

# A Narrative

By Holly Metz

"Therefore, one cannot, unfortunately, cling to the facts, which are too mixed up with chance and don't tell much. But it also becomes harder to keep things separate: what one knows with certainty, and since when; what she herself revealed, and what others revealed; what her writings add and what they hide; and what it is that one has to invent, for the truth's sake..."

Christa Wolf,  
from *The Quest For Christa T.*

An associate of mine, who worked as an editor on several design and illustration annuals, was receiving letters from Soviet artists asking for help. Or at least it seemed like that: the sentences written on pulpy paper

were in badly constructed English; they pleaded, but one could not be fully sure for what. The writers of the letters wanted their Western recipient to know they existed and that their work too was in existence—that much could be gathered. They were not the letters of dissidents; in fact, they were not unlike the contents of information capsules this country's space program has deposited on alien ground: this is who we are; this is what we do; we don't want to leave our home, but we want you to know that we're alive, some place far away from you.

The analogy to space capsules may seem a bit remote, but not when you consider certain tangible facts, such as the major difference between the climate of most of the US and the USSR: over one-third of the

Soviet Union is above the 60 degree parallel; Leningrad university students have been known to have their study habits influenced by the extended periods of daylight which one most often associates with Scandinavia.

I tucked the addresses of these artists into my suitcase, among the heavy sweaters and jackets that I was instructed I would need, despite the calendar's insistence that it was May, and therefore, Spring.

Persons without a thorough command of the Russian language (such as myself) are strongly encouraged to go on a guided tour while visiting the Soviet Union. Planned itineraries are required: my group was to tour art museums like the magnificent Hermitage in Leningrad, which contains in its collection rarely-loaned Matisse's, and one source of their inspiration: elaborate Russian icons.

Being a guest of the Soviet Union is a serious affair; and that is what you are con-

sidered—a guest—so Igor, our putty-faced tour guide, impressed upon us as we were swept ahead of lines at the Moscow train station to board the train to Leningrad (in front of which the fictional Anna Karenina had thrown herself.) Igor intimated that these courtesies were granted us in exchange for our adherence to a routine that was officially circumscribed: we were not to go off on our own.

Inside the train we could purchase glasses of hot tea for a few kopeks from an elderly woman wearing a *babushka*. Thick burgundy curtains hung over the window of the train. One could feel that the opulence provided for the privileged during the Czar's reign had not passed—if not for the anachronistic dress of the young. Anachronistic in more than one respect: the last major influx of Western style and culture was during 1967, when a youth conference convened in the Soviet Union. The Western participants wore attire which was then considered fashionable: leather peace symbols, "hot" or "electric" colored clothing, and enormous plastic sunglasses. They brought acid rock music with them. In addition, they probably wore an abundance of denim, most notably Levis.

The young people on the train (that is, in an age group from 20 to 30) were dressed in modified 60's attire. The women back-combed their hair or wore it very long. But although they wore denim clothing, it was not made by Levis—which I was later to discover could be sold to the black marketeers for a considerable amount of rubles.

After we had been in Leningrad for several days, we were brought to a youth league to meet some Soviet young people, and Igor impressed upon us that there would be a few aspiring artists among them.

We watched a film featuring factory workers and farmers planting wheat, in a large auditorium. Following the film, various members of the league stood up and introduced themselves, noting their profession: "I am Boris. I am an engineer," and so on. One large, blowzy woman introduced herself as Natasia—she was a sculptor.

Then we were allowed to talk with the league members, and I approached Natasia. A friend of hers, who spoke better English, explained that Natasia was executing giant metal sculptures for the state, and was highly regarded in her field. It was hard to believe, but only because I expected a more staid personality to be representative of official Soviet art. Natasia had the huge, luminous, roving eyes one associates with the insane, and her hair was a wild mass surrounding her face.

She showed me a few of her sketches, and they consisted of monumental figures of workers in an exaggerated realistic style.

I was carrying the address of one of my associate's contacts in Leningrad, and asked Natasia's friend, who had not identified himself as a member of the league (and therefore seemed to me to be less likely to be an official of some sort), to indicate on my tourist's map in which area the artist lived. He circled the spot, and translated the English letters from my paper into Russian so that I could recognize the street signs.

