Rereading Moscow Conceptualism

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In a March 2012 discussion of Moscow conceptualism, the well-known artist Yuri Albert noted a striking contradiction in scholarship about that influential movement. "It is customary," Albert observed, for most "grown-up" critics "to speak about the literary nature of 'Moscow conceptualism,' its sectarian exclusivity, its esoteric nature, its tendency to provide long-winded and tedious commentaries, and its cultivated air of inscrutability." Yet "no one seems bothered," he continued, "by the fact that my works, for example, exhibit none of these characteristics."[1] The incongruity Albert observes in contemporary criticism characterizes many studies of Moscow conceptualism, an unofficial art movement of particular importance in the late Soviet Union from the 1970s to the 1980s and now considered the most significant development in Russian art in the second half of the twentieth century. This once underground movement has received some critical attention in the international art world, especially after a Sotheby auction in 1988 thrust previously unsanctioned works into the limelight. Yet closer scrutiny has still not produced a complete picture of this imperfectly understood movement. Conceptualist Vadim Zakharov asked pointedly in 2010 "what has changed in the understanding of Moscow conceptualism in the last 21 years in the west," before emphatically answering his own question: "NOTHING."[2] A critical apparatus that fails to explain the work of the movement's leading proponents clearly needs adjustment.

The painted word that appears in so many visual works of Moscow conceptualism is central to understanding the movement. That is clear from the definition offered by Boris Groys, whose 1979 article on "Moscow romantic conceptualism" has been central to western notions of the phenomenon. In an updated discussion of his ideas in 2008, Groys characterized Moscow con-

ceptualism as art in which "the image is replaced by a written commentary, by a description of a certain art project, by a critical statement."[3] The process of reevaluating Moscow conceptualism thus includes, first and foremost, the task of identifying the written terrain. Despite the obvious importance of text to these artists, however, relatively little critical attention has been focused on the actual painted words they use in their works, and research remains to be done on the texts that appear in their visual compositions. In particular, critics need to consider more closely how such texts function in the creations of individual artists. As Albert's 2012 comment demonstrates, not all conceptual artists are alike, and painting them and their texts with a single critical brush obscures important creative, art historical, and philosophical differences. Because painted commentaries are essential to the conceptualist movement, we need to investigate such differences carefully. Only then will we be able to consider crucial larger questions, such as whether the presence of text in conceptualist works represents a departure from or continuation of the Russian artistic tradition and whether such texts reflect Russian verbal didacticism, the insufficiency of visual images in the "logocentric" Soviet universe, or something else altogether. The answers we posit to these questions are needed for a better picture of Moscow conceptualism and the diverse artists involved in its development.

In what follows, I suggest a revised approach to Moscow conceptualism that focuses specifically on the function of text in unofficial Russian art in the formative period from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. I argue that painted words played a crucial conceptual role in the early work of "first-generation" conceptualists Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid and that written text and its manipulation served as an essential stepping stone for the generation of postconceptualists who built on that duo's discoveries. The textual work of these artistic descendants—"second-generation conceptualists" who included Albert, Gennadii Donskoi, Mikhail Roshal', Victor Skersis, and Zakharov—deserves our particularly close attention since both they and their mentors are often described inaccurately or even omitted from discussions of Moscow conceptualism.[4]

These issues are especially pointed in the work of Yuri Albert, a prominent figure in contemporary Russian art circles whose textual oeuvre diverges in significant ways from received opinion about the movement. Critical at-

3. This more recent definition of conceptualism—no longer "romantic"—comes from Boris Groys, "Communist Conceptual Art," in Boris Groys, Max Hollein, and Manuel Fontán del Junco, eds., *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960–1990* (Frankfurt, 2008), 30. Groys's early article "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" first gained wide attention when it appeared in the alternative publication *A-Ia*, no. 1 (1979) 3–11. It is reprinted in Boris Grois, *Utopiia i obmen: Stil' Stalin. O novom. Stat'i* (Moscow, 1993), 260–74. Another reevaluation can be found in Boris Groys, "Moscow Conceptualism Twenty-Five Years Later," in Irwin (group), ed., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London, 2006), 408.

4. The identification of first and second generations is problematic, since certain "second-generation" artists such as those in the Nest group (Gnezdo, made up of Donskoi, Roshal', and Skersis) began exhibiting before some in the "first generation." Nevertheless, the generational divisions, based primarily on the artists' years of birth, are a common shorthand in scholarship on Moscow conceptualism, and I retain them here.

tention to Moscow conceptualism in the west has focused primarily on the work of Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrski, and Kabakov in particular continues to dominate the picture most westerners have of this group of artists.[5] Contributors to the impressive volume *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* show more breadth in their varied descriptions of the movement, but even that collection tends to overemphasize its supposedly "ethereal, dispersed, and fragmentary nature."[6] When prominent conceptualists fail to recognize themselves in a definition that relies on exclusivity, sectarianism, ineffability, and esoteric commentary for its classification, then the description itself needs modification. It may seem quaint to recall that conceptual art was itself once expected to be "the very terminus of art . . . , the absolute negation of all that Western art has traditionally valued and sustained."[7] But it is useful to remember that very history as we investigate the complicated role of the artistic text in Moscow conceptualism. Reliance on the word was not the negation of Russian figurative art, as some feared, but its salvation. That vitality is due in large part to second-generation artists, like Albert, who deviate from current descriptions of Moscow conceptualism.

The complex task of understanding the unique role that words play in Moscow conceptualism is complicated in Albert's case by the fact that the artist denies any professional curiosity about the subject. According to Albert, the seemingly essential issue of the relationship between word and image in pictorial art holds no interest. Many of his earliest works were entirely text-based, and his oeuvre now contains scores of pieces incorporating words in Russian, English, German, Russian Sign Language, Braille, and semaphore communication and painted, typed, printed, and handwritten texts. Yet Albert insists that he was "never in his life interested" in the topic or "in the word as such or

5. See, for example, Matthew Jesse Jackson's study *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago, 2010). Art historian Terry Smith faults Jackson's "otherwise excellent survey" for its uncritical acceptance of the term *Moscow conceptualism*. Terry Smith, "One and Three Ideas: Conceptualism before, during, and after Conceptual Art," *e-flux*, no. 29 (November 2011), at www.e-flux.com/journal/one-and-three-ideas-conceptualism-before-during-and-after-conceptual-art/ (last accessed November 5, 2015); and in Boris Groys, ed., *Moscow Symposium: Conceptualism Revisited* (Berlin, 2012), 63. Kabakov's work fits traditional descriptions of conceptualism imperfectly, and critic Andrei Kovalev comments on the resulting critical tautology, noting that Kabakov is not a conceptualist "in the true sense of the word," yet he "is the founding father of the movement, so he has to be defined as the 'conceptualist.'" Kovalev, quoted in Konstantin Akinsha, "Between Lent and Carnival: Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art (Differences, Similarities, Interconnections): A Series of Interviews," in Alla Rosenfeld, ed., *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Munich, 2011), 28. Monastyrski was featured at the Venice Biennale and a major retrospective exhibit in Moscow in 2011. Yelena Kalinsky's impressive selection of documents by Collective Actions helped create interest in the group and Monastyrski's leading role in it. Yelena Kalinsky, ed., *Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1981* (Chicago, 2012). Octavian Eşanu attempts an updated map of Moscow conceptualism in his intriguing study *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group before and after 1989* (Budapest, 2013), but his focus is also on Monastyrski and the artists around him.

6. Marek Bartelik, "The Banner without a Slogan: Definitions and Sources of Moscow Conceptualism," in Rosenfeld, ed., *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, 16.

7. John Roberts, "Conceptual Art and Imageless Truth," in Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), 305.

in the image as such."[8] Nevertheless, observers of Albert's work cannot help but be struck by the fact that his canvases almost always incorporate words. This approach, which Albert shares with certain contemporaries, presents the artistic text as a meaningful, succinct, self-sufficient but negotiated contribution to an on-going dialogue about art that is neither exclusive nor sectarian. Their words are concrete, rather than ineffable, and widely comprehensible, rather than esoteric, ethereal, or obscure. Those Moscow conceptualists who deal in "writing conceived as art," to use Charles Harrison's taxonomy, often use text that is surprisingly straightforward and direct, intent on candid communication rather than partial revelation of ephemeral, private sensations.[9] The variety of such texts can be striking: these artists use titles, captions, slogans, challenges, citations, affirmations, and a plethora of other types of statements to make their point that art is democratic and dialogical.

The artists' approach to these myriad written texts sets them apart and constitutes a little-explored aspect of Moscow conceptualism and its subsequent development. To understand the context in which Albert and other such artists evolved, I look first at the textual work of their direct predecessors and teachers, Komar and Melamid, and suggest its centrality to Moscow conceptualism. I turn then to text in works by the Nest (Gnezdo), a group of their students, whose important contribution to the development of unofficial art in the period from 1975 to 1979 is consistently underappreciated. Finally, I conduct a closer investigation of text in Albert's work, particularly from the crucial late Soviet period 1978 to 1988, and suggest its enduring interest for critics today. Albert and artists like him use techniques from Moscow conceptualism to define a distinct direction in Russian art that has been largely misunderstood. As Aleš Erjavec has suggested, unofficial art from this period helped make late socialism already equivalent to postsocialism, since it was a

8. Albert's comments were part of a presentation titled "Word and Image" that he gave at the National Center for Contemporary Arts: "Zaiavlennaia tema 'Slovo i izobrazhenie' . . . menia nikogda v zhizni ne interesovala, ni otnoshenie mezhdu slovom i izobrazheniem, ni slovo kak takovoe ni izobrazhenie kak takovoe." A video recording of the talk was posted on *Theory and Practice*, at theoryandpractice.ru/videos/443-slovo-i-izobrazhenie (accessed July 16, 2012; no longer available).

