1985

Soviet Emigre Artists in the American Art World

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Soviet artists come to New York "to paint the way they want to," but they soon learn that the art world in the United States is a complex system of relationships and is imbued with its own standards of what is acceptable art. Mediating between art as it is produced by artists and the audience that purchases it, or even looks at it, are galleries, museums, funding agencies, and critics. Art schools, critics, and galleries as well as the most prestigious painters and sculptors influence what even artists themselves deem worthy of consideration as art. The Soviet art world in which the emigres trained, developed, and worked is a very different system.

How do these artists make their way in the art scene of New York City? Their adjustment involves not only a coming to terms with some practical realities, but also a clash of artistic ideas and standards, and the confusion and despair as well as the elation that individual artists experience in the confrontation. Although they have rejected the official standards of Soviet art and its bureaucratic organization, the emigres bring with them to the United States cherished values and assumptions that were formed in the world they left behind. There were features of their lives as Soviet artists that they experienced as rewarding and worthwhile, and may have taken for granted.

The cultural and social outlook of the immigrants is of course not only determined by their artistic work and experience; it is also shaped by their past participation in Soviet society in general. The expectations they bring with them, which are shared by other Soviet emigres, further complicate life in the early years in New York. This essay begins with a consideration of the emigre artists' professional backgrounds—their education and their work experience in the Soviet Union—and also their political experiences. We will explore in some detail the particular life histories of individual emigre artists I interviewed in New York, without assuming that they reflect the average careers and encounters of artists in the USSR. We then turn to the emigres' experiences in New York and their attempts to work again as professional artists—to become part of a new artistic milieu, expand their artistic sensibilities, and get their work exhibited, reviewed, and sold. Their discoveries encouraged them to reflect on the nature of art, on the role of art and artists, and the effect of the ways in which people live and work on their art, in two very different societies. All of these issues will be discussed below, whenever possible in the artists' own words.

The Education and Work Experiences of the Emigre Artists

Becoming an artist in the Soviet Union requires rigorous academic training in the arts, and before beginning formal study one must meet high admission standards. Working as an artist in the Soviet Union requires conformity to accepted artistic standards, for which the rewards are security and membership in the Soviet intelligentsia. Most of the emigre artists who have come to New York are themselves the children of professionals; they were brought up in households where reading, music, and the arts were greatly valued. It is of course possible for the child of a worker or a collective farmer to attend art school, since art education is free, but it is can be a rather difficult transition. One artist, whose father was employed by the railroad, described his experience:
"The first time I tried to gain admittance to the art institute I failed. I couldn't believe it, but they wouldn't accept me. My father dressed up and came to the school for an explanation. They told him I should do what my father did. I cried and said I was going to be an artist. I participated in art clubs and after the tenth year, I tried again and then succeeded—but I believe the children of well-known artists were admitted without difficulties."

Generally, the schooling of the artists I interviewed varied tremendously. Some had attended art schools for especially gifted children; a few had studied in schools attached to the Academy of Arts, such as the Repin Institute in Leningrad or the Surikov Institute in Moscow. Most of the artists, however, graduated from an ordinary ten-year school and then began professional studies. Some had attended the special art schools that hold classes after the normal school day is over. Applicants to these classes must submit a portfolio; those who are not accepted are referred to art programs run by the Young Pioneers. The after-school classes are geared not only to training professional artists, but also to developing artistic creativity and interest in youngsters who will work in other professions.

The next step for future artists is attendance at a specialized art school for five years, or perhaps a specialized technical school. These institutions vary considerably in their rigidity of administration and orthodoxy of practice and outlook. The Academy of Arts is the most prestigious art institute and the primary educational and research center in the country. It is also the most conservative, both in its methods and in its administrative arrangements. One of the artists had been in a special school for gifted children attached to the Academy, but chose not to go on to study in the Academy itself because of its rigid atmosphere; he attended a design institute instead. Another said he had chosen a graphics institute over the Academy because it gave him more freedom to do the work he wanted to do. A few of the artists were asked to leave the Academy because their work deviated from the tenets of socialist realism; they switched to technical institutes. Several had studied in specialized institutes that prepared them for such fields as theater and cinema design, decorative ceramics and glass. Still, even within the Academy there is some variation in what is acceptable art; architecture, for example, is more innovative than painting and sculpture. Despite the compromises students at the Academy have to make, however, most are eager to remain there because of the prestige attached to being an Academy graduate.

The work experiences of the artists are as varied as their courses of training. Some painted or did sculpture full-time; others combined their art with work that was more or less closely related. Several worked for publishing houses designing bookcovers, magazines, and posters. One of the artists did ceramics, another designed for the theater, a third designed costumes for the circus. One man worked as an architect for several years before concentrating more intensely on his painting. One of the women earned money as an editor in a publishing house; another continued the psychology research she had begun while still an art student. Several of the artists had been able to work at their art only at night or on weekends and did not begin to paint full-time until they arrived in the United States.

It is difficult to describe the artists as a group, especially with respect to their standing as "official" or "unofficial" artists in the Soviet Union. Official artists belong to the Union of Soviet Artists. Typically they paint in the more conventional style of socialist realism for state commissions and sales in the government-run salons, yet some who belonged to the Union worked in a more innovative style in their private studios. Even those who were unofficial artists compromised at times in order to earn money with their art. The artists describe two levels of artistic existence in the Soviet Union—one that is acceptable to those who control commissions and the granting of contracts, and another that is not, but conforms more to the artist's inner standards. "I wish I could be strong," said the wife of an artist still in the Soviet Union, who expressed feelings of powerlessness and hesitation about the way they lived. "But sometimes I'm so afraid that I will not see the change happen and realize that I might not be able to help my friends or myself—and that what we do will just make things worse for ourselves." Painting in a nonconventional style does not always result in a lack of formal recognition and acceptance; much depends on who the artist's admirers are. There are examples of artists who do not follow the official line yet earn a great deal of money for their work and are
officially rewarded with commissions.²

The Union is of critical importance in the artist’s relationship to Soviet society. It is a channel for benefits and patronage and at the same time it monitors and influences the art produced. Younger artists who are still preparing work for exhibitions belong to a youth section of the Union. Of the 2,500 members of the Union of Soviet Artists in Leningrad, for example, 500 belong to the youth affiliate.³ Although formally they are not yet members, they are entitled to some Union privileges. This attachment of young artists to the Union may have a profound influence, because the early years of professional practice can be decisive in shaping one’s later outlook. Most of the artists I spoke with in New York had been members of the Union for at least some period of their working lives. They experienced some acceptance of minor artistic innovations, particularly if they were in certain affiliates of the Union, for example youth sections, or city branches controlled in part by local boards, which have sometimes been more open and liberal than the Union as a whole. The Union of Graphic Artists has included a variety of interesting artists among its members. Vladimir Nemukhin, Dmitri Plavinsky, and Valentina Kropivnitskaya belonged to the Amalgamated City Committee of Moscow Artists and Draughtsmen, which is a branch of the Union of Cultural Workers, not part of the Union of Soviet Artists. Membership entitled them to be free-lance artists once they had completed their commissioned work.⁴ In 1976 the City Committee established a painting section and invited nonconformists to join, except for Oscar Rabin, who had been expelled earlier, and his son Alexander.

The Union of Soviet Artists has changed over time. There have been power struggles among the members, and opportunities for diversity have been greater at certain times than at others. Igor Golomshhok writes of one period, in the late fifties, when a more “liberal” group committed to portraying social reality truthfully in painting “significantly affected the composition of exhibition selection committees, art councils, the editorial boards of art journals and publishing houses, educational institutions and museums.”⁵ For a time the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny played an active role in the “left wing” of the Moscow section of the Artists’ Union, and new members were admitted whose unconventional art received positive responses. There have also been periods of tension between the Union and the Academy. The Manège incident in 1962 took place when the Moscow Section of the Union “was about to propose to the government that this expensive organization, which acted as a spur to Soviet art, should be abolished altogether.”⁶ The situation became more difficult for artists in the early seventies, a restrictive counterpoint to the earlier period of de-Stalinization. Nevertheless, some art that was previously considered outrageous had become acceptable; the notion of realism had broadened somewhat. Golomshhok and others remain pessimistic, however, about the depth of the changes that have taken place, believing that “the guardians of Socialist Realism close their eyes to these formal innovations, as to preserve intact the essence of Socialist Realism itself—namely its propagandistic character and its social optimism.”⁷

The well-known history of Ernst Neizvestny, who now lives in New York, illustrates the unpredictability of a nonconforming artist’s “career.” For a while he was supported by the Union. During some extraordinarily difficult years when he was “unofficial,” Neizvestny did manual labor to earn money and buy materials on the black market. In his last years in the Soviet Union he received tremendous recognition and support, both from officialdom and from foreigners interested in his work.

Partly because of the international recognition the unofficial artists have received, there have been efforts over the past few years to incorporate those considered most talented into the system, perhaps through membership in a more “liberal” Union affiliate. On occasion a gallery run by the Union of Artists will exhibit works that are slightly more modern and innovative than the norm. Some older, established artists have lent support to their younger colleagues—arranging exhibits, getting them into the official unions, and defending them against conservative critics. A few official artists have even participated in unofficial exhibits, hoping to legitimate them.

Some of the “official” artists I interviewed in New York regarded the “unofficial” artists as amateurs. In their view Union membership implied that an artist had met professional standards of
artistic quality. Similarly, two of the younger artists praised the more innovative artists still in the Soviet Union and claimed not only that excellent artists were still working there, but furthermore that the more interesting artists had not emigrated. However, not all of the alternative routes for the more experimental artists are still open. Some of them have been asked to leave even the more liberal branches of the Union, and now must continue their work without that support. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid were dismissed from the Moscow youth section of the Artists' Union in 1972, after they showed some of their work satirizing Soviet propaganda art to Union officials. They asked for a one-day show; instead they were kicked out of the Union. They subsequently joined the Union of Graphic Artists, but were expelled from it after they applied for exit visas.

Artists who are refused membership in the Union, or are asked to leave it, may pursue other avenues. Sometimes editors in publishing houses hire them, or officials give them commissions to paint portraits or public murals. The wife of one unofficial artist succeeded in getting orders from the state for three or four years, which enabled the couple to live comfortably. Some of the artists I interviewed had been sought out regularly by members of the intelligentsia, scientists, and even government officials who tried to arrange exhibits in institutes, youth cafes, and private homes. There are “ unofficial” salons that exhibit work, and even a few private collectors. George Costakis, a Greek citizen who resided in the Soviet Union, managed over the years to acquire and show modern paintings there. He now lives in the West and was able to bring part of his collection with him. Diplomats, journalists, and tourists have brought examples of Soviet unofficial art to exhibits held in Western Europe. This attention and support has permitted a few unofficial artists to devote more time to their creative work.

The problems the artists had in the Soviet Union were not primarily material ones. Several of them, though certainly not all, had had separate studios and nice apartments. Established artists were able to earn money through their art and some even did their own creative work during the week. Several of the emigrés had had considerable success as “official” artists and had participated in exhibits at the Hermitage, the Manège, the Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin Museum, and the Russian Museum, to name only a few of the most important. Some had been among those chosen to represent the Soviet Union in group exhibits held in Eastern Europe. A few artists, both official and unofficial, succeeded in having their work exhibited in Western Europe and in the United States, both in individual shows and in group exhibitions of Soviet contemporary art. These exhibits of their work, and articles about them in the Western press, gave the artists satisfaction and encouragement. On the other hand, those who bypassed official channels and sold their work independently, especially to foreigners, frequently had no idea of where their work was. Much of it disappeared in foreign countries. Furthermore, because they were unable to share their art with a large Soviet audience, these artists felt uncertain, even hopeless, about their future identities.

