

# ART IN TODAY'S SOVIET UNION

## WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP FOR ARTISTS, DEALERS AND AUCTION HOUSES IN A PERIOD OF TURMOIL?



Discussing the future of Soviet art are (from bottom left) Phyllis Kind, Jill Bokor, William Struve, Serge Sorokko, Simon de Pury, Amy Page, Vladislav Provotorov and Victor Bondarenko.

**M**ATTERS COULDN'T BE MORE CONFUSING than they are in the USSR these days, as the nation makes the difficult transition from communism to controlled capitalism. The fallout has affected contemporary Soviet art, and those who have followed its rapid rise to global exposure can be excused for being bewildered now that its outlaw position may be changed. Soviet artists today face the challenge of joining the worldwide ranks of contemporary artists on an equal basis. *Art & Auction* Publisher Jill Bokor and Editor-in-Chief Amy Page invite six leading experts to clarify the pressing issues facing Soviet artists and the market for their work. Vladislav Provotorov is a Moscow artist who is a member of MARS, the city's best-known art gallery. Victor Bondarenko, who acts as translator for Provotorov, is the vice president of Zigzag Venture Group, which promotes the work of 13 Soviet artists in the U.S. Phyllis Kind is a dealer based in New York; William Struve deals in contemporary Soviet art out of Chicago. Serge Sorokko is head of the Bowles/Hopkins Gallery in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and Simon de Pury is chairman of Sotheby's Switzerland.

**AMY PAGE:** When did the market begin opening up for contemporary Russian art?

**SERGE SOROKKO:** The general public became aware of it with Sotheby's Moscow auction in July 1988,

which was a huge event politically as an expression of *perestroika*.

**WILLIAM STRUVE:** That's when the press got the information, but I think the market had been established. Phyllis had been there a year or so earlier, and had already exhibited work. There were people like Eduard Nakhamkin showing émigré artists, so there was a sort of foundation earlier on.

**PHYLLIS KIND:** When Bill [Struve] and I went over there as advisers to SovArt [an organization established by Westerners to facilitate the importation of Soviet art], we were quite skeptical. We went to all of the "unofficial" studios secretly. We came up with an agenda that involved 17 artists, only 6 of whom were unofficial, who we thought would get the attention of people in the West.

**STRUVE:** I know this is hard to believe, but when Phyllis and I were there we were rather naive. We went

California dealer Serge Sorokko is concerned that many Soviet artists have not yet attracted due international attention.



coincided with the advent of television. In 1974, the government agreed to give an unofficial group of artists, who were not part of the Soviet Union of Artists, permission to do their own exhibition. Just before December 1979, when Afghanistan was occupied, the same group of artists had a few very interesting exhibitions in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. But officials tried to control them from the KGB level and the Party level. Now it seems crazy and uncivilized that an exhibition of paintings attracted so much official attention.

**KIND:** Certain artists actually chose to say *nyet* to the union. They felt it was much more important for them to make a stand and to be unofficial than to be official. So this "apartment art" idea took on importance. The term apartment art came from the informal exhibition by which artists were at least enabled to show each other their own works. Of course, the artists were deprived of studio space and materials, but they were accepted among a group of artists who had an idealistic point of view. And some artists actually would not have belonged to the painters' union even if they could. They would belong to the book illustrators' union, or the graphic artists' union, but they would not show their paintings to the officials. It became a circle of reinforcement, and the officials became frustrated.

**SIMON DE PURY:** I worked for Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza as curator of his collection, and from 1982 on I was going to the Soviet Union on a regular basis to coordinate exchange exhibitions between the Thyssen collection and the civic museums. And through friends I was taken in the evening to some of the studios. So in late 1986, we felt there was a market that had developed. We came

SovArt and the official Union of Artists were in fact already hand in glove. We're business people. We'll give advice. Of course, they couldn't accept it, because we had found a number of artists who were just absolutely unacceptable for political reasons.

**KIND:** The people in the union all wanted themselves to be chosen. I certainly didn't expect to fall in love. I was taking a week out of my life because I was asked to, and my carfare was paid. And lo and behold, I fell in love. Then came the frustration of not being able to make contact with the people I thought were doing interesting things: not being able to arrange shows for artists that I thought really important.

