Life Between Two Panels
Soviet Nonconformism in the Cold War Era

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

Beneath the façade of total conformity in the Soviet Union, a dynamic underground community of artists and intellectuals worked in forced isolation. Rejecting the mandates of state-sanctioned Socialist Realist art, these dissident artists pursued diverse creative directions in their private practice. When they attempted to display their work publicly in 1974, the carefully crafted façade of Soviet society cracked, and the West became aware of a politically subversive undercurrent in Soviet cultural life. Responding to the international condemnation of the censorship, Soviet officials allowed and encouraged the emigration of the nonconformist artists to the West.

This dissertation analyzes the foundation and growth of the nonconformist artistic movement in the Soviet Union, focusing on a key group of artists who reached artistic maturity in the Brezhnev era and began forging connections in the West. The first two chapters of the dissertation center on works that were, by and large, produced before emigration to the West. In particular, I explore the growing awareness of artists like Oleg Vassiliev of their native artistic heritage, especially the work of Russian avant-garde artists like Kazimir Malevich. I look at how Vassiliev, in a search for an alternative form of expression to the mandated form of art, took up the legacy of nineteenth-century Realism, avant-garde abstraction, and Socialist Realism. From there, I investigate issues of text and communication in Soviet society, considering both the official language of
power from state propaganda, to the coded language of the communal apartments, shaped by the awareness of constant surveillance. In this section, the artworks of Komar and Melamid, Erik Bulatov, and Ilya Kabakov are discussed.

The second half of the dissertation focuses on works produced by artists who left Russia for various western capitals. At issue are works that take a retrospective point-of-view on the experience of life in the Soviet Union from the distance of political exile, deconstructing its commonplaces as well as the state’s exercise of power over historical interpretation. My project examines how these artists, having emigrated to the West mid-career, were simultaneously insiders and outsiders within the major discourses of both socialism and capitalism. From their liminal perspective, Soviet dissident artists employed deconstructive practices to challenge prevailing notions about the geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, and find conceptual footing for themselves that is not complicit in the ideology of either superpower. Rejecting the premise that being anti-Soviet automatically makes one pro-Western, these artists undermined the political dogma of the world as ideologically binary, exposing fundamental similarities between each respective system’s power structures and territorial tendencies. This dissertation seeks to investigate the work of nonconformist artists from the Soviet Union as a means of better understanding the Cold War era that served as the backdrop for twentieth century geopolitical developments.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... iv  

Vita .................................................................................................................................. vi  

List of Figures ................................................................................................................ viii  

Introduction ................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 1  Complicated Legacies: The Rediscovery of Kazimir Malevich ............ 24  

Chapter 2  The Language of Control ........................................................................ 60  

Chapter 3  Archiving Mythology: Recreating the Past in Komar and Melamid’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism Series ................................................................. 104  

Chapter 4  The Artist-Nomad ..................................................................................... 140  

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 172  

Appendix: Figures .......................................................................................................... 176  

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 239  

Notes ............................................................................................................................... 258
List of Figures

Figure 1 – Eduard Steinberg, *Composition*, 1979, oil on canvas, 44x40 in

Figure 2 – Francisco Infante, *Suprematist Games: Homage to Malevich*, 1969, cibachrome photograph, 20x20 in

Figure 3 – Leonid Lamm, *Mother Darkness*, 1965, tempera and watercolor on paper, 25x34 in

Figure 4 – Oleg Vassiliev, *House on the Island Anzer*, 1965, oil on canvas, 28x28 in

Figure 5 – Kazimir Malevich, *Morning in the Village after a Snowstorm*, 1912, oil on canvas, 32x32 in

Figure 6 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Two Spaces*, 1968, oil on canvas, 35x31 in

Figure 7 – Oleg Vassiliev, detail from *Substitutions and Transformations*, 1981, colored pencil on paper, 21x14 in each

Figure 8 – Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870-73, oil on canvas, 52x111 in

Figure 9 – Tatyana Yablonskaya, *Bread*, 1949, oil on canvas, 39x87 in

Figure 10 – Oleg Vassiliev, *At the Edge (Broken Tree)*, 1990, oil on canvas, 48x36 in

Figure 11 – Oleg Vassiliev, “Intermission—Leaves” (detail), from the series *On Black Paper*, 1994-97, colored pencil on black paper, 13x10 in each

Figure 12 – Oleg Vassiliev, “Malevich—Nekrasov” (detail), from the series *On Black Paper*, 1994-97, colored pencil on black paper, 13x10 in each
Figure 13 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1993, oil on canvas, 48x36 in

Figure 14 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Ogonyok, No. 25, 1975*, 1980, oil on canvas, 48x36 in

Figure 15 – Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*, 1915, oil on canvas, 21x21 in

Figure 16 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Spaces*, 2002, oil on canvas, 43x38 in

Figure 17 – Postcard from the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, showing the German and Soviet pavilions opposite each other

Figure 18 – Joseph Kosuth, *On and Three Chairs*, 1965, wooden folding chair and photographs, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 19 – Komar and Melamid, *Onward to the Victory of Communism*, (Untitled Installation from the Sots Art Series), 1972, Paint on Red Cloth, 20 x 74 in

Figure 20 – Komar and Melamid, *Scroll*, 1975, Ink on Cavas, 224 x 31 in

Figure 21 – Grisha Bruskin, *Fundamental Lexicon (detail)*, 1986, Oil on Linen, 44 x 30 in

Figure 22 – Andy Warhol, *32 Soup Cans*, 1961-62, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 in each

Figure 23 – Komar and Melamid, *Quotation*, 1972, (from Sots Art Series), Oil on Canvas, 46 ½ x 31 in

Figure 24 – Komar and Melamid, *Color Therapeutics*, 1975, Oil on Wood, 25 panels, 1 5/8 x 1 5/8 in each

Figure 25 – Alexander Kosolapov, *Coca-Cola Lenin*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 42 in

Figure 26 – Erik Bulatov, *Glory to the CPSU*, 1975, Oil on Canvas, 90 ¼ x 90 in
Figure 27 - Rostislav Lebedev, *Situation No. 2*, 1979, Painted wood, 52 ¾ x 58 ½ x 33.5 in.

Figure 28 - Erik Bulatov, *Two Landscapes on a Red Background*, 1972-74, Oil on Canvas, 43 x 43 ½ in.

Figure 29 - Erik Bulatov, *Red Sky*, 1973-74, Oil on Canvas, 51 x 31 ½ in.

Figure 30 - Erik Bulatov, *Horizon*, 1971-72, Oil on Canvas, 59 x 70 in.

Figure 31 - Erik Bulatov, *Self-Portrait*, 1971-73, Oil on Canvas, 43 x 43 in.

Figure 32 – Erik Bulatov, *Entrance—No Entrance*, 1974-75, Oil on Canvas, 71 x 71 in.

Figure 33 – Erik Bulatov, *Danger*, 1972-73, Oil on Canvas, 42 ¾ x 43 in.

Figure 34 – Leonid Lamm, *The Morning of Our Motherland (Labor Camp Near Rostov-on-Don)*, 1976, watercolor, 8 2/8 x 14 ¼ in.

Figure 35 – Aleksandr Laktionov, *The New Apartment*, 1952, Oil on Canvas.


Figure 37 – Ilya Kabakov, *Where Are They?*, 1979, pen, ink and crayon on paper, 16 x 10 ½ in each.

Figure 38 – Komar and Melamid, *Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution (after the First Version by V. Serov)*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in.

Figure 39 – Vladimir Serov, *V. I. Lenin Proclaims the Power of the Soviets*, ca. late 1940s (first version) oil on canvas, Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.
Figure 40 – Vladimir Serov, *V. I. Lenin Proclaims the Power of the Soviets*, ca. late 1950s (second version) oil on canvas, Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

Figure 41 – Alexander Kosolapov, *Soviet Myth*, 1974, oil on cardboard, 17 x 24 in.

Figure 42 – Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in.

Figure 43 – Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1973 (copy of destroyed *Double Self-Portrait as Lenin and Stalin*, 1972 which was destroyed in the Bulldozer Exhibition) (from Sots Art series), oil on canvas, 36 in. diameter

Figure 44 – Soviet portrait of Lenin and Stalin, ca. 1950

Figure 45 – Komar and Melamid, *Yalta Conference (from a History Textbook 1984)*, 1982 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in.

Figure 46 – Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin meet at the Yalta Conference

Figure 47 – Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Newark, NJ

Figure 48 – Komar and Melamid, *Stalin and the Muses*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 55 in.

Figure 49 – Komar and Melamid, *Portrait of Medved*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in.
Figure 50 – Komar and Melamid, *Blindman’s Buff*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 47 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 51 – Komar and Melamid, *Thirty Years Ago 1953*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 47 in.

Figure 52 – Komar and Melamid, *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 53 – Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500, oil on wood panel, 26 x 19 in. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 54 – Komar and Melamid, *The Blue Cup*, 1985-86, mixed media, 60 x 72 in

Figure 55 – Leonid Sokov, *Lenin and Giacometti*, 1989, bronze, 15 x 5½ x 15 in

Figure 56 – Ilya Kabakov, *Sitting in the Closet Primakov (detail)*, 1972-75, Ink and colored pencil on paper, 47 pages, 20¼ x 13¾ in

Figure 57 – Komar and Melamid, *Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood*, 1983, silkscreen in enamel ink, 14 x 30 in

Figure 58 – Leonid Lamm, *I, You, He, She*, 1971, oil on canvas, 25½ x 50¾ in

Figure 59 – Vladimir Tatlin, *Model of the Model to the Third International*, 1920

Figure 60 – Konstantin Melnikov, *Rusakov Workers’ Club*, 1927-29

Figure 61 – Alexander Gerasimov, *Comrade Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, 1938, oil on canvas, 116½ x 112½ in, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Figure 62 – Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Bogatyrs*, 1898, oil on canvas, 87½ x 126½ in, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Figure 63 – Komar and Melamid, *Yalta, 1945*, 1986-87, mixed media, 31 panels, 48 x 48 in each
Introduction

This awareness began in my early childhood: a feeling that the outside is not coordinated with, or is not adequate to, what’s taking place inside . . . My problem was how to learn to have a double mind, a double life, in order to survive, so that reality wouldn’t destroy me.

- Ilya Kabakov

In the latter half of the 1970s the contemporary art world took notice of a burgeoning nonconformist art scene operating in the underground of the Soviet Union. A number of events led to the increased attention, the most significant of which occurred in 1974 when a group of artists decided to stage an outdoor exhibition of unofficial art on the outskirts of Moscow. The foreign press, which had been invited, witnessed and later reported how Soviet authorities showed up with heavy machinery and destroyed art works, detaining many of the artists. Staged during the negotiation phase of the Helsinki Accords, the so-called “Bulldozer Exhibition” became an international scandal, eventually compelling the Soviet government to adopt a more tolerant stance toward unofficial artists.

The scandal piqued the interest of the Western art world and soon exhibitions of smuggled-out artwork began cropping up in the West. One year before their 1977
emigration from the Soviet Union, the artistic team of Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945) had an exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, titled “Color is a Mighty Power,” which turned out to be a great success. In the years that followed, many other artists such as Aleksandr Kosolapov, Leonid Sokov, Oleg Vassiliev, Eric Bulatov, and Ilya Kabakov had their art exhibited in galleries and museums in Europe and the United States.

The art market’s demand for Soviet nonconformist art reached a fever pitch in 1988 when, at the peak of Glasnost’, the auction house Sotheby’s was able to stage an open auction of the works of artists in Moscow who had been working on the fringes of institutional art. The show was a major financial success, vastly outpacing everyone’s expectations. By introducing the artists to the market economy in dramatic fashion, the Sotheby’s auction forever changed the complexion of the nonconformist community in Russia. Representation in leading western galleries, articles in prominent art journals, and inclusion in some of the most important museums in the world vaulted Soviet artists to the heights of celebrity within the art world. They became a worldwide sensation overnight.

I became particularly intrigued with this art when I first encountered Alexander Kosolapov’s (b. 1943) painting *Coca-Cola Lenin* (1980 – Figure 25). This work consists of a flat red background upon which the stenciled profile of Lenin’s head is juxtaposed with Coca-Cola’s logo, accompanied by the words “It’s the Real Thing. – Lenin”. Kosolapov’s work is obviously meant to be understood ironically by sacrilegiously associating Lenin—the symbol of Soviet socialism—with Coca-Cola—the most
recognizable image of capitalist globalization. It can, and has, been read as a play of
signs intent on emptying out the signification of charged images—an attempt to present
Lenin as just one more sign amongst many to be drawn upon in an expansive social
critique. While the bulk of existing research on nonconformist artworks limits itself to
analysis of these ironic dimensions, the artist’s own words reveal something much deeper
and more personal: “Somehow the two paradises came together in that work with Lenin
and Coca-Cola. I found in them a meaning of paradise—one, a paradise lost, the other,
not quite found.”6 This painting clearly has very personal and profound connotations for
the artist. To him, this work is connected to the profound disillusionment one encounters
when growing up to find out that what was believed as a child is really just a myth; it
points back to his finding out that the bright future of communist utopia was not coming.
He connects this disillusionment to his experience of immigrating to the United States
only to find it not to be the promised-land he had imagined as a dissident struggling
against a totalitarian regime. This work speaks to cultural detachment, to the experience
of the Diaspora, to false assumptions of Cold War geopolitics, and to the effects of
globalization.

Like Coca-Cola Lenin, the work of the artistic duo of Vitaly Komar and
Alexander Melamid has also been summarily interpreted as humorous ironic jokes at the
expense of Soviet high culture. While this is certainly an important aspect of their work,
Melamid has expressed his frustration with this fairly narrow interpretation: “We want to
be far less satirical than people think,” he explains, to which Komar adds, “Often viewers
laugh just not to say they don’t understand.”7 Humor is certainly a powerful element of
their work, but behind the humor there is a deeply serious meaning that is often lost on viewers in the West. A good example of Komar and Melamid’s classic style is *Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood* (1983 – Figure 57). The idea that anyone who has escaped persecution in the Soviet Union could actually sincerely feel nostalgia for such an awful experience is difficult to comprehend. Nonetheless, the artists are adamant that they are serious about their nostalgia. Linda Hutcheon, who has written extensively about the use of irony in postmodern art, remarks that, “Irony is not something in an object that you either ‘get’ or fail to ‘get’: irony ‘happens’ for you. .when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid come together, usually with a certain critical edge.” For Komar and Melamid, the implications are that the cultural differences between the artists and viewer likely account for the immediate perception of irony and the failure to grasp the more sincere elements of the work. Hutcheon notes that nostalgia is similarly dependent upon viewer response, “Likewise, nostalgia is not something you ‘perceive’ in an object; it is what you ‘feel’ when two different temporal moments. . .come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective—that makes for the power.” The cultural imagery of the artists’ childhood in the Stalinist era comes into contact with their current displacement outside their native land, leading to a feeling of nostalgia. In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which it is possible to feel both irony and nostalgia for the object at the same time. In particular, my project focuses on artists like Oleg Vassiliev (b. 1931), Kosolapov, and Komar and Melamid who create works of art that are profoundly ambivalent toward their artistic
legacy; an inheritance that includes the nineteenth-century Realists, the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth-century, and the Socialist Realism of the Soviet state.¹⁰

**History of the Nonconformist Art Movement**

To call the rise of unofficial art in the Soviet Union a “movement” can only be done with some degree of hesitation. Indeed, a survey of the works produced in the underground community quickly reveals that these artists were far from unified artistically. Some artists, like Eduard Steinberg (b. 1937) and Vladimir Nemukhin (b. 1925), were primarily interested in abstraction and the historical avant-garde; others, like Aleksandr Kharitonov (b. 1932) worked with religious issues; still others engaged, as did Oleg Tselkov (b. 1934), with metaphysical subject matter. Sharing a studio and an official practice, Oleg Vassiliev and Erik Bulatov (b. 1933) engaged formal issues of space in a dual analysis of the avant-garde and the nineteenth century Realists. The artists Komar and Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, and Leonid Sokov (b. 1941), stimulated by the art of Andy Warhol, developed a method known as *Соц Art* (Sots being Cyrillic short form for Socialist Realism and Art borrowed from Pop Art). Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933), Rimma (b. 1951) and Valeriy Gerlovin (b. 1945), Andrey Monastyrsky (b. 1949) and others, meanwhile, engaged with the issues of Conceptualism. To try to group all of these artists together stylistically would be equivalent to creating a label to describe the expressionistic art of Jackson Pollock, the geometric abstraction of Frank Stella, the ironic parody of Andy Warhol, conceptual performance by Vito Acconci, and
photorealism of Chuck Close under a single category. Still, there is something about the way in which this art was produced within a closed society and against a common foe or intransigent obstacle as state politics that leads one to look at it as a social movement in art, if not an artistic movement in the traditional sense.

Political dissidence within the visual arts was born with the founding and emergence of the Soviet state. For much of the first decade of the Soviet Union, there were no formal restrictions on art and Russian avant-garde artists continued to practice in diverse ways. With Stalin’s declaration that Socialist Realism was the only acceptable form of art, however, it became increasingly dangerous for artists to produce subversive visual artworks—not only did the larger dimensions of the works make it impracticable to keep them hidden from view in cramped studios, but it became less and less feasible to procure the necessary artistic materials and find private space in which to work discreetly. Even more daunting for the avant-garde artists was that they were forced to either conform to the officially mandated parameters for art, or risk exile and/or death.  

The nonconformist art movement was fully launched in 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev, delivered a speech denouncing Stalinist policies and ushering in a more liberal period known as “the thaw.” In order to end the terror brought on by the fears of extermination without undermining the authority of the Communist Party, officials devised a way to scapegoat Stalin and preach a return to the policies of Lenin. De-Stalinization was accompanied by an increase in freedoms, albeit still uneasy ones, that opened up exchanges with the West. This open attitude led to a number of exhibitions and international festivals that introduced Soviet artists for the first time to artworks from
abroad not done in a Socialist-Realist manner. Emboldened by the government’s seeming openness to more progressive trends, artists rapidly strayed from Socialist Realism into other styles including abstraction and expressionism; simultaneously, the began to tackle the taboo subjects of sex, religion, and drinking.

This all came to a head, however, during an exhibition at the Manezh Gallery in Moscow at which, for the first time, artists working outside the powerful Artists Union were allowed to exhibit alongside official artists in a public venue. Goaded by the more traditional artists, Khrushchev denounced what he saw on exhibit by the emerging neo-avant-gardists. The breaking point was Khrushchev’s heated public exchange with the controversial sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, an abstractionist, about the merits of this new art. The exhibition was shut down the following day and the promising signs of freedom shifted again into dictatorship—the thaw was over. The end of the thaw did not, however, stop the production of more experimental art; instead, it went underground where nonconformist artists would continue to innovate and experiment, but in the shadows.

The necessity of operating underground led experimentally-minded artists to form a rather tight-knit community; it required that they lead double lives. In their public and sanctioned persona many, like Kabakov, Bulatov, and Vassiliev, worked as illustrators for children’s books; others, like Komar and Melamid, held teaching positions and took on freelance commissions of propaganda posters. These openly maintained and legitimate careers sustained the artists, while creating cover for their unofficial lives as active figures in the underground. Because the display of underground art was strictly
forbidden, the only way to show it was to stage private and usually ephemeral “apartment exhibitions” that would be limited to very close friends for a short time before being shut down by the KGB.

The nonconformist movement in the Soviet Union can be broadly divided into three generations. The first generation consisted of artists already established by the time of Khrushchev’s speech. They were strongly influenced by the art of the avant-garde that they were able to see and absorb during the period of the thaw. A major influence on this generation was the so-called “Lianozovo Group”—a group headed by Oskar Rabin that met in the Moscow suburb named Lianozovo. Members of this group included Valentina Kropivnitskaia (b. 1924), Lev Kropivnitsky (b. 1922), Lydia Masterkova (b. 1929), Vladimir Nemukhin (b. 1925), and Nikolai Vechtomov (b. 1923). These artists were not unified by a single aesthetic style, but rather shared a bohemian lifestyle of resistance. Victor Tupitsyn argues that the art of the Lianozovo group, while it is stylistically diverse, shares a common goal: “The aestheticization of misery is precisely what distinguishes the representatives of the de-classed communal intelligentsia of the thaw generation from their predecessors (the Socialist Realists), who created a paradisiac image of history.”

The art created by the Lianozovo Group sought to undermine the false reality presented by official artists and by presenting life as it really was.

Another important group from the first generation of nonconformists was assembled around the studio of Ilya Kabakov; it came to be known as the Sretensky Boulevard Group. Artists in this group included Bulatov, Neizvestny, Viktor Pivovarov (b. 1937), Ullo Sooster (b. 1924), Steinberg, Vassiliev, and Vladimir Yankilevsky (b.
Like the Lianozovo Group, no single style defined these artists, although they were also strongly influenced by the art of the avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s. Rather than confronting Socialist Realism in an openly hostile manner, the way the Lianozovo group did, these artists tended to appropriate the art of the avant-garde in a less political manner. Abstraction was explored for its purely aesthetic possibilities, and art was seen as an escape from social constrictions and a path to transcendence. Along with others of this generation that did not affiliate with any particular group, the Lianozovo and Sretensky groups shared a strong affinity for the art of the historical avant-garde. The diversity of styles within this neo-avant-garde is reflective of the historical precedent set by artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, and Aleksandr Rodchenko.

Over time, however, some of the artists of this first generation, particularly the close group of friends Kabakov, Vassiliev, and Bulatov, grew wary of the avant-garde project. They acted as important transitional figures between the artists of the thaw and the second generation of nonconformists—those associated with Moscow Conceptualism. As mentioned earlier, a critical turning point in nonconformism was the development of Sots Art by Komar and Melamid, as well as other artists such as Grisha Bruskin (b. 1945), Kosolapov, Rostislav Lebedev (b. 1946), Boris Orlov (b. 1941), and Leonid Sokov (b. 1941). Taking their cue from the work of Andy Warhol, these artists confronted the imagery of the Soviet state directly, engaging in a deconstructive style. Of their art, Margarita Tupitsyn writes, “Sots artists proposed to view Socialist Realism not as mere kitsch or as simply a vehicle for bureaucratic manipulation and state propaganda, but as a
rich field of stereotypes and myths which could transform into a new, contemporary language, one able to deconstruct official myths on their own terms.” As the first fully postmodern artists in the underground community, these artists rejected modernist utopian goals both of the avant-garde and the Soviet state.

In addition to the Sots artists, Moscow Conceptualism also included a number of artists and groups that were interested in the western conceptualist trend toward performance, happenings, and installation art. The most emblematic group centered on Andrei Monastyrsky and his Collective Actions Group which conducted a series of events called *Journeys to the Countryside*—unscripted performances which often involved the audience acting as participants in a simple, collective act.18

The third generation of nonconformists began their careers in the late 1970s to early 1980s, after the movement was well-established and when many of the practitioners of the first two generations had already emigrated to the West. This generation is closely associated with the AptArt movement—a group that took as one of its major objects of consideration not official state art, but the art of earlier nonconformists. The reference to apartment exhibitions in their name was a play on the local custom of holding communal gatherings at artists’ studios or apartments, as in the Lianozova and Sretensky Boulevard events. A leading figure of this last generation of nonconformists was Vadim Zakharov (b. 1959). In his project *I Acquired Enemies* (1983), Zakharov presents himself in a number of photographs displaying writing on his palms. Each photograph is intended to directly challenge one of the members of the unofficial “patriarchy” by offering a provocative insult, such as “Steinberg, you are powdered Malevich.”
similar to the earlier generations of nonconformists that felt oppressed by the legacy of the historical avant-garde, Zakharov expresses his difficulty with the historical legacy left to him in Soviet nonconformism. Other artists were less confrontational, but nonetheless took very seriously the legacy they had inherited from earlier dissidents. Their artworks reflect a blend of admiration and resentment. Beyond this broader interest in the legacy of Soviet nonconformism, the artists of this last generation demonstrated a wide range of interests and styles. This group included figures such as Natalia Abalakova (b. 1941), Nikita Alekseev (b. 1953), Sven Gundlakh (b. 1959), Sergei (b. 1959) and Vladimir Mironenko (b. 1952), Anatolii Zhigalov (b. 1941), and Konstantin Zvezdochetov (b. 1958). With Gorbechev’s declaration of Glasnost’ in 1986, and its accompanying removal of artistic restrictions, the nonconformist movement in Russia came to an end.

**State of the Literature:**

As this dissertation is being written, the scholarship on dissident Soviet art is not very extensive. Being a fairly young field, there are relatively few scholarly books and articles in peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the subject. To date, most of the literature on nonconformist artists is composed of essays written for exhibitions as well as recorded interviews in journals, newspapers, and catalogs. Renee and Matthew Baigell’s book *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika*, published in 1995 in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, is based on a series of conversations with forty-seven artists affiliated with the nonconformist movement, and is emblematic of the kind of primary source material available to researchers.
In addition to the printed primary sources, I conducted a series of interviews with artists, gallerists, and scholars closely connected with the movement, both in New York as well as Moscow. While these discussions were helpful in the formulations of my thesis, much of what they provided was background context for my research. As such, while invaluable, their appearance within the dissertation is limited.

The Paris-based art journal *A-Ya*, published in seven issues from 1979-1986 by exiled members of the community, is another excellent resource for contemporary commentary on dissident Soviet art. Each edition of the periodical features essays highlighting the work of a few members of the unofficial art circles in Moscow. Most often, the articles are written by the artists themselves about the work, or by other members of the Soviet underground—be they artists or theorists. Because they were frequently smuggled back into Russia, the journals contained selections that highlighted the legacy of the Russian avant-garde or featured particularly interesting shows in the West by artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Ed Ruscha. The goals of the publication were two-fold: first, to provide a forum where artists could showcase and expose the principles and intentions their art (since any such publications of underground art were forbidden in the Soviet Union); and second, to do the reverse and promote the Russian unofficial art community for western audiences, with the intent of raising their visibility as artistic personalities, forcing the government in the Soviet Union to act cautiously in any attempt to annihilate the underground. As Vitaly Komar explains succinctly: “[Soviet citizens] who are more or less successful in the West are more or less protected in the East.”19 The discontinuation of the journal did not result from budgetary concerns
or political pressure as would be the expectation; instead, it was the emergence of 
glasnost’ that prompted the journal’s discontinuation.\textsuperscript{20} With the loss of fear of 
retribution and the growing popularity of the art in the West, the editor Igor Shelkovsky 
decided to discontinue its production because he felt its objectives had been met.

Andrew Solomon’s book \textit{The Irony Tower} (1991) was likewise instrumental in 
raising awareness of Soviet art. Based on the author’s direct engagement with the artists 
and their circumstances, it provides rich historical context for the unofficial movement. 
Solomon was a British journalist sent to the Soviet Union to cover the groundbreaking 
Sotheby’s auction of nonconformist art in 1988. Soon thereafter, he became personally 
involved with the artists at the very core of the momentous event. While Solomon’s book 
is not an art historical account, it tells a chronological story of the underground Soviet art 
movement from its inception in the early sixties, culminating in the auction of the late 
eighties. This was the first publication to highlight the initial stages of contact between 
the dissident artists in Russia and the Western art market in the immediate aftermath of 
the auction.

Of the scholarly publications dealing with Soviet dissident artists, the most 
prominent is Boris Groys’ seminal book \textit{The Total Art of Stalinism} (1992). Boris Groys 
is an art theorist who was a member of the unofficial community in the Soviet Union and 
one of the primary contributors to \textit{A-Ya}. He gained notoriety for his alternative readings 
of the Soviet avant-garde, and has since become an academic scholar in the West (he 
currently teaches at NYU). Most of Groys’ text does not directly address Soviet 
nonconformist artworks but focuses rather on the official art advocated for by Stalin.
Groys’ central thesis is that Soviet Socialist Realism was not simply a retrograde form of art that cut short the avant-garde in Russia; on the contrary, he sees it as the culmination of the larger avant-garde project of the 1910s and 1920s. The most fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde, argues Groys, is its desire to institute a totalizing system, though the specific framework of such a system may vary from one group or political/artistic context to another. Sometimes this is based on a rejection of the artistic past (as in the destruction of history advocated by the Futurists or the zero point of Malevich), while at other times, avant-garde artists are seen as promoting a more constitutive role for themselves in everyday life, such as the model of the Constructivist artist-engineer. For Groys the experimental formal aesthetics of the avant-garde are not its defining characteristic, but merely the outward manifestations of a fundamental totalizing drive. In this light, Stalin becomes the ultimate avant-garde artist because, using Soviet society as artistic agency, he builds an entire system on its foundational principles. Groys sees artists such as Komar and Melamid and Kabakov as an alternative to the totalitarian artistic projects; rather than attacking the style of Soviet Socialist Realism, they deconstruct Stalin’s methodology and thereby undermine its power. Groys calls this deconstructive artistic approach “post-utopian” because its fundamental goal is to question the system rather than to pretend to have all the answers. From the Groysian position, the nonconformists who worked in abstraction in order to rebel against Stalinism succeeded in rejecting the outward style of Stalin only, but nonetheless mimicked his methodology.
Groys’ book has gained wide critical attention even beyond the field of Soviet dissident art because it questions the dismissal of Stalinist art as merely a retrograde form without artistic merit (a position famously advocated by the likes of Clement Greenberg in his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” 1939). The validity and problematics of Groys’ narrative are less important for the purposes of my project than the fact that they reflect the beliefs held by many of the nonconformist artists he discusses. As a figure who was both part of the underground community, and now serves as one of its primary critics, Groys can be read in a similar manner to which Guy Debord is in relation to the Situationists, or Lucy Lippard and the Conceptualists. Whereas much of the art under consideration in my research was made first and foremost as a reaction to the artist’s experience with Stalinism, Groys articulates the beliefs widely held within the community toward the dictator’s methodology. As a case in point, Groys’ book helps us understand the political stance of Komar and Melamid when they called the 1945 Yalta Conference between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin the greatest conceptual performance ever. Preferring instead to challenge Groys’ theories on the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, many scholars have overlooked the dimension of his work that operates as an extension of the primary source artistic material.

Several anthologies of essays by leading scholars in the field comprise the vast majority of the academic literature on Soviet nonconformist artists. Major among them is Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956-1986, edited by Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (1995). This seminal collection of essays was commissioned to explore the holdings of the Norton T. Dodge collection of Soviet nonconformist art in the
Several of the essays in this anthology have greatly informed my own research, particularly Victor Tupitsyn’s “‘Nonidentity Within Identity’: Moscow Communal Modernism, 1950s-1980s.” Tupitsyn’s essay explores issues of artistic freedom and the dichotomies between official and unofficial language and provides a timeline of major events and exhibitions that spurred the development of dissident art. Likewise, Margarita Tupitsyn’s article “On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism” provides valuable insight into the growing conceptualism within nonconformist art that separates the work of the older generation from artists like Ilya Kabakov, Leonid Lamm, and Komar and Melamid. Both of these authors were also members, like Groys, of the underground Soviet community. Nonconformist Art also contains essays that explore the particularities of art from outlying areas of the Soviet Union such as Leningrad, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, and Armenia. While works produced in these areas generally fall outside the main focus of my research, they nonetheless help define the rich texture of unofficial society in the late-Soviet period.

Another significant anthology is Moscow Conceptualism: In Context, edited by Alla Rosenfeld (2011). This volume focuses more narrowly on the second generation of nonconformists that often fall under the moniker of Moscow Conceptualism. In the book, scholars and artists address various issues, including the differences between artists associated with Sots Art and those with the more performative style of conceptualism. One particularly helpful essay is Yevgeny Barabanov’s “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine.” In this essay, Barabanov traces the very
important differences between Moscow conceptualists and those practicing in the West, highlighting how the title of “Conceptualism” being attached to both has led to a lot of misunderstanding of the practice. One particularly important distinction for the author is that in the West, conceptualists were committed to investigating the implications and politics of text, whereas Russians’ use of text was uniquely tied in to investigations of literariness. The anthology also contains a series of artist statements from some of the major figures of Moscow Conceptualism: Kabakov, Monastyrsky, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, and Komar and Melamid. Rather than generalized statements about their art, however, these essays are particularly focused on the legacy of Moscow Conceptualism as an historical artistic movement.

Carter Ratcliff’s book Komar and Melamid (1988) is one of very few scholarly monographs dedicated to a single Soviet nonconformist artist, which is not in some way connected to a particular exhibition. Ratcliff’s book provides both a full historical account of the pair’s collaboration, which began in the Soviet Union in 1967 and continued well after both immigrated to the United States in 1978. Ratcliff offers insightful analysis of individual artworks that have since become iconic for representing Russian nonconformism. He also provides invaluable the full transcript of an extensive discussion (over 25 pages) between the two artists that summarizes their positions on style, the mechanics of their collaboration, and recapitulates their observations about the state of contemporary art. I have found this source particularly helpful; not only does it reveal their beliefs on a variety of topics, but it provides a glimpse into their collaborative relationship.
Matthew Jesse Jackson’s book *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (2010) offers a more recent scholarly investigation of unofficial Soviet art. Rather than a broad analysis of the movement, Jackson analyzes various developments within dissident circles through lens of a single figure, Ilya Kabakov, who was an active participant in each successive stage of nonconformism’s development. Throughout the book, Jackson provides cogent analyses of the works of a wide variety of artists; each analysis highlights those particular intersections with Kabakov’s own project.

At present, the field of researchers exploring the art of Soviet unofficial art is small, but growing. While there have been a number of compelling recent publications on the topic, there is still a lot of work to be done considering the large and diverse body of work produced over more than three decades of the Cold War era. Although much of the research completed in the last years has been focused on the second generation of nonconformists that serve as the core of my own project, they emphasize, in large part, the artists associated with Moscow Conceptualism rather than on the circle of Sots artists that I consider. My project endeavors to contribute to the growing field of research around Moscow Conceptualism by more fully elaborating on the projects of the Sots artists.

**Dissertation Outline**

My dissertation focuses specifically on those of the Sots Art circle and the transitional members of the Sretensky Boulevard group—Oleg Vassiliev, Erik Bulatov, and Ilya Kabakov—whose art intersects directly with the Sots artists. All of these artists
were raised and received their initial artistic training during Stalinism. As young art students, they took full advantage of the limited openness of Khrushchev’s thaw and became aware of international trends in art. Perhaps because of this awareness, they were also the first generation to participate fully in the discourses of postmodernism, deconstructivism, and conceptualism. Additionally, they belonged to a generation that was allowed to emigrate to the West. As a result, they have the unique perspective of having lived in Stalinist society, as well as experiencing the Cold War from both sides of the Iron Curtain. These historical circumstances, along with their critical artistic approach, provided them a unique perspective on the geopolitical landscape of the latter half of the twentieth century.

The dissertation is organized thematically to link these artists as sharing the same socio-political and aesthetic realities. Chapter 1 “Complicated Legacies: The Rediscovery of Kazimir Malevich” takes a closer look at some of the fundamental differences that separate the first generation of unofficial artists, the so-called “thaw” generation, from the second generation of more conceptually minded artists. In particular, it analyzes the shifting attitudes towards the art of avant-garde artists as a model for their own unofficial pursuits. Whereas the first generation saw in the avant-garde the pinnacle of artistic freedom and expression, later generations became increasingly disillusioned by the utopian political ambitions of early twentieth-century figures such as Kazimir Malevich.

Rather than comparing the work of first and second generation nonconformists as a whole, my chapter centers on the art of Oleg Vassiliev who, along with Erik Bulatov,
began his unofficial practice alongside artists of the first generation but grew increasingly disillusioned with the art of the avant-garde. Recently deceased, Vassiliev represents an important transitional figure in the attitudes and opinions of artists toward their art historical heritage. I look closely at an article Vassiliev wrote in A-Ya about Malevich in which he describes how he had initially understood the avant-garde to be an ideal of artistic freedom, but came to understand the prescriptive nature of this art. For Vassiliev, Malevich ceases to be a model upon which to base his unofficial practice and instead becomes for the nonconformist an object of inquiry. In a sense, Vassiliev’s art would prefigure the later Sots Art project that took up the aesthetics of Soviet high art in order to more fully analyze its formal mechanisms. Vassiliev is interested in his own artistic heritage, and he attempts to situate Malevich within the broader history of Realism in Russia, stretching from the political activism of the nineteenth-century Wanderers through the state-sanctioned art of Socialist Realism.

Inasmuch as literariness was a hallmark of Realism, Chapter 2 “The Language of Control,” begins my broader analysis of the deconstructive strategies of Soviet conceptualists by analyzing the use of text and language in their artworks. In particular, I investigate artists’ attempts to engage the text-based state propaganda designed to evolve citizens into the New Soviet Man, or as it was often called, “Homo Sovieticus.” Indeed, language was an important part of life in the Soviet Union. As Kabakov notes: “It is hard to overestimate the role of the written text in our society.” Looking back to Russian linguistic theorists of the 1920s, in particular Mikhail Bakhtin, the 1970s generation of
nonconformists set out to expose the underlying power structures of both the official language of the state as well as its communal counterpart.

By focusing more on word than on image in this chapter, I analyze the work of a number of artists including Komar and Melamid, Lebedev, and Bulatov who engaged directly with the omnipresent Soviet propaganda banner. Full of empty slogans that had lost their specific meaning, these banners had much in common with advertising in the West. The artworks of unofficial artists analyze Soviet banners as interpretive cues designed to foster a proper ideological perception of the world. Shifting from official language to more personal communication, the chapter considers the art of Ilya Kabakov and the ways in which he exposes the effects that Soviet policies had on life in a communal setting under the constant threat of surveillance.

