Out of Nowhere: Emptiness and Aesthetic Feeling in the Works of Collective Actions

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In a joke from the late Soviet period, a man throws pamphlets on the Red Square, right outside Lenin’s Mausoleum. A KGB officer arrests him on the spot only to find both sides of the leaflet blank. “Comrade, what are you doing?” the officer asks, “The leaflets are empty!” “What's the point,” the arrested replies, “everything is clear as is.” The anecdote plays with the absurdity of the action—if everything is “clear as is” what is the purpose of the flyers?—highlighting a seemingly pointless gesture that nonetheless arouses tense suspicion of the authorities also rendered absurd in its turn. While the blankness of the leaflet does not contain a meaningful statement, critique, or call to action, the scene that ensues around the unmarked page illustrates the interrelational (i.e. social and formal) dynamics that characterize much of the late Soviet political climate.

It might be more conventional to read the emptiness of the flyer as symbolic of the hollow ideological core of the Socialist project, along with the impending collapse of the Soviet state. In such a light, the pamphlet can be seen as an allusion to the crisis of representation, communication, and self-expression, not exclusively characteristic of the late-Soviet context. Like much of post-war art, conceptualism turned to notions of emptiness and dematerialization to articulate a position defiantly alternative to the tried and by then suspect notions of institution and aesthetic form. In 1970s Moscow, a community of unofficial artists—most commonly referred to as Moscow Conceptualists—similarly explored the qualities of their cultural climate, diagnosing its eerie ideological and institutional insubstantiality with a tone of both chagrin and lyricism. These explorations found various forms. In Moscow, among the unofficial poets, sculptors, and painters, the most notable collective working in performance art was the Collective Actions group (hereafter also referred to as CA) founded in 1976.

The subject of this study, Collective Actions offers a decisively unique approach to both conceptual and formal considerations of emptiness as a compositional element. What is curious in the opening joke is the communicative and formal function of the empty leaflet that brings both the gravity and the absurdity of surrounding circumstances into a sharper focus, accentuating the actions of the parties involved. This function of emptiness lies at the core of my understanding of how the art practices of CA depart from the common evocations of emptiness in Western and Soviet conceptualism. I propose that Collective Actions provides an alternative approach to the dominant theme of emptiness by engaging its aesthetic quality and attempts to articulate the possibility of human practice within an empty space.

The stakes of approaching Collective Actions through the theme of emptiness are best understood when one considers the historical moment of Collective Actions’ work: the contemporaneous artistic tendencies within the unofficial art circle in the Soviet Union and the ambition of Western conceptual art. The emergence of conceptual art in the post-war West was, to an extent, an expression of growing anxiety about the political complacency of institutionalized art. Following art historian Blake Stimson, one may understand this dynamic as a “shift from object-based aestheticism to a language- and theory-based anti-aestheticism.” This shift from object to theory allowed the artists to explore metaphoric dematerialization of a work of art as an emancipatory rejection of art’s institutionalization as well as categories of composition and artistic form. Renunciation of aesthetic, formal, and compositional structures is conceived as liberatory purging, as evident in John Baldessari’s work from 1967 (Figure 1). In Everything Is Purged, by the means of a few lines of text painted on a clean canvas, Baldessari irreverently declares to have wiped his artwork clean of all ideas, leaving it in the

1 While not entirely a laughing matter at the time of the joke’s circulation, this form of protest became less so in recent years. Starting in 2014, journalists, political activists, and civilians turn to the format of a one-man picket (“ОДИНОЧНЫЙ ПИКЕТ”) holding up empty banners, as gestures in protest of official policies. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the number of blank-poster protests has increased. The consequences for such actions grew gravier—escalating from fines to administrative arrests.

2 A notable anthropological and culturological study of this period can be found in Alexei Yurchak’s Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation. Princeton University Press, 2013.

3 Among others, art historian Rosalind Krauss addresses the precarious status of material support in works of late modernism. Specifically, Krauss considers the role photography, above all other media, plays in the demise of media-specificity and the notion of medium as such. See Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” Critical Inquiry 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305.


5 In her work, Rosalind Krauss proposes conceptualism's rejection of medium-specificity, as an attempt to escape "the effects of the market." See Rosalind Krauss, A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 11.


