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WHO IS PRINCE PHILIP?

The unofficial Russians

In Moscow, JOHN BERGER has been meeting some of the painters and sculptors rejected by the art hierarchy which controls artistic activity. JEAN MOHR photographed them

A few days before we went to Moscow I was invited to criticise a Sketch Club at a large London art school. Sketch Clubs are traditionally organised by the students themselves who invite an outsider to come and criticise the work they have produced on their own, out of school.

I wasn't very impressed by most of the works on show, and I think I said so. Sometimes a student argued with me. But only one remark I made provoked a really emphatic reaction. This was when I complained that a certain painting, whilst being quite well done, was far too unambitious.

"But why should a work be ambitious?" a girl shouted immediately. "We despise ambition," said somebody else.

I hastened to explain that by ambition I didn't mean the seeking of commercial success. But nobody had supposed that I did mean that. "If I get some satisfaction from painting it, that's enough for me," explained another student.

The first thing to say about the artists we spent our time with in Moscow is that they have an absolutely contrary attitude. All their ideas about art are highly ambitious.

The second thing to say is that their work, if viewed superficially and purely stylistically, is often similar to work being produced in the West.

How can one explain this simultaneous contrast and similarity? The obvious explanation would be that, faced with the massive conformity of official Soviet art, the more independent-minded young artists place great symbolic value on gestures of nonconformity: that their ambition is to acquire our 'freedom'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If we are to understand the significance of what these artists working in Moscow today are doing, we must understand the nature of their opposition. They in no way constitute an organised group with an agreed programme. But they share a common situation.

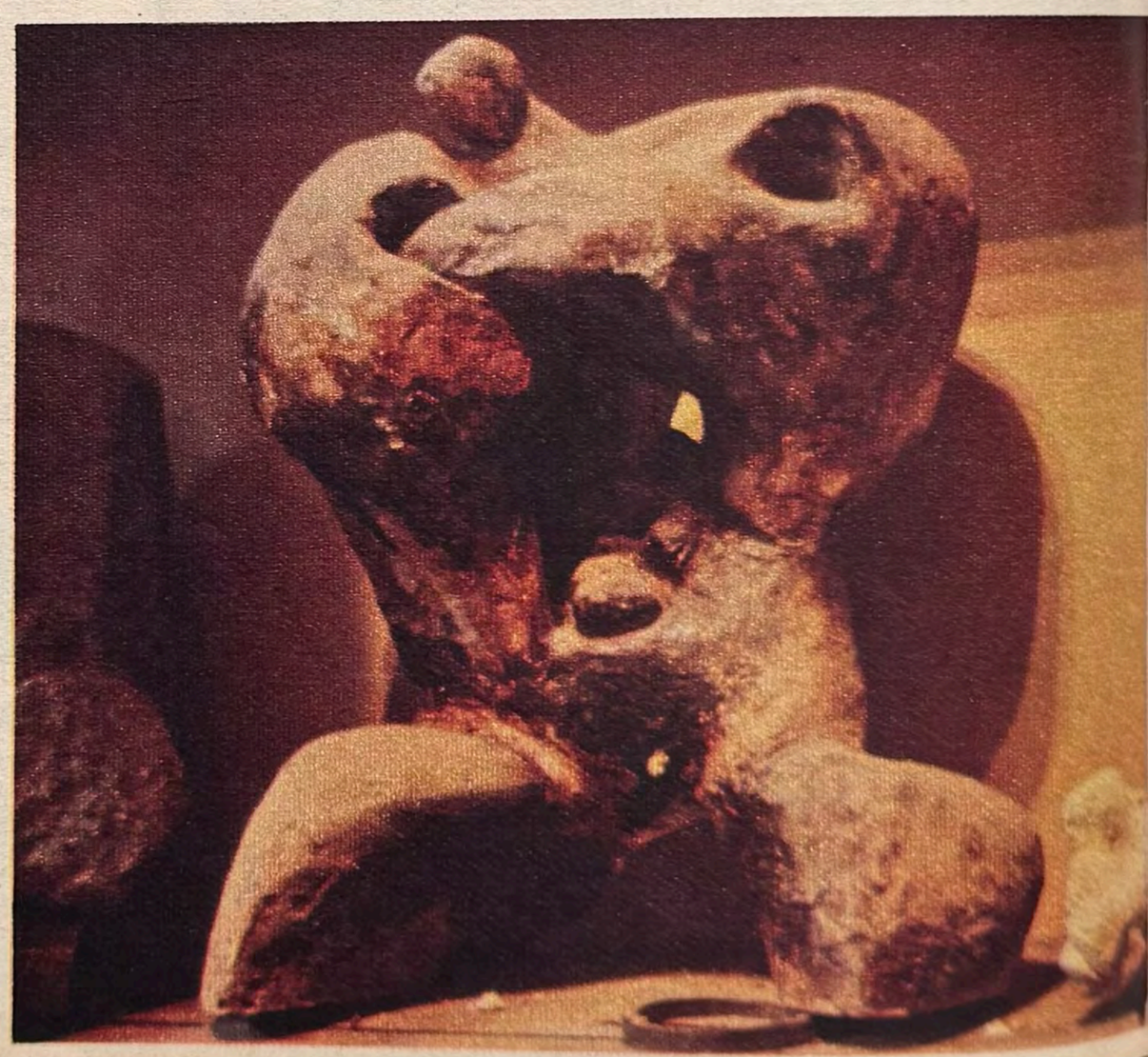
At one level this common situation is the result of their work being rejected by the official art hierarchy, who virtually control all artistic activity. None of these artists has a properly equipped studio; they work in living rooms or disused basements. None (with the exception of the kinetic artists) has had his work publicly exhibited since Khrushchev closed their first and only exhibition in 1962. It is rare for any of them (again with the exception of the kinetic artists) to be given any public commission or to have works bought by any public body. They have difficulties in acquiring the materials they need.

