Claire Bishop

Zones of Indistinguishability: Collective Actions Group and Participatory Art

The rise of participatory art since the 1990s invites us to constitute a history of this practice, ideally one that reflects the global spread of this work today.[1] In charting this history, important variants appear that challenge the dominant way of thinking about participatory art in Western Europe and North America, where this work tends to be positioned as a political, constructive, and oppositional response to the spectacle's atomization of social relations. By contrast, the participatory art of Eastern Europe and Russia from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s is frequently marked by the desire for an increasingly subjective and privatized aesthetic experience. At first glance, this seems to be an inversion of the Western model (despite Guy Debord's observation that bureaucratic communism is no less spectacular than its capitalist variant; it is simply "concentrated" as opposed to "diffused").[2] However, and crucially, the individual experiences that were the target of participatory art under really existing socialism continue to be framed as *shared* privatized experiences: the construction of a collective artistic space amongst mutually trusting colleagues. Rather than frame this work as "implicitly political," as is the habit with current Western approaches to Eastern bloc art history, this essay will argue that work produced under state socialism during these decades should rather be viewed in more complex terms. Given the saturation of everyday life with ideology, Soviet artists did not regard their work as political but rather as existential and *a*political, committed to ideas of freedom and the individual imagination. At the same time, they sought an expanded – one might say democratized – horizon of artistic production, in contrast to the highly regulated and hierarchized system of the Union of Soviet Artists.

In the present essay, I want to focus on the Collective Actions Group, active in Moscow from the mid-1970s onwards, from the perspective of Western participatory art. Unlike many recent socially-engaged artists, for whom social participation in art denotes the inclusion of the working class, marginalized communities, or at least everyday non-professionals (rather than the artists's friends and colleagues), the political context of the Collective Actions Group rendered such distinctions redundant. The impulse to collaborate with disenfranchised communities that we see so frequently today was a somewhat alien concept in the 1970s: under Cold War socialism, every citizen was (nominally at least) equal, a co-producer of the communist state. Class difference did not exist.[3] Finding participants for one's art was therefore a question of selecting reliable colleagues who would not inform on one's activities. In an

Collective Actions, *Appearances*, Moscow, 13 March, 1976.

atmosphere of near constant surveillance and insecurity, participation was an artistic and social strategy to be deployed only amongst the most trusted groups of friends. The restrictions of life under Cold War communism do more than simply affect the question of who participates in art. They also govern the appearance of these works: materially frugal and temporally brief, many of these actions and events were located in the countryside, far away from networks of surveillance. The fact that many of these actions do not look like art is less an indication of the artists's commitment to blurring "art and life" than a deliberate strategy of self-protection, as well as a reaction to the state's own military displays and socialist festivals as a visual reference point; these events dissuaded artists from contrived displays of collective participation even if they had the resources to emulate them.[4]

It is useful to remind ourselves that unofficial art began in Moscow in 1964, after Khrushchev visited the thirtieth anniversary show of the Moscow Union of Artists at the Manezh Gallery, which included a display of non-figurative, abstract paintings; Khrushchev declared these to be (among other things) "private psycho-pathological distortions of the public conscience."[5] The extent of his reaction led to the ever-increasing domestic isolation of independent artists and their being denied the right to show their works to the public in any place or form. And yet, despite being severely criticized and censured, unofficial art continued into the mid-1970s, when the first legal exhibitions took place and a shadow union for unofficial artists was set up (the Graphics Moscow City Committee). After the controversial Bulldozer exhibition of September 1974 (in which an exhibition of unofficial art was destroyed by bulldozer), cultural authorities decided to regulate and legalize their relationships with "underground" art via the State Committee for Security (KGB). Most unofficial art was exhibited inside private apartments, forcing a convergence of art and life that surpassed what the majority of twentieth-century avant-gardists had ever intended by this term. The phenomenon of "Apt-Art" (apartment art), an initiative by Nikita Alekseev, referred to exhibitions and performances taking place in private homes for small networks of trusted friends; Apt-Art flourished in the early 1980s.

