That the formation of the Moscow avant-garde milieu of the late 1950s and 1960s was stimulated by contacts with the West has long been recognized. However, the relations between this trend and Western art have yet to be mapped out. My approach will be first to adumbrate the ideology and structure of the Moscow avant-garde group (often called “underground” or “nonconformist”) as a response to impulses that came from the West, and then to analyze the ideas that this art induced in three major European art critics who visited Moscow in the mid- and late 1960s.

Cultural relations between the USSR and other countries during Khrushchev’s Thaw were governmentally supported and explicitly charged with political propaganda on both ends. These purposes, however, do not exhaust the content and meaning of the contact between the art worlds thus allowed. The Moscow public became acquainted with the contemporary art of the West through a series of traveling exhibitions, in which abstract expressionism presented the strongest challenge to the audiences.1 By the time these exhibitions

1 At the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 one could even see artists at work, among others Gary Coleman, who demonstrated the method of action painting: Igor Golomstok and Alexander Glezer,
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When abstract expressionism reached Moscow, abstract expressionism was no longer the newest artistic trend in America and the Western world, while more recent art, such as neo-Dada and other new developments were not exhibited at these shows. However, the exposure to the works of Pollock, Rothko and Motherwell at the American National Exhibition and abstract expressionism’s growing popularity in the world came like an explosion. My use of a military simile in this context is an intentional reference to the discourse on abstract expressionism as a “cultural Cold War” weapon. According to Max Kozloff and other scholars, the choice of abstract art to represent the US and its effect abroad had been calculated long before: this trend had conquered the world since 1940s, in no small measure because it figured prominently in traveling shows of American art which received institutional backing from the CIA and the UCIA. These agencies used this art for propaganda abroad, realizing that it was the first original American trend and that it could convey liberal ideas of individual freedom and free initiative. This background must be taken into account with the corrections suggested by Nancy Jachec. As she has shown, the overlapping of these institutional goals with the position of the artists who let these institutions promote their works was inevitably partial. This is true even when political ideals are concerned. As Jachec describes the development of the artists belonging to the milieu, the influence of existentialist philosophy led them to substitute a subjective vision and the creative act for the leftist ideology of collective political agency with which they formerly aligned themselves. Their transcendental approach to individual subjectivity still had a connotation of social critique or “private revolt” that was contiguous with the governmental liberal stance, but not identical with it.

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2 Jachec, Philosophy and Politics, Chapter 2. The interpretation of action painting as “private revolt,” is Harold Rosenberg’s.
People in the USSR responded to this complex political message with a vigorous ideological and aesthetic debate. Beyond the familiar problematic of representation in abstract art, its contemporary political and philosophical connotations featured prominently in Soviet discourse. Abstract expressionism’s embracing alienation and being in conflict with the outer world was noticed and mocked by official criticism, while abstract form’s potential for modernizing the environment was discussed by the left wing of the official Union of Artists. The connotations of political liberalism, the emphasis on the individual and the call for freedom of expression were taken up at the nonofficial left end of the spectrum.

Unavoidably, as soon as anything resembling a political spectrum appeared in Soviet culture, it was almost the mirror image of the Western system: thus, the position of the radical Soviet “left” intelligentsia did not correspond to the Western left, but to the anticommunist liberal stance. This must be taken into account when studying the nonofficial trend of Moscow “left artists” as they called themselves. By the mid- and late 1960s the trend already had a history and a certain number of achievements. Recently, an attempt has been made to map the nonofficial Soviet art scene, treating it inclusively and recording all the artists influenced by abstract expressionism. However, the critics who visited the Soviet Union in the 1960s described the “left” trend’s structure more or less unanimously in a different way. In their writing, the same relatively few personalities are mentioned as being active in Moscow and working differently in terms of the styles and techniques they used. Among them were painters,

