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What was the Artist Struggling Against? On Autobiographical Novels by Andrey Monastyrsky

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Abstract: This paper analyses the activities of Andrey Monastyrsky, the leader of the group called "Collective Actions" (CA) which is a part of Moscow conceptualism, namely, a remarkable community of Soviet unofficial art in the 1970s and 1980s. CA is a group that has practiced many performances (they call it "action") in the field and the forest near Moscow since 1976. The perspective which could be the key to re-examine their long history is the issue of how they sought to appropriate and privatize spacetime. Regarding the privatization, Boris Groys, Russian art-critic and philosopher, pointed out that this term is linked to Moscow conceptualism, though his argument is mainly related to another group from a younger generation of conceptualism. Meanwhile, it is researcher Octavian Esanu who mentions the problem of space and time in CA. However, there exists scope for further research on the theme of time based on the perspective of appropriation. Therefore, this paper tried to shed light on Monastyrsky's awareness of the issue about time above all.

Specifically, a comparative review of Monastyrsky's twin diary-novels ("Kashirckoe Shosse" written in 1987 and "Maintenance work of Kashirskoe Shosse" written in 2009) was conducted in this paper. As a result, it turns out that Monastyrsky, who was absorbed in an eternal metaphysical world in "Kashirskoe Shosse," began to be desperately aware of the systematic passage of time, i.e., a concept in opposition to his sense of an eternity in "Maintenance work." It should be noted, however, that in this instance, the passage of time dominates his consciousness as a certain type of god and he invokes the words of Buddhism to keep a proper distance from this new absolute being. In other words, he has struggled against the temptation to the metaphysical in another world in "Kashirskoe Shosse," and against the gravity of the passage of time in "Maintenance work." Recent actions of the CA might be regarded as the results of such an attempt. In some actions of the CA, obsession about dominative time and the metaphysical world disappeared and the conception of transcendence itself was transformed. There occurred a rearrangement of the past and the construction of private spacetime through the appropriation of the absolute thing, which can be regarded as one of the distinctive strategies of CA's activity.

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Introduction

Although unofficial art in the Soviet Union lost its function as an alternative art form against Socialist realism after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Moscow Conceptualism, a well-known unofficial art movement of the 1970s and 1980s, continues to remain active. Certainly, conceptualists' awareness of issues has changed from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet era. Then, how can we analyze their activities, which span across two different time periods?

Boris Groys, Russian philosopher and art critic, points out that a project of privatization had started in Russia after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. which promoted a project of nationalization, and that this project itself was a certain type of artistic installation.[1] According to him, as with the state level, obsession about private things were particularly prominent among younger generations of conceptualists, such as the Medical Hermeneutics group, who began their artistic career in the late 1980s. For them, "The line between purely personal and ideological fetishes is blurred."[2] More specifically, it was this group and generation that took assimilation or privatization of the holistic space of ideology to an extreme. Groys' main focus is this kind of privatization of ideology; however, at the same time, there was also a group of older conceptualists who tried to appropriate the Soviet space more directly: this group called Collective Actions (CA) has a history of over forty years of engaging in artistic activity (they call it "action") in the suburbs of Moscow as they sought to take ownership of the land in a symbolic sense, since 1976. Given the fact that CA had an extensive influence on Medical Hermeneutics, it can be argued that such privatization of the ideological and symbolic world, which began fitting in with the reality of society after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., was a pioneering activity in the late Soviet Union. Consequently, it is necessary to follow the history of this appropriation which can be said to have grown into an obsession.

Meanwhile, Octavian Esanu notes that there appeared another form of conceptualist activities such as installation in the museum or gallery, which influenced their modes of creation. That is to say, according to him, conceptualists turned their attention from the theme of time to the theme of space.[3] However, it is still arguable whether the theme of time was less represented in the post-Soviet period or not. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to discuss their focus on the time, linking it to a perspective of appropriation, and to raise the possibility that conceptualists have played a variation on the theme of time even after the collapse of U.S.S.R., mixing it with the metaphysical character of their works.

Therefore, we'll study two diary-novels of Andrey Monastyrsky (1949-), a leading artist of CA. One is "Kashirskoe Shosse (Kashira Highway)" written in 1987, and the other is "Maintenance work of Kashirskoe Shosse" (hereafter "Maintenance work") in 2009. Both diary-novels appear to be similar, if we consider them at a superficial level, but we can observe how different they are in terms of attitudes regarding the metaphysical and time. In this paper, we will make a comparative review of these twin works and some actions of CA, focusing on the theme of time as a transcendent entity. At the beginning, I would like to provide a brief description of the plots of these two texts.

