

INTERVIEW WITH THE RUSSIAN ARTIST VITALY KOMAR

Question: Vitaly, first a broad question: what is Soviet mass culture and where does it fit in the Russian context?

Answer: When we are starting to discuss Soviet mass culture, we have to remember that the whole country, the whole Soviet Union was a highly ideological society, a highly ideological state. Mass culture is also ideological. That means that Soviet mass culture, as opposed to Western mass culture, is much more conceptual. This is true because ideology and conceptual manifestation of the visual art, particularly in mass culture, are very similar. For example, during my childhood, we were surrounded by so-called visual propaganda or visual agitation. Mostly these were slogans and poster-style images of the leaders. The slogans usually were executed by artists on a red background with white letters and exclamation marks. This style started at the time of the Russian avant-garde in the early revolutionary years. As you know, later, during the Stalin era, Russian avant-garde was transformed into official socialist realism, sponsored by the government. This led to the creation of official paintings which glorified the Soviet Union and its leaders. But one branch of the Russian avant-garde, the design of mass celebrations, for example, the May 1st day, and November 7th, the day of October revolution, was started at the time of Russian avant-garde. And, paradoxically, this branch of Russian avant-garde survived in mass propaganda, in the Soviet posters we were surrounded by. This really was a very interesting phenomenon because in the West, mass culture was mostly preoccupied with commercials and was a result of consumerism. In the Soviet Union, the official propaganda promoted the ideological ideas. It was the overproduction of ideology, not the overproduction of consumerism. There is a big difference between the mass culture of the Soviet Union and the mass culture of the West. There is also a big difference between Russian Soviet *sots* art and American and Western pop art. Pop art in the West usually reflected commercials and advertising. Our *sots* art was a reflection of overproduction of ideology. That meant that it was a kind of conceptual pop art. Everybody of course remembers that Soviet government sponsored art, official patriotic art, which was also a form of visual agitation. It was a kind of officially sponsored

conceptual art, which we call visual propaganda — all these colorful slogans and posters. That is the basic difference between *sots* art and pop art.

Question: Vitaly, you talked about agitation art and *sots* art, in a way, they are similar, are they not?

Answer: Yes, we can speak about the similarity between Soviet *sots* art and Soviet conceptual art and such phenomena as pop art and American conceptual art. They are similar because artists reflect mass culture in the kind of museum forms which traditionally are related to the art of elite. That was one of the paradoxes of *sots* art and pop art. We can imagine, for example the American art in the 1950s. The museums were full of abstract art, which was not really close to the soul of people. The same situation was occurring in the Soviet Union. Museums and official exhibitions were full of the images of the leaders painted in post-impressionist or 19th-century classical style of painting. But real mass culture was outside the museum walls, in the streets. In the United States, in the West, the streets were full of commercials and advertising of Coca-Cola or a lot of other consumer goods. In Russia, outside of museum walls, we saw the over-production of the slogans, all these red banners with white exclamation marks and the profiles of the leaders and working class people and the collective-farm workers. The elite of both art worlds saw this mass culture as a secondary culture, but suddenly a few young artists appeared like, for example, in the United States, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Jones, and Rauschenberg and they brought this culture from the streets to this museum environment.

That was a revolutionary gesture which was very close to the gesture of Marcel Duchamp. We can call Duchamp the father of pop art and conceptual art because his “readymade” was a kind of revolution in the visual art of the 20th century or in the modern art of the 20th century. A very similar gesture was made by Komar and Melamid — I speak about my friend Alex Melamid and myself — in the early 1970s. We brought to the Moscow small apartments of underground circle, which played a role of the place for discussions, apartment shows for the chosen circle of dissidents and liberal people, whom we can call the elite of the Soviet society. What we brought to our apartment shows a reflection of mass propaganda art, hated by many of us and which was outside and all around us. Bringing this art into our consciousness became a very special psychological act of self-reflection, very similar to the act of self-reflection done by Andy Warhol: “Yes, we’re drinking Coca-Cola, but at the same time we’re admiring the museum art of elite. But this Coca-Cola is reality, and if we brought this depiction of the commercial into the museum elite, that is an important gesture. We’re bringing mass culture into the frame of elite culture.” I can compare this also with 17th century Dutch still-life painters. They brought to the elite form of the painting very simple things like salted herring, or some very simple carafes, other objects from everyday life. Also they started to depict

everyday life of simple people. It was a kind of gesture very close to that of pop artists or *sots* artists in the Soviet Union.

Question: So by taking it from the mass culture and bringing it into the elite culture, did they make it not ‘mass’ any more? So when, for example, your art, or Andy Warhol’s art went into museums, was it appealing to the masses, or not anymore?

Answer: That’s a very important question. Lenin always said that culture, high culture, must be understood by the masses. This is a very democratic and populist slogan. By the way, according to statistics, the number of visitors in museums in the Soviet Union grew emergently every year. That means that museum culture was gradually becoming mass culture. That fact was claimed both by the Soviet avant-garde movement and the Soviet government.

