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*Dream Factory Communism: the Visual Culture
of the Stalin Era*

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Max Hollein, Director of the Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, relates how he suddenly conceived of the exhibition *Dream Factory Communism* on a trip to Moscow after a chance encounter with the power and desire that radiate from Socialist Realist painting. A visit to the Tretyakov Gallery convinced him to discard his original plan for a Kandinsky retrospective, in favour of a controversial art that fascinates the contemporary imagination with its mixture of the 'monumental and folksy' on the one hand, and the 'postmodern and visionary' on the other.² The flash of inspiration and coincidental origins of the project, combined with the unique curatorial vision of art theorist Boris Groys, has resulted in an exhibition that is unprecedented, both for its original and all-encompassing approach to Soviet art, and for having the courage to lay aside western modernist scruples and hang iconic works of Socialist Realism on the walls of a major German art gallery.

¹ First published in *Art Margins. Contemporary Central and Eastern European Visual Culture*; <http://www.artmargins.com>

² M. Hollein, foreword to *Dream Factory Communism: the Visual Culture of the Stalin Era*, eds. B. Groys and M. Hollein, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt: Frankfurt 2003, p. 9.

Dream Factory Communism set itself the ambitious task of examining the interconnections between three twentieth-century art movements that have up to now been kept carefully separate by art history. The show presents a novel periodisation in which the 'late Russian avant-garde' (1928-33) overlaps with the period of Socialist Realism (1922-53), the starting point of which is pushed back an extra decade before the movement was actually christened as Socialist Realism in 1932.³ The official art created between Stalin's death and the fall of the Soviet Union (1953-91) is excluded from the scope of the exhibition, seemingly missing an opportunity to examine the overlap and continuities between 'late Socialist Realism' and Sots Art (1972-91). By showing together works from what are conventionally seen as dissimilar and conflicting schools of art, the exhibition aims to present them in a radical new light as 'a unified aesthetic phenomenon that intersects all media.'⁴

The lead curator of the Dream Factory, Boris Groys, is best known for his controversial theory that links the aesthetic ambitions of the avant-garde with the political ambitions of totalitarian states. His main criticism of early twentieth century avant-garde artists is that they 'wished to create a new public, a new kind of human being, who would share their own taste and see the world through their eyes.' While faith in their radical vision waned in the capitalist West, Stalinism 'inherited the avant-garde belief that humanity could be changed.'⁵ It is Groys's thesis that despite the clear stylistic differences, Socialist Realism should be regarded as 'not only the organic continuation of the avant-garde, but also its culmination and in some sense its completion.'⁶

Groys can muster little sympathy for the fate of the avant-garde artists under Stalin, attributing their persecution to the fact that the avant-garde and the dictator were 'competitors in the struggle for aesthetic-political power'. Stalin was in essence 'the only artist of the Stalin era' and should be regarded as 'a successor

³ Matthew Cullerne Bown, in his exhaustive survey, relates that 'the syntagma [Socialist Realism] acquired definitive status' on 26 October 1932, at a late night meeting between Stalin and Soviet writers at Gorky's house. M. Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London 1998, p. 140.

⁴ M. Hollein, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵ B. Groys, *Introduction*, in: *Dream Factory Communism...*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁶ B. Groys, *Stalinism as Aesthetic Phenomenon*, in: *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, eds. and trans. A. Efimova and L. Manovich, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London 1993, p. 120-21.

of Malevich or Tatlin to a greater degree than the later museum stylisations of the avant-garde [in the West].⁷ Put succinctly, we may observe that he is distinctly hostile to the historical avant-garde, and highly critical of the positive evaluation accorded to Suprematism and Constructivism by Western art history.

Groys's unusually negative view of the Russian avant-garde is reflected in the curatorial scheme of *Dream Factory Communism*. The 'late Russian avant-garde' (1928-33) is represented in the exhibition by a single painter. The three canvases of Kazimir Malevich can be read as mournful evocations of the dismal conditions of the Stalinist countryside during collectivisation. Each shows three expressionless peasant women positioned geometrically in the centre of the composition and seemingly disconnected from the rural scene behind them. These though are not the finest examples of Malevich's celebrated return to painting, and there is a suspicion that the works were chosen not for their artistic quality, but instead to illustrate the artist's alleged conversion to Socialist Realism. Groys is at pains to point out that Malevich's later 'Socialist Realist' works were not simply a response to external pressure from the authorities, but 'the result of a continuous and logical development' from his earlier Suprematism.⁸

