The Object of Moscow Conceptualism

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Abstract

This thesis explores an underground art movement at the end of the Soviet Union. Moscow Conceptualism was a movement, or better described as a community, that reimagined a life on the periphery of the totalitarian state. By unmaking the utopian ideology of the failing Soviet state, the Moscow Conceptualists repurposed its material (or lack of material) to form their own utopia. The goal of this work is to show how these artists remade a world for themselves with the dying roots of Marxism. By looking at the work of Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a), the *Collective Actions Group*, and Ilya Kabakov (with a few others sprinkled in), I propose that these conceptual artists did not dissolve the art object, but repurposed it, and gave it a new life under a Marxist agenda.

The first chapter of this thesis defines the terms of my argument by explaining how the history of Marx's social object and conceptual performance art in the Soviet Union converge in the 1970s with the "Moscow Conceptual Object." My second and third chapters explore different works of Moscow Conceptualist art that fit within the model I introduced. The second chapter uses works that deal with themes of emptiness and excess to dissect the Soviet semiotic system and re-materialize objects into "social objects." The third chapter continues the deconstruction of the Soviet system and Marxism with themes of truth and collectivity, materializing a new system through a "scene" of artists who often practiced and wrote collectively. By focusing on the object-hood, materiality, and collectivity in each of these artists' works, this thesis proposes, defines, and situates, what I call the "Moscow Conceptual Object" and its revolutionary potential.

"The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality."

-Herbert Marcuse[1]

[1] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 9.

Introduction: Moscow Conceptualism

The History of Unofficial Art in post-Stalin USSR

On December 1st, 1962, Nikita Khrushchev, then Premier of the Soviet Union, went to the opening of the 30th anniversary exhibition of the Moscow Union of Artists. The show exhibited abstract works by artists of the "Left," representing the new liberalism of the post-Stalinist Thaw. Would Khrushchev support this progressive and experimental trajectory? Or, in the manner of Stalin, would he attack the artists as manifestations of harmful outside influences? His compromise was to judge them as "private psycho-pathological distortions of the public conscience."[2] Art that deviated from the accepted paradigm was now, as it was before, an illness of the social body. After the Thaw, after the trials of Sinyavsky and Daniel[3] and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968[4], artists, were once again isolated and forced to pursue alternative channels to disseminate their work. And here, more or less officially, was the advent of a "second culture," a "stolen space" for non-official art.

In early September 1974, you—as an artistically inclined and creative Soviet citizen—receive a letter slipped under your door with the following text: "We invite you to the first autumn viewing of paintings outdoors." Oskar Rabin, an underground artist, set off to organize the first public exhibition of unofficial art, with or without the support of the Artists' Union (MOSKh). On September 15th, 1974, this unofficial art exhibit was set up in a vacant lot in the Belyayevo forest outside of Moscow. The exhibition brought underground art to the public—creating a new awareness that would inevitably bring the

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[2] Andrei Erofeev, Laura J Hoptman, and Tomáš Pospiszyl. "Nonofficial Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s." In *Primary documents: a sourcebook for Eastern and Central European art since the 1950s*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002) 42.

[3] Between 1965 and 1966, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel were put on trial for their literary texts. This was the first show trial where writers were openly convicted for their work. The trials marked the end of Kruschev's "liberalism" and inspired a growing dissident culture.

[4] In 1968 Alexander Dubček was elected First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He attempted to grant additional rights to citizens, decentralize the economy, free up restrictions on media, speech, and travel, and split the country up into 3 republics. The Soviets consequently sent thousands of Warsaw Pact troops to occupy the country. This event is known as "Prague Spring."

fraught relations of modern art and the Soviet agenda to a close.[5] On the day of the exhibition, around 20 artists and a small group of relatives, friends, and community members came to view the unofficial art—paintings that did not fit under the rubric of Socialist Realism—hanging on stands made out of scraps of wood. The whole thing was rather small and unassuming, but Rabin understood that there would be large consequences:

> The exhibition was prepared as a political act against the oppressive regime, rather than an artistic event. I knew that we'd be in trouble, that we could be arrested, beaten. There could be public trials. The last two days before the event were very scary, we were anxious about our fate. Knowing that virtually anything can happen to you is frightening.[6]

As Rabin and his peers predicted, a large group of attackers, officially known as "gardeners," arrived at the lot with bulldozers, water cannons, dump trucks, and hundreds of off-duty policemen (Fig.1). The attackers destroyed the paintings and then beat and arrested the artists, spectators, and journalists. One of the attackers, *militsiia* lieutenant Avdeenko, famously shouted: "Стрелять вас надо! Только патронов жалко... [You should be shot! Only you are not worth the ammunition...]" Rabin, according to a report, hung from the blade of a bulldozer as it made its way through the exhibition. For all his spirit and initiative, when Rabin distributed those invitations with the time, date, location of the exhibition, and the names of the 13 artists participating, he was knowingly committing an act of cultural and economic suicide for himself and all others involved.

Interestingly, the bulldozer exhibition spurred an embarrassing media crusade in the West, forcing the government to approve a second exhibition on September 29th, in Izmailovsky Park. The second event brought ten thousand visitors and came to be known as the "Soviet Woodstock." The art, however, was neither representative of the unofficial

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[5] Ever since the formation of the Itinerants in 1863, when a group of art students refused to accept "The Entry of Wotan into Valhalla" as the theme from the Academy's contest, there was an on-going clash in Russia between official cultural authorities and dissident artists.
Matthew Jesse Jackson. *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010) 136.

[6] Dayla Alberge, "Russian painters denounced as Soviet traitors exhibit in London," *The Guardian* (2010).

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RUSSIANS DISRUPT MODERN ART SHOW WITH BULLDOZERS

Unofficial Outside Exhibition Dispersed—Bystanders Hit and Paintings Confiscated

By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN
Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Sept. 15—In a dramatic confrontation over nonconformist art, Soviet authorities used buldozers, dump trucks and water-spraying trucks today to break up an outdoor exhibition of unofficial art as it was being set up in a vacant lot.

A crowd of several hundred people, among them artists, Western diplomats, correspondents and curious neighborhood residents, scattered when dump trucks and a pair of bulldozers overran what the artists had billed as the first autumn outdoor art show in the Soviet Union.

Two water trucks, normally

United Press International

A water truck pursuing crowd from the scene of an outdoor art show near Moscow after authorities halted exhibit

Figure 1. *Bulldozer exhibition*, Moscow, 1974, New York Times. September 16, 1974. http://www.agora8.org/reader/Kenny_McBride_ch1.html (accessed February 24, 2014.)

art movement nor terribly avant-garde. Vladimir Nemukhin, an artist and organizer of the show, said "We are not avant-garde in our art, only in our behavior in trying to stage a public show."[7] Ilya Kabakov, the most famous Moscow Conceptualist, along with many future Moscow Conceptualists, declined his invitation to participate. Viktor Pivovarov, another artist, explained that he did not participate in the event because he did not believe in the other art being shown: "I must admit that there was a measure of elitist arrogance in this. I constantly praised Rabin and Nemukhin, the main initiators and heroes of these events, but I was sickened by the fact that the majority of the work was everyday kitsch with pretensions to spirituality."[8] Nonetheless, the approval of the second show led to a more or less amicable arrangement. Exhibition opportunities expanded for

[7] Vladimir Nemukhin quoted in Hedrick Smith, "Modernist Art in Soviet a Legacy of Khrushchev," *New York Times (*23 September 1974.)

[8] Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennyi agent*, 82. Quoted in Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes.*

unofficial artists with support from the "Gorkom Grafikov," Moscow's alternative arts organization. It was not in the "Artists' Union," but it was "official" and thus, tolerated and monitored by the government's cultural control. In February 1975, the unofficial artists were granted permission to exhibit in a real exhibition hall in the Beekeeping Pavilion. Again, Kabakov and many of the "Conceptualists" refused to exhibit because they did not like the "social gesture of all proletarians uniting."[9] Even though the Conceptualists denied having a formal political stance, the event in the Beekeeping Pavilion was too "Soviet" for them. The participating artists' quasi-autonomy did not constitute a real protest against the government.

Most of the Moscow Conceptualists were trying to create an art practice where the artwork and the artist could be autonomous. They wanted to pursue aesthetics and ideas that were not affiliated with the government and Soviet psychology. At this point the unofficial artists of the Soviet Union split into two factions: the *shestidesiatniki* [the people of the 60s] and the *kontseptualisty* [the Conceptualists]. Nonconformist artists actually formed many different groups like the collective ARGO, the movement group, the students of Vladimir Sterligov (1905-1973), the students of Mikhail Chernyshov (b. 1945), the Friendship Club, the Blue Bird cafe, Sots Art, the Star group, the Toadstool Group, AptArt, etc. [10] The Conceptualists were smaller and more insular, retreating far enough away that they could create a new realm of reality.

Why the name: "Moscow Conceptualism"?

Boris Groys coined the term "Moscow Conceptualism" in his seminal 1979 essay, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism." He affiliated the movement with Western Conceptualism because it similarly questioned the autonomy of material objects and

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[9] Kabakov Quoted in Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes,* 140.

[10] For more information see: Victor Tupitsyn, Alla Rosenfeld, and Norton T. Dodge. "'Nonidentity within Identity': Moscow communal modernism, 1950s-1980s." In *Nonconformist art: the Soviet experience, 1956-1986 : the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.* (New York: Thames and Hudson in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995) 88-92.

redirected its practice towards contemplation and aesthetic evaluation.[11] Natalia Tamruchi describes the un-official artist as seeing a "double image of the present," both the oppressive present and the "free" West where conceptual art was embraced.[12] Western art practices penetrated into the Moscow art scene through art journals and catalogues. Still, to what degree does Moscow Conceptual art actually fit under the rubric of Western Conceptualism? In the sixties, Western Conceptualism consolidated its practice into a vague formula based on the displacement of objects by ideas. Conceptual artists pushed the object towards dematerialization or complete abolishment, while simultaneously deprecating the officially approved art spaces like galleries or museums.[13] The attack on the art object was conceived as a part of a larger attack on the increasing commodification of life and art.[14] The conceptual "object" was constituted from ideas--immaterial and un-commodifiable.

In his survey history, "Conceptual Art," Tony Godfrey breaks down the art of this vague and disparate movement.[15] Though he makes the disclaimer that conceptual art is impossible to categorize because everyone has a different definition based on their personal artistic practice, he still provides us a working framework founded on three competing definitions of Conceptual art. The first was Sol LeWitt's early article "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art":

> In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the

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[11] "However odd the juxtaposition of these two words may sound, I know of no better term than romantic conceptualism to describe the present development in Moscow [sic!] art field. The word "conceptualism" may be understood in the narrower sense as designating a specific artistic movement clearly limited to place, time and origin. Or it may be interpreted more broadly, by referring to any attempt to withdraw from considering artworks as material objects intended for contemplation and aesthetic evaluation." Boris Groys, "Romantic Conceptualism," in *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960–1990,* ed. Boris Groys et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008) 316–22.

[12] Natalia Tamruchi, *Moscow Conceptualism, 1970-1990*. (Roseville East, NSW: Craftsman House, 1995) 8.

[13] Lippard, Lucy R. *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)

[14] Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012.)

[15] Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual art.* (London: Phaidon, 1998)

> execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.[16]

Second, Lucy Lippard wrote, in the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*:

> Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or dematerialized.[17]

And third, Joseph Kosuth wrote in his 1969 article "Art after Philosophy":

> the purest definition of conceptual art would be that it is inquiry into the foundations of the concept of "art," as it has come to mean.[18]

And by 1996, he expanded his definition a little, saying:

> Conceptual art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colors, or materials.

LeWitt defines conceptual art by its intention and process of production, Lippard sees it through its materiality, and Kosuth understands it by its social function. These are just three definitions and cannot begin to encompass all the work that was created under the umbrella of Conceptualism, but they are starting points to understanding the vague and fluid foundation of the movement. Conceptualism is a broad redirection of artistic practice towards concepts, ephemerality, implying a critical re-evaluation of art, the spaces it inhabits, and its position within culture.

As these definitions suggest, most Moscow Conceptualists challenged the uniqueness and authority of the art object and the artist in the vein of Western Conceptualism. The artists within Moscow Conceptualism follow a Conceptualist agenda in many ways: they privilege concept and create work whose material is "secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or dematerialized," as Lucy Lippard

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[16] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in *Art Forum* (1967) http://www.tufts.edu/programs/mma/fah188/sol_lewitt/paragraphs%20on%20conceptual%20art.htm (accessed January 29, 2014).

[17] Lucy Lippard. "Escape Attempts" *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975.* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995.)

[18] Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 1969. *UbuWeb.* http://www.intermediamfa.org/imd501/media/1236865544.pdf (accessed January 29, 2014).

put it. They question the authority and definition of "art" and the artist, attempting to make art that is an "object of culture." They are not, however, engaged in critiquing the commodity or the ability of institutions to absorb radical art and neutralize it. There was no art market, in the first place, and, moreover, their art was forcefully rejected by the cultural institutions that did exist in their society. Instead, the Moscow Conceptualists developed a critique of a country where the ideals of communal life and freedom from alienation are practiced, at least in theory. They articulated a different understanding of conceptual art, not one that privileges an idea, but one that strives for the ideal—a conceptualism that is a production of change. Groys writes in "Romantic Conceptualism" that, unlike Western Conceptualism, Moscow Conceptualism aims for a metaphysical dimension, another world.[19] Art is not only about questioning "art," but is capable of grasping at that something that is reflected in art. In "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," Groys writes:

> In England and America, where conceptual art originated, transparency meant the explicitness of a scientific experiment clearly exposing the limits and the unique character of our cognitive faculties. In Russia, however, it is impossible to paint a decent abstract picture without reference to the Holy Light. The unity of collective spirit is still so very much alive in our country that mystical experience here appears quite as comprehensible and lucid as does scientific experience … Unless it culminates in a mystical experience, creative activity seems to be of inferior worth.[20]

Western Conceptualism, Modernism, and the Formalist Avant Garde place the work of art in the nominal objective appearance. But Soviet or Russian aesthetics asks for the opposite. Evald Ilyenkov, a Soviet Marxist philosopher, asks that "art [be] something other than what it nominally presents (as a thing or as a bulk of body)."[21] Art can be the materialization of the ideal. In Groys' term, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," he grounds the movement in a mythical substratum that has historically constituted the "Russian Soul." As he said rather simply; "In Russia, art is still magic."[22] It is easy to see

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[19] Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," 54.

[20] Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," *A-YA* 1 (1979): 4.

This can be clearly seen in Kandinsky, Malevich, etc.

[21] Evald Ilienkov, *Philosophy and Culture* (Moscow: Political Literature Press, 1991) 234.

[22] Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," Ibid.

how Constructivism and Socialist Realism developed from this same trait. Art and life had always been woven together, producing each other in an impulse of spiritual feeling. Kabakov explains that art has always—at least since the 19th century—taken up the role of religion, philosophy, and life doctrine. Art is understood in terms of belief, as the shape of a future heaven that awaits us. "We always dreamed of making the projects that would say everything about everything."[23] Moscow Conceptualism, however, differs from Socialist Realism and Constructivism, first because it was an unsanctioned art practice, and secondly because it was ineffable, it could not be held to one critique, intention, or practice. What was Moscow Conceptualism? I see the art of the Moscow Conceptualists as a sort of materialization of Moscow's hidden emotional life—a blend of belief, formless ideology, hysteria, and attachment to the beautiful facade. It stands opposed yet intimately bonded to the "dryness of officialdom," concerning itself with the emotional and fragmentary voice of the everyday.[24]

This Thesis

Moscow Conceptualism has only in the past 15 years become a distinct object of study separate from umbrella genres like "underground" or "nonconformist" art. At the time of its initial debut with the title "Moscow Conceptualism," many scholars like Hubert Klocker and Hans Christoph von Tavel viewed it in a classic conceptualist framework: as a performance, action, or happening that emphasized the ephemerality of time in real life.[25] Many chose to compare the work of these artists with Fluxus, Minimalism, Pop Art, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth, or John Cage. But after the publication of *Journeys Outside the City*, *The Moscow Conceptualist Dictionary*, and other texts, the critical response began to orient itself around the literary or poetic elements of

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[23] Ilya Kabakov cited in Svetlana Boym, "Ilya Kabakov: The Soviet Toilet and the Palace of Utopias." *art margins.* http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/3-exhibitions/435-ilya-kabakov-the-soviet-toilet-and-the-palace-of-utopias#ftnlink_artnotes1_4 (accessed March 21, 2014).

[24] Jorg Heiser, "Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism, and After," *e-flux 29* (2011). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/moscow-romantic-conceptualism-and-after/ (accessed October 20, 2013).

[25] Enrico Crispolti and Gabriela Moncada, *La nuova arte Sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale / La Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1977), 183-201. Ilaria Bignamini, "From the USSR," *Flash Art* 76/77 (1977). Margarita Tupitsyn and Norton T. Dodge, *Russian New Wave* (Mechanicsville: Cremona Foundation, 1981). Margarita Tupitsyn, "Some Russian Performances," *High Performance* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1981- 82).

Moscow Conceptualism. Ekaterina Bobrinskaia describes it as a transformation of literature and text into action and the everyday, suggesting that the text is the source and consequence of actions and art objects.[26] She calls the work of *Collective Actions,* "collective actionist poetry," explaining that their book of documentation, *Journeys Outside the City*, records poetry as it transforms into action and then again as actions become poetry. She claims that the textual interpretation is integral to the completion of the work, a necessary destination in the journey of the action.

Another main theme that critics and artists have addressed is the relationship of Moscow Conceptualism with the Russian avant-garde. Boris Groys, one of the leading voices in the scholarship on Moscow Conceptualism, is concerned with how this movement disrupts the language and ideology of the avant-garde. He claims that while Socialist Realism flows easily from the avant-garde's radical program of transforming reality, Moscow Conceptualism chooses to confront the transformed reality and push back against it.[27] Others argue that Moscow Conceptualism is the much more authentic inheritor of the Russian avant-garde. They claim that it takes on the exaltation of abstract or "non-objective" art that does not eliminate objects but subjectivizes them. Joseph Backstein and Groys speak of Moscow Conceptualism as though it were an angel come to enlighten a benighted Soviet Culture about the structure of its dominant ideology.[28] Thinking through its difficult position simultaneously within and in opposition to an evolving Soviet ideology, Viktor Tupitsyn prefers to call Moscow Conceptualism "Moscow Communal Conceptualism." Tupitsyn is concerned with the dimensions of communality amongst the artists (quite different from the Marxist-Leninist ideal of communist society or the reality of a Russian village commune). The Moscow Conceptualists and artists like Ilya Kabakov and the *Collective Actions Group* [*Kollektivnye deistviia,* abbreviated in this thesis as *KD*] have been approached from various angles.

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[26] Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, "O knigah 'Poezdki za gorod'," in A. Monastyrsky *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols (*Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1998).

[27] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[28] Joseph Backstein and Bart de Baere, *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2005).
Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960–1990, ed. Boris Groys et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008) 316–22.

In this thesis, however, I will investigate materiality and collectivity as central concepts in the theory and practice of Moscow Conceptualism. Using Kabakov's assertion that Soviet Culture is inherently conceptual, Groys' reading of disruption and deconstruction of Soviet language and ideology, and Tupitsyn's focus on communality, I propose that Moscow Conceptualism traces the idea of materiality and community back to the Soviet Union's Marxist origins. This thesis explores a Conceptualism that situates itself within Russian history, taking on the performative language of the Soviet Union and reclaiming the lost ideals of the Soviet Union's Marxist past. They question the art of the Soviet Union, both in the artistic objects produced — like the paintings of Socialist Realism—and the total aesthetic and material production of culture. In opposition to the generally accepted system of conceptual art, Moscow Conceptualism used object-hood and materiality as "concepts" in themselves.

The formation of my thesis moves fluidly between the historical and ideological context of the Soviet Union, theoretical issues of language, semiotics, and text, and investigations of the conceptual artists' art and activities. I begin this study by defining the "Moscow Conceptual object" in two forms. First, I situate the art of the Moscow Conceptualists by defining and tracing Marx's "social object" from its advent in the *1844 Manuscripts* to the Bolshevik revolution through to Khrushchev's "thaw" and the beginnings of Moscow Conceptualism. Then, I link the "social object" to what I term the "Moscow Conceptual Object." I show how the conceptual performance in Moscow, contrary to conventional understandings of conceptual art, was interested in objects and the material of human production. Soviet conceptual art/performance, born from a concern with text and language, evolved into an art practice directly related to objects. Using Rimma Gerlovina's *Cube Poems,* I show how the art objects of Moscow Conceptualism exemplify Marx's concern with production, sociality, and materiality.

My second chapter explores how a void is created by the Soviet system and the kinds of objects that arise from it. I consider the Soviet government's system of total control and the history of incongruity between idea and material reality. Throughout this thesis, I primarily look at the art and texts of Ilya Kabakov, the *Collective Actions Group*, and Valery and Rimma Gerlovin. All of these artists deconstruct Soviet language by displacing it into a field of empty or arbitrary signifiers. In some cases, the signifiers are

blank and literally empty, like Kabakov's album *10 Characters* (Figs. 7,8) and *KD's* action *Appearance* (Fig. 9). In others, they are overly abundant, excessive, and non-functional. Kabakov's installations (Fig. 10) and the Gerlovins' mail art sculpture *Collective Farm* (Fig. 16-18) use trash and the refuse of paperwork to critique the absurdity of the Soviet state's obsession with technological organization and bureaucratic ritual, and reconstruct a system of excluded material and memory. All of these artists use materials that have been referenced and iterated to a point where they are either totally meaningless or have dissolved into literal emptiness. This chapter shows the materiality of emptiness and its potential to create a new system of meaning that can visualize exclusion.

In my third chapter, I discuss the materialization of ephemeral art into objects more concretely. *Collective Actions Group* centralized their conceptual practice on the basis of textual manifestations, or "factography," for each action. In its 10 volume publication documenting the actions, *Journeys Outside the City, Collective Actions* produced a text that was a collective work—an aggregate of every participant's experience. *Collective Actions* initiated each participant's critical analysis by decolonizing the Soviet hierarchy of "truth." They did this by mimicking the media of purported truth-telling—like photography or bureaucratic documentation—and then making it lie. Once freed from these structures of truth and meaning-making, each individual could create their own meaning from the intentionally ineffable actions and submit it to the collective document. I continue by examining how Rimma and Valery Gerlovin's *Collective Farm* collects work from artists around the world (Figs. 16-18). Through a similar mimicry of bureaucracy, the Gerlovins use a form of collective meaning-making to create networks of alternative sociality. I argue that these collective products are manifestations of Marx's "social object" because they exemplify collective labor and the cultivation of a new sociality. This chapter is about the systems of participation and community that are created through the reinvention of fact and collective authorship.

This thesis questions the relationship of Moscow Conceptualism with the Soviet Union. In this totalitarian state, where objects were already highly conceptualized with ideology, the Conceptualists were drawn to the materiality of human experience. Without their ever actually framing the project in such terms, the effect of their activity was to revive Marx's project of sociality, freedom from alienation, and human (as opposed to

dehumanizing or alienating) production. They took up the complex relationship of the individual artistic consciousness with the community, attempting to free the individual from the hold of a totalizing ideology and asking them to imagine themselves within a new collective object. I propose that Moscow Conceptualism was reclaiming the dematerialized or dissolved object-hood of Marx's ideal object. Through the cultivation of artistic objects, both ephemeral (actions, performances) and permanent (texts, books, photography, sculpture), and through new sociality in intimate, dangerous, and intellectually probing communities, the Moscow Conceptualists materialize Marx's lost "social object," and consequently, the "social being."

