



'Never Turn Back!' 1989, by Boris Orlov, from the Stella Art Foundation.

Stella Art Foundation

Russia's contemporary stars

RUSSIAN COLLECTOR Stella Kesaeva is passionate about her mission to make contemporary Russian artists better known in the West.

In 2004 she founded the Stella Art Foundation, a nonprofit, Moscow-based organization that supports Russian contemporary art and aims "to bridge a cultural gap

Collecting

MARGARET STUDER

between the East and West inherited during the totalitarian rule in the Soviet Union and its former satellites."

The foundation runs an extensive exhibition program. Its current show, "That Obscure Object of Art: Contemporary Russian Art 1975-2007" is at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna until Nov. 16. The exhibition presents 40 paintings, installations and sculptures by 17 contemporary Russian artists from the Stella Art Foundation collection. The show is built around Russian conceptual art, which has its roots in the Sots Art (Soviet pop art) movement of the 1970s that rebelled against official Soviet art.

Among the artists in the show are Alexander Kosolapov, known for his paintings combining stereotypes of American and Soviet mass culture, the ideologies of capitalism and socialism; and Boris Orlov, who looks at power as embodied in imperial busts such as his armed "Sailor" (1975) on a pedestal.

The KHM exhibition is the latest event in the Stella Foundation's international program—seen by Ms. Kesaeva as part of a tour of Europe over the next few years as she builds relationships with other leading museums. In 2007, the foundation participated in the Venice Biennale with the project "Ruin Russia," an installation by Stas Polnarev built around the demolition of one of the main symbols of Soviet life, the Hotel Russia in Moscow. Ms. Kesaeva will return to the Venice Biennale in 2009 with an exhibition of artists little known outside Russia.

In 2007, works from the Foundation were exhibited at the Documenta in Kassel, Germany, the first time since 1992 that Russian



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art has been chosen for this benchmark event.

In Russia the Stella Foundation has supported major museum exhibitions with works from the West by the likes of Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alex Katz, Robert Rauschenberg and Marc Quinn.

The Stella Foundation currently has several hundred works by western and Russian artists it plans to put on permanent display when it opens a contemporary art museum in Moscow in 2010.

Ms. Kesaeva is married to Russian billionaire Igor Kesaev, who founded the Mercury Group of companies with diverse interests in food, beverages and cigarette distribution as well as energy (the company is not to be confused with the Mercury company that recently took over auction house Phillips de Pury).

We spoke to Ms. Kesaeva during the KHM exhibition.

Q: When did you first become interested in contemporary art?

I was always interested in contemporary art, but it was only after a visit to Switzerland, Germany and France in 2000 that I began to look at it with a professional eye. I returned to Russia and realized that contemporary art was not being viewed on the same level. We had a lot of interesting contemporary artists who were not getting the exposure that they should.

Q: Which artist interested you the most at that time?

I saw an exhibition of Russian conceptualist artist Ilya Kabakov in Germany, and it moved me to tears. I couldn't understand the

conceptualist art of Germany's Joseph Beuys, but I could understand the thoughts and people presented by Kabakov in his Palace ["The Palace of Projects" installation lets visitors explore individual projects that provide suggestions for improving oneself and the world]. I am interested in ideas and philosophy, and not primarily in the beautiful.

Q: How would you describe the Russian art scene today?

After a long period of socialist indifference to contemporary trends, the enormous interest in contemporary art in Russia is visible. Each year sees the opening of new galleries, the establishment of new art prizes and more major exhibitions.

Q: Who was the first artist that you bought?

An image of a cat by Andy Warhol.

Q: How does the global economic crisis affect your plans for the future?

Our projects will go ahead as planned.

Q: You support young artists in Russia who might otherwise not find an audience. What is the main challenge facing them?

Education. Schools in Russia are very much concentrated on traditional art. So we support projects which give young artists a chance to develop their ideas. In September 2006, for example, the foundation organized a seminar for young artists from Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Ukraine where the artists got an opportunity to work with the dean of Yale School of Art, the director of the 52nd Venice Biennale and other authorities on contemporary art.

Q: Your parties are famous, like your glamorous event in Venice to celebrate "Ruin Russia." How important are celebrity parties in promoting art?

You have to make a noise that draws attention. In business circles, many important artists who don't have an immediate visual and aesthetic impact are largely unknown. When you hold a party and the artist appears in the glamour press, he or she becomes known and fashionable to own.