HOT ART IN A COLD WAR
Intersections of Art and Science in the Soviet Era
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In an age when there is renewed rivalry between the United States and Russia, it is informative to look back to the era of the space race, when for those of us who are old enough to remember it, the sight of the Soviets’ Sputnik crossing the night skies was an unsettling experience.

Hot Art in a Cold War expands upon an exhibition first organized at the Zimmerli Art Museum by Ksenia Nouril, Dodge Fellow and PhD Candidate in Art History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. That exhibition as well as Ms. Nouril’s fellowship have been supported by the Avenir Foundation and the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Hot Art in a Cold War is co-curated by Ms. Nouril and Dr. Daniel Ksepka, Bruce Museum Curator of Science, who augmented the original art exhibition with Soviet-era science and historical objects.

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Peter C. Sutton
The Susan E. Lynch Executive Director
In a 1920 interview with the renowned British science fiction writer H. G. Wells, Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Russian Communist Party and leader of the Russian Revolution, reflected on the potential of space travel. He said, “If we succeed in making contact with other planets, all our philosophical, social, and moral ideals will have to be revised... and it will put an end to violence as a necessary means of progress.” Lenin made this overly optimistic statement on the backdrop of a bloody civil war precipitated by the deposition of the Czar in October 1917. At this time, space exploration was still a pipe dream, as the science necessary to launch interplanetary rockets was far from developed. While Lenin’s projection was naïve, it is rooted in the utopian promises of scientific advancement that characterized the twentieth century. Unfortunately, as revealed by historian Susan Buck-Morss in her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, the hope of using knowledge for the greater good of humanity was quickly shattered by two world wars, genocide, exploitation and destruction—to name just a few of the “phantasmagoric effects that aestheticize the violence of modernity and anaesthetize its victims.”

*Hot Art in a Cold War: Intersections of Art and Science in the Soviet Era*, on exhibit at the Bruce Museum, examines one of the dominant concerns of Soviet unofficial artists—and citizens everywhere—in the second half of the twentieth century: the positive and negative effects of innovation in science, technology, mathematics, communications and design. Juxtaposing artworks with artifacts, the exhibition traces repercussions of scientific advancement on everyday life in the Soviet Union. Produced between the 1960s and the 1980s, the works on view address themes of international significance during the turbulent period between the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and the establishment of the first modular space station Mir in 1986. While many unofficial artists working across the Soviet Union embraced technological progress in hope of a better future, some were wary of its effects. They communicated their desires as well as fears through artworks that made prescient proposals still applicable to our world today.

*Hot Art in a Cold War* features thirty-four works on loan from the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at the Zimme rli Art Museum. Comprised of more than 20,000 works of art created between the 1950s and the early 1990s representing all fifteen republics, it is the largest collection of...
nonconformist or unofficial art in the world. "Unofficial" is a general term applied to all artwork produced in opposition to the state-sanctioned style of Socialist Realism, which typically depicted positive, heroic and idealized subjects unencumbered by the trials and tribulations of the everyday. However, unofficial art was not exclusively motivated by politics, and due to fluctuations in Soviet cultural policy, it may have been acceptable for public exhibition under the ideologically correct circumstances. Examining several key works from Hot Art in a Cold War, this essay argues that the subjects of the nuclear arms and space races were regarded as universal, thus satisfactorily blurring the lines between official and unofficial art in the Soviet Union.

