

Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
71 Hamilton Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1248
TEL 848.932.7237
FAX 732.932.8201
www.zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu



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For Immediate Release

Zimmerli Art Museum to Present First US Retrospective of Radical Soviet Conceptual Artist Vagrigh Bakhchanyan

***Accidental Absurdity* to feature key works from the museum's unparalleled collection of
nonconformist art from the Soviet Union**

New Brunswick, NJ—October 6, 2015—On October 17, the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers will present the first US retrospective on the groundbreaking work of Soviet conceptual artist Vagrigh Bakhchanyan (1938-2009), whose incisive critiques of Soviet propaganda led to unlikely success and an embrace in Soviet popular culture that remains relevant to this day. *Accidental Absurdity* will feature approximately 80 works from the artist's multidisciplinary oeuvre, including prints, collages, literary compositions, and conceptual performances, all of which highlight the humor that guided Bakhchanyan's artistic experimentations. The exhibition will remain on view through March 6, 2016, and the Zimmerli will serve as the only US venue for this unprecedented presentation.

Using image transference and manipulation, wordplay, and parody to challenge the government mandated Socialist Realist style, Bakhchanyan played a crucial role in many major Russian art movements. The exhibition traces the full arc of Bakhchanyan's career, from the early work that led him to flee his hometown of Kharkov, in Soviet Ukraine, in the mid-1960s, to the years spent in Moscow, when he came to prominence and notoriety for upending artistic expectations, and through to his practice in New York, where he moved to find the personal and artistic freedom he had long sought.

The majority of the material on view will be drawn from the Zimmerli's Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union—the largest and most comprehensive collection of dissident Soviet art in the world, and which includes the work of such notables as Ilya Kabakov, Victor Pivovarov, Vitaly Komar, and Alexander Melamid. The Collection includes approximately 200 works by Bakhchanyan, whom American collector Norton Dodge met following the artist's move to New York. Many of the works selected for the exhibition have not previously been displayed, and provide a rare glimpse into the full range of the artist's diverse artistic output. Additional works for the exhibition will be on loan from private collections.

“Bakhchanyan was an artist who recontextualized the absurdity of everyday life in the USSR to evoke a larger truth about humanity with profound clarity and wit,” said Julia Tulovsky, associate curator for Russian and Soviet nonconformist art. “His contributions to contemporary Russian society’s memory and understanding of life during the Soviet regime have been widely embraced, and yet not properly documented. This is especially true of the slogans he created by subverting official propaganda. He was a critical forerunner for major Russian movements like Sots art, which emerged in Moscow in the 1970s as an artistic rejection of the official aesthetic doctrine of the state. It’s a pleasure, but also a curatorial responsibility, in my opinion, to bring attention to his influential practice through this unprecedented exhibition.”

Accidental Absurdity is organized around three areas of Bakhchanyan’s diverse practice: drawings and collages, presented chronologically; three-dimensional objects and writings; and work addressing the artist’s fascination with the book. The works on paper reflect the artist’s tremendous skill and formal training through their striking compositions, which he deftly layered with imagery from posted propaganda and the signage within Soviet communities. Bakhchanyan’s objects and writings similarly highlight his interest in the delicate boundaries between the common and bizarre. In some cases, his play on words and slogans left lasting popular impressions. For instance, Bakhchanyan’s conversion of the official Soviet propaganda slogan, ‘We are here to turn life into a fairytale,’ into, ‘We are here to turn life into Kafka,’ remains an established colloquialism in former Soviet communities to reference the past (the words fairytale and Kafka sound very similar in Russian).

“Today, Bakhchanyan’s practice appears strikingly contemporary. His effortless movement between mediums, enabled by his formal training and combined with his absurd and almost accidental humor, seem to foreshadow the paths of artists like Bruce Nauman and Martin Creed,” said Marti Mayo, the Zimmerli’s interim director. “Yet it is crucial to remember that Bakhchanyan—and indeed all the artists in the Dodge Collection—was working in isolation from the wider world. There was no dialogue with Western contemporary art, barring the occasional foreign magazine brought into the country by an outsider like Norton Dodge, or a rare sympathizer in a position of power. This makes positioning nonconformist Soviet art along the conventional timeline of art history difficult, but very important if we are to have a complete picture of art in the 20th century.”

