

Marina Gerber

Empty Action

Labour and Free Time
in the Art of Collective Actions



From:

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Collective Actions is one of the most significant artistic practices to emerge from Moscow Conceptualism. The group's enigmatic idea of 'Empty action' is the focal point for Marina Gerber's exploration of this practice in relation to labour in the late Soviet Union. Based on interviews with members of the group (Monastyrski, Panitkov, Alexeev, Makarevich, Elagina, Romashko, Hänsen and Kiesewalter) she exposes the relation between their jobs, their individual art practices and their contribution to the collective in the context of post-Stalinist debates on labour and free time. Departing from the mundane fact that Collective Actions' practice took place in free time from work for the Soviet State, Gerber identifies Empty action as a form of 'art after work'.

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Introduction

Forty years ago a group of friends from Moscow decided to make an Action on the snowy, empty field of a park. The plan was to ‘appear’ to a group of invited viewers on the other side of the field, to photograph it, and to call it *Appearance* (1976). One year later these photographs and those of their subsequent Actions, *Tent* and *Banner-1977*, were published in a catalogue of the Venice Biennale, where, in a section called “Mediazione Concettuale, Comportamento e Azioni Collettive”, the names of Andrei Monastyrski, Nikita Alexeev and Georgi Kiese-walter were mentioned.¹ In the same year they were joined by Nikolai Panitkov and, in 1983, by Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich and Sergei Romashko. In 1979 Boris Groys attended his first and last Action (*Pictures*), and immediately wrote his essay “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism”, where he referred to the group as ‘Collective Actions’ (Коллективные Действия/*Kollektivnyye Deystviya*).² Recently Groys claimed that he did not invent this name himself and that it came up in a conversation with Monastyrski in mid-1978, before he published his essay.³ Monastyrski subsequently speculated that this name might have come up as a result of talking to Groys about the exhibition catalogue from the Venice Biennale. In any case, it is only in 1983 that the name ‘Collective Actions’ emerged on the cover of their, by then, second volume about the Actions,

1 | Cf. *La Nuova Art Sovietica. Una Prospettiva non Ufficiale a Cura di Enrico Crispolti e Gabriella Moncada*, exh. catalogue, la Biennale di Venezia, 1977.

2 | Cf. Boris Groys, “Moskovskiy Romanticheskiy Kontseptualizm”, in *A-Ya*, no. 1 (Paris, 1979), pp. 3–11. Translated as “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism”, in idem., *History Becomes Form. Moscow Conceptualism* (MIT, Cambridge/MA, 2010), pp. 35–55. Cf. Andrei Monastyrski, “Obshcheye Primechaniye” [1997], in *Kollektivnyye Deystviya, Poyezdki za Gorod* [vol. 5], (Ad Marginem, Moscow, 1998), p. 779.

The transliteration of Russian terms and Russian bibliographical references follows the BGN/PCGN 1947 System. Excepted are the names of individuals who have chosen a specific transliteration, e.g. Andrei Monastyrski.

3 | Cf. Boris Groys in conversation with Andrei Monastyrski, “O Nazvanii KD”, video recording, February 12, 2011. URL: m.youtube.com/watch?v=9nht_QzmzYQ

Trips out of Town (Поездки за Город/Poyezdki za Gorod).⁴ Before that, only the names of the group's members were listed. By the time the group name had been established, Alexeev had already left the group. Subsequently, in 1989, a new member joined, Sabine Hänsen, who together with Monastyrski remains an active member to date.

Until now Collective Actions have produced over 140 Actions and completed twelve volumes of *Trips out of Town*, books that describe, document, comment and analyse the Actions. For someone who has never participated in an Action, reading this material is the only way to familiarise oneself with the work of Collective Actions. Given that it is impossible to participate in past Actions, the importance of *Trips out of Town* cannot be overestimated. The typical volume includes around a dozen Action descriptions (*opisatel'nyye teksty*), photographs, several participants' reports (*rasskazy uchastnikov*), a few thematic essays, one foreword (*predisloviye*), a few commentaries (*kommentarii*) by the members of Collective Actions, transcribed recorded discussions, and documentation (*dokumentatsiya*), such as tables, schemes, leaflets, etc. They also include photographs and descriptions of Actions by individual members of Collective Actions that are related to, but not part of the collective practice.

It makes sense to read *Trips out of Town* from the beginning, because Collective Actions understand their practice and these volumes as broadly sequential and historically evolving. The forewords to the volumes make this explicit. It is also possible to study single Actions, but one needs to be prepared to follow up some cross references. Each Action is surrounded by complementary material, which gives it a certain degree of self-sufficiency, so one can spend hours reading around one Action, e.g. the Action description, then the reports by the participants, looking at the photographs and the documentation, reading the foreword which contextualises the Action, or perhaps the essays and commentaries. Each of these genres of documentation offers a different perspective on the Action.

