

Muller, Dominikus and Mania, Astrid. "Three Day Weekend: An interview with Vitaly Komar." *artnet.com*, September 9, 2009.

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Komar & Melamid

Double Self-Portrait as Lenin & Stalin (from the series, "Sots Art")

1972

All illustrations courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Komar & Melamid

The History of the USSR (detail)

1975



Komar & Melamid

Stalin and the Muses (from the series "Nostalgic Socialist Realism")

1981-82

THREE-DAY WEEKEND

An Interview with Vitaly Komar

by Dominikus Müller and Astrid Mania

The New York-based Russian artist Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) has much to tell. He formed his famous partnership with Alexander Melamid in Russia in the late 1960s, and the artistic team of Komar & Melamid went on to found the Sots Art movement in 1972, become world famous and emigrate to New York in 1978. Komar & Melamid translated the history of the USSR into monstrous paintings, plumbed the artistic psychology of the U.S. public, and helped elephants become Abstract-Expressionists.

Since 2004 Vitaly Komar has worked solo, on a project involving a new world religion, an amalgam of Christianity, Islam and Judaism whose founding principles include a "Three-Day Weekend" (Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians). Works from this series were shown in "Three-Day Weekend" at Feldman Fine Arts in 2005, and a new show is planned for November 2009.

Dominikus Müller and Astrid Mania, editors of the German-language *Artnet Magazine*, met Komar on one Saturday in Berlin, seeking to delve a bit deeper into his schemes involving God and the world, religion, Marxism and spiritual irony. A longer version of this "discussion in quotation marks" appears in *Artnet.de*.

Artnet.de: Mr. Komar, do you like chronologies?

Vitaly Komar: Why?

We get that feeling from your website, which is programmed as a chronology, as well as from one of your major works, *The History of the USSR*, that huge (80 x 1740 cm) multipanel abstract painting from 1975.

Yes, I think a chronology is the only context for understanding art.

Why?

Well, because it creates a dialogue, a dialogue with history. People like to forget history, because they like to escape Marxism. Because if you start to think about history, you become a Marxist sooner or later.

Is that a rule? That if you start to get into history, you inevitably become a Marxist.

Of course, because it is the logic of history. The spirit of history. That's it.

So maybe we should talk about Marxism then. Maybe we start with *The History of the USSR*.



Komar & Melamid's "Elephant Art Academy" in action in Lampang, Thailand, 1999
Photo by Jason Schmidt



Komar & Melamid
America's Most Wanted (from "People's Choice" series)
1994



Vitaly Komar
Between State and Heaven (detail) (from "Three-Day Weekend")
2004-05



Vitaly Komar
Fragile Unity #2 (from "Three-Day Weekend")

That one is about how to use images of abstract art as emblems of history. We have a few different styles of abstract art: First, there is Abstract Expressionism. In our work here, it represents the revolution. Also you have geometrical abstract art and Constructivism, which represent the years of industrialization. And then, there is abstract surrealism, representing the years of purges and the Gulag. It's a very simple concept: you take these three styles of abstract art of the 20th century and transform them into symbols of political events. Very simple.

Your more recent series, the extensive group of works called *Three Day-Weekend*, does also connect symbols to historical events?

Yes, that one works with emblems. Here, for example, you have the five-pointed star. It was a symbol of Russia. But I made a five-armed swastika. It's supposed to be a symbol that represents the unity between the different "ethnic versions" of socialism. You had an Italian version, Mussolini; a German version, represented by Hitler; a Stalinist version; and a Leninist version of Russian socialism, Bolshevism; and so on. But with the idea of socialism, the same thing happened as to the Tower of Babel.

That tower was never finished. It dissolved in a rancorous confusion of different tongues. That happened to the socialist ideal, too. The socialist idea was an idea to build a tower, to build a paradise on earth to touch god, touch the sky and touch the heaven. But as each nation translated Karl Marx in a different way, they stopped understanding each other and instead started to fight. The original idea of socialism was to create friendship between nations, very close to early Christianity. But in the end it became war.

And capitalism? What went wrong there?