The following day I learned that our

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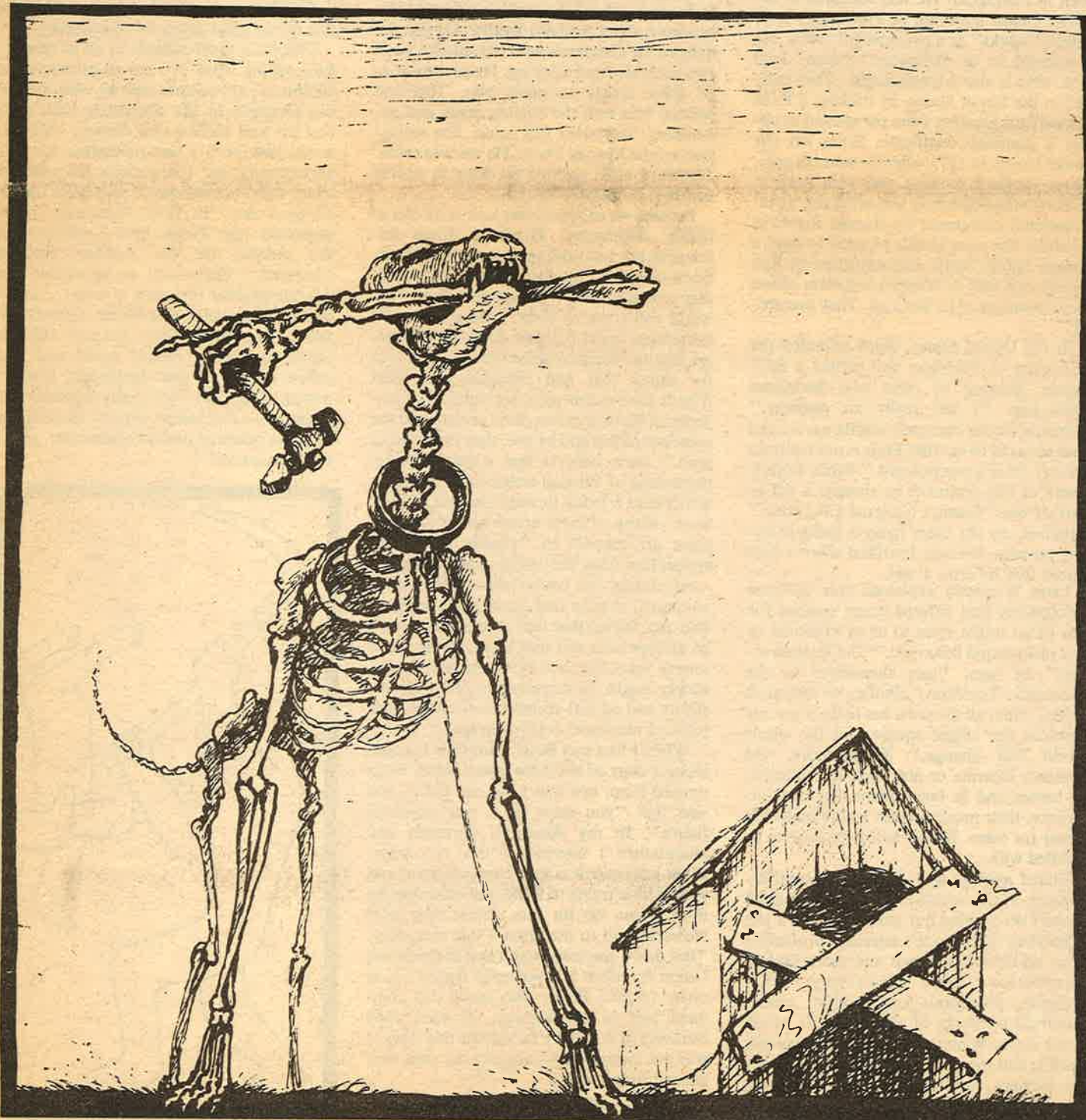


Photo courtesy of Holly Metz; artist unidentified.

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group was to be visiting a site not far from the home of the artist, M.K. So instead of dutifully trailing after our guide, I walked off in the opposite direction to find the appropriate street.

No matter how modestly a Westerner might dress, he or she will always be noticeably different. When I attempted to stop a few passerby to inquire as to whether I was going in the right direction, they would run away, terrified, shouting, "Nyet! Nyet!" (No! No!) after them.

Finally I came upon a block of apartments—a dark square of buildings with a concrete courtyard in the center, akin to the projects of New York City, and proceeded up the stairs, attempting to locate M.K.'s apartment. There was a strong smell of sweat and cabbage in the hallway; each door was padded with black leather to keep out the wind, interrupted only by a small rectangle of metal that could be moved from the inside to allow for the inspection of visitors.

