COLORIST ART, CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN ART, AND NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST IN THE COLLECTION OF NEIL K. RECTOR

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The collection of Neil Rector is comprised of three disparate bodies of art: American colorist art, contemporary Russian art of the Moscow school, and the Slovene collective Neue Slowenische Kunst, featuring Laibach and Irwin. Each of the groups in Rector's collection came into being as the result of political, ideological and social fracture in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. Therefore, they all respond to a dominant ideology. The colorists must contend with formalism in the United States, the Russians are up against socialist realism, and Laibach and Irwin address the very system that promotes and creates ideology, thusly opposing every one. Their vision is unique for they look beyond the common and accepted styles of the time. With a historical eye, these artists recognize that there is danger in sameness, that the space of art is compromised without challenges to its validity. For all three groups of Rector's collection, that intent is not for art to create life, or even to reflect it, but is located in the creation of new ideas about how one sees.

While there is much to make these three bodies of work appear separate from each other, there is much that draws them together. Firstly, these three bodies of work are under appreciated by the American audience. All three are culturally specific and some knowledge or insight is imperative for maximum enjoyment of this body of work. While all three bodies can be enjoyed aesthetically, the work is increasingly provocative
the greater knowledge one has. This collection represents a narrow slice of life. Three
distinct groups of artists have remained faithful to their unique styles, which represent a
particular vision predicated by cultural, political and artistic beliefs. As represented by
the art within it, Rector's collection is the result of experiment and experience. Each new
painting adds a deeper dimension to complement the other works within the collection.
What these paintings reveal about one another is that there are many different ways of
seeing. As the Bauhaus has taught these artists, the material conditions its manner of
perception.
Dedicated to my parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Myroslava Mudrak, for her patience, support and guidance. The honesty and depth of her constructive criticism encouraged me to search deeper and understand better. I will always appreciate her kindness and generosity.

I also wish to thank Neil Rector for employing me as his collection manager. I admire his passion for the artists that he collects and his skill in promoting their work. It is difficult to articulate how thankful I am for this opportunity and how much I have learned as a result. He has been a generous and insightful mentor.

Through Neil I have had the opportunity to meet Oleg and Kira Vassiliev, Roman Uranjek of Irwin, Ivan Novak of Laibach, the Russian art dealer Mina Litinsky, and Julian and Barbara Stanczak. I have had the opportunity to work closely with Julian and Barbara. They are gracious hosts and fascinating people. I am grateful to all of them for taking the time to discuss their work with me.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents for their encouragement and support.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Colorists</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Russians</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. NSK</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Artist Biographies</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz, <em>Apian's Quadrant</em>, 1961, 32 x 24 inches, oil on canvas</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Julian Stanczak, <em>Concurrent Colours</em>, 1964, 45 x 46 inches, acrylic polymer on canvas</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz, <em>That Which is Seen</em>, 1964, 36 x 36 inches, liquitex on board</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Julian Stanczak, <em>Red Trilogy</em>, 1969, 36 x 36 inches, acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz, <em>All Things Do Live in the Three</em>, 1963, 22 x 36 inches, acrylic on masonite</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz, <em>Six on Yellow</em>, 1972-1988, 32 x 24 inches, acrylic on panel</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Josef Albers, <em>Homage to the Square: Some Time</em>, 1965, 32 x 32 inches, oil on masonite</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Julian Stanczak, <em>Reversed Pair – Red</em>, 1979, 30 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Julian Stanczak, <em>Reversed Pair – Blue</em>, 1979, 30 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Julian Stanczak, <em>Sheen</em>, 1978, 60 x 60 inches, acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Richard Anuszkiewicz, <em>Green and Masonite with Blue Square</em>, 1978, 48 x 48 inches, acrylic on masonite</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All works are part of the Rector Collection unless otherwise noted
Oleg Vassiliev, *From the Past*, 1994, 48 x 36 inches, oil on canvas


Komar and Melamid, study for *Stalin and the Muses*, 1981, 40 x 32 inches, mixed media on cardboard


Francisco Infante, *Artefact*, 1977, 20 x 20 inches, cibachrome print

Leonid Sokov, *Meeting of Two Sculptures – Lenin and Giacometti*, 1990, 19 ¾ x 15 x 5 ½ inches, bronze

Ilya Kabakov, *Window*, 1974, 9 ½ x 12 ½ inches, mixed media on paper

Irwin, *To the Victims of Orjuna*, 1985, 29 ¼ x 46 ½ x 2 ½ inches, mixed media

Irwin, *Malevich Between Two Wars (White Cross)*, 1998, 20 x 18 ½ inches, mixed media

Laibach, *La Centrale Electric*, 1981, 18 ½ x 26 inches, oil on pressboard

Laibach, *Doors of Reception*, 1985, 22 x 17 ½ inches, mixed media on wood

Irwin, *Two Crosses*, 1985, 31 x 21 ¾ inches, mixed media

John Heartfield, *As in the Middle Ages...so in the Third Reich*, Photomontage, originally published in AIZ, 31 May 1934.

Laibach, *Blue Sower in Lenin’s Room*, 1982, 83 ½ x 56 inches, oil on canvas

Isaak Brodsky, *Lenin at the Smolny*, 1930, 77 x 125 inches, oil on canvas, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
30 Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850, 40 x 32 ½ inches, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston...

31 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Cross*, 1915, 31 x 31 inches, oil on canvas, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris...
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1936 Alfred Barr launched the monumental exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art. This show was fundamental for many reasons that still pertain today, namely that his now infamous catalogue cover diagram attempted a chronology of modern art styles from 1890 to 1935. It identified many major European styles and influences, from Neo-Impressionism to Cubism and Suprematism on one side, and Fauvism and Dadaism on the other. The multiplicity of movements that Barr chronicled culminated in just two styles in 1935: geometric abstract art and non-geometric abstract art. The non-geometrical side of the diagram was influenced by the expressionist movements: Fauvism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, whereas the geometric side was derived from the rigid styles: Cubism, Suprematism, Constructivism and De Stijl. External factors played a role as well, like Japanese prints,
Near Eastern art, Negro sculpture, and the "machine esthetic."\(^1\) Nowhere does Barr mention societal factors like war, politics or economics. He promotes the idea of an internal dynamic that drives art forward.

Mostly, Barr’s diagram demonstrates his interest in the artistic process, how artists could move through so many movements so quickly and how they influenced each other. An important question is why, after all of the interconnectedness, do two diametrically opposing styles emerge? Partially, this was for the sake of simplicity. Barr needed to show that the frenetic pace of the turn of the century had slowed down, and a type of purity had been attained. This reflects how he was influenced by the Bauhaus, which he had visited in the late 1920s. The Bauhaus advocated utility and function, and consequently, it seemed to Barr that those qualities should be exhibited in all arts. Since non-geometrical abstraction and geometrical abstraction function in different manners, and were formulated from different processes, they had to be separated. “By focusing on the processes involved and constructing an overview of cubism and abstract art, Barr unwittingly suggested the fate of modern art that would eventually turn toward art as process.”\(^2\)

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1 Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Arno Press, reprint edition, 1966), 19. Barr finds the precedence for both styles of abstraction in impressionism. He describes geometrical abstract art as passing through cubism and constructivism, and describes its attributes as “intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic and calculation.” The other trend is identified with fauvism, German abstract expressionism and surrealism, described by Barr as, “organic or biomorphic...curvilinear...decorative...and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational.” He goes on to state that, “At their purest, the two tendencies may be illustrated by paintings of twenty years ago: a Suprematist composition by Malevich and an Improvisation by Kandinsky.”

However, what Barr chose to ignore is that the Bauhaus assimilated craft and technology, design and function, in order to promote a new vision or a new reality that was universal. Consequently, if craft, the product of skill, talent, and the human hand can be combined with technology, a mechanical and automatic process that removes the human element, then Barr’s two types of abstraction can have commonalities as well. It is not a coincidence that the three groups in Rector’s collection are all derived, in part, from Bauhaus principles. The Bauhaus was essential for creating an understanding of art that was rooted in technical discipline and the integration of design with functionality. Bauhaus was the international movement, and Rector’s is an international collection.

Rector’s collection turns Barr’s paradigm upside down, favoring a constructivist, ideological, transcendental viewpoint over a heterogeneous one that progresses rather simplistically from representation to abstraction. What one does notice, however, is that the connections are not purely linear, they are circuitous; references continuously reinvigorate each other thus becoming dialogue (rather than diagram) in the contemporary culture. It is difficult to conceive of an artworld that is not linear in the traditional conception of the word, for art history textbooks and other authoritative sources organize their formats around such premises of chronological linearity.

When Rector purchased Richard Anuszkiewicz’s painting, Soft Deep Red (1982) in 1989, he was unaware that such a small painting would lead to a large and diverse art
collection.\textsuperscript{3} Quickly following the first purchase was another painting by Anuszkiewicz, and shortly thereafter, several paintings by Julian Stanczak. Within two years, Rector’s small collection had grown to twelve paintings, including seven by Stanczak and five by Anuszkiewicz. However, as will be made clear in this thesis, it is not the number of artworks that makes a collection, it is the will of the collector. Rector was completely committed to collecting, as his collection became a means of investigating the world. As the museum scholar Susan Pearce notes, “The material comes as part of a context, part of the web of relationships, for which ‘ideological’ is a useful word, which involved persons and the material world. The forming of the collection is part of the relation between the subject . . . and the object . . . material and otherwise, which lies outside him or her.”\textsuperscript{4} While this paper does not attempt to interpret the psychology of the collector, it should be noted that Rector has described his interest in colorist art, especially that of Stanczak, as “visceral.” Consequently, his collection arose from an intuitive sensory response.

Such is the value of the art collection: that it is the ground for exploration and learning. A collector’s ideology determines the collection’s scope, parameters, and acquisitions. A collection is a contained unit, defined by its processes and objects, as well as by the subjective discrimination of its custodian. Further, as objects enter a new context (the collection itself) their intrinsic values are perceived anew, and their function

\textsuperscript{3} The collection of Neil Rector is limited to works created between 1960 and the present, by three discrete groups of artists (as will be discussed in detail). It is comprised primarily of paintings and works on paper, with some sculptures. It is inventoried in an ArtSystems database that fully documents each accession. Each work is catalogued, assigned an inventory number, and most works are photographed. In my capacity as his collections manager, since 2002, I have had complete access to this information, and have utilized the database as a resource for factual information throughout this paper. At Rector’s request, in the interest of security, sensitive information, including the total numbers of works in the collection (and by each artist), purchase prices, and locations of the works in question, is omitted.

becomes relative to the other objects in the collection. One may describe this as an integral relativism, whereby the collection, as a sum of its parts, is defined relative to the "web of objects" that compose its structure. Therefore, despite the disparity of objects that compose a collection, the fact of their having been selected by the ideology of the collector, makes them relative to one another, providing a unique connection.

Nearly all of the artists in Rector's collection are academically trained. This is important to recognize because each group of artists exhibits an insightful knowledge of art theory, practice and history. The Russian duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, for instance, reflect their academic training with preparatory sketches on cardboard that are exactly scaled to the final composition. They are uniquely represented in Rector's collection primarily through large scale final studies for some of their most renowned compositions, especially those from their Nostalgic Socialist Realism series (1981-83). Their compositions have a draughtsmanship quality in their use of proportion and linearity, and furthermore, in Komar and Melamid's compositions such as Stalin and the Muses (1981) (fig. 15), the artists display an intimate connection with classicism, and neoclassicism, in particular. Their affinity for history is well represented in the work as it relates to the process of creation.

In 1992, Rector purchased his first works of contemporary Russian art, a diptych, Untitled (1988) by Ivan Chuikov and a painting titled Suprematism Composition (1984) by Eduard Shteingberg. Rector's first purchases of Russian art were the beginnings of a discrete body limited to the so-called Moscow school that includes Sots art, conceptualism, kinetic and abstract art. Restricted to the Moscow school, the group fit Rector's collecting parameters. The first of Rector's collection criteria is that he likes...
what he collects. Second, he insists on a manageable collection, one whose scope can be described. Thirdly, historically important works have to be available; and last, but not least, they need to be affordable. Max Dolgicer of International Systems Group and Mina Litinsky of the Sloane Gallery in Denver became instrumental early on, in the late 1980s, in helping Rector to determine pieces to purchase.

Rector’s interest in contemporary Russian art originated innocently enough by his attendance at a lecture series on twentieth-century art at the Columbus Museum of Art. The instructor, Mark Svede, introduced him to the Russian avant-garde and German Bauhaus movements of the early twentieth-century. These movements took place in times of great political upheaval, and the artists of the period adapted the idealistic political rhetoric to a simplified pictorial language that reflected the purity of the revolutionary spirit. Simplified geometric constructions replaced moralizing and narrative subject matter in an attempt to render a truthful concept on canvas. Both movements sought to unify the fine arts with the applied arts in order to give cultural activity a functional role in society. This information proved to be the central point from which Rector’s collection would begin to grow.

In 1993, Rector made a group purchase from the Sloane Gallery, adding works on paper by Ilya Kabakov, Vladimir Nemukhin and Oleg Vassiliev to his collection. He also

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3 Max Dolgicer is an independent dealer of contemporary Russian art in New York, from whom Rector purchased many of his first works. Dolgicer was instrumental in helping Rector define the scope of his Russian collection. Mina Litinsky is the Russian born director of the Sloane Gallery of Art. She moved to Denver in the 1970s for her husband’s employment, and opened the gallery in the 1980s. She represents: Alexander Anufriev, Mikhail Chemiakin, Igor Galanin, Ilya Kabakov, Viatcheslav Kalinin, Komar & Melamid, Dimitri Krasnopevtsev, Yuri Krasny, Lev Meshberg, Eugene Mikhnow-Voitenko, Ernst Neizvessny, Vladimir Nemukhin, Alexander Rikhter, Ilya Shenker, Tengiz, Oleg Tsalkov, Oleg Vassiliev, Vladimir Yakovlev, Anatoly Zverev.
acquired four Francisco Infante works from the 1960s (tempera on paper or board) from International Systems Group. These purchases indicate that he was beginning to define the scope of the Russian collection. In 1994, Rector added works by the critically acclaimed and internationally recognized art-duo of Komar and Melamid, as well as Leonid Sokov.

Rector’s collection contains many sketches, maquettes and prints. Works on paper, ubiquitous in his collection, are more immediate to the artist’s initial idea than the work on canvas. There the artist will not often spend as much time on the sketch, leaving detailed elements unfinished, with only the crux of the main idea presented. While drafts may not possess the prestige of the final copy, they reflect thought or the moment when a thought first starts to become tangible. In this way, Rector’s collection of ephemera suits his personality, for he is the type of person who does not throw much away. He sees the value in how things came to be and he has an inquisitive nature. His collecting style is deliberate, the parameters are narrow and carefully defined, for if they were not, he would not be able to know the material completely, and the collection would risk becoming superficial. Rector realizes an idea with the works that have formed his collection, much like an artist begins to realize an idea with the first sketch. He shapes his conception of the time period through the three movements that comprise his collection.

During the early 1990s, he also continued to add to his collection of colorist art, acquiring several seminal works by Anuszkiewicz, a very significant work by Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Some Time* (1965), and a large body of work by Stanczak in 1995. These important purchases led to the exhibition *Color Function Painting: The*
Art of Josef Albers, Julian Stanczak and Richard Anuszkiewicz, curated by Rector, and staged at the Wake Forest University Fine Art Gallery in 1996. The catalogue that Rector wrote to accompany the exhibition links these three artists together for the first time as a unified group of practitioners of the color function methodology. This is significant because though previously these artists were united through Yale University, and Anuszkiewicz and Stanczak were part of the “Op” movement together, they were not otherwise defined by their singular and unswerving focus on color as content and medium. The juxtaposition of carefully determined color contrasts engenders surface tension that complicates traditional figure/ground relationships. Color function art, as the name connotes, succinctly demonstrates the sensual forces that stand in stark contrast to the dominant formalist ideology of the day.

Color Function, or colorist, art deals primarily with the interaction of color in terms of contrast, hue, and saturation. It was formulated as a theory by Josef Albers at the Bauhaus, where he taught design. Albers’s methodology is based on experimentation with patterns and colors, which is also how he taught students. Of all the artists working with color relationships, Richard Anuszkiewicz and Julian Stanczak are the most faithful to Albers’s technique.

Albers taught Anuszkiewicz and Stanczak in the Masters program at Yale University in the late 1950s. Upon graduation Anuszkiewicz remained in the East, but Stanczak returned home to Ohio, obtaining a teaching position in Cincinnati. When the Op Art (from Optical) art movement began in the early 1960s, Anuszkiewicz obtained representation from the Sidney Janis Gallery; Martha Jackson, happening upon an exhibition in Cincinnati, became Stanczak’s New York representative. The name “Op” seems from Jackson’s first exhibition of Stanczak’s work, which she called Optical Paintings. The name stuck when abbreviated to “Op” which rhymed with Pop, another popular movement of the day. It was used primarily to describe wavy, hypnotic, trompe l’oeil, and strikingly visual images. Albers thought the name redundant, and preferred perceptual abstraction to describe the style.