The high point of the exhibition is the presence of a number of extraordinary paintings that should undoubtedly be counted among the master works of Socialist Realism. Aleksander Gerasimov's *Lenin on the Tribune* (1930) quickly became one of the best known iconic representations of the revolutionary leader. Lenin is pictured with cap in hand, standing on the podium, in full-flow delivery of a speech to a sea of flag-waving people. The revolutionary storm clouds part to illuminate the solitary leader as he communes with the masses, and perhaps also the gods. If you look carefully, you can see that the pointed staff of the red banner in the foreground has been repainted to make it more erect and emphatic, apparently on the advice of a party committee. When compared with the three portraits of Lenin from the 1920s that are also on show, it is clear that Gerasimov's Lenin marked a decisive advance towards achieving a fitting personification of Lenin the indefatigable revolutionary leader, and an improvement – in Socialist Realist terms – upon the thoughtful, darker, more emotional Lenin seen in early portraits.⁹

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ B. Groys, *Introduction...*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁹ The early portraits shown were by Emil-Anton-Wisel and Ilja Grinman.

Vasili Efanov's *An Unforgettable Meeting* (1936-7) dominates the first large hall of the exhibition space, subordinating the surrounding canvases with its aesthetic intensity and indubitable monumentality. Book reproductions of this work fail to convey the bright and uncanny light with which everything in the picture is bathed, or the intense melodrama of the moment depicted, in which a model collective farm girl gets her hand grasped by the benevolent father of the Soviet universe. Stalin and the pretty girl are surrounded by applauding Soviet dignitaries and a chorus of joyful peasant women, but although everyone is smiling, no one looks anyone else in the eye, nor dares to look directly at the magical coupling at the centre of things; all stare benignly into the middle distance, a metaphorical (and hallucinogenic) state used to suggest the dawning socialist future. Resplendent bunches of flowers on the walls and table embellish the areas of the tableau not already filled with smiling faces, creating the impression of unlimited happiness and abundance, and driving out any lurking shadows of doubt from this unforgettable orgy of Stalinist excess.

The painterly touch and hint of impressionism in Efanov and Gerasimov is absent from the squeaky clean photo-realism of Aleksander Laktionov's *Hero of the Soviet Union N.V. Yudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops (Military Cadets Designing a Wall Newspaper)* (1938). Laktionov was a pupil of Issak Brodski (discussed below) at the Leningrad Academy of Arts, and his diploma work is a stunning example of the 'naturalist' tendency in Socialist Realism. The cadets, who are pictured standing good humouredly around a table, represent the 'new cadres' of Stalinist Russia, the first generation to be fully formed in the Soviet Union. They are back lit from two high balcony windows, through which the cool, white light of the Leningrad summer pours in. The atmosphere of Russian nationalism, and military preparedness, is heightened still by the presence of a portrait of Stalin and Voroshilov by the Kremlin, overlooking the scene and framed by neo-classical pillars.

The glossy, highly-finished surface of Laktionov's canvas is a tribute to the influence of his master at the All-Russian Academy of Arts in Leningrad, Issak Brodski, who was to die a year after its completion. Brodski is well represented in *Dream Factory Communism* by a total of seven oil paintings, including well-known photo-realist works such as *Lenin in the Smolny* (1930). This was painted in the same year as Gerasimov's *Lenin on the Tribune*, and serves to illustrate the difference in approach of the Leningrad and Moscow 'schools' of Socialist Realism. The essence of the conflict that raged behind the official

facade of stylistic uniformity was between those who put a premium on the mimetic depiction of reality (the conservative Leningrad 'Naturalists'), and those who put the stress on representing 'reality in its revolutionary development' (the more liberal Moscow 'Formalists').¹⁰

Of even greater interest are a number of works from the early 1920s, the truthful, documentary approach of which rendered them unexhibitable for many decades. *At the Coffin of the Leader* (1925) is an extraordinary record of Lenin's lying in state, which freeze-frames the revolutionary drama before the historical narrative was rewritten by Stalin. We see Trotsky and Stalin standing side by side at the open coffin. The sombre scene is transfigured by a strong yellow light from six massive chandeliers, which is reflected back down on the crowd from luxuriant palm trees that reach up out of our frame of view; clearly a device to express the idea that Lenin lives on through the triumph of the Revolution. The other extraordinary early Brodski painting is *The Second Congress of the Comintern (Festive Opening of the Comintern in the Uritskii Palace)* (1920-24), a meticulous record of a monumental meeting of international Communist Parties in revolutionary Russia which is three metres high and five metres wide. Stalin is just another face in the crowd of three hundred delegates, based on sketches that Brodski made during the congress, thirty of which are also exhibited here.

