Transition in Post-Soviet Art:

"Collective Actions" Before and After 1989
by
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

For more than three decades the Moscow-based conceptual artist group

"Collective Actions" has been organizing actions. Each action, typically taking place at

the outskirts of Moscow, is regarded as a trigger for a series of intellectual activities, such

as analysis, interpretation, narration, and description. The artists have systematically

recorded and transcribed these activities, collecting and assembling texts, diagrams, and

photographs in a ten-volume publication entitled *Journeys Outside the City*. Five volumes

of this publication concern the activities of the group before, and five after, 1989. Over

the years the *Journeys Outside the City* became an idiosyncratic, self-sufficient aesthetic

discourse arrayed along a constellation of concepts developed by those engaged in

"Collective Actions." In its elusive hermeticism and self-referentiality the aesthetic

framework constructed by these artists formed a closed system, gathering bundles of

signs that seldom referred to anything concrete outside the horizon of Moscow

Conceptualism. It is in this regard that the early volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City*

can be compared to the similarly closed ideological discourse of the Soviet Politburo.

After 1989, however, with the transition from socialism to capitalism, the aesthetic and

artistic language of this group began to change as its text-based self-sufficient system

began to open up under pressure from new socioeconomic conditions introduced by the

processes of democratization and liberalization.

My dissertation *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: 'Collective Actions' Before and

After 1989* is neither a history of nor a monographical work on "Collective Actions," but

rather an analytical exploration of aesthetic, artistic and institutional changes that have transpired in the *Journeys Outside the City* during the transition from socialism to capitalism. As the artists migrated from one art historical category into another (from the status of "unofficial artists" to that of "contemporary artists"), their aesthetics and art revealed a series of stylistic, technical, formal, textual, and aesthetical transformations and metamorphoses that paralleled broader cultural conversions taking place in post-Soviet and Eastern European art during the transition to capitalism.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s a Moscow-based institute for the study of culture investigated some major changes that had occurred in the genre of "author's song" (*avtorskaya pesnya*)[1] after the fall of the USSR. In the Soviet times this semi-official genre was practiced mainly by dissident singers, making it very popular among the public. The researchers discovered that during the transition from socialism to capitalism the following important changes took place. Before 1989 there were three main requirements that a performer had to meet in order to be called an "author" or a "bard:" 1) the concert had to take place in an informal or unofficial location, and in the Soviet times the bards often performed in apartments, or in the woods around a fire when they sang for a larger group; 2) the lyrics had to be semantically complex, for the songs were also called "guitar poems"; 3) the author-singer wore the same kind of clothes as his or her audience. After 1989 none of these three criteria survived. During the transitional nineties, and after the interpreters of the author songs started to perform in large and brightly lit concert halls, the verses began to deteriorate, becoming simple and straightforward, losing the previous semantic depth acquired during years of learning to conceal rebellious meanings behind metaphors; and finally, their appearance changed as the singers began to wear different clothes than their public.

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[1] In the "author's song" (also called "guitar poetry") the singer-guitarist is also the author of the lyrics and music. These songs were popular among the dissident circles and have been usually regarded as semi-official or "middle ground" to distinguish them from the criminal and camp "underground" song. See Daphne Skillen, "[Untitled]," *The Modern Language Review* 81, no. 3 (1986).

The foregoing example conveys in a more compact form the objectives as well as the main direction of research for my present thesis. It became de rigueur to discuss the transition from socialism to capitalism only in terms of its economic and political significance. Over the last two decades scholars of political and social sciences analyzed the advent of the market economy and representative democratic politics from various angles, developing a large range of methodologies. It is one of the main objectives of this thesis, which was inspired by stories such as the one described above, to study the impact of transition on art and to examine the transition from a cultural point of view, for such an analysis is long overdue.

My dissertation *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: "Collective Actions" Before and After 1989* identifies major artistic and aesthetic transformations in post-Soviet art by analyzing the aesthetic discourse constructed by the members of the Moscow-based artist group "Collective Actions" (hereafter referred to as KD, or *kollektivnye deistvia*). During three decades of collaboration this group of conceptual artists was concerned with investigating the nature of art, collecting the processes and conclusions into the ten-volume publication *Journeys Outside the City* (hereafter referred to as *Journeys*), which constitutes the main object of study for this dissertation.[2] While my dissertation presents

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[2] The first five volumes of KD's *Journeys Outside the City* were published in 1998, and will henceforth be cited as: Andrei Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1998). The second part of the *Journeys* is unpublished manuscript material, which I cite as: A. Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols," (unpublished, unpaginated: 2008). Recently the ten-volume material has been partially published online and is available in both Russian and English at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html. Various authors have translated the title of KD's *Poezdki za gorod* differently. Among the most common translations are: "Trips Outside the City*,*" "Country Walks," "Travels to the Country," "Journeys to the Countryside," "Travels Outside the City." I will translate KD's

the transformations that accompanied KD's aesthetic discourse constructed in the *Journeys* in a historical context, it is not a history of this artist group, nor a monographical work, but rather an analysis of the aesthetic, artistic and institutional practices instigated by KD, and their subsequent changes after the transition from socialism to capitalism.

"Transition" is the key concept for this dissertation and it refers to the radical transformations that took place during the 1990s in Eastern Europe. The significance of the concept of "transition" has been confirmed by a science called "transitology," a new paradigm that emerged in the social and political sciences in the second half of the eighties in order to analyze global political and social transformations in the countries of the second and third world. Throughout the nineties (which in this region have been also known as the "decade of transition") transitology became the new hegemonic discourse that filled in the ideological vacuum once occupied by Marxism-Leninism. Whereas in the West (and particularly in the USA where the new paradigm emerged) transitology was only known to a small number of academics and government specialists, in the post-Soviet countries the science of transition has affected (through numerous transitions, for example, to a new currency, to a new constitution and national anthem, and sometimes even to another national appellation) the lives of the masses.

My dissertation addresses the effects of transition on the field of art and aesthetics, following KD's aesthetic discourse through its gradual evolution from the

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title as *Journeys Outside the City* and refer to them in my texts using the shortened form *Journeys*. All translations from the Russian are mine, unless indicated.

Soviet to the Russian period, and from socialism to capitalism. The history of the group is the history of their aesthetic system presented in the ten-volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City.* Four artists (Andrei Monastyrsky (Sumnin) [Murmansk Region, b. 1949] Nikita Alexeev [Moscow, b. 1953], Nikolai Panitkov [Viena, b. 1950], Georgii Kizevalter [Moscow, b. 1955]) formed KD in 1976, and worked together until 1989 when the group, which consisted at that time of eight members, disbanded. After six years of separation they reunited in 1995 under the name "[KD]," inserting the name in between square brackets, suggesting that the return to the former composition of the group was still in process, partly because two of its previous eight members participated only occasionally. After several years the artists dropped the brackets and KD is still active to this day. This abridged history of the group roughly overlaps with that of USSR and later of Russia during the last three decades: 1976-1989, the decade of economic stagnation (*zastoi*) and the beginning of perestroika; 1989-1995, the collapse of USSR (1991) and the beginning of the transition to capitalism; and 1995-2008, the perpetuation of transition, and the attempt to re-invent Russia in the image of its former glory. The division of KD's *Journeys* into ten progressive phases offers the possibility of investigating these changes chronologically.

KD is part of the Moscow Conceptualist tradition, and as conceptual artists they have been primarily concerned with the investigation of the nature of art, attempting to comprehend what constitutes an artistic and an aesthetic experience. KD became known in Moscow artistic circles for introducing a new genre of art called "journeys." These were trips in which the artists invited their spectators to travel outside Moscow, most

often to a meadow called "Kievogorskoe Field," which is a field near the village Kievy

Gorky on the outskirts of the city. During each journey the group organized an artistic

event which they called "action" (*akzia*) – a form of artistic expression that may be

compared to Western "happenings" in the late 1950s, and "performances" in the 1970s

and 1980s. KD's actions, however, differed from the Western manifestations in that at the

end of each action the artists asked the spectators to engage in the process of

interpretation, by describing and reporting what they had witnessed, as well as by

analyzing those thoughts and reactions that the action had triggered in them. The

accumulated material, which consisted of documents and texts, commentaries and

analyses, photographs, diagrams and schemas were collected and assembled in the ten

volumes of *Journeys Outside the City*, corresponding to ten phases in the thirty-year

history of KD. The first five volumes of the *Journeys* comprise the activity of the group

during the Soviet period (1976 -89), often described by the artists themselves as the

"classical KD." After a period of transition, which lasted six years (1989-1995) the group

reunited and began to assemble material for the next five volumes of the *Journeys* (1991-

2008).[3]

The dissertation addresses a series of questions about the progress of KD's

Journeys during three decades of history, aiming to comprehend how it was affected by

the transition to a new social and political system. I ask: What are the main repercussions

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[3] The periodization of KD's *Journeys* is the following: (Soviet period) Volume I (1976-80), Volume II (1980-83), Volume III (1983-85), Volume IV (1985-87), and Volume V (1987-89): (Russian period) Volume VI (1991-94), Volume VII (1995-99), Volume VIII (1999-2003), Volume IX (2003-06), Volume X (2006-08). Monastyrsky refers to the first four volumes of the *Journeys* as "classical KD." See the Foreword to Volume Seven in Andrei Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

of the transition from socialism to capitalism on KD's artistic and aesthetic heritage? What are the main transformations, and how did new economic and social conditions affect the relation between KD and the spectators; the relation among the members of the group; the relation of the artists to artistic and aesthetic experience; the relation of artists and spectators to the Kievogorskoe Field? Which of these changes and transformations may be used to explain cultural process that occurred on the broader scale of post-Soviet art and culture? The answers to some of these questions are included in KD's *Journeys* as they emerged, evolved and formed during the Soviet period and then re-surfaced in new social and economic conditions in the post-Soviet and Russian transitional period. A transition is most of the time compressed in between a "before" and an "after," and in order to understand it one needs to apply a method akin to arithmetical subtraction and obtain the difference.

My dissertation examines KD aesthetics historically, following a "before and after" formula. Today one can encounter this temporal construction mainly in the language of advertising, which uses it in order to promote various products. But the advertisers achieve the dramatic "before and after effect" by repressing and passing over in silence the middle term "during," which often stands for the painful transition and the change of each "before" into its "after." In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin cites Théodore Muret on Augustin Eugène Scribe and Roger de Rougemont's play "Avant, pendant et apres, esquisses historiques." The play premiered in Paris on June 28, 1828 and, according to Benjamin, was concerned with three phases of French history: "The

first part of the trilogy [before] represents the society of the Ancient Régime, the second part [during] depicts the Reign of Terror, and the third part [after], takes place in the society of the Restoration period."[4] In considering the changes of KD's *Journeys* through the Soviet Régime to the Restoration my dissertation also examines the Terror of transition.

The organization of the dissertation follows the tripartite structure of the temporal expression "Before, During and After" with each part serving as a title for the three main chapters which correspond to the three periods in KD's history. Thus Chapter 2, titled "KD's Journeys Before 1989," examines the evolution of the *Journeys* under the Soviet *ancien régime*; Chapter 3, titled "'During:' Transition to Capitalism" steps aside from the *Journeys* and from KD in order to examine the discourse of transitology, along with one of the cultural mechanisms of transition – the Soros Center for Contemporary Art network; and Chapter 4, "[KD]'s Journeys After 1989," surveys the Russian volumes of the *Journeys*. These three chapters are preceded by a general introduction to the phenomena of Moscow Conceptualism.

Chapter 1: KD and Moscow Romantic Conceptualism

KD emerged as a part of Moscow Conceptualism in the mid-1970s, at a time when neither "Collective Actions" nor "Moscow Conceptualism" were as well established and known as they are today. In fact, the two names were used for the first

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[4] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 39.

time by the Russian critic Boris Groys in one of his early texts[5] and the two

nomenclatures are not only contemporaneous but also share a common ancestry. Not only

the names relate KD to Moscow Conceptualism, as one way to picture this relation is to

imagine Moscow Conceptualism in terms of a circle of people (the artists and their

spectators) who journeyed (in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s) together outside

the city in order to attend KD actions.[6] More recently critics have argued that KD was the

institution that contributed to the consolidation of Moscow Conceptualism into a distinct

tradition, assisting this tradition in gaining what Russian artist Ilya Kabakov called its

"field of consciousness."[7] KD helped Moscow Conceptualism acquire its distinct

language and the two phenomena cannot be considered apart.

Chapter 1 begins the discussion of KD and Moscow Conceptualism with an

overview of existing literature. During three decades two distinct methodologies have

prevailed, for Moscow Conceptualism emerged at the junction of fine art and literature.

This chapter groups bibliographical sources together according to the preference given to

one approach or the other, explaining why the artistic method prevailed before and the

literary one after 1989. It also analyzes the contribution of certain literature to the

construction of a distinct cultural category called "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" by

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[5] Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," *A-YA*, no. 1 (1979).

[6] Monastyrsky estimates that the number of conceptualists in the seventies and the eighties did not exceed fifty persons. Andrei Monastyrsky, "Batiskaf kontseptualizma," in *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, ed. Boris Groys, Max Hollein, and Manuel Fontán del Junco (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 18.

[7] E. Bobrinskaia, "Kollektivnye desitvia kak institutia," Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal N 23, http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/xindx.htm [accessed November 23, 2008].

examining how different sources have promoted this tradition over three decades,

singling this designation out and separating it from other established cultural labels such

as "unofficial art" or "Soviet nonconformism" before, and "contemporary Russian art"

during the post-1989 period.

Moscow Conceptualism began to consolidate into a cultural entity after a split that

occurred within the Moscow unofficial art scene. The latter appeared after the death of

Stalin and by the early seventies it formed a "parallel polis" with its own parallel culture,

economy and media.[8] The relative openness of Moscow, which the city enjoyed thanks to

its capital status, made it possible for local artists to learn more quickly of international

cultural processes on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Moscow Conceptualism launched

its own distinct artistic and aesthetic paradigm during the seventies in what was for the

most part an imaginary dialogue with Western conceptual artists. In search of their

identity these artists produced a unique language with a distinct vocabulary of concepts,

terms, and definitions that were later collected and assembled by KD's leader Andrei

Monastyrsky into the *Dictionary of Terms of Moscow Conceptualism* (hereafter referred

to as the *Dictionary*).[9] The chapter discusses some of these categories and their

importance for this tradition, often referring the reader to a Glossary in the appendix of

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[8] The concept of "parallel polis" was introduced by the Czechoslovakian *Charter 77* dissident writer Václav Benda in 1978 to describe unofficial economic, political and cultural manifestations. The Moscow unofficial art scene had all the attributes of a "parallel polis:" an economic black market where artists sold their works, parallel information networks where critics published unofficial criticism in the format of *samizdat* (self-published) or *tamizdat* (published abroad). See Vaclav Benda, "The Parallel 'Polis'," in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia*, ed. H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

[9] Andrei Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1999).

the dissertation that translates and explains some of the most important concepts of Moscow Conceptualism, and of other concepts that are relevant for this field.

Two of these concepts are discussed in more detail. The attribute "romantic," which was used by Boris Groys to distinguish Moscow Conceptualism from its Western counterpart, and the concept of "emptiness" (*pustota*) placed by Ilya Kabakov at the center of this tradition, are examined in relation to Moscow conceptualists' predecessors: the so-called "modernists of the 1950s and 1960s," and the Russian historical avant-garde of the 1920s. The chapter draws attention to the fact that the relation to the historical avant-garde, in particular, became an important theme, and the critics and artists associated with this tradition exploited this relation in order to present Moscow Conceptualism, if not as the next avant-garde, then as the most elaborate recent Russian cultural phenomenon. It has been argued that these artists articulated a critical response to their predecessors, and that Moscow Romantic Conceptualism with its social disengagement and distrust for politics, of which the aesthetics of KD may serve as a good example, emerged as the most successful dialectical negation of Russian avant-garde and its applauded political commitment.

Chapter 2: KD's Journeys Before 1989

Chapter 2 introduces KD's aesthetic system as it evolved during the first five volumes of *Journeys Outside the City*. The chapter is divided into four sections and proceeds by analyzing a series of actions organized by KD during its Soviet or "classical" period. It examines the main innovations that occur during each subsequent phase by

introducing and explaining the most frequently used concepts, by describing some of the established rituals in the interaction of the spectators and the artists, by translating some of the artists' analyses and commentaries and presenting some of the thoughts and impressions presented in the reports written by spectators. The chapter examines the general structure of the *Journeys*, translating and explaining some of KD's central categories, for instance the difference between the "spectator-participant" and the "anonymous-spectator," as well as concepts crucial for the aesthetic of the group, such as "empty action," "empty photographs," "demonstrative fields," and "exposition fields," and "factographical discourse," frequently referring to the Dictionary, which is another important source for this dissertation.[10]

The chapter begins with a discussion of the first action organized by KD in 1976, describing the artists' actions and the spectators' reactions. With each new volume KD's aesthetic discourse expanded, allowing new concepts and terms, new rules and procedures to arrange themselves into a distinct discursive entity. The chapter depicts these five volumes of the *Journeys* in terms of a system which responds to the rapidly changing political and social conditions under the late Soviet Union. The method used by KD significantly differs from that of other Western or Russian conceptualists, and this may be partially explained by the nature of the *Journeys*, which gradually acquired a more complex form and structure, operating from the third phase on according to a logic of its own.

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[10] Ibid.

Chapter 3: "During:" Transition to Capitalism

Compositionally, the shorter third chapter is wedged between the second and the fourth in order to express the "terror" of transition from the Soviet to the Russian volumes of KD's *Journeys*. Chapter 3 corresponds to the slash in the "before/after" metaphor, examining the repressed during of transition. Chronologically the chapter corresponds to the turn of the nineties, and to the time when KD ceased to exist, with its former members traveling to diverse Western contemporary art venues in order to represent "Soviet nonconformism," "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" or "contemporary Russian art." The space that separates KD from its before and after period may be compared to larger historical events, and its history is similar to that of the USSR. Like the Soviet Union, which broke apart and divided its property among the independent republics in order to find a new form of reunion within the Commonwealths of Independent States (CIS), KD separated and after six years it teamed up again under the new name [KD].

Chapter 3 "fills" the blank spot that occurs in the history of KD, examining the transition by redirecting attention from the disbanded KD and their interrupted Journeys to the concept of transition per se, focusing on the new paradigm of transitology. The latter was introduced in the earlier nineties together with several Western institutions which promoted radical neo-liberal reforms in every sphere of social life. The chapter traces the origins of transitology in the modernization theories of the previous decades, suggesting that while in such fields as politics and economics transitology has been recognized from the beginning as an official discourse, in arts and culture it was and

remains a latent, and implicit narrative. One of the main goals of this dissertation is to make this cultural transitology manifest, by pointing to some of its most evident traces as well as by learning to recognize some of its concealed forces.

One of the main instruments of the transition in art and culture was the implementation by the international philanthropist George Soros of more than twenty Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) throughout the entire post-Soviet space. The chapter brings forward the history of the SCCA network as an example of an institution that carried on the transition in the field of art, culture and cultural policy, arguing that its impact on the region's culture may be compared to the influence of such key participants in the process of transition as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. While these international organizations have been concerned with the conversion of planned economies into free markets and of monolithic one-party politics into multi-party democracies, the SCCA network dealt mainly with the emancipation of art and culture from the ideological, political and economic control of the state. For instance, KD's five-volumes of the Soviet *Journeys* were published with the partial financial assistance of SCCA Moscow and other Western institutions that could afford in the nineties to invest in contemporary art. The final section of this chapter discusses the SCCA model and its impact on the model of cultural policy in Eastern Europe.

Chapter 4: [KD]'s Journeys After 1989

KD's passage from "during" to "after" is more diffused and hazy, comparable to that of the political and economic transition. While the Soviet (before) period was

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concluded after the dissolution of USSR in 1991, the question of whether Russia has embraced pro-Western values and accomplished the transition (during) to a democratic model (after), is currently being widely debated.[11] KD's periodization of the nineties follows similar lines. The group reunited in 1995 but kept its name until the late nineties in a pair of square brackets [KD], as noted above. I will keep these brackets in the last chapter in order to distinguish the KD of before from that of after.

The chapter discusses a series of fragmentations that began to occur in the second part of the *Journeys*. It brings in several elements of [KD]'s discourse (introduced and discussed in Chapter 2) and shows how they have been modified in the post-1989 part of the Journeys. I introduce a series of new concepts, which entered the Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism during the nineties, utilizing them to analyze major changes that took place during this period. Some of these concepts are preceded by the prefix "schizo" ("schizo-analysis," "schizo-illustration," "schizo-China," or "schizo-analytical places of Moscow and Moscow Region") confirming the process of fragmentation of some of the main elements and relations in [KD]'s art and aesthetics.

The chapter discusses various instances of fragmentation in the second part of the *Journeys*. One example is the new form of relation among the group's members. In 1990 they elaborated a special index in order to calculate the "percentages of authorship" and to compute and translate into precise figures the exact involvement of each member in the production of actions. This sign of re-distribution of collective property among the

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[11] A large body of literature exists on this topic. See for instance the more recent book Lilia Fedorovna Shevtsova, *Russia - Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

individual subjects mirrors larger social processes that took place at that time throughout the post-Soviet space. The transition affected not only the interaction among the members of the group but also modified other pre-established relations, for example the relation of the group to its public, to the notion of journey, to the participants' reports, and to the Kievogorskoe Field.

The fate of this field on the outskirts of Moscow is an appropriate metaphor for [KD]'s aesthetic discourse after 1989. Kievogorskoe Field was purchased in the nineties by real estate developers and was converted from raw kolkhoz land into equally partitioned lots with brand new mansions and villas for the Russian nouveau riches. This transformation of the Kievogorskoe Field, which had constituted the group's aesthetic firing ground since the mid-1970s, corresponded to a significant change in the process of their own art production. Under new economic and social conditions, the gallery space (and not the field) became the most important site of KD's interaction with the public. The change in the space of art production and exhibiting led to the emergence of another genre that the group did not use in the Soviet times. After 1989 the artists of [KD] resorted to the medium of installation, which was conditioned by the appearance of the gallery space. The latter manifestation is another example of art's manifold paradoxes: while I would suggest, on the one hand, that the artists had obtained a good opportunity to make their work known to a wider public, on the other hand this "opportunity" had come at the price of permitting their actions and their aesthetic discourse to become reified, transformed into objects manipulable within the enclosed space and the ideology of the white cube. KD constructed its aesthetical paradigm during the Soviet times by

identifying itself with the self-enclosed and hermetic system and language of the Politburo. With the restoration of capitalism in Russia, this model – formed to question and undermine an official hegemonic aesthetic position – lost some of its initial meaning and purpose, but continued to exist by virtue of its historical significance, as its aura was regularly conjured up in public displays and institutional promotions.

CHAPTER 1

KD and Moscow Romantic Conceptualism

Before discussing the first five (Soviet) volumes of KD's *Journeys Outside the City*, I will describe the background against which this group emerged and evolved. For the last thirty years KD has been part of the "Moscow Conceptualism" phenomenon. It must be emphasized that the terms "Collective Actions" (KD) and "Moscow Conceptualism" emerged at the same time, and that the two entities must not be regarded independently. This first chapter consists of two sections. It begins with a review of the existing literature on KD and on Moscow Conceptualism and then shows how the first publications on these artists contributed to the emergence of the name "Collective Actions" and of the term "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism." I then touch on one theme that has prevailed in this literature, especially after 1989: the relation of Moscow Conceptualism to the historical Russian avant-garde, explaining why it was namely this relationship that has become particularly relevant for the artists and critics associated with this tradition. In the second section of this chapter I address in broader terms the phenomenon of Moscow Conceptualism by pointing to some of the most important figures, theories, names, and concepts that shaped the tradition to which KD belongs.

Literature Review

In this section I address the last three decades of literature on KD, considering its evolution before and after 1989. This year, which has been considered a historical turning point in Eastern Europe, divides more than thirty years of KD's activities into two large periods: the Soviet period (1976-1989) and the Russian period (1989-2008), often referred to in scholarly parlance as "post-Soviet." Focusing on this thirty-year time span permits examination of some of the changes and alterations revealed in these texts: the approaches to writing and the methodologies which prevailed before and after 1989; art historical categories used to describe and categorize these artists before and after; and themes favored by artists and critics during the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods. Most of the available literature on KD (with the exception of KD's own writings, on which I rely in the next chapters) is integrated within a larger body of texts dedicated to Moscow Conceptualism. This fact demands that I discuss various sources on KD within the broader context of Moscow Conceptualism, looking particularly at those texts, which helped establish this tradition as a self-sufficient cultural phenomenon.

I would like to begin by pointing out that the literature on KD over the last thirty years may be described as fortuitous and fragmentary. It lacks a certain consecutiveness and continuity characteristic of writings on other artist collectives, writings that follow a group's development over the years, creating a unified body of scholarship or criticism on a group. This has not been the case with the literature on KD. If one can speak of continuity, then this continuity would exist only in relation to the literature on Moscow Conceptualism to which KD belongs. The literature on KD is fragmentary partly because

a good number of the critical interpretations appeared in a series of survey texts intended to introduce Soviet or Russian art to a Western public. In these general texts, the group's works is treated in an abbreviated matter, in paragraphs or sections devoted to describing larger phenomena such as: "Soviet unofficial art," for example, or "Moscow Conceptualism," or, from the late eighties on, "Russian contemporary art." Furthermore, no monograph exists on KD to date, and the most reliable source of information remains KD's own published and unpublished ten volumes, *Journeys Outside the City* (henceforth *Journeys*), which this dissertation examines.[1]

Another reason to consider the literature on KD as fortuitous and fragmentary is how criticism reflects its peculiar art and aesthetics, which have often been described as "uncomfortable," "vague," "indeterminate," "mysterious," "aerial," "elusive" "untranslatable," etc.[2] Commentators also often stress the degree of hermeticism that characterizes the Moscow conceptualists, but KD takes this hermeticism to an extreme alienating the lay outsider, as well as many of those who consider themselves well versed in the history of twentieth-century Western, Soviet and Russian art. As one critic put it: "A person outside of Moscow Conceptualism is regarded as *a priori* incompetent (although he is given a chance to prove the opposite.)"[3]

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[1] Andrei Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.* ———, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols." The material for the actions organized after 1989, which constitute five post-Soviet volumes of the *Journeys*, are also available online at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-91.html.

[2] See for instance Viktor Tupitsyn and Ilia Iosifovich Kabakov, *Glaznoe iabloko razdora: besedy s Il'ei Kabakovym* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), 94-105.

[3] Ekaterina Dyogot and Vadim Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, World Art Muzei no. 15-16 (Moskva: Izdatelistvo WAM, 2005), 11.

One of the main reasons for what may only be described as KD's untranslatability is the abundance of new terminology the group introduced in its texts, a proclivity they share with other "text-oriented" representatives of Moscow Conceptualism. For example, reading a text by poet Andrei Monastyrsky, the leader of the group who edited and wrote most of the texts, one finds such words, or categories, as "hidden emptiness" (*spreatanaia pustota*), "corpse(oral) planting" (*trupnoe ozelenenie*), and "rotten Pinocchios" (*gnilye Buratino*). In order to understand such language, one needs to have some idea of to what these words refer; and to do so one would have to have been initiated into the circle of Moscow conceptualists.

Before the publication of the first five volumes of the *Journeys*, in 1998, and of the *Dictionary of Terms of the Moscow Conceptual School* (henceforth *Dictionary*),[4] in 1999, only the initiates, or a relatively select group of people invited to attend the actions of KD, and who artists grouped under the special category of "spectators-participants," could have been familiar with many of these terms. Even after the publication of the *Dictionary*, which was intended to translate Moscow conceptualists' terminology (for the most part fabricated by KD and its circle), critics did not write elaborate interpretations of KD's aesthetics, partly because the *Dictionary* itself needed further translation. Perhaps the main contributing factor behind the dense verbiage obscuring KD's art is that in their writings the artists seemed to anticipate a critique and hastened to provide their own interpretation in advance.

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[4] Andrei Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*.

Literature Before-1989

The earliest published texts on "Collective Actions" are responsible to some extent, for the emergence of this group. The first short reviews about the artist Nikita Alexeev, the philology student and photographer Georgii Kizevalter, and the poet Andrei Monastyrsky, who used to gather and began working together already in 1975, were published in several Western art publications shortly after their first meetings. The very first report was published in 1977 in the Italian magazine *Flash Art*, amidst a larger body of textual and photographic material dedicated to Soviet unofficial art.[5] The editors dedicated two pages to the three artists and placed their material under the heading "N. Alexeev, G. Kizevalter, A. Monastyrsky & Co." Later that year the Venice Biennial published a special catalogue on Soviet unofficial art.[6] In this publication, which announced the unofficial participation of the USSR in the biennial, some of the Moscow unofficial artists and artist groups were represented under a series of art historical categories such as abstraction, gesture, surreal figuration, organic abstractionism, post-constructivism, etc. In the section entitled *Mediazione concettuale, comportamento e azioni collettive* (conceptual meditations, behavior and collective actions) photographs of works by Alexeev, Kizevalter, and Monastyrsky appeared. The Russian critic and philosopher Boris Groys borrowed the last two words *azioni collettive* (collective actions) from this heading in the Venice Biennial catalogue and used it in one of his early articles

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[5] Ilaria Bignamini, "From the USSR," *Flash Art* 76/77 (1977), 16-17.
[6] Enrico Crispolti and Gabriela Moncada, *La nuova arte Sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale / La Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1977), 183-201.

to discuss these artists' work.[7] Thus the name *kollektivnye deistvia* (collective actions) emerged. The artists, who until then signed their works individually, began gradually to acquire a collective consciousness and think of themselves in terms of a group.[8] Towards the end of the first phase (1976-80) they began to sign their works with the phrase "Collective Actions" and later switched to the abbreviation "KD." It is also worth mentioning that around this time the artists did not yet use the category "action" to define their works. They spoke instead of "productions" or "stagings" (*postanovka*), less frequently of "performances," or often using such abstract categories as "thing" (*vesch'*) or "work" (*rabota*).[9]

In 1979 Groys published his text "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" in the first issue of *A-Ya* – the major dissident art journal published in Paris. I will discuss *A-Ya* in more detail (and this particular text by Groys) in the next section when I examine the concept "romantic," which has been used as the main attribute of Moscow Conceptualism. For now, I will refer only to Groys' first critical description of KD's art, which the author considered to represent performance art within the larger circle of Moscow Conceptualism. Groys wrote that the groups' actions were an attempt to "decompose the visual effects produced by the events into its primordial elements – such as space, time, sound or a number of figures," and that the group relied upon the viewer's

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[7] Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," in *A-YA*, no. 1 (1979), 3-11.

[8] On the emergence of the name "Collective Actions" see Givi Kordiashvili "Istoria Kollektivnykh desitvii" in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1998), 198-215.

[9] Ibid., 203.

emotional predisposition and upon chance.[10] Already at this early stage, Groys credits the artists with refusing to set up laws, and with the attempt to engage the spectator in an act of interpretation that leads to "unexpected forebodings and amazing discoveries – the sort of a world in which mankind was actually living not very long ago… a time when people came across inexplicable traces of some indefinite presence, signaling the existence of active and purposive forces that lead beyond the limits of common-sense explanations."[11]

Two years later Margarita Tupitsyn, who curated the exhibition "Russian New Wave" in New York,[12] wrote in the exhibition catalogue about some performances organized by KD. M. Tupitsyn pointed to their major influences: above all, to John Cage and his concept of "sounding silence" (as it was expressed in his composition *4'33"*), and to a certain Zen tranquility and contemplation that one could find in KD's performances.[13] A more detailed review of KD's practice signed by M. Tupitsyn appeared shortly thereafter in the California-based art quarterly *High Performance*.[14] Here Tupitsyn placed the work of the group within a larger art historical context, relating it to the Russian historical avant-garde, to the late sixties kinetic experiments of the Moscow group "Movement" (*Dvijhenie*), as well as to the art of the international movement Fluxus. Tupitsyn also made the first attempt to introduce American readers to

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[10] Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," 10-11.

[11] Ibid., 11.

[12] The exhibition "Russian New Wave" inaugurated the activities of the Contemporary Russian Art Center of America, an institution launched by Norton Dodge – the biggest American collector of Soviet nonconformist art. Margarita Tupitsyn and Norton T. Dodge, *Russian New Wave* (Mechanicsville: Cremona Foundation, 1981), [unpaginated].

[13] Ibid.

[14] Margarita Tupitsyn, "Some Russian Performances," *High Performance* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1981-82), 11-17.

some terms used by the group, briefly explaining the notion of "empty action," the idea

of "journey," and its aesthetical terminus – the concept of "emptiness." In 1985 a short

reference to KD's art appeared in a book entitled *Soviet Émigré Artists* that investigated

the working and living conditions of artists in the USSR and the United States and

provided sociological insight into the motivations that led some Soviet artists to

immigrate to the United States. Marilyn Rueschemeyer quotes from previous sources

(Tupitsyn 1981) in explaining KD's conceptualistic refusal to produce tangible objects in

light of the lack of an art market and the impossibility of exhibiting these objects. This

was, according to her, also one of the main motives behind many Soviet artists'

emigration to New York.[15]

Before 1989, professional criticism of KD could have appeared only in the West,

where this group of conceptual artists was presented as part of a larger category defined

at one time or another as "underground" "unofficial," "nonconformist," "dissident,"

"alternative" or "unengaged artists" (Crispoliti 1977, Bignamini 1977, Groys 1979,

Tupitsyn 1981, 1981-82, Rueschemeyer 1985.)[16] In the USSR, meanwhile, the only place

where one could have found information about this and other unofficial groups was in a

series of samizdat publications. Most of the information was collected in two projects

launched and carried out in the early 1980s by the conceptualists themselves: KD's main

project *Journeys Outside the City* (*Poezdki za gorod*), which the artists began to assemble

in 1980 from documents, photographs, factographs, schemas, reports, and commentaries

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[15] Marilyn Rueschemeyer, Igor Golomshtok, and Janet Kennedy, *Soviet Emigre Artists: Life and Work in the USSR and the United States* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1985), 99-102.
[16] See Glossary for a direct translation of these terms.

about KD's actions. In 1998 this material was published in the five-volume publication of

the same name, and constitutes the main primary source of this dissertation. The second

samizdat project of the Moscow conceptualists was launched in 1982 under the title

MANI. The acronym MANI stood for the Moscow Archive of New Art (*Moskovskii*

archiv novogo iskusstva), an archive assembled by Nikita Alexeev and Andrei

Monastyrsky (two of KD's members), as well as by the poets Dima Prigov, Lev

Rubinstein and the artist Vadim Zakharov.[17] In 1988 the *Journeys Outside the City*

documentation and the MANI archive, which contained files on most of the Moscow

conceptualists, was bought by Norton Dodge, the American collector of Soviet

nonconformist art, and it is now part of the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Soviet

Nonconformist Art at Rutgers University.[18] The *Journeys* contains the most detailed

information about the group, such as Givi Kordiashvili's 1983 account of the first and

second phases of KD. In his text Kordiashvili described important details of the

emergence of the group, from their early meetings and the main topics of their discussion,

to their common interests and friends, their trips to various Russian towns, and even

intimate details of the original members' private lives.[19]

     Thus most of the pre-1989 literature about KD and other artists of Moscow

Conceptualism was either published abroad or circulated in a few copies among a few

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[17] On the chronology of the *MANI* archive and the *Journeys* see Ekaterina Dyogot, "Russian Art in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/nc2/degot_art.html [accessed September 23, 2008].

[18] About Norton Dodge's collection of Soviet nonconformism see John McPhee, *The Ransom of Russian Art*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

[19] See Givi Kordiashvili "Istoria Kollektivnykh desitvii" in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.*

unofficial artists. But in the late eighties even these limited *samizdat* copies (the original

documents of the *Journeys* and the MANI archive) were sold in the West and are now

part of foreign collections. The event which best symbolizes the beginning of the

transition from the Soviet "before" to the post-Soviet and then Russian "after" period was

an auction organized by Sotheby's in Moscow. This event is responsible for the last

pieces of literature from the "before" period entitled *Catalogue of Russian Avant-Garde*

and Soviet Contemporary Art Sold by Auction in Moscow, on Thursday, July 7th 1988.[20]

The Sotheby's auction concerns KD only indirectly, as they did not sell their objects at

the auction but organized an action the following day, which was attended by some of the

auction's guests. The Sotheby's event had a tremendous impact on the local unofficial art

scene (see Chapter 2) and, I would argue, marked the beginning of the new post-1989

period. Russian art critics write today that "at this time Sotheby's solemnly entered into

the history of Russian art,"[21] and indeed it was the title of this catalogue that announced

to the large Soviet public the arrival of a new cultural category: "contemporary art."

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[20] Sotheby's, *Catalogue of Russian Avant-Garde and Soviet contemporary art ... Moscow, Thursday 7 July 1988* (Sotheby's, 1988). On the effect that the Sotheby's auction had on the local artistic scene see Barbara Herbich, "USSR ART," (Los Angeles, Calif: Direct Cinema Ltd., 1990).

[21] Today Russian critics discuss largely the impact of the auction. See for instance Faina Balachovskaia, "Dvadzati let spustea," http://www.gif.ru/themes/kunstbazar/sothebys-ruscont/20let/ [accessed November 23, 2008].

Literature After-1989

For many, the Sotheby's auction was a historical marker after which things permanently changed.[22] Towards the end of 1989 KD disintegrated, and the artists began to exhibit individually, touring in various venues and exhibitions. They were not "unofficial" anymore. In the first half of the nineties, a certain confusion of terms emerged, and the literature in which the group was represented during this time used in its titles such terms as "nonconformism," "Moscow Conceptualism," "contemporary art," or one of many words that begin with the prefix post: postsoviet, postsocialist, posthistorical, posttotalitarian, postideological, postmodernist, etc.[23] With a few exceptions most of these texts continued to be written in the format of a survey. Groys considers this general form of presentation of Moscow Conceptualism (popular since the early nineties), to be the consequence of numerous exhibitions organized in order to introduce the unknown Russian artists to Western curators and collectors.[24] Many texts come from catalogues that accompanied these exhibitions, from articles and reviews

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[22] For the impact of the Sotheby's auction see Herbich, "USSR ART."

[23] Some examples of "post" literature that mentions KD or Moscow Conceptualism: Alexey Yurasovsky and Sophie Ovenden, *Post-Soviet Art and Architecture* (London, New York: Academy Editions, 1994); Viktor Tupitsyn, *Kommunalinyi (post)modernizm: russkoe iskusstvo vtoroi poloviny XX veka* (Moskva: Ad Marginiem, 1998); Larissa Rudova, "Paradigms of Postmodernism: Conceptualism and Sots-Art in Contemporary Russian Literature," *Pacific Coast Philology* 35, no. 1 (2000); Mikhail Epstein, Aleksandr Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); Aleš Erjavec and Boris Groys, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[24] Boris Groys, Max Hollein, and Manuel Fontán del Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 29.

published in Russia and abroad, and from published conversations, which became one of the most popular genres among Russian artists, art historians and critics.[25]

Before I discuss and compare several methodological tendencies and themes that prevailed before and after 1989 in the literature on KD, I want to cite Andrew Solomon's *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost* (1991). Written in a formal yet non-academic style, the book begins with the description of the Sotheby's 1988 auction in Moscow and its impact on the local unofficial art scene. In the following chapters the author narrates his own experience of meeting the Moscow unofficial artists during his trips to the USSR in the late eighties.[26] The author tells the story of many of these artists, (including some key KD members), describes how they came together in the early seventies, identifies some of their first works, discusses their meetings, considers the dominant figures, and cites the main circles. *The Irony Tower* remains the most complete biographical account of many of these artists in any language to date.

From a critical perspective the literature on KD can be divided along two methodological lines: a) emphasis on the visual art, and b) emphasis on the literary and/or the poetical. And although these two lines are not strictly parallel but tend often to intersect, in every text about KD one can sense either the prevalence of the visual or of the literary approach. Those commentators who tend to regard the work of the group

[25] See Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, *Noma ili Moskovskii kontseptualnyi krug: installiatsiia* (Cantz: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1993); Viktor Tupitsyn, *"Drugoe" iskusstva: besedy s khudozhnikami, kritikami, filosofami, 1980-1995* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1997); Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, Boris Groys, and Elena Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994* (Moskva: Ad-Marginem, 1999); Tupitsyn and Kabakov, *Glaznoe iabloko razdora: besedy s Il'ei Kabakovym*.

[26] Andrew Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

within the fine art tradition of performances, actions, or happenings emphasize the ephemerality of the lived artistic moment, bringing into focus the documentation or the objects that accompanied, or were produced at the end of the action.[27] Critics inclined towards this approach often draw parallels with other traditions in the Western contemporary art, comparing or referring the aesthetics of the group to Fluxus, Minimalism, Pop art, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth, or to John Cage, who was one of their main influences. The trend towards regarding the group within the visual art traditions prevailed especially before 1989 (Crispolti 1977, Bignamini 1977, M. Tupitsyn 1981,82, Tavel, 1988), although this tendency continued with some authors into the nineties (Bobrinskaia 1994, Klocker 1998, Dyogot 2000). The predominance of this visual arts approach, before 1989, was due primarily to the fact that most of the documents and texts written or assembled by KD and other Moscow conceptualists had not yet been published.

After 1989, and especially towards the late nineties, when most of the writings of conceptualists had been published in Russia and abroad, gradually a different orientation and critical method began to take shape, namely the literary approach. The latter must not be confused with the "linguistic" approach that has been more specific to the Western, especially to the Anglo-American conceptualism of Art & Language and Joseph Kosuth. The first texts which emphasized the literary approach appeared in the first half of the

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[27] See for instance Hans Christoph von Tavel, Markus Landert, and Kunstmuseum Bern., *Zhivu-vizhu = Ich lebe-ich sehe* (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 1988); Hubert Klocker, "Gesture and the Object, Liberation as Aktion: A European Component of Performative Art," in *Out of Actions: between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles, New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Thames and Hudson, 1998).

nineties (Bobrinskaia 1994). The literary tendency, however, became more obvious towards the end of the nineties and the beginning of the twenty-first century when many texts on Moscow Conceptualism (including *Journeys* and the *Dictionary*) were made public. Those who rely on this method perform a closer reading of the literature produced by KD, paying tribute to the importance that the group attributed to text. Moscow Conceptualism has often been described as emerging at the junction of art and literature, and in the case of KD, some of its members and participants were poets, writers or philologists.[28]

Those critics who favor the literary or poetical interpretation tend (as I have already mentioned) to integrate the visual and the literary: the action and the post-action. Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, who wrote the foreword to the *Journeys*, stresses that from the early days KD's performances were not based on visual art but above all on poetry and music.[29] She describes the work of KD in terms of the dissolution of literature and of the poetical text into action, into everyday life, suggesting that text comes first and the action second. This is different from other works of art, where an action or artistic object predisposes or even conditions the emergence of the textual interpretation. In KD the action is the interpretation of the text. Bobrinskaia calls KD's work "'collective' actionist

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[28] Today some literary critics write of Monastyrsky that he "soon abandoned his poetic experiments and became leader of Collective Actions." Mikhail Aizenberg and Michael Makin, *A Few Others; an alternative chronicle: first version*, vol. 32 no 2, Russian Studies in Literature (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996), 44. Among other poets, writers, and philologists who have been involved in the work of KD as members or participants are L. Rubenshtein, D. Prigov, G. Kizevalter, V. Sorokin, and the German cultural historian Sabine Hänsgen who joined the group in 1988.

[29] E. Bobrinskaia, "O knigah 'Poezdki za gorod'," in A. Monastyrsky *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.*

poetry" ('*kollektivnaia' akzionnaia poezia*) insisting that the first five volumes of the

Journeys are documentation of the process of transition of the poetical into action, and

that the documentation and the interpretation which follows after the action should be

regarded in terms of a trace of something that took place and was experienced in the past

and is now required in order to complete the work of art.[30] In other words, an action by

KD is not considered complete without the act of interpretation. Another text in which

language and speech are at the center of critical analysis is Sylvia Sasse's *Texte in Aktion*

(2003). Of all the literature written about KD (with the exception of the *Journeys*

themselves) Sasse's is the most complete and theoretical work to date. Sasse discusses

the notion of speech and of the speech-act in the context of Moscow Conceptualism. In a

long chapter, she examines in detail some of KD's actions from the first five phases (the

Soviet period), placing them in a larger cultural, historical, and theoretical context, as

well as attempting to introduce the reader to some of the most common terms the artists

used.[31]

The Consolidation of Moscow Conceptualism

With the exception of Sasse's scholarship, most of the literature about KD that

appeared during the nineties remains relatively fragmented and dispersed into more

general survey texts about Soviet nonconformism or Russian contemporary art of the

nineties. This fragmentation of the literature represents the general confusion which

[30] Ibid., 13-14.

[31] Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion: Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (München: W. Fink, 2003).

existed in the first half of the nineties in late Soviet and new Russian contemporary art

history. For instance, after 1989, and especially in the first half of the nineties, when

numerous Western exhibitions began to introduce Russian artists abroad, KD was

sometimes catalogued as "nonconformist" (as I noted above), following a tradition

established in the Soviet times, and sometimes as "contemporary art." Some exhibition

catalogues of this period show members of KD, or of Medgerminevtika (the Medical

Hermeneutics group of the third and last generation of Moscow conceptualists)

participating shoulder to shoulder in the same exhibition as the notorious Russian

actionists of the nineties (Alexander Brener and Oleg Kulik).[32] Many critics (mainly non-

Russian) did not make a clear distinction between the actionism of the Russian actionists

and the collective actions of KD.[33] Groys writes of this period that art historians and

curators "mixed up very different, often incompatible artistic positions."[34] It was only

towards the second half of the nineties and in the next century that one can observe a

more clear tendency to present Moscow Conceptualism as an autonomous, self-sufficient

phenomenon developed by three generations of Moscow artists. It came as a result of

numerous efforts made by artists and critics associated with this tradition, who over the

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[32] For an example a mid-nineties exhibition of nonconformism where KD and many other groups and artists are represented Gosudarstvennyi muzei Tsaritsyno, Jean Hubert Martin, and Andrei Erofeev, *Kunst im Verborgenen: Nonkonformisten Russland 1957-1995: Sammlung des Staatlichen Zarizino-Museums, Moskau* (München; New York: Prestel, 1995). For a contemporary art show see Morten Lerhard, *No Man's Land: Art from the near Abroad = Kunst fra det nære udland*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 1995).

[33] See for instance Hubert Klocker in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Out of Actions: between performance and the object, 1949-1979* (Los Angeles, Calif., New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Thames and Hudson, 1998), 166-67.

[34] See Groys, Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, 29.

years organized exhibitions and dedicated considerable efforts to publishing the texts

produced by the circle of Moscow Conceptualism, stressing the distinctiveness and

historical relevance of this tradition.[35] (Groys 1979, M. Tupitsyn 1981, Ross 1990,

Bonito Olivo 1992, Kabakov 1993, 1999, Becker 1995, V. Tupitsyn 1997, 1998,

Monastyrsky 1998, 1999, Bobrinskaia 1994, 1999, Backstein 2005, V. Tupitsyn 2006,

Groys 2008).

By the mid nineties some critics had attempted to break the Soviet-Russian art of

the second half of the century into clearer art historical categories.[36] The term

"nonconformism" is increasingly being applied to the earlier generations of painters, and

to those to whom the conceptualists often referred to as the "underground," the

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[35] The following list of publications has contributed substantially to the formation of a consecutive body of literature on Moscow Conceptualism, and may be arranged in chronological order: Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism"; David A. Ross, ed., *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990); Achille Bonito Oliva and L. Bazhanov, *A Mosca–a Mosca* (Verona: Olograf, 1992); Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, Nicola von Velsen, and Boris Groys, *Ilya Kabakov: das Leben der Fliegen = Ilia Kabakov: zhizn' mukh* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992); Kabakov, *Noma ili Moskovskii kontseptualnyi krug: installiatsiia*; E. Bobrinskaia, *Konzeptualism* (Moskva: Galart, 1994); Kathrin Becker, Dorothee Bienert, and Milena Slavická, *Flug, Entfernung, Verschwinden: Konzeptuelle Moskauer Kunst: Galerie hlavního mesta Prahy, Prag, Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof, Kiel* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995); Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*; ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*; Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*; Joseph Backstein and Bart de Baere, *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2005); Tupitsyn and Kabakov, *Glaznoe iabloko razdora: besedy s Il'ei Kabakovym*; Groys, Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*.

[36] The field of post-1945 Soviet-Russian art is more clearly divided into such themes as: "metaphysical painting" (1950s) "abstraction" (1950-60s) "realism of the everyday" (1960s) "language and representation" (1960-70s) "Moscow Conceptualism" (mid-1970) "Sots art" (mid-1970s), "Apt-art" (mid-1980s), "Schizoanaliz" (mid-1980s) "Art history appropriation" (1980s) "Echoes of Dada and the re-actualization of the modernist provocations" (1980s) "Mass media and the re-actualization of the engaged art" (late 1980s and 1990s). See Gosudarstvennyi muzei Tsaritsyno, Martin, and Erofeev, *Kunst im Verborgenen: Nonkonformisten Russland 1957-1995: Sammlung des Staatlichen Zarizino-Museums, Moskau*, 54-55.

"communal" or the "dissident modernists" of the fifties and sixties."[37] This

reorganization of the art historical field into more precise categories is related to one of

the main themes that one often encounters in the literature on KD and Moscow

Conceptualism, that of the relation of the Moscow artists from the second half of the last

century to their historical predecessors – the Russian avant-garde. Critics and artists that

have been associated with Moscow Conceptualism have also written extensively about

this complex relation. In the catalogue to the first large-scale exhibition of Moscow

conceptual art in the United States, organized by the Boston Institute of Contemporary

Art and the Tacoma Art Museum, the writers analyzed the relationship of the aesthetic

program of Moscow Conceptualism to modernism, and asked whether these artists should

be defined as modern or as postmodern.[38] Most of the contributors tended to agree that

the overall program of the Moscow conceptualists was anti-modernist in that they

confronted the ideology of USSR, which was the materialization of utopian modernist

beliefs (Sussman, 63); the artists used postmodern devices to confront the modernist ideal

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[37] Although the first generation of conceptualists (Kabakov, Chuikov, Bulatov, etc) are also catalogued as nonconformists the category is now applied mostly to those painters who emerged in the late fifties and sixties and who are known by the name of several groups i.e. *Lianozovskaia* group, *Sretenskii Boulevard* and others. For a chronology of the evolution of the Moscow artistic life after the death of Stalin see Ibid. For "underground modernism" see Ekaterina Dyogot, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2000). pp. 159-64 The term "dissident modernism" belongs to M. Tupitsyn. See Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 38. The term "communal modernism" was introduced by V. Tupitsyn, Ibid., 53.
[38] Ross, ed., *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, 62.

of the artist-ideologue (Backstein, 77); or, as in the case of KD group, the artists rejected the modernist belief in a work of art as a discrete event or object (Ross, 14).[39]

The relation to high-modernism was not a new theme. Most of the unofficial Soviet artists from the fifties on have been faced with the question of how to relate to the revolutionary zeal of the avant-garde artists of the twenties. One publication by Boris Groys, which assimilated some of the concerns voiced by many unofficial artists in regard to their historical predecessors, appeared in the late eighties: *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988). This important book which soon was translated in English in 1992 and into Russian in 1993.[40] For Groys, the doctrine and the language of Socialist Realism, which was the major working material for many conceptualists, was the logical outcome of the historical Russian avant-garde and their radical program of transforming reality. To many artists of the post-1945 generations, Stalin was the perfect embodiment of the avant-garde artist of the twenties – the artist-ideologue, who shouldered the demiurgic task of transforming and reshaping inert human material. In this and in other books, Groys suggests that the main political and aesthetic task of the Moscow conceptualists was to disrupt the Soviet project, to deconstruct that language and ideology to which the Russian avant-garde artists had indirectly contributed.

But this tendency to compare and to place Moscow Conceptualism within the context of the historical Russian avant-garde has also had a more pragmatic agenda. The main concern was to claim that the former had taken the mantle from the latter, and that

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion* (München: C. Hanser, 1988). ———, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the Moscow conceptualists (and not the modernists of the sixties, the *shestidesyatniki*, or the actionists of the nineties, or the Leningrad artists who never denied their "'loyalty' to the legacy of the historic Russian and Soviet avant-gardes"[41]) were the true inheritors of the historical avant-garde.[42] Critics who have made these claims have argued that only Moscow Conceptualism could be compared in intensity and significance to the historical avant-garde; the conceptualists were the ones who managed in three generations to articulate the most elaborate aesthetic and political responses to their eminent predecessors; they conducted a successful counter-revolution against the utopian revolutionary principles of the avant-garde. The perpetuation of the Russian cultural tradition again followed the formula deduced in the twenties by Vladimir Shklovsky, a formula according to which the succession of heritage and the renewal of literary or artistic form does not take place in a linear way but as in the "knight's move" (*khod konya*) – the inheritance is passed not from the father to the son but from the uncle to the nephew.[43]

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[41] *Shestidesyatniki* - Generation of the sixties, from *shestdesyat'* = sixty. Soviet humanist intellectuals who voiced their protest in art and culture from the second half of the sixties. For the Leningrad unofficial artists see Victor Tupitsyn in Ross, ed., *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, 104.

[42] One wing of the historical Russian avant-guard, to which the conceptualists and other Soviet unofficials showed full loyalty and claimed direct linkage, was the OBERIU group. But the latter did not share the same passion for revolutionary art with the Cubo-futurists, the Constructivists or the Suprematists, and therefore they have been lesser known abroad. For an overview of OBERIU movement see Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-garde: OBERIU–Fact, Fiction, Metafiction*, Cambridge studies in Russian literature (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); A. Kobrinskii, *Poetika "OBERIU" v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda*, Izd. vtoroe, ispr. i dop. ed., 2 vols. (Moskva: Izd-vo Moskovskogo kulturologicheskogo lytsieia, 2000). See also Glossary.

[43] Viktor Borisovich Shklovskii and Richard Sheldon, *Knight's Move*, 1st ed. (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).