Chapter 1. The Moscow Conceptual Object

On a bright and sunny November morning in 1967, Moscow celebrated its 50th birthday, the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution. (Fig. 2). The entire population, in neat lines, came to express their enthusiasm at this special parade. Men in proletarian uniforms sang anthems to the Soviet Union in a moving harmony. Cars rolled back and forth with leaders standing on the seats, saluting the people with a humble and powerful stoicism. This was Communism; the performance of unified voices, strength, honor, cars, long speeches commemorating Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and all the men that fathered this nation. The Soviet Union was a living theatre—an existence shaped by ritual and ideology. Art, as realized and institutionalized by the post-revolutionary avant-garde, was no longer separated from life. Artists were the designers and collaborators in culture's remodel. This merging of political and aesthetic agendas led to a highly aestheticized political life exemplified in mass festivals or parades, like the one described above, that recurred every year, like an archaic rite.

When I first approached this thesis, I wanted to study performance art in the Soviet Union. In a world that was already a theatre, performance art would just be a matter of staging. Nevertheless, the theatre of Soviet politics, as a material for art, was more complicated than mere ephemeral performance. Soviet ideological culture was a culture of texts, manifestos, and slogans. It was a performance based on the transformation of all material into sanctioned material—a type of materiality that was more akin to stage props than the real substance of life. After this thesis began to grow, I came to understand that objects were the locus of performance art in Moscow. What was the object (in both senses of the word) of Moscow Conceptualism?

Marx's Social Object

What is materiality and why is it important? For Marx, the material world was the antithesis and solution to a world divided by a "base" and a "superstructure." The base is the human masses, the social relations and economic organization that make up the

Figure 2. Marc Riboud, *The parade for the 50th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution*, 1967, Photo. http://www.realussr.com (accessed April 10, 2014).

everyday life. The superstructure is the realm of abstract political ideas and institutions, conventions, and ritual that rule the base. Yet, as the polemic goes, the superstructure is organized by the ruling class, so its ideas and institutions generally legitimize a structure of dominance that maintains the ruling party's power and obfuscates the exploitation and violence that subordinates the lower classes. According to Marx, the most violent of superstructures is Capitalism. Workers are stripped of their humanity because Capitalism denies them their material being, their ability to make themselves through their own labor. As I will explain in detail soon, Marx sees humanity as the transformation of the world through the production of material that will, in turn, transform our selves. But Capitalism disrupts this cycle, making objects into commodities. A "commodity" is an object that initially gains value through the labor put into it; but whose value is subsequently replaced by use value, exchange value, and finally a monetary price. These new values "fetishize" or mystify the object and alienate it from its producer. Stated differently, Marx argues that an object, in commodity form, is a cultural construct that conceals exploitation and perpetuates mythical values that support systematic manipulation and subjugation.

Marx and Engels propose a new methodology, called "historical materialism" that will address the real conditions of human existence. Marx defines this in the first part of *The German Ideology* as a concern with "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity."[29] It is a theory of history that looks at the material underpinnings of society as the predecessor and determinant of consciousness or subjectivity.[30] But what exactly is this material? Here I will suggest that materiality is defined in opposition to ideology, or the superstructure. Materiality is production; the production of history, bodies, objects, subjectivity, culture, and relationships. It is the material that can produce form, consciousness, or the capacity to create. To look at the material conditions of life, or the material underpinnings of society, is to look at our own specificity. It is to acknowledge the processes of production that shape our context and the agency that we have to shape

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[29] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology Part On*e (New York: International Publishers, 2001).

[30] "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."
Marx, "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy," *The German Ideology Part On*e.

future contexts.[31] The Socialist revolution sought to instate materiality, the base, as the new rule of human consciousness and the world.

This new world of materiality is predicated on the formation of "social objects" and "social beings." In the *3rd Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844*, "Private Property and Communism," Marx describes a "social object." He writes:

> [...] it is only when man's object becomes a human object or objective that man does not lose himself in that object. This is only possible when it becomes a social object for him and when he himself becomes a social being for himself, just as society becomes a being for him in this object. [32]

Opposed to a capitalist object, a "social object," reflects man as a social being. The social being produced in a new society of collective governance will embrace the unique cadence of each voice. Marx explains:

> On the one hand, therefore, it is only when objective reality universally becomes for man in society the reality of man's essential powers, becomes human reality, and thus the reality of his own essential powers, that all objects become for him the objectification of himself, objects that confirm and realize his individuality, his objects – i.e., he himself becomes the object.[33]

The "social object" is an object produced in conjunction with consciousness or subjectivity. It is an object that is produced, freely, for a community. Capitalist modes of production and consumption tether man to a life constantly on the brink of dissolution, where the material conditions of life, like food, warmth, shelter, etc., are never assured. Peter Stallybrass narrates in his essay "Marx's Coat," that when Marx was living in England, under the harsh emergence of industrialization and the proletarian class, he was forced to live in poverty. In a moment of desperation, he pawned his winter coat, obliging him to stay indoors until he could make enough money to buy it back.[34] Losing his coat meant both less employment and the loss of an object that had enabled him to function

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[31] Daniel Miller, "Introduction" In *Materiality.* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005)

[32] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker, "Private Property and Communism," In *The Marx-Engels reader.* (1972. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1978) 88.

[33] Marx, Engels, and Tucker, "Private Property and Communism," Ibid.

[34] Peter Stallybrass, *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces,* "Marx's Coat." (London: Routledge, 1998) 183-207.

normally within society. Marx's coat illustrates how objects are a part of the self, they enable us to go outside, participate in society, make memories, live life in an un-alienated way. In *The German Ideology,* Marx writes: "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."[35] When the basics of material life are compromised, there is no hope for a productive or progressive future. Capitalism turns the worker into a thing, barricaded from products and ownership over production. Thus, Marx is not disavowing objects *per se* but rather their status as commodities, their value based on markets, and the possibility that social and economic circumstances can take away the objects that, at times, embody a person's self.

Even more important to Marx is the role of objects as productions, as the products of a day's work. As Marx states, to produce is to be human. An ideal Marxist object is produced from a place of individual fulfillment in the context of a community of people. In *Capital,* Marx maps out a better world:

> Let us now picture ourselves...a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as a combined labour-power of the community... The total product of our community is a social product.[36]

Marx sees work and the products of work as the crux of individual and collective human life. Returning to the earlier passage from the *1844 manuscripts*, an object can be made "human" or "social" if it is made by a person who has not been barred from the products of their labor or ownership over their production. Through the production of objects, a dialectical process is opened up where new awarenesses and capacities are produced through "Communist labor" a form of labor that produces for the community. The labor of production is a form of materiality that constitutes the texture of a person's day-to-day life. Meaningful production is the foundation of humanity.

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[35] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology Part On*e.

[36] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker. "Capital" In *The Marx-Engels reader.* (1972. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1978) 326.

Materialism and the notion of the "object" emerged as subjects of importance in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Taking up Marxism, the Bolshevik leaders wanted to dissolve class, abolish private property, and instate a proletariat dictatorship. As they began to map Marx's plan onto Russia, however, they were confronted with a paradox: how can a state support both a radical new sociality and consciousness through an experimental aesthetic that feeds on creative freedom *and* subsume these aesthetic innovations under the strict control of a vanguard party?[37] How much of Marx's radical materiality could be retained? In this next section I will trace how the paradigm of materiality and the object evolve and progress with each era in the Soviet Union.

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The first Soviet leader and practitioner of Marxism was Vladimir Lenin, in what was termed Marxism-Leninism.[38] This philosophy was a synthesis of Marxist theory and Lenin's local adaptations for a country with almost no capitalist history or industrialization. Lenin follows Marx in his general theoretical premises but tilts the dialectic balance by privileging matter over consciousness. Lenin emphasizes the subordination of consciousness, sensation, and experience to material reality: "materialism recognizes in a general way that real, objective being (matter) is independent of the consciousness, sensations, experience etc. of man. Historical materialism recognizes that social being is independent of the social consciousness of man."[39] For Lenin, materialism represents human history, in a quantifiable way, unlike consciousness and sensual experience. He uses this idea to envision a system where materiality will begin to transform consciousness, but not vice versa: "Consciousness in general reflects being— this is the general thesis of all materialism. It is impossible to avoid seeing its inseparable connection with the historical materialist thesis: social consciousness reflects social being."[40] This is a direct contrast to Marx's formulation, in which consciousness is not a mere reflection of the material base but a crucial element in the reciprocal production of social objects and social beings.

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[37] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation. (*Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 13.

[38] Note: coined after Lenin's death around 1924.

[39] Vladimir Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972) 394.

[40] Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 391.

Lenin's regime worked to transform the "social being," and then individual consciousness from the top down: through collectivization, centralized production and distribution, reforms of numeration, spelling, and the calendar, establishing a new "emancipated" Soviet woman, Socialist youth, the press, etc.[41] By changing the calendar, for instance, Lenin was transforming the fundamental structure of temporality. Rather than a traditional structure of time based on seasons or agriculture, the new time was based on an external aesthetic of "order" and "logic." The Soviet Union was built through this kind of material transformation. Like Peter the Great, Lenin went to battle against nature in order to create a new, modern and totally planned state. Instead of letting Socialism evolve organically from Capitalism, as ordained in Marx's texts, and instead of letting the consciousness of the new Soviet man liberate itself spontaneously, Lenin wrote history in his own way. The people and the land would need to be educated into liberation.[42] Through the imposition of a new reality, Russian consciousness could be reshaped into one that fit inside the Soviet paradigm. The transformative Soviet object, or Lenin's rendition of Marx's treatment of materiality, was not one produced by the un-alienated self of man for society in the deliberate, enlightened way envisioned by Marx, but one produced to transform the consumer actively into a "comrade," a wholly integrated member of the mechanistically productive social whole.

The Soviets entered this project through "the everyday." In his 1923 book *Questions of Everyday Life,* Leon Trotsky stresses the importance of revolution at the most basic, everyday level. The utopian goals of the 1918 revolution, according to Trotsky, cannot be achieved without changing the private sphere, home life, and the family.[43] To him, this meant the socialization of childcare, the liberation of marriage from private property relations, and the freedom of women from the "domestic slavery" of gendered

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[41] The need to initiate change from the top down is probably based in the economic and social situation in Russia. Unlike the industrial West that Marx uses to formulate his polemic, Russia was rural, feudal, and spread out across a massive land. There were no urban centers and plummeting standards of living, where workers could group up, educate themselves, and let their blood boil. Russian "proletariats" needed to be educated *after* the revolution—a new consciousness did not have the material circumstances to come about on its own.

[42] Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation,* 12.

[43] Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

experience.[44] In response to Trotsky, the Productivists, a group of Soviet avant-garde artists, renounced conventional artistic practice in order to do "productive" work, like industrial labor, and rejected the idea of redistributing the private sphere to the collective public. Instead, they sought to transform life by reactivating everyday objects, transforming capitalist commodities into socialist "things."[45] In this way, the object became endowed with the purpose of creating relations of consumption and new everyday experiences. It becomes, as Boris Arvatov argues in his important essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," "the fulfillment of the physiological-laboring capacities of the organism, as a social-laboring force, as an instrument and as a co-worker."[46] Instead of dissolving the duties of the private sphere, the socialist object, theoretically, repurposes these private and domestic duties within the Soviet project. Cooking, playing with children, marital love, etc., became rewritten in the Communist language. Amongst the ambitions to dissolve rich and poor, man and woman, white and non-white, the Communist revolution sought to dissolve subject and object. The object would acquire a "conscience," a non-alienated subjectivity, and would become a "comrade-thing" in the journey towards Communism.[47]

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Later, Arvatov asks a crucial question: what do you do with the desire created by consumer capitalism? The socialist object must satisfy the consumer's desire without stimulating the sense of possession. Christina Kiaer explains that the goal of the socialist object is to "use the most advanced technological forms of industry to amplify the sensory experience of its human user, and awaken him or her from the dream sleep of the

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[44] Christina Kiaer, and Margarita Tupitsyn. "His and Her Constructivism." *Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism.* (London: Tate Gallery, 2009) 143-59.
[45] Boris Arvatov. "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)." Trans. Christina Kiaer. *October* 81 (1997): 119-28.
[46] Arvatov. "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," 124.
[47] Ekaterina Degot, "Performing Objects, Narrating Installations: Moscow Conceptualism and the Rediscovery of the Art Object." *e-flux* 29 (2011). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/performing-objects-narrating-installations-moscow-conceptualism-and-the-rediscovery-of-the-art-object/ (accessed November 2, 2013).

Figure 3. Golub, *Stalin CCCP,* 1949, Paper, 45 x 32 cm (17.7 x 12.6 inch). [translated as: "Long live and prosper our Motherland! -I. Stalin"]

commodity phantasmagoria."[48] The socialist or "Soviet" object does not create a "commodity phantasmagoria," a sensorium of limitless consumption, as it did/does in the West, but rather a sensorium of production and useful invention. Unlike a "use-value" subsumed by capital in capitalism, Soviet "use-value" was geared towards the collective community. The Soviet dream was a progression towards the technological mastery of industry which eventually would lead to the emancipation of all labor. The Constructivists and the Productivists created objects to integrate industry, efficiency, and

[48] Christina Kiaer, "'Into Production!': The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism." *European Institute from Progressive Cultural Policies (*2009). http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/kiaer/en. (accessed November 2, 2013).

technology into the *byt* [everyday]. Unlike the purely emancipatory purpose of Marx's object, the Soviet object takes on what one might call the character of a fetish, a "progress-value" where the objects are markers of the trajectory of industrial progress.

When a capitalist consumer product is converted into a "ready-made" art object, its fetishism is diagnosed, mocked, and "conceptualized," as in Duchamp's Urinal. The commodity undergoes a "conceptualization" to become art (or vice versa; the art object becomes "commodified"). A Soviet consumer product, however, has already been conceptualized; each product has already been conceived and produced within the matrix of Soviet ideology. The Soviet commodity was simply a use-value; un-aesthetic and un-sellable. Without an exchange value on an art market, the value of a work of art in the Soviet Union came to be judged through its ideological symbols, on its relationship to the total system. When looking at art, one would initially determine how "Soviet" it was before considering the visual effects, the artist, the "value" of their past work, their prestige, etc. The value lived in both the official and unofficial statements that accompanied the work. Ekaterina Degot writes,

> Under communism, where art objects were just as subject to democracy and egalitarianism as artists, artworks were judged by their "moral" and communicative qualities, not by their beauty.[49]

Groys similarly claims that, "[t]he Communist Revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money into the medium of language—a linguistic turn at the level of social practice."[50] The symbols of ideology came to circulate in a figurative economy, just like money in the West. [51] There was no art market in the Soviet bloc, so there was no time spent critiquing the "market value" of commodified art works. The "value" was in

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[49] Degot, "Performing Objects, Narrating Installations: Moscow Conceptualism and the Rediscovery of the Art Object."

[50] The statement continues:
"In Soviet communism, every commodity became an ideologically relevant statement, just as in capitalism every statement becomes a commodity. One could eat communistically, house and dress oneself communistically—or likewise non-communistically, or even anti-communistically. This meant that in the Soviet Union it was in theory just as possible to protest against the shoes or eggs or sausage then available in the stores as it was to protest against the official doctrines of historical materialism. They could be criticized in the same terms because these doctrines had the same original source as the shoes, eggs, and sausage—namely the relevant decisions of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU."
Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript* (London: Verso, 2009) xx–xxi.

[51] Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," 31.

the work's level of Soviet-ness—a value that changed with time from a marker of progress to a mark of allegiance to the dominant power.

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After Lenin died, Stalin took over as the hegemon. His reign initiated a new revolution in the Soviet Union, but this time it was from above. Stalin's leadership focused on the cult of his own personality, an all-encompassing system of surveillance and a network of personal loyalties that could ensure and stabilize his power. Stalin made the Soviet Union into a fully totalitarian regime. Through a state monopoly of media that encompassed literature, art, news, science, etc., Stalin reformed public culture to reflect his own dictation. As seen in Figure 3, Stalin took the image of his body and made it into the image of the motherland, the masses, past, present, and the future. He stands with the next generation, peering into both to the future and to the world which he has created with a modest appreciation and pride. His calm stance in front of flourishing and organized fields explicitly lays the claim of this political performance: Stalin is the father and creator of Socialism. This was the project of Stalin: to write a new material world in the reflection of himself. Yet, in obvious contradiction to Marx, Stalin was an a-social being. His relationship to the world around him was one of exteriority, a voice from outside or above dictating the law.[52] Using language, aesthetics, new values, etc., Stalin used his ideology as a text of dominance that was transcribed onto the world in order to create a new one.

To build a new world meant the total destruction of the old one. Through mass purges, the dispersal of unions and communities, the further dissolution of class distinctions, Stalin was able to totally atomize and strip man of any distinction, history, or context.[53] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt explains how Marx's dialectical materialism evolved under Stalin from the rule of history to the rule of Stalin. She explains that Stalin engaged in a constant,

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[52] Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation.*

[53] "The masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society, whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual has been held in check only though membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is bit brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships."
Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966) 317.

> zigzag of the Communist Party lines, and the constant reinterpretation and application of Marxism which voided the doctrine of all its content because it was no longer possible to predict what course or action it would inspire. The fact that the most perfect education in Marxism and Leninism was no guide whatsoever for political behavior—that on the contrary, one could follow the party line only if one repeated each morning what Stalin had announced the night before—naturally resulted in the same state of mind, the same obedience, undivided by any attempt to understand what one was doing.[54]

The absurd hypocrisy and disconnection between law and consequence (e.g., the mass purges of people who simply were "affiliated" with an "objective enemy") led to a formless, amorphous regime. By reinventing law to be in constant and illogical flux and by taking away any material stability (privacy in the home, trustful friendships, the ability to protect your family, etc.), Stalin set the people in a state of anxiety where everything and everyone was suspect.

The Foundation Pit, Andrei Platonov's 1937 bleak dystopian novel, depicts life on a collective farm and work site during the period of collectivization. His landscape is frozen and bare, covered with the refuse of a prosperity long gone. The protagonist keeps forgotten objects as relics of a hope that he will someday understand the meaning of life. Platonov narrates that, "he simply collected... all kinds of petty and unfortunate scraps of nature, as documentary proof of the plan-less creation of the world, as facts of the melancholy of each living breath."[55] The materials are "facts" in a world of absurdity, they ground experience in a "material world," where at least nature can maintain a kind of order. Objects will always have volume, gravity, some form of consistency based on the physics of their materiality. Platonov's character saves these relics because he is trying to give meaning to the lives lost, he wants to restore meaning to humanity, and "avenge... those liquidated toilers."[56] Platonov's harsh story illustrates the lack of human-ness in the

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[54] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 32.

[55]Andreĭ Platonovich Platonov, *The Foundation Pit.* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 44.
"Without full understanding, Voshchev had collected like a miser a sackful of material remnants of lost people, who had lived like him without truth and who had died before the victorious conclusion. Now he was presenting those liquidated toilers before the face of the government and the future, so that those who lay quietly in the depth of the earth could be avenged through the organization of the eternal meaning of man."

[56] Platonov, *The Foundation Pit,* 44.

mechanistic Communist political and social structure. Man is reduced to a body, a name in a file, maybe even a dried-up pen thrown on the road. This reduction and de-personalization allows governments to commit violence "objectively," to further terrorize and alienate their people. The collective community envisioned in the Soviet ideology is clearly subverted when people lose their connection to any form of sociality. What Platonov shows us are the living dead, people with nothing left to lose. He shows us how Stalin's new decrees destroyed at a much faster pace than they could create. Objects were no longer vehicles of transformation but deposits of memory and wilted dreams. These garbage objects and relics represent the lost people and the lost hope that material reality will align with "human" instincts and desires. The material of life—space, objects, subjectivities, bodies, culture, sociality—were lost to a new life that was based on abstraction and ideology.

In 1953, Stalin died and the world that he created began to wither away. As mentioned in the introduction, Moscow Conceptualism developed during the 1960s and 1970s, in the cultural environment after Stalin's death, the de-Stalinization or "thaw" initiated by Nikita Khrushchev. As the cult of Stalin disintegrated, people emerged as if out of a dream, mystified as to what had just consumed their reality. The rituals and ideological texts and aesthetics that were so meaningful and un-negotiable under Stalin, lost much of their cadence. Ideology could no longer fully control its effects because its original purpose had grown too distant. On a material level, television had just been introduced. Now, instead of illustrations of Stalin looking spry and powerful, people could see their rulers without facade—tired, old, and too human to sparkle with an unquestionable authority. These leaders became domesticated and their power exhausted. This allowed people to engage with new meanings and creative understandings that the repeated rituals (like law, parades, the language of communist enthusiasm, etc.) enabled but could never fully realize.[57] Stalin's strict system of meaning relaxed, creativity became more normal, and people began to exercise their critical muscles. The trickle of information about experimental art practices in the West and the expression of frustration inspired an exploration of new forms of art. Unfortunately, the Thaw was short-lived and Soviet society eventually "froze over" again, as we saw in the

[57] Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation,* 12.

30th anniversary exhibition of the Moscow Union of Artists in the introduction. By 1961, the Soviet authorities had established new laws restricting "parasitism," or the avoidance of socially useful work, and began arresting poets and artists or committing them to psychiatric institutions. The production of art, especially experimental art, had lost its position as an index of progress. The initial paradox that tripped the leaders of the Bolshevik party has long been dissolved: the total control of the state was much more important than the freedom of creativity necessary for the innovation of a radical new material life. Any art outside of the bounds of Socialist realism was a threat to the Soviet Union's ideological unity.

Under Brezhnev, the boundaries of permissible expression became even narrower, sparking an empowered dissident movement. Dissidents took on the historically well-established role of the "Russian Intelligentsia" as a "conscience of society."[58] As Roy Medvedev, a major Marxist dissident, wrote in *On Socialist Democracy,*

> Only this kind of open political contest can offer our people a proper political education, teaching them not only to express their own opinions but also to heed the views of others. This is the only way to establish a convention of ethical behavior in politics, to eliminate uncompromising sectarianism, intolerance, and elitist complacency.[59]

Medvedev is advocating for a new dialectic, a transcendence of the dictator rule. The Soviet regime had strayed from its Marxist roots, returning to bourgeois notions of hierarchy and class. The dissidents were claiming, accurately, that power was no longer rising from the "base," but was instead being exercised downwards from the centralized government, i.e., the superstructure. The initial concern with the welfare of the masses and with material reality as a theoretical support had lost its way. Material reality, as expressed through the production of Soviet objects, no longer represented a progression towards an economic and social utopia, but rather represented the meaningless dictation of those in power. In response, a broad-based dissident movement emerged through public protests, open letters to Soviet leaders, and *samizdat* books, which circulated

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[58] James Von Geldern, "1973: The Dissident Movement." *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. http://www.soviethistory.org/index.phppage=subject&SubjectID=1973dissidents&Year=1973&navi=byYear (accessed October 20, 2013).