The volumes of *Trips out of Town* were initially produced to be 'published' privately, as *samizdat*, i.e. in merely five copies, which were shown to friends

4 | The title translates into German as *Reisen vor die Stadt*, in Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion. Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (Fink, Munich, 2003); as *Reisen aus der Stadt* in Georg Witte, "Kleine Reisen aus Moskau", in Bernd Blaschke et al. (eds.), *Umwege. Ästhetik und Poetik exzentrischer Reisen* (Aisthesis, Bielefeld, 2008), pp. 275–296; into English as *Trips to the Countryside* in *Empty Zones. Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions*, exh. catalogue, ed. Boris Groys, Pavilion of Russia at the 54th International Art Exhibition – la biennale di Venezia, 2011; *Journeys Outside the City* in Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989* (CEU, Budapest/New York, 2013).

only. The texts were typed on blueprint A4 sheets of paper and the photographs were glued onto the paper. It was only in 1998 that *Trips out of Town* became available to a wider audience, as the first five volumes were issued by the publisher Ad Marginem in Moscow.⁵ Since 2009 the so-called Guerman Titov's Library of Moscow Conceptualism (*Biblioteka Moskovskogo Kontseptualizma Germana Titova*, BMK hereafter) published all twelve volumes of *Trips out of Town* (and the first part of volume 13).⁶ Alongside the latest Action descriptions in Russian, one can find English, German and Japanese translations on Sergey Letov's website, which includes numerous photographs, videos and audio-recordings.⁷

The meticulous documentation and publication of the Actions has no doubt enabled a wide international reception of Collective Actions, which pays tribute to their historical and contemporary significance. Being part of the broader circle of artists known as Moscow Conceptualists, Collective Actions got to show their work in a number of major international exhibitions, which resulted in catalogues featuring essays or passages on Collective Actions. Such publications include: *Between Spring and Summer. Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of late Communism* (1991), *Total Enlightenment. Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960–1990* (2008), *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (2011), *Field of Action. The Moscow Conceptual School in Context* (2011).⁸

The grouping of the Moscow-based artists and writers – besides Collective Actions, including Ilya Kabakov, Vladimir Sorokin, Vadim Zakharov, Yuri Albert, Yuri Leiderman, etc. – is not a curatorial invention. They were a group long before they got to exhibit together abroad and in Russia. An alternative way to show their work was the production of the so-called MANI Folders (*Papki*

5 | Cf. Kollektivnyye Deystviya, *Poyezdki za Gorod* (Ad Marginem, Moscow, 1998).

6 | Kollektivnyye Deystviya, *Poyezdki za Gorod 1* (BMK, Vologda, 2011); Kollektivnyye Deystviya, *Poyezdki za Gorod 2–3* (BMK, Vologda, 2011); Kollektivnyye Deystviya, *Poyezdki za Gorod 4–5+11–13* (BMK, Vologda, 2016); Kollektivnyye Deystviya, *Poyezdki za Gorod 6–11* (BMK, Vologda, 2009).

7 | Cf. *conceptualism.letov.ru*, ed. Sergey Letov. URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html>

8 | Cf. *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of late Communism*, exh. catalogue, ed. David A. Ross, Tacoma Art Museum, 1990, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1990–1991, Des Moines Art Center, 1991; *Die Totale Aufklärung. Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960–1990/Total Enlightenment. Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960–1990*, exh. catalogue, eds. Boris Groys et al., Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2008; Alla Rosenfeld (ed.), *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* (Prestel, New York, Munich/London, 2011); *Field of Action. The Moscow Conceptual School in Context 1970–1980s*, exh. catalogue, eds. Alexandra Danilova and Elena Kuprina-Lyakhovich, Ekaterina Cultural Foundation, Moscow, 2010.

MANI) – folders in which the artists could put their latest works and which were circulated amongst friends.⁹ Alexeev used to show some of the Moscow Conceptualists' work in his apartment (AptArt Gallery).¹⁰ Another indicator of the relation between Collective Actions and Moscow Conceptualism is, for example, the list of Collective Actions' viewers; most of the Moscow Conceptualists attended at least one Action.¹¹ The term itself was coined by Groys in 1979,¹² and generally the 'conceptualism' at stake is not to be considered as programmatic. Its use in regard to Moscow-based artists is a strategic choice, intended to communicate their work to a broader audience, perhaps acquainted with the Anglo-American artistic movement from the 1960s–1970s.¹³ In this light, Collective Actions were also included in exhibitions and publications, which go beyond Moscow and the Soviet context. The exhibition catalogue *Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin* (1999) frames Moscow Conceptualists, including Collective Actions, in terms of an expanded and international idea of Conceptualism.¹⁴ The exhibition catalogue *Out of Actions. Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979* (1998) provides some contextualisation of Collective Actions within the history of performance and Action art, while remaining within the framework that was provided by Groys' essay "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism".¹⁵ Jörg Heiser's exhibition and catalogue *Romantic Conceptualism* (2007) included Collective Actions and developed Groys' idea considerably further.¹⁶ Although this idea was very popular, it remained largely unquestioned and none of the authors have engaged with Collective Actions' actual, very critical reception of Romanticism, which will be raised here in chapter 2.

Due to Collective Actions' work and interest in music and sound art they also operate in music theory contexts: *Sounding the Body Electric. Experiments*

9 | In the archive of E.K. Art Bureau, Moscow.

10 | Cf. Margarita Tupitsyn et al., *Anti-Shows. AptArt 1982–84* (Afterall, London, 2017).

11 | Cf. Andrei Monastyrski, "Obshcheye Primechaniye", pp. 780–782.

12 | Cf. fn. 2.

13 | For comparisons between Moscow and western Conceptualism: cf. Valerie L. Hillings, "Where is the Line between us? Moscow and western Conceptualism in the 1970s", in Alla Rosenfeld (ed.), *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, pp. 260–283.

14 | Cf. *Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*, exh. catalogue, eds. Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999.

15 | Cf. *Out of Actions. Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, exh. catalogue, ed. Paul Schimmel, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998.