I rapped on the metal portion of M.K.'s door. A face appeared and asked me a question in Russian. I asked for M.K. and stated my purpose in English. The door opened a crack and an elderly woman peered around the corner of it. She told me that M.K. was not at home. I pointed to my watch to find out when she expected him, and she indicated that it would be in over an hour. I could not wait, and she refused to open the door any further to accept a card with my hotel telephone number on it.

Dejected, I began to make my way down the stairs, and noticed a young man with long brown hair opening his mail box. The box said M.K.! I approached him and asked if it was he. He was very thin and his worn black suit hung on his frame. When he turned, I was confronted with a face that I'd seen on hundreds of Russian icons in Soviet museums—long, with pale, almost translucent skin. His lips trembled. I had the strange feeling that by my very appearance, without offering anything, I had fulfilled an impassioned dream of M.K.'s: connection with another world.

I left my card with him, and he said he would contact me the next day.

A taxi brought me back to my hotel. The driver, obviously involved with the black

market, made repeated requests for Levis, Yves St. Laurent clothing, and perfume. It is foolish for a traveller to sell such items for profit, for all currency must be accounted for upon arrival to and departure from the Soviet Union. There is also, unfortunately, a limit to the amount of Vodka one can leave the country with.

That evening I avoided Igor by ducking into the hotel bar after dinner. But that escape was short-lived, for when Igor found out that his guests were in the bar listening to a tall blonde man drunkenly denounce the state as "satanic," he swiftly arrived upon the scene and ushered us out.

The telephone's ringing woke me in the morning. A gruff male voice told me that he was a friend of M.K.'s and asked if I could meet them by the church behind my hotel after dinner. I could manage that.

From my seat in front of it, the church looked like a pale orange and cream Oriental confection made from marzipan. Two men in shabby raincoats with upturned collars approached me. I was tempted to laugh because they looked like bad imitations of spies. One of them was M.K. As the other man came closer, I noticed that he was the drunken pontificator from the hotel bar. That explained the rough voice.

We greeted each other, and the blonde man informed me that his name was Eric, he was originally from East Germany, and that he was a photographer. M.K. was not an artist himself, but a collector. He had a vast collection of original drawings—George Grosz was a particular favorite. Eric would not tell me how M.K. has acquired this work.

M.K. also collected the work of living Russian artists—and Eric emphasized Russian, as opposed to Soviet. He declared that these artists were devout Christians, as he was, and that the Soviet state's atheism was abhorrent to them. He asked me if I was religious, and scowled when I admitted that I was not.

Did I want to see the work of these artists, he asked. Then I would have to go with them to an apartment in another section of Leningrad, where an "underground" exhibition space had been set up.

My curiosity was stronger than my fear, although images of being stabbed because I was an atheist ran in technicolor through my brain. I reasoned, however, that I was of potential use to them only when living.

After a short bus ride, we arrived at an apartment block similar to M.K.'s in design, but much newer. A dark, bearded man wearing a leather peace sign on a rope around his neck answered the door. His living room had been converted into an exhibition space; interspersed between the framed paintings and drawings were lit candles, crucifixes and rosary beads hanging on nails.

There were at least five different artists' works represented. It was difficult to see the work properly, lit only by candles, but when I asked if the electric lights could be turned on, they looked at me as if I had requested the unspeakable. I did not press the point.

Some of the paintings could only be described as hallucinatory—wild dashes of thick paint forming images of demonic in-

dividuals, mostly women. Sitting in a barely lit corner of the room was a young woman sewing.

The bearded man approached me as I began to view the drawings, mostly executed in pen and black ink with repeated images of skeletons, prisons, and birds released from cages. "Do you like the Grateful Dead?" he asked. It was then that I realized that he was playing a tape of an old Grateful Dead recording. "Not very much," I replied. My attention had been caught by a series of skilled pen and ink sketches, obviously influenced by German Expressionism: a cat exploded with frenetic energy; two skeletons did a mad dance over the page while a woman with a strained expression on her face sat upright in what appeared to be a hospital bed. The artist, Eric said, worked as an orderly in a hospital and had witnessed what he presumed to be the isolation of "believers" in Christianity.

I photographed as many pictures as I could, despite the poor lighting, and left an extra roll of film with Eric, who promised to photograph the work in daylight. He was to meet me by the church the following afternoon, before our tour group was to move on to Moscow.

On the bus ride back to my hotel, I asked Eric how M.K. had come to write to my associate. As M.K. was not an artist but a collector, the artists thought it was best for him to take the risk of sending a message to the West.

