

**Scribes,
Self-Publishers,
Artists:
Performing
the Book
in the Samizdat
Writing Scene**

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As the scribes will persist, the few readers there are in the world are going to have to change their roles and become scribes themselves.

More and more countries will be made up of scribes, and more and more factories will be necessary to manufacture paper and ink [...].¹

In his 1962 short story "End of the World of the End," the Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar suggested that, in a very near future, the world would be invaded by countless anonymous, tireless scribes, who would overflow seas and oceans with a mass of printed matters painstakingly issued by themselves.² Cortázar's prophecy has been recently interpreted as a sort of anticipation of the electronic, self-publishing world, initiated by the emergence of cheap and effective free tools for textual production and dissemination. Still, the transformation of readers into scribes/publishers, and the unrestrained verbal

1 Julio Cortázar, *Cronopios and Famas* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1999), 71.

2 "[...] much of the water invades many of the lands and there is a new distribution of continents and oceans, and presidents of various republics are replaced by lakes and peninsulas, presidents of other republics see immense territories newly open to their ambitions, etc." *Ibid.*, 72.

3 See Albert Boiter, "Samizdat: Primary Source Material in the Study of Current Soviet Affairs," *Russian Review* 31, no. 3 (1972): 282–285. On Sovietologists and their approach to samizdat see also Dimitry Pospelovsky, "From Gosizdat to Samizdat and Tamizdat," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 20, no. 1 (1978): 44–62.

4 Indicative of the "material turn" that has recently occurred in samizdat studies are Ann Komaromi's articles "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004): 597–618, and "Samizdat as Extra-Gutenberg Phenomenon," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008): 629–667. "Pre-Gutenbergian" implications of self-publishing in the USSR are also at the core of the catalog edited by Sascha Wonders and Günther Hirt (aka Sabine Hänsgen and Georg Witte), *Präprintium: Moskauer Bücher aus dem Samizdat* (Bremen: Temmen, 1998).

proliferation, which in Cortázar's story came as consequence of it, evoke not only some aspects of the present changing media landscape, but also a peculiar phenomenon occurring in the same period as the piece was written. I hereby refer to various, spontaneous practices of self-publishing which come together under the name of samizdat and which flourished in all of the Eastern European countries during late Socialism, coexisting in parallel with the censored press.

Originally started as a way to compensate for the book shortage generated by preventive censorship and to circulate texts, which for various reasons were quite unlikely to be printed in the state-controlled media, samizdat soon developed into the privileged medium of political dissent and, as such, it was incorporated into Cold War narratives. Perceived as a reliable repository of information about what was going on beyond the Iron Curtain ("primary source material in the study of current Soviet affairs,"³ as Albert Boiter defined it in 1972), as well as a significant symptom of restlessness and instabilities in civil societies, grassroots self-publishing was accorded great attention by Western observers. Yet, from a chronologically distant perspective, samizdat emerges, first of all, as a medium which challenges to a great extent our presuppositions about how a published text should look like. Namely, while it established a parallel level of textual production, samizdat recalled to life aspects of scribal culture which have been marginalized by the invention of the printing press.⁴ On the one hand, underground self-publishers questioned the state monopoly on print; on the other one their activity significantly impacted on firmly established concepts of authorship and reception. "Writers write a text, readers read it [...]. This tradition, which dates back to the nineteenth century—a relatively peaceful time, favorable to

literary creation—has been now interrupted,”⁵ Andrey Sinyavskiy explained in 1977, while participating in a conference on literature and political dissent, organized as a collateral event of the Venice Biennale. The *émigré* writer (who in February 1966 had been sentenced to a seven-year prison term for having published his works abroad) had in mind the overlapping of the author’s, reader’s, and publisher’s function, which often occurred in samizdat practice. Thus, by reproducing a text by typing (and/or photocopying, taking photos of) it, the samizdat “readers/scribes”⁶ exceeded the responsibilities traditionally ascribed to the recipient of a literary work, in so far as they established a new edition of the text, designed the external layout of the book, and became engaged in its further dissemination.

In view of this, book history seems to provide a valid conceptual framework for interpreting such a peculiar phenomenon. Memoirs written by Soviet self-publishers provide evidence that in the case of samizdat the many agents (authors, editors, publishers, booksellers, smugglers, readers etc.) identified by the American historian Robert Darnton in order to schematize the circulation of printed items through societies tend to exchange roles and to overlap in their functions.⁷ After having received a self-published work, an occasional reader could become not only a regular reader, but also a distributor or publisher of samizdat literature, whereas other readers preferred to skip the tiring phase of manual reproduction and asked professional typists to make a copy for them. As a consequence, a black market of samizdat books was established.⁸ Therefore, the “complex human topography,” or, in other words, the “whole human comedy”⁹ hidden behind publishing that Darnton tried to reconstruct seems to be even more complex when authors and readers become self-appointed publishers.

Given the role played by samizdat in circumventing state censorship and sharing free flows of information, it comes as no surprise that from the 1970s onward an increasing number of visual artists turned to this practice in order to make their own works “public” (although in very narrow circles) or to experiment with the book form. Typewritten journals such as *Arkhiv* (Archive) and *Galereya* (Gallery), both edited in Leningrad, respectively in 1976–1978 and 1981, aspired to present and conceptualize non-conformist art tendencies by publishing reviews of underground exhibitions organized in private apartments, as well as a large photographic documentation of them. As evident by the titles of these journals, paper media played here a compensative

5 Abram Terz (aka Andrey Sinyavskiy), “L’evoluzione letteraria in Russia,” in *Letteratura e dissenso nell’Europa dell’Est*, ed. Antonin J. Liehm (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977), 99, translation mine.

6 Aleksandr Ginzburg, editor-in-chief of one of the first samizdat literary almanacs, *Sintaksis* (Syntax) (Moscow, 1959–1960, 3 issues) remembers: “As we started publishing, we had no typists, we could only rely on readers-scribes. That’s how we defined them: first readers, second readers ... You give them a copy and you ask them to give you back two copies.” Aleksandr Ginzburg, “Kogda puskalis’ na debyut,” in *Russkaya mysl’* (October 1987): 8, translation mine.

7 Robert Darnton, “What is the history of books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83 and *Ibid.*, “What is the history of books? revisited,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 3 (2007): 495–508, 496.

8 Some activists involved in the diffusion of political samizdat tend to deny the existence of a black market in order to avoid compromising the “heroic” image of Soviet dissent. See Aleksandr Daniel’, *Istoki i smysl sovetskogo samizdata*, in *Antologiya samizdata: Nepodtsenzurnaya literatura v SSSR, 1950e–1980e*, vol. 1: *Do 1966 goda*, ed. V. Igrunov (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyy institut gumanitarnykh-politicheskikh issledovaniy, 2005), 17–33; and interviews with Viktoriya Vol’pina, Lyudmila Alekseyeva and Petr Starchik in Mark Barbarkadze, ed., *Antologiya Samizdata*, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://antology.igrunov.ru/stories/>.

9 Darnton, “What is the history of books? revisited,” 496.

function: given the lack of private galleries as well as of institutions collecting and preserving artistic ephemera, self-publications became repositories of otherwise almost invisible art objects.

Yet, I think that, from a theoretical standpoint, it is necessary to draw a distinction between self-published documentation of artworks and self-publishing as an artistic strategy, invested with a conscious aesthetic stance. In the latter case, samizdat significantly echoes tendencies which arose in the West in the 1960s and in the 1970s reached—although in an episodic and chaotic way—Soviet unofficial artistic circles as well. I am referring to the emergence of “post-object or post-gallery art,”¹⁰ which contested the commodification of artworks, strived for a reduction of art to linguistic concept, and therefore found in artists’ publications a powerful tool for self-expression. This latter point was made clear in 1969 by the gallerist Seth Siegelau: “For painting and sculpture, where the visual presence—color, scale, size, location—is important to the work, the photograph or verbalization of that work is

a bastardization of the art. But when art concerns itself with things not germane to physical presence, its intrinsic ‘communicative’ value is not altered by its presentation in printed media,”¹¹ he explained in a talk, referring to the group exhibitions he curated, generally having no existence outside of the catalog. And in 1976 Sol LeWitt echoed his words: “Artist’s books are [...] available to all at a low cost. They do not need a special place to be seen. They are not valuable except for the idea they contain [...]. They are works themselves, not reproductions of work. Books are the best medium for many artists working today.”¹²

Turning back to the Soviet Union, we cannot help but notice that the state hegemony on arts and the absence of a private art market resulted in practices that partially resemble artistic strategies generated in the West by the increasing dissatisfaction with the artwork as a commercial object. So far scholars have been stressing differences between artists’ publications in the West and beyond the Iron Curtain, proceeding from the assumption that in the socialist countries presuppositions triggering the Western artists’ growing interest for the book as a medium were largely missing.¹³ Yet, obvious discrepancies in the political and socio-economic context should not obscure the fact that samizdat artists’ publications display attitudes that fit in the frame of the critical re-thinking of publishing, initiated in the 1960s and now placed at the core of several art-projects which engage concepts central to samizdat practice, like copying, appropriating, and sharing. In this essay, I will approach samizdat artists’ publications from this operational viewpoint, highlighting similarities to both co-eval and further experiments with self-publishing in the

10 “[T]he kind of art called by the American critics *post-studio*, *post-object*, or *post-gallery* is namely art of and for the printed page” (“cet art que la critique américaine a appelé *post-studio* ou *post-object* ou encore *post-gallery* est par excellence l’art de la page imprimée”), Anne Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d’artiste, 1960–1980* (Paris: J. M. Place, 1997), 138, translation mine.

11 Quote in Charles Harrison, “On Exhibition and the World at Large: A Conversation with Seth Siegelau,” in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: Dutton, 1973), 165–173, 168.

12 Sol LeWitt, “Statement,” *Art-Rite* 14 (1976–1977): 10.

13 See, for instance, Piotr Rypson on the situation in Poland: “Art activities alternative to the existing establishment naturally meant something fundamentally different than in the West: there could have been no discussion or strategy aimed against the art market and its institutions, since no real market of that kind has existed.” Piotr Rypson, “Polish Artists’ Books in the 1990s and Three Libraries,” in *Artists’ Publications: Ein Genre und seine Erschließung*, ed. Sigrid Schade and Anne Thurmann-Jajes (Cologne: Salon Verlag, 2009), 80–86, quote at 81–82.

West, as well as the peculiar, historical background which samizdat artists' books should be necessarily placed against, that is grassroots self-publishing performed by the readers themselves.

Copying, Editing & Appropriating

The act of copying was inherent to samizdat from the very beginning. On the one hand, readers-scribes reproduced literary (and non-literary) texts that for several reasons were not available; on the other, original works conceived for underground circulation (and not for submission into the official, censored publishing circuit) generally came out in as many legible copies as the typewriter allowed. Therefore, self-publishing implied the production of surplus of copies (i.e., of a small run that could be distributed to readers for further reproduction and dissemination). Still, while typing, samizdat scribes did not limit themselves to reproducing the text, but established a new, supposedly authoritative, edition of it. At the same time, they created the actual form of the artifact, which is the "fringe" of the typewritten text, by arranging paratextual elements on the front cover and on the title page, as well as inside the book. Given the limited access to mechanical reproduction techniques such as photocopying or photographing, the typewriter was definitely the most popular self-publishing tool. Furthermore, readers' expectations (i.e., their interest in reading a certain work) often determined the choice of the technique used in the reproduction process, as Leonid Zhmud' remembers: "I incessantly received books, but sooner or later I had to give them back and I couldn't bear it. Consequently, I started to reproduce them by Xerox or I gave them to typists. Nabokov and Platonov passed through the typewriter, because typists loved them, while Solzhenitsyn and Zinov'ev would end up in the Xerox."¹⁴

This example reflects quite well the private character and the emotional significance self-publishing was generally invested with. This brought about a fetishization of the samizdat copy, which in its own turn descended, of course, from all the difficulties that self-publishers had to face in order to obtain the scarcely attainable original text. *Ex libris* designed *ad hoc* for private collections of typewritten books often emphasized all risks related to self-publishing, as evident in the ones that identify samizdat copies belonging to Juriy Ivanovich Abyzov and to Lev Mikhaylovich Turchinskiy [fig. 1]. In both vignettes samizdat bibliophiles are represented as carrying out their task while struggling against troubled waters—a metaphor that represents their attempt to save forgotten writers from the oblivion of the past despite ideological pressure and political repressions. Significantly, in Turchinskiy's *ex libris* the self-publisher is compared to a man dressed like an intellectual who tows

¹⁴ Leonid Zhmud', "Studenty-istoriki mezhdou ofitsiozom i 'liberal'noy' naukoy," *Zvezda* 8 (1998): 205.

a boat full of volumes of forbidden authors, whose names are written on the spines. Self-publishing was definitely a hard job; nevertheless it allowed one to enjoy reading extremely

rare books in a comfortable, intimate, domestic atmosphere—as Natal'ya Isayevna Fel'dman-Konrad's *ex libris* seemed to suggest.

This peculiar *pathos*—inspired by the belief that only samizdat could help Russian intellectuals in re-appropriating literary heritage of the 1920s–30s—re-emerged in what one would call typewritten (or even handwritten) “reprints” of hardly attainable pre-revolutionary or *émigré* editions. In some cases samizdat scribes reproduced in painstaking detail all paratextual elements of the typographical book that they were copying, including even those that were not pertinent to the new, self-published edition, as, for instance, the name of the artist who designed the original cover, or the address of the publishing house. This kind of mimicry—probably instigated by the desire to prove that the copy was made on the basis of the original edition and not from another samizdat copy—lead to sometimes paradoxical effects as in the case of Abyzov's handwritten copy of *Nevod* (Fishnet), an anthology of Russian poets based in Berlin, which had come out in April 1933. Abyzov not only carefully reproduced the design of the cover [fig. 2, 3], but also appropriated the logo of the *émigré* publishing house Slovo (Word) and the impressum [fig. 4]. This case seems far from being unique. The samizdat collection at the Research Centre for East European Studies in Bremen provides many other striking examples of “non-printed reprints,” for instance Marina Tsvetaeva's collected works in nine typewritten volumes, reproduced by Valentin Fedorovich Tsvetkov in Riga between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s on the basis of both pre-revolutionary and *émigré* editions, or countless typewritten collections of Nikolay Gumilëv's poetry [fig. 5, 6].

