

Identity and the Artist: Soviet and Post-Soviet Sots

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It would seem that with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 an art movement that took its most potent iconography from official Party propaganda—and that critically examined the Soviet system—would meet its end as well. Even though the peak of its popularity was nearly twenty years ago, the Nonconformist movement known as Sots art remained in full swing throughout the 1990s, and contemporary artists are still making art that fits well within the Sots tradition. Though superficially an art of agitprop, consumerism, and pop culture, Sots art is inextricably tied to identity. During the Soviet era, Sots artists defined themselves by the official images that so pervaded every facet of their lives and, conversely, by the Western consumer culture to which they were denied access. In the decade or so since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Sots artists have had to come to terms with an era of oftentimes unsure iconoclasm, as well as with living in a world where formerly unobtainable commodities abound. One of the most crucial issues for post-Soviet Sots artists is working through what it means to be a New Russian Person, especially when one has already lived a lifetime with a Soviet identity.

While Sots is most often compared to Pop art (and rightly so), more accurately at its origin were the Socialist Realist images that were the only permissible form of art since the time of Stalin.¹ In theoretical terms, Socialist Realism was intended to be a “truthful portrayal of the life of the land of the Soviets,” and was extolled above all as an art for the people, accessible to all Soviet citizens, regardless of level of education or region of origin.² Socialist Realist artists were members of the Artists’ Union, and the government provided them with commissions, studio and exhibition space, and materials. Art that touched on proscribed subject matter or that was executed in a style other than Socialist Realism was labeled Nonconformist and its creators faced what ranged from close scrutiny from the police and KGB to outright persecution. Many of the Nonconformist artists had state-funded careers as illustrators or artists and simply made and exhibited their unofficial work underground.

Such was the case with Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Sots art’s founding fathers. The Sots art they have been making since the 1970s is an outgrowth of their careers as Socialist Realist painters and of the memories of their childhood years spent surrounded by paintings and statues of Soviet leaders and everyday heroes. It is difficult for the Western observer, particularly in the current post-Soviet age of technological globalization, to understand the extent to which the imagery penetrated people’s lives. Every public space, every piece of print media, every school and place of work was a museum that forced interaction with instructive Socialist Realist images.

Victor Tupitsyn discusses the effect of constant inundation by such images on the psyche in terms of identification. A Soviet person, every facet of whose life would be shaped by the propagandistic images, must surely have been in constant conflict between the authoritarian “je” and the communal “moi,” to borrow terms from Jacques Lacan. The communal experience was like a constant encounter with Lacan’s Imaginary Order; for the masses there existed an ongoing tension between identification with the images and alienation stemming from the unattainable nature of the images. Since the experience of the images was a communal one, the acuteness of alienation was dampened by what Tupitsyn calls the “cathartic optic,” a mechanism by which multiple viewers (functioning as a singular unit) can distance themselves both from identifying with the image and from experiencing the sting of realization that the image is a representation of the unreachable.³

Within the fantasy of official Soviet ideology, nothing was unreachable. It was only in the West that the human appetite for fulfillment went lacking. Capitalism created a culture of want, the icons of which were slick and colorful advertisements for consumer products. These were the materials of Pop art. The connection between Pop and Sots is intentional; when Komar and Melamid invented the term, they took the first syllable of the Russian word for Socialist Realism, and com-

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¹ C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origins and Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1973) 86-7. For general information on Soviet So-

cialist Realism, see also Matthew Cullerme Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998).

² James 86-7.

³ Victor Tupitsyn, “Icons of Iconoclasm,” *Parachute* 91 (1998): 14-15.

bined it with the English word “art” (taken from “Pop art” and deliberately not translated into Russian).⁴ The two movements are most related, however, in terms of the way in which their sources function in the societies from which they derive. For the Soviet Union, despite its theoretical denial of such a system, instructive images were the equivalent of product advertisements. They were a currency unto themselves, a commodity to be exchanged, and a product to be desired. The Socialist Realist painted type can be thought of as equivalent to the celebrity product endorser in America. The paintings, like commercials, inspired desire in the viewer.