7 Blake Stimson, “The Promise of Conceptual Art,” xii.
realm of pure art that is expressed by a blank page with a few lines of text on it. Of course, a comedic paradox arises, as the viewer may very well recognize the contradiction between the work’s form and its message. *Everything Is Purged* seems to have lost all aesthetic quality and remains in the realm of ideas expressed through a written statement.8

In her account of the phenomenon of dematerialization, critic and theoretician Lucy Lippard establishes an art-historical trajectory that outlines the gradual transformation of artistic practices that, in the American post-war moment, moved beyond the material. In her 1968 essay “The Dematerialization of Art,” Lippard positions this tendency in line with the project of historical avant-garde. Lippard writes:

the artist has achieved more with less, has continued to make something of “naught” fifty years after Malevich’s *White on White* seemed to have defined naught for once and for all. We still do not know how much less “nothing” can be, has an ultimate zero point been arrived at with black paintings, white paintings, light beams, transparent film, silent concerts, invisible sculpture, or any of the other projects mentioned above? It hardly seems likely.9

For Lippard, art’s dematerialization and de-aestheticization continues the project of the historical avant-garde that, heralded by the originator of Suprematism Kazimir Malevich, demands a radical termination of the aesthetic evolution of form.10 Works by artists such as Yves Klein and Joseph Kosuth further demonstrate the tendency toward dematerialization. The emptying of the artistic form was seen as a means for, to use Klein’s language, “overcoming the problematics of art.”11 Keeping this lineage in mind, one may see the movement into the beyond alluding to the avant-garde marriage of scientific ambition and utopian transcendentalism. Nevertheless, the beyond here hardly constitutes a destination but rather connotes an eagerness to take a broadly defined trajectory.

Similar aesthetic tendencies can be traced in late-Soviet art. While it was the complacency with the market that haunted artmaking in the West, the unofficial Soviet artists approached conceptual art practices as attempts to circumvent banal complacency with the state. Khrušchev’s Thaw—a period of relative cultural and state liberalization following the death of Stalin in 1953—allowed the Soviet citizens to get a glimpse of the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain.12 In the late 1970s Soviet Union, following this short period of de-Stalinization, the state returned to its hallmark, Stalin-era restrictions and oppressive practices.13 This return to already re-examined and condemned policies of the past led to the hollowing out of socialism’s ideological corpus that eventually led to the system’s entropic disintegration.14 Many Moscow Conceptualists harvested this new quality of “emptiness” felt where socialism had once been as both a medium for an imaginative escape from the disappointments and restrictions of the everyday and an opportunity to raise questions about their place in the newly emergent ideological void. Ilya Kabakov, perhaps the most well-known Moscow Conceptualist in the West, once described this predicament as “the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live.”15

For Kabakov, living in the “state of emptiness,” is to be painfully aware of one’s own increasing incongruity with one’s surroundings. His installation *Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* from 1985 (Figure 2) holds, at its center, an absence. The work demonstrates the ways in which the space of one’s room can be both a sanctuary one curates according to his lived experiences and a prison cell that encloses its inhabitant, pushing him toward an abrupt and violent breakaway. The two qualities here do not contradict each other but enhance one another’s potency. Kabakov creates an interior of a room in a communal apartment that contains a foldout metal cot and an improvised bench built out of two chairs, and a wooden panel. The room’s walls are erratically covered with Soviet propaganda posters and information brochures. From the ceiling, Kabakov suspends a catapult-like device that, we are invited to read, has recently been used to transport the inhabitant of the room (his shoes left on the floor by the bench) out of his cell into the stratosphere. The ceiling of the room is ripped open, marking the dramatic exit point. In his analysis of the work, art historian Adrian Barr points out that the status of a communal apartment as “a microcosm of the socialist project” especially fascinated Kabakov, who “probes the relationship between this degraded (yet still potent) ideological space and the lived experience of those

8 In conversation with Sidra Stich, who points out the irony in *Everything Is Purged*, Baldessari does not speak about the gesture as ironic or humorous, but rather as a play with notions of belief and ontological nature of artwork as such. See full interview in “Conceptual Alchemy: A Conversation with John Baldessari.” *American Art* 19, no. 1 (2005): 60–81. https://doi.org/10.1086/429975.


12 First-person recollections of the cultural and political climate of the late-Soviet period can be found in an edited volume of interviews Soviet Dissident Artists: interviews after Perestroika, eds. Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).


14 Here one can consider Nikita Khrušchev’s “Secret Speech” of 1956 as the most notable example of a denunciation of Stalin’s regime.

who inhabit it.”

Writing about this installation, art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson shares an insight into Kabakov’s position vis-à-vis the notion of an “organized” space. For Kabakov, Jackson explains, the drive to curate, as seen in the installation, suggests an uncomfortable kinship between the practices of spatial organization that were characteristic of both the historical avant-garde and the Soviet state’s “exhortative management.” Assuming a position that rings similar to that of philosopher Boris Groys, who suggests a continuation between the project of the historical avant-garde and Soviet totalitarianism, Kabakov rejects both iterations of structural organization with a single eruptive blow. A result of such projects, Kabakov seems to suggest, is an empty, uninhabitable space.

