

Notes for an Art School

A Conversation Between Boris Groys & Anton Vidokle

Art Beyond the Art Market

AV – Dear Boris, you recently mentioned to me that you left Russia in 1981, the same year that my family and I left. A couple of years before departing, I had started taking painting lessons at a private artist’s studio in Moscow. There was a feeling of underground activity going on in this small class, in part because of its literally underground basement location, but also because of the style of painting we were taught—vaguely modernistic and slightly reminiscent of Cézanne. While this was more liberal than the methodologies of existing official art schools and academies, it was of course light years away from the advanced Conceptual art practices that started proliferating in the seventies and eighties in Moscow. Was there something like a ‘school’ for this new type of work? Where did Moscow Conceptualists study?

BG – Dear Anton, no, of course, there was not a school for this kind of Conceptual art practice in Russia at that time. But I don’t believe that such a school could be found in the West at the beginning of the seventies either—for example, at the time the Moscow Conceptualist circle started. On the other hand, the majority of the Moscow Conceptualist artists of the time already combined visual images and language in their work—long before they began to make Conceptual art. Many of them were book illustrators or designers: Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, Victor Pivovarov, Vladimir Sorokin, Vadim Zacharov. Dmitri Prigov was a sculptor and a poet. Andrei Monastyrsky and Lev Rubinstein were poets and participated in the artistic performances. As Western Conceptual art became known in Moscow through Western art magazines and catalogues, these artists saw the chance to use their training in this new framework—to redefine their already existing art practices in a new way. You can compare this move to the shift from advertisement to ‘high art’ that was effected by Andy Warhol. Additionally, structuralism was the dominant intellectual fashion in Russia at that time. That means that it was easy and almost self-evident for Russian artists to perceive art as a kind of visual language.

This also explains the relationship between Western Conceptual art practices and the art of the Moscow Conceptualist circle. The acquaintance with Western Conceptual art opened Russian artists up to the possibility of using their own art tradition and artistic training in a new way. But it remained the same tradition and the same training—and therefore Russian Conceptualist artworks actually look quite different from Western ones. In this sense it seems to me that the use the artist makes of his or her training and education is decisive in the contemporary art context. To a certain degree every kind of education is a ready-made—and can be used in very different ways in the art context. The crucial question is, as always: how?

AV – So if we are to take education as one of a number of influences that affect an artist’s approach, can we still talk about certain models of education that are more productive, whether focused on art or otherwise?

Perhaps if we speak of a ‘school’ in both senses of the word—both as an educational institution and an affiliation of like-minded colleagues—it becomes useful to think of historical precedents, such as the relationship between New York School artists in the fifties and sixties with Black Mountain College, or the experimental painting workshop that Siqueiros taught in New York to a group of expressionist painters, including Pollock.

Was there such a connection between artists and institutions

in Moscow in the sixties and seventies? Or were the artists, like their educational backgrounds, ready-mades: one day a book designer, the next day a Conceptual artist? Did institutions ever provide an unofficial framework for group experiments? In Poland, for example, there was an unofficial group working within the Lodz film academy that used the school's resources for independent experimental research—their work closely parallels that of North American and European artists like Michael Snow and Chris Marker. Were there any similar initiatives within the official art academies in Russia?

BG – No, the independent, unofficial Russian art of that time emerged and developed beyond the official institutions. That was partially because of the restrictive art policies of these institutions. But, on the other hand, the artists and intellectuals themselves wanted to go away from these institutions, wanted to situate themselves outside them. I remember this time very well. All Soviet things were hated and despised. One did not want to be a part of the Soviet system, did not want to be mixed with 'them'. People wished to demonstrate that they were different, non-Soviet. Art was just one way to become different—to be unlike the others. It was a form of dandyism in the first place. People were not thrown out of the institutions because they made a certain kind art. They made a certain kind of art just to demonstrate that they didn't belong to the 'Soviet herd'. To do so, one displayed all the conventional signs of 'non-Sovietness': modern art, the Bible, the *Kama Sutra*, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Freud, etc. The Soviet state created a huge reservoir of the forbidden and excluded—and the Russian intellectuals and the artists of that time were happy to exploit it as far as they could. They built the networks and circles and black markets that were present in all the major cities of the country. One could live and survive in these networks without having any need to deal with anything 'Soviet'. The majority of unofficial artists of that time were quite satisfied with this lifestyle. Only the Moscow Conceptualists were unsatisfied, because the members of this circle asked a disturbing question: How does the art production of the unofficial Russian scene look in the international art context?

