

Art Duo Komar and Melamid Were Laughed Out of the Soviet Union. Are They Having the Last Laugh on Us?

What is the lesson of these proto-postmodern artists for us today?

Ben Davis, June 7, 2023



Komar & Melamid, *Double Self-Portrait* [from the "Sots-Art" series] (1972). Photo by Ben Davis.

Going into the [large Komar & Melamid retrospective](#) currently at the Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers, I already knew the wily, proto-postmodern art style that this artist duo brought with them when they emigrated from the U.S.S.R. at the end of the 1970s. Above all, I knew such calling-card projects as “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” and “The People’s Choice.” These are characterized by a spirit that is brainy and satirical, almost verging on a kind of deadpan wackiness—an unusual vibe for art.

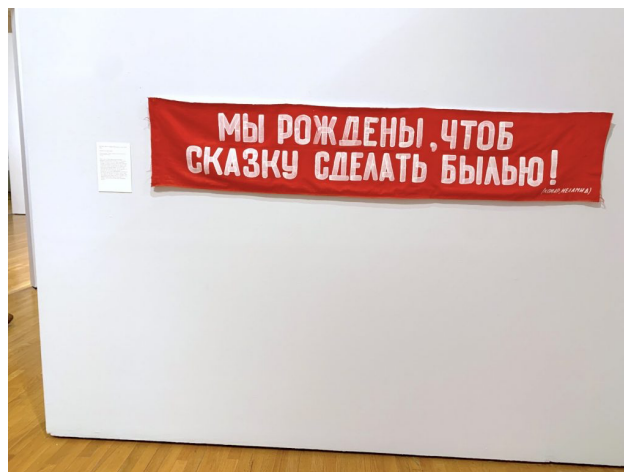
But I'm not sure I understood the overall nature of the game Komar & Melamid were playing. I'm not sure I got that their signature humor wasn't just a way to make a serious point, but might actually reflect an unnerving skepticism about the very idea of serious points.

For me, getting an overview of the twists and turns of the Komar & Melamid corpus here (the duo broke up in 2003 and they now work separately) is something like a moment of zooming out from a maze, seeing it from above, and realizing suddenly that there is no way out.

Signing Slogans

The legacy of the Cold War makes the “dissident artist” narrative an appealing hook for any writing on Komar & Melamid. It was certainly part of what made their careers in the States. The catalogue of this show even suggests that the duo's signature jokes about government propaganda “produced a strong undermining effect on the prestige of Soviet power and advanced its fall.”

This is a bit much. They certainly were stifled by the authorities (they were part of the infamous “Bulldozer Exhibition” of '74, an attempt to hold a show of non-official art in a vacant lot that was spectacularly suppressed). But an essay in the catalogue for a previous Zimmerli exhibition, *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, states plainly that Moscow's small independent scene of non-official artists—very much including Komar & Melamid—was “largely invisible to the general public until they started to be exhibited in the West in the early 1980s.” As a consequence, it says, they “should not be equated with the Soviet dissidents, who relentlessly publicly opposed the Communist authorities.”



Komar & Melamid, *We Were Born to Make the Fairytale Come True* (from the “Sots-Art” series) (1972). Photo by Ben Davis.

Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid met studying at the Stroganoff Art Academy, both graduating in 1967. At the time, a relative thaw let news of developments in Western contemporary art seep through. Komar remembers piecing together Conceptual art “based on scattered quotations from Joseph Kosuth and Lucy Lippard” and from “Soviet publications that criticized decadent Western movements.” The crushing of the Prague Spring in '68 produced a fresh crackdown on information, even as they failed entry to the official Union of Artists.

In 1972, Komar & Melamid’s first and still most-generative creation as a duo would be a movement they styled “Sots-Art.” In a nutshell, the idea was to reframe state propaganda in the same way as Pop art reframed ads and comics—a great formula, you have to admit. But whereas Pop art was embraced in the U.S. as a frolicsome affirmation of the vibrancy of the post-war consumer society, Sots-Art remained utterly marginal in its homeland.

Its materially modest nature reflects this. It is represented in the Zimmerli by a room of funny little paintings, images of the artists and their wives that goof on the idea of Soviet Man and Woman, plus stark white-on-red banners with slogans like “OUR GOAL IS COMMUNISM!” and “WE WERE BORN TO MAKE THE FAIRYTALE COME TRUE.”

The key detail of these latter works is that Komar & Melamid stamped their own names beneath these arid exhortations, transforming them, through the magic of artistic irony, into arch works of word art. The joke, of course, is that these kinds of slogans, which were everywhere in the streets, were so aesthetically flat and ideologically hollow that no one would ever want to claim them. (“The paradox consists in the fact that the only slogans that have survived from the Soviet period are slogans that are signed ‘Komar and Melamid,’” Komar remembers wryly.)

Pretty funny! But who, finally, were these subversions aimed at within the tightly controlled civil society of the U.S.S.R.? Melamid puts it bluntly, in an interview printed in the new catalogue: “We were addressing the West. We weren’t talking to the Soviet people.”

