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ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE: MOSCOW CONCEPTUALISM AND
THE LEGACIES OF SOVIET MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation engages historical accounts of the art of the Moscow conceptualist circle and proposes a different understanding of its purpose and significance for Russian and international art history. It challenges the current critical narratives of Moscow Conceptualism as a Soviet variant of a globalizing conceptual art and argues that the movement cannot be assimilated by the taxonomical categories of Western art history. Rather, I contend that Moscow Conceptualism must be historically and locally situated within the discursive framework of the late Soviet era. Through extended analyses of major Moscow conceptualist works, I demonstrate that the movement is distinguished by its purposive investigation of the organizational structures of Soviet history. These investigations occur at a juncture in which the teleological frameworks of official Soviet discourse had become self-evidently obsolete and incapable of orientating the present within a broader historical manifold. It is the uncanny space that exists between the modernist and Utopian foundations of Soviet socialism and the stagnation and alienation of contemporary Soviet life which this dissertation frames as a primary subject of Moscow conceptualist enquiry.

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Introduction

In his recent monograph on Ilya Kabakov, the art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson makes a piquant observation. “The [Moscow] Conceptualists,” he writes, “occupied a space that the history of twentieth-century art has not yet been able to describe, much less understand.”¹ This study is orientated around the very problem Jackson raises, if only in passing: that the developmental models and taxonomical categories of our (Western) art history gain little purchase upon the movement they are tasked with describing. Despite the internationalism of its title, the art of Moscow Conceptualism remains enigmatic to criticism. The cultural product of a closed and policed country, it exists at the limits and margins of the classificatory systems of post-war art. From this boundary zone the movement vexes and disorientates the categories that seek to elucidate it.² How, then, does art history approach the liminal space Moscow Conceptualism occupies? With what tools and with whose tools does the critic seek to tell its story?

These questions are fundamental. At stake is our historical understanding of the artists involved – in relation to each other as a group, in relation to their point in time, and, not least, in relation to the West and the global art world. As Moscow Conceptualism benefits

¹ Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 211.

² In addition to being categorized as a form of conceptual art, Moscow Conceptualism is also frequently described as a Soviet varietal of postmodernism. For the most recent example of this, see Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 211, 224.

from an increasing critical consensus regarding its significance as a movement,³ its *position* within the pantheon it is welcomed into remains contentious and unclear. In presenting a new account of the moment and method of Moscow conceptualist art, my study addresses itself to these problems.

This dissertation argues that Moscow Conceptualism must be repositioned outside of the aegis of the taxonomical system thus far applied to it. In it, I contend that the inclusion of Moscow Conceptualism within this system – an inclusion encapsulated and underlined in the movement’s own title – has distorted critical understandings of Moscow conceptualist art, whilst also destabilizing the categories that currently receive it. The judgment that affirms Moscow Conceptualism as a varietal of conceptual art (or indeed as a Soviet form of postmodernism) is deleterious to both parties and as a consequence unsustainable.

In lieu of the categories it rejects as interpretative tools, this dissertation reconsiders Moscow Conceptualism through the lens of its own Soviet history. This history is presented as substantively singular and distinct, despite being frequently adjudicated in

³ Among other measurements, this consensus is reflected in the increasing pace of major studies and exhibitions on the movement (or artists belonging to the movement). The last two years alone have seen large exhibitions on Moscow Conceptualism held at the Frankfurt Schirn kunsthalle (“Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990”) and at the Ekaterina Foundation in Moscow (“Field of Action: The Moscow Conceptualist School in Context 1970s-1980s”), as well as the publication of *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010) by Boris Groys, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (University of Chicago Press, 2010) by Matthew Jackson, and “Moscow Conceptualism in Context,” edited by Alla Rosenfeld (New York: Prestel, 2011). In addition, in 2012 a comprehensive exhibition on Moscow Conceptualism, entitled *Stories about Ourselves: Moscow Conceptualism in the 1970s-80s*, curated by Jane A. Sharp, will open at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers.

terms of equivalences and communalities with that of the West.⁴ The processes of Soviet history, I argue, constitute a common object of Moscow conceptualist enquiry, and much of the coherence the movement possesses *as* a movement arises from these purposive investigations. Rather than a mode of conceptual art, this dissertation then frames Moscow Conceptualism as a congruence of intent, of *questions*. Because these points of congruence are sustained through various techniques and artistic media, they elude formalist classifications. And because they seek to divine and to chart the structuring logic of their own history, they must be analyzed in light of that concrete process. Moscow Conceptualism, then, emerges from this account as a self-consciously situated mode of art-making that must be approached upon its own terms.

In arguing that Moscow Conceptualism must be framed by the history that begets it, this dissertation considers the artworks it studies not as determined products *of* Soviet history, but as active enquiries *into* that historical process. My treatment of individual works attends to the dialogue with history these works inaugurate and engages them as fulcrums and focal points for consideration of that history. I support and contextualize my readings with a variety of primary and secondary sources that include interviews with prominent figures of the Moscow conceptualist circle.

Because circles and groups are complex phenomena, typically adding and shedding members over time and dividing in turn into various sub-groups, associations, friendships, and rivalries, there has been much disagreement about how broadly, and to

⁴ For example, by Susan Buck-Morss in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) and Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (NY: Zone Books, 1999).

whom, the term Moscow Conceptualism can be applied.⁵ As Moscow Conceptualism comprises a loose and informal circle (or perhaps better, *circles*) of artists, any concrete or exclusionary definition of movement membership risks distorting the fluid, conversational nature of the group with a post-facto formality. Consequently, this dissertation attempts no definitive enumeration of Moscow Conceptualist artists. Rather, I engage with those figures who are regarded, by common critical consent, as central or integral members of the Moscow Conceptualist circle. These include Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Viktor Pivovarov, Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina, and the group Collective Actions, founded by Andrei Monastyrsky.⁶ Significantly, all of these artists were participants in what Matthew Jackson terms the “unwieldy Conceptualist collective”⁷ that met and discussed works in Kabakov’s apartment on Sretensky Boulevard. In addition to their interconnected and dialogical practices, these artists also constitute a loose generational cohort, who came of age after the death of Stalin in 1953. Affected in youth by the fleeting energies of Khrushchev’s reforms, the Moscow Conceptualists were nonetheless fated to develop and mature as artists in what Paulina Bren terms the great “nothingness” of late Communist rule.⁸ It is, then, the era stretching from the end of the

⁵ Konstantin Akinsha details many of these debates in his essay “Between Lent and Carnival: Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art. Differences, similarities, interconnections; a series of interviews,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (New Brunswick, NJ: Zimmerli Art Museum, 2011), 24-47.

⁶ For example, all of these artists are profiled in *A-Ya*, the émigré journal of contemporary Russian art, which was published in eight editions from 1979 to 1987. Boris Groys, in his *The Total Art of Stalinism*, first published in America in 1992, lists Kabakov and Bulatov as important representatives of a Soviet “postutopian” art. In *Moscow Conceptualism*, published by WAM in Moscow in 2005 (often termed the “gold” book), all these artists which the exception of Erik Bulatov are profiled. In *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, Matthew Jesse Jackson examines the works of Kabakov, Bulatov, Pivovarov, and Collective Actions in detail, but only discusses Makarevich in terms of his participation in Collective Actions, and Elagina as a member of Kabakov’s informal circle of interlocutors. Whilst, then, there is no definitive manifesto or list of participants, the artists this dissertation treats are those most centrally associated with Moscow Conceptualism as a movement in art.

⁷ Matthew Jesse Jackson: *The Experimental Group*, 108.

⁸ Paulina Bren: *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 4.

thaw to *perestroika* and marked primarily by the rule of Brezhnev that provides the contextual frame for the interactions, conversations, friendships, and artistic production of the Moscow Conceptualist circle. Moscow Conceptualism, this dissertation holds, is distinguished as much by the movement's collaborative exploration of its own *situation* within Soviet history as it is by the aesthetic preferences and creative strategies of individual artists.

To organize its argument, this study divides itself into four chapters. Chapter One examines the current situation of Moscow Conceptualism within the aegis of a globalized conceptual art and concludes that it is insufficiently coherent and, consequently, must be substantially rethought. The subsequent three chapters then engage with different points of thematic coherence within Moscow conceptualist practice. These chapters combine to demonstrate that Moscow Conceptualism must be approached and adjudicated in terms of the particular discursive environment of the late Soviet Union which the movement orientates itself towards. Chapter Two enumerates the correspondences between the stagnated temporal flow of the late socialist era and the lapses and disjunctions in temporality cultivated in Moscow conceptualist art. Chapter Three examines the treatment of space and subjectivity in Moscow Conceptualism. It argues that the Moscow conceptualists employ these categories as tools to orientate the late socialist present with regards to the foundational claims of Soviet socialism. Chapter Four investigates the status of the Soviet past in Moscow conceptualist art. It contends that this past is uniquely marked by traumatic disappearance and erasure, and that this historical trauma is itself mediated in much Moscow conceptualist practice. The dissertation concludes by noting

that in its investigations into the deeper structures of the late Soviet present, Moscow Conceptualism offers an artistic chronicle of the loss of control by the ruling Communist Party of the historical categories it claimed to know and to direct. It is this moment, which might best be simply termed “post Utopian,” that my study places at the heart of the Moscow conceptualist endeavor.

Chapter One

Moscow Conceptualism and Western Conceptual Art

“Personally, I am less and less sure what, precisely, conceptual art is or was in either East or West. Judging by the recent literature, it seems as if the longer the debate continues, the larger the category becomes.” Desa Philippi, “Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism”¹

What is in a name? Names often appear to simply denote existing objects, and thus constitute incidental attachments. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,”² muses Juliet to Romeo, and she is of course correct. Yet, and as Shakespeare’s young lovers quickly discover, names are at once a far more stubborn, complex, and trenchant phenomenon than they first appear. For naming is also an act of definition which imparts qualities and specifies relationships between objects. Indeed, divested of their titles and assignations, many objects would themselves blur and alter, becoming in turn different phenomena. Such is the case with Montagues and Capulets and also, intriguingly, with the movement known as Moscow Conceptualism.

To the critic, Moscow Conceptualism constitutes an open question as much as it does a movement. Given to discursive excess and likewise encased in a thick patina of critical

¹ Desa Philippi, “Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism,” in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion, 1999), 152-168 (153).

² William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Penguin, 2005), Act II, Scene ii, 1-2.

discourse, Moscow Conceptualism greets the newly curious with the discovery that all their questions have been asked in advance. These questions circulate and linger but are never answered, for the movement makes much of the awkwardness and irresolution that attend its position within the taxonomical systems of art history. “For many years now (roughly 40), we’ve been unable to properly define Moscow Conceptualism,”³ writes the artist Vadim Zakharov, and due attention to the literature surrounding the movement would suggest that he is right. Much of this hesitancy, in turn, stems from the endemic uncertainty which surrounds the relationship of Moscow Conceptualism to conceptual art; that is, to the connection its own name establishes. To illustrate this, let us take the art historian Andrei Kovalev:

If you look closely at the Moscow Conceptualists it is possible to observe that the majority of them, with the exception of those belonging to the group Collective Actions, couldn’t be defined as conceptualists per se. Strictly speaking, Eric Bulatov and even Ilya Kabakov are not conceptualists in the true sense of the word. However, Kabakov is the founding father of the movement, so he has to be defined as the “conceptualist”.⁴

And now the Curator Ekaterina Degot:

“Moscow Conceptualism could be understood as the broad definition, “the Russian version of conceptual art”, inside which both Moscow Conceptualism, as the school of

³ Vadim Zakharov, interview in “Between Lent and Carnival: Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art. Differences, Similarities, Interconnections; A Series of Interviews Conducted by Konstantin Akinsha,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld (New York: Prestel, 2011) 24-47 (32).

⁴ Andrei Kovalev, interview in “Between Lent and Carnival: Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art (Differences, Similarities, Interconnections); A Series of Interviews Conducted by Konstantin Akinsha,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, 24-47 (28).

Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrsky (known as “NOMA”), and Sots Art, the grouping of artists formed around Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, coexisted”.⁵

These conflicting assertions in turn reveal a whole host of subsidiary assumptions and ambiguities, all of which pertain to Moscow Conceptualism’s self-definition and consequent situation within the indistinct, yet meaningful boundaries of conceptualism in art. What internal coherence binds or distinguishes the movement; which formal or thematic criteria might mark its communality with Western conceptual art; whether and to what degree the art of a shuttered and policed country can indeed traffic in the categories of a globalizing West: these are but some of the questions that attend and trouble, yet also sustain, Moscow Conceptualism as a movement.

Unlike perhaps Cubism, or indeed Suprematism, movements which possess relatively firm typological boundaries, Moscow Conceptualism often appears to surreptitiously bracket its title with a question mark, all the better to denote the circuitous dialogue which revolves about that title’s own substance and suitability. “I have spent many years thinking about the term Moscow Conceptualism,” recounts Viktor Pivovarov, “and I know this. It is easier to *know* what is meant by the term than it is to articulate it aloud.”⁶ This contrasts with Ilya Kabakov, Pivovarov’s colleague and friend, for whom “the nature of Moscow Conceptualism... is precisely a collection of observations of a cultural nature of various aspects of Soviet life, Soviet consciousness, and so-called art, including

⁵ Ekaterina Degot, interview in “Between Lent and Carnival: Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art (Differences, Similarities, Interconnections); A Series of Interviews Conducted by Konstantin Akinsha,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, 24-47 (25).

⁶ Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08. All translations of interviews, texts, and documents are my own unless otherwise acknowledged.

that unofficial art produced in this very community.”⁷ These tangles of terms and definitions are left for the hapless critic to unravel. An opponent of smooth and easy narratives, Moscow Conceptualism presents its story in a grammar interspersed with question marks, parentheses and elipses.

Yet it is also the case that through all the categorical confusion and mischief, wedged in between telling silences and disparate definitions, the object of this enquiry remains. The name Moscow Conceptualism *does* denote a sophisticated and sustaining body of art, produced by a small and closely-connected circle of artists. How, then, and in what terms can one evaluate the production of this group, in order to situate it within a broader art-historical field, yet not merely contribute to and continue the movement’s productive and perpetual self-analysis? This is a demanding critical task, not least because Moscow Conceptualism continually threatens to transform all critical enquiry into undifferentiated and endless discourse; mere materials for its continued operations.

This chapter inaugurates my reconsideration of Moscow conceptualist art by examining the categorical uncertainty that surrounds Moscow Conceptualism as a movement. Here, I seek to clarify the questions cited above by examining the nature of the relationship between Moscow Conceptualism and Western conceptual art. This chapter argues that the alignment between the two movements, the consequence of a terminological

⁷ Ilya Kabakov, “Foreword,” in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 7-8 (8).

correspondence which has been encouraged and sustained by critics on both sides, has resulted in an increasing categorical incoherence and thus worked to hinder more productive critical analysis. To make its case, the chapter organizes itself around two successive yet interconnected analytical frames. Firstly, I consider the increasingly problematic question of categorical boundaries with regards to both Moscow Conceptualism and Western conceptual art. I argue that these corresponding difficulties of definition issue from a particular critical claim upon conceptualism, in which the movement is viewed as representing a momentous reconfiguration in the spatial modalities of art production. The recalibration which conceptualism here embodies, that from a centripetal nationalism to a globalized network, positions the movement on the fault line of the shift from modernity to postmodernity, consequently heightening its significance as an art form. I contend that these attempts to bind conceptualism to a new form of global space have resulted in an overly-eager expansion of the category, in which geographical diversity is courted as proof of the movement's spatial radicalism. Such strategic inclusiveness has in turn underestimated the depth of difference, the respective separations of the arts which it aligns, and thus obscures as much as it purports to reveal. This is particularly true, I make to demonstrate, with regards to Moscow Conceptualism.

Having established the critical difficulties which accompany the notion of a globalized conceptual art, this chapter then turns to a detailed examination of the critical history of Moscow Conceptualism. Here I analyze, in chronological order, four significant attempts to elucidate the communalities between Moscow Conceptualism and conceptual art. I argue that these efforts to identify substantive grounds for the comparison they draw are

neither cogent nor compelling. Detailing the flaws of successive approaches, which tend, on the Russian side, towards a defensive essentialism and on The Western side towards an uncritical acceptance of art labeled “conceptual,” I conclude that the nature of the relationship between Moscow Conceptualism and Western conceptual art remains unclear and marked by incongruity and contradiction. As a consequence, I close by noting, it would be critically productive to reconsider Moscow Conceptualism in a manner that seeks to circumscribe the presumptions and presuppositions engendered by the movement’s title.

Conceptual art, for the critic Peter Wollen, was “not simply a new style or movement.”⁸ Rather, it represented “the single greatest shift in art since the Renaissance,”⁹ a monumental recalibration of artistic practice that, among other things, challenged the long-established regency of painting and sculpture within the hierarchy of the arts. For Fredric Jameson, conceptual art, along with pop art, marks within the artistic realm the primary economic and cultural shift of the twentieth century: the supersession of modernity by postmodernity.¹⁰ Yet, for all the importance accorded to it by criticism, conceptual art remains a remarkably indistinct and contested object of study. “There has been a lot of bickering about what Conceptual art is/was; who began it; who did what

⁸ Peter Wollen, “Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 72-85 (81).

⁹ Ibid, 81.

¹⁰ Discussing the turn towards spatiality which distinguishes postmodernism from the temporal categories of modernism (speed, the future), Jameson notes that “conceptual art, too, surely stands under the sign of spatialization, in the sense that in which, one is tempted to say, every problematization or dissolution of inherited form leaves us high and dry in space itself.” *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 157-158.

when with it; what its goals, philosophy and politics were and might have been.”¹¹ Thus writes Lucy Lippard, the well-known critic and historian of conceptual art, in her 1973 summary of the movement, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. And indeed, in the intervening years, the bickering has rarely ceased or abated. Rather, it seems that the more conceptual art is discussed and written about, the harder it becomes to define or grasp what is meant by the term. Does “conceptual art”, for example, refer to a specific and identifiable set of practices or, rather, a general attitude or approach towards art making? Is what Lippard terms the “dematerialization”¹² of the art object a central or necessary feature of conceptualism, or may a painter or sculptor also produce conceptual art within their own “traditional” media?¹³ Furthermore, should the spectacular geographical diffusion of conceptual art – with self-declared conceptualist movements appearing from New York to Buenos Aires to Moscow to Tokyo and beyond – be taken as evidence of a new globalizing imperative in art making, a genuine de-

¹¹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), vii.

¹² Lippard first used the term in an essay with John Chandler entitled “the dematerialization of art,” appearing in *Art International*, 12:2 (February 1968).

¹³ There have been a series of attempts in the critical literature pertaining to conceptual art to distinguish between the terms “conceptual art” and “conceptualism.” Principally, this is done in order to indicate some segregation or distance between North American and European conceptual movements, and those other, “global” conceptual movements, that may diverge in theory or practice from “Western” prescriptions. The foreword to the catalogue *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* attempts such a distinction: “It is important to delineate a clear distinction between *conceptual art* as a term used to denote an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism, and *conceptualism*, which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception” (Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, “Foreword,” *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1999), vii-xi (viii)). I reject this distinction because I believe it attempts to artificially segregate conceptualist movements in order to forestall or disarm awkward questions concerning the influence of American and European conceptual art on subsequent “conceptualist” movements around the world. As Jon Bird and Michael Newman put it, “[t]he distinction between Conceptual art – the movement – and “Conceptualism”... is far from precise and frequently breaks down” (Jon Bird and Michael Newman, “Introduction”, in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 1-10 (6-7)). It is instructive that nobody arguing for this terminological distinction has provided more than the broadest explanation for the differences and distinctions the two terms describe, and no explanation of how “conceptual art” and “conceptualism” interact. Consequent to considering this a false distinction, I will hence employ the terms interchangeably to designate the same broad-based and international movement which nonetheless first emerged in America and Europe.

centering of the art world, or merely as confirmation of the continuing power and influence of the traditional Western capitals of high culture? Questions of this kind inflect the histories of conceptual art, becoming, if anything, more contentious and contested, and hence more intractable, as the literature on conceptualism expands.¹⁴ Even as the growing number of critical studies on conceptual art usher the movement further into place within the legitimizing terrain of academic art history, they also cement as a feature of the movement lingering questions of scope, of boundaries, and ultimately, of cogency. Consequently, and for all of its oft-cited significance within the histories of twentieth century art, conceptual art remains a style or movement deeply uncertain about its self-identity.

As already noted, the disagreements and debates regarding what, precisely, is referred to by the terms “conceptual art,” or, “conceptualism” in art, also extend beyond the broad use of these designations in the West. The movement known as Moscow Conceptualism, whose years of activity in the Soviet Union date from the early nineteen-seventies until the late nineteen-eighties, was first accorded its title by the critic Boris Groys in 1979, well after conceptual art in the West had become *démodé*.¹⁵ For Groys, the title was intended to indicate broad similarities with Western conceptual art, as he understood it, and therefore instate the movement as an advanced, internationally significant art.¹⁶ Yet

¹⁴ This expansion was noted in 1971 by members of Art-Language, who commented, in an interview with Catherine Millet, that “[t]he general usage of the term “conceptual art” has extended to the point where any distinctive meaning that it might have had has disappeared.” (Catherine Millet, “interview with art-language,” reproduced in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 262-265 (262).

¹⁵ “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” the inaugural essay on the movement by Boris Groys, is discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁶ The Russian art historian Joseph Backstein notes of Moscow Conceptualism that of post-war Soviet art movements, it alone “could offer a system of representation that would both serve as an alternative to

as Groys was vague about the nature of these relations, and vaguer still about the internal cohesion of Moscow Conceptualism as a movement, this act of naming in turn aroused a host of questions. What practices, for instance, bind this group together and align it with conceptual art in the West? Furthermore, what would such a connection imply about a movement whose years of activity and innovation almost entirely postdate the six years of 1966 to 1972 that Lucy Lippard cites as bookends for Western conceptual art?¹⁷ And if Moscow Conceptualism, qua conceptual art, is belated, is it then also derivative?

Reflecting on these foundational quandaries, the critic Yevgeny Barabanov has described the movement as being marked by “the painful and adolescent trauma of having been late learners, of having lagged behind.”¹⁸ These anxieties of belatedness, of what form originality might take when it is not also and at once *priority*, in turn confer a political valence upon the movement’s new title. For it is now apparent that the manner in which the critic interprets or construes the relationship which the title “Moscow Conceptualism” asserts is itself fraught with implication with regards to the status, originality, and importance consequently accorded to Moscow conceptualist art.

The double delicacy of describing a Soviet movement, of somewhat indeterminate nature, that shares a title and perhaps more with a notoriously fluid and heterogeneous Western

official Soviet art and enable Russian art to reenter the orbit of the international art world.” Joseph Backstein, “The Exhibition *Prospects of Conceptualism* and the Institutionalization of Moscow Conceptual Art”, in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld (New York: Prestel, 2011), 136-151 (143). It is important to note that aspirations towards participation in the international art field were as central to Moscow Conceptualism as was its isolation deep within the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. In her introduction to the book, Lippard views conceptual art’s “capture” by the gallery system in the early nineteen seventies as essentially signaling the end of its subversive or revolutionary power as a movement. She writes that: “By 1973, I was writing with some disillusion in the “Postface” of *Six Years*: “Hopes that ‘conceptual art’ would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded.”” Lippard, xxi.

¹⁸ Yevgeny Barabanov, “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld (New York: Prestel, 2011), 48-99 (60).

movement, is captured well in the quotation from Desa Philippi that fronts this chapter.¹⁹ Philippi subsequently gestures towards the frequent response to these lingering problems of critical taxonomy by noting that “it seems as if the longer the debate continues, the larger the categories are.”²⁰ And indeed, much recent writing on Moscow Conceptualism seeks to either evade or re-conceive such questions of taxonomy. The art historian Marek Bartelik, in a recent article, acknowledges the problems of category with regards to Moscow Conceptualism, yet argues that “such “confusion” should not be too disconcerting,”²¹ given what he terms “the widely embracing aspects of the origins and practice of Moscow Conceptualism.”²² Further to this, Bartelik writes that any history of the movement:

Should be *inclusive* rather than *exclusive* of as many artists as possible. After all, it was Moscow Conceptualism’s ethereal, dispersed, and fragmentary nature – as opposed to the official, solid, and permanent nature of Socialist Realism and its correlates – that helped its development and survival for more than twenty years.²³

In response to the problems of categorization, Moscow Conceptualism is presented here as a meta-movement, the artistic equivalent of a large river, which contains the water of many separate streams. Precisely what common character is shared within this broad channel, beyond the “ethereal, dispersed, and fragmentary nature” Bartelik speaks of, remains unclear. The manifold difficulties of describing Moscow Conceptualism are here

¹⁹ Philippi writes: “Personally, I am less and less sure what, precisely, conceptual art is or was either in East or West. Judging by the recent literature, it seems as if the longer the debate continues, the larger the category becomes.” Desa Philippi, “Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism,” 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹ Marek Bartelik, “The Banner Without a Slogan: Definitions and Sources of Moscow Conceptualism,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld (New York: Prestel, 2011), 2-23 (2).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

deferred by opening the terminological field to almost any art that would oppose itself to the “permanent nature” of Socialist Realism.²⁴ Yet for those who seek a more rigorous understanding of the communalities of Moscow Conceptualism or the nature of its relationship to conceptual art in the West, this strategic inclusiveness simply serves to further darken already murky waters. If, some twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most certain thing to be said for Moscow Conceptualism is that uncertainty and ambiguity have attended it from the very beginning, then it would seem that the passage of time has itself shed little light on these questions of critical category.

It is then ironic that it is precisely here, along this fold of critical retreat or revision, that perhaps the most palpable correspondence between Moscow Conceptualism and conceptual art manifests itself. This fold traverses an indeterminacy that is always present, yet deepens and ossifies with the retrospective gaze of the critic. It is timely at this point to consider the slippage that marks two different attempts by Lucy Lippard to define conceptual art. Here is Lippard in “the dematerialization of art,” an important early essay on conceptualism, co-authored with John Chandler and published in 1968:

²⁴ Yevgeny Barabanov notes that loose and non-rigorous definitions regarding Moscow Conceptualism have been proffered throughout the movement’s history: “Other types of broad interpretations include those *simplifications* that have become part of cultural custom. First of all, the reduction of conceptualism to techniques involving “the imposition of two languages” (for example, “the tired cliché of the Soviet Language-Object and avant-garde meta-language describing that Soviet language-reality”), the construction of a kind of “general-conceptual cultural mentality (as distinguished from conceptualism as a narrow stylistic movement), or the readiness to include within the ranks of the Conceptualists “any artists showing even the faintest claim to being intellectuals.”” (“Between Self-Definition and Doctrine,” 48.)

During the 1960's, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive process of art-making has begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively.²⁵

If a significant degree of looseness is inevitable in what was one of the earliest attempts to lend critical form to a series of new artistic experiments, Lippard and Chandler are nonetheless explicit about the shift away from intuition and materiality that conceptual art represents. However, by 1973, in her summary of the movement entitled *Six Years*, Lippard has significantly broadened this formulation:

Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or “dematerialized.”²⁶

Lippard's subsequent inclusion of various materials in her definition anticipates the terminological expansion which marks much recent literature on conceptual art. As with Bartelik regarding Moscow Conceptualism, conceptualist criticism increasingly prefers to treat the persistent presence of questions concerning definition as a component or feature of the movement itself. And, again like Bartelik, when definitions are provided, what is frequently noteworthy is the terminological looseness enjoined, the reluctance to resolve any of these questions of categorization by asserting that certain tendencies or approaches fall *outside* the purview of the movement. This reluctance in turn leads to definitions of the movement that read almost as surveys or inventories of the sum total of previous uses of the term. Take the art historian Alexander Alberro:

²⁵ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “the dematerialization of art,” reproduced in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 46-51.

²⁶ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art-object from 1966 to 1972*, vii.

In its broadest possible definition, then, the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness towards definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution.²⁷

What is here identified as constituting conceptual art, albeit in its broadest possible definition, amounts to little more than a cloudy collection of vague attitudes and vaguer definitions. Conceptualism here represents and is represented by a loose set of critiques and revisions, grounded in suspicion and hostility, towards artistic convention. A more rigorous or prescriptive criticism is in turn avoided. This relative absence of rigor regarding what the term conceptualism denotes may indeed be understandable in an evaluation that seeks to set the “broadest possible” parameters for the movement. Yet it also embodies an increasingly common critical assertion regarding the nature of conceptual art. The claim, implicit in Alberro’s definition, is concisely set forth by the art historian Tony Godfrey. In his monograph on conceptual art, Godfrey notes that critics of conceptualism “must be wary of typologies, something which conceptual artists have regarded as anathema,”²⁸ and subsequently cautions that “symptomatically, there has never been a generally accepted definition of conceptual art, though many have been proposed.”²⁹

²⁷ Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-77,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, xvi-xxxvii (xvii).

²⁸ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

In these cases, the categorical or taxonomical looseness of criticism concerning conceptual art is presented as being both deliberate and prudent, a realistic recalibration of the abilities of criticism to delineate or prescribe boundaries, and a response to the inadequacies of early definitions of the movement. These include Lucy Lippard's thesis of dematerialization and Joseph Kosuth's claim that conceptualism represents "inquiry into the foundations of the concept "art," as it has come to mean."³⁰ For Alberro, Godfrey, and indeed Bartelik, then, as for other scholars of conceptualism in art, the prolonged confusion surrounding the term "conceptualism" is itself highly revealing, being symptomatic of a movement openly dismissive of the received critical typologies of the art world. Through this lens, it is a mark of conceptualism's success and radicalism that it continues to complicate and annoy categorical definitions, those outdated tools of an anachronistic critical apparatus. After all, Kosuth, at the very beginning of the movement, was openly contemptuous of any morphological categorization of "art."³¹ Is it then realistic to seek or expect a more rigorous critical parameter regarding what constitutes an example of conceptual art, or indeed Moscow Conceptualism? Rather, is perhaps the "essence" of these movements to be found precisely in their energetic trespass through those borders and barriers which a critical taxonomy must erect? And if this is so, can the critic do much more than a Godfrey or a Bartelik: that is, to simply watch and take note of this escape?

³⁰ Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," in *Studio International*, 178: 915-917 (October, November, December 1969). Reproduced in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 158-177 (171).

³¹ In "Art After Philosophy," Kosuth writes: "formalist criticism is no more than an analysis of the physical attributes of particular objects which happen to exist in a morphological context. But this doesn't add any understanding (or facts) to our understanding of the nature or function of art." (163.)

I begin by raising the difficult and frequently tenuous relationship of much criticism to Moscow Conceptualism and conceptual art because I want to propose that much turns on it. For, in addition to raising necessary questions about the movements' *self*-knowledge, the critical hesitancy or retreat with regards to the terminological boundaries of conceptualism in art renders all attempts to probe the connections and convergences between conceptualist movements deeply problematic. If we cannot well say what conceptual art is, or indeed, just what constitutes conceptualism in Moscow, then the nature of the correspondence between the movements remains opaque and cloudy, by parts Moscow mist and New York fog. And consequently, one perhaps looks askance at the very taxonomical system of art history itself. There is, then, slippage here, from questions about the nature of conceptual art, towards broader questions concerning the efficacy of classification within art. Is the very designation "conceptualism" useful enough to be accurate? Or accurate enough to be useful? Certainly, the exasperation Desa Philippi voices, in the midst of an article about conceptual art, that she is "less and less sure what, precisely, conceptual art is or was in either East or West,"³² reminds one that the strategic critical indeterminacy spoken of above has its flipside in confusion and frustration. Conceptual art, it would seem here, risks simply *outsmarting itself* in complicating to the point of incoherence the very categories through which it claims self-sufficiency and distinction as a movement.

In attempting to chart a course through these manifold problems and complications in turn to examine the nature of the relationship between Western conceptual art and

³² Desa Philippi, "Matter of Words: Translations in East European Conceptualism," 153.

conceptualism in Moscow, I want initially to consider the origins of the critical imbroglio I have outlined above. In particular, I wish to argue that the *reductio ad absurdum* which criticism threatens to perform on conceptual art is the logical consequence of a foundational and enduring tension within the movement. This tension, to state the matter simply, has at its base the attempted unification, in the histories of conceptual art, of two frequently divergent genealogies of the movement. To one side of these largely unreconciled genealogies is the idea or ideal of a series of de-centered, “global” conceptualist movements, appearing more or less independently in various locations, in what Lucy Lippard termed a process of “ideas in the air – the spontaneous appearance of similar work.”³³ And on the other is the critical architecture of an originary conceptual art, specific to North America, and to a lesser degree, Europe. Because much of the idealism and energetic anger that drove conceptual art sought to transmute the national into the global and to claim the latter as a new field of action, it is unsurprising that most histories of the movement have refused to concede or acknowledge that these claims themselves may be in need of critical interrogation. The resulting question, which one might formulate as: “to what extent was conceptualism a genuinely global movement?” thus remains deeply political.

In order to better situate the enduring tension or opposition of which I speak, let us turn to two statements that attest to starkly differing realities concerning the possibilities of conceptual art in a global field. The first, from the manifesto “Art After Philosophy”, was penned by the young New York-based artist Joseph Kosuth, and published, in three installments, in *Studio International* in late 1969. In the conclusion to the second

³³ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966-1972*, ix.

installment, Kosuth contends that the transition towards an art of concepts will itself influence the political geographies of the art world:

Pollock and Judd are, I feel, the beginning and the end of American dominance in art; partly due to the ability of many of the younger artists in Europe to “purge” themselves of their traditions, but most likely due to the fact that nationalism is as out of place in art as it is in any other field. Seth Siegelau, a former art dealer who now functions as a curator at large and was the first exhibition organizer to “specialize” in this area of recent art, has had many group exhibitions that existed no *place* (other than the catalogue). As Siegelau has stated: “I am very interested in conveying the idea that the artist can live where he wants to – not necessarily in New York or London or Paris as he has had to in the past – but *anywhere* and still make important art.”³⁴

Eleven years later in 1980, also in New York, two other “conceptual” artists, Russian-Jewish émigrés whose collaborative career had begun in Moscow, far away from the great Western metropoleis Siegelau cites, published an article entitled “The Barren Flowers of Evil” in *Artforum* magazine. The article by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid begins by acknowledging the obstacles of distance:

³⁴ Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 158-177 (175). The claims of Kosuth and Siegelau for a post-national art, in turn, become the central focus of one of the most extensive exhibitions of conceptual art ever staged, the 1999 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, which was first displayed at the Queens Museum of art and subsequently travelled to Minneapolis and Miami. The thesis of *Global Conceptualism* was that conceptualism in art was truly a post-national event; one whose significance and reach has been underreported thus far. Stephen Bann’s claims in his introduction to the *Global Conceptualism* catalogue summarize the ambitions of the exhibition: “The present exhibition, with its highly ambitious global reach, puts forward a persuasive case for the historical importance of a view of contemporary art that breaks decisively with the heritage of modernism. That is to say, it explicitly rejects the customary practice of plotting out the topology of artistic connections in terms of “center” and “periphery”: Paris and New York in relation to the various satellites that have come within their sphere of influence. Instead, *Global Conceptualism* offers an alternative framework of multiple “points of origin”. The contention is that global conceptualism marks a radical shift, not merely in the morphology of modernism, but in the pattern of art’s development and diffusion worldwide.” (Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 3-13 (3)). The assumptions structuring *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* will be discussed in this chapter.

How difficult it is to understand something you know nothing about. Leafing through the pages of books arrived from afar, it is pure torment to get inside a foreign text, to separate metaphor from reality. In order to form a mental picture of another world through the comparison of words and images, texts and realities, one must possess a truly iron will and a stubborn belief in the necessity of such an activity... It is with nostalgia that we, the authors of this article, remember Igor Shelkovsky's small studio, which could barely hold our friends: Rimma and Valerii Gerlovin, Sasha Kosalapov, and several others. Ivan Chuikov was the only one of us who knew English, and we would gather and listen as he translated for us from the pages of the very magazine which you, dear reader, now hold in your hands.³⁵

As the words of Kosuth and Siegelauub indicate, from the initial stages of the movement, the critics and artists associated with conceptual art were deeply committed to both the dismantling and the re-imagining of the existing geographical hierarchies of art production.³⁶ Siegelauub's anticipation, that with conceptual art an artist can now live "anywhere *and* still make important art,"³⁷ raises to an aphorism the de-centering, globalizing revolution that was sought in art practice and production. Yet, as the experience of Komar, Melamid, and their circle of friends makes clear, no mere ideal of a dispersed and globalized movement could simply override or transcend the deep geopolitical divisions of the period. For the Soviet Union, China, the nations of Eastern Europe, and much of the Third World, the easy interconnectedness that was coming to

³⁵ Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "The Barren Flowers of Evil," in *Artforum* (March, 1980). Reproduced in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: MoMA, 2002), 258-271 (258).

³⁶ The 1968 exhibition *The Xerox Book*, curated by Siegelauub, in which seven conceptual artists each submitted 25 pages of material, which were then Xeroxed into 100 copies and each bound as a book which constituted the sum total of the exhibition and could be read or viewed anywhere. Discussing the exhibition, Siegelauub stated that "I've just, in a sense, eliminated the idea of space. My gallery is the world now." In *Recording Conceptual Art*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 38-39.

³⁷ In Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 175. My italics.

characterize the West existed only on the level of imaginative, utopian possibility, reproduced, if at all, in unintentional parodies and faintly ridiculous pantomimes of the global, of the sort that Komar and Melamid describe.³⁸ For conceptual art, which spanned both the heart of the Cold War and Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, the bright and brassy call for new, liberating geographies of art production frequently encountered an echo of tragic parody in contemporary events such as the completion of the Berlin Wall and the crushing of the Prague Spring. Furthermore, for all the vigor with which conceptualism imagined a new demographics in art, the very calls for change still issued from the great capitals of Western culture and were consumed in the byways and backwaters of the global, in much the same fashion that theories of modernism had been, some fifty years before. This is true of Kosuth and Siegelau, who lived in New York, as it is true of Komar and Melamid, who sought access to the global from deep within a closed country.

There is, of course, no novelty in this frisson between the creative idealities of art and the colder, harder realities of political and economic life. The historical avant-garde unsuccessfully summoned whole new social worlds in its art, and Socialist Realism recited moral catechisms for a society it simultaneously imagined into being. One can point to innumerable cases of art's failure to mold and knead the recalcitrant stuff of reality into its own image. However, what distinguishes the idealistic polity of

³⁸ In his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2006), the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak describes how the frustrated desires of many Soviet citizens to participate in a global culture led to the creation of vast imaginative industries which sought interaction with what the West was perceived to be via Western objects, from jeans to jazz records to soft drinks. Yurchak terms this phenomenon the Imaginary West and notes that "it was produced locally and existed only at the time when the real West could not be encountered." (159) This would then seem similar to the readings at Igor Shelkovsky's studio.

conceptualism in art is that the frequent dissonance between globalizing claims and more situated realities itself penetrated much of the critical writing on the movement. This sublimation appears in unusually sharp relief in the first paragraph of Peter Wollen's article "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art":

Conceptualism, as this exhibition suggests, was a global movement. However, unlike surrealism, which had important adherents and followers in the Caribbean, Mexico, Japan, and the Arab World, it did not simply spread out from a center in Europe or the United States – in other words, from the traditional art capitals of Paris or New York... But it is important to note that conceptualism's global reach is a product both of its multipolar origins and the impetus initially given to it by New York-based conceptual artists. This very small but very vocal and productive phalanx of artists, *strategically situated* and committed to a typically avant-garde strategy... *set the theoretical parameters that consequently made it possible for conceptual art to transform the landscape of the global art world in an enduring way.* North American conceptual art, then, inevitably came to play a disproportionate role in the emergence of the much broader conceptualist movement.³⁹

The forthright claims Wollen makes here for conceptual art's decentered or globalized nature, its transgressive or revolutionary spatial fluidity, are subsequently mustered to stand awkwardly alongside the simultaneous acknowledgement of the enduring power and importance of the traditional citadels of the art world. The caveat which invokes "the impetus given... by New York-based conceptual artists" at once erodes the very claims Wollen submits regarding the pattern of conceptual art's diffusion and the consequent departure from Surrealism this represents. And in the space opened between these conflicting hypotheses, awkward questions emerge. If, for example, a small group of

³⁹ Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 73-85 (73). My italics.

artists in New York did indeed “set the theoretical parameters that consequently made it possible for conceptual art to transform the landscape of the global art world”, does this not at once cast Komar and Melamid’s journey, from Soviet Moscow to Manhattan, as rather similar to that of Picasso to Paris, indeed of Jackson Pollock to New York? Is this resettling of two conceptualist artists, from one city to another, not, then, a journey (re)enacted throughout art history, undertaken from the provinces of art to the metropolis, from the periphery to the center? And if so, what then of talk of the new spatial modalities of art ushered in with conceptualism? Wollen’s attempt to square the critical circle, to postulate a genuinely global art movement operating from corporate headquarters in New York, only stirs a host of subsequent uncertainties regarding the movement. And it is here, in these circling, nagging questions and queries, that the critical stakes surrounding the genealogy of conceptualism become clear.

With few exceptions, conceptual art has entered the art historical canon as one of the principle death knells of an exhausted modernism.⁴⁰ Conceptual art was “the last avant-garde of all, the one modernism found it impossible to digest, whose impact had to be smoothed out and rationalized by the invention of a new period hold-all, “post-modernism.”⁴¹ Subsequently, as noted above, the overturning of the high-modernist spatial order has been frequently cited as a central proof of the paradigm shift which

⁴⁰ For example, Charles Harrison writes that: “The first requirement [for conceptual artists] was to establish a critique of the aesthetics of Modernism. This entailed the development of the appropriate art-theoretical and art-historical tools. The second requirement was to establish a critique of the politics of Modernism. This entailed the application of socio-economic forms of analysis.” “Conceptual Art and Critical Judgment,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 538-545 (540).

⁴¹ Peter Wollen, “Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art,” 74.

conceptual art both inaugurates and presides over. In his introduction to the catalogue for the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition, Stephen Bann sets forth this thesis:

Global conceptualism marks a radical shift, not merely in the morphology of modernist art but in the pattern of art's development and diffusion worldwide. This perspective would certainly mark out the art exhibited here as representing a decisive break with the preconditions of artistic development during the modern movement. But it might go further than that. Global conceptualism may be the visible proof that the Western hegemony in ways of seeing, ushered in by the perspectival science of the Renaissance, no longer holds sway.⁴²

In this view, conceptualism signals art's movement away from the modernist metropolis and towards the proto post-modernity of the McLuhanian global village. Its putative spatial radicalism – decentered, de-territorialized, even - dovetails perfectly with the most influential theories of the postmodern, including those of Fredric Jameson who writes that “[a] certain spatial turn has often seemed to offer one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper.”⁴³ For if postmodernity dissolves the temporal drive of modernity, its emphasis on priority and speed, into simultaneity and spatialization, as Jameson himself argues,⁴⁴ then it certainly behooves the histories of conceptual art to themselves demonstrate the prescience of their subject through the discovery of these self-same qualities, if perhaps only in utero. On the other hand, were it

⁴² Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” 3-13 (3).

⁴³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 154.

⁴⁴ Consider Jameson's pronouncement that “it is precisely this whole extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space which is the “moment of truth” of postmodernism... The distorted and unreflexive attempts of newer cultural production to explore and to express this new space must then also, in their own fashion, be considered as so many approaches to the representation of (a new) reality (to use a more antiquated language). (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 49.) For more on postmodernism's spatial mutations, see the first chapter of *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

the case that conceptual art essentially remained a Western product, consumed and emulated in the further corners of the global, then beside the *correspondence* with the dissemination of modernism around the world, conceptual art might stand to be accused of itself enacting a new cultural hegemony, disguised as the very refutation of older hegemonic forms.⁴⁵ An accusation of this order would additionally threaten to denude or segregate the movement from its politics, the main thrust of which ostensibly clusters around trenchant opposition to the received structures of Western power, whether cultural or political. Rather, conceptual art would carry within itself those darker seeds of what Peter Wollen terms a “postmodernism of the core,”⁴⁶ embodying both the conclusive annexation of critical distance and the final, massive expansion and purification of the forms of late capital throughout the cultural realm. This is, of course, the famous verdict of Benjamin Buchloh:

Paradoxically, it would appear that Conceptual Art truly became the most significant paradigmatic change of postwar artistic production at the very moment that it mimed the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality in an effort to place its auto-critical investigations at the service of liquidating even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience. In that process it succeeded in purging itself entirely of imaginary and bodily experience, of physical substance and the space of memory, to the same extent that it effaced all residues of representation and style, of individuality and skill.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ It should be noted that inaugurating a new mode of cultural hegemony should itself not disabuse conceptual art of its claims to the postmodern. As Fredric Jameson noted, “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.” (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 5.)

⁴⁶ Peter Wollen, *Raiding The Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 191.

⁴⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, in *October*, 55 (Winter 1990), 105-143 (143).

It must then be emphasized that judgments concerning the political substance of conceptual art, the degree of its radicalism or complicity, then depend to a far greater degree than commonly acknowledged on the *spatial form of the movement*. A conceptual art that emerged as a genuinely global, de-centered series of related or interconnected practices would be a broad movement whose very multiplicity and geographical dispersion was anti-imperialist and politically resonant. Yet if the same movement grew via the export of the reified forms of capitalist instrumentality, primarily from the financial and cultural capitals of America, and to those regions and countries where modernization was partial or incomplete, it would be surely be consequent upon criticism to treat claims for the transformative radicalism of conceptualism with great caution.⁴⁸

The meaning of conceptual art, its position within the histories of twentieth-century artistic production, is thus bound tightly to its topographical genealogies.

It is here, at this point and at this question, that much critical writing on conceptualism splits the difference. Guided by a distaste for the dismissive self-importance of Western art histories, critics like Wollen and Godfrey are largely unwilling to interrogate the membership claims of the many self-declared non-Western “conceptualist” movements, and are consequently unable to describe how the erstwhile center and periphery of a global conceptualism otherwise relate to one another. Vague talk, as with Lucy Lippard,

⁴⁸ In his book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), the Latin American conceptualist and curator Luis Camnitzer notes how the term conceptual art itself carried a double-edged political valence when applied to artists in what he terms the “periphery.” Camnitzer writes that: “Problems abound with the term “conceptual art,” at least when we try to cover all the artistic activities that took place around the world and have as their departure point some sort of concept. The term is generally used in that curiously inclusive/exclusive way that is customary for hegemonic styles in art: “Yes, it is international and not local,” and, “No, you are not really part of it because your stuff is different.” (22)

of “ideas in the air” does little to clarify the mechanisms involved, especially as any globalizing mechanism underpinning the diverse appearances of like practices in art must, in conceptualism’s case be, *more* than globalizing. That is, it must effortlessly traverse the economic and social barriers of the cold war and third world, thus extending far beyond the interconnected communities of the nascent “global village.”⁴⁹ How such unifying, trans-national winds blow through the shuttered streets of a closed country like the USSR, outside of the process of painfully incremental and private learning described by Komar and Melamid, remains obscure and unsaid. Rather, movements like Moscow Conceptualism are included in the histories of conceptual art as *proof* of its global and democratic nature, whilst the reasons, the critical justifications for such inclusions are largely passed over in silence. As a consequence of these accommodations, the critical boundaries of conceptual art are necessarily loosened and slackened further. All the while, as conceptual art expands its holdings, it progressively forgoes what internal coherence it once possessed. Still instinctively defined and described through the lens of its North American origins, the inclusivity and geographical breadth that have

⁴⁹ In a conversation with Luis Camnitzer, Blake Stimson confronts the looming question of what, other than direct influence, might motivate or account for the geographically dispersed yet seemingly aligned practices of conceptualism: “It is important... to understand why these various practices which we are assuming can all be grouped together under the rubric “conceptualism” emerged when they did and as they did. This does not mean we need to fall back on a strict innovator/follower model or even a center/periphery model but I also think we don’t want to assume, even as a general pattern, that artists in Latin America were responding to local and global political issues while artists in New York were responding to *Artforum*. The question then becomes, what historical determinants do they share and how are they inflected by local circumstances? If we don’t grant a shared history (above and beyond a shared art history) to the developments in question then the “conceptualism” that they share is rendered a matter of coincidence or merely stylistic.” (Blake Stimson, ““dada-situationism/tupamaros-conceptualism”: an interview with luis camnitzer,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 492-500 (499).) Whilst Stimson tentatively proceeds to posit a simultaneous “radicalization of the larger political cultures” (499) as a possible motivating factor for conceptualism shared by Latin America and the USA, this attempted explanation raises many further questions, from the nature of these radicalizations (how similar? motivated by what?) to the wholesale absence of any such radicalization in some of the remaining centers of a global conceptual art – for example, Moscow. Stimson’s awkwardness in answering his own question regarding the motivation of an international conceptualism is instructive, in particular regarding the general avoidance of the question of motivation or causality in the literature on conceptualism as a global movement.

subsequently come to characterize conceptualism have resulted in an art-historical category that is both terminologically confused and at frequent odds with its own foundational precepts.⁵⁰ It follows that the blurred boundaries and expanded categories which were postulated as an accurate reflection of the typological liberties of conceptual art now reveal little more than their own logical circularity. This misplacement of cause and effect welcomes to the conceptualist pantheon many diverse practices from many countries and cultures only to subsequently offer up their very presence within the borders of conceptual art as deductive proof of the movement's irreducible and global heterodoxy. In coalescing under a single banner allegedly similar practices in East and West alike, much writing on conceptual art has deferred questions as to the nature or cogency of these claims to membership, as well as to the political underpinnings of conceptualism as a broadly global category. This can no longer suffice.