Chapter 3, “Archiving Mythology: Recreating the Past in Komar and Melamid’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism Series,” takes as its point of departure the Soviet conception of historical time and the state’s attempts to monopolize historical interpretation. In particular, I look at the concept of the archive as an instrument of state power designed to protect a certain understanding of historical events. This chapter focuses on the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series of canvases created by Komar and Melamid. Using the visual style of Soviet high art, the artists establish a kind of counter-narrative of Soviet history. Rather than simply trying to set the historical record straight, Komar and Melamid approach the past with an interest in its resonance in the present. As a result, the canvases from the series become deeply personalized and subjective as they speak to the continuing influence of the legacy of Soviet history exerted on the pair of émigré artists.
The canvases from the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, somewhat counter-intuitively, expose the falsity of Socialist Realism by overindulging in its artistic conventions, especially the cult of personality surrounding figures such as Lenin and Stalin. What the series of over-dramatic, Baroque canvases does is to highlight the underlying mythology of the Soviet state. Komar and Melamid nostalgically look back on the Stalinist era—a time that saw itself as somehow post-historical, which meant that looking back to the past was tantamount to betraying the cause of socialism. Undermining Stalinism’s claims to historical exclusivity, the artists’ project decisively contextualizes it within the past, emphasizing both its termination at Stalin’s death and its continued resonance in the art and culture of the following decades.

Given the circumstances, there would be no other alternative but to seek one’s artistic future away from the homeland. Thus, Chapter 4 “The Artist-Nomad,” investigates the tendency toward ideological nomadism in contemporary art as it relates to Soviet nonconformist artists. The physical itinerancy of unofficial artists has often been understood as a defining characteristic of their art, particularly in regards to their emigration from the Soviet Union and resettlement in various Western art centers, particularly New York. While this displacement was certainly traumatic and influential on the direction of their art, I argue that the physical detachment of the artists from Soviet society was secondary to the effect of their ideological dislocation from their native culture.

Using Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of ideological nomadism, I analyze the detachment experienced by these artists and connect it to broader tendencies
of cultural disconnection and a weakening of native self-identification in the postmodern, globalized world. I explore the insistent tendency of these artists to avoid aligning themselves with any particular ideological program—including their resistance to establishing their own. Embracing a peripheral, liminal position as both insiders and outsiders within both major discourses of the Cold War, these artists created self-reflective, and at the same time overtly political works of art that question what it means to form a point-of-view, an ideological dwelling, for oneself in a “post-utopian” world.
Chapter 1

Complicated Legacies: The Rediscovery of Kazimir Malevich

The images of remarkable people in our imagination, who have brought us the light of their personalities from the distant past, are usually quite far removed from the people who once actually lived. Often they are greatly exaggerated and endowed with fantastic properties.

- Oleg Vassiliev

The exhibition *Moscow-Paris: 1900-1930,* held in Moscow in 1981, marked the culmination of a long period of rediscovery of the Russian avant-garde for artists working in the Soviet underground. With the official declaration of Socialist Realism in the 1930s as the only acceptable form of art, the avant-garde suddenly became taboo, and as a result, knowledge of it slowly faded from the collective consciousness throughout Stalin’s long reign. The memory of the avant-garde survived only in a few tangential figures associated with the movement who survived the purges by renouncing experimental art and conforming to official dictates, or with those administrators in the state’s art museums who had access to the works stored away in basements and back rooms. The only physically accessible reminder of the avant-garde legacy was the presence of modernist architecture designed by figures such as Konstantin Melnikov. These buildings did little to keep the memory alive because, as Ilya Kabakov explains, “I
didn’t see them. The problem was that I didn’t have any contact with this vanished civilization. My perception of these buildings was like that of a dog running about the ruins of the Parthenon.” After Khrushchev gave his infamous 1956 speech denouncing Stalin, the curators at the Pushkin museum decided to test the seemingly more open attitude of Party leaders by staging an exhibition of Pablo Picasso. This was the first opportunity Soviet artists had to see modernism directly, aside from the occasional reproduction in a magazine casting aspersions on abstract art and denouncing it as “bourgeois.” In 1957, when the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students (the first in which Soviets participated) was held in Moscow, the occasion provided the Soviets their first chance to see modern and contemporary art produced in other countries. While the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s was not present at either exhibition, the festival allowed artists to make contacts with their western counterparts. Such introductions would lead to the smuggling of western art journals, books and, eventually, buyers for their art. In 1959, the Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture (covertly funded by the C.I.A.), introduced underground artists to the works of Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Yves Tanguy. Seeing western progressive art had a powerful impact on Soviet artists; the natural association of this seemingly uninhibited style of art combined with the dream of American freedom in the minds of disaffected artists only heightened its appeal.

While the succession of such events in the latter half of the 1950s marked an important shift toward openness, the Soviet government never allowed the work of its own historical avant-garde to be displayed. Such open exhibitions of more progressive
art abruptly ended in 1962 after Khrushchev made an appearance at the exhibition *Thirty Years of the Moscow Union of Artists* at the Manezh exhibition hall in Moscow. The premier caused a huge sensation when he became angered by the displayed work of nonconformist artists such as Vladimir Yankilevsky and Ernst Neizvestny. Khrushchev’s heated argument with Neizvestny about contemporary art became a cause célèbre that led to official denunciations from art critics in state papers. That same year, 1962, when nonconformist artists were forced back underground, Camilla Gray published her seminal book, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922.* The coincidence of these events—unique as they were—caused a huge soaring of interest and curiosity about the state of the arts, particularly modernist expression in Russia. Western art journals showed a renewed interest in Russian avant-garde works of art, and numerous exhibitions were staged that incorporated these works with those of Soviet nonconformists that had been successfully smuggled out to the West. For Soviets operating in the underground, the search for their own avant-garde legacy intensified—no figure was more sought after and had a greater impact than Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935). In fact, in the group’s Paris-based *samizdat* journal *A-Ya* dedicated to works of Soviet nonconformist artists, Malevich appears almost as often as any of the contemporary artists.

Nonconformist artists reacted to Malevich’s legacy in a variety of ways, ranging from attempts to take up his mantle to outright rejection of his art. Eduard Steinberg’s works show a direct lineage to Malevich’s Suprematist works. His painting *Composition* (1979 – Figure 1), is emblematic of his mature style. Working with purely geometric forms inspired by his predecessor, Steinberg’s compositions rely on a much more muted
color palette. Occasionally, the geometric forms appear to intersect with one another, evident here in the greenish-brown square that recedes perspectivally in space but appears to cut through the beige square facing much more frontally to the viewer. Additionally, the overlapping of these forms suggests a sort of translucence and immateriality to the geometric shapes. The lack of clarity resulting from the unaggressive colors in his paintings is complemented by a sense of being untethered: forms are seen floating aimlessly across the surface of the canvas. Hans Peter-Riese explains that these ephemeral and immaterial effects were central to the artist’s understanding of Malevich’s project: “What Steinberg had come to understand from his preoccupation with Malevich and the Russian avant-garde was their striving for ‘truth and transcendence.’” He goes on to note that “the paintings take on a certain transparency. The individual elements seem to hover in space, indeed they do not take up any real space at all.”11 Exposure to Malevich’s supematist works provided Steinberg’s mature style with a new visual vocabulary with which to create a spiritual and contemplative form of art.

For Steinberg, a seminal moment in his artistic development came in 1961 when Stalin’s mummified body was removed from Lenin’s mausoleum and buried near the Kremlin wall. Seeking a new spiritual father (having rid himself of Stalin’s paternal control), Steinberg incorporated Malevich’s style, a psychological gesture that marked a symbolic shift in his intentionality, showing a clear disavowal of the Soviet legacy.12 As a disciple of Malevich, Steinberg initiated a program designed to adapt Suprematism to his own personal circumstances, in essence reclaiming Malevich’s project and reinstating it for the new Soviet era. In 1981 Steinberg penned a letter to Malevich, in which he
states, “You were clearly born to remind the world of the language of geometry, a language capable of expressing a tragic muteness. The language of Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus and the early Christian catacombs. Although this language, for me, is not a universe, it does incorporate a longing for the truth and the transcendental, a kinship with apophatic theology.”

Steinberg blends the principles of Suprematism with his own faith in Orthodoxy in an attempt to find some sort of transcendental art, based on the principles of what he calls “metageometry.” While he does not accept Malevich’s theories wholesale (for example, he is clearly uncomfortable with Malevich’s declarations on destroying the perceptible world and creating it anew under the flag of the Black Square, a gesture he labels, “Suicide by cold calculation, for the sake of curiosity”), he nonetheless finds in Malevich’s example a true path through which to create transcendent art. Most importantly, he finds in Malevich a model which can be used as an alternative to the constrictive demands of officially mandated Socialist Realism.

Eduard Steinberg was only one of many nonconformists to champion Malevich’s art and attempt to rescue his project. In 1962, the same year that Khrushchev cracked down on unofficial art, a group of artists including Galina Bitt, Francisco Infante, Lev Nusberg, Viacheslav Shcherbakov, Viktor Stepanov, and Rimma Zanevskaya formed the Movement Group. This group, as their friend and fellow underground artist Viktor Tupitsyn describes, “focused on the propagation and development of Kinetic Art, the design of artificial environments, and on the staging of outdoor theatrical spectacles with elements of happenings and body art.” Like Steinberg, they wrote letters to Malevich, inquiring about his motivations and continuing legacy. One of the founders in particular,
Francisco Infante, broke off and searched for ways in which Malevich’s program could be used in his outdoor staged environments, what he called his “games.” Infante’s work *Suprematist Games: Homage to Malevich* (1969 – Figure 2) is emblematic of his attempts to integrate Malevich’s project into the more conceptual trends of the 1960s. Laying out painted pieces of cardboard on the snow in an arrangement that is unmistakably influenced by Malevich’s Suprematist works, Infante physically acknowledges, if a bit superficially, Malevich’s desire to reorganize reality by imposing the higher aesthetic reality of geometric abstraction. Although his works appear to concern themselves primarily with photographed interventions into nature, reminiscent of western artists like Robert Smithson, he nonetheless sees his own work very much in line with artists of the avant-garde. Of this artistic heritage, Steinberg argues, “In mastering form, we turn back again and again to Malevich, Duchamp, Rodchenko, Klee, and Mondrian—those geniuses whose works elucidate the life of form. We have an obligation to them, and we do not want to lose a feeling for the purity and the original spontaneity of form." 17 It is not the issue of photography and materiality that is of primary concern, rather, a desire to integrate the natural world with the higher reality of the avant-garde expression; photography represents merely a means to this end. Infante characterizes his approach according to a principle he terms “artifacticity,” defined as “a phenomenon whereby mastery of form is attained through use of opportunities offered by technology.” 18 His preoccupation with formal matters of geometry and its imposition on nature presents an effort to continue the search pioneered by Malevich to reach a higher plane of existence. Far from a critique of Malevich’s utopian aims, therefore Infante
attempts to locate their revolutionary aspirations in the stale atmosphere of the Brezhnev era. In essence like Steinberg, he looks to the example of Malevich as a model of resistance, a way of overcoming the strictures imposed by the institutions of the Soviet state.

Not all artists in the Soviet underground saw in Malevich a symbol of freedom and resistance to the state, however. Quite to the contrary, many became disillusioned with Malevich’s diffidence and found it every bit as problematic as was Socialist Realism. Whereas the first generation of nonconformists saw Socialist Realism as a betrayal of the avant-garde spirit, the younger generation of unsanctioned artists saw official art as modernism’s ontological culmination. Conceding that Socialist Realism was aesthetically very different from the avant-garde, these younger artists argued that there was very little difference between the two in ambition. This shifting attitude is manifest in works such as Leonid Lamm’s *Mother Darkness* (1965—Figure 3). Initially, Lamm had been very enthusiastic about the work of avant-garde artists, particularly Kazimir Malevich. But over time, he became disaffected by Malevich’s prescriptivness. In this work, Lamm recreates Malevich’s iconic *Black Square*, inscribing the word “mother” (*mat’*) over and over again, without any spaces. But the word play shows Lamm’s shift from seeing Malevich in a positive light to a negative one. The word “mother”, *mat’,* because it has no spaces, turns into the word “darkness”, *t’ma*, as it crosses the central point of the square. The shape carved out of the square is immediately recognizable as the German iron cross, an allusion to totalitarian control no doubt intended. Lamm passionately denounces Malevich for his “idolatrous ambitions, like the
declaration of a single path or of one unique truth. . .Doubtless it was therefore no accident that Malevich easily turned his black square into a black commissar’s jacket.”

The root of Lamm’s discontent lay in the fact that Malevich did not see his art as a formula for art, but as the formula for art. Initially energized by the promise of avant-garde freedom, artists such as Lamm realized that the totalitarian drive in Socialist Realism was not only used against avant-garde artists, it was borrowed from them.

Disenchantment with the avant-garde’s politics led to a new assessment of official art, evaluated from the vantage point of late Communism and articulated by Boris Groys:

“The Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetic-political project.”

What the avant-garde and Soviet Socialist Realism share is the desire to use art not just to imitate reality, or even to create a new object of beauty, but to fundamentally restructure the world ideologically. In the official charter of the Union of Socialist Writers of the U.S.S.R., the aims of official art are explained:

Socialist Realism. . .requires of the artist a true, historically concrete depiction of reality in its Revolutionary development. In this respect, truth and historical concreteness of the artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of the ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of Socialism.

It is the second objective articulated here that made Socialist Realism truly radical. Such a broad prescription necessarily begs the question: how can someone create a “historically concrete depiction of reality” that nonetheless reflects the requirement to
make art reflective of a higher, not yet achieved socialist society? Stalin’s own words point to the conundrum:

What is important to the dialectical method is not that which is stable at present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable, since for the dialectical method only that which is emerging and developing cannot be overcome.22

Official artists are thus left with the task of forming a higher reality, with the requirement that their art, in its current state, embodies that future state of being. Malevich’s artistic utopianism was also based on the idea that, by creating a new visual realm, the artist could transform the natural world. He confirms this by writing:

Abandon the baggage of wisdom, for in the new culture, your wisdom is ridiculous and insignificant. I have untied the knots of wisdom and liberated the consciousness of color! Hurry up and shed the hardened skin of centuries, so that you can catch up with us more easily. I have overcome the impossible and made gulfs with my breath. You are caught in the nets of the horizon, like fish! We, suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry!23

Like the Socialist-Realists in the 1970s, Malevich had argued early on that the natural world, as observed in the present, was an illusion that must be overcome ideologically. The difference between the two was not the desire to dictate a new reality, but the form of that reality as its aesthetic nature. While it may seem counterintuitive to categorize the rather traditional-looking art of the Soviets so closely with the abstract works of the avant-garde, Groys argues that this possibility exists, in large part, due to a fundamental
mischaracterization of the avant-garde period: “Modern art is often characterized as a series of broken taboos, as a constant expansion of the possibility of making art. In fact, the situation is precisely the reverse. New taboos and new reductions were constantly being introduced. . .The forms of modern art are due solely to this self-imposed ascetic creation of taboos, restrictions and reductions.”

For disaffected Soviet artists struggling with the stringent requirements of Socialist Realism, initial exposure to the abstract, avant-garde artworks seemed to offer an alternative method for free expression. A growing understanding of the actual projects undertaken by figures like Malevich brought many of them to the conclusion that this art was every bit as constricting as was Stalin’s art. Consequently, for them, Black Square shifted from a symbol of resistance and defiance, to the mark of aesthetic dictatorship.

The introduction of Sots Art—a style of art inspired by the example of America’s Pop Art—is often regarded as a watershed moment in the development of underground art. Sots Art’s significance lay in the fact that it turned away from an artistic program seeking ideologically pure art in the historical avant-garde towards a more direct confrontation with the iconography of the Soviet state.

While this was certainly a critical turning point in the history of unofficial art, the changing attitude towards modernism was not nearly so sudden. Between the neo-avant-gardists of the 1960s and the later generations of Sots artists and conceptualists, a more discriminating group continued to look to the Russian modernists. However, rather than emulating them and hoping to find in them a strategy for spiritual transcendence, these artists analyzed the legacy of the avant-garde for both its positive and negative elements; figures like
Malevich were taken as their artistic subject rather than a model creative approach. This intermediary group was the first to place the avant-garde into the larger Russian artistic heritage, encompassing the nineteenth-century Realist movement as a starting point and working through the art of Soviet propaganda. Three artists, Bulatov, Kabakov, Vassiliev—who formed the core of the so-called “Sretensky Boulevard Group”—shared an acute interest in the legacy of Malevich and occupied a transitional moment between the first generation of nonconformists and younger practitioners. Erik Bulatov is often mentioned in connection with the Sots artists, though his early work is clearly neo-avant-gardist and he shows no real debt to the work of American Pop. Similarly, Kabakov took part in the artistic community at Lianozovo along with the earliest nonconformists; he is widely considered the most important figure of Moscow Conceptualism. Neither Kabakov nor Bulatov were as dedicated as was Oleg Vassiliev, however, to reconciling the legacy of Malevich with the Russian Realist traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These artists were instrumental in the shifting nature of underground art—as artists working in the interstices of modernist reactionary tendencies against Socialist Realism to a more nuanced and ambivalent postmodern attitude toward Soviet history and art.

Vassiliev, whose work will be examined in this chapter, met Bulatov and Kabakov while in art school. Even before graduating, the three began exploring “forbidden” directions in art. Their beginnings expose a shared experience in children’s book illustration. Being slightly ahead in his schooling, Kabakov graduated one year earlier in 1957, taking a job as a children’s book illustrator. Bulatov and Vassiliev, at
Kabakov’s suggestion, became childrens’ book illustrators as well, sharing a studio for over thirty years. So intertwined was their work that all their official works for children’s books were co-signed. Ironically, their decision to work in common nearly kept them out of the artist union tasked with fostering in society a spirit of collectivity. When interviewed for consideration of membership in the powerful Artist’s Union, one official member complained, “How do we know who did what? Maybe Bulatov worked and Vassiliev was out buying vodka.”

Notwithstanding opposition, the artists were granted membership, which provided them continuous work and studio space. Moreover, illustrating children’s book allowed the artists to create works with greater creativity than otherwise allowed and without the intense scrutiny attached to more high-profile commissions such as large-scale oil paintings for the state. In addition, children’s book production afforded them plenty of time to explore their own, unofficial projects. As Svetlana Boym explains, “The excess of time for conversation and reflection was a perverse outcome of a socialist economy: time was not a precious commodity; the shortage of private space allowed people to make private use of their time.”

Although doing so at great personal risk, the artists made use of this time to also produce unsanctioned works of art. Vassiliev explains how they managed this dual life: “We were like seasonal workers; for half a year we earned our living by illustrating children’s books. The other half we could work for ourselves, making oil paintings. Twice a year, between the two jobs, we hiked outside Moscow, usually in early spring and late fall.”

These bi-annual outings into the Russian countryside by Vassiliev, Bulatov, Kabakov, and occasionally other friends, proved to be very influential on their works, fostering a
powerful affinity for the slavophilic landscape paintings of the nineteenth-century Realists.

Because direct access to the work of the historical avant-garde was still extremely rare, Bulatov and Vassiliev’s introduction to it happened in a roundabout way, filtered by conversations with the few remaining artists from the avant-garde era who had survived the Stalinist purge, especially such seminal surviving avant-garde personalities as Robert Falk and Vladimir Favorsky. These artists did not explicitly discuss the work of the avant-garde, for to do so was still politically dangerous. Skirting authority, they sustained a lively conversation about art and philosophy generally. Favorsky’s ideas of light and space proved especially influential on the work of both Bulatov and Vassiliev.29

In 1983 Vassiliev, along with Bulatov and Kabakov, was asked to respond to Malevich’s work in the exhibition “Moscow-Paris” for the journal A-YA. Faced with the task of clarifying how Malevich pertained to his own art, Vassiliev discussed the major disconnect that existed between the actual artistic program of Malevich and his own earlier understanding of that art when the works of the avant-garde were still largely inaccessible. Of his earliest impressions of Malevich, Vassiliev noted, “A few chance reproductions and a single visit to a museum repository could not be taken seriously and it was difficult to form an objective conception. . .I looked through the pictures hastily, in half-darkness in the narrow passages between the stacks. . .I saw only what I had brought in my imagination and was delighted with a joy laid in previously.”30 In 1965, Vassiliev produced the first unofficial work with which he was satisfied that he had found his path, House on the Island Anzer (1965 – Figure 4), which was the first work he actually signed.
Working with very limited contact with the work of Malevich and primarily with the theories of Favorsky, Vassiliev would only in retrospect recognize the subconscious influence that the earlier, cubist-inspired paintings of Malevich had had upon this work. Comparing Vassiliev’s painting to Malevich’s *Morning in the Village after a Snowstorm* (1912 – Figure 5), it is evident that many of Malevich’s innovations had been carried forward into Vassiliev’s work. In both works, there is a separation of light and an emphasis on just the primary colors. While Malevich has isolated those primary colors from each other, juxtaposing the conical shapes, Vassiliev allows the colors to collide, creating spectral effects that give an undefined contour to earth and sky. While neither shares in the mimetic naturalism of nineteenth-century Russian landscape painting, they both borrow from that tradition a romantic conception that conflates a personal spirituality with the physical topography of the countryside.

In the period that followed this discovery, Vassiliev took what he had learned from Favorsky and worked out his theories of light and space. While each had a slight variation on the meaning of each type of space, both he and Bulatov believed that a work of art can be divided into four separate components: the surface, deep space (perspectival recession into the picture), high space (space projecting out toward the viewer), and the picture’s own light. In 1968 Vassiliev worked this out in five canvases from a series, aptly titled “Spaces” (Figure 6). In the spirit of avant-garde abstract experimentation, the artist’s spectral works attempted to create the illusion of projection and recession using nothing but pure light and color. While by no means an absolute rule, Vassiliev observed a general tendency wherein areas where the canvas becomes purely white tend to exist in
the high space, and black areas belong to deep space. Vassiliev’s theories regarding the significance of light and dark, white and black, would continue to evolve, and his ideas of the actual visual effects worked out in this series remain a fairly constant theme throughout his career.\textsuperscript{33}

Similar to Lamm, Vassiliev discovered that the more he learned about Malevich’s project, especially Suprematism with its restrictive and exclusionary requirements, the less feasible it seemed to try to follow or emulate Malevich’s trajectory. A major disillusionment in this regard came about when Vassiliev saw the fairly comprehensive presentation of Malevich’s work and notes at the “Moscow-Paris” exhibition. As indicated earlier, the exhibition was a turning point for Vassiliev who was beginning to understand that the avant-garde was something other than unfettered personal expression. He explains that he began to see the avant-garde against a rather troubling background of the “terrible possession of the age and the grimace of inhumanity.”\textsuperscript{34} Vassiliev found the contempt shown by the avant-garde toward the viewer disconcerting. Initially, he regarded Malevich as “a lode-star, the ultimate point on the path upon which the work and philosophy of Vladimir Andreyevich Favorsky looked a thoroughly humane affair, accessible and comprehensible.”\textsuperscript{35} Instead of a beacon of freedom, Vassiliev discovered Malevich to be yet another aesthetic dictator. The initial, positive reactions by underground artists toward the art of the avant-garde were almost inevitable given the situation of being forced to produce art for the Soviet dictatorship, which fostered a sense that anything else must be less oppressive. Additionally, the lack of access to the actual writings of avant-garde artists shielded nonconformist artists from the constrictive
dimensions to the work of figures like Malevich. Out of these circumstances, Vassiliev had come to Malevich’s canvases with preconceived notions, as he terms it “a joy laid in previously,” that led him to be sympathetic to the images. Quite simply, living under the oppressive influence of Soviet authorities, unofficial artists interpreted anything that was forbidden to be worthy of their attention. The prohibition placed upon formalist work and the strong denunciations leveled against “bourgeois” avant-garde art fostered a belief that the radical artwork symbolized freedom and humanity, in contradistinction to the restrictions and terror of the Soviet regime. Vassiliev notes, “I would now categorize Malevich among those artists that stand at the limit. . .He stands not simply at the limit, but at the very summit, on the razor’s edge of movement. . .There is no further natural continuation of the road. . .Emptiness or, rather, the ‘white nothingness,’ now define the character of the work done.”

The more Vassiliev became exposed to Malevich’s work, especially those of his Suprematist phase, the more he came to realize that Malevich’s project was prescriptive and did not encourage individual freedom.

Unlike other disillusioned artists like Leonid Lamm, exposure to Malevich’s burdensome theories did not lead Vassiliev to swear off the avant-garde project altogether. Instead, he engaged it as part of the complicated heritage that he, as a Russian artist, had inherited and therefore could not ignore. Positive or negative, Vassiliev believed that the events of the past actively influence events in the present, whether consciously or unconsciously. It would have been just as inauthentic to simply renounce the legacy of Malevich in his work as it would be to hold on to an untrue heroic view of his project:
For me, the artist of my youth is alive and authentic. It is impossible to abolish him, as it is impossible to abolish the past or the light of a star which, even after its death, will cast light for a countless number of years. Even if this fairy-tale about Malevich had existed for me alone, I believe that it would nevertheless be a true existence, relating not only to me but also to Malevich. The light must have been in him, for otherwise there would have been nothing for me to react to.\(^\text{38}\)

Having come to a truer understanding of Malevich’s project, Vassiliev did not simply abandon his investigations of light and space that had been inspired by Malevich (indirectly through the theories of Favorsky). Instead, Vassiliev attempted to reconcile the uninhibited Malevich of his youth with the historical, dictatorial Malevich. In other words, his work is an analysis of the ongoing legacy of Malevich, an attempt to take it out of its ideological box and discover its own particular humanity. Importantly, this was not done in an effort to somehow rehabilitate him or continue his project. Rather, Vassiliev became interested first and foremost in the Malevich of the present: “The present is saturated with the past as a live sponge is saturated with water,” Vassiliev writes, “Not the past which has passed, but that which is constantly alive, that whose light helps transform the volatile, ever-mobile ‘now’ into a phenomenon forever fixed in the visible space of the arrested moment.”\(^\text{39}\) His attempts to imbue the Suprematist project with a form of humanity had little to do with the historical figure of Kazimir Malevich, and everything to do with Vassiliev’s own inner need to find a new ethical dimension to his own works.
In the wake of the “Moscow-Paris” exhibition, Vassiliev carried out a project called *Substitutions and Transformations* (1981-86 – Figure 7), which consisted of 102 drawings and collages exploring the interactions of space, light, and objects. Continuing his experimental approach to art, in several of the sheets Vassiliev combined the spectral effects of his earlier career with various landscape images. In the three colored-pencil images presented here, the artist uses the image of a man standing on a muddy road that leads back into the picture through a forest. Above the images, are abstract, spectral images reminiscent of his “Spaces” series. The first features a white center, the second a black center, and the third has one of each. The constant image below is then combined with the light effects worked out in the corresponding abstract box. In the first, the outline of the figure is white and the whole composition projects out into the viewer’s space. In the second, the same figure is pushed back into the background with the trees. In the third, Vassiliev tries to combine the two effects, resulting in a complex composition in which elements on the vertical axis correspond to the white-center configuration, while the horizontal elements are the black center type. The result is one in which certain elements protrude out into space, while others appear to recede. The exploratory process by which Vassiliev carries out this project is reminiscent of something like Monet’s Haystacks—another artist Vassiliev admired.

Vassiliev’s combination of the avant-garde-inspired, abstract spectral images with conventional landscapes rooted in his new understanding of Malevich in the wake of the “Moscow – Paris” exhibition of 1981. In introducing Vassiliev’s *A-Ya* essay on the exhibition, Boris Groys summarizes the view held by many nonconformists regarding
Malevich’s radicalism in rejecting the premise that art reflects nature. Malevich was opposed to the imitation of nature which has the deleterious effect of conditioning people to iconography of conventional art. Further, Malevich believed that such imitations of nature were actually only reflections of people’s understanding of nature, as conditioned through conventional depictions. In a sort of circular logic, art conditioned people to see the world in a manner consistent with traditional art. In the wake of technological innovations that had proven they could reshape the natural world, Malevich set out to find a perfect set of forms that could act as a blueprint for this new reality. “Malevich’s art finds its place wholly within the framework of ideas of European classicism,” Groys explains, “with the imposition of a world of perfect, beautiful forms upon chaos as its object. This is to be done through pure contemplation. The white background of Malevich’s worlds symbolizes this idea of a new beginning without conditions.”

The most troubling aspect of Malevich’s prescriptions was not that he wanted to create a more beautiful world, but that he wanted to begin this new world on a blank canvas.

The continued influence of Malevich in Vassiliev’s work centers around this concept of “white nothingness,” and its opposite, “infinite” blackness. In order to begin afresh, to establish a new beginning upon the “white nothingness” required the complete destruction of all existing forms. “Black Square – a reduction of the abyss (in a perspectival sense) appears as an object, placed into the white ‘nothingness,’” Vassiliev writes. “The emphasis shifts to the instant of liberation of the object from everything, that is, to ‘nothingness.’” By working his abstract, spectral forms into an interaction with landscape elements, Vassiliev shows the continuing possibilities of form and color
from Malevich’s spiritualism, but refutes the premise that it must come out of nothingness. In this sense, Vassiliev’s project reflects the larger, international trends within postmodernism that rejected the notion of absolute originality—the idea that something must be created out of nothing. His rejection of the modernist premise that the past is something to be overcome, while advocating for the notion that all elements of the past be inspected for their continued relevance to the present, is central to Vassiliev’s analysis of Malevich’s art.

The use of landscape elements in Vassiliev’s works defies Malevich’s distrust of the natural world and links up more directly with the art of the nineteenth-century Realists whose legacy continued to loom large in Russia throughout the twentieth century. The Wanderers (Peredvizhniki), collectively resigned from the Academy in 1863 to pursue more populist themes. Rejecting the traditional genre hierarchy of the academy, the members of the group particularly favored landscape painting, specifically populist, slavophilic landscapes of the Russian countryside. Vassiliev’s affinity for the work of the Wanderers has often been noted by figures such as Ilya Kabakov—a close observer of Vassiliev’s approach. He argues that it is specifically Vassiliev’s connection to the Wanderers that represents his contribution to the nonconformist movement, “Vassiliev was able to unite the innovative, formalist, investigations and directions of the avant-garde with that humanity, lyricism, and appeal to real life that was characteristic of the nineteenth century. Doing this was a very important thing, it returned the visual narrative to the picture.” Vassiliev’s recognition of Malevich’s prescriptive utopianism did not lead him to purge Malevich’s legacy from his own art, nor did he attempt to
cleanse it of all undesirable aspects; rather he preferred to reach further back into Russian history in an attempt to situate his own art within a complicated artistic heritage.

For an artist frustrated by official art and operating in the underground, the appeal to the example of the Wanderers is somewhat surprising. After all, it was this very artistic movement from which Socialist Realism claimed its heritage. The prestigious institute from which Vassiliev graduated even bore the name of one of the Wanderers’ leading figures—Vassily Surikov. As John Bowlt notes, the Wanderers were cast as the prototype for Socialist Realism from its very inception when it was looking for an historical model: “Socialist Realism called for an artform that was to be figurative, accessible, and connected explicitly with socio-political reality. . . .These Realists such as Vasilii Perov, Ilia Repin, and Vasilii Surikov were put forward as models for young Soviets to follow.” Indeed, Vassiliev’s method for finding an alternative to official art is all the more peculiar considering that both can be seen as a combination of the same two things—the nineteenth-century Wanderers and the Russian avant-garde. The populist political agenda forwarded by the Wanderers, along with their intense sense of national identity were seen by Soviet policy makers as an ideal model, and manifest themselves not only in the broad adoption of Realism over other art forms, but also in the mandates that art contain narodnost’—an untranslatable term that suggests a quality of the people. These qualities borrowed from the nineteenth century were combined with a future-oriented utopianism and totalism that is distinctly modernist. When comparing a work of the Wanderers like Ilya Repin’s Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870-73 – Figure 8) with a classic Socialist Realist canvas like Tatyana Yablonskaya’s Bread (1949 –
Figure 9), it is apparent that the former lacks the overwhelming optimism of the latter. The somber, strained faces of Repin’s laborers have given way in Yablonskaya’s painting to joyous, smiling caricatures of the working class. The Soviets’ adoption of the nineteenth-century tradition consciously rejected many of the critical elements of the artistic project undertaken by the Wanderers. Indeed, there is no small amount of irony involved in the use of a group of artists who rebelled against artistic prescription by the state in order to establish an officially mandated style of art to bolster the state’s power.

Vassiliev’s combination of the art of the avant-garde and that of the Wanderers in his own paintings can be read as a shadow of Socialist Realism. His works draw upon particular characteristics of each legacy that were suppressed in state-sanctioned art. From the nineteenth-century he borrowed an existential tendency, that found its basis in the timelessness of the natural landscape in Russia which contrasts with the mortality of man, and from the avant-garde he embraced an individualism and experimental freedom of expression which he believed it to contain. He was intrigued by the formal interests of figures like Malevich that explored the power of light and color independent of subject matter. *At the Edge (Broken Tree)* (1990 – Figure 10), a work of Vassiliev’s mature style, incorporates both the legacy of the avant-garde with the tradition of the nineteenth-century. The choice of subject matter in Vassiliev’s composition—a sort of dramatic romanticism found in the imperfections of nature—is typical of the quintessential landscapists of the Wanderers Ivan Shishkin and Isaak Levitan. The Russian forest is powerfully connected to the Russian national identity and many of Vassiliev’s works focus on it. Nature is not presented in Vassiliev’s works as a perfect and complete object
of beauty, but is given the full force of reality, depicted as an endless cycle of life and death. The tree in this work is dead and broken, but as it falls to the ground, it can already be seen that new life is rising from the forest floor. Rather than merely replicating the style of the nineteenth-century Realists he admired, Vassiliev blends into his composition the reminders of the avant-garde legacy, namely the spectrums of color that play across the surface of the surface of the painting. As viewers we are offered a look back onto the nineteenth-century tradition through the lens of modernism. A spectral light encompasses the whole canvas, encircling the central portion of the broken tree in a white halo of light. Standing before such a canvas, the light creates an optical effect making the central portion appear to project outwardly toward the spectator. This projection is fragile. Once focused upon, the center suddenly appears to recede deeply into the space of the painting. Thus the object in the center is simultaneously proximate and distant. In a visual reference to Malevich’s theories in regards to pure light and color, Vassiliev has suspended the shape of the broken tree in the shimmering “white nothingness”—an emptiness that is not space, but an irrational absence of anything. The title of the work, At the Edge, refers not only to the tree’s physical location at the edge of the forest, but also to something much more fundamental—its position at the edge of oblivion. The liminality of space is central to Vassliev’s larger artistic theory: "I think I might define my goals in painting as follows: to 'open up' the painting and remain balanced on the edge, on the border between the space for the viewer and the space of the painting, of black and white; to create communication between these two different spaces; to hide the image in the pictorial space." Vassiliev’s works tenuously balance
the object between the space of the viewer and a visual recession into the picture. Here, white becomes a powerful metaphor for death because it has the potential to saturate and obliterate the objects. Noticeably absent from Vassiliev’s metaphoric images of the Russian countryside is the type of Christian moralizing one might expect to find in a work by Levitan, dwelling instead on nothingness after death. The tree in Vassiliev’s work is dead, and the instability with which it stands after death, before falling to the ground to be lost forever, is paralleled by the unstable projections created by what he and Bulatov referred to as the canvas’s own inner light. The oblivion facing the tree, symbolized by its slowly being engulfed in a blinding white light, will eventually give birth to something new—a higher realm of existence in Malevich; new-growth forest in Vassiliev. Looking to the same historical models as official art theorists, Vassiliev creates a very different result that focuses on formal issues of color and space and the existential themes of the Wanderers.

At the Edge highlights an internal conflict for Vassiliev between the historical Malevich and the imagined, ideal Malevich of his imagination. Whereas his earlier works had looked to the avant-garde as a source of pure individualism and creative freedom, this painting also exhibits a certain crisis of existence born out of modernist destruction. Just as the “white nothingness” of Malevich’s Suprematism would give birth first to the Black Square, and later to all other geometric objects as the basis of a higher, more beautiful world, the tree in Vassiliev’s work is giving rise to new life on the forest floor. But unlike Malevich, Vassiliev does not accept the idea that this nothingness is necessary and desirable; it is precisely this “ends justify the means” type of mentality that
Vassiliev, as a child of the great socialist experiment, simply will not accept. There is a sense of a crisis of existence evident in Vassiliev’s works, and the tree’s gradual disappearance is observed almost nostalgically, as a moment in time that cannot be arrested.

Of equal importance to the “white nothingness” in Vassiliev’s analysis of Malevich’s legacy is his interest in the meaning and importance of the “Black Square.” Vassiliev’s investigations into the implications of black as a metaphor intensified after his emigration to New York, as he completed a series of eighty-four drawings called “On Black Paper.” This series is decidedly retrospective, as several of the drawings actually re-use the imagery of some of his former works. Each image is either drawn directly onto, or mounted in the center of a sheet of black paper. The use of black for the background reflects not merely an aesthetic choice, but a metaphorical analysis of blackness. One of the recurring themes throughout the series is that of falling leaves. Many of the sheets of paper contain small, beautifully executed drawings of falling leaves. (Figure 11) In all their simplicity, they reveal a very important aspect of Vassiliev’s artistic theory. Upon seeing the works, Vassiliev’s longtime collaborator Erik Bulatov wrote, “This darkness is not death or nothingness; it is life. . .the black is a space in which these drawings fly past us like leaves. The image of flying leaves is repeated insistently, and we realize its significance at once. These leaves are recollections, impressions, ‘flashes of memory.’” Darkness, for Vassiliev, in no way indicates nothingness or even emptiness but is instead space which is full of unseen objects. As if to make this connection absolutely clear, in the seventh section of the series, “Malevich-
Nekrasov,” he includes the image of Malevich’s *White Square* with the word “nothing” above it, and *Black Square* with the word “everything.” (Figure 12) If white is the nothingness of oblivion, then black is an infinite abyss.

