

**Looking in the Wrong Direction:
Emptiness and the Aesthetic Feeling in the Early Works of Collective Actions**

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SUMMARY

This thesis examines the early works of Soviet conceptual performance art group Collective Actions, founded in 1976, and focuses on the way the group employed the concept of “emptiness” as a motif throughout its practice. Notions of nothingness, emptiness, and dematerialization dominate the visual language of much conceptual art in post-war Western and late-Soviet contexts and articulate a critical position vis-à-vis the old, assumed to be retrograde, notions of structure, State, and aesthetic form. I argue that the performance art practices of Collective Actions negotiate a productive relationship between emptiness and collectivity through artistic practice that relies on, at the time suspect, categories of structure, composition, and social form, articulating conditions for an aesthetic experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a joke from the late Soviet period, a man throws pamphlets on the Red Square, right outside Lenin's Mausoleum. A KGB officer arrests him on the spot only to find both sides of the leaflet blank. "Comrade, what are you doing?" the officer asks, "The leaflets are empty!" "What's the point," the arrested replies, "Everything is clear as is!" ("А всё и так понятно!"). The emptiness on a pamphlet—a format that presupposes a mass audience—the joke suggests, says as much, and perhaps even more, than any text or image could. "Everything" that could be worth communicating to the citizens of Moscow is perfectly encapsulated in the situation surrounding the empty sheet of paper. The blank pamphlet could be seen to indicate what artist Ilya Kabakov called "the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live"¹—a shared understanding of the present condition as an all-permeating sense of cruel absurdity, stifling in its ubiquity. The "Soviet situation" alluded to in the joke does not require form nor text (it is enough to be alluded to) to serve as a backdrop for the artworks of the last Soviet generation.

By the 1970s, a beleaguered Soviet state attempted to revive the sanctimonious visual language of Stalinist propaganda, but this return fostered a paradoxical effect. Mainstream visual culture no longer promised progress but instead situated itself within a timeless eternity, which led to a transformation of the imagined space *par excellence* from the explorable "cosmos" of the 1960s to stagnant "emptiness." As Nikita Khrushchev's Thaw came to a close, and the state's leniency in cultural and economic matters following the death of Stalin began to slowly dwindle, the official rhetoric worked to undo some of the liberatory effects that had been established. Now, with Leonid Brezhnev as the general secretary, familiar patterns of

¹ Ilya Kabakov, "On Emptiness," in *On Art* ed. Matthew Jesse Jackson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 35-42.

the State system's intervention into the realm of private and public life began to emerge as operative tools of control over the public sphere: reinstatement of the cult of personality rhetoric, tightening of censorship of arts and literature, and persecution of members of the intelligentsia. This change of official tone, which happened in a matter of years, laid bare the operational ability of the State to turn on a dime and utilize the ideological apparatus for the purpose of its own survival rather than the betterment of the people it claimed to serve. Eventually, the hollowing out of socialism's ideological corpus and the doubling down on policies of restriction ultimately led to the system's entropic disintegration. At the time, however, because these processes could not have been reflected upon, unmonitored, in official public spaces, they became a pervasive theme in unofficial art circles.

Many Moscow conceptualists harvested this new quality of "emptiness" felt where socialism had once been as a medium for a collective escape from the disappointments and restrictions of everyday life. As I will show in what follows, numerous artists in the late 1970s explored the newly emergent ideological void as a way to probe the notions of limitlessness, escape, and a continuous, melancholic diagnosing of "the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live," that were soon accepted as a postmodern truth.² I want to propose that working within the same conditions, the Collective Actions group offered a different articulation of emptiness as leitmotif. The Actions, organized by Andrey Monastyrski and Nikita Alekseev in the late 1970s, engaged with the aesthetic quality of emptiness and worked to articulate the possibility of human practice within an empty space.

² Kabakov, "On Emptiness," 35.

a. Collective Actions Group

Collective Actions is primarily known for its ongoing series of “Trips out of Town” consisting of minimal outdoor group actions that took place in fields and forests on the outskirts of Moscow. The inaugural performance organized, witnessed, and cataloged by the members of Collective Actions, was entitled *Appearance*. On March 13, 1976, a group of thirty Soviet men and women gathered on the edge of Ismailovskoye field in Moscow (Figure 1). They stood waiting on an empty, frozen-over field. After five minutes two figures emerged from the forest opposite the field and headed toward them (Figure 2). The two men were Andrei Monastyrski and Lev Rubenstein (Figure 3), members of the Moscow Conceptualism art movement. As the artists reached the opposite end of the field, they gave all the participants a bureaucratic note that certified that they had witnessed the *Appearance* (Figure 4). Despite the artists’ referring to the Actions as “empty,” each trip was a collective enterprise in facilitating an experience of anticipation, wonder, and heightened awareness.³ In the group’s practice, the interaction with the silent, the invisible, and the vast is inseparable from close attention to the interior life of the Soviet citizen, here a witness of the “empty action.”⁴

I will be focusing on Collective Action’s *Place of Action*, which occurred on October, 1979. A reconstruction of the Action through the myriad references to the disparate documentary materials accompanying each work provides a fragmentary, albeit nuanced, account of any given work. Because I insist on the group’s commitment to creating an artistic whole—a contained aesthetic event that allows itself to be considered as a complete entity—I want to first outline

³ Andrey Monastyrski, Preface to *Volume One* in *Trips out of Town*. 1980. Trans. Yelena Kalinsky, accessed September 5, 2021, <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-PREFACE-TO-1-VOLUME.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

what I imagine a participant's experience to have been like as she moved through the multiple stages, spaces, and tasks in *Place of Action's* open field, following the artist/organizers' instructions. While I will address the reading of documentation as an extension of the performative field, I want to first guide the reader of my text, this text, using the second person, through the short period of time in which the Action unraveled.

b. Action *Place of Action*

Every Action begins with a departure. Today is Sunday, and you get ready to take the public train out of the city. It will take you to the area near the Kiev Gorki village. Apart from the date, time, place, and names of the organizers of the event (Andrei Monastyrski and Nikita Alekseev), which are noted on the invitation you received several days ago, you know very little of what is going to happen there. What you do know is that you will be joined by friends, acquaintances, and possibly some unfamiliar faces from the unofficial art scene in Moscow. You most likely have heard, or even participated in some, of these collective gatherings. You dress warmly and might even pack some food to go—a little bit of bread, meat, maybe some cheese--it is not certain how long the action will last. And so, you depart.

You might take the train alone or with friends who were also invited to the Action. As you move further and further away from the city, the landscape around you transforms, becoming more bucolic, while the train moves smoothly along the forest belt. You arrive at the designated stop and find the field following the instructions on the invitation. You arrive at the site.

A vast open field surrounded by a wall of birch trees spreads before you. You join the group of those who came before you and receive another short list of instructions. You are asked

to cross the field following a line of cardboard circles that, hardly standing out against the darkness of the soil, punctuate the ground. Upon reaching each mark you will turn around and pose for a photograph. Sounds straightforward enough. Andrei Monastyrski, in a turtleneck sweater and beret, with binoculars and a piece of graph paper around his neck, paces nearby along the forest line, time and again directing his gaze across the (Figure 5). After the first couple of volunteers make their way from circle to circle and disappear over the horizon of the field, you take your first step toward the other side.

As you begin walking, you might experience a momentary feeling of untetheredness. There is nothing around you but open space in an enclosed ring of forest, your friends who came to the field with you are left behind and you do not know what happened to those in whose footsteps you are now following. This feeling may be akin to letting go of the edge of a pool and pushing yourself out towards the middle, now floating above the deep water. But this is no mindless drifting.

You reach the first cardboard mark on the ground and, as instructed, turn around to have your picture taken by maybe another participant. As you repeat the steps, moving further and further into the field, turning back again and again, the group of people appears smaller. You understand that for those on that side of the field, and for the camera, it is you that becomes more and more indistinguishable. As both you and the group you've left decrease in size respective of one another, the distance between you swells up with space and air. The vastness of the field becomes more palpable as you move across the space. But just before the natural vastness of the surroundings overwhelm you with a sublime force, you notice a curtain located directly on your path. You turn around for the last time—the figure of the photographer completely indistinguishable (Figure 6). Can they see you, back on the other side? Do they zoom in to record

more than just your presence? Maybe they stopped taking your picture a long time ago. And even if they did not, the last several photographs must have showed nothing but an empty field. Why, then, did you keep turning around? You turn back to your path, moving forward. You reach a curtain (Figure 7).

Between two vertically installed branches, there hangs a curtain made of purple and white fabric. The horizontal line connecting the two colors almost reminds one of the field's horizon line. The instructions attached to one of the poles tell you to open the curtain and lay down in a ditch. What is behind that curtain? What ditch? There is anticipation about crossing a threshold that suddenly attempts to break the continuous space you have been navigating. The attempt seems somehow tenderly naive—to break up a field that large, many kilometers of fabric would be necessary. You do not have to open the curtain to see what's on the other side—you could simply go around it. But you follow the instructions. You push the fabric of the curtain to the side and walk through.

Behind the curtain you, indeed, find a freshly dug rectangular ditch just big enough for a full-grown human body to fit it. And the spot is not vacant. The participant who went before you has been waiting patiently for you (Figure 8). You might share a smile or a comment about your walk across the field: "What's next?" He looks up at you and passes you a camera, you take a picture of him in the ditch, after which, he continues his walk across the field toward the opposite side, maybe to reunite with those who already completed their passage. You lay yourself down in the ditch. At first you feel slightly irritated about this part of the task. It is October, after all, and laying down in a damp hole in the ground is not the most appealing thing. But in fact, it is surprisingly roomy, comfortable. Someone laid down a blanket and it is still warm from the ditch's last inhabitant. You wait, holding the camera, for someone to come and

take your place. You look up at the open autumn sky and listen for the approaching footsteps. It might feel odd to reflect on the vastness of the surrounding space —both below and above— while you lay in a confined space. It somehow establishes a relationship between your body, neatly fitted into the rectangular opening, and the visual and spatial expanse that you cannot help but take note of. You hear someone approach the curtain. They move the fabric out of their way and find you in the ground. They look both surprised and happy to see someone familiar after a long and lonely walk. You smile and hand them the camera. After you give your spot to the newcomer, you continue your journey towards the opposite side of the field. You again move through the open space of the field, enjoying the expansive spaciousness that you were momentarily deprived of. You reach the woods.

Upon your arrival, you see familiar faces, one is that of an organizers, gathered around an announcement board that is hammered to a tree. You are welcomed and asked about your experience. You reply, and your response is immediately recorded on a tape recorder. There is someone taking pictures as well. You approach the board and find its contents dizzyingly disorienting. It is a schematic, mathematical account of the Action's plan (Figure 9). You see yourself and your fellow participants represented as numbers and shapes, your mark lost among many others. You try to reconcile the experience you just had with the borderline bureaucratic articulation of the collective motions through space on the board. You soon turn away and start a conversation with someone in the group. It is getting colder. Someone asks if anyone has anything to eat, and you share your food. There is a sense of a finale. Something just happened and you took part in it.

In the weeks that follow you might be invited to someone's apartment to look at the photographs and discuss the action. Someone made a film reel and printed all of the photographs

in order (Figure 10). You look at the reels, watching figures of people you know disappear and appear again. You listen to everyone's experience of the event and maybe sometimes wonder if everyone walked on the same field.

This imaginary reconstruction of the *Place of Action*, I hope, alludes to several elements that are foundational to my sense of what distinguishes the work of Collective Actions from other Moscow conceptualists during the 1970s.

First, the description of the work highlights the way an experience of spatial emptiness provides a fertile ground for imaginative leaps, reflections, and meditation on one's own positioning within the field. One way such an interaction with the empty space is achieved is through highlighting the inability of the material props to successfully intervene, circumvent, or fracture the spatial vastness. The small cardboard circles, while directing the participant's trajectory, remain modest and alien to the field's black earth. The curtain, although alluding to perhaps notions of privacy, secrecy, or a dramatically theatrical reveal, appears incapable of achieving such effects. The experience of the confinement in the ditch further highlights the experience of an expansive space of the field. Even in the post factum reading of the action, one cannot but reflect upon the way in which the photographic documentation, unable to depict anything more than a small portion of the spatial qualities of the action, asks the present reader to fill in the gaps and maintain, in her imagination, both the specifics of the work as well as the larger whole that contains them. *Place of Action* choreographs bodies in simultaneously real and abstract space. Abstract because in relation to the material and experiential components that structure the work, the spatial particulars of the field take on and stand for qualities that exist and have meaning beyond its specific instantiation of them. This relational dynamic brings me to my second point.

The Action relies on a series of tensions. It maintains within itself elements that contradict the very qualities of vastness and emptiness it wants to foreground. Some of these tensions are established between the individual and the group, orderliness and personal agency, the organizers and the participants, structure and open space, the visual and the auditory, the impressionistic and the schematic. Another relational tension I will discuss later in this work is that between the limitless, textual nothingness and the composed, artistic emptiness. These series of tensions contribute to the work's dynamics.