1 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), p. 165.
2 Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 61.
3 Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-soviet Art: Collective Actions Before and After 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), pp. 239-240.

In “Kashirskoe Shosse,” it is written that Monastyrsky became mentally ill and deeply involved in his own religious delusion in 1981. He was hospitalized, but his condition persisted despite treatment. In August 1982, as his symptoms worsened, he started to think of himself as God. At the end of the story, he sought unsuccessfully to head for a colleague’s house and arrived at a different train station instead of his intended destination. After falling into a puddle near the station, he experienced a period of time that felt like an eternity and his religious delusion approached a crescendo. However, finally, he successfully escaped from this feeling of being stuck in an eternity and started to walk along the railroad in the direction of Moscow.

“Kashirskoe Shosse,” as seen above, can be described as a contiguous story. After all, it is a novel based on the author’s own life while “Maintenance work” maintains its form as a diary and events are written by date (from 2005 to 2009). With regard to the content, in this diary-novel, Monastyrsky spent days in agony due to noises emanating from his neighbors. He sometimes calls these neighbors “Evil spirits,” but there is no symbolic battle with “Evil spirits.” Unlike “Kashirskoe Shosse,” religious, mythical, and metaphysical aspects of his life are out of focus in this text. At first glance, these two diary-novels look similar, because both of them are stories about Monastyrsky’s agony. However, there are differences not just in the form of the story, but also in the nature of his agony. It’s time for us to explore the question of the artist’s struggle.

1. The dual world of “Kashirskoe Shosse”

As Tomáš Glanc pointed out, the distinctive nature of this text is the duality of the world view represented by it[4]. In this novel, Monastyrsky sometimes interprets the meaning of reality in a religious sense: from his standpoint, a colleague Anna is an angel, patients in the hospital are evil spirits, and in the final stage of this story, he felt as if he were Shiva, a god of Hinduism. I’ll provide a specific example of his religious hallucination: there is a scene in which Monastyrsky and Anna stop by a cafe at the beginning of this text. Anna ate Smetana, saying that she was apparently eating herself. After that, Monastyrsky depicts how she looked like an angel.

> She covered her face with her hands, and after that, she slowly revealed the upper part of her face — forehead, brow, and eyes, slightly bent her head to the side, and asked, “Do you recognize me?” This was said in quite a coaxing voice, but it sounded like a thunderclap to me. I really did “recognize” her: in front of me was an angel’s face to the last detail, and more properly, in severe, reddish reflection, it was an appearance of Our Lady of Kazan.[5]

As seen from the above, Monastyrsky started to submerge himself in the religious and hallucinatory world, triggered by Anna’s phrase. Nonetheless, he was not always diving deep into the depth of the

4 Tomáš Glanc, “Psikhodelicheskii realizm: Poisk kanona” [http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2001/51/glanz.html] (Accessed October 29, 2017).

5 Andrey Monastyrsky, “Kashirskoe Shosse,” in *Esteticheskie issledovaniya* (Vologda: The Library of Moscow Conceptualism, 2009), p. 246.

symbolic world. According to Emanuel Landolt, "This novel depicts a conflict between normal consciousness and mystic consciousness";[6] therefore, it would appear that Monastyrsky had felt conflicted between two worlds. In other words, "Kashirskoe Shosse" depicts the attraction for another world that he grappled with for years.

2. Cessation of time in "Kashirskoe Shosse"

This kind of attraction to another world is not limited to issues of religious vision. According to Landolt, "This entire novel can be read as an obsession about sources and as a spiritual journey to the past, to the light source and to God."[7] Religion is a representative case: Monastyrsky was attracted to it because religion has close ties to the concept of origin. As Landolt pointed out above, in this context, the light source also plays a role as an absolute origin. In connection with this, I would like to point out the existence of the transcendental world, generated by the combination of the flows of light and time. There are impressive scenes which depict the cessation of time: in this novel, Monastyrsky experienced the feeling of the cessation of time again and again. The following sentences are cited from the second instance in which he felt the cessation of time.