Unlike Kabakov, who turned to the Soviet communal, private experiences, pioneers of Sots Art Komar and Melamid made use of the state’s artistic language that addressed the public. Sots Art worked with the visual language of Socialist Realism and ideological paraphernalia, satirizing their pathos and laying bare the absurdity underpinning the grandeur of their claims. In their work Ideal Slogan from 1972 (Figure 3), Komar and Melamid take the familiar form of a red socialist banner and replace what would have been an exclamatory statement with a row of white rectangles that culminates with an exclamation mark. Anything or nothing, the artists seem to suggest, can be contained in such a banner—its ideologically-charged form has shed the capacity to retain meaning and is presented here as an empty formulaic vessel.

Kabakov’s installation offers a sense of an absent subject, while Komar and Melamid illustrate an endless fungibility and meaninglessness of the authoritative discourse. The physical space allotted to the Soviet citizen seems violently uninhabitable and crippling, while the sphere of ideology is rid of any reliable core and is hostile to any meaning. Such allusions to an emptied or absent subjectivity—an interiority weakened, peripheral (in contrast to the Russian avant-garde forms, the late Soviet artists established an inverse relationship to the historical avant-garde. Namely, a peculiar distancing from the leftist utopianism adopted by the early-twentieth-century art movement coupled with the utilization and, at times, aping of its forms for newly articulated ends. As scholar Svetlana Boym, puts it: “While Western followers of the Russian avant-garde embrace the social message and try to see the utopian as possible, the Russian architects embrace the artistic potential, blatantly defying official collective imperatives. They might have shared forms, but not their understanding.” This respective inversion of the relationship to the avant-garde results in two different approaches to the questions of absences, disappearance, and voids. In the West, the art objects become de-materialized following the formal development of the arts, as it is understood, to reach a dead end. In the Soviet context, the production of art objects does not cease. However, in many cases, the figure of the artist begins to lose its contours as he engages in a recycling of forms, an articulation of absences and an expression of a weakened, peripheral (in contrast to the Russian avant-garde artists) positionality vis-à-vis the political.

Organizing their performances within the Moscow Conceptualist circle, Collective Actions exercised an approach to the dominant themes that nonetheless differed from that of Western and fellow unofficial artists. It rendered emptiness not a consequence of a disenchanted negation of undesirable, repressive circumstances but as a condition of possibility its Moscow namesake presents numerous methodological complications. However, what is undeniable is that the two movements shared a political moment—the ongoing Cold War and the slow collapse of the Socialist state—and engaged with the legacy of the historical avant-garde (granted, the modes of this engagement differ). I suggest that both of these points of similarity led members of the global conceptualist movement to the notion of “emptiness” as most appropriate for their respective political and cultural situations. If the Western branch of conceptualism indeed operated under the pretenses of avant-garde political ambition while bypassing its forms, the late Soviet artists established an inverse relationship to the historical avant-garde. Namely, a peculiar distancing from the leftist utopianism adopted by the early-twentieth-century art movement coupled with the utilization and, at times, aping of its forms for newly articulated ends. As scholar Svetlana Boym, puts it: “While Western followers of the Russian avant-garde embrace the social message and try to see the utopian as possible, the Russian architects embrace the artistic potential, blatantly defying official collective imperatives. They might have shared forms, but not their understanding.” This respective inversion of the relationship to the avant-garde results in two different approaches to the questions of absences, disappearance, and voids. In the West, the art objects become de-materialized following the formal development of the arts, as it is understood, to reach a dead end. In the Soviet context, the production of art objects does not cease. However, in many cases, the figure of the artist begins to lose its contours as he engages in a recycling of forms, an articulation of absences and an expression of a weakened, peripheral (in contrast to the Russian avant-garde artists) positionality vis-à-vis the political.

Drawing a parallel between Western conceptualism and


19 This distinction has been elaborated by Victor Tupitsyn in his chapter “Moscow Communal Conceptualism” in *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post) Modernism in Russia*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 101–122.

20 In her account of political implications of text-based works of Komar and Melamid, art historian Mary Nicholas points to the way in which the public grew “adept at not seeing” the posters, as they became just another mundane part of public spaces. The artists signed the parodied slogans, drawing attention to the meaning of the texts and making them available for audience’s re-evaluation. See Mary A. Nicholas, “We Were Born to Make Fairytales Come True,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, (June-Sept-Dec. 2011), 343.


for an aesthetic experience. Diverging from Western notion of material’s emancipatory dissolution, Sots Art’s sardonic emptying of ideological discourse, and Kabakovian suspicion of organization and construction as artistic method, Collective Actions implemented emptiness as a compositional, spatial, and site-defining element in their works.