And finally, I hope that my reconstruction illustrates how the *Place of Action* articulates its borders. Both spatially and pictorially, the action presents a work that contains tensions, relations within a boundary. The Action presents an object of discussion, of interpretation and, in some ways, it indeed continues on long after the organizers and the participants depart. However, this continuation does not connote a never-ending unraveling of the event. Instead, it suggests a series of returns and reflections on the contained set of experiences. Although imperceptible at times, the natural borders of the field that contain the empty space are unescapably present throughout the participant's journey. The list of instructions, as well as the curtain, the ditch, the announcement board, and numerous modes of recording the Action enact miniature attempts to enclose the Action while existing in tension with the spatial vastness of the field. In what follows, I will address the way in which photographic and textual documentation work to maintain the shape of the action for the secondary viewer-reader-participant long after its completion. But what I wish to stress now is precisely the manner in which the boundaries of the work allow an experience of the Action that is akin to that of a work of art, something that feels like a complex social form.

The stakes of these observations are best understood when one considers the historical moment of the Collective Actions work as well as the parallel artistic tendencies within the unofficial art circle in the Soviet Union and the ambition of conceptual art in the West. For my purposes, I specifically want to foreground the expressions of disillusionment in and disavowal of political and cultural institutions which welcomed nothingness as productive metaphor into larger conversations about the art's function in the late Cold War era. Though they took different avenues, many Western and Soviet conceptual practices arrive at theorizations of varying voids as emancipatory practices. Thus, engagements with the notions of emptiness and nothingness carry a promise of liberty *from* structures in place, a freedom that was understood as radically antithetical to the existing institutions.

Unlike many of their contemporaries, Monastyrski and Alekseev seem to have made works that engaged with the notions of emptied forms not as means of ironic critique or formulations of an escape, theorizing an endless, boundless space forever distant from the Soviet everyday. Rather, their work seeks to formulate a way to imagine how one could inhabit and establish a human practice *in* an empty space. If Collective Actions were a Soviet citizen standing on the Red Square with a handful of empty leaflets, instead of handing them out one by one to the passersby, maintaining as self-evident the hopelessness of their shared situation, he would perhaps use the pamphlets to compose a patterned ornament on the cobble stone of the square, mapping the space, abstracting it, and using it not only for the purpose of his personal expression, but also for a different articulation of communal existence.

In what follows, I bring into a sharper focus the leitmotif of nothingness—so pervasive in Moscow conceptualism at large—and argue for Collective Actions' unique contribution to the articulation of late-Soviet emptiness as they engage with the inheritance of the historical avant-

garde and some contemporaneous artistic practices in the West. Collective Actions take one of conceptualism's dominant tropes—that of nothingness, dematerialization, boundlessness—and articulate it in a tangible, workable, and localized tension within the confines of a work of art.

II. OUT OF NOWHERE

a. Inventing Moscow Conceptualism

In the first part of this project, I will establish a conjunction between Western conceptualism of the 1970s and the work of first-generation Moscow conceptualists, analyzing both movements vis-à-vis the project of the historical avant-garde. The point of connection I hope to explore is both movements' ambition (either proclaimed or concealed) to establish some immediate, critical relationship to contemporary politics in their respective locations. Both movements do so, I argue, by engaging with and uncovering the gaps between the predominant political discourse and the material reality of the everyday experience. The emptying out of the ideological corpus of the Socialist official discourse in the Soviet Union paralleled the growing anxiety about the political complacency of institutionalized art in the West. The emerging disillusionment that arises around such voids is what I will treat as "empty spaces" within which the conceptualist aesthetic project resides.

While vastly different in their political trajectories, both Western and Moscow conceptual art movements engaged with the notions of emptiness as representative of political developments and aesthetic disillusionments of the time. Manifestations of emptiness, absence, and dematerialization were considered as potential avenues for the exploration and re-iteration of the problems at hand. In the West, the emptiness manifested itself in the assault on the material status of the art object, as in, for example, John Baldessari's *Everything Is Purged . . .*, 1967-8 (Figure 11), while for the unofficial Soviet artists of the 1970s, it was the artist himself who began to fade into thin air, as in Kichigin's *Studio*, 1982 (Figure 12) or Kabakov's *Man who flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985 (Figure 13).

The artistic practice of Collective Actions, however, offers a third way of approaching the idea of emptiness. Their approach locates aesthetic feeling in the space they outline within participatory performances, and it is primarily an aesthetic of vast but limited, thus controllable, spatiality. They circumvent political pretenses to salvage the aesthetic experience available on the outskirts of the everyday. Like much conceptual art, each action is purposively composed to facilitate a turning away from aesthetic objects and a decentering of the artist's role in order to enhance the aesthetic experience for the Action's participants. To situate the work of Collective Actions and its main organizer, Andrei Monastyrski, within the context of the Moscow art scene, it is worth taking the time to expand upon the diverse approaches to the notion of emptiness in Western and Soviet post-war practices.

b. "Zero Form" in the Russian Avant-Garde

Various forms of void⁵ emerged for those artistic practices of early twentieth-century Russia that rejected the traditional notions of beauty. Because highly aestheticized, commodified objects were seen in immediate connection to the bourgeoisie, avant-garde artists choose an artistic direction that went radically against traditional notions of beauty and toward a new system of pictorial relations. From that necessary step of destruction and annihilation of the old emerged the necessity to locate oneself in an absolute field of unadulterated artistic potential.

The political vanguard was not as radical as the aesthetic one—Kazimir Malevich announces the "zero form" in 1915, two years before the October Revolution. What is worth noting is the way

⁵ I use this term because I believe it characterizes both notions—"nothingness" and "emptiness"—in a general enough manner. A void, for my purposes, refers to a material "naught," a presence of an absence. Its spatial and material ambiguity allows me to use it as an umbrella term. While later, this thesis will thoroughly outline the difference between (literary) "nothingness" and (plastic) "emptiness," I want to highlight their shared origin which accounts for their commonalities and allows me to foreground their dissimilarities.

in which the aforementioned “void” or “zero,” as it was theorized in major avant-garde works, was not conceived of as an end in and of itself, a kind of nihilism, but rather a necessary point of arrival, a stop on the way toward a new world altogether.

Most notably, Malevich was the artist who championed most vehemently the notions of destruction and emancipatory cleansing of the past through the necessary intermediary step of achieving a kind of empty state, referred to as “zero.” Malevich systematically worked to strip all forms of their embellishments, arriving at what he calls “zero form,” and worked to reduce the color palette to primary colors only. “I have transformed myself *in the zero of form*,” Malevich writes in 1915, “and have fished myself out of the *rubbishy slough of academic art*.”⁶ For Malevich, the painterly change is not limited to the space depicted on canvas but affects the world and him.

Literary scholar Nikolai Firtich argues the relationship between futurist poetry at the time and Malevich’s engagement with the “zero” symbolism against the backdrop of the intermingling of the arts in early twentieth century Russia.⁷ Firtich argues that the futurist poetry of Aleksei Kruchenykh, namely, his libretto to the futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* played a decisive role in Malevich’s articulation of “zero form.” (Figure 14) Firtich outlines the evolution of “zero” symbolism in Malevich’s work as follows:

Appearing at the beginning as a departure point for existing beyond the limits of the logical progression of numbers, moving beyond the boundaries of art reduced to “zero” by reason, this sign gradually acquires a more metaphysical meaning, initially as a symbol in which one must “dissolve” (“rastvorit’sja”) in order to enter the Non-Objective

⁶ Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” in *Russian Art of the Avant Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 116-135.

⁷ Zero also looms large in post-war art and literary discourses throughout Europe. To mention few instances: Roland Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* published in 1953, and the ZERO Group artist collective that emerged in post-war Germany and spread to several European countries in the 1950s’.

world, and eventually becomes in *The Suprematistic Mirror* the symbol of the infinite God, the divine “nonentity”⁸

Malevich gradually developed his conception of “zero” into a system of objective and non-objective relations. *The Suprematic Mirror*, published in 1923, describes the “zero” “as a mirror-like boundary between two worlds—objective and non-objective.”⁹ “The zero itself,” Firtich explains, “is seen by Malevich as a symbol of absolute infinity”¹⁰ that underlies the scientific, mathematical, and metaphysical essence of the world. Here, “zero form” is not nothing, but rather everything to the heights of its potential, a pure potentiality.

For Malevich, the notion of “becoming zero” is intimately connected with the conception of the abandonment of reason along with the rejection of one’s material self “in order to perceive the ‘higher logic’ of the transcendent.”¹¹ Looking back at *Victory Over The Sun*’s black and white set design, one can imagine the black triangle signifying partial eclipse of light, sun, or reason, reaching a total eclipse in Malevich’s *Black Square* painted two years later (Figure 15). At first sight, such an arrangement can strike one as peculiar double logic—an insistence on both scientific progression of things and a complete rejection of reason. However, for the futurists and the suprematists, the nonsensical “worldbackwards” that was illustrated in Kruchenykh’s poetry was seen as “fully scientific” by Jakobson, who declared it to be “clearly outlined in the relativity principle.”¹² The often seemingly nonsensical poetry of the futurists, Kruchenykh being one of their most notable representatives, promoted the idea of the abandonment of reason as a

⁸ Nikolai Firtich, “Rejecting ‘The Sun of Cheap Appearances’: Journey Beyond ‘Zero’ with Kruchenykh, Malevic, Bely, Jakobson and Jean-Luc Godard,” *Russian Literature* 65 (2009): 359.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 365.

¹² Ibid, 364.

way of liberating oneself from the oppressive systems of superficial “cheap appearances” and grasping the vastness of the universal order of things.

What is important here, for my purposes, is not only the way in which the Russian avant-garde formulates its understanding of the importance of “zero,” but also the degree to which literature—the written word—affects and even shapes that very understanding. The consideration of nothingness in visual art does not only inevitably transform the notion but also relies on the congruence of visual and literary arts. In other words, while conceptions of “nothingness” in literature are abstract, in art, they are inevitably given form, introduced into physical space, put in front of the viewer. This asks one to consider the emptiness which is contained within a space available for interaction with and penetration by human bodies, rather than nothingness which demands an admission of absolute absence.

As the legacy of the historical avant-garde echoes through the post-war art movements that assumed, whether by intention or historical circumstance, varying degrees of political positionality—either actively engaging or actively disengaging with the contemporaneous political machinations—the topic of voids, absences, and emptying remained as central to art’s formal manifestations as to the consideration of its political function.

c. Western Conceptualism and the Dematerialization of the Work of Art

The most direct way in which Western conceptualism of the 1960s engages the question of emptiness is through the notion of the dematerialization of the art object. The idea is that conceptual art uses as its point of departure (and destination), not the formal elements of visual art but concepts, intellectual musings, ideas first and foremost. It thus follows that conceptual artwork is articulated not through the use of paint, marble, and other malleable materials, but ethereal concepts and ideas. The concept is then all: the point of departure, the “material” of the

artwork, and the output of the conceptual art practice. This reduction, if not eradication, of an artwork's material form was understood to be politically emancipatory insofar as it aims to avoid commodification and directly engage with the minds of the audience.

In her account of the phenomenon of dematerialization, Lippard establishes the art-historical trajectory that outlines the gradual transformation of artistic practices that, arriving at the post-war American art world, move beyond the material. This movement into the beyond appears to follow the logic of both scientific ambition and utopian transcendentalism, as “beyond” is hardly a destination, but rather a general direction. Lippard understands this expansive characteristic of dematerialization as a place for an expansive growth:

Involved with opening up rather than narrowing down, the newer work offers a curious kind of Utopianism which should not be confused with Nihilism except in that, like all Utopias, it indirectly advocates a *tabula rasa*; like most Utopias it has no concrete expression.¹³

Lippard connects this new development in art with the notion of the anti-aesthetic: “after the intuitive process of recreating aesthetic realities through man's own body, the process of reproduction or imitation,” the aesthetic gives way to the scientific: “mathematical logic,” Lippard declares, “enters into art.”¹⁴

The connection between the mathematical denotations of “emptiness” and the Utopian aspirations of dematerialized art rests on the totalizing character and inherent un-achievability of the two—zero, just like a utopia, implies a state that is so absolute in its totality it exceeds all

¹³ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler “The Dematerialization of Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 46-50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

possible material manifestation of its form. Much like an idea, it is materially boundless precisely because it does not possess a material form.¹⁵

“When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas,” Lippard explains, “they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or ‘art-as-art.’”¹⁶ While the question of a medium’s material support will be addressed shortly, here it appears that for Lippard, “medium” refers only to a mediating *function* and does not entail any sort of relationship between idea and a materially present form. “The studio,” Lippard writes “is again becoming a study.”¹⁷

Concluding her account, Lippard writes:

the artist has achieved more with less, has continued to make something of ‘naught’ fifty years after Malevich’s *White on White* seemed to have defined naught for once and for all. We still do not know how much less ‘nothing’ can be, has an ultimate zero point been arrived at with black paintings, white paintings, light beams, transparent film, silent concerts, invisible sculpture, or any of the other projects mentioned above? It hardly seems likely.¹⁸

Conceptual art expands the anti-aesthetic premise and extends it into the realm of dematerialization, since the latter promises to have no bounds and, therefore, limitless possibilities. The notion of boundlessness, of unlimited, unregulated, unsupervised choosing carries a faint echo of both commodity-fetishism and utopian dreams: a (neo-liberal) market logic which equates the vastness of options with a vehemently advanced yet vaguely defined notion of *freedom*. To achieve the “naught” and then move into a surplus of “nothing” (the less of nothing, the more of nothing) is, in a way a project that can be most adequately addressed

¹⁵ This immaterial boundlessness acquires an attractive quality as it raises notions of sublimity, purity of death, and a kind of innocence that comes with an abdication of any set positionality vis-à-vis material structures of one’s reality.