Therefore, one could infer that, rather than doing away with the traditional typographic book structure, many self-publishers tended to ideally reinforce it, by reproducing it with the greatest care. Still, this veneration for individual authorship, as fixed and perpetuated by typography should not obliterate the circumstance that viral copying and uncontrolled spreading of new textual versions, irrespective of the reliability of the primary source, was the rule for the Soviet self-publishers. Taken as a whole, the samizdat circuit resembles Western experiments such as the Underground Press Syndicate, a network of countercultural newspapers and magazines, founded in the USA in 1966. Underground publishers agreed on the principle that any member of the network was allowed “to reprint, free of charge, the contents of any other member,”¹⁵ in order to reach a broader readership. Similarly, textual dissemination in the samizdat circuit was virtually unrestrained and not subject to legal restrictions even if no common agreement between self-publishers and/or authors was ever reached or made explicit. Samizdat journals simply appropriated any work they deemed worthy of being published or re-published; as a consequence, texts were reproduced and circulated with only the implied (but rarely explicit) consent of the authors. Strange as it may seem, the concern about the unlimited freedom to copy and assemble any material led to the emergence of a samizdat copyright. In July 1983, the typewritten journal

15 Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print. The Mutation of Publishing since 1984* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2012), 42.

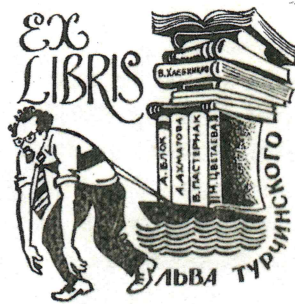


Fig. 1.

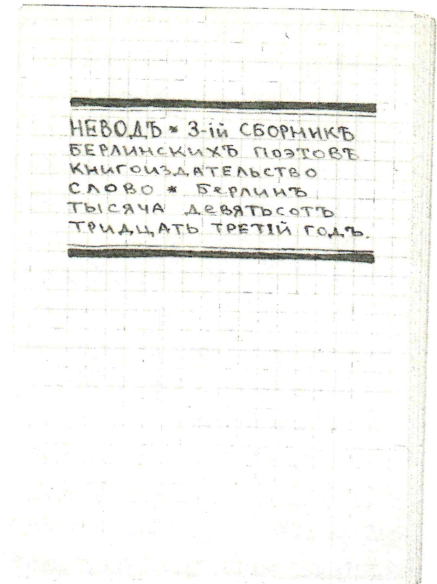


Fig. 3.

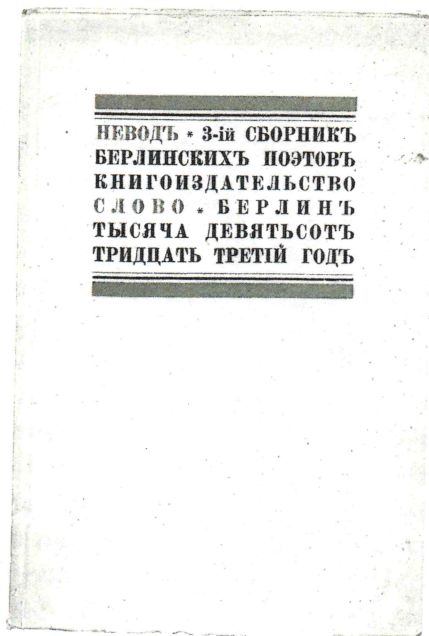


Fig. 2.

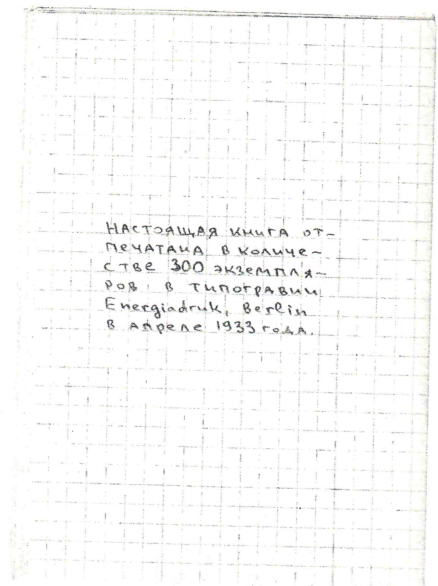


Fig. 4.

Fig. 1. Lev Mikhaylovich Turchinskiy's *ex libris* from his self-published anthology *Vospominaniya. Pis'ma* (Recollections. Letters) (Moscow region: 1970s). FSO 01-091 (Turčinskij), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 2. *Nevod*. 3-iy sbornik berlinskikh poetov (Fishnet) (Berlin: Knigoizdatel'stvo Slovo, 1933), cover.

Fig. 3. *Nevod*. 3-iy sbornik berlinskikh poetov (Fishnet), samizdat copy made by Juriy Ivanovich Abyzov, Riga, cover. FSO 01-117/2 (Abyzov), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 4. *Nevod*. 3-iy sbornik berlinskikh poetov (Fishnet), samizdat copy made by Juriy Ivanovich Abyzov, Riga, imprint: "This book has been printed in an edition of 300 copies by Energiadruk, Berlin, in April 1933." FSO 01-117/2 (Abyzov), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Transponans released, in its seventeenth issue, some unpublished materials by avant-garde artists thanks to the collaboration with the art historian Nikolay Khardzhiev, who as a young man in the 1930s befriended leading members of the Russian avant-garde and preserved their manuscripts long after their works were banned as subversively bourgeois. In view of the artistic and historical value of such texts—unpublished poems by Aleksey Kruchenykh and Kazimir Malevich—*Transponans* editors Sergey Sigov and Anna Tarshis decided to prevent readers from copying them by specifying in a notice “perepechatka zapreshaet’sya” (reproduction is forbidden). Moreover, they appropriated the copyright on the materials together with Khardzhiev by adding a curious typewritten copyright symbol [fig. 7].¹⁶

Although Sigov and Tarshis did not expect any financial return from this purely formal ownership of rights, their act introduced a bias in self-publishing: at that time it was generally assumed that readers-scribes had to mention the title of the journal they had copied texts from,¹⁷ but nobody had yet tried to forbid the further reproduction and dissemination of a self-published text. Before Khardzhiev, Sigov, and Tarshis started using it, the copyright symbol had already appeared in the colophon of the famous typewritten literary almanac *Metropol’* edited by Vasilii Aksenov, Andrey Bitov, Viktor Yerofeyev, Fazil’ Iskander, and Yevgeniy Popov in Moscow in 1979 [fig. 8]. The editors did not introduce any restriction on copying; they simply gave instructions on how the manuscript had to be printed (e.g., no integrations or shortenings are allowed). It is very likely that such a warning was addressed to Russian-language publishers abroad. Another striking ex-

¹⁶ On Khardzhiev’s criticism of self-publishing see Nadezhda Mandel’shtam: “Khardzhiev was a sworn enemy of the ‘parallel literature’ and used to blame me and Anna Andreyevna (Akhmatova) for helping readers to circulate copies of O. M. (Osip Mandel’shtam) and for contributing to journal publications, usually based on those very copies and, consequently, full of mistakes,” Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, *Vospominaniya. Kniga tret’ya* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1987), 108, translation mine.

¹⁷ For example, in 1973 the typewritten journal *Veche* (Assembly) (Aleksandrov) published the notice: “When copying texts, please mention the journal ‘Veche,’” while in 1983 “Molchanie’s editors (Leningrad) pointed out: ‘Copying original texts is allowed only by mentioning M.’”

¹⁸ First published in the *New York Review* on February 27, 1986.

ample is the hand-written copyright symbol placed by the poet Yuri Kublanovsky on the colophon of a self-published copy of his poems [fig. 9]. It is quite unlikely that their warning could prevent anybody from copying; still, their attempt to reassert the principle of intellectual property and copyrighted distribution in a context where copying, reassembling, and sharing was the rule is highly indicative of increasing authors’ dissatisfaction with their inability to supervise samizdat publishing and to exert control over their own work. Of course, they did not charge samizdat publishers with piracy crime or copyright infringement; rather they claimed the right to have their works circulating *only* in a form which was revised and approved by themselves. For example, in 1990 Joseph Brodsky protested against the editors of the Leningrad samizdat journal *Sumerki* (Twilight), as they published an unauthorized translation of his English essay “In a Room and a Half.”¹⁸ In an editorial note, *Sumerki* editor Aleksandr Novakovskiy commented bitterly: “After issuing the first run of ‘Sumerki’ n. 8, we heard that Joseph Brodsky had categorically prohibited the publication of his English text in Russia [...]. We express our apologies to Joseph Brodsky.

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In sum, being a do-it-yourself tool for circumventing censorship, Soviet samizdat could not help but rely massively on readers' initiative; consequently, it bypassed not only state surveillance on printed contents, but also the privileged relationship between author and publisher. In taking over the role of publishers, readers-scribes opened up a new “writing scene”²⁰ where, basically, no legal restrictions or copyright laws prevented anybody from assembling, disassembling, and reassembling texts at his/her disposal. Rather than external regulation, a kind of interiorized ethics of copying and the feeling of being responsible for the future “survival”²¹ of forgotten works written by often repressed authors instilled in self-publishers a sort of veneration of the (supposedly) authoritative copy-text. This resulted in a conservative attitude toward the paratextual fringe which is well reflected by what I would call “samizdat reprints.” Bizarre as it may sound, censorship and self-publishing *de facto* conjured in establishing a territory of intellectual commons in the

literary and artistic sphere. On the one hand, preventive censorship excluded a large number of authors from copyrighted reproduction by declaring them not eligible to publish in the state-controlled media. On the other, self-publishers strived to save these authors from oblivion or invisibility in so far as they tried to grant their works with the widest and most unrestricted circulation possible. The awe inspired by the mythologization of repressed authors of the past as well as solidarity toward contemporary outsiders generally made “copy and paste” experiments reproachable, although possible. At the same time, the unprecedented freedom inherent in this grassroots' practice also generated its discontents as evident from Joseph Brodsky's reaction to *Sumerki* publication.

Make it (II) legible

How do all these elements come into the picture if we turn our attention to samizdat artists' publications? To what extent were artists' publications issued in the context of Soviet self-publishing affected by the medial specificities of samizdat production that we have tried to describe? To what degree did they respond to the widespread appraisal of the book as the most appropriate medium for disseminating artistic ideas—considering that many Soviet artists who engaged self-publishing as an artistic practice were inspired by new trends coming from the West? As the exhibition “Russian samizdat art,” curated by Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin at

19 Aleksandr Novakovskiy, [editorial note], *Sumerki*, 8 (1990), unpag. FSO 01-53, Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies. Translation mine.

20 I refer here to the concept of *Schreibszene* introduced by Rüdiger Campe in order to define the historically and individually constituted interrelation of semantics, instrumentality (technology of writing) and bodily gesture. See Rüdiger Campe, “Die Schreibszene, Schreiben,” in *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche. Situationen offener Epistemologie*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 759-772.

21 The “survival of a bibliographical document” is a notion that Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Barker introduced in their alternative schema to Darnton's “communication circuit” by taking into account reworking of texts through new editions, translations, and the changing contexts both of reading and of literature in general. Thomas R. Adams and N. Barker, “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, ed. N. Barker (London: British Library, 1993), 5-31, 13.

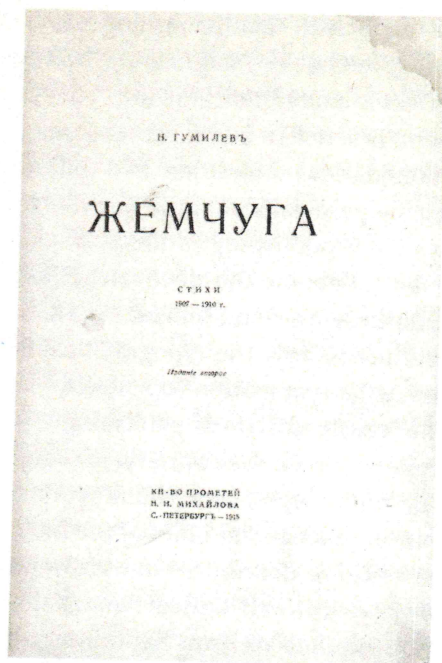


Fig. 5.

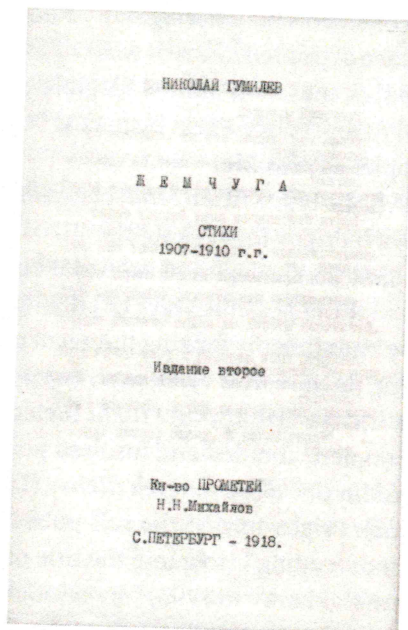


Fig. 6.

Fig. 5. Nikolay Gumil'ev, *Zhemchuga. Stikhi 1907-1910 g.* (Pearl Poems) (Sankt-Peterburg: Kn. Prometey N. N. Mikhaylova, 1918), front page.

