

The Artist Nomad: Soviet Dissident Artists in the West

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Abstract

When Ronald Reagan infamously declared the Soviet Union to be the “Evil Empire” in 1983, he was playing upon a fundamental axiom of Cold War politics: that the world can be neatly divided between the First World of Capitalism and the Second World of Communism. Equating this divide with that of good and evil only served to strengthen the notion that the two sides were mutually exclusive. Personal politics were an extension of this perspective. One was either a Capitalist or a Communist—to reject one was equivalent to embracing the other. This paper examines the art of dissident artists such as Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Sokov, and Ilya Kabakov; artists from the Soviet Union who were exiled to the West during the Cold War. It seeks to better understand why these artists’ rebellion against the Soviet system did not translate into an embrace of Western culture upon arrival in America. The roots of their critical artistic approach are interpreted through the prism of ideological nomadism which reveals their art to be deeply ambivalent. These artworks are analyzed as a disruption to the binary understanding of the Cold War and Post-Soviet eras by their embrace of a liminal position in the overlap between the capitalist and communist cultural milieus.

The Artist-Nomad

Clint Buhler

*“We’re not breaking the frame. We’re outside all the frames,
in between them. We were born in a time of broken frames.”*

—Alexander Melamid

When Ronald Reagan infamously declared the Soviet Union to be the “Evil Empire,” and Margaret Thatcher accused labor unions of being socialist “enemies within,” they were merely articulating a widely accepted understanding of Cold War politics: a perception that one must side with either capitalism or socialism, and that the two systems are mutually exclusive.

From this binary point of view, it was assumed that when a group of dissident Soviet artists arrived in the West, their art would be strongly anti-communist and feed into Western society’s self-congratulatory sense of superiority. However, many of these artists were quickly disillusioned with capitalism upon arrival in New York and, rather than adopting a pro-Western philosophy, these refugees remained highly skeptical of both dominant systems of government.

The predetermined expectation that their art would express a pro-Western viewpoint led many observers into premature, misguided interpretations. “I think we are accepted here as artists ninety percent because we’re exotic. Russian,” artist Alexander Melamid said at the time, “So people think of what we’re doing in ways that are completely strange to me, completely different from what we think we’re doing...I feel like a fool.”

Artists like Melamid soon realized that the enthusiasm surrounding their art had much more to do with the fact that their work was being read as Cold War propaganda, than it did with the actual artistic messages they were attempting to convey.

Confronted with viewer expectations to create anti-Soviet, pro-Western artworks, artists more explicitly turned their critical lens on a dual criticism of both political frameworks. Emblematic of this shift in focus is Alexander Kosolapov’s *Coca-Cola Lenin* (1980). On its surface the work immediately betrays a certain level of contempt toward both Leninist ideology as well as Western corporate capitalism. Far from dispassionate political critique, the work is a very personal, self-critical reflection of the fact that at different points in his life, Kosolapov was deeply invested in the ideology of both. Kosolapov was raised in

the Soviet system and, like all children, was taught about the virtues of socialism and the inevitability of communist utopia. At some point, however, he became disillusioned with official ideology, like many Soviet citizens. While attending an International Youth Festival, he found himself in the American section: “The Coca-Cola company gave away free samples. This was like a dreamland for me. This was American culture...The taste of Coke was like the milk of paradise.”

As with many youth of Kosolapov’s generation, dissatisfaction with official culture manifested as a fascination with Western society.



Alexander Kosolapov, *Coca-Cola Lenin*, 1980

Created in Cold War-era New York, the work was immediately interpreted as an affront to Coca-Cola’s image by suggesting Lenin’s endorsement.

The fondness with which Kosolapov recalls his first encounter with Coca-Cola makes such a definition seem unlikely, or at the very least, incomplete. To read this work as an attack on Coca-Cola assumes a negative value judgment toward Lenin. Indeed, the work would have been equally outrageous in Soviet Russia, but for precisely the opposite reason: rather than Lenin’s presence sully the reputation of Coca-Cola, it would have been the association with Coca-Cola which compromises Lenin’s image. The power of the work lies precisely in the tensions between Leninism and capitalism and the tremendous feelings of ambivalence the artist feels toward each. This ambivalence, it’s worth noting, is not an indecision or lack of strong feelings toward either, but the more precise meaning of the word which is both a strong attachment and repulsion toward the object. Such conflicted emotions are apparent in Kosolapov’s own reflections on the work: “Somehow the two paradises came together in that work with Lenin and Coca-Cola. I found in them a meaning of paradise—one, a paradise lost, the other, not quite found.”

The disappointment expressed in this statement is palpable and is directly re-

lated to the artist's experience at the International Youth Festival which portended every intention of embracing Western culture. Like many Soviets who left the U.S.S.R. and were confronted with the realities of living in the West, Kosolapov found himself caught in a liminal state of homelessness—no longer Soviet, but not quite American. The artist's dispossession is made manifest in the way he describes his work in spatial terms. Specifically, he envisions the work as inhabiting the space between two non-existent paradises; a utopia (literally, "nowhere") that is impossible to locate. Kosolapov's work is almost apophatic in that it attempts to define paradise by juxtaposing two things it is not, thereby hinting at what it is somewhere in the nebulous in-between.

The misdirected expectation that these artists would be "anti-Soviet," which led to reactions contrary to the artists' intentions, may find its roots in the misperception of them as immigrants rather than emigrants; or more precisely migrants rather than nomads. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explain the difference: "The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory...Although the points determine the paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary."