¹⁶ Ibid, 49.

¹⁷ Ibid, 46.

¹⁸ Ibid, 50.

through the written/spoken work rather than an artwork. It is hard to speak of the immateriality of an artwork without entering a state of hyper-theoretical detachment from materiality. Though, of course, for such a state to be achieved, there must be a material one can detach from. In other words, in art, there is always a “there” there. What is the possible limitation of the investment in the limitlessness?

In his response to Lippard’s contemplation of dematerialization, British artist Terry Atkinson speaks to this tension between the conceptual dematerialization of the work of art and its actual, irrevocable belonging to the material world. “[Y]our usage of ‘dematerialization,’” Atkinson writes to Lippard, “is a metaphorical one.”¹⁹ To favor the poetic device as a lens through which to examine the artwork’s material status would mean to avoid the degrees in which the medium adds to the work itself, and to displace one’s sensory experience in favor of the intellectual, individualistic machinations. Lippard speaks about the invisibility of the artwork in terms of the way in which the concept is positioned downstage center, leaving its form to linger upstage. “It is more than plain then,” Atkinson writes, “that when a material entity becomes dematerialized it does not simply become non-visible (as opposed to invisible), it becomes an entity which cannot be perceived by any of our senses.”²⁰ The degree of visibility does not speak so much about the material state of the object but rather speaks to the senses the audience resorts to in their experience of the artwork. “That some art should be directly material and that other art should produce a material entity only as a necessary by-product of the need to record the ideas is not at all to say that the latter is connected by any process of dematerialization

¹⁹ Terry Atkinson, “Concerning the Article ‘The Dematerialization of Art’” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 52.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

to the former.”²¹ Atkinson’s response to Lippard’s notion of dematerialization puts pressure on often self-evidently presented dualisms of material-immaterial, feeling-thought, artist-viewer that emerge in considerations of conceptual art and might urge us to explore a different axis along which the development of the artistic object can be mapped: medium.

In several essays on conceptual art, art historian Rosalind Krauss addresses the precarious status of material support in works of late modernism. Specifically, Krauss considers the role photography, above all other media, plays in the demise of media-specificity and the notion of medium as such. For Krauss, photography lost “its deconstructive force by passing out of the field of social use into the twilight zone of obsolescence,”²² which allowed it to traverse from the realm of medium-specificity into that of theoretical inquiry. The ubiquity of photographic images and the commodification of photographic practice, Krauss appears to suggest, took away from photography’s ability to perform a deconstructive function in art. Because of its already unstable ontological nature, as an image copy without an original, a photograph was transformed into what Krauss calls a “theoretical object” by leaving “behind its identity as a historical or an aesthetic object.”²³ The outmoded, invisible to the aesthetic register (due to its ubiquity), amateurish nature of the photographic liberated photography from the specificity of its medium and without leaving a trace on the artwork as such. In other words, the artwork can be said to make a claim on existing, to a degree, independently from its support. “For photography converges with art as a means of both enacting and documenting a fundamental transformation whereby the specificity of the individual medium is abandoned in favor of a practice focused on

²¹ Ibid, 54.

²² Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 292.

²³ Ibid.

what has to be called art-in-general, the generic character of art independent of a specific, traditional support.”²⁴

As numerous conceptualists note, however, independence from material support does not produce an absolute autonomy, but rather promises a certain kind of purity, or independence from, as Robert Smithson put it, "industry, commercialism, and the bourgeoisie" that are, in reality "very much with us." ²⁵ Smithson compares this striving for a purified work of art with an intoxicating religious feeling: "purity is the opiate, the reward they [artists] get."²⁶ The extent to which conceptual purity alludes to the immateriality of the idea reminds us that the merging of art and critique has been one of the objectives of the conceptual project from the get-go in the mid-1960s United States. In line with its utopian character, this newly dematerialized art brings in novel ways of interacting. "The dematerialization of the object might eventually lead to the disintegration of criticism as it is known today," Lippard explains, because "if an object becomes obsolete [...] the objective distance becomes obsolete."²⁷ The state of boundlessness, reminiscent to the limitless nature of the market, is now accessible through the elimination of objective distance. In his introduction to *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, art historian Blake Stimson explains this shift as an attack on the critic (personified most often by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried) resulting in a "particular Oedipal struggle" that presupposes and resents a

²⁴ Ibid, 294.

²⁵ Robert Smithson interviewed by Bruce Kurtz in 1972, first published in *The Fox*, no. 2 (1975) and reprinted in Smithson, *Collected Writings*, pp. 264-265. As quoted in Blake Stimson, "The Promise of Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), xlv.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lippard, "The Dematerialization of Art," 49.

paternalistic relationship between theory and art, the former assumed to be necessary for art to "be explained by the civilized critic."²⁸

This assertion of independence was potentially liberating from many spheres of cultural production that were seen as complicit in—and whose response was seen as inadequate to—the political realities of the time. The late 1960s burgeoning political crisis spilled over into the cultural realm. In the attempt to be rid of the critic, to democratize the artwork and its institutions, to meet the political moment, Conceptual art rejected medium-specificity. In an essay "A Voyage on the North Sea," Krauss explains that conceptualism, by abandoning the pretense of artistic autonomy and "by willingly assuming various forms and sites ... saw itself securing a higher purity of Art, so that in flowing through the channels of commodity distribution it would not only adopt any form it needed but would, by a kind of homeopathic defense, escape the effects of the market itself."²⁹

d. Moscow Conceptualism and Emptiness

Drawing a parallel between Western conceptualism and its Moscow namesake presents numerous methodological complications. To speak of the unofficial late-Soviet artists as belonging in any meaningful way to the post-war art context in the West is to lose sight of the artists' accounts at the time and to look at their practice with a strictly Western eye, often blind to the intricacies of alternative positions vis-a-vis the political. The assumed positionality of political opposition is often assigned to late-Soviet artists and presumes that "unofficial" is synonymous with "dissident." It is this system of equivalences that allows Rene and Matthew

²⁸ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 12-16.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 11.

Baigell to title their volume of interviews with late-Soviet artists (most of them émigrés) "Soviet Dissident Artists," while a great deal of the artists, again and again, refuse the term and express surprise and often annoyance when asked about the dissident aspects of their political practices.³⁰ This is not to say that artists took no political positions, but to understand all late-Soviet unofficial practices as inherently politically charged, as opposed to retroactively politicized, is to fit a large body of work into too tight of a mold. The common practice, for example, of referring to Sots-Art as the Soviet Pop-Art, robs the historicity of the former, as well as its lyrical undertones. It smooths the edges around its scratchy relationship with Soviet cultural practice at the time. Scholarship on the artistic back-and-forth between Eastern and Western conceptualists remains wanting, and the work of better positioning Moscow conceptualists historiographically remains to be done.

However, what is undeniable is that the two movements share the political moment—the ongoing Cold War—and engage with the legacy of the historical avant-garde (albeit the modes of this engagement differ). I want to suggest that both of these points of similarity led the conceptualists to the question of "emptiness" as potentially fruitful for their respective political and cultural situations. I argue that if the Western branch of conceptualism indeed operated under the pretenses of avant-garde political ambition while bypassing its forms, the late Soviet artists established an inverse relationship to the historical avant-garde. Namely, a peculiar distancing from the leftist utopianism adopted by the early-twentieth-century art movement coupled with the utilization and, at times, aping of its forms for newly articulated ends. A similar argument has been made, though not fully developed, by scholar Svetlana Boym, who writes:

³⁰ Renee Baigell, Mathew Baigell, eds., *Soviet Dissident Artists: interviews after Perestroika* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

While Western followers of the Russian avant-garde embrace the social message and try to see the utopian as possible, the Russian architects embrace the artistic potential, blatantly defying official collective imperatives. They might have shared forms, but not their understanding.³¹

This respective inversion of the relationship to the avant-garde results in two different approaches to the questions of absences, disappearance, and voids. In the West, the art objects become de-materialized following the material development of the arts, as it is understood, to reach a dead end. In the Soviet context, art object production does not cease. However, in many cases, the figure of the artist begins to lose its contours as he engages in a recycling of forms, an articulation of absences (that assumes his absence as well), and an expression of the weakened, peripheral (in comparison to the Russian avant-garde artists) positionality vis-a-vis the political.

The theme of disappearance was not exclusive to conceptualist works in the Soviet Union. In his 1982 painting *Studio. The Central Part* (Figure 12), realist painter Georgi Kichigin offers the literal shadow of a painter to the seemingly unstable ontology of the inhabitants of the artist's studio. In the painting's foreground, the painter's tools are depicted—a messy arrangement of oil paints, rags, paint thinner, and spackles. The tools look abandoned as the human figures seem to face each other, or the world beyond the window frame. This cancellation of material objects, bundled tightly on a small painter's table, remains grounded in the material world (perhaps the world of the viewer). The brown horizontal strip that works to signify some terrestrial material belonging pulls the artist's appliances toward the bottom of the canvas, amplifying their weight and materiality. It is, however, not entirely clear what the brown horizontal represents. What is clear is that it works as a kind of a barrier between the artist's tools and the shadow-work that takes place on the wall behind.

³¹ Svetlana Boym, "Ruins of the Avant-Garde," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell, Andreas Schonle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 76.

On a blank white wall, two human figures cast a shadow. The bare bones of the easel mimic the geometry of the window. The canvas is absent, and the material surrounding the studio becomes the material support for the artistic expression. One of the men stands up, gesticulating while the other figure watches the speaker, sitting down. The second figure brings his hand up to his face as if taking a drink or, perhaps, a photograph. The painting, paradoxically, speaks to the shortcomings of its own material support. It would appear that whatever is worth capturing resides in the sphere of the performative—participation in a communicative exchange. At the same time, *The Workshop* alludes to the fleeting, transitory position occupied by the unofficial artists vis-a-vis the outside world, as well as the notion that the most important things happen in private, small circles, away from the centers of material tools of power.

In the practice of the artists that worked under the umbrella of Moscow conceptualism, the disappearance of the artist's figure manifested itself in varying modes—not representing the artist's absence but reproducing it. In the installation works of Ilya Kabakov, for example, the artist seems to have recently departed or is dissolved in the crowd of the audience—he flies away from his apartment, he hides in closets, he goes underground. Yet in other works, Kabakov strives for an intimate, collective experience by publicly reading his illustrated albums in front of a group of close acquaintances,³² alluding to the childhood bed-time stories or formal language of constructivist works.

In published statements, Kabakov rejects any direct engagement with the avant-garde heritage, claiming improbably that most of the unofficial art circle were not familiar with any artistic tradition preceding them and had to start “from scratch.”³³ In his *Composition in*

³² Among Kabakov's myriad artistic practices was one of public readings of his illustrated albums, sharing his illustrations and speaking about his work.

³³ Ilya Kabakov, interviewed by David A. Ross, in *Ilya Kabakov*, ed. Groys et al., 13.

Constructivist Style (Figure 16) from 1962³⁴, a gray plane undermines the sequence of almost primary colors (there are two shades of red, barely distinguishable from one another), and the irregularity of the black form surrounding the perfectly square central arrangement throws the rectangular composition out of balance. While many constructivist works relied on the dynamic potentiality of new materials (be it pictorial or kinetic), Kabakov's *Composition*, undoes any potential functionality. Looking at the work, one feels the loosely packed blocks are almost falling out of their box-like, ragged frame. One can see the formal kinship between Kabakov's work and Aleksandr Rodchenko's constructivist design for the 1925 exhibition of *Industrial Art of the Soviet Union in Paris* (Figure 17). Similar to Rodchenko's work, Kabakov's arrangement of red, gray, and black squares and rectangles articulate a formal system dictated by the geometric qualities of its components. Rodchenko assembles a kind of technocratic unity in his constructed system. Kabakov's composition, on the other hand, "proffers a grammar of paradox," as Matthew Jesse Jackson writes, "of entropic circuitry, of a system that works but does not work well, or at least not as one supposes it should."³⁵ In other words, "[t]he work is in 'constructivist style' but not 'constructivist' enough to satisfy a Constructivist."³⁶ Satisfying one's elders, however, is not something Kabakov strives for. The (il-)logic of error, for him, carries an important aspect of his practice. As Jackson puts it: "the contemplation of error challenges one to formulate new interpretive criteria."³⁷ The constructivist concern with the material integrity of

³⁴ The same year, Camilla Gray introduced Russian Avant Garde to English-speaking readers with "The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922."

³⁵ Matthew Jesse Jackson. *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 64.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 65.

the work is also absent here. Kabakov does not seem to be interested in the failure of material but rather that of the constructivist logic—its driving aspirations.