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6 They were trying to make the abstract qualities of folk art and of architectural design their weapon in the struggle for the liberalization of the art scene. See S. Rappoport, “Abstraktnaja forma v dekorativno-prikladnom iskusstve i abstraktionizm,” Iskusstvo 9 (1959): 36–42.
8 Sharp, “Abstract Expressionism.”
sculptors and graphic artists, some of whose work was abstract, some figurative, and some halfway between the two—so their connection to the experience of abstract art, which they all admired, was not always in plain view. The artists themselves aver that the group was small and highly selective, and that adherence to American abstraction or to any other stylistic vein did not confer membership in it. Rather, in order to be recognized, artists had to demonstrate a coherent artistic individuality, to show their ability to produce an idiom independent of external influences. To practice tachism or action painting as such was deemed inferior.10

All the artists of the “left” signed up to the requirement of individuality. It is here that the influence of American abstract expressionism is most evident, and where the American artists became their models. The political outlook of the “left” was complex and intertwined with their artistic ideology. The artists for the most part denied the political meaning of their work altogether, in order to distinguish their position from that of the collective agency of the dissidents. But the political meaning was there to be found, in an implicit or encoded form. They offered their individualistic freedom in opposition to the collectivist ideology of communist society, and art was the medium through which their “private revolt” was best pursued. Within their art each of these artists strove to create a “signature style” of sorts. To be read as authentic, this idiom was to be connected to the artist’s persona and his or her unconscious, or rationalized, subjectivity, which would then be revealed in idiosyncratic behavior, or in a personal philosophy. The group was famous for both the inimitable conduct of some of its members and the philosophical interests and metaphysical quests pursued by others. Michail Grobman whose work was highly personal in meaning as well as in style, may serve as an example. Since the mid-1960s his imagery contained a built-in philosophical narrative derived from the amalgamation of Malevitch’s theories with Jewish Cabbala, about the energy of creation present in the avant-garde image. Grobman’s pictographic, semi-figurative style combined geometry with biomorphic motifs, often representing the very act of Creation.11 The “sub-

11 His openly declared Jewish identity was also a unique “signature” stance in the cultural milieu of Moscow. For Grobman’s theories, see “Leviathan. Manifesty I Fragmenty,” Zerkalo 19–20 (2002): 193–212.
We can therefore say that the theme shared by modernist artistic milieus on both sides of the Iron Curtain was that of the freedom of the individual. While the American artists were exploring and glorifying subjectivity proper, their Moscow colleagues, 15 to 20 years later, merged this subjective content with impulses that came from various other traditions. Individual freedom and liberation from collective politics and from mass mentality remained one of the central topics of art on both sides for the remainder of the century. However, since the 1960s this philosophy that underpinned the left avant-garde practices in both the East and West was, as I mentioned earlier, connected to the different, if not completely reversed political agendas of
each side, which made the premises they shared not easily recognizable on the opposite side. This political difference was like a transparent screen substituted for the former curtain. Looking through it, most of the critics who wrote on the Moscow “left” and described its complex relations with the official Soviet art world rarely felt the relevance of this topic to their own concerns.

Unlike them, the three writers whom I will discuss below found that the Moscow group was important in their theoretical quest to define the current artistic situation. It was a moment when formalist avant-garde art went through its crisis and new radical art practices appeared that rejected art objects altogether. The idea of the “end of art” was often heard. What these three critics saw in Moscow became a part of the discussion of the role and the future of art in contemporary society. The conclusions they reached were mixed—for Michel Ragon and John Berger their Moscow essays were among their last art-critical writings proper. Ragon went on to focus mainly on architecture, while Berger’s next important work was *Ways of Seeing* (1972), one of the first theoretical post-WWII books presenting the visual arts from a neo-Marxist perspective, emphasizing the social function of images.12

The success of *Ways of Seeing* was due to Berger’s Marxist premises that were in many points consonant with the philosophy of the new art practices, for conceptual artists also referred to hidden ideology expressed through images. They renounced making art objects in order to impede the commodification of art by the capitalist art market, thus reaffirming the critique that had been advanced by Berger in the 1950s in his articles for the New Statesman. The main character of Berger’s very first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), also called his paintings “another commodity that nobody needs,” and claimed that art collectors had usurped the privilege of looking at works of art by purchasing them for money, while the real addressees of art are men of action, or “heroes.” Berger presented as unavoidable the artist’s alienation from society by market forces. By making his character give up painting, return to political activity and die in Hungary in 1956, Berger actually foresaw the “end of art” of the 1960s. His solution to this cul-de-sac, which he stuck to even years later, was to break out of the confines of the West, as his character did. Thus, in the mid-1960s, in his monograph on Picasso, Berger returned

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2. The Moscow Underground Art Scene

to the idea that artists must turn away from the nonheroic, capitalist world of goods consumers where even the most talented decline because they do not feel they have the addressees.\textsuperscript{13} Although Berger’s confidence that the late Picasso could find inspiration in the developing world was misplaced, his analysis was much more realistic when he extended it in the opposite geographical direction, to the Moscow left.