One last aspect of the emigré artists’ varied backgrounds involves the part of the country in which they lived and worked. While most of the emigré artists are from Moscow, and about a quarter from Leningrad, there are others who come from outside the Russian Federation. In particular, there is a small group of artists that emigrated from Soviet Armenia; many of them are now in California and New York. Although artists are subject to the same broad regulations in Erevan as they are in Moscow and Leningrad, there are a few significant differences. Armenia, like some other parts of Transcaucasia and also the Baltic republics, has enjoyed a somewhat livelier tradition in the visual arts. There is a Museum of Modern Art in Erevan, and an ongoing exchange with the Armenian Artists Association of America, organized in 1973 by Richard Tashjian, a resident of Boston. There have been official visits by Soviet Armenian artists to the United States, and the Armenian Artists Association of America has had an exhibit in the Erevan Museum. Such exchanges have given Soviet Armenian artists a direct exposure to Western art.

The Armenian emigrés had been very successful in the Soviet Union. They belonged to the Union. Their work was exhibited. They lived in four- or five-room apartments (generous by Soviet standards), had studios, and were able to work as full-time artists. In
addition to selling their art to the state, they had many private commissions. One of the artists was featured in an article in *Soviet Life* a few years ago. Still, their reasons for leaving were similar to those of other Soviet artists: they wanted complete freedom in their work and freedom to move and travel as they wished. They hoped to earn a lot of money with their art. An American who had gotten to know some of these artists in the Soviet Union commented: “Of course by American standards, they didn’t earn all that much. Once I asked what one of the artists earned for doing an elaborate stage design for the theater. I was astonished with what he told me and mentioned that for all the work he did he would earn much more in the States.” One artist claimed that in Armenia he had been unable to work with religious motifs, but others vehemently deny this and maintain that religious art is being done in Soviet Armenia. Still, all are aware that one well-known and rather outspoken young artist, Minas Avedissian, died mysteriously in an automobile accident in Armenia, and many draw a connection between his death and his nonconformity. The significance attached to such incidents indicates that the artists did not harbor illusions of acceptance and inviolability.

**Settling in New York**

It is a devious journey from Moscow to New York. Soviet emigrants first arrive in Vienna. There they are met by officials of the Jewish agency, the Sachnut, which serves as a link between Israel and the Jewish diaspora. One of its functions has been to organize and facilitate the immigration of Jews to Israel. Those who do not want to settle in Israel are directed to the Rome office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), a U.S.-based organization. Most Soviet emigrants waiting to enter the United States spend several months in Rome. The strangeness, the difficulty of dealing with the various bureaucratic organizations, and the tensions of obtaining temporary housing and medical and financial help while waiting to enter their chosen country are all still vivid to them.

In the United States the immigrants may be aided by HIAS and a variety of other welfare organizations. Local Jewish agencies decide on how many and what kinds of immigrants they can help to resettle. The immigrants receive financial aid for a period of several months as well as language instruction, career counseling, and help in finding a place to live. Although Soviet Jews have settled all over the United States, New York has accepted more of these immigrants than any other city. The present living conditions of the Soviet artists in New York are shaped by the great variety of neighborhoods, streets, and milieux that exist in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and even Jersey City. They tend to move into outlying neighborhoods where housing is less expensive, often mixing with other immigrants and minority groups, rather than to areas of the city where there are concentrations of American artists.

One older artist, who had lived through the Second World War and the Stalin era, chose to live in a Brooklyn neighborhood where many Soviet emigrés have settled. Here it is possible to walk through the streets and hear Russian spoken, buy in shops run by Soviet emigrés, and eat and drink in familiar style. His wife, luckier than many emigrés, has found work in her profession as an architect. The artist has a studio in an office building in Manhattan. He goes there every day, mingling with business people, shoppers, and visitors from every part of the world and all walks of life.

Another artist in Brooklyn lives and has his studio in an old apartment house. The street below appears poor and run-down; among the shops there are fast-food stores selling falafel and pizza. The apartment is small, with a kitchen, living room, and bedroom, where the artist works. He is employed part-time as a guard and tries to earn just enough to be able to spend the rest of his week painting. Only a few streets away, there are lovely one-family homes. Several of the residents are orthodox Jews. A third lives with his wife and son in a one-family house on a quiet, tree-lined street in Queens. It is a pleasant middle-class neighborhood. Previously the family had lived in a large apartment house a few streets away, but found it too noisy. The artist’s wife works as a bookkeeper. Her earnings and the sale of his paintings and lithographs enabled them to buy their home. They also own a car.

Another lives in a housing project in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Astoria, Queens. The project is not for families on
welfare but for employed workers. Surrounding this huge project are blocks of small one-family houses. The artist told me that the neighborhood is ethnically very mixed, with many Greek and Italian families. He said he liked this environment and felt at home in the apartment house. Outside the entrance to his building I observed an elderly white woman having an animated conversation with a young black boy she appeared to know well. The elevator and hallways were spotlessly clean. There was a sign indicating the building was tenant-patrolled. The artist’s studio was in the apartment and the walls were filled with his paintings. There was a large glass-enclosed bookshelf and a collection of classical records. His wife works full-time as a commercial artist. They have two children.

One artist who began his life in the United States in a small American city moved to upper Manhattan after his divorce. His former wife is employed as a professional musician. They have one son. The artist’s apartment is on the top floor of a huge apartment house. A guard at the entrance screens visitors; the hallways appear secure and unthreatening. The families living there seem to have come from all over the world; each time I visited I heard a variety of languages. The apartment itself is small and bright. The living room, which is also the artist’s studio, overlooks the city.

One of the most famous of the Soviet artists lives and has his studio in SoHo. Visitors unfamiliar with the vitality of the area are initially impressed by the shabby appearance of his street. However, when one looks closer, there is a modern bar, a Chinese restaurant, a new French restaurant, and intense street life. The artist’s huge studio is filled with sculpture. There are usually apprentices working with him; the last time I visited, two spoke Russian. Only the frequent interruptions of telephone calls made him seem a bit more the entrepreneur than the traditional master-sculptor. His wife and daughter remain in the Soviet Union.

When I began these interviews, few Soviet artists lived in SoHo or even in Manhattan. As we shall see, living outside the art centers has been a problem for the artists. Those who have been most successful or who manage to find other good sources of support move to Manhattan. One older artist was finally able to move his studio to SoHo after he had lived and worked for a few years in Queens. Another, who had had considerable success in Paris, moved to a large and beautiful studio in SoHo. A young husband and wife team found an old apartment behind a garage in SoHo and turned it into a studio. However, those artists who have succeeded in moving to Manhattan are still the minority.

Three of the artists I spoke with live in Jersey City. Many Soviet families were settled there in an attempt to bring “new life” to the area and improve a blighted neighborhood. Only a few years ago the street where one of the artists lives was considered so dangerous that the police refused to patrol it. This artist had lived for a while in Manhattan, in SoHo, the area where so many of his colleagues yearn to live and work. However, in Jersey City he has been able to afford a house for his family—his wife, who recently started working as a draughtsman, and their sixteen-year-old daughter. Parts of the house are in poor condition and still need to be repaired. Upstairs, however, he has built a large and beautiful studio. Several of the houses on the street are potentially very attractive and in the process of being renovated. His neighbors, he said, are determined to improve the area, and everyone thought the street was already much safer than it had been only a few years ago.

Not too far away a new museum, the Museum of Soviet Unofficial Art, is being constructed from a nineteenth-century stone building that had once housed the administrative offices of the local fire department. It is to be directed by Alexander Glezer, an amateur art collector who became known for a series of unofficial exhibitions he helped to organize in the Soviet Union. He also founded the Russian Museum in Exile at Montgeron, outside of Paris, which exhibits contemporary Soviet unofficial art. Glezer’s plan was to model the Jersey City museum after the one in France. In addition to exhibiting works of art, the museum holds extensive biographical materials on the artists. It is still uncertain whether the museum in Jersey City will succeed in attracting as many visitors as Montgeron. The organizers—Joseph Shneberg, executive director of the Committee for the Absorption of Soviet Emigrés, Abba Goldberg, who chaired the group, Alexander Ginzburg, the Soviet journalist and a human-rights activist, and Glezer—hope that the museum will be supported and used not only by the many Soviet
families living in the area but also by visitors who are interested in Soviet art and artists.

**Gaining Entry to the American Art World**

As soon as the émigrés find housing and recover from the initial shock and excitement of their arrival in New York, they begin to think concretely of how they can continue their lives as artists. In the Soviet Union, some had made contacts with Americans. They now turned to them, hoping for encouragement and help. Others have tried to strengthen their ties to the European galleries that had shown an early interest in their work. Some become a bit nostalgic for those “care-free” months in Italy, which many other emigrés describe as tense because of the difficult living conditions and their fears about the unknown future. One artist was helped by a professor from Bologna to set up an exhibition. Another spoke of the greater respect for artists in Italy, a difference that had tangible consequences: “I was able to pay for the rent with my paintings.” One artist remembered a restaurant owner in Rome who, after watching him paint, insisted that he eat without paying. Although one artist had the terrible misfortune in Vienna of having his portfolio stolen, and with it seven years of his work, most of the other artists spoke of their initial enthusiasm and of the warmth and excitement they experienced in Europe, which made this period an especially memorable one for them. Perhaps there was an additional important factor. While in Rome, the artists had strong hopes for their future in the United States which were not yet challenged by reality.

Those artists who had succeeded in arranging exhibits in the United States or in Europe before they emigrated had a little additional money and, equally important, some feeling of professional continuity. A few of the artists had been contacted before they left the Soviet Union by art collectors and gallery owners who were themselves emigrés and had a special interest in promoting the work of Soviet artists.

The émigrés, then, began to rebuild their professional lives in this country using the various routes available to them. They contacted the Americans they had met in the Soviet Union, hoping they would be interested in purchasing their art, in helping them to arrange exhibits, and in introducing them to American artists, gallery owners, and other important people in the art world. They took their work to general art galleries, they exhibited their work in special collections that traveled to Jewish communities throughout the United States, and they contacted the few galleries and private dealers who were especially interested in Soviet art. The artists, although grateful for what they were able to accomplish, had difficulties and feelings of ambivalence with regard to all of these undertakings.

The first difficulty, shared by American artists as well, is that although there are many galleries in New York, their owners and managers are not waiting with open arms to exhibit new artists. Some of the better-known art galleries will not even look at an artist’s work unless the artist is recommended by the right people. Others will not take chances with art that does not conform to the international style—in all its variety—of the accepted avant-garde. Still others refuse artists because they are not impressed by the quality of their work against less sharply defined standards. Whatever the standards are, the artist who comes to New York from an environment as aesthetically insular as the Soviet Union faces a tremendous and potentially devastating problem. Even if the artist begins to understand the critical standards in all their subtlety, other issues remain: the need to be true to one’s past work, and the ambiguities of submitting to critical standards that remain external even if well understood. Although nearly all of the artists had participated in at least one group exhibit or one-person show in a “normal” gallery in New York City, success in exhibiting in known art galleries or museums was much rarer than they had anticipated. Several have had occasional exhibits in little-known art galleries. One reported: “I had an exhibit in a small gallery that an American suggested to me. I sold one piece to a collector. I sold a bit more in Maine and the Hamptons.” A small number of younger, stylistically experimental artists who managed to find studio space in SoHo and were good entrepreneurs succeeded in getting a series of exhibits in “alternative” SoHo galleries, which pleased them. They criticized their older compatriots for being too serious. One art curator who had emigrated from the Soviet Union said that most of the émigrés...
failed "to move with the time or live intensely enough in the present." A few of the artists described how difficult it was to have their work exhibited and how so much depended on being introduced or becoming known to the "right" people.

