

Miszellen | Unoccupied Centers in Moscow Conceptualism. Collective Actions' Journeys into Nothingness

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Conceptualism or self-sufficient philosophizings

Formed around Andrei Monastyrsky in 1976, Collective Actions (Kollektivnye deistviya, hereafter referred to as KD) was a Moscow-based group of conceptual artists that organized various actions for more than three decades. KD usually put on its events on the outskirts of Moscow, which were followed by a series of descriptive, contextualizing and interpretative activities carried out by its participants. Most of the actions had the same format: A group of people (of close friends and fellow artists) was invited to take a train to a station outside Moscow. They would walk from that station to a field and wait for something to happen. The group would witness and take part in a small-scale action/an event and then return to Moscow. Once they discovered an electric bell buried under the snow in the middle of the field, which continued ringing after they had left. Other times, the group discovered a banner with a slogan hung between the trees or simply the organizers appearing at the other end of the field. At the level of content/appearance, the actions could be summarized as “being in a certain place”, “walking in a straight line”, “motionless standing”, “appearing”, “disappearing” etc.¹ Afterwards, participants would engage in a personal process of finding meaning, writing about their experiences and providing interpretations for further debate among the members of the circle. The *Dictionary of Terms of Moscow Conceptualism*, collected and assembled by Andrei Monastyrsky, defines the *journey*

¹ Monastyrsky, Andrei: *Poezdki Za Gorod: Kollektivnye Deistvia*. Vol. 4. Moscow 1998, p. 450.

outside the city (poezdka za gorod) as a “genre of action in which the accent was placed on the aesthetic importance of various phases of travelling to the place of the action, as well as various forms of describing it”². The action undertaken by the participants was just as important as the theoretical-analytical activity afterwards; both activities were considered part of the *journey*.

All of these activities were documented by KD’s main theoretician, Andrei Monastyrsky, and published in 1998 in an eleven-volume publication, *Journeys Outside the City (Poezdki Za Gorod)*, hereafter referred to as *Journeys*.³ The members of KD meticulously documented every single performance. There seems to have been an aesthetic of administration, something like a bureaucracy of madness at work here. A simple description of an action turned into an interpretation, which was based on or resulted in theoretical texts on the acts of perception, which became the subject of further interpretations, which were reinterpreted – until participants finally got lost in the loop of reinterpretation and self-referentiality. Andrei Monastyrsky’s *Journeys* is anything but straightforward; its discourse is often hermetic and impenetrable. The hyper-reflexivity presented in the explanatory and analytic texts is already an attack on the commentator, forestalling his or her judgement. To which extent is this documentation a kind of wishful thinking, where the intentions of the actions are possibly presented as their results, where the group’s aspirations are presented as the outcomes of actions? It seems to me that thinking with, within and about the conceptualist archive requires a type of thinking that is also able to simultaneously think against itself – an almost impossible task, in fact. KD’s archive forces us to accept incomprehension and incompleteness, but even this acceptance seems to be consistent with conceptualist aspirations, for as Pavel Pepperstein once put it in an interview with Aleksandr Goldstein: “Conceptualism deliberately calls for incomprehension [...]. Conceptualism expects incomprehension and works with it.”⁴

In a narrower sense, Moscow Conceptualism was a circle of artists united by a search for new forms, which emerged as an underground movement in the early 1970s, at a

² Monastyrsky, Andrei (ed.): *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontseptualinoi shkoly*. Moscow 1999. <http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=313> .

³ Cf. Monastyrsky 1998.

⁴ <http://pergam-club.ru/book/4801>.

time when Socialist Realism was the only officially acceptable form of artistic expression. Its roots go back to the unofficial art movement that developed during the Khrushchev Thaw of the mid-1950s and early 1960s, a period of de-Stalinization that loosened the straightjacket of repression and censorship in the Soviet Union.

