

TransStates: Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe and the Limits of Utopia

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(History of Art)
in The University of Michigan
2011

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To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a large number of people whom I have to thank for making the existence of this dissertation possible. First among them is Alex Potts, who in the first three years of graduate school was a wonderful professor and mentor to me. As my advisor and the chair of my dissertation committee in the last three, he offered advice and feedback that were instrumental in shaping my research and writing. I consider it a great honor to have had my thinking about both art history as a discipline and individual works of art be so thoroughly informed over the years by Alex's insight and erudition.

I am also deeply grateful to the three other members of my dissertation committee for their feedback and support. Matt Biro and David Doris have been valuable teachers to me in my time at the University of Michigan, and I appreciate the perspectives they brought to the project. I am also deeply indebted to Benjamin Paloff for taking an interest in my work and pointing out numerous connections that will provide me with further avenues for investigation. Finally, I would also like to thank Ray Silverman for indirectly but powerfully shaping the dissertation project by influencing the way I conceive both art's social function and my own professional future. Being a part of the Museum Studies Program that Ray heads along with Brad Taylor at the University of Michigan was a singularly formative part of my graduate education.

My research took me to Ljubljana, Moscow, and New York, and in all three places, I encountered great personal and professional generosity that made working on

the dissertation both possible and personally meaningful. Those who shared their thoughts and memories with me during my time in Slovenia include Marko and Marika Pogačnik, Tomaž Šalamun, Naško Križnar, Iztok Geister, Matjaž Hanžek, Andraž Šalamun, Tomaž Brejc, Borut Vogelc, and Miran Mohar. To all of them, I want to express my deepest gratitude for their time and trust, coupled with a hope that I have done justice to their stories. The same is true of my interactions with Milenko Matanović and David Nez, who made it so thoroughly worthwhile to take special trips to Seattle and Portland, respectively.

My research in Ljubljana would also have been impossible were it not for the professionalism and good will of the staff of Moderna Galerija. I am very grateful to its director, Zdenka Badovinac, for encouraging me to pursue the project when I first came to Ljubljana, and to Igor Španjol, Jana Ferjan, Bojana Rogina, Maja Finžgar, Tomaž Kučer, and in particular Mojca Štuhec for facilitating my work with the museum's archival materials and collections. I am also very grateful to Jurij Meden for his efforts as the editor of my article on OHO's films in the journal *Kino!*, which also led to a much deeper analysis of the films in the dissertation. Finally, I want to pay a particular debt of gratitude to Igor Zabel, the curator at Moderna Galerija whom I never got a chance to meet due to his untimely death, but without whose decade-long engagement with OHO's work and legacy they would surely not have become known to me.

In my time in New York and Moscow, I was delighted to have the chance to interview Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid, Viktor Skersis, Vadim Zakharov, Yuri Albert, and Anna Roshal-Fyodorova. It is, again, my hope, that they will find my dissertation to be a valuable contribution to the literature on Moscow Conceptualism. I

am also deeply grateful to Mary Nicholas for her enthusiasm and encouragement over the course of the last two years.

The Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum's Dodge Collection and the archives that are part of it was another important resource access to which I deeply appreciated. For their help and encouragement there, I would like to thank Marilyn Symmes, Leslie Kriff, fellow graduate students Andrew Scruggs, Olena Martynyuk, and Allison Leigh-Perlman, and in particular curators Jane Sharp and Julia Tulovsky, working with whom in other contexts has been my pleasure.

I would also like to thank Mary Nicholas and Jane Sharp separately for encouraging me to participate in the ASEEES conference in the Fall of 2010. The feedback I received on my presentation there was very helpful in improving the chapters on Komar and Melamid. Similarly, I would like to extend my thanks to Nariman Skakov at Stanford for inviting me to present at the Slavic Languages and Literatures Colloquium in the Spring of 2011. Writing that talk and receiving feedback on it was another occasion that allowed me to rethink and refine the second half of the dissertation.

My work on the dissertation was generously supported by the Department of the History of Art and the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan, who awarded me several fellowships that made sustained and continued progress possible. I am particularly grateful to the Forsyth family for endowing in the Department of the History of Art the Forsyth Dissertation Fellowship, which gave me funding during the early stages of work on the dissertation. The Summer Foreign Language Area Studies grant from the U.S. Department of Education made it possible for me to become near fluent in Slovene. The Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies made

entering graduate school during my first year much easier.

The final year of my work on the dissertation was spent at the Getty Research Institute, and I am deeply grateful to this institution for awarding me a predoctoral fellowship during its Display of Art theme year. Every single staff member I encountered at the GRI made being there a delight, and access to the GRI's Special Collections helped me to widen considerably the scope of my thinking and understanding of the historical period I cover in the dissertation. Conversations with GRI curators Nancy Perloff and John Tain, along with many other art historians who work at the GRI, as well as with fellow scholars Anthony Fontenot, Jenni Sorkin, Lucy Bradnock, Atreyee Gupta, Adriano Aymonino, Weihong Bao, Olivier Lugon, Ann Thomas, and Saloni Mathur gave me consistently valuable food for thought, while Isabelle Flour proved to be a wonderful partner in both late-night writing marathons and non-academic pursuits.

The staff and faculty at the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan make up yet another group of people who have been a source of help, insight, and inspiration through all of my time in graduate school. I am grateful to Deirdre Spencer, Myrtle Hudson, and Debbie Fitch for the both expert and friendly way in which they run the Fine Arts Library and handle graduate student affairs.

I am grateful to the members of the History of Art faculty whose expertise, methodological savvy, and dedication to teaching prepared me to become a researcher myself. Stella Nair, Fernando Lara, Jacqueline Francis, Rebecca Zurier, and Jorella Andrews both opened up new realms of knowledge for me and offered models for the kind of teacher I myself might hope to become. Also, a special thank you is due to professor Betsy Sears, whose indefatigable efforts in her capacity as the department's

Director of Graduate Studies were awe-inspiring.

My friends and peers have been deeply valued sources of support, encouragement, and advice over the years. At Michigan, my gratitude for their friendship goes in particular to fellow art historians Beth Horwitz, Kirsten Olds, Monica Huerta, Rebecca Bieberly, Kathy Zarur, Chris Coltrin, Elissa Park, Phil Guilbeau, Melanie Simpson, Marin Sullivan, Megan McNamee, Bea Zengotitobengoa, Candice Hamelin, and Anna Wieck. In my time in Ann Arbor, living and talking with Olivia Bustion and Libby Boulter made my life rich, and I am grateful to them for helping me make it through those long winters. While living in London, I was delighted to find similar-minded people in Klara Kemp-Welch and Milena Tomic. In Moscow, Natasha Milovzorova was first a wonderful colleague and then a deeply appreciated friend. Yelena Kalinsky has been a gift in terms of both shared intellectual interests and great personal kindness. And even though I met Josh Saxe towards the end of my work on the dissertation, his unflagging support, interest, patience, and willingness to engage me in intelligent conversation about my work, as well as help edit it, were things that I deeply appreciated and that made the final push less of an ordeal.

Finally, I have to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, Olga Vorobieva and Alex Gurshtein, to whom I have also dedicated the dissertation. They have supported me over the years in innumerable practical ways as I pursued the study of art history, doing everything from making it financially possible to take on unpaid museum internships to e-mailing me hundreds of scanned pages while I was living abroad. More importantly, they gave me the capacity for inquisitiveness and persistence, along with their blessing to pursue my dreams and hunches. For this, as much else, I will always be in their debt.

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ABSTRACT

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by

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Chair: Alexander D. Potts

This dissertation explores the utopian and metaphysical aspirations found in the pockets of collective creativity that drove Conceptual art in Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. It does so by focusing on two groups of artists from the places that defined the limits of relative freedom and unfreedom in Cold War Eastern Europe: the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR. Thus, I trace the trajectories of philosophical and stylistic developments in the work of the OHO collective, which worked in Ljubljana (Slovenia) from 1965-1971 and the work of the duo of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid which they did between 1972 and 1980, before and immediately after their emigration from Moscow to the U.S.

In narrating the groups' histories and addressing the existing narratives about them, I pay particular attention to the way the groups' work was tied to both local forms of protest and desire for self-governed spaces of freedom, as well as to a larger global shift in both the production and display of art taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, I argue that within the global Conceptual shift of which these collectives were part, their

practices were singularly representative of the preoccupations broadly shared by artists in Eastern Europe. In both cases, the oeuvres encompassed diverse media and spoke to multiple audiences, both actual and imagined, often using similar tropes. Even more importantly, in both cases, the groups' projects were driven by a desire to respond to utopian aspirations through artistic practice, self-consciously modeling through art the possibilities of personal politics in one's particular time and place. It is in these responses to the utopian impulse that one also finds the stark contrast between OHO and Komar and Melamid, who define the far opposite ends of the spectrum of good and bad faith in utopia. In doing so, they offer insight both into the wide array of roles that unofficial art sought to play in Cold War Eastern Europe and into the limits to which utopianism could still be reconciled with artistic practice in the wake of the Conceptual shift.

INTRODUCTION

As the reader will soon discover, my dissertation is filled with attempts at understanding and reconciling conflicting desires and internal contradictions, as channeled by artists in the works I discuss. For this reason, it is both unsurprising and fitting that the dissertation itself is the result of my own desire to reconcile several contradictory impulses. On the one hand, I had set out to provide further evidence, both concrete and theoretical, for the argument that Conceptualism was *the* artistic movement that emerged, despite the post-war period's great socio-political divides, on a global scale as a multicentric shift in the way artists *en masse* understood their social role, practice, and audiences. To do this, I felt I needed to redefine the term "conceptualism" in its broadest possible sense as an operational principle and a pattern of systemic thought. The goals of Conceptualism as I came to understand it revolved around the tasks of making the invisible visible and making the metaphorical literal. Conceptualism understood in these terms, moreover, could retroactively be applied as an umbrella term by historians both to art that claimed it as its own from the start and to art that, for any number of reasons, did not, but could be now usefully located within what we increasingly see as a global conversation.¹

¹ An idea further supported in practical terms by the striking propensity of artists who were part of the shift I'm describing towards emigration, nomadism, or at the very least extensive travel – a trend that by the end of the century would be emblematically reflected in artists' biographies by the phrase "lives in X and Y," the "Y" most often being New York, Berlin, London, or Paris.

At the same time, the framing of the dissertation was deliberately designed to emphasize and outline a regional specificity and identity of work that came out of Eastern Europe, as the region was understood at the peak of its cohesiveness in the 1960s and 70s. Pinning down this Eastern European-ness became my own task of making visible in the work the social forces and structural limitations of life in Eastern Europe that the artists themselves often addressed, but that had been rendered invisible in the wake of the large-scale socio-political changes that have also rendered the regional identity in question obsolete. In writing the dissertation, I have tried to achieve a sense of simultaneity in examining history at once on scales sliding somewhere between the global and the local, as well as to shuttle between the highly ideological and the very personal. If I have produced any greater visibility, it is thus most likely a visibility of selective and partial affinities, but that, I believe, can still add an important dimension to understanding times and places that in the popular imagination continue to be associated with a politics of polarization.

For practical reasons, in settling on the actual subjects of the dissertation, I could choose only two collectives out of the intimidatingly large number of artists whose work I might have investigated. When I first started research, the desire to look at the two bodies of work I discuss was driven by a hunch and by a belief that my own sense of urgent need to study these particular groups had to somehow have an explanation. With time, I became convinced that OHO's collective experiments and Komar and Melamid's collaboration were, in fact, exemplary of the three structural elements whose impact and presence in the work coming out of Eastern Europe I wanted to trace: collective practice, the intertwining of art and biography to the point of inseparability, and a preoccupation

with utopianism.²

What became clear to me, moreover, was that OHO and Komar and Melamid were important because they defined the two far extreme ends of a range of possibilities when it came to utopianism. The answer I set out to get and have yet to find even for myself – which of these two approaches is better or which, at the very least, will predict the direction in which the ethics of artistic practice will move in the future – is something that the reader, in the best case scenario, will be better equipped to answer him- or herself after reading my text. For the time being, I hope that my own work of untangling definitions and assessing options will be a useful aid in the process.

Defining Global Conceptualisms

Conceptual art was the first artistic movement to arise on a truly global scale in the span of about a decade in various countries in Asia, South America, North America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the USSR. This was the argument put forth most explicitly by the seminal 1999 exhibition, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin*. “Its interdisciplinary nature, along with its political face, gives conceptualism its particular character and cultural importance,” the show’s curators suggested.³ Yet their attempts to offer such a broad umbrella to what were visually and experientially diverse bodies of work from eleven countries or regions of the world were questioned by even the most progressive U.S. scholars.

² On a side note, I find it very interesting – and this was not something I had realized at the start of my project – that the two groups I work on made a big early impression on the two most prominent contemporary cultural theorists to come out of Eastern Europe, Slavoj Žižek and Boris Groys. Moreover, their contemporary stance on utopian political and social projects arguably reflect the differences that I see as crucial between OHO and Komar and Melamid.

³ Luis Camnitzer et al., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art: Available through D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 1999), viii.

Thus, James Meyer called the show “confusing” and wrote that the show “did not begin to explain the contexts it attempted to map.”⁴ As an example, he cited the inclusion of Lygia Clark’s wearable pieces (Fig. 1) as extraneous because these works offered more a phenomenological activity than a language-based practice, and “the precise Conceptual nature of [Clark’s] practice” thus eluded him. Likewise, Frazer Ward questioned the validity of the distinction that the show drew “between Conceptual art as ‘an essentially formalist practice’” and “Conceptualism ‘which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception.’”⁵

Meyer additionally focused his attention on the curators’ lack of self-reflexivity about “jumping onto the global bandwagon,” but never addressed in earnest the potential benefits to art history of their attempt to offer a “radical antidote to so-called formalist Conceptual art” of the well-established Anglo-American tradition. Yet even if the show’s premise “was articulated in the language of late-capitalist expansion” – a language of global interconnectedness, I would add, on which corporate culture does not have a monopoly, even when it does exploit it – the revisionist questions of cultural value that *Global Conceptualism* raised were important ones. That their most immediate repercussions might manifest themselves not in history textbooks but in emerging art markets was, I would argue, a side-effect that did not diminish the significance of showing work that in the first instance was responding to social mechanisms that existed

⁴ James Meyer, "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," in *Artforum* (September 1999), available on-line at <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_38/ai_55939339/>, accessed June 1, 2011.

⁵ Frazer Ward, "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," in *Frieze* (London: September-October 1999), available on-line at <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/global_conceptualism_points_of_origin_1950s_1980s/>, accessed June 1, 2011.

in cultures outside of advanced capitalism. It is, therefore, on making those contexts visible that the show justly focused its attention.

The critics were probably right that the show did not manage to offer a single, concise definition that would justify its sprawling inclusiveness. Yet I think the radical approach it proposed of defining “Conceptualism” as certain possible responses to a local context, as a particular way of paying attention to one’s own historical situation, rather than as a movement that took a similar visual form around the world, is something that ought to be pursued further. Indeed, recent research that looks again at the more canonical Western “center,” rather than global peripheries, also suggests as much.

I am referring specifically to Sophie Richard’s analysis of networks of “Conceptual” artists and their dealers, which was published in 2009 as a massive volume called *Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-1977 - Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*. It reveals that at the heart of what was historically called Conceptualism, one finds not a singular consistent formal approach and not even a pervasive preoccupation with language. Instead, one finds a broader desire on the part of conceptual artists to expose and analyze those structural conditions and cultural assumptions that made it possible for them to be artists. (This was also the premise of the most recent exhibition on Conceptual art in a major Western museum, the 2005 *Open Systems* at Tate Modern). In the West, as Lynda Morris notes in her introduction, this meant that for conceptualists working in a capitalist market, “the business of Conceptual art, or more precisely the accrual of value” was one of the layers

of meaning buried within the work. “What [Sophie] Richard’s databases reveal,” Morris notes, “is the increasingly central role economics plays in recent art history.”⁶

The value of Richard’s work, though, is not in making this connection between art and economics, per se. That has already been done by scholars such as Benjamin Buchloh, who also famously argued that Conceptual art in the West failed to fulfill its potential for criticality when its “aesthetics of administration” were ultimately appropriated and neutralized by the very institutions it sought to critique.⁷ Accounts such as Buchloh’s or Bruce Altschuler’s *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* have focused on the way Conceptual art in the West constantly describes its fraught relationship with institutional spaces – the commercial gallery and the museum – and the role they play in the accrual of value by framing everything that comes inside their walls.

Against this background, Sophie Richard’s work is important because it looks not at institutional framing, but at the way networks of human connections between artists, gallerists, and curators, often unstable, accidental, and intuitive, shaped what work would be shown and designated as “Conceptual” art. “Conceptual art in the first decade,” Morris sums up,

... was marked by a[n]... emergence of a new generation of young dealers who developed innovative means of distribution, and they frequently worked as curators of exhibitions in public galleries and museums. An analysis of Richard’s data suggests that there was a correlation between these exhibitions curated by dealers and the subsequent purchase of the artists’ work by museums.⁸

⁶ Sophie Richard and Norwich University College of the Arts, *Unconcealed, the International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77: Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections* (London: Ridinghouse, 2009), 16.

⁷ B. H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143.

⁸ Richard and Norwich University College of the Arts, *Unconcealed, the International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77: Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, 14. Konrad Fischer, according to Richard and Morris, is a particularly exemplary case of a dealer cum curator.

An acknowledgement of the importance of such networks and their incorporation into written and exhibited histories should, logically, be of vital importance to work that so often thematized the social conditions of its own creation. Such an acknowledgement would also begin to trouble and blur any stable definition or clear line between “Conceptualism” and other manifestations of a conceptual shift in the Euro-American world, such as Fluxus or Arte Povera, whose practice cannot solely or even primarily be characterized as “rational, anti-autographic, [and] wary of the creation of objects.”⁹

Yet the human networks of acquaintance and exchange of ideas, which helped constitute the “Siegelaub mafia” as much as they helped congeal Fluxus or Arte Povera, remain largely invisible. This, in part, is surely, due to the difficulty of tracking the size, geographic spread, and often unstable configurations of networks whose hubs were so often moving targets – now-defunct semi-commercial galleries, eccentric private collectors, individual curators moving from institution to institution, etc.¹⁰ Instead, the complexity that was made possible by the very same post-war socio-economic conditions that artists also sought to expose and defy falls prey too easily to a continued desire to constitute distinct movements nestled within national (rather than, for example, regional or city-centered) narratives. What a study such as Richard’s reveals, however, is that the overlapping circuits of private galleries and public museums in the U.S. and Western

⁹ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art, Art & Ideas* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 183. A figure as prominent as Joseph Beuys might be considered Conceptual (this too is tricky; Peter Osborne sees Beuys as a Conceptualist, whereas Tony Godfrey does not) because of the degree to which his object-making was dependent on a much broader social practice (and was, therefore, of necessity, heavily reliant on language as its means of communication), but in terms of his affiliations, Beuys was much closer to the Fluxus circle of artists than he was to the Americans promoted in the late 1960s by Seth Siegelaub. The fact that he also showed with Vienna Actionists on some occasions further upsets any neat divisions between Conceptual artists, at least in Europe. But in the U.S., as well, there were also conceptual moments in the practices of artists not normally classified as conceptual, such as, for example, Ed. Kienholz.

¹⁰ This is particularly true of a group like Fluxus, which was comprised to such a high degree of immigrants and expatriates – another point of affinity it shares with Conceptual artists from Eastern Europe.

Europe framed and shaped a variety of shifting groupings, any one of which could choose in the late 1960s and early 1970s lay claim to the term “Conceptualism.”¹¹

Despite the existence of numerous conceptual constellations of artists constituted by curators and dealers, very little work until recently has been done on connecting these dots.¹² So much so that Morris sees a revision of current narratives about the history of Conceptualism as imperative because they privilege work from New York so greatly, downplaying the importance of Western Europe. In Morris’s estimation, Western European Conceptual art has been ignored in the scholarship; her text is full of genuine indignation at the “extent to which recent US books on Conceptual art had altered [the] balance” in representing a movement that, in Morris’ estimation, was “the first post-1945 art movement to treat American and European artists equally.”¹³

To someone who studies Eastern European art, this assertion of indignation may seem almost comical given the much smaller literature on post-war art in the region and the early stages of research on the West’s interconnectedness with other parts of the world; but Morris’s point about the importance of trans-Atlantic distribution and travel in

¹¹ The shifting nature of the terminology reflecting the shifting nature of these groupings is summed up by Lucy Lippard’s recollection in 1996, “When I compiled *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object...* in 1972-1973, I described it in the nearly 100-word title as ‘...focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, antiform, systems, earth or process art...’” Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 3. The book was originally published in 1973.

¹² An extremely valuable contribution to this literature is Christian Rattemeyer et al.’s *Exhibiting New Art: ‘Op Losse Schroeven’ and ‘When Attitudes Become Form’ 1969* (London: Afterall Books, 2010). In his discussion of the installation for Op Losse Schroeven created by curator Wim Beeren, Christian Rattemeyer notes that the narrative imposed on the exhibition by the *enfilade* layout of the Stedelijk Museum alternated between showing works grouped by thematic affinities and works grouped by the artists’ place of origin. “Clearly Beeren initially understood the separation between Europeans and US artists to be compelling, even fundamental, to his exhibition concept. However...his final plan mixes US and European artists, and the sense of geographical distinctness that appears to have preoccupied him in his early planning is largely absent in the final configuration.” See above, p. 31.

¹³ Richard and Norwich University College of the Arts, *Unconcealed, the International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967-77: Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, 12.

Western Conceptual art is well-taken.¹⁴ It brings back to the fore the primacy of the process of creation, which, paradoxically, gets lost in the reification of individual Conceptual objects.

Taken alongside the contributions by scholars from outside the West, who consistently point out the importance of tight-knit social circles, particularly in countries with repressive regimes, for the appearance and development of local practices that identify themselves as “Conceptual,” Richard and Morris’s approach to reconstructing what was Conceptualism is important because it highlights the contestability and nebulousness of what and where the movement was. The approach Richard’s study takes suggests that we both legitimately can and should define a “Conceptualism” with multiple centers and multiple foci, one which, taken alongside the terms for other overlapping circles, such as Fluxus, Arte Povera, Nouveau Realism, Pop Art, etc., would be seen as part of an overall small-c “conceptual” shift in artistic practice.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 17-18; The importance of global distribution of ideas in Conceptualism becomes particularly evident when one considers that Seth Sieglaub, the gallerist who first pioneered New York Conceptualism’s most prominent figures – Kosuth, Weiner, Huebler, as well as the now much more obscure Robert Barry – was also the person responsible for creating such “non-geographically-located shows” as *March 1969*, which consisted solely of a catalogue mailed to various places and *July-August-September 1969*, which took place in eleven locations around the world simultaneously.

¹⁵ Again, here one must note the significance of large-scale exhibitions at the time in making a very public argument for such a shift while bringing together and mixing up groups of artists that otherwise might have seemed more contained in local contexts and strictly delimited in the writings of critics. To give but one example, Giorgio Maffei observes in relation to Arte Povera, “However, it would be the large museum exhibitions in Europe that would make the Arte Povera artists more visible, often alongside parallel works by international artists. ...In 1969 the great period of European exhibitions began, where an attempt was made at clearing up artistic ideas at the end of a decade.” Even the critics and theorists, moreover, were often invested in broadening out the scope of work to which their observations applied. The examples of Allan Kaprow, Lucy Lippard, or Germano Celant come to mind here. Of the latter, Maffei writes, “The book *Arte Povera*, by Celant, collected original contributions by artists who, in Italy, the rest of Europe, and in America, interpreted art as the story which would be variously labeled as Arte Povera, Processual Art, Conceptual Art, and Land Art.” Importantly, the book was not limited to only Italian artists. It also contained a minimum of explanation and criticism. “This unhinging of the traditional order in editorial essays found precedents that year in the catalogues for international exhibitions by Szeemann, Beeren, Fischer, and Ammann.” Giorgio Maffei, *Arte Povera, 1966-1980: Libri E Documenti* (Mantova: Corraini, 2007), 32-33.

Indeed, the history of the term itself – which was first used in the post-war period by Henry Flynt¹⁶ in 1961 – suggests that groups such as Fluxus can comfortably fit under its umbrella. Similarly, the descriptions of Conceptualism offered by Sol LeWitt, the godfather of New York Conceptualism, leave a lot of room for maneuver. In 1967, he opened his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” with the simple, “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work”¹⁷ and later supplemented this in “Sentences on Conceptual Art” with the insight that “Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”¹⁸

The single factor scholars have consistently identified as the most clearly defining feature of Conceptualism has been its use of language and a fascination with the ways language shapes cognition. It is, therefore, not wrong to argue that “Conceptualism [is] the visual presentation of a linguistic idea.”¹⁹ It is, however, wrong to therefore reduce Conceptualism to a very small canon of works in which a very precisely articulated linguistic idea is absolutely transparent, just as it is wrong to neglect the irreducibility of the visual component of conceptual art, as Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-1975) (Fig. 2), an undeniably canonical work, should make obvious.

It is but one example, but the critics’ response to Komar and Melamid’s work shown in *Global Conceptualism* is a good example of how highly subjective the

¹⁶ Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, 102.

¹⁷ Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 12. The text originally appeared in *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), pp. 79-84.

¹⁸ ———, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 106. The text originally appeared in *0-9*, no. 5, (Jan. 1969), pp. 3-5.

¹⁹ Meyer, “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s,” available on-line at <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_38/ai_55939339/>, accessed June 1, 2011.

application of the existing definition tying Conceptualism to language really is. Whereas James Meyers found that “Komar and Melamid's early efforts...had a metaphorical openness lacking in their later painting projects,”²⁰ to Frazer Ward, the inclusion “of Komar and Melamid’s abstraction of the bureaucratic means of Soviet surveillance in the form of a red square (*Documents: Ideal Document*, 1975)” exemplified the way the exhibition’s idea of “conceptualism became too baggy, temporally distended and leaky a category to make productive sense of the relations between works made not only under different, local conditions, but long after the global emergence of Conceptual/ist strategies.”²¹

Yet Komar and Melamid are a perfect example of artists working outside the West who not only participated in the global conceptual shift, but self-consciously adopted the term “Conceptualism” early on in their collaboration. If anything, they are proof that it was a particular kind of response to local conditions that help us define a fluid – rather than leaky – Conceptualism whose history could be seen as a global phenomenon.

In looking for a fluid definition, I have found useful Boris Groys’ articulation of the one thing that unites all global Conceptualisms as “a common...interest in the correlation between image and language.” Conceptualism, according to Groys, treats visual art as a kind of language and text as a kind of image, without, I would stress again, claiming to conflate the two media or fully reducing one to the other.²² Given the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ward, "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," available on-line at <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/global_conceptualism_points_of_origin_1950s_1980s/>, accessed June 1, 2011.

²² Ekaterina Degot and Vadim Zakharov, *Moskovskii Kontseptualizm* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo WAM, 2005), 23.

extremely broad usage of the term “text” in a post-linguistic turn era, of which Conceptualism was surely a harbinger and promoter, Groys’ articulation allows us to see Conceptualism’s task in divining or deducing systems of meaning-making that are concealed behind the separateness of individual objects and images. It is in this sense that Conceptualism makes the invisible visible, often by means of making the metaphorical literal.²³

The list of the structures and systems that Conceptualism makes visible in this formulation is long and difficult to exhaust. It contains, as I have discussed above in regards to Conceptualism in the West, economic relations, but it also includes social interactions, political possibilities, ideological assumptions, spiritual beliefs, and philosophical discourses. The conceptualist attitude towards the object of the artist’s examination can also vary widely, from active participation to dispassionate remove and anything in between. The only constant one finds here is a significant degree of self-reflection on the nature of one’s activities (or the nature of group dynamics, a point to which I will return later), which helps articulate *within* (rather than outside, as has always been true of art criticism) the works of art themselves the role that an artist or artists could play in their various environments.

²³ This applies even to the small but important body of work which keeps the invisible invisible, but makes one cognitively aware of it; see the catalog for the exhibition *A Brief History of Invisible Art* (San Francisco, CA: California College of the Arts, 2005).

The desire to make the invisible visible is also closely intertwined with the rise to prominence in the post-war period of structuralism as the dominant methodological paradigm in the social sciences and literary theory. One structuralist in particular to whose work I’ll return in the chapters on Komar and Melamid is the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist summarize the impetus behind Bakhtin’s thinking in the following way: “The systems that texts manifest may also be thought of as ideologies. Ideology in this sense is locatable in all that texts take for granted, the preconditions held to be so certain by their authors that they need not be stated. The pillars supporting a text’s assumptive world are thus invisible insofar as they need not be expressed. Ideology must be seen in a text’s holes, in what it has felt it could leave unuttered. . . . Great effort is required even to see [ideology], since so much of its function is to ensure that it never becomes an issue independent of the material it organizes.” Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 299.

A definition like this, which encompasses combinations of either the explicit use of language or a more broadly semiotic approach, dematerialization, distribution of work across multiple media to render individual components partial, emphasis on process over product, and outright political action stretches the meaning of the term “Conceptualism” to its limits. However, its terms of reference are in one sense useful because even though it accommodates Conceptualism as a broad method rather than a particular “look,” it also avoids the term’s immediate politicization.²⁴ Conceptualism as a term can thus now speak to the operational principle at work in a given piece without immediately invoking debates about legitimacy and political viability, unlike, for instance, the term “neo-avant-garde,” which seems hopelessly mired in irresolvable debates about other rather generic terms, such as “art” and “life.”

It is against the background of the definition given above that I would like to see the distinctiveness of Conceptualism from Eastern Europe. But before I address that distinctiveness, I’d like to stress again that, in keeping with the spirit of Conceptualism, this distinctiveness cannot be reduced to the visual alone. Indeed, it is not particularly difficult to find some obvious visual parallels between works that were produced in the former East and the former West. Consider, for instance, the similarity of the impulse behind the action staged by Milenko Matanović, a member of OHO, in *Wheat and Rope*

²⁴ A tendency to see non-Western Conceptualism through a purely political prism justly rankled critics of *Global Conceptualism*. Thus, Frazer Ward wrote, “The inclusiveness of ‘Global Conceptualism’ rested in part on a distinction emphasised by the project directors, Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss in the highly informative catalogue: a distinction between Conceptual art as ‘an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of Minimalism’ (though this may come as a surprise to some of its practitioners) and Conceptualism, ‘which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception’ and was characterised by the de-emphasis of the object in favour of the ‘idea’ (a largely unexamined term in the discourse on Conceptual/ist art) and the conduct of art. This is perhaps too fine a distinction, which tends to separate good (political) from bad (formal) Conceptual artists.” Ward, “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s,” available on-line at <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/global_conceptualism_points_of_origin_1950s_1980s/>, accessed June 1, 2011.

(Fig. 3) to the American Dennis Oppenheim's *Canceled Crop* (Fig. 4); or the parallel between the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's domestic endeavors in their *The Essence of Truth* (Fig. 5) and the American Martha Rosler's iconic video performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Fig. 6) or Englishman John Latham's literal consumption of a copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art & Culture*; or, for that matter, the similarity of the attempts at intercontinental telepathic communication documented by OHO (Fig. 7) and Komar and Melamid (Fig. 8) without any knowledge of the other artists' existence.²⁵

The visual parallels, I believe, are certainly indicative of shared concerns, which came about sometimes in the presence of a cross-pollination of ideas and sometimes in its absence. But even when shared, those concerns existed within larger structural frameworks that, without showing up in every individual work, did, nevertheless, inform artistic practice on the whole and to which one should look to define regional distinctiveness.

The existence of unofficial art in Eastern Europe was defined first and foremost by the absence of markets and institutional frameworks, which resulted in a prominent tendency towards artists' self-organization at the level of groups and collectives.²⁶ This

²⁵ The OHO telepathic works, titled *Intercontinental Group Projects America-Europe* (1970), were designed to maintain and keep a record of the collective members' mutual links during their separation in space and time. According to the project devised by Marko Pogačnik, in the period between the Februar 4th and 28th, 1970, David Nez and Milenko Matanović in New York and Andraž Šalamun and Marko Pogačnik in Ljubljana simultaneously chose one of the previously agreed upon ways to position a line in a square. In accordance with Milenko Matanović's idea, all four of them looked toward the sun at the agreed upon moment, dropped a match from a height of 10 cm onto a piece of paper, and marked its position. Igor Zabel and Moderna galerija (Ljubljana Slovenia), *Oho: Retrospektiva = Eine Retrospektive = a Retrospective*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007), 131.

²⁶ Something one almost never finds in unofficial Eastern European post-war art are grand gestures of excessive expenditure of resources or destruction of physical objects or infrastructure – something that would resemble Michael Heizer's destruction with a wrecking ball of the asphalt in front of the Bern Kunsthalle as the piece *Bern Depression* (1969) for *When Attitudes Become Form*. Similarly, if one looks at the outdoor installations surrounding *Op Losse Schroeven*, one is struck by the number of works that

also bred an inadvertent fascination with the nature not only of art, but specifically with the dynamics of different kinds of artistic partnership. In the case of the two groups I discuss, it meant a propensity toward self-reinvention, both by individual members of the collective and by the collective as a whole. It also meant that the artists were very often their own curators and, working for a very small and sympathetic audience, could shift quickly and work easily across multiple media, producing, in the context of politically repressive regimes, a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts – a private sphere of freedom, of thought if not always of action.

The sense of creating a separate world, moreover, was reinforced economically by the fact that they usually led professional lives that were at best only partially related to what they saw as their true work. In the case of the Russians, underground artists who had professional artistic training used the system of official patronage to the degree necessary to procure basic income, studio space, and art supplies. They worked in the officially recognized cultural sphere in positions that were supported, but not highly visible and, therefore, subject to less scrutiny. These included such jobs as designers, illustrators, decorators, and art teachers. (Similarly, those in the literary underground found jobs as editors, translators, or librarians). It was also not uncommon, especially for those with no official training in their chosen field of art, to take on nonprofessional jobs

disturb the physical infrastructure of the city immediately surrounding the museum. Particularly evocative is Jan Dibbets's piece, *Museum Pedestal with Four Angles of 90 Degrees* (1969), in which he dug trenches to expose the Stedelijk Museum's foundation at all four corners. This is yet another particularly vivid literalization of a metaphoric impulse to shake the institution to its very foundations, but of a kind that one does not find in Eastern Europe. This discrepancy seems to me also to tie very clearly mental possibilities to economic and political ones. For details on the two exhibitions I mention, see Rattemeyer, *Exhibiting the New Art: 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969*, 29, 133.

to support one's basic needs and dedicate the rest of one's time and efforts to one's chosen calling.²⁷

The situation outside the USSR tended to be less dire and artists did not always have to expend as much effort on hiding their unofficial activities from official professional organizations. As the case of the OHO artists also indicates, in the more liberal countries of Eastern Europe, university students enjoyed a significant degree of independence in actions and opinions while still actively participating in university life and presumably receiving government-funded stipends. In Yugoslavia, as also in Poland, there were publicly funded Student Cultural Centers and independent galleries that emerged as centers of cultural dissent and bolstered the existence of vibrant artistic scenes. The fact remains, though, that even in these countries, where artists working outside the officially sanctioned aesthetic paradigms had exhibition spaces, participated in government-sponsored competitions, or received grants for their activities, no artist made a living through his or her calling and all derived their primary income from various other jobs.²⁸

It is, in part, because the state was ultimately the only employer in all of Eastern Europe, that the artists' relationship with the authorities, although by no means constantly confrontational, did oblige them to see any deviation from the sanctioned norm as much more politicized than it might have been in a Western European or American context. In Eastern Europe, in the context of a collective unofficial artistic practice, any work could

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of the market in unofficial art in Moscow in the post-war period and other means by which artists supported themselves, see Waltraud Bayer, "The Unofficial Market: Art and Dissent, 1956-88," *Zimmerli Journal*, no. 5 (Fall 2008): 58-83.

²⁸ For a study of the ways in which Conceptual artists in the West were also supported by art educational institutions while creating work that could for a time avoid incorporation into the art market, see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). See in particular the chapter titled "Professing Postmodernism."

at once be questioning the nature of art or exploring fundamental, even timeless, philosophical questions and be understood as a way of seeking an immediate remedy for Communist indoctrination, even as it also often acknowledged the power of the latter's assumptions. In a strange way, the state's intolerance towards difference also allowed for a larger number of tenable positions Conceptual artists could find for themselves. One could be an archivist and describer of the present, an agitator and provocateur, an advocate for a particular cause, a person who broadly models new possible ways of being, a holy fool, or something in between. Similarly, work described by its creators as Conceptual in Eastern Europe could be premised on humor or an exploration of the Unknown, the Illogical, and the Inexplicable just as easily as it could turn to straight-faced linguistic analysis associated with the most familiar examples of New York Conceptualism.²⁹ All these positions were available and equally viable, so long as they allowed for the crucial critical distance from the culture at large and articulation of one's position in it.³⁰

Finally, in the context of Cold War divides, the existence of various degrees of limitation on travel and exchange of ideas obliged the artists to speak with frequency, urgency, and often a poetics of the impossible to the idea of living on a periphery, both

²⁹ There were numerous figures in the West – Marcel Broodthaers, James Lee Byars, Bas Jan Ader, and Joseph Beuys, to name just a few – whose sensibility I would describe as being much closer to an Eastern European one (as it is defined above) than an Anglo-American one. These figures, however, with the exception of Beuys, who himself has been viewed as an exception, have until very recently been very marginal to the narrative of what Conceptual art stood for in the West. Thus, it's important to stress that the exploration of the irrational, the unknown, and, for that matter, the utopian, was not exclusive to Eastern Europe, but did have an indisputable centrality that it did not always enjoy in the West.

³⁰ I am borrowing a lot of my articulations here from Vadim Zakharov, who has written the following passage in relation specifically to Moscow Conceptualism, though I believe his assertions should apply more widely to art from Eastern Europe: "What distinguishes the artists of Moscow Conceptualism is the multifacetedness of their work – artistic, literary, poetic, journalistic, performance-based, publishing, archival; the existence of a critical distance towards one's own work and one's position in culture; laughter as the basis of one's work and of every concept; the untiring dynamics of a search for newness; and the invariable presence of a background of the Unknown, the Illogical, and the Inexplicable." Degot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii Kontseptualizm*, 7.

geographic and temporal. This too, however, in retrospect, allowed for a certain kind of open-ended freedom of experimentation in the works to which I will return throughout the discussions in the dissertation.

Defining Eastern Europe

Despite the self-evidence of such an entity within the framework of American academic area studies, the issue of whether Eastern Europe existed and continues exist, and within what boundaries, is a hotly debated one in the places directly affected by it. Thus, before going on to argue for an existence of an Eastern European Conceptual art, I want to address the surprisingly contentious subject of how Eastern Europe might be defined and to address the geographic framing of my project.

Someone familiar with the debates I mention might find it strange that artist collectives from Yugoslavia and the USSR should be emblematic of what was possible on the post-war unofficial Eastern European art scene. Neither country belonged to Eastern Europe if we strictly define it as the geographical area which was forced into the Soviet sphere of domination after World War II. The countries that did fall under the Soviet sphere of influence – the signatories of the 1955 Warsaw Pact – included Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The case studies I look at, on the other hand, come from the two “former” countries – the former USSR and the former Yugoslavia – that framed the aforementioned region on the northeast and southwest, but arguably did not share its common plight. The USSR held a special place because it was the overbearing, deeply resented hegemon of the region.

Yugoslavia, on the other hand, despite remaining socialist, left the Soviet sphere of influence under Marshall Tito's leadership in 1948.³¹

The Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski has to date written the only comprehensive monographic account of post-war art from East-Central Europe.³² In his book, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, he argues passionately and persuasively for a regional, rather than nation-based, history of "Eastern Europe." This history could embrace Eastern Europe's Cold War "Otherness" and its position as a cultural periphery while also asserting the value of both in a global context. He asserts that despite significant differences in their situations, the countries of the Eastern Bloc shared important commonalities. These included the background pressure of official Socialist Realism; excitement about "the introduction of a few elements of consumerism" in the early 60s; "the appearance of political pragmatism"; and the "ideological divestment of the system," which started to take place after the Thaw. To these commonalities, I would add both an intense interest in and increasing ambivalence towards political and social utopianism, at least in the artistic realm. Though not entirely ready to give up on the promise of a better future so dominant in their public discourse, Eastern European Conceptual artists began to invent more private and idiosyncratic utopias.

All of this, I would argue, was true of the cultural situation in the Soviet Union, as well. Yet Piotrowski deliberately excludes the USSR from his comparative history, even though he includes Yugoslavia in it. This exclusion, he argues, is justified because the Soviet Union did not have to contend with "the shadow of Yalta." Yet specifically in the

³¹ It then further sought to distance itself from the squabbling of the Cold War by becoming one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961.

³² The only comprehensive non-monographic account of post-war Eastern European art can be found in Irwin (Artist group), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall, 2006).

context of art history, this omission should be redressed if we are to create a more complete picture of “unofficial” Cold War art in all the countries where this distinction meant something. The experience of Soviet unofficial artists, who lived in a kind of self-imposed internal exile, was not simply similar to the experience of artists in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. It often marked the extreme limit of the privations to which Eastern European artists were subjected. Indeed, if the accounts given by the people living in the heart of one of the Cold War’s two great hegemons are to be trusted, they felt their existence to be more peripheral relative to the rest of the world and more marked by the shadow of Soviet officialdom precisely because of their physical proximity to it.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Yugoslavia still fell under the criteria of “Eastern Europeanness” described above, but it also benefited from a more benevolent dictatorship. Its citizens, for instance, had passports that were automatically valid for foreign travel and could obtain tourist visas to both the East and the West; nor was its official art world dominated by the dictates of Socialist Realism. Yet its socialist economy still aligned it with “the East” both culturally and economically, as did its self-perception as a cultural periphery that could attempt only a very one-sided dialogue with the West. Yugoslavia thus both belonged to Eastern Europe and marked the limit of greatest possible freedoms in the region.

As I have already suggested, the situation of artists in Eastern Europe *a priori* politicized any deviation from the sanctioned norm much more than it did in the West. Given that, it therefore makes sense to consider work from artists working under the region’s most and least repressive conditions in order to discuss how the political climate

shaped their aspirations and practices. At this point, I should mention that OHO, the Ljubljana collective, and Komar and Melamid, the Muscovites, did not know of each other's existence when they were creating in the 1960s and 1970s the works I will discuss. Indeed, nobody in the region at the time – given restricted possibilities of travel, linguistic barriers, and the underground or at best semi-official nature of the artistic activities – seems to have understood the exact size of unofficial art scenes or the scope of what might be called “conceptual art” within them.

For my purposes, however, the fact that the groups did not know about each other's existence only strengthens the argument that similar social conditions pushed artists to address similar concerns. What those artistic responses actually meant in relation to their environment and how defined they were by it remains a subject of yet another fraught debate, one which has continued to play out with particular passion in relation to Moscow Conceptualism.

Thus, the art historian Ekaterina Degot has gone so far as to rename the phenomenon “Moscow Communist Conceptualism” and has asserted that its particularity should be located first and foremost in the economic context of the USSR.³³ We have to look at them as “communist” artists, she argues, given the objective particularities of their productions.

At the same time, the art historian Margarita Tupitsyn, who herself was associated with this group of artists in the 1970s, asks, in critiquing Boris Groys, whether it is “legitimate for a critic to label this movement's production “Communist,” when the artists steadfastly refused to be associated with that particular doctrine?” She opposes vehemently Groys' interpretation that Moscow Conceptualism's engagement with official

³³ Degot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii Kontseptualizm*, 12.

ideology sought “to save for a future . . . the utopian energy of Soviet culture” and argues that the artists’ chief desire was “to escape and deconstruct that culture, and thus elude the specter of totality.”³⁴

She likewise rails against the implication of Matthew Jesse Jackson’s book, *The Experimental Group*, “that the project of creating an autonomous postwar culture, unauthorized by the state, could not be realized.”³⁵ According to Tupitsyn, it not only could be realized, but it also could in the process make a significant contribution to an international art scene. “That assessment,” of Moscow Conceptualism’s international role, however, “is yet to be made by future art historians of Soviet counterculture, who will clear away any lingering suspicion that the work of the postwar vanguard was contaminated by the Soviet culture industry.”³⁶

While I share entirely Tupitsyn’s belief that Moscow Conceptualism, and, for that matter, Eastern European post-war art, needs to be assessed and understood in an international context, I find startling her absolutism in denying the “contamination” of the unofficial art scene by the ideology that surrounded it. Instead, what I think needs to be stressed again is that Conceptual art as a subset of the unofficial art scene thrived precisely because it could imagine entering into dialogue with official ideology and could turn necessity into virtue by creatively making the most of the limitations that the official culture industry undoubtedly imposed upon it. In the process, paradoxically, it also took seriously, salvaged, and repurposed the very same ideals that communist reality made hollow and would eventually discredit completely in the popular imagination.

³⁴ Margarita Tupitsyn, "Conceiving Counter-Soviet Art," *Art in America* (March 2011): 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

Collective Work

One of the necessities turned virtues was, as I have suggested above, a very strong propensity for collective, rather than individual work and a tendency to create small, tight-knit circles in which individual physical objects and actions made sense as works of art only as part of a broader common practice distributed across multiple media.

In regards to Yugoslavia, one should address the fact that the country's relative openness to the West meant that Yugoslavs did have reasonably good access to information about intellectual life abroad. OHO's work could and did engage in dialogue with intellectual trends, foreign art movements, philosophy, and sociological changes, ranging from the sexual revolution to ecological awareness to the rise of information theory. The more important point, though, was that despite access to information, Yugoslav artists continued to exist very much on the periphery of a global dialogue, doubly so, in a way, since their country was proudly not fully a part of the Eastern Bloc, but was also not integrated with the West.

Zdenka Badovinac has argued that

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s there were many neo-avant-garde artists in Yugoslavia who worked in groups both because they shared similar aesthetic concepts and because group work provided better production conditions. In a country without a developed art system, group/collective habitat was an alternative to official networks.³⁷

OHO was one of the earliest such examples of a group that turned inwards, working for a dialogue that occurred almost entirely either in Ljubljana or the two other

³⁷ The argument was made during a public lecture: Zdenka Badovinac, "How Do We Work? / Collective Production as an Aesthetic Gesture in Some Yugoslav Conceptual Art Groups," in *Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum* (London: 2011). An abstract of the lecture is available on-line at <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/researchforum/events/2011/spring/feb22_friendslecture.shtml>, accessed March 15, 2011. For another source that argues that collectivism was a trait common to both Soviet and Yugoslav artists, see Zdenka Badovinac and et. al., *7 Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2004).

major Yugoslav artistic centers, Belgrade and Zagreb. This inwardness, however, also allowed for the possibility of a great diversity of interests and approaches within the group, unconstrained as the artists were by market competition or a need for an individual marketable style. Thus, in the same breath as one compares OHO's 1969 work to Arte Povera, which one well might do on visual grounds alone, one also needs to note how different the Slovene collective was in its cohesiveness from Germano Celant's motley invention, which he promoted as a movement through a series of exhibitions at the same time. In OHO's case, moreover, most of their earlier work done before they adopted the term "Conceptualism" can fall into this category only when it is taken together retroactively as a group practice focused on the exchange of ideas between members and the creation of a small but separate social sphere.

The situation in Moscow took the insularity I describe above to its extreme.³⁸

Andrey Monastyrsky, one of Moscow Conceptualism's most active members, a prolific organizer of actions and theorist, has written that,

A peculiarity of Moscow conceptualism... can be found in the fact that it was minimally socialized until the late 1980s. ... The artists were forced to build by themselves the infrastructures and institutions of representation, which ended up being pierced through by creative inspiration.

He went on to assert that,

³⁸ The situation of underground artists in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc was, as Boris Groys, among others, has noted, defined first and foremost by their lack of access to public display or institutional affiliation. Thus, both the exhibitionary and even artistic forms found in Moscow Conceptualism were dictated by the need to invent other means of dissemination and sharing. Apartment exhibitions were the most obvious, though there was also Collective Actions [KD], with its performances created during trips to the countryside and an elaborate practice of compiling a private archive. The legacy of apartment exhibitions is preserved in Ilya Kabakov's installations, which stage for the viewer the experience of stumbling into a communal apartment. This legacy was also very relevant to Komar and Melamid, who staged all of their early performances in their apartments. It is curious to note also that at least one performance which originally took place literally next to a kitchen was later restaged in New York at a venue called The Kitchen.

The research nature of Conceptualist practice demands a high degree of hermeticism. Earlier, this hermeticism (in the 1970s-80s) involved a fairly large number of people. Recently I counted (based on MANI folders) more than fifty artists, poets, writers and musicians who worked in those years in the framework of Moscow conceptualism! The population of the hermetic “bubble” of MOKSHA [Moscow Conceptual School] was very large!³⁹

The poignancy of that last exclamation mark – the excitement that in a city of many millions and the capital of what used to be 1/6th of the Earth’s dry land, an art scene comprised of as many as fifty people could be put together – speaks for itself. So does the fact that the only attempt at a region-wide history of post-war underground art in Eastern Europe that includes all of the region’s countries has been pioneered not by art historians, but by an artist collective, IRWIN, in 2006. Founded in the 1980s, but aware of the unofficial histories of the 60s and 70s, IRWIN continue the tradition of artists writing their own histories and mapping (quite literally) their situation and heritage.⁴⁰

One cannot really overemphasize the significant role of the nonexistence of an art market or an official infrastructure for the formation of Eastern Europe’s artistic communities and the art works and theories produced within them. If these networks cared about the accrual of value, then the value in question had entirely to do with social capital within the community. How incommensurate the two value systems – that of social capital and of market-driven commercial prestige – really were is something Andrew Solomon describes as an eye-witness to the 1988 Sotheby’s auction held in Moscow, the first – and for a long time, only – auction of Soviet non-conformist art for which a flock of Western collectors and socialites flew into late-perestroika-era Moscow to open up the local art scene to the global art market. The sums they were willing to pay

³⁹ Andrey Monastyrsky, “The Diving Bell of Conceptualism” in Degot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii Kontseptualizm*, 18. Monastyrsky goes on to add, “Now, for various reasons, this population has been reduced to a few people (in Moscow).” Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ideologically, IRWIN is what a love child between Komar and Melamid and OHO would look like.

for the works on sale were orders of magnitude greater than the Russian artists had dreamed of. Yet what shocked and bewildered the Russians even more, according to Solomon, was the fact that the highest-selling lot (and three out of the top ten selling lots) was a canvas by Grisha Bruskin, a late-comer and a fairly marginal figure on the unofficial artistic scene, while the works of the artists considered to be the local art world's acknowledged masters – Ilya Kabakov among them – did not fetch nearly as much. Thus, even as the auction brought great financial promise for the artists, it also marked the moment of encounter with the market that brought almost immediate disillusionment about the artists' prospects of being understood and valued in the way they were by their peers within their artistic community.⁴¹

Art, Biography, and the Limits of Utopia

Because insularity and introversion were such an important feature – even for artists who had relative freedom of movement and communication for someone coming from the East – embedding work deeply in the human network of its makers and referencing their lives was yet another common feature of Conceptual art in Eastern Europe that I use to draw parallels between the two collectives I discuss. The telepathy works I mentioned above, as well as the “OHO man” (Fig. 9), the sale of souls (Fig. 10), and attempt at materializing Komar and Melamid (Fig. 11) that I discuss in subsequent

⁴¹ Andrew Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991), 32. For details concerning the 1988 Sotheby's auction, see Bayer, "The Unofficial Market: Art and Dissent, 1956-88," 78-79. According to Bayer, Ilya Kabakov's *Answers of the Experimental Group* of 1972 exceeded its asking price and sold for 22,000 GBP. That a work that many consider to be the first, foundational piece of Moscow Conceptualism fetched ten times less than Bruskin's *Fundamental Lexicon*, which sold for 242,000 GBP is indicative of the degree to which the value system and standards of judgment of the buyers did not coincide with those of the artistic community, which had long been the sole arbiter of the works produced within it. Even more curiously, the work's significance was acknowledged not monetarily but by the fact that its buyer, A. Alfred Taubman, donated it to a future museum of contemporary art in the USSR.

chapters, are all gestures that speak to the highly personal involvement of the artists and their communities in the works of art, as does Komar and Melamid's *TransStates*, from which the title of my dissertation comes (Fig. 12).⁴²

The high degree of personal investment in and commitment to their work was, for Eastern European artists, a result of the possible politicization of every action that their political regimes forced upon them. Both Milenko Matanović, a member of OHO, and Vitaly Komar tell strikingly similar stories of ways in which the authorities unsubtly informed them that their steps were being watched and their conversations listened to.⁴³ Even when they took a nonchalant attitude towards this fact, as Matanović seems to have done, artists, like everyone else, lived with the understanding that their choices could suddenly and unpredictably be turned against them. Art-making thus was, in addition to everything else, a way of increasing personal risk *vis a vis* the state. This was certainly not a feature that all artists had to choose to embrace, but it did structure their field of possibilities, and the combination of the awareness of both the pleasure and danger of the subversion shows up in a lot of the work.

⁴² In 1977, David Shipler reported for *The New York Times* a story titled "Soviet's Solution to Pair of Satirical Artists: Give Just one a Visa." It details Komar and Melamid's travails at a time when Melamid had gotten an exit visa from the USSR while Komar still had not. The reporter asked Komar how he and Melamid would work now. "We are going to try telepathy," Komar answered. David K. Shipler, "Soviet's Solution to Pair of Satirical Artists: Give Just One a Visa," *The New York Times* October 31, 1977.

⁴³ This is an excerpt from an interview with Milenko Matanović published in the on-line journal ARTMargins: " ...[D]id you have any serious trouble [with the authorities] because of your work? - Once I was taken to a police station - I think it was in 1969 - where a couple of plain-clothed policemen asked me about my life, but mainly wanted to let me know that I've been watched. They showed me a large binder and asked me if I wanted to know what I was doing on a specific day and they pulled out a page: on such and such a day you had coffee at 8:15 ; you bought socks at 11:17 at Nama; etc. They wanted me to know that I've been observed, nothing more. I was never bothered again. At first I was upset and unsettled. A few days later I accepted a more generous view: I was proud of myself for providing jobs for several individuals; I helped the economy." Beti Žerovc, Milenko Matanović, and David Nez, "An Interview with Milenko Matanović and David Nez," ARTMargins: Central & Eastern European Visual Culture. In the interview I recorded with him, Komar tells a strikingly similar story of having the contents of his phone conversations recounted to him by a low-level party official. Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

The intertwining of one's future with one's unofficial artistic activities, to the extent that the artists were putting at the very least all professional prospects and in some cases a sense of personal safety on the line, gave their work a very deliberate aspect of highly self-aware utopianism that required of artists a remarkable degree of faith in the necessity of their activities. This is the last distinctive element of Conceptual art from Eastern Europe that I want to consider, even as I realize that there is a certain perverse irony in attributing to the artists and their works the very same aspiration that had engendered the regimes they simply despised or wished to change.⁴⁴

This irony, however, captures better than any other the dialectical relationship of both attraction *and* repulsion that Eastern European artists felt towards their social realities (a fact which many may have only come to appreciate after 1989, but which, nevertheless, seems clear today). I use "utopianism" here, moreover, not as something that was exclusive to Eastern Europe (even if it was a more prominent feature of public discourse than elsewhere). Rather, I see it as a fundamental structuring element of social thought, as defined and described by Karl Mannheim, a founder in the 1920s of the sociology of knowledge and the author of the germinal *Ideology and Utopia*.

Mannheim's first definition of the multivalent social function of utopia seems shocking in both its simplicity and its breadth. "A state of mind is utopian," he writes,

⁴⁴ The belief that utopia drove the failures of socialism and communism was reflected, for example, in the mid-1980 in the title of *Utopia in Power*, a rather unflattering history of the Soviet Union. Writing after the end of the Cold War, Frederic Jameson is but one of many observers also to note the degree to which the post-war period has inflected and colored the popular perception of utopia, making it into a dirty byword for dangerously misguided attempts at social change. Henri Vogt notes as an impartial observer that, indeed, "[S]ocialism (or communism) was, throughout its existence, the most important societal utopia in many corners of the world. It was the only utopian counterculture to the capitalist class society (cf. Bauman 1976)." He also asserts, that "...One also has to bear in mind that people in Eastern Europe were raised in the socialist belief that society should have a utopia, a clearly defined future goal," supporting the argument that even when Eastern European artists did not share the official vision of what utopia should look like, they may have not been willing to give up a deep-seated belief in the necessity of a social utopian vision. Henri Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe*, Studies in Contemporary European History (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 6.

“when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs.” “This incongruence is always evident,” he goes on,

in the fact that such a state of mind in experience, in thought, and in practice, is oriented towards objects, which do not exist in the actual situation. However...[o]nly those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time.⁴⁵

That Conceptual artists in Eastern Europe possessed a state of mind incongruous with the reality around them should become readily apparent to the reader of this dissertation very quickly. The more important point is that through their art, both OHO and Komar and Melamid actively sought to take action and model behavior that would transcend their situation and offer revolutionary possibilities – or, at the very least, raise the question of whether such possibilities might or ought to exist.⁴⁶

Because the projects espoused by the Conceptual artists in Eastern Europe kept their distance from direct, single-minded political dissidence aimed at toppling the existing order, the degree of utopianism in their work is something that must necessarily remain a subject of contention. This too, however, is a fundamental element of utopianism, which is always unrealizable to an unknown degree and always contested as to its contents. Utopias, Mannheim notes, are not ideologies only “in so far as they succeed through counteractivity in transforming the existing historical reality...more in accord with their own conceptions.”⁴⁷ Here, however, in considering the degree to which

⁴⁵ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1936), 192.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 194; Both ideology and utopia, according to Mannheim, are fundamental structuring elements of social thought and both transcend “situationally congruous and adequate ideas,” but only utopia offers revolutionary possibilities with regards to the present.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 195-196. Mannheim goes on, “To an observer who has a relatively external view of them, this theoretical and completely formal distinction between utopias and ideologies seems to offer little difficulty. To determine concretely, however, what in a given case is ideological and what utopian is extremely difficult. We are confronted here with the application of a concept involving values and standards. To carry

the obvious efficacy of an action should determine its utopianism, one might also note Frederic Jameson's remark from the early 21st century that "at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment; ...the best Utopias [therefore] are those that fail the most comprehensively."⁴⁸

If we accept that the members of OHO and Komar and Melamid can at least potentially be seen as carriers of utopian ideas and if, as Henri Vogt puts it, "utopia is transformative - it has the capacity to transform the present with the premises of the future," and "many different types, scales and functions of utopias can, and often do, co-exist,"⁴⁹ then we've now come to the crux of the argument for selecting these particular collectives for close comparative examination. For in the way their biographies entwine with their artwork, they represent the two extreme positions artists in the former Eastern Europe could take relative to the utopian beliefs that they either embraced or could not quite disavow.

For OHO, taking the utopian ideal of art as a project of improving the world in good faith ultimately meant leaving the existing art world altogether. The taste of success in the West that the artists experienced in 1970-1971 did not encourage them to try and make their activities into a career. Instead, in 1971, they formed a very short-lived commune to fulfill the historic avant-garde's utopian dream of combining art with life and then subsequently quickly disbanded (with Marko Pogačnik staying and leading the commune for almost two more decades and other members of the collective pursuing

it out, one must necessarily participate in the feelings and motives of the parties struggling for dominance over historical reality."

⁴⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, UK ; New York: Verso, 2005), xiii.

⁴⁹ Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe*, 83.

other paths). In large part, this decision had to do with the interpersonal dynamics in the group and the members' extreme youth. Yet the decision, I would argue, had to do with OHO members' commitment to personal utopianism as well. They left art precisely because their encounter with its institutionalized Western face disabused them of an earlier faith in its potential as a source for positive social change.

Instead, they sought to produce this change by other means, as the subsequent careers of most of the group's active participants show. Marko Pogačnik ran the commune at Šempas until the late 1980s. He still lives on the farm in that Slovene village, and he creates stone installations that could be mistaken for art, though they are actually lithopunctures – objects that Pogačnik believes will heal the Earth in places where its energy has been damaged by invasive human activity. David Nez works as an art therapist in Portland, Oregon. Milenko Matanović runs Pomegranate Center, an organization near Seattle, Washington, that works with communities to design and construct social spaces collaboratively. Of the four core OHO members who disbanded in 1971, only Andraž Šalamun is a professional painter whose works are well represented in Slovene collections.

The artists themselves have confirmed the utopian reasons for leaving art in numerous interviews. Thus, Milenko Matanović has recently stated that,

...mainly we felt that the path that was opening to us through art-exhibits in museums and galleries – was too narrow and leading to an increasingly specialized activity that would, over time, narrow rather than expand our pursuits. We had conversations about all this amongst ourselves, and over time it simply became common sense to try new things. I do not think of that time as ending, but beginning a whole new track that eventually led me to create Pomegranate Center in 1986, a non-profit that started with the premise that art belongs in life and community, and that creativity should be employed to address problems facing humanity.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Žerovc, Matanović, and Nez, "An Interview with Milenko Matanović and David Nez."

The anxieties and ambivalences concomitant with this version of utopia were, as Frederic Jameson writes, being theorized by Herbert Marcuse, “surely the most influential Utopian of the 1960s,” at almost the same time as OHO was making its decisions. According to Jameson,

Marcuse argues that it is the very separation of art and culture from the social – a separation that inaugurates culture as a realm in its own right and defines it as such – which is the source of art’s incorrigible ambiguity. For that very distance of culture from its social context which allows it to function as a critique and indictment of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such intersections are neutralized in advance. This dialectic accounts even more persuasively for the ambivalencies of the Utopian text as well: for the more surely a given Utopia asserts its radical difference from what currently is, to that very degree it becomes, not merely unrealizable but, what is worse, unimaginable.⁵¹

In response to these ambivalences, OHO members decided to forego what Marcuse termed the anti-utopian “repressive tolerance” of the Western art world.⁵² Having, as a group, oscillated from the start between the desire to engage with and change the broadest public sphere and a desire to withdraw from it to a more controllable environment, and having, perhaps, intuitively understood that the separate “space of freedom” that they’d created for themselves in Slovenia would not survive elsewhere and would, moreover, lose its utopian charge in the West, the artists staked their futures on that which could be imagined and could be effectual; they opted for realizable, relative, and personal utopias of everyday action.⁵³

⁵¹ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, xv. xv

⁵² It is again interesting to note that the Lacanian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who was a member of OHO’s extended circle of friends in Ljubljana, has picked up the baton of opposing “repressive tolerance” in his consistent condemnation of Europe’s attempts at multiculturalism.

⁵³ In their disillusionment about the radical liberatory potential of art OHO were not that dissimilar from the mood that would pervade the Western art scene by the late 1970s, but the way in which they left the art and offered a model of action outside it is. The most significant parallel I see in the West is the way that radical artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Allan Kaprow perhaps being the most paradigmatic example, found academia to be the only place they could retreat to keep their ethical commitments intact.

By contrast, Komar and Melamid, who took utopian aspirations in extremely bad faith, were the ones who pursued absolute utopias to the end of their collaboration, which thrived for ten years in the Soviet Union and went on for at least fifteen more after the artists' immigration to the U.S. Their work exposed the unrealizable and unconscious utopian desires of others.⁵⁴ Komar and Melamid's oeuvre became a utopia cornucopia that cataloged and mocked the failed visions of others, but in thus assessing the past also reclaimed utopia for the future, whose denizens were offered new choices concerning which utopia to pursue and whether to pursue utopia at all. Komar and Melamid almost never filled their utopia with positive content, but their negative utopia was something that Mannheim predicted in the 1920s. "Socialist thought," Mannheim wrote,

which hitherto has unmasked all its adversaries' utopias as ideologies, never raised the problem of determinateness about its own position. It never applied this method to itself and never checked its own desire to be absolute. It is nevertheless inevitable that here too the utopian element disappears with an increase in the feeling of determinateness.⁵⁵

As concerns a commitment to everydayness as a form of utopia, that's the only kind of utopianism that the former Eastern Europe seems to be able to imagine for the time being. Henri Vogt writes, "In view of all this, the critical argument of this study is that in most analyses of post-communism the concept of utopia and its role and nature have been far too narrowly understood, or even misplaced. The possibility of seeing utopia in terms of individuality, plurality and 'everydayness' has not been considered. ...what may appear as an ideological or utopian vacuum at the level of official politics may be full of utopias, even collective ones, at the level of individuals." In this sense, OHO had been prophetic. Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe*, 9.

⁵⁴ There is a particularly striking contrast here between the fact that David Nez, a former OHO member, went on to become a art therapist and Komar and Melamid's project *Color Therapeutics*, which took to its utopian, universal – and absurd – limit the idea that art can heal. JoAnn Wypijewski notes on this point, "There is a cultural chain, obscured by class and form and taste, between this pop faith in the spiritual essence of color and highbrow faith of the same order. Wasn't it one of the most *avant* of the *avant-garde* painters, Malevich, who maintained that color had an intrinsically purifying, beneficent effect? ...Komar and Melamid blurred the difference between the sacred and the mundane with their *Color Therapeutics*. Parodying both Malevich's misty modernist concept and socialist realism's insistence on art-for-improvement's-sake, they lined up twenty-five tiny colored tiles and appended an instruction sheet. ...Today, 'art therapy' is a real discipline. And psychologists regularly use color and design as interpretive tools." Vitaly Komar, Aleksandr Melamid, and JoAnn Wypijewski, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 60. There are other, slightly less obvious but also important parallels between Milenko Matanović's and Marko Pogačnik's collaborative projects with communities and the earth, respectively, and the kinds of collaborations Komar & Melamid pursued with opinion pollsters and animals in the 1990s and early 2000s.

⁵⁵ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, 250.

As I argue in the chapters dedicated to them, Komar and Melamid made a career of deconstructing the ideological “determinateness” into which the Soviet socialist utopia had ossified by the 1970s. And as they robbed “existing” or “real socialism” of its sense of determinateness – of the idea of absolute human rationality, for instance, which had become an ideology having been an earlier liberal utopia⁵⁶ – they also recovered from the dust bin of history⁵⁷ a horizon of utopian aspiration that socialism once represented.⁵⁸ Indeed, in so doing, they inadvertently invented the “anti-anti-utopianism” that Frederic Jameson argues “might well offer the best working strategy” for those who still want to hold on to utopia as a structural element of social life in the wake of the Cold War.⁵⁹ They went to great personal trouble in order to keep making and show their art, trying time and again to prove that it changes absolutely nothing and yet tacitly persevering in the hope that it might.⁶⁰

Thus, OHO and Komar and Melamid both speak to a preoccupation with utopia that links them, but also marks the opposite ends of a spectrum on which, I believe, most Conceptual art produced in Eastern Europe could find a home. What unites them is an aesthetics of personal ethics concomitant with utopian action; what divides them are the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁵⁷ Quite literally, in some cases, since the original inspiration for the Buchumov project came from a painting that the artists literally found in the trash.

⁵⁸ This, for instance, can be seen in their *Passport Music*, which was performed simultaneously around the world and like OHO’s *Transcontinental Projects* was a literalization, powerful in a symbolic way and utterly futile in a practical way, of what was back then and still is to a large degree today a utopian desire for unimpeded global communication and universal mutual comprehension between people on different sides of major ideological divides.

⁵⁹ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, xvi.

⁶⁰ Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, or Bas Jan Ader are again Western artists who come immediately to mind as those who shared a similar sentiment. The difference lies in the extent to which a personal ethical commitment in conditions of obscurity and lack of economic incentive was a part of their work.

particular forms they produced of modeling non-helplessness in their historical situation and relating to art as a social institution.

Boiled down to the basics, it makes a lot of sense that a more flexible form of socialism in Yugoslavia would produce in its impressionable young people a utopia premised on the belief in personal agency for immediate change. It also makes an equal amount of sense that artists who made a career out of analyzing the repressiveness of the Soviet situation produced a cynical form of non-helplessness that could only describe its own condition of helplessness and mock those naïve enough to believe in the ideals of the system or fight it on its own terms.