> Thus, I experienced the next "cessation of time" in my room in the daytime. I was standing near the window and the road outside our house was brightly covered with snow. It was as if, all of a sudden in my head, there occurred the spinning stream of the outside reality, shining in its aspects, limitless in depth and outlined only by the edges of my consciousness, and as if the thought-form of the whole reality which turned out to be inside my head flamed up unexpectedly. The impact and blast of this inner sight was so powerful that I reeled, froze completely on the spot and fell into a Catalepsy trance. The wheel of time which always skirts around us suddenly accumulated and stopped in my head. Simultaneously, my sense of reality, the feeling that I myself exist, stopped as well.[8]

In this case, the cessation of time occurred due to the glare of the snow, and light is the catalyst for this reaction in other cases as well. Time stops for Monastyrsky by virtue of his perception of light and a simultaneous integration into it. It is interesting to note that he combines the cessation of time with eternity, saying that falling outside the flow of time made it possible for him to recognize eternity.[9] Here, what merits attention is that there is not only the immersion into a religious world, but also an integration into light and eternity. The origin of light functions as a medium for the creation of another transcendental, eternal world in "Kashirskoe Shosse." At the end of the story, he falls into a puddle, feels as if he dropped out of the symbolic world, and "goes through the experience which precedes all creative work"[10]. Then, what happened in his creative work after this? Here, I would like to focus on the theme

6 Emanuel Landolt, "«Kashirskoe Shosse»: Otchayannoe khozhdenie v metafiziku," in Kornelia Ichin, ed., *I posle avangarda - avangard* (Belgrade: The Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade, 2017), p. 238.
7 Ibid., p. 242.
8 Monastyrsky, "Kashirskoe Shosse," p. 329.
9 Ibid., p. 330.
10 Landolt, "«Kashirskoe Shosse»," p. 252.

of time and another diary-novel by Monastyrsky.

3. Obsession with time in "Maintenance work"

After the collapse of U.S.S.R., as time passed, themes of time, the past, history and so on, started to be emphasized in the works of conceptualists. However, it is not limited to mere nostalgia. For example, Vadim Zakharov (1959-) who has been involved in the archivization of their activity since the 1980s likened an archive to a killer, saying that there is a certain type of obsession about an archive.[11] In other words, the long history of their activities started to bring about a feeling of heaviness in recent years. In the same way, unlike "Kashirskoe Shosse," the theme of time begins to emerge and is depicted as the thing which forcibly captures people. The details of how Monastyrsky grappled with time are described below.

In "Maintenance work," Monastyrsky is always greatly troubled by noisy neighbors and calls them "Evil spirits." He fires a claim, but his neighbors pay no attention to his complaint and continue to torture him using strange noises. Then he devises two ways out of this terrible situation: his move into another house or their natural death with the passage of time. He really follows through with the move, but the situation remains serious, and there was no hope for another move in terms of money. That being so, he could only hope for the natural death of his neighbors with the passage of time. It is worthy to note that this passage of time is deified and described by him as the god Chronos:

> There is only one real god to whom Evil spirits give in. It's Chronos. He makes decisions about the time for Evil spirits to come and leave.
>
> Chronos will come and devour all kinds of Evil spirits.[12]

From this, it can be understood that the passage of time, named Chronos, is seen by Monastyrsky as a cruel, life-threatening thing. Transcendental eternity occupies a special place in "Kashirskoe Shosse," while the realistic passage of time is on his radar in "Maintenance work." As might be expected, unlike eternity, this realistic time has an influence on Monastyrsky himself in the form of old age.[13]

Other than direct disasters such as old age and natural death, there also exists the conception of time and its passage as karma, a concept in Buddhism. According to him, he suffers from noise in the 21st century because he was noisy himself, and he calls this causal relationship karma[14].

> Even if you existentially feel that it is conscious punishment for the sin, it's not true. It is — even if it is karma — something mechanical, blunt, and endless throughout life (I wrote "I hear sounds" and "Breathe and hear," and then there appeared a sound overhead, for example)[15].

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11 Vadim Zakharov, P. S. in *Postskpiptum posle R. I. P. Videodokumentatsiya vystavok sovremennykh moskovskikh khudozhnikov 1989-2014: Kamera, installyatsiya, arkhiv: Vadim Zakharov* (Moscow: Garage, 2015), p. 124.

12 Andrey Monastyrsky, "Maintenance work of Kashirskoe Shosse," in Vadim Zakharov et al., eds., *Kh. D. K. almanakh No. 1* (Vologda: The Library of Moscow Conceptualism, 2011), p. 250.

