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Valera and Natasha Cherkashin: Practicing Self-Historicization in Post-Soviet Russia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ongoing commitment by academics on the matter of compensating the long-standing lack of a systematic art-historical narrative of eastern Europe, still some peripheral stories are left outside, or not properly considered, by some of the most successful attempts regarding the re-construction of an Art History of the East. The purpose of my work is motivated by the will to put the spotlight on one of these excluded stories, that of the duo of artists, as well as partners in life, formed by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin. By doing so, I wish to present the Cherkashins' case to speak of what seems to be a peculiar phenomenon of art of former Eastern European countries: Self-Historicization. The latter proved to be the response, at times intentional, to an absent institution – the latter meant in full sense – which should have been concerned about art historiography of Soviet and Post-Soviet times. Therefore, the aim of my study is to investigate how the phenomenon of self-historicization reveals itself through the practice of the Cherkashins to the extent that it is almost impossible to consider one without the other. I will argue for their archive and the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum as representing the artists' ultimate realization of their own historicization, and how their total involvement in the art system eventually helped them to shape their own place within Art History.

Moreover, believing that much more can still be done in terms of critical reception of their work, it is in light of this thought that the final part of my study starts. The latter will be involved in presenting some theoretical notions which hopefully will prove to serve as theoretical background for their work. Concepts such as Nostalgia, Amnesia and Utopia will be presented and discussed throughout my discourse, and hopefully provided as evidence – concerning their early-1990s work – to interpret the artists' practice in light of some ground-breaking theories such as the Off-Modern perspective theorised by Svetlana Boym. All the above, however, will continue to run parallelly the same line of reasoning of my whole analysis: that is shedding a light of the phenomenon of self-historicization, by means of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's early practice, while addressing though in a liminal way the more comprehensive issue of historicizing art of former Eastern European countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A C.B.

INTRODUCTION

That which is often described as self-historicization is a phenomenon which in literature has been extensively investigated, presented under different definitions, emphasizing various features of it, depending on the context and on the issue under scrutiny. Sometimes it has been used as a synonym for self-archiving[1], others for speaking of innovative forms of archives[2], as well as referring to processes of self-institutionalization in art[3]. But if these and other definitions undoubtedly helped with the theoretical construction of the concept and represent to some degree the latter's declinations, I believe a general conception of the term is well needed here for it introduces my discourse – giving an initial understanding of the core of my study – and it allows me to address each of its above declinations. Nadja Gnamuš, art historian, art critic and curator, drawing on Zdenka Badovinac's work and studies carried out as director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, perfectly fulfils this initial task:

> The method of self-historicisation emerged as a contemporary approach to reinterpretation of history as well as a desire for democratising and multiple readings of its material. In this context, it is usually carried out as an informal system of historicisation practised by artists, who act as archivists and curators and reflect the role, context and history of their own artistic practice. Such historicisation is an art project of (re)constructing history through art and contextualising and producing one's position in history.[4]

From Gnamuš's quote can be extrapolated some key words and key phrases which will permeate my whole discourse on the phenomenon of self-historicization and its interpretation with respect to Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's art. In this sense, therefore, all my study on the Cherkashins will try to evaluate the above-mentioned

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[1] See for example D. Grúň (2020), *Processes of Self-Historicisation in East European Art*, in "Apparatus", issue *Doing Performance Art History*, edited by S. Frimmel, T. Glanc, S. Hänsgen et all, 09 Oct 2020, https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2020.0000.186

[2] See N. Petrešin-Bachelez, I*nnovative Forms of Archives, Part One: Exhibitions, Events, Books, Museums, and Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art*, in "e-flux journal", issue 13, Feb 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/13/61328/innovative-forms-of-archives-part-one and N. Petrešin-Bachelez, I*nnovative Forms of Archives, Part Two: IRWIN's East Art Map and Tomás St. Auby's Portable Intelligence Increase Museum*, in "e-flux journal", issue 16, May 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61282/innovative-forms-of-archives-part-two

[3] On such account see Z. Galliera, *Self-Institutionalizing as Political Agency: Contemporary Art Practice in Bucharest and Budapest*, in "ARTMargins", issue 2, vol 5, 01 Jun 2016, pp. 50–73 https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00147

[4] N. Gnamuš, *The Concept of Eastern Art and Self-Historicisation: The Slovenian Case* in *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918–2018*, edited by A. Chmielewska, I. Kossowska, M. Lachowski, New York: Routledge, 2023, p. 46.

quote. In particular, regarding Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's self-historicization, the key words and phrases that will guide my discourse are: *emerging*, *reinterpretation of history*, *informal system of historicisation practiced by artists*, *(re)constructing history through art*, and *producing one's position in history*. These key elements structure my rationale and will rise several parallel discussions that will be gradually addressed. Accordingly, I begin my analysis by setting the historic and artistic context of Soviet Union: from Russian revolution's events to the aftermath of such ground-breaking moment. The reason that led me to start by considering the historical and artistic backgrounds lies on the very nature of self-historicization which, as will be shown throughout the first and second chapters, precisely *emerged* as a response to some specific art-historical and, in the case of Valera Cherkashin, geographic conditions. It will be demonstrated how, albeit gradually but already since the October Revolution, the formation of the binary consisting of an art considered to be official and one unofficial forced the latter to resort to unorthodox means in order to assert its own raison d'être. It is precisely within this framework that self-historicization originally *emerges* as an approach for the artistic survival – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not – of unofficial artists. Later, after some general considerations about performance art in former Eastern European countries, as Valera and Natasha's art being at large attributable to such art form, I move on and introduce Valera Cherkashin's early practice of the 1960s. Here I must say that given that self-historicization has been widely considered, what prompted me in the first place to study this phenomenon was the opportunity to shed light on a former marginal history such as that of Valerii, shortened Valera, Cherkashin. Active already in the 1960s, he was born in Kharkiv in 1948. This geographical condition will be shown to fall within the more general historical conditions connected with the phenomenon of self-historicization because the fact of being born in such a peripheral city, with respect to the centers of Moscow and Leningrad, inevitably influenced Valera's practice.[5]

Subsequently, following the key elements above, my analysis will reach its core by discussing that which the title refer to: practicing self-historicization. I will start by retracing the latter's embryonic manners of occurrence: such as the first informal

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[5] On the concept of peripheral see M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, in "Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia", Issue 06/11/2016, pp. 217-238.

gatherings of unofficial artists in the 1960s and the APTART Moscow movement in the early 1980s. Following the developments of such initial attempts to build an art-historical counter narrative, self-historicization will emerge as an increasingly mature practice implemented by the artists themselves and, in the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, will be shown to be so interconnected with the latter's artistic practice to the extent that it is not possible to separate one from the other. The general context of emergence could be summarized in three different phases: in Valera's early performances that will be discussed in the second part of the first chapter the artist tries to claim his own physical presence as a young artist growing in a peripheral reality. At this juncture self-historicization will be interpreted in an original sense as the Kharkiv-born artist's physical practice. Later, by drawing on Groys's theory on Stalinist art and avant-garde art's will to power[6], self-historicization will be addressed as Valera and Natasha's effort to self-institutionalize and enter into history. In this instance, the artists' achievement of institutionalization will be proved to be the foundation of their Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum, founded in 1992. The third and last phase, instead, will present self-historicization by means of a combination of its previous two manners of occurrence: as the artists' mature empowerment regarding their history both as artists and as citizens of a former communist country. At this point, Valera and Natasha's mature empowerment will express itself through their cycle of works *The End of an Epoch* (1990-1993).

Therefore, I will provide practical and theoretical elements to understand Cherkashins' self-historicization as follows: originally as a practice that emerges in a physical sense; later as a systematization of it through their personal conception of the archive and the foundation of their museum, that is, through an *informal system of historicisation practiced by* Valera and Natasha to *producing their position in history*; ultimately, as the artists' critical approach to their status as post-communist individuals to address the issue of *reconstructing history through their art.*

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[6] B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1988), translated by C. Rougle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 140.

1. Setting the context: Art in Soviet and post-Soviet times

1.1 Macro-Historical and Macro-Artistic Context

> On one side there was the urgent need to reestablish contact with the avant-garde movements and, as a consequence, with the origins of Russian thought. But the dream had already imploded and its own helpless grandeur had already paid its dramatic tribute to history. On the other there was the prospect of the so-called "international styles" of the West. Enticing as they were, however, these were bound up with a logic of production/consumption that was too remote from the structures of a culture based on Platonism and Neo-Platonism. The fact remains that the narcissistic paranoia of Soviet power had found expression in the dogmatic reality of Socialist Realism. No other space was left. Not for the diversity of dream, not for the dialectics of art, not for the apocalypse of anti-art. There was space for the underground, though, for the hideout that was more or less known to the authorities, and either tolerated or prosecuted.[7].

From these words one can grasp the kind of limbo in which some Soviet artists found themselves immediately after the Second World War, even though this no man's land came into being already in the aftermath of the October revolution only to intensify and consolidate with Stalin's rise to power. But if until the death of the latter the not-aligned artists were strongly prosecuted to the extent that some of them were forced to go on exile, detained or found dead[8], with the following governments things did slightly change. That is, the life of those who didn't adjust to the canons of official art, which still was considered to be socialist realism, would have continued to be harder but not as hard as during Stalinism. That means that the relentless effort to repress their works as something similar to an ever-present threat was still a main concern of the state. The not aligned, consequently, living permanently in danger, made up the counterpart: the unofficial art, sometimes referred to as underground art. As it will be showed, it should be avoided, however, "the mistake to think that non-official art was a by-product and unforeseen result of the totalitarian state's pressure upon the creative intelligentsia."[9] Such a conclusion would be rather reductive and simplistic. But rather the emerging of this phenomenon is to be reconducted – without reducing it entirely to this – from one hand to the general mild change in the attitude

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[7] G. Cortenova, *L'arte Vietata in U.R.S.S., 1955-1988: Non-conformisti dalla Collezione Bar-Gera*, Milano: Electa, 2000, p. 15.
[8] Avant-gardists were particularly and violently prosecuted by the regime: see the case of Ülo Sooster
[9] A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, Roseville East: Craftsman House, 1995, p. 22.

of politics towards the arts, from the other hand to Russians' self-consciousness and the latter's attitude towards history and art. Also, After Stalin's death and with the loosening of some policies as mentioned earlier the idea of freedom changed and, as expressed by Erofeev, "was now viewed from a position approximating liberalism."[10] Now, it was a freedom deriving from a gradual awareness of one's own self and consequence indulgence in the latter's needs and desires. After all, it is precisely this liberalism that it is likely Margarita Tupitsyn refers to when she defines the dichotomy "dissident Modernism and socialist realism or avant-gardes and Kitsch"[11] in speaking of respectively non-official art and official art. This, together with other social and artistic events that will be considered later on, contributed enormously to the birth of unofficial art. This pattern which sees the existence of two arts with a protagonist-antagonist relationship stayed during all the late 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, up till the dissolution of the Soviet Union and concerned all its satellites states. However, the collapsing of the latter didn't necessarily mean a green light for all or the disappearance of the aforementioned double level art pattern. Artists from the eastern part of the iron curtain suddenly found themselves before new artistic traditions. But if for the ones who had the rare opportunity to get relatively acquainted with Western art – even before the new-born dialogue between the East and the West[12] – this meant a kind of further access, yet for many represented a sort of oasis in the desert. All at once, everyone could see and compare their works with a wide range of a brand-new art, at least at first sight. Some of them felt relieved by finally getting in touch with works which shared similar features to theirs, making them acknowledge that they were not as lonely as they thought in the end. Some others, instead, didn't see in the newly discovered art nor a model to imitate neither artworks sharing the same meanings as theirs. Rather, they thought that there were some similarities in the form but not in the content, they still intended their works as something deeply tied to their regions and to their culture. Therefore, for the latter category of artists, the West kept on being for a while the former enemy side which had been for some time now.

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[10] Ibid.

[11] M. Tupitsyn, *Arte Sovietica Contemporanea Dal Realismo Socialista ad Oggi* (1989), trad. it. by Gianni Romano, Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1990, p.33, [translated by me].

[12] A proof of early openness towards Western art is attested by Picasso's retrospective exhibition held in Moscow back in 1956.

In any event, the binary between official and unofficial art which stems from art, intended as a whole, and politics has been far investigated from the literature[13], and account of such would be beyond the scope of my study. Yet the important statement to make here is that it is not just a matter of official versus dissident, as the eternal struggle between the established power against the resistance. The issue is more intricate than this. Also, as suggested by Amy Bryzgel, it should be avoided the belittling and imprecise narrative according to which art from communist and post-communist Europe deals only with politics or, if there was not any political stance from artists, these were to be considered as anti-political. Not all artists wanted to be activists. Rather, most of them just wanted to be free and experiment without being committed to any of the societal issues. Even though sometimes it happened to them to be involved into political matters indirectly, this running into such off-tracks is to be read as an almost impossible and complete escape from the public arena. Such an effort was very difficult given the profound and rooted encroachment of politics in all soviet life scopes. For these reasons, a more accurate adjective to define them is a-political rather than anti-political, meaning not political. In this regard, following up herein on Bryzgel earlier in the text, in her PhD thesis Daria Darewych presents a concise and truly appropriate definition of what she prefers to name as non-conformist art:

> Non-conformist art does not comprise a collective movement, nor is it a style. No uniformity of ideology, beliefs or technique stand behind it. Neither is it, for the most part, a dissident art which is politically motivated. Figurative pursuits stand alongside abstract and formal concerns. The only unifying link is the artists' belief and insistence on freedom to think and express themselves creatively as individuals.[14]

Alongside the terms figurative, abstract and formal in the quote from Darewych, one can add the terms performative visual and conceptual as well, these three referring to the Cherkashins' work. But the list regarding the art forms could go on because Darewych's definition perfectly captures the general character of unofficial or, as she prefers to define it, non-conformist art. Further, Darewych touched upon the private character of unofficial art which is a particular feature of the latter. This manner of

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[13] See M. Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present* (1989),, Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989 or A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, Roseville: Craftsman House, 1995.

[14] D. Darewych, *Soviet Ukrainian Paintings c. 1955 – 1979: New Currents and Undercurrents*, London: University College, 1990, pp. 168-169.

exhibiting of unofficial works for which the phenomenon of APTART represents one of the most relevant in the history of exhibitions making is something it will be discussed further ahead in the second chapter. Nonetheless, as things stand, the unofficial or underground art should be regarded as a category truly heterogeneous under different points of view and, given its heterogeneity, it requires a deeper look if one wants to have a complete and faithful understanding of it without falling into loose statements.

Considering the foregoing as a starting point which also serves as a premise for the purpose of my study, the discourse continues, as the title of this chapter indicates, taking into consideration the historical framework at issue. The reason for the latter is because in dealing with Soviet and post-Soviet art, particularly with unofficial art, one should always bear in mind that former Eastern Europe in the twentieth century is a place in which many historical changes upset all the territories making up it. One cannot fail of taking into account these upheavals that inevitably had repercussions on art even if one tried to hold them out against. Here, although previously it has been suggested to avoid any oversimplifications as the one which deems all the unofficial Soviet and post-Soviet artists activists, still there will be provided reasons why an account regarding the historical background is necessary. The aim of this chapter is to find us in the situation described by Cortenova bearing in mind the digression that will be made. Furthermore, since the Cherkashins' practice is essentially part of the macro-category of performance art – though it will be indirectly shown how difficult a task is to ascribe them into an artistic category – and considered that their practice often appropriated symbols of national culture, elements like these further claim that it is well-needed to review the history of performance art together with a view on the historical context of the geographical area at issue. Therefore, before getting to the matter of performance art and in order to understand it better, attention now will be on the realm of formation of such an art form in Soviet Union, that of unofficial art, which will be briefly introduced in the following paragraph.

1.2 Unofficial Art

As stated in the very first part of the previous paragraph, what we nowadays call unofficial art is something which came into being gradually as some major unrests upset the Soviet land starting from the early 1900s. With the collapse of the tsarist Russia the revolutionary wind appeased, and the Bolsheviks could finally shape Soviet society according to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. But they didn't just want to shape Soviet society, even though we know how the Soviet state policy of socialism in one country promoted by Stalin soon wiped out its counterpart, the Trotskyist permanent revolution or world socialism, the ultimate goal of the early twentieth century Zeitgeist was far more ambitious: to build a new worldview. Everything was destroyed and now everything had to be rebuilt. However, the ruins were not just those of the empire or the bourgeoisie, among the decayed parts were ideals, traditions, culture and history itself. As it has been often declared, with the October Revolution it was reached a zero point, a second genesis that was supposed to engender a new man, this time a socialist man. However, the creation of the latter is not to be understood as the main goal of the nascent socialist vision of society, but rather as the means by which to give concrete shape to that vision, even if the latter turned out to be a chimera. Given the colossal scope of this vision, however, the fabrication of this new socialist man had to foresee different types of its final product and, consequently, include a wide range of depictions of the same. It was time to give birth to a new bureaucrat, a new worker, a new family formed by new fathers, mothers and sons; for these newcomers, hence, new cities thought in the minds of new architects and engineers were necessary and, ultimately, the same fate befell culture. In this context of construction, comes by itself that the role played by art was of primary importance in the task of shaping the new world. Therefore, artists were recruited to serve. Now, in this last sentence, namely that artists were called upon to serve the regime's purpose, is enclosed the heart of the matter or, precisely, the breaking point which resulted in the labelling of a certain art as unofficial. Although already pointed out by Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead when they argued that "'irreconcilability of art and ideological utility'"[15] was the point of rupture in Soviet art, the two authors also highlighted that:

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[15] P. Sjeklocha, I. Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1967, p.1.

there has also been a greater compliance with the state's dictates than perhaps one would expect from the art community, particularly if one cherishes the romantic nineteenth-century image of the Russian who seemingly tumbled from one schism to another with exotic aplomb or of the reformer with a mystical master plan. Such cliches have served to mask the fact that art in Russia has, for most of its history, been in bondage — first to the ecclesiastical state, then to the patronage of the aristocracy, and in the twentieth century to the secular state.[16]

Sjeklocha and Mead draw attention to the fact that the crack in Soviet art coming from those artists who chose or were forced to follow the regime's dictates and those who chose not to is not to be intended as a novelty or, at least, not exactly. Indeed, the revolutionary enthusiasm made art getting carried away by its ardency, but that has to be seen as the moment in which the noise generated by the fracture between the two currents was the loudest in the far history of culture of the Russian land, just because of the intense revolutionary fever. If anything, it is this feverish spasm of those who did not line up with the officialdom that should be seen as a novelty. On further consideration, together with what has been said, the two scholars warned that one should resist the temptation to view art as historically untied to any forces, which periodically took over each other. In a kind of tension between dialectical Materialism[17] and dialectical Idealism[18] can the last part of Sjeklocha and Mead's quotation be read. Being mindful of that, here it useful to deliver Boris Groys's contribute to the issue. In his controversial *The Total Art of Stalinism*, he built the foundations for a new interpretation of Russian avant-garde art and the thereafter defined official art or, as he wrote in his work, Stalinist art. Here, it should be recalled that art in the prerevolutionary period was both dragged by the vehemence of the event

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[16] Ibi, p. 2.

[17] Georgi Plekhanov, a Russian revolutionary, philosopher and Marxist theoretician, used the terms dialectical materialism and historical materialism interchangeably. "Dialectical materialism, after all, consisted in the classical Hegelian relativization of all individual positions plus the "materialistic" impossibility of ultimate contemplation, of synthesis on the level of philosophical contemplation, since such synthesis is admitted only in "social practice", that is, beyond individual consciousness in general." in B. Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988); *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, translated by C. Rougle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 108.

[18] "Dialectical Idealism as applied to social theory may be provisionally defined as an attempt to explain the evolution of Western society through the use of dialectical forms which rely upon the presumed motive power of spiritual, mental, or ideal forces. These forces are presumed to "realize themselves" in the historical process. Hegel and Fichte, of course, first made such concepts familiar. The mighty influence of Marx and dialectical materialism, which kept the form but not the Idealism of the Hegelian dialectic, has accounted for a lasting eclipse of interest in this earlier form of dialectical social thought." J. Weiss, *Dialectical Idealism and The Work of Lorenz Von Stein* (1963), in "International Review of Social History", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 8, issue 1, 18 December 2008, pp. 75-93, here p. 75, https://www.cambridge.pdf, [last access 12 December 2022]

and one of the main prime movers of the same. Malevich, probably the representative of avant-garde art, embodied the sentiment of a section of the latter of shaping a new world, the idea of prime mover. Only that he was involved with the construction of another world, a metaphysical one. His art did not deal with the construction of a new socialist man as stated before, rather with his formulation of Suprematism he tried to create a new world which had nothing in common with the one that came into being soon later with the establishment of Stalin's dictates. Therefore, once the time of building the new world arrived, art was confronted with some opposed pushes which were both internal and external, and which had different versions of it. Considering these dynamics, Groys elucidates brilliantly the complex positions held by art and the State during the years following the revolution and I believe his words could be read together with the ones more extensive of Sjeklocha and Mead's:

> Historically, however, art that is universally regarded as good has frequently served to embellish and glorify power. Even more important is the fact that refusal to acknowledge the art of the avant-garde – which made its creators outsiders – by no means implies that these artists consciously aspired to such a position or that they lacked the will to power. An attentive study of their theory and practice indicates quite the contrary – it is in avant-garde art that we find a direct connection between the will to power and the artistic will to master the material and organize it according to laws dictated by the artists themselves, and this is the source of the conflict between the artists and society.[19]

Here, Groys – after embracing the position of Sjeklocha and Mead – keeps on highlighting the similarity shared by society and the avant-garde art, arguing that the latter too – and maybe not consciously – possessed a will to power and control, as in the case of Malevich which was mentioned before. What Groys calls society is the about-to-born Soviet society, the same that shortly thereafter will be dominated by the vision of Stalin, namely the socialist realism. Hence, these two forces were battling to give rise to each other's personal vision of the so-called new world. What Groys is trying to prove in his work is that both socialist realism and avant-garde art had the same claim, only that the latter was different in form and content.[20] Later, Groys ends the introduction to his work by stating his will to provide "[…] a kind of cultural archeology" which "will attempt to describe not only successive paradigms but also the mechanism of their succession". Little further on, then, he writes that he "[…] shall

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[19] B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 7.
[20] This claim will be deeply considered in the second chapter.

be focusing more attention on the artists' self-interpretation than on their already well-known works."[21] The latter statements are perfectly in line with the purpose of the present study: Cherkashins' artistic practice and research could be seen as a kind of cultural archeology as well. Frequently, their works deal with cultural myths and historical symbols which they appropriate and present reinterpreted through their artistic prism. Shedding a light on the past, they seek to provide a further understanding of the future but, at the same time, they present us a future which could be another than the one we think of. A kind of focus on the artists' self-interpretation, then, is also what brings together the purpose of the current study with Groys's. Here, however, Cherkashins' self-interpretation is to be intended as self-historicization, that is the mechanism occurred in former Eastern Europe art scene for different reasons but, above all, to stand up to the absence of an institution or figure entitled of building a comprehensive art discourse of the region.

Now, having briefly explained how the notion of unofficial art took root and having called on Sjeklocha, Mead and Groys' contributions to clarify the complicated positions of both socialist realism and avant-garde art, the discourse gets close to the heart of the matter by spending some words about the aforementioned umbrella term in which the two artists are part of even if not completely: the performance art.

1.3 Performance Art

Given the intrinsic protean nature of performance art, herein the present study will restrict the analysis to an initial and very general account of it. The reason for that is because a deeper look at this art form would be off topic both as such a broad and variegated art category should be the object of a study entirely devoted to it, and given the miscellaneous feature of Cherkashins' works, which is almost as wide-ranging as performance art itself. Consequently, after having briefly introduced it, it follows an attempt to trace its peculiar elements which specifically refer to Valera Cherkashin's early practice and, therefore, provide elements for the interpretation of self-historicization as a physical practice.

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[21] B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 13.

Nowadays there is plenty of literature on performance art, arguably a little less as a practice pertaining the region of Eastern Europe during twentieth century. However, this was far from being the situation until recently. On one hand this was due to its nature which does not allow for an easy and comprehensive understanding and, consequently, classification of it – ending up being for too long not considered at all – on the other hand because, even after having toiled for the status of art, for a long time kept on being considered a minor one than the noblest painting and sculpture. However, regardless of being one of the late comers in the Olympus of the arts, this has not prevented it from being tied to those seemingly eternal dynamics of power it was discussed about in the previous paragraph regarding unofficial art. As to performance art however, the dynamic of power is in some way inverse in terms of what has been said before. Putting aside for a moment the distinctive traits of each performer, it can be argued that this art form has an intrinsic will to subvert the established norms, not matter of what kind the latter are. Interpreted as such, Roselee Goldberg's words in the foreword of her *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*, seized exactly this feature.

> Such a radical stance has made performance a catalyst in history of twentieth-century art; whenever a certain school, be it Cubism, Minimalism or conceptual art, seemed to have reached an impasse, artists have turned to performance as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions. Moreover, within the history of avant-garde – meaning those artists who led the field in breaking with each successive tradition – performance in the twentieth century has been at the forefront of such an activity: an avant avant garde.[22]

R. Goldberg reveals how performance originated as a means which artists resort to in order to free themselves from a provisional language whenever they feel trapped by it. In this sense, from R. Goldberg's words come up even a certain political component of performance art. The term political though is not to be intended in its strict sense, that is as something related to the govern of a community, society or, much less, to the established power, rather it should be read in full as a concept referred to the ensemble of norms which rule phenomena. Thereby, the element emphasized here is the phenomenological aspect of performance art. Based on this, it is reasonable to believe

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[22] R. Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present* (1979), China: Everbest Printing Co. Ltd, 2011, p. 7.

that performance could be defined a powerful avant avant garde which yet again supports the thesis that there seems to be a visceral affinity between art and power.

Considered its impactful nature, performance is a kind of shout out in the history of art, a shout out that was far noisier in its early years which, according to R. Goldberg, were the "[…] 1970s of the twentieth century".[23] It was during these years that performance art started to gain ground, becoming increasingly interesting both for artists and the public. However, regarding former communist, socialist and Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe, traces of artists working as performers could already be found back in the 1960s, and this is precisely the case of Valera Cherkashin who, starting as early as 1962, got involved in several activities and happenings which will be discussed further on. Now, the understanding of performance as a shout out in history of art is far more evident and deeper in the communist part of the Iron Curtain. If there is a place in which artists turn to this practice to break with traditions or to make strong stances of every nature with the most zeal, this place is undoubtedly the former European Eastern Bloc. Artists from there approached this practice as a way to stress their physical presence – especially during communist period – but also to assert and uphold their singularities as artists. Nevertheless, the reasons are not limited to these, but the latter are certainly among the most radical. As referred to the former, the notion of the body is central in all performance art. The reason for that is because the body is the symbolic and intimate archetype of one's own subjectivity, acting on or with it means exploring the self and its relations with the surrounding environment, be the latter social – as living within a community – or the place in which one exists in a broad sense. As to that, what follows is indebted to the ground-breaking work of Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, and moves from her proposal to "rethink art's histories."[24] That of being artistically involved in stressing physical presence and of finding a shelter for one's own features are two essential concepts of Valera Cherkashin's early practice in the 1960s, and both R. Goldberg and A. Bryzgel dedicated parts of their works to such matters. Specifically speaking of the idea of body, the former takes into consideration essentially Western artists but present a kind of critical apparatus which is sensible also for Valera Cherkashin's 1960s activity.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017 p. 6.

The demonstrations which concentrated on the artist's body as material came to be known as 'body art'. […]. While some body artists used their own persons as art material, others positioned themselves against walls, in corners, or in open fields, making human sculptural forms in space. Others constructed spaces in which both they and the viewer's sensation of space would be determined by the particular environment. […] Some artists, dissatisfied with the somewhat materialist exploration of the body, assumed poses and wore costumes (in performance and also in everyday life), creating 'living sculpture'. This concentration on the personality and appearance of the artist led directly to a large body of work which came to be called 'autobiographical', since the content of these performances used aspects of the performer's personal history. Such a reconstruction of private memory had its complement in the work of many performers who turned to 'collective memory' […].[25]

In 1960s, a teenager Valera begins to enact a series of performances which can be critically understood in light of the words of R. Goldberg. *Kheppeningi* (happenings), as he would start calling such early works, as *I Am a Soviet Athlete* (1962), *Bodybuilding in The USSR* (1963), or *Narcissus* (1965) are all characterized by the will of the young artist to source from his personal experience – as a young adolescent living in a peripheral city - and from symbols of both universal and Soviet culture, to critically stress his physical presence.

