

## **CHAPTER 1**



**"I Saw Stalin  
Once When I Was  
a Child": Socialist  
Realism, the  
Last Ism**

## SOCIALIST REALISM = SECOND REALITY

There is a specter haunting modern art. An accursed vanguard, the last of the great European "isms," the most totalizing and the most monstrous, that movement known as Socialist Realism might be construed as the guilty secret, the evil twin, the secret sharer of the very enterprise it proposed to liquidate.

Socialist Realism has been doubly repressed. For the society that spawned it, classical Socialist Realism was, as Professor Boris Groys—a Russian émigré living in Germany—wrote in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, ultimately and officially "no less taboo than the art of the avant-garde." Indeed, during the thirty-five years between the death of Stalin and the height of perestroika, the two tendencies might well have been

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I can date my interest in Socialist Realism to October 1982 and the brilliant Komar and Melamid show, marking the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, at Ronald Feldman's gallery, a laugh-out-loud extrapolation of the Stalinist idiom into the "new morning" of Ronald Reagan's America. Until the early 1990s, however, it was difficult to find even reproductions of the paintings that informed their work, let alone any discussion of this mutant modernism. This survey has been greatly expanded from three pieces published during the ensuing boom: a review of Boris Groys's *The Total Art of Stalinism* and four other books on Socialist Realism in the *Voice Literary Supplement* (March 1993), an essay on the relationship between Socialist Realism and Sots Art published in *Artforum* (October 1993), and a review of the exhibit "Stalin's Choice" for the *Forward* (28 January 1994).

crated up and hidden together in Soviet museum basements. But since the collapse of Soviet communism, its once-holy relics have become collectible, not to mention camp—the stuff of music videos and nightclub design.<sup>1</sup>

The Berlin Wall crashed and Socialist Realism emerged. Like hoards from a newly opened pharaoh's tomb, troves of bizarre hieroglyphics and sacred artifacts were assembled in certain museum exhibitions of the early and mid-1990s. Here, blinking in the sunlight, were academic pictures of frozen *kolkhoz* fiestas; ecstatic steel-factory cathedrals, illuminated by shafts streaming through unseen windows; solemnly bombastic portraits of the Soviet leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Oxford University Museum of Modern Art curator David Elliott declared that Socialist Realist “products” were, “in their way, just as visionary as those of the avant-garde artists” who preceded them. Groys had already gone further: Stalin's dictum that writers were engineers of the human soul was anticipated by supremacist painter Kazimir Malevich's visionary notion of the state as a form of enforced aesthetic education—a machine designed to regulate the nervous systems of its citizens.<sup>3</sup> Never mind that Malevich returned to painterly representation by 1930; Socialist Realism consummated the vanguard project to transcend the museum and fuse art with life. It was Socialist Realism that bridged the gap between elite culture and the masses. Groys's radical position was also advanced by his fellow émigré academic Igor Golomstock: Socialist Realism first crushed the vanguard, then “usurped and tried to realize the avant-garde idea” of a new community and a new cultural totality—albeit in a perverted form that resurrected the moldering concepts of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Like the masterpieces of the medieval church, Socialist Realism originals could not be purchased. They could only be contemplated, as they hung in factory Houses of Culture or state Palaces of Labor. Now, Socialist Realism has returned to the people—although, theoretically, it always belonged to them. In the May 1992 issue of *Artforum*, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid (émigrés who “rewrote” Socialist Realism to make themselves its greatest exponents) posed the classic Russian question “What is to be done?” as applied to the monumental propaganda of the former Soviet Union. The pair offered their own witty suggestions—adding, for example, an ism to the occupant's name on the Lenin Mausoleum.<sup>5</sup>

Some Socialist Realist pieces have been sold abroad. But there is more than enough statuary left over to create a Leninland theme park, separated from the EuroDisney outside Paris by a facsimile Berlin Wall. As early as 1993 something like this had happened in Hungary, where fifty-

eight monuments celebrating Karl Marx, Béla Kun, Ho Chi Minh, the Red Army, and generically heroic workers were relocated to an empty field on the outskirts of Budapest—the specter’s graveyard.

**S**ocialist Realism was by no means restricted to the Soviet Union. The Museum of Chinese Revolution on Tiananmen Square is filled with musty examples.