Sots was the first current of Nonconformist art that addressed this commodification. Sots paintings, such as the 1972 diptych, *Portrait of Komar’s Wife and Child* and *Portrait of Melamid’s Wife* 1973 (Figure 1), sought the decommunalization and “decatharsization” of perception. Both represent what would have been immediately recognizable as traditional types in Socialist Realist painting. Komar presented his wife in the guise of the New Soviet Woman: strong and triumphant, but nevertheless tied to traditional domesticity (symbolized by the wash hanging on a clothesline behind her).⁵ The presence of the child as well as the bright sun referenced the constant push to the future that characterized Socialist Realism, as did the general upward thrust of the visual elements in the painting. The same vertical push is visible in the background and reaching posture of the figure in Melamid’s painting. The athlete was another permutation of the New Soviet Woman, and a gymnast would have resonated as particularly Soviet. Even though the figures are stylized, opaque forms that bear no visual markers as to their exact identities, the titles make it clear that they are portraits of specific people. Viewers saw not only the perfect New Soviet Woman, but also Melamid’s wife. Komar’s painting was not just an ideal vision of family, it was somebody else’s own family. By giving individual identities to the types that had long been held as exemplar, Komar and Melamid forced individual, rather than communal, interaction with the image. When the buffer of the “cathartic optic” (only possible through mass identification) is removed, alienation is the natural response to such images. This, according to Tupitsyn, was the desired effect of Sots art, as its practitioners “thrive on alienation.”⁶

Not surprisingly, Komar and Melamid’s attempts at public exhibition of their works were quashed (sometimes even

by violent military action).⁷ The pair left the Soviet Union in 1978 and set up studios in New York, effectively ushering in the second phase of Sots art, often called New York Sots.⁸ One of the best known pieces of New York Sots is fellow émigré Alexander Kosolapov’s *Coca-Cola* (Figure 2).

The painting juxtaposes the iconic profile of Lenin’s head with the corporate logo for Coca-Cola and its then current advertising slogan, “It’s the Real Thing.” For Kosolapov, who immigrated to the United States in 1975, the painting’s iconography is laden with meaning both on a national and personal level.⁹ In a 1995 interview he mentioned a life-changing event at the 1957 International Youth Festival. The festival, which a number of Sots artists identify as both their first exposure to American culture and as a defining moment in their childhoods, was an exposition of American technology, visual experiences, and consumer culture. A highlight for nearly every artist who writes about the event was the free Coke; each visitor was treated to a complimentary glass of that most American of beverages, Coca-Cola. Kosolapov said, “The taste of Coke was like the milk of paradise.”¹⁰

He goes on to recount how when he moved to America, he drank Coke all the time, and ultimately discovered that one can only drink so much soda. The paradise represented by the taste of Coke was tainted by his longing for a different paradise, that of the Soviet Union. By combining the two in the 1980 painting, Kosolapov expressed his feelings about his place in the world, caught between two paradises (“one, a paradise lost, and the other, not quite found”).¹¹ The painting’s bright red color was the natural connection between the two cultures, representing both the leading product of American consumerism and the color of the Soviet world. The text also represents Kosolapov’s place in limbo between two cultures. “The Real Thing” was and is immediately recognizable as Coke’s slogan, but it also represents the feelings of ambivalence toward their Soviet heritage felt by Kosolapov and other Soviet defectors. Lenin, and the world his face and name represent, may indeed have truly been the real thing, and their new American world, a land of false promise.

In 1998 the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota mounted the exhibition, “It’s the Real Thing: Soviet and Post-Soviet Sots Art and American Pop Art.” Not surprisingly, its catalogue featured a work by Komar and Melamid on its cover. In *Lenin Hails a Cab*, 1993 (Figure

Sots) artists, is a prime example of this excessive use of force.