First and foremost, conceptualism deals with ideas. A concept is any idea presented as an idea, where any reference to the 'real' or the prospect of realization is irrelevant. As Mikhail Epstein points out, contrary to the Marxist assumption that concepts like collectivism, equality and freedom are "historically real", conceptualists view any system of thought as self-enclosed, with no correspondence to reality whatsoever: "Conceptualists demonstrate that all these notions are contingent on mental structures or derived from linguistic structures."⁵ Andrei Monastyrsky understood conceptualism not as an independent school or a period of art history but as a "philosophical-aesthetic methodology", as a "mode of artistic vision and thought", as "a poesis of philosophy"⁶. The aim of conceptualism is to reflect and meditate on the hidden conditioning of our consciousness. Whereas all the -isms and schools of thought impose ideological schemes upon reality, which is not intelligible, conceptualism tries to uncover the aggressiveness of such impositions.⁷ KD had its origins in poetry and actually put on "poetic performances". In a letter from 1976, when referring to its first actions, Monastyrsky asks Agamov-Tupitsyn to take into account "that all these things are poetry"⁸. Whereas 'Western' performances and happenings in the 1960s and 1970s might be best captured by the term indistinguishability (between art and life) or at least by the aspiration to blur the division between art and life, Moscow Conceptualist performance art – and KD in particular – can be best described by the terms detachment and isolation: understood as events which took place outside of the sphere of life, outside of the sphere of art, outside of the indistinguishable zone between them. Yevgeniy Barabanov emphasizes that Moscow Conceptualism – in contrast to conceptualists on the other side of the iron curtain such as Hans Haacke or Wolf Vostell – was not primarily concerned with social problems. Instead, its

⁵ Epstein, Mikhail. "Philosophical Implications of Moscow Conceptualism", in: *Journal for Eurasian Studies* 1:1 (2010), pp. 64-71, here p. 65.

⁶ Degot, Ekaterina: "Batiskaf konzenpualizma", in: Degot, Ekaterina/Zakharov, Vadim (eds.): *Moskovskii Konseptualizm – Moscow Conceptualism*. Moscow 2005, p. 17.

⁷ Cf. Epstein 2010, p. 67.

⁸ Agamov-Tupitsyn, Viktor/Monastyrsky, Andrei: *Tet-a-Tet: Peregiska, Dialogi, Interpretacia, Faktografia*. Vologda 2013, p. 13.

attention was directed toward questions of perception, purely aesthetic investigations, structures of consciousness and the different layers of the psyche.⁹ While the ‘Western’ conceptual (performance) tradition put the figure of the artist, the body, the face at its center, Moscow Conceptualism left its center unoccupied. Its central category was emptiness, a void, or as Kabakov once put it: “its contact to nothingness, void nebulosity”¹⁰.

In the following I am interested in looking at KD as embodied thinking, as a “philosophical practice”. I borrow this term (*filosofskaya praktika*) from the *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*, which defines it as a “ritualized part of philosophy”, as a “type of activity or a quasi-ritual addition of a practical component to philosophy”¹¹. KD’s activities can be seen as concrete philosophy, which is expressed not in concepts but in concrete objects, sounds, performative actions etc. In the sixth volume of the *Journeys*, Monastyrsky writes that actions are “sort of self-sufficient philosophizings with legs, body, sounds”¹².

By touch through the fog

In a letter to Viktor Tupitsyn, recalling his own participation in KD, Ilya Kabakov explains the essence of his experience with an image from his childhood: an image of walking somewhere with his mother. He describes a kind of walking when your mother knows where you are heading to, but you have not really paid attention, so you are just following her down the street – in a light and happy manner – observing the houses, kicking a tin can; you have no goal, the ‘other’ – your mother – knows the aim. Your inner “dispatch operator” is switched off. She takes you somewhere without explaining what is awaiting you, but you are assured that nobody will harm you. Kabakov describes how he felt the same kind of lightness and joy while taking part in the journeys: “From the moment I got on the train, my goals, the questions and affairs that constantly preoccupied me, my fear of myself and others, were all, as it were, taken away from me”¹³. He emphasizes that the most remarkable thing was that not

⁹ Cf. Barabanov, Yevgeniy: “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine”, in: Rosenfeld, Alla (ed.): *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*. New Brunswick 2005, pp. 48-99, here p. 61f.

¹⁰ Kabakov, Ilya/Kabakova, Emiliya: *Zhizn mukh (Life of Flies)*. Bielefeld 2008, p. 133.

¹¹ Monastyrsky, Andrei (ed.): *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*. Moscow 1999. <http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=313>.

