

Art

Samizdat Art: Initiating a Conversation Between Countries

by Hunter Drohojowska

“What does CCCP mean?” I asked. Russian artists Valery and Rimma Gerlovin exchanged glances and laughed. “It means U.S.S.R. in Russian. It’s so funny. In Russia, everyone knows the letters ‘U.S.A.’, but here, people know so little about the Soviet Union.”

This exchange took place in front of one of Valery Gerlovin’s works, “Mirror Games,” a series of photographs framed in Russian newsprint. Like most of the works in “Russian Samizdat Art,” at L.A. Contemporary Exhibitions, it was banned in Moscow.

“Russian Samizdat Art” is LACE’s Olympics exhibition (on view through August 11), and it offers more visual and refreshing intellectual substance than most of the officially sanctioned Olympic Arts Festival exhibitions. (Consider a few of the alternatives: California sculpture? French Impressionist landscapes from the Louvre? L.A. and the Palm Tree?)

Samizdat is the Russian word for “self-published,” and most of the artists in the show work with photographs and text, making books, posters, leaflets, and other objects. *Samizdat* art began with the innovative books and magazines produced in the early 20th century by avant-garde artists and writers such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, El Lissitzky, and Alexander Rodchenko.

According to the Gerlovin’s, it’s a particularly risky undertaking because “working in language is already dealing with the censors, who are very strict.” Because any books not published by the government are forbidden, these small works are handmade and passed from person to person, to be discussed among an underground intelligentsia.

The subtitle of the show is “The First Russian Vagabond Reading Room in U.S.A.” It’s an apt description. Some 30 artists are represented in 100 works that hang from crimson ladders, sit on tables, or adorn the walls. The floor is littered with propaganda. Much of the work was smuggled out of Russia, although a number of pieces were created by Russian artists who immigrated to New York, as the Gerlovin’s did four years ago. This is the tenth stop for the exhibition, which the couple organized for New York’s Franklin Furnace in 1982. They want to show Americans that the adventurous spirit of Russian artists did not die with the constructivism and suprematism of the Avant-Garde.

“Energy still exists in the Russian culture, even after Stalin,” Rimma Gerlovin says. “We’re the same people who created the Avant-Garde, but our life is much harder for us in terms of creating new work and self-publishing. There is a lot of inertia now.” Valery concurs, “In the Avant-Garde movement, everybody who participated, even a secondary artist, was visible. It was an easy period. The challenge is to be avant-garde in a bad



Gregg Segal

period.”

Rimma scurries around the gallery, eager to explain the work of her friends. She points to two iconic portraits of Lenin and Stalin by Vagrich Bakhchanyan, now living in New York, who was a leader in conceptual and book art. Each of the portraits is composed of photographic fragments that coalesce as a whole image but have a wry twist. Each fragment is also the cover of a small book. The books of Stalin’s face contain text from *Pravda*; Lenin’s books are filled from *Playboy*.

Rimma laughs. “Everything he does is a joke.”

In fact, most of the work in the show is startlingly witty, playful, or amusing, although it is quite serious at the core. The influence of the Dadaist movement is obvious. It contrasts with the often dry didacticism that informs so much political art in America, as though the oppression in Russia inspired the motto: “If you can’t beat ‘em, make fun of ‘em.”

The artists led me to a stand of handmade magazines by Lev Nussberg, who now lives in Israel. Nussberg is known for his kinetic sculptures, but this time he has produced books filled with fictional correspondence with the founder of Suprematism, Kasimir Malevich. “Nussberg is trying to breach the gap between our generations,” Rimma says, “connecting us to the Avant-Garde.” She notes that the covers of these publications are all hand-colored. “He could afford to have them printed, but there are some traditions we need to keep, almost like we have them in the blood.”

Rimma Gerlovin, 33, has the porcelain complexion, aquiline nose, and large Byzantine eyes, set well apart, of an icon madonna. Her brown hair hangs straight to the middle of her back. She is small and slender, but her presence is forceful. Of the couple, she is the more fluent in English; she studied three languages at Moscow University. She came to art through poetry. “I was interested in

language as object. I wanted to transform the shape of poetry.” She builds mechanistic men out of cubes, each one containing a word, description, or poem. In the show, there is a red figure suspended in air, each of its cubes containing a message. It’s titled, “One Man Show.”

Valery Gerlovin, 39, is less confident of his English, preferring to let Rimma talk. Bearded and dark-haired, with a round, kindly face, Valery is dressed a la Melrose Avenue, wearing a pink shirt from the ‘40s, black loose-fitting trousers held by suspenders and red shoes. They met in 1969, when Rimma came to him to have her portrait painted. He did three versions and they got married.

Valery was trained as a theater designer, and for a time worked for the Moscow circus (“I designed for clowns, bears, lions, everything”), a job that gave him time for his artwork. His new paintings simulate mosaics, using painted hypodermic syringes stuck into the fabric of the picture to define a specific area. One piece depicts three men standing, wearing the green uniforms of border guards. One holds a book with a picture of a general, another, a fish; both are created with syringes.

Valery calls the series “Ancient New York Mosaics” because “they are kin to the monumental portraits in ancient Rome and Byzantium, two cultures in decadence and decline, with similar qualities to the superpowers of Russia and America today.” Rimma adds, “We realize that we came from one totalitarian country to another — though it’s less totalitarian here.”

Valery says he also uses syringes to signify narcotics, an attempt at “self-affirmation outside society as well as a means of self-destruction.”

None of these pieces could have been shown in the Soviet Union. The Gerlovin’s decided to emigrate after their work was censored from an exhibition at Moscow’s House of Scientists. “Three commissions — the artistic, political, and theological — looked at the work and came to the opi-

nion that it was too dangerous and provocative,” Rimma says. Not only was Gerlovin’s work removed from the show, their names were cut by razor blade from 1,000 printed invitations.

“You have to make a decision whether you’ll accept this control for the rest of your life,” Rimma said. “It’s not easy. I took a whole year, and during that time you don’t know what is going on. The government is already your enemy because you’ve applied to emigrate. Everyone at work knows you’re leaving. And not everyone gets to leave.”

Many of the artists whose work is in the show no longer live in the U.S.S.R.

“The government thinks artists are troublemakers,” Valery says. “If you resist, they permit you to leave. If you’re a technological profession, it’s almost impossible because you have value to the government. The arts are part of the ideological control. They want you to leave.”

According to the Gerlovin’s, everyone who wants to leave Russia must apply to go to Israel. “It’s a false excuse; it’s only they permit you to leave. They know it’s not true.” The couple actually went to Vienna for eight months, where they were trained to restore Russian icons for a dealer. Then they moved to New York and now have a studio for art restoration in SoHo.

Both show regularly in New York, especially at East Village galleries. Rimma opens a *New York* magazine to show Valery’s work at the Sensory Evolution Gallery. Yet the Gerlovin’s demonstrate generosity toward their colleagues that seems more prevalent in Europe than the competitive U.S. That generosity is evident in this exhibition and in their accompanying essay on *Samizdat*, which includes information on all their artist comrades.

“We want people to know that this exists,” Rimma concludes. “Russia most Americans is a kind of obscurity. I think of this as a conversation between two countries.” ■