The art movements championed by formalist critics, such as Clement Greenberg, throughout the 1950s and 1960s stress the objectification of art. Formalist theory of painting advocates utilizing the characteristics of a medium, such as painting, to best exemplify each aspect of the medium. The goal is to distinguish painting from all other forms of art, thus establishing its purity. The critics believed that abstract expressionism typified the purity of painting as a self-contained medium. When the Op art style arose in the 1960s, formalist critics were hostile towards it because of the perceptual nature of the paint application, and the movement or optical effects it demonstrated. It appeared to the formalist critics that Op art surpassed painting’s prescribed function. It is important to make this distinction, as well as to address the theory that governed abstraction for decades because despite its flaws, it helped to establish that as a concept and a physical object, art should be regarded by its own set of rules.
Throughout the 1990s Rector continued to expand his Russian collection, although, in comparison with the colorist art, the Russian body is more densely concentrated, featuring fewer acquisitions (though often quite important ones) by more artists. However, he did acquire significant works by Komar and Melamid and Vassiliev, and added pieces by Alexander Kosolapov to the collection. He also curated an exhibition at Wake Forest University of works on paper by Vassiliev; one of his few solo museum shows in the United States as of 1999. This exhibition, like Color Function Painting, stems from Rector’s visceral reaction to Vassiliev’s work. It is obvious that Rector works to promote the underrepresented artists in his collection like Stanczak and Vassiliev. He does this not for self-recognition or financial gain, but because he is so deeply moved by their work and wishes others the opportunity to be affected as well.

A great impact to Rector’s collection came in 1998 with the addition of the third group, paintings by the Slovene collectives Laibach and Irwin, both part of the collective organization Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovene Art – NSK). In many ways, the art of NSK is the best match for the parameters of his collecting because its scope is already well defined; moreover, their process of creation is varied and self-evident, and in the late

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9 In 1989 Sotheby’s staged a monumental auction of contemporary Russian art in glasnost Russia. This put Russian art on the international stage, and established preliminary prices for a number of the artists. While the initial fervor for Russian art waned following the auction, many serious collectors had become devotees. This consequently raised the profiles and base prices for many of the better known artists, of which Rector collects several: Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Komar and Melamid, Sokov and Alexander Kosolapov. As a result, Rector’s Russian art collection contains a large number of works on paper and many studies. While no less historically important, these are not the works that are generally included in museum exhibitions, journal articles or books. Therefore, I would describe the Russian segment of the collection as being the least known to the public.

10 The exhibition also traveled to Denison University. Rector wrote a catalogue to accompany the exhibition titled Oleg Vassiliev: On Black Paper, 1994-97 (Columbus: Neil Rector, 1999).
1990s, important works were readily available. Rector's decision to begin collecting the group came from a suggestion by his friend, the art historian, Myroslava Mudrak. In the summer of 1998, he purchased a group of paintings by Laibach, and shortly thereafter purchased another group of paintings by Irwin. Within six months Rector had the largest collection of NSK art in the United States.

This body of work has been exhibited several times. An exhibition curated by Marian Mazzone was shown at the Halsey Gallery in South Carolina before traveling to the Thorne Gallery in Keene, New Hampshire in 1999. The Columbus College of Art and Design exhibited part of the collection in 2003, and most recently, in 2005, the Frye Museum in Seattle staged the exhibition *The RetroFuturistic Universe of NSK*. More politically overt than the Russian artists, the members of Laibach and Irwin parody the militancy of totalitarianism in theatrical fashion. Their methodology returns them to historical periods when shifts in the dominant social or artistic ideology occurred. For instance, they utilize several of Malevich's forms, like the square and the cross. To Laibach and Irwin, these forms represent the Bolshevik revolution, the Suprematist movement and its underlying desire to help shape a new ideal world order. Recontextualizing symbols of previous generations, their art expresses an avant-garde spirit rooted in the de(con)struction of traditional sign systems.

Each of the groups in Rector's collection came into being as the result of political, ideological and social fracture in Eastern Europe. Revolution and war swept through the region in the early decades of the twentieth century, uprooting people and introducing

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11 This is less true presently, since Irwin, especially, has an extremely large audience, particularly in Europe. The works of Laibach have become more rare as they are more coveted, and consequently, the works available have increased greatly in price.
new ideas regarding art's role in society, amounting to a singular myopic view, or artistic hegemony. While the historical avant-garde had the idea to shape the look (and consequently, the consciousness) of the new society, it was the totalitarian governments (primarily Germany and the Soviet Union) that enacted a plan to have a national art form, what came to be known as socialist realism.\(^\text{12}\) The style of this art was supposed to meld form and function, "socialist in style, national in content," through uplifting propagandistic images. The artists of that generation saw firsthand that the end result of such omnipotence was fascism. Life as art meant that freedom was suppressed. Art as life would mean no more art. While utopian, it came to be realized that having a separate sphere for the creation and viewing was art truly was more idealistic.

Consequently, the avant-garde had to regroup and obtain distance. Many Bauhaus instructors moved to the United States; for the Russians, a generation had to pass (and Stalin had to die), and for the NSK artists, two generations had to pass. During this time the new avant-garde had to reconsider what was to be the intent of the artistic process. For all three groups of Rector's collection, that intent is not for art to create life, or even to reflect it, but is located in the creation of new ideas about how one sees. The colorists' art is geometric and regular, serialized, certainly not seen in nature, but Stanczak, for instance, freely admits that nature is his inspiration. The Russians create improbable scenes in which their political or artistic icons are depicted out of context from traditional representation. The NSK artists work from the argument that art is

\(^{12}\) It was believed that the abstract forms of the avant-garde were too bourgeois for the working man that formed the base of the socialist society. Socialist realism was supposed to appeal to the working man's sensibilities.
autonomous, that its evolution is self-regulated and thus, their works use familiar (and unfamiliar) references.

Whereas the classic avant-garde of the early twentieth century had been enchanted by the industrialization and mechanization of society, this group of artists put the craft, or the man-made quality back into the work. They invoke classicism to describe the mimetic function of art with an updated understanding of what it means to imitate. Principally, that imitation is not exact, it is practiced through a complex process of vision (perception) and technique. Ideology is not so overt in this group of artists.

All three groups of artists in Rector’s collection create from the position as underdog. The colorists must contend with formalism in the United States, the Russians are up against socialist realism, and Laibach and Irwin address the very system that promotes and creates ideology, thusly opposing every one. Their vision is demiurgic for they look beyond the common and accepted styles of the time. With a historical eye, these artists recognize that there is danger in sameness, that the space of art is compromised without challenges to its validity.

One is certain to notice that none of these groups are widely recognized in the American artworld. None of them fits the organic plan charted first by Barr and then promoted with the theory of American formalism. Partly due to this reason, in addition to the cultural identification, all three groups represented in Rector’s collection are better
known in Europe. Rector’s collection certainly aims to educate through his investigation and combination of three groups that have not enjoyed continued popular success.\textsuperscript{13}

In this thesis, the colorists are addressed first. Their art is the most immediate and accessible of Rector’s collection. While the process of colorist art’s creation is very deliberate and exacting, the effect of its viewing is simple and direct. Russian art is considered in the second chapter. The Russian body unites abstraction with realism in presentations that are visually straightforward but conceptually complex and meaningful. NSK is presented in the third chapter. Aesthetically, Irwin’s work is heavy and materialistic whereas Laibach’s tends toward traditional means and most utilizes historical mining for source material. All three bodies of Rector’s collection contain large amounts of ephemera: works on paper, sketches, books, photographs; bridging the gap between perception and knowledge.

Rector’s collection exhibits his motivation to investigate the world and construct his own worldview. Each facet of the collection represents a different way of viewing and perceiving the world, and each section of the collection is fluid to allow for continual revisions to that worldview as experiences are gained. Stemming from Bauhaus roots, the collection demonstrates the same desire to accentuate the conditions that best suit the material. While each group in this collection can be perceived as a distinct entity, it is through contrast with each other that their essences are revealed. In the Bauhaus there

\textsuperscript{13} It is interesting to note that each group currently is simultaneously enjoying success. The colorists and Russians are receiving renewed commercial attention. Op Art has recently been described as undervalued and there is a major retrospective exhibition to open at the Columbus Museum of Art in February 2007. Across the board, Russian art prices have recently risen significantly at auction, especially for contemporary artists. This is no doubt due in part to the massive Guggenheim exhibition Russia! (2005) that was a blockbuster for the museum. As mentioned in the text, Irwin’s prestige continues to grow in Europe, although Laibach is probably better known in the US for their brand of heavy industrial music known to a niche crowd.
was not room for superfluousness, every element of a design had to contribute to its overall effect. One certainly can say the same is true of Rector’s collection; everything in it has a place and a purpose.
CHAPTER 2

THE COLORISTS

The practice of painting often is framed in a discussion of the artist’s technique in how they apply paint to surface. This is especially the case with abstract painting, when one does not have a subject, per se, or narrative with which to contend. Consequently, a new vocabulary has arisen that pertains specifically to the quality or type of abstraction that one has encountered. Terms such as nonobjective, linear, formal, expressionist and post-painterly describe the nature of various modes of abstraction. Additionally, the discussion of abstraction is compounded by visual properties of line, color, shape, mass, and space, each of which operate independently to form a unified presentation on the picture plane (in contrast to accentuating or describing representational forms). The twentieth century saw a rise in the use of such a formal language to describe the presentation of painting that could not easily be described by the existing aesthetic vocabulary. As art moved away from representations of life to a self-critical inquiry of its means, its place had to be justified within the cultural framework of society. As such, the dominant methodology was that of formalism, which asserted that painting, as a discipline, maintained an internal relativism. However, the problem with formalism dictating the critical response to art from the 1930s-1960s is that its ubiquity equaled
omnipotence. Like socialist realism in Russia, for any one style to become dominant means that the entire genre becomes stagnant and the evolutionary process stops.

The colorists, the group of painters that comprise the majority of Neil Rector's art collection, understood this point well. They are a small group of artists: Josef Albers, and his students, Julian Stanczak and Richard Anuszkiewicz.\(^1\) As a student and then a teacher at the Bauhaus, Albers instilled in his students two important ideas: that color is not static, and that it is an interdependent medium, meaning that its effect is dependent upon relationships and juxtapositions with other colors. The Bauhaus emphasized function in design such that each compositional element must have a purpose relative to the overall effect of the artwork. From this school of thought, Albers developed a novel method for teaching about color. He had students experiment with color relationships because he believed that a true understanding of color was not intuitive but experiential.\(^2\)

Consequently, his pupils have become the foremost practitioners of a style often referred to as "color function" art. To put it simply, the colorists' art is about the relationship of colors. The physical presence of color, as well as its perception, is

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\(^1\) Josef Albers taught Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz at Yale University in the early 1950s, where Albers was the head of the Design Department, a post he took after leaving Black Mountain College in 1949. Rudolph Arnheim, Harry Rand, Robert J. Bertholf, \textit{Julian Stanczak: Decades of Light} (Buffalo: Poetry/Rare Books Collection, University at Buffalo SUNY, 1990), 16.

\(^2\) Undoubtedly, Albers derived his color theory from that of Johann Wolfgang Goethe who published his influential treatise \textit{Theory of Colors} in 1810. (Newton, of course, discovered the color spectrum after seeing how light refracts through a prism, providing the objective base for studying color over a century earlier). Goethe was the first to describe color as a visual sensation, rather than a mere physical action. He did this through phenomenological observations of color through the interplay of light and dark. See Sanford Wurmfeld, "Color in Abstract Painting," in \textit{Color for Science, Art and Technology}, ed. Kurt Nassau (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1998), passim. Albers's influential book \textit{Interaction of Color} outlines his experimental approach to teaching color theory. His interest in color, and how it shaped a generation of artists can be summed up with his statement, "In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is – as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art," (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 1.
described through the components of hue, saturation and brightness. While Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz are frequently labeled optical “op” artists, the term does not adequately describe their processes. Op conveys that the practice is deceptively visual, relying on trompe l’oeil and hypnotic patterns to confound the eye. The colorists use geometric forms and well-conceived patterns and plans to explore various color formulas and mixtures. While they may appear to have depth, or they may exhibit the after-effects of color mixing, color compositions still primarily rely on the frontal nature of colors juxtaposed on a plane, as opposed to abstract compositions in which figure and background are perceived distinctly.

Aesthetically, the compositions overwhelm perception, encouraging a deeper investigation into what it means to see. In his authoritative book on this subject, Art and Visual Perception, Rudolph Arnheim relates vision to a psychology of seeing that is predicated on the concept that visual language is a distinct ordering of perception, and as such, it cannot adequately be described in words. It is necessary to understand how vision works so one can best utilize the properties of verbal language. Therefore, perceptual abstraction should not be regarded as pure form divorced from content, as it is often misconstrued; content, in this case, is an experience of sight.

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3 Floyd Ratliff, “The Theory of Color and Practice of Painting,” in Color Function Painting: The Art of Josef Albers, Julian Stanczak and Richard Anuszkiewicz (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Fine Arts Gallery, 1996), 5. Hues are the names of colors with which one is familiar from a young age, red, yellow, blue, and green. Saturation is the density of hue concentration, and brightness is the radiance of the hue.

4 Often, Anuszkiewicz and Stanczak are labeled “Op” (from Optical) artists, a term that refers to a relatively short-lived movement of undulating “hypnotic” trompe-l’oeil effects. The term Op does not do justice to the body of work, and the historic label undermines its contemporary position.
Although the earliest compositions of both Anuszkiewicz and Stanczak lean heavily on an optical, mesmerizing style, their compositions did not remain that way. Two early examples are, Anuszkiewicz’s *Apian’s Quadrant* (1961) (fig. 1), and Stanczak’s *Concurrent Colours* (1964) (fig. 2). Apian’s Quadrant is comprised primarily of orange “plus sign” shapes against a turquoise ground. They form a diamond shape at the center of the composition as they decrease in size. Since the shapes are hand-drawn and irregular, they are not strictly rigid. The contrast of two different orange hues against a turquoise background produces a color combination that is of the highest contrast and makes the forms struggle in their relationship to the background. When the orange marks become smaller toward the center, the blue becomes dominant, and the relationship of foreground and background is reversed. Furthermore, toward the center, where the truer orange becomes more clustered, the hue almost appears as yellow in contrast with the blue. The painting Concurrent Colours has a similar effect. It, too, utilizes a high degree of color contrast with magenta-red wavy lines playing on a turquoise-blue background. The visual effect of this contrast makes the lines appear to vacillate, creating an illusion of three-dimensional space through the perceived movement of the forms.

As delineated by the examples above, the forms maintain an organicity, reinforced by their freehand handling; their whirling patterns confuse issues of surface and space through the disorientation created by the optical effects of the contrasting

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5 One cannot help but notice the influences on these early pieces by Anuszkiewicz and Stanczak. Regarding Anuszkiewicz’s painting one may see similarities with Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean*, 1915, in regard to how the “plus” signs cluster toward the center of the ovoid painting. As to Stanczak’s painting, Bridget Riley was (and still is) the Op artist best known for this style of painting. Her mesmerizing wavy lines were made famous by her painting *Current* (1964) used as the cover of the catalogue for *The Responsive Eye* exhibition at MoMA in 1965.
colors. Sometimes these canvases even vibrate, like *Concurrent Colours*, as the color contrasts and organic free-forms vie for the eye’s focus. However, in the use of the word “vibrate” to describe such activity on the canvas, one immediately notices that this is more than a purely “optical” art.\(^6\) Vibrations are felt in a tactile sense. Colors vibrate when they contrast and are of similar intensity. Oftentimes an after-image is produced wherein the image stays on the retina even after one has looked away from the painting. The perception, or more precisely, the painful feeling caused by the pulsating intensity of the image, is still there. Perhaps this is why the op and kinetic art movements began around the same time. Though kinetic art typically refers to works that literally move, its spirit is shared by op art because it has the illusion of movement. The vibrations felt in colorist art demonstrate how the colorists create a sensory experience merely through the application of color to canvas.

However, while the term “optical” is catchy and easy to grasp, it does not reflect the breadth of colorist work. Furthermore, it conveys an art movement whose time was short-lived, and, aside from the monumental exhibition *The Responsive Eye* (Museum of

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\(^6\) Martha Jackson is credited with having coined the term Optical Art in the title for a 1964 exhibition by Stanczak at her gallery called *Julian Stanczak - Optical Paintings*. The term came into vogue when *Time* and *Life* published articles about the movement, shortening the term to Op, which was catchier (and, not coincidentally, rhymed with Pop). Arnheim, Rand, and Bertholf, 30. Jackson also had a group exhibition at her gallery titled *Vibrations II*, in which she showed works by 11 artists (Benkert, Hewitt, Mieczkowski, Anuszkiewicz, Demarco, Gauker, Goodyear, Lamis, Levinson, Pearson, Stanczak, Townsend) working by the same method. Martha Jackson, catalogue for the exhibition *Vibrations II* (New York: Martha Jackson Gallery, January 6-31, 1965).
Modern Art, 1965) the movement did not receive much critical attention or praise.\textsuperscript{7}

Albers was particularly irritated by the term "optical art" and suggested that the style be called "perceptual abstraction."\textsuperscript{8} This term encourages a discussion of illusion and reality. Since it is abstract, the content of colorist art is its dynamism. The surface of the artwork is conditioned by the tension of color interaction. Its force stems from the material reality of the structure perceived through the sensation of the object’s components as they are projected onto the retina.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, what one perceives as illusion is the psychological condition of seeing. Since we know sight to be an objective phenomenon, perceptual abstraction consequently is rooted in reality.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{7}As articles in \textit{Time} and \textit{Life} suggest, the movement was however immensely popular with the public. The elitist separation of "avant-garde and kitsch" (Clement Greenberg’s idiomatic phrase from a 1939 article of the same name) is certainly part of the problem with the critical response to the style. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) from \textit{The Collected Essays and Criticism}, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago, 1993, vol. 1). The formalists of the Clement Greenberg school denounced Op as trying to forcefully overtake the "true" optical styles, color field painting and abstract expressionism. The critics thought that Op art "assaulted" the eye, many of them even attacked the MoMA exhibition because William Seitz, the curator, deigned to place Op art and color field painting in the same venue. Obviously the curator was attempting to broaden the awareness of perceptual painting, but the art world was not ready to accept an alternative optical style as more than the fashion of the moment. Irving Sandler, \textit{American Art of the 1960s} (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 224-232, 240. This problem was compounded by the fact that many Op artists, Anuszkiewicz among them, allowed their designs to be used for utilitarian objects, which was part of the Bauhaus philosophy. However, as "high" and "low" art were still distinguished as relatively separate entities in the 1960s, the commingling of form and function further led to critical distaste. Karl Lunde, \textit{Anuszkiewicz} (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 38.

