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Collecting, Archiving, Canonizing: The Role of Exhibitions in the Transnational Reception History of Moscow Conceptualism

Dorine Schellens

Introduction

> Надо бы вспомнить всё, что
> было в таком роде.[1] (Lev Rubinshtein, 1984)

[1] Unless indicated otherwise, the translations in this article are my own. I use the ALA-LC transliteration system to transcribe Cyrillic characters. An exception is made in the references, which list the published names of Russian authors (for example Sacharow instead of Zakharov or Dyogot instead of Degot'). I make an exception for names for which a certain transliteration has become the standard, such as Boris Groys instead of Boris Grois.

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One ought to remember everything that
Was like that

In September 2003, the Gropius Bau Museum in Berlin opened the binational exhibition *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin* (Berlin–Moskva/Moskva–Berlin) as part of the German-Russian Cultural Encounters in 2003–2004. Designed as a sequel to the same titled exhibition from 1995, this ambitious project presented an overview of Russian and German art from the 1950s to the early 2000s. As one of its centerpieces, the event featured an installation by the Russian artist Vadim Zakharov entitled *The History of Russian Art: From the Russian Avant-Garde to the Moscow School of Conceptualists* (*Istoriia russkogo iskusstva ot russkogo avangarda do moskovskoi kontseptual'noi shkoly*, 2003) (Fig. 11.1).[2] The almost four-meter-high artwork consists of five archival binders which visitors were able to enter. Dividing twentieth-century Russian art into five (more or less) chronological sections, the binders attribute a keyword to each stage in this history: "Russian Avant-Garde: Utopia", "Socialist Realism: Ideology", "Non-Conformism (Unofficial Art of the 50s–60s): Art", "Soz-Art: Self-criticism" and, finally, "Moscow Conceptual School: Archive". Stepping inside the latter binder, viewers encountered a wall of Leitz lever arch files referring to the work of various art groups commonly subsumed under the term Moscow conceptualism, such as NOMA, MANI (Moskovskii arkhiv novogo iskusstva/Moscow Archive of New Art), and KD/CA (Kollektivnye deistviia/Collective Actions).

Archives, the installation indicates, play a central role not just in the internal historiography of the Moscow conceptualist scene but also in its external reception history. Playfully staging Moscow conceptualism as the last heir in the line of Soviet-Russian art, Zakharov underlines its perceived canonical status. The artwork thus establishes a twofold connection between the archive and the canon. On the one hand, the Leitz binders refer to a process of self-archiving and auto-canonization within Moscow conceptualism which is reflected in various documentation projects such as the *Papki MANI* (MANI Folders) and the *Poezdki za gorod* (Trips Out of Town) volumes. These collections did not just

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[2] Figure 11.1 as well as additional photographs of Zakharov's installation can be viewed on the homepage of the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt am Main: https://collection.mmk.art/de/nc/werkdetailseite/?werk=2005%2F6 (Accessed: 12 December 2021).
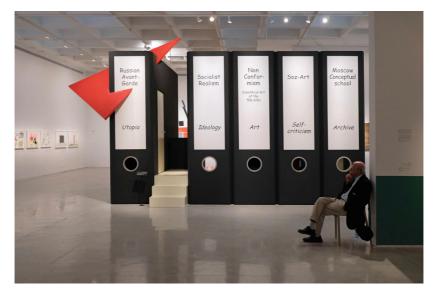
Fig. 11.1 Vadim Zakharov: The History of Russian Art: From the Russian Avant-Garde to the Moscow School of Conceptualists (Zakharov, 2003a) (collection.mmk.art). © Vadim Zakharov. Photography by Axel Schneider

enable their authors to preserve and comment on their activities and exchanges, an endeavor which was continued in later initiatives such as Andrei Monastyrskii's *Slovar' terminov Moskovskoi kontseptual'noi shkoly* (*Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*) (1999) and Zakharov's art journal *Pastor* (1992–2001). Artists also actively experimented with the aesthetics of the archive, turning it into an independent object of reflection (Scharf, 2006: 43). Lev Rubinshtein's index card series titled *Predromanticheskie predpolozheniia 1983 g.* (*Pre-Romantic Assumptions from 1983*) cited at the beginning of this chapter is an example of an archival technique turned into a poetic text. Moscow conceptualism's fascination with minutely documenting, categorizing, as well as analyzing its own activities serves a clear historiographic purpose. However, it is important to keep in mind that these archival projects were intended for internal use, as Julia Scharf (2006: 18) points out. Highly self-referential and hermetic in nature, they are almost impossible to understand for an audience not versed in Soviet *samizdat* culture and the language of the Moscow

conceptualist group, which Il'ia Kabakov has famously compared to a "secret society" (Geheimorden) (Groys & Kabakov, 1993: 25).

Zakharov's installation, on the other hand, also refers to a different process of archiving, one that took place outside the immediate circle of the Moscow conceptualists. By using the English term 'Moscow Conceptual School' on the fifth binder rather than the more widespread 'Moscow Conceptualism', the artist draws on the abbreviation 'MOK-SHA' (Moskovskaia Kontseptual'naia Shkola) which was introduced in 1993 by fellow conceptualist Andrei Monastyrskii to denote the reception of the group during the 1990s (Zakharov, 2003b: 181). This chapter intends to show that the canonical status attributed to Moscow conceptualism today is largely the result of an archiving process which started in the 1970s, when a small network of Soviet and international collectors, academics, and diplomats began to archive, interpret, and circulate works from Moscow's unofficial art scene. During this decade, artworks from artists such as Il'ia Kabakov, Vladimir Iankilevskii, and Erik Bulatov were subsumed under a range of different names and categories, a process in which 'Moscow conceptualism' surfaced as the dominant and, ultimately, canonized term. I therefore posit that Boris Groys' much-cited claim that "to create an archive for [Moscow conceptualism, D.S.] and to document it is to invent it" (2003: 87) does not only hold true for the aesthetic practices and internal historiography of the Moscow conceptualists. It equally applies to the reception history of the group, in which archival activities during the 1970s and early 1980s constituted the material and discursive foundation for Moscow conceptualism's entry into the canon as a movement or 'school'.