The meaning of the leaves that recur throughout Vassiliev’s works extends far beyond being a reminder of the fullness of the dark, they serve as poignant markers of the passing of time. “Like that of leaves is a generation of men,” was one of Vassiliev’s favorite quotes taken from Homer’s *Iliad*. Related to the symbolism of the leaves, the artist’s interest in the theme of life and death permeates the entire series. This theme is introduced right at the beginning of the series with a group of three images: the first is a delicately sketched leaf falling, half-shrouded in darkness; the second, a silhouette of a house against the darkening sky at twilight; finally, the third is a poem by Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934-2009) who participated in the discussion on Sretensky Boulevard, and it puts the first two into context:

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People lived. . .
Lived. . .
People lived. . .
People lived. . .
People lived. . .
People lived. . .
Lived. . .
Then nothing.
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Setting the tone for the entire series, this poem evokes images of mortality and loss that color the viewer’s interpretation of each of the sheets. As the leaves emerge from the blackness, momentarily catching the light, they represent a life lived. Falling out of the darkness and off of the sheet of paper, they pass into the oblivion of nothingness. Like
the leaves, figures from Vassiliev’s life appear, caught in the light of memory, only to disappear once more.47

Like Malevich, Vassiliev understood the future to be an infinite blackness symbolized by *Black Square*; unlike Malevich, he moves forward in time reluctantly and does not have faith in a better future. In the year preceding his “On Black Paper” series of drawings, Vassiliev painted an introspective self-portrait that explores the interactions between white and black, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1993 – Figure 13). Sitting before the viewer, Vassiliev depicts himself drinking alone. Leaning forward on his stool, drink in hand, the artist gazes off into the distance, absent of any context save the bottle and newspaper at his feet. In the background of the image, the artist has executed his signature spectral effect with the black center intertwined with an image. The image that emerges, almost ghostly from the darkness, is that of an old dilapidated country estate from the pre-revolutionary era that has been neglected and has fallen into disrepair.

In its clear allusions to an act of reminiscence, this painting can be read more fully in regards to the artist’s own essay “On Memory.” In this essay, Vassiliev discusses how little, incidental events from our past come to our conscious attention, almost at random. These memories can be triggered by sounds, smells or, at times, for no reason at all. He analogizes these memories to flashes of light from the past. “That light is the very essence of remembrance,” he explains, “The deeper one delves into the past, the more powerful the stream of light. And somewhere over there, beyond the boundaries of the discernible, it turns into a river of golden light. In that river my life drowns, and everything that was before lives.”48 For Vassiliev, a memory is not lost as it fades into
darkness, but when it becomes overwhelmed and blends into other memories (and can only be felt as pure light), its details cannot be discerned, but its influence can still be felt. While the individual past experiences can no longer be distinguished from one another, they continue to act as a sort of guiding light of past knowledge gained. Those memories that stick with us, he explains, are those that escape complete saturation and somehow remain on the banks of the river—images he strives to hold on to. He elaborates on how these past elements interact with him in the present moment:

I become, as it were, stretched in time, moving simultaneously in two opposite directions. The first movement takes me, in violation to the natural course of events, further and further back into the past, into ‘the glow of days gone by’; the second carries me, the way it’s supposed to be, ‘ahead’ into the silent abyss of the future of which I know nothing and which I experience as a black hole, as an emptiness devoid of matter, a hole that, for me, fills up with life to the extent that it turns into the past.49

With his back to the blackness in his self-portrait, Vassiliev gazes ahead into the pure white light of memory—he moves to the future with his attention squarely on the past. By placing the old, broken down estate in the dark center, Vassiliev reveals just how complicated he sees the relationship between past and future. The ruins of the house are powerful signals of the passage of time and a marker of the past, but here they are placed into the future abyss, illuminated by the light of the past. In the evident slow deterioration of the house Vassiliev sees a metaphor for his own finite existence. Reflections on the past and on people that have come and gone in his life cast their light onto an awareness of mortality. As that future becomes past, it joins the light of
recollection, eventually becoming saturated and eventually becoming nothingness. Whereas Malevich saw in the promise of Black Square a potential of becoming and a higher place of existence, all Vassiliev sees is inevitable oblivion.

In addition to these self-reflective themes that draw heavily on the traditions of nineteenth-century art, Vassiliev did, at times, engage his spectral investigations with explicitly political themes. The most notable example of this is his painting Ogonyok, No. 25, 1975 (1980 – Figure 14). The source material for this work is not landscape or ruins, but a magazine cover from the popular Soviet periodical Ogonyok. This particular edition of the magazine featured a photograph of Leonid Brezhnev delivering a special speech on May 8, 1975 on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. The artist faithfully renders all of the details of the photograph with the exception of the speaker. Streaming in from four corners is a light effect that converges in the center as a bright, white light. By connecting these effects with the photograph of Brezhnev, Vassiliev is making a direct connection between Soviet politics and the defunct avant-garde. Indeed, as he notes in his writings, white is the color that occupies “high space,” or the space of the viewer, and thus projects outward toward us. For his part, Bulatov notes that for him and Vassiliev, perspectival recession into the picture was a characteristic of the nineteenth century Realists, but with avant-garde figures such as Malevich, “the artist does not draw the viewer inside the painting; rather the painting turns toward the viewer, including him or her in its space and literally forcing the viewer to become a participant.” The difference, then, between the Realists and the avant-garde is that the former allows the viewer the agency to engage or not,
while the latter projects out toward the viewer eliciting a reaction. For artists of the underground, it was exactly this aggressive prescriptiveness that was so troubling about the avant-garde, for it felt too much like party dictates. Vassiliev makes this connection visually between what is being delivered at the podium and the dictates of the avant-garde. The use of the Ogonyok cover, and not another press photograph of the event, also implicates the magazine as an agent in this type of dictation. Interestingly, the connection between this magazine and avant-garde ambition is also present in the fact that the headquarters for Ogonyok were actually designed by Malevich’s protégé—El Lissitzky. Using Malevich’s theories of light and space derived from Malevich’s artistic legacy, Vassiliev critiques the ethicality of both the avant-garde and Soviet art in terms of the power dynamics that exist between artist and viewer.

The actual speech that Brezhnev delivered at that meeting, which was titled “Immortal Exploit,” resonates directly with Vassiliev’s recurrent themes of life and death. Whereas Brezhnev extolled the virtues of the soldiers that fought in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), making the case for their immortality, Vassiliev highlights (quite literally) their death. In the supercharged light of the past, all details of the conflict become indiscernible, and only the broad historical narrative is told. In essence, Vassiliev’s counter-argument is that when it comes to historical accounts of war, the experiences and contribution of individual soldiers always fades.

Beyond Black Square, Oleg Vassiliev had a strong interest in exploring the ongoing implications of another of Malevich’s seminal paintings—Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions (1915 – Figure 15). The symbolism of
the Malevich’s use of red is not so pronounced for Vassiliev as is the dichotomy of the “infinite” black and “nothingness” of white. After his analysis of white and black squares in the “Malevich-Nekrasov” section of his “On Black Paper” series (Figure 12), Vassiliev turns his attention to the red square, so prominently repositioned in Malevich’s compositions, eventually altogether usurping the black square. In a pair of drawings, Vassiliev reveals his difficulty in understanding the meaning of the work. In one, he draws a self-portrait, facing away from the viewer, standing before Red Square. Above the work, the resolved statements such as “everything” and “nothing” give way to a simple question mark. In the work paired with this drawing, Vassiliev depicts his friend Eric Bulatov who stands before the Kremlin Palace of Congresses—a Soviet-era assembly hall just inside the gates of the Kremlin. Drawn as a black-and-white image, the only color in the work is a representation of the red square that has rotated in space and recedes perpectivally into the composition, parallel to the façade of the building. Bulatov stands before the structure, gazing pensively through the translucent red shape up toward the hammer and sickle seal above the door. Below the image, in a more subtle gray textual label, is the word “nostalgia.” The paired drawings reveal that Vassiliev sees this work as reflexive, and that its importance is somehow tied up with the Soviet history that came after it, but the precise implications are not so clear.

Vassiliev’s choice of context for his portrait of Bulatov in Nostalgia is very carefully chosen for its historical and political connotations. In this single image, Vassiliev has outlined several important parallels between modernism and the Soviet state. The most apparent connection is drawn between the red square and the Soviet-era
construction. This conflation of the Soviet and the avant-garde is made all the more complicated by the fact that the building itself is unmistakably modern in its conception and design, while still serving its old purpose as the Soviet Union’s most important meeting hall. Indeed, it was in this hall that Brezhnev delivered that inimitable speech depicted in Vassiliev’s *Ogonyok, No. 25, 1975*. Built from 1959-1961, the construction of this assembly hall was accompanied by a great deal of controversy because in order to build it, several heritage buildings, including parts of the state armory and Kremlin palace were destroyed. The blatant disregard for history exhibited by the Soviet state toward historical heritage in this egregious manner bore striking similarities for Vassiliev to Malevich’s own contempt for the past; both believed there was nothing to be gained from one’s own history. That the state chose a modern style of architecture makes the parallel all the more striking.

Vassiliev’s drawing *Nostalgia* not only highlights connections between the avant-garde and the Soviets generally, but makes these correlations specifically through the complex associations with the color red in the Russian cultural context—a color adopted by the Soviet Union for all of its propagandistic imagery. Of course, Malevich could not have possibly known the specific connotations the color red would acquire during the Soviet era. However, he was certainly aware of red’s prominence in Russian history. The word for the color red, *krasny* is etymologically linked to the word for beautiful, *krasivy*. In fact, throughout much of Russian history, there was no distinction between the two words. So although Malevich could not know the future ideological exploits of the Soviet state symbolized by the color red, it would come as no surprise that party
leaders would show a preference for that color when establishing their state iconography. Situated within the Kremlin walls, it does not go unnoticed that the Kremlin Palace of Congresses sits directly adjacent to Red Square.\textsuperscript{56} In his composition, paired with his own puzzling over Malevich’s painting, Vassiliev analyzes the color’s meaning in his own present reality and the place occupied by Malevich and the Soviet state in its history of connotations. Raised in the Stalinist era, and specifically working as an unofficial artist in opposition to the state, Vassiliev highlights the fact that red, once the very pinnacle of beauty, can no longer be understood in a purely positive way.

Vassiliev’s uneasiness with \textit{Red Square} and the complicated relationship between the avant-garde and Soviet artistic legacies is imbued with a sense of loss hinted at by its title, \textit{Nostalgia}. We presume that Bulatov (perhaps a stand-in for Vassiliev himself) stands there feeling a sense of nostalgia for something, but what? Viewed from a post-Soviet point of view, several potential interpretations emerge. The harsh economic shock of capitalist privatization inspired throughout Russian society a broad wave of nostalgia for the stability of the Brezhnev era. Glancing back at one of the centerpieces of the Soviet state, Bulatov is perhaps longing for simpler times. Conversely, the fall of the Soviet Union also brought out a strong sense of nationalism and a desire to restore Russia’s Imperial greatness. Svetlana Boym describes this mentality in her analysis of postmodern nostalgia, noting that “restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past.”\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, the restorative nostalgic wants to correct the errors of the past by recreating the world as it existed before something (in this case the Soviet Union) corrupts that world. At the time Vassiliev was carrying out
the “On Black Paper” series, there was a major undertaking in Moscow to rebuild the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, originally built in 1833; destroyed in 1931. The drive to rebuild this cathedral was part of a larger trend aimed at removing Soviet monuments and replacing them with rebuilt tsarist-era structures. The Kremlin Palace of Congresses was controversial even in the Soviet era because it does not fit in with the larger architectural program of the Kremlin, and was built on the site of earlier, Imperial-era buildings. For the restorative nostalgic, the Soviet meeting hall was a potent symbol of the Soviet government’s destruction of Russian cultural heritage sites. In addition to a longing for imperial Russia, the feelings of nostalgia embodied by Bulatov could be for more optimistic times, an era in which figures like Malevich and Soviet revolutionaries could look forward to the future with the promise of a higher and more beautiful way of life. In a single image, Vassiliev evokes competing types of nostalgia, showing that he is even unsure of what past it is for which he longs.

Vassiliev would return to Malevich’s Red Square to evoke a sense of post-Soviet loss in his own version of the work, titled Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Spaces (2002 – Figure 16)—a slight variation on Malevich’s title of Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions. Vassiliev’s work challenges Malevich’s own claims on the legacy of nineteenth-century Realism. According to Malevich’s theory, a red geometric shape could represent a way of viewing a peasant woman on a higher plane of understanding that is every bit as true as anything the Wanderers might present. Vassiliev re-introduces a traditional form of figuration to the geometric vocabulary of Suprematism. Importantly, by keeping the geometric
iconography, Vassiliev signals that he does not reject Malevich’s Painterly Realism outright: he merely challenges its exclusivity. The change in title from a depiction of a peasant woman in “two dimensions” to “two spaces” is critical in this comparison. Malevich limits his composition to the flat, two-dimensional surface of the canvas—a deliberate move away from typical perspectival illusionism. Vassiliev leaves this depiction of a red square in the space of the surface, but adds to it a figure that recedes into the space of the picture—the “pictorial space” of Vassiliev’s and Bulatov’s theory. The traditionally rendered form of the peasant woman in Vassiliev’s composition is based on one of the most powerful symbols in the Soviet Union: Vera Mukhina’s 1937 statue *Worker and Collective Farm Girl*. This detail highlights another strange moment of coincidence between Malevich’s Suprematism and the iconography of the Soviet state, specifically that he would choose a peasant woman for his red square given the future importance of both the color red and of working class imagery. Mukhina’s statue was chosen to crown the Soviet pavilion at the International Exposition in Paris in 1937, directly opposite the German Nazi pavilion in a sort of artistic preview to the coming war (Figure 17). Moved from Paris to Moscow at the end of the exposition, Mukhina’s statue stood in a prominent position during the rest of the Soviet era outside the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh)—a permanent fairgrounds on which each of the Soviet territories established their own pavilions. Again, Vassiliev brings together the iconography of Malevich and the Soviet state by combining the iconography of the peasant woman of Malevich’s red square with a reference to Mukhina’s famous statue. Interestingly, rather than using the actual sculpture for his
model, Vassiliev uses a self-portrait he had created of the statue in 1988, where he dressed himself in a dress, stuffed with pillows, and had Bulatov take a picture of him on the roof of their studio. Quite literally drawing himself into the composition, Vassiliev makes personal the larger geopolitical events he references. “In my imagination this episode has merged with other more significant events,” he notes, going on to explain that the most important was when, “the ‘Iron Felix’ was removed.” From his post-Soviet, reflective perspective, Vassiliev demonstrates the failure of both Malevich and the Soviet state to realize their respective promises for the future. He works out the implications of the fall of both ideologies for his own self-identity. For Vassiliev, his own heritage as an artist is a complicated mix of the nineteenth-century Realist tradition, the avant-garde, and official Soviet propaganda. The defining characteristic of Vassiliev’s art is the element of light; it is a feature that symbolizes for him the workings of the past that define the present and hint at the future. The memories encapsulated in that light are good and bad, and separating one from the other is impossible. The sources of Vassiliev’s light that guide his artistic practice are variable, including Kazimir Malevich, Socialist Realism, the nineteenth-century Wanderers, as well as friends and family. Vassiliev marks an important transition point in the history of the nonconformist movement in the Soviet Union because he recognized the futility of attempting to purge some of the light from the past, in search of a purer light. Instead, he simply tries to better understand the influence of that sum total of light on his present worldview.
Chapter 2

The Language of Control

Perhaps the key feature of the symbolic economy of the late ‘real Socialism’ was...the almost paranoiac belief in the power of the Word.

-Slavoj Žižek

In Soviet Russia, library book checks you out!

-Yakov Smirnoff

The narrative of the Conceptualist movement is rife with inconsistencies and exceptions, as is the case with any attempt to unify the work of diverse artists into a single category. If there is a defining feature of conceptualism, however, it is likely the increased attention paid by artists to the politics, and implicit connotations, of text and language. Robert Storr summarized the situation thus: “What words said—their dictionary definitions, colloquial meanings, acquired connotation, sounds, alliterative associations—were both means and ends of conceptual art.”¹ Such linguistic and semiotic interests were not limited to artists practicing in the West, however, but were a primary concern for nonconformist artists operating in the underground of Soviet society. Far from an examination of text in the abstract, their work was rooted in the privileged position occupied by language in Soviet policy, exemplified by the omnipresent text-
based propaganda banners. Citing the expansive propaganda program and prevalence of bureaucratic documents, Ilya Kabakov explains that “it is hard to overestimate the role of the written text in our society.” Likewise Komar and Melamid, highlighting the differences between western visual culture and Soviet society, point out that in the latter “speech is behind everything: I don’t see, I speak.” However, the Soviet unofficial artists’ desire to deconstruct language, both written and spoken, had little to do with the endeavors of their Western peers, of whose works they had little or no cognizance.

In the West, Conceptualists were engaging in a deconstructive discourse heavily inflected by the philosophies of writers associated with the Parisian journal Tel Quel—writers such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva. Although Soviet artists did not have access to these writings, it should be noted that both the Tel Quel group and underground Soviet artists were drawing linguistic inspiration from a shared historical source: the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers. Whereas the Tel Quel group had direct access to the writings of Saussure, Soviet artists and theorists were only able to access his ideas through the work of the prominent Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. Through the work of Kristeva, Bakhtin’s work would also end up heavily influencing the Tel Quel writers after his death in 1975. Thus it is important to note that although both western and Soviet conceptualists engage semiotic theory in their work, it would be a mistake to see one as an outgrowth of the other. Instead, these two forms of Conceptualism should be understood as parallel intellectual pursuits, developing largely independent of one another from a shared theoretical antecedent.
Western interest in the work of Saussure centered on his argument that words are not directly referential to objects in the real world, but instead make reference to a system of language within which they are necessarily associated with numerous other words and concepts. In short, a word is not denotative, but connotative. For example, the word ‘tree’ does not refer to an actual tree under which one stands. Instead, it connotes similar concepts such as ‘leaves’, ‘trunk’, ‘nature’, ‘forest’, ‘shade’ or even ‘environmentalism.’ From this network of associations, one understands the word ‘tree’ as a symbol standing for a generalized notion of a tree, its make-up, context, and function. In addition to the fact that words are not directly referential, Saussure explains that a word’s connotations may actually operate below the level of an individual’s conscious attention, and thus he advocated for a branch of psychology he called “semiology.” The subconscious, connotative nature of language and the corollary relationship between text and image constituted a primary concern for Conceptualists. Graham Allen explains, “Structural analysis tends to dispense with the question of the meaning of texts in favor of an assessment of the text’s relation to the system out of which it is presumed to have been produced.” This structural interest in the relation between signifier and signified is central to conceptual artworks such as Joseph Kosuth’s iconic One and Three Chairs (1965 – Figure 18) For his installation, the artist arranged an actual folding chair, a full-scale photograph of a chair, and a dictionary definition of “chair.” The work questions the relationship between the actual object of a chair, and its ideal conception as a word. Of course the actual chair is only one example of an object that conforms to the larger connotations associated with the word. Kosuth’s work can be read as a sort of
demonstration piece of semiotic theory, highlighting the different degrees to which word, image, or object can capture the essence of “chairness.” Later examples of conceptual art by artists such as Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, and Adrian Piper would expand on these semiotic theories to challenge cultural issues such as sexism and racism. Most important for these artists was not how a text referred to a specific object of interest, but how language causes the reader to associate it with other subjects or ideas. In particular, these artists concerned themselves with the way a person’s view of the world could be externally conditioned by influencing the word associations made by people on the level of the subconscious.

Bakhtin expanded upon Saussure’s theories by foregrounding the fact that every act of communication must be understood in terms of its specific historical circumstances. He writes, “Not only is the meaning of the utterance but also the very fact of its performance is of historical and social significance, as in general, is the fact of its realization in the here and now, in given circumstances, at a certain historical moment, under the conditions of the given social situation.” Because language operates according to a network of associations in both the speaker’s and the listener’s minds, the specific cultural and historical locatedness of the interlocutors needs to be considered when analyzing any linguistic relay. For example, the phrase “Just Do It” would be understood differently by someone in American society before it was coined by Nike for a 1988 advertising campaign. Before seeing these advertisements the addressee would likely ask what ‘it’ was that should be done. Now, owing to the extensive reach of Nike’s advertising, the phrase is self-sufficient and the connotations are clear to the culturally
initiated. Because speech relies so heavily on such outside connotations and historical circumstances, it is not so much something an individual has as it is something an individual uses. This concept, famously explored in the writings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, positions language as an active agent in the formulation of social structures.7 “Whenever subjects enter language they enter into situations in which their personal subjectivity is lost,”8 explains Graham Allen in his book Intertextuality, “With the acquisition of language, the subject enters into all the social positions and rules and relations which underpin society. . . the subject in language is always being temporarily fixed and positioned as an ‘I’ or ‘you’ or as part of a collective ‘we’.”9 From this perspective, language does not belong to an individual; rather, an individual belongs to a language.10

Bakhtin draws attention to the fact that communication involves both a speaker and a listener, and each plays a very particular role in an individual’s situatedness within a system of language:

. . . word is a two sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As a word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’. I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. . . A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee.11

An utterance is not the exclusive possession of the speaker, Bakhtin argues, even more important for communication is the addressee’s reception. On this point, Roland Barthes
notes, “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”12 This does not, however, mean that the power relation in speech favors the addressee. Bakhtin explains that speech constantly oscillates between two types of utterance which he terms “monologic” and “dialogic.”13 In the former, the addressee assumes a passive role and is unable to respond, while in the latter the addressee is granted equal opportunity to speak. Given that it was through Bakhtin that Soviet artists and theorists could access semiotic theory, a distinct interest in the power dynamics of a communication act are a primary concern in Moscow conceptualist artworks, such as Komar and Melamid’s Onward to the Victory of Communism (1972 – Figure 19). Recreating a Soviet propaganda banner and signing it, the artists question what happens when the addressee of such messages (a Soviet citizen) becomes the speaker. At the root of their artwork is the passiveness or activeness of communication. In this sense, words and their associations are being challenged in a very different way than in works like Kosuth’s. Rather than questioning the associations of a word-concept within the network of language, Komar and Melamid’s banner is aimed at understanding how the meaning of words is secondary to the mode of their transmission. Soviet conceptualists are interested in how, as Rosalind Krauss explains it, speech is “more than the simple (and neutral) transmission of a message. It is also the enactment of a relation of force, a move to modify the addressee’s right to speak.”14 Of course, an interest in the power dynamics of communication is not unique to Soviet artists, and was explored famously by western figures such as Marshall McLuhan. But as foundational examples of both western and Soviet Conceptualism, Kosuth’s and Komar and Melamid’s works demonstrate a difference of emphasis,
reflecting their respective cultural circumstances: in the West, text was deconstructed for
its subconscious biases and the communication act was primarily analyzed in terms of
technological media; in the Soviet Union, text and language were considered as
mechanisms of propaganda and the communication of the message relied not on a
particular medium as it did an iconography of state control and authority.

The establishment of a distinctly Soviet language system was a focus of
Communist Party leaders from the very early years of the Soviet Union. While they did
not attempt to completely invent a new language, Soviet leaders modified the
grammatical structure of the Russian language and expanded its vocabulary through the
invention of acronyms and neologisms.15 John Bowlt explains, “Soviet society, then, was
a culture of the word, of the acronym (for example, komsomol), and of the letter (CPSU)
that communicated meaning to those accustomed to their presence, and the result was a
sign system understood by all, appreciated by few.”16 The development of a Soviet
language system was not the result of the natural evolution of language over time, but of
targeted propaganda policies. Along these lines, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue
that the development of a system of language is anything but natural—it is the result of a
successful campaign to establish authority: “There is no mother tongue, only a power
takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity.”17 Because language is
something one belongs to, and an individual’s words will shape one’s conceptual
understanding of the world, the imposition of a language system is an auctioned aimed at
controlling and shaping another person’s worldview. The successful shaping of a system
of language to the needs of the state enables territorial claims to be made upon the
individuals who belong to that language. “Writing has nothing to do with signifying,” Deleuze and Guattari write in regards to the active force of language upon an individual, “It has to do with surveying, mapping.”¹⁸ The imposition of spelling and grammar reforms along with the requirement that all Soviets speak Russian was an important part of state policies designed to shape the perceptions of the citizenry.

Because of the dangers inherent in political dissent in the Soviet Union, particularly during the Stalinist era, the reforms and modifications occurring with official language were paralleled by the development of a carefully coded informal language used by ordinary citizens. In a sense, everybody became bilingual, speaking both the official language sanctioned by the Communist Party as well as the vernacular, ‘communal’ language. Speaking in the proper tongue for any given situation was critical if one was to stay out of trouble. As Komar and Melamid explain, “A dissident is an individual who was determined to break the double standard, a person who has decided to say ‘I will do openly that which I do in a small group.’”¹⁹ While it is tempting to characterize this duality of language according to Bakhtin’s two categories of speech—understanding official language to be monologic and, conversely, communal speech as dialogic—in reality the situation was much more complex and, ultimately, troubling. The text-based works of unofficial artists raise serious doubts about the possibility of ever engaging in real communication in the Soviet Union.
The Creation of an Official Soviet Language

In the formative years of the Soviet Union, a fundamental concern of Communist Party leaders was the education and creation of the ‘New Soviet Man’ and ‘New Soviet Woman,’ or as it was referred to popularly, ‘Homo-Sovieticus.’\(^{20}\) Despite the economic hardships that had fallen on the young state after two revolutions and a drawn-out civil war, the education of the citizenry was prioritized even over investment in manufacturing and industry. That a people shaped by revolution have a proper ideological outlook was understood to be a critical first step toward the rise in manufacturing. This policy is born out in Fyodor Gladkov’s celebrated novel *Cement*, where the “positive hero” Gleb must first undergo reeducation before he was fit to oversee the resuscitation of the dead provincial factory.\(^ {21}\) The focus on educating the masses produced some notable results, especially noted in the jump in the literacy rate from about 45% to 85%.\(^ {22}\) Soviet theorists had not perceived education as a means of simply transferring information; in keeping with Engels’ interpretations of the theory of evolution, they saw it as a transformative process of the very nature of the individual. In his influential book *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Leon Trotsky advanced the position that it was possible to take human evolution into one’s own hands:

The human species, the coagulated *Homo Sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution. . .the nature of man is hidden in the deepest and darkest corner of the unconscious, of the elemental, of the sub-soil. Is it not self-evident that the greatest efforts of investigative thought and of creative initiative will
be in that direction? . . . Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.  

The firmly ingrained belief that such supermen could be created, and in a very short time, was the basis for the primacy of education in Soviet political strategy. Indeed, as Boris Groys notes in his seminal text *The Total Art of Stalinism*, much of the economic success of the early years of Stalin’s rule was rooted in what came to be known as Stakhanovism—the belief that physical limitations could be overcome through sheer willpower alone.  

Central to the educational strategy of the Soviet Union was a pervasive agitational strategy, exemplified by Lenin’s 1918 decree “Concerning Monuments of the Republics”—a monumental propaganda program based on Tommaso Campanella’s utopian novel *Civitas Solis* (1602). In addition to the abundant statuary dedicated to Soviet leaders and war heroes, a majority of the state’s propaganda consisted of textually based banners, flags, and posters. Rather than containing specific didactic messages telling people what to do, the textual exhortations most often referred to abstract concepts and future states of being such as “Glory to the International Proletariat!” and “To the Bright Future of Communism!” The theory behind this strategy is rooted in a particular interpretation of Marxist materialism. Vitaly Komar writes about this theory, noting that in the Soviet Union, school children were taught that in ancient times, “Language had no symbolic words. Symbols appeared first in visual form...in our language symbolic
words appeared as a result of symbolic drawings.”26 In other words, abstract concepts only entered language and thought because they first existed as pictographs within a system of representation. Although this philosophical outlook privileges written text as being primary to the spoken word, its implications extend well beyond the bounds of the development of language as a means of verbal communication. Not only could written words create a spoken equivalent, but written words could bring into being an altered world such as that hoped for by the Soviet state. Considered another way, the bright future of communism was bound to become a reality because it had already been written. In their 1975 work *Scroll*, (Figure 20) Komar and Melamid parodied this theory by creating a language they called “Aruoit” (a neologism referring to their invented and undecodable language). By writing their text on a scroll, they lend to the work certain spiritual or transcendental connotations, if only superficially. With the material foundation of their language in place, they reasoned, the constitution of an alternate reality was inevitable.

The bringing to form of a new world through written text was not some magical and mysterious process for the Soviets; it was a direct extension of the theory of evolution as inspired by Engels. Because a person belongs to a language, and not the other way around, Soviets believed that changing the form of language would reshape the actual thought processes of the masses. In short, if you can control the words at an individual’s disposal, you can control their thoughts and views. On the primacy of words in dialectical materialism, Stalin argued, “Bare thoughts, free of the language material, free of the ‘natural matter’ of language—do not exist.”27 Just as a house will be
structured according to available building materials, thoughts are reliant on available linguistic resources. Because communist utopia depends on a change of attitude to a less selfish human race, the ability to reshape thoughts was crucial toward its ultimate realization. Propagandistic texts on banners and posters would be the central component of the Soviet re-education strategy. Their constant barrage upon the average Soviet citizen created a situation in which, as art history Yevgeny Barabanov writes “individual sight is consistently replaced by the cultural text.” Consistent exposure to proper ideological positions, it was contended, would lead the consumer of these textual works to conform to larger collective ideals. In a sense, it was an accelerated form of evolution based on radical intervention. As a process of “revolutionary evolution” it was reflective of the pervasive Leninist belief that the process of class development could be accelerated through a revolution headed by a small group of highly trained ideologues.

Unofficial Soviet artists such as Grisha Bruskin were particularly interested in deconstructing the foundational aspects of official language. In his work *Fundamental Lexicon* (1986 – Figure 21), Bruskin attempted to articulate the language of Soviet power visually by breaking it down into cellular units that account for its connotative associations and inter-textual relationships. As Bruskin explains it (if not somewhat facetiously), the work is conceived as a way of helping researchers in the distant future decode the culture of the Soviet Union after its fall. To do this, Bruskin creates a multi-paneled work which depicts archetypal figures, each representing a genetic unit of Soviet culture. “One allegorical figure supports another,” he writes, “The painting ceases to be different from text, and image becomes word.” As with any lexicon, Bruskin’s work is
a collection of words. Separated out onto small panels, these words have the capability of multiplying infinitely, as new words emerge. But Bruskin’s conception of the word is not that of a signifier that denotes a concrete signified. Instead, each figure might be understood as a “meme”—a term coined by Richard Dawkins as a cultural counterpart to the biological gene. Each of Bruskin’s words stands as a “unit of cultural transmission,” standing in for a collection of subconscious connotations rising out of their historical moment and location. For example, in one panel, the figure stands holding the interlocking rings of the Olympics, and the viewer is to connect this to the great emphasis placed upon supremacy in international athletics. The correct understanding of the connotations of the Olympics depends on the fact that this work was painted in the Soviet Union. If this work had been painted in any other country, the network of associations for the viewer would be very different. Likewise, other panels highlight other aspects of Soviet cultural identity: a little boy holds up the portrait of Chapaev—a Red Army soldier and commander from the Revolutionary era; a man in the lower left holds up gearshifts as a reminder of the growth of Soviet manufacturing; and a woman in the lower right holds a model of the Ivan the Great Bell Tower from the Kremlin, highlighting the rich Russian heritage stretching back to the medieval era. As the artist describes it, “Fundamental Lexicon is a collection of characters, each of whom represents an archetype of the Soviet ideological myth.” Each of these panels contains individual aspects of Soviet self-identity, though the manner in which an individual is to balance the various associations is unclear. Bruskin is not aspiring to objective observation of Soviet life; rather he is reenacting the communication of power and the models used to reshape
citizens into the New Soviet Man. Yevgeny Barabanov writes that these building blocks of Soviet culture (what I’m equating to memes), “enter Bruskin’s book-based world not as ethnological materials, but in their myth-generating capacity to reproduce ideal models, paragons, archetypal images, sacramental texts, and the interplay of ideological codes and symbols. For Bruskin, myth is an endless, all-encompassing text, giving rise to the urge toward instruction.”

The artist presents his own Soviet identity from an imagined post-historical point of view. Each figure represents a cultural ideal to which every citizen should aspire, though full attainment of this ideal is out of reach to all but highly evolved “supermen.”

**Official Language’s Territorial Claims**

By the time Stalin had solidified his position as the head of the state, utopian goals of creating communist supermen had been all but abandoned. This shift in policy did not lead to a de-emphasis on propaganda, however, but intensified into even more aggressive campaigns. Using the educational framework established in the early years of the Soviet Union, Stalin sought to control the most trivial aspects of one’s existence. Asserting himself as the father of the country, Stalin took a deeply paternal interest in the private life of all his children, seeking control over their every thought. In the words of Groys: “In the Soviet era, every private psyche was subordinated to the official ideology and thus nationalized.” Just as the Soviet government had seized control of urban factories and remote mining operations, under Stalin it sought to remove ownership rights from its greatest resource: its people. The combination of imposed communal living
quarters with a culture of terror that required everybody to spy on everybody else, ensured that the private space of thought and repose did not exist. Thus even in one’s own home, it was absolutely necessary to continue to act as if in public. Eric Bulatov recalls how this exacted a terrible toll, “I must add that the most terrible part of the Soviet ideological dictatorship for me was the fact that they declared the social space to be the only reality.”36 By never allowing its citizens to escape the constant ideological barrage, the reeducation undertaken by Soviet authorities through the program of propaganda texts is, perhaps, the prime example of a teaching style that is truly disciplinary in the sense that it is done with the explicit goal of inspiring subservience.37

The totalizing claims made by Stalin upon the Soviet people were reinforced not only through the omnipresence of propaganda banners, but also through the repetition of the ideological tenets they contained. Overwhelmingly, these textual proclamations were larger and more abstract points of communist ideology, rather than agitation for a specific issue or action. The banners not only failed to address the present in concrete terms, but they proclaimed things that were such basic knowledge to Soviet citizens that one can reasonably assume that they did not instruct anyone. Thus, Ilya Kabakov notes that Soviet textual propaganda banners “do not correspond to anything, ever, anywhere in reality. These are pure, wholly self-sufficient utterances, TEXT in the precise sense of the word. . .Our texts address only texts, and every text is a text responding to some preceding text.”38 That Soviet propaganda was almost exclusively characterized by the reiteration of universally understood doctrinal points is analogous to what noted art historian Erwin Panofsky saw in medieval churches, which he described as scholasticism.
Panofsky’s basic definition for scholasticism is “the postulate of clarification for clarification’s sake.” He argues that medieval cathedral decoration rarely addressed the finer and more complicated aspects of Christian theology, instead opting to express the most basic doctrinal points in as many ways as possible. Like a medieval Christian encountering yet another image of the Last Judgment, a Soviet citizen coming upon a banner proclaiming, “To the Bright Future of Communism!” could not possibly learn anything new from it. Instead, such reinforcements of basic principles play into scholasticism’s primary goal, which Panofsky summarizes as the “task of writing a permanent peace treaty between faith and reason.” The aim was to condition the viewer to believe that conclusions and predictions that cannot be arrived at using reason alone, are nonetheless the result of rational thought. Pointing to the limits of reason, to the things that cannot be known, such as what happens after death, or what the future may hold, scholastics argued that one must supplement reason with a leap of faith. The paradoxical embrace of logic and the illogical is key to Christian authority. “Christian theology required centuries of intellectual effort to arrive at formulations that are completely paradoxical,” writes Boris Groys, “It had constantly to battle heresies that weaken paradox in one direction or another and could thus lead to theology being subjected to the rules of formal logic and losing its claim to totality.” It was this type of total authority that Stalin sought—the ability to apply logic to the present in order to claim prophetic ability to predict the future.

The constant repetition of seemingly self-evident ideological slogans in Soviet propaganda produced in the viewer a sense of naturalness that would make the illogical,
faith-driven belief in a future communist utopia more tenable. In other words, the most powerful counter to disbelief is familiarity. As with Christian theology, Soviet ideology placed heavy emphasis on future states of being, discounting as short-sighted any reflection on existing circumstances in the present. Hence, Stalin argues, “What is most important to the dialectical method is not that which is stable at present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable.” In the Soviet Union, the indeterminacy of the present was always trumped by the certainty of the future.

The function and consumption of text-based propaganda banners was directly addressed by Komar and Melamid’s Sots Art works. Although Sots Art was inspired by the work of American Pop Art, in particular the work of Andy Warhol, there are fundamental differences stemming from each respective society’s systems of distribution and consumption: whereas American artists like Andy Warhol were creating art in response to the overproduction of consumer goods in capitalist society, Sots artists argue that they were confronted with a society in which instead of goods, there was an overproduction of ideology. Because the propaganda program in the Soviet Union consisted primarily of banners bearing slogans, Sots artworks are often textually based. Such is the case with Komar and Melamid’s untitled exhibition of propagandistic banners in 1972, including the banner discussed earlier in this chapter. (Figure 19) Proclaiming stereotypical Soviet slogans such as “Onward to the Victory of Communism!” and “Our Goal – Communism!”, the hanging banners were signed by the artists in the space where viewers were accustomed to seeing the name of Lenin, Marx, or Stalin. In contrast to
American consumer advertising, these proclamations do not make reference to any product external to the banner itself.

Important distinctions between Pop Art and Sots Art are illuminated by comparing Komar and Melamid’s banners with Andy Warhol’s iconic 1962 solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, at which he displayed his “32 Soup Cans” (Figure 22). For his installation, Warhol painted thirty-two separate canvases, each representing a different flavor of Campbell’s Soup. These works were lined up along a shelf, mimicking the way a viewer encounters the actual soup cans on a grocery store shelf. Warhol draws a connection between consumerism and the art market by not only representing a capitalist commodity in his works (Campbell Soup cans), but also creating a commodity that is itself for sale (works of art). Referring to his studio as “the factory,” Warhol never shied away from the products of mass production, even claiming to eat a can of Campbell’s Soup for lunch every day.