\textsuperscript{8}Perceptual abstraction is truly the best term to define this group of artists because it describes the function of the art - the interaction of color requiring an active process of seeing, or percept. For a simple descriptive term, I will use "colorist" or "color function."

\textsuperscript{9}Rudolph Arnheim, \textit{Art and Visual Perception} (Berkeley: UC Press, 1974, revised and expanded ed.), 17. Arnheim provides the scientific explanation for how vision occurs: "Light rays, emanating from the sun or some other source, hit the object and are partly absorbed and partly reflected by it. Some of the reflected rays reach the lenses of the eye and are projected on its sensitive background, the retina...[E]lementary organization of visual shape is obtained very close to the level of retinal stimulation. As the electrochemical messages travel toward their final destination in the brain, they are subjected to further shaping...until the pattern is completed at the various levels of the visual cortex."

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 16.
As artists have long known, color has many functions in painting. In figurative art, color is used to describe the subject or object of a composition. It highlights form and evokes mood. Color establishes hierarchy, with brightly colored forms first catching the eye, complementing a painting’s narrative. However, it was not until the twentieth century that color became a content-giving property instead of merely a content-affirming property.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, even in the content-giving aspect of color, color does not stop from distinguishing one thing from another, such as the contours of geometric forms. As the vision scholar Floyd Ratliff explains in an article regarding retinal color processing, geometric forms do not have prescribed colors; therefore, they serve as a template for color.\textsuperscript{12}

The cool nonobjectivity of the geometric form is derived from the principles of the Bauhaus. Influenced by Russian constructivism, Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, set out to establish an interdisciplinary program that would combine the tenets of high art with utilitarian production and craftsmanship. The school that evolved became one of the most influential in Europe, combining the constructivist practices of figures like László Moholy-Nagy, with the more organic free-form abstractions of a painter like Wassily Kandinsky.\textsuperscript{13} This resulted in a theory of artistic practice in the

\textsuperscript{11} This is meant specifically in regard to abstraction. While previous artists (Delacroix, Turner, etc.) may have used color to create form without the aid of line, it was still in a representational context, and therefore descriptive. Wassily Kandinsky was one of the first artists to use color as content. His abstract compositions of the early twentieth century feature a diminished and secondary use of line and expressive use of color as color. He equated color with mood (sensation), utilizing certain colors to achieve desired effects. While not objectively scientific, Kandinsky did succeed in liberating color from descriptive function.

\textsuperscript{12} Ratliff, 11.

\textsuperscript{13} An important legacy of the Bauhaus is that two different means of abstraction were practiced in the same facility. Kandinsky’s was sensual and expressive whereas Moholy-Nagy’s were hard-edged, exacting and tending toward the utilitarian.
modern age that sought inspiration in both technology and traditional artistic methods. Students were taught that every aspect of form has a function, and each part of the design should have function in favor of an integrated whole.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, it was taught that the procedures that govern such an approach are not founded in theory, but in practice.

If the "trial and error" procedure of Albers is integrated with a scientific analysis of color theory, one arrives at the color function discipline. It cannot be considered a hard science because the retinal effects of color are subjective, so consequently, the artists are always honing and testing patterns and relationships. Anuszkiewicz’s painting, \textit{That Which is Seen} (1964) (fig. 3) demonstrates how geometric forms do not anticipate color, and how the form unites with color to create an effect. The painting is comprised of five squares overlaid in blue, red and green. The background square is blue overset by a green square; atop that is a red square, on which is another blue square situated on its axis to form a diamond; this diamond encloses a red square. The center red square seems to push against the edges of the blue diamond-shaped square, which emanates rays of blue that radiate across the third red square. Anuszkiewicz takes a fundamental form and juxtaposes it using contrasting colors to emphasize the dynamic structure of the square. The bright colors and the diamond shape make the work active: the central red square both sinks into and springs forth from the blue diamond that encompasses it. This intensity of color creates a push-pull effect that causes one first to see squares, then to see

\textsuperscript{14} Specifically Gropius writes, “The guiding principle of the Bauhaus was therefore the idea of creating a new unity through the welding together of many ‘arts’ and movements: a unity having its basis in Man himself and significant only as a living organism…Real unity can be achieved only by coherent restatement of the formal theme, by repetition of its integral proportions in all parts of the work.” Walter Gropius, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus,” (1923) in \textit{Art in Theory}, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell, 1993), 340, 342.
four triangles surrounding a square, and so on. The forms act in this manner because their sole function is to frame and separate, and they are not representative of anything.

In this manner, one notices the impetus of suprmatist thought; Malevich’s *Black Square*, 1913 (fig. 4), is recognized as the first truly nonobjective painting. Conceived of as an “empty” form, the *Black Square* is not representative or symbolic of anything. It is a space that defines the rules of perception, for “objective reality” is only something that can be determined through perception. As Malevich states, “The world stands before man as an invariable fact of reality, an unshakeable reality (as people say), yet two people cannot enter this unshakeable reality as actuality; and produce from it one sum; they cannot measure it identically.” Likewise, when two people are asked to think of the color blue, they will think of two different hues of blue, *and* they will both be right.

When artists began viewing art creation as an independent process, they also began to see it as having a greater purpose. Formalist theory helps to develop the idea that art communicates like language, carrying messages. In this theory, subjectivity is diminished, for in the conviction that the depiction is true and pure, only one interpretation can be considered. Consequently, formalism, especially in the United States in the mid-century, became the dominant ideology of the art world. “The highest form of the ideological is the assertion that its content is nature, that its appearance is

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15 Malevich designed the backdrops and costumes for Alexei Kruchenykh’s Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, in 1913. He attributed the origins of Suprematism to his designs for this project, which he named in 1915 when he first exhibited a body of Suprematist work. Abstract movements that came before Suprematism did not claim to be strictly nonrepresentational, even Kandinsky’s abstractions maintained vestiges of figuration. Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, revised and enlarged ed. by Marian Burleigh-Motley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986; reprint 1998), 158-160.

reality.”17 Clement Greenberg, formalism’s primary practitioner, and Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, enforced formalism’s ideological power by demonstrating that it is derived in linear progression from the European avant-garde through American abstraction.

Since the perceptual effects of colorist art are subjective, they are in opposition to the objective rationalism of formalist theory. The “deception” inherent to colorist art occurs through optical mixing, trompe l’œil and the indistinguishability of figure and ground. In a strict formalist composition, the ground would be the canvas, and it would be identifiable as surface. The colorists often deny this strict interpretation of surface, by making the canvases vibrate, for instance.18 By bringing tactility and sensuality back to the canvas, the colorist succeeded in undermining the influence of formalist theory.

Anuszkiewicz’s composition, All Things Do Live in the Three (1963) (fig. 6), is an examination of the illusion of ungrounded space. In this work, color itself represents the division between surface and space. The color is an actuality; it defines the surface. The action of color reveals the space, by demonstrating what the surface does. The tension that results from this spatial divergence is the content of the composition, inherent through perception of the work. Green and blue dots form overlapping diamonds on the red background of a rectangular panel. However, due to the calculated method of the


18 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960) from The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago, 1993, vol. 4), 86. Greenberg’s discussion centers on achieving purity in each medium, in order that it best represent its inherent qualities. For Greenberg, if a painting references dimension or space it is part of the sculptural realm, therefore, the painting is not experienced as a painting, but as an “arbitrary object.” The description, resolution and interpretation of a painting must be resolved through only the unique qualities painting possess. This also serves to keep if from being kitsch, which imitates the way things look.
dots' application to the surface, they are never really seen as separate colors. The colors blend, in an effect of optical mixing, which creates the perception of new or different colors. Consequently, the entire composition is a type of illusion. The green dots that form the shape of the diamonds are simply in contrast to the blue dots that do not form diamonds. The saturation of the green is darker than the saturation of the blue; therefore, the diamond shapes are more distinct. Furthermore, the difference in contrast of the blue dots versus the green dots on the red background makes the red appear different. For instance, when the blue is juxtaposed to the red, it looks like pink. When the green is juxtaposed to the red, it looks like orange. Moreover, against the deeper blue dots in the center of the composition, the red looks like fuchsia. It is surprising to discover that it is, in fact, the same hue of red that covers the entire panel.

As a result of the color interaction, depth is revealed. Although the composition is a flat panel covered with a network of relatively constant dots, the distinction of the color juxtaposition foregrounds and backgrounds certain sections of the painting. It creates a hierarchy of color, not unlike that created by painters who used color to create a hierarchy of figures. In my observation of this painting, the eye is immediately drawn to the small central diamond shape. While focusing on the center diamond, the adjacent sections go in and out of focus. At first the center diamond comes to the fore as the green dots make the diamond “pop.” Then the entire composition is overtaken by the blue dots that are in the sections immediately adjacent to the center diamond. Finally, the entire plane delineated by diamond-forming dots becomes a solid orange-red, and the edges of the composition with the blue dots are only vaguely discernible with peripheral vision.
This entire process takes less than five seconds, but its effect lingers on the viewer's eye, even after one looks away from the composition.

A further example of the creation of depth through surface and plane is found in Anuszkiewicz's painting, *Six on Yellow* (1972–88) (fig. 7). The artist created a structure of six black rectangles superimposed in ascending scale; three large ones form the background; two smaller ones, the middle ground; and one small rectangle is the foreground. A yellow border frames the composition. The rectangles have the appearance of volume, as if they are being pushed outward from the canvas. Thin white lines concentrically distinguish the form of each rectangle, culminating in an axis at the center of the composition. Since one is unable to distinguish between the figure and the ground, one attempts, through the experience of viewing, to determine other forms to which the image corresponds. Consequently, the illusion of a Mayan-like temple structure is generated as the concentric white lines become closer to each other the nearer they get to the outward edge of the rectangle's shape. The yellow border, at the top of the brightness spectrum, and highly contrasted to the black of the rectangles, establishes the ground from which the temple rises.

There is no limit to the number of colors that can be used in a colorist composition. Some effects are achieved with simple colors and patterns and others are more complex. In the example of Anuszkiewicz's *That Which is Seen* (fig. 3), each color is seen distinctly, and the cumulative effect resides in the intensity of the presentation. How the colors are applied to the surface greatly affects their perception. Simple shape, symmetry, the width of lines, and the proximity of their application, are all conditions that can be manipulated to determine the color's effect. Furthermore, the application of
colors in direct confrontation eliminates the need for line or shadow. The direct juxtaposition of color indicates that they are intended to work with, and against, each other, creating harmony or discord, depending on their method of placement.

Other presentations are subtler: Stanczak’s *Red Trilogy* (1969) (fig. 5), also composed of red, blue and green on a square canvas, is a study of the dynamism of line. A blue background is overlaid with green diagonal stripes and red vertical lines. As a result, the underlying blue is only seen interspersed vertically between the dominant red and green tones, appearing as purple. While the green diagonals are constant in their placement, the width of the red lines is variable; they are wider toward the outside, growing progressively thinner, until they become wider again at the center, and once again thinner. This divides the composition into seven “zones.” Four zones of vertical red lines are separated by three zones, dominated by green and purple diagonals. This draws the eye to the center of the composition. Its secondary effect makes the diagonals rise upward from the bottom left corner to the top right corner of the composition. Furthermore, the fact that the red lines occlude the green diagonals gives the work dynamic tension, because it prevents the ground from being seen completely.19 While Stanczak’s composition is comprised of essentially the same colors as Anuszkiewicz’s, and they are both square, the canvas by Stanczak is perceived as more unified. In Anuszkiewicz’s painting, one perceives colors in a tense relationship, each vying for control over the viewer’s eye. Stanczak’s painting, conversely, evokes a sensation of being taken on a visual journey; the proximity of the colored lines is calculated and the effect is not of visual power, but visual integration.

19 *Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception*, 252.
If the locus of examination for perceptual art were to be confined to one shape, it would be the square. Although hard-edged and geometrically constant, it expresses attributes of both rigidity and mutability, much like colorist art exhibits tendencies of both the linear and the painterly. For Albers, the square form is a tool for investigating color principles and exploring color formulas. The square is a form that exhibits change. As a highly simplified shape, the boundaries of the square can be either sharp or soft. It depends on the colors used to describe its form. Albers recognized that these principles make the square an ideal shape for color experimentation. In soft applications, where color contrasts are minimized, color eclipses the form, thus upholding Albers’s thesis, that color can be form.\textsuperscript{20}

In Albers’s painting \textit{Study for Homage to the Square: Some Time} (1965), the edges of the square are softened by a low degree of color contrast (fig. 8). As Ratliff points out, there is only a ten percent degree of brightness contrast between the center and outermost squares.\textsuperscript{21} The contour of the square shape permits a melding of the colors because of the similarity of contrast. Thus, though the square is perceived as a rigid shape, that rigidity is only imposed by how or whether the square is colored, and if it has a border.\textsuperscript{22} Anuszkiewicz utilized the principles that Albers established in \textit{That Which is Seen} (fig. 3). In his composition, the strong contrast of colors makes the center square appear brighter than the surrounding red, even though it is the same all over. Similarly, in other variations of Albers’s \textit{Homage} series, the squares burst off the canvas in relation


\textsuperscript{21} Ratliff, 12.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
to each other because of their strong contrasts. Nevertheless, the unifying feature of all
*Homage* paintings is that the square provides the locus of examination.

Albers derived this notion as “color as an end in itself” from the historical avant-
garde, particularly the Russian suprematists, who wanted to remove form and color from
their descriptive contexts. For Malevich, the founder of the suprematist movement, color
was “enslaved” by its purpose of describing form, and forms themselves were relegated
to depicting objects.\(^{23}\) Malevich sought to prove that the square, in not representing an
organic form, is the “zero of form.”\(^{24}\) As such, it is a space for perception because it
sheds itself of the necessity to imitate nature. Although the square is a closed form,
geometrically rigid and unassuming, it conveys an idea that extends off the picture plane,
opening the simple composition to the condition of something other. The rigid square
becomes soft, mutable, a space of possibility, yet subject to what is around it, and what
causes it to be mutable.

In the same way that the canvases of Albers exposed the square in relation to
color, so do those of Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz. They, too, rely on geometric forms to
examine the properties and function of color. As has already been seen, examples of
these artists’ early works were based on organic free-forms. As Stanczak and
Anuszkiewicz matured, their forms became increasingly constant, serialized, and
classifiable. The rigid structure of square-based compositions allows color to be regarded
only as color, and only in relation to another color. The rigidity frees color from being
imbued with another purpose, and allows it to merely function through interaction.


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 166.
For example, many compositions by Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz are formed by a grid paradigm. The grid is an infinitely reproducible structure. Its form can be applied to many different surfaces, but once applied it is delimited and contained. Like the square, the grid is a static form, but it is also open because it is infinitely reproducible, referring outside of itself. In this manner, the grid provides a basis for the exploitation of surface. Relative to a colorist painting’s inherent structure, the painting repeats itself; it can be its own model and copy. The repetition of the form provides for an emancipation of color because it becomes detached from the object it represents, becoming a pictorial tool instead, giving color its independence. For example, in *Reversed Pair – Red and Blue* (1979), Stanczak exploits the quality of repetition through the grid in each individual painting, and then through its reflection in a diptych (fig. 9 and 10). This work is created on a square grid, in successive layers of blue, green, red and orange in one composition and orange, red, green and blue in its pair. Stanczak uses the same structure and color palette for each composition; the only difference is the order of their application. The quality of the hues reveals that one painting is seen as deep whereas the other is seen as light. This reveals that depth is an illusion of space. The deeper tone recedes while the lighter tone foregrounds, which confers relational value upon colors.

Stanczak’s composition *Sheen* (1978) is entirely constructed upon the premise of the square (fig. 11). The shape of the composition is square, and small sub-units approximately one inch square, and outlined in uniform yellow, cover the entire composition. The background is comprised of successive shades of yellow, from the brightest yellow creating a square in the center of the composition, to a brown yellow

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forming the composition's border. The brightness and hue of the center square is the same hue as the yellow borders for the small squares. Due to the diminution of the border squares, and the lessening of background brightness toward the edges of the composition, a bright yellow "X" is apparent across the plane. However, this "X" is an illusion that the color contrast, in combination with the points of the square, creates. Upon close examination of the work, one sees that the background colors and outline color are constant. As such, there appears to be a recessive movement inherent in the composition when the overall pattern is actually constant.

The structure of Anuszkiewicz's composition *Green and Masonite with Blue Square* (1977) (fig. 12) is similar to the above-mentioned work by Stanczak. In the center of the composition is a bright blue square. The rest of the composition has a less intense green background. It uses the blue square as a focal point, as red lines branch out obliquely outward to the edges of the composition. The lines radiate upward at an increasing angle across the top half of the composition and downward in the same manner across the bottom half of the composition. As such, the lines are grouped more closely together around the shape of the blue square, and the longest lines extend from the corner of the blue square to the corner of the composition, creating a genuine, though not perceived "X." The structure of the shape and color creates two effects. The first is that the blue square is emanating red lines, or glowing red; the second that the blue square is recessed, as if one is looking into an open box.

