NEW ART FROM THE SOVIET UNION: THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN. By *Norton Dodge* and *Alison Hilton*. Washington, D.C. and Mechanicsville, Md.: Acropolis Books and Cremona Foundation, 1977. 127 pp. Illus. $14.50, cloth. $7.95, paper. (Available from the Cremona Foundation, Inc., Mechanicsville, Maryland 20659).

New Art from the Soviet Union—as a touring exhibition and catalog—has undertaken the unenviable task of presenting the Western public with a representative view of postwar vanguard art from a nation where individual tendencies seem to be trampled at every turn, where carrying photographs, let alone actual works, out of the country is often impossible, and where the artists themselves frequently retreat from sight in fear of government harassment. This book certainly conveys the repressive atmosphere and consequently insular character of the contemporary art scene in the Soviet Union. Together, the eight essays (by different authors) that make up this volume touch on the half-dozen highlights in the history of official Soviet rapport with unofficial art since the Second World War. The book's primary subject, however—the art and artists—has been treated ineptly. Three articles survey the work by region—two decades of art in Moscow, Leningrad, and Estonia, respectively. Three essays stylistically group new Soviet art into surrealist art, nonobjective art, and "conceptual" and "Pop" movements. The last chapter predicts the future of Soviet art.

The awkwardness of the book results from more than the disorganization of the essays and a tendency to dwell on the deplorable working atmosphere while failing to talk about the art itself. The most important problem with this catalog is a pervasive but implicit pair of assumptions: that unofficial art is avant-garde and that the most gifted artistic talents naturally gravitate to avant-garde circles. Every moment in history seems to have certain central moral and intellectual preoccupations; these questions characterize the cultural activity of that place and time. With the Constructivists, for example, this concerned the implementation of utopian social visions. With contemporary American art it may have to do with the implications of a runaway technology and mass culture. The concept of the bohemian avant-garde fits the young Picasso and the first wave of Abstract Expressionism. It does not describe David, Rodin, nor, in my opinion, the most innovative current American tendencies. Similarly, it may not be the wellspring of new artistic talent in the Soviet Union.

In any case, creating art (at its highest level) is an intellectual activity that involves finding visual metaphors for the things that are most deeply felt in a society. In these feelings the artist has a great deal in common with his fellow man. Through empathy, all art serves as a vicarious experience of something meaningful. In addition, Russian art has had a long tradition of carrying a "message" that intends to affect the viewer's perception of real events—from Russian icons, through Constructivism, to Socialist Realism. This tradition, as Susan Burke points out in her catalog essay, helped dispose Russians toward Socialist Realism. John Bowlt suggests in his article that the continued dominance of the principles set out in 1934 (when Socialist Realism was declared the only viable means for writers, artists, and musicians) indicates a national disposition toward this line of thinking. This may boil down to anti-intellectualism on the part of the general public. But it may also reflect a deep commitment to wrestling with the social questions of contemporary Russia (whether one agrees with the ideology or not), and it may turn out that because of this conviction the most interesting new talent will rise out of the otherwise aesthetically appalling refuse heap of Socialist Realism.

At the very least, it is necessary to point out that most unofficial Soviet art is low in quality and interest and that its resemblance to Western styles of the recent (or not so recent) past suggests a lack of authentic rapport between this art and the real

sensibilities of its time and place. Contemporary Moscow is clearly not like present-day New York—ethically, politically, or artistically. Thus, even if a Soviet artist produces a stylistically competent Abstract Expressionist or Surrealist painting, it cannot derive from the same ideological impulse and carry the same meaning. Insofar as such a work borrows an established Western style (without reinventing it in Russian terms), it obscures its own originality behind the implications belonging to the borrowed language. For this reason I firmly agree with John Bowlt, who finally admits that "unofficial art in the Soviet Union has produced little of permanent aesthetic worth" (p. 21).

A few artists (Komar and Melamid, the Gerlovins, and perhaps Kabakov and Povovarov) are making contributions of interest. Some (for example, Nemukhin, Belutin, and Iankilevskii) at least display a considerable artistic sensibility, but the essays in the book do not illuminate their qualities enough to convey this impression. Instead, the essayists (Bowlt, Golomstock, and others) speculate on how the present situation possesses the key elements for a great flowering in the future. Comparisons are made with the derivative early phases of Malevich and others, prognostications are cast about the future relation of Soviet unofficial art to Western vanguardism. But as Paul Valery once pointed out, "the trouble with the future is that it isn't what it used to be."

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THE PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN THEATRE. By *Herbert Marshall.* Introduction by *Harold Clurman.* New York: Crown Publishers, 1977. xvi, 208 pp. Photographs. $14.95.

Few know the Soviet theater more intimately than does Herbert Marshall, and his *Pictorial History of the Russian Theatre* is a treasury of theatrical memorabilia. The book adds valuable visual material to already known historical information as well as detailed descriptions of many theatrical troupes in existence in the two cultural capitals of the USSR, Moscow and Leningrad.

The book contains over five hundred black-and-white photographs and prints of stage sets, play scenes, graphic works, and portraits of theater personalities. A short section summarizes the history of the theater up to the year 1900. The main part of the book discusses the histories of various theatrical endeavors in the two cultural capitals. Of priceless value are Professor Marshall's own photographs taken during his years in the Soviet theater which, happily, coincided with its best years, namely, the 1920s and early 1930s. A large portion of Marshall's photos was taken of the avant-garde productions, notably those in the Kamernyi, Vakhtangov, and Meyerhold Theaters. The narrative is unfortunately sprinkled with various minor inaccuracies—for example, Blok's *Showbooth* or, better, *Puppet Show* (*Balaganchik*) mistranslated as *Showman* (p. 127)—and some phrasing could have been better edited; but these factors should not detract from the general value of the book. This reader has never encountered such a rich collection of photographs in any volume on Russian theater, Soviet or otherwise. Herbert Marshall's commentary is seasoned with his opinions and recollections of this period.

The book is no doubt intended for a general rather than a specialized audience, but no Russian scholar should be without it. When it goes out of print, it will become a collector's item.

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