"My wife's professor was well acquainted with the owner of the S. Gallery in New York City. He introduced me and I was given a contract and exhibit. However, he's ill now and I don't know what will happen if he dies. I sent my slides to another gallery but they weren't interested."

This particular artist had the unfortunate experience of having two paintings stolen during his first exhibit in Connecticut.

Komar and Melamid's success in New York provides a dramatic example of how important initial connections with respected dealers and collectors are. Tourists and diplomats had been bringing Komar and Melamid's work out of the Soviet Union for some time. A Soviet activist named Goldfarb, now in the United States, approached several galleries, indicating the artists' interest in emigrating if they could become known in New York. Ronald Feldman, their present dealer, related in an interview that Goldfarb had approached other galleries without success before visiting him.¹⁰

"The American art public was becoming aware of unofficial art in the Soviet Union when the authorities bulldozed the Moscow outdoor art show. After I looked at the work of Komar and Melamid and listened to the explanations of their art by Goldfarb, I became very excited about what they were doing."

Some of the artists—those who identified themselves as Jews or who incorporated Jewish themes in their art—had had their work shown in Jewish community centers, synagogues, and local galleries throughout the United States. This was not the solution to their problems, however. Although the artists were appreciative and even glad of the support they received, they did not consider these exhibits as entries into the "real, professional art world." If at first some emigre artists had a rather imperfect understanding of the art market in the United States, they soon learned that the typical buyer at a provincial community center was not likely to be intimately connected to the New York art scene or even educated about art.

The few Armenian artists who came to New York had similar experiences. So remote was the chance of their having an exhibit in an established gallery that they turned in desperation to the Armenian Artists Association of America for help in showing their work. It was useless to advise them to submit portfolios and slides to as many galleries as they could; they did not have enough money to publicize themselves. The association and the Armenian community function as a kinship group and make great efforts to help those in difficulty, whom they consider as members of an extended family. The emigres, however, hope to become successful American artists rather than depend on "national" ties for support and acceptance. If eventually they are successful, it is quite likely that many of them will loosen their connections to the Armenian community and become integrated into a community of American artists.

A similar issue exists for those artists—and this includes nearly every one I spoke with—who exhibit mainly in the one or two art galleries that specialize in Soviet art. The emigres fear that by remaining attached to a "Russian gallery" they will isolate themselves from the New York art world and be considered Soviet exiles rather than artists. They want to become part of the American art scene. A few said that they did not consider themselves Soviet, but American, and refused to identify themselves in any way with their Soviet colleagues: "I want to become an American artist—not like the old immigrants who only associate with each other." Several indicated that they exhibit with a Russian gallery only because they have no other choice:

"I don't believe in having only a 'Russian' gallery. I don't believe in this nationalism, as if everyone wears the same socks. . . ."

"For months, I tried to get into other galleries. You can't walk in the front door; you have to know someone."

The owner of one of the main galleries exhibiting Soviet art in New York, Eduard Nakhamkin, is very sensitive to these problems.
When I met Soviet artists, no one knew them, promoted them or even cared about their work. The artists I had at first weren't all good, but then a few excellent ones brought in their art and the gallery got a good reputation. . . . the artists were afraid to exhibit their work in a gallery that might close in a few months; they considered themselves great. Now the gallery is a business of hundreds of thousands of dollars. When we began to promote the artists, it became easier for them to go elsewhere.

Several of the emigres thought of themselves as not only competent but extraordinarily talented artists. They expected to receive great sums for their paintings and were deeply disappointed when this did not happen.

"I thought I would get thousands of dollars for each work I did; the galleries offered me much less. . . . Of course, now I understand the situation wasn't what I expected. I was unknown. At first, I was terribly hurt that my prices weren't accepted, not even for my lithographs."

A gallery manager added:

"They may be big names in the Soviet Union, but on the world scene they are unknown, even if they are good and deserve more recognition. They say their paintings are worth a great deal of money, but there is no real market for Soviet art."

The artists were concerned about the fact that their need for cash meant they had to produce and sell more than they had in the Soviet Union.

"It takes me a long time to complete a painting, sometimes a few years. You can get poor in America that way."

"Here you can have what you want but you have to work hard. In Russia, you could live off a painting for several months. Here, you can't live off it for one month."

"There is more security in the Soviet Union. Now you get a studio and an income whether you exhibit or not, if you belong to the Union."

"I see now that America is good for big artists."

It is rare for Soviet artists to earn money doing commercial work in New York, although a few with specialized skills that are especially marketable manage to do so. Most of the artists I spoke with intended to do only their own creative art; but even if they were interested in getting work as commercial artists, they were handicapped by their inability to communicate well. Since most of their work is done in isolation, the artists do not have as much opportunity as other Soviet emigres to become fluent in English. One artist built lofts and painted buildings in SoHo in order to earn money. A couple has been successful in getting commissions to restore damaged paintings, work they very much enjoy and which leaves them considerable time for their own projects. Another artist teaches young people in order to earn additional money; his students are the children of Soviet emigres. Norton Dodge and Alison Hilton estimate that only a dozen of the Soviet artists in New York are able to support themselves and their families from the earnings of their art, and that of these less than half make as much as $50,000 a year.  

A few of the artists are on welfare; one such unfortunate emigre is the Armenian artist who was featured in Soviet Life some years ago. Several of the artists are divorced or separated from their families. Many if not most of the male artists who have remained with their families have spouses who earn enough to contribute substantially to their endeavors to remain full-time artists. Generally, Soviet emigres tend to have a fairly high divorce rate—both predating their emigration and afterwards. For some of the artists, then, emigration to America not only meant coming to a very different society and adjusting to a new way of being an artist, but also involved a radical break in their personal relationships. The continuing links that estranged husbands and wives often maintain exist only for those emigres with ex-spouses in the United States. If either husband or wife remains in the Soviet Union, the separation is complete.
Some of the artists insist that earning great salaries is unimportant in comparison to continuing to develop artistically. A few had huge projects they wanted to complete, or theories of art they wanted to expound to the American intelligentsia. One had been working for two and a half years on a project that had fifty-six pieces; he was searching for a place in New York large enough to exhibit it. The sculptor Neizvestny has a major project called "The Tree of Life," which has been described as an "international monument to the heart and mind of man, all of whose accomplishments are here blended into a polyphonic design of spatial union." 13

Yet, despite the "bravado" many of them display to outsiders, some of the tension the emigres experience undoubtedly stems from a lack of confidence in themselves as artists, in an artistic environment they neither belong to nor even clearly understand.

"My first exhibit was a reaction to life in the Soviet Union and I'm uncertain of it..."

"I had an exhibit and sold a lot, but it was a period of trial and I wasn't satisfied."

One artist, who had been very successful in the Soviet Union, and was even interviewed on television upon his arrival in the United States, soon found himself overwhelmed by frustrations.

"I am unstable and unsure of my style; I am uncertain of where to turn. I don't know what Americans want. I don't understand them."

We will hear many such reflections. It will become increasingly evident that the Soviet emigres are trying to make their way in an art world that has remained rather incomprehensible to them. The artists anticipated more public recognition and acceptance than they found. The many complicated problems they faced on arrival in New York produced in them a certain insecurity about what they were doing and unclear expectations for the future.

However, the difficulties these emigres talk about should be understood in a larger context—their generally positive evaluation of an artist's life in the United States. There is still excitement about the possibilities open to them, and a lingering memory of what had disturbed them in the Soviet Union. One artist, recalling with nostalgia the material security he had once enjoyed, added:

"But on the other hand, I was afraid even to telephone foreign friends... and if I can't exhibit everything I want to, it's not a professional life. In time, I'll find that if I'm a real artist, I'll make it. I'll be written up. It will come."

The Special Problems of Women Artists

Among the emigres, women artists have particular difficulties in rebuilding their lives as artists. They are busy seeing that their families are well settled and only then do they begin to reestablish their careers; moreover, unless they are working in collaboration with their husbands, they must do this alone.

According to socialist theory, a woman has to work outside the household if she is to participate on an equal basis in the society and in her family. Ideally, then, the family is based on human affection rather than on the economic dependence of the woman and children on her husband. In the Soviet Union, 88 percent of women work outside the family, nearly all full-time or as students. 14 Soviet women participate fully in professional life, although their distribution over different fields is not the same as that of men. 15 At the end of 1974 women in the Soviet Union constituted about 55 percent of the population between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-nine and 59 percent of the total number of employed specialists with higher or specialized secondary education. 16 Women's participation in the arts is strong. In 1974/75 the proportion of women studying in some field of the arts in higher educational institutions was 68 percent and in specialized secondary schools 81 percent. 17 This is not especially surprising. What is remarkable to a Westerner is the strong presence of Soviet women in "nontraditional" occupations: 40 percent of Soviet engineers are women, 57 percent of designers and...
draughtsmen, 40 percent of scientific research personnel, 77 percent of doctors and dentists, and 53 percent of medical administrators.18

We do not have exact information on the percentage of women in each branch of the arts, but according to a representative of the Union of Artists, women comprise more than half of those employed in the applied arts, pottery, weaving, etc., while most painters and sculptors are men.19 This imbalance is also characteristic in the emigration.20 However, the situation is more complicated than the statistics may suggest. The women artists I spoke with, like many of the men, may have gotten their formal training in an applied field, but put their major energy into the creative work they do on their own. A woman may, for example, be trained in graphics, take employment in a publishing house for income, and put her heart into painting in her studio when she can make the time for it.

One of the emigrés I interviewed had studied linguistics at the University of Moscow and had been employed at a government publishing house. She had worked on her own art during the rest of the week and in the evening, as did her husband, an artist who had worked as a costume designer in the circus. They had collaborated on many art projects and met regularly with other unofficial artists in the Soviet Union.

Another woman, also married to an artist, had studied at the Moscow Polygraphic Institute. Since her student days, she has had employment three days a week in the psychology department of a university, creating programs for children. While a student she had been able to do a great deal of work independently at home. She said that her friends in more traditional art institutions had envied her comparative freedom. She, too, had been deeply involved in a community of artists with her husband, his collaborators, and their friends.

A third woman had attended one of the special art schools, described earlier, three times a week before she entered the Polygraphic Institute. She had worked on a free-lance basis with various publishing houses, as well as doing her own art. She had succeeded in entering Ely Beliutin’s studio and there was able to work and exhibit paintings that were unorthodox by Soviet standards.21 However, after Khrushchev’s visit to the Manège exhibit, in which she had participated, the studio group was officially disbanded.

In spite of the drastically changed role of women in Soviet society, some of the artists I interviewed saw men and women as intrinsically different in artistic creativity. Reflecting about why there were relatively few women artists, one of the women observed that the power for great creativity is “thought to be male.” A male artist added: “There were great female artists. You couldn’t tell the difference [between] their work and the work of male artists. Now I always can. Somehow, the women have gotten weaker.”