To loose this terminological knot, to make sense of the concatenation of difference which shelters beneath the umbrella of "conceptual art," it is then necessary to comprehensively reexamine the globalist claims that surround the movement. Such an undertaking would involve a reassessment of many membership applications and a renewed consideration of the movement's written histories. These enquiries would consequently be positioned *outside* of the existing terminological field and would focus on the judgments and the politics that drove the expansion of the conceptualist category. They would pay as careful attention to dissenting voices as to affirmatory ones and diligently note the assumptions and hesitations that mark the conceptualist diaspora. Such reevaluations would parse

⁵⁰ For example, there is little impetus towards any form of dematerialization in Eastern European conceptualism, which remains broadly comfortable with the traditional categories of painting, drawing, and sculpture.

carefully, for example, Luis Camnitzer's remark that "much of Latin American conceptualism was a consequence of an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stance and to co-opt it into the New York movement seems not only tricky because of the dates involved, but may also be interpreted as offensive by many artists."⁵¹ They would also take note of Lev Rubenstein's assertion that there exists "an enormous difference between the concepts of "American" and "Russian" conceptualism, and the overlap is only one of terminology."⁵² For it is in these resistances and incongruities that the tensions which attend the category of a globalized conceptual art disclose themselves. In which cases and to what degree, it must then be asked, do the stubborn gravities of the national prove more powerful and trenchant than the transfiguring spatialities of an emergent postmodernity?

As a small component of this broader reevaluation, it is then opportune to here turn and evaluate in detail the critical judgments that first assigned Moscow Conceptualism its title and subsequently defended its inclusion within the categorical borders of an advanced Western art. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the cogency and coherence of different attempts to describe the nature of Moscow Conceptualism's internationalism, to identify the mechanisms that bind the movement to the supra-national discourses of conceptual art. Much about Moscow Conceptualism depends, I argue, upon whether the implicit spatial tension of the movement's title – its amalgamation of the polemical energies of the local *and* the global – can be successfully mediated in criticism.

⁵¹ Blake Stimson, "dada-situationism/tupamaros-conceptualism:" an interview with luis camnitzer," 497.

⁵² Lev Rubenstein, "Avangard segodnia ne aktualen," manuscript collection, Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art.

This section investigates and critiques four significant attempts to elucidate the relationship between Moscow Conceptualism and Western conceptual art. Of these attempts, three present their arguments in essay form, while the fourth frames its thesis via an exhibition and accompanying catalogue. Each of these works of criticism has exerted significant influence in shaping the critical discourse that surrounds Moscow Conceptualism. This salience is itself reflected in the stature of the critics involved. Boris Groys, whose work inaugurates this discussion, was a close friend and interlocutor of several Moscow conceptualist artists, and a regular observer of (and thus participant in) the works of Collective Actions.⁵³ Groys' writings from the late nineteen-seventies onward inaugurate the discourses of criticism regarding Moscow Conceptualism, and he consequently remains the most influential critic and theorist of the movement. After Groys, I examine the work of the art historian Joseph Bakshtein, who has written extensively on late-Soviet and contemporary Russian art. Thirdly, I discuss the writings of the Russian philologist Mikhail Epstein, whose theories on Soviet postmodernism gained wide currency during the nineteen-nineties. Finally, I consider and discuss the major 1999 exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, the catalogue of which was edited by the noted art historian Stephen Bann.

⁵³ Groys, especially, was close with Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrsky.

There is a pleasing symmetry to the fact that the first serious critical attempt to situate Moscow Conceptualism within a broader international cultural field appeared in *samizdat*, itself a form designed to subvert and traverse the borders erected by the Soviet State. The publication concerned was a short-lived Leningrad art magazine entitled *37*, which contained the article “The Zero Solution,” by Boris Groys. While *37* was a typical *samizdat* publication with a small print run, within the year the article was expanded and re-titled as “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” to become the centerpiece of the inaugural edition of the journal *A-Ya*.⁵⁴ Printed in Paris in a bilingual text of Russian and English, and featuring color reproductions upon appropriately glossy paper, *A-Ya* represented the first significant attempt to present non-conformist Soviet art to the Western world.⁵⁵ As such, “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” remains the foundational text of the movement, not least for the reason that the critical history of Moscow Conceptualism begins with its inauguration *as* a movement, its naming.⁵⁶ Groys’ act of assignation shapes all subsequent discourse because of its priority in defining the terms through which this art would be considered.

⁵⁴ *A-Ya* was the product of the efforts of two Russian émigrés to the West, Igor Shelkovsky and Alexander Sidorov. The magazine was published in eight editions from 1979 to 1987, with the first seven covering visual art and the final edition devoted to developments in literature. As the magazine was dedicated to covering the work of those artists remaining in the Soviet Union, there was considerable anxiety as to whether these artists would be subject to reprisals from the State. Because of this, the magazine emphasized in print that it reproduced the work of these artists without their knowledge or permission.

⁵⁵ Groys has recently claimed that his choice of the artists included in “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” was influenced by concerns regarding the effect the essay might have on those artists still living and practicing in the Soviet Union. As a consequence, Groys claims to have included in “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” only those artists who gave consent for him to do so. This claim is somewhat problematic, as Groys has defended and republished “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” (most recently in *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*) without previously noting this mitigating factor. When the author interviewed Groys on 30/4/2009, Groys made no mention of any voluntary omissions of artists whilst discussing “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism.”

⁵⁶ This point is reiterated by Galina Yelshevskaya in the article ““A-Ya”: opit vtopogo chteniya” [““A-Ya”: The Experience of the Second Reading”], where she notes that “the article of [Boris] Groys entitled “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” in the first issue was when an assortment of artistic gestures were first positioned as an integrated phenomenon, corresponding to an international context”. *A-Ya: zhurnal neofitsial'nogo russkogo iskusstva* Moscow: Artkhronika, 2004), iii-vi (iv).

“Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” represents a dual gambit on the part of its author. The article seeks both to instate the art it describes within the parameters of advanced, serious Western conceptualism, whilst simultaneously insisting on an absolute, ontological division between Russian and Western art. “Romantic” conceptualism is thus *Russian* conceptualism for Groys, and its primary point of comparison with the Occidental variety is as a new stage within an unfurling historical dialectics of art. The dialectical progression which Groys describes moves from matter towards thought, and is thus classically Hegelian.⁵⁷ This is developed from Groys’ initial definition of the movement:

However odd the juxtaposition of these two words may sound, I know of no better term than romantic conceptualism to describe the present development in the Moscow art field. The word “conceptualism” may be understood in the narrower sense as designating a specific artistic movement clearly limited to place, time, and origin. Or, it may be interpreted more broadly by referring to any attempt to withdraw from considering artworks as material objects intended for contemplation and aesthetic evaluation.⁵⁸

Dematerialization and anti-aestheticism, notably two of the central themes of conceptualism in the West, are here reemphasized as defining strategies of conceptual art. Conceptualism, in this view, consequently ceases to be a “specific artistic movement” or

⁵⁷ Hegel’s philosophy of art, set forth in his collected *Lectures on Aesthetics*, hold that art is the first of three media (the others being, respectively, religion and philosophy) in which spirit (or *geist*) attains self-awareness. As *geist* moves towards self-attainment, it progresses from the object-based intuition of art towards the concept-based world of philosophy. As Frederick Beiser puts it, “art, religion, and philosophy all have the same object, the absolute of truth itself; but they consist in different forms of knowledge of it. Art presents the absolute in the form of immediate intuition, religion presents it in the form of representation, and, finally, philosophy presents it in the form of concepts.” (Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 288).

⁵⁸ Boris Groys, “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism”, *A-Ya No. 1*, reprinted in *A-Ya: zhurnal neofitsial'nogo russkogo iskusstva* Moscow: Artkhronika, 2004), 3-11 (3).

school, and becomes instead a process or stage in a broader trajectory of art. Echoing the critical writings of Lucy Lippard and Joseph Kosuth, Groys views the transition to conceptualism as evidence of a new stage of artistic-self awareness.⁵⁹ This critical framework is shortly buttressed with a direct reference to Hegel, in which Groys notes that:

It is natural... to look at the question of how artworks function by comparison with other types of objects. Clearly, if art possesses some kind of truth, it is precisely at this point that it should be discovered. Here, however, as Hegel might say, art comes into its concept; that is, it becomes “conceptual.”⁶⁰

“Conceptual” art then represents, as with Hegel, the attainment of a higher stage of art’s self-awareness through the lawful and idyllic procession of the dialectic. Groys, like his Western counterparts, therefore finds in Hegel’s model of art’s eventual escape from art a useful categorical template for a new movement which seeks to question and subvert the hitherto stable typologies of its predecessors.⁶¹ If not proof of the existence of Hegel’s *geist*, an art of concepts nevertheless exists as evidence of an ascending artistic self-awareness.

Yet Groys’ Hegelianism here also means that the term “conceptualism” acquires, in relation to Soviet art, a double edge. For if conceptualism denotes a historically advanced

⁵⁹ Lippard and Kosuth’s writings on conceptual art are both heavily influenced by the aesthetic philosophy of Hegel, in particular his description of humanity’s ascending self consciousness, which moves from the intuitive languages of visual art to the conceptual medium of philosophy.

⁶⁰ Boris Groys, “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 3.

⁶¹ Groys writes that “Hegel himself held that with attainment of Absolute Spirit (or the sphere of ideas or concepts), art disappears, because of its very nature, which is the actualization of the immediate.” “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 4.

Soviet art, then the term also circumscribes that art as secondary and subsidiary with regards to its Western equivalent. Indeed, in “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” Groys is quickly forced to concede the origins of conceptual art to the West,⁶² and to justify his very application of the term to Russian art by citing the inclusion in the Western conceptualist canon of Yves Klein, who similarly “distinguished... between a world of pure dream and a world governed by earthly laws.”⁶³ The very dialectic Groys uses to insert conceptualism into a broader art history, in which each step is consequent upon and reactive to the one before, would then seem to underwrite the art of the West as both privileged and prior, demonstrably more advanced in having ascended first to a new level of artistic self-understanding. Here, the Moscow varietal of conceptualism Groys seeks to champion risks being painted into a terminological corner as little more than a further testimony to Russia’s age-old sense of belatedness vis-à-vis its Western rivals.⁶⁴ A Soviet or Moscow conceptualism would thus be conceptualism *post-factum*, intriguing perhaps, but scarcely less of a tribute to the cultural priority of the West than the Russian Baroque architecture of the eighteenth century.

It is here that the strategic importance of the “Romantic” that punctuates the title of Groys’ essay becomes clear. In asserting that he knows of “no better term than romantic

⁶² “In England and America, where conceptual art originated, transparency meant the explicitness of a scientific experiment, clearly exposing the limits and the unique characteristics of our cognitive facilities.” “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 4.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 4.

⁶⁴ In the introduction to his collected essays on the movement, entitled *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), Groys notes this persistent anxiety: “The deeper source of a certain uneasiness that is felt by some Russian artists regarding the term “Moscow Conceptualism” is a completely different one [to uncertainties about the definition of conceptualism]: The term seems to suggest that the Russian art movement was not an original phenomenon but was merely a variation of Western conceptual art – deeply dependent on its prototype.” (7.)

conceptualism to describe the present development in the Moscow art field,”⁶⁵ Groys denotes a point of separation with regards to the movement in the West which allows him to argue that, while conceptualism in Moscow may indeed be belated, it is nonetheless of unique kind and consequently independent value.⁶⁶ What distinguishes Moscow Conceptualism as a unique artistic form is, for Groys, simply the soil from which the movement springs. “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” holds that all true Russian art is a unique product of the Russian soul and therefore incommensurate with the arts of the West. As hackneyed as this argument appears, with its overtones of nineteenth-century Slavophilism and the subsequent, parochial artistic theories of figures like Pavel Florensky,⁶⁷ it nevertheless provides Groys with a watertight because a-priori methodology for distinguishing Moscow Conceptualism as, before anything else, Russian:

The [Western] positivist view on art as an anonymous sphere of activity determined solely by an available historical tradition has always been alien to the Russian mind. We can hardly reconcile ourselves with the idea that art should be regarded as being simply the total sum of its techniques, and that its purpose has been lost sight of. Therefore, romantic conceptualism in Moscow testifies not only to the continued unity of the “Russian Soul”; it also tried to bring to light the conditions under which art can extend beyond its own borders. It makes a conscious effort to recover and preserve all that

⁶⁵ “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 4.

⁶⁶ Groys confirms this in the introduction to his recent collection of essays, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, where he writes that: “I used the word “Romantic” precisely to indicate the difference between Anglo-American conceptual art and Moscow art practices.” (7)

⁶⁷ As Nicoletta Misler notes, Pavel Florensky “considered the ideal model or synthesis of the visual arts to be the Russian and Byzantine icon.” His artistic theories valorized the spiritual depth of Russian religious art, and argued that the turn towards European academism and then modernism was indicative of a broad cultural crisis resulting from Russia’s abandonment of Orthodox traditions. “Pavel Florensky as Art Historian,” in *Pavel Florensky: Beyond Vision* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 31.

constitutes art as an event in the History of Spirit and which renders its own history uncompleted.⁶⁸

Logically consequent to this proof concerning the “continued unity of the Russian Soul” is the proposition that all art produced under the aegis of this unity can only be fully grasped by those who swim in the same cultural sea; in short, by those themselves possessing a “Russian Soul.” Groys develops this point by asserting that while, “in one way or another, Western art says something about the world,”⁶⁹ the art of the Russian soul, “from the age of icons to our time, seeks to speak of another world.”⁷⁰ The tenor of the text makes it dimly improbable that Western artists or viewers possess the spiritual apparatus necessary to apprehend the presence of this other world. The content of Russian art, Romantic conceptualism included, is for Russians alone. Groys succinctly summarizes this point when he writes that “in Russia, art is magic.”⁷¹

For Groys, then, the Russian transition or ascension to an art of concepts may be justified via a totalizing model or art’s dialectical progress, with the crucial caveat that this progression is itself not unanimous, but rather comprises different and discrete national or cultural forms. To twist a well-known claim for Soviet art, it could be said that Moscow Conceptualism, with its “romantic” addendum, is here presented as being global in form and national in content.⁷² Moscow (Romantic) Conceptualism is irreducibly a portrait of the workings of the Russian Soul, with the formal innovations of the movement an

⁶⁸ “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 11.

⁷¹ Ibid, 11.

⁷² The above is a paraphrase of Stalin’s assertion at the 16th Party Congress in 1930 that proletarian culture was to be “socialist in content and national in form.” See David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 161.

instrument to aid in the location of this collective soul upon the developmental axis of History.

Moscow Conceptualism here emerges from its first substantial encounter with criticism as part of a broader, international conceptual movement *only* in terms of progression along its respective dialectic. What formal or thematic correspondences may exist between the work of those artists included in the movement and conceptualists in the West can only be evaluated in these terms, lest we otherwise subvert or trespass upon the cast-iron cultural nationalism that “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” insists upon. Here then, Groys’ critical gesture is highly ambiguous. In bringing the art of a small and isolated group of Russian artists within the terminological borders of Western art, he simultaneously reproduces and reinforces the radical isolation of Soviet artistic life. The political restrictions of the USSR are here recast as existential or ontological in character, and a contingent political segregation is made over to become eternal and immutable.

Unsurprisingly, this critical sequestering of Moscow Conceptualism – and indeed all non-conformist Russian art – into its own hermetic space aroused criticism. Indeed, Komar and Melamid devoted a considerable part of their 1980 *Artforum* essay “The Barren Flowers of Evil” to refuting and ridiculing Groys’ messianic generalizations. Writing from the position of recent Soviet émigrés who thus had a considerable stake in the free exchange of artistic cultures and dialects, Komar and Melamid dismissed the cultural essentialism of Groys as representative of a tired Soviet extension of Slavophilism:

Today Soviet Slavophiles understand that any individual Western phenomenon, when brought into Russia, finds itself in a different context, and begins to shine with some Holy Light, in the way that Edison's electric light bulb became Lenin's light bulb when it crossed into Russia. Groys is a typical representative of this "neo-patriotism". He has set himself the goal of pouring old vodka into modernist wine skins. Sometimes it seems that a drunken mix-up occurred in the printer's shop where the magazine [*A-Ya*] was typeset, so obvious is the lack of correspondence between Groys' arguments for Russian originality and the thoroughly ordinary performances of artists such as Francisco Infante and the group "action"... Try as one might, it is difficult to see any mystical national originality in the restrained elegance of Infante's kinetic games. We see how his triangular mirrors, like some unexpected neo-cubism, decompose the reflected landscape into illusory planes... [His] artifacts could, with equal success, reflect the skies of Russia or Spain, as well as the skies of any other country or climatic zone.⁷³

The price of a movement formed in these terms is thus the critical invalidation of the most straightforward cross-cultural comparisons as category mistakes. Whilst it is precisely the subordination or relegation of this art to secondary status through its inclusion within the Western terminological frame that Groys fears (and which we see in Komar and Melamid's categorization of Infante's work as "neo-cubist"), the consequent debarring of discussion is a critical gesture made comic, as Komar and Melamid note, by the manifest similarities of much of this work to the advanced arts of the West.⁷⁴ Groys' categorical insistence on Russian originality is thus a defensive gesture that protests its point too much, revealing instead a deep unease as to how the minor and unofficial arts of a closed country might fare in the very international field into which they sought to insert themselves.

⁷³ Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "The Barren Flowers of Evil," 265.

⁷⁴ It should be noted that Groys is at times tripped by his own categories. In the part of the article dedicated to the group *Collective Actions*, Groys notes that "Performance art is represented in Moscow by the group known as Collective Actions" ("Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," 10), thus effectively positioning *Collective Actions* as a regional variant of a Western genre.

“Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” inaugurates the critical history of the movement via a tenuous and defensive comparison with conceptual art in the West. This new art is presented to the world as separate but equal, inassimilable by the very movement it seeks recognition within. And it is this structural paradox which drastically limits Groy's ability to speak to the very correspondence he both establishes and defers. Indeed, by declaring Moscow Romantic Conceptualism an artistic testimony to “the continued unity of the “Russian Soul,””⁷⁵ Groy's forestalls any genuinely rigorous definition of the movement. This is reflected, indeed embodied, in the heterodox styles and approaches of the artists he selects as representatives of this new movement. There is no argument presented for what formally or thematically unites the work of Lev Rubenstein, Ivan Chuikov, Francisco Infante, and Collective Actions, and indeed the text emphasizes their respective singularities, their separation. The absence of any such undergirding highlights the fact that, beyond an ontological category sustained by the dialectic, there remains for Groy's no such thing as Moscow Conceptualism. What is here termed Moscow Romantic Conceptualism exists as a philosophical category and not an artistic or art-historical one.

With “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” the critical gambit that binds its subject together as a movement also evacuates that subject from its designated field. The article therefore presents its case as a double entendre, an inclusion that is also an exclusion, an initiation that remains a separation. Furthermore, the very question the article frames, that of just how and why the movement inaugurated as Moscow Romantic Conceptualism exists as a variety of conceptual art, is simply deferred by the declamation of Groy's that

⁷⁵ “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” 4.

he knows “of no better term than romantic conceptualism to describe the present development in the Moscow art field.”⁷⁶ The slow, detailed work of evaluative criticism is here substituted for grand postulations of borders and boundaries, of ontological division and dialectical progress. It is a measure of Groys’ early predilection for philosophical categories and maximalist claims that, at the close of the article, little more can be said of its subject other than it represents an advanced Soviet art, metaphysically distinct from advanced arts in the West. And in this attempt to instate Moscow Conceptualism within the discourses of contemporary Western art, yet also to sequester it from critical comparisons, Groys’ proximity to the movement he writes about becomes evident. A circle member, interlocutor, and participant, Groys’ early writings on Moscow Conceptualism cast him more as a de facto group publicist than an inaugural critic. As such, Moscow Romantic Conceptualism is best viewed as a promotional, rather than a critical essay.

Despite the ontological assertions and internal contradictions that weaken “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” the thesis Groys presents of Moscow Conceptualism as both irreducibly Russian and simultaneously international was to become a common critical leitmotif. This is particularly evident in the writings of Russian critics who succeeded Groys in elaborating a foundational narrative of Moscow Conceptualism. Joseph Bakshtein, a friend and associate of Groys, and a major scholar of contemporary art in Russia, has argued that Western conceptual art privileges qualities and traits that are

⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

integral to Russian culture.⁷⁷ In his article “On Conceptual Art in Russia,” published in 1990, Bakshtein asserted that “such important components of conceptual art as commentary, interpretation, or self-interpretation have long been inherent in Russian art.”⁷⁸ Bakshtein, writing a decade after “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” was first published, is too urbane and sensitive as a critic to countenance messianic absolutisms about the Russian Soul, yet his repeated intimations regarding the *Russianness* of the idea of conceptual art work to destabilize or reverse the chronology of conceptual art in ways similar to Groys. When Bakshtein writes that “the primordial conceptualism of Russian art lies in its ideological nature,”⁷⁹ he makes a subtle claim of priority, postulating that what Western conceptualism has discovered historically, Russian art has possessed immutably. The supposed alignment between Western and Russian cultural forms that conceptual art represents is thus an alignment born of the discovery and affirmation by the West of that which Russia has always known.

The “primordial” qualities of Soviet conceptualism spring, in Bakshtein’s view, from a longstanding Russian belief in the contingency of all representation and the consequent suspicion that the visual field will always be suffused with language and thus ideology. This claim is in turn based upon a highly eclectic reading of Western conceptualism, in which the writings of Joseph Kosuth are presented as the authoritative conceptualist texts, becoming in effect a synecdochal substitution for diverse corpus of conceptualist criticism. Bakshtein, for instance, writes that:

⁷⁷ Like Groys, Bakshtein was a member of the loose circle that frequented Kabakov’s studio at Sretensky Boulevard.

⁷⁸ Joseph Bakshtein, “On Conceptual Art in Russia”, in *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 73-82 (73).

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 74.

The term conceptualism, as used by Joseph Kosuth, quickly became popular at this time [the 1970s in the Soviet Union] not simply due to the originality and depth of Kosuth's ideas, but also due to the fact that conceptualism expressed some very essential aspects of the entire artistic process in Russia.⁸⁰

This reduction of the broad and often bewildering heterogeneity of conceptual art to the critical aperture of a single figure meant that Bakshtein, like other Russian critics, viewed conceptual art as far more reductively linguistic and propositional than was the case. As a consequence, the price of Bakshtein's comparison between Western and Moscow conceptualism is the downplaying, if not divestiture, of the pervasive socio-political aspects of the former. The two conceptualisms are here aligned only in a bloodless, apolitical series of enquiries concerning the relationship of language to the visual realm.

It is equally significant that Bakshtein's thesis all but dissolves Moscow Conceptualism within the Russian conceptual tradition which he speaks of. Because Moscow Conceptualism embodies a set of traits characteristic of Russian art, it represents less a series of innovations than the cyclical rediscovery of a set of ur-forms. This critical schema lessens the historicity of the movement, loosening its connections and responses to the political, social, and technological singularity of its own historical period. Moscow Conceptualism is thus essentially dehistoricized, leading Bakshtein to compare an historically evolving Western art with an ahistorical Russian "equivalent". Whilst Bakshtein, writing with the years of *perestroika* and *glasnost* at his back, certainly

⁸⁰ Ibid, 73. In his criticism, Bakshtein cites Kosuth repeatedly, mistaking Kosuth's theories of conceptual art for a verbatim intellectual history of the entire movement. In focusing on Kosuth's dry and philosophically-orientated writings, Bakshtein, much like Groys, seems either disinterested in or unaware of the strong socio-political bases of much Western conceptual art.

possesses a broader appreciation of Western art than Groys, and is less inclined to crude reduction, his reconfiguration of a “essence” inherent to Russian art extends, if also softens, Groys’ division of conceptualism in Moscow and the West into separate camps of the essential and the contingent. Such category mistakes of criticism only serve to further complicate and obstruct serious attempts to situate Western conceptual art and Moscow Conceptualism in relation to one another.

The first decade of critical writing on Moscow Conceptualism was then largely driven by Russian scholars, and defined by attempts to sequester the movement away from direct and unflattering comparisons with its Western namesake, to identify and underwrite its uniqueness and singularity. However, as *perestroika* and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 stimulated international interest in the formerly unofficial arts of the USSR, and as a series of exhibitions of conceptualist work in the West brought the movement to the attention of the Western viewers and critics, new critical trends emerged. The nineteen-nineties were marked by renewed scholarly attempts to identify and define the grounds for correspondence between the two conceptualisms, to unearth the deeper logic of the relationship indicated in the movements’ titles and corresponding practices. These efforts to elucidate the motivations that caused two putatively aligned cultural forms to arise from radically different milieux were led on the Russian side by the theories of Mikhail Epstein. In the West it was the 1999 exhibition *Global Conceptualism* that contributed most significantly to the project.

The Russian philologist Mikhail Epstein has published extensively on contemporary Russian culture. Beginning in the final years of *perestroika* and continuing through the subsequent decade, Epstein produced a substantial body of work that catalogues the many curious correspondences which seem to align late-Soviet and post-Soviet culture with postmodernism in the West. Epstein advocates a distinctly Russian form of postmodernism, with conceptualism, both in the Soviet period and after, existing as the pre-eminent form of what has been termed a “second world postmodernism.”⁸¹ For Epstein, Russian postmodernism is directly comparable with postmodern culture in the West, including of course Western conceptual art. Moscow Conceptualism is, in this view, exemplary of a Soviet Union that has pursued a largely parallel course to the West throughout the twentieth century and consequently has independently reached the same level of abstraction or alienation from the real. It is to Epstein’s innovative theories of a Soviet or Russian postmodernism that we now turn.

In the essay “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” Mikhail Epstein sets forth his theory of a Soviet and post-Soviet postmodernism:

What is called postmodernism in contemporary Russia is not only a response to its Western counterpart, but also represents a new developmental stage of the same artistic mentality that generated socialist realism. Further, both of these movements, socialist

⁸¹ Anesa Miller-Pogacar employs the term in “Mikhail Epstein’s Transcultural Visions,” her introduction to *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*. 1-16 (6).

realism and postmodernism, are actually components of a single ideological paradigm deeply rooted in the Russian cultural tradition.⁸²

The “single ideological Paradigm” that Epstein cites is one of the foundational tenets of postmodernism in the West, namely the disappearance or displacement of reality in a world of endless simulation, where “[m]odels of reality replace reality itself, which then becomes irrecoverable.”⁸³ As opposed to the dissolution of the real in the mediated electronic simulacra typical of late capitalism in the West, Epstein argues that the ideological saturation of the Soviet social field performs the same removal, inserting the subject into a world of signs, none of which grasp the reality they purport to describe.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Epstein views this problem of reality as itself intimately characteristic of Russian culture, asserting that:

The production of reality seems new for Western civilization, but it has been routinely accomplished throughout all of Russian history. Here, ideas have always tended to substitute for reality, beginning, perhaps, with Prince Vladimir, who adopted the idea of Christianity in A.D. 988, and proceeded to implant it in a vast country where it had been virtually unknown until that time.⁸⁵

Epstein’s comparison is thus also essentially an inversion in which the West, with its transition to postmodernity, finally discovers or attains what Russia has always known or

⁸² Mikhail Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism”, in *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 188-210 (189).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁸⁴ In his book *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization*, Vitaly Chernetsky offers a similar argument. Concerning the idea of Soviet postmodernism, Chernetsky notes that “what we are dealing with in the case of the late Soviet Empire is excess of ideological signification overwhelming and fragmenting the perceiving subjects.” (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 30.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

possessed. The structure of this model, in which a Western historicism eventually aligns itself with a Russian essentialism is of course familiar from the writings of Bakshstein, and is reproduced throughout Epstein's work. Russian postmodernism is thus postulated as a recurring leitmotif within a culture of prototypes, sharply segregated from the historicity of Western cultural forms. It is this model which provides the theoretical basis for Epstein's writings on Soviet conceptualism.

It is noteworthy that the theoretical model of postmodernism which Epstein presents is overwhelmingly dependent on French post-structuralism and, in particular, the ideas of Jean Baudrillard.⁸⁶ As a result, the author's assertions regarding conceptualism in the Soviet Union do little more than reproduce the formal logic of the model they describe. This is evident in much of Epstein's writing, including his claim that the "aim of the conceptualist aesthetic" is "to demonstrate the complex reality of ideological signs in a world of spectral and annulled realities."⁸⁷ Soviet conceptualism is for Epstein an art of the sign and the signifier, a "set of such labels, a collection of facades lacking the other

⁸⁶ Epstein writes that "[a]mong the diverse definitions of postmodernism, I would single out as the most important the production of reality as a series of plausible copies, or what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation." Other features of postmodernism, such as the waning of comprehensive theoretical metanarratives or the abolishment of oppositions between high and low culture seem to be derived from this phenomenon of hyperreality." ("The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism," 189.) Epstein's chronically reductive view of postmodernism as essentially hyperreality is to a degree foisted upon him through the necessity of either ignoring or challenging Fredric Jameson's version of postmodernity as a stage in the development of capitalism; a theory that obviously excludes the Communist world from the term as it applies to advanced capitalist societies. It is just one of the manifold weaknesses in Epstein's theory of a Soviet/post-Soviet (and indeed pre-Soviet!) postmodernism that it must appeal to something as dubious as "national character" to provide a motivational explanation for the "postmodern" practices it catalogues in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. In contrast, Jameson's theory of postmodernity centers in detail upon the already-sophisticated discourses of Marxism, extending the Marxist model of cultural dependence on economic development (especially as set forth by Ernst Mandel in his *Late Capitalism*) into a new historical period. In comparison to the sophistication of Jameson's work, it is difficult to view Epstein's work as constituting a serious alternative narrative of postmodernism and/or postmodernity.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 193.

three sides,”⁸⁸ and thus uniquely capable of internalizing and reproducing the ideological structures of Soviet (hyper)reality.⁸⁹ The function of this art is therefore to draw attention to the Soviet desert of the real, to unmask via imitation the absence of a structural center to Soviet discourse.

Consequently, the philosophical heritage which Epstein positions Soviet Conceptualism within contrasts sharply with that of Western conceptual art, which primarily looked to the Anglo-American tradition for guidance. For Joseph Kosuth, the Western conceptual artist most influential in Russia, philosophy provided the conceptual underpinning to art’s ultimate *reality*, that is, as a series of philosophical propositions concerning the nature of art. Kosuth’s embrace of the linguistic logical positivism of Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer, insofar as logical positivism asserts that language *can* capture and describe reality, places his conceptualism as theoretically distant from the radical epistemological skepticism of Baudrillard and French post-structuralism as can be imagined.⁹⁰ In positing a Soviet equivalent to Western postmodernism, motivated by the ideological saturation of the social field, Epstein inscribes in his theory a sharp division between the conceptualist

⁸⁸ Ibid, 192.

⁸⁹ Edith Clowes, in her article “Simulacrum as S(t)imulation? Postmodern Theory and Russian Cultural Criticism” remains unconvinced by Epstein’s claims of a Soviet hyper-reality. She notes that, “[i]t is important to note, that while Baudrillard claims that the American public is in the grip of hyper-reality, these Soviet-era simulacra have long since lost their power to convince even the simplest worker... The hold of ideology, as surface, as desire, in Western postmodernism is not the case in Russia, where not only intellectuals, but others as well, have known for a long time that they were being lied to, cheated, and coerced.” *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), pp.333-343 (334).

⁹⁰ In “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy”, in the anthology *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion, 1999), Peter Osborne examines the influence of logical positivism of Kosuth’s writings and views on art during the late nineteen-sixties when, most notably, “Art After Philosophy” was published. Osborne notes that all of Kosuth’s assertions concerning art during this period were “dependent on a quite particular philosophy of language.” (57) This “propositional positivism,” (57) as Osborne describes it, was also integral to the writings of *Art & Language*. Given this, Western conceptual art and Moscow Conceptualism, as Epstein conceives it, are positioned within discrete and frequently opposed philosophical traditions, respectively, the Anglo-American and the Continental.

products of this cultural paradigm and conceptual art in the West. Each descends from radically differing philosophical precepts and cognizes reality in a radically different manner.

The theory Epstein develops, of Moscow Conceptualism as a cultural logic of Soviet postmodernism, then only works to obscure the grounds for comparison between the movement and Western conceptual art. These difficulties are further heightened by consistent emphasis on the primacy of literature and poetry in conceptualism and the author's subsequent refusal to countenance any distinction between conceptualism's literary form and its manifestation in the visual arts.⁹¹ The privileging of literature in Epstein's work is itself the natural consequence of a theory that views ideological language as constituting the primary reality of Soviet life. This strong and characteristically Russian logocentricism therefore foregrounds literature precisely because it traffics in language, the stuff of the real. As a consequence, conceptual art is only conceptual to the degree to which its operations are themselves linguistic. For Epstein:

Conceptualism is the auto-representation and self-criticism of language, which having lost the second dimension of being able to speak about itself, risks identifying itself with reality and proudly abolishing the latter, - an entirely imaginable event as our recent history shows with its rhetorical "achievements."⁹²

⁹¹ In the essay "New Currents in Russian Poetry", Epstein describes the aims of conceptualist poetry in terms that also apply to the visual arts, noting that "conceptualists create precisely such a break between the idea and the things, the sign and reality, but in this case with complete intentionality, as a stylistic principle". Here, as elsewhere in Epstein, the purported techniques of poets like Prigov and Rubinshtein are simply transferred to the artistic sphere when any discussion of conceptualism in art arises. In *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, 19-50 (31).

⁹² Ibid, 36.

Within the Soviet prison-state of language, conceptual art exists as a subsidiary and secondary form, its legitimacy dependent upon an isomorphic alignment with the techniques and strategies of conceptualist poetry.⁹³ The movement Epstein frequently terms “conceptual painting and writing”⁹⁴ is, in this view, one in which a painting and a poem are functionally identical. Each constitutes an inoculation or an antidote against the ubiquitous extension of Soviet ideology.⁹⁵

In addition to the semiotic and ideological character of Soviet conceptualism, Epstein discerns an important ethical aspect to its operations. Conceptualism, he argues, performs a vital cultural function by appropriating for display the myriad worn clichés of cultural automation. In Epstein’s words, the movement “carries out an important task by sweeping culture clean, turning up and sweeping off its dead layers of cliché and kitsch.”⁹⁶ Soviet conceptualism acts, then, as a sort of kidney to the social body,

⁹³ The collapse of any generic distinction between conceptualism in art and literature within Epstein’s work is also apparent in his frequent enumerations of conceptualist figures, which casually mix writers and artists. For example, in “After The Future”, Epstein writes that “represented by the works of Ilya Kabakov, Dmitry Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, Timur Kibirov, Mikhail Sukhotin, and Arkady Bartov, conceptualism did not limit itself to playing with signs of Soviet civilization.” In *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, 71-97 (77).

⁹⁴ Mikhail Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism.” 201.

⁹⁵ Although Epstein frequently defines Soviet conceptualism in opposition to what he terms “metarealism” (the metaphysical currents in underground Soviet poetry), and his focus remains primarily on conceptualism as a literary movement, he always takes care to render his definitions of conceptualism in media-neutral terms. For example, in his essay “After The Future”, he writes of conceptualism that “here, linguistic signs do not strive for a fullness of their meaning; on the contrary, they reveal the vacuousness of their essence, their freedom from the signified. Conceptualism, which emerged as an artistic movement in the West at the end of the 1960s, acquired a second homeland in the Soviet Russia of the seventies and eighties, where by this time ideological consciousness had decomposed into a rich collection of empty fictions and hollowed-out structures.” In *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, 71-97 (77).

⁹⁶ “New Currents in Russian Poetry,” 25.

purifying, purging and eventually expelling that which would otherwise accumulate as a socio-cultural poison:

Conceptualism is a canal system, draining of all of this cultural garbage and scrap into cesspool texts where the garbage can be filtered out from the non-garbage – a necessary function for any developed culture.⁹⁷

It is in prescriptions such as this that once again one encounters the urge to essentialize and de-historicize Russian culture which typifies Epstein's thought. For the process of social cleansing through linguistic renewal described here is of course a contemporary variant to the futurist theme of *ostranenie*, or "defamiliarization," first theorized by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique." In Shklovsky's famous formulation, *ostranenie* was the poetic renewal of the habitual or unconscious perception of things, a continuous invigoration of life by art necessary for the perpetuation of culture. In framing the world through ever-evolving formal devices, art replenishes the senses, evacuating the dulled and the automatic and replacing it with the sensuality of the novel and unexpected. By conferring upon conceptualism the momentous duty of preserving the vitality of culture *in toto*, Epstein clothes the movement in the messianic garb of Russian Futurism. Consider the task assigned to conceptualism in the following excerpt:

The culture that does not allow its conceptions to be brought out into the open and changed into "concepts", into the objects of conceptual art, is a one-dimensional culture, condemned to decay.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 36.

This is an extraordinary claim. For Epstein, it is solely the invigorating actions of conceptualism that preserve late Soviet/post-Soviet culture (for the article is about recent Russian poetry) from stagnation and decay. This of course echoes and reiterates Shklovsky's central points in "Art as Technique":

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.⁹⁹

For both critics, the choices are clear. It is art or the habituation to stagnation or decline. Shklovsky and Epstein each champion an artistic movement as the sole vital force of the culture they describe, and endow their respective movements with the privilege and responsibility of preserving cultural life in their time. Yet, if the call to the cultural barricades for the benefit of all society is understandable in – and indeed characteristic of – the year 1917, when all of Europe seemed on the brink of revolution, it sounds discordant and anachronistic when applied to the Russia of the late twentieth century, a Russia Epstein insists is fundamentally postmodern. In aligning conceptualism with Russian Futurism as concerns its ethical tasks and responsibilities, Epstein's strict insistence on the postmodern credentials of Russian conceptualism is itself smudged by the messianic narratives of the high modern.¹⁰⁰ Because it is tasked with unmasking the

⁹⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24 (12).

¹⁰⁰ In her article "Simulacrum as S(t)imulation? Postmodern Theory and Russian Cultural Criticism," Edith Clowes notes the persistence of the modern in Russian theories of the postmodern. She writes that: "something closer to a "modernist" impulse is present in both Groys' and Epstein's writing. Epstein's work

ideological simulacrum of Soviet life, as well as with purifying and rejuvenating its discourse, Epstein's model of conceptualism is inevitably future-orientated, optimistic and revelatory. The dissonance of such terms in relation to the categories and characteristics of the postmodern scarcely needs to be mentioned.

It is here, then, in the loose admixture of the modern and the postmodern within a model that seeks to present the purity and sophistication of a Russian postmodernism, that we encounter further problems with Epstein's theories of conceptualism. Because his historical modeling for Russia consists of a series of recurring national-cultural prototypes, be they the simulacrum or *ostranenie*, he is remarkably blind to the specificities of historical circumstance. In his influential essay "The Origins and Meanings of Russian Postmodernism," he demonstrates this, conjoining two separate periods in order to postulate *two* separate Soviet postmodernisms, "one in the thirties [Socialist Realism] and one in the seventies [conceptualism]." ¹⁰¹ His model of conceptualism in Russia similarly collapses or ignores historical circumstance, treating the movement as essentially unchanged through the stark cultural shifts that encompass the rule of Brezhnev, *Perestroika*, and then the post-Soviet period. As a consequence of his presentation of Russian history as the cyclical (re)appearance of prototypical forms, in contradistinction to the West, Epstein cannot speak with any precision or rigor of what is specific to any moment of Russian history without undermining his own model. ¹⁰²

has a strong orientation towards the future. His is a predictive criticism that presses beyond an unacceptable present. . . . This continual denial of the present in favor of the future is not just modernist, but a deeply ingrained quality in Russian intellectual discourse." *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), 333-343 (340).

¹⁰¹ Mikhail Epstein, "The Origins and Meanings of Russian Postmodernism," 210.

¹⁰² In the conclusion to his article "The Origins and Meanings of Russian Postmodernism", Epstein frames his views on the privileged and prototypical aspects of Russian history and its difference from the West

Moscow Conceptualism is thus presented not a singular product of its own historical period, but rather as evidence of Russia's distinctly non-Western history of recurrent prototypes. In is in deference to this theory that Epstein offers up Socialist Realism as a postmodern predecessor and equivalent to Russian conceptualism, and not as its antithesis. When Epstein writes of the obligation "not only to compare Russian postmodernism with its Western counterpart, but also to examine the two separate phases of Russian postmodernism: socialist realism and conceptualism,"¹⁰³ he seeks to silence or bury the numerous, stark differences between these distinct period-styles in favor of the tenuous unity of a theoretical model. And thus we find that the elaborate model which appropriates Moscow Conceptualism as an exemplar of a Russian postmodernism, like so many critical theories, sustains itself by submerging the unique and irreducible beneath the apparently equivalent.

Moscow Conceptualism, for Epstein, often seems to exist only as so much material for larger cultural theories. His emphasis on ideology as the fundament of Soviet reality disposes him towards viewing the whole conceptualist movement in the terms of Sots Art. Consequently the more personal works of Viktor Pivovarov and Igor Makarevich, both unquestionably central figures within the Moscow conceptualist circle, are passed over in silence. Even were we to accept Epstein's model as cogent or accurate, it would tell us little about the relationship between Moscow Conceptualism and Western

with some precision. He writes: "The tendency to perceive socialist realism and conceptualism as mutually s[t]imulating aspects of one and the same cultural paradigm will undoubtedly find further support in the course of future reinterpretations of Soviet history as a whole. The two Russian postmodernisms complement each other and present a more complicated and self-contradictory phenomenon than Western postmodernism, which is concentrated in a single epoch." (210.)

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.210.

conceptual art, beside that both represent postmodern manifestations of different cultural processes. Because one movement restates an ontological national condition, while the other represents a “single historical period,”¹⁰⁴ any attempt to measure the nature or degree of their interaction or cross-pollination would, as with Groys, come close to being an error of category. In its rigorous categorical divisions, then, Epstein’s work represents another stage of a distinctly Russian critical approach towards Moscow Conceptualism. This approach is defined by the strategic mystification of the movement as embodying a set of uniquely Russian historical and cultural forms. From Groys’ indivisible “Russian soul” to Epstein’s history of Russian archetypes, the urge to place the movement within the secure fortress of the national character appears all but irresistible. These gambits both essentialize Moscow Conceptualism and remove it from the field of history, for they posit that the movement cannot speak of the texture of its own specific time, of its historical situatedness, but must rather affirm the a-historicity of transcendent national traits.

In this view, what Moscow Conceptualism shares with conceptual art in the West is a loose synchronicity, an almost simultaneous appearance of comparable cultural forms that can be employed as markers or beacons of Russia’s temporal or historical development vis-à-vis the West. For while Russia may not have been condemned to the West’s rootless existence in history, the very existence of cultural forms like conceptualism or postmodernism document that it nonetheless *progresses at the rate of the West*, that its National culture remains vital and advanced. The theories of Groys, Bakshstein, and Epstein all then seek to quiet anxieties of belatedness or provinciality by

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 210.

largely denying the grounds for such judgments.¹⁰⁵ All are, to a significant degree, critical defense-formations that seek primarily to return to Russia some measure of cultural parity with the West. This is no doubt understandable, given the enduring official hostility towards cultural heterodoxy and artistic freedom during the Soviet period. Yet it remains a marker of the weakness of such approaches that the distinguishing features of a Russian conceptualism, its very claim to significance in broader art-historical or literary terms, are generally presented as metaphysical and absolute, rather than formal or thematic. The very questions that arose with the assignation of the term conceptualism to this body of work – those of the nature and extent of Moscow Conceptualism’s similarities to conceptual art in the West – are here not addressed, but rather sequestered away and deferred indefinitely.

If much Russian writing on Moscow Conceptualism displays a predilection for nationalist mystification, then analysis of the movement in the West has tended to accept at face value its title, firstly placing it within the categorical borders of conceptual art and only then searching for post-facto justifications. Perhaps the most salient example of this practice came with the landmark 1999 exhibition, *Global Conceptualism*, which opened at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, before travelling to Minneapolis and Miami.

The aim of *Global Conceptualism* was, somewhat unsurprisingly, to present

¹⁰⁵ Yevgeny Barabanov describes this critical gambit well, noting that such definitions of Moscow Conceptualism represent a “tradition of self-Westernization and, simultaneously, the sidestepping of any attempts at a critical comparison of the results of this Westernization with the initial models”. “Moscow Conceptualism: Between Self-Definition and Doctrine,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (New York: Prestel, 2011), 48-99 (94).

conceptualism as a foundational paradigm of the emerging, globalised art world. Before proceeding further, it is timely to here reiterate the claims for the exhibition made by Stephen Bann, the primary editor of the exhibition catalogue:

Global Conceptualism offers an alternative framework of multiple “points of origin”. The contention is that global conceptualism marks a radical shift, not merely in the morphology of modernist art, but in the pattern of art’s development and diffusion worldwide.¹⁰⁶

To strengthen the case for conceptualism as embodying the transformation of the outdated spatial modes of modernism, the exhibition musters work from as many separate “points of origin” as possible. Included under the subheading ‘Soviet Union’ were seven works, two apiece from Kabakov and Komar/Melamid, and a single work each by Irina Nakhova, Collective Actions, and Boris Mikhailov.¹⁰⁷ This somewhat schematic selection notwithstanding, the inclusion of art from the former Soviet Union was more than a simple act of categorization of such work as conceptualist. More broadly, it was a claim of causality, an assertion that the mechanisms of the global that drove the “radical shift” of which Bann writes, and which conceptualism represents, existed in the Soviet Union as in North America and Asia. Soviet conceptualism is then accepted into the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition as more than simply “the local version of conceptual art,”¹⁰⁸ as Margarita Tupitsyn puts it in her catalogue essay. It is also circumscribed as a product of

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Bann, “Introduction”, in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ The works represented were *Answers of the Experimental Group* (1970-71) and *Sitting in the Closet Primakov* (1972-74) by Ilya Kabakov; *Documents: Ideal Document* (1975) and *Hamburgers “Pravda”* [also titled *Grinding Pravda*] (1975) by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid; *Unfinished Dissertation* (1983-84) by Boris Mikhailov; *Investigation of Documentation* (1976-83) by Andrei Monastyrsky and Collective Actions; and *Room No. 2* (1984) by Irina Nakhova.

¹⁰⁸ Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 99-107 (99).

a broader historical shift, a street address in the newly globalized village. Regardless, however, of such optimistic inclusiveness on the part of the curators of *Global Conceptualism*, Soviet conceptual art was not so easily assimilated.

The theoretical basis through which *Global Conceptualism* predicated its vision of a genuinely multinational artistic movement was political and technological. The catalogue describes how conceptual art arose with sixties counterculture, encapsulating a generational hostility to received authority and entrenched power. The symbolic forms of conceptualism were disruptive, embodied in the international student uprisings of the late 1960s. Its technological bases included television and the unprecedented affordability of international air travel. Here, conceptualism represents the historical punctum when politics itself was globalized, when, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “what happened at the Sorbonne, in Berkeley, in Prague, [was] part of the same event in the same global village.”¹⁰⁹

The manifold interconnections between conceptual art and the new technologies and social forms of the global are reiterated by Stephan Bann throughout his catalogue introduction.¹¹⁰ His assertion that “the reality of rapid communication within an increasingly interconnected world economy remained a distinctive and novel feature of the period in which conceptualism emerged,”¹¹¹ is buttressed by a reference to Marshall

¹⁰⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (London: Vintage, 1996), 446-47.

¹¹⁰ It is worthy of mention that, in his review of *Global Conceptualism*, Robert C. Morgan notes that Stephen Bann “understands conceptualism as a response to specific political conditions that exist simultaneously worldwide”. *Art Journal*: Vol.58, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), 109-111 (110).

¹¹¹ Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” 4.

McLuhan who, Bann notes, “saw the cultural aspect of globalization as primarily a shift from print-dominated communication technologies to electronic media.”¹¹² Yet as the necessary technical and social preconditions for a new, globalised art are enumerated and set forth, the less clear it becomes as to precisely how a movement from within the Soviet Union might cogently be included within this frame. This incongruity further insinuates itself in the paucity of evidence presented in the catalogue to justify the inclusion of Soviet art, despite such evidence being energetically mustered in defense of other countries and regions. In this regard, it is salient that the sole example given in the catalogue of student activism east of the Berlin Wall is of course the Prague Spring. It is increasingly evident that most of the putative causal conditions the catalogue cites in support of its thesis, from student activism and the rise of counterculture to the growth and dissemination of electronic media, barely apply to the dour and restricted Soviet *lebenswelt* of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Still more so, the mercantile conditions of the Western art world, so closely bound to the political thrust of conceptualism in its challenge to the market and gallery system, are starkly incongruous with the contemporary situation in the Soviet Union. Take the assertion in the *Global Conceptualism* catalogue that:

Conceptual artists found further targets for attack in galleries, formalist art criticism, the collection, the market, and the tangible product (These attacks were often seriously weakened by the fact that artists, in spite of their ideological stance, still defined themselves within the gallery landscape).¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid, 4.

¹¹³ “Foreword”, by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, vii-xi (ix).

Not a single of these “targets for attack” existed in the USSR in any analogous form.¹¹⁴ Bereft of both an art market and a critical industry, Soviet conceptualism simply could not partake in the shared discursive projects that *Global Conceptualism* cites as evidence of the obsolescence of those older categories of the national and the modern. This stark separation from the legacies of formalist art criticism, student revolt, and the workings of the market would thus seem, by the exhibition’s own criteria, to disbar the Soviet Union from the very categories of the global that its purportedly conceptual art has been sequestered within.

