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The Schizoid
Objects of Moscow Conceptualism

[The schizo] scrambles all the codes and is the transmitter of the decoded flows of desire.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus

The 1970s were a decade of major changes for unofficial art in Moscow. The censorship of the 1974 Bulldozer Show led to a realignment of relations among underground artists, the public, and the state.1 While some of the most strident artistic voices for public recognition were forced into emigration, many of those who stayed turned inward, producing work for a small circle of fellow artists and collaborators. Others joined the newly established Painting Section of Gorkom (Moscow City Committee of Graphic Artists), securing a degree of professional status that afforded stability as well as regular opportunities to exhibit.2 Though the distinctions between the latter two paths were not always clear-cut, the most radical aesthetic positions came from the narrow circle, later dubbed the Moscow Conceptualists, who turned to each other as viewers, interlocutors, and critics and took up self-institutionalizing strategies of establishing artists’ archives and editions that helped them coalesce as a distinct entity on the unofficial art scene.3

The Moscow Conceptualists began to explore a range of textual, performative, and conceptual strategies, while de-emphasizing academic technique and turning away from the individual artist’s grappling with the medium that was at the heart of dissident modernism.4 Elements of the everyday seeped into these experimental artistic practices, as genres and media blurred. Viktor Pivovarov and Ilya Kabakov purloined the children’s book for use in their serially produced albums: objects and actions by the Nest Group and later the SZ Group savagely mocked the material exertions of Soviet labor; and Yevgeny Nekrasov, Lev Rubinštejn, and Dmitri Prigov channeled communal and bureaucratic speech into their conceptual-minimalist poems. One curious product of this transformation was the emergence of a wide variety of conceptual objects. Hardly recognizable as sculpture, these objects engaged viewer participation and rejected the impulse toward wide public display. Instead, they tapped into the material stratum of Soviet life, projecting ready-made things or provisionally made constructions into a semantic field of the Moscow Conceptualist imaginary.5

By the mid-1980s, however, more shifts in the dynamics of the art world, as well as in Soviet culture broadly, put these experimental objects at a crossroads as artists grappled with a schizoid excess of signs, symbols, and codes.6

Some of the most recognizable Soviet conceptual objects were the so-called sots art works produced by the artist duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Leonid Sokov, and Alexander Kosolapov, among others. These colorful works appropriated the visual signs and symbols of official culture in order to both make visible and destabilize the mythical power embedded in Soviet objects. Thus Sokov’s Project to Construct Glasses for Every Soviet Citizen (1976) (fig. 3.1) or Komar and Melamid’s Catalogue of Superobjects—Supercomfort for Superpeople (1976) (fig. 3.2) employed tongue-in-cheek humor to send up the failed utopian aspirations of the civilization that was supposed to bring every citizen into the bright, shining future. Produced at a time of noted shortages in consumer products and a thriving black market economy for
Western goods, the sots objects gently mocked the country's inferior material conditions and critiqued the tired materialist ideology of Soviet Marxism that accompanied them. At the same time, the mute objecthood of Sokov's rough-hewn painted wood glasses, kefir cartons, and doorbells stood in lighthearted opposition to the seriousness of dissident modernists like Ernst Neizvestny, Oskar Rabin, and Evgeny Rukhin, or metaphysical painters like Mikhail Shvartsman, Vladimir Vesiberg, and Dmitri Krasnopovtsev. As many of the sots artists emigrated to the West in the second half of the 1970s, the movement increasingly addressed a Western audience and refocused its critical gaze on capitalist consumerism and Western art institutions alongside Soviet mythmaking. Meanwhile, an aspect of the sots aesthetic found new energy when merged with the conceptualist strategies of the artists who remained.