[59] Roy A. Medvedev, *On Socialist Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 310-15, 331-32.

handmade versions of banned literature and social commentary. A new un-sanctioned material world was created, including the practice and discourse around conceptual art.

The Materiality of Human-ness

Samizdat is the term for an underground system of publication that emerged after Stalin's death in the 1950s and continued until the fall of the Soviet Union. The word's Russian derivation is *sam* (self) + *izdat'* (publish), hence the meaning "self-publication" or "self-published." The *samizdat* movement was a response to the censorship and total control of the Soviet regime. A *samizdat* text was usually produced on a typewriter with carbon paper and thin onionskin, cheap and easily concealed. The materiality of *samizdat* became a new aesthetic tradition that signaled rebellion and opposition to the Soviet government. These texts transmitted an otherwise unavailable truth. For instance, the human rights violations that were hidden or not officially acknowledged were recorded and circulated in the *samizdat* text, *Chronicle of Current Events*.[60] Both *Collective Actions* and Valery and Rimma Gerlovin(a) used *samizdat* as a medium for their art and documentation. The Gerlovins emphasize in their essay "*Samizdat* Art " that the *samizdat* medium makes their book-art an "antidote to totalitarianism," especially when contrasted with the authorized books that were freely available.[61] As Ann Komaromi describes in her article, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," the low quality and makeshift material of *samizdat* came to symbolize heroic resistance to the official suppression of culture and individual expression.[62] Each text was written with a consciousness, not only of the message, but of its censorship, of the fact that it was illegal to have and read this text on onionskin paper.

Komaromi points out the importance of the *samizdat* aesthetic to its radical dissidence: "the amateur typescript, the deformity of the text, the characteristic mistakes, corrections, fragile paper, and degraded print quality had value because they marked the

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[60] Translated on "Amnesty International" http://www.amnesty.org/en/ai_search?title=chronicle+of+current+events.

[61] John E. Bowlt, Charles Doria, Rimma Gerlovina, and Valery Gerlovin. *Russian Samizdat Art: Essays.* (New York: Willis Locker & Owens Pub., 1986) 171.

[62] Ann Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat." *Slavic Review* 63.3 (2004) 597-618.

difference between *samizdat* and official publications."[63] With onionskin paper and hand-bound covers, the books smelled and felt like wholly different objects. One had to pick it up with care: the transparent pages often exposed text from the following page, the ink so light that one needed to hold it up to a light to see—the meaning of the words were entangled in their materiality. Each publication was construed and understood through the senses of sight and touch and the physical act of reading. Marx says in "Private Property and Communism" that we become "stupid" when we allow an object to exist only as capital or as something we can directly "use," because the "sense of having" takes over all other senses.[64] *Samizdat* texts were created expressively to be shared, passed from hand to hand. Though Marx does not attribute a specific aesthetic quality to the overcoming of private property, he says that an un-estranged person can relate to an object for its own sake: "In practice I can only relate myself to a thing in a human way if the thing is related in a human way to man."[65] But what does it mean to be related to a thing in a "human" way? It's the sensuality—smells, delicacy, blemished type or handwriting— that is "human," in Marx's terms. Put differently, the *samizdat*, handmade aesthetic communicates an intention unmediated by the dominant economic and social structures. Andrei Erofeev, a nonofficial artist, wrote:

> [The production of Moscow Conceptual objects] bears little resemblance to any form of well-adjusted commodity production, a manufacture whereby the market is regularly supplied with standard-quality goods. This creativity was rather like playing music at home: it may be very skillful, and the musician may be talented, but it still does not go beyond being a mixture of a divertissement and an emotional confession; it is always improvisation, a hint at the possibility of a high-standard performance, which is out of place in the privacy of the home.[66]

The creation was always contingent on the materials available, the time of day, the number of people in the apartment; in other words, the production is markedly different from an object made in a factory. The *samizdat* text communicates its humanity and non-conformism by opposing its onionskin paper, smudged ink, in-the-kitchen-at-midnight

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[63] Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," 609.

[64] Marx, "Private Property and Communism," 87.

[65] Marx, Ibid.

[66] Erofeev, Hoptman, and Pospiszyl. "Nonofficial Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s," 43.

production to institutionally-approved, mass-reproduced objects. Returning to Stallybrass and Platonov, the object can be a memory bank of personal experience. In the 19th century, the wrinkles in the elbows and sleeves of a coat were called "memories."[67] Material, like the fabric of a coat, can hold a person's history. The materiality of *Samizdat* creates objects that speak to the intimacy of people and production. *Samizdat* rejects Soviet social structures and creates a system based on dissidence, home-made products, personal relations, and, as we will soon see, a communal approach to authorship. *Samizdat* was the material of an underground world where people created relationships through the production of art and ideas excluded from the Soviet totality. The Moscow Conceptualists integrated *samizdat* into their conceptual practice, drawing the hermeneutic space into a material and human one.

Performance-Object

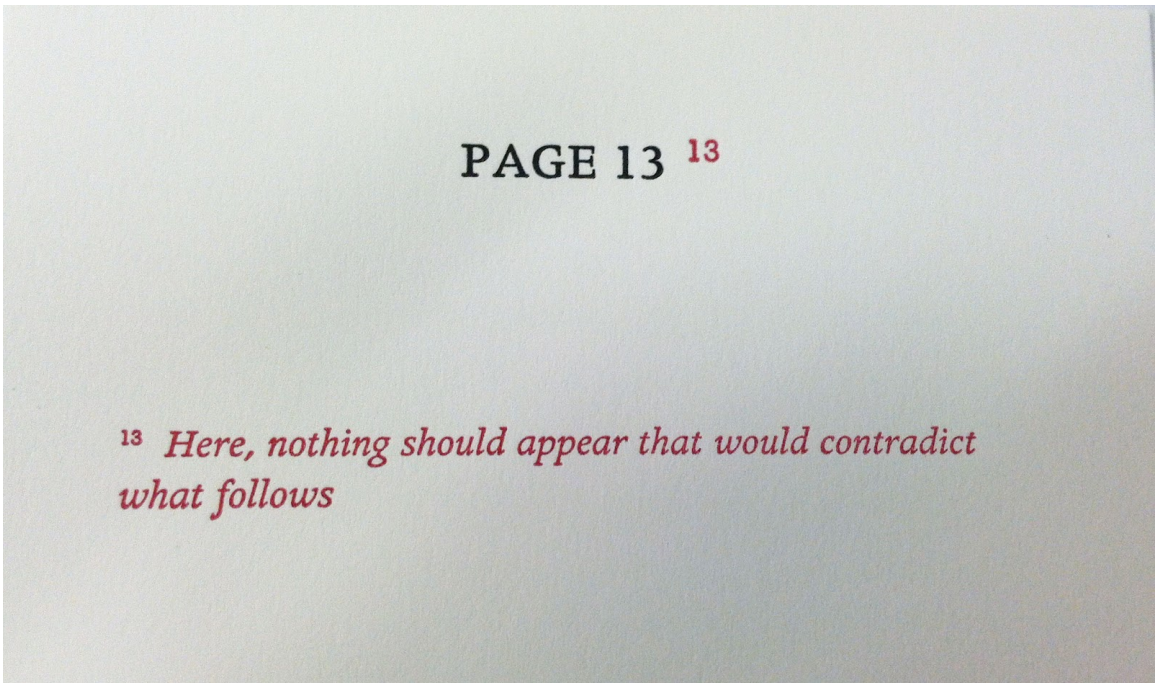

Figure 4. Lev Rubinstein, "Page 13" In *Thirty-Five New Pages*. Translated by Philip Metres and Tatiana Tulchinsky. Brooklyn, New York: Ugly Ducking Press, 2011.

As I explained in the introduction, Moscow Conceptualism borrowed its name and many of its practices from the Conceptual Art movement in the West. The most

[67] Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat," 196.

important aspect of this was performance art. Because of its ephemerality, it was a perfect solution to the commodification and authority of the art object. What were the implications of performance in a world without an art market or with one dominated by a single state-sanction art practice (Socialist Realism)? Instead of using ephemerality to critique the commodification of art or the authority of certain forms of an art object, the Moscow Conceptualists used performance to dissect the language of authority and reconsider the importance of objects.

Moscow Conceptualism and, more specifically, conceptual performance originated with the reading of texts, and the idea of "action poetry."[68] Action poetry was a form of conceptual poetry that explored the mechanics of performance with respect to the text. In the early 20th century, Constructivist poet Aleksei Chicherin, anticipating Structuralist ideas of language, studied the "signs of poetry" and rejected the privilege of words, beginning poetry's trajectory toward abstraction in Russia.[69] Later, in the mid-20th century, Vsevolod Nekrasov introduced a style of colloquial and a-rhythmic language in poetry. He synthesized the inconsistencies of everyday language into lyric, blurring the lines between conversation and poetry. His poems introduced what *Collective Actions* would later call "vocal space,"[70] where "conceptual components as words, phonation of sounds, and meaning,... fluctuated and dissolved depending on the tempo, intonation, and rhythm of the speech."[71] Through these experimentations, words could escape their status as 2-D text to perform on the sonic field and later the more abstract conceptual field.

By the 60s and 70s, these practices expanded into what was called Conceptualist literature. Conceptualist literature began, more or less, with Lev Rubinstein. Rubinstein wrote poems with words that were found on the streets and subways of Moscow, collages of short phrases and scraps of conversation (Fig 4). Rubinstein's poem "The Hero Emerges" reads like this:

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[68] Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art." *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (New Brunswick, N.J: Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, 2011) 156.

[69] Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History." *La ilustración total: arte conceptual de Moscú, 1960-1990 = Total enlightenment : conceptual art in Moscow 1960-1990.* (Ostfidern: Hatje Cantz, 2008) 56.

[70] *Collective Actions* conducted a series of actions entitled "vocal space" in the mid-80s.

[71] Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," 155.

86 You're just an idiot, that's all.

87 Twelve in one night? I don't believe it!

88 Spit that out of your mouth, right now!

89 Someone has brought it from abroad.

90 It's closed. They're having an inspection.

...

99 The student asked the teacher: "May I leave? I have a bad headache." The teacher said: "Go ahead. Aren't you getting headaches a lot?"

The student left and began to think.

100 The student asked: "To dissolve in being or non-being— isn't it all the same?" The teacher said: "I don't know." So the student left and began to think.[72]

Rubinstein is playing with the disparities between the ideological language of the Soviet Union and the individual voices of people in their kitchens and on the street. The phrases he borrows are banal and naive, but have a way of always probing the edges of official Soviet language. Their confusion and hysteria expose the huge slippages between ideology and reality. In the next step, Rubinstein transforms his text into performance, or "Action Poetry," through the invention of "catalogue poems" (Fig. 4). Like the fragments gathered in his poems, he transcribed scraps of everyday conversation onto catalogue cards. Rubinstein explains:

> Each fragment of my text (in the original) is arranged on a separate sheet of paper or card... This is the material metaphor of my understanding of the text as object, as of reading as serious work. Each small card is both an object and universal unit of rhythm, equalizing all gestures of speech—from an elaborate theoretical statement to an interjection, from a stage direction to a snatch of telephone conversation.[73]

The cards would then be shuffled and read in a random order. In "The Hero Emerges," each number preceding the text is the number of the notecard. The work becomes a "score" that the reader can follow, where reading from left to right can expand into a 3

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[72] Lev Rubinshteĭn, and Philip Metres. *Catalogue of comedic novelties: selected poems.* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ugly Duckling Press; 2004.)

[73] Rubinshtein and Metres. *Catalogue of comedic novelties: selected poems,* 155.

dimensional space.[74] Rubinstein contends that the cards are a manipulable object that should be leafed through rhythmically to peel "back its layers... literally plunging into the depths of the text."[75] Reading becomes a game, a performance, labor, and an object. Each person will flip through the lines of the poem differently. By aestheticizing and staging text, these poems become specimens of materiality that make readers into participants and authors of their own experience. The synthesis of ideological and everyday language, materialized into a participatory performance, opens up the veiled hegemony of meaning within Soviet language—creating a consciousness about language, and a capacity to critique it.

Monastyrsky's series *Elementary Poetry* experiments with similar dynamics. In one piece, *Cannon/Gun,* there is a box with a black cylinder, a button, and wire in the front. The spectator is asked to look inside the black cylinder while pressing the button that is attached to an electric bell inside the box. Where the spectator is supposed to see an image, they hear a sound. Bobrinskaia explains that "the participant of this poetic action was introduced to the realm of a paradoxically uninterpretable and textually unrepeatable inner experience achieved by means of artistic minimalism and a rigidly structural approach that at the same time contained an element of play and irony."[76] These "action objects" were meant to expand the field of "object" to "act" upon consciousness and participatory experience. Further, as the rest of my argument will show, the field of performance expands into object. Performance was never purely ephemeral but always closely engaged with the relationship of material bodies and objects. Many of the Moscow Conceptual objects are materializations of participation and new systems of perception created by performance.

Along with conceptual objects, the Moscow Conceptualists' conceptual performances frequently materialized in the form of a text. Performance transcribed into a text is nothing new, but for *Collective Actions,* the production of a textual materialization was also performance. Text, in many ways, is the materialization of language. Rubinstein wrote about the importance of an "understanding of the text as object, as of reading as

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[74] Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," 155; Rubinshtein and Metres. *Catalogue of comedic novelties: selected poems.*, 54-155.

[75] Rubinshteĭn and Metres. *Catalogue of comedic novelties: selected poems*, iv-v.

[76] Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," 157.

serious work" in his work.[77] The materiality of the text and labor it embodies are integral to his work. Text-as-object turns language and ideas into material labor, a transformation of actions and ideas into words on paper. David Abram writes the history of writing in his 1996 book: *The Spell of the Sensuous.* Abram explains how our once spontaneously intimate and unstructured relationship with nature yielded to the abstractions, rationality, and objectivity of written text. The alienation from nature came with the advent of the alphabet. Writing made the writer an autonomous self, isolated from their material and relational existence. The written word organizes and structures perception and experience. Ilya Kabakov states that "it is hard to overestimate the role of the written text in our society."[78] Under Abram's terms, the Soviet language was not a language at all, but a text, an organization and structure of experience and perception. The Soviet Union was, from many perspectives, one large ideological text written on its citizens and their material world (space, relationships, labor, language, etc.) as if they were blank pieces of paper. The Soviet Union functioned through a strictly finite system that limited experience and meaning-making.

So why would the Moscow Conceptualists be interested in text? To begin with, because it is the material that forms their subjectivity. Groys writes that "the world of the endless ideological text is not in absolute opposition to the artist, because Kabakov's artistic memory remembers how he was "made" in the Stalin era, he is unable to regard this world as if it were something totally external in which he, as this concrete subjectivity, could completely dissolve."[79] These artists are undeniably immersed in Soviet totality, but they were compelled to examine themselves within it. They were interested in the power and absurdity of texts that scripted their position and experience in society. Also, text, through collective and un-alienated labor, has the potential to materialize as a "social object." Returning to Rubinstein, text is the material of language. As evidenced by the power of text within the Soviet government, the Moscow Conceptualists could see the

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[77] Rubinshteĭn and Metres. *Catalogue of comedic novelties: selected poems,* 155.

[78] Ilya Kabakov, *Yuri Kuper: 52 entretiens dans la cuisine communautaire* (Rennes: La Criee, Halle d'Art Contemporain, 1992) 96.

[79] Boris Groys. "Postutopian Art: From Myth to Mythology" in *The total art of Stalinism: avant-garde, aesthetic dictatorship, and beyond.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.) 88.

revolutionary potential of language. If produced in Marx's vision, it can create new and radical forms, consciousness, and capacity.

In 1974, in the advent of Moscow Conceptualism as an un-official recognized movement, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a) started to make conceptual texts into objects or *Cube Poems* (Figs. 5, 6). In a text about the pieces, she explains:

> Cubic concepts are embodied in different geometrical forms; in general, they are clothed in cardboard cubes, each 8 x 8 x 8 cm (3¼ x 3¼ x 3¼"), featuring inscriptions inside and outside. Many of them are occupied by little wooden cubes, 3 x 3 x 3 cm (1¼ x 1¼ x 1¼"), also with a short conceptual message. Serving as allegorical units of time, space, or human character, they are specimens of a noetic form of concrete poetry that gains new corporeal habitation in the cubes. For example, upon opening the cube that says on its lid "The Soul. Do not open - it can fly away!," one sees the message written on its bottom, "There it goes!" (1974).[80] (Fig. 5)

The Gerlovins give concepts a material form that can exist and be interacted with on the physical level. They take the medium of the Soviet regime, text, and materialize it into an object that requires the participation of other people. In Rimma Gerlovina's analysis, she describes how the poetic texts gain a "new corporeal habitation," a physical form that dwells in this realm amongst us. She writes:

> In 1974, little cubes, the portable objects of three-dimensional poetry, burst forth as if a fountain, overflowing our entire apartment in Moscow. Made with one breath, they were given away as gifts to our friends, artists, and poets, with easiness and spontaneity.[81]

The cubes were forms of sociality, literally made for the community. The cubes were not fully realized without the participation of the spectator: you have to open the box, look inside, turn it over, etc., making the object a participatory experience and performance. By reading the text written on top of and inside of the cube, each person adds their voice to the plurality that constitute the art objects' meaning. The cubes make conceptual investigation and hand-made craft into material for the cultivation of relationships—the basis of a new sociality. We can see a Marxian notion of objects in this

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[80] Rimma Gerlovina, "THE CUBES," 2010. http://www.gerlovin.com/English/eng_cubes/eng_cubes_1.htm (accessed February 15, 2014).

[81] Gerlovina, Ibid.

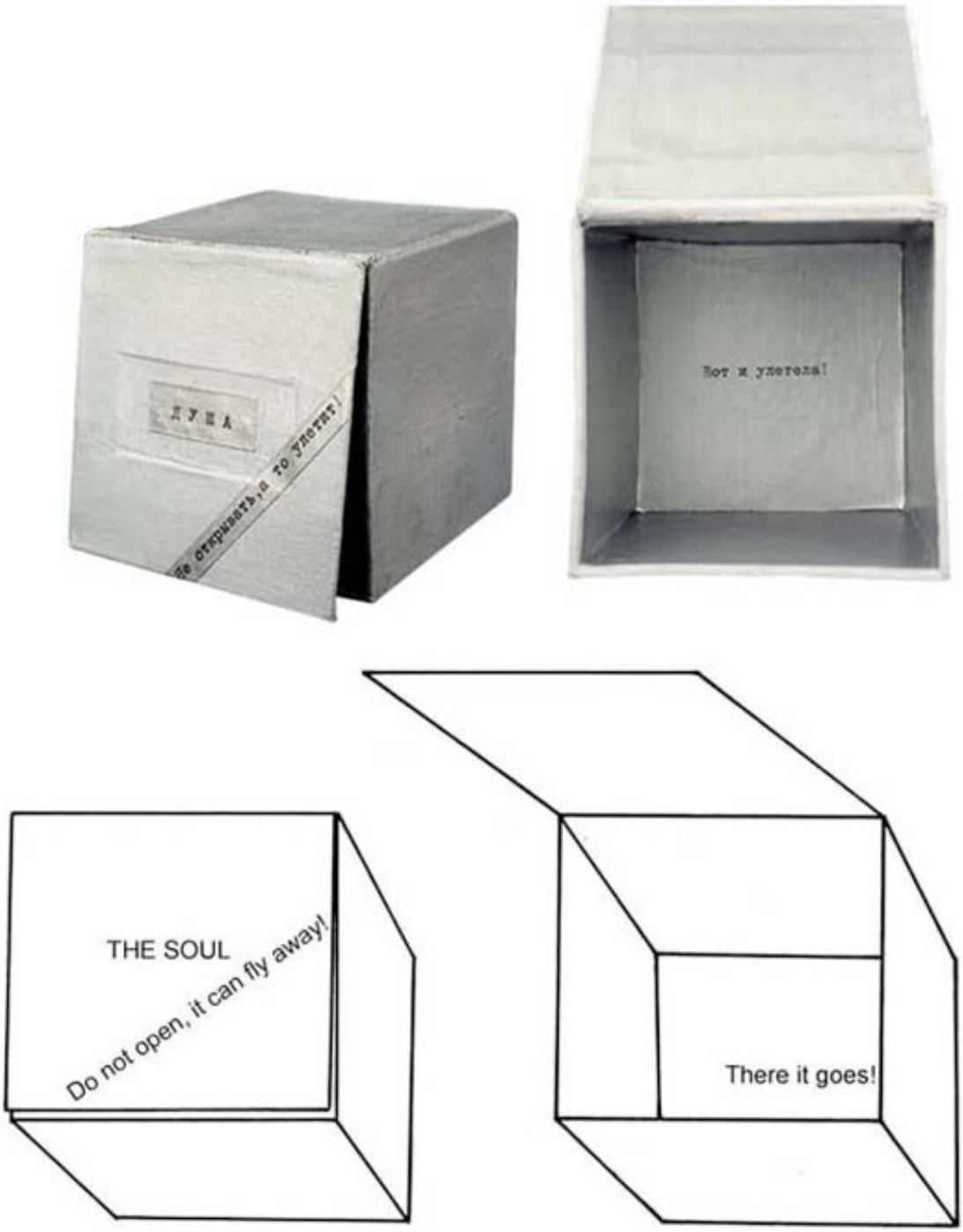

Figure 5. Rimma Gerlovina, *The Soul*, 1974. Cardboard, paper, fabric, acrylic, 3¼ x 3¼ x 3¼." Collection of The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia; The Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Collection, Los Angeles, CA; and Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers State University, New Brunswick, NJ. Artist's website. http://www.gerlovin.com/English/eng_cubes/eng_cubes_1.htm (accessed February 2014).

Figure 6. Rimma Gerlovina with Cube Poems, 1976. Moscow, photo. Artist's website. http://www.gerlovin.com/English/eng_cubes/eng_cubes_1.htm (accessed February 2014).

form. As I explained early on in the chapter, Marx's ideal world is one formed mutually between creative objects and communities of creative people. Through the freedom of creativity, people can make objects in the mirror of their own context within a society. Objects that mirror sociality can, in turn, propagate a society of fulfilling production and values based on people not abstractions. The cubes "burst forth" in an objectification of self that is instantly given away to the community. Like the "social object" of Marx's early manuscripts, the cubes function collaboratively with the participants. Their performance was scripted by whoever was holding, reading, and opening them. The Gerlovins' cubes initiated individual investigation and meaning-making that built up a community of trust and collaborative production.

The Moscow Conceptual Object

The ideology of the state had destroyed things from its conception, leaving only select things to grow and thrive in the new communist world. The only objects that populated the space were those that were ideologically saturated, state-approved objects or dissident objects that existed underground, like those in the black markets that sold western goods or the *samizdat* circulation of forbidden texts. Monastyrsky explains that the dissolving object of Western Conceptualism is appropriate in the context of the then-current Soviet regime: "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."[82] Sven Gundlakh similarly states: "one can understand that conceptualism and the Soviet cultural system were the same, producing not things, but the ideas of things."[83] Moscow Conceptualism is, above all, a consequence of its context within the Soviet Union.