Just as Chinese Communism has lived on beyond the Russian model, so Chinese Socialist Realism outlasted the Soviet variant. Witness Dong Xiwen’s suitably cosmic *Grand Ceremony of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China* (1953), in which Chairman Mao addresses the charged void of a buttermilk sky over Tiananmen Square, or the madly stilted merriment of Zhan Jianzun’s 1976 *Mao Zedong Investigating the Peasant’s Movement in Hunan*, in which the chortling young revolutionary leader—surrounded by red banners, pitchforks, and grinning acolytes—suggests nothing so much as the ventriloquist’s dummy for his own speech.

Nor is this most reviled and purposeful of art movements limited to the various denominations of real or no-longer-existing socialism. The Woman’s National Republican Club in New York City, where I once interviewed Yevgeny Yevtushenko, has a major collection, with life-size statues of Ronald Reagan, a bust of George Bush, oil portraits of Mamie Eisenhower. The centerpiece of the Richard Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California, is a sixty-square-foot canvas commemorating the then vice president’s 1957 visit to an Austrian camp for Hungarian refugees: The heroic Nixon, somewhat incongruous in an inexpensive raincoat he might have borrowed from television’s Lieutenant Columbo (benign symbol of America in Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*), pats a child’s head and stares at the viewer while reaching out to another refugee—perhaps the painter himself—pointing fiercely back at the smoke that rises from his unhappy homeland.

Strictly speaking, however, true Socialist Realism existed in the Stalin era alone. It was forged in the fiery debates that began with the 1928 Central Committee Conference on Agitation and Propaganda (which mandated that literature, drama, and film be designed to reach the entire population, according to the requirements of the First Five-Year Plan) and culminated in the 1934 First Writers’ Conference. As described and deconstructed by the Canadian sociologist (and Red Diaper baby) Régine Robin, the Writers’ Conference consigned modernism to history’s dustbin,

engaging in a repetition that mistook itself for innovation and yet, even so, brought forth something new under the sun—namely, naturalized allegory, the representation of a purely ideological landscape.<sup>6</sup>

The essence of Socialist Realism is this combination of strict idealization and naive, almost goofy idealism. “Soviet painting is optimistic, it speaks of joyous feelings. Landscapes show the changed aspect of the new country. Portraits show its new people. Pictures of complex compositions depict its heroic history, its new Socialist life and work”—or so read the introductory text greeting visitors to the Soviet Pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair.<sup>7</sup>

Because Socialist Realism was less a style than a magical incantation, the categories each example illustrated were identical to those by which it was evaluated: *klassovost* (class awareness), *partiinnost* (the expression of the leading role of the party), *ideinnost* (the introduction of new thinking as approved by the party), *narodnost* (the celebration of populist sentiments). David Elliott cites Aleksei Vasilev’s 1951 *They Are Writing about Us in Pravda* as the embodiment of all four categories plus a fifth, *tipichnost* (the miracle by which a particular individual is universalized, for example, *A Daughter of Soviet Kirgizia*): A group of newly collectivized Moldavian peasants break for lunch, sitting cross-legged on a traditional blanket and beaming at the woman in red babushka who reads aloud the newspaper report that is presumably reflected in the ample harvest surrounding them.<sup>8</sup> And who filed this report? *They Are Writing about Us in Pravda* even suggests a sixth category: *paranoidnost* (the heady sense of instant feedback and total surveillance implicit in all Socialist Realism). For Socialist Realist artworks can barely be considered autonomous objects. They were part of a single, cross-referenced, intertextual, and self-contained multimedia utterance.

Socialist Realism was defined as a “utopia in lifelike forms,” differing, for example, from the naturalism of Émile Zola in that, like Lenin, it “dares to dream.” And yet, because Socialist Realism was also “the enemy of everything supernatural and mystic, all other-worldly idealism” (according to N. Bukharin), it sought to ground its visionary extravagance in concrete historical circumstance and presented its ideal world as a second reality—reality, that is, as we desire it to be and as it shall inevitably become.<sup>9</sup>

SR = Socialist Realism/Second Reality. Socialist Realism is modernism come to power, a modernism mighty enough to project a new mass consciousness—beyond truth or falsehood. With each canvas a glowing