

## where is the line between us?

interview with vitaly komar

julia tulovsky



1.

■ Vitaly, when you, an underground artist in the Soviet Union, came to the U.S. in the late 1970s, you found yourself in the very midst of the world of artistic life. Did your ideas of New York as the capital of world art agree with what you saw?

■ I was rather well prepared for what I saw because, at the Stroganov Art School, where my co-author, Alex Melamid, and I received our education in the 1960s, the library subscribed to many Western art magazines. Besides, we got magazines such as *Art in America*, *Art News* and *Art Forum* from our foreign friends who came to Moscow. There were exhibitions of U.S. art in Moscow, including American Pop Art. So many of my friends and I had a fairly good idea of what was going on. I wouldn't say anything came as a big surprise when I moved to the U.S. What surprised me was perhaps the intensity of artistic life. A single magazine carries about ten reviews. I didn't expect New York to have thousands of exhibitions going on at the same time, while only a small percentage get reviewed.

At the personal level, I was amazed that artists, just like many representatives of the world of art, have a special attitude toward clothes. In Russia, an artist didn't care what he put on. It was an expression of a special philosophical detachment not to pay any attention to your clothes. It was fashionable to think that great philosophers were absolutely careless about their appearance because their thoughts were elsewhere, in another dimension. In New York, artists have a much keener sense of style, especially in clothes worn at exhibition openings. Critics have always dressed fashionably, but artists could get away with almost anything. I remember going to a reception and the invitation said "black tie". I knew an artist could do without a tie. But it turned out that artists didn't need a tie only at exhibitions and art receptions, and here I found myself in the company of prominent politicians, even senators. The man at the door wouldn't let me in at first...I unlaced one shoe and tied the string around my neck instead of a tie. The guard laughed and let me in.

■ As you got to understand New York's world of art, were there any surprises in store for you?

■ Yes. What surprised me most was the fact that art critics have practically no influence upon the art market. By the time I came to the U.S., the art market had become independent and the high and mighty critics

had disappeared. Way back in the 1950s, it was sufficient for Greenberg to appear at an exhibition and say, "flat, flat" and it virtually meant the end of the artist's career. Beginning with the late 1970s, the art market gained great power. Even the formal difference between traditional and experimental art was gone, that is, experimental art began to sell at very high prices. I think this is what struck me most here – that critics were unable, to be exact, absolutely powerless, to influence the art market any longer.

■ Why do you think there is a chasm between the critics and the market?

■ Critics played a major role in the 1950s when there was still a disparity between modernism and popular art. At that time, critics seemed to be aware of the secrets of modernism and the intellectual European elite. You know that because of Hitler, the majority of the intellectual elite fled Europe. A kind of hothouse for great artists emerged here. Of course, the U.S. had modernists of its own, but they were not held in great esteem. It was realists who always played first fiddle. In the 1930s-1940s, a kind of intellectual social realism was blossoming here, painters like Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer. The latter had, for example, as many as four personal exhibitions in Whitney, more than any other painter either before or after. Even the leftist public regarded left-wing art as socially oriented. So at some moment, critics began to explain to the public how badly the U.S. was lagging behind European modernism. This campaign against backwardness led to the destruction of some magnificent buildings in New York. From a European point of view, they were pompous and tasteless. There was a clash of different ideas. Buyers and gallery owners suffered from an inferiority complex that made them fear that they didn't fully understand the elite's intellectual art life, so the views of the critics carried great weight. The critics were regarded as philosophers, prophets, who pointed to new paths. But somewhere after Pop Art, the Americans understood that they shouldn't be ashamed of their provinciality. On the contrary, they should play it up because it was a style in its own right. Pop Art is a purely American phenomenon. It was then that art gallery owners, people involved in the art business and people working with buyers and investors in art became independent. There was nothing the critics could tell them that they didn't already know.



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1. Douglas Davis with Komar and Melamid, 1976, *Questions New York Moscow*, Photo offset poster, 60x50, collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

2. *Onward to the Victory of Communism*, 1975, Paint on cloth, 50x184, private collection, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

How has the role of critics changed now that their influence on the world of art has diminished?

