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**ART AND AUTHORITY
ASPECTS OF RUSSIAN ART SINCE 1917.**

THESIS

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Master of Fine Art degree
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by

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To Lisa,
for her continual assistance, spirit and joy.

A DRINKING SONG

Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye,
That's all we shall know for truth
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth,
I look at you, and I sigh.

(W. B. YEATS)

Many thanks to Jeanne Wright for her editing ideas and to Robert Brooks for his excellent supervision.

No Artist will be at ease with an opinion that holds him to be a mere handyman of art - the fellow who puts the paint on. Nor will any artist rest well with the notion that he is a mad genius....

Ben Shahn

INTRODUCTION

The Artist was denied any role in Plato's *Republic* because of his ability to impair reason by imitating reality through his works. Aristotle, however, welcomed the artist because of his ability to express ideas about society through artistic form. Ernst Fischer agrees with the latter view,

"Art enables man to comprehend reality, and not only helps him to bear it but increases his determination to make it more human and more worthy of mankind. Art is itself a social reality, society needs the artist ... and it has a right to demand of him that he should be conscious of his social function" (Fischer:1963:46).

Fischer adds to Aristotle's view by stating that society has a right to demand a social function from the artist. This issue has been the subject of controversial debate throughout the history of art. In a society based on class, the classes try to recruit art to serve their particular purposes. Art is seen by some as a powerful weapon - a means by which people can be swayed towards certain ideals. At the time of the Counter Reformation Italian artists were given strict instructions by the Jesuits on how to persuade and educate the people with their paintings. Napoleon urged his men of letters, painters and architects to refer to the classical ideals of ancient Greece and Rome to shape the emergent French Republic. The French philosopher, Denis Diderot, stressed the futility of art unless it expressed great principles or lessons for the spectator. Ideals of justice, courage and patriotism were embodied in the Neo-Classical movement. The didactic paintings of Jacques Louis David portray the above ideals. History records several attempts by those in power to coerce artists into conforming to

their idea of society, indicating that authoritative manipulation of the arts is not purely a twentieth century phenomenon.

This thesis intends to examine aspects of Russian art since 1917. Because Soviet art was dominated by policies which enabled authorities to determine its content, its history raises ideological issues which are relevant to the study of art. The theories of Suprematism, Constructivism and Socialist Realism will be discussed and conclusions will be drawn as to whether these theories succeeded as art movements which were ostensibly designed for the improvement of mankind. Present attitudes toward the visual arts in Russia will also be examined. However, in order to examine the above it is necessary to place the development of art into historical perspective.

Prior to the 1917 revolution, Russia was populated by a vast majority of peasants. Agriculture was primitive and rural education had just begun. There was serious overpopulation, and the size of large estates belonging to aristocratic land owners made the problem of rural land scarcity endemic. In addition to poverty in rural areas, a predominantly unskilled labour force who received low wages for casual employment, resided in towns. Competition for jobs by peasant children pouring in from the countryside exacerbated the situation. These conditions initiated class hatred among millions who had little means of supporting their families in comparison to the wealthy elite who ruled alongside the Tsars.

It must be remembered that more than half the population of this country, the largest territorial state on earth, consisted not only of Russians but Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, Georgians, Armenians, Tartars, Central Asian Turks, as well as other peoples whose absorption into Russia had been going on ever since the Middle Ages. This raised questions for citizens of the empire: did they belong to Russia or to their national homelands? The answer depended on language, culture, career and religion. Religious discrimination against Jews, Moslems and members of schismatic or sectarian

communities whose origins were to be found in the Orthodox church, caused further contention amongst millions.

The Tsars and their advisors insisted on the maintenance of autocratic government and refused to grant political liberty of modern constitutional states, including the right of secession. Thus, they rejected or obstructed social and economic reforms which would jeopardise their powerful position.

Apart from the rural peasantry and the industrial workers in the towns there existed a third "social group" which can be termed the "intelligentsia". These men and women of contemporary European education found themselves isolated both from their own people and their rulers. The group included doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, engineers, actors and artists.

The absorption of this social group into the Soviet political milieu was far easier and more rapid than in the case of other classes. As there was little hope of achieving reform through legal channels, the intelligentsia, by using their own talents, and by taking ideas from European socialism, managed to win the support of the masses. They initiated a campaign of strikes and revolts, only to be crushed by the Tzarist government. As a result, some reforms were made to political, agricultural and educational institutions in 1905 which encouraged some hope of peaceful political progress. These reform measures, however, did not suffice to remove revolutionary feeling which intensified amongst the majority of people.

The main tenet of this revolutionary ideal lies in the belief that material human possessions should be commonly held. This is not entirely a communist or socialist idea. Movements and institutions which at least partly embody this principle, can be traced in history to the organisation of tribes, official doctrines and heresies of the great religions, and in the collective life of monastic orders and brotherhoods. Karl Marx was the first

political philosopher who placed socialist and communist theory on a scientific basis.

The incorporation of socialism into a system of government was above all the concept of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1870-1924), better known as Lenin. In 1903, Lenin began building his own faction; the elitist and conspiratorial party called the Bolsheviks which subsequently gained majority support. This party was organised into a political and military system which then fought and won the civil war in 1917. The party later became known as the Russian Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Paradoxically, Marx designed his socialist system for a society with a strong industrial working class. Russia was, at the time of the revolution, overwhelmingly agricultural and subsequently industrially backward. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik victory in November 1917, demonstrates that Lenin's tactical skills enabled him to co-opt a powerful base of mass support and thus to seize power. This was a first victory for revolutionaries professing an ideology of Marxist-Socialism.

The Bolshevik government which came to power in Russia in 1917 aimed to leading the masses to "socialist" consciousness. It was the first twentieth century government which adopted a conscious policy towards the arts, in line with their attempts to reconstruct society along socialist lines. One of the aims of this essay is to examine the effects of these policies. All culture, including art and music, according to conventional Marxist view, automatically reflects the economic class structure of a society. The Bolshevik government claimed that in the new society which they were creating, all culture would be "proletarian", and all art "people's art".

At the time of the revolution in Russia, the arts were still dominated by the ideology of the late nineteenth century. The revolution stimulated the return of some artists who had been participating in revolutionary art movements in Paris, Germany and elsewhere. Prior to their arrival, modern art movements, which had taken generations to establish in

the West, were condensed into little more than a decade (1893 to 1910). The ideas of Impressionism, Symbolism, Fauvism and Cubism swept across the country, and coupled with the arrival of artists such as Kandinsky, Gabo and Pevsner with their ideas, the basis of the Russian avant-garde was formed. This revolution in art preceded the communist revolution by almost a decade.

The victory of the revolution was seen by the majority of the avant-garde as an opportunity to spread their new ideas about art into a new world. The Bolshevik government dissolved the Imperial Academy of Art which was still entrenched in the art of the past (the poet Mayakovsky summarised this in the slogan "burn Raphael"). New educational institutions arose which were headed by avant-garde artists. Here, for the first time, abstract art was hailed as the official style of the proletariat. It was not until 1921 that Lenin attacked these avant-garde ideas and replaced them with the ideal of art as a form of universal propaganda. He opposed any monopoly by a single school of avant-garde art under the title of "official proletarian art" as ideologically and practically harmful.

However, the idea of a separate proletarian culture persisted into the thirties and embodied itself in the official style of Socialist Realism. All artistic institutions adopted this style and were brought under one central body called the Union of Artists. This Union maintained control throughout Stalin's reign of terror. It was only after Krushchev's rise to power in 1955 that the Union was to be challenged by artists from within and without. These artists, however, only gained favourable recognition after Brezhnev came to power. They opposed political doctrine in the arts and represented a purely aesthetic movement. By expressing individual concerns they contradicted the official dogma of Socialist Realism. This was met by strict censorship control enforced by the state apparatus.

However individualism in the arts flourished of its own accord. Recent developments and

reforms have allowed styles of post-modernism from the West to influence artistic direction in the Soviet Union. Currently, after decades of suppression, Russian artists are now free to openly experiment in stylistic and thematic concepts hitherto unexplored.

Thus the changing attitudes to art and its evolvement in the context of Soviet society are the central themes of this analysis.

CHAPTER ONE
THE REVOLUTION IN ART.

Suzi Gablik in her treatise on modern art entitled Has Modernism Failed? describes the two paths that modernism has taken,

"Anyone trying to face the full reality of modernism can still get caught in the cross-fire between its admirers (those who defend abstraction and art-for-arts sake) and its detractors (those who believe that art must serve a purpose or be socially useful) (Gablik:1984:20).

This chapter deals with abstraction in art, and will attempt to analyse the ideas of abstraction in early modern Russian art particular attention to the works and writings of Kasimir Malevitch (1878-1935). Malevitch founded an art movement called Suprematism in Moscow in 1913. This radical movement, although primed by Italian Futurism and the ideas of Cubism in its geometrical abstraction, sought to move away from preoccupation with style to the creation of a new pictorial language with its own rules. This distinguished Suprematism from previous Russian avant-garde art.

Prior to the Suprematist movement, the Russian avant-garde artists existed as an underground movement in deliberate opposition to the mainstream of bourgeois society. Although they relied on private patronage to sustain their movement, they attacked conventional art and society at large, thus increasing the gap between themselves and the establishment. It was this gap between artist and society that post-revolutionary policy attempted to overcome.