In light of Kabakov's engagement with the constructivist "style," a school of art that was devoted to acting as one of the informational elements of the socialist project, his work can be seen as disavowal of the idea of political cooperation between the artist and the state. No longer tethered to a political project, Kabakov explores plastic elements of his works as tools of diagnosing the disintegration of the official aesthetic language and means of exploration of the limitless beyond visible through the cracks in the façade of the socialist official doctrine. In that way, Kabakov often explores his own inability to express the boundlessness, but only to, as he puts it, "describe it s a doctor might describe the history of an illness with which he is terminally afflicted."³⁸

Concurrently, among the Moscow conceptualists, despite the seemingly concerted effort to minimize the discursive political dimension of their work there was nonetheless a sense of accomplishment that came with the end of the Stagnation period. In conversation with Bart De Baere, art historian and curator Joseph Backstein notes, "it looked as though we had won. Because of us perestroika could take place ... I remember this feeling between 1987 and 1992."³⁹ I want to consider this statement in light of unambiguous distancing from the artistic and historical heritage of the early 20th century. Many, including Kabakov and Monastyrski, expressed being either unaware or disinterested in avant-garde techniques. Kabakov claims "I found out about them [avant-garde artists] when I was almost forty [i.e., 1973], and by that time

³⁸ Kabakov, "On Emptiness," 42.

³⁹ Joseph Backstein and Bart De Baere, *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and Its Influence* (Antwerp: Europalia, 2005), 17.

they were dead for me. The majority of us didn't know about any traditions at all. We all started from scratch."⁴⁰ In correspondence with Yelena Kalinsky (October 14, 2011), Monastyrski writes,

"I cannot say where the word factography came from, but I think that in a sense, I somehow 'invented' it (from the word 'fact'), since I did not know the tradition of the 1920s–1930s. Or rather, I knew LEF and Novyi LEF and all of these names, but the theme of factography and this word . . . I did not know and was not interested in—these were, after all, Soviet problems, Communist problems, and I was absolutely uninterested in them."⁴¹

However, "The notion that we Russians are barbarians," sculptor Ernst Neizvestny explains, "is simply not true. I studied Russian avant-garde art when I was a student and also when we started our underground group."⁴² Rejection of the historical avant-garde (as a political statement) was a statement of disappointment and disillusionment with its "Fabian socialism," as Neizvestny puts it. Yet Moscow conceptualists nonetheless called upon and reproduced many techniques implemented by the artists of the early 1920s (allusions to constructivist and cubist aesthetics in the works of Kabakov, factographic methods in the work of Collective Actions).

To square these idiosyncrasies, however broadly, it is worth noting the peculiar way in which the generation of artists in question occupied the space of the Russian avant-garde: not as inheritors of its project, but as inhabitants of its ruins.⁴³ Indeed, Kabakov did not have to study constructivism to know how to reproduce its forms. Most prominent in the capital's architecture and popular visual culture, visual tropes from the avant-garde comprised the backdrop for the

⁴⁰ Ilya Kabakov, interviewed by David A. Ross, in Boris Groys, et. al. eds., *Ilya Kabakov* (New York: Phaidon, 1998), 13.

⁴¹ Yelena Kalinsky, "Drowning in Documents: Action, Documentation, and Factography in Early Work by The Collective Actions Group," *ARTMargins* 2:1 (2013), 100.

⁴² Ernst Neizvestny, interviewed by Renee Baigell in *Soviet Dissident Artists*, 81.

⁴³ Svetlana Boym, "Ruins of the Avant-Garde," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell, Andreas Schonle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 58-85.

Soviet everyday. This positioning vis-à-vis the avant-garde, both intimate and excruciatingly distanced, allowed the artists to re-invent, or re-cycle, the all-too-familiar forms in a shallow way, establishing an artistic practice that tackled its socio-political conditions tangentially, rather than head-on as in the Western case.

Dematerialization of the art object and engagement with the unsubstantiated promises of old ideological orders (in consumer-capitalism in the West and late socialism in USSR) pushed artists and their audiences to consider the instances of emptiness as symptomatic of their situation. In other words, while in the West, the artists worked to make the object disappear to liberate it from the confines of the commodity-production, the Soviet unofficial artists were unmaking themselves.

e. An Action in an Empty Space

As mentioned above, while the historiographic account of the reception of Western post-war art during the Thaw and Stagnation periods in the Soviet Union is still to be written, I rely on the accounts of the artists from that period as well as select publications on this topic to outline the complex ways in which Western art at the time affected the modes of artistic thought among the Moscow unofficial art scene. In her brief account of this topic, art historian Yelena Kalinsky recounts the first time Nikita Alekseev and Andrei Monastyrski (founders of the Collective Actions) encountered a work of Western conceptual art. In a Soviet-published volume *Modernism: Analysis and Critique of the Main Trends* (1969), a book that was ideologically charged to dismantle the artistic practices produced in the “spiritual crisis of rotting capitalism,”⁴⁴ the young artists came upon Dennis Oppenheim’s *Replanting Corn on the Bottom*

⁴⁴ Yelena Kalinsky, “The View from Out Here: Western Conceptual Art in the Moscow Conceptualist Imagination,” *Athanor XXIX* (2011): 97.

of the Ocean from 1969 (Figure 18). To think through the importance of this encounter, Kalinsky asks whether “the experience of misplacement and imaginative travel prompted by Monastyrski and Alekseev’s discovery of Oppenheim’s underwater photograph” could have somehow informed Collective Actions practice of “escaping the over-signified space of the city” and landing their participants “into a realm of pure potential in the empty, snow-covered field.”⁴⁵ In other words, Monastyrski and Alekseev seek to recreate the feeling “of pure potential,” of wonder and anticipation that the art object elicited but not the object itself. To achieve such an effect, the artists were presented with the task of creating hybrid works that relied on a different question: that of documentation, discussed in the next section.

The reason performance is particularly interesting in considering the Moscow conceptualists’ relationship to the historical avant-garde as well as the Western contemporaneous practices is the way in which Collective Actions works toward a collective, artistic, unsupervised reformulation of the real physical space. Collective Actions appear to articulate an artwork-specific set of circumstances that allow for numerous tensions to take place within their bounds. An Action then operates within an enclosed space that is both defined through the action itself and the subsequent shared recollections of individual participants.

In the Soviet context, what Stimson calls the conceptual “burden of endless philosophizing about the meaning of art, the burden of the shift from object-based aestheticism to a language- and theory-based anti-aestheticism” can be theorized as a response to the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 98.

homogeneous, oppressive state apparatus that was precisely active during the era of Stagnation. The “clear-as-is” state of affairs carries the political punch of the conceptual artwork.

What sets Collective Actions apart from its contemporaries is a lack of preoccupation with the conceptual rejection, inversion, and direct subversion of modern artistic traditions. Because of their commitment to confined, outlined boundaries of each Action their works bring attention to that which they enclose, not that which they lack. Like *Place of Action*, many other works by the group insist, for example, on the concentration of its participants as they complete the assigned tasks. Additionally, Collective Actions’ concern with myriad tensions among the compositional elements of the actions and their relationality contributes to the aesthetic experience that appears to have been demoted to the unimportant, if not unfavorable, property of art in case with Western and Moscow Conceptualisms.

The Action populates empty spaces without filling them in. It plans the trajectories and traces the steps of the participants, it is eager to record each reaction, every comment. This points toward a particularly distinctive approach to the question of voids, emptiness, dematerializations, and myriad degrees of absences that contemporaneous art movements articulate. Collective Actions does not invest in notions of a disembodied emptiness, considered from the outside (once we leave, hide, fly away, immigrate), nor does it dwell on the ways in which we can approach the subject from a critical distance alone. It is rather interested in articulating what we are in emptiness, what kind of relationship to the experience—our own and that of a friend—can we make a claim to under the conditions of radical blankness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I see the latter in opposition to the postwar anti-enlightenment tradition, beginning already in 1943 with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, that posits that

III. OUT OF TOWN

a. Emptiness and Periphery in Factographic Practice

A careful approach to the question of documenting the live Actions will position the work of Collective Actions firmly in the artistic context of its time. To situate emptiness as a central, period-specific concept within the practice of Collective Actions is to recontextualize the very practice of late-Soviet performance in a way that encompasses the larger aesthetic context specific to the historical moment. For my purposes, what is of importance is the way in which the documentation does not only play a role as a material proof of the Action post-factum, but also as an abstract compositional element during the performance. The foregrounding of the incompleteness of the documentary evidence undoes the staunchly factual role one could assign to a voice recording or a photograph. What the document does, I argue, is contribute to the maintenance of the borders of the performative field.

In reflecting on his use of documentary material, Monastyrski often relies on the term “factography” to name such engagement with the document. Monastyrski claims to have invented the term to name the documentary component of his practice. Factography, however, has a long history in the avant-garde practices of the early twentieth century.

In his account of the emergence of factographic practice, "From Factura to Factography," Benjamin Buchloh argues that factography emerged in the moment of crisis of plastic

“nothingness” defines much of one’s experience of existence. In her consideration of Sartre’s writing, Meghan Vicks contrasts Sartre’s conception that “nothingness only comes into the world through the being of man” with Martin Heidegger’s notion that “human existence (Dasein) only occurs by being held out in the nothing” (Vicks, 38). While the period-specific phenomenological discourse proposes theorizing “nothingness” in the realm of literature and metaphysics, the notion of spatial emptiness as an aesthetic, workable quality of an artwork presents an alternative to such phenomenological considerations.

credibility.⁴⁷ For constructivists, faktura (the material quality of the work) was no longer able to establish effective communication with a mass audience, which led, according to Buchloh to the development and mass implementation of the factographic practice of photomontage.

Photomontage established an immediate relationship between the art and the contemporaneous social and political project through photographic imagery and what Buchloh characterizes as a “cinematic” viewing (Figure 19). The problem the artists were trying to solve was reducing the distance between the artwork and the new material reality of a communist social order and the new viewer.

Factography arises in response to “a crisis of audience relationships, a moment in which the historical institutionalization of the avant-garde had reached its peak of credibility, from which legitimation was only to be obtained by a redefinition of its relationship with the new urban masses and their cultural demands.”⁴⁸

In the photo reels printed out after the *Place of Action* (Figure 10), factography injects the photographic into the work of art in order to construct a totality: “Photomontage at its present stage of development uses finished, entire photographs as elements from which it constructs a totality.”⁴⁹ Thus, factography presents fragments of a whole brought together in a single visual statement.

The ‘factographic discourse’—the approach to the document as an important part of every work—did not occur simultaneously with the start of the Collective Actions’ practice. It developed later, by the time of the second volume of *Trips Out of Town* in 1983. It is during that

⁴⁷ Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October 30* (Autumn, 1984): 82-119.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁹ Lissitzky, “Der Künstler in der Produktion,” *Proun*, pp. 113ff. quoted in Buchloh, 102.

time, in the early 1980s, that the practice of documentation was interwoven into the fabric of every Action. Once introduced, factography maintained a consistent presence in the works of the group. The effect it had on Actions themselves has been a subject of extensive academic consideration and theoretical debate.

Yelena Kalinsky, in her essay “Drowning in Documents: action, documentation, and factography in early works by Collective Actions,” suggests that the introduction of documentation into the action can potentially stifle the ephemeral potentiality of the Action. For Kalinsky, the gradual increase of documentation-production marks a “shift away from the ephemeral, spatiotemporal actions toward an aesthetic of documentation and factographic discourse [which] engendered a form of group institutionalization that struck some as excessively theoretical and virtually impenetrable.”⁵⁰ The bureaucratic, material grip of documentation, takes away from the supposedly unmediated experience of an Empty Action.

Marina Gerber, in her book *Empty Action: Labour and Free Time in the Art of Collective Actions*, emphasizes the role of factographic discourse in the notion of “Empty Action”—seeing the factographic discourse as an obstacle in the way of realization of Empty Action. For her, it is the aesthetic category of Empty Action that distinguishes Collective Actions’ Trip Out of Town from a leisurely trip to the country. In other words, Empty Action is what makes each performance a work of art. Gerber explains the mechanics of the Empty Action by placing an emphasis on the fusion between introduced and the already present elements of the scene. Strikingly similar to the aesthetic quality of photographic art, an Empty Action occurs in an instance when the extra-demonstrational field—that which is not constructed by the organizers,

⁵⁰ Kalinsky, “Drowning in Documents,” 105.

i.e. the field, the snow, everything that surrounds the action—is momentarily mistaken for the constructed part of the action. For Gerber, these moments of unintelligibility are key to maintaining the participant’s state of wonder and anticipation:

The Empty action begins to work when the demonstrational element is perceived by the viewers as the extra-demonstrational element and vice-versa ... The point of the Empty action is to delay judgment and interpretation for as long as possible.⁵¹

Thus, the state of a delayed judgment, according to Gerber, is where the experiential core of the action resides as an “experience of a certain indistinguishability between the demonstrational and extra- demonstrational elements”⁵² The example Gerber provides is the inaugural *Appearance* Action of 1976, in which the participants witnessed the two organizers crossing the field toward the invited audience. Gerber explains that while the invited might have thought that they were witnessing an extra-demonstrational element—i.e., the organizers crossing the distance to arrive at an intended point and begin the Action—they in fact saw a demonstrational element—i.e., a planned activity that constituted the main part of action unbeknownst to the viewers until later.

