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EASTERN EUROPE

euphoria

A YEAR AFTER EASTERN EUROPE'S revolutions, our correspondents report that the euphoria that had seemed to sweep away half a century of totalitarian rule has vanished in turn, chastened by the reality that democracy and capitalism come hard earned.

The art world there, overjoyed amid the tumult of widespread freedom a mere 12 months ago, faces innumerable hardships today—not least among them the difficulty of getting used to the practices of the free market. As one art historian put it flatly, "The concept of cash is here to stay, whether people like it or not."

For example, in the Soviet Union, gallery spaces are on the rise, but many of them are really speculative ventures whose entrepreneurs know little or nothing about the art—some of them rumored to be operating fronts for black market goods.

In Poland, studio space, once subsidized by the government, is now undergoing ferocious rent hikes, and artists are scrambling to hold onto their working quarters. Still, Polish art is flourishing in the air of total stylistic freedom.

In Czechoslovakia the cultural atmosphere practically rings with the carnival spirit of late-'60s bohemia. Recently, a wild new space in Prague—part exhibition bunker, part night club—was christened "The Totalitarian Zone" in a Kafkaesque former bomb shelter. Yet the exuberance also masks frustration with an artists union that has changed its name but not its bureaucracy and with a grossly undernourished national arts budget.

Hungary is no less embattled, yet local capitalism is maneuvering with imaginative flair. The National Gallery is renting its halls for parties, while it sends out proposals for crowd-pleasing blockbusters. Still, artists are struggling to afford sky-rocketing prices for materials and cheap studios are dwindling fast.

Meanwhile, artists in Romania, where revolution was far more violent, remain under fire. The artists union is threatening to cut funding for the nation's only art magazine if it doesn't represent a broader range of its members' works. And though Mihai Manescu, the president of the union, states, "We artists were the last capitalists in the socialist countries," not a single commercial gallery had opened in Romania as we went to press.

—Steven Henry Madoff

Soviet Union

REINVENTING AN ART WORLD

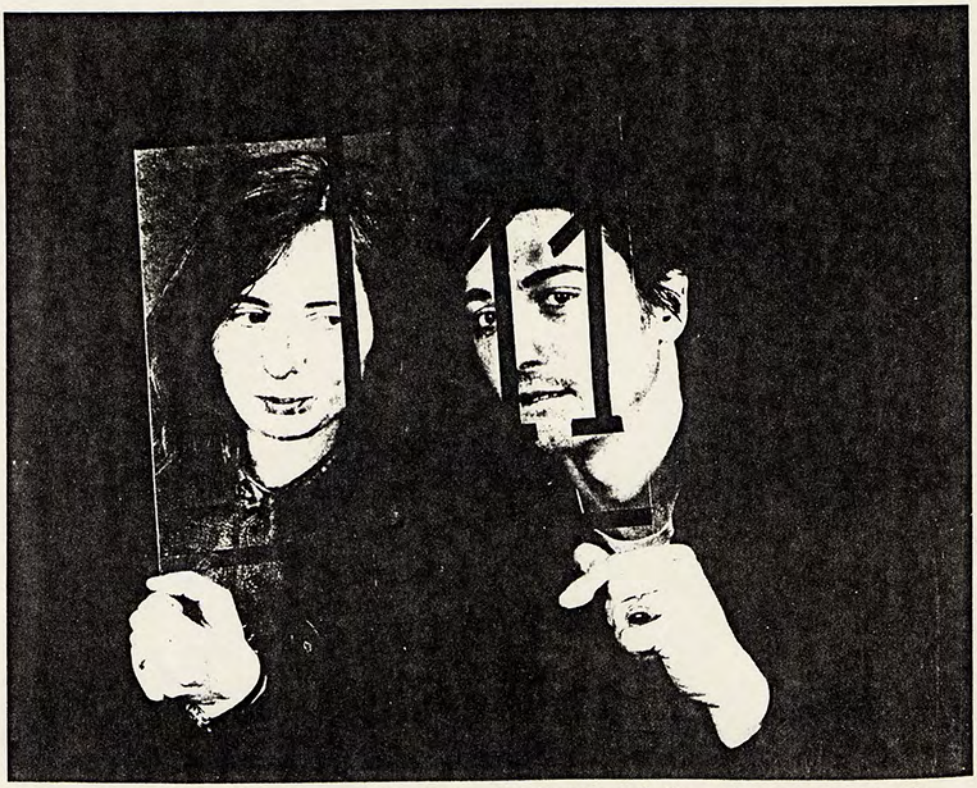
"The thing you have to understand about the Moscow art world," says a local critic, "is that it's made up of small closed circles who are showing all the time that they are the enemies of other circles. Everybody hates everybody else. Pluralism is impossible."