"PROPAGANDA BY MONUMENTS".

Prior to the development of the new artistic forms (i.e. the "isms"- movements such as Futurism, Cubism, Suprematism and Constructivism), Lenin decided that art should serve propagandistic ends. The results were seen in the creation of monuments which, by their mere size, brought about the beginnings of a new epoch in Russian art history. These new monuments were not intended to celebrate the fame of a tyrant or a race of oppressors, but the victory and limitless power of the now "liberated ones".

Using traditional principles of sculpture, painting and architecture, plans for gigantic monuments heralding the victory of the proletariat were drawn up. Attempts were made to embody the collective ideal in an artistic manner by merely working traditional style on a gigantic scale. The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky proclaimed "...the streets are our brush, the squares our palette ": These words were more than an ideal. All available wall space, including rows of houses, were painted with enormous frescoes or adorned with bas-reliefs. Gigantic panels, often up to forty feet high, were placed in main streets. These bore large slogans which communicated the latest events of the revolution to the masses. The surfaces of all means of transport - the sides of automobiles, railway carriages and ships - were painted with revolutionary propaganda. Trains accommodated travelling theatres, art exhibitions and reading rooms which were specifically aimed at spreading communist culture. This facilitated the transfer of socialist ideology into remote provincial corners.

In addition to the above, the traditional style of the Imperial Pottery Factory was replaced by the new Bolshevik style. Porcelain pieces were decorated with slogans proclaiming socialism, and painted with figures, trees and other motifs taken from the archaic forms of Russian peasant art. Statuettes of workers and Red Army soldiers were also made by the factory.

"Propaganda by monuments" had many pitfalls. The erection of these large sculptures was unprofessional. Many statues were not recognisable and had to be accompanied by explanatory inscriptions. Furthermore, the works were made of impermanent materials which deteriorated due to the effects of weathering. Panels suspended from buildings were also affected in this way. It is impossible to attach any objective artistic value to these naive frescoes and plaster statues whose only concern with monumentality was the obvious one of size.

Nevertheless, it was not these factors alone which saw the end of "monumental propaganda" as a movement. The new avant-garde condemned this kind of revolutionary art, emphasising that it was inconsistent with the true spirit of the revolution and had nothing to do with a new art being discovered for the new man. They saw this art as a naive and crude distortion of the old artistic forms which had originated in the bourgeois world. They thus proclaimed other paths for the "true proletarian art".

SUPREMATISM.

René Fülöp Miller writes in The Mind and Face of Bolshevism that,

"...just as political Bolshevism aimed at purging society from all anarchical 'accidentals', and at building it up on an abstract rationalistic structure of the working masses, the newly created revolutionary art also decided to root out everything 'accidental' and coincidental, and to replace it by a rational organisation of the material. Only in this way could the new art really become an adequate 'superstructure' on the collective organisation of the proletariat"

(Fülöp-Miller:1927:94).

Malevitch and other avant-garde artists, while developing abstractionist theories, attempted to validate their work within the revolutionary ethos. Malevitch himself asserted,

"Suprematism is the beginning of a new culture: a new form will be built, Suprematism is attempting to set up a genuine world order, a new philosophy of life" (Fletcher:1983:48).

Donald Kuspit, in his collection of essays entitled The Intentionality of Art, examines aspects of Malevitch's work in a chapter called "Malevitch's Quest for Unconditioned Creativity". Here Kuspit divides Malevitch's work into seven periods from 1910-1920:

1) colourism 2) depiction of the eternal peasant 3) aestheticism 4) simple Suprematism 5) constructive Suprematism 6) Monumental Suprematism and 7) depiction of the cross form

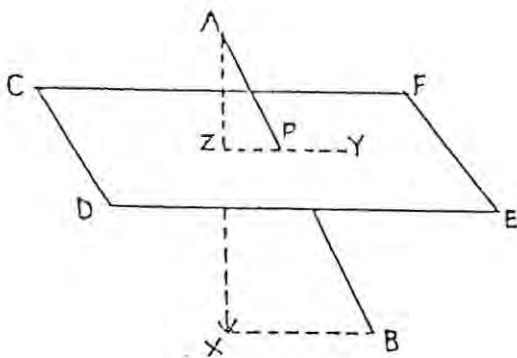
(Kuspit: 1984:149).

Kuspit analyses these phases and draws the conclusion that Malevitch's quest for pure abstraction failed because he returned to the figurative in his later works with the use of the cruxiform. Nevertheless, these works were all part of Malevitch's movement of Suprematism, which was ultimately concerned with abstraction even though it shows a return to geometric forms in its later stages.

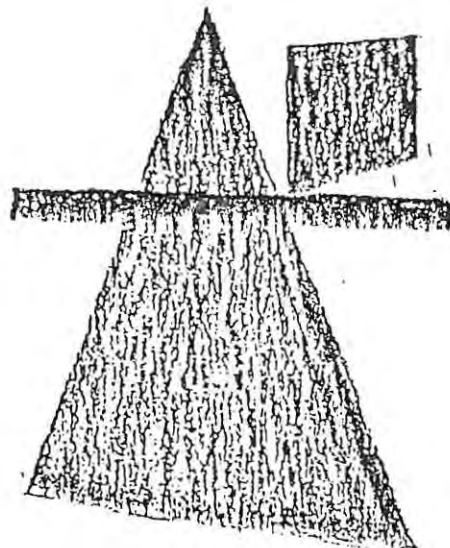
To understand just how Malevitch proposed to use abstraction as a socially political tool it is necessary to analyse his aims in more depth. Kuspit states that few art historians have cogently explored the social and political conditions leading to the emergence of abstract art. He does say that Meyer Schapiro regards abstract artists of the revolutionary kind as "...concerned with spiritual and social issues as well as stylistic matters...aiming to depict mood in painting" (Kuspit:1984:129). Malevitch attempted to create a mood or "spiritual feeling" in painting through abstraction.

Gablik has stated that modernism has taken two paths, that which defended abstraction and that which believed that art must be socially useful. Malevitch tried to do both. His art was ultimately abstract and was also designed to be a metaphysical and spiritual tool geared to raising human consciousness. This expansion of consciousness was the essential utopia being sought for, a place where the essential nature of humanity would be revolutionised. The Suprematist work of art is no longer seen as the depiction of reality or of ordinary perceptions, but as something which serves as the catalyst for enlightened intellectual and spiritual consciousness.

Susan Compton's article titled "Malevitch's Suprematism - The Higher Intuition" explores the beginnings of Malevitch's theories and his ultimate aim. She compares a diagram which the theorist C. Bragdon had used in an attempt to explain the existence of a fourth dimension, to an early drawing by Malevitch.



Bragdon's diagram



Malevitch's sketch

(Compton:1976:585).

Compton suggests that Malevitch appropriated the composition from Bragdon's diagram to portray his own rendering of the fourth dimension (or the higher intuition) in

this Suprematist drawing. Compton states that Bragdon's diagram "...used the known three dimensions to describe the fourth" (Compton:1976:585). This is of course theoretical, as the fourth dimension is not an illustrative concept. Therefore, Malevitch's drawing could not be illustrative of the fourth dimension or a "higher intuition". Nor could it be seen as an expression of a spiritual consciousness.

At this point, it is necessary to examine the tenuous nature of this "ism". In essence, the work rejects any type of figuration. The dominant forms are geometric shapes arranged on a flat plane. Rulers, compasses and set squares have been used to create form on the picture plane. In some works, this resembles architectural drawing. Malevitch has called these *Planits* - dwelling places for the future man. Here there is a return to figuration and to recognisable structures, unlike the abstract composition as manifest in "Black Square" (circa 1913). These *Planits* were worked further into free standing sculptures called *Arkitektonics* (1924-28) where there was a more "utilitarian" use of Suprematism in the construction of building models. Thus Malevitch departs from the expression of "feelings" through abstraction to the portrayal of tangible elements in his return to figuration. Kuspit has shown that there is a continuity between the Suprematist phases - "...but nonetheless a conflict of motivation, for while simple Suprematism aims to communicate pure feeling, constructive Suprematism with its obvious complication of figural forms aims to communicate pictorial-plastic feeling" (Kuspit:1984:149).

It was only when Malevitch began to use his geometric forms in his *Arkitektonics* series that Suprematism began to embody concrete reality. This work rejects Suprematism's deeper purpose, that is, the portrayal of human feeling or primordial consciousness through abstraction. Malevitch eventually attempted to portray spiritual consciousness with the clichéd and established religious form of the cruxiform (Suprematist Cross Painting 1920). Ironically however, the cross becomes symbolic of the death of Suprematism as a movement designed to lift man's consciousness through abstraction. It indicates the return to figuration.

Before conclusions can be drawn regarding the problems facing expressionist attempts in abstraction, the theories of El Lizzitsky, one of Malevitch's pupils and followers of Suprematism, must be examined. Lizzitsky, in his essay "Not World Visions But World Reality" (1920) says of Suprematism,

"A sign is designed, much later it is given it's name, and later still it's meaning becomes clear. So we do not understand the signs, the shapes, which the artist has created, because man's brain has not yet reached the corresponding stage of development" (Fletcher:1983:52).

This is a naive attempt to explain the meaninglessness of Suprematism. Lizzitsky hides the inexplicable behind the concept of an intangible force that is supposed to emanate from the artist's inner self. If the artist himself cannot understand where these shapes and signs come from, then how can he hope to reach the spectator through these works or to make known these feelings?

