
MYSTIC CONCEPTUALISM

INVISIBILITY AND EPIPHANY IN RUSSIAN CONCEPTUAL ART

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(Received 19 October 2012, revised 6 January 2013)

Abstract

In this paper I propose an alternative reading of the politically charged artistic activities of the Russian conceptual art group 'Collective Actions', taking into account the structure of the aesthetic experience and the key concept of 'empty action' from the perspective of mystical experience. I suggest that translating the language of apophatic theology into the regime of mundane aesthetic experience *via* Heidegger's reflections on 'nothingness' is able not only to articulate possible genealogical references still missing in dominant art historical accounts of the group, but also to enrich our understanding of how such participative artistic actions critically worked against the dominant political regime to engender a new mode of subjectivity.

Keywords: conceptual art, mystical experience, epiphany, ideology, Heidegger

1. Russian conceptual art and mystic theology: an interpretive hypothesis

In this article I intend to offer an alternative reading to some aspects of the artistic practices of the Russian conceptual art group *Kollektivnye Deystviya* (or 'Collective Actions', henceforth abbreviated as KD), by indicating and explaining the presence of the language and experience of mysticism in their art. By practicing a close reading of some relevant artworks, I intend to explain how theological concepts may be existentially translated into the everyday life and how they may thus become powerful counter-ideological therapeutic devices.

Using a provisional definition, conceptual art may be conceived as "an art of ideas" [1], which may be further specified as a type of art stressing the relational character of the artwork. From the contemplation of material objects, the artist passes to the consideration of the conditions governing the perception of art. The artwork itself, conceived as an idea, appears as a dematerialized object [2], redefining art as a process of communication rather than as the production of aesthetic objects. If, in relational terms, a conceptual artwork consists in logical and political, but also in temporal and spatial relations [3],

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then Russian conceptual art most often makes use of these sets of relations in order to comment upon political relations in an expanded historical field.

Stylistically, Russian conceptual art appears as a heterogeneous practice in twentieth century art, whose common denominator often seems to reside rather externally, more precisely, in the particular cultural position and function occupied by art in its initial context of artistic production and reception. Thus, Russian conceptualism is most often linked to the unofficial character and political opposition or ideological resistance, having been often equated with 'nonconformist art' [4]. Such a contextualized definition of Russian conceptualism takes into account its crucial relation to a cultural field almost over-determined by the communist ideology, to an over-conceptualization of social life. Ideology appears as a constant background for all artistic activities, amounting to a "complete linguistification of the social reality" [5], in which ideas replace the production of commodities [6]. It is in this context of ideological rationalism, rooted both in Marxist dialectics and a technological and scientific rationality, that Moscow Conceptualism is considered to perform an operation of critical enlightenment, "enlightening Soviet culture about its own ideological mechanisms" [6].

Therefore, it may seem uncommon to place Russian conceptualism in relation to mystic theology, unless we understand Soviet ideology as a form of extreme technological rationalism. However, such a reading is not without precedent. We may return to Boris Groys's early art critical readings, insisting on the vocabulary of revelation and highlighting the emancipating function of art in contrast with the positivistic understanding of conceptual art in the West. For the Western view of conceptual art as transparent communication, described as technocratic and positivistic, the conditions for being art may be contained by the artwork (for instance, in the form of instructions), which may be repeated or recreated as a scientific experience. On the contrary, Russian conceptual art appears as promoting singular aesthetic experiences. While Western art always speaks about the world, Russian conceptualism, as most Russian art before it, speaks about *another* world (be it the sacred or only the profane transformation of the society through socialism). The difference becomes obvious if set in epistemological terms. Western conceptualism is "clearly exposing the limits and the unique characteristics of our cognitive faculties" [7]. "In Russia, however, it is impossible to paint a decent picture without reference to the Holy Light. The unity of the collective spirit is still so very much alive in our country that mystical experience here appears quite as comprehensible and lucid as does scientific experience." [7] Thus, Groys regards Moscow Conceptualism as a form of art concerned with a specific form of revelation or epiphany: the revelation of the historicity and facticity of everyday life in the utopian, a-historical conditions of life promoted by the communist ideology [7, p. 321].