By all historical accounts, Aleksandr Zhitomirsky (1907–1993) was an official artist formally employed by popular state-sponsored periodicals as early as the 1920s. His photomontage Ferocious Appetite (1969) makes literal the phrase "sharks of capitalism," which was coined by the Russian writer Nikolai Bukharin in his 1918 treatise Programme of the World Revolution. In this photomontage, the artist uses a stock photograph of a decorated American general surveying strategic plans and turns him into a monster with a warhead for a face. Wearing a nameplate with the word "Pentagon" transliterated in Cyrillic letters, he devours a hospital, a school, an office building and numerous links of juicy sausages that fly through his sharp fangs into his large, gaping mouth. Grotesque in nature, this caricature is rooted in Zhitomirsky's pioneering work during the Second World War, when he created pro-Soviet photomontages for the Front-Illustrierte Zeitung, a German-language propaganda newspaper distributed by the Soviet Union to German soldiers on the front line. Zhitomirsky's carefully constructed photomontages juxtapose seemingly incongruent objects to produce metaphors that send overtly critical messages. The inclusion of his work in the Dodge Collection may seem contradictory, given the artist's political predilections. It stands in stark contrast to that of unofficial artists, such as Gennady Goushchin (1943– ), whose photo collage series Alternative Museum (1979) ironically breaks down salient aspects of the Soviet Union's monolithic monoculture years before its eventual demise in 1991.

Although Boris Mikhailov (1938– ) used photography to subtly undermine the Soviet system for decades, he was first introduced to art through an official channel. In
1966, while working as an engineer at a factory in his hometown of Kharkiv in Soviet Ukraine, Mikhailov was assigned to produce a short film about the day-to-day operations of the factory. He took this opportunity to experiment with the camera, producing a series of nude images of his wife. After being unceremoniously fired, Mikhailov turned to commercial photography, where he developed retouching and other technical skills. For the series Sots Art, Mikhailov hand-colored photographs he shot in and around Kharkiv between 1975 and 1990, breathing life into the banal scenes of everyday Soviet existence. The title of this series refers to a movement within unofficial art developed in the early 1970s by Vitaly Komar (1943–) and Alexander Melamid (1945–), who adapted the symbols of Socialist—shortened in Russian to Sots—Realism in works that were profoundly sardonic and unabashedly irreverent. In one of Mikhailov’s photographs (ill. 2), two boys dressed in uniforms customary of elementary military training courses (nachal’naia voennaia podgotovka) model gas masks under the watchful eye of their teacher. In this didactic moment of emergency preparedness, the boys are transformed into monsters. With its garish colors and bizarre imagery, Mikhailov’s photograph does not reassure its viewer but sounds the alarm of an impending nuclear attack.

The nuclear arms race marked the Cold War, a period in which there was no “hot” war or large-scale, direct fighting between the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. With American President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech and the opening of the first nuclear power station in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, both countries welcomed the seemingly positive byproducts of atomic energy. That is, until the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which resulted in a devastating release of radioactive material over Ukraine, Belarus,
Russia and parts of Europe. Atomic Reactor (1975) [III. 3], by Latvian printmaker Inārs Helmūts, provides a detailed depiction of a nuclear power plant, from the control desk to the reactor’s core. In the center of this tripartite composition, a worker wears a hazmat suit, protecting him against radiation poisoning. Helmūts was inspired to make this work after visiting a friend who worked in a newly built atomic reactor in Soviet Latvia.