As a Marxist, Berger had visited Moscow several times, but he was not deceived by the official culture of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{14} In 1966 he discovered the “left” milieu at the peak of its activity, and was attracted by the artists’ particular form of political involvement. His first connection was with the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, in whom Berger found his ideal, an artist and a hero in the same person: Neizvestny fought and had nearly been killed in WWII, and later confronted Khrushchev at the Manège exhibition of 1962. Berger wrote a book about Neizvestny, which turned him—purposefully or not—into the opposite of Picasso. While the leitmotif of Berger’s book on Picasso was that after cubism he always had trouble finding significant subjects, in his interpretation of Neizvestny, Berger emphasized the sculptor’s obsession with the urgent subject of the human body under the new conditions of modern warfare and the paradoxical reversal of the traditional humanistic idea of heroism in his works.\textsuperscript{15}

In his article “The Unofficial Russians” (1966) in the \textit{Sunday Times Magazine}, Berger explicitly compared the situation of art in Moscow and in the West. He began his essay from what he saw as the hedonistic and purposeless approach to art-making in London. The Moscow “left” milieu, in comparison, thrived in an atmosphere of ambitious aspiration. Whether artists strove to show the human body from within, or composed a thesaurus of secondary images, or revealed the incongruity of commonplace situations, their art was filled with purpose: “Art for art’s sake they call ‘professional’ and despise,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{16} Beyond the reach of art market mechanisms and in the absence of state support, their modernist work had a genuine social connection. This fas-

\begin{itemize}
\item[14] As he wrote, he gave up his former “polarized dogmatism” after the Hungarian and Polish uprisings. See John Berger, \textit{Permanent Red} (London: Methuen, 1960), 8.
\item[16] Berger “Unofficial Russians,” 51.
\end{itemize}
cinated Berger, who saw their work as important art by definition, because, as he wrote, “what matters, is the need that art answers.”\textsuperscript{17} At the end of the article he formulated his view of the main purpose of this art movement as a whole. The official style of Soviet art, he wrote, was created out of fear of the unrecognizable and of changing reality, and it enchanted the masses with a naturalistic, recognizable, finished world, while the artists of the Moscow left presented the public with “an exercise in mutual responsibility toward the unfinished nature of all experience.”\textsuperscript{18} This conclusion is similar to the postmodern artistic critique of the culture industry (to which socialist realism is implicitly compared), years before this criticism was made.

Ragon, too, was looking for a balance between the inherent content of art and its social function when he visited Moscow, but he wrote a strikingly different account of what he saw, because his philosophy and position in the art world were different. He was mainly connected to Art Informel and to other trends that developed out of the denial of the old Paris School and of cubism. His major book, \textit{25 ans d'art vivant} (1969), reflects his appreciation of modernism with romantic and expressionist origins as well as his growing anxiety about its future. In the final chapters, he wrote that \textit{art vivant} can and should integrate into the social milieu and speak to people not only from its elitist position. He approved of its inclusion in the urban environment and of its merging with scientific approaches, while explicitly criticizing the growing tendency of introducing social content and social action into art. He was particularly interested in kinetic art and in its ability to create public spectacle while keeping qualities of abstraction. Ragon’s visit to Moscow in 1971 was connected to his interest in the kinetic group Dvizhenie, on which he wrote a special essay for \textit{Cimaise}. Lev Nusberg, its leader, gave him a wider perspective on Moscow art, providing him with information and insights that Ragon used immediately in his book \textit{L'art: pour quoi faire?} (1971).