Collective Actions group was founded in Moscow in 1976. Among its founding members are poet Andrei Monastyrski, artist Nikita Alekseev, photographer Georgy Kiesewalter, and artist and trained librarian Nikolai Paitkov. CA is primarily known for its ongoing series of “Trips out of town” consisting of minimal outdoor participatory performances. These actions involve a group of audience-participants (friends and acquaintances of the unofficial art circle) and take place in the open suburban fields, usually on the weekends. Some gatherings involve props and costumes and frequently rely on a series of instructions that the audience members are asked to follow. Upon the completion of these actions, participants are invited to write reflections and recollections of their experiences. In addressing the nature of these works, Monastyrski often uses the term “empty,” referring, among other things, to the absence of a clear purpose for each action. In CA’s work, the notion of “emptiness” (pykmono) appears in more than one way. For instance, among its other iterations, emptiness is theorized by Monastyrski as an important demonstrational quality of photographs that depict uninhabited fields at different points during the actions. A close reading of early works organized by the group, with a particular focus on their structural and aesthetic qualities, demonstrates “emptiness” playing a compositional role in these performances.

Scholarship dedicated to the works of Collective Actions pays due attention to the notion of emptiness and proposes varying approaches to its theorizing. Art historian Yelena Kalinsky, in her study of CA’s documentary practices, considers how documentation and photography specifically work to circumvent the issue of representation of “empty action” given its inherent un-representability. Kalinsky’s close examination of the notion “empty photograph,” a term coined by Andrei Monastyrski, demonstrates the metaphorical nature of much of the photographic evidence of CA’s works. The photograph at times “relinquishes its claim to indexicality and ... becomes an event in itself.” This emptiness is not fully available to the audience during the action’s unraveling, as the event unfolds unbeknownst to the participant. Nor is it accessible for the beholder of documentation, because the document becomes another work altogether, related but separate. Art critic and theorist Victor Tupitsyn approaches CA’s practice through the prism of language, accounting for the overwhelmingly logo-centric nature of Soviet culture. Tupitsyn reads the actions as curated instances of diffusing the participants’ will to speak, perpetually postponing the “verbal time” by filling it with action, and only allowing the participants to verbalize their subjective experiences upon completion of the in-the-filed action. The emptiness for Tupitsyn resides in the realm of the word, manifest in the “verbal vacuum” that is compensated for post factum through recollections, discussions, and commentaries. Unlike Kalinsky and Tupitsyn, art historian Marina Gerber does not focus on notions of lack or absence of representation or speech, but rather understands this “emptiness” as a “lack or absence as such.” The experience of the empty action, Gerber proposes, “relieves tension and gives the viewers a sense of comfortable emptiness.” Gerber’s work on CA is organized around the notion of the artists’ and audience’s free time, dedicated to the organization of and participation in the actions, differing drastically from their life in the Soviet every day. Highlighting that contrast in the context of CA’s practices, Gerber’s is a psychologically pleasant, “comfortable emptiness.”

The aforementioned theorizations of Collective Actions’ emptiness—factographic, verbal, and psychological—are both diverging in understandings of the concept and intimately intertwined. The unrepresentable part of the action is that which takes place in the psychological sphere of the viewer, hinging on his or her expectations and anticipations. This aspect of an “empty action” categorically resists representation.

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29 Monastyrski explains this state of anticipation as “looking in the wrong direction,” as the audience-participants do not recognize the action as such while it is happening and even at times baffled by what they are witnessing.


31 Marina Gerber, Empty Action: Labour and Free Time in the Art of Collective Actions (Verlag, Bielefeld: Transcript, 1018), 53.

32 Gerber, Empty Action, 53.

33 Gerber, Empty Action, 54.

23 Membership changed over time, for an account of the group’s early years see George Kiesewalter (pen name Givi Kordiaishvili), “Istoryia ‘Kollektivnykh deistviia: Povest’ v dvukh chastakh s epilogom,” in Kollektivnye Deistviia, Poezdkii za Gorod, vols. 2–3 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011), 125–43.