The Moscow Conceptualists take the medium of performance, the ultimate act of dematerialization and contextualize it into their own history. Performance in conceptual Russian art does not come from Fluxus or the Actionists (though they may be influences), but from its own history of poetry and language. It comes from the signs of language and art, "vocal space," the voice of the everyday, thinking about text as object, etc. The Moscow Conceptualists situate their practice within their own history of performance and the state of Marxism fifty years after the rise of the Soviet Union. Their practice of conceptual performance uses materiality, text, *samizdat* human-ness, and collective production to critique the institution of art and ideology. Monastyrsky and Gundlakh are pointing to both a literal absence of objects (for consumption) and, I propose, to the fact that the "social object," which was supposed to transform individual consciousness and free man from capitalism, no longer exists.

What is the Moscow Conceptual object? The Moscow Conceptualists use performance as an exploration and mimesis of the Soviet Union's political performance. Instead of critiquing the institution of art or its commodification, they critique that state of materiality, production, and subjectivity under a totalitarian regime. Moscow

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[82] Quoted in Bobrinskaia, *Konzeptualizm*, [unpaginated].

[83] Quoted in Andrew Solomon, *The irony tower: Soviet artists in a time of glasnost*. (New York: Knopf, 1991) 86-7.

Conceptualism, contrary to a general practice of conceptual art, uses objects as the form of their critique. And, so, I propose a "Moscow Conceptual Object," as a way to envision these artists' local interpretation of conceptual art practice and institutional critique. Initially, the "Moscow Conceptual Object" can be considered the "replacement" of an empty or vacuous Soviet object for consumption, with a physical object that is real at least in the literal sense. On a grander scale, the Moscow Conceptual object is a return to Marx's object, with its putative destiny of overcoming human alienation. The Moscow Conceptual object, like Marx's "social object," is a production of materiality, individual creativity, and a manifestation of sociability. The Gerlovins' cubes exemplify the "Moscow Conceptual object" because they create a space for the convergence of text, materiality, and community. While inhabiting the small collective apartment, these objects invite people to touch, engage, and respond. They beg the contemplation of their physical form, their message, and the relationship between viewer and maker.

Chapter 2. Materializing the Void

After more than two decades inside the Soviet Union, Ilya Kabakov went on vacation to Czechoslovakia. The experience of traveling led to a disorienting and abstract autobiographical text entitled "On Emptiness." Kabakov starts the text describing the experience of riding in a train and getting off the train car at a stop. He looks from outside into his old compartment, and he sees the place where he had been sitting shortly before. On his old seat he sees a vast and voluminous void. The empty compartment transforms into an all-absorbing mass of emptiness. He defines the emptiness:

> Emptiness is the other, antithetical side to any question, it is the inside, the opposite, the eternal "no" beneath everything small and large, whole and individual, intelligent and mindless--all which we cannot name and which has a meaning and a name.[84]

In Czechoslovakia, Kabakov could finally look at the Soviet Union from an outside perspective; what he saw was a space of absurdity, a monstrous ocean that absorbs life and spits it out as its antithesis, "destroying construction, mystifying reality, turning all into dust and emptiness."[85] Kabakov and the Moscow Conceptualists take up this form of digestion and excretion to perform and investigate the transformation of the Soviet system into a void of emptiness and dust. And with the refuse create a new object that can produce a more successful system, a system where the ideal and material are aligned. Through themes of emptiness, excess, arbitrary power, and absurdity, this chapter will explore the meaning and potential of the void.

Emptiness

Though the underlying mission of Soviet philosophy was to reconcile the "real" and the "ideal," the real quickly fell between the Soviet regime's fingers, leaving only the "ideal" to grow. Keti Chukhrov explains that "the ideal" takes different routes in Western

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[84] Ilya Kabakov. "On Emptiness." In *Between spring and summer: Soviet conceptual art in the era of late communism.* (Tacoma, Wash.: Tacoma Art Museum: 1990) 53- 59.

[85] Ilya Kabakov. "On Emptiness," 54.

post-structuralism and Soviet Marxist philosophy. While the West rejected idealism and metaphysics, Soviet philosophers like Ilyenkov, Davidov, and Lifshitz thought Marxist political economy, labor theory, and aesthetics were "on the horizon of the ideal." Evald Ilyenkov, a Soviet philosopher and Marxist author from the Stalinist period, saw the ideal as an intimation of what can be done in reality, as the possibility of an alter-existence. He writes in his essay "The Concept of the Ideal" that, "'[i]deality' is a category inseparably linked with the notion that human culture, human life activity is purposeful and, therefore, includes the activity of the human brain, consciousness and will."[86] It is part of our nature to act in relation to ideals. Marx says that the ideal is "nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought."[87] Ilyenkov essentially claims that according to Marx, the ideal does not simply live in consciousness but is, in fact, material.[88] Nothing can be made without the dimension of the ideal because, "culture in its being is material, but in purport and origin it is general and ideal, just because it contains the collective's aspirations and thinking."[89] A new world created within the shape of a language of ideals—this is the total art that the Soviet system aspired to and that, potentially, the Moscow Conceptualists achieve. As I argued in the first chapter, Marx stresses that consciousness and the materiality of social beings and social objects produce each other reciprocally, and thus, the production of an ideal within consciousness is inseparable from the creation of a new ideal being and object. Of course, the Soviet Union was very different from what Marx and early Soviet philosophers theorized. Ilyenkov's argument is a little naive and optimistic, a logical product of early Soviet thinking. The ideal never really materialized in the way they imagined.

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[86] Evald Ilyenkov, "The Concept of the Ideal" in *Problems of Dialectical Materialism* (Progress Publishers: 1977). http://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/ideal/ideal.htm (accessed March 3, 2014).

[87] Marx, "Afterword" in *Capital.*

[88] "In Capital Marx defines the form of value in general as "purely ideal" not on the grounds that it exists only "in the consciousness", only in the head of the commodity-owner, but on quite opposite grounds. The price or the money form of value, like any form of value in general, is IDEAL because it is totally distinct from the palpable, corporeal form of commodity in which it is presented, we read in the chapter on "Money". (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 98-99). In other words, the form of value is IDEAL, although it exists outside human consciousness and independently of it."
Ilienkov, "The Concept of the Ideal" in *Problems of Dialectical Materialism.*

[89] Ilienkov, *Philosophy and Culture*, 251.

The Soviet Union was a totalitarian system. Everything was seen and everything regulated. From the 20s to the 50s, Stalin was the demiurge of the new, better life. His regime relied on surveillance to regulate and on myth and fear to maintain power. This was not completely new; the Soviet Union had relied on myth since its birth. In Groys' essay "Designers of the Unconscious," he explains that, contrary to Barthes' notion of myth in *Mythologies*[90], myth in the Soviet Union has been deployed by the "left." Myth-making was inherent in the engagement and arousal of people in revolutionary movements. Despite its theoretical basis in materialism, Marxism, like all revolutionary practice, started with symbols and systems of meaning that could transform material reality. But material reality was only transformed partially. Life felt like a poorly-acted performance, a series of myths that were not naturalized but, nonetheless, adjusted to. Like the parade described in Chapter 1, these performative rituals were never actually reflected in the everyday reality of the Soviet Union.[91] Instead of modeling a new world on human experience and class-less sociality, the Soviet Union was more an abstract sphere made up of theories and plans that were barely, if at all, based on material reality. Groys writes: "Russia, experiencing its space as 'empty,' as the space of the purely unconscious, proclaims its aim of insinuating, into this space, an entirely artificial world." Lived experience was an endlessly repeating ritual honoring these irrelevant ideals. The Soviet Union is a performance of Marxism based on the imposition of a new language that utilized myth and fear to control and eventually to systematize its citizens.

After the fall of Stalin, science and engineering emerged as the new cultural icons, ushering in a torrent of publications and studies on "cybernetics." Cybernetics, according to Norbert Wiener, is the study of systems and their structures. It is the science of control and communication between animals and machines. Cyberneticians aimed to formulate systems of communication in mathematical formulas with a view to increasing their efficiency.[92] With the Thaw, cybernetics were encouraged in all disciplines as a way of

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[90] Put very simply, Barthes explains myth to be a constructed symbol, narrative, or assumption that becomes naturalized in culture. He takes on what Marx calls "false consciousness," assigning the process of myth-making to a class: the bourgeoise.

[91] Boris Groys. "Designers of the Unconscious" In *The total art of Stalinism: avant-garde, aesthetic dictatorship, and beyond.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 113-120.

[92] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: J. Wiley, 1948).

universally enhancing organizational structures. "However unusual this may sound to some conservatives who do not wish to comprehend elementary truths, we will be building communism on the basis of the most broad use of electronic machines, capable of processing enormous amounts of technological, economic, and biological information in the shortest time," proclaimed Engineer Admiral Aksel' Berg, Chairman of the Academy Council on Cybernetics in 1962. "These machines, aptly called 'cybernetic machines', will solve the problem of continuous optimal planning and control."[93] Cybernetics was the culmination of the Soviet Union's obsession with mechanization and objectivity. It came as a logical and modern continuation of Marx and Engels' original goal of letting administration fall into the hands of machines and technology. By rendering language, life, art, etc., as a system of formulas, cybernetics provided the most effective system for instrumentalizing people. At the same time, it also spurred the investigation of semiotics and linguistic structuralism. In 1955-66, a formal school of structural linguistics called the "Moscow-Tartu School of Soviet Semiotics" was formed. It gave the bureaucratic and objective Soviet language a revived relevance.

Moscow Conceptualism came to fruition amongst this flourish of theoretical approaches to representation and signification. In 1961, Boris Uspensky published an essay entitled "The Semiotics of Art" for a collection on the structural study of sign systems. Uspensky explains:

> From a diachronic perspective, art, like language, can be conceived as a system that strives continually toward stability. At any moment, art and language are characterized by a tendency to conform to some norm... Every work of art is conventional, for it always presupposes some norm as the background against which it is perceived.[94]

Uspensky is looking at the cultural production of language and semiotic culture. Like other theorists of the time,[95] Uspensky is celebrating art that can create new forms of communication and new cultural norms that increase efficiency and progress. The

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[93] Aksel' Berg, "Kibernetika i nauchno-tekhnicheskii progress", in Aleksandr Kuzin, ed., *Biologicheskie aspekty kibernetiki* (Moscow: 1962) 14. Emphasis in original.
Quoted in Slava Gerovitch, "The Cybernetics Scare and the Origins of the Internet," in *Baltic Worlds, vol II* (2009) 32-38.

[94] Boris Uspensky, "Semiotics of Art," in *Soviet Semiotics* (Moscow: 1962) 172.

[95] See Vladimir Tubin's *Comrade Time and Comrade Art*

Conceptualist "seminar"—the group of Moscow Conceptualists who met to discuss philosophical and meta-physical ideas and projects—often met in the homes of the "Moscow-Tartu semioticians," scholars like Vyacheslav Ivanov and Aleksandr Zholkovsky. They were deeply influenced by this investigation of language, signs, and meaning. Yet however much the Conceptualists enjoyed the free play of signs, theirs was not a semiotic art in a pure or classical sense.[96] They were interested in things. They wanted to materialize the void. Matthew Jesse Jackson writes that the Conceptualists were open to Heidegger's conceptions of language, space, time, and technology because his "writings cleared a way back to the resistant phenomenality of things."[97] Can "things" communicate through their materiality instead of their symbolic value? Cybernetics and totalitarianism could be seen as attempts to materialize the ineffability of human existence—but through their limiting and oppressive system, they made human existence meaningless. The Conceptualists were looking to escape the Soviet language that transcribed existence according to the text of an oppressive ideology and create a new language that allowed objects to speak through their material production and existence. The Moscow Conceptualists were nostalgic for something real, a real world.

The reality of Soviet history struck a harsh contrast to the ideal. The celebrations of ideology were incompatible with the cramped communal living, endless stacks of paperwork, etc. The idolatry of cybernetic organization, efficiency, and simplification of systems and language ushered people into a half-formed materialization of Soviet ideality. Teetering between mechanistically dispensable worker and thinking, feeling human—man became highly atomized and nervous. Through the hyper coordination and conceptualization of everyday interaction, mutual support and the ineffable feelings within human interaction became structurally impossible. Under constant suspicion from officials, co-workers, and neighbors, man looked for safety through allegiance and status in the Communist party. But these allegiances and statuses were meaningless and eventually stripped people of their social networks. The void created by the incongruity of the ideal and its materialization became the subject of Moscow Conceptualism's

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[96] e.g. surrealism 'to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar'

[97] Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes,* 183.

conceptual art. They asked how conceptual art could fit inside a context where the ideal already dominates perception.

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Kabakov writes that, in the West, conceptual art followed the principle of "one instead of another," where concepts came to replace artistic objects.[98] He explains that this formula is invalid in Russia because there is no "other." The art object is already debased and compromised.[99] With reference to classic Russian authors like Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, Kabakov unpacks Russia's history of disjunction between ideas and their materializations. He points to the emptiness that emerges when there is an abundance of representation, a surplus that interposes distance between the reader and the object. For example, Dostoevsky writes endless monologues about a thing or idea until it evolves into sheer absurdity or emptiness. Kabakov writes that, "These are not discussions, but discussions of discussions."[100] Meta-discussions, references of references eventually just dissolve into an intangible abstraction. Kabakov, and many Moscow Conceptualists use "emptiness" as a representation of Soviet ideology's intangible abstraction, the empty materials on which ideals grow. They use emptiness as a blank canvas, a post-apocalyptic vacancy, to embrace the infinite combination of arbitrary signs within the system of value. The Conceptualists replace objects with "nothing." They fill their compositions with motifs of seemingly no significance, that, paradoxically, give the work meaning.

In his famous album cycle "Ten Characters" Kabakov tells the stories of ten lonely people (Fig. 7) At the beginning of each album, Kabakov establishes a setting, a construction of a specific reality and a specific moment, and then as the story proceeds, the image slowly deconstructs (Fig. 8). He creates a formula that systematizes each character's story. Each of the ten portfolios is structurally identical. Each suggests ten ways in which a person can react to the world, ten psychological attitudes, ten observations of emptiness and whiteness, ten imitations of the Soviet

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[98] Ilya Kabakov, *Zhizn' mukh* (Cologne: Edition Cantz, 1992) 246.

[99] Ilya Kabakov and Amei Wallach. *The man who never threw anything away*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996) 51.

[100] Kabakov, *Zhizn' mukh*, 128.

Figure 7. Ilya Kabakov, *V Okno Glyadashiy Arhipov [Arhipov Looking out the Window]* from *10 Personnagey [10 Characters]*, 1973, India ink and colored pencil on paper 24 x 32 cm (9 1/2 x 12 5/8 in.), Private Collection, USA.

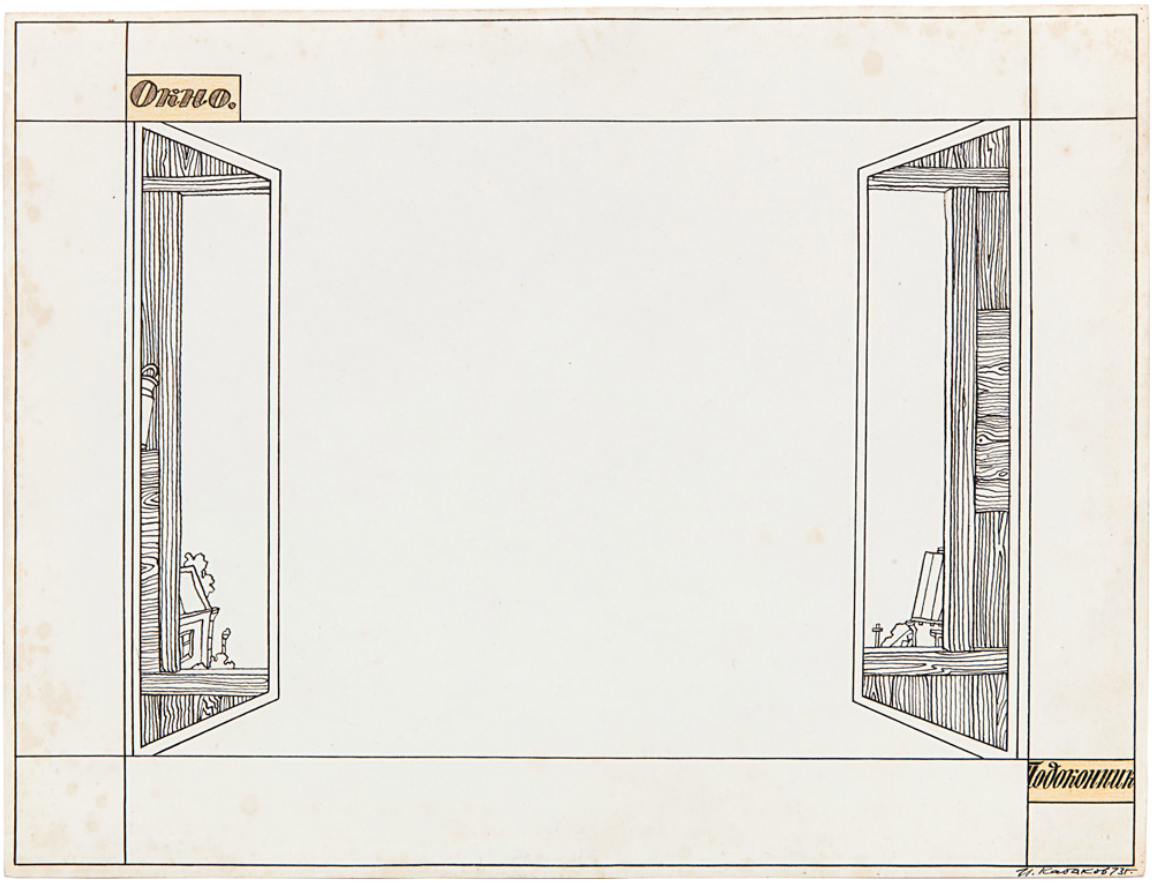

Figure 8. Ilya Kabakov, *V Okno Glyadashiy Arhipov [Arhipov Looking out the Window]* from *10 Personnagey [10 Characters]*, detail, 1973, India ink and colored pencil on paper 24 x 32 cm (9 1/2 x 12 5/8 in.), Private Collection, USA.

aesthetic tradition, ten versions of Kabakov,[101] and ten deaths. There is a certain off-beat rhythm in the albums that make them feel both like cycles and a single monotonous tone. Like the rituals of ideology, Kabakov's stories are repeated in an endless and static way. Often when Kabakov describes the "emptiness" in his albums, he talks about the physical act of turning the pages.[102] The image on each page is not paramount, but rather the

[101] In her essay "Alienation as Status," Margarita Tupitsyn argues that Kabakov's "semiological polyphony" is a result of social and psychological alienation. He is trying to escape his alienation through a sort of schizophrenic splitting into ten different personalities.

Margarita Tupitsyn, "Alienation as Status" in *Margins of Soviet art: socialist realism to the present*. (Milan, Italy: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989) 40-41.

[102] "Crucially, these Albums were not read as books but were performed by the artist for small groups of friends. Boris Groys recalls that one would make an appointment with Kabakov (rather like organizing a studio visit) and go to his home, where the artist would place the book on a music stand and read the entire text in a neutral and unexpressive tone of voice. The experience was extremely monotonous but had a ritualistic quality in which the turning of the pages became central."

repetitive act of flipping page after page and the immense boredom that comes from looking at too many pages. Boredom, rhythm, banality, absurdity, and repetition become tangible materializations of internal emptiness.[103]

Emptiness also exists as a white page. Each image slowly deconstructs until it hits the final tone: emptiness and death. When a character dies at the end of their fable, they enter into an abstract realm. "Where is Maria Nikolaevna?" "Where is Boris Ignatievich?" "They are gone." They have left the story, they have left this field of perception and have transitioned onto the empty pages. Each death is represented by a series of blank pages. To Kabakov, the blankness of the page "comes forward as a grand total, as a final line." The grand total is the alternative world outside the totality of the Soviet project; it is a space completely free from alienation and ideological abuse, a place only for the freed human psyche. Kabakov's intention with these albums—and with his paintings of the same period, which played with a similar blankness, Beckettian dialogues, and banal objects or phrases—was for the viewer to become trapped in a "psychological web of commonplaces and finally [be] left face to face with the simulacrum of a world" that is devoid of meaning (i.e. emptiness).[104] Emptiness is the nothingness of everyday existence. The everyday is an unstable mix of ideologies, images, discourses, styles, traditions, revolutions against traditions which reference and comment on each other forever, leading to deeper opacity and complete absurdity.[105] Since there was no boundary between the everyday domestic sphere and art practice, as established by the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde, Kabakov, Rubinstein, and many others used the trivialities of everyday life to create a "rebus-like idiom of Soviet Culture."[106] What

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Claire Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art," *E-flux* (Fall 2011).

[103] Octavian Esanu. *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012) 66.

[104] Margarita Tupitsyn, "Alienation as Status," 50.

[105] Groys, "Postutopian Art: From Myth to Mythology," 86.

[106] "Stylistically, the work of the conceptualists was seen as a Soviet parallel to pop art, only instead of the advertisement culture they used the trivial and drab rituals of Soviet everyday life—too banal and insignificant to be recorded anywhere else, and made taboo not because of their potential political explosiveness, but because of their sheer ordinariness, their all-too-human scale. The conceptualists "quoted" both the Russian avant-garde and Socialist realism, as well as amateur crafts, "bad art," and ordinary people's collections of useless objects. Their artistic language consisted of Soviet symbols and

Kabakov's forms express is that the answer to the puzzle of Soviet ideality and reality is actually just emptiness, it has "no history, no sedimented deposits, no continuity... nothing results from anything, nothing is connected to anything, nothing means anything."[107] It was an omnivorous abyss of endlessly iterated emptiness.

And Kabakov was a part of it. His works do not view the incongruity of Soviet life as a tragedy but as a farce. Kabakov uses the material of his life, the helplessness of his position as an official or unofficial artist. Kabakov does not think he can change the system, but he can make it "absurdly palpable, or palpably absurd."[108] The Moscow Conceptualists set out to describe the Soviet system through a series of reiterations, of references that are so far down the line of reference that the "trace" begins to obscure any original meaning. With time, altering contexts, and conflicting interests, rituals and systems evolve even within the act of repetition. This is certainly the case in the Soviet Union, where Marx's plan and object, as seen in the previous chapter, had become almost unrecognizable. In the end, even if there had been an original meaning, it became deeply unimportant: the reiterations and references could now only be sourced from emptiness.

Empty Actions

What Kabakov did on paper, *Collective Actions* did on a field. *Collective Actions Group [Kollektivnye deistviia or KD]* was started in 1976 by Nikita Alekseyev, Georgi Kizevalter, Andrei Monastyrsky, and Nikolai Panitkov. *Collective Actions* were known for their artistic events called "actions" (*deistviia)*. The "actions" explored liminal psychological or perceptual states versus a conventional production of art objects and paintings. Bobrinskaia writes that, "instead of paint and clay, meter and rhythm, musical notation

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emblems, as well as trivial, found objects, unoriginal quotes, slogans, and domestic trash. The word and the image collaborated in their work to create a rebus-like idiom of Soviet culture."

Svetlana Boym, "Ilya Kabakov: The Soviet Toilet and the Palace of Utopias." *art margins.* http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/3-exhibitions/435-ilya-kabakov-the-soviet-toilet-and-the-palace-of-utopias#ftnlink_artnotes1_4 (accessed March 21, 2014).

