

Keti Chukhrov

Soviet Material Culture and Socialist Ethics in Moscow Conceptualism

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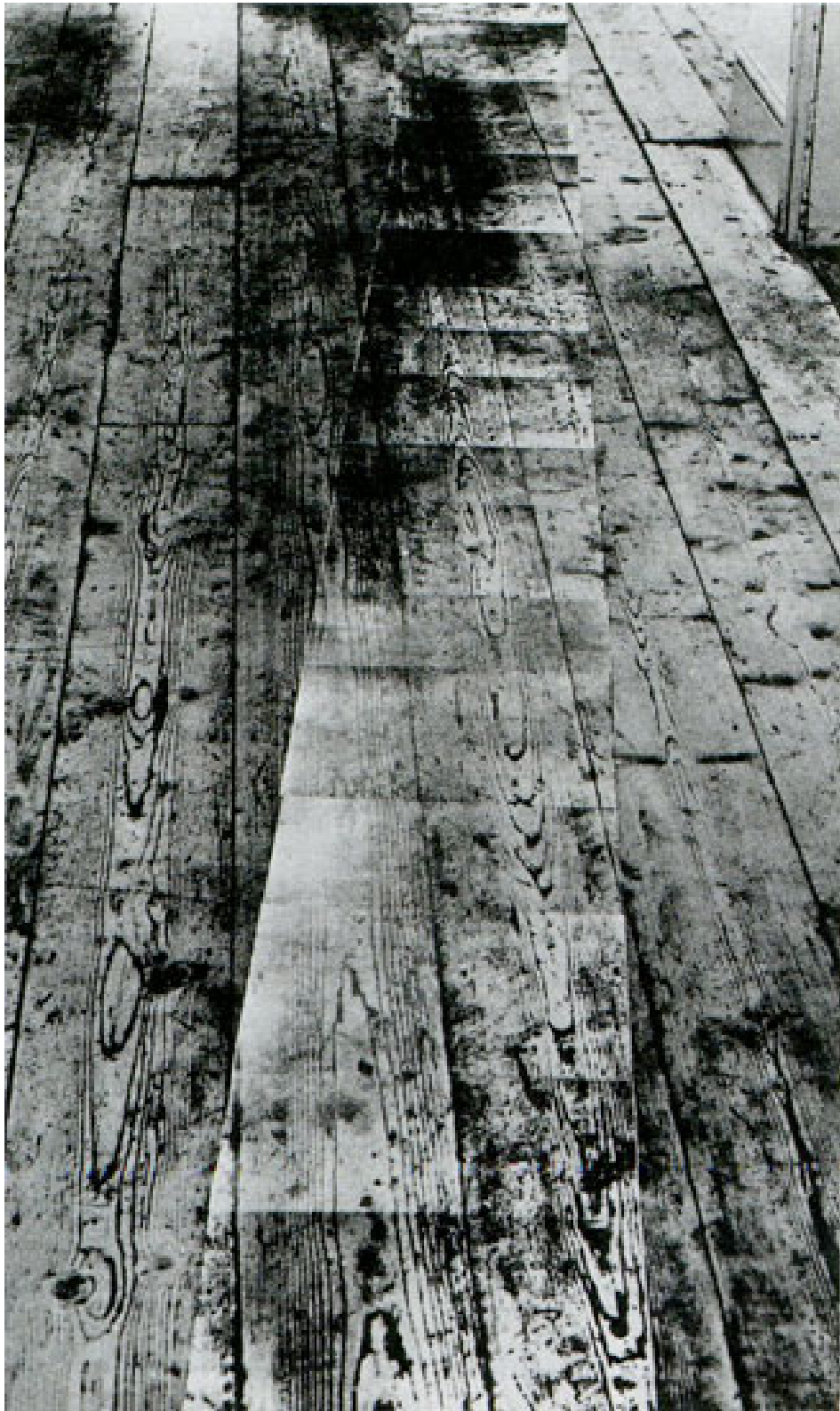
Conceptual Artwork as an Index Machine
Moscow Conceptualism, when historicized in the Soviet frame, should be regarded as part of a broader nonconformist anti-Soviet culture. All of the Moscow conceptualist groups functioned as collective quasi-institutions, but were nevertheless hermetic organizations that produced ironic and critical deconstructions of the languages of Soviet bureaucracy and ideology. Unfortunately, this has encouraged foreign collectors and researchers (e.g., Norton Dodge collection, Zimmerli museum) to confuse aesthetically and politically the nonconformist art of the 1960s and the conceptualist aftermath of the 70s as related dissident forms of escapism with regard to Soviet ideology. In fact, nonconformist painting, or even the Lianosov group (E. Shteinberg, O. Rabin, E. and L. Kropivnitski, V. Nemukhin, L. Masterkova, G. Sapgir, I. Holin) – generally considered to be the predecessors of conceptualists – were quite distant from conceptualist poetics. In his *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow*,¹ Ilya Kabakov defines the nonconformist art of the 60s as extremely individualistic practices preoccupied with quasi-modernist painting techniques.