16 | Cf. *Romantic Conceptualism/Romantic Conceptualism*, exh. catalogue, eds. Jörg Heiser, Ellen Seifermann, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, BAWAG foundation Vienna, 2007.

in *Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984* (2013),¹⁷ and *Sounds Like Silence. John Cage–4'33''–Silence Today* (2012).¹⁸ (Cf. chapter 2.)

Despite this sustained and broad public interest in Collective Actions, only a few scholarly studies were published. The main point of originality of the present study is that it addresses Collective Actions' main artistic idea, which revolves around the term 'Empty action' (*nycmoe deŭcmoe / pustoye deystviye*). Empty action is, as far as Collective Actions are concerned, a neologism. It describes a certain experience that they seek in their practice, namely of action without purpose. This is not intended to induce an experience of futility as such, but of a break or pause from the purposefulness of art, from the necessity of interpreting and judging artworks. Meaning and interpretation are not constituted by the Empty action, but arise almost independently from it, afterwards.¹⁹ The reports and numerous other reflections on the Actions, which include interpretations, are incidental effects and afterimages of the experience of the Empty action. The Empty action is, however, more than an experience – its conceptual aspect permeates Collective Actions' whole practice and, once grasped, it enables us to understand the vast majority of their views on, and their relations to, various artistic and social practices, as the present study sets out to demonstrate. A critical study of Collective Actions' practice in terms of the Empty action thus promises to reveal what is most specific and original about their art.

Scholarly research on Collective Actions took place in various disciplines, such as Slavic Studies, Philology, Archivology, Religion Studies and Art History. Sylvia Sasse's *Texte in Aktion* (2003) examines the relation between the 'power of the word' in the Soviet Union to the art of the Moscow Conceptualists, including Collective Actions, in the framework of theories around the so-called 'performative turn'.²⁰ The Actions of Collective Actions are treated as an analytical tool with a view to revealing the cultural specificity of the practice

17 | Cf. *Sounding the Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984*, exh. catalogue, eds. David Crowley, Daniel Muzyczuk, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2012/Calvert 22, London, 2013.

18 | Cf. *Sounds like Silence. John Cage–4'33''–Silence Today*, exh. catalogue, eds. Dieter Daniels, Inke Arns, Hartware Medien Kunstverein, Dortmund, 2012/2013.

19 | Cf. Dennis Ioffe, "Andrei Monastyrskii's Post-Semiosis and the Tradition of Moscow Conceptualism: Ekphrasis and the Problem of Visual-Ironic Suggestion", in *Russian Literature*, no. 74, 1–2 (2013), pp. 255–273.

20 | Cf. Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion*; Uwe Wirth (ed.), *Performanz. Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2002); Erika Fischer-Lichte, K. Hasselmann (eds.), *Performing the Future. Die Zukunft der Performativitätsforschung* (Fink, Munich, 2012); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Performativität. Eine Einführung* (transcript, Bielefeld, 2012).

at stake. Consequently, not the Empty action, but the Action itself is the main object of analysis for Sasse. Julia Scharf's *Das Archiv ist die Kunst* (2006) can be considered as an elaboration of Sasse's analysis of the Actions, on the one hand, and on the other as a departure from it, insofar as she proposes that the 'performative' is not only to be found in the Actions, but also in Collective Actions' documentation practice. Her thesis is that the 'performance', and therefore the 'art', of Collective Actions is to be found in the way that they document the Actions and how they use these documents in and for further Actions. According to Scharf, the documentation and Actions are entwined to such a degree that a differentiation between the two becomes absurd.²¹ Here too, the Empty action is conceived as a tool or device only,²² and not as the main object of art, as will be done in the present book.

The philologists Georg Witte and Sabine Hänsgen participated in a number of Actions of Collective Actions from the mid-1980s, and their very early translation and editorial work around Moscow Conceptualism, including Collective Actions, has been a major reference point in the German-speaking reception of Collective Actions.²³ Witte's two essays on Collective Actions from 2008 and 2010 approach their work mostly immanently, employing the terms and concepts of literary-criticism.²⁴ Witte is the only author (apart from the viewers who were commissioned by Collective Actions to write reports) who considered his experience of participating in the Actions as central. It is perhaps for this reason that Witte recognises the relevance and consistency of the Empty action in Collective Actions' work.

The complex issue of Collective Actions' relation to religious practices has been addressed in the unpublished course work by the student of world religions Arina Atik, who examines the relation of Collective Actions to Zen-Bud-

21 | Cf. Julia Scharf, *Das Archiv ist die Kunst. Verfahren der textuellen Selbstreproduktion im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen, no. 78, 2006), p. 44.

22 | "Als Mittel zur Konstruktion des Ereignisses wird also diese 'leere Handlung' angesehen, während das Ziel der Aktion darin besteht, diesem Ereignis einen textuellen Ausdruck zu geben." (Ibid., p. 23.)

23 | Cf. e.g. Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders [pseudonym G. Witte and S. Hänsgen] (eds.), *Kulturpalast. Neue Moskauer Poesie und Aktionskunst*, incl. audio cassette and cards (Edition S, Wuppertal, 1984); *Moskau. Moskau. Aktion Kunst Poesie* (S, Wuppertal, 1987).