[107] Kabakov and Wallach. *The man who never threw anything away,* 68.

[108] Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes,* 91.

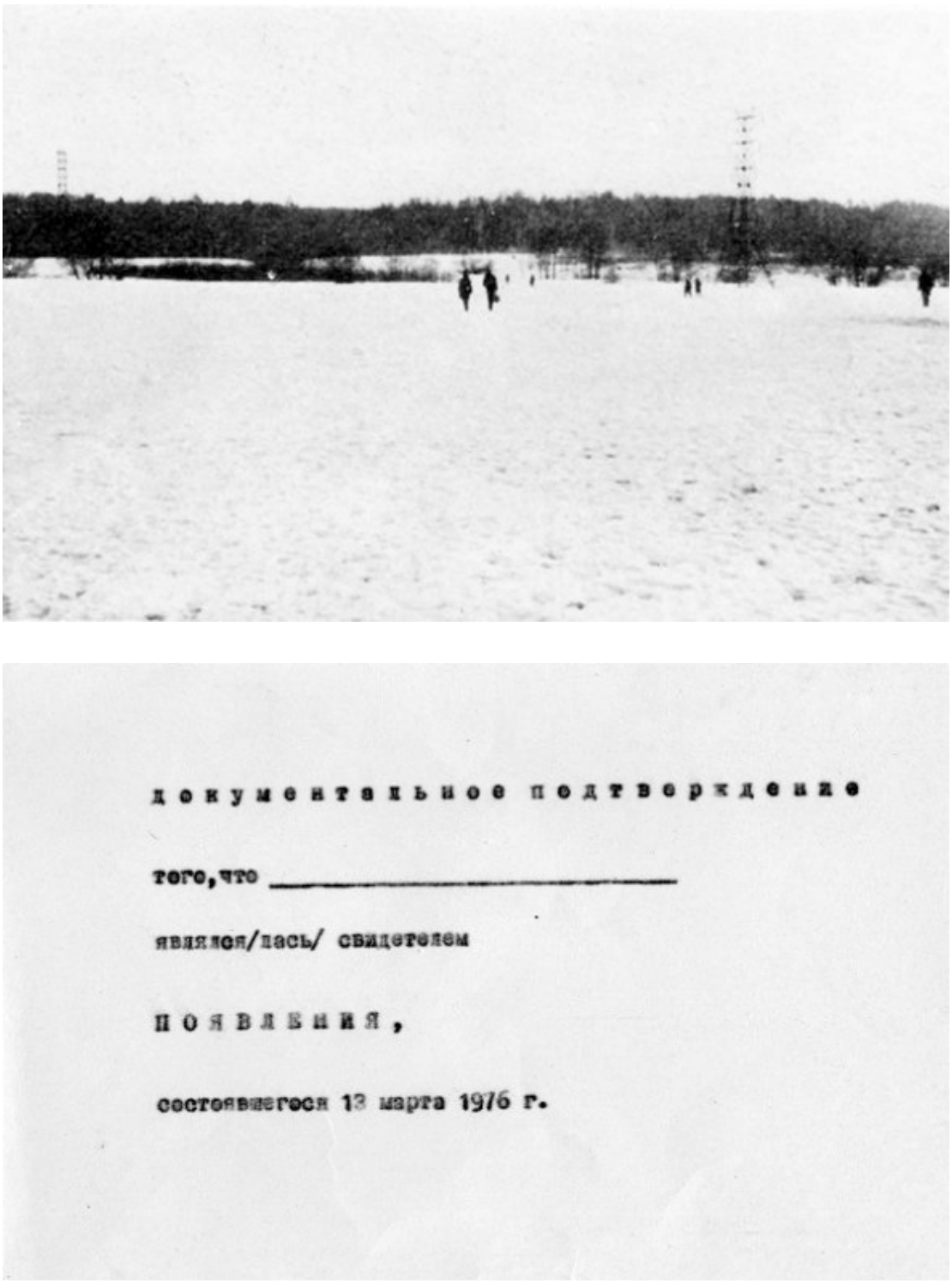

Figure 9. Collective Actions, *Appearance,* 1976, photo, Moscow, Izmaylovskoe field, Collective Actions MANI archive. http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-1.htm (accessed October 27, 2013) ("Documentary Confirmation" translated as: "Documentary Confirmation... that___ was witness to APPEARANCE. March 13, 1976.)

and musical sounds, the workings of consciousness, the thought process, understanding, is [KD's] artistic medium."[109] The actions cultivated a particular "experience" that could live outside the boundaries of language and the institutional system. Bobrinskaia points to this emphasis of consciousness or experience as a dematerialization of art, but in the context of the Soviet Union, it was the reverse. The actions were the materializations of consciousness.

KD took on the challenge of finding a physical space that was free from the ideological weight of Soviet urban reality. The art collective originated a series of art experiences, entitled "Journeys," or "Trips," where spectators were invited to travel outside Moscow into a meadow near Kievy Gorky called "Kievogorskoe Field." As the name of the 10 volumes of documentation *Journeys Outside the City* [*Poezdki za gorod*] suggests, moving outside of the city was a crucial theme. It highlighted the idea of liminal space and the movement between physical and psychological states. Like Kabakov's journey to Czechoslovakia, traveling took the participant outside of their physical reality and gave them perspective. A new angle was presented from which they could more "scientifically" or "objectively" diagnose their own mutated consciousness. In the "Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism," compiled by Monastyrsky, "Journeys outside the city," is defined 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 describing it."[110] Each phase of traveling requires a sustained fluidity, an openness to not knowing what will come next. "Journeys outside the city" is in conjuncture with another *KD* term called "Out-of-town-ness" [*zagorodnost'*]. This refers to the line between a city and non-city, the in-between area that cannot belong to the countryside but is outside the city. Most of the actions were performed in this grey area because the state of liminality allows things to be unnamed. When things and people are transitioning they cease to be something concrete but take a fluid form that defies absolute signification. Monastyrsky explains in his article "Collective Actions and *Trips out of Town*—The Aesthetics of Collective Actions," that "out of town" [*za gorodom*] in Russian

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[109] Bobrinskaia, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," 169-170.

[110] *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia* 1-5 vols, 69.
See the Dictionary translated by Octavian Esanu: http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=198&lang=en or experts in Appendix 3.

is a very ambiguous phrase that is easily understood by those to whom it is directed but could really mean anything. "[The] semantic field of the concept 'out of town' is very blurring, indeterminate, and, as such, in the psychological sense mentally charged and erogenous."[111] Because "town" has such an unclear definition in Russian and is thus "non-functional," it can become something seductive, a shape that shimmers as a potentially alternative world. From the name of the action to the feelings of indeterminacy, "Out of town" or "Journeys outside the city" signaled a linguistic and physical displacement. The journey brought people to a field of consciousness that made self-reflexivity more accessible.

In 1976, *Collective Actions* performed their first action, "Appearance" [*Poiavlenie*]. The artists wrote a factographical description explaining the event:

> 30 people were invited to journey to Izmailovsk Field in Moscow. When they arrived, they gathered on the edge of a field, from the opposite side, and 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.'[112]

The participants, having just left Moscow, found themselves trudging through snow to "lose their urban orientation," and were now standing, waiting, cold, confused, and feeling ignorant. After waiting a long time, the participants watch two figures emerge from the forest, two black dots in an endless blank field walking slowly towards a zone of visual comprehension. The participants' minds are "empty" as they focus intently on the black dots, waiting for a long stretch of time, almost as if in a meditation. *Collective Actions* demonstrate that the two organizers, the two dots emerging from the forest to hand each participant a documentary certificates were not the important thing; in fact, the action was referred to as a "pause," or a "decoy." What was important was the psychological state that evolved in the participants as they waited for the figures to arrive, straining to make out who they were and what was happening. He writes: "We have no intention of

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[111] Andrei Monastyrsky, "Collective Actions and Trips out of Town- The Aesthetics of Collective Actions" In *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrsky and Collective Actions.* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2011) 70.
[112] *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia* 1-5 vol., 25.
Translated in: Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*, 74.

'showing' anything to the spectator; our task is to preserve the experience of waiting as an important, valuable event."[113]

The "Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism" takes many of these verbs—"understanding," "waiting," "looking," "interpreting," "failing to understand," etc.—and defines them as important deconstructive psychological states. The plot of each action was only meant to trigger various emotions states in the participants' experience. The Moscow Conceptual dictionary defines an "Empty Action" 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...[114]

The "empty action" occurs when "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."[115] Like flipping the pages of Kabakov's album, the participants of "Appearance" had to endure the repetitive, minimal, and "empty" action. *KD* had constructed a space where the participants could neither leave nor understand nor look away. You were forced to focus on "nothing," on an image that has no meaning and no purpose. And in that process when you get bored, tired, you're cold and everything around you is blank, the workings of your body become heard. Time dissipates. The

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[113] Monastyrsky, "Collective Actions and Trips out of Town—The Aesthetics of Collective Actions," 22.

[114] *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia* 1-5 vols, 20-21.
See the Dictionary translated by Octavian Esanu: http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=198&lang=en or experts in appendix 3.

[115] Ibid, 306: Malevich coined the understanding of the "zero degree" within Suprematism in the 1920s. To him, the zero degree was the extreme to which the medium could go without ceasing to be art. Malevich's art philosophy "Suprematism," is defined as "the primacy of pure feeling in creative art. To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth."

In his philosophy, he deemed white as "infinity," the the zero point between art and non-art.

Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-objective World.* (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1959.)

persistent feeling of living in the future, second nature to the citizens who live in a regime based on ideals, is pulled into the present.[116] The waiting, confusion, looking, and listening materialize into the white field with the two black dots. These actions force a tangible form of zen-like self-reflection, both in the image and the reflection it entails.

The experience of the action was prolonged, displaced, or maybe never present. As Claire Bishop notes, the action's engagement never occurred where it was expected.[117] When the two organizers had finished crossing the field, they hand each person a paper "confirmation of their appearance." At the moment when these participants should have had a connection with "art" and "nature," they received what seemed like an administrative confirmation. The experience lived in the emptiness, the confusion, and the process of assigning the action meaning. Emptiness forces the re-signification of the context. For example, waiting was a feeling associated with the frustration and complacency of waiting in an impossibly slow queue, to receive the weekly bread ration. But outside of Moscow, waiting becomes an explicit search for meaning. The systems that we use to make life legible are performed and deconstructed, expanding the perception of reality.

KD takes its participants outside the city and asks them to look inside the compartment where they were just sitting. But once they are outside, they are in a version of where they were before. "Outside" the system is just another version of the system. Only, now it is slightly off, its "trace" more visible—things are uncomfortable and cease to make sense. The illegibility of this space is repulsive. It makes us reject what is happening (i.e. nothing) and actively search for meaning. Emptiness is important because it is both the foil and essence of the Soviet system. Emptiness is the "Other" of the system but it is also the core of "truth" and meaning. Through distance, space, time, minimalism, the removal of distractions, and the zero degree, *KD* materializes the space of emptiness, the void, that Kabakov sees on his trip out of the country. Kabakov and *KD* peel back the layers of ideology to find emptiness—the omnivorous void that has

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[116] "...the goal of Moscow Conceptualism was to change the direction of one's own gaze from future to present, from inner vision to external image. Or: to become external spectator in a world of shared visions." Boris Groys, "Intro," In *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism.* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010) 2.

[117] Claire Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art."

destroyed, mystified, and dematerialized the original Marxist goals, leaving a violent, yet revolutionary nothingness.

Indecent Excess & Bureaucracy

Between 1972 and1975, Kabakov deliberately let trash accumulate in his studio He titled this installation: *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (Fig. 10). Here began his ventures from the blankness of meaning to meaning as refuse. In "On Emptiness," Kabakov describes the radiant and glimmering whiteness of Malevich's canvases. Malevich's whiteness was from another world, a superior one that was composed of spirit and feeling, not the debased world of things.[118] Kabakov did not want this emptiness. He wanted to see the waste, the debris piling up in a system that did not know how to take care of the real world behind its ideological performance. And he wanted to revive what has been cleansed, to take back the fragments of life and memory that were swept into the vast, monstrous ocean of nothingness. Unlike Malevich, who "placed art above life and sought to render life in the form of art," Kabakov's emptiness is ephemeral, absurd, fragile, and deeply engaged with life.[119] His whiteness is not an art of "nonobjectivity," an art totally free of things, but the ultimate "thing," the bare life or death after ideology and ideals have imploded. In this next stage of Kabakov's work, he wants to show representation right before it implodes, the "rebus-like web," before its complete

[118] In "Suprematism" (Part II of The Non-Objective World), Malevich writes:
Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without "things" (that is, the "time-tested well-spring of life").
[119] Ilya Kabakov. "On Emptiness," 55.

abstraction. He constructs his works with abundance, refuse, and trash—materials that are function-less but claim space. Just like emptiness, trash is the foil to everything acknowledged as "real" by Soviet ideology.

Figure 10. Ilya Kabakov, *The man who never threw anything away (the garbage man)*, 1988. Trash, paper, wood. In Collection of Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst, in Oslo, Norway. artnet http://www.artnet.com (accessed March 10, 2014)

Trash is everyday lived emptiness. It is the surplus of representation, information, stuff that cannot fit inside reality, living on the fringe of culture, hidden yet out of control. In *The man who never threw anything away (the garbage man),* the piles of trash and surplus

"stuff" transform Kabakov's studio into another all-consuming void. It is impossible to distinguish between what is personal, aesthetic, and political—when these stacks of receipt, letters, bus passes, etc., come to represent his lived experience. Kabakov, as man and artist, is indistinguishable from these documents. These relics of official bureaucratic culture have already served their function—now they are just paper. The paradox of these "functionless" yet essentially constitutive materials is that they expose the aspects of human identity and consciousness beyond the control of a totalitarian ideology. Humans can not live perpetually in the future, constantly striving for an ideal efficiency and functionality. They live in a movement between the past and the future. In other words, man's life is not always functional but dwells in memory and petty desires. Trash for Kabakov is a symbol of authenticity, an indecent surplus of life, material evidence of existence, the exemplar of the Soviet object's lack of intention and seductiveness, or the embarrassing, forgotten, delayed, angry fragments of memory and history. It represents what is excluded from an official collective memory—the ultimate material for emptiness.

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During the 70s and 80s, many Moscow Conceptualists emigrated to New York. But, like Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a), they still engaged with the same ideas and themes. In the Gerlovins' *Collective Farm,* they use trash and *samizdat* aesthetics from New York. How is trash different in New York? Gillian Whiteley delineates in her book, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash,* the trash art movements of the late 20th century. In the introduction she writes: "Waste is, of course, an adjunct of luxury. Junk, trash, garbage, rubbish, refuse—whatever we call it—is dependent on economic wealth and excess production."[120] This, of course, was not the case in the Soviet Union. In New York the trash is capitalist. Soviet trash, like Soviet objects, lacked any libidinal pleasure. Whiteley claims that Western art which incorporates the aesthetics of trash, like Objet Trouvé or the Annandale Imitation Realists, fetishize junk. In the fashion of Baudelaire, they "find beauty in ruin." She cites the contemporary artist Justin Gignac, showing how he takes trash and strips it of its slime and smell, packages it up, and sells it (Fig. 11). In his work *NYC Garbage boxes,* he literally takes trash from the subway, puts it in a glass cube, and sells

[120] Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (London; I.B.Tauris, 2010) 4.

it online as an "artifact of New York."[121] He rehabilitates trash, making it fashionable—and commodifiable. Whiteley also often refers to trash art as a kind of "bricolage," a practice that gathers objects from disparate places of value, geography, and temporality.[122] The bricolage of Soviet trash is pretty unilateral, except maybe temporally. Soviet trash was a

Figure 11: Justin Gignac, *NYC Garbage Boxes*, 2001, Plastic and trash. available for purchase: http://nycgarbage.com/order/ (accessed February 25, 2014)

lot more about the memory of man in Russia than the memory of a globalized production. Capitalist trash signals plastic, fordist factories, millions of uniform productive hands in China. It signals the global free market and the emptiness behind the spectacle and promises of a better life. Though both systems fetishize objects and suffer from a deceptive political and economic facade, the un-fulfillment stems from different things. Soviet trash, unlike Soviet objects, remembers a material existence free of ideological

[121] Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash,* 6.

[122] Whiteley is referring to assemblage art here, the art movement coined by Jean Dubuffet in the early 1950s as the composition of found objects. In 1961, MOMA had an exhibition entitled "The Art of Assemblage," which categorized assemblages as the combination of preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials.

value. Soviet trash is the excess that doesn't fit within the totalitarian program. It is, like emptiness, the "un-representable," the refuse outside of the picture frame.

Rimma and Valery Gerlovin's work *Collective Farm* (1981-85) is a mail art sculpture made from letters and other recycled garbage (Fig. 16). It was created in New York after the Gerlovins had emigrated from Russia. The work is a series of five samizdat publications that assemble postcards, paper collage, rubber stamps, etc., from various participating artists. Each book opens like a folder into a collection of pockets; within the pockets there are more folders, papers, and letters. There is a continual unpacking and opening, so that a holistic image of the book is impossible. The volumes act as systems of bureaucratic packaging and organization for objects and documents that appear to be functionless. The materials for the books and letters were all found on the streets of cities around the world where artists were creating the little pieces, putting them in envelopes, and sending them in. The letters have manifestos, drawings, lists, plans, food marks, small objects, dirt, blood, anything and everything, creating a collection of excess and disorder. Each artist, in each of their home countries, experienced trash in a different form, be it excess, scarcity, loss, waste, emptiness or humanity. Together, however, as Chapter 3 will explicate in detail, they use trash as a material of solidarity and a community of self-determining, self-publishing artists.

In the first envelope of "Volume 1: Kolkhoz," Victor Tupitsyn explains a new ideology called "NONCREATIVITY," which he claims to be the product of collectivization. "NONCREATIVITY," also known as "Avant-Garbage," fights against creativity because creativity "is the most stable of all forms of mass insanity."[123] The book lays down a set of rules, diagrams, house-plans, mythical characters, and theatrical institutions, in short, a whole society mimicking the base-superstructure relationship supposedly observed in the USSR (figure 16). The direct order tries to reorganize the "mass insanity" to the point of absurdity. On the first page of Tupitsyn's manual, he gives a list of declarations outlining his new doctrine: there will be no statements like "Garbage-A is more garbagistic that Garbage- B," there will be no censorship, and the prime form of noncreative construction will be "Avant-Garbage." What is "Avant-Garbage"? Why

[123] Rimma and Valery Gerlovin and Vagrich Bakhchanyan, *Collective Farm*, "Volume 1: Kolkhoz," 1981-1985. 12" x 9¼" edition of 150, 34 pages. Reed College Collection.

use "garbage" to parody the non-creative, hegemonic nature of the Soviet Union? In a long footnote, Tupitsyn describes the process of "Avant Garbage," as a "form of utilization of artistic junk, scrap, trash..."[124] Like Kabakov and *KD*'s emptiness, *Collective Farm* repurposes the material of a totalitarian regime: its garbage. The work mimics the structures that function through the exclusion of garbage, creating an ironic subversion of bureaucratic material.

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Figure 12: Ilya Kabakov, *The Schedule for Taking Out the Garbage Can*, 1980. Enamel on masonite, 150 x 210 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel.

In 1982, Kabakov published a *samizdat* text entitled, *Ilya Kabakov, "*In our Zhek.*"* A *Zhilkontora*, or "Housing Office" was an office for the administration of apartments in urban neighborhoods—an exemplar of real-life bureaucracy. Kabakov's text attempts to inhabit the "consciousness which all members of the *Zhek* share," mimicking the everyday

[124] Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a), ibid.

language and mythology of everyday life.[125] The artist's book is a collection of reproductions of his "ZhEK-style" paintings. The paintings reference the advertisements, propaganda posters, schedules, menus, announcements, quotations, and kitchen utensils that littered the hallways and offices of the city. In the text, Kabakov presents himself as a hobby artist who paints the ZhEK as a pastoral landscape. Imagine Kabakov, under a parasol, leisurely painting the images and words that cover stained walls. The paintings, like *The Schedule for Taking Out the Garbage Can (1980),* confront the aspirations of the Soviet avant-garde (Fig. 12). They take up the productivist ideal of functionality that would make the practice of easel painting obsolete. Simultaneously, the painting makes an everyday "thing" into an art object that embodies the iconic canvas form. Matthew Jackson explains it well: "Absorbing the technical procedures of the historical avant-garde, Kabakov fabricates a work of housing-authority modernism, inventing a homegrown dialectical materialism along the way."[126] The paintings take up the materials of various conflicting projects—making their own message mute. They both satirize bureaucracy and make its organization effective. *The Schedule for Taking Out the Garbage Can* actually gives you the schedule for taking out the garbage can. Kabakov seems to be presenting these images, not with a critical distance, but with the intimacy of a person enmeshed in the contradictions of a bureaucratic environment. And finally, in true bureaucratic form, each painting is "documented" and "collected" like postcards in a scrapbook. Also, like Collective Action's text *Journeys Outside the City,* the documents are followed by a collection of critical essays.

In one essay, Kabakov theorizes trash. He illustrates the moment when the pile of paper at one's desk becomes so large that you are forced to sort it into two piles: "important" and trash. Kabakov questions this binary: when do we know something is important? What organizational hierarchy is governing the world? Kabakov asserts that if something is collected, by the nature of being collected, it gains use and importance. As mentioned earlier, the collection of letters, notes, bus tickets, notices from the *zhek,* etc., that are saved in our pockets and drawers become, in some sense, an assertion of individuality. They become the material of memory, the artifacts that create history. But

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[125] Ilya Kabakov, "In our ZhEK," *ZHEK Nr. 8, Baumann-Bezirk, Stadt Moskau,* ed. Gunter Hirt and Sascha Wonders (Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1994)

[126] Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes,* 193.

the collections, folders, boxes, and catalogues also signal a deeply ingrained bureaucracy. Memory and experience, itself, becomes structured—legible and instrumentalized by the system. Desa Philippi, in her article "Matter of Words: Translations in Eastern European Conceptualism," writes that:

> [A] telling gap opens between the detailed attention paid to the classificatory process and the intellectual and material poverty that results from it. Where everything can be turned into a collectable and equally becomes a repository of memory, memory itself turns into trash—arbitrary, unreliable, formless.[127]

Is the Soviet subject's memory "arbitrary, unreliable, and formless"?

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Auguste Comte says we cannot escape arbitrariness in any government if it rests, in any way, on a metaphysical truth. To trade ambiguity for "truth" will always create space for the absurd. Things (objects but also beings, matters, affairs, events, facts, circumstances, occurrences, deeds, conditions, cases, climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, and manners) govern us by constraining possible actions and constraining permissible ones.[128] Things become structure. Marx and Engels loved things, as long as they weren't commodified. The utopian future is an administration that can be governed by things. The famous quote goes:

> The first act by virtue of which the State really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society—the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society—this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a State. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The State is not "abolished." It withers away.[129]

Once the state is gone, the only thing left for humans will be to monitor and administer resources and production. Class division will dissolve as the state is run impartially by

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[127] Desa Philippi, Michael Newman, and Jon Bird, "Matter of Words: Translations in Eastern European Conceptualism," in *Rewriting conceptual art.* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 1999) 159.