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[25] Ibi, p. 153.

1. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *I Am a Soviet Athlete,* 1962*,* Scan of the negative

Being more exact, going through some of his early but also late works, one could see how the artist's works in some way fit almost into all the modes of realization enunciated by Goldberg. There are photographs that testify the artist working just with his body as the sole material, or his body as something immersed in a specific environment with which it is in dialogue. In some of these constructions, then, the role played by the viewers helps with the reflection awaken by the performance. In some others, then, regarding the creation of live sculptures, it will be showed how the artist presented a particular declination. Therefore, by being simultaneously anchored to some renowned cultural references and to his neighbouring environment – by using normal and simple objects which he found in his area – he was working on his "self-awareness and self-determination."[26] Accordingly, bearing in mind R. Goldberg, it can

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[26] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, in "Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia", Issue 06/11/2016, p. 219.

be stated that early stage of Cherkashin's work may be read as autobiographical, that is because the content of the performances dealt essentially with his body and with his personal history.

2. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin*, Bodybuilding in The USSR,* 1963, Scan of the negative

Likewise, the young Cherkashin here – although unconsciously – is also stating his presence as an artist: he is not just constructing himself as an individual, but as an artist coming into the world as well. The autobiography here, is not just that of Cherkashin as a growing man, it is also that of Cherkashin as an artist. Therefore, it must be emphasized that the idea of construction, as an on-going process of being conscious of both one's own existence and one's own actions, is a recurrent theme in the work of the artist, and it is within this framework that Groys's concern on the artists' self-interpretation should be recalled. What comes forth is that from such early happenings up to some mature works – though not the entirety of his practice dealt with such a concern - Cherkashin reflects the idea of self-interpretation expressed by B. Groys and, similarly, by Matteo Bertelé. The latter, particularly, speaking of reaction brings forth this idea in a critical essay about Cherkashin's activity in the sixties:

> […] if action is propelled from the centre, reaction, in Cherkashin's case, is a peripheral practice. Reaction should be understood as neither a political statement, a conservative act of restoration, nor as a subversive counteraction, but as an essentially physical response to an outer stimulus, a physiological reflex and need to claim one's own presence.[27]

Echoing what has been said in the second paragraph, if we were to outline a brief typology of these early happenings – such duty will be extensively addressed starting from the next paragraph – we do not distance ourselves from M. Bertelé's words when contending, mindful of the contribution of A. Bryzgel, that it is underestimating as well as inexact to view performances from former Eastern Europe as just a practice dealing with matters of state. As stated by M. Bertelé, these reactions do not relate to any political or rebellious stances. Their only claim is about "the body as his own art and life project."[28] The latter expression, therefore, reverberates the core of the current study: the body as the object or material, the art and life project as the process or action. These two elements, then, dovetail with the concept of self-historicization. Contrary to the aims of the early avant-garde artist and the early official artist, Cherkashin's early practice is concerned with the construction not of another world – the latter be it metaphysical as for the avant-gardist or materialistic as for the socialist realism – but of his own narrative or place in history. In a way he is widening the meshes of art history.[29] To deepen the understanding of the body and its role in performance art given that in "[…] the socialist spaces of Eastern Europe, the body had unique resonance"[30] and that R. Goldberg's work only briefly paused on issues regarding the Eastern part of the Iron Curtain, the contribution of A. Bryzgel is as indispensable as ever. In fact, she dedicates to it a chapter of her book in whose foreword she accounts for the choice of doing so. The author precises that the titles of the chapters stem from the interviews with artists and year-lasting research she carried out. After having outlined "the chronological development of performance art"[31], in addition to the second chapter titled *The Body*, she titles the next ones as *Gender*, *Politics and Identity* and *Institutional Critique*. She justifies this nomenclature by stating that "these

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[27] Ibi, p. 218.
[28] Ibi, p. 219.
[29] The theme of reconstruction will be furtherly addressed in the second chapter when it will be discussed the Russian attitude towards history and, also, when it will be addressed self-historicization as the actual reconstruction of an art-historical discourse.
[30] A. Bryzgel, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 103.
[31] Ibi, p. 4.

categories emerged from the research as opposed to proceeding or being applied to it".[32] In the following paragraph, in presenting the performative works of Valera Cherkashin, it will be provided elements for supporting A. Bryzgel's categories, and showing how the Kharkiv-born artist's practices share similarities with some of the artists analysed by her. The aim is therefore to prove some consistency with some of the headings emerged from Bryzgel's work.

1.4 Valerii Cherkashin in The Soviet Art Scene

The peripheral aspect, emerged in the contribution of M. Bertelé, is a concept deeply rooted into Cherkashin's character. It is not just a matter of early marginality in terms of art-historical consideration, it is also a geographical issue which indeed had echoes in his personal history.

Valera – shortened version of Valerii – Cherkashin was born on August 23 in 1948 in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Kharkiv – Khar'kov in Russian – was a peripheral city of one of the Soviet republics which represents "a significant argument for the, though modest, permeability of the Soviet periphery to cultural phenomena propelled by the centre."[33] Even though grown up far from the cultural centre, this did not prevent an early-in-life encounter with art for the young Valera. He got his first camera, a Smena 4, in 1958, already revealing a certain propension for visual art, but it is not until 1962 that we find the first actions and happenings, some of which I mentioned in the previous paragraph. As stated, being somehow disconnected from an artistic milieu did not necessarily translate into a lacuna which halted his artistic drive. On the contrary, "a lack of equipment was not obstacle, and given enough desire, the means and opportunities would come."[34] Just in this regard, during my conversation with the artist, he stated: "I did not try to learn much. I felt that I had my own program inside me"[35]. In such ways, happenings as *I Am a Soviet Athlete* of 1962 were born. In the latter, he used pieces of rail and wheels to exercise with, as a kind of weightlifter.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 217.

[34] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, translated by Eclectic Translations, A. Malkhova, M. Zheregi, K. Wooddissee, Moscow: Cherkashin Metropolitan Museum, 2016, p. 16.

[35] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashin, Personal Interview, February 10, 2023.

Cherkashin appropriated a social and national figure given its prestige in the Soviet society in the wake of stressing his own presence. The prestige of the athlete's figure relies on being "generally supported by the authorities"[36] and by presenting "the opportunity to obtain some privileges, like travelling abroad."[37] By embodying this symbol, he was making himself visible not only at national level, but he was also dealing with international matters as well. Bertelé, in fact, pointed out how "one of the first battlefields of the Cold War was sport competitions."[38] This happening encompassed in a way different meanings, from cultural to political; from social to personal; all surrounded by a playful atmosphere. The latter aspect, particularly, will represent a kind of fil rouge in Cherkashin's work. By looking at these early works, but also at some of the more mature ones, one cannot fail to notice a certain playfulness, which is something echoed by the photographs that Cherkashin or a member of his family took during these activities. Besides representing the first works, these kinds of happenings also relate to what has been stated earlier when we discussed about the body. If we take into consideration *Bodybuilding in The USSR*, *Narcissus* or yet *Gladiator*, respectively of 1963 and 1965, this characteristic is far more evident. Once again, the words of Bertelé brilliantly grasp the essence of these happenings, reinforcing Bryzgel's thesis that the notion of body is crucial to Eastern European performance art. In *Bodybuilding in The USSR*, Cherkashin took a photo of himself in his house while striking a pose, just as a bodybuilder, before a hanging blanket. The whole scene is lighted up by two lamps at the sides of him. Bertelé writes that

> [h]is body is showcased as body image, and every art device plays a primary role
> in its definition: it is displayed in a suggestive *chiaroscuro* effect and in its total
> plasticity, both on the recto and verso.[39]

In this happening the stress on the body is even more stressed to the extent that the surrounding space is almost rendered void by the emphasis of light all over the artist's body. The reflection here cannot help but be bodily, with and on the body in full sense. Further, the plasticity rendered thanks to the chiaroscuro effect recalls a kind of

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[36] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 218.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibi, p. 219.

Caravaggesque figure or Rodin's sculpture, and how – the former through light and colours and the latter through a unique use of the material – both tried and succeeded in reaching a sense of liveness never achieved before. Likewise, both Cherkashin's body and image of it are trying to encroach all the space around, springing to life. The sense of totality or wholeness, then, is reiterated also by Bertelé himself:

> *Bodybuilding in the USSR* does not represent the starting point of a new discipline in the country, but rather the initiation of the artist self-construction as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as a "total work of art."[40]

As in the end of the previous paragraph, when it was proposed a parallel consisting of the body as the material and the art project as the actions, Cherkashin is slowly incorporating, in literal sense, the concept of work of art. He is not just moulding an image; he is moulding his artist and human selves. If in socialist realism art and life merged in a kind of inextricable amalgam, here art is merging with the individual. Similarly, Bertelé calls attention to this reference to the aesthetic during Stalinism:

> Paraphrasing Stalin's formula of the artist as "an engineer of the human soul," Cherkashin seems to be his eloquent counterpart as the "engineer of the human body". In his work, he is emulating the language of socialist realism, in which the naked and physically fit male body incarnated the myth of heroism […].[41]

These emulations carry with them also playful aspects which set themselves in an opposite position regarding the works created under the Stalinist period.[42] Cherkashin is appropriating these cultural references and gave them back reinterpreted as a way to also stress a certain freedom by being geographically far both from the artistic centre of the Soviet Union and the public sphere in which artists, as in a kind of panopticon, still were constantly and politically monitored. In such a context he had the opportunity to experiment without any codes and canons being imposed to him. In the series *Narcissus* (1965), instead, Cherkashin appropriated a mythological symbol by impersonating it, this time to stress his beauty.

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibi, p. 220.

[42] The ludic aspect is something which can be read together with the deconstruction realized by sots-art. Particularly explanatory of the latter is Komar & Melanid's practices which will be considered in the second chapter.

3. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Narcissus,* 1965, Scan of the negative

In dealing with aesthetics, he is also getting always more acquainted with his self-confidence and with the camera, evolving as to become the altogether being, not just of a whatsoever physicality but also of beautiful one. Considering this:

> Cherkashin's body is the catalyst of the whole practice, playing the roles of both subject and object, action and exhibition. It is a self-generated reactive practice, where the male gazing is contemplating and being contemplated at the same time, in a vicious circle of (self-)voyeurism.[43]

Subject and object, thus, meaning the man as the artist and the artist as his art. Everything intertwines in the figure of Valera Cherkashin, there are not borders except those imposed from the outside which he constantly tries to overcome. And it is exactly with the outside, precisely with United States cultural framework, that *Gladiator*

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[43] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 221.

(1965) deals with. In *Gladiator* he overcomes his national border – something not to be taken for granted since the cultural thaw during Khrushchev was coming to an end as the aftermath of the Menage Affair of 1962, paving the way for the "Era of Stagnation"[44] – by appropriating not the idea of the gladiator but rather its Hollywoodian movie adaptation.

4. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Gladiator,* 1966, Scan of the negative

As aforesaid, the theme of mass culture symbols recurs very often in his artistic research: where in *Bodybuilding in the USSR* he took over a national symbol with a specific value in the region; and in *Narcissus* a classical one with a universally shared cultural value; in *Gladiator* it is the turn of a foreign symbol, that is Kubrick's movie *Spartacus* of 1960. A further aspect of the latter is that it shows a certain permeability between the border of Western and Eastern blocs and consequently supports Bryzgel's thesis that, despite everything and contrary to popular belief, existed a "reciprocal cultural exchange between East and West, as well as across the East […]."[45] In *Gladiator*, therefore, the artist who plays Kirk Douglas who, in turn, plays Spartacus, reenacts an event of the movie, specifically the moment when Spartacus was going to fight till death. Cherkashin declared that he "wanted to experience what the protagonist

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[44] On such account, see chapters III and IV of P. Sjeklocha, I. Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1967.
[45] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 2.

felt"[46] not, arguably, in a kind of historical re-enactment, but as an experiential and emotional re-enactment. The historical aspect is in the background, while the artist is trying to mise-en-scène the event as a heuristic process or method. This is also highlighted by the decision to portrays the actor and not the historical character. A deeper look, then, reveals an original and elementary off-modern characteristic which I believe is disclosed by the fact that

> [t]he appropriation of Western mass-culture products based on historical subject triggered a double shift – both synchronic and diachronic – in the artist, giving him the chance to imagine and reconstruct a journey both in time and space.[47]

This shift is symptomatic of a distinctive trait, that is the theoretical framework of the off-modern which, however, will be the object of the last chapter in which I will try to consider the cycle *The End of an Epoch* on the basics of this and other conceptual underpinnings.

After this first characterization of the young Valera Cherkashin through a critical reading of some of his early works, some similarities with Bryzgel's anthology on performance art could be observed for outlining a comparative look which would deepen Valera's early oeuvre.. As stated by the artist himself:

> These were photo documents of activities that we would now call "actions," since they were aimed at achieving a specific goal: recording the development of my body. All of these actions took place in and around Kharkov in the 1960s–1980s. Despite the Iron Curtain, I was able to pick up all the new trends of the time intuitively in the clear atmosphere of the Soviet space. I never felt cut off from the outer world.[48]

Cherkashin explains the meaning of these actions as recording the development of his body. Bryzgel, presenting the first category came out from her study, speaks of the different manners in which the body was used in the region. She defines these manners as *The Present Body*, *The Exposed Body*, *The Transformed Body*, *The Ritualistic Body* and *The Limits of the Body*[49]. Here I consider the first of these, *The Present Body*, because the early actions of Cherkashin could be viewed together with those analyzed

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[46] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 23.
[47] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 221.
[48] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 16.
[49] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., chapter 2.

by Bryzgel regarding just this manner. Even though from the actions presented just now we stressed different times a whole figure, that is an individual who finds meaning within himself, in his totality; this, however, is only partly true. In speaking of re-action and not of action, as a matter of fact, Bertelé fully grasped exactly the missing aspect. In the prefix *re-* lies the twofold characteristic of Cherkashin's early practice: by being conscious of him as self-sufficient, nonetheless we cannot forget the social and political space in which he seeks to become present. As specified in the second paragraph, when it was explained that, notwithstanding, a political, historical and social account must be borne in mind without necessarily forcing any narrow labelling of performance art, here it should be recollected that Cherkashin started to work in the sixties in Soviet Ukraine. Even though still too young at the time, Cherkashin started to create happenings in a particular cultural atmosphere shaped by a part of the Ukrainian intelligentsia which scholars ended up calling it *Shistdesiatnyky*, Sixtiers.[50] In an interview, Yevhen Sverstiuk, a former member of the sixtiers, defined the feeling of this rising atmosphere as having "more space, more freedom", however it was a "controlled freedom (*pidkontrolnoi svobody*)."[51] It is in this regard that Bryzgel, taking up Amelia Jones[52], precisely explains that "it is through body art that the artist makes him or herself present, be in the social space of the public or private sphere."[53] As to that, Cherkashin cannot be completely detached from his reference space: in his wholeness there is also the context, otherwise there would be no reason for him to claim his own presence if not also in relation to the outer space, other than his personal will. The social space highlighted here and in which Cherkashin makes himself further present, hence, is not that which he tries to render void as in "*Bodybuilding in the USSR*", or the complementary one in *Narcissus*: in these he is dealing with that that Bryzgel called social space of the private sphere; the social space which we are referring to is that of the public sphere, meaning Soviet Ukraine in the sixties. "Between 1956 and 1964, the year Khrushchev was removed from power, periods of

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[50] For an account on this phenomenon refer to: S. Yekelchyk, *The Early 1960s as a Cultural Space: a Microhistory of Ukraine's Generation of Cultural Rebels,* in "Nationalities Papers 43", no. 1, pp. 45-62.
[51] I. Sverstiuk, *My obyraly zhyttia*, in *Bunt pokolinnia: rozmovy z ukrainskymy intelektualamy*, B. Berdykhova and O. Hnatiuk, translated by Roksana Kharchuk, Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2004, p. 82.
[52] For a full account on this topic see A. Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
[53] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 107.

liberalization were followed by periods of tighter controls throughout the Soviet Union […]."[54] Under such circumstances, that of the *Shistdesiatnytstvo* could be viewed as a certain rising resistance mood belonging to young generations towards the state control. Not that Cherkashin could be strictly included in such a phenomenon – as it was discussed he was not directly engaged with political or social issues – but as a non-conformist artist there are reasons to believe that his early practice could be seen in a broader sense under this juncture. Performances making up *The End of a Hippie* series in 1972 can be viewed in this perspective: *The End of a Hippie: Doubts*, *The End of a Hippie: The week of hair-Cutting*, *The End of a Hippie: The Joy of Accomplishment* and *The End of a Hippie: A New Man*. In any event, this parenthesis comprises performances all enacted in the same year in which Cherkashin gets inspired by the general atmosphere of the late sixties.[55]

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[54] D. Darewych, *Soviet Ukrainian Paintings c. 1955 – 1979: New Currents and Undercurrents*, cit., p. 108.

[55] "There was some kind of a spiritual restructuring that came about as a consequence of the Khrushchev-era Thaw, too. At that time, the Iron Curtain was lifted a little and the country was flooded with new information – books, movies, philosophical literature. This was an intellectual storm. Everyone read a lot, wrote poetry and prose, and painted. I didn't know anything about the hippie movement. I just intuitively sensed the new trends in the air, and my ideas were confirmed by some of the stories my friends told me." In V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 48.

5. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: Doubts,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credit to the artists

5a. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: The Week of Hair-Cutting,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credit to the artists

5b. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Self-portrait*, 1972, credits to the artists

5c. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: The Joy of Accomplishment,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credits to the artist

Now, resuming Bryzgel's category of *The Present Body*, I want to compare Cherkashin's early works with that of Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu. The reason for that is because the differences between the two artists help to highlight, through a relationship of indirect opposition, the artistic features of Valera Cherkashin. Self-performative practices as *Boxing* (1977), *Box-Yoga* (1980) or *The Ritual Bath* (1975), in the context of Ceausescu's Romania, deal with the notion of the body and its presence within both private and social space.

6. Ion Grigorescu, *Boxing,* 1977*,* 8mm film transferred to 16mm film (black & white, silent)

Grigorescu's approach, however, is to some extent different than Cherkashin's: he "has developed a unique artistic practice *reacting* [italics mine] to current political developments through an existential approach."[56] Like Cherkashin, therefore, his work is a *re-action*, but unlike Cherkashin's, that of the Bucharest-based artist is more imbued of political claims. The thought of human condition in relation to the then social and political situation is crucial in Grigorescu's. In the latter, further, one cannot fail to detect a certain pessimism pervading his actions, as also expressed by the exhibition title of the solo project of prometeogallery in 2013: "*Trauma of the Exposed Body*"[57]. In Cherkashin's, instead, we argued that the feeling of playfulness is constant. Despite these contrasts, however, in *Boxing* we witnessed to the artist creating

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[56] K. Rhomberg, M. Dziewańska, *Ion Grigorescu. In the Body of the Victim 1969-2008*, in "Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw", n.d., https://artmuseum.pl/en/wystawy/ion-grigorescu-w-ciele-ofiary-1969-2008 [last access on 11 December 2022]
[57] See http://www.prometeogallery.com/en/mostra/trauma-of-the-exposed-body

> […] a double self-portrait. He appears naked, fighting himself. The looping action of this grainy, black-and-white, 8mm film reflects the artist's frustration with the strict confines of everyday life in communist Romania. Boxing against oneself is a losing battle; his persistence despite the futility of his actions serves as an expression of private resistance.[58]

The focus on the body and its presence then is alike that of Cherkashin in "*Bodybuilding in the URSS*": the notion of encroaching or trespassing into the surrounding space is translated – paraphrasing the Romanian artist – into the idea of getting to the real through means of resistance. Only that, where the Kharkiv-born artist's approach to reality is in good spirits and looking on the bright side; in Grigorescu's system there is a feeling of hopelessness. The series *Box-Yoga* viewed in parallel with Cherkashin's *Jaw. Acting in a Hospital* (1966) I believe bears echoes of such dichotomy. In *Box-Yoga* "he pushes his body and mind to physical and psychological limits by contorting himself into various positions requiring significant strength and focus."[59] The feeling of segregation arousing from Grigorescu's pictures as being confined in a place incompatible for life is reversed in Cherkashin's unrehearsed action: having broken his jaw, the artist is forced to spend some time in a hospital to recover. He seizes this opportunity to perform some actions and take pictures of them:

> His costume is a striped uniform, with associations not only with the forced labour-camp prisoners from the previous decades, but also with the new inmates of the Sixties, non-conformist artists segregated (or threatened with segregation) in psychiatric hospitals by Soviet authorities. At the time, *psikhushka* [nut house] had made its way into Soviet cultural rhetoric, regulating through "clinical metaphors" and threats any deviancy from the general accepted (Party) line. The "clinical language" was applied to the verbal discourse much more than to the visual one. In this work, Cherkashin violates this taboo: even though depicted in full vulnerability, he does not behave as a martyr, as a segregated non-conformist; on the contrary, he is involved in a rehabilitating process, lifting a heavy stone and staring at the camera with a (forced) sardonic smile.[60]

Both artists then are exploring the idea of segregation but, if in the former the sense of oppression and torment represented by the apparently more and more shrinking box seems almost insuperable, in the latter the re-action is telling of an unconquerable spirit. The heavy stone lifted by Cherkashin could represent, inter alia, an implicit

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[58] K. Nouril, *Ion Grigorescu Romanian, born 1945,* in "moma.org", n.d., https://www.moma.org/artists/39193 [last access 12 December 2022]

[59] Ibid.

[60] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 222.

reference to the sensation of being crushed by a heavy burden, meaning the state's impositions. But despite this, the eighteen-year-old Cherkashin proves not only to be able to lift the stone but to bear such a great load as well, almost betraying with his smile a certain will to throw it and, consequently, overcome it.

7. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Jaw. Acting in A Hospital,* 1966, Scan of the negative

Nevertheless, as previously specified, given his chameleonic feature even during the same performance – the artist himself different times highlighted the importance of randomness and extemporization in his practices[61] – it must be avoided monolithic or rigid interpretations of Valera Cherkashin's works. Taking that into consideration

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[61] "People, especially artists, often carry out actions intuitively, without truly understanding their meaning. These acts amuse or annoy the public, or are simply not taken seriously.
And sometimes the artist, too, will say to him or herself: "What did I do that for?" In V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 38.

and mindful of his singularity, he also "eluded the behavioural code of the underground artist: to him art was not an inner spiritual vocation, oppressed by ideological dogmas" – as was the case of Grigorescu – "but a physical practice."[62] What remains common in the two non-conformist artists, therefore, is the understanding of the body as both subject and object.

From the brief outline of the macro-historical and macro-artistic context comes forth a complex and interconnected scenario of Soviet Union and its satellites states. As shown, art together with politics played a key role during the upheavals which led to a new national order: the two were at the same time attracted by and motive forces of the already-present warning signs of change of the early twentieth century. Discussing the notion of unofficial art through Groys, Mead and Sjeklocha's key to interpretation of the phenomenon, then, I argued for the latter as being a wing which was declared incompatible with the late changed revolutionary ideals and with the accordingly rising *Homo Sovieticus*. In such a context, the private sphere of Soviet life became something similar to a refugee camp, a place where displaced and disappointed people maintained, despite all, a certain freedom.[63] Performance art, as an avant-avant garde, was the confined within the realm of arts due to its inherent tendency to overthrow. However, introducing Valera Cherkashin – supported by a comparative look at both his and Ion Grigorescu's performative practices – it has been revealed a certain rupture with the Kharkiv-born artist and the belief that performance art possesses an implicit will to break with any traditions. Subsequently, continuing to live in the shadow of society, these artists sought to emerge and overstep into real life as both an artistic practice and an attempt to build and art-historical narrative. It is precisely this attempt to mould one's own place in art history that represents the study object of the following chapter. Many other works of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin will be presented: both to further deepen our knowledge of these two artists and to provide a more considerable case study for better understanding the phenomenon of self-historicization.

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[62] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 222.

[63] As argued, borders between official and unofficial art were not clear-cut, similarly is to be understood also that between public and private spheres. It was not unusual, therefore, for the same individual to act according to the official dictates when in public while acting differently once in private. For a full account on this topic refer to A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, cit.

2. Self-Historicization

2.1 On The Concept of History and Historicizing

As we get closer to the understanding of the circumstances of self-historicization, it is important to dwell for a moment on the notion of history. The reason for that is because in order to fully understand the phenomenon at issue it is important first to reflect on the two components making up the second part of the word: history and historicization. The aim of this first paragraph, however, is not to reflect on the notion of history tout court, but to retrace some of the major contributions to the comprehension of the concept, since it will prove to be much less objective than one might think. Moreover, the importance of addressing this discourse is doubly remarked when dealing with art and history of former Eastern European countries because, as it will be showed, they represent a particular case.

I agree with Peter Ludwig when he stated in an introductory essay that "[…] art is rooted in the traditions that nourish it, on the one hand, and in the social relations which it reflects, on the other."[64] When speaking of Soviet art, this aspect acquires a particular meaning and requires a deep consideration of social issues and, in a broader sense, the controversial history of the Soviet Union. Further, I decided to dedicate this paragraph to the notions of history and historicization for the concept that the German language defines as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that is "the process of coming to terms with historical past".[65] This last concept, I believe, is fundamental for the purpose of my work on two counts: as it will be shown, it captures both one of the main - it will be indirectly discussed if favourably or not - features of Russian art and culture, and also one of the key aspects of the cycle *The End of an Epoch* which, as revealed in the first chapter, deals with cultural and past topoi.

