"During the period of our work at GAKhN from 1926-1930, we conducted an active struggle for 'pure art' and against Marxism as an international doctrine. In actual fact, there was no struggle; rather, we carried on counter-revolutionary work, because there was no-one who could struggle against us. The Vice-President of the Academy, G. G. Shpet, along with M. A. Petrovsky, B. I. Yarkho and I, A. G. Gabrichevsky, all occupied leading posts in the Academy and thereby held it under our control. Consequently, we enjoyed complete freedom to do as we pleased. Our counter-revolutionary work resulted in the liquidation of the Academy as a non-Soviet institution in 1930."

Art criticism emerged as an independent science in Russia only in the 1920s, a striking development when we remember that in less than a decade, Russian art criticism not only came into existence, completed its German apprenticeship, and achieved international renown, but also elaborated its own theory and methodology. True, the new science of art, as the discipline was called, failed to create an enduring school, but this was due not to any organic defect, but to the repression of many of its outstanding theoreticians and to its enforced liquidation in the 1930s. Unfortunately, however, this sudden interruption has led to a distorted interpretation of Russian or Soviet art criticism as a whole, for historians have tended to assume that in the 1920s the discipline was little more than a respectable handmaiden to the German formal method. In turn, this assumption derives partly from our current concentration on the artists of the avant-garde and their destruction of theories that they considered "academic." Reevaluating the critical heritage of the 1920s, therefore, is an important process, because it helps correct a critical and historical imbalance. After all, the new scholarship of art, especially as developed at RAKhN, was the first, if not only, attempt to create an exact science of the spirit.

In order for us to understand the reasons for this development, it is important to delineate the general cultural context that prompted the
scholarly study of art in Russia, especially the intellectual and social mood of the fin de siècle. This was an era characterized by the premonition of impending transformation, a mood that, in turn, used epithets that are now associated automatically with Symbolism and early Modernism — revolution, radiant future, coming Huns, machine age, Nietzschean superman and so on. Before the outbreak of the First World War it was clear that the world had changed forever, a sentiment that literature, philosophy, and the visual arts manifested immediately and urgently. Identifying this moment as a "crisis of culture," Andrei Bely declared: "Never before have the contradictions of human consciousness collided in the soul so sharply; never before has the dualism of consciousness and feeling, contemplation and will, the individual and society, science and religion, morality and beauty expressed itself so distinctly." After searching for a cohesive style in countless historical variations, art entered a critical and final stage of development which the art historian and theoretician Alexander Gabrichevsky described in the following manner:

It is difficult to think of an era which produced so few significant works of art and yet which knew so much about art or understood it so well; it is difficult to think of an era more impotent in style and which at the same time produced so many experts and researchers with a highly developed and precise feeling for style; an era which so lacked the skill to produce beautiful works and yet could analyze them with such virtuosity; an era, finally, which had so lost the elements of a cohesive cultural and social basis, and yet whose scientific consciousness of the social nature and cultural expressiveness of any art was so clear.

Just as Bely and Gabrichevsky were describing the paradoxes of their material and esthetic reality, culture was shifting from the artistic to the conceptual, while theory was becoming the motivation and foundation of art. The expressive gesture assumed unprecedented significance and the embodiment of the expressive gesture came to be perceived by artists — and eventually by the public — as a work of art. New genres emerged such as the Futurist scandal or the urinal exhibited by Marcel Duchamp, but, in aspiring towards an ultimate truth and a philosophical system, the new movements proved incapable of creating a school or

3. A. Gabrichevsky, "Novaia nauka ob iskusstve" [conditional title]. Quoted from the manuscript in the archive of Olga Severtseva, Moscow.