It's true that you can divide Moscow artists into two groups. There are those who have been adopted by the Western art market—and then there are all the others. Most of the approximately 20 people in the first group are Conceptualists. Some, like Ilya Kabakov, one of the founding fathers of Moscow Conceptualism, now live more or less permanently abroad, and the rest of them travel a lot. In Moscow, many live and work in a cavernous old building on Chistoprudnii Boulevard, sometimes known as the New Furmanny, after the name of their former home on Furmanny Lane. These artists have been living and working together for years, since the days when they constituted the avant-garde of the underground. They are a close-knit group, collectively known as Noma, and their success in the West has made them the elite here, where recognition in New York or Frankfurt is the ultimate accolade for an artist.

According to the artist Pavel Pepperstein, the word Noma implies "a definite group of people, identifying itself as a collective body by means of an 'internal' corps of linguistic acts." Soviet ideology and the absurdities and kitsch of Soviet life have been the major themes of these artists, as in Kabakov's famous communal apartment, or in the gorgeously tacky fabrics of Larisa Zvezdochetova, Andrei Roiter's deliberately shabby-looking paintings and objects, often painted a drab, institutional green, and the installations of Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko, a husband-and-wife team known as the Peppers, who use grungy domestic objects from everyday life.

For artists who aren't Conceptualists or for those who don't live in Moscow, the situation is much more difficult. There are avant-garde groups in Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, and other cities, but outside Moscow there is no public for contemporary art and almost no opportunity to exhibit or to capture the attention of Westerners.

In Kiev, too, a group of avant-garde paint-



The Peppers (Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko). Their installations of everyday domestic objects comment on the conditions of contemporary Soviet life.

ers live and work together in a single building. But, as one of them, Oleg Golocii, jokes, "it's less like the Furmanny than like a community of Early Christians, and with about the same degree of commercial success. Our studios aren't overcrowded with visitors, foreigners, and journalists." The Kiev painters are postmodernists, strongly influenced by the Italian *transavanguardia*, which puts them at a disadvantage in Moscow, where current opinion holds that only conceptualism—particularly object making—is contemporary. As one critic put it, "traditional direct expressionistic painting is dead. It was possible only for painters of another time, another generation."

History meets kitsch in an untitled work by Larisa and Konstantin Zvezdochetov. Their works are often gorgeously tacky.

"We have two separate art worlds," says critic Andrei Kovalev, "and the contacts between them are very limited. There are the conceptualists who are making money in the West—not very big money, but enough to allow them to live well here and organize a cultural life inside their circle." In their exclusivity, Kovalev jokes, they're like the Central Committee of the Communist party—and Kabakov is the general secretary. Their ties with Western galleries give them great prestige at home and at the same time allow them "to pretend here that they are completely noncommercial artists."

But two critics closely associated with Noma, Vladimir Levashov and his wife, Katya Dyogot, believe that the group is in the throes of an identity crisis now that its members are no longer underground artists. They were, Levashov says, "a very closed unofficial community" and created a kind of art that couldn't be shown in public. All of them worked in one way or another with parodies of Soviet ideology, but their themes have become clichés as they have filtered down into the work of artists who hawk their paintings to tourists on the street and in the Izmailovo Park flea market.