24 | Cf. Georg Witte, "Unsichtbar machen. Kontraevidentielle Aktionsbeschreibungen der Gruppe 'Kollektive Handlungen'", in Gabriele Brandstetter et al. (eds.), *Notationen und Choreographisches Denken* (Rombach, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2010), pp. 207–233; idem., "Kleine Reisen aus Moskau".

dhism (2015).²⁵ This is illuminating, insofar as it clarifies the extent to which the Empty action is akin to certain Buddhist experiences of the enlightenment (e.g. *prajñā*), and thorough, since Atik acknowledges the depth of Collective Actions' knowledge of Buddhism. However, given that the Empty action is intended by Collective Actions as a means of forming an *artistic* practice and not as a religious practice, such studies are problematic, because they ignore Collective Actions' implicit critique of religion as an ideology.

The work by German authors has remained unacknowledged in the English-speaking literature on Collective Actions. Yelena Kalinsky's PhD thesis (2013) is a history of Collective Actions from 1976 until 1989, which largely draws on Collective Actions' self-historicisation, with a contextualisation of Collective Actions within the Moscow Conceptual art circle.²⁶ Kalinsky also translated the first reports of the viewers, *Collective Actions: Audience Recollections From the First Five Years, 1976–1981* (2012).²⁷ Generally, her thesis provides an overview of the different materials that Collective Actions worked with, such as documentation, photography, recorded speech and sounds. Kalinsky understands the work of Collective Actions in purely material and structural terms, and therefore the Empty action as a specific experience of art remains unaddressed. Octavian Esanu's published PhD *Transition in Post-Soviet Art* (2013) presents Collective Actions' practice as a case study in order to illuminate cultural shifts that took place in the former socialist countries during the period of 'transition' (the 1990s), in particular the liberalisation of markets, including the art market.²⁸ The first part of his book delivers a similar, if less detailed, account of Collective Actions' work between 1976 and 1989 to Kalinsky's. It goes beyond Kalinsky's history insofar as Esanu considers Collective Actions' terms after 1989. In terms of method, Esanu's book can be compared to Scharf's *Das Archiv ist die Kunst* (2006), which is to say that it aims to demonstrate Collective

25 | Cf. Atik, Arina, "Proizvodstvo Opyta Osvobozhdeniya v Religii i vne Religii: Vliyaniye Dzen-Buddizma na Ranniy Moskovskiy Kontseptualizm", unpublished essay, 48 pp., Philosophy of Religion and Religion History Department of the Moscow State University, 2015.

26 | Cf. Yelena Kalinsky, "Collective Actions: Moscow Conceptualism, Performance, and the Archive", PhD thesis, The State University of New Jersey, 2013; cf. also her published article, which represents chapter 3 of her dissertation: "Drowning in Documents. Action, Documentation and Factography in Early Work by the Collective Actions Group", in *ArtMargins*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2013), pp. 82–105.

27 | Cf. Yelena Kalinsky (ed. and transl.), *Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1981* (Soberscove, Chicago, 2012). Cf. Marina Gerber, "After Participation", in *Mute*, September 19, 2013. URL: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/after-participation>

28 | Cf. Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art*.

Actions' evolution in relation to their textual production. Despite his claims to "pay attention to concepts and ideas", Esanu's contribution to the understanding of the main concept of the Empty action, or to the understanding of the sources which Collective Actions used, remains limited.²⁹

The variety of the possibilities of interpretation and association that arises from Collective Actions' practice will no doubt continue to generate more and more perspectives. For example, a study in terms of music history, the various philosophical traditions or literature is overdue. Just as with Buddhism, and, in fact, Russian orthodox Christianity, Collective Actions' members demonstrate substantial engagement with musicology, with German Romanticism, with philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and literary works such as Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg* and the so-called "four classic Chinese Novels".³⁰ Each of these numerous ex-

29 | The basis for Esanu's book is his 2010 translation of the *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*, which was edited by Monastyrski in 1999. Cf. Andrei Monastyrski (ed.), *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*, trans. Octavian Esanu (Contemporary, Chisinau, 2010). Originally published in Russian in 1999 in Vadim Zakharov's journal *Pastor*, no. 7.

30 | See Monastyrski's video, where he goes through books which he would "get rid of in the last instance": Andrei Monastyrski, "Knigi, ot Kotorykh ya by Izbavilsya v Poslednyuyu Ochered", video recording, February 16, 2011. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4tfj5jC2Ss>

The list of books consists of (in order of appearance): Yulian Shchutsky, *I Ching*; Thomas Mann, *Magic Mountain*; Lama Anagarica Govinda, "Psychology of the early Buddhism" and "The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism"; Vladimir Losski, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*; F.I. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; Chandrakirti, *Introduction to Madhyamaka*; Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; Xu Yun, *Empty Cloud. Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Xu Yun*; *Iron Flute. 100 Koan*; *Fauna of USSR. Tunicates*; Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West*.

In this video Monastyrski is sitting in his living room and going through a selection of twelve books from his library. On the table in front of him are two stacks of books, divided into what he calls "the Palestinian canon" and "the Far-Eastern canon". By "Palestinian canon" he means "the sum of Old Testament and Testament books, the writings of church fathers, Muslim tradition, even Ancient Greek – all in all, the textual canon of the European civilization, which was consolidated towards the end of the 19th century." (Correspondence with the author, November 22, 2014.) The Far-Eastern-canon stack includes two branches of Far-Eastern traditions: Buddhist and Daoist. Before picking up one book after another, each time alternating between the 'canons', he says that he is going to read a passage from each of the books, from pages opened at random. Each book is introduced in the following way: the author, full title,

PLICIT and implicit references, which can be followed up throughout *Trips out of Town*, promises to illuminate Collective Actions' relation to world culture. The present study, however, only deals with these references insofar as they are necessary to understand the form of the Empty action. It does not seek to probe whether Collective Actions understood or misunderstood certain traditions, but to investigate Collective Actions' own 'theory', which itself results in their own tradition. Even though, strictly speaking, the Empty action does not constitute a theory in a conventional sense, its consistency and depth has proven to be an effective epistemological tool within the analysis of Collective Actions' practice and their historical context. The present study of the Empty action is understood as setting the ground for any further investigations of Collective Actions' relation to other traditions.

