RUSSIAN ARTISTS/THAI ELEPHANTS: ART ON A GLOBAL SCALE

by Carter Ratcliff

In 1995, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid made the acquaintance of Renée, an elephant residing in the zoo in Toledo, Ohio. Since 1965, the artists had been collaborating with each other; now, they collaborated with Renee, joining her in the production of abstract paintings. “The elephant’s trunk is amazing,” says Komar. “Dexterous and sensitive. And, of course, elephants are extremely intelligent, so Renee had a really very impressive command of the brush.” Dazzled by her work, Komar & Melamid came to believe that a vast reservoir of elephant talent was going untapped. Within three years, they had founded The Asian Elephant Art & Conservation Project and established several Elephant Art Academies in Thailand. “Traditionally, Thai elephants were trained to work in the logging industry,” Melamid explains. “But that has been forbidden by the government—the forests were vanishing too quickly—so an entire population was thrown out of work. We gave them the opportunity to have a second career, to become artists.” After opening the first Elephant Art Academy, at Lampang, on the island of Phuket, Komar & Melamid launched another in the village of Ayutthaya.

Born in Moscow during the Second World War, Komar & Melamid’s education prepared them to produce Socialist realist art in the official Soviet manner. Rebelling, they joined the dissident underground and showed their work in unsanctioned exhibitions. The youth section of the Moscow Union of Artists expelled them in 1974. Then, they lost their membership in the Graphic Artists’ Organization. As their careers took one risky turn after another, Komar and Melamid grew uneasy. In 1977, they managed to escape the Soviet Union. Settling in the United States the following year, they became American citizens a decade later.

Although Komar and Melamid had been objects of official disfavor in the Soviet Union, the Russia that emerged from the dissolution of the USSR was more forgiving, even welcoming. Invited to display new work in the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in June 1999, they offered a selection of elephant paintings from the academies of Thailand. Later that summer, the artists traveled to the Balinese village of Toro and established a third Elephant Art Academy. And in Kerala, a city in the south of India, they have introduced an elephant to painting. “His name is Ganesh,” Melamid says. “He is one of the most productive, and a wonderful painter. A real star.” In all, Komar & Melamid report, they have inspired twenty or twenty-one elephants to become painters.

The word “academy” might tempt us to see these elephant-artists as pupils. Yet, Komar & Melamid offer no course of instruction. They simply provide the elephants with materials and wait to see what happens. “Only a few elephants like to paint,” says Komar. “Perhaps ten or twenty percent. But the ones that do like it can’t be stopped, so we really don’t have to do anything except give them materials and the idea. The elephants do the rest.” The artists in Komar & Melamid’s academies are more like collaborators than pupils, it seems, and yet, how is this possible? What does it mean for animals to collaborate with humans in the production of art? To answer that question, we need to recall what sort of collaborators Komar & Melamid have been during the past three and a half decades.

They met in 1963, at Moscow’s Stroganov Institute, a five-year college of art and design. “The idea, of course, was to learn to be proper Socialist realists,” Melamid recalls. “But Socialist realism was not one, unified thing. There were ambiguities, a certain latitude. So, for example, the

drawing and painting department of the institute was not very interesting. But the design department was different, more open to Western influences." Both students were highly talented. When Komar and Melamid graduated in 1967, it would have been easy—or convenient—to pursue the careers for which they had been trained. The Soviet regime provided comfortable places for artists willing to illustrate the Marxist-Leninist version of reality. In earlier decades, artists unwilling to perform this task would have been summarily suppressed. This was impossible during the seventies, in part because the Soviet Union's policies on human rights had come under newly intense scrutiny from the West.

Dissident artists and writers became a favorite topic among journalists in Europe and the United States. Komar & Melamid were particular favorites, singled out as rebels who were not only courageous but engaging. This interest was entirely warranted, yet Western journalists missed an important point. Unlike other members of Moscow's art underground, they did not rebel in the name of individuality. Their rebellion was a joint effort, the work not of Vitaly Komar, on one hand, and Alex Melamid on the other, but of an organization known from the outset as Komar & Melamid. From the beginning, they defied the traditional notion—current, even, in the collectivist society of the Soviet Union—that art is the product of an inspired individual.