The Noma artists have also had to confront the issue of quality. "For Moscow unofficial art," Dyogot says, "the question of quality didn't exist. They made dirty things, shabby things, not beautiful at all, not technically good at all." That was part of their ideology: formal qualities were seen as belonging only to the despised and derided official art. But "now in the West, those funny and interesting things that represent the culture of the underground years can't be understood at all. Now they have to make something that is not an idea but a thing, a work, and it's a problem for some of them.

"Most of these artists understand that they have to preserve the identity of Moscow artists. Most of them don't want to be Western artists. They understand that it's impossible. They understand that as Soviet artists they can do something in the West too. But what is the identity of Soviet artists if not Soviet ideology?"

Outside these small avant-garde groups, there seem to be thousands of Soviet artists who are still producing the same kind of painting that prevailed here from the '50s: Chagall-derived mixtures of naiveté and Surrealism, portentously symbolic canvases on Themes of Major Importance, sad-eyed Christs on the Cross, tired Abstract Expressionism.

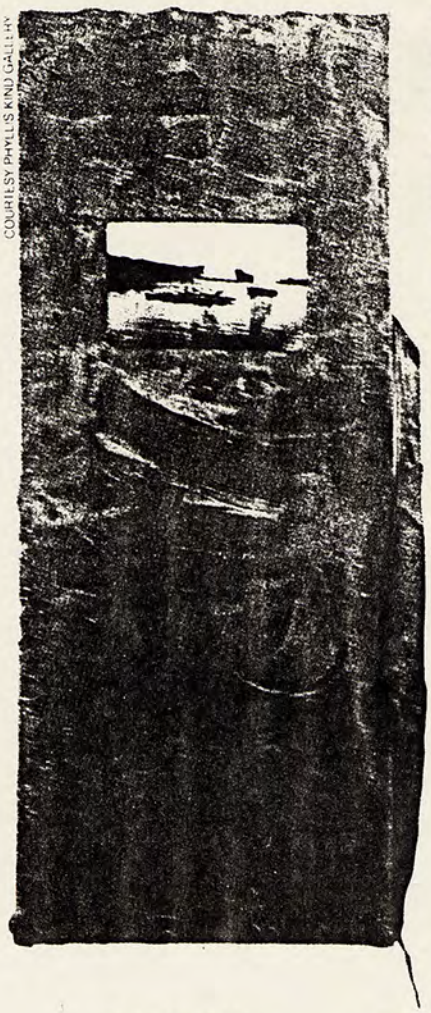
But for a country as vast as the USSR, the art world is astonishingly small and the amount of organized activity very meager. Here, as in the rest of Soviet society, the old systems have broken down and new ones have not yet been created. The Artists Union has become irrelevant. The institutions we take for granted in the West that promote and disseminate contemporary art—schools, museums and exhibition halls, books and magazines—are almost entirely absent. There are very few exhibitions of contemporary art. Most glaringly absent are serious galleries. There is no domestic art market. Government support for the arts is declining, but nothing is taking its place. The situation, as people say, is abnormal.

Making it "normal" is proving to be very difficult. The current chaotic state of the emerging art market was made clear in the First Soviet Art Fair, staged last November in the inhospitable space of the Central House of Artists. Among the organizers and participants were several serious and highly respected critics, but the art on view, with few exceptions, was low in quality. The 21 galleries that took part—there are now close to 200 entities that call themselves galleries in the USSR—included a number of joint ventures with foreigners whose art business is purely a speculative sideline.