What is, indeed, surprising is that even for the Soviet artists, their predictable cynicism was mixed with an irrepressible fascination with utopian aspirations and a lurking faith in the possibility of a future that would finally learn from the failures of the past. Thus, for example, despite their acerbic mockery and deep suspicion of their own Soviet *intelligentsia* roots, Komar and Melamid would resurrect and give new life in their works the *intelligentsia* attitude towards truth, which Andrew Solomon describes evocatively when he writes,

The Russian intelligentsia believes in truth and in the importance of locating and communicating that truth. Once, a long time ago, they thought that truth was communism, and now they know they were wrong. But it is their faith in communism that has dimmed, and not their faith in truth itself, a manifest abstract, a thing as palpable as the kitchen table if one could only locate it. The fate of members of the Russian Soviet intelligentsia has been harsher than the fate of almost anyone in the West, but despite all the endemic grumbling, their outlook is still, in its serious engagement with the idea of utopia, shimmeringly bright. It is that brightness that is so inspiring and so compelling.⁶¹

In creating a Conceptualism that looked to the utopian aspirations of the past, moreover, Komar and Melamid paradoxically salvaged the very same parts of official ideology that

⁶¹ Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, xix.

they also wanted to subvert. They also thus became some of the last keepers of the values of grand-scale utopianism of the early Soviet regime, which the regime itself had radically undermined.

Likewise, given what one knows of the postmodern age's dislike for big narratives, it makes sense that OHO's focus on looking to the future produced a utopianism on a human-scale. Here, the method of making the invisible visible produced ways to visualize and experience, for instance, a personal engagement with the metaphysics of basic physics that echoed the rise of both consumer-driven environmental awareness and New Age spirituality. It was only a desire to look back upon history (and its sublimity) that could produce a utopianism that literalized metaphors of universalism and could claim to operate on a truly grand geographic and temporal scale.

The question that this conclusion still cannot answer, as I have mentioned above, is whether the artistic models offered by OHO, Komar and Melamid, or both can point a way to where the future horizon of utopian aspirations lies and whether artistic practice as understood today is something that can and will contribute to it meaningfully. The only thing they can suggest, I think, is the potential of the importance of utopia as part of Conceptualism's global legacy, the acknowledgement of the value that each of its regional manifestations brought along with it, and the need to pay particular attention to the way an analysis of oblique forms of resistance and hope, complete with an inescapable ethical dimension, that emerged through Conceptual art in places like Eastern Europe might inform art and its histories today.

CHAPTER I

The Beginning of OHO and the Spatialization of Language

Introduction

When one encounters the work of the OHO collective, one is most struck by the sheer length of the list of activities in which its associates engaged between 1965 and 1971. These include drawing, object-making, poetry, book and journal publication, manifesto writing, newspaper design, comic strips, urban performances, Land Art projects, photography, film, installations, telepathy, and communal life. Similarly, the list of the group's connections to other artistic movements, cultural developments, and schools of thought is daunting. Greater or lesser degree of engagement has been suggested with Arte Povera, Conceptualism, analytical philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, Marxist critical theory, transcendental meditation, the hippie movement, the New Left, ludism, and the sexual revolution.¹ Indeed, there is no doubt that OHO emerged as part of events much larger than itself, which reconfigured artistic production in places well beyond the acknowledged centers of "new art" in the 1960s. In such a complex global context, it also contributed a highly singular body of work marked by the combination of, on the one hand, a highly analytical approach to the deep structures of visual and linguistic representation and on the other, a playful engagement with the richness found in things quotidian and insignificant.

¹ See Miško Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., 2009), 10. See also Igor Zabel and Moderna galerija (Ljubljana Slovenia), *Oho: Retrospektiva = Eine Retrospektive = a Retrospective*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007), 117-118.

What is even more remarkable is that OHO seemed to emerge autochthonously with no immediate precedents on Yugoslavia's (let alone Slovenia's) artistic or literary scenes. The Gorgona group, which existed in Zagreb, Croatia in 1959-1966, might at first appear to have set an example for OHO, but it was, in fact, both unknown to the Slovenes and qualitatively different in its practice. Even though its members – all well-established artists and critics – met for discussions, put out publications, and conducted activities aimed at integrating art into its members' lives, said activities remained mostly a private matter that did not fundamentally change the independent practices of the sculptors, painters, and critics who made up Gorgona. As a joint “search for spiritual and intellectual freedom,” Gorgona's practice did not produce a cohesive body of objects and discourse that would establish a clear group identity.²

Likewise, the New Tendencies movement, centered in Zagreb between 1961 and 1973, while helping to create a vibrant experimental artistic scene in that city from which OHO benefited indirectly, was also a radically different phenomenon. So named after the series of five international exhibitions held in Zagreb, New Tendencies promoted “neoconstructivist, neoconcretist, optical, programmed, kinetic, lumino-kinetic, and computer art.” While some of these interests would overlap with OHO's (and OHO did, in fact, participate in at least one *New Tendencies* show), the difference here lies in the fact that the Zagreb events were, in this case, not focused on communal group activity and represented, in terms of both aesthetics and politics, only one facet of the ideas OHO would try to engage. Ješa Denegri usefully notes that,

The appearance of New Tendencies in the early 1960s took place in a brief period of Yugoslav social, economic, and cultural prosperity, a time when this

² Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 201-203.

environment was imbued with an optimistic mood of belonging to the modern world and a tendency to adopt, apply, and develop many progressive achievements of contemporary civilization in the specific conditions of Yugoslav society.³

Insofar as it also clearly responded to this environment in the mid-1960s, OHO was similar to New Tendencies. Yet the way it responded was, as I have noted, very different and highly original. New Tendencies had its roots in the work of Exat 51, a group of painters in Zagreb and Belgrade who promoted primarily geometric painted abstraction in the early 1950s.⁴ Due to these origins, it lacked entirely, despite being politically and socially progressive, any close engagement with the politics of the New Left or any interest in the conceptual shift of visual art towards discourse rooted in philosophy and critical theory that OHO's visual artists pursued from early on.

Against this Yugoslav background, OHO's ability to integrate a public group identity and public activities with the private artistic practices and individual interests of its members was truly pioneering. So was its ability to intertwine literary and visual endeavors. OHO was a group that included both figures who worked primarily as writers and poets and figures (on whom I lavish most of my attention) who are best seen as artists who made language an integral feature of their practice.⁵ Indeed, in this, OHO's work harkened back to its clearest progenitors – the Yugoslav historical avant-gardes. One such historical group were the Serbo-Croatian Zenitists: a group of writers, mostly poets, led by the charismatic and difficult Ljubomir Micić, who published the magazine *Zenit* between 1921 and 1926 in Zagreb and Belgrade and showed a lot of interest in the

³ Ibid., 204-206.

⁴ Ibid., 178, 182.

⁵ Alex Potts has pointed out to me the international spread of similar groups, noting that in the U.S. the Semina group in California also had a similar mix of writers and artists who blurred the boundaries of their respective media, as did a lot of Fluxus artists in their reoccupation with poetry-like writing.

avant-garde in the visual arts (Fig. 13). The other, even more relevant, ancestor was the group of contributors that emerged in Ljubljana in 1927 around the magazine *Tank*, which combined visual examples of Slovene artists' Constructivism with avant-garde poetry and texts by foreign contributors (Fig. 14). Inauspiciously for OHO members' future struggles, *Tank* was banned from publication after only two issues.⁶

OHO members were aware of these historical precedents and were among the first to revive the heretofore forgotten memory of these historical avant-gardes and to engage in new literary and literary-visual pursuits.⁷ In the Yugoslav literary arena, there were also others who started to work with visual and concrete poetry independently of OHO at the same time (Josip Stošić, Zvonimir Mrkonjić, and Josip Sever in Croatia; Vladan Radovanović and Miroljub Todorović in Serbia), but they were contemporaries with shared interests rather than influences. In the case of such poets as Biljana Tomić and the groups KôD and (Ξ from Novi Sad in Serbia, their work came after OHO's and was, in all likelihood, influenced by the Slovene examples.⁸

As for the avant-garde legacy, as with the Moscow artists I discuss later, OHO members' access to comprehensive historical knowledge was quite limited. It is this ignorance, however, that also led them to reinterpret and apply the older avant-garde operational principles innovatively to a very different contemporary situation. Thus, for example, even though the centrality of poetry to the group's activities was an element OHO shared with the historical avant-gardes, the focus in those activities on

⁶ Ibid., 308.

⁷ The impact this had can be seen in the fact that Anton Ocvirk, the executor of the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel, who died tragically young in 1926, published *Integrali*, a book of Kosovel's most daring and previously unpublished Constructivist poems only in 1967, after seeing a resurgence of interest in the kind of poetry that Kosovel – unbeknownst to OHO in 1965 or 1966 – was creating in the mid-1920s.

⁸ Ibid., 86-92.

collaboration and the intertextuality of the poetic text was something that belonged to OHO alone. Indeed, as I will argue throughout this chapter, which examines the uses of language in OHO's early practice, the novelty of OHO's work lay not in the experimental use of language as such, but in a hybrid practice in which the members of the group engaged so as to straddle the divide between artistic/object production and writing.

Ordering the activities and ideas of a group with such a broad range of hybrid interests and shifting membership at various times may seem like a task that goes against the group's desire for protean creativity. There does, however, exist a chronology and periodization of events well established by Tomaž Brejc and Igor Zabel, two Slovene art historians and curators who have written the most on the group and put on OHO's largest retrospectives in 1978 and 1994, respectively.

In this chapter, I overlay this substantial foundation with an argument about OHO's preoccupation with language as a central theme that undergirds the consistency of the group's interests. Found in poetry, theoretical discourse, works of visual art, on film, and sometimes even in its disappearance or absence, the preoccupation with language connects OHO to the much broader "linguistic turn" of the 1960s while providing a concrete example of the way that expanded uses of language proved to be the crucial step to incorporating other practices into an expanded field of art. Reconfiguring one's relationship to the most ubiquitous and foundational system of symbolic representation was a path taken by many of those who, in the spirit of what Susan Sontag dubbed "the new sensibility," saw art's emerging function as "an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility."⁹

⁹ Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Picador USA, 2001), 296. The book was originally published in 1966.

I use this phrase, “new sensibility,” in relation to OHO because it was being applied to the group by its earliest critics, namely Brejc, at least as early as 1969 and because it is valuable as a period term that captures the fluidity (rather than theoretical rigor) of the ideas OHO explored.¹⁰ I also reference it because it makes explicit the link between work done in OHO’s middle period and the politics of the New Left, particularly as they were espoused in the writings of Herbert Marcuse, who used it extensively. Most importantly, I find it fitting because OHO’s work did represent exactly the kind of toolkit of new instruments that Sontag described. At the same time, the group’s contributions to the emerging definition of this “new sensibility” also poignantly laid bare the internal contradictoriness of the desires and aims driving its experiments.

It is in seeing OHO’s work as rent by internal contradictions, rather than tracing through it “a development of parallel, interconnected and complementary tendencies” that I offer a fresh perspective on the collective.¹¹ Defining these tensions – which both made the group’s oeuvre as multifaceted as it was and ultimately probably forced the collective to split up – is a crucial task of Chapters I and II, and the group’s engagement with language reveals some of the clearest ways in which OHO courted paradoxes.

Its uses of language were meant to produce at once everything from defamiliarizing non-sense to transparent description, social critique and absolute silence, all caught in the artists’ desire for both social engagement and reclusive isolation. This instability of “the new sensibility” proved extremely productive.¹²

Ultimately, it was this framework in which inconsistency and contradiction

¹⁰ See Tomaž Brejc, "Komentar K Zagrebški Razstavi," *Problemi* (Ljubljana) 75 (1969): 32.

¹¹ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 31.

¹² OHO shared at times with emerging post-structuralist thought a sense of the instability of language, though it understood this instability in rather different terms and within the framework of the “new sensibility” also saw language as transparent and instrumental when that suited its needs.

became useable and expressable (if not “sayable,” per se) that produced OHO’s “space of freedom,” and formed the basis for the group’s utopian drive and its understanding of the new role of the artist. As such, it remains the group’s most significant legacy. There remains, however, a need to trace the interrelationships between the rethinking of language, its bearing on artistic practice, and the resultant expansion of art into new spaces, both physical and mental, and it is this that the present chapter strives to do.

Early Texts

Fittingly, it all started with a newspaper. The foundational event of the group took place in 1963, when Marko Pogačnik and Iztok Geister, two students at the gymnasium in a small town called Kranj caused a furor by publishing the first (and also last) issue of a school newspaper called *Plamenica [The Torch]*, which contained Geister’s poetry, along with Pogačnik’s abstract drawings and a Dada-inspired manifesto of artistic liberty.¹³ The ensuing reaction of the authorities, who threatened to expel the young men and demanded that Pogačnik should undergo a psychiatric examination, served only to heighten their interest in avant-gardism and helped the pair find like-minded collaborators, most notably the older poet Franci Zagoričnik and the amateur film-maker Naško Križnar. By 1964, when Pogačnik, Geister and Križnar came to Ljubljana to pursue university studies, the circle of their collaborators grew considerably larger as they became involved in several publications, eventually writing for and editing the university student newspaper, *Tribuna*

¹³ Miha Mohor, “‘Iz moje katedrale rujete opeke...’ Dijaški list Plamenica in začetki avantgardističnega gibanja OHO,” *Dialogi* 41:3-4 (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 2005), 23. See also Miha Mohor, “Plamenica 1963” in *Kranjski Zbornik 2005* (Kranj: Mestna Občina Kranj), pp. 231-243.

Here and throughout the text, I rely for all information related to dates primarily on the Chronology of OHO’s history compiled in the catalogue edited by Igor Zabel for Moderna Galerija’s 1994 OHO retrospective and based on the Chronology originally provided by Tomaž Brejc in the 1978 catalogue of the OHO retrospective he curated at the Študentski Kulturni Center in Ljubljana.

[*The Rostrum*] and later *Problemi* [*Problems*], subtitled “the journal of literature and thought.”¹⁴

The preoccupation with language can partly be explained by the fact that writing was central to OHO’s earliest period for practical reasons. *Tribuna* and *Problemi* provided the only public fora where the young radicals could put their ideas into circulation while the self-published OHO Editions books, cards, and boxes were a cheap, if labor-intensive, way to bypass the need for official support or sanction when experimenting with literary or visual form. The use of spaces which have traditionally been the preserves of language promised access to a wide audience, constant change and spontaneity, and social interaction – all things that the group would continue to seek for most of its existence, but were hardly guaranteed, as became clear with the example of Marko Pogačnik’s experimental Synth Gallery, erected in early 1966. Seeking to create a portable exhibition space in a high foot-traffic area, Pogačnik erected a small metal shed in the lobby of the University of Ljubljana’s Faculty of Arts and hung his drawings there, only to have the whole structure exiled by the disgruntled authorities to an administrative building where the point of the provocation and the intended dynamics of the space would be lost entirely.¹⁵

More importantly, language in its expanded forms could provide the perfect medium of collaboration for a large group of creative people, particularly in a region where the printed word has, due to the role of national languages in shaping national

¹⁴ Marko Pogačnik, interview by author, tape recording, Šempas, Slovenia, April 23, 2009.

¹⁵ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 109-110. Pogačnik’s other unorthodox activities included painting posters protesting the Vietnam war outside the building that housed *Tribuna*’s offices. In 1967, there was also talk of renting a basement in the town of Škofja Loka in order for the group to have its own exhibition space, but those plans never materialized. See Janez Kajzer, “Riž, Hrana Za Oči in Uho. Galerija Mladih Avantgardistov,” *TT / Tedenska Tribuna (Ljubljana)* 40 (October 11, 1967).

identity, long been viewed as history's most significant instrument.¹⁶ In looking through the archives of *Tribuna*, for instance, one finds in them a constant, on-going dialogue between contributors, with exchanges of opinions, ideas, and theoretical frameworks between the students producing the impressively adult newspaper unfolded over multiple issues in front of a mostly invisible audience. Spanning various discursive registers and genres, offering itself up as a field for experimentation in visual art and film, as well as poetry, fiction, and theory, linguistic notation, at once familiar and defamiliarized, was used by all members of OHO at one point or another. It was using it that the group marked, both literally and metaphorically, new territory – a new notion of “space” that the group carved out for itself. Liz Kotz' remarks on the “linguistic turn” in the 1960s apply fully here when she writes, “it is not just the *visual* presentation of words but their use as an underlying structure and temporal model that undergirds artists' uses of language in the 1960s.”¹⁷

A paradigmatic early OHO work which shows the way that thinking about language structured broader practice is the first book of the OHO Editions series, Marko Pogačnik's *Artikel Knjiga* [*Article Book*] (1966) (Fig. 15). The “article” of the title is part of the philosophical lexicon of “reism,” discussed below, which urged the production of a new kind of thing – “article” – positioned, at least discursively, between a totally utilitarian object and a reified work of art. What is significant for this discussion, however, is that the experiments here were often carried out in and on books, of necessity

¹⁶ Dubravka Djurić writes on this point, “Some Slavic theorists of the avant-garde speak of the small Slavic nations as philological nations, national groups constituted through their national languages. In this sense national literature is sacred, organic, and untouchable.” Djurić and Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, 66.

¹⁷ Liz Kotz, *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 4.

tying them to contemporaneous literary developments and urging the question of why a medium usually reliant on language was chosen.

The book in question consists solely of thick sheets of white cardboard with round holes punched through them. There is no legible “meaning” to be found in it, and yet the book does have a kind of language. The holes provide the basic units on each page and come in different sizes, producing a large number of permutations of possible appearances for each page. The varied layout and sizes of hole come to create an arrangement of “text” on each page, which is then altered by its relationship to the rest of the book, parts of which are visible in changing patterns of overlapping holes. In the multitude of possible combinations, one finds various possibilities for order, albeit always a precarious and shifting one.

As one considers the purpose of the book and the various configurations of parts to whole, one discovers two facts. The first is that whatever the book’s potential “meaning” may be, it is wrapped up in the exploration of the object which defies our preconceived expectations and demands a careful, surprised gaze at the independent lives of things. (This is the fundamental premise of “reism,” a term which I will discuss at length below). Paradoxically, the second discovery is that in its desire to defy our expectations of books, meaning-making, and language, the mysterious object that is *Artikel Knjiga* is more than anything else *about* language. It excludes language only to visualize it, revealing through the visual two intellectual extremes: the yearning for the complete (literal) transparency of language and the possibility that it is nothing but an opaque string of (literally) empty signifiers. This extreme metaphorizing literalness would become a hallmark of OHO’s work even after the connections to explicitly verbal

genres became less obvious; here, the etymological meaning of the word “literal” as “of the letter” is telling – the strength and logic of the images continued to rely on a heavily linguistic way of thinking about the world. The metaprocesses of seeking a grammar (if only to destroy it), the struggle against the arbitrariness of symbolic representation, and the desire to reach the limits of what can be said about the world (found particularly in puns and tautologies) would structure much of the visual artistic practice.

The year 1968 saw an important change in the group’s internal organization and interests. In chapter II, I will discuss the significance of the shift from a working model in which individuals contributed to specific projects as part of a broader movement that relied heavily on publications towards a working model in which four members – Marko Pogačnik, Milenko Matanovič, David Nez, and Andraž Šalamun, with occasional collaboration from Tomaž Šalamun – worked as a tightly knit unit that focused primarily on exhibition-making. The role of the written word in the group’s activities diminished when Arte Povera-like installations and filmed or photographed interventions in natural landscape formed the core of the group’s output in 1968-1969. It was also at that juncture that OHO’s acclaim reached a point when critical discussions by a group of dedicated art historians and critics from Ljubljana and Belgrade started to fill the need for theoretical discourse that the artists had previously supplied themselves.

Nevertheless, a fascination with schema and the use of language came back full force in OHO’s concluding phase, its so-called “transcendental” or “esoteric” Conceptualism. OHO’s last works before the move to the village of Šempas to undertake spiritual “schooling” combined a quasi-scientific research rigor (minutely detailed charts and graphs to predict and record outcomes of chaotic or inconspicuous events) with a

renewed faith in the mediational and meditative power of language (extensive lists and diagrams to outline the internal structure of the group, its methodological approach, and its place in the universe) (Fig. 16). These late experiments in structuring and controlling the unpredictable and the ineffable suddenly assumed that text is transparent and purely informational -- and could be used, for instance, to represent to a broad public an inward-directed, almost mystical group experience. Which was, indeed, a drastic departure from what ostensibly started out as a project of liberating things and people from the yoke of anthropocentric meaning, but loyal still to the preoccupation with language and the need to structure the visual world through it which was found from the start, as I discuss below, even in reism.

Reism: Reconfiguring the power of description

The term that has become attached to the attitude proposed and practiced most consistently as early as 1965 by Marko Pogačnik and Iztok Geister, the two young men from a small town called Kranj whose activities started the movement, is reism. Reism, according to Igor Zabel, “established a firm foundation and clear guidelines” for the activities that the Kranj group conducted together with new collaborators in Ljubljana. If one takes the artists at their word, reism “was more than the name of a new artistic movement; it designated a complex theoretical system that not only defined a specific aesthetic and artistic method but also influenced even the smallest details of everyday life.”¹⁸

As Tomaž Brejc, OHO’s first historian, sums it up, *reism*

signifies a general ability to master phenomena in their immediate presence, before they become subject to other specifically structured classification... [It]

¹⁸ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 108.

marks a descent from a tradition burdened by ideas of what can be accepted as work or deed of art to objects themselves.¹⁹

Or, as Igor Zabel puts it, “To discover a 'thing' means to discover its radical independence from man and its own autonomous being.”²⁰ But what did this mean in practical terms for Geister and Pogačnik as they tried to return greater agency to things? The production of aforementioned *artikli* – most notably plaster casts of utilitarian objects such as bottles (Fig. 17) – was the first step. Tomaž Brejc argues that in the *Bottles* series, “the appearance of [the objects’] direct presence which is to us, being used to their utility only, completely alien” gave the casts a “status of basic, indisputably original experience of objects themselves.”²¹ Igor Zabel continued the same line of thought when he wrote,

Reistic 'artikli' do not spread around themselves an aura of precious, unique objects, attainable only to an elite. They always behave as things among things; the genuine space of reism is clearly among things, especially among the objects of industrial and consumer society as things par excellence.²²

Yet practice did not always conform to theory, and the *artikli* – which were exhibited in Moderna Galerija in 1968 – demonstrate how difficult it was for objects to transgress or transcend the discursive limitations of the spaces where they were shown and could be all too quickly reappropriated into familiar categories. Thus, Marko

¹⁹ Tomaž Brejc, *Oho: 1966-1971* (Ljubljana: Študentski kulturni center, 1978), 13.

²⁰ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 108.

²¹ Brejc, *Oho: 1966-1971*, 13.

²² Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 22; Alex Potts has pointed out to me the striking similarity that OHO’s artistic intentions and strategies bear to the prose poetry of Francis Ponge, whose *Le Parti Pris des Choses* was published in 1942 and was discussed and praised in the 1960s on the pages of the influential French journal *Tel Quel*. Ponge’s work was characterized by extended, linguistically playful descriptions of mundane objects and creatures, his technique summed up by the neologism *objeu*, which puns on the French words for “object” and “game.” To the best of my understanding, members of OHO did not have direct knowledge of Ponge’s work. However, the fact that they shared with the older Frenchman a desire to “take the side of things” by attempting their impartial description is indicative of the way in which OHO responded to its era’s major intellectual preoccupations often without having direct knowledge of antecedents or contemporaries elsewhere. For more information on Ponge, see Sarah N. Lawall, “Ponge and the Poetry of Self-Knowledge,” *Contemporary Literature* 11.2 (1970), 192-216.

Pogačnik says (laughing) of his one attempt to insert the plaster-cast *artikli* into everyday life by taking them to the market in Kranj,

It was a disaster. ...People thought that it was artwork that I was selling. ...People didn't realize that this was a performance. Later, I would say that this was a performance, a symbolic action. [Because I didn't actually want to sell them] and I didn't try again. I exhibited them.

Pogačnik goes on to observe, "This was an attempt to bring art to the street. Like young people, we had intuitions where it needs to go, but we didn't yet have knowledge how to put it in the proper form."²³

The question of proper form would find a much more successful resolution in the books, drawings, films, and printed matter produced in the name of reism. It was on the page and on film stock that reism's project of heightening the user's awareness of the way one interacts with "objects" came into its own. Here, the work constantly shifted registers between emphasizing both actual physical objects and the materiality of their representation, especially as it happened in language. This shiftiness of language, as I will argue later, allowed it to become the perfect metaphor for a new kind of space, which, upon occupying actual physical space, could bring together and make interchangeable the page, the street, and the mind. For the moment, however, what must be stressed is that despite its self-proclaimed single-minded emphasis on things, reism could only happen in language and spoke, in the end, less to things in themselves than to the new possibilities of representation of things in language.

Appropriately enough, the term came, as so many art historical terms after it, out of literary criticism.²⁴ In 1966, in an essay on Tomaž Šalamun's newly published and

²³ Marko Pogačnik, interview by author, tape recording, Šempas, Slovenia, April 23, 2009.

²⁴ Barbara Orel notes that the use of the term in the 1960s did not immediately extend to OHO as a movement, though it was used within the same intellectual circles and applied by its creator to Tomaž

highly influential poetry collection, *Poker*, the critic and philosopher Taras Kermauner, using a fragmentary style which itself presents a curious mix between impressionistic sketches and Wittgenstein's philosophy, wrote about Šalamun's "reism"²⁵:

[The poet] consumes himself, [but] he does not fall into self-destruction because of narcissism, but because of self-negation on account of an objective reality [*stvarnost*, which literally means 'thingness' - KG] (reduced in its sensual dimension). A poet...is only a praxis of nullification, of subjective consumption. The only thing untouched is the objective world. Everything spiritual, moral, historical, human is consumed, removed, the cleaning offensive is finished with great success, man is brushed into Beckett's trash bin [and] the world remains, shining in its Fullness... Living Speech is not living because man would turn himself into it, ...but because it is purified of everything human, because it is as it is... Metahumanism begins after total human absence, the World becomes that, which it is (without man). Lies, confusions, appearances, ambivalences, ambiguities, and polarities all will disappear through a drainage channel with the last remaining smell of humans. Speech (the World)...will become the way they were before they were covered and enslaved by History. Man's kingdom, the period of human rule (human-ism) has ended. The period of Speech (res-ism) has begun.²⁶

Kermauner sees in Šalamun a repudiation of high literature and its dubious humanist values, but his choice of terminology has a telling connection to philosophy of language. Though Kermauner coined his term independently, it shares both its name and its ethos, if not necessarily its logical rigor, with reism as the philosophical doctrine developed most extensively by Tadeusz Kotarbinski in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. Originally an ontology onto itself, in its semantic aspect, Kotarbinski's reism

Šalamun and Franci Zagoričnik, both of whom were OHO members at various points. However, Tomaž Brejc used it in the 1978 catalog of the first major OHO retrospective as the main term describing the philosophy of OHO's early period and Marko Pogačnik accepted it as the most fitting descriptor in a 1986 interview with Taras Kermauner published in the book *Zmajeve Črte*. In his 2009 interview with me, however, Iztok Geister, who also wrote resitic poetry and co-authored OHO's 'reistic' ideas with Marko Pogačnik, expressed the opinion that Taras Kermauner in his writings simplified things to such a degree that he impoverished them. Barbara Orel, "Redefinicija Ohojevskoga Reizma," in *Literarni Modernizem V "Svinčenih" Letih*, ed. Gašper Troha (Ljubljana: Študentska založba: Društvo Slovenska matica 2008), 55.

²⁵ The spelling is given in several variants here just as it is in the book itself; Kermauner derived the term from the Latin "res," meaning "thing," and originally used the word "resizem," and changed it to "reizm" in 1968 on the basis of a more appealing sound and appearance. In English translations, the word was subsequently spelled as "reism." See Taras Kermauner, *Na poti k niču in reči*, (Maribor: Obzorja, 1968), 200.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-64. Translations are my own.

“recommends that only singular names, that is, names referring to concrete things, should be used, and abstract words avoided.” For its creator, it was “a very natural interpretation of natural language [in which] concrete terms precede abstract nouns in language acquisition and only bodies are beings which we encounter in our everyday experience.” Plagued by problems with internal consistency and definitions, reism, even for its creator, was “rather a program than a theory of the world and language. However, he always stressed that every form of progress in reism, even regional or local, is a cognitive success, because it introduces a language which is free of the dangers that result from using abstract words.”²⁷

Clearly, it is this latter broad goal – the elimination of vague and dubious meanings and aspirations based on abstract concepts, the fight against universals – that spans borders and decades. Kermauner’s literary trend shares this goal with both the older philosophical school and the line of critical thought that culminated in the post-war period with the French *nouveau roman*, summed up by Alain Robbe-Grillet when he wrote,

To describe things, as a matter of fact, is deliberately to place oneself outside them, confronting them. It is no longer a matter of appropriating them to oneself, of projecting anything onto them. Posited, from the start, as *not being man* they remain constantly out of reach and are, ultimately, neither comprehended in a natural alliance nor recovered by suffering. To limit oneself to description is obviously to reject all other modes of approaching the object.²⁸

²⁷ Jan Woleński, "Reism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2004), available on-line at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reism/>>, accessed September 15, 2009.

²⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 70. On the whole, I can say that contemporary French theoretical thought had an extremely strong influence in Slovenia by the mid-1960s. Even though Robbe-Grillet was at odds with it as a philosophy, Existentialism was another French import to which Slovene students had consistent exposure. A look at *Tribuna* (the student newspaper) alone reveals numerous extensive translations of texts by Jean-Paul Sartre. Interestingly, the back cover of *Katalog*, an OHO-produced publication discussed below, contained an advertisement for an upcoming publication in Slovene of a text by Robbe-Grillet in the next issue of the journal *Problemi*. For a discussion of the influence of the *nouveau roman*, see Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 118.

Tomaz Šalamun's early poetry, along with that of the other “reist” poets bears out this emphasis on description and the strong form of nominalism that a refusal to subject (i.e. subjugate) things to analysis implies. The poets *name* things without explaining their meaning or their relationships to the speaker and to each other. They delight in the diversity of things and support those who, in a world of people alienated from the objects they consume, at least offer variety – as Iztok Geister (writing as I.G. Plamen) put it, “In the social division of labor, hooligans, foreigners, and fashion models are the mobilizers of the multidimensionalizing of things, that is, of the experiencing of the world in its wholeness.”²⁹ They offer a world of fragmented descriptions, which in their juxtapositions produce limitless interpretive possibilities of equal value and plausibility. In doing this, if one trusts Roland Barthes’ analysis, they merely capture the essence of the modernist poetic tradition. “Modern poetry,” Barthes writes,

destroys the spontaneously functional nature of language, and leaves standing only its lexical basis...the Word which is ‘the dwelling place’ – it is a sign which stands. ...The Word achieves a state which is possible only in the dictionary or in poetry...and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications.”³⁰

More crucially for understanding the seductiveness of poetic language and theory for the visual arts, Barthes notes that,

²⁹ I.G. Plamen, "Drugačne Kape [Different Hats]," *Tribuna* (Ljubljana) XVI:13 (January 12, 1966): page number unknown.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 46-48. There is no doubt that members of OHO would have been familiar with Barthes’ writings since translations of them appeared in both *Problemi* and *Tribuna*. The latter, surprisingly for a student newspaper, even had a theory-focused supplement called *Zasnove* [Plans], which first started to be published in 1965, and footnote 80 below provides at least one instance in which four essays by Barthes were published alongside OHO’s output in the first issue of *Katalog* in 1968. Thus, Barthes is doubly significant for my purposes, both because he offered particularly telling characterizations of broader cultural tendencies in this period and because he was a theorist with whose writings the OHO circle would have been quite conversant. For more on OHO’s connections to Structuralism, see Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 113.

Modern poetry is a poetry of the object. In it, Nature becomes a fragmented space, made of objects solitary and terrible, because the links between them are only potential. ... These unrelated objects – these poetic words exclude men: there is no humanism of modern poetry. This erect discourse is full of terror. ... It relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images in Nature: heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter, etc.³¹

If modern poetry wanted to conjure a world of free objects in indeterminate space, then adopting its aspirational critical language was a logical move (especially given the large number of poets in the OHO circle) for visual artists who also wanted to liberate the object. Enacting such aims, however, surely faced unforeseen challenges. Robbe-Grillet noted, for instance, commented on the problem of absolutizing his goals: “Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word – total impersonality of observation – is all too obviously an illusion. But *freedom* of observation should be possible, and yet it is not.” If just naming things to provide observation free from “the continuous fringe of culture (psychology, ethics, metaphysics, etc.),” was no easy task, how much greater, then – or how impossible – would be the challenge of actually activating them, urging and helping objects to speak for and by themselves?³²

The Dream of a Liberated Object

That this desire was the very foundation of OHO’s new world can be seen in a children’s book (planned as the first in a trilogy of programmatic OHO texts for children, adolescents, and adults, respectively) called *Steklenica bi rada pila* [*The Bottle Would Like to Drink*].³³ The poetic combination of Iztok Geister’s text and Marko Pogačnik’s drawings follows the story of a bottle and glass that would like a drink of water, a cork

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, 18.

³³ Although it did not see actual publication until 2003, the book was co-created by Pogačnik and Geister in 1967.

stuck in the bottle's neck, and several independent, disembodied body parts of the same body (an eye, feet, mouth, and ears) who work together with the objects to wake up one of the two sleeping hands (Fig. 18). The book – which, according to the authors' introduction, was intended to catch the attention of parents that they might become more like children – is most appealing in its naïveté, in the suspensions of disbelief and logical ellipses that the canons of children's literature allow. However, in its need to be accessible, it also elaborates OHO's aspirations with the candor of child-like literalness.

Thus, the dismembered and re-assembled body described in the book illustrates the trope implicit in the very name of the movement and meant to assert the primacy of the sensorial and the desire for new modes of perception. Fittingly, given my argument about the role of literary and linguistic experimentation in OHO's development, the name comes from the title of Pogačnik and Geister's self-published 1966 book, *OHO*. A made-up word, it is a cross between the Slovene words for eye (*oko*) and ear (*uho*). Putting one in mind of synesthesia, it is also an expression of wonderment. Iztok Geister, the person who coined it, writes, "It is possible to experience wonder at/for anything, including oneself" – and this last point of clarification is revealing.³⁴ Despite the staunch insistence on the re-visit demise of anthropocentrism, OHO's sense of permanent surprise – linked to the desire for both extreme particularity and the abolition of judgments made on preexistent basis – always ultimately comes back to the perceiving subject, who takes a circuitous route to self-re-assessment in trying to liberate the world around him from his subjective obsessions and concerns.

³⁴ Iztok Geister, unpublished manuscript, undated, given to the author in August 2009.

One sees a similar turn of events take place in the project of liberating the chair, which Geister privileges in the following way in a glossary of terms that, for him, define OHO's goals:

“CHAIR – A chair is a thing, which is at the center of OHO’s paradigmatic attentiveness. OHO liberated it on one side from the backside (anthropocentric viewpoint) and on the other side from the table (functionalistic viewpoint). The historical and functional variability of the chair dating far back enables the emphasis on its personality as an object of a special kind. This is why OHO built its doctrine upon it.”³⁵

Three of Marko Pogačnik's characteristic drawings from the 1967 series *Words* illustrate this point. In them, we see line drawings of what are recognizably, though not naturalistically, different chairs (Fig. 19). The objects speak. They speak in first person and, significantly, in riddles and puns. The phrase “obseden sem” means “I am obsessed.” Just as in English, where “obsess” (etymologically meaning “sit opposite to”) is a close relative of “possess” (i.e. own, etymologically derived from the same Latin root “to sit”), so in Slovene, “obseden” is a close relative of “zaseden” – meaning “occupied,” a word which normally describes a chair’s relationship to a human sitter and contains the etymological link between the act of sitting and domination or ownership. In combining the drawn chairs, reiterated three times to stress their differences, with the switch-up of the word’s expected prefix, the artist asks us to reconsider the familiar relationship between us – the viewer – as the presumed subject and the chair as the object that can only await occupation. To suggest an alternative, we are shown a chair that can express its own interests and is in possession of its own voice rather than of an owner.

A playful 1968 project by Milenko Matanović also investigates the chair’s importance as it literally foregrounds this object in a photoproject born of an urban

³⁵ Ibid.

action. In *Chair, cathedral, passers-by* (Fig. 20), Matanović shows the chair in a new light when he makes literal the metonymic power that the chair has as the site/seat of power, suggesting, perhaps, that the chair had for an already long time been the unsung physical object from which a spiritual domain derived its authority. Matanović's premise is, again, supported by a pun. The Slovene word for chair is "stol" and the word for cathedral is "stolnica," literally meaning "the place of the chair."³⁶ In his series of photographs, we first see Matanović sitting alone on a chair in front of a church. In a second photograph, two chairs are now visible, with a new one having been placed next to the first one. Chairs are added one at a time until there's a total of seven, with Matanović sitting each time in the newly added chair. What's fascinating is the degree of variation in design from one chair to the next. One cannot help but observe the nuances and pay attention to the physical characteristics of the various furniture items – and, perhaps, marvel at the absurdity of wondering as to which of these chairs has the greatest innate claim to being the seat of divine authority. In the next six photographs, the logic is inverted. Instead of one man with ever more chairs, we are given one chair – the very first one – with ever more people, the passers-by, who pose along with Matanović and David Nez. This time, the humans are subjected to the scrutiny of their variation while the chair they hold remains a constant and the reason for their gathering, the center of the camera's attention. A parallel is drawn between people and chairs that finds them of equal interest and equal visual value.

Forty years after the fact, it is hard to tell precisely why OHO members chose the chair as one of the subjects of their experiments with the meaning of things, but I believe

³⁶ The etymological parallel to English is again easily drawn – a "cathedral" is the place of a "cathedra," the "bishop's seat" derived from the Greek word for a "seat" or "bench."

that even if the choice was somewhat subconscious, it was not accidental. As Arthur Danto argues in an essay titled “The Seat of the Soul: Three Chairs,” the chair is a semiotically stuffed piece of furniture, and his remarks reveal the subterranean significance of OHO’s references. “[S]itting down,” Danto writes, is “less a matter of taking weight off our feet than of declaring where we are and how we fit into the larger scheme of things.” Thus, even when it “becomes an instrument of comfort, it is not as though [the chair] loses its political or social meaning, but rather that it acquires a different one.”³⁷ The chair is deeply bound up (here, Danto cites abundant linguistic evidence, including the connections I mention above) with the imagery of power, authority, and mastery. A given chair’s design encodes the sitter’s degree of control and security in her environment – so that the stylistic heterogeneity of the chairs in Pogačnik’s drawings and Matanović’s photo connotes entry into a variety of possible social scenes, as well as a reluctance to choose one – while equating oneself with a chair is a gesture of abasement.

Thus, the choice of the chair as the object -- it is, indeed, “of a special kind” – to be liberated is a resonant one. And so is the shift, Danto suggests, from representing a chair *in* art to making a chair *into* art. He writes,

That the chair should in recent days have entered art as a medium or a form rather than as subject; that the chair should have become art...strikes me as a sign that a certain barrier has been made visible by being broken. In the act of artistic celebration or artistic aggression (they are perhaps inseparable), we may be trying to liberate ourselves from forms of life the chair condenses as part of its steady message.³⁸

³⁷ Arthur Coleman Danto, “The Seat of the Soul” in *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 149.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

Danto's final insight is that our own desire to envision and create a more egalitarian, less hierarchical society has manifested itself in the wish of some artists to grant their chairs the ontological status of art by stressing the objects' personality (rather than merely declaring them ready-mades).³⁹

This suggests that OHO's ideas were, indeed, meant to offer a radical (and refreshingly non-ironic) way to show the rootedness of the project of man's liberation in the world of things around him. Danto's emphasis, however, on the *actual* chairs-cum-art as the harbingers of change also makes us cognizant of the constant, unarticulated conflation in OHO's early practice of the physical objects, of which OHO speaks, and the objects' various representations, in which the artists actually traffic. Given this slippage, one finds problematic Iztok Geister's pun-based argument that the reason man does not see things in their original reality is because they are covered up by layers of meanings (*pomeni*) and are hence understood *po meni* (by *my*, *the viewer's* own measure) rather than *po sebi* – by their own measure.⁴⁰ The chairs drawn and spoken for by Marko Pogačnik or photographed and punned on by Milenko Matanović cannot possibly escape the imposed burden of meaning and of language – indeed, they are arguably subjected to more of it than usual.

However, making visible this burden, along with the limits and the possibilities of language for understanding both things and their representations, would in itself be a great feat, and it is here that OHO's early work proved to be richest and most complex.

³⁹ Danto's point is borne out by the centrality of the chair in the most famous work of New York Conceptualism, Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), as well as the presence of chairs in earlier post-war works, such as Robert Rauschenberg's *Pilgrim* (1960). The shared imagery of the chair in these works and OHO's work speaks further to the existence of shared preoccupations even in the absence of concrete information or direct influence.

⁴⁰ I.G. Plamen, "Teorija Pomena [the Theory of Meaning]," *Tribuna* XVI:22 (April 20, 1966): 9.

While OHO's printed matter, films, sculptural objects and performances could not get away from the fact that one could only be "freed" from discourse by producing more or new discourse, the group did find modes and forms of representation that turned language into a utopian space of possibility which with time extended farther and farther beyond the page.

The printed page, and particularly the book, however, did prove to be fertile grounds for experimentation with objects that could come closest to being liberated objects that spoke for themselves and used language, paradoxically, to assert most aggressively their own materiality and irreducibility to language. Marko Pogačnik stressed this ability of the book as the reist object *par excellence* when he described the radicalized process of reading: "While man reads, looks at the book, the book looks "back" at the reader at his reading. Looking "back" as the negative imprint of normal looking is that form of vision, which is not connected to the understanding of meaning through the looker's experience."⁴¹

Making the reader aware that the act of reading is also an act of looking, stressing the inseparability of the text's visual element, would prove to be the most consistent tactic, though Iztok Geister's *Sound Book* also incorporated auditory experience. "Silence" reads the book's first page; "Noise" reads the reverse as you turn it. "Just as the word was born, noise happened. That noise is in the book as the noise you are hearing and as the word you are reading. The whole time, you are in the book."⁴² A book made into an experience that engaged more faculties and sharpened one's skills of observation would not necessarily liberate it as an object from human interpretation, but it would,

⁴¹ Marko Pogačnik, *Zmajeve Črte, Ekologija in Umetnost [Dragon Lines, Ecology and Art]*, ed. Taras Kermauner, Znamenja (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1986), 89.

⁴² Rastko Močnik, "Edicija Oho," *Tribuna* XVI:16 (1968): 19.

indeed, push the reader's horizon of possibility as she explored the logic and uses of a page. Doing this in conjunction with a content of tautologies and puns, both verbal and visual, would further interrogate the mechanisms by which the reader uses language to make sense of the world. In this particular regard, OHO's work can be discussed especially productively through the lens offered by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose influence on visual art extends not only through ideas that suggestively link the function of language with sight, but also comes in the form of vivid, powerful tropes that will shed light on OHO's energetic efforts to spatialize language and think of it as an expanded space and an intellectual playground.

OHO texts and Wittgenstein: picturing the limits of logical space

The intense preoccupation with looking, combined with a questioning of language of representation and a positivist distrust of abstract value-laden concepts, creates a strong connection between the reistic strain of OHO's work and the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose aforistic style lends itself well for selective cooptation and poetic reinterpretation.⁴³ OHO's works do not offer an understanding of analytical philosophy of language interested in establishing the truth or falsehood of statements, but they do substantiate in poetic form (in fact, often in poetry) Wittgenstein's general postulates about the nature of things, representation, language, and logic. One sees these attitudes materialize most successfully in a series of books published as the OHO Editions, most of which were produced in 1967-1968, and on the pages of other printed matter – the books *Eva*, *Pericarežeracirep* and *Katalog 2*, as well as the student newspaper *Tribuna*.

⁴³ A Serbian translation of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was published in Yugoslavia in 1960; *Philosophical Investigations* came out in 1969. For other suggestions of a connection between OHO and Wittgenstein, see Zabel, *OHO*, 118.

What provides an important link between OHO's interest in uniting the verbal and the visual is early Wittgenstein's insight that thoughts and propositions are pictures. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he argues that "the picture is a model of reality" which explains how thought is represented in sensical language, so that "the logical picture of the facts is the thought."⁴⁴ Only the language that *pictures* something has logical sense – "a proposition states something only in so far as it is a picture."⁴⁵ Defining the limits of the sayable about the world, it produces an endless number of meaningful propositions that have equal value and represent *actual* or *possible* objects and states of affairs.

Sensical language, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be applied to what historically had been philosophy's greatest quandaries – ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. This would become a source of philosophical tension for OHO's last works of "transcendental Conceptualism," but the emphasis that Wittgenstein's writings, both early and late, place on looking is more than consistent with the goals of the young reists. "Don't think but look!" he instructs in the anti-generalizing *Philosophical Investigations* anyone who wishes to understand the meanings and uses of words.⁴⁶ Crucially for OHO, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein stresses the difference between *saying* and *showing*, claiming that things which cannot be articulated in sensical language can be shown: "What *can* be shown *cannot* be said."⁴⁷

Above, I have already discussed the book *Artikel Knjiga* as a crucial work that engages with language by showing what it cannot say. A number of other works do the

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, [Revised ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 2.12 and 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.03.

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), §66.

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.1212.

same when they produce combinations of the verbal and visual that show both the limits and the infinite possibility of linguistic form. In Iztok Geister's *Two Poems* (Fig. 21), the poet does use actual language, but breaks the texts of his two poems into combinations of one or two letters. When placed as cards on a ring, these become potentially very difficult to reassemble into any recognizable language as one is forced to look through the multiple possible beginnings of texts which, to boot, are shuffled together, with the two poems interrupting each other and asking to be read in two different directions. The book not only provides descriptions of the world in language, but also creates a visual meta-experience, *showing* what the perils and possibilities inherent in any act of reading are.

The poet Matjaž Hanžek likewise uses letters in *The Alphabet, in to for ever, I love you* (Fig. 22), which turns to the alphabet as the foundational system of signs whose arbitrary, unstable forms both threaten to erase their own concrete meaning (each sign here contains partial resemblance to several existing letters of Latin script) and hold the promise of a new meaning emerging out of the gaps and overlaps. This instability of Hanžek's mutating system of notation is echoed and amplified in the visual puns in Franci Zagoričnik's works published under the collective title *Peace on Earth*. Zagoričnik uses basic mathematical notation, the plus and minus signs, to produce image-poems that, when combined with their titles, operate on a constant slippage between the mathematical and metaphysical meanings of "positive" and "negative." The plus sign, despite its positivity (and hence traditional association with light), fills up space with "Total Earthly Darkness," while the "Sign of Freedom" uses that same visual notation for the positive to depict grids reminiscent of prison bars (Fig. 23). Zagoričnik takes two things that, according to Wittgenstein lack sense – mathematical signs, which is the form

that can be used to represent the world but cannot itself be re-presented; and metaphysical evaluations, which arise from questions that fail to understand the logic of language – and makes visible in visual puns the internal contradictoriness of a language that allows for the co-existence of both but has no way to address that which lies beyond the limits of the sayable.

One might add here that Wittgenstein took puns – grammatical jokes – quite seriously, describing them using a spatial trope in *Philosophical Investigations* by asking, “Why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*?” and answering his own question: “The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes. ... (And that is what the depth of philosophy is).”⁴⁸ Indeed, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein consistently uses a lot of strikingly topographic imagery of language as something in which “a picture presents a situation in logical space.”⁴⁹ The way Wittgenstein describes it, this logical space exists both as a mental construct – indeed, the entirety of the *Tractatus* is a kind of scaffolding that must logically be discarded once the logic it describes is understood, – and a palpable, perceivable reality that – crucially for OHO’s later shifts in practice – can put bodies into the space of language. Wittgenstein writes: “A proposition, a picture, or a model is, in the negative sense, like a solid body that restricts the freedom of movement of others and, in the positive sense, like a space bounded by solid substance in which there is room for a body.”

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §111. For a more thorough discussion of the significance of this passage see Richard Allen Gilmore, *Philosophical Health: Wittgenstein's Method In "Philosophical Investigations"* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), 96.

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2.11.

Early on in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes, “Each thing is, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs. This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space.”⁵⁰ He also postulates, “A picture represents a possible situation in logical space.”⁵¹

The “bodies” that Wittgenstein is concerned with, however, are those of propositions – particularly those that define language through the limits of its possibility. These include tautologies and contradictions: “A tautology leaves open to reality the whole – the infinite whole – of logical space: a contradiction fills the whole of logical space leaving no point of it for reality. Thus neither of them can determine reality in any way.”⁵²

The idea, taken with characteristic literal-mindedness, that language exists in space and is itself an inhabitable space appears very early in OHO’s print output and is, indeed, that crucial mental step that can justify the inclusion of multiple practices used for similar explorations of language into one holistic, logical world whose edges are marked out by its own tautologies and contradictions. To note the power of this visual metaphor and the hold it had on writers of very different intellectual orientations, one might look again to Barthes, who describes language as that which

enfolds the whole of literary creation much as the Earth, the sky and the line where they meet outline a familiar habitat for mankind. It is not so much a stock of materials as a horizon, which implies both a boundary and a perspective; in short, it is the comforting area of an ordered space. ...it is a field of action, the definition of, and hope for, a possibility.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., 2.013.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.202.

⁵² Ibid., 4.463.

⁵³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 9.

One of the earliest examples of OHO's spatialization of language is Marko Pogačnik's *Book with a Ring* (1967) (Fig. 24). It is similar to *Artikel Knjiga* in most respects, but is better able to show an encounter with a book as an action that takes place in actual space. The cards with punched holes used to make the book are hung on a ring and can be "read" by being laid flat, suspended in space, flipped in one of two directions, or pulled out laterally. (The same is true of Geister's *Two Poems*, one of which can only be read by flipping the cards away from oneself while the other demands that they be flipped toward oneself). *Book with a Ring* lacks a beginning or end altogether, and the space it takes up is one of careful but undirected observation. Its absence of any recognizable beginning, end, or prescribed mode of engagement is a radical expression of a desire to mix all the possible existing meanings into no particular one, to represent everything and nothing at once. One sees this also in the book *OHO*, designed to be read circularly, flipped over, and opened up as a series of overlapping flaps with no driving logical sequence. In a book such as this, the physical mode of engagement with it as a spatial object has at least as much import as the book's content (poems and drawings), and the reader's resultant sense of being taken into the physical space of the book also suggests the inverse effect of the book's contents expanding to take over the reader's space – an idea Marko Pogačnik would subsequently realize several times with his drawing installations (Fig. 25).

Topographic poetry

It bears noting that even as the textual experiments of OHO's members fit into a philosophically-informed reist paradigm, they were also part of a much larger global surge of interest in concrete and topographic poetry that started in the 1950s and

continued throughout the 1960s.⁵⁴ By 1969, Mary Ellen Solt would write in her book *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (where she uses the terms “concrete” and “visual” more or less interchangeably),

Whether or not concrete poetry is a temporary or a permanent evolution of linguistic art form is unpredictable and beside the point. For the poem will go where it needs to go, rather where it is man's spiritual need for it to go. ...[R]ight now it seems to need to go to the foundations of meaning in language, to convey its message in forms akin to the advanced methods of communication operating in the world of which it is a part, and to be seen and touched like a painting or a piece of sculpture, not to be shut away always between the dark pages of a book. And this need is being felt throughout the world.⁵⁵

Only two members of the OHO circle, the poets Franci Zagoričnik and Matjaž Hanžek, would continue to have long-standing connections to the circles of concrete poets inside and outside Yugoslavia beyond the late 60s, when Solt was observing the global need for a radically different kind of poetry. Indeed, Hanžek would go on to publish some of his most interesting work in 1972 (*Osnutek*) [*Draft*] and 1977 (*61 Tekstov*) [*61 Texts*], after OHO had ceased to exist as a movement.

Yet visual poetry is important to OHO's history for several reasons. As I have already mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, visual or topographic poetry was OHO's link to the reconfiguration of text found in *Tank* and *Zenit*, two avant-garde journals published in Yugoslavia in the 1920s. Although forgotten in the culture at large,

⁵⁴ As I was finishing the final draft of the dissertation, I was struck by the news of the publication of a book titled *Tree of Codes* by the contemporary writer Jonathan Safran Foer. It seems to me to indicate a way in which writers since the 1960s have continued and will continue to return to the physicality and materiality of the text as an important theme. In Foer's case, the book “is as much a “sculptural object” as it is a work of fiction.” The author had taken his favorite book and physically cut into and out of its pages to “reveal” a new story. As Foer himself put it, “On the brink of the end of paper, I was attracted to the idea of a book that can't forget it has a body.” Admittedly, he also said, “My first several drafts read more like concrete poetry, and I hated them.” Yet the fact of his turning to insights that he shares with concrete poetry seems significant to me. See Stephen Heller, “Jonathan Safran Foer's Book as Art Object,” *The New York Times* November 24, 2010, available on-line at <<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/jonathan-safran-foers-book-as-art-object/>>, accessed June 13, 2011.

⁵⁵ Mary Ellen Solt and Willis Barnstone, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), available on-line at <http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/new_poet.html>, accessed November 13, 2009.

these publications re-surfaced in the 1960s as a source of inspiration and historical precedent for a new generation, and having an affinity with them allowed OHO to establish a proper avant-garde pedigree. Tomaž Brejc also notes that an important boost to the significance of topographic poetry was offered by the publication in 1967 of the book *Integrali*, which contained previously unpublished Constructivist poems produced in 1925-26 (shortly before his death at the age of 22) by Srečko Kosovel, a leading light of Slovene literary Modernism rediscovered in the 1960s.⁵⁶ The publication of *Integrali*, in turn, likely happened because an interest in such poetry was being shown by a younger generation, which demonstrates the curious cycle of mutual reinforcement of their significance between the historical avant-garde and its descendants in the 1960s.

Even though visual poetry was far from the only kind of texts that poets and other literati in the OHO circle produced, it is of particular interest to me because it links language with the visual – a coupling that, as I have been arguing, – is central to OHO's most radical and innovative activities. It is this coupling, moreover, that links OHO to similar developments both within and outside of Yugoslavia and allows us to see the group as a microcosm which absorbed and worked its way through the most exciting intellectual developments of its time. Thus, I see the experimentation with topographic and concrete texts in the mid-60s in which many of the OHO members – including Iztok Geister (I.G. Plamen), Franci Zagoričnik, Matjaž Hanžek, Milenko Matanović, Vojin Kovač-Chubby, Aleš Kermavner, and Naško Križnar – engaged as a crucial stepping stone to the very different conception of space that they would go on to develop in other media.

This too was consistent with global trends. Solt suggested this when she wrote,

⁵⁶ Tomaž Brejc, "Skupina Oho I Topografska Poezija U Sloveniji," *Bit (Zagreb)*, no. 5-6 (1969): 103.

The fact remains, though, that we have an increasing number of poems which are primarily, and in the case of non-semantic poems totally visual; and the tradition of poetry is believed to be oral. Why suddenly the visual poem? Suppose we stop trying to draw support for the visual poem from the few historical examples of shape poetry, Futurist typograms, calligrams, picture writing, etc. and join Carlo Belloli in his bold assertion that the visual poem is a unique new art form created by contemporary man from contemporary linguistic materials to meet spiritual needs peculiar to his own time and place. Pierre Garnier has suggested that the poem now wishes to become a material object because man is becoming increasingly aware of the spirituality that resides in the material itself of the objects that surround him. Also, man having discovered or rediscovered himself as a cosmic being in the age of space, space itself takes on spiritual (poetic) content. The visual poem is a material object in space which can achieve spiritual influence.⁵⁷

I quote this passage at such length because it demonstrates both OHO's connection to the larger artistic world beyond Slovenia's borders – Belloli and Garnier were both figures of which OHO's concrete poets knew – and suggests how far OHO members would eventually take their awareness of space, which started on the page and migrated onto film before moving into galleries and coming to seem as a practice familiar from Western Conceptualism.

What makes a subset of OHO members' poetry "topographic" – the term was adapted by Zagoričnik and Geister already in the 60s, in preference over "concrete poetry" – is both the fact that it visually maps linguistic thought processes, often those of its own creation, and the fact that the page itself becomes something more than invisible backing, even when only "normal" text appears on it. Though not as literally as the spatialized books, topographic poetry also obviously literalizes the idea of topography while using the visual to make one aware of the limits of the sayable. In *Pericarežeracirep*, (1967) a book with a palindromic title that reads "A laundress is cutting the tail of a duck," we find such examples of language whose limitations are made

⁵⁷ Ibid.

visible. Matjaž Hanžek, whose poetry at the time largely thematized the process of writing poetry, presents “Pesem” (“Poem”) and “Pozor” (“Attention”) (Fig. 26). In the former, the Slovene word for “poem” appears in a black circle, giving us on the page both an instance of a particular poem and a demonstration of the abstract process of selecting words, arranging them, enclosing them in the limits of artistic form and calling the result a “poem.” Likewise, “Pozor” at once names the abstract concept of attention and draws a picture that, through the alteration of typescript, demands and elicits what it names by literally shifting “attention.”

When Geister, continuing the group’s fascination with letters, uses a simple rearrangement trick to both state and show their madness (Fig. 27) – i.e. the ease with which they slip into the unfamiliar terrain of the chaotic possible – he also utilizes the page as a resource where literal space that separates the two printed possibilities functions both as itself and a visual metaphor for the mental space that separates sense from nonsense. This was clearly intentional since at the end of *Pericarežeracirep*, Geister writes, “The truthfulness of fiction is decisive for topography, which is both speaking and showing together. Only the truthfulness of fiction makes possible a speech that shows and a showing that speaks, which is also topography.”⁵⁸

Such combinations of speaking and showing, as it turns out, were possible – indeed, logical – in spaces beyond the page, and the next section considers how the experiments on the printed page migrated into the topography of first cinematic image and then actual urban space.

⁵⁸ Aleš Kermavner et al., *Pericarežeracirep*, ed. Dušan Pirjevec, Znamenja (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1969), unpaginated. The book did not see publication until January 1969, but the manuscript was completed in October 1967. This is the date I cite above to emphasize the book’s belonging to an earlier phase of OHO creativity, which was waning by 1969.

An Introduction to OHO films

In this sections and others interspersed throughout chapters I and II, I offer a detailed analysis of the group's films, which are significant for OHO's oeuvre doubly. Firstly, they are important because they provide a crucial link, both iconographically and structurally, through their mode of production, between the ethos of "free" reistic vision that informed OHO's earliest object-making endeavors (particularly the publication of OHO Editions books, discussed above) and the group's later shift of emphasis to working in and with existing physical space for the purpose of imagining new social and mental uses for it.

Secondly, the films matter as artifacts that gain an ever greater centrality to OHO's oeuvre with the passage of time. What the films offer, illusory though it may be, is a sense of OHO members' personal presence, which was once integral to the group's experiments with dematerialization or the spreading of its work's meaning across multiple coexisting media. Likewise, the films are also the richest remaining source of the visual texture of the group's historical context. They are at once works of art in their individual right and key components of the metanarrative of the group's existence.

This metanarrative of OHO's work can, as I have suggested in the beginning of this chapter, best be constructed as a series of internal contradictions in the group's practice which coexisted in productive tension until eventually reaching their logical limits and taking group members in divergent directions. At the core of these contradictions lay a desire to use art to impose logic, order, and systematicity onto one's experience of the world, which coexisted with an equally strong fascination with chaos and arbitrariness. In the resultant body of work, which was also much indebted to literary

activities for its earliest inspiration, the uses of language as raw material had to contend with a progressively greater investment in philosophical discourse while decidedly political urban actions were followed by an equally decided withdrawal from the public sphere. OHO's work, moreover, constantly blurred the line where the literal ended and the metaphoric began, veering between the love of cold material facts and esoteric mysticism.

The films were an integral part in the process of working out the shape and form these contradictory desires would take and can be used as guideposts for mapping OHO's history. Thus, here and elsewhere, I strive to provide a thematic chronology of OHO's film work, combined with detailed discussions of what I see as key works. What Naško Križnar,⁵⁹ the man central to the creation the vast majority of OHO's films, and his collaborators managed to do with their best work is demonstrate the great range of ends which film could serve in the context of an expanded art practice, from experiments with pure visual materiality and explorations of the materiality of language to its role in staging and recording a new kind of social action in urban space. Blurring the lines between metaphor and literalness and fiction and documentation, OHO's productions offered new inventive possibilities for doing away with traditional categories of plot and character and pointed the way for turning films into spaces rather than stories, even as they also became characters of sorts that today can be used to narrate the story of OHO itself.

⁵⁹ Križnar was central to the creation of almost all of the films I discuss below (the only exception being *Waiting for Godot*), though the three-disk anthology of OHO films compiled by Moderna Galerija which I have used as a primary source of information does contain three other films in whose creation Križnar did not participate.

Concrete Poetry on a Concrete Wall: Reism and the Expansion of Language onto Film

Naško Križnar first started to use an 8 mm camera to work on projects with his friends before there was any group. He continued his pursuits both at the time before the group began to understand itself as a movement or even had a name and during the time when the group was as much a literary collective as a visual arts one.⁶⁰ Even at that very early point, Marko Pogačnik was already looking for and articulating ways in which the future OHO could generate a new kind of space for a new kind of artistic practice. Yet it was certainly on and relative to the printed page that Pogačnik and Iztok Geister Plamen's "reism" was most extensively theorized and implemented early on. The group's explorations of concrete and topographic poetry, however, as the latter name suggests, brought with them an expanded understanding of a page as a physical space and language as a place and a material, and these ideas form an important early background for OHO films and resurface in a number of them.

One can find compelling evidence for the fact that creating or making "space" visible was a central goal of early OHO and that the book offered a model for such a project in Iztok Geister's *OHO Manifesto*. Appearing in *Tribuna* in 1966 on the occasion of the publication of the book *OHO*, the convoluted text tries to break language down (by using many puns and literally taking words apart into their component parts) in order to

⁶⁰ Križnar was first trained to use a photo camera by his father, an avid photographer, and then switched to using an 8 mm camera that he carried everywhere with him. He also became a member of his local amateur cinema club, which could apply for official funding and thus get basic film-making equipment, as well as the ability to show its members' films at amateur film festivals. Križnar had known Marko Pogačnik since childhood as a neighbor in Kranj, and they made their first film together, *Overstory* [*Nadstavba*], in 1963. Križnar's film-making with OHO, however, really took off after 1966 when he started visiting Ljubljana regularly and the broader circle of collaborators was established. Naško Križnar, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, September 18, 2009.

en-vision a free space in which writing is used to make one aware of the free and empty space available for reism's "free vision." Geister wrote:

When does *prostor* ("space") break down into *prosti zor* ("free vision"). When I write this, therefore immediately or simultaneously. When I *sprostim* ("release" "relax") *prostor* (space) into *prosti zor* ("free vision"), therefore immediately or simultaneously. In the *pred-stavi* ("representation", "before-position") *ob-staja* ("exists", "near-position") *prostor* ("space") which is empty, which is *prost* ("free") in the sense that (n)ought is there. If it is true that (n)ought is there, then what is. Therefore the definition of claiming of space is not possible because of the presence of nothing, that will be there (parts), if anything is already there since the time that (n)ought is.

And truly, *prosti zor* ("free vision") is liberty-filled vision, such a vision as is Its own master. In the same way as a book is not thrown into (societal) space, as there is no space for the book there, rather the book itself is space, where again there is no space for anything else.⁶¹

The book here is clearly the central "space," but the reference to "representation" suggests that the space of free vision can be produced elsewhere, and OHO's film-making should thus be seen in light of the desire to extend such space beyond the page while still maintaining allegiance to the importance of the act of writing.

Taking the poetry of his friends and extending its logic beyond the page, Naško Križnar expanded the reach of writing by bringing it to life on film, and thereby also making film into a space of OHO's extended topography. Examples of language and poetry expanding their domain into and onto film produced by Križnar in collaboration with various group members include *On the road to Dajla* [*Na poti za Dajlo*] (1965),⁶² *Nomama* (1967), *A Sporty Type* [*Športni tip*] (1968), *Project 2* [*Projekt 2*] (1969-70), and *A film about film* [*Film o filmu*] (1969-70).

The earliest of the films above, *On the road to Dajla* (1965), literalizes a poem by Franci Zagoričnik, which puns in Slovene on the word "pot," meaning both "road, path"

⁶¹ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 13.

⁶² Franci Zagoričnik's proto-concrete *Dajla* poems were published alongside Marko Pogačnik's drawings in *Tribuna* XIV:26 (November 18, 1964).

and “sweat.” The poem speaks of the unreachability of a place called Dajla (an artist colony which Franci Zagoričnik, Marko Pogačnik, and Naško Križnar in fact visited together)⁶³, and the film alternates a series of hazy zooms on a house lying far away across a snowy field with the lines of the poem written in charcoal on a concrete wall. The technical means by which the film was made are crude, but the close-up focus on the act of writing as contrasted with a vast, pristine landscape still creates a moving visual metaphor for poetic language that at once produces its own space in language and uses the changed perception possible in this space to alter and occupy the space of the real world.

What is also important for the idea of films creating as a separate kind of space is the fact that with *On the Road to Dajla*, only his second OHO film, Naško Križnar already started to establish an iconography that blurred the line between literal and metaphoric space. In this regard, the use of the concrete wall as the writing surface is particularly significant. Križnar himself has noted that in the film, “poetry symbolically combined itself with the wall. But those are two walls. One is material, and it blocks; the other is poetic, a net for catching emotions.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the concrete wall – and it is extremely tempting to pun on “concrete” here as both the material of which the wall is made and the quality it lends to poetry written on it – is an important visual trope, and it reappears in several films. Turned into a “page,” it consistently serves in the films as an example of an actual physical space that is both taken for what it is (the wall’s rough texture guarantees this, showing up particularly well in cinematic close-ups) and is turned

⁶³ Darja Skrt, *Po Sledovih Reizma: Od Eksperimenta Do Znanosti V Filmih Naška Križnarja* (Nova Gorica: Goriški muzej, 1996), 91.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

through the use of language from a literal marker of limitation in space into a metaphoric space of possibility.

The same is true of *Nomama* (1967), which transfers onto film the title and content (a made up word with no defined meaning) of a series of topographic poems published by Matjaž Hanžek in *Tribuna* in April of 1967 (Fig. 28). *Nomama* thus demonstrates how OHO constructed an inter-media space in which the transfer of ideas and images from one medium to another became a central activity. While the film obviously does not preserve the form and layout of the printed poems, what it does offer the viewer is a very literal ability to watch the poem come into being. In this, it has continuity with *On the Road to Dajla*, as well. The film opens with shots of the word “nomama” being written and un-written, the material form of language becoming alive and malleable. These shots of language as substance alternate with images of everyday objects (a vase, a box of light bulbs), which are likewise shown in unusual ways. The suggestion that objects in and of themselves are concrete poetry comes from concrete poetry that wants to look like a physical object. Objects, like text, move from side to side, appear upside down, or are shown with the black and white of the film reversed, at once making them seem like the *subjects* (rather than objects) of the story and drawing attention to the manipulability of film as a material by disturbing the symmetry and balance of normal perception.

In *A sporty type* (1968), the camera-eye remains fascinated with the material form of language-as-letters written on a concrete wall while the “story” of the film seeks to equate the language used to describe clothes to actual clothes, thus again making visible language as yet another trapping. The camera follows the hand writing in charcoal letter

by letter, foregrounding the pictorial quality of language while the words being written out name a series of items of clothing, which appear both as clothing on a man (the poet Matjaž Hanžek) and as independent actors in the film, named in the same fashion as the actor and cameraman, demanding attention in their own right when contrasted with the gradually stripped, naked human body.

