The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first LEA book, titled “Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism.” The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.
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ART WORK / DREAM WORK IN NEW MEDIA DOCUMENTARY
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Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it? This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these are two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is ‘Red’ or ‘Communist.’

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with animus, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich. Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Commonist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Communist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit in edulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives.

If today’s Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word ‘Communist,’ borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: Commonist Art. If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and ‘loose/open’ commitments that could be defined in technological terms as liquid digital utopias or as a new form of permanent dystopia.

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The ‘semantic’ distinguo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on ‘likes,’ actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another; e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi’s government and I like the programs on his private TV.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new ‘church.’

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (exonymorically defined Cattocommunists or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that as being as binding as the light of God in the painting, The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

[...] and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. ‘That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,’ the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP.

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immodifications, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party’s ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

Stefania: This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. [...] I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.

Jep Gambardella: How many certainties you have, Stefania. I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. [...] Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead
To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the name of right-wing parties with state or corporate money – having both adopted and co-opted the same systems and frameworks of malfeasance shared with sycophantic artists and intellectuals.

In order to understand the misery of this kind of Red Art one would have to look at the Italian aesthetization of failure – which successfully celebrates failure in the Great Beauty by Paolo Sorrentino when the character of Stefania, and her ‘oozing civic duty,’ is ripped apart. It is a civic responsibility that is deprived and devoid of any ethics and morals.

This is but one of the multiple meanings of the concept of Red Art – the definition of Red Art as Communist Art, is the one that can only lead to sterile definitions and autocelebratory constructs based on the ‘aesthetic obfuscation of the lack of meaning’ as a tool for the obscurity of the aesthetic to act as a producer of meaning when the artist producing it is inept at creating meaning. Even more tragically, Red Art leads to the molding of the artist as spokesperson of the party and to the reduction of the artwork, whenever successful, to advertising and propaganda.

Commonist Art, founded on the whim of the ‘like’ and ‘trend,’ on the common that springs from the aggregation around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence of opinions and actions that can be counted and weighed and that cannot be taken for granted. Could this be a Gramscian utopia of re-construction and re-fashioning of aesthetics according to ‘lower commons’ instead of high and rich ‘exclusivity,’ which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every other opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby’s conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal difference towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support ‘their own images and meanings’ in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination.

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional ‘approval’ and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional iranjeris that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionally re-processed and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Communist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds’ likes and dislikes based on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten.

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.
Changing the Game: Towards an ‘Internet of Praxis’

There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent articles, panel discussions and books as the ‘ism’ that could, possibly, best describe the current dispositions of contemporary art. The name of the spectre is “post-internet art”. Unlike, however, its counter-part that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today’s artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non-intended) audiences. Notably, in his book Post Internet (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regardless of an artist’s intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, “[...] contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it.” Quite naturally, this would seem like a strong oppositional force directed against the modus operandi of the mainstream art world. Yet, further down in the same page, McHugh characterizes this acknowledgement as a constituent part of the much larger “game” that is played by commercial galleries, biennials, museums and auction houses.

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and challenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfil as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable ‘anxiety’ to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post-internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of ‘post-radio art’ or ‘post-television art’ or, even, ‘post-videogames art’; and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches.

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticization may readily become a very effective tool of politization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potentiality inherent in the characterisation of a network as ‘distributed’ was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-
siveness of neoliberalism during the same period. Distribution – not to mention, equal distribution – could have enjoyed a much more prominent role as a natural fundament of the Web and, accordingly, as a contributing factor in any investigation of digital art. Last but definitely not least, one cannot ignore the crucial fact that apocryphal art is much easier to enter the art market and play the ‘game’ of institutionalization (and vice versa).

To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true ‘game changers’ in the current historical conjuncture? What does ‘red art’ have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described ‘post-internet condition’?

Interestingly, the term “post-internet art” was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to “reclaim” and to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

‘Red Art’ can be understood as a tool for the creation of such ‘topoi.’ The lesson that new media artists can learn from the political osmoses catalyzed by the economic crisis is that, in order to be effective, cyberspace should become part of a strategy that combines physical and online spaces, practically and conceptually, whilst taking into account the individual traits of both. The necessity expressed through this combination constitutes (at least partly) a departure from the developing discourses around the ‘Internet of Things’ or the ‘Internet of Places.’ Alternatively, or additionally, what is proposed here is the formulation of an ‘Internet of Praxis’ (including, of course, artistic praxis). This approach is vividly reflected in several of the projects examined in this publication, as well as in the theoretical frameworks that are outlined.