It was in this context that the most celebrated of Moscow Conceptualists, Ilya Kabakov (b.1933), developed his personal work alongside his official job as a children's book illustrator. Kabakov's *Albums* (1972–75) are illustrated narratives, each revolving around one fictional character, most of whom are isolated,

lonely, idiosyncratic figures on the margins of society, cocooned in a private dream world. The first, *Sitting in the Closet Primakov*, is typical in that it describes the life of a boy who sits in a dark closet and refuses to come out; when he does, he sees the world in terms of modernist abstract paintings. Each *Album* was accompanied by drawings and general comments on the character spoken by other fictional commentators. Crucially, these *Albums* were not read as books but were performed by the artist for small groups of friends. Boris Groys recalls that one would make an appointment with Kabakov (rather like organizing a studio visit) and go to his home, where the artist would place the book on a music stand and read the entire text in a neutral and unexpressive tone of voice. The experience was extremely monotonous but had a ritualistic quality in which the turning of the pages became central. Most readings took an hour, although Groys recalls once undergoing an eight-hour performance.[6] One of the key points to emerge here is the use of a neutral, descriptive, analytical language focusing on the inconspicuous, the banal, and the marginal; another is that the stories are geared more towards invented forms of survival and endurance than of criticism; and another is the repeated motif of isolated individuals negotiating the endless and uncomfortable scrutiny of the communal apartment.[7] All of these points provide an important contextual precursor for the work discussed in the remainder of this essay.

It is in this literary context, with a strong reverence for textual expression, that the Collective Actions Group (CAG) (*Kollektivnye Deistvia*, or *K/D*) was formed in 1976; at its inception there were four members; by 1979 there were seven; and in 2005 there were six.[8] The group took its lead from the first generation of Moscow Conceptualists, especially Kabakov, whose installations implied characters and viewing subjects caught between "a communal body" and "an existential individualist."[9] The central theorist of CAG, Andrei Monastyrsky (b.1949), has recalled that their earliest pieces were perceived as a form of poetry reading. The group continues to produce around eight performances a year, although the character of this work has changed considerably since 1989: the actions are more complex, with more references to Eastern mysticism, and frequently make use of documentation (especially tape recordings) from earlier actions. Since the focus here is on participatory art under socialism, the following discussion will concern a selection of actions produced in the first decade of the group's existence. Most of these actions typically followed a standard format: a group of fifteen to

twenty participants were invited by telephone (at a time when, of course, phone lines could be tapped) to take a train to a designated station outside Moscow; they would walk from the station to a remote field; the group would wait around (not knowing what would happen), before witnessing a minimal, perhaps mysterious, and often visually unremarkable event. On returning to Moscow, participants would write an account of the experience and offer interpretations of its meaning; these subsequently became the focus of discussion and debate amongst the artists and their circle.[10]

It should immediately be apparent that the intellectualism of this structure is a considerable step away from the 1960s model in both Europe and North America, in which it was regarded as sufficient simply for things to "happen," and through which the participating subject would attain a more vivid, authentic level of reality (as seen, for example, in the work of Knížák and Kaprow). Monastyrsky complicated this paradigm by aiming to produce situations in which participants had no idea what was going to happen, to the point where they sometimes found it difficult to know if they had in fact experienced an action; when participants's engagement finally occurred, it was never in the

place where they expected it.[11] CAG stretched the temporality of event-based art away from pure presence and into a relationship of distance between "then" (I thought I experienced...) and "now" (I understand it to be otherwise...). It is also of central importance that this production of distance was not only temporal but social, prising open a space for modes of communicational practice otherwise absent in the rigid and monolithic ideology of Soviet collectivism. The event itself is effectively an "empty action," designed to preclude interpretation from taking place during the performance, and thereby serving to prompt a wide range of descriptions and analyses, which were undertaken individually but shared within the group.