At least two more films also returned to language and its visual materiality later on, after Križnar's repertoire of genres and ideas expanded. Like the films discussed above, *Project 2* and *A Film about Film*, both from 1969-70, extended onto film Matjaž Hanžek's typographic experiments in breaking up the language of his alliterative, tautological poems. Here, film's ability to project images into space over time is again used to disrupt habitual patterns of reading and viewing, activate language as a material force, and, in the case of *A Film about Film*, promote medium self-reflexivity that, in the end, was reism's most important contribution to OHO's practice.

Narrative and Storytelling in OHO's Early Films

In her valuable study of Naško Križnar's cinematic works, Darja Skrt makes sense of OHO's film oeuvre by excluding "strict" documentation (films of exhibition openings and performances) from consideration and dividing the rest into those films where play-acting taking place in real life has a narrative ark (she identifies five such films) and those which were shot based entirely on a script. For her, OHO's cinematic singularity at its best lies in the ability to produce films that mix together and make indistinguishable within one narrative real and imagined events.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibid., 34-35.

Indeed, it is important to note that despite OHO's resistance to existing classificatory categories and accepted genre conventions, the group's films did retain a strong need for some kind of narrative, which ran parallel to efforts to figure visual materiality with as little story-telling as possible. The issue of narrative, in fact, is a crucial one in discussing the development of OHO films and Naško Križnar's work, which ran in conjunction with but also independent of OHO's other activities, funded and promoted as it was not through galleries, but through the channels of amateur film clubs and festivals which existed throughout Yugoslavia.⁶⁶

What is surprising when one looks for narratives in OHO films is the frequency with which one finds motifs of death and violence, which provide a sharp contrast to the non-violence of both OHO's philosophical stance, as found in reism, and of OHO members' political positions. Thus, *The Ends of Tips [Konice špic]* (1966) tells the confused but menacing story of two men whose disagreement ends in murder (before the victim rises to go pee alongside his killer).⁶⁷ *Morgue* (1966) not only tells the story of a murder, but suggests obliquely that the film-camera is the murder-weapon (and the viewer is both killer and victim), while *Interest [Interes]* (written and directed by Iztok Geister, 1967) also ends with dead body and revolves around the theme of concealment and inscrutability in a world where careful visual attending leads only to paradoxical incomprehension. *The Suicide [Samomorilec]*, which was made in 1966 as a tribute to Aleš Kermavner (who, in fact, committed suicide several days after the filming of *Zurigo*, discussed below) juxtaposes an episode of an averted suicide (again, an actual scene

⁶⁶ Naško Križnar, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, September 18, 2009.

⁶⁷ Like *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*, which I will discuss in more detail below, this film was also based on a real event which Križnar witnessed when his neighbor took refuge from a factory to burn it in a neighboring field. Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 46.

Križnar witnessed in Ljubljana) with the suggested inner turmoil of a young man whose world closes in on him. The ending of *It Is Beautiful to Be Young in Our Motherland* [*Lepo je v naši domovini biti mlad*] (1967) also suggests the possibility of suicide, albeit very ambiguously. Finally, *The Mermaid* [*Žalik žena*] (1967), an introduction to what was meant to be a much larger film, ends with what to this viewer comes across as a strong suggestion of an imminent rape and what Naško Križnar describes as an insinuation of “a demonic component of an erotic relationship.”⁶⁸

Given the predominance of these films in the first two years of Križnar’s collaboration with OHO, one could think of the interest in such narratives as simply a passing early phase. Indeed, Križnar himself has said that by the time *Morgue* was created in 1966, he started to feel for the first time that what interested him most in film was the life of the film image rather than dramaturgy or the story.⁶⁹ The very technical means available to him at the time, moreover, lent themselves much more easily to spontaneous image-making rather than the pain-staking construction of elaborate stories. Shooting with a hand-held 8 mm, Križnar could have steady shots that were no more than five to eight seconds long, made while the person holding the camera held his breath.⁷⁰ Lacking consistent access to editing equipment, Križnar also often edited directly in the camera, thinking one shot in advance about where to point his lens next.⁷¹ The equipment he was using also had no ability to record sound, which meant that clarity and nuance in storytelling were next to unattainable.

⁶⁸ Naško Križnar, personal e-mail to the author, November 2010.

⁶⁹ Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 95; Križnar noted in an interview I conducted with him that narrative films were more difficult to realize fully due to the technical limitations of the resources available to him at the time. Naško Križnar, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, September 18, 2009.

⁷⁰ Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 85.

⁷¹ Naško Križnar, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, September 18, 2009.

By 1967, with films such as *It Is Beautiful to Be Young in Our Homeland* and *Delagubantskilimez*, Križnar's attempts to use his camera to tell stories in the films were getting increasingly fragmented and unmoored from the expectations of plot or character development. That year's *Lego* was Križnar's first (and, as far as I am aware, only) OHO color film, which consisted of images of paint canisters floating in water, came quite close to almost pure abstraction, and signaled a preference for exploring the qualities of film stock rather than film story. Increasingly, Križnar's films tended to provide striking, unusual imagery, but demanded either that one give up on narrative or import significant context from outside the film for it to attain a legible narrative or comprehensible metaphoric content. This tendency would only increase by 1968 and 1969, when Križnar produced the numerous films documenting OHO happenings, performances, exhibition openings, and ephemeral works in nature. Yet despite all this, OHO's numerous early attempts to create films that had actors, characters, and a narrative ark are another important element of OHO's film legacy that adds to our understanding of the mixed impulses to which the group's overall practice was responding.

“Here it comes...”

One early film – *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown [Devetnajsti živčni zlom]* (1966) – stands out from the rest as crucial in understanding how reistic “free vision” and interest in language could combine with a desire for spontaneous storytelling. It helps, furthermore, to position film-making as a vital part of an expanded OHO space and presages the group's concerted move into various parts of the public sphere in 1968. It also intimates the importance of Western pop music to OHO members at the time: one of

their most complex and visually compelling films, *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown* was named so after the Rolling Stones song used as the film's soundtrack.

In the course of getting back editorial feedback on an article I wrote on OHO films, I found out that there are discrepancies in the way that those who participated in the film's creation remember that process. What I had originally understood to be a filmed restaging of an impromptu happening that Križnar observed Marko and Marika Pogačnik perform in their native Kranj⁷² (the scenes when the couple finds an empty cardboard box and, seeking a creatively non-utilitarian use for it, cuts holes for eyes and walks around concealed by the box) may have been much more heavily scripted by Križnar from the start.⁷³ Regardless of the exact origins of this idea and the degree to which the film's details came in the first instance from a script or a performance, however, the film certainly serves as an important link between the ideas that OHO's early members were working out in other media and the projected sensation of pure spontaneity that would characterize the work of the group's middle period.

Reism shows up in the film doubly: in the imagery it uses and in the very use of the camera. In the first part of the film, before the pair discover the box, the concrete wall (in fact, the very same physical structure as the one used in the films discussed above)

becomes the center of attention as we see the camera zoom in on Marko Pogačnik's hand

⁷² Darja Skrt, "Kako so Nastajali Filmi Skupine Oho: Pogovor Z Mariko in Markom Pogačnik," *Primorska srečanja* 19:166 (1995): 132. According to this interview, *19th Nervouse Breakdown* was a filmed restaging of an impromptu happening that Križnar observed Marko and Marika Pogačnik perform in their native Kranj. The occasion for the original event and its later restaging was that the pair, having found an empty box from a washing machine, sought a creatively non-utilitarian use for it, cut holes for eyes, and proceeded to go through town concealed by the box.

⁷³ According to Križnar, it was his script that included "the names of people, the writings on a concrete wall, the behavior of the protagonists, the shoe, and the game with cardboard boxes," and it was this script that Križnar asked his friends to perform, recycling the idea of using a cardboard box as a costume from an earlier occasion when all three of them had used boxes as carnival costumes. This information was conveyed to me in an e-mail through Jurij Meden, the editor of my article "When Film and Author Made Love: Reconsidering OHO's Film Legacy" in *Kino!* #11-12, (Ljubljana: Kino! Society for the Expansion of Film Culture, 2010), pp. 128-153.

writing in charcoal, “Ana is my most beloved,” followed by the same hand drawing a shoe and writing, “This is Ana.” Pogačnik then waves around the woman’s shoe that he had just drawn, and we next see a drawing of the shoe, which itself now has feet in shoes.

The expression of the materiality of language already overlaps here with OHO’s inward-looking self-referentiality since this cheeky personification of the shoe harkens directly back to the *OHO Manifesto*, published the same year that the film was made (Fig. 29).⁷⁴ In both the text and the film, the shoe loses its familiar name, the sign that denotes it, and gains instead a visual representation and a new life in language – an extended, defamiliarizing description or simply a proper female name. In both cases, the artists try to turn the shoe – normally down-trodden and servile, like the chair – from an object into a subject, carefully observed for purposes of demonstrating the irreducibility of its worth and nature. Indeed, this irreducibility is only emphasized by the shifts in representation from drawing to language to film as the shoe becomes a privileged inhabitant of the space of OHO freedom, which first and foremost gives ideas, things, and people the ability to shift and evade being pinned down by one exhaustive mode of representation.⁷⁵ Iconographically, the same belief in asserting the agency of things

⁷⁴ The opening section of text, found beneath a schematic line drawing of a shoe, asks “What is this on newspaper in printer’s ink in a trace that falls and rises in a curve...” and goes on to assert, “This is not a body...” that the text then describes verbally in painstaking detail. See “OHO Manifesto” in Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 13.

⁷⁵ That the shoe, like the chair, would be a special OHO object becomes clear from one of Marko Pogačnik earliest articles published in *Tribuna*, a text that contemplated in late 1964 the implications of the American Pop Art movement, which had been introduced to Ljubljana audiences earlier that Fall. In the article, Pogačnik sees in Pop Art a protoconceptual bend that strives to name things in order to make them visible. Pogačnik wrote, “For example, an amateurishly painted shoe with the clear sign ‘shoe’ enables recognition. A person recognizes a painted shoe as a shoe. This is undoubtedly the minimal act of thought.” It is fascinating that in 1964, Pogačnik took Pop Art to be not a capitulation to the logic of the market or an ambivalent response to the rising tide of consumerism, but a conceptual way out of the narrowness of the “technological civilization.” “Man, sunk into it, started thinking in the horizon of things: standardized objects, numbers, functions. Man found himself in a very narrow space, which makes possible almost nothing except production and the consumption of the object world and the sensory reaction that goes with it.” Pogačnik sees modern art as a reaction to this delimitation of existence. “Modern art has opened

seems to bring the bit of packaging to life (while concealing the two human actors) and provides in the film an image of an independent, living object, with the last scene presenting a vision of a box which has grown four legs (just like the shoe before it), walking off on the horizon into the sunset.

The viewer's awareness of the box's actual animating forces, however, foregrounds the importance of play to humans far more than it provides evidence of the agency of things, and it is OHO's theoretical ideas about the use of the camera that are more significant in understanding what reistic ideas meant for actual artistic practice and how viable they actually were. In the texts he wrote at the time, Naško Križnar declared – in a historically common attitude towards the mechanical eye⁷⁶ – that the movie camera was an ostensibly perfect reistic tool since it allowed the maximum ability to eliminate human subjectivity from the process of seeing the world: a blindfolded “operator” could simply push a button and capture things as they are.⁷⁷ Barbara Orel goes so far as to argue that “the view of the camera eye gives the key for understanding OHO's reism,” which

dimensions which had become inaccessible to thought-sight due to the limitations of the technological civilization. American Pop artists began to open forms inside this limited space permitted by the technologization and functionalization of the mind. [They offered] recognition of new possibilities for things, recognition of things as not purely instrumental objects which had made its processes invisible and whose logic was inaccessible to the representational means of older art, including abstract art.” These objects may inspire, Pogačnik argued, the minimum of intellectual effort, but it is effort nonetheless, and this effort matters. This effort results in “A realization of the way man thinks the world, thinks the flood which comes unfathomably over humanity.” This text is the earliest example I know that articulates Pogačnik's view of art as something that required of the viewer to exert effort in considering and becoming aware of the nature of representation. It also clearly utilizes the metaphor of space to explain art's new expanded role. See Marko Pogačnik, “Kultura Ljudstva,” *Tribuna*, December 16, 1964, XIV:29. Translations are my own.

⁷⁶ Consider, for instance, this passage from Walter Benjamin: “It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously.” Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 202. The text was originally published in 1931.

⁷⁷ Naško Križnar, “GEFF – Trenutek (ne)možnosti,” *Tribuna*, XVI: 13, Ljubljana, January 1966.

tries to mimic the gaze of “an objectifying eye of the camera.” This is “not an objective look,” she stresses, “but a look that objectifies.”⁷⁸

The assertion of this power of the camera is troubled, I would argue, by the simple fact that the operator was *not* blindfolded, and this highlights the kinds of logical lapses that lead to reism’s ultimate untenability. After all, the consideration of authorial intention in *where* to point the camera necessarily makes one attentive to the fact that the film-maker, rather than the camera eye itself, made the decisions (where matters were not dictated purely by mechanical limitations) as to *how* to look, as well.⁷⁹

Thus, what is truly reist in Križnar’s filming technique is the suggestion that things have agency made by using the camera alternately to look *at* things (the box, in this case) from the outside and looking from beneath it, as though from its perspective, through its “eyes.” This technique, I would argue, is quite possibly OHO’s most original filmic contribution and later reappears in film footage of OHO’s performances in Zvezda Park and other actions in urban settings. The uses of this technique for such purposes also again point to the fact that the reistic mode of vision ultimately succeeded more in making the film-maker and the viewer aware of his own habits of perception than it did in liberating specific things from the tyranny of the gaze.

OHO Films, the Move Into the Public Sphere, and the Emergence of OHO’s Metanarrative

What is also important about *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown* is that it started to connect reistic attentiveness and language games to the possibility of playful performance in everyday life. Adding a number of other fragmented images to its central “story,” the

⁷⁸ Orel, "Redefinicija Ohojevskoga Reizma," 47.

⁷⁹ This has been thematized by film-makers as early as Dziga Vertov in his *Man with a Movie Camera*, of which Križnar was aware.

film captured the vibrant, dizzying (quite literally, due to the unsteady motions of a hand-held 8 mm camera) and frenetic sense of playfulness and excitement that their attempts to see and describe the world anew inspired in group members. This sense can also be found in the film called *Zurigo*, which was made by Križnar with Aleš Kermavner, Bogdan Gradišnik and Milenko Matanović and pursued even further the idea of play (and play-acting) in an urban setting, foreshadowing OHO's urban happenings of 1968.

The film is made up of three vignettes. In the first episode (set to a brassy jazz tune), Aleš Kermavner, dressed as an older gentleman, tries to scare away – to comic effect – two young men as they examine and poke at a car parked next to Ljubljana's Zvezda park. In the second vignette (set to "Hard-hearted Hannah from Savannah"), Milenko Matanović tries to use a phone booth on the same square while the other two seem to distract him. In the third vignette (set to "Autumn Leaves"), the action moves a short distance across the river to Ljubljana's central market, where the young men first follow women around and then grab empty cardboard boxes to walk around with them over their heads (much as Marko and Marika Pogačnik had done in *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*). They then turn one of the boxes into an improvised drum to the bemusement of passers-by, and the film ends with a scene of the boxes riding up on their own in an elevator and falling from the height of a second or third story as the song closes.

There are some reinitic elements to the film. The box at the end seems temporarily to be given life, and the camera-eye here too possesses the ability to look onto the action as both observer and actor (the screen goes black for two seconds when the young men put boxes over their heads). It also gets distracted by the pleasures of pure visual

abstraction, be it in the form of the vertiginous blur of scenes shot while running or close-ups of faces, hands, and a checkered headscarf which the camera follows around.

At the same time, the camera pays attention to new activities. The exchanges it observes, for example, focus on the interaction of humans with one another rather than with objects. There are numerous shots in the film of passers-by glancing curiously at the semi-staged events as they walk past them, and the desire for human interaction hits a high poetic note when in the second vignette, a young woman with a bouquet of daffodils seems to stop spontaneously to give one of her flowers to each of the three actors.

This pregnant poetic moment, however, also highlights the tension in the film's desire both to produce a spontaneous realistic mode of vision, on the one hand, and to give the films structuring narratives, or at least hint at them, on the other. According to Križnar, *Zurigo* was based on the same idea as a happening, which is interesting, given that OHO's large-scale group happenings would not become a staple of the group practice until 1968. Here, the film-maker and actors performed in a public space based on a very loose script in the hopes that their actions might provoke the spontaneous reactions of strangers.⁸⁰ The blurring of the line between actions based on scripted narrative and spontaneous play in which this resulted became another notable characteristic of OHO's film-making that captured the ethos of OHO's larger practice until the moment when the group consciously started to pull away from performances in the public sphere.

⁸⁰ As Darja Skrt notes, "the film displays wonderfully the erased border between different genres (play film vs. documentary), which is also probably a response to the genre segregation in amateur film-maker's organizations and festivals. Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 40, 92. Translation my own.

Film and Author Make Love

In the case of those later films, the relevant narrative would actually be a meta-narrative, which demanded primarily the knowledge of the group's own story. In *Zurigo*, this is not yet entirely the case – one could construct a story, no matter how loose, out of the contents of the film alone, and this was true of most OHO films from 1966 and 1967. In the existential lightness of happening-like films (*Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*, *Zurigo*), however, one can see a contrast with and a move away from the darkness of Križnar's early attempts to work with traditional script and narrative. This tendency continued with *The Film and Author Make Love* [*Film in avtor se ljubita*], which Križnar has described in one interview as the film he holds dearest of all his OHO-period films. And it is, indeed, the film that best embodies both Križnar's outlook at this time and the group's ethos in 1968.⁸¹ Even the film's title is suggestively ambiguous in a way that combines OHO's preoccupations. Its use of the word "author" points, on the one hand, to the self-reflexivity of the film-maker "making love" to film by exploring his medium's sensual side and, on the other, to a writer whose language acquires a new physical form on film.

Križnar also used the name "The Film and Author Make Love" as the title for his film-making credo, published in the journal *Ekran* in 1969.⁸² The film, Križnar asserts, is one in which he was "left alone with the camera and the medium," thus "most powerfully reveal[ing] a specific film language in light of OHO thought." The film, according to Skrt's description, is a "euphoric and ludistic look at the world," which combines the formal achievements of classic avant-garde cinema (Križnar cites Dziga Vertov as a

⁸¹ Ibid., 103.

⁸² Naško Križnar, "Film in Avtor Se Ljubita," *Ekran* 1969, 56.

precedent) with “erotic play with medium” that produce “film picture as visual sculpture.”⁸³

These assertions accord with the views Križnar articulated in 1969, still loyal to realist ideas. “What’s dying,” Križnar wrote then,

is the film language that is an agreement [between maker and viewer]... [Instead, [j]ust like literary language is doing with the material of the word, so too film language is looking for its basis in the material of the picture, the film. The topography of the sign (letter) in literature in film is replaced by the topography of the picture (reflection).

Navigating this topography is a task that the “author” undertakes with no authority to shape it into a “message,” being only “the first viewer of his film.”⁸⁴

One could already see the breakdown of the “agreement” or “pact” between maker and viewer in three of the films made in 1967: *Delagubantskilimez*, which echoes Dajla’s unreachability by referencing the existence in Slovenia of a no longer visible but erstwhile impenetrable Roman fortification system;⁸⁵ or *Interest*, which can only offer paradoxical, nonsensical wordplay – “Cheap furniture is rare; rare things are expensive” – as the answer to the series of visual mysteries it presents; or *Waiting for Godot*, which literalizes the frustration of Beckett’s characters (as well as, perhaps, of viewers waiting for the film’s true action and story to begin) by showing for several minutes the close-up of a man who taps his watch and looks around expectantly, getting, of course, nothing in the end for his trouble.

Against these films’ darker tenor, the uncertainty of *Film and Author Make Love* (as the very title suggests) seems more joyous and radiant, reaching the heights of erratic and erotic playfulness heretofore found only in *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*. This

⁸³ Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 104.

⁸⁴ Križnar, “Film in avtor se ljubita,” 56.

⁸⁵ Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 35.

tenor would continue to predominate in the films from 1968 and 1969, most of them recordings of OHO happenings and performances, and it owed much to the film-makers having dispensed, for aesthetic reasons born out of utility, with attempts to work from a script or root metaphor in coherent narrative.

The film opens with its title, spelled in a frequently-used OHO technique one letter at a time, slowing the viewer down to feel the materiality of language and making its point by adding to the sense-making words a sequence of linguistic “raw material, the letters “Šsrponmlkjihgfedčba,” which are the first part of the Slovene alphabet in reverse order. Superimposed on this is the familiar physical space of Zvezda park, in which the camera eye “runs” to the swift pace of “Lara’s Waltz” from *Dr. Zhivago* and alternately shows recognizable human forms and totally abstract shots, the sensual dimension of film stock. Then into this alternation of abstract and figurative sequences (shots of OHO members David Nez, Milenko Matanović, and Vojin Kovač-Chubby) individual words are inserted, which complete the catalogue of OHO’s preoccupations in such a way that the very technique of constant shifting and alternation of frames of reference from one frame to the next embodies the group’s aesthetic and political stances. Adding to the obvious self-referentiality of filming the group’s members (it may be a point too obvious to make, but OHO films never had hired actors), the verbal additions also weave a loose narrative by pointing both to the abstract ideas which the film embodies concretely (“cilj” (goal), “poezija” (poetry), “lirika” (lyricism or lyric poetry), “zanos” (enthusiasm, passion)) and to the group’s works in other media (thus, “Katalog” alludes to a journal in whose publication many of the group’s members participated in 1968).

All of this is additionally interspersed with a slowed down, frame-by-frame

depiction of a simple action – the rolling and smoking of a cigarette. Then another small action is performed: the synchronizing blowing into and smashing of paper bags inadvertently makes one aware of absent sound. More black and white abstract shots follow, becoming gradually recognizable as the outside of and the world as seen from underneath a black tarp. This technique of the camera as an eye that can look both from the perspective of things and upon things from the outside is something Križnar utilized in *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown* and *Zurigo*, and here again it serves to satisfy the demand for a constantly shifting point of view, which finds no final resolution.⁸⁶ Like all OHO films, this one ends suddenly and inconclusively, teasing the viewer beforehand with the second repetition of “cilj” (goal), followed by close-ups of a face making funny faces at the camera and viewer, as if mocking whatever expectations we might have had for a final clarification.

At the same time, what needs to be stressed is that the disappearance of traditional story-telling in the film and the erasure of the line between fiction and documentation did not, despite OHO’s stated reist goals, do away with the need narrative or metaphor in the films. Analyzing his films many years later, Križnar himself acknowledged relative to the question of the viewer’s perception that what so often was missing in OHO films was a way for the author to extend a “helping hand” to the viewer, some way to avoid a cryptic hermeticism that rebuffed the viewer.⁸⁷ A key was still needed to puzzle out the rules of the game that the maker of the film established to create it, and Križnar’s use of language in the film became a way to introduce concrete poetry as the underlying structuring

⁸⁶ The strange three-headed creature which the camera eventually reveals as the three men running with the black piece of cloth over their heads also prefigures the *Triglav* performance, which took place at the very end of 1968 shortly before the group transitioned into a new phase of its work.

⁸⁷ Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 95.

metaphor of OHO's practice in its expanded space, as well as a way to tie together the heterogeneity of the film's visuals. The use of language in *Film and Author Make Love* as a way of introducing OHO's central OHO explicitly also suggests that in his most interesting work, Križnar sought ways to produce narrative even if the story itself was about the destruction of narrative. The film superimposes OHO's literary and visual topographies on top of one another while also showing its own cipher, making OHO's ideas accessible without falling into either of the extremes of obscure hermeticism or a didacticism that went against Križnar's concretist conviction that the film's very existence was the only message it needed to have.

CHAPTER II

New Sensibility and OHO's Spaces of Freedom

The shifts of 1968: language games in gallery space

OHO's early exploration of language, as I have argued in Chapter I, made possible the middle period when the membership of the group changed and yielded a new direction by extending some of the possibilities opened up by reism. 1968 was the year that saw major changes in the group's make-up and mode of practice. It was in 1968 that Marko Pogačnik left the group to do his year of compulsory military service while David Nez, an American who was studying at Ljubljana's Fine Arts University, joined the group. It was also in the summer of that year that the so-called *Katalog* group was established with the purpose of creating a magazine that would be "a forum for new tendencies in art and theory."¹

The publication of *Katalog* as an issue of the journal *Problemi* in July-August of 1968² probably marked the culmination of OHO's interest in experiments in print media. By 1969, OHO would become less engaged with innovations on the page; its biggest visual contribution to the second (and last) issue of *Katalog*, which appeared as a separate volume that year, consisted of photoprojects and documentation of performances from

¹ Igor Zabel and Moderna galerija (Ljubljana Slovenia), *Oho: Retrospektiva = Eine Retrospektive = a Retrospective*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007), 148.

² The plans for the journal were first made and mentioned at least as early as 1967. See Janez Kajzer, "Riž, Hrana Za Oči in Uho. Galerija Mladih Avantgardistov," *TT / Tedenska Tribuna (Ljubljana)* 40 (October 11, 1967): 9.

the previous two years rather than any direct involvement with the page as a medium.³

Katalog, in fact, was a separate, bigger undertaking to which OHO members contributed. As such, it encompassed the whole scope of different uses to which language was being put by the generation of artists and intellectuals to which OHO belonged. Among other things, it included a critical and theoretical essay on the interpretation of avant-garde poetry by Taras Kermauner; a text on “Sade in Text” by the founder of *Tel Quel*, Philippe Sollers; a prose text by Tomaž Šalamun; an excerpt of a fictional dialogue between Jean Harlow and Billy the Kid by the American Beat poet Michael McClure; a text by Slavoj Žižek, which was built on references to Bond movies and offered a theoretical account of neo-capitalist consumer society through the interconnection of dialectical materialism and semantic materialism; and four short critical essays by Roland Barthes.⁴ Poetry was represented by Iztok Geister (as I.G. Plamen), Matjaž Hanžek, and Franci Zagoričnik. Alongside these texts, visual content was provided in the form of topographic poetry by Milenko Matanović, Naško Križnar, and Vojin Kovač-Chubby.

The only contributions that resembled any kind of traditional visual art form were Matjaž Hanžek’s Pop-inspired collages and Marko Pogačnik’s comic strip titled “The Light of Darkness.” Strikingly similar to the children’s book *The Bottle Would Like to Drink*, this comic tells the story of a city in which light bulbs suddenly refuse to serve their function, followed by other light-producing implements (matches and lighters), which essentially shut down the possibility of civilization (Fig. 30). After all other objects surrounding urban man refuse to work (as forks, spoons, trousers, and shirts all conspire against people), the city folk go into nature where they are able to recognize the

³ The manuscript for it was completed in March of that year.

⁴ Based on my own back-translations from Slovene, the titles of these were “Writers and Writing,” “The Structure of News,” “Representation of the Sign,” and “What is Criticism.”

individuality of objects, speak to them, and name them as individuals rather than collective categories. The comic's protagonist notices the light bulb for the first time and through linguistic play understands the non-coincidence of the name with the object and the way its function renders it invisible: "How wonderful you are," he says. "Of course, we only have you because you light up our room, but you yourself are most illuminated when you are not burning. Only now I understand why you resisted. Your name will be 'The resister.'"⁵ With this, the light bulb burns again while the protagonist acknowledges himself to be just one thing in a world of things.

This is clearly yet another attempt to find both an intellectual framework and possible ways of visualizing reism's preoccupation with the particularity of individual objects, to suggest scenarios that defamiliarize the lived environment. It is also probably the single most easily engaging contribution to the journal since the comic strip here marks the middle point in the spectrum ranging from, on the one hand, poetic non-sense, which avoids narrative or message (and even does away at times with legible letter-signs), and, on the other hand, the convoluted acrobatics of abstract thought and interpretive schema found in the theoretical texts. A couple of the latter, however, when seen in conjunction with Pogačnik's story, reveal the complexity and internal tension in OHO's project at that crucial moment.

With by now familiar literalness, Pogačnik's comic strip operates on an inseparability of visualization (image) and speech (language). The same issue is addressed, alongside the issue of naming, by Tomaž Brejc in a short article titled "Type of Speech." In it, Brejc proposes to understand the relationship between speech and its

⁵ Marko Pogačnik and Benjamin Luks, "Svetloba Teme," *Problemi (Katalog)* (Ljubljana), no. 67-68 (July-August 1968): 24-38.

applicability to a work of art. Founded on “objectivizing a meaning or set of meanings that a name carries in itself,” speech, according to Brejc, requires constant visualization of that which it predetermines and systematizes. It is the foundational medium that produces the “illusionism of meaning” by making that which is seen and that which is named seem identical. What it thus raises is the specter of possibility “that we only see things after they are named [and that] that which we cannot name does not exist.”⁶

What Brejc seeks is a way of getting out of this ouroboros – the constant feedback loop of visualization that is a mode of speech and speech that exists to organize the visual chaos of “the iconosphere.” And he finds the potential for doing so in the act of separating out into multiple layers the seen and its name and meaning. This, Brejc argues, makes it possible to perceive visualizations as only symbolic models of the meanings that structure our thought. “If today we turn to the picture and split it into layers using speech, we shall see (speak) the analysis of speech.”⁷

This analytical activity becomes for Brejc – as well as Braco Rotar, the other young art theorist writing in Ljubljana on contemporary art at the time – “the aesthetic of the iconosphere” that “visualizes the intellectual games of speech (aesthetic canons)” and seeks to find transparency, clarity, and organizational principles of the value systems that guide various models of visualization. Crucially, however, Brejc adds that this occurs in “a realm of fantasy, imagination,” where any means necessary are to be utilized, from analytical transformation of selected meanings or names to “intellectually undeveloped

⁶ Tomaž Brejc, “Vid Govora [Type of Speech],” *Problemi (Katalog)*, no. 67-68 (July-August 1968): 80. Translations are my own.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

aphrodisiac ‘play.’”⁸

The notion of art as an activity that develops a new kind of language also had a powerful impact on the reception of the group’s first exhibition, which took place at Ljubljana’s Moderna Galerija in February of 1968 and became the first step in the focus on exhibiting which would greatly alter the group in the course of the next year. It was at this exhibition that Marko Pogačnik, Milenko Matanović and Andraž Šalamun first showed in a public space the concrete embodiments of their ideas. If the critics are to be trusted, they were, on this first attempt, much more successful at providing a pretext for the development of a new critical language than they were at producing aesthetic objects that could remain compelling once the critical language was articulated.

The works in the exhibition included Pogačnik’s *artikli* – plaster casts of everyday objects (bottles, bags, shoes, rubber gloves, boxes), plaster slab reliefs with colored designs and embedded objects, and reist drawing series (two of these showed bananas and knives). Andraž Šalamun contributed brightly colored ink drawings, sticker designs, and schematic drawings of human figures while Milenko Matanović showed multicolor hand-painted abstract sculptures made of egg cartons, two white plastic boxes divided

⁸ Ibid., 82. Brejc and Rotar were the two young Slovene critics and friends of OHO members who championed the collective and made a concerted effort to produce in Slovene a new critical language that could give an accurate account of what OHO was doing. Braco Rotar, moreover, is another interesting figure for demonstrating the fluidity of the creative activities of those in the OHO circle and the centrality of poetry as a sort of baseline creative activity for the group as a whole. Before he turned most of his attention to writing critical texts (and eventually went on to become a sociologist), Rotar also published poetry. The earliest of his poems that I have been able to locate were, in fact, published on the same page as Franci Zagoričnik’s *Dajla* poems in *Tribuna* XIV:26 (November 18, 1964). Other critics who participated in the work of theorizing OHO’s activities early on included Ješa Denegri and Biljana Tomić, who lived and wrote in Belgrade (Tomić, interestingly, also published concrete poetry in addition to her analytical writings). In terms of publications in which these theoretical texts were disseminated, in addition to Ljubljana’s short-lived *Katalog*, by c. 1970, there were two more journals in Yugoslavia that focused their attention on new media and new modes of art: *Bit*, published in Zagreb, and *Rok*, published in Belgrade. *Sinteza*, the official Slovene art and design magazine, did cover OHO’s exhibitions, and reviews also appeared in regular, non-art focused periodicals. It was, however, almost entirely on the pages of *Tribuna* and *Problemi* that the involved theoretical discussions that reflected and shaped OHO’s development took place.

into compartments and also painted different colors, and drawings of abstract geometric patterns.

Though the interest in seriality, the line-drawn depictions of the human figures, and the creative re-use of a non-traditional art materials echoed both the interests OHO had already shown in print and the directions of its future work, the geometric abstraction fell quite comfortably into the range of what Miško Šuvaković and others have called “socialist Modernism” – a visual idiom embraced and promoted by the powers that be.⁹ It was, therefore, the discursive element which the artists introduced to bridge the heterogeneity of their otherwise dissimilar, cryptic works (derided by a couple of the critics as derivative Pop art) that was the exhibition’s most important accomplishment. Even hostile or skeptical critics (such as the one writing for Slovenia’s newspaper of record, *Delo*) noted its importance in this connection for widening the horizons of what was available on the Slovene artistic scene.¹⁰ At the same time, even Braco Rotar, sympathetic to his friends’ cause, seemed to praise the show negatively. What he liked about it were all the things it did not have – impressionistic or expressionistic stylings which strove to produce either lyrical emotional transparency or a sense of pathos. Both paradigms, in Rotar’s opinion, were rooted in a “Slovene” identity. By becoming unmoored from this identity’s instrumentalized meanings and presenting nothing by the free play of visual information, OHO’s “exhibited objects [we]re realized quite radically

⁹ Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 172-175.

¹⁰ Mirko Juteršek, the critic for *Ljubljanski dnevnik*, noted the views of Dadaism and the immediate influence of pop as important points of reference. See Mirko Juteršek, "Matanović, Pogačnik in Šalamun V Moderni Galeriji," *Ljubljanski dnevnik* 48 (February 20, 1968): 7. The critic for *Delo*, Janez Mesesnel, also saw the works on view as “usual pop art” – like something, he noted, one saw in Venice four years ago [in 1964] from the Americans. The critic went on, “more interesting (than the derivative works) are the so-called explanations of the young artists and their wish to do something different from the uniform Slovene scene.” See Janez Mesesnel, "Artikli Namesto Umetnosti. Ob Razstavi Del Skupine Matanović, Pogačnik in Šalamun v Moderni Galeriji," *Delo* (Ljubljana) 50 (February 21, 1968): 5. Translations are my own.

regardless of the success of individual realizations.”¹¹

***Pradedje* exhibition**

The much more successful marriage of language with material did not occur until the *Pradedje* exhibition, which took place in Zagreb in February of 1969 and which, paradoxically, has been regarded by historians as marking the group’s shift away from reism and into *arte povera*.¹² I would argue, however, that there did remain in this much more successful show a strong connection to OHO’s earlier language games.

In particular, Braco Rotar’s text, which was published on this occasion in the catalogue of the exhibition, stressed the continuity between an *arte povera*-esque fascination with materials and the linguistic analysis the work still implied and necessitated. Rotar focused on David Nez’ *Roof* (Fig. 31), the work in which Nez had placed on the gallery floor the roof of a neighboring building being torn down. *Roof*, Rotar wrote, asks us

What is happening with material, transposed in a particular way, so that it loses the normal functionality implied by its name? And how can we ignore the difference between name and function, as well as difference between visual sensation and function? To put it more succinctly: what does this transposition mean?¹³

He came to the (perhaps obvious) conclusion that “The transposition means a change of the basic (or normal) purpose of the meaning of a certain material,” here justified by the transformative nature of the exhibition space. Hence, “The roof has a new aesthetic function or the function of a semantic game” in which an object we still call a

¹¹ Braco Rotar, "Razstava M. Pogačnika, M. Matanovića in A. Šalamuna V Moderni Galeriji," *Naši razgledi* (Ljubljana) XVII:6 (March 23, 1968): 171. Translations are my own.

¹² Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 120-121.

¹³ *Milenko Matanović -- David Nez -- Andraž Šalamun -- Tomaž Šalamun. Pradedjovi*, (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1969), 1. Translations are my own.

“roof” violates doubly our assumptions of what a roof is by lying indoors and on the floor. What’s more, Rotar notes, by playing this game, “the probability of a normal function is accentuated.”¹⁴

Roof was the most literal example of a work that gave visible form to a floating signifier, but Nez’s other work, *Iron Jungle* (a large jungle-like web of strands of steel wool), as well as Andraž Šalamun’s *Wood* (Fig. 32) also played semantic games, punning on the word “environment” just as it was beginning to enter art-world parlance. They made visible the associative discontinuities between the title’s “natural” meaning, the installation’s formal suggestion of plant-like forms, and the artificiality of the artist’s means of re-presentation, particularly evident in Andraž Šalamun’s use of synthetic materials.

The same intermediate – and quite surreal – space of the natural world re-created in a decidedly unnatural idiom was produced in Milenko Matanović’s *Albino Embryo of Gessner’s Elephant* (Fig. 33), the title referencing the work of Conrad Gessner, the 16th century Swiss naturalist considered the “founder of modern descriptive zoology.”¹⁵ If Gessner’s *Historiae Animalium* (1551) was the first modern Western pictorial catalogue of the animal world, which paired descriptions with images so as to impose order on the chaos of nature, then Matanović’s room-size installation was its modern counterpart, which recast the contents of a page as a literal and mental space. In it, the artist performed a task opposite of Gessner’s. Instead of dispensing with the particular to create abstract categories, he surrounded the viewer by dismembered shapes that could not even

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Urs B. Leu and Walter D. Morris, "Gessner, Conrad," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Oxford University Press, 1996), available on-line at <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t172.e0572&srn=1&ssid=180799376#FIRSTHIT>>, accessed December 8, 2009.

depict a single elephant, but were a visual puzzle that questioned scientific assumptions about the dispensability of the particular while also alluding to the *idea* of an elephant. Thus, as Rotar had put it, the work actually accentuated the probability of the normal, heightening one's awareness of the "normal" and "natural" through the dismemberment of normal meaning and the use of unnatural materials.

Reminiscent to some degree in their physical appearance to sculptures by both Claes Oldenberg and Pino Pascali, *Wood* and *Albino Embryo of Gessner's Elephant* are notably not ghosts of consumer goods or allusions to them, which is something that many of the works in the 1968 Ljubljana exhibition had been. In Zagreb, all the works contained, in one form or another, allusions to nature, and this points to a gradual shift not just in the group's iconography, but also its conception of the truths it was after. In the *Pradedje* show, alongside the semantically playful installations described above, one also saw the organic matter of Milenko Matanović's *Fifteen Roman Hills* (Fig. 34) and the piles of *Hay-Bricks-Corn Husks* (Fig. 35) laid out by Tomaž Šalamun, who had organized the exhibition and was actively steering the group in a new direction.

Šalamun had spent time in Rome, where he encountered *arte povera* and where Pino Pascali in particular made a strong impression on him. It was Šalamun's decision to join his brother Andraž, Milenko Matanović, and David Nez that re-formed OHO as a group and gave it new goals to work for in the guise of increasingly sophisticated exhibitions. It was also his raw-materials-cum-sculptures that best demonstrated a desire for the absolute transparency of meaning (found in the idea of 'material as material' and most self-evident in the use of raw natural materials) that now began to appear in OHO's work alongside the earlier explorations of meaning's non-transparency. Tomaž Brejc

noted this in his review of the Zagreb exhibition when he argued that the works shown there “produced tense uncertainty as to how one prioritized the role of materials in relation to the visibility of the artist’s intention and the function of naming, available to artist and critic alike.” Even more surprisingly, despite this tense uncertainty, the works convinced Brejc that

transparency on the level of existential terminology ([about] the dialectical space of conditions which are created by the technical structures of new reality, new constructivism, objectivism, and romantic materials, alienated and authentic materials – found art, *arte trovatta*, *arte povera*) is possible, but demands exceptional caution and a systematically constructed method of observation.”¹⁶

It could be that Brejc’s optimism was engendered by the quality of the exhibition, precisely because it was able to form a coherent whole while maintaining a tense balance between its interests in material immediacy and language games. Not falling firmly in one camp, it made evident the need for the new critical language Brejc wanted to produce, and it also gave that language a sense of focus. The Zagreb show, as Igor Zabel has noted, “signifie[d] a decisive turning point in the development of OHO, for from then on art in the narrower sense of the word prevail[ed] over what up till then had been much more atomized and diverse activities.”¹⁷

Ironically, what had inspired Tomaž Šalamun to arrange the exhibition that would give OHO institutional legitimation and push it into what seemed to be a narrower realm of formal artistic exploration were his friends’ free-wheeling experiments of the previous year, which added performance to their repertoire, moved the group’s project into the urban environment, and aligned it with the politics of the New Left. It was, therefore, not

¹⁶ Tomaž Brejc, "Komentar k Zagrebški Razstavi," *Problemi* (Ljubljana) 75 (1969): 32. Translations are my own.

¹⁷ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 148.

insignificant that the *Pradedje* show opened with a performance¹⁸ or that the photos for the Zagreb catalogue positioned the artists in a new relationship to their work – they were physically embedded in it in the installation shots (see Figs. 31 and 32).

It was, I believe, the group's 1968 activities that made it possible for the group to move (at least for a time) away from language and arrive at an emphasis on form and formalism that grew, directly and indirectly, out of the political commitments of the New Left and made it possible for Brejc to see the importance of the Zagreb show in the fact that it presented "borderline actions/objects that open up and make interpretive frames visible." If, as Brejc argued, their works' greatest virtue resided in the fact that they've broken the "opus complex," whereby the work becomes "purified form" complete in itself, it is to the 1968 experiments that we must turn to understand the cultural and political contexts which would inform OHO's subsequent work.¹⁹

Herbert Marcuse, New Sensibility, and OHO's political commitments

The social and political implications and aspirations that OHO's work demonstrated in the period of its active engagement with the public sphere in 1968 and 1969 can most succinctly and usefully be illuminated by looking at the writings of Herbert Marcuse, the philosophical god-father of the 1960s New Left, who sought to apply the insights of Frankfurt School analysis to the immediate historical situation of the 1960s. He did so most notably in *An Essay on Liberation* (written before but published soon after the events that took place in Paris and elsewhere in 1968), in which he

¹⁸ For a detailed description of the Happening that opened the Zagreb exhibition and involved vacuum cleaners and clear tubing, see Barbara Orel, "Redefinicija Ohojevskoga Reizma," in *Literarni Modernizem V "Svinčenihi" Letih*, ed. Gašper Troha (Ljubljana: Študentska založba: Društvo Slovenska matica 2008), 53.

¹⁹ Brejc, "Komentar K Zagrebški Razstavi," 32.

speculated on the steps necessary for a fundamental social restructuring. It was in this book that Marcuse deployed the term “new sensibility” extensively – a term which Tomaž Brejc would be using by 1969 to describe the Zagreb show.²⁰ This shared vocabulary points to the way Marcuse’s writings can help to lay bare the political content of OHO’s shifting practices and the crucial tension between conflicting positivist and metaphysical tendencies that define much of OHO’s existence after its earliest period.

As I discuss in this and subsequent sections, the political views and commitments of OHO members were very ambivalent towards the Yugoslav socio-political order and in most cases tended not to focus on direct protest or indignation with the existing social order. For this reason, Marcuse’s views should in no way be seen as a blueprint for a political stance that OHO’s members pursued with any consistency. Yet Marcuse’s views on the function and promise of both philosophy and art in the social arena shed as much light on the logic and import of OHO’s practices as Wittgenstein’s writings do.

This makes it all the more interesting to find that in his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse dedicated a whole chapter to addressing and attacking Wittgenstein’s work (specifically the recently published *Philosophical Investigations*) as the philosophy that at best complies with and at worst promotes the “one-dimensional” world Marcuse saw emerging around him. While focused primarily on the capitalist, industrial West, Marcuse’s cultural critique sought to be global in its scope, and the issues it raised resonate deeply with OHO’s later practice. It is worthwhile, therefore, to understand what qualms Marcuse, as “one of the principal architects of Critical Theory,”²¹ had with

²⁰ The term was first used widely in print by Susan Sontag in 1965 in the essay I cite below.

²¹ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, [1st ed. (Boston, Little, 1973), 28.

Wittgenstein's positivist linguistic analysis and how these qualms related to his own (then quite popular) vision of a liberatory philosophical project.

Marcuse's fundamental disagreement is with Wittgenstein's famous pronouncement in *Philosophical Investigations* that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" by analyzing language which "is in order as it is."²² This attitude Marcuse defines as an "intrinsically positive" one, whose empiricist "self-imposed restriction to the prevalent behavioral universe" does not allow for a possibility of envisioning alternatives, be they linguistic, conceptual, political, or social.²³ Marcuse's own project, by contrast, is to fight against the fact that with the rise of positivism,

The metaphysical dimension, formerly a genuine field of rational thought, becomes irrational and unscientific. ... With all its exploring, exposing, and clarifying of ambiguities and obscurities, neo-positivism is not concerned with the great and general ambiguity and obscurity which is the established universe of experience.²⁴

Marcuse's answer and path to clarifying this latter ambiguity took up a rather traditional function of philosophy as a meta-language that "aim[s] at a dimension of fact and meaning which elucidates the atomized phrases or words of ordinary discourse 'from without' by showing this 'without' as essential to the understanding of ordinary discourse." Marcuse's vision of a language outside language, if taken to its logical conclusion, offers the extreme (and equally untenable) opposite to reism's attempt to see things outside any pre-existing frameworks of meaning or points of reference. To counter Wittgenstein's dictum, which could well have served as a reist motto, that "We must do

²² Quoted in Chapter 7 of *One-Dimensional Man*, "The Triumph of Positive Thinking: One-Dimensional Philosophy." Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 173, 177. (The citation he offers for Wittgenstein's remarks is *Philosophical Investigations*, (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 51, 45.)

²³ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173, 183.

away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place,”²⁵ Marcuse offers a fundamental (Marxist) assumption of an existing objective reality into which individual facts can be slotted by “dissolv[ing] the established experiential context of meaning into that of its reality [and] abstract[ing] from the immediate concreteness in order to attain true concreteness.”²⁶

In theory, in the struggle to define what is both “concrete” and “transparent” – by what means one can best speak of everyday reality – the two positions outlined above should have produced irreconcilable differences. And yet this was not the case in OHO’s artistic practice. On the contrary, they mutually reinforced each other, the combination producing a rare zone of intellectual freedom from which forays and border raids were made into the physical space of everyday reality. That these forays had a subversive edge derives primarily from the fact that those performing them fostered a certain rhetorical and ideological evasiveness, a commitment to resolutely escaping any attempt to be pinned down to any one movement or stance.

In fact, the vexed question of OHO’s relationship to political action goes back – unsurprisingly, perhaps – to the group’s very beginnings and surfaces like a refrain throughout its existence. One key to OHO’s complicated relationship to political engagement can be found in Tomaž Šalamun’s remark concerning the lesson he drew from his brief arrest in 1964 as an editor of *Perspektive*, the journal closed down by the authorities as the last bastion of intellectuals who, in the view of the authorities, allowed themselves to speak their minds too freely. The publication of Šalamun’s own poem *Duma ’64* in *Perspektive* was one of the events that precipitated the shut-down of the

²⁵ Wittgenstein quoted in *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 180.

journal.²⁷ Yet Šalamun describes the process of being politicized as one in which he realized that becoming a “political” poet would mean getting caught in and by the political system on its own terms.²⁸

The same sentiment was expressed in extended form by a nineteen-year-old Marko Pogačnik in a letter he wrote to *Perspektive* approximately a year later following the scandal with the publication of the school newspaper *Plamenica*. Of the accusations waged against them, Pogačnik wrote, the one the students found the most hurtful was the suggestion of their “apriori opposition to the given social situation, as though [we] draw on some example and then in a dull, incomprehensible and yet still obvious way force it upon [our] classmates.” Pogačnik asserts his freedom to speak from a primarily non-political position:

Because we molded our relationship to the social situation in the journal on literary and artistic bases, a political point of view for the journal was totally alien to us because it had no real connection to either of our actual political viewpoints. ...[As people] we were not apolitical, but the journal due to its form was apolitical.²⁹

What’s more, Pogačnik presciently describes the mechanism which was used to make it impossible for his and his collaborators to speak on their own terms.

With the replacement of our literary-artistic relationship to the problems with their own political starting point, the political people led us away to their sphere, where they have their own privileged possessions, like the words ‘resistance,’ ‘partisan,’ or, let us say, the color red, the star, etc. We had to consent to this replacement because otherwise our work would have been pushed aside as immature artistry and with that, the problems it raised would have remained untouched. This shift was followed by one more step. Our political views, after an

²⁷ See Slobodan Stankovic, "Slovenian Poet: Against Socialism a la Louis XIV," in *Open Society Archives* (July 21, 1965), available on-line at <<http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/76-3-217.shtml>>, accessed May 21, 2011. In 1964-1965, there were also controversies surrounding the censorship of the periodicals *Dialogi* and *Sodobnost* that were consistently discussed on the pages of *Tribuna*.

²⁸ Tomaž Šalamun, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, May 28, 2009.

²⁹ Marko Pogačnik, "[Uredništvu Perspektiv]," *Perspektive*, no. 36-37 (1963-1964): 889. Translations are my own.

unsuccessful attempt at mutual persuasion, were disqualified as reactionary, bourgeois, as ignoring the revolution, etc. Now, they were able to treat our poems as leaning towards political pamphlets in cowardly shape and the drawings as undercover political caricatures.³⁰

Given the self-evident monopoly of the “political people” in the domain of purely political discourse, Pogačnik extrapolated from his own plight (which included being expelled from the school without due process and reinstated after having to proffer two proofs of his psychiatric health) to argue against “crude alienation” of the individual wherein

a young person’s problems, which originate not in the political, but in the social and personal structures of existence are...appropriated by political people. That is to say, they drag (alienate) them in the political sphere, presumably so that they can have an exclusive right to resolve them.

Pogačnik also notes that “If this is the will of a political group, then for its realization, violence is necessary, be it moral, material, or political,” including the violence that effectively destroyed the desire of those like him for concrete engagement in social life and real access to “self-management,” which had become the banner doctrine of the Yugoslav economic order since the 1950s. Pogačnik finally, bluntly concludes that “If a person grows up in such conditions, he will obviously grow up to resist such conditions.”³¹

It is clear from his letter that the events around *Plamenica* politicized him, but politicized him primarily, just like they did Šalamun, to resist the incursion of unpredictably and aggressively defensive, doctrinaire political concerns into the realms meant to afford relative freedom. Faced with this situation, young Slovenes were, of course, hardly alone. Similar conclusions were reached by artists all over the former

³⁰ Ibid. 889.

³¹ Ibid. 890-91.

Eastern Bloc and the only difference, perhaps, was that those living in Yugoslavia had more to defend, a wider berth in their personal freedoms, and, as a rule, faced milder potential consequences than residents of Warsaw Pact countries. Yugoslavs also had access to much current literature in the social sciences and the arts, and I would like to suggest in looking at the applicability of Marcuse's writings to their work that they participated in what they understood to be a global paradigm shift, but did so in a way that responded to their local situation.

The bearing that Marcuse's vision of philosophy has on art becomes clear in the section titled "New Sensibility" of *An Essay on Liberation*. Here, Marcuse outlines a function for art as "a radical transvaluation of values," a practice which "involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitative world." Additionally, artistic practice aligned with the "new sensibility" participates in "the Great Refusal," which leads its proponents to "reject the rules of the game that is rigged against them."³²

The political stance found in Marcuse's vision of art can be summed up by his assertion that "The political protest, assuming a total character, reaches into a dimension which, as aesthetic dimension, has been essentially apolitical; sensibility guided by imagination rather than rationality of domination." In the new situation, "the right and the truth of the imagination become the demands of political action."³³

One might argue, as Igor Zabel has, that in this sense, reism had been political from the start. It was this kind of politicality, I believe, that Zabel meant when he wrote

³² Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1969), 5-6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

that,

in the context of reism, the avant-garde impulse of OHO, which manifested itself in aesthetic and social provocation, acquired a particular meaning. It was understood as a way of pointing out the differences, and the reality, usually hidden beneath conceptual and functional conventions.³⁴

This undoubtedly continued to be the case in OHO's later practice, as well, but the quality of their social engagement did change in 1968. Through their increasingly frequent urban interventions, OHO started to create literally a Marcusean "aesthetic universe" in which the group could realize the "collective practice of creating an environment...in which the non-aggressive, erotic, receptive faculties of man ...strive for the pacification of man and nature."³⁵ Indeed, the locations of the group's activities would, by the summer of 1969, shift into nature; but it was the earlier need and ability to invent ways to transform or co-opt public spaces in the city that responded to Marcuse's call and could also claim to skirt his anxieties about the compartmentalization of such activities in a few small locations, the art world – unavailable to OHO at that moment – prominent among them.

Marcuse argued that even if it was compartmentalized, "artificial and 'private' liberation" of the rebels who "link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception" still "anticipate[d], in a distorted manner, an exigency of the social liberation: the revolution must be at the same time be a revolution in perception which will accompany the material and intellectual reconstruction of society, creating the new aesthetic environment."³⁶

Marcuse also suggested that thanks to the aesthetic drive of the "new sensibility,"

³⁴ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 108.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 37.

“the value and function of art are undergoing essential changes.” While “the new object of art is not yet ‘given,’ ...the familiar object has become impossible, false.” At his most optimistic, he suggested that

“The ‘meditations’ which would make...rebellious art a liberating force on the societal scale... would reside in modes of work and pleasure, of thought and behavior, in a technology and in a natural environment which express the aesthetic ethos of socialism. This may be the future, but the future ingresses into the present: in its negativity, the desublimating art and anti-art of today "anticipate" a stage where society's capacity to produce may be akin to the creative capacity of art, and the construction of the world of art akin to the reconstruction of the real world - union of liberating art and liberating technology...By virtue of this anticipation, the disorderly, uncivil, farcical, artistic desublimation of culture constitutes an essential element of radical politics: of the subverting forces in transition.³⁷

Playing with Politics on Film

Generalizing them into a unified whole, the art historian and theorist Miško Šuvaković has described “OHO’s films made in the mid-60s” as a “part of the ‘countercultural urban’ gestures of resistance” that “suggest ‘a hooligan way of life’” and emphasize the resistance found in youth culture.³⁸ The films he cites as evidence include *Eve of Destruction*, *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*, and *Film and Author Make Love*, though what should, logically, be the most salient to Šuvaković’s argument are the filmed urban happenings which the group staged throughout the fateful year of 1968. These, however, reveal if anything, OHO’s profoundly ambivalent relationship to political engagement.

³⁷ Ibid., 48.

³⁸ Šuvaković, *Skrite zgodovine skupine OHO*, 55. More broadly, Šuvaković has extensively discussed OHO’s history as a manifestation of social transgression and subversion by the deployment of alternative approaches to “sexuality, politicality and alternative urban behavior” and the “post-1968 figure of the resister and carrier of utopian demands which occurred after the creation of ‘new sensibility.’” Ibid., 39-40. While his argument certainly applies to a portion of OHO’s works, which he discusses in *Skrite zgodovine skupine OHO*, his most recent book about the group, the overall approach seems to me to be too reductive of OHO’s oeuvre as a whole.

There is, on the one hand, direct evidence that members of the OHO circle understood themselves as participating in the politics of the New Left. As Šuvaković, again, has noted, the special issue of the journal *Problemi* titled *Katalog* (1968) contains at least one text that explicitly links the ideas that percolated in OHO's circle to the New Left and specifically to the writings of Herbert Marcuse. In his two-page manifesto, "Revolution does not have a project," the sociologist and future Lacanian Marxist Rastko Močnik articulated political demands identical to those of the Western New Left. The manifesto linked poetry and politics into a single whole by proclaiming "Revolution is a permanent revolution: poetic subversion"³⁹ and promoted the twin responses of sexual libidinal politics and subversion through artistic practice as the basis of what Šuvaković calls the "urban and non-directional politicality of youth on the Ljubljana scene."⁴⁰

It was also close to the time of the publication of *Katalog* that staged events that claimed urban space as OHO's own reached their culmination in 1968 and were in several instances filmed by Križnar. The earliest such film, *Eve of Destruction*, actually dates to 1966 and records Marko Pogačnik's one-man anti-Vietnam protest, which consisted of Pogačnik alternating between anti-war sentiments and reist non-sense and drawings while the camera followed his hand closely, much as it did in other films that strove to capture the materiality of written language.

The directness of Pogačnik's appeal both to a specific political cause and to instrumentally political speech (an act that seems to cancel out reism's desire for

³⁹ Rastko Močnik, "Revolucija Je Brez Projekta," *Problemi (Katalog)* (Ljubljana), no. 67-68 (July-August 1968): 109.

⁴⁰ Šuvaković, *Skrite zgodovine skupine OHO*, 69-70. The earliest article written by Močnik that I have located was published in *Tribuna* (December 16, 1964, XIV:29, p.4) and was titled "Duh očetov" ["Spirit of the Fathers"]. Already at that point, Močnik was discussing contemporary problems with "cultural-political, i.e., political-cultural machinations" that centered around the authorities' attempts to control magazine editors and argued for the need for the young generation to transcend the dualities and oppositional logic of the older generation.

estrangement from the immediate political and social reality), however, contrasts sharply with such actions as the one captured in *Dok. Film* (1968), in which the film-maker asks passers-by to wink into his camera and juxtaposes these soundless interactions with images of “winking” objects, such as car headlights, a stop-light, and a woman’s ring. These very simple gestures still hearken to a reist preoccupation with difference found in seriality, with objects and body parts that have agency, and with vision as a way of taking in the world without the prejudice of selection. They also acquire a subversive potential by making use of the language of the city (whose advertising posters also “wink”) and striving for direct engagement with residents unfamiliar with reist dogma.

Yet the winking is in no way a direct protest. It is a non-confrontational action and like best reist work, it blurs the line between literal and symbolic engagement. It suggests the possibility of breaking up habitual modes of perception in a literal way (since it affects vision) and in actual space. It also becomes symbolic of the possibility of interpersonal understanding when it requires a brief but suggestive moment of engagement and trust between strangers (and comes, of course, with the cultural baggage of the wink as a sign of both flirtation and camaraderie). All of this, moreover, hints at the Marcusean values of liberated eroticism and social solidarity, but does so in a deliberately roundabout way.

A similar tactic built around the desire to change perception while laying claim to the space of the city can be found in the *Urban Theater (Urbani teater)*, performance, which was recorded in Belgrade in 1969 during the BITEF festival and was re-created later that year as *A Walk with a Whistle on the Streets of Ljubljana (Vaja s piščalko po ljubljanskih ulicah)* on the streets of Ljubljana. This event put a greater emphasis on

collective action and consisted of an actual walk of a group of participants through a city following a leader with a whistle. When the leader blew the whistle, the participants were meant to freeze in their exact position, moving again only when the whistle was blown a second time. (This, one might say, was a performance that stressed aural attentiveness in the city, just as *Dok. Film* stressed the visual, with the two of them covering both of the senses that the word “OHO” describes). One anecdotal but important piece of information about the performance in Belgrade sheds light on OHO’s relationship to political dissent. According to Naško Križnar, before the walk began, some local “provocateur” suggested that it should go past the major governmental buildings of the capital, which was likely to cause a run-in with the authorities next to buildings under heavy police surveillance. The organizers of the walk, however, were not looking for that kind of attention; what they valued instead was the fact that a small crowd of strangers who observed the unusual procession on the streets actually joined those who were coming from BITEF.⁴¹

In Ljubljana, OHO members (most consistently, these actions were carried out by Milenko Matanović, David Nez, and Andraž Šalamun, with Naško Križnar behind the camera and a number of others in attendance or participating) staged an even more theatrical performance in late 1968 when they conducted *The Burial of the Pharaoh* (*Pokop faraona*). In this procession, which passed through the center of the city, Matanović, Nez, and Šalamun carried a tightly wrapped woman’s body while themselves covered by a black tarp, with only their heads sticking out of it.⁴² Five others carried the edges of the large black piece of fabric and draped it over their heads while another eight

⁴¹ Naško Križnar, interview by author, tape recording, Ljubljana, September 18, 2009.

⁴² This is the same kind of tarp that played a prominent role in both *Film in Avtor*, which was made earlier that year, and *Triglav*, which was made later.

followed behind carrying a white cloth. The film ends abruptly and has very rapid jumps towards the end, but from the footage that is there, it's clear that the performance ended in snow-covered Zvezda park with the tarp laid down, the "body" covered collectively with some snow, and the fabric finally bundled together, possibly with the "pharaoh" still wrapped inside it.

The political content of this film, which lacks even a musical soundtrack, is oblique at best, but what the film does help to picture is the distinctive iconography of black cloth against white snow.⁴³ Borne, no doubt, out of expediency, the snowy backdrops of such films as *On the Road to Dajla, Marsh (Barje)* (1968), and *White People (Beli Ljudje)* (1970) also carry connotations of purity, renewal, and the erasure of the marks of a familiar landscape. Against the blankness of the white backgrounds, the strangeness of OHO's actions could both truly emerge and yet seem as if it were normal in this filmic world where a dark cloth, for instance, could have the power of turning individuals into a communal body.

Both the color scheme and the unusual use of the tarp would recur again in *Triglav*, the last performance of 1968 staged by Matanović and Nez together with Drago Dellabernardina, which has now arguably become OHO's most famous work (Fig. 36). In it, narrative (absent even in the form of an action with an identifiable beginning, end, or logic) reached a new level of abstraction, paving the way for OHO's increased later tendency to self-referentiality. Mt. Triglav, a peak in the Julian Alps, is Slovenia's tallest mountain and a central symbol of national identification. Its name literally means "three-headed" since the mountain has three peaks. Taking that fact as their cue, the three young

⁴³ A film made earlier that year, *Portraits and a Worm (Portreti in črv)* also shows semi-staged performances in Zvezda park that make use of a large black piece of plastic sheeting and offer close-up portraits of several of OHO's most active members at the time.

men found a spot in Zvezda Park and turned themselves into a structure loosely resembling the mountain, with their three heads sticking out from under black cloth to form the three “peaks.” They then stayed in that arrangement for about an hour, remaining silent and only putting a hand-written sign that read “Triglav” in front of themselves in the snow.

Still true to the spirit of reism, the performance used a pun to take a metaphor to its logical literal conclusion, making visible the linguistic sleights of hand that turn the literal into the abstract. And in this film, moreover, added to the reist equation of things and people, the political undertone of the action is hard to ignore. Here, three individuals’ self-identification with the symbol of national identity becomes so grotesquely, hilariously complete that they turn themselves into a mute object that would resemble the anthropomorphized mountain. At the same time, it is again significant to a discussion of OHO’s political stance to note that in this performance as in many others, the film stock registers either minimal speech or – especially in *Triglav* – its noticeable absence. Indeed, some of the most interesting footage in Križnar’s *Pokop faraona* and *Triglav* are shots of passers-by who watch with curiosity, bemusement, or even certain consternation the silent affront presented by the strange performances.

Indeed, *Triglav* presents the epitome of what Šuvaković calls “urban and non-directional” politicality, yet even that mode of engagement with politics proved to be difficult for OHO to sustain judging by the relocation from 1969 on of most of the group’s actions away from the city and into the countryside or the separate arena of the art world.

What was central to shaping OHO's political ambivalence and making it into an existential position was the socio-political environment which constantly threatened to politicize any gesture. Under these circumstances, OHO seems to have deemed it most worthwhile to use art to make the political and social background visible only in the negative, by acting *as if* it did not exist, *as if* it was not a shaping force. Thus, the apoliticality of OHO's ambivalence and the emphasis on such features as the erasure of the background or silence was, in fact, arrived at politically, but with time began to appear more and more like a complete turning away.⁴⁴

By 1969, the ambivalence of their desire to be politically engaged, even in an "undirectional" way through urban interventions, manifested in the content of the films. The only films made that year that actively engaged with the dynamics of the urban environment were two reprises of earlier performances (*A Walk with Whistle* re-done in Ljubljana and *Triglav* performed in the Serbian town of Novi Sad) and a one-man urban walk by Tomaž Šalamun, which also took place in Novi Sad. Among the series of so-called *Projects* recorded on film that year, *Project 6 (Projekt 6)* – which involved the transportation by manual rolling through the city of an airplane tire that was exhibited in Moderna Galerija during the *Atelje 69* exhibition – did take account of urban topography, but seems to have done so solely out of practical necessity, and the film footage curiously ignores the reactions of passers by, which earlier had been of interest to the film-maker. All of the other film projects showed a tendency towards private experiments carried out by individuals or within the group with its smaller membership. If Močnik gives voice in

⁴⁴ This makes all the more striking the reversal that took place in Slovene radicalism by the 1980s when the musical band Laibach and the artist collective IRWIN, working closely with theater groups and forming *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, chose the strategy of over-identification with structures of power to register their dissent.

Katalog to a post-Marcusean activist yearning for the demolition of the autonomy of art so as to make it possible for art to show itself in the world as a platform of living human processes, then this was the leap from which OHO actually pulled back as it began to exhibit more actively in 1969.⁴⁵

The unstable balance of opposites

As I have noted before, OHO was associated with but not identical to *Katalog*, and the visual artists' relationship to politicality seems to have been much more troubled than that of the writers and the philosophers. It alternated between moments of undeniably Marcusean excitement and a clear continued desire for an autonomous sphere of art. Indeed, the last two-and-a-half years of the group's existence showed their greatest political value through the instability, which, as I will discuss later, echoes Marcuse's own misgivings about the possibility and potential of integrating the aesthetic into life.

At the same time, what I believe was crucially important to shaping this ambivalence and making it into an existential position was the socio-political environment which already constantly threatened to politicize any gesture. One finds an allusion to this fact, for instance, in Marko Pogačnik's comic strip in *Katalog*, in which the new name given to the revolting lightbulb – “the resister” – evokes not just an abstract idea of resistance, but also the immediate WWII past, which Yugoslavia's “political people” marshaled in the 1960s as a way of suppressing discontent from a younger generation. The same insistently present political background came to the surface in 1969 during an incident in which Tomaž Šalamun's one-man exhibition in Kranj was shut

⁴⁵ Miško Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., 2009), 69-70.

down after its first day. Civil liberties in Yugoslavia went far enough to allow letters and editorial comments of protest to be published in a number of newspapers, but the exhibition was not re-opened.

Although in retrospect (and almost two decades after the historical narrative of Yugoslavia as a state had ended), members of the group have often noted in the interviews I recorded that the pleasure they derived from OHO's work came in large part from its ability to distance them from the glut of overfamiliar political rhetoric, it seems clear that the ubiquity of the rhetoric, the fact that its insistent background never quite disappeared, was influential on the forms that OHO's creativity took.⁴⁶ And under the

⁴⁶ In doing interviews with OHO members, I have come across recollections of run-ins with authorities that did not warrant the descriptor "repressive" and which they downplayed, but which do, nevertheless, testify to the fact that the artists were living in a state of constant awareness of the possibility of retaliation or a sudden surge of interest from the authorities. Milenko Matanović claimed that OHO's apoliticality was the best thing about being in the collective. This assertion suggests to me that OHO's games were a response to the overt domination of ideology in public life, but that in this, they themselves contained a subterranean political content that was present and understood by the participants. The same was true of Marko Pogačnik's practice of signifying resistance by wearing the jacket that belonged to his father while the latter was a partisan, a member of the Yugoslav resistance movement against German occupation during World War II. The story Matanović tells (see footnote 42 above) of being made aware of state surveillance indicates that the resentment of the state and its intervention in the affairs of its citizens was not unfounded. The stories Pogačnik tells of letters coming in to *Tribuna* on several occasions to protest its decisions to publish challenging or critical content actually indicates that there was room for debate and active engagement of citizens in institutions of civil society, but Pogačnik's own experiences as a school-boy and the run-ins that poets like Tomaž Šalamun had with authorities suggest that the state's heavy-handedness in matters of dissent or deviation from ideological purity put a damper on the trust young Slovenes had in civil society to achieve their political or cultural goals.