Distinct from Soviet non-conformism, Moscow Conceptualism is also quite distinct from Western conceptualism as well. This distinction resides not so much in their methodologies but rather in their historical and biopolitical conditions of development.



Gordon Matta Clark, *Splitting*, 1974.

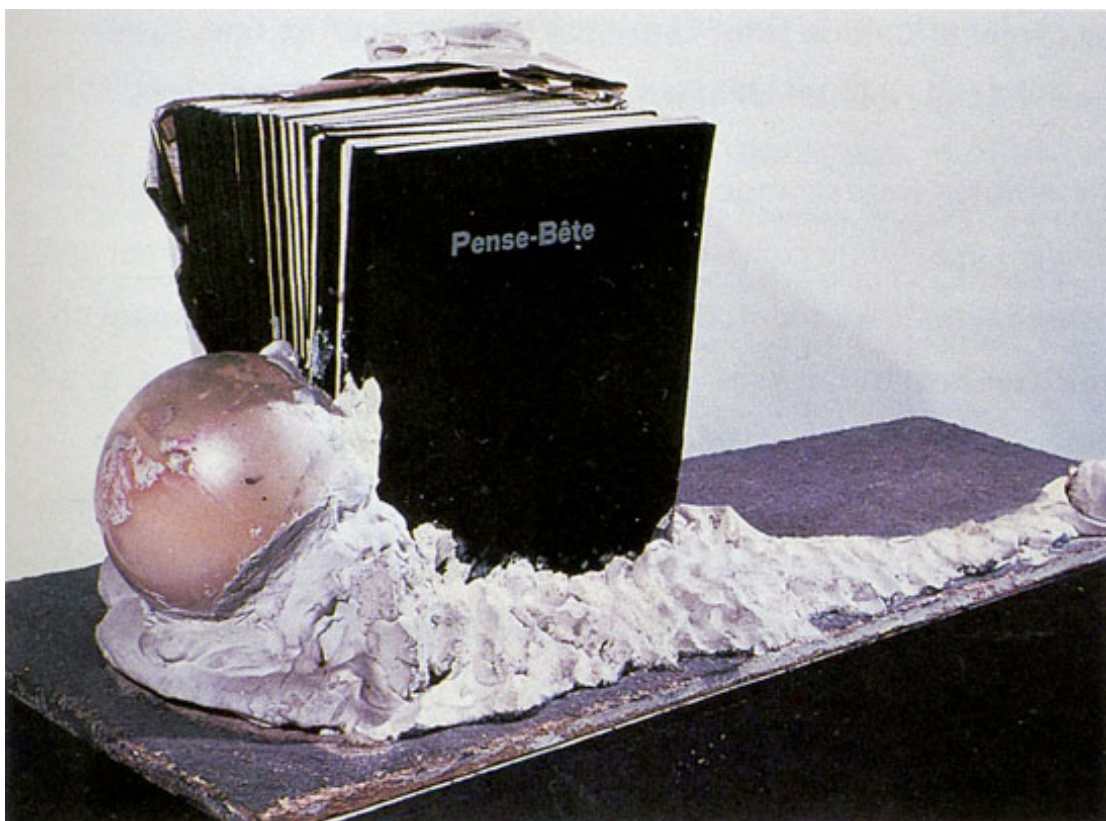
In her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*,² Rosalind Krauss makes an attempt to discover a specific



Victor Burgin, *Photopath*, 1967. As installed in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1969.