The first key action that crystallized this form of working was *Appearance* (March 13, 1976). Devised by Monastyrsky, Lev Rubinstein, Nikia Alekseev, and Georgii Kizevalter, it involved around thirty audience members as participants. Upon arriving in a remote field at Izmaylovskoe, the group was asked to wait and watch for something to appear in the distance. Eventually, a couple of the organizers became visible on the horizon, in what Monastyrsky refers to as the "zone of indistinguishability": the moment when

Collective Actions, *Appearances*, Moscow, 13 March, 1976.

Kabakov in his studio presenting his *Albums*, 1972–75.

one can tell that something is happening but the figures are too far away for one to clarify who they are and what exactly is taking place. The figures approached the group and gave them certification of having attended the event (CAG refers to this as "factography"). Monastyrsky later explained that what had happened in the field was not that they (the organizers) had appeared for the participants, but rather, that the participants had appeared *for them*. This inversion of what one might expect to experience with an artistic action – an unfurling of events for the *organizers* rather than for an audience – was matched by the group's preference for the banality of waiting rather than the production of a vivid and visually memorable event: Monastyrsky described the participants's eventual appearance in the work as a "pause," thereby reconceptualizing the waiting not as a prelude to some more specific action, but as the main event.[12] Typically, CAG's primary focus is never on the ostensible action taking place in the snowy landscape, but rather the deferral and displacement of this action both physically (events happen where one was not prepared to see them) and semantically. The phenomenological level of immediate events was subordinated to the conceptual and linguistic activity that subsequently took place in the participants's consciousness: in Monastyrsky's words, the mythological or symbolic content of the action is "used only as an instrument to create that 'inner' level of perception" in the viewer.[13]

This technique can be seen in other early works such as *Pictures* (February 11, 1979), which divided the participants into two groups, one of which undertook an action in the snow, watched by the other group. Twelve sets of twelve colored envelopes (in gradually larger sizes) were distributed to twelve of the thirty participants. Inside each envelope was a description of the key components of the event: from schedule, setting, and weather to audience reaction, meaning, and interpretation. After they had read the instructions, the participants were told to fold and paste each set of envelopes on top of each other, with the largest on the bottom, to form a concentric pattern of color; these were later signed as certification of the participants's attendance. While all this was going on, three of the participants (the organizers) crossed the field and wandered into the woods on the other side. Once again, the "zone of indistinguishability" was put into play: the participants's preoccupation with making the pictures was a distraction from the action on the margin, namely the organizers's disappearance into the woods. The participatory activity (finding and assembling the colored envelopes) was

undermined as a central focus by the sly subtraction of the organizers's presence, indicating that – contra the US model of the Happening – in CAG's works there is no authentic shared experience underlying the event.

In his article "Seven Photographs" (1980), Monastyrsky presents seven near identical photographs of a snowy field, each of which relate to a different action by CAG, including *Appearance* and *Pictures*. The bleak similarity of the images is amusing, but drives home his point that secondary material such as photographs, instructions, descriptions, and participant recollections have a completely separate aesthetic reality to the action itself. (At best, he writes, "a familiarity with the photographs and texts can bring about a sensation of positive indeterminacy."[14]) Influenced by semiotics and making frequent reference to Heidegger, Monastyrsky argues that the group's actions result for the participants in a real experience, but not in an *image* of that experience. The event's existential presence takes place in the viewer's consciousness (as a state of "completed anticipation") and thus cannot be represented: "The only thing that can be represented is the thing that accompanies this internal process, the thing that takes place on the field of action at the time."[15] The exquisite precision of this idea, in which documentation is conceived as a representation of what *accompanied* an artistic experience, explains the repetitive quality of CAG's photographs of (apparently) nothing taking place, since they record only what seems to be a withdrawal of action. Each photograph is to be considered, Monastyrsky writes, as "a sign of a higher order, a sign of an 'unarbitrary emptiness' with the following meaning: 'nothing is represented on it not because nothing happened at that given moment, but because the thing that happened is essentially unrepresentable.'"[16] The highly theorized, quasi-mystical flavor of this position gives CAG a unique status within a history of performance documentation, while also being highly suggestive of an approach to documentary that is ripe for re-exploration today.