All Wrong

The meretricious nature of official Soviet culture is part of any Western observer’s latent understanding of that era. What’s more interesting to me is how the work of Komar & Melamid *also* expressed alienation from the imaginable *alternatives* to state-sanctioned Communist art.

Importantly, in their most generative early-'70s period, Komar & Melamid were mocking critics not just of official art in Moscow, but also—and maybe especially—of the handfuls of active non-conformist artists (most notably the recently passed Ilya Kabakov) who formed an alternative scene. What makes Komar & Melamid unique is just how deeply they imbibed and embodied the cynicism nurtured in the clunky, bureaucratic world of Breshnev-era Russia during the so-called Era of Stagnation—cynicism that metastasized into a disidentification from *any* positive ideology for art at all.



Komar & Melamid, *Circle, Square, Triangle* (1975). Photo by Ben Davis.

Komar & Melamid despised the apartment-bound intellectualism of its non-conformist art scene, with its posture of ethereal spirituality. They mocked escapist spiritual claims for art in works like *Circle, Square, Triangle* (1975), which took the ideal abstract geometry of the square, triangle, and circle, and presented these with overwrought texts advertising their magical healing abilities.

For that matter, remarkably, Komar & Melamid were suspicious of big, optimistic claims about Western art as a progressive force as well. Such a sentiment finds

programmatic expression (almost too programmatic) in their “Post Art” series. Made in the early ‘70s while still working in the hermetically sealed Moscow semi-underground, these depict Pop art works by Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol as flaking, fallen frescos, as if viewed from a future where their glamor had turned to dust.



Komar & Melamid, *Post-Art #2* (from the “Post-Art” series) (1973). Photo by Ben Davis.

Men of the Zeitgeist

In the late ‘70s, Komar & Melamid made the jump out of their home country, first to Israel (after a period of being held in bureaucratic limbo) and then to New York, where they continued spinning out new projects at a brisk clip.



Komar & Melamid, advertisements for the project *Komar & Melamid Inc., We Buy and Sell Souls* (1978-83). Photo by Ben Davis.

In general, one of the things the Zimmerli show makes vivid is how Komar & Melamid willfully refused to repeat themselves. Their corpus manifests as a series of art-games, each abandoned almost as soon as they created it: from making goofs on propaganda banners in Russia, they switched suddenly to “discovering” Russian artists that they had totally made up; in the States, they launched a company that offered to buy people’s souls, later pivoting to animal art, employing elephants to make abstract paintings and showing beaver-gnawed logs as goofs on post-minimal sculpture.

Their inability to hold still is a tic that was probably to the detriment of building up a “Komar & Melamid” art brand—but that was the point, in a way. This habit emerged from how they generalized their contempt for the deadness of the art-ideologies all around them in Moscow into a philosophy that held that commitment to any one art-ideology was inherently deadening.



Komar & Melamid, two sculptures from *Project for Collaboration with Beavers* from the “Ecollaboration” series (1995-98). Photo by Ben Davis.

There’s a moment in “[A Girl of the Zeitgeist](#),” the late Janet Malcolm’s long, gimlet-eyed *New Yorker* essay on Ingrid Sischy’s tenure as editor of *Artforum*, in which Sischy takes Malcolm to visit Komar & Melamid’s Canal Street studio to show her the deeper end of the New York art scene, why it all matters. Here is the passage I always remember:

They start another animated debate, one that soon gets into art theory, the condition of art today, the situation of art in New York. As this argument, too, begins to peter out, Melamid sighs and says, “We sit here, and we talk, and I think, ‘Where is life in all this? Life! Life!’ We go at things obliquely, to the side,” making a gesture of ineffectuality with his hand, “instead of straight, like this,” pounding his fist into his palm. He continues, emotionally, “Last year, I woke up in a hotel room in Amsterdam. There was a woman in my bed. I looked in the mirror and saw that my eyebrows were gray. I saw that I was forty.”

“You got that from Chekhov, you faker,” I say to myself. I am no longer charmed by this pair. I find their performance tiresome, calculated. I look over at Sischy, who is enjoying herself, who thinks they are “great,” and I ponder anew the question of authenticity that has been reverberating through the art world of the eighties.

The assessment is biting. But also, to call Komar & Melamid fakers... well, I can't help but think that Malcolm didn't quite get the nature of the phenomenon she was dealing with.

Of course, a *New Yorker* writer, and the U.S. public in general, wanted from them a performance of Russian intellectualism and dissident authenticity. Perhaps that was what they were roleplaying for Malcolm and Sischy.

But in Russia, as they themselves remembered, they were known as clowns: “It's a joke, it's amusing—they're funny guys—but it's not art”—that was the general opinion,” Melamid remembers. The lesson that Komar & Melamid brought with them to New York from Moscow was that all postures of artistic authenticity were a pose, a posture, a game.

Socialist Un-realism

At the time of the *New Yorker* article, Komar & Melamid were at the peak of their relevance, with their “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” series launching that year at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. These were adroitly painted, pokerfaced spoofs of the Old Master manqué style of Socialist Realism.