“Factography,” Gerber writes, “is thus not a realist or fictional description of the Action, but the data that surrounds and attaches to the Action.”⁵³ In other words, the factographic archive forms a documentational residue that relates to the Action only as far as it envelops, cocoon-like the intricately orchestrated interplay of private and collectively shared expectations, discoveries, and realizations experienced by the participants within the demonstrational field. Following this reading, the document remains always on the outside of the performance, always on the periphery of the Action’s realization.

⁵¹ Marina Gerber, *Empty Action: Labour and Free Time in the Art of Collective Actions* (Verlag, Bielefeld: transcript, 1018), 42.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gerber, 58.

Kalinsky explains that this abstraction of documentary material is manifest in what she terms the “empty photograph.”⁵⁴ The emptiness here alludes to the impossibility of representing the action itself due to its already ephemeral nature. If that is the case, and “an action’s existential essence ... is inherently unrepresentable,” what is this photograph of (Figure 6)? Kalinsky then accounts for the function of the photograph not as an indexical tool, but as an event in itself because of the way in which “in its non-representational emptiness [the photograph] relinquishes its claims to representation.”⁵⁵ It is precisely in the abdication of its representational faculty, I claim, the photograph becomes a contour around the event of the action.

Photo document as contour around the Action functions as a kind of bridge to what is outside the event, not the least because of it being one of the main ways of making the work accessible to the secondary viewer, i.e., whoever did not participate in the performance (Figure 10). While photographing as practice works to punctuate the event and ensure the completion of instructions during the real-time happening of the *Place of Action* (by insisting on participants’ engagement with the camera, checking-in at different points in performance), the photograph performs an important function in the engagement with the work post-factum, making it available to the secondary viewer (one that engages with the work via the document). The emptiness of the “empty photograph” is akin to that of the field, as it provides the conceptual yet bound space for the action to take shape. The periphery outlined by the empty photograph serves as a point of entry into the work for the audience that encounters artworks of Collective Actions without being among the on-the-field participants.

⁵⁴ Kalinsky, “Drowning in Documents,” 99.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 103.

The emptiness of the photograph is imperative as it prevents the Action from morphing into a photographic art and allows the photograph to play a distinct compositional role rather than being just another event among many that comprise the Action. In other words, the photograph does not pretend to provide its viewer with a comprehensive view of the artwork. The visual of the event assists the wider audience of the Collective Actions with approaching the work but denies them an immediate access to the Action itself, inviting an engagement with supplementary materials including audience recollections, interviews, or audio recordings. It asks the viewer to reconstruct the Action and consider the varying relations permeating the work without overidentifying the technological component of the Action with its relational dynamics. The photograph's emptiness does not render the photograph useless, but rather enhances its importance as compositional element.

A consideration of factographic practice in relation to the theme of "emptiness" that permeated the art scene of the unofficial Soviet artists at the time provides a different view of the factographic in relation to the aesthetic project of Collective Actions.

Barrington Montgomery's insistence on having invented the term, "factography" as it was developed in the late 1920s Soviet Union provides a compelling insight into the way in which documentation in general, and photography in particular, contributed to the overall effect of a given Action. Namely, the emphasis on a historical fact and truthful representation of reality is at the core of factographic practice. However, when included in the structural support of an Action, the document, as well as the practice of documentation, perform a distancing function hollowing out the otherwise constructed event, and pointing at the unrepresentability of the empty Action. Not only does it intervene in pulling the participants away from the unmediated experience of their feelings of wonder and expectation, it transforms the event into an archival corpus. Yet the

seeming meaninglessness of the Action compromises the purposefulness of the created record. But it is precisely because of its distancing faculty that the factographic practice is crucial in the creation of an aesthetic feeling. The purposeless and therefore “empty” aesthetic quality of the Action as it unfolds within the abstracted vastness of the just experienced field is thus so much more heightened when placed in tense relationship with the compromised bureaucratic practice of keeping record that serves to frame it.

Because my conception of emptiness is spatial, and the “empty action,” as theorized by Monastyrski is psychic (i.e., occurs in the mind of the viewer-participant; unrepresentable on a photograph), when put in relation, the two are positioned to enhance one another’s effects. Just like in *Place of Action*, during a typical Collective Actions work, documentation works to delineate the empty, available to be inhabited center of the event by continuously distancing the viewer-participants both spatially (asking them to move away from the group) and experientially (asking them to pose for the camera, or presenting them with a schematic break-down of the Action, both of which take them out of the immediate experience of the event). Upon the Action's completion, the document then is an indicator pointing at a center of the event itself that has been filled with the aesthetic experience of its participants.

In the factographic practice of the early twentieth century, the artists’ aim consisted of an expressively factual representation of reality that would speak to the masses on an understandable level. The infusion of factography with a cinematic aspect of viewing—a continuous strip of photographic and textual material combined in a continuous strip—also speaks to factography’s ambition to emulate a given experience as if in real time, to articulate an experience of presence.

In the context of Collective Actions' practice, factography achieves an almost opposite effect—that of an overproduction of documentary material that ultimately renders a beholder of documentation completely incapable of grasping the central point of the Action. Much like the participants, the camera looks “in the wrong direction,” but because the experience of the spatially vast, empty field cannot be captured on film, the empty Action is twice removed from the beholder of the document.⁵⁶ The document always already fails. In this striving to capture the event the documents manifest the event's unattainability through documentation. The document fails as material proof of the ephemeral event but continues to function as a sign pointing at the unattainable realness of the event itself.

b. Performance and Documentation

In her article “‘The Artist is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” art historian Amelia Jones questions the importance of the authentically original events (live performances) in our grasping of the piece. The mythology of the original, so frequently prescribed to the experience of artworks—through such notions as the (Benjaminian) aura, for example—when applied to performance, does not quite work, Jones proposes. The reason being that the very notion of an authentically original artwork relies on its fixed, motionless corpus. Because a performance extends itself temporally as well as spatially toward a viewer, a fixed perception is consistently out of reach. Our incapability of securing time, Jones explains, renders performance a branch of artistic practices that subvert the notion of the original. Jones explains that the very notion of a live event is completely unattainable since, even at the moment of encountering the performance, we cannot establish an unmediated connection to the action.

⁵⁶ Andrei Monastyrski, *Trips out of Town*, Preface to Volume One, trans. Yelena Kalinsky, accessed September 5, 2021, <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-PREFACE-TO-1-VOLUME.htm>

Reenactment, Jones proposes, is the practice of making “into ‘art’” the actions. That is, repetition of an act for the purpose of its repetition adds an artistic dimension to the action—action for the sake of itself. The broader point Jones makes in her article reads as follows:

There is no singular, authentic ‘original’ act we can refer to in order to confirm the true meaning of an event, an act, a performance, or a body—presented in the art realm or otherwise. We are always already in the “now,” which can never be grasped, and yet all experience is mediated, representational.⁵⁷

In her personal account of Marina Abramovic's 2010 performance *The Artist Is Present* (Figure 20) at MoMA, Jones notes that despite, or perhaps because of, all the effort that went into organizing the event with the idea of presence at its core, the experience of said presence was virtually impossible. The spectacle as an event—the central role of looking embedded in the performance itself—as well the spectacularity of the event—the extreme media frenzy surrounding the limited time that Abramovic spent at the museum—prevented Jones, the museum-goer, from experiencing the presence of both her own body and that of the artist. “I found the exchange to be anything but energizing, personal, or transformative,” Jones writes.⁵⁸

For Jones, an experience of being an object of documentation overrides the intended (and desired) experience of being present alongside the performance: “I primarily felt myself the object of myriad individual and photographic gazes (including hers [Abramovic]), and the experience overall was very strongly one of participating in a spectacle.”⁵⁹ It would then follow that to be objectified under a given gaze is to be deprived of a live experience. The heightened spectacularism and the pressure to appear to be “looking,” despite the distractions of the institutional event, induces a kind of out-of-body experience, where the audience member is forced to understand

⁵⁷ Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR* Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 42.

⁵⁸ Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist is Present,’” 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

herself as an image among other images, occupying a static space-time of a gallery cluttered with myriad objecthoods.

Paradoxically, in the work of *Collective Actions*, no participant recounts an experience of being watched, or monitored, or surveilled. The instructions ask their participants to engage in often taxing physical activities—crossing large distances, pulling rope, or stressing their hearing in an attempt to locate a ringing bell hidden underneath the snow. The participants are deprived of the ability to experience themselves as objects. Rather, the Action is depending on them to exercise physically and to exercise a private subjectivity (both in their experience and decision-making), as well as to share their personal encounters with the collective.

The aim of the *Empty Action* is to establish the conditions under which the participants become aware of their own perception in relation to the intended composition that they understand themselves to be a part of. This enhances the experience of the action as that of a work of art. The slowed-down perception of the event and the necessary work of replaying the action in one's mind afterward, to make sense of it, subverts the necessity of identifying oneself as an all-seeing spectator, and sheds the light on one's role as a participant.

A kind of spectatorial disembodiment Jones recounts in her article is avoided through the perpetual lack of clarity, the written-in confusions. As Kalinsky explains,

To suggest, as Monastyrski and *Collective Actions* eventually did, that certain types of factographic objects and photographs approach the status of action is to envision other possibilities for performance, ones that do not rely on the artist's or performer's presence expressed theatrically or intersubjectively and instead are located in the viewer's engagement with the performance as a text that unfolds not only in the dimensions of time and space, but also in the manifold spaces of factographic discourse.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Kalinsky, "Drowning in Documents," 85.

Thus, the participants are put in the position of imagining being within the physical space, but also as being a part of a text, a factographic object that will compile a total picture of the event in the future, but which is as unavailable.

At the moment of it happening, *Place of Action* is one of the most photographed actions organized by Monastyrski and Alekseev. The factographic discourse both preceded the Action in the field—in the preparation of the board that describes methodically, every step of every participant—and follows the completion of the event in the reams of photographs. The factographic re-articulates the emptied categories of everyday bureaucratic minutiae. It also works to both highlight and subvert among the participants the immediate experience (each participant is asked to travel across the field alone within his own subjective perception) and territorial distances (the vastness of the empty field).

It is clear, then, that the document, through creating both alienating and aestheticizing effects, works as a bivalent element that creates tension between the binary oppositions of absence and presence, knowledge and wonder.

In her consideration of the role and implications of documentation as it relates to performance, art historian Anne Wagner proposes to consider the way in which documentation articulates both an enclosing and a revealing effect. She responds to Krauss's reading of Vito Acconci's *Centers* (Figure 22), which she argues brackets out the connection Acconci seems to struggle to make with the viewer. This attempt to connect, for Wagner, exists in an almost enclosed space. It is this enclosure, between Acconci and the camera, that the video media enables and records. Wagner explains:

These 'parentheses' only apparently enforce a closure: the technology of the monitor opens outward, as well as in. Not only does it register a process of surveillance, it itself asks for monitoring.⁶¹

Wagner writes that it is of great importance that we stand aware of just how much "video and performance art is bound up in describing the technological effects of contemporaneity as simultaneously alienating and intimate."⁶² While Collective Actions did not videotape *Place of Action*, they are known to produce video recordings of their later actions. But even still, the factographic approach does not eliminate and very often depends on, as Buchloh points out, a kind of a cinematic viewing. Such viewing, for example, is welcome in considering the dozens of photographs, film-still like that were arranged in succession to illustrate the gradual recession of figures toward the horizon line. Thus, the application of Wagner's point here stands. It demonstrates the way in which a document can articulate an enclosure that enables a space for relationships to be felt and considered.

⁶¹ Anne M. Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* Vol. 91 (Winter, 2000): 68.

⁶² *Ibid*, 79.

IV. LOOKING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

Periphery is where the limits are, where the Collective Actions' work ends and the outside, everyday world begins. As discussed in the previous section, the factographic practice works to maintain the shape of the Action during its happening as well as after its completion. The emptiness must remain within those limits and pull the participants' attention toward a horizon of possibility, meaning, and relation. Because, per Gerber's reading, the manifestation of the Empty Action relies on the moment of confusion between the demonstrational and extra-demonstrational components of the event, the vast openness of the field provides, perhaps quite literally, space for free interpretation as well as confusion.

In 1981, two years after *Place of Action*, another action, *Ten Appearances*, this openness gives way to numerous (mis)interpretations of the Action's instructions resulting in multiple drastically different experiences of the event (Figure 22). The spatial and metaphorical (the one built into the action's structure through the confusion of its parts) emptiness of the field of Action shapes the experience of the participants, diluting the potential spectacular effect of an Action and constructing a space radically unlike the lived-in Soviet spaces. This vastly expansive space then creates dynamic relations among the participants as they live through a collective aesthetic experience.

a. Action *Ten Appearances*

On February 1, 1981, ten participants led by the Collective Actions organizers convened in the middle of a vast, snow-covered field near the Kiev Gorky village. They gathered around a wooden board (90 x 60 cm) onto which ten identical reels of white thread were secured with vertically hammered-in nails. The participants (I. Pivovarova, N. Kozlov, V. Skersis, L.

Talochkin, O. Vasilyev, I. Kabakov, I. Chuikov, Y. Albert, V. Nekrasov, A. Zhigalov) were prompted to take the end of one string and walk, in a straight line, towards the surrounding forest and deeper into the woods, unwinding the reel. The photographs documenting the Action show each attendant heading towards the woods that wrap, ribbon-like, around the snowed-covered field.