Monastyrsky's article was written before *Ten Appearances* (1981) and seems to pave the way for the centrality of photography in this work. The participants in *Ten Appearances* were notified that everyone attending would have to participate in the work; those who were unwilling should not come.[17] The action took place in a snowy field and was organized around a flat board bearing dozens of nails with bobbins, each wound with 200–300 meters of white thread. The assignment was for each of the ten participants to take a thread and walk away from the board in a different direction towards the forest that surrounded the field. Kabakov describes the

Collective Actions, *Pictures*, Moscow Region, February 11, 1979.

minutiae of his volatile emotions as he underwent this process: from anxiety (about how long he would be standing in the cold) to fear (suspecting the organizers of sadism) to sheer joy and "mystic melancholy" on finally reaching the end of the thread, to which was affixed a piece of paper bearing the "factographic text" (the name of the organizers, time, date, and place of the action).[18] At this point it was up to the participants to decide what happened next. Eight of them walked back out of the forest to rejoin the group; two did not return and got a train back to Moscow. Those who returned were given a photograph of themselves emerging from the forest in the "zone of indistinguishability," with each image captioned "The appearance of [name] on February 1, 1981." This simulated photographic documentation had been taken a few weeks earlier but was indistinguishable from the actual appearance of the participants as they emerged from the forest. Monastyrsky refers to these photographs as an "empty act": a mere sign of the elapsed time between the end of the first phase of the action for the participants (receiving the factographic text) and their reappearance in the field ("the signified and culminating event in the structure of the action").[19] Both the act and the image are empty signifiers; the meaning is formulated subsequently by reflection on the totality of the events experienced.

Collective Actions, *Appearances*, Moscow, 13 March, 1976.

Of course, the poignant fact that two participants, Nekrasov and Zhigalov, didn't return to the group did not mean that the work was a failure. Rather, Monastyrsky asserted, it showed that the participants had emerged from a "non-artistic, non-artificially-constructed space" – in other words, an everyday reality in which they were capable of acting of their own free will.[20] This, Monastyrsky reasoned, was why the same people kept coming back to their

events over the course of fifteen years: the pretextual nature of the experiences that the group constructed ensured that participants were continually intrigued, as well as continually motivated to write descriptions and analyses. Since it was near impossible to scrutinize the events as they were happening, these hermeneutical narratives had a compensatory aspect, endlessly chasing a meaning that remained elusive, precisely because the generation of different interpretative positions *was* the meaning.[21] The surfeit of texts that resulted from these actions were collected into books every three to five years, and are published in Russian and German under the title *Trips to the Countryside*; the group is currently at work on an eleventh volume.[22] Volume two, from 1983, for example, is typical in its structure: a theoretical preface by Monastyrsky; descriptions of the events with photographs; an appendix of documentation, which includes the schema of *Ten Appearances* and a list of slides; texts by participants (including Kabakov on *Ten Appearances*); photographs and descriptions of actions by individual artists that are close to CAG's actions, such as Monastyrsky's *Flat Cap* (1983); commentaries and photographs. Later volumes also include interviews and a list of videos, produced after the German artist Sabine Hänsgen joined the group.