In a parallel manner to Warhol, Komar and Melamid not only refer to propaganda in their project, they also generate their own ideological product for consumption. The signature of the two artists on each banner is not the typical artistic signature claiming credit for the production of the painting—it also acts as an attribution for the written slogan. With this gesture, the artists move past merely commenting on ideology, and enter the business of creating it themselves. Just as Warhol consumed the object of his consideration every day for lunch, Komar and Melamid show that they had fully internalized the ideological discourse of communism. Warhol had become a capitalist; Komar and Melamid had become ideologists.
At least as important as the central proclamations reproduced by Komar and Melamid are the formal qualities of the banners themselves. While these objects are not consumer goods or commodities, their material quality of white painted block letters on a flat red background is nonetheless an important aspect of the work. The significance of this formal composition is better understood in the context of another artwork produced the same year: *Quotation* (1972 – Figure 23). In this work, Komar and Melamid have borrowed the basic layout of a Soviet banner and replaced each of the block letters with a square. Despite the fact that the work is entirely composed of abstract, geometric shapes, it is immediately recognizable to the viewer as a parody on Soviet propaganda. As Komar explains, each of the white boxes is not a reduction of the form to a box, but like a palimpsest, it is instead a layered accumulation of the sum total of all propaganda banners encountered by the viewer. This important difference stems from the average Soviet citizen’s everyday experience with these ubiquitous banners and flags. Because they were everywhere, the sayings did not even need to be read in order to be understood. Indeed, the constant barrage made it rather impossible for the viewer to actually pay any attention to each particular proclamation without a concentrated effort. One should not assume, however, that the banners were ineffective in reaching the citizen-consumer. Indeed, the success or failure of the propaganda banners had very little to do with whether or not the viewer believed in the message. The ability of the banners to make an instantaneous, formal connection in the mind of the pedestrian constitutes a powerful tool wielded by the Soviet state to impose its influence.
The use of a red background in Soviet propaganda was not merely an aesthetic choice, nor can it be read as a blank, neutral space. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the omnipresence of red in the Soviet Union was not incidental, but reflected a long history of the color’s associations with beauty and holiness. These cultural connotations were enhanced by the fact that color theory was a prominent field in Soviet research, particularly in the first decade after the Revolution. In his 1926 book, *The Sociology of Art*, ‘psychoideologist’ Vladimir Friche of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR argued that behavior could be effectively controlled and directed using the natural associations of specific colors. Reminiscent of the avant-garde theories of artists such as Vladimir Kandinsky, Friche points out that “different colors influence the psyche of individuals differently.” While the belief that colors can have a psychological impact upon the individual is not in itself radical, in the Soviet context in which it was believed that ideological intervention can lead to the evolution of supermen in the space of one or two generations, the implications were significant. If the development of a Soviet ideological vocabulary could be used to shape the citizenry’s conception of the world, the psychological impact of color could be utilized to more effectively code the connotations attached to those words. Komar and Melamid’s 1975 work, *Color Therapeutics* (Figure 24) parodies the official belief in color’s transformative abilities. Headed by a invented Soviet slogan, “Color is a Mighty Power!” the work is a series of 25 monochrome panels designed to cure you of any psychological problems. The artists explain, in a pseudo-scientific manner, “A strictly definite light wave frequency corresponds to each color. Upon reflection from the plaques, light acquires new qualities. Penetrating into the
organs of vision, the reflected light stimulates the light-sensitive retinal rods and cones that transmit such stimulation through the optic nerve to the brain. A sample of the ailments that can be overcome by simply staring at the colored panels also accompanies the work:

- **DRINKING PROBLEMS**—3 min. 7 sec., dark green
- **INFERIORITY COMPLEXES**—4 min. 5 sec., turquoise
- **INSOMNIA**—4 min. 8 sec., reddish brown
- **LAZINESS**—1 min. 6 sec., dark brown
- **ALIENATION**—5 min. 9 sec., rust

The absurdity of the claims makes reference to the seriousness with which official ideology was invested in color’s ability to transform the selfish individual into the selfless being—the essential first step toward realizing the bright future of Communism. Whereas the transformative abilities of color may have been envisioned by figures such as Friche as a tool for helping humanity rise to a higher, utopian state, in practice they were used to emphasize the power of the state. Artist Erik Bulatov explains that the meaning of red within the Soviet Union shifted drastically: “In the era of the Soviet Union. . .red became the direct expression and symbol of Soviet ideology. It must be stated that our entire social space was shaped by this ideology and was in its power. . .The colour of the Revolution and freedom became the colour of prohibition, power, the government and party control.” Far from incorporating a neutral background for the transmission of a textual slogan, the red cloth of a banner was an important part of the state’s aim to nationalize the psyche of all of its citizens. By using the white block letters on a red ground in both *Quotation* and their banners, Komar and Melamid connect their
own project to all other instances of Soviet propaganda, whether it was a banner in the local factory, the giant profile of Lenin on the curtain behind Brezhnev in a nationally televised speech, or the pin awarded to the child by the Pioneer organization. The white letters on a red ground became a potent reminder of the state’s absolute authority and expansive reach.

Alexander Kosolapov’s work, *Coca-Cola Lenin* (1980 – Figure 25) demonstrates that the impact an abstract background can have upon the viewer is not limited to the Soviet Union. Kosolapov takes advantage of the fortuitous coincidence that Soviet propaganda and the West’s most recognizable corporate image both rely on the same flat red background. The simple similarity begs questions of the degree to which colors have psychological impact inherently, and how much is culturally inflected. Even more, it asks the viewer to consider the ways in which both propaganda and advertising are similar: a ubiquitous presence, reliance on instantly recognizable imagery, and overstated promises. In addition to the appropriation and juxtaposition of the two logos, Kosolapov, like Komar and Melamid, is playing with the idea of quotation by attributing Coca-Cola’s current slogan at the time, “It’s the Real Thing,” to Lenin. This reflects a fairly common practice within the Soviet Union—fabricating quotes and attributing them to important figures such as Lenin, Stalin, Marx, and Engels. So long as the saying was ideologically correct, the fabricator—be it a schoolgirl or a professional propagandist—could be confident that no challenges would be raised.

The subversive element in Kosolapov’s work is, of course, that the attribution is ideologically corrupt. However, in its most basic function, Coca-Cola’s slogan is not
unlike a Soviet proclamation in that neither would have been taken at face value. Long before unofficial artists began challenging the ideology supported by Soviet propaganda, the average citizen had ceased to really believe the messages proclaimed on banners. As noted above, the motivation of the Communist Party by the time of Stalin’s reign in creating the banners was not actually to inspire belief in the possibility of the existence of a future communist utopia, but rather to continually reinforce the power and authority of the state. Each particular banner acted first and foremost as a territorial marker, delineating the space of their authority. The ubiquity of the banners produced a sense of inevitability—a sense that the Soviet state would exist in perpetuity. “The generation of unofficial artists did not have any future,” explains Ilya Kabakov, “because all of us were convinced the Soviet power would last for 10,000 years, that nothing would ever change.” The artist also observes that the apparent permanence of the Soviet state created “an atmosphere of despair, longing, endlessness, and horror...in which a sense of the absurdity and hopelessness of their destiny reigned.” The juxtaposition of the formal associations of propaganda with corporate advertising allows Kosolapov to undermine the popular belief that the lack of censorship in the capitalist West results in a situation where the viewer is treated to the truth; the difference being, as Robert Storr articulates it, life in capitalist democracies is “a business of subscribing to lies rather than having them imposed.” The claims made by politicians or corporations like Coca-Cola with slogans such as “It’s the Real Thing” are not actually taken at face value by consumers. Presented with contradictory unbelievable claims by competing corporate interests, the consumer makes a choice as to which one to subscribe to. In a similar way
to scholasticism’s “clarification for clarification’s sake” that sought to normalize Christian faith through repetition, Soviet propaganda and corporate advertising both rely on a strategy of constant confrontation with the viewer that lends their imagery a sense of power and inevitability.

Like Kosolapov, Komar and Melamid create their banners not to challenge the truth of the proclamations they make, but to deconstruct the method of their delivery. Drawing a similar connection between advertising and propaganda, Komar labels Soviet propaganda as “the advertisement of ideology” and Western advertising as “the propaganda of consumerism.” In addition, like Kosolapov, in their 1972 banners Komar and Melamid use the attribution to accomplish their goal. Margarita Tupitsyn argues that the artists’ signatures represent “the usurpation to the collective that signals the deconstructive gesture.” The simple action of claiming the collective utterance is an attempt by the artists, as what I call “artist-nomads,” to smooth the space otherwise delineated by the state using such banners. A phrase such as “Our Goal – Communism” shifts from an unattributed statement of the entire collective, to a personal expression of the artists. Each time the statement is read, by pronouncing the word “our,” the viewer is included as part of the assumed subject. With a signature, however, the viewer now reads it as a quote expressing the goal of the particular subjects, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. By speaking for the collective, propaganda banners remove individuality and assume conformity. Whereas in the revolutionary years, red banners were the spontaneous creations of the crowd, by the time Komar and Melamid produce their works, the production of such sayings was subject to strict censorship. In essence, the
rights of individual citizens to express themselves had been centralized by the state. Rather than allowing the state to take sole authority for their speech, the artists claim possession of collective statements for their personal use. Even though they express a completely appropriate ideological message, they undermine the absolute authority of the transmission of messages on red banners by personalizing it, and thus allowing the viewer freedom to either agree or disagree.

In his works, Erik Bulatov also addresses the average Soviet citizen’s struggle with the state’s imposed restrictions on free speech. His works approach this issue using a metaphor of contrasting color associations, specifically between the color red, “the colour of prohibition, power, the government, and party control,”\textsuperscript{58} and blue which, because of its association with the sky, represented for him the color of absolute freedom.\textsuperscript{59} Nowhere is this tension more evident than in his 1975 work, \textit{Glory to the CPSU} (Communist Party of the Soviet Union – Figure 26). The artist depicts a beautiful, partly cloudy blue sky that covers the whole canvas, but between the viewer and the sky are the block Cyrillic letters of the familiar propaganda slogan, “Glory to the CPSU,” written in flat red. Bulatov’s work highlights how such propagandistic banners had not only ceased to be believed by Soviet citizens, but as the most visible symbol of the lack of freedom of speech in the Soviet Union, they had become an impediment to a person’s happiness. Similar sentiments were shared by other artists, such as Rostislav Lebedev in his work \textit{Situation No. 2}, 1979, (Figure 27) in which propaganda banners, each bearing the phrase “no exit,” create a space from which there is exactly that: no escape. Both works present a vision of society as a prison in which the ideology, manifested as
omnipresent propaganda, is the wall and bars. By contrast, Bulatov’s outlook is not quite as pessimistic as Lebedev’s because he ultimately believes in the redemptive abilities of art: “It has always been my conviction,” he writes, “that the social space is limited, and the path to freedom leads through the artistic space.” This liberation is not a physical escape from the Soviet Union; rather, it is the ability of an individual to claim oneself as an independent entity from the state, to extricate one’s psyche from the forced conformity of thought. Bulatov describes this process, laying out his primary artistic goal:

To express myself in such a way that each individual in the Soviet Union could say, ‘Yes, I understand. This is my life. This is reality.’ […] I could show the viewer at least one aspect of his reality, and seeing this reality in art could be a liberating experience. It appeared outside the self, literally on canvas. It could provide a way to clear one’s mind of the ideology embedded in it. I didn’t want to seem like an artist teaching the viewer, but that the viewer and I were the same person, or at least in the same situation, trying to be aware of our situation.

Although Glory to the CPSU poignantly represents Soviet ideology as a barrier between the viewer and the free, open space beyond, this is not the ultimate function of the work. Not only does the open space of the sky draw even more attention to the red letters, but the contrast of the red letters serves to further emphasize the existence of an open beyond. Bulatov hopes that while looking at this work, the viewer will notice not only the bulk of the letters, but slowly the negative space between the letters will assert itself. For Bulatov, the red letters transform from a blockade into a series of portals through which the viewer can access freedom. Thus, the liberated viewer is one who is able to perceive the constant barrage of ideology not as a wall, but as a screen. The difference
between a free and individual lifestyle and allowing oneself to be a territorialized asset of the state was the ability to stake a territorial claim upon one’s own psyche—to look past the ideology and the limits it attempts to establish.

While Bulatov takes a fairly optimistic stance by opening the space for art to alleviate the restrictions imposed by the state, his works also consistently draw attention to the limitations of this model of freedom. His work *Two Landscapes on a Red Background* (1972-74 – Figure 28) illustrates important points about the omnipresence of ideology in the Soviet state. As the title suggests, Bulatov renders two idyllic landscapes to the viewer, but drawing immediate attention to the artifice of the images, he has layered one atop the other. The artistic illusion of naturalism evident in the use of perspective and spatial recession in the landscape images is undermined by the way the landscapes are presented like two sheets of paper within the broader composition. But the most striking aspect of the work is that both of the landscapes rest on a red, banner-like or flag-like background. Bulatov’s use of this highly charged color for a backdrop suggests the constant, if at times unseen, presence of ideological determinism in Soviet culture. Margarita Tupitsyn observes in such gestures an unsettling element: “Bulatov promotes a gesture of subtle warning, an index of ideological presence in an otherwise innocuous environment.” The presence of this ideological foundation announces itself most profoundly in the smallest of details—the red dress worn by the figure on the right side of the bottom landscape. This little bit of paint disrupts the separation of the greens and blues of the landscapes from the red of the background. The linearity of the work created by the length of the figure double in the reflection in the water makes it look like
we are looking at a rip or a tear. Indeed, for Bulatov, little moments like this in life represent a crack in the façade that reveals the truth behind the lies. Making even more explicit the presence of an ideological background, Bulatov repeats the same landscape that sits on top in *Two Landscapes on a Red Background* in a second work, *Red Sky* (1973-74 – Figure 29). Whereas in the first painting the bucolic landscape had remained rather unaffected by the red background, in the later work the red seeps through and asserts its presence. Poignantly, the red has overwhelmed the blue sky of the original, neutralizing and making impotent what is, for Bulatov, the ultimate symbol of freedom and hope.

The illustration of a sub-surface ideological background in *Two Landscapes on a Red Background* and *Red Sky* complicates Bulatov’s own reading of *Glory to the CPSU*. While, in one sense, it can be read as flat red letters overtop the depth of the open sky, given the artist’s propensity to play with the falsity of illusionistic recession, it can also be seen as the flat red letters emerging from behind the illusionistic sky. Rather than the existence of open space beyond the ideology, it is ideology upon which the illusion of freedom is built. In this way, Alla Rosenfeld notes, Bulatov’s works mirror the reality of the Soviet social milieu, in which “citizens were granted freedom by public declaration but personally restricted in actual daily life.”\(^6\) Paradoxically, the illusion of freedom was central to the very ideological system designed to control the populace. Although Bulatov would like to see the free, open space beyond the veil of ideology, his work appears to simultaneously expose the reality of the situation in which ideology is not
applied to life in the Soviet Union, rather ideology was the foundational basis of one’s very existence.

Perhaps Bulatov’s most dramatic and profound use of artistic illusion as a metaphor for the falsity of an average Soviet citizen’s access to freedom is his 1971-72 work *Horizon*. (Figure 30) As with other works such as *Two Landscapes on a Red Background*, the artist depicts a pleasant scene that suggests a fulfilling life—he presents the viewer with a relaxing day at the beach on a beautiful, sunny day. In the foreground a group of workers still in their suits, have just arrived to enjoy the pleasant atmosphere. But a thick red band placed overtop the horizon line disrupts the tranquil scene. In this case, the red is not from a banner or flag, but is unmistakably from a military uniform—a reference to the Order of Lenin instantly recognizable to any Soviet citizen. The idyllic nature of the scene is undermined by a prominent reminder of control. The blunt allusions to the state’s militarism make it all the more disturbing. Not only does Bulatov once again use his trademark plane of flat red color to upset the painting’s spatial illusionism, but he does so at the most noticeable position—the point of spatial recession at the horizon. In addition to its perspectival implications, the horizon carries with it powerful connotations in Soviet society. In the early, revolutionary years of the Soviet Union, the horizon was used as a symbol of relentless progress toward the future of communism. It represented the constant change needed to draw society ever closer to the eventual attainment of communist utopia. But, like the color red, the associations attached to the horizon changed dramatically under Stalinist rule. As Soviet historian Emma Widdis remarks, “In the 20s, the horizon was the point of a goal—to be strived
for—by the 30s, it was restricted.” The loss of access to the horizon meant the loss of the possibility of utopia of absolute freedom. Most of all, it meant a state of endless stasis.

The horizon as a point of termination rather than a visual manifestation of limitlessness served as one of Bulatov’s major themes throughout his years in the Soviet underground. In his work *Self-Portrait* (1971-73 – Figure 31), the visual field has been considerably reduced, replacing the landscape with a field of white, upon which the horizon is demarcated by a dotted line. Along this horizon line, the artist has employed the familiar red block letters, repeating the phrase, “no entrance.” Paralleling the abstraction of the visual field to a dotted horizon line, Bulatov has converted the red barrier in *Horizon* to a textual declaration. The artist stands before this horizon, gazing directly out toward the viewer. In the center of his head, right between his eyes, there is a rupture which allows the viewer visual access to his mind, upon which the dotted line of the horizon is prominently on display. Within the artist’s consciousness the horizon seems to remain the point of endless possibility, unfettered by the physical limitations placed upon the horizon.

By 1974, Bulatov was creating works that had been completely reduced to textual representation. Although his works had generally shifted from the representational to the textual, the issues he was addressing remain much the same. Indeed, one could easily see a work like *Entrance—No Entrance* (1974-75 – Figure 32) as a textual mirroring of his earlier work *Horizon* (1971-72) in the simultaneous invitation of the viewer into the space of the painting, and prohibition along the horizon line. Unlike Bulatov’s use of
illusionistic space to represent the ideas of progress and freedom in the earlier painting, here he uses the color blue to write out the word “entrance” twice, using the metaphorical connotations of freedom and space to bolster the meaning of the written word. He further enhances the parallel between the written invitation to enter and the illusionistic, welcoming space of Horizon, by having the blue words recede perspectivally toward the horizon. As in Self-Portrait, the red banner of horizon is replaced again with the words “no entrance.” The natural aesthetic contrast between red and blue in both works is given added metaphorical dimension with the connotative associations of both; this is heightened by the simultaneous illusion of perspectival space attached to the blue which is disrupted by the stark re-emphasis of the surface of the painting by the red lettering.

Bulatov once again relies on color connotations and spatial recession to comment on the lack of freedom in Soviet society. “An important tool is thus placed at my disposal,” Bulatov writes, “the possibility of expressing a social problem as a spatial one.”

Entrance—No Entrance is a visual manifestation of the frustrations felt by many members of the nonconformist art community who, having been exposed to Western society, accepted the possibilities of freedom and progress, but also acknowledged their inaccessibility.

Importantly, in works such as Horizon and Entrance—No Entrance, Bulatov has not destroyed the horizon, but has actually re-emphasized and dramatized it; he has enlarged and drawn our attention to the limits. Within the field of Soviet theory, border zones—of which the horizon is the ultimate example—are extremely important. As Evgeny Dobrenko observes, “the border lived its own special life, full of dangers and
heroic feats, and therefore full of heroes and enemies.” Dissidents like those producing unofficial Soviet art were drawn to the fringes of ideology, yet they were not the only ones. The most ardent supporters and defenders of Soviet socialism also headed for the borders. As Boris Groys explains, “The principal demand placed on the Soviet person was therefore not that of Soviet thinking, but rather that of simultaneous Soviet and anti-Soviet thinking—thus that of total thought.” Because the parameters for Soviet Socialist Realism were defined at least as much by what was forbidden as by what it should exhibit, the task of creating art required an understanding of anti-Soviet ideology so as to avoid it. In order to bring about a completely new reality, in dialectical theory, required an understanding of all preceding stages of progression so as to create total synthesis. To think dialectically, therefore, meant to be able to simultaneously inhabit A and not-A; it was the ability to internalize that which is anti-Soviet into the Soviet. In other words, the Soviet obsession with dialectics led to a constant emphasis on the limits—not to clearly delineate the self from the other—but to expand the liminal zone, to foster a sense of what Derrida terms limitrophy: “not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delineating, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply.” As part of Derrida’s deconstructive theory, limitrophy serves to undermine false duality by highlighting the overlapping, if at times not consciously acknowledged, elements between two seemingly binary oppositions. From the point-of-view of dialectical progression, the theorist’s job is likewise to find these shared traits between two previous structures, and expand on them such that the new reality encompasses all previous forms of existence. By continually
expanding the horizon—not in the sense of a forward progress that pushes out the horizon line, but in the expansion of the delineation itself—the Soviet state made more and more inclusive, not exclusive, territorial claims, thus making it ever more difficult to withdraw.

The multiplication, or limitrophy, of the border zones in Soviet ideology quite often took shape at the level of text and language. Language use in the Soviet Union was characterized by a situation in which the denotation of a word, its literal meaning, often radically differed from its connotations, or the associations made by the word in the addressee’s mind. Encompassing both ‘A’ and ‘not A,’ a word’s denotative meaning could be the exact opposite of its connotative meaning. Only in such a paradoxical situation could a phrase like “Onward to the Victory of Communism” (a literal reference to a future utopian society with no government) be deployed propagandistically to reinforce the permanence of the Soviet totalitarian dictatorship. Such a slippage between the connotative and denotative meaning in Soviet propaganda is also reflected in the combination of both text and image. Of their interrelationship, Jean-Luc Nancy explains, “Image and text are therefore distinguished as soul and body: each is the limit of the other, its horizon of interpretation. The horizon of the image is the text. . . but the horizon of the text is the image.” The nebulous and potent intersection between image and text is likewise noted by Vitaly Komar who argues, “The connection between art and spiritual things is very close to the connection between words and art.” For Nancy, this complementary relationship is rooted in the fact that each provides a different, though nonetheless “indefinite power to imagine.” Whereas an image, unlike text, has the power to reveal the unimaginable, it is also, unlike text, a closure, one possibility
amongst many. In other words, a picture may say a thousand words, but a word conjures a thousand images.

When considering a work of art like Bulatov’s *Danger* (1972-73 – Figure 33), it becomes apparent that the Soviet conceptualists’ scrutiny of the interplay of text and image does not deconstruct the hidden operations of text itself, so much as the hidden operations of text in daily life. This is most apparent in the fact that there is no obvious connection between the subject matter of the illustration and the words around the edges. Indeed, the formal tension of this work of art is created in the way the text, which repeats the phrase “danger” four times, asserts itself against the bucolic scene. Although the red block letters seem to float above the scene, Bulatov carefully integrates them by drawing them back to the same perspectival vanishing point. The clear connection between the two leaves the viewer to wonder what could possibly be dangerous about this scene. There appears to be nothing politically or physically present which could be regarded as threatening, so it resists being simply read it as a descriptive title. However, this does not mean there is no inherent connection between text and image. “The picture is not intended as an illustration of the text,” Bulatov insists. 74 If words and texts are not meant to describe the pictures, what, then, is their function? Rather than seeing the text as a description of the image, it is perhaps more useful to understand the text as anchoring the image, as proposed by Roland Barthes: the term anchorage refers to the common practice of affixing captions to photographs, both in the news and in advertisements. When the text appears to describe what the viewer is looking at, its function in reality is to help the viewer to read the image in the intended manner, i.e., “the text directs the
reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle *dispatching*, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance.” The text in Bulatov’s work aids the viewer in the proper interpretation of the scene—to make sure the viewer conjures the proper set of associations for the image.

By placing a key word onto an image of a quiet picnic, Bulatov is mirroring the realities of everyday life in the Soviet Union. The omnipresent exclamatory banners of the Soviet propaganda program operated, first and foremost, as anchors to Soviet existence. Just as with Bulatov’s painting, the text and the image may seem completely at odds with one another. The apparent disconnect between the calm scene and the threatening words in Bulatov’s composition parallels the lack of any obvious correlation between a drab Soviet boulevard and its propagandistic banners touting the bright future of Communism. The viewer is challenged to read into the image something that may not be perceptible on the surface. The text in Bulatov’s composition serves as a reminder that it was often such quiet, seemingly safe private conversations that were cited in the show trials of political prisoners. Bulatov calls attention to the fact that in a culture dominated by fear and surveillance, there was no limit to the potential reach of ideological control.

Being forced to produce text-based propaganda was the experience that was most troubling for the artist Leonid Lamm from his time in the Soviet Union. Arrested for ‘hooliganism,’ Lamm spent several years in the Gulag prison system. In his recollections of his experience, he notes that, “prison and labor camps were a
continuation of life in the boundless expanses of the Soviet empire, only a more concentrated form of brutality.”77 While a prisoner, Lamm was often forced to work as the resident artist for the camp; in 1976 he was assigned to decorate the camp for May Day festivities. He was so troubled by the experience, that he surreptitiously created a work titled *The Morning of Our Motherland (Labor Camp Near Rostov-on-Don)*, 1976. (Figure 34) The illegal image depicts the prisoners in their uniforms, lined up along the main boulevard of the camp. The gray, drab clothing of the uniforms contrasts markedly from the brightly colored placards bearing slogans such as “Onward to the Victory of Communism!”, “Labor is a Matter of Honor, Conscience, Valor and Heroism!”, and “The People and the Party are One!” The ideal utopian life promised by the garish posters Lamm had created did not give the prisoners hope, but only heightened the sense of despair in their confinement. While the contrast between everyday reality and the life promised in propaganda is particularly acute in this prison setting, it is not unlike the situation shared by the larger Soviet populace. Extending throughout the vast expanse of the Soviet Union, propaganda banners acted as both spatial and ideological markers of the State’s territory.

Anchored by the interpretive guidance of propaganda banners and placards, an ideologically proper perception of the world in the Soviet Union required citizens to see more than what was empirically observable. Boris Groys argues that in order to embrace the philosophy of dialectical materialism requires a certain embrace of *metanoia*, which he defines as “the transition from an individual subjective perspective, to a general perspective, to a metaposition.”78 From the Greek roots μετά (*metá*) (meaning "beyond"
or "after") and νόος (noeo) (meaning "perception" or "understanding"), metanoia is the ability to look beyond what is immediately visible and understand the physical world in its larger context. Thus, Soviet metanoia suggests a particular kind of conversion in which the individual prioritizes belief in the future of communism over lived reality. The banners acted as a constant call to interpret daily life within the context of historical materialism, looking for clues portending future developments. It was fruitless to criticize present reality because it was seen as transitory—caught in an inevitable cycle of change. The slogans are not a call to action, but rather a call to inaction; they do not ask the viewer to change the world, but reinforce the notion that the relentless march of history will continue with or without her. It’s not unimportant that Groys invokes metanoia, a term commonly associated with Christian theology, in his explication of Soviet metaphysical thought, for the slogans splayed out across the banners operate like commandments from God, irrefutable and self-evident.

Communal Language

As was demonstrated by the example of Erik Bulatov’s painting Danger, the ideological influence of the state extended far beyond Soviet public spaces adorned with propaganda banners from the time of Lenin. Under Stalin, the self-defensive drive to inform on others was the basis of Soviet terror. Katerina Gerasimova, borrowing from Foucault, describes this system of enforcement as horizontal control: “In Soviet civilization, the individual was formed simultaneously with the collective as a result of collective practices of denunciation, the system of comrades’ courts, purges and so on.”79
The danger was rarely that your interlocutor was interested in hurting you or seeking revenge; quite to the contrary, many denunciations were made against people the informer barely knew. Reporting on others was a way of protecting oneself and one’s family. This reality made the terror all the more acute, because it could never be known whether the other person might get into trouble in the future and denounce you in a bid to save his or her own life. The requirement to actively participate in such a system of denunciations was reinforced from an individual’s youth, when children would be taught the fictitious story of the Soviet martyr Pavlik Morozov (Pavel Trofimovich Morozov). As a boy Pavlik, a patriotic young Pioneer, reported to authorities about his own father’s anti-communist statements made at home. After his father’s subsequent arrest (according to the official version of the story) Pavlik’s heroic act led to his other family members to conspire and kill him. Pavlik quickly entered the pantheon of Soviet heroes who bravely sacrificed themselves for the greater good. The spreading of such accounts by the Communist Party reinforced in the mind of every citizen the seemingly limitless extent of state surveillance. The failure to cultivate a proper awareness of being constantly observed, frequently led to the kind of careless statement that carried tragic consequences.

Nowhere was oppressive presence of ideological danger more acutely felt than in the communal apartment, or the kommunalka. As a response to the housing shortage in large cities such as Moscow and Petrograd (later renamed Leningrad), Lenin drafted a plan to seize control of large private apartments, and divide them into communal living spaces. A “sanitary norm” was established, whereby every individual was entitled to
8.25 square meters of space (though the actual size was far less). Constructed merely of flimsy plywood, the partitions between individuals and families who had been assigned to live together offered little, to no privacy. One former tenant explained, “...the children listen to everything they should not hear and do their homework accompanied by the conversations of their grandmother with neighbors and relatives. The middle generation is in an awkward situation too. It is impossible to say anything sweet or reproachful, everybody hears everything.”

Another former tenant added, “There are no good neighbors in the communal apartment. They are bad just because they are neighbors.”

Of course, it is not only the young lovers’ inability to find a private space for courtship that made the communal apartment so problematic, but also the fact that any conversation risked being overheard by all the neighbors. Victor Tupitsyn explains, “The inhabitants of the communal thermae were at once ‘prison guards’ and ‘inmates’ in their relations with one another. Neighbors, from whose ‘love’ there was nowhere to hide, denounced each other to the secret police in mutual surveillance.” Because denouncing your neighbor was a way of insuring you own safety (and might free up some space in the apartment as a bonus), communal apartment inhabitants were more than happy to spy on each other.

“The communal apartment was both omnipresent and invisible,” notes Svetlana Boym, a prominent scholar who grew up in a communal apartment in Leningrad, “It was everywhere in daily life and nowhere in official representation.” Despite the fact that communal apartments were the dominant form of housing in the urban centers of the
Soviet Union, and one that was at the very heart of Communist theories of collectivity and impersonal domesticity, they were rarely, if ever, featured in the propagandistic images of Socialist Realism. In fact, Boym documents how one of the few attempts by an artist to depict a communal apartment from the proper ideological standpoint, Aleksandr Laktionov’s *The New Apartment* (1952 – Figure 35), was consistently repressed by authorities for unclear reasons. The absence of the communal apartment in official media was addressed throughout the Soviet period by authors such as Yevgeny Zamiatin, Yuri Olesha, and Mikhail Bulgakov.

In the visual arts, the situation was most prominently taken up by Ilya Kabakov. It is not incidental that Kabakov’s artwork so strongly identifies with works of literature, perhaps even more so than with the visual art of other nonconformists, because Kabakov’s artistic approach is highly literary. His early works often took the form of “albums” in which he tells the biography of an ordinary Soviet citizen. For his works created in the West, Kabakov shifted to installation art, although his literary style is still evident. A key example of his storytelling technique in the West is the work *Ten Characters*, which was installed at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York in 1988. The installation was a complete recreation of a communal apartment, and outside each of the rooms are a series of printed texts telling the inhabitant’s story. Rather than using first-person narrative or omniscient narrators, Kabakov chooses to relay the stories of these people from the point of view of their neighbors as told in official bureaucratic documents. Standing outside the person’s door, the reader/viewer is placed in the position of the eavesdropping neighbor and is implicated in the system of surveillance
that is at the very heart of the subject’s psychosis. For example, “The Composer Who Combined Music with Things and Images,” (Figure 36) presents the story of the protagonist through a series of formal complaints and court hearings detailing the neighbors’ frustrations with his eccentricities. For the egregious crime of blocking up the corridor, a joint complaint concludes: “In connection with this we ask you to put an end to this scandalous behavior and create, once and for all, the favourable conditions which are supposed to exist in a socialist dormitory.”\textsuperscript{86} Importantly, the complainants connect their statement to the larger ideological context of socialism, hoping to compel the authorities to act in defense of the state, rather than merely in defense of the tenants.

The need to constantly bear in mind the presence of the eavesdropper, a proxy for the organs of the State, was a difficult task and often led to silence. Rather than risk saying something that could lead to denunciation, the inhabitant of the communal apartment lived in constant fear of their neighbors. Insistent metanoia produced a very real side effect: paranoia.\textsuperscript{87} As Yossarian, the protagonist of Joseph Heller’s novel \textit{Catch-22}, reminds us, “Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they aren’t after you.”\textsuperscript{88} Of course, one could not simply refuse to speak, to do so would be both impractical and could lead to suspicion and self-denunciation. The necessity of communicating without actually saying anything led to the formation of a dialectical other to official language, namely a communal language.

Born out of paranoia, communal language was primarily comprised of banal statements. On the surface, at least, very little was actually ever said; communal language was purposefully economical. Svetlana Boym explains that the goal of
communal language was “to understand each other with half-words. . .what is shared is silence, tone of voice, nuance and intonation. To say a full word is to say too much.” Kabakov utilizes prototypical communal conversations in works such as Where are They? (1979 – Figure 37). Typical of many of his works, most of the surface of the three panels is simply white. Like many conversations in a communal apartment, this one begins with inane references to simple household objects. “Where is the Big Plate? Where is the tea-kettle with a bell? Where is the Portrait of Rosalia? Where is the precise clock?” Separated by a significant area of blank white space, the questions are answered with the retort: “Petrovich took them all with him.” Personal possessions acted as territorial markers within the common space of the kitchen in the apartment. As such, they took the form of votive objects marking Petrovich’s presence. The information that they were taken with him tells the questioner that he has left permanently and of his own volition. From there, the adjacent panel moves from the topic of objects, to specific individuals, and in a most direct fashion. The questioner asks, “Where is Marina Zhakovoit? Where is Mikhail Ignatievich?” Again, the questions are interrupted by a large space, followed by a simple answer: “they are not here.” The last panel asks about nine more people, to which the answer is “they are long gone.”

It is important to understand that the phrase used in answer to the whereabouts of the missing people, *Iх nem (Ikh Nyet)*, literally translates to “they are not.” In other words, it can mean that “they are not here,” but it can also mean “they do not exist.” This helps explain the dynamics of the conversation, because obviously the questioner knows the people are not there, or else he or she would not be asking about them. Kabakov has
created a demonstration of Bakhtin’s theories that an utterance is equally reliant on the interpretive skills of the listener as it is on the speaker’s words. The given answer that the former inhabitants of the communal apartment are not present is hardly an answer in a strictly literal sense, but rooted in the particular historical moment of its utterance, the answer provides the listener all the needed information. The people in question have disappeared, which was not uncommon in the Soviet Union. By responding in this way, the person answering the questions has indicated that they disappeared for unspecified reasons. Whether or not they will ever come back or even if they are alive is unknown and unknowable. But to openly discuss the way people disappeared would be dangerous, for it could be reported to authorities as anti-Party slander. The disappearance of Petrovich’s belongings with him suggests he has met a better fate, because when someone was arrested there was no time to gather belongings anyway. The detritus left behind stood as the only reminder of the person’s existence.

Kabakov’s commentary on the nature of communal language is aided by the juxtaposition of both written and pictorial elements. First is the fact that the vast majority of the surface of his work is covered in white. Beyond its symbolic associations for the artist, these flat white fields pace the conversation and help with the viewer’s interpretation of the textual exchange. The first speaker’s queries come rather quickly; they are met by a long pause, a visual caesura. Before responding, the second person carefully weighs his or her words. Finally, another conspicuous element comes into play: a fly on the wall. The fly is present in each of the three panels, implying that it is flying about the room as the two engage in conversation. Its presence underscores the banality
of the whole situation. One can imagine sitting in a kitchen of the communal apartment, hearing its incessant buzzing as it is flies from one temporary resting spot to another.

For Kabakov, the fly is a constantly recurring symbol, representing more than just a reference to the banality of communal life. He explains, “the fly knows neither top nor bottom, can sit freely on the ceiling as well as on the walls, and as a result turns out to be surrounded by a total spherical cosmos, where it represents both the centre and a point on the circumference.”\textsuperscript{90} That the fly is seemingly free from the physical laws of this world is an important metaphor for the artist. Despite its usual association with the most abject materials of human existence—garbage and excrement—the fly possesses the ability to transcend human limitation. It is simultaneously of this world and not of this world. Boris Groys explains, “The fly thus becomes a symbol of the soul, hovering freely and liberated from the bonds of earthly existence.”\textsuperscript{91} As he has done time and time again, Kabakov’s work looks forward to transcendence through death. The fly represents the departed soul of missing neighbors. Where language has failed to probe the deeper questions of life, Kabakov finds symbols and metaphors in the basest aspects of human existence.
Chapter 3

Archiving Mythology:

Recreating the Past in Komar and Melamid’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism Series

*History breaks down into images, not into stories.*

--Walter Benjamin¹

*The Ego wants everything—it seems that the sole purpose of human action is possession (I have spoken, struggled, conquered...). How greedy man appears to be! He does not want to extricate himself even from the past, but wants to continue to have it!*

--Friedrich Nietzsche²

Komar and Melamid’s sepia-toned canvas *Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution (after the First Version by V. Serov)*, (1981-82 – Figure 38), does not appear at first blush to be overly subversive or critical of official Soviet art. On the contrary, it seems to be a perfectly typical Socialist Realist composition with both Lenin and Stalin standing before a crowd at a pivotal moment of the revolution. However, this work is revelatory about the complicated and ambivalent attitude of Communist Party leaders in the Soviet Union toward history and the past. Komar and Melamid’s painting is a copy of a very famous work of Soviet propaganda, painted in two iterations by the renowned artist Vladimir Serov (Figures 39, 40). The most apparent difference between Serov’s works is the presence of Stalin in the first, and the omission of him in the second. The latter was painted in the years after Stalin’s death, during Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization
campaign—a radical denunciation of his predecessor. Ironically, it was Stalin who was notorious for such modifications of history. By reviving Serov’s original image with Stalin reinserted, Komar and Melamid create their own historical revisions, reversing the effects of Khrushchev’s directive. Significantly, the artists are not basing their corrections on what was reported to have happened on April 3, 1917 when Lenin spoke at the Kshesinskaya mansion near the Finland Station in Saint Petersburg.³ In point of fact, Stalin was not present for the speech, just as he was not involved with numerous other revolutionary events at which Soviet propagandists routinely depicted him. Komar and Melamid are motivated by the recognition that in the Soviet Union, what actually happened in actual fact had very little to do with official history. That Soviet history is inaccurate should not imply, however, that its writing was ineffectual; Soviet propagandists regularly, and successfully, appealed to official histories to support Party directives.

