, the better. Sometimes this humor was incomprehensible from the side. But to us, it was always funny.

Y. A.: One can't get much out of you. It's like you're on a hot frying pan.

A. M.: You know, I'm no longer used to talking about art. I'm speaking honestly, I just don't know. I haven't talked about art in a long time with anyone. Or else I speak publicly at various forums, but that's a different thing, and I'm not trying to explain. And again, when I speak in public, it's always funny. It seems, being funny is the main theme.

No, I command an audience very well. There's constant laughter, people go into laughing fits.

A few times I've pushed people into a state when the audience loses it, people can't stop laughing. I'm a clown like that, yeah. The artist as clown. That's what we were—clowns.

Y. A.: Well, yeah. The joke—that's a low genre. It's not an epic poem, obviously.

A. M.: Naturally. But I remember we had an explanation, an important argument. I read somewhere in Hegel about the pyramid of the arts, where tragedy was at the top. "But here," he says, "there's something even higher. This is comedy, which destroys the whole pyramid to hell." And that's it. I mean, that was one of the arguments—that above tragedy, there's still comedy.

Y. A.: That's a powerful notion. And in fact, as far as you're concerned, it's even quite accurate.

A. M.: I haven't read Hegel, but I came across this in some book or other about him. That's the explanation we came up with in the end. Because everything is meaningless. The whole pyramid has become meaningless. It's the end of the pyramid as such, because the pyramid has been destroyed.

Translated by Ilya Bernstein from Yuri Albert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo*. [Moscow Conceptualism. Beginning], exh. cat. (Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia: Privolzhskii filial GTsSI, 2014).

NOTES

1. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton), 1972.
2. Mikhail Shvartsman (1926–1997), Russian nonconformist artist.
3. Yevgeny Shiffers (1934–1997), director, philosopher, theologian, writer.
4. The series *Nostalgic Socialist Realism*, 1980–83.
5. The *Art Healing Ministry* was opened by Alexander Melamid in New York in 2011.



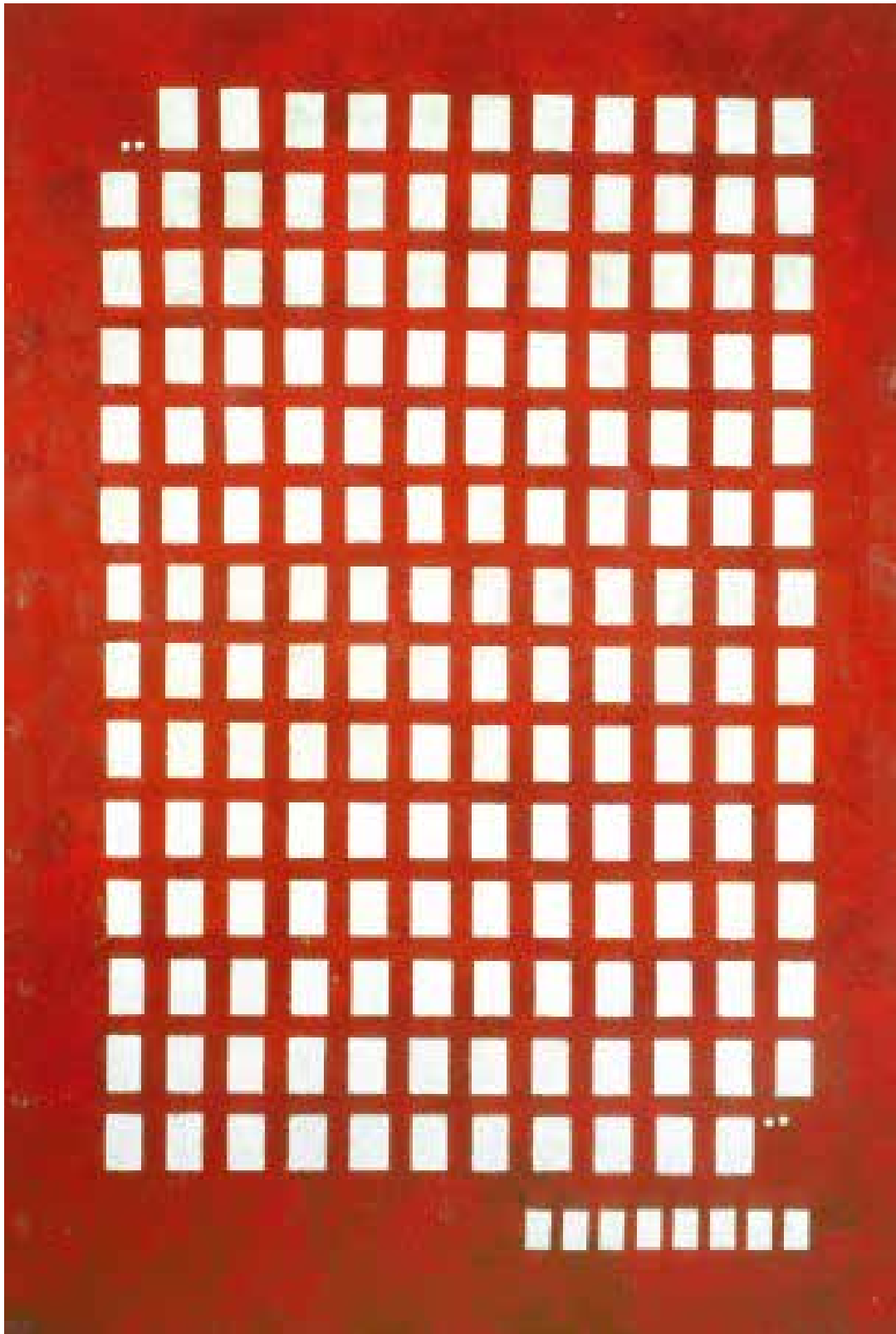


CATALOGUE

Sots-Art

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid began their collaboration in 1972 with the invention of sots-art, the name a combination of references to socialist realism and American pop art. If pop art in America was a reaction to the overproduction of consumer goods, sots-art was a reaction to the overproduction of ideology in the USSR. This combination of seemingly unrelated things, which Komar and Melamid called “conceptual eclectics,” became the basic method of their art.

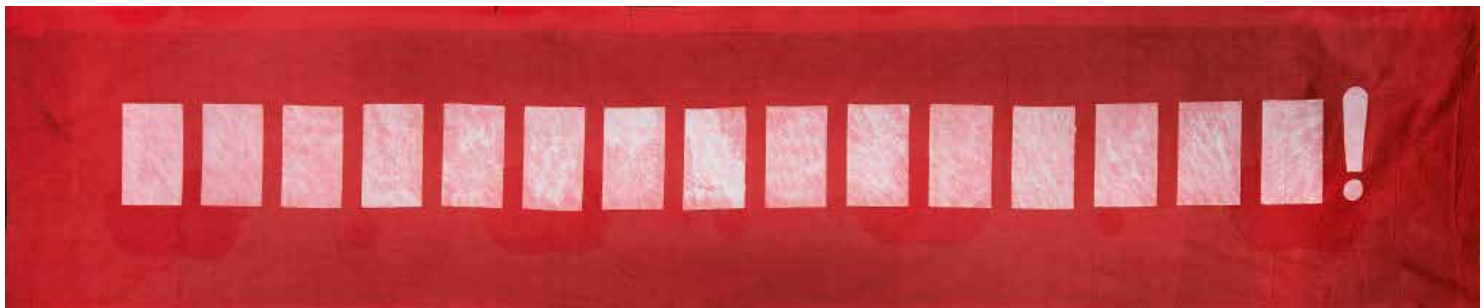
The idea of sots-art came to the artists in the winter of 1972, when they were trying to earn money by decorating a kindergarten with images of Soviet propaganda. To entertain themselves, they imagined an artist who would perform such a banal task not for money but sincerely. Such an artist could, for example, claim authorship of the slogans he was painting by assigning his name to them (p. 93). Or he could make private family portraits in the style of official propaganda imagery of heroes (p. 103). Considering that propaganda images had a practically sacred status in the Soviet Union, these “sincere” gestures, daring and incredibly funny at the same time, rendered the Communist slogans and signifiers of the regime nonsensical.



Quotation from the Sots-Art series, 1972



We Were Born to Make the Fairytale Come True from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Ideal Slogan from the Sots-Art series, 1972



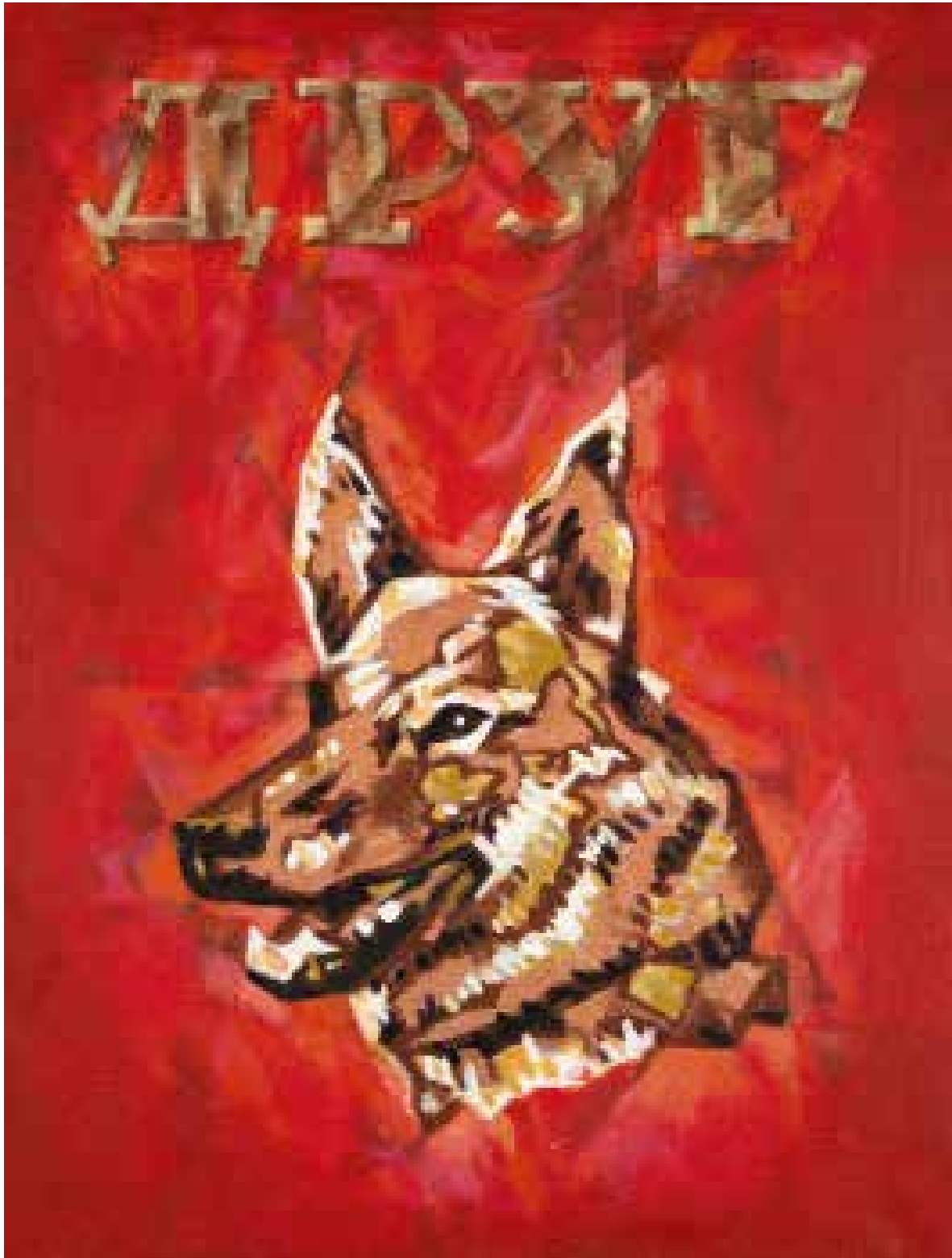
Our Goal Is Communism! from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Forward to the Sun (Communism) from the Sots-Art series, 1972



You Are Feeling Good! from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Friend Cigarette Box from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Double Self-Portrait from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Portraits of Wives (diptych) from the Sots-Art series, 1972



Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood, 1983

ТОВАРИЩУ
СТАЛИНУ
СЧАСТЛИВОЕ
ДЕТСТВО!

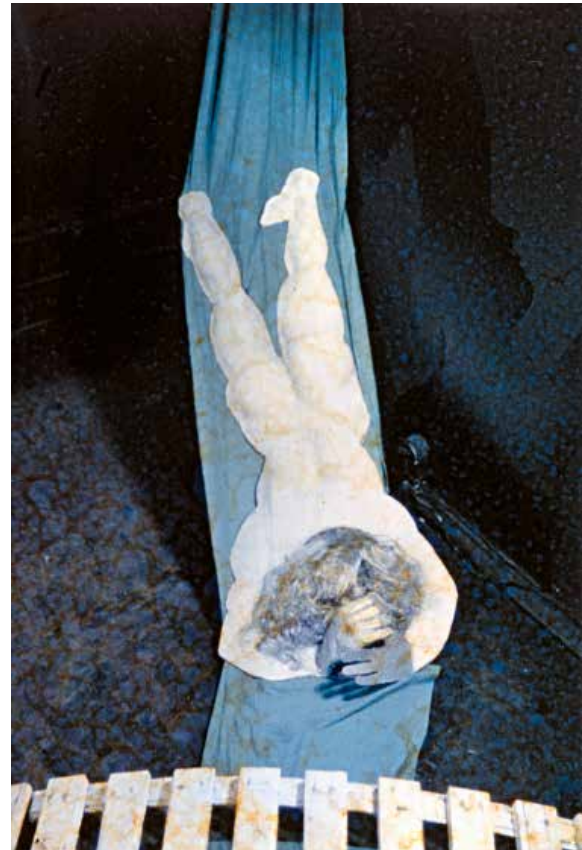
Paradise

Opened in spring 1973, *Paradise* was one of the first—if not the first—works of “total installation,” which many artists of the Moscow conceptualist movement, including Ilya Kabakov and Irina Nakhova, would contribute to. Komar and Melamid converted a room in a Moscow apartment into an immersive experience. As described by Melvyn Nathanson: “The walls, floor, and ceiling were painted and covered with sculpted figures and bizarre electrical light effects. Soviet radio played in the background. A river of blue cloth flowed under a wooden bridge, while a hideous Stalin-like figure [*Prometheus*] sculpted in a corner of the ceiling dripped blood, and a gold Buddha along the wall was covered with lacelike miniature soldiers, planes, and tanks” (*Komar and Melamid: Two Dissident Artists*). The installation included the smell of gasoline mixed with the smell of cheap perfume. Visitors were locked in the room, one by one, to be subjected to a chaotic, claustrophobic experience symbolic of daily life in the Soviet Union.

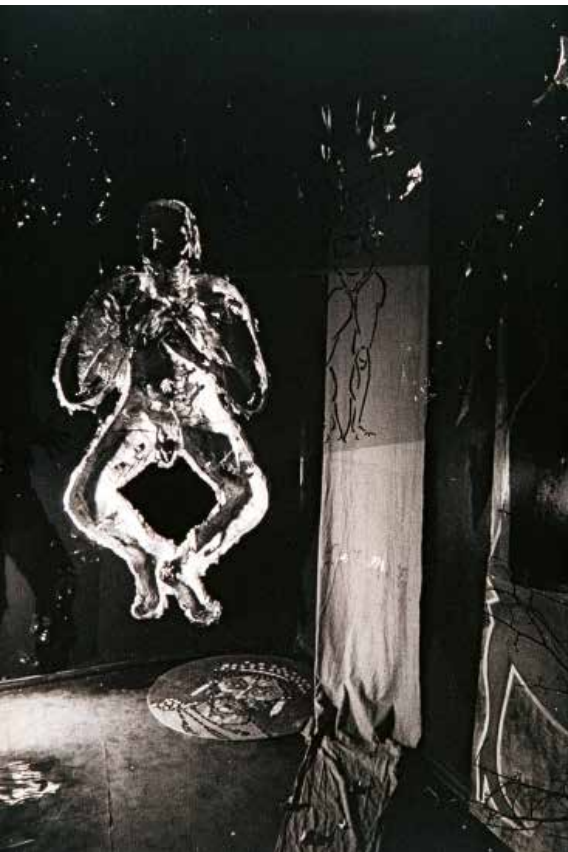
The installation was the site of *Performance in Paradise*—one of the first works of performance art in Russia. At the end of 1974, after the notorious “Bulldozer Exhibition,” *Paradise* had to be dismantled because of increased government control.

Paradise installation, 1972–73





PAGES 107-9: *Paradise* installation, 1972-73





ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *Performance in Paradise*, 1972–73



Biographies and Legends

Among the most important works made by Komar and Melamid in the 1970s, *Biographies* and *Legends* outline the lives of invented characters, a theme that subsequently became a dominant topic in Soviet underground art.

PAGES 113–17

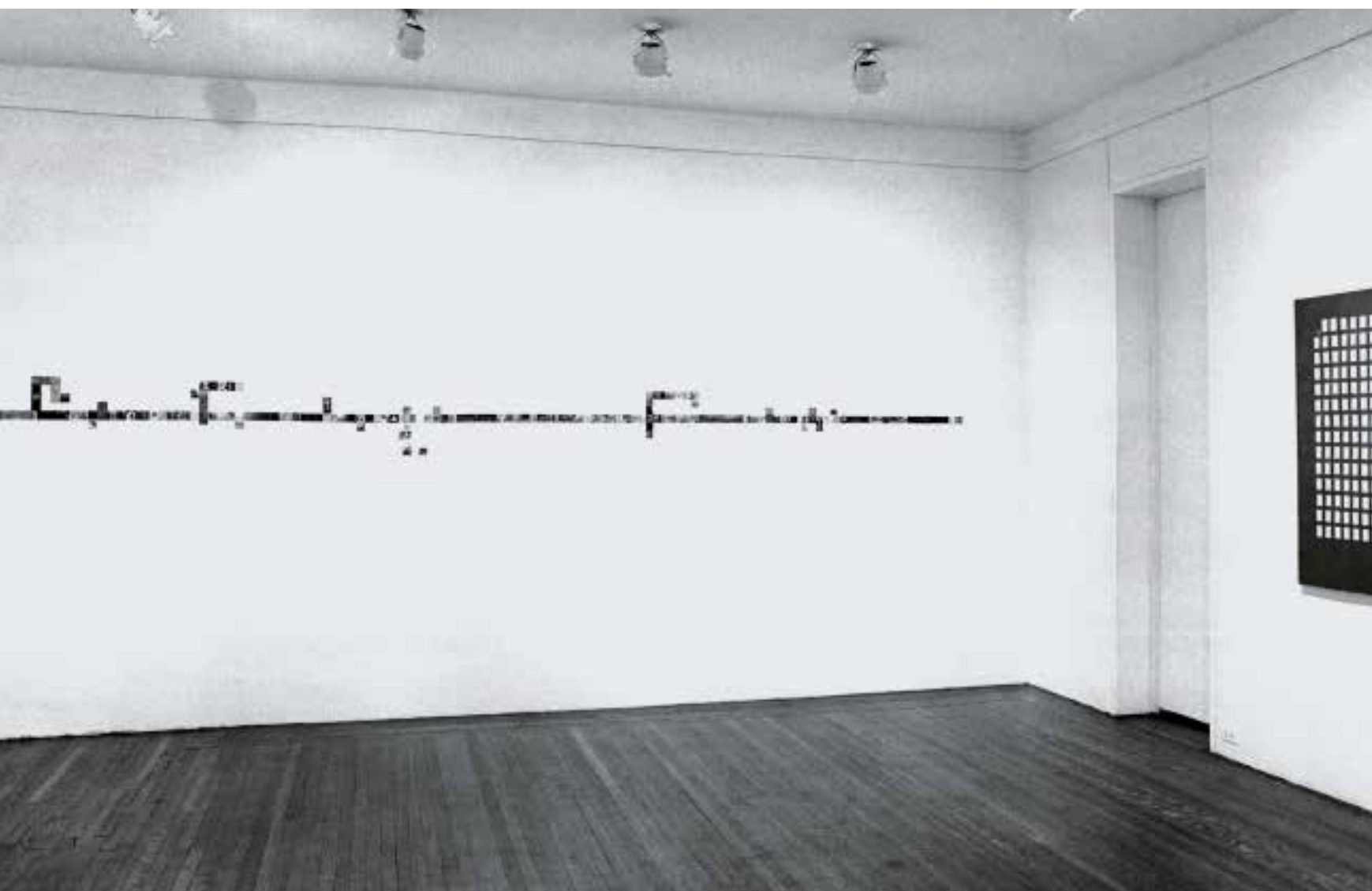
Biography of Our Contemporary—Komar and Melamid's first multipanel work—consists of 197 squares that tell the story of a Russian Jewish youth from the moment of conception through childhood, school, first love, disappointments, and the trauma of the Stalin era, all the way to emigration. The method of combining different artistic styles for each part of the story is a prototype for later series such as *Anarchistic Synthesism* and *Diary*.

PAGES 118–29

Much of Soviet art historical narrative consisted not of critiques of styles or quality—which was politicized and censured—but of biographical and descriptive information. These descriptions were substitutes for the works' visual aesthetics, much like the legends about artists of antiquity, in particular Apelles, whose works survive only in verbal description. Komar and Melamid decided to create such legends themselves. *Apelles Ziablov*, they claimed, was a serf artist in eighteenth-century Russia who invented abstraction. Because he was a serf, his great artistic discovery was not appreciated by his superiors and was overlooked by the world. In addition to paintings, Komar and Melamid also invented Ziablov's biography and documentary materials. Ziablov's story, of course, alludes to the position of contemporary artists such as Komar and Melamid in Soviet Russia.

PAGES 130–35

Komar and Melamid took the name *Nikolai Buchumov* from a painting they found in the trash on a Moscow street. Unable to find any biographical information on him, they created it. Buchumov, they said, was an orphan raised in the countryside who made his way to Moscow to study art. There he lost his left eye in a fight with an avant-gardist. After returning to his village, Buchumov primed sixty canvases; then, standing in the spot in a field where his mother had given birth to him, he painted precisely what he saw (which included the tip of his nose since he had only one eye) at each season of the year. This project plays with many Soviet clichés, including the socialist realist premise that proper art is a faithful transcription of reality.

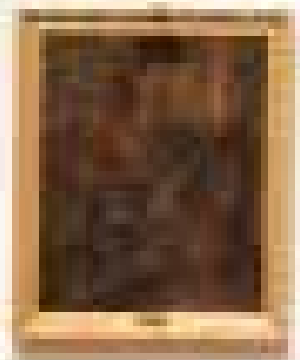
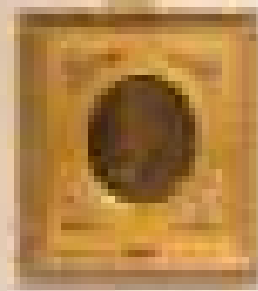


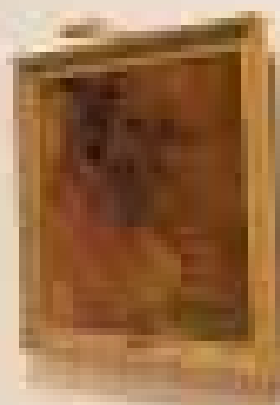












APELLES ZIABLOV

Undated

To my Lord and most Shining Genius Nikolai Erenevich, from his lowliest slave and personal portraitist Apelles* Ziablov,

I beg to inform your All Mighty Worthiness that the marble fresco illuminations, decorated with the aid of assorted specially prepared pigments, is now completed. These sketches recall the varied countenances of the Heavens and the surfaces of the Great Waters more truly than do the portraits of Their Majesties' Nothingness, executed on the 23rd of September by myself at your command, and which you exhibit in the capital, making them the object of your drinking companions' ridicule and thereby wounding me to the core.

Upon the completion of the works and Lent, your lowliest slave was visited by an otherworldly, prophetic dream, wherein materialized a burning woman, and the burning orb of the earth, transformed into a mobile, swollen mass from the great heat such that like molten metals, the continents, the outlines of the seas and pastures, and the contours of the great cities where holy and ungodly acts are committed, began to change their very forms, and when suddenly a Light as cold as ice came forth, they froze and became like unto the patterns of hoarfrost captured on a glass.

And the Fire was the very Image of the first portrait of Their Majesties' N, and the Light as cold as ice was the second portrait, and then I was awakened by the cackling of the hens.

So you see my Lord, how that which is to you but a miserable jest is yet worthy enough that the gods and Higher Spheres have made it known to you through your most humble servant.

These events forever convinced me that even when Creation is accomplished at command, or to gain a morsel of daily bread, it is yet possible to make manifest the soul's expression, and, with the passage of time, to instruct even those who command.

I am and remain, your Most Sightly Highness, the worst and lowest of your lowly slaves, and your personal favorite,

Apelles

* Contemporary historians have speculated that Apelles was not the serf's baptismal name, but that it was given to him by his owner, Nikolai Struisky, in honor of the most renowned of the ancient Greek painters, Apelles (4th century B.C.), none of whose works have come down to us.

May 1, 1725

To my heart's friend and the lowest of our slaves, Apelles,

On the Russian Olympus there now rules a regency of debauch and joyfulness, for the death of our lord halted preparations for further executions, which threatened in their numbers to outdistance all previous measures. The gossips' hero Hermes is again in favor.¹

Not long ago, on the first day of April, the whole glorious, sleeping city was awakened by the frantic tolling of alarm bells, which were discovered to be the April Fool's jest of the inconsolable widow of he who recently embarked in Charon's craft down the River Styx.

Twenty days before that event, at the funeral of our Padre I, the Vice President² of the holy and ruling church Synod, in his ceremonial address was inspired to compare the once-unquiet deceased to Samson, Japhet, Moses, Solomon, David, and the Emperor Constantine all in one.

Listening to his declaration, I sought apt comparisons for the speaker himself, but none were to his advantage. Then I remembered thy esteemed Stephan Yavorsky³ and recalled the speech in which he named the tale bearer's law of the year 1711⁴ a sinful law. It seems that this was the loquacious Metropolitan's last pronouncement. But the priest spoke justly. I believe that this law more than all others recently enacted will affect the people's spirit, and its consequences will be no less grave than the Caesar's tradition of treating his subjects' property as his own. Henceforth, informing is not an offense, but a civil duty, and the citizen is relieved of his conscience much in the manner that his horses are requisitioned by the army.

For heaven's sake do not take my querulous revelations to heart; my views have changed. I am no longer so certain that the adoption of Europe's parliament would be any greater boon than would the adoption of her military inventions and fashions. If at this very moment I were to find myself with thee on those poetic English isles as in the past,⁵ I would exchange all of Seneca for a pound of fine wig powder. Verily, do we not see that the palace and the nearby prison fortress now often exchange their inhabitants?

Of late I am overcome by crisis and doubt, and I have even abandoned my eclogues, though I know that my idleness is a loss for the Muses' chronology. Everything in this world now seems weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable to me and the posture of ridicule I see merely as the result of risk and daring.

It is only out of love for thee that I cannot and do not wish to ridicule thy convictions and thy iconoclasm.

Think on it, if thou art not fallen into heresy or art not yet so low and dull that thou hopest to remake the world order, preferring blind sentiment to dialectical argument, why dost thou try to instruct others? Why dost thou pronounce speeches before those surpassing thee in rude ignorance? Would not it be better to cease making images altogether and honor only the Bible's letters, as in ancient times and even now the Hebrews have done? If thou fightest idols, then why only these idols and not others?

The London atheist, and no doubt the model for our heirs, has chosen the fine arts as the object of his devotion. Why shouldst thou not, at my whim, though voluntarily, become a spiritual "artoclast"?

What could be more unusual and original? Although the struggle against worship of my beloved Bacchus is yet more absurd, is it not? Do not take offense at thy master, my little soul.

I do miss thee heartily. Apelles, where art thou my dear Apelles? In what lonely corner of Ruzaevka dost thou hide thyself? What entertains thy soul and nurtures thy heart? What pleasures dost thou find in life? And dost thou think on occasion of thy platonic friend?

Forgive the blurry lines of these words, these are not tears but the effects of my trembling hand admixed with a splash of wine and spirits. Thus I command thee, my unworthy and lowest slave, to directly cease the decoration of my estate's torture chambers and to appear before our eyes as fleetly as a Borzoi hound.

N. E. Struisky

1. An obvious reference to A. D. Menshikov, Peter the Great's closest adviser, who fell out of favor not long before the czar's death.
2. I.e., the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Vice President of the Synod was an office introduced by Peter I in an attempt to turn the church into a bureaucratic ministry; the ruling was later revoked.
3. The former head of the Russian Orthodox Church, removed from his position by Peter I.
4. A law obliging priests to reveal the secrets of the confession to the secret police.
5. In his youth, Struisky had been sent with his serf Ziablov by the czar to study in England, as were other children of important families.

DECISION OF THE MINOR ACADEMIC ASSEMBLY

In the year of our Lord 1798, on the seventh day of November, were the sketches of the freed serf Apelles Ziablov displayed, and not merely displayed, but forthwith deliberated upon by the Minor Academic Assembly in the presence of the Professor on Duty, the adjuncts, and of the Guard Officer. Upon termination of the deliberation on the subject of these unmentionable

sketches, it was ruled that the morals of their maker had been sorely impaired by old age and infected by undertakings that are contrary to God and to the Law, and which the noble arts can in no way tolerate.

In response to such ruling, the aforementioned Ziablov hastened to further his foul and obscene behavior by declaiming some dark verse penned by his deceased master with the insolent intention of foully distorting historical perspective and besmirching the titles of the assembly members. This oration, such as it was, recalled by the stoker who inadvertently lingered near the stove in the assembly hall, is hereby quoted.

Tis in our power to merit world esteem and admiration
Yet ever refrain from quarrels over station.
Raphael was never
A ministry assessor.

The liberal arts, which are guided by taste and reason and encouraged by the attention of our superiors as well as by the advice and praise of celebrated artists and connoisseurs of art, have as their goal to bring forth, through steadfast instruction, a flourishing condition of morals, such that the endeavors of this bountiful source, which may be inclined to good and evil alike, might be of beneficial use to both state and society.

And this inclination shall receive praise or vilification in accord with the object, either beneficial or corruptive, which the artist or writer hath chosen. Repulsiveness doth occupy a false place in art, for it is not to be encountered in nature, and if it should be encountered, then it hath no correspondence and is needlessly employed by certain people only that they may show their disregard for the rules.