Fig. 6. Nikolay Gumil'ev, *Zhemchuga. Stikhi 1907-1910 g.* (Pearl Poems), samizdat copy made by an unknown reader, front page. FSO 01-5/2.18, Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

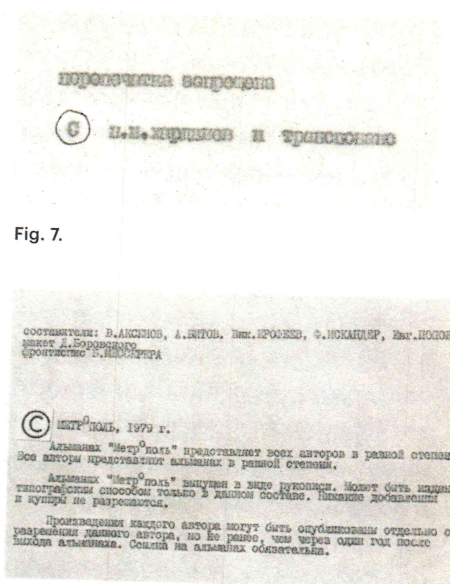


Fig. 7.

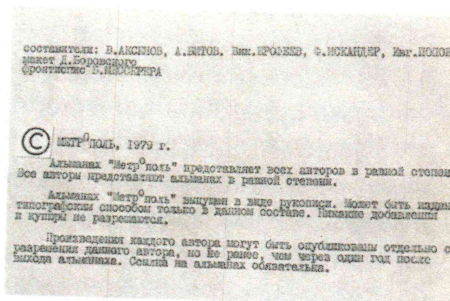


Fig. 8.

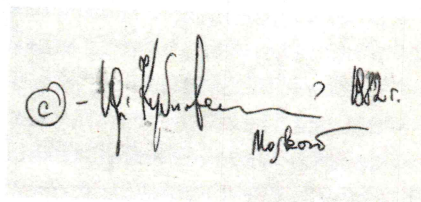


Fig. 9.

Fig. 7. Copyright symbol from the samizdat journal *Transponans* (Eysk), 17 (July 1983): "Reproduction is forbidden. © N.N. Khardzhiev and *Transponans*." FSO 01-37 (Ehr), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 8. Copyright symbol from the samizdat almanac *Metropol'* (Moscow, 1979): "Ed. by V. Aksënov, A. Bitov, V. Yerofeyev, F. Iskander, Ye. Popov. Design by D. Borovskiy. Front page by B. Messerer. © *Metropol'*, 1979. [...] The almanac '*Metropol'*' is published in manuscript form. It may be printed and published only in the given compilation. Additions and shortening are not permitted. Works of single authors may be published separately with permission of the respective author, but not earlier than one year after the almanac's publication. A reference to the almanac is obligatory." FSO 01-103 (Babënyshyev), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 9. Handwritten copyright symbol from Yury Kublanov's self-published book *Poems* (Moscow, 1982). FSO 01-30.117 (Poljakova), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Franklin Furnace in New York in 1982 made clear,²² self-publishing (obviously in its own “authorial” version),²³ during Brezhnev’s “stagnation,” had represented an invaluable tool for visual artists to experiment with the “bookwork” form and document their own creative practice in a free, uncensored way. Yet, one should not forget that the boundaries between the two attitudes—creating and archiving—were extremely permeable. On the one hand, the ever increasing institutionalization of self-publishing in the 1970s led to a strong tendency toward critical self-reflection and deconstruction. As Sabine Hänsgen and Georg Witte remarked, in several samizdat bookworks, the object of desacralization was not necessarily the typographical book, issued by the State, but rather the samizdat typewritten copy itself,²⁴ if not, I would add, the whole “reading scene” connected to self-publishing.

In this regard, precluding legibility or, on the contrary, making legible extremely unreadable or self-referential texts, were the most obvious devices in order to deconstruct samizdat practices and hint at the fetishization of the self-published, small run editions, distributed in narrow underground circles. Under a conceptual viewpoint, self-critical samizdat bookworks do not substantially differ from similar Western experiments that polemically engaged themselves with the tradition of the bibliophilic book production. Still, playing with legibility/readability is invested here with some additional meanings, since in the context of samizdat legibility could by no means be taken for granted as in the case of printed items. It was rather the opposite: as many self-publishers stated, evanescent, almost illegible typescripts were the rule, for scribes tended to reproduce a text by means of carbon paper in as many copies as possible.

carbon paper in as many copies as possible.

In this perspective, the typewritten *Minibooks* created by Dmitriy Aleksandrovich Prigov throughout the 1970s can be regarded as irreverent facsimile copies of samizdat books, in so far as they explore all the possible ways of frustrating readers’ expectations by intentionally making the act of reading extremely demanding (in the series *Vyrvannye, vydrannye, vybroshennye, izmyatye, istertye i porugannye stikhi* (Selected, tear-out, discarded, crumpled, abraded and insulted poems, fig. 101), if not impossible (in *Grobik otrinutykh stikhov* (Little grave for refused poems). Prigov turned the self-published book into a device “for not reading” (to quote the title of his conversation with Vadim Zakharov in 1993)²⁵ by mimicking the paratextual elements of a “typical” samizdat booklet, whereas he drastically reduced the textual content to the linguistic description of the interiorized acts that accompany reading—that is, opening the book, turning pages, closing the book, and so on. For example, the verbal content of *Prosto kniga* (Simply a book, 1977) tautologically adheres to the operations that readers are expected to perform in a mechanical way: “Turn the page/turn the next page/turn one more

22 See the catalog edited by John E. Bowlit and Charles Doria, *Russian Samizdat Art* (New York: Locker&Owens, 1986).

23 The indication “authorial samizdat” (evidently used in opposition to copies issued by readers-scribes) appeared, for example, on Vladimir Aleynikov’s self-published volumes belonging to Mikhail Grobman. FSO 01-74, Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

24 See Sascha Wonders and Günther Hirt, “Einführung,” in *Präprintium*, 8-40, 34.

25 Dmitriy Aleksandrovich Prigov, “Kniga kak sposob nechitaniya. Beseda s izdatelem, sostoyavshayasya v yanvare 1993 goda v gorode Kel’ne. S preduvledomleniem,” *Pastor* 3 (1993), later re-published in *Pastor: Sbornik izbrannykh materialov, opublikovannykh v zhurnale “Pastor” 1992-2001* (Vologda: German Titov, 2009), 141-152.

page/turn the last page/the end.”²⁶ In other terms, readers’ gestures coincide with the imperatives they gradually discover, in so far as their hands instinctively anticipate the commands they are about to read.

Therefore, from a conceptual standpoint, Prigov’s *Minibook* would apparently have a great deal in common with similar “tautological” bookworks which engage the structural elements of the book. Look, for instance, at George Brecht’s *Book* (1972), where single paratextual details such as the author’s name, title, and publisher are reported on a slipcase in the form of adhesive labels and accompanied by printed statements, such as: “This is the title page,” “This is ...,” etc. Still, Prigov’s *Prosto kniga* radically differs from it in force of its evident imperative, thus performative character, for it openly addresses the reader in order to be performed, i.e., realized in all its possibilities. The constant appeal to the readership—even when an actual reproduction of the typewritten text would seem highly unlikely—represents, I would say, one of the distinctive features of samizdat artists’ publications, and is generally accompanied by a tendency to fragment the book form and, consequently, to emphasize the individual interaction with single carriers of meaning.

This kind of strategy is displayed by Lev Rubinshteyn’s poetic works written on library file cards. Look for instance at *Programma sovместnykh perezhivaniy* (*A Program of Shared Tribulations*, 1981), a piece which deconstructed one of the most widespread rituals in underground circles, that is the collective, silent “consumption” of a single self-published work by several persons who (at night, generally) gathered together and passed to each other every single sheet, in order to allow as many people as possible to share the reading experience.²⁷ According to conceptual reductionism, Rubinshteyn turned this ritual into an empty act through a series of self-referential reflections about the “present moment,” i.e., the actual time when the reading took place. As a result, his piece intentionally frustrated readers’ expectations about the appearance of a “real,” non-tautological text:

“after reading, please pass this to a friend

1

Are we ready for shared tribulations?

2

If we are, then good.

If not, readiness will come in its own good time.

3

At this moment we are interested only in this moment,
and also everything that’s connected with it.

4

As we know, much is connected to this moment.

5

Let’s combine our efforts to define this moment most accurately.

6

Let’s apply a maximum effort for the most precise self-fixation
of each person in the context of this moment. [...]”²⁸

²⁶ Dmitriy Aleksandrovich Prigov, *Prosto kniga* (Moscow: samizdat, 1977).

²⁷ See interviews with Viktoriya Vol’pina and Natal’ya Sadomskaya in Barbarkadze, *Antologiya Samizdata*.

²⁸ Lev Rubinstein, *A Program of Shared Tribulations*, in *Compleat Catalogue of Comedic Novelties* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014), 324–329, 325.

Again, the linguistic content of the self-published work is drastically confined to the description of the operations performed by the readers in order to make possible its consumption in a particular writing scene. At the same time, Rubinshteyn's conceptual staging of reading is an example of the particular performative nature of the samizdat text, conceived not in order to appear in print, but rather—as the underground poet Mikhail Yerebin pointed out—to be “realized”²⁹ in different ways: copied by the readers and/or read before an audience, appropriated, and slandered by the official press, quoted and/or printed by Western and/or *émigré* publishers, allowed to survive thanks to different kind of archives (from KGB's one to unofficial archival projects). This latter aspect, related to self-documentation and preservation, became crucial by the end of 1970s, as a large number of artists emigrated, and a new generation of young artists entered the scene. These two phenomena combined conjured in initiating a series of artists' samizdat publications where archiving purposes and performative elements are often closely intertwined.

Make It Public

In this respect, it is remarkable that, while underground artists turned to samizdat to document their works, they also began to explore it as a medium in its own right, creating artworks expressly for typewritten editions. This two-fold approach toward self-publishing is well reflected by the Moscow typewritten art magazine *Metki novoy zhivopisi* (Marking the new painting), edited by Vladimir Petrov and Vitaliy Gribkov between 1975 and 1979. Beside publishing theoretical contributions on unofficial art, the editors turned their journal into a collective platform for ephemeral, *hic et nunc* experiments, by “yielding the floor” to visual artists and asking them to conceive the new issue as a whole. This happened on two different occasions, namely in 1979, as the young members of the group Mukhomory (Toadstools) re-designed *Metki* #8 in the spirit of the provocative, colorful aesthetics which characterized their handwritten books [fig. 11]. Three years earlier, on March 3rd, 1976, Andrey Monastyrskiy, Nikita Alekseyev, and Lev Rubinshteyn—who were about to conceive *Poyavlenie* (Appearance), the first “action” of the Kollektivnye deystviya (Collective Actions) group—had transformed the editing of *Metki* #3 in a one-day performance: instead of publishing the expected documentation related to their artworks, they preferred to turn the journal into a conceptual piece, by providing a brief linguistic description of their minimalistic interventions on it, accompanied by the precise timing of when they took place.

For instance, Rubinshteyn commented: “Since Nikita Alekseyev likes to soften everything, he decided to cut away all corners with scissors and to make them round. March 3rd, 1976, 7 PM.” After a while (7:07 PM) Monastyrskiy drew small crosses on every corner with a red pencil, and so on.³⁰

29 D. Sukhovey, “Mne tyazhelo ottogo, chto ja deystvitel'no ostal'sya odin” accessed August 16, 2015, <http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/1689>.

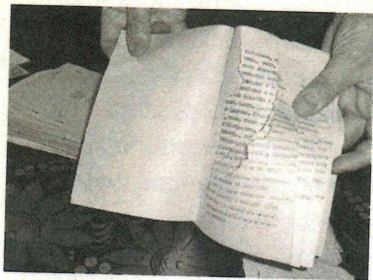


Fig. 10.

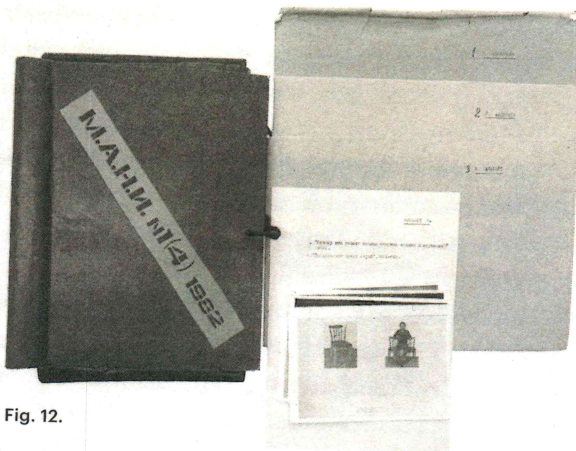


Fig. 12.

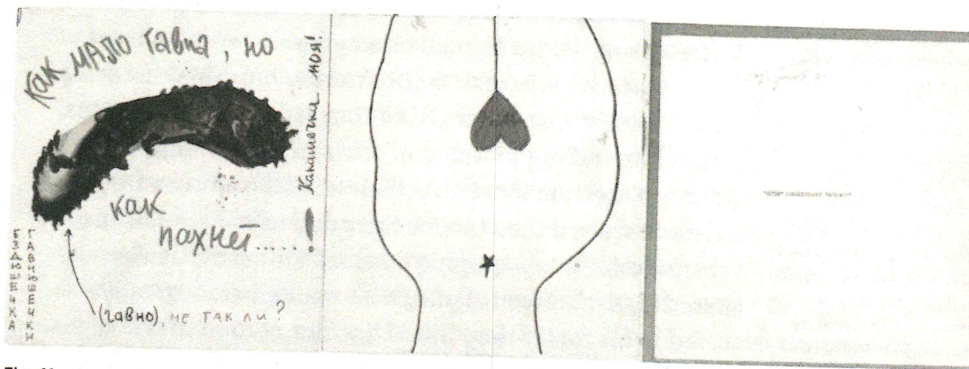


Fig. 11.