Boris Groys has observed how CAG's performances were "meticulously, almost bureaucratically, documented, commented on, and archived."[23] This textual production is one of the dominant characteristics of their practice, and positions it as the inverse of the impulse to make participatory art in Western cultures – which can broadly be summarized as positioned against the atomization of social relations under consumer spectacle. Groys has argued that Soviet society, by contrast,

> was a society of production without consumption. There was no spectator and there was no consumer. Everyone was involved in a productive process. So the role of Collective Actions and some other artists of the time was to create the possibility of consumption, the possibility of an external position from which one could enjoy communism.[24]

What CAG's works gave rise to, then, was not unified collective presence and immediacy but its opposite: difference, dissensus, and debate; a space of privatized experience, liberal democratic indecision, and a plurality of hermeneutical speculation at a time when the dominant discourse and spectatorial regime was marshaled towards a collective and rigidly

schematized apparatus of meaning. This is borne out by Monastyrsky's observation that

> in the Stalin or Brezhnev era, contemplation of an artwork involved a certain compulsion, a kind of tunnel vision. There was nothing peripheral. But when one comes to a field – when one comes there, moreover, with no sense of obligation but for private reasons of one's own – a vast flexible space is created, in which one can look at whatever one likes. One's under no obligation to look at what's being presented – that freedom, in fact, is the whole idea.[25]

The use of a field as the backdrop to so many of CAG's works is therefore doubly salient.[26] It did not designate a specific rejection of the city or a conscious embrace of nature; as Sergei Sitar notes, the field is not chosen for its independent aesthetic merits, "but simply as 'the lesser evil' – as a space that is the least occupied, the least appropriated by the dominant cultural discourse."[27] For Monastyrsky, it is a space "free from any affiliation": "the countryside, for us, isn't the countryside tilled by peasants but that of the thinking classes's vacation retreats."[28] The fields are less about framing (in the way that Prague's Wenceslas Square frames Jiří Kovanda's contemporaneous actions) than *un*framing; the countryside's multiple perspectives corresponded to the group's open-ended, neutral actions that were contrived to leave room for the greatest number of hermeneutic possibilities. The result was a privatized liberal space that existed in covert parallel to official social structures. As Kabakov recalls:

> From the moment I got on the train ... my goals, the questions and affairs that constantly preoccupied me, my fears of myself and others, were all, as it were, taken away from me. The most remarkable thing, however, was that those who led us had no goals either! And, of course, there is something else: for the first time in my life, I was among "my own"; we had our own world, parallel to the real one, and this world had been created and compressed by the CA group until it had achieved complete materiality, or, one might say, tangibility – if this notion is at all applicable to something absolutely ethereal and elusive.[29]

And again, in concluding his account of *Ten Appearances*:

> This [action] actualized one of the most pleasant and practically unknown sides of

the socius, the socius that is so painful in our time. Here the social is not antagonistic to you, but instead good-willed, reliable, and extremely welcoming. This feeling is so unusual, so not experienced before, that it not only recovers you, but also becomes an amazing gift compared to everyday reality.[30]

Between Monastyrsky's highly theoretical musings on semiotics and orientalism, and the more accessible narratives of those who participated in the works, it was this emphasis on freedom – the self-selecting construction of a self-determining social group – that formed the social core of CAG's practice. Participation here denoted the possibility of producing individual affect and singular experience, relayed through a meditative relationship to language that in turn presupposed collective reception and debate.

Participatory art under state socialism in the 1960s and 1970s provides an important counter-model to contemporaneous examples from Europe and North America. Rather than aspiring to create a participatory public sphere as the counterpoint to a privatized world of individual affect and consumption, artists working collaboratively under socialism sought to provide a space for nurturing individualism (of behavior, actions, interpretations) against an oppressively monolithic cultural sphere in which artistic judgments were reduced to a question of their position within Marxist-Leninist dogma. This led to a situation in which most artists wanted nothing to do with politics – and indeed even rejected the dissident position – by choosing to operate, instead, on an existential plane: making assertions of individual freedom, even in the slightest or most silent of forms.[31] We can also contrast this approach with that taken by artists in South America, where participation was used as a means to provoke art audiences into heightened self-awareness of their social conditions and thereby (it was hoped) to impel them to take action in the social sphere. For artists living under communism, participation had no such agitational goals. It was, rather, a means of experiencing a more authentic (because individual and self-organized) mode of collective experience than the one prescribed by the state in official parades and mass spectacles; as such it is frequently figured as escapist or celebratory, regardless of whether it took place on a physical or solely cerebral level. Today, the escapist and celebratory tend to be weak terms in contemporary art criticism, signifying a willful refusal of artists to engage in their political reality and to express a critical stance towards it. However, the example of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde under socialism