I want to start with the words of Barbara M. Thiemann who, introducing Ludwig Collection, argued that "[w]hen studying post-Stalinist art," – here I would also add when studying Soviet art already since its very beginning – "which is not unadulterated Socialist Realism but only displays certain of its characteristics, we are not merely

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[64] B. M. Thiemann*, (Non)conform Russian and Soviet Art, 1958-1995 The Ludwig Collection*, Aachen München: Peter Und Irene Ludwig Stiftung Prestel, 2007, p. 20.
[65] Ibi, p. 19.

involved in art history but – and this, above all – contemporary history."[66] Now, coping with contemporary history it must be stated that over the years the latter has been the subject of a multitude of interpretations which led to several – though sometimes contrasting – definitions of it. Nowadays, the debate regarding its characterization seems to have taken on greater importance than ever before. Scholars from various disciplines have presented a plethora of conceptions of it to the extent that it is almost no longer possible to speak of history but rather of histories. In such a situation the task of historiography has never been so difficult and given this complexity, before getting to the more recent post-Colonial and post-Modern studies, I want to start by recalling the reasoning of Benedetto Croce whose notion of history, I believe, helps us with an initial comprehension of the issue. Croce claims that:

> […] all history is contemporary history, meaning that all history was written from the point of view of contemporary preoccupations and that, inevitably, we look at the past through the eyes of the present. Hence, history is not a stable and total phenomenon but it changes through a dialogue between the events of the past, interpretations of the present and emerging future ends.[67]

I believe the relativistic aspect that stands out from Croce's definition stresses the temporal and spatial perspective from which we look at events. Our social, geo-political and cultural standpoints inevitably filter these events according to the respective paradigms, and eventually influence our understanding. Hence, as specified by Croce, when we speak of history we are speaking of the past, from the present and in relation to what we think may be the future. Going further, it can be argued that our knowledge of the past is not only within a constrained facet of our present, but also determined by contingencies of the past itself. That means that the past we look at is already something constructed by the contemporaries who gave value to certain phenomena to the detriment of others. In this way, it can be assumed that historiography proceeds in a hierarchical manner, the latter constituting – among all the other purposes - that which post-Colonial and post-Modern theories pretend to expose by putting the spotlight on those histories that the hierarchy neglects or those which are set in lower positions of it. The hierarchy or hierarchical manner, therefore,

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[66] Ibi, p. 14.
[67] Croce cit. in Nadja Gnamuš, *The Concept of Eastern Art and Self-Historicisation: The Slovenian Case* in A. Chmielewska, I. Kossowska, M. Lachowski, *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918–2018*, New York: Routledge, 2023, p. 45.

revealed to be something belonging both to the past and the present and, by stating that all history is contemporary history, this concept is confirmed by Croce himself when he says that:

> [h]istory is not concerned with any event, it only collects, scrutinises and presents those which are relevant in creating (social) changes and have consequences. This means that history more or less deals with historical ruptures and breaks. The relevance of a historical fact is measured by its effect on the future development of events.[68]

These words disclosed a specific characteristic of history, namely a desire to give order to events. In this context history becomes absolute or objective, something constructed according to its specific internal logic. Having stated that I do not wish here to propose a certain immanent or absolutist conception of history such as that of the neo-idealist philosopher, my content is nevertheless to start from Croce's particular conception of history because I believe the latter still holds aspects not to be overlooked when considering the history of Soviet Union. Moving forward, in the work *State Construction and Art in Eastern Central Europe, 1918-2018*, the authors discussed about this seemingly proper feature of history consisting of the selection of specific historical facts. Introducing the concept of self-historicization and paraphrasing Edward H. Carr, they argued that "[a]ll historical facts come to us as a result of interpretations by historians influenced by the standards, criteria and values of their age and environment through which they consider and measure the facts."[69] Given this further statement, it can be argued that such a thing as historical truth does not or, to better say, cannot exists. The reason for the latter is because facts appear to be corrupted by those who narrate them and in the exact moment of the narration the hierarchy which I was talking about earlier is created. Drawing from these two similar points of view, it seems that the logic which appears to govern the dynamics of history is that of power which, consequently, is what sets the form and essence of hierarchies and eventually of history itself. In this framework, the expression according to which history is written by winners should be taken with reservation. I would rather state that history is written by those who have the power, which not necessarily means the winners. What I am referring to is something akin to the principle of authority, the latter to be understood not in the sense of those who are entitled to deal with history,

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[68] Ibi, p. 46.
[69] Ibi, p. 45.

namely historians, but in that of those who, located in specific temporal, spatial and cultural contexts determine the *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* regarding the events. To clarify this concept, it is Groys's reading which, once again, helps us – by moving our attention towards the relationship between power and history – with a deeper understanding of the latter according to the perspective presented here[70]. Groys's interpretation of the relationship existing between early avant-garde art and socialist realism or Stalinist art calls for a different consideration of the role of winners and losers. Before going further with Groys's analysis, I beg pardon in advance if my discourse might be momentarily perceived as being a little out of its due course, but I believe a look at Groys's interpretation of this topic is more than useful in understanding and deepening both the notion of history on the whole and the practice of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin which, often, deals with the concepts of past, present and future. Moreover, the reasoning about history that I am about to deliver through Groys hopefully will provide further elements for considering self-historicization as being symptomatic of post-Stalinist and post-Soviet epochs and, consequently, help with the understanding of the Russian attitude towards history. Groys argues that:

> [s]ocialist realism was not created by the masses but was formulated in their name by the well-educated and experienced elites who had assimilated the experience of the avant-garde and been brought to socialist realism by the internal logic of the avant-garde method itself, which had nothing to do with the actual tastes of the masses. [71]

By stating that, Groys is laying the conceptual ground to re-interpret the role of the two forces involved in the clash for the title of new Messiah of the world. As a matter of fact, for him the two were fighting for the same goal and moving on a same ground, namely that of power. Only that, contrary to what might be usually thought in the field of art in the early Soviet Union, avant-garde and socialist realism also shared the same attitude towards history: even if they differ on the formal level, both had the strong desire to break with tradition, namely with history in the whole. And both also knew that to accomplish such an ambitious mission aesthetic was crucial, because in order

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[70] This topic has been addressed marginally in the first chapter when speaking of the relationship between official and unofficial art. Here is being taken up for its usefulness in deepening the notion of Soviet history.
[71] B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 9.

to build the supposedly new world first the latter must be envisioned. However, the rupture between the two contenders took place at this juncture: avant-garde claimed the destruction of history with the consequential trespassing in the supposedly declaimed new world without specifying the leader at the helm of this new world; that which soon became called socialist realism, instead, knew exactly who was going to be in command on the route to the a-historical future, Stalin. This crucial aspect is confirmed by the aesthetic of the two forces. By adopting "realistic devices of secular painting"[72] and, I add, with the pervasiveness of Stalin's image in the latter, socialist realism filled the driving seat left vacant by avant-garde art. Contrary to the latter, this made manifest the earthly yet divine presence of the Demiurge. The importance of this feature is stated by Groys when he states that "Soviet aesthetic theory […] is an integral component of socialist realism rather than its meta description."[73] Thus, Stalinist art, contrary to avant-garde art, set a true north which was worth heading towards. Now, drawing from this Groys warned us that the "[…] similarity between the views of the victors and their victims obliges us to regard with peculiar caution any unambiguous oppositions between them arising from a purely moral interpretation of events."[74] It is precisely this same peculiar caution that I want to call upon when looking at history. When I was referring to the principle of authority, I meant just this: if one considers that avant-garde lost in the fight for becoming the "[earthly incarnation of the demiurge]"[75], as Groys defines the disputed role by the two forces, it can be argued for socialist realism did not win either. If ever the title of winner was to be bestowed, it belongs to history. As the work of Groys proposes both the two forces perceived themselves – in a mutually exclusive way and from the perspective of Neo-Platonism – as the authority in charge for the creation of a new world, as an all-mighty artificer. But if avant-garde was eventually nailed by Stalinist art, the latter suffered the same fate when faced history. That is because the "totality of the ideological horizon contrasted with the avant-gardist belief in the possibility of breaching it"[76]. The horizon it has being talking about here is that of history which, if one tries to reach it, as we proceed towards it, this too moves always a little further from the position it

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[72] Ibi, p. 113.
[73] Ibi, p. 6.
[74] Ibi, p. 9.
[75] Ibi, p. 56.
[76] Ibi, p. 107.

was. In this respect, "what Malevich felt to be an escape into the eternity beyond the three-dimensional illusion, however, is regarded by the modern viewer as a two-dimensional plane"[77]. Stalinist culture, instead, was grounded on the will to create a "union of everything historical in a single myth"[78], with the latter being Stalin himself under whose figure past, present and future had to be simultaneously unified. This, however, met the insurmountability of history: by overcoming history and becoming a myth, Stalin was actually remaking another one, at the same time different and the same. Therefore, history could not and cannot be overcame, one cannot help but be in history. Resuming the notion of authority, then, history seems to be shaped by those who have the power to do so, not matter of the result and, despite a common interpretation of the latter, one should always give oneself the benefit of the doubt. This is proved by the fact that the lesson of the avant-garde art and socialist realism has remained fixed in the artists' mind during post-Stalinist and post-Soviet period: the historical Big Bang-like represented by revolution, the tension between avant-garde and socialist realism as well as its gradual implosion inevitably influenced the following history of art[79].

Now, continuing with the notion of history I wish to outline here, a similar reasoning regarding the complex relationship between history and the narration of it which connects with mine is provided by Lotman. After pointing out the randomly aspect of occurrence of historical events, he argues that "[…] separating the "subjective" from the "objective" is essentially impossible. We can change the language for describing events, but we must not forget that this language can be transformed in an instant into an active participant in those events."[80] Lotman also shares the view for which perspectives of narration may influence that which is narrated. Despite the objective nature of historical events which, to him, consists in the randomness with which they take place, these same events may still be manipulated. In this sense, I believe a further Lotman's argumentation acts as a link

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[77] Ibi, p. 83.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Moscow Conceptualism and Sots-Art deal, among all the other references, with avant-garde and socialist realism phenomena. On such account see B. Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010 and E. Andreeva, *Sots-Art: Soviet Artists of the 1970s-1980s*, Roseville: Craftsman House, 1995.
[80] M. Tamm, *Juri Lotman - Culture, Memory and History*, translated by B. J. Baer, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG., 2019, p. 117.

between Groys's interpretation of the previous roles of avant-gardes and Stalinist art regarding history, and the latter's relationship with power or authority. By stating that it is not possible to separate the subjective from the objective, Lotman was just affirming that, despite a certain degree of objectiveness, still the concept of subjectivity cannot be denied – here I add – not only in the process of narration of the facts but above all in their very process of formation and progression. However obvious this may seem, this aspect is a crucial point for the notion of history, and it leads us to the matter regarding Russian attitude towards history.

We drew a line from Croce, past Carr and Groys, all the way to Lotman, with the latter making us not to forget about the subjective feature which is what I now want to discuss about. Lotman, proceeding with his argumentation, stated that "[d]ynamic processes that occur in history are unavoidably associated with self-consciousness."[81] Speaking of authority, my content was not just that of pointing out a sort of historical tension between phenomena self-proclaiming themselves the authority of power in the name of some idea. My intention is also that of directing the attention to the very same authority of power which seems to take on a particular character when speaking of Russian people. Therefore, it is to their self-consciousness of which Lotman speaks that I am now turning the attention to.

2.2 On The Russian Attitude Towards History: Nostalgia, Amnesia, Utopia

I admit that defining the self-consciousness of a people is not something which can be easily achieved, and the scope of such an endeavour requires a multidisciplinary approach which I cannot provide. Not to mention that undertaking such a task would be off topic regarding the area of my study. However, in order to introduce the discourse about Russians' particular attitude towards history, I still believe that it must be individualized those features regarding Russian self-consciousness which are telling of their disposition towards history and, consequently, providing additional concepts useful for the comprehension of the process of self-historicization. A contribution by Russian literary critic Viktor Erofeev serves as a guide in such a

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[81] Ibi, p 118.

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framework.[82] Some excerpts of *Entsiklopediia russkoĭ dushi* reveal three particular features. Under the heading *"Distrust of Mind"*[83], he writes: "[n]ostalgia for the homeland is much more homeland than the homeland itself. Other homelands can succeed one another without particular illness. Is this not a striking testimony of the significance of the Russian essence?"[84]. With another heading's excerpt, "The Originality"[85], Erofeev states: "Russian thought consists of traces in the sand. […]. The next generation comes, and everything starts all over again ab ovo."[86]. Or, as well as in "The Sunset of Russia"[87]: "The Russian fills itself with utopia, like pus. Then he bursts]."[88] These three headings, though the former in the form of rhetorical question, reveal three fundamental aspects of Russians' self-consciousness that I would summarize respectively with the following terms: nostalgia, amnesia and utopia. Far from pretending to enclose the concept of self-consciousness in just three terms, still I propose them because of their relevance, however minimal, regarding both the concept here at issue and the artistic practice of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin in the cycle *The End of an Epoch* which cannot help but be mindful of them despite still holding a certain degree of singularity. Nostalgia, which will be appropriately addressed in the third chapter given its complex essence, refers to some sort of projection towards something in the past which keeps on being missed by contemporary people; the second expresses a kind of inability to learn from the very same past, which on the contrary leads to an eternal returning desire for what the third word refers to: utopia. The latter could be viewed in line with Groys's interpretation of avant-garde art and Stalinist art's dynamic. Having both failed to overcome history and speaking of post-utopianism by drawing on a Sasha Sokolov's novel, Groys argues that the feeling

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[82] In this regard, let me offer you a clarification before presenting Viktor Erofeev's work. If what follows will be seen to be in contradiction with what Mead and Sjeklocha has argued when they exhorted us to be wary of any romantic assumptions regarding Russians' tendency towards mystical master plans, let me state that Erofeev's contribution presented here is, however, an aspect which must not be forgotten when it comes to Russia's attitude towards history.

[83] V. Erofeev, *Entsiklopediia russkoĭ dushi*, Saint Petersburg: Azbuka, 2010, p. 161, [*Nedoverie k umu*].

[84] Ibi p. 162, [Toska po rodine v gorazdo bol'sheĭ stepeni okazyvaetsya rodinoĭ, chem sama rodina. Drugie rodiny mozhno pomeniat' odnu na druguiu bez osoboĭ bolezni. Ne ėto li porazitel'noe svidetel'stvo znachitel'nosti russkoĭ sushchnosti?].

[85] Ibi, p.184, [Samobytnost].

[86] Ibi, p. 185, [Russkaia mysl' - sledy na peske. [...] Pridet sleduiushchee pokolenie - i vsë opiat' "ot iaĭtsa"].

[87] Ibi, p 31. [Zakat Rossii].

[88] Ibid., [Russkiĭ nalivaetsia utopieĭ, kak gnoem. Potom on lopaetsia].

experienced after Stalin's death has to be viewed as "the beginning of timelessness"[89], just like a post-utopian time. In this sense, "when the hero is banished from paradise" – that which Stalin also wanted to create, a paradise – "he is driven not into history but outside of it – to a loss of historical memory, into the everyday in which historical heroes lose their eternal youth."[90] As confirmation that nostalgia is far more homeland than it is homeland itself and that the loss of historical memory deviates into the desire for utopia are A. Erofeev's words. Speaking of the Soviet artists of the 1960s he states that:

> [a]rtists were faced with a difficult dilemma. They could either recognise the existence of the devastated space, their own loneliness and lack of continuity, and start from scratch, relying on an active world outlook, their own intuition and subtle emanations of the times; or they could seek support in abstract thinking, in a certain public project of art. The former option opened the road towards a creativity which would be truly modern and adequate both for the creator's personality and for the situation at hand. In the latter option, a variety of Utopian art would again come in the footsteps of the avant-gardism of the 1920s and of Socialist Realism. The vast majority of artists chose the latter option […].[91]

By choosing the latter option, then, artists led themselves to "the formation and objectifying of the cults, myths and manias that spread in Soviet society in the 1960s."[92] Now, given this recurrent theme deriving from a seemingly loss of historical memory, a natural continuation of my line of reasoning would be considering this kind of amnesia.

Resuming the previously introduced concept of hierarchies, by which I mean dominant narratives stemming from the selection of those events capable of influencing society and bearing in mind the authors' contributions presented so far, in former Socialist countries of Eastern Europe these hierarchies were one of the effects of the more or less regularly alternating imperatives of governments. In this view, the early-twentieth-century events, as the issue of avant-garde art for example, were swept away by the socialist paradigm which declare the former not conformed to its canons. History was, hence, written by the imperative of that epoch, namely socialist realism. After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation process – though aiming at revealing to the world Stalinism' s untruths and atrocities – did not represent

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[89] B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 102.
[90] Ibi, p. 103.
[91] A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, Roseville: Craftsman House, 1995, p. 59.
[92] Ibi, p. 60.

a sort of Dubchekian socialism with a human face which shortly thereafter made its way in Prague, but rather became tantamount to another imperative. Khrushchev's thaw involved only a modest concession of freedom regarding the arts, as stated in the first chapter.[93] Thus history again was being written according to another order, this time slightly different from the previous, at least within the art sphere. Artists who still produced works with few if not even nothing in common with the criteria of socialist realism or were reminiscent of the early avant-garde art kept on being somehow prosecuted. After the short parenthesis of the late 1960s movements manifesting the wish for a more liberal society, which spurred roughly in all Soviet Union and its satellite states, the twenty-year period spanning from Khrushchev to Brezhnev was of relative sly statal control in the arts. We must wait few years more - the mid 1980s - until Gorbachev for society and, therefore, history to change in a significant manner. In any case, by just considering this brief and by no means exhaustive historical review of Soviet leaders' impact on history, it can be highlighted the particular attitude towards history that Russian people seem to share:

> Russian conscience is unfavourably disposed to the cause and ideology of its immediate predecessors, the 'forefathers'. This, in fact, defines the specific rhythm or respiration that is typical of Russian history: it comes in spasmodic gasps, like the breathing of a TB patient. Each of its phases equate to 20 or 30 years, that is, the active life cycle of a generation; it is regularly followed by an attack of convulsions, a paroxysm of the entire social organism, a crisis which opens up a new epoch in politics, public consciousness and art.[94]

From Erofeev's words comes up a scenario for which Russian land seems to be constantly haunted by the ghosts of the past. Or, I shall say, that the past itself seems to be an eternal phantom which have relapses into contemporary society, as something that cannot be discarded. Its pervasiveness is of equal intensity of the visual and intellectual ones expressed by the medal ribbon of Erik Bulatov in *The Horizon* (1972). The past, then, never ceased to interfere in the future of the always younger generations. The latter, under the ruling of the Soviet leaders from Stalin on, experienced the passing of time as just a changing of the politician of the moment but not of the political agenda, at least until Gorbachev. That of being disposed to the past, hence, can be interpreted in a kind of nostalgia for something which has ceased to exist

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[93] See note 36 in chapter 1.
[94] Ibi, p. 6.

but that somehow continues to outlive. Reconnecting us with Croce, then, it can be argued that Soviet history during the twentieth century was not in dialogue with anything, rather it was stuck within the same paradigm, namely socialism. The Soviet Union closure to the outside world and novelty as well as its excessive rigid values and paradigms – all this being originated, though not exclusively, by a sentiment of nostalgia – did nothing but turn history on itself. When I will punctually consider Cherkashins' dynamic of self-historicization and their cycle of performances *The End of an Epoch*, it will be shown how both the former and the latter can be interpreted as an artistic and living attempt to cope with this idea of history folding back on itself and the latter's consequences. Self-historicization, in a way, is the re-action to a historical denial. However, resuming the discourse regarding socialist realism, it must be said that it would be too general to dismiss it without holding the different – albeit minimal – declinations that have gone through it. As I cannot pay due attention to this subject, though, it will suffice here to say that official art has passed from an initial stage in which it assumed a monolithic nature and, dare I say, almost watertight against any outside intrusion, to a style which, in its late versions, presented a slightly increased degree of tolerance and acceptance towards other artistic forms.[95] Despite these slightly changes, however, harking back to the attitude held by Russians towards history, the latter reveals itself to proceed as the rhythm of a TB patient whose paroxysmal crisis leads the patient into oblivion, with the losing of memory as its aftermath. That is his amnesia: a collateral effect. Hence, instead of acting a kind of historical amnesty on both the unconscious and conscious selves – what Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's quest in their early-1990s performances in *The End of an Epoch* just tried to do – they suffered from historical amnesia. In this perspective Erofeev's expression "traces in the sand"[96] finds further confirmation. Considering the period between the late 1950s to the late 1980s, the spasmodic gasps stated by Viktor Erofeev were several but for different reasons they failed to generate an upheaval similar to the post-revolutionary one. Although not as intense as that of the beginning of the twentieth century, the crisis of the second half of 1900, despite being promptly repressed in any way, did not disappear completely without leaving even the minor

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[95] For an art-historical excursus on Socialist Realism art see G. Prokhorov, *Art Under Socialist Realism: Soviet Painting, 1930-1950*, East Roseville: Craftsman House: G + B Arts Int., 1995.
[96] See note 87.

trace. In this sense, not all traces were of sand, some of them were still visible and making possible to assume that the history-making event represented by the fall of the Wall was a turning point which took along with it such minor traces. The 1989 was the year representing the dovetail of all these changes occurred in the second half of the so-called short twentieth century. With Gorbachev's settlement and at the sunset of Soviet Union, history was rewritten significantly but, as stated in the first chapter, however promising the re-starting conditions were, what was foreshadowed before the Russian artists was a doubtful future, as one having skeletons in the closet which again confirms the words of Andrei and Viktor Erofeev.

2.3 Eastern European Art: a Theorical and Practical Entity at The National and International Border

"State Malfunction in Central and Eastern Europe"[97]: if we imagined a report about the functioning of the state machine with respect to the art sphere, that would be the result of the analysis. Also, a similar picture would be given if the same report was drafted after 1989, portraying a precarious condition with the general nature of the malfunction revealing a systematic problem in the region. The causes of this malfunction were various, however, as we left ourselves in the previous paragraph, all of them were to be traced back to the Soviet and post-Soviet historical events. This issue became undeniable with Gorbachev's actions " […] of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) […]", making "the newly established post-Soviet and post-communist states found themselves largely without an established infrastructure for the creation, development and exhibition of contemporary art."[98] Considered all the above,"[t]he pace of historical changes and turmoil in Eastern and East-Central Europe was such that hardly any theoretical apparatus or artistic direction could be generated to navigate art, art history or art theory during those fast-changing historical eras."[99] The intensity of their occurrence together with a succession of political leaders which always consisted in a change of form rather than one in essence dried out all the attempts to build a solid cultural framework on which grounding a real breakthrough.

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[97] É. Forgács, *History Too Fast*, in *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918–2018*, cit., p. 29.
[98] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 88.
[99] É. Forgács, *History Too Fast*, in cit., p. 29.

It comes with no surprise then that, as for the results of the after-1989 imaginative report, the nineties carried with them this same institutional negligence with the general nature of it now shared – sometimes equally, sometimes not – among the post-Soviet countries. In these poor conditions Eastern European art presented itself to the world, as an ensemble of histories without History. Now artists and people in general, starting from the late '80s, wanted to get historically back on track after Stalinist and post-Stalinist deviances. Now the issue of claiming one's own artistic presence was not only facing institutional ostracism, but rather its long-term effects. In this framework, looking at the lifted Iron Curtain, artists were now confronted with a twofold conundrum made up of past and future.

Speaking of context as the historical and cultural background of art produced in the region, Ilya Kabakov writes that the latter "happened in distant, closed countries, that – at least in the case of Soviet Union – virtually did not exist on the artistic map of the world from the 1930s until the 1980s."[100] It can be argued that at the turn of the century, having obtained the potential visibility it was entitled to, Eastern European art had freed itself from the realm of un-officiality, only to find itself yet again in a similar realm, this time however being that of the whole artistic world. If until now, being bound internally, i.e. nationally, had been the most immediate problem to be solved, now it was time to deal with another aspect of that problem: the fact that the former also led to isolation at international level. Since the late 1980s, it was this problem to be tackled. Artists, curators, historians, scholars, everyone who decided to tackle this issue which involved in an activity of historical reconstruction, as the then general imperative of *perestraĭvat'sia* expected, felt ambivalent in front of the conundrum: from one side there was a "constant sense of lagging behind and of being under (objectively and partly imagined) threat from surrounding enemies" which Lotman argues "gave birth to the idea of a 'besieged city' so characteristic of Russian history."[101] This feeling is, somehow, indirectly due to the idea of perceiving one's own self always at the border of something else. From the other side, there was a "heightened sense of one's own exceptionalism […] – producing a desire to merge

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[100] I. Kabakov, *Foreword*, in *Primary Documents A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, L. Hoptman, T. Pospiszyl, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002, pp. 7-8, here p. 7.
[101] M. Tamm, *Juri Lotman - Culture, Memory and History*, cit., p. 119.

with one of those cultures on the border […] and a keen sense of the impossibility that this desired merge could ever take place, as well as a sense of internal isolation"[102]. The latter, instead, could be indirectly due to the nostalgia for utopia which it has been discussed earlier. In such a framework the conundrum was not just a matter of past and future, but also and above all of present. Speaking of Moscow Romantic Conceptualism, Groys points out how the very concept of present must be considered in a particular way. Starting from the 1960s, he states that the "true Soviet citizen was somebody living in total oblivion of the present"[103]. Groys traces back this attitude during Communist times, when the whole Soviet Union was concerned with the future and the project to realize the latter. In the name of the latter, present was totally disregarded and denied. By the end of the twentieth century, then, the issue of present was acknowledged and became something to be solved and saved, reaching its apex in importance with the phenomenon of self-historicization.

However, mindful of these considerations most of the artistic declinations – which thanks to the newly acquired freedom started already in the sixties by those who managed to have contacts with the outside artistic world and consequently influenced the internal artistic milieu – should be viewed as follows. There were those who adopted Western modern artistic canons as the case of the Lianozovo Group which, though its members emulated these outside canons, "the borrowed manner was viewed as an opportunity to learn a free and non-ideologized language"[104]. And those who still were reminiscent of the nostalgia for utopia as the case of the group Dvizenije, which "gave birth to the last Utopian project of mass public modern art in USSR" and "directed its projects into a non-artistic environments, into a space inhabited by life, which it wished to permeate with aesthetic values, an ideal geometrical plasticity, light and electronic music."[105] In any case, the general picture – though without reducing entirely to what follows[106] – which comes forth from the 1960s up till after the

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[102] Ibi, p. 120.
[103] B. Groys, *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 2.
[104] A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, cit., p. 64.
[105] Ibi, p. 70.
[106] A phenomenon which is an exception is represented by Sots-Art: "[…] this art will be referred to as postutopian, first of all, to distinguish it from both the utopian art of the avant-garde and Stalinism and the antiutopian art usually associated with the postmodernist situation, and second, to underscore the tendency of sots art not to criticize modern progress, but to reflect utopian ambitions to halt it.", in B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 81.

dissolution of Soviet union and which confirms the concepts of amnesia and nostalgia for utopia, is that of "a multitude of home-based groups with diametrically opposed political and cultural orientations". In such a context, "not general Utopia of art was possible" but, as argued by A. Erofeev, "[s]till, if we try to identify similar moments in their evolution, we can trace a common descent from Utopian dreams about the future of the grass roots, to sources and lost traditions."[107] Erofeev's opinion is held also by Groys when, speaking of postmodernism, he specifies the kind of utopia which seems to govern since the seventies on. He argues that "the attitude toward the world and history remains critical, and the search goes on for a utopian escape from them through a kind of "negative utopia" that unites features of traditional utopias and dystopias."[108]

As to performance art then, it has been discussed in the first chapter how this practice is particularly linked with the ideas of subversion given its intrinsic nature of breaking with established canons and, at the same time, holds a certain freedom in essence for the sake of artistic experimentation per se. Given these two features, performance art naturally spurred within the unofficial or underground realm and, starting from the sixties, its relevance gradually increased both as an artistic practice untied to any social and political matters – even if the contrary is also true – and as way to stress one's own artistic presence consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, the concept of identity which often was juxtaposed to this practice acquired particular relevance especially during post-socialist times when it was time to understand the *what* and the *who*, only that what was missing was the *how*.

