

# The New Sectarianism

## A Manual for Art

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David Crowley

In 1985 the Institute of Atheism in Moscow published a report into the various religious communities and beliefs that had taken root in the Soviet Union since the 1960s. How, it asked, could new forms of spirituality emerge in a society organized by the reifying force of Marxist-Leninism? Why were new religions continuing to emerge after the instruments to advance atheism had been put in place? A classified document, *New Sectarianism* (*Novoe sekstanstvo*) was an anthology of materials that the Institute's researchers had gathered since the late 1970s. They had taken what they called "religious expeditions"—conducting interviews, tracking samizdat documents—and, from these activities, they fashioned an archive of the "New Sects" of the USSR.

*New Sectarianism* did not address the atavistic belief systems still persisting in the remotest fringes of the Union itself. Instead, the primary interest of the Institute's researchers was in the new religious feeling of the scientific-technical and artistic-literary intelligentsia largely living in Soviet cities. The manual's editor, Professor Raisa Omarovna Gibaydulina, was interested in non-traditional, non-organized forms of religion, hypothesizing that there was a kind of metaphysical surplus in the Soviet Union which persisted despite the militant atheism of official ideology. Troublingly, the diverse faces of new "religiosity" were, in fact, adaptations to or, perhaps, products of distinctly Soviet conditions: some of these sects emerged within intelligentsia professions—physicists who attributed special meaning to light, or philologists who saw divine meaning in particular words. These new sects were notably literary too: they sought to outline and test their beliefs in words—written privately or in samizdat, or in their professional lives—and they left textual traces which the Institute's researchers collected. The manual describes a

kind of expanding world, with sects dividing and forming, often without any kind of organizational cohesion.

One of the researchers' tasks was to create a taxonomy for the many faces of the new sectarianism. Gibaydulina's team identified various categories including "sects of everyday life," "doomsday cults," ultra-conformists, those who venerated atheism or philistinism, and others who discovered mystical and religious values in official culture such as the "Pushkinites" who treated the great Russian poet as a messiah. Each category was further sub-divided into sects: the sects of the everyday included "food worshippers" who sanctified food but treated hunger as higher condition: "domesticans" who, perceiving crisis in the world, transformed their homes into "all-comprehensive" systems of life and waited for a future utopia in which all civilization would take on domestic forms; and "matterists" who stood against official Soviet doctrines of materialism by worshipping the humble things in the world and rejected "semiotherapy"—the hegemony of signs—in favor of the undervalued sense of touch.

Gibaydulina admitted uncertainty in naming these cults. Partly, because it was difficult to distinguish between what might be a matter of faith and what might be a cultish in-joke, or perhaps even a parody. The new sectarians had the habit of sanctifying everyday things and experiences while mocking sanctity itself. In "The Sacrament of Laughter," a document cited in *New Sectarianism*, an author known by the initials VN writes:

Religion as an object is parodied, so that the Subject of religion itself may reveal itself. The sermon is parodied so that the Subject of the sermon may itself be expressed [...]. For false seriousness is killed by parody, false subjectivity by citation.

In other words, the new sectarians relished the polysemy of words, a flicker effect switching between plain and metaphorical meanings.

In fact, this was a kind of admission. *New Sectarianism* was a fiction ... of sorts. It was the creative invention of the Russian writer and philosopher Mikhail Epstein and had been published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, first in Russian in 1993 in the USA, and in Russia in 1994.<sup>1</sup> He had been working on the manuscript since 1985, and the ideas it contained earlier. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> *Novoe sektantstvo: tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii (70–80 gody XX Veka)* [New sectarianism: The varieties of religious-philosophical consciousness in Russia in the 1970–80s] (Holyoke: New England, 1993; Moscow: Labirint, 1994). Epstein's book

Epstein himself had undertaken what might be called “religious expeditions” for Moscow State University in the mid-1980s. And in 1982 he had written an essay on “Minimal Religion”:

Minimal religion is a “poor religion.” Its name conjures up a state of religiosity that elicits pity or sympathy or the expression of condolences. It begins from zero and has apparently no tradition. Its “goD” is one of (be)coming, of the second or last coming, which will pass ultimate judgement on the world. The atheistic spelling of the word “goD” with a small initial letter is preserved, but the last letter of the word is, written in uppercase. GoD is perceived as not the “alpha” but the “omega” of the historical process.<sup>2</sup>