¹² Monastyrsky 1998, p. 25.

¹³ Tupitsyn, Viktor: *Glaznoe Yabloko Razdora: Besedy s Ilyei Kabakovym*. Moscow 2006, p. 97.

even the organizers seemed to have any aims or concrete wishes to show, create or transmit anything, “everyone was moving by touch through the fog”¹⁴ Another aspect he highlights is the experience of “for the first time, being among my own”¹⁵, in a carefully designed parallel reality, undetermined but safe. These two aspects – being released from a goal and a peculiar sense of being among “my own” – presented in Kabakov’s metaphoric reminiscence of his own participation provide an ideal introduction to what I would like to discuss: the question of unity and communality KD negotiated by performative means. I will refer to two actions that were organized under conditions of so-called “real socialism”.

For the action *Balloon* (1977), participants and organizers (Monastyrski, Nikita Alexeev, Georgy Kizevalter, L. Veshnevskaya, Andrei Abramov) gathered in the forest near the Gorkovskaya railway station and inflated balloons for six hours. Afterwards, pieces of colored calico were sewn together to form an envelope for the balloons four meters in diameter, which was subsequently stuffed with the smaller balloons. At the end, a ringing alarm clock was put inside and the huge balloon was let off to drift down the Klyazma River.¹⁶ In *Pictures* (1979), twelve sets of twelve colored envelopes were distributed to twelve of the thirty participants. Each envelope contained basic information about the event: a timeline of the action, weather conditions, the color of the envelopes, sound, audience reactions, interpretation. While the viewers were unsealing the envelopes and arranging them in a line in the snow, three people crossed the field and disappeared into the forest. After having read the inscriptions on each of the envelopes, the participants folded and pasted each set of envelopes (the biggest on the bottom, the smallest on the top), so that one had twelve colored “framework” pictures in the end. The text – except for the indication of time and place of action – disappeared under the envelopes.¹⁷

Inoperative community

By trying to look at KD as both a group trying to build up a system of alternative inter-human relations and as a group practicing total escapism from its socio-political

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Monastyrsky 1998, p. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

environment, I would like to consider their actions alongside Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the "inoperative community" (la communauté désœuvrée).¹⁸ For Nancy, community should be understood neither as a coming together of distinctly subjectivized individuals nor as an entity organized around a certain characteristic or any other formed and therefore closed identity. The central thought underpinning Nancy's thinking in *Inoperative Community* (1991) is that community has never been possible on the basis of sharing an essence or identity. Its basis, as Nancy argues, is rupture, dispersal. Separation, distance is what makes it possible for entities to be exposed to each other, to communicate, to share an existence. In the absence of separation, distance, dispersal, no exposure can occur. Nancy's historic references in his thinking of community are Heidegger's concept of "being-with" (*Mitsein*) and Bataille's notion of "community", which he reviews and combines in the concept of "shared finitude"¹⁹. He sees Heidegger's shortcoming in not having implicated "being-towards-death" (*Sein zu Tode*) in "being-with" (*Mitsein*)²⁰ Nancy moves from thinking about community as a metaphysical concept to the mortality of the body; he views community as being built up on singularities that are defined by their finitude.²¹ This finitude characterizes both the being of singularity and the being of community and implies a sort of incompleteness. Nancy writes: "Community is calibrated on death as that of which it is precisely impossible to make a work"²², because a shared relationship to death undoes assumptions about identity and collectivity. Nancy's community is a multiplicity of singular existences that share nothing but mortality, the impossibility of being-in-common, or, in his own words: "The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject."²³

It is not wholeness or unity that builds up a community, but exposure to others or, in Nancy's term, "co-appearance"²⁴. Rejecting "immanentism" – the desire for a closed social identity – as necessarily ultimately leading to totalitarianism, Nancy proposes

¹⁸ Cf. Nancy, Jean-Luc: *The Inoperative Community*. Transl. by Peter Connor et al. Minneapolis 1991.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

that “we have to dis-identify ourselves from every sort of ‘we’ that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this insofar as ‘we’ co-appear”²⁵. For Nancy, there is no world of ‘real’ identities and relationships, it is only through co-appearance that our being together is constituted; we are only related insofar as we appear.²⁶