It is then the postulation of a global or internationalist art from the Soviet Union that reveals the inconsistencies of the exhibition’s methodology. In order to exist as more than a scattered collection of curious correspondences, the art that *Global Conceptualism* presents as evidence of a momentous reconfiguration of artistic production and distribution must itself be causally connected. That is, as a newly globalized movement, it must reify and articulate globalizing forces, be they social, technological, or political. Yet if conceptualism is here enabled and defined as the artistic conquest of the old cartographies of the border and the Nation State, then the Soviet Union is distinguished by its obsessive defense of the same. Here the global village and the iron curtain collide. By what means, then, can this model approach or account for the cultural products of a closed and policed country, all the more so when such products bear the name “conceptualism” and display a measure of similarity to much “global” conceptual art?

¹¹⁴ In the introduction to his collected essays on Moscow Conceptualism, *History Becomes Form*, Boris Groys makes this point emphatically, writing that: “Soviet unofficial artists had no access to any galleries, museums, art markets, or media. The art markets and galleries did not exist in the Soviet Union, and the museums and media did not let them in.” (11)

The tension that the inclusion of Soviet conceptualism brings to the theoretical basis of the exhibition then presents a major challenge to the notion of a motivated global conceptual art. It is therefore salient that this challenge is recognized and raised in the text. When, in his introduction, Stephen Bann addresses the Soviet example, he does so to speak of “the logic that underwrites Russian Conceptualism almost as a negative pole of its Euro-North American counterpart.”¹¹⁵ This insinuation that the Soviet example must be treated or adjudicated through discrepancy as much as through communality is reiterated by Margarita Tupitsyn in her catalogue essay. Here she notes that: “if the foundation of Western Conceptualism was a built in reaction to the over-presence of the beholder and critic, then Soviet conceptualism was a reaction to the absence of both.”¹¹⁶ Yet, instead of leading to questions concerning the efficacy of the global model, the difference in question is raised only to be disarmed and reabsorbed. It is to this end that Stephen Bann writes that “[t]he example of Soviet Conceptualism enables us to assess, again paradoxically, the strength of the Western tradition and its capacity for “globalization.””¹¹⁷ Bann’s sentence works hard to make something from nothing, to loose the Gordian knot that it acknowledges in the term “paradoxically,” to weave even a loose unity from the stubborn stuff of difference. The task, however, is too great, as the strained language and non-sequitural conclusion demonstrate. Rather than admit that

¹¹⁵ Stephen Bann, “Introduction”, in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism”, in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 99-107 (100). In her essay, Tupitsyn frequently emphasizes the stark differences in the conditions of production and reception between Soviet conceptualism and Western conceptual art. For instance, she writes of Kabakov’s works that “In contrast to Western conceptual art, in which the operative strategy – as defined by Charles Harrison – is the “suppression of the beholder,” in Soviet alternative art, the prolonged absence of the beholder caused Kabakov to invent and introduce him/her into the artwork itself.” (99) Despite her intentions, the discrepancies which Tupitsyn draws attention to only further underscore the difficulties of assimilating Soviet conceptualism into the global model.

¹¹⁷ Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 9.

Soviet conceptualism may problematize the model of a global conceptual practice, Bann awkwardly recasts this art as the exception that proves the rule.

The acknowledgement that Soviet conceptualism must in some way be adjudicated through difference, that it constitutes a special case, is then raised as the cost of preserving the globalist model of the exhibition. Yet this approach to the Soviet example, the simultaneous admission of non-contiguity *and* insistence on the movement's broader fidelity to the categories of the global only further destabilizes the case for its inclusion. Because Soviet Conceptualism is admitted as essentially unmotivated, with the recognition of its difference pertaining primarily to the social conditions in which the art was produced, all comparisons with Western conceptualisms are rendered spurious. Consider here an assertion made by Margarita Tupitsyn in her catalogue essay:

Then, in his drawing *Answers of the Experimental Group (Otvety eksperemental'noi gruppy*, 1969), Kabakov took a decisive step towards the condition Benjamin Buchloh defined as the “withdrawal of visuality”.¹¹⁸

Tupitsyn here invokes Buchloh's Marxist approach to conceptual art to facilitate a comparison made purely on the basis of formal correspondence. Even if such a “withdrawal of visuality” could be cogently traced in Kabakov's work, the question of whether it might represent a political-aesthetic engagement even vaguely similar to what motivated the equivalent withdrawal in Western conceptual art would remain wholly unclear. Having already conceded the vast difference of Soviet political and social life,

¹¹⁸ Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, 99-107 (99).

Tupitsyn can offer no causal narrative for the equivalences she asserts, and indeed proceeds to note the great *difference* concerning the status of the visual in Russian culture when compared to the Western tradition.¹¹⁹ A comparison such as this, which takes as its base unit *form* – the very evaluative paradigm Western conceptualism was trying to escape *from* – and fails to document the motivational grounds for such a correspondence, lapses quickly into the most frivolous variety of pseudomorphism, leaving us no closer to an understanding of the nature of the relationship in question. The strategic latitude granted to Soviet conceptualism as a result of the self-evident difference in its generative conditions then only works to further corrode the global model from within, bringing into question the basis for all comparisons or comparative judgments.

The critical methodology exemplified in *Global Conceptualism* thus wedges Soviet “conceptual” art between two evaluative poles, each of which pulls in a different direction. Firstly, a proportion of this art displays a loose formal isomorphism with Western conceptual practices and is thus included, qua conceptualism, in the roll call of international conceptual movements. Yet, as the social and economic conditions that inaugurate these practices are utterly different within the closed borders of the USSR, then Soviet conceptualism must also to a degree be distinguished or abstracted from a critical model that invokes a nascent cultural and economic communality to account for the global growth of conceptualist art. The cogency and coherence of the claims made by

¹¹⁹ Tupitsyn writes: “Here I would like to add that this linguistic element, intrinsic to both eras of Soviet culture... illustrates the prolonged dependence of Russian and Soviet culture on textual rather than visual mechanisms of art making.” (Ibid, 107.) The long and well-documented history of logocentricism in Russian culture would suggest that any “withdrawal of visuality” by Kabakov would encapsulate a *return to tradition* rather than a break from it, making any such strategy all but impossible to assimilate or explain within the parameters of a global conceptualist practice. For a discussion of logocentricism and Russian modernity, see Thomas Seifrid, *The Word Made Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition then to a significant degree founder on the Soviet example, which, rather than being the exception that proves the rule, becomes the exemplar which most undermines it. The heralded new spatialities of the global, it would then seem, must be erected around the geographies of the Cold War and do not simply supersede them.

The failure of the global conceptualist model to accurately situate Soviet conceptualism in relation to its Western namesake, to cogently account for its putative convergences and evident divergences, is simply the most recent in a series of energetic but unsatisfactory attempts to chart and describe the nature of this relationship. Given this, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that comparative criticism has thus far told us surprisingly little about the movement known as Moscow Conceptualism. Rather, as this chapter has documented, it has highlighted a stubborn depth of distance, an enduring *non-*correspondence that casts doubt on the ability of the two conceptualisms to meaningfully converse with each other. Furthermore, what dialogue does exist remains stilted and tenuous, redolent with difference and distance, and thus reminiscent of the studio readings of *Artforum* described by Komar and Melamid in “The Barren Flowers of Evil.” Names, then, do matter. For the synchronicities these investigations search for attest to the active and continuing influence of Moscow Conceptualism’s title upon its reception and treatment in criticism and, indeed, its position within the histories of art. In calling attention to this titular dilemma, to the problems it engenders for both Moscow

Conceptualism *and* conceptual art as categories, I then reject Boris Groys' recent assertion that this correspondence is contingent and unimportant:

But, on the other hand [regarding the suitability of the title "Moscow Conceptualism"], who can tell what is the precise sense of a certain notion? At least Wittgenstein did not believe in our ability – or in the necessity – to define the precise sense of any notion at all. And Wittgenstein, as we know, is by no means a foreign figure to conceptual art.¹²⁰

The term Moscow Conceptualism, and the global or international sphere it has consequently been aligned with, have *already*, this chapter has argued, had a decisive and distorting effect on the movement. It is because of this that it is well time to reconsider our attempts to account for Moscow Conceptualism primarily in terms of a synchronic or spatial model of international categories and global movements.

Let us, then, close here by noting that any reconsideration of Moscow Conceptualism's position within the globalizing currencies of late twentieth century art should also pause to wonder whether a genuinely globalized art history must unfold outside of a Western terminological framework if it is to record and register the stubborn persistence of place as accurately as it records the restless spread of a globalizing, yet always Western cultural matrix. Consequently, rather than place the term "Moscow Conceptualism" under erasure in a Derridean sense, we should henceforth declare it *na remonte*, or "under repair," in the Russian fashion. This would indicate a prolonged or indefinite postponement of the term's normal operations whilst new enquiries are carried out.

¹²⁰ Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, 7.

Chapter Two

Moscow Conceptualism and the Epoch of Late Socialism

“Everything is not so good and not so bad. But you cannot believe that this is human life. It is like the life of chickens and cows. It is absolutely life without perspective, life without the possibility of change.” Ilya Kabakov.¹²¹

This chapter turns from the consideration of Moscow Conceptualism’s relationship with Western conceptual art to an examination of the concrete historical situation of the movement itself. In doing so, this chapter introduces the primary thesis of this dissertation with regards to Moscow Conceptualism. This thesis, which is expanded upon in subsequent chapters, consists of two related premises. The first of these submits that the foundational period of Moscow Conceptualism accompanies, or is aligned with, a distinct Soviet epoch, whose spatial and temporal parameters are unique and divergent from those of the contemporary West. The second premise posits that one of the unifying traits, or distinguishing methodologies, of Moscow Conceptualism is its purposive reification of the discursive forms of its own era. I seek to demonstrate, then, that one of the most salient features of Moscow conceptualist art is its incorporation and reproduction of the organizing structures of the Soviet present. Consequently, and because of the internalization by Moscow Conceptualism of the specific historical forms

¹²¹ Ilya Kabakov quoted in Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 63.

of its era, it is the self-conscious situatedness of the movement that offers itself most forcefully to critical appraisal.

In detailing the concern of Moscow Conceptualism with the discursive structures of its generative period, I argue, here and in subsequent chapters, that these enquiries are further distinguished by their epistemological, and not their aesthetic, character.

Occurring in a period when it was increasingly evident that the discourses of official Soviet culture were incapable of apprehending a changing Soviet reality, the Moscow conceptualist examination of its era sought to chart and thus give form to that era's specific contours and crenulations. This significant aspect of Moscow conceptualist practice, passed over thus far in silence by the critical literature on the movement, might best be termed a project for self-knowledge of the present. Here it resembles what Fredric Jameson, in another context, describes as "cognitive mapping."¹²² Jameson, writing of Western postmodernism, sees "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping" in terms of a recuperation of the political within the postmodern, as a "pedagogical political culture that seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system."¹²³ As opposed to the political, Moscow Conceptualism's particular mode of cognitive mapping might better be described as *archaeological* in its focus, employed primarily as a means of historical self-orientation. That is, the charting of the present that Moscow Conceptualism engages is itself a mode of historical enquiry, a series of attempts to better understand the contemporary moment by enquiring of its relationship to the broader structures of Soviet history. Ilya Kabakov articulates this

¹²² The term is employed in Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 51-54.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

procedure well when he describes the conceptualist project as “the effort of those living in a deep foundation pit to understand History and Being beyond the pit’s borders from random scraps of paper or words sent from God-knows where.”¹²⁴ This effort to historicize, to comprehend historically, the structures of contemporary Soviet existence is integral to the art of the Moscow conceptualist circle.

What I have termed the “self-conscious situatedness” of Moscow Conceptualism, its cognitive charting of the Soviet present and its enquiries into that present’s deeper origins, is also significant with regards to the two dominant critical frames that have thus far been applied to the movement. Because Moscow Conceptualism actively makes to incorporate the spatial and temporal modes of a discrete and specific epoch, it remains distinct from the globalizing and decentered presuppositions of Western conceptual art, with its different modalities of time and space. And because Moscow Conceptualism traces the forms of its era in order to probe the operational logic of Soviet history, it must be critically situated *in* that history, and not in some ahistorical or essentialist national box, whether that of Epstein’s “Russian postmodernism” or Groys’ “unity of the Russian soul.”¹²⁵ What distinguishes Moscow Conceptualism from its Western namesake, in my account, is its purposive and methodological investigation of its own historical circumstance. The movement is thus irreducibly Soviet in its cast and orientation, whilst being neither categorically or ontologically “Russian.” The national here, insofar as it

¹²⁴ Ilya Kabakov quoted in Matthew Jesse Jackson, “Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes,” 189.

¹²⁵ The ahistorical or archetypal underpinnings of Mikhail Epstein’s theory of Russian postmodernism, as presented in “The Origins and Meanings of Russia Postmodernism,” and Boris Groys’ “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” two influential attempts to categorize Moscow Conceptualism, are discussed in my first chapter.

constitutes a genuine (and genuinely enclosed) lifeworld, operates as a purely political category, contingent and open-ended. It can represent no eternal or absolute horizon. Consequently, here and in subsequent chapters, my account of Moscow Conceptualism looks to the concrete specificities of history whilst rejecting both the myriad equivalences of the global and the romantic singularity of the national as critical frames.

In setting forth the thesis detailed above, all three remaining chapters turn their attentions to detailing specific aspects of Moscow Conceptualism's cartographical approach to its era. This chapter examines the late Soviet era, the foundational period of Moscow Conceptualism, and argues that it constitutes, in the words of Alexei Yurchak, "a particular period with shared characteristics."¹²⁶ This era is distinguished, among other things, by a congealment or ossification of temporal flow, in which the movement of time from the future to the past is impeded or stalled. These changes to the temporal manifold are significant with regards to Moscow Conceptualism as they themselves become a focus of Moscow conceptualist enquiry and a shared subject of its art. In seeking to demonstrate that the temporal disjunctions which characterize this era are reified as a material in Moscow conceptualist art, this chapter then makes to document, with regards to temporality, the primary thesis of this dissertation. That is, it marshals evidence for both the singularity of the Soviet period in which Moscow Conceptualism arose as well as for the purposive investigation and incorporation by Moscow Conceptualism of the specific forms of its era.

¹²⁶ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 31.

To make this argument, this chapter begins with an extended analysis of *Krasikov Street* by Erik Bulatov. It subsequently intersperses the analyses of individual works with the evaluation of two different theoretical models which discern in the late Soviet era a distinct historical period. The earlier of these models, termed “developed socialism”, is official and contemporary to the period it addresses. It represents an attempt by Soviet authorities to account for the persistent difference between current Soviet society and the promised communist future. The latter is Western and academic, set forth by Alexei Yurchak in his recent book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Yurchak argues that the period he terms “late socialism”, which dates from the wane of Khrushchev’s reforms until *perestroika*, is distinguished by an increasing entropy and circularity of discursive forms. Significantly, both models discern in the period they delineate a set of common temporal traits which, I argue, are both distinct from those of Western postmodernism and specific to this stage of Soviet history. These temporal traits, the chapter seeks to demonstrate, are reified and internalized as subject matter in various Moscow conceptualist artworks. This investigative emphasis on the discursive forms of its own era, the chapter concludes, is both a significant and distinguishing characteristic of Moscow Conceptualism.

In the slanting sun of a late afternoon or an early morning, in a metronomic landscape of Soviet urban planning, several loose groups of Soviet citizens trot or trudge away from the viewer along a city street. The street, an aggregate and identikit of countless such

streets in countless towns and cities throughout the Soviet Union, is named Krasikov Street, and it forms the subject of Eric Bulatov's 1977 painting, *Krasikov Street* [Ills.2.1]. An authoritative and significant example of Moscow conceptualist art, *Krasikov Street* deploys a dry and meager realism to capture its subject matter, so much so that the underlying grid dividing the work into quadrants remains clearly visible. With the framing of the scene sharply cropped, and the viewer-beholder positioned on the sidewalk with the pedestrians, the arrangement of the work invokes a hasty photograph, or, perhaps more generously, the urban impressionism of Gustave Caillebotte. Yet in the midst of this uninteresting scene, painted in an uninteresting manner, there is something strange and disquieting. In the middle distance, as if suspended in plasma, an enormous figure of Lenin marches upon a pure white billboard, striding towards the picture plane.

To judge from the automobiles that traverse the street, or the gaudy summer fashions on display, the moment captured on Krasikov Street would appear to be roughly contemporary with the date of the work. Yet this discrete temporal security, so central to the work's knockdown realism, is itself eroded by the very whiteness of the billboard, which in its rectangular flatness invokes the *fon*, or background, of the Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich.¹²⁷ And the closer one looks, the less legible the billboard's place in the picture becomes. The scale is wrong, for a start. Situated in the middle distance, it nevertheless dwarfs the vehicles that pass it, rendering them almost

¹²⁷ In his *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, Boris Groys notes the explicit reference to Malevich's Suprematism that the billboard in *Krasikov Street* represents. Groys writes that "In other works [in addition to *Horizon* of 1971], Bulatov develops further this same device of combining the illusionary three-dimensional realistic picture and Suprematist flatness. Sometimes the latter is introduced by a poster (as in *Krasikov Street*, which essentially reproduces the composition of Malevich's *Black Square* except that in place of the square there is a poster of Lenin.)" (83.)

toy-size despite the short distance from the pedestrians in the foreground to the road. The viewer comes to wonder: just how far then is it from the billboard to the picture plane? And what size is it, really?

In light of these observations, the putative realism of *Krasikov Street* begins to unravel, as does its situation in a discrete moment of historical time. Rather than securing the painting in its assumed vocation as a faithful rendering of the Soviet everyday, the billboard depicting Lenin destabilizes the work by refusing to integrate itself within the depicted scene. Instead, it opens up a space through which history – in the non-synchronous moment and the non-contemporaneous artistic style – rushes in.¹²⁸ The resulting tension splits and fractures the work, as abstraction and figuration, grand ideology and meager reality, heroic past and prosaic present all confront each other, indefinitely postponing all resolution or integration. These disjunctions are nowhere more acute than in the juxtaposition of the strolling citizens, caught in the present's slender moment, and the rapidly striding figure of Lenin, whose image occupies multiple temporal positions. The symbolic embodiment of both the origins of Soviet History and its unshakeable progress towards Communism, Lenin here emerges from the past and traverses to the future, which is fixed in his gaze as imminent, palpable, visible, in the direction of his motion. Inhabiting all three tenses – past, present, and future - as he

¹²⁸ Discussing the work of Erik Bulatov, Viktor Pivovarov makes the comment that “several of us, and especially Bulatov, made the discovery that the very time we lived in - our sense of time, internal to us – was also a Soviet product. This was a very significant discovery.” Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author, Prague, 9/27/08. Pivovarov makes a similar point in his book *Ocherki vizual'nosti*, where he writes that “in the 1970s, Erik Bulatov accomplished genuine transformation, a genuine revolution in Moscow art. I suspect that this revolution is still not sufficiently recognized or valued. On the level of pure form Bulatov carried out a simple and very natural logical operation. To the space of [the artist Vladimir] Favorskii, he introduced time.” *Ocherki vizual'nosti: O liubvi, slova, i izobrazhenia* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 12. Pivovarov's interest in Bulatov's use of time is acutely insightful.

moves ever-purposefully through space, Lenin is thus fully cognizant of the *trajectory* of the history that he oversees; its direction, its pace, its final destination and fulfillment in developed Communist society. Yet despite this mastery, it is well apparent that Lenin cannot unify or integrate the work within his own teleological frame. For in *Krasikov Street even Lenin cannot orientate the scene or its participants in History*. Here, not even the anchoring and ordering presence of the leader of the Revolution can resolve the questions that circulate regarding the situation of this Soviet city and these Soviet citizens on History's path to Communism. For does one see in the spindly trees, the crumbling sidewalks and the dejected lope of the men, clad in their elephantine suits, testimony to a promise betrayed, a catalogue of social regression or stagnation? Or, rather, should one attend to the brightly-colored dresses, the cars and apartment blocks, as corroboration or celebration of the promises of social progress and material abundance made by Soviet power?

Integral to the structure of *Krasikov Street* is a reticence and hesitancy regarding the work's relation to Soviet history. The scene registers its refusal or inability – and possibly both – to occupy either of the oppositional positions of affirmation or dissent in regards to the version and vision of history represented by Lenin. The result is that the central relationship in the painting, that between the Soviet citizenry and their master signifier, here suspended in amniotic white, cannot be narrativized across the fissures in the work. It is unclear then quite how *Krasikov Street*, in its simple, Sunday-painter observations, proposes to position or situate the scene it depicts within the broader history that the presence of Lenin and Suprematism invoke. Despite initially appearing “realistic” in

terms of its temporal security and its conservation of the discrete moment, *Krasikov Street* proves itself as resistant to temporal resolution as it does to formal. And in this foundational structural irresolution, history or temporality oscillates between the linear and the cyclical, as Lenin's teleological gaze jostles with the return of Suprematism and the routine the painting depicts. Existence is schismatic, caught between contending temporal imperatives, and the painting's many disjunctions all work to make this problem of historicity clear. In its diffusion of times and temporal flows, *Krasikov Street* captures not simply a street scene, but rather portrays a culture or society that is *unable to orientate itself either through or in history*. The past that is here represented by Suprematism does not support the present in history (as the bourgeois past supports the socialist present), but instead destabilizes it, undermining its claims to *presentness*.

In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss speaks of the contrasting strategies of time employed in the early Soviet Union by the cultural avant-garde and the Bolsheviks.¹²⁹ The avant-garde's challenge to temporal stability was quickly subordinated to "the temporality of the political revolution which, as the locomotive of history's progress, invested the party with the sovereign power to force mass compliance in history's name."¹³⁰ The result of this was that the Soviet Union became a state ruled by

¹²⁹ Buck-Morss writes that the "time" of the cultural avant-garde is not the same as that of the vanguard party. These artists' practices interrupted the continuity of perceptions and estranged the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. Progress for the early Russian modernists meant stepping out of the frame of the existing order, whether towards the "beautiful East," back to the "primitive," or through to the "eternal," no matter. The effect was to rupture the continuity of time, opening it up to new cognitive and sensory experiences. In contrast, the party submitted to a historical cosmology that provided no such freedom of movement. Bolshevism's claim to know the course of history in its totality presumed a "science" of the future that encouraged revolutionary politics to dictate to art. Culture was to be operationalized. Its products would serve "progress" as the latter's visual representation." Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 49.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

“a political vanguard that had a monopoly over time’s meaning.”¹³¹ I want to employ this formulation to suggest – perhaps more strongly, to claim – that what is approximated or grasped by Bulatov within his painting is the breakdown of this temporal regency, the moment when the state’s ability to press and shape time into History first stutters and then collapses.¹³² This is to say, that at the level of its deepest structure, *Krasikov Street* is not concerned with Soviet social life or the prevalence of ideological signs as it is with the operations of Soviet temporality. The work portrays a broken historical structure, a dysfunctional temporality that can no longer legibly organize itself across the social field. Here, the gaze of Lenin has come undone.

I then submit that *Krasikov Street* attacks the apparent stability of the moment it depicts in order to register a shift or recalibration in the structure of Soviet time. The work catalogues within its structure the new opacity or illegibility of traditional temporal markers, like portraits of Lenin, as well as the ghostly recapitulation of suppressed and alternative temporalities. Such recapitulations will command our attention in subsequent chapters, yet here an important question remains. For the interpretation of *Krasikov Street* I offer to be suasive or convincing, it must also be demonstrated that the temporal disjunctions which the painting incorporates into itself as structure have their analogues in contemporary Soviet society. To phrase it differently, if part of the salience of *Krasikov Street* as a work of art is its intuitive sublimation of a concrete historical phenomenon, then this phenomenon must itself be set forth and well documented. The

¹³¹ Ibid, 60.

¹³² It is therefore intriguing that the two signifiers Bulatov employs to destabilize his street scene – the white *fon* of Suprematism and the ideological master-sign of Lenin – represent both the avant-garde and the vanguard political party that Buck-Morss describes as battling for the control of time.

task of this chapter is then framed in this discussion of *Krasikov Street*: it is to argue for the cogency and greater substance of the correspondence between late Soviet temporality and Moscow conceptualist method which informs my analysis of Bulatov's work.

Before we turn to this task, there is a further point to make, or perhaps reiterate, here. In my first chapter I argue that the current critical frameworks employed to define and situate Moscow Conceptualism are inadequate and frequently self-contradictory. The analysis of *Krasikov Street* offered above emphasizes this point. For if one grants that *Krasikov Street* is chiefly orientated towards the forms of its own historicity, that the work seeks to uncover and interrogate the deeper structures of the Soviet life-world, then one also concedes of the specificity, the situatedness, of the critical framework required to address the work. To offer this in a different formulation, the degree to which the hermeneutical operations of *Krasikov Street* are directed at a specific social formation is the degree to which the critical frameworks of conceptual art are themselves inadequate as interpretative tools. Whether as a local variant of a global movement or as an ontologically distinct articulation of Russian national character, the categories thus far assigned to Moscow Conceptualism adjudicate in terms of broad equivalences and communalities, and not stubborn, situated specificity. Consequent to this is the situation where that within *Krasikov Street* which dissents from the prevailing evaluative models is precisely that which these models are least equipped to discern and appraise. We cannot, for example, adequately address the temporal fracturing in *Krasikov Street* through the lens of conceptual art, as conceptualism has long viewed its operations as primarily

synchronic and spatial in character.¹³³ Rather, then, than proffering narratives of maximalist depth or breadth, which discern in Moscow Conceptualism close correspondences with Potemkin villages or conceptual art in Western Europe, the critic would do well to consider carefully the movement's emphasis on its own, intractable situatedness.¹³⁴ It is, accordingly, to this question that I now turn, via an examination of the initial attempts to periodize the era of Moscow conceptualist practice.

As Svetlana Boym observes, in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the Bolshevik Party “performed one invisible nationalization – the nationalization of time. The revolution was presented as the culmination of world history to be completed with the final victory of communism and the “end of history.””¹³⁵ In light of this great seizure and symbolic domination, it is intriguing that the formation of Moscow Conceptualism, in the first years of the nineteen-seventies, coincided with an official recalibration of Soviet

¹³³ I emphasize primarily. Certainly, the Hegelian dialectic has been prominent in certain theories of conceptual art. However, the dialectical ascent towards an art of concepts (or a dematerialized art) itself supports a historical model of orderly temporal succession and hence of linear artistic progress, not of return and recapitulation (which is generally considered under the aegis of the “neo-avant-garde”). As noted in Chapter One, far more emphasis is typically placed by critics on the political or social internationalism of conceptual art. Tony Godfrey, for example, emphasizes this axis to the point of hyperbole when he notes that: “Conceptual art was, and is, a truly international phenomenon. In the 1960s, you were just as likely to find it being made in San Diego, Prague, and Buenos Aires as New York.” *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 7.

¹³⁴ It is Mikhail Epstein who pursues the analogy between Moscow Conceptualism and the Potemkin village in his “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism.” At one point he notes that “Conceptualism, for example, the prevailing trend of Russian art of the 1980s and early 1990s is a set of such labels, a collection of facades lacking the other three sides.” (192) In turn, it is Tony Godfrey who argues for the trans-national identity of conceptual art in his *Conceptual Art*. (7.)

¹³⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 59.

history.¹³⁶ Indeed, in the formative years of the Brezhnev era and under the direction of politburo member and chief party ideologue Mikhail Suslov, an extensive new historical phase of Communist construction, to be termed “developed socialism,” was identified with the Soviet present and attributed to it. The proclaimed purpose of developed socialism was to mark anew that present’s place within the Party’s view of History. In the words of Mark Sandle, this newly conceptualized socialist epoch “came both to shape and to embody the nature of Soviet socialism under Brezhnev.”¹³⁷

The achievement of developed socialism as a new level of Soviet advancement was proclaimed at length at the Twenty-fourth Party Congress in 1971, becoming official doctrine from that point. In an early essay devoted to this newly theorized stage of socialism, entitled “Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology,” Alfred Evans notes that developed socialism “was a term essentially novel in Soviet Communist discourse and

¹³⁶ The dates of the emergence of Moscow Conceptualism as a movement are of course approximate. In his doctoral dissertation “Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes”, Matthew Jackson notes that Kabakov’s *Answers of the Experimental Group* of 1970 represents “as convenient a moment as any to mark the debut of Moscow Conceptualism.” (190.) Whether one marks the beginnings of the movement with an actual work, be it *Answers of the Experimental Group*, or, perhaps, Erik Bulatov’s *Horizon* of 1971, the first years of the nineteen seventies are broadly viewed as foundational to the movement. Postulating an end date has proved far more controversial, with several scholars (notably Mikhail Epstein), arguing that the movement represents a trend in Russian art that continues to this day and must thus still be considered an operative category. However, because of the epochal changes to Soviet life that took place under the rule of Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985-1991, which resulted in the policies of *Perestroika* and *Glast’nost*, and the emigration to the West of Ilya Kabakov in 1987 and Erik Bulatov in 1989, most scholars now view the late nineteen eighties as representing the end of Moscow Conceptualism in its original form. This includes Boris Groys, who views the emergence under *Perestroika* of a market in the West for Moscow Conceptualist art as representing the transformation and rupture of the operational logic underpinning the movement (Boris Groys, interview with author, New York, 4/30/09). If, as I argue, Moscow Conceptualism indeed represents a series of investigations into the forms of late Soviet life, then the transformation of that life would indeed necessarily signal a break or closure of sorts.

¹³⁷ Mark Sandle, *A Short History of Soviet Socialism* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 337. Despite its title, Mark Sandle’s *Short History* provides a detailed account of the introduction and consolidation of developed socialism during the rule of Brezhnev.

was associated with a new periodization of Soviet experience.”¹³⁸ Examining the circumstances surrounding the introduction of the term, Evans argues that this “new periodization of Soviet experience” was, for the Party, both necessary and tactical. For Evans, developed socialism was introduced as a needed deferral and indefinite postponement of Khrushchev’s hotheaded claim before the Twenty-second Party Congress in 1961 that the USSR would “on the whole,” have attained full Communism by 1980. This pressing need to buy time from history is also iterated by Mark Sandle:

Developed Socialism arose out of a very specific political and theoretical context. Faced with the problem of Khrushchev’s grandiose claims about the proximity of communism, the Soviet leadership were in something of a dilemma.¹³⁹

By inserting a new development period along the road to Communism, Brezhnev, Suslov, and the Party could hope to forestall an impending and unattainable goal, whilst repositioning the final transition to a fully classless society at a safe and agreeable distance from the present. In the words of Evans:

The general trend has been to postpone achievement of the ideal, but not to abandon it openly. The concept of “developed socialism” serves to both convey a sense of progress, and also to excuse the failure of present Soviet institutions to match the standards of full Communism.¹⁴⁰

As a means of managing public expectations and deflecting awkward questions vis-à-vis Soviet progress, the simultaneous utility and necessity of the concept of developed

¹³⁸ Alfred B. Evans, Jr., “Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology,” in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. xxix, July 1977, 409-428 (412).

¹³⁹ Mark Sandle, *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, 337.

¹⁴⁰ Alfred B. Evans, Jr., “Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology,” 414.

socialism to the Party at this juncture becomes apparent. Yet in the very necessity of this indefinite deferral of History's culmination in Communism there is much of significance. For what the new framework for socialist development sought to conceal within its officious strategies for progress and growth, its exhortations to "trust in cadres," and its promotion of the technocracy, was an epic and epochal loss. The hastily-charted and newly-baptized era of developed socialism is significant because it represents a forced acknowledgement from the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that they have lost control and authority over the very history they propose to know and to direct. Far from a timetable measured in a mere two decades, the vanguard party can now only affirm that "the complete elimination of social class differences will be realized at some time in the future, a time unknown but very distant."¹⁴¹ The novel historical category of developed socialism was then simultaneously the tacit official admission that what Susan Buck-Morss termed "the continuum of history as defined and led by the party,"¹⁴² had derailed and was, as a consequence, indefinitely postponed.¹⁴³

Unsurprisingly, it is this new distance, swelling like an ocean between the present and its transformation as the future that came most to symbolize and structure the age of

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 420. Mark Sandle makes a similar point, stating that developed socialism constituted a "fundamental revision to the orthodox view of the transition from capitalism to communism. Communism was now postponed until the distant future." *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, 338.

¹⁴² Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, 60.

¹⁴³ As Katherine Verdery argues in her thought-provoking *What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next?*, Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* was primarily a belated and hopeless attempt to return to the socialist system its lapsed temporal dynamism and control of history, in the face of the increasing velocity of Western capitalism. For Verdery, "the significance of Gorbachev's *perestroika* was its recognition that socialism's temporality was unsustainable in a capitalist world. *Perestroika* reversed Soviet ideas as to whose time-definitions and rhythms were dominant and where dynamism lay: no longer within the socialist system but outside it, in the West. Gorbachev's rhetoric from the mid-1980s is full of words about time: the Soviet Union needs to "catch up," to "accelerate" its development, to shed its "sluggishness" and "inertia" and leave behind the "era of stagnation."" *What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 36.

Moscow Conceptualism. The term “era of stagnation”¹⁴⁴ has consequently become an almost unavoidable epithet to denote the rule of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, for it discerns retrospectively what Suslov’s new periodization anticipated. Whilst this new period in Soviet history is here marked and identified against the Party’s admission that it can no longer control its own temporal model, other transitional or inaugural moments have been raised. These include the 1965 trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Iulii Daniel for smuggling samizdat literature abroad, and the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.¹⁴⁵

Matthew Jackson cites the latter in noting that:

After 1968, the Soviet regime ceased to leaven its pronouncements with promises of significant reforms or stunning technological advances. “What is, shall be” became the unspoken mantra of the already stagnating Brezhnev era.¹⁴⁶

With regards to 1968 it should be noted that the lopsided confrontation in the streets of Prague between Alexander Dubcek’s “socialism with a human face” and Brezhnev’s “fraternal” tanks itself represented the clash of two different attempts to recalibrate the timetable of socialist development. Dubcek and his fellow reformers sought to reinvigorate socialism by liberalizing and de-centralizing its mechanisms. The expectation was that such changes would return to the system its lapsed dynamism and

¹⁴⁴ The Russian term is *zastoi*, and it is frequently used to refer to the entire period of Brezhnev’s tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party, from 1946 until 1982, as well as the brief appointments to the position of Yuri Andropov (1982-1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-1985).

¹⁴⁵ In his book *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow’s Arbat*, Stephen Bittner views the trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel as effectively marking the closure of the Thaw. He notes that “The trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel, though hardly the catastrophe that many envisioned, marked real changes in Soviet cultural policy. Transgressions that warranted only a sharp rebuke under Khrushchev, earned a lengthy prison sentence under Brezhnev” (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 208.

¹⁴⁶ Matthew Jesse Jackson, “Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes,” 169.

velocity, its trajectory in history. In contrast, the principle architects of developed socialism, Suslov and Fedor Burlatsky, made to reconfigure the model of Marxist history onto which progress is written. Here the hope was that with the teleological frame indefinitely extended, lapses or losses in momentum would no longer inscribe themselves on its surface, but rather simply cease to register. “What is, shall be,” then, could additionally summarize the Brezhnev era at the level of deep structure. The tectonic shifts of temporality which developed socialism sought both to rationalize and to circumscribe would consequently be registered across the Soviet social field.¹⁴⁷

Even before the ascension of Brezhnev to power, in around 1962, Ilya Kabakov began to make successive drawings of the same image. The image was of a schematic man standing naked under a shower head, heavy arms folded, obstinately waiting. In each drawing his goal eludes him as the water from the shower head variously flows sideways, bows around his posture, or simply stops. [Ills. 2.2-2.7] The bather is never bathed, his act of cleansing never consummated. Kabakov would rework this scene over and over during the next three decades, as if to catalogue a perpetual deferral or disappointment. Matthew Jackson, whose analysis of the *Shower* series constitutes by far the most

¹⁴⁷ Serguei Oushakine, in his article “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat” notes that through this period the Soviet dissident movement increasingly felt “a loss of hope for changing anything within the country.” (210) This increasing sense of the system’s immutability is well captured in an open letter to the Soviet government, published in samizdat by a Yelena Andronova in 1977, which Oushakine cites: “I understand it pretty well – my letter will change nothing, will move nothing, will result in nothing, and yet I see it as my duty to stop lying and stop being silent.” (210.) This loss of faith in the possibility of systemic change, even from those whose lives were devoted to agitating for such change, illustrates vividly the social effects of the elision in developed socialism of the future as an immanent and transformative category. In *Public Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 2001), 191-214.

comprehensive investigation of the works to date, ratifies the works' significance by observing that this "is the only image Kabakov will constantly reinterpret in his art."¹⁴⁸ Because of this, it is intriguing that Kabakov himself describes the *Shower* series as depicting "the idea of waiting."¹⁴⁹ The cumbersome homunculus positioned beneath the nozzle experiences not the anticipated event, but an ever-expanding accumulation of unfilled time that can only gather at the threshold of event-ness. The *Shower* drawings, in their prolific variations upon a singular moment, or, perhaps more accurately, their persistent supplementation *to* that moment, become the collective register of a vast surplus of the present, uncoupled or detached from its narrative chain. The very act of repetition or supplementation, of reproducing the scene ever-anew consequently becomes, in the words of Matthew Jackson, "constitutive to the drawings' meaning."¹⁵⁰ The *Shower* series, then, produces as its primary subject matter something that cannot just be seen, but something that must be simply experienced, over and over and over, as sheer quantity. Meaning is here situated less at the end of the gaze than in the experience of duration without promise of closure, of the depicted moment ceaselessly multiplying, potentially out towards infinity.

¹⁴⁸ Jackson views the series as primarily an attempt to defer meaning or interpretation, to freight the images with hermeneutical possibilities, their "semantic load expanded through repeated invocation, as in prayers or chants." (67.) One of the interpretive threads that suggests itself to Jackson is Kabakov's residual anxiety about his Jewish ethnicity around the time of the great controversy surrounding Yevgeny Yevtushenko's publication of his poem *Babyi Yar* in 1961, with the shower series thus framing "a man constantly in pursuit of this elusive purification and its accompanying acculturation." (70.) While Jackson's points are cogent and well-expounded, the very persistence of the series over decades in Kabakov's art would also seem to suggest a certain procedural imperative in the *Shower* works, an elevation of process over content. See Jackson: "Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes," 65-77.

¹⁴⁹ Kabakov quoted in Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 37. Kabakov continues: "One waits and there is a position to take, but one doesn't know what will happen."

¹⁵⁰ Matthew Jackson, "Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes," 75.

Kabakov's *Shower* drawings then seek to manufacture via their multiplicity a genuinely metaphysical content, that of duration or extension. This novel content is independent of the works' formal devices and structure, for it cannot be contained or connoted in any single drawing extracted from the series. It is itself the product of a managed narrative breakdown, of a rupture in the temporal order of the signifying chain. In returning continually to this single image over the course of several decades, Kabakov erodes the distinction between the moment that constitutes a present, and a great quantity of time.

This leads to a central point with regards to the *Shower* drawings. The series musters an experience of temporality and unbroken duration that is remarkably similar to the present's great expansion within the periodizing framework of developed socialism.¹⁵¹

The "indefinitely prolonged historical stage"¹⁵² that was the present under Brezhnev is here reproduced in all of its serial sameness, whilst the period's inability to narrativize its path to the future is echoed in the breakdown of narrativity within the drawings. None of this, of course, is to claim that Kabakov consciously intended the series as an analogy of

¹⁵¹ The emphasis on duration within Moscow conceptualist art is by no means limited to Kabakov's *Shower* series. The performance art group Collective Actions frequently designed its performances, or "actions," to accentuate the passage of time. In the 1978 work "Time of Action", participants and spectators who had gathered at the edge of a field then unwound seven kilometers of thread from a spool hidden in the nearby forest over a period of ninety minutes. In her description of the action, Ira Pivovarova (who was at the time the wife of Viktor Pivovarov) noted the sense of prolonged, empty duration the action produced: "Someone took the string and began to pull it. Monastyrsky, probably. He pulled and pulled and pulled the string. We all stood – the people who had gathered stood and waited to see what would happen next. Everyone watched how he pulled the string, and understood that the action had already begun, and Monastyrsky kept pulling on the string – it was very long... Zigzags of string fell on the ground, and everyone thought "what happens next will be interesting," suddenly, at the end of the string there might appear a hare, say, or a saucepan full of fried potatoes. But, no, nothing like this happened, and the endless line of string continued to unwind... Some of the participants became hungry and got out sandwiches and apples to eat. Children were there, and they began to squabble and complain. And all the time the string was pulled and pulled and pulled. It seemed that an hour or two had passed, and still the string continued to be pulled and pulled and pulled." *Kollektivnie deistviya: Poezdki zagorod* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1998), 75. The emphasis on the sheer duration of the action very much resembles the expansion of the moment within the *Shower* series.

¹⁵² Alfred B. Evans, Jr., "Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology," 417.

Soviet time, particularly given that the earliest *Shower* drawings predate Brezhnev's appointment as General Secretary by some two years. It *is*, however, to enquire as to whether, in their prolonged repetition throughout the period, the multitudinous showers do not register at the level of structure a shift in the organization of temporality within the Soviet life-world, much in the manner of *Krasikov Street*. Given Kabakov's enduring fascination with the image, it seems incumbent on the critic to enquire as to what these serial returns signify.

There is more. Included in the great plenitude of surplus time that the drawings collectively muster are the traces of their own production, the memories that each drawing preserves within its form of the repetitive labor expended in its creation. In draining the productive act of creativity, emptying it out through continuous repetition, Kabakov aligns himself with the bureaucratic and industrial forms of Soviet modernity, becoming less an artistic *udarnik* or shockworker than a petty party apparatchik, forever recopying documents in a dimly-lit office somewhere within a big building.¹⁵³ The *Shower* drawings then mime or enact a Taylorization of the artistic process, in which Kabakov repeatedly creates a single panel for subsequent assembly into some larger, corporate album or book.¹⁵⁴ This removes the stable finitude of the creative task, in which

¹⁵³ Matthew Jackson observes presciently that Kabakov in these years "began to work with the bureaucratic substance within his life, not as some alien and despised material, but as a tool for self-recognition." ("Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes," 141.) Such ironic celebration of drudgery of course has its own distinguished provenance in Russian culture, extending back to Nikolai Gogol and characters like Akaky Akakievich from Gogol's short novel *The Overcoat*.

¹⁵⁴ Kabakov's discovery of an acute creative pleasure in repetitive drudgery is especially salient with regards to the attempts in the Soviet Union to recast industrial labor as sensuous and replete. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss discusses in detail the ways in which scientifically managed industrial labor was justified in the Soviet Union and the West. She writes, "Making up to the consumer what was robbed from his or her life as a productive worker was the norm of capitalist culture.

an artist completes and thus finishes a work, replacing it with a process which, by definition, can have neither end point nor ultimate horizon. Kabakov's authorial labor is consequently as unfinalizable as the series itself. It is reproduced or supplemented in each new drawing, but can never attain that threshold in time where the task is complete and further work redundant. It too hovers in an extended present, in which the transformative powers of the future – to *progress*, to *complete* – are indefinitely deferred.

In its continuous expansion, the *Shower* series oscillates between mapping or recording a bad infinity and discovering a degree of solace or compensation in just this process. It is thus its own recompense, a structurally ambiguous testimony to a task that is both enjoyed and endured – for author and viewer alike. Considering the creative methods of his close friend, Viktor Pivovarov identifies Kabakov's willingness to reify his experience of Soviet life into an artistic process:

Generally, our age was one of few events and of deep boredom. Most creative people sought refuge from this in their art or poetry, that is, they saw art as an escape from daily life. Kabakov, however, was both horrified and fascinated by this condition [boredom] and incorporated it into his art as a material, like paint or canvass. He would sit all day endlessly drawing letters, coloring them in, and then get up the next day and do the same again. Perhaps on one of these evenings he would read an album to some guests, and half the audience would fall asleep.¹⁵⁵

But precisely the rejection of this human cost-accounting was at the basis of socialist legitimacy – as well it should have been. By adopting the capitalist heavy-industry definition of economic modernization, however, Soviet socialism had no alternative other than to try to produce a utopia out of the production process itself.” (115.)

¹⁵⁵ Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08.

In terms of both content and process, the *Shower* series is saturated in a temporality which rises to the level of an experiential category. The works foreground and produce an overflowing yet unfilled duration that permits of no finitude, no closure, and discloses no origin. In its inability or refusal to situate the moment it endlessly supplements within a larger narrative frame, the series embodies as structure an ossification or breakdown of narrative similar to that which Hayden White describes in terms of larger social groups:

The breakdown of narrativity in a culture, group, or social class is a symptom of its having entered into a state of crisis. For with any weakening of narrativizing capacity, the group loses its power to locate itself in history, to come to grips with the Necessity that its past represents for it, and to imagine a creative, if only provisional, transcendence of its “fate.”¹⁵⁶

It is salient that the process which White here articulates could equally well describe the machinations of *Krasikov Street*, the *Shower* series, and developed socialism alike. The structural isomorphism of these works with their age is striking, and supports this chapter’s contention that one of the recurrent characteristics of Moscow Conceptualism is its frequent reproduction, at the level of form, of the experience of late Soviet temporality. Reflecting on Erik Bulatov’s ground-breaking paintings of the early nineteen-seventies, Viktor Pivovarov makes a like observation:

The time which was admitted into Bulatov’s paintings was a totalitarian and existential time. *More precisely, it is the time of the existential “I”, reflected through the spatial-temporal totalitarian net.* This was a huge discovery. The epoch unexpectedly found its

¹⁵⁶ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 149.

own language, its own voice. A style arose. And style is, after all, the voice of time, through style time expresses itself.¹⁵⁷

This chapter's identification of the temporal as a major structural and experiential category of Moscow conceptualist art is thus neither unique or merely confined to a handful of works, including *Krasikov Street* and the *Shower* series. Furthermore, Pivovarov's acknowledgement of the centrality of a certain formation of time to the Moscow conceptualist "style" is also an assertion of the specificity and situatedness of the consequent experience of that temporal order. Indeed, for Pivovarov, the significance of the "existential "I"" that he credits Bulatov with discovering for Moscow Conceptualism is that it is already conditioned or infused by the time that surrounds it. The temporality that Moscow Conceptualism both employs as material and incorporates within itself is thus one whose operational logic permeates the entire social field, and this includes the formation and consequent experience of the subject.

The experience of the subject is itself the central concern of the other periodizing model of the late Soviet era which this chapter addresses, Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*.¹⁵⁸ As the title of the work

¹⁵⁷ Viktor Pivovarov, *Ocherki Vizual'nosti: O liubvi, slova, i izobrazhenia* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 13. My italics.

¹⁵⁸ In defining the "last Soviet Generation," Yurchak notes that "in some of the literature addressing this period [between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s], the thirty years are divided into two shorter periods...: The Thaw (*ottepel'*), the period of Khrushchev's reforms, and the stagnation (*zastoi*), Brezhnev's period. The Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968 is often considered the symbolic divide between the two. These two periods roughly correspond to two generations – the older generation that is sometimes called the "sixtiers" (*shestidesiatniki*, identified by the name of their formative decade) and the

indicates, Alexei Yurchak seeks within to evaluate the parameters of experience of the last generational cohort to reach adulthood in the Soviet Union before the rapid changes of *perestroika*. The book's principal subjects, then, are "people who were born between the 1950s and early 1970s and came of age between the 1970s and the mid 1980s."¹⁵⁹ For Yurchak, this generation is distinguished the lack of a formative event around which to coalesce, as opposed to the preceding generations who came of age during the Second World War or the Thaw, as well as by a "shared experience of the normalized, ubiquitous, and immutable authoritative discourse of the Brezhnev years."¹⁶⁰ The last Soviet generation are therefore those citizens whose formative years coincide with, and are thus deeply marked by, the era of developed socialism. Iterating this correspondence, the Russian sociologist Maria Kniazeva employs the term "children of the stagnation"¹⁶¹ to describe the last Soviet generation. By identifying an epoch rather than an event as foundational to the collective identity of the generation it seeks to study, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*¹⁶² frames its discussions of the last Soviet generation in terms of the singularity or distinctiveness of that generation's era. In the course of arguing for these correspondences, Yurchak presents a comprehensive theory of the period in question, which he terms "late socialism." Yurchak's model of late socialism develops and extends many of the notions integral to developed socialism, and it is consequently to these developments that I now turn.

younger group, here called the "last Soviet generation." *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 31.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 31.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 32.

¹⁶¹ Marina Kniazeva, "Deti zastoia," in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, June 13, 1990. Archive of Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art.

¹⁶² Henceforth referred to as *Everything Was Forever*.

Late socialism, for Yurchak, dates from the wane of Khrushchev's reforms until the onset of *perestroika*. It is largely defined by the long rule of Brezhnev and thus delineates almost precisely the same period in which the doctrine of developed socialism was official party dogma. As with the theorists of developed socialism, Yurchak views late socialism as constituting a distinct historical period, marked by a common set of technological, temporal, and social forms. For Yurchak, the primary characteristic of late socialism is that it was experienced and comprehended as a timeless or perpetual present. Those who lived within it existed in what the author terms an "eternal state,"¹⁶³ sharing "a profound feeling of the Soviet system's permanence and immutability, and the complete unexpectedness of its collapse."¹⁶⁴ Here again, the foreclosure upon future change and concomitant expansion of the present moment are presented as fundamental features of the age. Yet while the doctrine of developed socialism was technical and defensive in nature, employed by the Party to circumscribe and disguise a lapsing control of history, Yurchak's model of late socialism is primarily sociological in focus, and seeks to discern the pressures of the age upon the social forms of Soviet life. Indeed, and much in the manner of *Magnetic Mountain*, Stephen Kotkin's influential study of Magnitogorsk during Stalin's rule, *Everything Was Forever* considers the ways in which its period of study produces social discourse.¹⁶⁵ Thus, for Yurchak, the "eternal state" of late socialism

¹⁶³ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, 1. Yurchak's first chapter is subtitled "Late Socialism: An Eternal State." Whilst Yurchak mines the dual meanings of "state" in English, he attributes the term to the musician Andrei Makarevich, who speaks of living in a *vechnoe gosudarstvo*, meaning "state" in the political sense.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. In describing this eternal state, Yurchak cites the musician Andrei Makarevich, who had remarked that: "It never even occurred to me that in the Soviet Union anything could change. Let alone that it could disappear. No one expected it. Neither children nor adults. There was a complete impression that everything was forever." (1.)