semiotic paradigm that defines conceptual thinking. She refers to the signification system of Charles Sanders Peirce, in which the index is the second category in the icon-index-symbol triad. The icon doesn't differentiate between itself and its object, as in a geometric figure. The symbol is based on convention and interprets the icon and the index, as in a word. The index represents not a mimetic, but a dynamic correlation of two elements, of two signs or of a sign and an object, as with a pointing finger, a bullet hole in a window pane, a footprint, or a pronoun.³ No matter what the conceptual work concentrates on – pure text, subversion, documentation, intervention, or animated situations (as in Hélio Oiticica's *parangolés*) – the prevalence of index semiology makes conceptual work a machine that always preserves the gap between two correlated elements. What is most important in the indexicality of a conceptual work is this disjunctive gap that remains despite the act of correlation. So rather than defining conceptualism's aims as juxtapositions of ideas and forms in favor of ideas, or as the correlation of the visual and the textual in favor of the textual, I would locate the tension of conceptualist semiology in the gap between the two indexically related elements, which can be

objective as well as linguistic. In other words, what is important in a conceptual work is the dynamic trip, the machine that reveals related elements as simultaneously attracted and disjunctive. Conceptual works lack a third element that would symbolize or lubricate the first two. Of the numerous examples of indexical dynamics in conceptual work we'll mention just a few: Victor Burgin's *Photopath* (1967), a photograph of a floor, printed to its actual size and stapled to the floor, so that the image is, on the one hand, congruent with the object, and, on the other, marks the cut from it; Marcel Broodthaers's *Pense-Bête* (1964), a sculpture of books and a rubber ball embedded in a mound of plaster, so that one is called on to read and yet cannot; Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974), in which the monolithic structure of a house undergoes a vertical dissection and subversion of its hermetic structure. All these methodological features matter for Moscow Conceptualism's poetics.⁴ But due to the Soviet social and political context, material culture, economy, and even ethics, the works of Moscow Conceptualism, whether consciously or not, exceed the rationalism, combinatorics, immanence, and indexical precision of Western conceptualism.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Pense-Bête*, 1964. Books, paper, plastic sphere and wood.

For example, Andrei Monastyrski's *Branch* (1995) contains the above-mentioned index relations and is very reminiscent of Lygia Clark's relational strategies of transforming the object into sensory relations and acts, but the work is realized only when it is touched.⁵ It is a regular wooden branch, pushed through the rolls of tape that hold it to a wooden panel. The installation is defined as a "musical" action-object that produces sound when the branch is pulled down and the scotch is unwound. The two incompatible indexical elements – object and sound – are present. At the same time, it is important that the sound here remains a pure potentiality, because as soon as the branch is drawn down to produce the sound, the object is ruined. As the artist himself puts it, although the branch can theoretically be pulled down, the realization of the actual sound could never correspond to the expected music.

This object thus becomes not only a conceptual relation, but a "score," the pure potentiality of an auditory event which is not just sound, but an ideal unheard music inherent in the relational object. Along with the sensory relations, the work aspires for sublimity. Monastyrski chooses to leave the material interaction with the object perpetually unrealized in order to preserve the sound as some ideal sound, as its eidos. According to Monastyrski, this infinite deferral places the auditory and the visual in suspense, on the verge of eidos and melos. The work is not only a concept, but the act of *ascension* to the eidetic state, residing nevertheless within materiality.

Libidinal Backgrounds of the Socialist and Capitalist Economies

But what is it that makes the impact of the socialist background on Moscow Conceptualism so distinct, and how can it be explained by the specific features of the socialist economy?

Actually, the divergence between socialist and capitalist economies arises from the anti-libidinality of the former and the libidinal nature of the latter. We all know Marx's term *Entfremdung* – alienation. In his article on contemporary theater "The Tooth, the Palm," Jean-Francois Lyotard touches on the inevitability of alienation in capitalism, given that the capitalist economy is rooted in the very form of libidinality; capitalism functions because it is unconsciously desired.⁶ Alienation is part and parcel of the type of libidinality that Michel Foucault defines as bourgeois sexuality without Eros.⁷ From Lyotard's point of view, we should drop Marx and think about capitalist alienation affirmatively. To become "sexier" than capitalism, the artist should increase the extent of capitalist alienation. Post-industrial

capitalism, in its non-hierarchic, post-modern semiology, instigates the artistic semiotics to become even more elusive, schizophrenic, and contingent than the capitalist economy. If we return to the Soviet socialist spaces, we notice to what extent they are, on the contrary, desexualized, to what extent the libidinal economy is turned into the Eros of collectivity and various forms of enthusiasm.