I think that the most talented critics, critics with a vision, and even philosophers, take up curators' jobs now. This brings in a better income, too. Even small exhibitions pay quite decent money, enough to live on for a year or two. Previously, curators and critics were not the same people, and it made a world of difference. Now, critics get their revenge over the art world by turning into curators. They unite artists and become meta-artists. They not only describe reality, they make it because curators' exhibitions are an alternative to commercial galleries. Of course, curators' exhibitions can take place in commercial galleries, but gallery owners are usually not in the habit of sharing profits with curators. Their world is a bit different. So curators and critics went to the alternative world of non-commercial exhibitions, installations, conceptual and ephemeral art, and video, that is art that hasn't yet become part of the art market and investments.

Vitaly, you belong not only to the U.S. art community, but also to the Russian art scene. How do you evaluate the changes in the art scene in Russia during the last few years? Is it in any way similar to the situation in the West?

No, the situation in Russia is different. My dream is to see Russia a prosperous country, in the artistic sense as well. Of course, I'm behind the times in many ways. The last time I was in Russia four years ago on the occasion of my exhibition in Marat Gelman's Gallery. So I have no clear idea of what's going on. But according to Russian art magazines, some people jumped to the conclusion that we have caught up with the West and will soon leave it behind. This idea is wrong. Sometimes a horse that is a lap behind everybody seems to be first to an outside observer because it is a couple of meters ahead of the others. And I think the feeling that we have suddenly become first is a misconception that is very dangerous for Russian art. Gone is the healthy, self-critical attitude of our day and this can only hinder further development.

So in what way is Russia backward? Is it the underdeveloped art infrastructure or the backwardness of art itself?

It is not a matter of an underdeveloped art infrastructure or the backwardness of art itself. It's about the

backward mentality and self-esteem. I'm speaking about a special attitude toward the West, a strange feeling that Russia is taking part in a socialist competition with world art. Naturally, artists, individual people compete with one another. But the very idea that a country can compete with world art is, in my opinion, absurd. A country can take such an attitude to world culture and, in particular, to the West when it doesn't consider itself to be part of it. I made a comparison with racing, but it was within the framework of the genre. In general, I'm against comparing the development of art history to races. This is not about racing. I used the comparison to parody the attitude to art history development as a kind of race between different countries. To be a full-fledged member of an art community, a country doesn't need either a superiority or inferiority complex. The sooner one gets rid of these complexes, the better it will be for Russian artists in the West.

Doesn't Russia have very successful artists?

Of course there are successful artists in Russia. But some of the most privileged painters in Russia don't exhibit their work at major international art exhibitions and don't participate in international publications. I am speaking, for example, about artists who have museums of their own in the city center. This is a unique phenomenon that doesn't exist in any other country. It is a purely Russian phenomenon and it speaks for itself. But I'd like to repeat that I'm not very knowledgeable on the subject. I don't know much about what's going on in Russia today.

Vitaly, you were one of the first people to collaborate with U.S. artists. Please tell us about your experience.

As you know, I took part in the Bulldozer Exhibition. After the exhibition, many reproductions of our work (I mean myself and Alex Melamid) as well as those of other participants were published in Western magazines. So Douglas Davis, the art critic and pioneer of video art, came to Moscow to write about the artists whose works had been destroyed at the Bulldozer Exhibition. Douglas Davis and I decided to collaborate. He had his photos taken in New York, and Alex Melamid and I, in Moscow. Douglas Davis made spliced photographic montages where we were divided by a line. Each of us held a canvas with a certain text both in English and in Russian, for example, "Where is the line between us?" This work is now part of the Metropolitan Museum's collection, which makes me very happy. As far as I know, it was the first ever experience of collaboration between Russian and U.S. artists. Incidentally, it was the time of the first joint flight of U.S. and Russian astronauts. I remember I was amazed when Douglas Davis came to our first meeting in Moscow in a red corduroy suit. Later, in New York, I asked him, "Why did you wear a red suit of all things?" He said, "I thought that this was a Communist country and the color red would make a good impression." But everybody took it as an eccentric gesture and did not connect it in any way with the color of the Soviet national flag. We also collaborated with the U.S. artist and musician Charlotte Moorman, a member of Fluxus, the famous U.S. Dadaist group. Later, when working at the Souls Project, we set up a company, We Buy and Sell Souls, through which we purchased souls of many celebrities or accepted them for sale on a commission basis. One of the people who sold us his soul was Andy Warhol.