Going back to Croce, at the turn of the century, the time had come to confront the malfunctioning of the state. To do so, it was necessary to resume the interrupted dialogue with history, and to reinterpret the historical facts according to the contemporary concerns, that is those capable of generating social changes. In the wake of this thought, histories capable of activating social changes were those that for so long remained hidden. Reconstructing meant rediscovering those histories but, as it will be shown, the problem of misinterpretation was just around the corner. Post-colonial studies, starting to permeate since the 1980s onward, tried to reconstruct the

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[107]A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, cit., pp. 64-66.
[108] B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit., p. 108.

interpretation of Eastern European art phenomenon. Despite the latter's general characters herein discussed, however, still its internal differences as being a heterogeneous phenomenon could not and cannot be discarded. In a similar framework, it remains critical to understand it while avoiding strict points of view of interpretation or categories too general. Bearing in mind the latter, post-colonial intellectual stances ground on the narrative East versus West which cannot help but perpetuating the divide between these two concepts rather than focus on the phenomenon of Eastern European art itself. In this framework, Katarina Wadstein MacLeod' claim seems to be punctual when she stated that "[w]hat is important to identify is that as soon as there is a distinction of experience and/or origin through a bipolar understanding of history, it is a matter of *who* is addressing *what* on behalf of *whom*."[109]

However, addressing this issue would falls within a larger field of study[110]. For the latter reason the focus will be on one of those phenomena which concerns all Eastern European art, albeit in different ways depending on the country under scrutiny: self-historicization. In proceeding, then, the reasoning here provided originates from Lotman's view who, paraphrasing Lev Tolstoy, stated that "true history takes place in private life and in unconscious mass movements [...]."[111] That is how the approach to self-historicization is presented here, as looking at both private life and unconscious mass movements. The former being that of the artists themselves, Valera and Natasha Cherkashin; the latter being the phenomenon of self-historicization itself, for it represents an unconscious – and sometimes conscious as well – movement stemming from artists of the region as the response to the lack of a comprehensive historical discourse and to an almost visceral need to stress their own physical presence in the world, after many years of historical denial. Hence, if through Carr it has been argued that a historical truth cannot exists given the contamination of the facts in the exact moment of their narration, the opposite is also true. That is, such a thing as a historical

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[109] K. W. MacLeod, *The Resilience of the Periphery: Narrating Europe through Curatorial Strategies*, in *Europe faces Europe: Narratives from Its Eastern Half*, Bristol: Intellect, 2017, pp. 153 -173, here p. 166.
[110] For an in-depth study on such account refer to J. Fornäs, *Europe Faces Europe Narratives from Its Eastern Half*, Bristol: Intellect, 2017.
[111] M. Tamm, *Juri Lotman - Culture, Memory and History*, cit., p 191.

truth, concerning self-historicization, can be achieved but in the way proposed by the historian Hayden White. He

> points out that historical events can be told through narrative accounts, but they do not have to be. There are other ways to communicate information without embedding it in a narrative form. He makes an important distinction between the historian who retells the events, that in a way is always to narrate, and the person who narrativizes these events. In other words, there is an implied difference between accounting for facts and telling a story. The curatorial tradition is deeply embedded in this tension between accounting for facts and telling stories.[112]

The method adopted for the present study is based on White's formulation: the case study of the Cherkashins hopefully will account for the phenomenon of self-historicization though without narrating it, but in the sense of accounting for it while preventing its interpretation to prevail over the phenomenon as such. Only in this way of proceeding the reinterpretation of facts required by Croce's philosophy can be made without the latter however compromising them. Finally, shedding light on the practice at issue hopefully will contribute for the abandoning of such a label as border or periphery, though without diminishing their relevance for the understanding of the art history of the region. The proposal here is to bear in mind these important concepts but only in order to go beyond them: to make "art historical narrative, which [Piotr Piotrowski] call[s] 'vertical'" – hence implying "a certain hierarchy" – horizontal.[113] The latter means an art historical narrative which has dismantled or deconstructed the verticality, meaning the hierarchy. "The question which I am going to raise here pertains […] to geography."[114]

2.4 Practicing Self-Historicization

It is just with the will to deconstruct the concepts of border and periphery that this paragraph begins. For, despite being cut off from the national and international art scene, it is also true that some channels through which make contacts and exchange information were still possible in some ways. That is why, "under the seemingly

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[112] Hayden White, *The Value of Narrativity in The Representation of Reality*, in "Critical Inquiry", vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5-27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174., [last access on 12/06/2023] cit. in K. W. MacLeod, *The Resilience of the Periphery: Narrating Europe through Curatorial Strategies*, cit., p. 157.
[113] P. Piotrowski, *Towards a Horizontal History of The European Avant-Gardes*, in *Europa? Europa! The Avant-Garde, Modernism and The Fate of a Continent*, edited by S. Bru, J, Baetens, B. Hjartarso et all, vol. 1, 2009, pp. 49.58, here p. 50.
[114] Ibi, p. 49.

homogeneous surface of official art, there persisted many lively attempts to create an autonomous visual culture."[115] Speaking of periphery then, it must be borne in mind that there was a dialectical tension between the latter and the centre, be it the national centre and/or the West.[116] After all, on the thesis for which there was a dialogical relationship between the periphery and the centre agree some of the scholars presented here: From Bertelé who argued for permeability[117], to Bryzgel's proved porosity between East and West.[118] Ultimately the artist himself, Valera Cherkashin, declared that he never felt cut off from the outer world[119]. However, as much as exchanges and connections existed, such labels as periphery and border still had reasons to exists, and these very same reasons were the causes of all the attempts made by unofficial artists to throw such labels off. Looking at exhibitions in former USSR one can readily understand the feeling experienced by unofficial artists already in the late 1950s, a feeling the lasted until the end of century and beyond. An example for that is represented by two exhibitions held in 1959. "[w]hilst the first half of the 1950s was almost completely dominated by Soviet exhibitions celebrating Socialist Realism, following the thaw in 1953 there was a change in the overall pattern."[120] However, the new pattern was nothing but the former with now the inclusion of some Western art, which, nevertheless, was still suspiciously regarded. Either way, in 1959 "an exhibition of modern US artists including Pollock and De Kooning proved of decisive importance" while "[t]he exhibition *Lianozovo* held during the same year in the

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[115] T. Pospiszyl, *The Secret Life of People's Culture*, in *Primary Documents A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, cit., pp. 13-14, here p. 13.

[116] Tomasz Zarycki's reading of this tension is explanatory: "In the light of Zarycki's theory, a large number of East Central European artists of the era – aware of the trends popular in the centre – should be considered a part of the peripheral elite. The proponents of universal modernism usually assumed the role of the centre's representatives on the periphery, while national artists spoke for the periphery in the centre – a task particularly important for establishing the nation, both artistically and politically. However, expressing peripheral identity in a way that is not only understood but also appreciated by the centre required demonstrating a national art that would match the standards of universal modernity." In A. Chmielewska, *Universal or National? Making Art on the European Periphery*, in *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918–2018*, cit., p. 39.

[117] See M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit., p. 217, on the argument for the permeability of Soviet periphery to cultural phenomena propelled by the centre. Note 33.

[118] The whole book of A. Bryzgel is a successful attempt of proving interconnections between Eastern and Western artists. Such an attempt is made explicit by the author herself in the introduction of the book. "[…] it attempts to outline the paths of reciprocal cultural exchange between East and West as well as across the East […]" in A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 2.

[119] See note 41 of the first chapter.

[120] O. Breininger, *Art Exhibitions in the Former USSR*, in *(Non)conform Russian and Soviet Art, 1958-1995 The Ludwig Collection*, cit., pp. 498- 502, here p. 499.

apartment of Oskar Rabin, could only be contemplated as the result of this display, as was the continuous presentation after 1960 of works by unofficial artists in the apartment of the collector George Costakis."[121] Stressing the fact that the exhibition *Lianozovo* was held in the apartment of one of the artists making up the group highlights the kind of visibility and the level of acceptance and consideration that was granted to unofficial artists.

From the 1960s on, however, the increasing number of attempts to encroach from the realm of the periphery upon that of the centre, combined with the growing attention of some of those representatives of the centre, the latter be internal or external, towards the periphery – as attested by the dialogical tension between these two entities[122] – were significant of the rising acknowledgement of art history towards unofficial art. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct the general manners through which unofficial artists made their way into history of art, by providing themselves as curators, critics, historians, archivists and collectors as a response for the longstanding lack of figures and institutions - as well as a lack physical and metaphorical space - in charge of building a history of art.

Before looking at the practical manners of realization of self-historicization, B. Groys's introductory text to Moscow conceptualism defines the starting conditions from which artists moved to accomplish such an ambition. The reflection that will follow moves on the introductory part titled "Who Is The Artist"[123] in *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism*. Groys answered this question by contrasting the figure of the Western artist and his Eastern counterpart. Highlighting the similarities and differences between the two, he speaks of a professional when referring to the Western artist: "[…] to make art professionally is first of all – and even essentially – to make one's living by selling one's art production."[124] Making one's living by selling one's art production means being recognized as one who produces valuable products worthy to be sold and bought. Going further, for Groys being recognized means being aware of all the elements which help with the notion of becoming noted. Elements like "[…] power relationships of the art world; the role of curators, museum directors, and

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[121] Ibid.
[122] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 2.
[123] B. Groys, *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 11.
[124] Ibid.

collectors; the tastes of the rich; the tastes of the public, the coverage of art events and art stars in the media; the role of gender, ethnicity, and class in the artist's professional success, the laws of the art market; […]"[125]. When speaking of Soviet unofficial artist, instead, he spoke of the latter as a kind of hobbyist. This is because the environment of Soviet unofficial artists lacked almost all the above elements:

> [t]hey did not make their living by making their art. The Soviet unofficial artists had not access to any galleries, museums, art markets, or media. The art market and galleries did not exist in the Soviet Union, and museums and the media did not let them in. So these artists made their living in different ways, practicing different professions.[126]

All these deficiencies of the art system which Natasha and Valera confirmed during our conversation[127], and which were the symptoms of the statal malfunction – the latter to be intended both economically and socially, and broadly grounding on the cultural and historical developments outlined so far – did not prevent unofficial artists to reach the status of their Western counterparts, actually the opposite is true.

> […] Russian unofficial artists had ambitions and goals typical of the professional artists – they wanted their name inscribed in art history; they wanted to find a pictorial language that would be able to describe and represent their own, namely Soviet, culture in the global cultural context; and, in general, […] they wanted to be 'the face of their time.'"[128]

With these universal ambitions, Soviet unofficial artists considered the hostilities and shortcomings of their institutional system an opportunity to raise their voice even stronger to assert their right of being represented and, at the same time, to question the very system of representation. In such a context, there were sometimes conflicting and contradictory positions precisely due to the fact of being at the crossroads of two artistic systems. As key informant of the general atmosphere of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, Groys, in a conversation with Anton Vidokle, artist and founder of the platform e-flux, aptly defined unofficial artists' behaviour of that times and help to better understand their standpoint. Answering a question of Vidokle, he stated that:

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibi, pp 11-12.
[127] See Appendix.
[128] B. Groys, *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 12.

> […] It was a form of dandyism in the first place. People were not thrown out of the institutions because they made a certain kind of art. They made a certain kind of art just to demonstrate that they didn't belong to the 'Soviet herd'. To do so, one displayed all the conventional signs of 'non-Sovietness' […] The Soviet state created a huge reservoir of the forbidden and excluded—and the Russian intellectuals and the artists of that time were happy to exploit it as far as they could. They built the networks and circles and black markets that were present in all the major cities of the country. One could live and survive in these networks without having any need to deal with anything 'Soviet'.[129]

Groys elucidates the controversial position taken by unofficial artists in the second half of the twentieth century. As it will be showed in the next paragraph in details, the feeling described by Groys is that experienced by artists after a sort of gradual empowerment. Starting from the 1960s onward, firstly they raised their voice seeking recognition as artists, then they slowly realised that they did not really need any recognition from the institutional system. As a matter of fact, as the years went by, and their conditions changed – thanks also to the initiatives of the first generation of unofficial artists – they began to disown the power of institutions. The latter aspect of disowning the power of institutions will be unconsciously acted by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin when they finally will reach their historicization through the creation of their virtual museum. In any event, towards the 1980s, then, with the phenomenon of APTART, the self-awareness of unofficial artists was such that they considered themselves totally free from the establishment in art. In this context they were not politically involved, but simply they did not bother with strictly political matters, it was not about being anti-political or anti-Soviet but, once again, as argued by Amy Bryzgel, a-political. And the latter aspect is evident in the final part of Groys's quote, by stating that they could have lived and survived in such a self-built environment. However, it is again Amy Bryzgel who takes into account the issue of institutional critique initiated by artists and reached the core of the matter. Drawing on Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, she argues that:

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[129] A. Vidokle, B. Groys, *Art Beyond the Art Market*, in *Manifesta 6: Notes for an Art School*, edited by M. A. ElDahab, A. Vidokle and F. Waldvogel, Amsterdam: International Foundation Manifesta, 2006, pp. 64-71, here p. 65, Art_Beyond_the_Art_Market_Manifesta6 [last access 26/03/2023]

> [i]n the 1960s, critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler noted a shift in focus, from the creation of objects to the process of creation in Minimal, Conceptual and performance art. In foregrounding process and the experience of the artwork, artists aimed to circumvent the formal atmosphere of the museum, creating an ephemeral work of art that could not stagnate or be commodified by being hung on the wall. These genres, then, were among the vehicles that artists used to attempt to critique the institution of art, challenge the commercialisations of the art object and contest the gallery system that bestows a value upon it.[130]

Bryzgel points out that the shift of stress from the aesthetic value of artworks to the process of creation of the same artworks was a resourceful attempt with which some artists were deliberately declaring war to the institutional system. Moreover, as performance art form being central in Cherkashins' practice, the stressing of the process rather than the artwork itself makes it clear right away how performance and conceptual art were the best art forms to resort to, given their ephemeral nature and non-conventional attitude. In this sense, performance and conceptual art extended the way already paved by the early century avant-gardes and brought back under the spotlight questions like what art is, what is an artist, together with all the elements tied to these two concepts. Therefore, concepts such as exhibiting, curating, marketing and archiving were questioned on the same basis, and they ended up with the creation of a representational system – as the peculiar case of the Cherkashins – and, at the same time, with the demonstration of alternative patterns to it. Continuing her analysis, Bryzgel delivers Benjamin Buchloh's contribution to the matter which turns out to be crucial for our line of reasoning. What Buchloh argues is that:

> [i]n the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgment – of taste and connoisseurship – have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other a function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).[131]

The framework outlined by Buchloh makes evident the contradictory position which has been mentioned earlier due to the fact of being at the crossroad. Artists' will to broaden the concepts of art and artist represented nothing but an appeal to the institutions for recognition of this broadening. Therefore, if on the one hand artists

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[130] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 298.
[131] B. Buchloh, *Conceptual Art, 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions*, in "October", vol. 55., 1990, pp. 105-143, here p. 118.

wanted to free themselves from the approval system of the institutions existing up to then, on the other hand this same will kept them trapped and, consequently, still dependent on the approval system of the institutions for their recognition as artists. In these circumstances, "[…] thus, far from comprising a utopian escape from the market, Conceptual and other related forms such as Process Art were co-opted by them"[132], namely by artists.

Further, I want to deliver Jelena Vesić's contribution to the issue because through her analysis of the phenomenon of "Self-Managed Art"[133] in the countries of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and later, she explained the complex situation of self-organized art groups and culture in general. I believe her examination to be representative – even though in different ways – of the entire region and that it connects Groys, Buchloh and Bryzgel's perspectives discussed earlier. She took two exhibition research projects as case studies: the Belgrade-based "Prelom Kolektiv's *Two Times of One Wall: The Case of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC)—Belgrade in the 1970s*" and "*Removed from the Crowd: Dissociative Association—Associations outside the programmatic collectivities in the art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia* by the Zagreb-based Institute for Duration, Location and Variables (DeLVe)"[134]. The critical reflections that came forth thanks to these projects can be used as means to understand the phenomena which will be considered in the next paragraph such as that of APTART. The Prelom Kolektiv's exhibition examined "the flux between self-organisation and the institution"[135], that of DeLVe, instead, is particularly relevant for our current discourse because it focused on the locations in which some artistic initiatives took place and, just as those which will be examined further on, such locations were similarly marginal and non-traditional. The latter has been defined as being "[…] not only extra-institutional locations but places of temporariness as well, which are also considered to be places of indefiniteness and, ultimately, as places with not programme."[136] It will be observed how these and other

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[132] A. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, cit., p. 299.
[133] J. Vesić, *Post-Research Notes: (Re)Search for the True Self-Managed Art,* in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, edited by A. Janevski, R. Marcoci, K. Nouril, New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 2018, pp. 40-49, here p. 40.
[134] Ibi, p. 40-41.
[135] Ibi, p. 41.
[136] I. Bago, A. Majača, *Removed from the Crowd: Dissociative Association—Associations Outside the Programmatic Collectivities in the Art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia*, in

characteristics also belongs to the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum. However, having set the geographical and conceptual coordinates of these two exhibitions, what stem after their reception was that:

> […] each curatorial research project disclosed—with a different effective focus—the numerous contradictions permeating the complex net of relationships between the institution, state, community, and individual at particular historical moments, which informed the production of collectivity and artistic subjectivity […]."[137]

As these two exhibitions tried to deconstruct some long-lasting clichés in the artistic discourse, such as that which divided rather abruptly the borders between official and unofficial art, the two projects further characterized the phenomena of self-organization in art as response to the lack of an institutional system and/or for a kind of not alignment with the traditional cultural dictates. In doing that, they showed:

> […] self-organisation in terms of a two-fold trap that must be negotiated daily: a sense of anxiety and grief over the loss of the social state combined with the enjoyment of mobility and freedom in the sense of avoiding the paternalistic control of permanent employment, the boredom of an everyday repetitiveness, institutional confinement, and various impositions by the cultural bureaucracy.[138]

The general character of this twofold feeling makes it suitable for description of all the initiatives of self-organisation in the region. It will be showed how, introducing the Moscow phenomenon of APTART, the latter is coherent with the feeling described by Jelena Vesić, and that how hard it is to set the thresholds among the several stances taken by artists in such a phenomenon. What remains, though, is artists' will to position themselves neither with their Western colleagues nor with Soviet pattern, but to trace this other position into something else. Such a way of organisation, production and perception of themselves find explanation in what Jelena Vesić defined as "'performative institution'", the latter defined as

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Political Practices of (Post) Yugoslav Art, exhibition catalogue (Zagreb, Museum of History of Yugoslavia, November 2009), edited by I. Bago and A. Majača, Belgrade: Prelom Kolektiv, 2010. p. 100.
[137] J. Vesić, *Post-Research Notes: (Re)Search for the True Self-Managed Art,* in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, cit., p. 41.
[138] Ibi, 42.

> […] the sum of all the institution's departures from the classical national welfare-state institution (i.e., an art museum), which expresses its power in terms of guardianship over a disembodied art-historical canon or, indeed, as disembodied canon-building. To call an institution "performative" and to observe its performativity in this manner is, therefore, to acknowledge the impossibility of placing the entirety of its practices on either side of the binary opposition between institution and self-organisation.[139]

Phenomena as APTART but, more in general, the process of self-historicization function exactly in the form of a performative institution. As such, then, they are neither a true institution – despite their alleged plea to institutions for their artistic and historical recognition, which ultimately does nothing but make them self-elect themselves just to the rank of institutions, just because they would become one of them – nor an embryonic and alternative institution which presents itself in the guise of a temporary self-organisation awaiting to take part to the establishment. Rather, it will be shown that it is more apt to speak of a synthesis between these two concepts to describe self-historicization and, ultimately, that a tension between the same two concepts is more likely to be, depending on the case at issue. In the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin this tension will be the re-creation of the so called "museological function"[140] through the realization of the artists' "individual's museological 'I'"[141]. However, as I will try to consider these concepts in the last paragraph of this chapter, in the two artists' case the individual's museological "I" will happen to be one who "[…] appropriates all the roles, functions, and prerogatives: it is the author[s] and (simultaneously) the creation, the collector[s] and the collection, the archivist[s] and the archive, the exhibition space and the exhibition, the art connoisseur[s] and the work of art."[142]

Ultimately, Viktor Misiano further elaborates on the multifaceted nature of such phenomena and confirmed Jelena Vesić's analysis by speaking of "Confidential Community" and "Aesthetics of Interaction"[143]. Having recalled Bourriaud, he considered the phenomena of self-organisation – hence the process of self-

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[139] Ibi, p. 46

[140] V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012, p. 229.

[141] Ibi, p. 234.

[142] Ibi p. 234-237.

[143] V. Misiano, *Confidential Community VS Aesthetics of Interaction*, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, cit., p. 236.

historicization – from a sociological perspective and reflected on the difference of behaviour between Western artists and Eastern artists. Paraphrasing Lucy Lippard Misiano, too, speaks of Moscow artistic scene in the nineties as being characterized by a departure from "[…] an artefact-based understanding of artistic production" and of a "return of the interactive, socially oriented gesture."[144] In trying to give an explanation of the reason why artists on both sides of the former Iron Curtain were behaving in such a similar manner, he traced the reason back to sociological aspects, particularly to the concept of institution and institutionalization. He argues that

> [t]he demise of the ideological order, in fact, stripped art of its former legitimacy and forced it to seek a new identity. For those in the art community, it led to a heightened feeling of internal mutual dependence. Moscow artists, then, would not be able to see themselves in this orientation towards "individual or collective flight." Whereas Western artists sought to construct an internal autonomy outside of official institutions, in Russia the construction of autonomy was meant to compensate for the "flight of the institutions."[145]

The ideological demise of which Misiano is talking is the "disillusionment in critical philosophy among artists and intellectuals in the 1990s"[146], meaning exactly the cessation, not necessarily traumatic, as the case of the Cherkashins, of the possibility of deluding oneself by still believing in values and meanings claimed by critical philosophy, namely by institutions. The reason for that, according to Misiano, is because contemporary art of that time increasingly acquired a critical function, the latter inevitably made art self-re-evaluating itself. But if the latter for Western artists meant an almost radical departure from the institutions of art, for Moscow artists of that period, who did not have institutions of art to depart from – at least not in the sense of their Western colleagues – this meant a self-institutionalisation both of the artistic process and artistic objects. In such a context, rather than a departure from, according to Moscow artists it should be speak of an act of replacing or filling in the place left vacant by the absentee, i.e. the institution. And once artists and intellectuals self-united they gave rise to what Misiano called "*tusovka*"[147], a Russian slang word which designates an informal get-together of young people sharing common interests and leading a similar lifestyle. Given the complex nature of tusovka whose comprehensive

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[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibi, p. 237.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibi, p. 238.

account would be beyond the point to be reached here[148], it is sufficient to state that "[t]usovka is a form of the artistic milieu's self-organisation, in a situation where other institutions and state protectionism are altogether lacking."[149] With the absence of the latter, then, and being "[…] conducive towards the potentiality of those who *meet* and indifferent to their past […]", "it includes professional art historians and computers profiteers, heroes of the underground and ex-officials. In this sense the *tusovka* denies tradition; it is post-historic."[150] The comprehensive character of tusovka which comes forth, hence, reflects its position as a phenomenon completely detached from past history, as something beyond history, as a new institution. Therefore, facing again some kind of utopia, Misiano argues that "[…] we are dealing with the totality of separate utopias […]"[151], with individuals trying to show their historically, artistically and culturally stories untied to any history before theirs. The members of this "confidential community"[152] made up of different individuals sharing the same practices, then, "[…] were trying to subject these principles", those of tusovka, "to thoughtful reflection and to occupy an intellectual and ethical meta-position in relation to the *tusovka*."[153] The aspect which should be pointed out here is just that of this particular intellectual and ethical meta-position, which is nothing but the same position where the process of self-historicization takes place, and the very same position which Groys, Bryzgel, Buchloh and Vesić defined and proved to be controversial.

> […] if relational aesthetics saved itself from the world of official institutions through "flight" into the micro utopias of interaction, then the utopia of the confidential community occupied a meta-position in relation to the tusovka, which was in itself already a community living according to the laws of artistic interaction. Hence, the practice of these performative projects made use of the procedures of relational aesthetics for the purpose of self-constitution while at the same time subjecting them to critical deconstruction.[154]

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[148] For a comprehensive explanation of this word, refers to V. Misiano, *The Cultural Contradictions of the Tusovka*, in "Khudozhestvennyĭ Zhurnal Moscow Art Magazine", no. 25, 1999, https://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/41/article/794.

[149] V. Misiano, *The Cultural Contradictions of the Tusovka*, in "Khudozhestvennyy Zhurnal Moscow Art Magazine", no. 25, 1999, https://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/41/article/794.

[150] Ibid.

[151] V. Misiano, *Confidential Community VS Aesthetics of Interaction*, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, cit., p. 238.

[152] Ibi. p. 239.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibi. p. 241.

Bourriaud's relational aesthetics is defined by Viktor Misiano as aesthetic of interaction, which sees the spectator as an integral part of the artwork and his interaction with the latter determines the artistic response. In this regard, it is useful to bear in mind that it is just of aesthetic of interaction that one can speak when considering Cherkashins' series *The End of an Epoch* which involved an aesthetic interaction triggered by people responding to Valera and Natasha artistic inputs. However, if aesthetic of interaction in the first place represented a kind of safe conduct to reflect upon art, art history, and history on the whole, soon this ambition revealed to be just what it was, a utopia. As such, then, unofficial artists of the late twentieth century ended up by deconstructing the starting laws of the confidential community and, consequently, self-constituting a new institution, a new history. "As for the *tusovka* the more it felt itself to be socially wounded the more it wished to please, to become part of the fashion, to acquire a status of privilege."[155] In such a context, artists "[…] were constantly breaking rules that they themselves had established for their work."[156] That is the contradiction in which unofficial artists, such as those of APTART, found themselves. In the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, instead, one cannot speak equally of utopia. This is because, if we consider the cycle of performances *The End of an Epoch* from 1990 to 1993, the two artists did not try to constitute a new institution, a new history, in a way different from the traditional one. Rather, they tried to get back in touch with Soviet history in order to understand their past and assess their place in the present. They did not deny Soviet history, but in a way tried to act on it a kind of psychological rehabilitation in order to resume their own interrupted historical discourse. In this context, these performances did not involve de-construction, but rather re-construction. With *The End of an Epoch* series the artists were reading history backwards, only to go forward. The latter aspect is confirmed by the artists' words when they told me: "as Alexandra Shatskih wrote, one can trace the history judging by our works, now or later."[157]

Now, in order to understand these complex dynamics through which takes place self-historicization, it will be discussed different phenomena which are linked to the

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[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Written Interview, Answer No. 6, (March 4, 2023). When indicated otherwise, all the excerpts are from the transcription of the video call interview on February 10, 2023.

elements mentioned by Groys when he compared Western and Eastern artists. Moreover, as explanation of the reason why the following paragraph presents a temporary historical slant is the will to describe, starting a little earlier the 1980s, the events regarding the artistic milieu with which Valera – as well as Natasha after their meet in 1982 – got in touch: that is Moscow art scene of the 1980s. Valera moved to Moscow in 1980 and, as the artists revealed in the interview, they did run into similar phenomena as the ones described in the following paragraph. Hence, speaking of these phenomena means understanding the dynamics of self-historicization in broad sense together with the latter's declination acted by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin.

2.4.1 (Self-)Exhibitions: from Tertulias through Bulldozer Exhibition to APTART

"Often the non-official spaces that supported non-conformist culture were also state institutions, just not those of the art system."[158]

It can be argued that one of the most powerful means through which self-historicization takes place is by showing artworks to a public as wide as possible. Making artworks visible, makes people discuss about those very artworks and, eventually, stimulate discussion and hopefully appreciation. This seemingly basic process sets in motion the organizational apparatus made of those elements enunciated earlier by Groys. However, given the starting conditions in the Soviet Union, exhibitions had to be different from the canonical way. A phenomenon born out of necessity, and which collaterally stressed new paradigms of exhibiting art is represented by APTART. The reason for deeply considering exhibition, then, is not just for its intrinsic nature of showcasing artworks in the most general understanding of the term, but also, and above all, because Cherkashins' practice for a considerable part of it consists of installations. Given their ways of producing, working and exhibiting, then, a comprehensive look at the idea of exhibition in URSS and post-1989 Russia is needed. However, before looking at the phenomenon of APTART, it is useful to take few steps back to *Lianozovo* exhibition held in 1959 at Oskar Rabin's apartment as well as also to exhibitions held in the 1960s and 1970s in George

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[158] D. Morris, *Introduction: Anti-Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, edited by M. Alcayde, M. Tupitsyn, V. Tupitsyn, London: Afterall, 2017, pp. 8-21, here p. 9.

Costakis's apartment, the latter seemingly functioning as unofficial Museum of Modern Art.[159] This digression is useful to understand the origin of phenomena such as APTART, for this represents just one of the unofficial artists' moves to step forward.