Official artists are among the most privileged of Soviet citizens, and their standard of living is, by comparison with the average, excessively high. The artists whom I am concerned with live extremely modestly. They may sell a few works to private individuals, often scientists, but mostly they earn their living by doing graphic work for magazines. The editorial boards of these magazines are largely independent from the influence of the art hierarchy.

At another, deeper, level their common situation is the entire culture and society into which they have been born and which they never wish to reject. Now that the Soviet Union has ceased to be thought of as an ever-present threat, the conventional thought to put forward is that Soviet life is becoming more and more like life in the West. This is marginally true in the area of technological decision. It is untrue in nearly all other areas, and above all in the meaning which people give to the experience of their lives.

One can argue about how much this is due to certain Russian traditions and how much it is the result of the Soviet people remaining the inheritors of the first undefeated socialist revolution. For myself I have no doubt that the latter is very much more important.

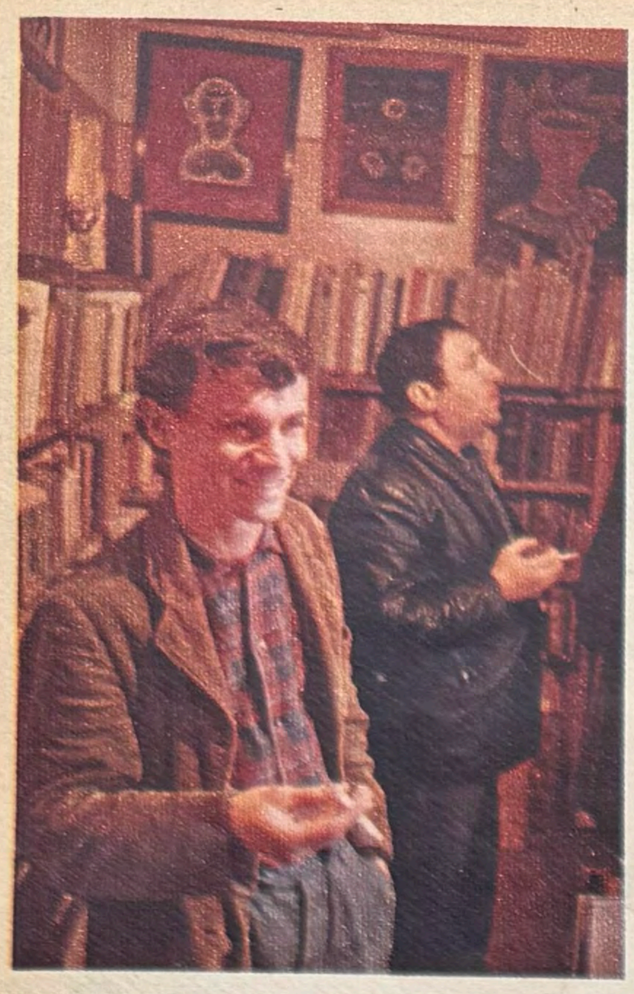
During this century, the Russians have suffered on a scale which is hard for us to take in. The suffering of mediaeval tyranny, revolution, famine, their own secret police, war. Yet this suffering has seldom been passive, as comparable suffering has been in other periods in history. It has been borne or resisted in the conviction, based on the evidence of /*continued on page 51*