This distinction, as it applies to these artists, suggests that they do not see themselves as Americans from Russia (as would an immigrant) nor as Russians living in America (as would an emigrant), but instead as a person disconnected from, but familiar with, both countries and systems. Theirs is not a journey from one ideological position to another. Artist-nomads move through and between the milieus of competing ideologies, often retracing their own steps, placing particular emphasis on the zones in which these milieus overlap and compete.

Because artist-nomads prioritize the paths over the points, "in-between" is often central to their practice. Such a focus is certainly evident in Kosolapov's *Coca-Cola Lenin*. To find meaning in this work, the viewer can not focus too much on any one element, but must instead balance the competing connotations of all elements together: socialist icon and capitalist logo, text and image. The flat red plane of color common to each provides a convenient setting whereby definite boundaries can not be drawn. It is in this redness that the milieus of capitalism and socialism overlap and compete; it is here that one not only is confronted by the two systems' differences but also, and perhaps especially, by the similarities that undermine the apparent polarity behind Cold War politics. In this work the nomadic Kosolapov refuses to pick sides, instead inhabiting the undefined and challenging space between socialism and capitalism.

Kosolapov's refusal to adopt a binary view of the world is mirrored in the work of other Soviet artist, such as sculptor Leonid Sokov. Sokov's works also employ the juxtaposition of eastern and western styles to relate his personal experience, albeit with less explicitly geopolitical overtones than Kosolapov. In his work *Lenin and Giacometti* (1989), Sokov creates a clash of two very distinct

styles of art—one representing Soviet Socialist Realism, the other western abstraction. Standing pensive and humble, hands in pockets, Lenin is executed in a typical pose repeated in the pervasive propagandistic representations of him. Lenin's introspective demeanor was a well-known trope to represent his constant attention to the problems of organization of the workers, electrification of the country, and promotion of the international proletariat. But Sokov gives him a new object of consideration—western culture. The abstract, elongated and ghostly form of Giacometti's walking man approaches Lenin, and even seems to stretch out his hand in greeting. It appears that Lenin will not return the gesture as he instead gazes back at the stranger with curiosity and some indignation. The viewer's initial reaction is one of uncomfortable humor, as it seems very strange to be confronted simultaneously with both styles of sculpture encountering each other in the same space. The viewer is also left to ponder over the artistic motivation behind this juxtaposition. First, it is useful to remember that Giacometti developed this figural style during his post-war turn from surrealism to existentialist representation. As Rosalind Krauss notes, Giacometti's elongated figures are closely related to the writings of Sartre in whose philosophy: "consciousness is always attempting to capture itself in its own mirror: seeing itself seeing, touching itself touching."

The subjects in Giacometti's work, often presented in pairs, are not encountering other personages; they represent an individual's confrontation with his or her own double. While the contemplative expression on Lenin's face has traditionally been interpreted as him thoughtfully contemplating solutions to society's issues, Sokov draws on Giacometti's existentialist content to suggest that Lenin's thoughts are also not external but introspective. Perhaps mirroring the artist's own experience, confrontation with the West leads Lenin to reevaluate accepted Soviet truisms. Of course, this work is not about Lenin the person, but Lenin as a symbol of the artist's own Soviet identity: "I—we—are culturally infected with Russian bacteria," Sokov explains, "Traces of my past are in my work when I combine, say, a traditional figure of Lenin with something based on modern Western art."¹ The sculpture stands as a symbolic, existential self-portrait of the artist as nomad. Forged out of Soviet ideology, his identity is forever locked in a tug of war between an ideology he never truly believed and another he is unable to completely accept.

An important aspect of both Kosolapov's and Sokov's works, which aligns them closely with nomadism rather than migrancy, is that not only do they not embrace and assimilate themselves into American society, they also do not self-identify with the culture that they left behind. Seeing themselves neither as Russian emigrants nor American immigrants, Sokov, Kosolapov, and other artists of their generation found themselves in an unstable and ill-defined border zone somewhere between the two ideological and cultural positions. The disconnection from their native culture experienced by dissident artist-nomads did not occur upon emigrating from the Soviet Union, but stemmed from a prior loss of faith in official ideology—or, for some, a failure to ever believe in the first place. Feel-

¹ Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 118.

ings of cultural alienation within the Soviet Union have been expressed by many of these artists—both by those who eventually left as well as those who stayed behind in Russia. Eduard Shteinberg, who chose to remain in Russia, feels that he is nonetheless a displaced person, “I do not leave, although I know that I am an immigrant here. But to be an immigrant in the West means to be an immigrant twice.”² Likewise, artist Mikhail Chemiakin, points out that he became dislocated long before he left Moscow in 1971, “We lived on a different planet from other Russians. We lived in a state of inner exile.”³ No doubt, emigration from the Soviet Union was nonetheless a profoundly disconcerting experience for those artists who made their way to the West. For the artist-nomad, however, the sense of loss associated with physical relocation was merely secondary to the cultural estrangement that led to their producing dissident art in the first place.