Digital art is today in a position to capitalize on the participatory potencies that have been revealed by the socio-political events that defined the early 2010s. The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a ‘cybertopos’ is a constituent part of this new ground on which people are called to stand and build. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of ‘post-net participation’ in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of ‘merely’ augmenting it), may allow us to explore “concrete utopias” to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

Bill Balaskas

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The term ‘post-internet art’ is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, Post Internet (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
3. Gene McHugh, Post Internet, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms ‘post-internet art’ and ‘postmodern art’ could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, ‘post-internet art’ puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term ‘post-internet art’ would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of ‘legitimization,’ towards which major museums, curators and art fairs have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a ‘neutral’ relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see endnote 8).
5. Thomas More’s Utopia was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, with an introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 51: “What the bourgeoisie produce, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”
8. For more on the concept of ‘concrete utopias’ see Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, tr. Neville Place, Stephen Place, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between ‘abstract utopias’ and ‘concrete utopias’ associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. ‘Concrete utopias’ should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘microtopias’ which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in Relational Aesthetics (2002) that “It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his Altermodern Manifesto (2002) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. ‘Post-internet art’ appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.
INTRODUCTION

What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today’s post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism? A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception, where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let’s be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art ‘red’ per se? Do we expect Red Art to be ‘red’ in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto Que faire? What is to be done? that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films ‘politically.’ It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be ‘red’ at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly ‘red’?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were ‘new’ in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and ‘users’ respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the ‘new’ and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the ‘better,’ by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that the Internet nor any other new technologies has saved us, but that the hopes for a more democratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not predefine too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective ‘new’ technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

Susanne Jaschko
Why Digital Art is Red

The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable. Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations. Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and masses of people globally - who turn out to be more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alex- ander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode. Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction. Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally – who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world’s press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from [J] Gaza or Ramallah or Qasrana or Vidarbha and it have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours. It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant.

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich. Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of ‘artist.’

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident. The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world). Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – ‘my art has no political effect.’ They have to say it, even when it is pertainly absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political. They run headlong from the red.

Julian Stallabrass
INTRODUCTION

REFERENCES AND NOTES


3. See Domenico Quaranta, Beyond New Media Art (Brescia: Link Editions, 2013), 4-6. Quaranta’s book offers a thoughtful and accessible account of many of the aspects of the divide.


The viewer observes a man performing what seems to be a ritual dance among the ruins of the abandoned Avar village of Gamsutl, situated in the Caucasian mountains. In the past, this village has been famous for its skillful jewelers and armourers. Since the seventies, however, Soviet agricultural and industrialisation policy has led to its rapid decay. The dance symbolically re-enacts poses and gestures from 19th century battle paintings, from Soviet socialist propaganda imagery of collective farm brigades, and also from the everyday life of the villagers. The human body attempts to physically merge with its surrounding, acting as an agent of re-connection with the “then” and “now.”

— Ilina Koralova


a project by

Taus Makhacheva

Gamsutl

Screenshot from White Gold of Our Country, directed by V. Belyaev. Central Documentary Film Studios, 1958. Courtesy of The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD). Used with permission.


Screenshots from *Path Leading Downhill*, directed by P. Finkelberg, North Caucasian Film Studio, 1962. Courtesy of The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD). Used with permission.
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“Dagestan fight for freedom against Iranian occupation.”

Information display outlining the defeat of Nadir Shah in 1741 near Gamsaut. Courtesy of Dagestan State Museum of History and Architecture. Used with permission.
Building High-altitude Channel in Dagestan in the 1940s, N. A. Lakov, 1940s. Paper, pastel, 79 × 99.5 cm. Courtesy of Dagestan Museum of Fine Arts named after P.S. Gamzatova. Used with permission.


Figure 6.7 “Dance of the Collective Farm Brigade Leader.” The sequence of photos shows: preliminary steps; plowing; driving a tractor; husking corn; binding the sheaves; lifting the sheaves; loading the sheaves; and final steps. (From Vsesoiuznyi tsentral’nyi sovet profsoyuzov, Soviet Folk Art [Moscow, 1939], 14-15)

In the mountain villages of Northern Ossetia, where the famous Lezghinka and Kabardinka originated, a new dance has acquired great popularity—the Dance of the Brigade Leader, portraying collective farm life. The dance is usually performed to the accompaniment of a popular folk tune, a phrase of which is continually repeated by an accordion to accent the movements of the dancers, which convey in graceful rhythm and striking realism various phases of their new life.

Cropped from Soviet Folk Art, Moscow, 1939.

Gamsutl was abandoned in 1960s, as a result of a Soviet program of relocating highlanders to collective farms.
Antique postcard, Karachai, Kislovodsk area, Bermamit, Southern steep: 2607 meter above the sea level, with the view of Elbrus (h. 5633 m.), MKO, Kislovodsk. Collection of the artist. Used with permission.