The objects fabricated by the Nest Group (Gennadii Donskoi, Mikhail Roshal', and Victor Skersis) constitute some of the more direct connections between sots art and Moscow Conceptualism in the 1970s. Works like the Communication Tube (1974) (fig. 3.3) or Push the Red Pump! (1975) (fig. 3.4), both first exhibited...
in Moscow’s House of Culture at VDNKh (The Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy) in the September 1975 exhibition of unofficial artists, borrow the external signifiers of Soviet industry—the painted metal instruments and rousing slogans—and call on viewers to perform useless but highly ideologically invested tasks “in the name of peace on earth . . . in the name of your children’s happiness . . . in the name of friendship and love!” It is somewhat unusual that these objects had an official exhibition history, occasioned by the fact that in the wake of the Bulldozer scandal the previous fall, the authorities had sanctioned a series of exhibitions to take place around the city. Even more unusual for this time, given how little action art had been produced in Russia before the second half of the 1970s, is that the young Nest Group artists engaged viewers directly by having them speak into the tube or choose between the two different colored pumps (the red one symbolizing “the reduction of tensions” the black one, “escalation”). It was during this VDNKh exhibition, too, that the trio staged their best-known action, Hatch Egg! (Nest), which not only invited viewers to sit in a nest of leaves and branches in the middle of the exhibition hall, but also aroused participation from the other artists in the show when the authorities attempted to remove the work. Extending the critique of Soviet signs into the real exhibition space of the VDNKh pavilion architecture and the real time of the visitor’s engagement with the objects, these works put to the test the traditional relationship between artist, audience, and exhibition. They rejected the sculptural pedestal and its invitation
to a properly distanced visual and bodily relation, and instead they acted as an apparatus for audience participation, with all the risks and dangers attendant on Soviet public speech. In being staged in the context of an official exhibition space, the Nest Group’s objects performed more than a representational function, casting the voluntary nest sitters and pump operators implicitly in solidarity with the artists whose works were in danger of removal.

More common for the unofficial underground, however, were the informal social gatherings at artists’ studios and apartments that served as the primary exhibition spaces where artworks were presented and discussed. Rather than casting viewers in the role of public disdainers, unofficial circles enabled artists to discuss art’s function as “cultural operators” while bracketing off for the time being questions of politics and institutional support. Artworks were held up as subjects of commentary, and that commentary was then implemented into the production of future works. This discursive circuit served as an opportunity for a conceptual critique of subject-object relations and of the art object as such through the production of participatory action objects. Of particular interest in this respect were the nature of perception and the boundary between the realms of the aesthetic and the everyday, the distinction a pressing question given the lack of institutional framing that a gallery or museum would otherwise afford.

Because action objects operated through the analysis of both spatial and linguistic structures, they united artists and poets around a common conceptually project of investigating the nature of the aesthetic sign and the margins where it passes into everyday experience. As the artist Georgy Kiesewalter recounts in his pseudonymous history of this time, discussions of the “aestheticization of reality” and concerns with art’s “ontological” aspects accompanied a growing interest in Zen Buddhism, John Cage, and Western-style Happenings: poems and action objects set these discussions into practice. In 1975 the poet Andrey Monastyrsky produced several small hand-bound books under the title Elementary Poetry. The first one, Elementary Poetry No. 1 (fig. 3.5), plays on the structure of the linguistic sign, pairing words with simple graphic lines and shapes in diagrams that illustrate the sign’s arbitrary nature: a squiggly line is labeled both hill and rope; a semicircle is a ditch, a boat, and a lake. A series of fabric-covered cubes by the artist and student of Slavonic languages Rimma Gerlovina demonstrates a similar principle: the cubes have witty inscriptions on the outside and inside that allow viewers handling them to read them like a performance score. One silver cube reads on the outside: “Soul. Do not open, or it will fly away!”, and on the inside: “There it goes!” Like Monastyrsky’s images and texts, Gerlovina’s inscribed cubes pitted outsiders against insides in a contest of meanings.