Artist and critic Victor Tupitsyn has argued that, “there was never any real history or truthful documentation of key events in the history of the country.” Similarly, Ilya Kabakov notes, that “the past is already hopelessly mythologized.”⁴ Indeed, Kabakov is not alone in his assertion that Soviet ideology is contained within a sort of mythologically based account of history.⁵ Alexander Kosolapov directly addressed this historical consciousness in his work Soviet Myth (1974 – Figure 41). In a single composition, Kosolapov combined some of the most potent images from Soviet mythology. On the right, Lenin stands upon a tank in an iconic pose that came to symbolize the revolution. Opposite him is the Battleship Aurora that fired the first shot of the Revolution, signals a company of revolutionaries that storms the gates of the Winter Palace and overthrow the
Romanov dynasty. In the foreground, Yuri Gagarin is figured by Kosolapov, as he often was by state propagandists, to stand as a symbol of the scientific and technological prowess of the Soviet Union. Gagarin dances with what can be interpreted as a reference to Soviet high culture—a ballerina performing Tchaikovsky’s iconic “Swan Lake.” The strange interaction of cosmonaut and dancer helps to highlight other strange interactions such as the “Aurora” floating in the very lake that lends its name to the ballet. Likewise, the “good versus evil” storyline of Tchaikovsky’s plot shows some parallels to the history of the Russian revolution that is playing out on its set. What Kosolapov presents to the viewer is a kind of dreamworld of associations that speak to the supremacy of Soviet ideology, a mythological tale about the inevitable triumph of good over the forces of evil. While few Soviets believed all the details of official history, the interpretations of it went relatively unchallenged and inspired a high degree of patriotism.

Komar and Melamid’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism project attempts to explore the implications of a mythical view of the past that results in people disbelieving the stories but not their importance. Proper analysis of Soviet myth (such as the kind under consideration in Komar and Melamid’s paintings) requires a certain understanding of what myth is and how it operates. First, we must dispense with the popular equation of myth with something false. As noted scholar of myth Robert Segal has demonstrated, myth is not to be understood as a prototype to science whose primary aim is to understand the natural world, rather myth is first and foremost a means of social cohesion. In other words, myths are not merely the primitive mind’s attempt to explain how the world came to be what it is, but are, as John Girling writes, “symbolic representations of critical changes; they do not ‘explain’ these changes.” Myths do not
describe how historical changes come about, they interpret the significance of these events. If history is understood as that which has constituted and brought about the present (a view consistent with Marxism’s historical dialecticism) than myths can be understood as a critical appraisal of historical events as they have taken shape in the present. For example, a creation myth such as the Judeo-Christian account of Adam and Eve is not intended solely to provide an explanation of how mankind came to inhabit the Earth. Inherent to the story is a lesson for the contemporary reader about man’s sinful nature and the need to seek redemption from God. Mythology scholar Rudolf Bultmann explains, “The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially.” Mythology’s primary function, is to answer basic question about the purpose of life—the kind employed by Gaugin’s painting, “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” (1897) In mythological societies, a past event is only relevant insofar as it has currency in present social dynamics. Myth is not a proto-scientific alternative explanation of the past, nor is it merely a series of accounts of the exploits of ancestors and founders; myth is concerned, above all, with how the past shapes present society.

It is during Stalinism that mythological paradigms had come to define official histories, and it is the early years of the Soviet Union before Lenin’s death, a time commonly referred to as the revolutionary period, that acts as the primary focus of historical study. The underlying ideology of this period was the inevitable acceleration of history toward Communism, which Marx had established as the natural result of
historical progress. Even before Lenin’s death, Soviet theorists worried about the instability of trying to establish a viable state that was paradoxically founded upon a theory of continuous upheaval. A contemporary critic and author, Yevgeny Zamyatin, in his essay “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters,” argued that it was futile to believe in the finality of the revolution:

Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number. . .When the flaming, seething sphere cools, the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma. . .Instead of the Sermon on the Mount, under the scorching sun, to up-raised arms and sobbing people, there is drowsy prayer in a magnificent abbey. Instead of Galileo’s ‘But still, it turns!’ there are dispassionate computations in a well-heated room in an observatory. . .This is the path of evolution—until a new heresy explodes the crush of dogma.11

As the upheaval of the Revolution and subsequent civil war faded, and the government took to the task of nation building, Soviet leaders were put in the awkward position of deriving their authority from an ideology that, through a perpetual cycle of class conflict, calls for the overthrow of all institutions of power. In response, Stalin paradoxically declared the preceding decade a success, announcing the arrival of “real, existing socialism” as a more stable foundation for Soviet state authority.

The partitioning off of the revolutionary era as a self-contained period of transition subverted a more linear historical model. Boris Groys describes how in making this doctrinal leap, Stalin radically altered the Party’s ideological relationship to the past: “in using the experience of the past, [Stalinism] always strove to distance itself from the past by reading it unhistorically and ‘incorrectly’ and incorporating it into its own posthistorical existence.”12 In other words, Stalin did not contradict the Marxist-Leninist
doctrine that history is defined by perpetual class struggle; he announced the end of history and adopted a mythological stance toward the past. In his influential book *Mythologies*, French theorist Roland Barthes introduced the idea that myth can serve as a useful model for maintaining power because its primary function is to perpetuate the status quo as a vehicle of social cohesion, even if it does so by glorifying past periods of upheaval and change. Just as the Greek gods of Olympus caused great tumult by overthrowing the Titans, Lenin and other revolutionaries were deified in Stalinist propaganda for their defeat of the twin giants of Monarchy and Capitalism. As was the case with the Olympians, the revolutionaries’ actions were not to be followed in kind, but were to be honored for having established a new, higher social order. The first version of Vladimir Serov’s painting (Figure 39) is part of a carefully-coordinated propaganda program designed to support this mythological view of Leninism. In the Stalin years, the hero worship of Lenin made him an undisputed god as evidenced by the popular phrase “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!” Using images of Lenin’s exploits, Stalin revised history by having himself depicted as Lenin’s protégé. His placement in the composition makes a clear argument that Stalin shared Lenin’s vision for the future, and solidifies his authority by connecting him to mythological times and reserving for him a seat in the Soviet pantheon.

Because Stalin was not actually a key figure in the revolutionary era, his inclusion in popular images like Serov’s painting required revision of the historical record. Indeed, such manipulations were a defining characteristic of Stalin’s program of propaganda, revealing that Stalin understood well that, as Jacques Derrida writes, “There is no political power without control of the archive.” Not only did Stalin present his own
false narrative, but he also cut off access to all conflicting documents. The complete control of historical understanding proved to be a powerful tool because, as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown observed, “There is a perversity to the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward.” Our behavior is largely based on our experiences with cause and effect—we rely on our knowledge of the past to made predictions about the likely result of an action. Stalin’s ability to seize control of the archive and present a particular view of history allowed him to support his policies and directives by establishing precedent. The archive is particularly effective as an organ of state control because, as Derrida notes, it exists precisely at the place of the structural breakdown of memory. Where personal experience is lacking, people rely upon archival records to decide upon a course of action. The ever-increasing reliance on the collection of documents in archival societies leads to a situation where knowledge is understood not as total recollection and mastery, but as the ability to tap into the vast archival collection.

The seemingly infinite capacity of archives for cataloging information, along with their apparent immunity to the types of subjective distortions of memory, lends them an aura of reliability valued even higher than actual individual experience. Therefore, the truthfulness of a historical account must be supported by archival documentation. Walter Benjamin remarked on this outsourcing of historical understanding, noting that, “it is far less important that the investigator report on [memories] than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.” Should a memory directly contradict the archival record, the overwhelming authority of the archive calls for the correction of the memory. The implications of this are enormous; the knowledge of
personal experience is superseded by the written record—a record at the service of those in power and susceptible to manipulation. Jacques Derrida’s book *Archive Fever* analyzes the ways in which the archive is granted a high level of authority in society and how control of it can be used as an extension of institutional power. With reference to the its semantic roots, Derrida defines the archive as, “*there where things commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle…*there* where men and gods *command, there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given.”

Tapping into the archive’s unquestioned authority, Stalin used manipulated records to consolidate his dictatorial power—a totalitarian authority he wielded as a powerful weapon of comprehensive oppression and control. Komar and Melamid’s decision to counter-intuitively reinsert Stalin into a historical situation to which he did not belong comes out of their understanding that in Soviet society, the past was subordinate to the present. While Stalin’s presence at Lenin’s side may be inaccurate, it nonetheless reflects, for the artists at least, a truer representation of that speech’s influence on the present. It does not so much matter whether or not Stalin stood on the podium with Lenin on that day. All that matters is that the power of the Soviet, claimed by Lenin at the time, can also be said to have resided with Stalin; it also informs whether Stalin still has a role to play in the exercise of that authority. That is to say, if Stalin ultimately assumed that power, it matters little if it was originally intended for him.

Archival manipulation in the Soviet Union not only took the form of fabricating information such as adding Stalin to historical accounts, but was also manifest in the removal of records. Stalin was regularly inserted into images of significant revolutionary events at the same time as it became a regular practice to strike a person from all archival
records if they fell out of favor. In visual culture, this meant that paintings were frequently re-touched and photographs manipulated. Stalin’s doctrine that held history to be pliable and subject to change—a doctrine at the base of such distortions of the visual record—reflects his post-historical, mythological view of the past. Because history is no longer understood as tied to the present, but is instead primarily a symbolic means by which to explain social realities, there is a justifiable back-and-forth between the past and the present. The past is consulted to find meaning in the present, but the present must also be explained by a suitable past—each time present circumstances change, the past must be changed to reflect this new reality. While Serov’s painting can be interpreted as part of Stalin’s campaign to ascend to the level of demigod and ideologue, alongside Lenin, it is equally plausible that by the time Serov painted his work, Stalin’s presence in the composition was not to shape reality, but to reflect it. In other words, the more Stalin solidified his authority, the more necessary it was to alter the historical record to accurately symbolize present dynamics. Likewise, when other Party leaders who inhabited such symbolic positions in the visual record were denounced and removed from the present political landscape, their image needed to be removed from past images to reflect this change.

Ironically, Stalin’s continuing influence on Soviet power structures is evident in the very attempts to wipe him from the historical record. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization campaign was most noticeable in the eradication of his image from the public sphere: statues were destroyed or buried, paintings were re-commissioned, and city streets and squares were renamed. In his attempts to correct Stalinist abuses of power, Khrushchev followed his example by seizing control of the archive and rewriting history. Even in his
infamous “secret speech” in which he first denounced Stalin, Khrushchev took great pains to preserve the Communist Party’s claim to absolute authority, and he does so by appealing to the mythological interpretation of history first put forward by the man he was condemning. Amidst the denunciations of the abuses of power, Khrushchev preserved and even bolstered the cult of personality centered on Lenin—an infallible image carefully crafted by Stalin. Instead of abandoning Stalin’s mythologizing of the revolutionary era, Khrushchev limited his critique to a challenge of Stalin’s place as inheritor of that revolutionary legacy, and subsequently claimed that mantle for himself. The second version of Serov’s painting (Figure 40) is the direct result of Khrushchev’s policy. While the omission of Stalin’s presence was seen as corrective to the historical record, the fact that the work was recreated (rather than removed) shows that Khrushchev was still very much interested in the ongoing mythologizing hero worship of Lenin. He claimed Lenin’s legacy not as Stalin had on the basis of physical proximity but, not unlike Martin Luther, Khrushchev proposed to return to the sacred source material of Marx’s and Lenin’s texts. In other words, he staked his claim on the basis of archival authority and made it sacrosanct.

Khrushchev’s adoption of Stalin’s model of historical revisionism should not be surprising, given that he was presented with a similar dilemma to that of Stalin’s. Once again, after Stalin’s death Soviet leaders were in the position of not being able to fully endorse their predecessor’s ideology, having nonetheless to rely on the authority derived from it for their political power. Notwithstanding these conditions, unlike Stalin, Khrushchev was left with the task of simultaneously mythologizing and demythologizing. “There is a myth associated with the concept of demythologizing,”
notes theorist Raphael Patai, “In Christianity it is ‘save Christianity by discarding its mythology.’ It’s the dilemma of not being able to believe, but remaining committed to it.” By openly challenging the cult of personality built up around Stalin, Khrushchev argued that he had saved the communist project by eradicating the Stalinist heresy.

Returning to Komar and Melamid’s painting *Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution*, by restoring Stalin to the composition, the artists assert that the molding and shaping of the power structures carried out by Stalin are still evident in Soviet society. They suggest, moreover, that Serov’s decision to remove Stalin from the image may have been premature. In particular, the artists challenge Khrushchev’s assumption that Leninism could be returned to by simply expunging Stalin from the historical record.

“That is the greatest arrogance,” explains Melamid, “that you can fight time. That you can bring back what really was.” Komar and Melamid’s appropriation of Serov’s first, rather than second, version was affected by an awareness that the original was first and foremost an artwork and a symbolic presentation of the past. It was not (nor was it ever intended to be) documentary evidence of the actual details of the instance of Lenin’s speech. While based on an actual event, the entire composition is fictionalized—the size and demeanor of the crowd, the setting, Lenin’s gesture, etc. Even more important than these details, however, is that by accepting Serov’s “correction” as legitimate, and even desirable, one glosses over the fact that the first canvas had its own historical currency and relevance. Put another way, the belief that Stalin was heavily involved in key revolutionary events and acted as Lenin’s natural successor (and all the political capital that accompanied this belief) had a far greater impact on the course of events in Stalin’s Soviet Union than even Lenin’s actual speech. To believe that Serov’s second version
somehow invalidated the first ignores the fact that the archive is not, as Michel Foucault would sum up, “that which the dustbin of utterances gathers up; it is that which determines the type of relevance of the utterance-thing.”22 In other words, as an archival interpretation, Serov’s first painting was not a passive record of historical occurrences; it was an active influence within society, shaping social discourse and action. It not only recounted a historical event, but became an event unto itself. Much like an irrational phobia cannot merely be corrected by demonstrating to the adult that their fear is illogical, Komar and Melamid suggest that the effects of Stalinist archival oppression could not be reversed by merely pointing out factual errors in Stalin-era accounts of history.

In the Soviet Union, works of art like Serov’s served a performativ role in the larger program of official propaganda by acting as a dramatic interpretation of actual archival records that were inaccessible to the general public. These paintings were not archival in the sense that they were actual historical documents, but in the sense that they gained their legitimacy by appeal to archival authority. In his book The Big Archive (2008), Sven Spieler investigates the role played by the archive within Soviet society, focusing in particular on the differing ways it was used as a tool of propaganda. Spieler describes how access to official state archives was actually quite restricted, and thus people relied on second-hand sources that were imbued with what he terms the “effect of the real.” Socialist Realist works of art, grandly displayed in museums and reproduced for mass consumption, acted as distillations of important historical events. The specific promotion of certain works of art acted as carefully coded messages intended to convey both explicit and implicit Party doctrine. A sudden shift in the interpretation of a past
event was a clear signal of a radical change in policy. As a highly visible revision of an historical account, the absence of Stalin in Serov’s second version sent a clear message to all Soviet citizens that Stalin was no longer to be praised, indeed to do so became politically dangerous. Similar messages had been conveyed numerous times under Stalinism as prominent leaders suddenly began to disappear.23 Importantly, the second version does not, by itself, convey this message, but requires the viewer to remember the first and to take note of the alteration. Thus, the defining characteristic of Serov’s second version is the meaningful absence of Stalin, just as the most salient detail of the first was his presence.

One of the formative events of the artistic development of Komar and Melamid, and one that eventually led to their long-term artistic collaboration on works such as Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution, occurred in the summer of 1972 when both artists were assigned to paint propaganda placards at a children’s camp outside of Moscow. One day, showing them the grounds, the camp director stopped, patted the ground with his foot, and explained that there was a large concrete bust of Stalin buried at that very spot. He explained that when Khrushchev took power, all the images of Stalin were taken down, and many of the large ones were simply buried. Melamid explained that this suddenly aroused memories from his childhood after Stalin died: “[Stalin] was gone—everything associated with Stalin was bad. In the summer in the camp with the buried Stalin, we suddenly realized that Stalin art isn’t good art, it’s not bad art, it’s just art. This was a great discovery for us. . .there were no taboos anymore.”24 The sudden awareness that Stalin was lurking in Russia’s soil awoke in the artists the realization that he was also still present within their own psyches. Despite Khrushchev’s efforts, Stalin’s
influence and power had not dissipated; it had merely become a subconscious force shaping present reality. For Komar and Melamid, re-inserting Stalin into Serov’s painting was not an insertion at all, it was an uncovering—it was an attempt to unearth Stalin’s continuing influence even after his death.

Whereas Serov’s altered his first version by removing Stalin, Komar and Melamid’s change it by shifting to a sepia-toned palette. The somber color scheme acts as an important clue to the viewer that what’s at stake in the work is not merely a historical correction. They are not trying to reclaim the validity of the first and discard the second, for to do so would be to repeat Khrushchev’s error. The effect of the artists’ alteration is that the image seems to be from memory—rather than a depiction of Lenin’s speech, it is the depiction of the artists’ understanding of that event as it pertains to their own everyday reality. For Komar and Melamid, who both grew up during Stalinism, Stalin was very much a part of their own relationship to the Soviet mythological past. As an appropriation, the historical event their work references is not Lenin’s speech, but Serov’s painting—it is not a painting of Lenin, it is a painting of a painting of Lenin. That is to say, Komar and Melamid’s canvas attempts to uncover the continued influence of the first Serov canvas in the present, without ignoring the subsequent impact of the second. Their analysis of the first version is not aimed at understanding its influence within its own historical moment, but on the influence it has had upon the course of events in the intervening years. The reduction of the bright color palette to more somber tones gives Komar and Melamid’s canvas the pictorial equivalent of architectural deterioration, hinting at the passage of time. Much as the bright paint on Greek temples has worn away with the passing of the empire’s vitality, the tones in Serov’s canvas have
dulled along with the hopes of the eventual attainment of the bright future of Communism.

Komar and Melamid’s interpretation of their experience standing above a buried statue of Stalin as the most seminal moment in their early artistic development results in a plenitude of archaeological metaphors used in their writings and artworks. Komar elaborates on these elements in their work, “Sometimes what we are doing reminds me of traveling in a mysterious city, the dark city of our mind. We can see many façades, labyrinths, different floors of various buildings in different styles. It’s like ancient Rome. In a single building, you can see one façade from ancient times, another that belongs to modern times.” In Komar’s statement the archaeological imagery has strong psychoanalytic overtones. This is manifested in the way Komar and Melamid confront official use of the archive as an organ of state control by mining their own memories. They understand that to attempt some sort of objective examination of archival records would paradoxically be challenging the archive with an appeal to the archive. Such an approach would only feed the perception that the archive is self-correcting and heighten the belief in the archive’s infallibility as such. The archive would emerge from such a process all the more powerful a weapon to be used as a means of state control.

In their Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, the Komar and Melamid set out to create an alternate historical model that is composed entirely from memory—one that would decentralize power by tipping the balance back in favor of lived experience. Komar and Melamid do so with the understanding that memory is not the same as the archive. The history they present is highly mythological and subjective. It is not interested in replacing the official version of history, but in multiplying it. The artists
reach back into their memories to explain the present, not the past. While the archive and memory are not the same, they are not necessarily polar opposites. As Spieker notes, “In the Freudian psyche, as in the archive, an object is shaped by forces that, while they may be unremembered or invisible, are nevertheless palpably present in the object itself.”26 The artists are interested in exploring these latent forces in a process of self-discovery, a process that reveals how the dark past of Stalinist oppression manifests itself upon the Cold War Soviet citizen’s psyche.

Notwithstanding the clearly psychoanalytic dimensions of Komar and Melamid’s paintings, the trauma they attempt to uncover is not unique to the artists, but is shared by the entirety of Soviet society. As Boris Groys notes, this self-analysis is thus more Lacanian than Freudian in that by excavating the latent forces pictorially “they do not attempt to reveal any specific individual trauma incarnated in a specific historical event, but allow signs of different semiotic systems to commutate, combine, become juxtaposed, and so on in order to uncover as much of the net of associations as possible in all directions and on all levels.”27

Komar and Melamid’s interest in scrutinizing their own personal experience with Stalin is perhaps most apparent in their work *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* (1982-83 – Figure 42). In this single canvas, the artists have brought together elements of their own past, Soviet propaganda, Romanticism, and self-portraiture. As the title of the work indicates, Komar and Melamid stand as young Communist Pioneers.28 Depicting themselves with children’s bodies and adult heads, the artists humorously reference the duality of their youth and maturity. Standing at attention on dramatically draped boxes and chairs, they pay homage to a bust of Stalin. Because they are operating from a
mythological, non-linear view of the past that sees time as malleable, the conflation of the adolescent and adult is not so problematic. The adolescent worship of Stalin that these artists learned in childhood still holds sway on their views as adults.

Myth serves as a useful paradigm from which the artists analyze their ambivalent feelings about their childhoods. This is because, as the noted scholar of myth Mircea Eliade explains in his book *Myth and Reality*, “The man of the archaic societies declares that he is the result of a certain number of mythical events.” Not only does a mythical perspective on the past lead to a belief in how society came to be structured as it is, but it is intended to be specifically interpreted by the individual to discover their own place within that society. In works like *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, Komar and Melamid highlight this idea that mythology is not an impersonal explanation of the world’s natural forces, but is instead a deeply personal understanding of oneself—a philosophy of social positioning. This is, in large part, why Soviets can be described simultaneously as mythological and committed scientists with a deep dedication to theories such as Darwinian evolution. Analyst Aleksei Losev cautions, however, that this mythological self-analysis is not strictly internal: “Any living person is a myth in one way or another. . .not by virtue of being a person, but by virtue of being understood and formed from the point of view of mythical consciousness.” In other words, what matters most is not how a person sees themselves, but how a person believes he is seen by others. In *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, Komar and Melamid reflect on the tension between the role within society they were expected to fulfill, and their later understanding that they could not do so. As young Pioneers, the artists carried on the
rituals of initiation into Soviet society, but the imposition of their adult heads onto the young bodies signals their later disillusionment with socialist ideology.

That Komar and Melamid specifically chose to resuscitate the mythology of Stalinism, and not some preceding or succeeding period, reflects their having grown up and acquired the cultural mythology of the Soviet state during Stalin’s reign. Remarkably, however, Komar and Melamid do not appear to be trying to remove the almost divine aura surrounding Stalin. As Boris Groys notes of the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, “Not only do these artists not ‘unmask’ or ‘demythologize’ the Stalin myth in these works; on the contrary, they ‘remythologize’ it, praising Stalin more vociferously than any artist of the period would have ventured to do.” Such overly exaggerated praise in Komar and Melamid’s project has often been misunderstood as ironically praising tyrants such as Stalin, after doing so had long been deemed taboo—a “re-mythologizing” with the express aim of being provocative and outrageous by presenting him as just another historical figure. This was born out when the artists’ 1981 Portrait of Hitler was actually slashed while at an exhibition because, as the man explained, he was “tired of irony” (the artists elected not to have the painting restored, instead naming the perpetrator a “co-creator”). Komar and Melamid’s approach went further than simply rendering irony, however, touching on subjects that are much more personal. Indeed, it’s difficult to imagine, as the viewer who slashed their canvas must have, that a pair of Jewish artists who had only recently escaped from a totalitarian dictatorship would approach the subject of Hitler so flippantly. Instead, as Komar explains, the portrait was done very carefully to avoid any sense of caricature or distorting expression as a way of confronting their past. Boris Groys describes the
artists’ efforts to overcome their personal taboos as “a session of social psychoanalysis that retrieves from the Soviet subconscious a mythology whose existence no one is prepared to acknowledge even to themselves.”

In that case, the Stalin that appears in Komar and Melamid’s canvases is not the historical figure, but rather an embodiment of that part of themselves that still sees the world through the lens of Stalinist mythology—a reflection of their childhood understanding of the promises of communism. In taking Stalin or Hitler as their subject matter, the artists are attempting to expose the latent influence of such figures in their present circumstances.

The psychoanalytic aspects of Komar and Melamid’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, in works such as Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution and Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers were already present, to a degree, in works produced before they emigrated from the Soviet Union. Both before and after emigration, the artists drew associations between themselves and Soviet leaders such as Lenin and Stalin in their artworks. Because the later works act as a reflection of their memories of life in Moscow, rather than an engagement with the reality of producing works in the Soviet underground, the artists had grown more self-aware of their own psychology, openly acknowledging and remarking on these differences. Comparing Double Self-Portrait (1973 – Figure 43) with Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers (1982-83—Figure 42) Melamid notes, “With the dark paintings, we did almost everything we had done before. We made our private version of Socialist Realism. We rewrote history. With Young Pioneers we even made a new double portrait of ourselves. But there is a big difference. Before the mirror was turned outward and now we turned it inward.”

As the title of the earlier work indicates, the artists have appropriated the iconic portrait format used by
official artists in the Soviet Union to express the shared vision of Stalin and Lenin (Figure 44). Just as they had done with their signed banners (Figure 19, Chapter 2), Komar and Melamid have usurped the pictorial authority typically reserved for Soviet leaders. In addition, the faux-mosaic style they employ connotes both Byzantine-inspired churches as well as the decorations in the Soviet metro. Thus, not only do the artists engage in a blasphemous association with Lenin and Stalin, but they also expose the blatantly religious iconography often exploited to build up the cult of personality around Party heads. While the decision to identify with tyrants already suggests a psychological element, the primary aim of the work is much more clearly deconstructive and expository in its aim—a strategy not surprising from political dissidents presented with daily opposition from authorities. By the time they paint works in New York from the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series such as *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, Komar and Melamid’s reflective attitude results in much more introspective images.

Having turned the focus inward, Komar and Melamid dig through their memories like so many archival records, searching for events and experiences that continue to influence their world view. As has already been noted, however, the artists were not concerned with what happens so much as what continues to matter—they were interested in history, not the past. Sven Spieker has argued, “The authenticity of memories is moored in the topography of the present rather than in the elusive past.”37 The search for these authentic memories often led the artists to re-write the history of well-known events, such as their work *Yalta Conference (from a History Textbook 1984)* (1982 – Figure 45). Perhaps no single event weighed more heavily on the minds of Soviet citizens during the Cold War than did the controversial conference between Roosevelt,
Churchill, and Stalin at Yalta that marked the end of World War II. The conference serves as the subject of works by many nonconformist artists, including Komar and Melamid, Leonid Sokov, Tengiz, and others. Meant to be a negotiation about the terms of surrender for Germany and a strategy for rebuilding European nations, it ultimately resulted in the division of Europe into East and West. In the end, Churchill proved to be ineffectual at the conference and most of the details were worked out between Roosevelt and Stalin. As a result, Komar and Melamid do not even include Churchill, an omission all the more glaring considering the artists based the composition on a very famous photograph of the three leaders (Figure 46). But Churchill’s absence is not even the most striking aspect of the work. Komar and Melamid have also replaced Roosevelt’s head and hands with those of E.T., from the very famous movie by Steven Spielberg that had just come out at the time the work was painted. Finally, in an even more provocative revision, the artists have included the vanquished Hitler in the background, who motions the viewer to not reveal his presence. These distortions are all the more outrageous given that the title declares to work fit for a history textbook (although, as far as can be discovered, nobody has taken them up on the offer).

Of course, Komar and Melamid are not painting the actual Yalta Conference, but its effects; more precisely, they re-present the historical event as seen through the lens of its effects. It is perhaps useful to consider Komar and Melamid’s canvas as a manifestation of the phenomenon first described by Sigmund Freud as nachträglichkeit. Made famous in his study of the “Wolf Man,” this concept holds that the impact of an experience upon the memory is constantly re-interpreted based on subsequent experience. In Freud’s writings, this generally manifested itself when a child witnesses a primal
event, such as his parents having sex which, despite inflicting no initial trauma upon the child, nonetheless impresses itself upon the child as significant. Freud then explains how subsequent sexual issues such as abuse can lead to a re-interpretation of the primal event as traumatic within the psyche of the child. Thus there is give-and-take with the past wherein memories affect our behavior in the present, while simultaneously present circumstances constantly lead to a re-interpretation of those memories. The newly understood memory then impresses itself on the present psyche in a new way, creating an endless cycle. McGill University neuroscientist Karim Nader has demonstrated that there is a biological basis for this process: “Each time you remember something, you’re changing the memory a little bit. We’re always changing the memory slightly.”39 It is more accurate, therefore, to say a memory is re-membered, or reconstituted as a body, than recalled. The only way for a memory to stay pure and unaltered in a person, is to never be remembered. The constant revision of memories results in a corrupted memory in which the past is susceptible to present circumstances. Freudian theorist Jean Laplanche highlights these back-and-forth aspects of nachträglichkeit—a term he translates as “afterwardness”:

Freud’s concept of afterwardness contains both great richness and great ambiguity between retrogressive and progressive directions. I want to account for this problem of the directional to and fro by arguing that, right at the start, there is something that goes in the direction from the past to the future, and in the direction from the adult to the baby, which I call the implantation of the enigmatic message. This message is then retranslated from a temporal direction which is sometimes progressive and sometimes retrogressive.40
At the time of the meeting, the Yalta Conference seemed to be the standard kind of formal meeting to work out the logistical details of the end of the war. Only in subsequent years did the full impact of those negotiations become apparent, as they paved the way for the division of Germany, drawing the future front lines of the Cold War. Komar and Melamid’s canvas addresses the Yalta Conference, both as an historical event and as the root of Cold War hostilities in the present.

Because Komar and Melamid wish to show not only the original conference, but its effects, they radically altered the form of the photograph. Thus, they focus on things such as Churchill’s inability to shape the discussion at Yalta, which had a dramatic impact on the dynamics of the Cold War. Roosevelt’s and Stalin’s monopolization of the negotiations essentially resulted in the claiming of territory by the two emergent world superpowers. Komar and Melamid acknowledge this not only through Churchill’s absence, but through Hitler’s presence, which signals his continuing influence in the negotiations. Although Hitler is most often associated with the Holocaust, and Americans like to see themselves primarily as liberators of oppressed Jews, this was not actually the impetus for the American entry into the war. In fact, in the film “Why We Fight: Prelude to War,” prepared by the U.S. Department of Defense to explain the reasons for the decision to enter the war, nowhere was the oppression of Jewish people even mentioned; the film manages to dwell over both religious oppression and German national supremacy without addressing it. Just as American authorities had intelligence on Hitler’s campaign against the Jews before engaging him in war, at the time of Yalta Americans were already aware of numerous reports of human rights violations by Stalin, most famously the Katyn forest massacre in which an estimated 22,000 Polish soldiers in
Soviet P.O.W. camps were summarily executed. When Roosevelt was challenged by the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, William Christian Bullitt, Jr. for working with Stalin, he responded, “I have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man. . .and I think that if I give him everything I can and ask for nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won’t try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace.” Rather unconcerned with domestic human rights violations, it was actually Hitler’s imperial desire to expand and occupy other countries—his violation of other nations’ sovereignty—that prompted American engagement. Komar and Melamid highlight the irony that while Yalta was intended as the conclusion of Hitler’s territorial expansion, it did not result in the restoration of those nations’ sovereignty but merely in the transfer of control being shifted from Germany to the other two world powers. Hitler’s presence in the painting reminds the viewer that his influence is still active in the present, in fact it is all the more powerful during the Cold War—both in the sense of imperial expansion and totalitarian mass execution.

Following the Yalta Conference, the United States and the Soviet Union staked their respective claims of Hitler’s territory in different ways. The figures of Stalin and Roosevelt (as E.T.) represent these divergent forms of occupation. Boris Groys argues that E.T. was used instead of Roosevelt because, for Komar and Melamid both E.T. and Stalin, “symbolize the utopian spirit dominating both empires.” In other words, what is being presented is not the historical figures of Roosevelt and Stalin, but the culture each brought to their respective territories. At the time of the painting’s execution, Spielberg’s E.T. had just been released and was the highest-grossing film of all time. This blockbuster status and international success of the film made it a perfect symbol for the
artists of the expansion of American culture throughout its sphere of influence. Lacking
the same symbolic import as E.T., Roosevelt has his likeness replaced because, though he
was present at the actual conference, the resulting effect was the spread of American
popular culture and not Roosevelt’s personal influence. Unlike Roosevelt, however,
Stalin had, even in his own time, transcended his physical self and become an idea—he
was both the leader and the basis of Soviet culture. Like Roosevelt, Stalin was present at
the conference itself, but as a symbol of Soviet popular culture, he is the perfect
complement to E.T. within the composition. The choice of E.T. specifically as a stand-in
for American popular culture can also be read as semi-autobiographical in the sense that
both the artists as exiles, and E.T. as a castaway are left in a foreign situation, unable to
return home. The paralleled figures of E.T. and Stalin may reflect a certain split
personality in the artists—on the one hand, they were raised as good Soviet Pioneers and
propagandists, on the other hand they had fully engrossed themselves in life in the United
States.

The decision by Komar and Melamid to address the Yalta Conference by
appropriating an actual photograph of the event represents a further challenge to archival
authority. Not only are the artists drawing attention to the continued resonance of the
conference in the Cold War, they also challenge the assumption that a photograph, with
its purported objectivity and factual recording of events, is necessarily the best way of
examining history. Indeed, for the artists, the factual distortions of their recollections as a
result of nachträglichkeit does not decrease the degree of authenticity of their memories,
on the contrary it can be said to increase. Perhaps out of the belief that a subjective
treatment of history is more reflective of reality than the photograph, Komar and
Melamid actually created this canvas with the United Nations headquarters in New York in mind.

Although Komar and Melamid advocate for a more interpretive approach to the study of history, they do not suggest that their account of the Yalta Conference is universally applicable, or more precisely, they do not believe it is the only universally applicable reading. Quite to the contrary, history is not objective fact, but is instead multiple subjective experiences—a multiplicity that should be embraced rather than attempting to simplify history as one coherent narrative. Groys writes, “In this post-Soviet time, as the majority of Russians try either to forget that unhappy century altogether or to glorify the Soviet past without actually remembering it, the unofficial art of the Soviet era functions, paradoxically, as the only cultural space where the private memories from the Soviet era are still kept.” Komar and Melamid buck the trend to willfully un-remember life in the Soviet Union, and their Nostalgic Socialist Realism series is an attempt to visually present those memories vividly to a culture suffering from self-inflicted amnesia. Although paintings such as those in the series represent a sort of artistic diary, documenting Komar and Melamid’s experiences growing up in the Soviet Union, as self-depicted personae, only rarely do the two artists self-represent. Nobody has a more prominent position in the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series than Stalin, yet not as the historical figure who lived and ruled the Soviet Union. Rather, as Carter Ratcliff argues, “In their dark paintings, Stalin is a powerfully remembered titan, not a historical figure but an autochthonous source of history.” Similar to how the photograph of the Yalta Conference will be understood by the Cold-War viewer to reflect so much more than was comprehended at the actual meeting, so too Stalin’s image held
connotations greater than that of a man. Far more than celebrity or hero worship, Stalin was seen as the origin of all Soviet cultural life. This view of Stalin is nowhere more evident within the series than in the two canvases *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982-83 – Figure 47) and *Stalin and the Muses* (1981-82 – Figure 48)—images that treat his representation with the kind of reverence befitting a religious deity.

Asked about the many images of Stalin in their paintings, Komar and Melamid explained, “To us, Stalin is a mythical figure. We are not trying to do a political show. This is nostalgia.”

It may seem strange to create a series of canvases littered with images of Stalin, Lenin, and Soviet propaganda, only to claim that they are not intentionally political. However, these highly charged political images had so thoroughly permeated Soviet society, that to engage with any aspect of one’s life would involve their use. The presence of political imagery in such highly personal works is a testament to the inescapability of politics in daily life in the Soviet Union. Because Komar and Melamid’s personal experience was that of students in the art academies, it is not surprising that in their works they are drawn to Stalin’s proclamation of an officially mandated form of art. In these two paintings, Komar and Melamid treat Stalin’s elaborations on the proper mode of artistic creation not as theory or ideology, or even as directives, but instead as a revelation. In an effort to convey the religious connotations of Socialist Realist doctrine, the artists resort to Greek mythology: in one work, Stalin receives the inspiration for official art from the four muses, emphasizing the official curriculum that taught how Socialist Realism was truly original, seemingly appearing out of nowhere.
In *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, Stalin is shown not only to be the divinely inspired creator of Socialist Realist art theory, but also its first subject. In this work, Stalin sits before a wall as his silhouette is traced by a classical figure. This refers back to the legend of the Corinthian maid laid out by Pliny in his *Natural History* (circa 77-79AD), a story that claims painting itself was invented when a young woman traced the shadow of her lover on her wall before he set out for war. By executing the works in a dramatic Baroque style usually reserved for scenes of divine revelation, Komar and Melamid convey the reverence paid to Socialist Realism in their classic Soviet education—Stalin’s declarations on the proper methods of artistic creation were presented to them in art school as a radical break from past art history—a sort of post-historical jump that mirrored the arrival of “real, existing socialism.” Far more than a new style that was well-suited to the Soviet Union’s political directives, Socialist Realism was an infallible doctrine with divine origins, the violation of which carried dire circumstances.