Fully elaborated, the ideal of artistic individuality insists that inspiration flourishes only in isolation. Thus, we expect the artist to be lonely, perhaps even tormented by a solitude that never can be truly alleviated, not even when the artist emerges from the studio to confront the adulation of the ordinary world. The loneliness of the studio imparts a glamorous aura to any individual willing to endure it. Nonetheless, Komar and Melamid chose to become collaborators. In their eyes, the melancholy and yet privileged isolation of the artist looks less like a hallowed tradition than a tattered cliché—and they had no tolerance for clichés

When Komar and Melamid were young, conventional wisdom defined the world with a set of clear-cut oppositions: East vs. West, collectivism vs. individuality, propaganda vs. pure art, and so on. The two artists found these patterns unconvincing. Intuitively, they understood that one side of a Cold War dichotomy could have its meaning only as a simple reversal of the other side. Thus, to defy collectivist ideals in the name of individuality would have been an empty gesture—an exchange of one banality for another. Rather than flaunt the virtues of individual freedom in the face of bad institutions, Komar & Melamid made a more oblique and interesting move. They established a series of good institutions. The first was their partnership.

The next was TransState, which the artists inaugurated on May 14, 1977. Having renounced their Soviet citizenship to become citizens of this new nation, they supplied it with a Provisional Constitution, a language, a currency, and a procedure for issuing passports. Defined as "a federation of free and independent state-individuals," TransState was an imaginary place where Komar & Melamid could find refuge from "the Powers of Darkness" and preserve "the independence and autonomy of the individual." Phrases like these do not claim the transcendent privileges of the creative self; rather, TransState was founded on a respect—perhaps a yearning—for the individuality of the ordinary citizen in a bourgeois democracy. A work of conceptual art in the form of a utopian fantasy, TransState is an oblique and witty argument to the effect that individuality is of value—more than that, it can have a credible existence—only with the help of favorable institutions. A year after inventing TransState, Komar & Melamid were permitted to immigrate to Israel.

During the previous decade, they had augmented the history of Russia with the invention of two artists. The first was Nikolai Buchumov, an early twentieth-century painter whose fidelity to the revolutionary demand for truth prompted him to record, at the edge of every canvas, the portion of his nose that intruded upon his field of vision. Their second imaginary painter was Apelles Ziablov, a serf so inept and so resistant to proper academic instruction that he could produce nothing but smears of color, which, by our standards, have the charm of airy, light-filled abstractions. Behind the accounts of art historians stand the institutions of art history—museums, university departments, specialized publishing houses. With these imaginary artists, Komar &

Melamid implied an imaginary art-historical establishment, one with the wit to accept Buchumov and Ziablov as real.

In 1978, Komar & Melamid traveled to the island of Crete and, with much fanfare, excavated the supposed bones of the Minotaur, the monster who once lived at the heart of Daedalus's labyrinth. Thus, they gave a notional reality to the labyrinth, to genetic possibilities realizable only in myth, and to archaeological institutions disposed to take their findings seriously. In the United States, their institution-building continued with Komar & Melamid, Inc., a bureau for the buying and selling of souls. In the course of three and a half years, they traded nearly a thousand souls, including Andy Warhol's, which he put on the market free of charge. In 1979, Komar & Melamid included Warhol's soul in a lot of ten, which they auctioned off, over the telephone, to buyers in Moscow. From their collaboration, Komar & Melamid had generated an extraordinary array of institutional entities—governmental, academic, commercial. This institution-building suggests that their partnership incorporates an urge to expand. Another sign of this urge is their habit of expanding the partnership itself. In 1978, Komar & Melamid presented a performance piece entitled Canine Art (Teaching a Dog To Draw). Dipping a dog's paw in ink, they pressed it repeatedly to a sheet of drawing paper. The resulting pattern resembles the chicken bone that lay in front of the dog as he worked. One could argue that Komar & Melamid's canine collaborator did not understand the point of this procedure, that he was simply put through paces that could not possibly have meant to him what they meant to Komar & Melamid. The artists wanted to enlarge the possibilities of collaboration. The dog, presumably, just wanted to get along with his human friends. Matters, however, are different with Mickey, a chimpanzee from a Moscow circus, says Komar.
"At first, Mikki didn't understand the connection between clicking the shutter and the resulting picture," Komar recalls. "But, because we were using a Polaroid camera, the time between clicking and seeing is very short. Mickey soon understood what he was doing. He made excellent pictures of Moscow landmarks." With The People's Choice, Komar & Melamid engaged entire populations in the process of making "excellent pictures"—or pictures that the artists' collaborators liked. In 1994, they hired a public research firm to put one hundred questions about art history and aesthetic preferences to a statistically representative group of Americans. Guided by the results of this poll, they painted America's Most Wanted and America's Most Unwanted pictures. Then, they conducted similar polls in thirteen other nations, from China to Finland, and let the outcome guide the production of a global gallery of Most Wanted and Most Unwanted pictures.