reminds us that there is an unimaginably large gap between managing such contextual awareness and heroic acts of dissidence (the latter being, for the most part, a Western fantasy). The reality of daily life under these regimes necessitates a more sober understanding of the artistic gestures achieved there, and appreciation of the consummate subtlety with which so many of them were undertaken.

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Claire Bishop (b.1971) is Associate Professor in the PhD Program in Art History at CUNY Graduate Center, New York. Her publications include *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005), and the edited anthologies *Participation* (2006), and 1968-1989: *Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (2010). She co-curated the exhibition "Double Agent" at the ICA London in 2008, and the performance festival "Prelude.11" at the Graduate Center in 2011. She is a regular contributor to Artforum and her second monograph, "Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship", will be published by Verso in 2012.

1

This essay forms part of a chapter in my forthcoming book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2011).

2

"The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery … If every Chinese must learn Mao, and thus be Mao, it is because he can be nothing else. Wherever the concentrated spectacle rules, so does the police." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), sections 63 and 64.

3

Of course, memories of class difference were not entirely erased. In "The Power of the Powerless," Václav Havel speaks of his social awkwardness at having to work in a brewery in the mid-1970s (Havel, *Open Letters* [London: Faber and Faber, 1991], 173–4). The artist Vladimír Boudník (1924–68) worked in a print factory and declared, a good decade before Joseph Beuys did, that everyone was an artist. He viewed his art as having an educative mission: he produced work in the streets (late 1940s–50s), finding images in peeling paint and stains on walls, occasionally adding to them, and framing them (for example with paper), before encouraging passers-by to converse with him about their meaning. See *Vladimír Boudník* (Prague: Gallery, 2004). Mílan Knížák was aware of Boudník's work, and some of his early actions make reference to everyday workers. For example, *Anonymous* (1965) involved scattering the following script in the street: "1. A HAPPENING for street-sweepers and janitors. 2. ENVIRONMENT for pedestrians. 3. DELIGHT for the creator, resulting from the action." See Milan Knížák, *Actions For Which at Least Some Documentation Remains, 1962–1995* (Prague: Gallery, 2000), 73.

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The socialist calendar in Slovakia, for example, included organized mass parades for Victorious February (February 25), International Women's Day (March 8), International

Workers's Day (May 1), Liberation Day (May 9), International Children's Day (June 1), Nationalization (October 28), and the Great October Socialist Revolution (November 7). See Mira Keratova, "Vivez sans temps mort," *Transforming 68/89* (Berlin: Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, 2008), 528–37. For the Yugoslav context, see Branislav Jakovljevic, "Balkan Baroque: Yugoslav Gestural Culture and Performance Art," *1968–1989: Political Upheaval and Artistic Change*, eds. Claire Bishop and Marta Dzeiwańska (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 31–50.

5

Andrei Erofeev, "Nonofficial Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s" (1995), *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, eds. Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 42. See also William J. Tompson, *Khrushchev: A Political Life* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1995), Chapter 10.

6

Groys, conversation with the author, New York, January 28, 2010.

7

"The communal apartment is a place where the social dimension occurs in its most horrifying, most obtrusive, and most radical form, where the individual is laid bare to the gaze of others. Furthermore, this gaze belongs to largely hostile strangers who consistently exploit their advantages of observation in order to gain advantage in the power struggle within the communal apartment." Boris Groys, "The Theatre of Authorship," *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983–2000, Catalogue Raisonné* Vol. 1, ed. Toni Stoos (Kunstmuseum Bern: Richter Verlag, 2003), 40.