One episode that sheds light on the state's practices of ambivalent censorship of the arts in the mid-60s is the story of Vladimir Gajšek. Gajšek was a nineteen-year-old poet and philosophy student who in January 1966 was sentenced by a Ljubljana court to two weeks of imprisonment and a year of probation for publishing a poem that contained "a really scurrilous and offensive description of the Holy Family." Slobodan Stankovic, writing in 1966 a report on the case for Radio Free Europe, noted the profound irony of a court in an officially socialist, anti-religious country passing such a sentence on a poet for offending religious sensibilities. For my purposes, however, the case demonstrates the way in which artistic and literary activities, though largely left alone by the state, did remain subject to its scrutiny and could result in criminal persecution, thus also giving counter-cultural activity an additional subversive edge. For information on Gajšek, see Slobodan Stankovic, "Yugoslav Communist Court Punishes Atheist Poet for Offending Religious Feelings," in *Radio Free Europe Research* (Open Society Archives, 1966), available on-line at <<http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/76-4-274.shtml>>, accessed November 13, 2010. Although he was not sentenced on the basis of the infamous Article 133 of the Penal Code of Yugoslavia, moreover, the article on the basis of which Gajšek was tried and sentenced was one of the provisions of the penal code that stipulated punishment for actions against the social order of the state and that came to be known as the so-called "verbalni delikt" or "verbal act" which was sufficient grounds for

circumstances, it seems, OHO largely deemed it most worthwhile to use art to make the political and social background visible only in the negative, by acting *as if* it did not exist, *as if* it was not a shaping force. Thus, the apoliticality of OHO's ambivalence and the emphasis on form was, in fact, arrived at politically, but with time began to appear more and more like a complete turning away.⁴⁷

Instability and fragility were also thematized in a very literal way in the formal qualities of the group's new works, shown at *Atelje 69*, OHO's largest exhibition to date, which took place in Moderna Galerija in March of 1969, extending further the experiments begun in Zagreb. The two Zagreb works by Tomaž Šalamun and Milenko Matanović that presented mounds of matter now turned into a veritable proliferation of messy materiality (Figs. 37 and 38). Here, Milenko Matanović showed coils of rope, heaped strips of foam rubber, large tangles of metal wire (*Springs*), and a chair sitting in a pile of hemp (*Hemp and Chair*), along with a large airplane tire into which audience

prosecuting political dissidents. See Jerneja Kos, "T.I. "Verbalni Delikt" V Sloveniji V Osemdesetih Letih" (University of Ljubljana, 2004), 8-10. Available on-line at <<http://dk.fdv.uni-lj.si/dela/Kos-Jerneja.PDF>>. Thus, in an environment where actions in the public sphere could unpredictably turn into incidents with ramifications of varying degrees of severity, OHO's interventions into daily urban life, though enjoyable and non-confrontational, would also seem to operate in the spirit of the call for a guerilla war with the culture at large made by Germano Celant in the first manifesto of Arte Povera, with whom OHO's practice had increasingly greater affinities since [the second half of] 1968.

At the same time, the state's response was also hard to predict. When staging the performance of *A Walk with Whistle* in Belgrade, according to Naško Križnar, the organizers planned their route in such a way as to avoid going past governmental buildings lest they should provoke the suspicion and wrath of the authorities. Yet in Ljubljana, Vojin Kovač-Chubby could take a walk in his pajamas and make the news without being harassed. Miško Šuvaković offers a list of ways in which OHO members faced "political violence," such as a physical attack on Marko Pogačnik in his native Kranj when he wore a shirt with the sign, "I am a hooligan"; the firing of Tomaž Šalamun [presumably from his job as a curator at Moderna Galerija] or the later "permanent police and military surveillance over the commune in Šempas and occasional provocations in the early and mid 70s." Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho*, 43. Šuvaković argues that this was part of a larger Yugoslav state strategy of "neutralizing" cultural and social transgression through more subtle means than elsewhere in the East, yet it's hard to see it as a consistent cultural policy, per se. If anything, the unpredictability of the state response to matters of dissent or cultural difference in the cultural sphere indicated a deeper ambivalence about its identity that Yugoslavia embodied as a state and it is this ambivalence, in turn, that OHO's political positions, such as they were, also reflected.

⁴⁷ This makes all the more striking the reversal that took place in Slovene radicalism by the 1980s when the musical band Laibach and the artist collective IRWIN chose the strategy of over-identification with structures of power to register their dissent.

members were invited to climb at the opening; and the transportation of which away from the museum turned into the event recorded in *Project 6*. Andraž Šalamun showed two wheelbarrows arranged around a pile of dirt, a pile of sawdust (which he tossed by the handful into the air at the opening of the exhibition), a box full of filings, a box of black oozing tar, and live rabbits, which were free to hop around the exhibition. David Nez' works differed slightly; and one of them in particular, titled *Cosmogony*, pointed towards OHO's next change of direction (Fig. 39), but his untidy arrangement of rusted metal sheets (*Plates*) and a rather precarious-looking arrangement of *Clay and Two Planks* fit in perfectly with the other works.

The creation of fragile configurations of materials and the evocation of instability, arbitrariness in form, temporariness, messiness and entropy were taken even further by Srečo Dragan, who collaborated with the group briefly and exhibited in Moderna Galerija together with Marko Pogačnik at the second *Atelje 69* exhibition, which followed immediately after the first one (described above). Dragan used a hand-cranked shredder to fill whole bags with shredded paper, let a movie projector run free so as to produce an enormous pile of film on the ground, and splashed soapy water out of a bucket at the opening -- the ultimate fluid, shape-shifting installation, which was echoed during the opening performance at Tomaž Šalamun's ill-fated one-man exhibition in Kranj when he used yeasty dough to form the word "morje" ("sea") over the shapes of several prone young men lying down on the floor in antiquated military uniforms (Fig. 40).

The fact that the exhibitions in this period contained a preponderance of imagery of fragility, ineffability, and fluidity was in an important way a result of interpersonal dynamics and unpremeditated circumstances. As I had mentioned earlier, in 1968, Marko

Pogačnik, who had been a strong driving force behind OHO as its founder and who tended towards great systematicity in his practice and writing, was summoned for one year of military service, as was his literary collaborator, Iztok Geister. In their absence, Matanović, Nez, Andraž Šalamun, and Naško Križnar collaborated with their circle of friends on performances and films, introducing elements of play, spontaneity and temporal ephemerality which could lead logically to the anti-form exhibitions the next year.

It was, however, the decision by the slightly older Tomaž Šalamun's to join his brother Andraž, Milenko Matanović and David Nez that pushed the group into a more mainstream direction and actually re-formed it as a defined group. Šalamun, a poet by calling, but an art historian by education, was working as a curator at Moderna Galerija and was attuned to contemporary artistic trends. What he brought to the group was not only professional savvy, which redefined the group's directions starting with *Pradedje*, but also, as Igor Zabel has noted, an artistic sentiment of poetic arbitrariness – the perfect visual embodiment of Barthes' idea of modern poetry⁴⁸ – which clashed noticeably with the strictness, “severity,” and a tendency towards systematicity found in Marko Pogačnik's thinking. Unlike Pogačnik, who strove to extend his philosophical reist vision, at least in theory, to all things, Šalamun “stressed the poetic effect of his chosen materials... and would choose and isolate individual things or events and transpose them to the context of art.”⁴⁹

As Šalamun tells it, his artworks were the result of inexplicable, almost mystical visions – sudden intense moments of noticing a particular object (a book-case in a library

⁴⁸ See footnotes 20 and 21 above.

⁴⁹ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 120.

in Paris, a stack of hay on the side of the highway), which he found so mesmerizing that he thought they needed to be put into the gallery, presumably to make others cognizant of their specialness. Philosophically, of course, this desire was the exact opposite of Marko Pogačnik's wish to systematically equalize all objects, both relative to others of their own kind and relative to whole of the universe. To Pogačnik's equalizing modes of representation – plaster casts, line drawings – Šalamun offered the readymade placed in the gallery and meant to emphasize the “personality” of the special chosen object. Likewise, Šalamun offered his own very different personality – quite possibly the very opposite of Pogačnik's. Intuitive, patrician, and unsystematic, he undoubtedly encouraged those works of his three collaborators that moved away both from language-based exercises and from the firm ideological commitments of reism as defined by Pogačnik and Geister.⁵⁰

Thus, the tension between arbitrariness and systematicity, which was fundamental to OHO's later work, can be seen as emerging out of a simple clash of personalities. Indeed, the group's character would change yet again after Pogačnik's return to his artistic activities, with the group gradually expanding the scope of its activities back out, but in a more focused, structured way. But the different approaches also transcended the personalities, and this tension remained a feature of OHO's increasingly complicated balancing act even after Tomaž Šalamun moved away from OHO's activities during 1969.

Thus, even amid the strong emphasis on unformed or minimally altered, often soft or malleable raw materials, which dominated the work of Matanović, Šalamun, and Nez

⁵⁰ Paradoxically, although the term was used by Taras Kermauner to describe Tomaž Šalamun's poetry, Šalamun himself lay no claim to it and has, to my knowledge, never used it in discussing his own work. See also Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 119.

in the *Atelje 69* exhibition, one also found David Nez' *Cosmogony*, a work meant to give visual form to the idea of order in the universe and to bring this order to the scale of an individual human being contemplating his own breath. Set apart in a separate room, Nez's work offered a therapeutic attempt at using metaphor to visualize the desire for finding spiritual order in the material world whose chaos and irreducibility to so much as a stable form the rest of the show emphasized.

This difference of approach became a central one after Marko Pogačnik reintroduced systematicity as the central driving force of his work in the exhibition that was the second part of *Atelje 69*.⁵¹ The "return to rational, systematic aspect" of work, as Igor Zabel notes, proved very important, though Pogačnik's work formally seemed to undermine the order he wished to program into it.

The centerpiece of his half of *Atelje 69* was a room-size installation of 156 mobiles made of programmed graphic series, hung over a floor on which the central program was written out (Fig. 25). Organized according to this code, Pogačnik's arrangement of individual cards into mobiles seemed to offer a rigorous, disciplined answer to the proliferation of unstructured materials found in the first exhibition. And yet the code's deliberate complicatedness, as well as its ultimate arbitrariness, surely produced unease and doubt as to its claims. It demanded a large investment of time in order for its systematic quality to emerge or be made evident through the knowledge of its hypothetical existence. Yet the apparent lack of not just narrative or meaning, but any sense of continuity at all between all the equal, but also equally arbitrary possibilities of arrangement offered no encouragement to make this investment of time. In this, the drawing series found on the cards were no different from Pogačnik's drawings for earlier

⁵¹ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 122-123.

books, such as *Pegam in Lambergar* (1968). There too the fragmented line drawings, often rife with a sense of possibility or expectancy achieved through abrupt ends and quick sudden curves, studiously avoided correlation to text and hinted at a larger whole that always eluded coming together (Fig. 41). Now, that very same sense was expanded spatially as Pogačnik reused earlier series,⁵² turned them into a three-dimensional “environment,” and found a way to both foreground and defy his viewer’s desire to make mental maps, sequences, and patterns into instruments of enlightenment.

The peak of this tension between extreme systematicity and extreme arbitrariness can be found back on the printed page in the special issue of the journal *Problemi* titled *Programmed Art* [*Programirana Umetnost* or *PU*], which came out in January 1970 (and, tellingly, contained an article “The views of the ideology of the ‘New Left’” in the non-programmed half of the publication).⁵³ The issue was edited by Iztok Geister, Rastko Mocnik, and Marko Pogačnik, and was one of the last two projects (the film *Beli Ljudi* being the other) that brought OHO as the smaller artistic collective into collaboration with their erstwhile broader circle. Here, OHO returned to the terrain of its members’ earliest interests in language, but inflected now with a desire to construct new systems and structures of the material (language) in whose unpredictability and elusiveness the writers and artists had once rejoiced.

The “program” for the issue, written up in August 1969, was explained at its very beginning. It divided the space of the magazine’s pages into four “channels,” with each channel occupying a different quadrant of every successive page. Each text was

⁵² Pogačnik’s earlier series of small and medium-sized drawings depicted knives, bananas, ears, parts of a gun, stalks, hands with matches, schematized family scenes, and the image of a naked woman from the comic strip *Ali me nočite*.

⁵³ *Problemi (PU)*, (Ljubljana) VIII:85 (January 1970).

considered a series whose units would be arranged sequentially within one of the four channels. The series themselves were arranged in the journal from lightest to heaviest, the weight (in grams) derived from weighing the manuscript pages sent by the authors.

Of the fourteen projects published in the journal, four used the alphabet as its raw material while one more hinted at it negatively by using keyboard signs and strokes to produce abstract design patterns. Two more produced systematic permutations of content to be used for a comic strip or a drama, and it's clear that for its editors, the project foregrounded reading and literacy as the comfortable activities they wanted their audience to reassess. It is as if the same people who three years prior sought to defamiliarize language down to letters as individual incomprehensible signs now sought to use them to build a system of their own, to create a new kind of literacy, a literacy which did all it could to force the reader to engage with a meta-text, which was equal parts comprehensible and convoluted (thus, for instance, if one needed to cite, one could not give a citation to a page number and would have to describe the content of a given page in painstaking detail or find another method of navigating the journal). Marko Pogačnik as one of the editors stated himself that *PU* as a whole was a "supertext," "legible on the basis of the different graphic-visual structure of the adjoining texts-series."⁵⁴

And yet like the individual cards in his environmental installation, the individual texts in *PU* did their best to subvert the meta-text by their overprogrammed chaos. The more the unusual division of the pages succeeded in producing a genuinely communal project, the more it enticed one to look for dialogue and correlation between texts whose

⁵⁴ Marko Pogačnik, "Grafični Material," *Problemi* (Ljubljana) VIII:87 (March 1970): 32 ("Aktualnosti" supplement).

mutual suitability did not, in fact, play a role in selecting their placement. And the harder one looked for the loss of individual voice which the anonymous scrambling of text and image would imply, the more one found that individual preferences subverted the journal's premises.

Thus, the projects published included not only the stenciled regularity of Marko Pogačnik's comic strips, Matjaž Hanžek's imaginary alphabet (Fig. 22), Franci Zagoričnik's carpets of type-writer dashes and dots, or Naško Križnar's photographs of a window taken at half-hour intervals (Fig. 42), all of which worked hard to maintain pattern and regularity within a set of arbitrarily selected criteria, but also the absolute arbitrariness found in David Nez's photographs of random combinations of granite cubes and white fabric and black pipes wrapped in white paper (in neither case were all the possible permutations exhausted) or Milenko Matanović's photographs capturing four strokes of an oar and the reaction of the water.

Even the practicalities of journal publication conspired against the editors' desire for systematicity when it was only feasible to publish 25% of Pogačnik's *Pointing Finger*, a project in which he typed up all the four-letter combinations that it is possible to create using the 12 letters accessible to the two pointing fingers on a standard Slovene typewriter. Thus, paradoxically, a project that was meant to guarantee the presence (under selected criteria) of all the possible words in all languages that use Latin script, to exclude "any selection" or "any authorial or cultural influence," and to counter the fact that "culture blocks 98% of all the possible words" in the end suffered itself from the very limitations it meant to expose.⁵⁵ While its systematic *idea* of confronting a national lexicon with the narrowness of its scope could be made visible and graspable (and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

required pages upon pages of non-words to sink in), its very realization proved in the same breath the inevitable need for authorial intervention and arbitrary limit-setting.

Igor Zabel has written that OHO “used two seemingly contradictory strategies – rational programming and coincidence and play” – when excluding “all subjective arbitrariness in the construction of the works,” noting that “one might argue that even a strictly programmed work includes the element of game, since a rational program might be seen as a set of game rules.”⁵⁶ “One striking and, indeed, almost contradictory aspect of reistic production,” he goes on,

was the combination of seemingly opposite principles: a strictly systematic, even mathematically based approach was joined with the idea of free play and the use of paradox and coincidence. This seeming contradiction stems partly from the differences in the artists’ characters, but it is also, and more importantly, related to the different sources the OHO artists used.⁵⁷

Zabel’s tracing of OHO’s historical roots to Dada and *Tank* is invaluable, as are the convincing parallels he draws between certain OHO projects and the Anglo-American Conceptualism rooted in French semiotics and analytical philosophy. But what needs to be articulated much more emphatically is that the logical incongruities and even failures I have been discussing above were not *seemingly* or *almost* contradictory. They were, in fact, very clearly self-contradictory and they were built into OHO’s practice – largely unconsciously, but also very consistently – as a crucial element that constituted the OHO project’s most utopian element and made the group so singularly emblematic of the “new sensibility.” This internal contradictoriness, moreover, can be traced back to OHO’s sources in the mid-60s which, as I have argued in Chapter I, consist both of an interest in analytical philosophy, which Anglo-American Conceptualism certainly shared, and an

⁵⁶ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

interest in experimental poetic practices, which in the West remained by and large unknown to the visual arts.

It is through the struggle to reconcile irreconcilable philosophical differences that OHO explicated the logic of the world by failing at it. In light of the group's forays into social and political realms, moreover, their actions could be read metaphorically as models of behavior not just in the natural, but also social environment. The very ambivalence of wavering between the desire for absolute consistency and an embrace of chaotic chance arguably mimicked on a meta level the political situation in which access to a relatively large number of sanctioned possibilities existed in the shadow of potentially sudden, unpredictable retribution. OHO's ambivalence thus reproduced the experience of needing to understand the rules of a system so as to push the limits of what its logic would allow while also trying to preempt its unpredictable response. The difference, of course, was that OHO reproduced this experience in absurdist form and in a separate realm, which offered the artists the psychic liberation of standing for both the system and its subversion, the chance to re-make systematic thought to their own ends and needs.

Likewise, the experience of living in a place where all possibilities were constantly measured as relative to two co-existing but incommensurably different worlds (East and West) produced another powerful structural tension in OHO's work, one between a wish for absolute transparency (for things to be simply what and as they are) and a continuous production of works that beg to be interpreted relative to the meta-narrative of the group project as metaphors for social relations. To maintain their freedom of action, in both a practical and philosophical sense, the group was adamant about its

desire for very literal interpretations of its works. The idea of “transparency” is almost an obsession in the rhetoric surrounding OHO’s later works. And yet given the clear shift in OHO’s work in 1969 to the examination of relationships and processes rather than pure materials, the transparency constantly threatened to slip into that of a metaphor, allowing one to see clearly through the work to another level of meaning or purpose.⁵⁸

Withdrawal into nature and the metaphysics of transparency

During and after the summer projects of 1969, the group increasingly withdrew from the urban scene to work in secluded natural settings. What changed at that time, as Braco Rotar noted of the projects published in *Katalog 2* and especially of *Summer Projects (Poletni projekti)*, was their process of production, wherein individual objects gave way to the organizing and “semiotic restructuring” of the whole environment, be it by means of systematic research of materials or their surprising juxtapositions. In the new work, Rotar concluded, it was the relationship of all the signs together that mattered, and this insight should be taken to heart when considering the metaphoric possibilities in OHO’s later work.⁵⁹

At the same time, OHO’s earliest reist goal of avoiding vague and dubious abstractions and universals was never revoked and never completely disappeared, so that both the artists themselves and the critics writing about their work treated with great suspicion the prospect of OHO’s work becoming illustrative of traditional meta-narratives (such as that of a “national art”) or turning into a cryptic cipher for values

⁵⁸ “Compared to *Great-Grandfathers* exhibition, the shows in Ljubljana and Kranj in the spring of 1969 made a shift from mere fascination with materials to the examination of relationships and processes. This aspect became fully developed later that year with what came to be known as the Summer Projects.” *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁵⁹ Braco Rotar, “Položaj Ohojevcev,” *Problemi*, no. 85 (January 1970): 21. Translations are my own.

beyond itself. The dream of transparent meaning could be found in the remarkable faith that Tomaž Brejc expressed when he wrote in his review of the *Pradedje* exhibition that “the structure of visual language,” if carefully and systematically observed, would yield something beyond “ceaseless interpretation,” would reveal an ultimate, incontrovertible truth or an entirely new set of relationships defining the purpose and form of art.⁶⁰

Similarly, Braco Rotar concluded the text I cited in the previous paragraph with the assertion that OHO’s

criterion of formulation cannot contain any illusionism or mystification. OHO is unique in Slovenia because its works are based not on semantic (illusionistic or mystificatory), but explicitly on semiotic transparency. At the same time, it’s the first artistic product of a group which comes exclusively from an urban environment and does not exhibit a pseudo-Rousseau-esque nostalgia for nature and rural life, which is the most common mystification in Slovene and Yugoslav “ambient.”⁶¹

Miško Šuvaković summarizes the same idea in even more extreme form when he writes that OHO offered

literal and existential gesture in place of the expected modernist metaphorical trace. ...The OHO subject was not a lone, anxious or horror-stricken creator...who with symbols, metaphors and allegories expresses his existential homelessness. The subject of...OHO is a young rebel, who goes out into the street and lives, dies, rearranges the world, publicly opens up violence or kindness, provokes the taboos of autoeroticism, homosexuality, and heterosexuality, lives with his urban tribe.⁶²

Yet the stress on the urban nature of the collective seems like a case of the lady protesting too much given that so much of OHO’s late work took place in nature and that the group clearly felt this was their strongest work. (The best surviving record of most of these extremely ephemeral pieces is the film *Summer Projects*, which OHO prepared as its contribution to the *Information* show at MoMA in 1970). Going into nature, OHO

⁶⁰ Brejc, "Komentar K Zagrebški Razstavi," 32. Translations are my own.

⁶¹ Rotar, "Položaj Ohojevcev," 22. Translations are my own.

⁶² Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho*, 55-56. Translations are my own.

artists surely understood the baggage of associations with the Romantic and the sublime (as well as national identity) that came with the tradition of working with or in landscape. It's not for nothing that Tomaž Brejc, a friend of the OHO group and their first historian, called their late work "transcendental Conceptualism."⁶³ Yet true to both the legacy of reism and the "entrance/exit" tactics of commitment, OHO was reluctant to discuss its work in metaphysical terms.

In a 1970 interview that appeared after the publication of *PU*, Marko Pogačnik gave a revealing response to a concern expressed by another member of the *Problemi* circle that in the absence of metaphysical content, the work turned into pure aestheticism and empty form. Indeed, Pogačnik argued, the new kind of art for which he stood had "no trace of the metaphysical." The new kind of creativity ("*novotvorba*") was based on completely different selective criteria from those known to traditional creative activity ("*tvorba*"). The new kind of creativity was neither

decadence [n]or the avant-garde of traditional creation, nor ... a competing form, nor ... its successor, nor [did it mean] a nearing end of traditional creation's end. The only systematic connection between them [was] that they meet in the same media, across/through which they both socialize.

In the particular example from *PU* – Naško Križnar's rather prosaic photos of shadows falling on the façade of an unremarkable building (Fig. 42) – this new kind of art, Pogačnik argued, provided information about the "functional relationship between time and position." That is, it offered "physical, but non-visual information."⁶⁴

In speaking about the in- or non-visible, this new art could not help but enter the terrain of traditional metaphysics when trying to excise the latter to replace it by the

⁶³ Tomaž Brejc, *Oho: 1966-1971* (Ljubljana: Študentski kulturni center, 1978), 30.

⁶⁴ Pogačnik, "Grafični Material," 32 ("Aktualnosti" supplement).

relations and processes of physics proper. The substitution could – as is usually the case with historical layering – only be partial, and the observation of physical processes teetered on the edge of the metaphysical when it could not stop itself from speaking in metaphors about social relations.

This teetering was yet another hallmark of the “new sensibility,” captured by Susan Sontag in her 1965 essay “One Culture and New Sensibility” when she cited Buckminster Fuller’s observation that, “All the important technical affairs of men today are invisible.” In her own words, Sontag asserted that “new sensibility” was a response to “the unprecedented change in what rules our environment from the intelligible and visible to that which is only with difficulty intelligible, and is invisible.”⁶⁵

Finding radically new means of making the invisible visible was also the political project behind “new sensibility,” as one discovers when one considers an imaginary dialogue Marcuse staged in *One-Dimensional Man* between the poet and the rational culture-at-large. “We want to understand your poetry,” says Marcuse’s imaginary analytic committee, “and we can do so only if we can interpret your symbols, metaphors, and images in terms of ordinary language.” “Understanding of my poetry,” says the poet,

presupposes the collapse and invalidation of precisely that universe of discourse and behavior into which you want to translate it. My language can be learned like any other language, then it will appear that my symbols, metaphors, etc. are *not* symbols, metaphors, etc. but mean exactly what they say.⁶⁶

OHO’s wish, then, to come as close as possible to making the invisible visible by speaking and being understood literally was consistent both with its history and its philosophical and political commitments. Yet in absence of an audience willing to learn

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Picador USA, 2001), 301.

⁶⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 192.

the new kind of language or a social environment where such literalness could speak for itself, what OHO produced when it went into the isolated realms of nature and the gallery was metaphors of both. In this move, OHO was hardly alone since this attitude is best summarize by Robert Smithson's poignant observation that "Discursive literalness is apt to be a container for radical metaphor."⁶⁷ What set OHO apart was the lengths to which they would take their literalness, but it is the tension of the literal and metaphoric in their works from 1969 and 1970 that I first wish to address.

In these works, there were a number of consistent tropes and interests. One was the desire to track invisible forces, captured most elegantly in Milenko Matanović's *Snake* (1969) (Fig. 43), in which sticks tied together with rope and let down into the Ljubljana river moved in a surprising snaking motion, indicating the existence of an otherwise imperceptible current. Matanović also did a similar work on land, letting a roll of white paper create a path on the ground following the undulations of the minute topographic features. A similar effect was produced by the *Water-Water Dynamic* part of Marko Pogačnik's *Family of Water Air and Fire* (1969) in which a clear plastic tube full of greenish water was placed in a clear stream, suddenly alerting the viewer to the rapidity and direction of the stream's motion (the point was made hard to miss by the supplementary diagram, which provided a schema of this simple occurrence).

Clear – i.e. invisible – materials could also be used to effect change and create a metaphor for the possibility of transformation, as in David Nez's *Invisible Sculpture* (July 1969), in which the artist wound 300 m of clear plastic string all around the walls of Ljubljana castle, offering in addition to the idea of a transformed castle a film of his

⁶⁷ Quoted in Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 3.

action and a postcard of the castle with a piece of clear string attached to it. Milenko Matanović performed an even more non-intrusive and temporary rearrangement of the world in his *Wheat and Rope* (1969) (Fig. 3), while a more lasting transformation was eloquently captured by Pogačnik in the *Water-Fire Dynamic* of Pogačnik's *Family of Water Air and Fire*. Here, the burning of the clear tubes of water turned into a quasi-mystical transformation of two opposing elements through each other, explicated by an accompanying diagram of water turning into steam, combustion turning kindling turning into CO₂, and the whole process ending with a lot of air and a small amount of ash. Similar transformations were presented in the works OHO showed in Belgrade (and Novi Sad) in fall 1969 when a pipette dropped water onto a hot-plate to produce steam (Fig. 44), a candle dropped liquid wax into a basin of water to produce suddenly solidified wax, and water traveled between two buckets (one raised above another) by means of a woolen string connecting them.

The same exhibition was also one where fragility and precarious balance became a preoccupation, be it by suggestion, in Andraž Šalamun's pieces of glass (another transparent – almost invisible – material) set into hunks of plaster (Fig. 45); David Nez's piece of glass propped up between bricks and looking as if it could float; or literally in Marko Pogačnik's second "family," the *Family of Weight, Measure and Position* (1969). In this work, the actual and psychological tension produced by suspension was used in one part for a 5 kg weight suspended on an elastic nylon rope so as to glide just barely above the floor while in another, a series of smaller weights were suspended on nylon string over razor blades, which threatened to cut the string were the weights to tip slightly beyond the point of balance (Fig. 46). And as if to combine the desires latent in all the

other works of the exhibition, David Nez also precariously suspended a pane of glass on a string held in place by the suction of a plunger centimeters away from the floor. His work *Arrangement of Wooden Sticks in a Forest Upon the Principles of Tension and Weight* done earlier that year in nature took a similar risk, though the use of glass added a new dimension to the visceral experience of fragility and danger the work elicited (and could potentially inflict were the glass to break).

Even more ineffable than glass are steam and smoke, two substances that recur frequently in late OHO's iconography and actually do become invisible and merge completely with their environment once the actions that produce them are realized. Steam figured prominently as part of the elemental relationships in *Family of Water Air and Fire* and Pogačnik's similar project done with the four elements as outlined by Aristotle. It was also the end result in David Nez's project with a pipette dropping water onto a hot aluminum plate. Smoke was the sole subject of Milenko Matanović's "total environment" *Smoke*, realized in Belgrade in December 1969 when he activated a smoke bomb in an enclosed space and presented photographs of the smoke cloud and the dust that settled on the room's surfaces as records of the smoke's existence (Fig. 47).

As if to suggest that language-based discursive self-reflexivity was never far from OHO's metaphorical use of materials, David Nez created at the Aktionsraum in Muenich in 1970 a project in which the text written out on the wall and describing its own disappearance actually disappeared once its photographic negative was projected on the wall (Fig. 48). Yet self-reflexivity, too, was coded in material terms, particularly through the use of mirrors in several installations executed by David Nez in the summer of 1969 (Fig. 49). Naško Križnar – whose own camera work so often tried to draw the viewer's

attention to the presence of the necessarily invisible camera creating the film (as in, for instance, his very last OHO film, *Projekt Kamera*) – pointed out the paradox of the mirrors installed in the landscape. By obscuring and distorting the landscape while seemingly disappearing into it, the mirrors created conceptual transparency by supplying a visual embodiment of the traditional notion of art as a mirror of life.⁶⁸

The project of structuring and mastering elemental forces through cognitive mapping was another one OHO members undertook in various guises. However, the attempts to fix these projects on film often seemed to prove the point that cognitive mastery does not translate into immediate visual experience, that the works' visual realization occurs only to stress that its most important element must remain invisible. This was true, for instance, of the collective *Night Projects*, performed deliberately at a time of day when vision becomes a rather unreliable faculty, and specifically of David Nez's *Time-Space Structures* (1970). In these, a progression of increasingly more complex operations involving flares takes place at night (Fig. 50). The filmic documentation of each event is preceded by a diagram, which demonstrates with simplicity and clarity the intended cause and effect. In the simpler actions, such as the throwing of a single flare into the air, the swinging of a single flare on a rope, or the dropping of a flare from a height, the expected trajectories can be seen in the photographs and on film easily enough. As the actions get more and more complicated, however, and involve timed exposures of multiple flares lit up at different times or, more importantly, of different group members carrying flares at the same time in predetermined patterns, the photographs turn into depictions of a glorious fiery mess, demanding a leap of faith from the viewer that would connect the neat explanatory schema with the belief – only

⁶⁸ Skrt, *Po Sledovih Reizma*, 87.

very partly supported by visual evidence -- that the instructions were carried out properly, and that the uncertainty of both the participants' and viewer's individual experience could through the work as a whole (both concept and execution) translate into a greater whole. The same theme was also elaborated with reference to the actual human history of finding structure in celestial chaos in Milenko Matanović's 1970 projects of setting out candles in the field to correspond to the constellations of the night sky, arranging mirrors and candles in a field to reflect (literally, since the sun was caught by the mirrors) the positions of the Sun and Venus relative to each other in the Zarica Valley, and positioning mirrors to reflect a sunbeam into a gallery space every hour during the 4th Belgrade Triennale in 1970.

These allusions to ancient rituals (prefigured in David Nez' *Cosmogony*), as well as the ritualistic use of fire and water, used traditional forms in non-traditional settings to stress the element of faith – again, a decidedly metaphysical category – which became central to the group of works that addressed communication and its limits as their theme and helped pave the logical way to the group's dissolution. Though the diagrams that explained them used language, the works themselves tried to enact silent, non-verbal communication between group members through means that ranged from various kinds of signals to attempts at telepathy.

Such works included another one of the *Night Projects*, Andraž Šalamun's *Reciprocal Symmetry* (1970) in which two participants, each holding a half-black and half- white spear face each other and perform a ritual-like sequence of actions (explicated through diagrams), mirroring each other's actions. In the film of the event, there's then a surprising moment when the two throw spears towards each other and a sequence of all

four members sticking the spears into the ground at different angles, with five sets of diagrams comparing the resultant positions of the spears relative to each other. In the context of the project, these random and seemingly insignificant gestures acquire the ability to speak both literally and metaphorically of the group's desire to constitute itself as a whole greater than the sum of its parts, to find a common denominator for the randomness of individual actions, to devise a space of mental unity to which one could arrive by analyzing random private experiences. The same can be said of Andraž Šalamun's project *Night, Bow and Flaming Arrows* (1970), in which four participants communicated across a river (two on each bank) by shooting flaming arrows either vertically or horizontally in a predetermined sequence or of Marko Pogačnik's *The OHO Group-Man* (1970), in which four participants threw stones into circles on the ground and drew lots to determine their standing positions relative to each other (Fig. 9).

These metaphors of group relations and communication were taken a step further in the telepathic projects. These included Milenko Matanović's *Collective Fixing of a Point* (1970), in which anyone who was able to see a particular monument in Belgrade was invited to fix his or her gaze upon an imaginary point immediately over its head at an appointed time. They also included Marko Pogačnik's and Matanović's versions of the *Intercontinental Group Project America-Europe* (1970) (Fig. 7). In the former, the four OHO members on two continents drew lines into identical paper grids at the same time; in the latter, the four participants recorded the position of a match they dropped onto a sheet of paper while looking into the sun at the same time.

The last films: *White People* and *Project Camera*

Igor Zabel has described OHO's late work (particularly in landscape) as a "search

for harmony and correspondences in the micro- and macro- cosmos,” similar to the way that “in their late conceptual projects they looked to geometrical gestalts to represent such relations, expressing their complexity as well as harmony in precise geometrical forms. This was an approach that could be applied to the whole universe and all the relations it contains.”⁶⁹ What this description does not stress, however, and what needs to be emphasized is the degree of practical uncertainty and failure built into these works. Here, strange literal actions could not serve as anything more than metaphors for a group dynamic that had to materialize outside the work (if it materialized at all). The works were always only a suggestion, a hint, a desire, a nod in the direction of a possibility that the personal, the interpersonal, the natural, and the social could intertwine, but remained always just beyond actual realization as a meta-narrative made up of metaphors.

In film, many of these tropes and stories of desire without a narrative came together in *White People (Beli Ljudje)*, the culminating effort of OHO’s film-making and the group’s most challenging film project, which was shot in the winter of 1969 around Kranj and edited and produced in early 1970.⁷⁰

That the film feels as if it has a semblance of narrative despite also resembling the spontaneous recording of a happening is no accident. In order to work on the project, OHO members had to submit a script. While extremely minimal, it does give one a starting point: “White people live in white houses, wear white clothes, eat yogurt and drink milk. They raise white sheep and white mice; when snow falls, they arrange a

⁶⁹ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 133.

⁷⁰ It was also the only to be shot on 35 mm film and with professional equipment provided by Neoplanta, a film studio from the Serbian town of Novi Sad whose director at the time was trying to recruit talent for the creation of alternative cinema. Skrt, *Po sledovih reizma*, 104-105.

festival.”⁷¹ After this proposal had been accepted, the creative team (the script-writers included Križnar, David Nez, and Milenko Matanović) produced a second script in which all the scenes were actually outlined and chosen from a broader array of possibilities.

What mostly sets *White People* apart is the scale of the undertaking, heretofore unprecedented for OHO films. Thanks to the effort that went into its making, the film encompasses and includes many of the concerns that Križnar and his collaborators earlier addressed individually in shorter films. Križnar himself has noted that making the film was the last big action undertaken by OHO as an extended collective, and it involved everyone from core members to occasional collaborators. “Today,” he said in a 1995 interview, it “seems to me a catalogue of certain OHO actions.”⁷²

Although the film has no proper story to speak of, the numerous continuities with earlier films and the iconographic references to the work OHO was doing in nature make it possible to see the film as part of a meta-narrative about OHO’s group history, values, and goals. Thus, for instance, the protagonists of the films are defined in the opening credits as “bodies,” which articulates more explicitly the previously implied erasure and redefinition of individual identity through group activity that one could find in *The Burial of the Pharaoh* or *Triglav*. In *White People*, the term “bodies” points not only to the transnational 1960s rhetoric of the sexual liberation of the body, but also highlights the uncertain status of the people we see on the screen as neither the actors’ real selves (since the film is scripted), nor those of properly named or defined fictional characters.

The first half of the film takes place in an undefined, white-walled interior space (reminiscent, curiously, of a gallery) and has suggestive imagery of men and women

⁷¹ Ibid., 105.

⁷² Ibid.

(both clothed and naked) straining against the walls and having to jump through an enclosure of their own making. It also has orgiastic sequences (including a playful suggestion of homoeroticism), images of humans sharing their space with animals (also chosen for their white color), and scenes in which people play with powdery, bendy, liquid, or otherwise amorphous substances, evoking OHO's exhibition history of working through its *arte povera* stage in 1969 before deciding to leave the confines of the gallery.

The film's chronology parallels the collective's history, and the second half of the film takes place in nature: partly on the seashore and the shore of a lake, extending OHO members' fascination with water as a substance, and partly in a wide-open snowy field (the very same field in Kranj, in fact, where Križnar and friends first started filming because Križnar's house abutted it). Here, the interests of the camera-eye shift to the visual language of OHO's later work and gets fascinated by elemental interactions, such as white powder being carried off by the ebb and flow of the water or the juxtaposition of fire burning through water as a fuse burns an opening in the snow. The black-white color motif (enhanced by the fact that the film is itself black-and-white), which builds on an obvious iconographic suggestion of white as both a color of purity and the color of blank but infinite possibility, is accentuated by the film's ending, in which torch-bearers walk around three separate groups of people to encircle them in large, billowing clouds of black smoke, as if trying to separate them off from the white landscape and from each other with the slowly dissipating substance.

Several evocative sequences in both halves of the film (one of them very reminiscent of a part of an earlier performance-film, *Marsh*) also make the eroticized desire for contact and communication into a theme. In them, as in the orgiastic scenes,

bodies come at each other, bump into each other, and move apart again. This strange method of interaction, of establishing shifting relationships between bodies makes one especially aware of the strange silences of the film, which has a soundtrack but lacks any verbal communication. Here, again, the literal enacting of the idea of communication by other means draws a parallel with the role of the films themselves in OHO's meta-narrative history as spaces of alternate possibilities in which the literal and metaphorical could overlap. More than any other OHO film, *White People* succeeds in using OHO's earlier experiments to build up the film into a distinctly separate and yet real space in which the group could envision as possible, if only briefly, its own utopian aspirations for internal harmony, creative and sexual liberation, and freedom of action and thought.

This elaborate visual exorcism of impossible desires, however, would be the last of its kind. Pursuing projects that would do this through art was not what OHO's ultimate goal. The close-knit four person group of Marko Pogačnik, Milenko Matanović, Andraž Šalamun, and David Nez disbanded by 1971. This happened largely under the pressure of interpersonal differences, though in my dissertation I also argue that the decision was grounded in a desire to avoid belonging to the art world's "deceptive 'community' within the society," as theorized by Marcuse. Instead, under the willful leadership of Marko Pogačnik, OHO members, first as a group and then individually, tried to turn to other spheres of human activity that supported a search for new "modes of work and pleasure, of thought and behavior, in a technology and in a natural environment which express the aesthetic ethos of socialism."⁷³

OHO's last film effort, however, the 1971 *Project Camera (Projekt Kamera)* does provide an extremely satisfying bookend to the group's film-making practice. It is a

⁷³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 48.

beautiful work on which to conclude a discussion of group and medium self-awareness in OHO's oeuvre and shows the way the films' self-reflexivity provides the metanarrative of OHO's philosophical shifts and artistic evolution.

Made at the Viba film studio in Ljubljana with sound and on 35 mm film, *Project Camera* has the look and feel of technical quality that most of the earlier films lack, yet it also manages to capture the spontaneity of other loosely scripted performances as it returns to the terrain of Ljubljana's streets. There, the reactions of passers by are still noticeably absent from the film's field of vision, but what one does find in this film is Križnar and his collaborators engaged more fully than ever in making the camera's presence and particular mode of vision the subject of the film.

The film opens with images produced by a camera swinging wildly up and down – a fact affirmed twice, first by the abstracted and dizzying shots that result from the motion and then by a side-shot made by another camera of the first one's erratic movement. This interplay of the difference between what the camera-eye sees as it interacts with the world and how those interactions look to an outside observer structure much of the film, equating the camera to a character of the limitations and particularities of whose sight we are constantly made aware. The black piece of fabric so familiar from other films makes an appearance again, this time with the whole group using it to engulf the camera-eye while the film tries to show the viewer that experience simultaneously from the position of both insider (the camera itself) and outsider (an observer standing far apart from the scene).

Making visible the normally invisible presence of the camera as instrument is also accomplished by the strong reactions of the humans it observes as they try to escape it,

outrun or run circles around it, cover the lens with their hands, throw balls at it, stick burning matches directly into it, or smudge paint over it, rendering it blind. Seemingly wary of the close-ups the camera constantly craves, a young woman at one point even takes off her sweater to throw it at the camera and cover its lens, though her action only makes her much more literally naked to the mechanical eye.

Some of the visual pay-off of what the camera can do in the film is quite spectacular. A young man lies down on the ground in the middle of a street, and the abstract geometry of the shot taken from a considerable height of him lying as people keep on going about their business is striking. Somehow, the perspective from great distance is necessary to capture the liberating strangeness of his action. Likewise, the camera's selective focus and ability to control how much enters its frame produces a totally non-narrative and yet gorgeous image of small white balls bouncing down a set of stairs in such a way that the bright light flattens out the steps into white and black stripes while the balls look like the jumping musical notes of the accompanying soundtrack.

Yet despite these moments of relishing visual pleasure, it is the half-playful but also persistent suspicion and anxiety about the camera that dominate the mood of the film, as if the film-maker himself had undertaken his self-reflexive experiments with the medium out of a sense of unease about it. And this is where the film also becomes a cipher for OHO's history as a group at a moment when its inward-looking, self-reflexive examinations of its own group dynamics dominated its work right up to the moment when it stopped producing "artwork" for or in galleries altogether. Too much reflexivity about one's own project, it would seem, produces too many misgivings about its limitations and implications.

The logical end

The word that OHO members and critics used for the group's ability to produce spaces that defied the boundaries of conventional classification systems was "mediality" – which captures both the group's shifts across media and its desire to exist *between* things. Igor Zabel writes that, "The notion of 'mediality,' of intermediate forms and states, had been very important even in OHO's first period,"⁷⁴ while Metka Lokar notes that topographic poetry was a medial form between word and picture and suggests that the creation of other medial forms – one of which is found in the very name of the group – became a guiding principle for OHO's output.⁷⁵ Medial forms existed in-between and mediated between existing ones. Lokar cites another example of mediality in photo projects, located between film, photography, and sometimes even poetry.

Yet one such photoproject, produced by Milenko Matanović in 1970 and published in OHO's last catalogue, points to a moment in which the nature of OHO's mediality was changing so that the state of being in-between the literal and metaphorical, which had defined OHO's practice before, was becoming increasingly untenable. Whereas before, it meant a construction of broadly applicable metaphors across different media, by 1970, it increasingly applied directly, but less metaphorically, to the construction of the actual, real-life identities of OHO members, both individually and as a group. In *Milenko Matanović: medial form between father and uncle* (Fig. 51), Matanović literalizes the idea of his own identity as something created in relation to others by noting that his very name makes him an in-between form of his relatives – his maternal uncle, who bore the name "Milenko," and his father, from whom the artist gets

⁷⁴ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 131.

⁷⁵ Miloš Bašin, ed., *Oho: Na Uho, V Oko* (Ljubljana: Mestna Galerija, 2005), 41.

his surname. Matanović also finds it important to list the two men's professions – his father the “Scientist, electric engineer, university professor,” his uncle the “Bohemian, jazz musician, painter, guerilla” – and to parallel them with a description of himself simply as “member of the OHO group,” as if to suggest that any and all of these diverse legacies could fit under the umbrella of OHO's practice, which, if one follows the parallel, is no longer confined to art.

Such a blurring of the line between art and life brings us to what Igor Zabel calls “the central work involving OHO's collective identity,” Marko Pogačnik's *Project OHO*. “The complicated work,” Zabel writes, “demonstrates how the four individual positions of the group members, in their differences and mutual relations, could become the basis for the group's complex relational structures...and could enter relational structures of a higher order”⁷⁶ (Fig. 16). What the work also demonstrates, however, is that by the time it was created, the role of language had changed in OHO's practice yet again, indicating a fundamental shift in goals driven primarily by Marko Pogačnik's interests.

One of the most interesting features of this exercise in structuring and mapping the world is the formal resemblance – the logical progression from the simpler to the more complex, the numbering and sub-numbering of ideas – that *Project OHO* bears to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein himself suggested should be used as a ladder and which he famously ended with the half-mystical suggestion, “That of that of which one cannot speak one must pass over in silence.”⁷⁷ And, indeed, if the silence of OHO's works in nature and telepathic projects was proving to be productive in giving visual form to that of which one cannot speak, the turn to analytical explication showed

⁷⁶ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 132.

⁷⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, [Revised ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 7.

pure self-analysis, like Wittgenstein's ladder, would exhaust its possibilities very quickly. Once OHO's self-construction and self-analysis veered towards the absolutely literal, once its language became purely utilitarian, and once the need for the metaphorical gesture disappeared, the group project's only realization could come in the form of OHO members' living out what it describes in their actual, real lives.

And, indeed, in the course of the so-called "schooling," this process of living out the values OHO had postulated obliquely up until that moment took the form of exercises and meditation that were meant to govern the entirety of the group members' days. As Zabel writes,

The OHO project implied the idea of liberating the body and then (by re-disciplining it through meditation practices, ritual, and esoteric 'schooling') bringing about its reharmonization with the universe," so that "body-oriented projects were replaced by exercises and rituals (schooling), which aided in the search for harmony.⁷⁸

Their search for actual harmony rather than metaphors of it resulted in 1970 in an attempt to establish a "total community in which there would be no separation of art and life and the body would live in harmony with itself, nature, and the cosmic order."⁷⁹ In approximately five years, the group had come full circle, from trying to find the tools for the total fragmentation of personal cognition and social order through reism to trying to find the tools for a new private totality of unified action and belief.

The commune at Šempas existed very briefly as an outgrowth of OHO's group project and the four members did not achieve the unity that the *OHO Project* diagrams described. Marko Pogačnik bought the farm at Šempas and moved there with his wife and young daughter. Andraž Šalamun, in his own words, stayed there for a day and then

⁷⁸ Zabel and Moderna Galerija, *OHO*, 127.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

left, realizing he was not cut out to be a farmer. David Nez and Milenko Matanović both came and went for a few months before deciding to go their separate ways; both left the country relatively soon afterwards. The commune at Šempas continued to exist throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Its members produced art as part of their daily life and had several exhibitions. Most notably, their drawings – done by the children living at Šempas at the time – were exhibited in the 1976 Venice Biennale where they might have been harbingers of a new aesthetic in which any traces of the creative act were necessary at all insofar as they offered evidence of the creative act having taken place.

All of which brings us to the crucial question of why this was the path that OHO had chosen, why the group shied away from trying to pursue success in the professional art world, why the gallery as a liminal space was not one that OHO wanted to inhabit anymore. The most pragmatic of the answers points quite simply to personal differences between members, which were dictated by personality and ranged from aesthetic interests and choices to lifestyle preferences and personal goals.

Yet another reason was the difficulty of breaking into the Western market in which, at least according to Igor Zabel, the artists had no faith and of which they were wary. “Eastern European artists in general,” he has written,

took very seriously the notion of conceptual art as an anti-market and anti-institutional practice. For this reason, they often reacted with disappointment and criticism when Western conceptual artists became involved with museums or the art market, viewing such involvement as a betrayal of the most basic critical attitudes. OHO’s decision was partly based on such disappointment. . . . OHO were not looking for financial success. [Walter] De Maria’s advice had the opposite effect. Now that they realized the actual nature of the world they were about to enter, OHO made the decision to abandon art.⁸⁰

Finally, Miško Šuvaković has argued that the “subtle mechanisms of surveillance

⁸⁰ Ibid., 136, Footnote 36.

and control” practiced by the government of Yugoslavia led to “the neutralizing of the effects of cultural and social transgression and subversion with their transformation into autonomously ‘aesthetic’ and ‘artistic,’” an effect which OHO wanted to avoid. Leaving the vocation of artists was better than being faced with a system that permitted them to exist in the public eye, but did its best to decontextualize transgressive and subversive artistic practices by, for example, encouraging artists to show outside their own republics.⁸¹ And it is, indeed, true that all but one of OHO’s important exhibitions took place outside of Slovenia, though the OHO members I have spoken to never themselves suggested direct or deliberate governmental involvement in the fact that it was in the more cosmopolitan Zagreb or Belgrade that they found like-minded people (and were, in fact, able to influence the next generation of artists in Belgrade who turned OHO’s isolated influence into a broader movement).

What I would like to suggest, however, is that the group’s decision to leave the art world was a logical conclusion to a practice that was founded on ambivalence and the tension of mutually contradictory wishes which were becoming increasingly unsustainable and untenable.

Herbert Marcuse’s writings, moreover, illuminate the way in which the process of arriving at OHO’s conclusion was certainly shaped by the group’s political and social environment, but was not unique to it. Rather, it was the group’s desire to exist in multiple contexts at once (analytical and metaphysical; political and aesthetic; urban and rural; Yugoslav and Western) running into the perceived – and also consistent – need to choose a firmer and less ambivalent commitment that brought the end of OHO as an artistic collective and, perhaps, produced the group’s last metaphor of living in the then

⁸¹ Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho*, 44.

non-aligned, Second World Yugoslavia.

OHO's early work explored the radical possibilities of the tautological, of shaking the absolute certainties held by oneself and others by using a form that should in principle be the very definition of absolute certainty and truth. Yet as Wittgenstein himself noted, "A tautology leaves open to reality the whole – the infinite whole – of logical space," making it impossible for it to "determine reality in any way."⁸² Something else would have to step into this gap, especially because the stakes in determining reality were raised when OHO entered the public sphere of exhibition space, when in practical terms it seemed that it had gained access to the mechanisms of drawing attention to themselves and making a difference. And thus what OHO took on board, going back and forth between these two stances, was a philosophical position associated with the New Left which, for the trouble of careful observation, also promised a transparency of social processes and relations and an active role in determining reality that a Wittgenstein refused to provide, resolutely passing it over in silence.

For a time, OHO was able to create a realm in which it was possible to picture the world with Wittgensteinian concreteness in silence, to show that which could not be told, while also gesturing towards ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and the social meta-language that Marcuse demanded. The ability to shift registers between the aesthetic and the political so adeptly is what makes this work remarkable, at least if read through the staggering scope of hope that *Essay on Liberation* offers. Looking at OHO's work, one sees aspirations to fulfill Marcuse's vision of the imagination which, "released from the bondage to exploitation [and] sustained by the achievements of science, could turn its productive power to the radical reconstruction of experience." In this new situation, "the

⁸² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.463.

historical topos of the aesthetic would change: it would find expression in the transformation of the Lebenswelt – society as a work of art.”⁸³

“This "utopian" goal,” however, “depends...on a revolution at the attainable level of liberation,” and the *attainable* level, as Marcuse himself points out, is never altered directly through art. Any direct engagement with the artists’ immediate situation only “defeats the radicalism of today’s art,” which must seek rupture with the familiar to fulfill its goals. “The conquest of this immediate familiarity, the "mediations” which would make the many forms of rebellious art a liberating force on the societal scale (a subverting force) are yet to be attained.”⁸⁴

With clear-eyed resignation, before affirming the value of artistic phenomena that de-sublimate society, Marcuse acknowledges in *An Essay on Liberation* a fundamental “self-defeat built into the very structure of art,” which makes ultimately futile any attempt to transform its intent. “The very Form of art,” Marcuse wrote, “contradicts the effort to do away with the segregation of art to a "second reality," to translate the truth of the productive imagination into the first reality.” Doomed to give Form and order to the chaotic content of matter, art “gives word to the unsaid and the unspeakable.” “The redeeming, reconciling power of art adheres even to the most radical manifestations of non-illusory art and antiart,” but through its resultant catharsis, it dulls the edge of the rage that could be harnessed for social protest.⁸⁵ “With restoration to order, Form achieves catharsis, but the achievement is illusory, false, fictitious.”⁸⁶ Thus, the uses of the imagination are always – or at least until the achievement of perfect freedom – tinged

⁸³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 45-46.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 44.

with the disappointment of redemption.

Considering the separate space of freedom that OHO created for itself, it is curious to note that both Wittgenstein and Marcuse use spatial metaphors to convey their philosophical vision. The “one-dimensionality” in the title of *One-Dimensional Man* is meant to describe a sad state of affairs and be contrasted with the potential “three-dimensional” fullness of life in a future era of freedom. The difference with Marcuse, however, is that his metaphors are supplemented by very literal calls to action in the existing social space.

Marcuse produces in his artist reader an ardent desire for actual change only to then assure him of the minimal effectiveness of the “the many forms of rebellious art” in bringing the future closer. He concludes *An Essay on Liberation* on a bittersweet note of ever-deferred promise. “The future,” he writes, “*ingresses* into the present.” “In its negativity, the desublimating art and anti-art of today ‘*anticipate*’ a stage where society's capacity to produce may be akin to the creative capacity of art.”⁸⁷ Yet the caveats and suppositions necessary to justify the value of the artistic desublimation of culture not only fail to guarantee the success of the venture, but also point to other activities in which immediate fulfillment of utopian goals seems more likely.

An awareness of this idea of infinite deferral can be found in two works in OHO's late oeuvre. One is David Nez' project (realized in April 1970 at the 4th Belgrade Triennial), which strove to illustrate, using stakes hammered into the ground and thread strung between them, Zeno's aporia – that one cannot cross a race-course due to the infinite divisibility of space and, therefore, one can never start at all. The same infinite divisibility was also found in an installation at the OHO exhibition in Mestna Galerija in

⁸⁷ Ibid., 48.

late 1970, when the first visitor was meant to eat half of a piece of bread laid out on a table, the second visitor half of the remaining half, the third visitor half of that, etc. *ad infinitum*.⁸⁸

These asymptotal approaches to the quotidian might be seen as the perfect metaphor for the group's practice – for what the group's other metaphors did. There is no anxiety in these analytical pieces, no judgment even, but they do seem to suggest that the group's metaphors, try as they might, would never be able to approach the fulfillment of the desires that produced them – and that perhaps there was no longer any sense in starting.

It is, perhaps, due to an awareness of the way that philosophically, one never arrives at the liberation promised by the New Left that, as Miško Šuvaković notes, Herbert Marcuse's strategy, based on an activist and populist project of "new sensitivity," did not become a diving board for the art of the sixties, giving way, instead, to the critical analysis of material institutions of the social realization of art.⁸⁹ Yet what makes OHO so unusual – and, as I shall discuss later, the subsequent activities of its members seem to bear this thesis out – is that it remained true to the deepest utopianism found in the ideals of the New Left and that in its move away from art, the group dared to commit themselves to fulfilling them.

In lieu of creating "a deceptive 'community' within the society," of the kind produced "as happenings, pop art, etc. enter commercial institutions," OHO, under the willful leadership of Marko Pogačnik, tried to turn to other spheres of human activity that

⁸⁸ While no record that I am aware of documents what actually happened with the piece of bread, one wonders whether the visitors to the gallery eventually left a crumb too small to divide or ate it whole, violating the artists' instructions.

⁸⁹ Šuvaković, *Skrite Zgodovine Skupine Oho*, 43.

supported a search for new “modes of work and pleasure, of thought and behavior, in a technology and in a natural environment which express the aesthetic ethos of socialism.” That their immediate efforts in this group project did not work out in the way they might have expected matters less than the fact that their attempt forces us to rethink what forms dissent and subversion could take in places where resisting socialism as presented by those in power was a viable artistic task. OHO’s literary, artistic, and filmic legacy presents through a diverse and inventive body of work a fascinating history of a collective practice that in a span of six to eight years (and appearing autochthonously, one might add, on a cultural periphery) worked through some of the most important historical ideas, cultural shifts, and innovative art-making techniques of its time and, moreover, left a record of its explorations that can continue to nourish new creative thought for a long time to come.

CHAPTER III

Komar and Melamid's Road to the Historical Sublime

Introduction

As I have suggested in the introduction, Komar and Melamid and OHO represent the far opposite ends on the spectrum of acting in good or bad faith on the avant-garde impulses of uniting life with art while living under regimes of varying degrees of repressiveness. Specifically of the pertinent socialist regimes, Susan Buck-Morss has written that, “[T]he historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.”¹ In the previous two chapters, I have traced the way in which OHO channeled its questioning of the “whole Western narrative” into activities that placed utopian faith in envisioning a future radically different from the present.

In the two chapters that follow, I examine the early work of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid to trace the way their activities under a socialist regime likewise placed “the whole Western narrative into question” by working even more explicitly than the Slovenes with utopian ideals, but did so by staunchly refusing to imagine the future. Instead, tried to find the origins of the present in the past. In doing so, the artists would seem to disparage utopian faith of both the past and the present, yet as I will argue, their preoccupations become for them the only way to sneak their fascination with utopian aspirations, at once irrational and irrepressible, by a back door into a surrounding present

¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), xii.

that was actively undermining the utopianism that made it possible in the first place.

Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, analyze the work done by Komar and Melamid between 1972 and 1982: a period framed by their deconstruction of the Soviet experience through the *Sots-Art* series, on the one hand, and their highly popular representation of the Soviet experience for an American audience in the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, on the other. In focusing only on the pair's earlier work, I want to trace Komar and Melamid's engagement with the sublimity of history up until the crucial moment in their American career that came with the success of *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* (1981-83), a series in which the artists made their own coming to terms with their past accessible to a wide Western audience (Fig. 52). I think my argument, however, does hold true for the entirety of Komar and Melamid's oeuvre and that their approach to history and its sublimity informs a lot of their later practice, which is important to their success in America, and which as a concept may also be useful to apply to Moscow Conceptualism on the whole.

In that first decade together, Komar and Melamid filled – largely for their own benefit, in the absence of a broad audience or any immediate socio-economic incentives (and quite obvious disincentives) – a gaping cultural void. They populated it not just with individual objects, but also characters, events, and, perhaps most importantly, a syncretic approach to understanding their own situation as artists and citizens of the world that would inform the rest of their collaborative practice. Through it, they managed to respond in both critically and commercially successful ways to such upheavals as first the artists' move to the West and their return to a new state after the one they left disappeared.

The syncretic approach was made up of several central philosophical, theoretical,

and methodological strands. These included an engagement with semiotics and a consequently literary quality, focused on narrative and often told in the subjunctive mood; a need to constantly re-imagine utopia, if only to be assured anew of its impossibility; an ontological curiosity about art's putative ability to access the realm of the metaphysical; and a resuscitation of the idea of the Sublime, which the artists transferred from the realm of Nature to the realm of History, making Komar and Melamid late 20th century's history painters *par excellence*. Understanding this strange mixture can help us locate the distinctiveness of Komar and Melamid's practice within the larger contexts of both Moscow and global Conceptualism. It can also offer insight into the particular combination of factors that produced, in the end, what might be seen as the definitively post-modern body of work in visual art – a fact important for our understanding of the multiple paths of modernity during the Cold War.

Sots-Art: Semiotics in the Communal Kitchen

“What's in a name?” A lot, judging from my discussion of OHO's engagement with philosophical ideas focused on semantics and on giving visual form, as well as names, to the previously un-figured parts of their cultural experience. And the same holds true for the work of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who certainly encountered the power of a single name growing up in post-war Stalinist Soviet Union. Indeed, the foundational power of that experience was so great that the two artists would return to it at multiple points in their artistic careers. Their investment in a semiotic approach was so extensive that it seems almost unnecessary to affirm their preoccupation with this discipline, which was central to the development of significant schools of thought in Russia and the USSR at several different points in the 20th century. It is nevertheless, just

as with OHO, appropriate to begin the discussion of Komar and Melamid's work with a name they coined.

That name is "Sots-Art," a term which does not sound too jarring in English and which has lost much of its shock value in post-Soviet Russian,² but which at the moment of its introduction in 1972 conjured up a hitherto unthinkable, blasphemous, dangerous, and unholy marriage of Soviet *sotsrealizm* (Socialist Realism – the USSR's official ideological doctrine for art since 1934) and American Pop Art. The power of this suggestion was such that today, in large part due to Komar and Melamid's own efforts in the early 70s, "Sots-Art" is thought of as a movement, though as they also vigorously aver, when it first appeared, it was one specific series of works, started and finished by Komar and Melamid working outside any larger artistic entity in 1972-1973.³

At the time, *Sots-Art* announced two things. The first was Komar and Melamid's fascination with the study of cultural signs and the techniques of their utilization. The second was that their fascination with semiotics as a discipline which came out of the study of language – a fact clearly signaled by the neologism summing up the essence of the series. For added emphasis, in the 1972 "Manifesto of Sots-Art," the artists wrote the name as "СОЦ-ART" – crucially, adding a visual element to the disjunctive effect – and proclaimed that "The sots-art artist is not a craftsman who services the aesthetic needs of the middle class. Sots-art artists are the midwives of new words."⁴

Words as potent signs also played a vital role in the works themselves. Two of the

² This is due to the introduction of scores of English words into Russian since 1991. One of the newly introduced words has been the English "art," now often used in lieu of the Russian word for "art" ["iskusstvo"] in order to denote a particular kind of contemporary art.

³ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁴ "Manifest Sots-Arta [Sots-Art Manifesto]," in *Sots-Art: Political Art in Russia*, ed. K. Svetlyakov; Yu. Liderman (Moscow: Fond Noviy and Tretyakov State Gallery, 2007), 1.

series' most famous and startling pieces involved nothing more – and nothing less – than the addition, brilliant in its simplicity, of names. Namely, Komar and Melamid's own names, with which they signed the ubiquitous Soviet slogans "Glory to Labor!" and "Onward to the Victory of Communism!" (Fig. 53) that otherwise remained identical to the white-letters-on-red-banners form that was an element, as indelible as it was banal, of the visual background of Soviet life.

This simple move also hinted at Komar and Melamid's grasp of dialogism, a semiotic concept utilized extensively in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin is a figure, I believe, singularly important for understanding Komar and Melamid's approach to visual semiotics, who anticipated in theoretical language what Komar and Melamid sought to express by other means.⁵ Bakhtin's sudden rise to academic popularity in the mid-60s, moreover, coincided almost exactly with the moment when a surge in the Soviet overproduction of official ideology inspired Komar and Melamid to engage with it as a text.

For Bakhtin, dialogism denoted the idea that cultural texts are made up of multiple voices, often with conflicting agendas, entering into dialogue with each other. And the importance of this Bakhtinian concept to Komar and Melamid's practice begins with the fact that their very co-authorship, based on and aimed at constant dialogue, as they often stressed, structurally literalized the idea of dialogism, ultimately resulting in

⁵ I am still not sure how much direct knowledge of Bakhtin's work Komar and Melamid had, and for my purposes, it is not crucial to establish a direct connection since Bakhtin's influence on Soviet intellectuals in the humanities was pervasive in the mid-60s and could have had an unacknowledged impact. I do, however, know from his mention of it that at least Melamid was reading Claude Levi-Strauss at that time and found his structuralist approach very exciting. Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

work that did not belong fully to either of the participants of the conversation.⁶ Indeed, in the same “Sots-Art Manifesto” I mentioned before, the artists wrote for the first time something they would affirm time and again later – “What’s important is not the picture, but the conversation about it.”⁷

The *Sots-Art* series as a whole, then, was a striking opening conversational salvo that also foreshadowed Komar and Melamid’s artistic concerns for decades to come. Chief among these was a desire to respond – with a mockery that nevertheless took seriously what others ignored altogether – to the relentless ideological realities of their surrounding environment. This early difference of approach also marks the distinction between OHO and Komar and Melamid, as triangulated through their relationship to fundamentally language-based inquiry and the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. If OHO’s early work started out being driven by the same impulse as early Wittgenstein’s search for the articulation of an indisputably and transparently true statement, Komar and Melamid seem to have focused right away on the ambivalent and dangerous fun to be had in playing language games. It is not for nothing that Arthur Danto notes of their oeuvre:

Wittgenstein once said that a philosophical work can be imagined that is composed exclusively of jokes. It is actually easier to imagine such a work than to imagine a serious body of art that consists only of jokes. But the aggregate art of Komar and Melamid comes close to this ideal.⁸

Uncovering Soviet Heteroglossia

The urge to respond to the ideological constraints others ignored, as both Komar

⁶ “One might consider that their primary objective is conversation – a claim which they have made on numerous occasions.” As Morgan also noted, the structure of Komar and Melamid’s installations “allows a maximum flexibility for purposes of story-telling.” Robert C. Morgan in Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, *Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Wichita, Kansas: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1980), unpaginated.

⁷ “Manifest Sots-Arta [Sots-Art Manifesto],” 1.

⁸ Vitaly Komar, Aleksandr Melamid, and JoAnn Wypijewski, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid’s Scientific Guide to Art* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 132.

and Melamid now see it, was tied in large part to the date of their finishing their artistic education as painters at the Stroganov Institute of Art and Design⁹ and entering adulthood as employment-seeking artists. The year 1967 marked the fifty-year anniversary of the Great October Revolution, with every subsequent year up until 1972 bringing with it more anniversaries of the Soviet state's key institutions, such as, for example, the Red Army and the Komsomol youth organization, both founded in 1918. By 1972, the long string of celebrations was coming to an end, with the Pioneer organization finally getting its turn – a fact significant insofar as it was the only anniversary from which Komar and Melamid got an opportunity to make money by creating celebratory visual décor for a pioneer camp in the Moscow countryside.¹⁰

What was important for Komar and Melamid was the fact that at a rather formative age, they saw their country experience a five-year period of intensive overproduction of ideology, when the State's desire to compel every citizen to celebrate its successes reached a fever pitch that contrasted perversely with the events of Prague Spring in 1968.¹¹ Against this background, Komar and Melamid's exceedingly literal interpretation of how to embrace the state's more metaphorical demand of ideological buy-in proved to be a new and very potent psychological antidote to the external pressure

⁹ The Stroganov Institute of Art and Design is the oldest artistic educational institution in Russia, founded in 1825 by Baron Sergey Stroganov.

¹⁰ In a 1986 profile of them written up for *The New Yorker*, Komar and Melamid told the story of being shown around the grounds of the pioneer camp and being shown a place where, so they were told, a large bust of Stalin had been buried underground because it was too big to destroy. As Carter Ratcliff puts it, "The knowledge that Stalin's effigies lurked in the very earth of Russia awoke in Komar and Melamid to his persistence in their own memories." See Ian Frazier, "Profiles: Partners," *New Yorker* 62 (December 29, 1986): 35. Carter Ratcliff, Vitaly Komar, and Aleksandr Melamid, *Komar & Melamid* (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 1988), 17.

¹¹ If Melvyn Nathanson's recollections are to be trusted, Komar and Melamid expressed the idea that the only thing the USSR overproduced was ideology already by the early 1970s. See Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 14. Vitaly Komar expressed the same idea in the interview I recorded with him and in at least one other interview, published in Georgy Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2010), 138.

to conform. It also marked a sharp break with the by then well-established tradition of resistance put up by unofficial, so-called “non-conformist” Soviet artists since the mid-50s in the form of painting done in styles (cubist, expressionist, surrealist, purely abstract)¹² that had been branded “formalist,” and pushed out of the Soviet artistic public sphere since the 1930s.¹³

Here, one might fruitfully keep in mind Bakhtin’s stress in his most famous book, *Rabelais and His Time*, on the subversive potential of the carnivalesque inversion of social norms and assumptions. Thus, what set Komar and Melamid’s semiotic approach in the *Sots-Art* series apart from other work that would fall under that term is its ability not just to visually identify the presence of ideology in everyday life, but to willfully and cleverly misunderstand it to damning effect. Amid all of the celebratory frenzy, rather than opposing the state on the terms that it itself established, Komar and Melamid’s irony – the pang of surprise and laughter that their will to misunderstanding elicited – was devastating. It demonstrated just how much those in charge of overproducing propaganda operated on the assumption that Soviet citizens needed to be brow-beaten into submission by the sheer volume of reiteration of ideas they had not internalized “properly.”¹⁴ It worked equally well, moreover, for identifying the two extremes of possible “improper” responses. One was the possibility of a Soviet citizen’s passive resistance in the form of

¹² Peter Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 178.

