Comically Serious and Seriously Comic: An Examination of Komar and Melamid's Work *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*

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After Khrushchev's thaw in 1956, the Soviet Union began to reflect upon Stalinism which had brought the nation so much suffering and fear. The totalitarian nature of Stalinism resulted in state control over every aspect of life, including the creation of art. Artists of the Stalin period were forced to abide by the rules of socialist realism, the only art style permitted in the period which expressed nationalism in every genre, or face ostracism. The later acknowledgment of Stalin's crimes opened up the opportunity for artists to expand beyond socialist realism and reflect upon the period without less government control. Despite this opening, not all artistic movements were publicly accepted. One such unofficial movement was called "sots art," which was a variation of American Pop Art, depicting Soviet mass-cultural imagery. The term, fittingly, was coined in 1972 by two artists whose work exemplifies the style, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, two Russian-Jewish dissident artists who worked together primarily from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s.[1] Komar and Melamid's painting *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* (1982-1983), is an especially striking example of sots art, as it utilizes national symbols to process emotions, only to ultimately reach an ambiguous resolution.

This essay will analyze the themes of sots art, as exemplified by *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, through three main frames of analysis: socialist realism, Bakhtinian carnival and the grotesque, and the politicization of art. Each of these perspectives not only reveals something new about sots art, but also the way in which they intertwine reveals an entirely new synthesis: Komar and Melamid's enigmatic reflections on the past. Though on the surface the painting *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* appears to be a satire of socialist realism, it is more ambiguous than that. It creates its own space to engage with the political, yet its ambiguous stance towards the political is what allows Komar and

1. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 4.

Melamid to use the painting to process their complex emotions about their childhood.

GROWING FROM SOCIALIST REALISM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SOTS ART

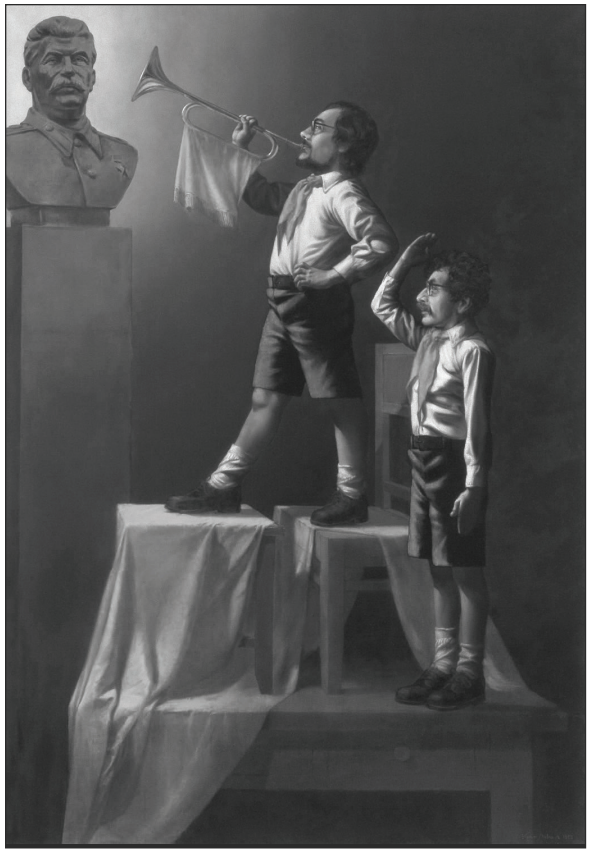
Sots art emerged after several decades of socialist realism as the only official style. The term "socialist realism" first emerged in 1932, and its principles were explicated by Stalin and Soviet writers as "national in form and socialist in content."[2] "Socialist content" referred to the ideological symbols of socialism, such as Party spirit and progressiveness, while the national form conveyed the importance of integrating the diverse national traditions of the Soviet Union.[3] In 1934, Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky, two writers who associated closely with Stalin, laid out the socialist realist principles such as "typicality," "Party spirit," and "reality in its revolutionary development." [4]"Typicality" referred to art serving as a reflection of everyday life, while "Party spirit" required the inclusion of national symbols of the party. "Reality in its revolutionary development" merged these two ideas, describing the ideal of portraying how the Soviet Union strove for communism in the past, present, and future.