In perceptual abstraction, the structure of the painting is intimately related to the structure of reality itself. As geometrically abstract works of art with no conceptual framework outside of the composition itself, the work is dependent upon a sum of its
parts for its structure. The greatest quality of color is that it has the ability to appear differently when exposed to various grounds. The material reality of these compositions is reduced to the interaction of color and form. "An individual must learn to create in such a way as to express how it is a perspective on the whole of reality but, also, how its sensations express an intense and singular transformation of that reality." 

Formalist criticism, the Bauhaus, Suprematism, constructivism, and perceptual abstraction are united in their fundamental concern for a new reality in art, or a language that expresses the ideal characteristics of art production. The means for such production are rooted in a systematic ordering and rational approach to art as an independent and functional medium. The ends vary greatly, as one considers European versus American influences, geometric versus non-geometric abstraction, utility versus aesthetics. The colorists in Rector’s collection demonstrate that two primary elements, line and color, contain an infinite amount of possibilities, and that by being neither a slave to nature nor in denial of its potential, painting’s expressive qualities can be depicted in an orderly manner. The colorist demonstrated that there is room for illusionism in art, that a return to some aspects of classicism does not make painting regressive, but opportunistic. On occasion art needs to be simplified in order for it to be renewed.

Since the beginning of the Op movement circa 1960, its dedicated practitioners have not significantly changed their approach or reduced their dedication to the style. Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz are working in the same manner as forty years ago. As the critic Boris Groys explains in the context of contemporary Russian art, “The work of art

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has disclosed its own structure and its material presence in the world. Attention is now focussed [sic] on what distinguishes the artwork from other things, rather than on the resemblance to other things that it acquires by means of illusion – which is to say, attention has been directed to the constructive basis of the picture as an object that is simply there."²⁷ Unaware of the source of this quote, one could assume that Groys was referring to Albers. It is precisely the elements that are there, the colors, that comprise the effect of this body of work. Colorist art has relatively narrow parameters. Only color and shape, pattern by proxy, are permitted to be used. However, the extraordinary variety this produces is astounding. Through process and experimentation these artists create dynamic compositions. Furthermore, one single truth is never revealed, for any viewer at any moment has the potential to experience a unique perception. This is precisely why this body of work forms the core of Rector’s collection. While there is hard science to provide evidence for how the eye sees what it does, it is the gut-level intuitive response that matters most. Rector’s response to Stanczak’s work was “visceral” not intellectual. However, he gains knowledge about himself and structures his worldview when he explores the reason behind the reaction. For Rector, like Albers, the unification of two strong forces produces the greatest sense of satisfaction.

In the next chapter, Rector’s collection of Russian art will be examined. Whereas one perceives the colorist art as forming a constructive basis of the collection, the Russian art comprises a deconstructive base as their art is rooted in the illusion of visual representation. In colorist art one knows that color is a relative medium, one also must know that in Russian art the entire image is relative to the conditions of its creation.

CHAPTER 3

THE RUSSIANS

One of the most stunning works in the entire Rector collection is the painting *From the Past* (1994) by Oleg Vassiliev (Fig. 13). The composition depicts a young, well-dressed woman, accompanying her grandmother (one assumes), down a garden path, outside a stately, though slightly neglected, dacha. In Vassiliev’s composition, light emanates from the corners, producing a prism-like effect of red, blue, green and yellow adjacent to the rays of light. Partially obscuring the subject matter, Vassiliev directs the viewer’s gaze to the center of the composition. The light breaks the plane of the canvas, framing the two women in the center while also pushing them into the background, causing Vassiliev’s light to be read as foreground.¹

¹ Vassiliev makes the distinction between two different types of space in his compositions. One is high space, represented by the white light obliterating, yet highlighting, the subject of the composition as in *From the Past*. The other is deep space, represented by blackness eradicating the subject. High space projects outward, illuminating the viewer in the space of perceiving the composition, also acting as a window, allowing the viewer to perceive what is both on and beyond the plane of composition. Conversely, deep space is inward, in the sense of the viewer being subjected to the space, or being drawn into the space. Deep space prohibits vision, thereby only allowing the space of thought. Conversation with Oleg and Kira Vassiliev at their home in New York, April 23, 2005. I am grateful to Mr. Vassiliev for defining the differences of spaces, as well as how they relate to Malevich’s concept of space, which is that Vassilier works with space whereas Malevich worked with dimension.
The subject matter is appropriated from Vasily Polenov’s painting *Grandmother’s Garden* from 1878 (fig. 14)² Polenov’s luminescent paintings were done outdoors (*en plein air*), and his brushwork displays a light impressionistic touch. Vassiliev modifies the Polenov by reproducing it in a grayish monotone, rather than the impressionistic pastel color palette of the original, reminiscent of a faded photograph. This visual effect makes it appear as if two temporal planes were cohabitating. In Vassiliev’s composition, the Polenov painting is fused with, yet distinct from, the white light of contemporaneity. A door-like effect is achieved, as if the plane of the “present” (the light) is opening to reveal the “past” plane (the Polenov painting). The doors disclose a new perspective; a fresh light being shed on what is considered, in a present-day context, a mimetic representation. The doors emphasize the structure of the painting, revealing its three-dimensionality. While Vassiliev’s composition frames the two women, it also blocks them because the rigid lines of the “doors” are impassable for them, but not for the viewer. Vassiliev invites the viewer into their world, destroying the illusion of reality that Polenov’s painting would have provoked in its time period.

As this painting illustrates, of fundamental concern for contemporary Russian art is the nature of reality and the artists’ approach to unveiling artistic and societal illusions. These artists were caught in a duality in which the authenticity of the social sphere was constructed by the state, as was the “official” artistic sphere. Not to mention that

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² Vasily Polenov, Russian *Peredvizhnik* (itinerant) artist, best known for his provincial landscapes. He was an originator of *plein-air* painting in Moscow, a unique feature of the Moscow school that broke with tradition of academic painting, and as a co-founder of the Abramtsevo art colony. Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, revised and enlarged ed., by Marian Burleigh-Motley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986; reprint 1998), 12-16. *Grandmother’s Garden*, 1878, is on display at the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Many of Vassiliev’s canvases replicate paintings on view at the Tretyakov. The appropriation of these paintings speaks to a Russian legacy of modernist painting, as well as to the socially conscious subject matter the *Peredvizhniki* thought to be important.
traditional artistic representation creates an illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-
dimensional plane. Consequently, contemporary Russian art functions to bridge this
dichotomy while asserting and maintaining its own inherent structure. While the formal
devices used by this group of artists are diverse, their general methodology stems from
the predominant structure of Soviet society. In the visual arts, the Soviet State structured
reality through a homogenized style of painting called socialist realism.\(^3\) As a
consequence of this style, the Soviet State governed forms, which thereby governed
perception. Because perception is the result of experience, a delimitation of forms was
meant to restrict experience.

All of the artists in the Rector collection of contemporary Russian art belong to
the so-called Moscow school of nonconformist art.\(^4\) Most of them were born between
1931-1945, making them the first truly Soviet generation of artists.\(^5\) Often referred to as

\(^3\) In a 1947 article written for foreign audiences, Vladimir Kemenov defended Soviet cultural principles. In reaction to the “decadence of bourgeois art” he writes, “Soviet art is progressing along the path of socialist realism, a path pointed out by Stalin. It is this path that has led to the creation of a vital Soviet art, ideologically forward-looking and artistically wholesome: socialist in content and national in form, an art worthy of the great Stalin epoch.” (ital. mine) From “Aspects of Two Cultures,” in Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993; reprint), 648.

\(^4\) The Moscow school designation is a general term used to describe the geographical location of the artists in Rector’s collection. The implications of this term are its historical relevance to describing groups of nonconformists by street names or neighborhoods, indicating geographical proximity above stylistic similarity. Tom Csaszar, in his review of the Nonconformist exhibition of the Dodge collection in “Considering and Reconsidering Nonconformist Art,” from The New Art Examiner (March 1996), delineates generations, groups and schools of nonconformist Russian art. The diversity of styles exercised by the nonconformists, and the artificiality of labels, makes the use of Moscow school more desirable.

\(^5\) The Moscow Nonconformists were the first generation to be born under Soviet communism, consequently, they did not have first hand experience of Imperialism or revolution. They were raised in Stalinist Russia’s highly contrived culture.
nonconformists, they came to prominence because of the Khrushchev “thaw” in the late 1950s to early 1960s. Rector’s collection contains paintings, drawings, sketches, photographs and books by fifteen artists of this generation. Three of the artists are represented by one work: Ernst Neizvestny, Vladimir Yakovlev, and Tengiz (Tengiz Mirzashvili). Ivan Chuikov is represented by two works. The other eleven, represented by a minimum of four works, include Erik Bulatov, Francisco Infante, Ilya Kabakov, the “two-man collective” Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Vladimir Nemukhin, Leonid Sokov, Eduard Shteinberg, Oleg Tselkov, Oleg Vassiliev, and Vladimir Yankilevsky.

The authoritative ideology of the Soviet State was a factor to which these first generation artists found themselves responding. Consequently, one observes a direct relationship between the dominance of the Soviet government, and the artists’ response to it. In the Soviet Union, art was utilized as a tool that declared the limitations of society, which thereby exposed the means of its control and oppression over the masses.

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6 I chose the term nonconformist because it is the most commonly used adjective to describe this group of artists. See, for instance, the catalogue Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956-1986, detailing the unsurpassed collection of Norton T. Dodge, who had concentrated mostly on the art and artists on the fringes of official Soviet circles. Additionally, it is more inclusive, allowing for the unique position of artists who maintained active Artist’s Union positions (i.e., legitimate in the eyes of the government), yet who also worked outside of the norms of Soviet art production. These artists continue the practice of creating avant-garde art, like the historical avant-garde of the turn of the century. The lineage was disrupted by the socialist realist period, but this group comprises its successors.

7 Norton T. Dodge, “Notes on collecting nonconformist Soviet art,” in Nonconformist Art: The Soviet experience 1956-1986, ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 9. In 1953, after Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet party. This time period is significant because Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s “cult of personality” in a secret speech three years after the dictator’s death. Not only were images of Stalin ordered removed or destroyed, but also the secret speech also effectively loosened state control over cultural media. This development led to the creation of nonconformism as a coherent movement, in addition to its means of exhibition – the apartments and studios of its practitioners.

8 Tengiz is Georgian, not Russian.
Therefore, the “legitimate” art forms of that society reflect its closed nature, made manifest through their stylistic and contextual similarities.

As a result of Soviet institutional dominance, some of the Russian artists developed a style of painting that reflects the power of the government by co-opting its visual manifestations, frequently referred to as Sots art. In their *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* Series (1981-1982), Komar and Melamid demonstrate this by identifying with the figure of Stalin, whose visage went from omnipresent to virtually nonexistent after Khrushchev’s denunciatory speech. In their study for the composition *Stalin and the Muses* (1981), they integrate various art historical references that coincide with systems of power, similar to that held by Stalin (Fig. 15). The overall style of the composition combines neoclassicism with Greek antiquity. The representation of Stalin, in the style of neoclassicism, is not unlike a David painting of Napoleon. Stalin is portrayed in formal military dress and with his hand in his pocket. The allusion to Greek mythology (specifically, the muses) refers to how both Napoleon and Stalin fancied themselves

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9 The term Sots was coined by Komar and Melamid. Often regarded as the Soviet derivation of Pop art, it utilizes the productive nature of ideology in its conception. It therefore demonstrates the manner by which the Soviet government promoted socialist realist iconography in the form of visual propaganda. Moreover, Sots utilizes the visual language of the institution (the Soviet government) to deconstruct the power structure. As Margarita Tupitsyn points out, “[The Sots artists] were the first to realize that Socialist Realism was structured as a conventional metaphysical system with carefully developed pictorial and verbal icons...[They] dismantled the system of these sacred referents of totalitarian culture without abandoning its generic features and mythical language.” In “From Sots Art to Sovart: A Story of the Moscow Vanguard,” *FlashArt* 137 (November-December 1987): 77.

10 The neoclassic style was predominant for approximately forty years, from the late eighteenth century to the second decade of the nineteenth century. In the arts, it arose, mostly through the efforts of Jacques-Louis David, in response to the Age of Enlightenment; a breakthrough period of scientific and philosophical thought in France. The ordered, rational compositions reflect a Greek and Roman revival that swept through France, which also responded to the preceding “decadent” political climate of the country. Neoclassicism is associated with Napoleon’s reign and the idealistic hope that the corruption of the autocracy would finally have been banished. The allegorical and moralizing subject matter of neoclassical compositions were to be an imitation of a new “Golden Age” in both culture and democracy. Lorenz Eitner, *An Outline of 19th Century European Painting: From David through Cézanne* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), Introduction, passim.
harbingers of a new Golden Age. As such, Stalin is depicted with four muses, the
goddesses that preside over the arts and sciences: Clio, the muse of history, hands a book
to Stalin, likely to contain the ancient precepts of which he was now paladin, the other
three muses are not specifically identifiable. The one who holds a palette and
paintbrushes is fictitious, for none of the nine muses of Greek mythology represents the
visual arts. The figure with the mallet and bare breast is not a muse, but an allegorical
reference to Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830 (fig. 16).\(^{11}\)

Komar and Melamid’s neoclassic style is reproduced so authentically that if not
for the subject matter, it could be mistaken as a period piece. The absolute clarity of the
imitation reveals that it is in fact a visual trick: the clarity of the presentment causes the
viewer to accept the composition as truth. The disparity of references in the composition
suggests multiplicity in the classic sense, furthering the identification with the Greek
style. The groups all appear as separate entities, they each serve a function to the overall
interpretation of the work, but they do not necessarily construct a unified pictorial
composition. Furthermore, the manner by which the figures are aligned on the plane of
the canvas suggests that they are staged; it is not a natural grouping.

Komar and Melamid’s ironic composition suggests that Stalin, like Napoleon, had
the need to promote his own image and legitimacy. Furthermore, they mock the

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\(^{11}\) Valerie Hillings, “Komar and Melamid’s Dialogue with (Art) History,” *Art Journal* v. 58 no. 4 (1999): 50. Komar and Melamid’s inclusion of this figure is ironic for two reasons. One is that Delacroix was a
romantic, therefore a member of the school that superseded neoclassicism. Secondly, the revolution that
“Liberty” led became the unpopular monarchy of Louis-Philippe, which was eventually overthrown in
1848. Furthermore, it is ironic, and possibly unintentional, on the part of the artists that the 1848 revolution
came at a time when socialism was beginning to take root in France. Pamela Pilbeam, *The Constitutional
and Melamid display three different supposedly utopian periods: the Napoleonic period, the “three glorious
days” 1830 revolution that was supposed to have (re)instituted a constitutional monarchy, and the Stalin
era.
artificiality of socialist realist representation by elevating the artifice to mythological proportions. Central to this composition is the continuation of historical precedent. In their own eras, the governments of France and the Soviet Union sanctioned neoclassicism and socialist realism, respectively, with the professed aim of apotheosizing the cult of personality surrounding their leaders.

Sots art is only one of the styles that Russian artists used to address the dominancy and prevalence of socialist realism. Many of the artists, in fact, employed a hybridized combination of styles to achieve their aims. Furthermore, the artists of the Moscow school are allied through common ideology more so than similar stylistic tendencies. While this is true, one can make the distinction of three different areas of production with diverse formal, aesthetic and theoretical views. They can all be seen as contrasted to, derived from, or opposed to the dominancy of socialist realism. These artists defied the strictures of the system. Whether overt or covert, any investigation of their procedures must be guided in some manner by how socialist realism pervaded Russian culture, or how the artists on the margins of Russian culture attempted to understand (or react to) the dominant methodology. For example, there are artists who work in blatant opposition to socialist realism: the formalists, Nemukhin, Neizvestny and Shteynberg, create compositions that are mostly abstract and material-based. Other Sots artists use the forms and themes of socialist realism in an ironic or satiric context; in Rector’s collection they are represented by Komar and Melamid, Sokov and Kosolapov. Lastly, there is a group of artists that place ideas before form. These conceptualists overcome the limitations of officially-sanctioned forms. They frame the everyday
experiences of life in art, causing the mundane to transcend the quotidian. Chief among them are Kabakov, Bulatov and Vassiliev.\textsuperscript{12}

The artists of the Soviet generation were brought up in a highly contrived culture that censored information and peppered the public with propaganda. The government believed that utopia could be achieved, if it first showed people what utopia looked like.\textsuperscript{13} The general idea behind socialist realism was that through the propagation of visual forms, ideas about how to conduct a constructive Soviet life would be disseminated. "Socialist realism was not created by the masses but was formulated in their name by well-educated and experienced elites…"\textsuperscript{14} The illusion of this art lies in the perceived purity of its representation, divorced from a market-based economy, and comprised of accessible narratives.\textsuperscript{15} The art promoted by the State was supposed to appear mimetic, i.e., derived from some facet of real life; in fact, it was completely artificial from its very conception: "The mimetic nature of the socialist realist picture is a mere illusion, or rather yet another ideologically motivated message among the other messages making up

\textsuperscript{12}Rector's collection demonstrates the variety of the Moscow school. If one generalization can be made about this group it is that the artists recognized the banality of the Soviet experience. Formally, these artists seek different means of expression, allowing for a diverse body of work from a like-minded group of individuals.

\textsuperscript{13}In Marxist theory, the idea that the superstructure could be used to change the base is a particular facet of Leninism and Stalinism. The general idea of Marxist theory demonstrates that this is a reversal of the traditional theory, whereby the superstructure is a tool of the base. In other words, typically, the economic objectives of the state would function in ideology as disseminated through the superstructure, therefore, it would be an organic process resulting from the hegemonic authority of the economic structure. By reversing this process, Leninism and Stalinism forced a process that attempted to position artistic creation in the authoritative role, superseding the productionist function of a socialist society, or attempting to coerce productionism into action. Consequently, this exposed the artificiality and weakness of the structure. Howard Risatti, Introduction to Part II in Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art, ed. Howard Risatti (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), passim.