24 Not all actions took place in rural settings. Some works were organized in the city (The Group 3 and The Exit from 1983) as well as private apartments of the CA members (Playback from 1981 and Voices from 1985). Works that were situated in rural settings were conducted in large rural spaces unmonitored by the state. The natural setting was attractive as an “anti-museum,” a space that allowed for experimentation and expansion. The first large event organized by the unofficial artist in the bucolic setting is the infamous Bulldozer Exhibition. For detailed discussion of the organization of the Bulldozer Exhibition, see Matthew Jesse Jackson, The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 136–39.

linked, complicating and enriching one-another’s claim. For the present study, I propose the generative implications of emptiness as formal and compositional element that emerge out of CA’s members’ thinking in aesthetic, and almost painterly, compositional terms. This approach may reveal the extent to which these works belong to the lineage of dematerialization in contemporary art.

In his texts from late 1970’s, Monastyrski works to articulate, formally and conceptually, a utilization of emptiness as a compositionally constitutive element of an aesthetic formal experience orchestrated within the bounds of a given action. This artistic trajectory is evident in the gradual development of the actions from smaller happening-like events (Appearance and Lieblitch from 1976) to time-sensitive, conceptual participatory works (Third Variant and Time of Action from 1978). In one of the first actions organized by Andrei Monastyrski, Slogan from 1977 (Figure 4), a group of artists gathered in a Moscow suburban region of Firsanovka for the installation of a red banner. The banner read, “I do not complain about anything, and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place.” The text quotes Monastyrski’s poem titled “Nothing happens.”

The familiar form of bright-red cloth inspires an expectation of jubilant party rhetoric. Monastyrski, however, subverts this expectation by inscribing onto the banner a statement of an almost fearful and apologetic complacency. Unlike the traditional propaganda object, this one has its fists unclenched, voice lowered, gaze softened. The banner presents a tension between a triumphalist form and a defiantly anti-triumphalist statement. It parodies the form of the party’s official trappings and infuses it with a rhetoric of unofficial, poetic, anti-agitational register. This tension between discursive tonalities is brought to the fore as the oxymoronic banner is placed into a rural, nondescript space of a public park on the outskirts of Moscow, unattended by the state propaganda. The “empty action” of installing the banner in Firsanovka, establishing a distance from the centers of power and the participants’ everyday urban spaces, provides literal and conceptual space for squaring the tonal and formal tensions of the work.

Implementation of the familiar state-associated forms and their parodic estrangement within the bucolic, unadulterated spaciousness of the chosen site is characteristic of the early participatory performances organized by Collective Actions. The “empty action,” an installation of the banner to no particular end, proscribes no fixed reading of the tension contained in the banner. Rather, it poses a question available to the viewer’s deliberation, interpretation, or dismissal. In other words, the location of the work, the formal emptiness of the snow-covered Firsanovka region, allows the action to relocate the banner from an ideologically charged political context into an ideologically un-marked space.

In his 1985 essay titled “With a Wheel in The Head,” Monastyrski describes Slogan as an aesthetic inversion of his participation in a 1967 student protest at Pushkin Square. In his recollections, Monastyrski recounts the event as underwhelming and “unserious,” as he briefly holds up a banner with a slogan, “I do not complain about anything...” From here, the banner is relocated to the bucolic Firsanovka region, 100km from Moscow’s center. This tension between the traditional propaganda object and the bucolic, unadulterated, rural space is characteristic of the early participatory performances organized by Collective Actions. The “empty action,” an installation of the banner to no particular end, proscribes no fixed reading of the tension contained in the banner. Rather, it poses a question available to the viewer’s deliberation, interpretation, or dismissal. In other words, the location of the work, the formal emptiness of the snow-covered Firsanovka region, allows the action to relocate the banner from an ideologically charged political context into an ideologically un-marked space.

34 I see these approaches to the notions of “emptiness” in opposition to the postwar anti-enlightenment tradition, which emerged already in 1943 with Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology. In his work, Sartre posits that “nothingness” defines much of one’s lived experience. In her consideration of Sartre’s writing, literary scholar Meghan Vicks contrasts Sartre’s conception that “nothingness only comes into the world through the being of man” with Martin Heidegger’s notion that “human existence (Dasein) only occurs by being held out in the nothing” (Vicks, 38). Sartre and Heidegger differ in the trajectory they outline vis-à-vis “nothingness” but hold it as central to understanding the human condition. While the period-specific phenomenological discourse proposes theorizing “nothingness” in the realm of literature and metaphysics, the notion of spatial emptiness as an aesthetic, workable quality of a given artwork presents an alternative to such phenomenological considerations. See Meghan Vicks, Narratives of Nothing in 20th-century Literature (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).


36 English translation of the banner may be found here https://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-ACTIONS-4.htm.


38 For more on use of text in the works of Moscow Conceptualism, see Mary Nichols, “Reading Moscow Conceptualism,” Slavic Review 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 22–51.

