

Wadsworth Atheneum  
Late September through November, 1978

Vitali Komar and  
Aleksandr Melamid  
MATRIX 43

Meeting between Solzhenitsyn and Boll at  
Rostropovich's Country House, 1972



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PLEASE NOTE: Vitali Komar and Aleksandr Melamid will deliver a MATRIX Evening Lecture at the Wadsworth Atheneum on Thursday, September 28, 1978 at 8:00 p.m. This event is free and the public is cordially invited.

#### BACKGROUND: THE SOVIET "NON-OFFICIAL" ARTIST

Despite all claims of détente, meaningful cultural exchanges between the Soviet Union and the United States have been severely restricted for many decades. In the area of the contemporary visual arts, dialogue between these two cultures has been nearly non-existent.

Although governmental control of the visual arts in Russia was well established in the nineteenth century, there was a time during the revolutionary upheavals from 1905 to the early 'twenties when Russian avant-garde artists (Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, etc.) enjoyed considerable freedom. By 1934 restrictions which had been felt for a decade were the subject of an official declaration which specifically decreed that Socialist Realism (defined as "the truthful depiction of reality in its revolutionary development") was the only acceptable style of artistic activity.

In the Soviet Union an artist has little choice but to harness his or her talents to the service of the state. Even today those artists whose works fail to conform stylistically to customary standards of Socialist Realism or whose works fail to convey an adequately optimistic outlook are soon ousted from the powerful artists' unions. These "non-official" artists are subsequently denied employment opportunities as well as access to quality materials and studio space. The few artists who venture a step further and dissent openly with public policy risk surveillance, harassment and incarceration.

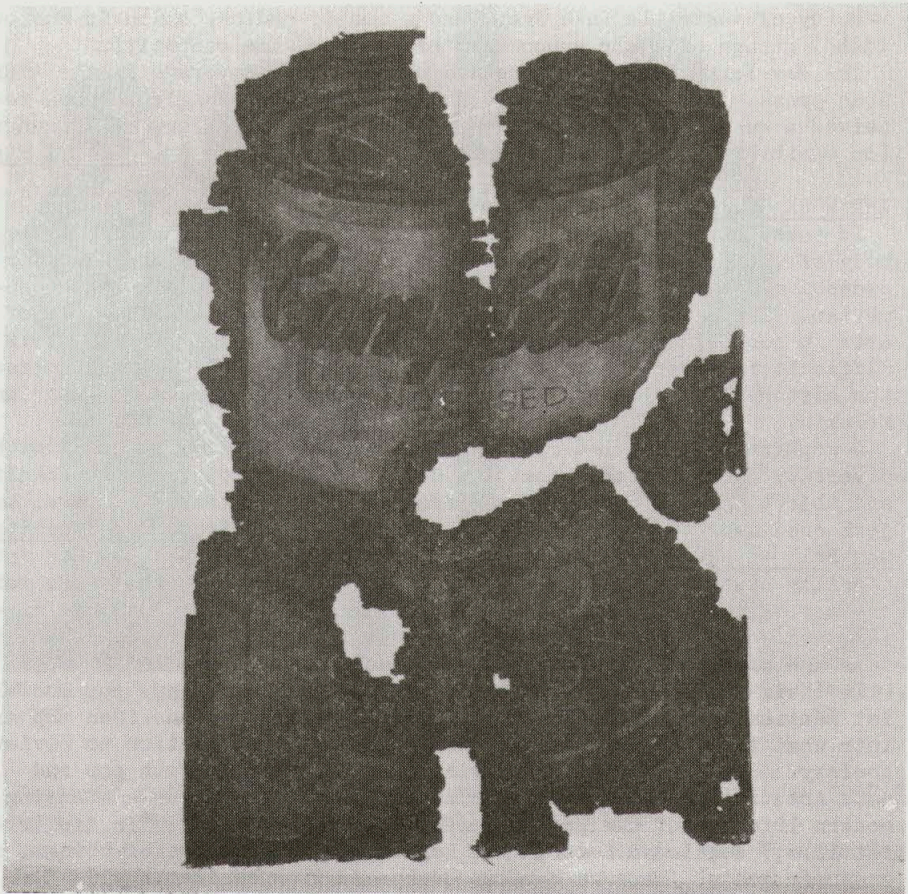
News of avant-garde developments in the West continues to reach interested Soviet artists by clandestine means only. The works these non-official artists make rarely leave their own cramped apartments. When such works do surface unexpectedly in the West, the full story of their conveyance often remains a mystery to protect the reputations and safety of the participants.