Investigations of the artistic sign quickly transitioned to explorations of the role of the viewer. In two iconic black cardboard box works, Cannon (1975) and Finger (1977) (figs. 3.6 and 3.7), Monastyrsky invited viewers to perform basic actions, like looking into Cannon’s eyepiece or reaching a hand through the bottom of Finger. When flipping the switch
on the side of Cannon, the viewer was surprised to
discover a loud noise instead of a light, and
extending a finger through the aperture in the
front of Finger resulted in the viewer’s pointing
back at herself. The effect of these action objects
is conceptual, in that they invite the viewer to
understand the aesthetic experience as one
conditioned by expectation (of being shown
something in Cannon’s eyepiece, for example)
and structured by the subject/object relationship
(as literalized by the pointing Finger). At the
same time, they go beyond the Kosuthian
tautology of naming art for what it is by opening
up a perceptual gap between the immediate
interaction with the object and the conceptual
payoff. In a 1983 text about his action objects,
Monastyrski called them “purely poetic events,”
and later in his Dictionary of Terms of the
School of Moscow Conceptualism, he defined
them as “a type of ‘apparatus’ for aesthetic
experience.” Once the Collective Actions group
(Monastyrski, Nikolai Alekseev, Kiesewalter,
and Nikolai Panitkov) began to stage actions
in the fields and forests outside Moscow, this
perceptual gap became even more spatially
and temporally extended, and questions about
the nature of perception, event, and aesthetic
experience became more central concerns. But
even in his early action objects, in producing the
sense of an event and pointing to the relational
structures that create the conditions for such
an event, Monastyrski reduced the focus on the
material objects at hand and redirected attention
to viewer participation.

One of Moscow Conceptualism’s key
themes is emptiness. For Kabakov, it manifests
itself as white canvases with images along the
edges, or the heteroglossia of fictionalized
voices, ultimately adding up to no single truth. For
Collective Actions, it is contained in the
principle of “empty action,” in which the viewer
intensely focused attention on something
happening in the field of action, only to find
out after the fact that the event had taken place
elsewhere, inside the viewer’s consciousness.
In the conceptualist objects discussed so far,
emptiness dwells in their resistance to the
exhibition pedestal, the lack of concern for the
worked material, and the demand on the viewer
to interact with the object in order to activate it
physically and discursively. In other words, these
objects make no pretensions to an autonomous
existence, but instead serve to stage an event
that subtly resonates with the wider Moscow
Conceptualist tradition, its constellation of
ideas, and its filaments of sociability. It is
perhaps surprising, then, to find the following
description in Monastyrski’s preface to the third
volume of Trips Out of Town from July 1985:

Before, the objects of our actions functioned as
devices for the creation of certain perceptual
effects or factographic signs. . . . The specific
nature of the objects in the actions of the third
volume [June 1983–September 1985], their
aesthetic self-sufficiency, is that they can be
exhibited without accompanying documentation
(descriptive texts, photographs of actions in which
they were used, etc.).

The objects that began to appear in the
course of Collective Actions’ performances or to be
distributed at the actions’ conclusions began
to take on a different, more enigmatic character
after 1982. Silver and gold shapes, like the tinfoil
torus in Silver Torus (August 3, 1983), the golden
wings in M (September 18, 1983), or the white
objects of Russian World (March 17, 1985) (figs.
3.8 and 3.9), having played their parts in the
actions, now carried an independent meaning
as autonomous objects and mysterious signs,
the significance of the metallic shapes or choice
of specific white objects remaining unexplained
and creating a secondary level of intrigue and
connection. The series of five indoor actions
that concluded the third volume of Trips Out of
Town between January and September 1985—
Voices, Translation, Jupiter, The Barrel, and
Discussion—employed equally inscrutable black
boxes fitted with flashlights, which accompanied
but played no logical, constructive role in the
unfolding of the actions they enhance (the boxes sit on tables or perch outside windows, mute witnesses to this series of noisy actions).

*Sound Perspectives of a Trip Out of Town*, an outdoor action from February 1983, concluded with the audience receiving sheets of nearly square flocked black paper with metal railroad emblems attached at the corners. (fig. 3.10, plate 47) Unlike previous factographic objects distributed at the conclusion of an action as documental souvenirs, these had no clear relationship to the action structure, as had, for example, the multicolored squares in *Pictures* (1979), nor were they photographically related to the action's narrative, even if falsely, as were those distributed at *Ten Appearances* (1981) (fig. 3.11). They were instead a kind of ready-made: the black flocked paper less art material than mass-produced decorative sheets recalling Duchamp's panoply of colored swatches in *Tu m'as* (1918) (fig. 3.12). Meanwhile, the railroad emblems in the corners, resonating as they did with the audio recordings of train announcements used in the indoor actions to come, all pointed to the realm of public transportation knitting together physically and conceptually the far-flung spaces of the city and nearby regions.