Of his own cultural alienation and his reasons for pursuing an unofficial course in his art, Sokov explains: “There was no relationship between the system and what I needed to do...I was educated in a classical mode. The world was not a classical one. I had to look at everything afresh.”⁴ American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton writes about how such realizations can play a role in alienation from one’s own society. His principle of “doctrine over person” states that within totalizing systems, such as that which existed in the Soviet Union, members of society are likely to confront a situation “when there is a conflict between what one feels oneself experiencing and what the doctrine or dogma says one should experience.”⁵ The rigidity of the Soviet system demanded that its citizens subordinate their reality to correct party principles—this was true especially for a generation of artists who spent their childhoods under Stalinism. The inability of individuals to properly code their daily experience led to a fundamental social disconnect. Consider the following statement by the leading Soviet conceptualist Ilya Kabakov: “This awareness began in my early childhood: a feeling that the outside was not coordinated with, or is not adequate to, what’s taking place inside...My problem was how to learn to have a double mind, a double life, in order to survive, so that reality wouldn’t destroy me.”⁶ For artists such as Kabakov, the ability to cultivate a split personality was absolutely necessary for survival.⁷ Not only were

² Ibid., 208.

³ Ibid., 303.

⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, “Cults: Religious Totalism and Civil Liberties,” in *The Future of Immortality and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1987), 215.

⁶ David A. Ross, “Interview,” in *Ilya Kabakov*, eds. Ian Farr and John Stack (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 11.

⁷ This isolation and alienation was not unique to artists, but may have been the condition of a majority of Soviet citizens. Historian Dimitry Pospelovsky explains, “the effect of the all-penetrating terror was fear and total isolation.” (Dimitry Pospelovsky, “From Gosizdat to Samizdat and Tamizdat,” in *Canadian Slavic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* (Vol. 21, No. 1, March 1978), p 47). While the death of Stalin changed the situation by degree, it was still necessary for citizens experiencing this ideological isolation to adopt survival strategies. As Alexei Yurchak suggests, this often took the form of the outward participation in the rituals of the Soviet state, accompanied with a private re-

official commissions needed to provide financial support, but unemployment was illegal in the Soviet Union. To take care of their needs and to stay out of prison, many artists were put in the difficult position of needing to create official works of propaganda in their public lives, while simultaneously opposing that very same official art in their private endeavors. "A whole generation of people had to think in a double way," explains artist Igor Makarevich, "It permeated our bodies and our blood. It became a part of our very marrow."⁸

The necessity of living a dualistic life and the resultant isolation led many artists to intellectual and ideological nomadism. This alienation was powerfully explored in Ilya Kabakov's album entitled *Sitting in the Closet Primakov* (1972-75). The albums are comprised of illustrated stories told about members of Soviet society which are, to varying degrees, a mixture of the most mundane aspects of life and fantastical whimsy inspired by Kabakov's work as a children's book illustrator. The albums also serve as semi-autobiographical stories of the artist's life in the Soviet Union. Kabakov acknowledges his connection to the stories of these protagonists and describes his reasoning, appropriately, through an ostensibly fictional eccentric in a later installation entitled *Ten Characters* (1989). In the text accompanying one of the figures, "The Person Who Describes His Life Through Characters," Kabakov writes:

He undertook once to describe his life, mostly so that he could find out from this description who he himself was, now that he had lived more than half his life...he suddenly realized that even these variegated fragments belonged not to his single consciousness, his memory alone, but, as it were, to the most diverse and separate minds...He made a decision: to unite this diversity into a kind of artistic whole, but to allow them to enter into arguments, to outdo one another, but let all express themselves in turn...He began to work. It ended up taking the shape of 10 albums...⁹

At the end of his account, he lists off the ten albums this artist wrote, which are the exact albums Kabakov had produced while still living in the Soviet Union, including the aforementioned *Sitting in the Closet Primakov*. Because the albums are written in the manner of a children's fairy tale, the viewer is hard-pressed to extract much in the way of concrete details of the artist's life from them. It is rather akin to separating fact from fiction in Homer's *Iliad*. However, it is precisely

interpretation of that ideology. But even in such instances where a person's reinterpretation of ideology allowed them to view themselves as good citizens, the system still required a double existence to which public performance clashed with private practice (Yurchak, "Soviet Hegemony of Form").

⁸ Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 286.

⁹ Ilya Kabakov, *Ten Characters*, ed. James Lingwood, trans. Cynthia Martin, Todd Bludeau, Sabina Perkeland Ruth Barton (London: ICA, 1989), 34-35.

Kabakov's fantastical style that lends the folios their unique ability to convey to the viewer what it felt like to live under Soviet dictatorship—a potent mixture of anxiety, fear, boredom, and protocol.

The tale of Primakov, for instance, spread across forty-seven pages, relates the experience of a young boy who has begun to feel himself estranged within his own family and home. The first page is completely black and from the text we learn that it is the view of a young boy sitting in a closet who refuses to come out. Over the next few pages the image remains completely dark, and Primakov's other senses, in the absence of sight, are heightened as he listens intently to banal, everyday noises such as his sister doing her homework or the wind blowing outside. Using Primakov, Kabakov conveys his own feelings of isolation as he realizes the world is not like what he was told. Disillusionment and boredom cause Primakov (Kabakov's alter-ego) to reconsider the smallest details of life, to once again pay attention to his material surroundings as they are, instead of viewing them against the bright future of communist utopia.¹⁰ As Primakov begins to open the closet, he stares out at his newly unfamiliar surroundings. The viewer, through Primakov's eyes, is presented with a scene of his family sitting around a table, but nobody acknowledges him—they are presented from a distance, almost like they are on display for him to contemplate. Like an unnoticed apparition, Primakov goes to the window to stare out into the courtyard of his apartment block with similar sense of wonder. At this point, Primakov flies out the window and ascends higher and higher into the sky. Along the way he sees the street where his apartment is located, the surrounding region, and the entire district, until finally the earth melts away and Primakov finds himself enveloped by pure sky. The end of Primakov's story is a series of white sheets of paper which for Kabakov is a symbol of death and oblivion.