The simplicity of the instructions did not foretell the difficulty of the task. In several recollections of the Action, the participants recount the physical difficulty that accompanied their path— each laying their track in the deep (50-100 cm), virgin snow, every step met with stiff resistance. After reaching the forest, they continued onto the best of their ability maintaining the straight trajectory, unwinding the string. Upon the completion of their trip, each participant was instructed to pull the other end of the string which, they would discover, contained a short text with the organizers' names, the day's date, and the location. There were no further instructions, and at that moment the participants had a choice: to continue on their outlined trajectory and leave the scene through the forest or to return to the starting point of the Action, tracing back their steps.

On that day, two participants walked on while eight returned back to the middle of the field. Upon their return, the eight were each given a photograph (30 x 40 cm) mounted on cardboard. Every photo depicted a barely discernible human figure in the section of the woods that a given participant reached at the end of crossing the field. Each photograph was labeled with the two organizers' names, title of the Action and scene depicted with the specific participant's name, e.g. "Appearance of I. Chuikov on the 1st of February, 1981." What the photographs really showed was the enactment of the Action that took place one week prior, depicting the organizers themselves walking back from different spots in the woods. Despite the

logical incompatibility of the large, developed photograph and the just-completed journey, the image itself did not strike as immediately implausible. Since the distance of the human figure rendered it anonymous, its identity was available to be established through the accompanying text. *Ten Appearances* was meticulously scripted and archived documentation included recollections of the participants and photos of the events that took place on February 1, 1981.

The emptiness at play in the practices of Collective Actions is not simply a diagnostic of emptiness but also a kind of generative field that calls for a tangential engagement leading to an artistic reformulation of contemporary spatial experiences. Collective Actions does not only diagnose emptiness as a pervasive characteristic of late-Soviet life, but reorchestrates it by banking on the uniquely individual, subjective experiences of this empty space that are nonetheless inseparable from the collective engaged in the same choreography in the space. In his 2019 interview, Monastyrski speaks about any artistic practice residing in a kind of emptiness, a liminal space between art and life. Later in the interview, Monastyrski explains:

Becoming contemporary—the most difficult thing. The moment of “here and now” is always lost, and that is why contemporaneity is a duration of sorts. But it is important for whatever is happening within the bounds of this duration to remain inconceivable for me [...]

For example, in an action “Time of Action” (October 15, 1978), where we spent an hour and a half in an open field, pulling rope out of the forest, everyone waited to see what is it that we are going to pull out of there. But there was nothing—nothing at the end of the rope. That is to say—there is no objective dimension to our anticipation. Moreover, our goal was a creation of an aesthetic situation, not of art as such. Contemplation not of a painting, but of its frame [...] This is what I call the space between the demonstrational field and experiential field. It is that border between art and life that interests me the most, not the art itself as something enclosed. All that is the most interesting is located on the border.⁶³

⁶³ Andrey Monastyrski, “Andrey Monastyrski: between the word and the object. Interview,” interview by Gleb Napreenko, *Mezhdunarodniy Psihologicheskii Zhurnal*, October 26, 2019, accessed September 10, 2021. https://lacan.moscow/2019/11/27/andrey_monastyrskiy_interview/. Translation mine.

Out on the border of over-signified life, which is to say of a measured, state-sponsored articulation of the everyday, Monastyrski wants to create an experience of presentness *in real time*, as it were. In other words, having been provided with a sense of eternity,⁶⁴ the late-Soviet citizen was robbed of any tangible experience of contemporaneity as something unformulated, unexpected, and undecided. This understanding of a late-Soviet sense of a lost present tense resonates with theorist Meghan Vick's notion that nothingness, discussed later in this section, as a concept works to render the world around itself palpable, tactile, perceptible.

Some scholars and select participant of the Actions⁶⁵ offer the reading of an empty field as akin to the empty page, which then carries the traces of a given action.⁶⁶ While the way in which the spatial emptiness of the field undoubtedly alludes to the material supports of visual art, it is perhaps worth considering the empty space not as a an allusion to a traditional material support of a visual artwork, but as a compositional element of the Empty Action in its own right. This approach asks us to consider the empty spaces of the fields Collective Actions uses as sites for the Actions in relation to other Soviet spaces and their peculiar spatial logics.

b. The Spatial Logic of Soviet Spaces in Moscow Conceptualist Objects

In a catalogue essay "In the Ruins of Utopia: The Spatial Dialectics of Moscow Conceptualism," art historian Adrian Barr traces the cataclysmic changes of everyday Soviet space. For Barr, the claustrophobic space that manifests itself in myriad works of Moscow conceptualism speaks to the stifling everyday spatiality that serves the production of some

⁶⁴ A notion particularly well-outlined in Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁶⁵ Yelena Kalinsky, "Pencil Marks on a Field: Form and Support in Late Soviet Participatory Performance by Collective Actions," in *Russian Performance: Word, Object, Action*, ed. Julie A. Buckler et. al., (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 82-92.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

stifled, particularly Soviet subjectivity. In his consideration of Igor Makarevich's *25 Memories of a Friend* (1978) (Figure 23), Barr demonstrates how the "spatial poetics of isolation" are manifest in Makarevich's considerations of disjointed collectivity.⁶⁷ Makarevich creates an open box-like frame that contains twenty-five individual compartments that bracket off identical plaster molds of a man's face, each painted a different color. The overall feeling of the work is that of confinement, tight enclosures, interpersonal isolation. The community represented in the work, Barr appears to be suggesting, is that of a graveyard or mortuary—all are equal in their embalmed state. Barr contrasts the alienated, caged selves with the collective selves represented in a constructivist photomontage. There, a collective consisting of subjects united by a single project, occupies spaces not of material restraint but of a unifying ideological project. In the late-Soviet period, Makarevich's work seems to suggest, the dimension of ideological unity is hollowed out and instead neurotically filled with the material reformulations of its operating principles—of unity, orderliness, and purpose. According to Barr, the use of borders and partitions allows for the "analysis of subjectivity through space" and encourages us to "cognize how that moment is itself informed and shaped by a deeper historical process."⁶⁸

This logic of confinement in *25 Memories of a Friend* and other artworks discussed by Barr articulates a sense of impossibility surrounding any sort of open space that would allow for an alternative mode of communication between subjects, and instead produces a construction supporting their separation. Shared spaces, however, were not materially absent from the everyday Soviet experience. Communal apartments constituted Soviet spaces par excellence and

⁶⁷ Adrian Barr, "In the Ruins of Utopia: The Spatial Dialectics of Moscow Conceptualism," in *Thinking Pictures : the Visual Field of Moscow Conceptualism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Zimmerli Art Museum, 2016), 26.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

were ubiquitous in late-Soviet life. A communal apartment banked on a material collectivity, a privacy destroyed, but, at the same time, pushed its inhabitants towards a kind of isolation. Kabakov, in his installation *Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* from 1985 (Figure 13) demonstrates the ways in which the space of one's room can be both a sanctuary one curates according to his lived experiences, and a prison cell that encloses its inhabitant, pushing him toward an abrupt and violent breakaway. The two qualities here do not contradict each other, but enhance one another's potency. Kabakov creates an interior of a room one might occupy in a communal apartment. Containing a foldout metal cot for a bed and a bench built out of two chairs and a wooden panel, the room's walls are erratically covered with Soviet propaganda posters and information brochures. From the ceiling, Kabakov suspends a catapult-like device that, we are invited to read, has recently been used to transport the inhabitant of the room (whose shoes we see left on the floor by the bench) out of his cell into the stratosphere. The ceiling of the room is ripped open, marking the violent exitpoint. Barr explains that the status of a communal apartment as "a microcosm of the socialist project" especially fascinated Kabakov, who "probes the relationship between this degraded (yet still potent) ideological space and the lived experience of those who inhabit it."⁶⁹

But where is it that Kabakov's character flies off to? It is glaringly obvious what he leaves behind, but the viewer is left wondering about the faith of the room's inhabitant. Despite the whimsical quality of the handmade catapult (as if a nod to Russian *smekalka*, inventiveness) and the installation's fairy-tale like title, the work nonetheless produces a conflicting feeling of dread. Kabakov could have easily replaced the catapult with a noose—a more readily available way of transporting oneself out of the Soviet reality without leaving one's room. And although

⁶⁹ Barr, "In the Ruins of Utopia: The Spatial Dialectics of Moscow Conceptualism," 31.

death undoubtedly haunts the very notion of leaving Russia (for Dostoevsky, for example, to say someone “left for America” would imply the character’s suicide), there seems to be little tensions between the private and public, the subjective and objective, the citizen and state that appear to long for an articulation of a kind of vitality within the enclosed spaces. This vitality, most Moscow conceptualism seems to suggest, is located within the subjective, privately enclosed circuits of production and perception of meanings. Barr compares Kabakov’s “room” to a skull, whose walls “partition and protect a rich and private interiority—a space of dream and fantasy replete with posters and colorful charts—from the attentions of neighbors and other outsiders.”⁷⁰

In the case of both Kabakov and Makarevich, the artworks offer a sense of an absent subject. The space allotted to the Soviet citizen seems violently uninhabitable: crippling, stifling, forever removed from the officially painted portrait of the Soviet everyday. This kind of allusion to an emptied or absent subjectivity—an interiority corrupted by the outside—is characteristic of much of the works of the Moscow conceptualist circle. These works exhibit a kind of anarchic approach to spatiality. In other words: they are modest in their scale but immodest in their execution. Kabakov vandalizes the room and tears open the ceiling; Makarevich confines the likenesses of a friend into boxes, paints them in psychedelic colors, and places them in a grid. Despite seeming relatively contained, with clear, perceivable limits, these works point away from themselves, asking the viewer to conjure an alternative space to that which she sees. The emptiness they allude to is saddled with dread for the inescapability of the material world. They make the viewer see the way in which the official visual language erodes structures that are

⁷⁰ Barr, “In the Ruins of Utopia: The Spatial Dialectics of Moscow Conceptualism,” 32.

meant to maintain any kind of privacy or sociality. As I have been suggesting, Collective Actions' work with the motif of late-Soviet emptiness is drastically different.

c. Emptiness and Looking in the Wrong Direction

What sets the practice of Collective Actions apart from many installations and object-based works of unofficial Moscow artists of the 1970s is the modesty of the execution—the preoccupation with the bureaucratic minutiae, the small number of participants—and the immodesty of scale—working with the vast spatiality of the field. This positions them in stark contrast with many works that convey a stifling feeling of aesthetic, ideological, and communal claustrophobic everydayness. One explanation for such difference can be the fact that for Kabakov and Makrevich, the point of departure is easel painting, whereas for Monastyrski it is poetry. But despite Monastyrski's seemingly logocentric approach to the practice, it is the sense of vision that seems to be central to his conception of the Actions. In a preface to the first volume of *Trips out of Town*, Monastyrski explains the way in which an Action acts to divert the attention from the 'main event':

The events of the action are undertaken in order to “distract the eye.” The nature of expectation demands that this step is carried out, and to get out of doing it in the context of the given problem is impossible. But it is possible to “deceive” perception, that is, to complete it but then to let the audience understand that “while everyone was looking in one direction, the main event was happening in a completely different place” —in this case in the consciousness of the viewers themselves.⁷¹

An Action, Monastyrski explains, does indeed engage a kind of looking, a collective looking that has already misplaced the very object it seeks.

⁷¹ Monastyrski, *Trips out of Town*, Preface to Volume One, trans. Yelena Kalinsky, accessed September 5, 2021, <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-PREFACE-TO-1-VOLUME.htm>

That is, that by the point when it is understood that the “looking” was a “looking in the wrong direction,” the main event has already taken place, in the present moment, it can only be remembered, but to observe it consciously is impossible, since during the time when it takes its course, consciousness is occupied elsewhere, it is directed toward the perception of something else.⁷²

In other words, the “main event” is moved to the interior of the participant, in their perception and levels of consciousness which they are not focusing on. It is only retrospectively that the participant’s looking reveals itself as “looking in the wrong direction,” and he begins to piece together his experience through a self-reflexive practice, often shared with fellow participants. Monastyrski’s account provides another aspect or site of “emptiness” in Collective Actions’ performance works, the empty interior consciousness of the participant, which the work proceeds to fill with perceptions and thoughts as the participant moves through the Action’s sequence.

d. Poetry and Space: From Nothingness to Emptiness

A consideration of Monastyrski’s poetry dedicated to the subject of nothingness is crucial for parsing the multivalent aspects of Collective Actions’ works. For the purpose of this work, I want to highlight Monastyrski’s writing that speaks to the subject of “nothingness”. It is important that even the terminology of Collective Actions’ practice cannot but carry within itself a language that is descriptive of a physical space—the performances are not “actions of nothing,” they are “empty actions”—marked, however faintly, with the language of space, presence, and agency. To appreciate the way in which Monastyrski’s poetic work affected his performative practice is to parse the delicate way in which “emptiness” manifests itself as the artistic counterpart of literary “nothingness.”

⁷² Ibid.