ERNST NEIZVESTNY

Neizvestny is probably the first visual artist of genius to have emerged in the Soviet Union since the twenties. He was born in 1926. His work will hold its own besides that of any of his contemporaries anywhere in the world. His unofficial reputation in the U.S.S.R. is legendary: not so much because of his work, little of which has been seen, but because for ten years he has consistently argued, demonstrated and worked to prove that official Soviet art has no right to its claims. He is a man of very considerable courage and intelligence. His enemies talk about him as though he were a kind of bandit. His example has influenced many younger artists. Not his stylistic example as a sculptor, but rather the example of how he thinks and what he dares to do. When necessary he acts as their spokesman. He encourages them – perhaps sometimes too much. "So much talent," he says, "has been destroyed that now perhaps we are over-protective towards any talent." He believes that art has to be based on ideas in order to gain humanity. "Dostoevsky's characters are all based on *ideas*, and that is why his insight, his perception, of them was so profound." The idea of an art truly serving a whole society is central to his thinking. Only art, he maintains, can make people fully conscious of themselves in time, in history. He works in a disused shop, desperately overcrowded and with no proper light. All his bronzes he casts himself in a small furnace at the back of the shop. He hasn't the right to send works to a State foundry. What he requires more than anything else is the calm and conditions for sustained work. Given these . . . but it is more than possible that he will never have them. For as soon as there is a break through in the visual arts – and there will be – Neizvestny will be involved in the new projects. He is not a man who can cultivate his own genius: but one preoccupied, enthralled by the force of events. There is very little of the bandit about him, but a good deal of the