I remember, during my childhood, all the mass magazines were full of color photo reproductions of classical art, renaissance art, 19th century Russian art. And all the radio channels, all the radio programs, were full of the very classical, very elite, music, like Bach, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky. It was an attempt to bring elite culture to the masses. And at the same time, I believe that when pop art and *sots* art appeared, mass art started to move very actively into the realm of elite art, to museums. According to statistics, the number of the visitors of the Metropolitan Museum in New York was higher than the number of visitors to New York baseball games in the years of the pop art revolution.

Question: Is there something different from the appreciation of this art, for the masses, compared to the elite? Do they get different things out of it?

Answer: As I said we live in a pluralistic society. We cannot say that now only one type of elite exists. Now we can speak about multi-central structure of the intelligentsia. It would be a simplification at the present time to speak merely about division between mass and elite culture. Because mass culture became part of the elite attention and elite culture became part of the mass education.

I would like to illustrate my points with some examples of visual agitation. People were surrounded by red banners with white slogans, exclamation marks and profiles of the leaders. Usually it used to be Lenin and Stalin, or in my time Lenin and Karl Marx. What we did actually, we made the same gesture as Marcel Duchamp made with his “readymades.” He just added a signature. And artists’ signatures immediately elevate the element of mass culture to the pedestal of museum art. He made his famous gesture in 1917, during the time of Russian revolution. He signed, by the name of the imaginary artist, the pissoir. It was a shock in the modern artist’s days. And the same shock was present for our friends when we signed the mass media slogan. For example, “Forward to Victory of Communism!” Or: “Glory to Labor!”



Figure 1. Komar and Melamid, *Onward to the Victory of Communism!* From *Sots Art* series, 1972.¹

We were surrounded by such slogans. But when we signed them “Komar and Melamid” (and actually nobody remembered who said it first), it produced a shocking effect which I can compare to Marcel Duchamp signing the “pissoir.” They were very typical prototypes of pop art and *sots* art.

Later in 1980s, we created a kind of museum *sots* art, in style of dark classic paintings. It is also the result of mixture of the pop mass culture criterion and the elite culture criterion. Most of these canvases represent the leaders, Lenin and Stalin. There were two ways to represent these leaders. One was to represent them as mythological figures, for example, as you see in the painting “The Origin of Socialist Realism.”



Figure 2. Komar and Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*. From *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1982-83, Zimmerly Museum, NJ.

¹ All images are courtesy Former Komar and Melamid Art Studio Archive.

The Muse is tracing the outline of Stalin's shadow on the wall, the act that, according to the classical mythology, was the origin of painting; the girlfriend traces the outline of the shadow of her boyfriend. Stalin in this case is represented as a mythological figure. Another picture is a representation of Stalin as an everyday person. You see Stalin as a person sitting in front of a mirror without his boots, and you can see him in his everyday life and maybe in a critical moment of his conscience. The third example is painting "I Saw Stalin Once, When I Was a Child." This painting is from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Figure 3. Komar and Melamid, *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*. From *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series, 1981-82.

Now in the collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York.

You see the back window of the car at night on a Moscow street and Stalin looks from this window. It really happened not far from my street where I was born and spent the first twenty-five years of my lifetime. It happened one evening on the Aleksei Tolstoi street, where many government cars were coming and going from time to time to and from the huge house of Molotov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Now I am not sure if it was Stalin, or maybe his double, or just his bodyguard in military uniform and with mustache. I don't know, but I was six years old at this time, which was 1949, and my first impression was that it was Stalin. Because all children believe in a very sweet, very narcotic and false model of the world.

We really believed that we were living in the best country of the world. We were living in paradise and the rest of the world was hell. It is very mythological, as in the ancient and archetypal metaphor of the dragon in the west that swallowed the sun — the sunset meant that the sun disappeared. We were living in the east, the place of sunrise. It was a pure mythology and only later, after Stalin's death, was all this mythology changed. Because of Nikita Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin's "East" that became then the place of *Gulag*, the place of Soviet hell. Instead of paradise, we were living in hell. And from the "West," a lot of consumer goods started to come; beautiful cars, glossy magazines, cover stories and so on. Another also false, also not real and simplified model of the world came to our minds that the west is paradise and that the Soviet Union is hell. Now we're living in much more complicated world. We're not living in a light and shadow world, a black and white world. Now we understand the complexity of contemporary Russian life, all the complexity of life in the West.

Question: In your talk at Grinnell at the Popular Culture Symposium, you made an interesting point comparing propaganda in the Soviet Union and in the West, showing some striking similarities. Can you elaborate on that?

Answer: Yes, in the United States, particularly in advertisement, American socialist realism also exists. Because, you know, all governments produce very similar results. For example, if I visit the post office, which belongs to the American government, I always see the big line of people which reminds me of the Soviet Union. I think that every place and activity that is connected to the government generates such lines. The same thing we can say about visual art. We can speak about internationally recognized patriotic art, sponsored by the government, which we can call socialist realism. For example, you can see in my collection a painting of Abraham Lincoln speaking in front of the masses and with the American flag in the background, and it is very close to the Soviet socialist realist picture of Lenin speaking in front of the masses and also against a banner — a Soviet one. You can find a lot of such examples in history. Everything, as I said, that belongs to governments, is similar in some way.

