

**THE AESTHETICS OF MERENESS: MOSCOW CONCEPTUALISM 1975–1989**

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**Introduction**

I am a Ph.D. candidate in the History of Art department at Yale University and a 2009 recipient of a Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training fellowship. Through my participation in the Title VIII program, I was able to conduct research vital to the progress of my dissertation, a study of Moscow-based conceptual artists during the 1970s and 1980s. My time in Moscow enabled me to make connections with leading members of Moscow’s art community, conduct interviews with numerous artists, critics, and curators, and access archival materials and texts essential to my project. Building on the research I performed with the support of my Title VIII award, I will now be able to write the first detailed English-language study of some of Russia’s most influential twentieth-century artists, making their work and activities considerably more accessible to an international public.

**Summary of the Project**

In my work, I make use of the following model of art: individual artworks are represented as points in three-dimensional space. These points are connected by numerous lines—traditions, influences, analogies, associations, oppositions, imitations, etc. In my opinion, these connections are more important than the works themselves. The place of each work within the broad category of art is determined by its relations to other works ... I try to trace lines directly, rather than drawing points. My recent works are nothing but orientations in artistic space, and have no value outside of it.

—Yuri Albert, *Autoserries I*, 1979–1980

What did it mean to be a young Soviet artist at the end of the twentieth century? For Yuri Albert and his close generational peers in Moscow—Vadim Zakharov, Igor Lutts, Viktor Skersis, Nikita Alekseev, and the members of the artists' collectives *Gnezdo* (The Nest) and the *gruppa Mukhomor* (Toadstool Group)—this question was, above all, one of circumstance. As members of the so-called “second generation” of Moscow Conceptualists—artists deeply influenced by the socially satirical, idea-based work of such pathbreaking “first-generation” figures as Ilia Kabakov, Vitali Komar, and Aleksandr Melamid—these artists came of age in an environment where Cold War politics prevented even the most outward-looking individuals from learning about the international art world, let alone participating in it; where Soviet cultural policy ensured that only artworks conforming to the conservative principles of Socialist Realism could be widely seen; and where even the burgeoning artistic underground seemed to leave little room for innovation, dominated as it was by the idiosyncratic ideas, terms, and approaches of first-generation Conceptualism. It was, in short, a world that left few doors open for aspiring modern artists; where, indeed, the notion of “aspiring modern artists” verged on the ridiculous.

My dissertation, “The Aesthetics of Mereness: Moscow Conceptualism 1975–1989,” examines the efforts of Albert, Zakharov, and their contemporaries to forge artistic identities for themselves within and despite these geographic, cultural, and historical constraints. I argue that each of the four terms set forth by the introductory question above—“young,” “Soviet,” “artist,” and “end of the twentieth century”—points toward a specific set of relations that these artists probed in their quest for self-definition: how they, as young people, related to their elders and to prevailing cultural stereotypes of

youth; how they, as Soviet citizens, related to international locations and contexts that remained inaccessible to them; how they, as “modern artists,” related to other kinds of workers and cultural producers in the Soviet Union; and how they, as individuals living and making art at the end of the twentieth century, related to other actors, moments, and narratives in that century’s longer history. The dissertation aims to show, first, that second-generation Conceptualists were centrally concerned with describing and securing a position for themselves and their art within each of these four frameworks; and, second, that they almost invariably chose to articulate their position as one of relative weakness rather than strength. I argue that such self-proclaimed unimportance, or *mereness*—the artists’ insistence on their own immaturity, provinciality, impotence, and historical insignificance—was equally an attempt at description and a strategic posture oriented toward the paradoxical task of describing the impossibility of being a “modern” artist in late twentieth-century Moscow. The dissertation explores the notion of mereness as an artistic strategy through four chapters corresponding to the four thematic areas outlined above.

Chapter One, “Juvenilia as Style,” discusses the ways in which second-generation Conceptualists performed cultural conceptions of youth dominant in both Soviet and Western societies as a means of measuring their distance from them. Using their work as a platform for the deconstruction of three stereotypical figures—the upstanding young citizen, the hooligan, and the Western hipster—the artists registered the failure of each of these models to provide a viable template for young Soviets of their generation. At the same time, through other works in which they repeatedly cast their artistic practice as a shoddy rehash of first-wave Conceptualism, they developed and occupied a fourth and,

for them, much more plausible avatar: that of the artist's apprentice. In so doing, they were able to secure a place for themselves within Moscow's artistic underground; however, it was a place not of mastery, but of self-proclaimed lowliness.