revolutionary leader. The starting point of all Neizvestny's work – both sculpture and drawings – is the tragic history of his time, the suffering of his country. In his new book on *Modern Tragedy* Raymond Williams writes about his own attitude to history, but what he says in a few sentences applies with remarkable accuracy to Neizvestny. "We have to recognise this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not cover it with names. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it . . . what we learn in suffering is again revolution, because we acknowledge others as men and any such acknowledgement is the beginning of struggle." What makes Neizvestny a true sculptor is that he sees the truth of this in terms of the human body. If one divides the body from the soul, the connection with suffering is only through the sensation of physical pain. But if one considers that consciousness is the property of physical matter, at a certain extraordinarily high degree of structural complexity, the body becomes the unique arena in which suffering is realised, is fought with, may triumph, or may be overcome. Neizvestny's figures are all concerned with endurance and the transformations it brings about. A chain is only as strong as its links: a machine, or an argument, is only as strong as its parts. But a man is stronger than most of his parts – and may one day become stronger than any of them. He can survive subtractions and improvised additions. The simplest artefact or the most complex machine which he invents for his use is absurdly delicate by comparison with himself. This is the recurring theme of Neizvestny's art. He sees all his figures as prophets or giants eventually forming part of an assembly, a *Gigantomachia*. He admires Henry Moore, is obsessed by Michelangelo, recognises an affinity with Rodin and in his shop works mostly at night.

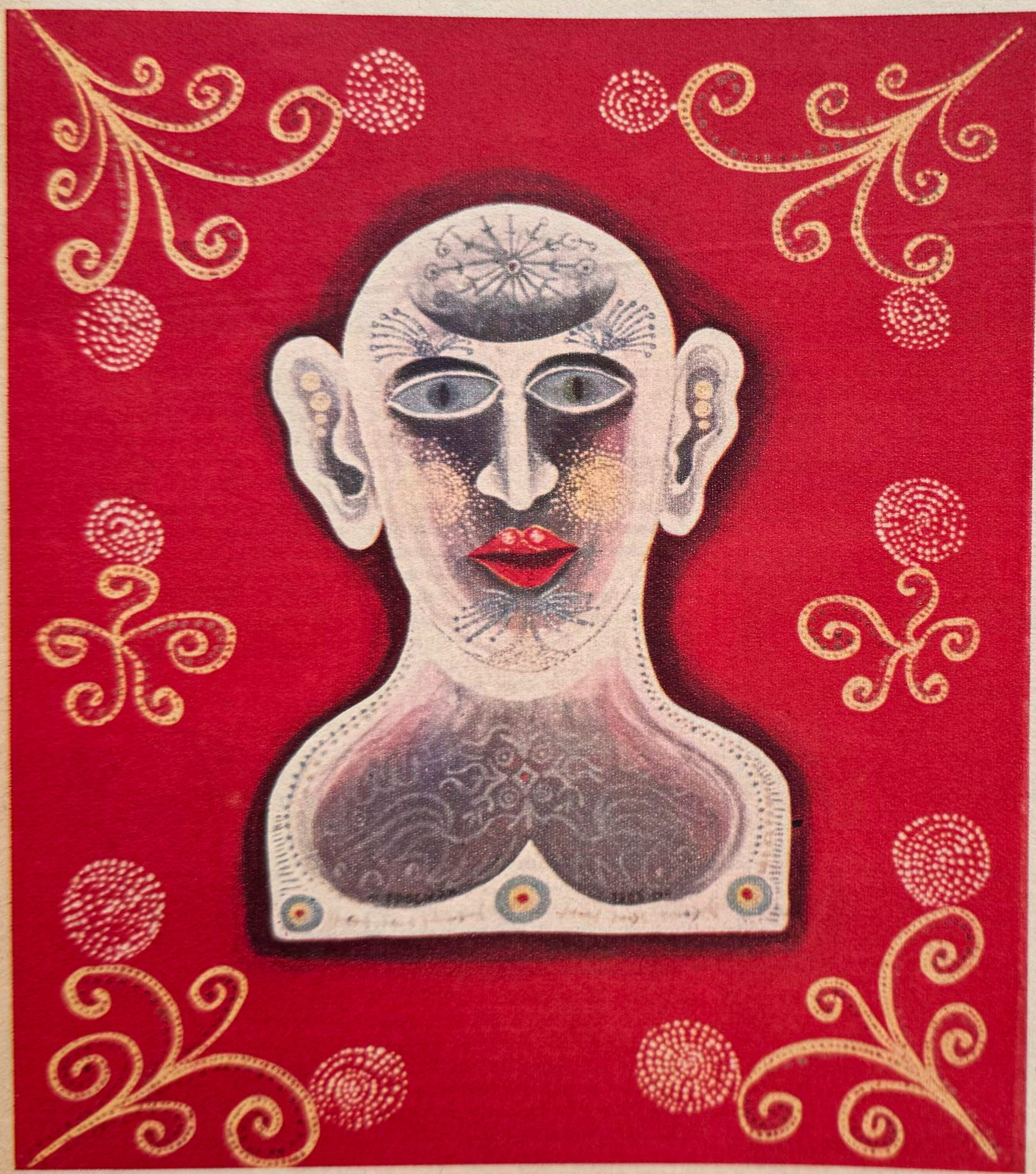
Above: *Orpheus*. Top left: Neizvestny. Bottom left: *Germination*. Below: drawing for Dante's *Inferno*.