13 Ibid., pp. 195-196.

14 Ibid., p. 206.

15 Ibid., p. 215.

Both “I hear sounds” and “Breathe and hear” are early works of Monastyrsky focused on the theme of sound. That is, he thinks he suffers the disturbance through noise by his neighbors because of these early works related to sound. It is important to note that in his view, this situation occurs not so much for ethical reasons, but in association with a mechanical causal relationship. The passage of time as karma in “Maintenance work” is irresistible because it works automatically. Likewise, at a more philosophical level, he writes that the whole universe is under the control of time as follows:

> [...] this universe is simply TIME, and all its phenomena are accidents of this TIME, the opposition to ETERNITY. All things in this universe are also time. However, thinking about some “other universes” is idiotic. Only NOT-UNIVERSE is normal. It is possible that Nagarjuna kept in mind, in other words, energy penetration of this terrible universe (in which we are installed) by NOT-UNIVERSE, saying that the transcendental is immanent.
>
> “Evil spirits” are especially burdensome clots of this time, greatly darkened things which NOT-UNIVERSE hardly pierces. They are the accumulation of things like obsession, delirium, which is also concentrated time.[16]

Here, we can observe that Monastyrsky tries to distance himself from the inclination to another world, which was remarkable in “Kashirskoe Shosse,” and to take a different approach to the transcendental entity. It is also worth noting that the neighbors who tortured him with noise are compared to “concentrated time” and he connects Buddhism (Nagarjuna) with “NOT-UNIVERSE,” the antithesis of Evil spirits in the form of concentrated time. Perhaps he referred to the argument about Tathāgata (Buddha) in chapter 22 of “Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way)” written by Nagarjuna. In this chapter, it is written that the Absolute (Tathāgata) exists in the world as Śūnyatā (emptiness).[17] Needless to say, the concept of Śūnyatā shows that everything consists of the causal relationship with other things and nothing can exist on its own, all by itself.[18] In other words, Nagarjuna thought that there is no eternal essence of existence in the world and this fact itself is the function of the transcendental, which accelerates changes in the conception of absoluteness. It can be said that this is precisely a gesture of rejecting the inclination towards the metaphysical world as “obsession, delirium.”

It can also be pointed out that there is a play on words between “NOT-UNIVERSE/ НЕВСЕЛЕННАЯ” and “to install/вселить.” That is to say, according to the cited phrase, we are installed (вселены) into the universe (ВСЕЛЕННАЯ), which must be pierced by NOT-UNIVERSE (НЕВСЕЛЕННАЯ). Therefore, we might say that this conception of NOT-UNIVERSE is a sign of his doubt about that which is perceived to be the origins of our world. In this sense, it would appear that Monastyrsky tried to transform his own past longing for another world and eternity.

16 Ibid., p. 259.

17 Takayuki Hirosawa, “Kakuban ni okeru choetsu to naizai,” *Gendai Mikkyo*, 1993, no. 5, pp. 50-65.

18 Hajime Nakamura, *Ryuju* (Tokyo: Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2002), pp. 234-238.

4. Performances of the Collective Actions group

So far, we have examined the change in Monastyrsky's view about the transcendental thing and time. Finally, I would like to mention some performances (actions) of CA in post-Soviet Russia and to show that thoughts about these themes are also unfolded in their outdoor activities.

"The library" (1996) and "The sack" (2001) are related actions which could be understood as a burial of the past. In the action "The library," participants buried ideological books which had been published during 20 years since 1976 (the CA started their activity in this year), wherein their past actions had been documented, in a field. In addition, a clock set in Rangoon (Yangon) time was also buried near this place. The intention was to dig up these things ten years later when the battery used in the clock would have died.[19]

However, within five years, they dug up the clock in an action titled "The sack." The plot of this action is as follows: participants dragged a sack with potatoes into the field where the clock of "The library" was buried, tied the control clock also set in Rangoon time which had been used to check the time for the digging, to an iron pillar, threw potatoes at the control clock on the pillar, and destroyed it. After that, they dug up the clock which was buried in "The library," but it was out of order for some reason.[20]

At first, it must have seemed attractive that not Moscow time, but Rangoon time was used. In other words, there was another time of another world in this action, which gives us the sense that it was a strategy of displacement. Besides, the most distinctive element of this action is the act of throwing potatoes at the clock. In the beginning, the plan was that "The library" would be continued for ten years, but "The sack" was done in 2001, which means that the artists themselves caused the failure of "The library" as a plan. The destruction of another time which they themselves set could be interpreted as a gesture of opposition to both the construction of another world and the pre-established passage of time, which creates images of an absolute creator.