Historically, there was some tradition in Russia of women in the arts. Margarita Tupitsyn speaks of a new phenomenon in the history of women’s art that emerged in the period preceding the revolution in 1917—“the collaboration and mutual influence between male and female artists and poets.” These women worked with men, artists and intellectuals, who were critical of traditional marriage and a family life that made women dependent. They spoke of, and lived, their ideas of free “marriage” and of relations between the sexes based on love, relations that could easily be broken if either partner were dissatisfied. Many of these ideas subsequently became public policy. But not all the consequences of this rather sudden emancipation were favorable to women. When divorces became easier to obtain, many men simply left their wives and children. Promised day-care centers and other public supports for the new modes of family life remained underdeveloped. Women became integrated into the labor force but still had to meet the demands of child and household care.

During the period of the 1920s, however, many women artists managed to live an intense personal and professional life. The collaboration between men and women in the avant-garde was extensive during this period and resulted in exquisite works of art. Women not only worked as fine artists, they designed books and posters and directed art schools. Popova and Stepanova established textile print factories, which “allowed them to carry their innovative ideas beyond the studio and, by means of constructivist design and clothing, to influence the appearance and sensibility of women as well as
The 1930s brought both the entrenchment of socialist realism in art and social policies that reinforced the validity and stability of traditional family life—although women remained in the labor force. Only a very few women artists continued to pursue the nontraditional lifestyles celebrated by the avant-garde, or to work independently without conforming to the standards of socialist realism. By the time of the Khrushchev “thaw,” women were a small minority in nonconformist circles; in Tupitsyn’s words, they remained “under the spell of the severe stereotypes propagated by socialist realism.”

Most Soviet women artists today work to contribute to the family income and spend time caring for their children and households. Yet, the women artists I spoke with saw themselves as professionals and no less committed to their work than their husbands were. They did not see their art as something they did on the side, “as a hobby.” Here is how one woman described her way of life before emigration:

“As in so many Soviet families, my parents lived with us and helped care for the children and the household. Each person in the family had a task. My husband took care of the heavy work, bringing the laundry to be washed, getting the potatoes, etc. It was too much for me, but it was too much for all of us. . . . Still, I was greatly involved in my work. The studio was my life. I worked intimately with the others; we showed each other our work and we solved problems together.”

Another woman said she took charge of most of the tasks at home, but that her husband helped whenever she asked him to:

“When I worked, he took the children. There was no choice. However, we have friends now in the Soviet Union who put all the jobs to be done on the refrigerator and then divide them up. We never did it that way.”

This woman was intensely affected by the experience of emigration. She and her husband had decided to settle in Israel, where it took many months for her to start working again. Her artist husband and his collaborator made plans for their projects a year in advance and their work was not much affected by the physical environment, but she needed to know the land and to work with the materials around her. Once she was able to start, she found that her work went well and that Israelis were interested and supportive of what she was doing. When her husband left for New York with his collaborator, she remained in Israel with their two children, continuing her work, but later moved to the United States on the advice of her husband’s gallery owner. This move, too, required her to adjust to a new environment, in order to be able to begin working once again. She has spent months walking around New York City, learning to know it, and although her art has been exhibited, she has not yet begun any new work.

A similar problem existed for another woman artist who moved with her husband from the Soviet Union to Boston, where he had relatives and employment. She, too, was unable to paint in her new environment and it took several years to “get started again, to understand the world, and to feel like a human being.” In Rome, where she and her family had stayed before coming to the United States, an Italian artist helped her set up an exhibit and she sold all her paintings. Soon after she arrived in the United States, three of her works were chosen for the American Painters in Paris exhibition. But access to American galleries remained a problem. When the artist finally found one in SoHo that was interested in her work, the gallery was sold to someone else.

She is astonished by the reaction of most people when she tells them she is an artist:

“. . . they don’t understand that I was trained as a professional artist and that I worked professionally. They think I paint pretty flowers and otherwise take care of my family and make my husband comfortable. I decided to tell people I am a book designer; that has also been my training and somehow it sounds more professional to them.”

For years, she has tried to find work in publishing houses. Once in a while she succeeds, but the competition is severe.
"I loved my work in the Soviet Union and I was successful doing it. It took me ten years to become really established as a book designer and illustrator because I worked free-lance and the profession is competitive. Here, I have the feeling that people don't believe a woman can do the work. In the Soviet Union, although the director at the highest level of the publishing house is usually a man, eighty percent of the directors on the next levels are women."

Surprised and disappointed with her professional development in the United States, she commented:

"There are many bad things in the Soviet Union, but I was working in publishing houses and painting. I never felt the way I feel here. I expected the United States to be a progressive country and in many ways it is... but with respect to women artists, it's in the Middle Ages. In the Soviet Union, I didn't feel that difference."

This artist agrees with the women's movement's critique of American professional life—that discrimination continues to exist in nearly all professions. However, she does not condone the "dichotomy," which, as she sees it, American women have set up between commitment to work and commitment to family life:

"They are only now beginning to understand that it's possible to do both. They have enough money to pay for babysitters. They have to make some compromises. Even if they hand over their entire salary, they maintain their profession. They stay alive. On the other hand, working doesn't hurt family life. It enhances it."

Living in Boston, this artist feels estranged from the center of artistic life. She shares this complaint with a close friend, an American artist from New York. "At least we have each other. It's bad for artists to be isolated."

Perhaps the easiest adjustment was made by the young woman artist who works with her husband. The two, who had often worked together in the Soviet Union, continue their joint art projects and art performances. Because a "performance" involves the reactions of viewers, they enjoy more intimate contact with their audience than many of the other artists. In one such performance, "Zoo," they exhibited themselves nude in a cage as animals with the label, "Homo Sapiens, group of mammals, male and female." They are among the few emigrés who have not experienced a severe disruption of their sense of community since leaving the Soviet Union.

**The American Response to the Emigré Artists**

Over time, most of the Soviet emigré artists have succeeded in selling some of their work, but still they are generally disappointed with the response they have received. It remains difficult to get journalists and critics to come to some of the galleries that show their work, so it can never be taken for granted that an exhibit will be reviewed in the newspapers or in art journals. In fact, very few exhibits are reviewed unless the artist is well known or the exhibition is held in a well-known art gallery. One gallery owner specializing in Soviet art observed:

"If an artist is born in the United States, he has connections and people will come. The Russian artists have skills and sometimes they are excellent but nobody knows them. Some of the American artists are mediocre... It's painful. You see the names of the same artists all the time and people buy them. It's so hard to get the important art critics to come. I've never met N.N. or had a chance to show him the work I have here. If we could speak, [they] would see. [They] would really be impressed."

Again, this problem is not unique to the emigrés; many small and good general galleries have difficulties bringing their artists to the attention of the critics. Indeed, a few of the younger Soviet artists were well aware that many of their American colleagues had never been, and probably never would be reviewed, and that some of the attention they themselves attracted was precisely because of their emigration from the Soviet Union. One disappointed artist reported:
"The reactions to my work were actually two-fold. People were interested in me; yet some of the critical articles ridiculed my work."

Some of the emigré artists have gotten very positive reviews, but in general, the impression of the critics seems to be that Soviet art is not easily accessible—intellectually or aesthetically—to Americans, and that much of the art is uninteresting, old, imitative. One Soviet art historian agrees with the reactions of these American critics:

"Artists think they're all geniuses. In the Soviet Union, abstract art is a revelation. In America, it doesn't have any meaning. Most of their work is mediocre; in the West the kind of art they do was done years ago. The talented will eventually be discovered."

Other critics, including Igor Golomshtok, sympathetic to what the emigrés are trying to do, strongly oppose these negative evaluations, contending that Americans do not understand Soviet art. They insist that the Soviet artists' work is varied and distinctive; that what they do may include surrealist, expressionistic, and other traditional approaches, but that their art is more than that, that it is new, and transcends the specific style. Some go as far as to suggest that Americans have no tradition for understanding their own contemporary art because the art has no meaning (we will discuss these different concepts of "true" art below), whereas Soviet intellectuals do have access to their art and in any case are not intimidated by unfamiliar techniques or symbols.

What do the emigré artists think of the critics who review their work? In the Soviet Union, unofficial art, even if exhibited, is rarely reviewed. It is common that exhibitions and the participating artists are never even mentioned. Moreover, official criticism adheres to traditional Soviet standards, and for the most part the artists found this criticism uninteresting. They do, however, refer to the existence of "deep and serious" art criticism in the Soviet Union. Studies of folk art and the art of earlier centuries are often considered excellent, and so is some of the "underground" criticism of unofficial art, which they welcomed—"desperate for a kind word."

It is from this experience that the artists derive their expectations and the standards by which they judge American art criticism. From the beginning, the emigrés were interested in, and felt that their futures depended on, American critics. They had high hopes, not only for good reviews of their work, but for the understanding that art criticism would give them of American art. Those who understood English took the reviews they read very seriously. There was much more variation than they had expected. Soon, however, they grew critical, and sometimes even suspicious, of the reviewers. Some, of course, were dismayed that their own work was evaluated negatively, if at all. But more generally, the emigrés were often confused by American criticism. Just as they lacked a very clear understanding of the structure of the American art world, they did not always grasp—and often were not aware of—the many kinds and methods and levels of art criticism that have a place in that world.

"Art criticism here is sometimes funny and sometimes serious. Often the art world is strange. Some of the reviews are serious and deep and at other times they are filled with rumor and gossip. Art criticism here can be superficial and does not touch on the philosophical basis."

"Generally, art criticism in the United States is on a much higher level because it is free and it is not necessary to use the ideas of the Party. On the other hand, the underground criticism we did for each other was on a much higher level; it involved philosophical discussion."

"In the United States, art critics explain their theories of how painting becomes alive. Even the artists don’t know that. When mediocre artists understand what critics like, they’ll begin to paint that way... The critics aren’t independent. I was at an art exhibit after I had read the criticism. Either there’s a complete absence of taste or a commercial interest—the critic makes a percentage of the money. I ran to see an exhibit I read about. The critics had written about the wonderful reds and greens. It was nothing."
Does art criticism have a place at all? And if so, what role should it play? One artist asserted that ‘Only artists should criticize each other.’ But another declared that critics helped to build the future of art. Most of the emigrés believed in some form of art criticism, although they disagreed about its purposes.

‘The criticism should be written for those who know about art. Lots of books are good but the articles in magazines and newspapers seem to be written for high school students.’

‘They should explain the art to the people. . . . On the other hand, it’s important not to tell people what to think.’

The emigrés are filled with ideas for communicating the philosophical basis of their art. Their ideas range from bringing critics together for a discussion to publishing a journal that would include pictures as well as extensive commentaries. They retain the hope that once the critics have a greater understanding of their art, they will respond more positively.

Another disappointment for many emigrés has been the public’s reception of their work. Many of them had once thought of the American audience as an appreciative support group for Soviet unofficial artists. The gallery owners have perhaps a more realistic sense of the American art market. One emigré gallery owner noted that the artists whose work he exhibited differed greatly from one another and suggested that the different styles appealed to different audiences:

‘For some it’s decoration, for others nostalgia. The modern art of Chemiakin and Neizvestny is more intellectual. The viewer has to understand these artists to accept their work.’