Nothing. Capitalism never tried to touch god, it was all about touching satan. It was a different direction from the very beginning. But to come back to socialism, you can illustrate the problem very well by taking that brilliant novel by the Soviet writer Andrei Platonow, titled *Kotlowan* (The Foundation Pit). It is based on a simple idea. The people in a Russian province try to build a palace for the proletariat, a huge building where everyone is supposed to live together. And if you want to build a tower, what you have to do? You have to build a foundation first. So they start to dig. The following year, more people want to join in. And so they say, "The house must be bigger. So let's dig deeper." That goes on, and year by year, instead of building a house, they dig deeper and deeper into the ground, down deep into the mud.

It is a brilliant picture of how the house which is supposed to grow into the sky became the complete opposite. It's a brilliant metaphor for the socialist method, unfortunately.

This story and the way you tell it, it all seems to be permeated with a sense of irony.

You know irony can be spiritual.

In what way?

It's very interesting. Spiritual irony! You can find it in the Bible.

2004-05



Vitaly Komar

Mandala above State Heraldry #2 (from "Three-Day Weekend")

2004-05



Vitaly Komar

Self-Portrait in a Mandala on the Roof of 718 Broadway (from "Three-Day Weekend")

2004-05

Photo by Alan Zindman



Vitaly Komar

The Flash of Memory #1 (detail) (from "Three-Day Weekend")

2004-05

Where in the Bible?

It's in there from the beginning!

So, then explain the Bible to us!

Sure, sure. Just take for example the passage, in which God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" God knows, of course, where Cain's brother is, because God knows everything. But he is asking Cain. So why is he doing that? He is asking in the same way as parents ask their children, "What happened to the ice cream?" The parents know what happened: the children ate the ice cream. That is an example of divine irony.

But isn't irony always a way of resisting the ruling system?

Absolutely! There has always been a close relation between irony and the idea of the avant-garde. Now the avant-garde has lost its power. Sometimes kitsch can pretend to play the role of the avant-garde. Kitsch now is only the dream of happiness that survives.

We have icons of abstract art, icons of realistic art, but we definitely see no spiritual or religious art. I believe it's time for a new religion.

Ah, ok, I think I understand. . .

Now we have the possibility to connect a political-social dream about a week with just four days of work with the peaceful coexistence of three big religions, Islam on Friday, Judaism on Saturday and Christianity on Sunday.

Is that the idea of the Three-Day Weekend, a regular holiday combining the different religions to some kind of "world-religion"?

Yes, and I think it's an especially good idea now, with the economic crisis. Because if we adopt the Three-Day Weekend, people will work less, and more of the unemployed will get jobs.

Sounds like a nice idea, but if people got paid the same amount for less work, then prices would rise.

That's a different matter. Money is printable. It's an unlimited edition. In terms of art, it is the most popular print. And all of them numbered, too. Some money even has a signature, just like art. Perhaps an artist like Gerhard Richter could make a lot of prints, and we could replace money with artists' prints.

That sounds. . . .

The Three-Day Weekend gives people immediate independence. From the market. From their lives. It is a second life. You could open your own business during the three days -- and work even more! Or you could become a Sunday painter. A Three-Day Weekend painter. It could be your hobby.

So a four-day work-week and a three-day weekend!

It's a magical number. Why have a Three-Day Weekend? Because we have a three-dimensional world. We have three primary colors. We have



Vitaly Komar

Yalta Conference at a Jewish Cemetery (detail)
(from "Three-Day Weekend")

2004-05

three forms of time, past, present and future.

At one point, you will have a U.S. presidential candidate promising a Three-Day Weekend, and he will be elected. I promise you. It is so simple.

Is that the Marxism of the 21st century?

Spiritual Marxism, right.

Four days of Marxism and three days Capitalism. A perfect dialectical model!

Yes, that's spiritual atheism. That's the future of intellectual life.



Vitaly Komar

Landscape with Lenin's Tomb

2007-09

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Photo by Lisa Kahane



Vitaly Komar

Last Days of the Job (detail)

2007-09

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Photo by Lisa Kahane



Vitaly Komar

Lenin

2007-09

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Photo by Lisa Kahane