An archetype of such socialist realist art is *Triumph of Our Fatherland* by Mikhail Khmelko, a painting full of Soviet nationalist imagery and sentiment. The painting depicts the Soviet Army laying down the banners of the defeated Germans before Lenin's mausoleum.[5] National symbolism serves as both the focal point and the physical setting of this painting. On the foreground, the painting depicts the Red Square, a cultural center of the Soviet Union that also houses Lenin's mausoleum, the resting place of the nation's principle revolutionary. Another visible symbol of the nation, the flag of the Soviet Union, waves, surrounded by soldiers as they are recognized for defending their country's honor through their defeat of the Nazis as they lay Nazi banners before Lenin's mausoleum. In the background of *Triumph of Our Fatherland*, a banner is depicted with portraits of Stalin and Lenin in profile—Lenin only slightly jutting out behind Stalin. Lenin and Stalin's likenesses are the only ones in the painting that are not physically present on the scene, conveying their omnipresence. This painting is excessive in its nationalist imagery, but this is precisely why it exemplifies what socialist realism strove for.

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However, the ambiguous guidelines of socialist realism meant that the *Triumph of Our Fatherland* provides many different avenues of interpretation. The Party was the sole authority on what was representative of socialist realism. Party control meant there did not need to be clear definitions because the principles were set by those who had been awarded with the highest State recognition.[6] This led artists trying to follow the strict guidelines set out by Zhdanov only to constantly face rejection of their work. In order to understand socialist realism, many artists were given access to privileged

2. Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China, 84, 147.
3. Ibid.
4. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group, 20.
5. Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China, 239.
6. Ibid. 97.



Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers, 1982-1983
Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid



Triumph of Our Fatherland, 1949
Mikhail Khmelko

Party groups in order to better comprehend correct, or typical, forms of socialist realist art.[7] Thus, only those who were already favored enough to interact with the most privileged members of the Party could even get close to accessing information regarding the expectations for socialist realism art.

SOCIALIST REALISM IN *DOUBLE SELF-PORTRAIT AS YOUNG PIONEERS*

Considering that sots art invoked the national imagery of socialist realism, understanding Soviet symbols proves essential to fully understanding the style's intended meaning. In *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, a bust of Stalin looms in the background of the left side of the painting, with light shining behind it.[8] The viewer's eye is drawn to the bust as the figures of Komar and Melamid form a line pointing towards the bust and its large size. The bust evokes imagery of actual statues of Stalin across the Soviet Union during this period, seemingly a permanent part of the environment. However, as destalinization (the denunciation of Stalin and removal of his policies), began to take place after the 1960s, many of these statues were taken down. The location of the bust in this setting thereby simultaneously suggests permanence and impermanence. The vacant background of the painting portrays the bust as existing in a liminal space, outside of normal time and space and thus everlasting. Or it could be conceived as placed inside a storage room—removed from public view post-destalinization.

The location of the bust in this setting thereby simultaneously suggests permanence and impermanence.

The viewer's attention is also drawn to the bust as the painting's only light source emanates from behind it. This light motif is reminiscent of religious paintings in which light emanates from behind holy figures as an indication of their divinity. This interpretation of Stalin as a holy figure aligns with the characterization of Stalin as the demiurge of the Soviet Union. Art critic and philosopher Boris Groys characterizes Stalin as a god-like figure because the goal of Stalinist art was to make visible the "struggle to determine the destiny of the world and the protagonists of the struggle."[9] By this Groys means that Stalinist sought to depict the "struggle" Soviet heroes like Stalin and Lenin to create the world in their image. However, socialist realist art was not meant to reflect reality, but rather incarnated heroes of its art, most often Stalin. As the protagonist of the struggle for the power to determine the world, Stalin had the power to form the world as he pleased through his mythological, divine portrayal in socialist realist art.

Komar and Melamid stand at attention directed at Stalin's demiurgic figure in *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers.* In the painting, Komar and Melamid wear the uniforms of Young Pioneers, a compulsory political youth organization that sought to appropriately educate children on Party values.[10] The uniforms serve as national symbols of childhood in the Soviet Union, but Komar and Melamid satirize this symbol by compounding the presence of the uniforms

7. Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992) 52.
8. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group, 40.
9. Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond, 62.
10. Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China, 202.

with their grotesque and playful figures. The striking red neckties of their uniforms visually connect Komar and Melamid's figures with other red features of the painting such as the table cloth, the flag on one of the boy's trumpets, and Stalin's bust.[11] The extensive inclusion of the color red is significant as Soviet national symbolism: it holds a strong representation in the national imagery of the Soviet Union, such as the Soviet flag, the Bolsheviks' alternative name "Reds", and Lenin's red mausoleum. The choice of the color red to be such a large piece of national symbolism may be its linguistic association in Russian. The word for red in Russian, *krasnyy*, is very close to the word beautiful, *krasivyy*, linguistically linking the color red with what is fine and good. So in making national symbolism red, the Soviet government is saying that the government is good and beautiful. Each of the red features of *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* invoke national imagery and also linguistically connect these national symbols with what is fine and good. The tablecloth invokes the image of the Soviet Union's flag. The bust of Stalin looks to be made out of the same red granite as Lenin's mausoleum, thus linking political greatness with the color red.

Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers further satirizes the imagery of Socialist Realism by mimicking the profile portraiture of great leaders. For example, in Khmelko's painting Lenin's and Stalin's appearance is reminiscent of classical iconography with profiles of emperors featured on coins, thus evoking ideas of the rulers' power and omnipresence as well as their separation from real men as their full faces are not shown. In Komar and Melamid's painting, their figures are instead displayed in playful militaristic stances as Melamid strikes a failed salute with his hand above his head and Komar over performs trumpet playing with a hand on his hip. Komar and Melamid's figures satirize the severe portraits of Stalin and Lenin by playfully mimicking their seriousness. All the similarities between these paintings bring out that Komar and Melamid are satirizing socialist realism by mimicking it. However, it is not clear if they do so out of affiliation with socialist realism or rejection of it. Examining the grotesque aspect of this painting will help clarify the meaning of this mimesis.

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BAKHTINIAN CARNIVAL AND THE GROTESQUE

The strangest aspect of *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* is the fact that Komar and Melamid portray themselves in the bodies of young boys with adult faces. [12]Komar and Melamid's distorted stand on top of a table with other furniture stacked around them, reminiscent of a playground structure. Within the austere atmosphere of the painting, conveyed by a vacant background, the absurdity of the figures is especially apparent. This absurdity of the painting can be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's explanation of the carnival and the grotesque.[13] In his work *Rabelais and His World* on the French Renaissance writer Françios Rabelais, Bakhtin explores medieval carnival festivities in which "serious

11. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group, 40.
12. Ibid.
13. M. M Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, First Midland book edition (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984) 5.

rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight" were presented in a comical way. In such comical presentations of serious events, the carnival lowered the official aspects of the state and the church to unofficial aspects of popular culture—making what is conceived as solely for the elites available instead to the masses. The application of these rituals in a different context is crucial to understanding Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque—the essence of which is to present "a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life."[14] In the grotesque, two contradictory ideas or figures are inseparable;for instance, life is inseparable from death or the serious is inseparable from the comic. In this manner, the grotesque also degrades the spiritual and the ideal to the earthly and material.[15] Thus, the carnival and the grotesque share the qualities of lowering the state of the official realm to establish a juxtaposition that is strange in everyday life.

The grotesque is deeply positive and universal, representing all people in the style of humorous folk with themes often focusing on bodily growth, fertility, and over abundance.

Although the carnival and the grotesque share many similarities in their themes, what distinguishes them is the roles they play in their expression, as the carnival is a setting and the grotesque is an aesthetic. The carnival consists of a typical space at an exceptional time; establishing a venue upon which the aesthetics of the grotesque can be applied. In Bakhtin's characterization, the carnival occurs in the marketplace, a public space that did not exist in the Soviet Union, which was a unique location even within medieval Europe. Whereas churches, institutions and private homes were dominated by clear, stringent hierarchies, the marketplace was characterized by freedom, familiarity, and communality.[16] Carnivals were held only on a few days throughout the year, but during this time, there was a "suspension of all hierarchical precedence," and this breakdown of the official realm brought about a momentary freedom from the authority that dictated people's daily lives.[17] The essential way in which the masses obtained freedom in the carnival was through positive laughter, a universal and communal sharing of the comic which allowed them to break down hierarchy. The grotesque is deeply positive and universal, representing all people in the style of humorous folk with themes often focusing on bodily growth, fertility, and over abundance.[18] Things such as extra limbs, distorted bodies, mixing the old and young together in the same body are common tropes of the grotesque. The positivity of the grotesque, insofar as it adds to a body, makes it the ideal aesthetic for bringing about positive laughter in the carnival. The carnival's disruption of the social hierarchy, although it is still limited to the few days of festivities, makes it inherently political whereas the grotesque can be political when it is used in the context of the carnival, but an aesthetic representation of contradiction is not necessarily political.