In his poem “Nothing Happens” from 1976 (the year of the first action *Appearance*), Monastyrski composes a stream of consciousness meditation on a peculiar state where nothing happens. While the poem, comprising 196 stanzas, makes it clear that Monastyrski cannot quite put his finger on the very state he seeks to describe. A “nothing” cannot be happening, much like nothing cannot be occupied—the figure that describes or inhabits the space of nothingness immediately spoils the unadulterated serenity of absolute absence (of action).

Throughout the poem, the speaker fluctuates between the state of absolute powerlessness, as he claims himself to be a figure disintegrating: “I disappear because / there is nothing that’s under my control” (p. 79) and demiurge creating everything within the nothingness: “not so long ago / there was nothing here / and now there is everything / I did it all / don’t want to do anything else / I did not destroy myself.”⁷³ These fluctuations continue throughout the text.

On the one hand, while nothing happens, the speaker has an opportunity to “do something.” There is not really anything that happens, except the speaker travels vast cognitive distances and perpetually comes back to himself in dissolution to make yet another imaginative leap:

do whatever you want
you can do something
here are the conditions:
whatever you will do here
will never begin
will never end

not so long ago there was nothing here
and now there is everything
I did it all
don’t want to do anything else
I did not destroy myself

⁷³ Andrey Monastyrski, “Ничего не происходит” [“Nothing Happens”] in *Поэтический Мир* [Poetic World], (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 76. Translation mine.

everything that follows
is free from whatever precedes it⁷⁴

At the same time, this state of “nothing” happening drives the speaker into a desperate state of indifference, and apathy:

everything that was behind me
disappeared
and everything that was behind him
disappeared
I disappeared myself
again
I disappear because
there is nothing that’s under my control

someone came, again
nothing to worry about
no one came
just some movement
no one can come here
terrible,
that there is no way out of here

I can’t see anything from here
if only I could peep
in a little hole⁷⁵

A little hole in what? What is the source of the movement? Who was it that came, again? Within this nothingness clearly something does happen, there is matter, there is motion. This fixation on “nothing” almost heightens the speaker’s attention to the point of stifling his sensation.

"Nothing is," literary scholar Meghan Vicks writes, "the ultimate fiction: that unreal and untrue story that renders the world meaningful, experiential, comprehensible—in a word, narratable." In other words, if there truly were no such thing as nothing, it would have to be

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 78.

invented. And invented it was, Vicks proposes, as for her, *nothing* is a modern artifact par excellence. In her short account of Moscow Conceptualism, Vicks asserts that “in Sots-Art specifically and in Russian conceptualism more generally the goal is to reveal the emptiness marked by the sign.” Supported by the writings of Boris Groys, Kabakov, Mikhail Epstein and others, her thesis carries a great deal of weight in the scholarship dedicated to the movement:

Silence, zero, and nothing are each an *impossible* or *imaginary state*, yet each is necessary to the condition and conditioning of a meaning-making system, be that music, numbers, being, or narrative. Silence, like zero and nothing it signifies, is *a fiction of an original and absolute blankness*—a fiction that renders possible, comprehensible, and meaningful the world.⁷⁶

But when this literary emptiness is translated into the realm of performance, art, and participatory actions, it is inevitable that it develops a spatial dimension that is antithetical to the radically abstracted notion of nothingness. In art, there is always something there, no matter how dematerialized, no matter how small. Monastyrski approaches this translation through the cartographic vastness of space where the Actions happen. Unlike the poetic text, a participatory action engages the participant on the level of sensory experience, rather than a cognitive process.

e. Spectacle and the Late-Soviet Image

The importance of misdirected looking highlights the distinctive “a-spectacularity” of Empty Actions. It appears that Monastyrski works to create an experience of sociality, togetherness among the participants, by subverting the alienating nature of spectacle French filmmaker and theorist Guy Debord outlined in his *Society of Spectacle* (1967). According to Debord, spectacle, is “a social relationship mediated by images.”⁷⁷ It would appear that the way in which social relations are supposed to be perceived is through a feeling other than sight—

⁷⁶ Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-century Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 11.

⁷⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Aldgate Press, 2005), 7.

social relations are meant to be almost tangible, they are to be felt, as well as seen. It is in this understanding of the spectacle as working to negate social life by calling upon something very real and familiar to the spectators and then immediately setting the distance not only between the real-life referent of the image but also among the spectators themselves. "Understood on its own terms," Debord writes, "the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearances." Debord continues:

The abstractifying of all individual labour and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose manner of being concrete is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, a part spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness.⁷⁸

In other words, the spectacle exploits the human desire for connection to the world as well as fellow men by substituting the real tangible, felt world with a two-dimensional image. It thus works to confuse the categories of seeing and feeling, consuming, and living.

While for Debord, the society of the spectacle is necessarily a consumerist, capitalistic society driven by consumption and greed, Debord's definition of spectacle could be productively applied to the context of the late-socialist state. The official visual language of the Soviet state, with socialist realism as its main formal pictorial language, worked to create a parallel visual world that made a claim of close ideological and material kinship to the real lived experience of the Soviet subjects. The pervasiveness of mass gatherings and celebratory parades (still largely present in Russia today) marked a punctuated majority of the collective relations between the population and the state (Figure 24).

⁷⁸ Ibid, 15-6.

Although their trustworthiness waned by the Stagnation Era, images and mass spectacle remained functionally similar to Debord's conception of the spectacle, although they carried an ideologically different charge than in the capitalist West. By the 1970s, the Soviet state-produced image completely fell into creating the alienating distancing Debord describes. However, unlike Debord's spectacle that successfully creates a distance *among* the spectators, the late-Soviet state image advertently established itself as drastically alien *to* the viewers it sought to affect. Its viewers were drastically detached from the state apparatus and its chief rhetoric. The official visual language, losing its ideological fervor in the eyes of the everyday man, was reduced to its status as an image alone, carrying a ghostly plume of the now distant promise of socialist glory.

In his 1977 *Krasikov Street* (Figure 25), Soviet painter Erik Bulatov demonstrates the new role of the image as an almost invisible background to the life of the Soviet man. The painting depicts a bright morning street, two pronounced unidirectional perspectives of pedestrians and traffic extend towards the horizon, passing by a giant billboard depicting Vladimir Lenin as leader of the proletariat against a blank white background. For Bulatov, his works concern the idea of freedom found in the space beyond the political. In an interview, Bulatov explains:

My practice is completely different from than that of Pop art or Sots art. They wanted to prove that social reality is the only one that we have. The only reality, and that everything else does not matter. And I always wanted to prove that the social reality is limited, and that freedom is always located beyond that limit. What I attempt to demonstrate is that that limit exists along with the possibility to cross it.⁷⁹

By "social reality" Bulatov understands the reality constructed by the official visual language. The liberation" from such reality, it would seem for Bulatov, is not asocial. The people in the

⁷⁹ "The Artist Speaks," Tretyakov Gallery. Moscow, Russia. YouTube, 2018, accessed April 3, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hny_xUTnumo&t=455s

painting engage in a collective motion, looking in the same direction, but past the object that was placed to attract their vision by the state. It is in crossing that ideological limit that Bulatov concentrates much of the dramatic and lyrical potency of his paintings. *Krasikov Street* illustrates this idea of liberation achieved not by breaking through the ideological circumstances, but by assuming a trajectory parallel to them. The initial impulse is to read this as Lenin's taking a step toward the Soviet people. However, it becomes clear that if the Vladimir Ilyich were to take one more step forward, he would step onto an unkept lawn rather than into the cheering crowd. It is not that Lenin is stepping into or is coming from nowhere. Lenin is going nowhere. Lenin is a kind of a faded constant. This ahistorical, irrelevant blankness of his background finds no point of contact with the everyday reality of Soviet life. Life and freedom ought to be constructed around this Lenin-shaped void.

Much like Debord's spectacle, the late-Soviet official visual language relies on the visuality of the image to produce an experience of some fabricated unity (that of ideologically formulated subjects, as opposed to consumers). It has been noted, however, that the state propaganda's image-production that saturated public spaces, over time, produced a kind of blindness. In her account of political implications of text-based works of Komar and Melamid, art historian Mary Nicholas points to the way in which the public grew "adept at not seeing" the posters.⁸⁰

This peculiar blindness is something that Collective Actions works to tap into as an opportunity for a truly collective experience of immediate social perception. The leitmotif of emptiness is often connected to dissolution and disappointment in official rhetoric that results in

⁸⁰ Mary A. Nicholas, "We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, (June-Sept.-Dec. 2011), 343.

an absence of the speaker or in the artists' opting out of their presence. However, in Collective Actions, it is approached as a potential to reconfigure relations among the participants. The multivalent emptiness within the performance works to heighten the potential of art as a relation-building medium.

The collective as a protagonist (imagined or actual) of Bulatov's late-Soviet and contemporaneous works appears to echo the notion of collectivity in play during the "empty actions" of the Collective Actions group. Art historian Victor Tupitsyn characterizes their work as "in search of common alternative to the language of communality and the language of power."⁸¹

⁸¹ Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 117.

V. CONCLUSION

In their works, Collective Actions approach the notion of emptiness as an aesthetically and socially conducive formal quality of a participatory performance. Because Monastyrski transplants his meditations on “nothingness” from poetic practice into the artistic realm, the poetic “nothing” assumes a physical space of emptiness and establishes structural performative poles that facilitate an aesthetic, collective encounter—a private subjective work of aesthetic judgment that is intended to be shared with a collective. Without overinvesting in diagnosing the newly established ideological and political characteristics of their time, Collective Actions seem to ask questions about the possible creative practices in the space one experiences as “empty.” This approach to and articulation of emptiness stands in contrast to the dominant gestures of negation and disavowal that operate in both Western conceptual artworks and those produced under the umbrella of Moscow Conceptualism.

To reiterate the stakes of this argument, I want to once again stress the emancipatory promise that underpins the political ambition of conceptualism at large. As far as Collective Actions belongs to a conceptualist movement, its work lends itself to readings that engage the political and ideological circumstances of its time, questions of possibility in the face of disintegration of the old structures and art’s precarious position within that context. However, while much conceptual art⁸² longs for a freedom *from* old structures and institutions that begin to crumble in the last decades of the 20th century, Collective Actions turned toward the questions of

⁸² For my purposes, the tendencies I describe here are best illustrated by Baldessari’s *Everything Is Purged* and Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, for the Western and the Soviet contexts respectively.

what kinds of artistic expressions such liberty allows. In other words, Monastyrski and Alekseev do the work of creating aesthetic and social forms in the newly inhabited empty space.

Many of the foundational artistic methods that were abandoned by the Collective Actions' contemporaries in favor of a traumatically emptied, structureless, dematerialized absence that later underpinned a postmodern aesthetic, were salvaged by Monastyrski and Alekseev to produce a multivalent works of art. Because an Action insists on the participant's consideration of its structures and compositional arrangements, it holds on to the notion that the Action is, ontologically, a work of art. This notion is supported by many audience recollections. I want to briefly consider an account of *Ten Appearances* by poet Vsevolod Nekrasov, who considered that Action to be one of the most successful works of the group because, in his mind, it is a "completely full-fledged" artwork.⁸³ In his recollection of the event, Nekrasov explains:

Any objections to this kind of art—that, say, it is too 'artificial' or somehow defective—would not stand up here. Because it has everything that any normal lyrical work has, and has it through and through, as when an author has long identified himself with his method and everything lines up as it should.⁸⁴

This experience of “everything lining up” could be considered in opposition to the effect of Ilya Kabakov's *Composition in Constructivist Style* (Figure 16), where nothing quite lines up as it should, and the viewer is presented with “a system that works but does not work well, or at least not as one supposes it should.”⁸⁵ There is something immediately satisfying about the way in which the Action unfolds in real time as if for each participant individually, yet also for all

⁸³ Vsevolod Nekrasov, “Nekrasov's Story: Ten Appearances,” in *Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976-1982*, trans. and ed. Yelena Kalinsky (Chicago: Sobercove Press: 2012), 78.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 78-9.

⁸⁵ Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 64.

collectively. The Actions put the participants in a position where they must exercise a power of aesthetic judgment in making sense of the action they have just taken. This necessity is orchestrated, in part, by the retrospective process of cataloging the recollections.

In his 2003 televised interview, poet Dmitri Prigov was asked to briefly explain what he understands by the term “conceptualism.”

You know that in Paris, there is standard meter. It is a piece of metal (zhelezyaka), that in theory could be used to hammer in nails, to kill someone. It becomes a standard meter only through the process of measure. In the process of measure, its metal-ness (zhelezyakost') disappears. And so, conceptualism does something very similar. It creates art objects while also creating procedures for measuring or endurance-testing the languages when the material character of the object is of little importance.⁸⁶

Prigov then goes on to say, that what conceptualists realized is the importance of the production of relations among those involved in an art experience. The manufacturing of these relationships, Prigov suggested, is the very stuff of Conceptualism. A subtle degree of sociality is built into this consideration of relations among physical objects. Prigov uses an example of a measuring tool that resides in a kind of universal standing, providing a standard for all measurement. Not only does the dimension of measurement extend into the aesthetic realm, with its role in determination of proportions, scale, and mass—but it also speaks to a universal dimension that makes a claim to belong to a social realm. It is tempting then to suggest that while a standard meter speaks to the way in which an object can be seen to lose its material dimension, it does so in favor of a kind of social standing, providing a medium for collective agreement. In the work of Collective Actions, a similar process is designed to take place. Material qualities of props and spatial setting

⁸⁶ Dmitri Prigov, interview by Avdotya Smirnova and Tatyana Tolstaya, *Школа Злословия*, НТВ, video, accessed April 2, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJsPCWEujhY>.

of the Action are subject to reformulation and debate among the participants. Relations, however, are constructed throughout the performance, once the structure/plan created by Monastyrski is populated by living subjects. This introduces instability and the possibility of error, missteps that the Action accommodates. The varying instabilities underpinning the Actions point toward their constructed nature as works of art.