9. In his study of western conceptual art, Charles Harrison identifies three broad categories of writing by visual artists: writing as "documentary accompaniment to artistic practice," as "literature," and as "art." Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 3. These distinctions provide a useful, if approximate, framework for investigating text in Moscow conceptualism as well. For an approach to Moscow conceptualism that emphasizes its "programmatic interaction with literature," see Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, "Moscow Conceptualism: Its Aesthetics and History," in Groys, Hollein, and del Junco, eds., *Total Enlightenment*, 57. Kabakov comments at length on the significance of Russian literature for the visual arts in remarks about his installation *Fly with Wings* (*Mukha s kryl'iami*), reprinted in Il'ia Kabakov, "O mestnom iazyke," in *Tri installiatsii* (Moscow, 2002), 234–40. "Documentary" writing played a crucial role in the work of Monastyrski and other Collective Actions artists, as copious records from their organized trips out of town testify. See *Poezdki za gorod: Kollektivnye deistviia, 1977–1998* (Moscow, 1998). Artist Joseph Kosuth's distinction between "stylistic conceptual art," which uses text as a "new kind of paint," and "theoretical conceptual art" reminds us that some use of text is formal rather than philosophical. Joseph Kosuth, "1975," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 335, 337.

"*proclamation of the end of socialism from within socialism itself.*"[10] This fact underlines the need for adjustments to our understanding of this important Russian art movement and its continued evolution today.

As Komar is fond of pointing out, conceptualism was already part of the life of every citizen of the Soviet empire when he and Melamid used the regime's own words to pose a solution to the artistic dilemma that faced would-be artists in the period of stagnation. Familiar texts on a red backdrop were the most visible cultural product in the Soviet Union, part of "state sots-conceptualism," as Komar now calls it, and easily identifiable in the prescribed words executed in crisp white stenciled capital letters on a formulaic red background.[11] The problem for unofficial artists in this environment was how to move out of that predetermined socialist realist narrative without withdrawing into either the wordlessness of abstraction or the pathos of an inevitably stunted lyricism, a difficulty Komar and Melamid solved by using official texts for their own striking ends.

This point is worth making, since the transformative role of Komar and Melamid's sots-art gesture is ignored or misrepresented in many discussions of Moscow conceptualism.[12] According to artist Boris Orlov, a primary impetus for the "revolution" that took place in the Russian visual arts in the early 1970s was "the studio of Komar and Melamid with their students."[13] Yet the centrality of Komar and Melamid and their sots-art gesture is far from obvious in the current, tangled history of Russian conceptualism. Groys's seminal text on "romantic" Moscow conceptualism fails to mention them, and many critics treat sots art as a movement largely separate from Moscow conceptualism.[14] Complicating the issue is that some "conceptualists" reject that designation for their work altogether. Dmitrii Prigov, for example, identified by the Tret´iakov State Gallery as "one of the founders of Moscow conceptualism," contended that the movement was tainted by the "stamp of utopia."[15] Prigov argued that

10. Aleš Erjavec, introduction to Aleš Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, 2003), 3.

11. The term is from Vitalii Komar, "Sots-art i ofitsial´nyi sots-kontseptualizm," in Aleksandra Danilova and Elena Kuprina-Liakhovich, eds., *Pole deistviia: Moskovskaia kontseptual´naia shkola i ee kontekst, 70–80 gody XX veka* (Moscow, 2010), 137.

12. The 1972 creation of Komar and Melamid, sots art used the symbols of socialist realism to examine and criticize official doctrine and conformist art from "within." One of many styles they employed, sots art was adopted by numerous other artists and developed into a movement in its own right.

13. Boris Orlov, "O passionarnosti al´ternativnoi kul´tury semidesiatykh (iz razgovora za chashkoi chaia)," in Georgii Kizeval´ter, ed., *Eti strannye semidesiatye, ili poteria nevinnosti: Esse, interv´iu, vospominaniia* (Moscow, 2010), 209.

14. Natalia Tamruchi, for example, differentiates between Moscow conceptualism and sots art as separate "collective trends in Russian non-official art." Natalia Tamruchi, *Moscow Conceptualism, 1970–1990* (Roseville East, 1995), 10.

15. See "Dmitrii Prigov. Ot renessansa do kontseptualizma i dalee, 16 maia 2014–9 noiabria," Gosudarstvennaia Tret´iakovskaia galereia, at www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/calendar/exhibitions/exhibitions4484/ (last accessed November 5, 2015). The artist objected to the term being applied to his work elsewhere, preferring to describe it as postmodern rather than conceptual. He noted that "we were engaged in sots art, then recognized ourselves as conceptualists," but "it turned out that from the very beginning we

Figure 1. Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, *Slava trudu* (Glory to Labor), 1972, tempera on cloth, 51 × 188 cm. Installation photograph courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

since unofficial Russian artists had already been painfully disabused of any lingering beliefs in a single true discourse, their transition to postmodernism in the visual arts was inevitable.

Komar and Melamid were perhaps the first to recognize the need for this evolution by putting a distinctively postmodern twist on the texts they appropriated. They invited direct artistic engagement by modeling such involvement, signaling its importance unequivocally by signing the Soviet-style slogans that make up the largest part of their verbal output. The simple act of signing texts that until that moment had been the product of an "invisible" state mechanism had the startling effect of assigning responsibility for the slogans to the artists who actually painted them and of forcing both text and artist to the forefront of the unofficial artistic world. As Michel Foucault pointed out in another context, an author's name marks writing as discourse that can no longer be "immediately consumed and forgotten."[16] Komar and Melamid's conceptual act of affixing their own signatures to official texts thus highlighted the content of those appropriated words and insisted on both their communicative role and the importance of the artists who painted them. This in turn occasioned a gestalt shift that reanimated all the other slogans in an

were practicing our own version of proto-postmodernism. . . . Stylistically, we belonged to conceptualism, but strategically, to postmodernism." D. A. Prigov and S. I. Shapoval, *Portretnaia galereia D. A. P.* (Moscow, 2003), 93, 94.

16. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in Donald Pieziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), 305.

otherwise unending series of similarly generated texts in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s.

In search of an originary moment for Moscow conceptualism, therefore, we could hardly find a better one than this signatory gesture from 1972.[17] By appropriating automatically generated state texts and attaching their own names to them, the artists insisted that responsibility for such texts be returned to the individual artist, especially to the new artistic collective made up of Komar and Melamid. This emphasis on agency was further underlined by a self-memorializing gesture: Komar and Melamid installed a plaque outside their studio in Moscow noting that it was the workplace of famous artists of the late twentieth century. By demonstratively claiming the very texts that seemed to others "devoid of any personal emphasis or intentional self-expression," the artists commandeered the official conversation, from which they were otherwise excluded, and began to move beyond their circumscribed environment within the borders of late Soviet existence.[18] Groys has argued that large masses of text in the visual space of Moscow conceptual work "somehow" caused the words to lose meaning completely, "becoming desemanticized." Yet text in the work of Komar and Melamid, Albert, and others retained its semantic meaning and communicative function and never acquired the "character of the uncommunicable" that texts in Kabakov often did or that Groys finds, for example, in the work of the later artistic group Medgermineftika.[19]

The transformative texts Komar and Melamid created came in the form of slogans written on *transparanty*, large political banners on stretches of red cotton that could be mounted on poles to be carried by participants in official parades.[20] Creative power and artistic imagination were now the provenance

17. In this context, see artist Iurii Leiderman's comment in a 2008 interview that Komar and Melamid, the Nest group, and Albert were close to conceptualism, while Kabakov, Monastyrski, and others are described as conceptualist only "because of a misunderstanding." Dasha Baryshnikova, "Predopredelennost' interpretatsii. Interv'iu s Iu. Leidermanom," *Iskusstvo*, no. 5 (2008): 71.

18. Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst, 1995), 207. Komar and Melamid's gesture challenges Epstein's contention that Russian postmodernism is a world of quotations in which statements are "never" pronounced "as a form of self-expression." Mikhail Epstein, "The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism," in Ellen E. Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar, eds., *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 38.

19. Boris Groys, "Text as a Ready-Made Object," in Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style* (Evanston, 2000), 35. The relatively short-lived group Medgermineftika (Inspektsiia "Meditsinskaia Germeneftika") was formed in late 1987 by Pavel Peppershtein (Pivovarov), Sergei Anufriev, and Iurii Leiderman. For a brief history of the group, see "Istoriia," *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=1678 (last accessed November 5, 2015).

20. The classic late Soviet dictionary, *Ozhegov*, describes the *transparant* as "fabric with images or inscriptions, attached to a frame." Its definition—"holiday banners on the streets"—makes the association with public demonstrations complete. *Slovar' Ozhegova: Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, s.v. "TRANSPARANT," at www.ozhegov.org/words/36232.shtml (last accessed November 5, 2015). These banners were typically made of red cotton,

of resourceful and inventive individuals who could repurpose the texts that filled the surrounding environment but had been "silent" until given a new voice. By insisting on an individual relationship to what had been a "public" text, Komar and Melamid highlighted their own agency in creating such words, an act of reappropriation that drew instantaneous attention to the role of artistic and moral authority.[21] By approaching shopworn slogans in a seemingly naive fashion, the artists were able to compel orthodox texts to reveal new meanings. Part of their "naiveté" belonged to the true believer Komar and Melamid imagined first creating such works, but their use of their own names reveals how close to the bone those constructed personalities cut.[22] As Ksenya Gurshtein notes in her persuasive study of the artists, "the duo's first invented artist was the character of 'Komar and Melamid.'"[23] Insisting that *Glory to Labor* (*Slava trudu*, 1972), for example, was "their" slogan by signing it, the artists managed in a single stroke to enliven an otherwise moribund sentiment and to cast their own activity in a new, self-conscious, and stimulating light. Their work *Ideal Slogan* (*Idealnyi lozung*, 1972) goes even further, replacing familiar slogans with white rectangles on a red field to indicate the interchangeability of the texts' individual elements and the arbitrary nature of such signs.

Komar and Melamid's appropriation of such political symbols was strikingly original, and the act was far from universally popular. As critic Laura Hoptman comments in a later discussion, unofficial artists throughout eastern Europe most often "chose not to address political issues directly, practicing what has been termed a 'strategic shunning' of all elements of the political, so-

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or *kumach*, which was used extensively for the purpose and became synonymous with Soviet power after the revolution.