This book was largely devoted to his explicit polemics with the radical trends of the 1960s. As sociological background he provided a despairing view of technocratic civilization, in which true art and culture had been displaced by different types of entertainment and to which the socialist society of the USSR, with its declared support of culture, provided no alternative, as

\textsuperscript{17} Berger, \textit{Art and Revolution}, Preface.
\textsuperscript{18} Berger "Unofficial Russians," 61.
Soviet socialism was created in the same spirit of bourgeois technocracy. If art’s displacement from contemporary life was not enough, it was condemned to death by the Western art world itself that agreed that art was coming to its end. The new art trends, which he saw as directly involved in political contest, were subject to the problems of subversive political movements, such as the spirit of conformism and isolation from society at large. In sum, this “cultural guerrilla” was in his view another of the symptoms of the technocratic “conspiracy” against culture, not its antidote. Because of their inherent similarity, artists who pursued a radical “anticareer” finally became enmeshed in
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the same institutions as those who had pursued a nonantagonistic career. In Ragon’s view, the substitution of political contest for art was a mistaken strategy, because art was capable of creating un monde autre, which is the only true revolutionary opposition to technocracy.

In his essay devoted to Moscow art, “Peinture et sculpture clandestines en U.R.S.S.” (1971), Ragon was mostly skeptical where Berger had been mostly enthusiastic in describing the individualistic politics of the Moscow “left.” His article is full of mixed feelings. In L’art: pour quoi faire? he had already defined the Moscow left as “underground,” which for him meant a rebellious group excluding itself from society and developing its own cultural niche.19 In his Moscow essay he often sounds suspicious that the result of their rebellion is precisely a sort of “anticareer.” He opposes Berger implicitly by showing that Neizvestny was not sent to prison after the Manège affair but was invited to meet with Khrushchev in private, that he could sell his works to art collectors and have exhibitions abroad, in addition to Berger’s own monograph about him. He checked the living conditions of Ely Beliuin and Vladimir Yankilevsky, the two other participants in the Manège affair, and found that the first had an outstanding studio while the second made a living as a graphic artist. The work of several other artists he did not find really modern or avant-garde by his artistic standards, and he wrote that their political isolation was a mistake. Dvizhenie was for him the exception that proved the rule. In their case, he approved of the state support they received as they were allowed to perform at public events, while at the same time they were the only group in Moscow that had broken with easel painting.

True art, both Berger and Ragon assumed, had to be anticapitalist. Their sympathy with Moscow artists, who had the reverse political outlook, was made possible through a generalization of the negative effects of power in both political camps. The third critic, Jindřich Chalupecký, was an entirely other case. His early essay, “The Intellectual under Socialism” (1948), devoted to his experience of the revolution in Czechoslovakia, can serve as an introduction to the political philosophy of dissent on the socialist side of the curtain, as the reverse of that of the European

19 Ragon, L’art: pour quoi faire?, 88–89.
left. He showed that the hopeful expectations of the intelligentsia that socialism would eliminate “cultural indifference, social injustices and economic inequalities” were misplaced, for those who were liberated from oppression were not only oppressed again by the totalitarian socialist state, but also became oppressors of each other, and socialist power paralyzed intellectual life as a part of its political ideology. The discovery that it was not the power per se that obstructed human freedom, but something that still required analysis, brought him to the realization that freedom is an inner quality, not an external condition. His philosophy, influenced by German existentialism, led him to concentrate on art as a special liberating practice, and this position made him a kindred spirit of Moscow left artists.

Chalupecký visited the USSR in 1967 as a member of an official delegation of critics. His newspaper account of this visit concludes, unexpectedly, with a manifesto of sorts:

Art must return to its proper function, which is not to instruct or to correct life. . . . Its deepest purpose is to glorify life, to create the space where life can glorify itself. Art is to be made so that people may realize why life is worth living fully and entirely. Beyond logic and ethical concerns, this is art’s wisdom and mission.21

This passage opposed not only socialist realism, but also any type of art’s active engagement in social critique. Art’s social mission was to provide people with genuine life experiences which they, under their given circumstances and constraints, do not really have. Chalupecký saw this as the essential, inner way toward liberation.