[128] Ben Kafka, "The Administration of Things: A Genealogy." *West 86th*, 2012. http://www.west86th.bgc.bard.edu/articles/the-administration-of-things.html# (accessed March 2, 2014).

[129] Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow, F.L.P.H., 1959); cited in Kafka, "The Administration of Things: A Genealogy."

things. People become superfluous, functional without distinction. Kabakov sees this administration of "things" as a totalitarian regime where any vestige of individuality must be salvaged and saved. Trash is a relic of a world where a person's relationship with material objects was meaningful. "Things," as the materializations of cybernetic bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, lose all connection to materiality, and subsequently lose all meaning. Truth, when handed over to the strictly unambiguous functionality of "things," is absurd and de-humanizing. Kabakov uses trash as a thing that can align material reality with human instincts and desires.

Collective Farm, Tupitsyn, Kabakov, *KD*, and the Gerlovins are parodying the bureaucracy that obscures humanity, and its characteristic proclivity to create. Like the instructions for assembling an Ikea chair, *Collective Farm*'s manual shows how to create "Avant-Garbage," via NONCREATIVITY.[130] Like the Ikea chair, "Avant-Garbage" productions are modular and "non-creative." The repetitive system of Soviet production, distribution, surveillance, and bureaucracy makes life modular, an imposition of non-creativity that is numbing and oppressive—it makes the non-sensical and abusive normal. Keti Churkhrov points out that,

> as anti-utilitarian collective consent becomes widespread, and as society grows accustomed to abstaining from pleasures and libidinal joys, consensus seems to be reached more often, and higher standards of living, for construction, technical efficiency, and consumer prosperity become less necessary.[131]

Churkhrov's quote is terrifying—to dull free creativity is to dull our perception of oppression. The new regime was far from the ideal envisioned in its inception, it was a totalitarian state that atomized individuals, blunted creativity, and rendered truth arbitrary. Chukhrov is saying that, the less productive we become and the less we take pleasure in people and objects, the more a zombie-like complacency will set in. The Moscow Conceptualists were interested in creative productivity and things, like the revolutionary and utopian origins of the Bolsheviks and the Russian avant-garde. Their deconstruction of the Soviet Union entailed the deconstruction of the non-creative

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[130] See Appendix 2, "THESES."

[131] Keti Churkhrov, "Soviet Material Culture and Socialist Ethics in Moscow Conceptualism," *e-flux* 29 (2011). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/soviet-material-culture-and-socialist-ethics-in-moscow-conceptualism/#_ftn84 (accessed October 20, 2013).

modularity of life. "Avant-Garbage" inverts the failed "social object" envisioned in Soviet ideology and creates a new ideology based on the re-creation of objects. They re-create Soviet ideology with garbage as an absurd Marxian avenue into a collective community without competition and exclusion.

Emptiness, trash, and bureaucracy are the elements of culture that are not acknowledged, antitheses to "real" and "functional" life. As stated above, the material object has been written into absurdity throughout Russian history and into the Soviet Union. The Moscow conceptual object does not replace a physical one but rather emptiness itself, the void produced by totalitarian social engineering. *Ten Characters* and *Appearance* break down the Soviet language by mimicking it poorly, allowing its essential emptiness to shine through and potentially materialize a space of internal mediation to restart our process of meaning making. Trash does a similar thing—it blinds us with its abundance and excess. In the Soviet Union, where everything and everyone was under surveillance and documented, trash was a novelty because of its total irrelevance. It was one of the few things that was actually ignored. *Collective Farm* and "In our Zhek" both use garbage to create their own bureaucracy to critique the absurdity of the Soviet government while simultaneously giving refuse a new life. By taking on the forms of the "manifesto," house planning, and other Soviet documentations and plans, *Collective Farm* and "In our Zhek "are imitations that critique and satirize the failure. Both works reinvent the human object through garbage, or relics of loss, destruction, and censorship. They take the emptiness of loss and absurdity and repurpose it—they give it a material form that can potentially liberate all the people involved.

To summarize, like Western conceptual art, the Gerlovins, Kabakov, and *KD* begin with a "concept." But as they begin to replace an autonomous commodifiable object with this "concept," they are confronted with a lack of object or an unrepresentable one. There is just a void of infinite abstraction. Consequently, they re-materialize the void to recapture the lost object of Soviet ideology. The Moscow Conceptualists take on the materials of the void—emptiness, nothingness, refuse—to make a new object that is both critical of the present and a productive member in the changing future. Unlike the Capitalist object that begs fetishization and begets human

alienation, the Moscow Conceptual object is trying to fulfill Marx's dream of a social object. Marx says that,

> [...] it is only when man's object becomes a human object or objective that man does not lose himself in that object. This is only possible when it becomes a social object for him and when he himself becomes a social being for himself, just as society becomes a being for him in this object. [132]

Social objects are the expression of man in society, of man un-tethered to the alienation of capital, man as a "social being," Through the performance of emptiness, refuse, and bureaucracy, the Moscow Conceptualist artists create material that can objectify "man's essential powers," his consciousness, and his self.

[132] Marx, Engels, and Tucker, "Private Property and Communism," 88.

Chapter 3. Collectivity Materialized

Figure 13:"The Moscow Conceptualists" after the "M" action (Golden Sphere and Silver Wings of "Collective Actions,") Kievogorskoe Field, 1983, photo. http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-29.html (accessed October 4, 2013).[133]

Friends pose for a photo. Smiling at the camera, listening to a horn being played, watching a baby sleep, looking straight and serious into the camera, or caught in the middle of a lively conversation: these people are the "Moscow Conceptualists." After completing an action, the *Collective Actions Group* smiles together with an array of absurd objects to document their participation, both in *KD's* work and in the larger sphere of the Moscow Conceptual artists. The participants and organizers will soon leave the thick grove of birch trees, traditional icons of the Russian landscape, and go home. They will discuss and write down how they felt and how they feel, sketching stories that begin to materialize their experience.

Moscow Conceptualism arose from conversations amongst friends at kitchen tables and in train cars, forming an insular and safe community of dissidents. *Collective Actions* and the Moscow Conceptualists cultivated a social circle that often resembled a

[133] Featuring from left to right: Andrei Monastyrskiy, Sergey Bordachev, Nikolay Panitkov, Pavel Pivovarov (Pasha Peppershtein), Irina Pivovarova, Elena Elagina, Vadim Zakharov, Ivan Chuikov, Eduard Gorokhovskiy, Erik Bulatov, Yuriy Leiderman, Sergey Mironenko, Nikita Alekseev, Il'ya Kabakov, Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Mironenko, Sven Gundlah, Vladimir Naumets, Sergey Letov, Nikolay Kozlov.

classroom or an experimental lab.[134] The artist friends met on a regular basis to discuss their work, listen to lectures, read poetry or theoretical texts, think about the semiotics of culture, and debate the nature of art. The goal of these seminars was to provoke creativity and commentary, to use art, literature, and philosophy to give rise to something new and worth discussing.[135] Kabakov recalls the feeling of a tangible new sociality during one of *KD's* actions:

> [F]or the first time in my life, I was among "my own"; we had our own world, parallel to the real one, and this world had been created and compressed by the [Collective Actions] group until it had achieved complete materiality, or, one might say, tangibility—if this notion is at all applicable to something absolutely ethereal and elusive.[136]

Unlike the art of the Soviet Union that was made for the open public, the Moscow Conceptualists sought privacy. They wanted intimacy and individualization within a collectively-producing community.[137] The self-selecting exclusivity of the group allowed for creative freedom and space to experiment without fear. Gathering bits and pieces from Western art practice, their avant-garde predecessors, and the bourgeoning conceptual practices of their friends, the Moscow Conceptualists cultivated a "conceptual art scene." Developed in a space beyond the reach of politics and the eye of the state, the Conceptualists created their own new world, their own relationships, modes of sociability,

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[134] Jackson, *The experimental group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow conceptualism, Soviet avant-gardes,* 182.

[135] "In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the regular trips to see and participate in actions and then discuss them became an instrument that structured Moscow artistic life and consciousness. The [KD] performances not only gathered, identified, and organized those individuals who were in one way or another connected with conceptualism, but they also fixed the rhythm and vectors for the awareness of the Moscow Conceptualist School. In a sense, it was the actions of [KD] that laid the foundations for the development of a proprietary descriptive language of Moscow Conceptualism."
Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptual Performance Art," 168.

[136] "Serebrianyi Dvorets," a conversation between Ilya Kabakov and Victor Tupitsyn, Khudozhestvennyi Zhurnal No. 42 (2002): 10–14; cited in Viktor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post-)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) 70.

[137] "Moscow conceptualism, which in the time of cultural isolation and unofficiality produced images and texts that were potentially accessible to everyone, reacted to the opening up of the public space by self-closure, by cultivating a sectarian and esoteric atmosphere, by making itself inscrutable to and impenetrable by uninitiated outsiders."
Groys, "Intro" in *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism,* 8.

events, traditions, forms of communication, etc. Kabakov notes, in his account of *10 Appearances:*

> This [action] actualized one of the most pleasant and practically unknown sides of the socius, the socius that is so painful in our time. Here the social is not antagonistic to you, but instead good-willed, reliable, and extremely welcoming. This feeling is so unusual, so not experienced before, that it not only recovers you, but also becomes an amazing gift compared to everyday reality.[138]

Through the practice of ethereal actions, *Collective Actions* and the Moscow Conceptualists were able to construct a tangible sense of community. This community, oriented towards similar existential questions, was also an artful formation of relations that allowed for the un-alienated sense of self that Marx was calling for. This new social structure was, in many ways, a materialization of their conceptual practice.

Factographical Discourse

The community that began as a group of participants evolved into a group of authors. Expanding from the Gerlovins' use of poetic text as object, *KD* used representation and text as a way to expand the field of the action and to collectivize the work. The investigation of representation, perception, and text led to the idea of "factographical discourse." The "Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism" defines the practice of "factographical discourse" as "another layer of reality" through which these forms of documentation run "parallel to other layers in the demonstrative field of the actions."[139] In other words, factographical discourse brings together texts, stories, and photographs in the broader construction of the action. Groys writes that the group attempted to "decompose the visual effects produced by the events into [their] primordial elements—such as space, time, sound or a number of figures," creating a set of "facts" that could represent the action while simultaneously, calling representation into question. They presented these "primordial elements" as crucial textual complements, material

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[138] Kabakov, "Ten Appearances," 154; translated by Anya Pantuyeva.

[139] Andrei Monastyrsky, "Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism," in *SLOVAR' TERMINOV MOSKOVSKOI KONTSEPTUAL'NOI SHKOLY* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999) http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=198&lang=en (accessed September 30, 2013).

building blocks of a new system to replace the one flattened by the fluid and "empty" actions.

Why "factography" and not simply documentation, as in Western conceptualism? Incorporating documentation into the aesthetic experience had long been a basic premise of Conceptualism. In his text, "Art after Philosophy," Joseph Kosuth argues that text and document are used so that the art does not actually have to materialize.[140] Documentation allows the work to exist as an abstraction, a moving process that doesn't require concrete form and thus is impossible to own. Factography serves a different purpose. Factography is not an addendum to or even a map of the action, it is a work of collective meaning-production. Benjamin Buchloh's seminal essay, "From Faktura to Factography," explores the history of factography. Factography is a Soviet concept that originated in the 1920s to integrate the aesthetic of "factual documentation" into the mythology of Soviet ideology. Buchloh traces the movement in Productivist art from *faktura* (texture)—the focus on materiality and juxtapositions of color, construction, etc., as a mark of human production—to factography, a practice based instead on the mechanical and documentary quality of photography.[141] Early production art focused on the sensuous or tactile quality of objects by highlighting the diverse materials and functions that went into their production, but factography changed the focus onto objects as communicators, as conveyers of information. For instance, factographers documented the construction of the first factories, collective farms, industrial projects, etc., using advanced technological methods and media, as a mode of active collaboration in the national project of modernization.[142]

Productivist and Constructivist artist Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) used photography to capture the fluidity of production and optimism in the new society. As seen in the photograph of the Moscow radio tower, Rodchenko used perspective and alignment to illuminate the power of technology (Fig. 14). The camera looks up, breaking up our vision into the complex layers of interwoven metal bars. The photo shows us how the future is enmeshed in a progress that is both technologically advanced and

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[140] Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," 1969. *UbuWeb.* http://www.intermediamfa.org/imd501/media/1236865544.pdf (accessed January 29, 2014).

[141] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October 30* (Fall 1984): 83-118.

[142] Devin Fore, "Soviet Factography: Production Art in the Information Age," *October 118* (Fall 2006): 3-10.

unadorned. As Lenin famously said, socialism = electricity + Soviet power. Rodchenko makes this mantra a visual narrative through his photos. This kind of factographic work distinguishes itself from documentary because it works to construct or

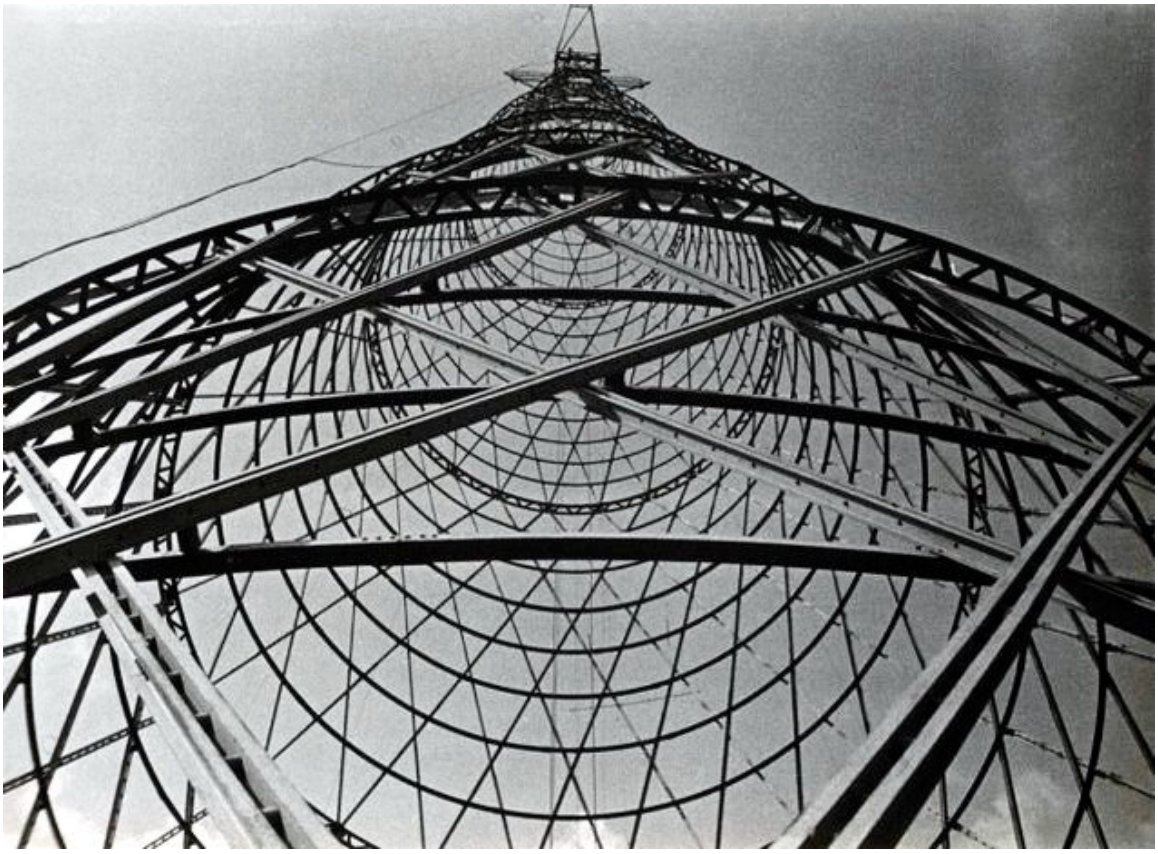

Figure 14: Alexander Rodchenko, *Moscow Radio Tower*, 1929, Photo. http://dieselpunksencyclopedia.wordpress.com/2012/04/06/our-gallery-before-it-all-began/ (accessed April 15, 2014)

reorganize reality and the future. Factography challenged the Productivist's limited recognition of the art object as something merely sensuous and somatic. It reintegrated the "concept," the symbolic and ideological system underlying the construction of an object, into the object itself. In this way, semiosis became established as an act of productive labor. How, why, and to what degree an object signifies could re-form the systems of meaning, re-forming the Soviet people into a Communist people. Factography is a vehicle of ideological myth through the aesthetic of cybernetic organization and accuracy of technology. Factography is propaganda under the guise of factual-ness.

Myth-making, myth-breaking, and fact are crucial elements in the construction of *Collective Actions'* and the Moscow Conceptualists' work. For the Productivist artists,

factography was a way to display the new truth of production and modernization. With time, however, "truth" had lost its authority in the Soviet Union, and factographical texts just seemed absurd. Margarita Tupitsyn explained that the injection of text into performance or action came from a "distrust of pure visuality in general, as well as in a particular Soviet context—as a reaction to Socialist Realism."[143] The "truth" of Socialist Realism, parades, or posters was hardly believed anymore. As I elaborated in chapters 1 and 2, after Stalin, people were more attuned to the meaninglessness of ideological ritual. What Margarita Tupitsyn's explanation doesn't take into account, is the almost identical mythologizing of language, words, and text. Thus, for *KD*, "fact" as text becomes the vehicle of deconstruction and reinvention. Their work involves two levels of factographical discourse: one that critiques representation, and one that produces new objects based on collective fact-making.

In the 1981 action *Ten Appearances*, *KD* used "documentary confirmation" to verify, label, and make this ineffable event concrete (Fig. 15). During the action, all the participants traveled to a white field surrounded by woods. In this empty white field, where all legible signs were gone, there was just blank space and questions as in the original "Appearance." Slowly, the object and language were reintroduced, but in a manipulated version that only moved clarity further away. This time, everyone was presented with a wooden board that had around 10 spools of red thread glued on. They were then asked to take an end of the thread and walk into the forest, following a series of directions, until they reached a sheet of paper or "factographical text" stating the names of the authors, the time and place of the action, and so forth. The action was now named, credited, and placed, but the "factual" information didn't actually divulge anything about what the participants just did or why they did it. *KD* is borrowing the "truth" that is signaled through documents, records, paperwork, and other material forms of bureaucracy. Kabakov describes his discomfort as he pulled the long thread for what seemed like an endless time. Only after reaching the end of this tedious and confusing journey and finding a paper with the "factographical" information did he exclaim: "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

[143] Tupitsyn, "Alienation as Status."

me."[144] He is confused up to the point where he has received documentation of what happened, until meaning has in some sense materialized.[145] In fact, the objects and texts *still* have no meaning. Kabakov's narration shows how even the mere mimicry of "fact" delivers the sense of security and joy that comes with the idea of truth.

But there is another element of the action. When the participants returned to the field and the wooden board, they were handed a photograph of a small figure emerging from the woods that stated the title of the action and the name of the participant pictured. Kabakov's read: "the appearance of I. Kabakov on February 1st 1981." There were now two documents that confirmed the action that each person just performed. But how had they managed to photograph Kabakov and develop the photo in such little time and with no outside resources? It was not Kabakov, of course, but some other person who had been photographed a few days before. Here, *Collective Actions* use factography to deconstruct representation by distributing "factographical" photos that lie. These photos are referred to as "empty photographs," because, like the "empty action," they continue to hold the participant in a "tense lack of understanding."[146] Each photograph is, Monastyrsky writes, "a sign of a higher order, a sign of an 'unarbitrary emptiness' with the following meaning: 'nothing is represented on it not because nothing happened at that given moment, but because the thing that happened is essentially unrepresentable.'"[147] As we know from chapter 2, this "unarbitrary emptiness" is essential. "Nothing" holds a trace of the "everything" that is the Soviet totality—the "emptiness" (i.e. the empty signifiers) in the photo materializes through the juxtaposition

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[144] *Rasskaz I. Kabakova (Ob akzii "Desiati poeavlenii")* in ———, *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia 1-5 vols*, 153.
[145] Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art"
[146] *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia* 1-5 vol., 20-21. At this point, Emptiness has materialized on the physical, psychical, and factographical level. In the physical dimension, the snowy field is empty because it is colorless and blank; in the psychical dimension, the spectators are confused, waiting, bored--their minds empty; and now, in a third, factographical dimension, "emptiness" appears in the photographs of a bleak landscape and a small figure emerging from the woods, labeled "empty photograph."
[147] Andrei Monastyrsky, trans. Yelena Kalinsky. "Seven Photographs." Moscow Conceptualism Russian Conceptual Art. http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-7-PHOTOGRAPHS.htm (accessed March 11, 2014).

Figure 15. Collective Actions, *Ten Appearances,* 1981, Photography, MANI Archive, Russia. http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-16.html (accessed October 27, 2013).

of the "everything" that it is not.[148] These empty photos visualize what the Soviet Union's ideological paradigm cannot represent. They become the material for a new paradigm. Factography, on one hand, emphasizes the attraction to and reliance on the categorization provided by language, but in the case of the Collective Action Group, it also allows the participants to categorize, materialize, and make meaning of the action in their own way.

Post-Factum Factography

The second level of factographical discourse arrives in the "post-factum" of the event. Following the confused state of each action, the participants were asked to record what happened and to write an analysis. These documents, texts, commentaries, analyses, photographs, diagrams, and schemas were collected and organized between 1976 and 1989, creating a ten volume *samizdat* publication entitled *Poezdki za gorod* or *Journeys Outside the City*.[149] The book splits the documentation of each action into 5 main categories: 1) a foreword, the main theoretical text containing the directions for each "phase" of the

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[148] Factography is a critique of representation, which resonates strongly with Derrida's concept of the "trace." Derrida delineates how speech has always been privileged over writing because it is "more immediate" or closer to original thought. He argues that writing, if it is a supplement to speech, is necessarily exposing what is missing in spoken language. There has never been a "real" that has not been constituted through supplements, substitute signs, etc.; a chain of references. "What opens up meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence," once we can understand that the "original" or "real" can never exist, we can allow writing or other "less immediate" forms of thought to have new significances (Derrida 159).

Derrida continues, "the supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source." In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida dissolves Structuralism's clear link between the sign and the signified, and speech and writing. Derrida claims that the sign can signify so many things that language can only exist in an unstable "free play" of signifiers. He explains that the sign always contains a "trace" of something it does not mean. Spivak writes in her introduction that, writing is "always inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such." This is the "play" of a sign that signifies both what it is and what it isn't.

Moscow Conceptualism, and Conceptualism in general, is all about the fallibility of what something is and what it signals. And more specifically, factography and *KD's* project of documentation all deal with the "secondariness" of writing, with its reliance on memory and privilege of truth. Like Derrida, *KD* wants to combat "Bias Logocentrism." But the Moscow Conceptualists also want to play with the double valence of text—with what it should mean and what it can mean.

Jacque Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[149] The publications were compiled into a formal book in 1998. The group re-banded after perestroika and there are 6 other volumes that documented actions after the reinstatement of "Russia"

action; 2) a minimal "factual" description of the action with the plot, location, and names of authors; 3) the writings provided by the spectators after each action; 4) commentaries and critical interpretations of the actions from the point of view of artists and spectators; and 5) photographs.[150] Each piece of documentation offers a different interpretation that revolves around the locus of the performance. The entire publication, as an art object, extends the presence and ephemerality of the actions into a space of collective materiality.