That means that Moscow Conceptual art was a part of a pretty well-developed unofficial art scene. This scene had had its own institutions, traditions and hierarchies since at least the mid-fifties. But Moscow Conceptualists were at the same time an opposition within the opposition, the outsiders within the community of the outsiders.

Speaking more generally, every education is based on a certain system of exclusion. If it is said that something is good and something is bad—and any education consists in saying that—then something is always excluded and suppressed. That means every education creates a domain of the excluded and forbidden that can be exploited by the students. To exclude or forbid something always means to open new possibilities and opportunities. In this sense, Soviet art education was very successful, because it created a huge domain of the excluded and forbidden that opened new possibilities for at least three generations of Russian artists.

AV – Last December in Ljubljana I had a very interesting conversation with Yuri Lederman, who told me a little bit about how he initially got involved with contemporary art in Odessa, in the early eighties. According to Yuri, this had to do with meeting Sergei Anufriev, who was a very flamboyant and charismatic

figure then, who single-handedly tried to start a contemporary art scene in Odessa! Thinking that a 'scene' has to incorporate a number of different types of practices, he assigned various roles among a group of friends, with and without any art background, some of who were supposed to start working with photography, others with sculpture or installation. Yuri was designated to be the performance artist within this group, although he was not quite sure exactly what this entailed at the time. Do you think it's possible to speak of this sort of playful, spontaneous collaboration as a sort of art school, albeit one without teachers?

BG – The unofficial art scene in Moscow was, of course, much more heterogeneous. But the Moscow Conceptualists also met in the seventies on a very regular basis to discuss their work and listen to lectures or readings of poetry and prose texts. This was called a 'seminar', and one can say that it worked like a school—especially for the younger artists. Of course, these meetings and discussions were very helpful, but I am not sure that this kind of practice could be generalised.

Russian unofficial artists had no access to Soviet official exhibition spaces and to the media. There was no art market, no spectators from the outside. That means that these artists made their works for colleagues—for other artists, writers or intellectuals involved in the unofficial art scene. There was almost no competition among the unofficial artists—they built a really utopian community. And an individual artist worked for this community. The contemporary situation is, of course, quite different. Young artists try to get in touch with galleries, with media, with potential collectors as soon as possible. A contemporary artist does not see other artists as the viewers who should appreciate his or her work. Rather, he or she regards other artists as competing for attention, for the gaze of a possible viewer. Under these conditions an education through the building of a utopian artistic community seems to me to be a still desirable but hardly achievable goal.

AV – This is very interesting—it makes me think of the Independent Group: Alloway, Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton and the others who held lectures at the ICA in London in the fifties. Can you tell me a little bit more about these seminars in Moscow—where did they take place? Who organised them? Surely you took part in them?

BG – Yes, I took part in them, indeed. The seminars took place in the apartment of Alik Chichko, in the studio of Igor Makarevich, from time to time also in the studio of Ilya Kabakov. The participants were mostly the members of the circle of Moscow Conceptualists. Each seminar began with a lecture or with a presentation of somebody's work. Then the participants reacted with their commentaries and critique. Also, artists and writers of the various non-Conceptualist orientations were invited to present their work. These seminars codified and formalised the practice that was already well established in the unofficial art milieu. The artists regularly invited people to their apartments or studios to show their new work. Such apartment exhibitions were very popular—and many people came. The poets also organised readings in private apartments. In some cases only a small group of people was invited. In other cases more than a hundred people came. But even if attendance was not so large, these readings and shows were frequent and the work of the unofficial artists quickly became known. Of course, to get the access one had to belong, to be invited or brought along by friends. If one shared some mutual friends with the artist, one could also just call this artist and ask to look at his or her work. In most cases it worked

perfectly. In this sense the unofficial art scene was well informed about what was going on. But on the other hand, one had to be polite—there was almost no discussion or critique. The seminars tried to compensate for this lack of discussion and to create a forum that could offer the artists and writers an opportunity to discuss their work in a more or less systematic way. The seminars took place every three or four weeks. They were attended by twenty to forty people and were not open to the public: one was admitted only by invitation. The seminars started after I moved from Leningrad to Moscow in 1977 and lasted for some time after I left Moscow in 1981.