¹³ For a detailed examination of the formation of the Socialist Realist aesthetic dogma in literature, see Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992). For a history of Socialist Realism in the visual arts, see Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), particularly parts IV-VI.

¹⁴ Apropos this subject, Komar and Melamid have written, “The first and best device for convincing the masses is repression. There is no need to point out the virtuosity with which the Soviet government has made use of this method. The other method – propaganda - has been carried on much less effectively. ...Failures in art have pursued the party officials from the beginning of Soviet power.” Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "In Search of Religion," *Artforum* (May 1980): 44.

indifference to propaganda in a work like *Quotation* (1972) (Fig. 54). The other was the possibility of a citizen's total and complete investment in the propaganda – as in the case of the aforementioned slogans, *Double Self-Portrait* (1973) or *Portrait of Komar's Wife and Child* (Figs. 55 and 56).

In the two latter, the artists used the distinctive stylizations of official Soviet visual vocabulary to imagine how someone who truly believed in socialist realism as being the one true socialist style would use it to depict not just lofty themes, but himself and his family members, as well. Indeed, stylistically, what is so striking about these works is the exactitude with which they copy the style of 1960s and 1970s propaganda posters (Fig. 57). The shock here comes not from an attempt at visual difference, which characterized non-conformist art of the 1960s, but from visual similarity, which embraced with absolute literalness the State's more metaphorical demand of ideological buy-in. This, in turn, forced the viewer to look more carefully for where the difference from official propaganda *was* to be found, and thus emphasized the discursive relocation of style as sign from the public realm into the private sphere. In fact, mimicking the formal qualities of borrowed imagery with great care in order to emphasize discursive dissonance would become a hallmark of Komar and Melamid's semiotically inspired activities, whose frequent recourse to working in series – to works in which meaning would be established in the clashes and gaps between constitutive elements – further formally mimicked the heteroglossia Bakhtin extolled. In this, they were, one might add, a short step away from the more systematic and austere seriality one sees in OHO and could find in Western Conceptualism.

Anti-non-conformism

One cannot overestimate the importance to Komar and Melamid's artistic activities of both choosing a strategy of collaborative work and the propensity to think in the subjunctive mood that the dialogical working process encouraged. The combination of these qualities is what set Komar and Melamid distinctly apart by allowing them to mine for ideas and access to avant-garde heritage, discursive as much as stylistic, *both* the hegemonic traditions of Socialist Realism *and* the non-conformist art that had embodied the "future-oriented dreams of Russian intelligentsiya."¹⁵ What Komar and Melamid's work thus offered was an ongoing ambivalent dialogue with what others had assumed to be diametrically opposed positions. Their signature contribution was a paradox-ridden grasp of history as a single compressed past, present, and future, all of which Komar and Melamid could inhabit at once while evading the need to commit to any one existing historical telos or narrative.

This self-consciously chosen compression of time was an especially striking departure against the historical background of 1960s non-conformist art, which underwent a similar temporal compression unselfconsciously when artists tried to make up in a decade for thirty years of Western art's stylistic development – a trend that would continue to have an independent and successful life in Russia into the 1980s.¹⁶

¹⁵ Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," 180.

¹⁶ For more on the non-conformist artists, see the following books:

Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956-1986: The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey* (New York: Thames and Hudson in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995). Barbara M. Thiemann, Olga Breining, and Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung., *(Non)Conform: Russian and Soviet Art, 1958-1995: The Ludwig Collection* (Aachen; Munich and New York: Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung; Prestel, 2007).

Gosudarstvennyi muzei Tsaritsyno, *Kunst Im Verborgenen: Nonkonformisten Russland 1957-1995: Sammlung Des Staatlichen Zarizino-Museums, Moskau* (Munich, New York: Prestel, 1995).

Of particular note are such figures as Oskar Rabin, the leader of the Lianozovo group; Lev Kropivnitsky;

Paradoxical though it may seem, the search for an individual style that non-conformism offered became a target of Komar and Melamid's unmitigated disdain, aimed against both the beliefs and aesthetic preferences of the oppositional, liberalizing *intelligentsia* culture, in which both men (and especially Melamid) were also deeply embedded. The apogee of their mockery of everything a member of the *intelligentsia* might hold dear came in the form of a large 1972 canvas titled *Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll at Rostropovich's Dacha* (Fig. 58). This was a particularly personal choice for Melamid since his mother was the primary translator of Heinrich Böll into Russian and Melamid had actually met the German author, who was widely published in the USSR.¹⁷

Later, when living in New York, Komar commented on this painting, You see, we have included in this painting everything that liberals in Moscow love, all you need for a good bourgeois life - a bowl of grapes, nice crystal glasses, a lemon with the peel hanging over the edge of the table. Like Dutch still-life painting of the seventeenth century. Most important we have done everything in a different style - Cezanne's style, Cubism, Futurism. We painted Böll's left leg in the style of Russian icons.¹⁸

In Peter Wollen's analysis,

“The painting presents an omnibus version of the paradoxically confused ideology of the Russian intelligentsia: the Stalinist remnant overhanging them, the fantasy of the plethora of the West, the echoes of a glorious national and sacred religious

Valentina Kropivnitskaya; Lidya Masterkova; Oleg Tselkov; Yuri Zlotnikov; Anatoly Zverev; Mikhail Roginsky; Alexander Yulikov; Dmitry Plavinsky; Evgeny Rukhin; Vladimir Nemukhin.; and Dmitry Krasnopevtsev, among others.

¹⁷ The painting's subject matter references actual events surrounding the persecution of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had seen his work (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) published in the USSR to great acclaim during the Thaw, but started facing persecution in 1965, immediately after Khrushchev was ousted from power. It was in the years of 1965 and 1974, when Solzhenitsyn was deported from the Soviet Union by the authorities, that he was sheltered by the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich while working in secret on his magnum opus, *The Gulag Archipelago*. Rostropovich, who was treated well by the authorities as an internationally acclaimed musician, let Solzhenitsyn stay at his *dacha* (country house) and also suffered for his support, eventually being forced into exile himself. During this same period, Heinrich Böll spoke out in support of Solzhenitsyn, who in the early 1970s was, rightfully, seen as a martyr for truth both by the Soviet *intelligentsia* and Western intellectuals. When the Soviet authorities deported Solzhenitsyn from the USSR in 1974, he stayed with Böll in the latter's cottage near Cologne. Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (Paladin: 1986). Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

¹⁸ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 62.

past. It combines two strategies that run throughout Komar & Melamid's career: the mixture of discordant styles and the mismatching of style to subject matter.¹⁹

The Discreet Charm of Socialist Realism

Choosing not to pursue non-conformism as a search for a sincere, singular, individual artistic voice, it was the style and discourse of Socialist Realism that Komar and Melamid decided, in their own peculiar way, to recuperate and salvage, despite the fact that its official standard-bearers made Komar and Melamid's professional life very difficult. Even more ironically, this project would also make them unpalatable later on, and not only to the Soviet authorities, who obviously saw no need for recuperating the avant-garde roots of Socialist Realism through mockery. The Western New Left, as it turned out, which by the early 1980s would no longer be very new, operated through dichotomies similar to the ones of doctrinaire Communism. When Marcuse wrote in *Essay on Liberation*, "And the young also attack the *esprit de serieux* in the socialist camp: miniskirts against the apparatchiks, rock'n'roll against Soviet Realism," he was willing to see the otherwise suspect products of the West's culture industry as harbingers of liberation in the East.²⁰ This dichotomy was one that Komar and Melamid disavowed both before and after their immigration, and it is for this reason that they became an important symptom in the West, as well as in the USSR. A need for a new historical paradigm, a new critical approach, and a new leftist politics in art that would yet again destabilize strict established correlations between visual style and political project.

"We are children of sots-realism [Socialist Realism] and grandchildren of the avant-garde," Komar and Melamid would later assert of their pedigree, and *vis a vis*

¹⁹ Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," 181.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1969), 26.

Socialist Realism, their work can only be understood as the rebellion of a child deeply indebted to a parent for the very foundations of his worldview.²¹ Indeed, today, both Komar and Melamid speak of the degree to which Socialist Realism as they experienced it remains utterly misunderstood and unfairly expunged from 20th century's art historical narrative. The crucial point is that Socialist Realism shaped them on an operational level. For one, the very idea of working together as a pair or group came to them from Socialist Realism, where it had survived as vestige of both the pre- and especially the post-revolutionary avant-garde, as did, remarkably, their penchant for eclecticism and their understanding of any artistic process as one that necessarily promotes collaboration with tradition and one's predecessors.²²

Going through their artistic schooling at the Stroganov Institute in the mid-60s right at the moment of transition from the Thaw, which ended in 1964, to the Stagnation, which would prevail under Brezhnev and last until 1985, Komar and Melamid experienced Socialist Realism not as a ruthless, monolithic, top-down dictum, but as an on-going search for styles and genres that could best reflect and serve changing political realities and the regime's own identity crisis. "We got caught between the Thaw and Stagnation," says Komar,

and so our teachers changed constantly. The names of the Institute's faculties changed. An old man would come with a yellowed magazine in hand – an

²¹ Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, *Stikhi O Smerti* (Moskva: Progress-Traditsia, 1999), 55.

²² The historical Russian and Soviet examples of artistic collaboration, according to Vitaly Komar, include Koz'ma Prutkov and Kukryniksy. The former was the name of an invented writer created by four actual writers – A.K. Tolstoy and the three Zhemchuzhnikov brothers -- who used it to publish witty aphorisms and other satirical texts in the 1850s and 1860s. The latter, whom both Komar and Melamid mentioned in their interviews with me, was an abbreviation of three names (Kupriyanov, Krylov, and Sokolov) used to publish the hugely popular political cartoons and book illustrations that this collective created from the mid-1920s until the late 1940s. Komar also cites the precedent of the Tkachev brothers, who created Socialist Realist paintings together. "Besides," he adds, "metaphoric collaboration is even more important. An artist is thus always collaborating with tradition, predecessors, the history of art." Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

erstwhile Constructivist. A year later, he would disappear and someone else would come to teach us about the Renaissance. And so I have retained an attitude towards art history as towards a dictionary. ... At Stroganovka, there was a subject called Styles, which had been around since the late 19th century, when prior to Constructivism artists were trained to work freely in different styles. ... If you're a professional, you can say 'apple' with the intonation of a Cezanne, or a photograph, or a Dutch still-life, etc.²³

Indeed, even those who have written on the dogmatic and formulaic nature of Socialist Realism as it came to be defined at its height note that it did have room for heterogeneity and was not an entirely predetermined ideological monolith. "Socialist realism is a somewhat elusive concept," write Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, "which has been defined in practice rather than theory. It is essentially a canonical system which rests on exemplars."²⁴ This reliance on exemplars – on copies of copies whose originals by the 1970s were difficult to establish – gave Socialist Realism a distinctly simulacral quality on the level of its logic, and it is to this level that Komar and Melamid looked, jettisoning the specifics of style.

Thus, Komar and Melamid noted in 1980, writing in *ArtForum*,

Socialist Realism - that grandiose manifestation of modernism - is not a style but a method of employing any artistic forms created by humankind. The Socialist content penetrates the cells of culture like a virus, and renews the forms from within. The cultures of the most varied epochs and people are used as manure, as fertilizer on the field of Socialist culture, which has no time, and to which space submits.²⁵

Some of their rhetoric employed here, to be sure, was meant to be a provocation aimed at an audience which, presumably, saw figuration as such, let alone figuration done

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 270. Apropos the role of literature in Soviet culture, they go on, "... Nowhere was socialist realism more conventionalized than in the novel, which was also the genre from which authorities drew most of the canonical exemplars. Gradually elements from these exemplars congealed into a de-facto formulaic masterplot which could be used to produce socialist realist novels on any acceptable topic, in the manner of an imperative poetics." Ibid.

²⁵ Komar and Melamid, "In Search of Religion," 46.

in the broadly populist and naturalist idiom of Socialist Realism, as beyond recuperation. Yet much of what Komar and Melamid claim for Socialist Realism does seem borne out in their artistic practice. Thus, Socialist Realism, despite the evident hollowness by the late 1960s of its promise to find the perfect correlation of formal expression with correct ideological content,²⁶ was on the operational level as much the progenitor of Sots-Art's machinations as it was their target, and this would continue to be the case for Komar and Melamid's subsequent work.

The Time Is Out of Joint

In particular, the adoption of a Socialist Realist *modus operandi* was connected to Komar and Melamid's observation that Socialist culture is one "which has no time, and to which space submits." It is also on this point that one final aspect of Bakhtinian semiotics becomes significant for understanding Komar and Melamid – namely, the idea of the chronotope and its concomitant critique, performed by both the artists and the literary theorist, of "epic time." "[T]he chronotope," write Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, "distinguishes broader categories within the history of literature...[and] emerges as the crucial factor determining what ... genre is." In using it, "Bakhtin ignores the usual generic divisions, such as epic, lyric, and drama, and proposes instead one master division within all genres, between 'epic' and 'novel,'" which are fundamentally distinguished by the way they narrate time. Thus,

The time of epic is not chronological; it is rather the world of beginnings and peak times in the national history, a world of firsts and bests. ...[E]pic time is best perceived as a value. What was in the past is automatically considered to be better, bigger, stronger, or more beautiful. ... Epic time...exists in a world without relativity or any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect

²⁶ A promise whose origins Komar and Melamid rightly saw as part of a larger global return to Realism in the 1930s.

it with the present where people constantly rethink, change, and reevaluate. ...[T]he epic as a genre is cut off from the present, a textual museum of antiquated speech, and a simulacrum of official values.²⁷

This idea of “epic time” relates directly to the analysis of visual semiotics that the artists undertook in the two major works they did immediately following *Sots-Art* in 1973 and 1974. Indeed, attempts to understand the means by which historical time is narrated, conceptualized, and visualized make up a major theme in Komar and Melamid’s oeuvre. Their unabashed use of symbol and reference-laden iconography to do so becomes yet another premise of Socialist Realism that they adopt. It is, however, in dealing with Komar and Melamid’s attempts to tackle history that one also begins to see the limits of semiotics. A desire to offer a literal staging of the chronotope of epic time backfires, taking the artists and viewers to a place where the ability of semiotics to order and systematize chaotic heteroglossia breaks down and a need for another – perhaps more affective than effective – approach emerges. Thus, in dealing with Komar and Melamid’s take on diachronic history (rather than synchronic visual culture), one must tackle an idea of what I will call the “historical sublime,” to which I will return after first discussing the way Komar and Melamid actually stage “epic time” in their 1972-73 installation *Paradise*.

Trouble in Paradise

Concerning their fascination with history, it is telling that both Komar and Melamid’s first attempt to create a movement in 1965 and their first joint exhibition in 1967 were called *Retrospectivism*.²⁸ This first attempt at going forward by looking back

²⁷ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 280; 287-288.

²⁸ Vitaly Komar, "Komar and Melamid on-Line Chronology," <<http://www.komarandmelamid.org/chronology.html>>, accessed October 10, 2010,

was followed in 1972-1973 by the installation-performance *Paradise/Pantheon*, which took place in Melamid's apartment and "featured images of deities in various historical styles and movements" (Figs. 59 and 60). According to Komar, this was the first post-modern work and the first piece of Soviet installation art,²⁹ and in it, at the very dawn of the two artists' collaboration, one sees their portentous preoccupation with the overwhelming, irrational forces of history, already curiously relatable to an 18th century precedent – Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon* of 1781, a miniature theatre with sound and lighting effects illustrating the sublimity of nature.³⁰ Three hundred years later, in *Paradise*, a similarly immersive environment, the artists allowed their audience, which consisted of invited friends and acquaintances, to be caught in the middle of both the clashing historical narratives of Russian history's sublime and the visual staging of Bakhtin's "epic time." The installation survives today only in a set of photographs whose quality leaves much to be desired, but they do still offer some idea of what this phantasmagorical space looked like.³¹

The focal point of the installation was located on the eastern wall of the apartment

<http://www.komarandmelamid.org/chronology.html>.

²⁹ Ibid. The following information is provided on the site: "Installation-performance *Paradise/Pantheon* featured images of deities in various historical styles and movements, held at private apartment in Moscow. First postmodern work. "Samisdat"—self published underground artist book named *Paradise* was made out of black and white photographs of the performance. Installation visited by Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov, dissident leader and inventor of the hydrogen bomb. Demolished on state order in 1974."

³⁰ "[T]he *Eidophusikon* brought landscape art into sympathy with the cult of feeling by linking sensation, and even sensationalism, to an appeal to the viewer's sympathetic imagination." Although de Loutherbourg never tried to create a spectacle of *Paradise*, curiously, during the *Eidophusikon*'s second season in London, he did create an image of Hell in the spectacle of "The Rising of the Palace of Pandemonium," based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Ann Bermingham, Yale Center for British Art., and Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, *Sensation & Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art; Yale University Press, 2005), 20-22.

³¹ It's an interesting methodological question how much of the meaning I am offering here would have been clear without the notes available in the Zimmerli archive alongside photographic documentation, which were presumably based on information provided with the artists, and without my own conversations with the artists. This kind of heavy, extensive reliance on culturally specific iconography to produce meaningful narrative, as well as affective experience, is an important point of difference between "Moscow Conceptualism" and almost every other form of Conceptualism.

– the side, one might note, on which the sun rises and the altars and iconostases of various Christian churches are found. There, a giant face, outlined with the heavy contour line familiar from *Sots-Art* and glowing with a light bulb halo, floated in mid-air. It was split into four quadrants that were held together by deliberately prominent seams. Each quadrant was executed in a different visual style, a Frankenstein’s monster of Russian and Soviet visual culture made up of a single eye from a Christ of Orthodox icons; another eye, narrower and with an arched eyebrow, belonging to Lenin executed in a Cubo-Futurist manner; half a mouth belonging to the 19th century Realist manner; and the other half of the mouth looking like an anatomical dissection of a face with skin stripped away, pointing to the relativity of the notion of one true painterly realism that was, of course, already foregrounded by the clash of four visual idioms. A paint-splattered stool with two footprints painted on it hung in the place of the nose and beneath it stood a table, altar-like, covered with highly reflective gold or silver cloth.

Immediately to the right of what one might well assume to be the face of God (be he Jesus or Lenin) – and what the notations on the photographs in the Zimmerli Museum archives refer to as “The Face of Humanity” – one could see a narrow blue sheet of cloth hung from the ceiling to the floor to look like a slide and a figure positioned at the bottom, plummeting head forward and facing down – a very literal representation, one might conjecture, of the Fall of man. Also positioned symmetrically to the right and left of the face were two line drawings on clear plastic of a male and female nude figures, presumably Adam and Eve.

On the northern wall, there stood a liquor cabinet with a fold-out leaf in which an opened bottle of vodka and glasses shared the company of a reproduction of Titian’s *The*

Pastoral Concert (1510), an impressionist piece, a book by Maxim Gorky, and a fly sitting on a single sugar cube. This peculiar still-life mimicked the juxtaposition, ubiquitously found in the common or utilitarian spaces (kitchens, storage closets, bathroom) of Soviet communal apartments, of cheap reproductions of the pinnacles of the Western painting tradition with the prose of everyday life.

Behind this cabinet of Soviet curiosities, the wall was covered by a large, poster-style drawing of a three-headed monster – or a Trinity – which united into one entity the kolkhoz-woman, the worker, and the *intelligentsia* professional (recognizable by his glasses) as the pillars of the communist state. Above them hung a moon with Stalin's face in it.

In addition to painted décor and assemblages, the room contained several papier-mâché busts and figures. One bust was located close to the center of the room in front of the liquor cabinet and was painted a silver color. It sat directly on the floor and depicted a man with a very large mustache holding a key – the “Key to Paradise.” Directly above this bust, another, larger figure was suspended, its midriff a series of bulges that dripped blood-like red paint onto the shoulder of the bust below it. Also on the floor, a piece of fabric split the room in two through with a snaking curve. It had little boats made of ruble bills on top of it and was spanned by a small bridge, intimating that it is a river – the River Styx.

Additionally, painted directly onto the floor were three round medallions, one containing the face of an Italian Renaissance youth, one with Komar and Melamid's pseudo-mosaic *Double Self-Portrait*, and one with the image of the famous mosaic depiction of emperor Justinian. Curiously, the notes in the Zimmerli archive identify the

mosaic – incorrectly, I believe, based on visual evidence – as the image of Constantine Palaeologus, the last reigning Byzantine Emperor whose death in battle marked the end of the millennium-old Byzantine Empire. This misattribution suggests that the medallions were there to allude to the historical idea of Moscow as the third Rome, a notion that captivated the imagination of the Muscovy city states immediately after the fall of Constantinople, which the emperor Constantine had designated as the “Second Rome” a thousand years earlier.³² And, indeed, the artistic representatives of all three great “Romes” are, arguably, in attendance in these paintings.

Finally, widening its historical scope beyond connections to the Western European and Byzantine traditions, the room also contained a gilded papier-mâché sculpture suspended from the ceiling in the northwestern corner above the Byzantine emperor and identified in the archival notes as the Buddha. His rough, highly textured surface was encrusted with small children’s toys of various kinds, cavalry soldiers scaling its large face. A knit monkey-like figure, identified in the notes as Confucius, was also suspended from the ceiling on the south wall. The atmosphere of this dark place, moreover, was made even stranger by the radio that was tuned to one of the official stations, and the fact that visitors were taken into this bizarre environment one at a time. After all, everyone does die – and presumably goes to *Paradise* – alone.

As Komar and Melamid would later point out in their article titled “In Search of

³² The seeds of this concept are to be found in Constantinople, which, by the end of the fourth century and after the fall of Rome, came to be referred to as the “New Rome.” Constantinople fell in 1453, and by the mid 1490s, after the world did not end in 1492 as expected by the millenarians, the seeds of the concept of Moscow under the leadership of Ivan III as the “Third Rome” emerged. By the early 16th century, it was articulated clearly in an epistle written by the monk Philotheus of Pskov to Grand Duke Vasili III, proclaiming “...two Romes have fallen and the third exists and there will not be a fourth.” This logic was used to justify a view of Russia as the last and only leader of the true Christian civilization (which excluded all of the West, which had succumbed to the heresy of Catholicism). Dimitri Stremooukhoff, “Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine,” *Speculum* 28, no. 1 (Jan. 1953): 84-101.

Religion,” linking their earlier installation to the presence in their work of an acute historical consciousness, Paradise is what comes before human history begins and after it ends as a narrative of unfolding events.³³ In *Paradise*, Komar and Melamid clearly tried to imagine a syncretic psychogeographic terrain of a place which, while revealing its constitutive historical narratives, also conflated them in a way that positioned it outside history.

This place was not a happy place, as Jamey Gambrell later suggested, her imagery evocative of those literal prominent seams holding together the central image of *Paradise*. “In this mass memory,” she wrote of Komar and Melamid’s work in 1983,

the seams of history are tenuous and emotional, pictorial logic supplants discursive logic as a more malleable, responsive correlative to the scale of its territory. Historical relationships are subject to precipitous realignments to express the mute emotion of the moment. When that emotion (in art or international affairs) is one of confusion, of being overwhelmed by the question of what is to be done,³⁴ the mood is likely to be retrospective, restrictive, to indulge in nostalgia or selective oblivion in order to temper the malaise caused by the glut of memory.³⁵

What is remarkable is that in using their “pictorial logic,” Komar and Melamid were able to produce an invaluable literalized topography of the Soviet psyche, which, rather than containing a single-minded Communist ideological vision, turned out to be a motley patchwork of visual idioms, beliefs, and desires, utopian ones among them, whose

³³ Komar and Melamid, "In Search of Religion," 39.

³⁴ The extended interview with Komar and Melamid Carter Ratcliff published in his book is evocatively titled by a quote, “In Our Art There Is May Be Too Much.”

³⁵ Jamey Gambrell, "Vitaly Komar - Alexandr Melamid," *A-Ya*, no. 5 (1983): 12-13. Wollen notes a similar glut of memory: “Stalin’s project was to combine a Fordist industrial revolution in the base with a neo-tsarist cultural counter-revolution in the superstructure, freezing Soviet culture in the nineteenth century while trying to force Soviet industry into the twenty-first. This dual imperative of accelerating towards the future while reversing towards the past naturally caused havoc with the Soviet sense of history. Moreover, by a strange byproduct of this time-warp, modernism in its Soviet form (constructivism, futurism, etcetera) began to recede into the distant past until, by the end of the Stalinist period of super-industrialization, it had become little more than a memory, almost a phantasm.” Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," 177.

archaeology Komar and Melamid made it their task to expose. Stylistically, they continued to do this in *Biography of a Contemporary*,³⁶ which succeeded *Paradise* in 1973 and similarly operated through the clash of a multitude of styles, “from erotic realism to expressionist and geometric abstraction,” while narrating the biography of a young man not dissimilar from Komar and Melamid themselves.³⁷

Paradise was also a work that further indicated that, as Matthew Jesse Jackson has noted, “Komar and Melamid lodged their creations within intricately assembled fields of words and images, to the effect that each individual artwork functioned as a mere fragment derived from a much larger project.”³⁸ Here, I would argue, the aesthetic of the fragment built into the process of creation mimicked in its logic the aesthetic of the ruin that, according to Nina Dubin, coincided in the 18th century with the blossoming of the depictions of the sublime, and was driven by the belief that “the most gratifying of aesthetic experiences were associated no longer with discrete objects but rather with unquantifiable events.”³⁹ The sublime effect that Komar and Melamid produced using their fragments and events is what I will turn to next.

The Historical Sublime

What made me look for a connection between Komar and Melamid’s work and

³⁶ “*Biography*, the show’s most ambitious work, consists of 197 tiny painted squares, each no larger than a matchbook, depicting by means of realistic and symbolic vignettes the story of a young Russian’s life. In it the two artists manage to comment on many features of Soviet society – standing on line, bureaucracy, education, the anti-Jewish purges of the early 1950’s. A number of the panels satirize Russian styles of art – poster, icon and 19th century realism – as well as the work of such Western artists as the Fauves, the German Expressionists, Picasso, Mondrian and Chagall.” In Grace Glueck, “Art Smuggled out of Russia Makes Satiric Show Here,” *The New York Times* February 7, 1976, 23, 50.

³⁷ Komar, “Komar and Melamid on-Line Chronology.”

³⁸ Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 126.

³⁹ Nina L. Dubin, *Futures & Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 1.

various historical takes on the idea of the Sublime was an obvious allusion that the artists themselves made. The penny dropped when I saw a drawing of *The Bank of England as a Ruin* by Joseph Gandy in the Sir John Soane Museum in London (Fig. 61). Here, at Soane's own request, Gandy, the master draughtsman and painter who executed the finest architectural drawings for Soane, imagined what his employer's masterpiece would look like in a state of decay. The project was clearly a predecessor of two Komar and Melamid series: *Post-Art* of 1973 (Fig. 62) and *Scenes from the Future* of 1975 (Fig. 63), both of which aimed to show what the masterpieces of Pop Art and modernist architecture, respectively, would look like after the apocalypse.

Fond of ruins, both historical and fictional, Gandy, along with such contemporaries as Turner and John Martin, was known for his feeling for the sublime, as was, of course, the older Frenchman Hubert Robert, to whom Komar and Melamid themselves acknowledged their debt of inspiration for their *Scenes from the Future* series.⁴⁰ Robert, whose works were collected by Catherine the Great, famously pictured sublimity by painting the grand gallery of the Louvre as a ruin even as the building was being fixed and remodeled to accommodate its role as a public museum (Fig. 64). Knowledge of his work came with Komar and Melamid's art historical education, and he is a fascinating figure to consider as a foil to Komar and Melamid.⁴¹ In both cases, we see artists engaging with the idea of ruins (the first time around as a tragedy, the second as a farce) in moments of historical transition and upheaval on a grand scale.

As Nina Dubin notes of Robert's "futuristic" ruins, they

marked the culmination of aesthetic strategies that enabled acclimation to

⁴⁰ The first works in the series date to 1974-75, and the artists would also return to it a decade later. Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 92-93.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

modernity in advance of its full-fledged arrival. ...The valorization of ruins...modeled a capacity to tolerate uncertainty [while]...the imaginative pleasure afforded by ruins [was] one that was premised on, and helped compensate for, the irretrievability of the past. ... The sight of ruins made anxiety about risk and uncertainty pleasurable.⁴²

Dubin further writes that “The aesthetic experience associated with ruins permitted acculturation to a “time of contingency’: to a time...when preoccupation with the past’s failure to serve as a guide to the present permeated multiple domains” and even suggests that “If Robert’s art fails by modernist standards, many of the works...have their distant echo in a postmodern hostility to medium specificity and a concomitant embrace of the sublime.”⁴³

Peter Wollen has written evocatively about Komar and Melamid’s engagement with history by discussing the ruin-themed works in particular. He notes of the *Scenes from the Future* and *Post-Art* series,

With nostalgic irony the West, in all its modernity, is inscribed into the preRomantic, eighteenth-century vision of antiquity favoured during the heyday of Russian absolutism. In a similar gesture conflating modernity with antiquity, [Komar and Melamid] painted damaged and time-worn versions of a Warhol soup can painting and a Lichtenstein comic strip painting, as though they were now stained and aged enough to be included in a Soviet museum as ancient artefacts. Thus American pop art itself was Russified by being seen retrospectively, in the remote past, rather than projected into an imaginary Westernized future.⁴⁴

Indeed, the complex relationships between ideas of the modern and the ancient, narratives of progress, regress, and stagnation, a projected, imagined Western present and an often equally imagined Soviet past, are absolutely central to Komar and Melamid’s work. Yet the experience they produce overall, I would argue, in these series as elsewhere, goes beyond just figuring a culture clash between Russia and the West.

⁴² Dubin, *Futures & Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert*, 2-3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," 182.

Instead, Komar and Melamid's work here speaks with the voice of transcultural applicability and can best be described through the aesthetic category of the Sublime. As had happened with Bakhtin's work a decade earlier, there was a revival of critical and academic interest in the Sublime (in particular in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard)⁴⁵ that roughly coincided with the early bloom of Komar and Melamid's historical experiments.

What defines the Sublime is the engendering of a special category of aesthetic experience that responds to the "vast, irregular, obscure and superhuman." As theorized in the 18th century, particularly by Edmund Burke, the concept acquired a new usefulness when it became a foil to the Beautiful. Whereas beauty "was the source of 'positive and independent' pleasure," the Sublime produced delight "from the contemplation of a terrifying situation that could not actually harm the spectator, except in the imagination." This, according to Burke, produced "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."⁴⁶ Even more influentially, Kant defined the sublime as a way for Reason to assert its superiority over nature by experiencing pleasure through the displeasure of recognizing man's physical powerlessness against Nature – the reassertion of reason that enables us to find in our mind "a superiority to nature" even in its immensity.⁴⁷

Though theorized by Burke and Kant as a broad category of aesthetic experience, the Sublime, in art historical terms, had come to be associated in particular with a certain kind of landscape painting, which most literally offered the visual depiction of the

⁴⁵ See Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Artforum* xxii, no. 4 (1984): 36-43.

⁴⁶ David Rodgers, "Sublime, The," in *Oxford Art Online*, <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T082179>>, accessed October 14, 2010.

⁴⁷ Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2008), available on-line at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/kant-aesthetics/>>, accessed October 15, 2010.

physical properties of the Sublime – vastness, obscurity, and irregularity⁴⁸ – and followed the distinction made by Kant that the “Sublime properly so-called” was restricted to judgments on natural objects.⁴⁹

Given that Komar and Melamid’s representations of nature, when they do occur, are decidedly underwhelming, it’s hard to argue for their engagement with that traditional idea of the Sublime in the visual arts. Yet a sense of dealing with an awe-inspiring, uncontrollable, overwhelming force recurs over and over in their art. That force, I would argue, is History, to whose status as their age’s new Sublime they give visual form. They address a particularly Kantian Sublime insofar as their imagery does not propose a single form or iconography for the idea but does evoke a sense of facing up to a historical situation which overwhelmed anyone coming to it with conventional understandings of historical narrative.⁵⁰ With Kant, Komar and Melamid see the Sublime not as that which resides in an object, but as an attitude or experience that

contributed, over and above the experience of the beautiful, ...restlessness as opposed to satisfaction, a drive toward the as yet unapprehended, that would come to be associated with the claim that sublime aesthetic experience contained within it a commitment to avant-gardism.⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Painters of landscapes recorded natural phenomena: from the mid-1770s Joseph Wright of Derby produced many pictures of *Vesuvius in Eruption*, while Richard Wilson painted the *Falls of Niagara* (1774) and Philippe de Loutherbourg invented the Eidophusikon, a miniature theatre with sound and lighting effects illustrating the sublimity of nature. Theories of the Sublime ceased to be widely discussed in the 19th century, but it remained a potent force in the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, John Martin, Francis Danby and James Ward. On the Continent the Sublime is a recognizable element in the work of Delacroix, Géricault and Friedrich.” Rodgers, “Sublime, The,” <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T082179>>, accessed October 14, 2010.

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant and James Creed Meredith, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 90-92.

⁵⁰ “While largely agreeing with Burke’s definition of the aesthetic qualities of the Sublime as vastness, terror and obscurity, Kant rejected the idea that sublimity is inherent in the specific properties of objects and substituted the importance of the individual’s subjective capacity for feeling; the Sublime was thus not a universal property but an individual response.” Rodgers, “Sublime, The,” <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T082179>>, accessed October 14, 2010.

⁵¹ Baldine Saint Girons, et al., “Sublime,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford Art

This take on the sublime, moreover, is consistent with the fact that in the post-war period, “With the work of Adorno and Lyotard, the sublime recovers the social function [wherein] it becomes the arena for a recognition of the force of the unanticipated, the success that seemed not to have been predicted.”⁵² Thus, although the sources – purely abstract painting – that Lyotard sees as inspiring feelings of the Sublime are vastly different from the overwhelming mass of history that I see as the origin of the sublime for Komar and Melamid, the general emphasis on looking for the sublime in the affect the work produces in the viewer rather than the intention of the author seems similar,⁵³ as does the assumption that whatever its source, the Sublime is that which allows the observer’s mind to reassert control after allowing itself to be overwhelmed.

What sublime impact their visions of the effects of history had on at least one actual living artist is demonstrated by an anecdote that Vitaly Komar relates about the aforementioned *Post-Art* series. As Komar tells it, based on the recollection of his long-time gallerist, Ronald Feldman, seeing what his works might look like “after... a nuclear war or some other catastrophe” made Andy Warhol “literally turn green.”⁵⁴

If for Warhol, a one-time encounter with his own future destructibility and insignificance could be so potent, then how overwhelming would the experience of living with the knowledge of one’s own historical dispensability be? Ilya Kabakov answers this question with a metaphor that again evokes the traditional tropes of the sublime as overwhelming natural grandeur. In a recent interview, Kabakov spoke of the ghosts of

Online), <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0490>>, accessed October 20, 2010.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 39.

⁵⁴ Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]*, 134.

Western art's greatness which he and his Moscow colleagues imagined into being out of an overwhelming feeling of their own inferiority. "This feeling," he said, "told us that there is a great river somewhere, which has flowed, flows now, and will continue to flow, washing up against beautiful banks, whereas we shall continue to sit here in shit as we always have."⁵⁵

Thinking of Soviet intellectuals' pervasive sense of their own peripheralness, one again remembers Bakhtin, who here becomes the kind of figure whose biography not only bears out the validity of his ideas but also encapsulates the situation of his culture. Clark and Holquist write of the discrepancy in the way Bakhtin is understood in various parts of the West and in Russia, "While this discrepancy might at first seem to be spatial – Russia versus the West – it is temporal at root. It has largely to do with a translation gap."⁵⁶ More than a mere accident of history, the translation gap which allowed Bakhtin's work to enter into an international dialogue with decades of delay, when it would come to seem both still prescient and yet already secondary, is singularly emblematic.⁵⁷ Yet

⁵⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁶ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, ix. According to Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, "[I]n the eyes of the world, Bakhtin had to all purposes died in 1929" and was "reborn" in the mid-60s, when the work he'd written earlier could finally be published." 1965 saw the publication of his *Rabelais and His Time* and by 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, parts of his writings were published in English translation. Of a subsequent English-language book, Clark and Holquist note that it "epitomizes the feature of belatedness that haunts [Bakhtin] career" and makes it difficult to assess the entirety of his contribution to 20th century thought, which spans Structuralism, semiotics, Formalism, and religious philosophy – all preoccupations that haunt Komar and Melamid's work, as well. Ibid., viii – ix.

Clark and Holquist write further on: "The centrality of the self/other distinction in all Bakhtin's work may obscure the originality of his thought, since many of his preoccupations are familiar through other thinkers who were working their way out of the same tradition of Cohen's Neo-Kantianism and Husserl's Phenomenology. Bakhtin's concept of responsibility has striking similarities to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, while Bakhtin's ideas about self/other and visual metaphors resemble Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Yet Bakhtin's *Architectonics* came first. Only the peculiarities of Soviet censorship and of Bakhtin himself kept it from being published until 1979. It had been written sixty years earlier, in 1919, eight years before the appearance of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and decades before Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943). There could be no question of influence. The situation was rather one of a series of like responses to the same set of philosophical questions that were abroad in the early twentieth century." Ibid., 94.

⁵⁷ All the more so since the narrative of belated discovery applied as much to historical figures praised (and

another narrative Komar and Melamid exploit is one about the fate of obscurity and rediscovery which was true, as in the case of Bakhtin cited above, of a number of Russian and Soviet thinkers disliked by the regime, but was also widely exploited by Soviet historians, who wrote about both actual and invented historical personages to assert Russia's historical primacy in a variety of scientific and cultural spheres.⁵⁸

Bakhtin's belated coming into prominence points to the degree to which the Soviet *intelligentsia* could in the 1970s rightfully perceive itself as existing on both a geographical and particularly a historical periphery. Against that understanding, Kabakov's metaphor cited above demonstrated the way in which the language of the sublime was particularly potent and relevant for those on the periphery to define their relationship to events that seemed, from afar, to take place on a truly grand scale, which was probably made all the more grand by the fact that it applied to an imagined psychogeography.

Thus, more often than not, "the West" for Soviets became a term that conflated time and space instead of referring to any one specific, observable place. It was, however, not the only construct that evoked feelings associated with the Sublime. Russian history, if sufficiently far removed from the banality of everyday Soviet life, could also be both mocked and surreptitiously admired for its ability to overwhelm one with the scale of its events.

The issue of how to visualize, expose, and distort that scale is one that Komar and Melamid addressed in one of their two most obviously historical early cycles of

sometimes invented) by the Soviet regime as it did to contemporary figures repressed by it.

⁵⁸ See Slava Gerovitch, "Perestroika of the History of Technology and Science in the Ussr: Changes in the Discourse," *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 102-134. See also Dmitry Pisarenko, "Kak Rossiya Delali Rodinoy Slonov," *Argumenty i fakty* January 30, 2002, available on-line at <<http://sci.informika.ru/text/magaz/newpaper/messedu/cour0202/800.htm>>, accessed November 27, 2010.

paintings, *History of Russia*, a six-canvas series from 1973 that narrates Russian history through six conferences that took place between 1471 and 1945 (Fig. 65). What one encounters in *History of Russia* is the disjunction between the momentousness of the events (e.g. the Yalta conference) one expects from the titles and the literalness with which Komar and Melamid approach the task of representing the actual, rather modest, number of people present at each event, each man, moreover, abbreviated as a tiny stick figure on a large unprimed canvas. Soon thereafter, Soviet art's existence on the periphery of time was tackled on a grand scale and, again, with sly literalness – in the second explicitly historical cycle, the 1976 *History of the USSR* polyptich. Made up of fifty-nine canvases, one for each year since the October 1917 Revolution, it dealt once more with the cognitive clash produced by an attempt to fulfill the aesthetic goals of Socialist Realism by narrating the history of Soviet Union through the idiom of purely abstract painting (Fig. 66).

Needless to say, a series such as *History of the USSR* could not fully or in good faith produce the pedagogical reinforcement of a “proper” understanding of history one might expect from a Socialist Realist canvas. Nor could it properly offer the avant-garde Sublime Lyotard attributes to the “this is happening” effect of pure abstraction. The latter is foreclosed by the fact that the title declares both Soviet history and the abstraction used here to capture it to be something that has already happened, a historical artifact with an established ideological connotation. The effect the paintings produce, then, is a combination of amusement and anxiety at the impossibility of sublating the opposing modes of picturing time into a higher reality, a new style that could accommodate both meaningfully while providing insight into something other than its own impossibility.

Thus, Komar and Melamid's work allows simultaneously for both the ironic remove offered by semiotic analysis *and* the emotional surrender of an encounter with the historical sublime that forces a collapse of all the usual narratives and distinctions. A surprising description of this collapse can be found in the artists' 1980 melancholy manifesto of sorts – an article in *Artforum* on unofficial art and Komar and Melamid's own experiences in America titled "The Barren Flowers of Evil." Sketching out in a few paragraphs what Boris Groys would later address in several books, Komar and Melamid intimate to their American readers that in exploring their historical roots, "Russian artists discovered that Lenin's avant-garde and Stalin's academicism are essentially only two different sides of the same socialist utopia. With the failure of this utopia art too was discredited." "For us...recent émigrés from Russia," the duo concluded, "it is obvious that the world is not only monotonously bad, but that changes in it have no meaning. Likewise, change in art is meaningless. Art ceases to be a movement from and to, and becomes only a reshuffling of what exists."⁵⁹

As I will argue later, in taking this very dim view of history, Komar and Melamid were, in fact, propelling it forward or, at the very least moving it somewhere. However, the movement required, among other things, that the artists should first take stock of their own position as people uniquely susceptible to being caught amid historical aporias. Thus, in the work collectively titled *Legends*, their second large-scale project from 1973 – a year of which Komar now says that it was the most intense and fruitful one of their collaboration – Komar and Melamid turned their archaeological gaze on subjects even

⁵⁹ Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "The Barren Flowers of Evil," in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 268. The article originally appeared in the March 1980 issue of *Artforum*.

closer at hand, and invented two new characters to help exorcise their own professional demons. These superimposed the demands of Soviet ideology onto older artistic preoccupations, ranging from the uses of landscape for nationalist ends, the myth of the tortured artist, and the need to fit into a canon structured around dualities to the race for primacy that often drives art historical debate.

Imaginary Artists – History’s Hostages

The imaginary characters Nikolay Buchumov and Apelles Zyablov were not, strictly speaking, Komar and Melamid’s first invented artists. The duo’s first invented artist was the character of “Komar and Melamid,” whose activities, thoughts, statements, etc. would always be close to and yet separate from those of the two individuals, who also bore these names and who staunchly refused to divulge which of them got a particular idea first or who added which brush stroke. This ability of two people to work together extended into a much more personal realm the quality of *as-if-ness* which so singularly marks Komar and Melamid’s oeuvre, and which was announced first in *Sots-Art* when the duo worked *as if* they were a character who could internalize perfectly a particular ideological belief or historical narrative.⁶⁰

In working as a pair, moreover, Komar and Melamid helped shape early on the communal character of Moscow Conceptualism, which began to take shape in the early 1970s and was a departure from the individualistic Modernist aspirations of 1960s non-

⁶⁰ To those acquainted with the works produced by the Moscow Conceptualist circle, the idea of *personazhnost’* – of the artist working with fictional characters or himself being in character – is very familiar. To give but one example, Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism’s single most famous representative, first made his name outside of the then USSR with the installation *Ten Characters* and has since the 1990s started to create elaborate bodies of work attributed to fictional painters, most notably Charles Rosenthal.

conformism. Communal interdependence would reach its most extreme form by the late 1980s, when Andrew Solomon as an outside observer who gradually infiltrated a part of this community would write,

What is meaningful in Moscow is the community of artists; the friendships of the artists are both the subject and the object of their work. Only the sociology of the Moscow scene explains its meanings; only by knowing the artists can one know their work.⁶¹

The roots of this dynamic can be traced to the emergence of “Komar and Melamid” as a creative figure over a period of several years. Even though their earliest collaborations started in 1965 while they were still art students, *Sots-Art* was the two artists’ first project that they had decided to sign jointly.⁶² It solidified their partnership as a single entity and seems also to have permanently imparted to the “Komar and Melamid” character the ethos of sardonic credulity. Vitaly Komar stresses the fact that working as an imagined artist who painted “for the soul” in the official manner was the starting point for *Sots-Art*. He also asserts that the subsequent inventions were a way to “jump out of Sots-Art” as a circumscribed series while still preserving the excitement and freshness of its logic.⁶³ Part of what also made *Sots-Art*’s discovery so exciting, he says, was that being in character for it allowed for “playing at being an idiot, but in the works – the works were idiotic – so we [the artists] could have some remove.” Observing oneself as if from a distance doing the ridiculous in art could, according to Komar, provide a sort of inoculation against the desire to perform those same actions in earnest in real life.⁶⁴

In fact, the very act of reasserting that separation between artist as person and

⁶¹ Andrew Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991), 10.

⁶² Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 15.

⁶³ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

artist as persona was a singularly subversive gesture in a country that extended the search for clear friend and foe into every sphere of activity and demanded, for ease of telling the two apart, absolute authorial sincerity from its cultural producers, as the Brodsky trial of 1964 and the Sinyavsky trial of 1966 most famously demonstrated in the post-Stalin period.⁶⁵ Indeed, criminal prosecution for artistic activity was a possibility distinct enough in the early 1970s that Komar cites it as yet another reason for working in a co-authorship: it would be harder to put two people away in prison than one. According to Komar, it is in part for that reason that he and Melamid started trying seriously to exhibit their work publicly only after beginning to work together in 1972, when they also started trying to build up a broader Sots-Art movement.⁶⁶

As a character, though, Komar and Melamid did not have nearly enough distance from his creators to speak publicly about the complexities of their allegiance to multiple mutually exclusive belief systems, though they did try to address their own biographies through stylistic heteroglossia in *Biography of a Contemporary* (Fig. 67).⁶⁷ But deliberate

⁶⁵ In February 1966, the writer Andrey Sinyavsky, who was being tried for distributing anti-Soviet propaganda after publishing abroad works critical of the regime, said the following in the closing speech at his trial: "Indeed, here, the literary trope [khudozhestvenny obraz] very strangely and unexpectedly loses its conditionality [uslovnost'], and is taken by the prosecutors literally, so literally, that the court proceedings get added to the text as its natural extension. ...Already during the inquiry I understood that...what interests the [prosecutors] are not the conceptual underpinnings of the creative output, but certain quotes, which get repeated over and over again. ...I wish only to offer certain arguments, which are elementary relative to literature. 1) A word is not an action, it's a word. 2) an artistic/literary image is relative/conditional; 3) the author is not identical with the character. ...I do not know why there is a need to invent enemies, to pile up monsters, realizing artistic images in actual life, understanding them literally." Ivo Bock and Universität Bremen. Forschungsstelle Osteuropa., *Samizdat: Alternative Kultur in Zentral- Und Osteuropa; Die 60er Bis 80er Jahre; [Anlässlich Der Ausstellung "Samizdat: Alternative Kultur in Zentral- Und Osteuropa - Die 60er Bis 80er Jahre". Ein Projekt Der Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an Der Universität Bremen Vom 10. September Bis 29. Oktober 2000 in Der Akademie Der Künste in Berlin]*, Dokumentationen Zur Kultur Und Gesellschaft Im Östlichen Europa (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2000), 204. Translations are my own.

Sinyavsky remained in prison until 1971 and was allowed to emigrate to France in 1973.

⁶⁶ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁶⁷ The need to speak of this ambivalence at all was in stark contrast to the accepted norms of behavior that would have guaranteed Komar and Melamid a higher chance of professional success and, at the very least, a steady income. In an interview I recorded with him, Komar kept stressing his loathing for the members of

obtuse literalness on the part of the artists would have been both dangerous and inexplicable if it responded not to the demands of Soviet ideology, but to the demands of earlier periods that Soviet historiography disparaged, disavowed, or refashioned drastically to its own needs. It's at this point that the fortuitous discovery in a dumpster of a painting of a maiden staring out onto the sea signed "N. Buchumov" (Fig. 68) led Komar and Melamid to the idea of *Legends*.⁶⁸

What *Legends* consisted of were two bodies of work – that of Nikolay Buchumov, the rest of whose oeuvre Komar and Melamid decided to “discover” after their original finding, and that of Apelles Zyablov, whose entire oeuvre was Komar and Melamid's contribution, “revealed” to the world in the service of art history.

The first “discovered” artist, Nikolay Buchumov, was a paragon of faithful Realism. His life, in Komar and Melamid's hands, became an installation consisting of sixty paintings (fifty nine of them are small landscapes) (Fig. 69), a written autobiography, a photographic portrait, some personal effects, and an the eye-patch he wore after losing an eye in a fight with either a decadent artist, an avant-gardist, a Constructivist, or a Futurist, depending on which interview with Komar and Melamid one consults (Fig. 70).

According to his autobiography, written in 1929, Buchumov was born in 1891 and raised by a grandmother in the small village of Buslaevk. At 12, the young Buchumov ran away to the city of Penza and was taught artistic basics by an “undeservedly forgotten” portraitist who himself had been trained in Moscow. After ten

Union of Artists observing whom made him realize that if one pretends to be an idiot long enough to conceal one's true thoughts, one actually will become the mask. Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁶⁸ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 66.

years in Penza, Buchumov went to study at the same art school in Moscow, only to find that he hated the commotion of the large city and did not agree in his ideas or work with his vainglorious teachers or fellow students. “My reserve was especially strained,” Buchumov writes, “when in an argument about art, a decadent... ..accidentally knocked out my left eye with his fist” – hence the need for the aforementioned eye-patch.⁶⁹ It was soon after this event that Buchumov painted *In the Sea* and then returned to Buslaevk due to ill health and the mockery the painting – by the artist’s own assessment “decadent and therefore...not sincere, [but with] some features of genuine work” – received at the student exhibition. Upon his return home, Buchumov immersed himself in village life and in 1917 – an auspicious year – he primed sixty pieces of cardboard the size of his palm and set himself the task of painting four landscapes a year, one for each season, while standing on the spot where his mother had given birth to him while working in the fields and where the artist hoped to be buried. Ever faithful to what he saw, he included in each painting not only the lyrical sadness of the changing seasons, but also the side of his nose, which his one-eyed condition placed permanently in his field of vision.

It’s fairly easy to establish the targets at which Komar and Melamid were taking aim when they presented Buchumov and his oeuvre to the world. Most obviously, there is the Realist painter, driven by the pursuit of absolute representational truth to the natural landscape he romanticizes as a cipher of his deep belonging to the location of his birth, convinced that the sincerity of this feeling will grant him if not recognition in life, then certainly artistic immortality after death. Encapsulating all the pathos of this sentiment, Buchumov’s autobiography opens with the words, “The life of nature, its breath fanning

⁶⁹ Ibid., 69. In other versions of the story, Komar and Melamid have also said that an avant-garde Constructivist and a Futurist knocked Buchumov’s eye out. See Glueck, “Art Smuggled out of Russia Makes Satiric Show Here,” 50. See also , *The Sunflower* 1980.

the body and the soul, the unhurried and majestic movement of time, this is the only theme of my work.” It closes with the artist stating that he is not sad about his task nearing its end because he knows “that the eternity of nature is a guarantee and pledge of [his] immortality.”

The irony one sees upon reading these lines as at least double. Most obviously, Nature’s majesty seems to be served spectacularly poorly by the visual poverty of the landscapes, their creator’s lack of skill, and the *ad absurdum* Realism of Buchumov’s representations, which all include the side of his own nose – the result of seeing the world through only one eye.⁷⁰ The actual paintings attributed to Buchumov offer the largest number of landscapes created by Komar and Melamid, and by their appearance, they make negatively the argument that sentimental depictions of native soil were, in Komar and Melamid’s estimation, much closer to the ridiculous than the sublime.

Secondly, the irony of the narrative lies in the fact that even the sight of the incessant nose, which obscures his beloved nature and, instead, creates a recognizable hallmark of authorial style, fails to dampen Buchumov’s belief in Realism’s claims. Having suffered, fittingly, at the hand of a decadent – a person all too happy to savor decaying social norms – or an avant-gardist, whose revolutionary beliefs propose new modes of representation for a new world, Buchumov still lacks any grasp of “reality” as a discourse constructed through social dialogue and consensus. Instead, he retreats into deliberate obscurity to hold on to his belief in the one true art which he links, to boot, to

⁷⁰ According to Komar, the introduction of the nose into the painting that had originally been found in the trash and into all subsequent works attributed to Buchumov also served to recreate the cliché of a great artist’s instantaneously recognizable touch or style. Buchumov’s nose is, in terms of the artist’s personal mythology, is also a counterpart of Van Gogh’s ear, which, in fact, was a subject of another one of Komar and Melamid’s series, *Arles, Portraits of World Leaders with Right Ear Cut Off* (1978). Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

his place of birth, arguing implicitly that his representational paradigm is an innate one, much like national character, both carrying him from birth to death.

And this, perhaps, would not be so sad – Buchumov’s autobiography does suggest that he will die happy, harboring the belief that his art is a “guarantee and pledge of [his] immortality” – were it not for history’s dramatic irony, wherein Komar and Melamid’s intervention in their role as curators creates an installation that raises Buchumov’s personal effects – the trappings of his story – to the same level of importance as his paintings. Given Buchumov’s own beliefs, history in the guise of the historian seems to turn – another irony – a blind eye to the painter’s actual work – whose lack of traditional technically accomplished naturalism is rather self-evident, whatever other quality of truthfulness it may possess – in order to recuperate the artist for the ideological value of his biography. Instead of being immortalized through his vision of nature, Buchumov becomes an almost anthropological curiosity, a pawn in the construction of a national school who is presented through precisely the kinds of material remnants of the painter’s own life that remind one of “human bustle, petty squabbles, [and] petty passions” that the artist sought to transcend in his fake life.

The same is true to some extent of the second “discovery” made by Komar and Melamid later that year – a group of eight canvases and several “historical” documents that narrate the story of Apelles Zyablov (Fig. 71). An 18th century serf who created purely abstract paintings of *Their Majesties’ ‘Nothingness,’* Zyablov was ordered later in life to undertake academic training in the figurative tradition, and hanged himself soon thereafter out of despair. The installation of Zyablov’s works hinges again on the close study of both the paintings and texts proffered by Komar and Melamid – this time, a

biographical sketch by a Soviet historian, and period documents dating between 1725 and 1798: two letters annotated by the historian and an official report. Zyablov, we glean from the faux historical documents rich in obscure detail, was a serf painter belonging to Nikolay Struisky, who dubbed him Apelles in honor of the Greek painter whose fame has survived since antiquity purely through narrative and hearsay in the absence of extant works.

Zyablov's paintings, which do survive, are profoundly strange and dark canvases that, according to the 20th century biographer, belong to the hand of Western art's first purely abstract painter. They were done originally, we glean from a letter from master to serf, at Struisky's behest, when Zyablov strove to depict in portraits *His Majesty Nothing* to decorate the walls of the torture chamber on his master's Ruzaevka estate. In doing so, he became, in Struisky's joking turn of phrase, an "artoclast." "What could be more unusual and original?" Struisky asks half disparagingly. From his meandering letter, one sees that there is a connection between the formerly Western-leaning aristocrat's disdain for his serf's work and his disappointment in parliamentary ideals. "I am no longer so certain," Struisky writes to Zyablov in 1725, shortly after Peter the Great's death, "that the adoption of Europe's parliament would be any greater boon than would the adoption of her military inventions and fashions... Verily, do we not see that the palace and the nearby prison fortress now often exchange their inhabitants?"⁷¹ In Struisky's letter, which is a jumble of sentimental affection and dismissive criticism towards his serf, of gossip from the imperial capital and deep ambivalence about the course the nation is taking, one recognizes yet another caricature of Russian intellectual elite's perennial complaints and uncertainties.

⁷¹ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 73.

Zyablov, in the meantime, takes on his work with a fervor driven not by Struisky's whim, but by his own prophetic and apocalyptic dream. "So you see my Lord," he writes, "how that which is to you but a miserable jest is yet worthy enough that the gods and Higher Spheres have made it known to you through your most humble servant." The serf has a vision, which clearly alludes to the Book of Revelation – of a burning woman and a burning orb of the earth, transformed into a great mass of heat from which the contours of continents and cities begin to change their forms, suddenly frozen by a Light as cold as ice and turning into hoarfrost-like patterns. "And the Fire was the very Image of the first portrait of Their Majesties' *N*, and the Light as cold as ice was the second portrait, and then," Zyablov concludes, "I was awakened by the cackling of the hens."⁷²

Time passes, and the last historical document in the sequence is a Decision of the Minor Academic Assembly, intimating that in 1798, sketches of the freed serf Zyablov, who had outlived his former master, were discussed at the Assembly, which decided that "the morals of their maker had been sorely impaired by old age and infected by undertakings that are contrary to God and to the Law, and which the noble arts can in no way tolerate."⁷³ Asserting that the liberal arts, "which are guided by taste and reason...have as their goal to bring forth...a flourishing condition of morals, such that the endeavors [of the arts] ...might be of beneficial use to both state and society," the decision denounces repulsiveness in art. "Praise or vilification," it announces, shall be given "in accord with the object, either beneficial or corruptive, which the artist or writer hath chosen," and on this basis, it condemns Zyablov's work to be burned. It also

⁷² Ibid., 72.

⁷³ Ibid., 75.

stipulates that Zyablov should receive a governmental subsidy in order to be taught “appropriate and correct drawing” under the supervision of a Lt. Colonel Rykov. The last thing one reads in the Decision is the fact, written across the original document, that Zyablov hanged himself.

And after all that, the patient reader is invited to peruse the interpretation of these events offered as a sketch by Zyablov’s Soviet biographer, who asserts that “Zyablov’s art was typical of ‘the early period in the emergence of Russian national consciousness, when the creative powers of a people awakened from their deep slumber by the great Peter began to seethe and surge.’” “Quite in the spirit of Stalinist historiography,” notes Groys, “we see the nationalist myth taking shape out of the history of Russia’s Europeanization.”⁷⁴ The biographer goes on to speculate on the origins of Zyablov’s talent, praising

the great artist’s life-affirming art, which draws its inspiration from the window-frost patterns of folk art, the ever-changing hues of the sea and the sky of Central Russia, the boldly flickering flame, and the rich plastic potential of cuts of ornamental stone, for imitations of which the Ural master craftsmen are so renowned.⁷⁵

To see how deeply rooted in their grasp of history Komar and Melamid’s invented narratives really were, it is instructive to consider the real-life story of Grigory Soroka, whose story has been generously pointed out to me by Dr. Jane Sharp, and whose biography shares elements with both Buchumov’s and Zyablov’s. It also provides a clear example of how Soviet-era art historical writing built up its heroes out of internally contradictory virtues and imperatives to produce narratives that established a national

⁷⁴ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 90. The biography of Zyablov is quoted in Groys; it was originally published in Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, “A. Zyablov. Etyud K Monografii,” in *Russica-81: Literaturnyi Sbornik*, ed. Alexander Sumerkin (New York: Russica Publishers, Inc., 1982), 403-408.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

school of painters who could at once claim to “catch up and overcome” the technical competence of Western academicism while also retaining a distinct national character and, if at all possible, produce a class-conscious art of or by “the people.”

Born as serf in 1823 in a deeply provincial village, Soroka belonged to the landowner Nikolay Milyukov, who intended that he should become a gardener. In his late teens, however, Soroka started studying painting with Aleksey Venetsianov, an academic painter who owned an adjoining estate, was the first Russian artist to found a school of genre painting dedicated to representing village life, and was an important early proponent of Realism. Soroka became one of Venetsianov’s favorite students, though the elder painter’s exhortations to Milyukov to free Soroka from serfdom fell on deaf ears, and Soroka was not able to go to St. Petersburg to study at the academy. Instead, he settled in his native village and became a church painter. The bulk of his work that is now in the collections of the State Russian Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery, among others, are canvases dating to the period of his studies with Venetsianov that depicted the rural life around him (Fig. 72). Soroka eventually committed suicide at the age of forty-one, and while his reasons for doing so remain unclear, his biographers suggest that the indignities of the treatment (either a whipping or arrest) to which he was subjected by his former owner (after serfdom was abolished by tsar Alexander II in 1861) for authoring a petition to the tsar and supposedly inciting unrest was a contributing factor.

Soroka’s story is undoubtedly tragic and deserves consideration on its own terms, but what interests me for now is the way it could be co-opted in the service of a unified agenda that sought to position the figure of the noble Creator within a teleological vision of progressive national history. Thus, in a brief Soviet biography of Soroka, one finds a

particularly revealing passage speculating on the reasons for Soroka's suicide. Its language and pathos throw as much light on the Soviet historiographic conventions and narratives that would have shaped Komar and Melamid (and that persist in Russian historiography to this day) as they do on the life of the unfortunate Soroka:

By village standards, Soroka was reasonably well off; according to some sources, he had a two-story house. But the self-perception of an artist-creator which had formed in him and the *de facto* lack of rights created an oppressive contrast, unbearable to his sensitive nature.⁷⁶

The text goes on to conflate in even unsubtler terms the sensitivity of the Artist's soul with Russian nationalism. It puts, by a sleight of hand, Soroka's uniqueness – his supposed individualist introspectiveness, combined with an innate talent for creating the effects associating with Western naturism – in the service of extolling the national history in which he was not allowed to participate fully in life, and to which he was invisible for decades after his death. "Following in his teacher's [Venetsianov's] footsteps," the text informs us,

Soroka stood at the beginnings of poetic realism in Russian art, as well as the formation of the image of the Russian national landscape. In his works, one finds the embodiment of the most attractive traits of the Venetsianov school – a sage simplicity, candor, and a thoughtful taking in of nature. . . . In his *Self-Portrait* the artist conveys the image of a man with a subtly organized soul, a man who is fragile and easily hurt. With wise resignation, he looks at the world with a sharp eye, and, at the same time, is immersed in himself.⁷⁷

The disjuncture apparent in that last sentence – that of trying to utilize the great artist's inner vision and resignation to an unjust world for purposes of a grand national history – brings us back to Komar and Melamid's invented artists. Even more so than in

⁷⁶ S.S. Stepanova, "Soroka (Vasilyev) Grigory," State Tretyakov Gallery, <http://files.school-collection.edu.ru/dlrstore/8bbd2011-c375-43ed-b84e-6b68d5d831e8/Soroka_biogr.htm>. Translations are my own.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; For a very similar passage concerning Soroka's *Self-Portrait* see T.V. Alekseeva, *Khudozhniki Shkoly Venetsianova [The Artists of the Venetsianov School]*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), 330.

the case of Buchumov, the parody in the case of Zyablov is multifaceted and multivalent, undermining several foundational historiographic assumptions at once. For one, it mocks the race for primacy in discovering “pioneers”⁷⁸ (particularly prevalent in Russia and the USSR during certain periods of its history) by moving the inception of avant-gardist abstraction to a ridiculously early date in the 18th century. It further pokes fun at the grand narrative through the visual poverty and obscure darkness of Zyablov’s actual paintings, which, like Buchumov’s works, turn what ought to be Sublime (this time in Lyotard’s rather than the Enlightenment formulation) into the ridiculous.

At the same time, the hyperbolic move of such events to an impossibly early date gets at a very real reconceptualization of history going on in the 1970s. It invokes a bleak version of Nietzschean eternal return, which is particularly relevant to the idea that Russia lives in a circular, rather than linear time, as theorized by several prominent members of the Moscow Conceptual circle.⁷⁹ In this interpretation, Komar and Melamid’s placement of a conflict that pits abstraction against figuration in the 18th century suggests that seemingly esoteric 20th century disputes were yet another battlefield in the older conflicts over secularization – and in the Russian context, rapid, often autocratically imposed Westernization – that marked Russian history throughout the 19th century and defined the debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers. These by the 1970s were certainly an archetypal, indelible feature of Russian cultural politics.

Perhaps more remarkably, the temporal relocation also predicted the kind of collapsing of the present with the past that was announced by Western scholarship (of

⁷⁸ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁷⁹ Most notably by Prigov and Rubinstein, though they would articulate their ideas fully only after Komar and Melamid’s emigration.

which Komar and Melamid could hardly have been aware but which they remarkably foreshadowed) with the advent of post-Structuralism, and which firmly located the origins of Modernity in the 18th century – a fact emphasized again for the Russian context by the allusions in Struisky’s letter to Zyablov to the reforms conducted by Peter the Great within the Russian Orthodox church.

The texts also stage around these strange canvases of questionable aesthetic appeal what Komar and Melamid perceive as modern art’s and especially modern Russian art’s foundational conflicts. On the one hand, Zyablov’s revolutionary but difficult abstract avant-gardism is pitted against the Minor Academic Assembly’s populist prescriptivism, clearly modeled on the Zhdanovshchina of official Socialist Realism, with its denunciations of “ideologically incorrect” depictions of Soviet reality and its branding as gratuitous, anti-social “formalism” of any deviation from the fuzzy but generically Realist representational norm.

On the other hand, Zyablov’s mystical, spiritual “Eastern” peasant art (one can’t help but think of Malevich here) inadvertently, paradoxically, and reluctantly becomes the unhappy bedfellow of Struisky’s Western progressivism, and the two have to stave off an assimilated and un-reflexive Western naturalism while themselves being aligned with the torture chambers whose use remains unclear.

As punishment for his possible sins, Zyablov, instead of being caught in an apocalyptic catastrophe he could envision, gets caught in the catastrophe of historiography, which misunderstands him, just as it did Buchmov, adding insult to injury in both cases. This despite the fact that between the two of them, Buchumov’s and Zyablov’s invented biographies satirized what at first would seem to be radically opposed

preconceived assumptions about the nature of artistic practice that Komar and Melamid themselves inherited. If Buchumov's tragicomedy lay in a desire that was certainly Socialist Realism's most obvious progenitor – to represent perfectly the majesty of Nature's physical reality, then Zyablov's tragicomedy lies on the other end of the spectrum – in the desire to dispense with all naturalism in order to capture an absolute spiritual truth – and also represented the condition of the avant-garde artist *par excellence*. What's ironic about the two invented artists, though, is that even though they represent two supposedly opposing artistic positions – that of Realism and that of the avant-garde – in Komar and Melamid's interpretation, they both share one fundamental desire – to speak of a higher or deeper hidden truth. And given this, both suffer equal indignities at the hands of historiography and both become the hostages of their biographies in the ideological battles that they so ardently sought to escape in “life.”

Boris Groys has argued that what the contradictions in the Zyablov story come down to is a transgressive act of sacrilegious mockery that treats (deservedly, in Groys' opinion) the Russian avant-garde as fodder for Soviet historiographic kitsch.⁸⁰ Zyablov's recuperation by the “sentimental ideological style and nationalist rhetoric of Soviet art history” knocks down from its high pedestal the myth of the martyred Russian avant-garde, which both participated in revolutionary violence and, according to Groys, built up “the myth of the artist as creator, prophet, and engineer,” which Socialist Realism then inherited and developed.⁸¹

However, “Komar and Melamid themselves,” according to Groys,

perceive no sacrilege here, because they consider the religion of the avant-garde to be false and idolatrous. ...The avant-gardist, Stalinist, Westernizer, and

⁸⁰ Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, 91.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 90, 95.

Slavophile myths are constantly interlacing, recording, retelling one another, for they are idolatrous myths of power. ... The central impulse in Komar and Melamid's works comes from this fundamental intuition that all art represents power. Proceeding from this insight they abandon from the outset the search for a form of art that can resist power, because they regard such a quest as itself a manifestation of the will to power. Their strategy is to show that the same myth of power – artistic and political at one and the same time – pervades all world art, not excluding their own.⁸²

Groys' assertion does, indeed, go a long way toward explaining why by 1980, Komar and Melamid would describe the world, both Eastern and Western, as “monotonously bad”; but their actual works, I believe have more to them than such bemused indifference to historic specificity.