Traditionally, art documentation is perceived not as art, but as the evidence of art. The ephemeral sense of "presence" that is so crucial to performance art is considered lost when solidified into a permanent document. For *Collective Actions* and Monastyrsky, however, the document was the final goal, an action performed through the labor of recollection. Groys writes, "here the originality of an action becomes secondary in relationship to its documentation—every documentation being not merely a re-presentation of this action but a further contribution to its creation."[151] And to reiterate the original definition of factography, it was "another layer of reality" through which these forms of documentation run "parallel to other layers in the demonstrative field of the actions." The actions were designed to be too intangible to analyze in the moment of the action. Only after each person had gone home with a "factographical confirmation" of the event did *KD* ask them to describe it, report what had happened, and intellectualize their reactions. Groys explains that "only the long process of clarification by reconstruction and documentation let the action emerge as a certain event in space and time."[152]

In the moment of its performance, each action was too empty and too foreign to situate, but with time the "hermeneutical narratives... [grew through] a compensatory aspect, endlessly chasing a meaning that remained elusive, precisely because the generation of different interpretative positions *was* the meaning."[153] There was time to think one thing, reject it, discuss it with another participant, and onwards until eventually the elusive emptiness could materialize into some form of meaning that was entirely

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[150] Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989,* 72.
[151] Boris Groys, "Art Clearings" in *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrsky and Collective Actions.* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2011) 9.
[152] Groys, "Art Clearings" in *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrsky and Collective Actions, 9.*
[153] Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art" [author's emphasis]

contingent on the body, experiences, and interests of the participant. The process of percolation and meaning-making expands the material and temporal range of each performance. With time, meaning could surface and materialize in diverse and revolutionary forms. The publications created an experience that existed in dialogue between materialized text and situation, each producing the other in a recurring cycle of memory and speculation.[154] Dense ideology, time, conversations in kitchens, theoretical texts, the network of memory, etc., fed the dialectic until it could achieve tangible, though never unified, meaning.

As I've mentioned many times, *KD* imitates the language of bureaucracy in the Soviet system. In *Journeys Outside the City,* the mass collection of participant accounts creates an overall sense of order, control, and an excess of information like a filing cabinet in a cramped administrative office. The "meticulously, almost bureaucratically, documented, commented on, and archived" performances reference the culture of surveillance and paperwork in the Soviet Union.[155] In his book *The Demon of Writing,* Ben Kafka argues that paperwork is the literal version of Derrida's *différénce,* it is manual labor that cannot help but slip up: "[n]ibs still break. Ink still smudges, Handwriting still cramps. Signifiers still slip."[156] Even though bureaucratic language symbolizes a new futuristic world, perfected by cybernetic organization and technological savvy, it is still imperfect, it still cannot align the ideal with reality. The simple and unavoidable failures in any structure of language expose how vast and unscripted the world can be. *KD* and the Moscow Conceptualists deconstruct the Soviet Union's inscription onto the world by separating the vast field of infinite meanings from its bureaucratic structure, pasting the structure back on, and then looking at where it slips. In other words, *KD* takes bureaucratic language, in the form of "documentary confirmations," separates it from its context within the bureaucratic system in Moscow, and then puts it in a vast and empty

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[154] Sabine Hansgen, "Collective Actions: Event and Documentation in the Aesthetics of Moscow Conceptualism." *Conceptualism.Letov* http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Haensgen-Collective-Actions-Event-and-Documentation-Aesthetics-Moscow-Conceptualism.htm. (accessed October 7, 2013). This calls for constant interrogation in an ongoing process of creative activity honoring a form of dialectical materialism. The dialectic is seen in the relationship of the organizers to the participants, which is upheld by the constant reading and investigation of the other's perception.

[155] Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," 33.

[156] Kafka, *The Demon of Writing,* 12.

field, where any signification and logic is missing. Although it feels absurd in the moment, the absurdity is confirmed when juxtaposed with the spectator accounts inside the publication. The difference in the quality and authenticity of the two kinds of accounts is astounding. *Journeys Outside the City* shows us the insufficiency of "cybernetic," "modern," "bureaucratic" language, compared to the fullness and creativity of personal narratives and theoretical formulations.

The importance of factography lies in the creation of new languages.[157] Language is the tool with which these individuals could decolonize or at least acknowledge the Soviet state's arbitrary claim on truth. As Nietzsche says, truth is simply the most dominant individual interpretation of the world.[158] By framing the Soviet state's system of truth, the Conceptualists are also defining "non-truth." *KD* present the participants with a moment that is "unrepresentable" and ask them to represent it. Within this logically impossible task, the idea of what is "representable" is interrogated. It exposes the structure that language imposes on the world and begins to deconstruct it. *KD* make this semiotic structure tangible by placing it in an empty, white, or "unrepresentable" field. The intervention of Moscow Conceptual art is linguistic, it refuses to align a sign with its strictly defined "signified," bringing attention to the Soviet system that supports oppressive semiotic meaning-making. It brings signs to an arena of play where their referents are many and arbitrary. Monastyrsky wrote that, "in the actions of 'Collective Actions' language manifests itself in an utterly unexpected place," like hanging an illegible slogan in the middle of an abandoned field.[159] The actions make the logic of the

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[157] KD created a dictionary to define new terms like "out-of-town-ness" or "empty action," that did not fit with in the official language. See the Dictionary translated by Octavian Esanu: http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=198&lang=en or excerpts in Appendix 3.

[158] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *On the genealogy of morals. (*New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 77-78.

[159] In 1980, *KD* staged an action entitled, "For G. Kizevalter (Slogan 1980)" where "Group member Georgi Kizevalter was staying in Siberia for a longish period of time. He was sent a package enclosing a slogan banner. In an accompanying letter, he received instructions to find a big field with a wood as a backdrop, in a setting as isolated as possible. Further instructions told him to hang up the slogan between two trees, although he was not to release the length of cloth covering the writing on the banner, using a rope device, until he had moved so far away from it that the text was no longer decipherable. While the writing on the banner—serving to articulate a lyrical text—was in tension with the empty landscape in the first two slogan actions, in this case its disappearance was organized."
Hansgen, "Collective Actions: Event and Documentation in the Aesthetics of Moscow Conceptualism."

dominant Soviet language incomprehensible and the possibility of a new one tangible. By mapping out the strict and limiting system of meaning and value within the Soviet Union, the Conceptualists situate themselves beyond it, in a system of meaning far vaster and freer.

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The several volumes constituting *Journeys Outside of the City* were constructed on a truth that understands the friction inherent in the notion of truth, on a collection of truths that espouses ambiguity. The book, especially in its *samizdat* form, signaled the ambiguity and imperfection of human-ness, the process of its composition and the network of social relations involved. Lev Rubinstein calls Moscow Conceptualism "the art of relationships," stating that:

> Broadly speaking, this is a system of relationships (and a clarification of relationships) between the 'presence' and the 'absence' of the author in the text, between 'one's own' speech and that of 'others,' between 'literal' and 'figurative' terms.[160]

Society and the artistic tradition interact at a new level that calls a certain kind of autonomy into question. The "artist" of each action is recreated as a collective, and meaning is rewritten as a multitude of experiences, perspectives, or truths. This action is not authored by the organizers but by all the participants. It begs the participation and analysis of the entire group. This movement and the multiplicity of experiences and interpretations save the object from being fetishized and losing its connection to its human producer. *Journeys Outside the City* is a collectively produced object that defies fetishization and perpetuates the intimacy and collectivity of the Moscow Conceptual scene. In its materiality—the composition of differing voices—it rejects a unified meaning and rejects the idea of a single author who dictates what is meaningful.

"Collectivity" here needs to be defined. In the Soviet system, collectivity was the formation of a unified whole or subject. The mass of singular subjectivities were compressed to fit into Stalin's or even Lenin's mass proletarian subjectivity. But for Marx, the individual was a crucial element in the construction of a collective. The community is

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[160] Lev Rubinstein, "Interim Foreword on the Experience of Conceptual Literature," *Iskusstvo 1*, 1990.

not one unified political body, leader, or state; but a multitude of singularities.[161] In *German Ideology,* Marx explains how the individual can only be realized through community:

> Only in community [does the] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible […] In a real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association.[162]

In other words, each person's subjectivity is affirmed and refined by his membership in the collective. But how does the cultivation of individuality or the freedom to creative interpretation contribute to the community? Can this degree of freedom result in anything but conflict? Marx doesn't give us a clear answer to this question. But in the context of Moscow Conceptualism, the community was composed of like-minded individuals, who presumably come from similar social contexts. They entered this community under similar pretenses: to explore a mode of subjectivity outside of the Soviet regime, to experiment with language and art, and to grow with friends. Conflict certainly occurred, but everyone in the group was personally involved and attached to the project. The community gave people the tools to exercise their individual nature alongside their human and communal nature.

In other words, Moscow Conceptualism created a space to exercise one's non-Soviet self, alongside a community of friends. Marx writes, "In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realized my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature"[163] Individuality is most free when it acknowledges and upholds the human instinct for mutual growth and support. *KD's* sense of collectivity, like Marx, is about each individual and the voice of that individual, radical and refined, not the unified voice of one ideology. Confident in numbers, their voices—though

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[161] Paolo Virno. *A grammar of the multitude for an analysis of contemporary forms of life.* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004).

[162] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology Part On*e.

[163] Karl Marx, "Comments on James Mill, Éléments D'économie Politique" In *In Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844.* 1st American ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1964)

oriented in various directions—interrogated the totalitarian reality of the Soviet Union.[164] *KD* materializes this chorus of voices by making each voice a coproducer of their performances and products.

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In her article, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art," Claire Bishop writes about the form of participatory art under socialism.[165] She explains that in the West, participatory art is centered around the alienation produced by the spectacle of Capitalism.[166] By contrast, Soviet conceptual art sought a singular, subjective, and private aesthetic experience. Rather than seeking an inversion of Western participatory art, these Soviet artists shared their individual experiences in a carefully situated collective space. In marked contrast to the Soviet state's conception of collectivity, *KD* created a collectivity that encouraged difference, dissent, debate, democratic indecision, private experience, and a multiplicity of hermeneutical speculations. Monastyrsky summarizes the experience of personal freedom within the collective performances:

> ... in the Stalin or Brezhnev era, contemplation of an artwork involved a certain compulsion, a kind of tunnel vision. There was nothing peripheral. But when one comes to a field—when one comes there, moreover, with no sense of obligation but for private reasons of one's own—a vast flexible space is created, in which one can look at whatever one likes. One's under no obligation to look at what's being presented—that freedom, in fact, is the whole idea.[167]

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[164] Although, with time and the fall of the Soviet Bloc, the Moscow Conceptualists dispersed and disconnected. The solidarity of being within an oppressive regime was probably the glue that kept their community together.

[165] Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art"

[166] Guy Debord claims that bureaucratic Communism is just as spectacular as Capitalism; it is just a more concentrated spectacle.

"The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery ... If every Chinese must learn Mao, and thus be Mao, it is because he can be nothing else. Wherever the concentrated spectacle rules, so does the police."

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994) sections 63 and 64.

[167] Tupitsyn and Monastyrsky, unpublished interview, 1997, archive of Exit Art, New York.

The freedom to access art in different and infinite ways was a form of liberation from the inflexible and leveling collectivity of the Soviet system. The Moscow Conceptualists needed each other to participate, to be active producers in the production of one another's art, meaning, and life—battling the alienation produced by Soviet collectivity. The act of documenting *KD's* performances through personal analysis freed the alienated individual; which, in turn, opened up the possibility of a working Marxist collective. Each participant could become the artist and the art critic. Each participant could see their labor as productive, as constitutive of a valuable product, i.e., produced by hand, for the collective body, and personally stimulating. And each participant could be a member of the Conceptualist collective.

The Materiality and Network of Human-ness

Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a)'s was a part of the Mail Art movement, which stems from Fluxus and Ray Johnson's "New York Correspondence School" of the 1950s (Figs. 16-18). Mail Art uses postcards, paper, collage, rubber stamps, etc., to send small-scale works through the postal system, with the intention either of participating in an exhibition or simply of building a relationship with someone through an exchange of art. Mail Art relies on an informal network of artist-friends rather than an official art distribution system. All five of the books in *Collective Farm* are made up of envelopes containing little postcards, letters, stickers, and small objects from different artists. The envelopes are often sealed with wax stamps and adorned with different postal stamps and addresses. In the first volume "Kolkhoz (1981)," whose name refers to a kind of "voluntarily" collectivized farm,[168] "mail" from various Soviet artists is assembled to build a new ideological structure. The book-sculpture is a bound collection of letters that have to be unsealed, opened, and investigated to access the various inserts. All the works used either copy paper or recycled paper, the materials of the *samizdat. Samizdat,* the underground publishing movement, established objects that circulated outside the state and were explicitly "shared" amongst the participating artists. Like *samizdat,* the Mail Art movement circumvents the established means of art distribution. Both create a "pure" art

[168] *Standard Kolkhoz Charter.* (Moscow: Agropromizdat, 1989) 4, 37.

Figure 16. Valery and Rimma Gerlovin(a), *Collective Farm,* 1981-1985. Bound envelopes on paper. Reed College Collection, Portland, OR.

object that is untainted by the market (or the state), curators, art critique, etc.

Edward Limonov, a writer within the *samizdat* scene, carefully cultivated a persona that thrived on dislocation and exile. Typical of his controversial persona, Limonov decided to sell his *samizdat* texts as a source of income, accepting the scorn of the whole community.[169] Limonov was rejecting the "purity" of other *samizdat* authors, differentiating his subversion of the Soviet system. The rejection of Limonov's gambit by the *samizdat* communities shows us the importance of non-capitalist purity to the *samizdat* mission. Their dissident texts recall Marx's mission to relieve the object of its exchange value, sense of ownership, and consequently, of its potential for commodity fetishism. The Moscow Conceptualists, similarly, took on Marx's distrust of Capitalism. Their project was not to create an anti-Soviet practice that idealized the West, but to reimagine the original goals of the Soviet Union. They wanted to give Marx a second chance. Moscow Conceptualists use *samizdat* because it exemplifies a specific materiality that can signal

[169] Olga Matich, "The Moral Immoralist" *Slavic and East European* 30.4 (1986): 526-40.

"human-ness" in Marxian sense. The aesthetics of the hand-made give the objects a value based on meaningful and local production versus money. Using *samizdat* materials and cultivating an alternative network of exchange and distribution, the Moscow Conceptualists return human relations to the object.

Collective Farm is about the network of social relations. Following the form of other mail artists, the Gerlovins' project materialized by inviting people to respond to their prompt. In Volume 6 of *Collective Farm*, "Stalin Test," a group of Russians were invited to draw Stalin. The Gerlovins then inserted each drawing into a small envelope, and stamped the outside with a red image of Stalin, the participant's name, and their profession. Each drawing was what one would expect, but the series as a whole is striking for the variations and imperfections that are found. We are presented with serial Stalins, a gambit which subtly subverts the singular official image. Groys interestingly notes in his essay, "Designers of the Unconscious,"

> It proved impossible to break free of Stalin without reiterating him at least aesthetically. Consequently, modern Russian art has approached Stalin as an aesthetic phenomenon in order to repeat him and thus liberate itself from him. By constructing text and context, practicing both construction and deconstruction, simultaneously projecting utopia and transforming it into antiutopia, it is attempting to enter the mythological family so that it may relate to Stalin not with *ressentiment* but with a feeling of superiority: every family has its black sheep. [170]

It is as if the participants are contributing to a collective therapy session. Each person was asked to revisit life-long relationship with Stalin's face and reproduce it. With each reproduction, his image falls farther and farther from the solid, un-malleable power that his face once held. Again the product is a congregate, a multiplicity of interpretations, a materialization of social relations. The concept is contingent on the work produced by these outside participants. Each envelope draws a direct line from the object to the author, illustrating the network of relations as a series of objects, sent through official (postal) channels, that communicate and contribute to the conceptual work of the community.

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[170] Groys. "Designers of the Unconscious," 19.

Figure 17. Komar & Melamid and Joseph Brodsky, "Stalin Test" detail of *Collective Farm,* 1986. Bound envelopes on paper. Reed College Collection, Portland, OR.

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In the fifth volume, "5 Year Plan," the Gerlovins chose eight themes for 40 artists to respond to.[171] The themes are presented in the form of a word map with a written declaration in the preface:

> FIVE YEAR PLAN implicates an intuitive mystification of a world model, in which the reality of utopia interfaces with the utopia of reality. Art reflects society in an oblique oration. Utilizing the language of a rationalistic proposal, we suggest that art itself is reminiscent of an abstract, international farm, having as its primary roots, economic, political, social, cultural, and other, consequent surplus values. This is not a community where individual creativity identifies itself with the collective interest, because the unity exists more in the subconscious. The world is not as large as man has 'painted.'
>
> ...
>
> Any society has a tendency toward the unification of human individuality. In our opinion, creativity interlaces with an inner harmony and ethic that exceeds the best social standards of any society. For personal freedom and the feeling of creative anarchy must be given and taken on the higher level of life—the metaconsciousness. The artistic mind has the ability, by intuition, to understand civilization with all its syncretism. This relationship gives meaning to things. Universals appear through the medium of the particular, to illustrate a principle you must exaggerate much and you must omit much.[172] (Fig. 18)

The declaration is quite a bit longer, but without going into it more deeply, what is important is the theoretical foundation that Gerlovina sets up. Art is a form of inspection, experimentation, and diagnosis. And this only works if the individual is given the latitude to exercise their interpretive will: "personal freedom and the feeling of creative anarchy

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[171] Artists involved: Robert Atkins, Vagrich Bakhchanyan, Beck Balken, Debra Balken, Mark Berghash, Renate Bertlmann, Mike Bidlo, Mark Blane, Szymon Bojko, Leslie Bohnenkamp, Elizabeth Cook, Ray Dobbins, Charles Doria, Jean Dupuy, Peter Frank, Ken Friedman, John Furnival, Valeriy Gerlovin, Rimma Gerlovina, Richard Hambleton, R.I.P. Hayman, Tehching Hsieh, John Jacob, P. Michael Kean, Michael Kostiuk, Henry Khudyakov, Donald Lipski, Igor Makarevich, Robert C. Morgan, Charlie Morrow, Jack Ox, Ralph Henry Reese, Diane Samuels, Carolee Schneemann, Fred Truck, Carol Tuynman, Paul Zelevansky

[172] Rimma Gerlovina in *Collective Farm.*
See Appendix 2 for complete quote.

must be given and taken on the higher level of life." In the volume, the Gerlovins choose 3-5 envelopes from the 40 artists to address the themes: Biosynthesis, Social Engineering, Industry, Politics/Military, Money/Law, Sound Theater, Forbidden Fruits, and Miscellaneous. What resulted was a myriad of plans, drawings, personal letters, arbitrary objects, etc., sent to the Soviet Union from various parts of the world and organized into large folders and envelopes. Like Kabakov and *Collective Actions*, all these artists responded to the bureaucratically organized themes with inventive and stimulating work. When you open one of the large official envelopes, you get posters, poems, etc. You get the voice of an individual's relationship to the idea. Each person created their own art, each envelope bore the stamp of that person's hand, and each was integrated into the collective sculpture. The process of assemblage materializes social relations that nurture individualism while creating a collective. Marx famously wrote: "Society does not consist of individualism but expresses the sum of interrelations."[173] With these forms of participation, could Marx's imagined collectivity materialize? Let me also reiterate his image of a better world:

> Let us now picture ourselves...a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as a combined labour-power of the community... The total product of our community is a social product.[174]

A community, materialized, can be thought of as a set of lines drawn between people, illustrating the paths of exchange and communication in a kind of humanistic graph. Both *KD's* and the Gerlovins' participants were the material and authors of each action. The relational, collective nature of each work marks them clearly within Marx's camp. Is this scene, this set of relations, a Marxist socialist object? The Moscow Conceptualists are creating their own utopia, possibly the one the Soviet Union failed to create, or simply a new world outside of this one. This new world was built collectively by a group of un-alienated individuals interested in the parameters of life and art.

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[173] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1st U.S. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 247.

[174] Marx, Engels, and Tucker, "Capital," 326.

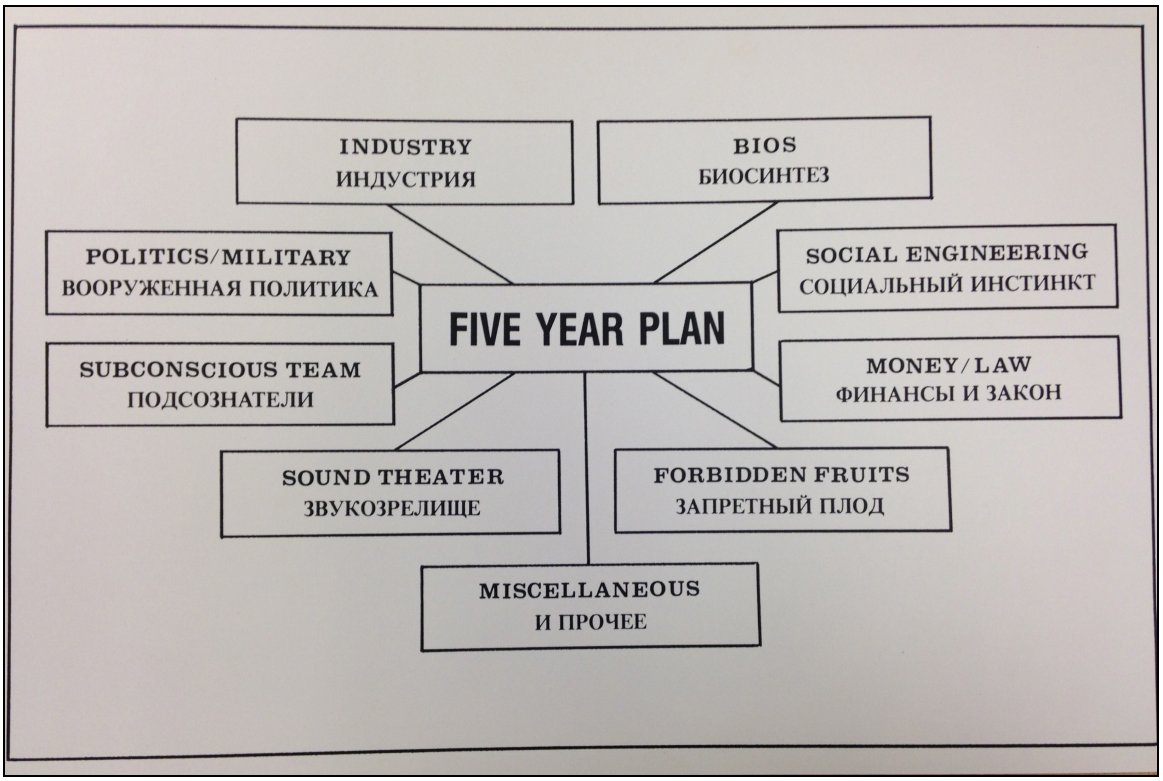

Figure 18. Valery and Rimma Gerlovin(a), "Five Year Plan" detail of *Collective Farm*, 1986. Bound envelopes on paper. Reed College Collection, Portland, OR.