Some Americans who cannot react easily to the Soviet art try to place it in a context that is more familiar to them. A gallery manager observed:

‘The Americans like to compare: ‘This artist looks like Chagall . . .’ If they say ‘it’s interesting,’ they don’t like it; if they think ‘it’s different,’ they hate it; if they mention that the price is ‘reasonable,’ they won’t buy anything.’

Over and over again, there were comments about the broad interests of intellectuals in the Soviet Union as compared to Americans.

‘Generally, the educated people in the Soviet Union are broader and better educated than their American counterparts. The average viewer may be the same, but a Soviet physician or a Soviet physicist also knows literature and art.’

‘I dragged intellectuals to SoHo but they have no relation to modern art. In the Soviet Union the intelligentsia enjoys modern art but in America it means nothing.’

There were some minority views among the artists suggesting that those with interest in their art were the same types in both societies.

‘My art isn’t for simple people; they won’t understand it. Culture doesn’t matter. Educated people share the same world.’

A few artists suggested that in fact Americans have more understanding than Soviets for stylistic variation. The majority, however, thought that while the people who buy art in the Soviet Union may be especially intelligent and well-off, the Americans who buy art are the rich and near-rich. Rarely did the emigrés appreciate the investment considerations that motivate the decisions of many art buyers; they looked primarily for artistic sensibility in their audience. They criticized Americans for their lack of understanding and faulted them for not buying more original art works.

‘People talk about the decorating possibilities of what they see, how it would look over their sofa—it’s depressing.’

‘People react well, but not with money . . . But galleries buy and show for money.’

‘The gallery manager has a party for the Americans but the guests want to talk to each other. They stand around with their
backs to the paintings, drinking. After the opening, the Americans come back and consider. Then they go home again to consider and come again to look and to speak. These people are rich. When they spend a thousand dollars for the evening, they don’t think about it as much."

"The people who buy my work are the Russians who have just come."

The artists disagreed about the willingness of Americans to trust their own judgments about art. Two of the artists thought that anything could be sold somewhere in the United States, even with negative reviews or none at all. Most of the artists, however, thought that Americans were reluctant to trust in their own reactions.

"Americans are afraid of a dramatic style and of an unusual content. That’s different in the Soviet Union and Europe. . . . In America, they want to know what school you belong to. If you belong to a school they don’t know of, they’re not interested. It’s hard to be an individual."

Margarita Tupitsyn, curator of the Contemporary Russian Art Center of America in SoHo, suggests that the difficulty is twofold.

"The Soviet artists are not ironic enough and don’t use the language of the time. The Americans cannot understand the imagery; therefore, Soviet art has to be explained."

Komar and Melamid, who make aggressive use of Soviet motifs, observed:

"We wanted to be Americans but we realized we couldn’t. Part of our past, for example the Stalinist period, belongs to everybody. It may be misinterpreted by Americans. Still, people are interested because the art looks like another civilization with its own secret interests."

Actually, the American public was more immediately receptive to the first Komar and Melamid exhibit than to most of the work shown by emigrés. The advance preparations for the exhibit were elaborate, and included making available to art writers extensive information on Soviet society and the specific setting of Komar and Melamid’s work. Gallery owner Ronald Feldman believes that the art critics who explained Komar and Melamid’s work were crucial for the success of the show. When Komar and Melamid’s "Biography," consisting of small, spread-out pictures, was exhibited, people stood waiting for turns to see it. Feldman phoned the artists in the Soviet Union to tell them about the show’s success. When he reported that people were waiting on line to come into the gallery, Komar and Melamid were uncomprehending; for them, waiting on line was not at all an unusual event. Feldman had to explain that people in the United States did not often queue up to see contemporary art.

The disappointment that many Soviet artists experience with the reactions to their art is compounded by their isolation from viewers and buyers. The artists are rarely around when visitors come to the galleries and they have little opportunity to meet them at other times. From the gallery owner’s point of view, which of course shapes the possibilities for contact between the Soviet artists and potential buyers, such relationships can be problematic.

"Artists often don’t know the people who buy their work. Most customers use the friendship to get cheaper art. They think it’s cheaper art; often it’s not. It’s bad for us and bad for the artist. . . . Such relationships destroy the market. The artists may sell a lot on their own at first—but then it stops."

"Usually there’s no follow-up in the relationship. They meet each other at parties and openings. If there are collectors in the gallery, they take pains to meet the artist. It’s not so different in the Soviet Union. The real difference is in the relation of the viewer to the work of art."

A few artists maintained they did not need personal contacts with buyers, that it was more professional not to become friendly with
them. One artist who had received a list of the people who bought his work had no interest in meeting the buyers or in going to parties to see them. Yet many of the Soviet artists yearn for more contact and exchange. For those who sold work in their studios in the Soviet Union, there was the joy of having personal contact with people who supported them and cherished their art. If they sold their work abroad, there was the excitement of a wider, although still unknown audience. Now they wanted to work as “real, professional” artists, which meant selling their work in galleries rather than in studios to personal acquaintances.

“In Russia, the people who bought art in my studio were friends or friends of a friend. They would call and ask if they could bring someone over to look at my work... I would like to know the people who buy my art here. Once I saw a young businessman come into the gallery and buy two of my pictures in a few minutes. The man seemed nice and full of life, but he walked out. Another time, someone bought a painting for a trade center out West. The gallery owner doesn’t give me names. He doesn’t want the artist to have the contact because the gallery gets half of the profit.”

“In the Soviet Union I didn’t have personal contact except with the publisher who took my work. I saw the Union jury; sometimes they approved of my work and gave me money and sometimes not. Now I would like to see the people and speak with them. I don’t understand why people buy what they do; I don’t know why they reject something... it would be interesting to know.”

“I know one art collector here; the other people I haven’t met. I will ask for it in my next contract because I want to know who they are... In the Soviet Union, aside from the galleries, intellectuals and musicians came to my studio to buy art.”

Still, most of the artists were at least ambivalent on this point. They felt isolated and unappreciated but at the same time they saw themselves as leading a professional artist’s life, something they could not do in the Soviet Union.

The views the emigrés have of their audience in America do not give us a detailed and realistic picture of the American art audience. They do, however, give us a fairly accurate idea of how the American art scene—critics, galleries, buyers—is experienced by these artists who until recently lived and worked in the Soviet Union. Their experiences and reactions are quite varied, yet there are common notes. They dreamt of a quicker acceptance and a warmer response; still they are aware that they have had more attention than many of their American colleagues who struggle for years with little recognition. While often puzzled about the prevailing tastes and critical standards in the American art world, and preoccupied with the tension between their own past artistic identity and these different standards, they see the chance to work in America as a professional artist as outweighing such conflicts and frustrations.

The Dealers

Anyone who has some knowledge of the New York art scene can appreciate how bewildering that world must seem to a newcomer. There are gallery owners and private dealers who seem to have a profound understanding of art, and others who are interested only in the latest art fashion; many will only consider showing the work of artists who are well known and recommended; there are even wealthy amateurs who run galleries “to have something to do.” One emigré, after a fight with a gallery, began to send all of his work to a businessman who then marketed it. This relationship was perhaps atypically intense; it also was problematic for the artist, because it made him dependent on one individual who had no professional ties to the art world. Since my first interview with this artist the association has broken up and he can no longer count on these sales as a source of income.

Personal relations with dealers and gallery owners are, as we have seen, very important to the emigré in the early phases of settling in New York. They also have an inherent fragility. One artist had had a warm relationship with a gallery owner who recently died.
The artist expressed fears about his future association with the gallery:

"He was a very nice man. I am so sorry he died. Before his death, he wrote to his personal dealer in Washington saying I was one of the best artists he had seen in ten years. But it was a closed professional relationship. . . . I wasn't invited to his home to eat or anything like that. We spoke only in the gallery."

This artist's fears proved justified. The gallery was eventually taken over by the owner's daughter, who decided not to renew the contract because "she wanted expensive artists."

The more complicated relationships, however, are probably with the Soviet emigre dealers. In a new, unknown atmosphere, the tensions of arranging exhibits and payments understandably feed suspicions of unfairness, being taken advantage of, and lack of appreciation. These feelings are not peculiar to Soviet artists, but they are probably intensified by the difficult circumstances. Emigre art dealers and collectors also struggle in New York; they, too, brought with them hopes and plans for what they would accomplish in this new and very different world. They are from a variety of backgrounds, and in some cases were not professionally involved with the arts in the Soviet Union. Some believed they could latch onto something with great financial potential, others were primarily committed to showing the American art world the contribution of Soviet artists; but all experienced difficult times and in some cases still face an uncertain future.

Eduard Nakhamkin, a gallery owner specializing in Soviet art, had little contact with Soviet dissident artists in the Soviet Union. Before coming to the United States in the late 1970s, he taught mathematics. He had many problems establishing himself, and was well aware that artists were reluctant to show their work in a new, unknown gallery. Now he has an established gallery on Madison Avenue that does considerable business and has been stable for several years, and another one downtown in a building he owns, he also has galleries in Los Angeles and San Diego.

Rowman Kaplan, an emigre who manages a gallery, taught literature in the Soviet Union and later in Israel. He had some training in art criticism while still in the Soviet Union.

One of the first emigres committed to taking Soviet art abroad was Alexander Glezer, who opened the Museum of Russian Art in Exile near Paris and is now curator of the Museum of Russian Contemporary Art in Jersey City. While in the Soviet Union, Glezer translated Georgian literature into Russian. He was an amateur art collector and helped arrange exhibits of dissident art even before he emigrated to France. Some of the artists disapprove of his persistent emphasis on the political history of their lives as artists in the Soviet Union and the political themes he uses in promoting Soviet emigre art. A man of extraordinary energy, Glezer had great hopes for the development of the new museum in Jersey City, but the museum has been plagued by financial difficulties and there is some doubt about how long it will be able to remain open. He is puzzled by its lack of success and by the disinterest of Americans.

Margarita Tupitsyn, the curator of the Contemporary Russian Art Center of America in New York City, is the youngest of this group. She attended university for two years in the Soviet Union, specializing in art history, and is now in a doctoral program in the United States. Since becoming associated with the Center, Tupitsyn has written several informative brochures and articles explaining contemporary Soviet art and the work that is being shown in the Center. Financed by a private collector and not a commercial gallery, the Contemporary Russian Art Center shares with one of the emigre art galleries the eleventh floor of an otherwise empty office building. The hope was to develop an international art center with a restaurant or cafe. The opening, a gala event to which all the "star" Soviet emigrés in the United States were invited, included waiters dressed as Cossacks. For now, however, all these hopes remain unfulfilled: both the downtown gallery and the Center struggle for financial survival.

The artists understand that the "Russian" gallery owners have had to learn about the New York art world just as they did. If a gallery specializing in Soviet art were to falter and eventually close, some of the artists would have real difficulty exhibiting their work at all. They therefore understood that a gallery owner had to take a
substantial percentage of the price paid for a painting in order to keep the gallery open; nevertheless, they were prone to suspicions that they had not been paid adequately.

“I needed money and went to M. He bought several lithographs for a certain amount of money and sold them for more—much more. I was upset. I was thankful because I needed the money then but I was upset later. I do trust him, though, in many ways... I think I could always go to him.”

“He is like a spider. He waits until the artist is in difficulty and then buys his paintings. He bought my paintings in advance and sold them for four to five times the amount he paid for them.”

One gallery manager observed that the artists try to find out what their colleagues are paid in order to assess the fairness of their own treatment. That is one reason the owner of the gallery does not develop close personal relationships with the artists, and objects to his employees doing so.