The firm and well-reasoned condemnation of these sketches (which shall be consigned to the flames) will not only enhance the zeal of artists of renown, but will encourage others who as yet do not possess such distinctions and all the same nourish hopes for governmental patronage.

Seeing as appropriate and correct drawing is a worthy road toward the achievement of perfection and the fulfillment of hope, and may prevent such a person from succumbing to vile and obscene behavior in which a man is easily rendered worthless, the aforementioned Apelles is to be properly fed and given governmental subsidy for continual practice in the plaster-drawing class, under the supervision of an executor, Lt. Colonel Rykov, who shall be specially assigned to him.

Written across this document: "Hanged himself
Wednesday morning between 7 and 12."
Signature illegible











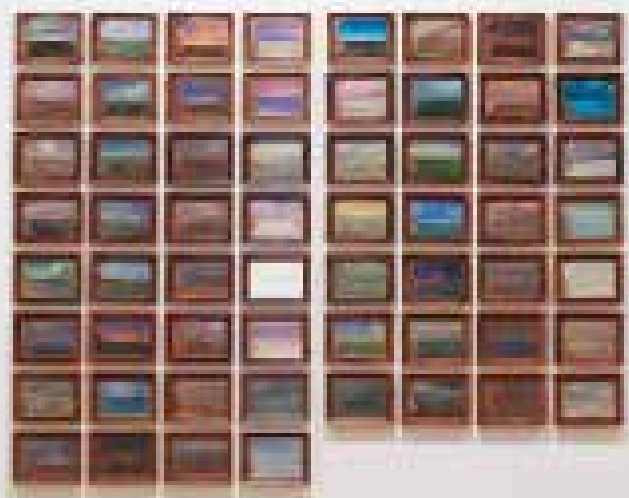




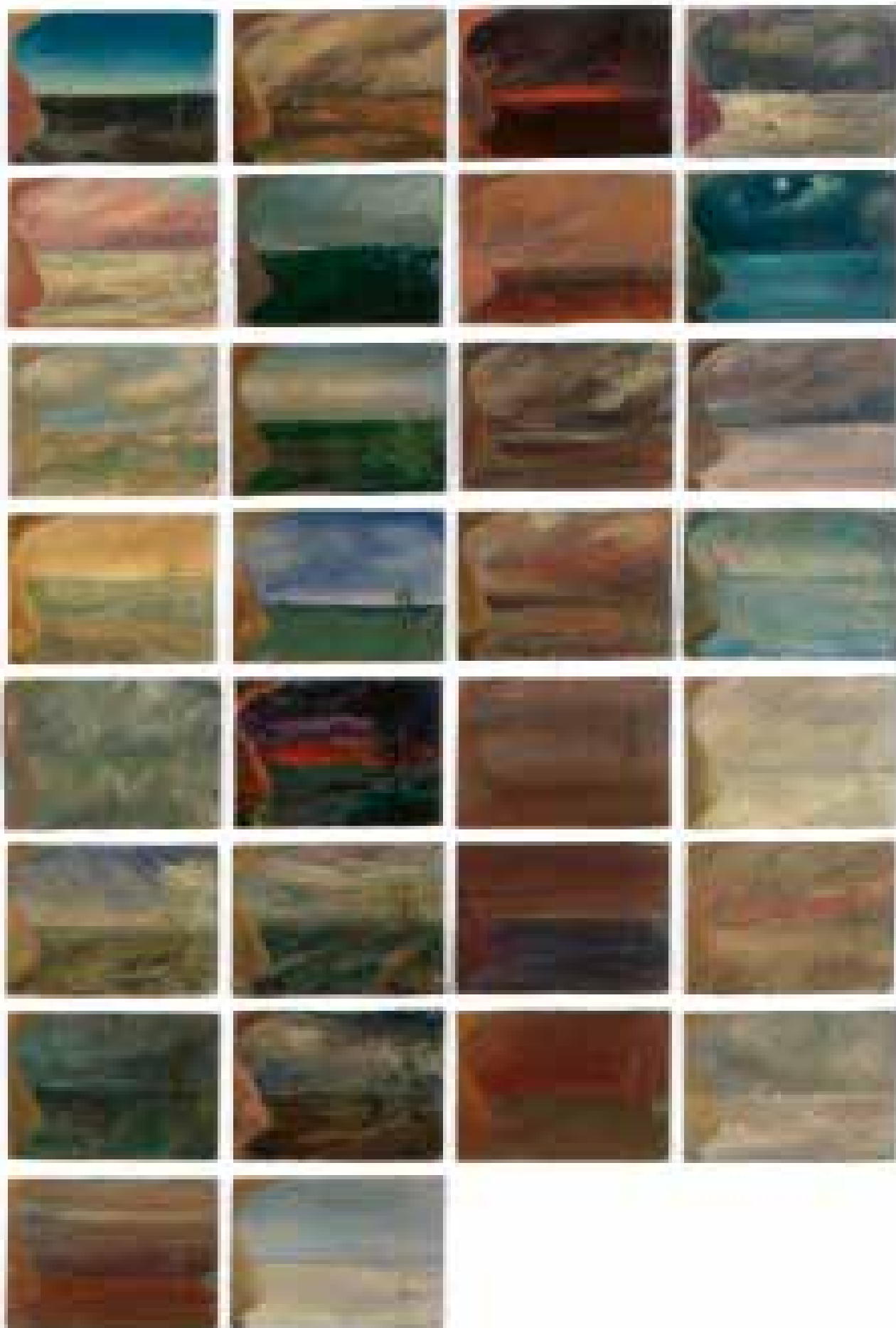




RIGHT AND PAGES 132–35: **Nikolai Buchumov**
from the *Legends* series, 1973









NIKOLAI BUCHUMOV AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The life of nature, its breath fanning the body and the soul, the unhurried and majestic movement of time, this is the only theme of my work. The human bustle, petty squabbles, petty passions, little boxlike houses, towers, columns—all this defiles nature, but, praise be to God, it does not affect its essence; these are only dirty specks on its body. No sooner does Mother Nature gently turn another side to the sun, than all loathsome things fall off from her, because they are superficial. And the abuse and running about of the petty people who had been quiet for a while, the people who try to cover everything with their excrement, begins anew. Let people be damned.

One must live so that nothing remains in man that is human, but only that which relates and blends with nature. Be a tree, river, grass, sky, part of the earth, and then you will be clean and light, as clean and light as a tree, river, grass, and sky.

I was born in the village of Buslaevk, Penza province, in 1891. The sexton of the parish church of the Holy Nikolai registered me on the instigation of my Grandmother Frosia, the sister-in-law of my mother's father, as Khariton. My deceased parents and all good people called me Nikolai. I do not remember my parents; I only remember the sharp odor of wormwood, its smell mixed up with something sweet and good—what it was I do not know to this day. I also remember that in the entranceway there was a wooden trough, which I often kicked with my feet, and it gave out such a wondrous peal, so that to this day at the sound of bare feet against a trough there arises in my spirit a feeling that I cannot put into human speech. My grandmother Frosia, with whom I spent my entire youth, used to give me a good hiding when she got angry, because of my passion to cover the stove with drawings in ashes, so that to this day in bad weather my kidneys do not let me fall asleep. In these dreamless nights I decided to put on paper my life and thoughts, which have arisen over more than twenty years' work with my brushes.

At the age of twelve, I ran away from my grandmother to the city of Penza, where at first, I had to steal; but then a good man, Petukhov, an undeservedly forgotten portraitist, a graduate of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, treated me, an orphan, kindly and gave me my initial knowledge of the modeling of a head, perspective, and other secrets of our wonderful profession. I used to work then about ten–twelve hours a day and felt as though my head were buried in fragrant straw.

During my tenth year there, with money given me by Petukhov, I went to Moscow, where I was stunned by the noise and the commotion, which I began to hate from that moment on all my life. And, on the whole, the Moscow period is the stupidest part of my life. Having passed the entrance exams, I studied in the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, but with the

professors—vain and empty people thinking only of earthly and base goods such as prizes, exhibitions, and grants—I agreed with them neither in my ideas nor in my work, for which they revenged themselves on me with bad marks. I did not agree with the students for the same reasons. My reserve was especially strained, when in an argument about art, a decadent (the third-year student Ptsel'nikov) accidentally knocked out my left eye with his fist. Lying in the hospital, I thought about many things and immediately upon my release painted the picture *In the Sea*. I can see it vividly; it is poor because it is decadent and therefore it is not sincere, not real, though it has some features of genuine work. It was shown at the student exhibition. Harshly hostile reviews and mockery rained down on me, and for this reason, also because of my shaken health, connected with my kidney ailment, I returned to Buslaevk.

It was the summer of 1913. The smells and colors of my native village enveloped me, and I vowed never to forsake it, no matter what would happen. I lived in the cottage of my grandmother, who soon died, so I began to fend for myself. I became a plower, hay mower, reaper, and so on. I was a little acquainted with these village professions even before, but now I came to master them in earnest. I decided for a time not to involve myself in painting but to look around and decide what to do and how to do it, to put together a plan and gradually carry it out. My musings over this plan took me three and a half years, after which in 1917, I primed, in a special way devised by myself, sixty pieces of cardboard about the size of my palm, four for each year, having figured out that I had no more than fifteen years left to live, considering my damaged kidneys. According to my plan, I decided to do four studies a year, one study for each time of year.

I prepared my brushes myself. A marble board, which formerly held a clock, carefully preserved by me, a gift of my late benefactor Petukhov, has faithfully served me until now. On it I rubbed in the juices of every manifestation of nature. In this connection, I would like to add that in the rubbings mixed with oil, each earthly creature gives its own color. I am painting from a single spot, where, as they say, my late mother gave birth to me while working in the fields. Here, I hope, they will bury me.

Now it is already 1929 and if God gives me four more years, I will be able to fully carry out my project: to create the epopee of my life, dissolved as an insignificant part into the immense expanse of my homeland. Observing that the bundle of cardboard, which I primed in 1917, is steadily dwindling. I am not experiencing any sadness, since I know that the eternity of nature is a guarantee and pledge of my immortality.

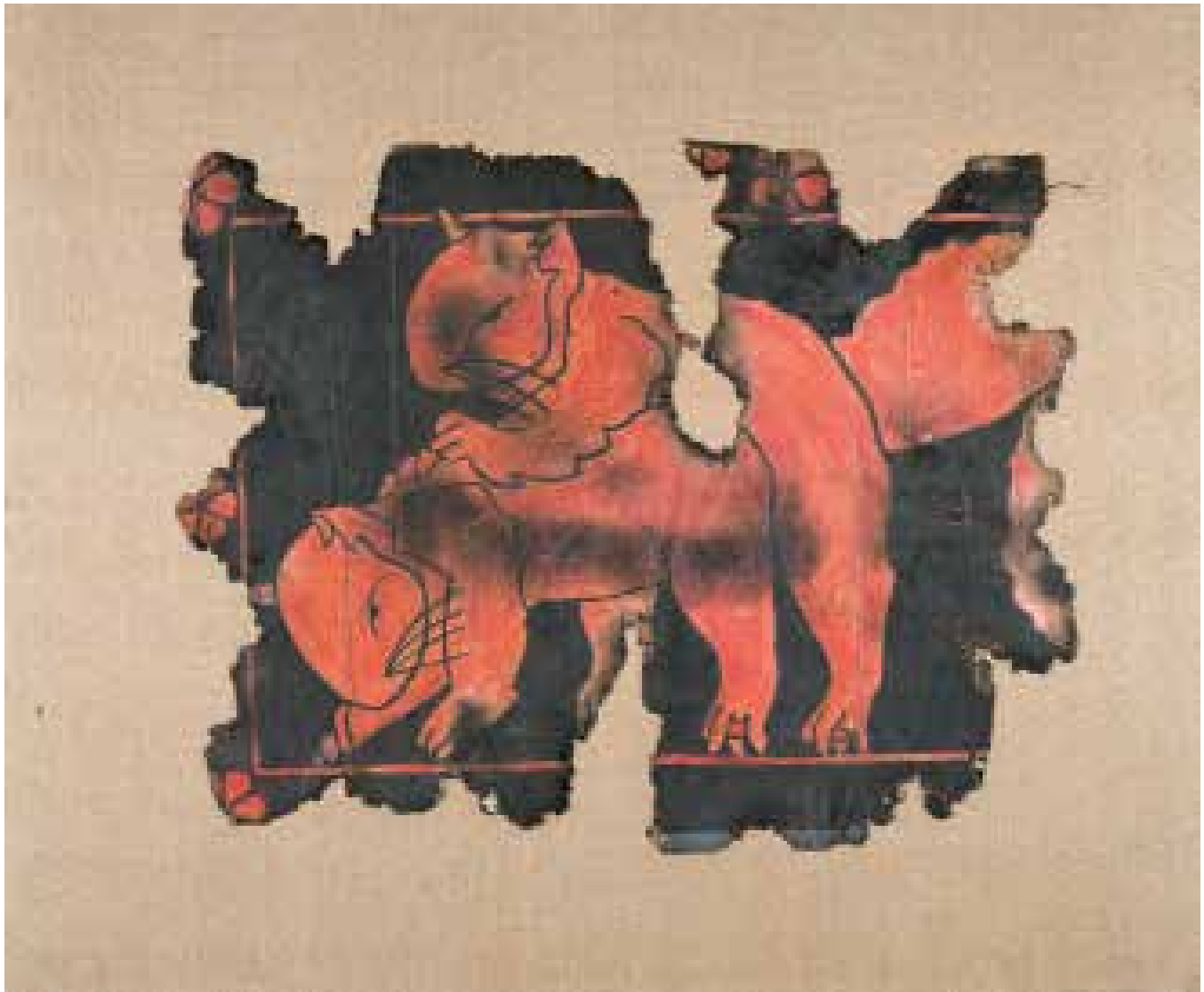
The village of Buslaevk
12 April 1929

Post Art

The *Post Art* series imagines how celebrated works of modern culture would look to future generations—after earthquakes, volcanoes, nuclear wars, and the work of restorers—the way Pompeian frescos look to us. The series also includes *Scenes from the Future* (pp. 140–41), paintings and prints showing the ruins of the Guggenheim Museum, John F. Kennedy Airport, and other scenes in the style of the French eighteenth-century painter Hubert Robert, who portrayed ruins of antiquity. Related in style and message is the painting *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke* (pp. 142–43), which is accompanied by letters with a proposal to build such a factory, sent to the prime minister of Greece and the minister of petroleum of Saudi Arabia.



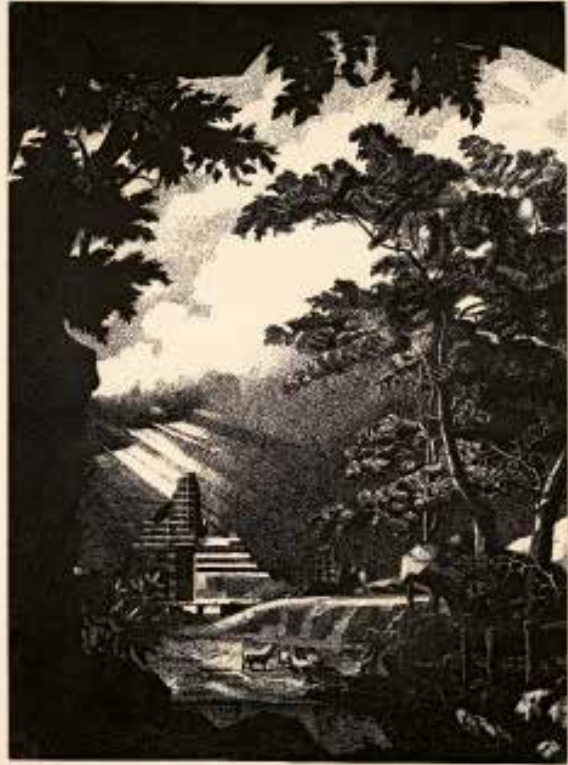
Post Art No. 2 from the *Post Art* series (Roy Lichtenstein), 1973



Post Art No. 5 from the *Post Art* series (Peter Phillips), 1973–74



Post Art No. 4 from the *Post Art* series (Jasper Johns), 1973–74



ABOVE LEFT: *Scenes from the Future*: Guggenheim Museum, 1990
 ABOVE RIGHT: *Scenes from the Future*: Museum of Modern Art, 1990



Untitled from the *Scenes from the Future* series, 1973

The Celebrated Artists
of the End of the 2nd Millennium A.D.
Moscow
Leninsky Prospect 70/II Apt. 404

His Excellency Sheikh A.Z. Yamani
Minister of Petroleum and
Mineral Resources
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

May 14, 1977

Dear Sheikh Yamani!

Your reputation as one of the major capitalists of our time compels us to appeal to you with a request to fund the construction of the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke.

In our century, when the problem of preserving harmony between man and his environment arouses the concern of world opinion, who better than you can show the ability of mankind to achieve independence from commercial imperatives so that we can turn away from our obsession with profits towards the eternal and ideal.

Clean, unpolluted with the ideas of utilitarianism, blue smoke, constantly diffused will produce monuments to the genuine beauty of human feelings and intelligence -- a symbol of the Renaissance of the idyllic landscape of the Golden Age.

We do not suggest the elimination of the colossal machinery of modern industrial production. However, it is within our power to direct this machine along the path of eternal and ideal aesthetics. Blue clouds, eternally wandering the atmosphere of our planet and freely transversing the borders of countries and continents, will remind all those who have not lost the ability to dreamily gaze at the sky of uncorruptible and undying Truth and Beauty.

We are attaching to this letter a photograph of the design for the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke, and we hope to receive a reply from you in the near future.

We ask you to send your reply either to our home address: Leninsky Prospect, 70/II, apt. 404, Moscow, USSR, or to the Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street, New York, New York 10021.

Coordination with the government of Greece is being handled through the Ronald Feldman Gallery.

Hopefully

 /Komar/
/Melamid/

The Renown Artists
of the End of the 2nd Millennium A.D.
Moscow
Leninsky Prospect 70/II, Apt. 404
Komar/Melamid

The Prime Minister of Greece
Mr. Karamanlis
Athens

Honorable Mr. Karamanlis!

You are the head of the government of a country which, being the cradle of European civilization, has always evoked the deepest feelings in the heart of every civilized man.

In our century, the problem of preserving harmony between man and the environment is attracting the anxious attention of world-wide opinion. Who, if not you and your country, could become the pioneers in the matter of resurrecting the idyllic landscape of the long gone Golden Age.

We do not suggest the elimination of the colossal machinery of modern industrial production. However, it is within our power to direct this machinery along the path of eternal and ideal aesthetics. Therefore, we appeal to you, Mr. Prime Minister, and also, in other letters, to the large-scale capitalists of our time, with the request to support the construction of the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke. We ask you to offer the land of ancient Hellas as an honored site for this Factory.

Clean, unpolluted with the ideas of utilitarianism, blue smoke, constantly diffused, will produce monuments to the genuine beauty of human sensibility and intelligence.

We are attaching to this letter a photograph of the design for the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke.

We hope to receive your reply as soon as possible. Would you please send your reply to our home address: Leninsky Prospect 70/II, apt. 404, Moscow, USSR, or to the Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street, New York, New York 10021.

The coordination of organizations which are financing the project and the purchase of the land is to be handled through the Ronald Feldman Gallery.

Hopefully

 /Komar/
/Melamid/

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke*, 1975



Art Belongs to People

Art Belongs to People was a performance enacted in Moscow in 1974 and re-created a decade later in New York at the performance space the Kitchen. In the original Moscow performance, three students with no art background relied on instructions from Komar and Melamid to reproduce on a large canvas a random subject from the news—a photograph from *Pravda* of a power plant in Minsk. The action was accompanied by Soviet marches played at high volume. In the New York reconstruction, the subject instead was John Hinckley's attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan, painted this time by four immigrants who also had no previous art experience. In both Moscow and New York, Komar and Melamid guided the process, and if a participant made a mistake, they would stop him so that the audience could discuss the offender's faults.

At the core of this performance is a parody on the Soviet art production system, which had the slogan "Art belongs to people." The performance allowed the audience to experience in a humorous way the humiliating process of government review and control that artists had to undergo.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *Art Belongs to People* performance at the Kitchen, New York, 1984



Rong Portraits

The *Rong Portraits* series derives from the idea that we are often shown likenesses of famous people without an opportunity to verify their accuracy. A portrait of Plato or Socrates, for example, cannot be compared to its original subject, but even portraits of recent historical figures might show an image altered from reality for the purpose of propaganda. *Rong Portraits* offers the viewer a gallery of famous writers, scholars, and philosophers portrayed in a most unlikely way. The series includes historical figures glorified by the Soviet state, in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Soviet practice of honoring heroes. At the same time, they relate to the *Art Belongs to People* project, alluding to how “simple people” might depict celebrities who were otherwise deserving but somewhat discredited by repeated praise from the Soviet state.

Pavlov, from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75





Hegel, from the Rong Portraits series, 1974–75



Dostoyevsky, from the Rong Portraits series, 1974–75



Socrates, from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75



Tchaikovsky, from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75



Pushkin, from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75



Young Marx, from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

The Essence of Truth (*Grinding Pravda*)

In the performance *The Essence of Truth*, Komar and Melamid took the newspaper *Pravda*—the main newspaper of the Soviet Union, whose title means “truth”—and fed it into a meat grinder in a desperate attempt to find the essence of truth in the very pages filled with false news and propaganda. The resulting meatball made of *Pravda* pages turned into a stonelike substance.



ABOVE, OPPOSITE, AND PAGES 154–55: *The Essence of Truth (Grinding Pravda)*, 1975







Conceptual/Commercial

In the mid-1970s, Komar and Melamid created a series of conceptual works that employed strategies of Western advertising to mock the spiritual and philosophical tendencies of modernist art in general and Soviet underground art in particular.

PAGES 157–63

In *Circle, Square, Triangle*, three simple white shapes cut out of plywood were offered “for sale” to be placed in people’s homes. These “ideal” forms, which artists of the Russian avant-garde had claimed to be linked to an absolute, were offered as tools to transform one’s dwelling and add spirituality to one’s life. An elaborate description that accompanied the works claimed that the forms “have been arrived at by mathematical computations that link together the dimensions of the Moon and of the human body” and that they satisfy people’s urge to possess “eternal ideals linked a priori to nothing.”

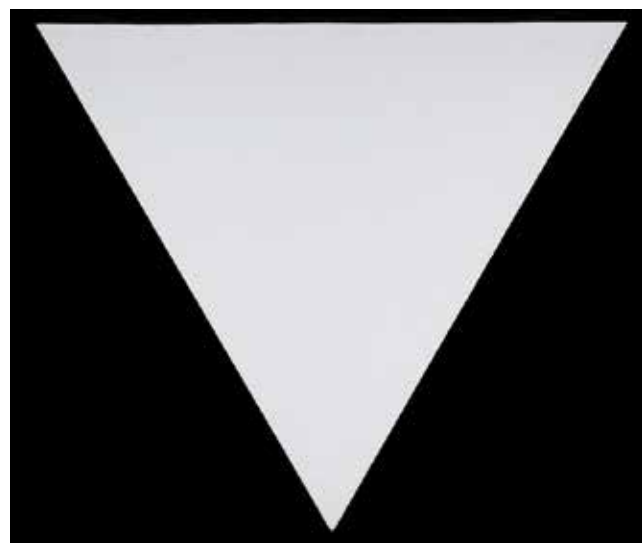
PAGES 164–69

Super Objects for Super People, a parody of Western consumer catalogues, advertises absurd goods invented by the artists and photographed using friends as models. The catalogue individualizes the general benefits promised by *Circle, Square, Triangle*, satirizing the consumerist dream of realizing one’s singular self through the purchase of a gadget. At the same time, it mocks Soviet propaganda: the advertised goods that, as advertisement claims, are aimed at people’s comfort in reality restrict freedom of movement and resemble instruments of torture, evoking the atmosphere of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Invitation to a Beheading*.

PAGES 170–72

The idea of the transforming power of art is continued in *Color Therapeutics*, which offers a remedy for all medical issues, physical and psychological. The viewer—or patient—is advised to stare at one of the work’s twenty-five wooden plaques, each painted a different color. The instruction panel prescribes which color to gaze at and for how long. The top of this panel displays a mock-Soviet slogan: “Color Is a Mighty Power!,” which became the title of a pocket-sized limited edition of *Color Therapeutics* issued in 1987.

OPPOSITE AND PAGES 158–63: *Circle, Square, Triangle*, 1975



CIRCLE, SQUARE, TRIANGLE

To Prospective Customers:

Ladies and Gentlemen, the urge for the gratification of ever-new desires leads you to buy either ultramodern goods or superannuated antiques. All our belongings, be they designated for use only once or inherited from our grandparents, generate in the depth of any sensitive soul a nascent feeling of the finiteness of our personal existence. Herein lies one of the causes of the stresses, neuroses, cancers, and other negative side effects of civilization. The modern man's image of the past and the future ranges from Eden to Hiroshima.

To possess the non-temporal, the ideal—this need of yours will be satisfied by the production of Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow. Substantiated ideal concepts of pure and clear reason are simple white figures—a CIRCLE, a SQUARE, and a TRIANGLE—figures that are from now on destined to become a part of your life. These very figures, hidden from pragmatic vision, are the prototypes confined in each and every perishable object of comfort: they have now been disclosed and their blinding nudity has eclipsed all the transient mediocrity of fashionable chance and temporal forms. Only objects devoid of the dead weight of utilitarian function soar high aloft above the lowly world of daily life.

The forms and dimensions of the figures we offer you are not fortuitous ones. They have been arrived at by mathematical computations that link together the dimensions of the Moon and of the human body. The Moon cult is just as abiding a historical companion of Mankind as are the Sun or Fire cults. The Sun is day, the Moon is night. The Sun is gold, the Moon is silver. The Sun is fury, the Moon is meekness. The Sun is the great, bright power of the official Patriarchy, the Moon is the dissentience of the obscure mysteries of virginal priestesses.

The diameter of the Moon is 348,000,000 centimeters. The combined length of the bodies of Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow, is equal to 348 cm., i.e., 1/1,000,000 of the lunar diameter.

Man is the digit 7. Man is the sum of a triad and a tetrad, 4 being his four limbs, 3—his soul (head, trunk, and sex). The head is a circle; the trunk—a square;

sex—a triangle. Seven will survive without his four limbs, but you cannot live without the circle, square, and triangle.

According to the ideal bodily proportions evolved by the ancients, the length of the soul is one-half of a man's height, hence the mean length of the soul of the Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow, is equal to 1/4,000,000 of the diameter of the Moon, or 348/4, which, on conversion to the metric system, makes 87 cm. Obviously, if the center of the soul, given as being between the heart and lungs in the horizontal plane is the site of the xiphisternum, then when equidistant in the vertical plane, the soul's radius is equal to approximately 43 cm. (Again we have a tetrad and a triad!) Now we merely have to double this radius.

So this is how a module for the diameter of the soul(s) of the Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow, was derived.

This value, incarnated in the sides of a square, an equilateral triangle, and in the diameter of a circle, gives splendid proportions to the products manufactured by this company and harmonizes with the dimensions of the standard modern home.

Buy the circles, squares, and triangles manufactured solely by Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow. The so-called works of art utilizing the figures produced by our enterprise cannot satisfy your urge to possess eternal ideals, insofar as their individual scale and composition reflect their own time alone.

Take your choice, we can supply you, wholesale and retail, with your individual eternal ideals linked a priori to nothing, manufactured from the highest quality of domestic lumber and imported cements and painted by the hands of the virginal maidens employed by the enterprise of Renowned Artists of the Twentieth-Century Seventies, Moscow.

A CIRCLE.

A SQUARE.

A TRIANGLE—for every home, for every family!

и здесь Вам нужен
КРУГ!



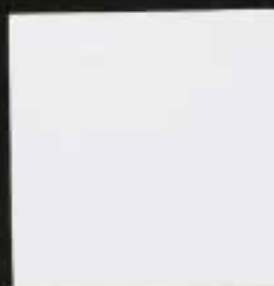
«ВАГРАТ»
каждой семье!



Потворитесь
«ВЕСТОЛАНД»!
/показываемые
нет!



ПРЕГЛОЗНИИ!



УВАЖАЕМЫЕ ПОКУПАТЕЛИ, присущая человеку неуловительность заставляет Вас приобрести как ультрасовременные, так и антикварные вещи. Как предметы одностороннего пользования, так и вещи универсальные от бабушек и дедушек, вызывают в глубине каждой души неопознанные ощущения конечности нашего вечного времени. Вот одна из причин стрессов, неврозов, рака и т.д. спутников цивилизации. То Элиас, то Аристотель представят современному человеку прошлое и будущее.

Освадать невременным, изощренным, но та Баба потребность, которую удовлетворяет продукция производителей Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го века, г. Москва.

Обществом известные идеальные понятия частного и общего, разума-простота, белые фигуры-КРУГ, КВАДРАТ, ТРЕУГОЛЬНИК-отныне войдут в Ваш быт. Те самые фигуры, которые скрыты от острого взора замечены как первообразы в каждом таинственном предмете комфорта отныне обогатятся и их ослепительная нагота затмевает все приходящее убийство новых случайных и временных форм. Только предметы, лишенные балласта утилитарности, мы-соко парят над низменным миром опущенного бытия.

Выбор формы и размера предлагаемых Вам фигур не случаен и обусловлен математическими расчетами, сложными величинами Луны и человеческого тела. Лунный квадрат-такой же непреходящий спутник истории человечества, как и культ Солнца, мугат огня. Солнце-день, Луна-ночь. Солнце-золото, Луна-серебро. Солнце-крест, Луна-крестость. Солнце-великий светлый бог олимпийской мифологии патриархата, Луна-неизвестные подпольные мистерии древнейших времен.

Диаметр Луны равен 344000000 см. Сумма длин тел Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го в. г. Москва составляет 248 см., т.е. 1/1000000 диаметра Луны. Человек есть число 7. Человек есть сумма триады и тетрады. 4 - рука и ноги, 3 - душа /голова, туловище, ноги/ Голова-круг, туловище-квадрат, ноги-

треугольник. Без рук, без ног 7 прожигает, но без круга, квадрата, треугольника Вам не прожить. Согласно античным пропорциям идеального тела, длина души равна 1/3 роста человека, следовательно срезаем длину души Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го в. г. Москва - 1/4000000 диаметра Луны или 348/4, что составляет в см. 87. Очевидно, что при центре Луны, взятном между сердцем и легкими по горизонтали и на месте меченого стрелки, в случае его равноудаленности от вертикали, радиус души приблизительно равен 43 см. /Пять тетрада и триада!/. Теперь остается лишь удивить разлук.