But the fair was regarded here as a significant event because it gave people an idea of what kinds of art businesses are struggling to emerge. "Our main purpose," says Marat Guelman, one of the organizers, "was to see if it was possible to unite all these galleries, these cultural islands, into one unit. In this country, every kind of activity, every sign of people's will to do something, is a manifesta-

tion of heroism." Is it so difficult to do anything? "Unbelievable!" he answered, enumerating a long list of ideological, bureaucratic, and technical obstacles that had to be overcome, including the general ignorance about the basic functions of an art market and the belief of many officials that all Soviet art constitutes a cultural heritage that should not be sold abroad.

Guelman, 29, is a new-style entrepreneur on the Soviet scene. Trained in communications technology, he has been collecting art and helping artists organize exhibitions for a long time. He says it was the absence of professionals that pressed him into the commercial world—failing to find an "expert" who could advise him, he decided to become one himself. The galleries he is involved with represent the new kinds of art businesses that are springing up here. His own gallery, which opened last December, is located in a building turned over to the art critic Leonid Bajanov by the Moscow city government. Guelman is also the "chief expert" for the Art Service gallery, a firm organized by the Soviet-American Fund, which is the local branch of the Soros Foundation, set up by the Hungarian-born American investor. And he is curator of exhibitions for a third gallery, Imex, a foreign-trade firm organized by the Estonian department of the Culture Fund, a government-organized foundation that is supposed to promote cultural activity. Foundations are exempt from the punitive taxes leveled on private businesses and from customs regulations that make the legal export of art almost impossible.



COURTESY PHYLLIS KIND GALLERY

***Private Geography*, 1990, by Andrei Roiter. His deliberately shabby-looking objects are often painted a drab institutional green.**

Who buys art in the Soviet Union? Almost nobody, Guelman says, because there aren't many rich people. Art isn't a profitable business for him, although he hopes it will be someday. He says he turned to art because he liked it and he liked being part of the art world. He's not uncomfortable with the idea that art and commerce can mix, an idea that is disturbing to many people here.

Bajanov, also an Art Fair participant, is one of a number of prominent critics who are now involved in trying to create "normal" institutions. He intends to use the building the city gave him to set up a center of modern art that will include a contemporary art collection, a cinema studio, an archive, and a publishing house. "For 70 years," Bajanov says, "the idea of art as a commercial entity didn't exist in Russia. We had only one seller and only one buyer and both of them were the state. Now we must start from the very beginning. I'm a product of this system, and the commercial side of art life doesn't interest me. But I'm a professional and I understand that the fine arts can't exist without commerce. Now I'm in a paradoxical situation because instead of dealing with the theory of art I have to use my energy for organizing practical institutions. And in organizing this gallery I'm creating future enemies because the basis of my activity as an art critic is a fight for the independence of art from commercial structures. This situation is possible only in Russia."

The critics Levashov and Dyogot have a similarly ambivalent attitude toward their new undertaking: curating exhibitions for Sintez, a Soviet-American joint venture dealing in software that wants to have a gallery for reasons of prestige and profit. "I want to be an art critic and write about art, but how can I if there are no exhibitions," says Dyogot. "We have no structures at all. We have to do it all with our own hands. It's impossible for us to have strict roles here, as in the West.

"We don't want to have anything to do with the commercial side of the gallery," Dyogot continues. "I don't understand at all about the art market, and I hope that it's possible not to understand anything."

"When somebody buys something here, it's a great surprise to me," says Aidan Salakhova, an artist and a codirector of the First Gallery, the most prestigious in Moscow. This is one of only two galleries in the city (the other is called Mars) that operate in a Western fashion: they have their own space, they put on exhibitions, they do public relations and publish catalogues. This is the best exhibition space in Moscow, with a prime location in the center of the city and an imaginative exhibition program. It is not, Salakhova says, a profitable venture and continues to exist only because the larger cooperative of which it is a part continues to support it.

The nonconvertibility of the ruble severely limits the amount of business the gallery can do. Salakhova often organizes noncommercial exhibitions because the artist doesn't want his works sold for rubles when he can sell them abroad for hard currency. Another problem is the difficulty of exporting works of art. There isn't any law against the export of artworks made after 1945, but customs officials make up their own rules on these matters. Salakhova says that a lot of people buy photographs because customs officials don't consider them to be art.