"Next, we would like to collaborate on architectural projects with animals who build complex structures," says Komar. "Beavers, for example, and termites, but, of course, there are many bureaucratic obstacles. It is not easy to get permission to do architectural collaborations with animals living on land controlled by federal agencies. In the meantime, the Elephant Art Academies are doing very well." Melamid adds that "we want to cover the world with these academies, to have thousands of elephants making art every day. This is our dream, to have the output of elephant art be as voluminous as the output of human art. Why not? Asia is crowded with unemployed elephants. And we are interested not only in setting up more production lines, the production should become a commodity. Some elephant paintings have been sold locally, and the proceeds are used to meet the needs of the elephants. But we want this work to be accepted in the international market. That was the purpose of the auction conducted by Christie's last March, in New York—to put the elephant artists on the same plane as human artists. Of course, there will always be differences. Unlike humans, elephants will never be corrupted by the market. They make art with a truly innocent eye."

With the Elephant Art Academies, Komar & Melamid not only enlarge their partnership to include other artists, they create new institutions. Therefore, the two expansive impulses of their collaboration become one. Moreover, they are seeking new collaborators and laying plans for new, ever more unlikely institutions. From within their world, all their projects make perfect sense. Then, when one steps outside that world, certain questions arise with screaming insistence. For instance, is a painting by an elephant really a work of art in any plausible sense of the phrase?

There is no doubt that the products of the Elephant Art Academies not only look like artworks but artworks of a certain kind—painterly abstractions, to affix a familiar label. As Melamid says, "The Americans made elephant painting possible, with their abstract expressionism. Before Jackson Pollock and the others, it wouldn't have been so easy to talk of elephant painting." Some elephants send paint over the surface with a boldness that brings to mind the abstractions of Franz Kline, although the elephantine touch tends to be more sinuous, less architectural, than Kline's. In some elephant paintings, colors are entangled with a lush complexity reminiscent of Philip Guston's abstractions—but no more than reminiscent. Each elephant has a style, a painterly manner, entirely his or her own. What are we to make of that? Or, feeling our bafflement full force, we might ask just what the elephants think they are doing?

It is comforting, at this point, to take up a formalist stance and say that the elephants' motives do not matter. The elephant paintings are to be judged apart from any question of authorship and intention, as if they were natural phenomena—textures left in the sand by waves, for instance, or striations left in marble by the formation of the earth's crust. To be consistent anti-intentionalist formalists, we would have to put the Mona Lisa, too, in the category of natural phenomena, and this is not satisfactory. Nor does any formalist expect us to do that. Even those of the Greenbergian variety acknowledged intention in a roundabout way, taking it from painters and giving it to an imaginary entity called "painting"—the medium itself, which the Greenbergian critics endowed with an urge to undergo the stylistic changes that would reveal its true essence.
More than a half-century ago, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley devised a formalism as strict as the Greenbergian, but less fanciful. In "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), they argue that one must attend to "works of art as such," and thus resist the temptation to look for clues to meaning in artists' lives or statements of purpose. In the struggle to understand what a poem means as a poem, biographies and manifestos are of no use. Yet, Wimsatt and Beardsley saw that if a poem is to count as a literary artifact, one must understand it as having been intended. Otherwise, the poem sinks to the level of natural things, and whatever meaning it may have evaporates. Unless imbued with intention, words are gibberish, so Wimsatt and Beardsley invented "the dramatic speaker"—a fictional character, not to be confused with the actual author of the poem, who charges its words with intention. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, a poem succeeds, in part, by supplying readers with the means to construct an appropriate "speaker." Presumably, a successful painting does something equivalent, encouraging the viewer to extrapolate from the painted image another, less tangible one: the fictive painter who may, plausibly, be supposed to have intended this particular painting. Thus, the appeal to externals—biographical detail, statements of purpose—is effectively blocked, and the need for intention is fully met. This is all very well when we stand before a drip painting by Jackson Pollock. Clearly, the loops and splashes of paint that fill the canvas are not random, they are intended. Yet, it is just as clear that no art historian or biographer has distilled a satisfactory account of Pollock's intention from the dispiriting record of his life and personality. The Pollock known to history is not convincing as the creator of his best canvases.

The disparity between the hapless, everyday Pollock and his brilliant unprecedented works is troubling enough to prompt a hypothesis: Working at the top of his form, Pollock became another person, one that no biographical examination can reveal. We can know this other, better Pollock only by knowing his art. To know art is to grapple with it imaginatively. In the course of that grappling, we charge it with meaning, and, because meaning must be intended, we imagine, as well, a person with suitable intentions: a fictive figure of the artist. We do this—consciously or not—in every instance, not only when artists seem incapable of their achievements.