Так был получен модуль, диаметр души Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го в. г. Москва.

Эта величина, возведенная в сторону квадрата, равносильного треугольника и в диаметре круга, предвещает прекрасные пропорции продукции, представляя и гармонизирует с масштабом стандартов современного жилья.

Приобретайте круги, квадраты, треугольники, изготовленные только на предприятии Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го в. г. Москва. Так называемые производственные искусства, исполненные фигурами, выходящими за пределы, не могут удовлетворить Вашу потребность обладать непреодолимой силой, т.е. невидимой силой масштаба и композиции-это только их время.

Предлагаем Вам на выбор, ситом и в разницу, отдельные, но с тем заране изготовленные вечные масла, изготовленные из лучших сортов отечественной древесины с использованием импортных клеев и красителей руками действительно-работника предприятия Известных художников 70-х г.г. XX-го века, г. Москва.

КРУГ,
КВАДРАТ,
ТРЕУГОЛЬНИК-
в каждую квартиру,
каждой семье!

Цена:
12 рублей,
с доставкой на дом 14 рублей.
Пересылку оплачивает заказчик.

Заказы направлять по адресу:
Москва, Ленинский пр., д. 70/11





ABOVE AND PAGES 162–63: Advertisement posters for *Circle, Square, Triangle*, 1975







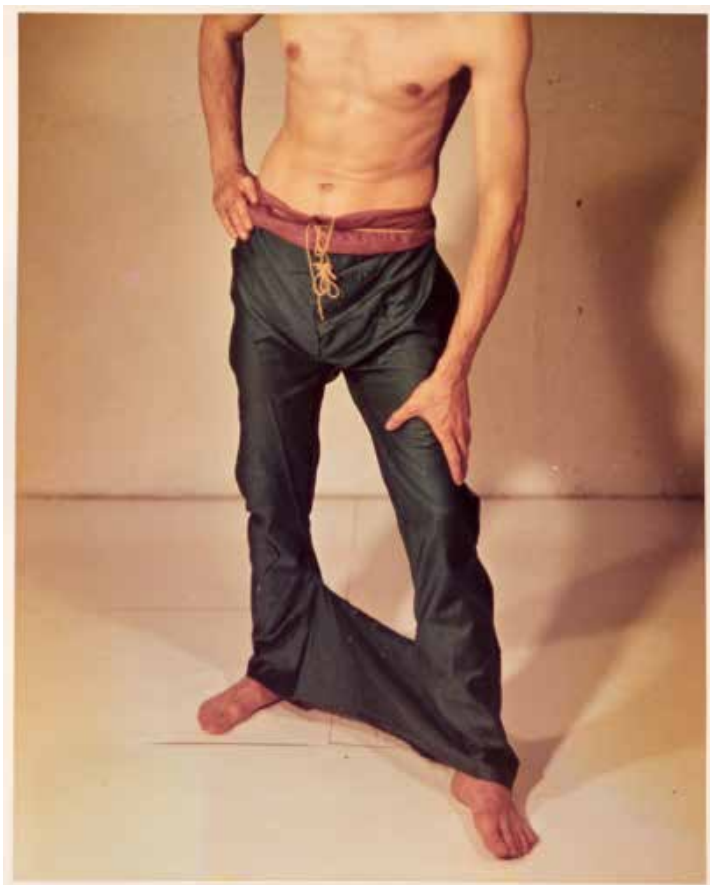


2. OLO

A Language Ornament!

Your every word is gold, your every word -- a pearl!

OLO is proof of your ideal marriage with Truth!



4. KSUSHNA

An Amplifier of the Sixth Sense!

Put the sensual world of matter behind you.

Use KSUSHNA to link up with the irrational sensations of the Invisible Ideal.

As the happy owner of KSUSHNA, you will be seized and overcome by sensations inexpressible in human language.

A light bronze diadem crowned with an antenna of chrome steel.

Threads uniting consciousness with the supersensual world are made from natural Chinese silk.

5. ZIG-GIMS

My Skin is the Living of the Universe!

To the owner of ZIG-GIMS, power over the boundless world of unique tactile sensations!

With the help of ZIG-GIMS you can scratch even where it doesn't itch!

Alone with ZIG-GIMS and you can reduce all the intrusions of the outside world to self-scratching!

9. IY-EDIY

Men!

Outfit yourselves in IY-EDIY!

It restores the best traits of independent personality to the male figure -- eradicates the false symbolism of Buddhism!

EDIY puts the brakes on the race along the Path of Progress.

EDIY is the basis of the outfit, the support of IY.

It leaves only the stomach -- the center of the Vile -- exposed to the effects of the external environment!

10. PIRA-EDIY

For Women (Modification of IY-EDIY)

PIRA (the top) epitomizes true femininity, the woman who gives her hand and heart only to a worthy chosen one.

The open traditional face gains fresh emphasis from the inseparability of the frontal extremities.



15. DIKLIOTIK

Guarantees your Security:

The legendary Cyclops had only one eye. A two-eyed man conquered the giant. But the Owner of DIKLIOTIK will conquer anyone.

DIKLIOTIK, your third eye, is always alert.

An eye that never dozes, this small rear-view mirror will warn its lucky owner in time.

DANGER WILL NOT CATCH YOU OFF GUARD!

The Classic ornament DIKLIOTIK-7 emphasizes the traditional fidelity of woman in marriage.

Spartan masculinity in the simple form of DIKLIOTIK-19.

The small mirror is made of polished wolfram and the other parts from gold and ebony.

18. KHUDAM

Take KHUDAM and smell yourself!

The smells of the world block out your own smell!

Smell yourself!

KHUDAM-212, the Self-Scenter, is made of natural rubber with gold-plated points. Helps you concentrate on yourself and brings out your SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL.

The special soft padding of the point completely halts penetration by extraneous smells.

Before work...

Before every important decision...

Smell yourself with the help of KHUDAM!

28. "All I have I carry with me," says the Owner of

IALEDOSIUS:

IALEDOSIUS is a head-trough made of gold-plated Wolfram, ebony and plastic pipes.

Besides its primary alimentary function, IALEDOSIUS-409 is an original head piece which frees its wearer from the humiliation of sitting at a table.

30. LARGE STERDAK

Made from the same materials and with the same purpose as the smaller model.

Serves as a complement to man's two traditional supports.

It takes the load off your feet!

You can't do without STERDAK when important decisions are in the air.

Major work is being undertaken by the British and American Governments, and the results will be published in the near future.

all legal, political, economic, administrative and environmental aspects of
energy policy.

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 221. 2248-2249

1. *Phragmites australis* (L.) Trin. ex Steud. (Common reed)
 2. *Scirpus setaceus* (L.) P. B. (Sedges)
 3. *Phragmites australis* (L.) Trin. ex Steud. (Common reed)
 4. *Phragmites australis* (L.) Trin. ex Steud. (Common reed)
 5. *Phragmites australis* (L.) Trin. ex Steud. (Common reed)
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 10. *Phragmites australis* (L.) Trin. ex Steud. (Common reed)

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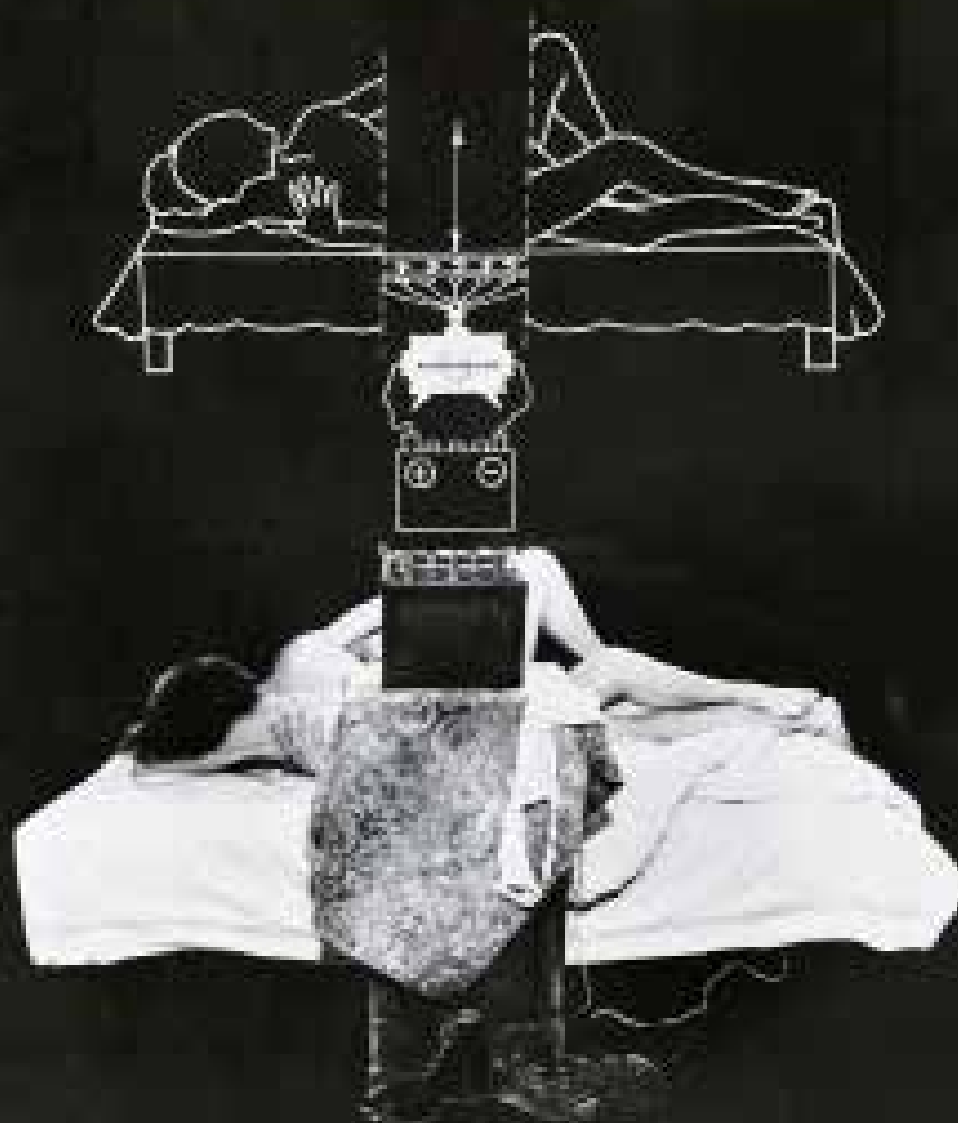
Color Is a Mighty Power, 1987

IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN ANYTHING,
BELIEVE IN US!
WE THINK OF YOU!



If You Don't Believe in Anything, Believe in Us! We Think of You!, 1975

**IDEAL APPARATUS OF KOMAR/MELAMID –
SOLVING PERSONAL ENERGY PROBLEMS!**



KOMAR/MELAMID

THE PRODUCTION OF A/B
IS AVAILABLE TO INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS AND COUNTRIES—ORDERS GO TO THEIR RESPECTIVE ADDRESSES.
ORDER FROM RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, 13 EAST 74 STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021

Ideal Apparatus of Komar/Melamid—Solving Personal Energy Problems!, 1975

**ON SUNDAYS KOMAR/MELAMID SEW RED SHORTS
FOR THE POOREST INHABITANS ON THIS GLOBE!**



THE PRODUCTION OF K/M
IS AVAILABLE TO INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS AND COUNTRIES- ORDERS GO TO THEIR RESPECTIVE ADDRESSES
ORDER FROM RONALD FELIHAM FINE ARTS, 33 EAST 74 STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021

On Sundays Komar/Melamid Sew Red Shorts for the Poorest Inhabitans [sic] on this Globe!, 1975

Coded Works

Living in a society full of secrecy, Soviet citizens used euphemisms and special codes in their daily lives to convey information that could cause them trouble with the authorities. Komar and Melamid created several works based on codes and obscure languages.

PAGE 177

For *Scroll*, the artists invented their own language based on hieroglyphic principles to tell the story of their lives and then read it out loud at a performance in Moscow. The code to this language, however, was lost when the work was transported out of Russia, and now no one can understand what is written.

PAGES 178–79

For *Prophet Obadiah*, the artists photographed the printed Hebrew text of the Book of Obadiah, at one page long the shortest book of the Hebrew Bible. Then they printed the images seven times—for seven days of the week—each image darker than the next, as if someone was rereading throughout the day and into the night under different lighting conditions. With this work the artists reflected on their Jewish identity. Jack Burnham has suggested that their use of Obadiah's doom-saying against the people of Edom can be read as a latter-day prophecy concerning the fate of Russia. ("Paradox and Politics: The Art of Komar and Melamid," in Nathanson, *Komar and Melamid: Two Soviet Dissident Artists*, xxxiv–v.)

PAGE 180

In *Soviet Constitution, Freedom of Speech Chapter. Ideological Abstraction* of 1974, the colored dots correspond to the letters of Cyrillic alphabet. The text is Article 129 on freedom of speech from the Soviet Constitution. The very idea to make the Freedom of Speech text coded and obscure alludes to the nonexistence of such freedom in the Soviet Union. It also transforms text into an abstraction, an art language that was officially forbidden. When the work was taken out of the Soviet Union, those meanings were illegible to the Russian officials, who took the work for a tablecloth.

PAGE 181

Komar and Melamid also coded letters of the alphabet as musical notes. At the performance *Music Writing: Passport*, which took place on February 7, 1976, at the Feldman Gallery in New York, the cellist and American performance artist Charlotte Moorman played a score transposed from ten of the thirty-eight regulations regarding the Soviet internal passport. Simultaneously, pianists in Moscow, London, San Francisco, Paris, and about fifteen other cities played the same composition.

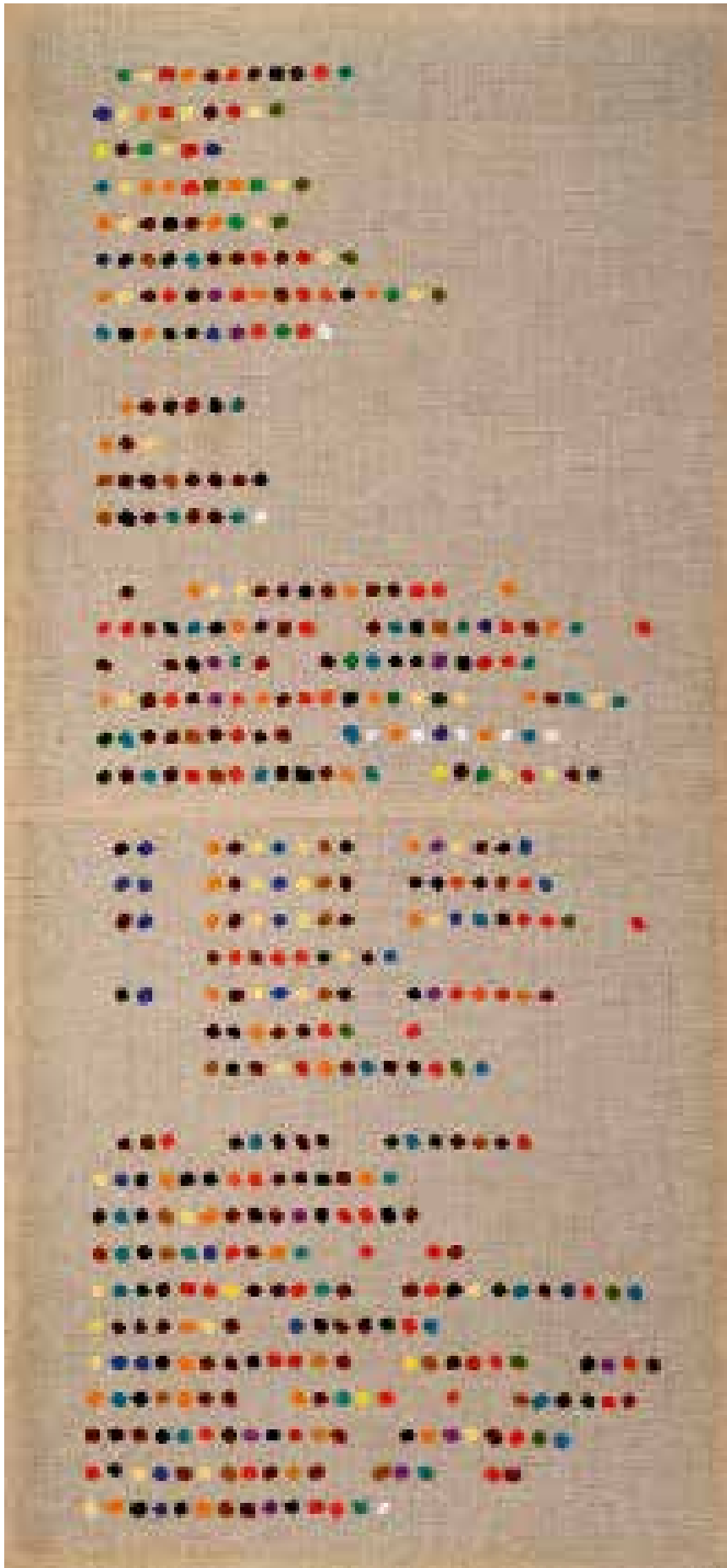
OPPOSITE: *Scroll*, 1976



Prophet Obadiah, 1976

הוא נשאל על ידי המלך והמלכה, ונראה שהם רוצים לדעת מה הוא חשב על היום הזה. הוא ענה להם, וסיפר להם על כל מה שראה ושמע. הם היו מודעים לזה, וידעו שזה היה יום חשוב. הם גם ידעו שזה היה יום שבו המלך והמלכה חתמו על הסכם חשוב. הם היו מודעים לזה, וידעו שזה היה יום חשוב. הם גם ידעו שזה היה יום שבו המלך והמלכה חתמו על הסכם חשוב.

[illegible][illegible][illegible]



TRANSLATION OF ARTICLE 129 OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE R.S.F.S.R.

In conformity with the interests of the working people, and for the purpose of strengthening the socialist system, the citizens of the R.S.F.S.R. shall be guaranteed by law:

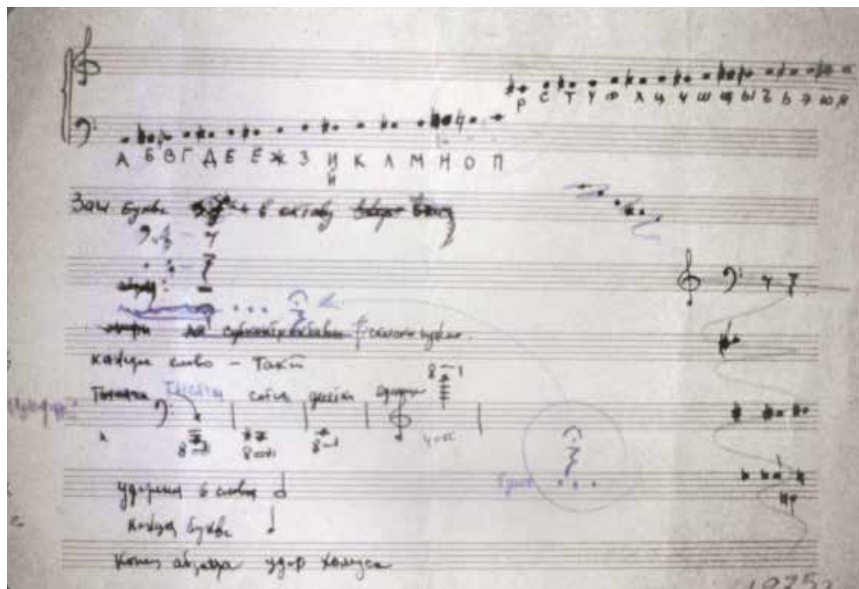
1. freedom of speech;
2. freedom of the press;
3. freedom of assembly and rallies;
4. freedom of street processions and demonstrations.

These rights of citizens shall be ensured by putting at the disposal of the working people and their organizations printing presses, stocks of paper, public buildings, streets, communication facilities, and other material requisites for the exercise of these rights.



Latin alphabet color code, 1974

Soviet Constitution, Freedom of Speech Chapter, Ideological Abstraction, 1974



top: Collage with Komar and Melamid at a piano with the music code from

Music Writings: Passport, 1976

bottom: Documents from the performance *Music Writings: Passport*, February 7, 1976

Farewell to Russia

While waiting to emigrate from the Soviet Union, Komar and Melamid created a number of works reflecting on Russia's history, officialdom, and citizenship.

PAGE 183

KGB is from a series of paintings done in a variety of styles but united by a missing upper-right corner. It illustrates the idea of coming up with a new movement every three months, changing like the seasons, as Komar explained to Yuri Albert (see p. 87). At the same time, the abbreviation *KGB*, standing for "Committee of State Security," has become a symbol of state oppression.

PAGES 184–87

In *Documents*, they assembled a collection of twelve plexiglass rectangles, each cut to the size of a document issued to Soviet citizens—internal passport, birth certificate, and so on. The thirteenth part of this work is a square of red plexiglass. According to the artists, its size is the average of those of the other twelve rectangles and represents the shape of a quintessential Soviet document—a red square.

PAGES 188–91

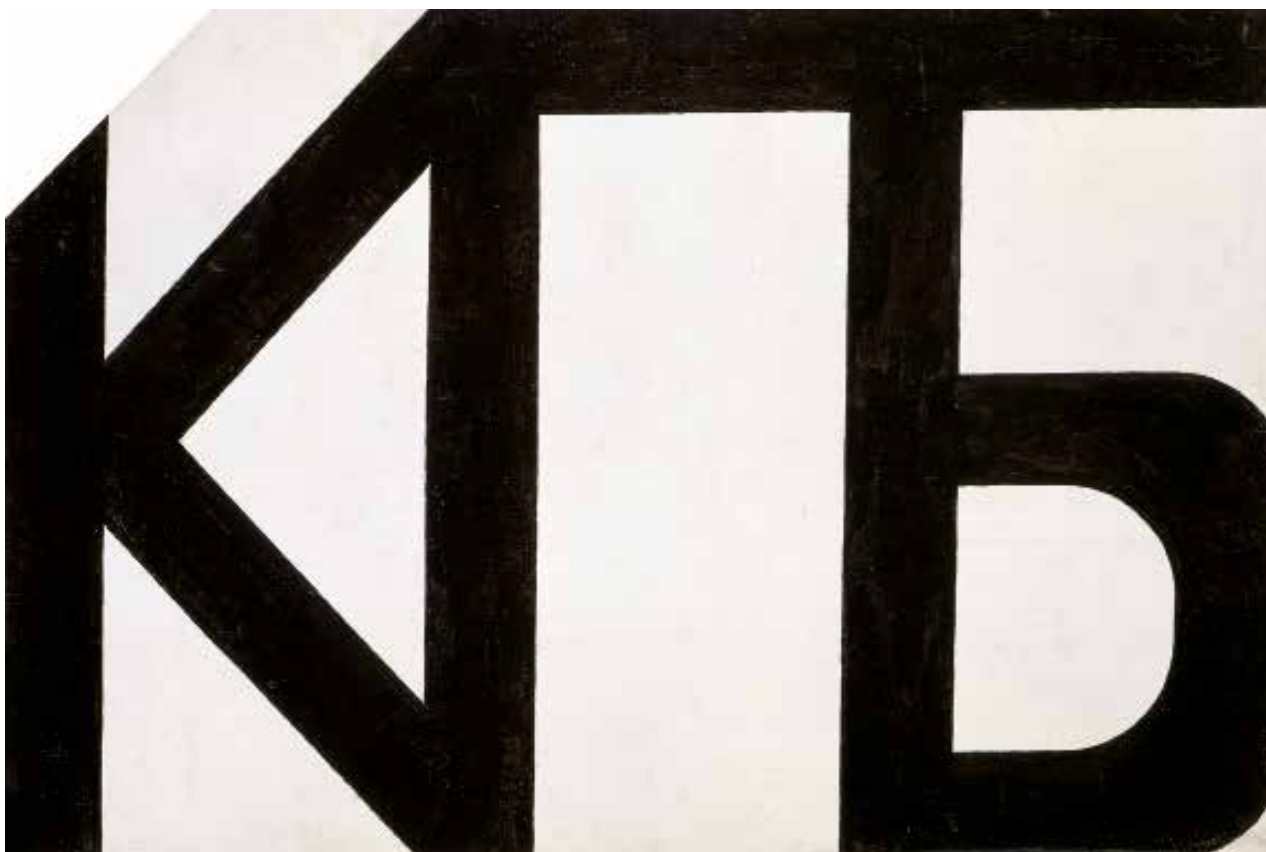
History of Russia comprises six rough, unprimed canvases, each one larger than the one before. In the middle of each canvas a group of people is indicated by small colored brushstrokes. These groupings represent important conferences in Russian history, each of which resulted in an increase of Russia's territory or influence. This representation of Russia's history is both ironic and symbolic: small groups of people decide the country's fate, adding to an empty land symbolized by the rough and unprimed canvas.

PAGES 192–93

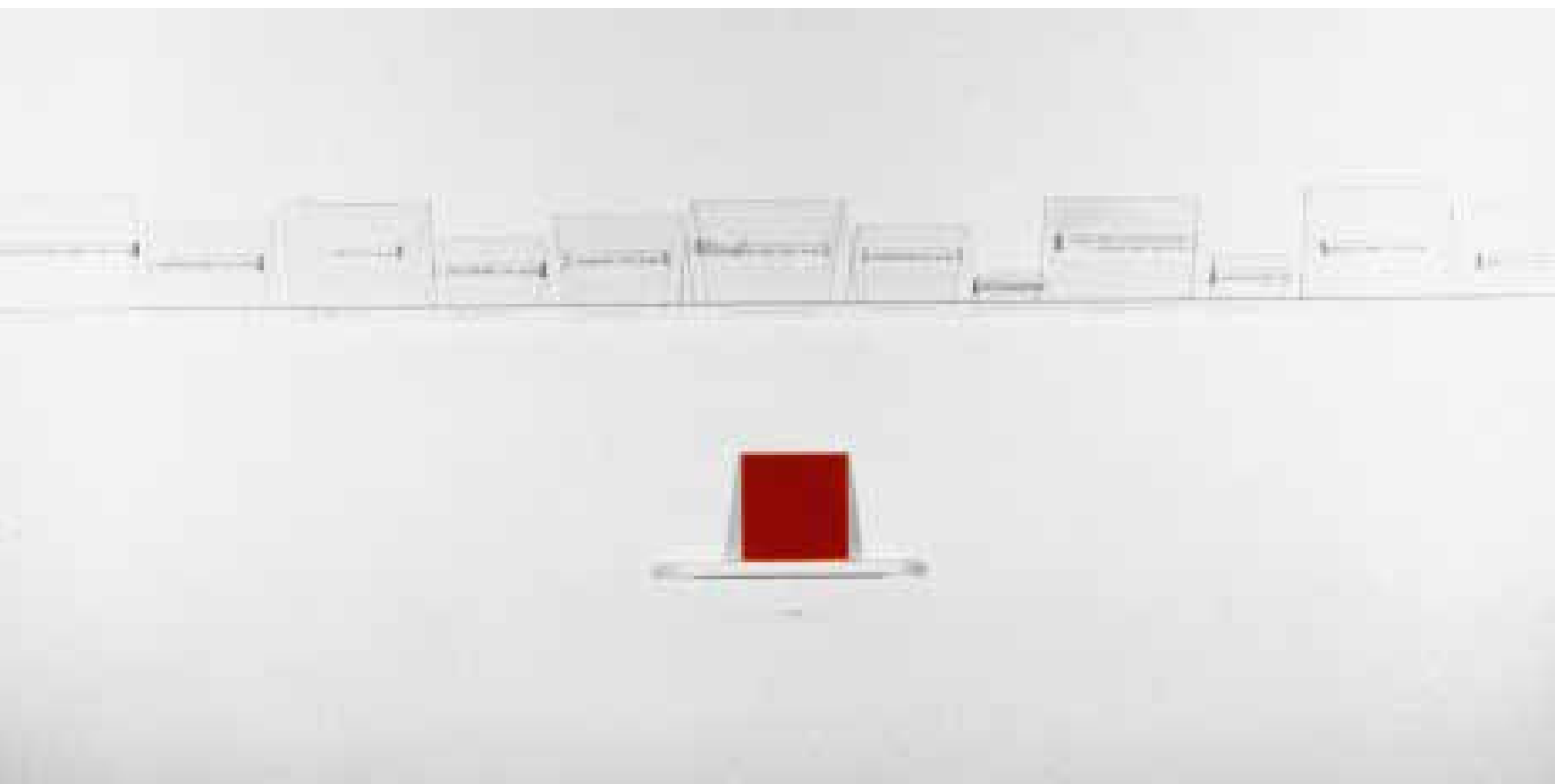
After the notorious "Bulldozer Exhibition" of 1974, many American journalists came to Russia to interview the participating artists, including the writer and artist Douglas Davis. Komar and Melamid decided to make a work with him, a bold undertaking when contact with foreigners was not encouraged. Komar and Melamid photographed themselves in Moscow and then in Tel Aviv, and Davis photographed himself in New York. They exchanged the photographs and combined them on either side of a line to make *Questions: New York Moscow New York Moscow*, where the line symbolizes boundaries. When they finally met in New York in 1978, they held a performance at which they tore down the line.