As mentioned earlier, several of the artists would prefer not to identify themselves as emigres and they hesitate to exhibit in galleries specializing in Soviet art. One informed me before our interview that he did not consider himself a “Russian” artist at all. If such a person has no choice but to exhibit in an emigre gallery, or decides that it is his best possibility for succeeding in a difficult situation, there is probably even more ambivalence in his relationship with the dealer than would normally be the case.

The artists are dependent on dealers for approval, for money, and for their link to the American art public. On the outside they may be friendly to the dealer and even somewhat trusting—they have to be. But deeper down, they feel competitive with other Soviet artists and suspicious that they are not earning as much money as they are entitled to.

“My relationship with these people is purely a business relationship. P. took my paintings and put them in his museum. He sold them and didn’t give me the money. I felt cheated.”

“With M., it’s mostly a business relationship. I don’t drink vodka with him, I don’t go home with him.”

“All the dealers are businessmen, not my kind of people. I have the same reaction to all of them. There are people in this world who do and people who use. They use the work of others for profit. I also don’t want to be in a Russian gallery. I wanted to come to America and be an American artist in an American gallery.”

Two of the artists, while still in the Soviet Union, made contacts with European dealers who were very enthusiastic about their art. Because their work seems to be more successful in Europe and because of the strong commitment expressed by the dealers, these artists feel more supported by their European dealers and more appreciated by Europeans. They developed close friendships with the European gallery owners. Two artists expressed strong feelings of trust and gratitude for their American dealer; they feel he has helped them tremendously. Very few, however, expressed similar sentiments. There was a somewhat more positive reaction to one gallery manager, who is probably less involved in the financial negotiations with artists than the owner is; still, even he was described as “just a businessman” by a few of the artists. He, on the other hand, considers the artists his friends and sees them outside of the gallery: “It is not a business relationship.”

Of course, some of the anxieties and suspicions emigre artists have in their relations with dealers are shared by their American colleagues. In a study conducted by Bernard Rosenberg and Norris Fliegel, American artists expressed a great deal of resentment of dealers, and only a few examples of good relations were reported. The American artists’ complaints were not unlike the emigres’.

Many artists feel that they are lifting the lid of corruption just a little to let us glimpse a hideous world they know too well. In their eyes many dealers are irresponsible (“they don’t handle the person correctly”); actually cruel (“they’ll pick up artists and drop them”); filled with resentment (“unconsciously they hate artists,
lots of them are frustrated artists who can't stand productive people and they take their revenge on us’); exploitative (‘‘they take advantage of artists, but what’s worse, they take advantage of ignoramuses who come to them for advice’’); meretricious (‘‘gimmicks are their stock-in-trade’’). They are above all, powerful agents of a sick system and a sick society which no artist by himself has the strength to lick.28

Most artists recognize the necessity of the dealer, but the Soviet emigrés are a bit idealistic in their expectations, perhaps, since they see the art world in the United States as more professional, freer, and more varied than the one they left. However, those artists whose work is rarely exhibited in New York, or who lose their connection with a gallery there that has supported their work, feel a sense of doom. They may retain some connections to art galleries elsewhere, perhaps in California, but they are cut off from the city that is the center of the art world as they know it. It is these artists who may now condemn most galleries as crass commercial enterprises.

The artists who are more successful are often, precisely because of their success, aware in a different way of the tensions of making a transition from one world to another. Here we can observe an interesting development. Although these artists seek to understand and respond to the artistic sensibilities prevalent in the New York galleries, it seems that they also develop a new acceptance of their Soviet experience, both in personal life and in art. While they seek to reveal elements of this past experience in their work and to share it with their new audience, there is also a realization that in some important respects they are alone, outside both worlds.

The sense of being outside the system is, of course, experienced by many artists. However, its roots are only partly the same in the case of the emigrés, and their feeling of isolation, moreover, is the more poignant since many of them were once part of an artistic community which they know will never be recreated in the United States. Nearly all of the artists I interviewed spoke of the intense personal and working relations they had had with their colleagues in the Soviet Union. Although it may be tempting to idealize such relationships after emigration, to ignore feelings of jealousy and other conflicts and tensions, it seems that the shared excitement and commitment to their art had indeed created a special environment.

The Colleague Group

Within the Soviet art world, there are many different ways for artists to maintain close contact. They may live and have their studios in the same building—there are several such special houses for artists. They are able to look at each other’s work regularly and talk about what they are doing. Even if they do not live in such close proximity, artists frequently gather together in studios or apartments to talk and to drink, sharing ideas and dreams and dissatisfactions.

‘‘In Russia, everyone is in a group. You know everyone. There are different places for graphics for ceramics. Most of my friends were together in one circle—or they were sculptors . . . In Russia, telephoning was hard so friends dropped by (without making an appointment). I lived thirty-three years in Russia and selected friends. I had the time—and it took time.’’

‘‘In Russia, one dreams about another life together because you can’t only have this life. An intelligent man needs these dreams there . . .’’

Some groups met to look at productions of contemporary art or to discuss and work on innovative art forms. One circle formed at the end of the 1950s around Oscar Rabin and his teacher Evgeni Kropivnitsky. Another met in the apartment of the art historian Ilya Tsirlin, who was chairman of the critics’ section of the Moscow Artists’ Union of Cinematography and director of the book section of the main art publishing house, ‘‘Iskusstvo.’’29 A woman who had been in the Beliuin studio spoke of the understanding that existed among the members of their group:

‘‘We could speak about anything, admit to artistic problems as well as other difficulties. We helped each other progress in our art. We discussed creative problems.’’
The members of such circles lend each other art magazines from the West and teach each other new techniques they have learned. An American art student who made many contacts with artists during a visit to the Soviet Union recalls their hunger for information:

"I was both embarrassed and amazed at the incongruency in the level of knowledge and exposure. One artist in Moscow looked disgusted when I handed him a two-year-old copy of *Art in America*. He spoke knowledgeably of current artists.

"The artists/feminists in Leningrad were avid readers of the conceptual magazine, *High Performance*, yet they had never even heard of Judy Chicago.

"Another artist, a man in his fifties, turned to me in the middle of a 'rock' concert and asked me what I thought of 'New Imagism.' I squirmed in my seat and replied that I was not familiar with the term. Later, we handed him a box of oil paint sticks, something he had never seen before. He made us read the words printed on the box several times and was so enthralled that he invited us to his house the next day to show him how to use them."

Rimma and Valery Gerlovin remember the Friday evenings when they used to get together with friends and vote on which journals they would read and translate. Vitaly Komar describes their gatherings in small studios to listen to translations of the latest issue of *Artforum*.

"How difficult it is to understand something you know nothing about... it is pure torment to get inside a foreign text... However, we were not deterred by such difficulties. We pored over those glossy pages with reverence, scrutinizing the colored splashes of the reproductions, the self-expression of distant and unknown American souls, until our eyes blurred."

Out of such shared reading, translating, and studying came collaborative artistic production and the collective construction of performances. Collaborative work is an interesting phenomenon. It exists in the United States as well, but it is much more common in the Soviet Union. The American art student mentioned above observed:

"Collaborative work seems to be a popular technique among the Soviet conceptualists... They come together to gain strength and fertility in a piece. With all the governmental restrictions placed on these artists, they realized a need for collaboration. Artistically, this secure, open collaboration has reduced an overgrowth of the artist's ego which is commonly fatal to American artists."

I explored the process of collaborative work with Komar and Melamid. They begin by discussing their ideas and making separate sketches. They select parts from each sketch and then compose a final one. They then start two separate paintings and at some point switch and continue the other's work.

A very important product of the artists' groups are the performances they construct. The Moscow Collective Action Group, which includes both artists and poets, often works with concepts related to Zen—for example, the idea that art should not be different from life but an action within life.

The... sense of contemplation and tranquility is reflected in such ritualistic performances as *Balloon*... The participants filled a large cloth sack with balloons for six hours in the rain. They put a bell inside the sack and let this inflated sculpture drift down the Klyazma River... [Only] the group members were present.

During other performances, the goals of the group are different and viewers participate.

The youngest "art team" in Moscow is the Toadstools; the five members work in all media and are in close contact with the Collective Action Group. Both groups create books, some of which become part of their performance art. The Nest Group "emerged during a performance of *Egg Hatching* as the three artists 'hatched' eggs in a huge nest during an exhibition of unofficial art at the Permanent Exhibition of Agricultural Achievement."
remains in close contact with Komar and Melamid and put on a "Half-Hour Attempt to Materialize Komar and Melamid" on the day of the artists' 1978 exhibit in New York, after the two had left the Soviet Union.

The Collective Action Group, says Margarita Tupitsyn, considers the production of tangible objects to be without purpose since the artists can not sell or freely exhibit them.

"It advocates performance art as a medium more suited to a closed society since it gives the illusion of travel (most performances are outdoors) and active change. Furthermore, performance art seems more appropriate in a transient environment, an artistic milieu partly depleted with the emigration of so many colleagues. More importantly, these Soviet artists, now more informed about recent Western developments, want to finally bridge the gap existing between Russian and Western artistic sensibilities since the decline of the Russian avant-garde in the 1930's."

Often Soviet artists' circles include intellectuals from a variety of fields who are interested in having discussions with them or even working together on projects. Ernst Neizvestny recalls:

"Within my circle were people of the most varied professions: mathematical logicians, Marxist philosophers, poets, semioticians, topologists, and so on. All of my activity was really of a samizdat nature because I fulfilled their spiritual needs in sculpture and they fulfilled my spiritual needs in other fields. It was an exchange for us."

The intense friendship relations that flourish in these creative collectives and discussion circles must be seen in the larger context of Soviet society. Soviet artists, like others, find in their friends and close colleagues an important source of emotional and practical support. The commitment of "unofficial" artists to creating an alternative to "official" art in the Soviet Union, and the complications they encounter in attempting to do this, are crucial components of their attachment to their community and the importance of close personal relationships in their lives. Mutual trust is highly valued because so much in one's life depends on that trust. The fact that the artists see philosophical and spiritual meaning in their art gives these friendship relations great intellectual substance. They share their artistic, metaphysical, and even political concerns with other questioning creative artists and intellectuals. This creates an ambience that is difficult to recapture in American society.

Although a few of the artists I interviewed in New York stay in contact with other emigrés, the intensity of their relationships is often greatly reduced. There are many factors involved in this change. An obvious one is that the artists live far away from one another and therefore have to plan trips well ahead of time. Because of the distance, and because they now have telephones, dropping in unannounced is less frequent and visiting patterns become more like those of other Americans living in New York City. If an artist lives and works outside of the inner city, not only do colleagues visit less often, but relatively few people, Americans or Russians, ever see the artist's work-in-progress, in his studio.

The artists react to their new, more isolated lives in a variety of ways. Some miss the closeness they once had in the Soviet Union. "[At] first I had a sickness," said one. "There was no one to talk to." One of the women reflected: "I long for the intense life we had, not only with artists, but with students who worked with us; I don't know if it's possible to repeat it."

However, isolation is not only something imposed by geography. The emigré artists are very anxious about "making it" in the United States. For one thing, an artist has to produce more in the United States than in the Soviet Union, in order to be self-supporting. For another, many of the emigrés are still unsure about how the New York art world functions, and some are uncertain about their own artistic development. Overwhelmed by these problems, they use all their energy for their artistic and professional endeavors and have little left for other concerns, even for friendship, which is so valued.