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). In a passage that also points to the influence of Michel Foucault on his work, Kotkin notes that: "It is not necessary to influence "the people," to argue that, simply by living life, the

is itself reified and reproduced throughout the social field. As a consequence, Moscow Conceptualism, in its investigative chartings of late Soviet temporality, has much material to draw on.

As with the doctrine of developed socialism, for Yurchak, the epoch of late socialism is the historical product of a lapse in control by the ruling party. Yurchak's account of this process is complex, and draws heavily on the work of the philosopher Claude Lefort. Lefort, in his signal work *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, argues that all forms of industrial modernity conceal within themselves a foundational paradox, in which the ideological discourse that animates a given system must itself claim to represent an "objective truth," external to that system.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, these forms of modernity are structurally incapable of representing themselves in total, since that "objective truth" claimed by each system as its justification is also necessarily external to it. For Yurchak, the Soviet version of the paradox Lefort cites is that:

the announced objective of achieving the full liberation of the society and individual (building of communism, creation of the New Man) by means of subsuming that society and individual under full party control. The Soviet citizen was called upon to submit completely to party leadership, to cultivate a collectivist ethic, and to repress

urban inhabitants [of Magnitogorsk] discovered that power was pliable. At the same time, their actions also demonstrated that power was productive: power relations created effects – of experience, identity, resistances. Concentrating on... the encounters of daily life involves shifting the focus from what the Party and its programs prevented, to what they made possible, intentionally and unintentionally." (22.)

¹⁶⁶ Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.) Lefort summarizes this tension of ideological representation: "The ideological discourse that we are examining has no safety catch; it is rendered vulnerable by its attempt to make visible the place from which the social relation would be conceivable (both thinkable and creatable), by its inability to define this place without letting its contingency appear, without condemning itself to slide from one position to another, without thereby making apparent the instability of an order that it is intending to raise to the status of an essence." (213.)

individualism, while at the same time become an enlightened and independent-minded individual.¹⁶⁷

For Lefort, this central paradox between the ideologies and the outcomes of modern political systems is most frequently mediated and concealed through the presence of a “master” figure, who combines external and systemic truths within his own representation. In the Soviet version of modernity, Yurchak argues, this crucial role was performed first by Lenin and then, most notably, by Stalin:

Stalin’s “external” editorial position vis-à-vis all forms of discourse and knowledge, which provided him with unique access to the external canon against which to evaluate them, was crucial in the emergence of those phenomena which became trademarks of his regime: his immense political power; the cult of his personality; his personal involvement in editing political speeches, scientific papers, films, and music compositions; the campaign of purges in party organizations; and the ultimate great terror, in which millions perished.¹⁶⁸

The era of late socialism, for Yurchak, is consequent to the collapse and disappearance of this external position. *Everything Was Forever* argues that the catalyst for this systemic closure occurred late in Stalin’s rule, during the heated debate surrounding the theories of the linguistic Nikolai Marr. Marr had died in 1934, yet his theories of a Communist language had subsequently become well known. Marr claimed that the rules of language were the product a determinate economic base and, subsequently, evolved through class struggle. Because of its materialism, language would reach its full potential only in an advanced Communist society, when all languages would organically merge into a single,

¹⁶⁷ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

true, human tongue. In 1950, Marr's theory was summarily and publicly condemned by Stalin in a *Pravda* article. However, rather than inserting himself into this discourse in order to orientate it with regards to the external canon of truth he presided over, Stalin here demurred, and advocated only further study by experts on the laws that structure language. The final resolution of the debate was thus delegated to technocrats whilst being left open and unsolved in the interim.

For Yurchak, this sudden shift in the role of the master figure initiated a series of recalibrations throughout the Soviet socialist system. From the constant interventions of a near-omniscient master figure located both within and outside the system, Soviet socialism moved towards what Yurchak terms "a model based on "objective scientific laws" that were not known in advance, not controlled by anyone exclusively, and therefore did not form any external canon."¹⁶⁹ Further more, and as *Everything Was Forever* notes, this shift was increasingly reproduced across the Soviet social spectrum in the following years. The consequence of this systemic recalibration was that "there was no longer any external discursive location from which a metadiscourse on ideological precision could originate. This metadiscourse could no longer exist."¹⁷⁰ Yurchak claims that Stalin's sudden appeal to the authority of scientific objectivity had eroded from within the structural position he occupied within the system of Soviet socialism.

It is this systemic closure which, for Yurchak, marks the transition to late socialism. The erasure of a mediatory link between the discourses of the Soviet system and those

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 46.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 46.

external to it resulted in a “profound transformation of the structure of all types of Soviet ideological discourse.”¹⁷¹ Lacking an authority figure who could calibrate and assess ideological decisions and pronouncements in terms of an “objective” metadiscourse, late socialism is in turn distinguished by the increasing circularity of its discursive forms. Whilst this circularity or systemic closure permeates all levels of late socialist life, Yurchak pays particular attention to its influence upon official language. As he notes of Soviet speechwriters of the period:

Since there was no longer any unambiguous and uniquely explain external canon against which to calibrate one’s own texts for ideological precision, what constituted the “norm” of that language became increasingly unknowable, and any new text could potentially be read as “deviation”... Party speeches and documents written in the Central Committee were increasingly subject to endless editing, behind closed doors, to produce texts that minimized the subjective stamp of the author and were preferably identical in style to texts previously written by others. This led to a progressive tightening, anonymity and predictability of authoritative language.¹⁷²

The disappearance of an external mediator thus resulted in the progressive ossification of discursive forms across the Soviet social spectrum. Yurchak refers to this process as one of “hypernormalization,” in which each new text increasingly replicates its predecessors in terms of narrative, syntax, and morphology. Late socialism is consequently distinguished by an increasing immutability and circularity of its discursive forms.¹⁷³ As

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁷² Ibid, 47.

¹⁷³ Yurchak details these changes at many levels of the social order, including within the field of visual propaganda. The image of Lenin becomes especially hypernormalized, with a small number of stock images reproduced time and again. As Yurchak notes, “artists stocked normalized images of Lenin in their studios to have enough material to “quote” from. This guaranteed that the norm was reproduced, minimizing the stamp of the author’s personal style... Artists developed painting techniques that can be called “block painting,” by analogy with “block writing,” developed by speech writers, that included exact

the systemic reproduction of existing typologies came more and more to define the operations of Soviet socialism, its temporal structure also underwent a significant shift.

Everything Was Forever argues that a new order or organization of time is integral to late socialism, and is itself produced by the loss of systemic externality. As the precise reproduction of previously sanctioned forms becomes ever more prevalent, the role of producer increasingly merges with that of mediator, ratifying via reproduction the authority of extant texts, images, or knowledge claims. As Yurchak puts it, “all types of information, new or old, were presented as knowledge previously asserted and commonly known.”¹⁷⁴ This “deep foundation of prior temporalities”¹⁷⁵ shifted the foundation of late socialist discourse inexorably towards the past. Or, more precisely, it remade the present in the idealized image of the past, hypothesizing a perfect temporal continuity in which all forms of knowledge “were already always known.”¹⁷⁶ As a consequence, the myriad elements and products of the past that remained incompatible with the present’s amalgamation with antecedent forms simply disappeared from view, incapable of being assimilated by a system predicated on continuity. Late socialism, in its assimilation and replication of prior forms, was then constructed upon a schism or break with any substantive past, any palpable history, which exists as a continuous process of

replication of visual elements, forms, designs, colors, styles, and textures across different contexts.”
Everything Was Forever, 56.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 60. In her book *Night Of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*, Catherine Merridale iterates this very point with regards to the production of discourses about the Second World War. She writes that “[i]t was also in the Brezhnev years that historians and veterans who wrote about the war were forbidden to refer to anything that had not already been published somewhere else. According to General Gorbатов, even the memoirs of protagonists were checked to make sure that they did not break new ground. “If the new text treated events or persons differently from memoirs of military leaders previously published,” he explained, “the new evidence had to be... removed or corrected in accordance with the earlier publications.”” *Night Of Stone* (New York: Viking, 2000), 273.

development or change. The temporal logic of late socialism, then, as with developed socialism, is that of an immutable and monolithic present which cannot easily conceive of, let alone enact, the systemic changes associated with “progress.” The oft-articulated sense of living within an “eternal state” that Yurchak views as characteristic of the last Soviet generation would then itself constitute the experiential imprint of the system’s temporal structure.¹⁷⁷

For Yurchak, the epoch of late socialism is the expression of the closure and subsequent entropy of the system of socialist modernity. This model of Soviet history naturally differs in its methodological framework and focus from the earlier, official attempts at periodization that the concept of developed socialism represents. On almost all substantive points, however, the two models converge. In both cases, the period each model delineates has its origins in the Soviet system’s loss of access or fidelity to an organizing metadiscourse of history. And in both cases, the consequence of this loss is primarily measured in a congealment or ossification of temporal flow and a concomitant expansion of the present across the temporal manifold. These correspondences are not diminished by a difference in orientation between the models, in which developed socialism seeks to place the Communist future at maximal distance, whilst late socialism

¹⁷⁷ Whilst Yurchak argues that the experience of late socialism largely defines the last Soviet generation, his treatment of this relationship is neither crude nor reductionist. Indeed, Yurchak argues that the discursive stagnation of the Soviet system results in its deterritorialization, the erosion of meaning throughout its structures and strictures. This process in turn *produces* space and possibility, and results in “an explosion of various styles of living that were simultaneously inside and outside the system and can be characterized as “being *vnye*.”” [*Vnye* usually translates as “outside”, but is used by Yurchak to denote “a condition of being simultaneously inside and outside of some context.”] (*Everything Was Forever*, 128.) Serguei Oushakine disagrees with Yurchak on this point, instead viewing the late socialist system as having determined all subject positions in advance, and thus dominating/organizing the entire discursive field. It is the lack of self-enabling or independent space, Oushakine posits, that is reflected in the strategy by Soviet dissidents of “identification with the dominant symbolic regime – a strategy of mimetic reproduction of already existing rhetorical tools. (“The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” 199.) The question of space and late socialism is addressed in my third chapter.

looks to elide the discontinuities of the past. These models, in their marked similarities, are thus significant because both attribute a unique historical status to the foundational period of Moscow Conceptualism. In addition, both discern in the age they mark a series of changes and recalibrations to the experience of time which one also finds, reified as structure or subject matter, in various examples of Moscow conceptualist art. The temporal disjunctions and incoherencies that inflect the Soviet everyday in *Krasikov Street* here have their theoretical ratification.

Consonant with the model of developed socialism that precedes it, the theory of late socialism presented in *Everything Was Forever* provides a much-needed theoretical framework through which to examine Moscow Conceptualism as a historically determined, yet specifically Soviet cultural form. By situating the quiddities of the epoch it delineates and documents within the aegis of a broader historical process, *Everything Was Forever* offers a hermeneutical alternative to the reductive essentialism that characterizes many of the attempts to define Moscow Conceptualism in terms of its national qualities.¹⁷⁸ It precludes, in other words, what Serguei Oushakine terms “the elevation of a concrete historical event to the level of an ahistorical archetype.”¹⁷⁹ These periodizing models should assist the critic to better evaluate the stubborn emphasis on self-situatedness that permeates the speech of Moscow Conceptualism, to make a case for the movement’s significance and originality that does not involve spurious claims of irreducible national specificity. They are, however, also double-edged, fraught and

¹⁷⁸ I have in mind here the attempts by critics like Boris Groys and Mikhail Epstein to distinguish Moscow Conceptualism from Western conceptual art by appeals to transcendent or archetypal national traits. These attempts are, of course, discussed in detail in Chapter One.

¹⁷⁹ Serguei Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” 196.

freighted with the more graduated questions of priority and influence. It is to one such question that we now turn.

It has been the task of this chapter thus far to establish that structural changes to the temporal order of Soviet society were both a defining characteristic of the period of Moscow Conceptualism and a recurrent subject of that circle's work. Yet this emphasis on the specificities, the unique signatures of the late socialist or developed socialist epoch itself raises new problems of proximity. Foremost amongst these is the contention that if, indeed, late socialism is marked by a vast temporal ossification, a congealing or collecting of temporal experience in the present that is registered throughout the discursive field, then in what regards does it differ from postmodernism in the West? This problem might itself be organized around Fredric Jameson's canonical claim that postmodernism is best grasped as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place."¹⁸⁰ Common to both systems is a crisis and collapse of historicity, a consequent reorganization of experience into an expanded and cluttered present, decoupled from "its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold,"¹⁸¹ and a loss of belief in the possibility of systemic change. The

¹⁸⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991), ix. While there are many theories and explanations for the postmodern, Jameson's account remains by far the most coherent and influential. As Perry Anderson writes of Jameson's work on postmodernism, "Henceforth, one great vision commands the field, setting the terms of theoretical opposition in the most striking imaginable way." (*The Origins of Postmodernity*, London: Verso, 1998, 66.)

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

critic Perry Anderson, in cataloguing the attributes of the postmodern, could all but be describing the late socialist milieu:

Among the traits of the new subjectivity, in fact, was the loss of any active sense of history, either as hope or memory. The charged sense of the past – as either ague-bed of repressive traditions, or reservoir of thwarted dreams; and heightened sense of the future – as potential cataclysm or transfiguration – which characterized modernism, was gone. At best, fading back into a perpetual present, retro styles and images proliferated as surrogates of the temporal.¹⁸²

It is given to these curious synchronicities, then, to shadow the attempts to establish late socialism as a unique and distinct discursive terrain. As the Soviet system moves from the instrumental modernity of Stalinism to something else again, the question remains as to whether what we isolate and identify as the era of late socialism might rather be a simple varietal of postmodernity, built, as Vitaly Chernetsky notes, on the “outright crumbling of a meta-narrative, that of Soviet Communism-building.”¹⁸³

These apprehensions return the critic to familiar terrain. For, as Chapter One argues, it is precisely such anxieties of influence and concerns of belatedness that were sublimated in the early critical attempts to categorize Moscow Conceptualism away from the field of history, to discover in it something archetypal or uniquely Russian. The challenge to an account of Moscow Conceptualism that seeks to both demystify the movement and contend for its originality then lies in dispelling, or at least complicating, the lingering doubts that fall like deep shadows of those larger categories and histories of Western

¹⁸² Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 56.

¹⁸³ Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and the Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), xv.

culture. Any new history must then meet these foundational and categorical anxieties on their own ground; that is, make to refute them rather than simply to evade or annul them.

In part, the question of proximity or similarity between late socialism and postmodernism is one of focus, or, perhaps better, aperture. Many putative correspondences, which, when framed at a certain distance arouse interest, loosen in their resemblance when examined in more detail. Thus, while both eras are marked by the crisis or obsolescence of earlier, modern, categories of history, late socialism is itself succeeded by the renewed urgency, rapid change and temporal acceleration of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.¹⁸⁴ *Perestroika*, which, as Svetlana Boym notes, “starts with a recovery of history”¹⁸⁵ and reinstates the future as a category of utmost importance, then abruptly divides late socialism from a subsequent, more properly substantial, post-socialist alignment with postmodernity. The hurried, slapdash reappearance of history after late socialism consequently imparts a distinctly transitional or intermediate quality to the period, something that has no counterpart in Western postmodernism. Curtailed by a new eruption of the same categories it ushered into crisis, late socialism now appears genuinely remote from contemporary experience. Seemingly in contrast to an ever more ubiquitous and hegemonic postmodernism, the era Yurchak charts contains within it the seeds of an irreversible systemic decline. Genuinely forever until it was no more, late socialism is, in this sense, less postmodernism’s analogue than another of its victims.

¹⁸⁴ As Katherine Verdery notes, Gorbachev’s rhetoric “from the mid-1980s is full of words about time: the Soviet Union needs to “catch up,” to “accelerate” its development, to shed its “sluggishness” and “inertia” and leave behind the “era of stagnation.” For him, change has suddenly become an “urgent” necessity. (*What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next?*, 36.) The return to the historical categories of speed and progress is central to the discourse surrounding *perestroika*.

¹⁸⁵ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 65.

A further distinction between the systems is of consequence to our study. The status of the past in each, while initially appearing to be a point of consonance, reveals considerable mutual differences when examined in more detail. Indeed, the closer one looks, the more the past particular to late socialism insinuates itself as a problematic and nonpareil entity. Unlike postmodernism, in which the numerous forms and products of a now old-fashioned history are recycled with ever-increasing rapidity, the late socialist era is marked by a whole-scale disappearance or submergence of the past as an entity, as something even capable of *being* recycled without threatening or destabilizing the social order.¹⁸⁶ As I argue in my final chapter, the register of this disappearance, the pressure that this occluded and vanquished past nevertheless exerts on the present, is another shared concern of Moscow conceptualist art.

Particular to late socialism is the monolithic immutability of its forms. As opposed to the postmodern emphasis on the fleeting and the aleatory, its mimicry or reification of historical change in the constant (re)cycling of fashions,¹⁸⁷ the dominant tendency of the late socialist era was, as we have seen, a ubiquitous standardization of discourse. Because authority was invested in the precise reproduction of forms, in which information of any

¹⁸⁶ Igor Makarevich makes precisely this point about the notion of a Russian or Soviet postmodernism in an interview with Gerald Pirog. Asked about the viability of the term with regards to Russian art, Makarevich responds: "Can one speak of postmodernism, if there was in fact no modernism in Russian art, an art to which I belong to and from which I cannot be separated? Perhaps, more accurately, one should say that it did exist but only in embryonic form. Although it was very powerful and heroic, it nevertheless existed only in the most embryonic form. And the most fundamental aspect of life is maturity, and the Russian avant-garde had only a youth. It was unable to enter a mature period, as in the West, because of external circumstances." "Igor Makarevich with Gerald Pirog: Unusual Perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities", in *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 278-291 (282).

¹⁸⁷ As Fredric Jameson notes of the postmodern, "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture." (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 18.)

type was presented as “knowledge previously asserted or commonly known,”¹⁸⁸ late socialism undermined the very distinction between the present and that which came before it. Late socialism could not engage in what Fredric Jameson terms “the random cannibalization of styles of the past”¹⁸⁹ characteristic of postmodernism, for it simply did not recognize any difference or distinction from its past, asserting instead a complete and unbroken continuity that subsumed that past as a locus of usable materials. Consequently, the late socialist present is not one in which the past is continuously on offer as a simulacrum or commodity, reified into all manner of historicist and retro styles, but one in which the past itself has been annexed or expelled from all official discourse. The period of late socialism is thus one of remarkable disconnection and isolation. For if the subject in postmodernism was “condemned to seek History by way of [its] own pop images and simulacra of that history,”¹⁹⁰ then the subject in late socialism was condemned to contend with the ghosts of that history’s absence.

The status of the past in late socialism is thus distinct and different, not only in contrast to Western postmodernism, but also with regards to the periods that border it historically. Common to both the era of Khrushchev’s Thaw and to *perestroika* was an uncovering or opening up of the past, an attempt to heal or reinvigorate the present – and thus the historical process – by allowing previously suppressed histories to be spoken aloud, to re-enter the official discourse. As Svetlana Boym observes, “during *glasnost*, everyone became an amateur historian looking for the black holes and blank spots of history. There was almost as much euphoria about the past as there was about the future after the

¹⁸⁸ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, 61.

¹⁸⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 18.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

revolution.”¹⁹¹ The immanent possibility of re-establishing a continuity of history, from which to better understand the present, accounts for much of the energetic excitement that came to characterize both the Thaw and the *glasnost/perestroika* periods.¹⁹² In contrast, the era of Moscow Conceptualism was one of silences and recesses, of large areas of the unspoken and holes in the official discourse. An episode that exemplifies the division between these periods is the blacklisting, under Brezhnev, of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novella *A Day in The Life of Ivan Denisovich*, whose publication in 1962 had epitomized the heroic recuperations of history during the Thaw. Solzhenitsyn himself, as a disseminator of a mode of memory irreconcilable with official discourse, was symbolically excised from the discursive field in 1974 by being forced into exile. Positioned, then, between the fleeting revisionism of the Thaw and the rapid unraveling of the Soviet system in *perestroika* and *glasnost*, late socialism was also constituted in the space assigned between an indefinitely deferred future and a decoupled and submerged past. It is to this unhoused past, inaccessible, yet never wholly absent, as a further subject of Moscow conceptualist enquiry that we now turn.

¹⁹¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 62.

¹⁹² The contrast between the intense historical focus of many of the discourses surrounding *glasnost* and their comparative absence during the period of late socialism is also noted by Yurchak, who supports his observation by citing the sociologist Kirill Rogov: “According to Rogov, “The [Soviet] person in the 1970s had a rather vague understanding about the historical coordinates of his epoch, considerably vaguer than became apparent to the same person from the perspective of the late 1980s and 1990s.” The *perestroika* critical discourse exposed many unknown facts about the Soviet past and critically articulated many realities that had been implicitly known but unarticulated until then.” *Everything Was Forever*, 7.

“The paintings I made from the start of the nineteen seventies... were open to time, flung open to the socio-cultural winds.”¹⁹³ This is Viktor Pivovarov, writing in his autobiography *The Agent in Love*. Pivovarov has repeatedly emphasized the “open” qualities of his art during this period, its efforts to dismantle the borders between work and world in order to more accurately incorporate the latter. Elsewhere in his autobiography, he notes that his paintings “do not require a frame, which insulates them, separating them from the surrounding world.”¹⁹⁴ Pivovarov’s conception of his art as a site of recording, a surface upon which the “socio-cultural winds” of the age impress themselves, is salient. For like his Moscow conceptualist colleagues, Pivovarov’s “open” art makes a leitmotif of temporality, incorporating and internalizing temporal structure as both a predominant theme and a primary material. A significant example of this practice is the illustrated album *Litso*, [Ils. 2.8-2.27] which enquires of an interruption of distance or space between history and the present.¹⁹⁵

Litso dates to nineteen seventy five, a year of feverish activity that forms something of an *annus mirabilis* in Pivovarov’s artistic biography. In addition to *Litso*, Pivovarov produced the albums *Stairway of the Spheres*, *Conclusions*, *Tears*, *Eros*, and *The Garden*, as well as the installation *Project for a Solitary Person*. Considered together, the works of this year evince a tight interweaving of formal and thematic concerns, a point Pivovarov himself raises in his autobiography:

¹⁹³ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent* [The Agent in Love], (Moscow: NLO, 2001), 92. Pivovarov terms his paintings from these years “open paintings” [*otkrytie kartini*] to emphasize their continuing dialogue with, and incorporation of, the world they study.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁹⁵ *Litso* translates as “Face,” although the original Russian title seems more adhesive than most and hence will be retained.

Now, from the distance of twenty-five years, I clearly see that *Project for a Solitary Person* and the albums *Tears*, *Litso*, *Conclusions*, *Eros*, and *The Garden* should be considered as a single structure... If we consider these works as a single whole, as a certain structure, as a treatise, each part of which supplements the others, then I would be bold enough to name this structure as my philosophy.¹⁹⁶

One of the guiding propositions of this philosophy, articulated in a number of structural and narrative devices within the afore-mentioned works, concerns the new incoherence of the experience of time. By adopting the illustrated album as his principal medium during this period, Pivovarov designates the temporal as a leading organizational category of his work. The successive, narrational structure of the album in turn enables Pivovarov to cast the experience of temporality as a recurrent theme or motif within these works, via the skilful manipulation of the narrative format to emphasize disruption, discontinuity, and absence. It is notable that Pivovarov's autobiographical commentaries concerning these albums linger on precisely these junctures, as when he writes of *Tears* that "the structure of the album is broken, fragmented. Fragments of reminiscences, moods, not joined to any thoughts."¹⁹⁷ Or of *The Garden*, which he describes as articulating "the conscious and subconscious idea of the departure, the break, of spatio-temporal holes."¹⁹⁸ With varying methods and mechanisms, then, the albums of this period reiterate the aspect of Moscow conceptualist practice which this chapter addresses, that of giving form to the strange and singular nature of late Soviet time. *Litso*, in particular, looks to trace upon its surface the intersections and interactions between memory, identity, and temporality.

¹⁹⁶ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 117.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁹⁸ Viktor Pivovarov, *Ocherki Vizual'nosti: O liubvi, slova, i izobrazhenia* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 32.

In a spare and elegiac style favoring crisp outlines and flat, muted blocks of color, *Litso* frames a man's face against a deep blue background. At first a silhouette, in successive panels the face is overlaid with various accoutrements and scenes of memory. That these represent trappings of reminiscence is made clear by the accompanying text, which details a conversation between two persons concerning their past. Yet this conversation is strange, transcribed as a soliloquy in which a lone speaker unsuccessfully entreats a silent interlocutor to recall a common history. The muted incomprehension of the interlocutor, whom Pivovarov simply terms the "Other,"¹⁹⁹ endows the album with an arrhythmia of hesitation and silence that in turn punctuates the speech of the speaker. "You don't remember?" enquires the speaker at one point. "The courtyard from our childhood, the dovecote, and the cloudy blue sky above us..." [Ills. 2.14] "No, you don't remember," [Ills. 2.21] he acknowledges somewhat later.²⁰⁰ "Well then. Goodbye." [Ills. 2.22] *Litso* concludes with the failure of these prompts to memory and the ensuing solitude of the protagonist, furthering the timbre of mystery and disjunction that pervades the work. Meanwhile, in this gulf of misapprehension a string of recollections linger and resonate, brightly vivid, their veracity unresolved. The thematic energies of the album will arrange themselves about and around this unhoused past.

As with *Krasikov Street*, *Litso* hedges its bets and disguises its intentions, offering up a thinly-spread realism which it immediately subverts. At a first impression, the album appears to cultivate humor and irony, presenting as its subject a simple case of

¹⁹⁹ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 110.

²⁰⁰ It is worthy of note that the recollections set forth in *Litso*, including of a "beautiful woman" walking past, [Ills. 2.18] would seem to indicate two male speakers.

embarrassing misrecognition. Yet as time settles in and the viewer lingers, this apparent simplicity estranges itself. In its place gather the pauses and questions which the subtler operations of the album provoke. How to reconcile, for one, the embroidered detail of the protagonist's recollections with his categorical mistake of identity? Or, indeed, the unchanging conviction of his identification with the unaltered incomprehension of his interlocutor? The energies of the album seem diametrically opposed to the simple resolution sought by the speaker. Rather, *Litso* works to cultivate the space between the interlocutors, to draw forth and accentuate, rather than to span, the emptiness and distance that divides the two. Whilst making to document the speaker's search for recognition, the album then also plots against him. In these opposed intentions, the silences and awkwardness that could otherwise be attributed to a common – or comical – misunderstanding, assume a broader, structural significance. Gathering its devices, *Litso* shades the veracity of the story it tells, subverting its integrity and undermining its plausibility. Even the dialogue that the album documents appears as less the record of a live conversation than the simple restatements of two mutually exclusive narrational positions. Here, each voice remains sealed and self-contained, hermetically impervious to the exhortations of the other. What one insists, the other insistently denies, and there can be, it seems, no resolution. How, then, to approach, and what to make, of such subtle dissemblance?

“For me, *Litso* was a way of giving expression to several questions that I was preoccupied with at the time.”²⁰¹ So notes Viktor Pivovarov in his Prague studio, emphasizing his points with his hands. “Primarily, of course, the album is about the

²⁰¹ Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08.

problem of self-identity, how our knowledge of ourselves is always reliant on other things, on other people, how our present is inseparable from our past.”²⁰² Framed in the author’s terms as a meditation on self-identity, the silences and disjunctions that punctuate and unsettle *Litso* assume an existential hue. Rather than as prompts to the memory of another, here the questions set forth by the speaker dart and probe in quest of *self*-recognition. What is at stake in *Litso* is not the simple veracity of a set of recollections, but the integrity or stability of a self-knowledge whose *sine qua non* is the acknowledgement of others. The schisms and absences that intersperse the album here write themselves on the identity of the speaker, denoting the failures of his attempts to cross the boundaries of his self, to ratify himself via dialogue with another. The broken conversation catalogued within *Litso* thus in turn articulates a isolated or alienated self, grasping for the security of mutual recognition. In the closing panels of the album, the speaker confronts the futility of his efforts. As he acknowledges the unyielding bewilderment of his interlocutor – “No, you don’t remember” – the depicted face first shatters, then is reduced to a partially-viewed sliver. [Ills.2.20-2.23] In the final four panels of the work, the face disappears altogether, its effacement a shadow and a counterpoint to the speaker’s frail hope that “we will meet again, somewhere, sometime, and you will recognize me without fail and, perhaps, remember my face.” [Ills. 2.24-2.27] Deprived of self-confirmation, the speaker here is undone. Cast back upon his own incompleteness, his unrequited memories are left dangling uselessly, incapable of being

²⁰² Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08. Pivovarov also emphasizes the centrality to *Litso* of questions of self-identity in *The Agent in Love*. Here he notes that “in the album *Litso*, the answer to the question “who am I?” is determined in dialogue with another. Naturally, this “I” proves to be dependent on the “other,” and there are no alternate means of self-definition.” (*Vliublennii agent*, 110.)

reintegrated into his story of himself. It is this self-estrangement that the album's cultivations of silence and absence work to emphasize.

The estrangement that forms the subject of *Litso* is also and at once an estrangement from time. For it is the speaker's past that constitutes the ground of his loss, in which the solid stability of recollected history is subverted, becoming instead newly contested and uncertain. The fractured instability of the self or the subject that *Litso* depicts is here inseparable from the occlusion of that subject's history, the destabilization of its psychic continuity. Besides being thrown back upon his isolated self, the speaker is also *endlessly returned to his own present*, as the histories he offers for confirmation are rejected, unrecognized. Self-identity in *Litso* – for Pivovarov the focus and fulcrum of the album – is detached and uncoupled from the narrative chains that support it, abandoned to the present moment, from which it struggles to find a way out. As with Kabakov's *Shower* drawings, it is within the confines of a discontinuous and isolated present that experience manifests itself. The route out from this solitude of broken time is not given in either work.

Litso seeks to position itself on the seam or nexus between self-identity and social structure. From this juncture it looks to record the interactions of the two categories, to detail the manner and means through which the former is shaped by the latter.

Consequently, the estranged isolation which *Litso* posits as constitutive of self-identity is not an ontological or transcendent condition, but rather one that is specific and

historically situated.²⁰³ What *Litso* makes to document are the pressures and effects upon the subject of the late Soviet lifeworld, and, in particular, the strange absence of history and temporal continuity within that lifeworld. The experience of the album's speaker, whose past is clouded and incapable of providing a foundation for identity and self-knowledge, then reproduces upon a personal level that larger loss which is the occlusion of the past within the late socialist era. This isomorphic replication, this *mapping*, of larger social and historical forms undertaken by Pivovarov in *Litso* here echoes the preoccupations of both *Krasikov Street* and the *Shower* series. Common to the three works is an attempt to internalize, to embody as structure the experience of a disjointed and incoherent temporal order. These are the "socio cultural winds"²⁰⁴ that Pivovarov speaks of opening his work to, and it is the openness of these works to the pressures and contours of their time, their willingness *to be written upon*, that constitutes their principle distinction.

The resonance of *Litso* is as a project of knowledge. The self-estrangement the work charts is divested of the tinctures of an authorial voice and all traces of the personal or political. This voiceless neutrality accommodates the work's desire to be read less as an artistic statement than as a document, a dry and dusty tabulation of facts gathered from the surveyed object. Integral to Moscow Conceptualism as a movement is this effort to distinguish its artistic production, not as representing a vision or style or *weltanschauung*,

²⁰³ While Pivovarov is reluctant to enter into excessive detail about *Litso*, noting that it is important to him that his work "remains open" to interpretation, he did insist on the situated nature of the isolation or solitude that the album depicts. For Pivovarov, "There is, of course, always solitude, but it comes in many different forms. We had our own, of course. Solitude in Prague, in the Czechoslovakia I immigrated to, is very different from solitude in the West or in the Soviet Union. The forms solitude takes here, now [in Prague] are very different to the forms they took 20 years ago, before the Wall came down." Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08.

²⁰⁴ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 92.

but rather as constituting an epistemology, a body of knowledge. The three works examined in this chapter all purge themselves of the vestments of artistic style, moving towards a degree zero of formal neutrality that reconfigures the author as a dispassionate observer, or, perhaps better, a cartographer. The stylistic poverty of Moscow Conceptualism, its collective disdain for the personal and the expressive, is thus purposeful. All works addressed in this chapter offer up their unremarkable artistic merits in order to align themselves more closely with the informational and descriptive. The clumsy heaviness of the *Shower* series, the knock-down realism of *Krasikov Street*, and the inexpressive coldness of *Litso* proclaim a paucity of artistic content in order to signal that their energies and concerns are extra-aesthetic. It is then as an archive of its own time that Moscow Conceptualism attains its communality, as it seeks to discern and chart the social forms of an age that was increasingly distant from its own foundational narratives and modes of representation.

The primary period of Moscow conceptualist practice, this chapter has argued, also constitutes a distinct era of Soviet history, distinguished by a common set of characteristics. This epoch, which, in accordance with Yurchak, I term late socialism, is the consequence of a crisis of Communist Party authority with regards to its own organizational categories. Prominent to the late socialist era is a collapse of historical motion and the pooling of the continuum of temporal experience within the singular tense of the present. Consequently, late socialism is further distinguished by the elision or

submergence of the future and, in particular, the past. These distinct temporal parameters, I argue, are in turn actively reified and internalized within Moscow conceptualist art. This isomorphic alignment, in which the organizational temporalities of contemporary Soviet life are reproduced as subject matter, is an important Moscow conceptualist strategy. For Bulatov, Kabakov, Pivovarov, and Collective Actions, the incorporation by art of the structuring temporalities of the age constituted a project of knowledge. For the Moscow conceptualist circle, art was a tool for apprehending the murky operations of an era whose irreconcilability with the rusting modes of official discourse was ever more palpable. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, this reification by art of the uncanny structures of late Soviet temporality is but one aspect of a sustained enquiry by the Moscow conceptualist circle into the deeper structures of the Soviet present.

Chapter Three

Archaeologies of the Avant-Garde: Space and Subjectivity in

Moscow Conceptualism

“I thought it was significant to name the artists of Moscow Conceptualism the Angels of History even if it is a rather high-flown gesture, because I believe they made a truly historicizing revolution (or counter-revolution) within the space of the Soviet metaphysics of their time: creating with their actions a dimension of history within the space of Bolshevism’s post-historicism.” Joseph Bakshtein, “History of Angels/Angels of History.”²⁰⁵

In the second half of the nineteen-seventies, Igor Makarevich created a series of works which addressed the theme of spatial confinement or enclosure. The works encompass both relief sculpture and photography, and employ a common grid of thick wooden frames to divide their interior space into a matrix of separate enclosures. Within this grid, Makarevich places objects that symbolize a human presence, from plaster casts of his head and torso to a molded dove representing the soul.²⁰⁶ The works seek to frame, both literally and figuratively, a specific and situated experience of space, to invoke boundaries and segregation as they are sensed by those who inhabit them. “In these works... I developed a repressive space, a space of torture,”²⁰⁷ writes Makarevich, and

²⁰⁵ Joseph Bakshtein, “History of Angels/Angels of History,” in *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence*, edited by Bart De Baere and Joseph Bakshtein (Brussels, Mercatorfonds, 2005), 16-23 (16).

²⁰⁶ For example, *Dispersion of a Soaring Soul*, of 1978, consists of 49 cast doves arranged within the gridded structure of the works, whilst *The Case of Sensations* [Ills. 3.2] of 1979 comprises six plaster casts of Makarevich’s torso.

²⁰⁷ Igor Makarevich, personal correspondence with author, 3/12/10.

the grids common to the series thus exist not as mere formal or analytic devices, but as an active machinery of confinement. For Makarevich, the structural division of space is here intimately, necessarily connected to a human presence, an active experience of that space.

Stratographic Structures, of 1978, pulls upon these threads.²⁰⁸ [Ills. 3.1] The work arranges, in a square grid, 25 plaster casts of Makarevich's face, each painted in a different color. The serial quality of the work, its extension and reproduction of the single moment of casting, recalls the continuous cultivation of the present which Kabakov's *Shower* series engages in. In addition, the mass or collective which *Stratographic Structures* constructs via the replication of a single image in turn evokes the practices of the Constructivist avant-garde. Constructivism employed the same techniques of repetition and identity in photomontage and sculptural constructions as a means to articulate in art the new ascendancy of the proletariat.²⁰⁹ The seriality which Makarevich structures his work around, then, carries its own past with it, which lingers as an echo or invocation of a broader cultural history. This presence, however, is necessarily double-edged, for *Stratographic Structures* works to make unquiet ghosts of its past.

It is salient that the collectivity which *Stratographic Structures* proposes, via repetition, is simultaneously undermined and hollowed out by the work's formal structure. The

²⁰⁸ *Stratographic Structures* has the alternate, informal title *25 Memories of a Friend*. Makarevich, however, is clear that *Stratographic Structures* is the "master title" for all works which set his face within a dividing lattice. Interview with Igor Makarevich, 24/5/2007.

²⁰⁹ Whilst the spatial constructions of constructivist artists like Aleksandr Rodchenko were frequently built from serial components of identical dimensions (for example, wooden blocks of equal length), Constructivist photomontage frequently reproduced individual portraits as a means of depicting the massed proletariat. This technique is evident in Valentina Kulagina's 1930 Poster *International Working Women's Day is the day of assessment of socialist competition*. [Ills. 3.3] Here, the mass of marching women moving towards the bottom of the work are constructed from a limited number of faces which are then conspicuously reproduced throughout the crowd.

multiple presences which the cast faces denote are themselves arranged in a segregated isolation by the wooden grid, becoming in turn an assembly of atomistic individuals, each hermetically unaware of the others that surround him. This separation is emphasized by the individual coloring of the casts, which creates a counterpoint to this massed identity. Furthermore, the poised pose of the faces themselves reiterate the isolating borders of the grid structure. With a tightly drawn mouth and closed, downcast eyes, the blank expression of the artist which the casts preserve constitutes its own physical barrier and enclosure, buttressing the interior space of the mind against all interaction with the surrounding world. *Stratographic Structures* thus aligns a rigorous, compartmentalizing partition of formal or physical space with an analogous division within the subject(s) it depicts. The dual components of the work, the organizational grid and the facial casts, both work to debar all communication and collectivity, presenting themselves as barriers to any interpenetration of internal and external space. What Makarevich articulates in *Stratographic Structures* is, then, a broken and alienated collectivity, a multiplicity of monads, in which even the plaster-cast subjects of the work armor themselves as border and boundary line.

Stratographic Structures takes late Soviet space as its subject and makes several central, yet related, proposals about its nature or form. Most notably, the work depicts a spatial order of unambiguous division and segregation, one that is marked or defined by a network of barriers and borders. Within these matrices of separation, however, *Stratographic Structures* discerns and preserves the faded, ghostly presence of an older form of space, which is presented as a decayed and eroded collectivity. Furthermore, this

spatial order is presented as one in which the partitions that structure the external world are recapitulated within the depicted subject, or, perhaps more precisely, one where the discursive forms of Soviet space are implicated in the formation of the Soviet person. Because these premises regarding the spatial order of late socialism are shared by Moscow Conceptualism as a whole, they form the parameters of the present chapter.

This chapter addresses the presentation of space in Moscow conceptualist practice. In this chapter I make to demonstrate that contemporary Soviet space constitutes another central category of Moscow conceptualist enquiry. I argue that in seeking to chart the forms and parameters of late Soviet space, Moscow Conceptualism again engages in a process well described as cognitive mapping. As I claim in the previous chapter, it is these investigations into the deeper forms of the Soviet present which distinguish and bind the movement. Like the enquiries into historical time, the charting of the spatial orders of late socialism within Moscow conceptualist art seeks to orientate the present moment by enquiring of its relationship to the larger narratives that structure Soviet discourse. In particular, Moscow Conceptualism examines late Soviet space in terms of its influence upon and relationship to subjectivity. The interdependence of these two categories had long been insisted upon by the Bolsheviks and subsequent Soviet authorities, who sought to employ space as a tool with which to control and shape the subject.²¹⁰ In investigating

²¹⁰ As David Crowley and Susan Reid note, the Bolsheviks viewed the reorganization of Soviet space as vital to the inculcation of socialist values: “to change how a person thought and behaved, one must change his or her material surroundings. Thus the architectural form of the city and the planning of urban space were vested with a socio-transformative role in the lives of its residents. The configuration of cities was

the contemporary contours of this highly ideological coupling, Moscow Conceptualism also then grounds this relationship historically, by mapping the consequences, the current fate or status, of these grand plans of Soviet Power.

In detailing the Moscow Conceptualist mapping of late socialist space and subjectivity, this chapter then seeks to both affirm the communality and importance of the these themes with regards to the movement, and to situate them at a particular moment or historical point in an evolving discourse. This moment, articulated within *Stratographic Structures*, is one where the varied, but primarily collectivist imperatives of Soviet space are themselves implicated in the production of isolation and alienation. The investigations of Moscow Conceptualism thus chart the unintended effects and consequences of the ideological marshalling of space, consequences that could neither be registered nor accounted for within official socialist frameworks. This increasing lack of alignment between the controlling ideologies of Soviet space and its reception by citizens is piquantly summarized by Svetlana Boym:

If there had been such a thing as a Soviet cultural unconscious, it would have been structured like a communal apartment – with flimsy partitions between public and private, between control and intoxication... Unfaithful to both communitarian mythologies and traditional family values.²¹¹

‘the strongest factor for organizing the psyche of the of the masses.’” “Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc,” in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Berg: Oxford, 2002), 1-23 (11).

²¹¹ Svetlana Boym: *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 123.

This chapter argues that it is around these areas of incongruity and non-alignment that Moscow Conceptualism gathers its attentions. The movement describes, with remarkable consistency from artist to artist, a late socialist subject radically different from the public and collective citizen that the Soviet authorities sought to use space to bring forth. The subject of Moscow Conceptualist art is still profoundly shaped by space, yet it is now the internalization of myriad borders and divisions which structures that subject's psyche and which collates mental and physical space. Far more substantial than Boym's "flimsy partitions," these psychic boundary zones arrange the world in binary divisions, opposing and segregating the internal from the external, the public from the private, and the familiar from the threatening. Most stridently, however, these mental borders separate the individual from his fellow citizens, inculcating a radical isolation as the paradigmatic form of late socialist life. As with the related categories of history and temporality, the primary phenomenon which these enquiries into space and subjectivity chart is the Party's sundering of control or authority over its own foundational narratives.

Because Moscow Conceptualism's investigations of late Soviet space and subjectivity are contingent upon a pre-existing discourse, this discourse is necessarily framed within the chapter. To this end, the chapter begins with a comparison of two important texts, each by a major artist from, respectively, the Soviet avant-garde and the Moscow conceptualist circle. The texts are, chronologically, the 1920 treatise *On New Systems in Art*, by Kazimir Malevich, which prognosticates a future of immanent unity and collectivity, and the 1981 essay *On Emptiness*, by Ilya Kabakov, which examines the atomization of contemporary Soviet life. The polemical distance between the worldviews of the

respective texts, which represent two distinct moments of Soviet history, is then contextualized. To account for these changes, the chapter examines both the initial alignment between the avant-garde and Bolsheviks with regards to the construction of a collectivist subject, and the revisions to these precepts during Stalinism. It then details the increasing incoherence and self-contradiction of this narrative in the post-Stalinist period. It is at this point of breakage or collapse in the official stories of the relationship between Soviet space and subjectivity that the Moscow conceptualist investigation of these categories is situated. Having established the position of Moscow Conceptualism within this evolving discourse, I then turn to examine the ways in which the movement reconceives the contemporary relationship between space and the subject as one of mutual fragmentation, segregation and isolation through an analysis of works that most clearly chart this shift.

In 1981, in the slow twilight of the Brezhnev era, Ilya Kabakov travelled outside the Soviet Union for the first time. Kabakov's destination was Prague, the city where Viktor Pivovarov had recently settled, and the experience of life beyond the borders of his homeland impressed itself powerfully upon him.²¹² Shortly after his return to Moscow, Kabakov wrote an essay addressing this experience, which he entitled *On Emptiness*. The

²¹² Pivovarov had moved to Prague early in 1981, after his marriage to Milena Slavitska. In his autobiography *The Agent in Love*, Pivovarov recounts Kabakov's visit, noting especially Kabakov's unflattering assessment of the city's artistic milieu: "Kabakov compared the "energy" of Moscow and Prague, and his conclusion was decisively not in favor of the latter." (*Vliublennii agent*, 156.) Despite Kabakov's skepticism, it was less the art of Prague than the experience of being outside the outside of the Soviet Union that made the journey memorable.

essay offers an account of the Soviet Union in terms of a metaphysics of space, centered, in turn, on the claim that life within the country is organized and defined by the emptiness to which the title refers. *On Emptiness* is a significant Moscow conceptualist document, for it enumerates in writing a series of positions common to Moscow Conceptualism with regards to late Soviet space. In addition to identifying these positions, the subsequent discussion employs *On Emptiness* as a means of situating the movement in terms of the larger history, or genealogy, of the discourses concerning space and the subject within the Soviet Union.

In the opening sentences of *On Emptiness*, Ilya Kabakov immediately frames his journey to Prague in terms of new perspectives:

I was in Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1981, and among the most interesting impressions and conceptions for me was the possibility of looking upon “our place” from the point of view of a “different place,” of one who has left. How does it look “from the outside?”²¹³

What is illuminated in the rarely-afforded view “from the outside” is, for Kabakov, a sublime and unbridgeable singularity that defines the Soviet Union in contradistinction to other nations. The Soviet Union constitutes a “gigantic reservoir”²¹⁴ which contains within itself a unique and defining characteristic; namely, a radically different form of space. Soviet space is metaphysically distinct, and is expressed or experienced as *emptiness*, constituting the inverse of all external space:

²¹³ Ilya Kabakov, “O Pustote,” in *Ilya Kabakov: Zhizn' mukh* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992), 82-96 (82).

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

This very emptiness inhabits the place where we live, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. It is a special - however bombastic the word may seem - hole in space, in the world, in the fabric of being, with its own territory. It is a reservoir of emptiness which contrasts with the rest of the world, and which carries out its terrible duty in relation to the entire remaining world.²¹⁵

The emptiness that suffuses the Soviet Union is thus both ontologically unique and topographically specific.²¹⁶ It is a quality, but also, inseparably, an extension, defined and contained by the borders of the nation state. Whilst beyond these borders emptiness represents a simple absence, a “space not yet filled,”²¹⁷ Soviet emptiness constitutes an active attack on presence, a constant agency of negation. As Kabakov expresses it, “emptiness adheres to, merges with, sucks being.”²¹⁸ It is parasitic and vampiric in content, cartographic and national in form.

The actions of emptiness consequently transform the Soviet Union into a hollow and apophatic geography. Within this realm, emptiness exercises dominion over all phenomena, including Soviet citizens. Moving to address the life-world of those living within the borders of erasure, Kabakov writes that he “would like to speak about a peculiar psychic cast, a psychological condition of those people born and residing in

²¹⁵ Ibid, 84.

²¹⁶ Kabakov is certainly not unique in his description. In his introductory essay to *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*, David Ross notes the predilection of non-conformist artists to describe late-Soviet life in terms of metaphysical or existential emptiness. “The specter of emptiness,” he writes, “has haunted Soviet alternative culture for the last few decades.” “Provisional Reading: Notes for an Exhibition,” 1-30 (19).

²¹⁷ Ibid, 82.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 84.

emptiness.”²¹⁹ The metaphysics of negation which Kabakov posits as the fundament of all Soviet existence thus in turn shapes and orders the psychic lives of those who inhabit this space.

Within the Soviet Union that *On Emptiness* describes, a metaphysical quality is continuously reconfigured as a mental condition, producing, in turn, specific modes of life. This process is registered in the form of what Kabakov terms “psychotechniques,” strategies of life that come to characterize contemporary Soviet existence:

Topographically [residence in emptiness] is expressed and exists in the *principally insular character of the settlement of emptiness*. We can speak of a distinctive ocean, of an archipelago of small and large settlements, lost and scattered about the expanse of emptiness and resembling a kind of Philippines. However, these are not islands in a warm ocean, but in an ocean of uncertainty, an ocean of emptiness.²²⁰

Emptiness is expressed, expresses itself, as disconnection, separation, and isolation. The cultural topography that Kabakov charts is one of division inside of division. Within the singular, bounded realm of emptiness, ontologically incommensurate with the world beyond, habitation exists as a series of points or dots, separate and adrift amid the vast space that flows between them. That these settlements, these points of habitation can never coalesce into a broader community is a point Kabakov makes emphatically clear.²²¹ Consequently, emptiness also manifests itself in the denial or rejection of all forms of

²¹⁹ Ibid, 86.

²²⁰ Ibid, 86-88. My italics.