Poor religion was defined as a sense of unworldly religiosity without temples, without doctrines and without priests. It was a concept which he grafted from Jerzy Grotowski’s ideas of Poor Theatre, a kind of direct theatre with minimum props, without lighting effects, without music. Epstein was less interested in creeds or rituals than with the persistence and morphology of faith in a society which declared mass atheism—and, as such, he was exploring a psychological phenomenon or in his words “an internal impulse, a state of spirit or a disposition of mind.”<sup>3</sup> He called this “post-atheistic spirituality”:

Minimal religion addresses itself to the ironies and paradoxes of Revelation, in which everything that is revealed is at the same time concealed. This is evident even in the early prophecy of Isiah on the future appearance of the Messiah: “He shall not cry, not list up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street” (Isaiah, 42:2). “[H]e hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire ... [A]nd we hid as it were our faces from him” (Isaiah, 53:2–3). This from the very beginning, the atheistic stage ... is (pre)inscribed in our perception of the Messiah. Post-atheism accepts this “disappearance” of God but interprets it as a sign of His authenticity rather than evidence of His absence.

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was translated and issued in English as *Cries in the New Wilderness: From the Files of the Moscow Institute of Atheism* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Epstein, “Minimal Religion” in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, eds. Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 228–9.

<sup>3</sup> Epstein, “Minimal,” 229.

*New Sectarianism* was the culmination of Epstein's long-standing interest. Moreover, the idea of "Revelation, in which everything that is revealed is at the same time concealed" and the concept of "post-atheistic spirituality" exemplified his intellectual method. (He was then concerned with advancing ideas about Soviet and post-Soviet postmodernism). Typically, in his writing, he rejected antinomies which organized the world as opposites—science and religion; fact and fiction and so on. Instead, his thinking was far more binomial, looking for "and" rather than "or" or finding, for instance, metaphysics in materiality.

In this sense (and in others), *New Sectarianism*—Epstein's parafiction—was fashioned from materials which might be declared as facts. In its identification of attitudes and activities, the reader is tempted to put faces to names: might the "defectors" cult also known as "garbagemen," an apocalyptic sect who anticipate the end of time and "bow down before filth, stooping before the load of human dirt"<sup>4</sup> be Leningrad's punky Necrorealist filmmakers gathered around the Yevgeny Yufit? Could "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away," featured in Ilya Kabakov's 1988 celebrated installation *10 Characters*, also be a fellow member of the cult?

Moreover, *New Sectarianism* ventriloquized Soviet authority. Moscow, for instance, had been home to the Institute of Scientific Atheism, a branch of the Academy of Social Sciences. It had been formed at the end of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign (1958–64). It conducted research into religious attitudes, treating religion as a kind of sociological matter; and coordinated the activities of more than fifty local Houses of Scientific Atheism; and published a popular magazine to promote secular rituals in Soviet society (state-administered weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals).<sup>5</sup> Following a characteristic pattern in Soviet life, the chief publication promoting atheism, *Nauka i religija* [Science and religion], launched in 1959, provided resources for those curious about the illicit subject of faith. "For many Soviet readers" writes Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "*Nauka i religija* was the only place where they encountered sacred texts, and readers were known to cut and save excerpts from the journal's pages."<sup>6</sup> Religiosity, esoteric thinking and occult practices grew

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4 *Novoe sekstantstvo*, 133.

5 See Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, NJ): Princeton University Press, 2018).

6 Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion, and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism" *The Russian Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2014): 196.

in Soviet society in the 1970s, becoming “open” interests during the *Glasnost* period.<sup>7</sup> They penetrated many of the most Soviet settings: Boris Rauschenbach, the engineer behind the docking technology in the *Salyut* space stations was also the author of a book on Russian icons; and they even found their way into the Kremlin with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev reportedly turning to faith healer, Eugenia Davitashvili.