The mythological overtones in *The Origin of Socialist Realism* and *Stalin and the Muses* make it clear that the figure of Stalin in these canvases is not the historical man; he is not even external to Komar and Melamid’s own psyches. One particularly intriguing canvas from the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series is *Portrait of Medved* (1982-83 – Figure 49). “Medved” is the Russian word for bear—a symbol associated with Russian national identity. It is also a stand-in for the very soil of Mother Russia herself. Chained up as it is, the bear becomes a powerful symbol of the yoke of oppression in Russia. Some have noted that the bear has a striking resemblance to Komar—a suggestion the artists have not discouraged. The merging of the artists’ identity with the soil of Russia is
lent added weight when considered in relation to the event the artists identify as the beginning of their artistic collaboration—the summer at the youth camp where they encounter the buried statue of Stalin. Recall again Melamid’s statement, “He was gone—everything associated with Stalin was bad. In the summer in the camp with the buried Stalin, we suddenly realized that Stalin art isn’t good art, it’s not bad art, it’s just art. This was a great discovery for us…there were no taboos anymore.”

The primary realization for the artists on that day was not that Stalin’s influence was still being felt in the upper echelons of the Communist Party (although that was important, too), but that Stalin still existed on a subconscious level within themselves. But though this story is routinely recited as the beginning of their artistic collaboration, in reality the artists had met some nine years earlier in art school, and had already collaborated on a private exhibition at the Blue Bird Café. While the summer at the youth camp was not the chronological starting point of Komar and Melamid’s partnership, it nonetheless acts as an originary event for them. Like their interpretation of the Yalta Conference, their own personal history is subject to change and adaptation according to the principles of nachträglichkeit. Komar and Melamid’s experience at the youth camp is the partnership’s point of origin not because it came first chronologically, but because it marked a significant shift in their worldview that led to a reinterpretation of all that came before.

The unearthing of Stalin’s presence within their psyches led Komar and Melamid to begin evaluating their own childhood relationship with him. One of the titles most frequently associated with Stalin during his reign was that of “father of the nation.” Interpreted in Freudian terms, Stalin’s role within the group psychology of the Soviet
Union was the “ego ideal”—a model set up for society to emulate. Jan Plamper, in his seminal text *The Stalin Cult*, writes that “Stalin had long before completed his journey to a higher kind of personhood. Stalin quite simply ‘was.’ He, and only he, embodied the endpoint of the utopian timeline. As such he was beyond time and place.” Despite his heroic status, Stalin was held up as an example of what a Soviet citizen should be. He had, in essence, already evolved to the point of becoming a socialist superman. Komar explains that because Stalin represented a glimpse into the future of what utopian communists would be, his persona became the goal: “everybody was supposed to live a collective, anti-individual existence because they identified the highest point of their individual lives with Stalin’s individuality.” But because of the cult of personality built up around Stalin, the image most people had of him was that of an infallible leader, making the goal of being like him unattainable. The failure to live up to this ambition inevitably resulted in frustration and aggression that, because of the power dynamics in the Soviet Union, could not be displayed toward the “ego ideal.” Following the Freudian principle, the frustration with the inability to live up to expectations devolves into guilt via the super-ego. The end result is an overemphasis of affection toward the ego ideal—in this case, Stalin. The overbearing and seemingly implausible adoration Komar and Melamid exhibit toward Stalin in their works, particularly in paintings such as *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* reflects a self-awareness of this tendency within themselves—both as children and as adults.

The internalization of Stalin as a super ego of the Soviet collective psyche further cemented his divine stature. Freud explains, “A great change takes place only when the authority is internalized through the establishment of a super-ego…since nothing can be
One of the popular legends about Stalin that circulated in Moscow was that it was possible to look up at his office in the Kremlin and see the light on, showing that he was tirelessly working for the people. Of course, the unspoken reverse of that suggests that at any moment he could look out and spy you on the street. Stalin’s panoptic gaze was the very instrument of his reign of terror; it depended on legions of surrogates in the form of ordinary citizens informing on one another, to carry out surveillance. The threat of denunciation meant that to express anything but complete adoration of Stalin was extremely treacherous. In essence, because Stalin demanded exclusive affection as the father of the nation, he fulfilled the role of a primal father. As his children, the relationship between Soviet citizens mirrored that of the children of a primal father in which fairness was measured not in terms of equal rights, but in that “all of the sons knew that they were equally persecuted by the primal father, and feared him equally.”

The omnipresence of Stalin as the primal father is at the heart of Komar and Melamid’s works such as Blindman’s Buff (1982–83 – Figure 50). According to Freud, the primal father demanded complete control, and “prevented his sons from satisfying their directly sexual impulsions; he forced them into abstinence and consequently into emotional ties with him.” Although sex was not explicitly prohibited in Stalinist Russia, on the contrary having children was strongly encouraged, one’s primary loyalty was always with Stalin and any children were understood to be his. Children were openly encouraged to inform on their parents, as were husbands and wives encouraged to inform on one another. There was to be no doubt that one’s fidelity was to the state, not the family. Because sex was understood as something done with the express purpose of having children for the state, Stalin imposed a Victorian prudishness
upon cultural life. Komar and Melamid’s work makes reference to this sexual repression. As the two figures play a game of Blindman’s Buff, Stalin’s persistent panoptic gaze is potently represented by his portrait on the wall. The voyeurism set up by the two men lurking in the shadows watching the vulnerable young woman creates an unsettling sexual tension. This tension is left unresolved between the couple as they play a game that they are clearly too old for—a sign of their stunted sexual development. Stalin’s presence as a portrait is the catalyst for the sexual frustration, as the young couple must engage in proper behavior before their beloved leader.

As a primal father, Stalin was fated in his death to be betrayed by his sons. Painted decades after the end of the dictator’s reign of terror, Komar and Melamid’s canvases carry with them a reminder of his death. The artists directly address Stalin’s death in several works in the series, one example being Thirty Years Ago 1953 (1982–83 – Figure 51). As in Blindman’s Bluff, with its wall portrait, Stalin’s panoptic vision is present in the room by proxy. But the news of Stalin’s death strips his gaze of its oppressive power. Since the great dictator is dead the two figures ignore his presence and indulge in sexual celebration of sorts—a reversal of the frustrated sexuality of Blindman’s Bluff. Instead, Thirty Years Ago 1953 explodes as a moment of pure ecstasy. Again, invoking Freud, the death of the primal father does not simply usher in a new sexual freedom, but the event incurs a changed societal relationship between the rebellious brothers: “they understood that they must all renounce their father’s heritage. They then formed the totemic community of brothers, all with equal rights and united by the totem prohibitions.” When Stalin died, Khrushchev took this first step by denouncing him, and claimed to renounce the cult of personality that served as the basis
of his rule. Once Stalin was buried, reference to him or any veneration of his achievements became strictly taboo. As Komar and Melamid explain it, their experience at the camp awakened in themselves an understanding that Stalin still existed inside of them, and their decision to address that part of themselves resulted, as Melamid explained, in a situation in which “there were no taboos anymore.” Whereas Stalin’s death marked the end of his oppression as a primal father of the country, by uttering his name Komar and Melamid hope to undermine his still-pervasive totemic power.

One particularly haunting image of the primal father of the country is Komar and Melamid’s *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child* (1981-82 – Figure 52). This canvas is based on an actual experience Komar had when he was just eight years old. The persistence of the memory suggests a sort of primal event that marked itself as significant on his young psyche, though as in psychoanalysis its full import would only be understood at a later time. While the entire country was intimately familiar with Stalin’s image, relatively few ever saw him in person. Freud explains that “it is precisely the sight of the chieftain that is dangerous and unbearable for primitive people, just as later that of the Godhead is for mortals.” Indeed, coming face-to-face was a terrifying experience for most people because, as Carter Ratcliff explains, “In the fear-haunted legends of his time, Stalin had the power to form the world with his gaze.” Adoration of Stalin was not expressed with the goal of getting noticed and gaining his favor. On the contrary, the hope was to not stand out, to not get noticed. Losing one’s anonymity was extremely dangerous. Being singled out by Stalin or one of his surrogates often led to one’s arrest and execution. By openly confronting this traumatic event from his own
childhood, Komar breaks a personal taboo in hopes of exposing it for the understanding of its continued impact on his life.

Despite the artists’ understanding of Stalin as a man that arouses so much terror, it is curious that the painting *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*, uses a photograph of Melamid looking back over his shoulder as a model (this is the only image in the series to do so). It is especially intriguing that Komar would use a model for Stalin to recount the single experience when he actually saw Stalin in person. In the final version, some of Melamid’s features still are visible: while the blending of Melamid’s visage with that of Stalin into a single image is unique to this work, yet the explicit identification with Soviet leaders was not. In the inscription of *Double Self-Portrait as Lenin and Stalin*, Komar and Melamid identify themselves as “famous artists.” The association of themselves with Lenin and Stalin not just as citizens, but claiming lineage on the basis of being artists draws in another set of important, and revealing, dimensions of the Stalinist cult. There is a long tradition in the history of Western art that conflates the artists with God, in that both are creators of something beautiful. Much like Dürer depicting himself as Christ (Figure 53), Komar and Melamid mimic the style of mosaic to represent themselves as Byzantine Emperor-Gods directly addressing this artistic convention. Drawing Lenin and Stalin into this tradition reveals that Stalin too aspired to creative power. Stalin’s medium was not canvas but people. His artwork was the complete transformation of Soviet society according to his dictates.

Komar and Melamid implicate themselves, as artists, into the Stalinist desire to transform society ideologically through aesthetic means. Whereas the earlier self-portrait was much more about the Stalinist cult of personality, the fusing of Melamid’s identity
with that of Stalin reveals a self-awareness of their own project’s political dimensions. Importantly, the self-identification with Stalin as a fellow artist—or as Groys calls him, an “artist-tyrant”—is not some kind of cathartic activity designed at exorcizing Stalin from their psyches (after all, as they pointed out earlier, Stalin art was not good art or bad art). Instead, the work demonstrates for the artists a particular understanding of utopia after dictatorship. Groys calls this approach post-utopian: “Thus utopia is not merely something that must be overcome or once and for all rejected—such a course would itself be utopian—but an ambivalence that is intrinsic to all artistic projects.”65 Komar and Melamid’s project is not invested in overcoming the past, but in remembering it. The artists attempt to highlight how the past shapes a person’s present behavior even if, or especially if, that person prefers to ignore such latent forces. Groys describes this project as “a social psychoanalysis that does not distinguish between self and others, between personal and political history.”66 By seamlessly blending the deeply personal, subjective experience of life in the Soviet Union with major historical events and propagandistic imagery, the artists present a chilling set of images, each of which reflects powerfully on totalitarianism and its lingering effects on the psyche.

The canvases of the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series do not cast judgment on these experiences, but are distinctly ambivalent toward life in the Soviet Union. Thus, the images do not aspire to cool objectivity, but speak to a passionate subjectivity. As reflections on history from the distant point-of-view of Soviet exiles, Komar and Melamid’s canvases represent a personal archive documenting life in Soviet society. The series weaves together official state mythology with interpretive deconstructions of significant historical events. The resulting somber-toned, dramatic images present the
viewer with a corpus of memories imbued with a profound sense of loss. The people depicted, as if in a Baroque art studio, present themselves as specters of the past (and I use this word intentionally, because the figures appear as so many ghosts), a haunting reminder that although the past is malleable and subject to change, it cannot be recovered: “We have lost even the things that we didn’t believe in.”67 The nostalgia Komar and Melamid feel for the past is palpable and reflects a certain sense of unease with their current situation. Painted in the West, where the vast majority of the viewers would be completely unfamiliar with life in a totalitarian regime, Komar and Melamid’s artworks challenge the assumption that they must look back on their former lives with disdain. Although the series demonstrates a certain degree of longing on the part of the artists, it does not indulge in the kind of historical revisionism aimed at suppressing the problematic dimensions of Soviet life. The artists remind the viewer that the past, no matter how problematic, will always hold a certain appeal because it contains one’s childhood and with it, a sense of familiarity, stability, and indelible memory.
Chapter 4
The Artist-Nomad

“Having rushed into the void, people try as quickly as possible to hurl themselves out of its invisible surroundings, to prevail, to reach a firm boundary, a crowded refuge.”

Mikhail Epstein

“It is clear that the history of mankind, as far as our knowledge goes, is a history of the transition from nomadic forms to more sedentary ones. Does it not follow that the most sedentary form of life (ours) is at the same time the most perfect one?”

D-503 in Evgeny Zamiatin’s We

When Ronald Reagan infamously labeled the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire” in 1983, he was articulating a critical assumption that was at the root of Cold War politics: one was either for capitalism and against socialism, or for socialism and against capitalism.¹ This dichotomous view of the world was echoed elsewhere, such as in Margaret Thatcher’s condemnation of unions as socialist “enemies within.”² Thus, when dissident Soviet artists defected to the West, it was widely assumed that their art would support the generally accepted superiority of Western society. Many of these artists became immediately disillusioned as they realized that the enthusiasm surrounding their art in New York had much more to do with the fact that their work could be used to stoke
the privileging of the West than it did with the actual artistic messages they were attempting to convey. “I think we are accepted here as artists ninety percent because we’re exotic. Russian,” artist Alexander Melamid said at the time, “So people think of what we’re doing in ways that are completely strange to me, completely different from what we think we’re doing. . .I feel like a fool.”3 In reality, the art produced by these refugees remained highly skeptical of both dominant systems of government. The predetermined expectation that their art would express a pro-Western viewpoint led many observers into premature and partial interpretations.

Confronted with viewer expectations to create anti-Soviet, pro-Western artworks, artists more explicitly turned their critical lens on a dual criticism of both political frameworks. Emblematic of these challenges is Alexander Kosolapov’s *Coca-Cola Lenin* (1980, Figure 25). While on its surface the work immediately betrays a certain level of contempt toward both Leninist ideology as well as Western corporate capitalism, underneath this is a certain self-critical reflection. Indeed, an important dimension of this work is the fact that at different points in his life, Kosolapov had believed deeply in the ideology of both. As a young boy, he attended the International Youth Festival, where in the American section: “The Coca-Cola company gave away free samples. This was like a dreamland for me. This was American culture…The taste of Coke was like the milk of paradise.”4 Created in Cold War-era New York, the work was immediately interpreted as an affront to Coca-Cola’s image by suggesting Lenin’s endorsement (for more on this dimension, see Chapter 2), but given the fondness with which Kosolapov recalls his first encounter with Coca-Cola, such a definition seems problematic, or at the very least, incomplete. To read this work as an attack on Coca-Cola assumes a negative value
judgment toward Lenin. Indeed, the work would have been equally outrageous in Soviet Russia, but for precisely the opposite reason: if one has a positive association with Coca-Cola, its association with Lenin could also be seen as a positive endorsement of him. Kosolapov’s description hardly feels like the ranting of an anti-corporate activist. The power of the work lies precisely in the tensions between Leninism and capitalism and the tremendous feelings of ambivalence the artist feels toward each. The sense of instability brought out by this work is evident in Kosolapov’s own assessment of it: “Somehow the two paradises came together in that work with Lenin and Coca-Cola. I found in them a meaning of paradise—one, a paradise lost, the other, not quite found.”

Coca-Cola Lenin is undoubtedly interested in exposing the falsity of both Leninism and capitalism, but the lie it is uncovering is, for Kosolapov, a beautiful lie. Having lost faith in Soviet ideology, his experience at the International Youth Festival portended every intention of embracing Western ideals. However, confronted with the realities of living in the West he, like many Soviets who left the U.S.S.R., found himself caught in a liminal state of homelessness—no longer Soviet, but not quite American.

Perhaps the misdirected expectation to simply be “anti-Soviet,” which led to reactions contrary to the artists’ intentions, finds its roots in the misperception of them as immigrants rather than emigrants; or more precisely migrants rather than nomads. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explain the difference: “The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory.” Artist-nomads, then, do not
move from one ideological position to another. Rather, they move through and between the milieus of competing ideologies, often retracing their own steps, placing particular emphasis on the zones in which these milieus intersect and compete. “The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points,” write Deleuze and Guattari, further stating that, “Although the points determine the paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary.” In other words, for the migrant the journey is an episode in a life otherwise defined by stasis, whereas life for the nomad is never stable; nomads are not going from one site to another, they are simply going.

Because artist-nomads prioritize the paths over the points, the concept of the in-between becomes primary for their work. For Kosolapov, this liminality manifests itself somewhere in-between “paradise lost” and paradise “not quite found.” Such ambivalence went sharply against Russian conventional wisdom. Referencing a popular Russian proverb that a person who attempts to sit between two chairs will likely fall down, artist Vitaly Komar explains, “It’s the same in our paintings. We live between two panels. Not in this panel or that panel, but between. So we are homeless even in our work.” The various dimensions of in-betweenness—between panels, cultures, and ideological milieus—are evident in Komar and Melamid’s work *The Blue Cup* (1985-86, Figure 54). The artwork is split into two panels. On the right is a painting of Lenin executed in the high-academic style of Socialist Realism. Here, Lenin stands against the backdrop of a red curtain (a not-so-subtle reference to the Communist Party) which is drawn up in the manner of traditional portraiture. The artists also introduce humor by showing Lenin dropping the titular blue cup onto the ground—a reference to the very famous Stalinist-
era children’s story by Arkady Gaidar in which a blue teacup is broken mysteriously and nobody will admit guilt. Komar and Melamid solve the age-old mystery of who actually broke the cup, revealing Lenin as the culprit.\textsuperscript{9} Opposite the painting of Lenin is a mixed-media composition reminiscent of post-war American abstraction, particularly the work of Jackson Pollock. The crumpled oil cloth splattered with paint presents itself as the artistic antithesis to the traditional naturalism of Lenin’s portrait. Further, the freedom of Pollock’s expressive approach (as opposed to the careful discipline of Soviet artistic process) was easily exploited by American politicians to reinforce the polarized worldview of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{10} The work thus stands as an artistic illustration of the standoff between Western capitalism and Soviet socialism. By juxtaposing the incongruous panels, and their associated ideologies, into a single work, Komar and Melamid challenge the need to occupy one or the other worldview. “We are capable of seeing things in at least two different ways, maybe more,” explains Melamid, “This gives us a life in two worlds.”\textsuperscript{11} Not privileging either panel over the other, the artists maintain their ambivalence toward each political system, inhabiting the space between love and hate of both socialism and capitalism.

*The Blue Cup* not only challenges the necessity of supporting either socialism or capitalism, it also disputes their apparent polarity to one another. Counteracting the disparate aesthetic styles of the two panels, Komar and Melamid have built in subtle cues for the viewer to make parallel connections. The folds in the red curtain behind Lenin are mirrored to a certain degree by the folds in the dirty oilcloth. Even more prominent, however, are the splashes of sky-blue paint on the left that are positioned directly opposite the teacup that has just slipped from Lenin’s grasp. Reinforcing the connection
between the two elements is the fact that the cup drops to the ground, mirroring the process by which artists like Pollock applied the paint to their canvases. The scattered blue paint in the abstract composition likewise foreshadows the broken form the cup will take when it crashes to the floor, suggesting an element of violence in both compositions. If the two panels can stand in as artistic surrogates for the rival Cold War ideologies, Komar and Melamid are suggesting that greater insight into each supposedly antithetical political system can be gained by taking up a place in-between them, though the exact nature of that insight is left up for the viewer to interpret.

Like Komar and Melamid, sculptor Leonid Sokov used the juxtaposition of eastern and western styles to relate his personal experience, albeit with less explicitly geopolitical overtones. In his work Lenin and Giacometti (1989, Figure 55), Sokov creates a clash of two very distinct styles of art—one representing Soviet Socialist Realism, the other western abstraction. Standing pensive and humble, hands in pockets, Lenin is executed in a typical pose repeated in pervasive propagandistic representations of him. Lenin’s introspective demeanor was a well-known trope to represent his constant attention on the problems of organization of the workers, electrification of the country, and promotion of the international proletariat. But Sokov gives him a new object of consideration—western culture. The abstract, elongated and ghostly form of Giacometti’s walking man approaches Lenin, and even seems to stretch out his hand in greeting. It appears, however, that Lenin will not return the gesture as he instead gazes back at the stranger with curiosity and some indignation. The viewer’s initial reaction is one of humor, as it seems very strange to be confronted simultaneously with both styles of sculpture encountering each other in the same space. The viewer is also left to ponder
over the artistic motivation behind this juxtaposition. Giacometti developed this figural style during his post-war turn from surrealism to existentialist representation. Rosalind Krauss notes Giacometti’s elongated figures are closely related to the writings of Sartre in whose philosophy, she notes, “consciousness is always attempting to capture itself in its own mirror: seeing itself seeing, touching itself touching.”12 The subjects in Giacometti’s work, often presented in pairs, are not encountering other personages; the represent instead an individual’s confrontation with his or her own double. While the contemplative expression on Lenin’s face has traditionally been interpreted as his brooding over society’s issues, Sokov draws on Giacometti’s existentialist content to suggest that Lenin’s thoughts are also not external but introspective. Perhaps mirroring the artist’s own experience, confrontation with the West leads Lenin to reevaluate accepted Soviet truisms. As with Komar and Melamid’s work, Lenin and Giacometti utilizes a juxtaposition of western abstraction confronting Soviet socialism in such a way that the work’s meaning is not to be found in either of its major elements, but somewhere in-between.

Sokov’s Lenin and Giacometti highlights an important characteristic of the artist-nomad that distinguishes them from migrants: not only do they advance without a specific destination in mind, they also do not self-identify with the culture that they left behind. The disconnect that artist-nomads of the nonconformist group experienced in relation to their native culture did not occur upon emigrating from the Soviet Union, but stemmed from a prior loss of faith in official ideology. Feelings of cultural alienation within the Soviet Union have been expressed by many of these artists—both by those who eventually emigrated as well as those who stayed behind in Russia. Eduard
Shteinberg, who chose to remain in Russia, feels that he is nonetheless a displaced person, “I do not leave, although I know that I am an immigrant here. But to be an immigrant in the West means to be an immigrant twice.”

Likewise, artist Mikhail Chemiakin, points out that he became dislocated long before he left Moscow in 1971, “We lived on a different planet from other Russians. We lived in a state of inner exile.”

No doubt, emigration from the Soviet Union was a profoundly disconcerting experience for those artists who made their way to the West. For the artist-nomad, however, the sense of loss associated with physical relocation was merely secondary to the cultural estrangement that led to their becoming dissidents in the first place.

American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton writes about the process by which an individual can become alienated within their own society. His principle of “doctrine over person” states that within totalizing systems, such as that which existed in the Soviet Union, members of society are likely to confront a situation “when there is a conflict between what one feels oneself experiencing and what the doctrine or dogma says one should experience.” The rigidity of the Soviet system demanded that its citizens subordinate their reality to correct party principles. The inability of individuals to properly code their daily experience led to a fundamental social disconnect. Consider the following statement by Ilya Kabakov: “This awareness began in my early childhood: a feeling that the outside was not coordinated with, or is not adequate to, what’s taking place inside…My problem was how to learn to have a double mind, a double life, in order to survive, so that reality wouldn’t destroy me.” For artists such as Kabakov, the ability to cultivate a split personality was absolutely necessary for survival. Because unemployment was illegal in the Soviet Union, many artists were put in the difficult
position of needing to create official works of propaganda in their public lives, while simultaneously opposing that very same official art in their private endeavors. “A whole generation of people had to think in a double way,” explains the underground artist Igor Makarevich, “It permeated our bodies and our blood. It became a part of our very marrow.”

The necessity of living a dualistic life resulted in feelings of isolation for artists of the nonconformist circle, a condition powerfully explored in Ilya Kabakov’s album entitled Sitting in the Closet Primakov (1972-75, Figure 56). The albums are comprised of illustrated stories told about members of Soviet society which are, to varying degrees, a mixture of the most mundane aspects of life and fantastical whimsy inspired by Kabakov’s work as a children’s book illustrator. The albums also serve as semi-autobiographical stories of the artist’s own life in the Soviet Union. Kabakov acknowledges his connection to the stories of these protagonists and describes his reasoning, appropriately, through a character in an installation entitled Ten Characters (1989). In the text accompanying one of the figures, “The Person Who Describes His Life Through Characters,” Kabakov writes:

He undertook once to describe his life, mostly so that he could find out from this description who he himself was, now that he had lived more than half his life. . .he suddenly realized that even these variegated fragments belonged not to his single consciousness, his memory alone, but, as it were, too the most diverse and separate minds. . .He made a decision: to unite this diversity into a kind of artistic whole, but to allow them to enter into arguments, to outdo one another, but let all express themselves in turn. . .He began to work. It ended up taking the shape of 10 albums. . .”

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At the end of his account, he lists off the ten albums this artist wrote, which are the exact albums Kabakov had produced while still living in the Soviet Union, including the aforementioned *Sitting in the Closet Primakov*. Boris Groys argues that because these albums represent the artist’s own thoughts and impressions of life, told with a bit of literary inventiveness, we can trust their veracity: “To a certain extent, we can trust these stories, since their heroes can also be considered pseudonyms or alter egos of Kabakov himself.” Rather than simply telling the stories from his own life exactly how he remembers them, Kabakov invents characters and narratives that allow him to convey the feelings and impressions he has had more vividly. In the sense that what matters to him are the sensations and anxieties he feels in the Soviet Union, such storytelling is to be understood as more true than a simple retelling of past events from his life.

The tale of Primakov, for instance, spread across forty-seven pages, relates the experience of a young boy who has begun to feel himself alienated within his own family and home. The first page is completely black and from the text we learn that it is the view of a young boy sitting in a closet who refuses to come out. Over the next few pages the image remains completely dark, and Primakov’s other senses, in the absence of sight, are heightened as he listens intently to banal, everyday noises such as his sister doing her homework or the wind blowing outside. Using Primakov, Kabakov conveys his own feelings of isolation as he realizes the world is not like what he was told. Disillusionment causes Primakov (Kabakov’s alter-ego) to reconsider the smallest details of life, to once again pay attention to his material surroundings as they are, instead of viewing them against the bright future of communist utopia. As Primakov begins to open the closet, he stares out at his newly unfamiliar surroundings. The viewer, through Primakov’s eyes, is
presented with a scene of his family sitting around a table, but nobody acknowledges him—they are presented from a distance, almost like they are on display for him to contemplate. Like an unnoticed apparition, Primakov goes to the window to stare out into the courtyard of his apartment block with similar sense of wonder. At this point, Primakov flies out the window and ascends higher and higher into the sky. Along the way he sees the street where his apartment is located, the surrounding region, and the entire district, until finally the earth melts away and Primakov finds himself enveloped by pure sky. The end of Primakov’s story is a series of white sheets of paper which for Kabakov, along with his close friend Oleg Vassiliev discussed in Chapter 1, is a symbol of death and oblivion.

Primakov’s poetic death is an apt analogy for Kabakov’s own estrangement from society. Essentially, Kabakov lived the life of an internal émigré. Fellow nonconformist Oleg Prokofiev sees emigration as a rehearsal for death in that émigrés can no longer rely on recognizable surroundings and find themselves separated from family and friends.19 While Kabakov had not actually emigrated from the Soviet Union at the time he created this album, his perception of his environment was fundamentally changed, and all sense of familiarity was shattered. Having lost faith in the Soviet system and resolved to not fully participate, Kabakov’s situation was not unlike that of a child who rejects the religion of his parents: his surroundings have not changed but his entire understanding of them has, and he can no longer relate to the world in the same way as family and friends. This paradigm shift (what Robert Lipton earlier described as a confrontation with the principle of “doctrine over person”) created a strong feeling of disorientation and is, like death, a definitive transition from which there is no going back. Like Primakov sitting in
the closet reevaluating the significance of the everyday actions of his family, Kabakov’s album expresses angst toward his having to live a double-life as a means of survival.

Cultural disassociation stemming from a loss of faith in Soviet socialism is also at base of Komar and Melamid’s Thank You Comrade Stalin for our Happy Childhood (1983 – Figure 57). In this work, the artists reveal the ambivalence they feel toward the art and culture of Stalinism. Komar explains that despite its negative associations, Socialist Realism and propaganda continued to have positive connotations for them personally: “Through Stalin art,” he notes, “we could recreate our childhood.”20 The coincidence of the carefree days of childhood and Stalin’s reign of terror created profound psychological conflict for the artists. By leaving the word “happy” in black lettering, Komar and Melamid draw attention to the shadow that hangs over their otherwise pleasant memories of their early life. The work conveys how the artists’ positive remembrances of Stalinism come into conflict with their understanding, as adults, of the terror perpetrated by Stalin upon his own people. By drawing upon Soviet propaganda to express their own personal feelings, Komar and Melamid highlight how Soviet ideology provided a beautiful myth for understanding the complexities of life. The loss of faith in that mythology led to a disorienting reevaluation of reality; while emigration may have resulted in physical displacement from their native country, there was a palpable psychological separation from the homeland as well.

Survival for the disillusioned Soviet artist required the adoption of a split personality and a double life. As such, most nonconformist artists took up official posts creating sanctioned art like children’s book illustrations or street placards, working on their unofficial works only privately. Some underground artists, such as Oskar Rabin,
Ernst Neizvestny and Komar and Melamid, were either unable or unwilling to hold official positions or keep their personal works private. In such situations the separation from society was reinforced by the government itself. This formal “disfellowshipping” is consistent with what political theorist Giorgio Agamben has argued when he targeted the twentieth century as the period in which the concepts of the people and the state became distinct from one another: “Starting in World War I, many European states began to pass laws allowing the denaturalization and denationalization of their own citizens…Such laws—and the mass statelessness resulting from them—mark a decisive turn in the life of the modern nation-state as well as its definitive emancipation from naïve notions of the citizen and a people.” As a result, the state had to believe the individual was worthy of citizenship. In the Soviet Union, revoking a person’s actual citizenship was not a common practice, but membership in the Communist Party and its workers unions was a privilege that had to be earned. Whereas so many rights other nations bestowed on all citizens were tied to union membership in the Soviet state (e.g. obtain a home, buy materials, find employment), being kicked out of the Party or union was not unlike having your citizenship revoked because it resulted in the loss of such privileges. Indeed, without union membership artists could not work as artists, and not working was an offense for which one could be imprisoned in the Soviet Union.

While it is true that many nonconformist artists actively tried to maintain membership in the Party and the Artist’s Union by working legitimate jobs, it should be noted that the convictions of others made it so that they were more willing to forfeit the privileges of full citizenship. Artists such as Oleg Vassiliev tried to maintain a balance by maintaining a double life: “I admire and give credit to those artists who defended the
right to show their works…I would not have been able to combine this with my professional work. Thus, I did not take part in the movement and even actively avoided it."³²³ Komar and Melamid, conversely, recall how such an arrangement became untenable for them. Describing dissidents like themselves, they note “at a certain moment they tired of living this double standard and came out in the public square and, say, marched against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Bulldozer exhibition held a similar meaning for us artists. At that moment we became dissidents. We opened ourselves up and we did it—in a true sense—officially.”³²⁴ As Agamben points out, voluntarily surrendering the full rights of citizenship was increasingly common in the twentieth century, and not just in totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union: “Citizens of advanced industrial states…demonstrate, through an increasing desertion of codified instances of political participation, an evident propensity to turn into denizens, into noncitizen residents.”³²⁵ Whereas in the West such “denizens” refused their patriotic duties such as voting, for artists in the Soviet Union this meant no longer contributing to the education and enlightenment of the proletariat.

It is tempting to categorize unofficial artists according to the openness of their political dissent. However, it should be remembered that for Soviet underground artists, the withdrawal from participation in political systems was merely an outward symptom of their earlier ideological alienation. Komar and Melamid describe a dissident as, “A person who had decided to say ‘I will do openly that which I do in a small group.’”³²⁶ Any number of outside circumstances (e.g., family circumstances, illness, etc.) could and did influence an artist’s decision to openly dissent or risk emigration.³²⁷ Thus public protest or physical emigration is not an accurate measure of the degree of ideological
nomadism felt by the artist; rather, the artist-nomad’s defining characteristic is the subjective feeling of cultural dislocation. Therefore, the artworks themselves and the artists’ statements must be given much more weight than political dissent and physical relocation.

**Occupying the Peripheral Space of State Ideology**

The cultural alienation of Soviet nonconformist artists, resulting from their own disillusionment with official ideology, has shaped much of their art—in Moscow as well as New York. Understanding of the dimensions of the artists’ dislocation can be expanded through a topographic conception of Soviet ideology. Called upon to be “engineers of the human soul,” artists in the Soviet Union were placed in the precarious position of negotiating the dangerous space of the periphery. Having found themselves unintentionally outside the parameters of state-sanctioned activity, many adopted nomadic strategies of survival.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that the fundamental distinction between nomadic culture and the sedentary culture of the state is their respective conceptualizations of space: “Sedentary space is striated, by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures, while nomad space is smooth, marked only by ‘traits’ that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory.” By imposing a system of organization on the land, the state territorially stakes a claim on that space and, by extension, the people that inhabit it. In the Soviet Union, the program of propaganda was designed to mark out territory for the state, not only figuratively, but physically; “Works of totalitarian art do not describe the world,” argues Boris Groys, “they occupy the world.” Based on
Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas Solis*, Lenin’s program of monumental propaganda, later extended under Stalin, inundated the public spaces with statues and murals proclaiming Soviet authority. These monuments were reinforced by the more ephemeral banners and art exhibitions aimed at reinforcing Soviet ideological dogma. But perhaps no action was more territorial than the renaming of cities, streets, regions, and natural landmarks after Soviet leaders, heroes, and accomplishments of the state. Delineating and mapping the space of the state, and anchoring it with propagandistic markers, represented a clear attempt at establishing a sedentary space, inhospitable to nomadic wandering.

In his painting *I, You, He, She* (1971, Figure 58), the nonconformist artist Leonid Lamm highlights another troubling aspect of the state’s territorial tendencies: “If you want to be a member of society, you have to be measured—to have a social security number, or else you are nothing.” In other words, delineation of the Soviet landscape included not only its geographic, but also its human resources. In a country founded on the principles of Taylorism—a system that treats the body as a mechanical machine that must be measured and controlled to achieve maximum efficiency—Lamm’s works investigate the process of breaking down a human being into a set of mathematical data. His painting was inspired by the popular Soviet song “We are like one family: We consist of 100,000 I’s.” Against a flat black background, the silhouettes of four white heads are lined up in a uniform manner. On each head are the four pronouns: I, You, He, and She. Surrounding each word are the artist’s precise measurements of every aspect of the letters. The careful precision of the whole work suggests that a person can ultimately be understood and categorized using a process of empirical observation. The loss of any sense of subjectivity in the piece heightens the sense that people in the Soviet Union are
depersonalized and regarded as assets to be measured and inventoried. In a Taylorist state that treats individuals like machines on the factory floor, territorial claims are placed upon the citizen as property of the state—a situation that led artist Vagrich Bakhchanyan to joke, “We all have the honorary brand ‘Made in the USSR’ on our foreheads.”

Soviet cultural historian Vladimir Paperny writes about how such quantifying of Soviet citizens eventually led to immobility, even within the union: “Beginning in 1932 the internal passport system was gradually implemented…In 1940 the ‘voluntary departure of employees from factories and offices’ was forbidden once and for all. Thus the man of Culture Two loses his mobility in geographical space.”

It is not surprising, then, that many of the artists in the Soviet nonconformist group came under their greatest persecution from authorities not for creating and exhibiting their work in the underground, but at the instance of applying for a visa to emigrate.

The primary effect of striation upon the citizens of the state is that it fosters a sense of stasis that in turn reinforces the permanence of the state’s power. The Soviet Union was certainly no exception to this rule. Susan Buck-Morss notes, “Stalinist culture abhorred uprootedness. Cosmopolitanism became synonymous with betraying the motherland.”

The propaganda created under Stalin was markedly different from that which was created in the early years of the Soviet Union, when the present was emphasized as merely a transitory and relatively unimportant stage in the eventual attainment of communism. “Life has improved, Comrades. Life has become more joyous,” proclaimed Stalin in 1935, reassuring Soviet citizens that the time of transition had been replaced by stability and stasis. Socialist Realism reflects this ideology by depicting a well-established society with Stalin firmly at the helm. This drastic change in
mentality from Culture One (Leninism) to Culture Two (Stalinism), was even reflected in the monumental propaganda and architecture. Whereas the architecture of Culture One was dynamic, idealized in Vladimir Tatlin’s famous *Monument to the Third International* (1920 – Figure 59), and realized in structures such as Konstantin Melnikov’s *Rusakov Workers’ Club* (1927-29 – Figure 60), Buck-Morss writes that, “The architectural style of Culture Two was monumentally permanent. Huge buildings pressed their heavy weight into the ground, constructed to embody principles of hierarchy and centralization…even a monument to space flight appears unrelentingly grounded.”40 In all aspects of life the values of revolution and change that permeated Culture One, gave way to Culture Two’s preference for immobility and stasis as a cultural value.41

In his wildly popular 1947 book *Map of the Motherland*, Nikolai Mikhailov writes, “We love our glorious, dear Volga, but we don’t wish to have it quiet as it is…The dams of hydroelectric stations will lock up the water…With our own hands, using well-considered blueprints, we are building our country, we are creating a new landscape.”42 While the Soviet Union is certainly not the first nation to fantasize about controlling nature, the immobility so highly valued in Stalinist culture is certainly palpable in Mikhailov’s description of this vision. In the Soviet conception of space, the ideal is quite similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s description of sedentary space, with its walls and enclosures. In this respect, the dissident writer Yevgeny Zamyatin made prescient observations about the future of the Soviet Union in 1921 when D-503, the protagonist of his dystopian novel *We* says in defense of the communist state: “It is clear that the history of mankind, as far as our knowledge goes, is a history of the transition from nomadic forms to more sedentary ones. Does it not follow that the most sedentary
form of life (ours) is at the same time the most perfect one? He goes on to elaborate, explaining, “Oh, how great and divinely limiting is the wisdom of walls and bars! Man ceased to be a wild animal the day he built the first wall.”