Mark Rothko stated that he saw his abstract work as "...expressing basic human emotions...the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them..." (Gablik:1985:22). It is interesting to note that Rothko and other recent abstract painters see their work as capable of expressing feeling. If such paintings do express emotions then these shall always remain inaccessible to some spectators.

In an article entitled "Art in the Godless World" by Waldemar Januszczak, he states that

Malevitch's "White on White" was to be a replacement for the image of God, a secular icon to the Marxist revolution. He goes on to say,

"If religion had previously been the opium of the people, then art was now to be that opium's replacement; a kind of religious methadone for those, like Malevitch himself, suffering with serious religious withdrawal symptoms. The new art would fill the God-shaped hole and assuage the pre-scholarly appetite for mystery, spirituality and imagination - and ultimate order"

(Januszczak:1987:23).

Thus the religious, prophetic ideas of the new art - abstract Suprematism - was seen as socially relevant to the organisation of Bolshevik political and artistic dogma.

As cultural revolutionaries, the avant-garde were chosen to fill key administrative posts by the Commissar for Enlightenment, A.V. Lunacharsky, (1875-1933) who recommended them to Lenin. Subsequently, abstraction and Cubo-Futurism were recognised as official art. These styles were seen as heralding the death of the bourgeois order, and the emergence of an official proletarian art.

Traditional bureaucracies which had controlled art education (including the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, galleries, museums, etc) were abolished and replaced by *Narkompros*, (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) and *Proletkult* (Proleterian Culture) and *Inkhuk* (Institute of Artistic Culture). These organisations, in addition to the complete reorganisation of the art schools, gave avant-garde artists unprecedented opportunities to wield administrative and bureaucratic power and gave them a platform from which to propagate their own beliefs.

Journals such as Art of the Commune (1918-19), Visual Art (1919) and Left\New Left

(1923-28) advocated Futurism, (or Communist Futurism), and later Constructivism as art forms essential to the new proletarian order. They resisted any return to realism insisting that,

"...the Soviet government shows a complete misunderstanding of the revolutionary task entrusted to them...under the guise of immutable truths the masses are being presented with the pseudo-teachings of the gentry"
(Bowlt:1971:44).

Bowlt suggests that the above criticism was directed not only at the representational tastes of the political leaders, but also at their initial capital expenditure on the preservation of historic monuments which many leftists now considered outdated (Bowlt:1971:45).

Nevertheless, the Cubo-Futurist style, an umbrella term for the Constructivist and Suprematist movements, was used in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad. The masses were now confronted with arcs, parallelograms and oblique angled figures. Walls were painted with abstract Cubist colour scrawls designed to destroy any trace of traditional forms. This aroused considerable opposition, not only among artists with traditional outlooks, but also among the working masses for whom this new art had been designed. There was outrage when revolutionary heroes became unrecognisable when executed in the Cubo-Futurist style. The majority of ordinary citizens could not understand this art form.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Thus new movements arose to replace Cubo-Futurism. Form and colour were abolished as being "bourgeois remnants" and only the geometric style of Suprematism was acceptable for a short period. This style was in turn condemned and made way for the new art of "counter-relief" or Constructivism. Constructivism made use of materials that

were symbolic of the age. Scraps of newspaper, glass fragments, box lids, hair, screws, nails and gas piping were commandeered to create "revolutionary" works of art.

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), one of the first constructivists, sought to promote the industrialisation of art. The easel format was rejected by the Constructivist school. Their art focused its attention on the factory and the machine. This "art production" movement sought to employ the artist as the creator of utilitarian art, or functional art. Clothes, theatre props, stamps, porcelain and furniture which often contained the ingredients of Suprematist and Cubo-Futurist painting, were produced in the art factories. This concentration on modern materials and on rationality were exemplified by Tatlin's model for the "Monument to the Third International" (1919).

The work of these artists initiated a type of "machine cult". Constructions of glass, wood, iron and concrete hung in workshops like icons to the new God. Some were labelled "holy ground plan A", or "holy turbo-generator B" (Fülöp-Miller:1927:105). The machine was now the supreme icon and art was seen as a medium to be used by its prophets - the carpenters, fitters and machine makers.

The differences between Suprematism and the later Constructivist style have been well documented by Camilla Gray in her book entitled The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922. Gray claims that Malevitch and his followers regarded art as a spiritual activity: its business was to order man's vision of the world. Disagreeing with the Constructivist idea of the artist-engineer, the Suprematist school claimed that to organise life practically in this way was to descend to the level of craftsmanship. For them, Suprematism should be incorporated into industrial design. However Tatlin and his followers believed that the artist should become an industrial designer (Gray:1971:248).

The German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Author as Producer" (1934), agrees with the idea of art as industry. For him, writers and painters are also

industrial workers. He states that art, "... like any other form of production depends on certain modes of production, painting, publishing, and so on" (Eagleton:1976:71). However Benjamin's theory is not as extreme as that of the Constructivist ideal - that the easel painting was no longer a valid creative vehicle.

El Lizzitsky saw the Constructivist and Suprematist as "...the promoter of a world which indeed already exists in man but which man has not yet been able to perceive..." (Fletcher:1983:62). Here again, Lizzitsky speaks of the unknown ideal - the imperceptible world which can be created. Ironically, these projects were never realised. Not only was Tatlin's monument never built, but many other plans were cut short due to limited state funds and the unavailability of materials.

In addition to the above mentioned problems, a hostile attitude of surprise and indignation prevailed amongst the workers who failed to accept Suprematism and Constructivism as proletarian art. The public's reaction to these works motivated Party officials to question the relevance of this kind of art in socialist society. Furthermore, in 1920 a group of students in Moscow complained to Lunacharsky about the avant-garde monopoly of the schools and requested that realist painting instructors be reinstated in the department.

Thus the dominance of the avant-garde in the arts in early Soviet Russia was brought to an end. This came about not only as a result of political pressure, but also as a result of personal artistic conviction. The analytical theories posed by Suprematism and the automation of the artist in the Constructivist phase were rejected by those who yearned for works of art created in traditional ways which were comprehensible and not obscured by theory. As a result, the utopian dream of the Russian avant-garde remained in effect no more than a dream.

CHAPTER TWO

ART FOR THE REVOLUTION.

SOCIALIST REALISM

"Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone" proclaimed Leo Tolstoy in the nineteenth century (Tolstoy:1898:102). These words preceded the ideas of the new style of Russian art by nearly a quarter of a century. After the revolution and all the "isms" that followed, these precepts still rang true to the exponents of a new style, the official style of Socialist Realism. For Ernst Fischer the term "socialist art" seems to be more indicative of the approach, for it "...clearly refers to an attitude - not a style and emphasises the 'socialist' outlook, not the realist method" (Fischer:1963:107). The term *realism* as defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary is said to mean "...the showing of life, etc. as it is, without glossing over what is ugly or painful." Leon Trotsky in "Literature and Revolution" (1923) states the following,

"It consists in the feeling of life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality ... it is always a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art"

(Chipp:1968:462).

To portray "life as it is" can thus mean portraying the vicissitudes of life, or that which is disturbing. It could, therefore, also mean the portrayal of the ills of socialism itself. This view is emphasised by Herbert Read,

"Reality is the totality of phenomena present to the senses, and as such, cannot be qualified as 'Socialist' or 'Capitalist'. It is 'life as it is,' and if it is the artist's duty to reflect such life - he is a passive, or at any rate, a disinterested instrument" (Read:1945:129).

This quotation emphasises the ambiguity of the term "Socialist Realism" as a means of describing an art movement. Thus Fischer's preference for the term "socialist art".

In 1934 Karl Radek delivered a speech at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. He attempted to capture the dogma of Socialist Realism and in so doing contradicted Read's view. He stated that there was no such thing as static realism or realism that only portrays what is,

"Socialist Realism as art shows the movement of socialism that the artist has seen in life and reflected in his work" (Read:1945:130).

Terry Eagleton, in Marxism and Literary Criticism speaks of the reflectionist theory. He says that if the artist is to reflect life by using his work like a mirror,

"...then it is, as Pierre Macherey argues, one place at an angle to reality, a broken mirror which presents it's images in fragmented form"
(Eagleton:1976:49).

Thus, Socialist Realism is a style which selects main phenomena from total phenomena by "sifting". Radek's view is that only that which is essential, from the point of view of guiding principles, should be portrayed. In this sense, art is but a reflection of a specific kind of ideology, the ideal of socialism. Therefore Socialist Realism is yet one more attempt to give intellectual or dogmatic purpose to art. Nevertheless, Leon Trotsky, in Literature and Revolution, denies that such desires, to dominate art by means of decrees and orders, exist - "Art must plow the field in all directions...". Trotsky also calls for free expression, or in his words, "Please write about anything you can think of!" However, he reminds us of the emerging proletariat - the new man - and states that "...the revolution cannot live together with mysticism, romanticism, or any type of formalism, which

ignores the psychological unity of man". Trotsky recognised the need for socialist culture to absorb the finer products of bourgeois art - "the new artist will need all the methods and processes evolved in the past..." (Chipp:1968:462-3). He stressed that this did not mean eclectically tolerating counter-revolutionary works. Perhaps the Party attitude can be better understood in Trotsky's following statement,

"Does not such a policy mean however that the Party is going to have an unprotected flank on the side of art? This is a great exaggeration. The Party will repel the clearly poisonous, disintegrating tendencies of art and will guide itself by its political standards. It is true however that it is less protected on the flank of art than on the political front..."