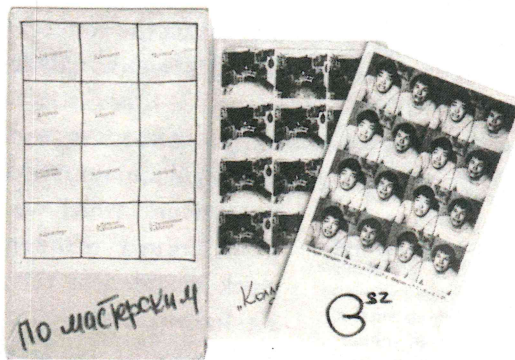


Fig. 13.

Fig. 10. D. A. Prigov, *Vyrvannyye, vydrannyye, vybroshennyye, izmyatyie, istertye i porugannyye stikhi* (Selected, tear-out, discarded, crumpled, abraded and insulted poems) (Moscow, 1970s). Artist's collection. © The Dmitry Prigov International Foundation, 2015.

Fig. 11. *Samizdat journal Metki novoy zhivopisi* (Marking the new painting), ed. V. Petrov and V. Gribkov, 8 (1979), Moscow, drawings by the group Mukhomory (Toadstools). FSO 01-076 (V. M. Petrov, V. S. Gribkov and L. A. Melamid), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 12. *MANI* (Moscow Archive of New Art), 4 (1982), ed. N. Abalakova and A. Zhigalov, Moscow. FSO 01-066 (MANI), Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Fig. 13. *Po masterskim* (Across the ateliers), (winter/summer 1983/1984), ed. G. Kizeval'ter and V. Zakharov, Moscow. Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies.

Whereas the *Metki* issues released by artists exemplify the strong performative character samizdat bookworks were generally invested with, some other underground artists' publications were rather centered on the blurring borders between creating and documenting, performing and archiving. This is the case of the probably most ambitious self-publishing project initiated by Moscow underground artists: I refer to four *MANI Files* (Moscow Archive of New Art) edited between February 1981 and 1982 in five copies and distributed to a few colleagues and friends. Each folder contained up to forty-four envelopes, each of them devoted to one participant (fig. 121). Artists were requested to insert some pictures or texts in their personal envelopes in order to present their activity, thus to make it public—although in a very narrow circle. This elementary, open-ended schema inspired a large range of solu-

30 It is worth adding that self-reference and playful minimalism were also the main characteristics of the performance *Poyavlenie* (Appearance), which took place on March 13, 1976, just ten days after *Metki* collective editing. Here participants were invited to reach by railway a field of snow outside Moscow in order to attend the "appearance" of one member of the group (not followed by any other substantial event) and to receive a certificate in order to prove their participation in the action. Here white field and white paper become almost interchangeable carriers of meaning, which can alternatively host artists' tautological, slightly absurd interventions.

31 Interestingly, Anne Mœglin-Delcroix referring to Joseph Kosuth's *Notebook on Water* (New York: Multiples, 1970), contrasted envelope to book, by declaring the former "a format without form," yet characterized by a higher degree of indifferenciation and abstractness (A. Mœglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique*, 147). Bookworks made out of envelopes were widespread in the Moscow Conceptual circle and eventually reached America, as Gerlovina and Gerlovin adopted the *MANI* format for the journal *Kolkhoz* they edited in New York with Vagrich Bakhchanyan, see <http://www.gerlovin.com/samizdat.htm>, accessed August 16, 2015.

tions, reflecting different ideas about how the self-published archive should look like. For instance, Oleg Vasil'ev and Erik Bulatov provided traditional photographic reproductions of their paintings, whereas Ilya Kabakov, Igor' Makharevich, Ivan Chuykov and Boris Orlov focused on the contextual "frame," by taking pictures of their artworks on the background of their ateliers. Nevertheless, all the aforementioned artists conceived the *MANI* archive as, basically, a self-made substitute for a typographic catalog. This attitude was also shared by Francisco Infante, who—quite paradoxically—inserted in his folder the printed documentation of one of his official exhibitions, held at the House of Scientists.

On the contrary, other contributions radically put in discussion the concept of the archive as a catalog, an inventory of artworks existing *outside* the archive itself. Interestingly, the four *MANI* issues contained an ever-increasing number of oeuvres explicitly conceived for the folder, that is not a documentation of external, autonomous artworks, but artworks which were consciously focused on the eponymous "format" of the envelope,³¹ like for instance the untitled work included by the group SZ (Viktor Skersis & Vadim Zakharov) in *MANI* #4, the playful series of envelopes created by the duo Leonid Tishkov/Nikolay Kozlov (#3), or the series *Zhivopis'* (Painting) by Mikhail Roshal' and Gennadiy Donskoy (#2), based on a tautological equivalence between concepts expressed in titles and their material realization, as exemplified by *Kholst, lishennyj devstvennosti* (A canvas deprived of its virginity) and *Kholst, maslo* (Canvas, oil). Again, artists tended to frustrate viewers' expectations, by denying them access to what the envelope could potentially contain, as in the case of Donskoy's *Samotsenzura* (Self-censorship, #4), or Rubinshteyn's tautological *Konvert* (Envelope, #3).

At the same time, the spontaneous spirit of the *MANI* archive allowed a few participants to take some ironic distance from the very concept of this underground samizdat publication itself, that is providing a trustworthy image of the Moscow unofficial art scene. In June 1981, Viktor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov inserted into the fourth issue of *MANI* the contributions of some non-existing, imaginary artists, namely I. Volodin, E. Volodina, E. Shnitser, whose works, in a way, looked like a parody of both Conceptualism and Sots art. On the one hand, their ironical attempt to put into question the very reliability of the documentation they were providing reflects the continuity of an already well-established tendency toward mystification within the Moscow art scene.³² On the other hand, it reflects an increasing interest in the context (real or potential) artists would be able to create around their oeuvre.

Whereas *MANI* incarnates a powerful inclination toward self-presentation, another artists' publication initiated in the same Moscow circle strived for self-reflection and confrontation among the artists through the form of the interview. The samizdat book *Po masterskim* (Across the ateliers, winter 1983/summer 1984, 12 copies [fig. 13]), realized by Vadim Zakharov and Georgiy Kizeval'ter, was based on the presupposition that the few texts and pictures included in the *MANI* archive were not enough to illuminate artists' positions. Shifting the attention from the work itself to the context and trying to describe from an objective viewpoint the underground scene to which he belonged, Zakharov affirmed the necessity to take some distance from the "obvious" support (if not reciprocal flattering) which characterized the communication among non-conformist artists and to initiate a critical assessment that at that point was still largely missing. At the same time, being a sort of "action book" carried out across the Moscow ateliers, *Po masterskim* reflects not only the entanglement of documentation and performativity in samizdat artists' publications, but also the possibility of integrating the editor/publisher function within one's own artistic practice, as Zakharov eventually did, initiating the Pastor Zond editions in Cologne in the post-Soviet (and post-samizdat) decade.³³

32 As already expressed by Vitaliy Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, who in 1973 "discovered" the forgotten painters Nikolay Buchumov and Apelles Zyablov.

33 I would like to thank Maria Klassen (Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies) and Roberta Sala (State University Turin) for generously providing information and images to support this essay.

No to Mass Circulation:

Publishing in the Context of an Aesthetics of the Relationships in Post-Samizdat

Vadim Zakharov / Annette Gilbert

ANNETTE GILBERT: Much has been said about the artistic microcosm on the periphery of the official and semi-official culture, a microcosm that was crucial for the development of samizdat and Moscow Conceptualism. The poet Vsevolod Nekrasov described one of the very first of these circles, the Lianozovo Group, as "something which was unprecedented in 1958, private space with an art gallery accessible to the public. A small room in a shed, open to everyone. A freely accessible zone, as we would say today. A visiting room. Come, if you want!" One could understand the art and literature as well as the publications that emerged from these contexts as a continuation of open conversations that are private and yet totally open and accessible to other interested parties as well. In this context, Ekaterina Degot once put forward the thesis that samizdat's orientation was essentially on human relationships and not on a product: "This state of affairs dramatically alters the status of a work of art. It does not possess any sort of self-contained value; instead, it constructs a system of interactions." Do you see things in a similar light? How have the forms of assembly and communication structures of these unofficial circles affected, in your own experience, the development of an adequate publication format?

VADIM ZAKHAROV: Yes, the established networks of relationships in these private spaces and the culture of dialogue that was developed there were prerequisites for everything that followed. In fact, only those people for whom conversation is a mode of existence were invited. Since the publications developed from conversations and human relationships, they acquired an intimate potency that would have been missing from the work in contexts like an exhibition. The reader is morphed into a conversation partner, a confidant in these publications. The book is no longer merely a thing—one cannot set it aside at any arbitrary moment. It becomes a concrete situation that sucks the reader into it. The publications might even be said to have the status of a token of friendship.

AG: A kind of parallel universe with its own system of publications developed in samizdat that was independent of the official literature and art. How exactly did this system function? At which moment, for example, was something understood as being published?

vz: According to Soviet legislation, the publication of more than five copies of a text was illegal. Perhaps this is why the magic number for us was five. But five—that is also the number of carbon copies a typewriter can produce, although the last copy is barely legible. You could say something was published with five copies. So, for example, five copies were always made of the famous *MANI Files* (*Papki MANI*). It was a collection of twenty-two

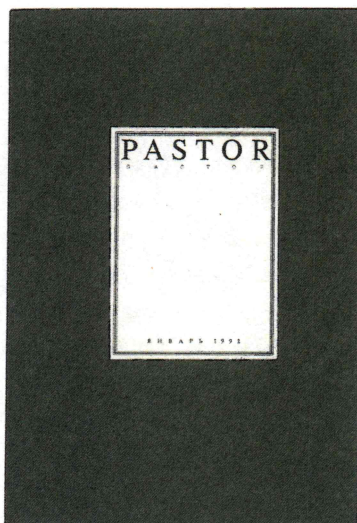


Fig. 1. *Pastor*, ed. Pastor Zond, 1 (January 1992), cover. Photo: Vadim Zakharov.

to forty-four envelopes with photos, drawings, etc. by a single artist. For all intents and purposes it was a complete exhibition. *MANI Files* were the first substantial collective publication of the Moscow samizdat, even if only five copies were made. There were four issues, if one wants to call it that, in total. I also assembled one issue, the second, together with Viktor Skersis.¹

AG: How were these files circulated?

vz: The method of distribution was mostly primitive: after becoming familiar with the content of a *MANI File*, you passed it on to the next person, for the most part to friends and artist colleagues. In doing so, we catered to different generations of the older avant-garde, the so-called *Shestidesyatniki* (Sixties), as well as the youth, so that the books circulated in various microcosms. As soon as we completed the five copies and brought them into circulation, they were, for us, finished and released, that is, published.

AG: Crucial for the act of “publishing” was then the moment a handful of copies began to circulate, even if these only passed from hand to hand and in very small circles?

vz: Yes, the things had to “function.” In retrospect it has sometimes been said that there were five *MANI Files*. But that simply isn’t true. The story behind the fifth issue is unclear. Probably the artist group *Mukhomory* (Toadstools) worked on its production but never finished. The fifth issue was never put into circulation. Thus this issue never fulfilled its function, it didn’t “function.” In my view, there is no fifth issue in the strict sense, there is only the preliminary work on one but it was never published. There were many things during

¹ Called into existence by Andrey Monastyrskiy in 1981. *Papki MANI* (i.e. “Moskovskiy Arkhiv Novogo Iskusstva,” Moscow Archive of New Art) can be seen in the samizdat collection at the Research Centre for East European Studies in Bremen. See also Valentina Parisi, *Scribes, Self-Publishers, Artists. Performing the Book in Samizdat Writing Scene* in this volume.

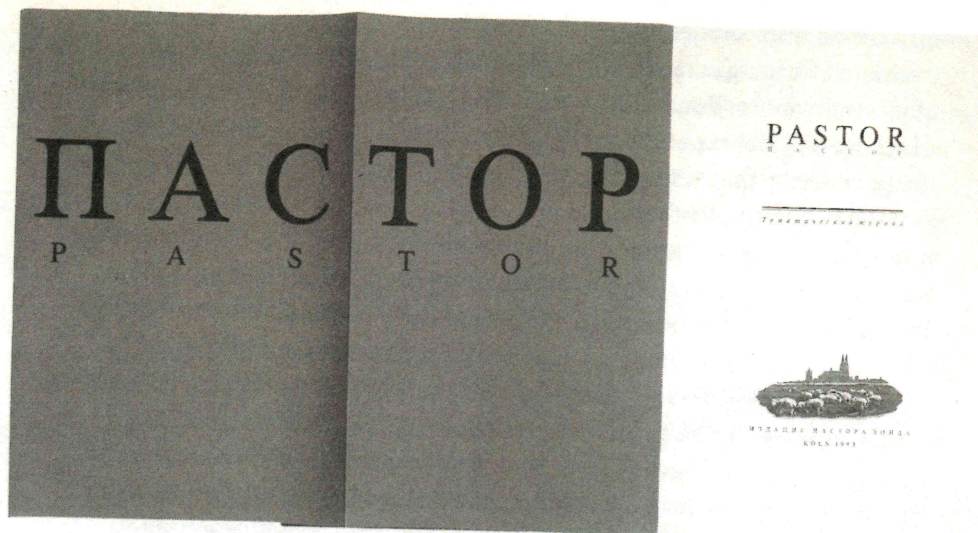


Fig. 2. *Pastor*, ed. Pastor Zond, 1 (January 1992), title page. Photo: Vadim Zakharov.

this time that were undertaken in this sense but which were never finished, you could say: that were never published.