21. The emphasis Komar and Melamid placed on individual agency distinguishes their robust assertion of artistic authority from the negotiated "performative shifts" that Alexei Yurchak argues were typical in late Soviet ritualized speech. Yurchak describes the "principle of performative shift," in which "the signifiers of authoritative discourse (how it represents) were meticulously reproduced, but its signifieds (what it represents) were relatively unimportant." Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 114. Fuller discussion of the role such ubiquitous but "unseen" texts played in Soviet society at the time can be found in Mary A. Nicholas, "'We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True': Reinterpreting Political Texts in Unofficial Soviet Art, 1972–1992," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, nos. 2–4 (June–September–December 2011): 335–64.

22. Komar recalls the artists' pride in "becoming our own personal creations" (*my sami stali svoimi sobstvennymi personazhami*), which he describes as the "end of loneliness." Komar, "Sots-art," 135. Elsewhere he notes that "no one has yet understood that sots art was never irony toward anyone else. It was always self-irony and auto-parody." Komar, "Interv'iu," in Donskoi, Roshal', Skersis, *Gnezdo* (Moscow, 2008), 151.

23. Invented personalities were, Gurshtein points out, essential both to sots art and to the artists' interrogation of "the myth of the tortured artist." She indicates that this idea of *personazhnost'* eventually became widespread in Moscow conceptualism. Ksenya A. Gurshtein, "TransStates: Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe and the Limits of Utopia" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011), 186. Victor Tupitsyn argues that "the camouflaging of the authorial 'I' became . . . rather typical for Moscow communal conceptualism." Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 60.

cial, and cultural apparatus."[24] As a result, when unofficial artists Komar and Melamid appropriated official words for their artworks, they initially seemed to be "talking the doggerel of power," and other artists, who were used to a "deeply spiritual, serious, almost religious" approach to the creative process, were sometimes confused or repulsed by the gesture.[25] First-generation conceptualist Dmitrii Prigov has noted that for his contemporaries in unofficial artistic circles, "stylization itself seemed disgusting, insolent."[26] Critic Andrei Erofeev's dismissive later comment about the "moronic Sots Art character," the "mask of an idiot" behind which such artists supposedly hid, reflects this kind of antagonism.[27] According to first-generation artist Viktor Pivovarov, however, Komar and Melamid created a sensation with such works, which were "so witty, so unexpected" that they generated "unbelievable enthusiasm and admiration."[28]

By the late Soviet period, unofficial artists were well aware that the state's claim to a single true discourse was illegitimate, but not all were ready to accept the notion that their own work might be similarly suspect. Artists who suggested that such might in fact be the case were initially considered by many to be "practically agents of the KGB, scoundrels and provocateurs, who didn't want to talk about higher things."[29] Artist Erik Bulatov, who used copious So-

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24. Laura J. Hoptman, "Seeing Is Believing," in Laura J. Hoptman and László Beke, eds., *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago, 1995), 2.

25. This description is from Albert's comment on a retrospective exhibition of Moscow conceptualism in 2010. Iurii Al'bert, "Sots-art," in Danilova and Kuprina-Liakhovich, eds., *Pole deistviia*, 138. Caution is appropriate with such statements, since unofficial artists, Albert included, often had to play the role of creator, art historian, collector, and critic of their own works. Komar describes underground artist Eduard Shteinberg's negative reaction to their work in an interview from 2010. "Interv'iu s Vitaliem Komarom," in Iurii Al'bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm: Nachalo* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2014), 85.

26. Quoted in Irina Balabanova, *Govorit Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov* (Moscow, 2001), 103.

27. Quoted in Akinsha, "Between Lent and Carnival," 26. Erofeev's irritation with such broad humor seems to reflect the still commonly held opinion that in Russia fine art had to be serious. Erofeev's vehemence suggests the continued difficulty these second-generation artists would encounter in their attempts to escape what Melamid calls the "prison" of style. "Interv'iu s Aleksandrom Melamidom," in Al'bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 115.

28. Pivovarov questions his colleague Kabakov's later comments about his "antipathy" to Komar and Melamid's "gags" (*smekhuechki*). "Interv'iu s Viktorom Pivovarovym i Milenoi Slavitskoi," in Al'bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 136. Kabakov's reported hostility again reflects the sense that humor is inappropriate to "high" art.

29. Al'bert, "Sots-art," 138. In a rich irony, such artists were also viewed as spokespersons for the west. Sots art's direct allusion to Andy Warhol's pop art made the conscious though often tenuous connection that these artists imagined with the west obvious. Monastyrski argues that interest in the west set Komar and Melamid's group apart from other Moscow conceptualists. See Andrei Monastyrskii, "Kak Vadim Zakharov Koshutom Diushana razbil," at vadimzakharov.com/images/texts/Monastyrsky_rus.pdf (last accessed November 5, 2015). One-time conceptualist Vladimir Sorokin sees this as a more general trend, claiming that "in the 1970s and 1980s, Moscow conceptualists claimed with one voice that they were agents of western culture in the USSR." Vladimir Sorokin and Nikolai Sheptulin, "Razgovor o moskovskom kontseptualizme, sostoiavshiisia zimnim dekabr'skim vecherom 2007 goda v podmoskovskom Vnukove," *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* 70, no. 2 (October 2008): 26. Tupitsyn suggests that many Soviet "nonconformists"

viet symbols in his own unofficial artworks, describes the difficulty such work presented for his contemporaries, explaining that "my canvases were received with hostility by our advanced cultural intellectuals because they saw them as nothing but Soviet painting. They had fought for real art against this Soviet painting their entire lives, you could say, and then suddenly someone's shoving the same thing under their noses and claiming it's contemporary art." It was impossible for many to comprehend that this was "something fundamentally different."[30] As critic Margarita Masterkova-Tupitsyn notes, however, the "pseudo-religious orientation" of many artists working in the 1960s and their "mix of 'shamanistic' and artistic practices" held little appeal for younger artists.[31] According to Albert, this second generation of artists recognized that by willfully appropriating Soviet slogans, Komar and Melamid sought not to claim preeminence for their own work but instead to "cast doubt on all alternatives, any pretension of the artist toward the idea that Truth spoke in his style."[32] Komar and Melamid's appropriation of the state text made the artists' understanding of that fact uncomfortably clear. For those artists ready to hear it, this powerful message was postmodern in its implications.

Komar thus notes about his work with Melamid that "our most important discovery" was "not sots art but eclecticism."[33] The point, Albert argues, is that the most significant contribution his artistic mentors made was to establish that "all the achievements of painting are no better (and also no worse) than a simple Soviet poster." Following this discovery, creative works reflected an important shift in their "center of weight." The significance of artistic activity "was no longer in the creation of a work of art but in the creation of a model."[34]

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ended up serving "unwittingly" as "apologists for the Western cultural establishment." Tupitsyn, *Museological Unconscious*, 53.

30. "Interv'iu s Erikom Bulatovym," in Al'bert, *Moskovskii kontsepualizm*, 45. Komar makes a similar point in his comment that sots art brought Soviet slogans "into the dissident kitchen. And therefore at first there were very many negative reactions from the left and the right." Komar, "Interv'iu s Vitaliem Komarom," 86.

31. Margarita Masterkova-Tupitsyna, "APTART: Ekspansiia postmodernizma," in Georgii Kizeval'ter, ed., *Perelomnye vos'midesiatye v neofitsial'nom iskusstve SSSR* (Moscow, 2014), 360–61. She describes the difficulty certain first-generation artists had with this change and contrasts it with second-generation figure Nikita Alexeev's "desperate" desire to free himself from artistic "sectarianism" (366–67).

32. Al'bert, "Sots-art," 138.

33. Komar, "Interv'iu," in Donskoi, Roshal', Skersis, *Gnezdo*, 151. This is part of what allows Albert to argue that Komar and Melamid were themselves postmodernists: "Classic Anglo-American conceptualism was already concluding, and the conceptualism of our teachers Komar and Melamid was different—you could say—postmodern. The main point is that we all already knew that conceptualism already existed and we worked with that fact in mind" (*Klassicheskii anglo-amerikanskii kontseptualizm uzhe konchalsia, a kontseptualizm nashikh uchitelei Komara i Melamida byl drugim—mozhno dazhe skazat'— postmodernistskim. Glavnoe, my vse uzhe znali, chto kontseptualizm uzhe sushchestvuet, i rabotali s etim faktom v pamiati*). Yuri Albert, e-mail to author, October 20, 2009. Quoted by permission. Melamid describes the pair's postmodern emphasis on continual evolution in his comment that "we changed ideas all the time. We could work up new concepts all the time and change all the time." "Interv'iu s Aleksandrom Melamidom," 115.

34. Al'bert, "Sots-art," 138; Iurii Al'bert, master-class lecture, Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia, October 5, 2012, at mdfschool.ru/events/videoarchive/yury_albert_video/lecture (last accessed November 28, 2015).

Artist Anatolii Zhigalov argues that it was precisely this sots-art discovery that served as "the premise for a dialogue with western art."[35] Skersis, another creative descendant of the duo, situates Komar and Melamid at the head of an "analytic branch" of Moscow conceptualism and identifies the creation of "models" as the defining activity for the entire circle of artists.[36]

The idea of dividing Moscow conceptualism into more than one branch is not unique to Skersis. Monastyrski identifies "northern" and "southern" branches, which he categorizes somewhat fancifully according to the location of the artists' one-time apartments in Moscow. The older artist contends that the northern branch, dominated by Kabakov and Monastyrski himself, was "logocentric," in contrast to an ostensibly "anthropocentric" southern branch populated by Komar and Melamid, Albert, and others.[37] In Monastyrski's understanding of the term, logocentrism seems to include interest in the metaphysical, curiosity about nonwestern modes of thought and behavior, attention to the object and its *eidos,* and rejection of topical social and political themes in favor of abstract notions of time and space. The artist concedes that such boundaries are fluid and notes that a concern with "text formation" was important to both branches of Moscow conceptualism. Nevertheless, he is critical of his colleagues for their supposed "politicization" of art and their alleged absorption with personality, or *lichnost',* which he describes in almost lyrical terms as a fascination with self, self-portraiture, and corporeality. Monastyrski criticizes Albert in particular for his alleged captivation with

35. A. A. Zhigalov, "Izmeneniia v khudozhestvennom soznanii na neofitsial'noi stsene 1970-kh godov," in N. M. Zorkaia, ed., *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Rossii 1970-kh godov kak sistemnoe tseloe* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 212. Zhigalov and fellow artist Natal'ia Abalakova played an important role in the unofficial Moscow art world, particularly in the Apt-Art exhibits of the early 1980s. Their ongoing TotArt project builds on numerous aspects of Moscow conceptualism.