#### KOMAR AND MELAMID

Vitali Komar and Aleksandr Melamid are two Soviet dissident artists who have worked exclusively on collaborative efforts since the late 'sixties. "The West still accepts the idea of the artist as an individual," said Komar in 1976. "We work together as a unit and express no personal cause of our own, but a social tendency. Whatever changes in the world balance affects us. As the earth turns we turn with it."

The two came to international attention when they joined with twenty-two other Russian artists to hold a one-day exhibition of their non-official art in a vacant lot on the outskirts of Moscow on Sunday, September 15, 1974. Within one-half hour Soviet authorities levelled the exhibit with bulldozers and fire hoses. Some works were seized, others were destroyed and four artists were jailed.

This distressing event was witnessed and photographed by a number of



Post-Art No. 1 (Warhol), 1973

foreign correspondents including three American journalists who were injured during the confrontation. Public outrage around the world was focused on the plight of such non-official Soviet artists.

This MATRIX installation, Komar and Melamid's first museum exhibition, surveys some of the important works these two artists made between 1972-77 while living in Moscow. In spite of surveillance and economic hardship, these were enormously productive years for Komar and Melamid. They enjoyed considerable contact with American newsmen and visiting scholars. In late 1974 American artist Douglas Davis (then art critic for Newsweek) met with them in Moscow and informed them firsthand about issues and concerns current in artistic circles in the West.

#### RECOGNITION FROM THE WEST

Gradually a number of their works were smuggled out of the Soviet Union and gathered into an impressive first public showing which opened on February 7, 1976 at the Ronald Feldman gallery in New York City. In defiant celebration of this important event the artists sat in a tiny Moscow apartment at eight o'clock that evening and played an original musical composition Passport in which they had coded the visa restrictions of a Russian domestic passport into musical notations. At precisely the same moment in nineteen other locations around the world (including the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the Uni-

versity of Australia in Sydney, and a public radio station in Moscow, Idaho) groups of their supporters played the same composition.

The New York exhibition received considerable coverage in the American press. Shortly after this public exposition Ronald Feldman received a reassuring message from the artists in the form of a banner (on exhibition in MATRIX) which said, in Russian, We Are All All Right.

#### THE WORK OF KOMAR AND MELAMID

In these five years Komar and Melamid have produced an impressive body of work which wittily chastizes both the East and the West for excessive nationalism, oppressive bureaucracies and unbounded consumerism. The artists' willful eclecticism parodies both the role of arts in society and the very fabric of art "history." Indeed it is difficult to think of any artists who have so casually romped across the history of style with quite the educated insouciance of Komar and Melamid.

A sophisticated Soviet citizen is confronted on a daily basis with a diversity of experiences that are difficult to reconcile: rationalism and objectivity in the sciences, mass ideology in the newspapers, knee-jerk obeisance at party meetings, etc. In The Meeting of Solzhenitsyn and Boll at the Country House of Rostropovich (1972) the artists intentionally combine a multiplicity of styles in one work--there are references to Russian icons, Byzantine mosaics, Socialist Realism, cubism, etc.--in order to portray the "mental eclecticism" that characterizes the dilemma of a Soviet intellectual.