They used their relationships and everyday interactions as the material for an art work that could reinvent and reexamine the status of a subject and his/her connection to the world. *KD* and the Gerlovins singularized and situated each participant within a community. They were are all artists, in some way, and through this affiliation, solidarity could be formed. *Journeys Outside the City* and *Collective Farm* are compilations, collectively authored objects that elaborate multiple meanings. Their production—from the actions of the fields to the kitchen table to the postal system—dissolve the atomization and loneliness of existence within a totalitarian regime. These objects create social beings, who, in turn, create social objects.

Conclusion: The Moscow Conceptual Subject

In his essay "On Emptiness," Kabakov describes the four kinds of occupants who inhabit and adapt to the Soviet Union. The first type ignores it, making the artifice a natural and normal way of life. The second type protests and demands improvements to the conditions of life. The third type cultivates an ascetic or religious attitude that accepts the suffering and turns the emptiness into a form of spirituality. And lastly, the fourth sees "the place as it is in fact and describe[s] it as a doctor might describe the history of an illness with which he is terminally afflicted."[175] As you may have guessed, the Moscow Conceptualists fall into the fourth category. With regard to the values of objectivity, science, and essentialism valorized in Soviet ideology, the Moscow Conceptualists became "doctors" who investigated those same values as the symptoms of the illness that had infected Russia and themselves. Moscow Conceptualism was not interested in art, *per se*, but in the "art" of the Soviet regime, the craftsmanship involved in inventing a new language, system of meaning, and *byt* [everyday]. Their hermeneutic practice included an examination of their own transformed subjectivities.

The examination was a nuanced one: to see the situation at a critical distance, the Moscow Conceptualists submerged themselves into the material of the ideal "new Soviet man." The new ideal man embodied youth, virility, discipline, equality, and mechanistic devotion to the state and machines, exemplified notably in Yury Olesha's 1927 novel *Envy.*[176] The Conceptualists did not so much take on its ideals as they investigated where the ideals failed and what they excluded. Their practice, paradoxically, took up all the ideals, values, and practices of the Bolsheviks and Marx. Marx's ideal man was strong, individual, an innovator, understood the power of community, and had the capacity to imagine a new kind of truth. Olesha's "new Soviet man" appears at first to be very similar to Marx's man: he was both the leader of a nation and indistinguishable from the mass. The new man was like a machine, groomed to fit perfectly inside a system of efficiency and equality. This is compatible with Marx in many ways, yet it forgets one of the

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[175] Kabakov, "On Emptiness," 59.

[176] Yuri Karlovich Olesha, *Envy*. (New York: New York Review Books, 2004).

quintessential elements of Marx: the social being. Marx says: "man's *need* has become a *human* need; the extent to which, therefore, the *other* person as a person has become for him a need—the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being."[177] The ideal Marxist man, "the social being," needs other people. It needs relationships and communication. The Soviet Union's social being was stripped of all distinction in order to fit within the unified masses; in other words, in spite of everything, it is alienated.

A social being that embraces the love and imperfection inherent in the human experience, that *needs* other people to live fully, did not fit in the Soviet paradigm. Such sociality was inefficient, function-less, and excessive. Luxuriating in relationships and feeling was antithetical to the cybernetic, mechanistically organized totality. The social being seems to fall into the same peripheral category as emptiness and refuse—the place for the repressed or excluded. This is the place where our artists chose to inhabit, at least for a critical part of their time. Their work was made through the material of the Soviet Union's failure (its meaningless absurdity) and Marx's lost ideal (its revolutionary hope.) As this thesis has argued that to re-materialize Marx's social being, the Moscow Conceptualists materialized the social object.

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My thesis began with the creation of a new term: the Moscow Conceptual object. This object represents the revival of Marx's lost social object. It represents the production of individual creativity, the importance and power of materiality, and a manifestation of sociability. My first example of a Moscow Conceptual object was Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a)'s series *Cubes.* Piled up in the corners of the Gerlovins' apartment where the secret exhibitions were shown, these objects were the literal materials of a new community-based reality.

[177] Marx, Engels, and Tucker, "Private Property and Communism," 85. (author's emphasis)

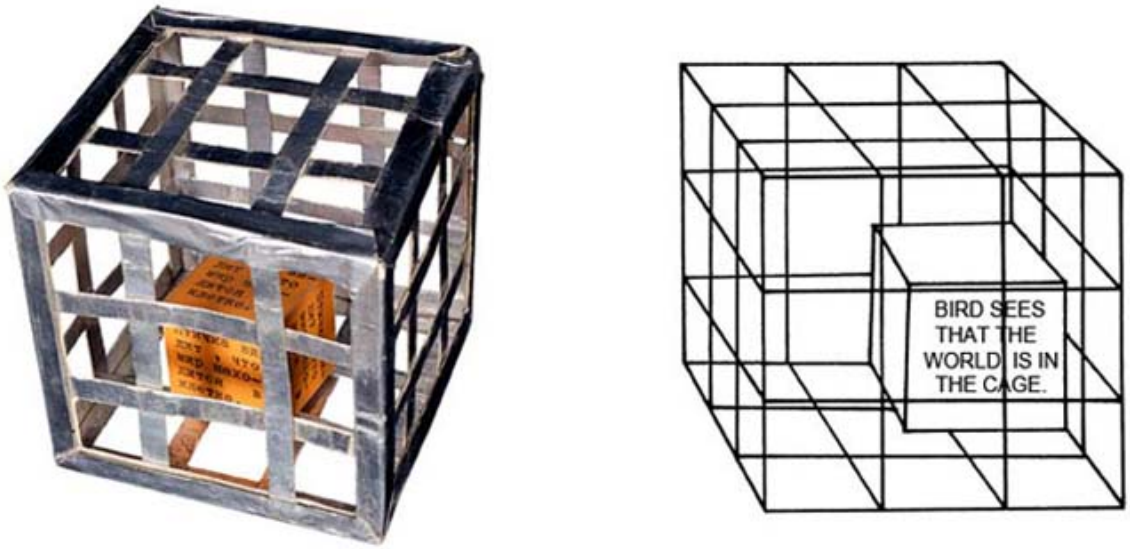

Figure 19. Rimma Gerlovina, *The Bird Sees That the World is in the Cage* appears on the smaller cube inside. 1974, cardboard, wood, paper, foil, 3¼ x 3¼ x 3¼".

Made from *samizdat* materials, the cubes are constructed with paper refuse, the material of totalitarian exclusion. They look hand-made, torn at the corners, slightly faded. They perform their production, the hands that gathered loose paper from the hallways of their apartment building, reclaiming the memories of life and objects that no longer fit within the Soviet program. But the cubes also live within a mass. Gerlovina said that, "[they] burst forth as if a fountain, overflowing our entire apartment."[178] They clutter and consume the space. And even in their profuseness, they are perfectly symmetrical—they stack and fit into perfect towers and lines. As *Icon* and the photo of Gerlovina in her studio illustrate, the cubes are organizable and systematic (Fig. 20, 6). But they are also a disaster. Like the absurdity of the Soviet language, the uniformity of the cubes themselves mimics and critiques a meaningless bureaucracy that masquerades as truth. The Gerlovins repurpose refuse and arbitrary organization to create objects that can materialize "man's essential powers," man's un-alienated self. Trash transforms into *samizdat,* an aesthetic of human-ness and dissidence, and bureaucracy transforms into a radically absurd joke. Together with emptiness, these things become tools to deconstruct

[178] Rimma Gerlovina, "THE CUBES," 2010. http://www.gerlovin.com/English/eng_cubes/eng_cubes_1.htm (accessed February 15, 2014).

Soviet reality, recollect the materials of its construction, and build a new reality.

Figure 20. Rimma Gerlovina, *Icon*: The cells code an archetypal destiny of a man. 1974, cardboard, wood, paper, acrylic, 19¼ x 18½ x 3". Collection of Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, NJ.

In the cube documented in Figure 5, a soul is supposedly housed. The lid reads: "THE SOUL... Do not open, it can fly away!" Of course, nothing happens when you open the box, except that you are presented with an empty space. This speaks to the language of Stalin and the Soviet Union more generally—where a referent should meet language, you get emptiness. Importantly, this is not "just emptiness," this is a powerful and un-arbitrary void. Once you open the box, the inside reads, "There it goes!" The soul is gone and the individual self of a subject is lost. Or the word "soul" is lost and the

Soviet linguistic sign for "soul" has flown away leaving a space to build a new one. Gerlovina and many of the Conceptualists play with the fallibility of words. When she

Figure 21. Rimma Gerlovina, an unofficial exhibition, 1976, Moscow. http://www.gerlovin.com/English/eng_cubes/eng_cubes_1.htm (accessed April 15, 2014).

presents us with a box that is labeled "The Soul," it is immediately legible that there is a soul inside. There is nothing inside, however: the "truth" or "fact" of the word is denied, presenting us with the fallibility of representation. Like *KD's* actions, where you were

forced to wait in a cold white field stripped of any sense of recognition, the emptiness inside the cubes forces a confrontation with your own soul. Has it flown away?

What is left of the soul under a totalitarian regime? The term "soul" is used here advisedly, with reference to an intangible human residue left behind in the attempts to construct a social/ideological totality. Can the Moscow Conceptual Object actually free the soul from alienation? By taking on the Soviet regime's systems of control, like bureaucracy and language, the Moscow Conceptualists transform people from "facts" to individuals. Like the aspirations of the Bolsheviks and Marx, the Moscow Conceptualists armed people with purpose, giving their voice and actions meaning. Their art needed people. The cubes were not complete without a person reading them, opening them, or turning them over. Kabakov needed an audience to hear his stories. *KD's* compilation text, *Journeys Outside the City,* needed the descriptions and analyses from each participant. *Collective Farm* needed artists to submit responses to nourish the collective product. The necessity of others allows "truth" to become a plurality of voices. In many ways, this plurality, this map of relationships, this "scene" of artists and friends, is the object that these art works materialize. Not only did the cubes beg participation, but they were a source of friendship and solidarity. The Gerlovins would have exhibitions in their apartment in which they would give away all their cubes. Gerlovina wrote that the cubes were, "[m]ade with one breath, they were given away as gifts to our friends, artists, and poets, with easiness and spontaneity." The intellectual and artistic practices of the Moscow Conceptualists created a new sociality that could reinstate trust, collaboration, and interest in the voices of others. They reestablished human relations within the Communist project.

This thesis is about the revival of a material and social existence amongst a small group of artists and thinkers. I argue that this scene, tucked inside decaying apartments or empty fields on the outskirts of the city, realized many of Marx's theoretical aspirations. They created a community of free individuals that produced collective "social objects;" they found freedom and friendship in this group of like-minded artists; and they were deeply reflective of their historical, ideological, philosophical, and cultural context--elaborating a dialogue about the status of their subjectivities within this totalitarian state. But what is important is that these artists created art with revolutionary potential. Their

"Conceptualism" was not the destruction of "art" as a consumable or commodifiable form,[179] but the delineation of a better world. By creating objects, the Moscow Conceptualists were creating things that would exist into the future, lasting markers of progress. And in this sense, the Conceptualists' resistance was one colored with revolution. Their art was an actual resistance, a real, material production of life to counter the one violently imposed by the regime.

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Unfortunately, my story isn't corroborated by the Moscow Conceptualists themselves. In the Moscow Conceptualists' accounts, they claim that they were far from being dissidents. They describe themselves as skeptical and heretic, but *not* political. Claire Bishop attributes their "apolitical" stance to the fact that, in their context, "political" denoted manipulation and propaganda.[180] Or maybe they were just dodging prosecution. Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, however, why would they still reiterate this claim? I can't answer that question, but my own understanding is that the Moscow Conceptualists were deeply political, if only by implication. The work of the Moscow Conceptualists was the space of their inhabitation: the un-officialness, intimacy, communal discussion, apartments, cold winters, littered hallways, statues of Stalin in the metro, Soviet life. Thus, by examining the "terminal affliction" of their own subjectivities within a densely political atmosphere, the Moscow Conceptual artists were examining the failure of Communism in the Soviet Union.[181]

In this space of hegemonic oppression and ideological uniformity, Moscow Conceptualist art distinguished itself from the devised life of the Soviet Union's totalitarianism. Their work was a *faktura* of this specific experience that forced everyone to live in a liminal space between human and ideal. To return to "On Emptiness," Kabakov describes the act of investigation as a journey *outside* reality. Their physical movements allowed the artists to inhabit a space on the periphery, an interstitial space that teetered between their deeply realistic understanding of life and survival in the USSR and a hermeneutic cultivation of an alternative conceptual world. By "conceptual world," I do not mean a world composed of abstractions, but rather a world in the process of

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[179] This is in spite of the fact that their objects were certainly not commodifiable.
[180] Bishop, "Zones of Indistinguishability: *Collective Actions Group* and Participatory Art."
[181] Kabakov, "On Emptiness," 59.

producing an ideal. Once outside the dominant system of reality, these artists could inspect their individual ideals and materialize another world. This was a form of resistance that didn't attack the government but slowly dissolved its hold on individual subjectivity.

What would be the implications if I said that, through Moscow Conceptualism, Marxism successfully materialized? Monastyrsky, Kabakov, the Gerlovins, Rubinstein, even Tupitsyn and Groys, actually created a world where there was a real solidarity, a communal means of production, collective authorship, meaningful social relations that inspired and cultivated inventive new forms, and a space where people were encouraged to voice themselves as individuals. When we say that "socialism failed" when the Soviet Union fell, we are assuming that socialism only lived in the state. But these people made their own socialism. There is a future in this. Why did Moscow Conceptualism succeed where the Soviet Union failed? Of course, there are endless reasons: in the Moscow Conceptual scene there were under 100 participants, there was no chance at real power, the participants were all interested in similar explorations, etc., etc. Maybe it was art. Maybe art was the material that can most successful embody Marx. Art was the common denominator, the material foundation of the Moscow Conceptualists' political critique, hermeneutic exploration, and internal speculation. The history of Marxist art history examines art as a production of culture and consciousness. Art is indisputably linked to subjectivity. The total art of the Soviet Union attempted to produce a new subjectivity, but, inevitably, just lost the subject. Moscow Conceptualism heals that loss through an artistic practice that cultivates subjectivity and fulfillment. They created a new glimmering ideal that they actually met.

Appendices

Appendix 1: "Factual Descriptions" of "Appearance" and "Ten Appearances" by *Collective Actions*

i. "Appearance" (Poiavlenie)

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 [182]

ii. "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, 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. 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

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[182] *Poezdki za gorod: kollektivnye deistvia* 1-5 vol., 25.
Translated in: Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989,* 74.

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 were 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 [183]

Appendix 2: Major texts included in Rimma and Valery Gerlovin(a)'s *Collective Farm*

i. manifesto of the "5 Year Plan" written by Rimma Gerlovina in 1986

FIVE YEAR PLAN

...implicates an intuitive mystification of a world model, in which the reality of utopia interfaces with the utopia of reality. Art reflects society in an oblique oration. Utilizing the language of a rationalistic proposal, we suggest

[183] "Ten Appearances" translated in Ross, ed., *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, 157-58.

that art itself is reminiscent of an abstract, international farm, having as its primary roots, economic, political, social, cultural, and other, consequent surplus values. This is not a community where individual creativity identifies itself with the collective interest, because the unity exists more in the subconscious. The world is not as large as man has 'painted.'

The anonymous art of early civilizations was succeeded by the renaissance's individualistic approach, which reached its apogee in modernism. Later the process went into reverse: towards mass consciousness again, science enlarged the gap between the intellectual avant-garde, which used its new knowledge as an instrument of culture, and society itself, which sees science, as well as art, mainly in terms of premises require a convergence of mundus sensibilis and mundus intelligibilis, since humankind's simultaneous desire for utility and individualism exist as a vital necessity.

Antiquity and the Middle ages saw the old world as an ideal order, accessible to intuition. Plato's teaching about the five regular bodies or Aristotle's principle of the year plan. Practicing the utopian methods of planning, we view art synoptically and see it as an interrelated whole; not as a random mixture, but as an organic and increasing-organism. The artist himself is free, loose, microworld, a syncretic unit of the multicellular life of individuals. This approach cannot be interpreted in a deterministic way, but rather as a dynamic order of irrationality. Mystification, grotesquerie and paradox flow out and into the frames of the ordinarily.

The allegory of planning is not an art-historical, but art-formative process. It is not the most typical process (as produced by mass taste), nor the best, because any taste is prejudiced. Our choice is extra conditional and symbolic, including the possible control of chance. So, the works of participating artists are evidence of the polyphonic collage—the author's idea.

Having been born in Russia and lived in America, we have tried to condense our experience of the two varieties of mass consciousness—one based on ideological, the other on monetary allegory. The American winged expression "no ideas but in things" is diametrically opposite its Russian mirror "no things but in ideas." We grew up suppressed by Soviet routine but still vital, full of idealistic, Russian energy. We have since observed an energetic American world full of salesmen and superstars, puttied with the mythology of egotistical individualism and possessive values.

Any society has a tendency toward the unification of human individuality. In our opinion, creativity interlaces with an inner harmony and ethic that exceeds the best social standards of any society. For personal freedom and the feeling of creative anarchy must be given and taken on the higher level of life—the metaconsciousness. The artistic mind has the ability, by intuition, to understand civilization with all its syncretism. This relationship gives meaning to things. Universals appear through the medium of the particular, to illustrate a principle you must exaggerate much and you must omit much.[184]

ii. "Theses" of Avant-Garbage, written by Victor Tupitsyn in 1981

THESES

1. The "Kolkhoz" is the most sublime form of NONCREATIVITY.
2. Collectivization, that is, the formation of a kolkhoz, is the process of forced induction into NONCREATIVITY.
3. or the mechanism of forced NONCREATVITY
4. Collectivization is preceded by the stage of raskulachivanie, after which the bright future of the Kolkhozian NONCREATIVITY is evidently scheduled to ensue. [185]

[184] Rimma Gerlovina, in *Collective Farm*, 1986.

[185] raskulachivanie: destruction of the class of kulaks, or prosperous independent farmers

5. No one is capable of achieving the snowy peaks of NONCREATIVITY alone. Only in a group of one's peers, that is, within the kolkhoz, is it possible to overcome creativity, a bad habit left over from an earlier period. Nevertheless this remnant of a former age is not at all easy to overcome, and force is required.
6. The prime form of kolkhozian construction is known as "Avant-Garbage."
7. This is a period of garbagistic masterpieces, garbagistic ideas and garbagistic attitudes.
8. The nirvana of absolute NONCREATIVITY represents the culmination of Kokhozian era.
9. By that time everyone will realize the absurdity of such statements as: "Garbage 'A' is more garbagistic than Garbage 'B.'"
10. NONCREATIVITY cannot be censored

New York Victor Tupitsyn [186]

Appendix 3: Excerpts from the Dictionary of Terms of Moscow Conceptualism, written by Andrei Monastyrsky and translated by Octavian Esanu.[187]

"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 points to the 1989 Foreword to Volume Fifth for the origins of this term, although "accidental passerby" was discussed by Nikita Alexeev as early as 1980.

[186] Victor Tupitsyn, in "Volume 1: Kolkhoz," 1981.
[187] Andrei Monastyrsky, *Slovari terminov moskovskoi kontzeptualinoi shkoly* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 1999).

Translated in: Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*

"Appearance" (*Poiavlenie*) – "...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)

"Communal Modernism" (*Kommunal'nyi modernizm*) – "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)

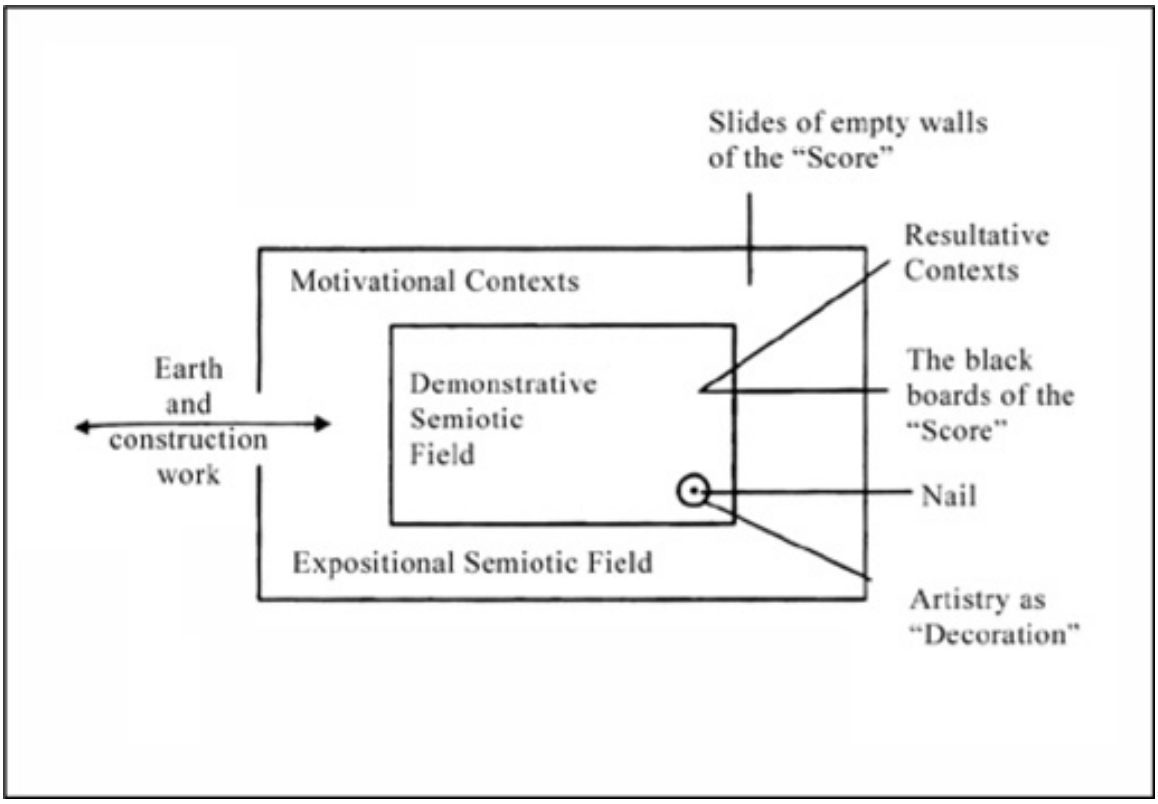

Figure 22. Andrei Monastyrsky, *Earth Works*, 1987, diagram. (reconstructed and translated by Octavian Esanu) http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=198&lang=en (accessed April 2, 2014).

"Emptiness" (*Pustota*) –"an extraordinarily active 'negative' space directed towards everyday reality and constantly seeking to 'swallow' it..." (*Dictionary* p. 75).

"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)

"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)

"Factographical Discourse" (*Faktographicheskii diskurs*) – "system of documentation used to establish multiple levels within the artistic event and various end results..." (*Dictionary* p. 90)

"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)

"Moscow Conceptualism" – "romantic, dreaming, and psychologizing version of the international conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s." (*Dictionary* p. 61)

"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)

"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 Groys' texts "Russia as the Unconscious of the West" (*Rossia kak podsoznanie Zapada*). (*Dictionary* p. 78)

"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)

"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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