Another interesting example of this pop art of the 1970s is how we, Melamid and I, imagined what the masterpieces of American pop art would look like in the future. We imagined that they would look like Pompeiian fresco. For example, we transformed Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can to a Pompeiian fresco. When Andy Warhol saw this painting in New York, his face became green because he could never imagine such a point of view. For us, people who grew up in the Soviet Union, it is quite a normal thing to imagine a today's phenomena from the point of view of the future. It was a great justification of everything that happened in the Soviet Union. The people would say: "Yes, we're suffering; yes we don't really have enough goods. But next generation, under communism, will live better and they will look at us with appreciation." It was a kind of perverse altruism which

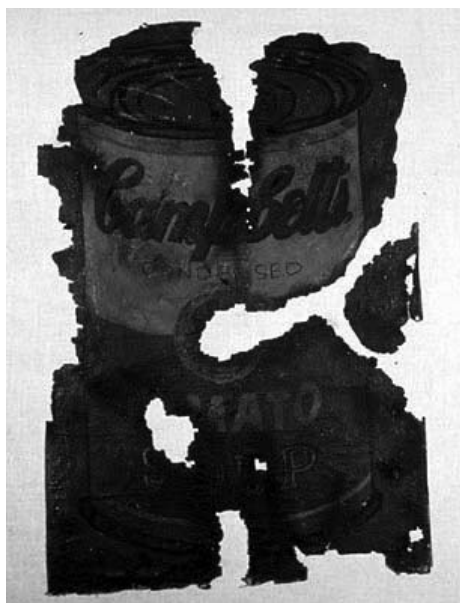


Figure 4. Komar and Melamid, *Post-Art #1*
A. Warhol. From *Pictures of the Future* series, 1973-74.

was an important part of Soviet psychology and Soviet mass culture: appreciation of contemporary difficulties from a future point of view. And that is why it was a total surprise for Andy Warhol to look at his contemporary art of today from the point of view of the future the way we would at the Pompeiian fresco. After all of the catastrophes, all of this terrorism, global warming, this glossy product of pop culture became like an archeological artifact.

Question: Where is mass culture going in Russia?

Answer: You know it is quite difficult today because there are so many tendencies. From one point of view, there now exists a real Russian pop culture. But this pop culture is in a very difficult, very complicated relationship with the Soviet past, and the pre-revolutionary past. The pre-revolutionary Russia had an important tie with Russian Orthodox Church, which also constituted an important part of the ancient Russian culture. And for me it is difficult to predict but it is really a unique phenomenon that the church and the images of the religion are now more and more becoming part of mass culture. This reminds me sometimes of the Soviet propaganda culture, when Soviet communist ideology was replaced by Christian spirituality. But we can only speak about early stages of such interesting and dramatic process.

Question: Is there a difference between mass culture and mass culture of the intellectuals?

Answer: People in the street took visual agitation at the Soviet times the same way as phenomena of nature. As a kind of natural phenomenon, like a moon, something that was not created by them, but was created by someone else for them, in case of propaganda and agitation, the government. Most of the people just do not pay a lot of attention to such things; only artists do. When artists see something in nature that people didn't pay attention to and paint it and depict it, people begin to understand: oh, this is really a birch tree, or: oh, this is a birch forest. Of course, everyone saw birches before, but it was when a few important Russian artists of the 19th century got excited by birches and depicted several landscapes with birches that those became so famous in Russian art history and Russian culture in general. And after that everybody looks at nature and says: "Oh, this is exactly like a picture by Kuindzhi," or, "Oh, that is exactly like a picture by Levitan," et cetera. This means that art has re-discovered something that up till now was routine in everyday life. Likewise, the mass culture of the streets that was part of the routine of everyday life, was rediscovered by pop art and *sots* art. The minds of the people are bombarded by all these slogans in the Soviet Union and by commercials in the West, and one of the functions of the art is just to look, to re-discover the fresh point of view of the trivial banality. For example, when we're children and we see a fine butterfly for the first time, we're excited. It really shocks us — the beauty of these flying flowers, but later it became trivial banality, and we're not excited anymore by them. But if an artist depicts this butterfly, we re-discover the freshness of the first impression. That, I believe, is the eternal subject of the art. Without art, we usually don't see much but banality. But we realize this banality and we re-discover objects through the art. Again, as in the time of our childhood we relive the freshness of the first impression.

Question: The art kind of takes the gloss out that was in years put on the things around us.

Answer: Gloss and dust. That I believe is the fantastic function of the art. An artist takes some trivial banality and depicts it so that we look at it as if for the first time, as if we looked at it as a child. We become like a hermit for five minutes; this is the function of the visual art, which I believe is very important. It makes any spectator for five minutes a hermit, as I remember in a poem, I forget the poet, unfortunately, "what is the life, if full of care? We have no time to 'stand and stare.'" And art makes us stand and stare, makes us a hermit, even if for a short time. In the vanity of life, we become a hermit for few minutes when we meet art. Art removes banality and triviality of our everyday life.

Interview conducted by *Anatoly Vishevsky*