Spirituality was an important if still largely unstudied theme of Soviet art too, at least in the 1970s. Sometimes this took the form of a direct engagement with the Orthodox church: Dmitri Plavinsky, an abstract painter who was denied the privileges which followed from membership of the official Union of Artists made pilgrimages to northern towns including Novgorod and Pskov to witness churches and monasteries in their ruined state “to represent the terrible conditions of religion in the Soviet Union” (and yet he was also suspicious of organized religion, viewing the orthodox priests as informants<sup>8</sup>). With their thick surfaces and rough textures, his paintings from the 1960s and 1970s of desiccated medieval frescos and distressed manuscripts, seem to measure decay. In Leningrad, Mikhail Chemiakin, and art historian Vladimir Ivanov, an expert on icons, were the authors of the manifesto of “Metaphysical Synthetism” at the end of the 1960s (published in Paris in 1974) a pantheistic view which saw common ground in all religions and different artistic traditions. In this, they presented themselves as the vanguard of a new spiritual enlightenment which had absorbed the lessons of psychoanalytical thought and modernist abstraction and other novelties:

In the twentieth century the birth of a new type of creative consciousness is taking place: those processes which earlier played in the subconsciousness and the superconscious regions of the soul are now—thanks to the power of the “I”—boldly introduced into the realm of the conscious. The artist is no longer a holy fool. He is a creator, a friend of God. The degree to which he

7 See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 29.

8 “Interview with Dmitri Plavinsky” in Matthew Baigell and Renee Baigell, eds., *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews After Perestroika* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 186.

is permeated by Christ's impulse determines the degree of consciousness in his work.<sup>9</sup>

Convulsing past and present, the Petersburg Group, as Chemiakin and his colleagues anointed themselves, declared themselves to be the new icon painters of the day.

Others declared a kind of loose and non-doctrinal spirituality as the basis of art. Asked, in the late 1970s, what kind of spiritual system to which he subscribed, founder of Collective Actions (discussed below) Andrei Monastyrsky replied: "I think that it is ecumenical—in the broad sense of the word. This is prayer in the language of symbols, one comprehensible to us. Poetics is playing a purely provocative role (the provocation of the sacrosanct)."<sup>10</sup> In other words, engaging the life of the spirit broadcast a kind of indifference to the priorities set by power. This set of testimonies might be much extended, but only to do little more than reinforce the point of the pervasive sense of religiosity in non-conformist culture in the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev years.

*New Sectarianism*—a text with a pseudonymous author, anthologizing works from a fictional archive and purporting to be the output of an institution—might well be claimed as undeclared and late work of Moscow Conceptualism, the creation of a small but dynamic network of artists and writers that formed in the Soviet capital in the late 1970s (sometimes called Moscow Communal Conceptualism to stress their interconnections<sup>11</sup>). It shares, for instance, their interest in the "Bureaucratic Aesthetics" of the archive and of the document. By this, I do not mean the economic, depersonalized and "desacralized" characteristics identified by art historian Benjamin Buchloh as typical of much Western Conceptualism that he called the "aesthetic of administration."<sup>12</sup> Writing of artists like Sol LeWitt, he claimed that "what Conceptual Art achieved at least temporarily, however, was to subject

9. Mikhail Shemyakin [Chemiakin] and Vladimir Ivanov, "Metaphysical Synthetism: Programme of the Petersburg Group," 1974, reproduced in Igor Golomshok and Aleksandr Glezer, eds., *Soviet Art in Exile* (New York: Random House, 1977), 157.

10. Monastyrsky interviewed by Tupitsyn in the late 1970s in Margarita Tupitsyn, "On some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism," in Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, eds., *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience* (London: Thames and Hudson), 317.

11. Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 101.

12. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), 105-43.

the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence (by means of traditional studio skills and privileged modes of experience) to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the Moscow Conceptualists discovered lyrical, poetic or absurd dimensions in the report, in the filing system, in the catalog, in the public notice. One of Ilya Kabakov’s early texts from 1982 (and published in A-YA in 1984) records his discovery of transcendental qualities in “notices, slips, menus, bills, tickets.” With wry humor, he writes of “The nothingness of the white sheet [...] acts to negate all, it is absolute emptiness, the repudiation of life and its opposite.”<sup>14</sup> This order of high metaphysics transforms a telephone bill into something divine or a work of Suprematist art. Kabakov also divined an existential dimension in the record, in the document, in the files. Here, in switching from otherworldly to the mundane, was a concise illustration of the flicker effect which ran throughout Epstein’s Manual.