39 Following Monastyrski’s writing, scholars have also understood the outdoor practices as critiquing the tradition of Socialist Realist landscape. See Marina Gerber, “Collective Actions’ Conception of Art” in Empty Action: Labour and Free Time in the Art of Collective Actions (Verlag, Bielefeld: Transcript, 1018), 71–107.

40 In the preface to the first volume of Trips Out of Town, Monastyrski stresses the open-endedness of the actions, the importance of the audience’s active interpretation of the witnessed work. No specific reading is prescribed, Monastyrski writes: “the viewer begins to wonder about the meaning of this or that activity and finally “discovers” its mythological or some other content.” See Andrei Monastyrski, Preface to Volume One in Trips out of Town. 1980. Trans. Yelena Kalinsky, accessed September 8, 2022, http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-PREFACE-TO-1-VOLUME.htm.

41 I refer to these spaces as empty, not as a way to refuse them a history or meaning existing outside Collective Actions’ works, but to honor their formal role in the actions discussed here and to stay in line with the artists’ focus on rural settings as residing on the outside of the political, ideological, state functioning. The formal qualities of these spaces, present in much of the Collective Actions’ photo documentation, are ones of vastness, organicity, and de-population. While these works welcome myriad contemporary readings through eco-critical, Anthropocene, and new materialist lenses, my primary aim here is to consider them in their sociohistorical context and analyze their structure using categories available to the artists at the time.

42 Historical note on the protest can be found here http://old.memo.ru/histo-ry/diss/linke/dempushk.htm.
the text of which he does not deem important enough to share with his readers. The 1967 protest against the repression of Soviet poets resulted in arrests and further persecution of the activists. In thinking about the viability and risks of such a political gesture, Monastyrski raises the question of form and content within an artistic framework emerging in the first years of the group’s work. In Slogan, Monastyrski writes, “the social, demarcated as form by the red color of the Collective Actions’ banner, was used as a filler, as a plastic element […] in order to build an artistic and existential space, a new framework of aesthetic conventions, inside of which, the social could exist, and not the other way around.” In other words, Monastyrski is interested in the practice of re-framing and re-, or rather de-contextualization, for the purposes of aesthetic constructions. The plasticity of the social (“социум”) is activated within the compositional tension among the open, de-contextualized rural space, as opposed to being deterministic and constitutive of the artistic and existential framework. The category of the social (both alluded to by the banner and present as viewers-participants) here becomes a plastic form that exists within a specific set of aesthetic coordinates.

To think about this claim art historically, I focus not on what Monastyrski calls a “filler” (“наполнитель”), but rather the aesthetic framework, a conceptual form put forth in the early outdoor works that are characterized by the open empty spaces Collective Actions used to conduct their works. The emptiness of the fields, strikingly evident in the photographic documentation of the actions, also echoes the nature of the in-the-field activity, purposefully purposeless or, to use Monastyrski’s language, “empty,” as the participants are invited to a suburban open field and asked to perform or witness tasks the goal of which is seldom articulated for them. It is precisely the quality of spaciousness, emptiness, and vastness that is constitutive of aesthetic conventions. Collective Actions explored during the first decades of the group’s existence.

The manner of engaging with the aesthetics of emptiness is varied throughout the diverse body of works documented and catalogued by CA. The group’s consideration of its compositional potential comes through particularly poignantly in an action from 1981, titled “Gazing at the Waterfall,” organized by Nikolai Panitkov. For the action, the viewers were invited to an open field to witness Panitkov, located at a considerable distance from the audience, run through the field in different directions and at different speeds falling from time to time, for the duration of seven minutes (Figure 5–6). Panitkov then stopped in the middle of the field and stood still, with his hat in his hand, for another three minutes. The witnesses were then handed a printed reproduction of 15th century Chinese artist Fen Xi’s “Looking at a Waterfall,” pointing to the fact that the trajectory of Panitkov’s footsteps against the field were meant to mimic the artwork’s outline (Figure 7). Xi’s depiction of the waterfall consists of dramatic concentrations of ink that signify deep shadows and light traces of pigment that suggest the landscape’s disappearing into the distance. Hence, the white areas of the paper are not understood as voids of nothingness in the natural landscape but are read in concord with the marks that contour them. Panitkov pushed the fifteenth century composition through the lens of conceptual understanding of form and parodies it to probe its aesthetic quality in a new context.