If life on Earth was destined to be short-lived, then surely life in space and, hypothetically, on other planets was more promising. Such utopian ideas buoyed citizens in both the United States and the Soviet Union, as they anxiously waited to see the launch of the first human into space. Laika
Cigarette Box (1972) [Ill. 4] by Komar and Melamid appropriates the graphic identity of the Soviet cigarettes that paid homage to Laika, the first animal to orbit the Earth.13 In a recent conversation, Komar recalled the impetus for the painting: the forbidden style of American pop art. “We loved pop art and saw examples of it in books,” he said. “American artists used cigarette logos in their works, why couldn’t we?”14 Rendered in a cubist style that breaks down the composition into distinct crystalline parts, the playfully repurposed logo draws attention to the use of Laika’s image as unabashed propaganda. Like the other dogs conscripted into the Soviet space program, Laika was a small mixed-breed rescued from the streets of Moscow, chosen on account of her resilience.15 At the Institute of Aviation Medicine, Laika underwent rigorous training in order to fly aboard the satellite Sputnik 2 in November 1957. While she sadly perished inflight, Laika paved the way for future missions with animals by the Soviet and other space programs. Details of these Soviet missions, including the fate of their sentient subjects, were classified as top secret and revealed only after the fall of the Soviet Union.
Like their canine compatriots, cosmonauts—Soviet astronauts—were lauded as heroes. Symbols of the Soviet Union’s victories over the United States, cosmonauts like Yuri Gagarin, the first human to orbit the Earth, were popular culture icons depicted by official and unofficial artists equally. *Cosmonaut Anatoly Berezovoy* by Mikhail Borisov (1950–) renders the cosmonaut in an unusual moment of repose, preparing a meal of fresh sausage and lemon with zero gravity. Berezovoy (1942–2014) was the commander of the first mission to the space station Salyut 7 in 1982. His 211 days in space were honored on a stamp issued by the Soviet Post Office. In the 1990s, Berezovoy continued his service to cosmonautics, acting as the deputy president of Russian Space Federation, the equivalent of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the United States.

Despite the negative effects of its cutthroat competition, the space race opened up new worlds previously deemed unimaginable. Artists especially were interested in reenvisioning both natural and artificial environments as a result of these developments. The impact of these new ways of seeing was strongly felt among Soviet artists—many of whom could not legally travel outside the Soviet Union. Inspired by the potential of life in space, they used their imaginations to see beyond the confines of their immediate surroundings.

In the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Raul Meel (1941–) trained as an engineer at Tallinn’s Polytechnic Institute from 1959 to 1964 before independently pursuing a career as an artist. His academic roots are revealed in *Under the Sky* (1973–1979), a series of large-scale screenprints based on the parabolic curve. Through the manipulation of this form, Meel translates the abstract language of mathematics into art. For Meel, this form represents more than just a lifeless equation; it possesses the warmth of humanity. “I remember a specific ‘epiphany,” says the artist. “The professor was drawing the graph of a certain function on the board, and I thought… this line is like a comparative image for human life.” While Meel made several failed attempts at exhibiting *Under the Sky* in Soviet Estonia, prints from this series were included in an exhibition of graphic art at the Riga State Planetarium in April 1979. Organized by the Latvian artist Jānis Borgs (1946–), the exhibition promoted an overtly intra-Baltic dialogue within the context of an official venue, coopting institutional authority to legitimize artwork that was politically subversive. Although the patterns of Meel’s series are innocently rooted in the coordinate system of geometry, its colors—white, black and blue—reference the flag of the Estonian Republic, which was outlawed under Soviet rule.

In Moscow, Kyiv-born artist Petr Belenok (1938–1991) actively exhibited within unofficial art circles. He participated in the Second Autumn Open-Air Exhibition in 1974, which was begrudgingly sanctioned after the earlier Bulldozer Exhibition in which Soviet authorities deliberately destroyed the works of unofficial artists. While acquainted with well-known nonconformists, such as Oskar Rabin (1928–), Ilya Kabakov (1933–) and Igor Palmin (1933–), Belenok kept to himself, developing his own style, called “panic realism.” Using a color palette primarily of black and white, he merged tiny, hyperrealist figures with expansive, abstract landscapes rendered in broad, bold brushstrokes. His works...
[Ill. 5] in this style depict dramatic, apocalyptic scenes in imaginary, cosmic spaces.

Closer to home on planet Earth, Borgs’ *Dynamic City* (1976) [Ill. 6] proposes a large-scale, electro-kinetic clock and graphic mural on the wall of a building on the corner of Cēsu and Lenin (now Brīvības) Streets in Riga. He created two additional designs for locations where geometric kinetic objects would intervene in architecture. The proposals were included in *For Our City*, an exhibition of monumental and decorative arts at the Riga Architecture and Urban Development Propaganda Center in 1978.18 Borgs’ work took its name from a drawing by Gustav Klucis (1895–1938), the early twentieth-century artist of Latvian origin associated with the Russian avant-garde. Like Klucis, Borgs had utopian dreams of building a new and better life in the Soviet Union, but unfortunately, his *Dynamic City* was never realized due to a lack of funding and materials.