(Chipp:1968:463).

This quotation clearly reflects the acknowledgement by the Party of the influence of the arts in Russia. They recognised artistic culture as a force to be reckoned with, and thus formed a conscious policy towards the arts. Lenin's speech to the 1920 Congress of Proletarian Writers espouses the valuable culture bequeathed by capitalism and, like Trotsky, he insisted that the new proletarian culture be built on these traditions. Clearly what Lenin called for is a return to a style of art which was intelligible. This was further emphasised in a prior decree on monumental propaganda issued in April 1918,

"Why do we have to turn away from the truly beautiful, reject it as a starting point for further development merely on the basis that it is 'old' ? Why do we have to worship the new like a 'god' whom we have to submit to simply because it is new?...I just cannot consider the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and other 'isms' as the highest manifestation of artistic genius. I do not understand them, I do not experience any pleasure from them..." (Bowl:1971:45).

Lenin's words are much the same as those of the workers and masses who, when confronted by these "isms", demanded an art that was intelligible and emotive. Thus realism as a style was accepted as more appropriate to the political purposes of the Soviet regime.

Lunarcharsky then devoted the bulk of his cultural budget to supporting groups of artists who conformed to this outlook. Financial support of the avant-garde was redirected to academicians and ideologues who subsequently established Socialist Realism as the only officially-sanctioned style. A new commission was established to control radicalism in design and decoration for propagandistic art.

Representational artists such as D.S. Moore (1883-1946) and A.A. Radakov (1879-1942) were assigned to promote this ideal and won acclaim for their broadly appealing simplistic themes and their realist technique. The establishment of *AkhRR* (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) in 1922, won Party approval as a realist organisation endeavouring to depict contemporary themes. These were followed by other groups such as *OST* (Society of Easel Painters), *NOZh* (New Society of Painters) and *4 Arts*. These groups influenced educational policy and posed a threat to abstractionist schools.

By the mid-1930's Constructivism was officially out of favour, and the dogma of Socialist Realism was firmly established by the Communist Party in 1934. In the visual arts, the works of the nineteenth century "Wanderers" and the Abramstevo colony¹ were used as a model to portray the idealisation of the peasant. Architecture of the period showed a return to classical style.

This style of painting was not merely a continuation of Russian culture or particular to the

¹The Wanderers from the Abramstevo colony believed that art should be primarily concerned with, and subordinate to, reality. Their subject matter emphasised an active force in the cause of social reform. (See Camilla Gray; *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*).

Stalin regime alone. It has flourished wherever a totalitarian state has demanded that art should serve a political purpose. Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy and the Mao Tse Tung regime have all adhered to realism of this kind. Nevertheless, Bowlit concludes that the

"...resultant artistic discipline of socialist realism which the Party provided was a bitter but essential remedy for the fragmentation confronting leftist art; at last a cohesive style, a definite school of Soviet painting was created"

(Bowlit:1971:51).

The emergence of this school was made possible by the annihilation of avant-garde art. The works of Suprematism and Constructivism were locked into vaults in Soviet museums. All Western artistic culture was labelled as "degenerate" and interest in foreign art was viewed as a criminal offence. Museums only displayed the work of the Wanderers and new Socialist Realist paintings. World art history was reviewed by Soviet officials who interpreted it in terms of a struggle between "realistic" and "anti-realistic" trends. Soviet culture was protected from penetration from the outside world by the Iron Curtain. The result of this was a cultural vacuum as well as a considerable decline in Russian cultural activity.

After Lenin's death (1924), leadership was assumed by Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili (1879-1953) more commonly known as Stalin. Stalin's strength lay in his control of the Party machine and especially his administrative control of official appointments to executive power through his position as General Secretary. During this period, the political purges which he instigated became a common occurrence and constitutes one of the prime foci of historical studies of the Soviet Union to this day. These purges revolved around competition for positions held by officials within the state machinery of government. Grievances held by certain individuals were played off against one another by Stalin, who thereby consolidated his status within the Party structure.

Western observers, according to Hosking, sought an explanation for these purges by attempting to analyse channels of leadership. They emerged with the term "totalitarianism", the principle characteristics of which were,

1) central direction of the entire economy, 2) a single mass party mobilising the entire population, with the rhetorical aim of either "building socialism" or "fighting the enemy", 3) an official monopoly of the means of mass communication, 4) supervision of the masses by a ubiquitous and terroristic security police 5) the encouraged adulation of a single leader and 6) a single official ideology projecting the perfect final state of mankind and claiming priority over both the legal order and the individual conscience

(Hosking:1985:205).

However, the role of the individual conscience challenged ideological constraints. Resistance to official ideology will be emphasised in later chapters.

Government propaganda created a fear of treason and sabotage. All political, economic and spiritual power was concentrated in the same hands. Spiritual power included not only the negative practice of prohibiting the expression of any ideas distasteful to the ideologue, but also the imposition of new moral criteria. The purpose of art and literature was to glorify the supreme ruler and to work up popular enthusiasm for his ideas. To assume that this total power of the "cult personality" was totally effective would be to forget that although individual Russians conformed, often with enthusiasm, they still preserved a great deal of autonomy in their private lives and family loyalties. Nevertheless the complete fragmentation of society with the reduction of every individual to the status of a pawn facing the state barricade remained.

It was obvious that if art was to become an effective political weapon, some kind of centralisation of artistic energies was needed. The Party itself then took control of cultural administration. Stalin's demand for an art that was national in form and socialist in content was carried out by the formation of a single union of Soviet artists including a communist faction. Here, direct contact between the political machine and artistic output was established. This was monitored by Stalin's "cultural thug" A. Zhdanov. All previous art organisations were dissolved and replaced by the Soviet Union of Artists which exists as an umbrella organisation for all art institutions to this day.

Igor Golomshtok has outlined this Soviet art establishment by describing the three basis institutions,

- 1) the Union of Soviet Artists
- 2) the Academy of Arts of the USSR
- 3) the Ministry of Culture of the USSR

(Golomshtok:1977:89).

All of the above were linked by Party control under the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Golomshtok then outlines four basic functions of the Union of Soviet Artists,

1) Ideological function: Members had to accept the codes of Socialist Realism. This meant that they had to paint works of a descriptive realism which would be comprehensible to the masses. Members painted Red army commanders, Red army victories, workers in the fields and Party members at Party congresses, as well as any facet of Soviet life that exalted communism. Style and technique reverted to that of the Salon at the turn of the previous century.

2) Judicial function: membership of the Union gave artists the right to work. This was similar to receiving a diploma. Thus acceptance of the Socialist Realist style became a

condition of membership. Membership became in turn a condition to be able to practice professionally.

3) Economic function: Commissions and material rewards were only achieved through the Union of Soviet Artists or the Ministry of Culture. Selling work privately was declared illegal.

4) Controlling function: The Union appointed adjudicators of works for exhibitions and any criticisms appearing in journals were scrutinised before publication

(Golomshtok:1977:90-8).

The Academy of Arts of the USSR was founded in 1947. This body controlled all important art institutes and schools. Here, qualified instructors in Socialist Realism explained to future artists the fallibility of modern art. Students were taught to paint portraits and to depict the achievements of socialism. These artists formed the vanguard of the elite of Socialist Realism. Leadership of institutions relied on these artists to enact their policies. Most of the artists were promoted to the Union of Soviet Artists where they received profitable commissions. The Union was made up of a limited number of highly paid members. Their technique earned them the nickname of "dry-brush men".

The Ministry of Culture of the USSR had direct control over exhibitions and museums. Unlike the museums, it had a committee which controlled all state purchases of art works. This was the cultural section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which controlled all three bodies - the Ministry, the Academy and the Union.

The Union proscribed the journals *Tvorchestvo* (creativity) and *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* (Decorative Art in the USSR) as well as a commissioning body known as the *Kudozhestvenny Fond* (Artistic Fund).

The Ministry controlled the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura* (Soviet Culture) and the State Hermitage and State Russian Museums. It also controlled the State Purchasing Commission and the Institute for the History of Art.

The Academy also controlled the following educational institutions; the Surikov Institute, (Moscow) the Repin Institute (Leningrad)¹, the Institute of Decorative and Applied Art (Moscow) and a research organisation known as the Institute for the History and Theory of the Figurative Arts.

The complex network that these organisations formed ensured that absolute control was maintained over any artist who wished to practice professionally. Theoretically, the State regarded it as impossible for any artist to practice professionally without membership. If he intended to work for personal financial gain he was liable for criminal prosecution. Golomshtok has stated "...he may be forced to give up his brush for the spade of an unskilled labourer" (Golomshtok:1977:97).

The Socialist Realist line imposed by Stalin after 1929 held that a work of art should fulfill the criteria of *partinost*, (party spirit) *ideinost* (firm commitment to prescribed ideology) and *narodnost* (true portrayal of the life, soul and spirit of the people). This "portrayal of the life and soul of the people" reaffirmed the religious undertones of the Soviet Union. The embodiment of this 'religion' in literature and art was Socialist Realism. Anyone who denied the dogma was deemed to have rejected the state religious ideology in favour of bourgeois or western philosophy, which was both apostasy and a crime.