While they do expose the interconnected mythological web underpinning the generic Soviet psyche, which they also acknowledge as their own, the artists remain acutely sensitive to the particulars of their own, very historically specific situation, and thematize in their work the options of what is possible within it – not all of them, ultimately, of equal merit. They may, indeed, see the drive for power everywhere, and may even acknowledge their own participation in it, but the acknowledgment of this complicity and action proceeding from it amount to more than simply showing and coming resignedly to terms with existing historical realities.

As “Komar and Melamid” – itself an invented entity, as I argued above – Komar and Melamid do not just mock Buchumov and Zyablov's predicament, but also identify with it. Matthew Jesse Jackson has noted that, “Such devices [as inventing artists] enabled Komar and Melamid to introduce metacommentaries on their own artistic labor, by deploying *personazhnost'* (“characterness”), to undermine the unproblematic

⁸² Ibid., 91

identification of artist and artwork.”⁸³ This they undoubtedly do, but just as importantly, they continue to hold steadfastly to their newly problematic identification with the same set of familiar narratives constructing them as artists and of necessity informing their artwork.

Through their invented artists, they expose, among other things, their acute awareness of the catch-22 of being a genius, an artist both unique and original – qualities that Socialist Realist discourse embraced with paradoxical readiness alongside its call for an art of easy accessibility for the masses, as the language describing Soroka above indicates. In order to prove his mettle relative to the existing order, such an artist either, like Buchumov, has to suffer because he is too naïve to wise up to the consensus representational mode, or, like Zyablov, has to suffer because this knowledge is forced upon him.

In either case, *choosing* to participate in already existing styles or schools is the one option that the free artistic spirit does not have. Agonism and suffering seem built into this narrative, and yet Komar and Melamid do not disavow it. Instead, they find a loophole in a refusal to be unique or original which, in their time and place, was still both unique and original. Thus, in a counter-intuitive way, they recuperate and find a way to make still available for themselves the very discourses they so viciously ridicule.

In doing so, they reveal the earnest side of their parody and show the power of history to frame and dictate the boundaries of even the most deconstructivist practice. It is a poignant fact to reiterate that the original inspiration for the Buchumov project came from a painting that the artists literally found in the trash.⁸⁴ In light of this, Komar and

⁸³ Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, 126.

⁸⁴ Vitaly Komar, Aleksandr Melamid, and Melvyn B. Nathanson, *Komar/Melamid, Two Soviet Dissident*

Melamid's first project of salvage through the invention seems first and foremost to allow them to restage the very identities that they at first glance they seem to want to discard.

The Conceptualist that Never Was

The practice of salvaging history would for Komar and Melamid become an inseparable part of a larger project that announced the entrance onto the historical stage of a new kind of artist who dealt in metanarratives rather than skillfully crafted objects. And while that development has no particularly Soviet specificity, Komar and Melamid's practice of setting history straight by making it up does insofar as it both mimics official Soviet historiography and responds with ingenuity to the condition of Soviet citizens who cherished the ideal of being well-educated, broad-minded people who had to make do with a great dearth of useable historical material out of which to construct their stories.⁸⁵

Against this background, what was so unusual about Komar and Melamid is that they performed feats of cultural archaeology not just to hold up a mirror to the powers that be, but also to speak to the condition of being themselves deeply compromised by and complicit in their discoveries. For this reason, for all their parodic verve, Komar and Melamid's conceits in *Legends* manage to evoke other feelings after the liberating laughter subsides – feelings of sadness and sympathy and, consistently with theories of the Sublime, of surprise and momentary surrender to one's own helplessness in the face of history.⁸⁶ Only an encounter with this Sublime – which traps Buchmov and Zyablov –

Artists (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), xii.

⁸⁵ Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]*, 94.

⁸⁶ In the set-up of the Buchmov and Zyablov installations, where the emphasis shifts from paintings of nature or abstraction to historical documents about them, one very much perceives the shift from the natural and avant-garde sublime to the historical sublime. The artists' choice of combining what they imagine as the 18th century prototype of Malevich's Sublime with "historical documents" as two equal and inalienable parts of their installation becomes crucial here, and it suggests that it is precisely the shift from nature or

allows Komar and Melamid to then reassert their own ability to master it, even if imperfectly, precisely by showing the ways in which they are very much susceptible to its power and its charms.

Given all this, it is fitting that the story of the road of purity not taken – of what happens if one refuses to be compromised by history and to compromise with it – is the theme of the work Komar and Melamid did around their last imagined artist. This time, though, the incredible story was based on a real historical personage and the twist was that the artists reimagined him *as though* he were an artist.

In 2002, at the very end of their thirty-year collaboration, Komar and Melamid created an installation of historical documents and a single – reconstructed, according to the artists – work by Dmitry Tveritinov (Fig. 73). An actual historical heretic, Tveritinov, a doctor working in Moscow in the first quarter of the 18th century, was imprisoned for many years for his iconoclastic beliefs (which, one might note parenthetically, he eventually denounced, possibly under duress).⁸⁷ His crime, in addition to espousing dangerous ideas, was that he created an icon which instead of an image contained the words of the Second Commandment – “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” To Komar and Melamid, he became the first Conceptualist, and his reconstructed work takes to their logical conclusion the possible implications of Komar and Melamid’s earlier installations by disavowing image-making altogether.

In fact, the icon responds directly to a criticism that Struisky makes of Zyablov when he asks his servant,

Think on it, if thou art not fallen into heresy or art not yet so low and dull that

spiritual longing to history as the source of sublime experience that interests the artists.

⁸⁷ "Tveritinov Dmitry Evdokimovich," in *Biografija.ru*, available on-line at <http://www.biografija.ru/show_bio.aspx?id=123639>, accessed October 25, 2010.

thou hopest to remake the world order, preferring blind sentiment to dialectical argument, why dost thou try to instruct others? ... Would not it be better to cease making images altogether and honor only the Bible's letters, as in ancient times and even now the Hebrews have done? If thou fightest idols, then why only these idols and not others?⁸⁸

If Tveritinov – and, by implication, a pure form of Conceptualism – were to have their way, this reconstruction of the Tveritinov's icon should logically be the last painting ever produced. Instead, it became merely a coda to Komar and Melamid's own personal history of imagined artists right at the time that the artist "Komar and Melamid" officially ceased to exist.

Individually, Komar and Melamid both continued to push at their personal limits of acceptable compromise with history and their work, just as the work of the 1970s, continued to be an illustration of the last sentence in the last article written by the forgotten and then remembered Bakhtin: "For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival."⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 73.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 350.

CHAPTER IV

Exit through the Loophole

The Bulldozer Exhibition

In important ways that concerned both the form and content of their work, Komar and Melamid defined with their projects of 1972-1973 the personal boundaries of what it was possible and impossible for artists in their situation to do. Given the centrality that language-based works, performances in the private sphere, installations, and invented personae would go on to play in the retroactively constituted Moscow Conceptual School in the 1970s and 1980s, Komar and Melamid's intuition about these boundaries, as well as to some extent their influence, would prove to be prescient indeed. In 1974, these internal insights were supplemented by the boundaries externally defined through Moscow non-conformist artists' encounter with the authorities in the course of what has become known as the Bulldozer exhibition.

In their interviews, Komar and Melamid have both spoken of the fact, mentioned earlier, that their collaboration – borne in part of well-known Russian historical precedents¹ – also came out of a great sense of loneliness and isolation, an urgent need for exchange with like-minded people. The dialogue they established in their partnership satisfied that need to some degree; but both men, trained as they also were through the historiographic categories of the canon, wanted a movement. Vitaly Komar notes that this desire also marked a sort of outer limit: “Because an individual style was forgivable, but

¹ See footnote 22 in Chapter 3.

the only collective style that existed [in the USSR] was Socialist Realism. [To propose an alternative collective style], was the outer limit of blasphemy."²

Having already defined their role at least in part as precipitators of conversation, Komar and Melamid, perhaps working against their own long-term interests, spent 1973 and 1974 actively recruiting other young artists to turn Sots-Art from a one-off series into a movement. According to Komar, his and Melamid's eagerness to produce a sense of belonging to a movement by having a joint exhibition served as an important impetus for what would become the Bulldozer Exhibition, which was ultimately made logistically possible by the authority and efforts of the much older and more experienced painter Oskar Rabin.³

The facts of the Bulldozer exhibition, some of which remain unclear to this day, have been discussed in great detail elsewhere, so what I offer here is a brief summary of the salient facts.⁴ On September 15, 1974, a group of artists gathered to show their work in an unoccupied empty field on the edge of the Cheryomushki suburb of Moscow. Despite the fact that they had notified city authorities of their intentions and were not explicitly prohibited from holding the exhibition, shortly after arrival, the artists were told to leave. When some refused, they were dispersed with high-pressure water hoses, bulldozers, and other equipment, which was ostensibly in the area due to tree-planting work meant to take place at that time (Fig. 74). In the scuffle that accompanied the

² Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a complete chronology of events, which I have consulted to verify the facts given here, see Majlena Braun, "A Case Study: Repression. Bulldozer Exhibition, Moscow, September 15, 1974; Izmailovsky Park Exhibition, Moscow, September 29, 1974," in *Primary Documents* ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 65-77. In Komar's recollection of the events, it was Oskar Rabin, who emigrated to France in 1978, who was the chief organizer and leader of the artists who took part in the Bulldozer and Izmailovsky Park exhibitions. According to the chronology of events cited above, however, the collector Aleksandr Glezer was also instrumental in organizing both exhibitions and was also forced to emigrate, leaving in 1975 for Paris.

dispersal, a number of people sustained injuries and works, including those by Komar and Melamid, were trampled. Oskar Rabin, along with several others, was arrested. A scandal also ensued when Western journalists, notified by the artists beforehand of the planned event, wrote up the story in a number of major international newspapers, including the *New York Times*.

When Rabin and the others were released from prison the next day [Komar remembers it as being two days], instead of feeling cowed, they wrote an open letter to the government announcing their intention to hold another open-air, open participation exhibition in two weeks. Whether because of the international notoriety the affair threatened to garner or for other reasons, the Soviet authorities consented to this second exhibition, although the organizers continued to be harassed by the authorities during the negotiation process. On September 29, the first completely uncensored exhibition of unofficial art was held in Moscow's Izmailovsky park. Exhibited by Komar (Melamid did not attend the exhibition), Komar and Melamid's works were again present at the exhibition, and if attendance is an indicator of success, this exhibition was wildly successful. A crowd of ten thousand viewers came out to look at works – the vast majority of them paintings – by seventy artists who, despite great differences in style and subject matter, had all been consigned to invisibility due to their “unofficial” and “non-conformist” status.

The Bulldozer Exhibition is the single moment to which Komar and Melamid still frequently refer as marking the most intense experience of their artistic lives. As with OHO, the desire to exhibit their work publicly guided Komar and Melamid's artistic trajectory and led them to what at first might seem like counter-intuitive conclusions. On

the one hand, the fact that the authorities bowed to the pressure to improve their international image and allowed the Izmailovsky park exhibition showed Komar and Melamid that artists could, in standing up to authorities, make a real difference, intervene in their own fate, and produce a change in their condition. Retrospectively, Vitaly Komar sees this incident as presaging the increased political pluralism of *perestroika* and marking the point when artists' desire for freedom of individual expression also foreshadowed, by using the rhetoric of freedom of speech, the advent of individual enterprise and market capitalism.⁵

At the same time, the changes ushered in by the Bulldozer Exhibition proved to Komar and Melamid conclusively that their work would not be understood or supported (intellectually, let alone financially) in the USSR by anything other than the narrowest circle of peers. It was, after all, also in 1974 that Komar and Melamid staged the first iteration of *Art Belongs to the People (School of Art)*, a raucous event which resulted in the arrest and brief detention of all the participants except Melamid, in whose studio it was taking place (Fig. 75). For the event, Komar and Melamid asked three artistically untrained acquaintances to illustrate a new plant described an upbeat *Pravda* article that was being read to them while Soviet marches played loudly in the background.⁶ This satire of the underlying Soviet assumption that that the country's aesthetic canons were a

⁵ According to Komar, the artists who stood up to the authorities in the late 70s represented a new avant-garde insofar as they revealed the structural paradoxes of the USSR's social system, thus raising concerns about free enterprise that would become widespread with the advent of *perestroika* in the mid-80s. "Soviet authorities always had particular problems with artists," Komar argues, "because officially, private enterprise was prohibited. There was only public ownership of the means of production. Whereas the artist owns his own means of production. So there was always a question of how an artist should pay taxes, is he a capitalist or not. This is why the capitalization of the USSR began with art exhibitions, with commercial exhibitions at *gorkom grafikov* [The City Committee of Graphic Artists]. Because the artist's creative activity is so close to the essence of private enterprise." Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁶ Carter Ratcliff, Vitaly Komar, and Aleksandr Melamid, *Komar & Melamid* (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 1988), 154. A second staging of this performance would take place ten years later at The Kitchen in New York.

natural extension of its facts of life was further supplemented by a satire of the Soviet practice of “self-criticism.” Throughout the painting process, the three unskilled artists were stopped if they were painting an insufficiently happy picture and were only allowed to carry on after apologizing for the error of their ways. While Komar maintains that his and others’ detention as a result of this private performance was not a result of some “devilish plot”⁷ – that it was, perhaps, an action undertaken by overeager local authorities rather than evidence of the KGB’s concerted efforts to hound artists, – the fact remains that in making their socially disruptive art, Komar and Melamid remained the targets of sporadic surveillance and policing whose outcome every time remained an unknown.

Against the background of permanent, if not always acute, fear, what predominated as an oblique response to Soviet life in the stylistic and ideological heterogeneity at Izmailovsky park were paintings that opposed to the dictates of Socialist Realism a different kind of reality – the otherwise unrepresented material poverty of Soviet life, the horrors of GULAG, the spiritual world of repressed Russian orthodoxy, and a variety of abstractionisms and expressionisms that wanted to defy Socialist Realism’s monopoly on Soviet art’s mode of vision. Against this background, Komar and Melamid’s narrative-rich, often time-based investigations of Soviet social and artistic metanarratives got lost in the crowd, were incomprehensible to most, and even elicited hostility, at least at the level of interpersonal conflict. A year later, in 1975, Komar and Melamid would choose not to participate in the first officially sanctioned uncensored indoor exhibition of unofficial art, held at the Beekeeping Pavilion at VDNKh due to being on bad terms by that point with the organizers of the exhibition.

In a paradoxical twist, it turned out that it was a repressive, monolithic Socialist

⁷ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

Realism that gave the artists their intellectually empowering ideas about stylistic pluralism, and it was the liberalizing changes that officials were willing to make for greater artistic pluralism that made the artists realize the hopelessness of their cause in the USSR.⁸ While the fact that the authorities could be made to back down surely served at that moment as an encouraging sign for the liberal intelligentsia, the state's concessions actually seemed to cause artists to form factions, squabble, and create new hierarchies and elites for the distribution of newly gained but still fairly paltry economic resources (access to exhibition space, most specifically). Even more disappointing was the ultimately very limited and primarily stylistic pluralism whose sanctioning was the ideological outcome of the Bulldozer exhibition. Thus, in its aftermath, Komar and Melamid, who had been optimistic about the potential of public exhibitions to strengthen their practice, found themselves disappointed, while other artists associated with the Moscow Conceptual School (many of whom did not participate in the Bulldozer or Izmaylovo exhibitions) continued to lead a fundamentally insular artistic lives.

Looking back at these events, Vitaly Komar observes that “Reconciliation with the absurd leads to compromise and in the end, to the destruction of the Romantic model of the artist and its replacement with a small-time entrepreneur.”⁹ The mid-70s did, indeed, see the growth of an entrepreneurial drive among unofficial artists from which the

⁸ The only other place in underground culture where I have been able to find references to a similar kind of embracing of eclecticism was in music. According to pianist Alexey Lyubimov, the concerts hosted by avant-garde music enthusiasts were widely attended by those now grouped as the artists of Moscow Conceptualism and allowed underground music ensembles to perform John Cage alongside medieval music, creating a space for all musical forms otherwise ignored by the musical officialdom. Georgy Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2010), 156. It was also in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Alfred Schnittke began to compose his quintessentially post-Modern polystylistic music, which one might easily consider to a musical equivalent to Komar and Melamid's practice.

⁹ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

Conceptualists were not exempt¹⁰; even so, their sales of works to domestic and foreign collectors remained, by all accounts, sporadic and accidental. Thus, Komar's words might well point to the fact that the moniker "Romantic," coined in Boris Groys' signal 1979 article "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," was particularly applicable to the Moscow Conceptualists insofar as they half chose and half had no choice but to hold on to the true Romantic ideal when it came to the impulse behind their creativity – driven as it was by personal and social needs quite separate from any consistent market demand.

For Komar and Melamid, who from the start placed a lot of emphasis on the social nature of their practice, the realization that they would need to leave the USSR in order to have any kind of sizeable audience appreciate their conceptual insights in an exhibition context seems to have become inevitable by 1975. It came, moreover, at roughly the same time as the signing, on August 1, 1975 of the Helsinki Declaration. An important document for both the reduction in Cold War hostilities and a strengthening of the demands of Eastern European dissident movements, the Declaration also made stipulations encouraging the reunification of families separated by national borders.¹¹ This proved to be particularly important for Soviet Jews, many of whom could apply to emigrate to Israel on these grounds. Starting in 1975 and lasting into the late 1980s, the USSR saw a massive exodus of professionals, many of them Jews leaving for Israel and the U.S. Komar and Melamid (along with eventually many other members of the Moscow Conceptual school) were early participants in this wave of emigration.

¹⁰ For information on the unofficial art market in post-war Moscow, see Waltraud Bayer, "The Unofficial Market: Art and Dissent, 1956-88," *Zimmerli Journal*, no. 5 (Fall 2008).

¹¹ The full text of the Helsinki Declaration can be found on-line at <<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/osce/basics/finact75.htm>>.

In 1975, friends began to smuggle Komar and Melamid's work to the West.¹² By 1976, both Komar and Melamid were applying for exit documents, though for bureaucratic reasons, the final decision permitting them and their families to leave for Israel would not be made until late 1977 (with Komar receiving permission several months after Melamid), in the meantime cutting the artists off from any official artistic life or income after their expulsion from the Union of Graphic Artists in February of 1977.¹³ This resulted in a rather remarkable three years of continued activity conducted with the idea of speaking to an imagined Western audience in Komar and Melamid's future home, and punctuated by their first two Western exhibitions at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York in 1976 and 1977.

Nearby / Far Away: Dialogue with the West and Relationship to the Russian Avant-Garde

A brief discussion of Komar and Melamid's relationship to Western Conceptualism seems necessary here because the very use of the term, as I noted in my Introduction, raises the specter of "derivativeness" or an "improper" translation of the idea outside those Euro-American centers – most obviously (though not at all exclusively) New York and Coventry, England – where the term was established, used, and defined by the late 1960s. The question of Komar and Melamid's early relationship

¹² According to Komar, it was as early as the end of 1972 that he and Melamid started making multiple copies of each of their works and wanted to create an exhibition abroad because they felt they would not be understood in the USSR. This also dictated a preference for canvas over heavy (but more easily available) fiberboard. The works that were lost during the Bulldozer exhibition were all done on fiberboard. Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009. Similarly, Alexander Melamid claims that "The idea to smuggle and show works in the West was there from the very beginning because we decided that it would never be understood here, that it's not of this world. Everything we made, we made in English from the very start." Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

¹³ David K. Shipler, "Soviet's Solution to Pair of Satirical Artists: Give Just One a Visa," *The New York Times* October 31, 1977.

to the West and to New York – or *the idea* of both these places – is all the more salient because New York is where Komar and Melamid would eventually end up in 1979. There, for the next decade, both the critics and, to a great extent, the artists themselves would focus on their foreignness and their difference, never disavowing the conceptual sophistication of their earliest Soviet work, but never particularly trying to get at the heart of the dynamic of a multi-centric global conceptual impulse, either. “Since childhood,” the artists asserted, “we have assimilated a geographical view of the world which contains a left (west)-right (east) opposition.”¹⁴

As articulated by Komar, the artists’ somewhat cynical position towards communicating with the art world of their new home came down to a belief that “In the case of the West, which understands us incorrectly, it is sometimes an advantageous strategy to be understood incorrectly.”¹⁵ Hence, the artists’ long-standing policy of never arguing with their critics and making a point of accepting all interpretations of their work, including the extreme one offered by a mentally unstable visitor to the exhibition *The Monumental Show* when he slashed their *Portrait of Hitler* in 1981 and was then declared by the artists to be a co-author, rather than a mere vandal.¹⁶

Cynical though Komar’s remark cited above may seem, it also might well be informed by the first-hand insight Komar and Melamid had into how misunderstanding a foreign place as built up in one’s imagined psychogeography might be an intensely productive artistic stimulus, as well as a source of frustrations. Writing in 1980 when already living in the U.S., Komar and Melamid seemed derisive of their former compatriots’ relationship to an imagine West, but one wonders if they weren’t speaking

¹⁴ Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "In Search of Religion," *Artforum* (May 1980): 43.

¹⁵ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

¹⁶ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 156.

from personal experience when they wrote: “In the troubled mind of a frightened spirit, the image of the Western ‘other world’ splits and takes on religious overtones of ‘paradise’ and ‘inferno.’”¹⁷ Komar and Melamid’s own work self-consciously entered into dialogue with the idea of the West from the very start when Sots-Art was declared the Soviet answer to Pop Art. By 1975, the artists were also taking practical steps towards the smuggleability and translatability of their works abroad. They started creating works in English (one can cite as examples the poster-like *Red Trousers*, *Light Station*, and *Energy Problems Solution*, all of 1975) (Fig. 76) and making them highly portable (using canvas rather than fiberboard, doing performances and documenting them in photographs, creating small-scale objects that Soviet customs officials would never recognize as art, etc.).

Clearly, this desire to communicate with the West presupposed certain background knowledge of who it was the artists were speaking to. It is, therefore, important to stress that even in the USSR, behind the Iron Curtain, unofficial artists’ relationship to contemporary developments in Western Europe and the U.S. was not one of complete isolation.¹⁸ The Stroganov Institute in particular, where both Komar and Melamid had received their training in the 1960s, was more open to contemporary artistic developments in the West than other Soviet artistic training institutions. Because it was meant to educate future designers and decorators (rather than academic artists), it had

¹⁷ The authors go on: “At this point it must be said that we...also have contradictory feelings. Of course, at a safe distance, it is easy to speak ironically of the judgments of a provincial patriot who isn’t here to defend himself.” Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 265.

¹⁸ It’s possible that if the unofficial Soviet artists had any interest, they would have been able to know something about contemporary developments outside of Western Europe and the U.S., but as far as I understand, only “the center” was of interest to them and events in the Eastern Bloc countries, such as Poland, were of interest only insofar as they were both physically and culturally closer to the West than the USSR was.

subscriptions to some Western design-oriented art publications, such as *Domus*, *Studio International*, and *Art International*. Thus, though neither Komar nor Melamid had useable foreign language skills at the time, they would have seen just enough information about developments such as Pop and Conceptual art to address Western audiences as if they were speaking from a position of shared cultural knowledge.¹⁹ It's this sense of perceived familiarity and kinship of principles and foundational assumptions that the name Sots-Art also implies.

At the same time, of course, this sense of shared knowledge and participation in a global dialogue was in many crucial respects an illusory one, constructed out of random fragments of fact with a subjunctive *as if* approach similar to the one the artists applied to Soviet ideology in *Sots-Art*. As Komar notes,

We knew the masterpieces of Western art, but try to imagine the art world based only on that – it was a very one-sided, narrow picture. What...amazed me the most [after emigrating] was the fact that the number of exhibitions was considerably larger than the number of reviews in the monthly issues of *Domus* or *Art International*. I simply could not have imagined that there were hundreds of galleries, not even counting those who sell antiques or prints.²⁰

Ironically, however, it was exactly this lack of contextual knowledge – a lack of being bogged down by the nuances of a busy unfolding present – and the concomitant heavy reliance on an older pan-European canon, which the artists wanted to mock and enter in equal measure, that led the two Soviet artists to offer the earliest visions of the advent of Post-Modernism, a fact to which I will return later.

A dearth of information about contemporary events was a powerful impetus

¹⁹ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009. According to Melamid, “There was a miniscule amount of information about “Conceptualism.” At some point must have heard the word. In reality, we came to all this more or less independently.” Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

²⁰ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

behind Moscow Conceptualists' and specifically Komar and Melamid's desire and surprising talent for reducing things to their essence. As a broader tendency, this is something that has been noted both by artists older than Komar and Melamid and by those younger than them. Ilya Kabakov recalls the hunger for knowledge that resulted in Soviet unofficial artists' having time as a freely available resource while historical knowledge was a finite and precious resource.²¹ Viktor Skersis, who worked with Komar and Melamid as a member of the Nest group, likewise notes the need he and others felt to construct coherent models and theories of art history that would connect and explain a few scarce facts.²² This dearth of information and need for creative reconstruction, moreover, related to history as much as geography, and the Russian avant-garde, to which the artists had precious little direct access, became another important imaginary topos and another reason why the obsession with historiography that singularly marked the advent of Post-Modernism could emerge so early and autochthonously in the USSR.

The ambivalent existence between a sense of kinship or affinity and the perception of an enormous gap that characterized the psychogeographic relationship between East and West also characterized Komar and Melamid's relationship of temporal distance to the historical Russian avant-gardes. And in that relationship, too, the result was an imaginative filling in of the gaps left open by a lack of historical facts, continuous narratives, or access to works and their creators. Like the idea of the West, the legacy of the avant-garde was both incredibly close, to the point of banal ubiquity, and incredibly far, to the point of being "little more than a memory, almost a phantasm... [so that the] futurist vision of the twenties avant-garde also appeared as mythic and even deluded, a

²¹ Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]*, 94.

²² *Ibid.*, 250, 251, 253.

kind of messianic utopianism.”²³

The closeness came in the form of what Vitaly Komar now calls “state conceptualism” – the bits of design found on commercial goods (the layout of the familiar labels for matches or condensed milk) and the “visual agitation” found in street propaganda (Fig. 77). These were, according to Komar, the only vestiges of the Constructivist (and hence Futurist and Suprematist, since there was continuity between these movements) legacy that surreptitiously survived on the streets and in the stores, away from the scrutiny to which any form of high culture was much more thoroughly subjected under Stalin.²⁴

The great distance, on the other hand, which made the avant-garde a kind of foreign country, stemmed from the virtual impossibility of recovering the historical facts and specificity that engendered this “state conceptualism.” As Komar recalls, the procedures he had to go through to conduct any self-initiated historical research were similar to the ones involved in learning about Western art – one had to know where to look, read against the grain, locate old magazine publications, and reconstruct on their

²³ Peter Wollen, “Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid,” in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 177.

²⁴ One such obvious example is the story of the design for the temporary decorations and their spatial arrangements of the Red Square during state-run festivities. As the architectural historian S.O. Khan-Magomedov has described in his biography of the Stenberg brothers, two of Soviet Constructivism’s early proponents and most talented designers, at least one instance in which Constructivist insights became Soviet “tradition” in a public outdoor propaganda context. “A job that the Stenbergs worked on for many years was the decoration of the Red Square for public holidays. They first designed decorations for it in 1928, and then for the next thirty five years (until 1963), the Stenbergs’ plans (and, following Georgy Avgustovich’s death in 1933 [during the Stalinist repressions – KG], Vladimir Avgustovich’s plans) were used to create decorations for the May Day and October celebrations, as well as for other public events (the welcoming of the survivors of the SS *Chelyuskin* expedition, International Youth Day, Moscow’s 800th anniversary, Victory Day parade, and others). It was the Stenbergs who proposed moving the main decorations from the side of the Kremlin wall to the façade of the GUM department store and developed the spatial silhouette and color and light structure of this decorative scheme, which subsequently became traditional.” S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Vladimir i Georgy Stenbergi*, *Tvortsy Avangarda* (Moscow: The Russian Avant-Garde Foundation, 2008), 218.

The Mausoleum is another example that Komar himself cites. Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

basis a useable approximation of the past, full of big ideas, but very short on particulars or specific works, which would be known at best in low-quality reproductions.²⁵

Melamid further comments on this fact (in his usual sardonic manner), “Nobody had seen the *Black Square* – thank god! – but we’d heard of it. Because when you don’t see it, it’s even better. It’s ideological art, it does not come through the eyes.” Knowledge of the historical avant-gardes seeped into their consciousness, he avers, with the names of Duchamp and Malevich, but this knowledge highlighted the primacy of ideology over formalism and needed to be supplemented by great imaginative conjectures in order to bring the scant available material legacy of the avant-garde back to life.²⁶

Moreover, the two restricted and seductive knowledges – of the West and of the avant-garde past – which should, theoretically, have helped one to find the path to a truly oppositional visual idiom – in combination revealed yet another aporia of the Soviet situation, at least to Komar and Melamid. By the 1970s, contemporary paintings done in the styles that signified modernity earlier in the 20th century would in the West be seen as simply commercial and, therefore, anti- (or, at the very least, non-) avant-garde. In the USSR, however, both their “formalist” qualities and their affinities with a commercial market made them oppositional to Socialist Realism and, therefore, viable to claim an affinity with a historic avant-garde that, according to the standard narrative, was also repressed by Socialist Realism. At the same time, what Komar and Melamid saw was that Socialist Realism, in its universalist aspirations to a single aesthetic that, at least in theory, could permeate every sphere of social life was in another way, paradoxically,

closer to the avant-garde spiritually than this room-size art of Surrealist and pretty semi-abstract pictures. The alternative art of the 60s were Surrealism and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

Expressionism on a small scale, about suitcase size so they could be sold to tourists or to hang in a small apartment of a wealthy doctor or of someone who could afford to collect art. But from the point of view of a Western critic, like Douglas Davis when he came, this art disappointed him because it looked like the art of Western commercial galleries.²⁷

Their acute awareness of the ways in which seemingly self-evident ideas about “progressive” and “reactionary” aesthetics were subject to cultural relativism made Komar and Melamid all the more attuned to the workings of discourse and the way it both required form to be understood and inflected it unpredictable ways.

Thus it was that the artists created in 1975 with the aforementioned Douglas Davis, himself a Conceptual artist from New York and a journalist for *Newsweek* who had traveled to Moscow, the project *Where Is the Line Between Us* (Fig. 78). For reasons I do not fully understand, in an interview with me, Melamid retroactively disparaged the work as “sentimental crap”²⁸ created under pressure from the gallerist Ronald Feldman to capitalize on the interest in US-Soviet relations in the wake of the experimental Apollo-Soyuz space mission.²⁹ This mission was, indeed, a prime example of almost entirely symbolic gestures representing supposedly warming international relations. Hyped up by two propaganda machines, the gestures remained, nevertheless, meaningless in practical terms for the everyday lives of the vast majority of Americans and Soviets alike. Yet *Where Is the Line Between Us* shares only very partially in the earnestness and self-importance of official diplomatic rhetoric. Instead, it captures yet again, with a certain effective crudeness, the utility of literalizing metaphors so as both to undo their hold and highlight the deeper and more complicated issue they conceal, those that go beyond the limits of the purely visual and require complex narratives and context in order to be

²⁷ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

²⁸ Alexander Melamid, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, January 26, 2010.

²⁹ It flew in July 1975 and was symbolic of the détente between the two superpowers at the time.

understood.

This structuralist impulse, which manifested itself earlier relative to specifically Soviet iconography in *Sots-Art*, had here taken a more universalist turn. The logic of *Where Is the Line Between Us* was an extension of the works that made up *Codes: Documents* (1975) (Fig. 79) and *Music Writing: Passport* (1974-1976) (Fig. 80). The former is a group of clear Plexiglas rectangles cut out to the exact dimensions of the official documents that regulate one's life at every level (from a train ticket to a marriage certificate) and stand in symbolically – here, as literally empty and transparent – for the complex mechanisms of social regulation created and enforced by any state, regardless of its political orientation. Likewise, *Music Writing: Passport* was based on Soviet material – in it, Komar and Melamid had transcribed into musical notation ten articles contained in the Soviet domestic passport – but clearly had universal applicability. This was affirmed when, by arrangement from New York by the Feldman Gallery, the musical score of the piece was performed on February 7, 1976 simultaneously at an appointed hour in twenty cities around the world to celebrate the opening of Komar and Melamid's first Western exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery. Given its impressive reception (it was reviewed positively in *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice*, among others and there were actually lines outside the gallery), Komar and Melamid's earliest attempts to translate Soviet culture to an imagined West and to address what they thought were shared Conceptual concerns were successful.

Caution Is of The Essence

Komar and Melamid's curiosity and suspiciousness concerning the mechanics by which discourse shapes thought and action was understandably deepest when it came to

the attempts of others to search for essences and truths. Thus, their 1974 performance *The Essence of Truth* was an even more sardonic act of literalizing discourse (Fig. 5).³⁰ In the spirit of making the invisible visible, Komar and Melamid took an issue of the newspaper *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist party whose name means “truth,” and turned it in their kitchen into cutlets, the resulting sappy nugget of paper being literally not an abstract idea, but a material object containing the worthless “essence” of “truth.”

Komar and Melamid’s active incorporation of performances, even extremely private ones, into their practice by the mid-70s set an important precedent for other Moscow artists. By the end of the decade, Viktor Skersis, a member of The Nest, would speak of having the option as of something “as self-evident as a pencil.”³¹ As for the theoretical significance of turning to performance, its logic seems very similar to that offered by exponents of performance in the West since at least the 1960s, with the proviso that the immediate social charge for the artists of blurring the line between ethics and aesthetics changed in direct proportion to the degree of control with which both were regulated in the public sphere. First and foremost, turning to performance, just like the act of working in collaboration, signaled Komar and Melamid’s understanding of avant-gardism as a mode of operation rather than a visual style. To them, whatever viability was left in the idea of the avant-garde was to be found in a series of questions one asked about one’s environment and a series of intellectual procedures through which one

³⁰ In analyzing official Soviet art in the 1980 article “In Search of Religion,” Komar and Melamid commented on the literalism typical of the Soviet state which, for instance, embalmed Lenin’s corpse to respond to the demand “that Ilyich physically remain with us so that the unbounded masses of workers may see him.” Komar and Melamid, “In Search of Religion,” 37.

³¹ M. Roshal-Fedorov and O. Kholmogorova, eds., *The Nest: Donskoy Roshal Skersis* (Moscow: National Centre for Contemporary Art, 2008), 15.

analyzed the answers, with the project's overall cohesion thus established through discourse rather than a unified field of visual imagery. "It's the same in our paintings," the artists have said. "We live between two panels. Not in this panel or that panel, but between."³² Komar further comments more specifically on his and Melamid's early performances as follows:

We were pioneers... We wanted to know where the limit was and where something unexpected would begin. The same is true of the avant-garde. That was the question for Duchamp – where is the limit, where can you stop? ...It's always interesting to touch this limit, the extreme limit where ethics and aesthetics begin to contradict each other. [This was] the tradition of Futurists, an attempt to touch this dangerous limit, to reach it but not, nevertheless, to step over it. This was the tradition of early Futurist performances and Russian Dadaists, like the Oberiuts. Performance allows most easily to touch this boundary where ethics ceases to be aesthetics.³³

Touching a limit was the basis of Komar and Melamid's Conceptual attitude. This is important to remember with a project such as *The Essence of Truth*, which was aimed less at exposing the lies of Soviet officialdom, though that would be an obvious interpretation, and more at deconstructing the validity of a search for abstract, universal ideals as a necessary enterprise. In this, one might add, Komar and Melamid were not far from the spirit of Joseph Kosuth's *Art as Idea as Idea*, though the Soviet artists' execution was both funnier and made for a more sustainable practice over the long term.

In 1974-1975, Komar and Melamid created *Circle, Square, Triangle* (Fig. 81), a photostat advertising the sale of pure forms – a white circle, square, or triangle – which, as sample models, formed the other half of the work. The text, arranged around the inset reproduction of Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819), proclaimed as slogans: "A Square for Each Family!" and "A sleeping aid? Pain killer?"

³² Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 14-15.

³³ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

Relaxant? No! A triangle!” The text went on:

Dear Customers! The dissatisfaction typical of humans forces you to purchase both ultramodern objects and antiques. Both single-use items and objects inherited from our grandmothers and grandfathers provoke in the depths of any sensitive soul a subconscious feeling of the finitude of our personal time. This is one of the reasons for stress, neuroses, cancer, and other fellow travellers of civilization. The past and the future seem to modern man to be sometimes an Eden, sometimes a Hiroshima. To possess that which is outside of time and ideal – that is the desire you have which is satisfied by the products of the company of the Famous Artists of the 70s of the 20th century, Moscow. The materialized ideal conceptions of pure and clear reason – the simple white figures of Circle, Square, Triangle – will from now on enter your daily life.

The text went on to expound that “The choice of the shape and size of these figures is not accidental” and offered complicated calculations determining the diameter of the soul of the Famous Artists as measuring 86 cm.³⁴ “This number,” the artists concluded, “materialized in the side of the square and the equilateral triangle and in the diameter of the circle gives beautiful proportions to the products of the company and fits harmoniously with the scale of the standards of contemporary housing.”

What is familiar about this work by now is the strategy of mockery through over-identification with the object of mockery. What is new is the object itself – a set of philosophical assumptions akin to Neo-Platonism, which, according to Clark and Holquist, had powerfully structured Soviet public discourse under Stalin. They write,

³⁴ There is precedent in classical Russian literature for similarly strange numerology. In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy writes: “The spirit of an army is the factor which multiplied by the mass gives the resulting force. To define and express the significance of this unknown factor - the spirit of an army - is a problem for science. This problem is only solvable if we cease arbitrarily to substitute for the unknown x itself the conditions under which that force becomes apparent - such as the commands of the general, the equipment employed, and so on - mistaking these for the real significance of the factor, and if we recognize this unknown quantity in its entirety as being the greater or lesser desire to fight and to face danger. Only then, expressing known historic facts by equations and comparing the relative significance of this factor, can we hope to define the unknown. Ten men, battalions, or divisions, fighting fifteen men, battalions, or divisions, conquer - that is, kill or take captive - all the others, while themselves losing four, so that on the one side four and on the other fifteen were lost. Consequently the four were equal to the fifteen, and therefore $4x = 15y$. Consequently $x/y = 15/4$. This equation does not give us the value of the unknown factor but gives us a ratio between two unknowns. And by bringing variously selected historic units (battles, campaigns, periods of war) into such equations, a series of numbers could be obtained in which certain laws should exist and might be discovered.” Leo Tolstoy et al., *War and Peace* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press), 1112.

[T]he rhetoric of Stalinism established a vertical ordering of reality, which was simplified to a binary contrast between everything ordinary and ‘low,’ on the one hand, and, on the other, everything different, extraordinary, and ‘high.’ Stalinist ideology was a crude form of Neo-Platonism in which only the elect, specifically the leaders, had access to the higher order of reality.³⁵

More than twenty years after Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s public denouncement of the cult of personality in 1956 – and more than ten years after Khrushchev’s removal from power in 1964 and the beginning of the period of Stagnation – Komar and Melamid could hardly have been unmasking Stalinism as such, though dark visions of deep-seated fear instilled in them in childhood is something to which they would return in their post-immigration work. Instead, what they were offering here was ontological archaeology – a mission that would reach its logical conclusion in 1978, when during *Archeological Excavations in Crete*, the artists “discovered,” in addition to the skeletal remains of the Minotaur, the bones of ancient humans who had the physical shape of ideal Platonic solids as *Homo Cube*, *Homo Tetrahedron*, and *Homo Octahedron* (Fig. 82).

In addition to their obvious jab at Plato, these names contain a telling similarity with *Homo Sovieticus*, a derisive term for a supposedly separate “species” of man whose mentality evolved in the isolation of the USSR.³⁶ Such assertions of Soviet Union’s separateness coming from both sides of the Iron Curtain made projects in the archaeology of specifically Soviet knowledge an obvious preoccupation for the country’s better-educated and more creative citizens. In a country where popular disillusionment with its great foundational ideals was met by the early 70s with at best a half-hearted official

³⁵ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 307-308. For more, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 141-146.

³⁶ As far as I know, the term was first used in print after immigration by Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksandr Zinovyev as the title of the eponymous book published in 1982.

acknowledgment of mistakes made by individual leaders, private citizens took it upon themselves to theorize extensively the assumptions and desires running their lives.

In the case of Moscow Conceptualism, their conclusions were surprising, rich, and rewarding. Much of the reward for their intellectual activities came for Komar and Melamid in the wider resonances of their discoveries. At first concerned with an archaeology of Soviet idealism, by the time of *Circle, Square, Triangle*, the artists expanded their scope of reference and developed a “nose” or “ear” for idealism in other kinds of discourse. Idealism, as it turned out, was pervasive and ubiquitous; it hung in the air like smoke – a point Komar and Melamid made (again, literalizing their discursive targets) when they proposed to the prime minister of Greece, Sheik Yamani of Saudi Arabia, and Giovanni Agnelli of Fiat a project for building a *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke* (1974-75) (Fig. 83).³⁷

Hence, the appeal to a universally human desire “to possess that which is outside time and is ideal” in the form of the circle, square, or triangle became a multi-layered allusion. It pointed most obviously to the aspirations of the Russian avant-garde, whose utopian and universalist goals, be they spiritual or social, were expressed in both Suprematism and Constructivism in the language of pure geometric abstraction.³⁸ It also pointed, however, to the mystical quasi-science of alchemical tracts and to Buddhist mandalas, both of which use geometric figures to visualize an abstracted and idealized order of the world.³⁹ After their immigration to the U.S., Komar and Melamid claimed that they continued to run a factory for the production of “‘ideal’ forms devoid of any

³⁷ Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 39.

³⁸ Even if they are not fully articulated here, one can see in this work the seeds of the conclusions about the totalitarian intentions of the Russian avant-garde that Boris Groys would eventually reach in *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*.

³⁹ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

information.” “In our world, we have a lot of information,” Melamid explained at the time. “There should be certain places where there should be no information.”⁴⁰ True to their blank form, the white circle, square, and triangle could become an embodiment of a new ideal and the embodiment of a content-free essence as that became necessary.

If You Can’t Make It Big, Make It Red

The same could be said of *Color Therapeutics* (1975) (Fig. 84), which offered twenty-five small panels painted various colors correlated with particular ailments and symptoms (ranging from drinking problems to insomnia to alienation) that they would heal if stared at for a certain amount of time. The work’s broadest allusions nod to a long history of attempts to discover the absolute physical and spiritual properties of individual colors, with the writings of both Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich being another obvious Russian avant-garde precursor to Komar and Melamid’s parodic endeavor.⁴¹ At the same time, the work’s more pointed political criticism, supplied in the form of a slogan-like subtitle “Color Is a Mighty Power,” takes aim at a particularly Soviet form of instrumentalizing art. In this articulation, color as the building block of art becomes a tool for building a strong, healthy society, the slogan implicitly likening it to raw materials as steel or intangible but strategic resources such as labor.

Scientific positivism, based on measurability and falsifiability, underpins the artists’ explanation of how the colors work. In highly technical language, the text panel summarizes the basic physiology of vision, impressing the uninitiated, but conveniently skipping any explanation of how exactly each color produces the desired effect in the

⁴⁰ He went on to say that they employ only virgins to make these pure forms and noted that in New York they have a hard time finding enough virgins. , *The Sunflower* 1980.

⁴¹ Kandinsky had a chapter titled “The Psychological Working on Color” in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Malevich theorized his views on color in, among other writings, *On new systems in art*.

brain. This critique, again, is a multifaceted one. On the one hand, it might be aimed at the oft-proclaimed Soviet intention to build “scientific” Communism. On the other hand, appeals to the interpretive power of the science of vision (as well as to physiological and psychological pathology as artistic motives) have been influential in Western writings on art since at least the early 19th century, when Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* was published.

What’s even more paradoxical is that pseudo-scientific language is used in *Color Therapeutics* to explain how art, as Komar and Melamid see it, serves an essentially religious function in secular culture. It is for this reason, rather than because of a scientific explanation (obviously bogus in this case), that it has the ability to heal – a point that Komar and Melamid (still working together) and later Melamid alone made two more times two decades after their immigration.⁴² What *Color Therapeutics*, along with the other projects discussed in this section, ultimately strives to reach is the limit of the Conceptualist’s skepticism – a distrust of *every* kind of discourse that elaborately instrumentalizes and seeks to justify a social practice whose utility and value both artists and viewers can ultimately only take on the basis of purely subjective experience and blind (ironically) faith. In Komar and Melamid’s hands, appeals to scientific calculation, demonstrable public good, or measurable personal benefit all ring equally laughable. The anti-instrumentalizing sentiment is addressed to multiple, otherwise antithetical, discourses.⁴³

All the multivalent references they make echo off of each other as historical

⁴² First they did so in the *Van Gogh Ministry* project of 1999 and most recently in the *Clinic* that Melamid opened in SoHo in May 2011. See Charles McGrath, "Can a Picasso Cure You?," *The New York Times* May 25, 2011, C1.

⁴³ It is to this fact that Carter Ratcliff speaks when he writes, “*Color Therapeutics* contradicts itself, attacking at once the idealism of Russian avant-gardists such as Malevich and the Soviet oppression that blocked Malevich’s flights of idealistic fancy.” Ratcliff, Komar, and Melamid, *Komar & Melamid*, 81.

instances of different kinds of proof and theories used to prop up or dress up a deeper fundamental assumption – the universally applicable commonplace about the healing, improving power of art – of which the artists cannot speak directly but of which they also cannot let go. Hence, again, the parallel religion: religious art heals, both spiritually and physically; if one ultimately takes the power of secular art on faith, then, shouldn't that art even in its simplest form (the blocks of color do, in fact, look like they could be a Minimalist painting) also be able to heal?⁴⁴

In that question mark lies the major difference between Komar and Melamid and OHO. Komar and Melamid also visualize discourse by literalizing it, but they obviously lack any desire to pass the un-speakable in silence. Instead, they prod incessantly at doubts to produce more and more conversation – indeed, there's something both wonderful and maddening about the fact that so much can or has to be had about such a materially and visually unrewarding piece of art. And the doubts to which the work speaks first and foremost are the artists' own. In the case of *Color Therapeutics*, the work is as much a parody as it is an affirmation of the artists' belief that color *is* a mighty power, else why would they go to the trouble of enduring social ostracism and jeopardizing their own futures in the name of creating their art.

The therapeutic aspect of *Color Therapeutics* comes, in the end, in the conversation it inspires (the text panel is vital for making this possible – that the criticism about it is built into the work itself is what crucially distinguishes the work from a Minimalist painting) and in the relief it offers to the artists' own misgivings about their situation. As they shift emphasis from the expectation of the artist showing his masterly

⁴⁴ One example of a Conceptual artist who explored and took seriously the healing power of art would be Lygia Clark, particularly toward the end of her long career.

hand to the artist showing his ideological hand, the act of revealing one's uncertainties also becomes a way of obtaining a degree of mastery over the situation in which the likelihood of others mishandling the artist's intentions seems almost certain. Instead, by preempting the doubt of others, Komar and Melamid are able to hold on to the use of color, form, etc. as weapons in a struggle for personal, if not social, liberation.

As I have been arguing, the scope of Komar and Melamid's interests and references in their Soviet work far transcends the commonplace realities of their immediate environment. At the same time, I would like to suggest that the early date and intellectual sophistication of their Post-Modern practice in the USSR was directly related to the relentlessness and social scale on which the USSR tried to enforce normative assertions about the nature and power of art, which, to boot, were often internally contradictory, as I have already noted above. Whereas in Western democracies, the desire to create a separate, self-sustaining sphere of art built on ultimately arbitrary and circular logic often coexisted with the liberatory impulses of the 1960s that demanded populist buy-in and appeal to public good, in the Soviet Union, insularity and poetic arbitrariness could easily be construed as justified, necessary, and ethically charged.

Blind faith in art to the point of mysticism, described in Boris Groys' landmark 1979 essay "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" as "speaking of another world,"⁴⁵ could, alongside healthy doses of wariness, usefully become a competitor to the blind faith in Marxism-Leninism. As Komar and Melamid argued in "In Search of Religion," Soviet ideology by the 1970s had finally ossified into the theology towards which it tended from

⁴⁵ Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszył (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 173. Groys also defines Romantic Conceptualism in Moscow as an "attempt to make known the conditions under which art may extend beyond its own borders." *Ibid.*, 164. The article was originally published in the first issue of the émigré journal *A-Ya* in 1979.

the start, the writings of its two Communist leaders having been turned virtually into scripture. And because Soviet artistic discourse offered an extreme example of the abuse of Marx's materialist insight into the function of art⁴⁶ for purposes of demanding a new visual canon, enacting trans-materialist mysticism, even if in jest, became another gesture against the system as it demanded one's faith or at least tacit assent.

What's deeply ironic about Komar and Melamid's commitments in this regard – and what again would become a subject of later misunderstandings – is that in their scorning of Soviet Marxism, they inadvertently and unintentionally found themselves, at least partially, on the same side of the barricades as the Western New Left, with which they had no conscious desire or intention to side. Nevertheless, one might have thought that Marcuse was addressing their art practice when he wrote despairingly and disparagingly of

[The] empiricism [that] substitutes for the hated world of metaphysical ghosts, myths, legends, and illusions a world of conceptual or sensual scraps, or words and utterances which are then organized into a philosophy. And all this is not only legitimate, it is even correct, for it reveals the extent to which non-operational ideas, aspirations, memories and images have become expendable, irrational, confusing, or meaningless.⁴⁷

Finding themselves, just as surprisingly, on the Leftist side of consumerism critique, in their next major project, Komar and Melamid would continue to make it quite literally their business – as they already had with *Circle, Square, Triangle* – to sell to a still imagined American audience metaphysical ghosts and historical phantasms.

⁴⁶ As far as I know, the USSR was the only country where a systematic attempt to compile all of Marx' and Engels' writings on art and literature was made. An English translation of the Preface to the resultant hefty volume is available on-line here <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>>.

⁴⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston,,: Beacon Press, 1969), 192.

Between Faith and Farce: Utopia for Sale

Trans-materialist mysticism is what Komar and Melamid proposed to sell in a 1976 portfolio titled *A Catalogue of Superobjects. Supercomfort for Superpeople* (Fig. 85), which again strikes one with the variety of its possible targets and the layered quality of its references.⁴⁸ The *Catalogue* is made to look like a mail-order catalog (it was originally meant to be bound as a single book, though that never happened for logistical reasons), offering thirty six objects for sale, with each described in a promotional text and each depicted in a color photograph being used by a model. Developed by “the Celebrated Artists of the End of the Second Millennium A.D., Moscow,” the objects are divided into nine categories: Prestigeants, Sensationizers, Clotheables, Cultivatents, Defendibles, Auto-Probes, Energy-Loss Abaters, Furniture to Wear, and Floorists. In general, the objects were supposed to produce on demand for their owner such ineffable sensations as self-confidence or inner peace and could generally tap into a person’s better, immaterial self through very material means.

A few examples include Alton, a Presigeant providing “the ultimate in Self-Assertion” in order to free one from “the foolish scramble up the ladder of social success”; Olo, a “language ornament” offering “proof of [one’s] ideal marriage with Truth”; and Ksushna, a Sensationizer linking one up with “the irrational sensations of the Invisible Ideal...inexpressible in human language.” The objects could also protect one’s self from oneself, as in the case of Spirit, a Clotheable that would “stop the sin of [one’s] slave-hands” or, conversely, could put one deeply in touch with one’s inner essence, as in the case of the Auto-Probes that would, like Udam, allow one to listen to oneself or, like

⁴⁸ I am very indebted to Nancy Perloff, curator at the Getty Research Institute, for a chance to engage closely with the portfolio and for thoughts on it.

Charog-15, would protect one's individuality by creating a shield from mass hypnosis. The objects could even facilitate higher forms of sociability, as was the case with the Floorist Small Dungan-7, which could "replace the traditional center of your home – the dinner table – with its spiritual analogue."

The two most obvious targets of satire in this work are, again contradictorily, both Soviet and Western, especially since by the time *Superobjects* were created, Komar and Melamid had already decided to emigrate to Israel and were creating the next batch of works for their 1977 show at Ronald Feldman. (Even though the photographs were shot in Moscow and the text written by the artists in Russian, the final work was printed from transparencies and assembled in New York and now exists only in English translation).⁴⁹ Being thus addressed to a Western audience, the work would most obviously seem to poke fun at the capitalist tendency to throw at all demand, including the metaphysical kind expressible only in terms of metaphors, the resources of consumerism's material supply. Komar and Melamid thus pretend to commodify here the desire for the last few things unavailable in an oversaturated market to the person who truly has everything except self-esteem, happiness, or access to absolute Truth.

At the same time, the names of the objects are deliberately reminiscent of the neologisms so beloved by Russian Futurist poets and artists, so the objects, both in their names and ludicrous claims, appeal to the utopian desire of the Russian avant-gardes to change the world by changing the everyday objects in it, be they books, clothes, furniture,

⁴⁹ The source of this information is an e-mail from Marco Nocella at Feldman Gallery to the Getty Research Institute sent when the GRI staff were doing research for the acquisition of the portfolio; "The transparencies and text for the "Catalogue of Superobjects for the Supercomfort of Superpeople" were received by Ronald Feldman through the aid of Alfred Friendly, a Newsweek correspondent who often helped with the transfer of Komar & Melamid artworks from Moscow to New York. In the cover letter, Komar & Melamid stated that it was pointless to send the objects because they were made of 'cheap materials' and had been 'messed up' during the photography sessions."

etc.⁵⁰ This tension between meanings becomes evident in the very materiality of the objects, many of which are described as having golden parts or elements (represented in the photographs by paint or metal which looks shiny, but clearly cheap and fake). This obsession with gold at once becomes a sign of wealth and prestige, the material representation of capital, as well as of the spiritual promise of the objects.⁵¹ This, moreover, is a trait characteristic not only of Komar and Melamid if one trusts Vadim Zakharov when he writes, “Gold is the paint of ideology, which, alongside red, dominates in the style of Moscow Conceptualism, which always paid increased attention to all ideologies and cults.”⁵² Similarly, the appeal to Superpeople in the title alludes to both the Soviet aim of creating a new type of socially conscious man and the new Soviet man’s surprising, unacknowledged forbearer: Nietzsche’s *uebermensch*, the ideal man of the future who has cast off all the harmful other-worldliness of Christianity, metaphysics, Platonism, Truth, and essences.

The remarkable opening text of the *Catalogue* is a testament to Komar and Melamid’s persistent will to misunderstand historical narratives and cultural assumptions in order to reveal their hidden ideological tensions. Taking at face value the proclaimed completion or near completion of modernity and Modernism’s projects in both East and West, Komar and Melamid assert in the preface to the *Catalogue* that,

The Socialization of the Modern World is a reality. It is propelling the relentless unification of the material and the spiritual. The wild utopias of Marx and Corbusier, of the surrealists and socialists, have materialized. The art and

⁵⁰ Vitaly Komar, interview by author, tape recording, New York, NY, November 19 and December 7, 2009.

⁵¹ Examples of Conceptual artists who took the symbolic and spiritual meanings of gold more seriously than Komar and Melamid would include Joseph Beuys and James Lee Byars. In a 1996 book-long interview, Byars explained that in his work, “Gold is the abstract possibility of the Sublime.” James Lee Byars and Joachim Sartorius, *James Lee Byars Im Gespräch Mit Joachim Sartorius* (Cologne: 1996), 27.

⁵² Ekaterina Degot and Vadim Zakharov, *Moskovskii Kontseptualizm* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo WAM, 2005), 10.

ideology of secret socialist clans⁵³ demand the unity of mankind – that the shining future of the world be shared by all.

To further highlight the preposterousness of these claims, some of them borrowed from Soviet triumphalist rhetoric, Komar and Melamid then take on the equally unexpected language of the enemies of both socialism and Western democracy. Thus, they go on,

[The socialist clans] have destroyed the wise and well-ordered social hierarchy of social life that emerged from the depths of Mediterranean civilization, returning the world to a primitive level of life. ...The result is the mindless, semi-literate economic and cultural policy of the governments of Europe. Contempt for ancestral traditions coupled with appeasement of every form of modernism has undermined the foundations of this world and will lead to its total destruction. The task today is to create a NEW ARISTOCRACY in place of the old one [which] must, for itself and by itself, devise a new language, traditions and culture which will be incomprehensible and alien to the masses. ...These are ‘Objects’ which correspond to the principles of Ideological Design; ‘Objects’ invested with New-Traditionalistic functions; ‘Objects’ of SUPERCOMFORT intended for the Ruling Elite and called upon to divide society into those who use these ‘Objects’ and all the rest. Price is no obstacle. Efforts to correct the existing social situation are essential.

In their rhetoric of overidentification with traditional elites, Komar and Melamid seem here to be both mocking and mourning the “existing social situation,” highlighting just how much socialist utopias have not, in fact, fulfilled their promises of social equality or united the material with the spiritual. Instead, the utopian projects Komar and Melamid mention – the Western Modernism of Le Corbusier and the Soviet Communism inspired by Marx – have spawned new inequalities and new unfreedoms. In the West, utopia has been replaced by the lonely consumer’s entrapment in attempts to silence with buying power his longing to know something greater than himself.⁵⁴ In the East, utopia

⁵³ A few years later, in 1980, Komar and Melamid would write, “It is impossible to understand contemporary Russian culture if one does not take into account the fact that the Bolsheviks came to power with no experience governing anything other than a secret society. ...Thus it is not surprising that they gradually transformed the entire country into one enormous, secret society.” Komar and Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” 263.

⁵⁴ That Komar and Melamid could articulate a sophisticated critique of or at least a distrust of consumerism’s abundance at this time is remarkable given that for most Soviet citizens at the time, such

has been tarnished beyond recognition by the repressive violence necessary to get individuals to accept an imposed, top-down happiness.

This violence of utopia shows up in a number of the Superobjects, and Komar and Melamid seem to be suggesting that it is implicit and inevitable in any project that strives to make an ideal order into a reality, be it on a personal or social level.⁵⁵ There is a strange, surrealistic (and they do name the Surrealists in the list of socialist utopians) type of violence that one finds in objects such as Tyairp, a mouth tube attached to a pair of eye coverings, which promises self-knowledge, but looks more like a disorienting torture device; or Booft, a wearable piece of wood which “consolidates [one’s] consciousness” by being a clunky burden that severely restricts the wearer’s range of physical motion. In both cases, as well as in a number of others, the pieces literalize in physical form the utopian, metaphorical promises of absolute comfort and self-realization gone terribly wrong in their desire to discipline the untrustworthy, fallible human body. This is yet another way in which utopian *Supercomfort* becomes in Komar and Melamid’s hands extremely uncomfortable.

What’s more, Komar and Melamid are channeling so many voices and views in this piece that it becomes very hard to find a politics they aren’t mocking or mourning and to tell if their more reactionary claims are a put on or speak to a commitment held in earnest. This ambivalence, for example, becomes evident in their relationship to popular culture, one of whose more commercial forms, the mail-order catalog, the artists adopt here, following again in the footsteps of Pop Art. In their subtle undermining of what a mail-order catalogue purports to offer, Komar and Melamid would almost seem to be

abundance seemed to be the most highly desirable good rather than a suspicious potential evil.

⁵⁵ Corbusier, when asked for a plan for modernizing post-revolutionary Moscow famously proposed obliterating the entire city except for the Kremlin and starting from scratch.

following Max Horkheimer's exhortation that, "The struggle against mass culture can consist only in pointing out its connection with the persistence of social injustice."⁵⁶ Yet, as I have noted above, Komar and Melamid had no desire to be associated with the Marxist politics of the Western New Left and privately felt misunderstood by the leftist critics who took them for one of their own. In their own work, they certainly showed much more ambivalence than Horkheimer in his assertion that in the struggle against mass culture, "The right to nostalgia, to transcendental knowledge, to a dangerous life cannot be validated." As much as they mocked them, Komar and Melamid, in the act of mockery, also consistently recuperated their nostalgia and yearning for transcendental knowledge. The social change promoted by the Superobjects and Superpeople, they claimed, would bring back a conflated golden age from the past of the "Mediterranean civilization" (which they would later unearth again during *Excavations on Crete*) and a "restoration of the Ideals and Principles of Alexander of Macedonia," (i.e. Alexander the Great).

The joke of creating futuristic utopian luxury that could hearken to an idealized, mythical Golden Age with its pearls, gold, costly woods and other lavishness is especially funny when one notices in the photographs the cheapness of the household materials – electric breakers, wires, curtain fringe, plungers, plastic flowers, laminated particle board, – used by the artists to construct their prototypes. Both Soviet and Western dreams look equally laughable when rendered in this international language of cheap mass produced materials, and the only obvious universal lesson here is that nothing – including promises of a brighter, greater future – is what it seems.

⁵⁶ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (1st ed. (Boston: Little, 1973), 215.

But is that, again, all the politics the work ultimately offers – that one simply ought not trust one’s eyes and ears, that every ideology and every promise is suspect, that all of 20th century’s loftier ideals are unsalvageable, and that, at the same time, ideology in both East and West continues to function by producing ever new desires for things it cannot provide? At their darkest, writing for an all-Western audience of *Artforum* four years later, in 1980, Komar and Melamid’s fully formulated post-modern (or, in their terminology, post-totalitarian) answer was “yes.”

The Barren Flowers of Evil

The text in question, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” was a melancholy manifesto and self-portrait of sorts, incorporated into a review of the first issue of *A-Ya*, a magazine dedicated to unofficial Russian art and published until the mid-80s in Paris by the Russian émigré artist Igor Shelkovsky together with Alexander Sidorov. Sketching out in a few paragraphs what Boris Groys would later address in several books, Komar and Melamid intimate to their American readers that in exploring their historical roots, Russian artists arrived at postmodernism earlier than most when they discovered “that Lenin’s avant-garde and Stalin’s academism are essentially only two different sides of the same socialist utopia. With the failure of this utopia art too was discredited. Indeed, if stylistic opposites are bad, then there’s no point in discussing subtleties.”⁵⁷

“Having just learned, with great difficulty, the modernist ABCs from the West,

⁵⁷ In 1979, the first issue of *A-Ya* contained the first ever publication of the first version of Malevich’s 1922 theoretical essay *Concerning the Subjective and the Objective in Art and Generally*. The introduction to the text argues that in the text, Malevich’s observation of the evolution from brush to pen is “one of the symptoms of n the future tragedy: the conflict between the artist and society, between the individual and the nascent totalirain Moloch.” By sharp contrast, in 1980’s “Barren Flowers of Evil,” Komar and Melamid suggest that Malevich was the direct progenitor of Soviet artistic bureaucracy. See K. Malevich, “Concerning the Subjective and the Objective in Art and Generally /Diary a, 1922/,” *A-Ya (Paris)*, no. 1 (1979): 42. See also Komar and Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” 270.

Russian post-avant-gardists unexpectedly revealed the full and horrifying power of that which is now called the avant-garde.”⁵⁸ The moral culpability of the avant-garde for the sin of ideological intolerance is the point about Russia – where “every phenomenon... is fatally unable to disengage itself from its context of social and religious ideas” – that Komar and Melamid concede to Groys, whom they otherwise disparage as a “provincial patriot” for his argument that “Western art ‘in one way or another speaks about the world,’ while ‘Russian art, from the icon to the present, wants to speak of another world,’” which lies at the “crossroads of religion and art.”⁵⁹

It’s not the form of the work as such, Komar and Melamid imply, that’s different about Russian art, but, rather, the interpretive toolkit the Russians, particularly those who have left the USSR or live in internal exile, bring with them based on the Soviet experience. The primacy of text and meta-narrative in Komar and Melamid’s own work clearly bears this belief out – the forms of their works would be laughable without accompanying stories. To the people aware of Russian history, however, “Russian modernism, and world modernism are deprived of yet another fundamental of their illusions – creation in the name of the betterment of mankind. For us... recent émigrés from Russia,” the artists thus conclude,

it is obvious that the world is not only monotonously bad, but that changes in it have no meaning. Likewise, change in art is meaningless. Art ceases to be a movement from and to, and becomes only a reshuffling of what exists... However, the quantity of combinations of the existing, though large indeed, is nevertheless limited. People who have been through two worlds know this.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 266. Recently, Groys has somewhat disavowed the earnestness of his earlier statements, saying, “When I spoke of metaphysics in Moscow Conceptualism, there was an element of irony in that.” Anna Tolstova, “Nichego 'Aktual'nogo' V Sovremennom Mire Bol'she Net,” *Kommersant Vlast'*, no. 7 (911) (February 21, 2011): available on-line at <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1580687>>, accessed March 15, 2011.

⁶⁰ Komar and Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” 268.

At the same time, the text that so staunchly refuses to buy into any narrative of progress still cannot help but wonder about the new possibilities that intertwining the new with the old can bring. “Who knows,” the artists muse,

perhaps a new paradox will bear fruit in the Third Rome. Religion is beginning to play the role of a ‘left’ opposition, using the avant-garde forms of modernism, an ‘ism’ genetically and spiritually bound with socialist dreams of the destruction of the old world. . . . It’s difficult to foresee what the character of the coming cultural revolution will be, not to mention whether or not it will be the result or cause of a social revolution.⁶¹

Komar and Melamid, as I have suggested above, do not intend to articulate a position clear or systematic enough to participate in any revolution, be it cultural or social. They describe themselves several times as people who have experienced life in two worlds. For such people,

[t]he complex of a ‘normal’ person, who believes in certain truths, torments them, and forces them to put on various masks – of prophets, philosophers, political activists, and God knows what else. But in their heart they know that this is all bullshit. They have to lie, dodge, make art – in order to be like everyone else.

The common characteristics the art of such people displays are conscious or unconscious deceit; preoccupation with content over form; lack of correspondence between proclaimed goals and things created; and the anti-aestheticism of placing the work in a non-artistic context.⁶²

True to their slippery form, by raising points one and three, Komar and Melamid invite the reader to distrust every assertion they make. To sow perpetual doubt and discontent in the souls of everyone else is the job that allows them to approximate for others the experience of living in two worlds. Therein, however, one also finds the ethical

⁶¹ Ibid., 266.

⁶² Komar and Melamid are clearly speaking of themselves, but they also bring these points up in relation to Joseph Beuys as another person who has lived between two worlds, an anti-Fascist who grew up under Fascism. Ibid., 268-269.

dimension of their work, which turns out to recuperate perfectly the Romantic ideal of personal salvation through art while also undermining it and gazing into “the complete and senseless void of dead European culture.”⁶³

Even amid gleeful nihilism, Komar and Melamid’s rhetoric reveals their investment in the idea of personal liberation through art. Of the specifically Russian interpretive mode they note that in it, “[The work of art] becomes an ethically heroic deed on the part of the creator – the visible form of an invisible ideological content, a flat mask which conceals an inexpressible depth.”⁶⁴ They further write that the existence of artists who create “postmodernist or, in our terminology, post-totalitarian Russian art” is a miracle, happening in a dreary city whose inhabitants are oppressed by a monstrous fear.⁶⁵ In this environment, raising the consciousness of a few is enough – a fact that explains the small-business model of individual engagement and privatized self-improvement in Komar and Melamid’s utopian projects of the 1970s. (It also equally well explains the much larger scale on which Komar and Melamid would work in the changed conditions after the collapse of the USSR in such projects as *Monumental Propaganda* and *People’s Choice*, in which they returned to their 1970s role as the keepers of historical memories and ideals that they salvaged through ridicule.)⁶⁶

Simply describing in detail the condition of one’s unfreedom becomes, in Komar and Melamid’s implicit formulation of their artistic mission, both an ethical gesture and a

⁶³ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 263-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 270. There are no more than thirty of these artists, by Komar and Melamid’s count.