\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 11.
the painting."\textsuperscript{16} Socialist realism contrasts with genuine mimetic representation -- the activity of representing actual things in a pictorial context. As the ancients understood it, mimetic representation was itself an illusory process that was not the literal transcription of the actual thing, but a perfected and idealized version of the model upon which it was based, subject to the perception of the artist.\textsuperscript{17}

Traditionally, the history of art may be regarded as one whose ends are justified by its means. In Soviet society that dictum is reversed, becoming one in which the means (attempt to) justify the ends. The nonconformists were the first generation to realize that the structure of socialist realist paintings could be dissected because its forms did not have real world referents.\textsuperscript{18} Mimetic art is not subject to this manner of deconstruction because its forms are known to be illusions of actual objects; such is the case with the avant-garde, to which belongs nonconformism. Accordingly, nonconformist art subversively exposes this illusion, by creating art that is even more artificial, and therefore, more genuine, for it acknowledges the illusionism of its process. For instance, in \textit{From the Past} (fig. 13), Vassiliev's light rays are like arrows, pointing out the willful imitation of the portrayal, making the subject appear as an illusion.

In many ways, the production of the contemporary Russian artists reflects the developments of the historical avant-garde. This is a result of how the avant-garde systematically deconstructed the nature of painting and its relationship to the social order.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 55.


\textsuperscript{18} Margarita Tupitsyn, "From Sots Art to Sovart: A Story of the Moscow Vanguard," \textit{FlashArt} 137 (November-December 1987): 77.
In this regard, Bulatov's compositions traverse the territory between supematist
transcendentalism and constructivist materiality. This concept is reflected through his
creation of boundaries that divide the plane of the canvas materially, but unite it
ideologically. The drawing *Red Horizon* (1971-2000) provides an example (fig. 17). The
plane of a seashore landscape with figures on a beach is broken by a horizontal red ribbon
that divides the composition into two separate planes, disrupting the continuity of the
natural horizon line (which was derived from a postcard). The ribbon cuts through the
narrative, mimetic aspect of the painting, creating a disjunction whereby a new horizon is
produced that links what are actually two separate planes of the composition. As an
"ideological sign," the ribbon assumes a constructive quality: it represents the Order of
Lenin, an award given to citizens of the Soviet Union for service to the State; it also
serves to represent communism in general. The Order of Lenin most likely would have
been regarded as a positive aspect of a socialist realist painting. However, as Bulatov
utilizes it, its meaning connotes division or disruption. In this case, the ribbon abruptly

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19 Suprematism (ca. 1913-1919), as has been previously mentioned, was the conception of Kazimir Malevich. Fostered in the fertile artistic ground of pre-Revolutionary Russia, Suprematism is the basis for nonobjectivity, or the complete reduction of forms. The theory is encapsulated by the *Black Square*, the zero point of form. Related to a spiritual or transcendental function, Malevich sought to discover the truth in art, which, he believed, could not be found though painting representative forms. He declares the elements of painting ends in themselves, paving the way for abstraction. See Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," (1916) *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 166-176. Constructivism (ca. 1919-1932), on the other hand, is a response to the utilitarian needs of the new social order in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. As a discipline, it seeks to delimit the autonomy of art in the social sphere. After 1923, it becomes increasingly productivist, actually structuring the artistic programs and aesthetic output of the communist government. The constructivists hoped to integrate artistic concepts into the fabric of the new socialist government, thereby effecting art's relevancy to the social order.

20 Sue Taylor, "Beyond the Picture Plane," *Art in America* v. 78 no. 3 (1990): 175.

censures the distant point where the sea and sky meet. Therefore, Bulatov creates a blockade: to maintain the “illusion of human ambition and ‘progress’” is foolish; it is more realistic to come up against a wall.\textsuperscript{22}

The ribbon that bisects Bulatov’s drawing is derived, in part, from Kazimir Malevich’s 1932 painting, \textit{Red Cavalry} (fig. 18). In Malevich’s work, a number of horsemen in silhouette gallop across a band of stripes representing the ground and the horizon. The sky and horizon do not meet, as the sky is depicted only along the top quarter of the composition. This device emphasizes the two-dimensionality of the canvas, which also allows his slight red figures to stand out against a barren background. The blank space that the figures inhabit is like the space of the square in Malevich’s earlier suprematist compositions. When he created the \textit{Black Square} in 1913 (fig. 4), it was supposed to represent the “zero” of painting. As such, the black square is referred to as a pure form, free from symbolism or representation, pure in its concept and manifestation. To utilize Malevich’s suprematist doctrine in a contemporary context requires an examination of the artist’s philosophy. In Bulatov’s drawing, the ribbon is the place where ideas transpire. Bulatov’s drawing contains a conceptual aspect. It is derived from the thought-provoking implication of the ribbon, as both physical horizon and the site of ideology. Its constructive aspect relates to the function of the ribbon’s material presence as an element of both ideas \textit{and} design. In its material function, the ribbon causes the drawing to become two separate planes. Accordingly, the ribbon connotes the materiality of the surface because it disrupts the illusionistic quality of the natural horizon. Consequently, Bulatov demonstrates an affinity for the avant-garde

\textsuperscript{22} Groys, \textit{The Total Art of Stalinism}, 82.
conception of *faktura*, the transformation of material to suit the purpose of creating coherent and complete images, an essential component to a painting’s unified structure.\(^{23}\)

As an element of concrete surface and conceptual space, *faktura* operates on the literal plane of the canvas, but it also influences perception. Infante’s installation photography provides an excellent example of an avant-garde melding of mechanical reproduction and artistic form that creates a new artistic language. He and his partner, Nonna Gorjunova, create installations from many different materials: cardboard, strings, mirrors, foil, wood, etc. and situate the constructions in nature. The constructions often bear resemblance to, or reflect, the nature in which they are encompassed. Infante then photographs the installation and the resulting cibachromes are published and sold as part of a series titled *Artefacti*. The photograph of the installation is the artwork; it is a document of the “happening” as well. One of the compositions from the 1977 *Artefact* series depicts a beach scene (fig. 19). A rocky gray beach stretches across the bottom quarter of the composition, and its rough texture stands out, as it is reflected as the center of three circles that partially obscure the horizon above where sky and sea meet. The other two circles, one white and the other black, immediately recall Malevich’s suprematist forms, but not by direct appropriation as seen in Bulatov. The circles stand out against the lush blues of the sky and sea, their tonality is so similar; the two almost

\(^{23}\) Alexei Gan, from “Constructivism,” in *Art in Theory*, 318-319. Gan was a prominent theorist of the constructivist movement along with Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, among others. As an aspect of constructive design, *faktura* is the physicality of the surface (texture), as part of an entire integrated system that also includes *tectonics*, the relationship of ideology to design, and construction, the coordination of tectonics and faktura into a cohesive unit. “The form of the work of art, derives from two fundamental premises: the material or medium...and the construction, through which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning.” Nikolai Tarabukin, *Le dernier tableau* (Paris: Editions Le Champ Libre, 1972): 102, cited in Benjamin Buchloh “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* no. 30 (1984): 87.
meld into one. The circles read as an achromatic progression from the left: white, gray and black. However, the opaque smoothness of the white and black circles is disrupted by the intense faktura of the pebbled gray circle.

Similar to Bulatov's composition, the disruption of the horizon in Infante's work calls attention to the horizon's function. In the case of Infante's photograph, the circles, being flat and centered, become the foreground of the composition, making the rest of the composition serve as background. Unlike Bulatov's composition however, the natural appearance of the beach is preserved. As the beach provides an entrée to the sea, it is obvious that there should be an element of perspective in the composition. This effect is downplayed when one focuses attention on the circles, and emphasized, when one reads the composition from bottom to top, dismissing the circles. "In their lightness and ephemerality, these constructions evoke the sensation of organic continuity with the landscape, even though the deformed images of their reflections undermine it. Infante thus establishes a discourse between the natural landscape, the artist, and the spectator that raises issues about ambiguity, veracity, and artificiality."24

Through its inherent nature, the photograph flattens and makes two-dimensional what had been a three-dimensional installation. However, there is an illusion, not only of space, but also of the realism behind the photograph, which is the space of perception, and concomitantly, the spatial construction. The photograph hides the process of its becoming. There is no record of the installation being created, nor can one see the props

and strings keeping the installation steady while the photograph is being taken. Thus Infante’s work is directly related to the technological and consequently to the idea of artificiality through the means of mechanical reproduction.

The function of the nonconformist Russian painting is to draw attention to the illusion of the artistic object. These “truly” Soviet artists were not fooled by the generic nature of socialist realist representation. If anything, the perpetuation of the myth that there was truth in the content of those images would cause one to see the image as illusion. Consequently, socialist realism caused these Soviet artists to see the canvas as a place where an illusioned or ideal reality can take place.

The Sots artists are perhaps the most adept at a kind of subtle recontextualization in which traditional subject and action agreement is inverted. Another look at Komar and Melamid’s Stalin and the Muses (fig. 15) demonstrates how at first glance, due to its classical manner of composition, the image seems banal. However, the two figural elements, Stalin and the muses, do not agree, and neoclassic form should not agree with a painting expressing Soviet ideological function. What Komar and Melamid did was mine a multiplicity of sources and recontextualize them in a narrative context. A sense of

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25 As the Deleuzian scholar Brian Massumi notes, “The production and function of a photograph has no relation to that of the object photographed... it is [a] masked difference... a copy is made in order to stand in for its model...” As Massumi explains, the photograph is not a copy, it is a separate entity, related to, but separate from, its subject. Brian Massumi, “Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari,” Copyright, no. 1 (1987).

26 Francisco Infante, “Art Studio: Francisco Infante,” A-Ya no. 1 (1979): 38. Infante is obviously aware of Walter Benjamin’s argument in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Like Benjamin, Infante separates the object photographed from the photograph itself. Calling his series Artefacts, Infante identifies with Benjamin’s notion of “artifice,” the illusion of photography that is not able to maintain an “aura” of original art. However, Benjamin’s argument was based on the aesthetic concept that faktura must be tangible to the work in order for it to have a force. Infante capitalizes on this idea by providing his object with a great deal of faktura, thus exploiting what it means to photograph the object (which for others would be the artwork).
displacement is caused because it becomes difficult to put this work into the correct period.

As another example, an artist removes something from its typical context, like an image of Lenin, and places it in a created or contrived context. He thereby deconstructs its context and consequently, its concept. To take the example of Lenin: the sculpture by Leonid Sokov, *Meeting of Two Sculptures – Lenin and Giacometti* (1990), depicts a typified thin, rough, hand-modeled Giacometti form juxtaposed to the traditional depiction of Lenin, suited, goateed, with his hands in his pockets (fig. 20). Both forms, modeled as they would be in their traditional contexts, (yet greatly reduced in size from their original counterparts), are actually no longer what they would ordinarily be known as. The two statues face each other in a confrontation of form. There is an immediate recognition of both forms, (despite the defamiliarization of context), for the forms are not traditionally in the same space. For this reason, the struggle between them becomes internal, intrinsic. The artifice is accentuated by the realization that both forms are unrealistic representations. While the figure of Lenin is regarded as realistic, primarily because of the repetitiousness of the image, the space and scale of the representation is artificial. On the other hand, Giacometti’s elongated and disproportionate figures are not regarded as a realistic type. The entire composition is thus fraudulent because Sokov renders two types of sculptural expression in juxtaposition. Typically, an entire sculptural form would have the same manner of stylistic representation. Furthermore, this sculpture is the product of one author imitating the forms of two different authors.

Sokov’s sculpture demonstrates that illusions are generated in the space of art, though they derive from the space of reality. Kabakov’s *Window* (1974), a
conceptualist\textsuperscript{27} composition, may best illustrate the conditions of illusionism, and the nonconformist response to it (fig. 21). The formal elements of the composition are limited to a few simple straight lines on a white background, essentially forming the outline of a window. He writes the words “window” and “sill” on the composition, thus describing the nature of the presentation. Furthermore, the window opens up onto nothing. In the perceived panes of glass that open perspectivally on the right and left portions of the drawing, is an illusionist reflection of the interior space of the window. What is reflected is only an interior artistic space; the full scope of the social space cannot be represented because it does not exist in an “open” manner for the nonconformist Russian artists.

Additionally, the representation of the window is an allusion to the historical tradition of pictorial representation. Until the period of modernism, when the picture plane became flattened and less three-dimensionally illusionistic, the plane of the painting was perceived as continuing beyond its borders. In traditional art, the literal frame of the painting served the function of delimiting a much broader space. However, in modernist representation, the frame defines the distinct pictorial space as such; it makes a point of illustrating that pictorial space is different from the space of reality yet it contains its own sense of reality.\textsuperscript{28} Through the simplicity of its presentation and its textual references, it is very clear that this drawing is not meant to be a mimetic account.

\textsuperscript{27} Conceptual art addresses the primacy of thought over form. In its most expansive definition, it could be considered pure thought without any form at all. It was natural that Russian artists would gravitate towards conceptualism because the Soviet State was committed to the visual. Though it should be noted that the visual is most often contained in a narrative context, suggestive of Russia’s literary tradition, as Matthew Cullerne Bown points out in \textit{Contemporary Russian Art} (New York: Philosophical Library, 1989), 78.

\textsuperscript{28} Rudolph Arnheim, \textit{Art and Visual Perception} (Berkeley: UC Press, 1974, revised and expanded ed.), 240.
of an actual window. Its economy of form presents the least amount of information necessary to be perceived as a window. The outline of the window fills the space of the composition, forming its own boundaries. These boundaries are both conceptual, which prevents us from trying to open the window, and planar, which prevents us from trying to see something in addition to the window.

Nonconformist painting is rooted in the depiction of artificiality derived from the structure of Soviet life. The nonconformists attempt to order a sense of their world by addressing what it means to create illusions. The artists in Rector’s collection demonstrate that illusionism is a quality to seek out, for illusion exposes truth. As this group of artists maneuvered through the territory of “official” art, they saw clearly that art is not a product of reality (as the government would have one believe); it is a process for uncovering reality. That is part of the reason that ephemera is a particularly large part of this body of Rector’s collection. The works on paper, where ideas are fresh and immediate are utilized to, “shape reality and then, in a spirit of ‘permanent revolution’...to destroy what it had shaped in order to comply with the demand for constant novelty.”29

In Rector’s collection one may be inclined to see illusionism in colorist art more so than in the Russian body. Illusionism is thought of in terms of trompe l’oeil, visual trickery. However, one can only be deceived when one believes there is truth in what one sees. The colorists do not promote their work as truth, but perception. The Russians are conditioned to believe that everything one sees is dishonest and therefore their work is presented as intentional illusionism. As in Vassiliev’s painting, From the Past (Fig. 13),

29 Groys, Total Art of Stalinism, 43.
the artificiality of the composition is signified by the superimposed abstraction which also serves to draw the viewer into the piece. The unnatural quality of the abstraction encourages the same reading of the subject matter. Consequently, two negatives (two deceptions), make a positive -- which is that the painting, is just that, a painting, and nothing more. This demonstrates that the complexity of painting is often something that is not inherent to the work but created by the viewer. Rector's collection dispels such pretenses, allowing the artwork to be uncomplicated, and in so doing, it becomes more expressive. Especially coming from a different culture, the immediacy of Russian painting stems from its conceptual underpinnings. Like colorist art, the juxtapositions in the Russian body are relative, designed for an effect that is not meant to be taken literally.

The combination of perception and conception in the Russian body serves to bridge colorist art with NSK art in Rector's collection. Whereas the colorists are strongly perceptual, NSK is exceedingly conceptual. Russian art provides an historical link, as well as an aesthetic and theoretical link in bringing the collection full circle. In the next chapter, we shall examine how an art organization, formed by high concept, makes themselves relative to contemporary culture and the pantheon of art history.
CHAPTER 4

NSK

Like their Russian neighbors to the East, the Slovene collectives Irwin and Laibach also interpret the mechanisms of totalitarian culture. Rather than conducting their investigation from a position of a marginalized “other,” however, they mimic the totalitarian process of systematically creating a visual language, thereby identifying themselves as “same.” While they appear active in this regard, they cultivate an attitude of disinterestedness, which provides them with the distance necessary to analyze the mechanism of totalitarian culture. In their art, Laibach and Irwin utilize signs that epitomize historical moments when utopian or imperialistic aims have ceased to function.¹ Much of this stems from Laibach’s founding during such a demise, just prior to the death of the Yugoslav dictator, Josef Broz Tito, in 1980. Consequently, the members of Laibach adopted the most severe countenance of dictatorial leadership, mimicking fascism. For Laibach to don the accoutrements and personae of fascists at this time for the purpose of demonstrating its absurdity, is equivalent to a rock band pretending to be neo-Nazis or Klan members in the United States while claiming to

support civil rights. In this manner, Laibach was assured of disdain, and therefore, to be regarded in the same way as that which they were mimicking. In contrast to a democratic society, politics is culture in the totalitarian society; they are inseparable entities. Because Laibach’s façade was so powerful, so memorable, and completely exaggerated, it permitted them entrance into the avant-garde cultural sphere. The timing was ideal because the death of Tito guaranteed that what remained of their communist state was soon to dissipate.

Laibach and Irwin are part of a larger multi-tiered collective called Neue Slowenische Kunst, of which Rector’s collection is the largest in the United States.