⁴ Renee and Matthew Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995) 268.

⁵ This was the ideal for women that the Party had promoted since the mid 1920s, when women were forbidden from holding certain political offices and urged to be “housewife activists.” The New Soviet Woman was to be healthy and robust enough to physically defend the nation’s vast borders if necessary, but more importantly strong enough to breed the Soviet Union into its bright future.

⁶ Tupitsyn 14-15.

⁷ The 1974 “Bulldozer Exhibition,” where the government sent in tanks, bulldozers, and fire hoses to level an outdoor exhibit of only 14 (mostly

⁸ Valerie L. Hillings, “Komar and Melamid’s Dialogue with (Art) History,” *Art Journal* 58.4 (1999): 48.

⁹ Baigell 257.

¹⁰ Baigell 262.

¹¹ Baigell 262. Carol Lufty (“Émigré Artists: Rocky Landings,” *Art News* 93 [1993]: 49-50) describes Kosolapov’s relationship to the subject matter as one of derision: “lingering contempt for totalitarianism and newfound contempt for capitalism” (49). Lufty’s reading and Kosolapov’s own are not mutually exclusive; much of the art produced by Sots artists reflects this same conflict between love and hatred for one’s homeland.

3), the leader stands with his right arm extended and his left hand clutching the lapel of his coat, a pose used repeatedly in Socialist Realist paintings and in monumental statuary. The painting and its title reference the longtime joke that Lenin actually raises his arm in order to signal a taxi (and has been waiting for decades but none has materialized). In Komar and Melamid's painting, the cab has arrived, and the letters "N.Y.C." stenciled on its side are one of many clues that the setting is New York, not Soviet Russia. The Chrysler building looms in the background, and at its top is the Soviet red star. Behind Lenin hangs a banner reminiscent of the Soviet flag. The golden arches of McDonald's, however, have replaced the gold hammer and sickle.

According to the exhibition's curator, Regina Khidekel, "the greatest Russian leader of the twentieth century has been reduced to hailing a cab in the center of the world that vanquished his ideals."¹² There is some truth to the observation; the painting speaks to the idea that Lenin must surely be turning in his grave since the state and system he and other Communist ideologues believed would last ten thousand years fell in less than a century. The implication that Lenin has been dropped into the middle of New York, however, is off the mark.

More accurately, the painting's iconography references the experience of Soviet émigrés living in New York. During the Soviet era, a number of Nonconformist artists fled to the United States to escape imprisonment. Many, Komar and Melamid included, encountered an almost complete ignorance of the Soviet Union on the part of their American neighbors and audience. As Kosolapov put it, "After I came, I understood for the first time that Russian culture was utterly unknown here."¹³ The American understanding of Soviet culture may well have been (and probably still is) limited to a rudimentary ability to identify its symbols. For ethnocentric Americans, the red star simply signifies Communism, and has no meaning beyond the superficial recognition. Though it gleams bright at the top of the composition, the star is upstaged by the skyscraper below. The Chrysler building is a New York landmark; the entire city can be reduced to that single icon.¹⁴ The red star (the artists' Soviet identity) is all but lost in the New York world which does not understand it.

The other side of the coin is the artists' feelings about American culture encroaching on the Soviet Union/Russia. The first Russian McDonald's restaurant opened in Moscow in January 1990.¹⁵ It was the beginning of the infiltration of Western capitalism that furthered the process of dissolving the Soviet Union and establishing free states. Unfortunately, the survival of such an institution as McDonald's meant the

death of one or more indigenous cultural traditions. The single golden "M" behind Lenin's head is now (like the red color of a Coke label) recognizable worldwide, and is in many ways synonymous with Americanness. Komar and Melamid replaced the crossed hammer and sickle, the symbol of the Soviet Union since the 1917 revolution, with the golden arches, implying that America has so wholly taken over Russia that even its flag is a product advertisement. Lenin has been usurped on his home turf, so to speak.