In what follows, I intend to develop Groys's remarks by stressing the mystical topics of apophatic theology present in the artistic actions initiated by KD, especially by interpreting the function and structure of their key concept of 'empty action'. I do not mean that the artworks reflect mystical topics in a

simple, straightforward manner. On the contrary, my thesis is that the artistic and rhetorical effects of the works (and perhaps, their politically challenging nature) result from the inherent tension between the sacred and the profane, between the religious topics they evoke and the ideological context they attempt to overcome. The sacred and the profane are kept into an essentially irreducible ambiguity and ambivalence, the first being considered an interpretive device for the latter. Thus, the interpretation I propose can easily be reconciled with the dominant political readings of KD's work.

2. Mystical experience and apophatic theology: a very brief analytic survey

As a provisional, working definition, let us consider the mystic experience as the direct or unmediated ('immediate') contact to God [8]. It is often related both to a sort of revelation or divine epiphany, to a state of mind in which God is revealed to the believer and to a certain condition of subjectivity, in which the profane self is dissolved in union with the divine. Many authors highlight the idea that union with the divine is the goal of mystic spiritual exercises. This means that for mystic theology theory and praxis are inseparable [9]. It also means that experience of union transcends the linguistic depiction or symbolization of God in favour of a deeper knowledge.

Mysticism articulates a fundamental tension between language and experience. Nevertheless, notable attempts of analytically circumscribing a common structure of mystical experience have been proposed. While some authors highlight ineffability (that is, its fundamental non-communicability through language and thus, the necessity of direct experience) and noetic quality among the most important features of mystic experience, others add to these features the paradoxicality of statements as a consequence of language's inability to cope with the absolute transcendence of God. Despite differences among religious systems, Almond also points to a useful definition of mystic experience from the perspective of inter-subjectivity, which can be understood minimally to express "the self as being in contact with another" (as an experience of otherness) and maximally "the union of the Soul with God" [10].

It should also be noted the essentially transformative or therapeutic function of mystical experience in relation to its epistemological functions. [9] In Christian doctrine, it is related to the purification (*catharsis*) and conversion (*metanoia*) of the soul, although the meanings of purification and conversion differ in Christian and the (neo-) Platonic tradition. Generally, *catharsis* relates to the purification of soul from worldly thoughts or passions and the conversion to a new perception of reality, while conversion itself is realized through repentance [8, p. 75]. Thus, mystical knowledge is less oriented towards a positive knowledge of God, but rather towards the attainment of this knowledge paradoxically as a state of emptiness of consciousness or simplicity. For Plotinus the attainment of empty consciousness may be equated with the conversion of discursive knowledge into immediate or intuitive knowledge (*nous*). Secondly, this may take place on an emotional rather than rational level, as a state of union

and love, which can be attained sometimes in a higher (or at least altered) state of consciousness and to which spiritual exercises (such as prayers) are meant to contribute. Thirdly, the attainment of this knowledge does not involve the succession of arguments, but rather takes place by means of an ontological 'leap' (*exaiphness*), which explains the sudden and momentary character of mystical enlightenment and the ecstatic feature of this experience. Thus, mystical experience is ineffable, transcending language altogether.

Relating to the tradition of Orthodox Christian doctrines, the neo-platonic tradition offers intelligibility to the mystic theology of the Fathers, the latter distinguishing itself given the problem of ontological difference between the human and divine [8, p. 101-108]. Therefore, for the Holy Fathers, it may no longer be the case that the human may know God only by an act of purification of thinking or other practical exercises, since souls are not pre-existent, but created *ex nihilo*. Hence, no union can be re-established by simply turning away from the worldly traps of the body, but only by the active intervention of God through the divine grace.

The doctrine of the radical ontological difference between creation and the Creator also institutes the incomprehensibility of God, which can only be known indirectly. Of particular importance for our discussion in this respect is represented by the import of negative theology on the epistemology of mystical experience, especially the concepts of 'unknowing' as a consequence of the radical transcendence, hence, incomprehensibility of God. Consequently, the progression of mind towards 'empty thoughts' rather than positive knowledge becomes the goal of many spiritual exercises. For instance, for Evagrius of Pontus, as well as for Saint Joan of the Cross or Isaac of Syria, the practice *apatheia* (the emptying of mind of individual will and desire) and of other related ascetic exercises becomes the first steps towards the absolutely simple contemplation, in which there is neither action nor affection of the mind and soul, but only the "silence of the mind" [8, p. 121]. As described by all the above mentioned, this essentially ecstatic state of mind may be regarded as a particular state of contemplation defined by 'pure indifference' in which there is no separation of subject and object. In the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, the Platonic progression towards the intellectual light of Ideas is replaced by a Plotinian and Philonian progression towards the indeterminate, that is, towards the darkness of mystic union [9, p. 56-63].

As far as the representational activity of language is concerned, such spiritual exercise is obviously iconoclastic in nature, emptying our thinking process not only of worldly passions, but also of useless or inappropriate images, concepts and symbols, thus transgressing intellection altogether. For Denys the Areopagite, symbols used in cataphatic theology to express God's attributes are always inappropriate to express God's being, thus leading the way towards the negative relation to God, which only affirms its absolute transcendence [9, p. 62]. Thus, one may also speak about "the infinite unknowledge" professed by Saint John of the Cross, for whom any positive illumination needs to be rejected in favour of pure, "contentless" experience [10].

3. Invisibility and Epiphany: an alternative reading of KD's 'empty actions'

Let me offer at this point a brief account of how some of the above mentioned ideas can be adapted in a secularized version to some of the works of KD, focusing on two key points: the question and meaning of their key concept of 'empty actions' and their ritualistic structure of aesthetic experience. In a nutshell, KD's artistic activities can be described as non-representational actions taking place since 1976, often performed with a small audience (mostly composed of fellow artists participating in the actions) and with no institutional acknowledgment as artistic practices, thus, literally outside Russian official culture. A particular aspect of the works or actions performed by the artistic group is their often hermetic, unintelligible (although readable), absurd or meaningless character. Indeed, the ultimately meaningless and most of the time commonplace character of their actions stress the emptiness of an action which performs nothing, thus being associated with the key concept of 'empty action'. As Monastyrski describes them: "All of our actions can be briefly characterized as a kind of trip in the direction of nothingness" armed with the equipment of an aesthetic/psychological nature" [11].

This concept may be interpreted in different ways. It may be considered to suspend usual art critical interpretations and the aesthetic framework of realist socialism and the former constructivist impulses, highlighting the ideology of the work and its transformative power over social life. But the group not only offers an artistic framework for the aesthetic contemplation, or a mere transposition of John Cage's 'aesthetics of silence', to which one of the founding members of the group, Andrei Monastyrski, seems to be indeed connected. [11, p. 107] It is important to place this concept in the context of an existential experience influenced by the Soviet ideology stressing communal indifference, the dissolution of the individual self and the complete linguistification of reality, its disappearance under a concept or an abstraction. For Ilya Kabakov, the concept of emptiness describes a specific 'state of mind'. Psychologically, it is equated with 'ephemerality, absurdity and fragility' of human action, as well as with an insular and impersonal way of existence. By merging subjectivities into the ideology of the common, the Soviet state system transforms emptiness into the logic of collective 'indifference', a 'condition of unseen impersonality' to which the collective self is abandoned [12]. This explains why Margarita Tupytsin reads emptiness in the case of KD's artistic actions as expressing "the main characteristic of Soviet existence throughout the Brezhnev era" [11, p. 105].

How could such existential emptiness be philosophically translated in the case of KD's actions? The echoes of mystical vocabulary in KD's actions I am referring to may be filtered (and thus, explained) through another philosophical interpretation with existential overtones, namely, in relation to Martin Heidegger's ontological vocabulary. In Heidegger's terms from *Being and Time*, being, in its everyday regime, is most often reduced to 'inauthenticity' [13]. In

other terms, being is most often concealed, reduced to inessential manifestations. Such a description of the quotidian regime of existence can be easily associated with the work of ideology given that, through the activity of ideological language, reality is always, reduced to a linguistic abstraction, external to the subjects. For the early Heidegger, the disclosure or 'unconcealment' of being may take place as a sudden enlightenment which may be experienced in anxiety. Stemming from the revelation of man's essential finite existence or mortal essence, anxiety produces such a nihilating moment which may bring into presence 'being as such'. In his later thinking, Heidegger will speak about the essential 'oblivion of being' in the history of metaphysics, in which being is constantly reduced to an illusory presence and to which conceptual reification plays a significant part [14]. We may also note at this point Heidegger's indebtedness to the vocabulary of mystic theology. In general terms, we may say that it is the non-representational approach to being that links Heidegger to mystic theology (though also with notable differences). Despite such differences, important associations are paramount, which become obvious especially in relation to Denys the Areopagite [15] or Meister Eckhart [16-17]. According to John D. Caputo, mysticism can also appear for Heidegger as the alternative option for 'the oblivion of being' in Metaphysics [18].

Going back to KD, we find a striking resemblance to Heidegger's non-representational doctrine of being assumed by the group itself, especially in Monastyrski's own reading of 'empty actions': "the entire point of the action was to create this 'nonrandom emptiness', to return the nonrandomness of the emptiness to space which is always 'randomly' empty" [19]. Monastyrski explicitly associates 'emptiness' with Heidegger's interpretation of the active work of nihilism as the 'disclosure of being', which he further defines, quoting Heidegger, as a gesture that „discloses these beings in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is the radically other" [20].

In order to better understand this epiphany of being as a whole or 'unconcealment' taking place through such acts of annihilation, let us take a look at the action *Comedy* (1977). A figure in shapeless garments moves towards the spectators, suggesting a concealed partner. However, this turns out to be a hoax, since the hidden emptiness is revealed and he retreats into the woods. At a first glance, the action has the intention of liberating emptiness in the demonstrational field, thus, producing awareness of emptiness as a process which "takes part in the consciousness of the participants and cannot be depicted" [19]. Invisibility plays an essential role in the articulation of the work. Thus, Monastyrski speaks about a time lag (of several seconds) between the physical appearance and the formation of semantic space or the beginning of its comprehension, which becomes the point of the action. Thus, he distinguishes between 'indiscernibility' (as semantic threshold of invisibility) and invisibility in its physical sense, which thus gains the attribute of 'vanishing' or 'disappearance' [19, p. 178]. More or less, invisibility in the proper, physical sense is the condition of possibility for a *sense* of totality to appear, for its epiphany in the semantic space that the work opens for the audience.

But how can this reading of KD's aesthetic program accommodate the mystic topics discussed above and how would this apply to the experience of the artworks? At the core of both Heidegger's and the Holy Fathers's non-representational doctrine of Being, respectively, God lies the assumption of the inherent insufficiency of language, its incapacity to depict the totality of being in a positive way. The same weakness of language to depict the totality of being is to be found programmatically in KD's artistic practice, which has already been considered to witness influences of Denys the Areopagite's apophatic theology [21]. Let us call this *strategic incomprehensibility*. Indeed, despite its complex relation with image, the linguistic element also remains a core definitional criterion for what may be termed 'conceptual art'. But the importance of linguistics in defining conceptual art may also be understood in relation to the limitations of language as a signifying practice constituting both subjectivity and reality, in our case, through the ideological overproduction of linguistic signs. In this context, the tense relation between the action and its photographic (and textual) documentation gains a particular significance. This relation also demonstrates the limits of artistic language as an instrument for depicting or indexing the experiential nature of the artistic event. In the images of the events nothing is depicted "not because nothing occurred at a given moment, but because what occurred cannot be depicted in principle" [19, p. 177]. The 'nondepictability' of the artistic event as a special kind of experience which indicates and exceeds the limitations of language becomes a key topic in KD's artistic works.

Concerning the exposure of the emptiness of ideological language, their works with slogans are illuminating, especially if viewed as a sequence. The first one, a banner set in 1977 in a forest near Moscow, reads: "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" (*Slogan*, 1977). It is perhaps equally important to note that it is a quote from Andrei Monastyrski's book suggestively titled *Nothing Happens*. Next year, the action repeats, this time the slogan reads: "I wonder why I lied to myself that I had never been here and was totally ignorant of this place – in fact, it's just like anywhere else here, only the feeling is stronger and incomprehension deeper" (*Slogan*, 1978). The incomprehensibility of artistic communication is constructed by the careful displacement and decontextualization of the banners, that is, by the careful suspension of any cultural context that could render them intelligible. Thus, KD set up the conditions for a pure state of artistic encounter. Both artistic language and the artists themselves are completely defamiliarized, estranged from their cultural habits and placed in an altered spatial and temporal framework of aesthetic perception. Thus, we obtain the sudden illumination of the emptiness of the ideological language as such.

Another common motif both in Heidegger's conception of thinking and in KD's actions is the (romantic) motif of the initiation journey, assumed by Heidegger as 'pathworks' (*Holzwege*) of thinking wandering on its way towards truth (literally, 'forest tracks') [22]. This motif highlights *the transformative*

structure of aesthetic experience. Not only that, as I have tried to show, the associations with the language of apophatic theology become obvious both in the above mentioned descriptions of existential emptiness, at least when filtered through Heideggerian interpretive lens. I also claim that these associations are further enhanced by the very structure of KD's artistic events understood as artistic encounters. Thus, I propose to regard the artistic actions as spiritual exercises, in which the artist abandons the world – in this sense, the world of official culture in which art already has a precise function and meaning. During this aesthetic experience, the entire cultural world and the distinctions between nature and culture, ideology and reality are suspended. Such suspension of distinctions is stressed by the fact that the events take place most of the time in a luminal zone, at the outskirts of Moscow, where aestheticized minimal actions take place (the unexpected and unexplainable ringing of a bell buried in the snow in the middle of the forest - the action 'Lieblich', 1976 - walking in the snow, talking).

Most events took the temporal dimension of the work to be their key medium to convey meaning. Thus, artworks present themselves as events, that is, as singular punctuations or 'apparitions' in a duration that often sets the participant in a condition of prolonged waiting. Often, the act of participation implies taking a road out of town, a sometimes long and rather painful journey in the nature outside Moscow, which often culminates into a minimal and contentless event whose meaning remains concealed to its participants and prone to future commentaries and interpretations. This journey is sometimes interrupted by obstacles (rain, deep snow), which only highlights the fact that the journey in itself becomes the very medium of aesthetic experience, thus playing an essentially transformative function (*metanoia*) on the participants. In a similar exercise of 'spiritual conversion', the participants are gradually abandoning the worldly universe, which, in conditions of complete atheist ideologization, means abandoning culture altogether. Participants enter into a space of empty thinking, where no positive description of experience resists, neither in symbols or images, and where 'nothing happens'. Thus, the structure of aesthetic experience is conceived according to the logic of ritualistic participation. It actually resembles an act of initiation, in which the spectator is ultimately converted through a sudden revelation. Therefore, the very act of participation may also be considered to become the main object of the artwork. The frustration of any positive meaning, hence, the incomprehensibility of the artistic events as described in positive terms is vital because it turns the tables from the action taking place to its condition of production and reception. Thus, the conditions of spectatorship in the Soviet system are not only altered, but also radically displaced. If the normal spectatorship of utopian Socialist realism, portraying a normative and ideal image of socialist society, usually implies a visual display of power, accompanied by pompous collective manifestations and adorned with signs and emblems belonging to the state apparatus, by contrast, the actions of KD are minimal, almost iconoclastic.

Their aesthetic regime affirms not only the invisibility of truth, but also its sudden emergence as an act of revelation, implying an ontological leap outside reason and the present historical conditions of living (*exaiiphness*). It is only due to this experience of the ‘revelation’ of historical facticity that the artworks, regarded as spiritual exercises, attain their meaning. Such an iconoclastic device, combined with a specific ‘artistic epiphany’ is obvious in the ‘primal stage’ of KD’s artistic encounters - their very first ‘empty action’ entitled the *Appearance* (1976). A group of thirty participants were called on a snow covered field, waiting. After five minutes, two members of the group went out of the forest from the other side of the field, approached the audience and distributed certificates of participation. The key material or at least visual element of the piece, the very ‘appearance’ as such, is missing from the visual documentation. For it is not clear neither if the members of the group, attesting participation to the event, are actually the ones mysteriously appearing, or if some other mysterious, unseen appearance is unnoticeably taking place. Another central element in this performance is the semantic emptiness of the official beurocratic forms, documenting everything and at the same time nothing. In this hypothesis, the documents speak about their failure to testify a meaningful presence. Thus, it is the absence itself that becomes the subject of the piece. Additionally, the very possibility that something invisible may actually take place shatters our belief in the beurocratic reality, its positivist descriptions and classifications. This provokes the awareness of the act of participation to a meaningless existence as the real content of the artistic event. Here, the question of how everyday life transforms into art is perhaps equally important in understanding the transformative task of aesthetic experience. The event itself becomes artistic not because it uses a different language, but because it conveys a different message about the world.

4. Conclusions

The alternative reading of Russian conceptualism I have proposed in this paper, as reflected in KD’s artistic actions, highlighted the both the mystic elements in the description of their actions as ‘empty actions’ and the associations of aesthetic experience with a transformative spiritual exercise, meant to alter the way subjects perceives their own existence. I have claimed that, according to a Heideggerian reading, they can be conceived as interventions upon the ontological regime of everyday life in order to provoke a heightened awareness or ‘epiphany’ of historicity by means of an ontological leap. I have also tried to show that the structure of artistic experience is also related to the language of apophatic theology given their common insistence on the limits of language. But, such an application of mystic vocabulary to the sphere of the profane engenders notable alterations. Perhaps the most significant one in our case concerns the conception of Totality, respectively viewed as the presence of God himself, as Being or a particularization of this being as a non-ideologized historical reality.

Acknowledgement

This article is part of the postdoctoral research project PN-II-PD nr. 104/2010 code 604 financed by CNCS-UEFISCDI.

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