Primakov's story is an apt analogy for Kabakov's own estrangement from society. As noted above, pursuing unofficial art was equivalent to living as an immigrant; one's surroundings become strange and family and friends distant. While Kabakov had not actually emigrated from the Soviet Union at the time he created this album, his perception of his environment was fundamentally changed, and all sense of familiarity was shattered. Having lost faith in the Soviet system and resolved to not fully participate, Kabakov's situation was not unlike that of a child who rejects the religion of his parents: his surroundings have not changed but his entire understanding of them has, and he can no longer relate to the world in the same way as family and friends. This paradigm shift (what Robert Lipton earlier described as a confrontation with the principle of "doctrine over person") created a strong feeling of disorientation and was, like death, a definitive transition from which there was no going back. Primakov's growing awareness while sitting in the closet leads to a reevaluation of the significance of the everyday actions of his

¹⁰ That Primakov sees himself as separate from the family group does not necessarily indicate that he is an individual while the family operates as an ideological collective still believing in utopian ideology. In all likelihood, they would feel alienated from each other as well. This is particularly true since this is reflecting on Kabakov's childhood, which took place under Stalin's pervasive rule, when any form of interaction was dangerous.

family. Like a child trapped in a dark closet, Kabakov becomes hyper-aware of his surroundings, but unlike the fictional child, he only dreams of flying into oblivion. His reality was that he had to walk out of that closet and, publicly at least, pretend nothing had happened. From this we learn nothing factual, but something much more consequential.

Occupying the Peripheral Space of State Ideology

The cultural alienation of Soviet unofficial artists, resulting from their own disillusionment with state ideology, has shaped their creative production both in Moscow as well as New York. Understanding of the dimensions of the artists' dislocation can be expanded through a topographic conception of Soviet ideology. Called upon to be "engineers of the human soul,"¹¹ artists in the Soviet Union were placed in the precarious position of negotiating the dangerous space of the periphery. Having found themselves unintentionally outside the parameters of party-sanctioned activity, many adopted nomadic strategies of survival.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that the fundamental distinction between nomadic culture and the sedentary culture of the state is their respective conceptualizations of space: "Sedentary space is striated, by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures, while nomad space is smooth, marked only by 'traits' that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory."¹² By imposing a system of organization on the land, the state territorially stakes a claim on that space and, by extension, the people that inhabit it. In the Soviet Union, the program of propaganda was designed to mark out territory for the state, not only figuratively, but physically; "Works of totalitarian art do not describe the world," argues Boris Groys, "they occupy the world."¹³ Based on Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis*, Lenin's program of monumental propaganda, later extended under Stalin, inundated the public spaces with statues and murals proclaiming Soviet authority.¹⁴ These monuments were reinforced by the more ephemeral banners and art exhibitions aimed at reinforcing Soviet ideological dogma. But perhaps no action was more territorial than the renaming of cities, streets, regions, and natural landmarks after Soviet leaders, heroes, and accomplishments of the state. Delineating and mapping the space of the state, and anchoring it with propagandistic markers, represented a clear attempt at establishing a sedentary space, inhospitable to nomadic wandering.

In his wildly popular 1947 book *Map of the Motherland*, Nikolai Mikhailov writes, "We love our glorious, dear Volga, but we don't wish to have it quiet as

¹¹ This phrase is attributed to Stalin, and was presented at the Soviet Writers Congress in 1934 in a speech by Andrei Zhdanov, apparently based on a conversation he had with Stalin.

¹² Deleuzes and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.

¹³ Boris Groys, "The Art of Totality," in *The Landscape of Stalinism*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), 98.

¹⁴ Campanella's novel describes a society in which the citizens are instructed through a series of murals that educate them on proper behavior and doctrine. Lenin's program, while it retained some of the didactic elements of Campanella's conception, also adopted more traditional iconography of victory and domination.

it is...The dams of hydroelectric stations will lock up the water...With our own hands, using well-considered blueprints, we are building our country, we are creating a new landscape."¹⁵ While the Soviet Union is certainly not the first nation to fantasize about controlling nature, the immobility so highly valued in Stalinist culture is certainly palpable in Mikhailov's description of this vision. In the Soviet conception of space, the ideal is quite similar to Deleuze and Guattari's description of sedentary space, with its walls and enclosures. Dissident writer Yevgeny Zamyatin made prescient observations about the future of the Soviet Union in 1921 when D-503, the protagonist of his dystopian novel *We* says in defense of the communist state: "It is clear that the entire history of mankind, insofar as we know it, is the history of transition from nomadic to increasingly settled forms of existence. And does it not follow that the most settled form (ours) is at the same time the most perfect (ours)?"¹⁶ He goes on to elaborate, explaining, "Oh, great, divinely bounding wisdom of walls and barriers! They are, perhaps, the greatest of man's inventions. Man ceased to be a wild animal only when he built the first wall."¹⁷