The canonization process saw the creation of different types of archives, ranging from museum and gallery collections to anthologies, and more recently, online resources devoted to the documentation of Moscow conceptualism. The fact that these archival activities have been performed in Russia, the United States, as well as in several European countries since the 1970s adds to the complexity of this cultural history.[3] This chapter will focus on one specific form of archiving that plays an important role in all stages of the group's reception: the exhibition and the catalogue. The lack of an institutionalized platform for unofficial art

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[3] In this article, I draw and expand on findings from my book *Kanonbildung im transkulturellen Netzwerk. Die Rezeptionsgeschichte des Moskauer Konzeptualismus aus deutsch-russischer Sicht* (2021).

from the Soviet Union either at home or abroad caused many archival projects during the 1970s and early 1980s to take shape in exhibitions in Western Europe. Some of these exhibitions traveled through various countries as mobile archives, not finding a more permanent home in an existing museum or gallery collection. One prominent cultural transmitter in this period was the art collector Aleksandr Glezer, who was exiled from Moscow due to his involvement in the organization of the Bulldozer exhibition in September 1974. Taking his large collection of non-canonized Soviet art with him to Europe,[4] he sent selected works on extensive tours through the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Austria, and the UK in the second half of the 1970s. These exhibitions did not just guarantee the preservation but also the circulation of art that could not be shown to a public audience at home, or, in the rare cases it was, ran the risk of being confiscated or destroyed.

Exhibitions and the accompanying catalogues remain an extremely important medium in the course of archiving and canonizing the unofficial Soviet art scene and, more specifically, Moscow conceptualism during and after *perestroika*. Especially in the transition period, they fulfill a crucial role not only in taking stock of a virtually unknown part of Soviet culture but also in reflecting on the changing geopolitical world after 1991. This dual purpose becomes particularly apparent in the post-reunification German museum landscape in which exhibitions devoted to alternative Soviet art were often considered a form of cultural diplomacy which could help redefine German-Russian relations. The fact that the process of archiving and institutionalizing Moscow conceptualism largely took place abroad during the 1990s[5] caused the group's historiography to be written predominantly from an international perspective. Dissatisfied with the course of their reception, several artists began to create 'counter-archives'[6] in response to regain influence on the perception of Moscow conceptualism, offering very different perspectives on the meaning and composition of the scene. As a prominent example, I will discuss Il'ia Kabakov's exhibition project *NOMA* (1993) which presents the group as

[4] Glezer was legally allowed to export 80 artworks. 500 pieces had already been moved abroad via different ways.

[5] In Russia, newly founded galleries played an important role in this process. Museums, meanwhile, struggled with the creation of new collections during this decade, especially since many artworks had already been sold and exported abroad.

[6] I expand on my use of the concept of the archive in the next section of this article.

an almost mystical sect, unattainable and unreadable to outsiders. Another particularly sensational case study worth mentioning here is Vsevolod Nekrasov's manifesto *Doiche bukh* (2002), whose title offers a pun on the Cyrillic spelling of the words "Deutsches Buch", meaning "German book". In this exposé, the poet vehemently protests against the dominant interpretation of Moscow conceptualism within the German academic and museum landscape which he felt excluded him from the emerging canon of the group's work.[7]

The question of the 'right' to tell the history of Moscow conceptualism as well as Soviet art in general also echoes outside the immediate circle of artists. This is illustrated, among other projects, by the binational exhibition *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin* (2003–2004) which was accompanied by demands on the side of the Russian press to strengthen the influence of Russian curators and art historians on the interpretation of Soviet art rather than to take over what journalists saw as a German perspective when the event opened in Moscow in 2004. Part of this post-Cold War discourse were also efforts to relocate collections of twentieth-century art back to Russia, for example with the opening of the Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg in 1994. In addition, archival institutions such as the Garage Museum in Moscow have developed an extensive corpus of documentation on alternative Soviet culture.

Building on this brief historical overview, this chapter explores three major turns in the history of archiving and canonizing Moscow conceptualism in exhibitions and catalogues. The first and most extensive part of this paper will foreground the art collector Aleksandr Glezer. In doing so, I will focus on the transnational network of cultural transmitters, artworks, and ideas that emerged during the 1970s through the organization of exhibitions which referred to conceptual art from Moscow or related notions such as Russian or Soviet conceptualism. The term 'Moscow conceptualism', meanwhile, did not start circulating until the early 1980s. These two decades laid the foundation for the reception of what increasingly came to be seen as an art movement after *perestroika*. As mentioned further above, the transnational nature of the canonization process saw the creation of several counter-archives on the side of the artists, which will be discussed in the second part of this article based on Il'ia Kabakov's exhibition project *NOMA* (1993). I will

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[7] For a more extensive discussion of Nekrasov's *Doiche bukh,* see Schellens (2021: 154ff.) and Schellens (2023).

conclude by arguing that debates on gaining influence on the memory of Moscow conceptualism and, in a broader sense, alternative Soviet art also characterize the Russian reception of traveling exhibitions such as *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin. 1950–2000* (2003–2004). Drawing on these three exemplary case studies, my intention is to show how these developments respond to and mutually define each other. Mapping the different turns in the reception of Moscow conceptualism is also crucial in order to understand more recent archival projects documenting the history of unofficial Soviet art in Russia. In the following section, I will first outline the key concepts used in this paper to explore the role of exhibitions and catalogues in archive and canon formation.