This cultural inheritance, which is not direct and linear but convoluted has been hinted at in many texts over the last fifteen years. While some critics have made direct claims (Backstein 2005, p.16) others have implied this relation by providing constant references to and comparisons between the conceptualists and the avant-gardists. For instance some of Kabakov's early works (the *Album* series), as well as the white empty snowy fields, on whose surface KD organized their actions, were often compared to Malevich's monochromes.[44] Many conceptualists throughout the world have done variations on Malevich's "Black Square" (1913), and this painting has been one of the main subjects of discussion among the Moscow Conceptualists.[45] Ekaterina Bobrinskaia compares KD's role in structuring and institutionalizing the Moscow conceptual art scene to that played by the historical avant-garde in creating new institutions. From the beginning of their appearance in the mid-seventies, KD acted as a substitute for the missing art infrastructure. By organizing journeys and encouraging their spectators to participate and engage in acts of interpretation, KD provided the necessary tools for institutionalizing a part of Moscow unofficial art and for structuring the artistic consciousness of its small but elite public.[46] The successful institutionalization that the group accomplished in the Soviet period allowed it to keep functioning in the nineties,

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[44] For references to Malevich's monochromes see Klocker, "Gesture and the Object, Liberation as Aktion: A European Component of Performative Art.", Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 99-100. See also Groys in Erjavec and Groys, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, 82. Dyogot, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka*, 189.

[45] See for instance the first issues of *A-YA* journal

[46] On the practice of establishing institutions see E. Bobrinskaia, "Kollektivnye desitvia kak institutia," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 23 (1999). http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/xindx.htm [accessed September 12, 2008] and Groys, Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, 35.

and, in this regard, KD and Moscow Conceptualists resemble the practices of the historical avant-garde. They both launched new institutions (publications, archives, museums, etc) and succeeded in establishing these activities in society despite the fact that the two stood on different, even conflicting political and aesthetic platforms.

Figure 1: Vadim Zakharov *History of Russian Art from the Russian Avant-Garde to Moscow Conceptualism*, installation, 2004.

In recent years, exhibitions and publications have been organized which have presented Moscow Conceptualism as the next significant Russian cultural phenomenon. The efforts to make this tradition recognizable have culminated in a series of "monumental" exhibitions and catalogues. In 2005, the "golden book" of Moscow Conceptualism (the term used by the editors Ekaterina Dyogot and Vadim Zakharov) presented the major twenty artists who formed the core of this tradition.[47] This book, as

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[47] The term "golden book" has been used by the editors Ekaterina Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 8, 10. More recent large-scale projects on Moscow Conceptualism include Backstein and Baere, *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence*. Groys,

well as a series of other recent publications, describe KD and the major Moscow conceptualists as "angels of history" who "made a truly historicizing revolution [or counter-revolution] within the space of the Soviet metaphysics of their time: creating with their actions a dimension of History inside the space of Bolshevism's post-historicism…" (Backstein 2005, p. 16) or that "the Moscow Conceptualists were practicing a kind of enlightenment – specifically a total enlightenment […] enlightening the Soviet culture about its own ideological mechanisms." (Groys 2008, p. 33) Such efforts, as I noted above, brought a series of structural changes to the field of late Soviet, post-Soviet and later Russian art history re-organizing this field into more distinct categories, especially shifting the term "nonconformist" to designate the modernists of the fifties and sixties, and to present them as a transitional phase between the Russian Avant-Garde and Moscow Conceptualism (Figure 1).[48] The term "dissident modernism" has been used more and more often to describe the "unofficial art of the 1960s."[49] Moreover, efforts have been made to try and to reconsolidate the former adversaries – the nonconformists of the fifties and sixties with the socialist realists of the same period – by exhibiting them together as two modernist offshoots.[50]

Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990.*

[48] See above note 34 Jean Hubert Martin and Andrei Erofeev, *Kunst im Verborgenen: Nonkonformisten Russland 1957-1995: Sammlung des Staatlichen Zarizino-Museums, Moskau* (München, New York: Prestel, 1995), 54-55.

[49] The term was first used by M. Tupitsyn in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present* (Milan, Italy: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989). It was later added to the *Dictionary* see Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 38.

[50] See for instance the catalogue of the exhibition *Soviet Dis-Union* (2006) where Raymond Johnson's collection of Socialist Realism has been shown next to Norton Dodge's collection of nonconformism. Maria Bulanova and Alla Rosenfeld, *Soviet Dis-Union: Socialist Realist &*

Defining Moscow Conceptualism

Before I proceed to discuss the art of KD during the Soviet period, I would like to introduce the context, or the background context against which this group emerged. KD together with their spectators constituted, for the most part, the entire circle of Moscow Conceptualism. This circle was a relatively closed company of artists, critics, poets and musicians and it numbered, according to A. Monastyrsky, not more than fifty people.[51] The first generations of conceptualists emerged in the early seventies as a reaction to the art of the previous generation of unofficial artists. The names that these artists used to describe themselves, as well as two concepts - "romantic" and "emptiness" - have played an important role in the formation of this tradition.

Although Boris Groys has been credited only with naming the group when he borrowed the phrase "collective actions" from the Venice Biennial catalogue,[52] I would also argue that he named the larger context within which "Collective Actions" group developed. The artists who were part of this larger community knew that what they were doing in the late seventies was called "conceptual art" in the West, and accordingly they all were "conceptualists," but they did not yet perceive themselves as part of that entity which was later to appear under the designation "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" or simply "Moscow Conceptualism." It was only after Groys' text in *A-Ya* that all these

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Nonconformist Art (Minneapolis: Museum of Russian Art, 2006). See also Barbara M. Thiemann and Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung., *(Non)conform: Russian and Soviet art, 1958-1995: the Ludwig Collection* (Aachen, Munich, New York: Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung, Prestel, 2007).
[51] Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 18.
[52] See Crispolti and Moncada, *La nuova arte Sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale / La Biennale di Venezia*, Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism."

names, "Collective Actions," "Moscow Conceptualism" and "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" entered art history; they remained coextensive, and this is perhaps one of the few instances in the history of art when the function of critique was prospective rather than retrospective, that is, when the critic named in advance a cultural entity which did not yet have a name (other well-known recent examples include Pierre Restany's naming of Nouveau Réalisme and Germano Celant's naming of Arte Povera).

Initially Groys published "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" in the Leningrad *samizdat* journal *37*. In the same year it was re-published in the first issue of *A-Ya* journal.[53] The *A-Ya*, sponsored in part by the CIA,[54] was one of the first official journals that presented Russian (or Soviet) unofficial art abroad. It must be stressed that the terms "unofficial/official" may be misleading. In Moscow, this kind of art was called "unofficial" or "nonconformist" (see Glossary of Terms in the Appendix) but as soon as the material crossed the USSR border and was presented by *A-Ya*, or by "The Contemporary Russian Art Center of America," it became "contemporary art" or "contemporary Russian art."[55] The editor of *A–Ya*, Igor Shelkovsky, tells how sometimes

[53] Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 351.
[54] Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 108.
[55] *A-Ya* (alternate titles *A-IA* and *A-JA*) was the major dissident art journal edited from 1980 till 1986 by the émigré sculptor and abstract painter Igor Shelkovsky. *A-YA* was printed in Paris but most of the material was sent from Moscow and other European and American cities. The following main objectives were announced on the inside cover of the first issue of *A-YA*: "to acquaint Russian artists – in and outside Russia with each other's work; to inform the reader about the artistic creativity and developments in contemporary Russian art…" *A-YA*, no. 1 (1979) Another institute dedicated to Russian contemporary art, which was launched around the same time (early eighties) was the so-called "The Contemporary Russian Art Center of America" opened with the support of the Cremona Foundation directed by Norton Dodge, the main collector of Soviet nonconformist art. See Tupitsyn and Dodge, *Russian New Wave*. On the history of *A-YA* see Matthew Baigell and Renee Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after*

the material written or taped on a micro-tape recorder was placed in a cellophane bag, then hermetically sealed in a jam jar, after which it was transported to the West.[56] It seems as if this unusual way of delivering material from the USSR has also affected the naming and categorization of art.

I will not concern myself here with the naming and re-naming that took place after the text or the work cleared the border police and customs, but only with the naming that occurred within Moscow, or more precisely within and around the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism. Most conceptual art could be called nominalistic, for it is concerned with the name and the concept as a property of the particular rather than with the abstract and universal or with the object. For Moscow conceptualists the process of naming is even more important as they have inhabited for several decades a discursive space crowded with terms, concepts, and expressions that were invented in order to precisely name gestures, actions, objects, and various ways of producing and exhibiting their art. They also came up with numerous ways of describing themselves. Some of these words became more popular than the others, but they all have been collected and preserved in a special literature published in the late nineties.[57] The terms "romantic," which was introduced by Groys, and "emptiness" introduced by artist Ilya Kabakov, are crucial for understating the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism.

Perestroika (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 198; Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 108.

[56] Baigell and Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists: Interviews after Perestroika*, 198.

[57] See for instance Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*.

"Moscow Romantic Conceptualism"

Groys' text "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," printed in facing page Russian-English translation, describes a new phenomenon that was taking shape during the late seventies in Moscow. Even if not all the artists agreed with the designation "Moscow Conceptualism," it continued to perform its nominal function for the last thirty years.[58] In this text the author uses the word "romantic" to illustrate the difference between the conceptual artists in Moscow and those in the West (especially in the USA and the UK). According to Groys, in the West conceptual art emerged when certain artists began to reclaim the institution of art criticism. For some time art criticism had ignored its original role of metalanguage, taking over some of the functions of the language of art. Western conceptualism was the outcome of the attempt of artists to regain control over the right to exercise critique over their work, as well as to explain their otherwise "incomprehensible" works to the public. In their attempts to deliver a transparency and clearness to the public, the Western artists used a scientific language traditional for their culture – a language based on the description of concrete empirical experience.

In Russia, where "it was impossible to paint a decent abstract picture without reference to the Holy light,"[59] and where Western positivism had never been popular among writers and artists, the language that was used by a small group of conceptual artists was more lyrical, literary, and even mystical. This was due, in part, to the

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[58] For instance, Ilya Kabakov finds the designation "Moscow Conceptualism" unfortunate. See Matthew Jesse Jackson, "Answers of the experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes" (Thesis (Ph. D. in History of Art) -- University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2003), n. 87.

[59] Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," 4.

atmosphere surrounding the unofficial Moscow intellectuals during the seventies. Groys described this special climate, which was propitious for the new phenomenon in terms of "a lyrical and romantic blend [which] stands opposed to the dryness of officialdom."[60] Those who belonged to these unofficial circles in Moscow and Leningrad were immersed, already from the late fifties, in a religious atmosphere of sacrament and devotion.[61] The romanticism of the first conceptualists had also something mystical and transcendental about it, and even Groys' own texts from this period were attempts to write unofficial art criticism free of religious and mystical conventions.[62] Even many texts published by Groys and other conceptualists after 1989 still appeared to be an intellectual engagement with the Russian nineteenth century Christian Orthodox religious and philosophical thinkers, from a Western European intellectual position.[63]

The word "romantic," to which I shall return after I introduce other attributes and terms of Moscow Conceptualism, was chosen as a middle term between the prevailing

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[60] Ibid.

[61] For a more detailed description of this climate see Kabakov's text "Air over Moscow" (*Vosdukh nad Moskvoi)* in Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, Wiener slawistischer Almanach. Sonderband; 47 (Wien: Gesellschaft zur Forderung slawistischer Studien, 1999).

[62] Groys wrote the text "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" after he moved from Leningrad to Moscow where he met Eduard Shteinberg, Viktor Pivovarov, and Ilya Kabakov. Earlier in 1977, while still in Leningrad, Groys published (under the pseudonym I. Suitzidov [Suicidal]) another text, called "Existential Preconditions for Conceptual Art." The text was published in the Leningrad *samizdat* journal *37*. Here the authors discussed (without yet making the distinction Western/Moscow) the *sine qua non* of conceptual art and the text has been regarded as polemic against the quasi-religious understating of art that dominated at that time the unofficial circles. See *Existentzialnye predposylki kontzeptualinogo iskusstva* in Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 332-42.

[63] This is very clear in some parts of Boris Groys, *Utopia i obmen* (Moskva: Znak, 1993). Another good example is Yury Leiderman, "Nikolai Fiodorov i Venera Stockman," in *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, ed. Ekaterina Dyogot and Vadim Zakharov, *World Art Muzei no. 15-16* (Moskva: Izdatelistvo WAM, 2008).

religious mysticism of the Soviet unofficial artists and the rationalistic evolution of art in the West. In comparison to Joseph Kosuth and to Art & Language, who both used a clear and a rational language to describe and analyze the nature of art, the Muscovites who were concerned at that time with dialogues among inhabitants of communal apartments, and fed up with the wooden language of the party, did indeed seem more lyrical and romantic in their use of language. The designation "romantic conceptualism" appeared to describe how two kind of artists, on either side of the Iron Curtain, used language as a tool, one in a more analytical, systematic, and specialized mode in the West, and the other in a more literary and less grammatical and explanatory manner in Moscow Conceptualism.

Kabakov's Term "Emptiness"

Kabakov did not like the designation "Moscow Conceptualism" because the phrase "sounds both parochial and epigonic to Western ears."[64] In his text "Conceptualism in Russia," the artist tried to examine the very essence of what constitutes "Russian Conceptualism." Like Groys, he compares local conceptual art to the foreign versions, but shifts the emphasis from Moscow to Russia, suggesting even that the title of his article should have been "Russian Conceptualism" instead of "Conceptualism in Russia."[65] The order of words in the title is important because Kabakov suggests that Russian culture has always been conceptual. "As it always

[64] See Jackson, "Answers of the experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes," n. 87.
[65] Kabakov, Velsen, and Groys, *Ilya Kabakov: das Leben der Fliegen = Ilia Kabakov: zhizn' much*, 122.

happens, a phenomenon living surreptitiously and for a long time over here, acquires one day a word that arrived from 'over there.'"[66] When the Russian artists discovered that "over there" (in the West) there was something called "conceptualism," they soon realized that an analogous phenomenon had always existed in Russia, and that this phenomenon was for a very long time one of the most important "constituent parts of our 'artistic' outlook on the world."[67] If the art critic Groys understood the difference between Western and Moscow conceptual art with reference to broader abstract categories (e.g. "analytic" versus "romantic" or "positivism" versus "metaphysics"), then the artist Kabakov drew the distinction between Western and Russian conceptualism from his observations on how the two cultures relate to the physical object.

In the West, writes Kabakov, conceptual art unfolds according to the principle: *quid pro quo* (one instead of another). Marcel Duchamp, to whom the conceptualists owe a great deal, was among the first to substitute, according to Kabakov's definition, one thing for another: the *Urinal* took its place alongside paintings and sculptures, replacing an art object (a painting or a sculpture) with an industrially produced item (a ready-made). With the emergence and consolidation of conceptualism in the sixties, moreover, it was the idea, the concept, that came to replace the artistic object. Concepts, which before were used only as signs or symbols to name and explain art objects, began to make greater demands, representing and even replacing the object. Western conceptualists insisted on dematerialization or even on the complete abolishment of the object, as well

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ilia Iosifovich Kabakov, *Zhizn' mukh* (Cologne: Edition Cantz, 1992), 246.

as of that specific artistic context (museums and galleries) which conferred on these objects their special artistic aura. The attack launched by Western conceptualism on the art object and its context was part of a larger critique against the increasing commodification of life and art that emerged, spread, and grew during the sixties.

In Russia everything was different according to Kabakov who explained that the principle "one thing instead of another" did not work because there was no "other:" it was not there, missing. "It is in itself an undivided unknownness, a complete emptiness" Kabakov insisted.[68] In order to illustrate this lack of an "other" – this missing "b" in the formula "*a* instead of *b*" – Kabakov turns to nineteenth Russian literature, discussing the writing techniques of Gogol, Dostoevsky and Chekhov. Dostoevsky, for instance, dedicates so much time and text to inexhaustible monologues about a thing or an idea that at some point the reader begins to lose the thread of the story. Such a way of writing transforms the described object into a sheer absurdity and emptiness that spreads along interminable paragraphs. These are not discussions, says Kabakov, but discussions of discussions.[69] Gogol, on the other hand, uses such a degree of precision, such an amount of detail in his depictions of characters and objects, that as a result both the object and the character (instead of becoming more clear and more prominent) disappear: they turn into something fantastic, absurd and empty.

Kabakov did not refer directly to Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), which may also be a good illustration of the missing "b." *Dead Souls* tells the story of Chichikov, a

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[68] Ibid., 126.
[69] Ibid., 128.

nineteenth century Russian landlord, who in order to "increase" his wealth used to buy up "dead souls" – that is, the names of those serfs who had died but were still listed in official governmental registers. This peculiar relation between a name and a missing person or inexistent object, between the concept on one side and emptiness on another, becomes one of the main themes and motives in Moscow Conceptualism. (Gogol's idea of buying dead souls was, for instance, re-enacted by the Sots artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid after their arrival in New York, and one of the first "souls," which was bought for $ 0 belonged to Andy Warhol).[70] Monastyrsky writes "Conceptualism in the Soviet Union is not an accident but it is related to our system, to our social sphere, where the object plays a very small role. We practically live in a conceptual space."[71] Sven Gundlakh has said, likewise, that "one can understand that conceptualism and the Soviet cultural system were the same, producing not things, but the ideas of things."[72] More recently Yury Leiderman has worked with the metaphor of the columbarium tablet, where one side, that is facing the viewer, bears the name of the deceased person in between two dates along with an occasional epitaph, whereas the other side faces the darkness and the emptiness of the funeral niche. Here it is not even clear if any ash is there, or if that ash belongs to the deceased. According to Leiderman this is both a real and a transcendental emptiness.[73]

When Kabakov speaks about "conceptualism in Russia" he does not refer so much to conceptualism as a concrete institution of contemporary art shaped by certain

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[70] See the receipt in Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 155.
[71] Quoted in Bobrinskaia, *Konzeptualism*, [unpaginated].
[72] Quoted in Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 86-7.
[73] Leiderman, "Nikolai Fiodorov i Venera Stockman."

laws, as to a certain tendency of Russian culture and people to "be conceptual," which could mean as much as saying that all Russians are "romantic," "mysterious" or "wild." In any case, the consequence of these interpretations, the notion of "emptiness" (*pustota*) stepped forward and became one of the main themes in Moscow Conceptualism. The concept of "emptiness" has been especially important for the later (second and third) generations of Moscow Romantic conceptualists, in particular for the KD and Medgerminevtika groups. But before I proceed, it may be useful to draw the reader's attention to a certain confusion that persists in many of these texts with regard to geography and politics. The authors, who emphasize the importance of emptiness for the conceptualists, seem not to know to which of the three geographical or political bodies this tradition belongs. Groys links it to Moscow by calling it "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism;" Kabakov is inclined more towards the designation "Russian Conceptualism;" and Monastyrsky prefers to speak of "Soviet Conceptualism." Groys' prevailed.[74]

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[74] Even if one could make a case for a certain "Soviet Conceptualism" by bringing in examples of conceptual art from the Baltic states, then to argue for the designation "Russian Conceptualism" would become more problematic. From all Russian cities Moscow was the only place where this kind of art could have emerged. In Leningrad (the Northern capital of Russia) a more internationally oriented generation of artists like Timur Novikov and Afrika emerged relatively late, in the eighties, and they could hardly be classified as conceptualists. For the situation in the unofficial art of Leningrad see Kathrin Becker and Barbara Straka, *Selbstidentifikation: Positionen St. Petersburger Kunst von 1970 bis heute = Self-identification: Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 until Today* (Berlin: Haus am Waldsee, 1994).

Other Terms in the Vocabulary of Moscow Conceptualism

While "romantic" and "emptiness" are the two words most often used to explain

Moscow Conceptualism, they have not been the only ones. Before I discuss how these

two terms came to play such an important role in the vocabulary of these artists, I would

like to mention other terms used to define some of this tradition. For instance, Viktor

Tupitsyn proposed the term "Moscow Communal Conceptualism," putting the accent on

the word "communal." This suggested communality should not be understood in terms of

the "communist society" promoted by Marxism-Leninism, and neither in terms of the

traditional Russian village commune (*obschina*) – a social order that was regarded by the

Slavophiles as the most suited for Russia – but as a "community of Moscow alternative

artists involved in the creation of textual objects."[75] Thus V. Tupitsyn's term places the

emphasis on the relations among these artists, and makes "Moscow Communal

Conceptualism" part of a larger category that Tupitsyn termed "Communal

Postmodernism."[76] The latter branched off, in the early seventies, from the "Communal

Modernism" of the fifties and sixties, and it became evident towards the mid-seventies

with the emergence, on the Moscow unofficial scene of a new generation of artists and

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[75] Tupitsyn, *Kommunalinyi (post)modernizm: russkoe iskusstvo vtoroi poloviny XX veka*. See also Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 60.

[76] In V. Tupitsyn's periodization "Communal Postmodernism" emerges, and then develops in parallel with the "Communal Modernism" of the early 1970s. "Communal Modernism is a set of aesthetical views and practices practiced by alternative Soviet artists and writers from the end of the 1950s till the beginning of the 1970s. The communality of Communal Modernism consists in the fact that its representatives were united in unofficial collective bodies, not in a compulsory (institutional) way but on their own accord. We can speak about a form of 'contractual communality.' Communal Postmodernism emerged in the beginning of the 1970s and from that moment it developed in parallel with Communal Modernism. Moscow Communal Conceptualism is part of Communal Postmodernism." Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 53.

artists groups (i.e. KD, Nest, Mukhomor), often called the second generation of Moscow Conceptualism.

In the late eighties and early nineties the term "Psychedelic Conceptualism" was introduced and used by the members of the Medgerminevtika group. "Psychedelic Conceptualism" is defined in the *Dictionary* as a new tendency that "came to replace the 'romantic conceptualism' of the seventies and eighties, representing a critical and aesthetic manipulation of (collective or individual) psychedelic material."[77] Monastyrsky's novel *Kashirskoe Road* (*Kashirskoe Shosse*), published in 1998 as part of the first five volumes of the *Journeys*, where the author describes a psychotic episode from his life, was regarded by the Medgerminevtika artists as their initial point of departure. Earlier, in the eighties, Moscow conceptualists used the acronym "MANI" (the Moscow Archive of New Art, see above) to denote their circle. But when the MANI archive (the acronym in Russian spells the English word "money,") was bought by the American collector of Soviet nonconformism Norton Dodge, a new term came to replace it. "NOMA," (Pavel Pepperstein's term) came to stand for a circle of people who describe themselves by means of a jointly developed set of linguistic practices, and it was used, especially in the early nineties, to refer to the central figures and the main texts of Moscow conceptualists.[78] "Estonia" was another term introduced in the early nineties to designate other re-groupings of younger conceptualists,[79] and in the nineties Monastyrsky

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[77] The term was introduced by Pavel Papperstein in 1997. Ibid., 180.
[78] Ibid., 65.
[79] *Estonia* – the name of a circle, which to some extent came to replace *NOMA*. The circle *Estonia* consisted of the groups MH (Medical Hermeneutics), SSV, The Fourth Height, Fenzo,

spoke about "Moksha," a term that referred to the third phase of evolution of Moscow

Conceptualism.[80]

There have also been different propositions for mapping Moscow Conceptualism.

Some suggested using a triangle and charting this tradition according to the dominant

media: in this case Kabakov would represent (from 1986) the art of installation, Vadim

Zakharov printing, and KD would stand for performances and actions.[81] Others have

argued that the "Moscow school" needed to be divided into three branches: "romantic

conceptualism" (the circle of Kabakov), "analytical conceptualism" practiced by Vitaly

Komar and Alexander Melamid, and "inductive conceptualism," the method favored by

KD. Still others go so far as to dismiss the entire tradition. Nikita Alexeev, one of KD's

members, states that: "Moscow Conceptualism never existed… Conceptual art for me is a

limited number of British, American and a few German, Italian and French artists."[82]

With both pro and contra arguments, the models of grouping and naming have

accumulated over the years. Such words and acronyms as "Psychedelic," "Romantic,"

"Inductive," "Analytical," "Communal," "MANI," "Apt-art," "Tot-art," "NOMA,"

"Estonia," "KLAVA" (Club of the Avantgardists – the first officially registered Moscow

artist association), "Moksha" etc, are not merely names, but have been used in order to

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Russia, Tartu, Piarnu, etc. The group was formed in the period after the second putsch of 1993.
Ibid., 98-9.

[80] Moksha – Moscow Conceptual School. The third phase of development of Moscow
Conceptualism after MANI and NOMA. Ibid., 60.

[81] Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols."

[82] For the division into "romantic," "analytic," and "inductive" see Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis,
Gnezdo (The Nest) (Moscow: National Center for Contemporary Art, 2008), 17. The member of
KD Nikita Alexeev denies the existence of Moscow Conceptualism. ———, *Gnezdo (The Nest)*,
21.

express new directions, tendencies and attributes, shared aesthetic views, alliances, and the emergence of new groups during the more than thirty year history of Moscow Conceptualism (see also Glossary).[83]

The Term "Romantic"

From so many definitions, the one proposed by Groys three decades ago remains the most popular. It defines Moscow Conceptualism as a "romantic, dreaming, and psychologizing version of international conceptual art of the 1960-70s."[84] By drawing the division between Moscow and Western conceptual art along the lines of scientific positivism versus metaphysical or mystical romanticism, Groys ventures on a path trod by writers and thinkers who have speculated, since the nineteenth century, about the existence of a "mysterious Russian soul" – a certain type of *duchovnosti* (spirituality) with which the Russians have been blessed. From the perspective of the present, Groys' understanding of "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" in terms of "proof of the surviving unity of the 'Russian spirit'" was the remnant of that quasi-religious understanding of art that at that time dominated unofficial circles, and of which the young critic was trying to liberate himself.[85] Thus the term "romantic" has often been used as a synonym for "spiritual" and "mystical," and it was part of that myth of the enigmatic "Russian soul,"

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[83] For a more detailed explanation of these terms see Glossary.

[84] The definition inserted in the *Dictionary* is from Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism." See also Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 61.

[85] The reference to the Russian spirit was then picked up by other critics who wrote about this phenomenon. See Bobrinskaia, *Konzeptualizm*, [unpaginated]. For the quasi-religious atmosphere of criticism see Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 332-42.

constantly spoken of within the pro-Slavophile regions of the unofficial circles of

Moscow and especially in Groys' own Leningrad.

I will place this metaphysical entity (the "Russian soul") aside, and look instead

for more clearly factual causes for the emergence of the attribute "romantic." It is true

that one can explain the romantic quality of this cultural phenomenon by describing the

general atmosphere of the seventies (something that Kabakov does with great skill in his

recollections),[86] and argue that part of the sense of romantic mystery comes as a result of

that all-enshrouding Soviet fogginess, which rendered everything unpractical and

enigmatic. But there was also something in that climate that surrounded in particular the

unofficial art scene, and this was later transferred to the next generations of artists, to the

conceptualists. In other words the word "romantic" points to a reaction, or to a series of

reactions, which took place in Moscow unofficial circles and led to the emergence of

Moscow Conceptualism, when the worldviews of two generations of unofficial artists

fused and produced an interstice, something "between," which is neither very Russia nor

yet Western, something synthetic like the project of the historical romantics.

Artists and critics often mention a "paradigm shift" that took place within

Moscow unofficial culture in the early seventies.[87] The aforementioned transition from

"communal modernism" to "communal postmodernism" described by V. Tupitsyn refers

also to this change. Kabakov proposed several metaphors to describe this shift. He

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[86] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve.*
[87] About the "paradigm shift" see Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis, *Gnezdo (The Nest)* (Moscow: National Center for Contemporary Art, 2008). Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols." For a more detailed account on the nature of this transition see Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve.*

compared how two generations of unofficial artists looked at a Soviet propaganda poster depicting an index finger pointing towards the bright future. Whereas, according to Kabakov, the modernists of the sixties looked in the direction of the index finger, criticizing the path to which it pointed (the red horizon of the bright future), the first generation of conceptualists (or the postmodernists) began instead to closely inspect the painted fingertip. "It became possible not to look where the finger was pointing but to turn the head and glance at this finger," or "instead of marching in the rhythm of a loud propagandistic music amplified via a megaphone, we stopped and began to stare dully at that megaphone."[88] The new generation scrutinized this fingertip, completely ignoring the direction in which it was pointing. This close inspection did not resemble a scientific investigation, nor a metaphysical interpretation or an attitude of worship, but instead was more like a Buddhist meditation – a prolonged concentration on the object until the point when both the painted fingertip and the megaphone disappear revealing instead emptiness. KD particularly favored such an approach.

The so-called "paradigm shift" was conditioned first of all by a series of political events. At the 24th Congress of CPSU (1971), Brezhnev introduced the notion of "developed socialism," which was an evident deviation from the early Soviet leaders' ambitions of proceeding from capitalism through socialism into communism. Khrushchev planned to catch up with the West in the early 1970s and by the 1980s to step into communism. Brezhnev's "developed socialism" was the postponement of communism, and it manifested the massive loss of faith of the Soviet citizens in the judgments of their

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[88] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 75.

leaders.[89] The changes that were taking place on the high political levels were also affecting the Moscow unofficial art circles. This was expressed above all in a change in terminology. If before the artists from this milieu used to refer to themselves as *podpolinye* (the underground, which translated literally means "to live under the floor"), after the infamous Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974 the new term *neofitsial'nyi* (unofficial), settled in, and after that came the term "nonconformist."[90]

ГРАФИК „НАДЕЖДЫ" И „СТРАХА"

Line of "fear" — линия „страха"

Line of "hope" — линия „надежды"

1957 г.   1963 г.   1974 г.   1976 г.   1979 г.   1983 г.
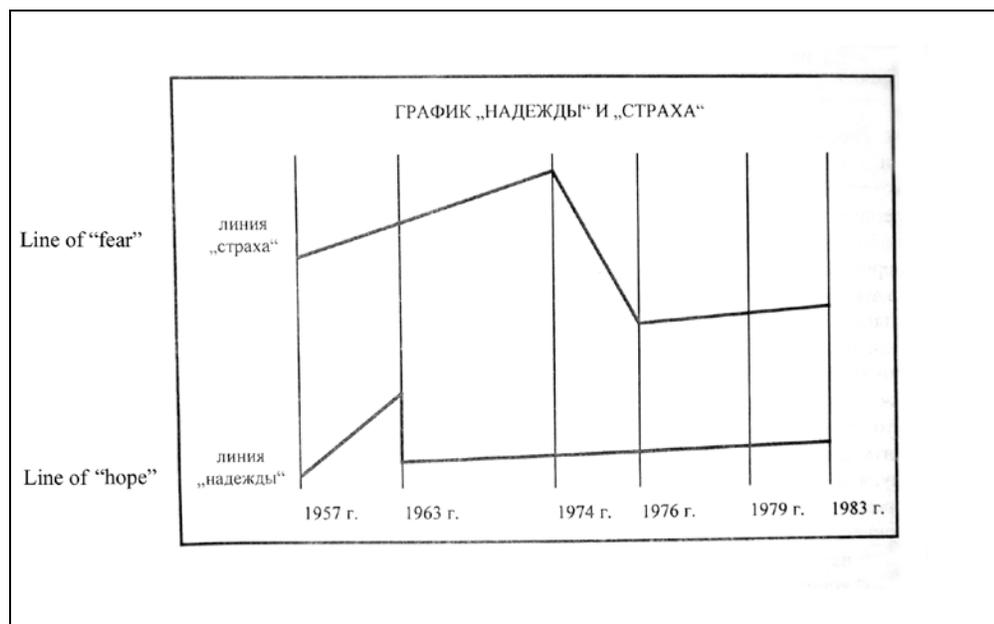
Figure 2: Ilya Kabakov, Diagram of "Hope" and "Fear," circa 1980.

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[89] Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, *Brezhnev reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 165-7.

[90] For the distinction "underground" and "unofficial" artists see Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 20. See also Glossary for the entries "Nonconformist and Dissident."

The unsanctioned Bulldozer Exhibition was the first to break the ice and to force the authorities to modify their views on artistic dissent.[91] Shortly after, the officials approved an "unofficial" exhibition in the open air. The "Second Fall Open-Air Show of Painting," which took place in the Moscow Izmailovo park, was dubbed the "Soviet Woodstock."[92] After these events the emerging conceptualists, especially the second generation to which KD belonged, were not "underground" anymore but "unofficial," a designation which was much easier to bear. In this change a sudden decrease of fear occurred, but also a decrease of hope, which is well illustrated by Kabakov's "Chart of Hope and Fear" (Figure 2). The horizontal "line of fear," upon crossing the vertical line of the year 1974, abruptly plunges down, indicating a turning point in Soviet politics under Brezhnev, and the beginning of the phase known as *zastoi* (stagnation.)

It must be said that Moscow Romantic Conceptualism came as a result of a generational clash when younger artists (Ilya Kabakov, Viktor Pivovarov, Eric Bulatov, Ivan Chuikov, Oleg Vasiliev) reacted against some of their predecessors, the dissident modernists of the sixties (*shestidesyatniki*). The former teased the latter for their interminable preoccupations with matters of individual expression and endless searches

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[91] "Bulldozer Exhibition" – One of the first exhibitions of unofficial art which took place at the outskirts of Moscow on September 15th 1974 . The "First Fall Open-Air Show of Painting," as it was called, took place on the outskirts of Moscow. The unsanctioned event was wrecked by the authorities with bulldozers and fire-hoses. Among the participants were O. Rabin, S. Glezer, V. Vorobiov, Komar & Melamid, L. Masterkova, V. Nemukhin and others. See some materials on the Bulldozer Exhibition in Aleksandr Glezer, *Lianozovskaia gruppa: istoki i sud'by: sbornik materialov i katalog k vystavke v Gosudarstvennoi Tretiakovskoi galeree, 10 marta-10 aprelia 1988: Tabakman museum of contemporary Russian art (New York), 15 May--15 June 1998* (Moskva: "Rasters", 1998). For the "Bulldozer Exhibition" see also Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 89-90.
[92] For the "Soviet Woodstock" see Time, "The Russian Woodstock," *TIME Magazine* (Oct 14, 1974).

for answers to eternal questions.[93] The dispute concerned each group's view on the question of what constitutes art, and whereas the modernists of the sixties and seventies still viewed art as an emotional outlet for individual expression, the younger generation began to question the very nature of art and, as in Kabakov's analogy, stare at the painted finger. Moscow Conceptualism "analyzes first of all the very notion of 'art.'… and this is what distinguishes them from the 'unofficial' art of the fifties and sixties preoccupied with the eternal and the infinite."[94]

There have been many ways to categorize the modernists of the sixties, and I will return to this problem. A large portion of the modernists resorted to the language of expressionism and abstraction, which may create the impression that their programs were synchronous with those of their Western colleagues. But this is not entirely the case. *Art informel* practiced by the Paris School theorized the new task of art to be its ability to reach a degree of formlessness, to go beyond the modernist dichotomy of form and content (neither "form" nor "content"),[95] and to find a language capable of expressing the anxiety of the subject faced with (or thrown into) the emerging *contemporary* world. Seeking inspiration in the art of outsiders (the folk, children and the art of the mentally ill) *Art informel* ventured to "unform" pre-established notions. Following the

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[93] One example was the relation between Eduard Steinberg (a modernist painter influenced by Russian Orthodox philosophers) and Kabakov who "approached such 'ultimate questions' with muted irony." Jackson, "Answers of the experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes," 164.
The conceptualists used, for instance, the words "*netlenka*" and "*dukhovka*" to refer to their predecessors. Whereas the former word means "imperishable" or "inextinguishable" the latter is formed from the root *dukh* meaning spirit, and in this diminutive form translates as "oven."
[94] Bobrinskaia, *Konzeptualism*, [unpaginated].
[95] See Yve Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: a User's Guide* (New York, Cambridge: Zone Books, 1997).

existentialists, they attempted to crack the shell of essences in order to reach the hard kernel of pure existence. On the other side of the Atlantic the triumphantly emerging Abstract Expressionism of the New York School defined the new task of art in terms of inventing new idioms and myths of personal liberation, drawing extensively on European Surrealism and Existentialism, as well as on Jungian psychoanalysis. Artists associated with the New York School used the canvas to record and preserve radical gestures made in the name of freedom, given that the notion of "personal freedom" was becoming a central concept in the Western political vocabulary after World War Two.

The unofficial painters of the sixties also saw their art as a form for self-expression, but unlike their Western colleagues many of the Muscovites viewed this form of expressionism through the prism of a series of religious, theosophical, or metaphysical themes. Although Kabakov refers to a group of Moscow painters from the sixties as a "group of existentialists,"[96] they must not be confused with the Sartrean atheistic existentialists who inspired many artists after WWII. For many painters from the sixties on, the writings of the Russian 19th century Christian Orthodox philosophers, most of whom were forbidden in the USSR, and the Christian tradition of the Russian icon were the main influences.[97] Here, and in the philosophical and theological writings of such nineteenth and twentieth century Russian Orthodox thinkers as Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Fedorov, and Pavel Florensky, they sought models of resistance to the repressive regime as well as for sources of artistic inspiration. The shift that occurred in the early seventies

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[96] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 169.
[97] Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 61.

was gradual, and the new conceptual tendency did not come instantly to replace the older one. Metaphysical and religious interests remained popular among Moscow and Leningrad painters and survived up until the eighties.[98] When the young generation of artists (the conceptualists) reacted against the metaphysical and mystical enthusiasm of their predecessors, this was also an attempt to introduce into the unofficial art a whiff of rationalism, to reconnect culturally to the West, and it is in this regard that the project of Moscow Conceptualism resembles that of the Russian historical avant-garde: they were both working within a Western artistic, aesthetic and political problematic. They were both pro-Western.[99]

In what sense then shall one understand the term "romantic," and how does it relate to this shift that occurred on the Moscow unofficial scene? Was the new paradigm romantic in the sense of the adjective "romantic" (i.e. loving, passionate, tender, sentimental) or of the historical term "Romantic," which, as many distinguished critics have remarked, is so difficult to define?[100] This has never been made clear in the literature on Moscow Conceptualism. It would perhaps be easier to discuss these artists from the perspective of the historical term than from that of the common adjective. Most historians tend to agree that the nineteenth century Romantic movement was a passionate

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[98] For a more detailed description of this religious climate that dominated the Moscow unofficial scene, including a presentation of various types of metaphysical consciousnesses see Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve.*

[99] Despite the pro-Western orientation of these artists many remained nevertheless grounded in and inspired by mystical or religious doctrines. In the case of the historical avant-garde see for instance Linda Henderson *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

[100] See for instance Isaiah Berlin's *In Search of a Definition* chapter in Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Bollingen series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

protest against universality of any kind,[101] and this might be one reason to call these artists romantic in the historical sense. Against the background of other generations of twentieth century Russian (and Soviet) artists the conceptualists were romantic precisely for their celebration of the particular. They opposed the utopian universalism of the Russian historical avant-garde and its belief in universal reason, just as they ignored the ostensibly naïve universalism of socialist realism; they also rejected (although respected) the pious and religious universalism of the dissident modernists. In fact their enormous respect for and prolonged contact with the latter made them seem so spiritual and lyrical compared to their Western counterparts. This has also been reflected in some of their works, particularly in the documentation and actions of the KD, where one can still find the vestiges of religious piety and eastern orthodox Byzantine mysticism.

The Term "Emptiness"

The relevance of the term "emptiness" for Moscow Conceptualism can be proven by a series of terms (discussed below) that use the notion of "emptiness" (*pustota*). For instance, the term "empty canon" was introduced by Medgerminevtika in the late eighties to describe their own writings as well as the "major" canonical texts of Moscow Conceptualism.[102] The concept of "emptiness," used to ensure the specificity of Moscow Conceptualism, can be also traced back to previous generations of Russian art. The

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[101] Ibid., 8.
[102] "Empty Canon" (*Pustotnyi kanon*) – a term used by Medical Hermeneutics group to describe the entire body of texts written by the group, including also all "central" texts of NOMA [i.e. of Moscow Conceptualism].Introduced in 1988. Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 76.

problem is to which one? When critics touch upon the "whiteness" or the "emptiness"

present in the works of some conceptualists they often bring in references to the historical

avant-garde, and this again in order to put these artists on the same scale with their

predecessors and to assure a continuation of the Russian cultural tradition. Kabakov's

series of empty or white works from the seventies have been often interpreted as a "re-

thinking the tradition of Malevich," whereas the white fields where KD's actions took

place were interpreted as "Malevich's whiteness, re-interpreted by KD in terms of the

snowy fields at the outskirts of Moscow."[103] But why is it that most of the time critics use

the historical avant-garde (and above all Malevich) as a historical marker for discussing

the Moscow conceptualists' central notion of "emptiness"? A genealogy of "emptiness"

in Russian/Soviet culture would have to take into account both Malevich and

Rodchenko's monochromes, as well as some earlier manifestations of emptying or

whitening and emptying the poetic image, as in for instance Vasilisk Gnedov's 1913

"Poem of the End."[104] But why not take more serious account of the significance that the

previous generations of painters (the dissident modernists) attributed to the notions of

whiteness and emptiness, as they were the ones who handed the torch of tradition on to

the conceptualists? As the attribute "romantic," which, as I have suggested, was

precipitated from the modernists' preoccupations with spiritualism and metaphysical

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[103] See dialogue "Emptiness" in Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 99-100.
[104] The futurist poet Vasilisk Gnedov published his scandalous collection of fifteen poems under the title Smert' iskusstvu (Death to Art) in 1913. The last fifteenth poem called *Poema kontsa* (Poem of the End) was the title of a white empty page. See Vasilisk Gnedov and Dmitrii Vladimirovich Kuzmin, *Smert' iskusstvu: piatnadtsat' (15) poem* (Moskva: Agro-Risk, 1996).

idealism, the second trait of "emptiness" can also be better understood if looked at through the work and beliefs of the unofficial artists of the sixties and seventies.

In his memoirs Kabakov offers a detailed account of the Moscow unofficial scene, portraying and describing individually many members of these circles, as well as grouping and categorizing them according to their age, generation, shared worldviews and forms of artistic, social and political engagement.[105] In his text "The Air Over Moscow" (*Vozdukh nad Moskvoi*), he portrays in more detail that unofficial intellectual atmosphere, which Groys describes in *A-Ya* as a lyrical and romantic blend opposed to the dryness of officialdom. Kabakov returns over and over again to reflect upon some painters who left a strong impact on him, and (one should add) through him on the later generations of Moscow conceptualists. It is in his description of the so-called "spiritual painters" Eduard Shteinberg and Mikhail Shvartsman, and in the way in which these artists perceived themselves and their art, that one can recognize some features of the conceptualists' "emptiness." These were artists who dedicated themselves, from the fifties on, to religious and spiritual pursuits; painters who would have been very deeply offended if told that they made good pictures, for they regarded themselves not as mere painters of pictures but as prophets and priests who offered an "opening into a new century" and "new spiritual transformations."[106] In addition to the persistent use of Christian symbolism (i.e. the cross, the fish, the bird) their works betrayed overwhelming preoccupations with such painterly issues as light, space, and whiteness. But their

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[105] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*.
[106] Kabakov refers to such artists Mikhail Shvartsman and Ülo Sooster. Ibid., 59.

preoccupations with these issues are not to be understood through the prism of mere physical phenomena, for instance with light as a natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible. They regarded these concepts from a broader metaphysical perspective, and they used them within a philosophical and even theological context, speaking not just about light but about the "metaphysics of light." One should remember that, when they refer to the word "light," they mean "Taboric Light," "Blessed Light" "Gracious Light," "Good Light," or "Eternal Light." Their "whiteness" was also metaphysical, for it did not mean negation but rather a transcendental emptiness, a space the beyond of which is unknown to those of this world. They discussed the notions of whiteness and space using a predominantly religious vocabulary; they would never say "painting something white" but rather "becoming white" (*stanovlenie belym*) or "journeying to the white" (*puti k belomu*.)[107]

Their attempts to find an adequate pictorial representation of a transcendental space was an inspiration to many that later became known as the first generation of conceptualists; especially for those who, like Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vasiliev, worked with the problematic of space, particularly of the Soviet ideological space. The prolonged contact of the latter with their metaphysically and mystically minded predecessors accounts for the rich and elaborate interpretations of space, of whiteness, and of emptiness. For Kabakov, who has been one of its main practitioners and theoreticians, "emptiness" is part of the triad "white, Empty, and light (*'beloe, 'Pustoe' i 'svet'*)."[108]

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[107] Ibid., 66 – 68.
[108] Ibid., 96.

The theme of "emptiness" was present in some of the Kabakov's early white paintings

and especially the album series *Ten Characters* (1972-75). "Each album narrates the

story of one lonely human being who dies in the end; Kabakov registers this act of death

by means of several white pages, which complete each portfolio."[109] But it is not only in

the whiteness of the page that Kabakov registers death or suggests emptiness. He explains

that the notion of "emptiness" is more tightly related to his *Album* series than one may

think, and that it is the very medium (or genre) of the album that is somehow suggestive

of "emptiness." He provides the following example:

> Now, let's remember a familiar situation, when you come into somebody's
> house and the hostess, not knowing how to keep you entertained, starts to
> show you a very thick family album. 'This is the aunt, this is the door,
> these are my sister's acquaintances from school, etc.' You know neither
> these acquaintances nor the hostess' sister. The album is paged through
> and through until the moment when aunts, uncles, children, grannies,
> grandpas, children, militaries, cousins, all mix up into one giant muddy
> stain. You are horrified and despairing when you think of that immense
> boredom that awaits you in the next fifty pages that you will have to look
> through, and not too fast, for you don't want to offend the hostess who has
> been carried away by memories.[110]

That "muddy stain" made up of unknown aunts, uncles, grannies and cousins, is

Kabakov's notion of emptiness and its relation to the genre of album. In an earlier text

written in the seventies Kabakov states that "the essence of the album consists in the

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[109] Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present*, 40.
[110] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 104.

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turning over of its pages."[111] It is not what is printed or shown on the surface of those pages, but the very repetitive gesture of paging through: page after page, page after page – it is then that the emptiness will emerge. The paging through is thus not an everyday (*bytovoe*) action as it may seem at the first glance, but it is an artistic (*khudojestvennoe*) gesture, and for this emptiness to emerge the album, the book (or whatever is paged though) must be very thick. This reference to quantity was mentioned above when Kabakov gave a definition of emptiness as a major theme in Russian conceptualism. He described the writing styles of Dostoevsky and Gogol, emphasizing that emptiness emerges only when there is an abundance, or even a surplus of representation; it is then that the veil of emptiness falls in between the reader or the spectator and the represented object.

It is in this definition of emptiness that one can trace some of the later generations of Moscow conceptualists' main tools and devices. For instance, KD's notion of "empty action" (*pustoe deistvie*), which refers to a set of apparently futile actions and gestures but which are investigated for marginal aesthetic value, is one of them. Kabakov's metaphor of leafing through the family album of someone unknown is a perfect example of an empty action. As KD would theorize it later, one cannot recognize it during the moment when one is performing it; it can only be detected later by looking at the documentation material (records, photographs, texts, and so forth.) Let us take instead another of KD's terms, "empty photographs." This term was employed by the artists starting with their second phase (1980-83). "Empty photographs" (*pustye fotografii*) are

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[111] Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 357-59.

part of the so-called "factographical discourse" and the term designates photographs in which nothing (or almost nothing) is shown – a "deliberate emptiness." Later, the third generation of Moscow conceptualists coined such terms as "book after book" (*kniga za knikoi*).[112] This term, which designates one of the main principles employed by the members of the Medgerminevtika, refers to the fact that information blocks (texts, artworks, etc.) should be divided internally by empty silent intervals, like the portfolios in Kabakov's *Album* which climaxed in "dead" white empty pages; and Leiderman's term "columbarium machines" was proposed during the nineties as a working metaphor for Western museums and the contemporary art exhibition space. Just below the surface all of these terms carry the meaning of Kabakov's emptiness, and through the latter one can descend even deeper and discern the metaphysical and religious emptiness of the dissident modernists, and then deeper again to the historical avant-garde.

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[112] For a more extended definition of these terms see the Glossary in the Appendix.

CHAPTER 2

KD's *Journeys* Before 1989

In this chapter I examine the Soviet period (the "before") of KD's history, which lasted from 1976 until 1989. During this time the group gradually emerged with its own mythology, methodology, and terminology; it is the period during which the artists established a way of interacting among themselves and with their public; the period during which they decided and established the role that objects and documentation would play in their work – in short, this is the period in which they created the model called "KD," a model which in spite of all changes has guided their aesthetic principles for almost three decades.

This chapter is divided into four sections and each section examines a phase in KD's Soviet history. Each section presents those changes and alterations that I found critical for what constitutes the aesthetic model of KD. In my discussion of each phase, I rely primarily on the material available in the published five volumes of KD's *Journeys* and in the *Dictionary*. In order to give the reader a sense of what a "typical" action of KD looks like, I introduce, in section one, two, and three of this chapter, three actions that took place in the first (1976-80) second (1980-83) and third (1983-85) phases. I also introduce and translate in these sections some of the main concepts from KD's lexicography, explaining their relevance in each particular phase. The last section of this

chapter discusses the development of the group during the fourth and the fifth phase that overlapped, in time, with a series of radical social and political transformations in which the USSR was caught up in the second half of the eighties.

Before I proceed I would like to define the position from which I will write. For years the KD artists arranged that part of the world with which they interacted into an elaborate and hermetic system, thus requiring the outsider to find a niche in this system that would allow him or her to discuss their work. To quote again Ekaterina Dyogot: "A person outside of Moscow Conceptualism is regarded as *a priori* incompetent (although he is given a chance to prove the opposite.)"[1] Kabakov has the same hermeticism in mind when he wrote: "I cannot frankly imagine what is it for an outsider to read Monastyrsky's texts in the *Journeys Outside the City*."[2] Indeed, KD's writing, particularly the texts written by Monastyrsky, are very difficult to follow. As the art critic Viktor Tupitsyn writes: "Andrei is a typical artist-theoretician, in the sense that he is not a theoretician of culture but of himself, of his own symbolic place that he constitutes by the means of the texts."[3] In order to be able to write about KD one has to navigate between definitions and terms, rules and regulations, concepts and techniques that constitute a dense net of mythemes in KD's mythology. Some of these terms were invented by the artists precisely in order to describe their relation with those with whom the group collaborated during those secretive years, as well as in order to tell apart those who did not belong to their closed circle. KD's lexicon distinguished initially two kinds of spectators: the "spectator-

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[1] Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 11.
[2] Kabakov, *Noma ili Moskovskii kontseptualnyi krug: installiatsiia*, 36.
[3] V. Tupitsyn in v. 8th of Andrei Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols."

participant" (*zriteli-uchastnik*) and the "anonymous-spectator" (*anonimnyi-zriteli*).[4] The former is a special category of public that includes artists, writers, critics, and poets, most of whom were part of the larger circle of Moscow Conceptualism. The "spectators-participants" received each time personal invitations to attend the actions of KD, and they were the ones who were personally asked to write reports and engage in interpretation of the attended actions. The second and far less restrictive category was that of "anonymous-spectator." If one happened to come accidentally across one of KD's actions, objects, or especially one of their works from the series *Banners*, remaining for a while in a state of puzzlement as to what these objects might mean, then one would automatically become an "anonymous-spectator" of KD.[5] Theoretically every Soviet citizen could have become part of this category. These two categories, "spectator-participant" and "anonymous-spectator," or "friends" and "everybody else," were the two main categories that existed before 1989.

In the manuscripts of the post-1989 unpublished *Journeys*, one encounters another category of spectator sometimes called the "free spectator," the "invisible spectator," or

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[4] The *Dictionary* does not contain the category "spectator-participant" but only that of "anonymous-spectator." In the *Journeys*, however, from the very first volume Monastyrsky mentions the category "spectator-participant" (*zriteli-uchatnik*). ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 20. For complete definitions of some these terms see the Glossary in the Appendix.

[5] In the first volume Nikita Alexeev described what could have happened when someone came accidentally across one of KD's *Banners*. It was from the following hypothetical description that the term "anonymous-spectator" has emerged. "When the passerby notices far away a *Banner*, hanging over the river, he will start wondering why it hangs there, being absolutely sure that the text is just another Soviet propaganda slogan. But when he approaches the site, he will be surprised to read: I DO NOT COMPLAIN ABOUT ANYTHING AND I DO LIKE EVERYTHING, DESPITE THE FACT THAT I NEVER BEEN HERE BEFORE AND I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THESE PLACES. Wondering about the written content, the passerby will find himself in a psychological empty space." Nikita Alexeev in Ibid., 94.

the "spectator outsider."[6] I will discuss this shift towards the new spectator in the fourth and last chapter of this dissertation, but for now, I bring in the category of the "spectator outsider" in order to indicate the position from which I write. It must be stressed that this position is that of the most disadvantaged category of spectators, for it includes all those who (like myself) encounter the art of the group neither through personal invitations like the "spectator-participant," nor accidentally like the "anonymous-spectator," but through books, catalogues, photographs, and other sources of documentation. From this position, which is the only one left to those who are not part of Moscow Conceptualism but who are still interested in this group, I translate, describe, and analyze the art and aesthetics of KD as it was documented in ten volumes of the *Journeys*. Over the years KD have asked their spectators-participants to write reports and describe their impressions and thoughts after attending their actions. The present text may in some ways be regarded as a participant-report submitted by an outsider-spectator upon encountering the work of KD.

For this chapter I draw mainly on the texts of two persons, whom one may call the "main artist-organizer" and the "main spectator-participant." The main artist of KD is Andrei Monastyrsky, who, as I noted in the previous chapter, authored and organized most of KD's actions, wrote most of KD's texts, and invented most of the group's vocabulary. Over the years he has asserted himself as the leader of this group. The main spectator for the before-*Journeys* is Ilya Kabakov, who was also the most influential

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[6] Foreword to Volume Seven in ———, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols."

person for the group, and who for an entire decade (1976-1986) has attended and written on many of KD's actions.[7]

Volume I (phase 1976-80): "Appearance"

The material in the first volume of the *Journeys* is arranged in the following order: Acknowledgment, Foreword, Descriptive Texts, Participant Reports, and Commentaries. With some exceptions, this is the order that has been kept in all the subsequent volumes of KD's *Journeys*. In the short "Acknowledgement," (*Ot avtorov*) the artists thank all those who helped them organize and photograph their actions, and also list those who have joined the group at some phase or another. Next is the "Foreword" (*Predislovie*), which is the main theoretical text of each volume. Here, Monastyrsky summarizes the general direction of the group during each phase, pointing to the main changes, their general direction and to the new terms and concepts developed in the course of a given phase. The next section, called "Descriptive Texts" (*Opisatelinye texty*), includes the descriptions of all the actions that have been organized during each phase. Each description contains the plot of the action, the location where the action took place, the names of the authors (ordered according to their contribution to the action), and the documentation that accompanied it. The following section, called "Participants' Reports" (*Rasskazy uchastnikov*), presents the reader with the spectator-participants' writings after their participation in one of the group's actions. Finally, each volume

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[7] Kabakov is only second (after Backstein) in the number of attended actions in the before-1989 period (1976-89). ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 781.

concludes with a section called "Commentaries" (*Kommentarii*), where the critical interpretations on the artists' actions and the spectators' reactions are compiled.