The artist who apparently was judged to best convey the idea of *Dream Factory Communism* is Aleksander Deineka, who is represented in the exhibition by eight oil paintings and a number of posters. His simplified modernist figurative style is visible throughout his oeuvre, from *The Defence of Sevastopol* (1927) to *Relay Race along the Garden Ring* (1947), and was the reason why he was criticised in the party's periodic campaigns against Formalism. It might be commented here that, contrary to the accepted wisdom, the more you see of the work of the standard bearers of Socialist Realism, the less uniform or generic the style appears. There were in fact several competing versions of Socialist Realism, each associated with a specific period in Soviet history, an issue which is only indirectly brought to light by the exhibition. Deineka is a very likeable painter, who even when he tries his hardest to create orthodox Socialist Realist works, always leaves a strong imprint of his own complex artistic personality.

¹⁰ For the conflict between Moscow and Leningrad, or 'Formalism' and 'Naturalism' in Socialist Realism, see also M. Cullerne Bown, op. cit., p. 192-95.

One such key historical period was the Second World War, the depiction of which in Soviet painting certainly has the potential to touch sensitive bilateral nerves. In fact, the only war painting in the exhibition is Vasili Yakovlev's stylised, neo-classical *Portrait of the Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgii Zhukov* (1946). It was perhaps judged too provocative or bad taste to show more 'realistic' war paintings, such as Michail Khmelko's *Triumph of the Conquering People* (1949). That particular work depicts the neo-medieval ceremony that took place in Red Square in 1945, during which Nazi banners were ritualistically deposited as war trophy before Stalin at the Lenin Mausoleum. The exhibition cleverly deals (and disposes) with the issue of the War, by placing Yakovlev's equestrian victory painting at the very beginning of the show.

Dream Factory Communism, perhaps surprisingly, also finds room for only one painting from the period of cultural thaw that followed the death of Stalin. Arcadi Plastov's *Spring* (1954) famously shows a peasant girl kneeling naked on a bed of hay, playfully dressing her young daughter in a head scarf, while snow gently falls. This much-loved metaphor for political liberalisation (and celebration of the timeless values of the Russian countryside) has been rudely paired with a new work by Boris Mikhailov. Mikhailov, who is well known for his recent series of voyeuristic photographs of Kiev homeless (for which he was awarded the Citibank Photography Prize in 2001), here presents a photograph of his attractive wife completely naked, combing her daughter's hair; a relational work that offers itself to a variety of interpretations.

The third period in Russian art that the exhibition considers is the unofficial Soviet art scene from the 1970s and 80s. Key works from the best known figures of Sots Art – Erik Bulatov, Komar & Melamid and Ilya Kabakov – are positioned at intervals along the exhibition path, and designed to act as a kind of aesthetic and moral guide to Socialist Realism. The most striking example of this strategy is in the first hall, where Komar & Melamid's *I Saw Stalin Once When I was a Child* (1981-2) is displayed at the end of a room full of iconic Socialist Realism. We see Stalin peeking out of the back of a secret police car, of the kind used in the mass terror of the 1930s to make arrests. He appears to be looking back at a life of crime recorded by the Socialist Realist paintings all around. The Sots Art artists belonged to 'the last generation of Soviet citizens capable of receiving the message of Socialist Realism directly from their teachers'¹¹; most of them received their artistic education in Stalin's Russia. Groys rightly points to their love-hate relationship with the seductive dream of Socialist Realism, 'for con-