COLLECTING, CATEGORIZING, CANONIZING: THE ROLE OF EXHIBITIONS IN MEMORY DISCOURSES

Archives, Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown write, "are the manufacturers of memory and not merely the guardians of it" (1998: 22). Reverberating Jacques Derrida's famous statement in *Archive Fever* (1995) that "archivization produces as much as it records the event" (17), the authors stress that archival collections do not function as neutral repositories but involve active curatorial work which is in turn shaped by the dominant sociopolitical and intellectual paradigms of a particular time and place (1998: 22, 25). Depending on their historical and cultural context, archives can assume a myriad of forms and are housed by a multitude of institutions, ranging from museums, libraries, universities, and government entities to business corporations, to name just a few examples. This, combined with the fact that the term 'archive' travels between different academic disciplines and is used not only in an empirical but also a metaphorical sense (Assmann, 2008: 102), makes it hard to give a comprehensive definition.

As institutions, however, archives share two fundamental characteristics relevant to this paper. Firstly, all archives have in common that they contain objects or texts to which a certain historical, sociopolitical, or cultural meaning is ascribed. Archival collections, secondly, are always organized according to a specific classification system which determines what will be preserved as opposed to what is excluded from the archivization process. As such, Aleida Assmann concludes, archives provide "the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past" (2008: 102). In other words, the selection criteria and

structure of an archive impact the formation of both our collective knowledge and memory, turning it into a political space (Harvey Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998: 22).

However, the role of archives in the circulation of knowledge and the development of memory discourses is almost never direct nor particularly straightforward, Anthea Josias explains with reference to archival scholars Michael Piggott and Margaret Hedstrom (2011: 103). At this point, it is important to distinguish the concept of the archive from collective memory or the canon which I use synonymously in this chapter. Aleida Assmann offers a helpful differentiation between both terms when she refers to the canon as "actively circulated memory that keeps the past present" while the archive represents "passively stored memory that preserves the past past" (2008: 98). She argues that as soon as materials become part of an archive, they are taken out of their original context and subjected to a different classification system instead, which enables their preservation and accessibility (2008: 103). In Assmann's view, the archive thus resembles an intermediary space, in which objects or documents are "deprived of their old existence and waiting for a new one" (2008: 103). This new existence requires an act of interpretation. Exhibitions and catalogues, I will argue in the following paragraphs, are able to recontextualize collected artworks or artifacts by embedding them in a new narrative, thereby bridging the gap between the archive and the canon.

The discursive power of exhibitions constitutes an interesting, yet understudied topic. Due to their popular appeal and historiographic function, they serve as a good starting point for an inquiry into canon formation. However, as the exhibitions discussed in this paper were designed as temporary events, it is hard to accurately reconstruct them without the help of photographic or video evidence which is not available in all cases. For this reason, the analysis will mainly rely on exhibition catalogues. Although these publications do not necessarily mirror the exact structure of the event on which they are based, they give a good indication of the latter's main goals and content. As a medium, the exhibition catalogue displays three features that are of particular interest to this chapter, namely its ability to (1) archive, (2) classify and interpret, as well as (3) circulate the artworks and artists it foregrounds.

Catalogues are an intermedial genre encompassing both images and texts. Generally, the images included in these publications do not offer a complete representation of the artworks displayed in an exhibition but

present a selection of the ones deemed most important. They are accompanied by different types of texts, ranging from an introduction written by the responsible museum director and/or curator(s), popular academic contributions devoted to the artworks, and interviews with or statements from the artists (Mackert, 2004: 106). Combined, these texts serve an explanatory as well as historiographic goal, Karin Mihatsch (2015: 27) argues. In addition to the content level, catalogues provide insight into the network of actors and institutions involved in the organization of an exhibition, including artists, curators, art institutions, and financial sponsors. As such, these publications can be seen as discursive knots, which unite disparate actors, artifacts, and ideas into a coherent story which aims to appeal to a broad audience.

The significance of catalogues in the formation of knowledge and memory discourses thus extends beyond a mere archival function. By offering an interpretative framework to categorize and understand the artworks, they develop a specific historiographic narrative which, if successful, is conducive to the broader circulation and acknowledgment of the art and artists in question. Writing about the interaction between art institutions and other areas of society, the sociologist Harrison C. White argues that the "art world combines artists and their works with others into a pattern that can reproduce itself, may become aware of itself, and does impose itself as reality upon those in it before its products reach out as a reality for others outside it" (1993: 9). Catalogues can be seen as performing such an intermediary act in their attempt to inscribe selected artworks and ideas into an existing canon (Mihatsch, 2015: 27). The success of this endeavor is revealed by the long-term circulation and institutionalization of both a work of art and its narrative interpretation. This becomes more likely if they are actively cited by other (especially influential) actors and media both inside and outside the immediate art world. The threefold function of catalogues to archive, analyze, and circulate artworks and ideas will constitute the focal point of my analysis, starting with the emerging exhibition network devoted to alternative Soviet art in Western Europe during the 1970s (Fig. 11.2).

Fig. 11.2 Network of exhibitions in Western Europe and Russia referring to conceptual art from Moscow (or a related term) between 1965 and 1985 (Schellens, 2021: 78). The three types of dots (from large to small) represent: more than 10 exhibitions, 2–4 exhibitions or 1 exhibition

Constructing Moscow Conceptualism
in Pre-Perestroika Exhibition Networks

In any network there are individuals or institutions acting as catalysts: they initiate or accelerate action and connect people or groups. An example of such a figure in the early reception history of conceptual art from Moscow is the collector and poet Aleksandr Glezer (1934–2016). After going into

exile from the Soviet Union in February 1975, he gained a prominent position in the emerging European network of exhibitions devoted to alternative Russian-Soviet art. Glezer's emigration was a direct consequence of his organizational role in the so-called Bulldozer exhibition which took place on 15 September 1974 in an empty field in Beliaevo. Displaying paintings from Moscow's and Leningrad's unofficial art scene, the open-air show was quickly and forcibly disbanded by members of the KGB, who used bulldozers and water cannons to drive artists and spectators away, destroying many artworks in the process. The presence of journalists and diplomats at the event led to an outcry in the international press, which also commented on Glezer's forced exile in the aftermath of the event. An article with the headline "Soviet Dissident Allowed to Leave" published in the *New York Times* on 17 February 1975 describes how the art collector had left the country for Vienna together with 80 paintings. The style of the artworks, according to the newspaper, "is not startling by Western standards, but […] has been criticized here for not reflecting the heroic optimism of the official style of socialist realism" (*New York Times,* 17 February 1975). This assessment illustrates how alternative Soviet art is perceived and assessed not just through an aesthetic but also a political lens, which characterizes its reception until today.