In his painting *I, You, He, She* (1971), Leonid Lamm highlights another troubling aspect of the state's territorial tendencies: "If you want to be a member of society, you have to be measured—to have a social security number, or else you are nothing."¹⁸ In other words, delineation of the Soviet landscape included not only its geographic, but also its human resources. In a country founded on the principles of Taylorism¹⁹—a system that treats the body as a mechanical machine that must be measured and controlled to achieve maximum efficiency—Lamm's works investigate the process of breaking down a human being into a set of mathematical data. His painting was inspired by the popular Soviet song "We are like one family: We consist of 100,000 I's."²⁰ Against a flat black background, the silhouettes of four white heads are lined up in a uniform manner. On each head are the four pronouns: I, You, He, and She. Surrounding each word are the artist's precise measurements of every aspect of the letters. The careful precision of the whole work suggests that a person can ultimately be understood and categorized

¹⁵ Evgeny Dobrenko, "The Art of Social Navigation," in *The Landscape of Stalinism*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, trans. Glen Worthey (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), 194-95.

¹⁶ Evgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York, NY: EOS, 1999), 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁸ Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 113.

¹⁹ Based on the theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Taylorism was a system of efficiency that proposed the analysis of the most minute movements of the worker to increase production dramatically through small adjustments. Taylorism became a favorite theory of over-zealous Communist Party workers, who even formed brigades whose specific task was to search out any type of inefficiency. For a good analysis of Taylorism and its influence throughout Europe, see Charles S. Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s," in *Journal of Contemporary History* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 1970).

²⁰ Alla Rosenfeld, "Word and/as Image," in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld (New York, NY: Prestel, 2011), 202.

using a process of empirical observation. The loss of any sense of subjectivity in the piece heightens the sense that people in the Soviet Union are depersonalized and regarded as assets to be measured and inventoried. In a Taylorist state that treats individuals like machines on the factory floor, territorial claims are placed upon the citizen as property of the state—a situation that led artist Vagrigh Bakhchanyan to joke, “We all have the honorary brand ‘Made in the USSR’ on our foreheads.”²¹ Soviet cultural historian Vladimir Paperny writes about how such quantifying of Soviet citizens eventually led to immobility, even within the union: “Beginning in 1932 the internal passport system was gradually implemented... In 1940 the ‘voluntary departure of employees from factories and offices’ was forbidden once and for all. Thus the man of [Stalinist culture] loses his mobility in geographical space.”²² It is not surprising, then, that many of the dissident artists came under their greatest persecution from authorities when applying for a visa to emigrate, not for creating and exhibiting their work in the underground.²³

The primary effect of striation upon the citizens of the state is that it fosters a sense of stasis that in turn reinforces the permanence of the state’s power. The Soviet Union was certainly no exception to this rule. Susan Buck-Morss notes, “Stalinist culture abhorred uprootedness. Cosmopolitanism became synonymous with betraying the motherland.”²⁴ The propaganda created under Stalin was markedly different from that which was created in the early years of the Soviet Union, when the present was emphasized as merely a transitory and relatively unimportant stage in the eventual attainment of communism. “Life has improved, Comrades. Life has become more joyous,” proclaimed Stalin in 1935, reassuring Soviet citizens that the time of transition had been replaced by stability and stasis.²⁵ Under Stalin’s leadership artists were responsible for reinforcing these notions of immobility and territoriality. Exemplifying the ideals of Socialist Realism and its advocacy of a sedentary, striated space for the state is Alexander Gerasimov’s painting *Comrade Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938). Standing with the leader of the Soviet Union’s military, Stalin looks peculiarly immobile despite the simple narrative displayed: a casual walk in the Kremlin. Gerasimov makes deliberate formal comparisons between the two men and the prominently visible

²¹ *A-Ya: Unofficial Art Revue. Vol. 1*, eds. Alexei Alexeev and Igor Shelkovsky (Elancourt, France: A-YA, 1979), 46.

²² Vladimir Paperny, “Movement—Immobility,” in *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, eds. and trans. Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 61.

²³ A striking example of the persecution that came as a result of applying to emigrate is Leonid Lamm. Lamm and some friends actually took the bold step of splashing a monument to Mayakovsky with red paint in the dead of night. But this incident did not cause him trouble for over six years when it was used as a pretext to imprison him after he peacefully applied for a visa to emigrate. Only then did he receive his prison sentence.

²⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 122.

²⁵ This quote was taken from Stalin’s “Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites,” which was delivered November 17, 1935. J. V. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism*, trans. Unattributed (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), 783.

Vodovozny Tower of the Kremlin. Writing of the painting, Gerasimov extolls the virtue of stone-like immobility: “These poses are supposed to express that the peoples and the Red Army are the same, are one *monolith* [emphasis added].”²⁶ Gerasimov’s work was inspired by the famous pre-revolutionary painting by Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Bogatyr*s (1898). The work depicts three wandering warriors from Russian epic poetry—Dobrynia, Ilia Moromets, and Alesha Popovich—who ride the countryside, protecting the people. Of Vasnetsov’s work, Gerasimov said, “I admit that this picture was constantly before my eyes; there are three warriors there, and here stand two warriors—our Soviet ones.”²⁷ In both works the viewer is reassured that there are warriors standing guard to protect them from outside hostile forces: Vasnetsov’s in the nomadic steppes, Gerasimov’s in the very center of a highly striated state. The most heroic figures in Stalin’s state are immobile; they are not men of action, but men of inaction.