36. Skersis, "Semidesiatye: Sem'-nol' v nashu pol'zu," in Kizeval'ter, ed., *Eti strannye semidesiatye,* 250–51. He argues that this pursuit elevates such work to the level of "meta-art." Skersis, Albert, and Andrei Filippov later expanded on this idea by organizing exhibits as part of the Cupid (Kupidon) collective, for which each of the artists contributed works devoted to a common theme. A Cupid exhibit at the Stella Foundation in 2009 had three titles, one of which, "The Artist and His Model," speaks directly to the idea of art as the continual exploration of various models. See "Iurii Al'bert, Viktor Skersis i Andrei Filippov. Show and Tell. Khudozhnik i ego model'. Omut," Stella Art Foundation, at safmuseum.org/exhibitions/237/ (last accessed November 5, 2015), for a brief description of the exhibit.

37. Monastyrskii, "Kak Vadim Zakharov Koshutom Diushana razbil." Monastyrski's reference to logocentrism is just one example of the broad application this term has received in discussions of late Soviet culture. Depending on the speaker, its meaning can vary to indicate everything from an artistic fascination with the hollow nature of "Soviet-ese" to a conviction that the Stalinist regime—indeed, totalitarianism in general—depends on the written word. Such a conviction—like Claude Levi-Strauss's argument in *Tristes Tropiques* that the "primary function of writing" is "to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings"—often underpins discussions of the Soviet period, despite its general unsuitability to the Russian experience. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques,* trans. John Russell (New York, 1961), 292. Levi-Strauss's approach, evolving out of romanticism, is echoed in Jacques Derrida's insistence on "writing in the common sense" as the "carrier of death." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1998), 17.

his own self, "especially in the exclusively textual works."[38] But the older artist seems not to have noticed either the detached and constructed nature of Albert's allegedly self-involved textual works or the explicitly democratic orientation of most works from this branch of Moscow art. For second-generation artists who followed Komar and Melamid, the postmodern implications for the future of art were irresistible. As second-generation artist Zakharov insisted later, Moscow conceptualism was not a hermetic system. At least for some late Soviet unofficial artists, its famed insular nature was actually "maximally open."[39]

Komar and Melamid crafted their verbal works on the red cotton banners associated with Soviet power, and they hung them unframed on the walls of their studio, as though ready to be carried into the street at a moment's notice. It was their creative descendants, the Nest group of Donskoi, Roshal´, and Skersis, however, who were able to move that conceptualist text out of the late Soviet workshop, off the canvas altogether, and onto the global stage, where it changed from being a text "instead of art" to become a text of art.[40] Building on a new approach to shared language, these students of Komar and Melamid made their name as artists with a work that played simultaneously on the importance of text, the instability of truth, and the dynamic nature of participatory art. Already convinced of the limited utility of a single style or message to render multivalent reality, the Nest made the conceptual leap off the canvas to an open-ended, experimental approach that encouraged spectator participation. Their work *Hatching a Spirit* (*Vysizhivanie dukha*, 1975) was a defining moment for this second-generation group of artists and for unofficial art as a whole.

This performance piece was part of the famous exhibit of unofficial art in Moscow at VDNKh (Vystavka Dostizhenii Narodnogo Khoziastva, the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy) in 1975. Organized as part of a delayed response to the scandal following the infamous *Bulldozer* exhibition of September 1974, the VDNKh show broke precedent by offering a large number of unofficial artists indoor space to exhibit their work.[41] Even in this unusual display of nonconformist art, however, the Nest's work stood out. Instead of the paint on canvas that nearly all the other artists used, *Hatching a Spirit* revolved around a nest of leaves and branches measuring nearly four

38. Monastyrskii, "Kak Vadim Zakharov Koshutom Diushana razbil." Monastryski argues that the black "inscriptions on white" in Albert's textual works connect him explicitly to western artists Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and others.

39. See Zakharov's reaction to a characterization of the movement as a "hermetic system" in his interview with Leonid Lerner wherein the artist uses the term *superotkryta*. Vadim Zakharov and Leonid Lerner, "Nastroiki zreniia," *Iskusstvo*, no. 5 (2008): 68.

40. The famous *Nest* piece, described below, gave the group its collective name, although the artists exhibited collectively as "Donskoi. Roshal´. Skersis" as well. The group was primarily active from 1975 to 1979. The Russian National Center for Contemporary Art and the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography awarded the Nest the 2007 Innovation Prize for creative contributions to the development of contemporary art.

41. For information about both the *Bulldozer* exhibit and the 1975 VDNKh exhibit, see Leonid Talochkin and Irina Alpatova, eds., *"Drugoe iskusstvo," Moskva, 1956–76: K khronike khudozhestvennoi zhizni* (Moscow, 1991), esp. 211–17 and 240–44.

Figure 2. Gnezdo (The Nest), *Vysizhivanie dukha* (Hatching a Spirit), 1975, branches, leaves, paper, 200 × 200 × 50 cm. Documentary photography courtesy of Victor Skersis.

feet across; that fact alone announced the artists' freedom from both institutionalized Soviet art and unofficial tradition. As its title made clear, the work involved the idea of hatching a "spirit," or *dukh*, from an egg in the nest the three young artists had crafted and then occupied for most of the exhibition.[42] The artists had painstakingly identified the egg they would use in a process both mechanical and traditional: the correct egg was the one that survived a ritual familiar from a children's game played at Orthodox Easter; when two eggs are knocked against each other, the hardest one "wins."

42. The nest was recreated as part of a retrospective exhibit at the National Center of Contemporary Arts in Moscow in 2008. Documentary photographs from the original exhibition are included in the catalogue Donskoi, Roshal´, Skersis, *Gnezdo*. The catalogue refers to the work as *Hatch Eggs! (The Nest)* (*Vysizhivaite iaitsa! [Gnezdo]*) throughout, but, according to Skersis, the original title was *Hatching a Spirit* (*Vysizhivanie dukha*), and that is the one I use here.

The artists' performance in the nest was underlined and framed by small texts that accompanied the work at the VDNKh. The larger stenciled text in front of the nest—"Quiet. Experiment in Progress!"—alluded to the pseudo-scientific impulse behind the hastily organized art show and its tragicomic location among other "achievements of the national economy." In referring to science, the text seemed to admonish spectators to adopt a serious attitude to the activity at hand and to the investigative spirit in which the artists were conducting their work. In this context, the ritual of choosing an egg acquires the patina of a quality-control test. The text itself suggests the artistic approach that critic Victor Misiano calls the "tradition of laboratory work, in analytical art, in language." As Misiano points out, this is "the strategy employed by artists who don't wish to be affiliated with any institution."[43] It helped establish these second-generation unofficial artists' departure from both official Soviet art and the conceptualism of the first generation.

Hatching a Spirit also played quite obviously on commonplaces about spirituality in both nineteenth-century and unofficial Russian art. Departing definitively from de rigueur platitudes about artistic inspiration and sacred missions, the second text the artists employed at the VDNKh exhibit spoke directly to their reliance on an open, democratic, and performative approach to art. Using the plural imperative for a small sign displayed on a shelf behind the actual nest, the artists encouraged exhibit visitors to "hatch eggs!"[44] Photographs from the exhibit document the active involvement of exhibit-goers, particularly children, who climbed unabashedly into the nest with the artists, a self-directed and independent but still public act nearly unheard of in Brezhnev's Russia. Pivovarov describes the significance of the work in his comment that it was "revolutionary in the extreme, very unexpected for all of us. It was difficult to swallow because it overturned all expectations" of what art could be. Commenting that the "Moscow school" of art at the time held "drawing and painting" as "primary values," Pivovarov repeats, "the nest was a revolution."[45]

The nest and the potential it presented for self-directed creative activity underline the overall discursive nature of this movement, in which conversation—the exchange of ideas between one individual and another—is art's real focus. Nowhere is that message more pointed than in the Nest group's 1975 work *Communication Tube* (*Kommunikatsionnaia truba*), which was also displayed at the VDNKh show. The piece was one of the first conceptual art objects to appear in the Soviet Union, but Nest artists used it to expand on their teachers' Moscow conceptualism in radical, postmodern ways. A metal cylinder approximately 130 centimeters long and about 16.5 centimeters in diameter, the tube retained evidence of its "official" lineage in the bright Soviet-red paint that covered it. The message it carried, however, was radi-

43. Quoted in Akinsha, "Between Lent and Carnival," 29.
44. The brash command, followed by an exclamation point, may have alluded as well to the need for courage in unofficial artistic endeavors. "Eggs" (*iaitsa*) is a euphemistic term for testicles in Russian.
45. "Interv'iu s Viktorom Pivovarovym," in Al´bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 136. Pivovarov draws a direct line from Komar and Melamid and their "revolutionary" work *Paradise* (*Rai*) to the nest.
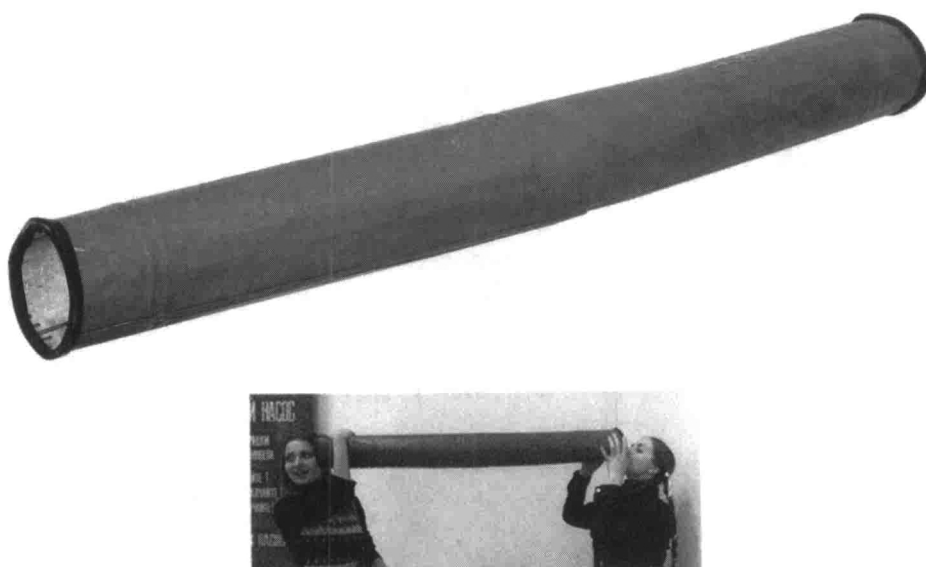
Figure 3. Gnezdo, *Kommunikatsionnaia truba* (Communication Tube), 1975, galvanized iron, enamel, rubber, 130 × 16.5 cm. Installation photograph courtesy of Victor Skersis.

cally "dissident": speech, political thought, and art itself were now firmly in the hands of anyone who dared use them.