In regular capitalist society, where the capitalist character of labor, production and consumption causes alienation, all idealistic projections are either unconscious or imaginary. In the Soviet – quasi-socialist, let's say – world, on the contrary, the utmost realizations of ethical deeds or *idealist* expectations in labor relations or social space are implemented and performed in *reality* (even if they may be insincere), while the consuming dreams and commercial luxury of capitalism occur as imaginary abstractions or ousted illusions, as something almost sublime. The creative topologies and trajectories of Moscow Conceptualism, voluntarily or not, follow and partake in the anti-libidinal material spaces of the socialist economy. It is important to keep this in mind, because traditionally, researchers investigating Moscow Conceptualism regard Soviet social spaces as the hostile "Big Other" in relation to which the conceptualists formed a hermetic island of deconstructive interpretations; this is the stance that was questioned by Ekaterina Degot in her article "Moscow Communist Conceptualism."⁸ According to Degot, even though the conceptualist artists would never refer to themselves as communists, we should keep in mind the objective, socialist economic conditions in which they produced their work.⁹

Returning to the notion of the ideal, it is interesting that while Western post-structuralism, arising out of Freud and Marx, rejected metaphysics and idealism, Soviet Marxist philosophy (E. Ilienkov, J. Davidov, M. Lifshitz) interpreted Marxist political economy, labor theory, and aesthetics on the horizon of the ideal.

In his works from the 1960s, Soviet philosopher Evald Ilienkov developed a Marxist interpretation of the notion of the ideal that is absolutely different from Kantian, Fichtean, and even Hegelian understandings of it. His notions of the spiritual and the ideal are far from metaphysical spiritualism and German idealism. The ideal interpreted by Ilienkov is a draft or contour of what can be accomplished in reality, as in the image of bread in the imaginations of a hungry person or a baker. At the same time, the ideal is the possibility of alter-existence (*Andersein*); it means that one thing cannot exist

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Erik Bulatov, *I'm Going*, 1975. Books, paper, plastic sphere and wood.

without its other, only through the other; to exist is to surpass the singularity of the self, due to its interrelation with things and other subjects, and in the end with the world.¹⁰ This presupposes that the thing is not self-sufficient and requires the dimension of the general, the collective. According to Ilienkov, no production is possible without the dimension of the ideal. This stance arises from understanding that “culture in its being is material, but in purport and origin it is general and ideal, just because it contains the collective’s aspirations and thinking.”¹¹ That is to say, the diachronic background of culture contains in itself the capacity to exceed the empirical and nominal strata.

In modernism, in Western conceptualism, and in the formalist avant-garde, the work of art is immanent in its “body,” in its objective represented appearance: it is nominalistic. Soviet Marxist aesthetics and Ilienkov insist on the contrary, that “art is something *other* than what it nominally presents (as a thing or as a bulk of body).”¹² This something is to be found in the contact of the artwork with reality and the world, where reality in turn not only has an empirical or naturalistic dimension, but first of all bears a potentiality for the general. The general in this case means not something reduced to bodily representation, but art’s necessity to speak through something other than itself. Such intermingling of the eidetic and the sublime with the everyday is the consequence of Soviet reality: a de-alienated economy, a de-alienated material culture, and collectivized social spaces.

Moscow Conceptualism finds itself in a de-alienated space of production and communication where art has no need to be something estranged or detached from reality; on the contrary, strange, absurd, and extreme things lose their quality of mysterious estrangement and become part and parcel of everyday normality – for the everyday Soviet reality is itself sublime, just because its material world and culture arise from non-libidinal sensitivity.

As Groys writes in “Romantic Conceptualism,” Moscow Conceptualism, unlike Western conceptualism, preserves a striving for the metaphysical dimension, the so-called other world. But this otherness is not something esoteric.¹³ It just asserts the insufficiency of empirical immediacy and the fact that art is a medium to grasp something other than art. This is what makes Moscow Conceptualism different from Western conceptualism’s academism, permanently focused on re-questioning the limits of art itself.