Gerasimov’s work, which is often pegged as the most important example of Soviet-era painting, features prominently the walls and barriers praised by Zamyatin’s protagonist D-503: the fence beside Stalin and Voroshilov, the walls of the Kremlin, and the embankment of the Moscow River all speak to the clear delineation of the Soviet topography. The further away from the central figure of Stalin the eye ventures, the less ordered and striated the space becomes. Far in the distance, the silhouette of a church is visible, indicating unfinished labor yet to be done; it supports Mikhailov’s assertion that “building communism, we are remaking the country with rational calculation, we are changing its geography.”²⁸ The work of Socialist Realism operates doubly as a confirmation of Stalin’s infallible status and as a call to arms for Soviet citizens—not so much to forge a new future, but to arrest the deleterious forces of the present.

In order to do so, artists had to be in a position where they could properly understand the difference between the striated space of the state, marked off by walls and barriers, and the unmarked space of nomadic existence. During Stalinism, progress came to be defined by the continual expansion of ideological territory, the incorporation of smooth, nomadic space into the state. As ideational people, artists (along with high-ranking officials) were tasked with negotiating the border between Soviet and anti-Soviet concepts, an assignment that carried great risk because any misstep could result in ostracism, denunciation, and arrest. With the risks of being an artist, came the potential for great reward in the form of privileges such as country retreats, lavish apartments, and access to luxury items not available to the average Soviet citizen. Weighing in on this situation, historian

²⁶ Jan Plamper, “The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), 32.

²⁷ Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 105.

²⁸ This quote is from the popular 1947 book by Nikolai Mikhailov, *Map of the Motherland*. In this book, Mikhailov frequently declared the supremacy of the Soviet Union to lie in its ability to change the landscape from chaos into rational resource, using “well-considered blueprints.” Thus Mikhailov touts the accomplishments of turning the lands around the Aral sea from desert into fertile land, just as American prairies are washed out and turned into dust bowls. Dobrenko, “The Art of Social Navigation,” 196.

Evgeny Dobrenko likewise takes under consideration the risk/reward qualities of life on the periphery: “The border lived its own special life, full of dangers and heroic feats, and therefore full of heroes and enemies.”²⁹ Because the artists were believed to possess the power to shape the very souls of the people, the feeling that “you’re either for us or against us” was particularly palpable.

The ideological boundary between delineated space of the state and smooth nomadic space beyond was never a solid line. Instead, it marked a zone of persistent struggle that the artist was responsible to navigate: “Smooth space is constantly being translated, traversed into striated space,” explain Deleuze and Guattari, “striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to smooth space.”³⁰ Placed on the front lines of the shifting interpretations of the acceptable and unacceptable, the artists are continually in danger of finding themselves on the wrong side of the line ideologically. It was, therefore, very difficult for an artist to inhabit the gray zone between ardent support of the party, and dissidence. For many of these artists, becoming a dissident was not a conscious choice but resulted from shifting political terrain, insufficiently or improperly decoded. For example, the artist Gustav Klutsis, a major propagandist throughout the 1920s, fell into disfavor and was executed by Stalin, despite his ardent support of the Communist Party. Klutsis’ eventual fall from grace was not the result of any change in his artistic approach, nor was it the result of his having challenged party leaders. Like many artists of his generation, Klutsis fell victim to an ideological shift in the upper echelons of the Communist Party that redefined his art as “formalist” and anti-Soviet. A similar fate befell many artists and composers, most famously Dmitri Shostakovich whose work *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was first praised in official print and subsequently denounced.

Artists of the Cold War era were equally as prone to inadvertently creating art that fell outside acceptable parameters. Oleg Vassiliev related his experience in 1961 of applying for union membership as an artist, for which he submitted a series of linocuts on the subject of the Moscow Metro: “Upon examination by the Reception Committee of the MOSKh (the Moscow Department of Artists’ Union), the linocuts were referred to as too preoccupied with formal issues, so I remained a candidate for the Union for seven years.”³¹ Vassiliev’s works were not deliberately subversive, and their subject, the glorification of the Moscow Metro, would seem incontestable according to the status quo. Despite the official pushback, Vassiliev had no intention of joining the dissidents. He writes, “I did not take part in the movement and even actively avoided it. . . However, in our social system, even this pursuing of one’s own work was criminal. . . Officially, therefore, I found myself in the circle of ‘unofficial’ artists.”³² Likewise, Vassiliev’s close friend Eric Bulatov writes that from the beginning, he had every intention of becoming a dedicated

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 474-75.

³¹ Oleg Vassiliev, “How I Became an Artist,” in *Oleg Vassiliev*, eds. Alexandra Bruskin, Anne Schneider, and Joan Beecher Eichrodt (Saint Petersburg, Russia: Palace Editions, 2004), 25.

³² Ibid., 26.