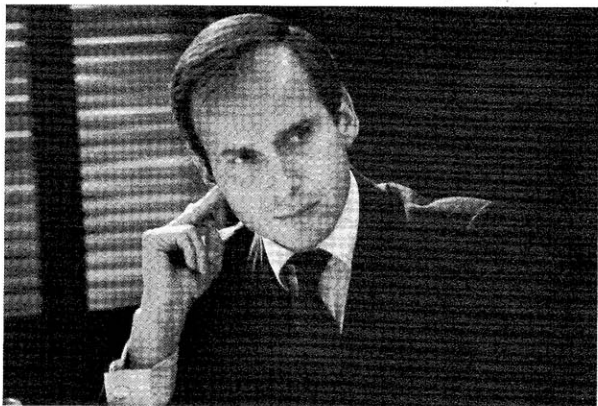
**SOROKKO:** Many of the Americans who were coming with me to Moscow had no idea of how to approach people. Had you approached them from a different business angle, you would have gotten some better results.

**JILL BOKOR:** Can we get an artist's point of view?

**VICTOR BONDARENKO FOR VLADISLAV PROVOTOROV:** There is always a group of artists who, by the nature of

**"People talk about Soviet art and a whole group of artists is omitted — every Russian artist who does not live in the Soviet Union. And those people consider themselves Russian artists."**  
*Serge Sorokko*

*Sotheby's Simon de Pury organized the Moscow auction of 1988 that focused media and market interest on contemporary Soviet art.*



armed with a list of artists, some of whom, such as Ilya Kabakov, had had either museum shows or exhibitions in the West. Indeed, we were asked to include one or two more that were not on our list, but basically we were able to choose freely. When we didn't have time to visit all the studios, we were able to see groups of work in the Polyanka Street Church in Moscow, where some of these works could be bought. Overall, the results of the sale took everybody by surprise, including us, and it established a set of values that was totally different from anything that had been expected on the Soviet side.

STRUVE: By that time the Union of Artists had pretty much collapsed as a force and the minister of culture, who showed the works at the Polyanka Street Church, had already taken over. And the minister of culture realized that what was important was getting money, and the union people weren't getting a foreign market, the hard currency, so they set up their own organization, which was essentially in conflict with the Union of Artists. The union sort of just crumbled.

DE PURY: That's how it was possible for Sotheby's to hold a sale. And it is interesting, for instance, that some works that I had seen in secret on my previous visit to Moscow, long before I was even working at Sotheby's, were suddenly now shown quite officially.

KIND: It was totally unprecedented for an organization like Sotheby's to take on this function. The work had not yet gone through the ordinary step-by-step progression of placement first in the hands of adventuresome collectors and then in a museum here and there—a process over a period of time that usually takes a minimum of a decade or two.

STRUVE: I think it's curious to note the nature of the people who have been responsive to these people: Phyllis Kind, a well-known outsider. Bill Struve, a provincial from Chicago. They are the kind of

galleries that are not supportive of the art "establishment."

BOKOR: Who were the buyers in your sale?

DE PURY: Since this was a new market, we felt we had to market it beyond just a normal sale. So we organized traveling exhibitions in New York, London, Zurich and Milan. We also organized an educational program to enable collectors to visit Moscow museums and the studios of a number of the artists. We had special planes from London and Paris. One-third of the clients were American and two-thirds were European, with one or two South Americans and other nationalities.

KIND: Our buyers started out being 1 or 2 percent American, and it may be exaggerating to say it's now between 20 and 25. My intention has been to try to include those buyers of more elastic collections. I wasn't interested in people who were only interested in Soviet art.

STRUVE: Soviet art came to this country in



*New York dealer Phyllis Kind fell in love with Russian art on her first trip to Moscow.*

KIND: I think a lot of the artists are now considering whether they want to live anywhere else. They have to consider that being in Moscow is different. They are painfully aware that their appeal might have something to do with the fact that they're still living at home, and that, somehow, something happens to an expatriate.

STRUVE: Russian art is about self-revelation, not about large aesthetic questions. So it's not like Sol LeWitt, who can be anywhere and whose sources of inspiration are in his own mind. These artists have to be where their life is.

SOROKKO: Don't you think a lot of Soviet artists now are working on trying to look like Western artists?

KIND: You've put your finger on a real problem. If they do that, they're bound to lose out. And they know it.

DE PURY: At the time of the auction, there was a fascination with what was happening in the Soviet Union, and it existed independent of the attraction many collectors

felt to the work of some artists. It was this exotic, unofficial factor that played a role. Now we've reached a new stage where one is interested in certain artists for their own, intrinsic artistic merit.