²²¹ Kabakov writes: “What does this community, this fellowship of people “swimming in emptiness,” this “society in a canoe” constitute? Does the community present a certain unity and continuity, in short a single, interacting human social body in the face of emptiness? Nothing of the sort.” Ibid, 88.

collectivity. Within the realm of emptiness, the Soviet subject remains hermetically isolated, even in the presence of others. Kabakov reiterates this point by noting that, even in society, “the sea of people around [the subject] does not lead to the formation of links between him and others, to benevolent harmony with the other.”²²² The subject is, in essence, his own exclusive division of space, buttressed and fortified against the great ocean of negation that surrounds his body. In the lonely archipelago of late Soviet society each man is indeed an island, and each citizen-subject consequently forms a singular cell. To be human is here to be a monad, incapable of either rescinding or transcending a formative condition of isolation.

Throughout *On Emptiness*, Kabakov describes his native land in terms of a spatial metaphysics that reiterates itself, first as psychic condition, and then again as a central principle of societal organization. The sociological structure of emptiness finds its basic expression in the dwellings of Soviet citizens, their sought refuge within the private and enclosed spaces which Kabakov terms “burrows”:

These burrows constitute the most important cell, the basic atom perhaps in the atomistic construction of the island. The burrow is the sole place of residence of the inhabitant of emptiness, a relatively hopeful refuge from emptiness and the other men who bear it. And as the island itself is an asylum from the emptiness of space, so the ever-so-similar burrow is the asylum of the individual man from the other inhabitants of the island.²²³

Psychologically isolated and self-enclosed, the citizen-subject seeks to reconstitute the atomizing imperatives of emptiness within the physical space he or she inhabits. The

²²² Ibid, 90.

²²³ Ibid, 90.

result is a hermetic spatial enclosure both separated from and opposed to the world beyond. Kabakov's Soviet Union thus comprises a matrushka-like series of oppositional divisions, in which external and interior spaces are rigidly segregated by borders and boundaries. Within the nation-state of emptiness there exists the dwelling built in emptiness, which in turn shelters and protects the psyche of the inhabitant of emptiness. Here, all communal or public territory carries a strongly negative valence, as indeed do all groups and crowds.²²⁴ Only the solitary and the private connote safety and security, and are hence to be desired. Existence in emptiness thus constitutes a whole cartography of spatial divides, boundaries and enclosures, which act to segregate and protect interior space from all that is external and hence threatening.

The profusion of fixed and firm spatial categories that *On Emptiness* identifies as integral to the late Soviet Union is also manifest in a pronounced flattening, or *spatialization*, of temporality. In the final paragraphs of *On Emptiness*, Kabakov describes how emptiness subverts or obviates the very sense of temporal flow:

Do these places, this island archipelago arranged on emptiness, have a history? Simply, no. The islands move off into the past as emptiness, they dissolve into it like clouds losing their form and configuration. The memory of past islands disappears, stops short with the disappearance of one set and the appearance of new islands beyond the edge of today, as the very same emptiness gapes beyond the edge of an island. There exists no history, no sedimented deposits, no continuity... Nothing results from anything, nothing is connected to anything, and nothing means anything.²²⁵

²²⁴ Kabakov writes that "all of the streets, roads, and sidewalks of these islands, these villages, cities and settlements are filled with thousands of these "burrow residents," rushing from one burrow to another, who neither see nor notice anyone and fear all outside their burrows, although they shove and collide with many similar to themselves." Ibid, 90.

²²⁵ Ibid, 92-94.

As time passes from the realm of the present, it vanishes, precisely as if it had crossed into another spatial realm beyond the domain of emptiness. History, time passed, becomes foreign territory, an ontologically separate entity incommensurate with and thus segregated from the bounded space of the present. Continuity, causality, those temporal structures that enable memory and thus identity, cease to function within the expanded and perpetual present that Kabakov describes. The “edge of today,” that recreates the “edge of an island” as border and boundary line for the spatio-temporal ontology of emptiness therefore condemns all residents of this land to further isolation by expunging their personal continuity, their past. The citizen-subject of emptiness is isolated even from herself, a point Kabakov emphasizes by declaring that “each person is provisionally present here, as if they had arrived from nowhere very recently.”²²⁶ Life is here defined by the compartmentalization not just of space but of time, an intense spatialization of temporality that transforms the past into a place, *zagranitsa*,²²⁷ at once contingent, inaccessible, and remote.

Kabakov concludes *On Emptiness* with a polar metaphor, comparing life in the Soviet Union to that of Antarctic explorers “visiting, drinking tea or dancing, moving from one tent to another”²²⁸ in an effort to assuage the reality of the empty white wilderness outside. Yet beyond the hyperbolic figuration and high-Russian despair which Kabakov effortlessly adopts as a register, the most significant aspect of *On Emptiness*, in terms of

²²⁶ Ibid, 94.

²²⁷ The Russian term for “abroad,” which, in the Soviet period, bore connotations of remoteness and inaccessibility.

²²⁸ Ibid, 96.

this enquiry, are the propositions it submits concerning the nature and form of late Soviet space. For Kabakov, and (as this chapter argues) for Moscow Conceptualism in general, space becomes both a complement and an analogue of temporality, its other or next dimension, if you will. As with late socialist temporality, which, as the previous chapter argued, Moscow Conceptualism viewed as both isolated and disconnected, removed from its larger sequence or manifold, so late Soviet space is conceived of in terms of segregation and division. Kabakov's insistence in *On Emptiness* that contemporary Soviet life consists of both spatial *and* temporal isolation makes its own case for the interdependence of these categories. *On Emptiness* is thus an exemplary illustration of the process this dissertation terms "cognitive mapping," in which the primary objects of Moscow conceptualist enquiry are the forms and contours of the present moment.

In asserting that the contemporary Soviet Union is characterized by segregational boundaries and existential isolation, Kabakov is, of course, not alone. These, we recall, are the very same claims which *Stratographic Structures* seeks to convey in visual form, and which subsequently organize the work's material structures. In addition to this, the correspondence which Kabakov's essay posits, between the physical organization of space and the psychic state of those who inhabit this space, recalls the way in which the cast faces of *Stratographic Structures* recapitulate the borders and boundaries of the grid that divides them. For Kabakov, the burrow man is a product and reflection of the segregating actions of emptiness and hence a uniquely Soviet subject. In turn, for Makarevich, the spatial divisions enforced by the lattice framework of *Stratographic*

Structures themselves connote psychological states, evoking “spaces of hiding and of protection.”²²⁹

These two separate Moscow conceptualist utterances, made in wholly different media, then advance almost identical claims concerning the alienating and segregating nature of late Soviet reality. Furthermore, towards this end, both works utilize a language or lexicon of space in order to speak of Soviet life. By itself, this striking correspondence advocates for the interactions between space and subjectivity as a common concern of Moscow Conceptualism, yet there is more here to be said. In probing this nexus between the physical and the mental, Between internal and external worlds, Moscow Conceptualism inserts itself into an active and extensive discourse concerning this very relationship. Far from being a marginal or nonconformist concern, this discourse was explicitly official. In addition, it traced its origins backwards in time, to the first years of Bolshevik rule and the activities of the avant-garde. Because the Moscow conceptualist investigations regarding space and subjectivity enquire of this larger history, seek to grasp its premises and chart its consequences, my account of the role of space in Moscow Conceptualism must, in turn, be framed within this broader discourse. As a means to situate the Moscow conceptualist address, it is to an earlier, and very different, conception of Soviet space and subjectivity that we now turn.

²²⁹ Igor Makarevich, personal correspondence with author, 3/12/10.

In December of 1919, at the height of the civil war, the artist Kazimir Malevich published his theoretical treatise *On New Systems in Art* on the lithographic presses of the Popular Art School in Vitebsk. Four years earlier, Malevich had unveiled his new Suprematist paintings. [Ills. 3.4] These works, geometric abstractions on a white background, had cemented his position at the head of the Russian avant-garde and ensured a following amongst younger artists. As with *On Emptiness*, *On New Systems in Art* was itself the result of a journey, in this case Malevich's relocation from Moscow to Vitebsk some two months before. The move was advantageous, for besides possessing facilities for printing, the Popular Art School was rapidly becoming a hotbed of avant-garde activity. In January of 1920, Malevich was appointed school director, succeeding Marc Chagall. A month later, with *On New Systems in Art* as its guiding document, the school would change its name to Unovis, an abbreviation of "Affirmers of the New Art."²³⁰

Under Malevich, Unovis sought an art of advanced communist consciousness, one that submerged the egocentric affectations of the individual within the purposive rationality of the collective.²³¹ This approach was well summarized by Malevich's assertion, in a lecture delivered at Unovis, that "the modern Saint must destroy himself before the collective, and before that image which perfects in the name of unity."²³² Art was to assume the forms of revolutionary politics, seeking to eventually merge with the political in a liminal new space, where every action within every human discipline progressed

²³⁰ *Utverditeli novogo iskusstva*. The school was briefly named Molposnovis before being renamed Unovis on February 14, 1920.

²³¹ As Aleksandra Shatskikh notes, this included all works being signed in the name of the collective. "Unovis: Epicenter of a New World," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 53-64 (56).

²³² Kazimir Malevich, "O 'Ia' i kollektive," lecture presented at Unovis 15 January 1920, cited in Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: Zhizn' iskusstva 1917-1922* (Moscow: Iaziki russkoi kul'turi, 2001), 83.

towards the same end. It is this transformation that *On New Systems in Art* is concerned with.

In the opening paragraph of *On New Systems in Art*, Malevich declares that economic reduction has become the new governing paradigm of artistic form. Modeled on the natural sciences,²³³ economy constitutes “the new measure, the fifth dimension, which evaluates and defines the contemporaneity of the arts and creative works.”²³⁴ The recent emergence of economic reduction as a determining principle of art is itself the product of creative intuition, an evolving, supra-rational consciousness that governs and directs advanced artistic creation. Against the entrenched habits of a divisive and outdated bourgeois rationality, intuition seeks unity and correspondence:

Human reason is divided into many cages, and in every cage lives a nationality, which constructs their own fenced, kitchen-garden kingdom... Yet, despite all of reason’s obstacles to the unification of peoples, intuition will smash with revolution the cages of the nationalities, fatherlands, and nations.²³⁵

In addition to art, the new, intuitive consciousness also manifests itself in social and technological processes, both of which articulate the same economic drive towards unity and collectivity. Increasingly governed by the unifying imperatives of intuition, the mind

²³³ As Patricia Railing notes, “economy is a determining constant in every being, qualifying energy, or force. It is the way in which nature produces form.” (*On Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, London: Artists Bookworks, 1990, 38.) As Railing also observes, Malevich’s use of the term “economy” and his recasting of art (and in particular Suprematism) as a process governed by quasi-scientific laws were new to his writings of 1919, and represent a significant departure from earlier texts on Suprematism.

²³⁴ Kazimir Malevich, “O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve: statika i skorost,” in *Kazimir Malevich: Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. one, edited by D. Sarabianov et al. (Moscow, 1995), 153-184 (153).

²³⁵ Kazimir Malevich, “O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve: statika i skorost,” 173.

of man constitutes “an organism of energy, a seed striving to form a single center.”²³⁶

Consequently, the progressive unification of world space is both a product of the evolving human psyche and a spur to its further refinement.

On New Systems in Art argues that all advanced creation, whether directed towards a new art or a new social order, moves from the division and separation of the old to the unity of the new with ever-increasing speed. In doing so, creation itself merges with the process of history in its path from archaic stagnation to technological progress. As history advances, previously separate phenomena amalgamate and fuse: “towns become cities, and cities merge together, economically concentrating their energy.”²³⁷ Ultimately, in the coming social order the once-distinct categories of history, science, technology, art, politics, and nations will merge, creating a “purely energetic power of movement”²³⁸ which both transcends and erases all previous categories, all prior boundaries.

The emergent Utopia which *On New Systems in Art* calls forth is a space of pure unity, collectivity and erasure, within which the ‘I’ of the old world fades against the ‘we’ of the new. Even art is to surrender its own distinctions and dissolve its own boundaries, economically merging with production, which in turn aligns itself with the political. Artists must now strive to “create as in our technical life.”²³⁹ In the new world of Bolshevik power and avant-garde preeminence, neither old egos, old property or old politics can remain. Consequently, throughout *On New Systems in Art*, Malevich echoes

²³⁶ Ibid, 181-182.

²³⁷ Ibid, 182.

²³⁸ Ibid, 182.

²³⁹ Ibid, 163.

the internationalism of early Bolshevism by speaking in global terms. The progress of man generates a “world energy,” and the collective future traverses a “world revolution.”²⁴⁰ The topography of this emerging global space is thus one in which extant divisions can no longer be mapped, in which no point is distinct from another point and no psyche different from another psyche. It is collective and collectively identical, boundless and undifferentiated. Having plotted its course to the future, *On New Systems in Art* then concludes by reaffirming the immanence of this world transformed. “It is in this direction,” Malevich asserts, “that the philosophy of contemporaneity lies, which our creative energies must follow.”²⁴¹

Under Malevich, Unovis strove to orientate their practices towards this new canon of future life. With few exceptions, the pupils at Unovis adopted Suprematism, the systematic and non-objective art style pioneered by Malevich, as their collective means of expression. [Ills. 3.5] The geometric impersonality of Suprematism evacuated all traces of personal style from the artwork, aligning the practitioner with the massed anonymity of industrial production. As T. J. Clark notes, the Suprematist collectivity of Unovis “was conceived as a kind of way-station on the road to a more comprehensive dissolution of the self.”²⁴² Furthermore, the limitless expansiveness of Suprematist space, its white uniformity and infinite extension beyond the arbitrary borders of each individual work, means that every work plots an equal and equivalent point within the greater, universalist space of Suprematism, and is hence related to other works via identity,

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 171, 183.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 183.

²⁴² T. J. Clark, “God is Not Cast Down,” in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 1999), 224-297 (226).

and not separation or difference.²⁴³ The space of one Suprematist work is simultaneously the space of each, and is thus a model for both art and life. All dissenting or heterodox space – the space of the old world – is to be subsumed within this new uniformity.

As with *On Emptiness* and indeed *Stratographic Structures*, *On New Systems in Art* describes a world in which psychic constitution is intimately connected to the organization of physical space. In each text, subjectivity is articulated in spatial terms, and exterior space likewise reflects the psychic processes of those who exist within it. Yet if both texts insist on the nexus between space and subjectivity in their respective periods, then they are diametrically opposed with regards to the mode, or content, of this relationship. The immanent, liminal, and collective space that Malevich and Unovis seek to call forth is universalist, destructive of all boundaries and borders, including, of course, those of the private psyche. In contrast, the dominion of emptiness which Kabakov describes is predicated on enclosure, division, and segregation. In two short essays, a representative of each of the Soviet avant-garde and the Moscow conceptualist circle describe phases of a single narrative that has mutated or changed almost beyond recognition. What reconfiguration of Soviet life, then, do these radically different versions of space and subjectivity represent, and how does one account for such changes?

²⁴³ Since unveiling Suprematism in 1915, Malevich had frequently depicted Suprematist forms extending out beyond the edge or frame of the painting, thus connoting that the work depicts only a small portion of a much greater extension of forms in space. El Lissitzky, Malevich's pupil at Unovis, also employs this technique in many of his *Proun* works, for example, *Proun 2C*, ca. 1920.

To answer this question, to frame the address of Moscow Conceptualism with regards to late Soviet space, we need to examine this narrative thread in more detail.

It seems all but superfluous to note that the new space which Malevich and Unovis call forth is fantastic and unrealizable, Utopian in the broadest sense of the term. Yet it is also salient that the difference between these transformative fantasies and the program of the Bolsheviks is merely one of hyperbole or degree, a distinction in tone or voice in which the avant-garde gambit, like the poetry of Mayakovsky, sharpens and heightens the revolutionary agenda, all the better to know it. The programmatic materialism which organized the Bolshevik *weltanschauung* was, as Crowley and Reid phrased it, “premised on the principle of environmental determinism” issuing from “the Marxist premise that matter determines consciousness.”²⁴⁴ Consequently, in both the connections between subject and environment which it predicated and the results it sought, it was Bolshevism that provided the template for the activities of Malevich and Unovis. If Unovis, whilst careful to justify its program in Bolshevik terms, also elevated that program to the realms of the fantastic, the ambitions of Bolshevism with regards to space remained, nonetheless, strident and maximalist.²⁴⁵ In the years after the Revolution, the new Soviet

²⁴⁴ David Crowley and Susan Reid, “Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc,” in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Berg: Oxford, 2002), 1-23 (11).

²⁴⁵ Malevich’s time at Unovis was marked by the attempts to place Suprematism within the (supposed) theoretical framework of Bolshevism, to re-imagine it as the natural or logical form of expression for the new collective world. Consequently, (and as with Inkhuk and Obmokhu in Moscow) Unovis existed as a politically active and agitational collective which sought to subsume all aesthetic activity within the sphere of the political. As Lazar Khidekel notes of the Unovis program, “in the equipping of the technico-electrical society, there is no place for the artist with his aesthetic rubbish, and every kind of creator will in future be required to participate in this strong and powerful culture, which is imminently coming into being

government sought not so much to rule *over* space as to co-opt and engineer it, refashioning it as something that itself ruled and commanded in the Revolution's name.

Initially, the Party's drive to restructure Soviet space was directed most forcefully at the domestic sphere. It was here, worried Leon Trotsky and others, that the most stubborn and pernicious pre-revolutionary habits endured and were transmitted to a younger generation. In 1923, Trotsky published a series of essays in *Pravda* arguing that *byt*, loosely translated as 'everyday life,'²⁴⁶ had to be confronted and radically altered, lest the revolution fail to achieve its transformative goals. As Christina Kiaer observes, in *byt*, "the Bolsheviks discover[ed] a backwardness that would sabotage revolutionary efforts to construct a new life if it was not investigated and combated."²⁴⁷ In the battle against *byt*, only new spaces could overcome old habits. It was, then, as a project to profoundly shape the psyche of the new Soviet citizen, to purge and eradicate the stultifying residues of the past, that the Bolsheviks sought to collectivize life.

A propaganda poster from 1924 entitled "Cooperation liberates women from the burdens of housekeeping" [Ills. 3.6] articulates the new designs for life. The poster organizes three domestic scenarios into dual illustrations of past and future. In the depictions of pre-revolutionary life, chaos and drudgery reign, emphasized in the loose and rapid quality of

in our Communist state." (Lazar Khidekel, "Unovis in the Studios," 29.) It is salient that Malevich's efforts to align Suprematism with politics were short-lived; by the mid nineteen-twenties he had returned to emphasizing the mystical qualities of Suprematism, and, in 1926, described Suprematism and Marxism as "mutually irrelevant." (Charlotte Douglas, "Biographical Outline," in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* (Moscow and Paris, 1991, 14.)

²⁴⁶ In her book *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Svetlana Boym describes *byt* as "the reign of stagnation and routine, of daily transience without transcendence, whether spiritual, artistic, or revolutionary." (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 30).

²⁴⁷ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 55.

the drawings. In contrast, the cooperative, collectivized future is defined by quiet orderliness, in which the actions of each mirror the actions of all, whether in dining, school lessons, or washing laundry.²⁴⁸ Positioned beneath these divisions and spanning the bottom of the poster is an illustration of the new cooperative buildings, the built space in which the transformation of the past into the future is facilitated. The message is unambiguous. It is by means of the revolutionary reordering of domestic space that past modes of life are erased and the new Soviet citizen emerges, collective and co-operational. In its first fifteen years of power, the Soviet government aggressively sought to engineer collectivity through the production of collective space. Stephen Kotkin, in *Magnetic Mountain*, his influential study of the construction of Magnitogorsk, describes the ideological underpinnings of communal housing in the city:

Living space permitted, and indeed came to signify, a reorientation of housing away from the family and toward the collective. “The family, the basic cell of... capitalist society... loses the economic basis of its existence in the conditions of socialist society,” the Magnitogorsk newspaper explained in 1930. “The very word ‘family’ loses its meaning.” Instead, each urban resident, standing in equal relationship to all others, was to occupy a fixed amount of space, determined by scientific norms for health and hygiene.²⁴⁹

In Magnitogorsk, as well as in numerous other towns, a new order of space manifested itself, fixed in steel and concrete. These dwellings, as well as the new boulevards,

²⁴⁸ In her analysis of “Cooperation liberates women from the burdens of housekeeping”, Christina Kiaer makes note of the gendered limits to the new life which the poster promotes, writing that “[t]he poster advertises a *novyi byt* that has liberated women, but women are still doing the laundry.” Certainly, the feminized domestic sphere was one of the major characteristics of pre-revolutionary life that was reproduced, the numerous avowals of the new position of women in Communism notwithstanding, within the “new everyday life” of Bolshevik power. *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, 64.

²⁴⁹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 158.

workers' clubs, cinemas, and squares, were to constitute the topography of the new Soviet psyche. Placed within these spaces, the Soviet citizen was fungible and equivalent, divested of the mental barriers of self-interest, property, and class that in turn sustained the enclosed, private self. If the *activity* of physical labor in a site like Magnitogorsk would transform and discipline the body, inculcating class-consciousness at a corporeal level, then the *experience* of organized, collective space would itself sweep the psyche clean.

The belief that historical progress was marked by a transition from the atomized to the collective, from the private and personal to the public and modular, was an article of faith common to both Party and avant-garde.²⁵⁰ The erasure of old boundaries itself became the common unit and measure of advancement, directing the collective gaze over the horizon of history to a future world reconfigured in synchronic uniformity. Yet this vision, so central to the Bolshevik program of the nineteen-twenties, was itself challenged and undermined in the following decade. The consolidation by Stalin of his power in the

²⁵⁰ In his book *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), Vladimir Paperny argues that the drive towards novelty, collectivity and uniformity which defines the early Soviet period represents the first of two alternating cultural paradigms, which reoccur throughout the history of Russia. The paradigm dominant through the nineteen-twenties, which he terms "Culture One" prizes horizontality, internationality and dispersal, and consequently seeks to dissolve the hierarchical and the spatially bounded. Culture One seeks to "mix everything together thoroughly and then spread it in a single layer upon the surface of the earth, so that no differences remain between city and country, East and West, rich and poor, physical and intellectual labor, work and leisure, art and life, men and women." (70.) In contrast, Culture Two, which becomes dominant in the Stalin period, prizes verticality, hierarchy, and centrality, enforcing these features by means of rigid spatial boundaries. Paperny's model is ingenious, detailed, exhaustively researched, and highly useful for describing the oppositions between early Soviet culture and the period of Stalinism. However, its claim to describe the deeper structures of Russian history is highly problematic, not least because, like Epstein's Russian postmodernism, it submerges historical change within the dual parameters of a binary structure. Whilst Paperny acknowledges this reductiveness, his model nonetheless remains mute to many of the complexities of Soviet space. For example, in arguing that the period from Stalin's death through the early nineteen-sixties represented the return of Culture One, he overlooks the increasing incoherence of the Soviet spatial order as differing and frequently contradictory imperatives piled up, one atop the other. My story of Soviet space then, as opposed to Paperny's, is *cumulative*, and not successive or alternating.

early nineteen-thirties expressed itself in a number of deep recalibrations to the relationship between Soviet citizen and Soviet space. In place of the collective and the uniform there emerged a new order, hierarchical and stratified, which sought to organize anew both social relations and built space.²⁵¹ In architecture, as Vladimir Paperny documents, Stalinism rejected the internationalist and non-hierarchical structures that predominated in the fifteen years following the Revolution in favor of a monumental verticality, in which “the gradually emerging hierarchy of people was grafted to the gradually emerging hierarchy of space.”²⁵² Under Stalin, the ordering of space became increasingly layered and centralized, centripetal to the city of Moscow and the figure of Stalin himself.²⁵³ From these sacralized center points, the significance of persons and places was organized in a radial matrix of proximity and distance.

For Paperny, the Stalinist skyscraper was an exemplar of the spatial order of Stalinism. The seven skyscrapers constructed in Moscow during this period all accentuated a pyramidal verticality that tapered towards an apex, thus inscribing upon themselves the

²⁵¹ In her *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (Yale University Press, 2003), Emma Widdis describes compellingly how the New centripetal space of Stalinism was articulated in film and presented to the Soviet public. In addition, the question of Stalinist subjectivity forms the subject of Jochen Hellbeck’s *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁵² Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, 78.

²⁵³ In his essay “The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult: Circles Around Stalin,” Jan Plamper argues that portraits of Stalin typically organized their space in a series of concentric circles with Stalin in the center. For Plamper, the paradigmatic example of this practice is Aleksandr Gerasimov’s monumental work *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, of 1938. Here, the figure of Stalin and the space of the Kremlin represent the absolute center points of the Stalinist hierarchical order, in which status is plotted in terms of spatial proximity: “Closest to Stalin (in the first concentric zone) is Voroshilov – a member, incidentally, of the coterie around Stalin known as his “inner circle.” The next concentric zones are occupied by the Kremlin tower, then the Kremlin wall, followed by the Moscow River and the masses along the embankment street right behind it. Finally we see the city sprawl of Moscow.” In *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington, 2003), 19-50 (28-29).

new, stratified social order that culminated in the pinnacle of Stalin.²⁵⁴ Consonant with this emerging patrimony, the traditional family structure was rehabilitated as the basic unit of Soviet life, existing as a microcosm of what Katerina Clark terms the “greater symbolic family of the nation.”²⁵⁵ Consequent to this, and in contradistinction to the open and collective psyche promulgated by the Party and avant-garde in the nineteen-twenties, Soviet subjectivity was now increasingly modeled on the single template of Stalin. Whilst lionized as State patriarch, whose thoughts and actions provided all necessary guidance for the filial masses of Soviet citizens, Stalin’s inner life nevertheless remained debarred and inaccessible to those same citizens, as simultaneously too complex and too elevated to be ever fully grasped or represented.²⁵⁶ As Katerina Clark notes elsewhere, this injunction also extends to the private spaces Stalin inhabits, in particular his Kremlin office, which was “too sacred to be actually represented.”²⁵⁷ As was the case with space, under Stalinism the private nature of the psyche, its hermetic enclosure and the significance of its contents, were increasingly stratified.

²⁵⁴ As Paperny notes, the architectural form of the Stalinist skyscraper, which suggests “multiple tall buildings placed one atop the other,” emphasizes, in its vertical divisions, “the incomparability of the [different] levels, where each succeeding level belongs to a different realm (the gulf between the levels increasing towards the top).” (90.) The division, then, between the ordinary citizen and the *vozhd*, or leader, which the buildings inscribes upon itself, is meant to be absolute.

²⁵⁵ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000), 115. Clark writes at length about the recasting of the family in the shape of the Stalinist state, a phenomenon diametrically opposed to the previous decade’s demands for the *dissolution* of the family as an embodiment and reflection of the new social order.

²⁵⁶ Katerina Clark, in detailing the highly publicized relationship between the paternalistic Stalin and the filial aviators and explorers of the nineteen-thirties, notes the fixity of the respective subject-positions: “The father-and-sons paradigm... provided a new pattern for determining status within the “family” in terms of a hierarchy of maturity and care. But, despite the many graduations of maturity, society’s sons were not to grow into fathers; rather, they were to be perfected as model sons. The burden of paternity was to fall on the very few.” (*The Soviet Novel*, 129.) Here, as elsewhere in Stalinism, the structural divisions constituting subjectivity were absolute and immutable.

²⁵⁷ Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3-18 (11).

The 1949 painting *Roses for Stalin*, [Ills. 3.7] by the Socialist Realist artist Boris Vladimirsky, provides an informative illustration of the reshaping of Soviet subjectivity under Stalin. In the work, a cluster of five children in pioneer uniforms gather around the leader as they present a gift of flowers. The awestruck and reverent expressions of the children provide an open transcription of their mental states, articulating a collective delight common to one and all. In contrast, Stalin remains expressionless, gazing out of the picture frame, his interior life private and inaccessible. These mental partitions then act as a counterpoint to the physical proximity of Stalin and the children, denoting a permanent iniquity in which the children serve as metonymical vehicles for an infantilized Soviet citizenry. As Katerina Clark observes in regards to the Socialist Realist novel, within the “Great Family” of Stalinism, even pilots and shock workers could not traverse the border that separated the *vozhd* from themselves. “The distance between [such heroes] and the father of fathers is so great that the acme of self-realization for them is to become his model sons.”²⁵⁸ It was, then, in terms of an increasingly stratified and absolute matrix of spaces and states of being that Stalinism organized itself. And it was through and within this matrix that the Soviet citizen was to navigate.

In the years following the death of Stalin in 1953, the dominant paradigms of space and subjectivity were again reconfigured. The years of the Thaw under Nikita Khrushchev were distinguished by attacks on the “personality cult” that flourished under Stalin, with Stalinist architecture, in particular, singled out for heavy criticism. As early as nineteen fifty-four, Khrushchev denounced the “extravagance” of contemporary building practices

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 128.

and demanded that architects “learn to count public money.”²⁵⁹ As Iurii Gerchuk notes, Khrushchev’s calls for a return to rationalist principles meant that “the ostentatious edifices which had only recently been awarded Stalin prizes were [now] denounced for “embellishment.”²⁶⁰ The revived emphasis on economical functionalism in architecture was accompanied by new warnings regarding the dangers of *byt* to the construction of socialist life. Evaluating the renewed problematization of the domestic realm during the Thaw period, Victor Buchli observes that “in rhetorical terms, the discourse on *byt* in 1959 was virtually indistinguishable from that of 1929.” A 1962 letter to *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, in response to an article about apartment design, concisely illustrates the congruence between the Bolshevik/avant-garde discourses regarding space and the subject and those of the Khrushchev era:

A separate, isolated apartment which opens into a stair landing encourages an individualistic, bourgeois attitude in families – “my house.” But soon it will be possible to walk out of an apartment straight into a pleasant throughway with flowers and paths leading to the house café, the library, the movie hall, children’s playrooms. This kind of housing will have an effect on the family spirit. The woman will no longer resist the idea of service installations and apartment house kitchens, saying “I can do it faster myself at home.” I know the time will come when a husband and wife moving into a new apartment will take along only a couple of suitcases of personal clothing, favorite books and toothbrushes.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Nikita Khrushchev, speech to the All-Union Conference of Constructors, 7th of December, 1954. In Thomas P. Whitney (ed.), *Khrushchev Speaks: Selected Speeches, Articles, and Press Conferences, 1949-1961* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 171.

²⁶⁰ Iurii Gerchuk, “The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64), in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, edited by Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 81-100 (82).

²⁶¹ *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, translated in *Soviet Review*, Issue Three, No. Eight (August, 1962), 32. Reproduced in *Socialist Spaces*, 11-12.

Here, as with Trotsky and Unovis, the collectivization of space is cast as a revolutionary act, an operational fulcrum through which a subdued, yet persistent past is re-forged to itself direct the future. For it is only within this transfigured spatial order that the new Soviet citizen can emerge, newly unfastened from the inertias and mental habits which the bourgeois home and the capitalist city preserve.

The attacks on the Stalinist legacy which characterize the Thaw period then result in the reinstatement of many of the collectivist imperatives of the nineteen-twenties. Yet this process is partial and frequently contradictory. As a consequence, the Thaw is significant less as a corrective return, after a period of deviationism, to the originary goals of the Revolution than as a period of increasing tension and dissonance surrounding the concept of socialist space.

Much of the tension of the post-Stalinist period in terms of spatial order centered upon questions of private space. The single family apartment, built and allotted under Stalin as inducement and reward for loyalty, remained a potent symbol of aspiration. Despite renewed attacks on the dangers of *byt*, these aspirations received official sanction with Khrushchev's promise, in 1961, that under Communism "each family will have its own apartment."²⁶² Consequently, the concept of private space was increasingly bifurcated, inscribed with negative and positive valences, at once the enduring repository of bourgeois values and the ideal habitat of the Communist citizen. Iurii Gerchuk describes

²⁶² Khrushchev quoted in Iurii Gerchuk, "The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64)," 88.

this tension in regard to Novye Cheremushki, an important Khrushchev-era housing project in Moscow based on single-family apartments:

Novye Cheremushki... signaled a certain crisis of Party ideology, albeit unclear at the time, concerning the subordination of the individual to the collective. Private life, enclosed in the family circle by the walls of the individual dwelling, was acknowledged to be a social value and one of the goals of social development. This contradicted the collectivist ideals that, far from having been officially repudiated, were, in fact, being reinvigorated in the Utopias of the Thaw period, including specifically architectural ones.²⁶³

The increasingly conflicted nature of the private sphere, which signaled the “crisis of party ideology” Gerchuk describes, had its converse in the destabilization of the public and collective. Since the Revolution, the collectivist renovation of space had been conceived and promoted as a conduit for the new Soviet person, an essential precondition to the emergence of a transformed, Communist consciousness. Liberated, via the “Communist restructuring of everyday life,” from the demands of a private and egocentric psyche, the Soviet citizen was primarily anti-bourgeois in cast. Yet the same Party that valorized and promoted collectivity as both ideal social form and inoculation against the past was now also committed to the large-scale production of private family dwellings, those egregious and frequently condemned shelters of property, class prejudice, and *byt*.²⁶⁴ The connections between space and subjectivity that the Bolsheviks

²⁶³ Iurii Gerchuk, “The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64),” 88.

²⁶⁴ It is indicative of the increasing incongruity surrounding the idea of socialist space that Khrushchev’s 1961 promise of “an apartment for each family” under Communism was made precisely when the renewed attacks on the domestic sphere reached their height. As Victor Buchli notes, in the Thaw period, “[t]he spectre of pre-revolutionary *petit-bourgeois* consciousness and its concomitant understandings of domesticity (believed by Leninist Modernists to obstruct the construction of socialism) was raised again to underline the threat of *petit-bourgeois* consciousness to the realization of full Communism in a late-

and avant-garde had so assiduously cultivated, and the Thaw reaffirmed, were here nonetheless lapsing into incoherence.

As the Khrushchev era draws to a close, the Soviet discourse on space becomes increasingly unable to represent itself within a cohesive or coherent framework. Caught between a chastised, yet alluring interiority and a Utopian, yet increasingly dysfunctional collectivity, space in the Soviet Union now furtively hedges its bets and muddles its grand claims. As forms of private space are fugitively rehabilitated, still unable to speak their name, within a social order that insists upon its public and collective identity, then the teleology that connects the socialist present to the Communist future becomes increasingly occluded and difficult to map. Wither now the path from the solidified, consolidated family unit to the new Soviet citizen? And how to direct and construct the emerging Communist consciousness from within the protecting walls of an antiquated and frequently denounced mode of living? As the tenure of Khrushchev in turn gave way to the *longue duree* of Brezhnev, these dissonances and incoherencies in the story of Soviet space became themselves more stubborn, more trenchant. As was the case with temporality at a similar juncture, the structuring narratives of space's role in the creation of a new society now hang within a broken frame. Increasingly unable to direct or describe reality, they are equally incapable of being rescinded.

socialist society. Within *seven years of Stalin's death* [my italics], a new cultural revolution was waged based on the principles of the first cultural revolution of the 1920s. ("Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against *Petit-Bourgeois* Consciousness in the Soviet Home," in *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1997), 161-176 (161)).

It is in terms of a social order that can no longer account for or describe its own spatial forms that the Moscow conceptualist discourse on space must be situated. If, as Katerina Clark suggests, under Stalinism the task of socialist realism was to “present the public with its landmarks and route maps,”²⁶⁵ to instruct in the navigation of Soviet space, then the enquiries of Moscow Conceptualism represent the historical punctum when these maps have become obsolete or self-contradictory, yet are nevertheless not replaced. The investigations performed by Moscow Conceptualism seek to chart the operations and effects of late Soviet space, to enquire of its migrations and mutations beyond the boundaries of official discourse. In doing so, the Moscow Conceptualist circle further underscores the specificity of its artistic mission, its situation within the discursive field of late socialism. This discursive field is unambiguously post-Utopian, a product of the failure of the grand Soviet claims to the command of History through temporality and subjectivity through space. The collapse of narrativity regarding Soviet space is itself reified in the built environment of late socialism, which juxtaposes Bolshevik modernism with high Stalinism, and communally-converted aristocratic townhouses with new, single-family apartments. The different imperatives that these spaces embody thus combine in a discord or static of mutually exclusive claims, within which the late Soviet subject must nevertheless attempt to orientate his or her self. This, then, is the home and habitat of the burrow men.

²⁶⁵ Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3-18 (8).

Having now established both the provenance and contemporary status of the discourse on space and subjectivity which Moscow Conceptualism positions itself within, it is timely to return to the concrete discussion of individual works with which the chapter began. As before, in these analyses I contend that Moscow Conceptualism articulates a shared and specific view regarding both the nature of late Soviet space and that space's influence upon those who inhabit it. Furthermore, the collective exploration of these categories by the Moscow conceptualist circle interjects upon and positions itself within a broader Soviet discourse concerning space and subjectivity. The movement thus seeks a historical assessment and a contemporary pronouncement on the status of the Utopia which these categories have sought to engineer. To discuss these enquiries in greater detail, let us here turn to the work of Erik Bulatov.

The painting *Horizon*, of 1972, [Ills. 3.8] is one of the canonical pieces of Moscow conceptualist art. Within the work, Bulatov frames in bright sunlight a group of young Soviet citizens as they walk away from the viewer and onto an open beach. In common with other paintings by Bulatov from this period, the depicted scene is taken from an image on a picture postcard. *Horizon* consequently recreates in paint an official mode and register of Soviet self-presentation.²⁶⁶ Yet in counterpoint to the ideals of camaraderie, relaxation and freedom which the image organizes itself to connote, Bulatov erects a barrier, a mechanism of spatial closure, in the form of a red strip that stretches across the

²⁶⁶ As Amei Wallach notes, Bulatov came across the postcard that serves as the basis for *Horizon* in 1971. (*Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, 53.) Bulatov continued to use postcards or magazine illustrations as the basis for many of his landscapes through the 1970s, including *Danger!* of 1972, and *Two Landscapes on a Red Banner*, of 1972-1974.

horizon. The strip, modeled on a ribbon from a military medal, yet also purposefully invoking the Suprematism of Malevich, thus annexes the vanishing point of the original image, that space of maximum pictorial distance towards which the members of the group direct their gaze.²⁶⁷ As the critic Bertrand Lorken concisely notes, “the ribbon, lying across the horizon, is out of place in this space.”²⁶⁸ To further emphasize its incongruence, the flat band of red which cancels the blue expanse of sky and ocean is drawn forward by its coloring, and presses itself against the picture plane.²⁶⁹

As numerous commentators have noted, Bulatov’s closure of space in *Horizon* and other works engenders an atmosphere of repression and spatial confinement. For the Russian critic Andrei Erofeev, *Horizon*, like other paintings by Bulatov from this period, “forbids movement, stops, erects visual barriers, compels a sharp experience of existence in some sort of “net” (which is a favorite motif of Bulatov), that is, it acts in a highly repressive manner.”²⁷⁰ It is salient here to note that the characteristics Erofeev catalogues would equally apply to *Stratographic Structures* and the many similar relief sculptures by Makarevich, as well as to the actions of emptiness that Kabakov describes in *On Emptiness*. In each of these works, a logic of repressive alienation is formulated in terms of enclosed and partitioned space. This thematic symmetry is in itself further evidence of

²⁶⁷ In *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, Boris Groys notes that *Horizon* quite consciously mines the avant-garde associations with Suprematism which the medal ribbon invokes: “The line of the horizon, however, cannot be seen because it is covered by a flat Suprematist form that seems to be superimposed on this conventional picture, cutting horizontally across its entire breadth. Upon closer examination, this turns out to be the ribbon of the Order of Lenin.” (81-82.)

²⁶⁸ Bertrand Lorken, “Erik Bulatov. Genealogia tvorchestva,” in *Erik Bulatov* (Moscow: WAM, 2006) 15-30 (20).

²⁶⁹ Bulatov’s use of color contrasts to heighten the tension between flatness and depth is not accidental, and is frequently used as a vehicle to articulate themes of freedom and confinement. As Bertrand Lorken observes, Bulatov “materializes two spaces- the flatness of the painting and the spatial depth of representation... Colliding them, the artist touches on the political situation, the problem of freedom, which acquires a key meaning in these [1970s] works.” “Erik Bulatov. Genealogia tvorchestva,” 20.

²⁷⁰ Andrei Erofeev, “Erik Bulatov kak razrushitel’,” in *Erik Bulatov*, 9-14 (11).

the commonality of Moscow conceptualist enquiries with regards to late Soviet space. Yet the devices Bulatov employs to “deprive the work of air,” as Erofeev phrases it,²⁷¹ have further valence than the simple cataloguing of restriction and confinement as features of late Soviet life. In its address to the contemporary moment, *Horizon* concurrently organizes itself to speak to the discursive history of space within the Soviet Union.

As with *Krasikov Street*, *Horizon* revels in its stylistic poverty. The work offers its thinly-spread paint and blurred outlines to the viewer in full awareness of their meager recompense, their slight purchase on the scene they represent. This studied and self-conscious ordinariness, almost mediocrity, is a recurrent Moscow conceptualist device, which Kabakov, especially, utilizes in works like the *Shower Series*. In *Horizon*, however, the technique is employed to evacuate all aesthetic effects from the represented scene. Rather than a mere reproduction, Bulatov constructs *Horizon* as an artistic impoverishment of an image originally designed to flatter and seduce. The collective and optimistic claims regarding life in the Soviet Union that the official image presents are thus not only interrupted by the red ribbon, but also hollowed out from within via a technique which erodes the gloss and sheen of directed desire to reveal its undergirded cliché and artifice. Like *Krasikov Street* in terms of its irregularities of scale and space, Bulatov presents in *Horizon* an image at odds with itself. Within the work, a celebratory and carefree content is etherized and brought low by a parsimonious, self-knowingly threadbare technique.

²⁷¹ Andrei Erofeev, “Erik Bulatov kak razrushitel’,” 12.

Horizon, then, cultivates an internal dissonance. Even if one temporarily brackets the horizontal strip of red from discussion, the painting employs its formal tools to destabilize and undermine the very image that it offers to the viewer. In formalist terms, the work bares the devices of the scene it mines, discerning the banality and exhaustion which undergird an official lexicon of beauty and freedom. In *Horizon*, Bulatov thus (re)presents an innocuous piece of domestic propaganda as a broken route map, a crumbling and compromised ideological world that can no longer muster belief in its premises, and is instead reduced to offering up its plastic cheapness and conventionality. As Ilya Kabakov has observed, *Horizon* depicts a world written entirely in the language of ideology, yet the painting also – crucially – works to present this language as being desiccated and hollow, meager and manifestly inadequate.²⁷² The simultaneous persistence and obsolescence of the organizing lexicons of Soviet life are, then, framed in the calculated painterly poverty of *Horizon*. They are subsequently reiterated in the work's treatment of space.

It is salient that the everyday image which Bulatov incorporates as the basis of *Horizon* offers up its seductions to the viewer in the conventional languages of Soviet space. The citizens are tightly bunched and move together, becoming a small collective, whilst their motion towards the broad expanse of ocean is at once a figurative motion towards the future. The space they move within is liminal and unitary, devoid of borders or barriers,

²⁷² Kabakov writes of *Horizon* that “the genuine and tormenting discovery that Bulatov made consists in the fact that there really is no way to separate these spheres [the public and the private] and that one must not hide from the all-penetrating, all-over radiation of this ideological language, blowing around our homes and studios, saturating all our space, penetrating everywhere, and most importantly, existing inside ourselves.” (*Zapiski*, 82.) The similarity here with Kabakov's vision of the all-pervasive nature of emptiness in *On Emptiness* is marked.

and the path they tread upon extends back to the picture plane, thus inviting the spectator's participation. Here, then, ossified and eroded by official use, is that collective, universalist, and future-orientated space that traces its history backwards, to the avant-garde and early Bolsheviks. And it is this space that Bulatov's red ribbon interjects itself upon and disrupts. *Horizon* announces the foreclosure of a mode of narrativity, plotted in the co-ordinates of three-dimensional space, by means of a flat plane, written in two dimensions.

In both painterly technique and spatial organization, *Horizon* documents a broken, yet intractable, ideological apparatus. The work thus positions itself over the horizon of Utopia, from where it looks back at the rusting ideologies that structure Soviet life. Because it cannot imagine a world divested of the ideological, *Horizon* turns this language against itself, highlighting its cliché and corrosion. And because the postcard Bulatov constructs his painting from presents an ideal subjectivity within an idealized space - the former collective, the latter extensive and unbounded - *Horizon* registers the obsolescence of this narrative mode by simply cancelling its space. Therefore, while the discordant and conflicted spatial orders the work stitches together have their analogies in the broken spatial narratives of late socialism, it is the closure and restriction effected by the horizontal band of red which strikes the dominant tone. In foreclosing and partitioning the open, unitary space of collectivist universalism, *Horizon* then aligns itself with *Stratographic Structures*. Airless and repressive, both works chart a very contemporary unease.

The conflicting spatial orders that *Horizon* musters, each against the other, are not unique to the work, but rather constitute a pair of oppositional leitmotifs, to which Bulatov returns repeatedly throughout the next decade. In *Skier*, [Ills. 3.9] completed over the three years from 1971 to 1974, a red grid, similar to the wooden framework Makarevich was later to use to divide the interior space of works like *Stratographic Structures* and *Changes*, is superimposed upon an image of a ski trail in a forest. Like *Horizon*, the image Bulatov here selects emphasizes spatial depth, with the trail receding away from the viewer. It is this space that the grid interjects upon, rejecting its contiguity and three-dimensionality in favor of a compartmentalized surface which separates the viewer's space from that of the image. In *Skier*, as with *Horizon*, an older mode of representation is subordinated to the segregating actions of a newly dominant spatial order.²⁷³

Like many of Bulatov's works from this period, *Horizon* and *Skier* organize a discomfiting reconfiguration of an officially calibrated mode of representation. Both paintings take as their basis images that utilize spatial depth to invoke freedom and possibility, and substitute instead sensations of apprehension and unease, expressed via spatial closure. In utilizing space as a tool with which to describe states of being, Bulatov, in common with much Moscow conceptualist art, situates his work within a broader discourse regarding Soviet space and subjectivity. Paintings like *Horizon*, however, do not simply seek inclusion within this discourse. More specifically, they seek to historicize

²⁷³ Another work by Bulatov which invokes or registers the obsolescence of the official ideologies of Soviet space is *Two Landscapes On A Red Banner*, of 1972-1974. As the title suggests, in this work two postcard-landscapes, one of bathers in a lake, the other of a road in a forest, are imposed upon a background of a red flag. The images, which both collate freedom and recreation with spatial depth, are thus circumscribed in space by the flag, reduced to becoming themselves a bounded and segregated space. As with *Horizon*, Bulatov works to reveal the ideological basis to the putative realism through which the images offer their content to the viewer.

it, to articulate and embody a specific and concrete moment within an evolving history of these categories. This moment, which we have come to term late socialism, is that of the increasing incoherence and obsolescence of the Utopian promises that space in the Soviet Union was invested with. The disruption, segregation, and atomization of space which Moscow Conceptualism marks as a fundamental feature of contemporary Soviet life appears in *Horizon* as the converse, but also the consequence, of a collectivity that is now broken.

The works which this chapter has, thus far, addressed, postulate a common vision concerning the nature of contemporary Soviet space and the pressures this spatial order exerts on those who inhabit it. This alone is evidence of a unifying purpose to these separate enquiries. In addition, works like *Stratographic Structures* and *Horizon* add an historical framework to their analysis of space, enquiring of the connections between the confining and segregating nature of contemporary life and the rusting modes of collectivity which still structure official discourse. As I contend, it is as a means of raising such questions, of tracing the genealogies of the present spatial order, that Moscow Conceptualism so frequently situates its enquires into contemporary space and subjectivity amidst the ruins of these older spatial modes. And if the avant-garde and the propaganda poster represent two sites in which the current status of the grand projects of a collective order can be dispassionately analyzed, then the dystopian topographies of the communal apartment represent another.

The communal apartment, or *kommunalka*, an urban dwelling in which individuals or families occupied the rooms of an apartment whilst sharing kitchen and bathroom areas, is a prototypically Soviet space. As Ilya Kabakov notes in his description of communal apartments, the *kommunalka* traces its origins to the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution:

In our big cities, especially in Moscow and Leningrad immediately after the 1917 revolution, “consolidation” and “settling” were started. In the big luxury apartments they began to house the basement dwellers, people of another class who had come from other cities. There were not enough homes, and the new waves of people and the existing residents moved into the homes of the departing “bourgeoisie” and the “royal protégés” by special “order”, handed out by the new organ of proletarian power.²⁷⁴

The space of the *kommunalka* is thus an admixture of the syncretic and Utopian, a pre-revolutionary and bourgeois spatial order, rearranged of necessity, yet framed in ideological terms. For Svetlana Boym, “[t]he communal apartment was not merely an outcome of the post-revolution housing crisis, but also of a revolutionary experiment in living, an attempt to practice utopian ideologies and destroy bourgeois banality.”²⁷⁵ The *kommunalka* is thus a microcosm and a laboratory of the Soviet project to enlist space in the production of new, socialist citizens. It is, however, also an impure laboratory, one

²⁷⁴ Ilya Kabakov, “What is a Communal Apartment?”, in *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Characters* (New York: ICA, 1989), 50-52 (50).