Valdis Celms (1943–) also faced challenges in his proposal for *Positron* (1976), a public sculpture to be built on the grounds of an electronics factory in the Ukrainian city of
Ivano-Frankivsk. A positron, or positive electron, is a positively charged subatomic particle, which, when unstable, can produce radiation. Trained as an interior designer at the Latvian Academy of Art in the late 1960s, Celms had little direct experience with chemistry and physics; yet he likely was inspired by the potential of the positron when naming his project. Although never realized due to the scarcity of resources, Positron is an excellent example of kinetic art, which enhances typically three-dimensional constructions with movement, light and even sound. If realized, Positron would have rotated and emitted patterns of colorful light [Ili. 7], producing psychological and emotional effects meant to relax the factory’s workers and lift overall morale.

In Soviet Russia, kinetic art was dominated by Dvizhenie (Movement Group), a short-lived, loose collective of artists, including Galina Bitt (1946–), Francisco Infante-Arana (1943–), Viacheslav Koleichuk (1941–), Lev Nussberg (1937–), Natalia Prokuratova (1948–) and others. While aspects of the group’s history remain under dispute, they worked together in Moscow.
in the mid- to late 1960s sharing an interest in synthesizing art and science through kinetic objects and environments. Nussberg concretized their practice in his “Kinetic Manifesto,” written in 1966 and subsequently published abroad in Yugoslav, British and Czechoslovak periodicals. This manifesto calls for the creation of a world institute of kineticism, harnessing the utopian idea of global integration at the height of the Cold War. Dvizhenie went on to exhibit in both official and unofficial art and science institutions, most notably the Kurchatov Institute for Atomic Energy and the Institute of High Temperatures in Moscow. Displaying the principles of movement, symmetry and synthesis, the photo collage Altar for the Temple of the Spirit (Sketch for the Creation of an Altar at the Institute of Kinetics) (1969–1970) [Ill. 8] presents a hybrid construction that ensconces figures within a fantastical, atemporal crystalline space.

In its structure, this space recalls Artificial Space Crystal (1972), an installation by Francisco Infante-Arana, a founding member of Dvizhenie, who went on to form the Authors’ Working Group (ARGO) in 1970. The project was funded by the State Glass Institute and exhibited in the Consumer Goods Pavilion at VDNKh (the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy). Today, only black-and-white documentary photographs [Ill. 9] of the installation remain. These photographs show how the layered planes of this temporary kinetic environment reflected and refracted light, fully immersing the viewer.

Their fate in the hands of science, official and unofficial artists were captivated by the events surrounding the nuclear and space races. As featured in this exhibition, their works reflect the anxious realities and utopian fantasies that were part of everyday Soviet life in the second half of the twentieth century. The artists use a variety of media, from documentary photographs and surrealist abstractions to hyperrealist paintings and kinetic sculptures. Together, they offer a glimpse into a troubled past, a promising present and unknown future.
NOTES


2. Rocke propelled by gunpowder had been in use since the thirteenth century. In the early twentieth century rocket technology was advanced through the use of liquid, gas, and more advanced solid fuels. Russian scientists and philosopher Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935) published an early treatise for rocket propulsion in 1903. Now heralded as the father of Soviet cosmonautics, Tsiolkovsky went unrecognized for decades, only rising to prominence in the 1950s. For more information on Tsiolkovsky and his influence, see A. T. Sidelle, The Red Rocket: Glenn, Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1867–1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xi. For a compressive survey of photography in the Dodge Collection, see Diane Neumaier, ed: Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

3. In Russian, mir is a homonym, meaning both “world” and “peace.”


5. The Zhitomir Art Museum’s part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.


13. Laika roughly translates as “Barker,” as the name is derived from the Russian verb: “to bark” (саним).


CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

The Soviet Cosmos, 1977

Midnight

Valdis Celms (Latvian, b. 1943)

Dynamic City, 1986

Gouache and oil pastel on photograph mounted on plywood

79.5 x 79.5 cm (31 5/16 x 31 5/16 in.)