¹ Ilya Repin (1844-1930) was a founder member of the Abramtsevo colony.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNOFFICIAL THREAT.

"It is useless to state what one's heart does not feel" announced Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Solzhenitsyn:1973:13). This Russian author was not alone in challenging the principles of *partinost* or *naradnost* in art during the mid-fifties. Although only a few artists opposed the dogma of Socialist Realism, they did leave an impact on all Soviet art of the late fifties and early sixties. These artists strove to depict all aspects of Soviet reality including its drab routine and its contradictions. Soviet art criticism established the term "tough style" for the definition of this period.

The unexpected death of Stalin in March 1953 led to the assumption of power of N.S. Khrushchev. The following year journalist Ilya Ehrenburg wrote a short novel in the pages of the literary journal *Znamya* entitled *Ottepel* (the Thaw). The title of his work has become symbolic of the "thaw" in the arts during the post-Stalin years.

The détente in Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation years lasted until 1962. During this period there were wild swings in official policy. Every act of liberality taken within Russian society was followed by an official call for ideological constraint. Although the slight raising of the Iron Curtain did nurture freer thinking in the Soviet art world, the whole political dogma of Socialist Realism remained untouched. All the former ideologies were kept in place as bastions of totalitarian art. Nevertheless, the need for individual expression grew, and the new movement of 'Unofficial' art emerged.

UNOFFICIAL ART

Because the art of this period continues to develop there is no definition that can be

attached to its style. Norton Dodge and Alison Hilton have stated the following on this phenomenon,

"The term 'Unofficial' is used in preference to more polemical ones, such as 'dissident' or 'underground'. It merely means that the art is not acceptable by official Party standards. The term is serviceable because it does not wrongly limit the art in question to any one style or tendency. It is not descriptive and does little to suggest either thematic and stylistic diversity or the artistic quality of officially unrecognised art in the Soviet Union" (Dodge and Hilton:1977:9).

At first, this movement used artistic forms simply to represent reality, and, in opposition to Socialist Realism, it chose different aspects of reality to reflect. Instead of admiration for the beauty and wealth of the material world, it strove to preserve spiritual values, to penetrate the aesthetic, ethical, religious and other perceptions of life. The alienation of the individual and the idea of existential pessimism replaced the superficial social optimism of Socialist Realism.

It is important to note that these artists did not adhere to any political doctrine. Each artist was guided above all by a personal disinclination to adhere to the aesthetic norms of Socialist Realism. Their main thrust was not political but artistic. Nevertheless, John E. Bowlt states that the movement flourished both as a "...protest mechanism and as an aesthetic experiment" (Bowlt:1971:20). By rejecting the dogma of official culture, they were, in effect, making a "political statement". Although some "unofficials" stressed that they were aloof from politics by underlining the non-ideological nature of their work, every article about them in the Soviet press accused them of denying Soviet ideals and propagating bourgeois ideology.

Before examining the problems facing these artists, it is necessary to analyse the nature

of their work. It has been noted, earlier in this chapter, that at first these artists confined their work to representational forms. These works reflected variants of Surrealism and Expressionism. Here they concentrated on portraying all aspects of Soviet life including the slums, factories, alcoholics and streetwalkers. Later the cultural shift of the Iron Curtain exposed artists to ideas and creative concepts which were new to the Soviet people.

The theories and history of the Russian and Western avant-garde of the early twentieth century together with latest foreign trends began to circulate among the intelligentsia. As a result, the task of reflecting reality became secondary to the creation of a new reality and new creative concepts. The ideas of Russian Constructivism, Pop-art, Abstractionism and Conceptualism were telescoped into little more than a decade. Here, Soviet artists condensed and assimilated thirty years of international art development. Golomshtok has discredited the accusation that Unofficial art plagiarised and imitated western trends, or that it seemed like a feeble reflection of things discovered long ago in the art of Europe and the USA. He states,

"...a closer examination reveals certain aesthetic traits which show that it is not merely a reflection of western trends but a deeply individual artistic phenomenon"

(Golomshtok:1977:82).

Although Soviet artists were interested in Western abstract art, they did not find abstraction a suitable vehicle for portraying their artistic concerns. There was, therefore, a return to a form of fantastical realism. This was for them a more satisfying way of expressing their understanding of art as a reflection of the deep social and spiritual developments of their time. Although many Unofficial artists worked through abstraction rapidly and returned to figuration, others clung to the idea. The Abstractionist genre in the Soviet Union is relatively small compared to the Surrealistic and Representational

styles.¹ The concept of art as purely an optical experience or "art for art's sake" was alien to the Russian sociological environment. Because abstraction had little to do with the main Socialist Realist literary or didactic function of Soviet art, it found itself defunct.

ABSTRACTIONISM

The 1960's abstract school in Russian art shows some influence of Western abstractionist ideas. This is a result of exhibitions permitted in the Russian state during this period. Here Russian artists came face to face with works of American artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine. Russian artists were interested in aspects of Abstract Expressionism and at first imitated expressionist techniques. Such artists were Vladimir Yakolev and Lev Krapivnitsky. Their work shows loose, rapid handling of uneven densities of paint, as well as brush and finger marks characteristic of Abstract Expressionism. These are reminiscent of the works of De Kooning and Gottlieb, which were also executed with hard forceful strokes.

Anatoly Zverev and Eli Bielutin strike a compromise between figuration and abstraction. Their "action painting" style still portrays representational forms, such as portraits which emerge from the abstract.

Lydia Masterkova and Evgeny Rukhin resorted to collage as an alternative medium rather than painting in the non-objective mode. Masterkova experiments chiefly in oil paint, but also does etchings and lithographs. Her palette is severe consisting of blacks, browns, greys, violets and blues. Doilies, lace, corrugated cardboard and other materials are pasted onto freely brushed or dripped backgrounds, the latter reminiscent of Pollock's dripped canvases.

Rukhin attaches found objects to the canvas, such as fragments of furniture, paint brushes and combs. Onto one painting he has attached a paint tube caught in a

¹ When Russian art has not been directly message orientated it has concerned itself with theoretical aspects, as noted in the discussion of Malevitch's work.

mousetrap. This recalls the Dada works of Marcel Duchamp.

Another group of Abstractionists revived the Russian abstract tradition of the 1920's. The Suprematist style is evident in their work. The Constructivist tradition, where the application of theoretical ideas allied to practical function is used, is also evident. Representative of this trend were the members of the Moscow kinetic group *Dvizhenie* (Movement). This group, founded by Lev Nusberg and Francisco Infante, attracted commissions for kinetic wall structures and ceilings in various halls of the Leningrad stadium, some editorial offices and a coffee bar on Gorky street. The changing taste of the intelligentsia allowed for assimilation of these works. The movement's work shows features of Suprematism and Constructivism. For example - the use of primary colours and geometric shapes with hard edges. Nusberg's movement has since then ended.

SURREALISM

However, while there were signs of a renewed interest in Constructivism, as in *Dvizhenie*, Surrealism dominated Russian unofficial art during this period. In Janet Kennedy's essay "From the Real to the Surreal" European art during the twenties and thirties is divided into two camps, Surrealism and Constructivism. Of these she says,

"The latter (Constructivism) was confidently political and utopian; Surrealism was by contrast individualistic; highly pessimistic about the possibility of political or social progress, and emphasised the irrational in it's concept of the human personality" (Dodge & Hilton:1977:38).

Surrealism is a loosely defined movement. It can be described as an attack on reality through it's portrayal of dream worlds - not in terms of creating utopian visions, but in the way in which objects are randomly assembled in hallucinatory environments. In a sense, Surrealism attempts to enrich the world by means of imagination and the subconscious. Thus, like abstraction, it is a highly idiosyncratic style. Surrealism produced by the

'unofficials' borrows ideas from western surrealists such as René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Andre Masson and Salvador Dali. These artists perceived the metaphysical world of the imagination as real, or perhaps more real than, the world of everyday phenomena, or "bourgeois reality" as they often called it. However, even though the Russian surrealists have been influenced by western artists, they do, as Kennedy points out "...share an ancestry going back to the long standing tradition of grotesque and fantastic art - to Hieronymous Bosch for example" (Dodge and Hilton:1977:38). Such Russian surrealists are Otari Kandaurov, Igor Tiulpanov, Vladimir Rokhlin and Ilya Murin, amongst others.

Kandaurov's work portrays bone-like amorphous forms which blend into half familiar objects. Content is based on personal or religious themes. His style extends to officially acceptable portraits in which the academic realist technique is combined with metaphysical qualities.

Tiulpanov's work shows imagery derived from the Dutch tradition of the seventeenth century. His paintings are meticulous in the extreme, so that the accumulation of detail creates a feeling of heightened sensory awareness characteristic of the surrealistic style.

Rokhlin's paintings are executed in techniques grounded in the Italian Renaissance tradition. His stylistic, precise architectural backgrounds, clearly defined contours and the modelling of deep browns and reds, are reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's work. However, Rokhlin's figures combine erotic and disturbing elements which are absent from the more idealistic Renaissance style.

Ilya Murin's work consists of large black and white drawings or etchings. His technique is reminiscent of old master engravings. Here fantastic and disparate combinations of objects are executed in fine lines, modulating contours and shades. His subject matter consists of chickens, nutcrackers, mirrors, butterflies, human figures and other objects which seem to be randomly assembled.