Willem de Kooning was both a brilliant person and painter, yet one sees his paintings as the work of an imaginary figure because one must. There is no plausible way to forge an explanatory link between his mind, which is unknowable, and his art. We derive his intentions from the art itself, as the very texture of his paint helps us to do. Sophisticated art teems with cues useful to the imagination as it devises not merely a plausible but an illuminating figure of the artist. Nonetheless, illumination depends on plausibility, and we can invent a convincing figure of the artist only from art that we have good reason to believe was made by someone like us—a

member of our culture. That is why we are cautioned to go slowly in trying to make sense of medieval art, for instance, or the art of ancient Egypt. Its maker didn't share our assumptions about the world—or about the individual's place in it—and so our attribution of an intention, hence, of meaning, is likely to falter. How much more awkward is our faltering when we are faced with a painting by an elephant.

If we push ourselves to extremes of empathy and historical expertise, we may be able to imagine our way to a plausible sense of ancient Egyptian intentions. But, as charming as an elephant may be—and Komar & Melamid report that they are completely smitten by their collaborators—we cannot empathize with the animal. We have no idea what elephants are doing—that is, no idea of what they intend to do—when they take brush in trunk and make marks on a sheet of paper or a canvas. As I already suggested, the results may remind us of works by Franz Kline or Philip Guston. An elephant's style may suggest André Masson or Henri Michaux. Yet, it would require naïveté of the most willful kind to suppose that these stylistic resemblances give us any idea of what the elephants are up to when they paint, or what their paintings mean.

It is difficult to elude our usual habits of looking. The knowledge that an elephant was the author of a certain image is not enough to prevent us from seeing it, understanding it, as the work not of a trunk but a hand. We do not have any other way to make sense of the painterly painting that emerges from the Elephant Art Academies. And, so, we have no practical use for the knowledge that certain paintings are the work of nonhumans. This fact simply loiters in the vicinity of elephant art, astonishing in its strangeness and grandeur but, finally, unassimilable. Our routines of interpretation have little flexibility. Exhibiting the work of their elephant collaborators simply as art, nothing more and nothing less, Komar & Melamid encourage us to see how narrowly, how securely, our interpretive routines enclose us. If we puzzle over the elephantine origins of these paintings, it is only for a moment, and, a moment later, we find ourselves comparing and categorizing these works, liking and disliking them, exactly as if they had emerged from the studios of human painters.

Nonetheless, it may be possible, for an exalted instant, to see an elephant painting as animated by an elephant's intention—or, rather, to gather from the painting some notion of how vast one's ignorance of such an intention must necessarily be. Say that one likes the painting, say that one loves it. Can this love survive the understanding that one will never be able to read a plausible meaning into the object of one's love? By introducing the art of elephants into the world of human art, Komar & Melamid suggest that, yes, it can survive. Moreover, they prompt us to think about the links between love and unknowing. In helping us to sense and come to terms with the incorrigible otherness of elephants, they tease us into wondering if human artists are no less ungraspably alien than Komar & Melamid's collaborators.

In imagining one's way to the meaning of a human's painting, one is never sure of being right. In fact, it is impossible to be right or wrong about the meanings of art or the intentions of artists. As I have suggested, one's conclusions about these matters can be, at most, agreeable to received opinion. Agreeableness of that sort produces no more than plausibility. Acknowledge that, and all certainties about art evaporate, no matter how solemnly they may be certified by theory and institutional authority. Familiar judgments and interpretations acquire the shimmer of distant mirages. As for our hope of defining art, Komar & Melamid and their elephant collaborators have crushed it. In taking away that hope, they help us see that the nature of art is utterly mysterious.
t still seems possible to say this much: Works of human art tend to allude to other works by humans. There is a tradition that, early in the twentieth century, was turned, rather heavy handedly, into a theme. Marcel Duchamp created a work of art by drawing a mustache on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Robert Rauschenberg's silk-screened Mona Lisas paid homage to Leonardo and Duchamp. Then, Andy Warhol produced his Mona Lisas. Talking of art-about-art, critics and curators invented a new genre, which is thought, sometimes, to include certain projects by Komar & Melamid. It makes a certain sense to say that America's Most Wanted and America's Least Wanted are works of art about art, and if we see the Elephant Art Academies as

artworks—artworks that generate more artworks—then, they, too, are examples of art-about-art. Yet, the phrase fits uneasily.

Well within the boundaries of the artworld, art-about-art makes its way by addressing self-referential witticisms to artworld initiates. Relying on the deeply ingrained assumptions of its audience, art-about-art leaves those assumptions questioned. Komar & Melamid, by contrast, are compulsive questioners—and incorrigibly restless. Ranging far beyond the artworld, they throw all our assumptions about art up into the air and give us no idea where, if anywhere, they will ever return to the solid ground of common sense. In challenging our aesthetic certainties, Komar & Melamid show them up for the merest plausibilities. By giving us a chance to see that we have nothing plausible to say about an elephant painting, even if we find it enthralling, they bring us face to face with the unknowability not only of elephants but of ourselves.