Salakhova has a lot of reasons to be pessimistic about the future of the gallery and of the Soviet art market in general. There are the punitive taxes on co-op enterprises (40 percent at this writing and expected to rise) and the tendency of artists to leave the country and

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Aidan Salakhova, artist and codirector of Moscow's First Gallery.

work abroad for long periods, the grueling problems of everyday life, and the total absence of stability that makes it difficult to plan for the future. The main problem today, she says, is the lack of new and interesting artists. Art production is on the decline simply because of the shortage of materials: canvas, paints, and brushes are all hard to find. A 100-foot roll of canvas that used to cost 300 rubles (about $50 at the commercial exchange rate) now costs 2,000, Salakhova says, because a cooperative cornered the market, and the price is expected to rise astronomically in the near future. The canvas co-op is speculating in art as well, exchanging the raw material for paintings. Art, Salakhova jokes, has become *defitsit*, unavailable, like most consumer goods.

Many, perhaps most, of the new entities that call themselves galleries are purely speculative ventures. Some are simply movable art stores, without spaces of their own. Some, it is widely believed, are fronts for black-market activity or financed by black-market profits. This isn't quite so sinister as it sounds. Much black-market activity here is the sort of business that would be legal in a normal economy: selling electronics, for example, that have been "unofficially" imported. Since the Sotheby's auction in Moscow in 1988, at which the works of contemporary Soviet artists were sold for high prices in hard currency, so much publicity has been lavished on Soviet art as a marketable commodity that art dealing has become a respectable occupation. Whether these new entrepreneurs make as much money in the art world as they anticipate is an open question, but a gallery in any case is a prestigious front for other business activities.

It's unfortunate that serious and talented artists have no other exhibition possibilities. For artists who have no other choice—and few do—"they must melt in this melting pot, they must make do with these galleries," says Kovalev. "Even for good artists this isn't a good thing for their careers because questions of prestige are taken very seriously here."

There's been a significant change of mood here since my last visit eight months ago. The post-Sotheby's euphoria is gone. Nobody now believes that Soviet art is going to conquer the world; on the contrary, a lot of people think that the sudden interest in it was fueled in part by fascination with the political and social changes taking place here and that Westerners have been disappointed by the general level of quality and sophistication of much Soviet art. Now Soviet artists must make it on their own, just as those of any other nation. In that sense, at least, the situation is becoming more normal.

But it's the future of Soviet society that worries people most. "Last winter," says Dyogot, "I could not have imagined our situation today. Things are changing so much we can't imagine the next year." The future of the art world "depends on the social situation. If the crisis deepens, there will be no art in Moscow. Every artist who can will go to the West. If so, we'll have no art." "Everybody's waiting for a disaster," says another observer. "Nobody knows what will happen to this country."

"I don't know what to say about the future of art life in our country," Kovalev comments. In a time of social disintegration, when people are filled with anxiety about the future, "I don't know where we'll find the energy to organize exhibitions and write about artists."

Then he adds ironically, "But if we're talking only about artistic life, I see a very good future. Historically the most interesting things in Russian culture have happened during the most terrible periods. The best period for art in the 20th century was from 1915 to 1921, a time of world war, revolution, and civil war. According to the political situation today, then, we're on the verge of a new renaissance."