8

According to an interview with Monastyrsky in *Flash Art* (October 2005): 114. The initial group consisted of Nikia Alekseev, Georgii Kizevalter, Andrei Monastyrsky, and Nikolai Panitkov, later joined by Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina, and Sergei Romashko. On the literary aspects of Moscow Conceptualism, Kabakov has noted the central role of the Russian literary tradition of the nineteenth century: "Literature took upon itself all moral, philosophical, pedagogical, and enlightening functions, concentrating them all in itself and not simultaneously in the plastic

arts, which did happen in the West." Kabakov, "On the Subject of the Local Language," in Kabakov, *Das Leben Der Fliegen* (Berlin: Edition Cantz, 1992), 237.

9

Viktor Misiano, "Solidarity: Collective and Collectiveness in Contemporary Russian Art," in WHW, *Collective Creativity* (Kassel: Fridericianum, 2005), 185.

10

It should be noted that CAG also designed actions for individuals or pairs; for example, *For N Panitkov (Three Darknesses)*, 1980; *For G Kizevalter (Slogan-1980)*, 1980; *The Encounter*, 1981; *For N Alekseev*, 1981. It was rarer for actions to take place in private apartments (*Playback*, 1981) or in the city streets (*Exit*, 1983; *The Group*, 1983).

11

Monastyrsky refers to this as a psychological state of "pre-expectation," created through the form of the invitation and through the spatio-temporal peculiarities of the journey to the site of the event. See Monastyrsky, "Preface to the First Volume of Trips to the Countryside," *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960–1990*, ed. Boris Groys (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle/Hatje Cantz, 2008), 335.

12

"And yet, if the experience so far was that of pure expectation, this experience now transforms upon the appearance of the object of perception on the real field. *It is interrupted*, and there begins a process of strenuous looking, accompanied by the desire to understand what this object means. In our view, this new stage of perception constitutes a pause. While it is a necessary stage in the process of perception, it is by no means the event for the sake of which all of this was arranged" (ibid., 336).

13

Ibid., 333.

14

Andrei Monastyrsky, "Seven Photographs," trans. Yelena Kalinsky, available at http://conceptualism.letov.r u (last accessed July 23, 2009).

15

Ibid.

16

Ibid.

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This, reports Kabakov, was unusual in setting up a particular

experience of expectation: "one was going there with the idea of participation, and one was wondering what would happen" (Ilya Kabakov, "Ten Appearances," in Kollektivnye deistviya, *Poezdki za gorod* [Moskva: Ad marginem, 1998], 151. Trans. Anya Pantuyeva.)

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Ibid., 151–2.

19

Andrey Monastyrsky, "Ten Appearances" (1981), reprinted in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 129.

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This is what I understand him to mean by the following dense sentence: "The fact that of the ten possible appearances only eight, and not all ten, came to pass, represents in our view not a failing of the action but, on the contrary, underscores the realization of zones of psychic experience of the action as aesthetically sufficient on the plane of the demonstrational field of the action as a whole" (ibid). This is corroborated by Kabakov's more amenable narrative: "I had some space of freedom and I had to make up my mind what to do then. But actually, I had no doubt or speculation about what to do – to leave, etc. – not at all. What I wanted to do immediately was to share this joy I experienced with the others, and also thank those people who made it happen for me" (Kabakov, "Ten Appearances," 153).