KIND: If you were to advise an artist who had roots in Moscow and who can travel, whether to cut the ties and move somewhere else or to continue back and forth, what would you say?

DE PURY: You can't give that advice because it varies from one artist to another.

PROVOTOROV: It is quite right for the artist or composer or writer to travel to New York, London, Paris, because many Russian artists before the Revolution traveled in Germany and Austria and Italy, and in those days there were 10 million travelers to the West. I studied at the Academy of Fine Art in St. Petersburg, where in the old days all artists were required to travel abroad and many lived away for many years.

STRUVE: The question is whether Soviet artists are going to become internationalist, or are they going to remain more as provincials, homegrown and idiosyncratic?

SOROKKO: I think the better ones will become international artists, in time.

DE PURY: A lot of people, when they saw the success of the auction, suddenly started to buy en masse, when the only common denominator of the work was that it was by a Soviet artist. They bought indiscriminately.

STRUVE: You have this tremendous market that is

**"The results of the sale took everybody by surprise, including us."**

*Simon de Pury*

**"Then came the frustration of not being able to make contact with the people I thought were doing interesting things."**

*Phyllis Kind*

a way that was very different from any other country's work. When the Germans came to America, they'd been supported by a whole government staff and by a syndicate of dealers who were already in place. German artists were essentially working on a bigger theme that was already acceptable. The same with the Italians and the Spanish. The Soviets had to trickle in. We have bought Soviet art over the last 10 years.

SOROKKO: But you have to remember that for many years in the Soviet Union, before that Sotheby's auction, there was a market in the West for the artists who were so-called nonconformist artists. That was a time when art was considered by the government an ideological battlefield, and many artists were persecuted. But people talk about Soviet art and a whole group of artists is omitted—every Russian artist who does not live in the Soviet Union. And those people consider themselves Russian artists, just as much as the Soviet artists that are now being brought into the West.

STRUVE: But they don't have quite the same sex appeal, however, as those who were still in the Soviet Union at the time of the Sotheby's auction. That's the difference. It's just a matter of public relations.

interested in what I call art lotto. The idea is to buy them young, and, who knows, they may turn out to be an enormous success.

**PAGE:** Will the ruble become a convertible currency, and, if so, what effect will it have on the market?

**SOROKKO:** There is no question that it will happen. It is part of Gorbachev's 500-day plan of economic reform. But I don't think it is going to affect the Western art market in any special way.

**DE PURY:** In contemporary art now, you have the effect of national buying. Fontanas are most likely to be bought by Italians, Chillidas by the Spaniards, and so forth. So the market situation will only be complete once there is a Soviet market and Soviet exposure for these artists.

**KIND:** Exactly, and I want to announce here that when it happens, and the ruble is real money, Mr. Struve and I will be partners in a gallery in Moscow.

**STRUVE:** Next commercial break!

**SOROKKO:** But is it possible that there is going to be a market in the Soviet Union that will flourish and yet have nothing to do with sales in the West?

**STRUVE:** When Sotheby's sold Soviet art, they did it in the Soviet Union for obvious reasons. They didn't take it to New York to sell, for marketing reasons.

**DE PURY:** If the same sale had taken place in London or New York, it would have had only half the exposure, and the whole point was giving exposure to these artists and this whole art form that had been inaccessible. Now, indeed, I think it is a different situation. We're not planning another sale in Moscow, for the short term; I can't rule it out for the middle or long term, but I think that now, if people consign to us works by some artists, we will include them in sales in New York or in London.

**BOKOR:** What happened at the Habsburg, Feldman sale in New York this May?

**DE PURY:** I think it was the selection. Some of the things that were very interesting did extremely well, and the other things that were not could not have done well in any context.

**SOROKKO:** That's only part of it. There is another very bad thing happening, and that is that there is so much Soviet art in the market today that most people, not the hard-core connoisseurs, are confused.

**KIND:** There is not that much Russian art in the market if you consider how many galleries there are, let's say, in the city of New York. That's not the problem. To me, the Habsburg, Feldman sale was a terrible event because there were things in it that shouldn't have been. I'm hoping that in the future there will be at least another six dealers in New York involved to some extent in showing artists who happen to be Soviet.