—Sylvia Hochfield

COURTESY THE ARTIST

***The Doctor's Dogs*, 1990, by Kiev painter Oleg Golocii. The subject comes from a children's book.**

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The Peppers at Ronald Feldman

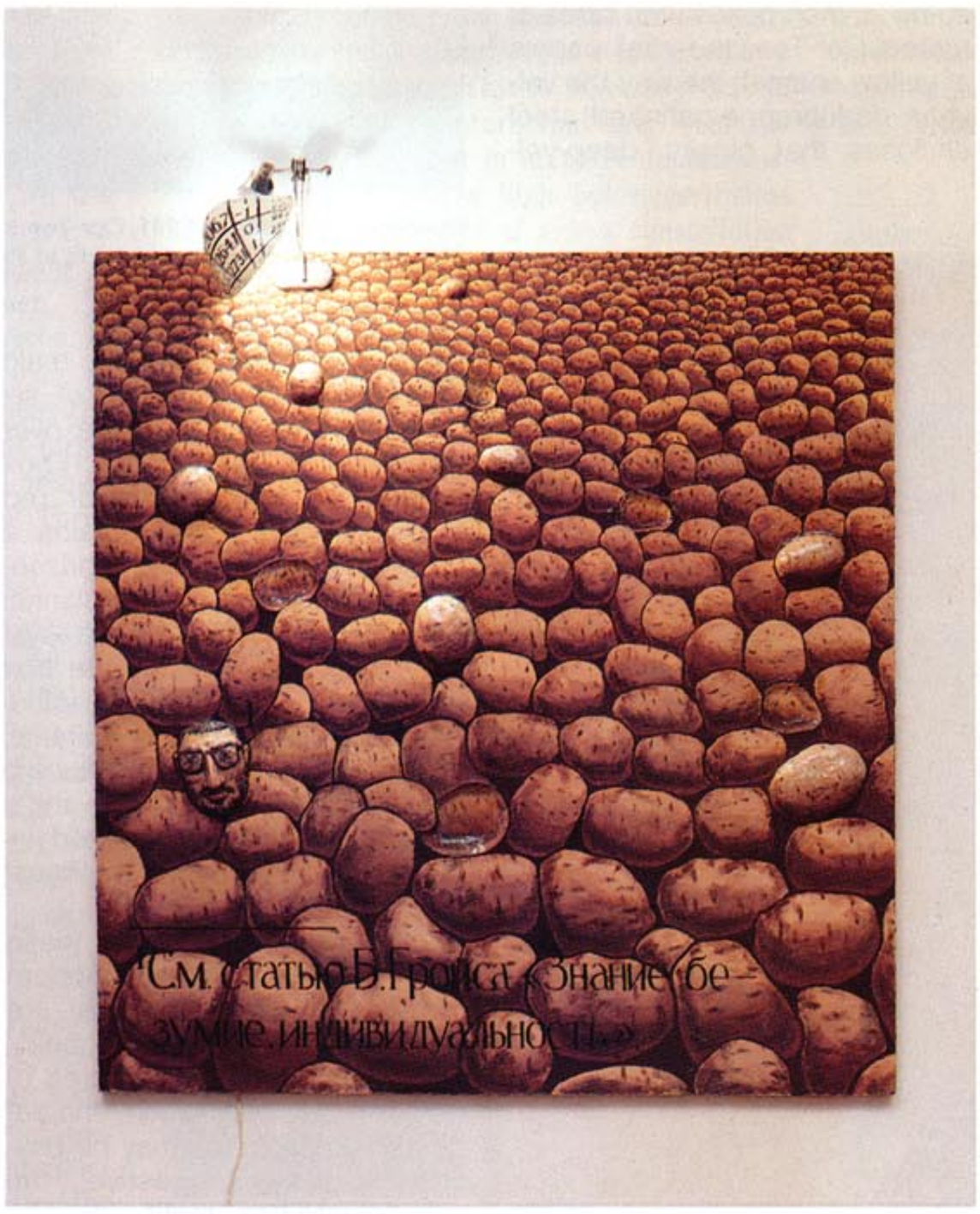
Recent events in the Soviet Union underscore the depth of the popular revulsion with the Communist experiment. But while these sentiments are just surfacing politically, they have been shaping the most interesting Soviet art throughout the Gorbachev era—and well before that. Taken up by artists as diverse as Ilya Kabakov, Komar & Melamid and Erik Bulatov, the nightmare of utopia is clearly a theme that haunts the Russian consciousness.