It is exactly to the origin of these self-organized events that the word *tertulias*[160] refers to. The term tertulia is described as an "informal, typically bohemian, gathering or party."[161] Although events such as *Lianozovo* exhibition or the series of exhibitions in Costakis's apartment cannot strictly fall under the definition as stated, still the latter holds meaning for such early events. The latter can be considered informal gatherings organised by artists themselves, as in the case of Oskar Rabin's *Lianozovo* exhibition, or by self-made collectors who, being connoisseurs and art enthusiasts, encouraged art production through patronage-like strategies, as in the case of George Costakis. Evidence for the latter's painstakingly effort is provided by the words of Thomas M. Messer, the former director of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York, in the catalogue of an exhibition of Costakis's collection of Russian avant-gardes held in 1981:

> Over the years, many a visitor from abroad was privileged to visit the Costakis apartment to find exquisite example illuminating a little-known chapter of modern-art history. The works were hung or merely placed in an informal and unselfconscious setting over which the collector-proprietor presided with authoritative knowledge and unflagging enthusiasm.[162]

How one can read these words if not as the personal commitment of a self-taught collector who contributed a lot in spreading early Russian avant-gardes both at a national and, above all, as Head of Personnel for the Canadian Embassy, at international level. His work brought him into contact with many visiting diplomats thanks to whom he eventually managed to make avant-gardes artists' names circulating also abroad. The latter is confirmed by Margarita Tupitsyn who stated that "regularly visited by the local nonconformist milieu and by foreigners, including high-ranking officials such as United States senators, Costakis apartment functioned as an

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[159] See note 119.
[160] D. Morris, *Introduction: Anti-Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, cit., p. 8.
[161] M. Alcayde, *Havana-Moscow: Reflections on a Marxist-Leninist Artist Exchange*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, cit., pp 222-225, here editor's note, p. 222.
[162] T. M. Messer, *Preface,* in *Art of the avant-garde in Russia: selections from the George Costakis Collection*, exhibition catalogue (New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 16 October 1981-3 January 1982), edited by M. Rowell and A. Z. Rudestine, New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1981, p. 6.

unauthorised museum of modern art and an escape from the Soviet order of things."[163] Moreover, M. Tupitsyn furtherly characterises Costakis's way of exhibiting by saying that "Costakis's example suggests an entirely different function of such display: resistance. Primarily, in his case, a resistance towards the canon imposed by official artists and the state."[164] However, if Costakis kept alive a then little-known chapter of modern-art history, Rabin's attempts and commitment was different in form but not in essence. The painter, starting from the late 1950s onwards, organised visits into his apartment, to make his and Lianozovo group's works visible. Rabin's words are emblematic of unofficial artists self-commitment: "[w]e continued to live in the hut in Lianozovo, as we didn't have a telephone, we declared that Sunday would be a 'visiting day'. Our visiting day was hugely successful. At times, a whole group of visitors would fill the narrow road from the station to our hut."[165]

That of Costakis's and Rabin's are provided as two examples - among the many possible - to broaden the meaning of the term tertulias and, therefore, to understand them as embryonic ways through which unofficial artists started to show their works, either through self-organized events by the artists themselves or thanks to the help of someone self-committed to accomplish such a task. To use Thomas M. Messer's words, if the way of exhibiting was informal and unselfconscious, it cannot be said the same with respect to the aim of these exhibitions. The latter was self-conscious in the sense of expressing the artistic self in Rabin's, and self-conscious in the sense of "[Costakis's] fundamental aim […] to represent as broadly as possible the full diversity of the Russian avant-garde achievement". That is because "[v]irtually every avant-garde artist who worked between ca. 1910 and the 1930s has, in his view, a legitimate place in the history of the movement and each stage in an artist's career is worthy of study."[166]

From the 1960s onwards, thanks also to the growing will to come to the fore, attempts similar to those described became always more recurrent. One which unarguably represented a turning point regarding unofficial artists' self-conscious and which revolutionised Russian art scene is the Bulldozer exhibition held on the outskirt

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[163] M. Tupitsyn, *Imagine No Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, cit., pp. 22-47, here p. 22.
[164] Ibid.
[165] *Lot Essay*, https://www.christies.com.cn/en/lot/lot-5146382 [last access 03/02/2023].
[166] A. Z. Rudenstine, *The George Costakis Collection,* in *Art of the avant-garde in Russia: selections from the George Costakis Collection,* cit., pp. 9-14, here p. 14.

of Moscow the 15 September in 1974. "The site was chosen for its remoteness so as to avoid possible claims of 'public disturbance'"[167]. This time the exhibition was again on the initiative of the Expressionist painter Oskar Rabin who, together with fellow artists as Nadezhda Elskaia, Vitaly Komar, Lydia Masterkova, Alexander Melanid, Vladimir Nemukhin, Viktor Tupitsyn and many more, "decided to hold an open-air exhibition on the empty field in the Cheryomushki district [....]."[168] It is not by coincidence that Costakis attended the event, highlighting his commitment in promoting such initiatives and his involvement in the unofficial culture. The name of the exhibition derives from the military manners used by the authorities to stop and eventually repress the exhibition, that is through bulldozers. However, as any failure being the dress rehearsal of success, the latter was achieved with the following exhibition, that at Izmailovsky Park two weeks later. In this occasion, the exhibition "last[ed] four hours, in sunny weather, without any interruption by authorities."[169]

In any events, a more important success was achieved thanks to the great media coverage granted by the presence of foreign press and due to the blatant repressive methods, which inevitably had international resonance. If unofficial artists joined forces to set up these exhibitions as reactions to the fact that by that time "[a]rtists had to be official union members to be allowed to exhibit, receive commissions and studio space, and membership was restricted to those artists whose work conformed to Party ideals"[170]; after these ground-breaking events Soviet authorities were forced to "change their treatment of unofficial artists. […], further exhibitions were mounted with state approval, and selected artists were allowed to travel and exhibit abroad […]."[171] However, these long-awaited benefits were granted not with little reluctance and the conditions for unofficial artists did not truly change until Gorbachev's settlement and his operations of *glasnost* and *perestroika.*

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[167] M. Braun, *A CASE STUDY: REPRESSION The Bulldozer Exhibition, Moscow, September 15, 1974 Izmailovsky Park Exhibition, Moscow, September 29, 1974*, in *Primary Documents A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, cit., pp. 65-66, here p. 66.
[168] Ibid.
[169] *Chronology of Events*, Ibi, pp. 66-71, here p. 70.
[170] M. Braun, *A CASE STUDY: REPRESSION The Bulldozer Exhibition, Moscow, September 15, 1974 Izmailovsky Park Exhibition, Moscow, September 29, 1974*, cit., p. 65.
[171] *Chronology of Events*, Ibi, p. 71.

Getting close to the real change, Moscow is the place where can be found another phenomenon of self-organised gatherings among artists. I am referring to APTART[172] which, from 1982 to 1984, represented an "artist-to-artist institutionalisation of such gatherings […]."[173] The phenomenon of APRART has an even more increased degree of maturity in terms of self-consciousness by unofficial artists towards their own art compared to the phenomena discussed earlier. This is evident by the fact that unofficial artists this time established a kind of collective that eventually put up a para-gallery which provided the means of exhibiting unofficial art. That of an increased and ever-increasing maturity is an element that can be deduced from the words of Nikita Alekseev, in whose apartment APTART began: "[…] we were developing social, exhibitory – and generally spatial and temporal – techniques and strategies which reverberated later in a variety of ways."[174] Even though they were not fully aware of the importance of what they were doing, through APTART unofficial artists were acquiring their legitimacy in the realm of art and history at the same time. It was not just about having the opportunity to exhibit; it was a matter of claiming one's own physical presence as artists in the broadest sense. The difference between APTART and the early attempts by artists to self-organised discussed before is stressed by Sven Gundlakh, an artist, critic, poet and musician who took part into Moscow's experimental art community during the 1980s. Speaking of both the Izmailovo and Bulldozer exhibitions, he stated that

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[172] [The name "APTART" […] was invented by Roshal, and I immediately liked it terribly. True, we understood it differently. It was important for Misha that it reads like an abbreviation for Apartment Art, "apartment art", and reminds of the tradition of apartment exhibitions. For me, the other, polysemantic sense of the word apt was more important - "inclined, capable, possible." And besides - Misha and I were printers - it turned out to be a very successful logo, APTART could also be interpreted as "ArtArt". And this tautology suited everyone.] translated by me, "Nazvaniye "APTART" […] pridumal Roshal', i ono mne srazu strashno ponravilos'. Pravda, ponimali my yego po-raznomu. Dlya Mishi bylo vazhno, chto eto chitayetsya kak abbreviatura Apartment Art, "kvartirnoye iskusstvo", i napominayet o traditsii kvartirnykh vystavok. Dlya menya vazhneye byl drugoĭ, mnogoznachnyĭ smysl slova apt – "sklonnyĭ, sposobnyĭ, vozmozhnyĭ". A krome togo – my zhe s Misheĭ byli poligrafistami – poluchalsya ochen' udachnyĭ logotip, APTART mozhno bylo takzhe interpretirovat' kak "IskusstvoIskusstvo". I eta tavtologiya ustroila vsekh." In N. Alekseev, *Zovut v pustotu*, in "Stengazeta.net", Sept. 12, 2006, https://stengazeta.net/?p=10001974 [last access on 13/06/2023]

[173] D. Morris, *Introduction: Anti-Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 8-21, here p. 8.
[174] N. Alekseev, *Call into the Void,* in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 192-199, here p. 192.

> [i]n both cases, it was an obvious sublimation and, simultaneously, a demonstration. The artists who participated in these exhibitions had clearly intended their works for galleries and museums; such expositions, part necessary and part holy foolery, were a heroic pose, a challenge to the conservative authorities and, of course, a very Russian kind of 'special suffering'. We tried to avoid all that. [...] we tried to create an exposition that was actually meant for the setting of an apartment.[175]

Hence, the APTART generation considered itself different from the previous generation of unofficial artists. If the latter was concerned just with the issue of being recognized, of acquiring voice and occupying space – and to a certain extent they succeeded to do so – the Moscow movement generation instead claimed to be a particular phenomenon of the unofficial community of artists. Their artworks were objects produced under certain circumstances and, as such, the very same objects were imbued of those circumstances. As if the latter had acquired a renewed conscience of what their conditions were and made this new conscience a strength, rather than simply seeking approval from institutional and aesthetic canons. Despite this, though, APTART was essentially an exhibition space. Richard Goldstein stated that "[APTART] had been functioning as the unofficial equivalent of a gallery, a new and dangerously intimate terrain for the presentation of Soviet Art."[176] APTART was the response to the lack of the elements enunciated by Groys: unofficial artists, not perceiving themselves as hobbyists, were trying to be acknowledged as professional, as artists for all intents and purposes, just as their Western counterpart. APTART can be seen as the exhibition opportunity which the heterogeneous home-based groups, as defined by A. Erofeev[177], granted themselves. However, it would be incorrect to say that through such phenomena they wanted to equate Western artists, as if they wanted to emulate them, actually this was barely the case.

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[175] S. Gundlakh, *The Show Must Go On*, in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 145-146, here p. 145.

[176] R. Goldstein, *Moscow Does Not Believe in New Wave Art*, in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 212-213, here p. 212.

[177] See note 107.

[…] the place in which Russian unofficial artists situated themselves as artists was neither the Western art market (because they had not access to it) nor the Soviet official art system (which they despised). Rather, they situated themselves in universal art history - a space that included all past and present artistic practices but at the same time was transcendent in relationship to any past or present art institutions. This space of universal art history existed, of course, only in the imagination of the Russian unofficial artists – it was a purely utopian space. Real art history is always part of national history. There is global art market, but there not international art institutions.[178]

With these words Groys describes the complex situation in which unofficial artists were since the 1960s and 1970s, a situation which again was made up by a utopian vision of art and history.[179] In this sense, APTART has to be considered from two perspectives: if from one hand it was a kind of secret and silent plea to institutions in order for artists to be recognized and treated as their Western counterparts, namely as professionals; from the other hand the consideration and acknowledgement artists were striving for were deeply rooted in the Russian notions of culture and history, with the only "[…] difference between Soviet art (official and unofficial alike) and Western art during cold war […] on the level of the professional and social status of the artist."[180] Moreover, the adjectives used by Nikita Alekseev with which he defined the actions taken place during the early eighties, social, temporal and spatial, are telling of APTART's broad scope in terms of reconstructing the historical discourse, ranging from the social issues to the artistic ones. The relational and social elements of this phenomenon are highlighted by Victor Tupitsyn when he wrote that "[t]o exhibit under the aegis of APTART presented the opportunity to mix aesthetic activity with existential practice, re-enacting *kommunalka*, albeit as a backdrop, […]"[181]. If APTART, hence, outgrew from necessity from the status of confined individuals almost without identity who made up an unknown artistic amalgam as that of the people living in soviet apartments, soon it ended up being an occasion to experiment and to go beyond the social and aesthetic canons, the latter be official and unofficial. It can be considered as one of the last revolutionary and vanguard flashes and, as such, confirmed to be yet another phenomenon inclined to utopian conception. "In Moscow,

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[178] B. Groys, *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism,* cit., p. 13.
[179] See note 108.
[180] B. Groys, *History Becomes Form Moscow Conceptualism,* cit., p. 14.
[181] V. Tupitsyn, *Airborne in a Not-Fly Zone,* in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 48-61, here p. 50.

APTART was definitely an attractor bent upon reinstating utopia at the borderline between hope and despair. What its key players ended up reinstating there was not utopia but utopian anxiety."[182] After stating that, Victor Tupitsyn continued by saying that "[u]topian anxiety reaches its pinnacle when we misguide ourselves, confusing the point of destination with that of departure."[183] According to him, therefore, APTART eventually ended to perceive itself as something external and different as both to the officialdom and the unofficial realm. The reason for that is because the consideration of underground art with respect to its relationship with the state was different compared to that of which unofficial artists of the 1960s and early 1970s benefited. After the efforts considered here in the first instance, to unofficial artists were granted different things: "dissident modernists received an official offer to exhibit at the Beekeeping Pavilion […] of the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh) […]"[184] in 1975. Moreover, the 1975 was the year of the establishment of Gorkom Grafikov, which granted a permanent exhibition space to unofficial artists. These circumstances "[…] brought about a disintegration of the camaraderie between nonconformists,"[185] raising questions of different nature among the artists. After "[…] artists' paranoia about everything official eased […] and the image of the ideological enemy schizophrenised", some of these artists found themselves "[…] working in a completely different and dialogical atmosphere, which prompted the budding of a kind of art in which image was overwritten by thought"[186]. In this sense they perpetuated the dream for utopia which it has been deeply discussed in the first part of the current chapter.

Now, apart from the utopian feature which kept of being reinstated although in different ways, APTART did not represent a novelty only in terms of aesthetic, so not just in terms of artistic production, but it also and above all stood for in terms of manner of exhibiting artworks. In this regard, Victor Tupitsyn speaks of "procreator" and "procurator"[187] when he considers the relationship between the artist and the curator which APTART, as a particular phenomenon, inevitably questioned. It is well known

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[182] Ibi, p 52.
[183] Ibi, p. 54.
[184] M. Tupitsyn, *Imagine No Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, cit., p. 32.
[185] Ibi, p. 33.
[186] Ibi, p. 41.
[187] V. Tupitsyn, *Airborne in a Not-Fly Zone,* in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., p. 61.

that the curator plays a crucial role when it comes to build an artistic discourse and in making art visible. This figure can be considered, among other things, as a disseminator and, as such, he has the ability and resources to help artists resonate and hopefully making their way into art history. Artists, on the other side, are the procreators, those who actually produce works, without which curators could not act as mediators. With the growing and evolving prominence of curators throughout history, then, there has been conflicts between the two figures. However, "APTART artists managed to escape an agonistic relationship with curators simply by not knowing of their existence."[188] That is because "[s]elf-evaluation and self-interpretation" – and self-exhibition – "were common practice among unofficial artists, […]"[189]. In such a context, then, the figure of curator was not necessary if not contemplated at all. As stated earlier, this particular aspect is emblematic of Cherkashins' practice, and they set themselves exactly at the crossroad between these two figures.

2.4.2 Cherkashins' Self-Exhibiting

A fragment of my conversation with Valera and Natasha Cherkashin is representative of the artists' activity in the artistic scene of the early 1980s, and it shows how they fit into the picture outlined:

> […] the term Aptart was not known to me until today. Although we have been to apartment exhibitions more than once, we have not exhibited there ourselves. Though sometimes we did our own exhibitions and poetry readings at our home. A few people came to us, but now, we can say that the chosen ones. Actually, those with whom we closely communicated at that time: the artists Kabakov, Infante, Gorokhovsky Eduard, Nemukhin, Yankilevsky ... the poets Prigov, Nekrasov, Kholin, Shcherbina… We arranged a personal show and talked about the works, in fact, these were our first performances […].[190]

Although they revealed that they did not exhibit their works at apartment exhibitions and were unaware of the phenomenon of APTART, still they attended similar events as public and even organised some exhibitions at their home. Therefore, the quote from the interview provides the evidence that the two artists – although not consciously and not in a systemic way which, however, only reinforces a close connection with the

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[188] Ibi, p. 60.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Written Interview, Answer No. 3,

APTART phenomenon[191] – were involved in this practice of self-exhibiting, self-evaluating and self-interpreting artworks. The reasons for that are furtherly stated by the fact that Valera Cherkashin moved to Moscow in 1980 and got in touch with several unofficial artists such as Dmitri Prigov, Ilya Kabakov, Francisco Infante, Vladimir Nemukhin and Vladimir Yankilevsky. Valera declared that "[…] artists did friendly shows of works to each other in their studios, it also helped to learn."[192] In this sense, it is reasonable to believe that Valera did took part in such events similar to that of APTART, even though he might not be fully aware of the relevance of such phenomena. Also, it would not be wrong to claim that a certain strangeness of the Cherkashins, and especially of Valera who has been active already in the 1960s, to the Soviet underground milieu is due to the fact that he came from a peripheral reality as that of Kharkiv.

Another important aspect on which I would like to draw the attention is related to the final part of the quote. Cherkashins defined these personal shows as performances rather than exhibitions. Even though the word performance is likely to be referred to actual artworks of Cherkashin which often essentially consisted of performances, yet it can be argued for this word to be somehow read in line with the words of what should have been the official press release of the first APTART exhibition: "[…] those who come here will find work and cooperation rather than normal 'viewing of art objects'. There are not 'art-object' here in the usual sense. There are not 'finished works', but rather, art-in-making."[193] Process, restless research and continuous search for new forms making up new concepts are also features typical of Cherkashins' work.

A little earlier, Valera Cherkashin confirms Boris Groys's analysis about the difference between the professional Western artist and the hobbyist Eastern artist by stating that: "At that time," before 1982, "I was mastering drawing and painting, in its almost traditional sense, I was drawn to a professional approach to art."[194] Cherkashin expressed his will to truly develop and refine his artistic abilities before exhibiting any of his works. During the interview he said: "I thought it was necessary to prepare well

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[191] For a full account about the non-systematic and not-hierarchical nature of APTART read V. Tupitsyn, *Airborne in a Not-Fly Zone,* in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp, 48- 61.
[192] Written Interview, Answer No. 4.
[193] N. Abalakova, A. Zhigalov, *Analysis – Action – TOTART (Natalia Abalakova and Anatoly Zhigalov)*, in *Anti-Shows*: *APTART 1982–84,* cit., pp. 92-93, here p. 93.
[194] Written Interview, Answer No. 3.

and then go out to the audience."[195] Therefore, Cherkashin's words endorse Groys's view for which Soviet unofficial artists shared the will to be acknowledged as professionals. This desire is further underlined by Cherkashin who, not being interested in exhibiting his works from the outset, was instead committed in his artistic research and forma mentis.

> Before the beginning of perestroika, I was engaged in my internal process of understanding and mastering contemporary art forms at that time. I have experienced my own way from the Russian avant-garde to the modern moment, studied, mastered different styles and tried to develop them. I chose the path of individual study […].[196]

Thus, even though their performances did not perfectly align with the phenomenon of APTART in Moscow in the 1980s, still their activities at that time held meaning in the general unofficial artistic milieu of Soviet Union at the turn of the century. Further, the fact that he did not know about this particular phenomenon happening in Moscow while at the same time acting in a similar way, confirmed Amy Bryzgel's thesis for which, despite all the difficulties, there still was space for an exchange of information along the underground artistic milieu.

Concerning the curatorial aspect, the artists confirmed that which was the general situation regarding unofficial art in the 1980s. In the interview they stated that they had to be their own curators. The reason for that is because, as confirmed in the interview, there was not such a figure as that of the curator in the Soviet Union at that time, just as argued by V. Tupitsyn. Regarding the performance *Secret Breakfast at the Kremlin in Honour of His Wife's Birthday* on April 19, 1992, they talked just about the absence of the curator. As a joint exhibition held together with Nikolay Durov's collection, there was a curator involved in the whole exhibition, Igor Petrov. In one of their books, the artists told how they finally reached an agreement according to the curatorship of the exhibition. They wrote that "[c]urators knew how to make installations out of artistic works, and the artists only got in the way."[197] These words highlight the kind of friction existent between artists and curators. Further on, regarding curatorship, Valera and Natasha revealed: "[…] we usually did it all

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[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibi, Answers No. 2.
[197] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 120.

ourselves, and very rarely cooperated with curators, since an installation was, for us, just as much a form of expression as a picture, only in three dimensions."[198] From these last words, it comes forth the artists' consideration of curatorship and, in general, all the aspects involving the installation of an exhibition. The intend the latter as an integral part of their practice and, consequently, they consider themselves also as curators.

Now, regarding another element of those mentioned by Groys, namely art galleries, Natasha highlighted the fact that there was no thing like commercial galleries, but rather State galleries, so not in the Western declination of this institution. Moreover, they specified that by commercial gallery they mean something akin to an exhibition space rather than a gallery which can actually sell works. The latter concept leads us to the next issue which is that of the art market at those times.[199]

2.4.3 The Art Market and Its Non-Marketability Feature

As already stated, unofficial artists did not have access to any institutions in terms of representation, neither art-historical nor economical.[200] The reason for that is to be traced both in the historical past outlined so far and, as Groys has already stated, by an identity issue which has always excruciatingly accompanied Russian culture. That of identity is an issue which has been deeply investigated, but in order to have a complete picture of the phenomenon of self-historicization it must not be forgotten that the market, especially nowadays, represents one of the most – if not the most – important critics and, as such, inarguably has the last word regarding the prestige of an artist. Mirroring the identity problem and social and political issues, the art market followed along the trend of being absent:

> [t]here was no market for works of art in the country, and practically not collectors of artistic works, so pictures […] were sold for a song or given as a gift to friends. The process of creativity and meditations and moments of bliss connected with it were considered more valuable than their result – a self-valued aesthetic object […]."[201]

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[198] Ibid.
[199] Online Interview. For the full transcription of the interview, see *Interview with Valera and Natasha Cherkashin* in the Appendix.
[200] See note 61.
[201] A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, cit., p. 46.

These words of Andrei Erofeev find confirmation with those of the Cherkashins themselves when during the interview they declared that there were some art collectors, but they mostly gave their works as gifts. However, they also stated that even though few times they managed to sell some of their artworks, the latter though were sold at a very low price. Also, they mentioned the so-called phenomenon of "suitcase art" through which they sold some of their smaller artworks even though at that time they were essentially working with big installations.[202] This phenomenon consisted of the buying and selling of small artworks by diplomats, who used to carry these artworks in their suitcases. Regarding this phenomenon, Ekaterina Degot has spoken of "black market", which was a market

> lacking access to the public. The buyer, (often a foreign diplomat secretly visiting an artist's home) acquired not a product so much as tangible evidence of suffering; its value was ethical rather than financial, absolute rather than calculable, in a closed culture which lacked all any physical or intellectual space for comparison.[203]

Degot contrasted the economic and financial nature of the actual trading of artworks with terms such as evidence of suffering, ethical, absolute. This description is very telling of the nature of the artworks that were being produced by unofficial artists at that time and, above all, of the non-market nature of the same artworks. The reason for all this lay precisely in the content of unofficial artists' artworks per se, and in the fact of being inevitably affected by the treatment they were granted by their country. In this regard, it is worthy to dwell on this particular aspect of underground works and, once more, it is the interview with the Cherkashins that reveals these peculiarities of unofficial artworks in relation to their marketability. In the interview, relating to their activity, they stated that:

> early period of creativity was not noticeable at all, and that was not the task then. Natasha and I were creating, not paying attention to whether our work will be noticed at the exhibition, or whether it will be sold…these tasks were not important for us. The joy was to create and to express our ideas.[204]

That of purely creating and exhibiting are concepts which Valera and Natasha stressed different times during our conversation. Their will of essentially creating and

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[202] Online Interview.

[203] E. Degot, *Russian Art in the Second Half of Twentieth Century*, in "D. N. Shalin", 2012, pp. 1-34, here p. 7; https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture/21/ [last access on 22 March 2023].

[204] Written Interview, Answers No. 7.

exhibiting is not just made evident by their words, but it is something which can be understood just by looking at their artistic practice. If one looks at their series of performances *The End of an Epoch* from 1990 to 1993 one will naturally understand that, as if reading the aforementioned words of Valera and Natasha. This is true for performances such as *Privatization of Sculptures* (1990) at Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station, the performances *Subbotnik* (1992), *Engagement* (1992), *Wedding* (1993) and *The Underground Beauty Contest Miss '38* (1993). It is hard to think of a way in which these performances could have been sold given their transitory, sometimes spontaneous and very often interactive nature, for all these characteristics of performance art makes it strictly related to the places and circumstances in which it occurs and, consequently, not always replicable. One can only be lucky enough – considered that very often such events were sponsored through word of a mouth - to attend such performances live.[205] It can be stated, then, that together with the physical absence of the market there was a non-marketing conscience by artists regarding their artworks which, in the case of Valera and Natasha, did not involve a reference with Ekaterina Degot's terms, but rather an intrinsic carelessness of the economic sphere. Recalling the phenomenon of APTART and confirming Cherkashins' words, the Moscow movement "[…] appears as a precursor to an entrepreneurial culture of start-up galleries in growing economies, where cultural formations are only able to emerge in anticipation of a commercial infrastructure to come."[206] However, this was barely the desire of APTART's artists and Valera and Natasha Cherkashin. As a matter of fact, in artists' consciousness there was not the will to obtain one of those elements which Groys mentioned regarding the process of recognition by the system, here the art market, but rather a parallel institution involved in discussion, artistic research, experimentation and free expression. Even Margarita Tupitsyn stated that "[…] some artists expressed their anti-market attitude by ridiculing underground artists' dependence on occasional foreign collectors."[207] True was also, however, that some of unofficial artists did wish for an art market in the Western sense, some of them wanted

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[205] The topic of reproducibility of performance art is an issue deeply investigated in the literature. Starting with *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* of W. Benjamin and, particularly, his elaboration of the concept of aura, a further useful reading is P. Phelan, *Unmarked the Politics of Performance*, London New York: Routledge, 1993.
[206] D. Morris, *Introduction: Anti-Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84,* cit., p 20.
[207] M. Tupitsyn, *Imagine No Shows*, in *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, cit., p. 40.

to work, live and have all the benefits of Western artists. But if Eastern European artists wanted to flee from the conception of themselves as hobbyists by turning their eyes to the Western institutions, some others as the Cherkashins were acting without worrying of any benefits in the Western sense. Although artists have to be supported financially in order to keep on producing their artworks, the issue of being recognized, institutionalised and, ultimately, artistically historicized was far more complicate than just obtaining different kind of benefits.

Ultimately, in dealing for a moment with the issue of being recognized in full sense and not only in a strictly economical meaning, the following Valera's statements during our conversation finally shed light on his concern with the matter of recognition. After asking him about one of his early performances which consisted in distributing to everyone tickets on which he asked to be recognized as a famous artist for "[t]he need for fame is a vital necessity for a creator"[208], he answered that:

> [r]ecognition comes to an artist with time, sometimes with delay, but this is how life works, so I focused more on my work. Perhaps this performance with the card I spread around helped me to understand this and after that I did not bother much with the desire to become a famous artist. It helped me to save energy for my work and not to waste it on trifles, such as external fame or envy.[209]

Despite one may be inclined – especially if grounding his reasoning from a Western perspective – to take these words as if the artist had realized the difficulty of becoming noted in his artistic milieu and eventually had given up such a task, still the latter reasoning reveal itself to be a misconception. As a matter of fact, the final part of this quote is proven by the fact that many times to Valera and Natasha were offered the opportunity to purchase their artworks when the latter did not consist of installations, a trading which would have contribute enormously in terms of recognition and fame. However, very often they declined such offers. Rather, it happened many times that the artists donated their artworks for free or as gifts, donations which often were intended to be performances per se. An example of that is when the artists in 1994 visited New York and went straight to the top of the statue of liberty to throw their signed artworks.

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[208] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 57.
[209] Written Interview, Answers No. 5.