AG: Censorship, which was one of the main reasons for the formation of samizdat, dissolved with Perestroika. Nevertheless, you stayed true to the samizdat tradition when you founded the magazine *Pastor* and the publishing house Pastor Zond Edition. Why?

vz: The dilemma is no longer political today, but rather economic. But that isn't the main reason why I began publishing things myself without utilizing the new possibilities of production after Perestroika. In a certain sense, I have cultivated the production methods of samizdat. Not out of pure nostalgia but also not out of a lack of funds, although that has naturally played a role. I was convinced by the necessity, indeed, by the lack of alternatives of publishing in this manner—particularly at a time in which you could suddenly publish and distribute anything you wanted. In 1992 I founded the magazine *Pastor*, which was the magazine for Moscow Conceptualism [fig. 1, 2], and the publishing house Pastor Zond Edition in Cologne. This occurred at a time when I was suddenly rediscovering myself as an artist in the West and my whole artistic context from Russia had also suddenly relocated to the West. The magazine was my attempt to occupy a territory that belongs to me and to save our old world that was in danger of vanishing in the Diaspora. As such, I provided the platform that, incidentally, was also set up as an archive from the very beginning. In the meantime, I've become known as the archivist of Moscow Conceptualism.

That the magazine is called *Pastor*² of all things had to do with my role as a “shepherd,” that is, as someone who re-convened and brought back together all the Russian

² Russian for shepherd.

artists who were suddenly spread across the world. Actually, I should have translated the magazine into German since I was in the West and not in Moscow anymore. But my aim wasn't to introduce Russian art to the West—which was the concept of the magazine *A-Ya*, for instance—rather it was to further develop the creative lineage of the Moscow scene even if it had moved to the West. Naturally that could only happen in the Russian language. It was a paradoxical and somewhat strange situation, and this is evident in the title: “Pastor” is Latin and thus straightaway reveals that I’m no longer in Russia. For the West, however, “Pastor” has a religious, Catholic meaning, which consequently evinces a certain irritation in contemporary art.

Using the ideological mask of the pastor I could, nevertheless, successfully maintain the old communal system of relations that were developed and perfected by the Moscow art scene. I gathered trusted authors in the pages of my magazine. As such, I renewed the familiarity and intimacy of samizdat as well as the tradition of verbal, private conversations that occurred in the times before Perestroika and this informed my publishing activities. At the time, *Pastor* was the appropriate frame, the appropriate format for me, and it was also very important for my own artistic development.

AG: The attempt to sustain the familiarity and intimacy of samizdat in *Pastor*'s network seems to also manifest itself in the content. Surely it isn't by chance that its own history, that is, the history of Moscow Conceptualism, is a constant theme of *Pastor*'s issues?

vz: Yes, I tried to reflect upon and capture our heritage and development in the issues. The first issue was called “Names.” Afterwards, there was a “Geography” issue, that is, we positioned ourselves. Then came an issue about making books, since so many Moscow artists earned their livings as illustrators and book designers in publishing houses during the Soviet Union, and the practice of making books was integral to their artistic production.

Incidentally, another publication emerged from the first issue on names that, in a way, reflects upon the foundation of my publishing and editorial activities: *Iz zhitiya promokshogo startsa* (*From the Life of the Wetted Elder*, 1994/95, ten copies). Encrypted initials of all of the nineteen authors and artists of the first issue are depicted. The initials as such symbolize the beginning. Black-and-white childhood photos of the authors and artists are attached to them on a second fanfold—they are recognizable, of course, only to this small flock itself. The majority of the circle from which the publications arose and to whom it was targeted is captured here. The whole thing was organized as a fanfold that can be formed into a circle—thus depicting the hermetic circle of Moscow Conceptualism.

As for the title: Russian literature in general and Dostoevsky in particular depict the “starets” (elder) as someone who demands great respect and who possesses the gift of prophecy. He is practically a holy person. The old man in the title of my book has become wet. “Promokshiy” (wet) has two meanings here: the first suggests the old man has pissed his

pants, that is, he's in a situation in which beginning and end, childhood and old age come together (after all, childhood photos and initials are to be found in my book). The second meaning is based on the word "promokshiy," which contains the abbreviation MOKSHA that stands for "MOskovskaya Kontseptual'naya SHkola" (Moscow Conceptual School). The entire title can then be read as "From the Life of the Elder of the Moscow Conceptual School." I then put myself in the role of an old archivist, which perhaps anticipates the future.

AG: What is different here to the earlier samizdat publications?
 vz: By the 1990s, it naturally needed a new format and a new concept. With the *MANI Files*, you simply couldn't produce fifty copies out of principle. In that way, it wasn't really a magazine. It was much more for internal use. There was no means of distribution. The print run was never an issue for Andrey Monastyrskiy, who later published *MANI Papers (Sborniki MANI)* following the *MANI Files*.³ Of course he distributed the things but he demanded that they should be returned. My concept, in contrast, was: I'll make thirty, fifty or even more copies to give away for free. With one copy for every contributing author. It was important for me that every author received a copy. After all, we could no longer pass them along from hand to hand as we did before. We no longer lived in the Soviet Union, we no longer lived in the same city, but rather in America, France, and Germany.

AG: In comparison to the *MANI Files* and other samizdat publications, *Pastor* doesn't look like it's handmade, like it's samizdat. It lacks the typical aesthetics of dirtiness and poorness. Instead, it seems as if you put a lot of emphasis on the craft not being apparent.

vz: Yes, my books and magazines look like "normal" books that were printed in larger print runs. The aesthetic quality of these works, however, lies in the finesse of the book design, which follows the timeless rules of classical typography. It is not the artist that is needed here but rather the book designer. Everything needs to be competently and professionally executed, the book should immediately reveal itself to the reader though the designer should remain invisible for all intents and purposes. In Russian, this is called "Ofornitel'," which is not a designer or an artist—it's much lower in the ranking. That's why I would never call myself a designer. If anything, then I'd be a typographer.

AG: In utilizing this classical reserved typography, you act as the humble editor who steps behind the participating artists and who forgoes the signature of his/her own authorship. Doesn't that overlook the artistic element?

vz: No. You can be professional in various ways. What is important is the approach. I could sign all of my publications, I even did that in the beginning with *Pastor*. For me, these are the works of an artist. I could even put them in a glass case. These are no different from my other works.

³ Six thematic issues between 1986 and 1991 in an edition of three to five copies.

It is also very important to me to have direct participation in the production process and that the books are not mass-produced. As such, every copy contains my own energy, my vigor, even if it isn't noticed by every reader—precisely because the books look like they were professionally made upon first glance. In reality, however, there's an awful lot of work, time and energy that goes into every edition since I sketch the things on the computer first (in the beginning I did this on a Macintosh Classic), and then I arrange everything on paper, glue them together, etc. Only then do I go to a copy shop, where I not only copy but also cut and bind them myself—with my hands and not with a machine, that's all manual labor! I've even made a video of my process. If it wasn't like this it would be mere production, which for me is no longer art. Of course, it doesn't all add up. But I stick with it: I don't want my publishing activities to be done mechanically.

AG: Then why did you gradually increase the print run?
Was there an increase in demand?

vz: Demand? No. I've never sold them, I gave them away. The increase in print run was connected to my physical capabilities. There are only as many copies as I'm actually able to produce. I thought that I had the strength to make more after the magazine's first two issues of thirty copies. The fourth and fifth issues then had fifty copies and I could also cope with that. In hindsight, the sixty copies I made for the sixth issue proved to be optimal. 100 copies was too much, it was too difficult for a single person. That's why a number of copies from the last two issues, #7 and #8, haven't been finished yet. They're still waiting for the binding and the cover. If someone were to order a copy, I could quickly put it together. Maybe this is a kind of book on demand that has come about—but it wasn't planned of course.

AG: Why did you discontinue the magazine in 2001? Was it a sign that you didn't finish the last editions?

vz: No, they have nothing to do with one another. The times changed. After the eighth issue in 2001, I noticed that the situation was different. Actually, the magazine should have been discontinued much earlier. Its necessity had disappeared, its concept had outlived it, the epoch was over. That which interested me in the Moscow Conceptual School—the circle, the relationships—was gone. As such, my inner drive was lost. Collectives are very important to me, I react strongly to such things.

AG: What happened next?

vz: I made a few of my own, independent publications as the author. And soon thereafter, it became possible to commission books. It was another, new technology and I had the desire to make books like that. A specific format corresponds to every age—you can't hold onto a format forever. In 2005/6 I made a series of portrait books of friends and artist colleagues. In a way, my archival streak was united with my artistic photographs, the book format and the new technologies. These books only exist in three to five copies as well.

After that, I began making what you could call pseudo-catalogs of my large artistic projects. It takes me at least half a month for a catalog, that

is, for the compilation, the photo selection, the writing of texts, typesetting, copy-editing and proofreading. I then order three to five copies of it, I can't afford more. I call it a "pseudo-catalog" since I'm the editor and not the institution that has invited me. They don't want to make a book so I make it myself to have it. This is important for me. It's also a "pseudo-catalog" since it's only a model or sample for a future one. You could say I prepare everything for a future publisher. Everything is ready, and so whoever wants it just needs to take it on.

Recently, I've been dreaming about making books of all my collaborative projects. For me, the book is the appropriate format—as an author—to collect things, edit them, also typographically, analyze and show them—as finished material, as a suggestion. It's how I see things at the moment and it's for later, for posterity. They are bricks for the future. This isn't just a form of documentation. A book is not an archive, it's an artistic gesture. In a way, the books made from my collaborative projects are created in the process of making the project. During the actions of our group Germaniya (Germany), for instance, I already understood that one needs to collect material and make books out of it. Afterwards I gave it to the four contributing artists. Afterwards that was it, it was over. That is, even today, when you can easily produce high print runs, I use a format that emerged from the tradition of the 1980s because I will never need more than ten copies. In principal, I could and should sign them. I have about twenty such books in the planning phases.

AG: Do these books also "function" as publications, in the definition you previously gave for samizdat publications?

vz: Yeah, that works. Everyone who is involved gets a copy of the photo books as well as the books documenting actions, of course. And I show all of the catalogs to my guests. At the end of 2014, for instance, I had an exhibition of my newest works in my studio for two months. You could call it an AptArt.⁴ I showed every visitor the catalog for my installation *Plyaska mērtvykh yazykov. Osen'yaya kolleksiya odezhdy* (Dead Languages Dance. Fall collection) that was at the fifth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2013. We leafed through the pages together and I told them about it. After all, I can't hang everything on the wall. But, I also upload the books as PDFs on my homepage. And sometimes I show the books in exhibitions.

AG: Just like in the samizdat era when the artists were forbidden to exhibit and consequently invited people over to their houses and showed their works there? Is the method of showing the books the old one? Do the catalogs "function" as they previously did in the context of meeting and discussing?

⁴ This kind of unofficial AptArt, or apartment art, in the 1970s and 80s resulted from the exclusion of a large portion of artists and writers from the official art and literary scene in the Soviet Union. This familiar setting was a precondition for generating the informal character of studio visits and the ensuing, now fabled, endless talking about everything and anything in the kitchen.

vz: Yes, exactly. But somehow it's a different model than the previous one.

AG: Is your publishing house Pastor Zond Editions actually registered?

vz: Of course not. It's a part of reality that hasn't been registered anywhere.

AG: Have you ever tried to get an ISBN for one of your publications?

vz: No, the thought never occurred to me, just as it never occurred to me to sell the books as print on demand or to try to find a publishing house. I use up a lot of time and energy and money on these books. Afterwards I put them on the shelf [fig. 3] and then for me they're finished, completed.

AG: You never had the desire to make your publications known to those outside of your narrow circle? Are "outside" readers of no interest to you?

vz: I always clearly had in mind who I was producing my books and magazines for. That is to say, I personally knew all of the readers and I was only geared toward them. It's about fifty or sixty people. With a higher print run, I would enter an entirely new terrain that I can't appreciate and that I don't aspire toward. No, my editorial activities were always aimed at a smaller audience. I doubt that anyone outside of it would be interested in what I'm doing. That's why I choose the smallest possible format I can cope with and show. This form of distribution may be somewhat archaic.



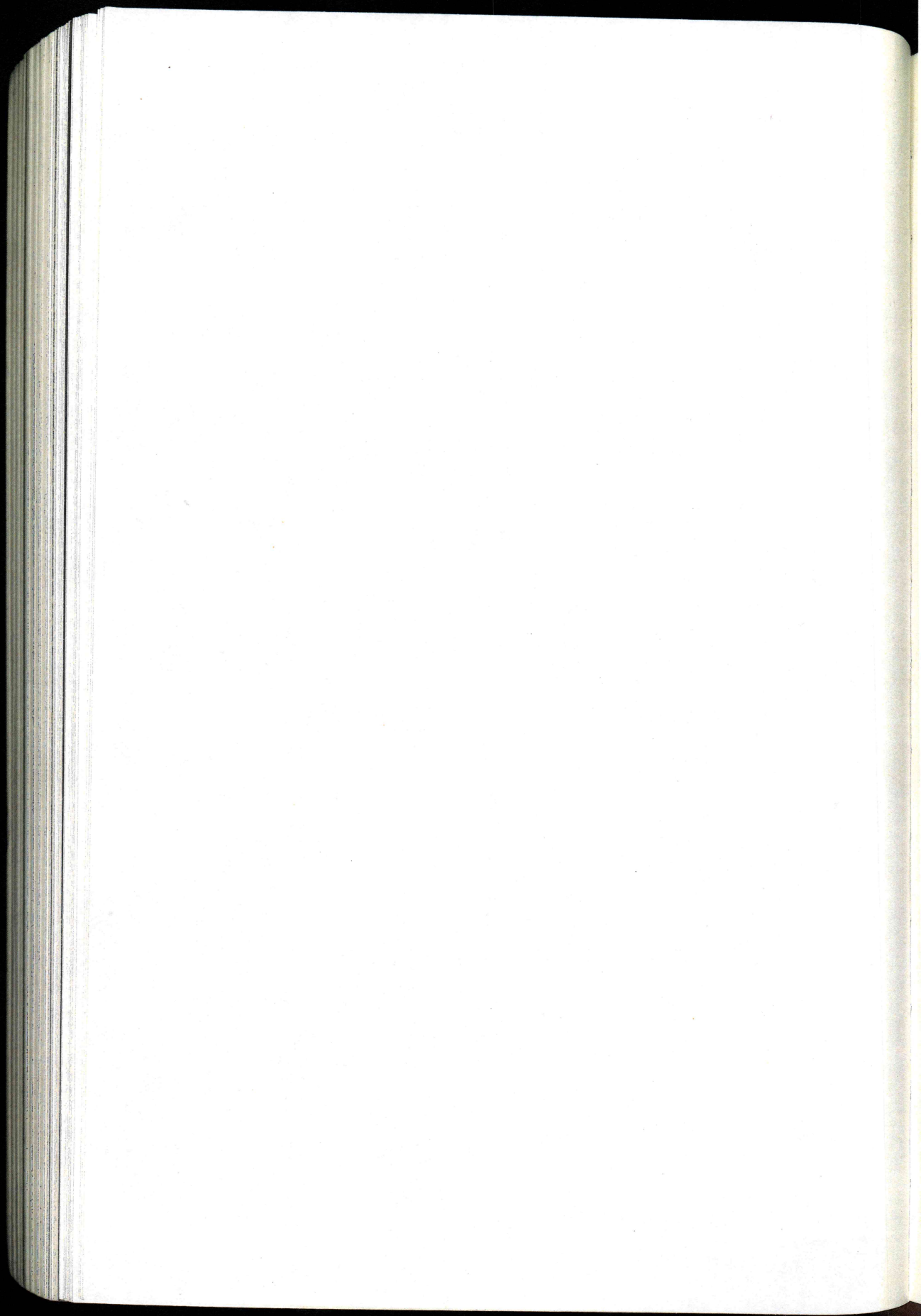
Fig. 3. Recent self-published books by Vadim Zakharov.
Photo: Vadim Zakharov.