"Immigrants don't discuss problems; they work as individuals, I had friends when I was young. Maybe it's age but there's tension now. There's no time for discussion. You have to establish yourself or get out. Maybe, after some years, I will have time to sit..."
down and have a beer... when I have established myself."

"In France, people helped me. America is hard; no one has time
to see you. Even my Soviet friends are too busy here with their
own problems to see you too often."

The artists must struggle so intensely to succeed that they often find
it difficult now to appreciate the accomplishments of their fellows.
Although a few take the energy and time to offer support, several
expressed feelings of jealousy and a desire to avoid contact with
most of the other emigre artists in New York.

"I see Russian artists only if I'm in the gallery. I'm not interested
in being friendly with them."

"I don't like Russian artists here. Two artists meet and there are
three opinions. They hate each other. They express jealousy and
have sensitive natures. I think I'm over these feelings."

"In New York, the artists come from different cities, I know them
but I'm not too close with them. In the Soviet Union I had good
friends, but among the Russian artists, there are problems and
competition... Americans are normal and quiet. Russians are a
bit crazy and nervous. They're not comfortable to be with. They
want too much, but people aren't interested in them... I want to
forget. I don't want to see Russians, to be with Russians."

Another aspect of making it in America derives not from compe-
tition and jealousy, but from diversity of artistic development. In a
new art world whose standards are partly understood and partly
alien, the options for response are so numerous that former col-
leagues and friends who shared an artistic culture in the Soviet
Union now drift apart.

Although two of the emigre artists I spoke with have American
friends and colleagues, the contacts most of them have with Ameri-
cans—artists or not—are very limited. One problem is language: the
conversations they can participate in in English are "simple" and
not particularly engaging. When I spoke with one of the artists about
learning more English, his daughter replied, "Why? He doesn't
speak to anyone." Many emigrés remain hesitant about approaching
American artists until they start to feel secure again about their
work. One admitted, "My level isn't ready for American artists, but
I dream. My dream is to talk to American artists and get to know
them." When contact does come about, it can be disappointing,
according to one artist who took the plunge. "I finally decided to see
an American artist whose work I admired. He was polite and kind
but refused to show me his paintings. I was shocked."

It is the view of one gallery owner that the Soviet emigre artists
have no contact at all with their American peers and that American
artists have no contact with one another. One emigre suggested that
American artists do not have the same need for intense discussion
that artists have in the Soviet Union.

"American artists don't like to invite and discuss because it's all
open. You can go and see everything you want to and evaluate
yourself and others. There's nothing to discuss."

A few of the artists were relatively successful in making close
contacts with Americans. One had lived in the United States for a
considerable time—seven years. However, he had been terribly
lonely until he divorced, left the small town where he was living,
and moved into the inner city. A second was a well-known artist
whose studio in the Soviet Union had been a gathering place for
other artists and intellectuals. When he came to the United States,
he was able to move to a large studio in SoHo. The artist told me that
he has a circle now, although the people are much more spread out
than in the Soviet Union. A small group of younger artists, in SoHo,
have created a sort of community through their performances and
their mail art. They conduct "mail-art exhibitions" by sending
small folders of their work to other American and European artists,
and through these contacts are able to move beyond the confines of
their studio. They have more contacts with other American artists
and with a variety of small galleries than most of the emigrés.

The emigre artists are ambivalent about their isolation. On the
one hand, some expressed regret about the loss of close friendships,
with other “Russian” artists as well as about the lack of contact with their American peers. Several mentioned that they did not understand Americans, “the American soul,” American psychology, the American life-style. On the other hand, they identify themselves as professional artists in the American sense; that is, as they perceive Americans to be. They are able now to do the work they want to do, look at the art they want to see, read the books they want to read. Here, talk is not important; work is.

Yet their isolation, whether embraced or tolerated, takes its toll. Close contact with colleagues and friends who are grappling with similar problems could be a valuable support in the American art world, as it was in the Soviet Union; yet the competitive structure of artistic production in capitalist society makes such mutuality very difficult. Losing it can have profound consequences, for the rapport between artist and artist, and the relations between artist and critic, viewer, or buyer, seem to go to the very heart of artistic creation. If we see artistic work as a personal and social construction—building into the void, as it were—the artists’ social world becomes more than the environment of their work and acquires artistic significance. A radical change in one’s relation to other artists, then, means a change in the very foundations of one’s art.

Thoughts on the Function of Art

Soviet and American society differ profoundly not only in the social organization of art, but also in their understandings of its function and role. Many of the Soviet emigres I interviewed spoke of the importance of content, of the eternal truths revealed in art; they displayed a concern with social or spiritual purpose that is not typical of many American artists. Those who are at odds with official Soviet ideas of art, whether they emigrate or continue to work in the Soviet Union, are not united by a single, shared artistic outlook. On the contrary, their styles differ and so do their philosophies. What they have in common is a protest against the political control of art. As Igor Golomshotk notes, what the “unofficial artists” rejected in the mid-fifties was not so much “the dogmatism of socialist realism as... its bureaucratic optimism in the interpre-

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tation of reality.” Rather than accepting this as their task, artists turned to the creation of a new reality and to new creative concepts. Lev Kropivnitsky, who was released in the mid-fifties after nine years in a labor camp, writes of that time, “I underwent a transformation.”

The business of the artist is art—and only art. Teaching, propagandizing, laying down the law, is not his business. This I knew. And know. All activism is alien to me. Even inimical.

Tupitsyn suggests that the “New Wave” artists in the Soviet Union today are cynical about those artists who believed art could change the world.

“They don’t believe art can change anything. They know what’s going on. They have information from the West. In the ’70s, when we left, we didn’t have this.”

Some of the artists I interviewed argued against any manipulation of culture, since this would only repeat in another form what they had fought against in Soviet official art. Yet most seemed to believe, nonetheless, that their art should be more than an end in itself; they tend to emphasize truth and purpose in their art, more than aesthetic pleasure. And insofar as they set out to break the socialist realist mold, to change perceptions and to create a new reality, they and their art must function in opposition to Soviet political ideology. One art collector observes:

“Russian artists don’t paint for themselves; they are always serving an ideology. Art for its own sake is a dear notion for Russian underground artists. They say they should be allowed to paint what they want, but the reasons for painting have another ideological context. There are major exceptions such as those who flirted with abstraction for a while; but inevitably, it led to a message.”
In their art, Komar and Melamid make fun of Soviet bureaucracy, socialist realism, poster propaganda, and so on. Unlike most of the emigrés, they also turn their irreverent attention on American culture, satirizing pop art, for example, "to comment on the commercialization of our notions of aesthetic value and our whole social milieu."\(^{40}\) John Bowlt suggests that Soviet artists' very different view of the function of art helps explain the indifferent responses they often encounter in the West. The emigrés, he says, now live and work "in a sybaritic society that tends to regard artistic creation as a form of recreation. They find it hard to stimulate general interest in the urgent political tasks of Soviet art, the more so since the art in question belongs to a specific political structure."\(^{41}\)

My respondents saw similar contrasts, but they tied them less directly to politics. As one explained:

"There is an historical tradition influencing our notion of art. Art was important in the church. Religion without art would have been empty. The function of the artist is to give people the feeling the artist has and they don't have. A real artist expresses what people feel deep in their souls."

This artist drew an interesting comparison:

"I deeply respect Pollock and de Kooning. They are spiritual artists who express feelings close to religious ones . . . but Warhol and Rauschenberg reflect real American life. A mirror also shows what American life is. Without doubt it's art, but it's like social realist reality."

Other respondents echoed these sentiments.

"Artists have intuitive power, a sense of the universal . . . American artists tend to think of art as a profession. For me, it involves something like a religious commitment."

"Western art is really perfect with color and line, but Russian art expresses an emotional and spiritual inner being."

One of the artists I interviewed said he believed that art reflects society, not something greater or higher; but most of the others see their art in the service of higher values. As John Berger wrote:

"The Russian cannot believe that the meaning of his life is self-sufficient . . . He is inclined to think that his destiny is larger than his interests . . . Russians expect their artists to be prophets because they think of themselves, they think of all men, as subjects of prophecy."\(^{42}\)

The importance of the spiritual was particularly mentioned by several of the artists. In this view, art ultimately expresses something religious. Most of these artists put their belief not so much in a specific creed, but more generally in a universal God. One artist said that art has to involve God, another, that it is impossible to be a real artist without faith: "Art is guided by God and in the faith that some things are meant to happen." In their "Petersburg" group manifesto, *Metaphysical Synthetism*,\(^{43}\) issued in 1974, Mikhail Chemiakin and Vladimir Ivanov wrote:

"Art means the paths of Beauty leading to God. The artist must always aspire to God. The power and vitality of his style are determined by the extent of his faith. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me!" (St. John, 15, 4)

Undoubtedly this religious or metaphysical dimension adds to the distance between Soviet emigré artists and the art world of the West. Some artists of both cultures, of course, use Christian symbols or Jewish themes in order to appeal to the nostalgia of certain groups; but this is not the sort of art of which we are speaking. In the contemporary American art world, one encounters few explicit invocations of religious themes. By contrast, the use of Christian and Jewish religious symbols has been very important for some of the leading unofficial artists. The symbols, as Igor GolomshTok explains, are used not to invoke some theological orthodoxy, but to mark a rejection of materialist values and to make contact with an ultimate—human or transcendent—reality.
Since the permitted forms of religious life and access to them are so very exiguous, art is often the only way of making contact with the spiritual: it becomes a means of acquiring religious understanding, thus transforming itself into a metaphysical act.  

One emigre who uses Jewish themes in his work spoke of clarifying his own relationship to Judaism.

"In the Soviet Union, I began to ask myself who I am. I'm not really Jewish, not a communist, not a capitalist. I began to think and go back to my Jewish roots. My mother was religious. I thought of familiar scenes from her house. I began creating some Jewish art. I am not religious, but I do believe in God."

Another remarked that his strong identification as a Jew distanced him from the cultural heroes of other Soviet intellectuals, for example Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. He did not identify with the Russian dissident movement and said he thought no Jew could depend on a Russian in a difficult situation. Most of the artists, however, were less particularistic in their beliefs and identifications. Very few of the Jewish artists attended synagogue, even for the high holy days, and almost no one of the small group of artists who identified themselves as Christians went to church.

In general, the artists who ascribed such important functions to their art were frustrated in Soviet society. They charged themselves, as the "official" artists were charged, with "carrying a message." But they had no way to reach the masses of people, to influence their perceptions and beliefs. They were powerless to effect social change through their art. Indeed, to support themselves, they often had to accept official commissions—and be glad of them. Several of the "unofficial" artists proudly saw themselves as alienated and truth-searching intellectuals. They saw American artists as commercialized and degraded, running after the galleries and standing with society rather than against it (apparently they were unacquainted with the complaints and feelings of isolation and alienation expressed by many American artists). The good artist, they thought, should stand against society. But at the same time, even for the nonconformist, being at odds with one's audience can be painful, and debilitating.

Not being able to share the imposed values, beliefs and culture of the mass, the majority's misconception of reality and of the society . . . the artist comes to doubt his own ideology. There is a fear of not being able to represent and reflect the needs and the values of the majority in the artist's own work, which is derived from his or her own values and ideology.

One emigre reflected that it was rare for people anywhere in the world to fully appreciate the eternal truths revealed in art—and rare for the artist to express spirituality in his or her life.