PAGES 194–99

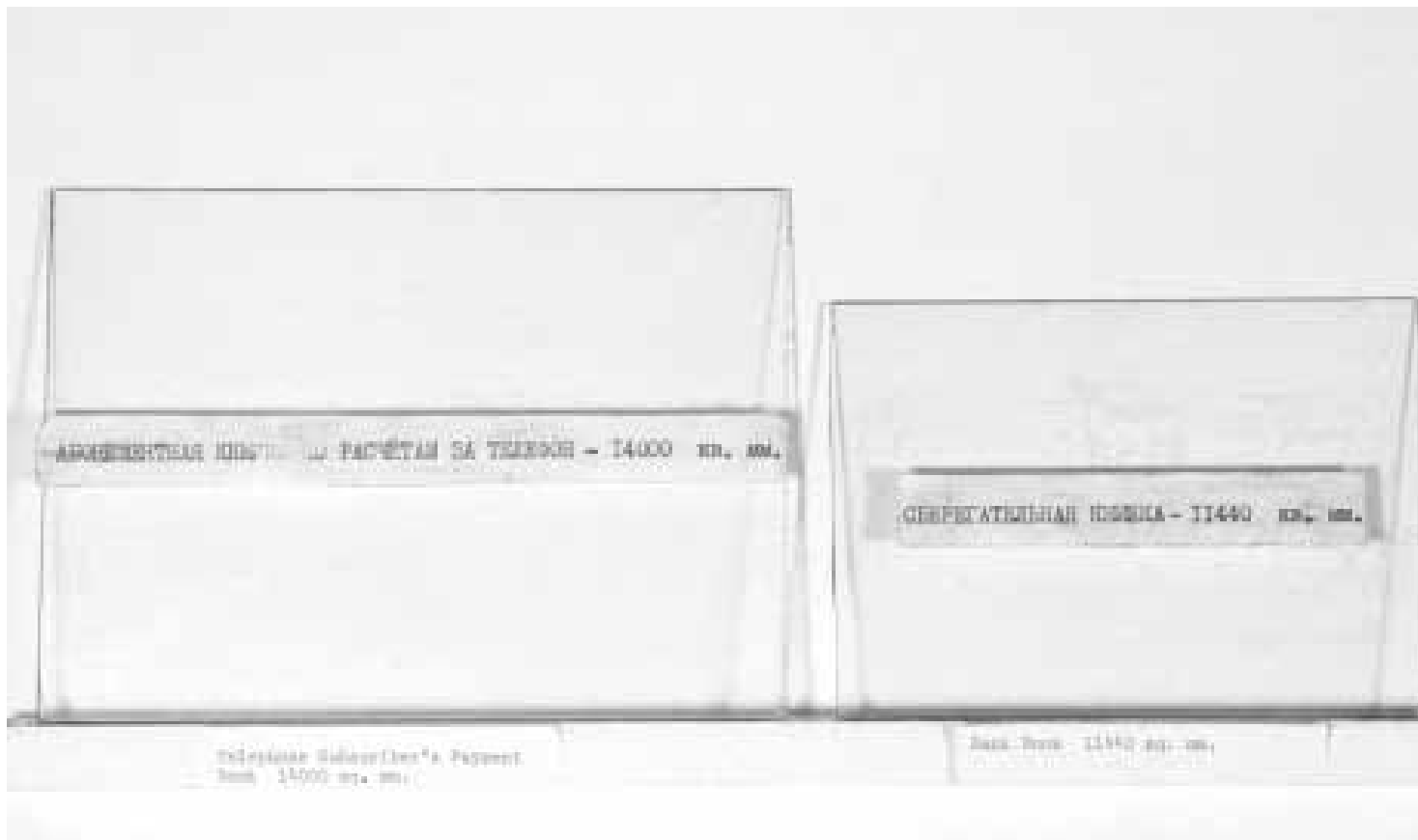
One of the artists' most controversial and rarely exhibited works is *Farewell to Russia*, created when the artists were refused exit visas and were living in the Soviet Union in limbo. It consists of eighteen icon boards over which black-and-white photographs of iconic views of Russia are glued. The artists then vandalized the objects with axes and needles, as if a black magic ritual aimed at destruction were being performed.



KGB from the *Cut-off Corner* series, 1975



ABOVE, OPPOSITE, AND PAGES 186–87: *Documents*, 1975



DOCUMENTS

Birth certificate 14,500 mm²
 City traffic ticket 1,798 mm²
 Train ticket 3,256 mm²
 Passport 10,614 mm²
 Telephone-account book 14,000 mm²
 Flat-account book 14,659 mm²
 Military card 10,614 mm²
 Trade-union card 7,770 mm²
 Student card 6,204 mm²
 Diploma 17,360 mm²
 Marriage certificate 14,500 mm²
 Bank-account book 11,440 mm²

 Document 10,482,416 mm²

IN SEARCH OF AN IDEAL

Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid

Our collective art is anti-individualistic and composed of visually and conceptually diverse approaches. The constant changes, generally speaking, coincide with seasonal changes in central Russia.

Our habitual method of working is based on conversations between us, out of which arise imaginings of artistic phenomena that are capable of making an impression on ourselves and on spectators. What remains to be done after that is of little significance: the embodiment of the conceit, the production of that which can be talked about.

In the fall of 1974, there was a great deal of meaningless commotion in the Moscow art world. Our reaction to this was an attempt to make something atemporal, abstract, and ideal. In the winter of 1975–75, we created the “Documents.”

In this work of art, as in certain others, we demonstrated our contemporary understanding of the fundamentals of “classical socialist realism” (1934–1954). One of the principles of this outstanding style of recent history consists in searching for “the typical in typical circumstances.” The canonic conception of what is typical and what is not typical endowed the masterpieces of socialist realism, despite the meaninglessness of their real-life details, with the original luster of a mythmaking idealism.

The method of typification becomes possible in time only following the emergence of an actual set of arbitrary concrete details that are capable of being unified into a “class.” But the subsequently derived “type” is not identical to any atemporal “prototype.” Therefore, the search for an ideal is not a creation, but a re-creation. In our quest, we went forward by facing backward: we turned to the classical idealism of Plato, and in particular, to the ancient Greek method of searching for the ideal of a beautiful face on the basis of the images of a number of actual faces. In our lives, a person’s public “face” has been replaced by a “document,” which accompanies an

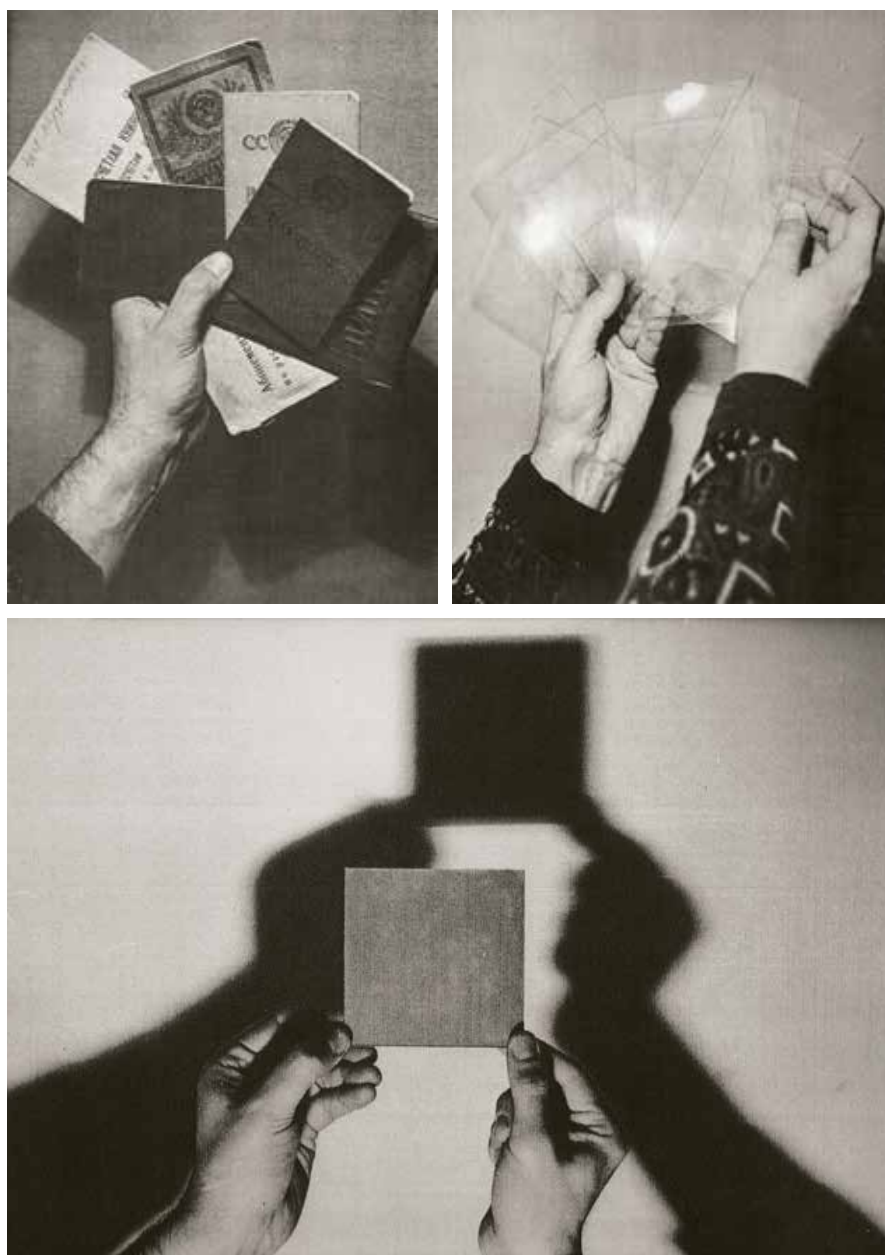
individual over the course of his life and registers all changes in the social status of a citizen.

On December 12, 1974, we measured the dimensions of the twelve most common Soviet documents and computed the area of each (see table). By turning to quantitative categories, which pointed toward the highest Pythagorean spheres, we were able to abstract from accidental qualitative categories, and to leave the realm of objective truthfulness for the supersensory realm of ideas—the realm of true reality. [Illegible.]

Our path into this world (see photo 1) consisted of the creation of 12 two-dimensional mental doubles for each document: rectangles made of colorless transparent plexiglass with red enamel paint along the perimeter of their edges (the thickness of the documents was not taken into account). Adding all the areas together and dividing the sum by 12 (see table), we obtained the arithmetic mean of the areas of the documents, the square root of which gave us the length of the side of an ideal square. This square (see photo 2), made on January 13, 1975, is the thirteenth and only (first) geometrical figure that is painted red. The color red elevates the real-life concreteness and specificity that is characteristic of socialist realism into an ideal—a pop-color (in Russian, “redness” and “beauty” come from the same root, and “red” and “beauty” are synonyms).

The obtained figure is an ideal—the concretized embodiment of the idea of a document, any document whatsoever, a hypostatized idea, a document-concept, as a combination of attributes common to all elements of a class.

The theoretically approximated expression of an ideal can be included among the elements of a class as one of its accidental manifestations. The area of the obtained document is closest to the area of a passport, the most common mandatory identity certificate. Considering the idea as an otherness of reality, we supplemented our work with a volumetric three-dimensional figure



(photo 3) generated by the rotation of a passport in an electric mixer, and also with the text of the rules for using a passport transposed for piano (each letter was encoded into a musical note in accordance with an arbitrary principle).

In conclusion, it should be noted that we were unable to measure the dimensions of certain documents (foreign passports, party membership

cards, security services certifications, driver's licenses) in view of the restricted range of their distribution. But since the creators of all actual documents (our nameless coauthors) are limited by the standard sizes of the pockets in clothes, we assume that this omission has not had any significant effect on the dimensions of the ideal that we have discovered.

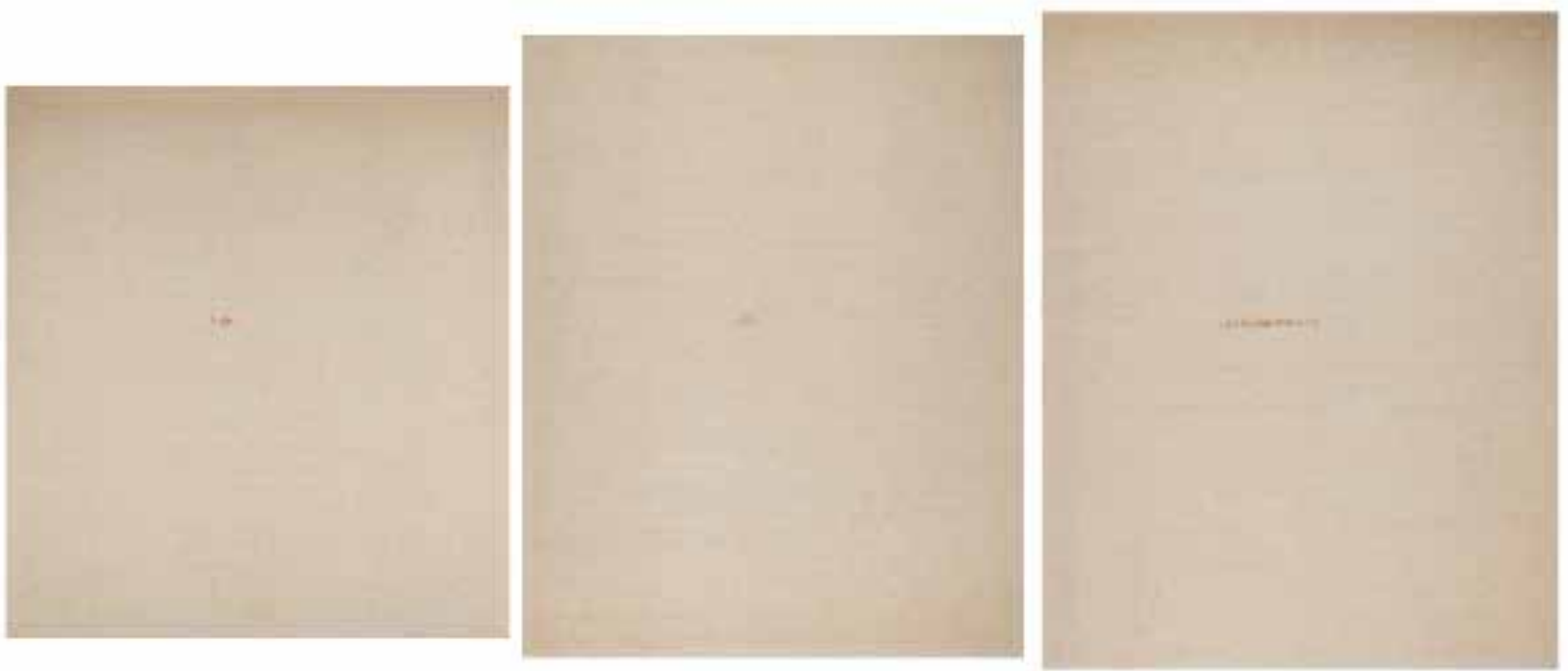


LEFT TO RIGHT: Conference regarding the right of Moscow to eradicate the self-government of Novgorod, May 1471.
Thirteen people present.

Nishtadt Congress regarding the annexation of Lifland, Eastland, Ingria, and Karelia to the Russian Empire, August 1721.
Five people present.

Conference regarding the best and quickest ways to subjugate the Khazan Khanate, April 1552.
Fourteen people present.

ABOVE, OPPOSITE, AND PAGES 190–91: *History of Russia*, 1975



LEFT TO RIGHT: Conference regarding the invasion of Poland by Russian troops under the supervision of Catherine II, May 1792.
Six people present.

Conference regarding a draft note to European governments explaining Russian military action in Central Asia, November 1864.
Four people present.

Yalta Conference regarding the division of Eastern Europe after World War II, February 1945.
Thirty-five people present.







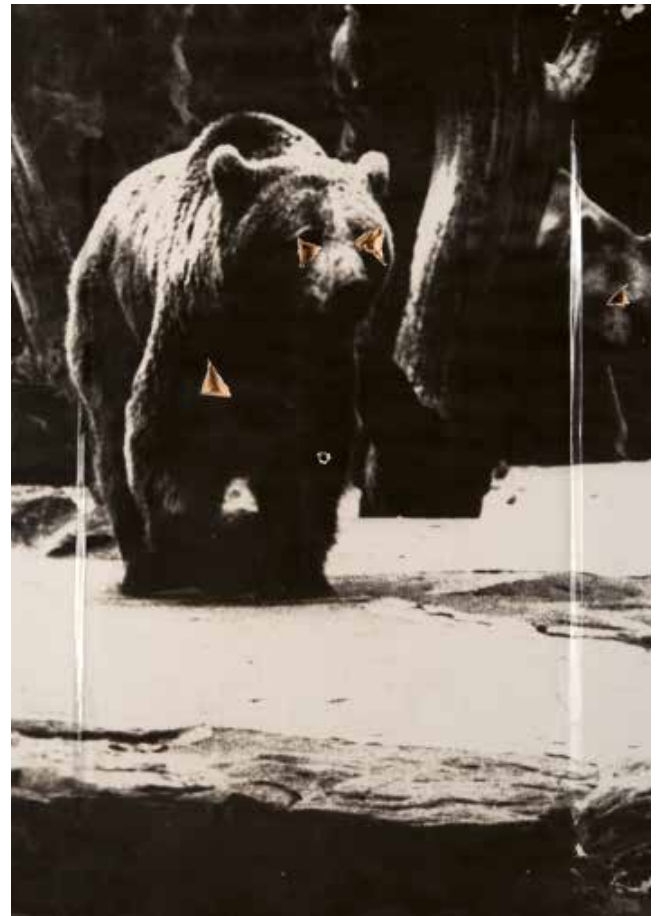
RIGHT AND OPPOSITE: Douglas Davis, Vitaly Komar, and Alexander Melamid, *Questions: New York Moscow New York Moscow*, 1976–78





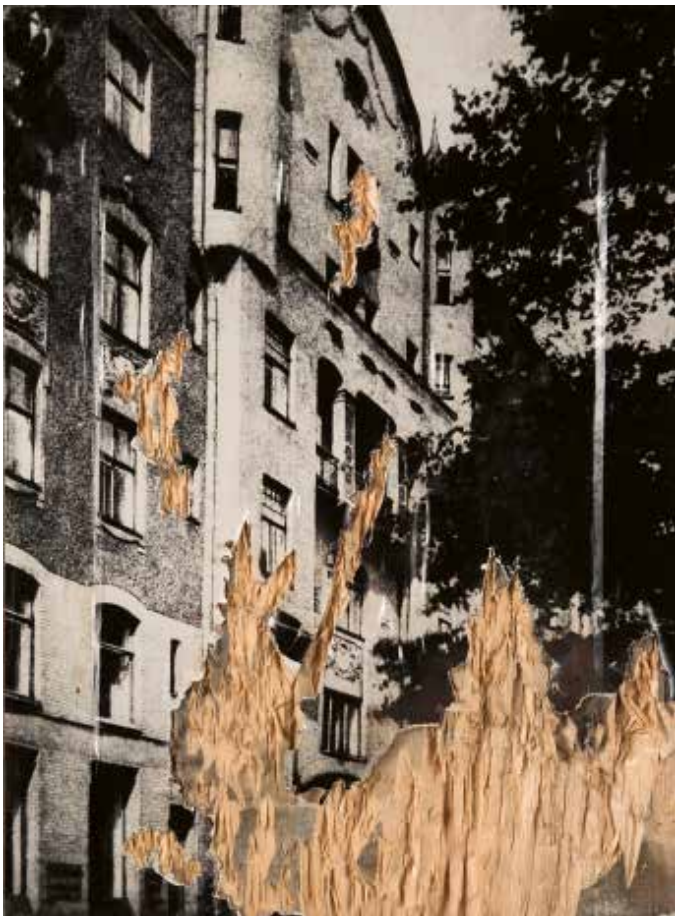
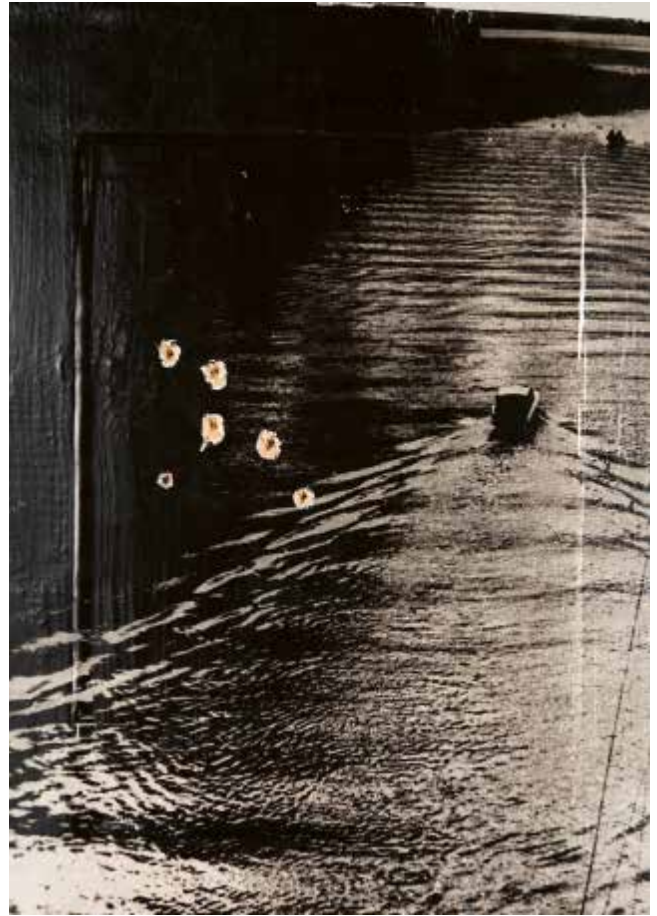
ABOVE, OPPOSITE, AND PAGES 196–99: *Farewell to Russia*, 1977











TransState

When the artists applied for emigration visas to Israel in 1977, the authorities confiscated their Soviet passports. So the artists proclaimed their own state—TransState—and made passports, money, and a multi-page constitution. The constitution of this newly formed two-person country claimed no land and only volunteer citizens; its territories were “the total area of the body surfaces of all members of the Federation, freely existing in and transiting through space.”

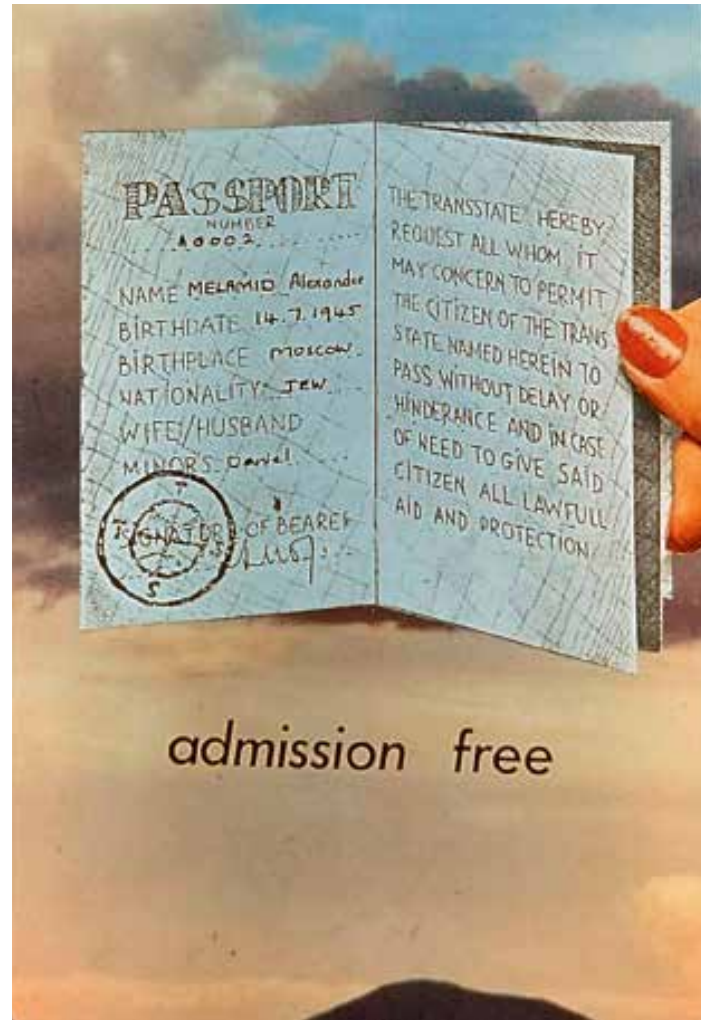
OPPOSITE AND PAGES 202–9: *TransState* project, 1977



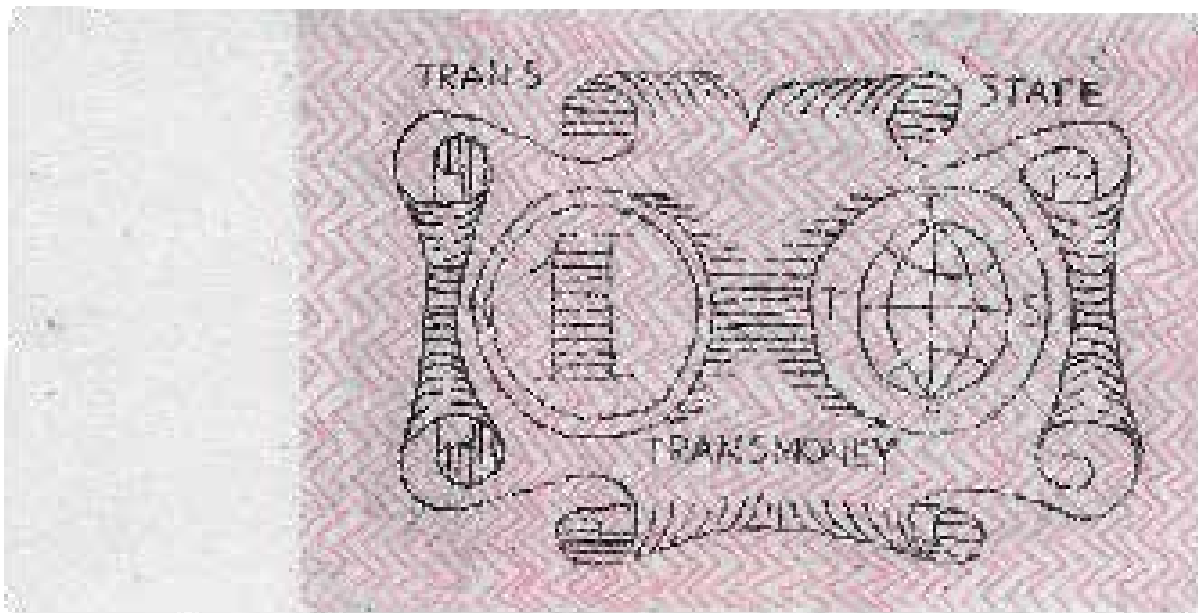
looking for the ideal state?

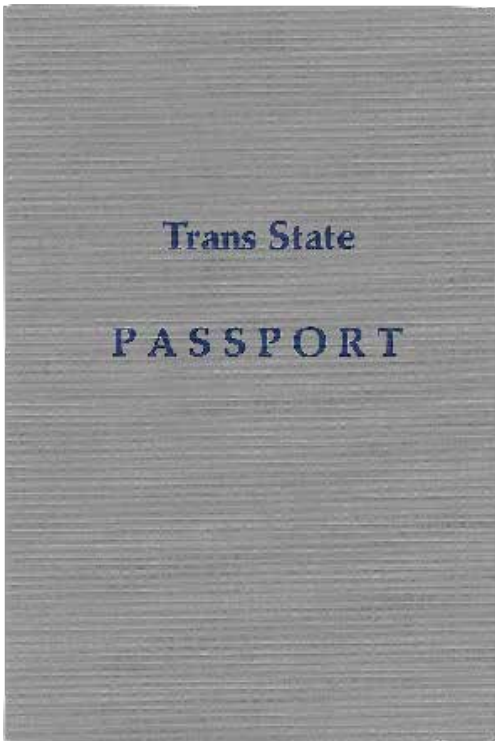


give a call
to Transstate consuls

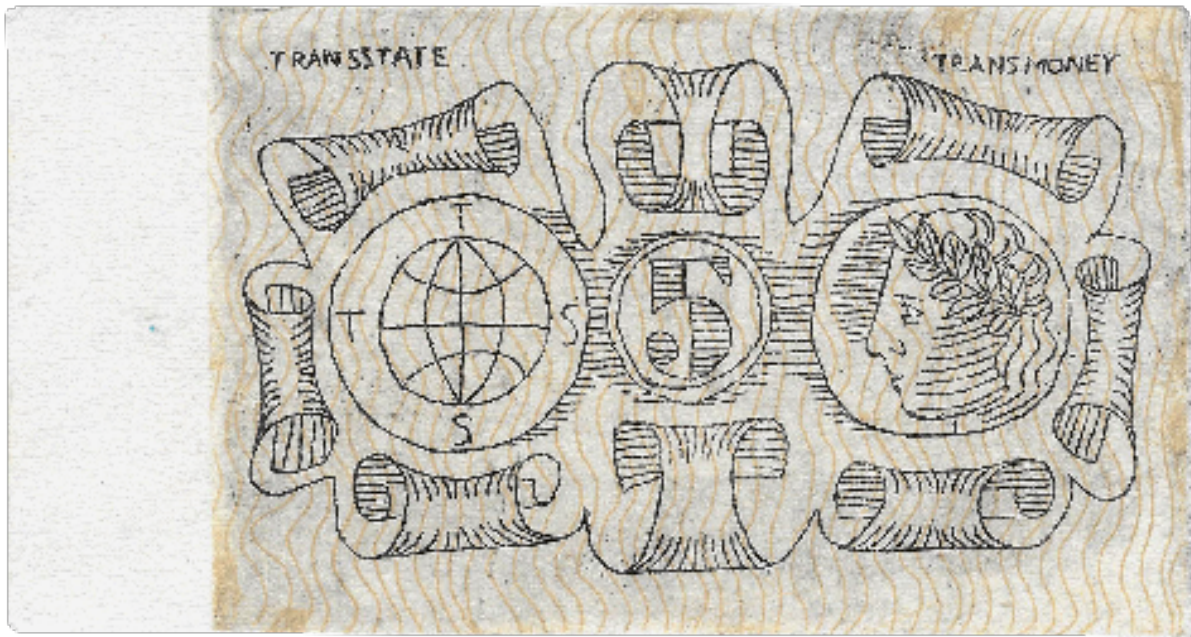


admission free





TRANS STATE PASSPORT	
I-State No. A-275	THE SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENT OF TRANS STATE HEREBY REQUESTS ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN TO PERMIT THE CITIZEN-STATE OF TRANS STATE NAMED HEREIN TO PASS WITHOUT DELAY OR HINDERANCE, AND IN THE EVENT OF NEED TO GIVE SAID CITIZEN-STATE ALL LAWFUL AID AND PROTECTION.
Name _____	In accordance with Article VI of the Trans State Constitution, the Consuls hereby confer on the Bearer a Patent for the Trans State Title of: _____
Date of Birth _____	
Place of Birth _____	
Place of Residence _____	
Photograph	Signature of Trans State Consul Signature of Trans State Consul
Valid until: _____	
Signature of Bearer _____	



TRANSSSTATE DOCUMENTS

May 14, 1977

Provisional Constitution of TransState
(adopted unanimously)

In order to constitute a more perfect social structure, to insure the independence and autonomy of the personality against encroachments by the Powers of Darkness, to implant social stability, order, and freedom, we—Vitalii Anatolievich Komar and Aleksandr Danilovich Melamid—found a new state—TransState—and adopt for it this Constitution.