And, of course, as many have noted, Kabakov’s works from the late Soviet period have a kind of pathetic quality. In his painting *Taking out the Garbage Can* (1980) (fig. 4.1) recording a rotation of domestic chores in a collective apartment, Kabakov reproduces the kind of panel which guarded hallways and corridors of offices and homes throughout the Soviet Union ready to instruct citizens with correct behavior. Approximating type or copperplate script but rendered by hand, the notice lacked the kind of menacing authority which Soviet power once possessed, as Alla Rosenfeld has noted.<sup>15</sup> Soviet power, once so forceful, was now wielded by the janitor or the secretary of the housing committee.

The self-archiving, self-surveilling practices of the Collective Actions group—in which Kabakov occasionally played a part—also displayed “bureaucratic aesthetics” too. Their early activities—known as “Journeys to the Countryside”—followed a general pattern: twenty or thirty participants would be invited by telephone to leave the city by an appointed train. On arrival, they would walk to a remote field to be presented with a modest intervention into the landscape. In *Appearance* (1976), the first of these actions, the group were

13 Buchloh, “Conceptual,” 142.

14 Ilya Kabakov, “Dissertation on the cognition of the three layers, three levels into which an ordinary, anonymous written product—notices, slips, menus, bills, tickets, etc.—may be broken down,” A-YA 6 (1984), 31.

15 Alla Rosenfeld, “Word and/as Image: Visual Experiments of Soviet Nonconformist Artists,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 188.

Figure 4.1: Ilya Kabakov, “Расписание выноса помойного ведра” [Taking Out the Garbage Can], 1980.



Enamel on wood, 152 x 216.3 cm. Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel. Photo: Bisig & Bayer, Basel. Courtesy of the Laurenz Foundation.

met by two men who distributed plain cards with the following inscription, “Documentary confirmation that \_\_\_\_\_ was a witness of Appearance which occurred on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1976.” Later actions were more elaborate, although just as “empty.” On returning to Moscow, the participants would write an account of what they had witnessed. The action itself and these reports would form the basis of further discussion by the group. In acting as “informants” recording the activities of their friends, and in Monastyrsky’s systematic “factographic” documentation of the participants in the events with photographs and diagrams, Collective Actions mirrored the actions of the Soviet state. As Cristina Vatulescu points out in her 2010 book, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, after the terror of the Stalin years, the fictions about counter-revolutionary activities in secret police files declined whilst the reach of the state’s surveillance methods expanded and voluminous reports of suspects going about their—often banal—everyday

activities grew.<sup>16</sup> Artists were surveilled by a unit from the fifth division of the KGB tasked with watching out for internal dissent. A consciousness of the potential of being monitored or recorded by the state hung over the lives and the imaginations of Soviet artists and writers. Painter Gleb Bogomolov dryly recalled in the early 1990s—"I would say that they were mostly bored with us but at the same time we were fascinated [with] them."<sup>17</sup> Viewed in these terms, Collective Actions not only re-enacted the techniques of the state surveillance but also the banality (or, put another way, the ideological emptiness) of its archives.

Epstein was close—in personal and intellectual terms—to Moscow Conceptualists in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> And one can detect close affinities between his writings and the art and writing of Kabakov and that of others including Viktor Pivovarov. In the *New Sectarianism*, one of the most vividly drawn cults are the Matterists who:

Believe that in paradise all souls overcome their "sign-like" duality and acquire the pure being of a thing, which signifies nothing but itself [...] They conduct rituals of sanctifying the tiniest things, such as grains of sand and hand-made spoons, because these items are as unique as God, are patient to all suffering, and are responsive to any need. According to matterism, a man must follow the path of things for they reveal the silent and humble wisdom of being.<sup>19</sup>

Pivovarov's *How to Picture the Life of a Soul?*, a 1975 painting (fig. 4.2), seems to be concerned with similar themes. Sixteen ordinary domestic objects are presented in a grid below the words "I can draw" in tidy letters, as if on a page in a schoolbook. Here, the title / question is purposefully ambiguous: is it that objects have souls? or do they constitute material for the task of illuminating the inner life of another person?

Pivovarov, a Moscow artist and illustrator who left the Soviet Union in 1982, was the author of a number of paintings in the 1970s that, in toto, he saw

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16 Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), chapter 1.

17 "Interview with Gleb Bogomolov" in Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 139.

18 See his "The Philosophical Implications of Russian Conceptualism," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010), 71.

19 *Novoe sektantstvo*, 173.

