

AFTER MOSCOW CONCEPTUALISM

REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTER AND PERIPHERY AND CULTURAL BELATEDNESS

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Moscow Conceptualism has since the early 1990s gained an enormous amount of critical attention in Russia, Europe, and North America. Indeed, its status has risen greatly with the historical recovery and critical repositioning of the group Collective Actions and the intellectuals, writers, and philosophers who worked in collaboration with this group, or in its orbit. This is because Moscow Conceptualism achieved something remarkable during the period of Conceptual art's decline in Europe and America: a coherent program of cognitive strategies, formal subtractions, and an expanded collective model of production and reception that extended the range and attributes of what we might mean by "Conceptual art" as a post-medium specific sequence of artistic manifestations.¹ This points to two key issues regarding the development of Conceptual art and the refunctioning and continuity of the avant-garde more generally in the 1970s.

Firstly, Conceptual art was not simply a globalized phenomenon in which the message of art's "dematerialization" (to use the familiar and clichéd term) was disseminated around the world from its intellectual "homelands" in the United States and the United Kingdom, on a kind

A version of this text was presented at the Victoria Foundation (V-A-C), Moscow, September 23, 2015.

1 Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group before and after 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013).

of loose and equitable basis. On the contrary, in the wake of Conceptual art's initial break with painterly modernism, "Conceptual art" came to serve very different functions and uses as a result of the cultural, social, and political circumstances in which it found itself, shifting and transforming the character and form of Conceptual art itself.² Thus in South America—particularly Argentina and Chile—Conceptual art's strategies of formal negation were overdetermined by anti-imperialist struggle, which included a critique of US American cultural imperialism and the US American neo-avant-garde itself.³ In Poland, Conceptual art drew on an already vigorous dramaturgic avant-garde tradition (Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre") to produce a network of predominantly event-based art communities located mostly in the countryside and the suburbs, and thereby, as far away as possible from the industrial imaginary of Soviet Socialist Realism and the prying eyes of the state.⁴ In Iceland in the early 1970s, the recourse to text and photography was, as it was in many other peripheral national European contexts, a means of breaking from a narrow national, painterly landscape tradition. Furthermore, the concerns of UK and US Conceptual art themselves were by no means compatible. Many of the interests of "analytic Conceptual art" in the United Kingdom are very different from those in the United States, given US Conceptual art's reliance on an undisclosed formalist hang-over from modernism (such as in the work of Joseph Kosuth), thereby weakening any assumed shared history between US and British Conceptual artists. Indeed, as in other centers of national Conceptual production, there is an implicit assumption that much American Conceptual art is turned inward, to the interests of the art market and "business as usual." Thus, in the group work of Art & Language, for instance, there was a primary concern with the intellectual division of labor and with questions of cultural pedagogy, in the wake of the huge influx of working-class and lower-middle-class students into the art school system in the Britain of the 1960s. How might class experience relate to learning and value in art? How might a non-bourgeois subjectivity be created from the discursive opportunities of Conceptual art?

2 Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999).

3 See Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writing of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

4 For a discussion of early Conceptual art in Poland and the flourishing of local networks and independent spaces, see Martin Patrick, "Polish Conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s: Images, Objects, Systems and Texts," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (Spring 2001): 25–45.

And how might women artists be an active part of this?⁵ As such, there were clear connections between these forms of group learning and the revolutionary debates on teamwork in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

In addition, we see another set of national-cultural conditions at play in the case of Moscow Conceptualism itself, producing a Conceptual art quite different in its theoretic-material concerns from that found in other centers of production. In the post-Thaw period, the late Soviet “stagnation,” Conceptual art took the form of a generalized entropic and apophatic withdrawal from the “public sphere” and direct political engagement, in which the absences, phlegmatic silences, and textual ambiguities of Conceptual art assumed a kind of moral and poetic antipode to the (failed) rhetoric of Stalinist productivism. Indeed, in the work of Collective Actions, these zero-sum manifestations, and their almost winsome indeterminacies, produced a radicalization of both Descartes’s libertine motto “a happy life is an unseen life” and Spinoza’s rejection of “affect” as a kind of bondage; art found an *active* “silence.” In this sense, Moscow Conceptualism shared certain “allegorical” affinities with other Conceptual art in Eastern Europe, primarily the opportunity that Conceptual art provides for small-scale temporary interventions, subtle acts of resistance, and “invisible” events that provide a space for art’s “withdrawal of consent.” But in the Soviet Union, this withdrawal from consent was also attached to a strong commitment to collective avant-garde values, and therefore had little time for the “self-possessive” individualism of much other Conceptual art in Eastern Europe. Thus, we might say that, whereas Polish Conceptual art had no stake in—or rather, refused a stake in—the memory of the (Soviet) historic avant-garde, Moscow Conceptualism saw one of its jobs as being to reclaim and defend what remained progressive about the avant-garde legacy of the 1920s.⁶