⁶⁶ It is true that *The Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke*, which I mentioned earlier and which was proposed in 1974, would have been a large-scale undertaking for aestheticizing the public sphere, but it differs from the later projects (*People’s Choice* and *Monumental Propaganda*) in that it was a clearly unrealizable proposition from the start, whereas the later projects came about in a situation where there was at least a good chance that the proposed large-scale undertakings (the conversion of Soviet-era monuments and the creation of paintings based on extensive polling data) could be realized.

kind of freedom. Peter Wollen comments on this when he says of Komar and Melamid that, “They quote Kierkegaard: 'In irony, the subject is negatively free, free from the shackles which in reality restrain him so firmly.' Irony provides a provisional release from tragedy.”⁶⁷

Komar and Melamid’s post-modernist project of liberation is private in nature and temporary in duration, at least insofar as their overidentification with systems of power shares so much with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Consider the degree to which Komar and Melamid’s description of Soviet reality as an endless performance whose fictional nature they reveal, mostly to themselves, by overidentifying with their assigned part resonates with Bakhtin’s conception of a self-conscious carnival as subversion. “This is a theatrical psychology,” Komar and Melamid write,

of a participant in the social spectacle entitled ‘Soviet Russia,’ where each person...without intermission, identifies with his role to the point that he cannot distinguish the lie from reality....A ritual culture of lies, worked out to the smallest details, has been created... in which theatrical camouflage imitates the superficial impression of a normal state. The artist’s mask has also become an aspect of the camouflage.⁶⁸

This is almost an exact echo of the Bakhtinian argument that carnival and the grotesque as parodic, self-conscious performances

both have the effect of plunging certainty into ambivalence and uncertainty, as a result of their emphasis on contradictions and the relativity of all classificatory systems. This is why the mask is so important to both forms. ...The mask is the very image of ambiguity, the variety and flux of identities that otherwise, unmasked, are conceived as single and fixed.⁶⁹

“[I]t’s fitting to recall here,” Komar and Melamid also note, “that Lenin and his friends often had to disguise themselves and changed their identities as effectively as the

⁶⁷ Wollen, "Morbid Symptoms: Komar & Melamid," 187.

⁶⁸ Komar and Melamid, "The Barren Flowers of Evil," 263.

⁶⁹ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 304.

trickster heroes of Russian fairy tales.” The identification with the archetypes of folktales (as described, in particular, by another Russian structuralist, Vladimir Propp) and especially with the figure of the trickster is something that united the Moscow Conceptualist circle and can be found in overt forms in the work of D.A. Prigov, Vadim Zakharov, and the group Inspection Medical Hermeneutics.

The Metaphysics of the Loophole

Komar and Melamid, however, were the first to identify with the role so directly and probably the most honest in revealing the ways in which playing the role was an instrument of personal liberation (and, for that matter, career-making) whose benefits for anyone else were almost accidental.⁷⁰ One of the roles of the trickster is to speak truth to power, albeit often obliquely. Yet Komar and Melamid, as I have discussed above, consistently want to absolve themselves of the responsibility of being beholden to a single Truth. In “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” they articulate clearly their contempt for the Russian *intelligentsia*’s propensity towards truth-seeking. Discussing the work of the painter Ivan Chuikov, they write that he “is concerned with a simple question: where is the boundary between falsehood and truth? His Russian audience seeks an answer to this question.” In response, “the artist, balancing on the edge of silence and revelation, hems and haws, saying that ‘an artistic object is by its very nature a paradox – is ambiguous,’” offering, it seems, little to satisfy “the Russian intelligentsia...preoccupied with the search for some abstract truth and the logically hopeless task of its separation from an all-

⁷⁰ Mark Lipovetsky has written on the figure of the trickster in contemporary Russian literature. See Mark Lipovetsky, *Charms of the Cynical Reason: Tricksters in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, Cultural Revolutions: Russia in the 20th Century (Academic Studies Press, 2011).

too-concrete lie.”⁷¹

The paradox of Komar and Melamid’s politics is that their constant telling of “lies to the liars,” in Bakhtin’s formulation, implies, indeed, logically demands, the revelation of a concealed truth, and yet this negative articulation of the truth never itself actually goes beyond a multi-faceted analysis of the “all-too-concrete lie.”⁷² In this, on an operational level, Komar and Melamid’s work is similar to the various “bad infinities” Pamela Lee describes in the Euro-American art of the 1960s. “[Hegel’s] spurious or bad infinity,” Lee writes, “is the nightmare of the dialectic. As applied to logic, it suggests the mind’s failure to sublimate the contradictions inherent in the finite relationship between subject and object, hence leading to a perpetual, ultimately fruitless, oscillation between the two.”

As I have argued above, in Komar and Melamid’s case, the solution they find is not sublation, but the experience of history as the sublime. Lee goes on, “When such thinking is applied to history, the bad infinity represents a failure to transcend the immanence of one’s own historical moment. Koselleck described modernity’s futureless future as such an ‘evil endlessness,’”⁷³ a phrase that rings remarkably similar to Komar and Melamid’s sentiment that the world is “monotonously bad.” “And yet in deploying this ‘bad infinity’ as a model for thinking about the endlessness of sixties art,” Lee concludes,

this repetition might...represent a critical stance on the question of time, technology, and ends. For this repetition, to borrow from Deleuze, is a repetition

⁷¹ Komar and Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” 262.

⁷² Taking all their references to the theatrical and performative nature of the way they see reality and thinking back to the golden age of the “Mediterranean civilization” for which Komar and Melamid have such a fondness, one might consider here the origins of Western theater and the parasitic but necessary function that Greek satyr plays had vis a vis the catharsis of Greek tragedies.

⁷³ Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960's* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 277, 271. See Lee’s footnote 38 on the citation from Koselleck’s *Futures Past*.

with difference. ...In its peculiar affirmation of a failed dialectic, [the approach of bad infinities and long duree] refuses any notion of a transcendental end-time and implicitly reclaims the speculative possibilities of the futurist project.⁷⁴

This hidden commitment to “the possibilities of the futurist project” that on the face of their work Komar and Melamid seem constantly to deny is also borne out in another way. Namely, the way the artists at once undermine and recuperate Romantic and Modernist aspirations through their paradoxical insistence that the radical newness of their practice be acknowledged. “If our philippics are understood,” they write in “The Barren Flowers of Evil,”

not as a condemnation, but as a statement of stubborn facts, and if they are believed [a curious caveat which, again, points to the centrality of faith, both good and bad, to Komar and Melamid worldview – KG], then this could be regarded as something, like an artistic platform...a certain original aesthetic. Of course, from the point of view of American aesthetic norms, post-totalitarianism seems hideous, both artistically and morally. But this has been the accusation leveled at every new movement in art.⁷⁵

What Komar and Melamid call “post-totalitarianism” is “hideous” of necessity if it sets as its task the concretization, the making visible and present, of various lies. Conversely, Komar and Melamid’s truth, when they appeal to the possibility of its existence, focuses more than their other work on invisibility, temporal and geographical non-simultaneity, and a presence that cannot be touched through visual representation. This, I believe, becomes for them a way to utilize a Bakhtinian “metaphysics of the loophole,” which, as Clark and Holquist write, arises out of the recognition of the

heterogeneity and contradiction that dominate life and the consequent speciousness of all claims to the absolute. ...[It is] is founded on the ineluctability of our ignorance, the necessary presence of gaps in all our fondest schemes and most elaborate systems. Bakhtin rejoices in the fatedness of uncertainty, which he reads as the constant availability of a way out, with no dead end. ...And although the loophole is the source of the frustration, pain, and danger we must confront in

⁷⁴ Ibid., 277.

⁷⁵ Komar and Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil,” 269.

a world so dominated by the unknowable, it is also the necessary precondition for any freedom we may know.⁷⁶

The use of the “metaphysics of the loophole” is true of three projects that span the period of Komar and Melamid’s immigration first to Israel and then to New York and form a coda to the Soviet phase of Komar and Melamid’s collaboration. The first of these is titled *TransState* (Fig. 12), a 1977 work which, I think, was Komar and Melamid’s most brilliant attempt not only to come to terms with reality as it was, but to point to a place beyond its reach, as well.⁷⁷ In this case, the glimmer of non-cynical futuristic optimism in the work might have something to do with the fact that the story the artists were telling was the most personal one yet.

The work was created at a time when Komar and Melamid had already received one official refusal of their request to be allowed to emigrate and were awaiting the next response.⁷⁸ It consisted of a road-marker with the word “TransState” pointing in every cardinal direction and a series of documents produced by Komar and Melamid in which they did nothing less than declare themselves the first citizens of the “federation of free and independent state-individuals” whose guaranteed constitutional rights included Contemplation, Meditation, and Generalization. *TransState* documents (a Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Address of the Consuls to the United Nations, currency, passports, etc.) articulate a vision of belonging to a global collectivity while retaining all

⁷⁶ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 347.

⁷⁷ That *TransState* is a direct and obvious precedent for *NSK-State in Time*, one of the main projects of IRWIN, Slovenia’s most famous artistic collective which came to prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, strikes me as yet another more than fateful coincidence. It is also particularly relevant given that IRWIN have been irreplaceable and indefatigable in preserving and resurrecting the legacy of the post-war Eastern European avant-garde phenomena, OHO prominently among them.

⁷⁸ Vitaly Komar, “Komar and Melamid on-Line Chronology,” <<http://www.komarandmelamid.org/chronology.html>>, accessed October 10, 2010.

the specificity and particularity that one brings from one's place of origin. Citizenship in TransState was open to any other individual who wanted to become a member state of their confederation of free state-individuals. Some traditional power structure was preserved by the fact that Komar and Melamid declared themselves the consuls of TransState, but as such, they played a purely administrative role and were the first among equals.

Untranslatable as a neologism into Russian, the title of this text-centered work suggests the existence of a place beyond the realm of the known and beyond the reach of historical reality in both the literal (physical or geographical) and metaphoric (psychological) sense. What that place might actually look like was not, of course, ever made visible by Komar and Melamid. Yet the strength of the work lies precisely in their impulse to imagine the possibility a geopolitical and psychogeographic terrain better than the one they actually inhabited, even if they could not visualize it.

There are equal measures of the poetics of failure and poetics of hope art in *TransState* since their invention obviously could not help the artists escape being Soviet citizens, but could offer psychic relief and a vision for a future, no matter how distant. The same was true of the *Half-Hour Attempt to Visualize Komar and Melamid* of 1979 (Fig. 11), a project dating to a time when mass immigration among artists threw into turmoil the lives of those who stayed in the USSR as well. Initiated by Komar and Melamid's former students who were working at the time as The Nest, the performance was in an obvious way the quintessence of an empty, pointless gesture that was certain from the start to change nothing about the location of Komar and Melamid's physical bodies. Yet this non-event in terms of observable changes pointed all the more clearly at

the concentration with which Gennady Donskoy, Viktor Skersis, and Mikhail Roshal-Fyodorov thought of their teachers in an attempt to bring them back and obviously suggested that, much like Lenin, who, according to Soviet propaganda, was “always with you” and “always alive,” Komar and Melamid would remain with their students, albeit in an invisible form.

Have You Sold Your Soul?

It was also with the help of the members of the Nest that in 1978-79, Komar and Melamid created the project titled *Souls* (Fig. 86), which took to its logical conclusion Komar and Melamid’s desire to combine their entrepreneurial spirit with the nobleness of art’s mission. The project consisted of advertising posters for K&M Inc., a corporation created for buying and selling of human souls; a neon ad in New York’s Time Square; a poster and print ad campaign with a mail-in form for the sale of souls that ran in *Artforum*⁷⁹; the actual forms that legalized the transfer of ownership of American souls, which were given on consignment; and the *First Auction of American Souls in Moscow* (Fig. 10), an auction of souls smuggled into the USSR conducted in 1979, obviously in Komar and Melamid’s absence, during which the souls in the form of the certificates were auctioned off to members of the Moscow unofficial art scene.

As was the case most notably with *Passport Music* before, *Souls* as a work was distributed not only across multiple media, but also across multiple locations and time zones, making it as difficult to locate in one object or event the existence of the souls in which Komar and Melamid wanted to trade. As was also the case with earlier works, *Souls* displayed an intellectual hybridity rooted in Komar and Melamid’s situation as

⁷⁹ This was a use of print media similar to that of Dan Graham and Joseph Kosuth a decade earlier.

Soviet immigrants who wanted to universalize their experience. Their main motive for collecting souls on consignment for future resale was to simplify and streamline the process of art's engagement with its viewer, bypassing the part where the artist puts his soul into the work and making the artist, instead, a middle man who connected those who wanted to share their souls with those who wanted to have access to the souls of others.⁸⁰ In this aspect of using the artist's authority to bypass the need for material production, as well as in the perceived need to conduct the exchange through the universally interchangeable medium of money and to commodify the ineffable, the work was not dissimilar from Yves Klein's sales of *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*.

At the same time, references to "the soul," an irreducible essence of a person, had a distinctly Russian flavor since this was yet another vestige of an older belief system that six decades of Soviet rule could not manage to exterminate in the Russian imagination. "As far as we know," Komar and Melamid wrote in their article "In Search of Religion," "Marxism-Leninism denies the existence of any soul whatsoever, be it mortal or immortal, as it denies anything which does not directly and logically flow from the human anatomy." Yet here the artists were, raising from the dead, in a sense, the metaphysical ghosts of a particularly Russian obsession with the soul, from Gogol's earnest "mysterious Russian soul" and satirical machinations with *Dead Souls* to Nikolay Fedorov's late 19th centuries theories on the need for space travel and interplanetary colonization for purposes of finding space to house the souls of all humans who were waiting to be raised from the dead.

The multivalent (linguistically, as well as ideologically) Russian "soul" became

⁸⁰ Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannyye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]*, 135.

the most perfect concept Komar and Melamid could find for something that was both universal and culturally specific, something whose existence could not be proven but which was made real by constant references to it. It was something whose contemporary history, as Komar and Melamid noted in “The Barren Flowers of Evil” concerning the return in Eastern Europe of an overt interest in spirituality, intertwined religious conservatism with current political progressivism.

The project also had a political dimension of hopefulness – of the possibility of mutual understanding between Soviet and American citizens, of the blurring and mixing up of commonly accepted sharp distinctions between East and West or modern and pre-modern – precisely because it did not reduce its subject matter to a visual, material form, which would have made the trade in souls as laughable as the *Superobjects* or the most and least wanted paintings would be later.⁸¹

Instead, *Souls* left to the imagination that which needs to remain invisible in order to retain its potency. Significantly, it also changed Komar and Melamid’s role as artists. Instead of producing commodities themselves, they became the mediators of a genuinely participatory process in which others had to decide on both ends how seriously to take the artists’ proposition. The scale of participation in the project of a no longer imagined American audience was, moreover, unprecedented for them. Over the course of the project, Komar & Melamid, Inc. took on consignment several hundred American souls, including that of Andy Warhol (Fig. 87),⁸² and the actual idea of taking souls on consignment arose from the fact that those who took the existence of their souls seriously

⁸¹ Admittedly, the cages with “SOS” signs in which the certificates for the souls were placed during the auction in Moscow did add a lot of ludicrousness to the affair, but they were only a small part of the work in its totality and the souls for sale were never themselves materialized in any way.

⁸² Andy Warhol’s soul sold for 30 rubles. Kizevalter, ed., *Eti Strannye Semidesyatye, Ili Poterya Nevinnosti [Those Strange Seventies, or the Loss of Innocence]*, 135.

or wanted to profit by them demanded sums that made it impossible for Komar and Melamid themselves to buy the souls outright without first finding a buyer. (As a result, most of the souls offered for sale were ultimately returned to their owners).

In the end, without expressing an opinion themselves one way or another, *Souls* made it possible for each participant to reclaim older metaphysics or find liberation from it in irony to the exact degree that the participant desired. The project is thus a perfect incarnation of Bakhtin's idea of the loophole as an engine of cultural production.

The advertising posters that Komar and Melamid produced for their campaign reflected the full range of positions that the artists saw as being available to the potential participants. The most light-hearted could see the project as a source of easy money to be made off of the superstitions of others, as the poster "No One Else in This World Pays Cash for Nothing" suggested. Other ads, on the other hand, acknowledged the potential gravity of the decision, associating the sale of the soul with the Biblical fall of man and the tragic story of Doctor Faustus. A third group treated the need to sell one's soul as an inevitability – "Have you sold your soul?" one poster inquired – and promised that for the seller, the deal made sense because "Your Soul Is In Good Hands With Us" while for the buyer, the artists offered "Fine Quality Souls for Every Taste."

Souls was the last project Komar and Melamid did in collaboration with their former students and friends in the USSR and by 1982, they would find an object-centered idiom that responded to the New York art market's desire for large-scale paintings. Komar and Melamid's work in the 1980s in certain ways managed to avoid playing by the limiting rules of the culture wars, but this often came at the price of playing up their Soviet otherness. In this work, too, many critics saw the implications I have discussed

above. Writing in 1982 about the paintings in the *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, Jamey Gambrell concluded that “History charged us with the ideology of progress, the burden of innovation, of the clean slate, and then refused to be erased. In inventing the present as our past, Komar and Melamid show us that we must look back – and look back carefully.”⁸³

Looking back carefully at Komar and Melamid’s own work, I would argue, shows that their most provocative, sophisticated, and lasting ideas were born in their first decade together under the conditions of Soviet isolation and ideological pressure. As one might have expected, in largest part, these ideas, steeped in irony and full of bad faith, bore out the disillusionment in the bankrupt utopian aspirations the artists saw as the progenitors of the socialist reality that surrounded them and their circle. What is more surprising and paradoxical is that the artists also retained strangely persistent attachments to utopian ideals, which they smuggled in, as if by a back door, through their choice of objects of ridicule.

As with the late OHO, it was encountering in earnest the very different structure of the Western art world that precipitated a serious shift in the work Komar and Melamid would do under changed circumstances. If for most OHO members, it ultimately made more sense to give up art in order to pursue the satisfaction of personal ethical imperatives, for Komar and Melamid, success in the West meant giving up the sense of personal ethical urgency that the utopian loopholes of their early work allowed them to exercise. The work they did in the 1980s and 1990s had other merits to recommend it, but what seems indisputable for both OHO and Komar and Melamid is that it is ultimately in

⁸³ Jamey Gambrell, "Komar and Melamid -- from Behind the Ironical Curtain," *Artforum* 20 (April 1982): 63.

the logic of their self-conscious responses to the conditions in which the groups first appeared that their importance as artists in the context of Conceptualism as a global movement is to be found.

FIGURES

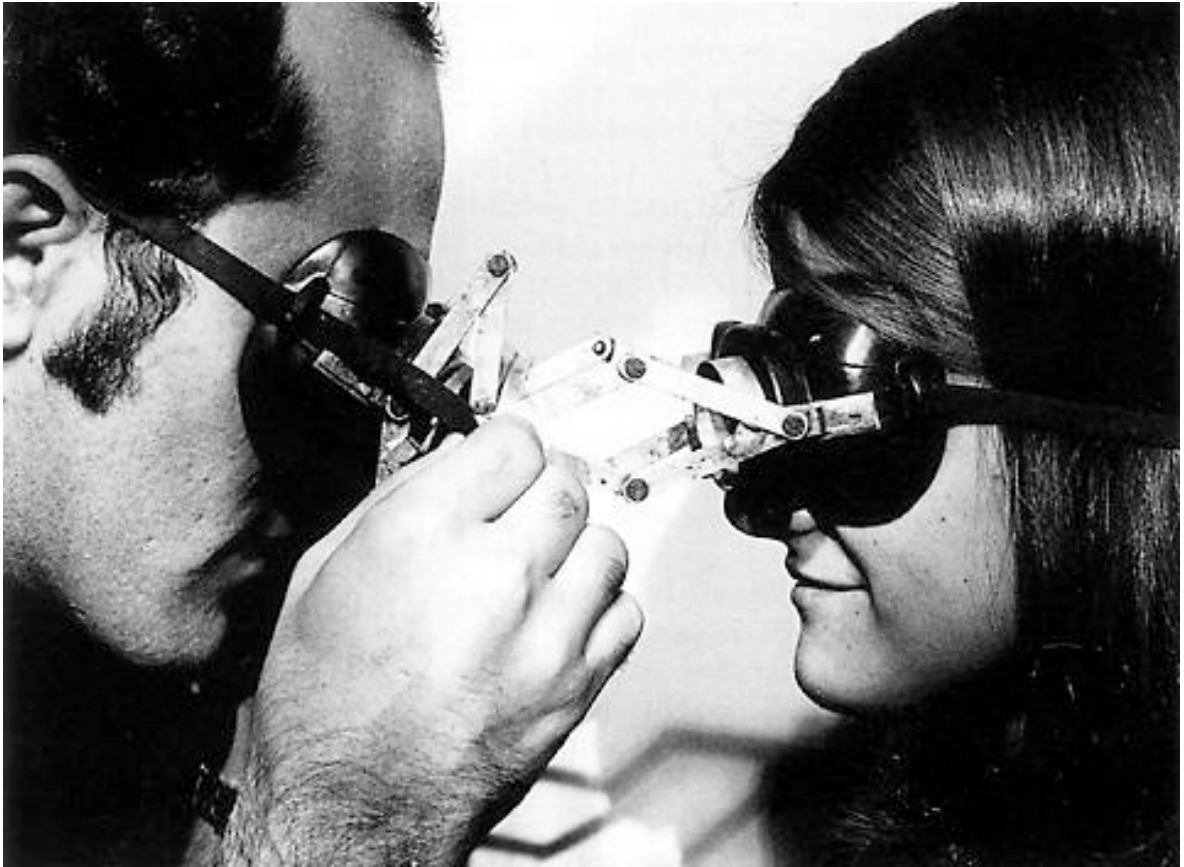


Fig. 1

Lygia Clark, *Diálogo: Óculos (Dialogue: Goggles)*, 1968. Modified diving goggles, metal, and mirror. $3 \times 7 \times 11 \frac{1}{2}$ in. Clark Family Collection, Rio de Janeiro. Photo: Eduardo Clark.

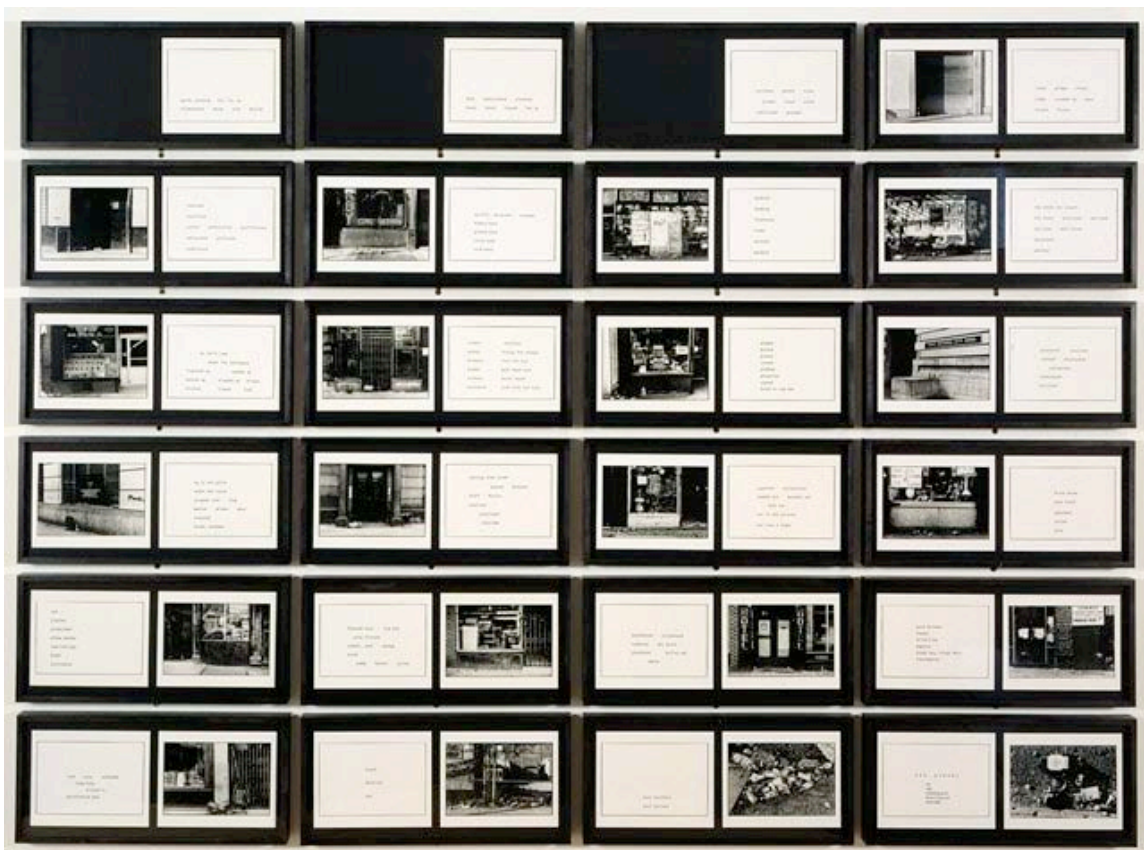


Fig. 2

Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-1975.
Installation, gelatin silver prints on board, 10 in. x 22 in. (25.4 cm x 55.88 cm).
Collection SFMOMA.



Fig. 3
Milenko Matanović, *Wheat and Rope*, summer 1969. Photo documentation of an action,
archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

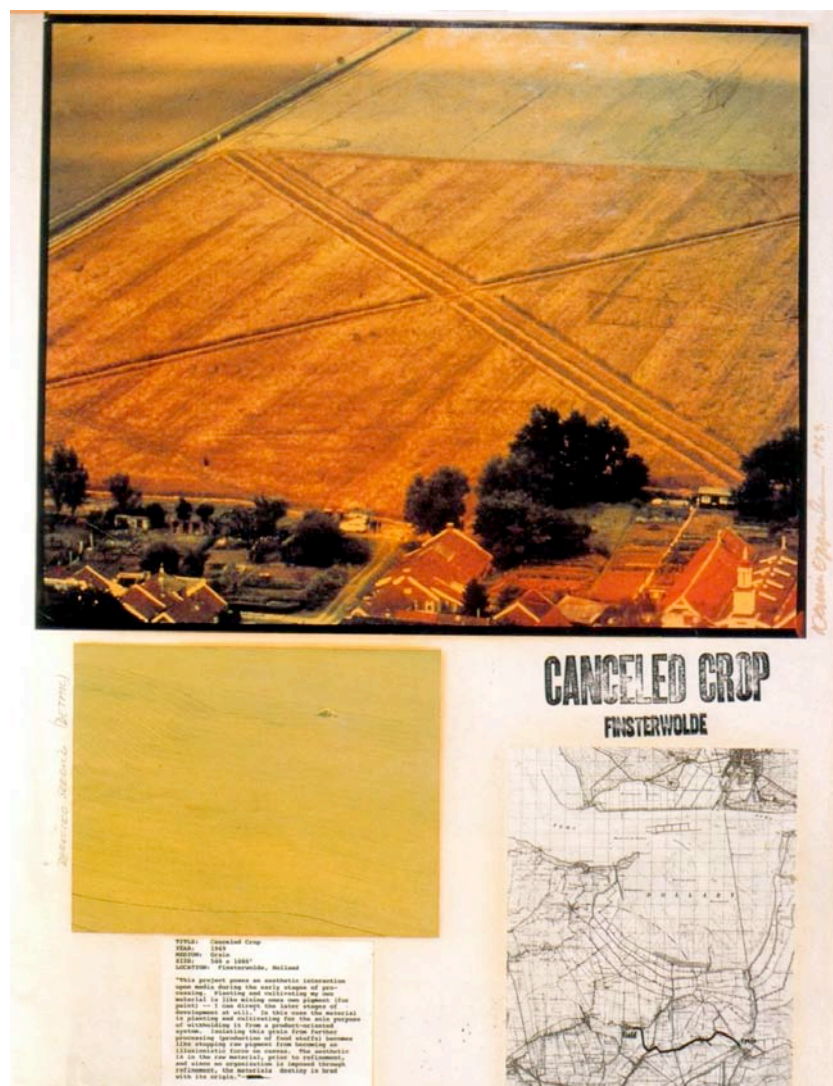


Fig. 4
Dennis Oppenheim, *Canceled Crop*, 1969.



Fig. 5
 Komar and Melamid, *The Essence of Truth*, 1975. Performance documentation and ball of newspaper. Collection of the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.



Fig. 6
 Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. Video, 6:09 min, black & white, sound.



Fig. 8
Komar and Melamid, *Light Station*, 1975, black and white photo print.

MARKO POGAČNIK, april 1970

GRUPNI OHO CLOVEK
OHO GROUP MAN

ritual / ritual dolina Save pri Bregu

foto / photo :

tekst / text :

štirje udeleženci na startnih pozicijah,
ki jih določa Projekt grupe OHO,

udeleženec meče po en kamen v
odgovarjajoči krog / trije ciklusi,

po metu se za vsak cikel posebej
žreba dominantna pozicija / ali obod
ali center kroga

dominantna pozicija selekcionira pri
prestopu v cikel višjega reda.

four participants on starting positions
limited by the Project of group OHO,

each participant is throwing one stone
into corresponding circle / three cycles

after each result of throwing, lots are
drawn deciding whether dominant position is
periphery or centre of the circle

higher order is selected by dominant
position of thrown stones.

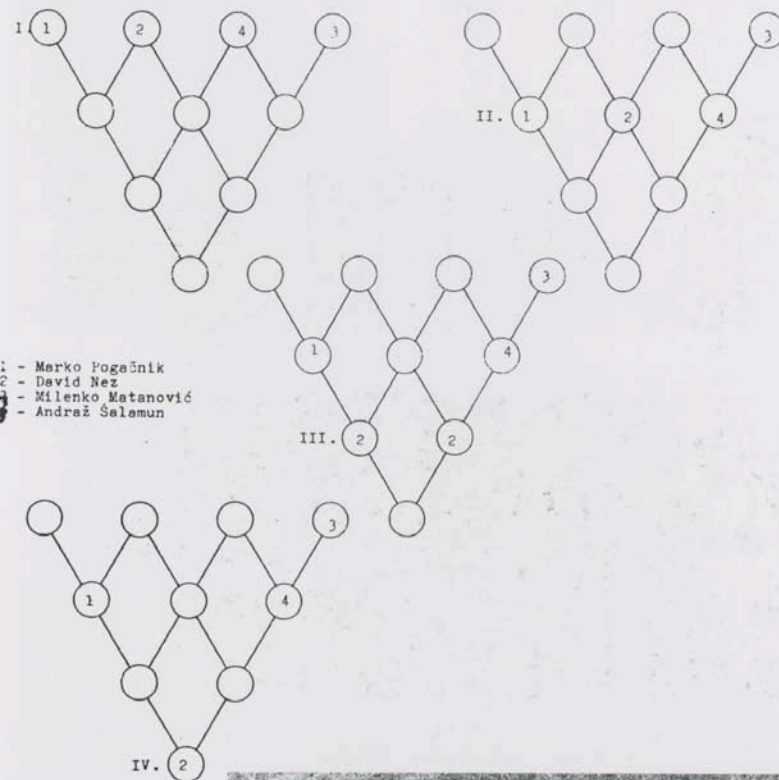


Fig. 9

Marko Pogačnik, *The OHO Group-Man*, April 1970. Photo documentation of an action, archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.



Fig. 10

Komar and Melamid, Mikhail Roshal-Fyodorov, Viktor Skersis, Gennady Donskoy, *Auction of American Souls in Moscow*, May 19, 1979. Photo documentation of an action.
Photo by Valentin Serov.



Fig. 11

Mikhail Roshal-Fyodorov, Viktor Skersis, Gennady Donskoy, *Half-Hour Attempt to Materialize Komar and Melamid*, October 5, 1978 (on the day of Komar and Melamid's exhibition opening in New York). Photo documentation of an action.

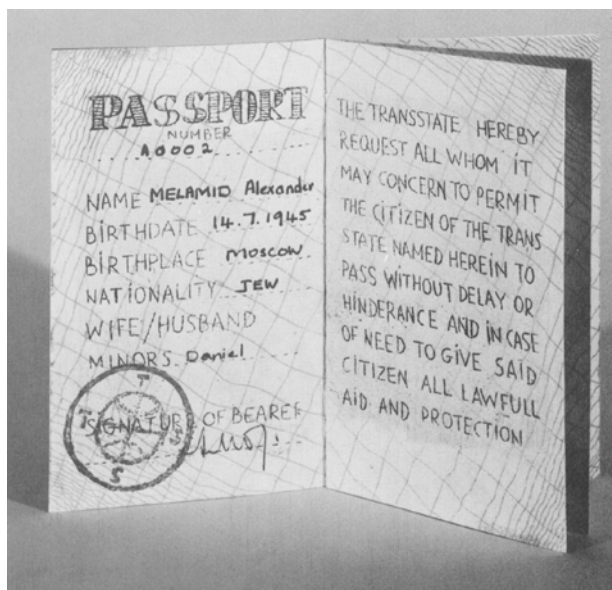


Fig. 12
 Komar and Melamid, *TransState*, 1977. Details from a multimedia installation. *Signpost*, wood, 79 in. high. *Passport*, etching, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Collection of the Grinstein family, Los Angeles.

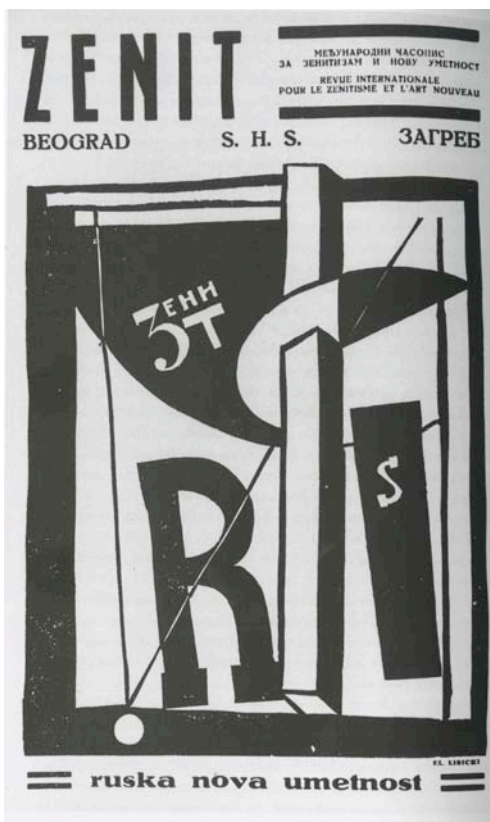


Fig. 13
Cover design for *Zenit*, no. 17-18 (Zagreb, 1922). Private collection.

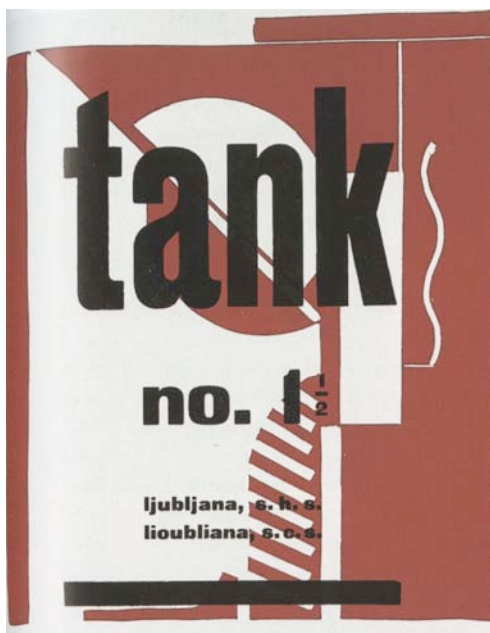


Fig. 14
Cover design for *Tank*, no. 1½ (Ljubljana, 1927). Private collection.

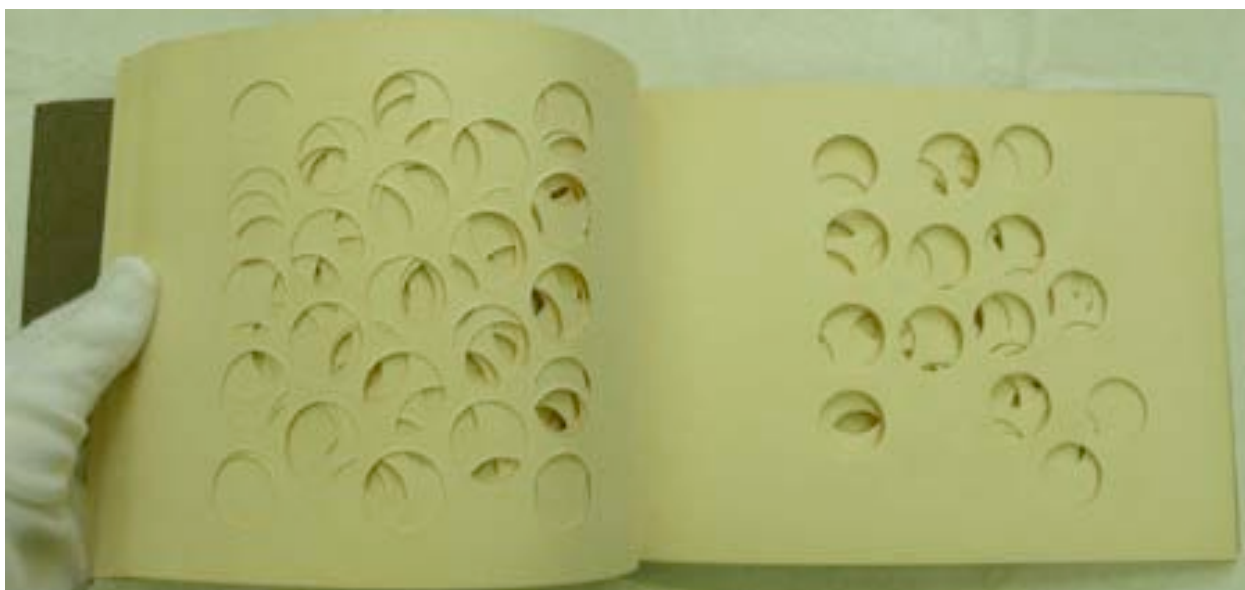


Fig. 15
Marko Pogačnik, *Artikel Knjiga* [Article Book], 1966. Cardboard, 25 x 17.5 x 0.6 cm.
Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

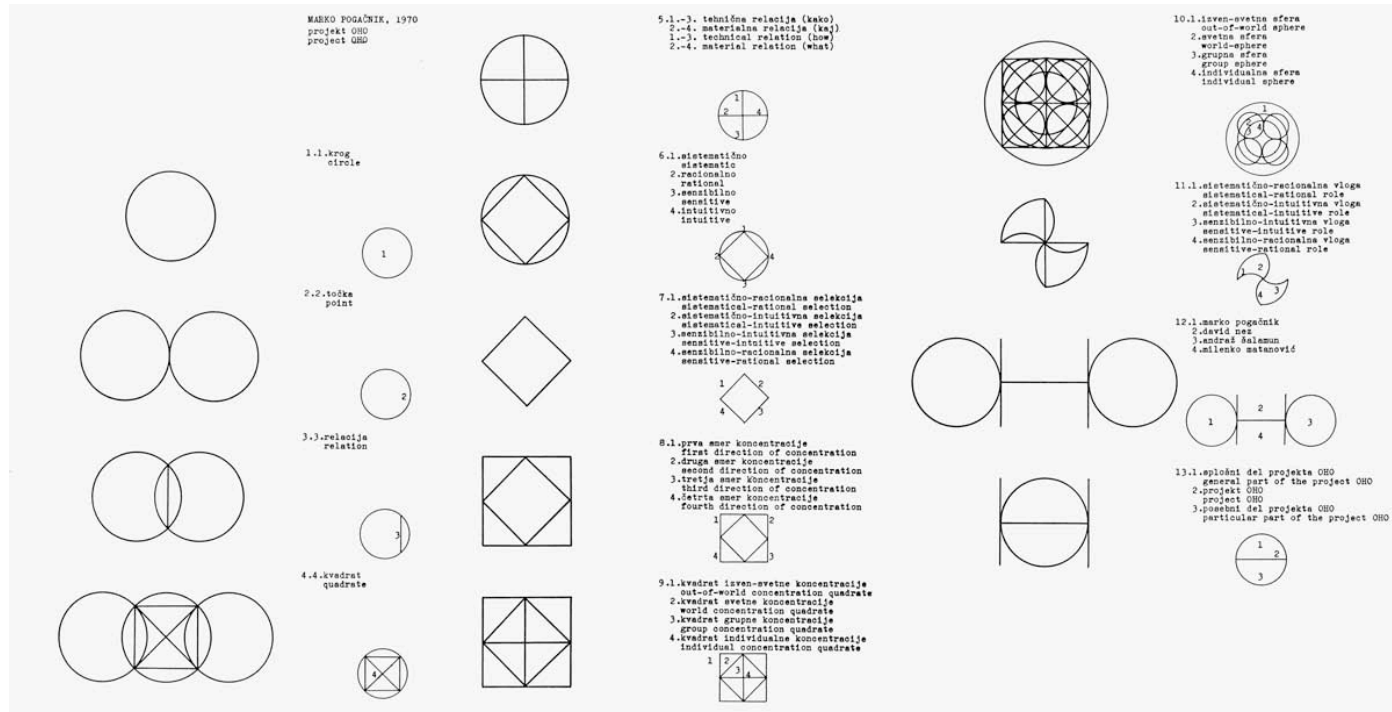


Fig. 16
Marko Pogačnik, *Project OHO*, 1970. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

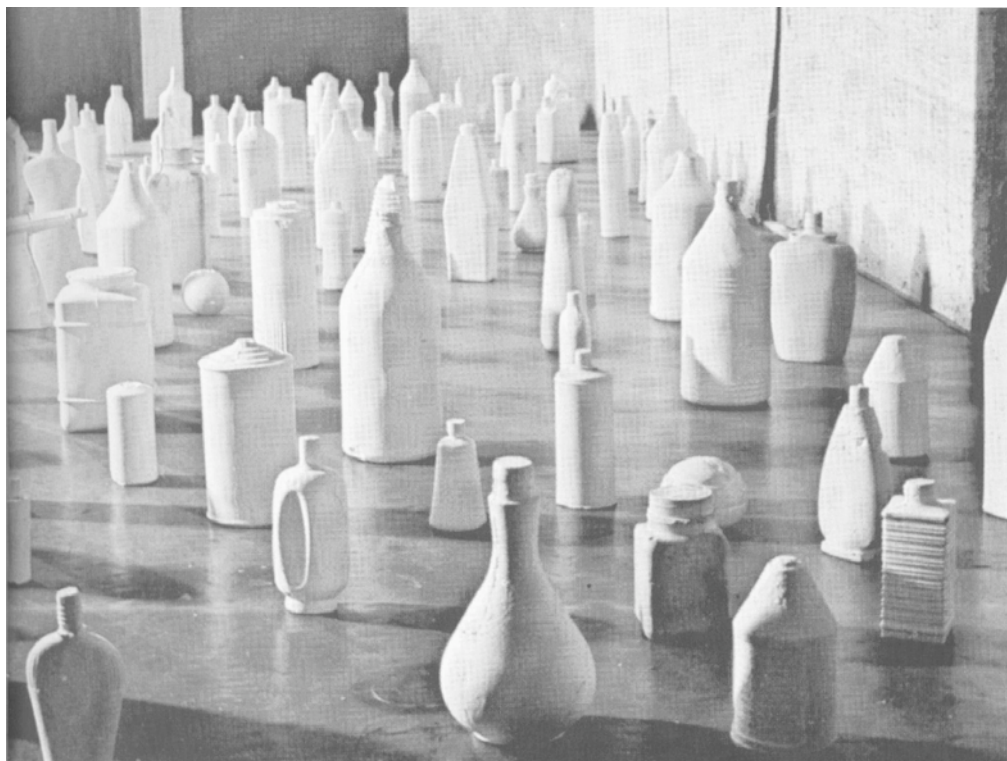


Fig. 17

Marko Pogačnik, *Artikli*, 1965-1968. Plaster casts of bottles and other objects. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

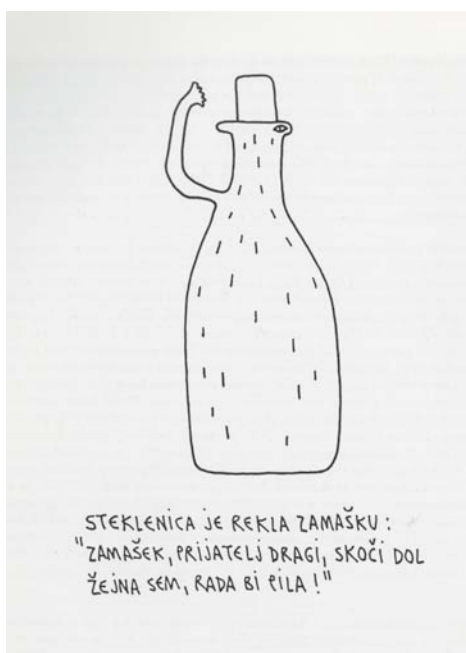


Fig. 18

Iztok Geister and Marko Pogačnik, *Steklenica bi rada pila*, manuscript created in 1967, book published in 2003. Page, 23.8 x 16.8 cm.

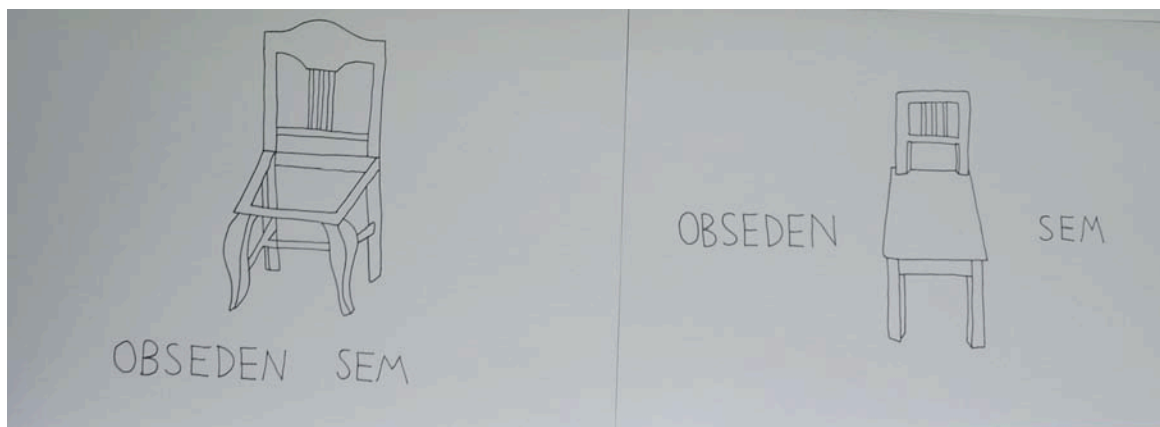


Fig. 19
 Marko Pogačnik, drawings from the series *Words*, 1967. Ink on paper cards. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

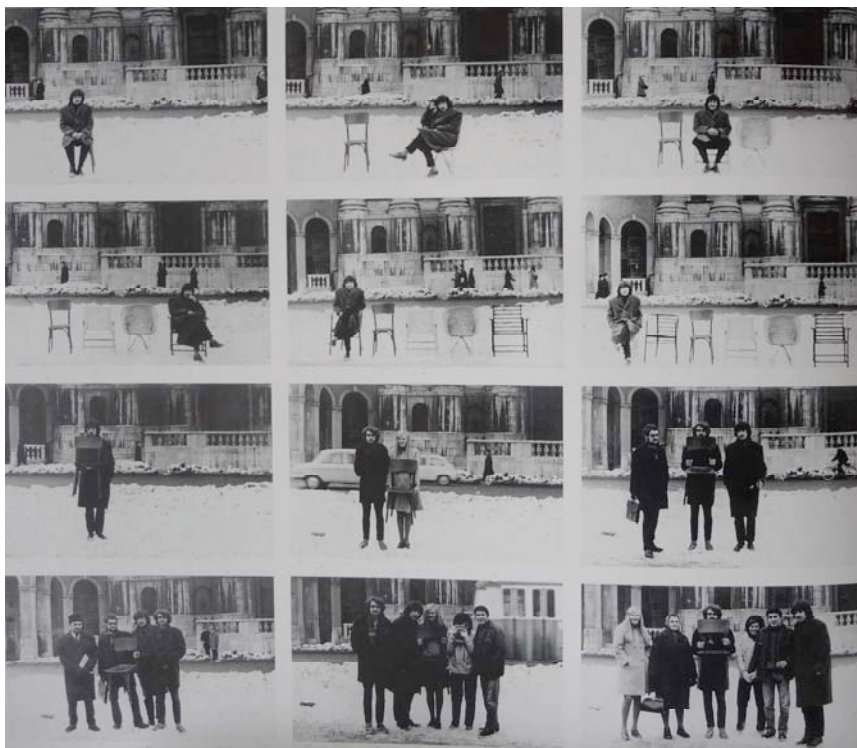


Fig. 20
 Milenko Matanović, *Chair, cathedral, passers-by*, 1968. Photo documentation of an action. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

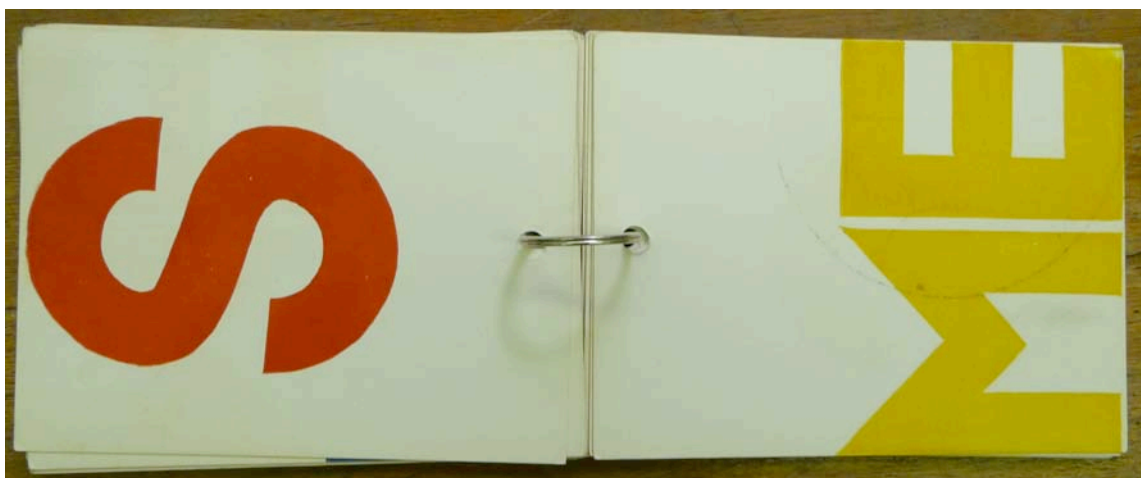


Fig. 21

I. G. Plamen, detail of the book *2 Pesmi [Two Poems]*, 1967. 30 cards, 17.5 x 13.5 cm. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

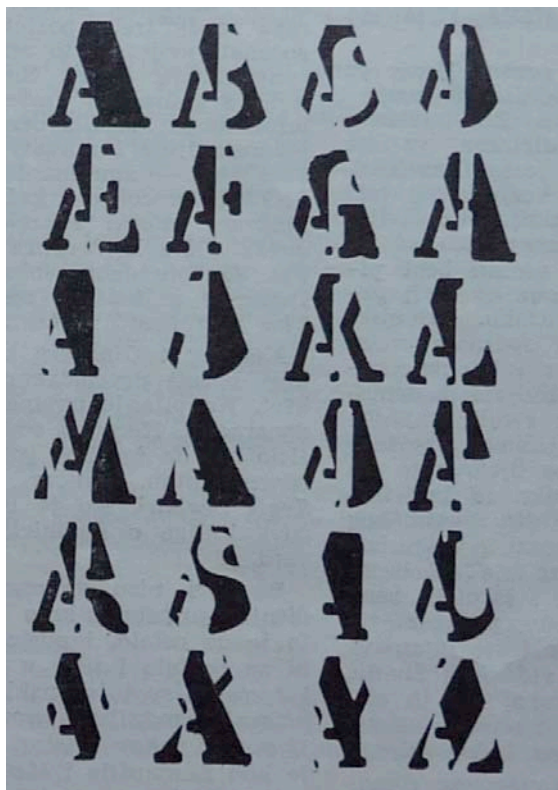


Fig. 22

Matjaž Hanžek, *The Alphabet, in to for ever, I love you*, 1968. Published in *Katalog*, a special issue of the journal *Problemi*, no. 67-68 (July-August 1968)

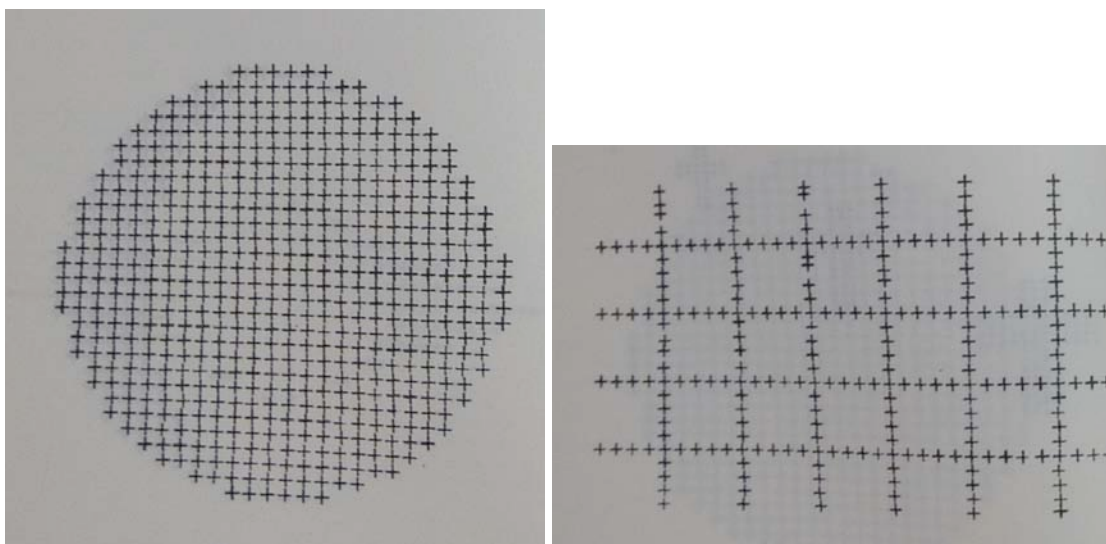


Fig. 23
 Franci Zagoričnik, “Total Earthly Darkness” and “Sign of Freedom,” 1967. Published in
 the book *Pericarežeracirep* in 1969.



Fig. 24
 Marko Pogačnik, *Knjiga z Obročkom [Book with a Ring]*, 1967. Hand-printed in an
 edition of 60. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

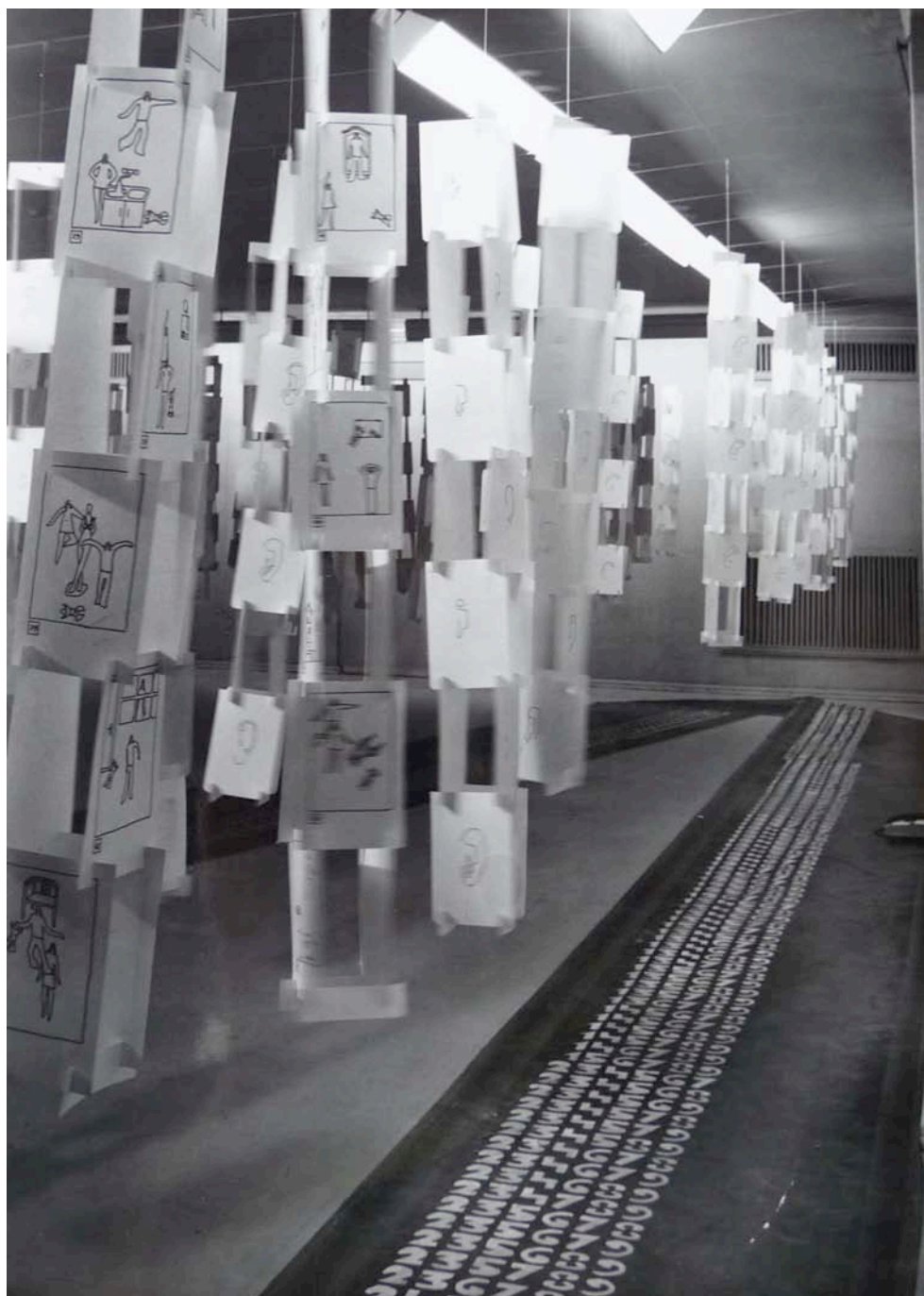


Fig. 25

Marko Pogačnik, *Programmed Environment*, 1969. Approximately 300 drawings on cards (ink on paper), 11 x 8.5 cm, distributed according to a numerical program. Shown during the *Atelje 69* exhibition, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana. Photo documentation of an installation. Archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.



Fig. 26

Matjaž Hanžek, “Pesem” (“Poem”) and “Pozor” (“Attention”), 1967. Published in the book *Pericarežeracirep* in 1969.

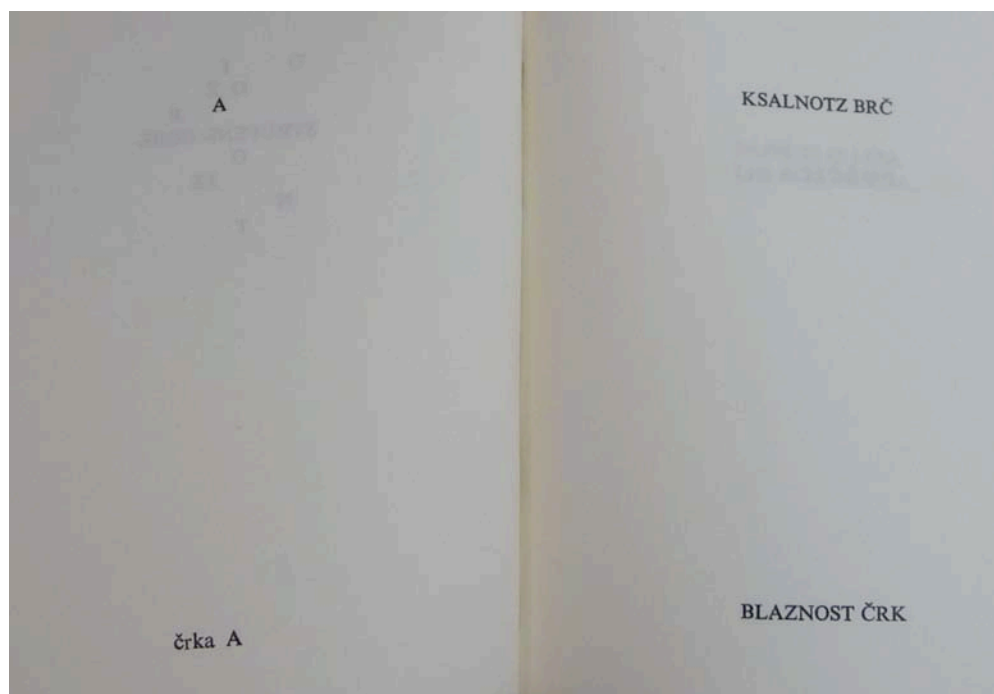


Fig. 27

I. G. Plamen, “Blažnost črk” (“The Madness of Letters”), 1967. Published in the book *Pericarežeracirep* in 1969.

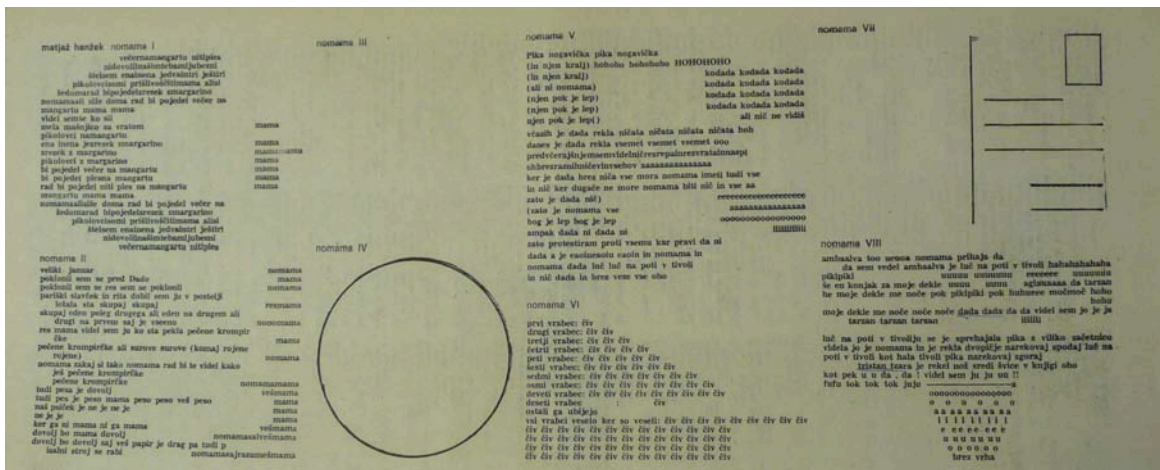


Fig. 28
 Matjaž Hanžek, “Nomama” poems, 1967. “Nomama I-VII” published in the newspaper *Tribuna*, April 14, 1967 and “Nomama as scissors” and “Nomama as table,” published in *Tribuna*, April 26, 1967.

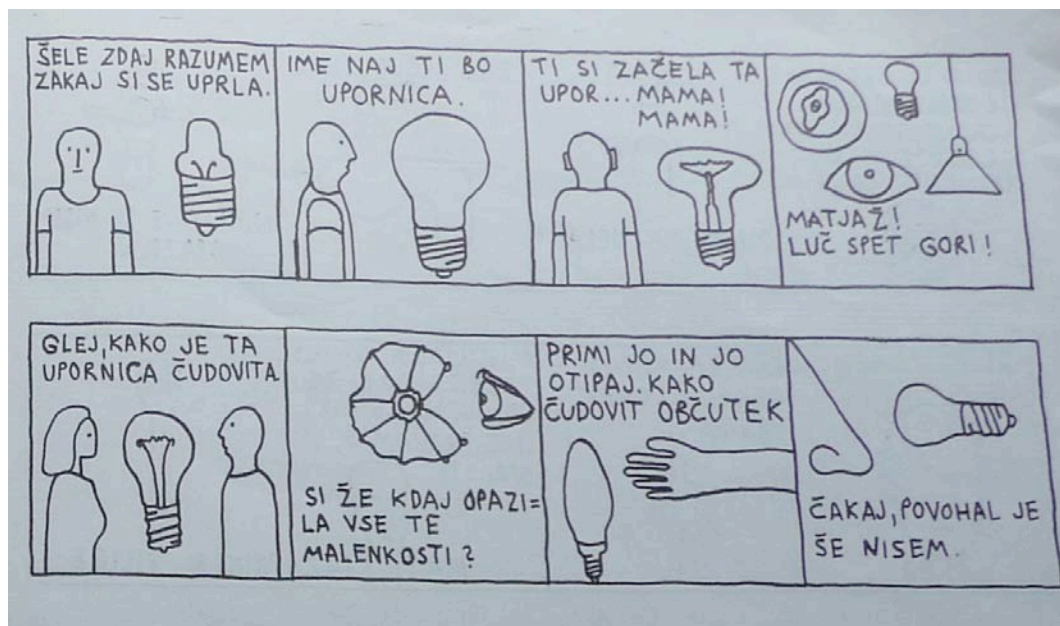


Fig. 30

Marko Pogačnik (drawings) and Benjamin Luks (text), *Svetloba teme [Lightness of Darkness]*, 1968. Comic strip published in *Katalog*, a special issue of the journal *Problemi*, no. 67-68, (July-August 1968).

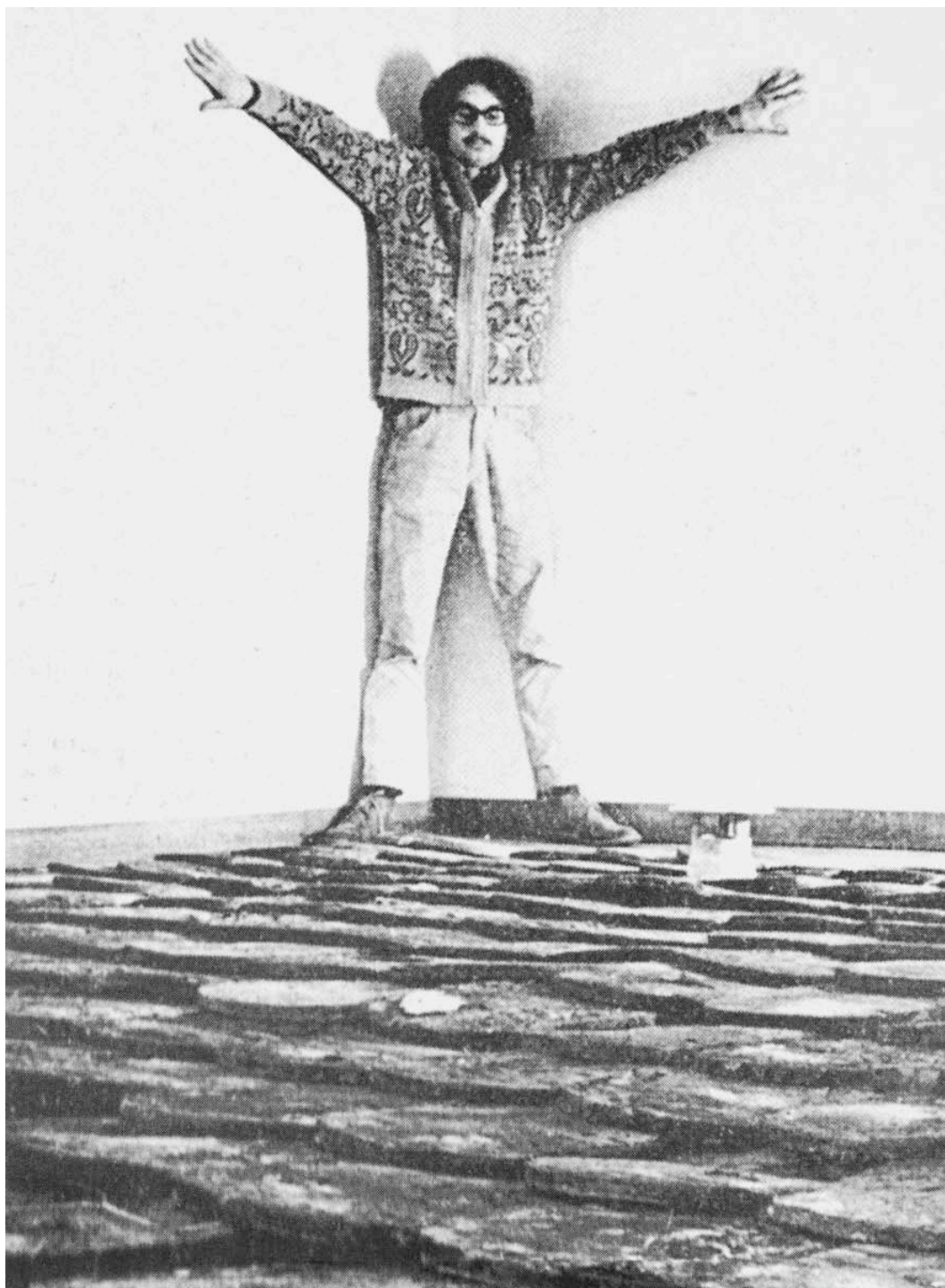


Fig. 31
David Nez, *Roof*, 1969. Roof tiles, chimney. Shown in the exhibition *Pradedje*, Zagreb, February-March 1969. Photo documentation of an installation.