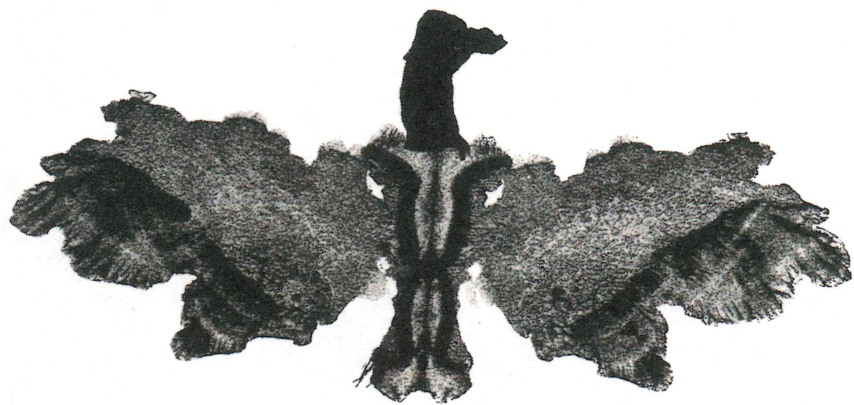
But it also has something authentic to it. Only this form of limitation can create trust, as much between the contributor and the editor as between the two of them and the reader—who for the most part belongs to the circle of contributors or is close to them.

AG: But shouldn't it at least be possible for the public to find out about it?

vz: Of course. If I had extra money, I would maybe produce twenty extra copies and give them to libraries. But for now they're all just collecting on my shelves. Of course this is a very limited sphere of influence, one could say: a very local sphere. But we didn't feel local and isolated even back in the Soviet Union. We always felt like part of the culture at large. We were convinced that we were contributing to the culture at large with our circles and publications and not just filling a niche or serving particular interests. Which is more the case today when everything is crumbling into smaller and smaller subgroups. But back then, we were culture. That's also why it isn't true to say that samizdat was the underground or counterculture. The thing is, I take it for granted that I'm anchored in and well-known enough in Russian culture. That's why every book I make has a certain impact, it's always totally clear what place it has. That's also why it isn't interesting to me to worry about the sales or the distribution of my things. Maybe nobody knows about these books. I have no idea what the next generation will say or whether these things will ever be archived. But I do know why I make them and who I make them for.

Translated by Shane Anderson





A Signature
of Indifference

Lucas W. Melkane

Only free beings can be strangers to each other.
They have a shared freedom but that is *precisely* what separates them.

Using my own artistic practice as the starting point, the following is a suggestion to the means of making public from the perspective of indifference, and an attempt to unfold the idea of an artwork which exists at a threshold.

Indifference is a space where differences meet, it is an in-between space. Strategies such as representation, replacement, and separation are commonly used in the act of making something public, but how do these strategies coincide with an artwork that exists within indifference? From the perspective of an idea of indifference, the act of making public may have to be rethought. Because how can it even be possible to make anything that is placed at a threshold public when it is neither visible nor invisible, neither proper nor improper, but something in itself? Is the act of making public the actualization of the artwork, not toward an end, but as a perpetual taking place? Can the signature of indifference be a strategy that can escape the condition of the spectacular capitalism, which mediates social relations through images, everywhere in present society? Will the signature of indifference be a way of changing the relationship between the artist and the artworks?

The following example, from my own artistic practice, of the act of making public is found in theft.

It is the theft of a backpack, one containing a collection of artworks that has been purposefully curated to be stolen. The backpack was brought on a trip to Southeast Asia in the spring of 2015. It was used for small outings to various places, and as such it retained its intended function. Exposed in use, anyone could steal this backpack.

By being in the backpack, the artworks are indifferent to any other objects that the backpack could contain, and as such not even different from the backpack.

The theft of the backpack is a situation in which the artworks are being actualized. They now form part of the context of a theft.

One of the works placed in the backpack resembles the 1959 English edition of *Jealousy* by Alain Robbe-Grillet. The former has been rewritten word by word in order to appropriate the language style of the latter.

The story in the book takes place on a tropical banana plantation where the narrative is told in a dispersed movement, implicating that the same events repeat over and over again like distorted pictures.

Two artworks have been added to the story in such a way that they appear in certain rooms of the plantation house every time they show up in the narrative. The artworks have been formed to be indifferent from the language of Robbe-Grillet, following the narrative, only to appear when the specific

rooms are described. One of the appended artworks is a postcard, with the picture of Sandy Island on the front, exposed in the bedroom.

A print run of 100 copies was made to be set in different contexts in different parts of the world. As of now, copies have been made public in Berlin, Istanbul, Tokyo, London, England's Lake District, Beirut, Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Mostar, Venice, Stockholm, Paris, Bangkok, Amsterdam, and Geneva. All of the books have been placed in different situations and settings while sharing the commonality of being in a zone of indistinction within the given context, and like the situation of the theft, it leaves the works in the backpack indistinguishable to the witness.

The rewritten book is not a readymade, a copy, or a representation, but is rather like a sculpture, which attempts to portray an object, and like every translation and mediation it includes a change, the work is a reassembling of the (object) context of concern, that will never be one to one.

Like an inverted readymade expropriated from what I would like to call the common gaze of separation, the signature of indifference places the artwork within an outside. Today's contemporary art is dominated by the idea of the readymade, which constitutes a gaze of difference separating objects in their presentation and separating them from the world. Thus the discourse of art risks turning objects into spectacle, i. e., into objects that demand a gaze to exist.

By being placed outside this zone of separation, the artwork is able to enter the sphere of indifference, where the object is not separated from the world, but included in its context, in such a way that the artwork has its own presentation, its own image.

The means is thus the threshold between the context and the appearance of the work, which is coming into visibility as its own appearance.

The movement of the artwork is then separated from its own separation, brought back into the world, away from the gaze that forces it away from its context, and therefore escapes the spectacular that turns everything particular into spectacle. The work is left in a condition where there is no longer any point in the gaze of separation, where the work is distinguishable from its context, as in what makes it different, and should rather be approached in its indifference, in its taking place.

It is worth noting that the strategy of indifference is not a refusal of an exhibition space, or any other defined space as such, but merely a strategy that can be converted into all contexts, as long as there are differences.

Language's ability to transform singularities into members of a class by tracing "the antinomy of the individual and the universal has its origin in language. The word 'tree' designates all trees indifferently, insofar as it posits the proper universal significance in place of singular ineffable trees [...]."

This process of belonging in the language resamples the relation that makes the experience between the book in the backpack and the context indifferent. By being placed in the contingency of the world, actualized by the theft, the appearance of the artwork is transformed into something general.

It is not an attempt to bring the artwork back into an original place or essence, but to let it exist by its own means.

The artwork that has its own image is placed inside its context in such a way that it is determined through the totality of its possibilities, they exist outside of its being. This means that the experience of the artwork is determined by the possibilities within its context. The outside is not another place in regard to properties, but precisely the experience of indifference between the work and its context.

The means of making public are not something else in regard to the artwork but constitute a possibility for a transition from one actuality to another.

In order to grasp the artwork as more than its function within a given context, as different from its form, it must be understood as an idea, as an image without an end.

The idea is what escapes the belonging in language, "the idea of a thing is the thing in *itself*."

The idea is then what draws the artwork away from its context, not in a movement toward any absence of object or context as such but toward the artwork itself, toward what reveals the artwork as it is.

The aim of the artwork is not to render a specific reading of its content or context but to reveal its being by means of its own image.

The artwork of indifference is what reveals a form of communality as such. It is therefore a relation between differences that meet at a threshold.

After the experience of such an artwork, how is it even possible to think any idea outside, beyond, or before the systems of difference that are already at work? Then, can indifference be determined as the idea of a relationship?

The act of making public forces the artist to be strangely remote from their artwork.

The image of the artist and the image of the artwork are not indifferent, which means that they can never coincide fully and constitute a relationship like the one that is to be found in language, and in the concept of enunciation. "An enunciation is always inscribed in a particular *subjectivity*, a subjective context characterized by semiotic *intentionality*. Someone is *performing the enunciation*; enunciation is an act performed by a speaker who stands in relation to an addressee." The artist is then present in the artwork as the subject is in the enunciation. Just as the subjectivity is inscribed in the exercise of language, and the artist is in the making of the artwork.

According to my conception, the artwork is like an enunciation that has left the speaker to become its own speaker, and in that sense it addresses itself

as such, and therefore it is not a relationship that can be grasped visually or in any particular aesthetic property outside of its context, and then lead back to the artist, but must be found in the very existence of the work as an idea, in its being indifferent.

The act of making public is not the separation of the object from its context in order to make it different, but the separation of the making from the artist, toward the world, and thus it is the actualization of the artwork not toward a final form or end, but toward its own existence. Actualization must be thought of not merely as the realization of potentiality but also as the act of impotentiality, to be and not to be. Potential and impotential at the same time, actualized as its own image, suspended between being public and not public, available and not available, concealment and unconcealment. To make public is thus to give the artwork to itself, to its own potentiality to become.

The artwork is without any specific message: its properties are such that none of them constitute a difference.

To communicate the work without its belonging to a context is to communicate its non-belonging to differences.

To communicate its belonging to a context is to make it indifferent.

But to communicate the work as itself, as an idea of a relation, is to communicate the space between belonging and non-belonging, communication and image, fiction and reality.

This space is the point where the visibility of the work itself is coming into visibility.

That is also why insofar as it is indifferent from its context, there is no proper way to experience the work, and so the proper has no other content than the improper.

The artwork is not something static but a dynamic structure oscillating between differences, as long as it is itself.

This means that it is the witness who extends the artwork into something of interest.

Credits

Giorgio Agamben
Line Brandt
Émile Benveniste
Alain Robbe-Grillet
Guy Louis Debord
Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht
Jean-Luc Godard
Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Steve Reich
Emmanuel Lévinas
Philip Pilekjær
Walls and Space

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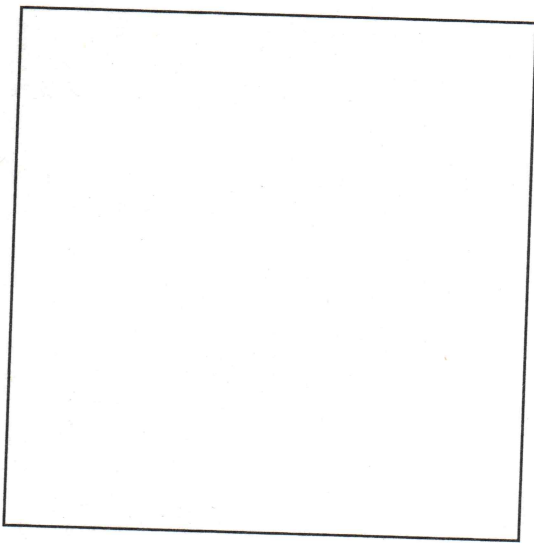


Fig. 1

**NO-ISBN –
Conceptual Perspectives
on Contemporary
Autonomous Publishing**

Leo Findeisen in Conversation with Bernhard Cella

Flashback*

LEO FINDEISEN: As a fine artist intensely involved with the book as an analog medium, you've been occupied with books as artistic material: collecting over 10,000 recent publications, curating, exhibiting, or copying books, and even producing your own. In your model spaces, salon exhibitions, and performances, the books are constantly set in new juxtapositions. In this way, a space of knowledge has emerged, which I experience as both novel and surprisingly concrete. Maybe we can explore more of the background in our conversation. To start, can you describe how you became interested in books as artistic material? When did you become involved in working with books for the first time?

BERNHARD CELLA: My earliest memories are of starting high school. Looking back, I was driven by two new forms of foreignness: the first was foreign languages, especially the new English course book at school, which was designed in such a boring way. The other was the fact that, for some of my classmates, it was a kind of sport to go and steal cosmetic products and other little objects from the store during the lunch break. I began to photograph the stolen objects with my pocket camera. Over the course of the school year, I glued the photos into the English course book and added comments. After a while, these documents of everyday life at school intermingled with what was taught at school. The blending of foreign languages and tabooed actions resulted in new content. Back then, however, I would never have regarded this as conceptualizing a book. I only gained that perspective later.

LF: How long did it take until your first artist's book?