Above: Grobman and Neizvestny.
Below: *Untitled Painting*

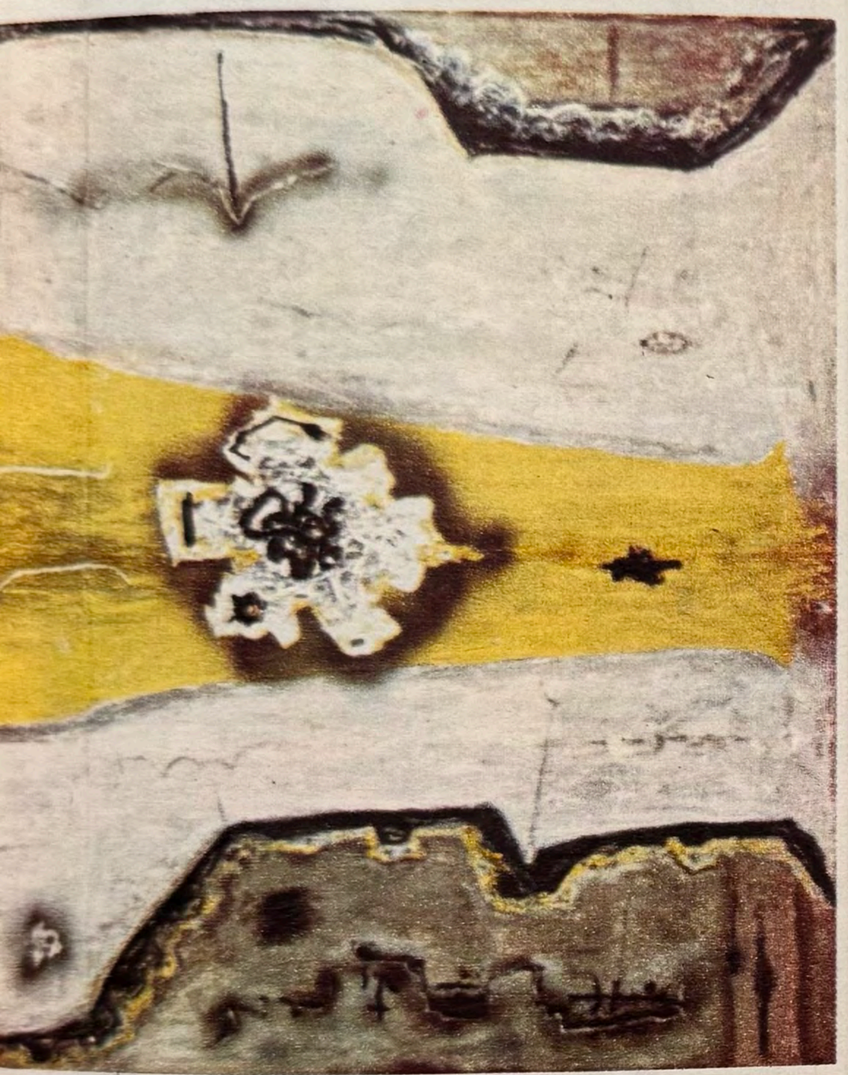
MIHAIL GROBMAN

The room is narrow and opens off a bare kitchen in a wooden house in a distant suburb. Every square foot of wall space is taken up with either books or pictures. On one of the bookshelves is a photograph of Pasternak. In front of the window, with a tree outside, is a writing desk. His handwriting is tiny and very certain. He is a poet and a painter. Both he and his wife have the air of being used to being a little cold and hungry. "Above all," he says, "artists must be ethical – and in that conviction lies our fundamental difference from the School of Paris: which is finished." To point out his paintings on the wall he uses a stick. Many are not his. Other artists leave their work with him to look after and to show to those who are interested. In his small, draughty corridor of a room he is the purest-minded curator that I have ever met. He shows us his own monotypes and drawings. One of them is of a butterfly whose wing patterns are made up of the words: "Grobman is a Jew, Grobman is a Jew, Grobman is a Jew." Another is a lament for the massacre at Babiy Yar. He asks me about modern primitives in the West since the Douanier Rousseau. Both the recurring imagery in his work – flowers, butterflies, small animals – and his taste in art suggest an overwhelming concern to preserve the innocent which he knows must be done systematically and not naively. Just before we leave, Grobman asks Jean Mohr to take a photograph of us all. He collects photographs and autographs, he says, smiling. He collects everything to preserve what can so easily be forgotten. He has seen and heard about too much that disappears without trace.



VLADIMIR YANKILEVSKY

Like most of the young artists in Moscow, he is extremely articulate, using in his arguments as many scientific references as artistic ones. Moscow is not a city of "Two Cultures". On the wall of the single room in the block of flats where he works is a reproduction of a Piero della Francesca. Yet he is profoundly anti-aesthetic, believing that all our inherited ideas of harmony are a barrier to the experience of modern reality. Aesthetic artists, including the older generation of unofficial Russian 'liberals', he dismisses as wasting their time "with



an infinite search for finite harmony''. He is interested in American Pop Art for its innovations in the making of ideograms. But its raw material – commercial art, pin-ups, posters, etc. – he finds trivial and boring. He is also interested in the Dadaist movements, and in some of his more recent work incorporates actual objects into his pictures, but his spirit is less bitter. He has the sense of being at the beginning of an artistic period rather than at the end. His very early works were influenced by the early Picasso. Four years ago he painted five large panels to be seen as a continuous whole and entitled *The Atom Station*. They might be taken as abstract but are in fact full of references to landscape, the human body and theories of knowledge. A project on which he is still working is made up of three panels: the two outside panels each show a head in profile, facing inwards, the heads constructed in metal and painted; the middle panel, like a field or a sky or a river, represents the content of the dialogue between the two heads. In character he is very different from Neizvestny, although much influenced by his ideas, especially by Neizvestny's concern with dealing with the human body from inside, with approaching reality through the way the body functions. But he is far more theoretical than Neizvestny and so far more extreme. His studio is clean and neat: almost like a room in which a man pursues a Sunday hobby. In fact he works incessantly. The neatness is only another expression of his character: the character of a pure researcher. ''When I find a solution,'' he says, ''and I can only find it by working, the problem no longer interests me. I drop it for another.'' What are the kind of problems? He is preoccupied by the fact that so great a contrast is possible between man's ideas and his actual existence. He sees this contrast implicit in the human body. Not as an absurdity, but as a danger if ignored. He wants to remind people of how they are constructed, the reminder free from all classical clichés and apologies. Sometimes he uses irony and comedy and diagrams, sometimes far more lyrical means. The constant problem is to preserve the shock value of his vision and yet behind the shock to create something complex and ordered enough to sustain interest when the shock has worn off. Sometimes, in my opinion, he succeeds brilliantly – as in *Woman's Torso*: sometimes he fails. If he fails, he continues. Twenty-eight years old, he has never sold a picture, had a word written about him in the Soviet Press, or for one moment considered himself unfortunate.

