

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

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ARTISTS AGAINST THE STATE: PERESTROIKA REVISITED

May 6 – June 24

It has not been emphasized nearly enough that the history of nonconformist art is one of the great heroic stories of the last half of this century. It is the story of several generations of artists who had learned their skills in the rigorous state-supported system of training, but who insisted on the kind of interior freedom that was anathema to the authorities....The desire to create from a sense of utter necessity and honesty prompted their refusal to accept the authority of the state in matters of art.

Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell, **Soviet Dissident Artists** (Rutgers University Press:1995)

The Feldman Gallery will exhibit conceptual works by more than fifty nonconformist artists from the former Soviet Union who burst onto the international art scene during Perestroika – that period of political and cultural reform initiated by Gorbachev in the late '80s and ending in 1991 with the break-up of the USSR. Working outside the parameters of government sanctioned art, unofficial artists developed various strategies for survival that ranged from public confrontation to withdrawal into the private sphere. Subject to persecution, the underground existed at great risk.

Nonconformist art evolved with its own systems of signage characterized by: text and commentary, the deconstruction of Soviet ideology, banalities of daily life, fictional mythologies and shifting truths, and arcane hermeneutics – an anti-utopian conceptualism laced with irony and biting satire.

The exhibition covers the period from the beginning of conceptualism in the '70s through Perestroika, with a few later works that relate to those times, and features early works by Komar & Melamid, whose satirical inversion of Soviet ideology (Sots Art) was a major influence throughout the period. The sprawling installation is comprised of four groups of several generations. **Moscow Conceptualism** includes Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, artists from the performance-based group, *Collective Action*, Vadim Zakharov, and Pavel Peppershtein, Yuri Leiderman, and Sergei Anufriev, who often collaborated as the *Medical Hermeneutics*. Other **Moscow artists** include Grisha Bruskin, "paper architects," and several younger artists working under different circumstances. Important **Leningrad artists** (now St. Petersburg) of the same period include the late Timur Novikov and Sergei Bugaev (Afrika). Works by **émigré artists**, who emigrated in the '70s, include Vagrish Bakhchanyan's depictions of caricatured Americans, Leonid Sokov sculptures, and a Leonid Lamm painting based upon his experience in prison.

A collection of drawings created for Andrew Solomon's book, *The Irony Tower* (Knopf:1991), captures the spirit of the times. Archival material traces the history of underground exhibitions from the censored to the commercial.

The Feldman Gallery has an historic association with nonconformist Russian artists beginning with its exhibition of smuggled works by Komar & Melamid in 1976. The gallery premiered three major installations by Ilya Kabakov, including the first realization of *Ten Characters* in 1988. Other exhibitions include large-scale installations by the paper architects, Brodsky & Utkin in 1990; *Grey Matter* by Alexander Brodsky in 1999; and installations by two collaborative duos, the Peppers in 1991 and The Martinchiks in 1995. The Feldman Gallery facilitated the United States traveling tour of *Perspectives of Conceptualism*, one of the first uncensored exhibitions of conceptual art held in Moscow in 1988. The gallery also published *Projects*, a portfolio of 35 etchings by Brodsky & Utkin.

The exhibition is curated by Marco Nocella, Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, and Ronald Feldman. The Harriman Institute at Columbia University will exhibit related photographs by Peggy Jarrell Kaplan in October.

There will be a reception May 6th, 6:00 – 8:00. Gallery hours are Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 – 6:00. Monday by appointment. For more information, contact Sarah Paulson at (212) 226-3232 or Sarah@feldmangallery.com.

31 Mercer Street, New York, New York 10013
212 226-3232 fax 212 941-1536 www.feldmangallery.com