



THE IRONY OF SOCIAL REALISM: SOTS-ART AS AN EARLY STAGE OF RUSSIAN POSTMODERNISM*

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Abstract

Socialist art, which is shortly known as Sots-art is an art movement derived from the reality of Social realism by the late 1950's. The term was first used in 1972 by the artists Vitaly Komar and Alexandr Melamid to define the brand-new Russian pop-art as an alternative to American pop art. Sots-art is an ironic expression of oppressive social realism, therefore, allegorically approaches to Soviet totalitarianism using typical Soviet discourses.

Sots-art is quite closely related to Moscow (Russian) Conceptualism, namely share similar grounds and therefore usually associated to it. One can say with certainty that both of them share the same views on art such as destroying the classic sense of art and creating a new art form. Sots-Art is also closely related to postmodernism, not only in terms of sense, but also technically. The movement makes use of postmodernism's beloved techniques like deconstruction, intertextuality and other rhetorical devices to release his voice. In this respect it is regarded as an essential component of Russian conceptualism and postmodernism.

Having known that Soviet discourses played a crucial role in Soviet society's memory, Sots-artists took advantage of its plain but picturesque language and inverted it to an Anti-Soviet art using the slogans and expressions that are inherent in them. Sots-art, as an art movement is tend to reconsider and reevaluate the Soviet past by defamiliarizing, estranging socialist clichés. The reflections of this estrangement can be seen both in art and literature; especially in the works of Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinstein and Vladimir Sorokin.

The history of Sots-art movement, its' features and correlation with Russian postmodernism are examined and discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Sots-art, Social Realism, Soviet Art, Russian Literature, Postmodernism.

Öz

Kısaca Sots-art olarak bilinen Sosyalist Sanat, Sovyet Gerçekçiliğinden türeyen ve 1950'li yılların sonunda itibaren etkili olan bir sanat akımıdır. Terim, ilk defa 1972 yılında sanatçılar Vitali Komar ve Aleksandr Melamid tarafından American pop-art sanatına bir alternatif olarak Ruslara özgü pop-art akımını tanımlamak üzere kullanılır.

Sots-Art, baskıcı Sosyalist Gerçekçiliğin ironik bir ifadesidir, bu sebeple Sovyet totalitarizmine tipik Sovyet söylemlerini kullanarak alegorik olarak yaklaşır.

Sots-art, Moskova (Rus) Kavramcılığı ile sıkı bir ilişki içindedir, başka bir deyişle onunla aynı anlayışa sahip olmasından dolayı genellikle onunla eşleştirilir. Sots-art ve Moskova kavramcılık akımı klasik sanat anlayışını yıkmaya ve yeni bir sanat türü yaratma konusunda aynı görüşü paylaşır. Sots-art hem sanat anlayışı hem de teknik açıdan postmodernizm ile de ilişkilendirilir. Sots-art akımı, postmodern sanatın sevdiği yöntemlerden olan yapıbozumu, metinlerarasılık ve diğer retorik sanatlardan faydalanır.

Sovyet toplumunun belleğinde Sovyet söylemlerinin önemli bir rol oynadığının farkında olan Sots-art sanatçıları, bu söylemlere özgü yalın ancak pitoresk dilden yararlanarak onun doğasında bulunan slogan ve ifadeleri Sovyet karşıtı bir sanat türüne dönüştürür. Bir sanat akımı olarak Sots-art Sovyet geçmişini ve sosyalist klişeleri yabancılaştırmaya meraklıdır. Bu yabancılaştırmanın yansımaları hem sanat hem de edebiyat alanında; özellikle İlya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinstein ve Vladimir Sorokin'i eserlerinde görmek mümkündür.

Çalışmada Sots-art hareketinin tarihi, özellikleri ve Rus postmodernizm ile olan ilişkisi irdelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sots-art, Sosyalist Gerçekçilik, Sovyet Sanatı, Rus Edebiyatı, Postmodernizm.

1. Introduction

The socialist art (социалистическое искусство) used as an official instrument in shaping the society in the direction of the Soviet's official ideology is Sots-art (Соц-арт), a non-formal and parodic antithesis; is a movement that defines postmodern aesthetic consciousness in late Soviet or post-Soviet culture with postmodernism that derives from the socialist reality (Danilova 2015: 157). The movement started with the work of Lianozovski Group (Лианозовская группа) consisting of names such as Yevgeni Kropivnitski, Igor Holin, Genrih Sapgir, Vsevolod Nekrasov which were effective in the process from the middle of 1950s to the 1970s, develops in a more settled way with the artworks of Vitali Komarov, Aleksandr Melamid, Ilya

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Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, and Dmitri Prigov in the following years (Epstein 2000: 81). Coined by artist Vitali Komar (1943-) and Aleksandr Melamid (1945-) for the first time in 1972 as an alternative to the pop art* with a western origin, this term* shows itself as an absurd irony against the totalitarian socialist regime.

