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The snow field as an archive of Soviet underground performance art

The Moscow performance group „Collective Actions“, which played a decisive role in developing an alternative space of communication outside the practices of Soviet state culture, uses since the 1970s the snow field as a stage for minimalist actions thematizing perceptual patterns and categories beyond the level of conventionalized languages (presence/absence, appearing/disappearing, sound/silence, rhythmical sequence, interval, pause). „Trips out of Town“ is the genre of these actions where, as a rule, a group of participants headed into the countryside around Moscow, i.e. away from the sphere of the metropolis saturated with ideological symbols and texts, into an unmarked, „empty“ natural space. Referring to the history of Arctic expeditions, in contrast to the heroic narratives of conquering nature in Stalinist Russia in these trips to the periphery of Moscow the white field as part of the Suprematist tradition of Kazimir Malevich, Martin Heidegger's „clearing“ and the Buddhist conception of „shunyata“ becomes a space of self-reflection and meditation for the participants. The performances by the “Collective Actions”, however, are not a naive, neo-Rousseauian escape from culture: they are not limited to the direct perception of a situation, but due to their enigmatic character they stimulate a multitude of interpretations. Thus, the aesthetic process is extended into a discourse of documentation. In a later stage of development, the group began to compile documentary volumes about its actions, in which a wide range of materials is brought together (descriptive texts, narratives by the participants, theoretical comments, discussions, photographs, drawings, diagrams complemented by video and audio recordings). The documentary volumes of the “Collective Actions”, which appeared as typewritten, illustrated books in “samizdat” independent of the official Soviet publication channels and monopolized print media inspired the creation of the Moscow Archive of New Art, an artists' archive for conceptual art in Russia, in which artists themselves collected the kind of art that used to be excluded through the state policy of remembrance, thus making it available to future generations by giving it the chance of hibernating.