Socialist-Realist. At one point in his studies, though, he found that what he was doing was unacceptable, and this often caught him by surprise:

Until about 1958 I had consciously included myself within the tradition in which I was raised. But it became apparent to me that what I had begun to do, and what I intended to do, would not be the same...At the Surikov Institute in the mid-1950s this separation of private and public thoughts and attitudes became painful, particularly because the 1950s were years of crisis for us. I realized that everything we had learned was a lie and that I really had to start over again, to learn everything from scratch. When I finished studying at the Institute in 1958, I had to face the question: was I a dissident? ...I had no idea what kind of artist I would become, but I had to be absolutely free in my choices and free from the officially accepted art styles.³³

Faced with the situation of being on the wrong side of the party line, artists really had three choices. The first option was to display penance and resubmit oneself to the state, thereby retreating safely within the ideological confines of the strated state.³⁴ The second possibility also involved abandoning the liminal border zone, but rather than retreating back to the state, the artist stops trying to balance competing systems and establishes a position within a competing, though equally well-defined, ideological or aesthetic system such as abstraction. The final option, adopted by the artists under consideration here, is to embrace the ill-defined, smooth space of ideological nomadism. What separates the latter two options (which were both adopted by unofficial artists) is a matter of conceptual framework. This difference is analogous to Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between migrants and nomads: "Whereas the migrant leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge."³⁵ Ideological artist-migrants, such as those in the Lianozovo Group, left behind the official cultural elements of Socialist Realism and propaganda and sought refuge in other cultural and stylistically defined regions such as abstraction, symbolism, and religious imagery.

On the other hand, many Soviet dissident artists adopted a survival strategy of ideological nomadism as a response to the hostilities of the state. Artist-nomads were not interested in staking territorial claims of their own; instead, they carried out deconstructive projects that were inclined toward an analysis of territorialization itself. Artists, like Komar and Melamid, Kosolapov, Sokov, and Kabakov

³³ Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 153.

³⁴ This strategy was famously adopted by Shostakovich who, after his official denunciation mentioned above, withdrew his Fourth Symphony and took up work in the much-less controversial field of writing music for propagandistic films.

³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.

borrowed from numerous historical traditions, but aligned themselves with none of them. From this position, these artists carved out smooth spaces within striated ideological systems. Rather than eschewing the imagery of official culture entirely, they engaged it in such a way as to disassociate it from its intended purpose. Importantly, leaving the physical territory of the state was not necessary in order to abandon the role of the artist-engineer in favor of that of the artist-nomad. Deleuze and Guattari note, “Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces: to live in the city as a nomad...movements, speed and slowness, are sometimes enough to reconstruct a smooth space.”³⁶ Rather than seeking out a more hospitable space, the artist-nomad strives to transform the hostile milieu of the state to something more preferable.

Nomadic Dwelling

That artist-nomads like Kosolapov, Sokov, and Kabakov were not seeking to adopt or create an alternate stratified system to that of the Soviet state had a profound influence on how they confronted the ideological “other” of the Cold War era upon arrival in New York.³⁷ As in the case of their works that combine imagery from East and West, these artists’ approach was not one of choosing and supporting one system over the other, but was a rejection of systems as such; while the territory in the West was new, the process of institutional territorialization was not.³⁸ In a world largely occupied by competing political systems that claimed exclusive supremacy, artist-nomads strove for a way of living independent of the territorial claims of state ideology. They had to learn how to dwell as cultural outsiders in a globalized world.

Having considered themselves as something other than Russian for a long time, displaced artists did not seek out the Russian diasporic community when they arrived in New York. Boris Groys, himself a displaced Soviet, writes: “What they took with them as they moved to the West was not their cultural identity, but their cultural nonidentity.”³⁹ In America they neither sought refuge in the familiar cultural surroundings of the diasporic community nor did they seek to fully invest in an American identity. That their estrangement from society predates emigration also helps explain why so few of them chose to return to Russia when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, and those who did rarely received an enthusiastic reception.

In their nomadic wandering, Soviet dissident artists had to negotiate the terrain between competing ideological milieus: capitalism and communism; Russian

³⁶ Ibid., 500.

³⁷ This may also explain why they may not have designated themselves as dissidents – viewing a dissident as an advocate for an alternate ideological system.

³⁸ While the artists were not interested in endorsing either side of the Cold War, Donald Kuspit points out that because their art was a rejection of Soviet socialism, it was often interpreted as an endorsement for Capitalism—an unintended result to be sure. Donald Kuspit, “New York Contra Moscow, Moscow Contra New York: The Battle in the Soul of the New Russian Immigrant Artists,” in *Forbidden Art*, ed. Garrett White (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 1988), 166.

³⁹ Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 109.

nationalism and western progressivism; socialist realism and avant-garde abstraction. “The notion of the milieu is not unitary,” explain Deleuze and Guattari, “not only does the living thing continually pass from one milieu to another, but the milieus pass into one another; they are essentially communicating. The milieus are open to chaos, which threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion.”⁴⁰ It was against the potential chaos induced by the opposing milieus that artists sought refuge in their work. At the heart of artworks such as Kosolapov’s *Coca-Cola Lenin* and Sokov’s *Lenin and Giacometti* is the terrain in which the competing milieus overlap and confront one another. Within the space of the artwork, the artists attempt to bring together elements carefully to create some sort of order within the chaos. Deleuze and Guattari address this condition by positing a hypothetical situation in which a child is scared while wandering in the darkness. To assuage the fear, the child almost instinctively begins to sing a song. “The song,” they explain, “is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos.”⁴¹ The imposition of some semblance of order into the child’s situation has a comforting effect and begins to create a sort of ephemeral and mobile dwelling-place. “But home does not preexist,” Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, “it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space.”⁴² Soviet artists were conscious of the possibility of using creative and expressive means to not only record their lives, but structure them. Eric Bulatov notes, “When you create a painting, you are creating yourself. Art is a way of getting through life.”⁴³ The rhythmic play of signs and their corresponding connotations creates a temporary, ideological home for the artist.⁴⁴ Artist-nomads such as Komar and Melamid were very aware of the possibility that their art could constitute an ephemeral dwelling. “Our art is very close to architecture,” explains Melamid, “each panel is a building block, painted separately with no thought of where we might eventually place it. When we assemble the panels, it’s a little like making a house.”⁴⁵ From this emboldened position, the individual can engage the chaos of the world anew: “One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.”⁴⁶