AV – Boris, who organised these seminars? It sounds like there was some structure to them, since there were rules such as having to be invited, etc. It's also interesting that writers and poets took part. The seminars must have been interdisciplinary in nature? What were some of the specific subjects discussed?

Coincidentally, in 1977 Joseph Beuys reconstituted his 'Free International University of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research' at Documenta, as a series of public seminars. Was this something that was discussed in the artists' circles in Moscow?

BG – To a certain degree the initiative came from me, because I started my activities in Leningrad and had already participated for a long time in such seminars there. Leningrad's unofficial cultural scene was generally better organised than Moscow's. We had some samizdat magazines in Leningrad like *37* or *Chassy* (Watch) that appeared on a more or less regular basis, etc. But the seminar didn't actually need any specific organisation. People were well connected, they were in regular contact—this was a very close network. So it was very easy to organise people, to bring them together.

The seminar was not really interdisciplinary, because the participating poets and writers were also involved in the visual arts in one way or another. On the other hand, the ideology, and not a profession or a discipline, was decisive. First of all, the participants had a common aesthetic programme. It was similar to the situation with the Surrealist movement, where the borders between artists, poets, philosophers, writers and filmmakers were less important than the common Surrealist programme. And secondly, the participants shared a certain political attitude. They were not political dissidents, but they were in clear cultural and ideological opposition to the official Soviet culture of that time. That produced a certain degree of ambivalence in their attitude to Western Conceptual art, which was—at least rhetorically—left-leaning. We should remember that all these art movements took place in the more general context of the Cold War. Russian artists at that time saw Western leftist politics as being pro-Soviet, as being favourable to the regime that oppressed them. On the other hand, the Western left-wing cultural opposition saw Soviet dissidents as traitors working at least 'objectively' for the CIA.

The situation was indeed complicated. Conceptual art became the lingua franca of the cultural opposition in the seventies. This united oppositions in the East and West on an aesthetic level. But their political sensibilities and attitudes were diametrically opposed to one another, because the regimes to which they were opposed were themselves diametrically opposed. The Cold War split the cultural opposition, including the contemporary art scene of that time, even more radically and uncompromisingly than the dominant regimes themselves.

That is why Beuys' political engagement could not find much positive resonance in Moscow during this historical period. Actually, this split between the cultural oppositions of East and West that has its roots in the Cold War has by no means been overcome yet—and it could be much more persistent than many people expected it to be immediately after the end of the Cold War. After the removal of the communist regimes and the end of the Cold War, the old enmity and distrust were reproduced—using different ideological signifiers—by the former oppositions that now came to power. This process of reproduction through opposition can last for a very long time—longer than people generally imagine.

AV – I'm really curious as to what examples you see of this ideological opposition being played out today. Boris, what does this mean for an art school? Does it have to be set up with an inbuilt oppositional structure, or just extremely aware of its various political contexts?

BG – It seems to me that left-wing intellectuals and artists from the West were shocked by the readiness of the Eastern European populations to abandon the socialist model and embrace a pretty rough version of capitalism. In recent years I have been repeatedly asked by Western colleagues if Eastern European intellectuals and artists would be ready to join the anti-capitalist movements in the West and in the Third World. I said, 'Yes, some of them are very much anti-capitalist,' but I also added that for many people in Eastern Europe, being anti-capitalist means being anti-Modernist and anti-contemporary art because Modernism and contemporary art are perceived there as the signs of Western capitalist expansion. And that means that the sensibilities are still different.

Does it mean that this should be made a topic for education? Rather, it should be made a topic for a discussion. The concept of education presupposes some privileged knowledge that has to be transmitted from the teacher to the students. I don't believe that we can speak about such kinds of knowledge in the context of contemporary art. But, of course, it is useful for an artist to be informed about what happens in the art world and also in the world of politics, theory and cultural studies. The concept of information is usually regarded as being something more profane than a concept of education. But, actually, well-informed people can be pretty inventive and effective—even if, and maybe precisely because, they are not especially well educated.