In general terms, a more moderate policy has been followed in the social life as well as in the field of art with the "Destalinization" (десталинизация-destalinization) practices Nikita Khrushchev's "Thaw" and that started after the death of Stalin in 1953. The spirit of opposition, which has been repressed by the communist ideology has been liberated to some extent with such practices. Especially from the 1960s, anti-Soviet art movements have gained momentum with the ease of pressure toward the "dissidents". Being the robust representation of Anti-Soviet art, Sots-Art has not been able to fully present itself within the Soviet geography and therefore, it has continued its existence in Europe and the USA more. In this context, mostly created by the Russian immigrants, Sots-Art is a considerably influential global movement for proclaiming the dissident artistic impulses prior to systemization of Russian postmodernism by gaining ground, which exhibits an ironic attitude toward the Soviet regime. Criticizing the Soviet's ideological discourses, slogans, cultural symbols, conceptual values, the ideals through the sub-culture, Sots-Art movement reveals the secrets of communism, its relations with postmodernism, its passion toward ideological allegory, eclecticism, quotations, surrealist nature as an early phase of postmodernism (Epstein 2000: 83).

2. The origin and the leading examples of Sots-art

Considering the art movements as a chain, one can say that the first link to create Sots-Art leads to Dadaism. The Fountain artwork, reproduced by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) by differentiating with only a signature from the ready-made object, a urinal, exhibited in 1917, is a challenge against the high aesthetic value and norm burden attributed to the art, is also an important example that transfers abstract art to a concrete concept. The new and extraordinary type of art, presented by Dadaism, effects of which extends to postmodernist art, influences the conceptual art that was emerged in 1960's. Even though Sots-Art is different from the conceptual arts in its political aspects, it has an apparent similarity in its perspective and presentation for the art. This second wave avant-garde type of art, inspired by the conceptual art and Pop-Art of the West, is analyzed under Moscow (Russian) Conceptualism movement, which only predicates on its own values. In this context, Sots-art movement is associated with Sots-artists such as Aleksandr Melamid, Vitali Komar, Boris Orlov, Aleksandr Kosolapov, Leonid Sokov and conceptual artists such as Erik Bulatov, Lev Rubinstein, Dmitri Prigov, who deconstructs this ideology by using specific propagandist signs, forms and language, and directs the written ideological weapon of Socialist Realism against it (Jitenev 2011: 78).

One of the concrete steps toward introducing Sots-art movement is the open-air exhibition, which makes a name for itself as "Bulldozer Exhibition" (Бульдозерная выставка)*, held in Belyayevo in Moscow on September 15, 1974. The paintings of Oscar Rabin, Yevgeni Rukhin, Margarita Tupitsyna (Masterskaya)*, Vladimir Nemukhin, Lidya Masterkova and much more are exhibited in the exhibition, which has a variety of unofficial, underground Soviet art. The exhibition also has the self-portraits of Aleksandr Melamid and Vitali Komar, masterminds of Sots-art movement and also has their Sots-art piece of work. This piece of work, having the shape of a logo, as the manifesto of Sots-art, refers to the classical visual of Socialist art, which brings together the reflection of Lenin and Stalin like a twin. Stalin has frequently been used as a figure, especially in the piece of work of Aleksandr Melamid and Vitali Komar, who are the mastermind of the Sots-art and which constitutes the key samples of the movement. The most specific example is in the artwork of Melamid and Komar as: Thank you, Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood in the banner-like piece of work, and the word "happy" is darkened and has the opposite meaning and they imply with such

* Coined by the British critic Lawrence Alloway for the first time in 1954, this term emerges to define commercial-indexed-society (see Stangos 2003:225). The collage of Andy Warhol from the Marilyn Monroe portrait in 1962 (Marilyn Diptych) and his work designed for canned soup known as the "Campbell's soup can" are among the most famous examples of this movement of art, which enables the production of consumables materials from the iconic figures based on the visuality to serve to the popular culture.