In applying the carnival and the grotesque to *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*, the ambiguity of the painting is revealed.[19] The author flickers or "shimmers" in between identifying with their

14. M. M Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 62.
15. Ibid. 19.
16. Ibid. 154.
17. Ibid. 10.
18. Ibid. 19.
19. Mikhail Epstein, "Postmodernist Thought of the Late Soviet Period: Three Profiles," 487-488.

work and distancing themselves from it. Dmitri Prigov's concept of "shimmering" expresses a state in which the viewer and the author never know how sincere or parodic the author is in their self-identification with their work.[20] Where the carnival is a place of public gathering, Komar and Melamid in the painting are in an ambiguous time and space that is isolated from reality. Besides the furniture, the bust of Stalin, and Komar and Melamid's figures, the background of the painting is devoid of any other figures or fixtures.[21] The painting's lack of any contextualization puts distance between Komar and Melamid in real life and Komar and Melamid as represented in the painting. Yet, there is the obvious self-identification of the artists with the painting, as they use their own likeness for the figures of the Young Pioneers. This contradiction between the imagined and some semblance of reality brings out that their self-identification is meant to be ambiguous as the absurdity of their physicality reflects an emotional confusion.

Komar and Melamid regard themselves not as merely satirizing socialist realism, but as discovering a universal, collective element within it.[22] Their re-mythologization of Soviet symbols, by placing them in new contexts, connects to a larger audience than that intended for socialist realism because of the new meaning created by, for example, placing a bust of Stalin amidst grotesque figures. Any person can recognize the grotesque even if they do not recognize symbols of Soviet nationalism, so the symbol becomes comically universal to anyone. The grotesqueness of the bust of Stalin can thus be understood collectively, and yet the painting lacks the collective space of the carnival. Instead it takes place in an ambiguous setting.

The grotesque figures of the Young Pioneers with the faces of the adult versions of Komar and Melamid is the most striking aspect of the painting. This depiction is a contradiction, an impossibility in reality that brings out a comical quality to the painting. The comic brings out laughter and in this case it brings out positive laughter from the fact that the grotesque is positive, adding new meaning, new bodily forms of being. This form of laughter has an intrinsic relationship with freedom from social hierarchy and authority as those who laugh overcome their fear because laughter has no inhibitions or limitations.[23] The conquering of fear is relevant to sots art as a response to socialist realism because it allowed for the conquering of fear that was omnipresent in the totalitarianism of the Stalin era. This requires understanding what fear Komar and Melamid were trying to conquer.

TOTALITARIANISM AND SOTS ART

Hannah Arendt, a political theorist of the 20th century, is a central authority for understanding the phenomenon and consequences of totalitarianism. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt characterizes Stalin's regime, along with Nazi Germany, as the world's two truly totalitarian regimes.[24] One of the central aims of totalitarianism is the abolition of freedom. Totalitarianism aims to eradicate freedom

20. Mikhail Epstein, "Postmodernist Thought of the Late Soviet Period: Three Profiles," Studies in East European Thought 73, no. 4 (2021 http://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-021-09417-2), 487.
21. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group, 40.
22. Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond, 93.
23. M. M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 90.
24. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Wilmington, UNITED STATES: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade & Reference Publishers, 1973) 405. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/berkeley-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3302075.

by eliminating the plurality of humanity, our diversity of individuals. Rather, totalitarianism seeks to create a oneness of humanity that never determines its own actions and only survives to preserve itself as a species.[25] Eliminating plurality eliminates freedom in the sense that individual choice is lost. Connecting back to themes of the carnival, by eliminating plurality, a totalitarian regime also eliminates the space in which the carnival can take place. The condition for carnival is plurality as it is characterized by collective and popular experience of the comic.[26] However, the collective of the carnival differs from the oneness of being under totalitarian control as the carnival masses have individual choice to partake while the masses under totalitarianism do not.

Since totalitarianism aims at making freedom impossible, positive laughter would also be impossible. The act of laughing in a positive carnivalesque way, like any action, is a new beginning. Arendt says this ability to start anew is man's supreme capacity and is identical with human freedom.[27] As humans we can always renew life so long as our species survives as we are characterized by natality insofar as we are alive because we are born. The cyclical nature of natality brings out why the grotesque often manifests itself in contradiction of the body; the bodily element of the grotesque is positive as it distorts what is life and what is death.[28] So although the Stalinist totalitarian government sought to eliminate freedom and thus laughter, human capacity for natality constantly gives us the chance to find freedom, particularly freedom from fear of the totalitarian state.