A further main point of originality of the present study is an innovative contextualisation of Collective Actions' practice within Soviet social history and theory, which, as a result, enables a deeper understanding of the Empty action.

The period in which the beginning of Collective Actions' practice falls is the mid-1970s. Mikhail Gorbachev referred to the period between 1964 and 1982, during which Leonid Brezhnev was the Second and then the First Secretary of the Communist Party, as 'the era of stagnation'. Monastyrski claimed in his essay "Earthworks" (1987) that the Actions of Collective Actions resonate with the era of stagnation: the Actions of Collective Actions, which were carried out on fields belonging to the kolkhozes and herewith against the background of the Soviet agrarian complex, *could* be interpreted "as an 'Empty action' (in the metaphorical sense as an inefficient, from the economic point of view, empty endeavour)."³¹ Writing about Collective Actions, Margarita Tupitsyn also implicitly endorses Gorbachev's interpretation of the Brezhnev era: Collective Actions "identified emptiness as the main characteristic of Soviet existence throughout the Brezhnev era."³² According to Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, one of the reasons why such a conception of the Brezhnev era remained unchallenged for so long is that "the discourse of stagnation seemed to have been so self-evidently confirmed by the chaos and breakdown of the Soviet collapse that

the first time he came across it (year), which edition, and the edition of the current publication. Then he reads out an arbitrary passage from each book.

31 | Andrei Monastyrski, "Zemlyanyye Raboty" [1987], in *Kollektivnyye Deystviya, Poyezdki za Gorod* [vol. 4], p. 546. Translated into English by Yelena Kalinsky as "Earthworks". URL: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/MONASTYRSKI-EARTHWORKS.htm>

32 | Margarita Tupitsyn, "About early Soviet Conceptualism", in *Global Conceptualism*, p. 105.

it was scarcely worth questioning.”³³ Drawing on the recent scholarly reconsideration of the Brezhnev era and its preconditions, the present study argues that it is the era of Nikita Khrushchev, also referred to as ‘De-Stalinization’ or ‘the Thaw’ (1953–1964), which was formative for the art of Collective Actions. On reflection, it is the social transformations during the Khrushchev era that affected cultural and intellectual aspects of life, as well as the conditions of work.

For example, one of the main themes in the literature on the post-Stalinist period is the development of housing, which enabled citizens to live in their own apartment, behind the doors of which they could speak and do what they wanted. (Previously they had to share housing with people in whose presence they did not feel free expressing their views.)³⁴ Collective Actions did not just carry out one third of the Actions in their apartments: it has also been emphasised by Kiesewalter that many conversations prior to 1976 took place during informal meetings in private apartments.³⁵ Alexeev’s AptArt Gallery would also have been unthinkable if he had not had his own private, if small, apartment. We can also take into account studies which demonstrate that during the Khrushchev era the numbers of people with higher education rose significantly, thus causing the Soviet intelligentsia to expand rapidly.³⁶ Another relevant feature of the period was the reduction of censorship in the arts, humanities

33 | Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, “Brezhnev Reconsidered”, in Edwin Bacon and M.A. Sandle, (eds.), *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2002), p. 204.

34 | Cf. Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (HarperCollins, London, 2009), pp. 257–258.

On the housing project during the Khrushchev era cf. e.g. Christine Varga-Harris, “Forging Citizenship on the Home Front: Reviving the Socialist Contract and Constructing Soviet Identity during the Thaw”, in Polly Jones (ed.), *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization. A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge, London/New York, 2006), pp. 101–116; Steven E. Harris, “Moving to the Separate Apartment: Building, Distributing, Furnishing, and Living in Urban Housing in Soviet Russia, 1950s–1960s”, PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2003; David Crowley, “Thaw Modern: Design in Eastern Europe after 1956”, in *Cold War Modern. Design 1945–1970*, exh. catalogue, eds. David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2008, pp. 128–153.

35 | Cf. Givi Kordiashvili [pseudonym Georgi Kiesewalter], “Istoriya ‘Kollektivnikh Deystviy’. Povest’ v Dvukh Chastyakh s Epilogom” [1983], in *Kollektivnyye Deystviya, Poyezdki za Gorod* [vol. 2], pp. 198–215.

36 | Cf. Mark Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered”, in Edwin Bacon, M.A. Sandle (eds.), *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, p. 137.

and science.³⁷ This showed itself in the expansion of academic journals, collaboration and research in general, in the publications of previously unpublished texts, and in exhibitions of previously unseen art works. The sudden access to completely new themes and literature can be recognised as having formed the extremely varied, eclectic and engaged reading of Collective Actions' members.