When Glezer left Vienna for Paris in the course of 1975, the city was already home to a large circle of Soviet émigrés and exiled dissidents. Here, he initiated several ambitious projects in an attempt to both institutionalize and gain recognition for his collection of non-canonized Soviet art, which mainly focused on works by artists associated with the Lianozovo group,[8] such as Oskar Rabin, Lidiia Masterkova, and Vladimir Nemukhin. In 1976, Glezer launched an art journal with the title *Tret'ia volna* (Third Wave) (1976–1986) as well as a publishing house that carried this name. That same year he also founded a museum in the southeast of Paris with the help of two fellow émigrés: the poet Aleksandr Galich and the writer Vladimir Maksimov, editor of the renowned literary-religious magazine *Kontinent* (Continent) (1974–1991) which came out in Paris. The Musée Russe en Exil was based

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[8] The Lianozovo group was an unofficial circle of artists and poets which existed from the late 1940s until the early 1970s. The group, whose name derives from the Lianozovo District, revolved around key figures such as Evgenii Kropivnitskii, Oskar Rabin, Lidiia Masterkova, Vladimir Nemukhin, and Vsevolod Nekrasov.

in the Château du Moulin de Senlis in Montgeron. A former shelter for orphans and political refugees from the Soviet Union after World War II, the building seemed like an ideal location for a museum dedicated to Russian art in exile. Unsurprisingly, the initiative caused some backlash in the Soviet press. In June 1977, the three founders were accused of money laundering and spreading anti-Soviet propaganda by the newspaper *Izvestiia* which published a denunciatory article entitled "Politicheskie litsemery i fal'shivye vekselia" (Political Hypocrites and False Bills) (Aparin/Briantsev 1977).[9]

Glezer, however, did not just accommodate his art collection in the Musée Russe en Exil. To ensure a wider circulation of the artworks, he sent selected paintings and drawings on extensive exhibition tours throughout several European countries. He started with a range of small exhibitions which traveled between galleries in the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria during 1975 and 1976.[10] In 1977, which proved to be an eventful year for alternative Soviet art, Glezer first co-organized the large exhibition project *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* together with the London-based Russian art historian Igor' Golomshtok and the author and translator Michael Scammel. He subsequently lent artworks to the *Biennale del dissenso culturale* (Biennial of Dissent) in Venice, which, after much political wrangling, opened in October of that year.

The above-mentioned exhibitions share a twofold strategy in order to appeal to a Western European audience unfamiliar with alternative

[9] Additionally, in 1977 a conflict arose between Glezer and the Center for Russian Emigration which owned the Château. In an archival document entitled "Rappel des faits" (Recall of Facts) from 1977, Vladimir Maksimov states that the Center proposed a shorter contract term than was initially discussed and forbade Glezer to publicly express himself in the name of the museum without prior approval from the board. The document ends with an appeal to save the museum by gaining support from prominent French intellectuals and Soviet émigrés at a reception honoring Soviet dissidents in the Théâtre Recamier in June 1977 (Maksimov). Leaving Paris for New York in 1979, Glezer eventually opened a new Museum of Russian Art in Exile (today: The Museum of International Art, MORA) in New Jersey on 15 September 1980, the sixth anniversary of the Bulldozer exhibition.

[10] In 1975, Glezer organized the exhibitions *Sieben russische Künstler* (Seven Russian Artists) (Vienna), *Russische nonkonformistische Maler. Sammlung Alexander Gleser* (Russian Non-Conformist Painters. Collection Alexander Gleser) (Braunschweig, Freiburg, West-Berlin), and *Der russische Februar* (The Russian February) (Vienna). In 1976, the exhibitions *Russische nonkonformistische Maler. Sammlung Gleser* (*Russian Non-Conformist Painters. Collection Gleser*) (Konstanz, Bad Saulgau) and *Alternativen (Sammlung Gleser)* (Alternatives (Collection Gleser)) (Esslingen) followed.

tendencies in Soviet art. On the one hand, the catalogues explain the style of the artworks by explicitly drawing on established art historical categories, such as pop art, surrealism, conceptual art, and expressionism. A sense of familiarity or recognition, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen writes, is a prerequisite in order for cultural transfers to succeed (2019: 220). However, it can also create the impression of (belated) repetition and unoriginality, which, in the context of today's Western art market, almost infallibly leads to rejection. Igor' Golomshtok addresses this complex balancing act in the catalogue *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* (1977):

> The chronology of unofficial art in the Soviet Union covers the last twenty years. Its representatives have never been united in an artistic grouping and have displayed no integrated stylistic trend. The styles in which their quests are carried out range from traditional realism […] to Pop art and Conceptual art. But even the boldest formal innovations by Soviet unofficial artists, which have departed so far from the generally required standards of Socialist Realism that in their own country they are seen as avant-garde extremism, seem at first sight here in the West to be only a feeble reflection of things discovered long ago in the art of Europe and the USA. (Golomshtok 1977: 81f.)