Komar and Melamid use the aesthetic of the grotesque to fuse natality and reality by combining their childhood bodies with their adult faces. The choice to make the grotesque manipulation in this way and not the other way around, putting their childhood heads on their adult bodies, puts the focus on their adult appearances and minds over their childhood appearances and mind. Putting their adult heads on their childhood bodies eliminates the hierarchy of adult over child, yet still puts precedence to their adult selves as their heads and their minds are representative of their inner thoughts and emotions while the childhood body conveys a bodily connection to the past.

The upsetting of the mind/body hierarchy upset the social position of Stalin in the *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers*. In a distortion of the Leader Principle as explained by Arendt, Stalin's bust as an inanimate object in the painting has no freedom and no choice. Yet, he is not completely relegated to an uninfluential position. As discussed, the halo of light around the bust draws the eye and evokes religious imagery which brings to mind the idea of Stalin as the demiurge of the Soviet Union. This contradictory representation of Stalin which depicts him as both a powerless object and an omnipotent demiurge challenges Stalin's place in the social hierarchy of the painting. This juxtapositional representation brings out the ambiguity of how Komar and Melamid feel about the political environment of totalitarianism under Stalin. The painting does not take place in a carnival environment and yet its usage of grotesque aesthetic touches on the political without taking a definitive stance.

POLITICIZATION OF SOTS ART

Komar and Melamid have said about their work "'To us, Stalin is a mythical figure. We are not trying to do a political show.

25. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 438.
26. M. M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 146.
27. Ibid. 479.
28. M. M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 19.

This is nostalgia.'"[29] If Komar and Melamid were not trying to make their art political, then they seem to have achieved this by the fact that their work of art does not have its setting in the carnival, which is inherently political, while still referencing the political by distancing themselves from it. Their grotesque imagery and nostalgic associations, though evocative and revealing, do not indicate any particular political stance toward Stalin or their childhood in the Soviet Union. Further, Stalin and politics solely occupy the background.

Though Komar and Melamid did not want their art to be political, a political interpretation is no less easy to extrapolate, given the stylistic underpinnings of sots art's connection to socialist realism and to power. In the final, stirring line of his fundamental work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin says that mechanical reproduction created a situation in which communism responded by politicizing art, which was a response to the fascist aestheticization of politics.[30] This seems true by the way socialist realism is presented by the Party as aiming to be socialist in its form instead of making the form socialist. The latter implies that there is an objective form of art which politics can be applied to. The former instead says that socialism can be the form of any aesthetic which emphasizes why socialist realism was so interpretive, yet limited in what was an acceptable piece of socialist realism. As Komar and Melamid's work engages with the symbols of socialist realism, socialism appears in the form of sots art. The simple fact that socialism appears in the form of their work means that sots art finds itself as politicization of art, but, as I have discussed, without necessarily taking a political stance.

CONCLUSION

In an article for the New York Times in 2011, Melamid shared his revelation that "Not everything that's funny is true, for sure. But whatever is not funny is not true."[31] This quotation perfectly synthesizes all of the ideas of how the comical and the serious, the real and unreal interplay with each other to create truth anew. Together all three lenses of analysis in this essay reveal the ambiguity Komar and Melamid bring out through their use of socialist realist symbolism and grotesque imagery. Ultimately, this strange and unexpected combination of images is meant to be funny. We are meant to laugh. The Stalinist totalitarian government committed terrible crimes against humanity, the terror inflicted upon people in the 1930s only increased as political opposition dwindled.[32] How do you live in a world that doesn't make sense? It seems like the only thing left to do is laugh at the absurdity of it. This humor is the approach that comes across in Komar and Melamid's work. They remain ambiguous on their political stance on socialist realism, but they stand definitive in their belief that what is true, especially when it is so absurd, is funny. To summarize Bakhtin, when we laugh we conquer fear. *Double Self-Portrait as Young Pioneers* conquers fear of Stalin and a repressive regime, of not knowing the right stance to take, of looking ridiculous. Taking a last look at the painting, I hope you laugh.

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29. Margarita Tupitsyn, Sots Art: Eric Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Alexander Kosolapov, Leonid Lamm, Leonid Sokov, Kazimir Passion Group, 4.

30. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations : Essays and Reflections (Vol. [1st ed.] New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968) https://web-s-ebscohost-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE4MjM4ODdfX0FO0?sid=1ea0877c-160f-42a9-b5c1-98c6d5b87e78@redis&vid=0&format=EK&lpid=c09&rid=0.
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31. Charles McGrath, "Can a Picasso Cure You?" The New York Times, May 24, 2011, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/arts/design/alexander-melamids-art-healing-ministry-in-soho.html.

32. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 393.

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