21

Viktor Tupitsyn: "The same happens in combat: while you're in the thick of it, everyone is so busy with the 'physical stuff' that all kinds of hermeneutic activities are foreclosed. Later, though, this void is going to be filled with interpretations, whose excessiveness will compensate for the lack of interpretation at the site of Action." Monastyrsky: "Exactly! … Quite a number of texts about our Actions were composed by both spectators and organizers, who were equally fond of writing down what had really happened – first Kabakov, followed by Leiderman, and then by Bakshtein and others. They were impelled to do so in order to compensate for the impossibility of commenting on and interpreting the Actions as they occurred." Tupitsyn and Monastyrsky, unpublished interview, 1997, archive of Exit Art, New York.

English translations of the works and
photo-documentation can be found at http://conceptualism.letov.r u (last accessed July 23, 2009).

23
Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," in Groys,
Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in
Moscow 1960-1990 (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle/Hatje Cantz, 2008), 33.

24
Groys, in Claire Bishop and Boris Groys, "Bring
the Noise," *Tate Etc*. (Summer 2009):
38.

25
Tupitsyn and Monastyrsky, unpublished interview,
1997, archive of Exit Art, New York. However, it's worth noting that
Monastyrsky goes on to assert (contra Groys) that CAG sought to *erase* the distinction between work of
art and spectator and with it the critical distance that might constitute the
political:

"Take our 'empty action,' in which
we purposely directed spectators's attention to what is nonsensical and just
plain unnecessary to look at: the wall of trees, the state of the weather, the
clouds drifting by, or the empty time of the spectators, which they're spending
idly, privately, before who knows what. The opposition between 'spectator' and
"work of art" was placed under erasure, that rigid opposition which left none
of the distance that would have allowed artists to engage seriously in the
political sphere."

We can read this two ways. Firstly, the idea of "political" art for this generation, as with Czech and Slovak artists of the 1970s, is
generally not viewed as desirable as a result of their daily experience of a Soviet ideology overdetermining all artistic meaning. (Groys again: "When
looking at a painting, normal Soviet viewers quite automatically, without ever having heard of Art and Language, saw this painting inherently replaced by its possible ideological-political-philos ophical commentary, and they took only
this commentary into account when assessing the painting in question – as Soviet, half-Soviet, non-Soviet, anti-Soviet, and so on." See Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," 31.) Secondly, although the participatory event could be

argued to foreclose the distance between viewer and work of art, in reality
this was complicated by a number of spectatorial models (ten participants
watched by twenty others, etc.) and reinstated by the textual analyses that
ensued from these experiences in the subsequent weeks.

26
The snowy fields have variously been
compared to Malevich's *White Paintings*
and the white pages of Kabakov's albums. It is worth noting that CAG was not
the first to use white fields as the site for art: Francisco Infante had also
deployed the field as a backdrop for photo-conceptualist works in the late
1960s, such as *Dedication* (1969), a
Malevich-style constructivist composition made of coloured papers on white
snow.

27
Sergei Sitar, "Four Slogans of 'Collective
Actions,'" *Third Text* 17:4 (2003): 364.

28
Tupitsyn and Monastyrsky, unpublished
interview, 1997, archive of Exit Art, New York.

29
Cited in "Serebrianyi Dvorets," a conversation between Ilya Kabakov and Victor
Tupitsyn, *Khudozhestvennyi Zhurnal*
No. 42 (2002): 10–14. Cited in Viktor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post-)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 70.

30
Kabakov, "Ten Appearances," 154. Translated by Anya Pantuyeva.

31
See for example the interview with Joseph
Beuys undertaken by two Russians, V. Bakchahyan and A. Ur, in the samizdat
magazine *A-YA* at the time of Beuys's
Guggenheim retrospective. Their questions make explicit their wariness of art
having anything to do with social change, since the work of the avant-garde
post-1917 was so flagrantly co-opted by political officials to be a harbinger
of communism: "Our Russian experience shows that to flirt with politics is
dangerous for an artist ... Aren't you afraid that the artist who's inside you
is being conquered by the politician?" (V. Backchahyan and A. Ur, "Joseph
Beuys: Art and Politics," *A-YA* 2 [1980]:

54–5).

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