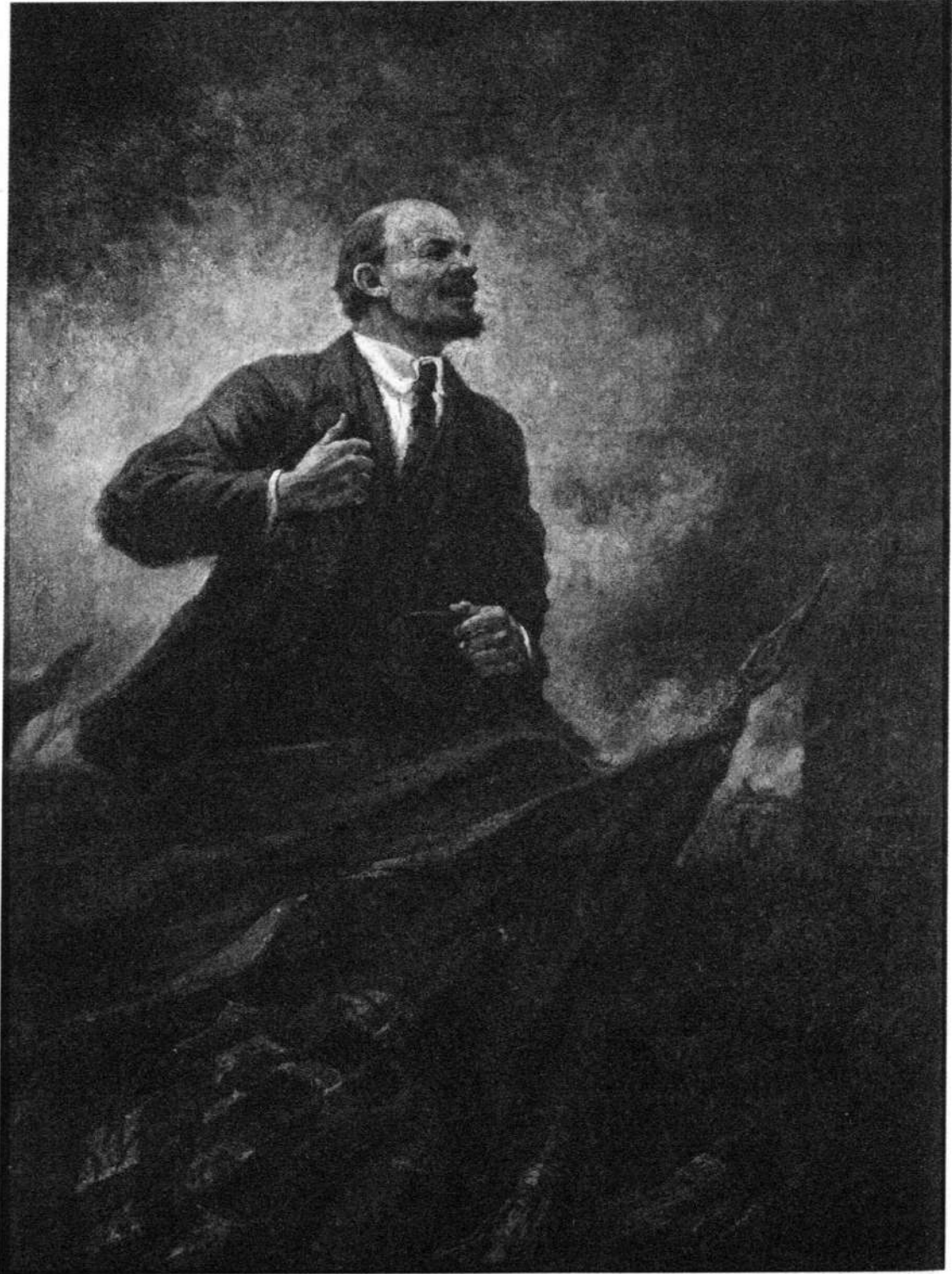
stantly practicing a critique of one kind of art can be interpreted as an expression of love for that art.¹²

Dream Factory Communism is a pioneering exhibition that inevitably raises a lot more questions than it can answer. The relationship of the avant-garde to Socialist Realism has yet to be fully unravelled; Groys is right to identify an avant-garde impulse at the heart of the utopian and transformative project of Stalinist culture, but perhaps wrong to view their interconnectedness in purely negative terms. Socialist Realist painting deserves to be treated as art, or in Ilya Kabakov's words, 'as a completely natural artistic phenomenon, absolutely normal, inevitable, and in essence, no worse or better than all other movements.'¹³ This major exhibition of Socialist Realist painting demonstrates the permeability of the border between the Russian avant-garde and the art of the Stalin era, and will encourage further revision of outdated modernist assumptions about Soviet art.

¹¹ B. Groys, *Introduction...*, op. cit., p. 36.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 35.

¹³ *Ilya Kabakov in Conversation with Boris Groys*, in: *Introduction...*, op. cit., p. 328-41.



A. Gerasimov, *Lenin on the Tribune*, 1930



V. Efanov, *An Unforgettable Meeting*, 1936-7



exhibition view