Another post-Soviet Sots artist whose works were featured in the 1998 exhibition is Sergei Bugaev, who paints under the pseudonym Afrika. His 1990 *Anufriev Goes Reconnoitering, Anti-Lissitzky Green* (Figure 4), is an inversion both of Soviet propaganda and of what many Westerners see as the "golden age" of Russian art, the short period when the Russian avant garde was allowed to create modern, abstract art without persecution. He appropriated El Lissitzky's famous graphic work, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, a print made in three colors, red, white, and black, substituting green for red and adding a column of text to the composition's right. The earlier work was Bolshevik propaganda, a poster the artist believed would sway even the illiterate to support the Reds on the strength of its bold colors and vocabulary of reduced forms. In replacing Red propaganda with green, the opposite of red, Afrika introduced yet another means of critiquing the visual language of Communism.

Certainly, Afrika's Sots work in the early 1990s primarily addressed his feelings about Soviet life and Soviet oppression (green figured into many of his paintings from the period; he chose it specifically because it was the most "unred" of colors). Paintings like *Anti-Lissitzky Green* were tools not only for Afrika to explore his cultural identity, but his identity as an artist and as a homosexual as well. The El Lissitzky composition referenced in the painting was revolutionary propaganda, but it was also a bold example of the Suprematist abstraction that can only be described as pure modernism. Afrika not only appropriated the image and inverted its colors, but he also added the word "grandpa" descending along the right edge of the composition. The text suggests that the image it accompanies is outmoded or old-fashioned, possibly that modernism as a whole is obsolete.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Afrika and fellow later Nonconformist artists saw themselves as heirs to the Rayonists, Suprematists, and Constructivists, as the new generation of the avant garde.¹⁷ A word as specific as "grandpa" might even hint at the artist's feelings of kinship to the legacy of ancestors like El Lissitzky.

The appropriation and inversion of El Lissitzky's work also

symbol for the whole of the United States.

¹² Regina Khidekel, *It's the Real Thing: Soviet and Post-Soviet Sots Art and American Pop Art* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) 82.

¹³ Khidekel 82.

¹⁴ The single symbol becomes particularly potent when viewed in light of changes in American society following the events of September 11, 2001: the entire nation identified with the city of New York in ways it had not previously. Likewise, in this painting, the symbol of New York is also a

¹⁵ "McDonald's—Russia," *McDonald's Around the World*, 3 December 2003 <<http://www.mcdonalds.com/countries/russia/index.html>>.

¹⁶ Khidekel 90.

¹⁷ Victor and Margarita Tupitsyn, "Timur and Afrika: Leningrad, Nomes, Necrorealism and the Disadvantages of Going West," *Flash Art* 151 (1990): 124.

addresses Afrika's experience as a gay artist. As with Abstract Expressionism, the Russian avant garde is often regarded as a heroic, heterosexual male enterprise.¹⁸ Like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, works by artists like Mikhail Larianov, Alexander Rodchenko, and El Lissitzky have a cachet of dominant masculine power attached to them. By making a painting that is in effect "the opposite" of such works, Afrika subverted that power structure and claimed some of its esteem as his own.

Some contemporary Sots art has added an additional element to the previously discussed issues of personal, national, and sexual identity, i.e. that of religious identity. During the Soviet era, artists could be imprisoned for creating religiously-themed art, and atheism was the mark of an enlightened person uninhibited by bourgeois or peasant superstition. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the Russian Orthodox Church had supplanted the Soviet state as the (unofficial) governing body over artistic production. The recent example of Avdei Ter-Oganyan, like Afrika, a second generation Sots artist, demonstrates that in some ways the situation of the Sots artist in Russia has changed little since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In a November 1998 performance called "Young Atheist," Ter-Oganyan created an exhibit of chintzy, mass-produced copies of Russia icons, which he offered to chop to bits with an axe for a small fee. The violent destruction of pieces of religious "art" was intended to comment both on Stalinism and capitalism.¹⁹ That he used an axe, a large, unwieldy weapon to destroy the images specifically refers to the often ostentatiously violent means that the KGB, military, and cultural authorities used to destroy paintings and exhibitions of religious or Nonconformist art during the Soviet era. On the other hand, that the artist only destroyed the images when paid for the service was most certainly a comment on the ills of capitalism, a system under which a person can even be paid to blaspheme. In true Sots fashion, the work described the unique condition of the post-Soviet Russian caught between two worlds.²⁰