²⁷⁵ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, 124. Boym continues: “Here is a Soviet common place par excellence, which reveals all of the paradoxes of the common place and of Soviet communality. The archeology of the communal apartment reveals what happens when utopian designs are put into practice, inhabited, and placed into history – individual and collective.” The archeology Boym here describes – that of discerning or uncovering the ways in which ideological forms are reconfigured by their own lived histories, their mutations and alterations beyond the boundaries of their own discourses – approximates the process of cognitive mapping which this dissertation attributes to Moscow Conceptualism.

erected upon the site of a former privacy, and thus always already infected with its opposite order.²⁷⁶ In this space, the ideologies of Utopian collectivity are cohabitant with both their prior antitheses and their own lived experience. As a result, the *kommunalka* is an unusually fragile ideological form, within which one could expect any fracturing of the collectivist modes of space and subjectivity to register more quickly and resonate more sharply. It is therefore no surprise that this petri-dish of the socialist project was of great interest to the Moscow conceptualist circle and forms, in particular, a recurrent subject and leitmotif within the works of Ilya Kabakov.

In conversation with the art critic Viktor Tupitsyn, Kabakov described the communal apartment as “my central subject.”²⁷⁷ Yet the *kommunalka* is only occasionally the direct topic of Kabakov’s art. Far more frequently, it forms a contextual background, an implied presence whose operational logic permeates the work and organizes its address. As I argue below, many of Kabakov’s most characteristic devices and themes self-consciously appropriate the spatial and social modes of the *Kommunalka*, all the while probing and evaluating their capacity to articulate a more general condition. As a consequence, the *kommunalka* becomes for Kabakov, as Aimei Wallach observes, a type of “grand

²⁷⁶ In his essay “Soviet Exurbia: Dachas in Postwar Russia,” Stephen Lovell writes of the internal contradictions that structured the *kommunalka*, describing it as “a social microcosm where basic human ties have been severed, where trust between people has broken down, where the household has been destroyed and collectively reformed, and where surveillance of the individual by the collective is consequently greatly facilitated.” In *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, 105-122 (119).

²⁷⁷ Viktor Tupitsyn, “From the Communal Kitchen: A Conversation with Ilya Kabakov,” in *Art in America* (October 1991), 48. In describing the centrality of the *kommunalka* to his work, Kabakov also ascribes to it a privileged position with regards to late Soviet life. He continues: “The *kommunalka* presents a certain collective image, in which all of the ill-assortedness and multi-leveledness of our reality is concentrated and vividly revealed.”

metaphor²⁷⁸ for contemporary Soviet life, a paradigmatic or archetypal form whose peculiar logic pervades the entire social field.²⁷⁹

In his art and in particular, his albums, Kabakov privileges the border or boundary line.

As Matthew Jackson notes of the artist's most significant album series:

Kabakov's concern for edges, frames, and framing defines the visual character of *Ten Characters*... Borders assign space, allowing it to be compared and contrasted with other marked-off spaces.²⁸⁰

The ruled black lines which partition the interior spaces of *Ten Characters* reoccur throughout Kabakov's mature art. In assigning and dividing pictorial space into segments, these linear scaffolds recreate the topography of segregation which Kabakov describes at length in *On Emptiness*. Here, the logic that governs the "principally insular character of the settlement of emptiness"²⁸¹ finds its visual articulation. The lines that constitute a central motif for Kabakov are thus more than merely formal tools. Rather, they also incorporate what Jackson terms a "semantic thrust."²⁸² In common with other

²⁷⁸ Aimei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 74.

²⁷⁹ In an essay discussing Kabakov, Robert Storr offers a series of analogies for Kabakov's work that are purposefully redolent of the *kommunalka*. Storr writes: "as a general rule, the quiet of IK's 'world apart' is that of abandonment, of an emptiness previously filled by the noises of cooking, of quarrelling, of shuffling and murmuring, of someone singing to themselves while working, of someone singing to themselves in the toilet, of a radio on in another room down the hall, or a loudspeaker squawking outside the window on the street below, of pages gently turning in the corner of a room where a book is being read, of a book being snapped shut, of a pen scratching, of the switching on or off of a lamp, of dust settling after the inhabitants of these spaces have departed..." "A Table of Content," in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 1957-2008, Catalogue Raisonné* (Wiesbaden: Kerber, 2009), 21-27 (21).

²⁸⁰ Matthew Jackson, *Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, 231.

²⁸¹ Ilya Kabakov, "On Emptiness," 56.

²⁸² Matthew Jackson, *Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, 231. Jackson writes: "the edges of Kabakov's albums perform not only a spatializing

Moscow conceptualist works discussed in this chapter, Kabakov's ruled lines segregate space in order to articulate a contemporary condition of alienation and isolation.

In addition, the divisions engineered by this gridlock of lines are frequently accentuated through their superimposition upon a background of monochromatic white, which purposefully invokes the unbounded and infinite extension of Suprematist space.²⁸³ In the numerous works by Kabakov which employ this oppositional tension as a formal device, the viewer again confronts the by-now-familiar motif of the annexation of an older, universalist mode of space by a new machinery of spatial division. Consequently, the grid of lines and borders which Kabakov erects in these works here again carries a thematic charge, overseeing a cancellation of Suprematist precepts to in turn reveal a newly emergent paradigm of the border and the boundary.

The lines which Kabakov uses to divide and partition space within his works thus speak of the present, of contemporaneity. They articulate what the Moscow conceptualist circle discerns as one of the most characteristic forms of contemporary Soviet society, that being its isolating and segregational nature. However, this cartography of spatial division which repeatedly structures Kabakov's artistic address does more than to simply transcribe to art the closeted spirit of the age. Rather, they adopt the register and insinuate

function, they carry a semantic thrust as well: each line serves as an index of order and complexity. From the neat, enframing grids in his drawings to the decaying walls in his later installations, Kabakov's borders not only separate insides and outsides; they are elemental indices of culture and technology at work."

²⁸³ There are numerous works by Kabakov in differing media that juxtapose a uniformly white background with a matrix of lines dividing that space. To select just two examples of this practice, one could take the 1967 drawing *In a Strict Order*, in which a square grid partitions various drawings from blank spaces; and the 1971-72 painting *Where Are They?*, [Ills. 3.10] in which five vertical lines segregate the work's text from other equally spaced divisions of white ground.

the logic of what Kabakov considers the exemplary social form of late socialism. This form is, of course, the *kommunalka*.

There is an architectonic quality to the lineal apportioning of space within Kabakov's works. This becomes clear when one compares the artist's albums and paintings with his later installations, such as *Ten Characters* of 1988, which transfer the divisions and partitions these lines preside over into the real space of a built environment. The linear boundaries of *Ten Characters* are walls, corridors and doors, and this synchronicity between graphic line and built space also extends to the landscape of burrows Kabakov describes in *On Emptiness*. The burrow, we recall, constitutes "the most important cell, the basic atom perhaps in the atomistic construction of the island."²⁸⁴ Framed by the burrows and installations, which situate the self-same logic of the border within a space meant to be inhabited, the ruled grids of Kabakov's painterly and graphic art resemble little so much as architectural plans. The areas they divide thus carry residues and hints of the built environment, of a specific space that is both enclosed and segregational yet must nevertheless be navigated through.

If the linear scaffolds which Kabakov so frequently employs appear to intimate or gesture towards physical plans of space, to articulate a contemporary logic most strikingly reified in the living arrangements of Soviet citizens, then these connections are also at times drawn in a concrete and explicit manner. In the painting *Taking Out the Garbage Can*, of 1980, [Ills. 3.11] Kabakov's grid organizes a timetable for one of the many routines of communal apartment life. The dwelling which forms the subject of the painting is listed

²⁸⁴ Ilya Kabakov, *On Emptiness*, 57.

with bureaucratic precision within the work as House 24, Entrance 6, V. Bardin Street, Zhek 8, of the Baumanskii Region. That it is a *kommunalka* is indicated by the jumble of unrelated residents' names which comprise the schedule for garbage disposal. In House 24, all tenants, from G. S. Lapin to M. V. Sizova to M. S. Zusman, are periodically assigned responsibility for the communal cleanliness via the petty and unpleasant ritual of carrying out the household rubbish. A co-operative choreography of drudgery, *Taking Out the Garbage Can* once again invokes the degraded and dystopian collectivity that Moscow Conceptualism so frequently discerns in contemporary Soviet life. And once again, Kabakov divides the work's space within a linear matrix that acts as a converse and correlative to the decaying Utopia the artist depicts. This structuring grid of lines synchronize their formal order with the work's contents, arranging a rectilinear pattern that invokes a plan of rooms and corridors, respective areas of privacy and compromise.

The inhabited space the work describes is thus one in which an enforced collectivity exists alongside a concurrent division and segregation of space, a double logic that is reinforced by the linear frame, which both groups tenants together and partitions them apart. In its clutter of names and boundaries, *Taking Out the Garbage Can* transcribes the simultaneous crush and compartmentalization of the *kommunalka*, offering a segmented yet suffocatingly crowded pictorial space to the viewer as an experience or intimation of communal apartment life. Viewing the work, one is meant to sense the pressures and tensions that this space produces.

A recurrent and central tool in Kabakov's explorations of late Soviet space, the lines that structure *Taking Out the Garbage Can* are purposeful and thematic, and not a merely supplementary formal device. This linear scaffolding incorporates and transmits the spatial logic of the communal apartment that forms the subject of the work. And, in addition, it offers that logic up to the senses, aligning itself with the other works discussed in this chapter by seeking to articulate a phenomenological or bodily experience of contemporary space, to notate that space's effects on the subject. The right-angled grid or scaffold of *Taking Out the Garbage Can*, which presses names into tight compartments, closely resembles the enclosing frames of *Stratographic Structures* precisely because it looks to transmit an analogous sensation. Yet whereas Makarevich presents *Stratographic Structures* as an existential portrait of the late socialist subject, of that subject's isolated and atomized condition, Kabakov muses upon the environments and structures within which this condition is manifest. For Kabakov, the *kommunalka* is a laboratory and proving ground for the investigation of late Soviet life, an incubator of the unique forms that this dusty and uncanny civilization haphazardly creates. As a consequence, the *kommunalka* inflects the timbre and tonality of much of Kabakov's work. At times a direct subject, it more frequently constitutes an implied or insinuated presence, lingering in the background like an unspoken tension between residents or a jostle of voices down the corridor. Such is the case with the plethora of lines Kabakov repeatedly employs to divide, and partition the interior spaces of his works. More tool than technique, these borders reify within themselves what their author discerns as the organizational logic of contemporary Soviet life.

The emphasis that Kabakov places on the border and the boundary in turn configures space as a central subject of his art. This art investigates and insists upon the causal connections between space and social forms, and identifies the *kommunalka* as synecdoche and archetype of the current socio-spatial order. For Kabakov, the *kommunalka* is a dystopian machine which produces interiority and alienation from collectivist and public materials. It is thus deeply implicated in the formation of the atomized and isolated citizens whom he describes in *On Emptiness*, and whom to him exemplify the contemporary Soviet condition. It is as an acknowledgment of the centrality of Soviet space to subject formation that Kabakov's art-making changes in the early nineteen-eighties, as Kabakov becomes increasingly focused upon the creation of large installations in real space. These works, which Kabakov terms "total installations,"²⁸⁵ frame Soviet life in spatial terms by incorporating the space they occupy into themselves as a direct material. This chapter concludes with an examination of Kabakov's early installations, centering upon the 1985 work *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* and the subsequent series *Ten Characters*, first installed in the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, in 1988. The total installation, I argue, enabled Kabakov to articulate in more comprehensive terms the nature of the relationship between space and late Soviet subjectivity. It is to this we now turn.

²⁸⁵ Ilya Kabakov, *On The Total Installation*, collected lectures (Bonn: VG Bild-Kunst, 1995), 244-245.

In the winter of 1993-94, Kabakov, who had moved to the West in 1988, discussed his installation art in a series of lectures at the Stadelschule in Frankfurt.²⁸⁶ Kabakov’s views were retrospective and informed by his experiences in Western Europe and America. Yet, as with his time in Prague in 1981, this external perspective upon his homeland had only deepened his conviction of its ontological separation from the West. And as in *On Emptiness*, Kabakov here again identifies space as the primary quality in which this distinction is manifest:

In our country, each place has its own clearly defined face, its own image, and all of them are equally aggressive... And the very same objects which in the West live independently: tables, chairs, etc., in our country become merely accessories of the general atmosphere, are engulfed by it, they play a role assigned by this atmosphere, serving merely as insignificant parts of a mysterious, but powerful and pervasive “whole.”²⁸⁷

For the artist-turned-public-speaker, within the Soviet Union it is space that is dominant, and it is space that projects its qualities upon objects, as well as upon those who inhabit its borders. As a consequence, any art that seeks to describe Soviet life must also articulate the role of space in structuring that life. These are the terms in which Kabakov narrates his transition to installation art:

All that I have said above [regarding the unique properties of Soviet space] has prompted me towards an obligatory inclusion of the surrounding space into the installation, which in turn led to that type of installation I call “total.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ The lectures are published under the title *On The Total Installation*. (Bonn: VG Bild-Kunst, 1995.)

²⁸⁷ Ilya Kabakov, *On The Total Installation*, 244.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 244-245.

The total installation thus differs from Western installation art, which – in keeping with the Western experience of space – centers upon the presentation of objects as independent entities. Orientated towards a specific regime of space which it also seeks to reproduce within itself, the total installation is presented by Kabakov in these lectures as a medium uniquely able to articulate the Soviet experience.

Whilst from the vantage point of post-Soviet life, what Kabakov had come to term the total installation could be situated in contradistinction to the art of the West, as a singular and innovative Soviet form, at the time Kabakov's initial experiments with the medium represented less a break with his past practices than a continuous evolution and refinement of them. The work that is generally regarded as his first installation, *The Ant*, of 1983, consists of six pages of text displayed on a wall, and thus transfers the album format into a three-dimensional space.²⁸⁹ Likewise, Kabakov's transition to installation art during the nineteen-eighties signifies no thematic shift, but rather stages a sharpening and intensification of the artist's core concerns, with the *kommunalka* emerging as a still more explicit centerpiece and symbol of Soviet existence. Both the continuities with past work and the new possibilities offered by the installation's appropriation of real space are readily apparent in one of Kabakov's most famous works, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, of 1985.

²⁸⁹ In his discussions with Kabakov, published under the heading "commentary" in Kabakov's *Catalogue Raisonné*, Joseph Bakshtein makes note of the spatial evolution which *The Ant* represents. Bakshtein comments: "This, as far as I can remember, was your very first experiment with installation. Before this there were also compositions that combined objects and commentaries about them (such as the painting *Where are they?*, albums). But these were compositions in which the commentaries and texts were arranged on one and the same pictorial plane as the drawings, or successively, one after the other as in the albums." *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné* (Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993). (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 53.

*The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*²⁹⁰ [Ills. 3.12] represents the inaugural episode or idea of what would in 1988 become the *Ten Characters* installation. As such, it occupies what Joseph Bakshtein terms a “special place” in Kabakov’s oeuvre, being “central for understanding the installation *Ten Characters*.”²⁹¹ In *The Man Who Flew into Space*, Kabakov transfers the narrative strategies he employed in his *Ten Characters* album cycle to a new spatial medium. In accordance with the albums which together comprise *Ten Characters*, *The Man Who Flew into Space* centers upon the uncommon antics of a single protagonist, whose story is narrated to the viewer via a descriptive text and the subsequent recollections of several intermediary characters. However, unlike the preceding albums, which remained purposefully vague about the living arrangements of their respective protagonists, *The Man Who Flew into Space* is explicitly situated within a *kommunalka*. This shift is not incidental. Rather, the nexus between Soviet space and subjectivity which the *kommunalka* mediates here becomes Kabakov’s principle subject.

The Man Who Flew into Space consists of a boarded-up room that presents a post-facto scenario. The texts attached to the installation inform the viewer that the occupant of the room has disappeared, upwards, perhaps into space, propelled by the home-made catapult affixed to the room’s walls. As the commentaries of other residents of the *kommunalka* make clear, the protagonist’s project had remained a closely guarded secret, constructed and executed within the privacy of his own room. This, the commentary emphasizes, corresponded with the secretive and hermetic personality of the protagonist, who kept scrupulously apart from the other members of the *kommunalka*. The text of the work

²⁹⁰ Henceforth abbreviated to *The Man Who Flew into Space*.

²⁹¹ Ilya Kabakov: *Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonne*, 99.

begins by describing the disappeared as “[t]he lonely inhabitant of this room.”²⁹²

Subsequently, the resident Nikolaev notes that:

I didn’t know him well... He arrived two years ago, having been recruited for a construction job. He was given a room in our communal apartment. Where he worked, I don’t know. I was his neighbor. His room was to the right of mine. He never visited me, and he let others into his room reluctantly. I don’t know if he has anyone, he always lived alone.²⁹³

This emphasis upon the furtive seclusion of the vanished tenant, who consequently constitutes an isolated member of a common body, attests to the thematic coherence of both Kabakov’s oeuvre and Moscow conceptualist enquiry. Here again is that causal chain between a decaying mode of collectivity and an emergent segregation or atomization of life that so interests the Moscow conceptualist circle.

In making a subject of the conflict between public and private space in the *kommunalka*, Kabakov also aligns the physical space of his installation with the psyche of his protagonist. Living space is here cast as a figure for mental space and vice-versa, an interrelationship that Amei Wallach also touches upon when she observes that in the *kommunalka*, “imagination was strictly for the seclusion of your own room.”²⁹⁴ The walls of the man who flew into space’s living quarters thus reproduce the division of his physical and mental worlds. Like a skull, these walls partition and protect a rich and

²⁹² Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space From His Apartment*, text reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné*, 96.

²⁹³ Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space From His Apartment*, text reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné*, 98. Nikolaev then adds that the protagonist “almost never talked to anyone, and almost never used the kitchen [the communal space par excellence], even though his door was just opposite it”.

²⁹⁴ Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, 74.

private interiority, a space of dream and fantasy, from the inquisitive attentions of neighbors and interlocutors. In empty room and absented protagonist alike, a creative and energetic internal space is sheltered and concealed via a dourly inexpressive external façade.²⁹⁵ [Ills.3.13]

Psychologically isomorphic to his living space, the secretive protagonist of the work thus incorporates within himself the very same divisions between exterior and interior, public and private, that the avant-garde and the Bolsheviks sought to erase via collectivity. The man who flew into space's dualistic existence, delineated by the borders of his room, organizes itself around a mental topography of sheltering and threatening zones that is diametrically opposed to the public and collectivist attitudes that the Soviet subject was supposed to infer and then internalize under the influence of communal space. In the partitioned privacy of its protagonist, *The Man Who Flew into Space* then documents the return or reemergence of a repressed mode of subjectivity associated with the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie. Yet Kabakov is most careful to situate this reemergence historically, as an unexpected and unmapped consequence of the collective project. The defensive interiority of the protagonist of *The Man Who Flew into Space* is consequently not an anachronistic oddity or dusty remainder from earlier times. Rather than a high-

²⁹⁵ In this regard, *The Man Who Flew into Space* plumbs or reinstates a modernist and bourgeois division between exterior and interior that has many precedents in architecture, perhaps most notably in the work of Adolf Loos. Hal Foster's evaluation of this foundational division in Loos' work is notable for its applicability to Kabakov's installation, and indicates that both Loos and Kabakov describe a curiously similar subject via their spatial constructions. Foster writes: "For Loos, clothing and cladding appear primordially connected as forms of protection, and he understands this protection as both physical shelter and psychological mask. Again, unlike subsequent modernists who expect the exterior somehow to express the interior, Loos insists on a division between outside and inside, especially in domestic architecture (a prime example is his famous Steiner House of 1910 in Vienna). The premium on protection might help to explain why this division is so important to him, for it allows the exterior to mask, and so to protect, the interior – of the house, of the family, but also of the self, of "interiority" as such. "The house can be silent on the outside," Loos writes, "all its riches are manifest in the interior." "A Proper Subject," in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 54-107 (72).

bourgeois relic, the man who flew into space is identifiably Soviet in cast. For in the privacy of his room and his mind, the grand dreams of Soviet power reemerge, transformed.

As the installation text prepared by Kabakov informs the viewer, the inhabitant of the displayed room “was obsessed by the dream of a lonely flight into space.”²⁹⁶ “In all probability,” the text continues, “he realized this dream of his, his ‘grand project.’”²⁹⁷ The associations which this final coupling mines are not incidental. The ‘grand project’ of the man who flew into space is steeped in the transformative, cosmic and universal, and thus both appropriates and mimics the original ‘grand project’ of the Bolsheviks and avant-garde. Consider how, in a commentary on the installation, describes the cosmos:

There is complete freedom of migration [in the cosmos]. No one and nothing can stand in your way, not people, nor buildings, nor trees. On Earth there are people divided by governments, cities, and apartments, but the cosmos is trans-national.²⁹⁸

The celestial realm that the protagonist (presumably) propels himself into is unitary and uniform, divested of the borders and boundaries that define life on earth. As a consequence, his fantastical journey mimes the teleology of the Revolution and avant-garde, propelling itself from the segregated stagnation of the old world to the boundless universalism of the new. This trajectory recalls Malevich’s claim, in *On New Systems in Art*, that:

²⁹⁶ Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space From His Apartment*, text reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné*, 96.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ilya Kabakov, commentary on *The Man Who Flew into Space From His Apartment*, in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné*, 101.

Human reason is divided into many cages, and in each cage lives a nationality, which constructs their own fenced, kitchen-garden kingdom... Yet, despite all of reason's obstacles to the unification of peoples, intuition will smash with revolution the cages of the nationalities, fatherlands, and nations.²⁹⁹

The Man Who Flew into Space thus avails itself of the avant-garde's master narrative whilst also appropriating its vision of Utopia. In doing so it satirizes the messianic scale and seriousness of avant-garde and Bolshevik ambitions. Yet the absurdist facsimile of the collective project that *The Man Who Flew into Space* presents as its subject matter is not reducible to the merely satirical or ironic. Rather, the work probes the historical distance between the two moments it traverses, discerning a eulogy for the collective project in its migration from the public realm to the private spaces of individual fantasy.

In *The Man Who Flew into Space* and the subsequent *Ten Characters* installation, Kabakov employs space to more concretely articulate the atomistic and post-Utopian character of late Soviet life. Boris Groys eloquently describes this period when he notes that, in the years of Moscow Conceptualism, "the single Utopia of the classical avant-garde and Stalinism has been replaced with a myriad of private, individual Utopias."³⁰⁰ It is this crisis and fragmentation of the collective dream, its atomization into a multitude of discrete fantasies, that Kabakov's work treats as a fact and feature of contemporary Soviet life. And it is this atomization that *produces* the isolated and hermetic subjects which Moscow Conceptualism so closely associates with its own epoch. The man who

²⁹⁹ Kazimir Malevich, "O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve: statika i skorost," in *Kazimir Malevich: Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. one, edited by D. Sarabianov et al. (Moscow, 1995), 153-184 (173).

³⁰⁰ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 78.

flew into space is in this sense a quintessentially late Soviet subject, for his solitude and interiority are themselves causally connected to the fracturing of the grand and collective dreams of Soviet power. His project represents a Utopian dream disconnected from the collective and universal manifold, one that only serves to isolate and insulate the protagonist from his fellow citizens. *The Man Who Flew into Space*, then, charts the fate and strange afterlife of the Soviet Utopia, formulating its findings in an algebra of post-Utopian space.

As a total installation, *The Man Who Flew into Space* replicates the interior space of the *kommunalka*, and then implicates that space in the production of a new type of Soviet citizen. That Kabakov considers the privatization of Utopia represented by his protagonist's project to be a broader phenomenon, rather than a singular and eccentric pursuit, is confirmed by the subsequent *Ten Characters* installation. Here, all inhabitants of the installed *kommunalka* create their own private, eccentric equivalents of Bolshevism's grand vision. In a remarkable quote, Kabakov describes both this process of atomization and the central role of the *kommunalka* in it:

The thing is that each of these characters lived according to his own special idea, an idea that had consumed him entirely. We shall describe in detail the ideas of each of these residents. Here it is important to note that these characters themselves, their *idea-fixe* could only have emerged under the conditions created by a communal apartment. These ideas were engendered by the special atmosphere of this communal apartment; the main task of the artist here was to create the image of a communal apartment, its air.³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Ilya Kabakov, commentary on *Ten Characters*, text reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné*, 136.

In the singular obsessions of characters like *The Man Who Flew into His Picture*, *The Composer*, and *The Man Who Collects the Opinions of Others*, are the ruins and remains of the collective project, with all of its concomitant assertions. It is these claims of control over history and humanity that gave birth to the *kommunalka* as an ideological proving-ground, and it is in this space that their oxidation and obsolescence is most clearly registered. Kabakov's installations suggest that whilst the Utopian imaginary is ineradicable, the Utopian project is itself fallible and historically grounded. It is this passing of History from the dominion and control of Party discourse that *The Man Who Flew into Space* and the subsequent *Ten Characters* most clearly register. The broadening non-correspondence, between the coercive and official forms of Soviet society and the lived experience they induce, is here sublimated and expressed as a plethora of unofficial dreams.

This chapter has considered Moscow Conceptualism's engagement with the evolving Soviet discourses on space and subjectivity. It has argued that whilst the isomorphic alignment between subject and space which the Revolution insisted upon remains a constant feature of these discourses, the nature of this correspondence changes through the course of Soviet history. Moscow Conceptualism, I contend, examines the contemporary parameters of this relationship, discerning in it a tool or mode of enquiry into the provenance of the present. In Moscow conceptualist art, then, this discourse becomes a means of calibrating the relationship between the present moment and the

Party's grand narrative, its strident claims regarding the nature of man and Soviet power. By charting the contemporary shifts within this relationship, the emergent logic of segregation, interiority and isolation that has come to characterize Soviet existence, Moscow Conceptualism demonstrates that the increasing stagnation and incoherence of the Soviet project is itself registered in space and subjectivity. In addition, by positing a connection between this discursive configuration and one of its previous stages, Moscow Conceptualism grasps the discourses of space and the subject in a genuinely dialectical manner. Within this discursive frame, the movement finds a means of negotiating that persistently problematic nexus between the present and the past that has elsewhere been mediated in the negative terms of silence and absence.³⁰² The historicized portrait of the present that Moscow Conceptualism here offers is then a prime example of the process this dissertation terms "cognitive mapping," in which the movement seeks to apprehend in art the deeper structures of its own benighted age. In this, the empty expansion of the present that Moscow Conceptualism associates with current time has its complement in the atomization of uniform and collective space – a process which, of course, also permeates the subject. And in these investigations, what Moscow Conceptualism ultimately charts and captures, what it finally *depicts*, is the Soviet Union's progressive loss of control over its own enabling narratives. Whether, in retrospect, we term this period "post-Utopian" or "late socialist," it finds vital expression in an art which seeks to discern the contours and parameters of a present that has moved beyond the reach of a now-obsolete official discourse.

³⁰² For example, in the album *Litso* by Viktor Pivovarov, discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four

Traumatic Objects: Moscow Conceptualism and the Soviet

Past

“What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time.” Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.³⁰³

In 1977, the Erastov family, friends of Igor Makarevich, emigrated to Israel from Moscow. On the day of their departure, before accompanying them to the airport, Makarevich took a series of photographs of the Erastovs, gathered with their friends, in the Moscow apartment they were about to leave forever. Later that day, Makarevich returned to the deserted apartment to photograph it again. However, as the artist notes in a conversation with Gerald Pirog, he “forgot to put in a new roll of film,”³⁰⁴ and subsequently produced only double-exposures. These accidental double exposures, which Makarevich describes as “much more expressive work than I could have consciously done,”³⁰⁵ were subsequently entitled *Exodus* and presented as a photographic series. [Ills. 4.1-4.3]

³⁰³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61.

³⁰⁴ “Igor Makarevich with Gerald Pirog: Unusual Perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities,” in *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 278-291 (284).

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 284.

The *Exodus* photographs, which are individually untitled, thus combine within themselves separate traces of presence and absence, before and after. These distinct moments merge joltingly, awkwardly, in each work, with the seam between the two not always legible. Which interior belongs to which instant, for example, is often hard to discern in the mixed tangle of ceilings, walls and corridors. This instability carries over to the groups of people the photographs record, who are in turns translucent, half-exposed, or otherwise cropped by frames or edges. An unintentional poetry, the *Exodus* series melds together frames from a story of leaving, creating something elegiac and affecting from otherwise prosaic photographic documents. Suffused by the deserted spaces of their apartment, the Erastovs and their gathered friends inhabit these serendipitous photomontages as witnesses to their own absence.

What is significant about this fortuitous chaos, this accidental mingling of moments that the *Exodus* photographs enact, is that the past as a site of absence or loss, of a broken continuity, constitutes a further area of Moscow conceptualist enquiry. The attempts to comprehend and to bind this wound, to articulate an absence which is never simply absent, but which creates its own ghosts, constitutes a central theme for both Igor Makarevich and the Moscow conceptualist circle. Moscow Conceptualism seeks to find ways to bring a past it views as marked by ruination and disappearance back into contact with the present. In the afore-mentioned interview, Makarevich touches upon this aspect of his work:

When I was young, I liked to go into abandoned buildings. There were many of them in Moscow at that time. I would find many strange objects that I would use in my still-life

works. Seeing these abandoned spaces was a deeply emotional experience for me because this was a mysterious world where people used to live, and now they seemed to be flying all around like ghosts.³⁰⁶

Exodus, then, accomplishes by chance what Makarevich's works with found materials achieve purposively. Each carries out what Makarevich memorably terms "archaeological work on the field of historical destruction,"³⁰⁷ tracing the ways in which a vanquished or obliterated past still inflects and resonates within the present. It is this search for continuities and connections in Soviet history, for the provenance of the broken temporal manifold of contemporary Soviet life, that forms the subject of this chapter.

This chapter addresses the status of the past in Moscow conceptualist art. Within it I argue that the enquiries by Moscow Conceptualism into the shape and form of the Soviet past represent another aspect, or side, to the examinations of the late socialist present which are discussed in Chapter Two. This is because both modes of enquiry seek to grasp, from different ends, the contours and operational logic of the historical caesura that structures late socialist life, segregating the present from its antecedent moments and abrogating temporal flow. This chapter makes to demonstrate that Moscow Conceptualism apprehends the Soviet past in terms of traumatic loss and disappearance, and seeks to circumscribe this trauma by creating compensatory continuities. History, that which has been, then returns in Moscow conceptualist art as a figure of trauma, a

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 280.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 281.

defense against the breakage in narrativity and self that the Soviet past represents. The presence of the past in Moscow Conceptualism, I shall argue, is thus hollow and double-edged, marked with its own erasure, much in the manner of the gathered friends in the *Exodus* photographs, whose images populate a since-emptied apartment.

To make its argument, this chapter then examines the historical recuperations, reconnections, and returns that occur within the works of Moscow Conceptualism. It contends that, as with other enquiries of Moscow Conceptualism into the contours of its age, these investigative incorporations of the past articulate and reify a specifically Soviet historical process. Because Moscow Conceptualism seeks to discern and to chart the forms of its own uncanny history, the dialogue with the past that its artistic objects conduct remains distinct from the many returns and recuperations in Western art of this period.³⁰⁸ In addressing and setting forth the concrete, situated nature of Moscow Conceptualism's engagement with the Soviet past, this chapter then concludes my analysis of the purposive reification, in Moscow conceptualist art, of the discursive forms of the late Soviet era.

Because this chapter examines the traumatic nature of the Soviet past as it is mediated in Moscow Conceptualism, its initial concern is establishing a theoretical basis for describing trauma in art. To this end, I evaluate the most robust and influential model of returns and recuperations in late twentieth-century art, that of *nachträglichkeit*, of deferred action, in Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. Working from an analysis of the

³⁰⁸ This includes the many artists of the 1960s and 1970s whose work engages with avant-garde form and who have been subsumed under the broad term "neo-avant-garde." Such a list would include Daniel Buren, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Robert Ryman, and Piero Manzoni.

Western neo-avant-gardes, Foster argues that irruptions of the past in art can be read as a trauma which, as with the psychoanalytical subject, are only registered and worked through in subsequent episodes. Working from this model, I contend that the specific trauma that Moscow conceptualist art confronts is that of the repression and erasure of vast areas of the Soviet past. This trauma is predicated in numerous historical events, including Stalin's purges and the violent abrogation of the avant-garde, yet is also registered by late Soviet subjects as lapses and breakages in psychological continuity. The *nachträglichkeit* moment of this trauma, which Moscow Conceptualism both probes and embodies, is manifest in the attempts to bind and displace this loss with substituted mechanisms for historical transmission. Moscow Conceptualism then records the moment in which history, and historical depth, are sought by other means.

Having established its theoretical frame, the chapter then moves to concrete and detailed analyses of individual works of art. Examining works by Pivovarov, Kabakov, and Makarevich, I describe how these artists incorporate inanimate objects into their works as vessels and symbols of historical depth. I argue that in their mute materiality these objects embody a continuity and stability in time which late Soviet subjects frequently lack. In the works this chapter analyzes, it is in inanimate things and accoutrements that history and temporal depth are vested. These objects offer their possessors syncretic means of constructing historical selves, yet also point to the site of the trauma they seek to displace and defend against. History, I conclude, returns in Moscow conceptualist art not in the manner of neo-avant-garde recuperations or proto-postmodernist borrowings, but rather as a traumatic figure of its own absence.

In her book *Common Places*, in the course of a discussion concerning the Soviet memorabilia a Russian widow named Liuba preserves in her house, Svetlana Boym makes a piquant observation about the nature of the Soviet past:

It is hard to imagine a still life in a culture where one major devastation follows the other – revolutions, wars, housing crises, famine, Stalin’s purges – where habit, repetition, and everyday stability are so hard to sustain. In Russia, one can only speak of nostalgia for a still life, for a sustaining everyday materiality in the face of continuing crises.³⁰⁹

For Boym, the preservation and display of domestic accoutrements practiced by Soviet citizens like Liuba represents a common defense mechanism against the myriad traumatic interruptions of Soviet history. Symbols of stability and continuity, such objects connote what Boym terms “a sense of a long duration of time... that survives historical upheavals.”³¹⁰ Typically garlanded with objects a Western observer would likely identify as kitsch, the Soviet domestic interior then represents for Boym a unique and specific cultural form. Photographs, souvenirs, and valuables are here also well-tended monuments to duration and permanence, deployed against the many incursions of a capricious and catastrophic national history. It is these rituals and these uses which Boym

³⁰⁹ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 154.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

refers to when she states that Soviet life “endows private objects with a different cultural significance.”³¹¹

I begin with Boym’s explorations of Soviet domesticity because it underscores how specific historical traumas manifest themselves in equally specific ways. The objects that Liuba surrounds herself with resonate within the context of the historical upheavals and losses they symbolically disarm. They are, then, the physical symptoms of, and the defense mechanism against, a distinct and enduring trauma. Their resonance in the present, in this small apartment, is consequently itself a story of the Soviet past. Nothing so general as “postcards”, or “porcelain,” these many objects thus embody an experience and constitute a category that no typography of their mere materiality could either grasp or ascertain.³¹²

This specificity is important. For the enquiries of Moscow Conceptualism into the uncanny past of the Soviet Union occur in the same period in which trauma, and in particular the deferred returns of traumatic experience, come to occupy an increasingly

³¹¹ Ibid, 158. Boym notes the objects Liuba displays on her commode, or sideboard. They include “a big plastic apple brought from her native Belorussian village, a Chinese thermos with bright floral elements, a naturalistic porcelain dog, three bottles containing different glass flowers, - daisies and some exotic red flowers not without a touch of elegance – a samovar, a set of folk-style Soviet-made porcelain cups.” Ibid, 152.

³¹² The inadequacy of formal analysis as a means of apprehending the embedded cultural contexts and functions of art is, of course, the subject of Clifford Geertz’s well-known article, “Art as a Cultural System.” Geertz writes that “[t]he chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significance, is always a local matter, what art is in classical China or classical Islam, what it is in the Pueblo Southwest or Highland New Guinea, is not the same thing, no matter how universal the intrinsic qualities that actualize its emotional power may be... A theory of art is therefore a theory of culture, and not an autonomous enterprise.” “Art as a Cultural System,” in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 91, No. 6, Comparative Literature (Dec. 1976), 1473-1499 (1475-1476).

central position within Western art.³¹³ In addition, Moscow Conceptualism's sustained engagement with the art of the Soviet avant-garde would seem to align the movement with neo-avant-gardism in the West, which, in the writings of Hal Foster, represents a paradigmatic example of traumatic deferral. To better speak to the particularity of the traumas which Moscow Conceptualism confronts and embodies, then, we need to properly distinguish its operations from the returns and recoveries of contemporary Western art.

To this purpose, it is opportune here to examine the highly influential work of Hal Foster. In *The Return of the Real*, his seminal work on avant-gardism in late twentieth-century art, Foster sets forth an important theory of traumatic returns in art. This theoretical model takes the neo-avant-garde as its basis, yet frames a substantial methodology that has valence beyond its initial application. It is then timely, before discussing the broader implications of Foster's model, to set forth its central points.

"Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?," the first chapter of *The Return of the Real*, seeks to rehabilitate neo-avant-gardist art in light of the critic Peter Bürger's influential criticism of its appropriations as "at best pathetic and farcical, at worst cynical and

³¹³ Hal Foster has, of course, been the principal critic with regards to tracing these traumatic genealogies through post-war art. In the eponymous essay of his book *The Return of the Real*, Foster discusses Warhol's use of disaster images in terms of the same dual operations of trauma which I discern in the Moscow conceptualist engagement with the Soviet past. Foster notes that in these images, the unrepresentable real of Lacanian theory is mediated through Warhol's characteristic repetition. As Foster notes: "repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation... Rather, repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition." (Foster, 127-168 (132)) This process, in which the binding of a trauma in (order to contain it and return it to a symbolic order) also marks and identifies that trauma, is, I argue, a central feature of the Soviet past as mediated by Moscow Conceptualism.

opportunistic.”³¹⁴ To this end, Foster works to destabilize the emphasis on originality and priority that underwrites Bürger’s work on avant-gardism, proposing instead a psychoanalytical critical model. In Foster’s hermeneutics, both the irruptions of the avant-garde and their subsequent reprisals in neo-avant-gardist art are considered symptomatically. Avant-gardism manifests itself as a traumatic tear in the cultural fabric, which, like trauma in psychoanalysis, must be registered and worked through in subsequent episodes. It is this deferred and belated temporality of trauma that interests Foster and which, in accordance with Freud, he terms *nachträglichkeit*.³¹⁵ For Freud, as Foster notes with an eye on avant-garde returns, “[o]ne event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*).”³¹⁶

The history of avant-gardism that *The Return of the Real* submits then models itself explicitly on that of the subject in psychoanalysis. Or, more precisely, it takes the psychic temporality of that subject as a model, its “relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events.”³¹⁷ Foster both acknowledges and calls attention to this analogy, noting its prevalence in modernist histories, which, in his words, are “often conceived, secretly

³¹⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 13-14. The views of Peter Bürger which Foster challenges are set forth in Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³¹⁵ As Foster notes of Freud’s model of *nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action”: “In Freud an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action.” *The Return of the Real*, xii.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 29. The unique temporality of trauma is also summarized by Roger Luckhurst in his book *The Trauma Question*. Trauma, writes Luckhurst, “is *Nachträglich*, meaning deferred or delayed, an enigmatic term used by Freud and developed by subsequent psychoanalysts, to suggest that ordinary causality can be thrown into reverse by a traumatic impact, whose effect is only registered long after the first shock and which can retrospectively rewrite life narrative.” *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

or otherwise, on the model of the individual subject, indeed *as a subject*.”³¹⁸ Rather than a methodological flaw, however, this correspondence presents the critic with an opportunity:

For if this analogy to the individual subject is all but structural to historical studies, why not apply the most sophisticated model of the subject, the psychoanalytic one, and do so in a manifest way?³¹⁹

The strange temporality of the avant-garde, both historical and neo, is thus framed in *The Return of the Real* in terms of the strange temporality of the traumatic subject. Neither belated nor subsidiary, the reinstatements and recuperations of the neo-avant-garde are instead integral to the *nachträglichkeit* process of avant-gardist self-comprehension. Such returns are the deferred inscription of a prior event, a psychic wound, that “is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments.”³²⁰ For Foster, then, the traumatic art of neo-avant-gardism is one in which the present must continuously act to disarm, circumscribe and comprehend a past that repeatedly returns to haunt it.

It is this model of historical returns in art as manifestations of a prior trauma that, I want to suggest, provides a means of distinguishing Moscow Conceptualism’s engagement with the Soviet past from those of the neo-avant-garde and similar movements in the West. Foster’s model is maximalist and Western in its emphasis, and the genealogy it presents is thus that of a singular history of art inscribed upon the history of a single subject. In other words, *The Return of the Real* discerns a traumatic avant-garde break, a

³¹⁸ Ibid, 28.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 28.

³²⁰ Ibid, 29.

nachträglichkeit registration of that trauma in neo-avant-gardist art, and so forth. Yet if a history of art can be narrated as that of a subject, then it is logically consequent that differing histories must produce different symptoms in that subject, or, rather, different subjectivities. There can subsequently be no singular subjective experience of the myriad routes art navigates through modernity, for modernity is itself comprised of myriad national or local experiences of war, imperialism, industrialization, class conflict, urbanization, revolution, and assorted other traumas.

The model of traumatic deferral presented in *The Return of the Real* is thus too unitary, too singular, and needs to be broadened to take note of the many contexts in which trauma is registered and returns within the subject-histories of art. It is to this end that I want to adopt *and* recalibrate Foster's model in support of my thesis. For whilst Foster presents the primal scene of his scenario as one in which trauma is always already configured in the artistic languages of the avant-garde, avant-gardism is by no means the sole lexicon of traumatic experience in art. I wish to argue, then, that the primal scene of the historical traumas that Moscow Conceptualism explores is not predicated on an avant-garde irruption *but rather on its disappearance*.³²¹ The specifically Soviet trauma which Moscow Conceptualism stands at a *nachträglichkeit* relation to is the repression and

³²¹ The loss or disruption of the past and its attendant effects was also a topical subject in Soviet literature of the Moscow conceptualist period, perhaps most notably in Chingiz Aitmatov's popular science fiction novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), first published in 1980. *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* includes an account of slaves, called *mankurts*, that are forcibly deprived of their memory by torture. In Aitmatov's words: "The *mankurt* did not know who he had been, whence and from what tribe he had come, did not know his name, could not remember his childhood, father, or mother – in short, he could not recognize himself as a human being." (126.) In his *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), James V. Wertsch discusses Aitmatov's *mankurt* and notes that "the parallels between this procedure [the removal of memory by torture] and the effects of a totalitarian state were clear to Soviet readers. For example, the term "*mankurtizatsia*" was widely known in that context." (73.) That Soviet life had deprived its citizens of a living, accessible past, was thus a broad concern, raised in both the art and literature of the period.

disappearance of large sections of the past (including of course, the Soviet avant-garde).³²² Consequently, trauma in Moscow Conceptualism does not return in avant-gardist form, but rather as a series of threats to the continuity of the subject. The past in Moscow conceptualist art, then, troubles the present as an abrogation or an absence. It constitutes a series of wounds or holes in history that must be registered and then contained: closed over and sutured up.

Slightly refocused or adapted, then, Foster's theoretical schema of *nachträglichkeit* provides a methodological framework which accommodates and accounts for the difference, the specificity, that attends the presence of the past in Moscow conceptualist art. Per Foster, these returns should be understood as traumatic because they recuperate within themselves a wounded past that, even in the form of an absence, continues to act upon and resonate within the present moment. And as trauma, this recurrence of the past within the present can only be decoded or interpreted within the causal context of its own particular history. This is, of course, the very point Svetlana Boym insists upon with regards to the widow Liuba's collected accoutrements, and it likewise anchors my analysis of Moscow Conceptualism's explorations of the vanquished and decoupled forms of Soviet history.

³²² In his interview with Gerald Pirog, Igor Makarevich makes this point, noting that it is hard to speak of postmodernism in Soviet art because of the violent curtailment of modernism. Makarevich observes that the avant-garde "existed only in its most embryonic form. And the most fundamental aspect of life is maturity, and the Russian avant-garde had only a youth. It was unable to enter into a mature period, as in the West, because of external circumstances." "Igor Makarevich with Gerald Pirog: Unusual Perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities," 202.

In turning from questions of methodology towards the analysis of individual works, I want to pause here to recall Svetlana Boym's observation that the process of everyday life in the Soviet Union "endows private objects with a different cultural significance."³²³ This is because objects play a pivotal role in the Moscow conceptualist recuperations of the Soviet past. Indeed, what the Moscow conceptualists discover in their attempts to grasp this past, to give form to its uncannily absent presence within the late Soviet everyday, is that objects become the principle means by which this past is apprehended and secured. The attention Moscow Conceptualism pays to the myriad inanimate products of Soviet civilization is then a focused one. As I argue below, the signal historical process which Moscow Conceptualism grasps in its probings of the Soviet past is one in which debris, detritus, and domestic accoutrements are frequently reconfigured as metaphorical vehicles for a broken historical continuity which can only be reconstructed as cipher and substitution. The returns and recuperations of Moscow conceptualist art thus map a specific historical formation in which a vanquished and submerged past survives within the late Soviet present as the traumatic displacement of its own absence. The Moscow conceptualists, it would seem, have been lingering in Liuba's apartment and rummaging through her souvenirs.

As we recall, Viktor Pivovarov, in his album *Litso*, frames a meditation upon self-identity in terms of the loss of a common and secure past. [Ills. 2.8-2.27] In its twenty panels,

³²³ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, 154.

Litso chronicles the failed attempts of an anonymous protagonist to ratify his memories through dialogue with an interlocutor. The consequent estrangements, of self from self-history and of past from present, permeate the timbre of the album, which narrates its scenario in lucid tones of cool blue.³²⁴ Sober and spare, *Litso* makes unrequited enquiries of the past and, in the absence of an answering voice, inscribes this loss within the space of the subject. The solitude of the protagonist is thus an isolation in time, or rather, an isolation from time, in which no security of self can be established beyond the boundaries of the present. “No, you don’t remember,” [Ills. 2.21] laments Pivovarov’s protagonist, adrift in the lonely expanse of the other’s silence. “Well then. Goodbye.” [Ills. 2.22] The album concludes without resolution, thus leaving it to the viewer, as I note in Chapter Two, to imagine routes out from this cul-de-sac of memory.

Litso, then, lingers upon an absence. It traces the apophatic forms of this absence at a removal of time, behind the ostensible solidity of the present moment, whilst always observing its continued reverberations within that present. In doing so, the work tells a story of a self that is estranged and unmade by this hole in its prior histories. For the contemporary Soviet person, Pivovarov intimates, the process of being is at once an unsettled navigation of one’s own internalized discontinuities and incompletenesses.

³²⁴ In his autobiography *Vliublennii agent* [The Agent in Love], Pivovarov notes the importance of this color to the meaning of *Litso*, and intimates that the blue background itself could be viewed as a symbol of the work’s mysterious interlocutor. The artist writes that: “the whole album is undertaken in a blue register, and the semantics of blue in my previous work do not require an explanation [it is employed as a symbol of solitude] and thus it is not difficult to suggest that this itself may represent the silent “other”.” (*Vliublennii agent*, 110.)

As Pivovarov notes in his autobiography *The Agent in Love*, his major works of 1975 and 1976, including his albums, should properly be considered in terms of a “single structure... as a treatise, each part of which supplements the others.”³²⁵ The author-artist then proceeds to declare that he “would be bold enough to name this structure as my philosophy.”³²⁶ In light of the stipulated coherence of these works, as well as their centrality to Pivovarov’s oeuvre, I want to examine here how the past which *Litso* identifies as a space of loss and absence is framed within another album of this period. That album is entitled *The Garden*, and was produced in 1976, a year after *Litso*.³²⁷

The Garden, which spans ninety pages and is divided into three sections, is by far the longest of Pivovarov’s album works.³²⁸ As with *Litso*, *The Garden* is preoccupied with absence and absences, and concocts representational strategies of capture. To this end, the sections of the album organize themselves along various interstices where presence and non-presence divide. It is from these vantage points that the album seeks to discern ways in which each category implicates and inflects the other.

The three sections of *The Garden* thus constitute three separate meditations on absence.

[Ills. 4.4-4.6] The first of these, entitled “I Am Not Here,” contains the illustrated

³²⁵ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 117.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, 117.

³²⁷ The title of the album in Russian is *Sad*.

³²⁸ When the author interviewed Viktor Pivovarov at his apartment in Prague in September of 2008, Pivovarov produced photographs of the album to aid in discussion. While Pivovarov has written at length about *The Garden* in two of his three autobiographical works, he remains extremely reticent about the work, refusing, for example, to reveal its current location or owner. Unlike his other albums of the period, *The Garden* has never been reproduced in Pivovarov’s various publications. Despite the artist’s offer to send photos of *The Garden* to aid in this dissertation, none have been forthcoming. As a consequence, and because I judge the work to be of demonstrable importance to his oeuvre, I here only discuss the work in terms of what Pivovarov has written about it in his autobiographical texts. The three images I have been able to include here provide representative examples of the visual lexicon of *The Garden*.

reproductions of a series of notes left at Pivovarov's studio by various visitors in his absence. The second section, "Where Am I?," consists of, in Pivovarov's words, "drawings of different places and dwellings where I could have been found."³²⁹ The final section, entitled, like the album, "The Garden," is described by Pivovarov as comprising "a succession of very white pages, upon which almost nothing is visible. The white of the pages is further underlined by a thick black frame. Through the whiteness some sort of marks can occasionally be discerned."³³⁰ Of these three scenarios, it is the first two that I turn my attentions towards.