Petr Belenok portrays figures in Soviet dress which are placed in an illusory science fiction realm. These figures float, gesture and sometimes lock themselves into formations. This induces a mood which is entirely alien to any accepted image of Soviet reality.

It must be noted that, to this day, there is no organised movement or particular group of surrealists. All these artists work individually. Some are unknown to each other and prefer to work isolated from art groups.

POP AND CONCEPTUAL ART

Apart from the abstract and surreal movements in Russian art, there is experimentation with Pop and Conceptual art. The notion of Pop and Conceptual art as it evolved in Britain and America is alien to the circumstances of Soviet life. Although some of these artists do not fall into any particular classification of the above styles, their work contains elements of more than one grouping.

Vladimir Yankilevsky uses elements of Surrealism and Conceptual art in his work. He combines primitive and biological forms with modern mechanistic imagery. The paintings suggest distorted figurative imagery trapped somewhere between biological and mechanical worlds. The colours he uses are often luminescent and unnatural, creating a very disquieting effect. The humanoid creatures he creates inhabit a barren cosmic landscape, some with an arm in place of a leg - the arm carrying a soviet briefcase, or a head blowing a trumpet where a tail should be.

Ilya Kabakov combines scenes or objects together with words or statements evoking

philosophical questions or concepts. Like Magritte's painting of a pipe entitled *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Kabakov questions the nature of reality and the nature of art. He explains;

"A label is not a work of art, but a label perceived in the context of a classical picture has the potential for gigantic dramatic conclusions"

(Dodge and Hilton:1977:44).

Kabakov's work "A Picture Dictionary" uses the simple outline drawings of a child's alphabet book to depict the objects of everyday life - a teacup, chair, brush or table. These are labelled in careful Russian script. Each object is in a sense magnified and enobled, in order to remind us of their importance in Soviet life.

Perhaps the most successful conceptual artists are Vitaly Komar and Alexandr Melamid. This duo exploit the political clichés of Soviet life. Their work will be examined in the following chapter.

There are other artists whose works are of such individual style that they cannot be classified into any of the above mentioned streams of unofficial art.

Oscar Rabin's works show thickly encrusted reds, browns and blues in sombre shades. His portrayals of Moscow's cities and landscapes are littered with labels, stamps and other artifacts derived from Cubism. These paintings have a modest gentleness and sentimental charm, opposed to the harsh brashness of official art.

Boris Sveshnikov executes work that recalls the decorative style of art nouveau. Other works show delicate use of line and fantastic imagery. Subjects include flying men resembling angels and landscapes with a fairytale quality. Some of his works resemble the paintings of Bosch and Breughel. His artistic development began in the Stalinist

concentration camps, where he secretly created fantasy drawings in order to escape from the realities of the adverse conditions of his prison.

Valentina Kropivnitskaya is another artist whose work displays a whimsical illustrative style. Her work revolves around and encompasses the Russian folk tale genre. She works mainly in pencil, creating peaceful landscapes inhabited by humanoid beings with rabbitlike faces. These figures are removed from the everyday world by their unusual and exotic ambience.

The style of all these artists is, in some cases, difficult to pinpoint because of its constantly changing nature. On the whole most artists do have personal artistic direction and thus produce individually idiosyncratic work.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF, AND REACTION TO, UNOFFICIAL ART

Apart from official opposition, Unofficial artists have had to deal with the difficulty of obtaining materials in the Soviet Union. Only those who were still accepted in the Union of Artists had easy access to canvas and paper. Another factor has been the shortage of studio space. Most Unofficials worked in small apartments with restricted working areas. As a result some artists have utilised this spatial limitation to create larger wholes from smaller parts. Works were created in series, often to simply explore ideas as an option, rather than working in the traditional diptych or triptych format. The longest series of interrelated works is Ernst Neizvestny's sequence of multipart etchings, which were created at the rate of one a day over a period of the year in which the artist had been denied a studio. Russian artists have thus turned a material handicap into a basis for distinctive modes of stylistic experimentation and expression.

It was the very individualistic nature of output from these artists which aroused opposition from the CPSU. However, art which was not consistent with the requirements

of Soviet Socialist Realism comprised of only a small proportion of the nation's artistic output. In 1977 there were 15000 members of the Union of Soviet Artists as opposed to a few hundred Unofficials. Nonetheless, this work was met with disapproval by the authorities. The first exhibition of this work which was officially allowed, was held in one of the largest exhibition halls in Moscow called the Manege gallery. The current president of the USSR Academy of Arts, A.Serov, allowed the exhibition to take place to demonstrate to Krushev the climate of "liberal decadence" which was growing in art circles. Krushev's outrage is evident in his following speech delivered at a meeting of government leaders and Party officials on March 8 1963,

"The Communist Party is fighting and will continue to fight against
Abstractionism and against any other formalist distortions in art"

(Riha:1964:706).

The Manege affair resulted in a temporary reshuffling of liberal minded figures within the Artists' Union. Press campaigns were launched against these cultural deviationists, questioning how state money could be spent on such "harmful daubings". By the end of the sixties all dissident artists were deprived of any sales, exhibitions or commission opportunities. Most artists then effected a compromise and continued to work in the Socialist Realist style. Others joined the new movement of unofficial opposition.

Works by unofficials managed to find a market amongst the intelligentsia, especially those with scientific backgrounds. These supporters went so far as to arrange exhibitions within the confines of their institutions which attracted diplomats, tourists and correspondents. However, groups of unofficial artists who gathered at apartments to discuss their work were harassed by the KGB who warned them not to do abstract work. Exhibitions held at institutes of the intelligentsia were also closed by the KGB, who even harassed those who had commended work in visitor's books.

These dissident exhibitions peaked during Breshnev's rule in 1974, who made his opposition evident by instructing bulldozers to raze an open air exhibition in mid-September of that year. This resulted in vociferous opposition from the Western media. This perhaps prompted the creation of the Culture Division which was then opened by the state to negotiate with the non-conformists. Permission was granted for the Second Autumn Open Air Exhibition. Here work was seen by almost 15000 spectators. Officialdom could only stand by and observe, inhibited by the presence of the international media. However, the ideological war continued in the Soviet press. The Chronicle of the People printed an article by the critic F. Reshetnikov who stated,

"Here we have seen trash substituted for art before, at the beginning of the century ... (meaning Malevitch and Tatlin). This kind of work it seems to me is in it's very essence directed against the people" (Golomshtok:1977:114).

Other exhibitions resulted in further attacks from the press. In 1975, an exhibition held at the bee-keeping pavilion of the Institute of Economic Achievements was criticised by Y. Nekhoroshev, the editor of the journal Tvorchestvo (Creation). After accusing Oscar Rabin, Kandaurov and others of "...hypocritical primitivism and erotic representation..." he ended his article with a quotation from Maxim Gorky,

"What have they to do in life's battle?. We see them nervously and furtively slinking away from it as best they can, hiding in murky corners of mysticism, in the preciousness of hastily plagiarised aestheticism. Sadly and hopelessly they wander in the labyrinths of metaphysics, twisting and turning in the pokey paths of religion cluttered with centuries of lies, accompanied everywhere by the bane of triviality, hysteria of cowardice, and everything they touch is showered by pretty-pretty words, cold and void of meaning..." (Glezer:1977:115).

Furthermore, art expert I.Gorin released an article in Moskovskaya Pravda, the mouthpiece of the Moscow Party Committee,

"Seeing this work it is obvious that the real stakes are neither art nor freedom of expression, but politics and the confrontation of two ideologies, the communist and the bourgeois. Many so called avant-garde artists claim to avoid ideology, choosing some third way. But it is obvious to everyone that there is no such third way. In actual fact these artists are not innocently playing at 'art for arts sake' but actively preaching bourgeois ideology. We must not allow hostile ideology to penetrate into our midst in the guise of innovation and creative inquiry"

(Glezer:1977:118).

Gorin's statement encapsulated the unwillingness of the Party to accept the work of Unofficial artists. They were unwilling to endorse such art and dismissed it as purely political- "...the preaching of bourgeois ideology". Exhibitions were further denigrated by the Party as private enterprise where artists were accused of making political capital out of "...random bourgeois scribblings on canvas" (Glezer:1977:107).

These accusations did little to hinder the growth of Unofficial art. The government then proceeded to allow certain exhibitions in order to avoid organised protest from these artists. In May 1977, the Moscow Union of Graphic Artists sponsored an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. It was mooted however, that the work selected for exhibition was a reflection of the poor taste of the organisers, and was a device to deglamourise the avant-garde in the eyes of Western viewers. Attempts were also made to integrate unofficial artists into official organisations, presumably to manifest control over such dissidents by proclaiming that all artists were now regarded as official.

While the Unofficial artists were creating debate in Party circles, the existence of moderate, even progressive elements within the Union and the Academy had blurred the edges between what was, and what was not, officially acceptable in painting. The works of these painters, such as André Mylnikov, portrays the "...'poetic' aspect of Socialist Realism (rather) than it's application to 'concrete reality'..." (Bird:1987:273). Here there is a turn away from the public and monumental towards the sentimental and naïve, as portrayed in Mylnikov's "In Peaceful Fields" (1950). This is devoid of the political in that it is a direct representation of figures in a landscape and thus serves no propaganda purpose.