The Peppers, a young husband-and-wife team from Odessa named Ludmila Skrikina and Oleg Petrenko, provide a particularly striking example of this tendency. Their work, which mixes official-looking graphs and charts with such common objects as jars of preserves, saucepan lids and potatoes, is suffused with the dingy shades of green, brown and ocher that constitute the drab backdrop of urban Soviet life. While the charts celebrate the planner's conviction that data is truth and order is happiness, the objects tell another story. For instance, a pair of charts that correlate workers' cultural interests with their education levels serves as backdrop to two large mounds of plastic peas, from one of which emerges a slightly smaller than life-size plastic model of the face of Stalin and from the other a plastic woman's breast. Sexuality and repressed history, the Peppers suggest, are potentially disruptive elements that threaten the serene banality of the official order.

This show contained several installations. Passing through a black curtain, one entered the Potato Room. In a dimly lit space dotted with mounds of real potatoes were a variety of art works employing fabricated and painted potatoes. This installation seemed intended to suggest the absurdity of official pronouncements of prosperity in the face of real shortages and privations. Plastic potatoes sliced open to reveal bits of black-and-white graphs dangled from the ceiling or rested on pedestals, while big paintings of a vast, receding field of potatoes were punctuated by odd elements—a three-dimensional door, a face, a braid of rope. While the specific symbolism remained obscure, at least to a Western viewer, these works clearly pointed out the gaping divide between the government's ever-more-illusory control over its economy and its people and the ordinary citizen's struggle for daily survival. (In fact, there was something about the field of potatoes that brought to mind recent photographs of Moscow protesters crowded into Red Square.)

Another installation, which displayed charts offering scientific data relating to some sort of vaginal disorder, was even more enigmatic. A wall panel that referred to the tendency to define things using concepts from other fields suggested that the installation was to be seen as a critique of the scientific mode of explanation favored by the government in its efforts to contain and isolate reality, here represented by the messy physicality of the female body. These orderly charts—and the clinical mentality they represent—are emblems of the dangers of reason. Cut adrift from humanity and reality, logic and order may become a prison house, stifling the soul with false promises of a better life.

—Eleanor Heartney



The Peppers: *1. See Article by B. Groys, "Knowledge, Madness and Individuality,"* 1989, triptych panel, enamel on masonite; at Ronald Feldman.

Flash Art
vol. XXIV, no. 161
(Nov / Dec 1991): 134

THE PEPPERS
RONALD FELDMAN

The Peppers (Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko) choose a peripheral area for their work, alluding to facts and works little known to the viewer. Their artistic creations consist of appropriated scientific tables, enameled trays or teapots covered with formulas, and other corked vessels. They reveal an attractive selection of original, distinctive, descriptive elements propagated in an isolated social structure which produces an extreme inner self-enclosedness and splinters into a number of autonomous sub-units.

The paradox consists in the device of stylizing a language that is barbaric or evocative of science, which has an ancient and deeply rooted tradition in Russian and Soviet culture, parodying and canceling any pretension to absolute truth; in the Peppers's case, however, this device remains a claim that is part of its repertory or a question of making more precise linguistic-aesthetic choices.

Presenting the dense information of tables as an ascetic metaphor of a bared "skeleton" (*Selection of a Concert for Attendance by Workers of Various Age Groups, in %*, 1991), or a rich collection torn out of the context of scientific definitions which give rise to feelings of the absurd in a given context (*Strauss's Retromonoscope* or *Kafka's Covers*), they not only stay aloof from their interpretations, but through the open pathology of the linguistic schemes, they can bring about in the viewer an immunity to judgments of that kind.

The Peppers also integrate in their art the exotic elements and situations characteristic of a domestic pattern of life, considering them to be self-sufficient for the development of a narrative. However, if their work is aimed at an international audience, the question arises—can that audience penetrate into mysteries of Soviet reality, uninitiated as they are in its socio-cultural backwaters? Or are they compelled a priori to take this authorial discourse to be a product of the syndrome of a separately acquired experience or of the exoticism of the language used?