With its collected notes, written, as Pivovarov puts it, "on different scraps of paper and left on the door of my studio,"³³¹ "I Am Not Here" presents itself as an archive of missed connections. In common with *Litso*, "I Am Not Here" probes and sifts amongst the space of a prior absence. Yet where *Litso* grasped this absence negatively, as a loss or breakage measured in the collapse of self-narrativity, this section of *The Garden* marks the absence it organizes itself around with a substituted presence. This surrogate presence, of course, consists of the various notes addressed to Pivovarov's absented self. These fragmentary objects both register a loss and displace it, and it is precisely this dualistic quality that Pivovarov lingers upon in his autobiographical description of the work:

³²⁹ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 116. As Pivovarov notes, these various locations lead the viewer on a journey through the haunts and habitations of the Moscow conceptualist circle: "the eyes of the viewer undertake a mental journey from *Rechnoi Vokzal*, from my apartment to the metro, then travel to *Maroseika*, move through the archway of apartment block 13, enter the studio, move through its spaces, and then visit other places, Vicka's room, Shteinberg's kitchen, and so forth." (Ibid, 116.)

³³⁰ Ibid, 116.

³³¹ Viktor Pivovarov, *Ocherki vizual'nosti: O liubvi, slova, i izobrazhenia* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 32.

Insofar as these notes are a product of chance, of when someone is not home, then naturally it is this absence, and in this particular case my absence, which is present in each of them. Here is the *presence of an absence*.³³²

The notes and paper-scrap that “I Am Not Here” organizes itself around thus provide a mechanism for the recuperation and preservation of an otherwise inscrutable past.

Conversely, it is precisely such devices which are lacking in *Litso*. In reifying a prior absence, these assembled objects construct what Matthew Jackson has elsewhere termed “mechanisms for historical transmission.”³³³ Gathered from a site of blankness and absence, a space in the past that must otherwise be mediated via the negative terms of discontinuity and loss, these small notes offer a route-map through the very breach they mark. As objects, then, the scribbled paper epistles of “I Am Not Here” achieve what the recollections that *Litso* recounts could not. That is, they reinstate continuities and demarcate routes of return from an unanswering past whose ghosted presence inflects much of Pivovarov’s contemporary work.³³⁴

Whilst “I Am Not Here” constructs surrogate continuities to bridge the absence it confronts, “Where Am I?,” the second section of *The Garden*, frames its subject in a manner similar to *Litso*, emphasizing discontinuity and loss. In the futile search for its author, “Where Am I?” navigates an urban geography of absence, a succession of

³³² Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent*, 113-116. My italics.

³³³ Matthew Jesse Jackson, “Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes,” 182.

³³⁴ This absented past constitutes a common leitmotif in Pivovarov’s albums from 1975 and 1976. Take, for example, the album *Tears* of 1975, whose first panel consists of the text “In the morning I was surprised to discover that my pillow was wet with tears. However, I could neither recall my dreams nor recollect the reason for my tears.” Describing *Tears* in his autobiography, Pivovarov states that “the structure of the album is broken, fragmentary. It contains fragments of memory and mood, disconnected from any particular thoughts.” *Vliublennii agent*, 107.

Moscow conceptualist haunts and locales frequented by Pivovarov, the empty volumes of which consequently encompass the artist's former presence. Absence is here again endowed with an uncanny palpability and weight, and set forth to resonate within the spaces of the present. The final panel of the album, however, separates itself from this sequence. "The last drawing of this section represents a clear blue sky," explains Pivovarov, bluntly. "The drawing was torn in two."³³⁵

The torn page which concludes "Where Am I?" thus reifies as a physical act those breaks and disruptions of narrative which so frequently structure Moscow conceptualist descriptions of Soviet life. In his artistic memoirs, Pivovarov evaluates the significance of this act of artistic violence:

Torn paper. What does this say about me here? It speaks of wounds, of course, of sickness. But not just of them. Torn paper, in the case of this album page of mine, offers itself as a crack, an entrance, a break. It represents, consciously and subconsciously, the idea of departure, of fracture, of spatio-temporal holes.³³⁶

The sudden abrogation of narrative continuity in "Where Am I?" is therefore intended to be traumatic, to embody, as Pivovarov has it, "wounds."³³⁷ As Roger Luckhurst observes in his study of trauma and the arts, a recurrent feature of traumatic experience is that it "can only be conveyed by a catastrophic rupture of narrative possibility."³³⁸ Incapable of

³³⁵ Viktor Pivovarov, *Ocherki vizual'nosti: O liubvi, slova, i izobrazhenia*, 31-32.

³³⁶ Ibid, 32.

³³⁷ Ibid, 32. As Pivovarov here conflates wounding and illness in his description of this violent curtailment of narrative continuity, it is interesting to note that Arthur Frank, in his study of illness and literature entitled *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago University Press, 1995) argues that the onset of illness in literary memoirs is often framed in terms of "narrative wreckage." (68-69.)

³³⁸ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81.

being grasped in narrative form, the absence which Pivovarov here probes is consequently registered as a traumatic break or fracture, a violence performed upon presence and continuity.

Meditations upon effaced presence and enduring absence, the two initial sections of *The Garden* thus probe the same blankness, the same *terra nullius* on the historical map. As with *Litso*, both sections frame the absence they articulate in terms of an elision or dislocation of the past. Yet each evinces a different strategy for mediating this aphasic gap via art. “Where Am I?” registers this absence as traumatic rupture and narrative breakage, as a discontinuity that cannot be spoken across and therefore must be grasped in negative terms, as disruption and loss. And in contrast, “I Am Not Here” employs handwritten notes to bridge this blanked space and to reinstate a form of narrativity. In these two albums-within-an-album, then, an absented past is both registered as traumatic break and recuperated in object form.

In both *Litso* and *The Garden*, Pivovarov frames the Soviet past through a lens of absence, loss, and rupture. The unanswering blankness and inscrutability of this past is experienced traumatically, as a violent breakage in continuity which is in turn inscribed within the space of the self, disrupting the psychic continuum of memory and self-identity. Yet if the absence that haunts the works of Pivovarov is itself a figure of trauma, a cipher and a marker of lost histories and fractured continuities, then the gathered notes of “I Am Not Here” enact defenses and seek restitutions from this loss. In an object language of fragments rescued from oblivion, the past here returns. Yet it does not return

whole or intact and cannot be apprehended in toto, as presence. Rather, its reconstitution is partial and incomplete, stitched together in a string of objects. What “I Am Not Here” summons from history is thus a threadbare and fragmentary facsimile of that history, a surrogate presence that seeks to bind and displace a larger loss. The past that is reconstituted here is consequently itself a working-through of trauma, an attempt to reinstate a ruptured continuity through other means and mechanisms. As deferral and displacement, history – and thus *self*-history – can return only at a remove, as a figure of itself.

In *The Garden*, then, as in other works of this period, Viktor Pivovarov crafts elegiac meditations within a twinned poetics of objects and absences. In the final, self-titled section of *The Garden*, these two categories are blurred to the point of indistinction as, frame after frame, faint marks rise to risk the surface of an encompassing whiteness. These parameters are instructive, for it is through this dialectic of absences and objects, of loss and recuperative substitution, that Pivovarov and the Moscow conceptualist circle apprehend the Soviet past. The Moscow conceptualists make art that incorporates and articulates a process of *nachträglich* deferral, in which a vanquished history returns in *things*, as a defense mechanism against its own absence. In a double entendre laced with Soviet irony, these retrieved histories thus mark with presence the site of their own erasure. “Our past was, of course, one in ruins,” observes Pivovarov, matter-of-factly. “But we could, at the very least, search amongst the rubble.”³³⁹ In *The Garden*, as in the works addressed below, it is left to the items salvaged from this rubble to bear the burden of that greater history they memorialize.

³³⁹ Viktor Pivovarov, interview with author. Prague, 9/27/08.

“In Kabakov,” notes Svetlana Boym, “the past is embodied in fragments, ruins, trash, and vessels of all sorts - chests of drawers, cupboards, rugs, and worn-out clothes.”³⁴⁰ Indeed, in his object-paintings and installations, Kabakov creates vast inventories of detritus that serve as material for an artistic archaeology of Soviet culture. These operations are performed, as Pivovarov has it, from “amongst the rubble,” and mine vague sensations of dread and unease, hint towards unspoken cataclysms and catastrophes. In Kabakov’s art, people frequently vanish, unexpectedly and without trace, whilst objects remain and endure. Consequently, as Boym suggests, it is the items which Kabakov gathers together within his works that most frequently are marked with the creases and patinas of a lived history.

In the great object-archive of the Soviet world which Kabakov assembles, the most insistent and consistent denominators are age and dilapidation. As Matthew Jackson observes, Kabakov “esteems the dirty and the shoddy, that which falls apart, the worn-out. He likes garbage.”³⁴¹ Novelty or finery have no place amidst these artistic evocations of the decrepitude and shabbiness of Soviet life. Rather, objects bear the scars and the accumulated grime of long lives, thus embodying a historical depth which Kabakov’s various characters and personages seldom attain on their own. In turn, Kabakov uses this discrepancy to articulate a process in which the inanimate accoutrements of Soviet

³⁴⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 318.

³⁴¹ Matthew Jesse Jackson, “Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes,” 70.

existence themselves become conduits and repositories *for* subjectivity and, in particular, self-history.³⁴² This investiture of self-identity and self-continuity in objects is subsequently framed in a detailed examination of two of Kabakov's installation pieces. The selected works are *The Rope of Life*, of 1985, and *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, which the artist worked upon for several years and completed in 1988.

The installation *The Rope of Life* occupies a large room which, as Kabakov stipulates, has its floor "covered with large sheets of white paper, which impart to the room a rather strange, "temporary" appearance."³⁴³ In the center of the room is a rope, "approximately ten meters in length,"³⁴⁴ which lies, seemingly abandoned, on the floor of the installation space. Bare on each end, the remainder of the rope is festooned with a series of objects which are attached by short lengths of string. In turn, from the objects hang labels, which are also attached with string.³⁴⁵ [Ills. 4.7] As Kabakov makes clear in his later sketches

³⁴² The supplementation of the self by objects that Kabakov describes in these works might be viewed as having its Western equivalent in the self-fashioning that attends bourgeois collecting, which James Clifford describes in his essay "On Collecting Art and Culture." (in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215-251.) Clifford views collecting and display as "critical processes of Western identity formation," (220.) and argues that for the bourgeois male, "collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity." (218.) For Clifford, collecting aligns the subject with needed hierarchies of value and signs of historical depth. He notes of the latter that "old objects are endowed with a sense of depth by their historically minded collectors. Temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge." (222.) Whilst both processes then seek historical depth and continuity via objects, they have many other points of difference. For Clifford, bourgeois collecting is predicated on notions of value, hierarchy, and authenticity, which are then reified as a supplement to the self. For Kabakov, the gathering of objects by Soviet subjects is anti-hierarchical, traumatic and recuperative. Here the subject seeks to embed itself in objects, irrespective of value, as a means of restoring or preserving an otherwise threatened past. The process thus operates as a defense mechanism that protects memory and self-continuity against an erasing and capricious history.

³⁴³ Ilya Kabakov, "Description of the Installation [The Rope of Life]," reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 83.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴⁵ *The Rope of Life* is one of a series of installations by Kabakov that present as their material a series of objects attached to a rope scaffold. Other works that employ this format include *16 Ropes* of 1984, *The Rope Along The Edge* of 1985, and *Mother and Son* of 1990.

for the work, the viewer needs to get close to the rope, perhaps crouch beside it, in order to appraise the objects and to read the label texts. [Ills. 4.8] Within its impersonal, transitory scenario of refuse and repair, *The Rope of Life* extends an invitation to intimacy.

The physical proximity between viewer and object that Kabakov cultivates within the installation space of *The Rope of Life* then mimics a proximity of persons, mimes a somatic closeness. And this allusion is significant. For as Kabakov explains in the installation text, in the voice of the work's absent protagonist, the rope with its attached accoutrements is the explicit symbol of a life. As the protagonist recounts:

I decided to describe my life in the form of a rope and to arrange all of the events of my life in that order in which I remember them, taking care not to distinguish the important from the unimportant, since, for me, they were all equally important and significant.³⁴⁶

The notes strung along the rope therefore mark various moments from a life and combine to narrate a personal history. This history begins on February 12, 1932, when the rope's owner was born "in Berdyansk, into the family of a poor employee,"³⁴⁷ and continues through until the spring of 1975. In the space that intervenes these points, an orderly procession of seasons and years file by, all inscribed with discrete events. The spring of 1940, for instance, sees the rope owner's family "digging the shelter hole in the

³⁴⁶ Ilya Kabakov, "Text in the Installation [The Rope of Life]," reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 83.

³⁴⁷ Ilya Kabakov, *The Rope of Life*.

backyard.” And in the winter of 1948, “Mother brings the borscht, the main course and compote to the cloakroom downstairs. I eat.”

The lived history which *The Rope of Life* transcribes, in all of its intimate and incidental detail, is consequently one in which continuity and linearity are emphasized. The rope itself, which unites various points in time within an orderly chronology, is the principle symbol of this continuum. In addition, Kabakov’s descriptions of the work are densely packed with metaphors, which work to further underscore the unbroken, thread-like quality of this life on-a-rope:

[In considering life in abstract] you see your life as a whole, and you can fly freely from the beginning to the end and back again, like some sort of light, soundless flying machine rushing first to the source of a river, and then to its mouth.³⁴⁸

Akin to a river in its uninterrupted flow, the memorialized life which forms the subject of the installation can be traversed and navigated freely. This history is notably clear of breaks and blind-spots, unencumbered by temporal disjunctions and ruptures. In their methodical progression, then, the fragile series of dates on paper arranged along *The Rope of Life* work to preserve and protect a stability of the self in time.

In addition to dates and events, the assembled notes also mark objects. Indeed, each note is only attached to the rope via an intermediary item, which thus becomes the ostensible

³⁴⁸ Ilya Kabakov, “Description of the Installation [The Rope of Life],” reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993*, 82. Kabakov subsequently notes the similarity of the river he describes to the rope in the installation: “Nevertheless, how does this ‘journey’ along life look from above, from the light, aerial space? Isn’t it somewhat similar to a long string lying on the floor, with many twists and turns, loops and bends?” (Ibid, 82.)

subject of each dated recollection. Yet, as quickly becomes apparent, there is no evident connection between these items, which, as Kabakov enumerates, include “a broken toothbrush, empty bottles, buttons, papers, etc.”³⁴⁹ and the events the labels narrate. In a conversation with Joseph Bakshtein about *The Rope of Life*, Kabakov confirms this, stating that “these garbage objects have no relationship whatever to the dates. These are not objects of those days, but simply arbitrarily collected garbage.”³⁵⁰ In place of any causal or denotative nexus between item and label, *The Rope of Life* then organizes an indexical register of objects. Here each item, in its objecthood and arbitrariness, becomes an unmotivated physical symbol of the event and date that attaches to it. Signs of their own corporeality, these assorted pieces of detritus anchor the past they transcribe with a palpable material presence.

The personal history which *The Rope of Life* recounts therefore buttresses its narrative continuity with a scaffold of objects. Materiality itself is here configured as a sign of immutability and historical depth, an apotropaic defense formation that armors the immaterial fragility of memory against the annihilating Soviet past. The self-history that the rope organizes is thus a history that is fully reified, preserved in a taxidermy of things that connote duration and stability. As in subsequent installations such as *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Kabakov here authors a scenario where, as Svetlana Boym presciently observes, “time hides in the configuration of objects.”³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Ilya Kabakov, “Description of the Installation [The Rope of Life],” reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993*, 83.

³⁵⁰ Ilya Kabakov and Joseph Bakshtein, “Commentary,” in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993*, 85.

³⁵¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 318.

The Rope of Life is then presented to the viewer as the physical document of a project by an absent protagonist to fortify and preserve his past by reproducing it in object form. Recast in a fossicker's lexicon of notes and detritus, this everyday self-history conserves a temporal continuity and stability palpably opposed to the dislocated, inaccessible past that Moscow Conceptualism so frequently associates with its own era. Self-continuity is here invested and sustained in *things*, and this investiture consequently imbues the said objects with the auratic warmth and intimacy of the human. The defensive displacement of memory onto materials which the installation records then secures the rope maker's past as it also effaces the boundaries between subject and object.³⁵² With a self now implicated, itemized and arranged in objects, the limits of the protagonist's being become increasingly fluid and blurred. A subjectivity that organizes itself in things here also surrenders to them a measure of its autonomy and vital force. Having recast himself in object form, the rope's creator in turn becomes superfluous to his own life story.

Weary with dirt and disrepair, the incidental objects that Kabakov arranges along *The Rope of Life* then impart their age and historical depth to the life they notate. It is this exchange, this mutual investiture of objects in the self and the self in objects, which fascinates Kabakov and which *The Rope of Life* meditates upon. And it is significant that the fulcrum for these operations is lived history, the Soviet past. History here perseveres

³⁵² In his commentary on *The Rope of Life*, Kabakov makes note of this concatenation of person and object in the installation. Describing how the rope would resemble a the path of a life to an observer looking down on the world from above, Kabakov writes: "But then a certain time will pass and the rope and the garbage, having been gathered up into a single ball, into a tangled knot, will be shoved into a sack and taken away, put somewhere... And what about the observer? Where will he go? What will happen to him? It is impossible to say anything about this, for to tell the truth, he existed only because the rope existed. He was connected only to the rope, and what will happen to him without it, when it is taken away, put in a package and carried off to some unknown place?" (*Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations, 1983-1993*, 82.) In this parable, by embodying a life, the rope subsequently becomes an integral component of that life.

in materials, and the fragmented Soviet subject attains a measure of continuity and stability by appropriating these materials, incorporating them within himself. In *The Rope of Life*, then, Kabakov implicates the practices of collection and display in the formation of the self, and, critically, in the organization of self-history. Three years later, the artist would confirm the salience of these motifs to his work by making them the subject of another installation. The installation, which explores in greater depth and detail the preservation of the past in objects, is entitled *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*.

The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away, also known as *The Garbage Man*, was first displayed as part of Kabakov's *Ten Characters* exhibition at the Ronald Feldman gallery, New York, in 1988. In keeping with the other installations that, together, comprised the exhibition, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* takes as its subject the private project of a hermetic *kommunalka* tenant. Because this project is contained entirely within the tenant's room, the installation text informs the viewer that the locked door had been forced by repair men searching for a water meter. The text then describes what the other tenants, filing in to investigate, discovered:

The entire room, from floor to ceiling, was filled with piles of different types of garbage. But this wasn't a disgusting, stinking garbage dump like in the courtyard or in the large bins near the gates of our building, but rather a gigantic warehouse of the most varied things, arranged in a special, one might say, in a carefully maintained order.³⁵³

³⁵³ Ilya Kabakov "The Garbage Man" [installation text], reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations 1983-1993* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 177.

A scrupulously ordered, carefully tabulated collection of objects, organized in cases and shelves, completely fills the room of the man who never threw anything away. [Ills. 4.9] Arranged with the systematic objectivity of a scientific archive or museum display, these assembled articles of refuse are tagged and labeled, much in the manner of *The Rope of Life*. The viewer – or the curious *kommunalka* neighbor – is consequently left to wander amongst this meticulous assembly of detritus, to read the labels and to try to discern the logic that might govern such bewildering systemicity.

Kabakov, however, seeks to tell stories in his art, and the voluminous archive which crowds the installation space is consequently secured within a narrative framework. Set forth in a text that accompanies the installation, this sequence begins with the aforementioned discovery of the room's contents by other members of the *kommunalka*. Subsequently, an elderly tenant named Uncle Misha uncovers a pile of manuscripts on a table and begins to read them. At this point, the text switches to the voice of the absent tenant, henceforth called the garbage man, whose theories and philosophies of rubbish are documented within the papers Uncle Misha peruses.

Framed in this manner by the thoughts of its creator, the rubbish-archive of *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* presents itself as a philosophical system. Here, rubbish is not merely collected, but enlisted as a tool for understanding and self-comprehension. Like the unnamed protagonist in *The Rope of Life*, the garbage man utilizes rubbish as a means of structuring and ordering the self, a defense against the effacing capriciousness

of Soviet existence. Yet *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* also extends the concerns of the former work to describe a Soviet metaphysics of garbage, whose amorphous ubiquity threatens the subject with dissolution. As in *On Emptiness*, which tracks the lives of the burrow men amidst the vast archipelago of Soviet emptiness, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* posits a means of living – and surviving – in garbage.

There is a sketch by Kabakov that depicts a plan for the 1995 installation of *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* at the Museet for Samtidskunst in Oslo, Norway. [Ills. 4.10] In the sketch, before entering the room of the garbage man, the viewer first passes through an anterior space, approximating a corridor, which is piled high with what Kabakov labels as “broken furniture.” These chaotic stacks of abandoned objects serve to highlight the opposition between the accumulated grime and disorder of the communal apartment and the obsessive order of the tenant’s room. Bounded by dirt and debris, the garbage man’s private space assumes the auratic calm of a sanctuary, a refuge against an ever-encroaching chaos. This assault upon the self by things is immediately raised in the manuscript discovered by Uncle Misha:

Our home literally stands under a paper rain: magazines, letters, addresses, receipts, notes, envelopes, invitations, outlines, programs, telegrams, wrapping paper, etc. We periodically sort and arrange these streams, waterfalls of paper into groups... every person has his own principle. The rest, of course, is tossed out in the rubbish heap.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Ilya Kabakov “The Garbage Man” [installation text], reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations 1983-1993*, 177.

Life is the consequent process of separating the useful from the useless, of arranging the cluttered object-world that surrounds one in order to make sense of it. These sortings, as the author makes clear, also order the self, speak of priority and predilection. That which we salvage from the unceasing paper rain, that which we keep, is us.

The garbage man here articulates what Kabakov elsewhere described as “the special sensation, physical and mental, that everything which surrounded us living in the Soviet Union represented an enormous littered space.”³⁵⁵ Rubbish is amorphous and indistinct, “a boundary category,”³⁵⁶ in the words of Joseph Bakshtein, which itself blurs and erases boundaries.³⁵⁷ In threatening to transform everything into itself, to nullify the policed divisions between the valuable and the valueless, rubbish also threatens the integrity of the self. This troubles the garbage man:

But if you don't do these sortings, these purges, and you allow the flow of paper to engulf you, considering it impossible to separate the important from the unimportant – wouldn't that be insanity? When is this possible?³⁵⁸

To cease the sorting of objects is to be immediately overwhelmed by them, to lose sight of oneself amidst a sea of things whose relationship to one's own identity is no longer clear. Lost in garbage and unable to order the material world in its image, the organizing

³⁵⁵ Ilya Kabakov, “Works with Garbage”, in Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 170-171 (171).

³⁵⁶ “Ilya Kabakov, ili geografika kolobka,” in *Flash Art*, 1988 issue, 124-128 (126).

³⁵⁷ In the section of his manuscript entitled “The Dump,” the garbage man describes this amorphous extension of rubbish, writing: “The whole world, everything that surrounds me here, appears to me a boundless dump *with no ends or borders*, an inexhaustible diverse sea of garbage.” Ilya Kabakov “The Garbage Man” [installation text], 178. My italics.

³⁵⁸ Ilya Kabakov “The Garbage Man” [installation text], reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations 1983-1993*, 177.

subject, as the author worries, would consequently surrender its coherence and self-identity. The garbage man's subsequent anxiety that "we have lost the border between garbage and non-garbage space,"³⁵⁹ thus registers this erasure as an existential threat.

It is this loss or dissolution of oneself in an encroaching ocean of rubbish which, Kabakov suggests, the garbage man guards himself against. In its fastidious order, the private space of the garbage man's room embodies what Kabakov in *On Emptiness* terms a "psychotechnique" of Soviet life.³⁶⁰ Within these walls, the sorting of rubbish and the attendant anchoring of the self in objects is ceaselessly carried out. That this exhaustive process is an existential one, that it pertains to central questions of the self, emerges in the garbage man's anxieties when he worries that "to deprive ourselves of all of this [rubbish] means to part with who we were in the past, and in a certain sense, it means to cease to exist."³⁶¹ As with *The Rope of Life*, these objects embody and preserve the internal coherence of the subject.

The tension which Kabakov pursues in *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* is thus the one he accentuates in his sketch for the Oslo installation. Here an obsessive order is deployed as a defense against a surrounding world whose natural state is the primeval formlessness of garbage. Rather than sorting and discarding the materials that accumulates around him, the garbage man retains *everything*. He then distinguishes each item by inscribing the circumstances of its acquisition on an adjacent label. Every object

³⁵⁹ Ilya Kabakov "The Garbage Man" [installation text], reproduced in *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000, Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. One: Installations 1983-1993*, 179.

³⁶⁰ Ilya Kabakov, "O Pustote," 90.

³⁶¹ Ilya Kabakov "The Garbage Man" [installation text], 178.

arranged in his room is thus individualized, marked out from the indistinct masses of garbage that surround and lay siege to this small shrine of order. And in turn these myriad pieces of detritus fortify and structure the garbage man's person against the threat of dissolution. This final point is again iterated in the protagonist's description of his collection as constituting "the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous it seems from the outside."³⁶² The objects which the garbage man painstakingly arranges in albums and wall charts therefore reify and secure a lived history which would otherwise be forever lost as these objects flow on to merge with the amorphous, all-consuming ocean of rubbish that fills the Soviet Union.

The story which *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* arranges itself to relate is thus one of a sanctuary of order in which the temporal depth of a personal history is tabulated and preserved in object form. This persistence in time, Kabakov makes clear, is as integral to garbage as its relentless colonization of Soviet space. In a section of his manuscript entitled "The Dump", the garbage man meditates upon these dual qualities:

The whole world, everything that surrounds me here, appears to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible diverse sea of garbage. In this refuse of an enormous city one can feel the powerful breathing of its entire past. This whole dump is full of flashes, twinkling stars, reflections, and fragments of culture... An enormous past rises up behind these crates, vials, and sacks; all forms of packaging that were ever needed by man have not lost their shape, they did not become something dead when discarded. They cry out about a past life, they preserve it...³⁶³

³⁶² Ibid, 178.

³⁶³ Ibid, 178-179.

Fragmentary and abandoned, yet nonetheless vital, the Soviet past here endures in the primeval formlessness of rubbish. Soviet history is literally composed of garbage, and the detritus which permeates all space is at once the material ruins of the past. To grasp the past preserved in this dissolute mass of artifacts, to make sense of them as history, one must sort and dig and excavate amidst the vast burial ground of things the Soviet borders delineate. History must be reclaimed from oblivion, reanimated, reintegrated into life.³⁶⁴

In *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Kabakov presents being as the project of giving order to a vast reservoir of inchoate material. This material *is* history, and it is also the means by which the self is secured and organized as a historical entity. Yet the myriad fragments of the past with which the garbage man secures his own history render his self-identity a prosthetic one, incapable of being separated from the ordered objects which guard against the annihilating indistinction of rubbish. His defense of his self is thus at once a self-alienation, a reification and surrogate anchoring of identity along a temporal manifold that could not otherwise be navigated.

³⁶⁴ In his essay “Thing and Word: On the Lyrical Museum,” (in *After The Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 253-279) Mikhail Epstein develops the ideas that structure Kabakov’s works in rubbish, imagining a museum that was devoted to old, common, and worn-out objects. In keeping with Kabakov, Epstein argues that these items – which we would commonly term “rubbish” – have a unique ability to absorb the qualities and memories of their owners, which increases with age. Epstein writes that: “A *thing* possesses a particular essence that gains in significance in reverse proportion to the technological novelty, commercial value, and aesthetic appeal of the thing per se. This essence, involving the capability of a thing to become kindred, to enter the life of a human being, is revealed more fully as other qualities diminish and lose their value or newness.” (255.) For Epstein, this process additionally reveals the mutual dependence between human and (aged) object: “The very dichotomy of “thing” and “human” can at best be arbitrarily established within the framework of “human-thingness,” which, ultimately, is as indissoluble as soul and body.” (255.) Epstein’s description of a subjectivity anchored in garbage-objects is additionally concerned with how garbage can imbue its collector with a sense of memory or historical depth, and here the communalities with Kabakov again become clear. As Epstein notes: “It might indeed prove worthwhile to keep such dear and deserving things hanging on the walls to give the room a dimension of depth, or “eternity,” *where time-already-lived-through abides in a single space with the ongoing and incipient.*” (262, my italics.) For both men, then, worn and aged objects are both a necessary structural support for subjectivity *and* a bearer or sign of historical depth.

The detritus which the garbage man views as the fundament of all existence therefore permeates Soviet time as it does Soviet space. Rubbish transforms the past into an indistinct mass of material, divested of structure and chronological order. Within this world, the Soviet citizen's interaction with the past is *archaeological*, vested in a taxonomy of artifacts and found items. These objects signify and thus fortify the continuity of the subject against the great *informe* of Soviet history, yet also register that subject's limits, its inability to organize itself historically without material support. As with Pivovarov's studio notes or the assorted accoutrements that span *The Rope of Life*, the material memories the garbage man fastidiously arranges in albums and wall charts mask a deeper absence. What these object-archives then substitute *for* is a living, ordering history whose vanquished chronologies and continuities must now be reconstituted by other means. In his small sanctuary of ordered space, the garbage man then organizes his vast treasury of objects to denote and construe an equally ordered experience of time.

Rubbish in *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* is both a substance and a condition, the basis of a materialist ontology of Soviet existence. As the garbage man notes in his manuscript, within the Soviet Union rubbish operates in the manner of a Marxist dialectics, creating a "unity of oppositions"³⁶⁵ by infecting and eroding all

³⁶⁵ The garbage man writes that "this merging of two spaces - the place from which the garbage must be taken and the place to which it must be taken - this kind of 'unity of oppositions' which we were told about when we were still in school, functions as a real unity, a genuine indistinguishability of one from the other. How does a construction site differ from a garbage dump? The building across the street has been under construction for 18 years already and it is impossible to tell it apart from the ruins of the other buildings that were demolished in order to build this one." Ilya Kabakov "The Garbage Man" [installation text], 179.

opposing categories, stripping things of their novelty and utility. It is the stuff of Soviet life, the fundamental material upon which this uncanny civilization rests. As Andrei Monastyrsky muses, Kabakov in his art “finds the truthful face of this life only in rubbish.”³⁶⁶ Yet rubbish for Kabakov is also invested with potential, a tool and a resource for self-construction and knowledge.

In both *The Rope of Life* and *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, rubbish is presented as an integral material of self-narration, the physical scaffolding through which an otherwise unnavigable personal history is secured and displayed. It is this constructive and historical orientation of rubbish in Kabakov that Mikhail Epstein, in a well-known passage on the artist’s use of detritus, fails to grasp:

Rubbish is another form of emptiness, its static material manifestation. When emptiness penetrates the very structure of objects, eroding them from the inside, when it thrusts inner spaces onto the surface, when it reveals the wretched side of things, their futility and neglect, then out of emptiness *rubbish* emerges into the light of day, becoming Kabakov’s second most favored object of contemplation and artistic device.³⁶⁷

Epstein is correct that rubbish in Kabakov is invested with a quality, but rather than emptiness, that quality is primarily one of historical depth. In the works discussed above, rubbish is presented as the fragmentary endurance of a ruined past, that problematic nexus between an otherwise disconnected Soviet present and its antecedent moments. It is these temporal properties of garbage, its persistence in time, which are consequently

³⁶⁶ Andrei Monastyrsky in conversation with Joseph Bakshtein, in *Flash Art*, 1988 edition, 131-134 (133).

³⁶⁷ Mikhail Epstein, “Emptiness as a Technique: Word and Image in Ilya Kabakov,” in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, edited by Mikhail Epstein and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (Berghahn Books, 1999), 299- 340 (327).

framed in the fastidious arrangement, by both the rope maker and the garbage man, of their life histories in objects. In Kabakov, garbage offers a syncretic self-continuity, a material means of ordering the self along a broken temporal axis. Eccentric curators of their own surrogate histories, these characters, like *The Man Who Flew into Space*, are thus offered by Kabakov to his audience as case studies within a larger anthropology of Soviet civilization.

To continue these enquiries regarding the status of the Soviet past within Moscow conceptualist art, it is now timely to return to the work of Igor Makarevich, whose photographic series *Exodus* inaugurated this discussion. As the *Exodus* photographs intimate, one of the guiding concerns of Makarevich's art is the nature of the relationship between past and present. The Soviet past is therefore a recurrent presence in the artist's works, although, as with Pivovarov and Kabakov, the task of mediating this aphasiac presence within art is neither simple nor straightforward. In accordance with his Moscow conceptualist colleagues, no living, accessible past emerges from Makarevich's work. Rather, history, the prior moment, is constantly cognized in terms of death and disappearance.

“All of Makarevich's artistic actions are ritual acts of burial or a sort of funeral,”³⁶⁸ writes Andrei Monastyrsky, in a gesture towards the centrality of death within the artist's

³⁶⁸ Andrei Monastyrsky, “Monumental'ni Makarevich,” in *I. Makarevich/E. Elagina. V predelakh prekrasnogo: ob'ekti i installyatsii* (Moscow: XL Gallery, 2005), 14-19 (17).

oeuvre. Makarevich's explorations of the Soviet past, however, center primarily on the *process* of mortality, its attendant transformation of living tissue into inert matter. What history bequeaths the present is, for Makarevich, primarily ruination and material remains. Here, the communalities with Kabakov's use of rubbish become clear. For both artists, the past permeates the present via the physical husks of formerly vital objects. As with Kabakov, historical depth in Makarevich is mediated in an object-language of exhaustion, obsolescence and erasure. Yet Makarevich's emphasis on physical death also imbues his explorations of Soviet history with a minatory and haunting quality. Like the ghostly figures that populate the exodus photographs, the past here endures as an uncanny presence within the boundaries of a present that cannot properly accommodate it.

The Corpses of The Communards, [Ills. 4.11] a notable, large-scale painting from 1973, provides an auspicious early example of Makarevich's twinned concerns of death and history. As the artist notes, the work was conceived as a history painting and based upon a series of photographs of executed French communards, themselves reminiscent of similar images of Russian revolutionaries.³⁶⁹ With a tightly packed pictorial space further emphasized by the coffin frames which enclose each body, *The Corpses of The Communards* utilizes a formal logic of spatial confinement that is strikingly similar to the subsequent *Stratographic Structures*.³⁷⁰ This claustrophobic proximity, heightened by the evident decay of several corpses, is far removed from the grand stage history painting

³⁶⁹ "Igor Makarevich with Gerald Pirog: Unusual perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities," in *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 278-291 (283-84). It is worthy of note that Makarevich has superimposed his own face upon the third corpse from the lower right.

³⁷⁰ And of course to the many works place plaster casts of the artist's face or torso within a grid-shaped wooden framework, including *The Dispersion of a Soaring Soul* of 1978, and *The Case of Sensations* of 1979.

typically demands. Rather, history – and Makarevich notably selects a signal episode of class history – is here presented as the material fact of death, the mute aftermath of an event whose denouement has long since passed. In its emphasis upon the reduction of life or spirit to matter, *The Corpses of The Communards* then frames the history it addresses not as heroism or sacrifice, but rather as Thanatos and erasure. The historical materialism of Soviet ideology is itself here material for a macabre and subtle parody.

The meditations upon the physical legacy of death that structure *The Corpses of The Communards* are reiterated in an etching from later that same year entitled *Bird*. [Ills. 4.12] Rendered in a detailed and pronounced chiaroscuro, *Bird* memorializes the desiccated remains of a rook that Makarevich found upon the roof of an abandoned building. Like its predecessor, *Bird* too offers death as an ironic rebuttal to the affirmative machinery of Soviet mythmaking. As Makarevich notes, the carcass debases Picasso's dove of peace, which had become a ubiquitous presence in official propaganda.³⁷¹ It thus creates what the artist terms an “anti-sign,”³⁷² a starkly literal material proposition which reveals the cankering terrain beneath the ideological map.

Yet the blunt materiality which *Bird* offers as a purgative for metaphor and figuration is also placed within a temporal continuum. In its objecthood, the rook corpse embodies its own prior life, the organic process which first created and then animated these now decayed remains. Here again historical depth is predicated in object form, as the trace or

³⁷¹ “My etching *Bird* is connected with the universal symbol of piece [sic], the dove. Official propaganda turned Picasso's famous drawing into a repulsive, profaned sign.” “Igor Makarevich with Gerald Pirog: Unusual perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities,” 289.

³⁷² *Ibid*, 289.

the substitute of a living history. In *Bird*, the past enters the present as a dead thing. Like *The Corpses of The Communards*, then, Makarevich, in this small *nature morte*, circumscribes the dual endurance and erasure of death to create what Ekaterina Degot has termed “memorials of absence and oblivion.”³⁷³

The mortal process which Makarevich fixates upon in the above works is again raised in the artist’s many plaster cast constructions from the late nineteen-seventies. These works incorporate actual casts of the artist’s face or torso, typically encased in wooden frames. The constructions thus invoke strong funerary associations, hint at the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of death. In the words of Monastyrsky, these works constitute “thanatic shells,”³⁷⁴ a term that succinctly captures the analogies with reliquaries and death masks which Makarevich here plots. *Stratographic Structures*, [Ills. 3.1] with its serial reproductions of the artist’s expressionless face, lips pursed and eyelids tightly closed, provides one of many possible illustrations of this. The plaster constructions then commemorate the bodily tissue they are cast from, preserving that body’s creases and contours in materials less perishable than flesh.

Makarevich’s plaster cast constructions therefore sustain and develop the artist’s fascination with the transfiguring process of death, its reduction of spirit to matter. As with the cadavers and the carcass that constitute the respective subjects of *The Corpses of the Communards* and *Bird*, works like *Stratographic Structures* and *The Case of*

³⁷³ Ekaterina Degot, “Russkii iashchik i zimnii bivak”, in *I. Makarevich/E. Elagina. V predelakh prekrasnogo: ob’ekti i installyatsii* (Moscow: XL Gallery, 2005), 152-154 (152).

³⁷⁴ Andrei Monastyrsky, “Monumental’ni Makarevich,” in *I. Makarevich/E. Elagina. V predelakh prekrasnogo: ob’ekti i installyatsii*, 14-19 (14).

Sensations [Ills. 3.2] call attention to their own inert materiality, their lifeless representation of life. The patina of mortality which the casts inscribe their human subject with consequently imbues the casting procedure with connotations of death and dying. This process transforms living tissue into a mere image of itself, the physical effluvia of a former life. In a photomontage of the casting process entitled *Stratographic Structures-Changes*, [Ills. 4.13] Makarevich again draws this analogy, organizing sequential photographs of the molding of his face into a plaster mask, which is subsequently effaced from the visual field. Once again, death is here the transformative reduction of being to physical matter, and it is matter alone which endures in time.

In common with Makarevich's earlier work, the cast constructions frame the mortal process they meditate upon in temporal terms. Death is here a property of the past, of history. It is what endures into the present and, as such, death in Makarevich is mediated in archaeological terms, as the physical remnants of a broader historical process. It is highly salient that throughout Makarevich's long engagement with Thanatos, death is never predicated as an contemporaneous occurrence or an immanent threat. Rather, it is an event already transpired, located backwards in time, which bequeaths to the current moment only empty husks and inert matter. Here again, the correspondences between Makarevich's view of death and Kabakov's conception of rubbish are evident. Both entities form the basis of a materialist archaeology of the Soviet past, in which historical knowledge and information survive only in objects. These material remains may be used to construct and gird surrogate histories, as in Kabakov, or simply offered to the viewer as evidence of the past's status, as with Makarevich. Yet in each case, the Soviet past's

broken connection with the present can never be fully restored. In the work of both artists, history permeates the present in an object-language of its own desolation. Consequently, its presence is at once a physical sign of its lack and ruination. Soviet history here endures as detritus and dead things, and any historical recuperation is thus at the same time a recognition of the loss that these historical materials embody.

The objects that frame Makarevich's meditations upon death then plumb an uneasy tension, for which Pivovarov's term "the presence of an absence"³⁷⁵ seems uniquely suited. Vessels of oblivion, these casts and corpses memorialize a loss which they situate in the past, backwards in time. They are thus historical objects, bearers of temporal depth, yet what they convey of history is necessarily intertwined with the death they embody. Because of this, these objects are themselves traumatic figures, mute emissaries of an unseen, prior violence whose consequences Makarevich's art continuously confronts. Contemporary life for Makarevich thus exists in the shadow of prior catastrophes and is heavy with the task of confronting loss. These historical wounds manifest themselves in absence, disappearance, and death, and it is consequently in these sites that Makarevich's art seeks its engagement with history. The *Exodus* photographs and the artist's works on death are therefore distinct expressions of a common trauma, central to Makarevich's art, in which a past loss inflects the current moment with its haunting, disquieting presence.

³⁷⁵ Viktor Pivovarov, *Vliublennii agent* (Moscow: NRO, 2001), 116.

This chapter then frames the Soviet past as a distinct object and common category of Moscow conceptualist enquiry. It further argues that, as with the other discursive forms of the late Soviet era which Moscow Conceptualism examines or charts, the Soviet past here emerges as a unique and distinctive entity. The past in Moscow conceptualist art is primarily apprehended in terms of traumatic loss and abrogation, as a sundering of temporal continuity that in turn threatens the order of the self. As trauma constitutes an unrepresentable hole or rupture in the symbolic order, the past in Moscow Conceptualism never constitutes a direct presence, but is rather mediated via a variety of mechanisms. In probing this traumatic caesura within its own history, Moscow Conceptualism then also engages in a *nachträglichkeit* processing of this loss. As this chapter has demonstrated in its discussions of individual works, the *nachträglichkeit* moment of Moscow Conceptualism consists of its attempts to bind and process this traumatic absence, to unearth alternative modes of representation and to reintegrate it into a continuum of history. It is to this end that different Moscow conceptualist works seek to invest objects with historical depth and use them to construct surrogate continuities that bridge an otherwise unnavigable gap in prior life and past histories. These substitutions, however, are at once self-consciously hollow, permeated with the absence and fragmentation they defend against. This is true of Pivovarov's notes in *The Garden*. It is also true of Kabakov's garbage installations and Makarevich's works on death, in which history is recuperated, respectively, in ruins and mortal remains.

In these last lines, then, let us note that Moscow Conceptualism is here again possessed of a broad thematic consistency which traverses the various strategies of making, of

media and of genre, that the Moscow conceptualists frame their address with. These works probe and chart the means by which the past resonates and acts within the space of what Joseph Bakshtein termed “Bolshevism’s post-historicism.”³⁷⁶ It is this investigative orientation, inexactly characterized as a process of cognitive mapping, which this dissertation places at the heart of the Moscow conceptualist endeavor. For in its art, the movement grasps that even the breakdown or suppression of history is itself a historical phenomenon, a moment in a deeper dialectical process. In seeking to historicize and contextualize an age whose grand categories of history have failed it, Moscow Conceptualism then cultivates what might well be termed a post-Utopian dialectics.

³⁷⁶ Joseph Bakshtein, “History of Angels/Angels of History,” in *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptualism and its Influence*, edited by Bart De Baere and Joseph Bakshtein (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2005), 16-23 (16).

Conclusion

In 2011 the world will mark the twentieth anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In these intervening years, Russian society has been progressively integrated into the lifeworld of Western capitalism. Meanwhile, the Moscow conceptualists, many of whom left the Soviet Union during *perestroika*, create, exhibit, and sell works within the context of an international market. The symbols and mechanisms of a globalized culture, so conspicuous in their absence during the era of Moscow Conceptualism, are now ubiquitous in the Russian capital. From the Starbucks at the airport to the sushi bars that intersperse *Tverskaya Ulitsa* in the heart of the city, contemporary Moscow is far more the analogue of Paris or London than the antithesis. Yet it is from precisely this vantage point that Igor Makarevich, still stubbornly resident in the central Moscow apartment which he and Elena Elagina have occupied since the fall of the Soviet Union, writes:

Soviet life, from this distance in time, now appears to those of our circle as a vanquished and wonderful arcadia. Our existence amidst the Brezhnevian ruins has come to seem like a forever lost paradise.³⁷⁷

Makarevich here encapsulates the uncertainty and ambivalence which, for many former Soviet citizens, attends the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent insertion

³⁷⁷ Igor Makarevich, personal correspondence with author, 10/20/2010

of post-Soviet Russia into the continuum of another, hitherto alien, historical model. The shock of this transition is registered in the art of the (former) Moscow conceptualists, whose post-Soviet practices frequently seek refuge in the cultivation of high Communist nostalgia and pathos.³⁷⁸ Yet while Makarevich's elegiac description of the Brezhnev era is redolent with such nostalgia, it is also notable that his choice of similes emphasizes the very same timeless and eternal qualities so frequently ascribed to the period. As both lost paradise and vanquished arcadia, the late socialist era is here placed at maximal distance from recent history, framed as an epoch now wholly remote, inaccessible, and apart.

It is the strange isolation and self-enclosure of the Moscow conceptualist age – an isolation discerned at the time and reiterated retrospectively – which this dissertation has argued is integral to Moscow Conceptualism as a movement. This age – let us continue to term it late socialism – is the product of the obsolescence and redundancy of a specific historical narrative. The discursive forms of this epoch are, I have contended, unique and distinct from the West, in which a similar collapse of historical narrativity is implicated in the transition to postmodernism. The deep difference that underwrites this broad correspondence is addressed in my first chapter, which details the failure of successive attempts to relate Moscow Conceptualism, a movement self-consciously concerned with its age, to Western conceptual art, a canonical postmodern form. Late socialism is possessed of a unique spatial and temporal logic, which is in turn causally connected to the great Utopia of Soviet modernity. It is this logic, and these causalities, which this dissertation identifies as a principle subject of Moscow Conceptualism. Moscow

³⁷⁸ For example, Ilya Kabakov's *The Toilet* of 1992, in which a Soviet-style public toilet is decorated inside with the various accoutrements of family life, and *Life in the Snow* by Igor Makarevich and Elena Elagina, which investigates Soviet mythologies of winter cold.

conceptualist art, in my critical account of it, is less a variety or kind of conceptual art than it is a series of artistic investigations into the workings of Soviet history. The specific historical formation of late socialism which I present as the hermeneutical framework for the movement is thus at once the object of its enquiries.

Moscow Conceptualism, then, is repositioned in this account as constituting a mode of artistic enquiry. The movement's salient coherence, I have argued, is as a series of investigations, conducted in art, into the discursive contours of its own age. Critically, these investigations occur at a juncture in which the Soviet Union had become increasingly incapable of historical self-orientation, of matching the foundational categories and claims of Soviet modernity and modernism with the increasingly errant realities of contemporary life. It is this gap or elipsis between the promethean, Utopian project of Soviet Communism and its unintended and unspoken consequences which Moscow Conceptualism probes in art. And it is as a consequence of this that Moscow conceptualist art is possessed of an intensely historical consciousness. In an age both divided from and troubled by its deeper histories, it is this distinct, problematic nexus between a seemingly changeless present and a decoupled, submerged past which constitutes a primary object, as well as the foundational context, of Moscow conceptualist enquiry.