The period of De-Stalinization did not only have effects on culture, but also resulted in reforms of labour legislation, which, for example, made redundancies on the basis of the efficiency argument difficult or even impossible.³⁸ The increase in control over one's own work conditions made the Stalinist ideals of labour, such as efficiency and acceleration,³⁹ obsolete. Furthermore, it became illegal to be unemployed, which forced everyone, even people who did not need to work, or were self-employed, into employment. In this sense, this era is not only marked by a cultural Thaw, but also by a changed attitude to labour, and most importantly, to free time. These changes directly affected the members of Collective Actions. The everyday life of Collective Actions' members was structured by the routine of work and free time: by their official work for the Soviet state on the one hand, and their individual artistic practice, and the collective practice for Collective Actions, on the other, which took place in their free time. This straightforward observation leads to the following question: How does the practice of Collective Actions, and their Empty action, sit in relation to this structuring of their lives, and what does the relation tell us about the socio-historical context of labour and free time?

One of the main sources of this study are the interviews which the author conducted with all the members of Collective Actions between 2014 and 2015 (Monastyrski, Elagina, Makarevich, Panitkov, Kiesewalter, Romashko, Hänsen, Alexeev). The central questions of these interviews revolved around the individual members' professional work activities, and around the relation that these may have to Collective Actions' practice. The second main source for addressing the socio-historical question is the journal *Voprosy Filosofii* (*Questions*

37 | Cf. Karen Laß, *Vom Tauwetter zur Perestroika. Kulturpolitik in der Sowjetunion (1953–1991)* (Böhlau, Cologne, 2002); Polly Jones (ed.), *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization*.

38 | Cf. Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization. The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953–1964* (Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1992); Mark Harrison, "Economic Growth and Slowdown", in Edwin Bacon and M.A. Sandle (eds.), *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, pp. 38–67.

39 | Cf. Anna Feldmann Leibovich, *The Russian Concept of Work, Suffering, Drama, and Tradition in Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Russia* (Praeger, Westport, London, 1995), pp. 93–94.

of *Philosophy*).⁴⁰ Especially between 1959 and 1966, the journal published relevant essays around the relation between labour, free time, art and aesthetics. This period is marked by an epistemological break within the conceptions of labour and free time, and consequently of art and aesthetics. It is this epistemological break which will serve as a contextualisation for the present consideration of the work of Collective Actions. By adopting this perspective, the study not only contributes to the writing of the history of Collective Actions, but also to the history of Moscow Conceptualism, and, inasmuch as artists in other socialist countries were affected by the Thaw period, also to the history of art in the Eastern Bloc.

Finally, the immanent analysis of Collective Actions' Empty action and the socio-historical analysis are able to illuminate the unavoidable and problematic issue of Collective Actions' relation to politics. It is unavoidable, because it is expected from a non-official art practice, such as Collective Action, that it be politically active against the Soviet state, especially when it has 'action' in its name. The issue is problematic, insofar as this expectation is not entirely fulfilled, and furthermore, because Collective Actions understand their art to be independent from politics, or even opposed to politics. Recently the art critic Claire Bishop argued that Collective Actions are "a good example of participatory art under communism".⁴¹ Bishop's approach to Collective Actions is characterised by the method that she developed for the analysis of participation art.⁴² Her main proposition is to challenge the political ambitions of participatory art that emerge in the 1990s. She advocates the necessity of grasping internal for-

40 | *Voprosy Filosofii* was, and remains, an influential academic journal in the Soviet Union, founded in 1947, edited by a changing collective of academics. According to Vladislav Lektorski, chief editor of *Voprosy Filosofii* between 1987 and 2009: "One could claim that there is not one really interesting philosopher in our country, starting from the 1960s, who was not supported by the journal and was not published on its pages." (V.A. Lektorski, "Voprosy Filosofii za 60 Let", in *vphil.ru* [2007?]). URL: http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5&Itemid=6

Speaking especially about the period between 1947 and 1959, the bibliographer of Soviet philosophy J.M. Bochenski points out: "One could claim without exaggeration that all that is essential of the given period is either directly present, or is at least discussed here. Thus, the 'Voprosy' present the basis for any study of Soviet philosophy since 1947 until today." (J.M. Bochenski, *Bibliographie der Sowjetischen Philosophie* (D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1959), vols. 1–2, die 'Voprosy Filosofii' 1947–1956, II.)

41 | Cf. Claire Bishop and Boris Groys, "Bring the Noise", in *Tate Etc.*, May 1, 2009. URL: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/bring-noise>

42 | Cf. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", in *Artforum* (February 2006), pp. 178–183.

mal relations, rather than focusing exclusively on the ethical or political meaning that a given work projects. This is how she approaches Collective Actions, which she supports by suggesting that Collective Actions were not dissident or political artists, but rather wanted to withdraw from the political context of the Soviet Union.⁴³ This is broadly correct, but does not enable us to understand the actual complexity of Collective Actions' relation to politics.

When it is attempted to fit Collective Actions into a narrative of Russian art since the beginning of the 20th century, it is immediately suggested that as part of Moscow Conceptualism, Collective Actions need to be understood as a recovery of the achievements of the Russian Avant-Gardes; Socialist Realism is understood as a rupture from this critical and innovative movement. Ever since Boris Groys' *The Total Art of Stalinism* (originally published in German in 1988), in which Groys argued that the Avant-Garde could never be the point of departure for Moscow Conceptualists, because they do not share the utopianism of the Avant-Garde – a movement which, furthermore, was also appropriated by the Soviet State – it has been understood that it can have been at most *the formal and artistic achievements* of the Avant-Garde that were influential for the unofficial art of the 1960s–1980s.⁴⁴ What is interesting about Collective Actions is that even their main formal element, namely the Empty action, fundamentally contradicts the outlook of the Avant-Garde. But this is not reflected in Groys' narrative in any way. To elaborate Groys' argument: The Avant-Garde wanted to (artificially) construct a new world, following a certain *Gesamtplan*, herewith subjecting everyone and everything to the immanent rule of this plan. This, according to Groys, presupposed a certain understanding of the revolution, as discontinuation/end of time and history, which in turn is implicit in Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism.⁴⁵ Groys' *The Total Art of Stalinism* makes the argument that the very conception of art as Suprematism is problematic, because it urges to realise itself not just in art, but especially in the social. Groys rightly grasps the mood of the 1970s and 1980s Moscow Conceptualists by describing it as 'post-utopian', insofar as they had reflected on the 'perils' of art as the end

43 | Cf. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, London, 2012), p. 161.