Article I. Concerning the Essence

1. TransState is a federation of free and independent state-individuals—"I-States"—with the right of self-government and autonomy, even including secession. Each member of the Federation is a citizen-state in accordance with the TransState fundamental law, which proclaims: "L'état, c'est moi."

2. The territory of TransState shall consist of the total area of the body surface of all members of the Federation, freely existing in and transiting through space.

3. Membership of TransState is open to any person on Earth, regardless of sex, age, faith, or citizenship, who, in his own opinion, falls outside the structure of functioning state systems, provided that he does not wish to impose change on that unsatisfactory system by force or in any other manner and that he has paid the established fee to acquire a TransState citizen's passport. Each member of the TransState Federation, wishing to maintain his citizenship, must annually renew his passport by payment of the established fee and make a corresponding notation of that action in the appointed portion of his TransState passport.

4. TransState is a multilingual state. State papers are published in the native language of the Consuls with translations into other languages and in any world language, as the Consuls may decree.

Article II. Concerning the Consuls

1. TransState is governed by two Consuls with unlimited powers, elected for one-year terms.

2. The Consuls, during their terms of office, shall be subordinate only to Higher and Otherworldly authority.

3. The Consuls shall rule jointly during their terms and shall announce the composition of their Cabinet no later than three days after taking office. The Cabinet, personally selected by the Consuls, shall consist of five I-States, occupying the following positions:

1. Adviser on foreign affairs.
2. Adviser on internal affairs.
3. Adviser on defense.
4. Senior Secretary.
5. Secretary.

Payments for the enumerated positions shall be appropriated from the State Budget.

Article III. Concerning Unity

1. Those elected by the people shall embody the shining symbols of the Unity of the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Powers.

Article IV. Concerning Elections

1. Elections for the office of Consul are held once a year and all members of the Federation are obliged to take strictly voluntary part in them, either through their presence at a specially called Conference of All I-States or by communicating their decision by mail to the Electoral Tabulating Commission no later than three weeks before the agreed-upon convening of the Conference.

2. The ruling Consuls are entrusted with the honorary duty of selecting the site for the conduction of elections.

3. Voting is to be by secret ballot, filled in according to instructions and deposited in a special, single urn.

4. The Electoral Tabulating Commission is composed of two members, who shall be chronologically the oldest of the I-States, regardless of their seniority as members of the TransState Federation.

5. Nominations for positions as Consul may be made by any member or members of I-States and shall be submitted in writing to the Electoral Tabulating Commission no later than three months before the appointed election date. Only candidates who have received the nomination of at least 50 percent of the citizens shall be listed on the ballot. The Electoral Tabulating Commission shall inform all members of the Federation in writing one month before the election of the nominations for Consul. Each citizen of TransState must provide the

Commission a timely description of the coordinates of the location in space of that I-State.

6. Consuls shall be considered elected when their nominations receive the approval of no less than 70 percent of the total membership of the Federation, regardless of the number of citizen-states participating in the voting.

7. If no pair of candidates receives a sufficient number of votes, the balloting will be repeated up to seven times until the necessary percentage for election of Consuls is achieved in accordance with Section 6 of this Article. In the course of subsequent voting, the list for nominations will be reopened to new candidacies. In the event of a seventh ballot not producing the requisite majority, the candidates receiving the highest percentage of votes on that ballot will become Consuls and will form an independent federation of all the I-States who voted for them. New elections will be held among the remaining citizens, in accordance with the procedures of this Article, after which a new state will be formed, also subordinate to the present Constitution.

8. The Consuls shall take office immediately upon the announcement of the voting results.

9. Ex-Consuls will become equal members of the Federation and, as such, under the supervision of the newly elected Consuls, they shall, within three days and without leaving the place at which the announcement of the election results found them, write a detailed account of their activities. Immediately after their account has been written and duplicated, and in no event more than four days later, the Electoral Tabulating Commission shall send the account to all members of the Federation of TransState.

10. In the event of the death of a Consul, new elections for Consuls shall be held within three months. Until such election, all legal rights of the Consuls shall be vested in the one surviving Consul. Newly elected Consul shall rule until the end of the term of the Consuls they replace.

Article V. Concerning Rights

1. The members of the Federation of TransState have the right to:

- a. Contemplation.
- b. Meditation.
- c. Generalization.
- d. Reproduction.
- e. Natural and artificial selection and choice, in

accordance with the provisions of Section 1.d, of this Article and Article IV, Section 5, of the Provisional Constitution of TransState.

f. That which is stipulated in Article I, Section 1, of the Provisional Constitution of TransState.

g. Voluntary contributions to the treasury of TransState and, in accordance with set fees, to the acquisition of titles of TransStates.

Article VI. Concerning Titles

1. The Consuls shall have the exclusive right and privilege of distributing titles of TransState: Transbaron, Transcount, Transduke—listed in increasing order of their value. Distribution of such titles shall be effected only through delivery of a special Patent for a TransState Title, obligatorily accompanied by a voluntary donation on the part of the title-holder-to-be to the TransState treasury of a sum previously stipulated by agreement of the Cabinet of the Consuls, in accordance with the importance of each title.

2. In accordance with the structure of the primary I-State, all old titles shall be abolished within the framework of the Federation, as well as all the old personal forms of address, such as Mr., Comrade, etc. It is recommended that the only legal form of address of one individual to another be “State,” as for example, State Komar or State Melamid, etc.

3. Titled citizens of TransState shall retain the same rights and duties as all other I-States, except for those holding the position of Consul or member of the Consuls’ Cabinet, but with the obligatory addition, in oral or written address to them, of their title, as for example, “State Transduke . . . so-and-so.”

4. The laws of TransState do not forbid the application of emotional, respectful, intellectual, and other epithets or additions in addresses between citizens of the Federation, as for example: “Dear State . . .” “Most respected State Transbaron,” etc.

5. TransState citizens possessing titles of foreign states may retain them in accordance with Article I, Section 3, of the Provisional Constitution of TransState.

Article VII. Concerning Duties

1. The citizens of TransState must:

- a. Renew their Passports at the proper time within a month of its expiration and in no event more than seven days after its expiration.

- b. Take part in the election of the Consuls of TransState, as required by Article IV of the Provisional Constitution of TransState.
- c. Refrain from any factious activity, both within the framework of TransState and the limits of the I-State, voluntarily and in obedience to all orders and decrees of the Consuls.

Article VIII. Concerning Internal Affairs

1. TransState sets itself the goal of guaranteeing the sovereignty and integrity of the members of the Federation by all means available to all members of the Federation.
2. The basic aims of TransState are the universal unification of all members of the Federation, the collection of revenues from the renewal of Passports, and the use of the funds collected in the TransState treasury to fulfill the goals set forth in Section 1 of this Article.

Article IX. Concerning the Budget

1. Under supervision of the Consuls, TransState shall print and circulate currency in notes worth 1, 3, and 5 Transmoney. The value of Transmoney in circulation shall be guaranteed by the worth of all members of the Federation. The rate of exchange in relation to the dollar shall fluctuate freely in accordance with the rate of exchange of the dollar and the prevailing situation in TransState.
2. The state budget of TransState shall be determined by the holding of the treasury and shall consist of expenses and income.
3. Budgetary income shall derive from the sale of Passports; the renewal of citizenship; the sale of TransState stationery on which shall be conducted all correspondence within TransState and internationally with it, since no solicitations or addresses to the Consuls, the Consular Cabinet, or the Electoral Tabulating Commission not on TransState stationery will be accepted or examined; the sale of patents of nobility; exchange of Transmoney into the currency of foreign states; and voluntary donations.
4. The budgetary expenditures of TransState shall be the inviolable common property of all citizen-state members of the Federation and shall be made only with the approval of an Extraordinary session of the Consular Cabinet specifically convened in each, separate instance.

5. The accounting of all financial operations of TransState shall be made in Transmoney and in accordance with the simultaneous proclamation of the rate of exchange.

Article X. Concerning Defense

1. Citizens who violate the laws of the Federation of TransState shall be subject to punishment, the most extreme measure of which shall be a decision of the Consuls to deprive the violator of citizenship with consequent denial of Passport renewal, and confiscation by voluntary surrender by the condemned citizen of all Transmonies he owns. This punishment automatically transfers the criminal within the jurisdiction of foreign states.
2. In executing the functions of jurisprudence, the Consuls shall not be obliged to hear both sides of a given case. The right is acknowledged of each I-State to make one-sided presentations or explanations, petitions, and pleas for mercy directly in otherworldly contexts.
3. Any bodily harm inflicted on a citizen of TransState by any member of the Federation shall qualify both as a violation of the territorial integrity of an I-State and an infringement on autonomy. Such violation shall be penalized by the most severe punishment of TransState which shall be applied, without trial, to all participants in the conflict who have not suffered apparent injury and regardless of who initiated the conflict.
4. All other violations of the laws of the Federation, not defined in Section 3 of this Article, shall be punished, without appeal, by the levying of monetary fines to be exacted in increases in the fee for renewal of citizenship, established anew in each instance by the Consuls, depending on the specific circumstances and independent of any past precedent.
5. In the event of a violation of the provisions of Section 3 of this Article occurring against any member of the Federation because of the actions of subjects of any foreign state, as for example the imposition of administrative, legal, or any other form of punishment or pressure on a citizen of TransState who has not violated the laws of TransState, such violation shall be viewed as an act of aggression on the part of the authorities of the foreign state and shall inevitably incur all possible sanctions against the aggressor, not excluding a declaration of war involving the use of all means available to the Consuls, including the use of parapsychological weaponry.

Article XI. Concerning Foreign Affairs

1. With the support of all members of the Federation, TransState will achieve recognition of itself as an autonomous state entity from all states and will conduct a Policy of Peaceful Soaring, using for this purpose both bilateral and multilateral negotiations and international organizations: The United Nations, the European Community, Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, UNESCO, etc., etc. TransState shall be obliged strictly to fulfill and observe all the international obligations and treaties leading to the attainment of a state of global peace.

Article XII. Concerning the Constitutions of I-States

1. Each citizen-state member of the Federation shall promulgate in written or oral form the constitution of its I-State, obligatorily in conformity with the general features of the current basic law.

First Amendment to the Provisional Constitution of TransState (adopted by the First Consuls of TransState—Komar and Melamid—under the influence of circumstances not made public.)

1. In addition to people inhabiting Earth, any humanoid, regardless of place of origin and extent of territory (in the event that it is impossible, in principle, to measure the surface of the latter), may become a member of the Federation of TransState.

May 14, 1977

The Declaration of Independence of TransState (adopted unanimously)

Any phenomenon in human history is the highest reality not only for the participants or contemporaries of this moment, not only for those who have foreseen this event, those who have dreamed of it but have not lived it until it occurred, but also for those who live after and judge us by our deeds or—because of the fragility of all that is material—by the results and descriptions of our deeds, preserved in the depths of Time.

Therefore, in this document, we consider it our duty to explain to our contemporaries and to posterity the circumstances and goals of the creation of TransState, embodying the highest hopes of the best representatives of mankind and obliging us to transcend all the world's existing forms of state and social structure, and to found our own federation on principles which better approximate the guiding precepts of the legendary Golden Age of mankind.

Even a superficial critique of the structure of contemporary state systems would require some exposition of the root causes of the criticism. As the first to practice withdrawal from contemporary political forms, we are even more obligated to lay out before mankind and history the causes provoking the members of TransState to secession from their Alma Mater, which wallows, prey to unreasoning governmental policies, in lies and contradictions.

Despite their superficial differences, all existing states are very similar to each other, regardless of whether they practice equality or inequality of people, whether they express the policy of a majority or a minority. Until TransState, all social systems, as a result of perpetual distortions of the system of human values, are and have been built on an axiom as false as it is degrading to the individual: the impossibility of inserting an equal sign between the state and the individual. Only one prophet of the true principle—he who proclaimed, “L'état, c'est moi”—briefly illuminated this dark world of human delusions. This burst of truth, however, was quickly extinguished. It was replaced by the second axiom: “altering the placement of the ‘equal sign’ does not change the meaning of the formula,” a principle judged to apply even to social phenomena and demonstrating once again how little man has advanced from the times of barbarism and original logical thought.

The basic law of TransState, proclaiming “L'état, c'est moi,” is not only a capacious formula of post-logical reason but also the cornerstone of the future, shining edifice in the construction of which everyone who has become a citizen of TransState joins and, for these or other reasons, withdraws from existing social reality in order to combat the decay of his “I” into an empty sound in space and a naked letter on paper.

Therefore, each member of the Federation, being a self-sufficient and independent I-State, just as all of TransState as a whole, must embrace the necessity of his secession and his unification and must relate to other people as he would to foreign states, considering them enemies during war and friends during peace.

Therefore, we the Consuls and the first representatives of TransState having prepared for a Global Conference and calling as witness all who have lived, are living, and will live after us, as well as the supernatural bonds to which we are connected, repose our faith in the power of the foregoing concept. In goodness, happiness, and justice, triumphantly and everywhere, we announce what we have heard: that all the members of the Federation of TransState are state-individuals, that they have the power to embody the lofty unity of the best people of the earth, and transform themselves, in name and deed, into the honorable and shining

pathway leading to the great ideals of the Golden Age of mankind.

Let TransState be the new shrine of the most worthy, of those who will survive the dreadful, inexorable flood of the coming global upheavals that are bound to follow our examination of Ideals.

In support of this declaration, with firm faith in the truth and justice of the composition of TransState, we pledge the sacrifice of our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

V. A. Komar, A. D. Melamid

May 14, 1977

Address of the Government of TransState to the Heads of the Great Powers*

Most respected Presidents, Prime-Ministers, and Chairmen!

A feeling of profound anxiety and the consciousness of responsibility to the peoples of the entire world oblige the Consuls of TransState to address you with a number of constructive proposals expounded in this document. Our common duty to history consists not in a battle for spheres of influence, but in conducting a farseeing and wise policy directed at preventing the onset of global conflicts capable of bringing innumerable sufferings to mankind.

However, until the present your countries not only have not acknowledged TransState, but have also not expressed any response to the creation of our Federation. This irritating fact has already entered the annals of current history, and our descendants will remember it in shame, should there even be partial preservation of the ability to remember.

TransState today is not only the youngest state in the world, but also in structure the most unprecedented political form of coalition-cohesion of the individual and society.

According to Article I of the Provisional Constitution of TransState: "TransState is a federation of free and independent state-individuals—"I-States"—with the right of self-government and autonomy, even including secession. Each member of the Federation is a citizen-state in accordance with the TransState fundamental law, which proclaims: "L'état, c'est moi."

*People's Republic of China, France, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom, United States of America—transmitted through their Permanent Representatives to the United Nations.

And according to Article I, "The territory of TransState shall consist of the total area of the body surfaces of all members of the Federation, freely existing in and transiting through space."

Being a political form of a fundamentally new type, TransState conducts a Policy of *Peaceful Soaring* both above such problems as those of opposing social systems and above the problems of the so-called third world. It triumphantly asserts that it will firmly maintain this policy in the future as well.

Beginning from what was stated above and expressing the will of the citizens of the Federation, the Consuls of TransState address the following proposals to the leaders of the great powers:

1. For the conclusion between TransState and each of the great powers of Treaties of non-aggression and the development of relations on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, equality, the status of existing borders, and the inviolability of territorial integrity.

2. Such treaties must be preceded by the recognition of TransState on the part of the governments of the great powers and by exchange of representatives on the level of ambassadors with the presentation of credentials.

Note: In the event of nonrecognition of our Federation, the government of TransState retains the right of complete freedom of action, the total responsibility for the results of which will be laid entirely and exclusively on the non-recognizing side.

3. In the event of the implementation of the first and second proposals, TransState will not interfere with the development of mutually advantageous trade collaboration between our powers and of exchange of scientific, technical, and cultural achievements for the good of the peoples of our countries and the entire world.

Having taken upon itself the unilateral burden of putting forward a peaceful initiative, TransState—in the persons of its Consuls—begins by recognizing the disquieting fact that the modern world stands on the brink not only of physical and economic ruin, but on the brink of a transitional period to the age of the TransState.

This prognosis is based on the careful analysis and generalization of information received by the Consuls from reliable sources inaccessible to mankind.

The more rapidly the peoples and the governments, given their trust, see that recognition of TransState is the single route to the ultimate acquisition of the rights of autonomy within our Federation, the more surely will the great majority of people avoid utter disaster

and achieve a joyous rebirth of the Golden Age by recalling, with feelings of profound thankfulness for our joint efforts for the good and progress of the world, the conclusion of the treaties we have proposed.

The Consuls of TransState

May 14, 1977

Address of the Consuls of TransState to the United Nations

A feeling of profound concern for the fate of peace on earth and an unanswering aspiration to restrain several, specific Powers of Darkness standing in mankind's path toward progress oblige us, the Consuls of TransState, to address the United Nations.

In expressing the will of all the citizen-states of the Federation, the government of TransState proclaims its principled readiness to become a member with full rights of the authoritative and representative "world forum." The Federation of TransState, as is known to all progressive mankind, is today the youngest independent state embodying the new principle of the interaction of the individual and society.

According to the Provisional Constitution of TransState

Article 1:

1. TransState is a federation of free and independent state-individuals—"I-States"—with the right of self-government and autonomy, even including secession. Each member of the Federation is a citizen-state in accordance with the TransState fundamental law, which proclaims: "L'état, c'est moi."

2. The territory of TransState shall consist of the total area of the body surfaces of all members of the Federation, freely existing in and transiting through space.

And according to Section 3:

Membership of TransState is open to any person on Earth, regardless of sex, age, faith, or citizenship, who, in his own opinion, falls outside the structure of functioning state systems, provided that he does not wish to impose change on that unsatisfactory system by force or in any other manner and that he has paid the established fee to acquire a TransState citizen's passport.

The primitive and historically transient content of the concept of "Nation" is, in the best of cases, the most profound misconception of our contemporaries and, in the worst, the ill-intentioned covenant of the forces of world reaction. It is the single obstacle preventing the United Nations from fulfilling its lofty function of regulating mankind's international disputes.

1977—the year of the formation and first steps of TransState into the international arena—will go down in recent history as a year of bright hopes, as the beginning of the practical embodiment of the dream which has infused the best minds of mankind. But if the new Federation is the object of discrimination and is kept outside the United Nations framework, this year could be stamped in the memory of our descendants as a year of the greatest errors and injustices. And although we, the Consuls, have no doubt that TransState will sooner or later take its rightful place and exert its positive influence on the fate of the world, a shameful blot, no less than the one which lay in its time on the League of Nations, could forever compromise the United Nations in the eyes of the peoples of the world given their choice between continuing to drag out their existence under the aegis of the United Nations or becoming independent and free members of our Federation.

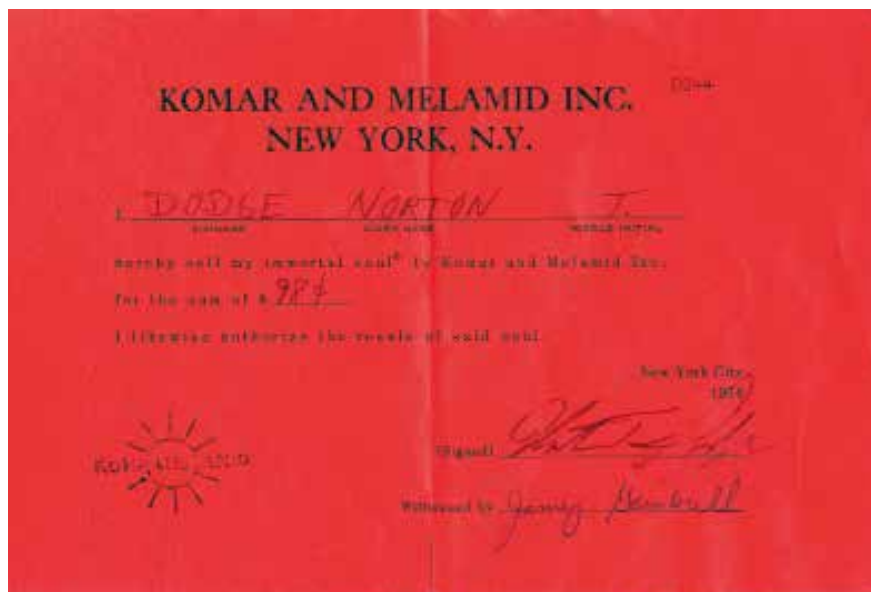
Either the world will remain a prison of personalities contained within unnatural boundaries—nothing more, in essence, than the result of the movement across a map by the fingers of short-sighted favorites—or the world will be maintained and strengthened in the form of friendly state individuals, the members of the Federation of TransState.

In announcing our readiness to become a member of the United Nations, the Consuls of TransState triumphantly announce that in the interests of peace and progress the representatives of the Federation will strictly observe all the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, actively participate in the discussion of all essential problems for future improvement and development of mutual understanding between peoples.

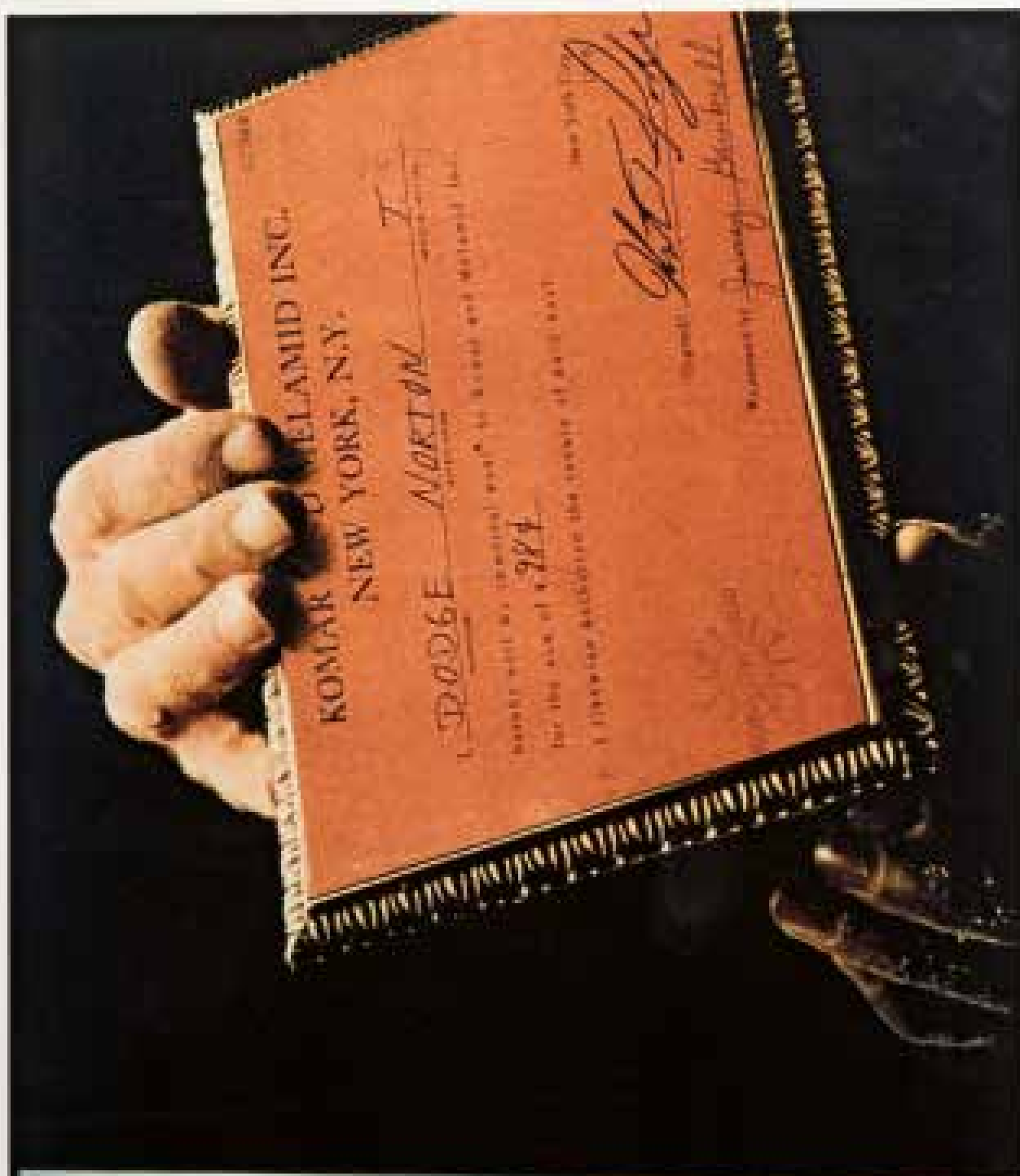
KOMAR/MELAMID—CONSULS OF TRANSSTATE
c/o Ronald Feldman Gallery
33 E. 74th Street
New York, NY 10021
1977 (the first year of trans-year counting)

We Buy and Sell Souls

When Komar and Melamid arrived in America via Israel in 1978, they found themselves in drastically different social and economic conditions. Immediately, however, they applied the “open market” strategies already probed in the Soviet context in works such as *Circle, Square, Triangle* or *Super Objects for Super People*. For their first project in America, *We Buy and Sell Souls*, they registered a company in the name of Komar and Melamid Inc. and created convincing advertisements. During a period of three-and-a-half years, Komar and Melamid Inc. bought and sold approximately one thousand souls, including Andy Warhol’s and Norton Dodge’s. Warhol’s soul was subsequently sold for 30 rubles—quite decent money at the time—at the famous auction that took place in Moscow via telephone in 1979.



ABOVE: *Soul of Norton Dodge*, from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978
OPPOSITE AND PAGES 212–13: Advertisement posters from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978–83



A SOUL IS THE BEST INVESTMENT



JOHN, JANE, & JIM (L-R) SITTING ON THE COUCH, 1978, 1979

JOHN, JANE, & JIM (L-R) SITTING ON THE COUCH, 1978, 1979



NO ONE ELSE IN THIS WORLD PAYS CASH FOR NOTHING

KOMAR AND MELAMID INC. NEW YORK, N.Y. <u>LEAH</u> <u>ADAM</u> Wishes not to transfer cash to Komar and Melamid Inc. for the sum of \$100. I hereby authorize the sale of my soul.  	KOMAR AND MELAMID INC. NEW YORK, N.Y. <u>LEAH</u> <u>ADAM</u> Wishes not to transfer cash to Komar and Melamid Inc. for the sum of \$100. I hereby authorize the sale of my soul.  
KOMAR AND MELAMID INC. NEW YORK, N.Y. <u>DODGE</u> <u>NORTH</u> <u>T.</u> Wishes not to transfer cash to Komar and Melamid Inc. for the sum of \$100. I hereby authorize the sale of my soul.  	KOMAR AND MELAMID INC. NEW YORK, N.Y. <u>DODGE</u> <u>NORTH</u> <u>T.</u> Wishes not to transfer cash to Komar and Melamid Inc. for the sum of \$100. I hereby authorize the sale of my soul.  

KOMAR & MELAMID INC.
WE BUY AND SELL SOULS®

DON'T PASS BY! THE SOUL SALE!

From nov.1978-may 1979,Komar & Melamid bought American souls with the aim of selling them later on in Moscow.

A simultaneous happening - 'auction of American souls' is planned for Moscow and New-York.The souls will be sold in Moscow,while in the same time there will be a gathering in the Ronald Feldman gallery in New York.

As we,the artists believe,the soul of the artist is present in every work of art,then the opposite may be assumed:every object which contains the soul of an individual is a work of art. Therefore,we are presenting the first open sale of American art in Moscow,in the framework of expanding American-Soviet trade.

The sale of American souls in Moscow will be carried out by Donskoy/Roshal/Skersis on the 19th of may at 7 p.m. Moscow time,in the studio of M.Odnoraltov, Dmytrievskogo str,10,apt.13
tel. 290.61.65

KOMAR & MELAMID, New York.

С ноября 1978г. по май 1979г. Комар и Меламид скупали души у американского населения для последующей перепродажи в Москве. Одновременный хепенинг - аукцион американских душ - планируется в Москве и Нью-Йорке. Души будут продаваться в Москве в то время, как в Нью-Йорке в галерее Рональда Фельдмана соберётся публика для участия в аукционе.

Как мы, художники, верим, душа творца присутствует в каждом произведении искусства. Таким образом, можно предположить и обратное: каждый предмет, который содержит душу индивидуума, является произведением искусства. Следовательно, мы осуществляем первую открытую распродажу американского искусства в Москве в целях дальнейшего расширения советско - американских торговых отношений.

Продажу душ осуществят Донской - Рашаль - Скерсис 19 мая 1979г. в 19 часов по московскому времени в мастерской художника Оdnоралова Михаила по адресу: Москва, ул. Дмитриевского, д. 10, кв. 13 /вход со двора, с торца здания/. *тел. 290.61.65*

И. Рашаль Комар и Меламид, Нью-Йорк.

НЕ ПРОХОДИТЕ МИМО! АУКЦИОН АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ДУШ В МОСКВЕ

WE
BUY
AND
SELL
SOULS

KOMAR AND MELAMID INC.
NEW YORK, N.Y.