* Sots-art term has been coined as a hybrid combination of "art" from the Pop-art and "Sots", which is the abbreviation of Socialist word. In his interview in Radio Svoboda, Aleksandr Melamid expresses that Sots-art movement has emerged consciously. See: Otyets Sots-arta. Melamid bez Komara. Access web site: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0kwruGlffo>.

* The exhibition has been metaphorically named this way for all artworks of exhibitor artists have been relentlessly destroyed by the Soviet administration forces and they got arrested and it turned into a scandal. For further information see: Dzhanyan, N. L., *Buldozernaya vystavka: Kommunikatsiya po povodu svobody, Teoriya i praktika obschestvennogo razvitiya* (2011, no: 8) Krasnodar.

* Artist Margarita Tupitsina has played a great role in recognition and spread of Sots-art. Emigrating to the USA in 1974, Tupitsina has extended the underground Soviet art movement, spreading out to a wide range, including Russian conceptualism (Moscow conceptualism) and Sots-Art by organizing exhibitions in the art galleries at different locations in the USA, mainly in New York as of 1980. She enabled the presentation of many arts in the Sots-art exhibition, held between 1984 and 1986. However, she has written numerous books and essays about sots-art, Russian conceptualism etc... as well. See: <http://artguide.com/posts/576-mediocrity-dissociates>.

detail that Stalin period would provide "most probably" unhappy childhood for many, even though such sweet memories engraved in the mind from the Soviet childhood. Furthermore, Stalin and Muse and The Origins of Socialist Realism pieces of work reflect the irony of Socialist Reality over the Stalin cult*. Leonid Sokov is another painter, who enjoys using Stalin in his works other than Melamid and Komar (1941-). He places the profile portrait of Stalin next to the cult image of the Marilyn Monroe by referring to the Marilyn Monroe collage of Andy Warhol with his Stalin and Monroe work. He has also other pieces of work which characterize tossing between Stalin and Monroe by assembling Monroe's hair to the Stalin portrait.

One of the most symbolic examples of using political figures as a part of Soviet irony is the banner it's the real thing of Aleksandr Kosolapov where Lenin and Coca-Cola meet at the same picture. By combining the brand value of Coca-Cola with Lenin, the leader of Soviet Revolution, he has created a hybrid Sots-art example, similar to the products of Pop-art movement. In an interview with Kosolapov, he notes that he gets excited by the American art and is influenced by Pop-Art movement (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixrQ1ClavSQ>). The most prominent of detail in the picture is that Lenin to the left symbolizes Communism Coca-Cola to the right represents the capitalism. Another popular work of Kosolapov is the Malevich* picture, by using the same font of the Marlboro pack. The artist expresses the meaning and aim of the work as: "(...) "Marlboro, is a heroic advertisement and it is the spiritual symbol of the USA, protestant country, to capture new soils and colonies, the hero, the cowboy symbolizes the concept of spiritual missionary work of the West. I am a Russian painter, raised with a heroic culture, and for me, Malevich is a spiritual, cultural hero who acquired new things" (Novikova 2009).

Basically criticizing the Soviet totalitarianism, Sots-art reinterprets the Soviet myths and symbols by applying deconstruction on them, which is one of the basic techniques of postmodernism. In this context, it exhibits a similar approach in the artistic technique and method aspects, by effectively using the postmodernist methods such as deconstruction, quotation, cross-referencing, allusion, circumlocution along with agreeing with Russian postmodernism, which is an undisputable dissident. The sense of the art of Sots-Art, based on the analysis of the Soviet specific phenomenon, and transfiguring the pieces (font, expression, text, visual elements etc...) specific to text implied to the Soviets, or belong to Soviets connote intertextuality, which is one of the most powerful methods of postmodern literature. The estrangement of Soviet discourse, exchanging the high and low by distorting the cultural hierarchy are an ironic response to the Soviet's Realism as representing itself as a reality by the Sots-Art. In this context, a hopeful utopia for Sots-Art, the Soviet Reality is represented as a simulacrum, as a representation of the reality in the postmodern era, by Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). Sots-Art works provide two different associative perspectives. The first one is the echo of communism propaganda, which acts as a spokesman for the regime and belongs to the Soviets, and the other one is the Anti-Soviet reference as a counter-attack, which reflects the tragic irony of this propaganda.