In what follows, I provide two descriptions of KD's first action "Appearance:" one is the original report, which I translate from the first volume of the *Journeys*, and the second is my description of this action using concepts from the vocabulary of KD. I deliberately re-tell the action using these concepts, so that I have the opportunity to define and explain some of KD's most important terms. It must be stressed that the first phase was the group's "time of innocence," the time when the artists were less concerned with forming concepts, documenting, reporting and commenting on their actions and were more focused on organizing actions. As the *Dictionary* indicates, almost no specific KD concept emerged during the first phase. Monastyrsky began to assemble the original *samizdat* version of the *Journeys* only in the eighties, and the book was published in 1998. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that the structure which I follow, as well as many of the words and concepts that I will use to describe the 1976 action "Appearance," are belated constructs, many of which did not exist at that time. The history of this artist group may serve as a good illustration of one important aspect in the emergence of the historical institution of art: the gradual transformation and even dissolution of practice into theory, or the ongoing perfection of a process in which theoretical and historical concepts are invented in order to be applied retrospectively to the unmediated practice of the past.

Description:

"Appearance" (*Poiavlenie*)

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The spectators received invitations to attend the action "Appearance." Five minutes after the spectators (30 people) gathered on the edge of the field, from the opposite side, from the woods, two participants [organizers] of the action appeared. They crossed the field, approached the spectators and handed them certificates ("Documentary Confirmation"), attesting their presence during the action "Appearance."

Moscow, Izmailovsk Field,

March 13, 1976A. Monastyrsky, L. Rubinstein, N. Alexeev, G. Kisevalter[8]

This is the original description of the action "Appearance," which arose from the intention of inviting a few friends to witness a very simple and non-artistic situation: "the appearance before a crowd of friends of two or three familiar people."[9] The description includes: the title, the sequence of events (plot), sometimes the number of spectator-participants, the place of the action, the name of the artists in the order that shows the level of their involvement in the work (for instance, the first name in the list always indicates the author who introduced the idea followed by those who assisted him). Most of the descriptions are written in a dry, informative style and describe what the group calls the plot or the "eventful part"[10] (*sobytiinaia chast'*) of the action. In the next paragraphs I provide my own description of the action "Appearance." I will modify the description by transforming it into a hypothetical (fictional) action with the same name,

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[8] Ibid., 25.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 107.

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in order that I may introduce some of KD's most important concepts, placed in square brackets.

> The action ["Appearance"] represents a situation where a group of [spectator- participants] follow the [Backstein Function] and [Journey Outside the City]. The group travels to a field, located [out-of-town], in order to undergo a certain spiritual experience. They will experience within their inner [ES – emotional space] a series of [empty] states such as [pre-waiting], [waiting] [accomplished waiting], as well as various other effects as a result of KD's [empty actions]. These states are part of a broader category called [undetermined zones] (or [zones of accidental impressions]), and they appear on the [demonstrative semiotic field] and on the [exposition semiotic field] set out by KD's actions.

For the action "Appearance" a group of friends are invited to make a trip outside Moscow. After they receive their invitations, (or after they are each called and informed) they meet at the train station preparing themselves to embark on a local train. They are about to [Journey Outside the City.] This is a crucial phrase in the vocabulary of the group, and it served them as the title of all (published and unpublished) volumes. Later, during the third phase, they will even use it to refer to a new genre of art-making. The phrase was suggested in 1980 by Kabakov, whose impact on Monastyrsky and on the work of the group was quite significant.[11] The *Dictionary* defines Journey Outside the City as a "genre of action in which the accent is made on the aesthetic importance of various phases of traveling to the place of the action, as well as various forms of

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[11] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 777.

describing it."[12] Over the years the artists of this group have worked to prove that a journey is for one of their actions what a frame is for a painting. One of the main aesthetical concerns of KD for decades has been the idea that while journeying to see an artwork, one must wait to see what will happen. KD owes this idea of "waiting as a frame" to the poet Vsevolod Nekrasov, who theorized that the sense of waiting for something surrounds or frames that which is about to take place. "In addition, Nekrasov believes that it is very difficult to locate this 'frame;' where does it begin and where does it end."[13] In its work KD attempts to deal with this difficult task of establishing when an action begins – does it begin when the guests receive their invitations, or when they embark on the train, or in the train?

Once embarked on the train the group begins to discuss the latest news, which for the most part concern issues current within their unofficial circles: art news from abroad, an acquaintance in common, studio visits and purchases by Moscow diplomatic personnel, a new commission for a children's book illustration at work, and so forth. When the train leaves behind the Moscow high-rises they are prepared to disembark at the first sign from the person delegated to lead the group. This person, who is in charge of leading the group to the field where the artists are preparing the action, is performing what KD calls the [Backstein Function] (*Bakshtein funkzia*). This is a task that consists in helping coordinate the moves of the spectators with those of the artists, or in helping to organize a discussion among the spectators. The term is defined by the *Dictionary* as a

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[12] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 69.
[13] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 728.

"universal operator of actuality within the circle of Moscow conceptualists."[14] For many

years, and particularly during the nineties when the term emerged, the Moscow organizer,

curator, and art critic Joseph Backstein carried out this function most often, which

explains the name of this function. When the "operator of actuality" in charge of the

Backstein Function announces the stop, the group gets ready to disembark, knowing that

they have reached their [out-of-town] destination.

[Out-of-town-ness] (*zagorodnosti*) is another specific KD aesthetic term that

Monastyrsky defines as a particular space adjacent to one or another of the big Soviet

cities. What is "out-of-town" refers to a well-defined border between the "city" and the

"non-city," a topographic category which Monastyrsky maintains is specific to the Soviet

landscape and which is missing as a concept in the topographies of the Western

countries.[15] To "out-of-town-ness" belongs the landscape that opens out at the edges of

the big cities (past suburbia) and although these territories may have all the features of

the countryside (field, woods, etc.), they cannot belong to the country due to their close

proximity to Moscow, Leningrad or any other big city. The "out-of-town" is almost a

"no-man's land," a "neutral zone," which does not fall under the authority of any law –

for the city officials it is already country and those of the country fear it because it is too

close to the city. Although KD also organized many actions in the city, their most

important work was done precisely in the fields near Moscow. One of these fields, called

"Kievogorskoe Field" (*Kievogorskoe pole*), near the village Kievy Gorky, was their

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[14] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 28.
[15] Not to be confused with "categories of KD." Ibid., 144.

aesthetic firing ground, for it is here that KD organized most of their "out-of-town"

actions.

Once detrained the group again follows the guide in charge of the Backstein

Function. It is already the middle of March but the landscape is still covered in a white

layer of pristine snow. They make their way towards a grove and when they pass it the

group reaches the edge of a large white field. The operator says "Kievogorskoe Field,"

nodding towards the empty field as if saying "it is here that everything will take place."[16]

At the edge of the field the group is invited to take its pre-arranged place and begins to

wait for the onset of the action. [Waiting] is another important category for KD,

especially during the first phase of their history. It was precisely the act of waiting that

transformed KD's guests into their spectators. For the moment it is worth mentioning that

KD divides the concept of "waiting" into such phases as "pre-waiting" (the time after the

guests receive their invitations), "waiting" (now, at the edge of the field), and the

"accomplished waiting," which comes (or does not) in the later stages of the action.

Monastyrsky introduced the term "theory of waiting" in 1983 and the *Dictionary* explains

that he decided to "describe and research various phases of waiting, after he encountered

the word 'pre-waiting' in one of Kabakov's report written about an early action of KD."[17]

Such states as "pre-waiting," "waiting," "accomplished waiting," "the receiving of the

invitation to attend an action," and the "journey to the place of the action" that the

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[16] Although the first action of KD ("Appearance") took place on the "Izmailovsk Field" I will use the "Kievogorskoe Field" where most of the actions of KD took place.

[17] Theory of Waiting (*Teoria ojhidania*) – "description and research of various phases of waiting. Monastyrsky introduced the term after he had encountered the word 'pre-waiting' in one of Kabakov's early in reports. See Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 156.

spectator is experiencing form part of another, broader category called [Undetermined Zones] (or [Zones of Accidental Impressions]) (see Glossary).

But "waiting" is only the first step in which this company of spectators has been engaged. As they wait to see what will happen next they "listen," they "look" fixedly, scanning the empty field and trying to catch the slightest change on its white snowy surface. Suddenly, in the distance, somebody notices two black dots, and they begin to communicate this to the rest of the group. Now the entire group watches the two figures moving towards them. While watching the two dots growing they are trying also to guess who these people are or into which members of KD the two distant silhouettes will resolve themselves. When the figures approach so that their faces are clearly distinguishable the spectators notice that the artists carry in their hands scraps of white paper. Now the artists come very close to the waiting group and they began handing each of the spectators a piece of paper which reads:

"Appearance"
(Sample of the certificate attesting your presence during the "Appearance")

confirmation

that (*name*)_____

has witnessed the APPEARANCE

which took place on March 13th 1976[18]

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[18] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 36.

The spectator-participants read the certificates, which is to say they are now

trying to "understand" and to "interpret" the actions of the artists-organizers. All together,

"waiting," "looking," "understanding," "failure to understand" and "interpreting" various

"strange" actions performed by KD's artists relate to another important category in the

aesthetics of KD and that of Moscow Conceptualism. The concept of Emptiness (*pustota*)

presides over the entire discourse of KD. Kabakov, as I noted in the previous chapter,

introduced and worked with this concept from the seventies on and managed to pass it on

other conceptualists as well.[19] The states that the group of spectator-participants

experience on the edge of the Kievogorskoe Filed are often described as "empty." As the

guests hold in their hands the white sheets of paper they are "waiting," "looking,"

"listening" and "trying to understand" what is going on. When they begin to discuss the

action with the organizers, they understand that the method of KD is different in many

regards from that of other artists and groups.

Many of KD's spectators had seen, for instance, the performances of the group

Nest [*Gnezdo*], which appeared one year prior to the formation of KD (1975). The three

members of Nest (Donskoy, Roshal and Skersis) practiced the so-called "analytical

conceptualism" of Komar and Melamid. They came to the attention of the Moscow

public during the 1975 unofficial exhibition organized at the VDNKh, when the artists sat

in a nest hatching an egg, the event that gave them their name.[20] Nest called their method

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[19] The *Dictionary* defines "Emptiness" briefly and rather vaguely. For a more detailed discussion of this concept and its importance for Moscow Conceptualists see Chapter 1. "Emptiness" (*pustota) –* "an extraordinarily active 'negative' space directed towards everyday reality wishing to 'swallow' it" ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 75.

[20] Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis, *Gnezdo (The Nest)*, 12.

"literal illustration" or "literal materialization" and in most of their actions they materialized a series of metaphors, as for instance when they made and held a real "iron curtain," illustrating the metaphor that had been used to describe the great division of the post-World War world, or when they made "underground art," literally shoveling earth to get down below it. These artists did their actions so that they could "be seen not read," and they described their work in terms of spontaneous manifestations and the joy of creation. Nest, for instance, did not care to document their work, nor did they bother to invite spectators to their actions.[21]

The aesthetics of KD and that of Nest may be contrasted using Yuri Albert's distinction between an "art of long stories perceived slowly" and an "art of short stories perceived quickly."[22] While the latter definition seems better suited to the work of Nest, whose short-lived puns are quickly understood, the former formula corresponds to the work of KD, which is constructed according to an elaborate schema and which is more puzzling for the public. Monastyrsky wrote that the action itself, or its scenario, is a decoy and that the mythical or symbolical content (which is sometimes called the "eventful part"[23]) is not important to the organizers. "We have no intention of 'showing' anything to the spectator; our task is to preserve the experience of waiting as an important, valuable event."[24] The eventful part of the action serves as mere preparation for opening up and activating a series of empty or undefined psychic processes. During their first phase, for example, KD attempted to target the [ES] of the participating

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 21.
[23] [*sobytiinaia chasti*] Ibid., 107.
[24] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 22.

spectator. "ES" is the "emotional space [or the degree of] emotional involvement of the spectator in the action."[25] The plot of the action only helps trigger a series of states and makes the spectator live and experience these states.

So far I have discussed the action as if from the perspective of the spectators-participants, and although this is an indispensable category without which one cannot imagine this group, they are still only one half of the action. The other half is comprised of the tools and devices the artists introduce in order to provoke in the viewer those "empty" states of "pre-waiting," "waiting," "looking," "listening," "understanding," and so forth. KD often refers to the place where the action takes place in terms of [Demonstrative Semiotic Field] (*Demonstrazionnoe znakovoe pole*). This concept stands for the dynamic center of the action, which is constituted by the totality of psychic (subjective) and empirical (objective) elements.[26] The "demonstrative field" totalizes all the elements engaged in the action within one common domain, and one can say that this is the action itself, or the action as planned by the authors. Those elements that constitute the demonstrative field are the eventful part (plot), the objects involved, the role of the spectators-participants and even those states that the latter have experienced in their ES, from the moment when they received the invitation until the present, when they hold their certificates. But these are only the subjective parts of the demonstrative field. The "objective" or empirical component of this field is the location of the action, namely the empty white snowy field at the outskirts of Moscow. The objective empirical emptiness

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[25] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 98.
[26] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 22-23.

of the real field and the empty states of expectation experienced by the spectators meet within the "demonstrative field." "The real field undergoes a metamorphosis and at a certain moment it could be perceived as a continuation of the field of waiting…"[27]

In order to provoke various perceptual states KD employs on its demonstrative field a series of tools. One of their most frequent tools is called the [Empty Action]. There have been many attempts to explain this term. The *Dictionary* defines an "empty action" (*pustoe deistvie*) as an element of KD's work which constitutes the dramatic center of the action.[28] Another, more extensive definition, presents it as:

> a principle that manifests differently in each action and must be
> understood as a segment of time in the action when the spectator remains
> in a state of a 'tense lack of understanding,' (or has a 'wrong
> understanding') of what is going on [in the action]… The action-means (or
> event-means) by which 'empty action' is achieved are [such moves from
> the side of the performers as] appearance, disappearance, moving away,
> etc, which also create conditions for mediation on the level of
> perception…[29]

The term "empty action" is best understood as a special kind of gestures, operations and moves which have a very limited degree of representation; it is an "action where the representation is reduced practically to zero and it almost merges with the background – on the one hand the external background of the countryside, on the other the background of the internal psychological state of our spectators."[30] For instance, the

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[27] Ibid., 22.
[28] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 75.
[29] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 20-21.
[30] Ibid., 306.

act of appearance (of the artist on the field as in the action "Appearance,") and that of

disappearance or departure (of the artists from the field) are employed by the artists in

order to catch the attention of their spectators-participants and keep it for as long as

possible in the "empty state" of their waiting or looking in order to understand. The best

way to express the effect of the empty action is by describing it in terms of a meditation

practice, where the subject is focused for a long period of time on a certain object, idea,

or psychological state.

KD introduces empty actions within their demonstrative field of the action in

order to draw the spectators' attention to the action, or "…to create conditions for

meditation on the level of perception."[31] In the action "Appearance," one example of

"empty action" may be regarded as the emergence of the two dots far in the distance, and

their movement on the white field until the moment when the spectators clearly perceive

two figures. This "walking" is a very simple gesture; it is a "just walking" which lacks

any degree of drama or of entertaining amusement that one often encounters in the

actions and performances of many other Western and Moscow artists (for instance with

Nest discussed above.) It is the empty action that provokes empty states in the ES of the

spectator-participants, and the two merge into one another within the demonstrative field

of the action.

In addition to the term "demonstrative field," KD also enlists in the *Dictionary* the

term [Exposition Semiotic Field] (*expozitionnoe znakovoe pole*) (henceforth "exposition

field"). The latter is constituted of all those elements that "were not deliberately included

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[31] Monastyrsky p. 21 or Kisevalter p. 108. Ibid.

by the authors in the construction of a certain work, but which are nevertheless influencing the work…"[32] The "exposition field" comprises those subjective and objective elements which are neither pre-planned nor foreseen, and simply emerge as unanticipated side effects. For instance, the plot of the action "Appearance" plans that the group of spectator-participants will stand at the edge of the field and wait. If for some unexpected reason one of the guests refuses to wait there or suddenly starts to walk towards the tiny dots in the distance, interfering with the plan of the action, then such an unannounced act would be part of the exposition field. Later KD artists would use the notion of the "exposition field" to refer to the urban or the natural context in which, or in the proximity of which, a certain action took place and which in turn influenced the action. All that is part of this field emerges spontaneously and, although the artists cannot control what happens, it remains an important part of the action. KD does not include in the *Dictionary* a special term to define the artist but it seems that with the emergence of the term "demonstrative field" the artist turns into a "participant-organizer" [*uchastnik ustroiteli*].[33] When both the spectator and the artist are included in the "demonstrative" or "exposition fields" they become accordingly "spectator-participants" and "participant-organizers," and the common denominator "participant" is applied to both groups of *acting* and *reacting* agents.

But let us return to the field. Now the two groups (the authors who arrive earlier to prepare the action, A. Monastyrsky, L. Rubinstein, N. Alexeev and G. Kizevalter, and

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[32] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 97.
[33] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 23.

the thirty spectator-participants who arrive later following the "universal operator of actuality") merge into one party, and together they start up a dialogue; they share impressions, discuss, argue, and try out various interpretations. In this process of interpretation, some of the participants suggest to others that the "real" or the most important part of the action had not taken place on the empirical field. "What happened was not what we had expected, not that concrete event or action that we have waited for, but the waiting itself that took place."[34] The action itself – the emergence of two dots, then their transformation into two figures who walked towards the spectator-participants handing them certificates – was not what the action was about. They had deliberately used actions and gestures of a very low degree of "artness" (empty actions) in order to suggest that what was really taking place in front of them was not as important as that which was emerging "inside" them. They were expected to "turn their eyes inwards" and observe their own state of waiting, looking, listening, or any other state that might emerge in the emotional space of their own perception.

As they leave the Kievogorskoe Field, the artists and spectators continue their discussions – through the grove, on the way to the station, in the warm car of the train, and inside the noisy central station in Moscow before parting. But the action "Appearance" is not yet complete. Before taking their leave, the organizers ask all the participants to write an account, a story in which they must describe what they experienced during the action. At the time of the action "Appearance" the tradition of writing a report did not yet exist in the practice of KD, and it was to be suggested four

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[34] Ibid., 23.

years later (1980) by Kabakov.[35] Since "Appearance" was the first action of KD there is no report written especially for this action. In the next paragraphs, I will construct a surrogate version of a report using quotes and paraphrases from several reports in which Kabakov describes his personal experiences during other actions of the first volume.[36]

Participant's Report for the Action "Appearance"

"Some time has passed and it would be interesting to call to mind what you experienced back on that day… I am now trying to remember what I do remember and not what I would have liked to remember, or any additional details."(58) The first thing I saw of KD was their action "Appearance." It was the first time that I had taken part in this kind of performance – or rather event, and I remember that from the very beginning I was in an unexplainably good mood. It had something to do with the thought that we were all traveling somewhere, that we were on a journey and that this journey outside the city did not have any particular goal. This journey was unusual because maybe for the first time in my life I was not traveling somewhere for a particular goal; there was no particular task, work, or any other kind of business-related activity. I also knew that we were not going somewhere in order to rest or to have fun, for even when you are invited to a party or when you go on vacation you already know in advance that you will be eating, drinking, looking, or having fun, and this knowing beforehand, this sort of planning somehow contaminates the joy of experience, removing a good part of the

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[35] Ibid., 777.

[36] What follows is a paraphrase from Ilia Iosifovich Kabakov, "Rasskaz Kabakova (Ob akziakh 'Komedia,' 'Tretii variant,' 'Kartiny')," in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 58-63. Verbatim translation is given in quotes.

excitement. Here, I felt as if a hidden layer of my psyche, which is in charge of comfort and well-being, had been freed – "it was freedom in the most direct sense of the word, a sense of freedom which could not be compared to practical, political, social or any other kinds of freedom."(58) Something awaits you in the future that you cannot even imagine, and the fact of us all traveling to a place where we were not sure what to expect created a certain psychological vacuum, an euphoric state filled with joy.

Next, I would like to mention our walk through the grove, because I clearly remember that at that moment I was thinking that I had strolled many times in the woods. But before, I always knew in advance why I had come here: to rest, to walk, to breathe a chest full of fresh air, etc. This time when I had no clue as to what I was supposed to do, or even why I was there, and what to expect I began, as I was walking, to pay very close attention to the trees, to the branches, to the bushes, to all those things which I had previously ignored because I was busy thinking about the final goal. Suddenly, as we left the grove behind, we were told to stop. I remember it was very cold, and that when we heard the voice the rest of our group stopped but I kept walking by inertia looking at nature as if I was seeing it for the first time.

Then I also stopped. We were in front of that hunchbacked white field. It was extraordinary, as if it had been completely adorned with my own state of pre-waiting. There was an interesting sense of communality among all those who had come here, and I remember telling someone that "the thing" which was about to happen may not even be shown to us because it was already here, it was already happening in the air, in the woods, and most importantly within ourselves. There was no sense of anything artistic

either. I did not feel that they had invited us here and that now we would be shown "something," something special that they had invented for us:

> yes, yes, get ready, we will show you what we've created – nothing of this took place. There were no backdrops, no machinery, and you somehow could see that even those who had invited you, even they did not entirely know what would happen. There was no sense of division on actors, who were there to show something, and spectators, who had come to watch – there was no division.(59)

As I was waiting I began to perceive the snowy field in front of me as a field of waiting and that particular time/space frame devoid of any activity became a continuum of pure waiting…

Suddenly someone said: "look, look over there!" I clearly remember that only a while ago there had been nothing on that field and in the next moment – a very important one – there was something. I followed someone's forefinger and noticed far in the distance two tiny dots which swayed glimmeringly and indiscernibly on the large bright surface of that white empty field. Everything was taking place so far away from me that I had the feeling that all that was happening depended entirely on how good my efforts were to see and discern it. I understood that at that point my psyche had completely merged with my own effort at looking. I felt that I was being offered a metaphor about art – if you keep looking you may see something, and if not… if not, then you'll see nothing, because everything in the end depends on your will, on your own consciousness. (60) Gradually I understood that their movement was somehow oblique, as if they were moving both towards and away from us, as if they were approaching and departing at the

same time. Then slowly but surely I saw two figures walking towards us. It must be made

clear that I did not have any such questions as "why two figures?" "who are they?" "what

is all this supposed to mean?" as if their gliding on the snow had annihilated all those

questions. When I began to discern the figures, their facial features, the movement of

their legs, the color of their dress, the bag that one of them held in his hand, I had a

special satisfaction. Just a little while ago they had been so far away that it was simply

impossible to recognize them as human beings and now I was presented with a manifold

of interesting elements and details. I felt that I was rewarded for my patient waiting.

Interestingly enough the action itself, its content or plot, was unfolding beyond the

threshold of my perception, somewhere on a rational level. The organizers made sure that

everything in the action was strictly established and maintained: the distance, silence,

time, extensions, unexpectedness, the mythological component – an entire range of

demonstrative elements had been introduced to produce states which had to unfold

"inside" the spectator, and those emotions that the spectators experienced were not forced

– there was no pressure perceived either as physical or emotional. The journey, the grove,

the field, the emergence of the figures, my waiting, my looking at their slow movements,

and then their approaching and handing us scraps of white paper, which I only read much

later on the way to the station – all of these touched me on a perceptual level. For the first

time I had the thought that everything which had taken place during that day had actually

taken place "inside me," and that what happened on the real field (the action itself) was

only meant to be a trigger which activated some latent layers of my perception.

The participant reports are texts in which the spectators reconstruct on a scrap of paper the actions in which they participated. Such an approach brings to mind Akira Kurosawa's 1950 movie *Rashomon*, where the plot is structured around the flashbacks of the main characters attempting to reconstruct the events that surrounded a crime. KD also asks its public to reconstruct the action, hoping that this will let them make a further step towards understanding the nature of art – their main aesthetic task. But this practice of writing reports, which became from the early eighties on central to the aesthetic investigations of KD, points again toward literature as one of the main sources of inspiration for the conceptualists. Kabakov's opinion is that Moscow Conceptualism has its origin in Russian literature, and he elaborates on this theme in his text "Russian conceptualism." Unlike the Western conceptual art, which emerged out of the tradition of fine arts, Moscow Conceptualism, according to Kabakov, is rooted in the literary tradition, beginning with such nineteenth-century Russian writers as Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov continuing into the twentieth century with the writings of Vvedensky, of the OBERIU members, and of Sapgir and Holin.[37] Kabakov has suggested that for the repressive Bolshevik regime it was much more difficult to supervise and control the literary avant-garde than the artistic avant-garde, and this is one of the reasons why in the USSR literature became the repository and the wellspring of the subsequent artistic avant-garde traditions. The difference between the intimate rustle of language in the privacy of one's own garret and the inevitable exhibitionism of painting may explain why literature was so important for the Moscow conceptualists. KD had also resorted to the

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[37] Quoted in Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis, *Gnezdo (The Nest)*, 17.

written text in order to carry out its aesthetic program, which during the first phase

unfolded under the banner of "spiritual experience" (*dukhovnyi opyt*).[38] Both

Monastyrsky and Kabakov's texts confirm this general direction of the group during this

time. The action is launched in order to trigger certain emotional states, and then the artist

encourages the spectators to become fully aware of these experiences by communicating

them to one another. During their first phase KD has directed its efforts at achieving an

almost mystical experience; their actions were spiritual practices in which the artists

attempted to expand their own and their spectators' consciousnesses; the actions were

attempts towards achieving enlightenment.

Volume II (phase 1980-83): "Ten Appearances"

In the foreword to the second volume Monastyrsky announces the most important

changes and transformations that have taken place during the second phase. First of all,

three new artists have joined the group – Igor Makarevich, Sergei Romashko and Elena

Elagina. The increase in the number of members also brought some changes to the inner

organizational policy. During the first phase the actions were singed by a "list of authors"

(*spisok avtorov*) – where the artists were ranked according to the degree of their

involvement in each action (the first name indicated the author who introduced the idea

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[38] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 23.

followed by those who had assisted him). From the second phase on the group signs its works with the abbreviation KD, a custom that would last until 1989.[39]

But in spite of this growing sense of collectivity the group was almost on the verge of dissolution. In the foreword to the second volume Monastyrsky suggests that the main cause for the crisis is the growing indifference, or "uninterestedness" (*neinterestnosti*) of the spectator-participants.[40] Monastyrsky seems optimistic, however, stating that since the main interest of KD has always been in the notion of "Nothing" (*nich'to*) (by which he means also "emptiness" (*pustota*)) then perhaps "uninterestedness" may be the essential quality of Nothing. He also suggests that "uninterestedness" must be incorporated into their work and used as one of its artistic materials.[41] Thus the concept of "uninterestedness" is suggested to be the essential quality of KD's art – an art which is concerned with the nature of nothing – and it is also described as one of the main themes of the group during this phase.

Another important change that took place in the second phase concerned the methodology of KD. If the first phase of KD (1976-80) was described in terms of "the winter-autumn qualities"[42] of the empty snowy fields in the nearby "out-of-town-ness" of Moscow, the second phase, which began in 1980 and lasted until 1983, was marked by a shift towards representation. One can express this shift using KD's own lexicon and describe it as a passage from the "out-of-town-ness" to the "out-of-the-photography-

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[39] Ibid., 783.
[40] Ibid., 116.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 214.

space."[43] If in the previous phase the artists found pleasure in the simple experience of journeying outside Moscow, for the purpose of organizing eccentric activities and having a wholly spiritual experience, from the second phase on they became more concerned with more practical issues of recording these escapades using various techniques of documentation. This shift is also announced in the subtitle of the second volume "Journeys and Representations." The new phase signals a move towards a more "artistic" problematic, as the notion of "representation" suggests. If in the first phase the overall impression was that KD tried hard to avoid any "artistry," any "backdrops," concealing any clue which may have suggested that the action or the event had anything to do with art, and exploring instead, liminal psychological or perceptual states, the second phase announces the theme of representation and the emphasis on various techniques of photographic and phonographic reproduction, recording and documentation. This new shift in the aesthetics and art of KD was termed the "factographical discourse" (*faktograficheski' diskurs*).[44]

One way to describe this shift from the first to the second phase is to regard it from the perspective of some Eastern spiritual practices, one of the interests that brought the members of the group together. If one regards it from this perspective then the second phase may appear regressive. In the first phase the overall impression was that KD's

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[43] "Out-of-photography-space" [*vnefotograficeskoe prostranstvo*] – the space where the photographer is positioned during the shooting… [introduced in 1980] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 141.
Although the term "out-of-town-ness" was invented in 1985 the idea of journeying to a space at the outskirts of Moscow was from the very beginning present in the work of KD. See Glossary in the Appendix.
[44] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 117.

"emptiness" mirrored the notion of *shunyata* (or *sunyata*) – the Buddhist concept of emptiness, which presents a reality that lacks an immutable or an intrinsic nature and which regards any form-imposing or representational activities as illusory from the onset. If the first phase of KD seem to have unfolded in a state of innocence, a state in which the artists were not very much concerned with the problems of artistic formalization, documentation and technique, in the second phase there is tendency towards a more solemn professionalism, control, and objectivity. KD brought in various tools and used them to mediate its relations with both the action and the spectator.

The shift which takes place in the second volume of the *Journeys* is clearly perceived in the action "Ten Appearances" organized in 1981 on the Kievogorskoe Field near Moscow. Like their first action "Appearance" discussed in the previous section, "Ten Appearances" was the first work of the second phase, being in fact a modification, or even a remake of the 1976 action. I will present below a summary description of the action, a schema showing the move of the actors on the field, followed by a comparison between the 1976 "Appearance" and the 1981 "Ten Appearances," and concluding with a synopsis of Kabakov's report. The shift towards representation has also brought a series of new concepts, which I will explain below.

"Ten Appearances"
Ten spectator-participants together with the organizers arrive at the middle of a white snow-covered field surrounded by woods. The spectators know neither the name of the action nor what is to happen. In the middle of the field, the organizers have installed a wooden board (60x90 cm) on which surface are nailed ten bobbins reeled with up to 300 meters of white,

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sturdy thread. Each of the participants is then told to take the end of a thread from one of the bobbins and, after a start signal to depart from the board in the center of the field towards the woods. Each spectator is asked to walk in a radiating line from the center of the field, following a straight line (see Figure 3) The participants walk 300 to 400 meters unreeling, the thread from the bobbin. Walking in the field entails a considerable physical effort, for the snow ranges from half a meter to a meter in depth. When the participants reach the woods they walk another 100-150 meters until they cannot see the field from which they came, and stop. They wait for another signal which will announce the time when the participants must start pulling the end of the thread left on the board in the middle of the field. After pulling 300 to 400 meters of thread they find on the other end a piece of paper containing the factographical text (the name of the authors, the time and place of the action.) When the spectator-participants return to the center of the field they are given photographs (30x40 cm) fixed on cardboard. On each of the ten photographs is represented that part of the woods where each participant has just been, with a small figure of somebody far in the distance emerging from the trees. Each photograph also contains a label with the name of the authors, the title of the action ("Ten Appearances"), and a reference to the appearance from the woods of the participant who has received it; for example, the participant Kabakov received a photograph with the caption: "the appearance of I. Kabakov on February 1st 1981." The photographs were prepared one week before the action and the small figure in the distance was one of the artists-organizers who was photographed in the "zone of imperceptibility."

Moscow Region, "Kievy Gorky"

February 1st 1981

A. Monastyrsky, G. Kisevalter, S. Romashko, N. Alexeev, I. Makarevich, E. Elagina[45]
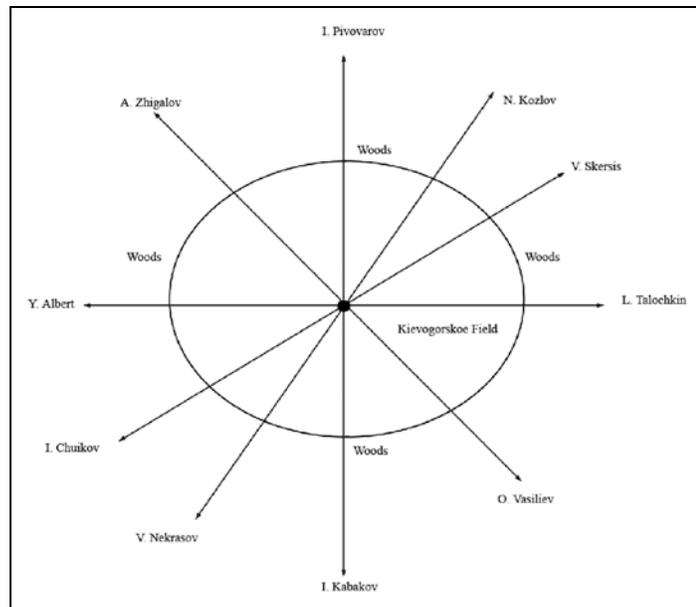
Figure 3: A. Monastyrsky, Ten Appearances, diagram, 1981, (reconstructed).

The first action of the second phase was similar in many respects to the first action of the first phase and many other actions organized by the group, particularly in that it followed a similar plot. At first it was announced to the spectators that they were to attend a new action by KD, after which they all met under the big clock of one of the local Moscow train stations. They journeyed outside the city by train, chatting animatedly

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[45] This is my own translation of the text from the second volume of the *Journeys* pp. 123-4. The translation is not verbatim but attempts to express the spirit of KD' language as well as to be more accessible to the reader. For the more verbatim translation of this action see "Ten Appearances" in Ross, ed., *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, 157-58.

as they passed high-rise apartments, factories, bridges, and birch groves, moving into the white and empty kolkhoz fields of the countryside; finally, they disembarked and stepped onto the field in order to participate in the action described above. But there were also some differences.

From the point of view of the artist, the main change or innovation that took place in the second phase was the introduction of the so-called "factographical discourse." The *Dictionary* defines it in terms of a "system of documentation, which helps to establish multiple levels within an action …"[46] Another way to discuss the factographical discourse would be to regard it as the documentation of the action, or, as the unfolding of the action on the level of documents, texts, photographs, and other additional or secondary material that supports an action or any other type of artwork. The introduction of the factographical discourse was like the discovery of another reality, which from the second phase on ran parallel to other layers on the demonstrative field of the actions.

In the foreword to the second phase Monastyrsky also compares "Ten Appearances" to the earlier "Appearance," maintaining that the latter took place in the so-called "eventful space," or within the real space of the forest and the field, whereas the former action unfolded both in the "eventful space" and in the space of the "factographical discourse," that is in the photographs and documents of the action. He also announces that it was precisely this action that had opened this new discourse for KD.

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[46] Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 90.

...the action 'Ten Appearances' has activated the space of the factographical discourse and announced it as a new artistic context, as a new element of the 'demonstrative field.' Now to those components that constitute the 'demonstrative field' may be also added the existence of the factographical discourse, defined as the layer of language whose text-forming material may be perceived as aesthetically self-sufficient.[47]

Thus the demonstrative field, which stands for all those elements that have been included by the artists in the construction of the action, acquired during the second phase a third factographical layer, which belongs to the realm of representation. The factographical discourse came forward and became, from this phase on, more important than the other discourses or components of the demonstrative field.

To the psychic (subjective) and the empirical (objective) dimensions of the demonstrative field, KD added a third dimension, which operated on a level constructed by various forms of mechanical reproductions (text, photo, sound, etc.) Emptiness, the main theme of KD, spreads now into all these three layers. If in the action "Appearance" of 1976 it was the snowy field that was empty, and this emptiness merged with the empty states of the spectators who were waiting to see what would happen, now in 1981, the emptiness also extended, by means of photography, into the third zone or layer of the factographical discourse. After the participants returned to the middle of the field they were handed out labeled "empty photographs" which depicted a gray sky and a black strip of the forest that stretched in the distance over the large white Kievogorskoe Field and a very tiny figure of somebody far in the distance emerging from the trees. It soon

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[47] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 118.

became a tradition of KD to give to their spectators, at the end of each action, "souvenirs" – a photograph or another token from the action, an artifact of the factographical discourse.

With the introduction of the factographical discourse a series of new concepts enter the lexicon of the group. Such terms as "empty photographs" (*pustye fotografii*), "imperceptibility" (*nevidimosti*), "the zone of imperceptibility" (*polosa nerazlichenia*), and "the out-of-the-photography-space" (*vnefotograficeskoe prostranstvo*)[48] registered the emergence of the new layer and the shift towards representation. The term "out-of-the-photography-space," for instance, suggests the space where the photographer is positioned during the shooting (behind the viewfinder of the camera). If in the first phase the artists expressed their interest in terms of liminal psychological states that emerged during the action within the "emotional space" (ES) of the spectator, then from the second phase on it appears that the artists were more interested in the liminal position of the photographer who documented their actions. By raising this position into a concept it also emphasizes the new direction and priorities of KD. It is a general tendency to move the action from what earlier was called "out-of-town-ness," (that is, the natural countryside surroundings in which the actions once took place) into that of "out-of-the-

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[48] "Empty photographs [*pustye fotografii*] – 'central' works of photography in the actions of KD, where nothing (or almost nothing) is shown, other than 'deliberate emptiness.'" "Imperceptibility [*nevidimosti*] – demonstrative relation in the aesthetics of KD (part of 'KD categories')…" [introduced in 1980] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 148. "Zone of imperceptibility" [*polosa nerazlichenia*] – zone of the "demonstrative field" (often at the border with "exposition field") where certain audio and visual objects cannot be recognized by the spectator as belonging to the action, [first mentioned in 1979]. Ibid., 71.
 "Out-of-photography-space" [*vnefotograficeskoe prostranstvo*] – the space where the photographer is positioned during the shooting… [introduced in 1980]. Ibid., 141.

photography-space" which defines the place of the artist or of the assistant in charge of taking pictures. The artists appear to have become more interested in the new space offered by the photographs, phonograms and other forms of technical recordings, and all these seems to have diverted KD's attention from their initial interest in the pure unmediated perception of their spectators and the psychology of perception that dominated the first phase's methodology of investigating the nature of art. Moreover, the new style of conducting the action and the reliance of KD on certain mediatory tools (directions, instructions, signals) introduced also a certain degree of tension into the relation between the artists and their spectators.

The role of the spectator during the second phase has also been modified. In the 1976 action "Appearance" the spectators' degree of participation was limited to the act of mere passive witnessing. In "Ten Appearances," and other actions of the second phase, KD demands that the spectator get involved in the actions, that he or she becomes indeed a "spectator-participant." In his report on the action "Ten Appearances" Kabakov expresses some of his concerns in regard to his participation in this action.

> It must be said that it was agreed in advance that those who decide to attend must also participate in the performance… and that the presence of those who will refuse to act is – undesired. This mandatory tone has created from the very beginning some esotericism, some closure of the situation, for usually we attended the actions of KD with our friends and it always had the character of a free and emancipated presence. But now the

tension produced by these constraints has generated a circle which seems

to have detached and set us all apart from everyday life.[49]

When the spectators respond to the invitation and agree to attend the action they sign

themselves up in advance as a constituent part of the action. The spectator-participant

may even have the impression that the agreement to participate has turned him or her into

a module of a mysterious machine. Kabakov's reports from this phase are different in

tone from those that he had written a few years earlier. Earlier, he described his

experience of attending an action by KD using such positive words as "freedom"

"comfort," and "joy."[50] Now, he spoke about "worries," "fears," and "tiredness"; he also

reports on his nervousness over missing the signal, his exhaustion from trudging in deep

snow, his anxiety over how many hours it may take to pull all that thread, and whether

the organizers had not added in the meantime more thread to the bobbin, and finally his

suspicions that the organizers may have involved him in a very unpleasant and precarious

situation. (152) This anxious tone is present also in other actions from this phase. In the

action "Dark Place" (*Temnoe mesto*) he complained about his difficulty to follow the

directions, as well as about how absurd it must have felt to listen to somebody's

instructions and to perform in nature (among trees and leaves) some abstruse actions.

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[49] See *Rasskaz I. Kabakova (Ob akzii "Desiati poeavlenii")* in ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 151.
[50] See above Kabakov, "Rasskaz Kabakova (Ob akziach "Komedia," "Tretii variant," "Kartiny"). Ibid., 58-63.

I experienced the most horrible degree of psychological discomfort… I could neither follow nor understand anything. It seems as if I cannot take part in this business as a participant but only as a spectator.[51]

In his participant's report for the action "Ten Appearances," Kabakov wrote that he became more relaxed only after he had finally pulled all that long thread and found at the end a scrap of paper. Upon reading there the names of the authors, the place and the date of the action, and not hearing any other signal, he turned around to head back. "I was filled with such joy that I almost started jumping from one hole (footprint) into another, scrambling back, because I was enormously joyful about everything that had happened to me."[52] Kabakov experienced this powerful sense of relief and pleasure at the moment when he thought that the action had ended, and he was thus finally absolved of the embarrassment of following somebody's instructions. His excitement was so high that he did not even mention receiving the photographs of the factographical discourse, which according to the organizers should have announced the "real" end of the action. What Kabakov did not know when he ran back, treading in his own footprints on the snow, was that for KD the action had not yet ended and that he was part of an experiment through which the group was investigating the conditions of an end of an action.

One of the questions with which the KD artists concerned themselves throughout their group history involved the moment when an action begins and ends. In 1999, at a symposium in Vienna, Monastyrsky explained this problematic to a larger audience:

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[51] See Rasskaz Kabakova (Ob akzii "Temnoe mesto"). Ibid., 174-5.
[52] Ibid., 153.

A group of spectators gather during a sunny April day on an empty snowy
field. Suddenly a bell begins to ring from somewhere under the snow.
Nothing else takes place. The spectators leave the field, but the bell is still
ringing. Has the action ended, or not yet? The spectators don't know yet
and they will find out only later when they familiarize themselves with the
description of the action and with the commentaries on it. These elements
of 'nothing-taking-place' we call 'empty actions.' These are like pauses in
John Cage's '4.33.' Similar cases of 'empty waiting' are in Kabakov's
'empty' works.[53]

In the action "Ten Appearances" the artists also investigated the question of the end of

the action. If in the 1976 "Appearance" the eventful part or what took place on the field

ended when the artists handed out certificates, five years later the action did not end when

the spectators had pulled the thread with the names of the artists, but when they had been

given the photographs, the factographical discourse. Officially the action "Ten

Appearances" ended when all ten participants returned to the center of the Kievogorskoe

Field and each was given an "empty photograph." By handing these photographs to the

spectators-participants the participant-organizers exercised their artistic authority and

certified the official end of the action. It was "the author's signature under the artwork."[54]

The problematic of the end of the action is important due to the divergence that

exists between the time when the spectators think that the work has ended, and the time

when the author has actually planned to end it. In the case of "Ten Appearances" the

spectators may have thought that the action had ended when they pulled the thread and

[53] Andrei Monastyrsky, "Rybak," in *TransArt: Simposium 10 und 11 Mai 1999, Akademie der Bildenden Kunste* (Vienna: 1999), [unpaginated].
[54] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 132.

read the names of the authors. They read this as being the artist's signature that announced the resolution of the work. This fact made them modify their further behavior on the field. Since they had not received any particular signal or instruction as to when they must return, or whether they must return to the same place from which they had started, not all of them came back to where the action began. From the ten participants who had left the middle of the field at the beginning of the action, only eight returned following the same route. The other two took a leisurely walk and arrived at the actual end of the action later and by different paths. In other words, once they thought that the action had ended they became more relaxed; they felt relieved of obligations and not anymore part of a construct called "action" or "art."

When Kabakov finally returned to the middle of the field he was handed a labeled photograph mounted on cardboard. The photograph looked very empty: a large white field, some trees in the background and a grey winter sky. It seemed to be a picture of the same Kievogorskoe Field in which they all had gathered that day. Initially Kabakov might not even have observed on his picture a tiny black dot, the figure of somebody appearing from the woods, if one of the artists had not pointed it out to him. The confusing label on this piece of cardboard (which the artists strangely called "the factographical discourse") reading "the appearance of I. Kabakov on February 1st 1981," wished to suggest however, that it was he who was appearing from the woods. This may have caused Kabakov some puzzlement, for how could the artists have managed, in such a short time, to photograph, develop the film, print the pictures, fix them on cardboard, write and then label each photograph? When he realized, or was told, that there was not

as much snow that day as there was in the photograph, and that the figure in the distance on this piece of factographical discourse was simply one of the artists who had traveled there one week earlier, he may have felt that this confusion that the artists called "empty action" was simply manipulative.

For KD, on the other hand, this interval at the end of the action in which the spectator abided in a state of bewilderment, thinking that he had left the frame of the action and stepped outside the realm of art (when in fact he hadn't) was the most important part of the work. This was the effect of the empty action which the artists often described in terms of a state of unawareness, or a tense lack of understanding. What was new in this action was the fact that the artists were now using photographs to produce these empty states. If before the introduction of the factographical discourse the empty actions were performed by the artists, who were appearing or disappearing from the empty field, or were lying down in a pit, blowing a whistle, pulling a thread, and performing many other variants of empty actions using their own bodies, from the second phase on the artists began to use tools, devices and techniques of representation to achieve a similar end.

After more than five years of continuous work there came a critical period in which it appeared that the innocent first phase of KD had passed and that the artists had entered a metaphorical kind of adolescence. The group went through a difficult period. Two of its members had serious psychiatric problems (Monastyrsky and Kizevalter) and, in addition, the high degree of hermeticism and obscurity began to annoy and alienate a good part of their spectators. Moreover not everyone liked the factographical discourse.

Dispute and difference of opinion also began to occur within the group, as some members became dissatisfied with the latest developments within KD. Nikita Alexeev, who had been with KD since the beginning, was one such dissatisfied member. He ceased to participate in the actions, though he remained a member-observer. At that time Alexeev felt that KD's time was over, and that the group was on the verge of disintegration, and he wrote a critical text discussing what he considered to be KD's problems. In the next paragraphs I will translate and discuss some of Alexeev's critical views concerning the second phase of KD.[55]

For Alexeev the main problem with KD during this time was the loss of dynamism, the elitist hermeticism and the monotony. Despite the changing political atmosphere, and the new climate within the unofficial artists' circles, the style of KD had remained the same already for the previous seven years. Alexeev writes that, "it would have been unthinkable to expect from them something nasty, provocative and dangerous," something which would resemble the work of the Mukhomors (Toadstools) group.[56] The latter was a group of five young artists, who Monastyrsky had mentored, and who for a while had been part of Kabakov's circle. Mukhomors was renowned for writing provocative and humorous political proclamations, as well as for organizing actions and performances in which they poked fun at the Soviet state, at Margaret Thatcher and the Falkland Islands, as well as at the circle of conceptual artists who

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[55] Ibid., 193-98.
[56] Mukhomors (Toadstools) – group of artists, writers, musicians, authors of proclamations, musical albums. The group was active in Moscow from 1978 to 1984 and it included Sven Gundlakh, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Vladimir and Sergey Mironenko and Alxey Kamensky. Dyogot and Zakharov, *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, 228.

permitted them to attend their closed meetings.[57] Unlike other gatherings of artists in Moscow (e.g. Prigov's circle, or the circle of the Sots artists), Kabakov's circle was known to be closed and hermetic and its members were very reluctant to accept new people into their secretive gatherings – a trait that also translated to the art of KD. In his 1983 text Alexeev wrote about his dissatisfaction with both organizational and artistic issues within the group.

> I felt that KD had become a kind of elitist cabaret for Kabakov and Chuikov and the rest of them… At the beginning, ideas were approved or taken up by everyone in the group together, and we did only what everyone in the group wanted to do. Then Andrei [Monastyrsky] became more authoritarian, and he began to push for his own ideas.[58]

Besides criticizing some organizational aspects of the group Alexeev also wrote that he had gradually became more and more skeptical as to whether the group was doing anything interesting and relevant. He insists that the art of KD was not conceptual, or as he wrote, "not cerebral enough," especially when compared to the work of such artists as Art & Language, Kosuth or even the Muscovites Komar & Melamid or Yuri Albert.(196) To him the second phase was the time when KD lived in a state of life-after-death, in which the same things were repeated over and over again. He even cites the appearance of some bourgeois trends, a certain conventionalism that makes the group look like a travel agency, which organizes regular journeys for a hungry group of townsfolk nostalgic for the countryside. Artistically the group had been also stalling.

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[57] On the relation between Mukhomors and Kabakov's circle see Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 97-106.
[58] Ibid., 107.

The structure of the actions has increased to such an extent that it has become incomprehensible not only to the participants but also to the authors. At the same time the volume of interpretations has grown catastrophically: there are interpretations by authors, interpretations by participants, then re-interpretations of those authors who often do not agree with each other, and so on, and so on. Such a volume of reasoning may create the illusion that there is serious research that aims at creating an original theory of perception. But most of the time it was a sense that this was not the case and that all these philosophical-psychological constructions are empty and lack sense. Suddenly, I had this impression that in what we are doing there is no research method, and that we have been simply involved in a meaningless discussion on an unclear theme.[59]

Alexeev proved wrong when he decided that KD was falling apart in the early eighties, as the group is still active almost thirty years later. But there is one thing that Alexeev was right about: the so-called "mummification" of the group during that period. Indeed, towards the middle of the eighties, KD's journeys, but most importantly their ways of exploring the nature of art, began to harden into various rules, methods, concepts, artifacts and objects, registering a new process for which I will use the term "objectification." In 2007 Monastyrsky described this important transition that took place in the second phase in the following terms:

After the first volume of the *Journeys* practically the entire space-event and existential horizon of KD was completely covered with text, traces, marks, and so forth. From 1981, all our subsequent activity consisted of work done in two directions: on one hand – a more intensive production or

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[59] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 195-6.

layering of texts, traces, and marks; and on another – an attempt to poke

holes in these layers, for each action was a hole in the texts produced

earlier.[60]

The texts, marks, and traces are the factographical discourse which KD adopted in the

early eighties. The emergence of the *Journeys* itself may be regarded as a result of this

shift. From this phase on the main task of the group shifted from the action and what they

had directly experienced on the Kievogorskoe Field to the process of recording,

reproducing, and interpreting that experience. It was the representational possibilities of

experience that now mattered the most. But the turn towards the factographical discourse,

or to representation, also meant a certain degree of distancing and estrangement from

direct experience, prompting Monastyrsky to use the metaphor of the space suit in order

to describe this shift. The factographical discourse became like the transparent visor of

the space or the diving helmet (*skafandry faktografii*) which separated the artists from

their previous rough and unmediated experience.

> In the actions "Ten Appearances" (*Deseati poeavlenii*) and "Recording"
> (*Vosproizvedenia*) the events took place on the real field. But after these
> two actions the events turned into photographs of the out-of-town fields,
> as if we had been separated from reality by a factographical film. It was as
> if we had been suddenly put into the space suits of the factographical
> discourse, and kept those suits in our subsequent actions. But the place
> itself had also been covered by a thin layer of film that belonged to the
> factographical discourse… The removal of the factographical space
> helmet during the action did not guarantee a return to reality, to a real sky,

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[60] ———, *"Skafandry faktografii" Predislovie k 7-9 tomam 'Poezdok za gorod.'* Andrei
Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

field, and so forth, because this reality was already of the second order and it was also covered by a layer of film, or a helmet. And although the space helmet could be removed because it was within reach, on our heads, then to remove the factographical layer of film that had covered the woods, the field, and the sky was impossible. It was out of reach. The Kievogorskoe Field was irreversibly transformed into a space shuttle (a mechanism) which flew from action to action in the cosmos of logos. In fact, the field research of the first volume has ended and we have turned to the usual frame of art and literature.[61]

The helmet of the factographical discourse is the regime of representation, which has been imposed on a previous unmediated experience. If in the first volume the artists' experience was simply observed and accepted, from the second volume, after the institution of the *Journeys* and of the factographical discourse, the experience which is produced in their actions is remembered, recorded, questioned, studied, shared, criticized, interpreted – in short it is addressed through the visor of language or of art. The second volume of the *Journeys* points towards the institution of the regime of art.

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[61] Ibid.

Volume III (phase 1983-85): "Discussion"

The position of the objects, the spectators, and the organizers during the action "Discussion"

Window

I.M.

M.E.

Table

Demonstrative Field

A.M.

Door

W h i t e   c l o t h

Box with lanterns

WALKING

Screen

Imperceptibility

69

Object-Frame

Tape recorder (recording the action)

"Transport. Aesthetical Plate"

Dumbbell Schema

P i a n o

Score of "Jupiter"

10   C

9   h

8   a

7   i   r   s

Table

"Vase (turned upside down)"

Microphone   Microphone

1

Photo Album

Slide Projector

Door

Amplifier

6

5   4   Sofa   3   G.K.   2

The stroboscopic screen of the "Barrel" ("Boch'ka")

1. L. Rubenstein
2. S. Letov
3. I. Kabakov
4. I. Bakstein
5. D. Prigov

6. Speaker repetition
7. Minister-adviser (FRG) Federal Republic of Germany
8. Culture-adviser (FRG)
9. Vika
10. V. Sorokin

I.M. – I. Makarevich
M.E. – M. Eremina
G.K. – G. Kisevalter
A.M. – A. Monastyrsky

Figure 4: A. Monastyrsky, *The Position of the Objects, the Spectators and the Organizers during the Action "Discussion,"* diagram, 1985, (reconstructed).

In this section, I discuss an action that took place in 1985 – at the end of the third phase. The action is called "Discussion," a work that I chose because it illustrates well a

series of new trends and developments in the evolution of the group during this period. This action also offers a glimpse of the process of interpretation in which the spectator-participants often had to engage. First I will translate a part of the description of the action "Discussion," then present some reactions and opinions expressed by the spectator-participants, in order to proceed to exegesis and to indicate what I consider to have been the main shifts that took place during this phase.

"Discussion" (*Obsujdenie*)

This action, which took place in the apartment of A.M. [Andrei Monastyrsky], consisted of two parts. During the first 55 minutes of the action, the spectators listened to the phonogram of a text by A.M. called 'TZI-TZI.' During the reading of this text, another voice was announcing (every three minutes): 'This is a reading of A.M.'s text TZI-TZI. The Tautology of Empty Action.'

In the center of the room there were placed a series of objects called 'Categories of KD' (see Figure 4). Eight out of ten objects were placed on a white cloth, which was spread on the floor, and two on a round table. One end of the cloth covered a long black box in which the organizers had placed four lanterns that shone through the white cloth. On the box covered by the cloth was placed a board called 'Demonstrative Field' (part of the series of objects 'Categories of KD.')… Next to the box, on the white cloth on the floor was placed the biggest object from the 'Categories of KD' – 'Walking.' On the upper side of 'Walking,' on different parts of the board, were written with a black marker: '(KD, Categories, Black Men's Overcoat (1 pc.). Walking. Moscow Region, next to the village Kievy Gorky. 1976-1985.)'

