

# Umbrella

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## RUSSIAN SAMIZDAT ART: 1960-1982

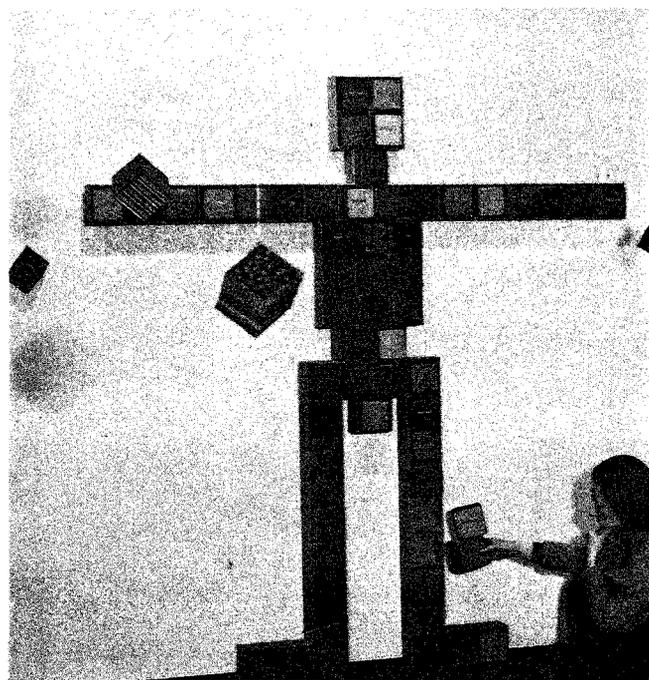
Franklin Furnace in New York City is giving the public a rare opportunity to view Russian Samizdat Art, curated by Rimma and Valery Gerlovin. The chance to see and experience handmade books and artworks made by Russian artists since the 1960s, who used these as the only outlet to express their aesthetic and political ideals is unique. These "samizdat" or self-published bookworks were a phenomenon begun in the 1960s, illegally printed and chain-distributed in the Soviet Union as well as works by those Russian artists who continue "samizdat" in the West by various means. The exhibition includes work by 28 artists, reflecting a rich period of self-publishing in the Soviet Union. These works are collected by people throughout the world as another aspect of bookmaking, not in the avant-garde book tradition, but a way of getting an aesthetic and political work out to a larger audience than in the repressed society of Russia and the Eastern European countries.

The curators, emigrés to America themselves, feel that the cultural artifact which is the samizdat book is completely independent of any outside influence, involving no censorship whatsoever, since each work consists of typed or hand-written carbons, in an edition of 2 to 12 copies. Printing equipment of any kind including copying machines is illegal in the repressed Russian society, so that each copy is passed from hand to hand accompanied by discussion and recommendation. Distribution is always dangerous, especially of handmade books if they are ever seen in public places. With that repressive social situation, there is a binding force in the artistic and poetry community, so that the challenge that this represents creates a stimulus for creativity.

The exhibition which opened on 24 February and remains available through 17 April is unique also because there is no way of showing handmade book objects in Russia. It is against the law. Among the artists are Henry Khudyakov (b. 1930) who did his first bookwork in 1963, typed on onion skin paper on the typewriter (10 copies), with a manifesto from his own "publishing company," and handwritten commentary. Visual poems are his medium, and his fame has spread. He now lives in New York, where he emigrated in 1974, and makes non-verbal symbolic objects, such as suits.

Vagrish Bakhchanyan (b. 1938) is a performance in himself, using books and mail art as his documentation. He was the first who deliberately started the wave of bookobjects and developed his medium of general production, doing a Book of Tobacco with real tobacco for pages, or toilet-paper book, with pages of that medium. On his mail art, he puts the label "Vagrish Bakhchanyan, President Reagan's Advisor on Mail-Art." His work is based on paradox, writing menus, obituaries, dreams and orders.

Other artists in the exhibition show collaboration—artists



**RIMMA GERLOVIN: The Man** with poets, photographers and musicians, as reflected in the collaboration of the curators of the show in book media. Rimma's "box-housed" poems done from cardboard, covered with colored fabric, with text inside and outside, allow the viewer to participate and change the meaning of the message by manipulating the cubes, turning them over, creating a new sense. *A Man*, a six-foot structure, consists of soft-covered boxes with bells inside bearing inscriptions on every side from positive to negative, and the viewer/participant is supposed to create his own ideal person.

The Gerlovins tell us that now in Moscow there are popular book-performances, such as those of the Moscow "Collective Action Group", a group of three artists who in 1979 laid on the snow about 20 handmade colored books, which participants and spectators decomposed further as these books consisted of different colored square-shaped loose pages with a concrete poetry text. Other groups and collaborators use books in their works, such as political artists Komar and Melamid.

The Gerlovins on the night of the opening did a performance/action in which they both threw out to the group of spectators and guests tickets, visas to Franklin Furnace, small handmade cardboard books entitled *Russian Yellow Pages 1982*, as well as a sheet of paper which Valery threw down to the spectators, entitled "Compressed Russian spirit concentrated in a ■ suitable for transplantation."

## UNDERGROUND MAGAZINES

In addition to bookworks, at the end of the 1960s, many new underground art magazines began to appear in the art community, at first in single editions, and then handmade art periodicals like the magazine *Aeronautic* in 1973, where artists were asked to do a page dedicated to the theme of aeronautics and Valery Gerlovin did the cover with a kinetic title.

A new magazine, *Kolkhoz* (Collective Farm, 1981, 150 ed.) is based on the contribution of Russian artists living in Moscow and in New York. Many pages are designed by hand, and the cover of the first issue has a red hanging label "Keep in Front" with a gold star that makes it look like an epaulet. This first issue, available at Printed Matter or from the curators, Rimma & Valery Gerlovin, 302 Spring St., New York, NY 10013 is a stunning document of interpretations of Russian artists now living in New York and pages contributed by Russian artists living in the Soviet Union. This is a true *samizdat* publication, but this time it is available for

\$25.00 in an edition of 150. Future editions will be international. Write to the Gerlovins for copies and more information.

The announcement for this exhibition, the third in a series of four presented in the 1981-82 season by Franklin Furnace devoted to bookworks from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, is also a work of art, a montage of photographs from the exhibition, folded in such a way to make a self-mailer, stunningly printed in red and black, with a gold star above the return address.

An exhibition catalog or checklist is also available from Franklin Furnace or from the Gerlovins that covers the entire exhibition.

The exhibition is inspiring, showing the undaunting spirit of artists who must get their ideas across in bookworks which become vital and resourceful for all artists and people everywhere. A detailed article by the curators describing this movement in the USSR will be published in *Flue*, vol. II, no. 2, which will appear in the spring. Write to Franklin Furnace, 112 Franklin St., New York, NY 10013 for further information.