44 | This is explicit in Inke Arns, "Objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear! Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel. Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avantgarderezeption in (Ex-) Jugoslawien und Russland von den 1980er Jahren bis in der Gegenwart", PhD thesis, Humboldt Universität, Berlin, 2004, and implicit in Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group. Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (University of Chicago, Chicago, 2010), and in Alla Rosenfeld (ed.), *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*.

45 | Cf. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, New Jersey, 1992), p. 93.

of history, i.e. fascism and Stalinism, and decided to turn back to the traditional role of the artist, namely that of constructing new worlds, but this time only *as art*.⁴⁶ Thus Groys understands ‘post-utopian’ art (which would include Collective Actions) as a complex critical narrative of the Soviet communists’ urge to realise a utopia. About Collective Actions’ Empty action he writes:

[... Monastyrski’s] artistic practice represents an intelligent and stimulating reaction to the phenomenon of Soviet Communism. Communism can indeed be best understood as a collective and yet ‘empty action’ that achieved its reality only through subsequent interpretations. The ‘collective actions’ Monastyrski organized are the manifestations of life, but a life that from the outset was a life in an art project.⁴⁷

This suggests that no one understood Soviet communism while it was happening, and that it is only retrospectively that we can make sense of it. This would presuppose that between 1917 and 1991 nothing happened (Empty action), and furthermore, that Collective Actions themselves were not aware of how they related to Soviet communism, and could only produce an unconscious ‘reaction’ to it. In any case, Groys’ hypothesis remains an account of ‘art’ or culture as such (its internal logic),⁴⁸ and not an account of art from a socio-historical perspective. That is, even when he speaks about the Soviet socio-historical context, it is always to give an account of the socio-historical *as art* (herewith himself remaining caught in the Avant-Garde’s project). The present study can be considered as an attempt to disentangle this conflation, by means of a new perspective on the socio-historical context; by means of a reflection on free time and labour; and by showing that Collective Actions did have a pronounced understanding of the social and did reflect on it consciously (chapters 3–7).

The socio-historical perspective of this study raises the question of what happens with Collective Actions and the Empty action after 1991. The relations to work and free time get completely inverted for most of the members of Collective Actions: the Actions are not made in free time anymore, not on weekends, but during the week, since most of the members no longer work at set hours. The fact that they have now reached retirement age is also a significant issue, and this would need to be considered in a study dedicated to the period after 1991. In any case, such a study presupposes the present one.

46 | Cf. *ibid.*, p. 78.

47 | Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form*, p. 151.

48 | Cf. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, p. 17.

GENERAL NOTES AND TRANSLATION ISSUES

The term ‘action’ is a translation from the Russian *действие* (*deystviye*), which Collective Actions use in their name – *Коллективные Действия*. This is, as we have seen above, literally a *given* name, because it was Groys who first used it. However, Groys did not use the name *Kollektivnyye Aktsii*, but *Kollektivnyye Deystviya*. The word *aktsiya* (Action) was used more or less from the start (first volume of *Trips out of Town*, 1980) and throughout to refer to the works of the group, the Actions: “This book is a collection of textual documentation of Actions [*aktsiy*] out of town, which we conducted in the course of the last five years.”⁴⁹ The first sentence of the foreword to volume one of *Trips out of Town* suggests that *aktsiya* and *deystviye* are not the same: “The majority of Actions [*aktsiy*] described here are situations, where a group of people are called by the organisers of the Action [*aktsii*] to participate in some action [*deystviye*] unknown to them.”⁵⁰ We get here a differentiation between the Action as a specific event to which the viewers are invited, and action as something that happens there. Sasse’s German translation of *deystviye* and *aktsiya* correctly reflects the importance of the difference between *deystviye/Handlung* as a dramaturgic device, and *aktsiya/Aktion* as Collective Actions’ works.⁵¹ In English there does not seem to exist a comparably good solution. If we wanted to differentiate *deystviye* from *aktsiya*, we would need to translate *deystviye* as ‘act’, ‘plot’ or ‘activity’, and *aktsiya* as ‘action’. But this would make it impossible to maintain the congruity with the original Russian text, which does not specify the exact meaning of the word *deystviye*. In this study *deystviye* will be referred to as ‘action’, and *aktsiya* as ‘Action’ with a capital ‘A’, with the aim of consistency.⁵² (The only

49 | “Эта книга представляет собой сборник текстовой документации по загородным акциям, которые мы проводили в течении пяти лет.” (*Kollektivnyye Deystviya, Poyezdki za Gorod*, p. 19.)

50 | “Большинство описанных здесь акций представляет собой ситуацию, когда группа людей позвана устроителями акции участвовать в каком-то неизвестном им действии.” (*Ibid.*)

51 | Cf. Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion*, p. 136.