This formal thinking is by no means limited to the group’s engagement with visual arts. The practical accentuation of emptiness is recognizable in contemporaneous experimental music, both in the Soviet Union and the United States, and conceptual poetry that proliferated the unofficial Moscow circle. Thinking about the aesthetic and artistic quality of CA’s works during the first decade of group’s practice, Monastyrski contemplates the aesthetic structure of the actions and the function allotted to the manifestations of emptiness seen in other aesthetic constructions. In an unpublished essay titled “Iskusstvo Fonov” [“The Art of Backgrounds”] Monastyrski highlights precisely the organizing quality of emptiness, seeing it not as a stand-alone, conceptually self-sufficient notion, but one with a “positive charge,” that functions as a connecting membrane among the elements of a work. “In reality,” Monastyrski writes, there is no such thing as real or mental emptiness. There is a chaos of the mind, chaos of the feeling—these things are completely different. Emptiness—is a pure notion [понятие] with a positive charge [со знаком плюс]—like a pause between two sounds. Because a pause is more active on the level of the work’s organization [организации вещи]—more so than a word or a sound.

To approach CA’s engagement with emptiness as predominately metaphorical, non-material concept is to risk favoring the notion’s eerie allusion to lack or absence and foregrounding it to a fault. To think of it in organizational terms, however, may lead one to understand it as a formal condition
for aesthetic and critical engagements, both individual and collective, with artistic propositions put forth by the actions’ organizers. Aesthetic conventions that contour the social, to rephrase Monastyrski, result in a conceptual work that, much like a painterly or musical composition, relies on interrelations of its parts. This compositional aspect allows for interrelational play that feels like a dynamic social form, the parts of which relate to one another through a set of agreed upon conditions.

One action that illustrates the role of emptiness in the aesthetic orchestration of social form is Place of Action from 1979.\(^{50}\) Here, emptiness is implemented as the quality of the action’s setting as well as an aesthetic conduit for both self-reflexive and collective experiences of its participants.\(^{51}\) During the action, the participants are gathered on the edge of a field and are asked to cross it, following the path of small wooden stakes. The journey across the field each participant must take alone. One by one, they begin to move deeper into the open space. As instructed, upon reaching each stake, the participant stops and turns back, toward a photographer who remains at the starting point, to have her picture taken (Figure 8). More than halfway through the journey, she arrives at a curtain installed in the middle of the field. Here, she finds instructions to pull back the curtain and lie down in a ditch dug up on the other side of it, closing the curtain behind her (Figures 9–10). Now horizontal, she waits for the next person to arrive. After a short while, the curtain is pulled back by the participants that followed and, as per instructions, they take each other’s photos in their respective positions. The newly arrived participant then occupies the ditch, and she, who has just risen, continues crossing the field until she reaches the other side, reuniting with those who went before her. She notices that some are looking at a wooden panel hammered to a tree. What is revealed as a signboard presents meticulously regimented movements of every participant written into a grid (Figure 11).

The photographic documentation of the action and the participants’ recollections illustrate how an experience of spatial emptiness provides a fertile ground for imaginative leaps, reflections, and meditations on one’s own positioning within the field. One way such an interaction with the empty space is achieved is through highlighting the inability of the material props and interventions—the takes, the curtain, the ditch—to intervene, circumvent, or fracture the spatial vastness successfully.\(^{52}\) While directing the participant’s trajectory, the small wooden stakes remain modest and alien to the field’s black earth. Although alluding to notions of privacy, secrecy, or a dramatic theatrical reveal, the curtain appears incapable of achieving such effects. The experience of the confinement in the ditch further highlights the experience of expansive space in the field.

Even in the post-factum reading of the action, one cannot help but reflect upon the way in which the photographic documentation, unable to depict anything more than a small portion of the spatial qualities of the action, asks the present reader to fill in the gaps and maintain, in their imagination, both the specifics of the work as well as the larger whole that contains them. “All around was emptiness,” artist and participant Vladimir Mironenko recounts his lying in the ditch, “silence, and enormous sky. When you look up at it directly from below, it surrounds you from all sides.”\(^{53}\) This is one of many instances Place of Action choreographs bodies in a simultaneously real and abstract space. Abstract because in relation to the material and experiential components that structure the work, the spatial particularities of the field take on and stand for qualities that exist and have meaning beyond their material instantiation.