Rector’s is a precise group of work, encapsulating the breadth of Laibach Kunst and

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2 Arns explains NSK’s methodology as provocative and “anti-enlightening.” Their strategy of assuming the power structure thus brings it to light, exposing its hidden myths and means of perpetuation. Furthermore, Slavoj Žižek calls Laibach’s procedure an “over-identification” which allows the implicit methodology of an ideological structure to be revealed, thereby exposing its “hidden” manner of functioning. Ibid. 23, 24. In Marxist theory, Laibach’s “over-identification” can be conceived of in terms of Gramsci’s “counter-hegemony.” Both systems are relativist doctrines that work through the processes of the dominant social structure for the purpose of legitimizing their aims by exposing the inauthentic means of the hegemonic power. Richard Terdiman, Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 42-3.


4 Tito broke with the Soviet Union in 1948 and opened Yugoslavia to the West for economic development. Consequently, Yugoslavians were not as sheltered as their Soviet neighbors and fascism was not as ingrained.

5 As an umbrella organization, Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovene Art), subsequently referred to as NSK, is a collective with three primary components: Laibach, an industrial rock band and painting collective formed in 1980; Irwin, a painting collective (1983); and a theatre group, presently known as Noordung Cosmokinetic Theatre (1983). The ideas generated therein are further disseminated by the other departments of NSK, including departments of design, philosophy and film. Laibach formed in Slovenia (formerly part of Yugoslavia) in 1980 after the death of Josef Broz Tito. In 1983 they formed NSK with Irwin and the Scipion Nasice Sisters (the former theatre troupe). The other organizations followed. Their collective organization stems from communism, in which collective organization was deemed necessary for working toward the common good of society, and not independent objectives. NSK freely borrows this working method in order to examine and explore its underlying structure.
Irwin in paintings, as well as containing ephemera, books, CDs, and documentary photographs. This body of work is not confined solely to the visual, but indeed is devoted, in large measure, to socialist ideology and avant-garde manifesto writing. As Boris Groys notes, this art and its related texts exhibit parallel objectives: they both combine references to modernism and totalitarianism, working concomitantly to expose the structure of an ideologically-based system. The relationship between art object and complementary text reinforces an idea central to NSK as an entity -- that systems of ideology and systems of art are both equal in their totalizing nature, but they are not “mutually exclusive.”

This premise is based on the conception and use of ideology in the East as a “system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.” Individuals are supposed to see themselves represented in the ideology, so that they will become part of its structure. Since ideology is an illusionary system, with “all reality external to it,” it is dependent upon the individual for its reproduction and its

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6 Boris Groys, “The Irwin Group: More Total than Totalitarianism,” in Retroprincip, 60. Groys points out that the historical avant-garde used texts to explain the nature of their work, especially any dichotomies. Laibach and Irwin’s texts are a contemporary phenomenon that do not attempt to explain, but rather, further their methodological approach to an ideological structure. To quote Irwin, “Just like a painting, we consider a philosophical work an object, which in the center of its conceptual constellation raises the question of the conditions and possibilities of awareness in general.” Irwin, “Interview” in Neue Slovenische Kunst (Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1991), 124.

7 Laibach, in Neue Slovenische Kunst, 21.


9 Ibid., 133. According to Althusser’s theory, when individuals see themselves in ideology, they become part of the process of its production, but consequently lose their identity as an individual and become a subject. In other words, the purpose of the ideology is to reproduce itself, and that occurs only through the effective reception of its dissemination. In accordance with Althusser’s description of how the ideological state apparatus works within the (repressive) state apparatus Laibach states, “LAIBACH adopts the organizational system of industrial production and the identification with the ideology as its work method.” Laibach, “10 Items of the Covenant,” in Neue Slovenische Kunst, 18.

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existence. Ideology thus has a reciprocal function, unable to function without the support of an audience. Therefore, when the entities of NSK expose the mechanism of ideology in both visual and textual documents, its ability to be reproduced (as an authentic system) is destroyed. Laibach and Irwin do this by mimicking the system that produces ideology, in effect becoming both the “state” that produces the ideology and the “masses” which receive it, and therefore completes its cycle of production. Their intent is to bring attention to the power of such a system, and not to overcome it.\(^{11}\)

To say that the system of ideology is illusionary is not to say that it does not exist. It is, in fact, quite real, but its premises are false, as their origin is not in something derived from nature, but from the will of the state (an abstract concept). Consequently, ideology is a social system that functions through its intent to dominate. It tends to be barren in content, but loaded with power. While Laibach and Irwin address the power structure of the ideological model, they do not want to be locked into this purely Eastern framework marked by the rigid systems of totalitarian culture in Yugoslavia by political association with the Soviet Union. Since Yugoslavia was dependent upon the West for its economy, the people were always exposed to Western thought and forms.\(^{12}\) Consequently, Laibach and Irwin approach their visual production by mining historical documents. Their pluralistic approach demonstrates that the boundaries and margins that are prescribed are mere illusions; overcoming them is simply a matter of attempting to

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 121-123.

\(^{11}\) Inke Arns, “Mobile States,” in *Retroprincip*, 22.

understand them, or to make them one’s own – to accept and possess them. Their visual production is the amalgamation of the Eastern historical avant-garde with contemporary theory that seeks to examine forms and concepts from a plethora of art historical, theoretical, political, and geographical sources. One of the novel aspects of the NSK organization is that their ideas become manifest in many different productions. Graphic art, painting, music, poetry and prose, map-making, and state building are a few examples. Their methodology is derived from the critical inquiry of the early 1980s when scholars in Slovenia began uncovering their historical avant-garde roots. Just at the time that postmodern theories were being disseminated in Slovenia, scholars used the new methodology to evaluate critically postwar art.¹³

The example of the Irwin painting, *To the Victims of Orjuna* (1985) elucidates this point (fig. 22).¹⁴ This work is comprised of three vignettes enclosed in a single frame. The left and right sections of the painting are two versions of Malevich’s Suprematist cross.¹⁵ The left cross is silvery white, superimposed over a lightly sketched mountain landscape. The right is the typical heavy iconographic black cross that Irwin and Laibach

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¹⁴ The title of the painting refers to the period between the wars when many people were murdered by the nationalist Yugoslav party, *Orjuna*. In the midst of these atrocities, Laibach notes that cultural activities flourished in the mining districts. Thus, this painting is an example of how they depict images that correspond with traumatic events in the history of imperialism. Laibach, “Excerpts from Interviews Given Between 1980-85,” in *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, 43.

¹⁵ One of the three typified forms created by the historical Russian avant-garde artist Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) in his investigation of nonobjectivity, called Suprematism. The other forms are the square and the circle. He says, “Color and texture are of the greatest value in painterly creation – they are the essence of painting; but this essence has always been killed by the subject,” quoted in Kasimir Malevich, “From Cubism to Futurism and Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, rev. ed.), 123.
use extensively, surrounded by splatters of black paint. The middle section is an amorphic black mass, resembling a Rorschach test, also bearing resemblance to the hammer and sickle in the form of a black smoke plume, hovering above a lightly sketched factory. Two bands of red velvet encase the work, top and bottom, between the vignettes and the frame. Perhaps this is a reference to communism, or perhaps it is merely a visual tool. There is also the materialist frame itself, the heavy black tar, wood and coal frame typical of the Was ist Kunst? series of Irwin paintings.16

The factory-scape is derived from the paintings of Janez Knez, a painter of socialist realism who earned his living making graphic depictions for the mining companies around Trbovlje, a coal-mining town in Slovenia where, not coincidentally, Laibach was founded.17 The silvery white Suprematist cross invokes the optimism of the period immediately preceding the Russian revolution, whereas the heavy black cross connotes the reality of the price that the workers had to pay to achieve the ideals of a communist society. The overall flat planarity of this piece serves to meld the forms at the

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16 The Was ist Kunst? (What is Art?) series, from 1985, consists of over 500 works, of which Rector owns approximately fifteen. It incorporates (among others) Laibach’s ideological motifs, Suprematist designs, and socialist realist images, with materials such as “blood, tar, coal, wood, gold leaf…” and it pays homage to Yugoslav artists Janez Knez, who created engravings of factories in the 1950s and Raša Todosijević, who performed a piece called Was ist Kunst in Belgrade in the 1970s. Inke Arns, “Irwin (NSK) 1983-2002: From Was ist Kunst? Via Eastern Modernism to Total Recall,” in Retroprinciple, 87.

17 Aleš Erjavec, “Neue Slowenische Kunst,” in Postmodernism, 171. Dejan Knez, a co-founder of Laibach, is the son of Janez Knez. Erjavec points out that Knez was one of the few artists to successfully work in the socialist realist style, and he implies that this is because he lived and worked in the proletarian city of Trbovlje. Trbovlje is of special significance as the site of the socialist revolution in Slovenia, occurring between the world wars. The miners there provoked the workers movement, and successfully repelled the Orjuna Yugoslav nationalists. As a consequence of the socialist idea “gradually capturing the workers’ mind,” the mining district became a place where culture flourished. In a contemporary context, Trbovlje is regarded as having lost its socialist romanticism, having become a subject of the new capitalist economic order. Laibach, “Excerpts from Interviews Given Between 1980-85,” in Neue Slowenische Kunst, 43.
surface like an industrial solder. The work becomes physically totalized, inextricable from its foundation, but inherently separate from what surrounds it.

Joined as it is by the construction of all three sections on a shiny gold-leaf surface becomes iconographically relevant.\textsuperscript{18} The icon is a unique form that, in its Orthodox context, contains the “essence” of the saint it represents. As such, it actually serves as an omnipresent stand-in for the actual presence of a saint. As an image, the icon is not so much considered a work of art, with its constituent notion of being “crafted,” but an image that has come into being through divine intercession with the icon-maker. Consequently, its materiality is denied, as it upholds the innate spirituality of its presence.\textsuperscript{19} This dichotomy between the real and the spiritual is made ever more elusive by Irwin’s use of Malevich’s cross as the iconic entity.\textsuperscript{20} As Irwin addresses iconicity in their work, it resonates with the language of Suprematism:

The icon is the site of some curious disturbance of the relations between spirit and sense, form and content, universal and particular. It is at once an object and not an object, perceptible and imperceptible by the senses, a false concretising but also a false abstracting of social relations. In mystifying, now you see it, now you don’t logic, the icon is simultaneously present and absent, a tangible entity whose meaning is

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\textsuperscript{18} I am grateful to Roman Uranjek, a member of Irwin, for helping me to understand the importance of iconography in Irwin’s work. He explained that the form of the icon conveys its significance, stemming from orthodoxy, and that although there may be thousands of “St. George” icons (to use his example) each one of them is imbued with the power of having icon status. Furthermore, there is no such thing as an original icon because each icon represents an idea. Though differences of authorship may be discussed in regard to icon-making, it is insignificant because the iconicity of the icon is all that matters, which is derived from the fact that it looks like all other icons. This is also a strong component in the mimesis of mimesis notion of repetition. Conversation with the artist. April 15, 2005, Seattle, WA.

\textsuperscript{19} Daniel Spanke, “Irwin Doesn’t Believe in Door: Irwin’s Icons, Kitsch, Propaganda, and Art,” in Retroprincip, 70.

\textsuperscript{20} At The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10 held in Moscow in 1915, Malevich hung his Black Square in the corner in the position traditionally reserved for icons. With this gesture, he suggested that the Black Square, standing for the Suprematist theory, should be considered a modern icon. Igor Zabel, “Icons by Irwin,” in Retroprincip, 77.
wholly immaterial and always elsewhere, in its formal exchange with other objects. Its value is eccentric itself, its soul or essence displaced to another artifact whose essence is similarly elsewhere, in an endless deferral of identity.  

Irwin suggests that the essence of the historical avant-garde is maintained in the contemporary context, even if that presence is only felt. They permit one to perceive that the generic, nonobjective forms of Suprematism can also be regarded as divinely inspired. The purity of Malevich’s representation reminds one that, “it is difficult for [man] to compose reality, for there is nothing that does not change countless times.”

Malevich’s Suprematism was an avant-garde victory over mimetic representation. By introducing Suprematism, Malevich established a new order in which nonobjective forms exist independent of sensual forms. The space in which these forms reside is the space of nothingness; however, it must be understood that this nothing-space is, in actuality, the space of purity. For the first time the Black Square (fig. 4) was a pictorial image that did not represent or symbolize something other than itself. This is why Suprematism is frequently referred to as the “zero” of painting. When Irwin incorporates aspects of Malevich’s work into their compositions, it is an example of the principle of “mimesis of mimesis,” a facet of the retro principle methodology coined by

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24 Igor Zabel, “Icons by Irwin,” in Reroprincip, 77.
NSK. Irwin consciously appropriates visual referents from a multiplicity of art historical sources. Their reference to mimesis is the secondary act of applying the once-rendered illusion to their compositions once again; a technique that Laibach uses as well in their music.  

This painting exploits the tension derived from what Irwin considers to be positive and negative factors which unify the overall presentation. Neither takes precedence; like magnets of the same charge, they repel each other. The derivation of negative symbols, motifs and themes that are predominant in Irwin’s images are derived from sources that were considered dominant: western art, Nazi art, totalitarian government, and religion. By recontextualizing them into a new work of art, they defamiliarize the traditional meanings of the selected symbols. The purpose of this methodology is to shock the viewer’s reception so that the viewer will deconstruct the coded visual language and give it new meaning in its reconstruction. As the members of

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25 NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, 111. The *retro principle* describes the evolution of western art, and how the artists assimilate historically derived forms into their works. It derives its power from recontextualizing an “eclectic” assemblage of past quotations into a new model. In this manner, new forms do not have to be generated because old forms can obtain new meaning when interpreted in a contemporary context, whether it is formal, geographical, aesthetic, etc. The artists write, “Without giving up achievements of modernism and without seeking new formal patterns, it remains a principle of thought maintaining a process of assimilation...exploiting the already existing personal expressions or typical (stylistic) equations.” The principle of “mimesis of mimesis” refers to the procedure for extracting signs. Mimesis in its customary definition refers to representing actual things in a pictorial context, which then makes the painting a product of culture. Irwin imitates the already copied, so the level of signification is not that of nature, but of culture, with all its associated connotations, “translating this culture into consciousness, its mimesis.” Irwin, “Interview,” in *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, 122. As Arns elaborates, “Irwin doesn’t use random historical images, but rather deliberately chooses those images and signs that have acquired additional meaning and connotation over time through a change in context.” Inke Arns, “Irwin Navigator: Reroprincip 1983-2003,” in *Reroprincip*, 12.

26 In music this process is referred to as “sampling”; using fragments of songs verbatim in a new context, or an aspect of a song, such as a bass line, and performing original material over it. In their music Laibach has sampled The Rolling Stones (*Sympathy for the Devil*, London: Mute Records, 1990) and The Beatles (*Let it Be*, London: Mute Records, 1988) among others.
NSK's design branch, New Collectivism,27 state, "Content and form are only tools that combine themes and symbols into dynamicism, tension, excitement and drama."28

The structures of their compositions stem from the systematic ordering of cultural references in their compositions. For instance, the Irwin painting Malevich Between Two Wars (1998), posits Malevich's Suprematist cross between a typified neo-classical face of a woman in the background (iconic in its own right, much used by Irwin), and the Nazi art forms of two muscular naked men in the foreground (fig. 23). The female face is relatively benign in this context. She represents the figurative and mimetic period of representation that preceded the First World War. The forms of the male figures represent the perfect Aryan race, while the style of the male figures represent Nazi art. Similar to socialist realism, its objective is to control form and content. As one of them holds a sword, the figures also depict the violent power of the Nazis in the Second World War. The cross separates these two periods. As a positive symbol crushed between two negative ones, the cross signifies a brief and elusive utopian moment that was overcome by the harsh reality of two dictators (Stalin and Hitler) who shared common traits.

The retro principle posits the imitation of culture, not nature, in the creation of art. It signifies that imitating nature has already been accomplished, that vision must now focus on culture, which is part of the present. Painting -- a mimesis of mimesis -- does away with the false notion that the representation of nature is truthful. Everything expressed on canvas has been through an impressionistic lens. In Laibach's landscape

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27 New Collectivism (NK) is comprised of two Laibach members: Darko Pokorn and Dejan Knez, and two Irwin members: Miran Mohar and Roman Uranjek. They work collectively on NSK's graphic production, including book design.

composition *La Centrale Electric* (1981), the artists depict what appears to be a small fishing hamlet situated aside a mountain lake (fig. 24). They combine two styles of *plein air* painting. The majority of the composition is a naïve representation of a landscape, while in the central background of the composition, where the lake recedes into a perspectival distance, they utilize a Cézanne-inspired breaking up of the picture plane to represent part of the mountain face, reminiscent of his *Mont-St. Victoire* compositions. They are making a statement about an artist’s inability to transcribe reality; it can only be interpreted. The title refers to this anomaly. It occurs in the center of the composition where a stylistic disjunction “electrifies” the composition. As if acknowledging the source of their appropriation, Malevich’s black cross is positioned on one of the small buildings on the left side of the composition.

When Irwin makes the statement, “Content (as an eclectic collage) ... is a procedure that dominates the form, not as a new style but as a procedure of recreating painting iconography in a more demanding way,”29 they are referring to the *retro principle*. It is the basis for their process of assimilating disparate materials such as gold leaf with coal, which ensures that the conceptual basis of the work is materially exploited. In the example of *Victims of Orjuna* (fig. 22), Irwin juxtaposes contradictory historical emblems of the avant-garde, e.g., the Suprematist cross, with a socialist realist landscape, e.g., the factory engraving by Knez. While this painting is not technically a collage, Irwin wants the viewer to understand that collage was its antecedent. Unbeknown to the

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historical avant-garde when they first created collage art, it was the first instance of deconstructionism.