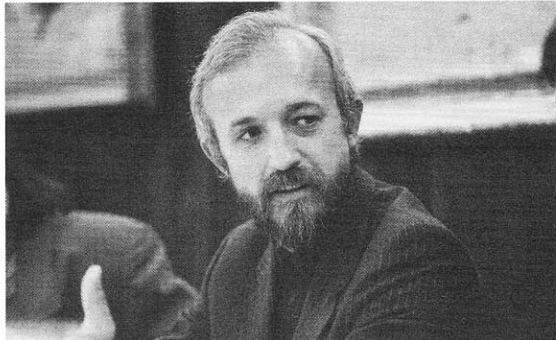
**PAGE:** In the USSR, how do the artists cope with the market?

**PROVOTOROV:** What's happening now, in this new process, is that many people in the Soviet Union just don't feel up to art now. I mean, the general population.

**KIND:** How could they?

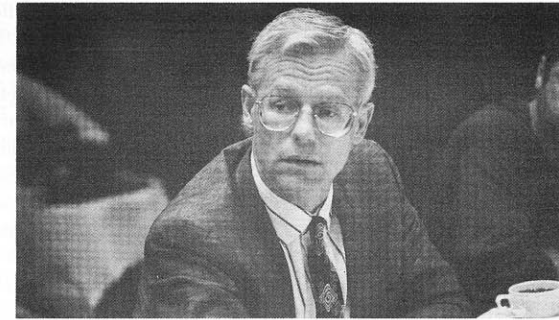
**PROVOTOROV:** It will take a few years for the situation to normalize, and then art will take its place in the life of the Soviet Union. Then there will be a market connected with the international markets. Being affected by prices is unavoidable. In the West, you will hardly find one artist who avoided this situation by running away

from the market. Velázquez worked on commissions from the court, and the Dutch guilds gave artists work, so a market always existed.



*Vladislav Provotorov, one of the leading lights of contemporary Soviet art, hopes that artistic life will become "normal" soon.*

*Chicago dealer William Struve was one of the first Westerners to see the new Soviet work. He began buying four years ago.*



the future?

**DE PURY:** I think the good artists will grow in stature, not only in terms of the market, but in terms of museum exhibitions and wider exposure to more collectors and entering the collections of people who do not collect just Soviet art. Over time, the good

artists will crystallize and do very well, and so will the market, and the lesser artists will not do well.

**PAGE:** How long a time frame will it take for this market to sort itself out?

**DE PURY:** It's a difficult topic, but I imagine that it will take three to five years.

**STRUVE:** I concur with Simon. I think Soviet art needs more exposure, more museum exhibitions, to be seen in more places. Certainly you cannot avoid a country that has one-sixth of the world's landmass and as many people as we have in America, and whose roots are so closely tied to the West, particularly to America, but to Europe also.

**SOROKKO:** I think there is going to be a correction in the market very soon, unless dealers take a more discriminating approach to Soviet art and artists, judging it for what it is rather than the fact that it is Soviet. The market is very unpredictable.

**STRUVE:** It's unpredictable, but still, it's art that just opened up to the West. In my opinion, it is the most undervalued in the world, especially when you talk about Europe and America. The artists have had very good, strong schooling, often 10 to 15 years of training at some of the best academies. They have also suffered a lot. In what country can you have an artist who suffers

to eat only bread and works 10 to 15 years to do just what he or she believes in, just to do it?

**KIND:** I, for one, am going to continue trying to fill in the gap between the "nonexistent" market and the auction market. Instead of going backward, we are going forward. And that's about all that we can do, with a lot of hope and work.

**PAGE:** Thank you very much for coming. (A&A)

**STRUVE:** Don't you think that with the chaos now in the Soviet Union there is going to be very interesting artistic production coming out of the country? The last free activity came out of the Revolution, and perhaps we're seeing a new revolution. So maybe we're going to encounter some interesting, and new, and provocative artistic activity.

**KIND:** The one problem that I had really found very, very difficult to communicate to my Russian artists is that any artist that thinks about money is already at great risk. An artist is someone who absolutely has a pact with the gods to ignore the issue of money and to continue doing his or her art. An artist who starts thinking about the market has lost it. It's over. And the biggest task that any single artist has to confront is to say, "Wait a minute. If my art was existential, and if my art was meaningful and if it was profound, I will not let money affect my art! I will not change my style because this other style will sell."

**STRUVE:** That's too narrow a view.

**PAGE:** Any predictions for

**"In this new process,  
...many people in  
the Soviet Union just don't feel  
up to art now."**

*Vladislav Provotorov*

**"Russian art is about  
self-revelation....  
These artists have to be where**

**their life is."**

*William Struve*