Top left: *Eve*. Centre: *Woman*. Bottom left: panel from *The Atom Station*. Above: the artist with *Woman's Torso*

ILYA KABAKOV

He will become a brilliant and highly influential theatre designer. I am sure of it. At the moment he works in a disused cellar, producing Dadaist objects. For example: a mattress, made by himself, covered with white plastic material and stuck on to it a very small cameo portrait of a man. He calls it *Living Space*. Another assembly consists of a piece of guttering, a stick and a ball, he calls it *Gutter, Stick and Ball*. He earns his living by illustrating children's books. "Listen," he says, "the state of art is like this. Once a locomotive was designed to pull a train. Gradually the locomotive has been entirely dismantled piece by piece. Now only the stoker is left going through the motion of shovelling coal into the furnace. It is meaningless. His excuse is that his daddy was once a stoker." He grins and, whilst grinning, says: "This too is tragic. The situation represents an alienation from all sense of purpose and therefore of responsibility. Responsibility about every act has to be re-established. This is our purpose. It doesn't matter whether the locomotive is a locomotive or a cat on wheels, but what does matter is the sense of responsibility." He shows us a painting of a fly on wallpaper. Just that. Then he laughs again and behind the laugh retreats into thought. "Have you seen that poster on railway stations? Warning you not to get run over. The man striding forward unawares as though to receive a medal – and the train charging at him. This too is tragic." He grins again, and considers yet another situation trying to fathom its incongruity. It is this sense of situation and incongruity which could make him a master in the theatre.

Above:
Sooster (left) and Kabakov (right) in the latter's basement workroom with *Man's Head*, a painted relief. Left: *Fly on Wallpaper*

YURI SOBOLEV

"Please be frank and tell us what is weak in our work. Are we provincial? Don't make any allowances for us." Everyone is aware that they lack criticism. Occasional predictable abuse is no substitute. There are, however, frequent discussions among the artists about their work. In these discussions Sobolev's opinions are often sought. He is extremely well informed about the history of 20th-century art, and he speaks with authority. "We don't believe that culture is a cumulative, fixed structure to which each artist can add his brick. It is an open dynamic structure. Each must struggle to arrive at a truth individually. When he has expressed it, it may be destroyed or overthrown – but this is what constitutes progress." He earns his living by working as an art director in a publishing house. He is not a man who expects comfort or easy confirmation. He knows that truth is abrasive. He is essentially a graphic artist. His drawings and collages are intensely introspective, but not in the sense of being vague or oceanic. He shows diagrammatically what goes on inside a person

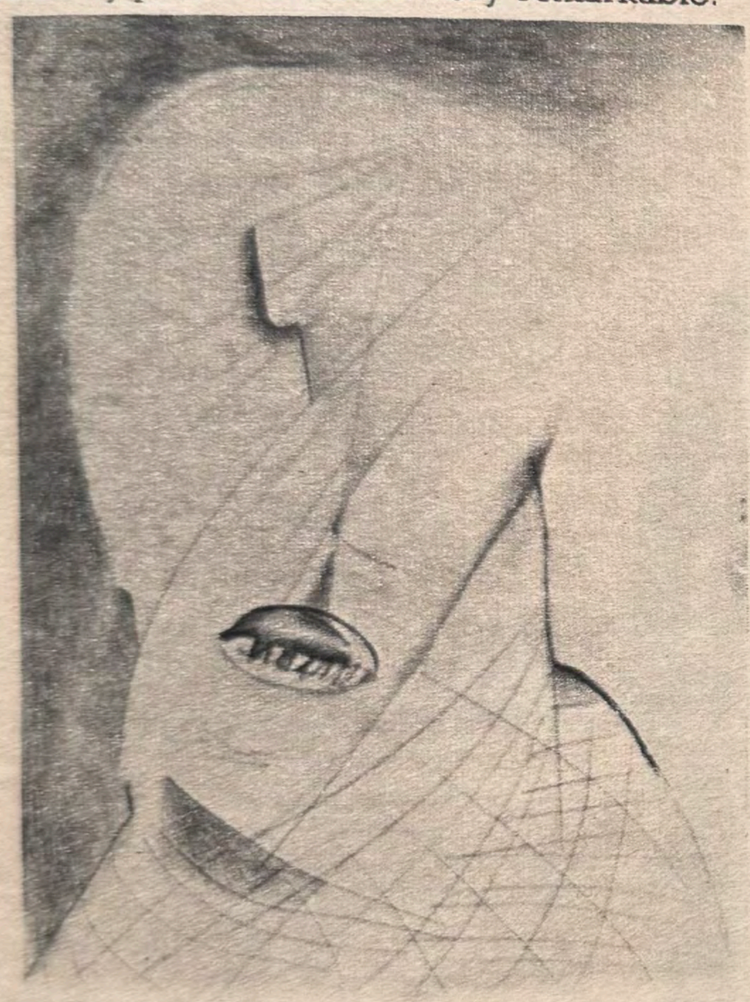
ULLO SOOSTER

He speaks rather little. He has gentle eyes but their expression is withdrawn. Dreams are not seen with the eyes. He is a man whose life continues independently from what he does or says. He spent several years in prison. He works extremely slowly, the texture of the paint gradually becoming more and more complex until it acquires the character of a rock surface covered with acorn shells – the shells from which it was once believed that the barnacle goose hatched. The subjects are huge eggs, juniper trees and parts of the female body. One painting, whose image seems as intricate, natural and mysterious as that of a

– letting all that is mysterious jump like a current from the terminal of one image to the terminal of its opposite. Juxtaposition is for him energy. I imagine him in his cramped room, drinking cup after cup of Turkish coffee, making an adult's, as opposed to a child's, alphabet book. A is for All, Animals, Art . . .