Figure 4.2: Viktor Pivovarov, “Как изобразить жизнь души?” [How to Picture the Life of a Soul?], 1975.



Gouache and ink on paper, 43.0 x 30.8 cm. Nancy and Norton Dodge collection, Zimmerly Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA. Courtesy of the artist.

as “a single unitary structure.” Featuring tables, taxonomies and lists with letter forms which approximate public notices, these serial works share the taste for “bureaucratic aesthetics” evident in Moscow conceptualism. Melancholic, they were often funny. They were also autobiographical too: in 1984 Pivovarov

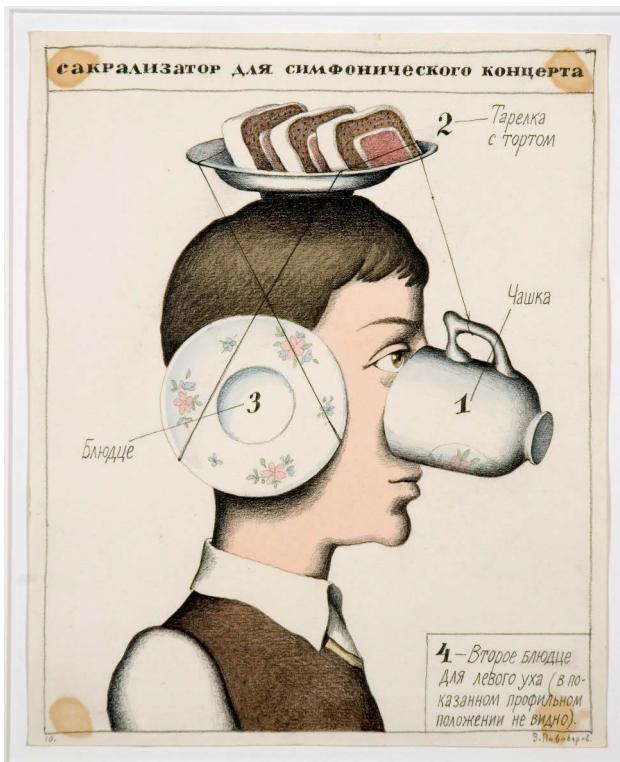
wrote: "I was born and raised in a poor room. It is my beginning, my roots, my homeland. I imbibed it with all its impoverished objects along with my mother's milk ... I draw this room and it is both the world in which I live and my inner self-portrait."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the best known of his works from his Soviet years are the Design of Objects for a Lonely Person series (1975). It starts with a *Design for a Living Space for a Lonely Person*, a floor plan of a thirty-two square meter apartment with a "view of the sky"; the second image presents the possessions required for this home, each accompanied by a matter-of-fact description; the third presents the changing view of the heavens from the window; and the fourth charts his predictable daily routines on the face of a twenty-four-hour clock. Even his dreams can be catalogued, the theme of the fifth image in the sequence. Finally, Pivovarov presents—in words—the biography of the lonely man: only after "university, military service, minor venereal disease, marriage, adultery of a wife, divorce, second marriage, having a lonely child, adultery of the second wife, divorce, an attempt to emigrate, acquisition of living space," is the lonely person ready to take possession of their new home and the "conscious loneliness" it promises. This "design" is presented as steps on the path to spiritual enlightenment and the joyful loneliness of the hermit, albeit one that reverses the disavowal of private possessions that is central to many mysticisms: "the projects presented [in the series] should help reach the fourth state of loneliness, that though coinciding with the physical death of the person, nonetheless brings true freedom and connects to the infinite."

Like many of his friends in Moscow art circles, Pivovarov had been drawn to spiritual matters in the 1970s, forming a close relation to the philosopher, filmmaker and theologian Evgeny Shiffers, before eventually pulling back from Shiffers's attempts to convert him to the Orthodox faith.<sup>21</sup> This distance is evident in his gently ironic approach to post-atheistic spirituality. In The Sacralizators series of watercolors of 1979, each image features a portrait of a man and is captioned above with a title which describes a mundane event or circumstance in everyday life. Absurd but rendered flatly, each deadpan character appears to be „wearing” unremarkable objects of everyday or domestic life on his face and head. In No. 7, *Sacralizator for watching television programs* the young man appears to have prepared for his journey by tying a sausage to the top of his head and a gherkin behind his ear. His nose is encased in a

20 Viktor Pivovarov's untitled text in *A-Ya* 6 (1984), 21.

21 Viktor Pivovarov, *The Agent in Love* (Moscow: Artguide Editions, 2019), 110.

Figure 4.3: Viktor Pivovarov, “10 листов из альбома  
‘Сакрализаторы’: Сакрализаторы Симфонического Концерта”  
[No. 10: *Sacralizator for a symphony concert*], 1979.