We buy
and sell
souls

Romar
Melamid
Inc



We buy
and sell
souls

FINE QUALITY SOULS FOR
EVERY TASTE

Romar
Melamid
Inc



We buy
and sell
souls

BRING US YOUR TIRED SOULS —
YEARNING TO BE FREE

Romar
Melamid
Inc



We buy
and sell
souls

YOUR SOUL IS IN GOOD HANDS
WITH US

Romar
Melamid
Inc



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Advertisement for the project Komar and Melamid Inc., *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978–83



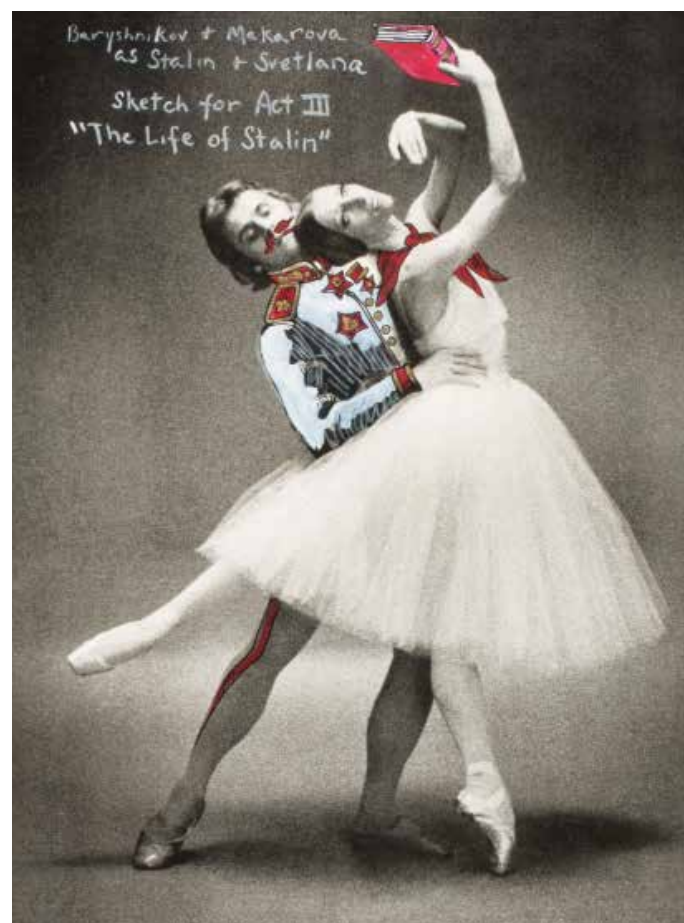
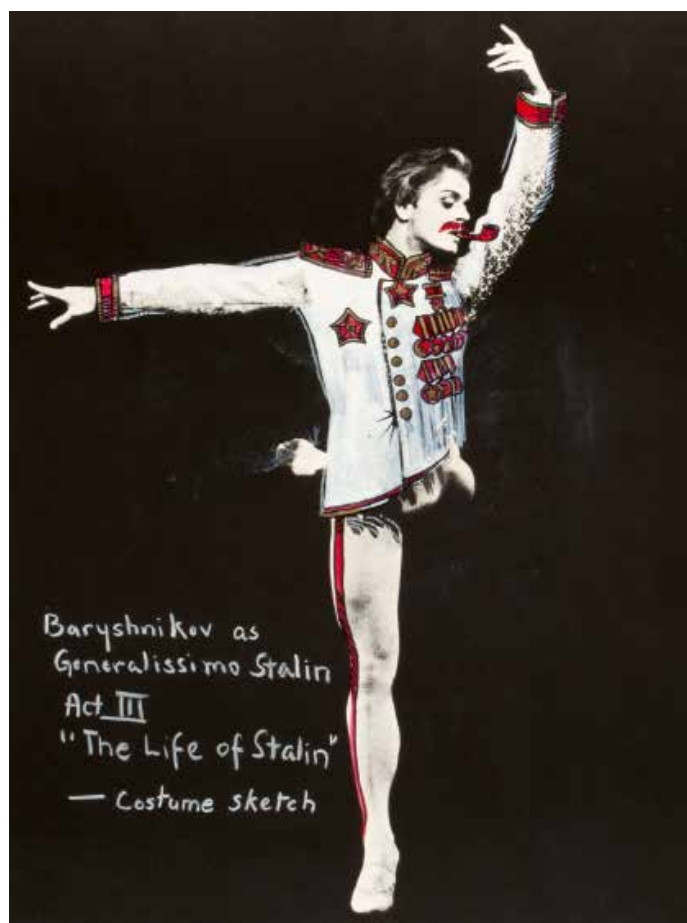
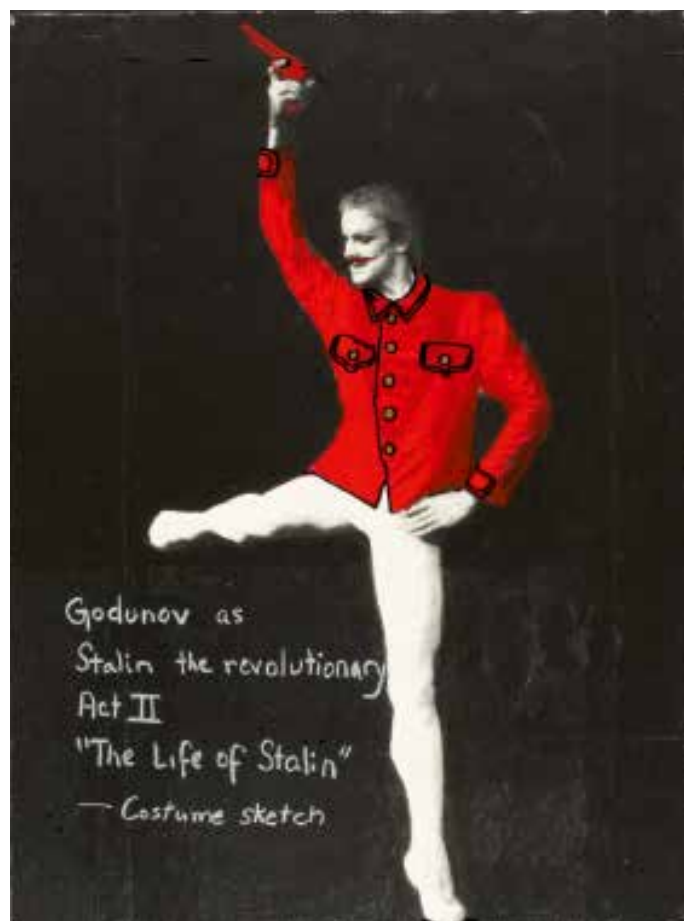
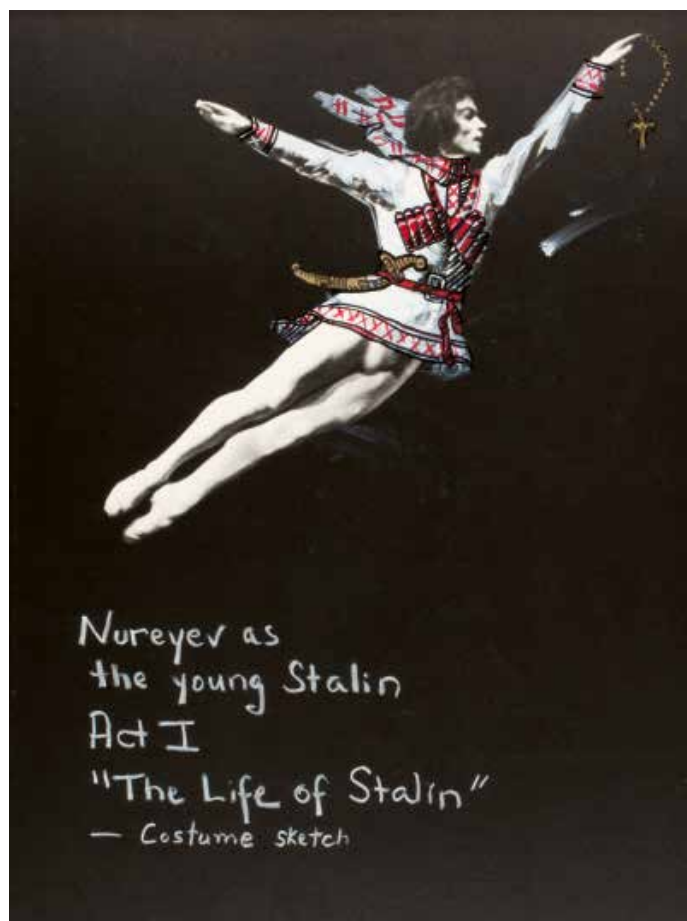
ABOVE: Advertisement for the project Komar and Melamid Inc., *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978–83
 OPPOSITE: *Cage for a Soul* from the project Komar and Melamid Inc., *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978



Life of Stalin

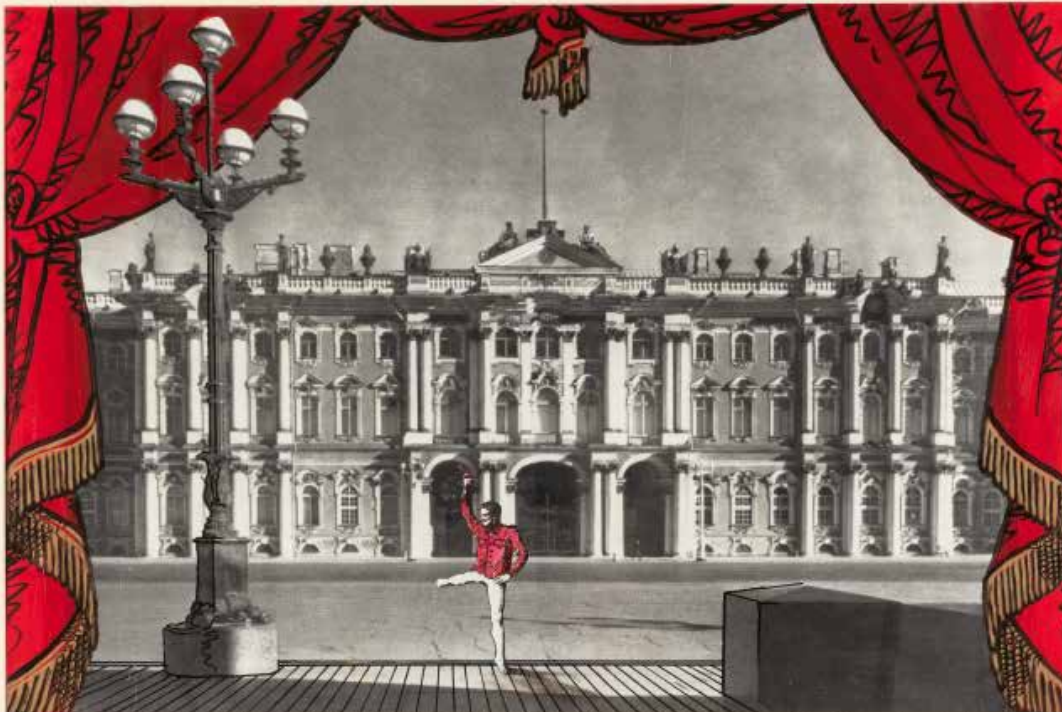


ABOVE, OPPOSITE, AND PAGES 222-23: *A Ballet: The Life of Stalin*, 1979





"The Caucasus" - Act I of the ballet "The Life of Stalin" - Sketch for set design



"Petrograd - The Winter Palace" Act II - "The Life of Stalin" - Sketch for set design



"Moscow - Red Square" - Act III of the ballet "The Life of Stalin" - Sketch for set design

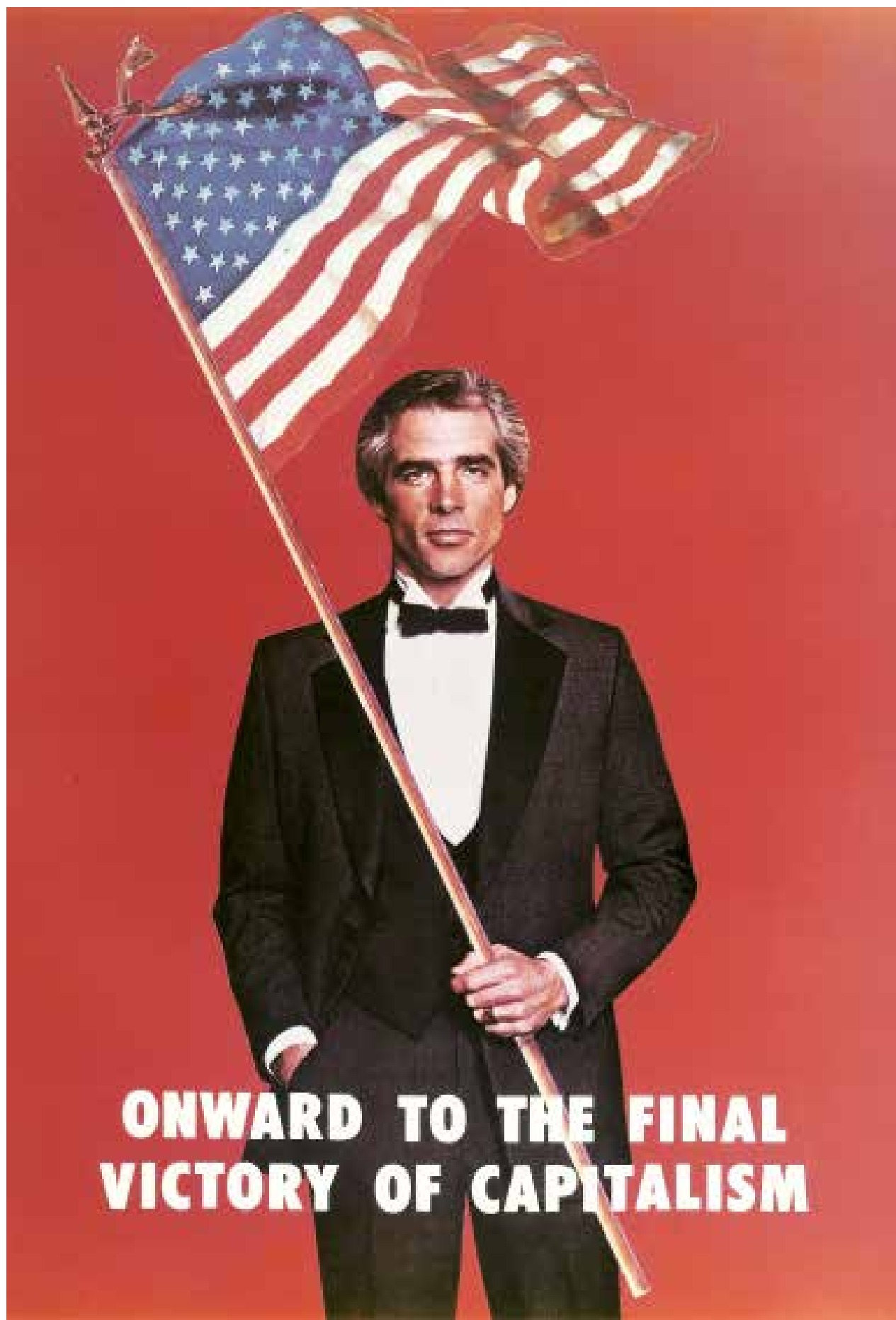
Glories

In America, Komar and Melamid applied sots-art ideas and principles to an American context, mixing socialist realism with American advertising. The posters in the series *Wake Up America* are compositions and slogans of Soviet propaganda posters filled with images of American life. In place of the Soviet worker-hero is an American worker; the peasant heroines of socialist labor are replaced by American bathing beauties. A blank-faced stereotype of a red soldier becomes a blank-faced stereotype of a Mr. Millionaire wearing a tuxedo. Presiding over the group is an American flag with a galaxy instead of the fifty stars.



ABOVE: *The Future American Flag*, 1980

OPPOSITE AND PAGES 226–27: *Wake Up America*, 1980





**GLORY TO THE AMERICAN
FARMER**



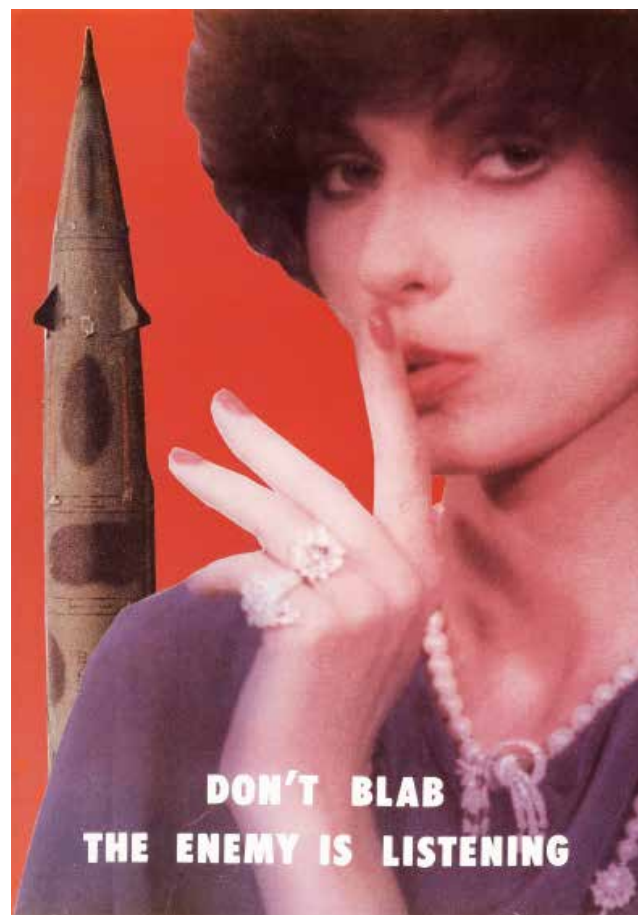
**GLORY TO THE AMERICAN
WORKER**



**GLORY TO THE U.S.
ARMED FORCES**



SHE CAN SLEEP SOUNDLY



**DON'T BLAB
THE ENEMY IS LISTENING**

Nostalgic Socialist Realism and Anarchistic Synthesism

In the Soviet Union, Komar and Melamid produced conceptual works in opposition both to the large paintings by socialist realist artists and to the spirituality of painterly experiments by fellow nonconformists. After their move to America, however, they started producing large paintings.

PAGES 229, 231–32, 234

Nostalgic Socialist Realism is the cycle they are probably most famous for. The “dark paintings,” as the artists call them, convey the memory of the atmosphere of their childhood, filled with a sense of gloom, absurdity, and the trauma of Stalin’s repression.

PAGES 233, 243

Equally important, the *Anarchistic Synthesism* series represents the clearest painterly manifestation of Komar and Melamid’s artistic method “conceptual eclectics.” This synthetic method, which combines opposite and seemingly incompatible styles such as socialist realism and modernism or classicism and abstract expressionism, was first probed in the artists’ seminal work *Biography of a Contemporary* (pp. 113–17). In America, these ideas were developed on a larger scale in *Yalta 1945* (pp. 236–39), *Midlife Crisis* (pp. 240–41), the *Diary* series (pp. 244–46), and others. The unexpected and witty combination of styles, subjects, and historical references is a tongue-in-cheek illustration of the Marxist postulate “unity and struggle of opposites.” On the other hand, it anticipates the pluralism of styles and the mindset of cultural inclusivity that are promoted now.

The Origins of Socialist Realism from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83





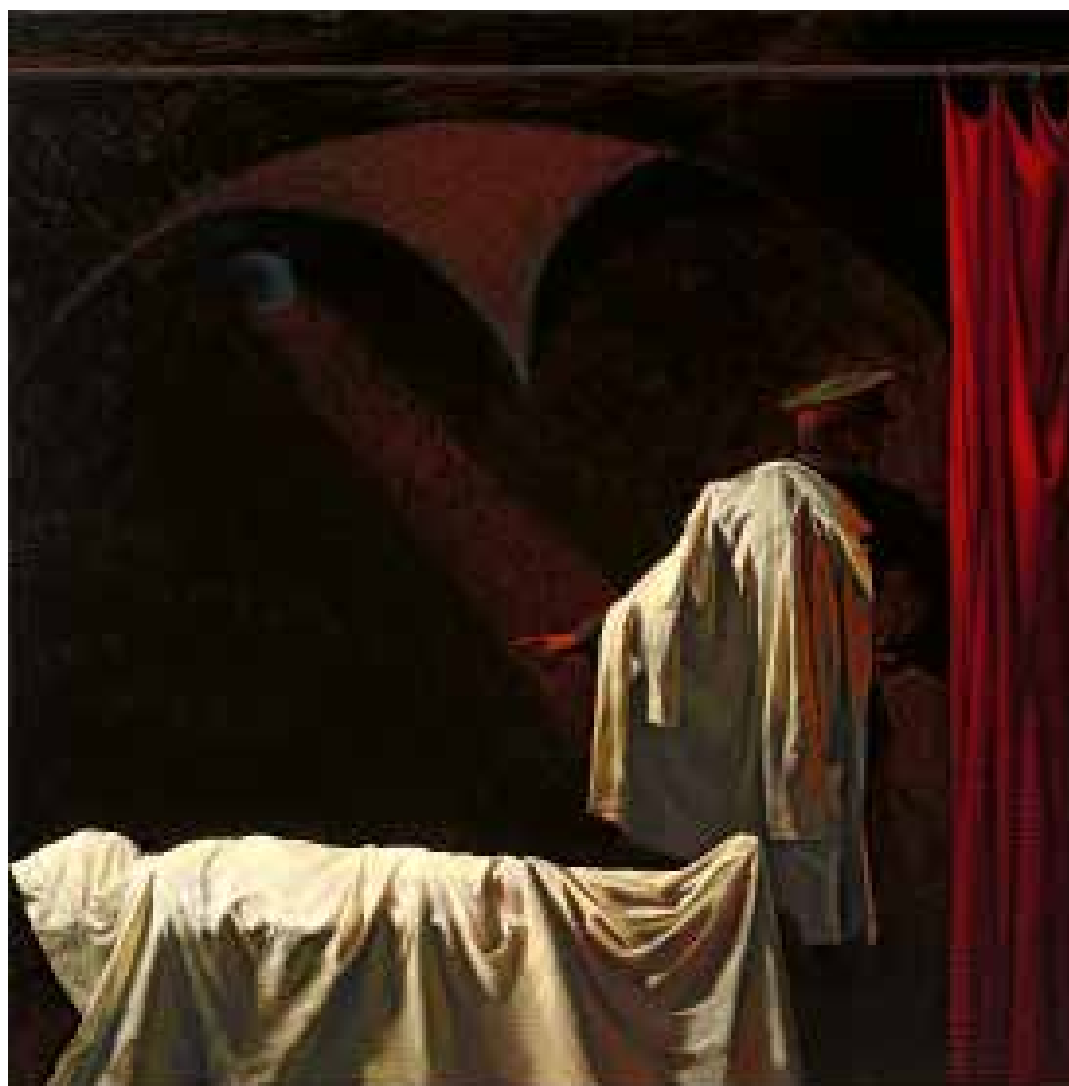
Protoceratops from the *Ancestral Portraits* series, 1980



Khrushchev's Plot Against Beria from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1981–82



Stalin in Front of the Mirror from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83



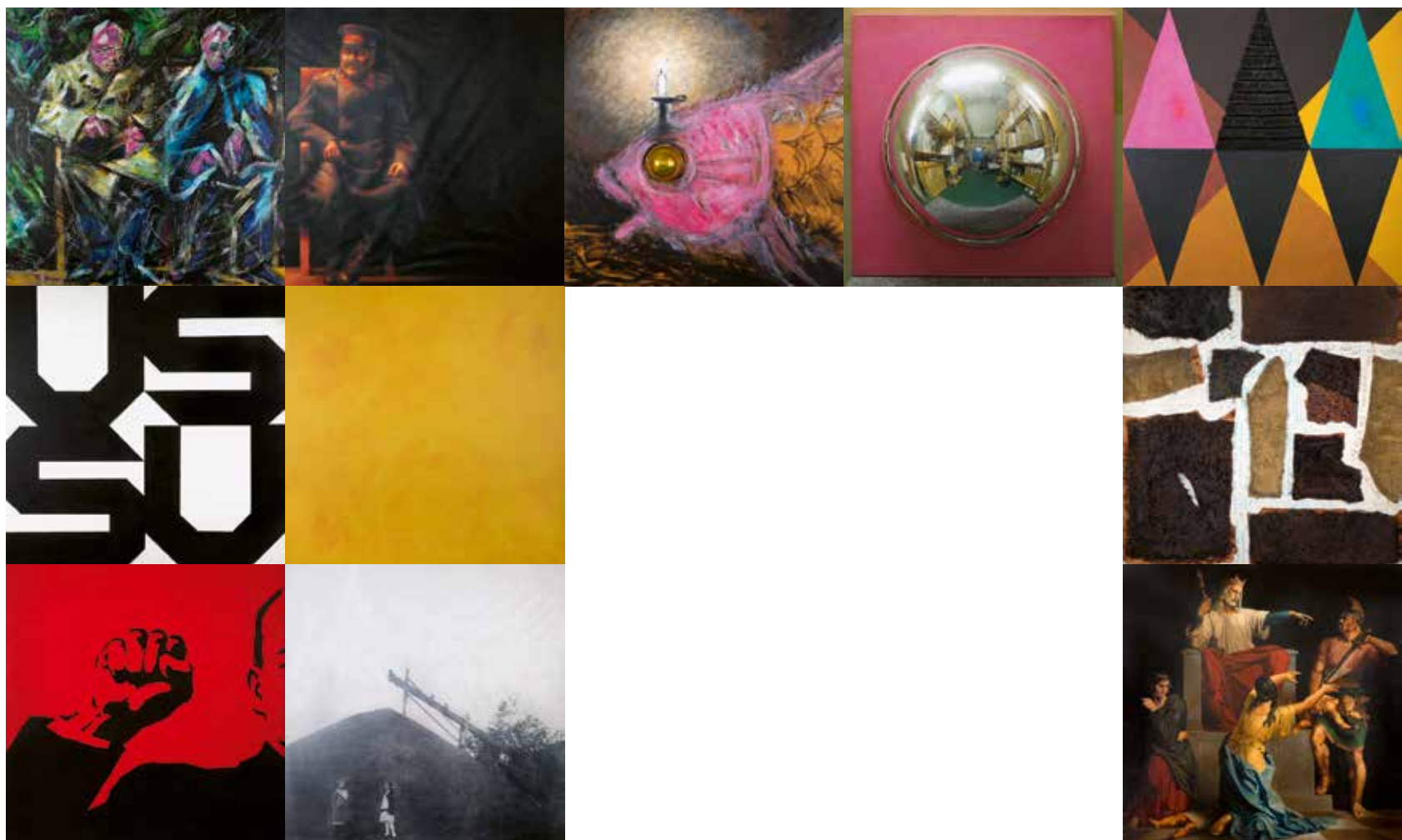
Stalin with Hitler's Remains from the *Anarchistic Synthesism* series, 1985–86



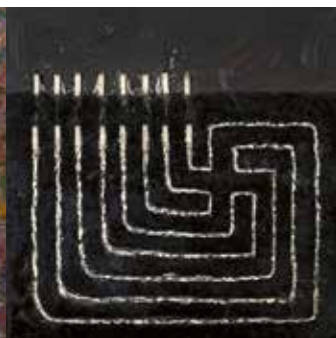
Lenin in Zurich from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83