In the Soviet Union, artists were responsible for reinforcing notions of immobility and territoriality. Perhaps no work better exemplifies the ideals of Socialist Realism and its advocacy of a sedentary, striated space for the state than Alexander Gerasimov’s painting *Comrade Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938, Figure 61). Standing with the leader of the Soviet Union’s military, Stalin looks peculiarly immobile despite the simple narrative displayed: a casual walk in the Kremlin. Gerasimov makes deliberate formal comparisons between the two men and the prominently visible Vodovozny Tower of the Kremlin. When he writes of the painting, Gerasimov makes clear that the intent of the work is to advocate for the immobility of a great stone: “These poses are supposed to express that the peoples and the Red Army are the same, are one monolith.”

Gerasimov’s work is inspired by the famous pre-revolutionary painting by Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Bogatyrs* (1898, Figure 62). The work depicts three wandering warriors from Russian epic poetry—Dobrynia, Ilia Moromets, and Alesha Popovich—who ride the countryside, protecting the people. Of Vasnetsov’s work, Gerasimov said, “I admit that this picture was constantly before my eyes; there are three warriors there, and here stand two warriors—our Soviet ones.” In both works the viewer is reassured that there are warriors standing guard to protect them from outside hostile forces: Vasnetsov’s in the nomadic steppes, Gerasimov’s in the very center of a highly striated state. The most heroic figures in Stalin’s state are immobile; they are not men of action, but men of inaction.
Interestingly, Gerasimov’s work, which is often pegged as the most important example of Soviet-era painting, features prominently the walls and barriers praised by Zamyatin’s protagonist D-503: the fence beside Stalin and Voroshilov, the walls of the Kremlin, and the embankment of the Moscow River all speak to the clear delineation of the Soviet topography. The further away from the central figure of Stalin the eye ventures, the less ordered and striated the space becomes. Far in the distance, the silhouette of a church is visible, indicating unfinished labor yet to be done; it supports Mikhailov’s assertion that “building communism, we are remaking the country with rational calculation, we are changing its geography.” The work of Socialist Realism operates doubly as a confirmation of Stalin’s infallible status and as a call to arms for Soviet citizens—not so much to forge a new future, but to arrest the deleterious forces of the present.

In order to do so, artists had to be in a position where they could properly understand the difference between the striated space of the state, marked off by walls and barriers, and the unmarked space of nomadic existence. As discussed in Chapter 2, Soviet dialectical theory assumes the eventual synthesis of all previous stages of development. As such, progress is defined by bringing together two seemingly opposite ideas; it is the ability to simultaneously inhabit both ‘A’ and ‘not A.’ During Stalinism, progress came to be defined by the continual expansion of ideological territory, the incorporation of smooth, nomadic space into the state. As ideational people, artists were tasked with negotiating the border between Soviet and anti-Soviet concepts, an assignment that carried great risk because any misstep could result in ostracism, denunciation, and arrest. With the risks of being an artist, came the potential for great
reward in the form of privileges such as country retreats, lavish apartments, and access to luxury items not available to the average Soviet citizen. Weighing in on this situation, historian Evgeny Dobrenko likewise takes under consideration the risk/reward qualities of life on the periphery: “The border lived its own special life, full of dangers and heroic feats, and therefore full of heroes and enemies.” Because the artists were believed to possess the power to shape the very souls of the people, the feeling that “you’re either for us or against us” was particularly palpable.

The ideological boundary between delineated space of the state and smooth nomadic space beyond was never a solid line. Instead, it marked a zone of persistent struggle that the artist was responsible to navigate: “Smooth space is constantly being translated, traversed into striated space,” explain Deleuze and Guattari, “striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to smooth space.” Placed on the front lines of the shifting interpretations of the acceptable and unacceptable, the artists are continually in danger of finding themselves on the wrong side of the line ideologically. It was, therefore, very difficult for an artist to inhabit the gray zone between ardent support of the party, and dissidence. For many nonconformist artists, becoming a dissident was not a conscious choice but resulted from shifting political terrain, insufficiently or improperly decoded. For example, the artist Gustav Klutsis, a major propagandist throughout the 1920s, fell into disfavor and was executed by Stalin, despite his ardent support of the Communist Party. Klutsis’ eventual fall from grace was not the result of any change in his artistic approach, nor was it the result of his having challenged party leaders. Like many artists of his generation, Klutsis fell victim to an ideological shift in the upper echelons of the Communist Party that redefined his art as “formalist” and anti-Soviet.
Artists of the Cold War era were equally as prone to inadvertently creating art that fell outside acceptable parameters. Oleg Vassiliev related his experience in 1961 of applying for union membership as an artist, for which he submitted a series of linocuts on the subject of the Moscow Metro: “Upon examination by the Reception Committee of the MOSKh (the Moscow Department of Artists’ Union), the linocuts were referred to as too preoccupied with formal issues, so I remained a candidate for the Union for seven years.” Vassiliev’s works were not deliberately subversive, and their subject, the glorification of the Moscow Metro, would seem incontestable according to the status quo. Despite the official pushback, Vassiliev had no intention of joining the nonconformists. He writes, “I did not take part in the movement and even actively avoided it. . .However, in our social system, even this pursuing of one’s own work was criminal. . .Officially, therefore, I found myself in the circle of ‘unofficial’ artists.” Likewise, Vassiliev’s close friend Eric Bulatov writes that from the beginning, he had every intention of becoming a dedicated Socialist-Realist. At some point in his studies, however, he found that what he was doing was unacceptable, and this often caught him by surprise: Until about 1958 I had consciously included myself within the tradition in which I was raised. But it became apparent to me that what I had begun to do, and what I intended to do, would not be the same…At the Surikov Institute in the mid-1950s this separation of private and public thoughts and attitudes became painful, particularly because the 1950s were years of crisis for us. I realized that everything we had learned was a lie and that I really had to start over again, to learn everything from scratch. When I finished studying at the Institute in 1958, I had to face the question: was I a dissident? …I had no idea what kind of artist I would become, but I had to be absolutely free in my choices and free from the officially accepted art styles.
Faced with the situation of being on the wrong side of the party line, artists really had three choices: display penance and resubmit themselves to the state, as did many official artists; take refuge in a different creatively defined system like abstraction; or embrace the ill-defined, smooth space of ideological nomadism. What separates the latter two options (which were both adopted by unofficial artists) is a matter of conceptual framework. This difference is analogous to Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between migrants and nomads: “Whereas the migrant leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge.”53 Ideological artist-migrants, such as those in the Lianozovo Group, left behind the official cultural elements of Socialist Realism and propaganda and sought refuge in other cultural and stylistically defined regions such as abstraction, symbolism, and religious imagery.

Other artists, like Komar and Melamid, Kabakov, and Bulatov, on the contrary, embraced the role of the artist-nomad by borrowing from numerous historical traditions, but aligning themselves with none of them. From this position, these artists carved out smooth spaces within striated ideological systems. Rather than eschewing the imagery of official culture entirely, they engaged it in such a way as to disassociate it from its intended purpose. Importantly, leaving the physical territory of the state was not necessary in order to abandon the role of the artist-engineer in favor of that of the artist-nomad. Deleuze and Guattari note, “Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces: to live in the city as a nomad…movements, speed and slowness, are sometimes enough to reconstruct a smooth space.”54 Rather than seeking out a more hospitable
space, the artist-nomad strives to transform the hostile milieu of the state to something more preferable.

**Nomadic Dwelling**

As a response to the hostilities of the state, many Soviet nonconformist artists adopted a survival strategy of ideological nomadism. Artist-nomads were not interested in staking territorial claims of their own; instead they carried out deconstructive projects that were inclined toward an analysis of territorialization itself. That artist-nomads like Komar and Melamid and Kosolapov were not seeking to adopt or create an alternate stratified system to that of the Soviet state had a profound influence on how they confronted the ideological “other” of the Cold War era upon arrival in New York. As in the case of their works that combine imagery from East and West, these artists approach was not one of choosing and supporting one system over the other, but was a rejection of systems as such; while the territory in the West was new, the process of institutional territorialization was not. In a world largely occupied by competing political systems that claimed exclusive supremacy, artist-nomads attempted a means of living independent of the territorial claims of state ideology. They had to learn how to dwell as cultural outsiders in a globalized world.

Boris Groys highlights the importance of understanding that Soviet nonconformist artists had already detached themselves ideologically from their native culture long before physically relocating to the West: “[In the Soviet Union] they lived in a kind of inner emigration. They operated in a territory that was controlled by a historical and ideological narrative that was familiar to them but which they didn’t share. So the
emigration to the West was for the unofficial Soviet artists and intellectuals a double emigration. What they took with them as they moved to the West was not their cultural identity, but their cultural nonidentity.”56 That the displaced artists had long considered themselves as something other than Russian goes a long way to explaining why it was that they did not seek out the Russian diasporic community when they arrived in New York. By embracing their detachment from culture, Soviet artists became subsumed by a larger international phenomenon, one aptly described by Agamben: “What industrialized countries face today is a permanently resident mass of noncitizens who do not want to be and cannot be either naturalized or repatriated. These noncitizens often have nationalities of origin, but, inasmuch as they prefer not to benefit from their own states’ protection, they find themselves, as refugees, in a condition of de facto statelessness.”57 The important thing to understand here, however, is not whether or not these artists sought out citizenship in the United States when they arrived from New York. What’s more important is that they neither sought refuge in the familiar cultural surroundings of the diasporic community nor did they seek to fully invest in an American identity. That their estrangement from society predates emigration also helps explain why so few of them chose to return to Russia when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s.

Emigration threw into starker contrast the difficulty associated with cultural estrangement. Martin Heidegger, addressing the post-World War II issues facing Germany, argued that the country’s crisis was not limited to physical problems (e.g., housing, unemployment, etc.): “The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.”58 Heidegger’s assertions seem to make the case that the loss of German identity, and the
accompanying sense of stability, takes much longer than the reconstruction of bombed-out buildings. The German people, much like disaffected Soviet artists, had to find a new relationship toward the outside world that was not organized around totalizing ideology. Emmanuel Levinas observes the intimate relationship between one’s dwelling and one’s engagement with the world: “To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of being cast into existence as a stone casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as a land of refuge.” For theorists such as Levinas and Heidegger, dwelling involves, first and foremost, self-awareness. Likewise, for the artist-nomad the concept of home is not simply a location, it is a constant positioning of oneself in relation to the outside world. The life characterized by the ‘in-between’ requires a continual process of erecting temporary dwellings, reevaluating one’s trajectory, and venturing forth again.

In their nomadic wandering, Soviet nonconformist artists had to negotiate the terrain between competing ideological milieus: capitalism and communism; Russian nationalism and western progressivism; socialist realism and avant-garde abstraction. “The notion of the milieu is not unitary,” explain Deleuze and Guattari, “not only does the living thing continually pass from one milieu to another, but the milieus pass into one another; they are essentially communicating. The milieus are open to chaos, which threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion.” It was against the potential chaos induced by the opposing milieus that artists sought refuge. Deleuze and Guattari address this condition by positing a hypothetical situation in which a child is scared while wandering in the darkness. To assuage the fear, the child almost instinctively begins to sing a song. “The song,” they explain, “is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and
stable, center in the heart of chaos." The imposition of some semblance of order into the child’s situation has a comforting effect and begins to create a sort of ephemeral and mobile dwelling-place. “But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space.” From this emboldened position, the individual can engage the chaos of the world anew: “One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.” Soviet artists recognized the possibility of using creative and expressive means to not only record their lives, but structure them. Eric Bulatov notes, “When you create a painting, you are creating yourself. Art is a way of getting through life.”

Central to Deleuze and Guattari’s model for mobile, or nomadic dwelling is the concept of rhythm: “Rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another. It does not operate in homogeneous space-time, but by heterogeneous blocks.” For Soviet artists engaging the milieus of rival ideological systems, rhythm is the strategy by which the various claims are dissected and evaluated. It provides an alternative to the chaos that results from the contradictory claims of different worldviews. Deleuze and Guattari continue, “What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between—between two milieus…in this in-between chaos becomes rhythm, not inexorably, but it has a chance to.” Only in the spaces where chaos is a distinct possibility can rhythm exist. Within the striated state, rhythm gives way to dogmatic meter.

Artist-nomads such as Komar and Melamid were very aware of the possibility that their art could constitute an ephemeral dwelling. “Our art is very close to
architecture,” explains Melamid, “each panel is a building block, painted separately with no thought of where we might eventually place it. When we assemble the panels, it’s a little like making a house.”67 Unlike the artist-engineer of the Soviet state, Komar and Melamid create the work of art without a specific idea of its final form. “The arrangement of the panels is arbitrary to a certain degree, so each work could give a different image of our experience. The architecture we build is as solid as we make it, but it is also fragile.”68 Indeed, Komar and Melamid’s installations are often constructed somewhat differently each time they are installed. In this sense, they are precisely understood as being in-stalled, in the manner in which that term implies a temporary stasis in an existence otherwise defined by motion. Boris Groys notes, “The installation demonstrates the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it installs everything that otherwise merely circulates in our civilization.”69 Each particular iteration of the work provides the viewer, as well as the artist, a moment of critical evaluation.

That the arrangement of the panels in a work by Komar and Melamid is fluid and imprecise, by no means indicates that it is done completely at random. As Melamid stated, it is only arbitrary “to a certain degree.” In their discussion of art and painting, Deleuze and Guattari argue that an artist’s skill can be measured by “the care with which they join together the sections or planes on which the type of depth depends. Without this respect and care painting is nothing, lacking work and thought.”70 In other words, there is a distinct skill associated with the correct arrangement of the panels, even if there is not simply one way to do it. The principle by which the works of art should be assembled so as to avoid chaos, then, is rhythm. A rhythmic arrangement will be critical
and ordered, even if it lacks an overarching unity. It will engage multiple ideological milieus, without prescribing its own totalizing system upon them.

Komar and Melamid’s installation *Yalta 1945* (1986-87, Figure 63) demonstrates their response to their ideological nomadism. The thirty-one panels are arranged in such a way that it is reminiscent of an architectural form with four doors. Each of the panels are the exact same size, so they can be arranged in virtually any order. Although the panels are capable of several possible arrangements, there is nonetheless an evident sense of rhythm to their organization. Some panels seem to have been created specifically to fit together, an example being the two panels which show the front and back of a fish, executed in a similar manner. While it may seem obvious that these two panels had to be arranged as they are, the artists could have just as easily assembled them next to each other so that they did not span an empty space. Or, they could have been arranged separated and apart from one another. Each arrangement would have resulted in a different effect. As it is, the fish invites the viewer to juxtapose panels that do not necessarily touch, thereby incorporating the negative space into the work. Other juxtapositions, though less obvious, nonetheless exhibit a sense of rhythmic play in their arrangement. One example is the naked woman on all fours whose limbs are reduced to Barnett Newman-like colored “zips” that, on the next panel, further reduce to a pattern of black and white, reminiscent of “Op” art. Most prominent in the work, however, are the two panels that together reference the famous photograph taken of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at the Yalta Conference in 1945—the event that lends its name to the title of the work. Located in the top-left, these two panels sit where a viewer would probably begin to “read” such a work. Interestingly, the iconic photograph has been split between
two panels, with Stalin on the right rendered in a highly academic naturalistic manner, and his two peers presented in an abstracted expressionistic style on the left. Komar and Melamid have thus intimated the split between East and West in the Cold War that has its roots at this fateful event. Depicting Stalin in a properly Soviet manner and Roosevelt and Churchill in a Western avant-garde style, Komar and Melamid draw attention to the way the Cold War was being fought in the cultural, artistic realms. It is specifically this aspect of the Cold War tensions that stands most representatively for the artists’ personal experience of living on both sides of the standoff. The resulting work engages the various ideological constructs that the artists encounter without subscribing to any of them.

By incorporating elements of visual culture in a context separate from their original, intended purpose, Komar and Melamid claim them from their clearly delineated place within society; in essence, the artists deterritorialize them. Thus the Yalta photograph no longer serves to express unity between the Allies; instead they point to this moment as the de facto declaration of the Cold War. “With the nomad,” Deleuze and Guattari argue, “it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself.”72 By stripping the exclusive territorial claims made by the state from an object or idea, the artist-nomad creates a smooth space for themselves—a less-hostile dwelling from which to engage the world.

But what does it mean that Komar and Melamid find a means of dwelling in their conceptual works of art? To better appreciate this dynamic, it is important to note that a dwelling place is “that which is from the outset ‘habitual’—we inhabit it,” as Heidegger
accurately noted. To be “at home” with something is to relegate it to the realm of habit, making of it a habitation. While this often takes the form of an architectural structure, habitation and dwelling are not limited to physical buildings. “We do not dwell because we have built,” Heidegger continues, “but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers.” By composing works of art, the artist-nomad does not begin dwelling. Rather, the works demonstrate that the artist-nomad already dwells in-between the rival ideological spheres of capitalism and socialism. The creation of the work of art merely defines a space and creates a home for that dwelling. In so doing, the work of art redefines the space of both ideological systems. In a sense, we can understand the work of art as analogous to Heidegger’s metaphor of a bridge in that it redefines that which it engages: “It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge decidedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge…the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.” Adrift in the smoothest type of landscape—water—the in-stallation of the work of art stands as a structure that allows for a temporary stasis, a vantage point from which the striated lands on either bank can be reclaimed as smooth territory and evaluated against one another.

By erecting a conceptual bridge between East and West, artist-nomads are prevented from becoming sedentary; by consistently destabilizing their own position and moving forward with new perspectives, they avoid becoming part of a single politico-ideological system. Komar explains his understanding of this process when he says,
“You paint a painting, then frame it. You make an object and set it apart from the rest of the world. Then you get the idea of breaking the barrier between the world of the artwork and the spectators’ world. But you have to set up this barrier before you can break it.”77

In other words, that the artist-nomad’s general condition is characterized by motion does not mean that he or she does not pause and dwell upon a certain ideological position or element of material culture. Rather the artist-nomad will arrest that motion temporarily in consideration, subsequently breaking free and roaming further. Continuing his analysis of dwelling, Levinas points out that constructing a home is not the ultimate aim:

“The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense, its commencement.”78 By operating as temporary nomadic dwellings, world of art like *Yalta, 1945* do not express permanent philosophical absolutes. They should instead be understood as momentary expressions of the artist’s current relationship to the world around him—a point in an indeterminate life journey: “Art is a diary.”
Conclusion

The theory advanced by the likes of Jacques Lacan and Mikhail Bakhtin that language is not possessed, but is instead a system one belongs to, has profound implications for how one sees the world. Nowhere was this theory tested to the degree it was in the Soviet Union. In an aggressive attempt to shape the worldview of its citizens, Soviet authorities deployed an ambitious program of propaganda intended to increase the pace of human evolution through linguistic means. Under Stalin, however, the utopian goals of creating supermen had been replaced by the use of textual banners and placards as mechanisms of control, a move to territorialize the psyches of Soviets. In a bid to escape the totalizing system of Stalinist language, early nonconformist artists sought refuge in the alternate semantics of avant-garde abstraction. Artists soon discovered, however, that the conceptual systems of artists like Kazimir Malevich were every bit as prescriptive and controlling as the Soviet one.

Unofficial artists of the second generation soon discovered that, as Slavoj Žižek argues, “the very gesture of stepping out of ideology pulls us back into it.” To demonstrate this point, Žižek poses the following question: “Does not the critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanisms that regulate social visibility and non-visibility? Is not the claim that we can accede to this place the
most obvious case of ideology?” Any attempt to find a space “outside” ideology is itself highly ideological. Thus the work of Oleg Vassiliev turns its critical lens on the prescriptiveness of the avant-garde not by rejecting it outright, but by drawing it into a conversation with the nineteenth-century Realists that preceded it, and the official artists of the Soviet state that came after. The recognition that as artists anything they create will contain its own ideology is also at the root of Komar and Melamid’s numerous works in which they draw connections between themselves and Lenin and Stalin.

I began this study with a consideration of Alexander Kosolapov’s Coca-Cola Lenin (1980 – Figure 25), and the disconnect between the typical analysis of the work and the artists’ own descriptions. Far from a cool act of provocation, the juxtaposition of Lenin and Coca-Cola hold deeply personal implications for the artist, representing “one, a paradise lost, the other, not quite found.” That the logo of the Coca-Cola could come to be “the milk of paradise” for the artist, owes much to developments in branding throughout the twentieth century. In her seminal book No Logo (2000), Naomi Klein explains how large corporations had discovered the power they could wield by focusing less on advertising specific products, and moving more “toward a psychological anthropological examination of what brands mean to the culture and to people’s lives. This was seen to be of crucial importance, since corporations may manufacture products, but what consumers buy are brands.” In Kosolapov’s work, both Lenin and Coca-Cola are presented as brands with a rich network of associations that connote very specific modes of being. By juxtaposing these two competing logos of Cold War ideology, the artist destabilizes the clear meanings of each; rather than attempting an escape from any
system of ideology, Kosolapov fully immerses his work in multiple ideologies at the same time.

By not allowing either the image of Lenin or the Coca-Cola logo to have their connotations controlled within a single ideological system, Kosolapov de-territorializes them and exhibits the characteristics of the artist-nomad discussed in the final chapter of this study. Taking on the guise of the Socratic gadfly, the artist challenges the prevailing cultural assumptions of each, but does so not from some imagined objective and detached position, but instead by drawing both structures into the same conceptual space. As such, the red ground of the work becomes a liminal zone of interpretation. Throughout this dissertation, we have traced the shifting connotations attached to the color red in Russian history, from its association with the beautiful in pre-revolutionary times to the symbol of state oppression and power in the Soviet Union. *Coca-Cola Lenin* is a work that communicates with an awareness of the cultural situatedness of the viewer. “A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another,” Bakhtin wrote, “A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee.” As a bi-lingual communication event, Kosolapov’s work not only throws out a bridge between himself and the viewer, but creates a cognate in the color red that draws together the territory of Soviet and capitalist ideology.

The geopolitical implications of Kosolapov’s work, however, are also deeply personal to him as a political exile living in New York. Using the Malevich-like red rectangle, Kosolapov’s creates a border-zone that is a conceptual space in which to dwell. *Coca-Cola Lenin* allows the artist to temporarily draw together the chaos of his own sense of identity, which is a complicated network of competing association. The larger geopolitical implications of the work that subvert the apparent dichotomy at base in Cold
War rhetoric, may in fact be secondary to the introspective elements of the work that allow Kosolapov to make sense of his own nomadism. The work is representative of the complicated position of Soviet nonconformist artists who have lost their faith in the mythology of Soviet socialism, the historical avant-garde, and western capitalism but nevertheless remain connected to each.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s subsequent re-integration into the western world has forced citizens of the former Soviet Union into a similar predicament as nonconformist emigrants; cultural self-identity in contemporary Russia is a complicated mix of pre-revolutionary nostalgia, loss of faith in socialism, and disappointment with the freedom of capitalist democracy. That works by artists such as Kosolapov, Komar and Melamid, and Bulatov are so often understood as being primarily political, while the artists interpret them very personally, only speaks to the degree to which Cold War politics are intimately tied to their own sense of identity. Boris Groys observes, “Russian ‘Sots-art’ of the 1970s and ‘80s never wanted to be futuristic. But contemporary Russia looks like a Sots-art installation: Orthodox priests consecrate the updated Soviet intercontinental rockets decorated with a red star; Lenin’s mummy can be seen not very far from Armani and Gucci boutiques.”

The end of the Cold War has done little to impact the significance of Soviet nonconformist art for contemporary society. Perhaps now more than ever, a nuanced understanding of the complex web of associations attached to Russian identity can be gained through careful consideration of this remarkable artistic movement.
Figure 1 – Eduard Steinberg, Composition, 1979, oil on canvas, 44x40 in (Eduard Steinberg: Heaven and Earth, ed. Yevgenia Petrovna and Alexander Morozov (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 41)
Figure 3 – Leonid Lamm, *Mother Darkness*, 1965, tempera and watercolor on paper, 25x34 in (*Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld (New York, NY: Prestel, 2011), 262)
Figure 4 – Oleg Vassiliev, *House on the Island Anzer*, 1965, oil on canvas, 28x28 in (*Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks*, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 35)
Figure 5 – Kazimir Malevich, *Morning in the Village after a Snowstorm*, 1912, oil on canvas, 32x32 in
Figure 6 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Two Spaces*, 1968, oil on canvas, 35x31 in (Oleg Vassiliev: 
*Memory Speaks*, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. 
Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 52)
Figure 7 – Oleg Vassiliev, detail from Substitutions and Transformations, 1981, colored pencil on paper, 21x14 in each (Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 65)
Figure 8 – Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870-73, oil on canvas, 52x111 in
(State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
http://www.rusmuseum.ru/eng/collections/painting/xix_xx/photos)
Figure 9 – Tatyana Yablonskaya, *Bread*, 1949, oil on canvas, 39x87 in
*(Dream Factory Communism, 224-25)*
Figure 10 – Oleg Vassiliev, *At the Edge (Broken Tree)*, 1990, oil on canvas, 48x36 in
(*Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks*, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 44)
Figure 11 – Oleg Vassiliev, “Intermission—Leaves” (detail), from the series On Black Paper, 1994-97, colored pencil on black paper, 13x10 in each (Oleg Vassiliev: On Black Paper, ed. Neil K. Rector (Greensboro, NC: DTP, Inc, 1999), 31)
Figure 12 – Oleg Vassiliev, “Malevich—Nekrasov” (detail), from the series On Black Paper, 1994-97, colored pencil on black paper, 13x10 in each (Oleg Vassiliev: On Black Paper, ed. Neil K. Rector (Greensboro, NC: DTP, Inc, 1999), 37)
Figure 13 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1993, oil on canvas, 48x36 in (Neil K. Rector)
Figure 14 – Oleg Vassiliev, Ogonyok, No. 25, 1975, 1980, oil on canvas, 48x36 in (Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 45)
Figure 15 – Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*, 1915, oil on canvas, 21x21 in
(State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg)
Figure 16 – Oleg Vassiliev, *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Spaces*, 2002, oil on canvas, 43x38 in (Oleg Vassiliev: *Memory Speaks*, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), 139)
Figure 17 – Postcard from the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, showing the German and Soviet pavilions opposite each other (http://www.expo2000.de/expo2000/geschichte/images/auswahl/1937_paris/03_deutscher_und_sowjetischer_pavillon.jpg)
Figure 18 – Joseph Kosuth, *On and Three Chairs*, 1965, wooden folding chair and photographs, Museum of Modern Art, New York
(H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 589)
Figure 19 – Komar and Melamid, *Onward to the Victory of Communism*, (Untitled Installation from the Sots Art Series), 1972, Paint on Red Cloth, 20 x 74 in (Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 67)
Figure 20 – Komar and Melamid, *Scroll*, 1975, Ink on Canvas, 224 x 31 in
(Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 104)
Figure 21 – Grisha Bruskin, *Fundamental Lexicon (detail)*, 1986, Oil on Linen, 44 x 30 in (*Nonconformist Art*, 23)
Figure 22 – Andy Warhol, 32 Soup Cans, 1961-62, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 in each (Fineburg, Art Since 1940, 242)
Figure 23 – Komar and Melamid, Quotation, 1972, (from Sots Art Series), Oil on Canvas, 46 ½ x 31 in (Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 63)
Figure 24 – Komar and Melamid, *Color Therapeutics*, 1975, Oil on Wood, 25 panels, 1 5/8 x 1 5/8 in each (Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 82)
Figure 25 – Alexander Kosolapov, Coca-Cola Lenin, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 42 in
(Alexander Kosolapov: Sots Art, 18)
**Figure 26** – Erik Bulatov, *Glory to the CPSU*, 1975, Oil on Canvas, 90 ¼ x 90 in

(*Erik Bulatov: Catalogue Raisonné*, 113)
**Figure 27** - Rostislav Lebedev, *Situation No. 2*, 1979, Painted wood, 52 ¾ x 58 ½ x 33.5 in (*Nonconformist Art*, 70)
Figure 28 - Erik Bulatov, *Two Landscapes on a Red Background*, 1972-74, Oil on Canvas, 43 x 43 ½ in (*Nonconformist Art*, 313)
Figure 29 - Erik Bulatov, *Red Sky*, 1973-74, Oil on Canvas, 51 x 31 ½ in

(*Erik Bulatov: Catalogue Raisonné*, 105)
Figure 30 - Erik Bulatov, Horizon, 1971-72, Oil on Canvas, 59 x 70 in
(Erik Bulatov: Catalogue Raisonné, 97)
Figure 31 - Erik Bulatov, *Self-Portrait*, 1971-73, Oil on Canvas, 43 x 43 in

*(Erik Bulatov: Catalogue Raisonné, 100)*
Figure 32 – Erik Bulatov, Entrance—No Entrance, 1974-75, Oil on Canvas, 71 x 71 in
(Erik Bulatov: Catalogue Raisonné, 109)
Figure 33 – Erik Bulatov, *Danger*, 1972-73, Oil on Canvas, 42 ¼ x 43 in
*(Nonconformist Art, 309)*
Figure 34 – Leonid Lamm, *The Morning of Our Motherland (Labor Camp Near Rostov-on-Don)*, 1976, watercolor, 8 2/8 x 14 ¼ in. (*Leonid Lamm: Birth of an Image*, 5)
Figure 35 – Aleksandr Laktionov, *The New Apartment*, 1952, Oil on Canvas, (Boym, *Common Places*, 6)
Figure 36 – Illya Kabakov, “The Composer Who Combined Music and Things and Images,” Drawing for Installation of Ten Characters, 1988, Ink on paper, 16 ½ x 11 ½ in (Illya Kabakov, ed. Ian Farr and John Stack, 58)
Figure 37 – Ilya Kabakov, *Where Are They?*, 1979, Four from a series of twelve, Pen, ink and crayon on paper, 16 x 10 ½ in each (*Nonconformist Art*, 312)
Figure 38 – Komar and Melamid, *Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution (after the First Version by V. Serov)*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in. (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 128)
Figure 39 – Vladimir Serov, *V. I. Lenin Proclaims the Power of the Soviets*, ca. late 1940s (first version) oil on canvas, Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 129)
Figure 40 – Vladimir Serov, *V. I. Lenin Proclaims the Power of the Soviets*, ca. late 1950s (second version) oil on canvas, Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 129)
Figure 41 – Alexander Kosolapov, Soviet Myth, 1974, oil on cardboard, 17 x 24 in. Collection of Neil K. Rector
Figure 42 – Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in.
(Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 26)
Figure 43 – Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1973 (copy of destroyed *Double Self-Portrait as Lenin and Stalin*, 1972 which was destroyed in the Bulldozer Exhibition) (from Sots Art series), oil on canvas, 36 in. diameter (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 64)
Figure 44 – Soviet portrait of Lenin and Stalin, ca. 1950
(Ratcliff, Komar and Melamid, 65)
Figure 45 – Komar and Melamid, *Yalta Conference (from a History Textbook 1984)*, 1982 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in.  
(Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 134)
Figure 46 – Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin meet at the Yalta Conference
Figure 47 – Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Newark, NJ (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 94)
Figure 48 – Komar and Melamid, *Stalin and the Muses*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 55 in. (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 36)
Figure 49 – Komar and Melamid, *Portrait of Medved*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in. (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 138)
Figure 50 – Komar and Melamd, *Blindman’s Buff*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 47 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 122)
Figure 51 – Komar and Melamid, *Thirty Years Ago 1953*, 1982-83 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 47 in. (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 141)
Figure 52 – Komar and Melamid, *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*, 1981-82 (from Nostalgic Socialist Realism series), oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 37)
Figure 53 – Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500, oil on wood panel, 26 x 19 in. Alte Pinakothek, Munich (Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, 715)
Figure 54 – Komar and Melamid, The Blue Cup, 1985-86, mixed media, 60 x 72 in
(Ratcliff, Komar and Melamid, 12)
Figure 55 – Leonid Sokov, *Lenin and Giacometti*, 1989, bronze, 15 x 5½ x 15 in

(Leonid Sokov, 83)
Figure 56 – Ilya Kabakov, *Sitting in the Closet Primakov (detail)*, 1972-75, Ink and colored pencil on paper, 47 pages, 20¼ x 13¾ in (Ilya Kabakov, 43)
Figure 57 – Komar and Melamid, *Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood*, 1983, silkscreen in enamel ink, 14 x 30 in (Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid*, 17)
Figure 58 – Leonid Lamm, *I, You, He, She*, 1971, oil on canvas, 25½ x 50¼ in
*(Nonconformist Art, 320)*
Figure 59 – Vladimir Tatlin, Model of the Model to the Third International, 1920
(Lodder, Russian Constructivism, 63)
Figure 60 – Konstantin Melnikov, *Rusakov Workers’ Club*, 1927-29
(http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/04/russian-avant-garde-constructivists)
Figure 61 – Alexander Gerasimov, *Comrade Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, 1938, oil on canvas, 116½ x 112½ in, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, Plate 3)
Figure 62 – Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Bogatyrs*, 1898, oil on canvas, 87½ x 126½ in, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (http://www.abcgallery.com/V/vasnetsov/vasnetsov65.html)
Figure 63 – Komar and Melamid, *Yalta, 1945*, 1986-87, mixed media, 31 panels, 48 x 48 in each (http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/1154/Komar_and_Melamid%3A_Yalta_1945__and__Winter_in_Moscow_1977)
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Notes

Introduction Notes


2 The Helsinki Accords were a series of agreements drafted and signed by the United States, Canada, European Nations and the Soviet bloc in August 1975, with the aim of improving relations between East and West during a strained Cold War period. The specific provision at issue with the Bulldozer Exhibition was Act VII, “Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” The international community strongly felt that artistic freedom fell into the protection over “freedom of thought.”

3 Two weeks after the so-called Buldoozer event Oskar Rabin organized another open-air exhibition at which 65 artists participated. City officials, embarrassed by the scandal, allowed it to go forward and over ten thousand people attended. See Carter Ratcliff, Komar and Melamid (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1988), 21). Also, in 1976 many of the nonconformist artists were invited to join the newly-formed Painting Section of the Moscow Municipal Committee of Graphic Artists—a clear attempt to pacify the artists and brign them into the fold. See Igor Golomshtok, “The History and Organization of Artistic Life in the Soviet Union,” in Soviet Émigré Artists (New York: M. E. Sharp, Inc, 1985), 48.

4 Komar and Melamid’s exhibition was so popular, that the line to enter it literally stretched around the block, which is highly unusual for an artist’s debut exhibition in New York. Amusingly, when Ronald Feldman recounted this to the artists over the phone they didn’t know that this meant it was a positive sign because, from their experience, one had to wait in long lines for everything in the Soviet Union. The exhibition was also written up in numerous newspapers such as The New York Times, New York Magazine, ARTnews, New York Post, Newsweek, Christian Science Monitor, International Herald Tribune, and Arts Magazine. The New York Times, for example, actually published two separate articles on the day the exhibition opened, one by art critic Grace Glueck who witnessed the exhibition, and another from Moscow correspondent David K. Shipler, who reported on an interview he had with the artists in their studio.

5 Presale estimate for the Sotheby’s auction was about $900,000, but it realized nearly $3.5M.


9 Ibid.

10 My methodological approach toward ambivalence is guided by Aron Vinegar’s analysis of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour’s groundbreaking book Learning from Las Vegas,
which has been taken as a kind of manifesto of postmodernism. In his book, Vinegar writes that the authors’ attitude toward Vegas is not indifference but ambivalence, a simultaneous love and hate, “I have a hunch that what made the book so infuriating was its courting the extremes of love and hate without occupying either position or the middle ground.”(18) See: Aron Vinegar, I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 2008.

11 Pavel Filonov is often pointed to as the last of the avant-gardists in Russia. Never conforming to official dictates, but having been denounced as a formalist, Filonov was forced into obscurity. He died in 1941 of starvation during the Nazi blockade of Leningrad.

12 For more on these exhibitions and festivals, see Chapter 1

13 Ernst Neizvestny (b. 1925), while classically trained at the Surikov Art Institute, quickly moved away from official forms of art in his own practice. The main theoretical issue behind his artworks is the need for individual freedom. It was because of this personal belief that he was drawn into such a heated debate with Khrushchev on the matter. Interestingly, after Khrushchev’s death, his family approached Neizvestny and asked him to design his tomb for the famous Novodevichi Cemetery in Moscow.

14 While no list can possibly be comprehensive, the artists generally associated with this generation are: Anatolii Brussilovsky, Mikhail Chemiakin, Ivan Chukov, Yurii Dyshlenko, Eduard Gorokhovsky, Mikhail Grobman, Andrei Grossitsky, Francisco Infante, Viacheslav Kalinin, Aleksandr Kharitonov, Dmitrii Krasnopevtsev, Valentina Kropivnitskaia, Lev Kropivnitsky, Dmitrii Lion, Lydia Masterkova, Ernst Neizvestny, Vladimir Nemukhin, Viktor Pivovarov, Dmitrii Plavinsky Leonid Purygin, Oskar Rabin, Evgenii Rukhin, Eduard Steinberg, Mikhail Shvartsman, Anatolii Slepyshev, Ullo Sooster, Boris Sveshnikov, Oleg Tselkov, Vladimir Veisberg, Vladimir Yakovlev, Vladimir Yankilevsky, and Anatolii Zverev.


16 It should be noted that Sots Art was actually developed and the name was coined by Komar and Melamid. Other artists have pursued programs concordant with this style and have sought to identify themselves as bona fide Sots Artists, but were never considered true or pure members by Komar and Melamid—the founders of the movement. The most famous example of this was when Kosolapov showed his work to the pair, and they declared to him, “This is no Sots Art, but American consumer stuff.” Tupitsyn, “Nonidentity within Identity,” 92.