The idea of the artwork acting as a home was carried out in a very literal sense by Kabakov upon his arrival in the West with his installation project *Ten Characters* (1989). As mentioned earlier, this work can be seen as a continuation of his previous project *Ten Albums*, as one of the characters is the author of the albums. The installation consisted of the recreation of a communal apartment from Soviet times. Each room is occupied by eccentric and fantastical figures such as “The

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 313.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴³ *A-Ya: Unofficial Art Revue. Vol. 1.* 31.

⁴⁴ “Rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another. It does not operate in homogeneous space-time, but by heterogeneous blocks.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 313.

⁴⁵ Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 55.

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment,” and “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away.” While the installation itself does not explicitly confront the West in the same way as Kosolapov or Sokov, its presence in New York itself provides the context for such a confrontation. The Western viewer was no doubt filled with some measure of astonishment at being presented with an alien living arrangement. The Soviet émigré, on the contrary, feels a strange dislocation as the familiar is presented in a disconnected land. However, the installation lends itself to comparisons with apartments in New York, surely some familiarity with cramped spaces and run-down architecture. In its particularity to another time and place, it nonetheless highlights something deeply universal.

The artist’s nomadism is emphasized when the viewer understands this work as being *in-stalled*, in the manner in which that term implies a temporary stasis in an existence otherwise defined by motion. Even when the ideological home is a literal one, it is still necessarily a temporary one. Boris Groys notes, “The installation *demonstrates* the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it *installs* everything that otherwise merely *circulates* in our civilization.”⁴⁷ From this perspective it is equally plausible to see *Coca-Cola Lenin* and *Lenin and Giacometti* as artistic installations. At any given moment, the totality of our lived cultural environment is composed of numerous signs and associations that, depending on context and chance, come together in infinite combinations. The works of the artist-nomad draws on this reservoir of cultural signs and symbols in a careful way to re-present them in a conscious, structured way thereby temporarily creating an ordered space for inhabitation.

“With the nomad,” Deleuze and Guattari further elucidate, “it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself.”⁴⁸ The artist-nomad presents a rhythmic world in which cultural elements come together arbitrarily and without any sort of underlying meaning assigned by a totalizing ideology. By stripping the exclusive territorial claims made by the state from an object or idea, the artist-nomad creates a smooth space for themselves—a less-hostile dwelling from which to engage the world.

By composing works of art, the artist-nomad does not begin dwelling. Rather, the works demonstrate that the artist-nomad already dwells in-between the rival ideological milieus of capitalism and socialism. The creation of the work of art merely defines a space and creates a home for that dwelling. In so doing, the work of art redefines the space of both ideological systems. In a sense, we can understand the work of art as analogous to Heidegger’s metaphor of a bridge in that it redefines that which it engages: “It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge decidedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge...the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and

⁴⁷ Boris Groys, “Multiple Authorship,” in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 95.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.

land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.⁴⁹ The *in-stalled* work of art stands as a structure that allows for a temporary stasis, a vantage point from which the striated lands on either bank can be reclaimed as smooth territory and evaluated against one another.⁵⁰ The two ideological systems are shown not to be mutually exclusive opposites, as asserted in the rhetoric of leaders like Reagan and Thatcher. Rather, they are rivals in the literal etymological meaning of the word—two that share the same river. They are two sides of the same coin.

By erecting these conceptual bridges between East and West, artist-nomads are prevented from becoming sedentary; by consistently destabilizing their own position and moving forward with new perspectives, they avoid becoming part of a single politico-ideological system. Vitaly Komar explains his understanding of this process when he says, "You paint a painting, then frame it. You make an object and set it apart from the rest of the world. Then you get the idea of breaking the barrier between the world of the artwork and the spectators' world. But you have to set up this barrier before you can break it."⁵¹ In other words, that the artist-nomad's general condition is characterized by motion does not mean that he or she does not pause and dwell upon a certain ideological position or element of material culture. Rather the artist-nomad will arrest that motion temporarily in consideration, subsequently breaking free and roaming further. In his analysis of dwelling, Immanuel Levinas points out that constructing a home is not the ultimate aim: "The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense, its commencement."⁵² By operating as temporary nomadic dwellings, works of art like *Coca-Cola Lenin* and *Lenin and Giacometti* do not express permanent philosophical points of view. They should instead be understood as momentary expressions of the artist's current relationship to the world around him—a point in an indeterminate life journey.

About the Author

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⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Perennial Classics, 2001), 150.

⁵⁰ Considering a work of art that spans a river, it is difficult not to consider Vladimir Tatlin's infamous *Monument to the Third International* of 1921. Conceptualized as the tallest structure in the world, it was to house all important functions of government in a position suspended above the Neva River. Interestingly, Tatlin envisioned a strict order being imposed on the structure as the buildings would rotate every day, month, and year respectively. The permanence and ordering associated with this work would have allowed a certain amount of control over the smooth and wild nature of the river.

⁵¹ Ratcliff, *Komar & Melamid*, 32-33.

⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 152.