Venus DeMilo, 1983

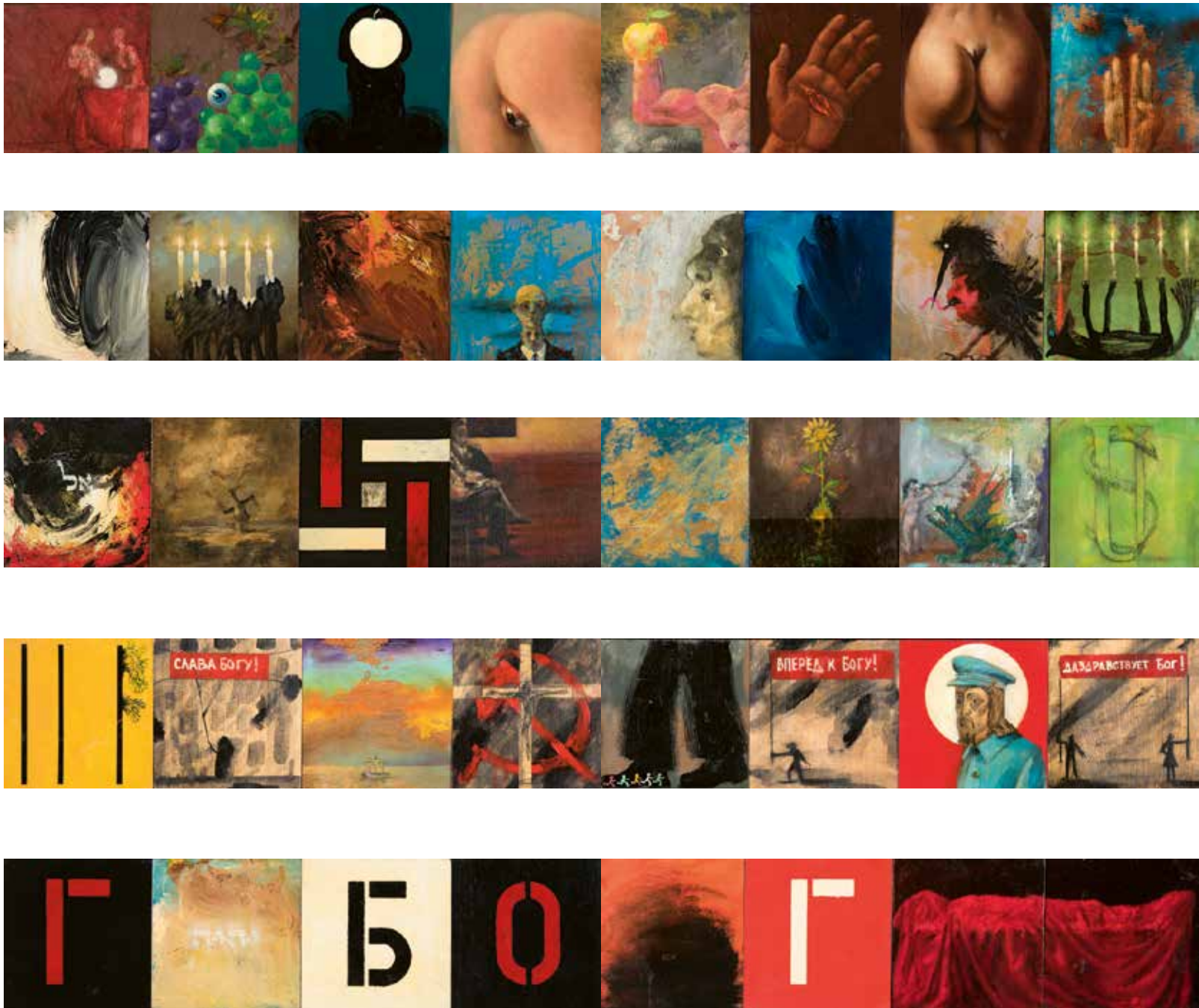


ABOVE AND PAGES 237–39: *Yalta 1945*, from the *Big Bang* series, 1986–87

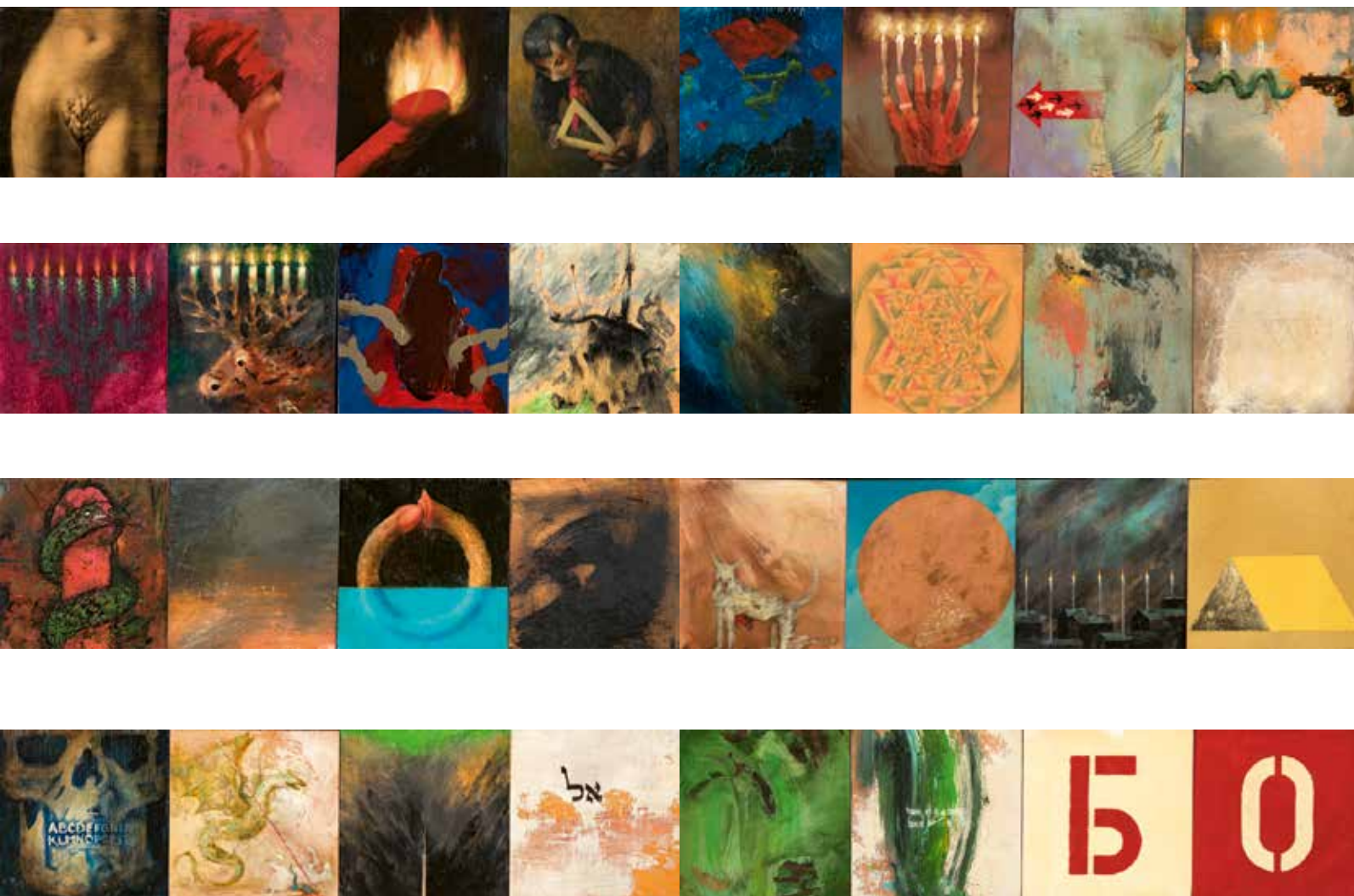




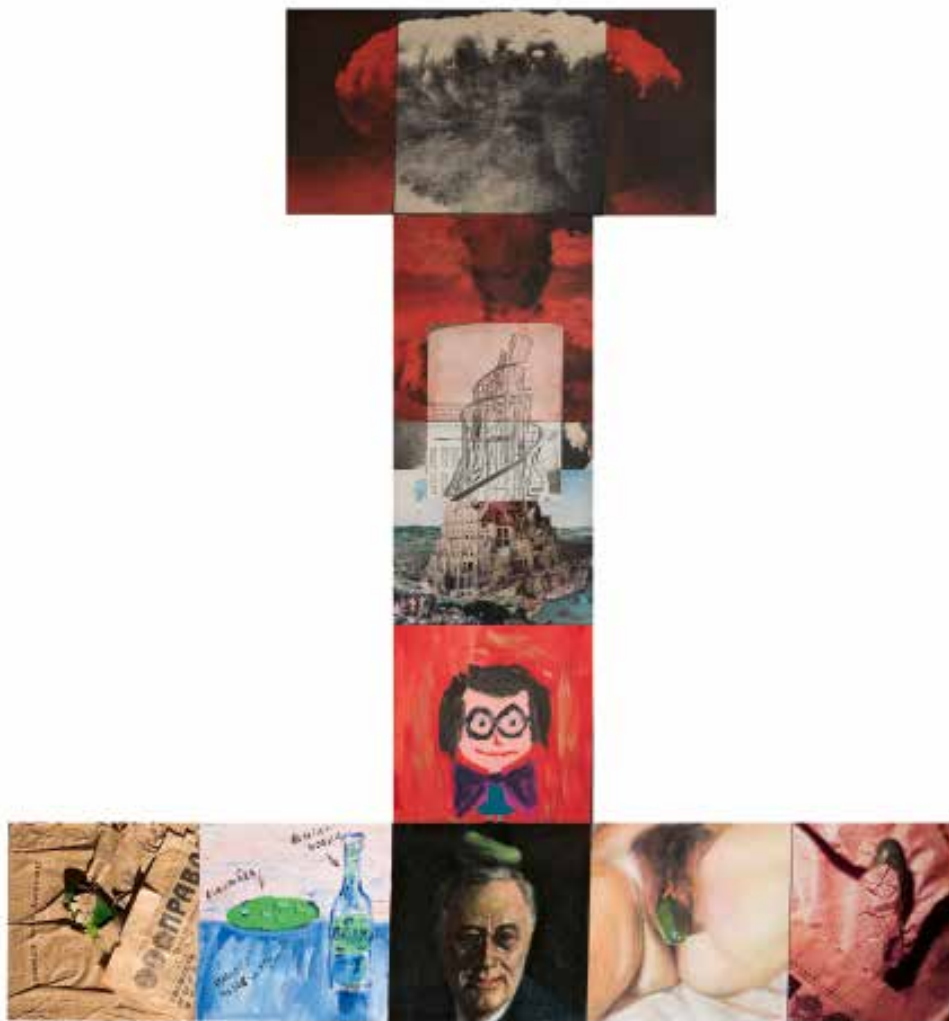




Midlife Crisis (assemblage), 1985



Копар и Метамор
 всего 72 кубов
 каждый куб
 15 см x 15 см
 Последний куб
 (конец)
 72
 Комар и Метамор
 22261, 72



Five Cucumbers from the *Diary* series, 1984–85



Letters as Insects from the *Anarchistic Synthesisism* series, 1984–87



Adam and Eve from the *Diary* series, 1984–85





Composition with Missiles in Rothko, 1985



A Day and Night in the Life of an Actress from the Diary series, 1985

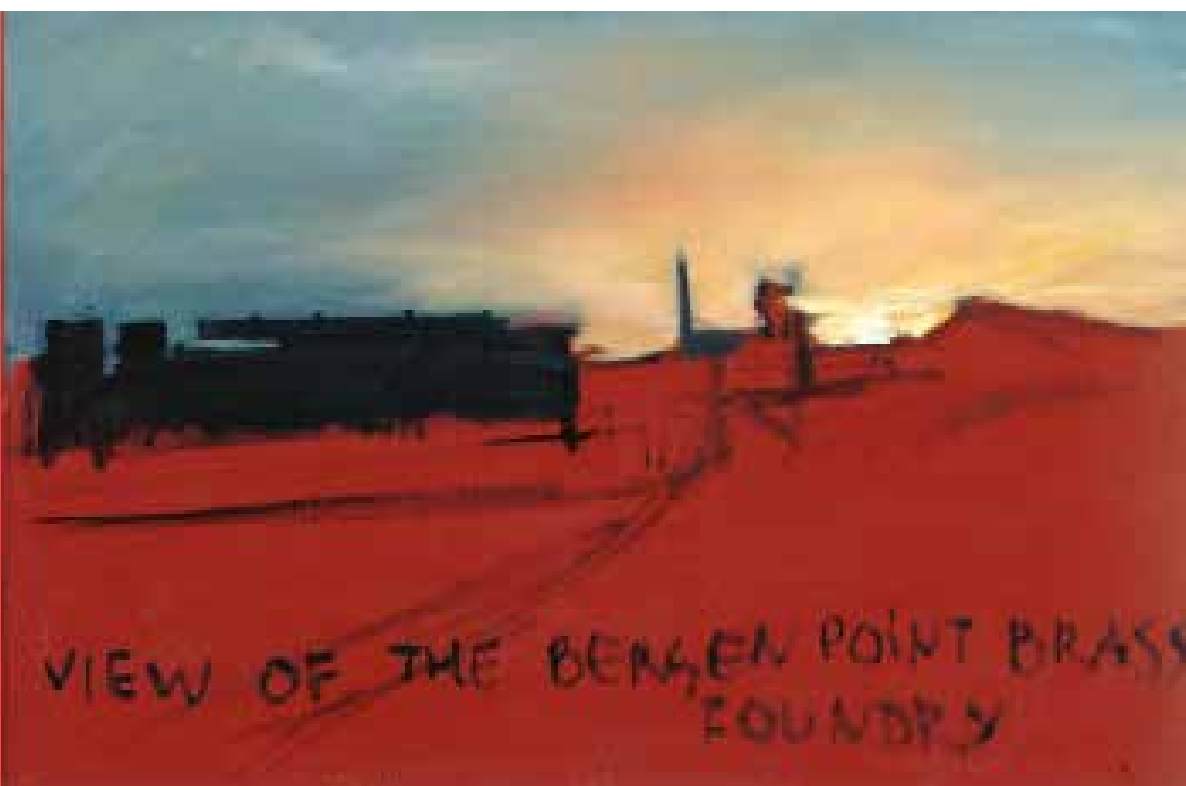


The Rose Beneath the Black, 1984–85



PIRE

Color of the Sunset from the *Bergen Point Brass Foundry* series, 1988

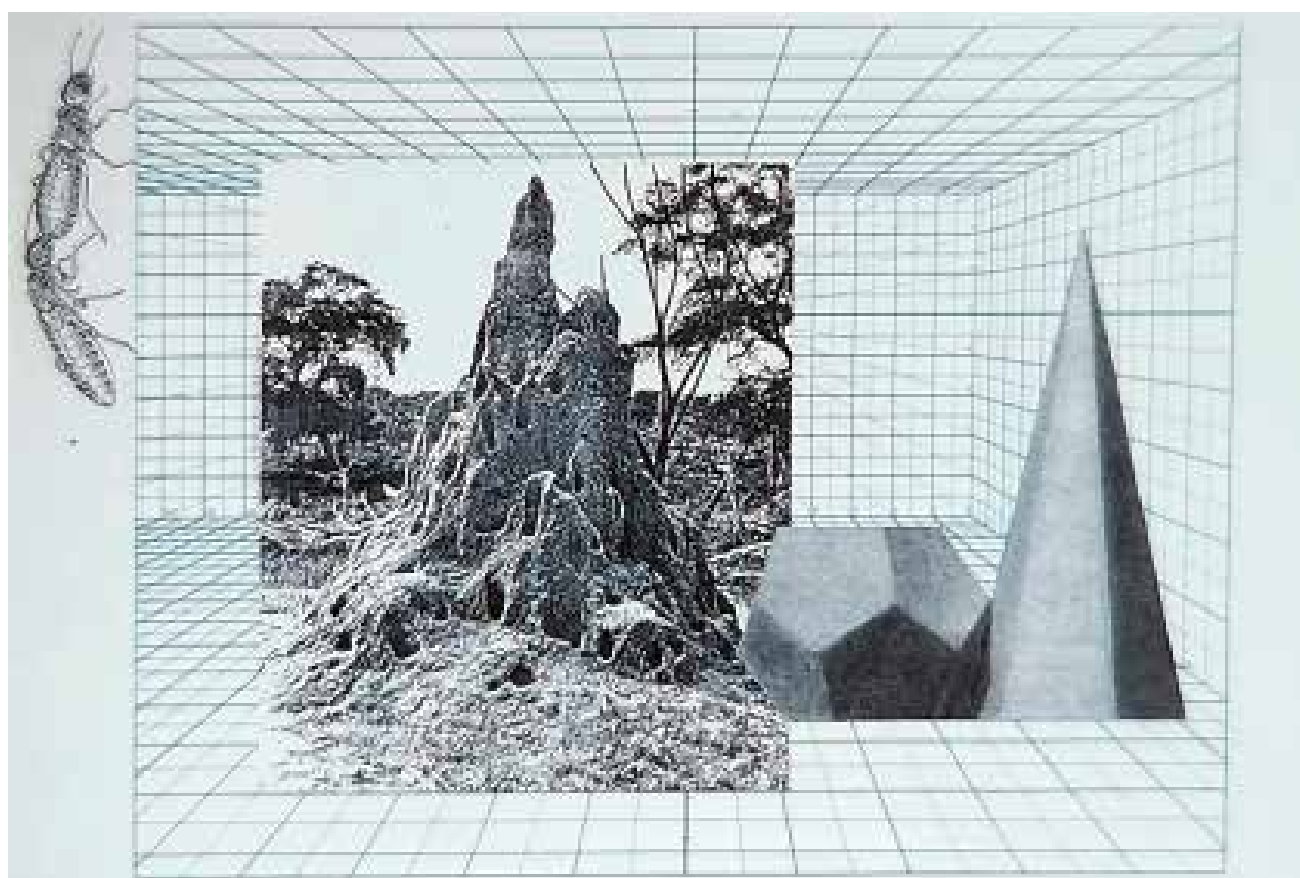
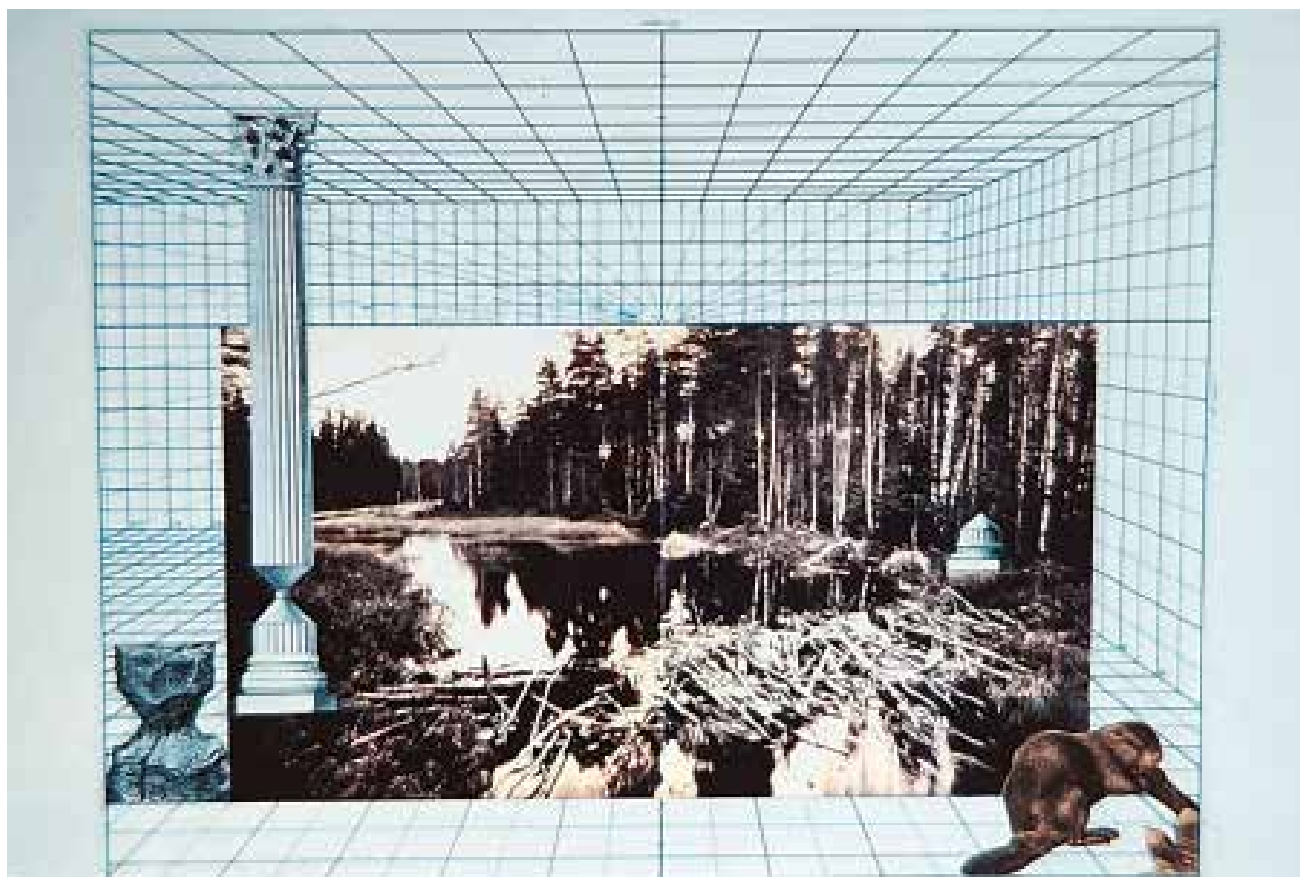


Collaborations with Animals

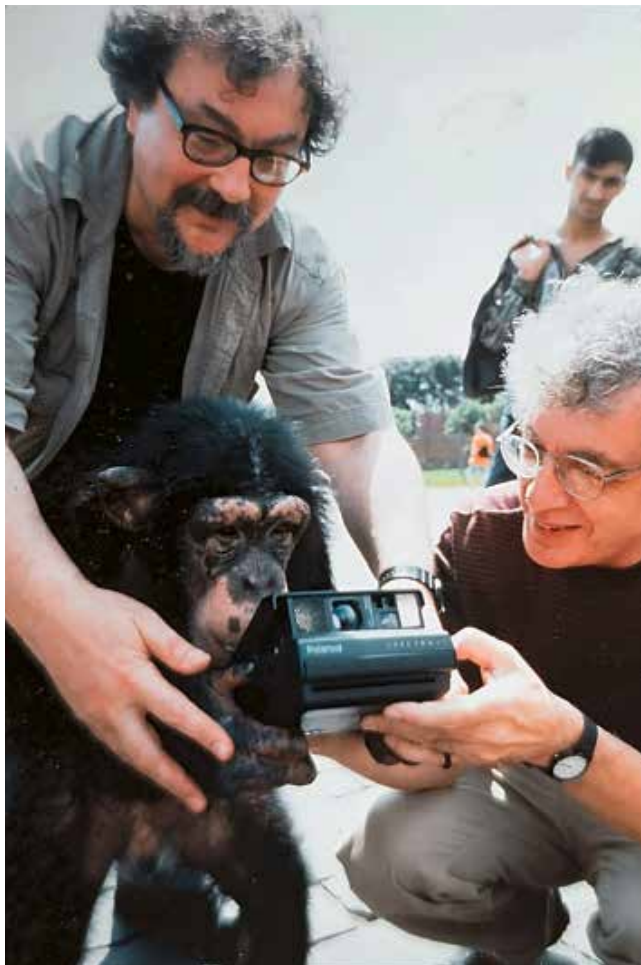
Pluralism, openness, and collaboration are at the core of Komar and Melamid's art. Besides collaborating with each other, they often invited other people and even animals to participate in their art. In the 1972 work *Canine Art (Teaching a Dog to Draw)* (below), they collaborated with a dog on a drawing of a bone. In 1997 and 1998, they embarked on the large project *Ec collaboration* (pp. 251–55). They taught a chimpanzee named Mikki to take photographs on Moscow's Red Square. They also created projects (not realized) for beavers and termites: by placing materials—such as sticks for beavers and large clay forms for termites—next to their dwellings, the artists invited these “collaborators” to use the offerings. The most famous animal collaboration, however, was with elephants. In Nepal, where modernization put elephants and their owners out of work with little means to support themselves, Komar and Melamid opened a drawing school for elephants. The elephants' works were successfully sold at an auction attended by the princess of Nepal.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: *Teaching a Dog to Draw*, 1978



TOP: *Project for Ecollaboration with Beavers* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995–98
 BOTTOM: *Project for Ecollaboration with Termites* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995–98



LEFT AND RIGHT: *Moscow Through the Eyes of Mikki* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1998. Photos by Peter Degtiarev



Photograph by Mikki from *Moscow Through the Eyes of Mikki* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1998



TOP AND BOTTOM: *Collaboration with Renée the Elephant* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995



Elephant Painting (with Renée) from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995

People's Choice

For their well-known project *People's Choice*, the artists engaged a firm to collect statistics of what people in different countries would like to see the most and the least in paintings. Based on this research, they produced the most and least wanted images for each country. Published here are examples of works from this project as well as rarely published studies. The artists also collaborated with the composer Dave Soldier on people's most and least wanted music. This project has as its basis the Soviet postulate that art must be made for people, as in Komar and Melamid's performance *Art Belongs to People*. Both projects show what happens if you take this idea literally.



America's Most Wanted (preliminary study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97



America's Most Wanted f (study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97



Russia's Most Wanted (preliminary study) from the People's Choice project, 1994–97



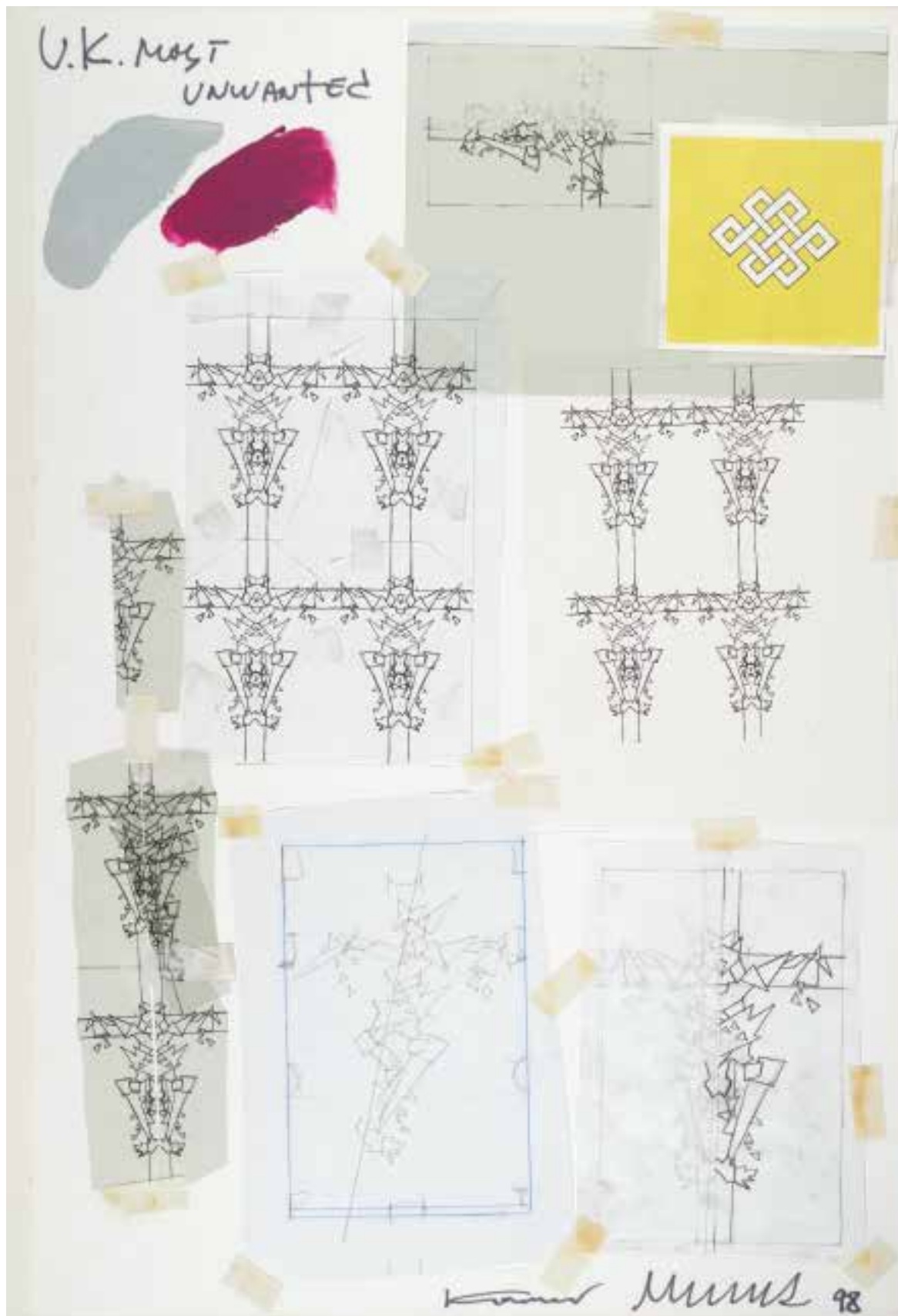
Russia's Most Wanted (study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97



TOP: **Russia's Most Wanted** (preliminary study) from the People's Choice project, 1994–97
 BOTTOM: **America's Most Wanted** (preliminary study) from the People's Choice project, 1994–97

OPPOSITE, TOP: **Italy's Most Wanted** (preliminary study) from the People's Choice project, 1994–97
 OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: **Italy's Most Wanted** (preliminary study) from the People's Choice project, 1994–97





United Kingdom's Most Unwanted (preliminary study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97





Koon Mues 97

Internet's Most Unwanted

Internet's Most Unwanted (preliminary study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97



Internet's Most Wanted (preliminary study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97