AV – Actually, this reminds me that virtually all the primary texts used in theory, art history or studio classes in all the schools I went to in New York in the late eighties to early nineties were basically either directly Marxist (Adorno, for example) or very strongly influenced by Marxism, like Foucault. This is interesting because it is taken completely for granted, like air—a kind of a sublimated ideology that underlies all Western contemporary art education.

BG – It seems to me that the absolute majority of today's world population believes that today's art is, actually, the art market, that art is primarily a commodity and that the art market is simply a specific fraction of the general capitalist economy. Marxism is only a sublime high-culture version of this dominant opinion. But beyond that, the Marxist tradition is also 'critical'. And it is critical in a double sense. It is critical of the authors who think that art is something more than simply a commodity—such authors are treated as being 'metaphysical', 'idealistic', 'naive' and blind to the economic and political realities of our world. But Marxism is also critical of people who accept that art is a

commodity and enjoy works of art as beautiful commodities. The correct attitude is to think that art is simply a commodity, but to hate this fact. In this respect, the Marxist tradition reproduces, on a rhetorically sophisticated level, the common-sense opinion that life and, especially, art are actually shit. Adorno is especially good at formulating this evident truth in philosophical language.

But the power of ‘critical theory’ depends substantially on faith in the power of capitalism itself. You have to believe that capitalism is indestructible, that the work of art is always a commodity, etc., to be able to be permanently critical in the Marxist way. Critical theory believes in its own truth because it believes in the historical stability of the object of its critical analysis. But for somebody who was raised outside of the capitalist regime, a critique of the Marxist type is less attractive because they cannot believe in the all-encompassing power of capitalism. In the Soviet Union art was not a commodity, there was no art market, but art was made nevertheless. Maybe this art was also shit, but it was a different kind of shit that cannot be analysed by the same ‘critical theory’ by which the capitalist shit is analysed.

AV – I’d like to bring up Nicosia, the site of our Manifesta 6 School project, as a concluding question. The history of Moscow Conceptual artists in the seventies and eighties is an amazing example of how (what you describe as) an opposition within an opposition can push artists to find potential not only in what is excluded and forbidden, but also in a critical reflection on the ideological nature of everyday reality. The Middle East, therefore, would provide interesting circumstances for similar developments. There are not only large areas of exclusion, but also factors of religion, nationalism and the legacy of colonialism which distort the Marxist/capitalist dialectic we all are used to in the West. Can we imagine a present-day, advanced educational structure for these conditions—to support a complex oppositional stance in a space that is more committed to ‘information’ than to ‘education’, and where the specific dispensation of privileged knowledge of a traditional education model is de-emphasised and its sanctity open to question? I would also be very interested in what critical models you propose in your own classes at the Centre for Art and Media.

BG – The capitalist subject does certain things because he or she is paid for doing these things. Or this subject raises money to be able to do things he or she likes to do. But, of course, one can also do things without being paid for them. Or without being sponsored. In this case we have to do with religion, nationalism, different ideologies, etc. The subject of religion or ideology does things without being paid for doing them. This is already a scandal. To do things unpaid means to be violent—violent against the others or at least against oneself. That is why Soviet art is still excluded from Western art history. It was made outside the art market—and so nobody knows its value. At the same time, this art is immediately perceived as being intrinsically violent, as being a kind of secret brainwashing—even if it does look very peaceful. To reflect something beyond the market means to reflect the violence. That means also to reflect capitalism itself as a form of violence—after all, capitalism can only survive because its security is guaranteed by the military and police. And how to be critical? I don’t think that we have to have a specific critical model to be able to be critical, because that would mean that we accept this critical model uncritically. And we actually don’t need such a critical model to formulate a critique. Every discourse wants to prove that

it is right and true. But by doing so it also shows that it is at the same time a wrong and false one. If a discourse would really be a true discourse it would be immediately evident—beyond any additional proofs or explanations, beyond any additional apology. But in reality every discourse wants to situate itself inside a certain discursive field, to show its differences and its similarities in relationship to the other discourses, to explain why it should be trusted, etc. Every discourse—as every artwork—can present itself only by means of such a self-apology. But every apology can be read as a critique. The need for an additional apology already reveals that things are not so obvious as they should be. Maybe this is precisely the goal of education: to make the students able to read an apology as a critique.