This idea is reinforced by the trope of seeing Russia as a 'copy culture' of the West. Golomshtok, on the other hand, counters this notion by inscribing the artworks in a discourse of originality and authenticity when he underlines their roots in artistic traditions inherent to Russian culture:

> However, the development of Russian art over the last three hundred years contradicts such a view, while a closer examination of unofficial art in the context of Russian reality reveals certain aesthetic traits which show that it is not merely a reflection of Western trends but a deeply individual artistic phenomenon. (Golomshtok 1977: 82)

Whereas Golomshtok focuses on the aesthetic value of the art in the above-cited passages, Glezer politicizes the works in his collection, using the word 'non-conformism' as an umbrella term for the artists he represents. In his exhibitions, he frequently draws on current cultural and political affairs to establish a foundation for the reception of alternative Soviet art. In his foreword to the catalogue *Sieben aus Moskau* (Seven from Moscow) from 1975, for example, he refers to the painter Oskar

Rabin as the "Solzhenitsyn of art" ("Solženicyn der Kunst") (Gleser, 1975). Due to the international renown of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Archipelag GULAG* (*Gulag Archipelago*), which was published between 1973 and 1975 in Paris, this was a promising argument to draw the public's attention to Rabin's work (Schellens, 2021: 98).

Although several of Glezer's exhibitions mention the term conceptual art, his catalogue contributions demonstrate a clear preference for artists associated with the Lianozovo group, whom the collector describes as the "most uncompromising fighters for the emancipation of creative activity" (Glezer 1977: 109). Meanwhile, artists such as Il'ia Kabakov, Ernst Neizvestnyi, and Vladimir Iankilevskii, who are referred to as Moscow's 'avant-garde', are discussed in a less favorable tone. Their work, according to Glezer, "had the backing of critics in Italy, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia and therefore achieved a certain reputation", whereas the Lianozovo group "had no desire to 'stretch Socialism [sic!] Realism' with the backing of 'progressive' art experts from either West or East. They only wanted to paint as they saw fit and exhibit their pictures" (1977: 109).

In the second half of the 1970s, Glezer constituted one of the most prominent cultural transmitters of non-canonized Soviet art. Not only was he active in several European countries at the same time, but he also performed a number of different roles, ranging from founder of a journal, publishing house, and museum to curator and publicist. However, as the network of actors concerned with unofficial Soviet-Russian art grew, a process which was accelerated by the impact of the Venice *Biennial of Dissent* in 1977, his influence gradually diminished, making room for different artists and interpretations. This shift becomes apparent in a conflict between Glezer and the then director of the Bochum Art Museum, Peter Spielmann, who expanded the museum's focus on art from the GDR, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union toward the end of the 1970s. Parts of the collection were shown in an exhibition from 1979 entitled *20 Jahre unabhängige Kunst aus der Sowjetunion* (20 Years of Independent Art from the Soviet Union). The catalogue opens with Spielmann describing a confrontation with Glezer, who, together with a number of artists, had tried to prevent the exhibition from taking place:

> Some (almost scandalous) circumstances during the preparation of this exhibition prove it. A small group of visual artists (Oskar Rabin, Michail Schemjakin, Oleg Tzelkow and Jurij Zarkich) together with the poet,

collector and director of the so-called 'Russian Museum in Exile' Alek-
sander Glezer claim the right to determine what is truly objective when
describing or showing the story of recent Russian art history. They also
act as the judge of the cultural political consequences of the work of other
artists, they want to have the exclusive and final say in determining the
extent of the heroism of individuals in the fight for the independence of
art. I would not have mentioned this episode had these events not influ-
enced the structure of our exhibition. Because they forbade friendly art
collectors to lend artworks to the Bochum Art Museum (Claude Day).
They tried to prevent the exhibition from taking place on the unsubstan-
tiated pretext of 'non-objectivity'. This incomprehensible attitude caused
the artists Nemuchin, Kalinin, Plawinskij, Wetschtomow and Kandaurow
to be almost absent or badly represented in the exhibition. (Spielmann,
1979: 3)

As a consequence, the exhibition moves different artists into the lime-
light. The catalogue is one of the first international publications to
define conceptual art from Moscow as more than an aesthetic tendency,
as Golomshtok described it further above.[11] Instead, Spielmann identi-
fies a group of conceptual artists, naming Il'ia Kabakov, Erik Bulatov,
Vladimir Iankilevskii, Leonid Sokov, Vitalii Komar, Aleksandr Melamid,
Ivan Chuikov, Oleg Vasil'ev, Aleksandr Kosolapov, and, lastly, Rimma
and Valerii Gerloviny as its main representatives: "They call themselves
'conceptualists' now, they declare art dead" (Spielmann, 1979: 8). ("Sie
nennen sich jetz [sic!] 'Konzeptualisten', sie erklären den Tod der
Kunst.").

The focus on this younger generation of artists (compared to the
Lianozovo group) united under the term conceptualists was strength-
ened and expanded on by the Slavic department at the Ruhr University
Bochum during this time, which became one of the most prominent
centers for archiving and studying alternative Soviet art during the late
1970s and early 1980s. In 1984, Slavic scholars Georg Witte and Sabine
Hänsgen published an extensive survey of an art movement now referred
to as 'Moscow conceptualism'. Their volume *Kulturpalast* (*Palace of
Culture*), which lists the editors under their pseudonyms Günter Hirt

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[11] I discuss the emergence and circulation of the term 'Moscow conceptualism' and
'Moscow conceptualists', as well as related terms more extensively in Schellens (2021,
85ff., 130ff., and 189ff.).

and Sascha Wonders, marks a discursive shift from the politicized perspective on alternative Soviet art that was widespread in the 1970s. Instead, Witte and Hänsgen propose an interpretation of Moscow conceptualism that is visibly influenced by the theory of cultural semiotics which had gained popularity in the German field of Slavic Studies around this time. Defining the analysis of Soviet culture as the main concern of the Moscow conceptualists, the authors write: "Whereas the discovery and rediscovery of 'different' worlds is characteristic for the 1960s […] artists can now be observed to return to their immediately surrounding reality. […] Reality is experienced as a reality of signs" (Hirt & Wonders, 1984: 7). ("Waren die sechziger Jahre bestimmt von der Entdeckung und Wiederentdeckung 'anderer' Welten—[…] so läßt sich nun eine erneute Hinwendung der Künstler zu der sie unmittelbar umgebenden Wirklichkeit beobachten. […] Die Wirklichkeit wird als Zeichenwirklichkeit erlebt.").