Innesa Levkova-Lamm

(Translated from Russian by George Gibian)

THE PEPPERS, WHEAT INSTALLATION, 1991.
20 "BUSHELS" OF WHEAT, PAPER BAGS, OBJECTS, TABLE, LOAVES OF BREAD. PHOTO DENNIS COWLEY.

ARTFORUM
XLVI, no. 7 (March 2008): 364-65

The Peppers

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

In 1991, Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko, who as a duo are known as the Peppers, installed *Potato Room* at Ronald Feldman Gallery. The Peppers were part of a loose-knit group of artists, dubbed "Moscow conceptualists" in the early 1980s, whose best-known member was Ilya Kabakov. The '91 show was their first—and until now their only—solo gallery exhibition in the US. The *Potato Room* included, among other things, six large paintings, six wall hangings made of peas and book fragments, and numerous potato sculptures, hung on and stacked atop cerulean blue walls and pedestals. Seven gnarled potato vines dangled menacingly from the ceiling, and eighty pounds of the vegetable slowly rotted in the corner.

For the Peppers' recent show, also at Feldman, the work was reconstructed and presented alongside twenty-eight paintings and sculptures by the couple, all from 1989 to 1991. The exhibition revisited and solidified the gallery's own role in bringing this work to New York during perestroika (in a manner similar to its 2006 exhibition "Artists Against the State: Perestroika Revisited"), and, considered in the light of the recent Sots Art exhibition that traveled from Moscow to Paris, it reasserted the significance of the Peppers, who have not shown actively since the early '90s.

Potato Room is clearly indebted to Kabakov, a mentor to the artists, in its animation of mundane items of *byt* (everyday life) with an element of fantasy. The sardonic world that the Peppers create—most clearly in the potato installation but also in charts such as *Data Concerning Discharge as Related to the Degree of Vaginal Cleanliness According to Hermin*, 1989, and *Methods of Provocation*, 1990—is pervaded by absurdist irony (although theirs lacks Kabakov's sense of melancholy). Here is a world in which pot lids are used to map bodily secretions, piles of peas sport breasts, and potatoes come equipped with fish-eye lenses, the better to see you with.

In the painting *1. See Article by B. Groys, "Knowledge, Madness and Individuality,"* 1989, potatoes recede into a seemingly limitless expanse. The Russian title runs along the bottom edge of the canvas, over the potatoes but beneath a dividing line, suggesting a footnote. In the lower left-hand corner, a lumpy, bespeckled plaster face emerges: Groys peeking out from beneath the mass of *pommes de terre*. The five other paintings in the show, each with a combination footnote/title, also serve as homages to Moscow conceptualists and their critical champions (several of whom, by the late '80s, had emigrated to the West).

The Peppers captured a moment in which the private—be it the inside joke, the secret code, the under-the-table reference—seemed to have the potential to impact the public. The pair's veiled signifiers represent both a tendency towards protective hermeticism and an indictment of their group as possessed of an ambition that reached beyond its immediate surroundings. In one painting, on a found handkerchief, a nurse lectures before a group of students while holding a jar of peppers, sealed with one of the artists' charts. The image would be just another drab social realist illustration were it not for the inclusion of this prop, modeled after a sculpture by the Peppers. Compared to *It's Not a Bomb*, 2003–04, three shrink-wrapped jars of pickled vegetables wired with explosives by David Ter-Oganian, one of a number of younger Russian artists who might be said to carry on the tradition of Moscow conceptualism, the Peppers' projects—now two decades old—clarify the extent to which contemporary art has waived its claim to radical absurdity: Now, even the most farcical of utopias, populated by potatoes and peas, are trumped by literalism.

—*Rachel Churner*

The Peppers, *Potato Room*, 1991/2008. Installation view.