Watercolour, pencil, ink on paper, 30 x 24 cm. Nancy and Norton Dodge collection, Zimmerly Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA. Courtesy of the artist.

roll of toilet paper. In No. 10, *Sacralizator for a symphony concert*, the subject has fixed a plate of sliced cakes to his head from which a teacup and saucer are suspended on fine strings (fig. 4.3). Whether masks or prosthetics (a watch, for instance, for an eye in another *Sacralizator*, or a light bulb for a nose), these mundane objects are The *Sacralizators* which gives the series its name. Protecting their users from any evil that might occur in daily life, they are

both Soviet commodities and fetishes, albeit in ways that predate Marx's conjoining of the latter term. The word fetish—as it was used by Marx—derives from Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning something like witchcraft. Portuguese traders operating along the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries called the amulets or devices protecting against ill fortune or bad spirits worn by the people they encountered *fetisso*. In the Western tradition, the attachment to the fetish marked an irrational hold of things on their owners and a way of claiming a progressive and superior attitude. Marx's writing on the Commodity Fetish belongs to that tradition: "In attributing the notion of the fetish to the commodity," writes Peter Stallybrass, "Marx ridiculed a society that thought it had surpassed the 'mere' worship of objects supposedly characteristic of 'Primitive Religions.'"<sup>22</sup> Here, these Soviet fetishes return to work their "magic" in an advanced, progressive society.

The idea that things might be *active agents*—a matter of faith for Epstein's "matterists" and the theme of Pivovarov's gentle satire—runs through other Soviet art works of this period. In the *Catalogue of Super Objects—Super Comfort for Super People* portfolio of 1976, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, for instance, presented thirty-six prostheses that alter the relation of their wearer to the sensible world. "CHAROG-15," a metal grill worn over the face, performs the following functions:

Protect the purity of your thoughts:

Incantations and curses hold no fear for the CHAROG owner.

CHAROG: Real security against mass hypnosis and demagoguery.

Thin, gold-plated strings lock the vices of the surrounding world behind a grill and project your individuality from coarse assaults.

The top of the CHAROG is carved from black wood and can be used as a head-piece completing this original veil.

Through CHAROG you can look to the future with Assurance.

Another, "Ksushna," is a device for heightening awareness, took the form of a kind of antenna worn on the forehead:

An Amplifier of the Sixth Sense:

Put the sensual world of matter behind you.

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat" in Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (London: Routledge, 1988), 186.

Use Ksushna to link up with the irrational senses of the Individual Ideal.  
As the happy owner of Ksushna, you will be seized and overcome by tensions  
inexpressible in human language.  
A light bronze diadem crowned with an antenna of chrome steel.  
Threads uniting consciousness with the supersensual world are made from  
Natural Chinese silk.

Drawing on the noisy hyperbole of commodity aesthetics but also the lofty values attached to citizenship in the USSR, Komar and Melamid's objects might be read as anti-Soviet satire (characteristic of the Sots-Art movement that the artists pioneered). There is much humor in Komar and Melamid's Super Objects, as there is in Pivovarov's Sacralizators, but they are not *merely* expressions of dark irony or absurdity. Here, Epstein's words—expressed through the proxy of "The Sacrament of Laughter," a document cited in *New Sectarianism*—act as a reminder: "Religion as an object is parodied, so that the Subject of religion itself may reveal itself." There is a kind of pathos in the Super Objects and the Sacralizators in which ordinary things are asked to bear the incalculable "weight" of metaphysics. These artworks point to a "humanthiness" which Epstein identified in human relations with ordinary, anonymous things. "Thingness," he declared, "derives its 'head' from humans, while acting in turn as an extended human 'body.' Wherever there is a thing, there is also a special exit for a human being beyond his body: to nature or art, space or thought, activity or quiet, contemplation or creativity."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Epstein, "Thing and Word: On the Lyrical Museum," in *Mikhail Epstein, After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 253–89.