Their approach does not just move away from politicized terms such as 'non-conformism' or 'dissidence' from the 1970s but also radically differs from Boris Groys' article "Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm/ Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" (1979) which had appeared a couple of years earlier in the first issue of the *tamizdat* journal *A-Ia. Zhurnal neofitsial'nogo russkogo iskusstva* (*A-Ya. Unofficial Russian Art Review*). In this essay, Groys characterizes the art of Moscow conceptualism as a metaphysical, almost religious search for another world, famously stating that "[a]rt in Russia is magic" (Iskusstvo v Rossii—eto magiia) (1979: 11).[12] In stark contrast to this, Witte and Hänsgen define Moscow conceptualism as an art movement which does not seek out different worlds but turns to the reality of Soviet mass culture instead in order to examine it with an almost scholarly rigor. In the exhibition catalogue *Soviet Art Around 1990* (*Sowjetische Kunst um 1990*) the authors even introduce the term "conceptualist artist scholar" ("konzeptualistische[r] Künstlerforscher") (Hirt & Wonders, 1991: 57). Both interpretations have very different implications. Whereas Groys draws on the trope of Russia as the unknowable Other of the West in *A-Ia*, Witte and Hänsgen depict Soviet culture as a semiotic system of signs which can be read and

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[12] This interpretation of Moscow conceptualism should be seen in the context of the Leningrad Religious-Philosophical Seminar, in which Groys was an active member. His essay first appeared in 1978 in the *samizdat* journal *Tridtsat' sem'* (*Thirty-Seven*) which was closely connected to the Seminar (von Zitzewitz, 2016: 25).

thus potentially understood by a non-Russian audience (Schellens, 2021: 113).

After *Palace of Culture* (1984) Witte and Hänsgen developed their semiotic approach to Moscow conceptualism in several catalogue contributions to large-scale exhibitions such as *I Live − I See* (*Ich lebe − Ich sehe*) (1988) in Bern and *Soviet Art Around 1990*, which traveled from Düsseldorf to Moscow and Jerusalem between 1991 and 1992. Cited by curators, scholars, and even some of the artists themselves, semiotic metaphors in discussions of Moscow conceptualism continue to circulate widely in today's academic and museum landscape. The considerable influence of the international art world on the perception and historiography of Moscow conceptualism in the late 1980s and 1990s, however, also inspired fear and criticism among the artists. In the exhibition catalogue *I Live − I See* (1988), for instance, Vadim Zakharov writes: "This Russian wave will end badly for us. People want to connect us to the main network. But for many of us this tension will be 'catastrophic'. The uniqueness of the Moscow art scene is already destroyed" (Sacharow 1988: 8). ("Diese russische Welle wird schlimm für uns enden. Man will uns ans allgemeine Netz anschliessen. Aber für viele wird diese Spannung die 'Katastrophe' bedeuten. Die Einzigartigkeit der Moskauer Kunstszene ist bereits zerstört.").

During the heyday of Moscow conceptualism's reception in the 1990s, artists such as Vsevolod Nekrasov in his earlier mentioned manifesto *Doiche bukh* (2002) voiced their protest against dominant interpretations of the group in quite a vocal way. Others continued to create documentation projects that held on to the character of small *samizdat* publications, marking a conscious withdrawal from public space. This is how Vadim Zakharov describes the motivation behind his self-edited art journal *Pastor* (1992–2001) in the catalogue *NOMA* (1993: 156). Il'ia Kabakov, meanwhile, used the medium of the exhibition to regain influence on the historiography of Moscow conceptualism. His installation *NOMA or The Moscow Conceptual Circle* (*NOMA, ili Moskovskii kontseptual'nyi krug*), which he exhibited at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1993, can be seen as a counter-archive that revisits Boris Groys' early theorization of Moscow conceptualism as a closed and metaphysically oriented art movement. The next section discusses the artwork as an attempt to reappropriate the discourse on the Moscow conceptualists by representing the group as a mystical, hermetic sect that can be watched from the

outside but not understood. Making the readable unreadable, I argue that the installation thus constitutes a counterpart to semiotic approaches to Moscow conceptualism.

The Unreadable Counter-Archive: Kabakov's Exhibition Project *NOMA* (1993)

The term NOMA, which figures as the title of Kabakov's installation from 1993, was introduced in 1988 by Pavel Peppershtein as an alternative to both 'MANI' and 'Moscow conceptualism'. Tracing the roots of the concept back to the Ancient Egyptian name for 'district',[13] Peppershtein defines NOMA as "'a group of people who describe the boundaries of the self [...] by means of a set of language practices that they have developed together'" (Eşanu, 2010: 79f.). Kabakov underlines this shared discourse by including terms such as 'empty' (pustoe) in the installation, which are common to the language of the Moscow conceptualists but less immediately understandable to an outside audience. This constitutes the main strategy of the artwork, which the artist describes in a letter to Boris Groys as an ultimately doomed-to-fail attempt to capture the "'mysterious stranger'" that is NOMA (kabakov.net).