One of the problems with Chalupecký’s position was that art escapes precise definition, and aestheticism has to adjust itself to the dynamic development of modern art’s forms. Chalupecký was aware of this, and dwelled on the dynamism and plurality of contemporary aesthetic experience, to the extent that he was even ready to drop the very word “artist” from his text when

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new forms of creativity, such as the technological performances of Dvizhenie, were discussed. However, his central Moscow experience was not Dvizhenie but the painter Vladimir Yakovlev, to whom he devoted an essay in the same year.

Yakovlev’s abstract and semi-abstract work was much in demand. Chalupecký estimated that he produced 3,500 works in ten years, of which only a small number remained in his hands. This amount of work he accomplished despite suffering from a severe eye disease. Half-blind and lacking basic living conditions, yet still producing influential art, it was his figure that gave rise to Chalupecký’s reflection on art’s nature and purpose. He wrote on art as the place of solution for the contradiction between transcendental freedom and its opposite, the world in which man physically lives. Yakovlev’s life was a metaphor for “the insatiable hunger that man’s freedom has for the world and that makes a man an artist.” Even Yakovlev’s worsening eyesight could not affect his production because sight is only one specialized sense in the synthetic action of the brain, which is an undifferentiated perception of “one’s presence in the world.” Yakovlev’s subtle paintings balance on “the imprecise limit between optic impression and pure event of color,” and are expressive precisely of these deep levels of an existential self “made visible” in his work. It is the precision of his intimations about these levels that drew viewers and fertilized a wide circle of artists. Chalupecký’s final words sum up his position:

The world is alien and presses on us, and we don’t know where to put our infinite freedom. But it’s not the world which is the problem. It is we who are half-blind, imperfect. . . . Yakovlev’s work is an itinerary of the soul, of its imprisoned blindness, of the sufferings of its struggle and of the liberation that is achieved within the world and not without it.

Guided by his philosophy of freedom as it is achieved through art, Chalupecký made long-lasting connections with artists grouped around Yakovlev. In his essay “Moscow Diary,” written after his private visit to Moscow in 1972, he again connected the aesthetic experience they sought to the

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22 Ibid.
feeling of mission: “They are involved in something which is no longer mere art, something far more precious than art and even more important than life itself.”

He was aware of the differences between this existential aestheticism and the leading tendencies in Western art in the early 1970s. One of his final remarks concerned Grobman’s emigration to Israel. “An artist who grew up in the Soviet Union, living in Israel or in Western Europe—how he can live there, for what? However parallel the artistic development in both parts of the world, the moral coordinates of artistic experience there and here are different.”

However, the gap between the two art worlds was not in fact unbridgeable. Things were changing rapidly. One of these changes was that the art market began its penetration of the Moscow scene. Foreigners began buying nonofficial art, and their demand influenced production. Grobman’s emigration was caused, in particular, by the sense that commercial art abounded and that the first momentum of the “left” was already exhausted. New and different artistic tendencies came to the fore afterward, and they were recorded by Chalupecký, who wrote about works in which social content began to surface. He found Eric Bulatov’s paintings similar with photorealism, and wrote of Ilya Kabakov’s work as “one of the most original and truly contemporary examples of current world art.” But would Kabakov’s existential tension in representing recognizably socialist reality be relevant for a viewer unfamiliar with this reality?

The answer to this and other questions can already be given. When Kabakov emigrated in 1987 he soon achieved great success. His different political outlook did not cause a problem, because he spoke to the Western world precisely about the Soviet life and mentality, the analysis of which became the main topic of his art. Grobman chose a more complex strategy of integration. He came to Israel with a political agenda, individualistic aesthetics and a personal philosophy based on Jewish mysticism, which were alien if not opposite to that of the Israeli left. In Israel his interest in Jewish heritage was

24 Chalupecký, “Moscow Diary,” 85.
25 This is why he now described these artists as pursuing the traditions of the Russian avant-garde rather than following Western trends.
26 Chalupecký, “Moscow Diary,” 85.
identified with the political right—yet he did not belong to that stream either. His choice thus put him in opposition to the entire local system of values, and he castigated Israeli mainstream art for its lack of originality, for following the paths well trodden in the West, and for its inability to create an idiom of modern art on the basis of Jewish thought.28 His reputation as an Israeli artist was established when he fulfilled this complex program with a small group of followers and retold his Cabalistic narrative on the energy of the Creation in the contemporary language of performance and photography.29

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