18 These events involved a number of artists on at different times, including Nikita Alekseev, Nikolai Panitkov, Georgii Kizevalter, Igor Makarevich, and Elena Elagina. Other important artists from Moscow Conceptualism included Ilya Kabakov, Rimma and Valeriy Gerlovin, and Oleg Kulik.

19 Ratcliff, Komar and Melamid, 23.


22 Other important collections of essays include:
—Joan Lee, ed., Soviet Disunion: Socialist Realist and Nonconformist Art (Minneapolis, MN: The Museum of Russian Art, 2006). This collection contains essays that focus primarily on how dissident art
was both the same and different than the official art form of Socialist Realism. In other words, it seeks to explore what, exactly, was unofficial about unofficial art. Another anthology that takes a similar approach is: Barbara M. Thiemann and Olga Breininger, ed., (Non)Conform: Russian and Soviet Art, 1958-1995 (New York: Prestel, 2007).

--Ales Erjavec, ed., Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2003). This anthology contains essays that explore the varying reactions to official Socialist art around the world, particularly in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Cuba and China.


23 Most of the individual monographs are actually exhibition catalogs with one or two essays and numerous illustrations. While the usefulness of such resources should not be underestimated, they tend to lack the comprehensive consideration that a scholarly monograph offers.


Chapter One Notes


2 Organized jointly by the Russian Ministry of Culture and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, this exhibition was first staged in Paris in 1979, and returned to Moscow in 1981, and included works by artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, Natalia Goncharova, and Kazimir Malevich. All works, including those of French artists such as Picasso, came from storehouses owned by the Soviet Union.


4 The World Festival of Youth and Students was organized by the United Nations' World Federation of Democratic Youth in the wake of World War II. The first festival was held in 1947, but it was not for ten more years that the Soviet Union would participate. The sixth festival, held in Moscow, was the largest and most successful to date, and had representatives from fifty-two countries. See: Michael Scammell, “Art as Politics and Politics in Art,” in Nonconformist Art, ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T Dodge (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 50.

5 This exhibition has also been noted often connection with the Abstract-Expressionists, with allegations that the United States government deliberately incorporated this art as a weapon in the Cold War. Because the aesthetics of the style differed so drastically from the style of Soviet propaganda, and the focus on the individualism of the artists, the style was seen as ideal to present as a contrast to Soviet art. See: Abstract Expressionism: The International Context, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

6 Although during this time the Soviet government never allowed the open exhibition of artworks for the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, many of the unofficial artists were able to use their connections to get into the store rooms of the state museums and access some of the work, if only for a brief period of time. While these covert visits in no way allowed the artists to get a comprehensive impression of the era, it did make them aware of its existence.

Examples of this are the exhibition of Ernst Neizvestny and Marc Chagall at the Grosvenor Gallery in London, and *60 Years of Russian Art: The Great Experiment and After 1900-1960* at the Sears Vincent Price Gallery in Chicago.

*Samizdat*, which literally translates to “self-published,” refers to a practice in which authors would smuggle manuscripts out to the West for publication, often at great personal risk. While it’s difficult to trace the origins of the actual practice, the term came into use during the Cold War era in the Soviet Union. Because the state controlled all the media in the Soviet Union, *samizdat* literature was really the only means by which outsiders could gain understanding about what was really going on in the country. See F J M Feldbrugge, *Samizdat and Political Dissent in the Soviet Union* (Leyden: A W Slijthoff, 1975).

*A-YA* (the first and last letters of the alphabet, equivalent to A-Z) was a journal of Russian unofficial art published in Paris from 1979-1986, edited by Igor Shelkovsky in an effort to publicize the work, and raise awareness in the West of the art being produced in the Soviet underground. The primary motivation for the journal was not to create a market in which to sell the art, but to counteract the persecution artists were suffering at the hands of Soviet authorities. Quite often, an artist’s participation in the journal would lead to increased pressure from authorities, but it also made it difficult for them to be arrested or committed to asylums without creating an international scandal. As Vassiliev noted, his first appearance on the pages of *A-YA* led to his being directly reprimanded by “The Troika”: the Artist Union director, the local Communist Party leader, and artist trade union leaders. See Oleg Vassiliev, “How I Became an Artist,” in *Memory Speaks*, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider, and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg, Russia: Palace Editions, 2004), 26.


Metageometry is a term Steinberg began using to describe his works beginning in about the 1970s. Though he doesn’t explicitly define this term, Hans-Peter Reise, a scholar of Steinberg’s work, explains: “In using the term ‘metageometry’ to describe his paintings of the seventies, Steinberg implies that he is not primarily concerned with the geometrical shapes as they appear on the canvas, nor indeed with any logical relationship between them in a neo-constructivist sense, but rather with the inner relationship which exists between these geometrical elements...the geometrical symbols in these later paintings now stand for existence and its philosophical (religious) justification.” The pure aesthetics of the canvases he paints is not the primary concern for Steinberg in his theory. He is searching for a higher metaphysical reality presented through a geometrical language. See Reise, “Eduard Steinberg,” 7.


Infante, “Francisco Infante,” 38.


The project referred to here, of course, involves more than simply creating art. What Groys is referring to is the use of art to create a blueprint for the reconstruction of society. Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.


Margarita Tupitsyn notes of the movement, “The Sots artists were the first to confront Socialist Realism’s structure as a conventional metaphysical system with carefully developed pictorial and verbal icons.” Tupitsyn, “Sots Art,” 5.


Vassiliev, “A Portrait of the Age,” 32.


Of the importance of this series of canvases, Vassiliev wrote, “I permanently turn to the models of painting that I made in 1968 and which I continue to develop during 1970s. It protects me from too much sentiment in my painting and from stickiness with the object. My dialogue with the painting is continued till now without interruption. The moment when a person first feels his urgent need to express something...this is one of the most important moments in an artist’s life...whatever the circumstances of his life’s journey may lead the person later on, in the end he will have to turn to face his ‘home,’ his beginning.” See Vassiliev, “How I Became an Artist,” 26.

Vassiliev, “A Portrait of the Age,” 32.
Vassiliev writes quite forcefully in this regard in several instances. In his essay “On Memory,” he states, “The present is saturated with the past as a live sponge is saturated with water. Not the past which has passed, but that which is constantly alive, that whose light helps transform the volatile, ever-mobile ‘now’ into a phenomenon forever fixed in the visible space of the arrested moment.” The past is not simply an account of things that have happened, but is an active force with great influence on the course of present events. Oleg Vassiliev, “On Memory,” in Memory Speaks, ed. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider, and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (St. Petersburg, Russia: Palace Editions, 2004), 19.


The Wanderers (Peredvizhniki) left the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1863, protesting the demands to paint mythological and religious subject matter. In 1870, the group established the Association of Travelling Art Exhibits that were aimed at making art available to the lower-class Russian people. The themes pursued varied, though some of the most popular were landscape and social commentary, reminiscent of French Realists like Gustave Courbet. The group included amongst its most influential members the artists Ivan Kramskoy, Isaak Levitan, VasilyPolenov, Ilya Repin, Ivan Shishkin, and Vasily Surikov. For further reading, see: Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, “The Art of the Wanderers in the Culture of Their Time,” in The Wanderers: Masters of 19th-Century Russian Painting, ed. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1990).

Talk delivered by Ilya Kabakov at the Hermitage Foundation, New York, November 5, 2012.


In addition to individual images of deceased friends like Mihael Sokovnin and Vsevolod Nekrasov, Vassiliev includes drawings of family portraits from different times of their lives. Inevitably, as time passes figures, such as his father, disappear from these generational portraits.


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Ibid., 19.

Vassiliev would paint the same cover two more times, in his drawing Ogonyok, No. 25, 1975 (1980-1993) and in the oil painting Variations on the Theme of the Ogonyok Magazine Cover (1980).

Ogonyok (alternatively spelled Ogoniok and Ogonek), was a tsarist-era journal that ran from 1899 until the Revolution in 1917. In 1923, it was re-established as a Soviet journal, analogous to something like Time magazine in the United States.
54 From the first establishment of the Soviet state, authorities showed a willingness to destroy old monuments and buildings in favor of their own constructions. The most notorious example of this was Stalin’s decision to destroy the largest Orthodox church in Moscow, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on December 5, 1931. On the site of the destruction, Stalin planned to build an immense Palace of the Soviets that would have been one of the tallest buildings in the world. With difficulties in the foundation and the outbreak of war with Nazi Germany, the plans were put on hold and ultimately never materialized.

55 “Krasny,” Gramota Russian Online Dictionary, last accessed March 22, 2013, http://www.gramota.ru/slovari/dic/?word=%EA%F0%E0%F1%ED%FB%E9&all=x

56 Red Square was originally referred to as Pozhar, or a “burnt-out place.” It is believed that it was the building of Saint Basil’s Cathedral, which was called beautiful, and the name was extended out onto the surrounding plaza.


58 In his seminal essay, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” Malevich explains that painting in the traditional manner lacked any sort of life: “But the realists, in transferring living things onto the canvas, deprive life of movement. And our academies teach dead, not living painting.” (129) He goes on to explains that in his new form of art, which he titles “New Painterly Realism,” the world will be represented not by depicting the world, but by supplementing it. In other words, forms will be created anew that parallel the actual world. “The new painterly realism is a painterly one precisely because it has no realism of mountains, sky, water . . . Any painterly surface is more alive than any face from which a pair of eyes and a smile protrude.” (133-134) By titling his work Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Spaces, Malevich signals that what we are looking at is not a depiction of a peasant woman, but a creation of a peasant woman. It is a higher understanding of the world that perceives everything aesthetically. In other words, it is formative of the world, rather than reflective. By depicting the woman this way, peasant women in the real world will take on this higher form of existence. See Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism,” in Russian Art of the Avant-Garde, ed. John Bowlt (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

59 The center was established in 1935 by Joseph Stalin and was named the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (Vsesoyuznaya Selsko-Khozyaystvennaya Vystavka, or VSKhV), however construction delays meant that the fairgrounds behind Mukhina’s statue did not actually open until 1939. In 1959, the park was renamed the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy (Vystavka Dostizheniy Narodnovo Khozyaystvo, or VDNKh). Within the park, there were various pavilions dedicated to the different regions of the Soviet Union, specifically for Leningrad, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Karelia, Ukraine, North Caucasus, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Over time, more pavilions were added that weren’t region-specific, including the Space Pavilion, the Pavilion of Atomic Energy, and various entertainment venues like a Ferris Wheel, Rollercoaster, and theater. For more information, visit the exhibition center’s website, http://www.vvcentre.ru/eng/ (last accessed March 25, 2013)
“Iron Felix” refers to the statue of the first director of the NKVD, a predecessor to the KGB, Felix Dzerzhinsky. In particular, it refers to a statue of Dzerzhinsky that stood in the middle of the square in front of the KGB headquarters in Moscow. As the Soviet Union collapsed, it was this sculpture around which the people gathered and eventually had it torn down. This event became a powerful symbol of the finality of the end of Soviet oppression. See Mikhail Yampolsky, “In the Shadow of Monuments: Notes on Iconoclasm and Time,” in Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia, ed. Nancy Condee, pp. 93-112 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).


Chapter Two Notes


4 Ferdinand Saussure’s ideas about the subconscious connotative nature of words was famously expounded upon by Jacques Derrida who argues that language is rife with polarities that appear to be equal in nature, at least on the conscious level. These polarities include such things as old/young, man/woman, or light/dark. Derrida argues that within these polarities, there is always a cultural linguistic bias toward one over the other: “In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.” This would become a major part of feminist practice, for example, that sought to expose gender bias in the way in which one can say “man” to indicate “human” but “woman” only indicates one subset of “human.” See Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.


8 Graham, Intertextuality, 41.

9 Ibid., 48.

10 Because the entirety of a language cannot be held by a single individual, and an individual’s use of language must conform to accepted social norms in order to be understood, language will always remain external to the individual. Subscribing to a particular language system can have a powerful effect on how an individual interacts with the world. As was noted earlier in regards to Derrida’s theories of polarity, the gender bias toward male in many languages has been argued by feminists to have perpetuated a continued privileging of males over females in society. Similar studies have been conducted to understand the relationship between words and perception in the realm of color. University of
Manchester linguist Guy Deutscher’s book *Through the Looking Glass: How Words Color Your World* (London: William Heinemann, 2010) explains how in the ancient world, none of the cultures had a word for blue. Curiously, even when describing the sky and sea, the word for blue is not used until a very late date. He explains that until blue is distinguished as a concept, it remains for the ancients merely a shade of green—a linkage represented in the development of their language. Likewise, University of London neuropsychologist Jules Davidoff has explained that when studying tribal cultures where there is no distinct word for blue, the subjects are unable to distinguish it from green when presented with color cards. (http://www.radiolab.org/2012/may/21/sky-isnt-blue/). The underlying assumption behind each study is that until the word exists, the concept is unattainable for the individual.


15 In 1918, Soviets instituted a spelling reform of the Russian language, intended to remove unnecessary elements and streamline the typographical process. Four letters were eradicated (ѣ, і, ѣ, and ъ) and the hard sign ъ was removed from the ends of words (previously, many words ended in either the soft sign ь or the hard sign ъ, after the reform, any words without either was assumed to be hard). In addition, new words for Soviet institutions were introduced, and many of the formalities of aristocratic speech were done away with. For further reading, see: *Politics and Theory of Language in the USSR 1917-1938*, ed. Craig Brandist and Katya Chown (London: Anthem Press, 2010).


18 Ibid., 4-5.


21 Gladkov’s novel begins with the reappearance of Gleb Chumalov, a Red Army soldier who has just returned from the front. Despite being a war hero, Gleb finds that he does not really understand what the future of Communism is when he expects to come home and find a loving wife eager to return to their former life. Instead, Dasha has been transformed into the ideal New Soviet woman, who has no interest in being confined to domestic affairs. The tomb-like cement factory that had previously supported their provincial town lies dormant, and in the process of trying to revive it, Gleb truly transforms into the New Soviet Man, and finally finds success. Gladkov, Fyodor, *Cement*, trans. AS Arthur and C Ashleigh (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994).


Perhaps the most apparent manifestation of this belief was the Stakhanovite movement that occurred during Stalin’s second Five-Year Plan. Named after a miner, Aleksei Stakhanov, who apparently mined 14 times his quota in coal in a single shift, this government-sponsored movement encouraged workers to break barriers of what was considered physically possible, awarding the Medal of Labor Valor when a worker or shift did so. The Stakhanovites were glorified throughout Soviet Art and literature, most notably in the wildly popular novel Time, Forward by Valentin Katayev. Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism, 60.

As part of Lenin’s decree for a coordinated monumental propaganda program was a plan to destroy monuments erected to the Tsar and his servants, and to replace them with didactic monuments about the lives and accomplishments of 66 historical figures he had identified as acceptable role models. He writes, “Campanella in his City of the Sun says that the walls of his fantastic socialist city are covered with frescoes which, serving the youth as a graphic lesson…participate in the business of raising and educating the new generation. It seems to me that this is far from being naïve and with certain changes could be adopted by us and put into operation now…I have called what I am thinking of monumental propaganda.” Quoted from Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 53. For a complete analysis of this program, see John E. Bowlt, “Russian Sculpture and Lenin’s Plan of Monumental Propaganda,” in Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), pp. 182-193.

Boris Groys, The Communist Postscript, trans. Thomas H Ford (New York, NY: Verso, 2009), 60. Stalin’s assertion did not come out of nowhere, but was rooted in the theories of the noted Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky whose book Thought and Language argued that thinking, as we understand it, begins as external conversations between the child and its mother and/or father. The dialogue is slowly individualized as the child begins the stage where they talk to themselves to solve problems. Eventually, the child learns to hold this conversation with themselves silently in their head, spawning the more complex thoughts we have as adults. Vygotsky’s theories are still very influential within the field of psychology. As Dr. Charles Fernyhough, a psychologist at Duham University argues, “All our thinking is full of other people’s voices.” “Shorts: Voices in Your Head,” narrated by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, Radiolab, NPR. September 7, 2010 http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2010/sep/07/voices-in-your-head/


The description of evolution as “revolutionary” is not meant in a broad, universal sense, but is used within the Soviet political context. In the Soviet Union, when something was “revolutionary” it typically meant that it involved intervention by ideologues.

In his most seminal writing, What is to be Done?, Vladimir Lenin takes great pains to argue against the principle of spontaneity. He notes that without proper guidance, the worker’s movement is doomed to fall under the control, once more, of the Bourgeoisie. Triumphantly he declares, “There are people among us who keel in prayer to spontaneity, gazing with awe upon the ‘posteriors’ of the Russian proletariat…But we will rid ourselves of this scum. The time has come when Russian revolutionaries, led by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last—at last!—rise to their full height and exert their giant strength to the utmost.” (Vladimir Lenin, “What is to be Done?,” in Essential Works of Lenin, ed. Henry M Christman (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1987), 134.) Lenin’s thesis that the process of class consciousness rising could be accelerated by means of intervention by a highly trained group of revolutionaries, was the underlying theme of much of the propaganda created in the subsequent years after the revolution.


Barabanov, “Art in the Delta of Alternative Culture,” 44.


This concept of knowledge as a form of discipline was introduced by Michel Foucault, when he argued that all discourse has at its base a show of force, and therefore any transmission of knowledge is bound to (re)assert power relations. See Michel Foucault, “The Archeology of Knowledge,” in *Literary Theory*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 421-28.


Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 51.


In 1911, Vassily Kandinsky wrote his seminal essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which he argues that artists are to fulfill the role of vanguard within society, leading it forward. Within the essay, Kandinsky points to color as an important tool for expression, meticulously analyzing the particular characteristics of each color for their emotional and spiritual values. For Kandinsky, the ability of color to have a strong influence upon the viewer was due, in large part, to synaesthetics—the inherent connection between a color and certain tastes, sounds, and textures.


Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 83.

Ibid., 83.


Carter Ratcliff recounts a conversation he had with Komar and Melamid in relation to the creation of their propaganda banners and the sayings often placed on such banners in the Soviet Union. In response to Ratcliff’s question about where such saying come from, he recalls, “Melamid points out that when
students in the Soviet Union write papers, they often fabricate quotations from these figures with confidence the teachers will offer no challenges.” Ratcliff, Komar and Melamid, 65.

51 Vitaly Komar remarks that their banners were adorned with “slogans like ‘COMMUNISM IS THE SHINING GOAL OF ALL HUMANITY!’ or ‘OUR GOAL IS COMMUNISM’ in the years in which no one believed this goal any longer.” Vitaly Komar, “Red is Beautiful!” in Realismi Socialisti, ed. Matthew Bown, Evgenija Petrova, and Zalfira Tregulova (Rome: Palazzo della Esposizioni, 2012), 231.


55 Komar, “Red is Beautiful!”, 225.


57 The genesis of the red banner from favored format of revolutionary mass demonstrations to object of tight governmental censorship is chronicled by Vitaly Komar in his essay “Red is Beautiful!” He writes of revolutionary demonstrations that “As opposed to the later Soviet slogans, these earlier ones were spontaneous, and their texts were not always subjected to party censorship.”(227-28) But with the expansion of the official propaganda program, “Red rectangles advanced along the streets of Russian cities and came to a stop when the revolution did. . .The state became the sole homeowner in the whole country, and had the right to hang any one of its own slogans wherever it pleased – even on your balcony. Regardless of what you might want, the all-powerful director drew you into this red theater.”(229)


59 On the meaning of this color, Bulatov stated, “Blue, the color of space, the sky, and the exact opposite of red, became the symbol and image of freedom.” Bulatov, “Words in Pictures,” 22.

60 Ibid., 23.

61 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 160.


63 Bulatov, “Words in Pictures,”


69 Groys, The Communist Postscript, 71.


Leonid Lamm was arrested in 1973, though the specific reasons for his arrest were never made clear. While he was told it was related to some vandalism that had occurred some years earlier, Lamm is convinced that it was in retribution for his having applied for a visa to emigrate shortly before his arrest. He spent three years in prison, two in Moscow’s Butyrskaya Prison and one in a labor camp. Because he was trained as an artist, he spent much of his imprisonment creating propaganda for demonstrations at the orders of prison wardens.


Pavel Trofimovich Morozov was not a fictional figure. He was killed in 1932 at the age of 13. There is very little first-hand evidence of what happened, although researchers believe the official story of death supposedly perpetrated by his family for informing on his father is almost certainly false. Despite these historical inaccuracies, Pavlik’s image was used extensively in Soviet propaganda and he became the subject of songs, operas, and was even to be the subject of one of Sergei Eisenstein’s movies, *Bezhin Meadow*. Yuri Druzhnikov, *Informer 001: The Myth of Pavlik Morozov* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

Communal apartments were repatriated large apartments that had previously been owned by the wealthy before the Russian Revolution. Although the initial idea was a very practical response to a logistical problem, Lenin saw in it an opportunity for “uniting different social groups in one physical space.” The communal apartment became a fixture of Soviet life even up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, after Stalin’s death, Khrushchev initiated a policy aimed at correcting housing shortages and reducing the overall number of communal apartments. For further information on life in communal apartments, see Lynne Atwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) or Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).


Ibid., 224.


The difference between these two terms—metanoia and paranoia—is merely a matter of degree. Both terms imply a sensitivity to something not immediately available to the senses. Paranoia comes from the Greek roots para (outside, by) and noia (mind, perception), while metanoia come from the roots meta (beyond) and noia (mind, perception). While the latter implies that there is something greater than what the senses can pick up, the former suggests a close proximity of that something. In the Soviet context, the proper sense of metanoia—the understanding of the dangers inherent in the political climate—indeed enhanced one’s paranoia, for that danger was likely situated just on the other side of a flimsy plywood wall within the communal apartment.

Chapter Three Notes

1 Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 68.


3 Finally bending to riots by workers and the defection of military leaders, Nicholas II abdicated the throne in March 1917, and soon afterward Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks who had been in exile, returned to Petrograd and gave an impassioned speech to soldiers and sailors. The Pravda newspaper account reads as follows: “In the street, standing on top of an armoured car, Comrade Lenin greeted the revolutionary Russian proletariat and the revolutionary Russian army, who had succeeded not only in liberating Russia from tsarist despotism, but in starting a social revolution on an international scale, and added that the proletariat of the whole world looked with hope to the Russian proletariat’s bold steps. The whole crowd walked in a body behind the car to the Kshesinskaya mansion, where the meeting continued.” Pravda No. 24, April 5, 1917. In Lenin Collected Works, Volume 41, trans. Yuri Sdobnikov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 399.


6 “Swan Lake” tells the story of Prince Siegfried, who is being forced to choose a bride to marry. On the side of an enchanted lake, he meets Odette—a beautiful princess falls under a spell that transforms her into a swan every night. The spell can only be broken if the prince falls in love with her. Whereas Odette is a pure, unblemished character, the man who cast the spell on her, Von Rothbart is the evil character with no redeeming qualities. Sigfried is tricked into thinking Von Rothbart’s daughter is actually Odette and he swear an oath to marry her. He realizes his mistake too late and chooses to die alongside Odette—an act that strips Von Rothbart of his power and results in his death. In Kosolapov’s painting, Siegfried has been replaced by Gagarin and, with the help of Lenin, Aurora, and the other revolutionaries, the story is given a happy ending.


87 The difference between these two terms—metanoia and paranoia—is merely a matter of degree. Both terms imply a sensitivity to something not immediately available to the senses. Paranoia comes from the Greek roots para (outside, by) and noia (mind, perception), while metanoia come from the roots meta (beyond) and noia (mind, perception). While the latter implies that there is something greater than what the senses can pick up, the former suggests a close proximity of that something. In the Soviet context, the proper sense of metanoia—the understanding of the dangers inherent in the political climate—indeed enhanced one’s paranoia, for that danger was likely situated just on the other side of a flimsy plywood wall within the communal apartment.


89 Boym, Common Places, 1.


91 Boris Groys, History Becomes Form (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 100.


10 These questions are the title of one of Paul Gaugin’s paintings from 1897-1898, painted in Tahiti. This canvas represents one of the most recognizable examples of post-Impressionism.


12 Groys, Total Art of Stalinism, 65.

13 In his text, Barthes recounts seeing a cover of the magazine Paris Match showing a young African boy from one of the French colonies depicted in a French uniform saluting, presumably the French tricolor. He explains that this image simultaneously glorifies the French battles that brought the colony under control, while simultaneously arguing against future regional upheavals: “...whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.” Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 19.


16 Derrida, Archive Fever, 11.

17 Spieker, The Big Archive, 19.

18 Derrida, Archive Fever, 1.


20 Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 28.

21 That Stalin was widely believed to be intimately involved with such events is evidenced in an article written by the British author Edward Crankshaw in 1954 (Edward Crankshaw, “When Lenin Returned,” in The Atlantic (October, 1954)). In the article, Crankshaw recounts the first few days of Lenin’s return from exile, telling how the first person Lenin came into contact with was Stalin who had waited to greet him. In reality, at the time of Lenin’s return, Stalin was the editor of the state newspaper Pravda, and had thrown his support behind Alexander Kerensky’s provisional government. It wasn’t until later that month, when Lenin was elected to lead at the Communist Party conference, that Stalin shifted his support. So thoroughly had this historical revision been covered up by the Stalinist regime, that even independent, foreign researchers like Crankshaw tell of Stalin’s presence. For more on Stalin’s role in the Revolution and civil war, see Robert Service, Stalin: A Biography (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

One of the most famous examples of the sudden disappearance of a Soviet leader was that of Nikolai Yezhov—the leader of the NKVD during the great purge. In 1940, he was arrested and confessed to anti-Soviet activities under torture and executed. After his death, all mention of his existence ceased; he was stricken from official records. In a particularly notorious example, a press photo of him along with Stalin and other leaders inspecting the White Canal was re-released after his execution. He had been retouched out of the photograph. For further reading on the subject, see Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin’s Loyal Executioner* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).


Ibid., 55.


Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 92.

The Young Pioneer Organization of the Soviet Union was established in 1922 and acted as a training ground for Communist Party membership. It was created to counter the influence of the international scouting movement established by Lord Baden Powell, because many of the figures associated with scouting before the civil war fought against the Bolsheviks with the White Army. The scout motto “be prepared” was modified to the phrase “always prepared.” Although membership was voluntary, virtually all children joined, especially during Stalinism when not doing so could put your family at risk. For further reading on the Pioneers see Sebastian Waack, *Lenins Kinder: Zur Genealogie der Pfadfinder und Pioniere in Russland 1908-1924* (Berlin: WVB, 2008).


Such mythological interpretations relate to Trotsky’s conception of future supermen. From a mythological point of view, it does not really matter how things evolved to the present. What is at stake is the understanding of meaning of past events. For example, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all point to the account of Adam and Eve for their creation stories, but the interpretation of the story’s meaning differs radically in each. Likewise, the significance of evolution can be argued as random occurrences, guided development at the hand of divinity, or as Trotsky saw it—a continual process of improvement that will inevitably lead to higher states of existence.


Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 92.

Komar and Melamid’s *Portrait of Hitler* was slashed with a knife when on exhibit at the Gowanus Memorial Art Yard in Brooklyn in 1981. Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 126.

Ibid., 126.

Ibid., 126.

Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 92.

Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 137.


Sergei Pankejeff, the “Wolf Man” was brought by his physician to Freud in 1910 to see if there was a psychological explanation for his physical problems and severe depression. As a very young child, he had a dream that he looked out the window and saw several wolves looking back at him from a tree. In his analysis, Freud noted that Pankejeff saw his parents having sex “doggy style” (hence the wolves) as a
child, but that this in itself did not cause any trauma. Later, when he was sexually abused, his psyche dealt with the trauma by deferring to the original primal scene, which was further obscured as a symbolic dream. Although Freud never goes into a lengthy explanation of the term *nachträglichkeit*, he does use it on several occasions in his diagnosis, such as in this case. For further reading, see Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *Three Case Histories: The “Wolf Man”, the “Rat Man,” and The Psychotic Doctor Schreber*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996), 161-280.


41 The Yalta Conference was held in the city of Yalta in the Soviet Union on February 4-11, 1945, and was attended by Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin. The task of the conference was to draft a plan for Nazi Germany’s surrender and to lay out a plan for the rebuilding of Europe after the war. As such, many nations including Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and East Germany were annexed by the Soviet Union. Soon after the agreements, Communist governments loyal to the Kremlin were installed in what came to be known as the Eastern Bloc. For further reading see Fraser J. Harbutt, *Yalta 1945: Europe and America at the Crossroads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

42 Throughout the course of the Yalta Conference and in its aftermath, Churchill raised numerous concerns in regards to Stalin and his annexation of Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. Roosevelt, however, was under tremendous pressure to get the Soviet Union to commit to help them defeat Japan, and so overlooked many obvious signs that Stalin was not being completely forthright. As a result, the concessions made in regards to Eastern European countries relied entirely upon the Soviet Union’s promise of restraint and contained no safeguards against corruption. After the conference, Churchill wrote a letter to Roosevelt urging some kind of intervention, but Roosevelt responded that Stalin’s earlier priesthood training had “entered into his nature in the way in which a Christian gentleman should behave.” For further reading see Simon Berthon and Joanna Potts. *Warlords: An Extraordinary Recreation of World War II Through the Eyes and Minds of Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 290-94.

43 Historian Peter Novick explains that reports of Nazi death camps began to trickle into the United States throughout the 1930s, but it was in the years from 1939-1941, the years directly leading up to the declaration of war against Germany, that such reports began to be confirmed. Even as reports of Jewish genocide were reported, American propaganda rarely made mention of it. He explains that “The Nazi concentration camp was the most common symbol of the enemy regime, and its archetypal inmate was usually represented as a political oppositionist or member of the resistance. Probably one of the reasons for this was that the seemingly natural framework for the war was one of actively contending forces: the dramatically satisfying victim of Nazism was the heroic and principled oppositionist. By contrast, Jews killed by the Nazis were widely perceived, less inspirationally, as passive victims.” See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 19-30.

44 For further reading on the Katyn massacre, see Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). In 2012, released archival documents showed that the United States had received confirmation of the mass graves at Katyn in a memo from American P.O.W.s who had inspected the site. The Roosevelt administration, however, chose to suppress this information and, remarkably, entrusted the future of Poland to the very man who had ordered the massacre of which the United States was aware. (http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/katyn-massacre-hushed-stalin-slaughter-polish-officers-released-memos-show-article-1.1156361).

45 Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52

46 Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 93.
Released in 1983, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (dir. Steven Spielberg) grossed $359 million box office in the United States, and $619 million worldwide. It surpassed *Star Wars* as the highest grossing film of all time, until the release of *Jurassic Park* a decade later.


Robert Hughes, “Through the Ironic Curtain,” *Time* 120, no. 17 (October 25, 1982), 73.

That Stalin’s proclamations on art were understood as infallible is evidenced by the reverent manner in which they were invoked. At the 1934 Congress at which the theory of Socialist Realism was articulated and declared the only acceptable form of art, Andrei Zhdanov exclaimed, “We have in our hands a sure weapon for the overcoming of all difficulties that stand in our way. This weapon is the great and invincible doctrine of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, embodied in life by our Party and Soviets.” See A. A. Zhdanov, “Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature,” on Marxist Internet Archive, http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zdhanov.htm (last accessed 3/9/2013)


Freud explains this process of frustration with not being able to live up to the ego ideal evolving into the creation of the super-ego when he writes, “His aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from—that is, directed towards his own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego.” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: WW Norton and Company, 1961), 84.

Ibid., 86.


Ibid., 72.

The most famous example of this is, of course, the story of Pavlik Morozov who became a hero for informing on his father’s anti-Soviet activities. For more on his story see Chapter 2.

The first decade of the Soviet Union had much more liberal attitudes toward sex than during Stalin’s time. Repealing the ideas of free divorce and the de-emphasis on the family advocated for by figures such as Leon Trotsky, Stalin sought to re-assert a traditional family structure as the basis of society. As a result, sex was relegated to married couples alone. For further reading see H. Kent Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).


Ibid., 74.

Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 137.

The full inscription says: “Famous artists | Early 1970s | 20th Century | City: Moscow.”
Chapter Four Notes

1 The speech was delivered on March 8, 1983 before the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando Florida. Not only did Reagan label them as evil, but he warned that to fail to see the world so simply, was a grave mistake: “I urge you to beware the temptation of pride, the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” Continuing to characterize the Cold War in such a dichotomous way, he went on to say, “The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith. . . Marxism-Leninism is actually the second oldest faith, first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation, “Ye shall be as gods.”” (http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm)

2 Margaret Thatcher delivered a speech on July 19, 1984 in regards to an ongoing strike between miners and the government. Balking at a proposal to shut down 20 mines, the National Union of Mineworkers declared a strike. Refusing to meet with labor leaders, Thatcher waged a public media campaign against organized labor, arguing “We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is much more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty.” She was so successful, that BBC political correspondent Paul Wilenius wrote that “she managed to destroy the power of the trade unions for almost a generation.” Paul Wilenius, “Enemies Within: Thatcher and the Unions,” on BBC News online edition, March 5, 2004 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3067563.stm), last accessed 11/15/2012.

3 Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 34.

4 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 262.

5 Ibid., 262.


7 Ibid., 380.

8 Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 15.

9 Arkady Gaidar (Arkady Petrovich Golikov) tells the story of a young family visiting their dacha on the outskirts of town. Over the course of the weekend, the father discovers that a blue cup has been broken, and the daughter, Svetlana, does not admit to doing it. They go on a hike around the region, and don’t discuss the cup any further—for the father, the child’s word seems to be enough. The story was originally published in 1936, and has been republished numerous times since. Arkady Gaidar, The Blue Cup (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981).

10 The use of Abstract Expressionist artworks by figures such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko by the CIA for propaganda was widely believed to be true, though it was only confirmed in 1995 with the de-classification of documents proving the link. Under the aegis of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was set up in 1950, the CIA secretly funded the purchase and exhibition of avant-garde artworks throughout Europe. This was not done openly because of the avant-garde’s unpopularity in Congress, even as McCarthyism was underway. For more, see Francis Stonor Sauners,

11 Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 35.


13 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 208.

14 Ibid., 303.


16 Ross, “Interview,” 11.


20 Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 18.

21 This term, which has its roots in Christian Protestantism, is used to reference a process by which a person is shunned or cut off as a result of a serious infraction. The failure to conform to proper Soviet behavior led to a parallel shunning by the Soviet establishment.


24 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 272.

25 Agamben, Means without End, 23.

26 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 272.

27 For example, Vladimir Nemukhin, one of the founders of the nonconformist art movement, explained to me that the reason he never emigrated was due solely to the health of his parents and concern for their well-being in his absence.

28 This phrase is attributed to Stalin, and was presented at the Soviet Writers Congress in 1934 in a speech by Andrei Zhdanov, apparently based on a conversation he had with Stalin.

29 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 381.


31 Campanella’s novel describes a society in which the citizens are instructed through a series of murals that educate them on proper behavior and doctrine. Lenin’s program, while it retained some of the didactic
elements of Campanella’s conception, also adopted more traditional iconography of victory and domination.

32 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 113.

33 Based on the theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Taylorism was a system of efficiency that proposed the analysis of the most minute movements of the worker to increase production dramatically through small adjustments. Taylorism became a favorite theory of over-zealous Communist Party workers, who even formed brigades whose specific task was to search out any type of inefficiency. For a good analysis of Taylorism and its influence throughout Europe, see Charles S. Maier, “Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s,” in Journal of Contemporary History (Vol. 5, No. 2, 1970).


37 A striking example of the persecution that came as a result of applying to emigrate is Leonid Lamm. Lamm and some friends actually took the bold step of splashing a monument to Mayakovsky with red paint in the dead of night. But this incident did not cause him trouble for over six years when it was used as a pretext to imprison him after he peacefully applied for a visa to emigrate. Only then did he receive his prison sentence.

38 Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe, 122.

39 This quote was taken from Stalin’s “Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites,” which was delivered November 17, 1935. J. V. Stalin, Problems of Leninism, trans. Unattributed (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), 783.

40 Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe, 122.

41 For further reading on the shifting architectural preferences from Culture One to Culture Two, see Vladimir Paperny, Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).


43 Eugene Zamiatin, We, trans. Gregory Zilboorg (Boston, MA: Gregg Press, 1975), 12.

44 Ibid., 89.


46 Plamper, The Stalin Cult, 105.

47 This quote is from the popular 1947 book by Nikolai Mikhailov, Map of the Motherland. In this book, Mikhailov frequently declared the supremacy of the Soviet Union to lie in its ability to change the landscape from chaos into rational resource, using “well-considered blueprints.” Thus Mikhailov touts the accomplishments of turning the lands around the Aral sea from desert into fertile land, just as American prairies are washed out and turned into dust bowls. Dobrenko, “The Art of Social Navigation,” 196.

48 Ibid., 186.
While the artists were not interested in endorsing either side of the Cold War, Donald Kuspit points out that because their art was a rejection of Soviet socialism, it was often interpreted as an endorsement for Capitalism—an unintended result to be sure. Donald Kuspit, “New York Contra Moscow, Moscow Contra New York: The Battle in the Soul of the New Russian Immigrant Artists,” in *Forbidden Art*, ed. Garrett White (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 1988), 166.


Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.


The image presented here shows how it was arranged for the show “Komar and Melamid: Yalta 1945 & Winter in Moscow 1977” at the Brooklyn Museum, March 16-June 4, 1990.
Considering a work of art that spans a river, it is difficult not to consider Vladimir Tatlin’s infamous Monument to the Third International of 1921. Conceptualized as the tallest structure in the world, it was to house all important functions of government in a position suspended above the Neva River. Interestingly, Tatlin envisioned a strict order being imposed on the structure as the buildings would rotate every day, month, and year respectively. The permanence and ordering associated with this work would have allowed a certain amount of control over the smooth and wild nature of the river.

Ratcliff, Komar & Melamid, 32-33.

Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 152.

Conclusion Notes


2 Ibid., 3.

3 Baigell, Soviet Dissident Artists, 262.

4 Ibid., 262.


6 Bakhtin and Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Lanuge, 86.

7 Groys, History Becomes Form, 69.