In their well-known Sots Art pieces (Sots is an acronym for Socialist Realism in Russian) Komar and Melamid transposed American pop art into what they perceived to be its appropriate application to Soviet society. Sots Art satirizes Soviet propaganda art. Both pop and Sots Art, said Melamid in 1974, "intend to provide an understanding of modern life and of the products of mass civilization." "In capitalist life," continued Komar, "you have an overproduction of things, of consumer goods. Here we have an overproduction of ideology."

Laika Cigarette Box (1972) shows how the Soviet dog lost in orbit with Sputnik II in 1957 has been honored as a hero in the packaging of a popular brand of Soviet cigarettes. The banner Onward to the Victory of Communism is a straightforward rendition of a stock exhortation. It expropriates the banal in much the way Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes did.

Komar and Melamid frequently explore the context in which art is understood and qualified. "We analyzed the development of many art styles," they have explained, "and came to the conclusion that the greatness of a famous artist is due not so much to the paintings themselves, but more to the circumstances under which they were painted."

Time itself affects an artist's notability. "Two hundred years is too long to wait. We can help a painting become a classic now . . . ." In Post-Art No. 1 (Warhol) (1973) and Post-Art No. 2 (Lichtenstein) (1973) Komar and Melamid painted replicas of works known to them only through magazine reproduction. They then deliberately used a blowtorch to reduce their copies to fragments. Other examples of Post-Art, the amending of the biographies of famous examples of contemporary art and architecture, are the three grisaille Scenes from the Future (1975).

The Cut-Off Corner Series (1977) effectively demonstrates the mutability of style. One incisive gesture superimposed upon four distinctly different styles of painting levels them all.

In a number of works Komar and Melamid take a familiar object or situation and prankishly transform it into an altered state. This occurs in both Sots Art and Post-Art works as well as the musical com-



Installation, Ronald Feldman gallery, New York 1976

position Passport mentioned earlier. Color Writing: Ideological Abstraction No. 1 (1974-75) appears at first glance to be an abstract painting and as such would be an anathema to Soviet authorities. The work passed by Soviet customs officials, declared as a tablecloth. Ironically the pretty daubs of color are simply a code for the text of Article 129 of the Constitution of the Russian Federal Republic, which guarantees freedom of speech, religion and the press. Each color corresponds to a letter in the Russian alphabet.

In Documents (1975) twelve red-rimmed clear plexiglass rectangles are lined up, each corresponding in size to the various papers most Soviet citizens must have: birth certificate, internal passport, school pass, party membership card, union card railway pass, telephone subscribers payment book, etc. A thirteenth piece of plexiglass, exactly the average size of the other twelve, is offered up as an all-purpose alternative. The untold distresses caused by an unruly bureaucracy have been elegantly synthesized into a little red square.

Even when living under precarious circumstances, Komar and Melamid relentlessly asserted their wry wit to comment upon society's foibles and failings. When denied exit visas from the USSR they responded by exhibiting the elaborate TransState (1977) in the West (Ronald Feldman gallery '77). It was a carefully argued philosophical stand against the restraints of national citizenship and territorial boundaries. In it they included their own Declaration of Independence, Constitution, a statement to the United Nations, passports, currency and a portable border post which they described as "stupid and artificial like all borders."