Closer to the table, under 'Walking,' was placed the object 'Imperceptibility.' To the right of 'Imperceptibility' was located the object '69,' represented by a mattress cover wrapped in a golden foil and fastened to two pieces of plywood. On the upper piece was glued a page from John Cage's score 'Water Music.' This page also contained the itinerary of the 69th trolleybus – which goes from the 'Southern gates of the VDNKh' to the 'Petrovskie Gates.' Under 'Imperceptibility' was placed the 'Object-Frame' – a pile of numbered black cardboard pieces, which had been used, as part of the interior object-frame, during the action 'Translation.' On the right was placed the object 'Transport. The Aesthetical Plate' – an assemblage constructed out of pages from the German magazine *Guten Tag*, wooden frames, and metallic fittings in the form of wings and stars – all piled up together. On the back of this pile was glued a photograph from the action 'Translation' (*Perevod*).

In between the 'Object-Frame' and 'Aesthetical Plate' on a plastic support was placed a walkman, and on the walkman a tape cover was marked, as with the other objects, with the inscription: 'Categories of KD. The Tautology of the Empty Action. DISCUSSION. (phonogram) 1985.' The recording that the walkman was making was the object that would in the end to be produced by the action 'Discussion.' Finally, next to the table on the white cloth was placed the object 'Dumbbell Schema,' which was a long cardboard box fastened by ropes and which contained inside two winter hats, one 3 kilo dumbbell, and two enemas…

After the spectators had looked at the 'Categories of KD' objects, a screen was hung in between the piano and the white cloth. On the screen was written in black letters 'KD. Categories. The Perspectives of Speech Space. Discussion. 1985.' The listening of the track was accompanied by slides from the actions 'Russian World,' and 'Burrell,' which were related

to the content of the track TZI-TZI. When the track TZI-TZI ended, the discussion of the paper and the objects began after a five minute break. The upper light was switched off and the 'Vase (turned upside down)' was switched on. On the screen was shown the first slide from the series 'Fragments,' and 'Hidden City.' At that point Kizevalter, who was in charge of showing slides, read a short introductory text (see the stenographic record). In the meantime this text was repeated through the speakers by A.M. who sat behind the screen so that he could not be seen by the spectators. On the other side of the screen A.M. was listening to the comments of the spectators and repeating them into the microphone, which was connected to a speaker on the other side of the room. A.M. never entered into discussion with the spectators (see stenographic record)…

Moscow
September 28th 1985

A. Monastyrsky, G. Kizevalter, M. Eremina, I. Makarevich"[62]

This is an abridged translation of the description of the action "Discussion." In the lexicon of the group this action belongs to the category "domestic," which means that it took place not outside the city (on the Kievogorskoe Field) but in Moscow (in Monastyrsky's apartment). From the end of the second phase and through the third one many of KD's actions belonged to the category "domestic." Part of the problem was the earlier mentioned problem of "uninterestedness," which had begun during the second phase and which indicated a lack of interest from the side of the spectators. Many of

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[62] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 384-87.

these "domestic" actions were a sort of revenge for the spectator-participants' lack of interest, as well as an attempt to provoke in them a nostalgia for KD's signature work – the journeys outside the city.[63] The crowded atmosphere of the action "Discussion" (fifteen persons packed into a tiny Moscow apartment among objects) was supposed to arouse in the spectators' imagination images of the famous expanse of the Russian steppes, and the fresh air and natural beauty of Kievogorskoe Field. In the foreword to the third volume, Monastyrsky also confirms that one of the main tasks of this phase was to provoke in a spectator the nostalgia for journeying again in the country.[64] I shall return to this issue later, but now I would like to examine the action "Discussion" in order to point to what I believe were the major shifts in the art and aesthetics of KD during this phase.

Although it was not the habit of KD artists to give their spectators details on any of their next planned actions, this time Monastyrsky had called Joseph Backstein asking for his help. The latter was not only a spectator, but also an organizer and as the term "Backstein Function" suggests, he was already emerging as the main "universal operator of actuality" among the Moscow conceptualists. Monastyrsky informed Backstein about the upcoming action, asking him to help organize a discussion. The discussion was to take place around Monastyrsky's reading of a text entitled "TZI-TZI" (a baffling piece of writing that analyzed the recent activity of KD), as well as around nine objects made also by Monastyrsky that were to be exhibited on a white cloth in the middle of the apartment

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 222.

(see above description and Figure 4). The main peculiarity of the text TZI-TZI was its logic, Backstein remembered in his participant report. "To say that this was the traditional logic of the absurd would not be accurate, although it resembled it in many respects."[65] The same could be said about the eight objects, that had been placed on the white cloth in the apartment. Their logic was also "completely incomprehensible for the uninitiated…These were not objects but a complete absurdity." (414) After Monastyrsky read the text the moderator Backstein was to encourage the spectators to comment on both the nature of the text and the objects in front of them.

The action was organized in such a way, that each time somebody said something his or her voice was instantly repeated by Monastyrsky, who sat behind a screen and "parroted" everything into a microphone. The so-called "parroting technique" made it more complicated to speak and to stay focused on any one's speech. The action appears to have dealt with the task of figuring out what were the necessary pre-requisites for a discussion, or what was needed in order to be able to exchange ideas on a particular matter; to see if it was still possible to exchange and reach a conclusion when most of the required conditions for a discussion had been either removed, or impeded, for example in the absence of a clearly defined subject or object of discussion, as well as the unavailability of a proper context or atmosphere for such an exchange to take place.

The first who entered the discussion was the spectator-participant called "Vika," (short for Viktoria, a name that stood apart from those spectators who could be identified

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[65] Ibid., 415.

by their patronymics and surnames). Vika questioned whether what they witnessed was to be regarded as absurd or as art:

> …KD has already taught us that everything which may initially seem absurd may not be so… I, for instance, find this interesting because in twentieth century art it has often observed a reverse process. One searches for traces of the absurd in something which common sense may not consider to be so. For instance, the sitting of the family at the dinner table, or the consumption of art, and many, many other situations that we know from works by local and above all by Western artists. There the task is to discover the absurd in the normal everyday life, and here, I think, the overall tendency is to find sense in something which seems to lack any meaning from the outset.[66]

Vika (Molchanova-Kabakova) then suggested that perhaps the main theme of KD's actions was incomprehension, and that their strange actions were forcing the spectator to make a journey from incomprehension to comprehension, proposing at some point that the action "Discussion" was basically about interpretation. The moderator Backstein tried to encourage other people to participate but the rest were passive and this line of discussion did not lead anywhere.

Next, the moderator asked the poet Dmitry Prigov to contribute to the debate. Unlike the previous speaker, Prigov was more critical of KD's actions. He began by arguing that Monastyrsky tended to build for his actions structures that were each time broader and broader. Everything was included in his actions: the apartment, the trolleybus, the code, the entire universe, and each time he was composing it in a different

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[66] Ibid., 391.

way; one wondered why one should organize these kinds of actions at all. When there are no criteria according to which the spectator can negotiate or even disagree with the author, then the only choice left is to accept what the artists have proposed and become in this way part of the action. Prigov found such an approach to be too elitist and discriminatory, and for him the biggest problem was that KD treated its spectators as objects. "What is the role that the artists attribute to the participants invited here?" asks Prigov, and responds: "He [the spectator] is turned into an object… and when he is turned into an object then all he needs is comfort and nothing else."[67] Kabakov expressed a similar point of view. Sitting on the sofa next to the moderator, he spoke only at the end of the discussion as if drawing the final conclusion. He compared the atmosphere constructed during "Discussion" to an environment, to a universe under the dominion of its own unique laws. Like the former speaker, he also mentioned the feeling of being turned into an object, and expressed his feeling, as he always did, in a very entertaining and metaphorical way:

For a while I forgot who I am, why I am, and how I ended up here, whether there was a yesterday and whether there will be a tomorrow, what the time is and what will happen today and after that. I exist only in the state of now, as if I am in the dentist's chair, and begin to understand everything around me only from the position of the patient. It is a complete paralysis of my subjectivity, of my will, of my reactions and so forth. I feel like I am on the couch of the psychologist, of the therapist, of the

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[67] Ibid., 393.

gynecologist – whoever. What is he going to do now – I don't know. Luckily Andrei did not knock out my teeth, did not hit me, and everything went fine…[68]

Objective Zone

The sense of discomfort that both Prigov and Kabakov reported, and which was expressed in terms of the feeling of being excluded from the zone of the action, is consistent with other processes that took place in the art of KD during this phase. Even if the artists did not intend to mistreat their spectators, the new methods and techniques that they had adopted in order to examine the nature of art began to acquire a certain hardness, as if everything had been covered with a layer of crust. "Objectification," is the word I will use to describe the changes that occurred in the third phase. This would be an appropriate word given the fact that Monastyrsky himself brings it up while discussing the changes that took place in the third phase.

In the foreword to the third volume Monastyrsky made known a new direction in the work of the group. He writes that the group must reject the method used in the previous phases, when the artists examined the nature of art by investigating such psychological states as waiting, looking, understanding, etc. The fixation of the group on various stages of waiting in the first and second phase (the "Theory of Waiting") must be abandoned, for one could not go beyond the level of "accomplished waiting," writes Monastyrsky.(226) He suggested that the psychology of perception and the direction towards the expansion of consciousness and enlightenment, which was the favorite

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[68] Ibid., 396.

method of KD in the late seventies and early eighties, needed to be declared a dead end and announced unfit for carrying out serious aesthetic research. The previous approach had not only been annoying to the spectator, but it had also caused some serious "irreversible psychological deviations" to some of KD's members. Monastyrsky had suffered a mental breakdown in the early eighties, and he believed that it was caused by the group's method of investigating the nature of art through the prism of the psychology of perception and his constant search for profound and ecstatic spiritual experiences. Now, he decided to give up the attempts to attain an expanded consciousness, and to use another method for constructing the actions of KD. The new method has been described in terms of the "ontology of perception that must replace the former psychology of perception"(226). Thus the new direction in the aesthetic investigation of KD during the third phase could be expressed in terms of a shift from psychology to ontology, from the study of various subjective and emotional states of the artists and their spectators to the broader examination of being that ontology presupposes. The new methodology would allow them to take into account other phenomenal and noumenal aspects of KD's actions. This was one of the main factors that caused the artists to turn towards the object – an element of the action that had previously been accorded less attention.

In the foreword to the third volume Monastyrsky warns the reader to pay special attention to the "objective zone of the demonstrative field." The latter is another concept that was introduced during this third phase in order to explain the shift that had occurred in regard to the status of the object.

> In our previous actions the objects played a secondary role as devices which helped us create certain perceptual effects or factographical signs given to the spectators after the actions. Later, the specifics of the actions of the third volume allow the objects an aesthetic independence; they may be exhibited without accompanying documentation (description texts, photographs of the actions where they are used.)[69]

As if in order to emphasize the new aesthetic independence granted to the object during this phase, the author enlists all the objects from this volume, describing the material from which each was made and naming the action in which each of them was used. Most of the objects produced for the actions of this volume were painted in gold and black, and Monastyrsky describes this third phase of KD in terms of the "golden" and the "black decadence"(221). It might be reasonable to expect that as conceptual artists KD should have strived towards attaining a greater degree of dematerialization and conceptuality. Instead, and like other representatives of international conceptualism, their career moved towards a greater fetishization of the object. In the case of Western conceptualism, one might blame the invisible hand of the market for the fetishization and commodification to which many conceptual artists succumbed after the enthusiasm with the dematerialization of the art object faded away at the end of the "six years" (1966-1972) or the "golden decade" of conceptualism (1965-1975).[70] In Moscow, where there were still three entire

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[69] Ibid., 219.

[70] These are two periodizations of conceptual art. For "Six Years" see Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972; a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries* (New York: Praeger, 1973). For the ten year period of conceptualism see B. H. D. Buchloh, "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962-1969)," in *L'art Conceptuel, Une Perspective: 22 Novembre 1989-18 Fevrier 1990,* (Paris: Musee d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1990), 41.

years left before the auction house Sotheby's stepped in, announcing in 1988 the beginning of the liberalization of the market, the artists themselves announced the return to the thing.

The objects made by Monastyrsky for the action "Discussion," were called "Categories of KD." They were placed on the white cloth in order to recreate a miniature replica of one of KD's out-of-town actions. The white cloth, which was spread on the floor and under the objects, and around whose perimeter were seated the spectators and the artists, was there in order to suggest the white snowy field which was traditionally part of KD's actions. The entire atmosphere that was created for this action suggested that KD had tried to scale down the objective elements of their demonstrative field (the white field and the grey skies) in order to "fit" them inside the small Moscow apartment. Each of these objects stood for an element often employed by KD in their actions, the only difference being that in the "genuine" out-of-town actions of KD these elements took the form of abstract concepts, gestures, movements, actions, sounds, or elements immaterial as the air over the village Kievy Gorky. For this action the demonstrative field itself, which according to its definition was the dynamic center of the action constituted by the totality of psychic (subjective) and empirical (objective) elements, was turned into a wooden board and placed in the middle of the room (Figure 4). The action of walking on the Kievogorskoe Field had been made into a wooden plank called "Walking," and the impossibility of seeing anything on that field, which had so often been deployed to create various empty states of waiting and incomprehension, was turned into an object called "Imperceptibility." The concept of "Categories of KD" enlists in its definition such

actions and gestures as walking, standing, lying in a pit, shouting, imperceptibility, knocking, and so forth.[71] The *Dictionary* defines the "Categories of KD" in terms of a series of gestures and actions performed by the artists in order to construct the action in terms of one of the most important devices (*priem*) in the aesthetics of KD, called "The Demonstration of the Demonstration" (*Demonstratsia demonstratsii*).[72] The objectification and hardening of which I spoke above is most clearly perceived in this tendency to transform actions, moves, sounds and gestures, previously performed by the artists in order to achieve various states in the ES (emotional space) of their spectator-participants, into a series of objects. This does not mean that KD ceased to perform or to use the "Categories of KD" as actions, but rather that these actions had acquired an objective equivalent, a kind of totem, which stood for actions, gestures, and language, instead of for natural objects such as animals and plants. Also from the end of the third phase on the actions of the group begin to be corseted in a structure that consisted of rules, concepts, and names of previous actions. This made KD's method resemble the game of chess, where the pieces move in accordance with pre-established rules.

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[71] "Categories KD" (*Kategorii KD*) – "a series of methods and devices often used by KD in order to construct the event, in terms of the "Demonstration of Demonstration" (walking, standing, lying in a pit, 'people in the distance,' moving along a straight line, 'imperceptibility,' light, sound, speech, group, repetitions, listening to listening, etc.) The categories of KD may also be autonomous, for instance in the series of objects made by A. Monastyrsky for the action 'Discussion.'" See Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 47.

[72] "The Demonstration of Demonstration" (*Demonstrazia demonstrazii*) – "the main device (*priem*) in the aesthetics of KD during which a distancing takes place from the act of demonstration which allows it to become part of the content of the action…" Ibid., 143.

The New Aesthetic Zone and the Journeys as Genre

These new trends, that I have described under the name of "objectification," were not limited to the reactions of spectators on the demonstrative field of the action "Discussion," or to KD's new attitude towards the status of the object. A series of new impulses and ideas that appear here and there in the texts from this period provide sufficient hints to confirm the appearance of a new tendency towards making new methodologies, as well as theorizing as an end in itself. For instance during this phase there is a clear tendency to methodically cut up the previous actions into parts and stages and thereby to reveal their essential structure. Monastyrsky writes that "the methodological schema of producing actions for the third volume remained the same: the initial notion (for instance the title of the action 'Appearance') – the event (the action 'Appearance') – the discourse (interpretational texts) – the aesthetical notion (for instance, such elements as 'appearance' which are used again later in other actions.)"[73] Although he claimed that this schema was present from the very first actions organized by the group, only during this phase was this fact announced. This is the period in which a series of unconscious impulses and wishes became manifest, as if KD had begun to acquire a certain acute form of self-consciousness. Although the predisposition towards rationalization and theorization had been present from the very beginning in the practice of this group, during the third phase it took a more methodical and systematic character, manifest above all in the tendency to encompass the actions within a rational grid

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[73] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 221.

composed of rules, norms, concepts and methods; it was also the effort to validate the work of the group as a tradition with a methodology at which the group had arrived by research and reflection. This attitude is confirmed by the introduction of such new expressions as "the aesthetic of KD," "the aesthetic object," "the aesthetic zone" that appear here and there in Monastyrsky's foreword to the third volume. The emphasis on the "aesthetic" expresses above all Monastyrsky's intent to give these activities the character of a discipline.

The attempt to impose a code of aesthetic behavior on the group's artistic activities is carried further by other art historical terms that appear in this volume. Monastyrsky, for instance, insists that KD's "journeys outside the city" must now be regarded as a genre. He writes that "the super-task of all the actions of the third volume was to activate the genre [of "journeys outside the city"] and to maintain a kind of aesthetic activity by negation."[74] By this he means that the artists must deny their spectators for a while the pleasure of traveling into the country, and hold them instead in Moscow so that the stuffy air of their domestic actions will hopefully evoke in the spectators, as I have already mentioned, a longing for KD's prior journeys. The domestic actions needed to provoke some negative emotions in order that the "real" actions of KD, the ones held in the midst of nature on the Kievogorskoe Field, consequently would be in greater demand among the spectators. Monastyrsky thus insists that journeying into the countryside must become a necessity, as well as a medium of communication and artistic expression. It was in this sense that the journeys had to become a genre.

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[74] Ibid., 221-22.

But a new genre also needs a theory and an aesthetics of its own. Monastyrsky's text "Stages and Stops" (*Peregony i sotianki*), which appears as a statement after the description of all the actions of the third volume, may be regarded as an attempt to provide such a theoretical framework for the new genre of art called "journey outside the city." The definition that the *Dictionary* gives for the entry "Stages and Stops" is the following: "an aesthetics, in which are woven together elements of transportation and a religious aesthetics."[75] Like many other definitions in the *Dictionary* this one is not very clear. The text itself describes the world that opens up when one travels from one place to another.[76] Train stations, airports, subways, buses, trains, whistles, instructions on how to comport yourself in each kind of transportation, all kind of posters telling of arrival and departure, the uniforms of the transportation personnel (each having its own emblem with golden and silver wings, and wheels or hammers and sickles), and so forth – all these Monastyrsky calls the realm of the "transportation aesthetic"(235). From describing the extensive transportation system in Russia, which accommodates the immense expanse of its territory, the author crosses to the notion of "spiritual journeying," bringing in various spiritual and religious practices where the notion of "journey," "path," "ascent," "advancement," "attainment" has played a central part. "It is possible that the Russian people, who are scattered over an immense territory of their country and who are often forced to cover very long distances when they travel, are very sensitive to the 'un-home-like' atmosphere of life, to their 'guest status' on earth, which is often expressed in all

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[75] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 152.
[76] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 234-9.

kind of parties and binges."[77] What follows in this text resembles a surrealist piece of writing in which the author establishes parallels between the Soviet transportation industry, some concepts and ideas from Russian Orthodox Church, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism and the work of KD. The author also discusses his idea of order, specifically the kind that is so important for the proper functioning of the transportation industry.

> In transportation aesthetics, as in the world of transport in general, any improvisation is strictly forbidden: trains must run on time, the chugging of the wheels must follow a certain pattern (otherwise something in the mechanism is broken), the whistles must also follow a pattern in order to be recognized as signals, and the shoulder-straps show who is who in the transport hierarchy of this enormous transport system.[78]

These examples from the world of transportation, and this tone of the "call to order," sound like an attempt to justify a series of moves that occurred during the third phase, namely, the accordance of a special aesthetic status to the object by turning it into an artifact; the declaration of a new artistic genre called "journeys outside the city;" and a separate self-sufficient "aesthetics of KD" that can account for these two innovations. Unlike the previous two phases, when the character of their actions seemed more arbitrary and open, in this phase KD closes up zones and sets up rules and concepts. It is not accidental that most of the concepts included in the *Dictionary* date from the mid-eighties on. I do not wish to suggest that KD's experience is unique in this regard and that the artists (or Monastyrsky, whose figure became more and more authoritative) did this

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[77] Ibid., 235.
[78] Ibid., 236.

purposefully. KD's experience in fact follows a certain mysterious rule, which all cultural phenomena tend to obey. KD's example is reminiscent of many other historical precedents, and it may be helpful to understand certain processes that followed a similar path. The evolution of KD reminds one of the emergence, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, of the very institution of art, when during a fifty-year span a series of processes took place in which art emerged as an autonomous bourgeois institution with its own genres and its own science of "aesthetics," and "art history," set up to distinguish some artifacts and objects from others.[79] This is also the history of the historical avant-garde, which in the USSR was gradually mummified into the doctrine of Socialist Realism and on the other side of the Atlantic became, after World War II, a highly commercialized system known today as the "art world."

In KD's case the shift towards a more formal approach in the making of their actions had been signaled already at the beginning of the second phase by the new representational layer called the factographical discourse. When documenting the action became more important than the action itself, this shift led to some of those changes discussed above, including the objectification of the actions, gestures, spectators, the appearance of "KD's aesthetics" and of the art genre of "journeying outside the city." But the factographical discourse that emerged with the first action of the second phase ("Ten Appearances") made possible another important shift. This change was not yet perceived at that time, but only a decade later. In an interview, which served as the foreword to the

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[79] For the emergence of art see L. E. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

unpublished sixth volume of the *Journeys* (1991-94), Monastyrsky announces that it was precisely in the third phase that KD's discourse had shifted towards postmodernism. He explains that if the first and the second volumes of the *Journeys* were made as documents and records of actions, and as such they were secondary to the actions, then from the third phase on the action becomes secondary to the document.

> …in the third volume a 'perversion' took place: it is as if we had first planned the third volume, and then started to make actions for it…In fact such a turn of events was already predetermined in the foreword to the second volume, where factographia ['factographical discourse'] were announced as part of the 'demonstrative field.' The realization of this layer was made in the format of the book, which became primary in regard to the event.[80]

Monastyrsky sees the emergence of postmodernism in the shift from the primacy of the action to that of the text, or when the text, which previously used to serve the actions, steps forward and becomes the sole pretext for the next action.

Did the factographical discourse signal the passage into a new cultural period, or should it be itself regarded as a result of those changes that took place in this phase (the status of the object, the emergence of KD's method, aesthetics, and genre)? When, in the previous sections, I spoke about of the three phases that lasted between 1976 until 1985, I made a clear distinction between a "phase" and a "volume." A phase is a temporal segment in KD's history and a volume is the collection of documents in which the

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[80] Interview between Sabine Hängsen and A. Monastyrsky in Volume Six. Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-8 vols."

groups' activities arranged into separate dossiers are recorded. With the assertion that from 1983 the actions are secondary to the book (the action "documents" the text and not vice versa), the volume becomes more significant than the phase; the term "volume" appears to take over from the term phase, and from the next section on I will discuss KD's subsequent stages by referring only to volumes, as does Monastyrsky, who for the record has never been very clear about the distinction between the two.

Volumes IV (phase 1985-87) and Volume V (1987-89)

With the movement towards the fourth and the fifth volumes, KD emerges in the second half of the eighties as an established cultural phenomenon of the Moscow unofficial scene. By the mid-eighties the group had organized thirty-nine actions, during which the artists had cultivated their own elite public and had instituted their customs and rituals, their stylistic principles and rules – in a word, they had established a tradition with its own aesthetics and its method of making and defining the nature of art. Journeying to the country in order to participate in the rituals on the Kievogorskoe Field had become by 1985 a matter of prestige, especially among a younger generation of artists. There were in particular some non-Muscovites who toured from Odessa in order to become at first spectator-participants, and later to emerge as Medgerminevtika and carry on further the project of Moscow Conceptualism. By the mid-eighties KD was an established community and even a school that inspired and instructed new generations of followers.

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In this section I examine both the fourth and the fifth volumes of the *Journeys*. The reason for combining these two volumes is that the fourth part was not a full-fledged volume but an addition, as its subtitle "Additional Material to the *Journeys Outside the City*" suggests. This volume, which documents and interprets the works made during the years 1985-87, indicates that the fourth volume represents the least active stage in the entire "before 1989" period. There were only eight actions (in contrast to 15, 11 and 14 in the previous phases) organized, with four taking place without any spectators.[81] Although each volume of the *Journeys* also has a section that comprises photographs of actions from each phase, it is only the fourth volume that lacks this photographic section, and the few photographs which document actions organized between 1985 and 1987 are distributed in the photographic sections of the third and the fifth volumes. In addition, half of this volume is occupied by Monastyrsky's autobiographical novel "Kashirskoe Road" (*Kashirskoe shosse*) – a text where the author retells the story of his going mad in 1981 after he finished the action "Ten Appearances." The text is regarded as one of the first examples of Russian psychedelic literature, and is also considered to be a point of origin for Moscow Psychedelic Conceptualism.

The fourth and the fifth volumes include material from 1985 until 1989. During these four years KD worked within the same group, adding only in 1987 its eighth member – the German cultural historian Sabine Hänsgen. These two phases of KD took place with perestroika in the background. In 1985 the newly elected general secretary

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———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 781.

Mikhail Gorbachev launched a series of far-reaching political, economic and social processes, and the entire USSR was living out, very fully in fact, its final years of existence. These dramatic years of perestroika brought the USSR to its end and also affected KD. In the next paragraphs I will examine what I consider to be some of the most radical changes that took place during this time, suggesting, in the first part of this section, that by the beginning of the fourth volume KD had managed to establish their own form of discourse, a very hermetic system modeled on the patterns of the Soviet totalitarian and ideological text. In the second part of this section, I will describe the ways in which the radical political and social transformations which were taking place under the banner of perestroika also affected the principles on which KD's closed discourse was built, leading to the dissolution of the group in 1989.

The Totalitarian Discourse: Kabakov's "Text"

By the mid-eighties the group had constructed a system to which Monastyrsky sometimes refers using the phrase: "the totalitarian space of KD."[82] He used the word "totalitarian" in order to introduce the new concept of "inciters" (*inspiratory*) which the *Dictionary* defines as: "objects (or processes) on the exposition semiotic field that bring forward new motivational contexts in aesthetical activity."[83] An example of "inciter" in the aesthetical discourse of KD may be an avenue, a monument complex, a building, or any other imposing structure that projects totalitarian politics through the discourse of

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[82] Ibid., 673.

[83] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 45. See Glossary for complete definition.

architecture. If an action takes place around one of these "inciters" then the structure incites new motivations and affects the context of the action; it is as if the "inciter" contaminates the work with its presence. An "inciter" is something too grand to be ignored, something that hovers over the exposition field of the action, dominating and controlling it, entrapping everything around it in its totalitarian nets.

It must be made clear that KD did not treat Soviet ideology in the same way as did other Moscow unofficial artists. For instance such Sots artists as Komar & Melamid or Alexander Kosolapov revealed their hostile attitude to the Soviet system by making an art that attempted to discredit the system and to expose the hypocrisy of the Party. They painted numerous humorous pictures of Stalin and the muses, or of Lenin advertising for Coca-Cola, and their artistic approach, which sought to expose the cult of personality in a new and more convincing way, may be described as an integration of the method of strong civic opposition used by the modernists of the sixties (*shestidesyatniki*) with the ironic and flamboyantly detached attitude of the Western Pop Art. The attitude of those who like KD belonged to the so-called "Kabakov circle" was different.

Over the years Kabakov has stated many times his disengagement from politics, and in doing this he had also expressed a position shared by many from his circle of followers.

> Kabakov has always styled himself a coward. He has consistently refused
> to take part in explicit political activities organized by other artists. He
> would come to watch and stand in the crowd, but he would always shrug
> his shoulders if anyone asked him why he didn't join in. 'I'm just an

ordinary frightened Soviet man,' he would say. 'I'm afraid even to walk in the streets. Don't ask me to be a hero.'[84]

In the early seventies Kabakov made a series of "empty" paintings and drawings. Later he explained that he had arrived at this method of representation intuitively – out of a certain fear of the center, as in the warning: "Don't get into the center, you might get smashed."[85] This "fear of the center" was what many of the "romantic" conceptualists had in common, and it was also what made them different from the historical avant-garde to whom they began to compare themselves in the nineties. I would like to pause here, and make a quick comparison between the Moscow Conceptualists' notion of emptiness and that of the Russian historical avant-garde.

Compared to Malevich, whose Suprematist language made a radical demand on the center of the canvas, Kabakov's characters gather at the margins, near the frame of the *Album* in the same manner in which KD artists and guests escape into the quiet, idyllic, all white "out-of-town-ness" of the Moscow region. In Malevich's *Black Square,* but also in his monochrome series *White on White*, (1918) the square per se is divided from the frame by a painted matte border. Every artist and professional picture shop framer knows that a matte border is added to the picture in order to accentuate it, and to facilitate and direct the eye's attention towards the center of the picture. Malevich's emptiness is full; it is a potentiality that scattered into multiple fragments, which soon were arranged in the new revolutionary language of Suprematism. In Kabakov the center

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[84] Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 78.
[85] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 544.

is deserted, it is left empty and is being observed from the surface of the matt border by various characters that he had invented for this series. Kabakov maintained that Malevich's *Black Square* dragged him into a certain depth, which he perceived as violence – "I did not give my permission for this violence!"[86] Kabakov was right that at the "center" (in Moscow), the unofficial artists could have all been smashed. His distrust and suspicion of political activism and his refusal to make his art a vehicle for expressing political beliefs was also transmitted to many within the younger generations of Moscow conceptualists. KD and Medgerminevtika, for instance, followed similar steps, avoiding explicit references to political or social issues, sublimating instead their desires and opinions into mystifying and baffling mythologies and rituals. Viktor Tupitsyn has called KD's actions "escapes into silence," but this silence, like that of John Cage, who was one of the greatest foreign influences for the group, was not mute.

> …KD's countryside performances in the seventies were in a certain sense 'escapes into silence.' And yet I always wanted to understand why in their work I always hear voices and speeches.[87]

The reason that Tupitsyn "heard voices" has to do with the way in which KD builds its discourse.

KD's artistic subversiveness (or non-conformity) may have resided in something else, in something that is sometimes hinted at but has never been fully stated or clearly explained. Their artistic originality may be found in the degree to which KD tried to

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[86] Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, Boris Groys, and Elena Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994* (Moskva: Ad-Marginem, 1999), 64.

[87] Tupitsyn and Kabakov, *Glaznoe iabloko razdora: besedy s Il'ei Kabakovym*. 24.

construct a self-enclosed aesthetic system, which resembled the Soviet ideological apparatus. In other words KD attempted to identify themselves with the totalitarian system, and instead of attacking or making jokes and puns about its absurdity they tried hard to *become* it; to mimic its discursive totalitarian features. Monastyrsky claimed that one of the models that had inspired him was the highly totalitarian version of North Korean Communism.[88] Other artists and critics used the adjective "total," which is central here to emphasizing its importance for Moscow Conceptualism. In the early eighties Natalya Abalakova and Anatoly Zhigalov worked on a project called "tot-art" in which they investigated the effect of the "total artistic action," and ten years later Kabakov introduced the term "total installation" to describe an art work which includes the spectator within itself. More recently, in 2007, Groys described the social effect of Moscow Conceptualism using the expression "total enlightenment."[89]

The method and the system that KD developed may be described in terms of a conscious or an unconscious self-identification with power. This is a tactic of dealing with ideology that is very close to the work of Slavoj Zizek in the late nineties. Zizek wrote about the naiveté of those who had suggested that a cynical or an ironical distance would be an adequate stance against the intrusive pervasiveness of ideology. His argument is that contemporary ideology is already ironical, and distanced from itself; it does not believe in its own premises and a cynical principle is inscribed *a priori* within its

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[88] Andrei Monastyrsky mentioned North Korean Communism in an interview with the author. Moscow, Russia July 24th 2004.

[89] For "tot-art" see Natalia Abalakova and Anatolii Zhigalov, *Totart: russkaia ruletka* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1999). For "total enlightenment" see Groys' foreword to Groys, Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990.*

mechanism, helping it to anticipate and annihilate a potential critique. For Zizek, the only

way to resist the pressure of ideology was to adopt a strategy developed by Lacanian

psychoanalysis, which recommended that one treat ideology as one treats a neurotic

symptom. Zizek calls this approach the "over-identification with the symptom" and gives

as an example the controversial music of the Slovenian band Laibach.[90] I would like to

suggest that KD has also used a similar technique and that instead of trying to ignore the

symptom or becoming hostile to it (like the New-York based Sots artists) they tried to

become like it.

Text has been one of the main concerns and models for the Moscow

conceptualists, and the way in which these artists understood and treated it was shaped by

Kabakov's work and thinking. Kabakov's speculations on the importance of text for this

group of unofficial artists are part of his broader theory of emptiness, discussed in the

previous chapter. By the early eighties, Kabakov insisted that text constituted his main

material, as well as that of his conceptualist friends. Although the word "conceptual"

seems to self-evidently invoke the text as primary artistic material, Kabakov's theory of

text is more complex than might first appear, involving a speculation on the importance

of self-referential and ready-made text for this circle of artists.

Kabakov describes how dramatically the ideological language of the Soviet Party

changed over the first three decades after World War II. He points out that, if during the

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[90] On cynical reason see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*; v. 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For Zizek's views on ideology see Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (London; New York: Verso, 1989), and "The Enlightenment of Laibach" in Inke Arms, *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983-2003* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, 2003).

decades of Stalin and Khrushchev (the fifties and sixties) Soviet ideological

paraphernalia (posters, stands, and panels) were "loaded with ideological powder, and

they literally were shooting at us with calls to accomplish great things, then towards the

end of the seventies they ceased to shoot and only stood around us as a formidable

weaponry."[91] These attributes of power that had before been threatening every Soviet

citizen with agitated revolutionary messages now began to appear as relics of the past, as

old weapons which once could kill but now only threaten. Likewise, in the eighties the

posters, the slogans, the banners, in short all the visual agitation once introduced and

perfected by the historical avant-garde, lost its function and it was used as decoration for

the Soviet public space. As in his theory of emptiness, Kabakov draws a parallel with the

West and states that if, in capitalism, the advertising billboards still correspond to a

product which consumers might find on the shelves of the supermarket, then in the Soviet

Union:

> posters, stands, slogans, banners, indications, time-tables and schedules do
> not correspond to anything in reality. These are clean, self-referential
> objects that contain utterances which do not refer to any known thing.
> These are TEXTS in the full sense of this word. These are TEXTS which
> everybody knows do not refer to anything, do not mean anything, are not
> meant to correspond to anything in particular – and yet, these texts are still
> very important 'in itself,' and the interest, the attention, the 'work' with
> this text is one of our main concerns for us. (116)

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[91] Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 115.

By "us" Kabakov meant the artists of his circle, to whom KD also belonged, and who had developed this theory of the self-sufficiency of the ideological text into a complete model. The interest in the nature of the totalitarian text was central for the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism.

"*Our texts*," Kabakov stressed, "*are directed only to texts*, and each text is text that embraces a previous text. In this regard we have a true Wittgensteinian hermeneutics – as if we all live within one Text."[92] What Kabakov has described (using the capital letter "T") as self-referential text is what he also considers to be the greatest contribution of the Moscow conceptualists to contemporary art. But the Text of which Kabakov speaks is not simply self-referential but also a *ready-made* text. If, in the West, Duchamp introduced the idea of using ready-made objects instead of works of art, thus raising the question of what constitutes art on the level of objects, Moscow conceptualists introduced into their art textual ready-mades, extending this question into the field of language. It is not entirely clear what Kabakov regards as the Moscow conceptualists' contribution to art, but he seems to suggest that they, and above all he himself, had introduced into art the self-referential and ready-made language mined from the terrain of Soviet ideology. If Duchamp's ready-made refers only to the realm of objects, prompting one to ask the question of what constitutes an art object and what does not, then the Moscow conceptualists use of the ready-made text may raise the question to the level of what is it that distinguishes an artistic from a non-artistic text.

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[92] Ibid., 116.

Western conceptualists, for instance, also used ready-made language but their language, Kabakov suggests, had once had its referent in something existing in the real world such as an object, product, or commercial good. The Muscovites, on the other hand, drew their texts from Soviet Union posters, slogans, banners, and communal apartments' announcement boards which most of the time did not refer to objects or goods – they were in shortage in the USSR – but to abstract ideological concepts. For instance, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) addresses three hypostases of the object "chair," whereas Bulatov's 1975 *Glory to the CPSU,*[93] (where the text "Glory to CPSU" is written on the background of the sky) does not refer to an object but to an acronym and a name of the party. In other words the idea behind the Moscow conceptualists' readymade text is that the frozen language of political propaganda had been lying dead in the streets, and these artists had picked it up and carried it into their studios in order to integrate it into their work. It is here that one traces an interesting encounter between the Moscow Conceptualists and the historical Russian avant-garde, for the former were basically carrying into their studios and trying to give a new life to what the latter had invented half a century earlier – the agitprop language developed for the education of the masses.

Thus Moscow conceptualists claim that they introduced ready-made language into contemporary art; I will neither affirm nor deny this claim nor question Kabakov's belief in the fact that in the West everything written on billboards had a material equivalent. As far as the language of the Soviet Communist Party is concerned this may

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[93] CPSU – Communist Party of the Soviet Union

be true, for indeed many artists have used it as their primary artistic material. But such an approach corresponds more to the first generation of conceptualists who like Kabakov, Bulatov, or Vasiliev used the party's wooden language as it was spoken by Brezhnev, or as it was found publicly displayed. The next generation of conceptualists did not simply work with text – they became text; they identified themselves with Text, in the same manner in which Zizek has later suggested that one had to identify oneself with the symptom of ideology. This is particularly relevant for KD artists, who performed, documented, recorded, discussed and then transcribed all this into endless text. Moreover, the text that was collected and assembled in the *Journeys* became a self-referential system whose closed hermeticism could be successfully compared to the program and the jargon of the party. KD's world is that of a closed system, which works very much like the party's ideology department – a bundle of signs that do not refer to anything concrete or real outside but only to other signs within the same system. KD's terminology is a good example of this self-referentiality. Many of terms published in their *Dictionary* seldom refer to anything that one may encounter outside of Moscow Conceptualism or of KD's circle. Instead they point to one another in a circular way and only to what exists within that ground that they have brought forward and agreed to accept.

But KD's model did not resemble from the beginning such a closed textual system. This closed circularity developed gradually over the years together with their theories about the text. The shift towards textuality is well reflected in the way the group once referred to their work throughout the "before 1989" period. In the first years of their collaboration the artists described their works using such theatrical terms as

"productions," "stagings" (*postanovka*) and "performances," or referring to them in terms of "things" (*vesch'*) or "work" (*rabota*).[94] After the appearance of the critical texts in foreign art press, and especially after Groys' essay in *A-YA,* they adopted the category "action." Towards the mid eighties, after the shift to postmodernism, they began to call their works "text." Some of their terms reflect this shift. For instance, the concept of "demonstrative field" was defined in the foreword to the first phase, in terms of the dynamic center of the *action* constituted by the totality of psychic (subjective) and empirical (objective) fields.[95] In 1987 Monastyrsky re-defined this concept in terms of a series of "elements included in the construction of the *text*."[96] For almost a decade the group had been searching for the right word for expressing what it was that they were doing and finally they solved this problem by redefining performances and actions as texts, or as object-texts.

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[94] See Givi Kordiashvili in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 203.
[95] Ibid., 22-23.
[96] The re-definition took place in the "A. M. Earth Works" (A. M. *Zemleanye raboty*). See ————
—, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 37-8. (italics mine).

THE ARRANGEMENT OF SPECTATORS ON THE KIEVOGORSKOE FIELD

1. "Comedy"
2. "The Third Variant"
3. "Time to Act"
4. "Place to Act"
5. "Ten Appearances"
6. "The Description of the Action"
7. "M"
8. "The Depiction of the Rhombus"
9. "The Shot"
10. "Russian World"
11. "The Gates"
12. "First Painting"
13. "To Makarevich"
14. "Romashko"
15. "The Move of the Spectators"
16. ...people in the distance..."
17. "A Call to Germany"

○ - the arrangement of the spectators does not change during the action

○ - the arrangement of the spectators changes during the action

◄►- the trajectory of the changing arrangements of the spectators

□ - individual actions (without spectators)

Figure 5: A. Monastyrsky, *The Arrangement of the Spectators on the Kievogorskoe Field*, diagram, 1989, (reconstructed).

The object-text became KD's *Journeys*, which from the third phase on was the most important aspect of their work. This collection of texts and documents is the perfect illustration of their self-referential system, where all elements are turned back on each other: concepts refer to concepts, new actions refer to previous ones, and Monastyrsky's sealed texts always refer back to other equally hermetic pieces of earlier writings. It is like a mysterious alphabet spoken only by a few who know the unspoken laws of combining its symbols. The above diagram called "The Arrangement of the Spectators on the Kievogorskoe Field" (Figure 5) was made for the fifth volume, and it illustrates this textual self-referentiality constructed by KD. The diagram is a map of the Kievogorskoe

Field – the firing ground of the group's aesthetics. The seventeen numbers enclosed in circles, polygons and squares stand for various actions organized since the seventies on this meadow near the village Kievy Gorky. For instance, the snowflake-like number 5 in the center of the Kievogorskoe Field shows the point from where ten spectator-participants moved in the direction of the woods unreeling their bobbins as the KD artists had required them to do back in 1981 for the action "Ten Appearances." This map, drawn by Monastyrsky, also indicates the place on the meadow where each of the seventeen actions of KD took place, as well as the position and/or the movement of the spectator-participants during each of these actions (indicated by arrows).

But this map is also interesting from another point of view, for it is an illustration of KD's system at work. Monastyrsky writes in the foreword to the fifth volume that most of the actions of the fifth volume were secondary in regard to previous actions, and that "some of them are simply mental-topographical 'repetitions/continuations' of the earlier actions."[97] This repetition/continuation was one KD's main strategies from the seventies on. Here, each action is in some respect the continuation and the perfection of the previous ones. Discussing the schema "The Arrangement of the Spectators on the Kievogorskoe Field" Monastyrsky suggests that each new action uses the "traces" of the previous works as bench-marks, and that the spectators in each action "move forward" from the position at which they ended the action last time.[98] Such an approach is reminiscent of Soviet ideology in that for the latter, every new act or deed is a

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[97] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 673.
[98] Ibid.

continuation of the *original* act of the October Revolution. KD's method of investigating the nature of art from the mid-eighties constructs a self-sufficient and self-reliant system, which like the language of the party does not refer to anything outside of itself. But with the beginning of a series of political and social reforms in the USSR KD's closed discourse also began to change.

Depressurization of the Totalitarian Discourse: The Gap Between Art and Life

In the mid eighties began a process of "depressurization," to employ a word used by Monastyrsky to describe one of the main tasks of the fifth volume.[99] The text-based self-sufficient system that KD had assembled for a decade began to open up. This change is betrayed by new words indicating a series of new concepts that appear in the texts of the fourth and fifth volumes. What the previously mentioned term "inciters" has in common with such new concepts as "Peasants in the City" (*Krestiane v gorode*) and "Cosmonauts, Titans, Fire-bars, Runts, and Georgians" (*Kosmonavty, titany, kolosniki, korotyshki, Gruziny*) is not only that fact that they all emerged during the first years of perestroika (1985-87), but also that these new designations have social, political and economic referents. These terms denote things and concepts from the political and economic sphere that had not previously been part of KD's zone of interest. The phrase "peasants in the city," for instance, refers to the large "nomadic masses of peasants that flooded the Soviet cities after the enforced mass collectivization of the thirties."[100]

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[99] Ibid.

[100] ———, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 55. See the extended definition of the term in the Glossary of Terms.

Monastyrsky mentions this Stalinist project and how drastically it had changed the economic and cultural life of Moscow. This shift towards the social, the political and the historical is one of the most visible changes that occurred during this period. Entering KD's discourse it diluted its closed self-referentiality with comments on the outside world. This process resembles in many respects the effect of perestroika and glasnost on millions of Soviet citizens, who all of a sudden began to discover on their TVs that the former enemies were simply other countries and other people who lived under the same sun.

One of the first texts in which this depressurization of KD's discourse takes place is "With a Wheel in the Head: Remarks on Sociology, Art and Aesthetics." This text was actually part of the third volume, and was prepared by Monastyrsky to be read for the action "Voices" (*Golosa*) in 1985.[101] It is one of the first texts in the *Journeys* in which the author attempts to place the phenomenon of KD within a broader historical context. Here Monastyrsky names the predecessors, mentions the key historical events within the unofficial art scene, enlists major *samizdat* publications, remembers important political actions, refers to KD's most political and most widely known work (*Banner*, printed in *Flash Art* magazine), and finally suggests that "a 'private' aesthetic historicism" had come to replace the broader "social historicism" of the previous decades.[102] "'Private' social historicism," on the other hand, is what Monastyrsky suggests is the attitude of such artists as Kabakov and Bulatov, who chose to rely on their own resources and

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[101] *A.M. S kolesom v golove: Zamechanie o sotziologii, ikusstbe i estetike.* In Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 292-99.
[102] Ibid., 299.

aesthetic projects instead of joining in with the "social historicism" of those associated with the Lianozovo Group or of those dissidents who had organized the Bulldozers Exhibition in 1974. Towards the fourth, and especially in the fifth volume KD's texts are gradually invaded by a new socio-political vocabulary. Monastyrsky writes about ideology, socio-economic systems, about Stalin and his wife Svetlana Allilueva, about the Cold War and modernism. He generates texts in which he presents the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism using as a metaphor various departments of the Moscow Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh).[103] At this point Soviet history in its broader movements (economy, agriculture) enters into the discourse of the group. It is the beginning of depressurization of the hitherto closed textuality of KD, and its turn towards the world, towards society.

Before perestroika, references to politics and society were almost missing from the texts of Monastyrsky and of other participants in KD's meetings. As I have already suggested, the group was not interested in producing art that carried an explicit political or social message. It may be useful to make a quick comparison between the Moscow "Collective Actions" and a group of artists that were called by the same name. The Santiago de Chile-based CADA (*Colectivo de Acciones de Arte or Art Actions Collective*) is a group of artists that emerged in the early 1970s as part of the Chilean Avanzada. CADA has organized numerous actions and performances in which they denounced poverty, hunger and other economic deprivations brought on by the pro-market right-

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[103] See *A.M. Rechnye zavodi sovetskoi kharizmy: kratkii shizoanaliz istorii "Kollektivnykh deistvii,"* Ibid., 552.

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wing military regime of general Augusto Pinochet.[104] While CADA was organizing

actions with unambiguous and clearly stated political messages, in Moscow around the

same time local underground artists were mocking all that was associated with left-wing

politics and art. In his memoirs, for instance, Kabakov writes about the studio exhibition

of the Sots artist Leonid Sokov. In 1975 artists from Moscow "were shaking with

laughter" in front of an installation entitled *The Restless Heart Of Luis Corvalan*.[105] This

work by Sokov, which consisted of a Plexiglas heart and a pump that pumped red paint

through two hoses, was a mocking reference to the Chilean communist leader Luis

Corvalan, who was at that time living in exile in the USSR. Whereas the Chilean CADA

journeyed to the outskirts of Santiago de Chile in order to distribute powdered milk in the

poorest suburbs of the city, the Moscow KD journeyed at the outskirts of Moscow in

order to explore the nature of art. The two forms of "collective actions" were vectored in

opposite directions; each group had an aesthetical, political and social agenda that

conflicted with that of the other, and one may repeat the question that still concerns many

artists and theoreticians: which of these two attitudes is the closest to that of the historical

avant-garde, or what form of collective action would have the latter favored the most?

These two forms of aesthetics, or rather two political attitudes, have been known

since the early nineteenth century, when the conflicting opposition *art for art's sake*

versus *art for life's sake* emerged, setting the limits to a new field of action for the

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[104] Coco Fusco, *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).
[105] Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, 76.

nineteenth and twentieth century avant-garde.[106] In the foreword to the fourth volume of

the *Journeys* Monastyrsky attempts to situate KD on this field, as if he was being

pressured by the events that were taking place behind the Kremlin walls and in the

streets. He introduces this topic by referring to Rauschenberg's infamous claim to be

"acting in the gap between art and life."[107] Rauschenberg, who refused to choose either

one of these positions (*l'art pour l'art* or *l'art social*,) and claiming instead that he stood

in the gap between the two of them, expressed in this way the rather apolitical agenda of

the American neo-avant-garde of the fifties and sixties. But KD's position is even more

obscure, for Monastyrsky affirms that his group is positioned neither in life, nor in art,

nor in the gap between the two. Here is what he writes:

> Indeed, if we regard our actions… then we may discover that they are not
> at all constructed in that undetermined place between life and art, and they
> do not point at this indeterminacy [gap] as their object of representation.
> The macrometaphor of KD's actions is not 'indeterminacy'
> (*heopredelennosti*) but 'aloofness' (*obosoblennosti*). Initially this
> aloofness is easier to determine negatively: the event of the action takes
> place neither in the sphere of life nor in that of art, nor in the diffuse and
> undetermined zone that exists between them. The only way to determine it
> positively is in the dynamics of the work: the event of the action takes
> place within the common efforts of the authors and spectators, directed at
> the movement of the subject of perception from the demonstrative field

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[106] On the emergence of social art see Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left, 1830-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[107] In the Foreword to Volume Four Monastyrsky attributes this phrase to Allan Kaprow. Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 449.

(art) through the 'zone of imperceptibility' into the zone of the absent-minded, everyday contemplation of life.[108]

One cannot determine from this statement where to locate KD within the ideological terrain of twentieth century art, but neither is this very important. One might say that Monastyrsky has deliberately chosen this ambiguity as if in order to mimic the vague and wooden language (*la langue-de-bois*) of Soviet totalitarian discourse. This is vagueness that, in a way, has been part of their aesthetic project from the very beginning expressed by such notions as "emptiness" and "nothingness." One might find yearning for emptiness or this asceticism in such personages as Melville's Bartleby, who prefers not to choose, or Kafka's Hunger Artist who couldn't simply find anything in this world that was likable or worthy of choosing. What I find important is not their initial ambiguous undecidedness but it was what made them finally speak about the choice between art and life, or what might have made them finally position themselves politically? Was this the effect of perestroika and glasnost that "forced" them to choose and to define their role and position in the changing society? This question is relevant for the entire scene of Moscow Conceptualism, which has insistently championed the *l'art pour l'art* position.

The statement about the "gap between art and life" is one of the multiple examples of the way in which social and political issues began to seep through into KD's discourse, diluting it with concepts and terms from political economic and social theory, and all this appears to happen as if independently of their artistic will. In the passage above, for instance, Monastyrsky tries to suggest that the model of "art-gap-life" may be

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[108] Ibid., 449-50.

understood in terms of KD's own tripartite theoretical schema: the "demonstrative field," the "zone of imperceptibility," and the "exposition field." But if in the previous volumes these fields and zones were kept separate from social and political issues, and defined only within the very closed field of KD's lexicography, with the advent of perestroika they began also to denote broader social and political aspects.

If previously the concept of "demonstrative field" was defined in terms of a series of elements that were deliberately included in the construction of the action, and the "exposition field " in terms of elements which were not deliberately included in the work then in the fourth volume they are re-defined using a new vocabulary.

> The first thing which comes into view when one examines the nature of the 'exposition field' is that unlike the 'demonstrative field' (which includes paintings and textual commentaries) it belongs not to the artist but to the state. The 'exposition field' may include such elements as: the walls of the apartments and studios, of the museums, factories, institutions (both the internal and external walls), the land belonging to the kolkhozes and sovkhozes, the roads, in one word everything, including the water and air – perhaps only the fire belongs to nobody, for nowhere is it yet written that fire is the property of the state.[109]

With the beginning of perestroika, and as some of the earlier introduced terminology became redefined using social or political terms, this terminology became clearer as a result. The demonstrative field above, which had been earlier defined in a series of abstract categories (e.g. "the system of spatio-temporal elements intentionally included by the authors in the construction of the text…") is now translated more simply as the

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[109] Ibid., 543.

artist and his or her work, whereas the concept of "exposition field" now stands for the context in which the artist works. In other words, the demonstrative field stands for the concept of "art" whereas the exposition field signifies "life," and the two are divided by the "zone of imperceptibility," which is the "gap" about which Rauschenberg spoke.

This opening up towards society was also manifested in the new approach that the group took towards its public. Monastyrsky writes that this part of the *Journeys* is dedicated to the "anonymous-spectator," and that the "depressurization of the anonymity" is the main intention of the fifth volume.[110] The "anonymous-spectators," as the second-least advantaged category of KD's public, are those who come accidentally across one of KD's works. If previously this category of spectators had been somewhat neglected, then in the foreword to the fifth volume Monastyrsky calls them "the most important structural element in the totalitarian aesthetical space of KD (specifically for the accidental anonymous spectator, many actions including a few from this volume were conceived."[111] Should this statement be read as a turn to the ordinary everyday people and as a departure from the elite public of KD, who began also gradually to disappear?

Towards the end of the fifth volume the tone of the reports written by KD's spectator-participants also changes. Before, the reports were more poetic in tone, for the guests had discussed the very personal matters of how the action had affected their impressions, perceptions, feelings and thoughts. The reports written for the last volumes are more prosaic in tone. Here is one of Kabakov's reports from 1987 where he

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[110] Ibid., 673.
[111] Ibid., 673.

remembers what he had been doing and thinking as he was walking towards the Kievogorskoe Field.

> We were discussing with Joseph all sorts of irrelevant and weird things.
> By the way, around that time I was very excited because there was an
> interview with Galerie de France, about money and this whole disgusting
> new situation which was interfering with life. I would even confess with
> sorrow that this atmosphere that dominates our life today, all these
> business talks about exhibitions and money and all other kind of nonsense,
> it has eclipsed and replaced those spiritual flights and all the exaltations
> that used to accompany our epoch, which is possibly gone forever.[112]

This is a short paragraph from the last report written by Kabakov for KD's actions. Perestroika has drastically changed his life, resulting in a very busy schedule for his new role – that of officially representing Soviet unofficial art abroad. By the late eighties the situation changed dramatically, and many artists who once attended the actions of KD had left the country temporarily or permanently. The event that announced the birth of a new epoch was an art auction organized in the late eighties in Moscow.

The Sotheby's auction took place on July 7th 1988, and it instantly became one of the major events in this period for both official and unofficial artists.[113] In fact, the

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[112] Ibid., 695.