What are we to make of Monastyrskii's suggestion that such objects be exhibited as objects in their own right, no longer linked to the specific event in which they were used? Considered alongside Moscow Conceptualist action objects of the 1970s, these works are deeply ambivalent. If objects like *Finger* or *Cannon* critically interrogated the conditions
of viewership and display, and the factographic action objects like the colored squares from Pictures or fabricated photographs from Ten Appearances probed the links between event and document, then objects like the black boxes of the indoor actions or the flocked papers with railroad emblems found themselves in a double bind with respect to their cultural conditions. In their inscrutability, they failed to produce the familiar sense of immediacy during action, yet the autonomy that Monastyrski claims for them in his text was at pains to imagine an institution in which they would occupy a pedestal or wall. At a time when avant-garde artists in Moscow were once again seeking public platforms—here we can mention APTART, KLAVYA, and the art squats on Furmannyy Lane, among other developments of the 1980s19—that these objects seemed to hover between the aesthetics of "empty action" and the schizoid reality of everyday life in the Soviet Union. Monastyrski's own psychic break in 1982, the loss of interest and engagement on the part of many in Collective Actions' audience and key group members, and the sclerotic, gerontocratic Soviet government that was once again tightening restrictions while at the same time overloading the visual field with symbols of power and the Third World with the deployments of empire: all of these contributed to a sense of quickening crisis. To make objects under such conditions would seem to scramble the codes, resulting in a set of mystifying works full of ambivalence in search of productive possibilities.
NOTES

Dulina and Guattari’s Anti-Godard: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1976) was translated into Russian by the philosopher Mikhail Rybkov in 1978. See Andrey Monastyrsky, Stalin’s Interventions: 1920–1928 (Moscow: Ad Margins, 1999), 45–46.

1 Baltaire Show is the familiar name for the 1975 Print Out exhibition entitled a political public presentation of non-art art as an empty Moscow gallery. On September 17, representatives of the government, including the IKB, destroyed many works with bulldozers and water cannons. For documents associated with the Print Out exhibition see Goubeau Show: Eastern and Central European Art since the 1970s (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 57–75. For a much wider, detailed chronology of cultural events, see I. Apatarno, L. Taubkin, and N. Tseredak, eds., Tsar'- gorge tsizur' (Moldova, 1998–1999) (Moscow: Galeri, 2005).


3 For more on these “invisible” exhibition strategies, see my essay “Invisible Exhibitions: Performance & The Archive in Moscow Conceptualism,” Galleria Nova News (July 2009) 31–32.

4 On “visible monarchy” and its connections to official Soviet art, see Margarita Tsigelnitskaya, Margot de Sowohl: Social Realism in the Present (Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1990), 35.


6 The term “official” borrowed from Dulina and Guattari’s Anti-Godard (1976) came into use within the Moscow Conceptualist circle in the mid-1980s, just as it did in modern Britain, to denote a new mode of thinking about art that was not the official association of different systems of thinking. This is the case for early movements in the United Kingdom and for the German West, as well as in post-Soviet art (see Alexey Kozlov, “Russia’s First Museum:’’ Art Journal 7 (1980): 6–10). The first exhibition of this kind was the 1978 “Soviet Avant-Garde” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1978.

7 The reception of Marcel Duchamp’s readymade works by the Moscow Conceptualists was not the official association of the institution, but rather, in the case of the “s whom everyone was looking in one direction, the main event was happening in a completely different place. In this case the researchers” of the viewers themselves.


9 In Pictures, viewers were invited to inspect a series of colored squares and then assemble them into rainbow-colored objects of radiant colors that were distributed to audience members at the conclusion of the action. In The Annunciation, two viewers were asked to walk radially from the center of a field on the forest floor until the field was no longer visible. Those who returned received previously prepared photographs of a figure appearing from the forest that seemed to capture their very own reappearance on the field that day.


12 The reception of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made works by the Moscow Conceptualists was not the official association of the institution, but rather, in the case of the “s whom everyone was looking in one direction, the main event was happening in a completely different place. In this case the researchers” of the viewers themselves.