The tube, which needed at least two spectator-participants in order to "work," was imagined as an "essential item for communication" in this "century of isolation" (*razroznennost'*) since it allowed participants "to look or listen to one another."[46] The curators of an important exhibit of post-Soviet art in 2005 called such an approach "naively idiotic."[47] But the artists' apparent lack of sophistication was a conscious act: their overly literal interpretation of societal directives refocused spectators' attention on the role of the individual in the creation of art itself. Despite its deadly serious aim, the Nest nevertheless managed to retain a sense of humor, even a child-like charm that only seems untutored. That point is worth noting, since humor, a frequent element in the work by this branch of artists, was pointedly missing from most west-

46. Comments on the tube come from Skersis, "Osnovnye proizvedeniia" (Principal Works), an unpublished manuscript from late 1981 or early 1982 in the artist's personal archive. The open nature of the discussion Skersis imagines there contrasts with the carefully orchestrated artistic conversations managed by Kabakov, Monastyrski, and other first-generation conceptualists. As Victor Tupitsyn points out, Monastryski "often interpreted everything himself, and he did it in advance, or he directed others' interpretations. . . . It was a theater for one actor, in which everyone else played the role of an extra." In the same vein, Tupitsyn notes, Kabakov "created all his spectators himself." "Interv'iu s Margaritoi Masterkovoi-Tupitsynoi i Viktorom Agamovym-Tupitsynym," in Al'bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 106.

47. A. Erofeev and T. Volkova, eds., *Soobshchniki: Kollektivnye i interaktivnye proizvedeniia v russkom iskusstve, 1960-x–2000-x gg.* (Moscow, 2005), 40. The curators of the *Soobshchniki* (Accomplices) exhibit mistakenly argue here that Nest performances were "purposely pointless."

ern conceptualist works and from the work of many Moscow conceptualists as well.[48]

The bright red tube initially seemed to complicate communication as much as it facilitated it by separating any two people who wished to talk to one another by the length of the object itself. This formal element was especially noticeable in the culture of the late Soviet period, when verbal intimacy was commonly associated with physical closeness and heart-felt, whispered conversations around the kitchen table. The communication tube appeared to impede such familiarity by recasting even private conversations as part of a public ritual with political potential. In practice, however, the tube turned the theoretical brutality of Soviet rhetoric into a considered act of intimacy. The delight with which spectators operated the device evoked memories of childhood. Such fun was rarely a part of official pronouncements from the Soviet regime, but the tube returned the idea of pleasure to human communication and placed it firmly in the hands of individual speakers. Individuality, wit, and intimacy were thus quietly but irrevocably reintroduced into public discourse. For this younger generation, art was no longer an esoteric or insular activity conducted by artists in service to an ineffable artistic truth but rather a warm and constantly evolving conversation about art that was itself continually changing.

Albert, who recounts that he first heard the word *conceptualism* when he visited Komar and Melamid's studio as a teenager, demonstrated his understanding of this postmodern message in his first textual work, *Y. F. Albert Gives His Entire Share of Warmth to Others* (*Iu. F. Al'bert vse vydeliaemoe im teplo otdaet liudiam*).[49] The text for this early performance work consisted of the title's single declarative sentence, printed in black capital letters on a white signboard approximately 1 foot wide and 2 feet long. Albert hung the board from his neck and carried it around while shaking spectators' hands at a gathering organized by the Nest on September 29, 1978, at the studio of artist Mikhail Odnoralov. Albert calls the work an "action" (*aktsiia*) and a "kind of performance" (*kak by performans*), and his pointed demonstration of it was the "gift" to which the sign referred. The "transfer of warmth took place through the handshake."[50] The signboard was just big and heavy enough to focus the artist's mind on his words. A well-known later photograph of the work in which the artist is depicted "giving his entire share of warmth to others" in the dead of winter captures the awkwardness with which the white

48. Use of the communication tube in Sergei Solov'ev's 1987 film *Assa* suggests its general appeal. The cult film starred film director Stanislav Govorukhin, famous rock musician Viktor Tsoi, and visual artist and actor Sergei "Afrika" Bugaev. The role of humor in unofficial Russian art warrants further study, particularly regarding the Nest and other second-generation artists. As Komar notes in an interview with critic Ol'ga Kholmogorova about the Nest, humor was what most distinguished them from the "deadly seriousness that dominated their surroundings." Vitalii Komar, "Interv'iu," in Donskoi, Roshal', Skersis, *Gnezdo*, 151.

49. Iurii Al'bert, "Moskovskii kontseptualizm. Nachalo," in Al'bert, ed., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, 6. Albert remembers Komar and Melamid speaking about sots art "as one of their conceptual projects." Iurii Al'bert, "Kommentarii," in Donskoi, Roshal', Skersis, *Gnezdo*, 21.

50. Yuri Albert, personal communication, October 15, 2010.

Figure 4. Yuri Albert, performance of *Iu. F. Al'bert vse vydeliaemoe im teplo otdaet liudiam* (Y. F. Albert Gives His Entire Share of Warmth to Others), 1978. Photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.

sign painted with carefully lettered words in black paint had to be maneuvered. The text itself, however, was elegant rather than clumsy, and it spoke on several levels simultaneously.

Albert's official reference to himself as "Iu. F. Al'bert" lends the text a certain formality: the first initials and last name establish his identity irrefutably in a prescribed manner. This meticulous detail is echoed in the sign's reference to Albert's "share" of warmth. The Russian word Albert uses is a passive participle—*vydeliaemoe*—and its verbal formality suggests an effort to reduce the otherwise amorphous "warmth" to a quantifiable measure. Like the scientific "experiment" of the Nest group's "hatching," Albert's identification of this "quantity" and his pointed surrender of it to others both echoes and parodies the self-sacrifice supposedly required by stalwart Soviet citizens and demanded of its leaders and outstanding artists. The apparent precision of Albert's statement allows him to distance himself effortlessly from the pathos that otherwise attended the position of nonconformist artist in the late Soviet context. His smiling surrender of his creative allotment frees him from the role of lonely truth-teller and allows him to assume the much more capacious role of postconceptual artist. His performance of that new role is significant, as is the rest of his programmatic first artistic statement.

The warmth Albert surrenders is directed not to fellow artists per se, still less to the "folk" (*narod*), as even parodies of the late Soviet context might still expect. His activity is addressed instead to a ubiquitous, democratic, inclusive "people" (*liudi*). The distinction is important. The restricted nature of

communication in the small group of unofficial Moscow creative artists had led poet Lev Rubinshtein, for example, to describe the "circle of interested parties" that was ostensibly necessary for Moscow conceptualists to create their work.[51] As with the Nest's *Communication Tube*, however, Albert calibrates his target to a much larger audience. Such generosity and liberality give the lie to characterizations of these second-generation works as inscrutable and insular. Albert's first action underlines the parameters of their creative activity: accessible, direct, participatory, and verbal.

Albert imagines himself not as a member of a small, esoteric group at war with a dominant ideology but rather as a part of a far-reaching and ongoing general conversation about the future of art which transcends local context and limited timeframes. His work *I Am Not Jasper Johns* (*Ia ne Dzhasper Dzhons*, 1980) situates his activity in a global artistic context with ease.[52] This work was the first in a long and apparently ongoing series in which Albert uses various artists' styles to repeat the phrase "I am not . . . ," followed by the name of the particular artist he is describing. After Albert's self-defining performance in the action at Odnoralov's studio, this series resonates particularly as an understated and intelligent continuation of that postconceptual gesture. In this first "I am not . . ." work, Albert appropriates Johns's well-known encaustic letters, the newsprint collage of many of his works, and the color scheme of his famous *Map* (1961) to insist quietly that Albert is a different artist altogether. Later English versions of *I Am Not Jasper John*s play with both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets to render the text even more capacious and to make Albert's point even more emphatically. Alternative readings of the words become possible, even necessary, and the spectator is free to intuit any number of viable texts within both the original and the reflected scripts. As with Johns's originals, once additional readings are entertained, the entire semantic field opens to the world of textual performance, activity which Michel Benamou has called "the unifying mode of the postmodern."[53]

Albert is able to imagine himself as part of a far-reaching conversation about the future of art that transcends local context, limited timeframes, and the surface of the canvas itself. Albert's (non-)performance of numerous roles, including Johns, Andy Warhol, Georg Baselitz, Roy Lichtenstein, and

51. See the brief discussion of this *krug zainteresovannykh lits* in Ekaterina Degot' and Vadim Zakharov, eds., *Moskovskii kontseptualizm* (Moscow, 2005), 158.

52. John Bowlt notes that the younger generation of artists was more "*au courant* with international contemporary trends" and they were "outgrowing" the "often parochial concerns" of many in the preceding generation. John E. Bowlt, "10 × 10," in his *10 + 10: Contemporary Soviet and American Painters* (New York, 1989), 12, 19.

53. Michel Benamou, "Presence and Play," in Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison, 1977), 3. Albert may be consciously building in these works on Komar and Melamid's *Post-Art* series as well as imagining what, or who, will be left after the "end" of modernism. The unique character of performance art by second-generation artists, including Skersis, Albert, Zakharov, and Filippov, needs further attention as a significant phenomenon in its own right and an important influence on Russian actionism and other performance art. Amy Bryzgel's *Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia, and Poland since 1980* (London, 2013) is a welcome exception to the general dearth of critical studies of the subject.