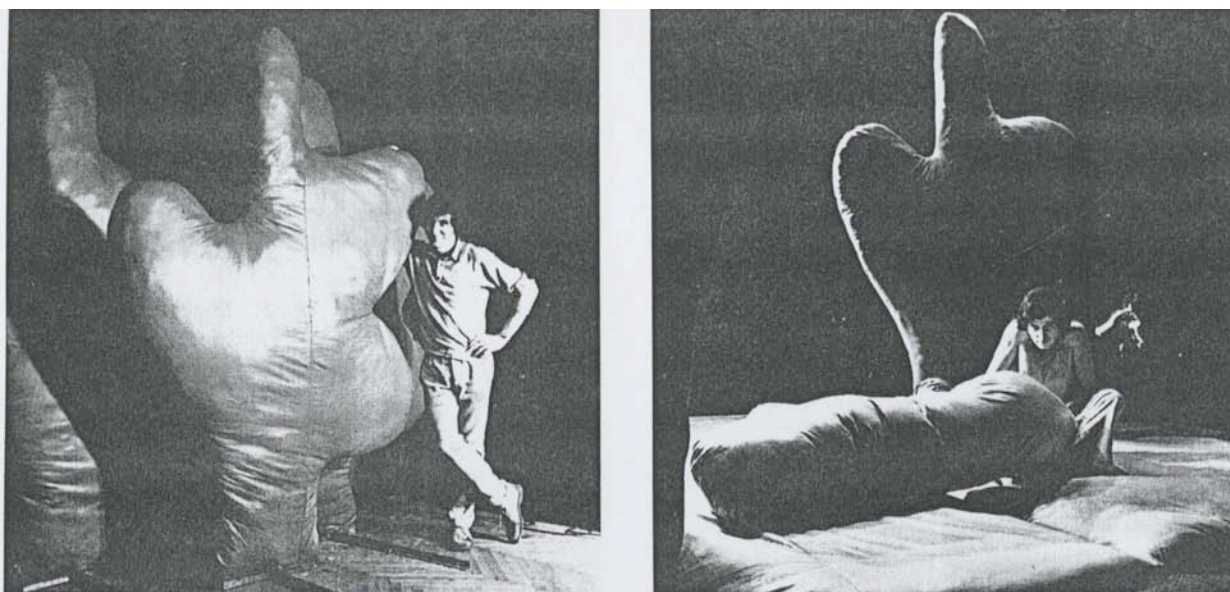


Fig. 32

Andraž Šalamun, *Wood*, 1969. Shown in the exhibition *Pradedje*, Zagreb, February-March 1969. Photo documentation of an installation.

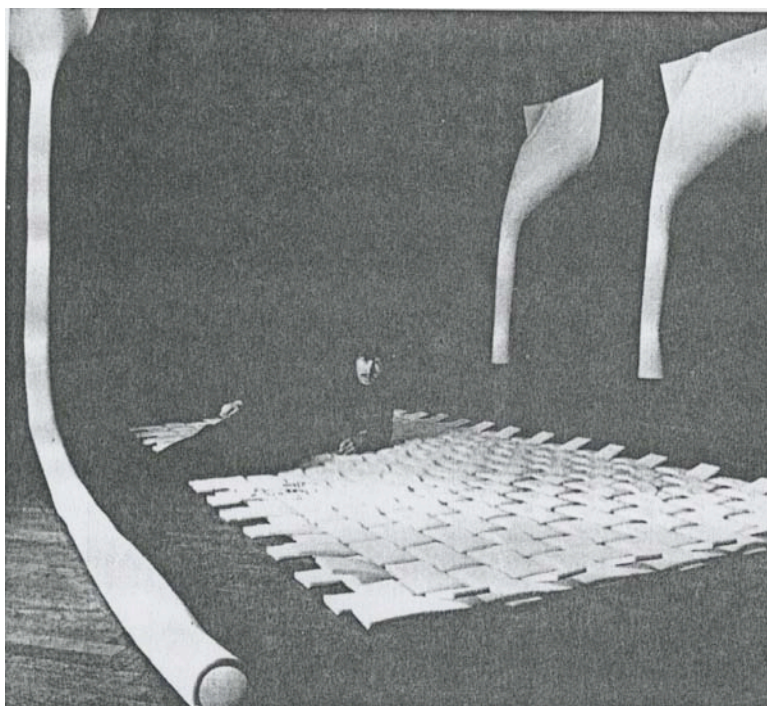


Fig. 33

Milenko Matanović, *Albino Embryo of Gessner's Elephant*, 1969. Shown in the exhibition *Pradedje*, Zagreb, February-March 1969. Photo documentation of an installation.



Fig. 34

Milenko Matanović, *Fifteen Roman Hills*, 1969. Shown in the exhibition *Pradedje*, Zagreb, February-March 1969. Photo documentation of an installation.



Fig. 35

Tomaž Šalamun, *Hay-Bricks-Corn Husks*, 1969. Hay, brick, and corn husks. Shown in the exhibition *Pradedje*, Zagreb, February-March 1969. Photo documentation of an installation.



Fig. 36

Milenko Matanović, David Nez, and Drago Dellabernardina, *Triglav*, 1968.
Documentation of a performance that took place in Zvezda Park, Ljubljana on December
30, 1968.. Film still. Collection of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.



Fig. 37
Installation view of works by Milenko Matanović, David Nez, and Andraž Šalamun
shown in the exhibition *Atelje 69*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 1969. Archive of
Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

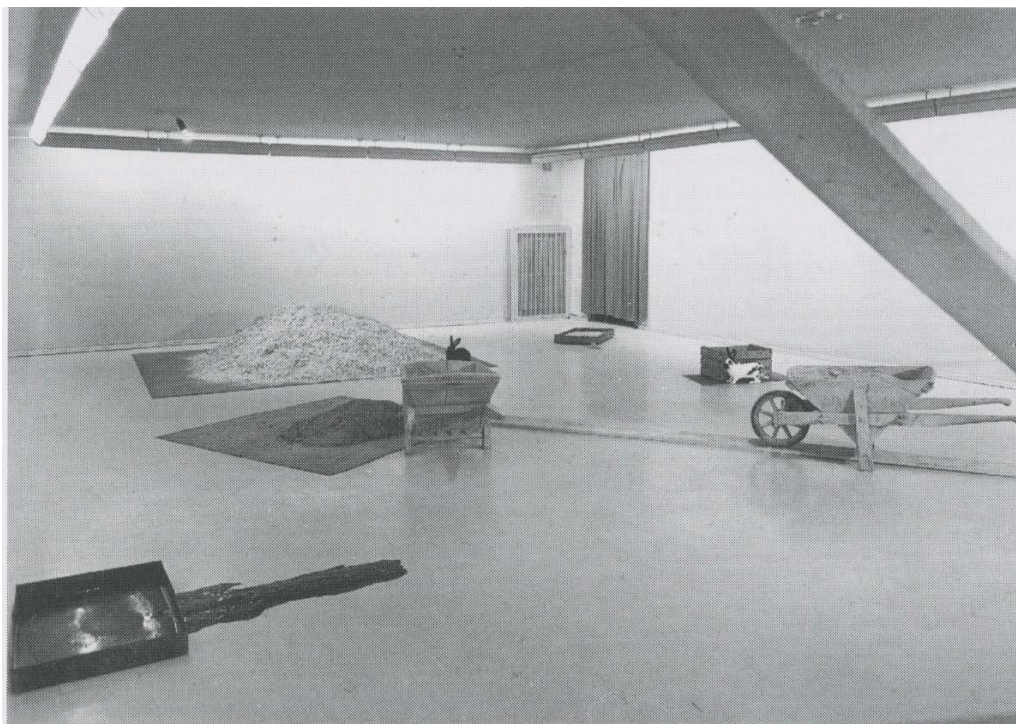


Fig. 38
 Installation view of works by Milenko Matanović, David Nez, and Andraž Šalamun shown in the exhibition *Atelje 69*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 1969. Archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

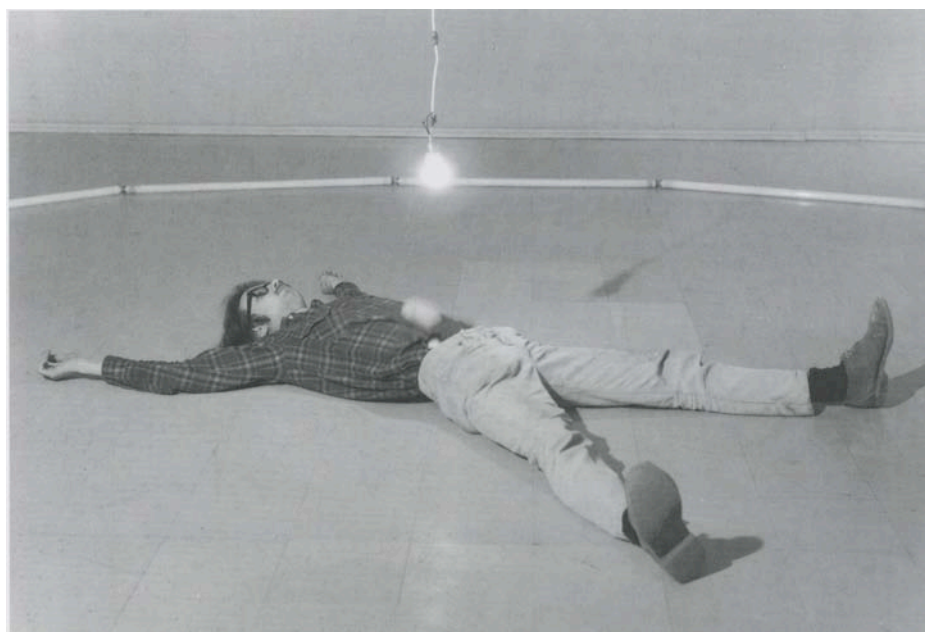


Fig. 39
 David Nez, *Cosmogony*, 1969, shown in the exhibition *Atelje 69*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 1969. Photo documentation of a performance. Archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.



Fig. 40
Tomaž Šalamun, *Morje* [*The Sea*], 1969. Shown during an exhibition at Prešern House Gallery, Kranj. Photo documentation of a performance. Archive of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.

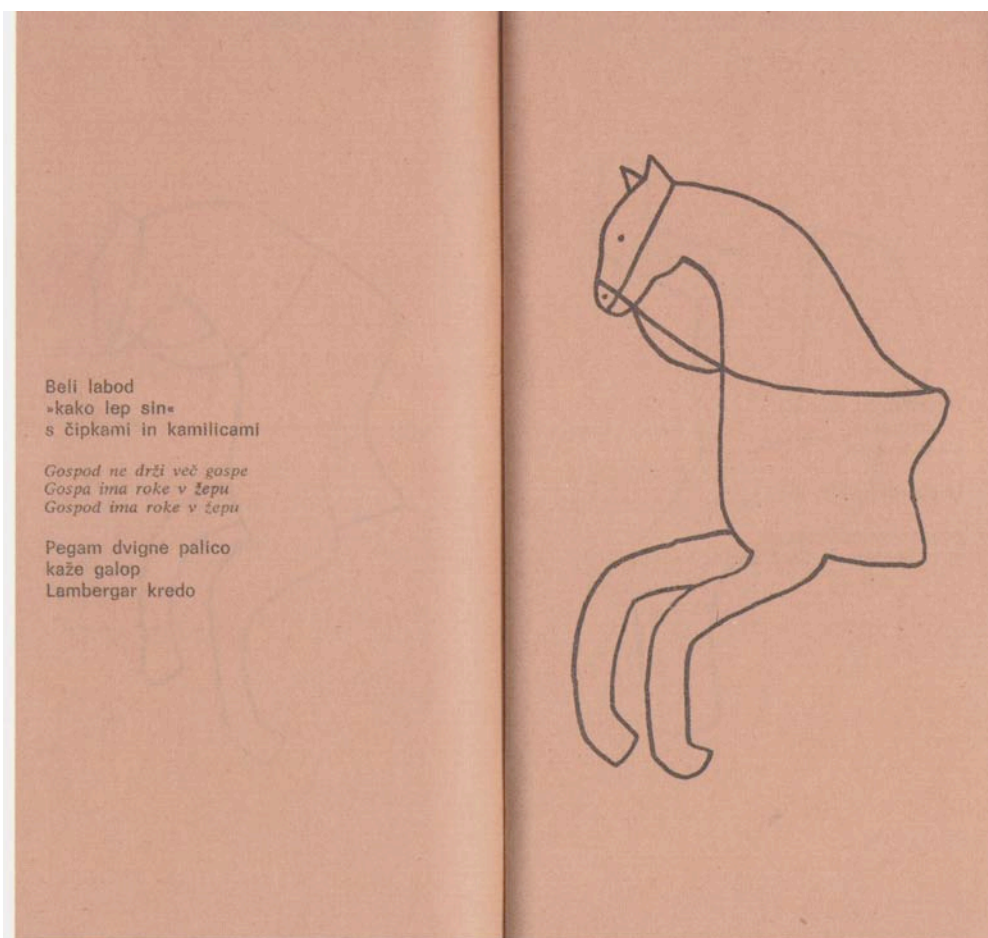


Fig. 41

Marko Pogačnik and I.G. Plamen, *Pegam in Lambergar*, 1968. Pages of a book published as part of the OHO Editions series. 20 x 11 x 0.4 cm.

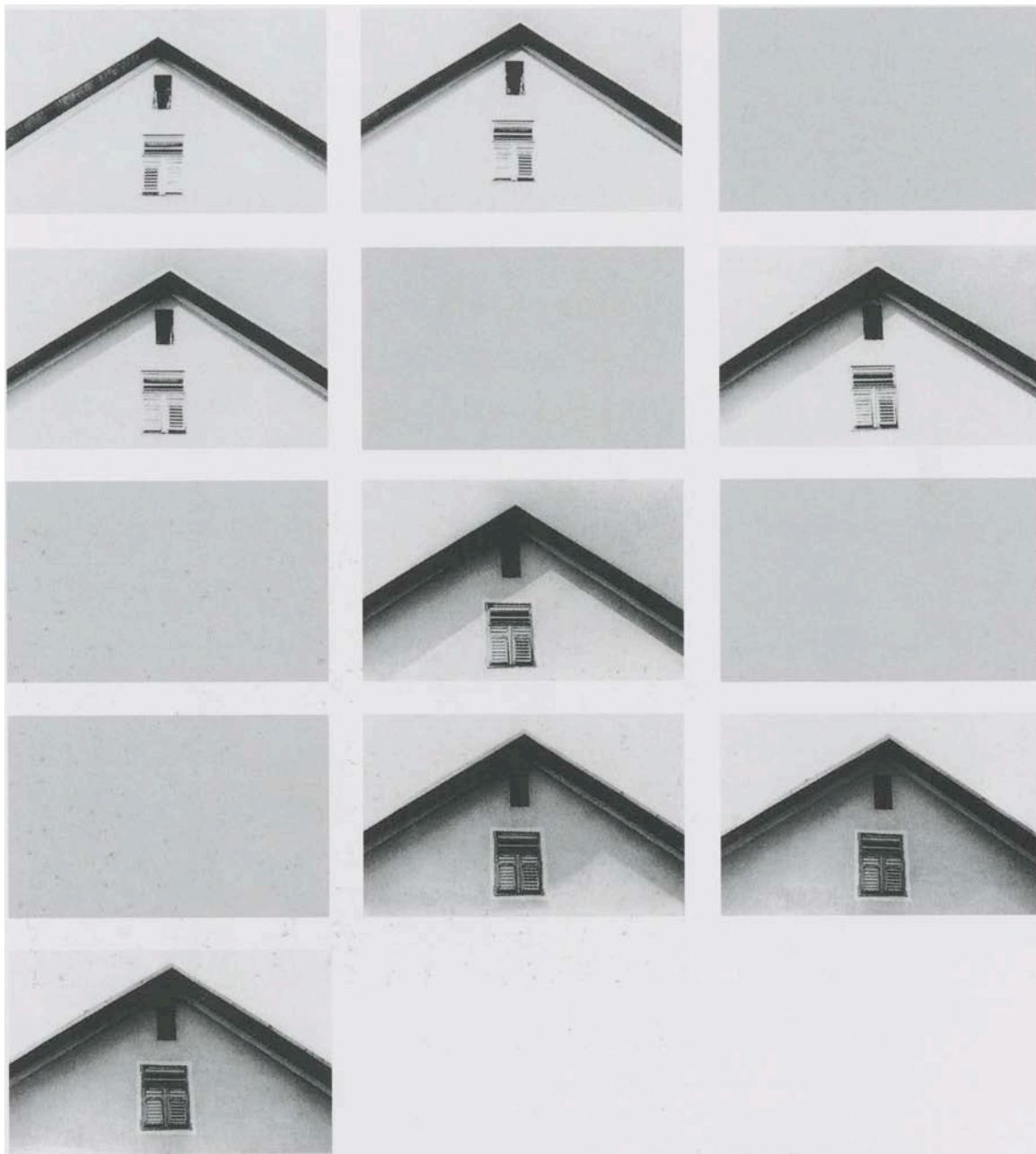


Fig. 42

Naško Križnar, *Untitled Project*, 1969. Published in *PU*, a special issue of the journal *Problemi*, VIII:85, (January 1970). Print reproductions of 13 black and white photographs.

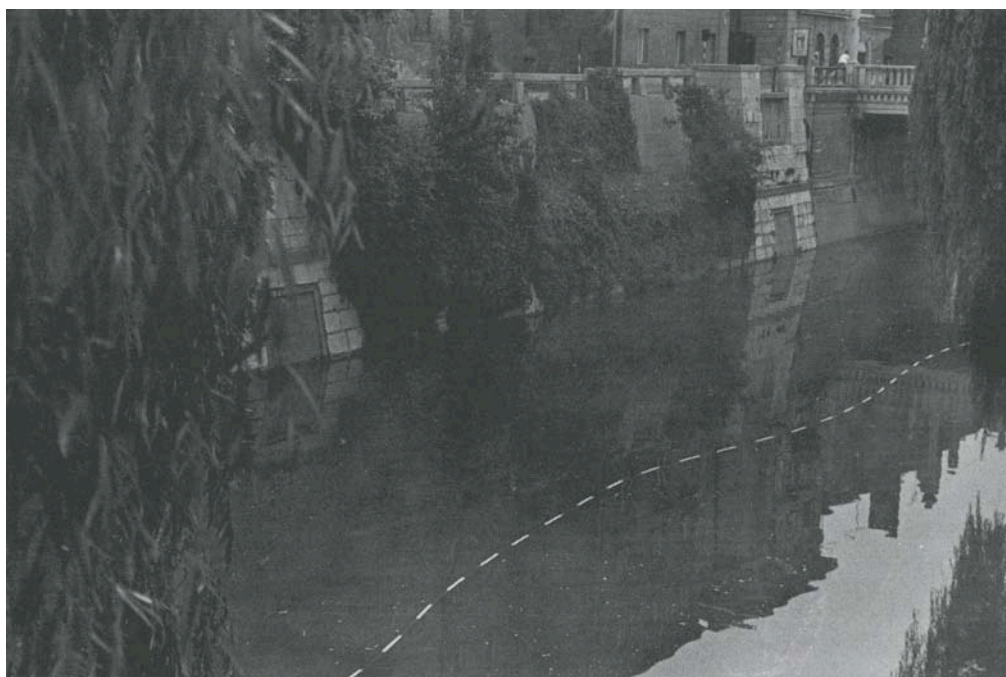


Fig. 43

Milenko Matanović, *Snake*, summer 1969. Wooden sticks and rope. Photo documentation of an action on the Ljubljana river.



Fig. 44

David Nez, *Project*, 1969. Pipette, water, heated aluminum plate. Shown at the OHO exhibition at the Galerija Doma Omladine, Belgrade, November – December, 1969.

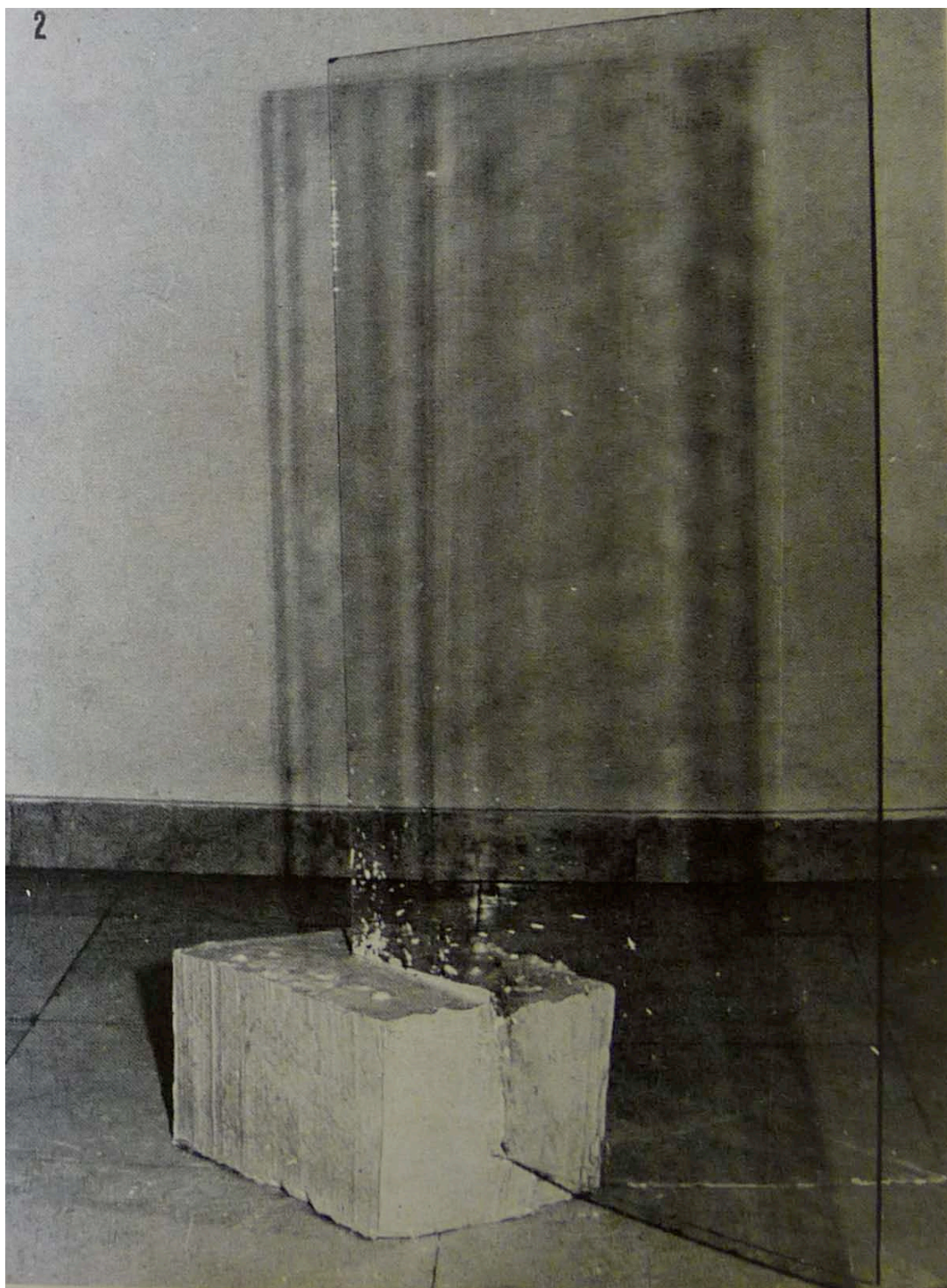


Fig. 45

Andraž Šalamun, *Plaster and Glass*, 1969. Plaster, glass. Shown at the OHO exhibition at the Galerija Doma Omladine, Belgrade, November – December, 1969.

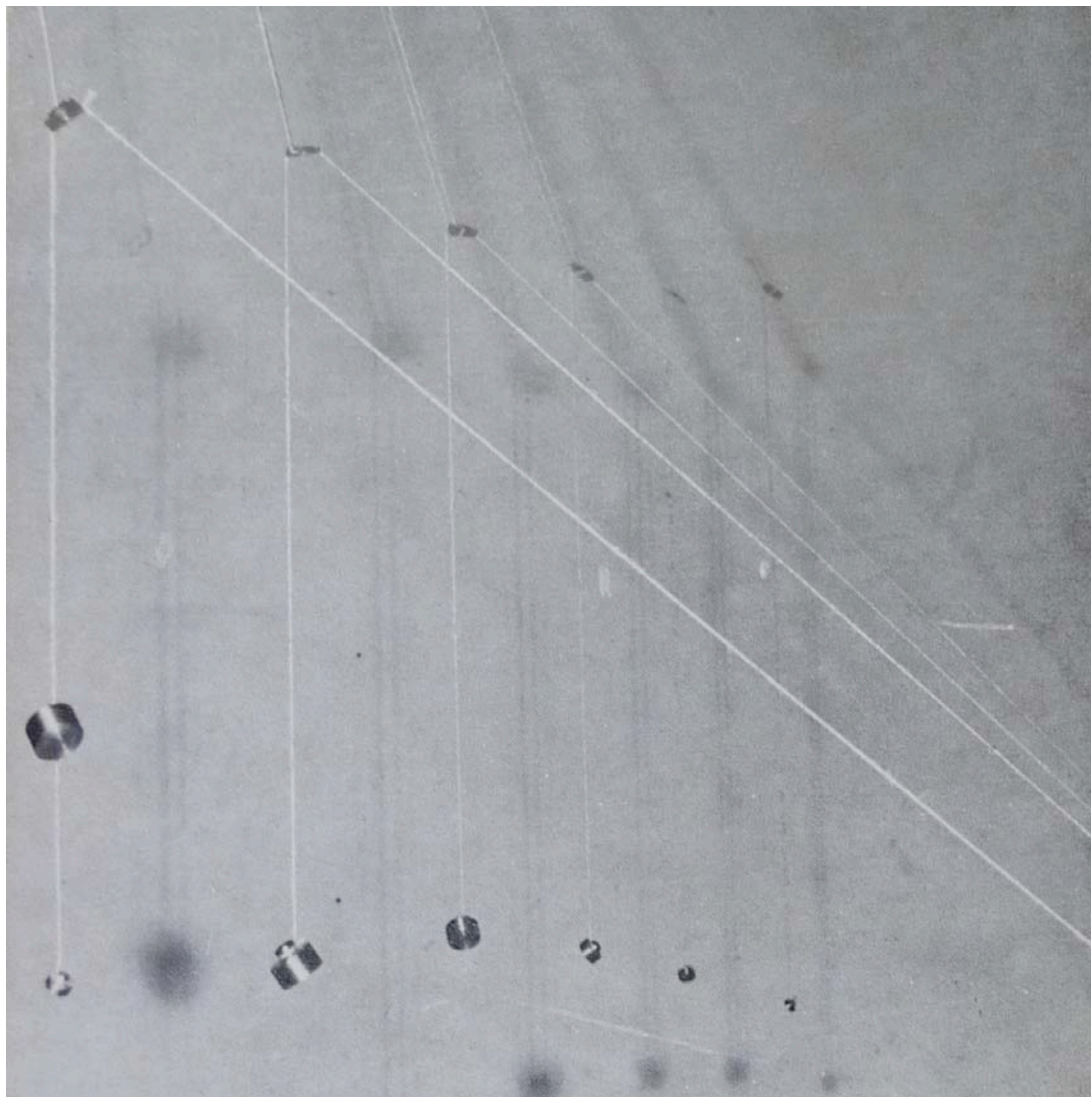


Fig. 46

Marko Pogačnik, *Family of weight, measure and position*, 1969. Metal weights, string, razors. Shown at the OHO exhibition at the Galerija Doma Omladine, Belgrade, November – December, 1969.

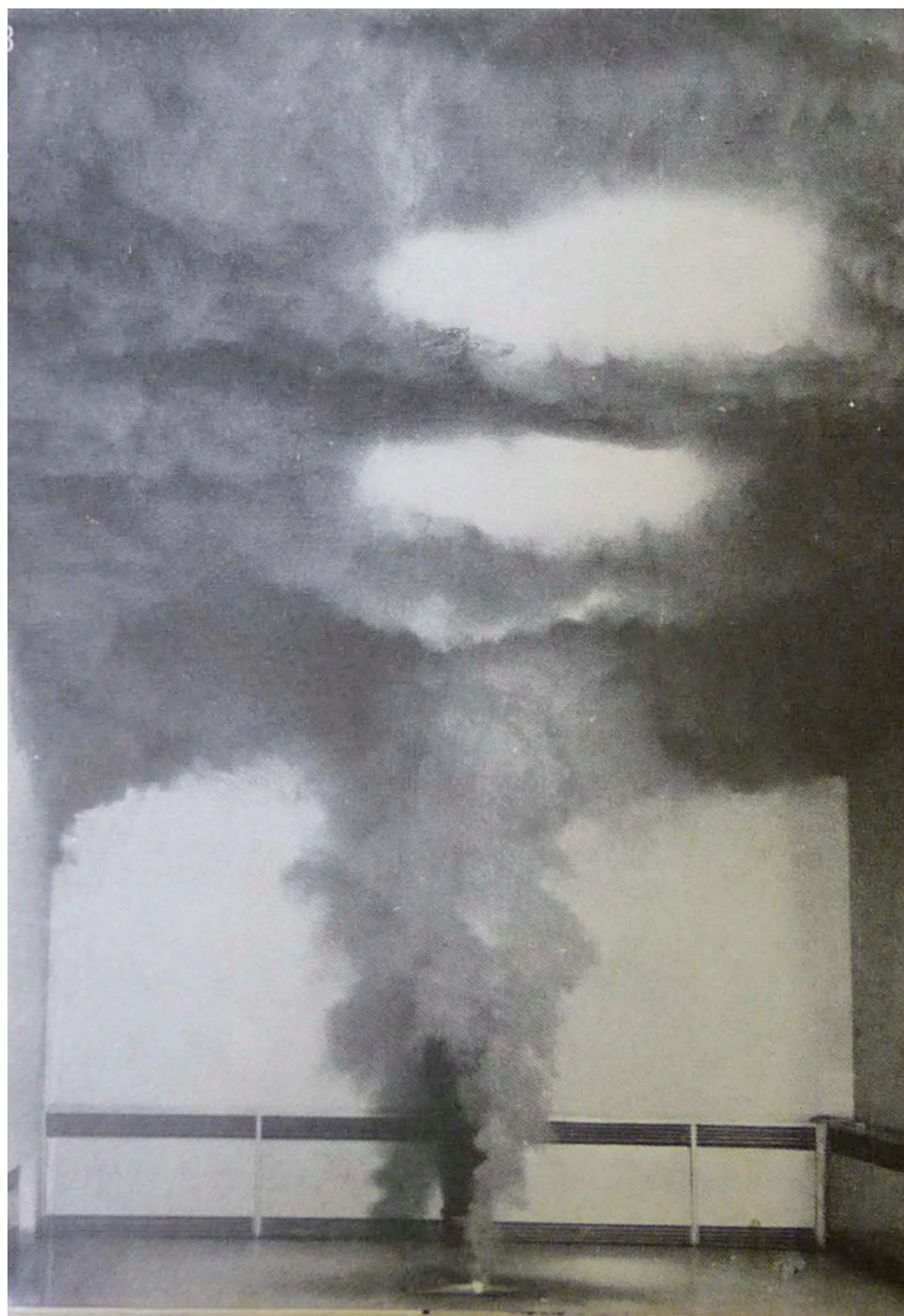


Fig. 47

Milenko Matanović, *Smoke*, 1969. Environmental installation created using a smoke bomb. Shown at the OHO exhibition at the Galerija Doma Omladine, Belgrade, November – December, 1969.

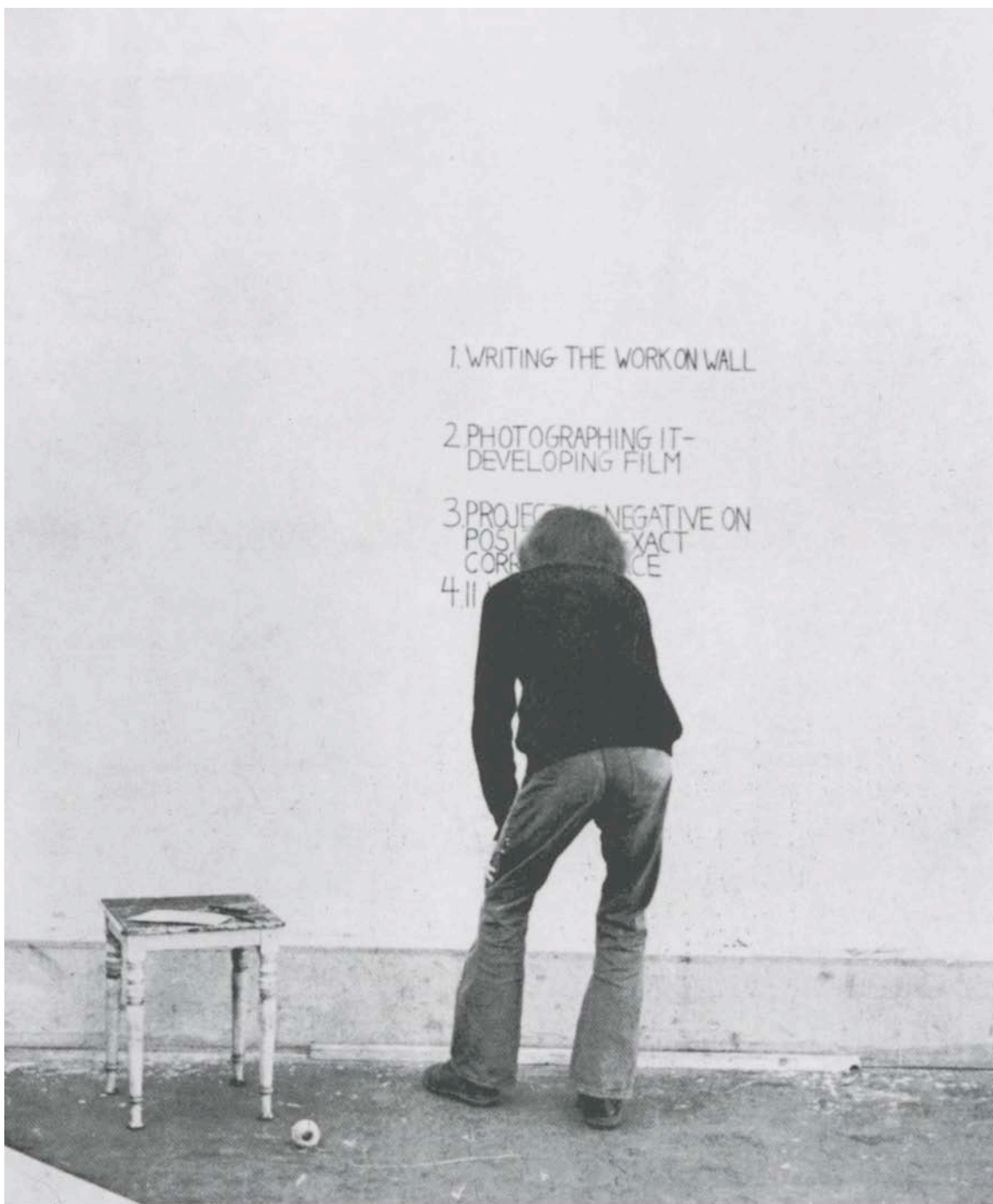


Fig. 48

David Nez, *Project*, 1970. Text written directly onto the wall, photographic negative of the text, projector. Shown at the exhibition at Aktionsraum 1 gallery in Munich, 1970.

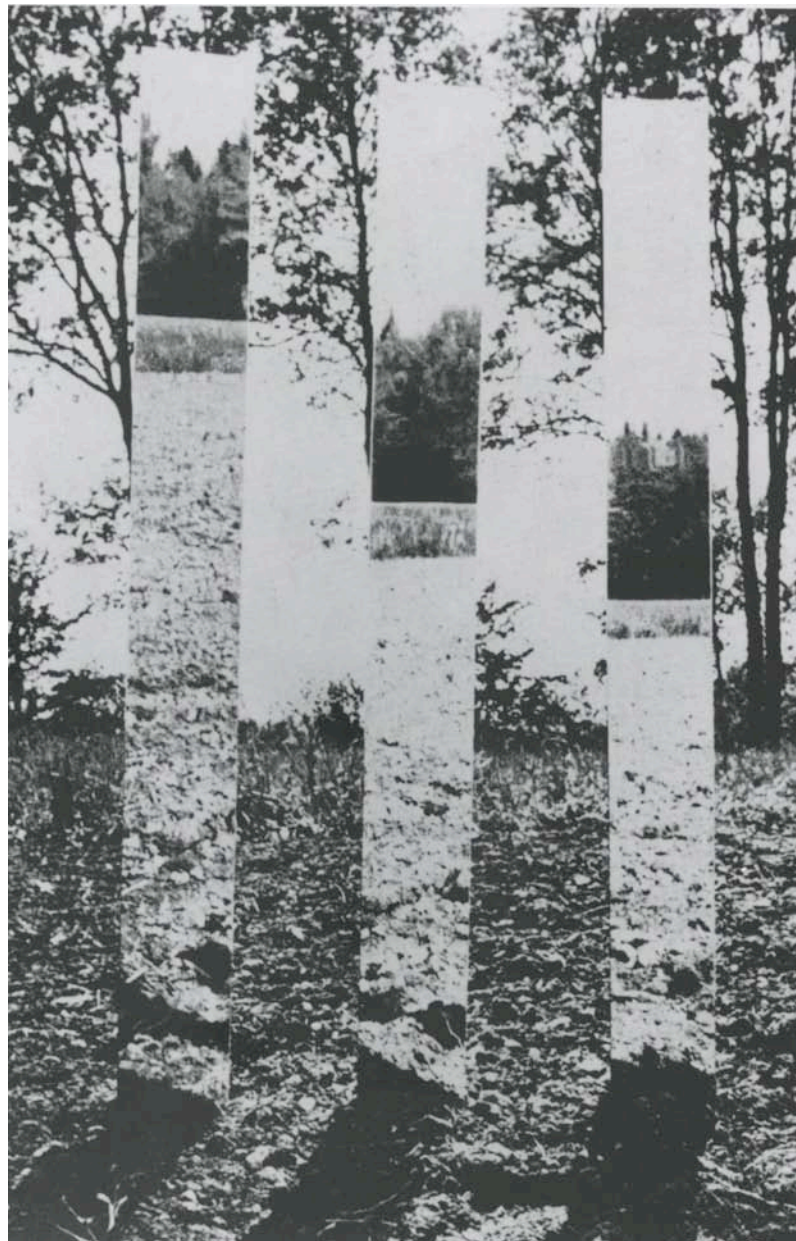


Fig. 49
David Nez, *Mirrors*, summer 1969. Mirrors installed in a field. Photo documentation of an action.



Fig. 52

Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, 1982-83. From the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series. Oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in. Collection of Martin Sklar.



Fig. 53

Komar and Melamid, *Onward to the Victory of Communism*, 1972. From the Sots Art series. Paint on red cloth, 20 x 74 in., collection of Jane Bell and Douglas Davis.

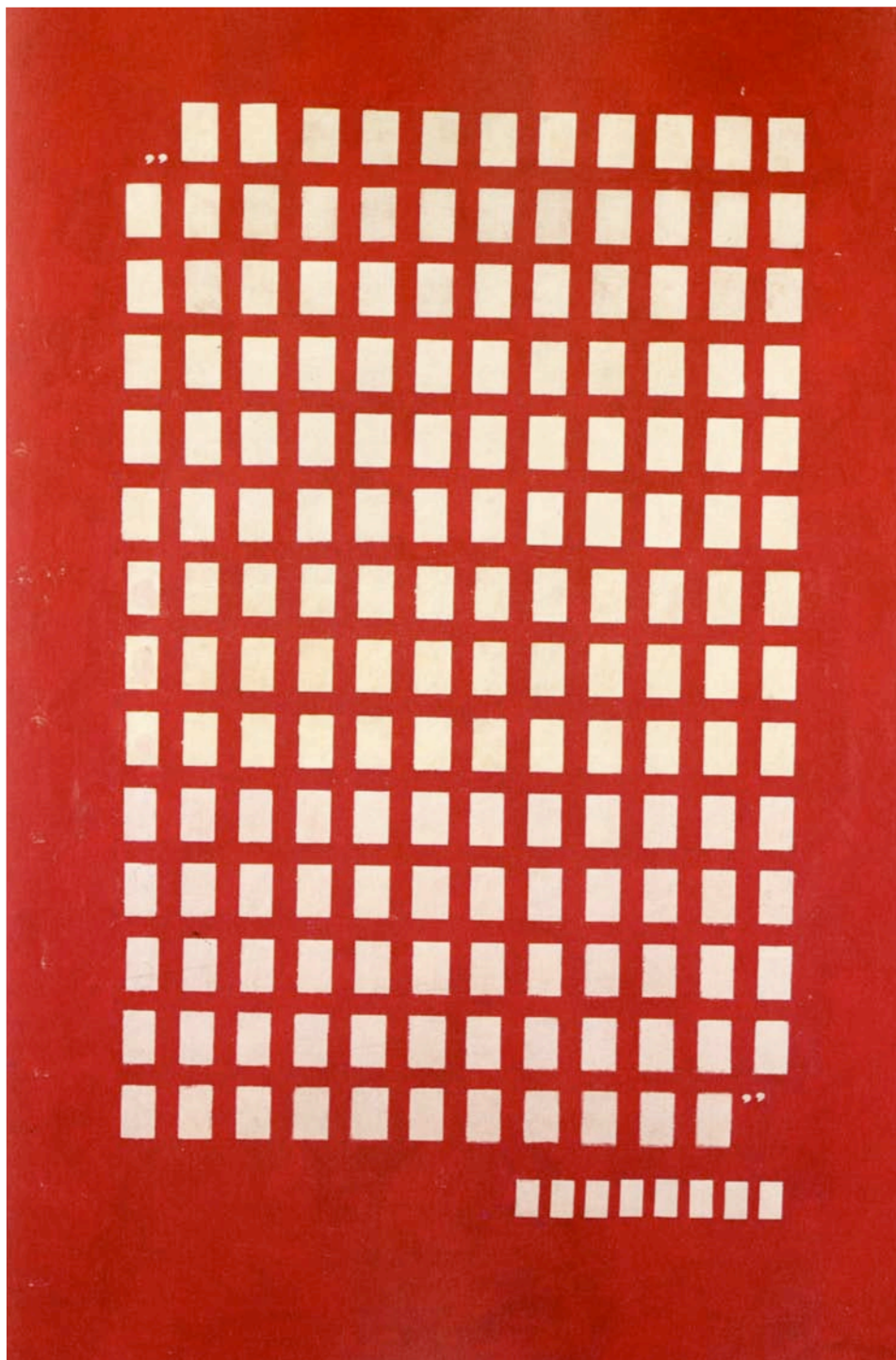


Fig. 54
Komar and Melamid, *Quotation*, 1972. From the Sots Art series. Oil on canvas, 46½ x 31 in., collection of Ronald and Frayda Feldman.



Fig. 55

Komar and Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1973. From the Sots Art series. Oil on canvas, 36 in. diameter, collection of Melvyn and Marjorie Nathanson.



Fig. 56

Komar and Melamid, *Portrait of Komar's Wife and Child* and *Portrait of Melamid's Wife*, 1972. From the Sots Art series. Tempera on plywood.



Fig. 57

We Shall Carry Out the Party Program!, 1961. Propaganda poster published by the Latvian State Publishing House, Riga. Collection of the Wende Museum, Los Angeles.



Fig. 58

Komar and Melamid, *Meeting Between Solzhenitsyn and Böll at Rostropovich's Dacha*, 1972. From the Sots Art series. Oil and collage on canvas, 69 x 48 in., collection of Robert and Maryse Boxer.



Fig. 59

Komar and Melamid, *Paradise*, 1973. Photo documentation of a multimedia installation in a private Moscow apartment. Collection of the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.

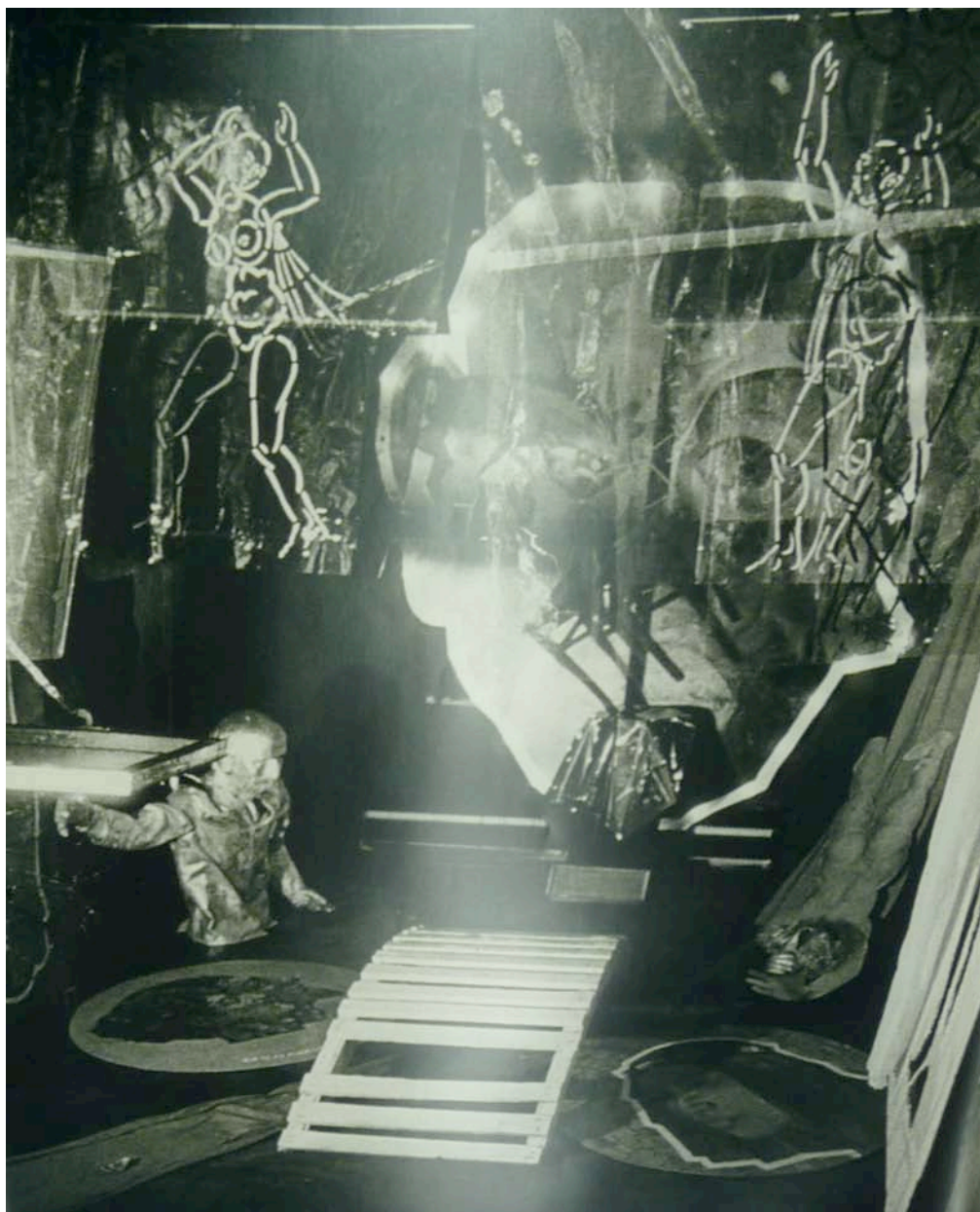


Fig. 60
Komar and Melamid, *Paradise*, 1973. Photo documentation of a multimedia installation in a private Moscow apartment. Collection of the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.



Fig. 61

Joseph Michael Gandy, *Sir John Soane's Rotunda of the Bank of England in Ruins*, c. 1830. Watercolor heightened with white on paper. Collection of the Sir John Soane Museum, London.



Fig. 62

Komar and Melamid, *Post-Art No. 1 (Warhol)*, 1973. From the Post-Art series. Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 in., collection of Ronald and Frayda Feldman.



Fig. 63

Komar and Melamid, *Scenes from the Future: Guggenheim Museum*, 1974. Oil on masonite, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 in., collection of Bente Hirsch.



Fig. 64

Hubert Robert, *Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie du Louvre en ruines*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 1.15 x 1.45 m. Collection of Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 65

Komar and Melamid, *History of Russia: Yalta Conference regarding the division of Eastern Europe after World War II, February 1945. Thirty-five people present*, 1973. Sixth of six canvases in *History of Russia*. Oil on canvas, 50½ x 38 in. Collection of the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.

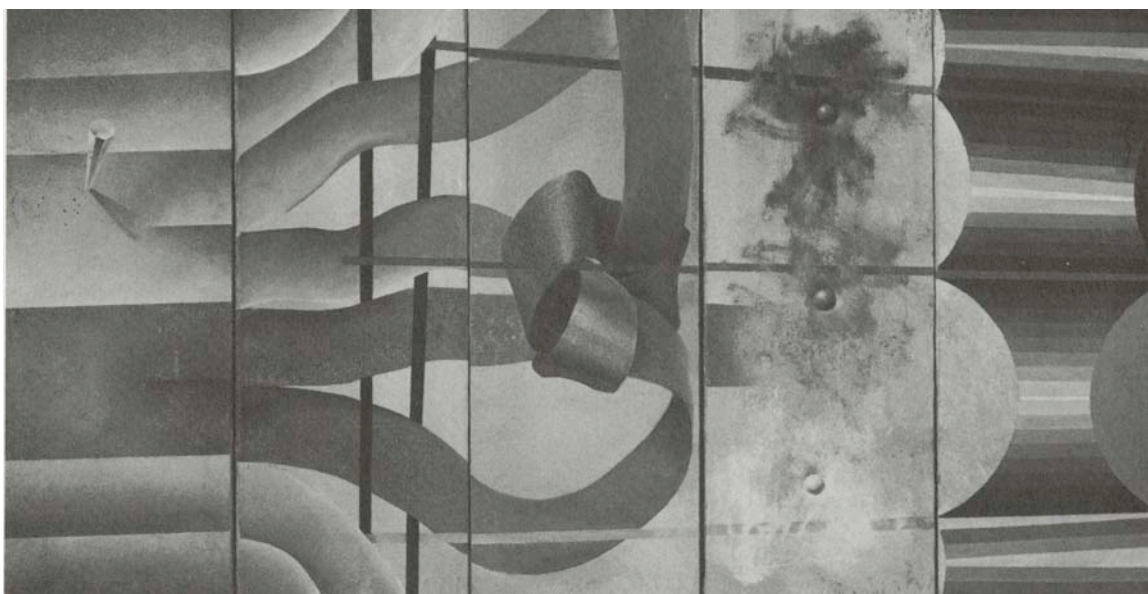


Fig. 66

Komar and Melamid, *History of the USSR* (detail showing 1967-1971), 1975. Oil on canvas, 58 panels, each 3½ x 12 in., collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

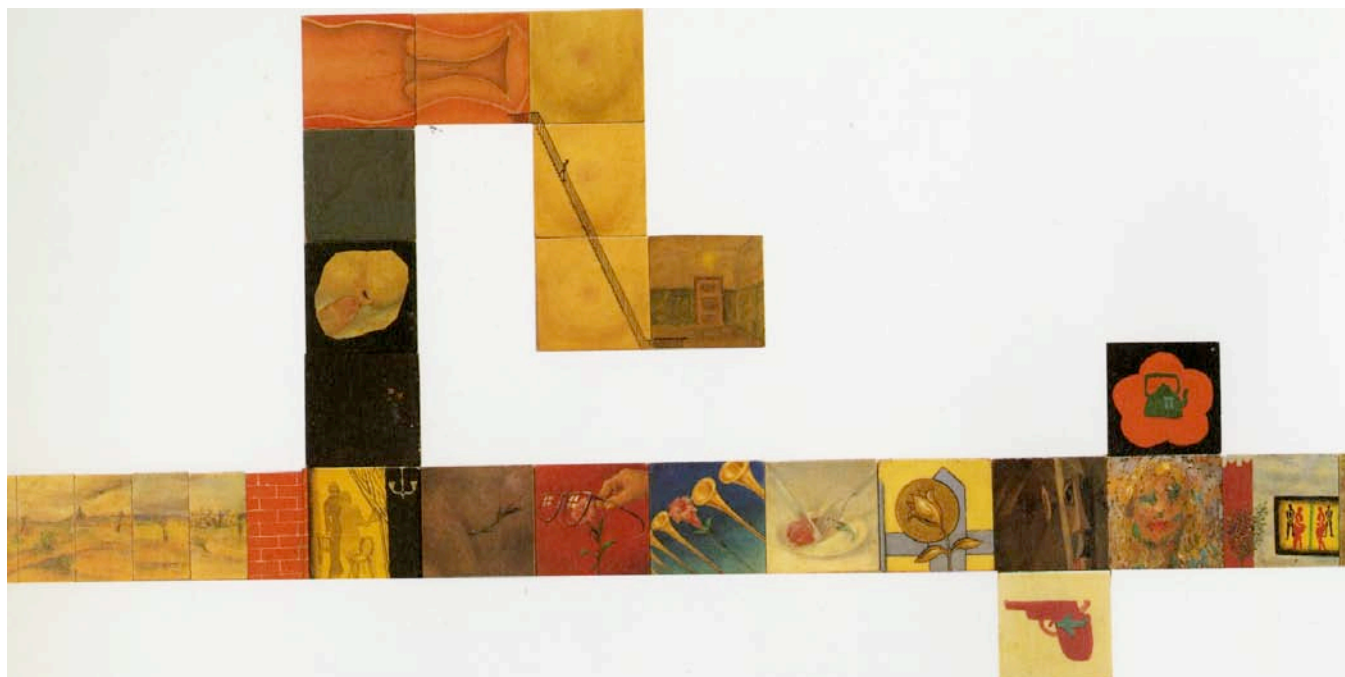


Fig. 67

Komar and Melamid, *Biography of Our Contemporary* (detail), 1972-73. Oil on wood, 197 panels, each 1 5/8 in square. Collection of Robert and Maryse Boxer.



Fig. 68
Komar and Melamid and N. Buchumov, *In the Sea*, date unknown, altered by Komar and Melamid in 1973. Oil on canvas, 20 x 43 ½ in., collection of Neil K. Rector.



Fig. 69
Komar and Melamid, *Nikolay Buchumov* (detail), 1973. From the series *Legends*. Oil on pasterboard, 59 panels, each 12.7 x 17.8 cm., collection of Neil K. Rector.

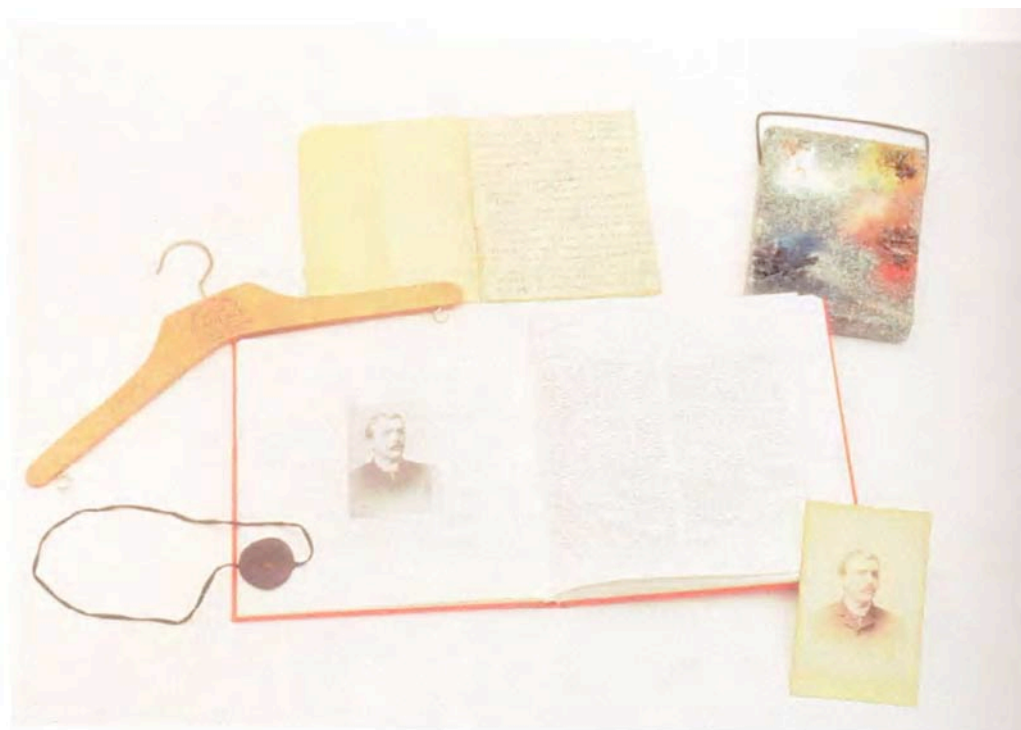


Fig. 70

Komar and Melamid, *Nikolay Buchumov* (detail), 1973. From the series *Legends*. Buchumov's personal effects and autobiography. Collection of Neil K. Rector.



Fig. 71

Komar and Melamid, *Apelles Zyablov*, 1973, installation view. From the series *Legends*. Seven paintings (oil on canvas) and one book. Collection of the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.



Fig. 72

G. V. Soroka, *A View onto the Spassokoe Estate of the Tambov Province*, 1840s. Oil on canvas, 69 x 88.5 cm, collection of the Kalinin Regional Picture Gallery.



Fig. 73
Komar and Melamid, *Dmitry Tveretinov* (detail), 2002. Multimedia installation.
Collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Fig. 74

Front page of *The New York Times*, September 16, 1974 with a photograph of gathered artists being dispersed by a water truck during the so-called Bulldozer Exhibition.



Fig. 75

Komar and Melamid, *Art Belongs to the People (School of Art)*, 1974. Photo documentation of a performance in a private Moscow apartment. Photo by the artists. Vitally Komar's private archive.

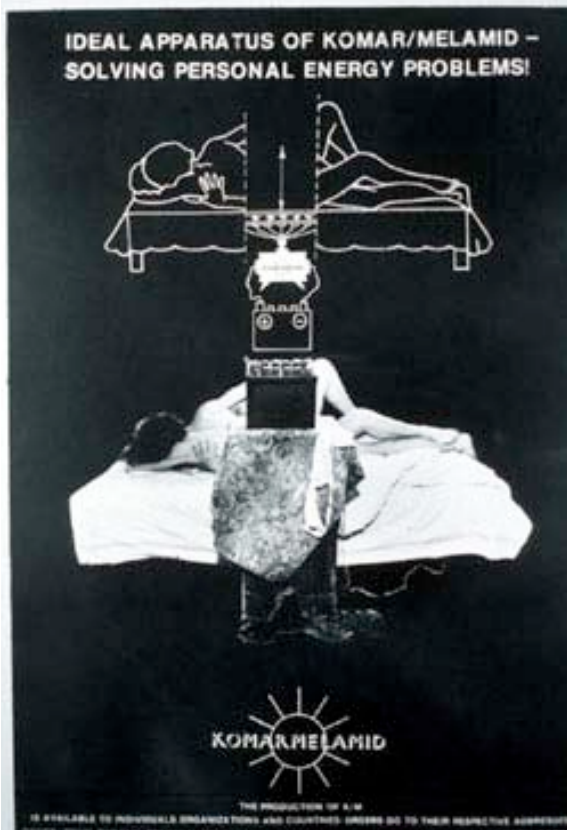


Fig. 76
Komar and Melamid, *Energy Problems Solution*, 1975. Black and white photo print.



Fig. 77
Evgeny Khaldey, *May Day Demonstration on Red Square*, 1940s. Black and white photograph.



Fig. 78
Komar and Melamid and Douglas Davis, *Questions: New York Moscow / Moscow New York [Where Is the Line Between Us?]* (detail), 1976. Black and white gelatin silver prints. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 79

Komar and Melamid, *Documents*, 1975. 13 plexiglas panels, 12 of them rectangles cut out to the exact dimensions of 12 official Soviet documents. Collection of Robert and Maryse Boxer.



Fig. 80

Komar and Melamid, *Music Writing: Passport*, 1974-1976. From the series Codes. Sheet music on paper and photo documentation of Charlotte Moorman performing the score in New York on February 7, 1976.



Fig. 81

Komar and Melamid, *Circle, Square, Triangle*, 1975. Black and white photoprint.

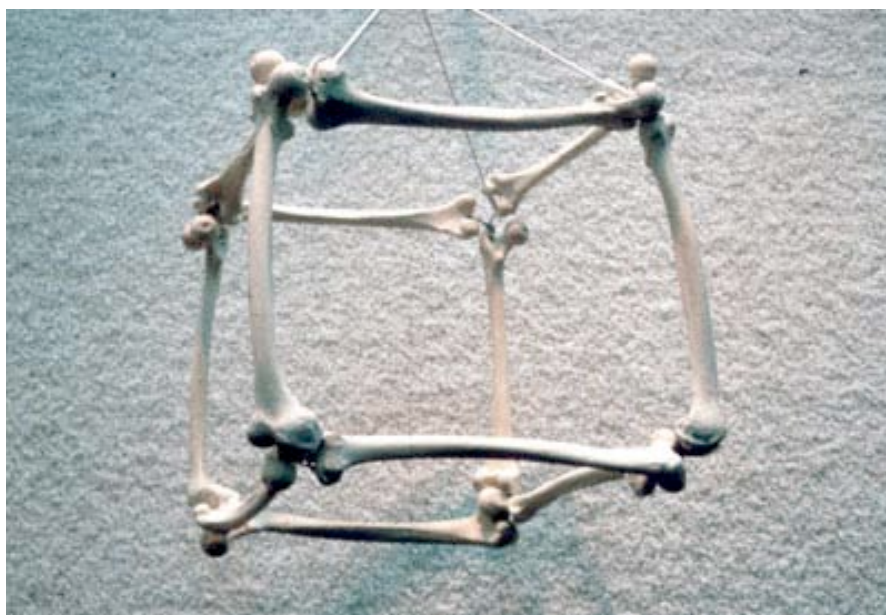


Fig. 82

Komar and Melamid, *Homo Cube*, part of the multimedia installation *Crete: c. 30,000-10,000 B.C. (The Golden Age)*, 1978. Bones and wire. Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Fig. 83
Komar and Melamid, *Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke*, 1975. Oil on canvas,
84½ x 39¼ in., collection of Alfred and Pie Friendly



Fig. 84

Komar and Melamid, *Color Therapeutics*, 1975. Oil on wood, 25 panels, each 1 5/8 in. square, collection of Robert and Maryse Boxer.



Fig. 85

Komar and Melamid, *A Catalogue of Superobjects. Supercomfort for Superpeople*, 1976. Portfolio of 36 color photographs published by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 1977.

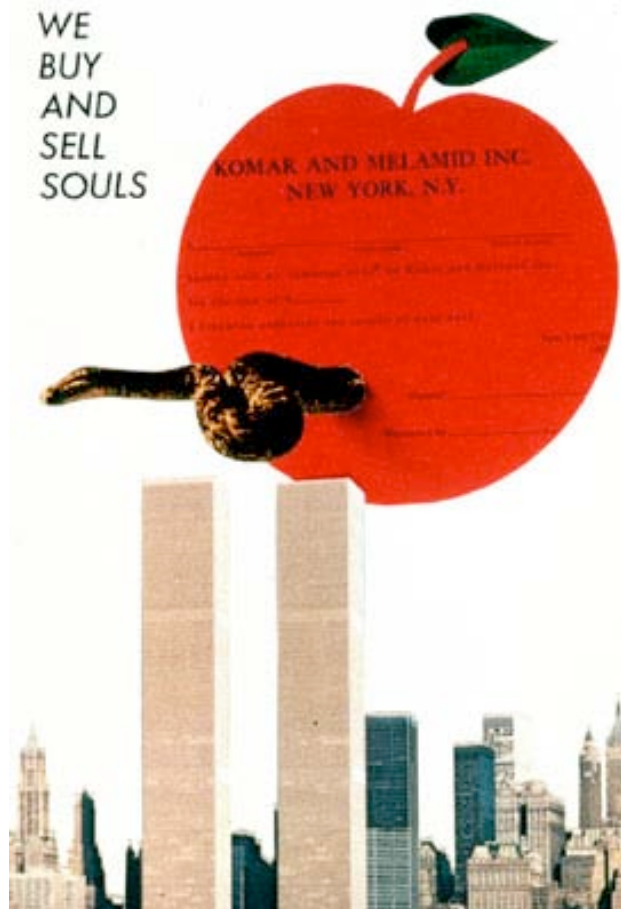


Fig. 86
 Komar and Melamid, *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978-1979. Advertisement poster for Komar and Melamid, Inc., photo offset, 24 x 20 in.

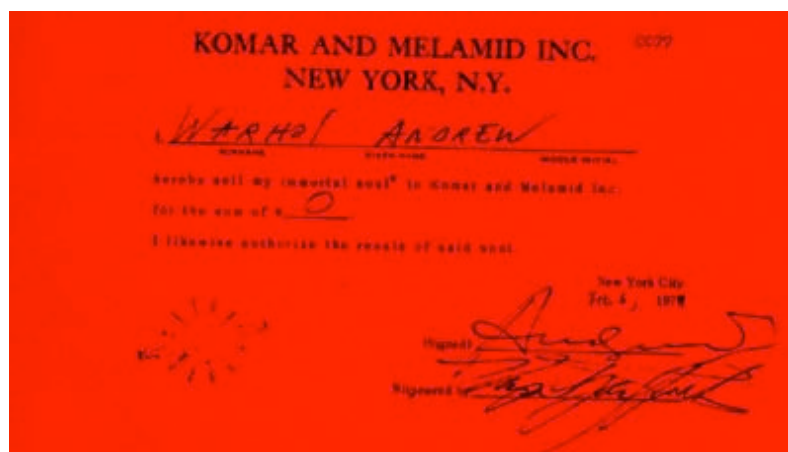


Fig. 87
 Komar and Melamid, *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978-1979. Receipt for Andy Warhol's soul.

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