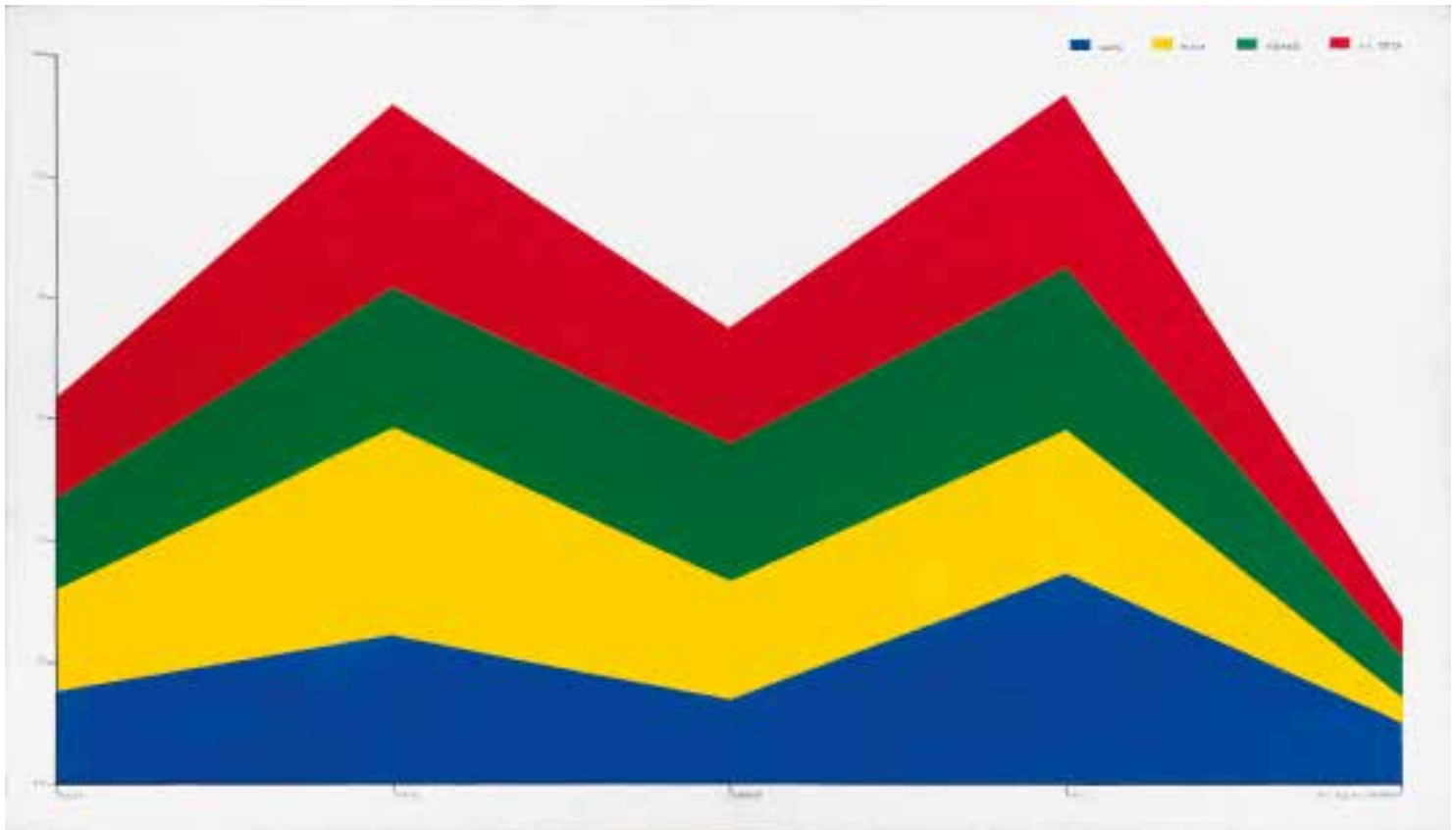


Diagram from the *People's Choice* project (4 of 6), 1994–97

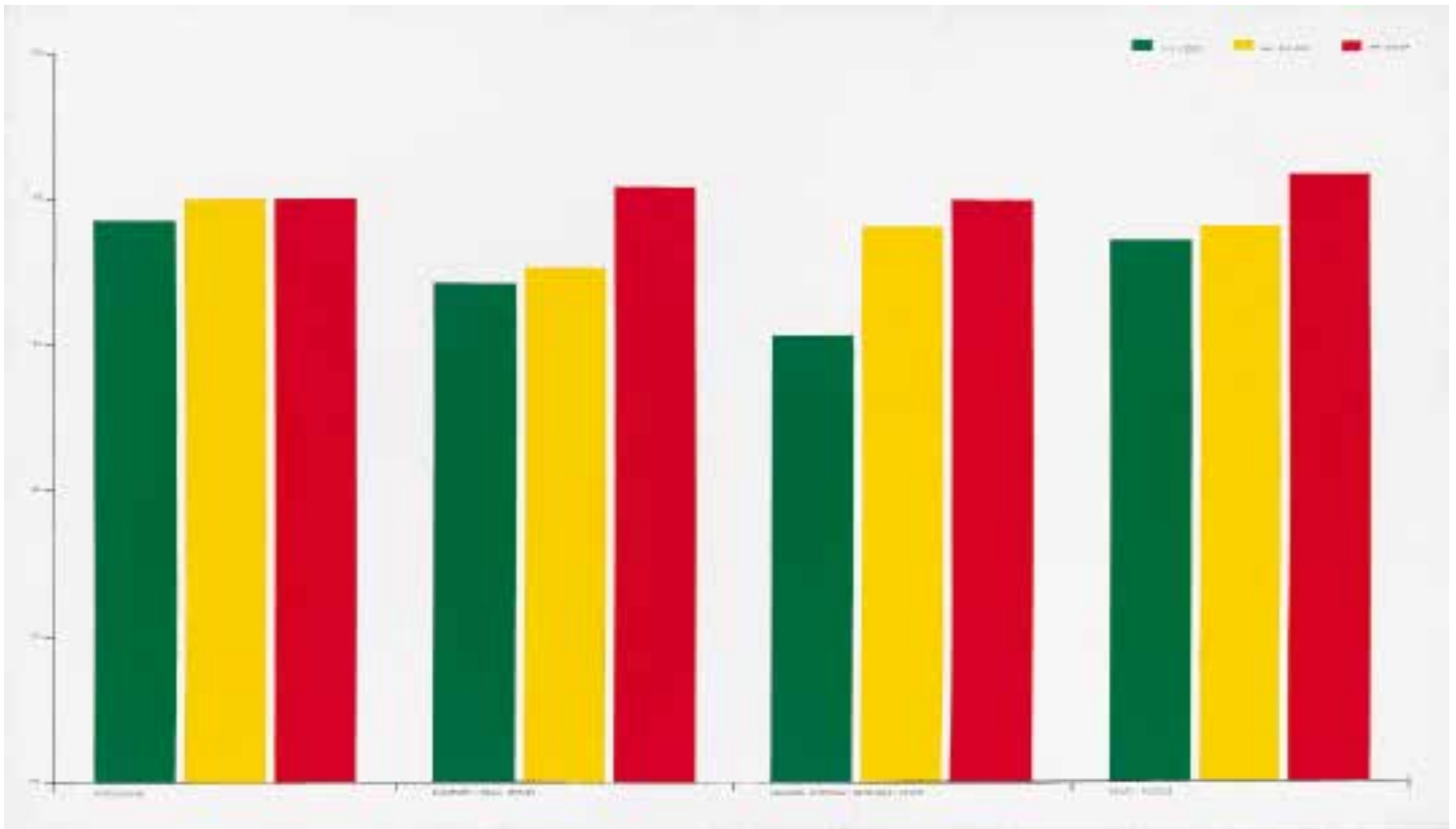


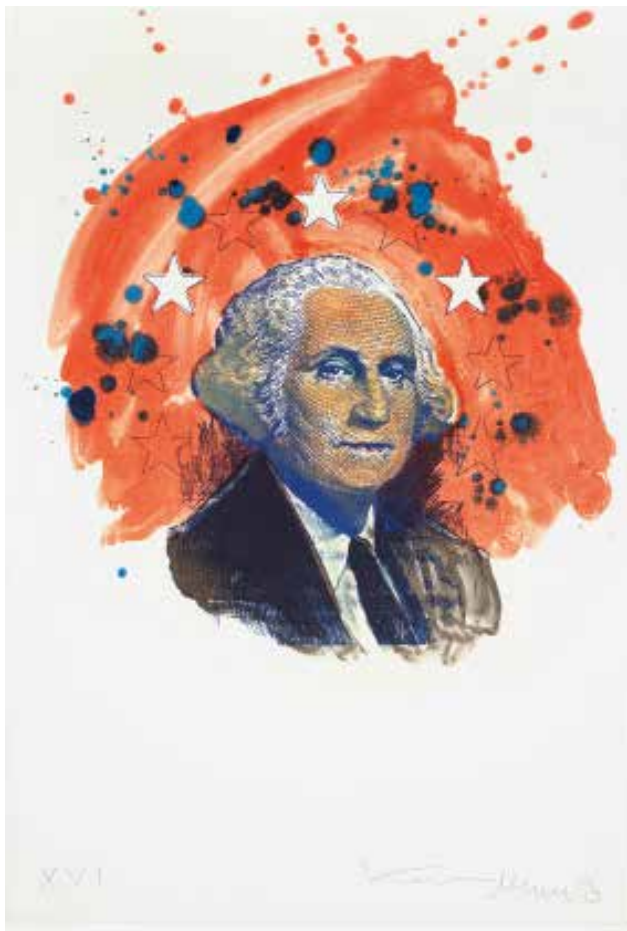
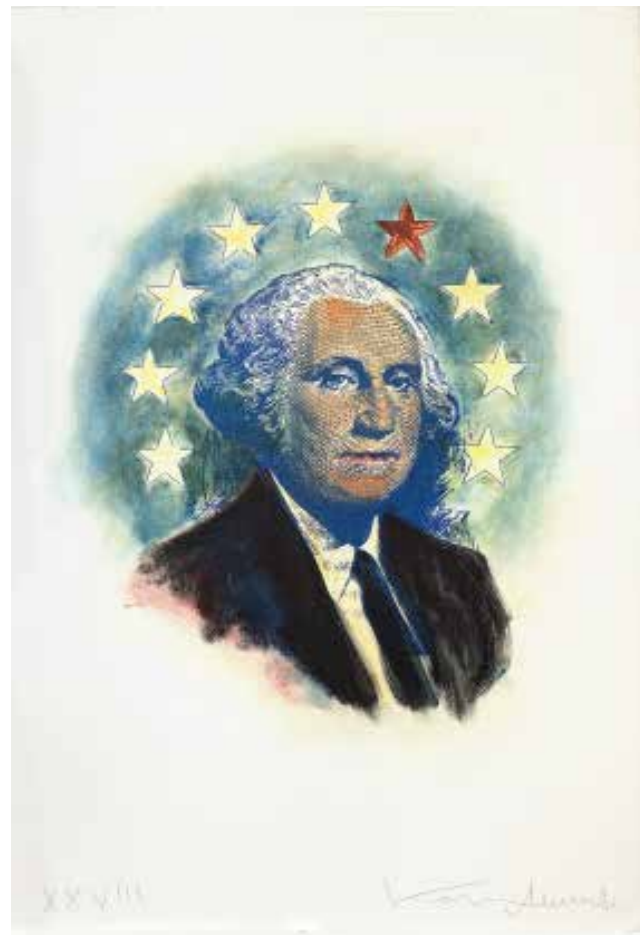
Diagram from the *People's Choice* project (1 of 6), 1994–97

American Dreams

American Dreams is an experiment to see what *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* would look like if applied to American history. Lenin's figure is replaced by George Washington's. Political figures of the American past and present are seen as characters from mythology, such as Ronald Reagan as a centaur (see p. 43). This project included paintings, sculpture, prints, and even an opera, *The Naked Revolution*, with sets by Komar and Melamid, which premiered at The Kitchen, New York, in October 1997.



Washington Lives! from the *American Dreams* series, 1999



Four Portraits of George Washington from the American Dreams series, 1999



1999



Lenin in George Washington's Mask from the *American Dreams* series, 1999

Checklist of the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the Zimmerli's Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union. Works marked ‡ are not illustrated in this volume.

p. 99 *Forward to the Sun (Communism)* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Oil and tempera on panel
17½ × 25⅜ in. (44.5 × 64 cm)
2001.1222

p. 101 *Friend Cigarette Box* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Oil on canvas
30½ × 23⅜ in. (77.5 × 58.8 cm)
1992.0311

p. 98 *Ideal Slogan* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Tempera on cotton fabric
30⅝ × 146½ in. (76.5 × 372 cm)
2006.0999

p. 98 *Our Goal Is Communism!* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Tempera on cotton fabric
15⅜ × 76⅜ in. (38.5 × 195.5 cm)
1999.0715

p. 103 *Portraits of Wives* (diptych) from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Oil on canvas and tempera on plywood
Overall: 26 × 36 in. (66 × 91.4 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 27 *Proletarian and Madonna* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Gouache on cardboard mounted on board
Panel: 26⅜ × 18⅞ in. (68.5 × 48 cm)
2001.1221

p. 97 *Quotation* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Oil on canvas
46½ × 31 in. (118.1 × 78.7 cm)
Private collection. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 98 *We Were Born to Make the Fairy-tale Come True* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Tempera on cotton fabric
14⅞ × 76¾ in. (37.8 × 195 cm)
1991.0905

p. 100 *You Are Feeling Good!* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1972
Tempera on cotton fabric
30⅝ × 40¼ in. (76.5 × 102 cm)
2006.1000

p. 102 *Double Self-Portrait* from the *Sots-Art* series, 1973
Oil on canvas
36 in. (92 cm) diameter
Collection of David and Kathryn Birnbaum
Photo: Brandon Huttenlocher Visuals

pp. 113–17 *Biography of Our Contemporary*, 1972–73
Wood, oil, tempera
197 panels, each: 2 × 1 in. (5 × 2.54 cm)
Private Collection, Courtesy of Cardi Gallery, London
Image Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

pp. 107–9 *Paradise* installation, 1972–73
Color photographs
30⅝ × 20⅞ in. (6.5 × 52 cm)
1999.1277.001-054

pp. 110–11 *Performance in Paradise*, 1972–73
Gelatin silver prints
Each: 18½ × 26⅝ in. (47 × 67 cm)
2001.0154.001–014

pp. 118–29 *Apelles Ziablov* from the *Legends* series, 1973
Installation of seven paintings (oil on canvas, framed), signage, and bookcase
Variable dimensions
1999.0716.001–008

pp. 130–35 *Nikolai Buchumov* from the *Legends* series, 1973
Installation of 59 oil-on-posterboard paintings, each: 5 × 7 in. (12.7 × 17.8 cm);
and 7 objects: eye patch, autobiography (typescript on paper), notebook, palette, coat hanger, oil painting (*Seascape with Girl*; 20 × 43½ in., 50.8 × 110.5 cm) and a photograph of Buchumov
Dimensions variable
Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 141 *Untitled* from the *Scenes from the Future* series, 1973

Graphite and gouache on panel
13⁷/₁₆ × 17¹/₂ in. (34.2 × 44.4 cm)
1999.0709

p. 137 *Post Art No. 2* from the *Post Art* series (Roy Lichtenstein), 1973

Oil on canvas
42 × 42 in. (107 × 107 cm)
Collection of David and Kathryn Birnbaum

p. 139 *Post Art No. 4* from the *Post Art* series (Jasper Johns), 1973–74

Oil on canvas mounted on burlap
31¹/₈ × 46³/₁₆ × 1³/₁₆ in. (79 × 117.3 × 2.1 cm)
1992.0317

p. 138 *Post Art No. 5* from the *Post Art* series (Peter Phillips), 1973–74

Oil on canvas collaged to burlap
39³/₈ × 47³/₈ × 1³/₁₆ in. (100 × 120.3 × 3 cm)
D06301

p. 180 *Soviet Constitution, Freedom of Speech Chapter. Ideological Abstraction*, 1974

Tempera on unprimed canvas
83 × 39 in. (210.8 × 99.1 cm)
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
Gift of Mr. Andrew J. Feldman,
2002.28.1

p. 148 *Dostoyevsky* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil and ink on cloth, wood
43⁵/₁₆ × 33⁷/₁₆ in. (110 × 85 cm)
1999.0713

p. 148 *Hegel* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil and felt-tip pen on cloth, wood
41¹/₈ × 32¹/₁₆ in. (104.4 × 81.5 cm)
1999.0712

p. 147 *Pavlov* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil on cloth, wood
41¹/₈ × 32³/₁₆ in. (104.5 × 81.8 cm)
2001.1224

p. 150 *Pushkin* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil on cloth, wood
41³/₁₆ × 30³/₁₆ in. (104.6 × 76.3 cm)
2001.1225

p. 149 *Socrates* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil on cloth, wood
41¹/₈ × 34¹/₄ in. (104.5 × 87 cm)
2001.1223

p. 149 *Tchaikovsky* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil on gray shirt, wood
49³/₁₆ × 32⁵/₁₆ in. (125 × 82 cm)
2001.1226

p. 151 *Young Marx* from the *Rong Portraits* series, 1974–75

Oil on cloth, wood
28³/₄ × 26³/₈ in. (73 × 67 cm)
D08239

‡ *Article 190.1 of the Criminal Code of USSR*, 1975

Tempera on unprimed canvas
19⁷/₈ × 28⁷/₈ in. (50.2 × 73 cm)
Private collection

pp. 157–63 *Circle, Square, Triangle*, 1975

Photolithograph, oil on board
Circle: 33⁷/₈ × 33⁷/₈ × 1¹/₁₆ in.
(86.1 × 86.1 × 1.8 cm)
Square: 33⁷/₈ × 33¹³/₁₆ × 1¹/₁₆ in.
(86 × 85.9 × 1.8 cm)
Triangle: 29¹/₈ × 33¹¹/₁₆ × 1¹/₁₆ in.
(74 × 85.5 × 1.8 cm)
Text panel: 23¹/₂ × 32⁷/₈
(59.8 × 83.4 × 1.8 cm)
1999.0714.001–004

pp. 170–71 *Color Therapeutics*, 1975

Oil paint on wood and ink on paper
14¹/₂ × 5 5/8 × 24 in. (37 × 61 cm)
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Acquisitions Fund for Russian Art, supported by V-A-C Foundation
2016, T1468
Photo: Tate © reserved

pp. 184–87 *Documents*, 1975

Acrylic, paper, paint, and ink
10⁵/₁₆ × 61¹/₁₆ in. (26.2 × 155.1 cm)
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee 2016, T14680
Photo: Tate © reserved

pp. 152–55 *The Essence of Truth (Grinding Pravda)*, 1975

4 gelatin silver prints on paper and object made of compressed newspaper
Images: 7¹/₂ × 5¹/₂ in. (19 × 14 cm)
Object: 1 × 2 × 2 in. (2.5 × 5 × 5 cm)
D20975.01-04, 1991.0885.004

pp. 142–43 *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke*, 1975

Oil on canvas

84½ × 39¼ in. (214.63 × 99.7 cm)

Private Collection

Photo: Gregory R. Staley

pp. 188–91 *History of Russia*, 1975

Oil on canvas, 6 pieces

27⅝ × 38⅛ in. (70.2 × 96.8 cm)

34⅝ × 38⅝ in. (87.2 × 97 cm)

38 × 38 in. (96.5 × 96.5 cm)

42⅛ × 38⅝ in. (107 × 97 cm)

46⅞ × 38⅝ in. (118 × 97 cm)

50⅛ × 38⅝ in. (127.3 × 97.6 cm)

1992.0555.001–006

p. 174 *Ideal Apparatus of Komar/Melamid—Solving Personal Energy Problems!*, 1975

Photolithograph (photo-offset)

23¼ × 16⅝ in. (59.1 × 41.5 cm)

1999.0708

p. 183 *KGB from the Cut-off Corner* series, 1975

Acrylic on canvas

31¼ × 47 in. (78.8 × 119.4 cm)

Private collection, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 175 *On Sundays Komar/Melamid Sew Red Shorts for the Poorest Inhabitants [sic] on this Globe!*, 1975

Photolithograph

23⅝ × 16¼ in. (59.3 × 41.3 cm)

1999.0711

p. 173 *If You Don't Believe in Anything, Believe in Us! We Think of You!*, 1975

Photolithograph

23⅝ × 16¼ in. (59.3 × 41.3 cm)

Courtesy of Yuri Albert

p. 181 Documents from performance *Music Writings: Passport*, February 7, 1976

‡ Original score, typewriting on paper
17 × 11 in. (43 × 28 cm)

Sheet with music code, pen and typewriting on paper

11 × 8.5 in. (28 × 22 cm)

‡ List of places where the performance took place, typewriting on paper,

11 × 8.5 in. (28 × 22 cm)

Collection of Vitaly Komar

p. 181 Collage with Komar and Melamid at a piano with music code from project *Music Writings: Passport*, 1976
Collage on paper

12 × 9 in. (30.5 × 23 cm)

Collection of Vitaly Komar

p. 177 *Scroll*, 1976

Wood, canvas

224 × 31 in. (570 × 80 cm)

Donated by American Friends of the Centre Pompidou in 2022

Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle

Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/

Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP

Digital Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist.

RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

‡ Komar and Melamid reading in Aueroiste language, 1976

Audio recording

Collection of Vitaly Komar

pp. 178–79 *Prophet Obadiah*, 1976

7 gelatin silver prints on paper

Overall: 11 × 32⅞ in. (28 × 83.5 cm)

1999.0710

pp. 164–69 *Super Objects for Super People*, 1976

Color photographs and typewritten sheets

Each: 8⅞ × 10⅓⅙ in. (22.5 × 27.5 cm)

D25763.001–050

pp. 192–93 Douglas Davis, Vitaly Komar, and Alexander Melamid

Questions: New York Moscow New York Moscow, 1976–78

6 gelatin silver prints on paper

Each: 16 × 19⅓⅙ in. (40.6 × 50.6 cm)

2001.1234–1239

pp. 194–99 *Farewell to Russia*, 1977

Collaged photograph on 18 wooden

boards

Each: 14¾ × 11 in. (37.5 × 28 cm)

2001.1228–1233, D07701–02, D07706–15

pp. 201–9 *TransState* project, 1977

Wood, paint, metal, paper

Dimensions variable

Donated by American Friends of the Centre Pompidou in 2022

Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle / Centre

Pompidou, Paris

Digital Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist.

RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

Photo: Philippe Migeat

p. 203 *Passport and money from the TransState* project, 1977

Mixed media on paper

Variable dimensions

Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 219 *Cage for a Soul* from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978

Painted wooden box with wire and shoelace

6¾ × 10⅓ × 5⅓ in. (17 × 25 × 14 cm)

D22783

p. 210 *Soul of Norton Dodge* from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978
 Typewritten ink and pen on paper;
 Construction of wood, metals, white string (cage not shown)
 6¾ × 10½ × 5½ in. (17 × 25 × 14 cm)
 Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, Kolodzei Art Foundation

‡ *Contract for a Soul* from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978
 Typewritten ink on paper
 5½ × 8⅞ in. (14 × 21.5 cm)
 D25758.001–002

pp. 211–13, 215–18 *We Buy and Sell Souls* advertisement posters for the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978–83
 Type-C print on paper
 26 × 17⅞ in. (66 × 45 cm)
 2001.0153.001–012

p. 214 Invitation to the Auction of American Souls in Moscow on May 19, 1979
 from the project *Komar and Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls*
 Typed text on paper
 7 × 7¼ in. (17.5 × 18.5 cm)
 Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, Kolodzei Art Foundation

pp. 220–23 *A Ballet: The Life of Stalin*, 1979
 8 pieces
Baryshnikov as Stalin
Nureyev as the Young Stalin
Godunov as Stalin the Revolutionary
Baryshnikov as Generalissimo Stalin
Baryshnikov and Makarova as Stalin & Svetlana

The Caucasus
Petrograd: The Winter Palace
Moscow—Red Square
 Mixed media
 4 pieces: 20¾ × 16¾ in. (52.7 × 40.5 cm)
 1 piece: 19¾ × 13¾ in. (50.7 × 34.8 cm)
 3 pieces: 20¾ × 28¾ in. (52.7 × 75.6 cm)
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. A. I. Sherr,
 Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University
 1981.21. a–h

p. 224 *The Future American Flag*, 1980
 Acrylic paint
 33½ × 57½ in. (85 × 146 cm)
 Donation of the Tsukanov Family Foundation in 2016
 Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle
 Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/
 Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP
 Digital Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

pp. 225–27 *Wake Up America*, 1980
 Series of 6 posters
Onward to the Final Victory of Capitalism
Black & White Brothers Forever
Glory to the American Farmer
Glory to the American Worker
Glory to the U.S. Armed Forces: She Can Sleep Soundly
Don't Blab, the Enemy Is Listening
 Offset photolithograph on paper, edition 5/10
 Each: 24 × 16½ in. (60.96 × 41.91 cm)
 Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Museum purchase, 1997.5.1.1–6

p. 230 *Protoceratops* from the *Ancestral Portraits* series, 1980
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 122 cm)
 Private collection. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 53 *Stalin and the Muses* (study), 1981
 Mixed media on cardboard, 40 × 32 in. (101.6 × 81 cm)
 Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 231 *Khrushchev's Plot Against Beria*, 1981–82
 Oil on canvas
 72⅞ × 76¾ in. (183 × 195 cm)
 Gift of Frayda and Ronald Feldman
 2002.0546

p. 10 *Stalin in Front of the Mirror* (study) from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 35⅞ × 23⅞ in. (91 × 60.2 cm)
 2002.0037

p. 234 *Lenin in Zurich* from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 72 × 47 in. (183 × 119.4 cm)
 Claude and Nina Gruen Collection of Contemporary Russian Art

p. 229 *The Origins of Socialist Realism* from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 72 × 48⅞ in. (183 × 122 cm)
 2001.0415

p. 232 *Stalin in Front of the Mirror* from the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982–83
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 72 × 48 in. (183 × 122 cm)
 Private collection. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 104 *Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood*, 1983
 Screenprint on paper
 9⅞ × 25⅞ in. (25.3 × 65.1 cm)
 Gift of Henry W. and Valli R. Ehlers
 83.072.005

p. 235 *Venus DeMilo*, 1983
Tempera and oil on canvas
72 × 48 in. (183 × 122 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

pp. 144–45 *Art Belongs to People* performance at the Kitchen, New York, 1984
Acrylic on canvas
3 parts, each: 80 × 85 in. (203 × 215 cm)
Collection of Alexander Melamid
Photo: Chris Kendall

pp. 244–45 *Adam and Eve* from the *Diary* series, 1984–85
Mixed media
4 panels, overall: 13½ × 54¼ in. (35 × 138 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

p. 242 *Five Cucumbers* from the *Diary* series, 1984–85
Mixed media (oil on canvas, oil on panel, photo reproduction on paper, newspaper)
68⅜ × 65⅛ in. (173.7 × 166.9 cm)
Zimmerli Art Museum
Gift of David Thickman
2020.009.001A,B

p. 247 *The Rose Beneath the Black*, 1984–85
Mixed media
Robert Harshorn Shimshak & Marion Brenner

p. 243 *Letters as Insects* from the *Anarchistic Synthesism* series, 1984–87
Mixed media on wood
36 panels, overall size: 108½ × 91 in. (335.3 × 231 cm)
Courtesy the artists and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 246 *A Day and Night in the Life of an Actress* from the *Diary* series, 1985
Mixed media
3 panels, overall: 13¾ × 140½ × 6⅝ in. (35 × 103 × 16 cm)
Tsukanov Family Foundation, London

p. 246 *Composition with Missiles in Rothko*, 1985
Mixed media
60 × 144 in. (152.4 × 365.8 cm)
Tsukanov Family Foundation, London

pp. 240–41 *Midlife Crisis* (assemblage), 1985
Oil on plywood
72 pieces, overall: 5⅞ × 53⅞ in. (15 × 15 cm)
2006.1001.001–072

p. 233 *Stalin with Hitler's Remains* from the *Anarchistic Synthesism* series, 1985–86
Oil on canvas
84¼ × 60¼ in. (214 × 153 cm)
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Museum purchase, 1992.8.1

pp. 236–39 *Yalta 1945*, from the *Big Bang* series, 1986–87
Mixed media
31-panel installation, each: 48 × 48 in. (121.9 × 121.9 cm)
On loan to Ben Uri Collection

p. 172 *Color Is a Mighty Power*, 1987
Color plexiglass squares
Each: 1⅜ × 2⅜ in. (3 × 5.56 cm)
University of Michigan Museum of Art, Gift of Jack A. and Noreen Rou-nick, 2004/2.89

pp. 248–49 *Color of the Sunset* from the *Bergen Point Brass Foundry* series, 1988
Mixed media
3 panels, overall: 24 × 84 in. (63.5 × 217.4 cm)
Private collection. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 140 *Scenes from the Future: Guggenheim Museum*, 1990
Etching
23¾ × 17¼ in. (60.3 × 43.8 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

p. 140 *Scenes from the Future: Museum of Modern Art*, 1990
Etching
23¾ × 17¼ in. (60.3 × 43.8 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

‡ *Minotaur* from the *Anarchistic Synthesism* series, 1991
Mixed media 3 wood panels, overall: 132 × 60 in. (335.3 × 152.4 cm)
Private collection. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

p. 255 *Elephant Painting (with Renée)* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995
Oil on canvas
35 × 54 in. (88.9 × 137.16 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 251 *Project for Collaboration with Beavers* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995–98
Mixed media on paper
17 × 23½ in. (43 × 55.5 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar

‡ Two sculptures from *Project for Collaboration with Beavers* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995–98
Wood and stone
28½ × 3½ × 3½ in. (71 × 9 × 9 cm)
16 × 3½ × 3½ in. (40 × 9 × 9 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar

p. 251 *Project for Collaboration with Termites* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1995–98
Mixed media on paper
17 × 23½ in. (43 × 55.5 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar

‡ *Moscow Through the Eyes of Mikki* from the *Ecollaboration* series, 1998
4 Polaroid photographs
Each: 4 × 4 in. (10 × 10 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar

pp. 266–67 *Diagrams* from the *People's Choice* project (2 of 6), 1994–97
Acrylic on canvas
Each: 48 × 84 in. (121 × 213 cm)
Collection of Alexander Melamid
Photo: Chris Kendall

p. 257 *America's Most Wanted* (study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97
Mixed media
29⅝ × 40 × ½ in. (75.2 × 101.6 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 259 *Russia's Most Wanted* (study) from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97
Mixed media
19⅞ × 23¾ in. (50.2 × 60.5 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

pp. 256, 258, 260–6 Preliminary studies from the *People's Choice* project, 1994–97
America's Most Wanted
Russia's Most Wanted
Russia's Most Unwanted
America's Most Unwanted
Italy's Most Wanted
Italy's Most Unwanted
United Kingdom's Most Unwanted
United Kingdom's Most Wanted
Internet's Most Unwanted
Internet's Most Wanted
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Collection of Neil K. Rector, Dave Soldier, and Komar and Melamid
‡ *The People's Choice Music*, 1996
Audio recording
Collection of Vitaly Komar

p. 268 *Washington Lives!* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999
Tempera and oil on canvas
23½ × 19¼ in. (59.7 × 48.9 cm)
Collection of Neil K. Rector

p. 270 *The Wings Will Grow* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999
Silkscreen on paper, edition 10/46
32 × 19 in. (81.3 × 48.3 cm)
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Gift of J. Gibson Waitzkin, 1999.5.1

p. 271 *Lenin in George Washington's Mask* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999
Silkscreen on paper
40 × 28 in. (100 × 70 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

‡ *Portrait of George Washington* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999
Silkscreen on paper
40 × 28 in. (100 × 70 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

p. 269 *Four Portraits of George Washington* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999
Mixed media
Each: 22 × 15 in. (56 × 38 cm)
Collection of Vitaly Komar
Photo: McKay Imaging Photography

Selected Bibliography

The literature on Komar and Melamid is extensive and includes a broad spectrum of publications from reviews in major newspapers to catalogues, monographs, and dissertations in multiple languages. Below is a list of publications, which, though by no means complete, gives an idea of the scope of the duo's popularity and importance for the American as well as international art scene.

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1987

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This book accompanies the exhibition
Komar and Melamid: A Lesson in History
organized by the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers,
The State University of New Jersey

Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
71 Hamilton Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1248
www.zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu

The exhibition is organized by Julia Tulovsky, PhD,
Curator for Russian and Soviet Nonconformist Art at
the Zimmerli Art Museum.

The project is supported by the Avenir Foundation
Endowment Fund, with additional support from the
Dodge Charitable Trust–Nancy Ruyle Dodge, Trustee.

The Zimmerli's operations, exhibitions, and programs
are funded in part by Rutgers, The State University of
New Jersey, and income from the Avenir Foundation
Endowment and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Endowment, among others.

Additional support comes from the New Jersey State
Council on the Arts and donors, members, and friends
of the museum.



© 2023 Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State
University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey
© 2023 Hirmer Verlag GmbH Munich

Published by
Hirmer Publishers
Bayerstrasse 57-59
80335 Munich
Germany
hirmerpublishers.com

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche
Nationalbibliothek. The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
lists this publication in the Deutsche National-
bibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on
the Internet at <http://www.dnb.de>.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023930136
ISBN: 978-3-7774-4109-2

General Editor: Julia Tulovsky
Publication Manager: Stacy Smith
Copy Editor: Carolyn Vaughan
Proofreader: Carrie Wicks
Designer: Laura Lindgren
Rights and Reproductions: Kiki Michael

Texts by Andrei Erofeev, Mikhail Iampolski, and Yuri
Albert (pages 21–35, 47–61, 63–93), and on page 186 are
translated from the Russian by Ilya Bernstein. Text on
Apelles Ziablov on pages 120–21 translated by Jamey
Gambrell.

Hirmer Senior Editor: Elisabeth Rochau-Shalem
Hirmer Project Manager: Rainer Arnold
Prepress: Reproline Mediateam, Munich
Printing and binding: Printer Trento s.r.l.
Set in News 702, Slate, and Rockwell
Paper: Garda Ultramatt 150 g/m²
Printed and bound in Italy

Front cover: *The Essence of Truth (Grinding Pravda)*, 1975
Front endpaper: *Midlife Crisis* (assemblage detail), 1985
Frontispiece: *View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape* (detail), 1981–82
Back endpaper: *A Ballet: The Life of Stalin* (series detail), 1979
Back cover: *Lenin in George Washington's Mask* from the *American Dreams* series, 1999

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