Karandash, which he "rejects" in his anti-self-portraits, serves antithetically to establish him as a significant presence in the art world.[54] This is not a post-modern game, still less a Kabakovian meditation on ubiquitous emptiness. After all, Albert's series contains the well-known work *I Am Not Kabakov* (1981), and he is aware that his own artistic persona is itself a construct. His continued construction and simultaneous rejection of "selves" is, rather, a considered deployment of various models, any one of which is part of Albert's artistic conversation, but none of which can sum up the artist in totality.

The spectator's essential role in such artistic activity is further emphasized in works from Albert's extended *Autoseries (Avtoseriia)*, which began in 1979. This series consists of short numbered statements that were "originally conceived as 'conceptual textual works' and should have been exhibited framed and under glass as typed sheets signed by the author." As such, Albert tells us, in a general statement about the series as a whole, they were intended as classic conceptual texts, which spectators would complete by imagining the works that were described in verbal form. Albert's studied manipulation of the concept of "conceptualism" here underlines his perception of his own location in a postconceptual world. Speaking about the series later, Albert notes that the works evolved from their intended role as "conceptual textual works" when they appeared out of context as commentary on his work generally. Albert suggests that such a process might deprive texts in the series of their "status as works of art," but, of course, it does not: their ability to move seamlessly from work to commentary to work establishes them definitively as postconceptual texts.[55]

It is such works—and Albert's studied production of them—that locate the artist in the pantheon of modern art while reminding us of his contention (in *Autoseries II*, from 1981) that artistic "connections are more important than the works themselves." Art "has no permanent features," Albert continues. "Its unity and continuous development are the result of the continuity" of ties between its practitioners. Proceeding from a model of art that emerges from "three-dimensional space," Albert imagines a map of sorts, on which individual artworks are the constantly shifting points of the compass. These individual works are connected by a "multiplicity of lines, which represent traditions, influences, analogies, associations, juxtapositions, imitations, and so on," Albert continues, and his goal is to "connect those lines without leaving any [fixed] points" of his own. To attempt that feat, he creates works that incorporate real and immediate yet decidedly temporal gestures. Thus, *Autoseries I* imagines an artist who plans to undertake serious research in his works but "never brings the concept to a conclusion," while *Autoseries II*

54. Karandash (Pencil) was a favorite cartoon character from Albert's own childhood. Invented in 1956, Karandash became the symbol of the thaw-era children's magazine *Veselye kartinki* (Cheerful Little Pictures) and was the embodiment of Soviet pedagogy-tinged erudition and good will. A talented artist in his own right, Karandash used his nose, a large sharp red pencil, to bring a variety of other characters and objects to life.

55. Albert's introduction to the series can be found at "Avtoseriia," *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, at www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=624 (last accessed November 8, 2015). Works from the *Autoseries* are used as commentary in John E. Bowlt, "Yurii Albert," *10 + 10*, 44.

refers pointedly only to Albert's "latest works," and *Autoseries III* (1984–85) conceptualizes a work that is "not mine" but nevertheless "does not violate the structure called 'The Art of Y. Albert.'"[56] Similarly, Albert's *I Am Not . . .* series analyzes all the many roles Albert might have adopted but has not, finally, assumed. Albert measures each role, each construct, investigating its utility before moving to another model. The process is intellectual and analytical rather than lyrical, inscrutable, or emotional.

Albert's "first textual work in the classical sense" is *Accepting as Gifts* (*Primu v podarok raboty*, tempera on fiberboard, 70 × 50 cm), from 1980.[57] Executed in stenciled block letters, it consists of an alphabetical list of artists whose works Albert is willing to receive as gifts. This roster establishes a pantheon of contemporary unofficial Moscow artists, fixing their importance by establishing their relationship to Albert. But Albert is careful not to look for dominance or relative worth; the list is alphabetical, after all, and the artists listed represent a colorful variety of styles and approaches from conceptualism, abstract art, and sots art. The wording is particular too: eliminating "I" in the first line makes the phrase closer to an impassive "Accepting" rather than a personalized "I will accept"; by omitting the pronoun, the artist underplays any sense of personal appeal and turns his statement into a kind of invitation or open call. Such announcements, often pasted to apartment entryways or lampposts near local buses, were a common feature of late Soviet life, as individuals looked for ways to exchange apartments, fix small appliances, and offer lessons on the margins of official existence. This democratic approach characterizes the end of Albert's list, too, where the inventory notes the "other artists" who may still contribute if they like.

Lyricism, emotionality, and self-absorption are pointedly absent in other textual works by Albert as well. A black-and-white piece from 1981 asks blankly *In What Tradition Was This Work Executed?* (*V kakoi traditsii sdelana eta rabota?*, letraset on paper, 48 × 36 cm) before moving expeditiously to the artist's "signature," which like the text itself is done in stark, transferrable lettering. The exact date following Albert's signature offers the only personal note to this otherwise carefully neutral work. Another work, from January 1981, offers a list of artists who have influenced Albert. This stock-taking roster suggests the importance of the conceptual text to the artist, his absorption of that inheritance from both the art group Art & Language and Komar and Melamid, and his move beyond the conceptual legacy to a postconceptual program influenced primarily by the Nest group and the artistic duo SZ (Skersis and Zakharov).[58]

56. The entire *Autoseries* and other textual works can be viewed at "Avtoseriia," *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, at www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=624&lang=ru (last accessed December 1, 2015).

57. The distinction is Albert's own, made in a Paris interview with the author, October 15, 2010.

58. Albert's list mentions members of the Nest individually, as was frequently done in the years the group was active. Skersis appears twice on the list, apparently because he was integral to the SZ partnership and active as a solo artist as well. Another textual work by Albert from June 1981 shares his conviction that "the most interesting people working in Moscow right now are Vadim Zakharov and Viktor Skersis" (oil on fiberboard,
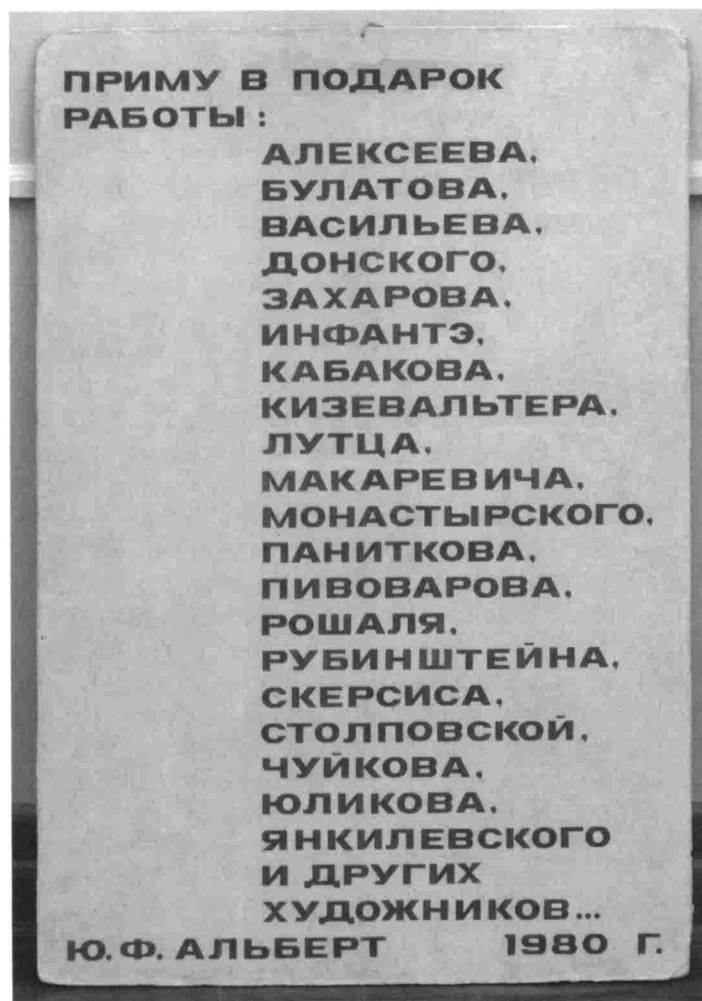
Figure 5. Yuri Albert, *Primu v podarok raboty* (Accepting as Gifts), 1980, tempera on fiberboard, 70 × 50 cm. Installation photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.

Here and elsewhere, Albert defines "self" in strict relation to art and others' artistic gestures, suggesting an artist less concerned with issues of identity or personality and much more involved with the larger community. In this context, even a seemingly plaintive canvas from May 1983 announcing Albert's supposed artistic "crisis" presents a "confused" and "perplexed" artist as just one more construct of a self he has contemplated before discarding. Textual works from September 1983 suggest that a solution to the crisis is in