Accordingly, Kabakov transformed the Hamburger Kunsthalle into "some sort of secret, ritualistic place, a departure site of some sort of cult" (kabakov.net). Chosen as the representatives of this cult were the art theoreticians Boris Groys and Iosif Bakshtein, the writers Dmitrii Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, and Vladimir Sorokin, the Medical Hermeneutics group, the performance artists Andrei Monastyrskii, Iurii Leiderman, and the Collective Actions group, as well as, finally, the visual artists Nikita Alekseev, Vadim Zakharov, and Kabakov himself. The latter devoted twelve chambers to the members of NOMA in the circular exhibition hall which somewhat resembled hospital rooms due to their sparsely furnished interiors. With light shining in through a lowered ceiling, illuminating the empty center of the hall, the installation created an atmosphere swaying between mysticism and pathology.

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[13] Peppershtein mythologizes the etymology of the word NOMA by explaining that the word 'nome' also refers to the dismembered body of Osiris in Ancient Egypt. According to this legend, each district contained a part of his buried body. Building on this idea, Peppershtein compares the circle of Moscow conceptualists to a "collective body" ("Kollektivkörper") (Pepperstein, 1993: 10).

Disclosing his motivation behind the artwork in the exhibition catalogue, Kabakov explains that the installation "should inscribe us in history before history does so itself, possibly in the ineptest manner (even worse is the idea that it will perhaps not do so at all) […]" (Groys & Kabakov, 1993: 25). ("Die Installation soll uns in die Geschichte einführen, ehe die Geschichte das selbst, und womöglich auf die ungeschickteste Weise, tut (noch schlimmer ist die Vorstellung, daß sie es vielleicht überhaupt nicht tun wird) […].") This is to be achieved not by referring to established art historical paradigms, such as 'conceptual art' or 'Moscow conceptualism', but rather to self-designed neologisms. "'Noma' is a word", Ekaterina Degot' aptly writes, "which demonstratively turns its back on the viewer" (Dyogot, 1995: 150). ("'Noma' ist ein Wort, das dem Betrachter demonstrativ den Rücken zukehrt.") In a conversation with Vadim Zakharov and Iurii Leiderman, Andrei Monastyrskii similarly stresses the importance of self-attributions as opposed to ascriptions by others:

> А. Монастырский: […] Вот, например, 'дадаизм'—это неправильно, '*dada*'—это правильно. И '*fluxus*'—это правильно. Потому что '*fluxus*' и '*dada*'—это самоназвания. Это абсолютно то же самое, что МАНИ или НОМА. Они выше направления—выше концептуализма, сюрреализма и т.д. (Monastyrskii et al., 2015)

> А. Monastyrskii: […] As such, for example, 'dadaism' is incorrect, '*dada*' is correct. And '*fluxus*' is correct. Because '*fluxus*' and '*dada*' are self-ascriptions. It is exactly the same as MANI or NOMA. They are above trends in art—above conceptualism, surrealism etc.

Neither MANI nor NOMA ultimately prevailed as the dominant umbrella term in the reception history of the artists. This is partly due to the fact that the name Moscow conceptualism was already widely circulating and accepted both in academia and the museum landscape, partly because constantly inventing new labels is inherent to the artistic practices of the group. The latter point, however, does not negate the importance to "understand whose voice puts itself on top of our voice" (Monastyrskii et al., 2015) ("poniat', chei golos prokhodit cherez nash golos"), as Iurii Leiderman states in the above-cited conversation with Monastyrskii and Zakharov. Kabakov counters this process by depicting NOMA as an 'unreadable' circle of artists actively resisting interpretation by outsiders. The inclusion of terms such as 'empty' whose meaning eludes a general visiting audience as well as the mystical atmosphere of the exhibition hall

ultimately create a "storm of associations" ("Sturm der Assoziationen"), a "torrent of concepts" ("Wortschwall der Begriffe") which challenge conventional art historical interpretations, as Silke Müller puts it in a review for the journal *Kunstforum* (Müller, 1994). In the context of the early 1990s, the installation should be seen as an attempt to take back control of the rapidly developing discourse surrounding Moscow conceptualism, which was predominantly influenced by the international art world during this period. Similar debates on the right to archive and represent Moscow conceptualism as well as Soviet art history in general can also be found outside the immediate artist group. Focusing on the traveling exhibition *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin* (2003–2004), the concluding section of this paper will discuss questions of (un)equal discursive power in the memory debate on Moscow conceptualism in the early 2000s, which are fundamental in order to understand twenty-first-century projects which archive the history of alternative Soviet art in Russia.

Rethinking the Archive of Soviet Art? The Exhibition *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin*

In 2003, a little over a decade after the German reunification and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the binational exhibition *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin. 1950–2000* opened in the Gropius Bau Museum in Berlin. During the following year, the collection of artworks traveled to Moscow where it was exhibited in the State Historical Museum on Red Square. Displaying an overview of German and Russian art from the second half of the twentieth century, the exhibition was curated by a team of three German (Jürgen Harten, Angela Schneider, and Christoph Tannert) and three Russian (Pavel Khoroshilov, Viktor Miziano, and Ekaterina Degot') curators. The introduction to the catalogue reveals the cultural political significance ascribed to *Berlin–Moscow*, which through the "joint remembrance of the past" ("gemeinsame Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit") should further the mutual understanding between Germany and Russia in the post-Cold War era (Choroschilow et al., 2003: 11).