How much was Andy Warhol's soul?

We got it free of charge. Warhol put a zero on the contract form. After that, it was sold for 30 roubles in Moscow. It probably costs much more today. I used to work with Andy Warhol before, too. He attended our first exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery when I was still living in Russia. Feldman told us Andy was greatly interested in

the ideas of Sots Art. He spent a long time examining our Post Art and looking at his soup can. Incidentally, this work anticipated post-modernism. As Robert Morgan put it in his *The Delta of Modernism*, it was in this work that the term "post" was first used in reference to modern art. It featured a masterpiece of world art, the famous Warhol soup can as it will look in the future – as a Pompeii fresco, burnt, chipped, dark and cracked. Feldman remembered that Andy's face went green. He could never imagine his work in such a historical perspective. It was just another vision of his art. After the exhibition, to show his respect, he sent a book to me in Moscow with a drawing of a soup can enclosed – a light drawing made by pen in the style of a sketch.

Both you and U.S. pop artists work with a system of myths functioning in society. What is different about the American approach to the deconstruction of social myths?

Pop Art and Sots Art are very similar phenomena, they have the same structure, but different forms. Both of them use irony as a weapon of iconoclasm. U.S. idols are consumer goods put on a pedestal by advertising. In Soviet Russia, it was ideological propaganda. I believe that official art contained not only official figurative socialist realism, but also official conceptualism. It found expression in slogans. The art of slogans has existed since the Russian avant-garde. It was unnoticed, though slogans were everywhere. Nobody collected them because they were an ephemeral art of visual propaganda everybody was already sick of. We were the first to pay attention to them, we understood that we are surrounded with conceptual culture. So we took the slogans and signed our names under them. Marcel Duchamp did the same with the urinal. And now museums have in their collections only the slogans Alex Melamid and I signed. Slogans were also advertisements, but they advertised ideology, not goods. In general, both of them have a lot to do with a certain myth, they are like incantations: "More electric energy to the people", "Let's build Communism" in Russia or "Buy soup" in the U.S. The aim of incantations is to influence people in some mysterious ways. Their function is deeply mythological. In the Soviet Union, they were based on ideological conceptualism, and in the U.S., on advertisements. U.S. society is a consumer society, it's not ideological. When you examine works of U.S. Pop Art, it is very important to understand that they don't depict consumer goods, they depict advertisements of consumer goods. Andy Warhol portrayed a soup can ad, not a soup can, and here lies a fine distinction between Pop Art and New Realism. Take, for instance, Roginsky's *Primus Stove*. From my point of view, it's not Pop Art because it is an image of a primus stove, not a primus stove ad. In Russia, goods didn't need advertising, people grabbed them anyway. It was ideology that was advertised in Russia. So the Russian version of Pop Art was Sots Art, visual propaganda and slogans. If Pop Art was the result of the overproduction of goods and their advertisements in the capitalist world, Sots Art was the result of the overproduction of ideology in the socialist world. Thus, one can say that Sots Art is the conceptual Soviet Pop Art.

How has the atmosphere of artistic life in New York changed since you settled here in 1979?

