

EXHIBITION REVIEW – *Dream Factory Communism* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany

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We were living in an increasingly complex world. Leaders and parents could no longer answer all our questions. Before, we were taught that we lived in Paradise and that the West was Hell, where every night the sun disappeared into a capitalist darkness. But after Stalin's death, birds of paradise with colorful plumage began to flock from the West: magazines, tourists, lighters, cigarettes, automobiles... And from Siberia, prisoners from the Gulag released by Khrushchev started to return home. As it turned out, Hell was here in the East.¹ Komar and Melamid

The exhibition *Dream Factory Communism* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt is both fascinating and unique. This is not the first time that Stalinist visual culture has been displayed in Germany. However, what sets this exhibition apart is the way in which these works have been approached. The premise of its curators, Boris Groys and Zelfira Tregulova, is as follows: whilst Stalinist era art was produced under a 'totalitarian' regime, the frequently adopted comparison between Soviet and Nazi art is not always useful or appropriate. The motto of Stalinist visual culture could indeed be that of the Soviet Air Force: 'Forwards and Upwards', for unlike the propaganda of the Nazi period, which focused on times past, Communism aimed to inspire its citizens with images of a bright future. For this rea-

son, a more useful analogy might be the rise of mass commercial culture during the 1950s in the West, the difference being that in the Soviet Union the only product on sale was Communism. Could Soviet culture have common ground with the capitalist ideology it so opposed? This is precisely what Groys and Tregulova want the visitor to contemplate whilst viewing the extensive selection of works on display.



Figure 1 Isaak Brodski, *Portrait of I. V. Stalin*, 1928, oil on canvas, 116 x 87.5cm, State History Museum, Moscow

Although the link with the West is made explicit before entering the exhibition space any thoughts regarding commercialism disappear in the first room. Here one is confronted by huge oil paintings representing Stalin, striking in their enormity. The walls are dark and glossy, which adds to the overpowering ambience of this space, whilst the lighting has been angled in such a way as to force the viewer to step back from the image in order to view the entire scene successfully. This room has the greatest impact as here Soviet ideology is explicitly linked with the powerful image of Stalin as leader. Where better to place this than at the start? The image of Stalin is the first of the themes around which the exhibition is organised; subsequent rooms address sport and technology, posters and personal happiness amongst others, the timescale within each theme stretching from the 1920s to the present day. Organising the works thematically works well. One of the most striking features of the exhibition is the display of Sots Art² and Moscow Conceptualist alongside their stylistic inspiration, Socialist Realism. Here they appear more effective when viewed alongside the works they mock and pity. Certainly seeing Gerasimov's *Portrait of Stalin* (1939) looking across at Komar and Melamid's *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child* (from the Nostalgic Socialist Realist series) 1981–82, makes each work resonate in a way that a chronological display could simply not manage.

The grandiose setting of the Stalin pictures and their impact can make the rest of the exhibition feel a little flat, though this is in no way a criticism of the other exhibits, which include paintings, film, sculpture, sketches and an installation. Intriguingly, one room consisting mainly of posters is set out as though the wall has been fly-posted with advertisements for Communism.

Groys and Tregulova's premise, I feel, works for most of the pieces in the exhibition, with notable exceptions such as the more

traditional official portraits of Stalin (figure 1). In some ways the closeness of Soviet art of this era to its Western counterpart is apparent, but so are the differences between them. American mass culture was selling a dream, but it was a dream that left the consumer with a degree of choice. Stalinist Socialist Realism was also selling a lifestyle, but no alternative to Communism was on offer. Moreover, the question of the immediate appeal of the works was perhaps less pressing as this was to be a culture for a new society. This culture would be deployed to facilitate the development and education of a people who would subsequently appreciate this new society and its culture. The artists and government would thus have been successful and their task would be complete.

However, Groys' thesis seems far less convincing when considering art produced during the Second World War. There are only two works in the exhibition painted during these years, although others dealing with this subject created after 1945 are present. This is noteworthy because of the passion that the Second World War evoked and still evokes in Russia. However, Soviet wartime art is in no way forward-looking – what was the point in creating images for a humanity that had not yet been moulded when you need the support of the people here and now, as was the case in 1941–45? Propaganda was used very differently during these years as energies were diverted to bolstering the patriotism of the people through appeals to tradition, including the reintroduction of religion. In times of crisis, familiarity, not novelty, was the keyword. Vasilii Iakovlev's *Portrait of the Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgii Zhukov*, (1946) here provides an interesting example illustrating this reference to the past (and present) which continued into the post-war years. Zhukov, astride a powerful steed, may well be crushing the trappings of fascist imperialism against a backdrop of both classical and medieval ruins signifying the retrospectivism



of National Socialist architecture. But his pose is unmistakably Napoleonic, an ironic reference in view of Russia's own victory of 1812.

Any exhibition focusing on Socialist Realism is to be encouraged, especially one held outside the former Soviet Union. However, as the Schirn Kunsthalle says in its own press release, Stalin era Soviet art is not that well known in the West and therefore perhaps more background information available inside the exhibition would have been helpful. A small guide in German was issued with each ticket giving a more detailed description of each work; it was a shame that this was the only piece of literature connected to the exhibition not presented bilingually. The catalogue has good reproductions of many of the exhibits featured including film stills, but does not feature these small snapshot descriptions. This made pieces such as *Let's Go Girls!* by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov something of a mystery if one was not aware of the concept of a Bolshevik propaganda wagon. These usually took the form of rail-

way coaches or in some cases entire trains containing posters, literature and film projectors to spread the word of Socialism throughout the Soviet Union. However, most rooms contained tables with pamphlets giving a small explanation of the theme therein; these were bilingual in German and English, and were an unobtrusive way of giving more information about Soviet society during the Stalinist era. This fitted in with the organisers' desire to leave moral judgements at the door and allow Sots Art and Moscow Conceptualism to be the ultimate criticism of works once intended to usher in their own new era.

Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalinist Era was at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, from 24 September 2003 until 4 January 2004. A selection of images from the exhibition can be viewed on the Schirn Kunsthalle website: <http://www.schirn-kunsthalle.de> (go to the PRESS section to find images).

- 1 Komar and Melamid, 'We Remember, Or So It Seems' in *Monumental Propaganda*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993: 48.
- 2 Term used from 1972 to describe a style of unofficial art that flourished in the USSR from c 1970 to c 1985–8. The term itself is formed from the first syllable of *Sotsialisticheskiy realism*.