While the exhibition received generally positive reviews in Germany, Russian press articles demonstrate a considerably less favorable assessment of the event. A recurring point of critique concerns the selection and categorization of the artists involved in the exhibition. For the Russian side, *Berlin–Moscow* included many works from the alternative Soviet art scene, quite prominently from Moscow conceptualism and Sots

Art, whereas Socialist Realism did not constitute a focal point. Several critics interpreted this as a concession to the German curators and a Western European audience, calling the selection of artists and artworks a misrepresentation of Soviet art history (Khachaturov, 2003; Kulik, 2003). Overall, the use of binary metaphors of winning and losing pervades the articles. Particularly telling is a review by Grigorii Revzin for the newspaper *Kommersant*, who writes:

> Так что в целом мы выиграли. Пусть поддались на безумные немецкие правила, но зато утвердили площадку. А что до всего остального, то, в конце концов, всю эту выставку можно рассматривать просто как заготовку. Как материал, из которого в Москве можно собрать нечто внятное. И если это удастся, то мы утвердим не только достоинство русских художников, но и достоинство русских кураторов. (Revzin, 2003)

> And so overall we have won. Even though we had to subject ourselves to the insane German rules, we have strengthened our platform. And as far as everything else is concerned we can consider this exhibition simply as preparation. As material which can be turned into something understandable in Moscow. And if that succeeds, we will not just affirm the worth of Russian artists but also the worth of Russian curators.

Revzin's words reveal a strong connection between the exhibition and questions of collective identity and pride. Rejecting a dominant German, or, more generally, foreign influence on the representation of Soviet art history, the Russian reception of *Berlin–Moscow* prompts the fundamental question of how to critically deconstruct the art archive and the knowledge that structures it. This problem is also addressed by Ekaterina Degot', who acted as one of the exhibition's curators, in her essay "How to Obtain the Right to Post-Colonial Discourse" (2005). Her statements recall Igor' Golomshtok's earlier cited thoughts on the complex balancing act that accompanies the cultural transfer of alternative Soviet art to a Western European context in the exhibition catalogue *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* (1977):

> We can find many cases in which the West usurps the right to represent the East, subjecting it to discursive exploitation. For an example, it will prohibit a person from the East to express himself in theoretical terms and only allow him to speak about his region. It orders the Russian (or any

other) to be authentic and exotic, thus placing him beyond the borders of the West […]. (Degot, 2005).

This debate is ongoing, making a critical inquiry into the intercultural tensions laid bare by traveling exhibitions such as *Berlin–Moscow/Moscow–Berlin* all the more necessary. More recent initiatives to establish archival institutions documenting the history of unofficial Soviet art in Russia such as the archive of the Moscow Garage Museum or the Ekaterina Cultural Foundation, which are funded with private rather than state capital, seem to represent a new turn in this memory discourse. By not just collecting documentation on alternative Soviet culture but by also producing extensive edited volumes of archival sources in English and Russian,[14] these institutions counteract imbalances in the availability of materials and respond to established power relations in the interpretation of Soviet art history, which warrants more scholarly attention.

Conclusion

In the theoretical section of this chapter, I have argued that exhibitions and especially the accompanying catalogues are able to bridge the gap between the archive and the canon, between what and how we remember. As documents that outlast temporary exhibitions, catalogues do not just archive a selection of artworks but also offer interpretative frameworks to analyze them. As discursive knots, they translate information and knowledge from various areas of society, ranging from the museum world and academia to art journalism, to a specific historiographic story which aims to appeal to a general audience. For this reason, it is important to examine their role in narratives of canon formation and collective identity more closely.

Reconstructing the transnational network of exhibitions and catalogues devoted to alternative Soviet art from the 1970s until today has revealed how the art historical paradigm of 'Moscow conceptualism' is gradually constructed. The close reading of catalogues has shown how selected artists were inscribed into this category as a result of the transfer and

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[14] See, for example, the volumes *Exhibit Russia. The New International Decade 1986–1996* (2016), *Access Moscow: The Art Life of a City Revealed 1990–2000* (2016), and *Critical Mass: Moscow Art Magazine 1993–2017* (2017) edited by the Moscow Garage Museum.

circulation of both material artworks and discursive knowledge between Russia, Western Europe, and the United States, with the latter falling beyond the scope of this article. The threefold function of exhibition catalogues to archive, interpret, and circulate artworks and ideas runs throughout this history. Due to the lack of institutionalized platforms for the reception of unofficial Soviet art during the Cold War, catalogues provide crucial insights into the early circulation and meaning ascribed to conceptual art from Moscow, a category which was eventually canonized as 'Moscow conceptualism'. European exhibitions between the late 1970s and early 1980s show that the interpretation of this term changes depending on the biographical and sociopolitical circumstances of cultural transmitters as well as the audience they attempt to reach. Whereas the exiled art collector Aleksandr Glezer subsumed conceptual art from Moscow under the politicized category of non-conformism in the second half of the 1970s, German Slavic scholars Georg Witte and Sabine Hänsgen spoke of Moscow conceptualism as a movement in their volume *Palace of Culture* (1984). Their interpretation of Moscow conceptualism as an artistic form of cultural semiotics began to circulate more widely not least due to influential exhibitions such as *I live – I see* (1988) and *Soviet Art Around 1990* (1991–1992) whose catalogues cite and expand on this approach.

However, as a famous leitmotiv in Il'ia Kabakov's work posits: "Not everyone will be taken into the future" ("V budushchee vozmut ne vsekh"). Writing the reception history of Moscow conceptualism—or in fact any reception history—should not limit itself to generally accepted interpretations but also study counter perspectives and ideas that have been marginalized or even excluded. In the discussed exhibition project *NOMA* (1993), Il'ia Kabakov presented a different point of view on the meaning and composition of the circle of Moscow conceptualists at the height of their international hype in an attempt to regain control of the discourse surrounding the group. This chapter's final case study, namely the critical response of the Russian press to the binational exhibition *Berlin-Moscow/Moscow-Berlin* (2003–2004), shows how crucial it is that reception studies move beyond a focus on individual countries (such as Germany in this case) and instead think of archive and canon formation as processes which transcend national borders. The emergence of memory discourses should therefore be studied as entangled histories which take the interaction between multiple actors, sociopolitical circumstances, and cultures, both on a micro- and macro-historical level, into account.

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