Highlights from *Accidental Absurdity* include:

- *Dollar Sized Pictures*, collage and stamps on paper, 2000-2009, from a private collection. A series of dollar-sized images cut out of reproductions of Socialist Realist or well-known Western artworks to emphasize specific elements of accepted and recognized artistic movements.
- *Hat for Norton Dodge*, circa 1980, on loan from Nancy Ruyle Dodge. A handmade wool hat, stitched by the artist as a gift for his collector friend.
- *Phone drawing books, including one made during a conversation about Joseph Brodsky’s death*, 1991-2009, from a private collection. A series of various notebooks and personal organizers filled with images completed during telephone conversations with friends and colleagues, including many notable figures of the New York and Russian cultural scenes.

- *Untitled*, transfer process and colored pencil, 1973-74, from the Dodge Collection. A striking diagonal composition of a splintered, topless female figure, heavily referencing 1970s American pop culture.
- *Ledger #7*, transfer process, ink, and color pencil, 1977, from the Dodge Collection. One of Bakhchanyan's most remarkable books, featuring an exquisitely illustrated fictional family tree.
- *Untitled*, collage, 1975-1976, from the Dodge Collection. A surreal repositioning of Lenin's face, with a painterly, yet Op Art quality.
- *First Russian Propaganda Art Performance*, archival photography, 1978. Images from Bakhchanyan's Fluxus-inspired performance at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—a performance the Museum had not authorized.

About Vagrigh Bakhchanyan:

Born in an Armenian family in Kharkov in Soviet Ukraine, Bakhchanyan initially engaged openly with the art scene there. In the mid-1960s, following his attempts to publicly show his works in Kharkov and in the West, the artist and his abstract works were ridiculed in the local media. The negative backlash was so intense that Bakhchanyan was forced to leave Kharkov, and very few works from his time in Ukraine survived as a result. His connections with underground art circles enabled him to move to Moscow, where he worked in an official capacity as a caricaturist at a major periodical, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* ("Literary Newspaper"). As an artist, he found a wider circle of like-minded individuals in the city's prohibited, yet flourishing, underground art milieu.

In 1974, Bakhchanyan immigrated to the United States, escaping the pressures of the Soviet regime. He eventually settled in New York, where he continued his artistic practice. His works from this period simultaneously show the influence of American pop culture, process art, and Fluxus. At this time, he met American collector Norton Dodge, who had been collecting Soviet nonconformist art during routine business trips to the USSR and who became an avid collector of the artist's work.

Although Bakhchanyan engaged with other Russian émigré artists, he was never able to establish himself as a major figure in New York's art scene. For an artist whose early creativity—and reputation—were derived from critiquing and rebelling against the oppressive Soviet regime, his new-found freedom in the US may have made his life as an artist more difficult. His frustrations with the cultural and language barriers he also encountered in New York often emerged in his later, Fluxus-influenced performances.

Today, his work can be found in the collections of the State Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow and State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, National Centre for Contemporary Art in Moscow, Museum of National Arts of Ukraine, and the John Paul Getty Research Center and Museum in Los Angeles, among other international institutions.

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The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum houses more than 60,000 works of art, ranging from ancient to contemporary art. The permanent collection features particularly rich holdings in 19th-century French art; Russian art from icons to the avant-garde; Soviet nonconformist art from the Dodge Collection; and American art with notable holdings of prints. In addition, small groups of antiquities, old master paintings, as well as art

inspired by Japan and original illustrations for children's books, provide representative examples of the museum's research and teaching message at Rutgers. One of the largest and most distinguished university-based art museums in the nation, the Zimmerli is located on the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Established in 1766, Rutgers is America's eighth oldest institution of higher learning and a premier public research university.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Admission is free to the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers. The museum is located at 71 Hamilton Street (at George Street) on the College Avenue Campus of Rutgers University in New Brunswick. The Zimmerli is a short walk from the NJ Transit train station in New Brunswick, midway between New York City and Philadelphia.

The Zimmerli Art Museum is open Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., and the first Tuesday of each month (except August), 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and major holidays, as well as the month of August.

Z Café featuring the Food Architects is open Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Friday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., with a variety of breakfast, lunch, and snack items. The café is closed major holidays, as well as the months of July and August.

For more information, visit the museum's website www.zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu or call 848-932-7237.

SUPPORT

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For additional information, please contact:

Local Media Contact:

Theresa C. Watson, Communications Coordinator
press@zimmerli.rutgers.edu or 848-932-6709

National Media Contacts:

Sascha Freudenheim, sascha@paveconsult.com, 917-544-6057
Alina Sumajin, alina@paveconsult.com, 646-369-2050