VLADIMIR YAKOVLEV

Among the drawings which Mihail Grobman showed us in his portfolios were some by a young man called Yakovlev. He is the grandson of a leading Russian Impressionist. He became a boxer. Lately he has been in a mental hospital for two years. He is going blind. Most of the drawings were of heads, broken by pain. I find them very remarkable.



starfish, represents only a vagina, urethra and anus. The often quoted axiom that an artist (or a certain kind of artist) is a man who sees something as though for the first time seems particularly applicable. But the axiom is misleading, for the gift is never spontaneous: it is achieved. Some of his drawings are satirical . . . Suddenly he turns round when Jean Mohr is photographing some of these drawings and poses. In his mouth is a third eye, a glass one. He has, I think, no desire to shock. But he needs to share his own sense of surprise at what he has discovered in solitude.

Above: drawing of a head by Yakovlev. Left: Sooster's *Resonant Juniper*

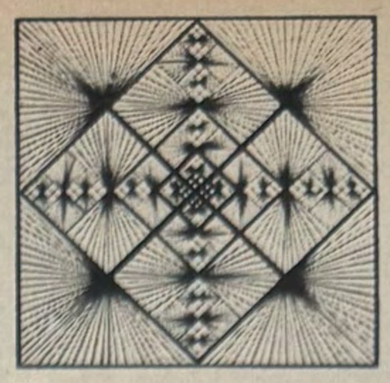
ANATOLI BRUSILOVSKY

He is well organised and his cast of mind, compared to that of most of his friends, is untheoretical. But he has the quick responses and irreverence for which Odessa, from where he comes, was once famous. He is the leading exponent in Moscow of photo-montage, and in this medium he has found himself. Five years ago when he first came to Moscow, he was a provincial art-student painter with a certain temperament. He had the good fortune to meet Sobolev and Neizvestny, and a further education then began. In the wardrobe in his room he has a filing system for all the pictures he clips from magazines (from East and West) and from books. Food. Plants. Trees. Maps. Mouths. Everything has its folder, so that when he is working on a new idea he can search through his vocabulary of images as a writer searches in his mind for words. Several Soviet magazines, thanks to his pioneering, now use photo-montage illustrations as a matter of course. A publishing house has asked him to make photo-montage illustrations for a history of the Revolution. Meanwhile he continues his practice of pickpocketing appearances . . .

Above: wall above Brusilovsky's desk including a photograph of himself. Left: collage

THE KINETIC GROUP

This is a group of about a dozen artists, all under 30, who work together. The founder, in 1962, was Lev Nusberg. Because their work can be subsumed under architecture and engineering, it escapes the veto of the art hierarchy. Earlier this year they held a highly successful exhibition at the Kurchatov Atomic Institute and they have now been commissioned to design three halls of the Palace of Recreation for the Leningrad Soviet. These include a dance hall in which the frequencies of the music being played will control the colour and movement of the forms of the ceiling. Nusberg acknowledges the formative influence of Gabo and the other Russian Constructivists, but believes that they can now go further, making the structure of movement itself the content of their art. ''And what we are talking about,'' he says, ''is not visual art, not at all. Music, technology, gesture and the word, colours and forms, the drama of movement and expression, the organisation of space, all these will have equal significance.'' What they have so far produced, he emphasises, are nothing but the most tentative studies. ''I can see clearly – and they



will exist – grandiose living machine worlds.'' These will incorporate whole landscapes, a beach, segments of the sky. In their own way these kinetic artists, like Neizvestny, use as their starting point the cardinal nature of the human body – not this time in order to represent it, but to appeal to the totality of its five senses. The scale of their schemes would render them megalomanic fantasies in the West. In the U.S.S.R., with its planned resources, they might become feasible. Meanwhile the existence and relative success of this group is one of the surest signs that, despite the resistance of the official art hierarchy, the situation of the visual arts in the U.S.S.R. is likely to change.

what has already been changed, that men can, or may, further change their condition for the better. As a result, *indifference* has become impossible. Cruelty, opportunism, treachery, are always possible because they are partly the result of individual choices, but indifference is mostly a social phenomenon encouraged or discouraged by social experience.