3. Sots-Art and Russian Postmodernism

Mikhail Epstein and Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, the leading researchers of Russian postmodernism, analyze the relationship between postmodernism and Sots-art and their organic bonds. Kuritsyn refers to Sots-art as a Russian conceptualism (отечественный концептуализм) and describes it as a prepostmodern movement that sets the stage for postmodernism. Kuritsyn observes Sots-art in four different discourses: "critical, culturologic, bodily meditation* and pleasurable contemplation (Kuritsyn 2001: 94). Intersecting with each other at many points, these four different discourses assume to revitalize the Soviet culture with new perspectives.

The critical discourse, underlying the Sots-Art, never gives up on the irony, even though it reflects the truculence of the regime over Anti-Sovietness (анти-советскость) with a tragedy or pleasurable contemplation and through opposite emotions, involving yearning and hate together from time to time. One of the most ironic and eye-catching examples of Sots-Art, is the graffiti, which reads as My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love (Господи! Помоги мне выжить этой смертной любви) on which Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev and East Germany Socialist president Erich Honecker kiss on the Berlin Wall, known as East Side Gallery and fell in 1989. This street art example of Sots-Art, revised in 2009, 20th anniversary of fall of Berlin Wall still attracts many visitors (<https://ria.ru/culture/20090330/166485903.html>).

* For original visuals see: Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style. (Ed: Marina Balina) Northwestern University Press, 2000, Illinois, USA.

* Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878-1935). Famous Russian painter, the creator of the geometric abstract art in suprematism. See: <http://www.kazmalevich.info/malevitch/biografiyakazimiramalevitcha.html>.

* Kuritsyn draws attention to the fact that literature is a physical thing (hand-written, vocalized and visible) prior to a symbolic and spiritual product with this metaphorical expression. However, he mentions that Sots-art has chosen a similar path like Socialist realism by noting that it has produced many physical or tangible-oriented products in this sense. (See: Kuritsyn 2001: 110).

Sots-Art movement includes spiritually sacred people and icons through parodia sacra, shown in the postmodern art as well as the parody of political figures, who are considered as socially and politically sacred or untouchable in the Soviet era. In a provocative paint *Burn, Burn My Candle* (Гори гори, моя свеча), collaging Pushkin, Christ and Putin together in 2004 by the Russian art group "The Blue Noses" (Синие носы), while Pushkin burns the candle, held by Christ, Putin covers the candle to catch fire. It is not permissible for paint to be taken abroad for it may create international disputes and it degrades the Holy Trinity (<http://news.meta.ua/archive/31.05.07/cluster:6526602-Putina-ne-vypustili-iz-Rossii/>).

Sots-Art occasionally criticizes the Soviet through details and subtle references that are distant from sharp discourse and strict dissident attitude. Painter Erik Bulatov's (1993) *Horizon* (Горизонт) exhibits the sample of naive Soviet criticism, which carries the past with details of the Soviet lifestyle to the future through avantgarde symbols. The painting depicts the walks of a group of people, dressed in Soviet clothes, to the sea under the horizon. At first glance, it may seem ordinary and the horizon line, symbolizing the physical and spiritual borders of the people, gets a different dimension when it is covered with the Ribbon of Order of Lenin, a symbol specific to Soviets. What he meant with this detail is open to comment. In fact, the artist himself expresses that this detail, mostly interpreted as the Order of Lenin, creates a dual association; and avoids being attributed as a dissident by saying that this ribbon may associate with the candy box or gift pack as well as associated with Lenin (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHSUACZPRWA>)

We reinterpret the typical writing fonts that associate the figures, symbols, banners, which are widespread in the Soviet culture in the axis of the sub-culture with the new codings in the Bulatov paintings*. Highlighting the sub-culture, which is shown in every aspect of postmodernist art is realized to reduce high Soviet culture to the sub-culture, while it is ennobled in Sots-Art movement. In this context, Bulatov's paintings, where he uses the paintings with text, impersonate the typeface, which is the symbol of Soviet propaganda discourse and reduce the high culture to the low by integrating with the associative words and distort its belonging.

Ilya Kabakov (1933-) is the leading painters of Russian conceptualism, pioneering the method of art, combining the text and painting, which is frequently used by Sots-Art. Kabakov's *10 Characters* (Десять персонажей) album in 1972 creates the prototype of combination of text and visual. Engaging in book illustration for many years, Kabakov has many books, prepared for kids in Soviet period (Groys 219-220). Kabakov has conceptualist pieces of art, reflect on the painting and photography along with pieces of art from the Soviet lifestyle that is suitable with Sots-Art. The most striking examples of this are the paintings in the *Holidays* (Праздники) series. Oil paintings are adorned with foil paper and have dual meaning.