All of these Conceptual art manifestations—East and West, North and South—can be defined, then, as part of that great sequence of events, manifestations, and intellectual horizons identifiable with “Conceptual art,” yet they all put the strategies of “conceptual” negation and denaturalization of the art object and artist to work in very different ways and with very different outcomes. This not only produces a strik-

5 See Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

6 For a critical engagement with the avant-garde legacy, see Andrei Monastyrsky, *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism* [1999], 2010, available at www.contemporary.org.

ing unevenness to Conceptual art in this period of its emergence and transformation, but it also confirms the general conditions of belatedness regarding Conceptual art's relationship to an understanding of its own avant-garde past. Each national cultural formation was working with, and through, very different cultural and historical materials on the basis of very different kinds of awareness of the avant-garde past and the recent conceptual present.

This takes me to my second point: Moscow Conceptualism is defined by a range of shared cultural memories of the avant-garde (given the avant-garde's constitutive legacy, if marginal, presence in post-1950s official Soviet artistic history) that are grounded in a set of political and cultural conditions quite unlike any other national-based Conceptual art, East or West, throwing into relief the complex belatedness affecting the formation and dissemination of Conceptual art during this period of globalization. Conceptual art in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, and the United States was not an unmediated transmission belt for the historic avant-garde, given that both sets of Conceptual artists were far from conversant with the critical and artistic legacy of Conceptual art's own anti-modernist claims: that is, very few artists at this time in the United States and United Kingdom had a working knowledge of the Soviet and Berlin avant-gardes (principally because little work was published in English on the early avant-garde period, and little work was shown). Falteringly, hesitantly, then, US-UK Conceptual art—through its primary critique of painterly modernism and dismissal of art as a would-be “natural kind”—generated a loose pathway back to the post-medium and interdisciplinary claims of the early avant-garde without in fact re-historicizing Conceptual art's possible links to this past (this came much later). In the Soviet Union, in contrast, despite the fact that few works from the 1920s were on permanent display, the avant-garde legacy was not only available through the rich critical literatures of the period, and shared (if oblique) memory of the revolutionary past, but significantly, was present critically in its remnant aspects and traces, in actual everyday Soviet life in the 1970s: namely, the critique of art's commodity form (given the absence of a private market for art), a residual anti-productivism (born of a post-Brezhnevite broken economy) and a commitment to a (residual) collectivism. In fact, we might stretch this sense of revolutionary remnancy even further back, to the days of high Stalinism in the mid-1930s.