Much like musical sampling, collage first singles out, then brings together, disparate elements to form a whole. Often derived from textual sources like newspapers and magazines, collage functions to destroy the “bourgeois” identification with high art while it concomitantly bridges the gap between art and life. In the historical period between the wars, the avant-gardes of the newly formed Yugoslavia united in their opposition to bourgeois ideology. As such, they experimented with the avant-garde forms of the West, such as collage and dada, while directing their own ideology toward the unstable situation in the East. A consequence of the materiality of collage is that it draws attention to the condition of its surface (its faktura) while “defamiliarizing” the work’s content. The space becomes a perceptual domain where referents are destroyed and recreated.

Laibach’s collage *Doors of Reception* (1985) provides an example (fig. 25). The composition is on imperfectly proportioned wood. There is a section approximately four inches in area that is longer on the right side of the composition. Shiny silver paper

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31 Faktura is associated with materiality of the surface, the condition of the pictorial surface, the structure and content of the surface. As Benjamin Buchloh states, “The new concern for faktura in the Soviet avant-garde emphasizes precisely the mechanical quality, the materiality, and the anonymity of the painterly procedure from a perspective of empirico-critical positivism. It demystifies and devalidates not only the claims for the authenticity of the spiritual and the transcendental in the painterly execution but, as well, the authenticity of the exchange value of the work of art that is bestowed on it by the first.” Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* no. 30 (1984): 86-87.

32 Early twentieth century Russian formalism, pioneered by Viktor Shklovsky, identifies the disparity of form and content through Shklovsky’s theory of ostranenie or “making strange” typically translated as defamiliarization. As such, the emblems of the picture “are not transparent to their referents, but have an existence of their own,” thus “renewing perception.” Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 130-1.
covers the entire surface, atop which, in the bottom right corner of the composition is a cut-out futuristic-looking female face. Elsewhere on the composition, red rectangles and other geometric forms are applied in a manner evoking both Suprematism’s influence and Shklovskian ostranenie. The paper was not evenly glued, creating bubbles in the surface. On the left side of the composition, a piece of transparent tape, approximately three inches long was applied in the center, and appears to have been placed as an intentional mar to the shiny surface. Because the work is unframed, its irregular shape serves as a means of containment and method of differentiation from the wall. The transparent tape highlights the materiality of the composition and the futuristic look pays homage to the Russian Cubo-Futurist movement; the other stylistic indicators reference Suprematism.

Although visually interesting, the work is very poorly constructed. In fact, nearly all of the Laibach objects in Rector’s collection are not well crafted. It appears that Laibach’s attitude towards the art object is one of transience, that is, they seem far more concerned with how the object will convey an idea than if it will do so for eternity. In this manner, Laibach relates itself to the historical avant-garde which, “demanded emancipation from all criteria of quality, tradition, taste, craftsmanship; or, to put it differently, from any kind of control by the consumer, the critic, or the viewer.” Their conceptual framework identifies with the notion of transforming the aesthetic sphere,


34 Boris Groys, “More Total than Totalitarianism,” in Retroprincip, 60.
creating what Groys refers to as an “artistic dictatorship”\textsuperscript{35} equivalent to the political dictatorship of the socialist government.

When Irwin joined Laibach to form NSK in 1984, they were brought in to be the visual component of the collective, at first serving to visually manifest Laibach’s concepts, before creating their own repertoire of forms. As a result, Irwin’s compositions are the product of skilled craftsmanship; they are more durable than those of their Laibach counterparts in Rector’s collection. Additionally, the way that Irwin approaches the art object makes it appear as though they place a greater value on the material presence of the object and its ability to maintain that presence for an extended period of time. In 1927, three years after Lenin’s death, the productivist phase of constructivism, whose purpose was to use the material base of constructivism for utilitarian design in products for mass consumption, was at its apogee.\textsuperscript{36} It may not be a coincidence then that in 1983, three years after Tito’s death, the painting collective Irwin was formed. It would seem that, whereas Laibach was primarily interested with \textit{faktura}, Irwin made the transition to \textit{factography}, in the way that Benjamin Buchloh has make apparent.

As Buchloh explains, \textit{faktura} was, from a historical standpoint, a formal condition of painting that sought to uncover its structure (its means to its end) so that its process could be repeated for artistic objectives. \textit{Factography} was essentially the same process,
but its objective was productive and utilitarian (also documentary). Representing the inclusion of both *faktura* and *factography* (the collage aesthetic with the photographic medium) within the NSK aesthetic are derivations of the photomontages of the anti-Nazi artist, John Heartfield. The function of Heartfield’s work is that, “[His] photomontages were so ‘constructed’ that they enabled the viewer to ‘deconstruct’ the interests underlying Hitler’s ‘messages’ in Nazi propaganda photography (Heartfield using the same medium to critique its (mis)use). As such, these photomontages were ‘models’ empowering viewers to deconstruct other representations where they were expected to be passive consumers of an ideological message.”

Using the symbols of propaganda to critique its method of employment is essential for connecting the viewer to the historicity of art production, especially in totalitarian regimes. An overt example of this technique is *Two Crosses* (1985) (fig. 26), an early Irwin work that derives its subject matter from the Heartfield photomontage, *As in the Middle Ages, So in the Third Reich*, 1934 (fig. 27). Irwin’s composition, such as *To the Victims of Orjuna* (fig. 22), straddles the conflicting notions of materialism and ideology. Heartfield’s original photomontage is already formally relevant to Nazi propaganda. He utilized its formal construct to attack its underlying ideology. In his original composition, the top panel features a tortured figure, woven through the spokes

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37 Buchloh explains why this shift occurred. “Formalism – in its failure to communicate with and address the new audiences of industrialized urban society in the Soviet Union, became increasingly problematic in the eyes of the very groups that had developed constructivist strategies to expand the framework of modernism. It had become clear that the new society following the socialist revolution...required systems of representation/production/distribution which would recognize the collective participation in the actual processes of production.” Buchloh, “Faktura,” 94.

38 Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris, eds., *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Phaidon, 1992), 293-4.
of a wheel. The bottom panel depicts a man draped over a swastika reminiscent of the 
Pietà. In their composition, Irwin replaces Heartfield’s top panel of a tortured man with 
a factory-scape, similar to that depicted in To the Victims of Orjuna. The bottom panel 
of the Irwin composition emulates the bottom panel of the Heartfield work, but with one 
exception: Irwin’s bottom panel is kinetic. The swastika with Christ spins when plugged 
into the wall via a small motor on the back of the composition. However, this work 
makes use of the graphic in the Knez factory reference, so this composition is like an 
homage to pre-industry and industry, incorporating craftsmanship and mechanical 
reproduction. Both Irwin panels feature the gold surface of iconography and the 
 juxtaposition of the two elements of traditional iconography -- one iconic of form and the 
other of content. By referencing its manner of replacing the graphic, it serves to 
underscore the intent of photomontage. Historically, the advent of photomontage 
represented, “an emerging awareness of the new need to construct iconic representations 
for a new mass audience,”39 by combining the faktura elements of collage with the 
factographic elements of photography, in its documentary nature.

Propaganda is like iconography in that it derives from an unknown, unseen source 
with omniscient powers. Propaganda stems from ideology, which is a condition of the 
totalitarian state. As Laibach says, “Ideology takes the place of authentic forms of social 
consciousness.”40 For example, in the Laibach painting Blue Sower in Lenin’s Room 
(1982), the artists appropriate a variety of ideologically charged symbols into an iconic 
representation (fig. 28). Painted in a loose manner but in a realistic style, Lenin is shown


sitting in a chair in his drab study (a scene derived from the painting *Lenin at the Smolny*, 1934 (fig. 29), by Isaak Brodsky, and a common motif for the NSK artists). The revolutionary leader is partially obscured by a large blue sower in the foreground. The sower wears a black glove that mimics the glove worn by the figure in the Malevich-style painting hanging on the wall in Laibach’s version of Lenin’s study. The sower directs his gaze toward Lenin, who is absorbed in his reading. Laibach’s Sower, as indicated by his bag and his outstretched arm, is a direct appropriation of Millet’s *The Sower*, 1850 (fig. 30). In the context of Irwin’s ideology, the sower:

becomes a “national icon”…which serves “as a symbolic substitute for tradition, and, at the same time, a rejection of the original illusion of its impressionist ideological purity.” Through its constant repetition in Irwin’s [and Laibach’s] paintings the motif of the sower was transformed into a “monumental form” in a process similar to the functioning of ideology. “Ideology, whether in politics and art, does not create the original, but, through repetition of its own images, produces power.”

Much as NSK utilizes the black cross to symbolize revolution and the formulation of avant-garde idealism, for them, the Sower represents the time in French history when the naturalists succeeded in changing perceptions about what constituted a work of art.

Through the juxtaposition of the Sower and Lenin on the plane of the canvas, the artists create an identification between art and ideology, stressing that the two are equally powerful. In this context, Lenin is perceived as the father of Soviet-style socialism, with

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42 The figure in fact appears to be one of his costume designs for the 1913 Futurist Opera, *Victory Over the Sun*.

all its inherent ideological force. As a stylized figure of a peasant, the Sower is also a symbol of the proletariat.

In referencing repetition, the rather lengthy quote above describes ideology’s power as not deriving from sheer fact of its existence, but through its dissemination in subjects. In its dominant form, ideology is produced with the intent for consumption, in a discursive strategy. It functions through a systematic production of repetition, which provides it with authority. Therefore, the nature of the ideology is that of a value system demonstrating truth. In order to identify with this mode of production, the artists of Laibach and Irwin assume the same discursive method of repetition, but apply it to a sign system of visual forms. Their strategy, however, is to take visual forms that do not necessarily contain inherent ideological overtones, such as the sower, the coffee drinker, the deer, etc.; rather, by using irony they prescribe an ideological function to those symbols. Thus, repetition speaks to its own nature. It creates the structure of its reality, which is a self-referential lexicon with its own inherent power. Accordingly, this methodology is not an overt critique of the system; instead, it is subversive because it exposes its mechanisms. Through this language of appropriation, Laibach addresses how their work functions: “Laibach excludes any evolution of the original idea; the original concept is not evolutionary but entelechical, and this presentation is only a link between

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this static and the changing determinant unit…”

This paradigm of repetition becomes one of the most important aspects of Laibach and Irwin’s methodology. The redundancy of the repetition creates a space of endless possibility for the reification of ideas.

In such a context whereby ideology is derived from hegemonic authority (the base structure), and its space is temporal in terms of being omnipresent, Irwin introduces the third of its governing principles: the Assertion of Nationality and National Culture. Within the Marxist dialectic of the superstructure, Irwin establishes its role as a collective, not as individuals, in adhering to the productionist model of socialism in maintaining a viable and important tradition of Slovene art. Through the development of a series of symbols and the appropriation of geographical places and names, Irwin constructs its identity. Much like the black cross itself, the artists envision Slovenia as a crossroads and a locus for the materialization of these ideas.

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45 Laibach, “10 Items of the Covenant,” in Neue Slovenische Kunst, 19. The static is the icon, symbol, or thing being represented; the changing determinant unit is time. Therefore, the symbols come to the canvas with fully realized meanings (signifiers), but their recontextualization in the present allows for interpretation due to the nature of time, the fourth dimension. Or as Inke Arns writes in Artnet Impulse, “For the definition of a proper ‘spiritual’ territory the concept of NSK emphasizes the notion of time – i.e. the accumulation of individual experiences – as a new productive category for the definition of space.”

46 In Marxist theory, the superstructure is comprised of the social, political and cultural facets of life, which are directly related to the productionist function of the base, the economy. Changes in the base, or changes in the mode of production (the working method of the economy) can cause the relationships between base and superstructure to change. Therefore, it is necessary for the superstructure to be a tool of the base, which is why ideology functions to support the objectives of the economy in communist societies. Furthermore, since the objective is collective and socialist, not individual and capitalist, the base does not operate for a profit margin, but for productivity from that which composes the base – the workers. Howard Risatti, ed. Introduction to Part II in Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), passim.

47 Irwin describes their base, to which artistic ideology responds, as modernism. In distinguishing their production from western modernism, they are declining the commodification of art, yet deriving ideological authority from western forms. Irwin, “The Program of the Irwin Group,” in Neue Slovenische Kunst, 114.
The ironic aspect of this is that Slovenia did not have a true national identity until 1991. Consequently, Laibach and Irwin constructed their identity not on what they thought a Slovene identity should look like, but what it did look like, an amalgamation of various cultures, with strong Germanic overtones. In fact, Laibach is the German name for Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. The name was first used in the tenth century and was retained until the fall of the Hapsburg Empire; it was restored again during the Nazi occupation. NSK also utilizes the German language, not Slovene, in its name. By using the language of their oppressors, Laibach co-opts their power. Not only is this a negative connotation, but also it seems counterintuitive for a group attempting to establish a Slovene identity. However, it serves just the right purpose. Until 1991, people of this geographical region who spoke Slovene and identified themselves as such did not have their own government or recognition outside of the Balkan region. Consequently, Slovenia, as a polity, always had a mythic or imagined character.

Because it had no official recognition as a bona fide state, NSK took it upon itself to create the NSK State in 1991.

The NSK State is defined as an “abstract organism,” as a “suprematist body,” installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not to a territory but to the mind, whose


49 Laibach, “Interview,” in Neue Slowenische Kunst, 43.

50 Neue Slowenische Kunst. “Thesis of the NSK State,” [online web page] available from www.nskstate.com/state/thesis.php As they state, “The NSK State denies in its fundamental acts the categories of fixed territory, the principle of national borders, and advocates the law of transnationality.” Furthermore, “NSK considers its existence within the framework of an autonomous state as an artistic act to which all other creative procedures are subjected.”

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borders are in a state of flux, in accordance with the movements and changes in its symbolic and physical collective body.\textsuperscript{51}

The \textit{NSK State} is the opposite of a political state because it does not create nor disseminate ideology. In this respect the \textit{NSK State} can be compared to the \textit{Black Square}. Both spaces are free from representation, symbolism and preconceived ideas. They are both conceptual domains with a physical presence, yet neither has a single frame of reference. It is as Irwin says of Malevich’s \textit{Cross}, 1915 (fig. 31), “It is an empty space, geometrically defined, but its significance has never been completely clarified. It is in here that we materialize our own ideas.”\textsuperscript{52}

The \textit{NSK State} exists as an ideal example of statehood. It is representative of how this collection evolved from a conception of art as process to art as life. In a world where wars are fought over territorial borders, and border crossings are prohibited to people of certain nationalities, the \textit{NSK State} demonstrates the absurdity of such distinctions. The \textit{NSK State} parallels the objectives of Irwin and Laibach’s separate initiatives. It creates a place where the utopian ideals of socialism were never achieved because the power structure got in the way. When ideas are created under the auspices of a virtual state, albeit one that issues passports,\textsuperscript{53} the domain of the state becomes the idea itself; therefore, the state is indestructible and intractable. Through its conceptual location in virtual space (the Internet), it allows for global and unfettered access.


\textsuperscript{52} Irwin, “Interview,” in \textit{Neue Slowenische Kunst}, 122.

\textsuperscript{53} NSK has created many embassies and consulates around the world at which people may apply for NSK “citizenship” certified by a passport. When a fee is paid, the passport is processed, entitling the holder to all rights and privileges of the NSK state, until the passport expires, is seized or returned. Passport applications may be found online available from, http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy/2a/appf.htm [Internet].
Within the context of Rector's collection, the concept of NSK art is the most contrived. It is dependent upon a complicated web of sources, and it is reliant upon the texts that are written to complement it. The full range of the movement would otherwise be impossible to discern. Furthermore, the ideological underpinnings of this body, rooted as they are in totalitarian culture, are difficult for the Western audience to fully comprehend. Perhaps because of their distance from the worst conditions of totalitarianism, the artists of NSK have most thoroughly fleshed it out. For them, everything is an illusion: art, life, social structures, politics, and government. They perceive all things that create culture as being on an equal plane. One is not more important than the other, though some are more powerful than others.

Irwin and Laibach deliberately attempt to make their art consequential. Furthermore, the NSK organization promotes nearly every type of media: visual art, music, video, literature, and graphic arts. They have, in essence, constructed an elaborate theatrical piece with each group fulfilling its specific role in carrying out the performance. Drama and tension are the allure of this body of work. Whereas the materiality and monumentality of an Irwin composition or the familiarity of a Laibach painting initially draw the viewer into the work, the artworks' inherent tension holds the viewer's attention. This is not unlike colorist art, wherein surface tension holds the colors to the surface creating an internal dynamic and the means for perception. Consequently, the effect of all three bodies of Rector's collection is dissonant, not harmonious, and that is what holds the viewer's attention both aesthetically and intellectually.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Neil Rector recorded his recollections of conversations he had during a 1998 visit to Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in Long Island. In one such discussion Kabakov stressed the role that sketches play in the artistic process. He impressed upon Rector the importance of this kind of ephemera; it is the place where ideas are fresh and immediate. Sketches demonstrate the artistic process, and they chart the act of creation.\(^1\) For some artists they are merely diagrams that can be destroyed when the final work is complete, for others, they are an integral component of the final composition. When Rector commissioned Oleg Vassiliev to paint a portrait of Rector and his wife for their twentieth anniversary, Vassiliev gave Rector the completed painting as well as four preparatory sketches for the work. It was obviously important to Vassiliev that Rector possess the records that culminated in the final product.