Nevertheless, the Unofficial art movement continued to grow and artists continued to meet in various apartments to exhibit and discuss their work, which remained outside the doctrines of Socialist Realism. This movement is the result of individual conviction rejecting ideological boundaries.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEMPORARY ASPECTS.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the CPSU. Realising the need for policy changes to cope with difficulties facing the Soviet Union both on the domestic front and on the international level, he developed a programme entitled *perestroika* (restructuring) which hoped to reform economic, political and social aspects of Russian life. Linked to this programme was the concept of *glasnost* which stands for "openness" or "truth-telling". In his book Perestroika Gorbachev addresses the intelligentsia and creative unions, requesting that they adhere to the notion of *glasnost*,

"The conference is in favour of further democratising science and culture, creating and developing the material basis for this sphere in keeping with the demands put forward by the restructuring of our society. The Party is for diversity in the search for truth and in the artistic vision of truth, for competitiveness, innovation and continuity. So it expects workers in science, literature and the arts to be most active, devoted and highly responsible before the people" (Gorbachev :1987:276).

Gorbachev still attaches importance to the responsibility of the people. He advocates openness and the search for truth, yet reminds artists to be aware of the masses,

"Let the intelligentsia's sense of responsibility also manifest itself in it's creative unions, taking care, above all, of society's spiritual development" (Gorbachev:1987:83).

Although Gorbachev advocates open debate within the creative unions, he does not place strictures on what direction should be taken. His goal is to allow free debate and a

policy-free approach to cultural matters. He has stated that bureaucratic manifestations of dogma should be challenged,

"A favourable climate for a free comparison of views and opinions must be created, and petty tutelage and the holdovers of the command style in the administration of science and culture must be overcome resolutely" (Gorbachev:1987:292).

Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy has stimulated debate amongst Soviet art historians. Some have argued that it will be difficult to work in an environment where each individual becomes his own philosopher and foremost authority. Gorbachev believes that passive attitudes are unproductive, apathy being a major problem within the Soviet workplace. Bowlt quotes two art historians debating the idea of Socialist Realism,

"Instead of the term (Socialist Realism) I would propose a completely different concept, so that we can be guided by other, totally different categories, ones that could be feasible. You see, we just don't know what Socialist Realism is and we have been confused by this for the longest time" (Dimitri Sarabianov).

(In reply, Vladimir Pogodin)

"I would like to object to comrade Sarabianov. He suggests abolishing the term Socialist Realism. Well, that's okay, we have democracy, no-one is prohibited from voicing their point of view. He has the full right to do that. But why should it's status be abolished? Comrade Sarabianov has another democratic right- to resign from the Union of Artists whose statute has the term Socialist Realism written into it!" (Bowl:1989:216).

The preceding debate illustrates that the credibility of Socialist Realism has become a contentious issue to those who have an interest in it. Nevertheless, however paradoxical the term might be, as mentioned in chapter two, the works of the Socialist Realist style remain part of the Russian Soviet tradition and culture. They cannot be dismissed as "deluded works" which are the result of an autocratic aesthetic doctrine. The majority of people in Russia prefer paintings of benign landscapes and Stalin's "style empire" to the avant-garde black squares of Malevitch. Although the works of the Russian avant-garde are attracting significant attention after being re-exposed to the public, Socialist Realist works previously dismissed as propaganda are being redressed. Eduard Nakhamkin, a leading New York dealer from the Soviet Union, has planned a series of Socialist Realist exhibitions for 1990. This proves that the genre is worthy of attention and shows some artistic merit. Intrinsically, it is probably the fact that they are Socialist Realist works which accounts for the interest in them.

The reinstatement of the early Russian avant-garde has, however, attracted many viewers to the museums. These works have been exhumed from the vaults to be shown to the public. Robert Hughes describes the phenomenon,

"Dissident modernism became a talisman only because it was repressed;
once tolerated and encouraged, it becomes politically harmless"

(Hughes:1989:80).

As discussed in Chapter One, the abstract compositions of Suprematism cannot ideologically influence the viewer. As a result these works are politically harmless.

The exhibiting of these works have resulted in criticism from art historians, not because of their content, but in the manner in which the works are selected and arranged. Charlotte Douglas states that Russian art historians and museums still adhere to the

ideological custom of artificially breaking Russian twentieth century art into rigid pre- and post revolutionary periods,

"Once the sensational aspect of seeing forbidden work wore off, the exhibition itself proved frustrating. The 'slice of time' approach makes it difficult to understand the development of any particular artist or movement" (Douglas: 1988:39).

Glasnost nevertheless poses problems far deeper than this. In recent years the international market has shown a marked interest in contemporary Soviet art. Because of Gorbachev's *openness* plan, the work has been presented as a forum for the spirit of *glasnost*. The fact that not all contemporary Russian artists are worthy of international attention has been obscured by this. Nevertheless works have been sold because of their intrinsic aesthetic value and not simply because that they are "Russian".

Besides the problems created by the flood of Russian art onto the international market since *glasnost*, there have been difficulties involved in creating a more dynamic domestic market. There are not enough private galleries suitable for exhibition or sufficient avenues for international art reviewers. The barter and exchange that does exist occurs among a small group of collectors and dealers. They are more concerned with aesthetic pleasure than monetary profit and are more interested in the early avant-garde art than contemporary aspects. Thus Russian artists continue to look to the West for a market. Margarita Tupitsyn describes the results,

"Under *glasnost*, where it would seem that 'everything is possible' and when limitations, which existed in the past, are beginning to be abolished, it has become much more difficult for Soviet artists to know how to orient themselves, to whom they should address their claims and so on..."

(Tupitsyn:1989:148).

The contemporary art scene in the Soviet Union is too varied and complex to make general comments about. Most artists are young, well aware of contemporary Western art, and socially conscious. The main characteristic of all these artists is their diversity - that is "...everything in the world is ours as artists and we can take anything we want and use it" (Caley:1987:74). This proliferation of ideas is synonymous with the western term "post-modernism", the aesthetic movement which Soviet artists have used as a means of identifying with Western art trends. Gablik aptly describes the term,

"Post-modernism is the somewhat weasel word now being used to describe the garbled situation of art in the 80's ... the old stylistic divisions now mix, blend and alternate interchangeably with each other: dogmatism and exclusivity have given way to openness and co-existence"

(Gablik:1984:73).

Margaret Tupitsyn elaborates the concept further in the context of contemporary Russian art,

"The old slogan 'national in form, socialist in content' was changed to the extent that national yielded to international (meaning modernist) and socialist content, with its glorification of collective consciousness within the space of heroic cliché, was replaced by an urge toward self-examination and solitude" (Tupitsyn:1987:76).

Bereft of a history of modernism in art, artists are now free to explore the directions art can take once released from the doctrinal confines of Socialist Realism.

Before analysing the present genres, the standing of these artists in terms of contemporary official culture requires attention. Unofficial art now serves as a trademark

of official culture. The government has realised that the diversity of works from the last eighty years are of increasing interest to tourists. This work draws crowds and thus has inherent commercial potential. International exhibitions have been organised by the Soviet Ministry of Culture itself. In fact, Eduard Nakhamkin has formed a partnership with Tair Salakhov, the present General Secretary of the USSR Union of Artists. Other dealers in Soviet art are Elena Kornetchuk, Phyllis Kind and Catherine Thieck. Works are sold through the Ministry which keeps 40% of the purchase price and passes on 10% to 15% to the artist in hard currency, which can only be spent outside the U.S.S.R., and the rest in Rubles. In 1987, the Soviet Culture Fund was formed in order to promote Soviet art both at home and abroad and it is interesting to note that Raisa Gorbachev is a board member. This Fund has proved to be more successful than the Ministry of Culture in supporting Russian art. For example, Nikita Lobanov-Rostovsky's collection of Russian theatrical art was refused promotion by the Ministry. But the Soviet Culture Fund has succeeded in marketing the work in London and New York (Trucco:1988:94).

One can conclude from this interest in modern art that the barriers between official and unofficial art are no longer as defined as they once were. This development is a continuation of the original challenge to the art establishment in the 1970's, which resulted in a more flexible approach within the Union of Artists. Presently, fostered by Gorbachev's reform plans and his attempts to stimulate private enterprise, the elite of the cultural establishment has begun to show signs of tolerance and interest in modernist styles.

The alliance between the avant-garde and the authorities, together with the sale of works in the western market, has created an incongruent development: the commercialisation of the visual arts. This is encouraged by government organisations whose previous manifesto was to ensure that art remained controlled in, and orientated to, ideological purposes as opposed to the "western bourgeois" commercial outlook. Thus art produced in a so called socialist environment now finds itself firmly entrenched in the

capitalist market-place.

Current overt movements in Moscow and Leningrad are the Conceptualists whose movements have been labelled *Sotsart*¹, *Aptart*², and the New Painters. These varied styles have produced a pluralistic arena where generational, local, aesthetic, metaphysical and political art movements co-exist.

SOTSART

Tupitsyn aptly describes the essence of Sotsart,

"Adopting Derrida's argument, one may say that Socialist Realism constitutes a political ideology that, in the name of a Marxist hypothesis, is articulated with the finest examples of...the metaphysics of presence. This presence imprints on every Soviet citizen an inescapable sensation of the tangibility and concrete reality of such abstract concepts as Marxist-Leninist truth, bright historical destiny, or even Lenin, Stalin who are, according to official sources, always alive and with you. The Sots artists dismantled the system of these sacred referents of totalitarian culture without abandoning it's generic features and mythical language. In this way they constituted an unprecedented paradigm of post-modernist praxis" (Tupitsyn:1987:77).