What remains valid is that the artists through such ways of working and acting were confirming the thesis for which there was a non-market attitude concerning their work, and that it cannot be denied that such ways contributed a lot in re-constructing an artistic discourse which eventually led to their institutionalisation and historicization.

2.4.4 Cherkashins' Self-Ongoing Biographical and Artistic Encyclopaedia as a Post-Socialist Active Archive

> For the first time we showed the early art of the 1960-1970s at exhibitions very late, in 2006. Before that not one knew about it. And even now, not all periods of our work are known to the public, and even to specialists. So much has been done, and is being done, that we decided to collect and organize everything ourselves in several volumes of our encyclopaedia.[210]

Speaking of historicization, one cannot pass over the notion of archive and its fundamental role in building a comprehensive artistic discourse regarding artists' work. Therefore, the question of historicization is also and above all a question of archiving. As the most reliable source of information, the archive represents a compendium of heterogeneous and original materials which cannot be discarded especially in shedding light on those histories for so long neglected or not sufficiently considered. Before reaching the core of this paragraph by considering the Cherkashins' archive, it is important to dwell on the general understanding of the term.

I propose to start by taking into account one of the most unceasingly commitments and contributions in such a scope, that is the involvement of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana coincidentally Zdenka Badovinac's long tenure, from 1993 to 2020, at the Slovenian institution. In a conversation stemmed from a conference organized by Badovinac in 2007 representing the start of a project on Eastern European conceptualism, she and several authors such as Boris Groys, Piotr Piotrowski and Eda Čufer, one of the founding members of Neue Slowenische Kunst, discussed about the systematization of Eastern Conceptual art with the aim to build an history of Conceptual art in the East. Discussing with Boris Groys about the critical reception of Eastern Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Eda Čufer argued that "[one] of the very important sources for reconstructing a historical period is reading the reviews of

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[210] Written Interview, Answer No. 7.

a certain art event."[211] Only that, as for the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin not such reviews existed. Some of their most popular installations and performances, such as *The End of an Epoch* series, did though have resonance, with journals, TV shows, critics, curators and people in general having turned their attention upon them, but overall they were not sufficiently reviewed. Answering to Čufer, Groys affirmed that contrary to art movements of the beginning of the twentieth century for which "[…] no archives, extended publications, or systematic reviews exist"[212]; art of the 1960s and 1970s had all the above missing elements, only that they circulated in a very internal, personal and non-institutional manners. Arguing furthermore regarding the huge amount of heterogeneous material of art movements and artists, Groys affirmed that "in the Soviet Union of the 1970s everyone was there, the political and cultural elites and the public in big cities - all were very much aware of it. Everybody read dissident writers and saw dissident exhibitions."[213] What was missing once again was an official systematization of such phenomena. The situation described by Groys is just that of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin: beyond being their own curators, the two artists had to be their own archivist as well. During our conversation, they pointed out just this matter. In the artists' words external organisations should be involved in the creation of artists' archives because artists, according to them, can simply loose and forget things, not to mention the fact that artists simply might not want to perform such a task. After many years of waiting for some organisation or someone to be interested in what they had been doing and to build their archive, they realized that, at least in Russia, there were not serious organisations and that there were not these kinds of traditions. They even reported that very often it happened that some artists' families threw away artists' things after their death. Therefore, they decided to build their own archive and, ultimately, they understood this practice as an integral part of their art.[214] As defined by the artists themselves, the kind of archive we are speaking of is understood as an encyclopaedia, hence as a series of volumes which collect all the artists' work, some of which still unpublished.[215] Beyond the texts written by the artists

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[211] Z. Badovinac et all, *Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe*, in "e-flux online journal", issue 40, December 2012, pp. 1-15, here p. 4, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/ [last access on 3 May 2023].
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Online Interview.
[215] See note 137.

themselves regarding the process of creation of their works, in this encyclopaedia there is also a biographical excursus of the artists, ranging from Valera's childhood to the couple's most recent work. These volumes also include scholars, critics, curators and art historians' contributions to the understanding of Cherkashins' works. In this regard, during our conversation they informed me about a funny anecdote concerning the giving of one of their volumes to Aleksandra Shatskikh, art historians and one of the most important researchers of Malevich. After Shatskikh received the book she said: "thank you, with this book you did our work and [...] it can be done lots of thesis" based on it.[216] Shatskikh's biting answer is very telling of the matter is has being discussed here. Due to the lack of institutional support on so many levels, the artists were forced to resort to different tasks and act at the same time as archivists, curators and art historians. For all these reasons, Cherkashins' practice of archiving sets itself in the explanation provided by Daniel Grúň. In questioning "[...] the role of artist archives as key instruments in the renewal of art history"[217] D. Grúň, reconnecting with Badovinac's definition of "self-historicization"[218], argued that

> [s]ince they constitute a source of information about art movements functioning under authoritarian political regimes, artist archives contribute to the canonization and establishment of originally forbidden alternative forms of art. This initiative by artists, often referred to as "self-historicization," reveals a variety of creative methods of documentation, careful preservation, diffusion, and foundation of communicative platforms.

The very nature of Cherkashins' archive and process of archiving makes the former and the latter possible to be included in the variety of creative methods discussed by Grúň. Moreover, the fact that the artists perceived their archive and its formation as integral parts of their work, and mindful of their interchange with Shatskikh, they confirmed Grúň's further words when the latter stated that:

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[216] Online Interview.
[217] D. Grúň, *Active Gaps and Absences in Artist Archives*, *The Global Networking of Artist Archive*, in *What Will Be Already Exists*, *Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, edited by E. Kürti, Z. László, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021, pp. 49-65, here p. 49.
[218] Z. Badovinac, *Interrupted Histories* in *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2019, p. 99.

> [t]he change in the status of artist archives to artworks, created by the artists themselves in their sustained and long-term efforts to present their collections of documentation, leads to an accumulation of symbolic capital to be used for the representation of alternative memory, given that the artists are themselves taking on the researcher's role as interpreter, historian, and activator.[219]

In this sense, the practice of documenting and keeping track of their works, which at the beginning born out of necessity, first proved to be the artists' response to the lack of consideration from those entitled to systematized and ultimately historicized their work, and then it became a complementary part of their artistic practice. In such a context they were essentially practicing self-historicization, the artistic practice was merging with its historicization. To better understand the importance of archive and archiving when dealing with historicization and specifically referring to Cherkashins' case, Grúň, recalling György Galántai's notion of the Active Archive[220], pinpointed the sore question when he defined post socialist archive:

> Postsocialist artist archives could be the kind of places that materialize discontinuities, absences, and gaps in narratives on the transformation of Eastern Europe's former socialist societies. Their significance consists in self-historicization and self-contextualization, because artistic and archival practice have combined in a method of constructing statements whose purposes are realized independently of established institutional practice and give visibility to extruded levels of social reality.[221]

In Grúň's notion of post-socialist archive Cherkashins' archive finds its raison d'être. The actual moment and process of collecting and building a comprehensive artistic discourse is the exact moment in which artists' self-consciousness is such that, that they self-historicized themselves outside the institution in full sense. In a footnote of his text, Grúň further clarifies this concept by drawing a parallel with Stuart Hall's concept of "living archive of the diaspora"[222]. By stating that the materializing of discontinuities, absences and gaps in narratives happens in the exact moment of archiving means that:

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[219] D. Grúň, *Active Gaps and Absences in Artist Archives*, *The Global Networking of Artist Archive*, in *What Will Be Already Exists*, *Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, cit., p. 50.

[220] On such notion refer to György Galántai's Active Archive: see *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, Budapest: Artpool, 2013, https://www.artpool.hu/archives_active.html

[221] D. Grúň, *Active Gaps and Absences in Artist Archives*, *The Global Networking of Artist Archive*, in *What Will Be Already Exists*, *Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, cit., p. 64.

[222] S. Hall, *Constituting an Archive*, in "Third Text", vol. 15, issue n. 54, 19 June 2008, pp. 89-92, here p. 89, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09528820108576903 [last access on 4 May 2023].

> [t]he moment of the archive represents the end of a certain kind of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement. Here the whole apparatus of 'a history' - periods, key figures and works, tendencies, shifts, breaks, ruptures - slips silently into place.[223]

Hence, the place the apparatus of a history slips into – here the apparatus of a history is that of Cherkashins, their archive – is precisely a place in art history built by the artists themselves. The reason why this happens according to Grúň is because it seems that the structure of the artist archive is, "[…] in principle, non-discursive, non-narrative, whose inner temporality is fully bound-up with the material and method of archivization."[224]

Further, Grúň concludes his analysis by highlighting the importance of artist archives on Eastern Europe due to their double nature as "[…] contra- and para-institutional concepts […]"[225]. Such underlining proves to be true also for the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's archive. Regarding artist archives' *Eigenzeit*, namely the latter resistance or independency towards time and, consequently, towards history, "what is important is not only their subversive aspect, undermining the state's totalitarian power of direction during the times of real socialism; equally significant is their resistance to reductive views of the socialist past."[226] On the latter point, If we are to study Cherkashins' archive and passing through their encyclopaedia, we will be exposed to "[…] three periods of historical experience: actually existing socialism; the revolutions and fall of socialist regimes; and, finally, the postcommunist transition to capitalism."[227] These three macro-strands encompassed all Cherkashins' practice, studying their works means, once again, studying history itself.

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[223] Ibid.

[224] D. Grúň, *Active Gaps and Absences in Artist Archives*, *The Global Networking of Artist Archive*, in *What Will Be Already Exists*, *Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, cit., p. 64.

[225] Ibi. p. 65.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Ibid.

2.4.5 The Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum

"Any museum has an influential structure, and usually the museum is the last organisation which recognized an artist."[228] Asking about museums and their role in terms of historicizing artists, Valera and Natasha identify the museum as the artistic institution par excellence. This statement in confirmed by Valera's words when he stated that "if all major museums would acquire artworks of an artist, then he or she can do whatever he or she wishes."[229] In this sense, Cherkashins confirm Groys's words when the latter mentioned all the elements which contribute to making artists recognized and, ultimately, acknowledged by art history.[230] Following the strange period, as defined by Valera and Natasha, of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the artists words everybody "[…] was experiencing the end of Soviet life and the beginning of something unknown."[231] It was the time of assessment of one's own place in the present, but the latter was far from being understood from Russian people. In such a context, people were exposed to new phenomena which found a fertile ground in the newly openness of the just-collapsed Soviet country. One of the phenomena which up to then was yet to be reached in Russia was that of Modernisation, which in that moment happened to be a synonym of privatisation and, collaterally, of Westernisation. The artists informed me that during the early 1990s "many organisations named themselves institutions: for example some universities named themselves academies, there were people who proclaimed themselves presidents of companies even if they were only in two."[232] Natasha's words express the atmosphere of those years: after decades of living as a unified and monolithic "we", people started to experience the "I", the self. It was no longer a matter of just being part of someone else's project or vision – the latter to be meant both ideologically and materially – now the concern was about one's personal authority, the one for a long time usurped by the ideological drifts of the twentieth century. In this instance, let me recall the concept of authority discussed in the first paragraph of this chapter. Mindful of the ideological drifts of the early twentieth century which, in the name of a certain authority, self-

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[228] Online Interview.
[229] Ibid.
[230] See note 60.
[231] Online Interview.
[232] Ibid.

reclaimed the power over history, now, at the turn of the twentieth century, the task of assessing one's own place in the present – therefore in history - was again performed through claiming the power, however this time in the name of several micro personal authorities. Following this trend, then, Valera and Natasha decided to establish their own institution and in 1992 they created the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum.

8. Opening of the Presentation of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum exhibition in Municipal Gallery A3, 1992, Moscow, Photograph, credits to the artists

The latter started as the actual place, namely Moscow Metro Station, in which *The End of an Epoch*'s performances and exhibitions took place. Subsequently, it became their personal virtual institution which still today represents them, their artworks and everything related to their practice. According to their Museum Valera and Natasha stated: "it is a process of our work: happenings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, research […]. Moscow Metro Station was one of many locations, of course an important one at that period, but not the only one."[233] The nature-shifting feature of their museum makes the latter a fluid component which is one and at the same their

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[233] Written Interview, Answer No. 8.

institution and their artistic practice. It is not possible to separate the former from the latter. It can be argued, then, that with the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum the two artists achieved institutionalization and, consequently, historicization, without the latter passing through any outside institutions but theirs. In this regard, V. Tupitsyn, in his *The Museological Unconscious*[234] seizes just this matter. Speaking of the museological function by drawing on M. Foucault's concept of heterotopia[235] and M. Bakhtin's notion of verticality[236], Tupitsyn argues:

> [w]hen time is vertical, all events occur simultaneously; deferred histories become synchronized, thoughts and visions attain the state of timelessness. Hence, "vertical" is synonymous with "ahistorical," which partially explains why our eagerness to *verticalize* history culminates in erecting museums.[237]

According to Tupitsyn, hence, the museum coincides with the place which stops history, with our will to escape from it and, consequently, to render all the things in it time independent and, in a way, self-sufficient. Drawing on Karl Jaspers, Tupitsyn pushes his argument even further by stating that the "[…] ahistorical 'hides his ass' beyond the looking-glass of historicity: their longing for one another should be viewed as a tradition rather than a chancy outcome."[238] These words take on a special meaning especially when read in line with the discourse on history made – by drawing on Groys and A. Erofeev – in the first part of this chapter. In so doing, the word tradition works as probative evidence for the claim for which the longing of the ahistorical for history and vice versa could be understood as deeply rooted in the Russian consciousness and culture, just as a tradition is. It comes, therefore, that this tradition consisting of the ahistorical and history longing for one another is the same tradition of nostalgia for utopia discussed in the second paragraph of the current chapter. The very essence of this longing is a utopia, the very same utopia which Groys unmasked. Further on, Tupitsyn argues for the existence of another tradition, that which sees artists "[…] cosponsoring publications about themselves […]"[239]. Now, since dealing with

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[234] V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, cit., pp. 352.
[235] M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* (1967), translated by Jay Miskowiec, in *Thessaloniki Biennale I of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Thessaloniki, I, Biennale of Contemporary Art, 21 May – 30 Sept. 2007) Thessaloniki: State Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007, pp. 1-9, here p. 4, https://biennale1.thessalonikibiennale.gr/pdf/MICHEL_FOUCAULT_HETEROTOPIAS_EN.pdf
[236] On such account refer to P. Borghart et all, *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, Gent: Academia Press, 2010, pp. 213.
[237] Ibid.
[238] V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, cit., p 229.
[239] Ibi, p. 229.

museological function means dealing with history and the ability to transgress its borders – and having showed that any attempt in this direction would mean nothing but a perpetuation of nostalgia for utopia – the author went even further and tried to answer that which he defined "[t]he eternal Russian question […]": "'What has to be done?'", which here in this context becomes, "[…] What is to be done with art that has not realized its 'museological function' in time, even if this is through no fault of its own?"[240]. If one tried to answer that question, the attempt would consist in considering the tradition which sees the artists cosponsoring publications about themselves, a tradition including Cherkashins' practice as well. It is with no surprise, then, that the answer to that question would lie just in their artistic practice. Answering this question, Tupitsyn argues that "[t]he museological function has a communicative dimension", namely "it generates the illusion […] that every creative act is common property"[241]. Citing Jean Piaget, then, he says that "[…] every creative gesture or event, including the results and traces of one's artistic quest – archival photographs, letters, drafts, early versions and fragments"[242] is a form of Piagetian egocentric speech, that is a speech or a text which does not recognize nothing but itself. This egocentricity of the speech, of the text relies just in the museological function which, in a sense, egocentrify or self-centred the object contained in the museum. "Thus, the principal purpose of the publications" – that is to say the whole Cherkashins' practice together with their self-construction of their art-historical discourse – "confirms their egocentricity: they are attempts to reproduce the museological function (and even to replicate its institutional format) at the artists' own expenses and on their own terms."[243] At this point, Cherkashins' Conceptual Museum acquires a whole different meaning: it is the artists' ultimate act to reach institutionalisation, their final gesture through which takes place their own historicization.

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[240] Ibi, p. 230.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibi, author's note, p. 319.
[243] Ibi, p. 230.

> […] publication of self-made books and catalogues or the belated realization of
> old art projects. In all such projects, the artists lay out their creative biographies
> (and their oeuvre) in a direction deviant from signification. What takes place in
> these antisignification plots is the return of the author […]. This return is
> expressed, above all, in the attempt by the art practitioners to redefine their
> function: to become psalmodists of their own "scripture", their own visual *texts*.
> To *read* them in a direction deviant from signification means to engage in an
> egocentric reading regarded as an alternative to an institutional one. Rather than
> resisting institutional control over the formation of meanings, egocentric readings
> can compensate for the absence of institutions. The important point for the
> majority of noninstitutional artists today is not the subversion of the mechanisms
> of signification nor the disassembly of the museological function, but their
> renewal, upgrading, and re-creation.[244]

With the above words Tupitsyn is seizing the point of Cherkashins' early practice, their archive and their virtual museum. Conceptual as it be, Natasha's words regarding the self-sufficiency of ideas, of the text[245] provide their museum with further value and meaning. Thus, with the creation of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum the artists essentially recreate the museological function which, "[f]or artists residing in the former USSR, the image of the institutional Other was (until the turn of this century) firmly fixed on the absent museum of contemporary art."[246] With their museum Valera and Natasha made the absent institutional Other present.

3. Self-Historicization For and From The Post-Communist Condition

3.1 Some Premises for a Critical-Artistic Discourse

This final chapter starts by resuming Cherkashins' work, herein presented to support a theoretical and artistic framework which hopefully in turn would provide a further understanding of the artists' oeuvre. While approaching this final part, I wish to spend few words on the reason why in this chapter I decided to go back to an art-critical discourse which it was left on hold at the end of the first chapter. After demonstrating how Valera and Natasha Cherkashin achieved their historicization, arguing for the latter to be deeply embedded in the artists' practice to the extent that it is not possible to think of one without the other, it is important to say that to their self-historicization did follow along an attention from some of the world's most important

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[244] Ibid.
[245] Online Interview.
[246] V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, cit., p 234.

institutions making the latter include some of their works. Just to name a few, some of Valera and Natasha's works can be found in the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, the World Bank headquarters in Washington DC, as well as The State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg and The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. To such institutional recognition correspond extensive critical studies regarding their work from several scholars, some of whom presented in the current study: from Matteo Bertelé, Associate Professor in Contemporary Art History and deputy director of the Centre of Studies of Russian Art (CSAR) at Ca' Foscari University in Venice to the Curator of Zimmerly Art Museum Jane A. Sharp. Thereby, after the initial attempt to historicize themselves and thanks to the works of several scholars and the interest of many institutions, Cherkashins' oeuvre received a considerable critical reception which eventually transformed self-historicization into historicization.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, after 1991, with the collapse of the USSR, the question of historicizing, that is, of telling those histories which long lived outside History – whose self-historicization was the creative attempt of the very same protagonists of those histories to compensate for the lack of consideration – acquired a significant importance. Concerning the work of the Cherkashins, as stated above, several studies have enormously contributed in terms of the artists' critical reception. However, the aim of the present chapter is to provide a further contribution to such a critical reception and, while doing so, join in the still on-going debate upon the modalities of art historicization relating socialist and post-socialist Eastern European countries. Thereby, my wish is that of providing with further critical literature about a specific segment of Valera and Natasha's work and, hopefully, adding a further part useful to their understanding and, laterally, facilitating the process of historicization.

The specific segment of their works I am referring to is limited to some of the performances and exhibitions which make up the series *The End of an Epoch* from 1990 to 1993. The choice to focus only on these specific performances and exhibitions is twofold: from one hand it relies on the fact that all the selected works share a common thread, namely that of dealing with history of socialist and post-socialist traditions and, for this reason, they position themselves as testimonies speaking of historical and cultural transition. Moreover, regarding the issue of historicization

which I wish to explore, for it represents a guiding thread of all my speech, the latter's relevance is remarked by the historical moment in which these works took place: the early 1990s. It is precisely in the early 1990s that the world found itself for the first time dealing with a large number of excluded histories, and *The End of an Epoch* series provide itself as a meaningful resource to understand one of those histories, namely that of the Cherkashins. From the other hand, having argued for these performances making up the program *The End of an Epoch* as happening in what has been defined the peak of artists' self-historicization – namely the moment of formation of their Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum – the issue of historicization acquires a whole different meaning. It will be showed that considering these performances means also to deepen the understanding of art and history of former Eastern European countries and some of their dynamics. In addition, as this chapter will try to show, the program *The End of an Epoch* deals with the three concepts discussed in the previous chapter: nostalgia, utopia and amnesia. This aspect, hence, allows me two things: to reconnect with the discourse started in the second chapter, but herein resumed in order to introduce one of those three concepts that has not yet been discussed and that will prove to be fundamental for understanding the works here addressed, that of nostalgia, and, at the same time, to confirm their significance regarding Cherkashins' practice of the early 1990s with *The End of an Epoch* series as object of study.

Moreover, by embarking on the artistic and critical discourse about the work under scrutiny, my whole reasoning led me to the issue of the post-communist condition which emerged as the centre of the artistic research undertook by Valera and Natasha in *The End of an Epoch*. The post-communist condition, hence, proves to be the connecting link between art and history: after the artists' artistic self-historicization, they resorted to a more general version of the latter, this time to assess their place in history on the whole.

Lastly, it is important to make one point of clarification relating the general methodology being applied for the aim of this last chapter. Having set out to undertake a critical reading of some of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's works, I would like to stress, however, that if my provision of theoretical and critical tools is perceived as a desire to artistically frame at all costs the work by the two artists here under scrutiny – with the risk that the latter is spoiled by my reading – then I must state that this is

the furthest thing from the will of this chapter. On the contrary, my will is that of essentially providing food for thought which hopefully will be supplementary in deepening the understanding of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's early-1990s practice. In no way what follows should be taken as a rigid formulation, but rather as an attempt to present potential theoretical concepts useful when studying art from former Eastern European countries.

3.2 The Future is Ending and The Past Does Not Begin: On the Post-Communist Experience

"While the postcolonial subject proceeds from the past into the present, the post-communist enters the present from the future."[247] As complicated as may seem, Groys's assertion nevertheless perfectly captures the post-communist perspective on history experienced – though not voluntarily – by many people of the former communist countries[248] at the turn of the twentieth century. The experience stemmed as the result of this perspective translates itself in a number of phenomena which make the post-communist subject the one who finds himself or herself in the starting (or ending) condition to understand history and the world on the whole. Valera and Natasha's *The End of an Epoch* precisely explores this condition and, by making sense of it, they try to reconnect with their past in order to imagine a new future. Unlike the postcolonial subject, however, the post-communist one does not have a revisionist attitude towards history, at least not at first instance. His or her wish is not that of merely rewriting history according to the contemporary preoccupations[249]. To make this concept clearer, let me emphasize that, as every subject being also an object depending on the perspective of an action, beyond being a subject the post-communist individual is also precisely an object.[250] Putting aside for a moment the notion of

[247] B. Groys, *Back From the Future*, in "Third Text", vol. 17, issue n. 4, 4 June 2010, pp. 323-331, here p. 327, doi: 10.1080/0952882032000166152 [last access on 15 May 2023]
[248] Here I specifically refer to former Soviet Socialist Republics.
[249] See B. Croce in the first chapter of the present work.
[250] In this regard, what follows should not be seen in contradiction with what emerged from Natasha's words when I argued - in the last paragraph of the second chapter – that, starting from the 1990s, notions regarding the self and one's assertion of personal authority had finally reached prominence in historical, social, political and cultural debates. Rather, what I shall argue for is to be seen as the experience which ultimately led to the formation of various phenomena, of which the one on which Natasha's words are based is just one of the many possible.

agency which is typical of the subject as such and whose essence, specifically speaking of the post-communist subject, is yet to be fully understood[251] – with the latter making resonate once again, from the 1990s onwards, the eternal question put forward by V. Tupitsyn, What has to be done[252] – the post-communist individual, as object, is a form deprived of its content. The experience he witnessed is an experience of loss and, as argued in the second chapter, the very same loss which he deals with is total, it embraces both the post-communist individual as a subject and as an object. To put it simply, the post-communist individual does not know what to do because he or she does not know what truly happened to him or her either. Valera and Natasha in *The End of an Epoch* tried to help – while helping themselves as well – the post-communist to know, and once he or she has known, to accept their historical condition in view of his or her historical past. Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, a film and media scholar as well as author of various articles on Eastern European cinema, in her essay on Alexander Sokurov's experimental-historical drama film *Russian Ark* (2002) describes the beginning of the movie in a way that is very telling of what I mean by total loss and offers a depiction of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century.

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[251] This represents, above all, the ultimate issue to be tackled and, as a cornerstone, to understand it means finally grasping the full meaning of the post-communist experience and its aftermath.
[252] See note 235 of the second chapter.

> *Russian Ark* begins with the anxiety produced by a sense of disorientation. The establishing shot is one of complete darkness accompanied by a cacophony of sounds — the wind, a ship's foghorn, the tuning of instruments, the sound of moving water, muffled laughter, and distorted musical accents that merge into one another to become indistinguishable. […]. A voice (Sokurov's own) emerges out of the darkness and, almost as if in an internal monologue, seeks to orient itself: "I open my eyes and I see nothing, I remember only that there was some calamity . . . but I just can't remember what happened to me." Alluding to the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* (and Pushkin's allegorical images of the flood of St. Petersburg in 1824), this lost soul seems to have strayed from the course of time.[3] There is no beginning or ending to this film; no foreboding entrance (as in the case of Dante's *Inferno*), only an unexpected immersion in what appears to be the simultaneous presence of various layers of the past. The images that suddenly appear out of nowhere before this off-screen persona are fleeting and sporadic recollections of historical scenes, interactions, and performances anachronistically joined into one spectacular, continuous, unedited shot. Though time is certainly out of joint, this persona will remain estranged from the "action" of the film.[253]

The Russian Ark, unlike Noah's, did not make it through the Flood. Or, one shall say that what eventually made it was a shipwreck rather than the entire Ark. Also, the flood myth here is less a Genesis narrative than a Last Judgement one, at least at first sight. The survivors of the *Russian Ark* resemble the subjects of a classical Doom painting whose role, however, is immediately subverted into that of objects of the only expected action by the only subject present in a such a category of paintings, Christ. However, as can be grasped by Biagioli's words, the whole event of *The Russian Ark* did not entail some kind of Second Coming of Christ, its passengers were not showing the symptoms that one is expected to have when one first stands before Christ and, moreover, awaits his judgement. The reason for all that is because the survivors of this ark realized that the messiah has died[254] or, rather, the one who self-appointed as such in reality was nothing but a fool and his claim of messiahship nothing but a foolishness.[255] Being as such, Sokurov's utterances "I can't see nothing", "I just can't remember what happened to me" or as well as Biagioli's words "this lost soul seems to have strayed from the course of time" rather than of some kind of religious call of

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[253] K. Ravetto-Biagioli, *FLOTING ON THE BORDERS OF EUROPE SOKUROV'S RUSSIAN ARK*, in "Film Quarterly", vol. 59, no. 1, 2005, pp. 18-26, here p. 18-19; https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2005.59.1.18 [last access on 17 May 2023].

[254] In a similar situation, Nietzsche's expression "*God is dead*" reinvigorates itself and resonates in an overwhelming way.