BC: That was in the early 1990s, when I began to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. My first public processual work was called *1 m² Kunst* (1 m² Art). It was an attempt to create a model of the conditions under which art is created, reviewed, and marketed. In an empty showroom opposite the Academy, I painted a grid of 96 squares of 1 m² each, in which the names of individual protagonists of the Vienna art scene were written. I then informed the artists about their presence in my installation and invited them to the opening. In the end, this led to a foldable catalog called *14 m² Dokumentation zu "1 m² Kunst"* (14 m² Documentation for "1 m² Art"). For me, this publication was the first attempt at developing an artist's book out of a process that took place earlier.

* Parts of this interview have been published in Bernhard Cella, Leo Findeisen, Agnes Blaha, eds., *NO-ISBN: On Self-Publishing* (Cologne: Walther König, 2015).

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ernhard Cella

The Starting Point for the NO-ISBN Project

Leo Findelsen / Bernhard Cella

LF: How is your current involvement in the self-publishing scene and NO-ISBN related to the process of collecting books in the Salon für Kunstbuch (Salon for Artists' books)?

bc: At the beginning of a process like this, there's nothing more than the notion of a possible "subject." A few artists' books by my peers inspired me, and I also created a few. That sparked my curiosity, and I simply pursued it. As an artist, what impressed me most was the potential for direct translation: in self-publishing people act without filters. In some of the works, the artist's affects and perceptions lead to an odd, deeply personal type of expression.

NO-ISBN is only one part of this, a subgroup of my general interest in books and the art that is produced around the world—its existence only became visible gradually. The development of NO-ISBN as an independent concept is inherent to the material itself. In the first years of the Salon I noticed that a lot of the artists' books I had were missing an ISBN. What defines these books is, as it were, a silent "no." I reacted to that in 2009 with a poster performance at MoMA PS1 in New York. I simply sent out a public call for people to send books without an ISBN to the Salon in Vienna (fig. 1).

What really surprised me was that nearly 500 books arrived over the next few weeks. This was not even a singular incident. Hubert Kretschmer from Munich, an expert of the history of artists' books since the 1970s,¹ experienced something similar about three decades earlier. In 1978, with his recently founded producers' gallery, he put an advert in *Kunstforum*, the leading German art magazine of that time. In the advert, he called for contributions for an exhibition of recent artists' books that he wanted to host at his private home. He received approximately 250 copies. He described this unexpected feedback as "kicking the hornets' nest." Kretschmer also mentioned similar practices of collecting within an art context, such as the mail art movement, in which letters, and also objects, are exchanged across different countries, even across the borders of countries with censorship regimes. Very clear rules were established for mail art. For instance, whoever called for an exhibition of mail artworks automatically committed herself to returning a minimal catalog of the works, including any new addresses, to everyone involved. In this slow give and take process, each individual exhibition could increase each participant's potential for networking.

Most books in my collection came from the U.S., Europe, and Japan, that is, from the Western cultural sphere after World War II. The mailing lists of today's self-publishing scenes were also crucial for this result. These same books have formed the base inventory of my material collection ever since and I use them as a starting point for developing artworks and new concepts.

¹ Archive Artist Publications, Munich. See his websites artistbooks.de and Hubert-Kretschmer.de.

On the Emergence of New Works from the Salon für Kunstbuch

NO-ISBN

LF: You run your Salon für Kunstbuch—a “1:1 model of a bookshop” with opening hours, a selection of books, and an event program—as a conceptual and fine artist. Could you share examples of how your own works emerge from your everyday studio routine?

bc: The prehistories of the works differ. After I had spent a whole decade abroad, I returned to Vienna and set up a local studio in 2006. This is, for instance, reflected in an early work from this period, the artist’s book *Artist at Work*, or *Neokuratin* [fig. 2]. It mirrors my own search for artistically autonomous models of working in the present. We developed a Band-Aid that helps artists reduce the auto-destructive dimension of what is expected by the curator. Each issue of *Artist at Work* contains a package of Neokuratin, together with numerous photos of colleagues who volunteered as test subjects in their studio routine.

The Salon für Kunstbuch is, overall, the result of my search for a coherent combination of a studio, exhibition, and withdrawal space. The beginning of the Salon in 2007 then coincided with a Documenta. I carried out a product performance at the Venice Art Biennale, the Art Basel and the Documenta, addressing the question “What does the artist do after the death of the curator?”

The constant interaction with the works of others in book form and the everyday work with artists’ books led to, for example, an installation on the published work of the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Everybody in the art world will probably have encountered one of Obrist’s interview books, so his publications were strikingly present in the Salon. In 2012, I had assembled all sixty-nine titles that had been published until then. I painted the book covers in watercolor in their original size [fig. 3], and presented them on a rotating turntable under the title *Covers*. This work was then published as an artist’s book during the Vienna Art Week 2012.

Other development processes, such as *Anarchives* (2011) or *Manquants* (2012) emerged from the interaction with visitors of the Salon after I established opening times for the studio, during which anyone could come in. The *Manquants* are a group of works consisting of tapestries that were created due to a breach of common practice. In 2011, I noticed that more than fifty publications were stolen from the Salon. Even worse, the theft could, for the most part, be traced back to colleagues. Most of the missing exhibition pieces were not for sale at all, and included items that were given to me as a loan, or they were unique pieces. I am really amazed how acceptable theft has become in today’s art world.

Subsequently, I translated several photos of the covers of missing books into a series of tapestries called *Manquants* [fig. 4], a collection of

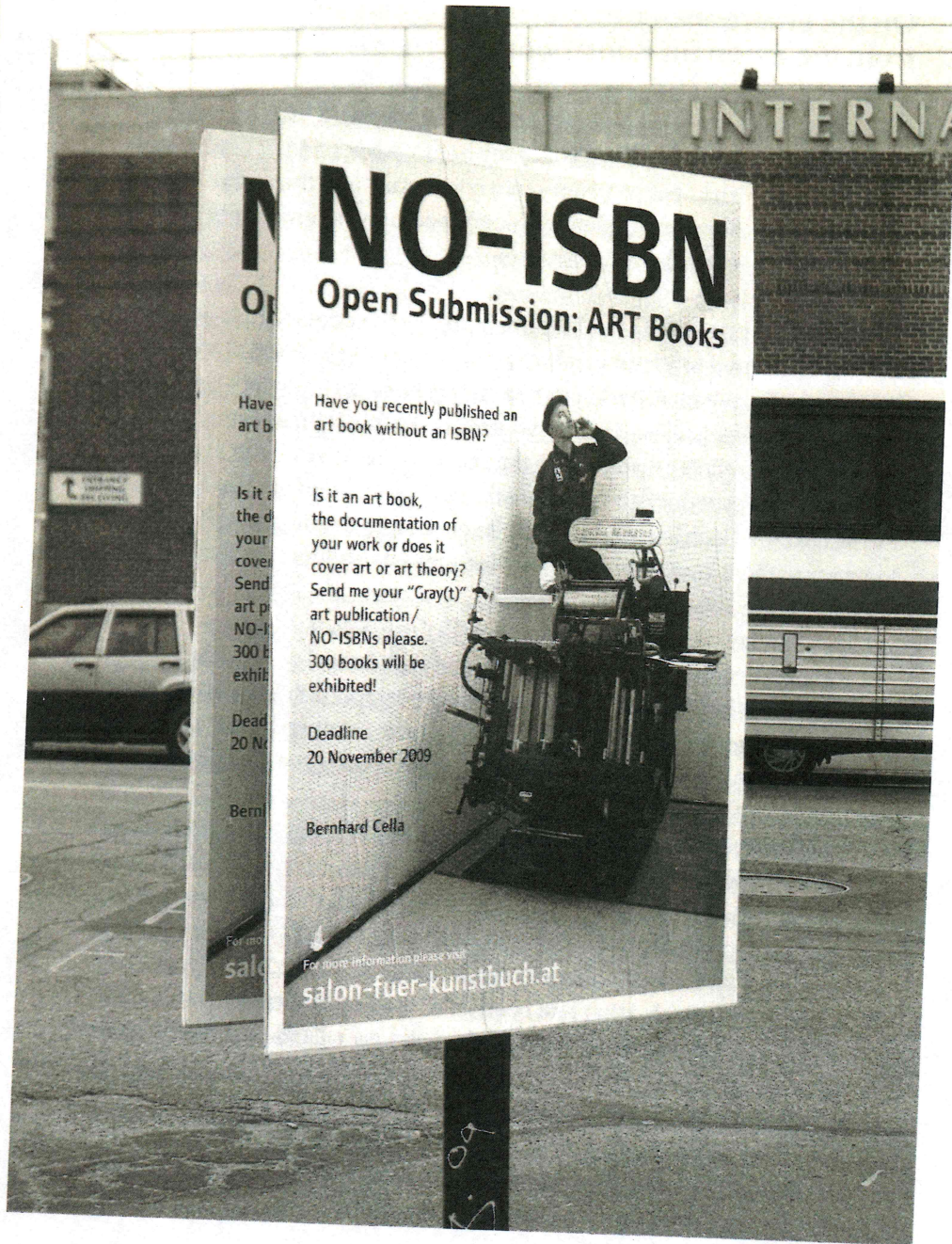


Fig. 1. Bernhard Cella, Call for NO-ISBN Publications, PS1, New York, September 2009.

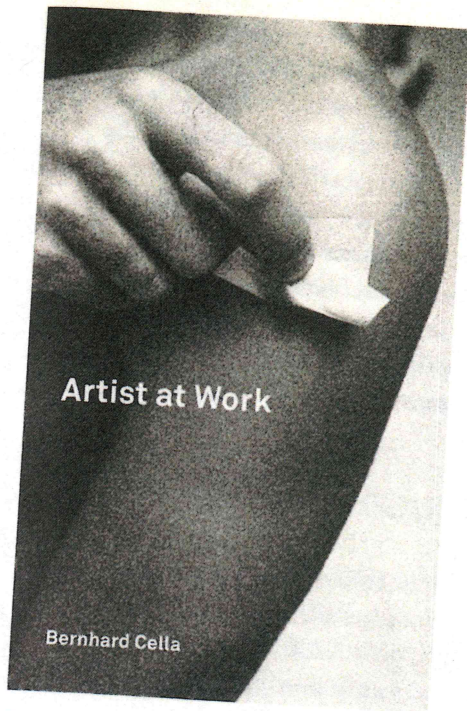


Fig. 2.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 3.

- Fig. 2. Bernhard Cella, *Artist at Work*, includes *Neokuratin* (Vienna, 2007).
- Fig. 3. Bernhard Cella, *Hans Ulrich Obrist neben Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Vienna, 2011).
- Fig. 4. Bernhard Cella, *Manquants*, tapestry in Jacquard knitting technique, Paris 2012.

injuries. This was my attempt to return what was violently taken from me to my studio in the form of translations. *Manquants* are a psycho-energetic transformer of sorts; they work quite well.

Then there is the *Anarchive* series from 2012, where art books of the same color family are gathered. It arose as a reaction to the habit of some guests who walked in the door and immediately asked, "Where is the theory?" "Where are the photo books?" or "Where are the books with drawings?" Meanwhile, the entire salon collection is arranged according to color. The actual sense of this color grouping is thus to interrupt the visitors' existing systems of organization in a formally surprising way, that is, through an alternative order, and lead to an encounter with unexpected works.

History and Meaning of ISBN and NO-ISBN

LF: It seems that NO-ISBN arose from your constant dealings with your stock of recent artists' books. Before we talk about the contents and peculiarities of NO-ISBN, I would like to suggest that we explore its historical origins: What is the historical connection between ISBN and artists' books?

bc: ISBN is the current international standard for the exchange of books. The biggest book retailer in Great Britain, W. H. Smith, announced its intention to computerize its entire storage system in 1965 and was inquiring about suggestions concerning an indexing method. The answer was soon published by a mathematician and statistician at the University of Dublin, Gordon Foster, who used to be, by the way, a colleague of the computing pioneer Alan Turing, and a researcher for the secret service MI6. His system of numbers served as the basis for the ISBN, which was later internationally standardized and significantly contributed to establishing an electronic cataloging system for mass book distribution. If you know how to read it, the series of digits that makes up the ISBN can tell you, for example, the language or the country where the book was first published. As each ISBN contains a check digit that results from applying an algorithm to the other digits at its end, the ISBN can be understood as a recursive semiotic entity.

LF: What did the creators of artists' books make of the introduction of the ISBN back then?

bc: First of all, artists' books had been published long before that—it doesn't make sense to talk about NO-ISBN before the introduction of ISBN. The picture first changed around 1970 when there was a genuine either—or. From there, the independent publishers of artists' books and art magazines in the 1970s continued to frequently publish without an ISBN, as did political activists and fanzine makers.

Another aspect of the history has to do with technical development, as previously, only very few people were able to produce books. That was the case into the 1980s as the production of printed works was much more elaborate until then, and some of the steps in the production process required professional knowledge, which meant that those who wanted to self-publish were soon confronted with issues they couldn't resolve. But gradually, production steps such as the typesetting, exposure of films and the creation of the printer's copy could be done on a computer. With digital printing, it became possible to produce smaller editions or to reprint them. As a result, there are lower thresholds regarding access to production, and the annoying problem of storage is, at least, alleviated.

NO-ISBN: The Collection

LF: Next, I'd like to talk in more detail about the act of collecting at the Salon. We could begin with some basic facts: what are the current figures in terms of books, and what publications are assembled in your Salon?

bc: At the moment there are around 10,000 different publications, mainly art books and artists' books, which is where the Salon gets its name. The two differ in that an artist's book is a uniquely designed publication in small editions, whereas the genre of art books also includes exhibition catalogs, theoretical publications, and new editions of classical avant-garde works. That's the collection at first glance. At second glance, it becomes clear that a fifth of the books have no ISBN, there are roughly 2,000 NO-ISBNs.²

LF: Is there anything else that distinguishes them other than this missing number?

bc: Let me put it this way: They open up unexpected perspectives on other scenes and aesthetics. At micro fairs—and this is my own empirical estimation—about a third of the titles offered there don't have an ISBN. Micro fairs have managed to establish themselves as an autonomous market place, they follow their own rules. The prices are in fact rather low, usually below twenty Euros per title. The artist Pat Steir has come up with a definition of artists' books that also applies to NO-ISBN: "Artists' books are: 1. Portable; 2. Durable; 3. Inexpensive; 4. Intimate; 5. Non-precious; 6. Replicable; 7. Historical; 8. Universal."