#### BIOGRAPHY

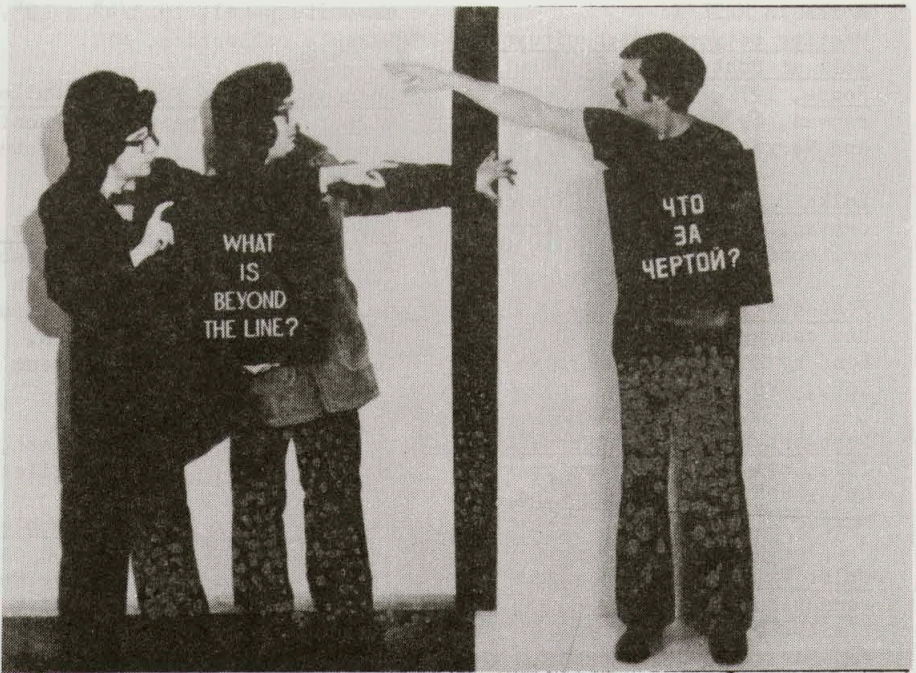
In October 1977 Melamid was permitted to emigrate to Israel with his wife and two children. Two months later Komar was allowed to join him there. An exhibition of works made by the two in the months following their departure from the USSR will be held at the Ronald Feldman gallery during October 1978. These new pieces offer abundant evidence that their creativity and originality continue at full strength.

Both artists were born in Moscow, Vitali Komar in 1943 and Aleksandr Melamid in 1945. Both graduated from Moscow Higher Industrial Art School and were later employed in book design and teaching. They began to work together in 1965. In 1972 they were expelled from the Union of Graphic Artists, Youth Division, "for distortion of Soviet reality and nonconformity with the principles of Socialist Realism." Komar and Melamid will visit the United States for the first time this fall. Both artists currently live in Jerusalem.

Andrea Miller-Keller  
Curator of MATRIX

Laika Cigarette Box, 1972





From Questions New York Moscow New York Moscow (with Douglas Davis), 1976

Excerpts from Statement by Komar and Melamid to the American People on the Occasion of Their First Public Exhibition

Ours is the art of incongruity, for we are middle men between East and West, the children of peaceful coexistence. . . .

Realism is still a standard Soviet style, for the essential thing in Russian art has always been uniformity. If you are not with us, goes the rule, you are against us. Just as all newspaper editorials have to read alike, all visual aids have to look alike. Here painting to order is not difficult; it is the life style. The hard thing is to paint without orders.

But our art has to be eclectic. For its elements are incompatible. The humor comes from the clash between an unsuitable container--*dé-tente*--and its unadaptable contents--Russia--since it is a head-on crash, it's funny. At least, it is funny today. Tomorrow, maybe, we will cry. And the day after again, perhaps we'll laugh like crazy. Peaceful coexistence brings the millenium. We tickle people now so that they can laugh in the next century. . . .

What happens in Moscow is that viewers take our work as an expression of the West, an effort to understand the West in the framework of Russia. In New York we hope it will be the reverse. Because our work grows from our conversations with each other--from our jokes and our fights--we hope it will draw viewers into a conversation not for judgments about whether it is good or bad, *avant-garde* or old fashioned, high art or low, left or right. Spatial considerations cannot matter, because from our point of view--120 degrees away--every painting that is hung in New York is going to be upside down.

Komar and Melamid

The celebrated artists of the end of the second millenium A. D.  
Moscow, February 1976

Works in MATRIX:

Meeting between Solzhenitsyn and Boll at Rostropovich's Country House, 1972, oil and collage on canvas, 69" x 48". Lent by Bob and Maryse Boxer, NYC.