The two artists Komar and Melamid, best represent the above theory in their approach. This duo first began their conceptual work in the mid sixties, and smuggled pieces to

¹. The first syllable in the Russian word "socialist" gives rise to this term.

². The term derives it's origin from the word apartment, referring to apartment art.

New York. Although their work remains centered on the Moscow experience, it also captures the language of Western Conceptualism.

What Komar and Melamid challenge is the nature of socialist life itself. Political ironies are portrayed in styles borrowed from the entire history of painting. They have used the style of Socialist Realism to communicate avant-garde ideas and have conducted a campaign against any ideal of authority, political or artistic. Upon emigration to New York, their work became increasingly autobiographical. They now quote themselves and their own history as artists in order to satirise the historical and social meaning and relevance of art. Each of their works is the product of two minds. Examples of such work are vast. Satirisations of the academic realist style can be seen in a painting of peasants plowing a field near the ruins of Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal (Scenes From the Future, 1975) and portraits of Lenin, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill (The Yalta panels, Documenta, 1987). Other works range from "A Young Karl Marx on a Dishrag" (1970) to conceptual 'happenings' such as the selling of Andy Warhol's soul and the sending of a telegram to Ayatollah Khomeini proclaiming responsibility for an earthquake in Iran¹. Absurdity and comic attitudes are the main aspects of their style. By making a spectacle of Soviet ideology itself they have created their own rules and have emerged with a satirical portrayal of the position they find themselves in as contemporary Russian artists.

Eric Bulatov, unlike other Soviet artists, chooses not to interpret Russian social life in a comic or abusive fashion in order to deconstruct the stereotypes of Soviet art. Instead he chooses to expose the ambiguity of the Soviet ideological environment through direct repetition of stereotypes - for example - photo-realistic representations of major streets, political leaders and slogans. These are depictions of a reality which is immersed in ideology. Works such as "Glory to the CPSU" (1975) or the portraits of Brezhnev (1983) are not seen by censors as subversive. In New York however his work tends to create

¹. This was in response to the hostage crisis.



confusion among those who are not familiar with the fabric of Soviet culture and who are, therefore, unable to interpret the irony of such representations.

APTART

The emergence of Aptart began in the early eighties when young artists became increasingly influenced by the New York and European art worlds. Intelligentsia who had left Russia sent back a constant flow of information about the most recent trends such as New Wave, Trans Avant-garde, German Expressionism and East Village art. As a result younger Soviet artists have focused on broader political and cultural issues. The works are generally small and untidy, encapsulating the non-commercial nature of this oppositional avant-garde. Vinyl tablecloths and other unconventional media are used in lieu of traditional materials. Nikita Alekseev, a member of this circle, describes how the contemporary avant-garde established itself as a movement. In a letter to Margarita Tupitsyn he writes,

"...went to the city cultural section and explained the following: 'you've already given permission to everyone to form special interest clubs, even heavy metalists with their studded jackets have one, but we avant-gardists, following in the steps of Beuys and Warhol, what are we, worse or something? Accept us or we will kick up a fuss in your doorways again!'. The officials scratched their heads and granted permission. The Club of Avant-Gardists was formed, (consisting exclusively of post-modernists) a fantastic set of rules was drawn up, having as it's goal the dissemination of ideas..." (Tupitsyn:1987:79).

By the 1980's the decision to exhibit in the Aptart gallery had become a conscious gesture; a style, not a grudging necessity, as it had been in the past.

THE NEW PAINTERS

The New Painters are the youngest and perhaps the most interesting movement existing today. Timur Novikov, a founder member, states,

"Artists must not only be painters, but they must be musicians, writers, film makers, actors, dancers and so on, and these activities must not be separated from painting" (Caley:1987:87).

This quotation typifies the genre. The New Painters have collaborated with rock groups and film makers. The film director Sergei Sokorov recently completed a film that stars members of this group. Furthermore, rock groups such as the Popular Mechanics and Gorky Park (influenced by the West but still sounding distinctly Russian) have included New Painters in concert performances. The work produced by these artists reflects the daily existence of their lives. Subject matter is that of rock groups and the process of making films. There are also more universal visual themes such as rocket ships, electric guitars, the Space Shuttle Challenger and Nelson Mandela. Some of the work is naive or erotic, occasionally using primitive Russian archetypes fused with futuristic imagery. The subject matter and the materials used (for example, fabric for canvas, collage, tyre hubs, plastic and other everyday paraphernalia,) has resulted in their work being labelled "The Wild Style". Such painters are Boris Koshelochov, Yuri Dyshlenko, Sergei Bugaev, alias Afrika, Oleg Kotelnikov and Eugene Dibsky, amongst many others.

The upheaval which is being created by these avant-garde artists, poets, and the emerging pop culture of rock musicians, recalls the atmosphere of the post-revolutionary period when the Soviet cultural apparatus had not yet created. The obvious difference is that it is now being dismantled to make way for new cultural movements devoid of restrictions. The power of individual energy and the potential of individual responsibility have superseded failed institutionalised ideologies, thus heralding a new appreciation of

individualism.

Western artists had hitherto been free to experiment with any artistic style they chose, including the avant-garde. However, the significance of some of these movements appears to be diminishing as a result of the pace of modern Western society. Media pressure and the effects of market trends of consumption and saturation have contributed to the loss of interest in art appreciation. The Soviet Union however, has been denied this type of development. The dam wall has only recently been opened, resulting in a cultural flood unparalleled anywhere in the western world.

CONCLUSION.

The revolution was seen as the "concrete beginning" of the new socialist state. By idealising its own history, Soviet Russia created a myth which was seen to have its origin in 1917. This year was seen as the beginning of Soviet culture. From this date onwards citizens would view the world in terms of socialist oriented ideals. Thus reality was simulated and the originality of self was diffused or erased through an attempt to portray the collective consciousness. Stalin's "style empire" and architectural "baroque" as well as the dogma of Socialist Realism became part of the theatre created by the state on which it staged its own existence. This was a simulation of reality - a world created by the ideological manipulation by the state.

The Russian theorist Victor Tupitsyn has analysed this scenario of simulation and has drawn the conclusion that the *ideological has preceded the real*. Because reality has been viewed from an ideological standpoint (Soviet socialism), the real no longer precedes ideology. Tupitsyn goes on to say,

"But for a Russian to accept that unreservedly would be as sinful as to suggest that the Epiphany of Christ had been preceded by his shroud"

(Tupitsyn:1987:85).

Ilya Kabakov describes the present situation in Russia as living in the aftermath of an atomic explosion.

"Our generation appeared in a world where utopia had already been realised and the explosion had already cooled down. The fallout has settled and now we find ourselves living in a post-utopian world. We're its

heirs and astounded spectators and we feel the brunt of its effects, and the function of our generation is to describe it: we're to talk about the condition of human beings and the world and our own psyches in a post-utopian universe" (Jolles & Misiano:1987:82).

The youngest generation of artists, the New Painters, have refused to be labelled as oppressed artists, thus disassociating themselves from artists of the previous generation. Their optimism heralds new possibilities for an international cultural movement. The young art critic André Khlobystyne states,

"The new art at the end of the twentieth century will be accessible to everyone and received by all classes" (Caley:1987:88).

This quote states the present attitudes of the younger artists in Russia. They are optimistic about the future of art in their world. If art is to be accessible and received by all classes, then artists have a formidable task ahead of them. Their job will be to enlighten mass culture about the many modes that modern art can take - a formidable and demanding task.

The journey taken by Soviet artists since the decline of Socialist Realism is outlined by the artist Vladimir Mironenko,

"...before, in our race to catch up, we only saw the back of the west's head, but now we rub shoulders and look at each other in bewilderment, in a vague expectation of mutual understanding"

(Tupitsyn:1987:80).

Because the work of the Russian avant-garde was officially halted to allow the doctrine of Socialist Realism to flourish, Russian artists indeed have had to "catch up". The return to

formalism and abstractionism in the visual arts in Russia only began during the late fifties when individual conscience began to openly challenge ideological constraints. Russian art was denied a natural progression and was not able to develop free from restrictions, unlike the Western world.

However, freedom of artistic expression has its own drawbacks. Pluralism implies that anything is permitted. This extensive range of options could threaten an important aspect of art: the idea that art can carry a message which could ultimately guide humanity toward a desired ideal. Each artist has his own idea as to what message he must convey, and he could thus find his message lost in the plethora of widely differing artistic styles and directions.

Apart from this inherent tendency towards fragmentation, Russian artists have up until now had a relatively small domestic market for their work. The appreciation of 'modern' art will always remain the preserve of an elite few, and if artists are to survive commercially, they may be forced to compromise their individual styles in order to create works which will satisfy mass demand and tastes.

However the dogma of Socialist Realism was created for the Russian masses. If art is to be programmed by mass taste, then one could conclude that art controlled by dogma tends towards political idealisation and manifests itself as a tendency towards a facile portrayal of romantic ideals, which can be further described as kitsch.

Thus the difficulties faced in terms of trends in modern western societies make the future of Russian art both difficult and challenging. Whether Russian artists can overcome these difficulties remains to be seen.

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