52 | Many of Collective Actions’ terms, including *действие*, can be found in the influential *Short Dictionary of Literary-Criticism Terms*, such as *сюжет* (*Sujet*), *замысел* (concept/idea), *персонаж* (personage), *образ* (image), *рассказ* (report/story) and *экспозиция* (exposition). (Cf. S.V. Turayev, L.I. Timofeev (eds.), *Literatura. Spravochnyye Materialy* (Prosveshcheniye, Moscow, 1989). The proximity of Collective Actions’ members to philology is implicitly addressed in Sasse’s and Witte’s translations and interpretations of Collective Actions’ Actions. Witte uses the terms *Aktionsergebnis* and *Mirkosujet* to refer to ‘actions’. Cf. Georg Witte, “Kleine Reisen aus Moskau”.

exception would be in the name of Collective Actions, the reason being the already internationally established usage.) Being aware of different performative artistic genres, such as performance, happening, staging (theatre), or concert, Collective Actions chose Action at a time when it was not common in the Soviet Union to call an artistic performance *aktsiya* (the term was rather associated with politics or finance, ‘shares’). The translation of the term ‘Empty action’ (*pustoye deystviye*) in the present book draws attention to the fact that it was not the planned event, the Action, that was at stake, but an ‘action’ or ‘act’ (*deystviye*), and, in order to emphasise the significance of this term, it is used with a capital ‘E’.

The argument of this study is that the best way of analysing and interpreting the practice of Collective Actions is to approach it through the Empty action – their main idea, which structures all that they do as part of their collective artistic practice. It is a key, which, in the first instance, enables a specific reading of the Actions. But what are these Actions? They are events that take place on a certain date, in a certain place and to which a certain number of viewers are invited. What Collective Actions call Action description is a description of what was planned and realised during this event. In the secondary literature it is common to treat these Action descriptions as seemingly the obvious piece of evidence of the ‘object’ at stake. This is, however, very questionable: these texts are already *descriptions* of the events, and are by no means objective. Theoretically, there could exist variations of these descriptions, employing different words and expressions. The rule would be only to describe those acts which are intentional. What dramatises the fragility of the Action descriptions is, for example, a translation, which necessarily questions the original description and consequently disrupts the initially presumed delimited character of the object. In this study the problem of the ephemeral character of the Actions will be addressed in the following way. Where an analysis of an Action is required, a translation of the Action description will be provided in a text box.⁵³ In a few instances where the Action description exceeds one page, a summary will be given. The Action descriptions will not be treated as the main ‘objects’ of art, but precisely as descriptions. These will be complemented by views that are produced in the viewers’ reports, and occasionally by other documentary materials, and by contextual material. The Action descriptions do not address the experience of the Empty action – this is something that only the viewers’ reports and the theoretical texts of the members of Collective Actions gesture towards. The photographs, videos and audio recordings purvey another dimension, which is not captured in the texts, but, on the other hand, they are not able

53 | In *Trips out of Town* the Action titles are emphasised with quotation marks, whereas here they will be in italics. The reason for the usage of quotation marks is simply that *Trips out of Town* were typed on a typewriter which did not have italics.

to grasp the scope of the proceedings of an Action (cf. chapter 1). What has been identified as the main ‘object’ of art in this book is the Empty action, which demands of the viewer and reader that they break with the presupposition that we need to be able to see an objectively delimited artwork. If we want to fully grasp the Empty action and herewith the specificity of Collective Actions’ art, we cannot compromise on this point.

The use and distinction between the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’ that is present in this study is mostly idiomatic. As opposed to the German language, where no distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’ exists (both *Arbeit*), in Russian and English two words are used to refer to more or less the same thing: labour (*trud*) and work (*rabota*). An analysis of the usage of these terms in *Trips out of Town* suggests that, for Collective Actions, work and labour do not consistently communicate different ideas (except, perhaps, in that ‘work’ is associated with ‘going to work’ (*idti na rabotu*), and labour (*trud*) with a purposeful activity, which is carried out at work, or for the Actions).⁵⁴ The distinction between the two terms, such as is maintained by Hannah Arendt,⁵⁵ for example, is not of principal importance here, because the main problem of the present study revolves around working and *not* working, between labour/work and free time. What is of principal importance is that Collective Actions’ artistic practice takes place in free time, as opposed to within a professional work practice. What is also relevant is that some of the members made art in the context of their official profession. This, in turn, is separate from their individual art practice in free time, which maintains a strong relation to work, as this study sets out to explore. In order to emphasise this relation, the term ‘art after work’ is introduced: ‘After’ refers to the temporal dimension, and in some cases, a resemblance of ‘art after work’ to work. ‘Art after work’ includes a number of activities that this study considers to be distinct: amateurism, individual artistic activities and the collective artistic practice. It is argued that the Empty action results from a peculiar form of ‘art after work’, which radicalises the suspension of work.

What follows is a participant’s report of the Action *SUMMA* (2015). It is conceived as a direct and vivid entry into the ‘object’ at stake in this study, and as a contrast to the rest of the work, insofar as it presents an individual and internal view on one Action of Collective Actions.

54 | Cf. Nikita Alexeev, “O Kollektivnykh i Individual’nykh Aktsiyakh 1976–1980” [1980], in *Kollektivnyye Deystviya, Poyezdki za Gorod* [vol. 1], pp. 87–107; Givi Kordiasvili, “Istoriya ‘Kollektivnykh Deystviy’”.

55 | Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago, Chicago/London, 1998 [1958]).