Even now, nearly 15 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian artists still struggle with expressing and exploring their personal and national identities. In some cases the government itself presents a major stumbling block to free expression. While the case is generally best exemplified by religious conflicts like that which Ter-Oganyan faced, holdover from the Soviet system is still evident in the way the government addresses itself to the arts. As recently as 2001, an official representing the Russian State Museum said of Grisha Bruskin, a Sots artist who remained in Russia rather than emigrating, "[His] art is more about life in general than about the Soviet era in particular...He chose Soviet material simply because he happened to grow up during that time." Bruskin himself, however, describes it differently: "I am sending a message to future generations, hoping that by comparing my art to genuine Soviet propaganda art, they will be able to get a true picture of the era."²¹ Even in the current age, when the Soviet system has been dead for over a decade, as far as the arts are concerned there is reticence to admit past wrongdoing.

For the artists themselves, ambivalence toward their Soviet past and New Russian present is a problem they will no doubt continue to explore in their work. When, in a 1995 interview, Nonconformist installationist Ilya Kabakov (whose work often intersects Sots), was asked if he worked in a Russian tradition, he replied, "No, I consider myself a Soviet artist. Soviet is not the same as Russian. I am a Soviet person, and the Soviet civilization uses the Russian language."²² This seems to be the experience of many of the artists highlighted herein. They lived as Soviets for a large portion of their lives, and were forced to reconcile being Russian overnight. The transition back to a culture that was suppressed for seventy years has been and will be difficult. Sots continues to offer formerly Soviet artists in the United States and Russia a language for exploring their cultural, national, and personal identities.

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¹⁸ Note: this was not the *Soviet* perception. Abstraction and homosexuality were equally as "dangerous" to Soviet ideals and were equally rejected.

¹⁹ Konstantin Akinsha, "The Icon and the Axe," *Art News* 101.9 (2002): 72.

²⁰ Andrey Kovalev, "Advey Ter-Organian at Marat Guelman," *Flash Art* 36 (2003): 158. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church accused Ter-Oganyan of attacking both the church and the government, and in 1999 he was charged with "promoting international and religious hatred" (By the time of the trial he had already fled the country and was living in a Czech

refugee camp; the Czech Republic granted him asylum in late 2002). The charge refers to a never-implemented law that seems to be only erratically applied, as Neo-Nazis and other anti-Semitic groups have been uncurbed (Akinsha 72).

²¹ Galina Stolyarova, "New Insights into Old Images," *The St. Petersburg Times*, 14 December 2001 <http://www.sptimesrussia.com/archive/times/730/features/a_5370.htm>.

²² Baigell 147.