Small editions are typical for NO-ISBN. In most cases, less than 100 copies are printed. If no price has been determined, I decide on it, based on my own assessment. Usually, we follow the authors' recommendations

² Cf. the list in Bernhard Cella, Leo Findeisen, Agnes Blaha, eds., *NO-ISBN: On Self-publishing* (Cologne: Walther König, 2015), 1–74.

as well as the usances and margins of the book trade. You can only get the international titles by directly paying for them anyway, which is also due to the costs of shipping. Goods on consignment are therefore limited to German-language publishing houses.

LF: Are there commonalities between the NO-ISBN books concerning their contents?

bc: The contents are often self-referential and erratic in a social respect, if the book is only aimed at a circle of friends or a few art people, or conceptual if an artist's book, for instance, contains the text of an exhibition or performance and an essential part of the work remains inaccessible. The actors in this area are as diverse as their ideas and the printed works that they develop. A typical example of this kind of book would be a booklet that addresses the inside, focusing on the private subject and his or her sensitivities. But it only presents what everybody already knows, anyway. It is almost uninformative. The motives and their sequences are interchangeable.

I may have presented the consequences that digital production has for independent book production too much in a positive light, even though this might sound strange: publishing can also mean to retreat into the private realm. The question is then: is the political sphere already too aggressive or dangerous for the authors to deal with it? Or do such aspirations not even occur to them? Maybe there is neither an aspiration nor a desire to participate in a public discourse about anything. NO-ISBN can, quite succinctly, indicate that someone is not at all bothered by others who assign him or her to the mainstream, that is, something everybody is doing. The collection of NO-ISBN ultimately covers the entire spectrum from subversive gesture to New Biedermeier.

Unfortunately, the epoch that we now remember as Biedermeier is more present than ever, that is, in the form of the climate of the surveillance state. After 1819, the Prince of Metternich installed the most powerful censorship and spying network in Vienna that had ever existed in Central Europe. For instance, any publications of less than 320 pages, such as pamphlets or magazines, were strictly controlled and banned, if deemed necessary. Via relay stations in Mainz and Frankfurt, Metternich became the best-informed man on the continent. So the citizens under surveillance focused on their domesticity, whether they wanted to or not.

LF: In the context of NO-ISBN, are there also books in which someone is deliberately opposing the contemporary Biedermeier of his or her environment?

bc: No, not directly. But in some NO-ISBNs, there is an indirect awareness-building against these Metternichian tendencies. There are numerous references to varieties of voluntary self-censorship given the comprehensive

surveillance and recording of our phone calls, bank transactions, and whereabouts. This sense of our time is reflected in many NO-ISBNs, but it does not create a public awareness that would present a potential for opposition.

LF: Well, things are not as bad yet as they were at the beginning of the Biedermeier era, fortunately. Despite all reservations concerning registration systems, there is no alternative to the ISBN in the publishing business, as far as I know. So if you publish without an ISBN, does that mean that you run the risk of being ignored by all public collections and archives?

bc: An ISBN surely increases the chances of being registered in a national archive, since it is the purpose of the archive to represent the entire production of written culture. I think, however, that the public libraries are currently suffering from a severe lack of finances and staff, which means that invaluable competencies will vanish without any replacement. When they are buying books, they have no time for research. Our own use of digital media also contributes to the ISBN sphere's loss of relevance. Putting a few key words and the author's name in the online search suffices, the self-publishers usually have a website or they use Tumblr or Facebook to advertise their products.

LF: How do titles that renounce an ISBN, but still manage to reach an audience, participate in a public dialogue?

bc: Many publishing artists regard, for instance, political participation as an essential component of their creative processes. This can directly concern the content of the book, its democratizing properties in production, distribution, and reception, or its function as a role model for an alternative economical system, as a book market distinct from the art market. I should give you some examples.

The publication *The American Holocaust* was produced to accompany the petition to return Montezuma's crown which had been given to Emperor Karl V of Habsburg as a war trophy by the Spanish conquerors to Mexico. Today, the featherwork crown is kept at the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna. This NO-ISBN was anonymously published in 2013, which suggests that the topic and therefore the authorship of this book was considered to be politically sensitive.

The artist's book *Black Market* by Pawel Althamer documents the development of a work. For more than two years, Pawel Althamer has worked on a group of sculptures called *Black Market*, which has, as its center, a self-portrait of the artist in African style. At this time, he encountered Issayas, Elmi, and Emanuel, three African immigrants living in Warsaw. Pawel invited them to come to Berlin for three weeks and to work on his group of sculptures. *Black Market* documents each individual step and decision.

Further installations of the ensemble take place within the same context, that is, the intercultural work community.

There is a NO-ISBN that was published over the last few years in Vienna by the Sozialistische Patientenkollektiv (SPK, Socialist Patients' Collective) or the Patients' Front, respectively, as an "Organ of patho-practical patients' resistance." In the course of the so-called anti-psychiatric movements of the 1970s, some people decided to "turn the illness into a weapon against the sick system." Numerous connections to the radical left also stem from this time. On the Internet, you can find that an Austrian party of the same name was founded in 2000, but nothing more. Whether an ISBN was left out deliberately here remains unclear.

There is also a direct reference to political discourses in *Asyl aktuell. Zeitschrift der Asylkoordination Österreich* (Asylum today. Journal of Asylum Coordination Austria). It documents, for instance, cases of "human rights violations at the fortress Europe" in 2006. The contents of this series of publications are often only relevant for a certain period of time, for example if they concern the current guidelines for seeking asylum. I would imagine that, for this type of publication in the non-profit sector, other aspects are more important than an ISBN, anyway.

Why did you shoot me? is a notable publication that I bought in Mexico City in 2014. Its background is the scandal surrounding the murder of forty-three Mexican students. There are no indications where or when the work was published, there is also no ISBN and there are no page numbers. The publication in fact merely consists of the cover, title page, empty pages, and two bullet holes from pistol shots. I would call this NO-ISBN an object book, a sculpture that embodies the violence inflicted on these young people, and its aim is to keep the question "why?" alive in a poignant form.

The U.S. artist Martine Workman has compiled any mention of food in Prince's lyrics and ordered them into six groups (breakfast, fruit, beverages, fast food, meat, and dessert). I would call her book an interesting hybrid between artist's book and fanzine.

The last case I want to mention is a pamphlet in the form of three critical treatises on Wikileaks, the cryptocurrency bitcoin, and the Free Software Movement. Interestingly, the only author mentioned is The Wine and Cheese Appreciation Society of Greater London/Kittens Editorial Collective. The magazine can be downloaded for free on antination.org, and the people behind it encourage further exchanges about its contents, but they strictly avoid mentioning their names.

These examples illustrate the range of strategies behind NO-ISBNs. A couple of artists have also already asked if they could use NO-ISBN as a label for a certain publication, as in "published by NO-ISBN." I was happy to agree. They understood that NO-ISBN is also an interface that I put into space.

Concerning the Boom of Artists' Books and Micro Fairs

NO-ISBN

LF: I would now like to talk about the boom in the artists' book production and trade that took place over the last decade. How does the scene itself explain this development?

bc: The fact that the artist's book is currently experiencing a revival has certainly to do with the art market itself. Art dealers have discovered, or rather re-discovered, the artist's book as an original and lucrative form of art, just as they did in the case of photography, which was regarded mostly as a reproducible document up to the 1980s. During the 1960s, the intention of the originators of the genre—Stanley Brouwn, Peter Downsborough, Sol LeWitt, Ed Ruscha, Dieter Roth, Lawrence Weiner—had been to create a work of art that was independent of its location, producible in high numbers and thus cheap to purchase. Titles from this era possibly saw the most pronounced increase in value on the art market. Accordingly, dealers, collectors and specialized fairs grew exponentially. By now, this sphere has created its own form of distribution system, the so-called micro fairs, where the titles that are produced in this field can be seen and disseminated.

LF: How old is the phenomenon of micro fairs?

bc: The first fairs emerged in the mid-1990s—Artist's Book Triennial, Vilnius (1994), Rencontres de l'édition de création, Marseille (1997), Editions/Artists' Book Fair, New York (1998)—while most of the more than fifty current fairs were only founded a few years ago.

A book fair can create encounters between different actors. There are artists who produce their own books. Then, there are second-hand bookshops that offer books that are out of print. Additionally, there are publishing houses, big and small, that only promote their own titles. A micro fair usually takes place as an additional event of a book fair. It's often the alternative publishers or publishers of books without ISBN who present very interesting and enriching titles. Most of these publishers are happy if their book sales cover their travel expenses. I frequently have to think of Andy Warhol's statement that, in the future, there will be fifteen minutes of fame for everybody, since the artists who confidently work with this form of publishing are often not interested in the durability of their publication, at least during certain phases of their personal development. In fact, an artists' books fair generates a great amount of attention, and it gives like-minded people the opportunity to meet each other. Personal exchanges and marketing efforts for one's own work are not at all looked down upon, but rather celebrated. The processes have accelerated and the so-called micro fairs have developed into traffic junctions for art.

This also has an influence on certain publishing houses and the artists' book trade. A new public sphere has developed here, and also a new market place. In this context, I find the Arts Libris in Barcelona interesting. Together with Mela Dávila Freire, who was the first head of the MACBA Study Centre in Barcelona, the Swiss curator Moritz Küng co-founded this artists' books fair. This fair also wants to find its own profile and make it more poignant. In the future, the Arts Libris will try to, for example, attract a larger number of international participants. To reach this goal, they generate content themselves—also in order to distinguish itself from other fairs. In 2015, Arts Libris was organizing, for the second time, an international symposium; it presented the exhibition *This is the Cover of the Book* (named after the book published in 1964 by Fluxus-artist George Brecht); it featured a Speakers' Corner for exhibitors, where they could present their program, their most recent publications, or upcoming projects. Then, Arts Libris purchased books and works available at the fair for the collection of Fundació Banc Sabadell and initiated their own series of artists' books, the AL series. It is connected to a production award for an artist featured at the fair, who will be invited to present a new title at next year's fair. Küng's aim for the development of Arts Libris is therefore to find a well-adjusted balance that leads to a reciprocal interchange of the alternative and the established. Concerning the micro fairs, it is safe to assume that similar strategies are being developed elsewhere.

With respect to the ability of these formats to temporarily bring together heterogeneous approaches in art and political discourse, it might be interesting to note what happened to us recently at the book fair in Frankfurt. We were there to present our book *NO-ISBN: On Self-Publishing* (2015). Parallel to the annual book fair, the Städelschule, a renowned art institution, and Merve-Verlag—who publishes books on philosophy, political theory, and art theory—jointly organized a micro fair. Visitors of the book fair could also visit an exhibition by the school's graduates. The class on "Pure Fiction" writing by Mark von Schlegell enacted an experimental theatre play that attracted more than 300 guests from very diverse crowds of art. And they managed to blend two formats into each other with the DJ who followed up with dance music. The conceptual synergies that can arise from the format of micro fairs are obviously as manifold as the contents of the artists' books themselves.

LF: I'd like to close our conversation with a reference to the social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and his treatise *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* from the 1980s. The influence of his theories extended to the later development of a "material turn" and the "Actor Network Theory" in the cultural sciences. With Appadurai, one can learn to distinguish between such basic terms as an "object," a "thing," a "tradable good," an "artifact," and a "subject." And at the background of such distinctions

of terms is, for him, the knowledge that objects possess the potential for social meaning and acting.

But in 1986, Appadurai could not yet foresee the influence of Amazon or eBay, where all objects potentially become goods that can be traded throughout the world. With Facebook and Google, the most complete and up-to-date profile achieves the highest price, our data shadow is sold as a tradable good. Therefore, in 2015, Appadurai also opens a new perspective on your collection of NO-ISBN: Each of these books presents the subjectivity of a potentially non-eavesdropped "other." This other does indeed live far away on the same globe, but they have not held back from expressing themselves in the materiality of book form and then allowed this object to circulate freely. Perhaps without even noticing, he or she has published without becoming Utah data.³

To conclude, I would like to invite you to present a prognosis for the future of analog publishing. Will NO-ISBN be valued in a hundred years as art, or as purchasable products, just like others? Will they change hands in exchange for other objects or for an abstract currency? Which role will the book play in contemporary art?

bc: A one-hundred-year prognosis? Before the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair, numerous articles in the press talked about a counter-trend to digitization, a newly increasing interest in the printed book that could be seen through various indications—the number of book fair visitors, the interest of the younger generation, nostalgic bibliophiles. But whatever isn't circulating online also renounces a form of meaning—that no one can know—in tomorrow's world. In Vienna, we are, by the way, still working on a platform for artists' books—with or without an ISBN—that individual authors or small publishing houses will be able to use to present themselves and make their products visible.⁴

Concerning the one-hundred-year question: indeed, what will the form and content of each book still be able to say about its author, their respective discipline, their place of origin, their intentions, and cultural environment? In the end, it is the materiality of the information bearer "artist's book" that seems to support such a prognosis. I am sure that in the future, a lot of features of analog printing will again play a role in society. NO-ISBNs are books, and books are stable.

³ This term refers to the US National Security Agency (NSA), which is setting up the world's largest digital storage center in Bluffdale (UT). The global public learned about it through the disclosures of Edward Snowden and the Academy Award winner *Citizenfour* by Laura Poirtras. Their plans include making transcripts of conversations, emails, messages, Skype conversations, etc., permanently available upon request for decades to come.

⁴ NO-ISBN.net. The whole collection of NO-ISBNs can be seen there in addition to information about their production and the number of copies printed.