The photograph of Mironenko lying down, however, does not depict a man in a state of serene awe of his circumstance (Figure 12). When photographed, the artist opens up a copy of H.G. Wells’s Russia in the Shadows and pretends to read it.\(^{54}\) Mironenko’s humorous self-fashioning, a playfully posing for the camera (Figure 13), established a momentous artistic collaboration between the photographer and the photographed.\(^{55}\)

Structural and conceptual complexities characteristic of these works allow for a peculiar kind of humor and play that informs the artistic encounters of the participants. The parodic objects ignite such experiences. For instance, participants’ encounter with the signboard, the main parodic element in the action, is recounted in Ilya Kabakov’s recollection. Kabakov writes: “I must say that I felt a pang at such profanation of the ‘other world.’ I am here practically post-mortem, I am practically flying, while here we are again accounting, re-accounting, the strict regimentation of everything that was taking place. Although, who knows, it must mean that such things exist here too.”\(^{56}\) Kabakov’s quote is instrumental to this reading as it underscores a peculiar quality of humor that permeates the complex structure of the action. The notion of an

50 For the description of the action and recollections of the participants, see https://conceptualism.letov.ru/KACTIONS-12.htm.
52 Indeed, the material props are repeatedly described as having an ambiguous relationship with the setting. Ilya Kabakov, for example, describes his encountering the curtain as dream-like experience, natural and yet strange. Ilya Kabakov, “Kabakov’s Story: Place of Action,” in Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1982, trans. and ed. Yelena Kalinsky (Chicago: Soberscove Press: 2012), 42.
54 Russia in the Shadows is a volume originally published in 1921, compiling essays by H.G. that narrate author’s trips to Russia in the early 1920s.
announcement board in Heaven is humorous and weary. The laughter at play within the aesthetic framework of the action realigns the critical positionality of the viewer-participant along the formal, compositional, and interrelational axis, as opposed to the social and symbolic axis. In other words, the humor at work is not one that targets, overidentifies with, or mocks the parodied practice, but one that asks to look beyond the apparent readings: connotations of state-control, reincarnation, rites of passage, and a return to the soil. The decidedly playful and unofficial experiential mode at work in Place of Action does not allow for a definitively resolved reading of such allusions, or at least makes them secondary to the overall makeup of the work. For one cannot lay in “sacred Russian black earth” and giggle. Placed in the seemingly de-contextualized formal qualities of the site, namely its emptiness as described above, conceptual components of the work become available to and even require novel, at times humorous, modes of reading that assert the individual and collective contextualities of the participants. This largely untheorized aspect of the action, then, brings to the fore a series of tensions between one’s collective and individual experience, the vastness of the field and the confines of the ditch, and the abstract exploration of the empty space versus overly familiar regimentation of a lived experience. These encounters with and within the empty space allow for imaginative leaps, humor, and defamiliarizing of the state’s official rhetoric, constructing conditions for alternative experiences of the spatial, social, and temporal dimensions.

In 2011, the New Museum in New York reinstalled Monastyrski’s 1970s banner at the Governor’s Island in, as part of the exhibition “Ostalgia” (a play on the words nostalgia and ost, or est, meaning east in German) (Figure 14). The exhibition was dedicated to the romantic longing for the time before the collapse of the Communist Bloc.57 Here, placed within a historical, contextually charged site, the banner indeed becomes a statement rather than an artwork subject to aesthetic contemplation. The official account by the New Museum of the installations says as much, namely that the work is a “commentary on the history of displacement and relocation that characterizes New York’s harbor.”58 But what is lost in this transplantation is the aesthetic convention Monastyrski initially establishes in the rural setting. Installation of the banner in 2011, in other words, is more akin to Ideal Slogan of Komar and Melamid, than to the 1977 installation in Firsanovka. The “social,” contextual, ideologically charged work dictates the “framework of aesthetic conventions”59 of the work, as opposed to residing within the aesthetic structures organized through the artistic choice of the action’s organizer.

Articulating emptiness within the compositional structure of the actions allows Collective Actions to move beyond statement-based artwork and language-based conceptual anti-aestheticism. Instead, CA turns toward an aesthetic, conceptual form containing empty spaces, and asks the participants and us, as secondary readers, to consider formal, compositional relations among the elements of each work. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Monastyrski seems to have made works that engaged with the notions of emptied forms not as means of ironic critique or formulations of an escape, theorizing an endless, boundless space forever distant from the Soviet every day. Rather, his work seeks to formulate a way to imagine how one could inhabit and establish a human practice in an empty space. Monastyrski’s approach differs from that of Western and fellow Moscow Conceptualists in that it renders emptiness not a byproduct of the disenchanted negation of the old but as a special quality of the newly articulated space, available for artistic practice and aesthetic exploration.

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57 For a survey of museum exhibitions exploring the of Eastern Europe, see Curating “Eastern Europe” and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition, ed. Mária Orišková (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).


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EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART; NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS WORK.

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Figure 7. Collective Actions, *Gazing at the Waterfall*, February 12, 1981. A reproduction of Fen Xi’s *Looking at a Waterfall* handed out to the viewer-participants during the action. © Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions.


Figure 11. Collective Actions, *Place of Action*, 1979. Participants before the signboard with action documentation at the conclusion of the action. © Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions.