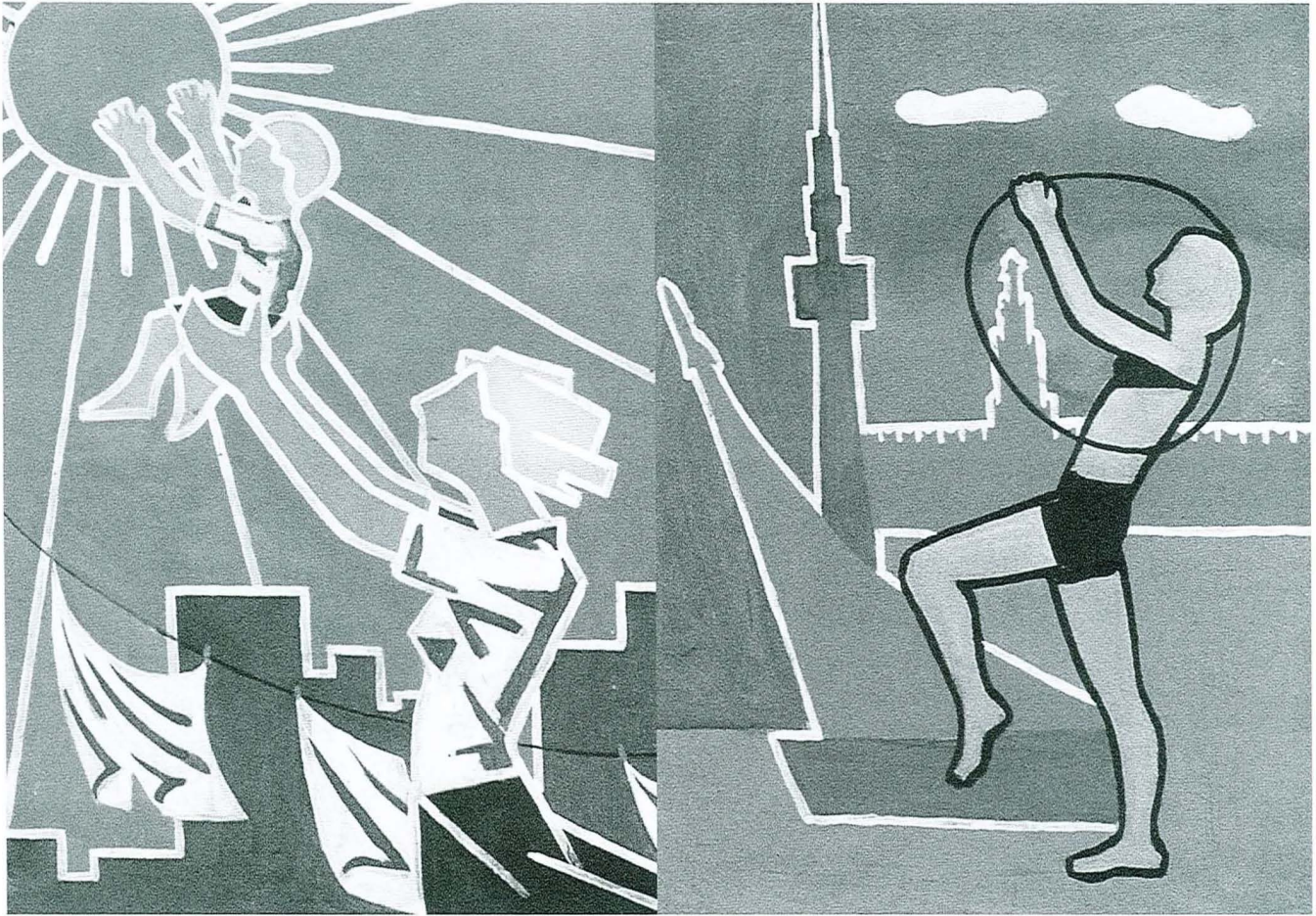


Figure 1. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Portrait of the Wife of Vitaly Komar with Son* and *Portrait of the Wife of Alex Melamid*, 1972, from *Sots Art* series, tempera on plywood, 25 1/2 x 17 3/4 inches. Collection of Neil K. Rector.



Figure 2. Alexander Kosolapov, *Coca-Cola*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 78 3/4 x 118 1/8 inches. Courtesy of Drs. Irene and Alex Valger.



Figure 3. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Lenin Hails a Cab*, 1993, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the Sloane Gallery of Art, Denver, and Wayne F. Yakes.