[113] The 1988 Sotheby's auction in Moscow was one of the major artistic events of perestroika. Sotheby's sold paintings by Soviet unofficial artists worth £2, 085,050 (as opposed to the original estimate of £ 796,800 to £1,068, 400). For the local art scene the outcome of the auction came as a shock. The artists who sold received 60% of the sales, an unusually high percentage to be offered by a Western auction house. The painting that established the absolute record was the *Fundamental Lexicon* (1986) by the Moscow painter Grisha Bruskin. The Soviet painters were sold in an alphabetical order, and Bruskin's name was first on this list. In addition his painting *Fundamental Lexicon* was depicted on the cover of the Sotheby's catalogue, and many has argued that it was precisely these facts that contributed to the record amount of £220,000 paid for this

auction erased the lasting political distinction that had divided the Soviet artists for almost half of a century, and had re-drawn the line of separation along economic interests, dividing the artists into those who could sell to the West, and those who couldn't. The American writer Andrew Solomon, who at that time was in Moscow to report on the Sotheby's event, described the day after the auction: "There was a certain separation among the artists. Those who had done too well stood at a distance from the others."[114] KD was not part of the auction because Sotheby's decided not to sell anything else but flat paintings. KD had planned the action "Painting Two" (*Vtoraia kartina*) for the days immediately following the auction, and many who attended that action felt that the impact of the auction had reached also into the countryside where KD traditionally worked.

It appeared as if the title of the action itself was suggestive of the Sotheby's event. The spectators, who met at the central train station to take the train, were discussing all the way to the field the exorbitant prices of paintings and how suddenly everything had changed. One might have heard, for example, the following words in the train car: "…The situation has changed dramatically and now our enemies are Zakharov, Volkov and Kabakov, now they are the official artists and we must start again a new Lianozovo Group."[115]

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work in contrast to £17,000 as it was initially predicted. The auction sent into the orbit of the international art world twenty nine Moscow artists. For the Sotheby's auction in Moscow see Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*; Aleksandr Tikhonov, "Deseati let spustea," http://www.nikofe.ru/nik/Desyt_let_spusty_sovetskii.html; Faina Balachovskaia, "Dvadzati let spustea," gif.ru, http://www.gif.ru/themes/kunstbazar/sothebys-ruscont/20let/
[114] Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*, 34.
[115] See Pivovarov's report in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols,* 720.

On the field the action "Painting Two" unfolded in the following way:

As the spectators were approaching the river Kliaz'ma in the Moscow region near the station Nazarievo, Georgii Kizevalter (one of KD's first members) was waiting in the bushes on the other bank of the river. When the spectators approached and sat on the grass in front of the river he appeared out of the bushes, took off his clothes, and lowered into the water a painting wrapped in cellophane. After putting his clothes on the painting he began to swim towards the spectators, pushing the wrapped painting forward toward the other bank of the river. When he reached the other bank of the Kliaz'ma river three other KD members took the painting from Kizevalter and installed it on a slope between the spectators and the river. When KD removed the cellophane wrap the spectators saw an enlarged painted copy of the color slide 'Ball in the Forest.' The painting was instantly dismantled: the canvas was detached from the molding and rolled, and the canvas stretcher was disassembled to pieces. 17 (out of 30) spectators received factographical material which consisted of a black and white copy of that slide. In addition, long before the appearance of the spectators on a slope, a battery-powered electric bell had been installed…

July 10 1988

Nazarievo, Moscow Region

A. Monastyrsky, G. Kizevalter, N. Pantikov, E. Elagina, I. Makarevich, M. Chuikov, Stefan Andre[116]

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[116] Ibid., 679-80.

At this point, Kabakov had left for the West and the Russian philosopher Mikhail

Ryklin, had become one of the most active spectators in KD's "after 1989" period. In his

report for this action Ryklin describes how they all met at the station, topics discussed by

spectators in the train car, and the walk to the river. Ryklin comments on "the Sotheby's

heroes" and describes Backstein (or the "Backstein Function"), who was leading an

American film crew.[117] The latter had come to film the action, but by the time they

reached the site and began to install their heavy video equipment, the action was already

finished.

> The Americans with Backstein showed up when Kizevalter was already
> out of the water. By the time the Americans crew set up their equipment
> the artists were already taking apart the canvas stretcher. Then they began
> to nervously record the public and the landscape. One of them asked:
> 'Who is this?' – 'Monastyrsky' – 'Damn, I knew it' (waving his hands
> hopelessly.) They began to film aggressively Kizevalter, Makarevich,
> Panitkov, and Elagina [KD's members]. The event, which took place
> within the framework of the Sotheby's auction, was ruined, the efforts of
> the American film crew went to waste, they were disappointed.[118]

After asserting that the action was part of the Sotheby's auction (which was not accurate)

Ryklin proceeds to describe his views on the action. His report for the action "Painting

Two" differs from those submitted in the earlier phases in several respects. Previously the

spectator-participants used to describe their experiences from the position of the

spectator, that is, staying focused and reporting only on what the artists did, how the

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[117] Ibid., 714-15.
[118] Ibid., 715.

action evolved and what their experiences were. Ryklin's report is different. Unlike the earlier reports, which were written from the personal position of the spectator and his interaction with the artist, Ryklin's account is more disengaged and distanced. This distance makes the report look like a piece of art criticism or a journalistic reportage, for Ryklin describes the interaction between the artists and the spectators (as well as the actions of the American film crew) from the detached position of an accidental observer, reporting from a bird's eye perspective. To him, KD's action and its public was one with the grey and monotonous landscape; KD's demonstrative field remained invisible to him, to many new guests, and to the film crew. Ryklin also suggests that the ideal spectator for this action was neither the spectator-participants, nor the film crew, nor the select guests of the Sotheby's auction, but a fisherman, an angler who was lolling in his boat anchored not far away from KD's demonstrative field.

> Actually that fisherman in his rubber boat was the ideal observer of the action because he was looking on the surface of the water staring into the space without resting his eyes on any particular object… he was not reacting to the action, he was not even catching fish, but he stood still in his boat like an object that was observing itself.[119]

After this action Monastyrsky introduced into KD's vocabulary a new term called "fisherman" (*pybak*). The *Dictionary* defines it in terms of a "singular element of unknown origin in the system of the demonstrative and/or exposition semiotic fields."[120]

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[119] Ibid., 715-16.
[120] "Fisherman" (*rybak*) – "singular element of unknown origins that has entered KD's system of demonstration/exposition fields. It was named after the fisherman who emerged on the demonstration field of the action 'Painting Two.' In other actions the element 'Fisherman' may

This detached meditative state of the fisherman was that ideal empty state that KD had tried to induce in their spectator-participants during the first phase. Both the artists' commentaries and the participants' reports from that period often suggest that the final product of the action was a state of intense and immediate awareness in which the spectators were waiting, looking, and trying to understand what was unfolding in front of them, which most of the time was a matter of their observing themselves observing themselves. It seems as if it was easier for KD to provide their guests with the necessary conditions for such a psychological state of emptiness. The group's empty actions invented for this aim, as well as the empty atmosphere of the field, were beneficial to such a collective form of meditation. In the first phase KD was to their spectators as the fish were to the fisherman. Gradually, however, they had ceased being interested in investigating the nature of art through the psychology of perception, and had moved forward, inventing new tools, concepts and techniques (the factographical discourse, the new status of the object, the invention of genre, etc.) This progress, as well as the new social and political conjuncture that made possible the appearance of Western collectors, curators, critics and film crews, immersed KD deeper and deeper into the complex world of contemporary art, further distancing them from their initial search for the emptiest emptiness. In 1989 the group disbanded.

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become a car or a cyclist that passes." *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 154-55.

CHAPTER 3

"During:" Transition to Capitalism

In 1989 KD dissolved, but they reunited again in 1995 as [KD]. During this six-year transitional period, which will be discussed in the next chapter, its members were dispersed, acting and exhibiting individually home and abroad. This chapter unfolds as if in their absence, and its content must be regarded as a rupture which brusquely separated this group's capitalist from socialist contexts; it is the terror of the "during" between the "after" and the "before." As KD's former members traveled abroad during the first half of the nineties, to represent the praised, prized, collected and much sought-after unofficial Soviet art, I re-direct my attention towards a more general discussion of transition from socialism to capitalism and its effect on the institution of art. The chapter starts with the examination of the concept of "transition," and the new paradigm of "transitology." From the early nineties, and for more than a decade, transitology became the new ideology in the countries of the post-Soviet bloc. Eastern European elites have used this discourse in order to legitimize radical reforms, and although the transition was primarily directed toward the political and economic spheres, it also indirectly affected the institution of art which had regained or gained its autonomy.

This chapter also discusses one particular mechanism of the cultural transition. The Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts (SCCA) were a network of art centers established in Eastern Europe during the nineties by the famed American philanthropist,

hedge fund manager and currency speculator George Soros. The SCCAs were implemented as mechanisms of transition in order to help democratize art in the post-Soviet space by snatching it from the grasp of the state and of the Socialist Realist doctrine. There was not a close relation between KD and this institution of transition, except for the fact that the SCCA Moscow financially contributed to the publication of the first five volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City*. In this chapter, however, I do not seek to establish relations but rather to zoom out over the field and present a more general view on the transition of the nineties, examining larger mechanisms of transition that affected the art of many of these artists.

In Eastern Europe the phrase "decade of transition" refers to the nineties, when the countries of the former Soviet bloc went through a series of radical transformations that touched almost every aspect of social life. Up until the end of this decade and beyond, into the new century, the words "transition" and "transformation" became central concepts in many fields.[1] Politicians spoke about the necessity of making a transition to a new electoral system based on multiparty politics and the cultivation of civil society; economists discussed the transition from a state to a free market and the extension of the private sector; humanist intellectuals argued about a transition to a democratic society in which basic human rights and freedoms would be recognized and valued. In the arts the word "transition" expressed the break with the dogmatic and monistic official doctrine of

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[1] Scholars like S. Huntington makes a distinction between the concept of "transition" and that of "transformation." I will not follow this distinction, but use the two words synonymously. The latter term designates a model of transition which does not necessarily involves change of political elites and rulers. In this text I use these words synonymously.

Socialist Realism and a new shift towards the Western paradigm of contemporary art, which was presented as a pluralistic and open cultural model free of discrimination and exclusion. The term "contemporary art" was popularized and implemented by a number of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular the Soros Foundation, whose autonomous regional program "Soros Centers for Contemporary Art" (henceforth SCCA) was one of the main mechanisms of this transition.

I would like to start with the concept of "transition," which invaded the cultural rhetoric of the nineties. Why was this concept so indispensable for the language of art criticism and of curators, artists and cultural managers? How did the concept of "transition" enter the vocabulary of the SCCA officers and march hand in hand with the new language of contemporary art? Why were the SCCAs making a transition to "contemporary art" and not to any other kind of art? And why, after 1989, did the nonconformists (the cultural dissidents) begin to be called contemporary artists? There are many questions concerning cultural transition of the nineties that still wait answers, and although I cannot completely account for the complexity of these questions here, I will suggest some starting points from which an investigation might begin.

Transition and Transitology

The word "transition" is unavoidable when one attempts to understand those processes in which most of the former socialist countries were caught up during the 1990s. The popularity of this concept in the region was precipitated, in part, by a new and influential academic and political paradigm known as "transformation studies," or

"transitology," a discourse that followed from the modernization theories of the late 1940s. Transitology uses the concept of "transition" to examine and support a tendency that evolved in world politics of the second half of the last century – namely, the fall of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, and the massive transition of countries to a Western political and economic model. Within the social sciences transitology emerged as a new area of research after the gradual fading of Area Studies (set up in the late 1940s), as well as of Soviet and Comparative Communist Studies (established at the beginning of the Cold War). Transitology transcended its purely theoretical nature and in the hands of Western governments became a foreign policy tool used to promote democratic and market reforms in the countries of the Second and the Third World. In its two hypostases (as pure academic discipline, and as practical policy-making) transitology became instrumental in implementing a series of radical political and economic transformations in the post-authoritarian and post-totalitarian states, which may explain why the word "transition" acquired such a special significance especially at the peripheries of the Western world.

But the idea of transition is not a strictly political or economic one. Richard Koselleck links the concept of "transition" to the notion of "epochal threshold" (*Epochenschwelle*), which emerged through the end of the eighteenth century as a new historical consciousness and a new understanding of lived time that he considers to be the true beginning of modernity. "Epochal consciousness" is an awareness of living in a

transitional period, when "history no longer takes place in time, but rather through time."[2] A transitional stage is experienced simultaneously as an end and as a beginning – between an "afterward no longer" and a "beforehand not yet."[3] Transitional time is like a intermediary lacking an ontological basis of its own and existing only as a point of connection between times understood as past and as future. Regarded from this perspective transition appears as one of the most crucial concepts for the understanding of modernity.

Marshall Berman's differentiation between "modernism," "modernization" and "modernity" is also helpful for discussing the concept of "transition." Berman suggested that one must make a clear distinction between these concepts which share the same root, arguing that "modernity" is the historical category which expresses a new mode of experiencing space and time, the self and others; that "modernism" is the cultural term which registers the new visions and values of a certain epoch; and that "modernization" must be regarded in technological terms, for it designates social processes that bring the maelstrom of the modern age into being.[4] From the perspective of this tripartite structure the idea of transition, as it was used in Eastern Europe during the nineties, appears as a process of modernization. Transitology is a component of political technology, a foreign-policy tool used by the Western governments to modernize the peripheries. Academic transitology produced knowledge and expertise which was passed through various

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[2] Reinhart Koselleck and Todd Samuel Presner, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 165.
[3] Ibid., 155.
[4] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 15-17.

institutional mechanisms in the form of recommendations, directives, grants and credits

to the local Eastern European elites.

The logic of transitology and the basic assumptions behind it are that "any

country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition

toward democracy."[5] This implies that "nearly 100 countries"[6] located in seven regions

of the world,[7] which towards the end of the last century emerged from totalitarian and

authoritarian regimes, were expected, irrespective of their religious, cultural, and national

distinctiveness, to perform a violent transformation and integrate themselves into the

global world of liberal democracy and the free market. Towards the end of the decade

and especially early into the next century it became more and more clear that many

countries did not register considerable progress on the path to democracy and that their

transitions had stalled. The failure of these "gray-zone countries" to reach the "post-

transitological" stage of democratic "consolidation" or "normalization" led some

transitologists to question the validity of their major assumptions, and to call for an "end

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[5] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002), 6.

[6] "Approximately 20 in Latin America, 25 in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, 30 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 10 in Asia, and five in Middle East." Ibid., 6-7.

[7] "In the last quarter of the twentieth century, trends in seven different regions converged to change the political landscape of the world: 1) the fall of right-wing authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s; 2) the replacement of military dictatorships by elected civilian governments across Latin America from late 1970s through the late 1980s; 3) the decline of authoritarian rule in parts of East and South Asia starting in the mid 1980s; 4) the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s; 5) the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of 15 post-Soviet republics in 1991; 6) the decline of one-party regimes in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of the 1990s; 7) a weak but recognizable liberalizing trend of in some Middle Eastern countries in the 1990s." Ibid., 5.

to the transition paradigm."[8] But this did not mean that the West had given up on the idea of promoting democracy throughout global grey-zones, but rather that the Western governments and academia were encouraged to find other more effective tools for achieving this goal.

As I have observed transitology flowed logically from the "modernization theories" method of the fifties and sixties. The latter dominated the political and social sciences, and by extension the US foreign-policy during the period of so-called "embedded liberalism." In the words of Walt Rostow, who was one of the major proponents of this theory, modernization came as "a new post-colonial relationship between the northern and the southern halves of the Free World… As the colonial ties are liquidated, new and most constructive relationships can be built… a new partnership among free men – rich and poor alike."[9] Modernization theories analyzed political transformation in terms of long-term socio-economic processes, explaining the emergence of democracy in terms of capitalist development, modernization and the growth of affluence. This sociological model "measured" societies according to their position on a "developmental" scale, in accordance with a series of dichotomies. The main dichotomy – "traditional" versus "modern society" – gathered an entire gamut of conflicting oppositions: folk-urban, *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*, status-to-contract, cosmopolitan-local, sacred-secular, land-cash, illiteracy-enlightenment, resignation-ambition, piety-pleasure, mobile individual-static individual, projective psyche-

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[8] Ibid., 19.
[9] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 16.

introjective psyche, trousers-shalwars, fedora-fez, etc. Non-Western societies were ranked or "audited" (to use a term from Daniel Lerner's popular book *The Passing of Traditional Society*) according to how they were positioned in relation to these dichotomies.[10] "The Moderns, on one side are cosmopolitan, urban, literate, usually well-off, and seldom devout – and the Traditionals on the other side – they are just the opposite."[11] Lerner proposed three character types: 1) the Traditionals, 2) the Moderns, and 3) the Transitionals. The third are the "societies-in-a-hurry;" they are in the state of becoming, negotiating between two poles: the enlightened progress of the Moderns, on one side, and the static ignorance of the Traditionals, on the other. To put it in Lerner's words, who examined the traditional society of the Middle East: "what the West is… the Middle East seeks to become."[12]

The Transitionals are transitional in every aspect sharing characteristics of both archetypes (Traditional and Modern) without being one or the other. For instance, a Transitional is someone who attends to the mass media but cannot read, persisting in the so-called post-literate state;[13] s/he has picked up new desires from Hollywood movies, but cannot satisfy or materialize them due to the lack of corresponding social and economic institutions capable of providing adequate opportunity for mobility. Such imbalances needed to be addressed. Modernization theorists argued that contact with Western film and radio would help the post-literate Transitional to make a transition into

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[10] See Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958).
[11] Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, 13.
[12] Ibid., 47.
[13] Ibid., 14.

the media of print, and would also motivate them to achieve increased efficiency, greater skills, and material rewards.

But modernization theory soon came under attack, mainly because of its methodology, as modernization theories were constructed on totalizing systems that favored macro-historical or macro-sociological analysis inspired by earlier sociological models. The new generation of sociologists, which focused on the transitional type, called for the development of more efficient tools for understanding the nature of democracy in the seventies and eighties. Their paradigm shift demanded more positivistic approaches and a higher degree of specialization and fragmentation of the field of study.

Dankwart Rustow was among to first to abandon the macro-analysis model in his 1970 article "Transition to Democracy."[14] Driven by an interest in the nature of democracy, Rustow asked himself the following question: "What conditions make democracy possible and what conditions make it thrive?" The question was not new, as theories of political change have existed for a long time. The novelty was Rustow's new "dynamic" model, known also as a "procedural" or "genetic" model which challenged the "functionalist" or the "structural" methods of the modernization theorists. Instead of working within a structural field limited by oppositional sets (e.g. modern-traditional, folk-urban, *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*, status-contract, etc.) Rustow proposed a method that favored diachrony over synchrony, cause over correlation, and concrete empirical analyses over vague theoretical speculations. The new "dynamic" method recuperates the

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[14] Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3 (1970), 337.

discredited category of causality asking for a set of concrete "why," "how," and "what" questions: e.g. "how is democracy possible," and "why are some countries democratic while others are not?"[15] Rustow's paper has been considered one of the foundations of transitology whereas its title "Transition to Democracy" became a popular political slogan.

The institutionalization of this new paradigm began in the late eighties, when a group of scholars associated with the Woodrow Wilson Center at Princeton University published *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* – a collective analysis on the progress of democratization in Latin America.[16] The book has established the canon for the new sub-discipline, framing it in terms of "comparative studies of political modernizing processes since the Second World War."[17] The authors, however, did not yet discuss Gorbachev's politics of "new thinking" and the new democratic changes in the USSR, but with the collapse of the communist governments in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the new method started to gain ground in social science departments. By the early nineties transitology began to displace older methodologies. For instance, specialists in "area studies," as well as those who were working in the Soviet and comparative

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[15] The author illustrates the method by bringing in two case studies in which he analyzes Sweden and Turkey's transitions to democracy. The new method makes a clear delimitation of each country's period of transition, pointing out how each country's transitional stage varies in length. For instance, Britain's transition to democracy lasted from before 1640 to 1918, Sweden's lasted only from 1890 to 1920, while in the case of Turkey the process of Westernization began in 1945 and is still underway. Ibid., 347-350.

[16] Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

[17] Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience*, 1st MIT Press ed., Studies in contemporary German social thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 31.

communist studies, began to be replaced by highly constricted and specialized

transitologists, who favored specific case studies based on empirical evidence.[18]

The main task of pure or academic transitology during the nineties was to provide

an explanation for the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Communist regimes, as

well as to develop new theories and prescriptions for more effective political and

economic modernization in the transitional regions. Practical or applied transitology, on

the other hand, was used (like modernization theory in its own time) as a policy-making

tool that helped implement and introduce theory into practice. The two acted in tandem:

theoreticians forged new tools and invented new strategies and the practitioners together

with the local elites implemented them by means of various programs funded by Western

governments and diverse private agencies and foundations. These implementations were

first and foremost concerned with dismantling the socialist economic and political

system, and the specialists in transition assisted the local elites in building new

democratic political institutions, establishing new fiscal policies, promoting deregulation

and the elimination of subsidies, in short enacting new capitalist mechanisms.

Transitology differs from its predecessors in several ways. For instance, in their

time modernization theorists were critical of the European colonialists who were

exclusively interest in modernizing only the local elites. The modernization theorists

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[18] For the emergence of the paradigm of transitology see Frank Bönker, Klaus Müller, and
Andreas Pickel, *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary
Approaches* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 4. On the "Area Studies" see David L.
Sills and Robert King Merton, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York:
Macmillan, 1968). University Grants Committee, "Report of the Sub-Committee on Oriental,
Slavonic, East European and African Studies," (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961);
H. A. R. Gibb, *Area Studies Reconsidered* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London, 1963).

suggested new approaches that allowed a wider impact on the field. Such new media as the radio and the cinema were regarded as the most efficient tools of modernization, tools that would help ignite the spirit of progress among the postcolonial masses. Applied transitology is different in this regard, even seeming at times to return to the agenda of European colonialism. Mainstream transitology ignores the masses and puts its stress on the local elites, designating them as the sole agents of change and democratization. Rustow stresses that the transition to democracy "uniformly begins only when elites make a conscious decision to negotiate a political settlement through a procedural consensus on the rules of the game."[19] And indeed, in most of the Eastern European countries the transformations were made during the 1990s from above, by and for the elites, a fact that suggests that these were not revolutions but restorations.

Although as a discourse and as an instrument of foreign politics transitology may seem new, its major assumptions are not. The belief that the Western political and economic model is the final destination for the rest of the world has its origins in the Age of Enlightenment. Transition is a new word for the two-century old idea of progress, and some of transitology's main assumptions were formulated along with it. The Marquis de Condorcet – reflecting at the end of the eighteenth century on the future of progress – asked rhetorically: "Will all nations one day attain the state of civilization which the most enlightened, the freest and the least burdened by prejudices, such as the French and the

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[19] Rustow quoted in James Hughes, "Transition Models and Democratization in Russia," in *Russia after the Cold War*, ed. Mike Bowker and Cameron Ross (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2000), 26.

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Anglo-Americans, have attained already?"[20] Perhaps it would have pleased him to know

that two hundred and fifty years later his vision would re-emerge (not in the interrogative

but in the indicative mood) to state the main task of the new paradigm of transitology:

> The common thread uniting the diverse transition approaches is a central
> assumption that the historical experience of transformation from
> authoritarianism to democracy and the emergence of capitalism in the
> states of Western Europe and North America in the eighteenth century
> provide generalisable lessons and an analytical framework for
> understanding and promoting similar processes of change and outcomes in
> other states. The basic premise is self-evidently normative and linear: that
> the values, structures and political procedures of advanced Western
> democracies are the most developed and should be transplanted.[21]

This formulation of transitology does not differ very much from Condorcet's.

"Prejudices," for example, have become "authoritarianism," whereas "freedom" and

"civilization" have been translated into "democracy" and "capitalism."

Condorcet was not alone in proposing the Western path of progress and

modernization to the rest of the world, and among many other early advocates of this idea

were such figures as Montesquieu, Sir James Steuart, William Robertson, Thomas Paine,

David Hume and Adam Smith.[22] One may also find an early prototype for transitology

and its method of gradual improvement over a series of stages in the discipline of the

philosophy of history that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries dividing

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[20] Marquis de Condorcet, "The Future Progress of the Human Mind," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 27.
[21] Hughes, "Transition Models and Democratization in Russia," 21.
[22] Albert Hirschman quoted in Bönker, Müller, and Pickel, *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, 226.

time into chains of historical phases, stages and steps of development. In Condorcet's model of history there are nine stages leading up to a tenth in which reason wins over superstition and ignorance; in Giambattista Vico's model there are three stages that society must pass through in order to create equality for all; in Adam Smith there are four ages that lead to the highest "age of Commerce."

But despite its roots in the Western project of Enlightenment, transitology has its own particularities. To put it briefly: transitology is the enlightenment of the non-Westerner "other"; it is progress for the non-Western world; it is a tool, a mechanism of political technology; it operates under the assumption that the West has already reached the stage, the phase and the age of progress, and that now is the time to help others. Conflicting methodologies about how to make such changes exist among the Western sociologists of transition, but despite differing political and methodological agendas, the opposing camps seemed (at least during the nineties) to agree that the world was moving towards progress and democracy. The adepts of the "dynamic" method called the final stage "post-transitology," "normalization" or "consolidation" into liberal-democratic regimes, while the other more speculative camp of "functionalist" sociologists theorizing the Eastern and Central Europe transitions in broader historical terms, regarded it in terms of a "retrieval" in which the non-Western nations would attempt to complete the project of Enlightenment and modernity by "catching-up" with the West.[23]

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[23] This is Jürgen Habermas' view. See Claus Offe, "An Excursion to the Transitology Zoo," in *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. Frank Bönker, Klaus Müller, and Andreas Pickel (Lanham, Md; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 251.

The Cultural Transition: The SCCA Model

As transitology filled the vacuum left after the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, its main postulates soon began to be felt in the domains of art and culture. The general direction was set towards negotiating for the arts a different social status. If the Politburo regarded art as an important tool for educating the masses, treating it as production and placing it next to the realms of politics and economics, then in the re-emerging capitalist world the autonomous institution of art was assigned to the non-profit sector and left to float free in the real world of the market. During the nineties, when the impoverished states were dealing mainly with urgent economic and political issues, the process of the democratization and the modernization of culture were mainly carried out by several foreign foundations.

The transition in art manifested first of all in the shift from a socialist cultural model, with Socialist Realism as the official doctrine (and nonconformism as the unofficial) to the new Western paradigm of "contemporary art." The idea of contemporary art was popularized and implemented by a number of public and private Western foundations and NGOs, and in particular by the Soros Foundation whose autonomous regional program "Soros Centers for Contemporary Art" (SCCA) was one of the main mechanisms of this transition. Unlike other public and private foreign foundations, which mostly provided resources for art and culture, the SCCAs were both financing and enacting mechanisms; they shared a common strategy elaborated by an international board of experts, which consisted of influential figures of the Western art

world and, most importantly, they acted through a coordinated effort of twenty-one art

centers which expanded geographically and ideologically from Prague to Alma-Aty.[24]

Their impact, therefore was much greater than that of other mechanisms of the cultural

transition.

The philosophy behind the activities of the SCCAs can be discussed using some

of the key concepts and postulates that have influenced George Soros – the financial

entrepreneur who established the Soros Foundation in 1984. Over the years the main

source of inspiration for Soros remained the writings of his distinguished tutor at the

London School of Economics, the influential liberal thinker Karl Popper. The name of

the managerial group that coordinated the work of his foundation, the Open Society

Institute, points toward one of Popper's most well-known works of social theory – the

Open Society and Its Enemies (1945). The book postulates that an open society is a

society based on the notion of fallibility; it is a society where truth arises from an ongoing

negotiation between the people and the state through the institutions of civil society that

help mediate this process. But an open society cannot fully emerge until the "enemies" of

this open society are eradicated. For Popper, those enemies are four philosophers whose

social thought has contributed to the emergence of authoritarian and totalitarian "closed

societies" ruled by ideologues who, among other things, believe that the laws of history

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[24] "The first SCCA was established in Budapest by the Soros Foundation Hungary in 1985. In 1992, two additional SCCAs were opened in Prague and Warsaw, and in 1993-94, the network expanded to a total of 16 SCCAs located in 15 countries. By 1998 there were 20 SCCAs located in 18 countries. "The SCCAs are open art centers. They maintain information on international grants, scholarships, arts program, exhibitions and other events. …The SCCAs support artistic experiments which broaden the aesthetic borders of visual culture." Quoted from the "SCCA Network" (brochure) published by Open Society Institute Budapest, 1998.

can be known and understood, and that once they are, the machinery of history can be tuned to accommodate the needs of humankind. According to Popper, such a mistaken teleology inevitably leads to totalitarian politics and to a form of social "tribalism."[25]

These ideas, briefly presented here, became guiding principles in the agenda of the Open Society Institute. Transferring the concept of open and closed societies to the activities of its SCCA program, one may say that the term "contemporary art," which these centers popularized in the former socialist countries, embodied the cultural principles and agenda of the open societies. Contemporary art, which has been regarded in the West as the main successor of the historical avant-garde, was called on to replace outdated and ostensibly bankrupt aesthetic ideals of the closed societies, concerned with a social realist depiction of broad historical processes. Thus the SCCAs, established from the mid-eighties to the second half of the nineties in almost every post-Soviet country and in some of the former republics of the USSR, were instruments of a transition to an alternative cultural model formulated on a different ideological understanding of society, history, and truth.

In a society constructed on the principle of fallibility, the institution of art is also to be regarded as a segment of civil society and as a platform for exercising democracy,[26] and democratic principles are to be inscribed in the very structure of its institutions. Modeled on Western corporate structures, with a governing board of experts that legislated the activities of the office managers, the Soros Centers introduced local artistic

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[25]Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Golden Jubilee Edition (London: Routledge, 1995), 260.
[26] "SCCA Network" (brochure) published by Open Society Institute Budapest, 1998.

communities to new cultural values and behaviors: launching exhibitions of contemporary art, organizing seminars on the history of contemporary art, encouraging international collaborations among artists, providing access to information, inspiring artists to explore and experiment with new media, and providing training in writing projects, grant proposals, and matters of cultural management. The SCCAs spent considerable effort and resources on setting a new cultural model of the production and distribution of culture. At the core of the new model was the nonprofit or the non-governmental organization (NGO), which would secure funding from private and public sources in order to redistribute money among the local artistic communities. One can use some of Popper's concepts to describe the main agents of the new model (the SCCAs) in terms of the "impersonal institutions" of the open society, which act indirectly within a pre-established legal framework and are better suited for large-scale democratic politics.[27] The SCCAs were among the first examples of new impersonalized institutions run, not by artists (as in the artists' unions), but mainly by managers, who were recruited among ostensibly open-minded art historians and critics.

The transition did not only result in new cultural strategies and methods but also brought into public cultural discourse a series of new themes and motifs, which, as was to be expected, focused on central issues of liberal politics. Most of the events financed and organized by the centers dealt with issues of individual freedom and identity politics, and the artists, curators, and critics directed the public's opinion towards new topics that dealt with the representation of gender, sexuality, marginality, ethnicity, desire, and the body.

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[27] Popper, Karl, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 126 and 360.

This often lead to tense relationships with the local cultural bureaucracies, who often appeared in the role of the preservers of national values and who often regarded SCCA's cultural policy, generously financed from abroad, as a threat to the local heritage. These cultural contradictions resembled, to some extent, the frictions between the liberals and the nationalists over issues related to the division of the political and economic spheres.

Critics of the SCCAs often asked, as did the Romanian art historian Erwin Kessler: "What is the main task of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art – to detect and sustain artists, indifferently of the genres and the techniques in which they choose to express themselves, or to reformulate the current aesthetics and to re-dimension it according to some (imported) 'standards' that are in used in the contemporary world?"[28] Many would agree that the answer is in fact stated in the second half of this question, for most of the SCCAs, especially in their initial phase, directed their main efforts and resources toward promoting contemporary art, which at that time was primarily recognized according to such new genres, techniques and forms of expression as installation, performance, video, and computer art. The activities of the centers aimed at a rapid modernization of the arts, resembling in this regard similar processes taking place in other fields (from banking to commerce and agriculture), and that may be accurately described, using once again Jürgen Habermas' definition of transition, as the process of "retrieval" and of "catching-up" with the West.

This was especially evident in the annual exhibitions organized by many centers, when the contemporary art shown in the gallery simultaneously introduced the spectator

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[28] Erwin Kessler, *Cearta* (Bucuresti: Nemira, 1997), 123.

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to the latest products of Western consumer electronics, communications and information technologies. Only in the final phases of the Soros Centers did many directors of these institutions became more suspicious and critical of the role and aims of their institutions, bringing to the public problematic issues related to the unequal character of the dialogue between Western and the Eastern European cultural representatives caused often by the patronizing attitudes of the Westerners. Some directors questioned and sought to redefine the role of the institution of contemporary art in society, launching projects that addressed the necessity of publishing more critical and extensive material and educating the public on the history of contemporary art and its role in a democratic society.[29]

Towards the end of the nineties the Open Society Institute proceeded gradually to reduce funding for the SCCA network. SCCA staff members were advised to register as independent NGOs and to search for alternative sources of financing.[30] In 1999 members of the SCCA Network created the International Contemporary Art Network (ICAN), which was launched primarily for fundraising purposes, but their efforts have not met with significant success. To date only a few of these centers maintain a low level of activity.

While the new economic and political models promoted by the economic and political transition (i.e. the free market and liberal democracy) have been studied and described extensively, the origins of the new paradigm of "contemporary art" –

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[29] See for instance Alenka Pirman, *Research & Education in Contemporary Art in Eastern and Central Europe: on Initiation, Development, and Implementation of a Network Program 1998-2000* (Ljubljana: Open Society Institute Slovenia, 2000).

[30] "…each SCCA should fundraise 25% of non-Soros money in order to gain the other 25% of its 1998 budget from its National OSI, with the deadline of 1 July 1999." *SCCA-Zagreb Strategy and Business Plan 2000 – 2003* at http://snap.archivum.ws/ [accessed December 7, 2008].

publicized by the SCCA network – still remain obscure. I want to stress that no literature

addresses the questions of when, how, why, and where the appellation "contemporary

art" emerged, or why art today is called "contemporary." This new form of temporality

remains a mystery, for although this word has been used for a century, it is still difficult

to say what is contemporary, or how long contemporaneity lasts. In art history, for

example, the contemporary art period begins after 1945, indicating more than half a

century of contemporaneity. In recent years scholars have proposed to investigate the

anthropology of the contemporary,[31] but in art, where this form of temporality has been

most exploited it is still largely neglected, especially where it concerns the phrase

"contemporary art." Only in France (one of the crucibles of "modern art") has a curious

debate called "the crisis of contemporary art" emerged in recent decades.[32] But

unfortunately, the French debate is little more than a public dispute among intellectuals,

and lacks an analysis which could provide a historical foundation for understanding the

contemporary art model implemented by the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art

throughout Eastern Europe.[33]

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[31] Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[32] On the French debate around the "crisis in contemporary art" see Michaud, Yves, *La crise de l'art contemporain: utopie, démocratie et comédie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997). Michaud, Yves, *L'art á l'état gazeux: Éssai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2003). Sourgins, Christine, *Les mirages de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Table ronde, 2005).
[33] For a discussion of two institutional historical models which were the first to use the adjective "contemporary" in their names, as well as how their practice may relate to that of the SCCA network see Octavian Eşanu *The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: the managed avant-garde*. Published by CCCK Kiev with the occasion of the Periferic 8 "Art as Gift Festival" in Iasi, Romania.
Available online at http://www.thinktank.nl/ccck/Esanu_ManagedAvant-garde.pdf

The overall impact of transitology on Russian political and economic life cannot

be compared with its effects in other post-socialist countries and republics of the former

USSR. This country's former status of superpower and the suspicious attitudes of the

reformed elites towards every foreign project or initiative, as well as the resistance,

traditional for this culture, to Westernization, are among many other factors that

prevented the proper functioning of this Western neoliberal paradigm of democratization

and modernization. Russian political scientists, however, did not ignore or neglect the

impact of the Western transitological method on both the local political and social

sciences as well as on the broader processes of democratization.[34] Likewise, the effects of

the Soros Foundation and of the Moscow SCCA programs on the local culture were not

as dramatic as they were in other post-Soviet countries.[35] This may be also partially

explained by the fact that this city had also other Western foundations and councils

supporting local art and culture. Nevertheless, the impact of the Soros Center in Russia

cannot be ignored, for it was one of the main mechanisms of the cultural transitology,

carrying out important new projects and initiatives independently, or as part of the

broader efforts of the SCCA network.

This chapter suggests that the cultural transformations that occurred in the post-

Soviet space throughout the nineties must be placed within a broader socioeconomic

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[34] On the discussion of transitology within a Russian context see Vladimir Gel'man, *Transformatsiia v Rossii: politicheskii rezhim i demokraticheskaia oppozitsiia* (Moskva: Moskovskii obshchestvennyi nauchnyi fond, 1999).

[35] In Moscow the activities of the Soros Foundation were accompanied by a series of scandals that lasted throughout the nineties and into the next century. See for instance "Russia: Soros Foundation to leave. (Open Society Institute suspends services in Russia in wake of office building scandal)," *IPR Strategic Business Information Database* (2002). http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/summary_0199-1884918_ITM [accessed, February 22, 2009].

context. In the discussion of KD's post-1989 *Journeys* that takes place in the next chapter, occasional references to the Soros Center of Contemporary Art, the Soros Foundation and some other marks and signs of transition to a new political or cultural model crop up in the works and in the writings of some artists and spectators. These references and indications may be regarded as manifestations of transition, and likewise most of the art from this period may be regarded under the heading "art of transition" – a category which has been used by scholars to discuss cultural processes in other transitological regions of the world.[36]

In some countries of Latin America, where the "transition to democracy" and to the free market were performed by military juntas during the seventies, local intellectuals have frequently employed the concept of transition to analyze recent social transformations as well as to examine various cultural processes and artistic practices. In Chile, for example, sociologists, philosophers, artists, and art critics have addressed Pinochet's "transition to democracy" and to the free market. Tomás Moulian describes these traumatic historical events in terms of a capitalist counter-revolution that was called upon to perform the radical process of modernization. Willy Thayer, from another hand, has brought the discussion of transition to the field of culture, suggesting that under the banner of transition to democracy the military junta has enforced a critique of representation, carrying out a radical assault on the established codes of signification,

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[36] See for instance Masiello, Francine, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis,* Latin America Otherwise (Durham N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2001).

which is a task that was once accomplished by the radical artistic avant-garde.[37] Discussing the art of transition in the countries of the Southern Cone (Chile and Argentina) Francine Masiello writes: "The art of transition thus evolves from duality and movement: a transition in political strategy from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy; a transition in cultural practices from focus on social class alone to matters of sexuality and gender; a transition in styles of representation that weave between modernist yearning and postmodernist pastiche."[38] This passage not only suggests that the art of transition may not be necessarily bounded only by the geographical or the temporal, but also that it may be regarded as a field of force that emerges in between certain conflicting limits, betrayed by such spatial-temporal constructions as "to and fro," "before and after" – formulas that belong to the trope of transition.

In Eastern Europe, where the transition to new cultural models, codes, and forms of representation was relatively smooth and steady, the artists and writers have been reluctant to start a critical appraisal of the broader mechanisms involved in these socioeconomic and cultural transformations. Despite significant differences in how the transition to liberal democracy unfolded in Eastern Europe and in other transitional regions of the world, there is much evidence which suggests similarities and parallels, encouraging a more general interpretation.

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[37] See Tomas Moulian, *Chile Actual: Anatomia de un Mito*, Coleccion Sin norte (Santiago, Chile: ARCIS Universidad: LOM Ediciones, 1997). Thayer, Willy "El golpe como consumacion de la vanguardia" *Extremoccidente*, no. 2 (Ano I): 54-58.

[38] Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*, 3.

CHAPTER 4

[KD]'s *Journeys* After 1989

This chapter analyzes the effects of the socioeconomic transition on the evolution

of post-1989 *Journeys*. After having introduced in Chapter 1 the tradition of Moscow

Conceptualism, which constituted KD's intellectual and aesthetical environment, and

after having discussed in Chapter 2 the Soviet, or the before-period of KD, which lasted

from 1976 until the disintegration of the group in 1989,[1] I made an abrupt transition in

Chapter 3 from a detailed treatment of KD's art and aesthetics to a more general

discussion of the phenomenon of transition in Eastern Europe. This chapter returns to KD

in order to point to the effects of the socioeconomic transition on the *Journeys*. I must

remind my reader that this dissertation is neither a history of, nor a monographical work

on KD, but rather an analytical exploration of aesthetic, artistic and institutional changes

that have transpired in the narrative of the *Journeys* during the transition from socialism

to capitalism.

Transition annuls one order in order to establish a new one. As the new order

begins to enable new and unfamiliar mechanisms of control and regulation, the remains

of the old order fragment into history. The peculiar temporality and duration of transition,

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[1] Nowhere in the *Journeys* it is stated that KD broke up in 1989, but only that the artists stopped
using the abbreviation KD to sign their post-1989 work (Monastyrsky, 1998, p. 783). However, in
an electronic correspondence with the author, Monastyrsky confirmed that it is right to say that
"in 1989 KD broke up (*raspustilsea, rasformirovalsea*) and the group reunited in 1995 as [KD]."
A. Monastyrsky e-mail message to author, February 25, 2009.

as it is briefly discussed below, also determines the general structure of this chapter. The

chapter does not proceed chronologically but topically. It divides the material of the after-

Journeys[2] into several subsectioned themes, which vary in length, analyzing them from

the perspective of the most important changes and adaptations that took place during the

transition to the new socioeconomic order. The chapter deals with a series of

fragmentations and rearrangements that occurred in KD's aesthetic and artistic practices,

starting with a discussion of the temporality of transition based on the evolution of the

post-1989 volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City*. These volumes were intended by

their makers to amount to a consecutive, well-connected, and eloquent narrative,

proceeding chronologically book after book or phase after phase from the Soviet eighties

into the post-Soviet and Russian nineties,[3] but this intention was suspended by the

ruptural nature of transition. This chapter also analyzes the following: a series of new

words and concepts that entered the vocabulary of Moscow conceptualists during the

transition, words that point to broader social transformations and to various mechanisms

of transitology; a new artistic medium toward which the cultural transition impelled these

artists, causing them to alter established ways of interacting with their public; a new form

of collectivity that emerged after 1989, altering the relations formed among the members

of the group, as well as between the artists and their public; a different way of journeying

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[2] Andrei Monastyrsky offered most of the material discussed in this chapter to me in the form of his manuscripts. Although these last four-five volumes (the tenth one is not complete) have not been printed, some of their contents have been made available on-line, both in Russian and English at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html. I have cited this material as Andrei Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols," (unpublished, unpaginated: 2008).

[3] Monastyrsky, Foreword to Volume Seven. Ibid.

outside the city; a new configuration of the Kievogorskoe Field; a new style of writing

spectators' reports; new observations, words, materials, places, events, people – all of

which reflect the broader social change that takes place during the transition from

socialism to capitalism.

Temporality of Transition

KD's transition from its before to its after-period took place during a time span

that loosely stretches from 1989 to 1995. This periodization is, however, approximate,

one of the main reasons being the peculiar temporality of transition, which does not flow

in a linear and sequential pattern but appears to twist back upon itself, moving among

confused temporal residues and agglutinations. If the first five volumes showed a smooth

chronology of actions and events, then the post-1989 actions, volumes and phases

evolved according to the new logic in which the group was caught up during its transition

from KD to [KD] between 1989 and 1995.[4]

Literature from various fields describes the turn of the eighties and the early

nineties in terms of a historical "limbo," a time when it seemed as if the very notion of

time had been abolished by some new global transnational authority. The space once

called USSR was immersed in a political vacuum: the old power was no longer effective

and the new one was not yet in effect. Writers often used the metaphor of the Romanian

flag with the black hole in the middle (the same black hole that pierced the Hungarian

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[4] Although the artists have used their name in square brackets [KD] only for two years (1995-97) I will use sometimes this transliteration in order to differentiate between KD before and after 1989.

flag in 1956) to describe this sublime historical moment of the vacuum of power.[5] Many

in Eastern Europe thought at the time that this was the moment of truth, the moment

when the many contradictions that had plagued this region for centuries would finally be

resolved. Their views were supported in part by sensational new opinions and

speculations produced in excess by many local and foreign writers. The American

historian Francis Fukuyama, for instance, prophesized a spectacular end of history,

arguing that the twentieth century's radical social ideologies had finally been negated,

and, in a Hegelian way, sublated, absorbed or reconciled dialectically within the

triumphant liberal democracy, which was expanding rapidly on the global level.[6] Many

other theories of the end were in vogue at the time. Extending through various

disciplines, they produced an entire gamut of ends (e.g. of art, of man, of utopia, of the

author, etc.), shocking many post-Soviet intellectuals who were still used to treating the

printed page with Byzantine awe.

In spite of the proliferation of ends, the turn of the nineties was also the time of

many new beginnings. Russian art historians and critics are still debating whether to

place the beginning of the transition to a new cultural pro-Western model in the year

1988 (the year of the Sotheby's auction); 1989, the more symbolically charged year of

the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the transition to market democracy for

almost a hundred countries on the globe; or, 1991 the year of the disintegration of the

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[5] See, for instance Slavoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Post-contemporary interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
[6] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, Toronto: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1992).

USSR. Some propose to set the beginning of the new epoch in Russian art, on the other hand, in 1990, arguing that during this year most of the radical changes took place within the Moscow art infrastructure.[7] 1990 was the year that the greatest number of officially registered artists' associations and organizations were formed, with many artists establishing new alternative spaces in what was not yet part of the highly profitable Moscow real estate business; it was also the year that it became clear that in order to be able to maintain a dialogue with the Western art world, the Muscovites needed to create their own domestic institutional system of contemporary art. 1990 was the year that the first Contemporary Art Center and Institute was planned, and the first Museum of Contemporary Art (Tsaritsyno) was opened; the year that the Soviet state made its first acquisitions of nonconformist or unofficial art; the year that the artists and their public interacted not in galleries and museums but in the streets and in the squats discussing and arguing about art; the year that many Moscow artists found their ideal spectator – the anonymous yet participating spectator (to use KD's vocabulary); it was, finally, the year that the first private contemporary art galleries began to emerge (Aidan Salakhova' "First Gallery" [*Pervaia Galerea*] in 1989, and "Guelman Gallery" and "Regina" in 1990).[8]

This was the general atmosphere among the former circles of unofficial artists at the turn of the nineties and until the middle of the decade. Despite rumors of the end of history and of art, many were very busy participating in all sorts of new activities and

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[7] For an example of literature that discusses the chronology of transition in Russian art see Natalia Sarkisian, "Eiforia: nastroenie i transformatsii art-soobschestva v 1990 godu," *Zhurnal'nyi zal: NLO*, no. 83 (2007). http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/83/sa39-pr.html [accessed December 1, 2008].

[8] Ibid., 6.

events organized at home and abroad. Like many other unofficial artists, the Moscow conceptualists traveled and exhibited intensely, mostly in the West. Numerous contemporary art centers and *kunstvereins* showed new art from the "Eastern bloc" to the Western public, exhibiting these artists at one time or another as Soviet nonconformists, Russian contemporary artists, or Moscow conceptualists. The confusion that persisted in these critical and art historical categories was also manifest in the chronology of the *Journeys* from the after-period.

Throughout his post-1989 texts, Monastyrsky often expresses his desire to avoid experimenting with history, insisting that he prefers to keep the flow of time logical, chronological, or consequential without unexplainable gaps or overlaps. This is, however, a preference with which the nature of transitional time interfered. In the foreword to the seventh volume, Monastyrsky pondered upon a problem that concerns the periodization of the *Journeys* after 1989.[9] The problem revolves around the following contradiction: although, the group actually ceased to exist in 1989, journeys or actions in the style of KD continued to take place uninterruptedly throughout the early nineties. This contradiction is tied to the first major fragmentation of KD, which triggered many others in turn. To address this paradox one must make a clear distinction between KD, the group of Moscow conceptualists, and the *Journeys Outside the City*, which was this group's aesthetic discourse, as noted in Chapter 1. In 1988 the *Journeys* documentation and the MANI archive was sold to Norton Dodge, and one year later the KD members disbanded. For the first time, then, the *Journeys* were literally distanced and distinct from their

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[9] Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

producers, a situation that also contributed to the subsequent distancing of their actions. Despite the group's disbandment two former members (Monastyrsky and Hänsgen) continued to make collective actions during the first half of the nineties. Thus, the problem that Monastyrsky needed to solve ten years later, when he began to assemble the continuation of the *Journeys*, was the following: should these actions be considered part of the *Journeys*' next sixth volume, or were they to be kept apart as individual works? In other words, should these works, which consisted predominantly of videos made by Monastyrsky (the self-proclaimed leader of the group) and Hänsgen (the last member to join KD in 1987 and Monastyrsky's wife) be considered collective actions?

In 2002, when Monastyrsky re-edited the forward to the seventh volume, he decided to count these works as part of KD's sixth phase (1991-94), also proposing a new chronology of the post-Soviet *Journeys*. In order to avoid inconsistencies and contradictions, Monastyrsky decided to abandon a commonsensical chronological order, and placed the actions of the sixth volume after those of the seventh. The temporal sequence of KD's aesthetical system during the transition from socialism to capitalism thus is arranged in the following order: Volume 5 (1987-89), Volume 7 (1995-99), Volume 6 (1991-94), Volume 8 (1999-2003). The yearly chronology of the actions organized during this period is the following: 1989, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1990, 1995.[10]

The transitional disruption of orderly and chronological time must have been especially difficult for Monastyrsky, who in spite of his openness to the mystical and the

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[10] See the post 1989 order of actions (1989-95) at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html

absurd, like many Soviet citizens, is respectful of history. He often regretfully compares the loose chronology of the nineties, with its temporal lapses and lacunae, to the consecutive, continuous, uninterrupted and compact phases and volumes of the before-period, which he often nostalgically referred to as "compact period" (*plotnyi period*), or the "classical KD."[11] The volumes that separate the fifth volume from the eighth appear in contrast patched and mended. This part of the *Journeys* may serve to illustrate the concept of transition, which philosophers have used synonymously with such concepts as mediation, negation and becoming. Transition was also used to describe the state of *kinesis* (movement) from possibility to actuality,[12] and historians have employed the notion of transition to speak about temporal leaps, historical breaks, suspensions, fluxes, shifts, ruptures, transformations, changes, metamorphoses, and various conversions and bifurcations. The skipping and lapsing in the chronology of the *Journeys* during the first half of the nineties suggests violence, anxiety, and unrest that alters meaning, order, and reason. Regarded from the perspective of all ten volumes of *Journeys Outside the City* produced by these artists to date, only the interfused sixth and seventh volumes, which account for actions organized from 1990 to 1995, may be called transitional.

One of the ways in which the arrangement of the nineties volumes of the *Journeys* reveals the peculiar temporality of transition is in the "shape" of their order: cut sharp at one end, and loose, indefinite and uncertain at the other. The before, or Soviet period of

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[11] Foreword to Volume Seven in Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

[12] See some short remarks on the concept of "transition" in philosophy in Søren Kierkegaard, Jane Chamberlain, and Jonathan Rée, *The Kierkegaard Reader*, Blackwell Readers (Oxford; Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 193-6.

KD is firmly established standing clearly materialized in the first five books of the

Journeys as the artists had always envisioned. The after-period of the *Journeys* is still

"unfastened," resembling an open-ended field of possibilities. The material is available

only online and its electronic virtuality does not possess the same clear materiality and

self-determination of the previous five volumes which are printed in book format. While

the transition has a clear beginning (1989) it lacks a clear end, suggesting that the after-

period of transition awaits its historical moment to become a new before, as it sediments

into new historic material. Likewise, the historical Soviet Union concluded symbolically

in 1989, and *de facto* in 1991, when the USSR broke apart and the transition to capitalism

began. However, it is more complicated to determine the end of this transition, for the

question of whether Russia has fully emerged to embrace a democratic model, and the

new pro-Western values prescribed by transitology is still widely debated.[13]

New Schizo- Terms in the Dictionary

After 1989 the lexicon of Moscow Conceptualism is populated by a series of new

words. Some of these words, beginning with the prefix "schizo-", emerged in the late

eighties when the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin translated and published an abridged

version of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and*

Schizophrenia, (the only available version of this work in Russian to date).[14] The

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[13] A large body of literature exists on this topic. See for instance one of the most recent books by Lilia Fedorovna Shevtsova, *Russia - Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies*.
[14] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *Kapitalism i shizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus*, trans. M. K. Ryklin (Moskva: INION, 1990).

conceptualists were inspired by this work's central concept of "schizoanalysis," applying it often to describe or express their own practice, as well to form their own terminology such as: "schizo-illustration," "schizo-China," or "schizo-analytical places of Moscow and the Moscow Region" (see Glossary). However, unlike many terms from the before-period, including "empty actions," or "demonstrative" and "exposition fields" (regularly deployed to describe and analyze actions), the schizo-concepts are treated inconsistently. References to the schizo- terms appear here and there throughout the seventh and the eighth volumes, but nowhere are they clearly explained nor is it even demonstrated how to handle them, which may suggest that they were orally rather than textually centered. They are nevertheless important from a sociological perspective, for they convey and express a number of concerns and processes that surfaced in the after-period of the *Journeys*. The overall sense of fragmentation and split, which is also denoted by this prefix, is felt on many levels of the post-1989 *Journeys*. It transpires above all in the altered relations among the members of [KD], in the temporal gaps of their chronology, but is also manifest in other elements and practices discussed below.

Fragmentation was also an issue for the Moscow conceptualists during the Soviet period but in a different way. At the time the schism ran along fundamental questions of ideology, with Soviet artists divided into official or unofficial, depending on the side they took in regard to the invasive general line of the Party. For example, in the eighties, Moscow conceptualists used in their lexicon the concept "artist-character," later extended

to include "spectator-character," and "critic-character."[15] The "character" part of these terms refers to a theatrical persona (*personazh*), and was used by artists to express the sense of duality that persisted in the everyday life of Soviet citizens. In some of his writings from that period Kabakov described this schism in terms of a parallel life, in which one worked during the day for the state and in the evening for him or herself. Various "characters" already inhabited his drawings during the seventies, and later in the eighties they moved into the communal space of the Soviet apartments recreated in his installations. In his memories he often describes the schism that divided the life of the Moscow unofficial artist.

