

Baigell, Renee, and Matthew Baigell, eds. *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995. xiv + 405 pp. \$39.95.

This project owes much to Norton Dodge's decision, made back in the late 1950s, to start a collection of Soviet unofficial art. The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union grew over the decades into the single most important source of its kind, numbering nearly ten thousand works by about eight hundred prominent Soviet artists whose art was denied an official seal of approval. With the Soviet era sliding into oblivion, Renee and Matthew Baigell mounted a valiant effort to track down Soviet nonconformist artists and gather their recollections about their art and times. The editors do not give the exact dates when some fifty featured interviews were conducted, but the bulk apparently was gathered between 1992 and 1994. The result is a poignant tribute to an era which produced some of the most disturbing uncensored art made in Soviet Russia.

Several themes run through this narrative as common threads. One is the resolute resistance to political labels. Unofficial Soviet artists sneer at terms like "dissident," "nonconformist," "unofficial." Even the practitioners of conceptualist and "sots art," who routinely used sacred Soviet symbols, tell us that their purpose was not to deride the regime but to further the existential quest for meaning. The allergic response to anything that smacked of politics was a natural reaction to the suffocating climate in Soviet Russia, where one way to snub the regime was to eschew any political agenda.

A desire to settle old accounts, to highlight one's role in past struggles, is another prominent feature of the interviews. Elii Beliutin, Vladimir Nemukhin, Ernst Neizvestny, Ilya Kabakov, Komar and Melamid—the luminaries of unofficial Soviet art regale us with their stories. According to Beliutin, Neizvestny stole the spotlight at the 1962 Manezh Exhibit after his confrontation with Khrushchev, yet it was he who organized the event to showcase his students' work. Beliutin sounds cross at Komar and Melamid, who, he claims, misrepresented themselves as his students to secure a better reception in the West. Several respondents appear to put down Kabakov. He chose not to take part in the ill-fated 1974 Bulldozer Exhibition in Moscow because he felt like "a slave" unfit for such defiant gestures. Others are quick to take credit for their past exploits: "I have become a legendary figure" (p. 45). Such statements sound like self-aggrandizement, but they are better read as belated efforts to carve out a niche in a history that was so unkind to its actors.

One more theme that deserves mention here is ambivalence toward the market. Although unofficial artists, particularly those residing in Moscow, began to sell their works to foreigners in the early 1960s, few could make a living from their art. The situation changed dramatically after the 1988 Sotheby auction, where the government put up for sale works by unofficial artists. The seven paintings by Grigorii Bruskin netted \$900,000. Even though the proceeds went to the government, the auction demonstrated the nonconformist art's market potential. "Before the auction, we knew everything about everyone, who was the better artist, who belonged where in our hierarchy," recalls Vladimir Yankilevsky. "All of this was completely changed in an hour. . . . [The] Sotheby auction was devastating and demeaning" (p. 216).

Now financially successful Russian artists spend much time in the West. The less fortunate ones reside in Russia. Meanwhile, the old debate about art and money rages on. According to Dmitri Lion, "the more successful the artist is, the worse he is as an artist" (p. 50). "An artist is crazy," concurs Elii Beliutin. "He looks for things that nobody needs. Then he is a true artist. If he contemplates selling his work, then he ceases to be an artist" (p. 42). As one can gather from the above, the transition to capitalism will be a painful one for ex-Soviet artists, conformist and nonconformist alike.

"Art is experience," John Dewey tells us. I take it to mean that true art must capture the artist's feelings and communicate them to others through the chosen media. It is the resolute effort to substitute dogma for experience that marks the Soviet regime, debases its official art, and distorts the relationship between the artist and society. Russian nonconformist artists sought to salvage their experience from the onslaught of socialist modernity, but in the process

they erected a wall between their experience and the normative world. Now that Soviet-style bureaucratic rationalization is giving way to capitalist modernity, they have to reexamine their ties to society and tear down some of the divides they built to protect their crumbling life-worlds. This book is an important document that shows the Russian artists' attitudes toward this process and the high stakes they have in its outcomes.

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