You see, for instance, fatherly tyrant Joseph Stalin being visited by a flowy-haired nude muse tracing the shadow of his profile on the wall. That's an allusion to the classical myth of the origin of art from Pliny, and the large canvas is called *The Origins of Socialist Realism* (1982-83).



Paintings from Komar & Melamid's “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” series. Photo by Ben Davis.

Robert Hughes praised the show in *Time* for nailing the “correct borsht-and-gravy colors of official Soviet art of 30 years ago.” Yet the truth is, Komar & Melamid’s tenebrous paintings looked nothing like the sunny romanticism of the classic period of Socialist Realism. Nor did “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” satirize then-contemporary official art in the U.S.S.R., which had adopted the so-called “severe style.”

Basically, this suite of paintings has to be seen as the equivalent of Melamid calculatedly channeling Chekhov’s “The Looking Glass” for Ingrid Sischy. “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” is a canny game played with the Cold War U.S. audience’s *ideas* of Russian art. As with a lot of Komar & Melamid’s work, when you really look into it, its ironies somehow turn back on you for having expected something serious.

Poll Workers

Another example of the same nesting-doll irony: In the 1990s, Komar & Melamid would realize their most-widely known work, “The People’s Choice.” These were paintings based on a series of polls, where they gathered data about the most-liked and least-liked kinds of art from publics in various countries, and then created works that incorporated all the best and worst traits. (By this method, almost all countries end up preferring figurative art where a historical figure is near a body of water, and hating some form of geometric abstraction.)



Study for Komar & Melamid, *The People’s Choice: Canada* (1995-97). Photo by Ben Davis.

I think of “The People’s Choice” as the ultimate distillation of the best of Komar & Melamid: needlingly funny, possessed of a kind of canny and theatrical cynicism, and inhabiting artistic styles as a series of strategic games.

It hails from the End of History, post-Cold War era. It can be, and has been, read as carrying on a joke about the illusion of a “People’s Art” from Soviet times. But it maybe even works better as being about the globalization of corporate-optimized, focus-grouped market culture in the Neoliberal ‘90s. It is thus a nicely plastic vehicle for the duo’s all-sided skepticism.

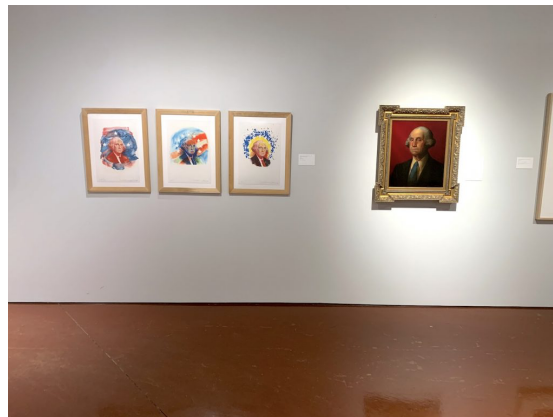
But, as with “Nostalgic Socialist Realism,” when you really think about “The People’s Choice,” your sense of the exact point that it is making starts to slip away.

Is it about the silliness of mass taste, mocking the comedy of lowest-common-denominator art, offering a window into what people really want if you get the filter of expert taste out of the way? Plenty of people read it that way!

Or is it, on the contrary, actually about making fun of the entire project of *experts* trying to opine on the “people’s” taste? After all, the images it conjures of what different national publics might want are clearly based on weird extrapolation and wishful amalgamation.

History Lessons?

You get a feeling that some of the animating specificity of Komar & Melamid’s work vanished as the Cold War context faded into the rear view. A series from 1999 making fun of the tropes of patriotic American art the way they had with “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” doesn’t really land. Meanwhile, once the end of the Soviet Union made “dissident Russian artists” less of a hot topic, some of the interest in Komar & Melamid vanished as well.



Works from Komar & Melamid’s “American Dreams” series. Photo by Ben Davis.

So, what do we do with this body of work now, some two decades after the curtain came down on the Komar & Melamid Show?

The Zimmerli retrospective was originally going to be called “You Are Feeling Good!”, a title that captures their humor (it’s from a slogan they ironically appropriated for one of their first Sots-Art banners). Instead, the exhibition arrived as “A Lesson in History,” with this more sober tone reflecting today’s renewed geopolitical conflict with Putin’s Russia, and the need to pre-address any questions about showing Russian artists by framing their work in relationship to the legacy of totalitarianism.

For myself, I *do* think that there is a lesson to be drawn from this history. I just don’t think it’s about art’s power to make dictators quake.

Asked about the final moral of their work in the catalogue, Melamid volunteers this: “Everything is meaningless.” If the Komar & Melamid corpus resonates now, it won’t really be because it shows us some tradition of heroic satire in Russia. I’d think the better shot at relevance would be that people in the U.S. might actually identify with the feeling of being in a world of stagnation, where the ruling ideologies feel arbitrary and senseless, the opposing ones feel cloistered and ineffective, and as a consequence the phrase “it’s all a game” starts to seem more and more seductively like the only philosophy to believe in.

“Komar & Melamid: A Lesson in History” is on view at the Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, N.J., through July 16, 2023.