> [The] third type to which I belong are the doubled figures, who look, on the one hand, like normal Soviet citizens but who also live a second life exhibiting at different unofficial exhibitions, not drawing what they were supposed to, selling their work where they were not expected to, and so forth. This 'doubling' is directly related to the problem of literary characters. The very existence of characters was related to the division of reality: within the unofficial circles you were not supposed to speak about your official membership in the Union of Artists, about official commissions, because this was simply indecent. But it was equally indecent to speak in your official workplace, in the publishing house for instance, about your unofficial work… a social schizophrenia.[16]

The appearance of new schizo-words in the vocabulary of KD suggests however, that this big Soviet divide that Kabakov mentions, the great schism that conditioned the Soviet citizen to wear a mask in order to defend him or herself from the unabashed

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[15] See also the entry "Artist-character" in the Glossary.
[16] Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 57.

intrusiveness of the state, had been replaced by more minuscule schisms. One significant

intellectual divide after 1989 concerned the relation of Moscow artists to the West. The

dichotomous concepts "Russia" and the "West" (*zapad*) entered the *Dictionary* of

Moscow conceptualists in the first half of the nineties. These two terms appeared after the

translation and publication in 1993 of Groys' article "Russia as the Unconscious of the

West" (*Rossia kak podsoznanie Zapada*).[17] After the collapse of the USSR the theme of

Russia's identity and its place in the world returned to the center of the country's

intellectual life.[18] In his article Groys defined "Russia" as the place where a number of

the destructive processes of Western civilization are summoned and conserved. The

instinctual "Russia" is the dark, self-destructive unconscious constituted from repressed

and forbidden impulses, which resists the rationality of the always conscious and lucid

"West." The Russia/West dichotomy is constructed along the same path that Groys had

already trod in the late seventies, when he defined Moscow Conceptualism as a

"romantic" and instinctual movement in contrast to the rationalism of its Western

counterpart (see Chapter 1). If Groys' late seventies constructions were drawn according

to the cultural opposites "romantic" versus "rationalist," "positivist" and "pragmatic"

then in the nineties the new dichotomy is framed within the discipline of psychoanalysis.

The "West" takes towards "Russia" a critical and moralizing function of the superego.

Groys even finds similarities between the Freudian psychoanalysis and the Russian

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[17] Groys, *Utopia i obmen*.

[18] Once again, like before the October revolution, the intellectual life of Russia's two capitals was divided between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. This becomes particularly clear at the turn of the century, when the artistic scene became polarized and fragmented into various anti-Western cultural and political fractions (e.g. the Euroasian nationalists, the National Bolsheviks).

Slavophiles' "Russian Idea,"[19] suggesting that the two theories emerged in order to help the Central European Jews and the Russians to resist the growing pressure of Western cultural imperialism.[20]

It was not accidental then that the "Russia" versus "West" dichotomy entered the vocabulary of Moscow conceptualists in the first half of the 1990s, when many of these artists were living a nomadic lifestyle, split in between Moscow and any one of a number of Western cities, and others had moved and settled permanently abroad. The dichotomy "Russia/West" appeared in order to signal a new turn in the relation between Russian intellectuals and the West. In Soviet times, the artists had certainly kept their eyes fixed on the West, and the tradition of Moscow Conceptualism emerged in part as an imaginary dialogue with Western art (see Chapter 1). But in the before-period, the West was not real. Groys writes: "…that West with which the Russian culture wanted to identify itself, it is not by any means the real West but a Russian phantasm, which does not exist outside Russia."[21] This was particularly the case in the Soviet period, for though the artists knew that the "West" existed somewhere, they had never experienced it in reality but as imaginary, either through the tinny *Voice of America* interrupted by the static of the short-wave radio, or in the glossy pages of art magazines and large coffee-table art books brought into the country by visitors or personnel of the foreign embassies in exchange for nonconformist Soviet art.

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[19] "Russian Idea" refers to Nicholas Berdyaev's theorization of freedom. In contrast to liberal individual freedom, or personalism the Russian Idea regards freedom as part of Christian community, which is often understood by the concept of *sobornost'*.
[20] Groys, *Utopia i obmen*, 245-58.
[21] Groys in Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 79.

To stress the role that such foreign books played for the unofficial artists in the Soviet times, Estonian art historian Sirje Helme coined the term "repro-avant-garde."[22] Often such a form of acquiring information about the evolution of Western art led to various misunderstandings, but this made it even more interesting. Recently, for example, Hungarian art historians have spoken of a "fruitful misunderstanding" of Pop Art in Hungary during the sixties, when under the influence of the Western advertising and media reproductions, local artists started to make pop-art-like paintings using motifs from the local world of folk and native peasant traditions.[23] In Moscow the situation was in many regards similar, and Moscow Conceptualism itself may be regarded as part of a "fruitful misunderstanding" of conceptual art by local artists.[24]

The emergence of the "Russia/West" dichotomy was a sign that this relation had begun to change. Gradually the phantasm "West" became more real as artists began to learn and experience it in their everyday lives. It was not accidental that the members of KD decided to reunite again in 1995. This year marked the end of a period of intense interest in post-Soviet art, a period which began in 1988 when the Sotheby's house opened a window for many Western collectors, curators and managers of contemporary art institutions. Towards the middle of the decade, as the shock of the sudden collapse of Soviet Union began to fade away, many foreigners started to lose interest in Russian art,

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[22] Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, Jan Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 2001), 168.

[23] See for instance Andrasi Gabor et al., *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1999).

[24] For an outright denial of the existence of a native Moscow conceptualism see Alexeev in Donskoy, Roshal, and Skersis, *Gnezdo (The Nest)*, 21.

re-directing their attention towards other regions of the world where more interesting processes were taking place. Artists, faced with the first capitalist recession in their lives, began to return to their pre-Sotheby's activities.[25]

The appearance of the "Russia/West" terms in the vocabulary of the conceptualists also marked the beginning of a new stage in the relation of these artists to the previous phantasm. As the West began to lose interest in Russian art, many artists began to change and then to express their own attitudes towards what they now perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the "real West." The 1994 exhibition *Interpol*, also called the "art show which divided East and West," was remembered for the scandalous accidents which involved the Israeli-Russian poet and artist Alexander Brener and the Russian-Ukrainian artist Oleg Kulik. In this international contemporary art exhibition organized in Stockholm, Brener destroyed the installation of the Chinese-American Wenda Gu; whereas Kulik took the role of the artist-dog and violently attacked and bit a spectator who had transgressed upon the territory Kulik had marked as his own, ignoring his sign "Danger!"[26] These accidents led to a collective protest against Brener and Kulik by the Western participants in *Interpol* and by the Swedish public, as well as to a new phase in the relations between Russian and Western art.

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[25] "Already by 1995 in the West there was a lack of interest towards Soviet art. Those who did not sink as far as to constantly re-produce their earlier works constantly searching for new markets returned to their previous activities." See Panitkov's text "About the Actions of the Seventh Volume of the Journeys Outside the CIty" (*Ob akzziakh 7 toma 'Poezdok za gorod'*) in Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

[26] See "An Open Letter to the Art World" in Eda Cufer and Viktor Misiano, eds., *Interpol: The Art Show which divided East and West* (Ljubljana: IRWIN, Moscow Art Magazine, 2000).

This incident is suggestive of other aspects that concern the cultural dialogue between the West and the rest of world. Groys, for instance, argues that during the most critical phases in the history of Western art its practitioners turned for insight and inspiration to the culture of the "other," to the non-Western or the "primitive" at the peripheries, hoping to find new solutions.[27] The European historical avant-garde is the good example of how artists in the West turned to the African mask and to the Japanese gravure in order to find ways out of the cultural impasse in which Western Europe found itself at the turn of the nineteenth century. The end of the eighties, argues Groys, was similar in many respects to the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century: many had hoped to find in the unofficial art and culture of the USSR new opportunities to revive Western art:

> The West was looking for a new form. The West expected from Russian artists just such a new form because they had naively assumed that the Russians followed their own alternative way of development. It was these expectations that provided a big impulse to the reception of Russian art in the West. But they did not receive from Russian artists the desired new form but only a new content in which the West was never particularly interested.[28]

Thus the "Russia/West" dichotomy contains a mutual disappointment. The West did not receive what it had looked for, and Russia, or, at least the Moscow conceptualists, realized that their aesthetic discoveries were of little interest to otherwise self-contained Western culture. In 1992 Monastyrsky and Hänsgen suggested the term "Local-Lore-

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[27] Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 81.
[28] Ibid.

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ness" ([*Kraevedenosti*], see Glossary) which perfectly renders the situation in which the Moscow conceptualists were presented in the West in public displays that resembled ethnographic exhibitions at the Museum of Natural History more than in exhibitions of contemporary conceptual art. The "Russia/West" dichotomy is the realization among the conceptualists that Moscow may be the capital of a vast empire, but an empire that exists at the periphery, as the political scientist Boris Kagarlitsky has recently put it.[29]

Bracketed [Totality]

At the turn of the nineties some of the unofficial artist groups that had functioned during the Soviet times began to fall apart. The main reasons for their disintegration were related, paradoxically as it may appear at first sight, to the increased opportunities offered to these artists by new galleries of contemporary art and many other private, or public cultural foundations. Many have suggested that it was these new possibilities, which began with the Sotheby's auction in 1988, that should be held accountable for the rapid deterioration of cordial relations among unofficial artists in general, and among the members of certain artist groups in particular.[30] One of the main reasons behind the breakup of many artist groups was the difficulty of equally dividing credit for collectively accomplished works. The case of the Moscow collective "Champions of the World" (*Chempiony mira*), which broke up in the late eighties, has been often offered as an

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[29] Boris Kagarlitsky, *Empire of the Periphery: Russia and the World System* (London; Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2008).

[30] On this issue see Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*.

illustration of the artists' separations over the issue of collective property.[31] Although the

division of property was not the main cause behind KD's 1989 divorce, the issue of

splitting the shares of collective authorships was one of the concerns of the after-1989

Journeys.

The very last page of the before-*Journeys* is called "The Activities of the Group

after 1989." Here Monastyrsky announces that "after finishing the fifth volume of

Journeys Outside the City the members of the group decided in the future not to sign new

actions with the name 'Collective Actions,' but to use instead the 'list-of-authors' (*spisok*

avtorov) principle used before 1980."[32] In the same text, (signed in 1997) Monastyrsky

announced that, "starting with 1995 the group re-united and resumed its work under a

slightly modified name [KD] (the acronym KD in square brackets)."[33] The new

orthography not only suggests the re-emergence of the artists from their six-year

transition period, but also the re-emergence of a new [bracketed] form of collectivity.[34]

Monastyrsky does not discuss the new orthography, but suggests only that the square

brackets that encircle their old name indicate the incompleteness of the group. Indeed, the

first page of the seventh volume lists only six members who returned to practice

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[31] The artist group "Champions of the World" (*Chempiony mira*) followed the same steps as KD. "For some time we tried to keep together and we signed our work with the label 'Champions of the World,' independently of who made it. The truth is that Kostea Latyshev categorically refused this principle and began to sign with his name…" Sarkisian, "Eiforia: nastroenie i transformatsii art-soobschestva v 1990 godu," n. 24.

[32] Andrei Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 783.

[33] Ibid.

[34] In 1997 after the action "The Participants' Report," (*Rasskazy uchastnikov*) the artists decided to drop the square brackets. On the more detailed discussion of KD's transition see above the beginning of this chapter.

collective actions.[35] The brackets also express the new conditions under which the artists decided to reunite, as well as the fact that the very notion of collectivity had acquired another meaning in post-Soviet Moscow.

During the six years that KD took to become [KD], Eastern Europe went through a series of historic events – from the fall of Berlin Wall to the breaking up of the USSR and of the Warsaw Pact. Officially, Russia also declared its readiness to embark on the new path of transition, but soon it became increasingly evident that instead of advancing straight towards democracy, it was drifting to the side or even making U-turns, impelling Western observers and political scientists to question whether Russia was taking the tenets of transitology seriously.[36] Both in economy and politics the results of transition were not very encouraging. The political transition, which was expected to result in free and fair multiparty elections, led instead to a more camouflaged form of "unipartism," and in the economy, the process of redistribution of collective resources initially led to an apparatchik-mafia oligarchic capitalism, in order to be soon drawn back into another form of state-controlled economy. The history of KD as a group follows in some aspects a similar trajectory: from disunion and independence to re-unification under a new form of contract.

A bracketed collectivity had already surfaced in the last pages of the appendix to the before-*Journeys*. The section "General Remarks" (*Obschie primechanie*) also

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[35] Alexeev and Kizevalter participated only occasionally in the after-period. See Foreword to Volume Seven in Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

[36] Although the discourse of transitology was not as influential in Russia as it was in other Eastern European countries and republics of the former USSR it had nevertheless played an important role in this country's economic and political transformations. See Gel'man, *Transformatsiia v Rossii: politicheskii rezhim i demokraticheskaia oppozitsiia*.

contains several short texts by Monastyrsky, which are concerned with more technical

aspects of the *Journeys*, expressing a similar attitude to that which prevailed in society at

the turn of the decade, when the transition of the Soviet Union to capitalism began with

the abolishment and redistribution of the collective economic assets. As if anticipating

these major social and political developments, two of KD's former members began in

1990 to divide the communal property of the group into individual shares. In the text

called "Authorship" (*Avtorstvo*) Monastyrsky explains the principle according to which

he and Panitkov calculated the so-called "percentages of authorship" (*avtorskie

prozenty*), which they did in order to deduce each member's contribution to all the

collective actions organized during the Soviet period.

> In 1990 N. Panitkov and A. Monastyrsky completed the document
> 'percentages of authorship" of KD's actions, using for the calculation the
> following method of evaluation: a) For the authorship of the plot (*siujet*)
> without a co-author – 6 (points). b) For the authorship of the plot with a
> co-author – 4 (in one case –5). c) For the co-authorship in the elaboration
> of the plot – 2. d) For the greatest expenditure of energy in the preparation
> and performance of the action – 1,5. e) For considerable help in the
> organization and performance of the action – 1. f) For help in the
> organization and performance of the action – 0,5. According to this
> evaluation principle 'KD's shares' have been distributed in the following
> way: A.M. – 53%, N.P. – 16% N.A.– 6%, I.M. – 6%, E.E.– 6%, G.K. –
> 5%, S.R. – 5%, S.H. – 3%...[37]

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[37] Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 779. The initials stand for the
following members of KD: A.M. – Andrei Monastyrsky, N.P. – Nikolai Panitkov, N.A. – Nikita
Alexeev, I.M. – Igor Makarevich, E.E. Elena Elagina, G.K. Georgii Kizevalter, S.R. – Sergei
Romashko, S.H. – Sabine Hänsgen

After completing the distribution of the shares among the eight members of KD, Monastyrsky lists all sixty-one actions organized during their Soviet period, and then performs a similar task with the spectator-participants. He provides a list of all guests who attended KD actions (about sixty people), indicating in front of the name of each person the number of actions in which he or she had participated. At the top of the list are Backstein with twenty-five attended actions, Kabakov with twenty-two, and the writer Vladimir Sorokin with eighteen.[38]

In the after-1989 *Journeys* the practice of calculating and dividing percentages, and of constructing indexes of collective actions, became more elaborate and complex. Documents annexed at the end of the seventh volume (1995-99) indicate a more detailed approach to the indexing of authorship percentages, and now Monastyrsky takes into account more details and subtleties. If such activities as "sending invitations to the guests" or "collecting the participants' reports" are not usually indexed or taken into account, then "meeting the spectators," "photographing the action," "purchasing various things for the action," "participating critically in the action," or "offering one's apartment or studio for the action" – each one of these contributions add 0,5 points to the overall percentage of authorship. "Participation in the plot," "participation in the discussion of the plan of action," and the "production of objects for the action" add another 1,5 points to the index of participation in the action.[39] The highest amount of points (6) was given, as in the 1990s, to single authorship. The section "Indexes KD" (*Indeksy KD*) lists

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[38] Ibid., 781.
[39] "Indexes KD" (*Indexy KD*) at the end of the Seventh Volume. ———, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

seventy-five actions, organized from 1976 to 1999, where each action is calculated

according to the percentage of involvement of each member. From the perspective of the

end of the century the authorship of the first action "Appearance" (1976) appears in the

following way: "1. APPEARANCE – Monastyrsky – 4, Rubenstein, Alexeev – 1,5,

Kizevalter – 0,5." The sum total of KD's actions to the year 2000 equals 686 (100%).

The largest share of KD authorship (348,5) belongs to Monastyrsky, followed by

Panitkov (105), Alexeev (39), Makarevich (41,5), Elagina (40,5), Kizevalter (41),

Romashko (41) and Hänsgen (29,5). A note closing this section states that these numbers

also express the intensity of each artist's participation in the actions.[40]

Monastyrsky made a similar index for the location of each of KD's actions, called

"Places of KD" (*Mesta KD*). It indicates various indoor and outdoor locations in Moscow

where KD had organized its actions, clearly showing the preference of these artists for

the Kievogorskoe Field. Another noticeable addition to the after-*Journeys* is the new

importance attributed to numerical symbols. Numbers began to play an increasingly

important role in the work of KD, appearing more and more often in the titles and in the

plots of the post-1989 actions. While there was not a single action in the before-*Journeys*

that contained numbers in its title (except for the year), many of the titles in the after-

period are either numbers or include digits in their name (e.g. "Places # 40 and 41," "625-

520," "625-520 in Berlin," "83," "51 (Archeology of light-2)," 14:07-15:13").[41] For the

action "Red Numbers (for Yuri Albert)" (*Krasnye chisla* [Y. Albertu]) organized in 2000

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[40] Ibid.

[41] See at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html. [accessed February 24, 2009].

in Bochum, (Germany), the artists went to a local supermarket and dictated the prices of various products on a tape recorder, while walking in between the aisles. Later, they returned to the campus of Rühr University, where the final part of this action took place, and here, in front of an audience, they listened to the tape, writing down the supermarket prices on a page copied from the book "Snuff Bottles from China."[42] At the end, they added up the figures using an electronic calculator, and the obtained sum of 3148.58 was printed on a separate sheet of paper and handed over to Yuri Albert, together with the proposition to include this paper as a new artwork in his next exhibition, as well as to try to sell it for 3148.58 in Marks if the exhibition was to take place in Germany, in dollars if it was in America, in pounds if in Britain, and so forth.[43] For the 2000 action "Garages" (*Garaji*), organized for the eighth volume of the *Journeys*, the artists and their spectator-participants arrived at a remote area of Moscow where a number of garages had been built. During this action the artists and the spectators attached next to the garage's number a paper which displayed the number and the name of one of KD's actions organized during the before-period, superimposing over the garages' numerical order the historical chronology of KD's actions.

Is the appearance of numbers, indexes, and percentages in the aesthetic discourse of [KD] a change of course, a leaning towards a more rationalistic aesthetics? Can this be interpreted as a sign of departure from the "romantic" and "metaphysical" qualities conferred on them by critics in the seventies (see Chapter 1 and 2) as an essential quality

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[42] Helen White, *Snuff Bottles from China* (London: Bamboo Publishing, 1992).
[43] For the description of these actions see "Red Numbers" (for Y. Albert) and "Garages" at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html [accessed January 12, 2009].

which distinguished Moscow Conceptualism from its "practical" and "positivistic" Western counterpart? Had the pragmatic program of *perestroika* and the instrumentalist agenda of transitology begun to suffuse the "emptiness" of KD's art and aesthetics, splitting it up in shares and percentages or filling it up with numbers, indexes and other statistical data? Might this new turn suggest that the literary backbone of Moscow Conceptualism, which had so far encouraged spontaneous speculation, contemplation, reflection, vague theory, or sheer mysticism and orthodox religiosity, had been permeated by a new mode of understanding that demanded factual evidence, statistics, and computable phenomena, making some parts of their after-*Journeys* look like a business inventory?

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh first introduced the terms "aesthetics of administration" or "managerial aesthetics" in his essay "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique."[44] The text has generated a heated debate, engaging such early proponents of American conceptualism as Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub in a fierce polemic.[45] It is not my goal to take sides in this debate; it is not Buchloh's distinction between "progressives" (artists of institutional critique) and "reactionaries" (artists of what he calls "managerial" or "administrative aesthetics") that is relevant in the present context, but instead his suggestion that the very emergence of the language of conceptual art (regardless of the political credo of its practitioners) was a reflection of a major social

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[44] Buchloh, "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962-1969)," in *L'art Conceptuel, Une Perspective: 22 Novembre 1989-18 Fevrier 1990,* (Paris: Musee d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1990).
[45] Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub, "Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub Reply to Benjamin Buchloh on Conceptual Art," *October* 57 (1991).

and economic shift that occurred in post-war Western society. Buchloh's text is an example of social art history, based on the Hegelian premise that art, or rather authentic art, is the expression of collective spirit, and that the history of art reflects, more than at first appears, the forces of progress in society.[46]

It was not accidental that such a new stylistic epithet as "conceptual art" emerged during the second half of the sixties. This art did not simply coincide with such major social and economic transformations as the detachment of capital from material wealth and the emergence of a new class of managers, who had come to replace the former owners turned shareholders, but it was in fact a direct cultural manifestation of the substitution of the outdated Fordist or industrial model by a new economic and ideological configuration.[47] Buchloh argues that the epithet "conceptual art," as it emerged in the late 1960s, may be regarded as the new aesthetic identity of the new managerial class that had come to replace the former captains of industry. The growing class of administrative workers did not need an aesthetics that addressed the object, but one that would remind them of their own immaterial world of figures, percentages, proportions, ratios, and other quantifiable facts with which they dealt everyday day.

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[46] Even such well-respected art historians as Ernst Gombrich, who did not necessarily practice a social history of art, considered Hegel the father of art history, agreeing with him that the art of a certain time is also a metaphor for the spirit of the age. See "The Father of Art History: A Reading of the *Lectures on Aesthetics of* G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831)" in E. H. Gombrich, *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[47] The appearance of the new ideological configuration has been more recently discussed by sociologists. Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello have analyzed the relation between the "new spirit" of capitalism, which they call "connectionist" or "relational," and the social and artistic critic of the sixties. See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007). See also Eve Chiapello, *Artistes versus managers: le management culturel face à la critique artiste* (Paris: Métailié, 1998).

Conceptual art replaced the aesthetic of the object, which corresponded to the outdated world of industrial production in which the art object was valued for its manufacturable quality, with an aesthetics of notional, abstract fact in its conceptual existence detached from the object.[48]

How does this argument apply to KD? The emergence of this collective, in the mid-seventies, was a manifestation of the liberalization that had unfolded since the thaw in the political and social life of the USSR. KD appeared at a time when socialist citizens began to witness the emergence of a socialist version of consumer society, or what was called in the more prosperous countries of the Soviet bloc "refrigerator" or "gulash socialism." Politically, these ironic expressions referred to the process of de-Stalinization, and in economic terms this meant de-industrialization – the displacement of the heavy industry model, which had been regarded since Lenin as the foundation of the socialist economy, by an economic model dominated by light industry and the production of mass consumer goods. These macro-political and economic transformations were partially responsible for the paradigm shift which brought the conceptualists onto Moscow's unofficial art scene in the early seventies (see Chapter 1). Unlike the modernist painters and sculptors of the 1950s and 60s, engaged in the production and manufacture of subversive objects, the conceptualists resorted to "lighter" modes of artistic production, much as KD created actions and then collected facts or factographical-discourse material

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[48] There is a parallel between the argument of Boltanski & Chiapello and that of Buchloh: the former argue in "The New Spirit of Capitalism" that after the sixties capitalism incorporated the artistic and social critique which led to what they call "relational" or "connectionist" capitalism. Buchloh, on the other hand, suggests that art has incorporated the latest economic and business transformations, leading to a "managerial" or "administrative" art that was later called "conceptual." Art has reflected life and life has reflected art.

for what they considered to be their main work – the volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City*. "Moscow Conceptualism," wrote Ekaterina Dyogot in 2002, "is socialist conceptualism,"[49] suggesting, like many other critics and artists, that this artistic phenomena must be regarded as part of the socialist ethos. For instance, the language of the before-*Journeys* emulate in their hermeticism the language of the Politburo (see Chapter 2). This language of the Party was often called "code language" because it relied so much on incomprehensible figures and numbers (e.g. "liters of milk per cow and per capita," "number of eggs laid and percentage hatched," or "tons of steel produced during the five-year plan"). However, despite the abundance of these inflated socialist statistics, the before-*Journeys* did not register much quantifiable data and neither did these artists fraction their, or their spectators,' collective experience into decimal parts of numbers and percentages. One cannot apply Buchloh's term "managerial" or "administrative aesthetics" to the before-*Journeys*, for in the USSR it was the party secretaries and the full-time functionaries of the ideological apparatus who were in charge of production, which might explain the fact that no one had taken their numbers seriously. It was only after 1989, when many of the former party leaders, deputies and representatives of the people had re-trained to became project managers and program administrators for the new businesses and non-profit structures, that the situation changed and that the *Journeys* began to reflect this shift by displaying indices and numbers. In other words, the quantitative indexation that occurs after 1989 in the discourse of KD reflects precisely the

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[49] Ekaterina Dyogot in Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, *Tri installiatsii* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2002), 18.

social and economic shifts, and the *Journeys* bear witness in their pages to the new

economic model that relied on ratios, indices and other quantitative measures for the

successful circulation of capital and services.

The appearance of digits, the application of percentages and ratios, as well as

Monastyrsky's attempts to derive an artistic coefficient of creativity, bring to mind other

works in which Western and non-Western conceptual and proto-conceptual artists have

resorted to the language of statistics and numbers in order to address an artistic problem.

Consider, for instance, Marcel Duchamp's "art coefficient," or the "coefficient of

creativity." Duchamp sought to determine a general "law of art," or a principle according

to which one can understand or "measure" the difference between the intention and the

realization, between the idea and the materialized product, between the beginning and the

end, or between the before and after of every artistic endeavor. Or consider On Kawara's

One Million Year (Past) (1969) and *One Million Years (Future)* (1981), which

chronologically lists two million years, number by number, on the pages of a twenty-

volume set of books. Komar & Melamid's series *People's Choice* (1994-97) deploys

statistics provided by polling companies in order to determine – under the motto

"numbers are innocent" or "truth is a number" – various peoples' and nations'

preferences for art.[50] The artists of institutional critique have used statistics in order to

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[50] See Marcel Duchamp, *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1973); Jonathan Watkins, René Denizot, and On Kawara, *On Kawara*,
Contemporary artists (London; New York: Phaidon, 2002); Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid,
and JoAnn Wypijewski, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*
(New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997). See also Komar and Melamid's "The Most Wanted
Painting on the Web" at Dia Center for Arts. http://www.diacenter.org/km/intro.html [accessed
March 6, 2009].

expose business and financial interests behind the facades of contemporary art museums and art centers. KD's indexation and numbers are quite different.

In the examples above, these artists resort to the mathematically inflected language of statistics in order address a certain problematic, which as it often happens is embodied or represented by an institution: be it art for Duchamp, time for On Kawara, democracy or the choice of the majority for Komar and Melamid, the museum of contemporary art for the artists of institutional critique. For KD, on the other hand, the application of percentages and ratios, as well as Monastyrsky's attempts to derive an artistic coefficient of creativity, is an attempt to measure and to represent mathematically (that is objectively) not an outside institution or agency but its own internal functioning. KD's coefficients deal with a specifically administrative problem: to determine the contribution and input of each member, adding up to the sum total of collective actions. In other words, the totality called KD has been put under pressure to re-identify itself by resorting to a new singularized and individualistic syntax which favors the first person pronoun "I" because it renders more clearly each member's individual responsibilities and functions. The previous totality had to be re-defined and divided according to each person's individual artistic input; its common field of action, or territory of operation had to be mapped and indexed according to the new understanding of what constitutes space; all the completed actions had to be enumerated, and arranged chronologically; all the spectator-participants had to be checked for attendance and listed top-down according to their degree of involvement in the works. All these operations were performed in order to

re-invent and re-negotiate collectivity, to make it possible to establish a new bracketed totality called [KD].

It is in the index of the after-*Journeys* that KD's language becomes most like that of an institution. The calculation of numbers of attendees, events, places, and so forth is what museums and galleries of art are officially required to do, for the sake of institutional accountability. While in the West progressive artists have protested for the last few decades the expansion of art institutions, in Eastern Europe artists were placing great hope in them. Unlike the conceptualists of the Western art world whose actions appear to be outwardly addressed to the institution of art, democracy, and the museum, KD's self-addressed approach indicates either that such institutions were still missing in Russia or that the group was itself becoming an institution, as some Russian critics had already suggested.[51] The indexed parts of the post-1989 *Journeys* tend to resemble a catalogue, its own catalogue raisonné, that attempts to offer an exhaustive record of roles, situations, relations, proposing its own art historical inventory.

The emergence of numbers in the titles of actions organized in the "after" period was also conditioned by the changing socioeconomic context and above all by the technological modernization of KD. Many of these titles were picked up by the artists directly from the electronic displays of the new devices and gadgets employed in the post-1989 actions. Some figures are in fact spatial and temporal measurements: geographic coordinates from GPS receivers, coordinates from topographic, satellite and

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[51] E. Bobrinskaia, "Kollektivnye desitvia kak institutia," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 23.

Google maps, time-codes from video and photo equipment, and other devices employed

by [KD] in their actions and in the process of gathering new factographical material. The

new media employed in the construction of actions did not only provide a more accurate

mapping of location, of time and space, but it also produced a new message.

KD's indices do not necessarily represent a pretext for speaking of a transition

from socialist to capitalist conceptualism, or from a more literature-based aesthetics to a

more managerial one. Rather they point to a series of mechanisms involved in the

fragmentation of totality. These indexes are above all about the disintegration of the

collective and communal experience of these artists and their spectators. But these

indexes, which attempt to break up a collective creativity into measurable inputs of each

individual participant, may be also regarded as an attempt to find a new form of

collectivity in a changing society. Instead of canceling their project, as did the members

of "Champions of the World," KD attempts to negotiate a new [bracketed] form of

collective action that will still allow them to function in the new socioeconomic context.

From Action to Installation

The last pages of the before-*Journeys* present the reader with a description of

several installations proposed by some of KD's members in 1989. They are listed as

individual works in a separate section of the before-*Journeys* called "Appendix"

(*Prilojhenie*)."[52] Increasingly, during the transitional nineties and into the next century, the artists started to produce more and more installations, and it took them more than a decade to realize and acknowledge this important transformation.

> Until Volume Five of the *Journeys* it seemed as if we were traveling by train, along the rails, with planned stops (actions) and there was a certain 'purposiveness' (although we lacked a definite purpose). In the end, when we reached the station 'Hangars North-West,' where we ventured into the inside space of several buildings, we made a transition to exhibitions, installations, etc.[53]

This was written in 2007, and "Hangars North-West," to which I will return, was the title of the very last action of KD in the before-period. The shift to the practice of exhibition and the genre of installation to which Monastyrsky refers may be considered the most important impact of transition on KD's artistic practice and aesthetical discourse after 1989. Installations and exhibitions did not completely replace the medium of action traditional for KD but the new forms of presentation, began throughout the nineties and later on, to play a more and more important part in their work.

I will discuss this significant aspect of the transition, referring to one of Monastyrsky's 1989 installation projects "Journeys to the West," found in the appendix

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[52] Initially this section was called "Individual actions that are related to the *Journeys Outside the City*," and later "Individual Works of the Group's Members." They were inserted in the middle of the first and the second volume. From the mid eighties (the third volume) on, this section was renamed "Appendix" (*Prilojhenie*) and it was moved to the end of the volume.
Since their early Soviet phases some members of KD also made individual works, which must not be confused with works (paintings, objects, installations) that some of KD's artists (N. Alexeev, I. Makarevich, E. Elagina) made and exhibited completely independently and outside of the group.
[53] Monastyrsky Foreword to the Ninth Volume. Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

to the Soviet *Journeys*. It is here, in this appendix, that one encounters for the first time in the vocabulary of KD two new words: "installation" and "project." The new terms, which are very closely related within the syntax of contemporary art, infiltrated not only the language of these artists but also that of many other Eastern European artists and critics. The words "installation" and "project" announced a cultural shift, and a new way of making art in the post-Soviet democratic societies. This is an abridged translation of Monastyrsky's installation project "Journeys to the West:"

A. Monastyrsky
"Journey to the West" (project)

The installation is to be located in a rectangular-shaped room the space of which must not exceed 30 square meters. Black and white photocopies of KD's 1977 action 'Comedy' hang on the walls…

A rectangular desk (length – 4.5 m, width – 1.5 m, height – 85 cm.) covered with a black tissue is placed in the middle of the room. On the middle of the desk, lengthwise oriented, are placed 23 books. The books are laid on book holders (22x30 cm), which were specially built for this occasion, along two rows in such a way that the covers of each row are directed towards two opposite walls. At one end of the desk, also on a book holder, lies the label of this exhibition, which reads: 'KD. *Journey to the West*. Installation. A. Monastyrsky, N. Panitkov, G. Kizevalter, I. Makarevichi, E. Elagina, S. Romashko, S. Hänsgen. 1989' and one of the books (#12, See 'The Position of the Objects on the Desk' (diagram), Figure 6). The TV shows a two-hour recording called 'Depot,' which is accompanied by a reading from the book 'Snow' (a weather forecast

reference book). On the other side of the desk there is available a copy machine which the spectators of the installation are free to use.

On the desk, next to the books, there are copies from the books. The spectator is free to take some of the copies as part of the factographical discourse. However some of the copies are necessary for the [successful operation] of the installation and as the spectators take the copies away the author restores them by using the copy machine. The author makes copies only of those pages which are absolutely "necessary" for the installation (the list of copies are indicated on Figure 6).

But the spectators may also choose to make copies from those books that they like. On the top of the copy machine must be glued a text informing the spectators to put the books back on the desk.

December, 1989[54]

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[54] Abridged translation from ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 774.

Desk

TV

Screen

12

11 | 13
10 | 14
9 | 15
8 | 16
Copies | 7 | 17 | Copies
6 | 18
5 | 19
4 | 20
3 | 21
2 | 22
1 | 23

0

Copy Machine

0 – Title page
1 – Cheng'en Wu Journey to the West, Moscow 1959, v. 1 (pp. 17 and
illustrations 176-177)
2 – Cheng'en Wu v. 2 (one page with poetry)
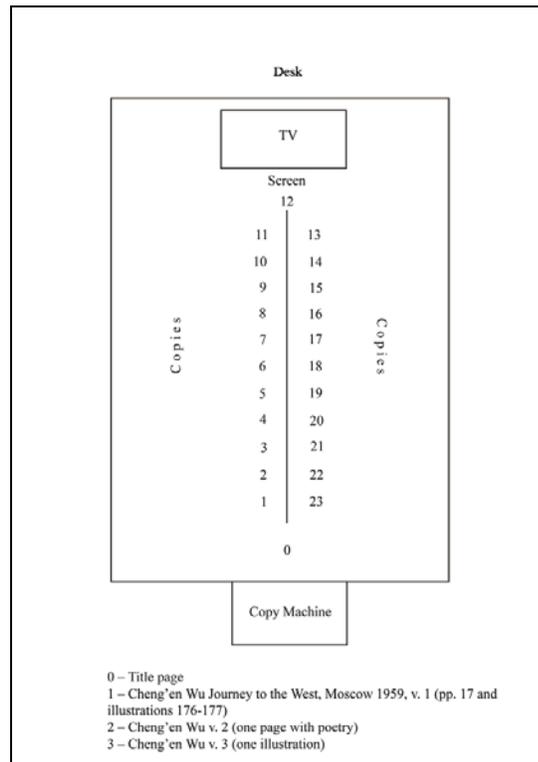3 – Cheng'en Wu v. 3 (one illustration)

**Figure 6: A. Monastyrsky, *The Position of the Objects on the Desk for the Installation
"Journey to the West,"* diagram, 1989, (reconstructed).**

The above text and diagram (Figure 6) is a description and graphical

representation of the installation project "Journey to the West." KD appropriated the title

of this project from the name of the Chinese sixteenth century classical novel by Hsi-yu

Chi (one of KD's members' main sources of inspiration) and it no doubt provides some

hints as to the new lifestyle of the Moscow conceptualists who were traveling extensively

at the end of the eighties. They journeyed, however, not in the "out-of-town-ness" of their

cities, as they used to do under KD's aegis for years, but abroad, mainly to the West.

Indeed, already from 1987 on many unofficial artists were preparing their exodus. In his

chapter "They Came West" Solomon tells the story of many of these artists' adventures

in Berlin, Paris and New York, describing how they appeared and were received abroad, how they collaborated with their Western colleagues, and "how Kabakov and Bulatov had been the first among the former unofficial artists to travel to the West," clearing the way for many younger artists who made journeying to the West their new way of life for decades to come.[55] This was the beginning of cultural nomadism, which became popular during the nineties and later, to a lesser degree, among Western artists. The journeys of many conceptualists abroad were not different from those of ordinary Soviet citizens, who managed to cross the USSR border in order to lose themselves in the shiny and glamorous world of advertising and quality consumer products. Thus, this early installation project by Monastyrsky may also be regarded as a commentary on the new way of journeying practiced by the Moscow conceptualists from the second half of the eighties.

Although the word "West" in the title of this work referred to India, where the medieval Chinese character journeyed to obtain the Buddhist sutras, the medium of installation used by Monastyrsky to present KD's aesthetic discourse to a larger audience of anonymous spectators was brought over the Western frontiers of the USSR. In a series of dialogues which took place between Kabakov and Groys in 1994, the section dedicated to the discussion of "installation art," or the "art of installing" (*iskusstvo intestallirovania*) is also subtitled "Dialogue about the West," suggesting that within the Russian cultural context installation has been regarded as a Western artistic medium.[56]

[55] Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*.
[56] Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*.

The main categories around which the dialogue evolves are "institution," "installation," and the "West," and the conclusion that may be extracted from their exchange of opinions is that in the new Western contemporary art model the word "installation" is unthinkable without the word "institution," and vice versa. In other words, the genre of installation art cannot be envisioned today without the support of the institution of contemporary art, nor can the institution of contemporary art be imagined without the medium of installation. Both critics and artists associated with Moscow contemporary art have suggested a strong correlation between installation and institution. Groys for example writes: "installation […] has become today the main artistic form within the borders of *contemporary art*…" The Moscow artist Avdei Ter-Oganian presented the terms "institution" and "installation" under one entry in his 1999 reference guide to Russian contemporary art.[57]

The first installations made by KD artists in 1989 were made for the first officially opened artists' spaces, suggesting that the emergence of installation art was related to the process of the democratization of culture.[58] But there are also paradoxes. Both the text and the diagram of *Journeys to the West* differ from the descriptions and the diagrams made for the earlier actions of the *Journeys* in several respects. If one compares

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[57] Boris Groys, "Topologia sovremennogo iskusstva," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 61-62 (2006). http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/61-62/topologya [accessed January 14, 2008]. See also entry "Institution/Installation" in Miroslav Nemirov, *A.S. Ter-Oganian: zhizn', sud'ba i kontemporari art: spravochnik-putevoditel'* (Moskva: GIF, 1999), 29.

[58] The Appendix (*Prilojenie*) of the Soviet *Journeys* contains several other installation projects: "Three Installations" by Monastyrsky and Hänsgen, which exhibited the archive MANI, and the installation "Research Documentation" assembled by E. Elagina, I. Backstein, G. Kizevalter, and N. Panitkov in 1989 for the Exhibition hall of Krasnogvardeiskij district ("Kashirka"). Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 72-3.

the diagram of this work (Figure 6) to diagrams made for the previous actions of KD (Figure 3, 4, 5 in Chapter 2 as well as Figure 7 and 8 below) it may be observed that Figure 6 shows neither artists nor spectators but only objects and equipment. There are no arrows showing the movement of the spectators on the field, no dots to indicate where the artist will appear, and no circles to mark the place from where the photographers will document the action. The missing human subject in the diagram of the *Journeys to the West* suggests that the project takes place in the gallery space where the work will interact with potential anonymous-spectators, a category of KD's discourse that was traditionally excluded from serious engagement in the group's aesthetic investigations. Instead, Monastyrsky provides within the white box of the sterile gallery space the necessary settings for anonymous-spectators to familiarize themselves with the process and procedures of investigating the nature of art; they may serve themselves with copies from various books on display; they may watch TV; but they are not asked to write reports, share their responses and reactions, or to participate in one form or another as did KD's spectator-participants. Most early diagrams of KD's actions showed the presence and the position of the human subject in between objects and places, but even in those diagrams that are unpopulated, they still impose on the surrounding space KD's own concepts, categories, zones and fields (i.e. demonstrative field, expositional field, the zone of imperceptibility, etc.,) redefining and recontextualizing that universe according to the artists' own understanding of the nature of art and of space (Figure 8 and 9). In the diagram for the installation *Journeys to the West* it is the gallery space that imposes its own fields and effects of power on the artwork through the "dictatorship" of architecture.
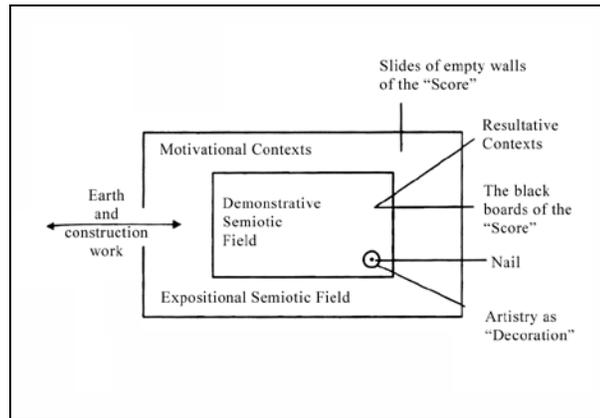
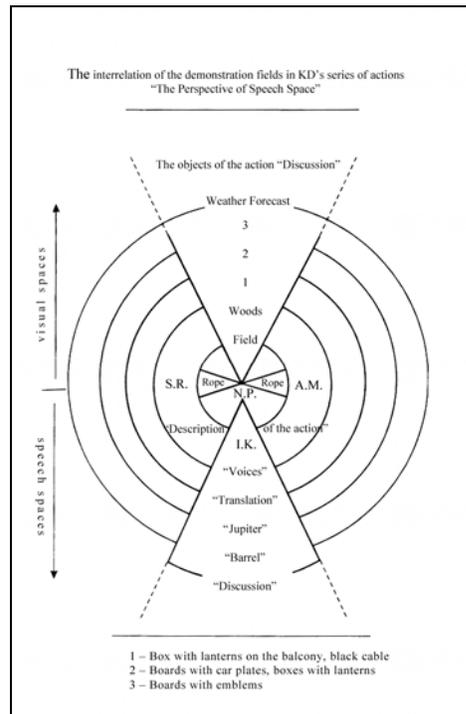**Figure 7: A. Monastyrsky, Earth Works, diagram, 1987, (reconstructed).**

Figure 8: A. Monastyrsky *The Interrelation of the Demonstrative Fields in KD's Series of Actions "The Perspective of Speech Act*," diagram, 1985 (reconstructed).

As Thomas McEvilley has observed about the white cube of the gallery space:

"The highly controlled context of the modernist gallery does to the art object what it does

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to the viewing subject…the context devours the object, becoming it."[59] The two types of

drawings may be compared to diagramming two different parts of speech: the drawings

from the before-period (Figure 3, 4, 5 and 8) represent both nouns and verbs (objects,

persons and their actions), whereas the 1989 drawing (Figure 6) diagrams only nouns

(objects). While the former diagrams have been drawn in order to motivate the artists and

the spectators to move and act, the latter diagram was made in order to settle down,

arrange and even arrest the movement. The verbs begin to calcify and turn into nouns.

Charles Peirce suggested that all nouns are reified verbs;[60] KD's transition offers a good

illustration of how this reification takes place in the arts under the influence of the new

socioeconomic conditions in which the institution of architecture arrested KD's

"actions," turning them into "installations." The strict and often authoritarian demands

that architecture made on art, during its long history, often resulted in the emergence of

new art genres and even styles, for example in the evolution, and then the divergence, of

genre painting from church murals in the West; or sculpture from religious icons in the

East. With the coming into being of art as an autonomous realm, the dialogue between

architecture and art was intensified and it led to further and more dramatic

transformations. Art historians have suggested that an innovative art dealer such as

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who introduced new marketing techniques in art (the small

gallery versus the spacious salons), also willingly or unwillingly contributed to the

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[59] Thomas McEvilley in the *Introduction* to Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.
[60] Umberto Eco quotes Charles Sanders Peirce in Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Advances in semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 187.

revolutionary aesthetic innovations made by the "gallery cubists" (Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque); Kahnweiler helped to create the necessary conditions for the emergence of collage and also affected the works of these artists in terms of the scale of and the choice over the material and subject matter.[61]

If in economy and politics the liberalization of Moscow in the 1990s manifested itself in the emergence of private cooperatives and the first free election of people's deputies – in the visual arts one of the first signs of the democratization of art was the complete rehabilitation in Russia of such artistic genres as performance, happening, and installation; genres which had been criminalized to buttress the authority of Socialist Realism. The three-dimensional art (apart from socialist sculpture and the decorative arts) that strived to spread out and unfold in the socialist time-space continuum was treated with iconoclastic suspicion and disapproval. It was, however, more difficult for the authorities to control time-dependent than space-dependent unofficial arts. It was complicated to restrict performances and happenings, for the artists either performed in their apartments, or like KD they journeyed outside the city and acted in the no-man's-land of the Soviet "out-of-town-ness." With installation it was different. One reason why this medium did not emerge earlier or become a popular unofficial art form lies in its dependence on space, which is a dimension that is much easier to commodify and control than time. In the USSR, with its imperial rapacity for territory, the state was the only proprietor of space, and this medium could not have flourished before 1989. Within the

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[61] On the relation between the new marketing strategies of Kahnweiler and the work of the gallery cubists see David Cottington, *Cubism and its Histories* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); ———, *Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris 1905-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

circle of Moscow conceptualists the duo Komar and Melamid, who have claimed to be the first artists in the USSR to have made installations in the seventies, made a few of their site-specific works in their apartments before they left for the West. But installation cannot be made in the apartment because the very history of this media is related to the process of the democratization of artistic production and display, which I shortly discuss below, requiring thus an open and public space. Kabakov, who is today the most well known Russian installation artist, who also elaborated an entire theory of "total installation," made installation his main and most consistent medium only after he moved to the West, in the second half of the eighties (1986).

For Monastyrsky, who remained in Moscow to make public the aesthetic program of KD, *Journeys to the West* was also among the first installation projects. A decade later he recounted how the transition to the new media had taken place:

> I have every reason to believe that during the 1990s my aesthetical discourse unfolded not as much in the actions of the Seventh volume of the *Journeys* as in installations… The installations naturally continued the fifth volume, which ended with the action 'Hangars North West.' In principle this was not an action but a sort of indication of the new locus of activity. The hangars located in the north west part of the Kievogorskoe Field, beyond its boundaries [see map of Kievogorskoe Field below Figure 8 and 9] are closed spaces which served us as a model, or as the eidos for the new space, in which we (or at least I) began to build, beginning with the 1990s, installations. This is to say that the open space of the

Kievogorskoe Field was replaced by the closed space of the galleries and museums…[62]

The last action of the fifth volume entitled "Hangars North West" revolved around the artists' discovery, in the north-west part of the Kievogorskoe Field, of several hangars. The buildings were storage facilities of the Williams Institute of Fodder in Moscow. The hangars were located beyond the limits of the Kievogorskoe Field, in the woods, and Monastyrsky maintains that they emerged there suddenly and unexpectedly. "Earlier in the seventies and the eighties we saw some wooden constructions and we heard dogs barking in that part of the field, which made us think that it was a little village."[63] When in November 1989 they finally decided to go and check that part of the field they discovered the hangars. Later Monastyrsky explained the appearance of these hangars on the Kievogorskoe Field as a sign of change, taking these constructions as an augur of the impending radical transformations in KD's aesthetic discourse; their art was about to move from the open into the closed space of museums and galleries. This interpretation is typical of KD and of Monastyrsky, who has always been reluctant to admit, or take into account, social and economic forces that may have left considerable imprints on their artistic practice and aesthetic discourse, and who rather preferred to resort to fortune-telling and pseudo-occult explanations. This political myopia, which was shared by many

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[62] Monastyrsky "Installations" in Volume Seven "Individual actions that are related to the *Journeys Outside the City*" Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."
[63] ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 672.

from the unofficial dissident circles, would be later criticized by the next generation of Russian artists as one of their great disadvantages.[64]

This transition of KD from actions to installation is important in several respects. It suggests first of all a transition from a problematic of time to that of space, and as such it provides additional insight into the main socioeconomic transformations of post-Soviet society. It may be understood as a transition from socialist politics, which was primarily concerned (even if distortedly) with time, or with history as the main category of Marxist thought, to a capitalist politics or rather economics, which has been more concerned with the effective and profitable management of space. The communist bureaucrats were primarily concerned with "before" and "after," with past and future (e.g. the "October Revolution" or "Communism,") whereas the newly-bred capitalist entrepreneurs dealt overtly and pragmatically with the efficient management of the present tense. The partial transformation of KD's actions into installation follows however a more general trend, which is today increasingly criticized by the new generation of intellectuals and artists. Aeneas, a character in Artem Magun's tragedy "Another Space," alludes to KD's *Journeys Outside the City* and to other major figures of Moscow Conceptualism, when he tells his father Anchises about a recent journey to Russia:

Aeneas: In Russia, they had enough of this travel romanticism in the
1970s. "My friend, believe in the road!" Now, they dream rather of places:
not only interiors but of a week on a paradise island. On an island you are
indeed like a pilgrim. Contemporary man wants both to decorate his house

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[64] For criticism of dissident collective actions see the writings of the Marxist working group "Chto Delat'?What is to be Done?" at http://www.chtodelat.org.

and go visiting. And places gape and beckon from all sides. You, our
fathers and grandfathers, were seduced by the religion of large spaces, the
ocean wind and so forth, and we are seduced by the religion of the aura.
See Ilya Kabakov's installations.[65]

From the point of view of cultural history the transition from action to installation
also follows a certain logic. In the West and more specifically in the US, the medium of
installation arose as a result of complex multilayered artistic processes that had evolved
over the previous fifty years. Both artists and art historians give the credit to Jackson
Pollock's *action* paintings, which William DeKooning famously stated "broke the ice"
for an entire spectrum of new forms of artistic manifestations and media in post-1945 art.
A simplified schema indicates that installation art evolved, during the second half of the
last century, from the late 1950s "environments" of Allan Kaprow, who had
acknowledged the legacy of Pollock's action;[66] from the minimalist "situations" of the
1960s; from the "project art" or "temporary art" in the 1970s to the official media of
"installation art" in the second half of the 1980s.[67] Although the term "installation art"
was known and used by artists from the late 1960s and 1970s, it was only in the late
1980s and particularly in the early 1990s that it took on a stronger meaning, being finally

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[65] Magun Artem, "Another Space. A Little Tragedy," *Mute Culture and Politics after the Net*
(2008). http://www.metamute.org/en/another_space_free_ad_space [accessed February 27, 2009].
[66] Alan Kaprow wrote "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" in 1956, acknowledging the role of
"action painting" in the creation of first assemblages and environments. Julie H. Reiss, *From
Margin to Center: the Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 8.
[67] Ibid. p. xi See also Erika Suderburg, *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

accepted as an independent category by the major art historical reference sources.[68] It

was also around this time that Western art historians and critics began gradually to

incorporate this new form of artistic expression into their academic disciplines, taking up

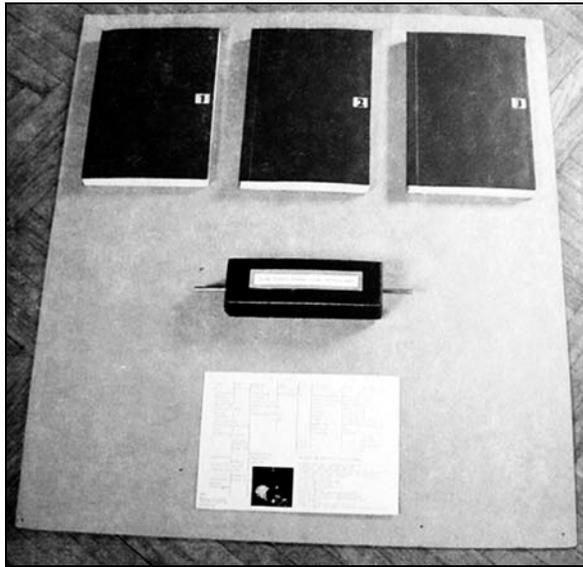this task from the artists, who had until then done all the theoretical and critical work

themselves.[69]

**Figure 9: A. Monastyrsky, *Show-window, Installation with the third volume of the
"Journeys Outside the City,*" Installation, 1990.**

As I have said KD's conversion followed the trajectory of the evolution of

Western contemporary art in the second half of the last century, which in a rather

simplified metaphor may be imagined as the gradual transformation of Pollock's arena

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[68] Reiss quotes *The Art Index* which until 1993 referred the researcher of "installation" to see
"Environment (Art)." Only from Volume 42 (November, 1993) was Installation art indexed by
this publication as an independent category. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of
Installation Art*, xii. On this topic see also Kristine Stiles, "I/Eye/Oculus: Performance,
Installation and Video," in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gillian Perry and Paul Wood (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 183-4.

[69] Stiles, "I/Eye/Oculus: Performance, Installation and Video," 183.

for action (the canvas stretched out on the floor) into an institutional venue, a gallery space offered to artists for installing, showing to the public and then uninstalling the end results of their artistic actions. Like many other Moscow unofficial artists, KD switches to a model which, on the one hand, may be regarded as more democratic, for it offers an opportunity to show the work to a larger audience, but on the another, it appears as an effort, or rather an invitation, to restrict, localize and confine their artistic movement to an environment which functions according to pre-established set of rules and regulations enacted by a certain territorial logic of capitalism. Moreover, KD's transformation takes place at the same time that installation art was finally accepted and integrated within the Western art world. Its recognition as an accepted and legitimate form of contemporary artistic expression in the West took place concomitantly with the promotion of this new media by the institutions of transition, above all by the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, whose first annual exhibitions consisted almost exclusively of installation art. When in the early nineties traditional structures in charge of supporting the arts, such as the Ministries of Culture and the Unions of Artists, went bankrupt, it was the foreign foundations and above all the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art that performed the main tasks of democratization and modernization of culture using installation as their preferred tool.