If Western conceptualism takes objects from reality and turns them into art (which is still

a modernist paradigm), Moscow Conceptualism steps out into something other than art: the Soviet socialist reality.

In the text accounting for his *Earth Works*, Monastyrski explains how the surface of a conceptual work, its “demonstrational sign field” (images and their textual commentaries), becomes transparent for “the expository sign field” (social reality). The expository sign field, as opposed to the demonstrational field, does not

belong to the artist but to the state, and its objectivity practically knows no boundaries: apartment walls and studios, museums, factories, institutions, the earth that is owned by collective and state-run farms (kolkhoz, sovkhoz), roads – in short, everything, including water resources and airspace.¹⁴

State here means not so much the state apparatus, but rather the permeation of the civic duties of commonwealth construction. So the outer social space, as well as both its ideocratic contents and material objectivity (which are inseparable), are seen as the initiators that the conceptual work cannot do without. According to Monastyrski, Kabakov was able to achieve a powerful aesthetic effect on the level of formal structures because his works were synergetically connected to the structural changes taking place on the “governmental” sign field. His works are defined as governmental not because they are about power, but because the artist searched in them for a very broad dimension and grasped at how construction of the spaces of existence is accomplished, including how not only art’s but “life’s necessities” evolved, implicating a “huge number of people and organizations.” The dimensions of the social, the artistic, the conceptual, and the ontological coincided. The “demonstration field of an artwork” (let’s remember the blank spaces in the drawings of Kabakov and the documentation of Monastyrski’s actions) remains empty – according to the often repeated remark of Monastyrski – because eventuality progresses on a broader scale than that of the artwork.

The Conceptual Objecthood of Socialist Reality

Moscow Conceptualism not only deconstructed but also, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, reconstructed the Soviet socialist anthropology and ethics. It can be said that Moscow Conceptualism, especially in its classical period, dealt with the already conceptualized social surrounding, since anti-libidinal and de-alienated social spaces happened to be already conceptual, if we understand the term

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Nikolai Panitkov, *In All Things*, 1988. Books, paper, plastic sphere and wood.

“conceptual” as synonymous with the eidetic. When a regular capitalist consumer object becomes a readymade, it is its seductive component that is conceptualized and thus intensified, as in the case with Andy Warhol’s readymades. The Soviet consumer object – whether clothes, underwear, furniture, and so forth – is already conceptual before its introduction into the space of art. It is conceptual because it belongs to the eidetic realm. Of course, Soviet consumer goods were also consumed, and they too possessed functions and utilitarian values. But the experience of using things in the Soviet social space has become devoid of libidinal pleasure. For example, if one has furniture, it has to be some eidetic piece of furniture, any furniture that serves its functions and its concept – if we regard the meaning of the word “concept” as defining why and how something had been conceived in the first place. An eidetic piece of furniture is completely free of decorative details that could allude to phantasmatic desire in relation to the image of the furniture, surpassing its most ascetic and minimalist use and purpose. The same concerns the room, the house, and the article of clothing. As Monastyrski put it in his text on the VDNKH Semiotic Mythology (Exhibition of the Achievements of the People’s Economy),

the Soviet Union could be seen as the objectified fruit of the German classical philosophy, seen as the romantic variant of Hegelianism, which is transcendent. Each member of this society combines extreme collective consciousness and extreme loneliness, not knowing pleasure. Such a member is surrounded only by symbolic things [or, we could, say, conceptual things].¹⁵

Anton von Webern, in an explication of his understanding of *fasslichkeit* (clarity) – for him the main feature of a work of art – says that an artwork is first and foremost conceived as a principle, as a concept. An everyday object such as pincers may be beautiful or ugly, big or small, new or old, but as the idea of pincers must coincide with what they are – and what they are is what they do – pincers are just those things that perform the proper function. The ideal pincers simply perform the minimal function of squeezing. This is when the thing can be seen as eidos, the eidetic, or the conceptual machine. Translated into Marxist terms, these could be things with use value only, which in fact the Soviet commodity was.