The choice to make works of art that retain their boundaries, that contain relational tensions, and exist in an orchestrated symbiosis with their surroundings is an exercise in a positive kind of freedom. Monastyrski and Alekseev seem to realize “the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live,”⁸⁷ and instead of reinstating the qualities of this spatiality—handing out empty leaflets, to think back to the joke this thesis opens with—they chose to establish a human practice within the new conditions. They utilize this emptiness as a positive liberty, a freedom for novel ways of inhabiting space, alternative approaches to their circumstances. However modest, this challenge to the vast and seemingly uninhabitable new reality, the insistence on artistic practice that considers the relations within a space, rather than a negation of old structures, articulates an artistic, aesthetic alternative to the surrender to the boundless postmodern nothingness.

⁸⁷ Kabakov, “On Emptiness,” 35.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Collective Actions, *Appearance*, March 13th, 1976
Participants awaiting on the Izmilovskoe field.
Performance. Photograph.
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-1.html>



Figure 2: Collective Actions, *Appearance*, March 13th, 1976
A. Monastyrski, L. Rubinstein crossing the Izmaylovskoe field.
Performance. Photograph.
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-1.html>



Figure 3: Collective Actions, *Appearance*, March 13th, 1976
 A. Monastyrski, L. Rubinstein.
 Performance. Photograph.
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-1.html>

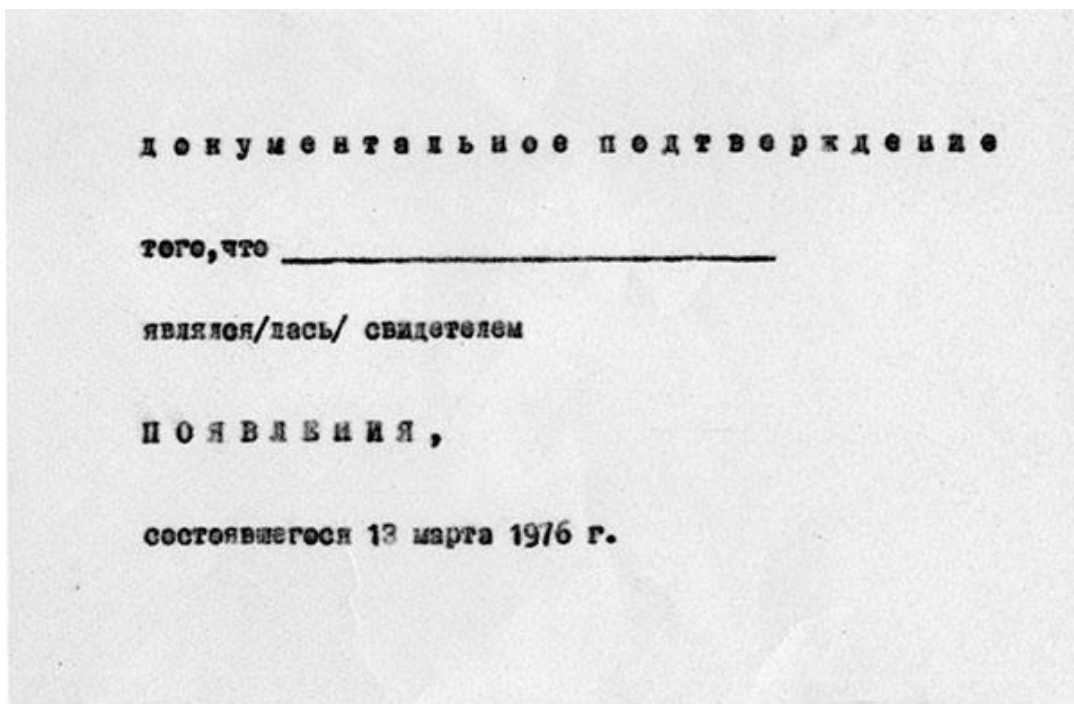


Figure 4: Collective Actions, *Appearance*, March 13th, 1976
 Document of proof
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-1.html>



Figure 5: Collective Actions. *Place of Action*, 1979
 Andrei Monastyrski and participants before the action commences.
http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MD/slides/am_s_binoklem.html



Figure 6: Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979
 Participant in the field. Photograph.
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MD/slides/mestodei-vpole.html>



Figure 7: Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979
 In preparation for the Action. Photograph.
http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MD/slides/podgotovka_1.html



Figure 8: Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979
 Eric Bulatov in the pit. Photograph.
<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-12.html>



Figure 9: Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979
 Installation of the board. Photograph.
http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MD/slides/pribivanije_ssita.html



Figure 10: Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979
 Photographs complied after the performance at an apartment that housed the subsequent discussion. Photograph.
http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MD/slides/MD-slaid_film.html



Figure 11: John Baldessari, *Everything Is Purged . . .*, 1967-8
68 x 56 in.



Figure 12: Georgi Kichigin, *Studio. The Central Part*, 1982
Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery



Figure 13: Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985
Mixed-media installation, 110 1.4 x 24 11.4 x 24 1.4
Musée national d'art moderne

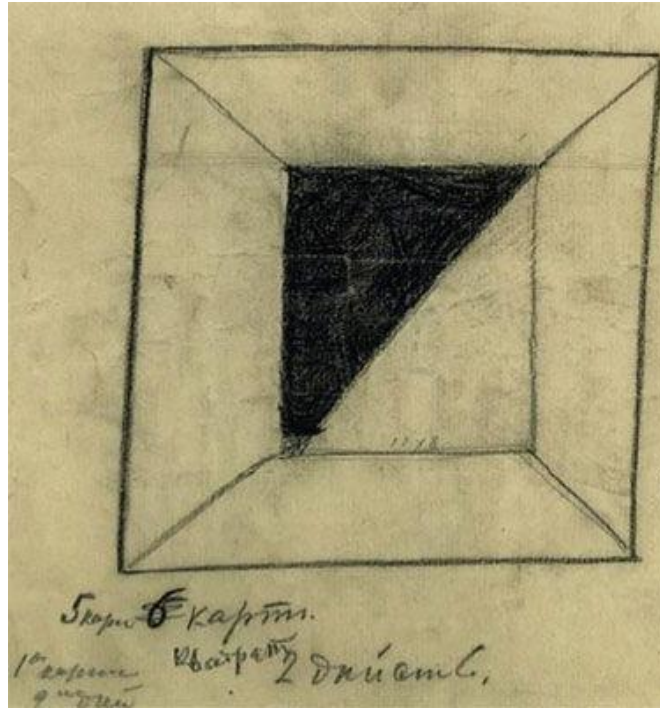


Figure 14: Kazimir Malevich, set design for the opera *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913
The St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music and Jerusalem Museum



Figure 15: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915
Oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5 cm
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

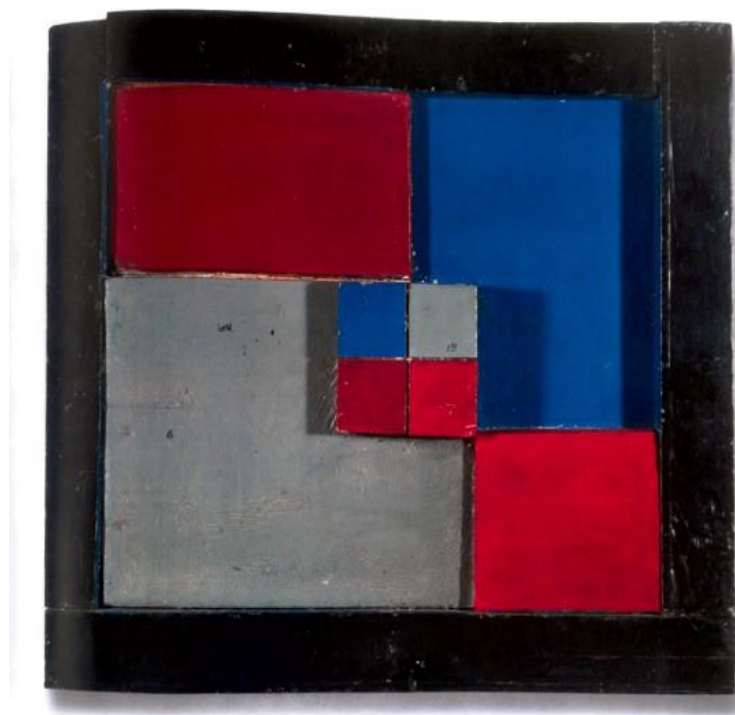


Figure 16: Ilya Kabakov, *Composition in Constructivist Style*, 1962
 Oil and enamel on wood. 38 x 42 x 6.6 cm
 Collection of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov



Figure 17: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *L'Art décoratif et industriel de l'U.R.S.S. (Decorative and Industrial Art of the U.S.S.R.)*, 1925
 Book with lithographed cover. 26.8 x 19.7 cm
 Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 18: Dennis Oppenheim, *Replanting Corn on the Bottom of the Ocean*, 1969
 Photograph of double-page spread from *Modernizm* (Moscow: *Iskusstvo*, 1973). Yelena Kalinsky, "The View from Out Here: Western Conceptual Art in the Moscow Conceptualist Imagination," *Athanor XXIX* (2011): 101, figure 1.



Figure 19: El Lissitzky, Pavillon der UdSSR auf der Pressa, Ukrainische Abteilung, Köln (The Pavilion of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian Section, at the Pressa Exhibition, Cologne), 1927-28
Exhibition view



Figure 20: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist Is Present*, 2010.
Performance.
Museum of Modern Art, New York

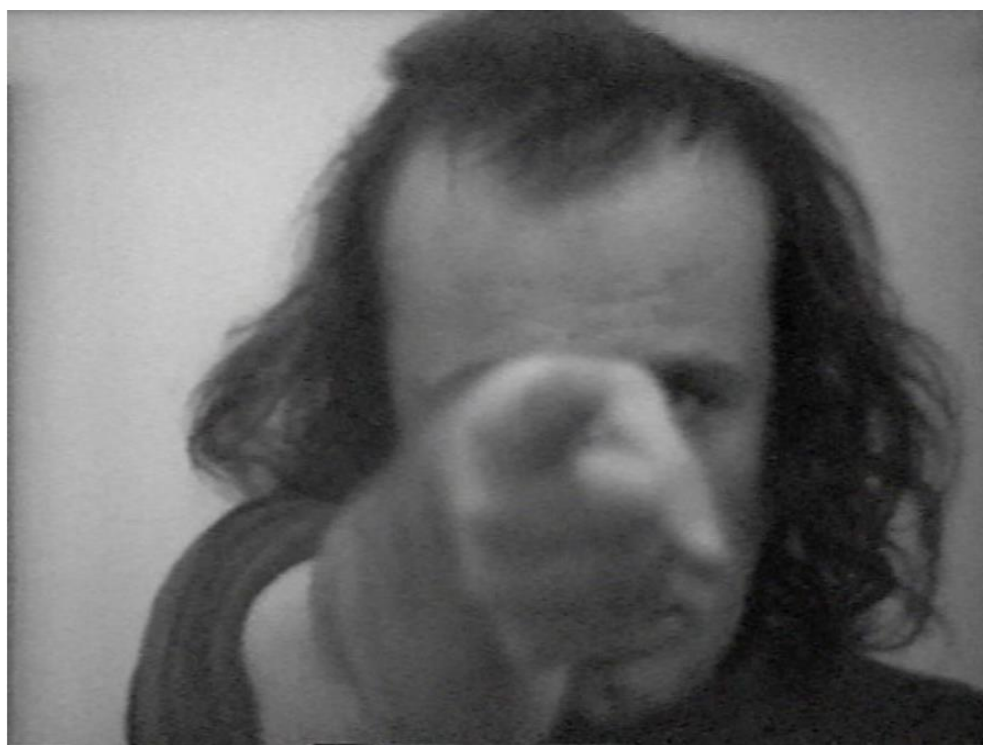


Figure 21: Vito Acconci, *Centers*, 1971
Single-channel digital video, transferred from video tape, black-and-white, sound
22 min., 28 sec.



Figure 22: Collective Actions, *Ten Appearances*, 1981.
Participants holding photographs
Performance.

<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/16/slides/10-pojavlenii-gruppa-stojat.html#picttop>



Figure 23: Igor Makarevich, *25 Memories of a Friend*, 1978
Enameled plastic casts in wooden frame



Figure 24: Victory Day (May 9th) celebration on Red Square, Moscow in 1975

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<https://ria.ru/20061213/56850916.html>



Figure 25: Erik Bulatov, *Krasikov Street*, 1977
Oil on Canvas
155.6 x 206.1 cm
Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ

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