In the West installation art evolved gradually, over decades of artists' struggling to launch alternative venues for the production and display of art, as well as to generate unconventional cultural forms and means of expression, which they thought perhaps naively could exist outside the reach of the market and of the culture industry. In Eastern

Europe, especially in more liberal socialist countries such as Hungary, Poland or Yugoslavia, artists inspired by their Western colleagues also established unofficial alternative venues and made happenings, environments, and other non-conventional site-specific work in order to distance themselves from the ideologized socialist mainland. Until the second half of the eighties these two histories evolved in parallel (officially on one side of the Iron Curtain and unofficially on the other) as if in order to be drawn together within the firm grip of the victorious capitalism of the nineties. Since in the West the emergence of installation was an open process it did not appear as unusual and foreign as it did in Eastern Europe, where the new form of art emerged suddenly, provoking a certain unease among the public at large as well as among many artists. In Estonia, for example, in the early nineties, local artists spoke of the "war of installation against painting,"[70] evoking the privileged position that this new medium received at the expense of other arts. Not only did installation art become the most favored medium of the new contemporary art cultural model that settled in Eastern Europe during the nineties, but it also was from the very beginning associated with the institutions to such a degree that today (two decades later) one still cannot imagine an installation outside of the confines of an art institution, or without its financial and logistical support. Installation art shares the fate of other new media like performance art, which today "remains more frequently encountered in documentary photography, film and video than in live events."[71] This is indeed ironic because these forms of artistic expression emerged

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[70] Kreg A. Kristring in Rosenfeld and Dodge, *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991*.
[71] Stiles, "I/Eye/Oculus: Performance, Installation and Video," 183.

in an attempt to liberate themselves from various extra-artistic constraints and to establish

more democratic and open forms of culture.

Project Method

The term "project" entered the language of KD at the same time as the term

"installation," and together they signaled a transition to new means and modes of artistic

production. Before 1989, the artists of KD had referred to their works using such terms as

"action," "journey," "work," "thing," or "setting." When the work was still in progress

they employed a more specific terminology, speaking about the planned or accomplished

event in terms of "description" (*opisania*), "descriptive text" (*opisatelinyi text*), "eventful

part" (*sobytinaia chasti*), and so forth. The same appendix to the Soviet *Journeys* that had

presented the first installations also introduced the new word "project." As the post-1989

context invited these artists to show their art to a large public, conditioning them to turn

to exhibition and installation practices, the textual documentation that had traditionally

accompanied their work tended to become projects; in other words, what was once a

description, or a plot for an action, became a project for an installation or exhibition.

The term "project" signals a major transformation in the local cultural landscape,

becoming during the nineties more and more popular throughout the entire post-Soviet

space. The new art institutions have also contributed to this trend, bringing, for instance,

specialists from the West to introduce Eastern European artists to the formulas of

Western art management, teaching them how to write up projects for grants and how to

obtain other sources of funding. For many artists developing and writing up projects

became not only an indispensable skill for survival under the new conditions of cultural administration but almost a form of artistic expression and art-making on its own.

In the 1990s the Moscow conceptualists also added the term "project" to their *Dictionary*.[72] The poet Prigov, who first drew attention to the growing popularity of this word, thought that the new term, which was now often used to designate various artistic practices, emphasized, above all, the development of the work along a temporal axis, laying stress on the temporal dimension in the unfolding of the process (see entry "project" in the Glossary). The appearance of this word in the vocabulary of the Moscow conceptualists and that of many other Eastern European artists heralded the transition to another model of cultural policy, to a model which has incorporated such terms as "painting," "sculpture," "drawing," and finally "artwork" under one central notion of "project."

The difference is also present in the text of the installation project *Journeys to the West*, which contrasts with the earlier descriptions of KD's actions (see descriptions of actions in Chapter 2). Although Monastyrsky's syntax did not change radically, the project for the *Journeys to the West* reads differently, and this is the result of the new format in which the writing was presented. The project is less specific with regard to the directions of the artists' and spectators' movements on the field of action, and instead it is more detailed and determined as to the position that the objects must occupy within a given context as well as in regard to the necessary equipment, space and materials, along with their dimensions and sizes and the manner of their application or usage. Whereas the

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[72] Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 193.

previous descriptions of actions had suggested that the described situation or event had already taken place, or that it would definitely unfold soon according to this or that scenario, the project, in contrast, implied that the work was not yet completed at the time of writing and that its completion or incompletion depended on whether the proposed idea and the list of necessary materials (or budget) would be accepted by the authority to whom the project was addressed. Unlike the description, the project for an installation is both an intention and a request for authorization to act. As in the earlier discussed diagram of the same work, which submits to the tetragonal logic of the modernist white cube, the meaning of the *Journeys to the West* text also abides by the new format of the project.

Kabakov has been, once again, the most eloquent and clear on the importance of the term "project." In the early nineties he drew attention to its significance for his own artistic career and life in the West. He uses this concept to reflect once again upon the differences between the West and the East (Russia):

> In the West there is a special relation and importance that is attributed to the notions of "project" and "success." These two words represent for me a very clear criteria for distinguishing the mode of existence in the East (specifically in Russia) and in the West (in Europe and America.) While observing many successful and unsuccessful people in the West I've noticed that the former rely very much on what is called 'project.' Only those are successful who have a project, who have a strategy on how to

reach success. We can even say that the normal functioning of the Western individual is to have a project and to bring it to success.[73]

In the East, and particularly in Russia, having a personal project (a plan, a strategy or a program), says Kabakov, is often regarded with suspicion of malicious or even devilish intent (*diavoliskoe namerenie*). The reason for the disbelief in projects has to do with resistance to change and reform, for "the history of Russia – is a history of failed projects… (this is the country of unrealized projects, like that of the Russian avant-garde)."[74] For Kabakov this term is relevant because it is directly related to installation, which would become his main medium from the second half of the eighties. He stresses that in the West the aim of the project is to make its intent, means, goals, aims and results as clear as possible.

> [In the West] every incomprehensibility in a project is punished in the most severe manner… I could provide examples from my own practice: unlike the production of paintings, the first phase of an installation consists in proposing it to the institution where it will be built. From my experience I could say that this project must present a product which is absolutely clear for comprehension… The condition must be respected in that the machine [installation] would not be doubted by anybody and you must be ready to answer to any question that your project may provoke.[75]

Kabakov also resorts to the notion of project in order to draw attention to one difference which existed between the artists of the nineties and what he calls the "artists of the past," or the pre-contemporary Moscow artists of the previous decades.

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[73] Kabakov, Groys, and Petrovskaia, *Dialogi: 1990-1994*, 152.
[74] Ibid., 152-54.
[75] Ibid., 157.

The projects that contemporary artists are proposing today radically differ from the indefinite projects of the artists of the past. To the question: 'What do you want to paint or to make?' the artist of the past could have calmly answered 'I will start and then – I will see,' 'And when are you going to finish?' – 'Well, this is such a process…' Today every sign of ambiguity in your project announces your defeat.[76]

Kabakov arrives at this understanding of the meaning of project after he had lived for several years in the West, where he developed the art of installation. He describes the project method as something that is profoundly Western, capitalistic and American, stating that he began to see the West as an immense "ocean of projects."[77] How might one further interpret the arrival of this new word? And does this word indeed point to a Western, or more specifically to an American, influence on the transitional processes that were taking place in Russia? What intellectual tradition has relied on this concept to articulate its doxa and to popularize its values?

In Russia the history of the word project goes hand in hand with its own project of westernization. The Russian word "proekt" (*proekt*), derived from the German *Projekt*, was brought by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century with the first pro-Western

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[76] Ibid.

[77] "It may be said that the entire West consists of an ocean of little projects. And despite the fact that these projects intersect and may theoretically even collide…they are conceived in such a way that the projects do not interfere and even help each other. I never heard of someone who was prevented from accomplishing his project. Moreover, when projects intersect they form gratings, structures and constructions that help elevate and parallel one project against others. In America, 'the country of the victorious capitalism,' this becomes especially obvious. When somebody brings in a new project he is instantly surrounded by others who wish to join it." Ibid., 153.

reforms.[78] The latter were regarded with suspicion and distaste by a large part of the population. For instance a dictionary entry such as *projektër* (projector) which adjoins the word "project" in the Russian etymological dictionaries, ironically denotes someone who is very enthusiastic about drawing up unrealizable and unfounded plans,[79] something to which Kabakov has also referred above in an example drawn from the historical Russian avant-garde. The Latin etymology of the term "project" suggests something which is "thrown forth or before," and the English dictionary is more specific when it renders it in terms of "a proposed undertaking," "an individual or collaborative enterprise that is carefully planned and designed to achieve a particular aim," providing it with such synonyms as "program," "venture," "scheme," "idea," "purpose" or "objective."[80] Some, or many of these meanings are inscribed in such phrases as "project manager," "project assistant," "project planning," "project resources" – phrases and expressions that entered the Russian language during the nineties and which many believed to be another wave of the political, economic and cultural Westernization of Russia.

The Russian historian Aleksandr Kamenskii suggests that in Russian political vocabulary the word "project" is for the most part accompanied by the word "liberal," as in the phrase "the liberal project." "I would like to draw your attention to the fact that 'project' is being used exclusively with the word 'liberal,' and that nobody speaks today

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[78] Max Vasmer, O. N. Trubachev, and B. A. Larin, *Etimologicheskii slovar russkogo iazyka*, Izd. 2., stereotipnoe, v chetyrekh tomakh. ed., 4 vols. (Moskva: Progress, 1987). v. III, 373.

[79] I. A. Vasiukova and I. K. Sazonova, *Slovar inostrannykh slov: s grammaticheskimi formami, sinonimami, primerami upotrebleniia* (Moskva: "Ast-Press", 1998), 497.

[80] See the definition of the word "project" provided by the Apple Dictionary Version 1.0.2 Apple Computer Incorporated, 2005. See also "project, *n*." The Oxford English Dictionary 2.nd ed. 1989, OED Online. Oxford University Press. http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50189690 [accessed November 8, 2008].

about a communist, a fascist, or any other kind of project; if something is called liberal –

then inevitably the word 'project' is also added."[81] Today Russian on-line chat rooms and

blogs are abuzz with discussions and criticism of this new word, which some regard as a

contamination of the Russian language by a parasite that attaches itself to all sorts of

activities.

> I began to be irritated by the word 'project.' B. Akunin is not a writer but a
> 'project.' Charity Project, Russian Project, Eastern project… Soon they
> will start calling children 'projects.'[82]

Most of the complaints about this word contain a whiff of nationalistic sentiment. In

Russia the word project was not only suspected of an opportunistic orientation towards

success (success at any cost) but it was also considered by some to represent a

rationalistic, materialistic, work-oriented instrumentalism, the soulless cult of the fact and

the cold pragmatism of the West, which had attempted to contain and control the

untamable creativity and unpredictability of the "Russian soul" (*Russkaia dusha*).

One intellectual tradition that made great use of the notion of project was

pragmatism.[83] The reception of both theoretical and applied pragmatism in Russia and in

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[81] Alexandr Kamenskii, "Reformy v Rossii s tochki zrenia istorika (lektzia)," polit.ru,
http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2005/11/17/kamensk.html [accessed November 22, 2008].
[82] Entry from the Russian LiveJournal blog by avla 2008-01-29 (15:51:00)
http://avla.livejournal.com/51193.html [accessed November 22, 2008].
[83] The notion of "project" also plays a central role in existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre conceived of the
project in terms of the unity of the subject's deeds, and the original existential project was the project of
being. See Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. London:
Routledge, 2003. I doubt however that the term "project" entered the vocabulary of Moscow
conceptualists from Sartrean existentialism, which was relatively little published and known in the USSR.
The word "project" came from the pragmatic language of the new cultural institutions that proposed
various forms of funding to many of these artists. I am thankful to Fredric Jameson for pointing out to me
the importance of the term "project" in existentialism.

the Soviet Union over the last century was problematic. At the turn of the last century

pragmatic ideas were received and widely discussed by Russian philosophers, and the

interest in the writings of the American pragmatists continued after the October

revolution, especially during the socialist-capitalist compromise of the New Economic

Policy (NEP) of the twenties. With the advance of Stalinism in the thirties the situation

radically changed, and thinkers like William James were called "puppets of American

capitalism" or lampooned as the "Wall Street Pragmatist."[84] In spite of the fact that some

Marxist intellectuals saw affinities between Marx's vision of *praxis* and the close

cohabitation of theory and practice in pragmatism, Lenin, and those after him in charge of

Marxism-Leninism, were dismissive and hostile of this tradition. Only with the advent of

perestroika was pragmatism rehabilitated; and as some critics pointed out, Gorbachev

began his reforms under the banner of "pluralism" (a central Jamesian concept).

Pluralism was used along with 'democracy,' 'parliament,' and later 'privatization,' which

constitute pragmatist keywords in the last years of Soviet rule.[85]

The term "project" is more likely to be encountered in practical pragmatism, and

the latter shared the same fate as pragmatic theories. For instance, in the early twentieth

century several Russian pedagogues were very enthusiastic about implementing in the

local schools a new educational model called the "project method." The method, which

originated in some American agricultural schools during in the second half of the

nineteenth century, was later developed and perfected by John Dewey, who was the most

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[84] Joan Delaney Grossman and Ruth Rischin, *William James in Russian culture* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 2.
[85] See also Mikhail Epstein's reference to "pluralism." Ibid., 213.

active advocate of this new method of education, and who insisted on its direct relation to democracy.[86] Dewey argued that the project method would be more effective in instructing and preparing children to live in a democratic society. William H. Kilpatrick, one of Dewey's pupils and colleagues, was one of the main theoreticians and most active implementers of the new method of teaching in the American schools during the antebellum period.[87] Before WWII this method became popular not only in the USA but also on the other side of the Atlantic. In Russia the project method had been put into practice already in the first decade of the last century, and here the accent was made on teaching children to live and interact in small communities – for which it was declared "socialist" and regarded with suspicion by the tsarist government.[88] After the revolution it was welcomed by the new power and was broadly adopted as one of the main technologies of education until the thirties when it was denounced and accused of American imperialism under Stalin's ministers of education.

The project method encouraged children to strive towards concrete achievements. Instead of studying abstract and speculative theories the pragmatic method motivated children to learn to perform various useful and purposeful social activities by interacting with the real world. Kilpatrick's subtitle for his "Project Method" treatise is "the use of

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[86] On the history of "project method" in Russia see Marina Aleksandrovna Smirnova, "Vozmojhnosti proektnogo obuchenia pri podgotovke studentov v tekhnicheskom vuze," *Nauka, obrozovanie, obschestvo (internet jurnal)* (2006). http://journal.sakhgu.ru/work.php?id=12 [accessed November 21, 2008].
[87] See for instance William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Project Method: the use of the purposeful act in the educative process* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1929).
[88] Such pedagogues as S. T. Shatskii, A.U. Zelenko, L.K. Shleger have implemented the "project method" in Russia. See Mikhail Epstein, "Metod proektov v shkole dvatsatogo veka," *Novaia evereiskaia shkola: pedagogicheskii alimanakh*, no. 11 (2002). http://www.ort.spb.ru/nesh/njs11/epst11.htm [accessed November 20, 2008].

the purposeful act in the educative process," and here he announces that "it is the purposeful act with the emphasis on the word purpose that I myself apply to the term 'project.'"[89] This idea that a project is the embodiment of a purposeful act was at the center of the pragmatic tradition. Pragmatist maxims called for a consideration of the practical effects that thinking has on everyday life, postulating that beliefs are rules for action and that philosophy, science and art must play a definite part in improving everyday life.[90] The early proponents of these views regarded them in terms of an intellectual tradition that must turn away from "abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions… from closed systems [and] turn towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power."[91] Dewey's term for pragmatism was instrumentalism, and this was consistent with his and some of his Chicago colleagues' views that human creativity, as it becomes manifest in the arts and sciences, must not be regarded as an answer to metaphysical enigmas but as an instrument that can improve and enrich experience and everyday life. William James writes that pragmatism was nothing essentially new and that it harmonized with other "*anti-intellectualist* tendencies;" it "agrees with nominalism for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with utilitarianism in emphasizing practical aspects; with positivism in its disdain for verbal solutions, useless questions and metaphysical abstractions."[92]

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[89] Kilpatrick, *The Project Method: the use of the purposeful act in the educative process*, 4.
[90] William James and Giles B. Gunn, *Pragmatism and other writings*, Penguin classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 25.
[91] Ibid., 27.
[92] Ibid., 28.

When the term project appears in the vocabulary of Moscow Conceptualism and of many other Russian and Eastern European artists does it signify another wave of Westernization or Americanization of Russia? How important is this question for a country whose modern history evolved at the crossroads of endless Westernizer-Slavophile debates? Leaving aside inquiries with broader implications concerning Russian identity, one may ask instead if there was a rationalistic or pragmatic effect on aesthetics and art. Can one draw a parallel with the political and economic transformations and suggest a transition to a liberal democratic and free market art model? In other words, did the cultural transition alter certain existing beliefs and assumptions regarding matters of aesthetics and art? What if there was an aesthetic transitology which had challenged the conviction, established since Kant and the German idealists, that true art and beauty was a purposeless and completely disinterested activity – a conviction that the Soviets had also tried hard to eradicate by converting art into a weapon of the working class? An aesthetic transitology in which art was to serve the promotion and protection of individual freedom and property – the basis of the neo-liberal project? What does the abrupt appearance of the new word "project" in the vocabulary of the Moscow conceptualists signify?

Above all, Monastyrsky's installation project *Journeys to the West* signaled the beginning of the transition to a new cultural system. The new, or rather the old capitalist world returned to Russia with a new model of cultural policy. The term "project" points to the main regulatory mechanism of this new model, which conceives of artistic production in terms of fair competition among individual or collaborative enterprises.

This transition may be described as a substitution of a totalitarian and dogmatic model for a new pragmatic model of cultural administration. The dogmatic model of Soviet cultural policy fed on the doctrine of Socialist Realism for its rules and principles of operation. For the dogmatic model the world of art and culture was either black or white, and this twofold division separated the cultural producers into official and unofficial, or into those who complied and those who did not. In the Soviet Union artists had not previously used the word "project" because this dogmatic model managed without projects, for it had been itself a project, a political and aesthetical meta-project constructed around the doctrine of Socialist Realism, which either incorporated or canceled every other individual endeavor and initiative. It was sufficient to declare allegiance to the faith in this meta-project in order to be admitted to its benefits and privileges, which most of the artists (including many unofficial ones) did, with varying degrees of sincerity, for matters of survival. The new system of cultural policy that began to transpire in the nineties may be instead described as pragmatic in the way that it is constrained to face the unpredictable forces of the market.

The word project, which appeared in the first installation proposals of KD artists, and in the vocabulary of other conceptualists after 1989, is a strong indication of the existence of a cultural transitology. The term may be regarded as a new signifier, or a nodal point that captioned and held together a new ideological field. For the new pragmatic cultural model this term served the same function as did such quilting

signifiers as "ideal," "heroic," or "enthusiasm" for the doctrine of Socialist Realism.[93]

"Project" is one of the early effects of transition; it points to the rhetoric of the new

mechanisms of cultural transition; to the language of the Soros Centers for Contemporary

Art, the British Council, KulturKontakt, IFA, Pro Helvetica, the World Bank, the

International Monetary Fund, and many other American, British, French, German,

Austrian, Swiss institutions and agencies of transitions that began to affect in some form

or another the artistic and aesthetic program of these artists.

The Fate of the Kievogorskoe Field

Kievogorskoe Field holds a special place in KD's aesthetics. It was where these

artists had organized most of their actions during the Soviet period, and both the

spectator-participants' reports and the artists' commentaries often reveal how dear this

place was for these city-dwellers, who journeyed to this field in the middle of the woods

in order to escape the everyday routine of the city. In one of his early reports Kabakov

tried to understand what exactly made him so depressed and irritated in the so-called

"domestic" works of KD, and so happy and gay in the out-of-town actions.[94] He came to

the conclusion that it had something to do with the power of suggestion, as well as with

the fact that in small spaces the dynamics of KD's actions were so intense that they filled

the entire space, giving the audience no place to hide. Everything was different in the

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[93] On the major concepts of Socialist Realism see Hans Günther "Totalitarnoe gosudarstvo kak cintez iskusstv" in Hans Günther and E. A. Dobrenko, *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (Sankt-Peterburg: Gumanitarnoe Agentstvo "Akademicheskii Proekt", 2000). For the metaphor of "Ideological Quilt" see chapter Identity: The Ideological Quilt in Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 1989).
[94] See Kabakov *Rasskaz ob akzii "Vorota"* in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.*

open air. The lengthy quotation that follows is from one of the reports written by

Kabakov in the before-period (1985):

> That pressure that I experienced under the influence of KD's actions
> organized within a small space was the result of a horrible force-field,
> which was generated not by some objects, as I thought earlier, but by the
> action itself. I now understand why I felt such a comfort in the
> countryside. Because the movement is concentrated in one place – here is
> Andrei doing something, but over there Andrei is doing nothing. I felt
> comfortable because I could look at those places where there was no
> Andrei. Here is Andrei, over there he is not. How wonderful, how great!
> Everything's clear! Here is a shit and over there is the river. For indeed,
> there are many of those who like to take a shit in the middle of nature. It is
> one thing to shit in the toilet – it is isolated, it is safe – but in some higher
> sense there is not much pleasure in it. In the meantime those who prefer to
> shit out in nature, they know what an unusual feeling of freedom and
> spaciousness this habit offers. In other words to piss and to shit in nature is
> something incredible, it is a very special feeling. I remember how I
> traveled to Germany. I was with a German lady in the woods and at some
> point I felt the need to go behind a tree. Of course, I apologized first. But
> the lady waved with her German hands in horror and said that it was not
> allowed to shit in the woods. At that time I understood this gesture in
> terms of: 'Oh My God!' What a high culture, what a high degree of
> civilization! I shouldn't even mention that they won't allow you to make
> fires, to collect and move brushwood from one place to another. I am not
> even sure if it is allowed to walk. No, I think to walk is fine. Yes, to walk

must be o.k. It is alright to walk as long as you don't shit in nature. How is that?[95]

It must be stressed that this quote is one of the earliest writings in the *Journeys* in which the notion of "nature" is brought up, and this despite the fact that the group preferred to make actions in the outdoors, in the fields and woods. After 1989 the relation of KD to nature would became problematized and, for the first time these artists would understand that Kievogorskoe Field, the main aesthetic firing ground of KD, was in fact a meadow in the woods. This shift may be illustrated using Ernst Bloch's example of the transformation of nature into landscape, an example which was later used by György Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*,[96] to criticize the bourgeois thinkers' troubled relation to history. According to Bloch, nature became landscape when the peasant's organic and unconscious life within nature has been replaced by the externalizing relationship of the artist or of the bourgeois city-dweller to nature – a relationship that operates remotely, over the gap of culture. This space of culture turns the subject into an "observer" and the object into "landscape."

If one extends this nature-to-landscape transition to Kabakov's fragment, it would imply that during that accident in the German woods, he realized that civilization and culture (*bildung*) meant above all that one should not mar or soil nature but only observe, study and enjoy it; it was then that his personal transition from nature-to-landscape took place. This restriction imposed on the human body (in itself an extension of nature) is

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[95] Ibid., 459.
[96] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

part of the argument offered by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, in which Western instrumental reason is accused of hijacking the noble ideal of progress which has led to the enslavement and domination of nature by reason.[97] Horkheimer and Adorno, who defined enlightened reason in terms of its modified attitude to nature, insisted that Enlightenment had achieved a transition from a "mythic" attitude to nature based on a mimetic relation to it (imitating nature through rituals and ceremonies) to an "enlightened" attitude in which nature is perceived as raw material to be exploited and used for the benefit of the human race. The enlightened, instrumental approach to nature turns it into landscape, which like the romantic "culturescapes," or the *Kulturlandschaft* constructed around ruins or medieval castles, is to be perceived also as a source of aesthetic pleasure.[98]

KD's transition from nature-to-landscape, which happened on the aesthetic ground of the Kievogorskoe Field, took place only in the second half of the nineties, although the action that best illustrates this transition took place abroad, in Canada. In 1999 Kizevalter, one of KD's members, who had settled in the nineties with his family in Canada, was asked to make another action for the series *Banner*. He had made works for this series before: in 1980, "when he was sent after school to work in the horrible Yakutia"[99] the rest of the group had asked him to put up a banner in the taiga, to photograph it from a distance without reading it, and then to send them pictures. The

[97] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1991).
[98] Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*, SUNY series in social and political thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 52 and 87.
[99] See Kordiashvili in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 205.

Yakutia banner read: IN THE SPRING, AT THE EDGE OF THE FIELD, AMONG

TREES, A WHITE BANNER WRITTEN IN RED LETTERS (950X80 CM) WAS PUT

UP BY G. KIZEVALTER.[100] Nineteen years later the group in Moscow sent him another

banner, this time to Toronto asking him to do the same thing.[101] But the "Canadian

Banner," as the artists called this action among themselves, has not been included in the

seventh volume of the *Journeys*.[102] Monastyrsky's reason for the exclusion of this action

from the group's main body of work was the "technically incorrect execution of this

action."[103] The Canadian banner was also white, and the text on it was written in English

and in black letters: ONE HUNDRED AND FIRST CHAPTER: HOW, IN THE

CANADIAN WOODS, MR. KIZELVALTER HUNG UP A SLOGAN. 1999 FROM

THE 7TH VOLUME OF JOURNEYS TO THE COUTNRYSIDE (e-mail:

haensgen@osteuropa.uni-bremen.de)"

The "technical problem" which interfered with the unfolding of the action was

caused by the new Western context, with which neither the Moscow group nor Kizevalter

were familiar. During a big national holiday (Queen Victoria Day) Kizevalter took his

family to a nearby island where he hoped to perform this action of the seventh volume.

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[100] See the action on-line at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-15.htm [accessed January 19, 2009].

[101] The Banner (*Lozung*) series is the most known and accessible work of KD. It consists of a banner put up in the woods on the chance that an accidental passerby, or in the terminology of the group an "anonymous-spectator," would come across it and experience a conceptual or perceptual emptiness. See Chapter 2 n.5

[102] This action is not included in the list of KD's actions on their website. I came across the work in the appendix to the seventh volume of Monastyrsky's manuscripts.

[103] See "Banner- 99 (Canadian)" *Lozung - 99* (*Canadskii*) in the Appendix to the Seventh Volume (*Prilojhenie k razdelu*). Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

His later report to Moscow describes the process and the troubles he went through to make this action.

> Finally we stopped by two trees. When I unfolded the banner and began to read it carefully I noticed the words 'in the Canadian woods.' I realized that we had not chosen the right place. This spot looked too civilized: in between the trees there were benches, a fence and we could even see some houses far in the distance. We decided to fold the banner back and leave… We spent the next couple of weeks in deep reflection, inquiring about a more appropriate place to put up this banner. It turned out, from the locals, that there are *no woods, in the proper sense*, *anywhere nearby*. There are parks, many of them, and the parks are divided from each other by developed areas. In the parks there might be 'wild' uncultivated parcels. So we decided to take a look at them.[104]

In the next paragraphs Kizevalter described how he and his family made a second attempt in a more wood-like glade that they finally found in the Old Mills Park near Toronto. As they prepared to attach one edge of their white banner to a tree, suddenly an ice-cream sales person showed up from behind the bushes asking when the event would begin, and how many people were expected to show up. Kizevalter responded that it was unlikely that there would be any attendees. "The ice-cream person began pondering, while biting his lips, and all of a sudden asked us if we had a special permit."[105] The family explained that this was not necessary, for this was not an official event but an artistic action – "something like a painting." After a few more questions and inquiries the ice-cream man pushed his cart and disappeared into the bushes. Kizevalter could finally focus again on

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[104] Banner 1999 (Canadian). Appendix to the Seventh Volume. Ibid.
[105] Ibid.

putting up the banner, which for many technical reasons did not hang as it was expected to but twisted and twined in the wind, making it difficult to photograph.

They finally succeeded, and even asked someone to take pictures, which Kizevalter sent home, but Moscow did not accept this action. Some years ago one could still come across this action on a Canadian website but it has recently vanished. The artists did not discuss what exactly had happened with the "Canadian Banner," and in this respect KD remained loyal to its hermetic system, which, as it was argued earlier (see Chapter 2), had to resemble that of the Politburo, for whom an antagonism or a problem was not to be solved but buried and forgotten. The "technical" problem mentioned by Monastyrsky must surely have been related to this incongruence between the Russian woods and the Western parks. For Kizevalter's action to have worked ideally near Toronto the artist should have submitted a project, in which he would have had to explain to the park authorities the significance of this event as well as to guarantee that no park rule or regulation would be broken. KD's actions ideally work in the Soviet or Russian context, and abroad only with authorizations or as arrested installations in the controlled climate of the neutral white cube.

The nature-to-landscape relation here translates into the problem of woods-to-parks. But this dependence of KD on the woods did not only disappoint the group abroad, but also at home. In a commentary to an action written in 1996 Monastyrsky confesses that the radical changes to which the Kievogorskoe Field had been subjected in the last

years has left a very strong impression on him.[106] During the before-period the Western part of the field was the most important area for KD; it was the place where most of the actions began, and where most of the time spectators gathered to observe or participate in the action. "I was shocked to discover that almost the entire Western part of the field was gone, and that what used to be a dense wall of trees had begun to show big open gaps."[107]

In the after part of the *Journeys* both the artists and the spectator-participants from the Soviet period lament the disappearance of the Kievogorskoe Field. In the second half of the nineties the field was acquired by realty developers, who began to cut down the trees, partitioning the field into lots for building Western-style villas. Artists complained that around the same time the field became very busy and sometimes trucks and tractors were appearing right in the middle of the action.[108] This change has contributed to fewer and fewer actions on the Kievogorskoe Field in the late 1990s and the 2000s.

> The actions of KD began to lose their association with a definite place,
> first of all with the Kievogorskoe Field, which constituted for a long time
> KD's *field of action*… There is for this a concrete practical cause, which
> is: Kievogorskoe Field is disappearing. At this point [January 2004] it may
> not exist as such, it has been completely covered with villas. This
> circumstance conditioned KD to move aside, trying to open up and
> develop new territories, adjacent to this field, to circle around it, or to
> simply go on and search for a completely new place.[109]

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[106] Monastyrsky "Commentary to the Action *Negatives*" (*Rasskaz ob akzii 'Negativy'*). Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Monastyrsky *Zametki o 7 Tome* 18.04.94. Ibid.
[109] *Ulet* December 2003-January 2004. Ibid.

Figure 10: Kievogorskoe Field Before (1989) and After (2001), maps assembled and reconstructed.

Figure 9 shows Kievogorskoe Field before and after 1989. The difference is above all graphical – a hand-drawn plan showing multiple locations of actions made on this field before, versus a satellite image showing a new suburban development afterwards. In Soviet times this field, which the artists believed to belong to the Williams Institute of Fodder, did not even have a name, and the designation "Kievogorskoe Field" was used only among the members and spectators of KD.

> In Soviet times the out-of-town space [see "out-of-town-ness" in the Glossary] was a no man's land, a territory which was out of anybody's control and where there were no laws to be applied. This had its beauty; it was enough to get off the highway (the highway was still a public space controlled by the representatives of the state) and you would roll out of the social context into a *Urwald,* a primeval territory, a jungle, a taiga, a whatever. There occurred the situation of the *tabula rasa*, of the blank page where one could construct whatever… And now this Russianized idyll started to fall apart, because every plot of out-of-town-ness has been sucked into the general context of civilization.[110]

With the advance of privatization the artists were gradually pushed aside from the Kievogorskoe Field and even their important category "out-of-town-ness" began to change its meaning.

The 1997 action "Library" (*Biblioteka*) was dedicated to the Kievogorskoe Field. For the action the artists chose "thirteen books with (mainly) ideological content, published during (1976-1996), a period in which KD's actions had taken place on the

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[110] *Ulet* December 2003-January 2004. Ibid.

Kievogorskoe Field (or near it)."[111] The first 1976 title was "Issues of Economic

Management in advanced Socialist Societies" by Brezhnev, which corresponded to KD's

action from the same year "Tent" (*Palatka*). The last book was "Complete Reference

Guide to Real Estate" (authored by G.H. Volochkov) which corresponded to the 1996

action "Negatives" (*Negativy*). In these ten books the artists inserted photographs and text

from their own actions and, after wrapping the books in plastic foil, dividing them into

five packages, they covered them in black tar and buried them in the woods next to the

field, which was at that time, already a construction site. In the same spot the artists also

buried an electric watch, powered by a lithium battery that was to keep the watch running

for ten years). Over the next decade the group returned to the same spot in the woods for

a series of sequels based on the 1997 "Library." In 2001 they unburied the electric watch

for the action "Bag" (*Meshok*); in 2003, they made the action "14:07 – 15:13 (*Action with

Clock*s)"; in 2005, they drew lots from a pack of Chinese postcards to see which of the

ten books had to be unburied (it turned out to be the "Chinese Documents from Dung

Xua"); and finally, in "Library 2007" they unburied the rest of the books. One package of

books was missing.

The effect of transition on this group's "field of action" is significant. The

differences are obvious on the two maps (Figure 9). The map from before shows the artist

of KD artists immersed in the field, whereas the satellite map shows [KD] wandering

around as if feeding on the energy that had been invested there in the past decades (see on

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[111] See the description of the action "Library" and the complete list of books and actions on
http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-81.htm [accessed January 19, 2009].

the map the actions "625-520" and the earlier described "Library" sequel). The 1989 drawing, which next to the satellite map looks like a peasant's plan for the rotation of crops, best illustrates KD's full immersion in their system, in their aesthetic nature. The second map, sent by a robot from satellite orbit, shows the artists wandering around their former field, making them seem like landless peasants during the industrial revolution. The two plans are confirmed by multiple voices that lament throughout the post-1989 *Journeys* the disappearance of the field, recalling with nostalgia the lost innocence of the state of nature. Only when this field was completely transformed did [KD] realize that Kievogorskoe Field was the group's main "field of action;" it was their *Urwald*, their primeval taiga, their *tabula rasa* – in other words it had come to represent the nature of their aesthetic and artistic system.

What I am suggesting here is that during the before-period KD deployed a more "natural" aesthetics. One can argue for a higher degree of naturalness in their earlier volumes, based on the fact that the artists were less dependent on extraneous devices and techniques (such as photography or video), as well as on the fact that in this period their actions were more imitative and mimetic, and less conceptual. Horkheimer and Adorno have argued that it is mimesis that distinguishes the pre-Enlightened subject from the Enlightened one, and the former mediates its relation to nature by imitating it, resorting to various rituals and ceremonies.[112] It was in their early actions that KD introduced their rituals, initiated their journeys outside the city, performed empty actions, and distributed

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[112] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002). See also Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*.

parts of the factographical discourse to their spectators. Some works from the early

volumes attend to the idea that the function of art, was, as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has

put it, to "imitate Nature in her manner of operation." This was one of the central

working postulates for John Cage, KD's main foreign influence, and Cage himself

absorbed this principle from Coomaraswamy, who places it at the center of "Oriental

aesthetics."[113] The variation on the idea of mimesis proposed by Coomaraswamy and

then used by Cage is indeed not a Western one. The artist does not copy nature externally

but seeks to imitate the very principles in which nature operates, attempting to "penetrate

the nature of Nature,"[114] often resorting to the ritualistic and ceremonial practices used by

cultures that employ this kind of aesthetics. This is the case particularly in some of KD's

early actions, such as "Appearance" (1976), in which both the artists and the spectators

were encouraged to observe liminal perceptual states such as waiting, watching, listening,

which are states that arise as a result of resorting to such elements as non-intentionality,

unpredictability, and chance.

From the second phase the group began to depart from these early principles.

Their gradual transformation may be regarded in terms of a transition from mimesis to

construction, from an attempt to imitate, naturally or unpredictably, to the application of a

more object-oriented constructivist approach. Their transformation may also be

considered from the perspective of the Western tradition of aesthetics. Kant's aesthetics

in particular suits KD's early actions in light of their distinguishing non-utilitarian

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[113] See Sam Richards, *John Cage as* (Charlbury, Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1996), 113. For
Coomaraswamy basic principle of "Oriental aesthetics" see Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The
Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).
[114] Richards, *John Cage as*, 113.

principles, of their purposeless purposefulness and disinterested pleasure. As in Kant's

aesthetics, which is not an aesthetic of art but an aesthetics of nature and of natural

beauty, KD's early works, in particular those made during the first phase, may be

regarded as ritualistic behaviors which are not yet indexed and pigeonholed into distinct

rational categories or constructed according to pre-established rules and devices. Starting

with phase two and increasingly into the eighth and ninth decade KD began to lose this

innocent "naturalness"; each of its new actions are now constructed within a framework

established by previous actions, and are based within a continuing tradition as a kind of

miniature institution. This transformation of a "natural" mimetic approach to a more

constructive one, might be imagined in terms of a transition from a Kantian to a Hegelian

aesthetics, or to be more accurate, from an aesthetics to a philosophy of art. Not only did

Hegel free Kantian aesthetics of its dependence on the notion of natural beauty

(*Naturschöne*), but he also proposed a philosophy of fine arts as a more suitable branch of

knowledge to deal with the products of the human spirit. KD's aesthetic and artistic

development, as if it were following a certain historical logic, gradually became acutely

aware of its past. As it did, the ritual mimesis of nature in the manner of its operation

gradually became a more schematic construction of reality, and action gradually

congealed into installation.

This is not to suggest that Soviet citizens were living at the end of the twentieth

century in a "state of nature," even if a comparison of the available technologies for the

domination of nature may sometimes create such an impression. To compare Soviet and

Western technologies of conquering nature is to compare the *kolkhoz* semi-feudal

approach, which left this meadow for the most part unexploited, to the intricate sophistication of the real estate development business – the complex industry which has developed means of controlling every aspect of the landscape, from the color of the grass to the configuration of the foliage and the height of the trees. The very medium of the satellite map (Figure 9) shows a more complex degree of mediation, but this does not imply that before this field was unmediated. It was possible for KD to work undisturbed in the seventies and the eighties on the Kievogorskoe Field not because of its pristine and untouched state but because of that lesser degree of exploitation and utilization of nature characteristic of a traditional, or non-capitalist society. The transition is not from nature to culture but is from an early form and technology of mediating nature to a later and a more advanced one.

In KD's case the disappearance of the Kievogorskoe Field behind the pink-painted facades of the new villas suggests the gradual dissolution of the Soviet context behind the new post-Soviet and Russian reality. The Soviet context constituted the true "nature" of KD, for their aesthetical system was constructed in a continuous mirroring of the totalitarian regime and its hermetic ideology (See Chapter 2). The transformation and fragmentation of the Kievogorskoe Field may serve as a good visual metaphor for KD's *Journeys* and the entire aesthetic discourse in the after-period. Having emerged under the Soviet regime, [KD] strove to accommodate themselves to the new socioeconomic conditions. With the gradual disappearance of a socialist approach to nature, [KD] was left with little else than to drift around the new capitalistic landscape, performing on the margins and hiding in the woods next to the privatized Kievogorskoe Field. KD's

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aesthetic system, which was assembled in the tradition of an asocial and apolitical *art for art's sake,* lacked the necessary tools and devices to deal with the changing socioeconomic context in the next wave of the Westernization of Russia. Some actionists and activist artists of the 1990s and 2000s would have sprayed green dollar signs on the pink walls of these villas; they would have tried to bite their inhabitants, or staged a demonstration. But KD's intellectual dissident aesthetics did not have such oppositional techniques in its toolbox.

A More Comfortable Journey

Another important element in KD's discourse that changes considerably in the after-period is the journey itself. The notion of the "journey" is crucial for their aesthetic discourse and for their artistic practice. By the third volume the repeated journeying outside the city was recognized as KD's signature approach, and in subsequent volumes the artists made considerable efforts to present the journey as a new artistic genre (see Chapter 2). Inspired by the poet Nekrasov, KD conceived of the act of journeying in terms of the frame built by the spectators as they anticipate the event that awaits them at the place of action. The emotional and mental energy spent in making all the assumptions and suppositions, the amount of hope or fear accumulated during the journey, must wrap and hold the action together.

In the first five volumes of the *Journeys* most of the spectators started their reports describing how they all met at the train station, enumerating all those who were already waiting under the clock, gradually leading the reader inside the train and offering

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a sense of the atmosphere inside the wagon, then concluding with a short presentation of topics and themes exchanged by the spectators as they journeyed in the "out-of-town-ness" facing each other. Most of their experience during the day (from meeting at the station until the evening when they shook hands and left for home) was collective, and this was not so much of their own merit as it was a result of the conditions for prescribed communal life set under the Soviet order. The frame, which the spectators assembled during each journey, consisted of these collective experiences which they were building together, piece by piece, as they waited together to arrive in the "out-of-town-ness," or as they returned to the city immersed in interpretations and comments on the action that they had witnessed or participated in.

During the nineties, and particularly into the new century, the experience of journeying to the place of the action changed:

> Thus we arrived at the place of the action (somewhere in the region of Lobni but it was not Kievogorskoe Field) by car: myself, Dasha, Andrei and Sereja with Panitkov. On the spot, there was another car and we saw Igor with Lena, Masha Konstantinovna and Julia Ovchinnikova. This pleasantly surprised me.[115]

In the actions of the eighth and ninth volumes (1999-2003 and 2003-2006), spectators travel to the Kievogorskoe Field, or to other locations of the action individually. This transformation did not happen overnight but gradually, for during the late nineties the spectators still used public transportation to arrive at the field. For the 1996 action

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[115] Leiderman *Polet na Saturn.* 2004. (Volume Nine). Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

"Negatives," spectators met at the station and the reports offer a glimpse of a changing Russia: "We arrived at the Savelovskaya train station, half an hour earlier, and we spent some time examining the new station decorated with marble inside and almost empty – only a couple of homeless persons without a distinctive age or gender carrying their possessions (the type ineradicable in Russia of the 'wanderer')."[116] In the late nineties but particularly into the next century, reports describe a different experience, as spectators arrived at the place of the action by car. Some spectators like Ryklin have noted this difference. "Whereas before we used to meet at the Savelovskaya train station and then travel by train to Lobni, from which we took a bus, these days," in 2003, "the spectators are brought by cars."[117]

Now, the journeys to the place of the action are faster and more comfortable. "Finally came Backstein, who parked his *Zhiguli* [Lada] next to the hotel Cosmos, and we all got into his car and in fifteen minutes we had already reached the field of action,"[118] or "…Alexeev gave a nine-minute speech in front of 15 spectators, brought to the place of action in 5 cars…."[119] The new way of journeying outside the city was not only faster but also more entertaining, as the spectator could now listen to the car radio, chat with the driver, or stare in silence out the window. The previous communal experience of the collective frame of action, which was conditioned by the confines of public transportation by train or by bus, and their complete immersion in a monotonous

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[116] Ryklin *Dva Golubea* Report on the action *Negatives*. Ibid.
[117] Ryklin "Remembering Remembrance" (*Vospominanie o vospominanii*) *Journeys* (Volume Eight). Ibid.
[118] Ryklin "Raising" (*Podniatie*) report on the action *M. Ryklin*. Ibid.
[119] From description of the action the "Second Speech" (*Vtoraia rechi*) (Volume Eight). Ibid.

Soviet landscape, had dissipated, scattering into numerous individual experiences and choices dispersed throughout the cozy interiors of personal automobiles. Unlike the reports from the before-*Journeys* – which often mention the collective experience in passing, as if each train journey was the same or naturalized, and therefore left little to discuss – the new reports appear as individual opinions and statements, each voicing distinct comments and responses to the action as well as succinct and wry backseat observations on the changing landscape of Moscow and its suburbs. Some described "blocks of old structures from the Khrushchev and Brezhnev age interspersed with the nouveaux riches' *buildingov*," whereas others report on "the roads lined with empty billboards covered with plywood."[120] Artists' and spectators' comments and reports on the new way of journeying also suggest a significant improvement in the living conditions and the lifestyle of the artists and the spectators, as when "suddenly Sheptulin showed up in his [Volkswagen] *Golf*."[121] Others reported on some unexpected side effects of the new way of journeying to the actions:

> I, like the other spectators, arrived at the Kievogorskoe Field much later
> than the organizers. Their presence as well as their obvious intention to
> remain hidden was betrayed by two *Niva*(s) parked on the side of the road,
> one belonging to Panitkov and another to Elagina.[122]

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[120] Alimpieva report on the action "Fisherman" and Alena Ivanova *Rasskaz ob akzii Meshok 03.03.02* (Volume Eight). Ibid.
[121] Alexeev report on the action "Second Speech" (*Vtoraya rechi*) and "Garages" (*Garazhi*) *Journeys* (Volume Eight). Ibid.
[122] N. Sheptulin *Rasskaz ob akzii "Signal krasnoi treapki" (Shvedagon k akzii Mesto deistvia)*. Ibid.

The new, fast, and comfortable journeying outside the city not only had a sociological effect, as it started to divide the collective of spectators into smaller and smaller groups dispersing them into separate cars, but it also has an aesthetic effect on KD's action. Waiting that constituted the frame of the action and which used to be performed collectively, was now carried out individually. The warm and comfortable social isolation of the car, where even the arrangement of the seats act against the face-to-face dialogue possible in the local trains, changed the character of the frame of action. In other words the very frame of KD's action, which is constituted from various anticipatory and awaited material, was scattered and fragmented. But the individual journeys also affected the style of writing spectators reports, as if the reporters did not want to contradict the "medium is the message" dictum.

The Democratization of Language

The after-*Journeys* reveal a certain confusion of roles manifest in the fact that the voices of the artists and those of the spectators become easier to confuse and confound. Before, in the first five volumes of the *Journeys*, a certain order of arranging the material existed. For instance, the section entitled "Descriptive Texts" (*Opisatelinye texty*) was the artist's section, which included only technical material, documentations, and descriptions of actions, whereas the section "Participants' Reports" (*Rasskazy uchastnikov*) was the part of the *Journeys*, which primarily consisted of reports by spectator-participants and occasionally a comment by one of the artists. In the material of the seventh volume of the *Journeys*, a tendency to annul and invalidate this strict division and compartmentalization

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occurs. Texts which would normally be written for the "Participants' Reports" section are now produced by [KD] artists themselves. Ryklin mentions this fact in one of his reports:

> The roles of the artist and the spectators became less differentiated… So un-differentiated became the roles and the functions of the organizer (artist) and those of the spectators (participant) that for instance N. Alekseev, who was part of the artist group, wrote an article in the newspaper as if he were the only spectator and Monastyrsky the only author.[123]

The confusion persists throughout the entire seventh volume, and Ryklin must have had this new alteration of the *Journeys* in mind when he wrote that in some of the last actions it looked as if "one person has organized this spectacle for himself, but made sure to invite as many friends and acquaintances as possible." Even the "inner circle of KD was in part turned into spectators."[124]

The gradual disappearance of the distinction between "artist" and "spectator" is reflected first of all in KD's use of words and the categories in their vocabulary. The major category "artist" remained unchanged, and only the attributes that accompanying it ("contemporary," "nonconformist," "conceptual," "Russian") changed depending on the circumstances, or on the theme of the text, or on the exhibition. The category "spectator," however, changed significantly, and this change comes as a sign of democratization of post-Soviet unofficial art. In the before-period KD had only two categories of spectators: the "spectator-participant," which included the artists' friends and acquaintances, and the

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[123] Ryklin *Dva golubea (rasskaz ob akzii "Negativy")* Volume Seven Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."
[124] Ryklin *Pivatizatzia pameati; Rasskaz ob akzii "Shvedagon k akzii Mesto deistvia"* (Volume Seven). Ibid.

"anonymous-spectators," or everybody else. Towards the end of the nineties Monastyrsky

mentions in his texts "interested-spectators," (*zainteresovannye zriteli*),[125] "action-

spectators" (*"akzionnye zriteli"*), "free-spectators" (*"svobodnyi" zriteli)* who witness the

action but do not participate; the "invisible-spectators" (*"nevidemyi" zriteli*), also called

"Sorokin's spectators" (after the writer Vladimir Sorokin), who are not familiar with the

action's plot, and the most disadvantaged category, "outsider-spectators" (*"postoronnii*

zriteli) who have neither a chance to see an action nor the opportunity to familiarize

themselves with KD's documentation. These last have only read "literature," which

constitutes the published documentation.[126] There is also the "gazing-spectator

(character)" (*smotreaschii zriteli personaj*),[127] including the numerous Western spectators

(counted in hundreds) who pay hard currency to see an action performed on a theater

stage (as in the 2001 Berlin action *"623-520"*), or in the Center Georges Pompidou in

Paris (as in the 2002 action "Archeology of Light" [*Arheologia sveta*]).

    The exhaustive compartmentalization of the category of spectator echoes the

increasing fragmentation of the consumer preferences in the market niches and the rapid

democratization of art, which takes place with the contribution of the new institutions of

transition – the contemporary art centers that contribute to the education of the public.

Paradoxically, in spite of this compartmentalization the artists of KD complain that over

the years a "gradual 'disappearance' of the spectator from the demonstration field

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[125] Monastyrsky *Zametki o 7-tome* (Volume Seven). Ibid.
[126] Hänsgen & Monastyrsky *O znachenie media v dokumentazii KD* (Volume Seven). Ibid.
[127] Monastyrsky *Pole komedii i linia kartiny* (*commentarii k sheme*) (Volume Nine). Ibid.

occurred."[128] "Before," writes Monastyrsky, "the spectators had to search for concealed meanings (which as a matter of fact did not exist) from one action to another, from one text to another, and most importantly they had to search for themselves within the 'hidden' layers of their consciousness, because it was precisely the consciousness of the spectator that was the primary object of representation of our actions."[129] The reactions submitted by many new spectators to the after volumes of the *Journeys* are often predictable and anticipated, as many attempt to impersonate the spectator-participants of the before-period, whose responses had been made known and popular by art historians and critics that followed KD after 1989.

> [On the field] we, the young artists, who were attending the seminars 'New Artistic Strategies' organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Soros Foundation, were trying to keep together… We were attempting to anticipate 'something' about which we have heard and read so much, and we were all worried that this knowledge may prevent us from having a 'pure perception' and "pure experiencing.' We feared that we would not see 'that,' and that we would be disappointed, or that we may somehow ruin the existing myth of KD. But there was also confidence in those who invited us, as well as in myself – it wasn't in vain that I was learning performance art. 'Everything will be alright' – I decided.[130]

The earlier spectator-participants were driven into the "out-of-town-ness" by their curiosity, their love for nature, or by the necessity of periodically meeting and

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[128] Monastyrsky *Pole komedii i linia kartiny* (Volume Eight). Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] E. Morozova *Polomichestvo k moscham neubitogo medvedea; Rasskaz ob akzii 'Primechanie' 31.03.99* (Volume Seven). Ibid.

communicating with like-minded friends. The new spectators, divided into various new categories, arrived on the Kievogorskoe Field with a more definite purpose. While some wanted to participate in the rituals of the group, about which they had read or heard in seminars, workshops, and exhibitions organized by Moscow conceptualists at the new contemporary art centers, others sought to experience emptiness, *Shunyata*, or attain *satori* and the awakening of the self. The artists of KD were also aware that they were dealing with a new less disinterested type of spectator.

> Among the new spectators there were many students from Moscow State University (MGU), where Lena Romanova teaches. They don't understand anything. This is a different kind of audience. For our spectators it was always clear that we had to free ourselves, and that art exists for liberation. For the new spectators this is not the case. They keep saying: we don't understand. Perhaps they lack a certain culture of perceiving these kind of things, for these things happen so rarely. Art historians too; they don't know what this is all about and they also say that they don't understand. But what is there to understand? I don't understand myself when they keep saying this. What do they mean by this, what is there that they have to understand?[131]

The purposeless and empty quality of the previous journeys outside the city had made these trips enjoyable and valuable to the spectator-participant (see Kabakov's participant report for the action "Appearance," Chapter 2, Volume One). The new, more pragmatic spectator, whom the artists call sometimes "free" and sometimes "interested," enters the half-privatized field of KD's action accompanied by the art historian, and together they

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[131] Panitkov *Ob akzieakh 7 toma "Poezdok za gorod"* (Volume Seven). Ibid.

demand meaning. *Non-understanding* by contrast, is one of KD's main criteria and conditions for a successful unfolding of the action. Non-understanding is a necessary ingredient that must precede the action and then follow it for a long period of time, a period which may last, at least, until the process of interpretation and commentary begins. Non-understanding is of course opposed to understanding, "or commentary which leads to neurosis,"[132] and the terminology of Moscow Conceptualism expresses this crucial opposition through the dichotomy: "Syndrome Guguta" (*Guguze Sindrom*) versus "Teddy Syndrome" (*Teddy Sindrom*). The two syndromes were diagnosed by the KD in the eighties, and had been used extensively in the interpretative and critical processes of these artists. When the new free-spectators present themselves on the field, where they seek instant gratification of their desire for meaning and purpose, they ignore the necessary element of non-understanding; they disrupt the necessary tension that must exist (and the longer the better) between understanding and non-understanding, between Teddy and Guguta (see the Glossary).

The democratization that the new paradigm of contemporary art permitted and encourages in the post-Soviet society allowed for a larger and a more diverse number of spectators to participate in the journeys, including persons from various socioeconomic and educational background, and even from different countries. This was quite a disparity from the very select and hermetic circle of Moscow Conceptualism in the before-period. Contrasting the reports of the spectator-participants with those of the new spectators of

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[132] Hänsgen & Monastyrsky *Dialog ob esteticheskoi situazii within KD in 2003* (Volume Eight). Ibid.

the nineties reveals significant differences. The two groups of texts, divided by a decade, express different worldviews and sharply differ in character, content, details and in the very manner of writing. The character of the reports written during the Soviet period may be described as metaphysical, romantic and even poetical, for here the spectator meticulously describes perceptual states, emotional experiences, instinctive and dormant feelings and thoughts, explaining them to themselves and to others by looking for traces and causes in the elements of KD's actions (see Kabakov's participant report for the action "Appearance," Chapter 2, Volume One). The earlier spectator-participants' reports, and those of Kabakov in particular, were descriptions of states of profound non-understanding. This was the ideal outcome of KD's actions.

The reports written for the after-period are more interested in physical, technical and procedural matters. This fact affects the course of the action and most often the process of interpretation, which is such an important component. Monastyrsky often complains about the new spectators' interpretations and how eager they are to see in every action some current sociopolitical context – which the group tried very hard to avoid during the Soviet *Journeys*. For the 1998 action entitled "Pipe" (*Truba*) filmed by the film crew of the Franco-German TV network *Arte*, many spectators' interpretations evolved around Russia's economic role as a major supplier of raw material and energy.[133] The penetration of the political into the aesthetics of KD may be considered a sign of distress, for the Moscow conceptualists, like other cultural non-conformists and dissidents, often affirmed that their opposition to the regime was never political but

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[133] Monastyrsky Foreword to the Seventh Volume. Ibid.

strictly aesthetical, thus making a clear division between these two domains.[134] But if KD

did not come to the political, the political came to [KD]. The social and the political

element seeped into the reports of their new spectators, but also into the texts of the

artists. The artists texts' express dissatisfaction with many aspects of the transitional post-

Soviet reality, often pointing to the invasion of cheap foreign products and especially to

the culture industry that had crippled the context or the "exposition field" of the group.

Monastyrsky seems particularly annoyed by the noxious voices of the new Russian pop-

stars that trickle through the millions of cheap loudspeakers that had invaded the city, as

well as by the ongoing process of the "provincialization" of Moscow (see "Peasants in

the City" in Glossary) reaching often for political metaphors, as when the he compares

the shrinking size of the Kievogorskoe Filed to the dissolution of the USSR.[135]

Even if KD artists still tried hard to suppress and resist universal impulses to pay

tribute and remain tied to the unofficial dissident tactics centered on the individual and

the particular narrative of personal liberation (to which they often referred as "private

art"),[136] the social and the political breaks through and penetrates their texts as well as the

writings of the new spectators. Unlike the previous reports by spectator-participants –

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[134] "…We wanted to 'insinuate ourselves into' (*vlitsea*) the social and in this sense we have never
been in opposition to the existing state order and we did not experience hostility to the accepted
directions in the official art. This is why we found absurd and unnatural our status as unofficial
artists and we found reasonable our open existence in society. Of course, we had our artistic
position, but the subject of what we were doing was not an expression of opposition…" Yurii
Sobolev quoted in Karl Eimermacher and Natalia Margulis, *Ot edinstva k mnogoobraziiu:
razyskaniia v oblasti "drugogo" iskusstva 1950-kh –1980-kh godov* (Moskva: Rossiiskii gos.
gumanitarnyi universitet, 2004), 53.
[135] Monastyrsky Forward to the Seventh and Ninth Volume. Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod:
kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."
[136] Eimermacher and Margulis, *Ot edinstva k mnogoobraziiu: razyskaniia v oblasti "drugogo"
iskusstva 1950-kh –1980-kh godov*, 53.

which were often so tedious in their long and detailed descriptions of worries or personal feelings, or of descriptions of the complete incomprehension triggered by an "empty action," or by a "demonstration of the demonstration" – the new reports are more entertaining. They are actually easier and more enjoyable to read. Some describe a drunk woman lying in the snow right in front of the Savelovskaya train station, while others mention a scuffle between what appear to be bandits or gangsters. One report from this period starts in the following way:

> Well, what can I write about? Shall I describe how we all took the train, and how we walked again in the snow, treading into each other's footprints, and how we covered our feet with plastic bags to keep our feet dry, and how we drank straight from the bottle? All this has been described tens of times and everybody knows how all this may be nice and friendly.[137]

Leiderman, who wrote the above report and had attended KD's journeys since the mid-eighties, was possibly exaggerating somewhat in maintaining that the spectators' reports described "tens of times" how they swigged vodka from the bottles. Neither the spectator-participants' reports nor the artists' texts from the first five-volumes of the published *Journeys* offer details on matters which did not concern the action. Reading the before-*Journeys*, I often asked myself how these artists had spent so much time outside, in the cold, without something to warm them up, something which (knowing the context) would have been sorely missed in its absence. It turned out that they had brought everything they needed, and today on KD's website one can see photographs of people

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[137] Leiderman *Rasskaz ob akzii "Negativy"* Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

picnicking during the action.[138] In the before-*Journeys* it is extremely rare to find a reference to food, alcohol, tobacco, or any other forms of relief, and it is also almost impossible to come across bad language, swearing or cursing. In the Soviet *Journeys* there was an unspoken rule, a moral imperative that, like the unuttered principles of the Politburo, kept everything irrelevant to art, aesthetics, or the future of the proletariat veiled and silenced. The sacred and the pure were not to be contaminated by everyday experience.

The volumes of the after-*Journeys*, by contrast, are open and democratic in allowing everything that has crossed the field of action, the demonstration field or the mind of the reporter to exist. Both the artists' and the spectators' texts from this period abound in details: how they passed a bottle of vodka around snacking on pickles; how they mixed gin with lemonade and drank as they walked; how some drank a shot or two before the action in order to deal with the frustration of trudging through deep snow or mud; how someone – whose anonymity I maintain – even got very drunk in the bus on the way back; and how during some difficult days one particular member of KD started to drink beer very early in the morning. The manner of writing is also more entertaining, and many spectators express their individuality through the text, working with elements of style, making puns, using English words in Russian transcription, (e.g. *buildingi*, *businessy*, *kontemporary art*) in short treating their textual experiences with postmodernist ease and irony. Many reports begin with epigraphs taken from famous

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[138] See the 1986 action "Banner-86" (*Slogan-86*) at http://conceptualism.letov.ru/ IV/losung-86/slides/loz86-juznaja_noch.html [accessed January 27, 2009].

writers (Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, or Borges' *Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*), and references to Kafka, Deleuze, Heidegger or Clint Eastwood confer on these late texts the aura of critique. These writings are not descriptions anymore but interpretations and theoretizations within a larger, globally cultural context. A series of new words from this new world draw attention to themselves as they flood the artists' commentaries and the spectators' reports, mixing up with old and new concepts from the *Dictionary* of Moscow Conceptualism: honorarium, vodka, "empty eternity," "Contemporary Artist," gin, Japan, Taiwan, Germany, Americans, *Śūnyatā*, *moksha*, feast (*zastolie*,) Europe, Switzerland, Sweden, Israel, lavish lunch in Italian restaurant, Cagor, Beer, vodka and pickles, "Local-Lore-ness," Soros, Soros Center for Contemporary Art, new artistic strategies, curators, Halls cough drops, cell phone, "Onanium," "Obsosium," "U-Topos," Niva, Golf [Volkswagen], new white Volvo, Karelia cigarettes (slim), Borges, Jewish, Billboard, Chukchia, 150 rubles per hour, Corel Draw, Google Earth, NATO, Gulag, GPS 12 XS (Garmin).[139] These words denote new ideas, influences and forces that have made their way into the after-*Journeys*, pointing not only to the most recent objects, gadgets, materials, and strategies that these artists had integrated into their discourse, but also suggesting that a series of new and pressing social issues – such as nationalism and globalization, or the invisible hand of the market and the latest state policies – had expanded the horizon of KD's discourse, making more complex the art of journeying outside the city.

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[139] The *Dictionary* concepts are in quotation marks. See Glossary.

CONCLUSION

From KD to [KD]: From Objectivation to Reification

Moscow conceptualists use the metaphor of a stone thrown into the air to describe the previous one hundred years of Russian art. At the origin of the stone's trajectory stood the Russian historical avant-garde which had forcefully propelled it high into the air; when the stone began to lose speed, reaching the vertex of the parabola, it represented the Zhdanovist doctrine of Socialist Realism at its height; the response of the stone to the law of gravity and its return to the ground corresponded to the downfall of Socialist Realism and the beginning of post-WWII unofficial art (the modernists of the 1950s and 1960s) that concluded with the art of Moscow conceptualists, who prided themselves on being the ones who had followed the stone back to where it had been at the beginning of the last century.[1]

There is in this metaphor of the stone something dialectical about its movement, something that may bring to the mind the Hegelian historical journey of the Spirit in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In Hegel's journey consciousness constantly objectifies and alienates itself in its interaction with the external world, following a trajectory but then returning, like the stone, back to its point of origin. The journey of the Spirit is a transition through various stops, called shapes of consciousness, which emerge in the result of objectification that consciousness performs in the process of acquiring

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[1] Kabakov used this metaphor in the dialogue "Spectator-Character" recorded by Monastyrsky in 1988. Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

knowledge of the object. In some respects KD's *Journeys* resembles the *Phenomenology*, for it presents the journey of an artistic consciousness as it hardens and freeze into phases, stages, or steps during its transition through history in order to return into itself.

In their critical response to Hegel, Marxist critics have used the concepts alienation and reification and in order to distinguish among various forms of relations that occur between individuals in modern society, or in the context of labor between the producer and the product. In critical theory this distinction received further attention in the work of György Lukács,[2] who initially used the terms "objectification" and "alienation" synonymously, and ceased to do so after he read the unpublished writings of the young Marx (the *Paris Manuscripts*).[3] Later, Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg would distinguished between objectification and reification in a more detailed and complex manner using the terms *objectivation, objectification, alienation,* and *reification*.[4] *Objectivation* is pure production; *objectification* involves the act of cognition and suggests the distance which emerges between the process of production and the product; *alienation* refers to the situation in which the unity between the process of producing and the product has been broken; finally *reification* is "the process of alienation in which the characteristic of thing-hood becomes the standard of objective

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[2] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

[3] On Lukács' confusion of "objectification" with "alienation" see Lee Congdon, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria, 1919-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 81.

[4] Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg, "Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness," *History and Theory* 4, no. 2 (1965), 199.

reality…," or to put it in other words, "reification is objectification in an alienated mode."[5]

Objectivation and objectification are value-free and anthropologically necessary. Objectivation is the process used to define the subject's intentionality and its exterior motivation for interacting with the world. It is that aspect of human nature that defines humanity as world-producing being, *homo faber*. "Objectification," on the other hand, "is a narrower epistemological concept and it refers to the way in which the world produced by man is apprehended by him."[6] This meaning is closer to the Hegelian use of the term, and it may be used to describe expression as well as the processes of naming, of knowing and of communicating knowledge to others. To objectify means to make various aspects of reality objects for consciousness. Objectification, which implies a distance between the subject and the object, or between the producer and the product, conveys that the subject, or the producer, is still in full control over the distance that inevitably occurs between the subject and what has been objectified. Objectivation and objectification are thus *a priori* conditions, and human existence cannot be conceived without them.[7]

Reification, on the other hand, involves the alienation of objectified reality; it is the process of forgetting the intimate relation between the subject and the object, or producer and product. Reification is separation and detachment, and it brings about an apprehension of the product as something which is independent of the producer. Marxist tradition that makes the clearest distinction between the neutral and value-free

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[5] Ibid., 199-200.
[6] Ibid., 200.
[7] Ibid., 201.

objectification, on the one hand, and value-laden reification.[8] In the economy of

exploitation the process of reification is regarded as key, for it permits social relations to

be objectified, alienated and then presented as if independent of their social origin.

Actions are perceived independently from actors and products from producers. The

modern state, in itself a reified force, resorts to reification in order to bestow ontological

status on social roles and rules, on forms of behavior and activity, as well as to maintain

the coercive instrumentality of various social, political and economic institutions by

presenting them as indisputable givens.

The evolution of KD's *Journeys* offers a good opportunity to exercise these

sociological concepts, and I maintain their established order (i.e. objectivation,

objectification, alienation, and reification) despite the fact that some scholars might

object against using this order to express a diachronic or a historical evolutionary process.

The relations that prevailed during the early phases of KD's activity may be summoned

under the first concept of objectivation. During their first phase (1976-80) the artists

made pure actions; they were not yet concerned with naming things, and even if they did,

these names were not deliberately recorded in order to be communicated to other

participants. This was also the stage when they did not yet have an established name to

describe their odd activities, to which they referred inconsistently as "works" (*raboty*),

"things" (*vesch'*) "performances," "stagings" (*postanivki*) etc. During this phase of

objectivation KD has not yet instituted the epistemological regime of the factographical

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[8] The non-Marxist thinkers for instance tend not to make this distinction. For example Hannah
Arendt uses reification in terms of "fabrication, the work of *homo faber*" which is in fact what the
Marxists call objectification. Her example is that when the carpenter creates a table he reifies
above all his idea of a table, his intention, his mental image. Quoted in Hanna Fenichel Pitkin,
"Rethinking Reification," *Theory and Society* 16, no. 2 (1987), 268.

discourse, and neither had they formed the habit of producing, gathering and collecting

material for the *Journeys*. At that stage of their practice, which cannot yet be called with

confidence "artistic" or "aesthetic," but perhaps "pre-art" ([*Vorkunst*], borrowing from

Hegel), they were concerned with observing liminal perceptual states, aiming, in a Zen-

like manner, to reach a pre-reflective condition, a state of pure duration (*durée*). Their

experience at that time resembled a collective meditation, which is one of the oldest

practices employed to guard against alienation and to reach pure de-reified experiences.[9]

The relations that developed in the second phase, and in the rest of the Soviet

period (1980-89), unfolded under the sign of objectification. A series of significant

additions that emerged during the second phase suggest an epistemological twist that

corresponds to the notion of objectification: the appearance of the factographical

discourse as a new significant layer in their actions; the decision to write theoretical texts,

introductions, reports, commentaries (written retrospectively to also include the first

phase); and finally, the chronological assemblage of this material into the separate

volumes of the *Journeys Outside the City*, which together with the archive MANI began

to carry out the function of art criticism and historiography. There was also the invention

of a series of concepts and terms intended to name and to communicate some of the non-

material manifestations of the action and its effect on others. Finally there was the

decision to adopt a name and call themselves "Collective Actions" (the name bestowed

by Groys), as well as to define their activities in terms of "actions." All of these new

epistemological tendencies tend towards the proliferation of discourse, knowledge and

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[9] See J. Robert Moore, "Dereification in Zen Buddhism," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1995)., 708.

critique, and are at the core of the process of objectification. This period also saw a series of literal objectifications, as actions, concepts, and relations were produced as concrete artistic objects and given autonomous aesthetic status. Thus one may subsume those processes that accompanied KD's work from the before-period of the *Journeys* under the concepts of objectivation and objectification – two necessary conditions of KD's artistic emergence and existence.

The processes that began to take place during the transition and in the after-*Journeys*, I will characterize using the categories of alienation and reification. While Berger and Pullberg present alienation in terms of the process by which the unity of production and product is broken, reification is a moment in the process of alienation when something is conceived as real only if it has the character of a thing.[10] From 1989, as I have mentioned, some artists of KD channeled their Soviet heritage into the gallery space, as many actions tended to become installations. Unlike in the previous phases, when although the actions were sedimented into objects the artists remained in control of them, the transformations that took place after 1989 resulted in the alienated separation of the process of production from the product. This is manifest not only in the literal estrangement of the artist from the exhibition site, which operates on a certain institutional schedule, but also in his estrangement from the Kievogorskoe Field, privatized by developers, and finally in the discursive regime imposed by the white cube. Before, the artwork and KD were in the same place; it was the "here and now" that conferred on these works the aura of authenticity. The transition to the gallery space and

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[10] Berger and Pullberg, "Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness," 200.

to the museum resulted in the delegation of the power to authenticate to the institution. The institution had now acquired, or purchased the right to assign an aura, making the presence of the artist in this space unnecessary.

"*Reification converts action into process*, which is precisely the core of its social functionality…inasmuch as this defines action without the actor, or praxis without its author…"[11] Increasingly after 1989, KD's actions became components, sets, parts, and objects of display and as such they are disguised and often lost in the intricate exchange system of the culture industry. As parts, they risk being forgotten, becoming subject to the impersonal forces of the art market and its multiple laws (demand, inflations, recessions, and so forth). The dialectically complex field that formed the totality of their actions in the before-period, its multiple layers of interactions and integrations, became a series of simplified causal processes that could run only within the sterile context of the gallery or contemporary art center. The process of reification is manifest in Monastyrsky' indexation of KD's activity and in the attempt to measure the creative act in positivistic values, figures and percentages. It also transpires in the project method which art institutions required in order to preempt unpredictability and surprise, and in the predictable and ready-made behavior of the new spectators, who began to attend KD's actions with pre-formed notions and expectations, not experienced directly but gathered from proliferating literature on KD. Such literature collects and then releases into the cultural circuit concepts and terms detached from the original work or action.

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[11] Ibid., 208.

The accelerated process of reification in the post-1989 period is conditioned first of all by a sudden adjustment of the artists' social status. After 1989 the artists were no longer "unofficials," known only to a small circle of Moscow conceptualists and to the KGB, but they emerged as officially recognized artists, both at home and abroad. They appear as the victors in an aesthetical battle with the cultural policy of the old regime, and the processes of alienation and reification were the price they had to pay for their success. KD is now recognized as the institution that prepared the ground for a new post-Soviet cultural infrastructure,[12] and institutions are the very realization of reified experience. In this new role KD does not need anymore to *act* (partly because the Soviet context which conditioned their actions has long ago disappeared), and instead they *perform* themselves as acting or reenacting collective actions in order to maintain the old myth as well as their new status. KD was invited to make these performances before large audiences at respectable art centers, on the theater stage; their work was projected and discussed by the public of the Moscow nightclubs.[13] The last volumes of the *Journeys*, which documents works produced in the 21st century, offers some glimpses into their new experience:

> The break with the [Kievogorskoe] field has led to a completely new
> sphere of activity for the group: for the first time KD has entered into the
> public space. It is true that in the old days we made a few actions that took

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[12] See in Chapter 1 the discussion of KD as an institution. E. Bobrinskaia, "Kollektivnye desitvia kak institutia," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 23 (1999). http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/xindx.htm [accessed September 12, 2008].
[13] The action "625-520" took place in a theater in Berlin, 2001. "51" (Archeology of Light – 2) was performed in front of a large audience at the Center George Pompidou in Paris (2002). The 1985 action "Barrel" (*Bochka*) was shown and discussed in the nightclub *Sine Fantom* for the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2007.

place in the city (e.g. "Stop" [*Ostanovka*], "Group-3" [*Gruppa 3*]) but those were completely hidden in the space of the city; those actions were deliberately made in such a way that they could not have been easily detected as unusual behavior. The new situation is very interesting: KD on stage! This has never happened before… But the first public presentations have shown that the aesthetics of KD is strong enough to deal with the new and peculiar situation…although it must be said that in some cases we feel the new context is really advancing on us.[14]

Theodor Adorno believed that it is the immanence of society in the artwork and not the immanence of artwork in society that constitutes art's essential relationship to the social.[15] In the before-period the emptiness of the Soviet context and the wooden language of the party was immanent in the content and format of KD's actions as well as in the impassive and often absent language of their *Journeys*. During this period KD built their artistic practice and aesthetic discourse on a conscious and deliberate self-identification with the system. After 1989, KD's art entered *into* society. KD's products circulate within the cultural exchange but at the cost of being detached and estranged from the producers. In the later volumes of the *Journeys* the post-Soviet transitional society appears in glimpses, fragmented and dispersed, or – depending on how one prefers to regard these processes – with multiple choices. It is a matter of interpretation whether multiple fragmentations are a new feature of society reflected in their work, or instead a result of KD's ambivalences and lack of proper tools to comprehend, affect, relate or mirror the new context in its totality. I would argue that it is the latter, for

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[14] Monastyrsky *Ulet* (Volume Eight) 2003-04 in Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."

[15] Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno, and Rolf Tiedeman, *Aesthetic Theory*, Theory and history of literature; v. 88 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 232.

although, for example, after 1989 KD compiled another five volumes of *Journeys,* art

historians and critics remain, for the most part, more interested in the sixty-one actions

assembled for the first five volumes of the *Journeys* – the only material that has been

published to date in the format of a book, as the group had always envisioned it. Today

even critics close to this tradition regard the Moscow conceptualists as "angels of

history" or preemptively regard this cultural tradition "a historically concluded

phenomenon."[16]

The trajectory of the thrown stone, with its "classical" ascendance, transitional

apex, and the restorative descent – where the initial ascent is endlessly recontextualized

and glorified – works as a metaphor not only for the development of KD but also for that

of many other official and unofficial artists both in East and West. The evolution of KD

and of their aesthetic discourse appears to obey a more general pattern followed by

broader cultural processes not limited to the post-Soviet context. Britta Wheeler

examines, for instance, the process of institutionalization of performance art in the United

States.[17] She divides the last half of the twentieth century into four stages, arguing that

performance art has evolved from a live, spontaneous, impulsive and disinterested artistic

activity into a highly procedural and purpose, or even a profit-oriented set of institutions

and enterprises.[18]

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[16] Boris Groys discusses Moscow Conceptualism as a concluded phenomenon in Groys, Hollein, and Junco, *Die Totale Aufklärung: Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960-1990 = Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, 34. For "angels of history" see Joseph Backstein and Bart de Baere, *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence*.

[17] Britta B. Wheeler, "The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture " *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (Winter, 2003).

[18] Ibid. During the first stage of the 1960s and early 1970s, artists inaugurated new informal venues outside the official framework of the culture industry, or to use KD's terminology – the

Although no large scale festival of collective actions or new university program

have yet been instituted in Russia, as they were in the U.S., some of the processes that

have accompanied KD bear a clear resemblance to the ones taking place there.

Comparing *Journeys* to the developments in the U.S. and other Western art centers, one

might conclude that when it comes to adjustments to global capitalism, the peripheries

lag behind by about a decade. More recently, however, the Moscow conceptualists have

voiced their concerns over the overall direction of these transformations. After 1989

Moscow Conceptualism found itself as part of a new structure called "contemporary art,"

and to have left its previous "unofficial" status behind. For most of the decade this fact

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American artists journeyed outside the city. The performances, actions, and happenings took
place in studios, storefronts, or in the streets, and many artists have occupied abandoned
warehouses and turned them into collectively and democratically run artist-spaces that offered to
many the opportunity to produce and exhibit. It was in these abandoned factories and warehouses
that the first women's studio workshops (e.g. the Woman's Building in Los Angeles) and the
earliest radical feminist performances took place, often undocumented and unrecorded. The
second phase of development of American performance art (1978-83) may be compared to the
emergence of KD's factographical discourse and the newly discursive format of the *Journeys
Outside the City*. This is the objectification stage, marked by the appearance of *High Performance*
quarterly in 1978 in California. During this phase many of those artists who had established in the
previous decades artist-run spaces and initiatives began to adopt more traditional patterns of
organization, seeking a different institutional status in order to establish a platform for dialogue
(e.g. the National Association of Artists' Organizations), as well as to apply for funding from the
National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which had established a new category of funding for
performance art called "interarts." (497-8) In the second phase many established artistic venues
embraced a more democratic or even populist approach. Stage three (1983-1990) is marked by a
larger concern for satisfying the needs of the audience, and many artists began to cross over into
Hollywood or began to perform in nightclubs for wide audiences that include both punks and US
senators. This is the phase of alienation, when the unity between the producer and the product but
also between the artist and the audience has been broken; many performances were staged *for* the
audience rather than made to directly interact with it. The last phase of Wheeler's article is
entitled "Post-Culture Wars Fragmentation and Revitalization (1991-2000)." This is the final
stage of reification during which performance art became increasingly institutionalized and
fragmented into various fields within the elite art world, as well as into multiple niches of the
growing sector of alternative culture. Performance art began to be employed as a "therapeutic
process of community development," and for many other pedagogical and practical matters.
Public radio and television reported on large scale performance art events, such as the Cleveland
Performance Art Festival, and New York University launched performance studies as part of its
interdisciplinary academic program. (507)

went unnoticed, and only relatively recently have some artists and critics begun to express disappointment, trying to distance themselves from the new cultural paradigm.

> The misfortune of Moscow Conceptualism was that it was inscribed in the orbit of the phenomenon known as 'contemporary art,' to which it is deeply antagonistic. As a typical Moscow conceptualist I never could stand contemporary art. I never attended exhibitions…Contemporary art in the form in which it exists today represents one aspect of the colonial structures which is being imposed on all colonized territories together with McDonald's and other things… The *plein air* painter who is daubing his birches somewhere in the woods is today the real revolutionary and the anti-globalist.[19]

The point must be made, however, that such a dire dissatisfaction with "contemporary art" is also a relatively recent phenomenon. Moscow conceptualists have contributed to, and have even been actively involved in, the creation of the first foreign and domestic institutions to promote their work under the mainstream appellation "contemporary art."[20] In the late nineties the foreword of the *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*

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[19] Pavel Pepperstein, "Soziologia moskovskogo konzeptualizma," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal*, no. 69 [Noeabr' 2008]. http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/69/soc-conc-msk/ [accessed January 23, 2009].
[20] The magazine *A-YA* was launched in order to "inform the reader about the artistic creativity and developments in contemporary Russian art…" "A-IA," (Elancourt, France: Boris Karmashov, 1979). The "Contemporary Russian Art Center of America" that opened in New York with support from the Cremona Foundation was also dedicated to Russian contemporary art. See more in Chapter 1 n.53 In Moscow the first institutions of contemporary art were opened during the nineties by those who were part of Moscow conceptualist circles. The Institute of Contemporary Art launched in 1991 in Kabakov's studio and the New Strategies in Contemporary Art, a postdoctoral program financed by the Soros Foundation Moscow in 1995, were initiated by Joseph Backstein. In addition many Moscow Conceptualists have benefited or participated in numerous activities of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network and Soros Foundation.

stated that "for the last quarter of the century the notions Moscow Conceptualism and Russian Contemporary Art have been synonymous."[21]

More recently Kabakov has expressed his disappointment with the bourgeois hypocrisy of the contemporary art industry that puts forward economic concerns over artistic ones.[22] Monastyrsky's messages are, as is to be expected, more puzzling, for he declared that the "discourse of contemporary art, as a single ideologeme had already ended in the mid nineties,"[23] despite the fact that in the next century numerous new contemporary art centers, galleries, biennials, have been launched, and that the Russian state began to award contemporary art prizes every year. Groys is more theoretical but not more optimistic. In his recent analysis he presents "contemporary art" as a separate entity detaching it from both "postmodernism" and "modernism" and presenting it as a cultural paradigm obsessed with the presentation of the present.[24] He ponders over the new type of artist who has replaced the former producers, insisting that "the contemporary artist is rather a consumer, analyst, and critic of images and texts produced by contemporary culture and I doubt that this role of the contemporary artist could

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[21] Joseph Backstein in Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly*, 15.
[22] See dialogue between Kabakov, V. Tupitsyn and M. Tupitsyn in Viktor Tupitsyn and Ilia Iosifovich Kabakov, *Glaznoe iabloko razdora: besedy s Il'ei Kabakovym*, 106-117.
[23] Monastyrsky *Ob akzii '625-520', 'Meshok', i 'pustom deistvii'* (Volume Eight) Monastyrsky, "Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 6-9 vols."
[24] "Today the term 'contemporary art' does not simply mean art made in our time. The contemporary art of today is a method by which contemporaneity presents its essence – the very act of presenting the present (*akt prezentazii nastoiaschego*). In this regard *contemporary art* is different both from *modern art*, which was oriented to the future, as well as from postmodern art, which was a historical reflection on the subject of the modernist project. *Contemporary art* gives preference to the present in regard to the future and the past. Thus in order correctly to characterize *contemporary art*, it is necessary to follow its relation to the modernist project and its evaluation of postmodernism. Boris Groys, "Topologia sovremennogo iskusstva," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 61-62 (2006). See also Glossary for a various presentations of the term "contemporary art."

change in the coming future."[25] These voices of dissatisfactions join the wave of criticism

that has emerged in the last decade, especially at the peripheries of Anglo-American

culture.[26] Increasingly the Moscow conceptualists, who had always insisted on their

aesthetic, rather than political opposition to the Soviet regime, began to remember with

nostalgia the socialist past, something that would have been difficult to imagine twenty

years ago. Some speak today like their former opponents, the socialist realists at one of

their party congresses, arguing that "only in the conditions of socialism could humans

withstand existence as such…only the return to socialism may place the inheritance of

Moscow Conceptualism in its right context."[27] The stone of Russian art had fallen back

to the ground, though not at precisely the same place.

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[25] ———, "Moskovskii konzeptualizm: 25 let spustea," in *Moskovskii konzeptualism*, ed.
Ekaterina Dyogot and Vadim Zakharov, *World Art Muzei no. 15-16* (Moskva: Izdatelistvo WAM,
2005), 24.
[26] On the French debate around the "crisis in contemporary art" see Michaud, Yves, *La crise de
l'art contemporain: utopie, démocratie et comédie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
Michaud, Yves, *L'art á l'état gazeux: Éssai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Stock,
2003). Sourgins, Christine, *Les mirages de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Table ronde, 2005).
[27] Pepperstein, "Soziologia moskovskogo konzeptualizma."

GLOSSARY

"Anonymous-Spectator" (*anonimnyi zriteli*) – "addressant of those of KD's actions that include a 'residual' empty action' (for instance, an accidental passerby who sees one of KD's *Banners* after the artists-organizers leave the field of action.)" (*Dictionary* p. 140) Monastyrsky indicates the 1989 Foreword to Volume Fifth for the origins of this term, although "accidental passerby" was discussed by Nikita Alexeev as early as 1980.[1]

"Apt-art" – "name of a gallery launched by Nikita Alexeev in 1982, which later gave the name to an entire direction in Moscow Conceptualism." (*Dictionary* p. 27)

"Appearance" (*Poeavlenie*) – "…condition for the reflexive act of demonstration and perception (as well as the name of KD's first action). It is part of the same discursive paradigm as the 'Zone of Imperceptibility.'" (*Dictionary* p. 153)

"Artist-character" (*Khudozhnik personaj*) – "intermediary figure between the artist and the spectator. The term was introduced by Sven Gundlakh (see text "Character Author" [*Personazhnyi avtor*] literature issue of *A-YA*, 1985). The concept of artist-character was further developed by Kabakov (see "Artist Character" [*Khudojhnik personaj*] 1985)." Later the category of "character" was extended to include the terms "spectator-character" (*zritel' personaj*), "critic-character" (*kritik-personaj*) and "ideologue–character" (*ideology-karakter*). (*Dictionary* pp. 93-4)

Art of Transition – "The art of transition thus evolves from duality and movement: a transition in political strategy from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy; a transition in cultural practices from focus on social class alone to matter of sexuality and gender; a

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[1] Only the concepts placed in between quotation marks are translated from the *Dictionary of Terms of Moscow Conceptualism* which I will hereafter cite as *Dictionary* with the corresponding page number. For "anonymous spectator" and Nikita Alexeev see Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 94.

transition in styles of representation that weave between modernist yearning and postmodernist pastiche."[2]

"Backstein Function" – "universal operator of actuality within the circle of Moscow conceptualists during the nineties." (*Dictionary* p. 28)

"Book after Book" (*Kniga za knigoi*) – "Principle of text production and exhibiting developed by the Medgerminevtika group. This principle presupposes that information blocks (i.e. books, series of texts and artworks, etc) must not be arranged in a strict succession but must be divided by empty intervals which shall not exceed the size of the information block itself." (*Dictionary* p. 48)

Bulldozer Exhibition (*Buldezernaia vystavka*) – One of the first exhibitions of unofficial art which took place at the outskirts of Moscow on September 15th, 1974 . The "First Fall Open-Air Show of Painting," as it was officially called, took place in Izmailovsky Park, at the edge of Moscow. The unsanctioned event was wrecked by the authorities with bulldozers and fire-hoses. Among the organizers and participants were: O. Rabin, S. Glezer, V. Vorobiov, Komar & Melamid, L. Masterkova, V. Nemukhin and others.[3]

"Categories of KD" (*Kategorii KD*) – "a series of methods and devices often used by KD in order to construct the event, in terms of the "Demonstration of Demonstration" (walking, standing, lying in a pit, 'people in the distance,' moving along a straight line, 'imperceptibility,' light, sound, speech, group, repetitions, listening to listening, etc.) The categories of KD may also be autonomous, for instance in the series of objects made by A. Monastyrsky for the action 'Discussion.'" (*Dictionary* p. 47)

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[2] Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*, Latin America otherwise, 3.

[3] For material on "Bulldozer Exhibition" see Aleksandr Glezer, *Lianozovskaia gruppa: istoki i sudby: sbornik materialov i katalog k vystavke v Gosudarstvennoi Tretiakovskoi galeree, 10 marta-10 aprelia 1988: Tabakman museum of contemporary Russian art (New York), 15 May--15 June 1998* (Moskva: "Rasters", 1998).

Contemporary Art – The phrase used to periodize Western art since 1945. According to Elisabeth Couturier the initial year of contemporary art is 1950. However, during the past fifteen years (since the early nineties) those in charge of various museums' contemporary art sections had to reconsider the choice of the year 1950 as the year zero of contemporary art. "They decided that contemporary art must be counted from 1970, and this was in accordance with Christie's and Sotheby's decisions. What justifies this? The fact that art underwent a profound transformation in the 1960s."[4]

Some authors have attempted to define contemporary art. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, writes: "The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is contemporary only with itself. It no longer knows any transcendence either towards past or future; its only reality is that of its operation in real time and its confusion with that reality."[5]

Christine Sourgins in her recent book *Les mirages de l'art contemporain* presents the following metaphor of the relation between contemporary and modern art:

> The cultural cauldron is an appropriate metaphor to think of [the relation between] modern and contemporary art. Let's imagine our cultural cauldron boiling: the more one heats it, the more the liquid burns up and becomes troubled. Let's say that this represents Modern art. Then, with one more dose of heat, the liquid becomes vapor, which represents contemporary art. Quantitative modifications have thus entailed qualitative modifications. One can thus observe this paradox in which, although contemporary art descends from modern art, it is also in a way, its opposite. This is how painting on a canvas or sculpting on a pedestal, which was practiced by the "moderns," is from now on part of a minor genre disregarded by the "contemporaries."[6]

Yves Michaud discusses the gulf which has recently appeared between the public and the institution of contemporary art. He argues that from the 1980s the contemporary art

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[4] Elisabeth Couturier, *L'art contemporain, mode d'emploi* (Paris: Filipacchi, 2004), 22.
[5] Jean Baudrillard, *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact*, English ed. (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005), 25.
[6] Christine Sourgins, *Les mirages de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Table ronde, 2005), 11.

museum became part of the leisure industry employed as an arena for conflicting cultural politics. Michaud accuses contemporary art – which operates today in a demilitarized zone in between the ghost of the avant-garde and the market – of being complicit in the atomization of culture, dividing the public into narrow consumer groups and niches. The biggest charge brought against contemporary art by Michaud is its connivance to maintain a general state of conflictlessness, a state caused not so much by the general peace in which French society dwells, but by the general state of indifference that befell this society.[7]

According to Boris Groys the function of contemporary art today is to bestow the aura of authenticity on some aspects of reality. Contemporary art performs this function topologically by employing the media of installation art. Groys' periodization of contemporary art involves its separation from modernist and postmodernist art. "Today the term 'contemporary art' does not simply mean art made in our time. The contemporary art of today is a method by which contemporaneity presents its essence – the very act of presenting the present (*akt prezentazii nastoiaschego*). In this regard contemporary art is different both from modern art, which was oriented to the future, as well as from postmodern art, which was a historical reflection on the subject of the modernist project. Contemporary art gives preference to the present in regard to the future and the past. Thus in order correctly to characterize contemporary art, it is necessary to follow its relation to the modernist project and its evaluation of postmodernism."[8]

"Contemporary Artist" (*Sovremennyi khudozhnik*) – "curator of somebody else's bad art." (*Dictionary* p. 81) The term was derived from one of Groys' 1988 essays entitled "The Artist as Curator of Bad Art" (*Khudojhnik kak kurator polokhogo iskusstva*).[9]

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[7] Yves Michaud, *La crise de l'art contemporain: utopie, démocratie et comédie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 60-63.
[8] Boris Groys, "Topologia sovremennogo iskusstva," *Khudozhestvenyi zhurnal* 61-62 (2006).
[9] ———, *Utopia i obmen* (Moskva: Znak, 1993).

"Communal Modernism" (*Kommunal'nyi modernism*) – "set of aesthetical views and conventions, practiced by alternative Soviet artists and writers from the end of the 1950s until the beginning of the 1970s. The communality of this branch of modernism was the result of the participation of this generation of artists and writers in various unofficial unions, associations and groups. Their voluntary involvement, which was opposed to compulsory (institutional) participation, permits one to speak of a form of 'contractual communality.' 'Communal Postmodernism' emerged at the beginning of the 1970s and from that moment it developed in parallel with Communal Modernism. Moscow Communal Conceptualism is part of Communal Postmodernism." (Term derived from the book with the same title by V. Tupitsyn. *Dictionary* p. 53)

"Demonstrative Semiotic Field" also called "Demonstrative Field" (*Deonstratzionnoe znakovoe pole*) – "the dynamic center of the action constituted by the totality of psychic (subjective) and empirical (objective) fields." [*Journeys* pp. 22-23] Another definition of "demonstrative field" is: "system of elements from the time-space continuum included by the authors intentionally in the construction of the text [work]…The term is part of the correlative pair 'Demonstrative Semiotic Field' – 'Exposition Semiotic Field.' In the discourse of KD this pair relation is constructed around various elements of the event ('categories KD'): walking, standing, lying in a pit, 'people in the distance,' moving along a straight line, 'imperceptibility,' light, sound, speech, group, listening to listening, etc., and, depending on the action, these elements may belong to either one term of the pair or to another." (*Dictionary* pp. 37-38)

"The Demonstration of Demonstration" (*Demonstrazia demonstrazii*) – "the main device (*priem*) in the aesthetics of KD during which a distancing takes place from the act of demonstration which allows it to become part of the content of the action…" (*Dictionary* p. 143)

"Dissident Modernism" (*Dissidentskii modernism*) – "used to refer to the unofficial art of the1960s." The term was derived from M. Tupitsyn's 1989 book *Margins of Soviet*

Art. (*Dictionary* p. 38) Often in order to describe the same cultural phenomenon critics use the term "Underground modernists of the 1950s and 1960s," or simply the "modernists."[10]

"Emptiness" (*Pustota*) –"an extraordinarily active 'negative' space directed towards everyday reality and constantly seeking to 'swallow' it…" (*Dictionary* p. 75). For a more detailed discussion of the concept of "emptiness" see section "Defining Moscow Conceptualism" in Chapter 1.

"Empty actions" (*Pustye desitvia*) – "outside-of-the-demonstration (*vnedemonstratzionnyi*) element of KD's action, which, although it may not be part of the demonstration and can even pass unnoticed by the spectator, constitutes the dramatic center of the action." (*Dictionary* p. 75)

"A principle that manifests differently in each action and must be understood as a segment of time during the action when the spectator remains in a state of a 'tense lack of understanding,' (or has a 'wrong understanding') of what is going on [in the action]… The action-means (or event-means) by which the 'empty action' is achieved are [such moves from the side of the performers as] appearance, disappearance, moving away, etc, which also create conditions for mediation on the level of perception…" (*Journeys* pp. 20-21)

"Empty actions are aesthetical analogies of the Buddhist (or childish) consciousness, a state of consciousness that constitutes the aim of Buddhist and Christian spiritual practices."[11]

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[10] See for example Ekaterina Dyogot, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2000), 159-64.

[11] Monastyrsky *Ob akzii '625-520,' Meshok,' i 'pustom deistvii'* (Volume Eight) in Monastyrsky, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols.*

"Empty Canon" (*Pustotnyi kanon*) – "term used by the Medgerminevtika group to describe the entire body of texts written by the group, including also the most important texts of NOMA [i.e. of Moscow Conceptualism]…" (*Dictionary* p. 76)

"Empty Photographs" (*Pustye fotografii*) – "'central' photographs in the actions of KD, where nothing (or almost nothing) is represented, besides a 'deliberate emptiness.'" (*Dictionary* p. 154)

"ES" - Emotional Space (*ES -emozionalinoe prostranstvo*) – "The spectator's consciousness…The degree of emotional involvement of the spectator in the action." (*Dictionary* p. 98)

"Estonia" – "name of a circle which replaced to some extent NOMA [Moscow Conceptualism]… The circle Estonia consisted of such groups as MG, Medgerminevtika, The Sky Commission, Fenzo, SSV, The Fourth Height, Russia, Tartu, Piarnu, KZS, Disco, etc. The circle was formed after the second putsch of 1993." (*Dictionary* pp. 98-99)

Exhibition in Izmailovo Park – Exhibition of unofficial art that took place officially in 1974. This event was later dubbed "Soviet Woodstock."[12]

"Exposition Semiotic Field" also called "Exposition Field" (*Ekspozitzionnoe znakovoe pole*) – "system of elements from the time-space continuum which is not deliberately included by the authors in the construction of a concrete text [work], but which are nevertheless influencing it by means of its hidden motivational contexts. In the aesthetic practice of KD the 'exposition semiotic field' may be activated as part of its correlation pair 'demonstrative semiotic field' using 'empty actions.'" (*Dictionary* p. 97)

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[12] For the "Soviet Woodstock" see Time, "The Russian Woodstock," *TIME Magazine* (Oct 14, 1974).

"Factographical Discourse" (*Faktographicheskii diskurs*) – "system of documentation used to establish multiple levels within the artistic event and various end results…" (*Dictionary* p. 90) For a more detailed discussion see the discussion of the "factographical discourse" in Chapter 2.

"Fisherman" (*Rybak*) – "singular element of unknown origins that has entered KD's system of demonstration/exposition fields. It was named after the fisherman who emerged on the demonstration field of the action 'Painting Two.' In other actions the element 'Fisherman' may become a car or a cyclist that passes." (*Dictionary* pp. 154-55)

"Group" (*Gruppa*) – "type of subjective member of the demonstrative model ('Dumbbell Schema'), that has been formed by the 'domestic' actions of KD in the second volume of the *Journeys…*" (*Dictionary* p. 142)

About the term "group" in the context of Soviet unofficial art: "In those days [1960s], for the artists, it was a special 'Western' mannerism to announce themselves as a 'group,' and it was also in order to distinguish themselves from the general mass of other artists. In the fifties there were already 'collectives' (*brigady*) of sculptors, organized in the mid-1950s around Sidur, Lemport and Silis, as well as the circle of artists which gathered in 1954 in Lianozovo and 1956 around the figure of Beliutin. Only later were these called groups. At the beginning of the 1960s there began to emerge such groups as: 'Group 8' (*Gruppa 8*) and 'Movement Group' (*gruppa Dvijhenie*, 1962) which may be regarded as veritable groups. Such a late formation of artistic groups in the postbellum period (in literature and music the situation was similar) may be explained by the fact that such groups were repressed in the twenties, while in the thirties their activities were completely paralyzed. The term 'group' carried the same meaning as the word 'opposition.'"[13]

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[13] Karl Eimermacher and Natalia Margulis, *Ot edinstva k mnogoobraziiu: razyskaniia v oblasti "drugogo" iskusstva 1950-kh –1980-kh godov* (Moskva: Rossiiskii gos. gumanitarnyi universitet, 2004), n. 9, 65.

"Imperceptibility" (*Nevidimosti*) – "demonstrative relation in the aesthetics of KD (part of 'Categories of KD'). It may be formed in various ways, including 'hiding' and 'departing.' Imperceptibility is used in opposition to 'perceivable visibility' as a 'realm of determined meanings' and articulations…" (*Dictionary* p. 148)

"Inciters" (*Inspirator*) – "objects (processes) on the exposition semiotic field that bring forward new motivational contexts in the aesthetical activity. Most often this term refers to elements (or processes) of building, topographical, economical and other collective discourses." (*Dictionary* p. 45)

"Journeys Outside the City" (*JOC*) [*Poezdki za gorod PZG*] – "Genre of action (and the title of KD's books) in which the accent is made on the aesthetical significance of different phases of journeying to the place of the event as well as of various forms of reporting and describing it. It is also the main plot of all of KD's *JOC* (including the sixth volume made A. Monastyrsky and S. Hänsgen independently of KD.) The term was introduced by Monastyrsky and Kabakov in 1979." (*Dictionary* pp. 69-70)

Lianozovo Group (*Gruppa Lianozovo*) – one of the first groups of Moscow underground painters and poets, who began from the mid-fifties to meet in the house of Evgeny Kropivnitsky and Ol'ga Potapova in the village Lianozovo (near Moscow). The name was given to the group by the KGB. Among the members of this group were the painters and poets Evgeny Kropivnitsky, Lev Kropivnitsky, the painters Oskar Rabin, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Vladimir Nemuchin, Lidia Masterkova, the poet Vsevolod Nekrasov, and others.[14]

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[14] See Glezer, *Lianozovskaia gruppa: istoki i sudby: sbornik materialov i katalog k vystavke v Gosudarstvennoi Tretiakovskoi galeree, 10 marta-10 aprelia 1988: Tabakman museum of contemporary Russian art (New York), 15 May--15 June 1998.*

"Local-Lore-ness" (*Kraevedenosti*) – During the late 1980s and early 1990s Moscow conceptualists were presented to the Western public in such a way that their displays resembled more traditional regional or ethnographical exhibitions (as might that of an exhibition entitled 'Australian aboriginal artists') than important representatives of contemporary art. Introduced by Monastyrsky & Hänsgen in 1992. (*Dictionary* p. 54)

"KLAVA" – Club of the Avantgardists (*Klub avangardistov*). The term was introduced by Anufriev and Gundalah in 1987. (*Dictionary* p. 48) KLAVA was the first officially registered artist association of Moscow artists.

"MANI" – "Moscow Archive of New Art. At the end of the 1970s the term was introduced by Monastyrsky (with the participation of L. Rubenstein and N. Alexeev) in order to refer to the circle of Moscow conceptualists. It was used until the emergence of the term NOMA in the late 1980s." (*Dictionary* p. 58)
In 1988 the *Journeys Outside the City* documentation and the *MANI* archive, which contained files on most of the Moscow conceptualists, was bought by the American collector of Soviet nonconformist art Norton Dodge, and it is now part of the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformist Art at Rutgers University.

"NOMA" – "The term was introduced by Pavel Papperstein in order to refer to the circle of Moscow conceptualism (the term replaced 'circle MANI' at the end of the 1980s). NOMA refers to a 'group of people who describe the boundaries of the self [*opisyvaiut svoi kraia*] by means of a set of language practices that they have developed together. The term was formed from the word 'nome' which was used in Ancient Egypt to refer to the divided parts of Osiris…" (*Dictionary* p. 65)

Medgerminevtika, also known as "Inspection Medical Hermeneutics" (*Medgerminevtika* or *Inspekzia Medizinskoi Germinevtiki*) – The group Medgerminevtika belongs to the third and the last generation of Moscow Conceptualists. It was founded in 1987 by Sergei Anufriev, Yuri Leiderman and Pavel Pepperstein. In 1991 Leiderman, who left the group,

was replaced by Vladimir Fedorov. The group has produced installations and objects as well as a series of dialogues and theoretical texts.

"Moksha" – Moscow Conceptual School. The third phase of development of Moscow Conceptualism (after MANI and NOMA). The term was introduced by Monastyrsky in 1993 during the viewing and interpretation of the motion picture *Dead Alive*." (*Dictionary* p. 60).

"Moscow Conceptualism" – "romantic, dreaming, and psychologizing version of the international conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s." (*Dictionary* p. 61)

Mukhomors (*Toadstools*) – group of artists, writers, musicians, authors of proclamations, musical albums. The group was active in Moscow from 1978 to 1984 and it included Sven Gundlakh, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Vladimir and Sergey Mironenko and Alxey Kamensky.

"Named Emptiness" (*Poiminovannaia pustota*) – model of exhibition space that functions like columbarium memorial tablets: on one side there are the names of the deceased and on the other there are dashes of ash. The term "Named Emptiness derives from Yuri Leiderman's 1993 text *Nikolai Fedorov and Venera Stokman*. (*Dictionary* p. 134)

Nonconformists and Dissidents – "In the sixties the [unofficial] artists were called 'underground,' then in the seventies they were called 'unofficial' then later (or the other way around?) 'nonconformists,' and now [1980s] I even don't know. In one catalogue I even encountered the term 'un-hang-able' (*nevyveshivaemye*)."[15] Kabakov is not sure when the terms "nonconformist" and "dissident" exactly emerged but it is most likely

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[15] Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov, *60-e – 70-e: zapiski o neofitialinoi zhizni v Moskve*, Wiener slawistischer Almanach. Sonderband; 47 (Wien: Gesellschaft zur Forderung slawistischer Studien, 1999), 153-5.

that they entered the vocabulary in the second half of the 1970s, after the Helsinki Accord Act of 1975.

"Objective Zone of the Demonstration Field" (*Predmetnaia zona demonstratzionogo polea*) – this field emerged during the third volume of the *Journeys* as a result of the development of the 'demonstrative/exposition fields,' which allow for the aesthetical autonomy of the objects involved in the action. In the previous volumes the objects played only a secondary supporting role in the actions. (*Dictionary* pp. 153-4)

"In our previous actions the objects played a secondary role as devices which helped us create certain perceptual effects or factographical signs given to the spectators after the actions. Later, the specifics of the third volume actions allow the objects an aesthetic independence; they may be exhibited without accompanying documentation (description texts, photographs of actions where they have been used.)" *Journeys* p. 219

OBERIU – "(an abbreviated form of *Ob'edinenie real'nogo iskusstva* meaning 'The Association of Real Art'), was the last, certainly the most outlandish, and arguably the most important, manifestation of the Soviet literary avant-garde of the late 1920s. The loose association of Leningrad writers, founded by Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedensky, Nikolay Zabolotsky, Igor' Bakhterev, and Konstantin Vaginov, lasted, in various forms and under a variety of names from 1926 to 1930."[16]

"Obsosium" (*Obsosium*) – "phenomenon in gnosiological packaging." Introduced by Vladimir Sorokin in the eighties. (*Dictionary* p. 66)

"Onanium" (*Onanium*) – "aesthetical auto-erotism" Introduced by Vladimir Sorokin in 1988. (*Dictionary* p. 67)

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[16] Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-garde: OBERIU–Fact, Fiction, Metafiction*, Cambridge studies in Russian literature (Cambridge, New York,: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

"Out-of-photography-space" (*Vnefotograficeskoe prostranstvo*) – "the space where the photographer is positioned during the shooting…" (*Dictionary* p. 141)

"Out-of-town-ness" (*Zagorodnosti*) – particular space adjacent to one or another of the big Soviet (Russian) cities. Something called 'out-of-town' is a well-defined border between the 'city' and the 'non-city,' and it is an important category in the aesthetics of KD (which must not be confused with 'Categories of KD.') This topographic category is specific only to the Soviet (Russian) landscape and it is missing as a concept in the topographies of the Western countries. (*Dictionary* p. 144)

"Peasants in the City" (*Krestiane v grode*) – the historical process in which nomadic masses of peasants flooded major Soviet cities during the enforced mass collectivization of the thirties, leading to the radical transformation of these cities' economic and cultural infrastructure. (*Dictionary* p. 55)

"Project" – in contrast to other textual practices the word "project" emphasizes the temporal dimension and the fact that a certain process is unfolding along the temporal axis (for instance, a project as long as life)… The term became part of the working vocabulary of D. Prigov, who introduced it, in the mid 1990s. (*Dictionary* p. 193)

"Psychedelic Conceptualism"(*Psikhodelicheskii konzeptualizm*) – In 1997 Pepperstein, who introduced this term, wrote: "It looks as if P.C. [Psychedelic Conceptualism] has came to replace the 'romantic conceptualism' of the 1970s and 1980s. It expresses the critical and aesthetical manipulation of the collective or individual psychedelic material. Monastyrsky's novel "Kashirskoe Highway" (*Kashriskoe shosse*) as well as of those actions of KD and Monastyrsky that are directly related to the experience described in the novel, have served as the main source of inspiration for this new direction in Moscow Conceptualism…" (*Dictionary* pp. 180-1)

"Russia" – "region in which a series of unconscious, destructive aspects of Western civilization are revealed (see also 'West')." The term is derived from the title of of Groys' texts "Russia as the Unconscious of the West" (*Rossia kak podsoznanie Zapada*). (*Dictionary* p. 78)

"Schizoanalysis" – "Deleuze and Guattari's term from *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*… which renders psychoanalysis as a repressive, family-oriented and neurosis-generating practice… This as well as other terms from *Anti-Oedipus* ('desiring machines,' 'bodies without organs') have been reconsidered and recontextualized by the Moscow conceptualists." (*Dictionary* p. 95)

"Schizo-Illustration" (*Shizoillustrirovanie*) – "one of the main artistic principles of Medgerminevtika: the division between 'direct illustration' and 'illustration of the illustration.'" (*Dictionary* p. 96)

"Schizo-China" or **"Schizophrenic China"** (*Shizokitai*) – "acoustic effect of the 'multi-secular tradition' created by the members of NOMA by means of schizophrenic expansions of consciousness, which these artists possess." (*Dictionary* p. 96)

"Schizoanalytical Places of Moscow and the Moscow Region" (*Shizoanaliticeskie mesta Moskvy I Moskovskoi oblastii)* – "often 'extremely distressing semantic spaces' and delusional and paranoiac parts of the theory of exposition/demonstration semantic fields that go beyond the literary and discursive system of 'inspirators'…" (*Dictionary* p. 159)

Sots Art – The term is used to refer to a Soviet version of Pop Art that originated in Moscow in the early 1970s. The term was first used by Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid to describe their aesthetic method.

"Spectator-Participant" (*Zriteli-uchastnik*) – "In many actions the spectator becomes involved. He does not simply contemplate what is going on but engages in certain activities. In some cases the action becomes possible only because of the engagement of the spectator whom it would be more precise to call participant…" (*Journeys* p. 111)

"Spectator outsider" (*Postornii zriteli*) – "those who encounter the work of KD not directly (like spectator-participants or anonymous-spectators) but from books, catalogues and other sources of documentation." (*Journeys* Monastyrsky's Foreword to Volume Seven)

Shestidesyatniki (from *shestesyat'* = sixty) – Soviet humanist intellectuals who were active in their opposition to the Party during Khrushchev's "thaw."

"Stages and Stops" (*Peregony i stoianki*) – "aesthetics in which are interwoven elements of transportation and religious aesthetics." Derived from Monastyrsky's eponymous text 1983. (*Dictionary* p. 152)

"Syndrome Guguta" (*Guguze sindrom*) – "Syndrome of complete lack of understanding (compare with 'Teddy Syndrome'). The concept is derived from the name of the character Guguta by the Moldovan writer Ion Druta and it represents a state of sudden and complete inability to comprehend." In the book "Guguta's Hat" (*Căciula lui Guguţă*) Druta tells the story of a little boy whose big hat covers his eyes, obstructing his vision of the world. (Medgerminevtika Dialogue "Teddy" 1988 *Dictionary* p. 36)

"Teddy Sindrome" – "Syndrome of immediate understanding. The term was proposed by Monastyrsky in the mid-1980s. Was widely used in Medgerminevtika texts. The syndrome was named after the story "Teddy" by the American writer J.D. Salinger." (Medgerminevtika Dialogue "Teddy" 1988 *Dictionary* p. 84)

"Undetermined Zones" or **"Zones of Accidental Impressions"** – (*Intederminirovanye zony ili zony sluchainykh vpechiatlenii*) – "phases of pre-waiting, waiting, empty actions, the receiving of the invitation to attend an action, and the journey to the place of the actions of KD." (*Dictionary* p. 145)

"U-Topos" (*Utopos*) – "place which does not has its own place – a place without place." (Anufriev 1989. *Dictionary* p. 89)

"Zone of Imperceptibility" (*Polosa nerazlichenia*) – "zone of the 'demonstrative semiotic field' (often bordering the 'exposition semiotic field') where certain aural and visual objects of the action cannot be recognized by the spectator as belonging to the action." (*Dictionary* p. 71)

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