Beyond the common plan or intent

According to the artist Ilya Kabakov, there was a peculiar sense of communality among the spectator-participants of KD. In the first volume of the *Journeys*, he recalls the euphoric feeling that arose from the fact that they were collectively travelling outside the city without any particular task or goal (*ne po delu*)²⁷. For Kabakov, the most unusual aspect of this action was the lack of any personal plan, intent or purpose. No one cared about accomplishing a task, nor was anyone bothered about whether or not the time they were spending was pleasurable, which can also be considered a kind of task. “Being cut off from personal intention”, Kabakov continues, “reveals some very comfortable layers of the psyche, [...] a feeling of freedom that is bigger than political, social or any other kind of freedom. You can’t imagine what awaits you. An interesting kind of vacuum emerges”²⁸. Kabakov recalls the feeling of unity (*chuvstvo obshnosti*), of being-called (*chuvstvo pozvannosti*) and the feeling that not even the organizers were in control of what would happen on that field, that even they would be surprised. Referring concretely to *Pictures*, Kabakov says: “Everyone was immersed in their own task, while everybody was occupied with this bullshit, as it seemed. This non-sociality, non-solidarity, but at the same time some kind of unity (communality) – all this created a field of freedom”²⁹ (. As in Nancy, community here is an experience of interrupted community. What you get as a result of the communal labor is a day in itself, the embodied proposition “there was a day” and that “this day is done”³⁰. Participants folded and pasted a picture of a day spent together, which they took home as a gift at the end of the action.

²⁵ Nancy, Jean-Luc: *Being Singular Plural*. Transl. by Robert D. Richardson/Anne E. O’Byrne. Stanford 2000, p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁷ Monastyrsky 1998, p. 69.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

We also have the aspect of collective labor in the action *Balloon*: six hours of collectively inflating balloons, sewing the fabric together. This labor was non-pragmatic, inoperative and, to a certain extent, absurd. The result of this collective labor – if it is at all possible to speak of a result – was a huge balloon stuffed with other balloons, drifting down the river, ringing: an object that was totally alien to its environment. Alekseev describes how this kind of labour was perceived by the participants as “necessary” but “not obligatory”³¹. It was a “collective labor shared by a group of people living in the absence of any canon”³².

When confronted with a statement that collectivity was at the center of KD in an interview with Sabine Hänsgen, Monastyrsky answered that it was not collectivity but “emptiness”, “pre-receptivity”, “slipping-away corporality” that were at its core (.³³ As in Nancy’s concept of community, there was no essence or identity at its core and, consequently, there was no sharing of it. Community was experienced as such in a rupture, underlying the event as individualized inner-psychic and unshared experience. Moreover, seen in the context of a system violently throwing people into communality, KD’s actions can be read as an invitation to dis-identify from the fictional Soviet ‘we’, from the myth of community, in favor of emptiness, openness, comfortable being-released. Being in the field of *co-appearance* (beyond any completeness, wholeness, unity) and being in a state of heightened attention was the “outside” from which participants were able to enjoy community.

Even though I have emphasized how KD provided an experience of communality by withdrawing any overarching goal or sharing of an essence or identity, we still should not forget that the circle of Moscow Conceptualists was a closed one, established around certain shared traits: be it hatred towards the Soviet System, the narrowness of artistic institutions, common interests or, in conceptualist jargon, common “gnoseological thirst”³⁴. However, it is important to keep in mind that, under Soviet communism, art was functionalized by being ascribed an official task to produce a New

³¹ Ibid., p. 95.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁴ According to *The Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*, it is a paradoxical combination of terms that connects the spiritual longing for knowledge and insight to a physiological process. <http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=313>.

Man and a new subjectivity. To this extent, we can read KD's actions as strategies of de-functionalization, as a clearing up of the very field of subjectivity. Obviously, KD did not aim to form a collectivist subject resting on – not exclusively, but predominantly – negative procedures: de-subjectivation, de-articulation of subjects.³⁵ This negativity is also at the core of Kabakov's descriptions when he emphasizes that the most pleasant moment consisted precisely in not having a common task, of not being united by a common goal. On the contrary: Communality was the result of being released from them.

³⁵ Concrete actions, as Collective Actions are, are also affirmative in the sense of bringing about something (new) devoid of a higher goal or intention.

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