Chapter Two, "Livingstones in Africa," focuses on the young Conceptualists' efforts to read and represent their "Sovietness" against the international context, tracing their fragmentary engagement with the history of Western modern art as well as recurring motifs of geographic marginality in their works. These themes are explored in relation to the transformation of Moscow Conceptualism during the late seventies and eighties into a multi-sited movement, as many first-generation artists emigrated to the West and a spate of international exhibitions of Soviet nonconformist art opened new horizons of possibility for Moscow artists.

Chapter Three, "What Is an Artist?," examines second-generation Conceptualists' attempts to articulate their position within the Soviet labor structure by tracking their critical engagement with three different spheres of work: official art, the state-controlled mass media, and the military. I argue that Conceptualist artists appropriated the trappings of official occupations in order to advance an ironically Marxian critique of official labor as fundamentally alienated. In the process, their works not only highlighted but also celebrated the absence of professional opportunities for nonconformist artists, identifying unofficial art as an exceptional sphere of unalienated work in late Soviet society.

Chapter Four, "The End of the Second World," explores historical and art-historical self-consciousness in second-generation Moscow Conceptualism, analyzing the artists' sense of belatedness relative to both the local and the international history of modern art. The chapter closes with an extended discussion of historiographic questions

pertaining not only to Moscow Conceptualism, but also more broadly to the situation of non-Western and non-capitalist postmodernities within the history of late twentieth-century art. In this final section I argue for an expanded account of 1970s and 1980s art, one that gives greater narrative emphasis to the global reverberations of the decline and demise of Soviet power, and that seeks to place in dialogue concurrent developments in the visual cultures of late socialism and late capitalism.

### **Description of Research in Moscow**

Due to a personal tragedy in my family, I performed my research in Moscow in two separate installments: the first from September through December 2009, and the second from February through April 2011. During the first trip, I conducted my inquiry along four tracks. First, I held interviews with artists, critics, and curators, recording and transcribing these conversations whenever possible. Second, I photographed relevant artworks at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the Tretyakov Gallery, and the Stella Art Foundation, as well as objects in the privately-owned MANI Collection of Moscow Conceptualist art. Third, I conducted extensive archival research at the Fond “*Khudozhestvennyye proekty*” (Art Projects Foundation), consulting and photographing exhibition catalogues, archival videos, press clippings, correspondence, and other primary materials. Fourth, I acquired books and catalogues relevant to my research and available only in Russia. Upon my return to Moscow in February 2011, I conducted follow-up interviews, accessed and photographed primary materials in the archives of E. K. ArtBureau, and acquired books published recently by the *Biblioteka moskovskogo kontseptualizma* (Library of Moscow Conceptualism), a new series of reprinted archival

texts. I am now working through the materials I gathered abroad in order to write my dissertation. I expect to complete and submit the dissertation in March 2013.

**Relevance to U.S. Policy**

My dissertation work stands to make a material contribution not only to art-historical scholarship on Russia—an area that remains severely underexplored in many academic fields—but also to U.S. policymakers’ efforts to better understand the region. I believe my research can serve U.S. national interests by helping to improve cultural diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia. During my time in Moscow, I built many individual and institutional relationships that I intend to maintain over the course of my career as an academic and art professional, with the goal of fomenting a robust and nuanced bi-national conversation on the subject of Russian modern art. Such cultural interchange between Russia and the U.S. is still at an early stage of development, and will only truly flourish if U.S. scholars continue to receive the support they need to familiarize themselves with the Russian context. In the future, my personal and professional links to scholars, artists, and art institutions in Moscow will facilitate the organization of exhibitions, conferences, symposia, and other cultural and educational projects involving cooperation between U.S. and Russian art specialists. These projects will provide new opportunities for intercultural communication and exchange, serving as constructive complements to more formal diplomatic activities.