In the 1930s despite the increasing state oppression and curtail-

ment of avant-garde ideology, Soviet society underwent an extraordinary period of political and ethical reconstruction, in which the building of socialist subjectivity and a new self drew on the memory of the 1920s for its bearings. Crucial to this appeal to the “new self” was the importance of the citizen diary, as a place where the Soviet citizen could explore his or her position in Soviet society, and as such raise its interests—as Jochen Hellbeck has outlined—“above [the] paltry, parochial concerns [of daily life] onto the higher plane of historical engagement and action.”⁷ These “public” diaries in the 1930s were a remarkably popular component of a mass mobilization of the “collective self.” Indeed, on the left, the proletarian diary was defended as a key part of the factographic and documentarist turn. LEF, for example encouraged all proletarians to keep a diary in order to document their place in and contribution to the revolutionary transformation of everyday life. Even if this call to self-representation was uneven (many workers feared its consequences, and many felt inadequate to the task; some of the diaries submitted to public scrutiny were barely literate), many workers nonetheless took the opportunity to write themselves into collective life and history: “They sought to realize themselves as historical subjects defined by their active adherence to a revolutionary common cause. . . . They put pen to paper because they had pressing problems about themselves and they sought answers in diaristic self-interrogation. Their diaries were active tools, deployed to intervene into their selves and align them on the axis of revolutionary time.”⁸ Thus, even after the Party had distanced itself from the interventionist and socially experimental character of the diary program (in a drive against bourgeois “self-representation”), there remained in place a strong ethos of the socialized self, in which the link between writerly self-representation and life, the self, and the collective promised authentic participation in a historical process larger than oneself. In this respect, despite the cynical narrowing of this ideal after the war, the Party sought to maintain the notion of each citizen as “consciously” integrated into Soviet society. Moscow Conceptualism, therefore, did not have to imagine the social character of the avant-garde through the creation of a micro or enclave “communalism,” in the manner of the post-1960s Western avant-garde; it could

7 Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

8 Hellbeck, 5.

draw on the avant-garde's still living, if attenuated, forms and deflected agency in the collective present. But, of course, if these conditions might enable the production of a Conceptual art free from the need for the machinery of social critique and critical theory, this Conceptual art was not free of its own local constraints and avant-garde belatedness.

If the group Collective Actions represented the first manifestation—loosely speaking—of the avant-garde in the Soviet Union for almost 50 years, it nevertheless had no working relationship to the socially transformative character of the historic Soviet avant-garde; officially, it was claimed, this kind of work had already been done. Indeed, in many respects Moscow Conceptualism represents the opposite: a ghostly or revenant avant-garde divorced from the avant-garde's socially constructive dynamic, or precisely the same condition as the avant-garde and Conceptual art, or neo-avant-garde, in the West after the Second World War—hence, the strange, withdrawn, oblique, indeterminate character of Moscow Conceptualism. As with Western Conceptual art, Conceptual art in the Soviet Union did not assume a primary field of engagement with the social and material world, but, rather, operated within the “secondary” realm of the symbolic. In other words, Moscow Conceptual art was no less distant from the fundamental structural promise of the original Soviet avant-garde—the radical dissolution of art into productive labor and productive labor into art; the transformation of the built environment; and the subsumption of art into life—than was Western Conceptual art at the time, despite Moscow Conceptualism's extraordinary, post-market conditions of artistic production. This gives the work of Collective Actions, and of Moscow Conceptualism generally, a haunted quality and pathos that is quite unlike any other Conceptual art of the period (with the exception, perhaps, of work being done in Poland [Włodzimierz Borowski, Zbigniew Warpechowski] and Czechoslovakia [Eugen Brikcius, Jan Steklík], although for quite different reasons). Its mode of production was free of the determinations of capitalist exchange (the singular commodity form, institutional approbation, the pressure of individual careers defined by market identity and branding), yet this mode of production—art as a nexus of post-object temporal conditions and de-reifying collective techniques—operated in a “suspended” state. Yet, this wasn't the “suspensive” state of the Western avant-garde, divorced from a revolutionary tradition and forced to find strategies of engagement/disen-gagement in a culture in which bourgeois cultural pluralism diverted,

ameliorated, or blocked the “world-transforming” and post-market functions of avant-garde practice. In the post-Thaw years in the Soviet Union, this was a notion of “suspension” as an actual state of withdrawal and radical non-compliance, as if to participate in the official channels of cultural support was to endorse Stalinism and betray the legacy of cultural resistance since the late 1930s. As Keti Chukhrov argues:

The 70s in Soviet society are known for economic and technological stagnation. At the same time, the texture of social life in the 70s is characterized by a strange spiritual pleroma [sense of fullness] or plenitude. . . . Anti-utilitarian collective consent becomes widespread, and as society grows accustomed to abstaining from pleasures and libidinal joys, consensus seems to be reached more often, and higher standards of living, for construction, technical efficiency, and consumer prosperity become less necessary.⁹

This places Moscow Conceptualism in an unprecedented position within the greater and uneven orbit of Conceptual art during this period, for all this work’s varieties of engagement: it draws on the historic Soviet avant-garde—indeed, benefits from the living interconnection between Conceptual art and the remnant collective ideologies of the 1920s under the post-market conditions of 1970s cultural production—yet, like many strategies of conventional modernism—which it also echoes—it withdraws backward into the world.