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Illustrations

Chapter Two



Illustration 2.1: Erik Bulatov, *Krasikov Street*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 150 x 200cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

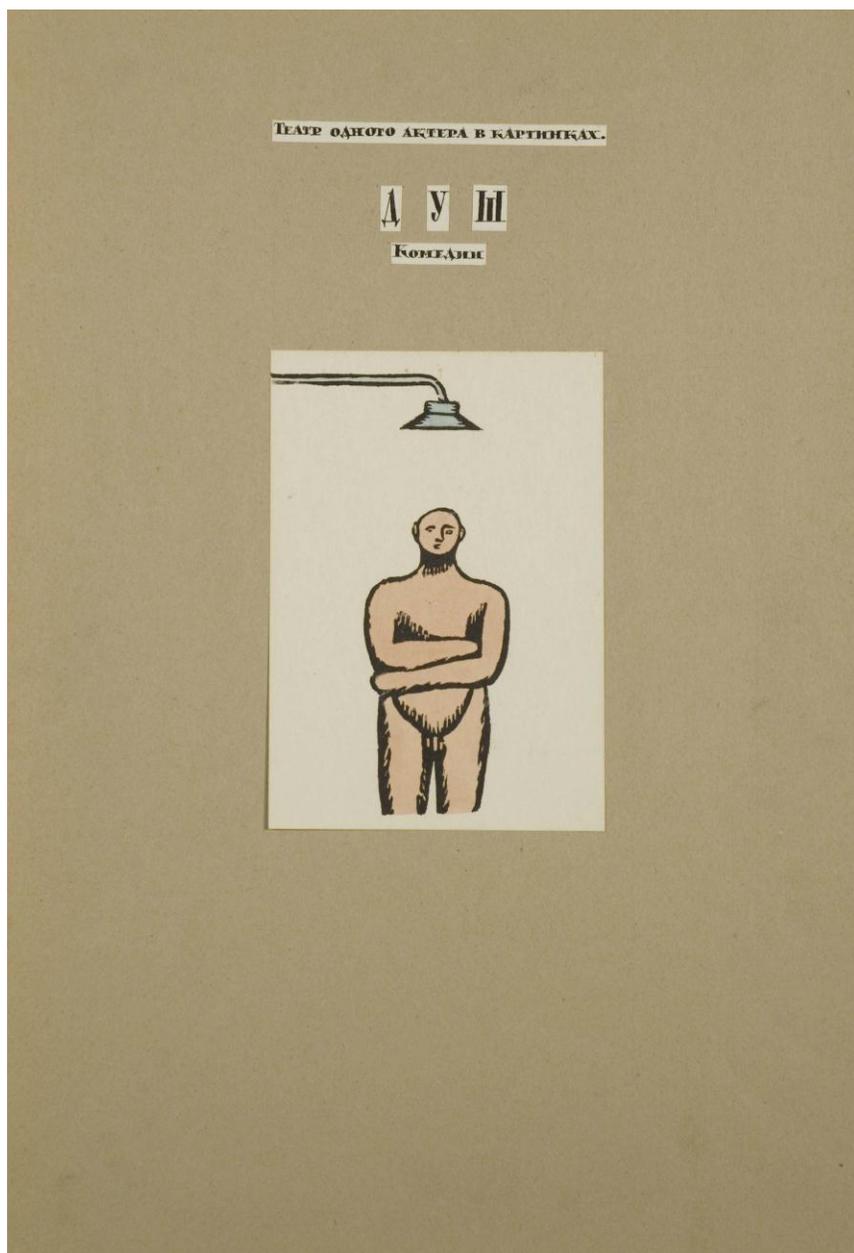


Illustration 2.2: Ilya Kabakov, title page, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

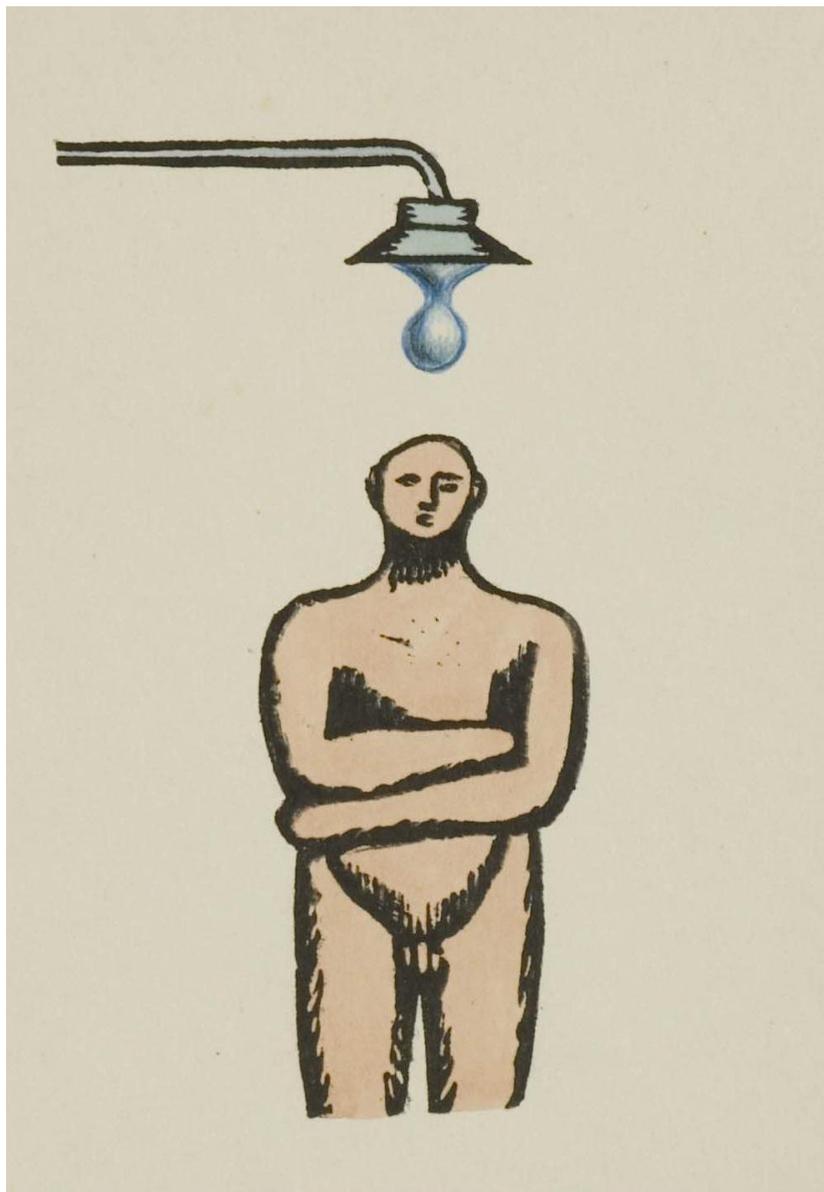


Illustration 2.3: Ilya Kabakov, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

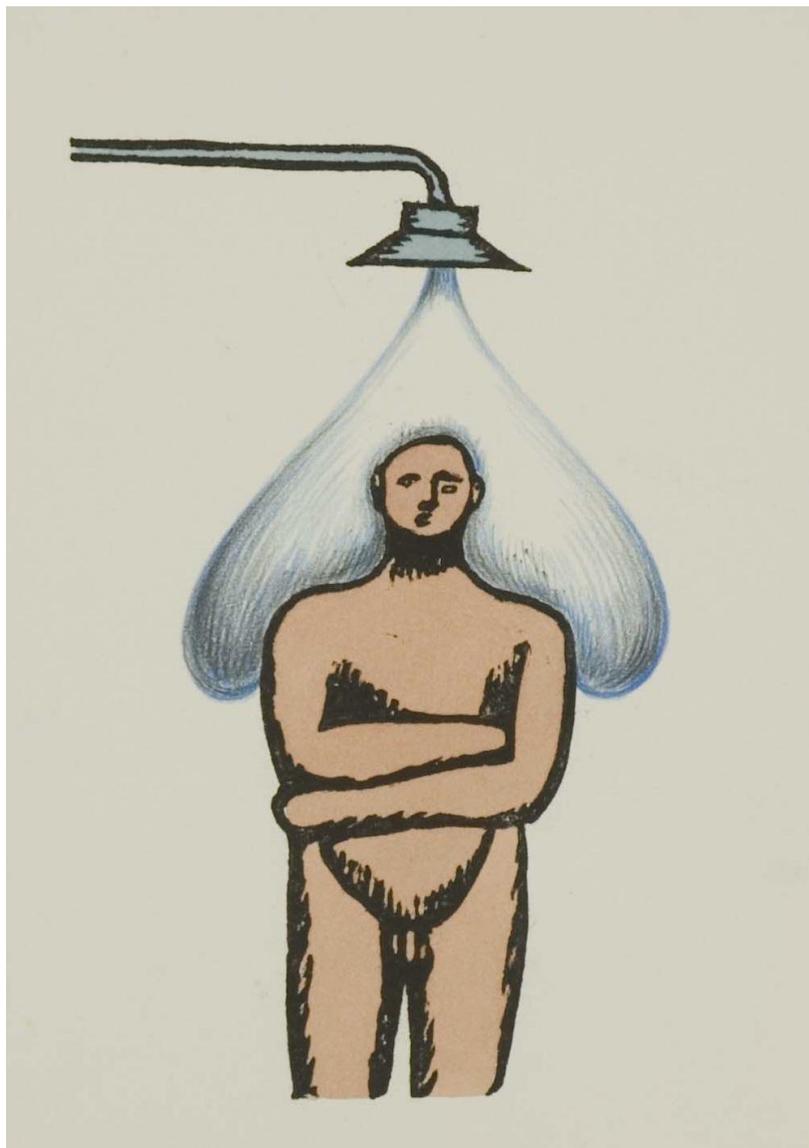


Illustration 2.4: Ilya Kabakov, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

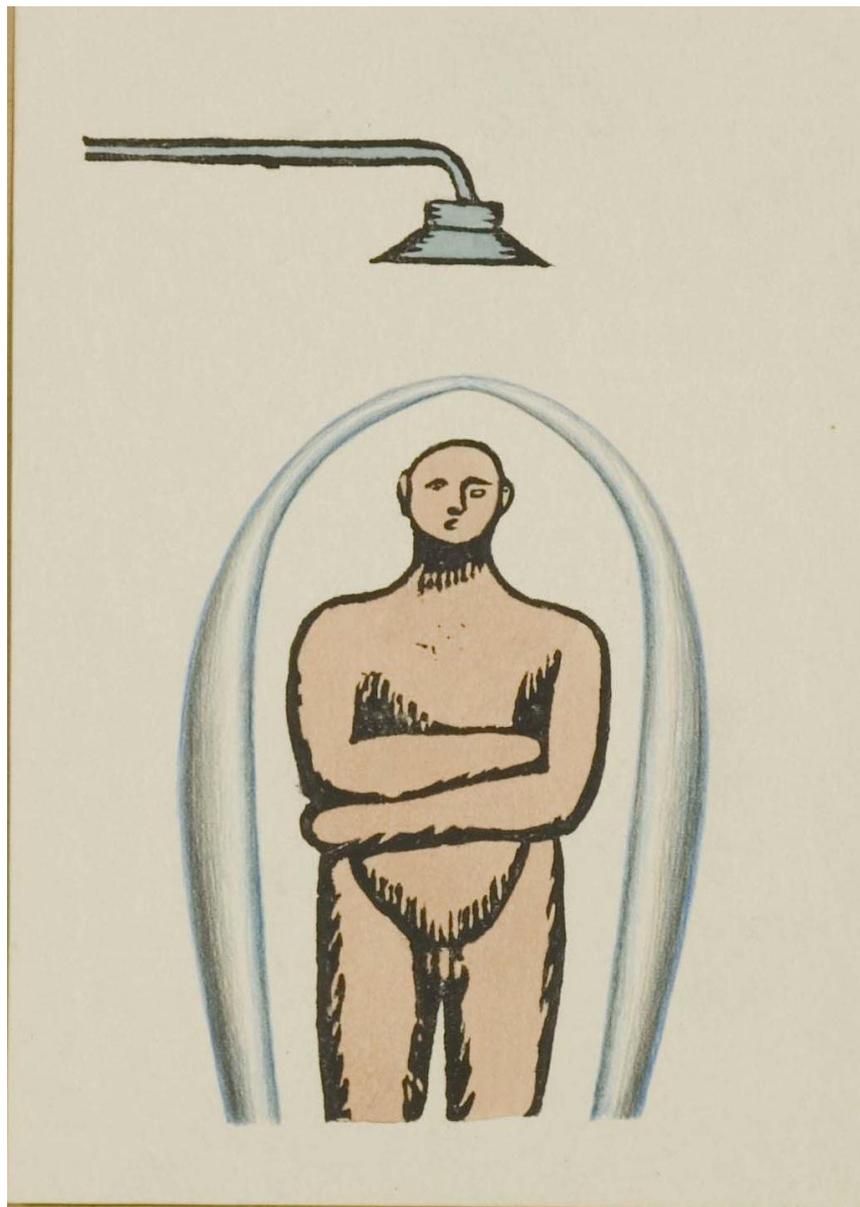


Illustration 2.5: Ilya Kabakov, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

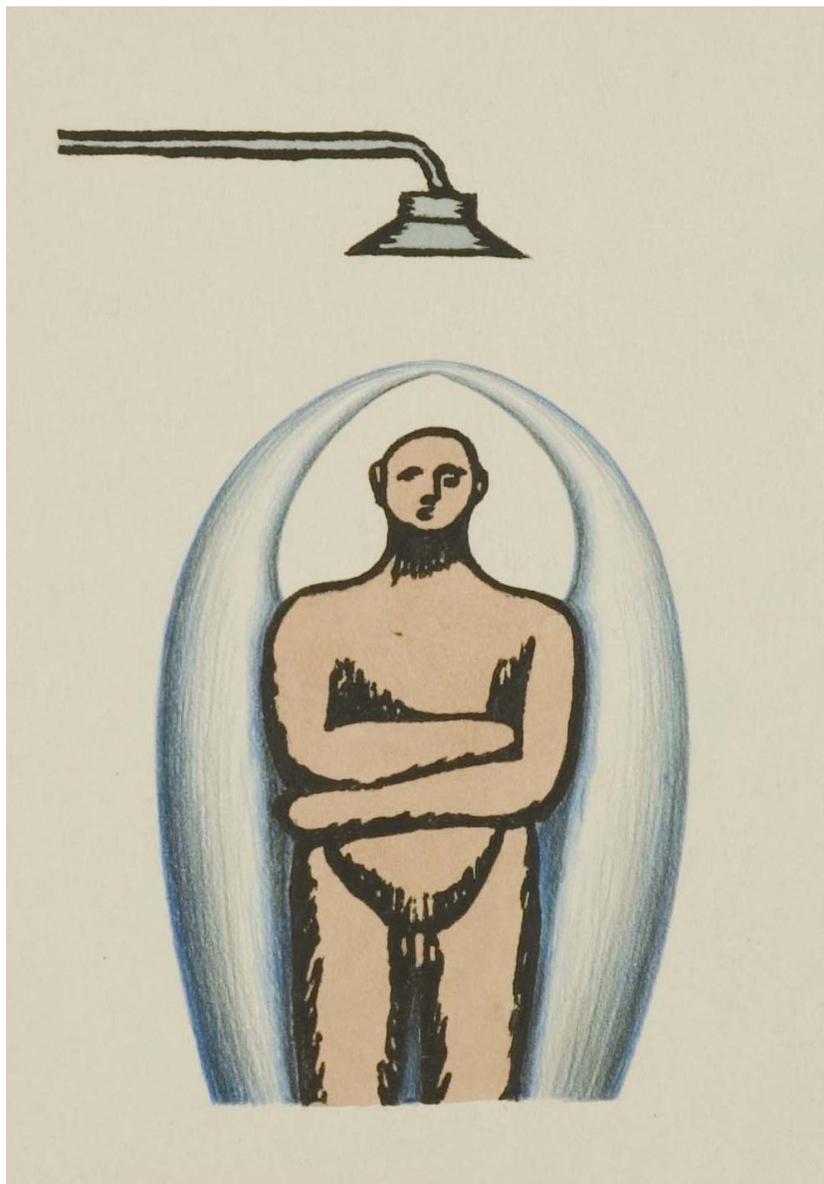


Illustration 2.6: Ilya Kabakov, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

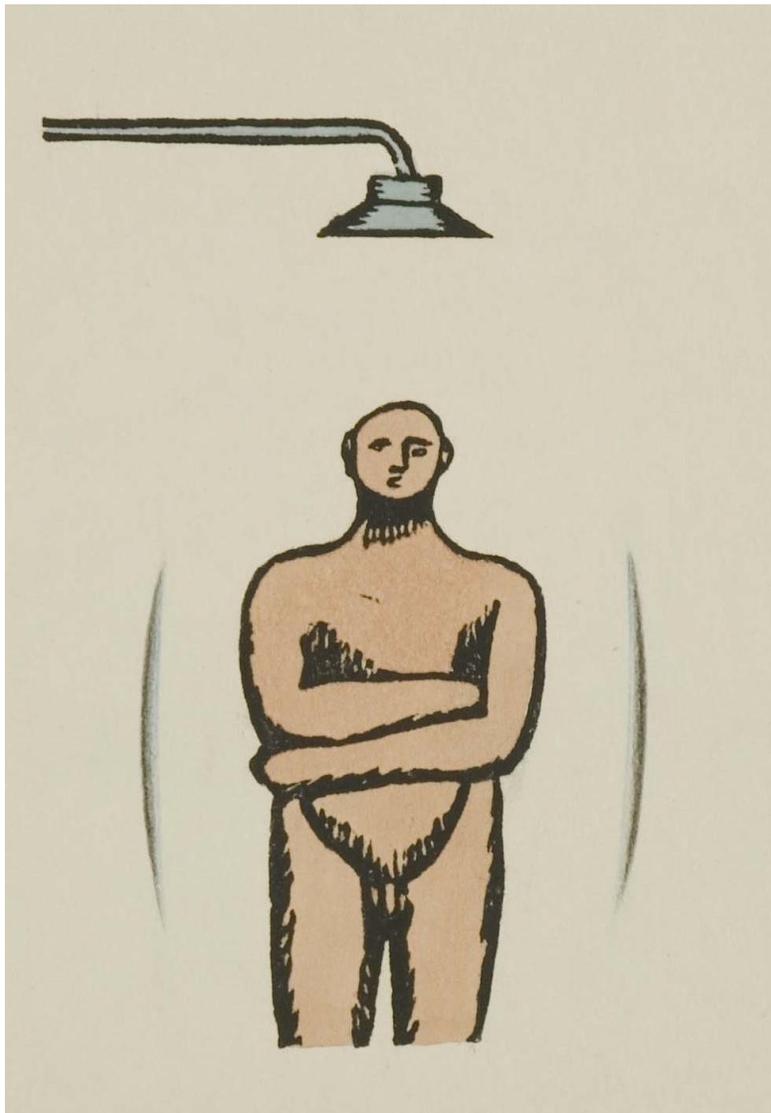


Illustration 2.7: Ilya Kabakov, *Shower*, 1970s. Linocut, watercolor and colored pencil, 22 x 16cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

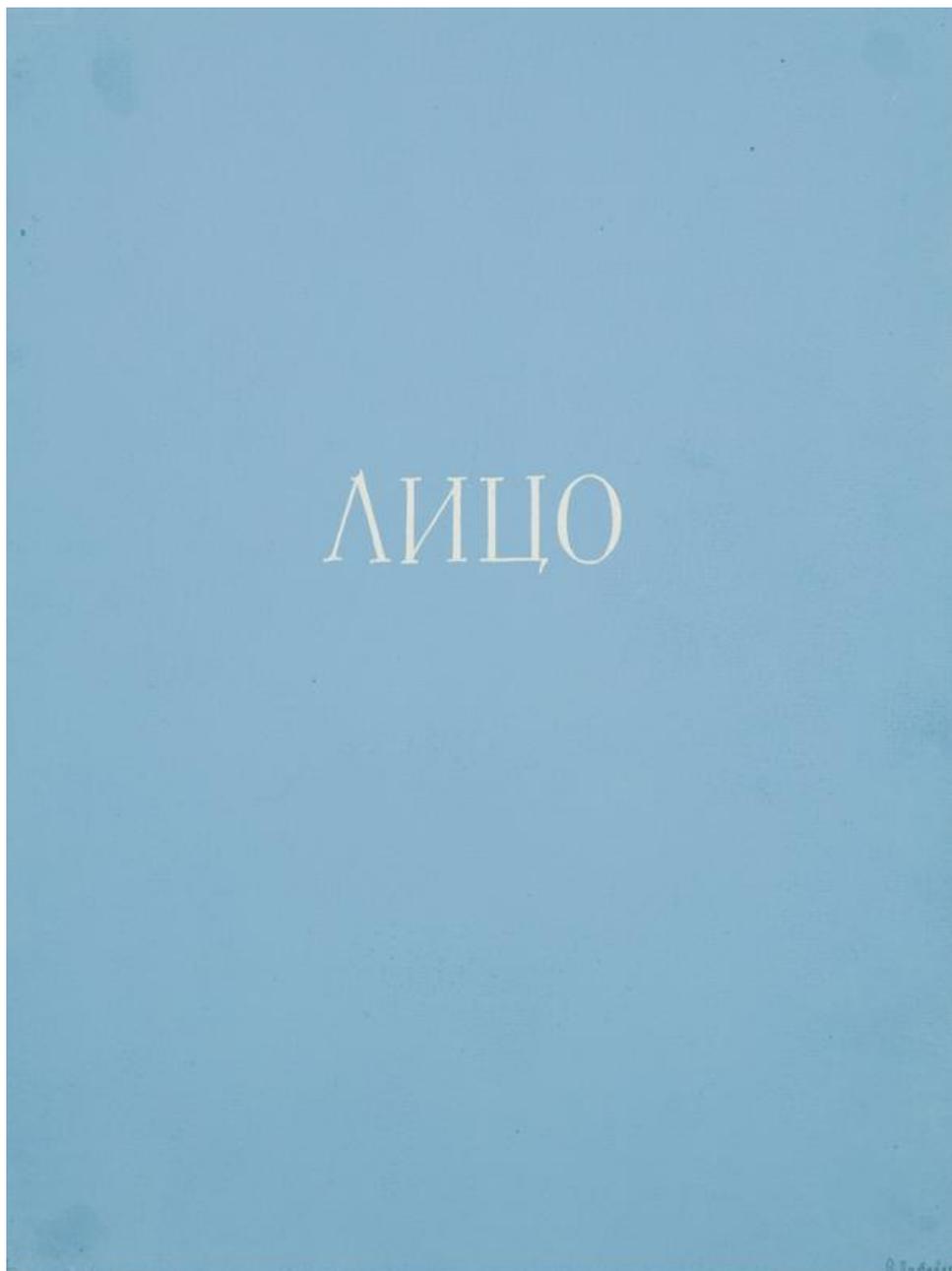


Illustration 2.8: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Illustrated album. All panels gouache on paper, 33 x 25cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum. Panel 1, "Litso."



Illustration 2.9: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 2, "Hello!"



Illustration 2.10: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 3, “Do you remember me?”



Illustration 2.11: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 4, “You remember yesterday, the green bench in the shadow of the bushes?”



Illustration 2.12: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 5, “You don’t remember? I was at Maroseika, we drank tea and recalled friends who had left in vain.”



Illustration 2.13: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 6, “And our friend was with us. He died.”



Illustration 2.14: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 7, “You don’t remember? The courtyard from our childhood, the dovecoat, and the cloudy blue sky overhead...”



Illustration 2.15: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 8, “There was a bitter frost. Do you remember?”



Illustration 2.16: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 9, “We met at the Kirovsky gates...”



Illustration 2.17: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 10, “You had a loaf of bread and a packet of butter in your hands.”



Illustration 2.18: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 11, “And a beautiful woman walked past.”



Illustration 2.19: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 12, “Oh yes! I was wearing a shirt and old jeans.”



Illustration 2.20: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 13, “But my face, do you remember my face?”



Illustration 2.21: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 14, “No, you don’t remember.”

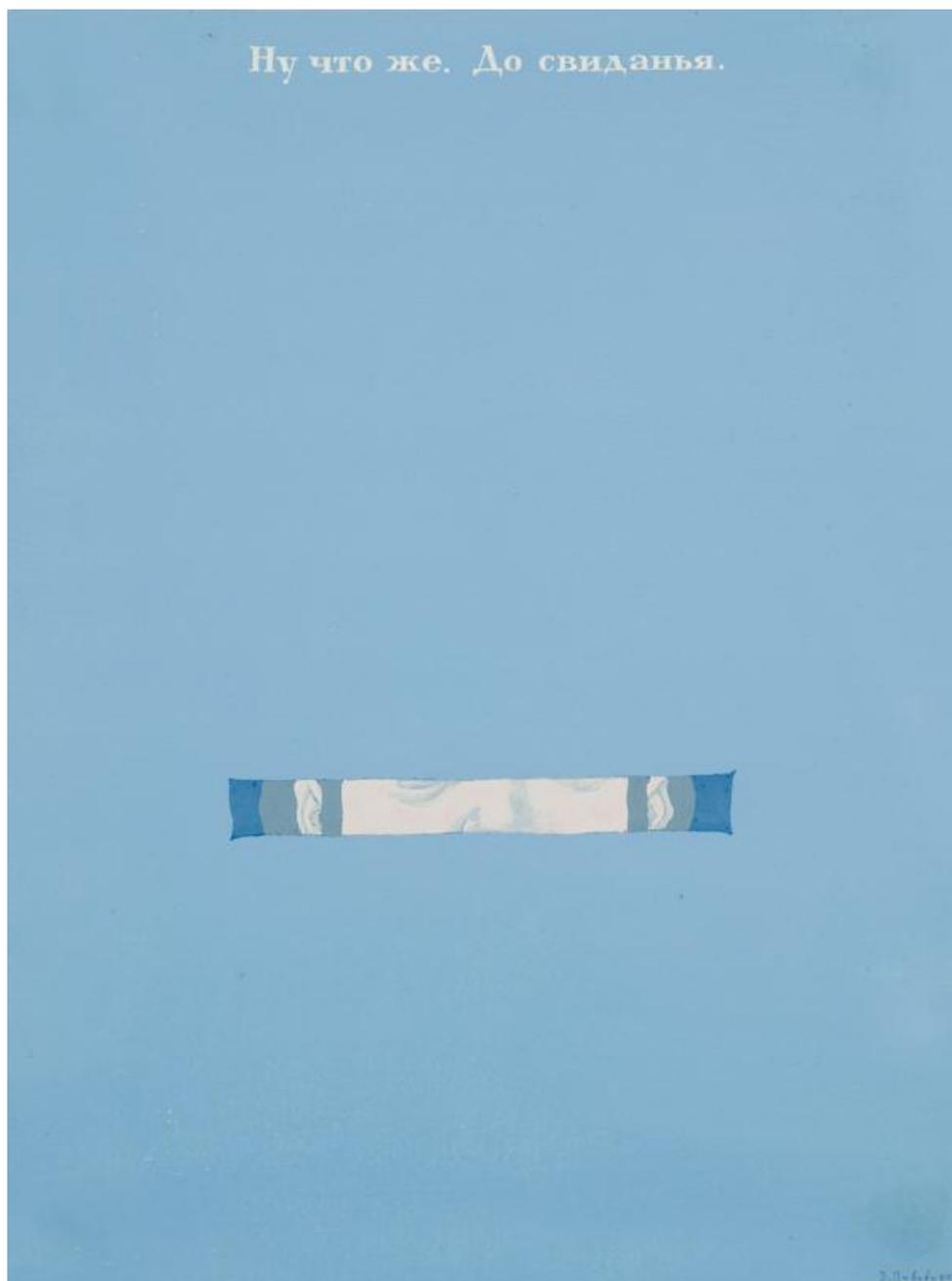


Illustration 2.22: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 15, “Well then. Goodbye.”



Illustration 2.23: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 16, "I have to go."



Illustration 2.24: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 17, “However, I don’t lose hope that we will meet again somewhere, sometime.”



Illustration 2.25: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 18, “And you will recognize me without fail.”



Illustration 2.26: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 19, “And remember, perhaps,”



Illustration 2.27: Viktor Pivovarov, *Litso*, 1975. Panel 20, “My face.”

Illustrations

Chapter Three



Illustration 3.1: Igor Makarevich, *Stratographic Structures, or, 25 Memories of a Friend*, 1978. Painted plaster casts in wooden frame, 85.5 x 85.5 x 8cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

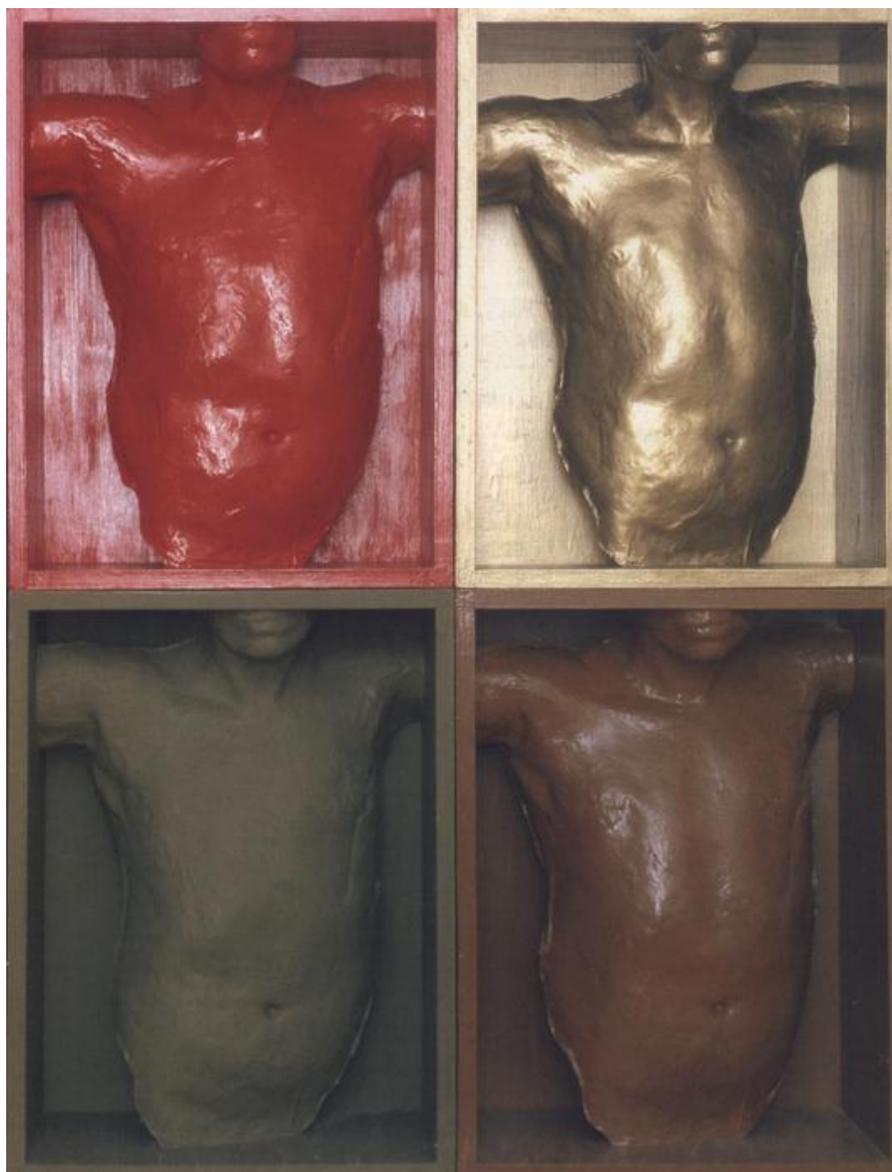


Illustration 3.2: Igor Makarevich, *The Case of Sensations*, 1979 [detail]. Wood, papier-mache, acrylic, each compartment 71 x 55 x 30cm. Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art.



Illustration 3.3: Valentina Kulagina, *International working women's day is the day of assessment of socialist competition*, poster, 1930.



Illustration 3.4: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition No. 56*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 71cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Illustration 3.5: Unknown photographer: Unovis classroom, 1921. Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne.

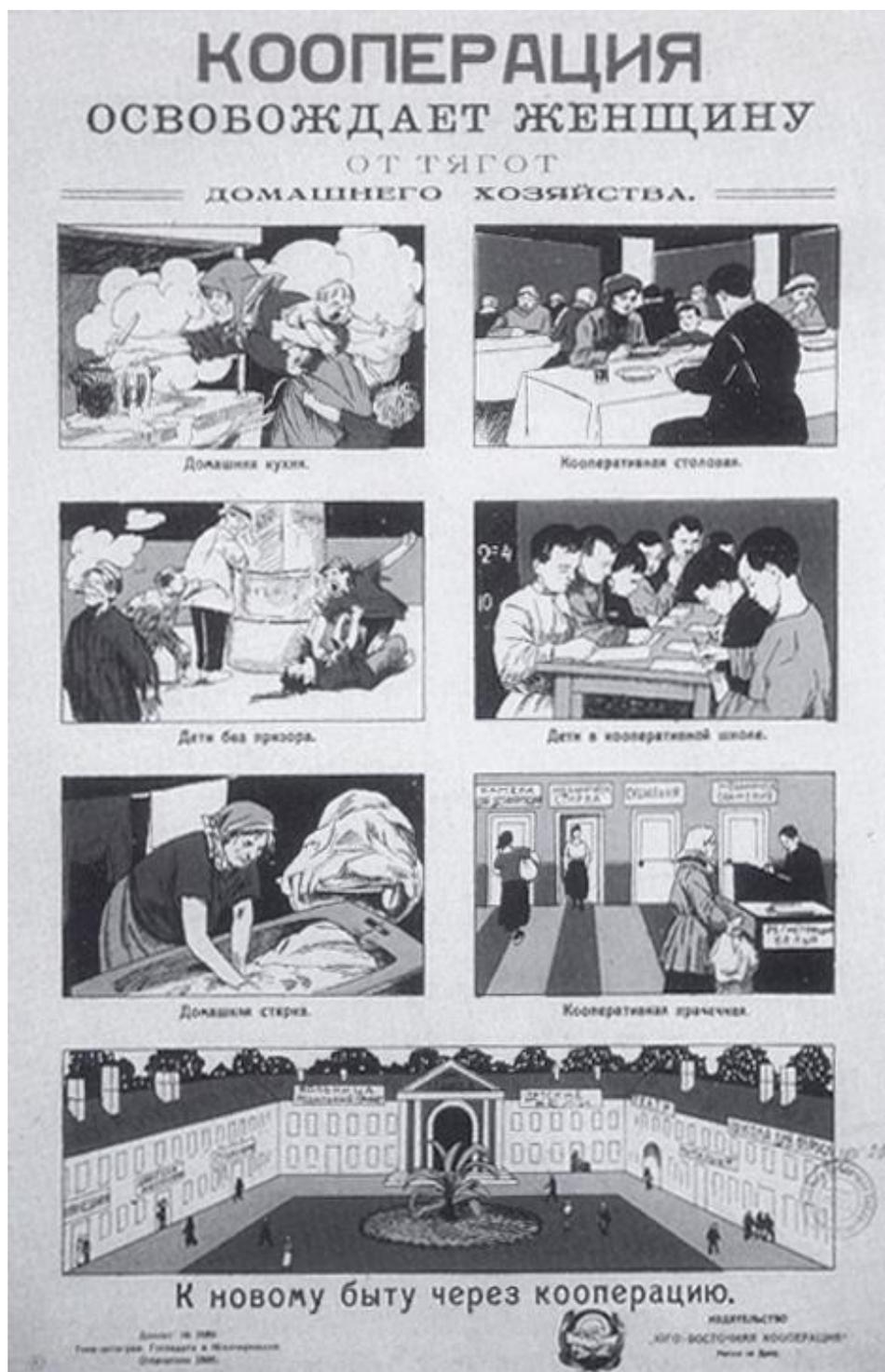


Illustration 3.6: Unknown artist, “Cooperation liberates women from the burdens of housekeeping. To the new everyday life through cooperation,” poster, 1924. Russian State Library, Department of Graphics, Moscow.



Illustration 3.7: Boris Vladimirsky, *Roses for Stalin*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 100.5 x 141cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Illustration 3.8: Erik Bulatov, *Horizon*, 1971-72. Oil on canvas, 150 x 180cm. Museum of Avant-Garde Mastery.



Illustration 3.9: Erik Bulatov, *Skier*, 1971-74. Oil on canvas, 180 x 180cm. Private collection, Bern.

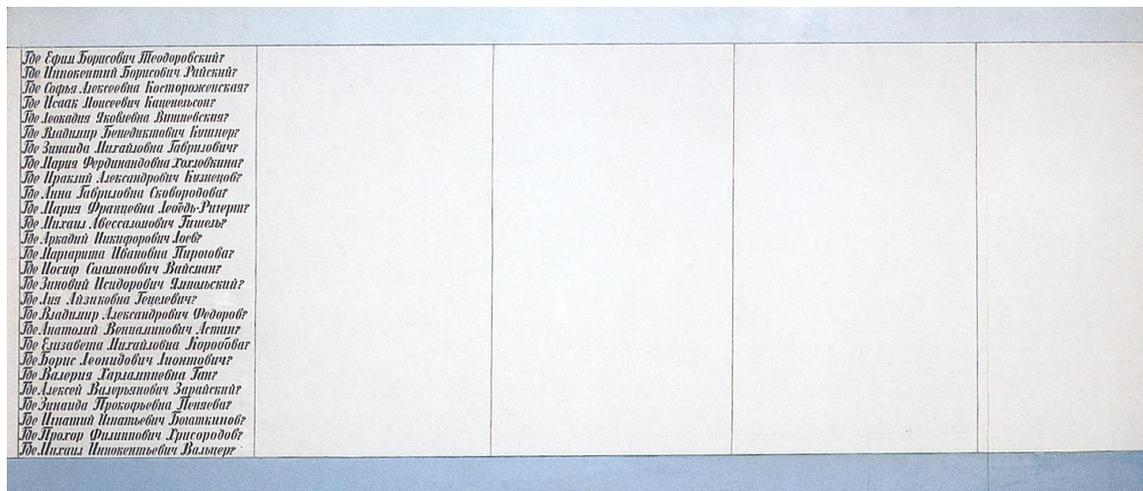


Illustration 3.10: Ilya Kabakov, *Where Are They?*, 1971. Oil and enamel on masonite, 147 x 350cm. Collection Monique Barbier-Müller, Geneva, Switzerland.

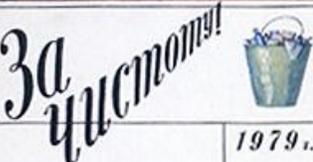
		<h2 style="text-align: center;">Расписание</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">выноса полойного ведра № дому № 24 подъезд № 6 улица им. В. Бардина ЖЭБ № 8 Бачманского р-на.</p>					
		Январь Февраль	Март Апрель	Май Июнь	Июль Август	Сентябрь Октябрь	Ноябрь Декабрь
1979 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
1980 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
1981 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
1982 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
1983 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
1984 г.	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31

Illustration 3.11: Ilya Kabakov, *Taking Out The Garbage Can*, 1980. Oil and enamel on masonite, 150 x 210cm. Schaulager Basel, Sammlung der Emmanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung.



Illustration 3.12: Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985. View of installation, Ronald Feldman Galleries, 1988.



Illustration 3.13: Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985. View of installation, Moscow studio, 1985. Photograph by Igor Makarevich.

Illustrations

Chapter Four



Illustration 4.1: Igor Makarevich, *Exodus*, 1977. Gelatin Silver Print, 11.7 x 30.3cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.



Illustration 4.2: Igor Makarevich, *Exodus*, 1977. Gelatin Silver Print, 11.9 x 33cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.



Illustration 4.3: Igor Makarevich, *Exodus*, 1977. Gelatin Silver Print, 11.8 x 29.4cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.

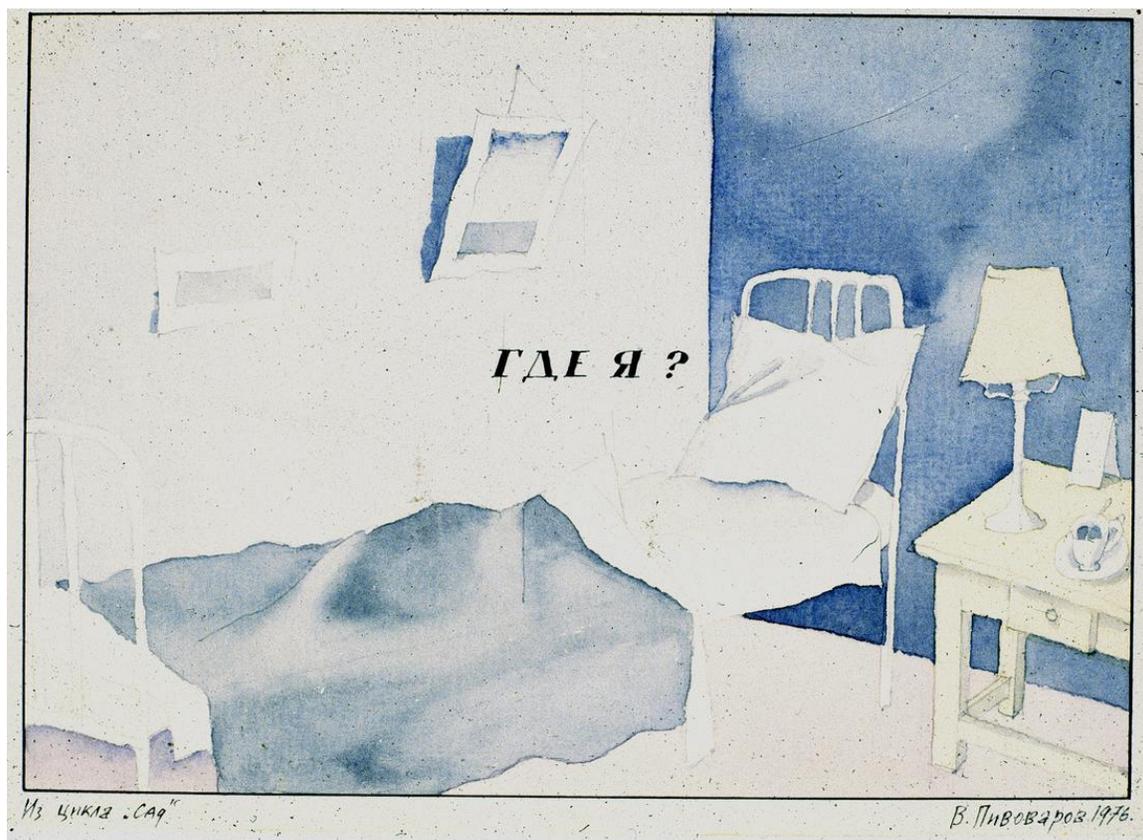


Illustration 4.4: Viktor Pivovarov, "Where Am I?" unnumbered panel from *The Garden*, 1976. Dimensions unrecorded.

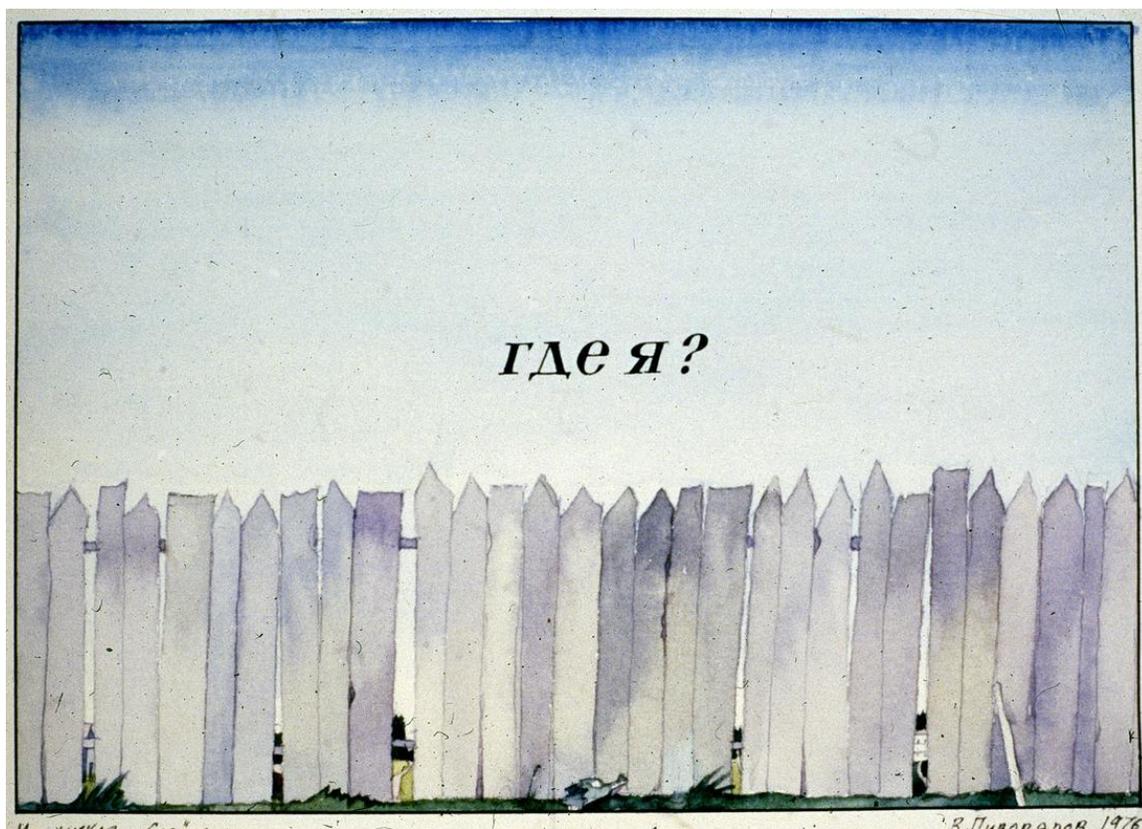


Illustration 4.5: Viktor Pivovarov, “Where am I?” Unnumbered panel from *The Garden*, 1976. Dimensions unrecorded.

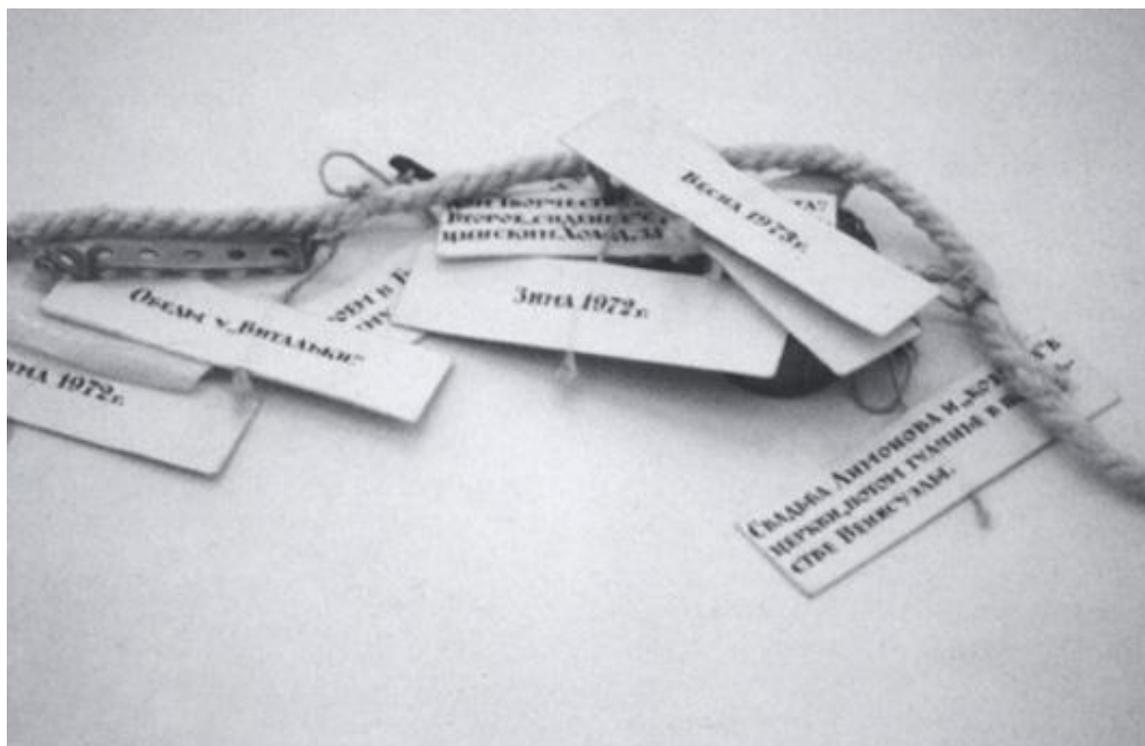


Illustration 4.7: Ilya Kabakov, *The Rope of Life*, 1985. Detail of installation, Fred Hoffman Gallery, Santa Monica, 1990.



Illustration 4.8: Ilya Kabakov, *The Rope of Life*, detail of concept drawing, 1995. Watercolor, chalk, lead pencil, and ball-point pen. 19.2 x 45.6 cm. Collection of the artist.



Illustration 4.9: Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, 1988. View of installation for Museet for Samtdiskunst, Oslo, 1995.

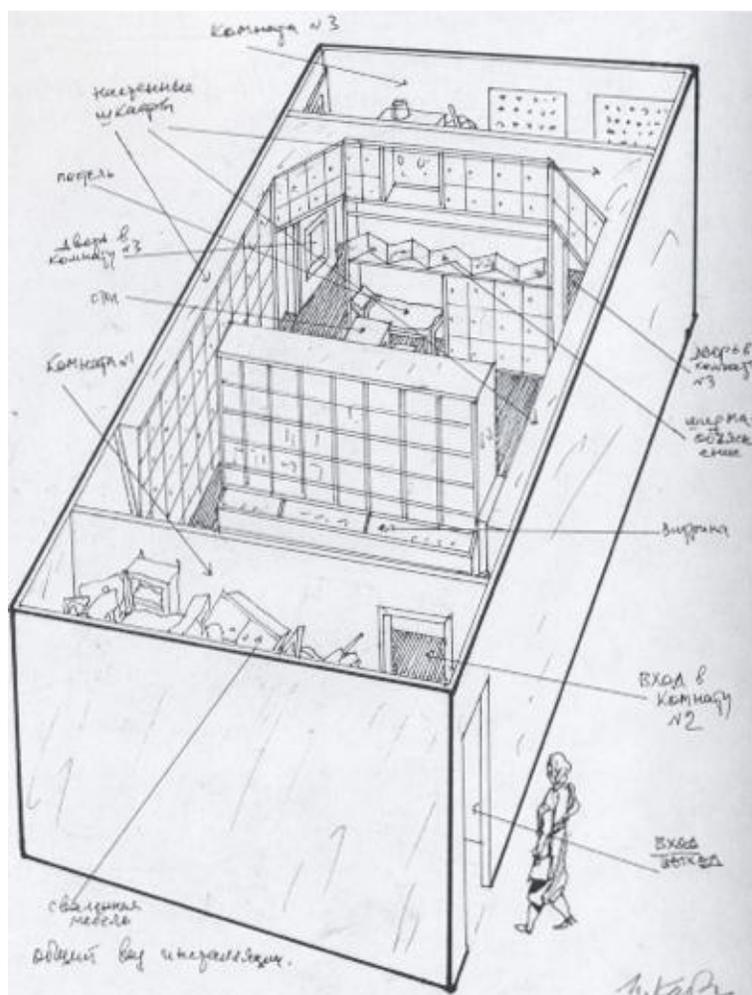


Illustration 4.10: Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, 1988. Perspective sketch with section for installation in the Museet for Samtdiskunst, Oslo, 1995. Felt pen and lead pencil, 27.9 x 21.6cm. Museet fir Samtdiskunst, Oslo.



Illustration 4.11: Igor Makarevich, *Corpses of the Communards*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 169.5cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.



Illustration 4.12: Igor Makarevich, *Bird*, 1973-74. Etching, 41.8 x 45.2cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.



Illustration 4.13: Igor Makarevich, *Stratographic Structures-Changes*, 1976. Photomontage, 101 x 101cm. Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum.