Triviality is the precipitate of sentimentality and insincerity – the two favourite disguises of indifference. There are trivialities of procedure in the Soviet Union, especially bureaucratic procedure, but in all direct social relations even the smallest actions or events are considered in the light of certain fundamental standards. There is a minimum scale by which people judge or justify themselves, and this minimum, compared with ours, is surprisingly high.

The common belief of the artists I am discussing is in the profound moral and social purpose of art. Art which is made for its own sake they term 'professional' and despise. Unless an artist is a prophet, he is nothing. The professional artist, in their sense of the term, is a scoundrel, more contemptible than any bureaucrat.

"The problem," said Yuri Sobolev (see page 48), "is between formal beauty and the truth. We are concerned with the latter. We try, in our inarticulate fashion, to arrive at a truth. We circle it in a series of concentric circles, and as the circles get smaller, we approach the point where there is an explosion and that particular search for the truth is finished, destroyed – though the total situation is that much different."

These Moscow artists appreciate that the function of art in a socialist society is different from its function in a capitalist one. They envy the artist in the West his opportunity to travel but they assume without question that, despite their difficulties, they themselves are in a far more advantageous position.

This advantage lies in the fact that they are able to believe that their work can contribute to the development of their society. Even the threats which they have faced – such as Khrushchev's intervention in 1962 – underline how far-reaching its effect can be.

They reject nearly all recent official art, not because it is official, but because it is pathetically inadequate for its purpose. It evades the problem of meeting the demands of a huge but relatively undeveloped public taste. It confirms the people's belief that they have a right to art. But it prevents them developing that right.

In Moscow between 1946 and 1961, as many square yards of mural were painted as in the whole of Mexico since the twenties. Mexican mural painting made an impact on the whole world. In Moscow nobody notices the countless painted walls and ceilings. Scarcely a single image is remembered by anybody. They impinge less than the weakest background music. The young unofficial artists find themselves in opposition because they maintain that the people have a right to an art which is urgent.

This idea of an urgent art precludes any concern with producing timeless masterpieces or with the pursuit of personal originality. Such preoccupations are usually the consolation of the artist in isolation. And the paradox of these Moscow artists is that, totally denied any official public position, they probably feel less isolated than artists anywhere else.

They are eclectic. They borrow from whoever is useful to them. (So far as current Western art is concerned, they are remarkably well-informed and constantly pass reproductions, books, etc., from one to the other.) Their sense of urgency is such that all means suggest ways of achieving their own purpose to them.

Their recognition of the failure of official art is shared by many eminent intellectuals and probably by certain members of the Central Committee of the party. The struggle is not between philistine politicos on the one hand and persecuted artists on the other.

Administration of the visual arts is in the hands of the more successful official artists, who, if they admit even part of the claims of those whom they term "the new nihilists", will be tacitly admitting their own failure. The more tolerant of them are now prepared to acknowledge a certain value in the 'liberal' opposition of an earlier generation – artists such as Falk and Favorsky – whose position was that of a kind of quietist *l'art pour l'art*. Such a concession, however, carries no danger. Indeed it may be a help if later they have to defend their own work against 'nihilistic anti-art'.

They operate their control through the Academy of Art and the Union of Artists. The character of both these bodies needs to be changed. But they resist change from within, and they cannot be summarily dissolved from above because it is through them that the whole structure of State patronage has been established. Some idea of the scale of this patronage is suggested by the approximate figure of 50 million roubles spent annually on sculptural monuments alone. Contrary to what one might expect, responsibility for Soviet visual art needs to be taken out of the hands of its artists.

The works reproduced on these pages are representative, but the list of artists is certainly not exhaustive, and even between those included the differences of method and of achievement are very great. It would be foolish to try to generalise about the works as such. What one can generalise about is the present ideological significance of the activity.

What each artist, in his own way, is arguing for is his faith in the potential of the spectator. Each includes the spectator in his calculations as a man not unlike himself. The spectator can be trusted. He can be trusted to assess the revelation of the work, if revelation it contains.

The official art trusts nobody. Its obsession with everything being naturalistically recognisable is not fundamentally a stylistic prejudice. It is a fear of the unrecognisable. Which means in practice a fear of the developing, the dynamic, the new, which may be misunderstood or misinterpreted. All content in official Soviet art is presented as *fait accompli*. All the spectator can do is to observe it. Usually he then forgets it. There is nothing for him to do *in* it. The social content of the official art is framed before it is painted.

In opposition, the unofficial artists consider the content of their work not as a completed proof of established positions but as the offer of a choice of position to the spectator. The content is an exercise in mutual responsibility towards the unfinished nature of all experience. Some of their works may fail, but through them they are arguing for the recognition of the human and political maturity of the Soviet people. That is why they are ambitious.