This anecdotal evidence represents just the type of meticulous investigation that is entailed in Rector's collecting habits. His initial reaction to art is aesthetically intuitive, but his secondary response is intellectual; he wants to understand what logically conditioned his emotion. His collecting methodology is the same as the artists' approach

\(^1\) Neil Rector, "Brief Notes on Visit to Kabakovs (July 10-12, 1998: Long Island), personal archives.
to creating it. In this regard one can reference Albers, "This way of searching [through practical exercises] will lead from a visual realization of the interaction between color and color to an awareness of the interdependence of color with form and placement." In other words, whereas one first sees something in terms of its separate attributes, through practice, one begins to see how each element is part of a cogent whole.

While there is much to make these three bodies of work appear separate from each other, there is much that draws them together. Firstly, these three bodies of work are under appreciated by the American audience. All three are culturally specific and some knowledge or insight is imperative for maximum enjoyment of this body of work. While all three bodies can be enjoyed aesthetically, the work is increasingly provocative the greater knowledge one has. For instance, colorist art takes on a new dimension when one understands the science behind Albers' experiments. Furthermore, the many motifs of Irwin's repertoire are appreciated when their origins are understood. And one cannot fully grasp the power of nonconformist art when one is unaware of Stalin's stranglehold on Soviet culture. Consequently, this collection demands investigation.

In terms of Rector's collecting style, his search entails acquiring works of art which fit his parameters on an intuitive level. Because his intuition is sufficiently honed, the artworks that enter the collection are all interdependent in the sense that each highlights the attributes of the other, even across genre lines. Within Rector's collection, the NSK organization operates the same way. Laibach, Irwin, New Kollectivism, the NSK books and photographs each accentuate the other. A better understanding of each group is derived from considering the entire NSK collection; much like an improved

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perception of colorist art is derived from observing it in relation to the Russian body and NSK.

As demonstrated throughout the chapters, all of the artists are process-oriented. Each group in Rector’s collection is motivated to transform their experiences of the world into ordered and logical compositions. Rector’s collecting style parallels the aesthetic aims of the artists represented in his collection. In this sense, one can say that the aesthetic impetus of the collection is derived from the Bauhaus, and Rector’s collection could be said to have a Bauhaus sensibility, meaning that the artworks dictate how they are perceived. This process, empirical, methodical and pragmatic, encourages an interpretation of the collection as egalitarian. The artists’ self-consciousness precludes elitism, and the same applies to the collector.

The Bauhaus encourages the creator to begin with material, to find the form that best expresses its inherent properties. This process, especially as viewed through Albers, is experimental and experiential. As experience in this method is gained, a deeper understanding of the process is acquired. This is how and why art that is visually discordant or contradictory comprises the majority of this collection. For as Albers says, if one is able to give up expectations of harmony then one can accept dissonance as a desirable effect.\(^3\) Basically, he is referring to being open to possibility by not limiting production or reception.

Rector’s collection has a strong predilection for abstraction. This is most evident in the colorist body. In one respect this is because all three bodies stem from the Bauhaus tradition. Some Russian artists, like Infante, exhibit the tendency of abstracting from, or

\(^3\) Albers, 42.
manipulating objects and textures to create new forms. This demonstrates how abstraction in Rector’s collection is also very sensual. As Infante’s composition *Artefact* (fig. 19) demonstrates, the pebbly circle crossing the horizon is tactile, it directly conjures up a feeling of rock in its incongruous usage. The same applies to Irwin as they utilize materials and forms in an abstract manner. They encompass disassociated forms within a large, sticky frame partly composed of tar, such as in *Two Crosses* (fig. 26). Truly, the hallmark of colorist art is its nonprescriptive use of form; that geometric forms are templates for infinite color combinations.

Often, the work in Rector’s collection is very witty. The wit in the Russian body relies on satire, irony and insinuation, while in NSK art it is also conditioned by deliberate juxtapositions of contrasting subjects. In colorist art the humor stems from a play on words. For instance, Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz often give their paintings humorous titles. Does *Apis’s Quadrant* by Anuszkiewicz relate to bees, or to ancient Rome’s Appian Way? Either could apply as both bees and the stone road suggest movement and irregularity. Stanczak’s composition *Concurrent Colours* could be interpreted as a double entendre, as in the two colors acting together, or literally interpreted as “with the current,” an insinuation to water, as the design of the painting is wavy.

As already suggested in the discussions of aesthetics and wit, craft is an important feature for the artists in Rector’s collection as it is very deliberate. Each body of work has a unified vision to present to the viewer. Colorist art is crafted so as to elicit a very specific visual effect. The combination of colors and form produce exacting results. In Russian art the emphasis is generally on setting up a space that exists independently of
life, specifically for the contemplation of art. The craft is the process of creation, which allows for transcendental respite. In NSK, craft is multi-faceted, establishing a unique aesthetic while drawing from a multiplicity of sources. It establishes fidelity with their own land (through the materials used) with the international scene (the forms used), in a final product so distinct it is almost a brand. In each group, the craft demonstrates the process that the artists went through to establish a very specific look with a specific objective.

Finally, these conditions of aesthetics, wit and craft are tied up in a common moral underpinning. Each group exhibits an implicit nobility or righteousness in how they maintain a very specific standard and mode of production. Despite the changing whims of the artworld, the colorists have maintained their primary mode of production since they began in the 1960s. Whereas many other Op artists have changed styles, Stanczak and Anuszkiewicz have remained faithful to theirs. The Russians are united ideologically in Rector’s collection rather than stylistically. However, each artist has remained true to the conceptual framework provided by a common struggle against officialdom. For Irwin and Laibach, nobility exists in their fealty to art historical precedence. At once, the artists establish how they are both indebted and equal to the history they assimilate. The characteristic framing of Irwin paintings identifies the works as belonging to a cohesive body.

This collection represents a narrow slice of life. Three distinct groups of artists have remained faithful to their unique styles, which represent a particular vision predicated by cultural, political and artistic beliefs. As represented by the art within it, Rector’s collection is the result of experiment and experience. Each new painting adds a
deeper dimension to complement the other works within the collection. The collection started with the purchase of one small painting by Anuszkiewicz. Then another Anuszkiewicz painting was added, and shortly thereafter a few Stanczaks entered the collection. What these paintings reveal about one another is that there are many different ways of seeing. As the Bauhaus has taught these artists, the material conditions its manner of perception. Under the auspice of Rector’s perception, this collection has blossomed. Rector’s collecting methodology is as deliberate as the artist’s method of creating art. One gathers, when viewing this collection, that if Rector were to add a fourth body of work to this collection it would exhibit many of the same qualities as these three groups.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Vassiliev, Oleg. Personal interview. 23 April 2005.

Uranjek, Roman. Personal interview. 15 April 2005.


APPENDIX: ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Josef Albers

Josef Albers (1888-1976) was born in Bottrop, Germany. He was an elementary school teacher before entering the Bauhaus in 1920. He began experimenting with glass and was given his own glass workshop in 1922. In 1925 Albers was promoted to Master and in 1928 he took over the furniture workshop. After the Bauhaus disbanded in 1933 because of Nazi pressure, Albers and his wife, Anni, a textile artist, moved to North Carolina to teach at the experimental Black Mountain College. In 1950 Josef Albers became the head of the design department at Yale University and began his best known series, Homage to the Square, that same year. Albers' process-oriented experimental approach to color trained many to perceive color in a different way. In 1971 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York honored Albers with the museum's first ever retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of a living artist.

Richard Anuszkiewicz

Richard Anuszkiewicz was born in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1930. He obtained his bachelor's degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1953 and his Master's degree from Yale University in 1955 where he was a student of Josef Albers. Considered a major force in the Op Art movement, Anuszkiewicz is concerned with the optical changes that occur when different high-intensity colors are applied to the same geometric configurations. He lives and works in Englewood, New Jersey.

Erik Bulatov

Erik Bulatov was born in Sverdlovsk in 1933 and raised in Moscow. He graduated from the Surikov Art Institute in 1958 and began working as a children's book illustrator for which he won numerous awards. In the 1960s Bulatov formed the Sretensky Boulevard Group with Kabakov, Shteinberg, Yankilevsky and Pivovarov. His paintings often depict words or slogans painted over an idyllic landscape. He has exhibited in the West since the 1970s. Bulatov currently lives and works in Paris.
Ivan Chuikov

Ivan Chuikov was born in Moscow in 1935 into a family of artists. He attended the Surikov Art Institute and worked as a design specialist in the Artists’ Union. In the 1970s he joined the unofficial art movement. His art examines the conditions of illusion in the space of painting. He has participated in over 70 exhibitions worldwide. Chuikov lives and works in Cologne, Germany.

Francisco Infante

Francisco Infante was born in 1943 in the Saratov region. After the death of his father, a Spanish civil war veteran, the Infante family moved to Moscow. Infante studied art at the Stroganov Institute and worked as a drawing instructor. He was a member of the Dvizhenie (Movement Group) from its inception. The group explored kinetic art and theories of color and music in outdoor performance art “happenings.” Infante broke with the group in 1968 and started to create cibachrome photographs of artificial objects within a natural environment. Since the 1970s he and his wife and collaborator, Noma Gorinunova, have called these works “Artifacts.” They live in Moscow.

IRWIN

IRWIN was founded in 1983 in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia (now Slovenia). Its members are Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, and Borut Vogelnik. Along with Laibach and the theatre group, Scipion Nascise Sisters, Irwin co-founded Neue Slowenische Kunst in 1984. As the visual arts wing of the organization, Irwin’s objective is to visually manifest NSK’s objectives. Since their founding, the group has become quite successful, especially in Europe, exhibiting often. Irwin is at the forefront of the contemporary European and Eastern European art scenes, helping to define its range through recent projects like the East Art Map, the slogan of which is “History is not given, it is made.”

Ilya Kabakov

Ilya Kabakov was born in Dnepropetrovsk in 1933. He graduated from the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow in 1957. He began his career as a children’s book illustrator before forming the Sretensky Boulevard Group and becoming one of the foremost Russian Conceptual artists on the international scene. He is best known for large scale installations that demythologize utopian perspectives. He emigrated in 1987, settling in New York. He currently lives in Long Island with his wife and collaborator, Emilia Kabakov.
Komar & Melamid

Vitaly Komar (1943) and Alexander Melamid (1945) were born in Moscow. They became friends and collaborators at the Stroganov Institute from which they graduated in 1967. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Komar & Melamid founded the movement that they called Sois Art, a unique version of Soviet Pop and Conceptual Art, which combines the principles of Dadaism and Socialist Realism. Both Jewish, they emigrated to the United States through Israel in the late 1970s. Their very successful partnership ended in 2003-4 and now both artists live and work independently in New York City.

Alexander Kosolapov

Alexander Kosolapov was born in Moscow in 1943. He graduated from the Stroganov Institute in 1968, and was a sculptor in the Artists’ Union until 1975 when he emigrated to New York City, where he continues to live. From 1975-1990 he was the co-editor and US representative of A-Ya magazine, which reviewed unofficial Russian art. His work is a juxtaposition of contradictory symbols and clichés that result in humorous and poignant compositions.

Laibach

Laibach was founded in Trbovlje, an industrial coal-mining town in central Slovenia in 1980. The industrial rock band was immediately surrounded by controversy due to their name, militaristic façade and fascist personae. Laibach is best known for covering popular rock music by The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Queen, to name a few, and changing the tone of the music into something distinct, yet familiar in a deconstructed context. In 1984 they co-founded the art organization Neue Slowensiche Kunst, serving, in addition to musicians, as the group’s ideological progenitors. Laibach live and work in Ljubljana.

Ernst Neizvestny

Ernst Neizvestny was born in Sverdlovsk in 1926. He fought with the Red Army in World War II and was severely injured. After the war he entered the Latvian Academy of Art but graduated from the Surikov Institute of Art in 1954. He is best known for large public sculpture and for being one of the Soviet Union’s most outspoken artist-dissidents. He participated in the famous Manezh exhibition in 1962 and got into an argument there with Khrushchev regarding artistic freedom. As a result, all official artistic channels were closed to Neizvestny, and he emigrated to New York City in 1976 where he continues to live and work.
Vladimir Nemukhin

Vladimir Nemukhin was born in Moscow in 1925. He was one of the earliest representatives of unofficial art, creating his first abstract composition in 1959, influenced by American Abstract Expressionism. His later work incorporates playing cards, symbolizing the unpredictability of life. In 1974 he organized what became known as the Bulldozer exhibition with fellow nonconformist Oscar Rabin. He lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Eduard Shteinberg

Eduard Shteinberg was born in Moscow in 1937 and raised in Tarus. His father was a well-known poet and translator. Shteinberg was introduced to the historical avant-garde in the 1960s by the collector George Costakis. Shteinberg’s geometric style was heavily influenced by this encounter. Shteinberg was a member of the Sretensky Boulevard Group and participated in some unofficial exhibitions. Since the early 1990s he has divided his time among Moscow, Tarus, and Paris.

Leonid Sokov

Leonid Sokov was born in Tver in 1941. He graduated from the Stroganov Institute in 1969. Sokov’s oeuvre is closely related to the Sots art movement and he has worked with others in that genre including Prigov, Kosolapov, and Lebedev. His compositions are in the Pop style, adapted to Socialist Realism through the use of ideology as an object of consumption. Sokov emigrated to the United States in 1980. He lives and works in New York City.

Julian Stanczak

Julian Stanczak was born in Borownica, Poland in 1928. At the beginning of the Second World War, Stanczak and his family were forced into a Siberian labor camp where young Julian permanently lost the use of his right arm. After the war the family ultimately settled in Cleveland. Stanczak received his bachelor’s degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1954 and his master’s degree from Yale University in 1956 where he was a student of Albers. In addition to painting Stanczak also had a distinguished career as a teacher at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and the Cleveland Institute of Art. Stanczak’s painting examines the complex and varied interaction of color. He lives and works in Seven Hills, Ohio.
Oleg Tselkov

Oleg Tselkov was born in 1934 outside of Moscow. In 1953, he graduated from the Surikov Art Institute and entered the Minsk Theatre and Art Institute, but was expelled for formalism a year later. The same thing happened at the Leningrad Academy of Arts in 1955. However, in 1958, he managed to graduate from the Leningrad Theatre Institute, which was an island of liberalism in the post-Stalin epoch. Tselkov is one of the few Russian artists to work in a surrealist style. Tselkov emigrated to the West in 1977 and currently lives and works in Paris.

Oleg Vassiliev

Oleg Vassiliev was born in Moscow in 1931. He graduated from the Surikov Art Institute in 1958 and began illustrating children’s books. In his art Vassiliev combines the traditions of Russian Realism of the 19th century with the Russian avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century. Vassiliev’s principal themes, which were born while he was in Russia and continue to the present day, are his memories of home and houses, roads, forests, fields, friends and family. Vassiliev emigrated to New York in 1990 and currently lives and works in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Vladimir Yakovlev

Yakovlev was born in Balakhna, near Nizhny in 1934. He suffered from mental illness, visual impairment, and had no formal artistic training. In the late 1950s he met Nemukhin and participated in an exhibition with Shteinberg. The subject matter of his painting is primarily portraits and flowers, and his work is influenced by German Neo-Expressionism. Yakovlev died in Moscow in 1998.

Vladimir Yankilevsky

Vladimir Yankilevsky was born in Moscow in 1938. He graduated from the Moscow Institute of Graphic Arts in 1962 and worked for a publishing house. In the early 1960s he became acquainted with Kabakov with whom he formed the Sretensky Boulevard Group. He exhibited publicly at the Manezh in 1962 but was not admitted into the Artists’ Union in 1980. He is best known for his triptychs which he considers to be models of world perception. Yankilevsky lives and works in Paris.
Figure 1 Richard Anuszkiewicz, *Apián's Quadrant*, 1961
Figure 2 Julian Stanczak, *Concurrent Colours*, 1964
Figure 3 Richard Anuszkiewicz, *That Which is Seen*, 1964

Figure 4 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, [1913] 1923-29
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Figure 5 Julian Stanczak, *Red Trilogy*, 1969

Figure 6 Richard Anuszkiewicz, *All Things Do Live in the Three*, 1963
Figure 7 Richard Anuszkiewicz, *Six on Yellow*, 1972-1988
Figure 8 Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Some Time*, 1965
Figure 9 Julian Stanczak, *Reversed Pair - Red*, 1979

Figure 10 Julian Stanczak, *Reversed Pair - Blue*, 1979
Figure 11 Julian Stanczak, *Sheen*, 1978

Figure 12 Richard Anuszkiewicz, *Green and Masonite with Blue Square*, 1978
Figure 13 Oleg Vasiliev, From the Past, 1994
Figure 14 Vasily Polenov, *Grandmother’s Garden*, 1878, The State Tretyakov Museum, Moscow
Figure 15 Komar and Melamid, *Study for Stalin and the Muses*, 1981
Figure 16 Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, Louvre Museum, Paris
Figure 17 Erik Bulatov, *Red Horizon*, 1971/2000

Figure 18 Kazimir Malevich, *Red Cavalry*, 1928-1932, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Figure 19 Francisco Infante, *Artefact*, 1977
Figure 20 Leonid Sokov, *Meeting of Two Sculptures – Lenin and Giacometti*, 1990
Figure 21 Ilya Kabakov, *Window*, 1974
Figure 22: Irwin, *To the Victims of Orjuna*, 1985

Figure 23: Irwin, *Malevich Between Two Wars (White Cross)*, 1998
Figure 24 Laibach, *La Centrale Electric*, 1981

Figure 25 Laibach, *Doors of Reception*, 1985
Figure 26 Irwin, Two Crosses, 1985
Figure 27 John Heartfield, *As in the Middle Ages...So in the Third Reich*, originally published in *AI*, 31 May 1934
Figure 28 Laibach, *Blue Sower in Lenin’s Room*, 1982

Figure 29 Isaak Brodsky, *Lenin at the Smolny*, 1930, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Figure 30 Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 31 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Cross*, 1915, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris