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Moscow Conceptualism in Context, Munich : Prestel ; New Brunswick : Zimmerli Art Museum, 2011. Sous la dir. d'Alla Rosenfeld

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Charles Penwarden

- 1 Without a doubt, the Zimmerli Art Museum (ZAM) in New Brunswick (New Jersey) occupies a unique position in the landscape of American museums. A third of its collection, representing over 20,000 pieces, is dedicated to the Nonconformist art of the late Soviet era, making it one of the most important museums in the world for contemporary Russian art. Most of the collection comes from a donation made in 1991 by the American couple Norton and Nancy Dodge. The Harvard-educated Norton (1927–2011) specialised in productivity systems and first went to the USSR to continue his research in 1955. He set about supporting Nonconformist and “non-official” Russian artists by secretly exporting their work to the United States, which he continued to do until 1988, in the process forming one of the biggest collections of work from this period outside Russia. Other less significant donations have added to the museum’s Russian collection – by George Riabov in 1990, and by Claude and Nina Gruen in 2008. However, the editor of this catalogue, *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, Alla Rosenfeld – curator of the ZAM Russian Art section between 1992 and 2006, and director of its Russian Art department from 2002 to 2006 – focuses mainly on the Dodge collection. Moscow Conceptualism being extensively studied in America and England, it is important to identify what it is that

makes this catalogue stand out in the panorama of publications already devoted to the subject, and also to pinpoint its historiographic qualities.

- 2 The book is not, strictly speaking, the catalogue of an exhibition but of part of the collection constituted by the works of so-called *Conceptualist* artists from the School of Moscow in the 1970s and 80s. The large number of contributors (twenty on the contents page, from Marek Bartelik to Grisha Bruskin) and diversity of viewpoints, in terms of analytical approach, references and personal memories of the period in question, is the first salient point, which gives this imposing tome edited by Alla Rosenfeld a rare quality: rather than homogeneity, one senses a real commitment to multiplicity in the reading of history. Another weightier catalogue – for one thing, it is bilingual – that might be compared to it is the one published by the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990* (2008),¹ and edited by one of the early theoreticians of Moscow Conceptualism, the German art critic Boris Groys. Groys offers five essays by different authors plus five historical documents, adding up to a closely-focused vision of the Conceptualist movement, deliberately tied to the memory of the editor. While the overall catalogue does not define and distinguish Sots Art and Moscow Conceptualism, there is an illustrated section where readers can visually and chronologically follow the shifting of aesthetic issues separating the two movements. A chronology from 1970 to 1989, put together by Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, completes the publication. Apparently less structured, but also more lively, *Field of Action: The Moscow Conceptual School in Context 1970s-1980s* (2010)² is the exhibition catalogue of the eponymous show at the Ekaterina Foundation. It brings together an abundant set of texts and artistic documents reflecting the richness and artistic energy of the period. Noteworthy is the welcome reprint of Joseph Backstein's text about the relevance of the notion of contemporaneity in Russian art, plus a section with short biographies of some hundred artists, groups, theoreticians and publishers who contributed to the Conceptualist movement. *Moskovskij konceptualizm* (2005)³ is the authoritative Russian-language volume on the subject by virtue of its systematic, almost encyclopaedic and richly illustrated presentation of the artists associated with Moscow Conceptualism. Finally, the small book containing the proceedings of *Revisiting Conceptual Art: The Russian Case in an International Context*,⁴ an international symposium organised by Groys in Moscow in April 2011, has the main specialists on the subject bringing together their expertise. It puts the emphasis on what distinguished Russian conceptual art from its equivalents elsewhere. Particularly prominent here are the texts by Claire Bishop, Ekaterina Degot and Sarah Wilson.
- 3 Alla Rosenfeld's book stands apart from these publications by virtue of its thematic approach. Artists and works are interpreted through the prisms of performance, linguistics and the different understandings of the words *conceptual art* in and East and West. Moreover, the first two texts in the book, by Marek Bartelik and Konstantin Akinsha, attempt to show what distinguished the Sots Art movement from Moscow Conceptualism. Another characteristic of Alla Rosenfeld's book about the Dodge collection is the *imported* aspect of its subject. If the works themselves left their country of origin to constitute a North American collection that was, so to speak, deracinated, then the book itself, too, is a way of importing a missing discursive context into the United States and the collection. Hence the reader's impression of seeing a work of comparative analysis and comprehension of the movement based on the work of interpretation. The book proves to be the result of a delicate exercise in importing and

transcribing problematics linked to Russian conceptualism while at the same time providing a serious introduction to the subject. Nevertheless, and in spite of these qualities, the supplementary provision of a purely factual historical framework, and a chronology, would have made it possible to place the Moscow Conceptualist movement within broader economic, social and political contexts.

- 4 A few words on the historical context will convey the main features of Moscow Conceptualism. The death of Stalin on 5 March 1953 and the ascension of Nikita Khrushchev on 7 September the same year were followed by a “thaw” marked by an attempt at “de-Stalinisation,” by a partial restocking of shops and by an attenuation of censorship. More and more artists proclaimed themselves “nonconformists” in opposition to the institutions and to the criteria of Socialist Realism issued and controlled by the Party, wherein artists were defined, in Stalin’s words to Maxim Gorky, as “the engineers of human souls.” This gave the artist a paradoxical position, at once vassalised, chained to social reality, and demiurgic. It is in reaction to these principles that the artists of the post-Stalin period need to be considered. “Nonconformist” art (from the artists’ point of view) and “non-official” art (from the viewpoint of the state) were two sides of the same coin. The accession of Leonid Brezhnev in 1964 marked the beginning of a grey period of “stagnation,” of withdrawal and general mistrust. With the exception of Sots Art, which was energised by the parody of ideological symbols and by a *monologue* with the state, the artists of the period that followed worked in closed groups and expressed themselves behind closed doors. To the relative expressiveness of the Nonconformist artists of the 1960s and the frontal parody of Sots Art from the early 1970s, the Moscow Conceptualist artists began responding in 1974 with a more interiorised approach. The central theme was no longer the state or even the artist’s expressiveness, but the subject him or herself. To free art from the state, to reconnect with and exert one’s interpretative subjectivity on the world, then undertake a deconstruction/reconstruction of the individual, and first of all the artist: such was the implicit undertaking of the Russian conceptualists. The object itself occupied only a secondary position, and could even be absent from the equation – which observation is not contradicted by the broad range of practices such as the use of archives and documents, performance, installation, photography and painting. In contrast to the institutional critique expressed by American conceptual art, Russian conceptual art can be seen as expressing an existential critique in which the Other is the state. This interiority was accompanied by the permissiveness – in the historical context – of the author’s genius and status, by the invention and abstraction of the public (the viewer, civil society, etc.), by the subjective differentiation between art and non-art, but also by a form of attachment to the magic and mysteries of Moscow, a city that polarises artists, and to a form of spirituality, or even mysticism. As early as 1979, Groys, in the text on “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism” that he published in the first issue of the journal *A-Ya*,⁵ which coined the name attributed to the movement, emphasised the irrevocably conceptual and yet lyrical character of Russian conceptualism.
- 5 *Moscow Conceptualism in Context* is divided up into four parts. The longest of these, “Critical Appraisal and History” (pp. 2-151), analyses the movement in its context from a number of angles such as the divergences and similarities between Sots Art and Moscow Conceptualism (Konstantin Akinsha), the question of self-definition and the doctrine implicitly articulated by the artists (Yevgeny Barabanov), and the retrospective turn and institutionalisation induced by the exhibition *Prospects of Conceptualism* in Moscow in 1989

(Joseph Backstein). The second part, “Aspects of The Movement” (pp.154–239), presents three lines of interpretation running through the work of all these artists: a study of the movement through the prism of performance (Ekaterina Bobrinskaia), a deciphering of the very particular relation between word and image, realities and double language among Russian artists (A. Rosenfeld), and an examination of the Inspection Medical Hermeneutics group (B. Groys). “Western Perspectives” (pp. 242–283) offers two Western viewpoints making it possible to compare dissimilarities and misunderstandings between East and West on the subject of conceptual art: dissimilarities and misunderstanding due to language and its presuppositions, such as implicit lying (Robert Storr), or more simply, to differences in historical context conducive to the emergence of ideas and practices (Valerie L. Hillings). The fourth and last part, “Artists' Statements and Interviews” (pp. 286–385) contains interviews in the form of correspondence between the critic and theoretician Victor Tupitsyn and artist Andrei Monastyrsky in 1978–79, a never-before published conversation between the artists Igor Makarevich and Nikolai Panitkov, a dialogue between the artists Andrei Monastyrsky, Yuri Leiderman and Vadim Zakharov, mainly recent artists' texts, some of them published here for the first time (the A to Z by Grisha Bruskin), others reprints, such as the essay previously published in the ZAM journal in autumn 2004 by Ilya Kabakov on fictionalisation and the status of the artist as character/extra. This section would have been improved by the inclusion of more historical texts, such as one of the many essays, yet to be translated, by Andrei Monastyrsky from the 1980-89 period, which would shed light on the theoretically implausible configuration of a conceptual type of art at the confluence of language, analytics, lyricism and the spiritual. More original documents would have heightened understanding of the historical context. But that was manifestly not the goal of the research here. The “in context” of the book title probably refers to the context of the Zimmerli Museum itself. Still, the selection of texts by Alla Rosenfeld does not in any way detract from what is a remarkable retrospective interpretation which draws on the collection while not making it the visible subject of the book.

NOTES

1. *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990* (ed. Boris Groys, Max Hollein, Manuel Fontán Del Junco), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008
2. *Field of Action: The Moscow Conceptual School in Context 1970s-1980s*, (ed. Aleksandra Danilova, Elena Kuprina-Lyakhovich), Moscow: Ekaterina Collection, 2010
3. *Moskovskij Konceptualizm*, (ed. Ekaterina Degot, Vadim Zakharov), Moscow: WAM, 2005
4. *e-flux journal. Moscow Symposium: Conceptualism Revisited*, (ed. Boris Groys), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011
5. Groys, Boris. “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” *A-Ya*, Paris, no. 1, 1979, pp. 3-11. Reprinted in Groys, Boris; *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge: MIT, 2010, pp. 35-55 (translated from Russian by Keith Hammond)