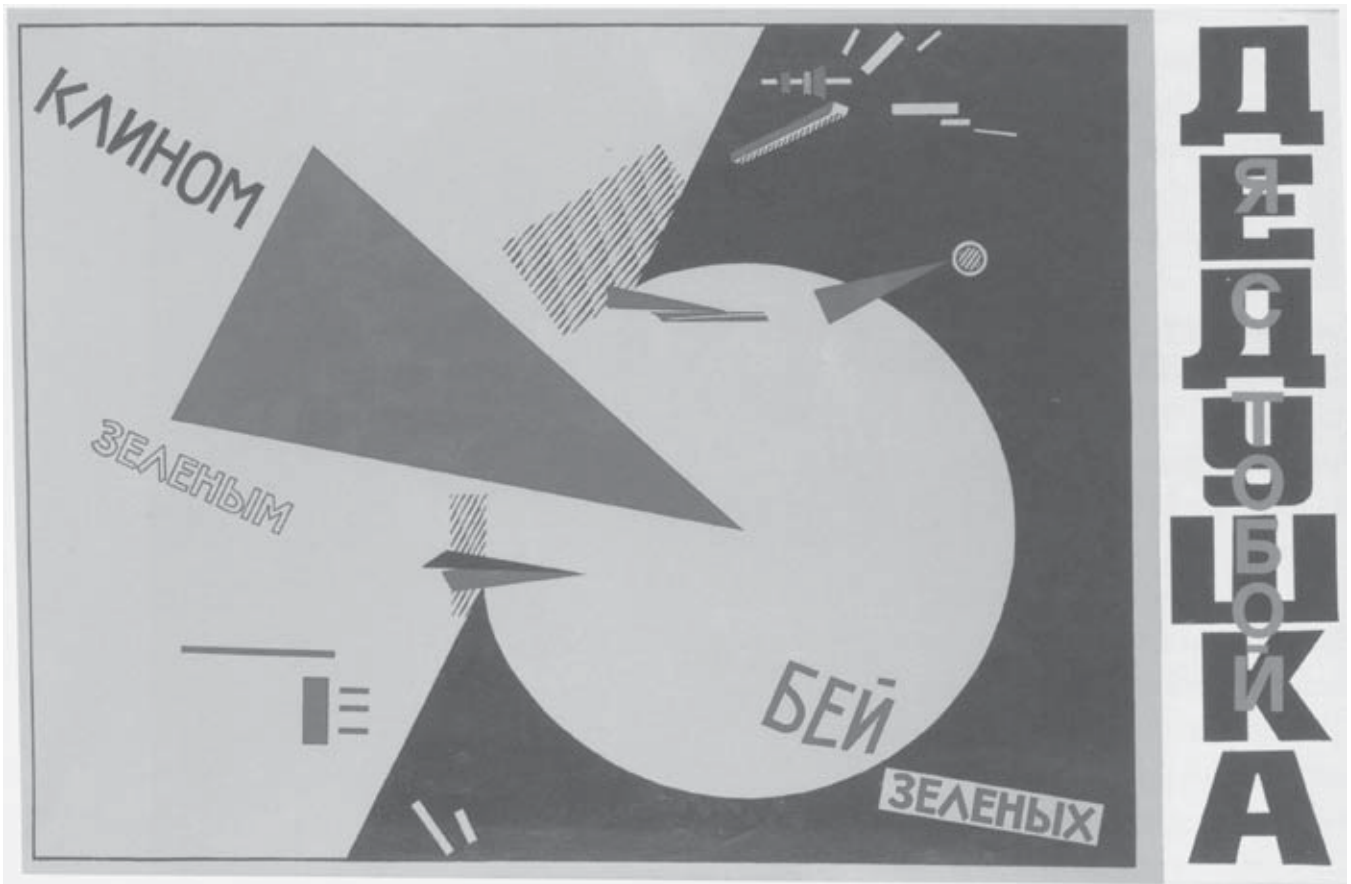


Figure 4. Afrika (Sergei Bugaev), *Anufriev Goes Reconnoitering, Anti-Lissitzky Green*, 1990, oil on canvas, 40 x 59 inches. Courtesy I-20 Gallery, New York.