This invites us to turn, therefore, to the question of cultural unevenness and the contemporary avant-garde. If the 1970s, in Europe, North America, and the Soviet Union, was a period of the belated possession and restaging of Conceptual art across national-cultural formations—under the impossible and half-forgotten name of the avant-garde itself—today the refunctioning of the avant-garde in the West and in Russia is, of course, no less subject to other kinds of unevenness, but at the same time, crucially, it is also subject to unprecedented kinds of historical consanguinity, given the global and post-Cold War character of art and the increasing global interconnection of the cultural margins. That is, if UK-US Conceptual art was in some sense blind to its own

9 Keti Chukhrov, “Soviet Material Culture and Socialist Ethics in Moscow Conceptualism,” in Boris Groys, ed., *Moscow Symposium: Conceptualism Revisited* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010).

avant-garde legacy, given its lack of theoretical access to the historic avant-garde, and therefore had to work falteringly to reconstruct this legacy and its possibilities, and if Moscow Conceptualism was an “avant-garde” “at home,” so to speak, but without real transformative agency, today the avant-garde is, at least, freely available intellectually as an ongoing research program in which the effects of the belated production and reception of the historic avant-garde are now self-consciously incorporated into a reflexive and historical understanding of the avant-garde’s limits and possibilities—that is, into a model of combined and uneven artistic development. In other words, the structural belatedness and unevenness of cultural production and reception is *built into* the theoretical claims of contemporary avant-garde research programs. And this necessarily shifts the operational and temporal terms of the avant-garde, in light of the massive changes historically and culturally since the 1920s. The avant-garde is not a thing or “movement” now to be recovered globally in light of this new intellectual and critical reflexiveness—as if we can now get on with the job of properly being “avant-garde”—but rather, a set of resources and possibilities to be re-thought and re-functioned as an outcome of its defeats, struggles, hiatuses, and caesurae over the last 90 years, and therefore something that is to be reconstructed constitutively from these hiatuses, gaps, and caesurae.

Thus, the avant-garde may be no less a “suspensive” project today than it has been from the late 1930s—that is, no less subject to the division between art and the social world, and between aesthesis and collective experience—but under the present political and social conditions, in the wake of the global crisis of capital, the intellectual demise of post-modernism, and the compression and claustrophobia of neo-liberal network culture, one of its core ideals has nevertheless returned to center stage to redirect a huge amount of artistic activity: the *totalizing critique of capitalist relations* as a condition of art’s emancipatory force and legibility. For the first time for a very long time, the relationships between art and praxis, art and politics, art and collective experience, art and productive labor, art and free labor, art and capital accumulation, art and universal emancipation, as well as the conditions of art’s living situatedness, are becoming the working terms and grammar of a huge number of artists, working collectively or individually on socially engaged projects that owe little or nothing to official or market criteria. This is an enormous social and intellectual shift within the political economy of art, and therefore is irreducible to the notion that these new forms of

collective, participatory, and temporal “postobject” practice simply represent a stylistic shift in concerns, and so will dissolve with changed social and political circumstances. On the contrary, these changes represent a massive reorientation of “business as usual” in art, transforming the artist in classic avant-garde terms, from the producer of discrete objects for exchange on the market to the producer or facilitator of *relations* between things, and of conceptual templates.

Two results ensue from these new conditions of the “suspensive” avant-garde.¹⁰ Firstly, we can see clearly how much this new practice and its recent forebears, back to Conceptual art and beyond, owe to the world-historical rupture of Soviet Constructivism as the metaform of all avant-garde research programs in the 20th and 21st centuries. All present and recent practices, consciously or not, derive from this Constructivist program: that is, they derive from the destruction of the authority of the discrete object, of authorial sovereignty and monadic consciousness, of disciplinary and craft unity, of aesthetic singularity, and of the non-discursive or aesthetic-contemplative reception of art. And, secondly, under globalization, we can see how changes in the relations and order of avant-garde belatedness have transformed the perception of cultural indebtedness across national borders, and as such, have released cultural peripheries, in some instances, from their subaltern relationship to the center. Thus, in globalized conditions of transnational exchange and collaboration, the Soviet avant-garde is no longer the “Soviet avant-garde” in conventional art historical terms (namely, that sequence of events and works that rise in prominence, fall away, and then disappear to be recovered as “influences”), but the enduring transformative core of art’s emergence from its bourgeois prehistory; in other words, its universalizing dimension is released into the problems of contemporary practice.