Laika Cigarette Box, 1972, oil on canvas, 30 1/2" x 23". Private collection, NYC.

Post-Art No. 1 (Warhol), 1973, oil and canvas on canvas, 42" x 42". Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

Post-Art No. 2 (Lichtenstein), 1973, oil and canvas on canvas, 42" x 42". Lent by Bob and Maryse Boxer, NYC.

Color Writing: Ideological Abstraction No. 1, 1974-75, oil on canvas, 83" x 39". Lent by Bob and Maryse Boxer, NYC.

Documents, 1975, plexiglass (12 transparent parts) plus 4" red square. Lent by Bob and Maryse Boxer, NYC.

Circle, Square, Triangle, 1975, oil on wood, triangle and square, each side 33 1/2", circle, diameter 33 1/2", and text. Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

Color Is a Mighty Power, 1975, oil on wood, fifteen 1 5/8" x 1 5/8" squares, and text. Lent by Bob and Maryse Boxer, NYC.

Onward to the Victory of Communism (trans.), 1975, paint on cloth banner, 20" x 74". Lent by Douglas Davis, NYC.

We Are All All Right (trans.), 1976, paint on cloth banner, 31 1/2" x 41 1/2". Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

Scenes from the Future: Kennedy Airport, 1975, paint on masonite panel, 15 3/4" x 12". Private collection, NYC.

Scenes from the Future: Guggenheim Museum, 1975, paint on

masonite panel, 15 3/4" x 12". Private collection, NYC.

Scenes from the Future: Dulles Airport, 1975, paint on masonite panel, 12" x 15 3/4". Private collection, NYC.

Questions New York Moscow New York Moscow, 1976-78, from a collaborative performance work with Douglas Davis, four photographs (with text), 30" x 40" each. Lent by North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

Pushkin, 1976, paint on cloth, 38 1/4" x 30". Private collection.

Cut-Off Corner Series: Double Self-Portrait, 1977, oil on canvas, 43 1/4" x 39 1/2". Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

Cut-Off Corner Series: Chemical Reaction, 1977, mixed media on canvas, 39 1/2" x 51". Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

Cut-Off Corner Series: KGB, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 47" x 31 1/4". Private collection, NYC.

Cut-Off Corner Series: Reproduction from a Picture on a Subject from Russian History, 1977, oil on paper, 6 1/2" x 8 1/2". Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.

TransState, 1977, selected documents, money, passports, metal dies, and 60" wooden border post. Lent by the Grinstein family, Los Angeles.

A Catalogue of Super Objects: Super Things for Super People, 1977, selections from a set of photographs and texts, photographs, 10" x 8" each. Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC.



Selected one-person and joint exhibitions (information about exhibitions in the USSR is listed to the best of our knowledge): Moscow Institute for Art and Design '67; Blue Bird Cafe, Moscow, Retrospectivism '67; Gallery of the Faculty Club, Academgoradok, Pushino, USSR '68; Moscow State University '68 (Komar only); Blue Bird Cafe, Moscow '69 (Melamid only); Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC '76 (first major exhibition), '77, '78.

Selected group exhibitions: Chermushki, Moscow, First Autumn Open-Air Exhibition, September 15 '74 (shut down by Soviet authorities); Ismailovsky Park, Moscow, Second Autumn Open-Air Exhibition, September 29 '74; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc., NYC, collaborative work with Douglas Davis included in exhibition of work by Davis '77 (travelled); Arts Club of Washington (D.C.) and Kiplingers Editors' Building, New Art from the Soviet Union '77 (travelled to Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca); Committee for the Biennale di Venezia, Venice, New Soviet Art '77; Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Artists Look at Art '78; Cooper-Hewitt Museum, NYC, Herbert Distel's Museum of Drawers '78 (travelled; coming to the Wadsworth Atheneum November '78); Tel Aviv Museum, Artists and Society, 1948-1978 '78.

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