Likewise any object or thing of the socialist society aspiring toward communism – table,

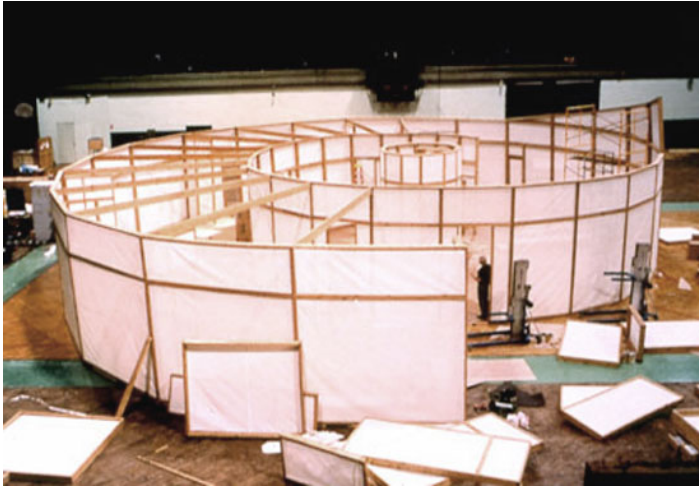
chair, wardrobe, wall, even food products and their images – is reduced to its essential, ideal application, with the idea capable of coinciding with matter and form. This is the reason why, upon viewing films of the 60s, 70s, and even 80s, what was then merely the material objecthood of the natural everyday appears today to be a conceptually and artistically constructed space, some kind of total installation.

Such a realm of objects presupposes the specificity of human behavior, human being, and human ethics. What kind of character or person is our human?

In his *Unfinished Dissertation*, Boris Mikhailov shows the spaces in which we see a minimum of materiality, a minimum of objecthood, and a maximum of spare time and spare space – some kind of void, inhabited by the desexualized Soviet character. Idea governs this reality; therefore reality becomes the mixture of the ideocratic and poetic dimensions – not only in the case of Mikhailov, but with Prigov, Monastyrski, and Kabakov as well. Void and sparseness here are not emptiness, but rather the field of potential poetic or ideal variations of behaviors, languages, and objects. The objects may become texts, the language can be a deed or an action, and behavior can form a space.¹⁶ Kabakov calls this space a void, but it could also be called spare time-space – time-space that is not the container for something as the void might be understood in the West, but is rather the freedom to poetically develop many variations without any pragmatic final efficiency. This space is not filled up libidinally, but sublimated eidetically (hence the modesty, shabbiness, and even squalor of material objects, for which it is sufficient to be variations of ideas and not self-sufficient objects).

A good example of such a mixture of the eidetic and poetic realms imagined as living space is Kabakov’s *Palace of Projects* (1998). It is an installation, perceived from without as a hermetic, minimalist building – something between a house, factory, or futuristic palace of culture. But inside, the spare space of the installation teems with projects of the future. It incorporates sixty-five models made by imaginary amateur utopians for the future improvement of the world. These possible projects are laid out as installations, and, combined with drawings, drafts, texts, and poems, they are posited as the new modes of life – social services, sites of public gatherings, new communicative habits, new modes for the consumption and exchange of goods, strange and unexpected usages of space, specific landscapes for loneliness. From the conceptual point of view, all of these projects are very articulate, but from the utilitarian point of view

they are utopian, even altruist, performative, and philosophical – made for an ideal community, aspiring to elevated or ethically “beautiful” relationships. It is in this project of Kabakov’s that one of the chief dramas of Soviet socialism’s history is brought forward.



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *Palace of Projects* under construction.

This drama is about the paradoxes and contradictions of modernity and modernization. The history of socialist modernization was connected with the acceleration of production, urbanization, and shock industrialization. Socialist ethics and belief in altruism, justice, and the importance of the communist idea over the pragmatics of its realization entered into contradiction with technocratic and engineering efficiencies. Political ontology could not always meet the interests of economic success and shock modernization. For Kabakov’s *Palace of Projects* to conceive the future, one needs a temporary repose for its contemplation, whereas the speed of modernity forecloses such possibilities of contemplation. It becomes clear that the future life of the coming community is not coincident with technological amelioration and abstract, dehumanized modernization. So the question was and is whether or not we can correlate *ethical* and *economic* (industrial, post-industrial) modes of maturity in the society; whether modernity is about ethical maturity within human commonality or whether it is about competitive economic excellence. Or whether these two have to be correlated; if so, the ethical goals of material development have to be articulated from the beginning in terms of whether they are part of the commons or are mere resources in the production of excellences.