"All countries are afraid of art. People don't like eternal truth; they don't want it . . . The serious artists in Europe care about the inner world. Artists are like Jews in Russia. They want survival. They carry on normally in their lives but express what they want to in their art. Here, nobody cares; there is no pressure."

The Intensity of Artistic Life

Most of my respondents in New York recalled the great respect the Soviet public has for the artist, the awe in which the artist is held, the hunger for art, the lively response of the public to genuine art and its support for it.

"Some days in Russia, hundreds of people came to my studio; here maybe twenty show up at the most."

"The artists feel the importance of their art more in the Soviet Union . . . In Russia, people would go anywhere to look at a work of art . . . Here, there is no hunger. There, people hunger for something new."

This recalls a passage from Alexander Zinoviev's novel, The Yawning Heights:

I watch E.N. working, and my little affair begins to look insignificant and not worth bothering about. I have said that E.N. is my
artist. That was putting it too weakly. E.N.'s art is an inalienable part of my existence. I cannot think what would become of me without it. I enter E.N.'s studio like a temple, and cleanse myself of the filth of the world.\textsuperscript{46}

Several of the emigres remarked that in the Soviet Union, people responded with something like reverence when they discovered an artist, whereas in the United States only the famous artist, the celebrity, was regarded as special. One of the artists realized that the public's view of the artist intensely affected her self-conception as well.

"In the Soviet Union, it's rare to be an artist. You feel as if you're the only person doing it. Here you feel the same but in the general eye you're lost. You're not seen as anything special in the society, and in the end that affects how you feel as an artist."

Some of the emigres thought that Americans did not take art very seriously, that they regarded art as an amusement.

"For Americans, art is fun and drink—on a higher level perhaps. For Russians, it's as if something comes out from the inside. . . . Here, the artist is just a strange kind of businessman. Russians have a holy reaction. They will stand a few hours in line to see an hour of an exhibit. Americans won't do that."

Another respondent related the different attitude toward art to broader contrasts between the Soviet Union and the United States.

"I don't blame the Americans. I understand. Here in New York, there is so much going on, so many artists, so many films, so much theatre. There is a fantastic choice here. In Russia, there is much less to do."

The intensity of cultural life in the Soviet Union, then, depends largely on shared understandings, a shared spirit, common goals, a way of life.

Of course, this shared intensity may be sacrificed if young Soviet artists, influenced by Western trends, move in radically new directions that will find little comprehension outside of the most innovative circles. Margarita Tupitsyn describes the diversification of the contemporary Soviet art world. Some of the younger, more experimental artists, she says, not only have not "earned the respect" of the authorities; their work is controversial even among some of the "unofficial" artists. "Their styles vary, but offer a new attitude toward artistic creation that is opposed to the previous generation's attitude of art as religious practice." Nonetheless, the performance artists, for example, "attract audiences hungry for new experiences, who are not yet saturated by innovative artistic developments."

The special intensity of the Soviet artist's life is irretrievably lost to the emigres in New York. Yet they find another kind of intensity, springing not from the shared enthusiasm and the bond of people daring to create and appreciate new forms, but rather from a sense of new possibilities, the opportunity to experiment ("If you can't experiment, there's no art," said one), and from the variety of the art they are able to see in New York.
“Here, you can go from one gallery to the next. Technical work is brought to its peak. The examples here are better. New York is like a blacksmith that bangs out the best.”

“Although some of the art is terrible, the serious and good people have the highest standards in the whole world. What is here now, will be in the Soviet Union in twenty years. Americans advance all the time.”

Some of the emigrés hold on to a more traditionally romantic image of the artist: the “bohemian lifestyle” is desirable; “real” artists live dangerously, they do not need the same security as other people. In the Soviet Union, they say, “The artist is not like Van Gogh; he is just another worker.” In America, “the artist is a businessman.” One emigré observed:

“For American artists, art is business. They are other men, other human beings. They are not so spiritual; they’re cool, professional in their art. Still, I admire their professionalism. Russians don’t have the same technical skill but they are warmer, more familiar, friendly ... Here, one must be selfish, be his own man.”

Complaints about “art as business” can be heard from American artists as well, of course. The emigrés tend to overestimate their American counterparts’ identification with the system of art that exists in the United States.

Emigration, and settlement in New York, has brought for the Soviet artists exposure to a tremendous variety of new art, the excitement of being able to experiment, and the chance to live and work as a “real artist,” whether in the image of nineteenth-century bohemianism or twentieth-century professionalism. Yet their separation from a context of meaning, and the loss of mutual support and intense exchange in an artistic and intellectual community, has also meant for many a loss of inner security, self-esteem, and a vital stimulus for their creative work.

Coda: Dilemmas and Difficulties

Just as the artists shared with other Soviet emigrés many reasons for leaving the Soviet Union, they are challenged by some of the same problems upon arrival in the United States. They come to the American art world with a different history, a different education, a different political experience. “It’s as if we were children. We have to start all over again,” said one of my respondents. They find it difficult to understand Americans, to get to know them well.

“It’s hard to understand the American soul. In Russia, with some people you can keep silent. But I can’t do that here. I don’t understand them, so a real connection isn’t possible. My friend Y. in Russia, for example, can get the character of a plumber in a few moments by watching his movements. That is impossible here.”

The emigrés complain about the “American life-style”—always rushing, meeting “contacts” at cocktail parties, not really learning to know people, forever making superficial acquaintances. Many, after an initial vain attempt to assimilate, begin to associate more exclusively with other emigrés, in a pattern that is a compromise between the society they had known before and the new one in which they must build a life. But none of this is unique to immigrants from the Soviet Union.

Soviet artists face some special difficulties in emigration. In hopes of inducing a response to their work, some are tempted to adopt the techniques of American contemporary art without having a real understanding or sympathy for it. It takes time to really integrate new forms. The artists worry about their development, and about the time it is taking them to adjust; they are anxious to exhibit and to assimilate into the American art world. As one said,

“I knew Western art through reproductions. I had a pass to Lenin library ... Still, the Soviet artist here is like a tree planted in new soil. The artist has to see what he missed, reevaluate everything, even himself.”
The emigre has also to learn to deal with the American art market, a complex world that is far more commercial and competitive than they had ever anticipated.

"In the Soviet Union, life is sheltered. You don’t develop the initiative you need to make it in America . . . The only possibility of becoming well known here is by [spending] millions of dollars to create an image . . . But Russian artists aren’t businessmen."

Finally, the artists are ambivalent about their goals. Some of their values are contradictory. They want a studio and prestige, but they think Americans emphasize such things too much and they criticize American artists for a lack of dedication to art. While they elected to become professional artists in the American sense—with no security, but no restrictions, and the possibility of enormous success—they were quite unprepared to have to “sell” themselves. The emigrés are attracted and also repelled by the image of the “artist as businessman.”

"You have to persuade others and be a salesman. Most Americans have that training from childhood."

"They say their paintings are worth thousands of dollars, but there’s no market for Soviet art. Still, although money and recognition are important, the artists don’t want to prostitute themselves."

But some find it hard to hold fast to their high principles when they have no one but themselves to rely on.

"In Russia, you can be poor and a free man. Your friends, your parents help you. Here you are alone and no one helps you. You think about money all the time."

This particular artist had hesitated to sell his paintings in the Soviet Union because it interfered with the “spiritual” element in his work. In the United States he has had to change. “If a painting is less successful, I finish it anyway rather than just put it aside.”

Poverty in the United States is not an artist’s badge of pride, it is a sign of not “making it,” of the impoverishment of one’s dreams and hopes. There have been a few suicides among the emigre artists, here and in other Western countries. Many emigrés find it very difficult to come to terms with their lack of success. Others are more realistic.

"Some artists are stupid. Last week L. committed suicide. He threw himself under the train. Artists think all America waits for them. I know that’s not true. I’m Jewish. No one waits for Jews to come. Some think they are great geniuses and people will give them everything . . . I know I’ll reach my goals and make it but I have to take it easy. I work."

A few of the artists have made quite successful adjustments to their new life, but the majority expressed feelings of isolation and were anxious about the future. As one artist put it: “You should write how alone Soviet artists are in America.”

Notes

1. Students from the Rhode Island School of Design visited one such experimental school in Moscow, met and talked extensively with the teachers and looked at the students’ work. They were most impressed by the high technical quality of the art. In this particular school, 700 students attend classes twice a week for three hours; included in this program is a theory course for students fourteen and older.


3. Information provided by an official of the Union House for Artists, Leningrad.


11. “Of these twelve, perhaps 4 or 5 make incomes of $50,000 a year. Two artists living in Paris (one is now in New York) derive incomes of close to $100,000 in one case and more than $200,000 in the other from their American sales.” Norton Dodge and Alison Hilton, New Art from the Soviet Union (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books), p. 4.


19. Conversation in Leningrad with a representative of the Union of Artists. One woman artist estimated that twenty to thirty percent of Soviet painters are women. All the other respondents were male.

20. The women I spoke with included four artists, two art historians, and one curator. All the other respondents were male.

21. At the beginning of the Khrushchev “Thaw,” Ely Beliutin was officially able to open a studio. It was used to give further training and introduce new approaches to professional artists.


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. The difficulty of not being able to work in an environment that is strange and even alien had also been expressed before her death by Anna Ticho, a well known Israeli artist who had come from Vienna. She was shocked by the new landscape and unable to paint for years. (Personal conversation.)

26. Margarita Tupitsyn writes of Katrina Arnold: “After her immigration to Israel . . . she worked out a series of performances, one of which, ‘Diachronic Preservation of the Object of Art,’ was to bury a variety of contemporary art works in sand, not to be dug out before July 15, 2080 . . . The ancient atmosphere of Jerusalem, where the items were buried, contributed to the impact of this performance.”

27. Melvyn Nathanson recounts in Komar/Melamid: Two Soviet Dissident Artists: “I began four months of work with Feldman to prepare the exhibition. This required repeated lectures to convey a feeling for Soviet society, its repressive compulsions, the pretenses of its constitution, the monotonous of its political propaganda, and also to make clear the meaning of the work of Komar/Melamid in its social setting. These lectures, repeated by Feldman to art writers who visited the gallery, appeared in many publications.”


29. Golomshok gives this account in “Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union” (p. 90): “. . . during the changes after Stalin’s death [Tsirlin] underwent a profound internal development as did many intellectuals of his generation. It would have been impossible to call the artists who gathered in his flat a creative organization or circle. Tsirlin simply told them about contemporary art, showed them reproductions, and gave material help to those who needed it, while in his flat they were able to show one another their work. In the late Fifties one of the central newspapers printed an article about him . . . denouncing Tsirlin as a secret apologist of abstractionism and an enemy of socialist culture. After this he was removed from all his posts and a year later he died of a heart attack.”

30. Lisa Furman, after her trip with students from the Rhode Island School of Design to the Soviet Union, in personal conversation.


33. Ibid.
Soviet emigré greatly in their divided roughly in their divided roughly, more avant greatly in their divided roughly, more avant, more avant. a warmly more avant received a warm more avant received a warm, more avant received a warm second group, more avant received a warm second group, Western colleagues enjoy greater logical benefits, more avant received a warm second group, Western colleagues enjoy greater logical benefits. whose art was enjoyed as unofficial whose art was enjoyed as unofficial, neither group can market or to whose art was enjoyed as unofficial, neither group can market or to have continued to have continued to have continued to have continued to formed in the So formed in the So formed in the So discovered an a