I remember walking in Soho, at the time the haunt of many artists and the venue of many galleries. The artist Arakawa, a friend of mine, pointed to one of the bars and said, "This is where all pop artists used to meet, but no longer do". True, there are no such places as Paris cafes of the 19th century where all the Bohemians could meet. Many things have changed. In the New York of the late 1970s, they wouldn't even put tables and chairs in the street because there were a lot of loonies and vagabonds who behaved

rather aggressively towards people and waiters had a hard time getting rid of them. Only somewhere in the 1980s did the situation return to normal. Today's New York is a much safer and respectable city than in the late 1970s when I came here. This is just one of the things that has changed. The same happened in Soho where a great number of posh shops have opened while most of the galleries moved to Chelsea. This doesn't mean that Chelsea is a new district. Years ago, it had the famous Chelsea Hotel where artists used to stay. But later, somewhere in the late 1950s, when synthetic fibre became fashionable, many factories making cotton fabrics – and New York and Soho in particular had a lot of them – closed down. As a result, there appeared large empty spaces – the so-called lofts, which were quickly occupied by artists. At that time, one could buy empty houses

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3. Andy Warhol giving his soul to Komar and Melamid, February 6, 1979  
Photo: Fred W. McDarrah, private collection,  
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

for a song. So when I came here in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, Soho was the center of artistic life. Of course, prices were higher than in the 1950s-1960s. There were galleries everywhere, crowds of tourists in the streets, in cafes and restaurants. Artists were the first to discover Soho, followed by gallery owners who were in turn followed by collectors or just rich parents' children who rented these lofts and lived a Bohemian life: they drank, smoked and played at being artists. Well, it was an extremely joyful place. Later, in the 1990s, all the galleries and most of the artists moved to Chelsea. But this time, things happened in a different way. If it was artists who first settled in Soho, followed by gallery owners, in Chelsea, gallery owners came first. They bought dilapidated derelict buildings, restored them and turned them into a kind of art supermarket – each storey housing a gallery. Finding themselves abandoned, artists moved there, too. This situation is highly symbolic and it means



4. "Fine Quality Souls for Every Taste"  
from *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978-83  
Photo offset poster, 60x50, private collection,  
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

that nowadays an artist is an appendage of the art world. If earlier an artist could influence gallery owners and lord over them, if he was at the center of the altar, in the center of the art shrine, now the center of the altar is occupied by priests of art and people related to the art business. Artists have become only misty images of saints, while it is priests who are in charge of everything. This is the difference.

■ In comparison, what is the status of gallery and art districts of Moscow?

■ I have no idea what's going on in Moscow. I don't think Moscow has such artists' quarters with cafes where artists settle and gather. The thing is that, in the U.S., real estate dealers use artists to their own advantage. When artists move somewhere, rich collectors follow in their footsteps and prices for properties go up. But I don't think it matters in Russia – there are different mechanisms of price hikes and artists do not contribute to them. In New York, artists are the real estate avant-garde. I've always said jokingly that once I was the avant-garde of intellectual and cultural life and now artists are the avant-garde of real estate.

■ So what is the role of the artist in the social life of society?

■ In general, I regard the work of a contemporary artist and his exhibitions as kinds of theatre sets on the stage where a certain way of life is played out. When you come to an exhibition, you become a member of a theatrical performance, a part of the theatrical way of life. Usually people attend exhibitions not for the sake of paintings, but

to appear in public and have a look at other people, talk to them, say "hi" to friends. Exhibition openings are a form of social contact. Paintings that are obstructed by other people's heads are only part of the scenery. So one of the main functions of art today is its social function. Art has turned into design, into stage props for social life. But again, that's just my own point of view. Art probably also has commercial value. It is a kind of stock to invest money in.

■ So what is fashionable in New York in the field of art today?

■ It seems to me that all flowers are in bloom now, so to speak. Installations, realism, super-realism, abstract expressionism, video art, conceptualism, photography... The number of galleries has increased. There are about a thousand of them in New York now. So about 5,000 personal exhibitions are going on during one season. Paris, Berlin or other cities can get nowhere near this figure. I'm talking only about the galleries that exhibit advanced art and claim to hold events. They alone number a thousand. I don't include galleries selling engravings or antiques. When you live in this muddle, it's difficult to single out some major trends from the cosmic point of view. For me personally, Fra Angelico's exhibition in the Metropolitan last year became a much more significant event than my own personal shows. Last year, I had four one-man shows, two in London and two in the U.S. But Fra Angelico's exhibition made a greater impact on me than all the exhibitions of contemporary art in New York or London or Germany.