This is a very important dilemma, one that had become urgent by the 1970s. The 70s in Soviet society are known for economic and technological stagnation. At the same time, the texture of social life in the 70s is characterized

by a strange spiritual plenitude. The question is: Was this plenitude an exception from economic stagnation, or could it arise, on the contrary, in the conditions of the economic crisis, as the paradoxical result of the cessation of productionism? It could well be the case that Soviet socialism, lacking the technical and economic maturity indispensable for socialism (the condition that became vivid in the 70s), quite paradoxically manifested certain features that amounted to certain mature communist ethical aspirations, exemplified in open education, a high estimation of theoretical science, leisure time as a common good, and non-class consciousness becoming the collective habitus.

How, then, might we explain the sparseness, void, and shabbiness in Moscow conceptualist artworks, produced in a socialist society so focused on progress? A socialist subject aspires to the ethical improvement of society by means of developing economical infrastructures and production facilities. Yet, as anti-utilitarian collective consent becomes widespread, and as society grows accustomed to abstaining from pleasures and libidinal joys, consensus seems to be reached more often, and higher standards of living, for construction, technical efficiency, and consumer prosperity become less necessary. This is the paradox rooted in Marx and brought to light in Moscow Conceptualism.

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Keti Chukhrov has a PhD in Comparative Literature and is Associate Professor at the Russian State University for Humanities, Department of Art Theory and Cultural Studies. Since 2003 she is a member of the editorial board and a writer for the *Moscow Art Magazine*, as well as author of various publications on culture, philosophy and art theory for journals, such as *New Literary Review*, *Chto delat*, *Brumaria*, *Documenta Magazine*, *Sarai Reader*, *Artforum*, *Springerin*, *E-Flux*, *Pushkin*, *Afterall*, *Open Space Magazine*. During 2008-2010 she was a researcher for the *Gender Check project*, Mumok museum. Her books include *Pound & £ Moscow* (Logos publishers, 1999), *To Be - to Perform. 'Theatre' in Philosophic Criticism of Art* (SPb, European Univ. Press, 2011), *War of Quantities, dramatic poetry* (Borey art-center, Spb.) 2003, *Just Humans* ("Prosto Liudi", dramatic poetry, Translit/Free Marxist Publishers, Moscow, 2010). She is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Philosophy Department of Russian State University for Humanities.

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Ilya Kabakov, *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).

2
Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

3
See John Baldessari's Commissioned Paintings series, in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Tony Godfrey (London: Phaidon Press, 1998).

4
See E. Bulatov's *I'm Going* (1975), in which the everyday phrase is painted on the background of the sky using the characters for ideological mottos, or N. Panitkov's *In All Things*, a shabby saucepan with the photo-image of Stalin's poster overlooking the Soviet landscape on its bottom, in *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960-1990*, ed. Boris Groys et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008).

5
As in her work *Air and Stone* (1966), a small plastic bag filled with air and a stone placed on the bag. The work can be considered accomplished only when it is carried, when one experiences the correlation of heaviness and weightlessness.

6
Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Tooth, the Palm," in *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

7
See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1976).

8
Ekaterina Degot, "Moscow Communist Conceptualism," in *Moscow Conceptualism*, ed. Ekaterina Degot and Vadim Zakharov (Moscow: Izdatelistvo WAM, 2005), 7-11.

9
According to Degot, defining "communist" features include the absence of market, the absence of any commitment to institutional commissions, and the self-organization of artistic and contemplative communication, where the audience is posited as potential thinkers and artists, rather than mere consumers.

10
Evald Ilienkov, *Philosophy and Culture*, (Moscow: Political Literature Press, 1991), 218.

11
Ibid., 251.

12

Ibid., 234.

13
Boris Groys, "Romantic Conceptualism," in *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960-1990*, ed. Boris Groys et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 316-22.

14
See <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Andrey-Monastyrsky-earthworks.html>.

15
See <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Andrey-Monastyrsky-VDNH.html>.

16
E.g., Sylvia Sasse dedicated her research to the aspect of Moscow Conceptualism's speech acts attainment of the goal and effect of a deed. See Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion. Sprech und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003).