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37 × 33.8 cm). The January text mentions as well Albert's art teacher Katya Arnold, Melamid's wife; artist Igor Lutz, with whom Zakharov cooperated, particularly in 1979; and artist Nadezhda Stolpovskaya, Albert's wife and coauthor of several projects with Zakharov. Albert's interest in the formalist critic Iurii Tynianov, mentioned at the end of the list, deserves additional study. Ekaterina Bobrinskaia discusses Tynianov's relevance to the unofficial Moscow art scene in E. Bobrinskaia, *Chuzhie?*, vol. 1, *Neofitsial'noe iskusstvo: Mify. Strategii. Kontseptsii* (Moscow, 2013), esp. 192–97.
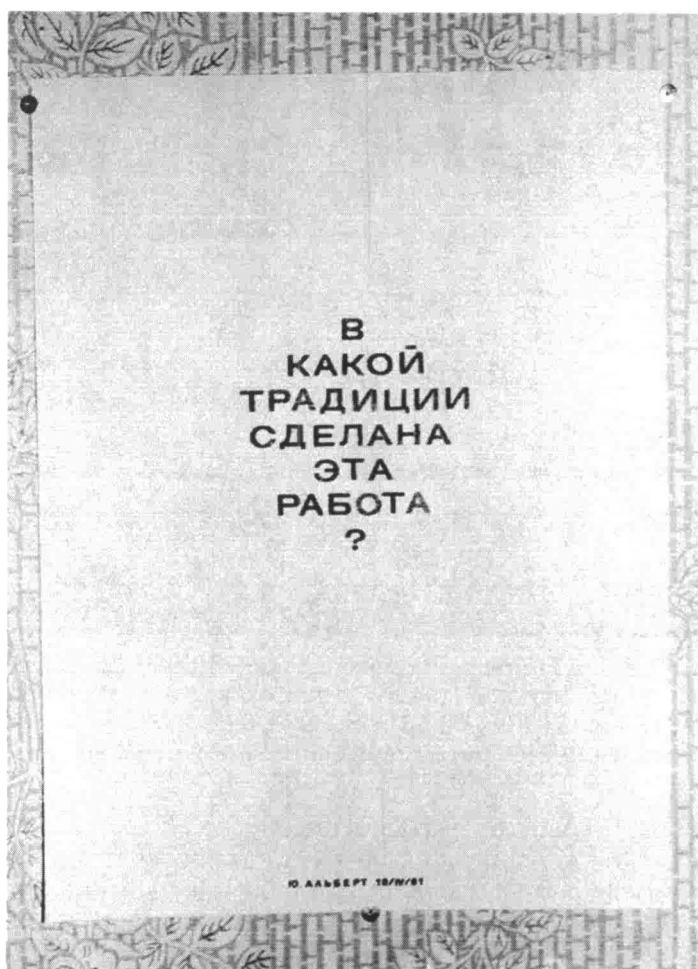
Figure 6. Yuri Albert, *V kakoi traditsii sdelana eta rabota?* (In What Tradition Was This Work Executed?), 1981, letraset on paper, 48 × 36 cm. Installation photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.

the process of art making and art commentary itself. "Great exhibit, isn't it?" Albert both asks and answers in a hand-written statement from the outdoor exhibit *Apt Art beyond the Fence* that autumn. "Zakharov doesn't like the Mukhomors," Albert notes in another comment, hand-written in felt-tip on paper from the same exhibit, "but I like them."[59]

59. The exhibit *Apt Art beyond the Fence* (*Apt-Art za zaborom*) was a two-day affair held outside Moscow in September 1983 as an extension of the series of unofficial apartment exhibits that had been taking place that year and the previous one in artist Nikita Alexeev's Moscow apartment. *Beyond the Fence*—the preposition *za* can mean both "behind" or "beyond"—provided the artists with ample room for exhibiting their work in the open air and temporarily relieved the tension that had attended their semi-clandestine gatherings at Alexeev's. Alexeev briefly discusses the phenomenon of Apt Art in his autobiographical *Riadi pamiati* (Moscow, 2008). Margarita and Victor Tupitsyn helped bring Apt Art to the

Figure 7. Yuri Albert, *Khoroshaia vystavka, pravda?* **(Great exhibit, isn't it?) and** *Zakharovu ne nraviatsia "Mukhomory," a mne oni nraviatsia* **(Zakharov Doesn't Like the "Mukhomors," But I Like Them), 1983, felt-tip pen on paper, no longer extant. Apt-art installation photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.**

Albert wants to engage spectators directly, and he occasionally alludes in pointed fashion to political and historical narratives that provide his visual artworks with a weighty back story. But he is equally likely to confound expectations by undermining the usual narrative possibilities of his relentlessly verbal works. Several of the pieces in his long series of explicitly textual works, for example, are stripped entirely of traditional narrative elements. "If you have any questions concerning this picture," the artist comments wryly on a black-and-white canvas from 1986, "I'll be glad to answer them" (tempera on canvas, 50 × 50 cm). A work from the following year transfers even that explicative function to the viewer, stating in casually drawn black letters on painted white plywood that "As far as your opinion of this work is concerned, I am in complete agreement with it" (acrylic on plywood, 24 × 30 cm). In the latter, Albert appears to challenge any interpretation of his visual art that relies on a narrative external to the pictorial work itself. By accepting any story about the piece, the artist renders all narratives equally credible and equally transitory. Another textual work, dated 1981–90, asks, "How has it happened that I made this very work and made it in this very way?" (*Kak poluchilos', chto ia sdelal imenno etu rabotu i sdelal ee imenno tak?*, tempera, 70 × 50 cm). The

attention of the west, although this influential if short-lived undertaking merits further attention. Norton Dodge, ed., *Apt Art: Moscow Vanguard in the '80s* (Mechanicsville, 1985). The Mukhomors were a Moscow-based art group in the early 1980s whose sensibility at the time tended toward late Soviet punk. Members included Sven Gundlakh, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Sergei and Vladimir Mironenko, and Aleksei Kaminskii.

text seems to invite interpretation, its intriguing dates hinting at the possibility of some sort of final, historical ruling to sum up the artist and that period. But the stark black-and-white words and stenciled signature offer almost limitless interpretive possibilities, and the analysis is left democratically in the hands of the viewer, the extended dateline hinting less at a final reckoning than at the provisional nature of any individual artistic solution.

Albert rejects a description of himself as "an artist working with text," insisting instead that he works "with art, often with descriptions of art." Text, he says, is "just the simplest way to express what I want to say . . . the most economical . . . . In that sense, my texts, unlike Kabakov's, for example, . . . are always simply informative announcements [*soobshcheniia*], . . . announcements of something in the most everyday [*bytovoe*] meaning of the word."[60] Albert claims such communicability as a defining feature of the "analytical branch" of Moscow conceptualism, although he rejects Skersis's use of the term *analytical* and suggests instead that their branch be characterized as "the art of short histories, perceived quickly." He contrasts these "short histories" to the "long histories, perceived slowly" that Kabakov, Monastyrski, and other artists produced.[61] Octavian Eşanu, in an approach that is common to critiques of these second-generation artists, uses Albert's distinction to suggest that the shorter texts are often nothing more than "short-lived puns" all too "quickly understood." Like other interpretations that rely on notions of artist-directed "truth," however, Eşanu's approach mistakenly equates textual length, intricate structure, and the retention of final artistic control with conceptual depth. What Eşanu describes as the "elaborate schema" of works by the Collective Actions group often appeared to this second generation of artists as trickery, nothing more than a "'ruse' (substitution, distraction, emotional deception)" of some artworks that they rejected along with other lessons from modernism.[62]

Economy thus plays a misunderstood role for Albert and other second-generation artists like him. Maintaining that his artistic activity is an attempt to eliminate everything superfluous from the work of art before examining what is left, Albert is frequently alone with the written word. When he does create impediments to comprehension, it is not to confuse or misdirect spectators in their search for the artist's hidden truth but to remove final, definitive, artist-mandated solutions to the art. This technique includes a conscious borrowing from an apt-art exhibit SZ held in 1983.The duo had spectators bandage one of their arms, apply small paper circles to their faces, or attach a large plywood circle to one of their feet as part of a work in the show, which was closed down and partially confiscated by the KGB. That work, *Caresses and Kisses Make People Ugly,* is an attempt to impose such "obstacles" to progress in order to stress the importance of spectator effort

60. Albert, Paris, October 15, 2010.
61. Al´bert, "Kommentarii," 21.
62. Eşanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art,* 99. The reference to trickery is part of Nikita Alexeev's 1980 categorization of different types of work by Collective Actions in Nikita Alexeev, "O kollektivnykh i individual´nykh aktsiiakh 1976–1980 gg.," in *Poezdki za gorod,* 88. Alexeev's departure from Collective Actions and his career as a whole deserve further study.

Figure 8. SZ, *Laski i potselui delaiut liudei urodlivymi* **(Caresses and Kisses Make People Ugly), 1982–83, fragment, mixed media. Photograph courtesy of Victor Skersis.**

in establishing artistic understanding. Both this piece and Albert's later re-working of it use humor to make a serious point: the search for meaning is a shared responsibility.[63]

In other works, Albert plays with giving voice to those denied one by put-ting easily comprehensible verbal works beyond easy access. In part of the larger series of *Elitist-Democratic Art* (1987–89), Albert photographed himself performing texts in sign language. The specific texts he uses vary, but all speak eloquently about the use of signs in communication and art. The larger series includes works for sailors executed in semaphore flag signals, includ-ing several "abstract" communications. Also included are works for both the hearing impaired and stenographers in which classical utterances such as "art requires sacrifices" vie with Albert's occasionally bemused interpretation of socialist realist dictates such as "incomprehensible in form, comprehensible

63. The work is described in brief at *"Caresses and Kisses Make People Ugly, 1982–83,"* *Moskovskii kontseptualizm,* at www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=406&lang=en (last accessed November 8, 2015), and documented at length in Viktor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov, *Gruppa SZ: Sovmestnye raboty, 1980–1984, 1989, 1990* (Moscow, 2004). In *Wan-dering through an Exhibit (Stone in Shoe) (Khozhdenie po vystavke [Kamen' v botinke]),* an audience performance work that he repeated several times between 2001 and 2009, Albert requested that visitors to various museums view the displays only after placing a small stone in one of their shoes. The pebble was intended both to distract and to concentrate spectators' attention on the art they were viewing.

in content." Works of *Art for the Blind* expand the series further. The piece *Visual Culture no. 3* (wood and enamel on fiberboard, 122 × 200 cm), from 1989, involves a paradoxical message that alludes to both the limits of pictorial art and the perceived powerlessness of the contemporary artist: "What you see in my works has no meaning." Another work for the visually impaired from 1989, *Visual Culture no. 2* (wood and enamel on fiberboard, 122 × 200 cm), exposes the only "secret" in Albert's art, revealing what we can now recognize as an essential text for this postconceptual artist and others like him: "In my works there is nothing to see but my love for art."