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D19054

Rudolf Balov (Russian, b. 1938)

Estrella de la Terminal (from Sots Art series)

Oil on canvas

1977

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D00626

Jānis Borgs (Latvian, b. 1946)

Dynamic City

Gouache and oil pastel on photograph mounted on plywood

30.5 x 20.3 cm (12 x 8 in.)

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D11577

Jānis Borgs (Latvian, b. 1946)

Lunar Globe

Lunokhod Rover

Space Station Museum

Lunokhod Rover Tire

Space Station Museum

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D0688

Witold Lorkowski (Russian, b. 1987)

Mixed media on dibond

136.6 x 121.5 cm (53 3/4 x 47 3/4 in.)

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D0686

Petr Belenok (Ukrainian, 1938–1991)

In Memory of Tsiolkovsky

Private Collection

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D07067

Petr Belenok (Ukrainian, 1938–1991)

Cosmonaut Food

Space Station Museum

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D00632

Duck and Cover

Video, run time: 9:40 minutes

Soviet Civil Defense “Most Importantly—Don’t Panic!” Video

run time: 4:40 minutes

Nuclear ICBM Launch Keys

Replicas

Bruce Museum Collection

Gouache and oil pastel on photograph mounted on plywood

376 x 22.7 cm (14 13/16 x 8 15/16 in.)

Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers

Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union

D00626
Valdis Celms (Latvian, b. 1943)

View of Positron, 1977
Ink and collaged photographs mounted on fiberboard
61 x 104 cm (24 x 40 15/16 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19058

Valdis Celms (Latvian, b. 1943)

View of Positron, 1977
Ink and collaged photograph mounted on fiberboard
61 x 104 cm (24 x 40 15/16 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19059

Valdis Celms (Latvian, b. 1943)

Positron, 1976
Kinetic maquette of steel, paper, and wood
46 x 37 x 40 cm (18 1/8 x 14 9/16 x 15 3/4 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19068

Viacheslav Koleichuk (Russian, b. 1941)

Mobius, designed in 1975, executed in 1985
Brass on wood base
64.5 x 50 x 22 cm (25 3/8 x 19 11/16 x 8 13/16 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D12037

Viacheslav Koleichuk (Russian, b. 1941)

Spiral, 1966
Painted wood dowel and wire
26 x 37.6 cm (10 1/4 x 14 11/16 in.)
On loan from the collection of Norton and Nancy Dodge L04306

Viacheslav Koleichuk (Russian, b. 1941)

Spiral of Infinity (Yellow variant) from the series Spiral, 1963
Tempera on paper mounted on fiberboard
45 x 90 cm (17 11/16 x 35 7/16 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19069

Francisco Infante-Arana (Russian, b. 1943)

Installation of “Artificial Space Crystal” (VDNKh, Moscow), n.d.
Gelatin silver print on paper mounted on illustration board
61 x 81 cm (24 1/8 x 31 7/8 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19070

Francisco Infante-Arana (Russian, b. 1943)

Spiral of Infinity No. 3 (Fiery Coils), 1964
Tempera on paper
Sheet 73.8 x 83 cm (29 1/16 x 32 11/16 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union D19071

Lev Nusberg (Russian, b. Uzbekistan, 1937) and Natalia Pokrovskaya (Russian, b. 1948)

Altar for the Temple of the Spirit (Sketch for the Creation of an Altar at the Institute of Kinetics), 1968–1970
Tempera and photocollage on paper
61.8 x 86.4 cm (24 1/8 x 34 in.)
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Gift of Dieter and Jutta Steimer 2003.0154