Combining text with the painting and speaking the language of art, Sots-art, which is mostly considered as the movement to influence the field of art, it reflects on the literature in Russian Conceptualism. Dmitri Prigov (1940-2007) is one of the poets and painters, who meets painting with literature. His *Versogram* painting in 1979 is quite interesting. There are ever-changing letters on the painting, resembling two "V", one is reverse and the other one is flat, similar to a baklava slice. When you take a wide look at the letters, we can see such sentences "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism. Dark and Sad specter- Why are you roaming here until morning". However, we can see some traces and references of the Soviet way of life in the poems of Prigov.

Sots-Art is closely related to postmodernism, not only in terms of sense, but also art techniques. The movement follows almost the same methods which are quite common and deliberately preferred in postmodern art. Sots-Art make use of postmodernism's beloved methods like deconstruction, intertextuality and other rhetorical devices to release his voice. By doing so, Sots-art totally ruins the semiotic and the semantic structure of the well-known statements. A conceptualist, postmodern author Vladimir Sorokin (1955-) is one of the authors that contributes to the Sots-Art movement by including elements and expressions that are specific to the Soviet lifestyle in his artwork. Sorokin's *The Cattle Plague* (Падёж) is second to none for the fall of Russian village. We can encounter with the deconstruction examples of the discourses of totalitarian Socialist reality in Vladimir Sorokin's works, especially in the first period; these works are; *The First Saturday Workday* (Первый субботник), *A Month in Dachua* (Месяц в Дахуа), *Norm* (Норма), *Marina's Thirtieth Love* (Тридцатая любовь Марины) (Beshukova 2008: 149). Therefore, we have to consider the artworks of Kabakov and Sorokin and other conceptualist artists as a movement that is the sequel of the Socialist project, protects and enriches the Socialist Realist literature (Kuritsyn 2001: 94, 99). Furthermore, it is possible to see the ironic, nostalgic or tragic reflection of Soviet period in the artworks of

* See also the works of Bulatov: *Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, *Entrance-No entrance*, *We wanted to Make it by Dark*, *Too Late*, *Our Time has come*.

some postmodern authors such as Venedikt Yerofeyev (1938-1990), Sasha Sokolov (1943-) Victor Pelevin (1962-) and so on. The greatest source of inspiration for Sots-art is the written propaganda instruments, which are relatively common in the Soviet era. Visual weapons of Socialist Realism such as banners, business signs, flyers, leaflets, brochures, graffiti to adopt and spread its so-called realism, transform into the pieces of art, exhibited in many places from the Berlin Wall to art galleries in America and Europe, which function as an Anti but similar to their essences with paintings, photography or concrete objects in within Sots-Art movement. In this way, the Soviet myth gains universalism upon being reshaped as a result of playing around with the semantics and ideological structure of the socialist cliches and slogans, specific only to Soviets. In other words, Sots-Art exhibits that the understanding of art in the secretive Soviet Union goes out of serving the Socialist Realism.

4. Conclusion

Sots-art has shown that socialist art is not dead but metamorphosed into an anti-Soviet propaganda mocking socialism's values, life style etc...What we perceive today, after being familiar with Sots-art is a reinterpreted Soviet world, in which irony masks the tragedy. Sots-artist have opened a new door into Soviet past, broadened our perspectives by carrying us to a new, post-modernized sphere.

Considering that Sots-Art is only limited to the Socialist Realist art, except for being a source of inspiration to the Russian postmodernism and benefiting from the common objective-method with postmodernism in general terms while relating it to postmodernism, we have to mention that it is only an art movement when compared to postmodernism, boundaries of which are very broad. Being postmodern for opening the elements of the past by pragmatically selecting out and transforming them into "consumable" materials as a result of Retro affection, which wrapping around again and again within the mass production-consumption rush of the postmodern period, Sots-Art has transformed some pieces of art, which was worth of millions of dollars, and even all other popular examples, to the products that appeal to every budget. Even though Sots-Art highlights social propaganda more rather than commercial concern in comparison to Pop-Art movement as its organizational philosophy, today it has been transformed the fragments of Soviet culture into a resource that can be marketed to the consumer society with quickly spreading capitalism in Russia after Soviet myth is embedded in history. By contrast, it has become the robust representative of the Anti-Soviet avant-garde art in Russia and all across the world and formed the basis of the birth of the Russian postmodern literature. Even though Sots-art movement does not maintain its actual existence as it was in the past, it demonstrates its reflections in the wreckage of the legacy to the Russian postmodernism as a movement.

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