I did meet Eric the next day and he returned the roll of film; however, when I left the Soviet Union and developed it, it proved only to contain pictures of Eric and his friends playing musical instruments.

By the time we were prepared to leave for Moscow, Igor was "very displeased" with my behavior. But he chose to mention his displeasure only to my tour leader, and left her to reprimand me.

Moscow is as cosmopolitan in appearance as London or New York, and I immediately felt more comfortable there than in Leningrad where the suspiciousness of its citizens seemed to me like that of members of a small town. A noticeable difference between Moscow and other major Western cities is the absence of skyscrapers and advertising; free water dispensers are situated on large public streets for anyone standing in the sun—it can become oppressively hot. A jacket was still necessary for the shade—a contrast in temperature that again reminds one of the moon.

Once inside my hotel lobby, where I was required to give up my passport upon registering (and therefore to "lose" identity when not with the tour group) I called the second artist who had written to my associate. V.M. spoke a far more servicable English than my Russian, and we agreed to meet that evening in the hotel lobby. I asked how I would recognize him, and he said, "I am thirty-three years, and I will be wearing an old skin." I imagined a young man, prematurely aged. In fact, V.M. arrived that evening wearing a worn leather coat.

We took a taxi to his modern apartment block where he lives with his wife, a social worker, and their pre-school-age son. By profession he is an art director for a technical publication, and that position allows him access to many Western art publications largely

unavailable to the Leningrad artists I had met.

V.M. had his "official" work and his "unofficial" work—the unofficial drawings were mostly editorial commentary in pen and ink (akin to the content of drawings by Brad Holland) and erotica. He said that his work outside the office was not considered "interesting" to the Soviet state, and also viewed as unproductive, but his imagination would not let him rest.

There were many traditional delicacies to be had at V.M.'s apartment: the May Day holiday brought a surplus of goods to the stores. He explained the significance of the ancient symbols on Vodka bottles to me, and discussed the importance of his work to his child, for V.M. wanted him to carry the memory of what was, what was vanishing, and also to imagine what could be.

At one point we discussed the salaries of art directors at comparable publications in the West, and when I translated the amounts into rubles, V.M. fell back on to the sofa in a near swoon.

He did not want to leave the Soviet Union—it is his home, and he wants to try to work there with all his capabilities. But he realizes that his work is not valued in the Soviet Union now, so he too must write letters to editors of foreign publications. To be denied any place to exhibit the products of artistic imagination is to suffer. V.M. told me about the bulldozing of an "unsanctioned" exhibition in a public park in Moscow.

It is 2 A.M. and V.M. must call a taxi for me. He also telephones the hotel and tells them that I am a Westerner that he has discovered carousing on the streets of Moscow; he does not wish for me to be endangered by explaining the real circumstances of our meeting, and he is concerned about the possible negative side-effects of my visit to his family, under what he believes to be the ever watchful eye of the state.

Igor did not find out about my late-night meeting with V.M., but throughout my visit in the Soviet Union, I found that people were impressed with the idea of surveillance, and the seemingly infinite number of K.G.B. members available for that purpose. It is a concept that has become a real and oppressive force, permeating the work I saw in Moscow and Leningrad, as the experience of incarceration often becomes the main focus of the artistic efforts of convicts and ex-convicts in this country.

I must say that I felt it too, but it seemed unreal to me in my experiential naivete, and it appeared most often in the underlying threat of madness within each artist's confrontation with non-existence through no exposure.

From the beginning of my visit, officials had referred to the isolation that the Soviet Union has experienced since its revolution, and its concern with the forces that threaten to disrupt the type of society it has produced. On a larger scale, one must remember the lives of the peasantry prior to the revolution, and the visible technological advances of the Soviet Union. It is when the individual "unofficial" artist is considered that one finds loss: an inability to procure materials for experimentation; a restrictive exhibition policy; and an intellectual and spiritual damper that the imagination can not accept.

### ANNOUNCEMENT

The 4th edition of Betty Chamberlain's *The Artist's Guide to His Market* has just appeared under the title *The Artist's Guide to the Art Market* (to eliminate sexism). The new version is not only updated, but also contains much new information on arts organizations: for photography, crafts, women, international studio exchanges, art in public places, religious art, computer-oriented art, and promotion for government support, among others. There are also additional data on foundation grants, art career opportunities, contracts, art insurance, IRS problems, art fakes and thefts, and new legislation governing editions of prints and sculpture. An annotated list of artist colonies and Artists-In-Residence is now supplied, and the useful List of Addresses is much enlarged. Published by Watson-Guption.