The notion that such a dialogue—the essence of art itself—depends on institutional politics may have been a discovery for artists in the west, but it was an obvious daily reality for those in the late Soviet east. Artists there problematized the role of politics in art by treating the subject with irony, skepticism, or feigned indifference. By making the written word the subject of their work, postconceptualists freed their art from a narrow national narrative and elevated it to the level of transnational dialogue. As others have commented, "ideology had already converted objects to ideas" in the late Soviet universe.[64] These artists understood intuitively that ideas are predominant and meaning contextualized. That understanding provided postconceptual artists with a rich shared vocabulary and the ideal workshop in which to carry out experiments in the construction of meaning. Zakharov alludes to this in his insistence that these artists "enjoyed significantly more freedom than young artists today," since the reigning "mini-model of a free, democratic space for creation" allowed unofficial artists to "look for all solutions ourselves."[65] Text in their work functioned as a direct link to the world of pictorial art beyond the confines of the Soviet Union and the artistic boundaries of late Soviet socialist realism. By enlarging the role played by painted texts, such artists were able to plot a route out of the creative dead end that otherwise faced Russian visual arts at the end of the twentieth century. It is this fact that makes necessary our focused attention on the written word, an approach that might otherwise run the risk of interpreting the term *conceptual* so narrowly "as to be offensive to almost everyone."[66]

64. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, "Preface," *e-flux*, no. 29 (November 2011), at www.e-flux.com/journal/preface/ (last accessed November 8, 2015).

65. Zakharov's exasperated certainty that this opinion will win him "the sharpest ostracism" from both western and Russian critics may reflect annoyance with the role of "beleaguered artist at war with the authorities" that is almost automatically assigned to Russian artists even today. Vadim Zakharov, "Vos'midesiatye—konets vechnosti," in Kizeval'ter, ed., *Perelomnye vos'midestiaye*, 234. See also Ekaterina Degot''s comment from 1997 that when a Russian artist "exhibits in the West he almost inevitably represents Russia." Yekaterina Degot, "Theatre of Envy: Commentary to 'Terrorist Naturalism,'" *i_CAN*, at www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text8ee9.html?id_text=18 (last accessed November 10, 2015). Irina Aristarkhova notes that Russians were continually asked to "confirm whatever their new [western] friends thought had happened to us under Soviet rule." Irina Aristarkhova, "Beyond Representation and Affiliation: Collective Action in Post-Soviet Russia," in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis, 2007), 254.

66. This is Terry Smith's description of what he argues was one of two possible strategic approaches to the term by artists who wished to keep their conceptual work "at a (critical) distance from Art (as an institution)." The other approach, according to Smith,
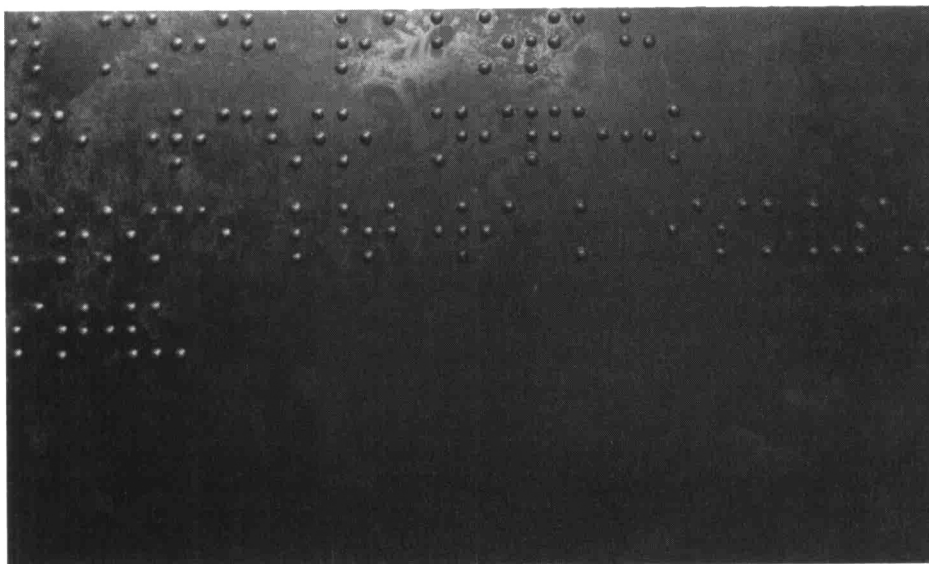
Figure 9. Yuri Albert, *Visual'naia kul'tura № 2 (V moikh rabotakh ne vidno nichego, krome liubvi k iskusstvy* (Visual Culture no. 2 [In My Works There Is Nothing to See But My Love for Art]), 1989, wood and enamel on fiberboard, 122 × 200 cm, from the series *Elitist-Democratic Art for the Blind.* Photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.

"Haven't you noticed," Albert asked tellingly in a 1987 interview, "that the subjects of my works are art and the artists?"[67] These postconceptualists' reliance on an eclectic model of artistic creation freed them from the local context to which they might otherwise have been confined. Their works offered powerful evidence that words could liberate art, particularly art in eastern Europe, from both the crushing politics of quotidian Soviet existence (*byt*) and the emptiness of a purely aesthetic gesture. It is words that connected them across both time and space in their on-going dialogue about art. Their work referred less to a collective Soviet narrative and more to a global cultural inheritance that is the continued subject of their shared artistic conversation. Words functioned for this group to erase the boundaries that otherwise existed between artists, between artists and viewers, and between the work and the world. Norman Bryson has argued that images in medieval French painting were less important as images than they were as "anticipated memory," and something similar is true of Albert's visual work and his division of art into categories of "real" (*nastoiashee*) and "contemporary" (*sovremennoe*).[68] Consider his expansion on the division in that 1987 interview: "I've never produced one single Real Work of Art. All I do is to hint at the possibility of such a

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was to insist that the term be applied so broadly "as to be meaningless." Smith, "One and Three Ideas," 2.

67. Yury Albert and Vadim Zakharov, "Beauty, Though, Saves the World!," *Flash Art International*, no. 139 (March–April 1987): 91.

68. Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981), 3.

thing. This can be seen very well in my old textual works: 'I'm working under the influence . . . ,' 'I'm exerting my influence . . . ,' 'A crisis has entered my work . . .' and so on. These works look like commentaries to the real works of Yuri Albert that, as a matter of fact, do not exist. I still refrain from taking responsibility for the contents of my works. Haven't you noticed that the subjects of my works are art and the artists?"[69] Albert notes wistfully that his art belongs to the lesser "contemporary" art, but his continued activity seems to inscribe him in the "real" world, as in a time-based performance work he presented at the Louvre in 2010, when the museum agreed to open one minute ahead of its normal schedule at his request.[70]

Such works remind us of Richard Palmer's argument that postmodern time is "intensive rather than extensive," able to "hold both past and future in a unity that adds depth to a now that always is." In this performative model of art, the artist acts "as an intermediary, a hermeneutical link in creation by which 'things' rise up in (linguistic) being."[71] Mikhail Epstein has argued that in Russian postmodernism "the flow of time stops and categories of space become primary," but for Albert and other postconceptual Moscow artists, time is newly animated, slowed, perhaps, but only long enough to hear the performative word that enlivens it.[72] Albert's major retrospective at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in November 2013 began, in fact, with nothing but words. The walls of the museum were initially graced only with written discussions of the artist's work or recorded descriptions of the pieces from the curator and an international collective of critics and artists. Over the next several weeks, those words were gradually replaced with the "pictorial" works they described, leaving the final exhibit in place only on the last day of its scheduled run, upending permanent notions of both time and space in a declaration of art alone.

As Albert's comments at the beginning of this article document and such works confirm, this group of artists has been poorly served by received opinion about Moscow conceptualism. They adopted a distinctly different attitude to the painted word than their older counterparts, a practice that presents the text as a negotiated contribution to an ongoing dialogue about art that is

69. Albert, "Beauty, Though, Saves the World!," 91. See other such comments about real and contemporary art in one of Albert's "unrealized projects" for a proposed exhibit on the "new Russian utopia" at "Neosushchestvlennye raboti," *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, at www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=293&lang=ru (last accessed November 10, 2015). Albert's comments suggest the validity of Jane Sharp's remarks on the complexity of such "references to preceding traditions" in late Soviet art. Jane A. Sharp, "After Malevich—Variations on the Return to the *Black Square*," in Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, eds., *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven, 2008), 233.

70. The idea for the early opening was originally one of Albert's "unrealized" projects from November 9, 1998. Its realization in France was scheduled for the Louvre on October 13, 2010. As luck would have it, however, Paris was awash with anti-Sarkozy fervor, and, like others in the city that day, museum workers were occupied by meetings to discuss the idea of a general strike. As a result, the early openings had to be delayed by one day. Yuri Albert, personal communication, October 13, 2010.

71. Richard Palmer, "Toward a Postmodern Hermeneutics of Performance," in Benamou and Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, 27, 29.

72. Epstein, "Origins and Meaning," 38.

Figure 10. Yuri Albert, *Ukazatel' I* **(Signpost I), 1994 (installation view, Cetinje, Montenegro). Photograph courtesy of Yuri Albert.**

neither exclusive nor sectarian. Their words are concrete, rather than ineffable, and widely accessible, rather than esoteric and obscure. The texts are pithy and direct, intent on candid communication rather than partial revelation of ephemeral and private sensation. Such an approach to the written word sets them apart and constitutes a little-explored aspect of unofficial artistic movements in the late Soviet period. A complete map of Moscow conceptualism will have to accommodate all approaches to text and locate the artists in an ongoing conversation about the meaning of the movement in a larger context.

It is essential to acknowledge both the dominant western axis of art history and the challenge presented to those coordinates by Moscow post-conceptualism and "global conceptualism" in general.[73] Albert's 1994 work *Signpost I* (*Ukazatel' I*), which itself references significant "topographical" art work by Komar and Melamid and others, points in many directions and indicates, in each case, the distance from his location to the world's most famous museums. All important roads lead us back to art. By focusing on conceptualism's discrete texts and its critical postconceptual developments, we can begin to construct a more complete history of art that includes its figures' distinct artistic positions. It is obvious how much art historians need this direction. It is less clear that the artists themselves require such a corrective. As artist Boris Orlov notes, unofficial artists in Moscow in the late Soviet era thought of themselves as "the center of existence on Earth, independent of New York and Paris."[74] It is meaning, these artists tell us, that is everywhere. We need only read the signs.

73. See the volume Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York, 1999), especially the article "About Early Soviet Conceptualism," 98–107, by Margarita Tupitsyn, one of the first critics to draw attention to important differences within the movement. Along similar lines, Albert notes paradoxically that the "term 'Moscow conceptualism' is broader than 'conceptualism'" itself. Al'bert, "Kommentarii," 21.
74. Orlov, "O passionarnosti," 207.