As we have seen, the passage of time was reorganized in the actions, "The library" and "The sack." Meanwhile, it can be pointed out that there is another sign of reorganization: in the action "Slogan-83" (2011), the CA developed the image of the transcendental thing in an interesting way. The following is a summary of this action. The participants lined up 14 boxes connected by rope, crossing the field and the forest. The reason that the selected number happened to be 14 is that each box is marked with a letter which is a part of the word "метафизическое/the metaphysical," which consists of 14 letters. The box of "Ч" was pierced by the rolled-up portrait of Chernenko (Черненко) instead of the letter "Ч." Further, into this box of "М" was placed a photo with the text which refers to the movement of Helmut Kohl from Moscow to Kiev. In the same way, into the box of "К" was placed a photo with the text which discusses Kohl in Kiev. According to Monastyrsky, these texts were originally thought up for use as slogans in the action in 1983.[21] After this 14th box, the 15th box appears. This last box was not marked with a letter, but

19 Andrey Monastyrsky et al., eds., *Kollektivnye deistviya: Poezdki za gorod 6-11* (Vologda: The Library of Moscow Conceptualism, 2009), pp. 112-113.

20 Ibid., p. 211, 229.

21 Andrey Monastyrsky, "Metafizicheskoe bomzhevanie v Mytishchakh" [http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Monastyrski-Metafizicheskoe-bomzhevanie-v-Mytishchah.html] (Accessed: October 29, 2017).

"was filled with fiber packing and a rolled-up sheet of photographic paper (size A4, black letters on a white background) printed with N. Panitkov's recollection about this action spoken by him into a tape recorder in 1989 and placed inside."[22] After that, the last box was covered with yellow taffeta. Next, a blue plastic sheet with a hole in its center was stretched out by the participants. Finally, Panitkov pulled this sheet over his head through its hole and talked about the past action "For N. Panitkov. Three Darknesses of 1980."

The most characteristic feature of this action is that the word "metaphysical" connects various past events, i.e., historical events and previous actions of the CA. At first sight, it seems that there appeared an inclination to the transcendental thing once again. However, the function of the word "metaphysical" in this action is totally different from the orientation to another transcendental world. "The metaphysical" is only a container for the past events and pierced by the line of rope which connects these things. Monastyrsky expresses this situation as "Metaphysical homelessness." According to him, Panitkov's images of the previous actions transcended into two layers of color (yellow and blue), connected with texts about Kohl and Chernenko.[23] In other words, the past is reworked through "the metaphysical." Given this, the conception of transcendence no longer indicates the ascent to the metaphysical world to which Monastyrsky was attracted in "Kashirskoe Shosse." As seen above, unlike the inclination to search for a transcendental origin or the construction of another world, there is an alternative perspective on the metaphysical images which makes them possible to freely rearrange their own experience.

It could be said from the above that they are engaged in a certain type of recombinational repair of the concept of time and metaphysics in recent years. As said before, there were observed two variants of the arrangement: they tried to liberate time from a defined period or to liberate themselves from the desire to set a defined time in "The Library" and "The Sack." In other words, constant and defined passage of time becomes hindered here. On the other hand, images of the metaphysical and the transcendental are also reworked in their activity: they rearranged their past through "the metaphysical" tunnel of texts and images in "Slogan-83." There is no longer another metaphysical world with eternity and metaphysics. Instead, these elements begin to function as a worktable for the rearrangement of past events.

Conclusion

In this paper, we made a comparative review of diary-novels by Monastyrsky and the actions of the CA. In "Kashirskoe Shosse," the daily life of Monastyrsky was transformed into a metaphysical eternal world from which he finally got disconnected at the end of the story. Meanwhile, the passage of time as a certain type of absolute god takes a dominant position over him in "Maintenance work." To put it the other way around, what matters is that issues of metaphysics and time are in the continuous stream. After being absorbed in the metaphysical eternal world ("Kashirskoe Shosse") and caught in the unavoidable passage of time, Monastyrsky and CA have sought to partially appropriate such an absolute position and to organize their own private spacetime in actions. As a result, there appeared a unique strategy to alter the meaning of transcendence and to rearrange both metaphysics and time. Therefore, activities of Monastyrsky and CA can be interpreted as the history of desacralization of absolute things. Into this

22 Kollektivnye Deistviya, "Lozung-83" [http://conceptualism.letov.ru/126/index.html] (Accessed: October 29, 2017).
23 Andrey Monastyrsky, "Metafizicheskoe bomzhevanie v Mytishchakh".

position of the absolute could have been placed various things such as capitalism, Soviet ideology, religion, as well as their own history. In this context, it could be said that their frequent act of hanging objects between trees — in the beginning, they would hang various slogans without political phrases, which watered down political things — must have functioned as a tool to such a strategy of desacralization. Furthermore, according to Monastyrsky, who often says his activity is closer to life work than contemporary art, it might be said that his life itself had been engaged in this sort of a strategy.

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