Yet if Western national cultural traditions can no longer secure a cultural patrimony for themselves by simply asserting the greater authority and prestige of the (white, normative) center, this is not to say that the Anglo-American imperialist relationship between the center and the periphery has changed how imperial capital operates; imperial capital still structures and shapes global circuits of influence and power, just as it structures finance capital’s investments in the global art market, to the advantage of the large Western markets. Nevertheless, in the

10 See John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015).

absence of the constraints of the Cold War, and in the wake of decolonialization and the new forces of transcultural exchange, the alignment between imperial capital and imperial cultural power in the interests of shaping and influencing the cultural direction of nation-states has diminished; the one-way traffic of modernization from center to periphery has broken down. Peripheries remain peripheries, certainly, but their peripheralness is no longer subordinate to an exoteric process of modernization. Rather, the experience of modernization on the periphery is now part of a challenge on the part of the peripheries to the ruling definitions of modernization itself. That is, if the center can no longer hold in place a Western-centric and unilinear understanding of modernization, progressive blocs in the peripheries have an unprecedented role to play in questioning and challenging the very character of modernization as part of an anti-imperialist politics. This is why cultural mimicry of the center (Anglo-American imperialism) by the peripheries, in order that the peripheries may enter the vaunted global circuits of cultural modernity, no longer applies or no longer works, because the very terms of modernity as a globalized experience are now being shaped by the non-synchronic demands and horizons of the peripheries.

Now, this contribution to the critique of imperialist modernization and modernity by various progressive blocs within various peripheral national cultures is itself dependent upon what kind of periphery the country in question is and what kinds of relationship the national culture in question has to the dynamics of global modernity. Not all peripheries have rich and extensive connections to the cultural legacies of a dynamic modernity, and therefore, clearly not all peripheral cultures are equal contributors to the anti-imperialist dialogue. This is why, although the new conditions of globalization have released a groundswell of other claims to modernity from periphery to center, this process is itself uneven, given each nation-state's determinate place within the network of imperialist relations. In other words, Kinshasa is not Bombay, despite both having a subordinate place in the imperialist chain.

This is why Russia is what we might call a privileged periphery, given its prominent place in the imperial world order—as a weakened imperial power itself—and its own historical and culture connections to epochal changes in modernization and emancipatory politics. However marginal this country remains culturally, at the moment, in relation to Anglo-American imperialism, progressive forces are able to draw on an unprecedented set of revolutionary cultural and political resources as

part of the ongoing debate on globalization and modernization. This is why Boris Kagarlitsky is wrong when in an interview with Ekaterina Degot and speaking of contemporary art in Russia, he argues that “we are still living off the remainders of the Russian avant-garde legacy, relying on it as parasites . . . our cultural assets are exhausted.”¹¹ Indeed, this tone and the accompanying judgment seem to me to be exactly what is not required under these transcultural conditions. For what the new avant-garde globally reveals is how Russia’s position as a privileged periphery lies precisely in its capacity to act as a critical placeholder for the collective legacy of this avant-garde. This is not nostalgia or a national propping up of an exhausted tradition, but on the contrary, a recognition of the huge transformations occurring globally in art, and—in the face of the still prevailing, if shifting, cultural unevenness of the imperial relation—that the avant-garde has a “home” in Russia, so to speak, that is demeaned at its peril. Therefore, wherever and whatever work is being done in the research programs of a new avant-garde internationally, Russia will remain a privileged space of reception for this avant-garde’s claims, despite all the reactionary forces currently lined up against it.

11 Boris Kagarlitsky interviewed by Ekaterina Degot, “Fragile Authoritarianism,” in *Post-Post Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade*, ed. Marta Dziewanska, Ekaterina Degot, and Ilya Budraitskis (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 2013), 144–45.