[255] On such topic refer to the first paragraph of the second chapter and, for an extensive understanding of the same topic see B. Groys, *The total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, cit.

whatever nature the latter may be, they speak of oblivion, of amnesia, of someone who seems to have awakened from a crazy dream or sleep.[256] As total as may be, however, this feeling of loss is not complete. When I argued – speaking of Russians' attitude towards historical events by drawing on V. Erofeev[257] – that not all traces were made of sand, I was just referring to the incompleteness of the paroxysm of the social organism[258]. Thus, as one who had a crazy dream still is able to partly remember it even if he or she might not be able to make full sense of it, so is the post-communist individual relating to his or her history. This very act of remembering the past, however, happened in the manners expressed by Biagioli's final part of her description when she speaks of: "simultaneous presence of various layers of the past", "fleeting and sporadic recollections of historical scenes, interactions, and performances anachronistically joined into one spectacular, continuous, unedited shot". The shot of which Biagioli is speaking is not just the cinematic one, a stylistic decision concerning the direction of the movie. This shot is the very same condition of present in which the post-communist individual found him or herself. As if the latter was living among social, cultural and historical ruins of which he or she could only partly make account. Lastly, the final sentence is as brilliant as it perfectly captures the whole sense of my discourse: the post-communist individual as one estranged from his past, present and future, hence from history. The post-communist individual is estranged from action because he or she finds him or herself in a kind of limbo wondering what to do or, as V. Erofeev stated, what has to be done. Herein lies the notion of the post-communist individual as an object before he or she as a subject: the agency of the latter is denied from the very place in which he is. Since he does not know where he historically is, he cannot know his course of action. Let me insist on this concept by reconnecting with Groys's discourse on history relating avant-garde and Stalinist art. It can be argued

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[256] If we replace the terms "dream" and "sleep" with their Spanish equivalent "sueño" - whose meaning expresses the meaning of both English terms depending on the context - and recollect F. Goya's artwork "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*", the final part of the sentence further characterizes the feeling experienced by the post-communist subject. The historical and ideological drifts of the twentieth century could be represented by the monsters in the painting; the communist – or Soviet – subject is the individual who *sueña* and, therefore, generates them. Hence, the post-communist subject is either one who has had (dreamt) a nightmare or one who slept so long he woke up and felt foggy, numb. Being asleep means also being in a way unconscious. In the latter's sense, the communist (Soviet) individual acted as a somnambulist.
[257] See paragraph 2.2 of the second chapter.
[258] See note 93 in the second chapter.

that having tried and failed to overcome history – that is the communist subject's journey into the future and its result – the latter resituates in itself the communist individual once again. In this sense, when stating that he does not know where he historically is, it means that he does not know a present other than the historical one: the latter, however, has gone lost and now the post-communist is looking for it among the historical ruins. In this regard, it will be shown that in *The End of an Epoch* Valera and Natasha first claimed their historicity through the foundation of their museum; then they questioned the works contained in it in order to make sense of the same historicity. Going further with our discourse, having accepted his historical present, in order to transform this acceptance into assessment he moves on and finds himself dwelling on his historical past, the one denied by his journey into the future, either voluntarily or involuntarily. However, the issue is far more intricate than it seems, and Fredric Jameson helps to better understand this moment. Before drawing on Jameson's reasoning on the concept of modernity, however, a clarification needs to be made: what follows will be an attempt to provide some of the maxims formulated by Jameson as an explanation of the post-communist condition, and not the reasoning undertaken by Jameson himself which led to the formulation of the aforementioned maxims. This is because a consideration on the validity of the latter would be off topic, of a scope far beyond my abilities, as well as because they are still up for discussion. In spite of this, however, Jameson's reasoning on modernity is fundamental for understanding Cherkashins' work *The End of an Epoch*, in light also of Boym's theory on the off-modern. It will be presented as a summa of theoretical concepts which the artists indirectly addressed in their work and make sense of their condition as post-communist subjects. In trying to formulate four maxims of modernity[259] by drawing on Hans

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[259] Here my wish is to indirectly demonstrate that dwelling on the notions of modernity and modernism as Jameson did could also mean dwelling on the communist and post-communist history. The reason for that is because coming to terms with communist past means trying to reach the modernity Russia wanted to achieve – though through its own terms, hence towards a non-Western modernism – since the October Revolution. However, as it will be showed, and as Natasha's words already disclosed in the second chapter, with the collapse of the Soviet Union Western values started to be adopted because to become modern happened to mean to westernize oneself. Also, it would be inexact to argue that Russian did not reach modernism until the collapse of the Soviet Union: "Communist-ruled societies might by all means have been hermetically closed societies but they were also utterly modern, […] communist society offers us an outstanding example of modernity that, rather than opening out, led towards enclosure and isolation; furthermore, it represents a prototype of modernity that is simply ignored by the predominant ideology of our time. […] this ideology ignores that communism was formulating its own agenda of globalisation, for which reason alone it should instead be ascribed to modernity." In B. Groys, *Back From the Future*, cit., p. 326-327.

Robert Jauss's notions of "cyclical" and "typological"[260], he states, relating to the former term, that "[…] the category of the 'generation' always brings a certain cyclical movement with it, while at the same time requiring intense collective self-consciousness about the identity and uniqueness of the period in question […]."[261] If one dwells on this last aspect of the cyclical version of the modern, he or she would note that the latter is just what the post-communist – first as an individual, and consequently as a member of a greater national, cultural and historical community – lacks. *The End of an Epoch* tried to construct the intense self-consciousness about identity Jameson spoke of. Further on Jameson continues by providing his own definition of the two Jauss's terms under scrutiny, "[which] involves a kind of Gestalt alternation between two forms of perception of the same object, the same moment in historical times."[262] Looking at the same object, that is the past and, specifically, the post-communist's past,

> […] the first perceptual organization (the one identified as 'cyclical') is better described as an awareness of history invested in the feeling of a radical break; the 'typological' form consists rather in the attention to a whole period, and the sense that our ('modern') period is somehow analogous to this or that period in the past. A shift of attention must be registered in passing from one perspective to the other, however complementary they may seem to be: to feel our own moment as a whole new period in its own right is not exactly the same as focusing on the dramatic way in which its originality is set off against an immediate past.[263]

The shift of attention of which Jameson speaks and I call attention on consists in the fact that having come to terms with the historicity of his own present – undertaking a cyclical perspective, hence realizing his or her present as a historical radical break – the post-communist individual should make a further step forward and try to understand how his or her present is set off against his or her immediate past, the latter step would precisely consist in undertaking a typological perspective. Thereby this would ultimately allow the post-communist individual to fully understand his or her condition in the present and, in so doing, he or she would no longer be estranged from the action. Anticipating what will be seen later when I will discuss some of the

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[260] On these two notions see H. R. Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte Als Provokation*, Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, chapter 1, *Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein der Modernität.*
[261] F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London New York: Verso, 2002, pp. 250, here p. 20.
[262] Ibi, p. 21.
[263] Ibid.

performances making up the cycle in question, the performance "*Underground Wedding*" (1993) precisely highlighted this difference existing between the present – hence the post-communist condition – and the past. Proceeding with Jameson's reasoning, the intermediate conclusion the latter arrives at is also the same the post-communist individual should arrive at and that which Cherkashins' performances in *The End of an Epoch* are headed towards: realizing that the past and the present are not in a relationship in which one is superior to the other, but simply different one another. He says that the moment of this realization is the exact moment "of the birth of historicity itself: and the historically new consciousness of historical difference as such now reshuffles the deck […]."[264] Now, having freed the post-communist's past from the misconception of it due to bias of whatever nature, the reasoning on the second maxim of Modernity formulated by Jameson suggests a further hint for the post-communist individual.

> […] the present cannot feel itself to be a historical period in its own right without this gaze from the future, which seals it off and expels it as powerfully from time to come as it was able to do with its own immediate precedents. We need not overemphasize the matter of guilt […] so much as that of responsibility which cannot perhaps be affirmed without the suspicion of guilt: for it is the present's responsibility for its own self-definition of its own mission that makes it into a historical period in its own right and that requires the relationship to the future fully as much it involves the taking of a position on the past. History is to be sure both dimensions; but it is not sufficiently understood that the future exists for us not merely as a Utopian space of projection and desire, of anticipation and the project: it must also bring with it that anxiety in the face of unknown future and its judgements for which the thematics of simple posterity is a truly insipid characterization.[265]

The key to proceeding in the processing of his past and, concurrently, his present lies precisely in the fact that the post-communist individual comes – as argued by Groys – from the future. Having argued that the moment in which he realizes the historical difference between his still-not-known present and his past corresponds to the historicity of his present, it is his experience of the future which ultimately gives the present its own historical raison d'être. The reason for this is because, as argued by Jameson, it is not sufficient to perceive the present as different from its past: in order to fulfill the second perceptual organization, that is the typological one, the future must

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[264] Ibi, p. 22.
[265] Ibi, p. 26.

be involved because history is made of both present and future. At this point Jameson further exhorts us to keep our guard up regarding the involvement of the future and not to fall back into the trap of nostalgia for utopia, a threat which seems to have always stayed with the Russian tradition and which ultimately could jeopardize the typological perspective. It is exactly at this point that the post-communist individual becomes again a subject – so no longer estranged from action – by pondering on all the elements necessary to take a decision and act accordingly. And this point is also the theoretical one within which Valera and Natasha's work in *The End of an Epoch* positions itself. Ultimately, Jameson's second maxim of modernity precisely defines this final position in which the post-communist individual – who in the meantime has become a subject after all the above reasoning – finds itself: "Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category."[266] Grounding on this maxim, what follows is an attempt to consider the post-communist subject – hence Valera and Natasha in *The End of an Epoch* cycle – as an agent of modernism.[267] To provide such explanation, it is useful to read Jameson's maxim together with Groys's words relating communism and modernity, after which the post-communist subject's position appears more meaningful. Having argued for communism being a version of modernity[268], Groys writes that "[…] communism is nothing more than the most extreme and radical manifestation of militant modernism, of the belief in progress and of the dream of an enlightened avant-gardes acting in total unison, of utter commitment to the future."[269] Remembering that the post-communist subject enters the present from the future and mindful of the high price he had to pay for embarking on such a historical journey, his experience coming from such journey without destination taught him – painfully – precisely Jameson's second maxim. Having adopted the most extreme and radical manifestation of militant modernism, the post-communist subject realized that modernism was nothing more than a narrative possibility, among many, which all eventually were nothing more than that. After believing so intensely in the future as the communist people did, the feeling coming from its delusion was such that he or she realized the narrative character of modernity. As if he had pushed ahead of

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[266] Ibi, p. 40.
[267] Here the term modernism is used to designate the process whereby modernity is achieved.
[268] See note 254 and, for a full understanding on this topic, refer to B. Groys, *Back From the Future*, cit.
[269] B. Groys, *Back From the Future*, cit., p. 327.

everyone and had reached the horizon of modernity, only to realize the latter as nothing more than the mechanism through which historical periods are formed. It is strengthened by this experience and knowledge, then, that the post-communist subject comes back from the future to the present, whose revealing power – and in a way also liberating from the nostalgia for utopia – lies at the root of the stalemate in which he finds himself after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As an agent of modernism, therefore, the post-communist is able to detect such mechanism of formation of historical periods and he himself becomes an explorer of such historical periods and "[…] History itself as a master category."[270] The fourth and last maxim on modernity grasps the characterization of the Cherkashins' actions in *The End of an Epoch*: "No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it is able to come to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern." It is precisely this coming to terms with such hypothesis that the artists' actions consist of and, as argued by Jameson "[i]f does so come to terms, however, it [modernity] unmasks itself as a purely historiographic category and thereby seems to undo all its claims as a temporal category and as a vanguard concept of innovation."[271] The post-communist subject, then, would act a kind of *Aufhebung*: unlike the Hegelian understanding of this term, the latter is here used to mean not a sublation of two former supposedly inferior concepts into a superior one, but rather with emphasis on its meaning of being essentially transcendent and in tension between two objects. Therefore, the whole *The End of an Epoch* program is not a matter of result, but rather of process.

Be that as it may, if so far it has been tried to establish the theoretical starting position of the Cherkashins, still it is important to look also at the latter's pragmatic circumstances. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's notion of "catching up revolution"[272], Boris Buden's account proves to be really punctual in making clear such circumstances. In the preface of his work *Transition to Nowhere* (2020), he "characterise[s] the events that brought Eastern European socialist regimes to collapse." Regarding the *nachholende Revolution* he says:

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[270] F. Jameson*, A Singular Modernity Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, cit., p. 108.
[271] Ibi, p. 94.
[272] On this concept refer to J. Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution: Kleine Politische Schriften 7*, Frankfurt A. M: Suhrkamp, 1990.

[r]arely a name given to an event seals in one single word so fatefully its historical meaning as was the case with this definition. The enormous amount of utopian energy discharged by an act of revolution, its total openness towards the future and the irreducible potentiality of freedom it activates were degraded, if only for the moment, to an opportunistic catch-up move along an already determined path long since made by others and reduced to a miserably belated imitation of a life already existing and brought to perfection somewhere else. At stake, however, was more than a simple misconception or underestimation of what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989/90. The "catching-up revolution" denied not only the historical importance but the very historicity of these events. The peoples of Eastern Europe, who brought down the com- munist regimes without any help from outside, have made neither their own history, nor history as such. Instead, they were just cloning the West.[273]

The definition of Habermas aligns with our up-to-now reasoning on modernity and represents a look from above or a wider shot of Biagioli's initial one. As if, after having shot a close-up of the post-communist subject, the view would become wider and wider. The moment Burden speaks of is that immediately after the collapse of Soviet Union in which all Soviet history was considered a parenthesis to be left behind – with a consequent perpetuation of the amnesia – and the opening of Russia – together with all the phenomena spurred by such event – as the final achievement of the long-desired and true modernity, namely the Western version of it.[274] Therefore, as stated by Burden, the historical catching-up revolution consisted in just adopting the Western declination of modernity. Post-communist individuals were being resituated into a historical narrative, only that the latter was neither conformed to their identity nor a truer version of their former historical narrative to which, on the contrary, was denied historicity. At this point it is important to stress that if the people of Eastern Europe were cloning the West, it can be argued for the latter was making the same mistake of former East. When Burden says that the catching-up revolution denied the very historicity of the Soviet past, it means that the West still was foolishly claiming that its own narrative (modernity, hence capitalism) was the only true one. By not appropriately recognizing the communist experience, they were perpetuating amnesia and potentially paving the way for a new, great Utopia. Or, to put it better, the West has not been able to capitalize on the communist experience but kept on believing that its modernism was something different from just an historical narrative and imposed

[273] B. Burden, *Transition to Nowhere – Art in History After 1989*, edited by Paolo Caffoni, Berlin: Archive Books, 2020, pp 400, here p. 17-18.
[274] See note 254.

it to the post-communism which, instead, "[…] mark[s] the end of modern social mass utopias more generally; or the end of the belief in the possibility of different world which some day will be, if at all, everywhere and for everyone the same […]."[275] On the inability of the West to capitalize on the Communist experience agrees also Walter Benjamin when he writes that "[c]apitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream sleep feel over Europe, and with it a reactivation of mythic powers."[276] Magda Schmukalla, former PhD student in psychological studies, also highlights the final outcome of the pattern it has being discussed: "the war of ideologies between the modern meta-narratives of capitalism vs. communism, between the West and the East, was seen as having ended, however, with a clear victory of one of the two ideologies involved over the other."[277] Cherkashins' work in *The End of an Epoch* precisely dwells on the end of the ideological war, trying to figure out if it is really an end.

Furthermore, if we were to construct the general pattern from which the above outcome stems and which would make account of both the theoretical and pragmatic circumstances presented so far, then it is Schmukalla once again who provides with a final description of such general pattern. Arguing for the post-communist condition as a threshold experience, she states that

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[275] M. Schmukalla, *Artistic Ruptures and Their 'Communist' Ghosts: on The Post-Communist Condition as Threshold Experience in Art From and In Eastern Europe*, unpublished, 2017, pp. 215, here p. 54, https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/40298/
[276] W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, *Das Passagen-Werk*, vol. 5, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982, pp. 654, here p. 494, [Der Kapitalismus war eine Naturerscheinung, mit der ein neuer Traumschlaf über Europa kam und in ihm eine Reaktivierung der mythischen Kräfte].
[277] M. Schmukalla, *Artistic Ruptures and Their 'Communist' Ghosts: on The Post-Communist Condition as Threshold Experience in Art From and In Eastern Europe*, cit., p.53.

> […] the post-communist threshold is a crisis in which not only the 'dying' origin and the not yet existing destination are blurred, but also the unidirectional temporal logic of our sense of moving from an old, non-functioning to a new, functioning state is profoundly disturbed. It is not simply that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, but that what is dying (communism) was believed to potentially be the new that would supersede what is now in the process of coming back (capitalism). The post-communist condition as threshold experience is thus an experience of time and space which is characterized not only by a lack of a historical telos, a telos or structure that still has to be designed or born, but also by a total loss of historical direction, triggering an experienced implosion of existing Western temporalities and identities more generally.[278]

The post-communist subject is in the middle of such crisis, between a dying future and a still-unknown past. He is called to take charge of such crisis and in doing so he must put together the remaining pieces of the ark, however this time not to sail towards a utopian future, but rather going up the river upstream and try to understand if, where and how the impact that led to the sinking could be avoided.

Now, before proceeding with our discourse, let me conclude this paragraph by making Magda Schmukalla's words also my own's, as well as the ultimate scope of the present chapter.

> […] to explore the postcommunist moment as a threshold experience which is characterized not by the clarity of a past one wants, or has to move away from, or the exact shape of a future one is pushed towards, but as an experience of crisis which is precisely characterized by the loss of such a knowledge of historical direction and purpose. Dwelling within this transitory state or interregnum of collective confusion instead of constructing it as a clearly defined bridge from one state to another, will allow us, I argue, to stumble over unexpected realities and 'unacknowledged cultural experiences' which may tell us about the dreams and catastrophes of the post-communist moment in new, contemporary and critical ways.[279]

In this sense, dwelling within the transitory state instead of constructing it as clearly defined bridge from one state to another means putting to test modernity as a narrative category – hence indirectly dealing with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern – while reaffirming the historicity of the communist experience, and hopefully finding unconsidered potential narratives. The latter, particularly, is what Boym's off-modern tries to do.

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[278] Ibi, p. 64.
[279] Ibi, p. 62.

3.3 Valera and Natasha Cherkashin as Post-Communist Collective Subject

   Having briefly outlined the post-communist condition and the figure of the post-communist subject, it is time to look at the latter's concrete action and, hence, considering the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin. Before doing so, however, let me recollect the discourse regarding their Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum because the latter's conception is at the very base of their post-communist action. When I argued for the formation of their conceptual museum as the exact moment in which the artists artistically historicized themselves, this argumentation is also true for their historicization within history in a broader sense. Arguing that it is not possible to separate the artists from their institution because they are one and the same, what comes out is that they and their oeuvre acquire historical presence and a historical present as well. At the foundation of their museum they were essentially taking on a cyclical and typological perceptual organization and, consequently, occupying a place within art history and history. V. Tupitsyn also seems to agree on this point when he states: "The birth of a museum is like the beginning of time, time is counted from that moment on […]. The museum's founders, curators, and artists whose work is in the permanent collection behave accordingly."[280] The latter acquires further meaning if we emphasize the fact that all the museum's roles above are performed by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin themselves. Bearing in mind this, we can say that, "[i]n the case of a plural "I," we are dealing with a "corporate museum," and thus with a collective author. At any rate, art whose time has gone compensates for the temps perdu with "museological time.""[281] In this sense, regarding the birth of their museum, Valera and Natasha Cherkashin are the post-communist collective author of a corporate museum whose art and everything related to their institution finally entered history through museological time. Now, if we agree with V. Tupitsyn when he states "[…] that any museum of fine arts is – in a way – a *Kommunalka*, where artists from different epochs end up "living" together"[282], Cherkashins' museum is no different from that. However, as their museum coincides with themselves and their historicization, what their institution contains is – inter alia – their post-communist

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[280] V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia*, cit., p 234.
[281] Ibi, p 237.
[282] Ibi, p. 55.

condition as post-communist collective subject. It is no coincidence, then, that the two moments – that of the collapse of the Soviet Union and that of the birth of their museum – are concomitant. The implosion of the utopian dream finally freed a place in history for those who had long been eclipsed by the same utopia.[283]

Just as Valera and Natasha did through their practice, i.e. shaping by means of appropriation their own place in art history, I argue that the birth of their museum in 1993 in Moscow Metro Station could be interpreted as the artists' appropriation of that one could call an imposing and sumptuous *Kommunalka* which appears to have been abruptly abandoned by its former Soviet residents. Following the latter's flee or disappearance, the place seems to have been rediscovered anew by those who came back from the flight and from the children, as well as grandchildren of the former Soviet people. Looking at this place the post-communist subject did not find artists living together as in the case of Tupitsyn's view of the museum as a *Kommunalka*. By stepping inside the Cherkashins' museum the post-communist is confronted with a copious number of some sort of mirabilia of the communist hegemonic *byt*, whose meaning however has gone lost in time and space. Even though the term *byt* is commonly understood as indicating material life or earthly existence often with reference to common people, still its density of meaning makes it understandable in different ways. Without embarking on a discussion of its different meanings, here I agree with Catriona Kelly when she argues that *byt*, among other things, "[…] was also a socially divisive term, used to claim authority on the part of the socially and intellectually advantaged, and to allow them to shape the space where the disadvantaged might realise their identities."[284] Kelly's words read in line with Svetlana Boym encapsulate our discourse on art and history made so far.

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[283] Although in the case of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin the present study has shown that such place in history and art history has been a result of the practice of the artists themselves, still it must be highlighted that the collapse of the Soviet Union – together with various events that preceded it – is at the base of the formation of their museum and, reasonably, their historicization.

[284] C. Kelly, *Byt: Identity and Everyday Life*, in *National Identity in Russian Culture: an Introduction*, edited by S. Franklin and E. Widdis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 149 – 167, here p. 152.

Nineteenth-century Westernizers and Slavophiles, Romantics and modernists, aesthetic and political utopians, and Bolsheviks and monarchists all engaged in battles with *byt*. For many of them what mattered was not physical survival but sacrifice, not preservation of life but its complete transcendence, not the fragile human existence in this world but collective happiness in the other world…In a culture in which the eschatological and the apocalyptic are closely linked to the conception of national identity, there can be very little patience for the ordinary, transient, end everyday.[285]

When I argue for the Cherkashins' museum[286] as a *Kommunalka*, therefore, I consider Moscow Metro Station as "[…] a remarkable technological achievement that was also an immense iconography of power"[287] – as highlighted by Boym – with the only difference from the iconography made up by the *byt* in an ordinary *Kommunalka* – as highlighted by Kelly – being its construction of a hegemonic discourse rather than a subordinate one. By acting in and with the communist *byt* and the space shaped by the latter, the artists were questioning the very essence of their *byt*, hence, their personal and collective (national) identity in full sense. To put it in a nutshell, they were questioning their history as post-communist subjects. Moreover, as their museum being both the physical and exhibition space – Moscow Metro Station – in which performances and exhibitions took place, as well as the very object of artistic transformation, the argument for which Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, together with the participants involved in the events, were acting upon their historical time is further reaffirmed through the aforementioned V. Tupitsyn's expression "the birth of a museum is like the beginning of time"[288]. From this perspective the museum is the content and the container, the significant and the signifier. In this case, the beginning of time we are speaking of is that of the post-communist[289] and, as pointed out, it can be argued that the artists once again were practicing self-historicization, however this

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[285] S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 31.

[286] While I am speaking of the Cherkashins' museum I am strictly referring to its birth and the series of performances and exhibitions *End of an Epoch* (1991- 1993).

[287] S. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, London: The MIT Press, 2000, here p. 208.

[288] See note 275.

[289] In this regard, it must be emphasized that my analysis aims to reveal the critical attitude of Valera and Natasha, and not the final characterization of the post-communist condition derived from that attitude. As argued in the previous chapter, *The End of an Epoch* series ask questions about the post-communist condition but does not give answers, at least not definitively. The whole artistic project is about the process.

time not in terms of their artistic institutionalisation – or not only – but rather in terms of historical assessment of their present.

3.4 *The End of an Epoch* Program: Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's Questioning the Post-Communism Condition

Buck-Morss's words fully describe what the whole project of *The End of an Epoch* dealt with: [t]he gap between the utopian promise believed in by children and the dystopian actuality that they experience as adults [which] can indeed generate a force for collective awakening." Then as today,

> […] is the moment of disenchantment—of recognizing the dream as dream. But a political awakening demands more. It requires the rescue of the collective desires to which the socialist dream gave expression, before they sink into the unconscious as forgotten. This rescue is the task of the dream's interpretation.[290]

Bearing in mind this notion of collective awakening, hence, we approach the final part of my study by considering some of the performances and exhibitions making up the cycle *The End of an Epoch* (1990-1993).

Before looking at some of the exhibitions and performances of *The End of an Epoch* series in details, I would like to deliver Lotman's contribute to the issue regarding the concept of museum which is important for deepening the understanding of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum, the series *End of an Epoch* and the artists' ever present ludic attitude. In the first chapter, I argued that the feature of playfulness could be considered a leitmotif in Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's art, something which in a way or another and in different extents can always be detected in the artists' work. Lotman's following words seem to grasp the above aspects of Valera and Natasha's artistic practice.

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[290] S. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, cit., p. 209.

> In order to penetrate, even roughly, the spirit of ancient art or of any other epoch, it is necessary to recreate its wholeness immersed in life, in customs, in prejudices, in the childish purity of faith. Here it is necessary to play with the lesson of art history in a double way: we must remember and forget it at the same time, just as we remember and forget that the actor on stage falls dead but remains alive. The museum is a theatre, it cannot be interpreted differently. In the museum you must play and not contemplate, it is not for nothing that children are the ones who better understand and absorb museums.[291]

Resuming our discourse on *The Russian Ark*, Valera and Natasha Cherkashin with this project tried to make sense of the dream (journey) by means of absorbing it – just as children absorb museums – only to be able to assess their own history, without the latter continuing to torment them.

Valera and Natasha's approach in *The End of an Epoch* program can be precisely interpreted as a penetration of the spirit of art – and history – of the communist epoch. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate that Valera and Natasha's performances and exhibitions consisted in the re-creation of the communist's wholeness immersed in life.

3.4.1 Performances: *Underground Subbotnik* (1992), *Privatization of Sculpture* (1990), *The Tactile Principle as the Key Artistic Principle of Art for the People* (1990), *The People's Love of Art for the People* (1991), *Underground Wedding* (1993)

The institution of the *Subbotnik* day in which Soviet people were called to do some voluntarily work for the common good is recreated by Valera and Natasha in their performance *Underground Subbotnik. Caring for Our Privatised Statues* (1992). After having privatised the statues at Ploshchad Revolyutsii Metro Station, the directorate of the Cherkashin Metropolitan Museum decided to institute a *Subbotnik* for the caring of such privatised sculptures.

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[291] J. M. Lotman, *Portret* [Portrait], in "Vyschgorod" (1997), 1-2, pp. 8-31. Here I accessed the work via the following link: http://philologos.narod.ru/lotman/portrait.htm [last access on 29/05/2023] [Dlia togo chtoby khot' priblizitel'not proniknut' v dvukh antichnogo ili liuboĭ drugoĭ epokhi isskustva, neobkhodimo vossozdat' ego covokupnost' pogruzhennuiu v byt, nravy, predraccudki, detckuiu chistotu verovaniia. Co vseĭ naukoĭ istorii iskusstva zdec' neobkhodima dvoĭnaia igra: eë nado odnovremenno pomnit' i zabyvat', kak my pomnim i zabyvaem v odno i to zhe vremia to, chto aktër na stsene padaet mertbym i ostaetsia pri etom zhvym. Museĭ – eto teatr, i inache ne mozhet byt' vospriniat. V musee nado igrat', a ne sozertsat', i ne sluchaĭno luchshe vsego ponimaiut i vosprinimaiut muzei deti.]

9. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Subbotnik. Caring for Our Privatized Statues*. 22 February 1992, Photograph, credit to the artists

After having been enthusiastically joined by several people, the two artists stated: "This performance brought our contemporaries even closer to the images of the USSR in the 1930s."[292] How this getting closer to the images of the USSR can be interpreted if not as the re-creation of the whole communist spirit as immersed in life, customs and childish purity of faith. Moreover, what one witnesses by looking at the photographs of this performance but also at others of the same program – see for example *The Tactile Principle as the Key Artistic Principle of Art for the People* (1990), *Engagement* (1992) or *The Underground Beauty Contest Miss '38* (1993) – is the artists and attendants' double play with the lesson of art history, as well as history. By speaking of the idea which led to the performance *Privatization of Sculptures* (1990), the two artists stated:

> We understood that there would be no present or future without a knowledge and understanding of our past. We read silly things in the papers about how we should take down everything that remained of the Soviet Union, and even remove the

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[292] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 90.

sculptures from Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station. It got us all agitated. It turned out that everything had belonged to everyone, and now belonged to nobody. So what if we privatized these sculptures – in an artistic way, of course?[293]

Among the privatised sculptures there was a Soviet student, a sportswoman, a family, a border guard and a sailor.

10. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Privatization of Sculptures: Lyudmila Bredikhina with a privatized student*, 28 November 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

[293] Ibi, p. 86.

11. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Privatization of Sculptures: Natasha Kolodzey with a privatized border gard*, 28 November 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

Privatisation here could be interpreted in two ways. As the artists and attendants' internalization of their past embodied by these figures, some sort of realization of their past as something that, despite everything, cannot be discarded. In this sense Irina Marchesini's words are telling of the process of privatisation. She states that it

> is widely known, if an object broke, or did not work properly during the Soviet period, people did not discard it, but instead adjust it or used it for another purpose. Object were thus modified to undergo a second, and more profound, process of personalization (or even privatization).[294]

In this sense, privatising these objects meant also enacting a process of re-personalization. The soviet student which seems to utter Komar and Melanid's words *Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood* (1983) of one of their artworks, the sportswoman which remember Valera's early work *I am a Soviet Athlete* (1962)

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[294] I. Marchesini, *The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature*, in *Melancholic Identities, Toska and Reflective Nostalgia*, edited by S. Dickinson, L. Salmon, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2015, pp. 149-165, here p. 156.

and all the cultural and political symbols connected to the figure of the athlete[295], the family as one of the most important social units in Soviet Union as well as recipient of great consideration to help with the pursuing of the general communist plan, the border guard and the sailor as respectively symbolizing protection from the enemy, i.e. the West, and the navigator towards a brighter future. From the other hand, privatisation could be interpreted also as the artists and, in general, the post-communists' exposition to the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption, as well as challenge of, the Western principles, the latter also meant as a provisional and initial making sense of their condition. Valera and Natasha's desire to learn the lessons of the past and recognize its importance is perhaps most evident in the performance *The Tactile Principle as the Key Artistic Principle of Art for the People* (1990) in which participants were called to identify bronze busts of Lenin while blindfolded.

12. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Marina Izyumskaja searches for the solution*, December 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

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[295] See M. Bertelé: notes 36, 37, 38 of the first chapter.

13. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, Klim notes down the results of the experiment, December 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

In the words of art critic Sergey Kuskov:

> Cherkashin has given us a very interesting 'examination' here, important as a sort of game, or playful initiation, both for art critics and for humanities scholars. It is an attempt at making contact with a known unknown, where something that seems so familiar as to be banal is made estranged, and through the process of recognition acquires a strangely paradoxical novelty, in doing so entering a new semantic dimension.[296]

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[296] S. Kuskov, in V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 82.

14. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Sergey Kuskov takes his exam*, *making use of the tactile principle*, December 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

Making contact with the known unknown – that is the post-communist's past, here reflected in an object of the *byt* – by means of *ostranenie*[297] makes the object acquire, as Kuskov said, a paradoxical novelty, entering a new semantic dimension[298], thus providing itself to be re-signified. This is the tension between remembering and forgetting which Lotman refers to: it could be seen as a process consisting in learning the lesson from the past, unlearning by means of estrangement, in order to learn it again anew. This is the historical amnesty that Valera and Natasha were practicing in *The End of an Epoch* program that I was referring to in the second chapter.[299] So, just as the actor on stage falls dead but remains alive, so does the past in Cherkashins' *The End of an Epoch* program, however it outlives not in the guise of nostalgia for utopia, but rather as a re-learned tradition which cannot be discarded. At the same time, if one considers performances *Engagement* (1992), *Underground Wedding* (1993), as well

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[297] Russian term coined in 1917 by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovskiĭ, often translated as estrangement or defamiliarization. On such concept see V. Shklovskiĭ, *O teorii prozy,* Moskva: Sovetskiĭ Pisatel', 1983.
[298] Here it is useful as well as appropriate to recall Lotman's neologism coined in 1984, *semiosphere*, and, more generally, the research field of the semiotic of culture. Moreover, since the image of Lenin, as well as that of Stalin, acquired mythological substance in Soviet Union, Barthes provides us with further food for thought to understand the process triggered by the performance in question: "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance." In R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), translated from the French by Annette Lavers, New York: The Noonday Press, 1991, p. 108.
[299] See paragraph 2.2, chapter 2.

as *The Underground Beauty Contest Miss '38* (1993), one witnesses the second aspect highlighted by Lotman: the playful and theatrical dimension. When Lotman says the museum is a theatre, Valera and Natasha seem to have taken his words literally: the fact that the coming into being of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum coincides with such performances further validates Lotman's thesis for which the museum is a theatre, for the latter institutions for Lotman and the Cherkashins are not divisible.

In *The People's Love of Art for the People* (1992) the artists with the help of a fashion model held a performance with the previously privatized sculptures. As for *Privatization of Sculptures* (1990), Valera and Natasha wanted to deepen the relationship between these images and people and decided to carry this performance for answering the question: "Had our images lost the ability to communicate with our contemporaries?"[300] Valena, a Russian fashion model from Rome, helped to find an answer, and her interactions with the privatised sculptures consolidated in a way the dialogue started as the result of the previous privatization.

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[300] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 88.

15. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The Long-Awaited Meeting*, 1993, Gelatine silver print with drawing and watercolour, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of David C. and Sarajean Ruttemberg

The artists were satisfied with the result coming from such interactions. In their book they stated that "[t]here was a lot of communication, love and revelations from images of the past."[301] As if, after having understood the importance of their past, as evidenced by the very act of privatization of the sculptures - to privatize also means to acknowledge something as having a certain value, even though not economical – the artists had decided to go further and try to understand what kind of value the latter could represent, and how the latter could be useful for further understanding the post-communist condition. At this juncture, one cannot fail to recall the reasoning that has been presented through Jameson in the second paragraph of the present chapter.

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[301] Ibid.

Mindful of the latter and putting aside for a moment the element of questioning the modernist narrative as that of privatization or commercialisation of cultural objects, by privatising the sculptures Valera and Natasha understood their past as something different from their present but, at the same time, as also something essential for assessing their post-communist present in relation to their communist past. As if they were assuming first a cyclical perspective and then a typological one as discussed by Jameson. Valera and Natasha recounted how one

> […] can see[s] from the photographs of our privatized images of Soviet culture, not abandoned by our compatriots to the depths of history, reacted and responded. They came to life, smiled, grew warm. It was hard to imagine that they had come to us from Stalinist times.[302]

As expressed by the title of this performance, there was a sort of fruitful exchange between Valena and these images, as well as with people involved in the event.

Underground Wedding (1993) also is a testimony of the artists working with their post-communist condition. A lady who participated in the performance of privatization, whose name was Irina Filatova, showed a deep emotional zeal towards her privatized sculpture that she gave the latter a name, Vasily, and expressed her will to be united with him even more. Valera and Natasha, then, decided to organize a performance consisting in the preparation and celebration of the marriage between Irina and the young Stakhanovite Vasily. They wanted "[t]o bring them together in one unified form […]" so that "[t]he present and the past became one in this performance."[303]

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[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibi. p. 92.

16. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin*, Underground Wedding: Marriage Ceremony at The Metro Station*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

The artists' will to unify the present and the past by means of a marriage between a statue and a woman collided with the difficulty of carrying out such a task: "how can we make it possible for these lovers to be together? There were two ways to do this: bring Vasily to life (like in the Greek Pygmalion) or turn Irina into a sculpture. […]. We went for the second option."[304] However, even though the whole performance turned out to be artistically successful with great media resonance, one witnesses the impossibility of unifying the past and present: the former did not begin to live or, as stated by a magazine heading "[it] was neither dead, nor alive"[305], the latter seemed to be at its end after the journey into the future. However, Valera and Natasha were still operating on their condition as post-communists. If we consider one picture in particular of this performance, it can be understood even further the nature of suspension and absurdity of the post-communist condition or, as stated by Schmukalla, the post-communist condition as a threshold experience.[306] The picture I am referring to is that which portrays Valera as the official and groom's representative accompanying Irina in the streets of Moscow.

17. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Wedding: Marriage Ceremony at The Metro Station*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

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[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibi, p. 94.
[306] See M. Schmukalla, *Artistic Ruptures and Their 'Communist' Ghosts: on The Post-Communist Condition as Threshold Experience in Art From and In Eastern Europe*, cit.

"Newlyweds traditionally tour city landmarks on their wedding day, so Irina visited a historical wall with the Soviet anthem inscribed on it."[307] By looking at this picture one cannot fail to notice how both Irina and Valera (as the groom) clashed with the surrounding environment. Valera's lifelessness given by acting as Vasily, hence as a statue, was as much at odds with the Soviet site as was the bronze-coloured Irina. Perhaps this picture is one of the most successful in terms of visual performance of the post-communist condition as threshold experience. A threshold that one can no longer be denied. Although the post-communist's present is still uncertain, at least Valera and Natasha have managed to embrace his past. This last aspect can be deduced from the words of Irina herself when at the banquet of her marriage, noting the absence of his groom who was forced to stay in his place, namely Moscow Metro Station, as well as Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum, she stated: "'I'll always know where to find him'"[308].

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[307] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 93.
[308] Ibi, p. 95.

18. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Wedding: Afterword*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

3.4.2 Exhibitions: *Kissing or Quarrelling* at All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature Exhibition (1990)

> The USSR ceased to exist. Everything that we had known since childhood fell apart. We were fully aware that in a few years, the next generation would not know what socialism was and why this specific culture and its values had developed. […] we should attempt to reflect on the legacy of our Soviet past, treating it without hatred and trying to actually understand why these particular cultural monuments had been created and how the era had been expressed through them. We knew that without the past, there was no future or present. This was a very dramatic time of fracture, shifts of perception, the joy of loss and the fear of the future. The End of an Epoch exhibitions ran alongside our actions. They created an environment where new conceptual ideas, actions, happenings and performances were born.[309]

Valera and Natasha's above words introduce the program of exhibitions with which the artists continued their exploration of the post-communist experience as a transitional period. Here, I want to provide one of the exhibits of the exhibition at All-Russian State Library for Foreign Literature in 1990 which staged precisely this post-communist transition. I am referring to the exhibit *Kissing or Quarrelling* which consisted in "a small cabinet containing four Lenin busts, […] surrounded by greeting cards and covered by a glass dome display case for rare books." The artists stated that time in the early 1990s "was a transitional, uncertain time, so two of our Lenins were kissing on a brick of history, while the other two had fallen out and were turned away from each other."[310] Valera and Natasha wanted to represent the conflicting attitude towards the soviet past shared among the post-communists at the turn of the twentieth century.

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[309] Ibi, p. 108.
[310] Ibi, p. 112.

19. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Kissing or Quarrelling*, 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

As essential as it was direct, this exhibit represented the objectified reflection of "a time of enormous internal contradictions, when many historical interpretations denounced Lenin while others celebrated him."[311] As objects of the *byt,* the small busts of Lenin displayed in such a manner could be interpreted with a reference to Boris Arvatov's theory on the *Socialist Objects*.[312] Even though Cherkashins' objects cannot be intended as fully technological as that of Arvatov's consideration which, in turn, had as its object the utilitarian production of Constructivist avant-gardes of the 1920s, still I believe Arvatov's claims could be transposed to Cherkashins' *Kissing or Quarrelling* because:

> [a]lthough politically charged, Lenin memorabilia is nonetheless comprised of objects from standard daily life that were easy to find in Soviet homes and thus recall not only politically history, but also a bygone dimension of domesticity that inevitably arouses feelings of nostalgia in the viewer.[313]

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[311] Ibid.

[312] See B. Arvatov, *Byt i kul'tura veshchi*, in *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (1925), pp. 75-82. For the English translation of Arvatov's essay see C. Kiaer, *Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)*, in "October", vol. 81, 1997, pp. 119 128, https://doi.org/10.2307/779022 [last access on 02/06/2023]

[313] I. Marchesini, *The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature*, cit., p. 159.

The dimension of domesticity evoked by these objects makes the viewer self-reflecting upon his past and present condition. For Arvatov, these objects, as socialist objects, could potentially "[…] produce new relation for consumption, new experience of everyday life, and new human subjects of modernity."[314]

> For Arvatov […] the everyday is an arena of human self-realization in modernity that must be mobilized for the formation of a (technological) socialist culture, not imagined as a site for resistance to it. He noted approvingly that the newly organized *byt* of the technical intelligentsia is engendering a newly evolved psyche[315].

Christina Kiaer, translating Arvatov, defined this evolved psyche as a "psycho-physiological individual"[316]. Later, drawing on the enormous collection of writings which make up Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* and citing Susan Buck-Morss's study on the latter, Kiaer wrote that

> "the ur-utopian themes are to be rediscovered not merely symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation, but actually, in matter's most modern configurations...the paradox is that precisely by giving up nostalgic mimicking of the past and paying strict attention to the new nature, the ur-images are reanimated."[317]

Lenin's busts of *Kissing or Quarrelling*, as objects of the byt, could be included in Arvatov's arena of human self-realization in modernity. In short, if I may shift for a moment Arvatov's emphasis on the matter and on the technological nature of these objects and, instead, bring it on the symbolically meaning of these objects, by exploring the latter as ur-utopian themes and potentially re-organizing them, the engendering of the newly psycho-physiological individual, the latter for us being first and foremost a newly psychological individual, would be finally possible. A personification for the latter would be the post-communist subject as one who has acquired full conscience of his condition and is finally able to act accordingly. Let me stress that even if for Arvatov this re-organization must necessarily pass through the matter and technological nature of these objects – thus through their production – this does not detract from the fact that a similar re-organizational approach towards any object of the *byt* can nevertheless potentially lead to a renewed consciousness of the

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[314] C. Kiaer, *Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects*, in "October", vol. 81, 1997, pp. 105-118, here p. 105, https://doi.org/10.2307/779021 [last access on 02/06/2023]
[315] Ibi, p. 114.
[316] B. Arvatov in ibid.
[317] S. Buck-Morss in ibid.

same objects and, hopefully, to the renewed individual. In this sense, I am departing from historical materialism, which is typical of Marxism and Walter Benjamin's thinking, without necessarily denying it. Finally, Susan Buck-Morss's arguing for the abandoning of the practice of nostalgic mimicking of the past and, instead, focusing on its renewed signification through the rediscovered ur-utopian themes, would eventually give the ur-images a new sense in the present, hence help in the understanding of the latter. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin's practice in *The End of an Epoch* does not consist in a nostalgic mimicking of the past, but rather in using nostalgia as the means through which the artists makes sense of their communist past, is the artists' going up the river upstream and try to understand the journey and possible re-significations of it. This particular form of nostalgia is enacted to explore the communist utopia: it is, as it will be shown in the next paragraph through Svetlana Boym, a "Prospective Nostalgia"[318].

3.5 An Off-Modern Interpretation of the work *The End of an Epoch*

As made evident in the premises for a critical-artistic discourse, I start this last paragraph with the will to present a theoretical perspective which seems to partially frame *The End of an Epoch* program (1990-1993), together with our discourse on modernity made so far. The theoretical framework I am referring to is Svetlana Boym's Off-Modern. What follows is an attempt to show that Valera and Natasha's work in *The End of an Epoch* program could be considered as the artists involuntarily and indirectly assuming an off-modern perspective, simply because they questions – by means of nostalgia and estrangement – their Soviet past, without coming to hasty conclusions due to common imperatives (modernities on duty) of time. The off-modern perspective is reflected in Valera and Natasha's words when they witnessed to what extent images of the Soviet culture reacted because they were not abandoned by their compatriots to the depths of history[319], and in their words in the first quote of this paragraph. In this sense, Cherkashins' *The End of an Epoch* cycle can be understood as an off-modern artistic research avant la lettre, which "[…] avoid[s]

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[318] S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, in "International Texts in Critical Media Studies", Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, Epub, Jun 15, 2017, p. 39.
[319] See note 297.

exploitation and commodification of the Soviet past" while "advocating quite the opposite – a critical nostalgia, where work of memory becomes a tool for exposing excesses of both the past and present indiscriminately."[320]

Boym, a Curt Hugo Reisinger Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature at Harvard University, constructed the Off-Modern as a "[…] culmination of lines of inquiry that she developed throughout her career: questions of exile and diasporic nostalgia, productive estrangement amid landscapes of urban ruins, the theory of the avant-garde and the arts of everyday life."[321] As one can see, these lines of enquiry has been addressed – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – during my historical and critical discourse on Valera and Natasha's work, representing a sort of permeating subtext of the latter. Svetlana Boym "develops the concept of the off-modern through analysis of decentred artists […] of the modern period, in dialogue with contemporary theorists […]."[322] The aim of this paragraph is to show how some features of the off-modern could be considered for deepening the understanding the work *The End of an Epoch.* In the manifesto of the off-modern Boym gives several definitions of it, each underlining a different feature of such perspective. Not being able here to consider all of them, here it is sufficient to say that the "'Off-modern' is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history […]."[323] Moreover, "[t]he 'off' in 'off-modern' designates both the belonging to the critical project of modernity and its edgy excess."[324] If we recollect Jameson's discourse in the second paragraph of the present chapter, Svetlana's definitions sets themselves as the missing piece of a gear within the discourse of modernity as a narrative category. Or rather, it would turn out to be the piece that sets in motion the narrative character. In short, off-modern, viewed in such a light and specifically referring to the post-communist condition, could be viewed as the historical going up upstream, in order to find alternative

[320] Y. Fiks, *Otvetstvennost' postcovetskovo khudozhnika* [*Responsibilities of the Post-Soviet Artist*], in "Moscow Art Magazine", issue 26, no. 65-65, 2007, https://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/26/article/434 [last access on 06/06/2023] [izbegat' vsyakoy ekspluatatsii i kommodifikatsii sovetskoy istorii] while [vystupayu kak raz za obratnoye – za kriticheskuyu nostal'giyu, gde rabota pamyati stanovitsya instrumentom dlya kritiki ekstsessov kak nastoyashchego, tak i proshlogo]
[321] D. Damrosch, *Preface*, in S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, cit., p. xi.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Ibi, p. 3.
[324] Ibid.

narrations. The alternative narration being under discussion in the present study is that of the post-communist subject explored in *The End of an Epoch*. In this regard Christina Kiaer's wish to present a further understanding of Russian constructivism in light of Arvatov's theory on *Socialist Objects*, could be here recovered but slightly rearranged to provide a constructivist's perspective for the post-communist subject. Her hope with her essay was to

> highlight [Russian constructivism's] interest in the formation of the subject of everyday life and consumption; to demonstrate that it imagined a future socialist version of modernity that would develop in dialogue with Western modernity, including commodity culture [...].[325]

By partially drawing on these words and assuming an off-modern perspective, *The End of an Epoch* work helped in constructing the post-communist subject as one fully aware of his/her modernity and Western modernity. Arvatov's emphasis on the object's matter and technology is, in *The End of an Epoch*, revived and readapted to the post-communist condition, shifting it to the objects understood as ruins of the past. Now, *The End of an Epoch* performances – both those discussed here and others not considered – could be seen as action having as research and transformation object ruins of the past. Memorabilia of Moscow Metro Station, having argued the latter to be an imposing *Kommunalka*, after the collapse of the Soviet Union become ruins of the past which Valera and Natasha appropriated and tried to make them undergo a new process of signification.

> The Soviet Union paid much attention to the interior of the Moscow metro. There are many reasons and explanations for this, but the fact remains: one of the key monuments of this passing epoch now sits underground, bearing messages encrypted into this labour of socialist architects, sculptors and artists of that time. When we were working with the Soviet culture, we noticed the importance of this monument.[326]

The above introductory statement of the program *The End of an Epoch* together with Boym's words about what she called "Ruinophilia" is explanatory of the object artistically appropriated by the Cherkashins:

[325] C. Kiaer, *Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects*, cit., p. 118.
[326] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 78.

> Ruin literally means "collapse," but actually, ruins are more about remainders and reminders. A tour of ruins leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal adverbs — "no longer" and "not yet," "nevertheless" and "albeit" — that play tricks with causality. Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time.[327]

Boym's provides us with a further understanding of *The End of an Epoch*: as an exploration tour of ruins which - as the latter being strictly linked to the history and culture of country - questions everything related to that culture and history to which they refer. What the final part of Boym's excerpt refer to, namely the ruins' tantalization with utopian dreams is, in *The End of an Epoch,* inhibited by the very experience of the post-communist subject who, coming from his journey into the future, is well aware of and fully equipped to deal with this threat. Ruins were questioned and explored but, as argued before, without falling back into the trap of nostalgia for utopia, but rather triggering a kind of critical nostalgia "as a form of reconciliation"[328] which does not drag the individual in the same limbo from which he is trying to escape. If one may naturally be led to think that nostalgia carries with itself a certain dangerous pathos, he or she must also remember that

> sentimentality does not necessarily imply desire for the restoration of the past ideal, nor does nostalgia automatically entails diffidence towards the present. [*The End of an Epoch*'s] works cause audiences to feel not restorative nostalgia, but a vaguer sense of longing connected to issue of identity, stimulating two interrelated questions: 'who were we (back in the USSR)?' and 'who are we today?'[329]

This is the form of reconciliation Irina Marchesini is speaking of regarding a particular type of nostalgia enacted by works of some former Soviet and Post-Soviet artists among which I am trying to also include Valera and Natasha's work in *The End of an Epoch*. Also, it may be useful to read the last questions of Marchesini's excerpt with the seemingly pervasive question forwarded by Victor Tupitsyn which here regains again relevance: "What has to be done?"[330] In such a context and mindful of this

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[327] S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, cit., p.43.
[328] I. Marchesini, *The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature*, cit., p. 161.
[329] Ibi, pp. 162-163.
[330] See note 235, chapter 2.

particular form of nostalgia which at this point can be defined as critical, reconciling and prospective or forward-looking, *The End of an Epoch* work,

> […] rather than offering sedatives to numb trauma 'patients' [they go] to the art of the problem, both literally and figuratively. [They stimulate] in the post-Soviet viewer conflicting and contradictory sentiments towards the experienced trauma and towards the viewer's own 'sutured belief' in a reality that, however crude, nonetheless constituted the cradle of national identity.[331]

The post-Soviet viewer's conflicting and contradictory sentiments are perhaps evident in the reactions of the participants in *The End of an Epoch*'s performances which were at times aggressive, at times enthusiastic. It appears, hence, that the off-modern's features are evident in the artists' artistic perspective which emphasizes the process, the act of exploration itself aware of the threats that such explorations could make you encounter. It is in the words "lucid understanding of the traumas of their time" that such experience lies:

> With the help of off - modern spyglasses [the works of *The End of an Epoch*] detect pluralities within cultures, traditions of dissent, and "the dignity of the defeated" in history. These fellow travellers were neither victors nor victims, and they often developed a lucid understanding of the traumas of their time, even if their insights and visionary dreams didn't make it into History with a capital "H."[332]

Consequently, given that "the off-modern perspective allows us to frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins—not to discard or demolish them, but rather to confront them and incorporate them into our own fleeting present"[333], solicitations coming from *The End of an Epoch* will hopefully give the post-communist form his content, his History. In the same way, the drawn silhouettes called *True Profiles* of the performance *Drawing Profile Portraits of Our Compatriots* (1993) held in an exhibition for a television broadcasting at Ostankino TV Centre in Moscow, consisting of the profile portraits of the participants in the performances made by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin using the newspaper *Pravda*, hopefully will no longer have just a profile, namely a form, but also and above all a content, the actual image of each post-communist individual.

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[331] I. Marchesini, *The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature*, cit., pp. 161-162.
[332] S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, cit., p. 39-40.
[333] Ibi. p. 45.

20. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The Russian national method of drawing head portraits. Valentin Mishaktin*, 19 April 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

21. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Drawing profile portraits of our compatriots*, 19 April 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

The artists stated: "We got the idea from the Soviet classics. Previously, the only profiles we saw on books and posters were those of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. But now that the country was a democracy, everyone was entitled to their own profile portrait."[334] These works and the cycle *The End of an Epoch* help to metaphorically substitute, though not by means of a damnatio memoriae, the image of Stalin with the image of the post-communist subject in Komar and Melamid's artwork *The Origins of Socialist Realism* (1982-1983). This title could now be changed in The Origins of Post-Communism or Post-Socialism; the name of the project Komar and Melamid's artwork is part of, *Nostalgia for Socialist Realism* (1981-1983), could in turn be changed in Prospective Nostalgia for Post-Communism.

That of nostalgia is a concept which has been summoned a lot in the literature about Soviet and Post-Soviet studies. Here my intent is to deliver Boym's version of the term because it finalises my discourse made so far and it proves to be coherent with Cherkashins' practice in their work *The End of an Epoch*. As stated earlier we could define nostalgia enacted by Valera and Natasha in *The End of an Epoch* as progressive.

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[334] V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 121.

In Boym's words this particular form of nostalgia "recovers unforeseen past and future anteriors that can still transform our present."[335] As Valera and Natasha in *The End of an Epoch*, "[p]rospective nostalgics don't merely recover the geological layers of impersonal pasts, but continue to engage in transcultural and transhistorical dialogues with our distant imaginary friends."[336] The whole cycle of *The End of an Epoch* could be intended as a transcultural and transhistorical dialogue between the post-communist subject and the communist one. As evident in the performance "*Underground Wedding*" (1993), from the latter's preparations to its final banquet, this trans-epoch dialogue is established by means of estrangement and nostalgia. However, the kind of nostalgia enacted by such performances does non consist, as cited by Kiaer, in a merely nostalgic mimicking of the past, but rather it is a nostalgia which projects the individual towards the future by means of an introjection of the past. On the latter aspect, Boym's understanding of the concepts "Tact and Touch"[337] further characterizes the nature of actions performed by Valera and Natasha. In a chapter of the manifesto, she tries to answer the questions: "How can we touch and open up the violent histories of the past?", "Why is there a disjuncture between the witnesses and the theorists of violence?". A little further, she states that "[t]hose who haven't experienced violence first hand often long for vicarious wounds and radical gestures, while those who have come into a direct contact with violence seek a fragile restorative touch, preservation of pentimenti and affects."[338] In *The End of an Epoch* Valera and Natasha precisely sought, although sometimes more intensely and explicit – as in the case of the performance *The Tactile Principle as the Key Artistic Principle of Art for the People* (1990) or *Underground Subbotnik* (1992) – and some others less intensely and more implicit – as for *Underground Wedding* (1993) – a fragile restorative touch. In Boym's words,

[335] S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, cit., p. 39.
[336] Ibi, p. 40.
[337] Ibi, p.13.
[338] Ibi, p. 71.

in the case of artists from traditions other than Western Europe or the United States, where violence isn't an armchair historical fantasy, tactfulness is less about abstinence than about a conscious reticence, less about interdiction than about deliberate choice to touch without tampering, to play on border zones without crossing them, to explore the shades of ambivalence, which can be more scandalous than a clear transgression. Tact points to the untouchable but also begs us not to forget the effect of touch, not to rush into transcendence or transgression.[339]

The conscious reticence Boym speaks of is a kind of *aposiopesis* with which Valera and Natasha consciously suspend time and history and explore this very suspension. They offered to the viewer and participant of *The End of an Epoch* the opportunity to embrace the temporal, cultural and historical suspension in order to assess their own identity. The act of playing on border zones without crossing them and exploring the shades of ambivalence is perhaps more evident in *Underground Wedding*'s stroll around the city of Moscow made by Irina and Vasily (Valera). Ultimately, as pointed out by Boym, by touching the untouchable, Valera and Natasha ensure that the past is not forgotten through a continuous and heterogeneous questioning of it according to their personal artistic style which, however, cannot and must not be totally reduced in the essence of the off-modern. The latter is a perspective which the artists assumed and conjugated according to their own unique artistic style, for which Boym's conceptual theory remains only a small though important part of a continuous and demanding theoretical understanding.

Finally, Vitaly Patsyukov, art historian and art critic, speaking of *The End of an Epoch* program, enriches and encloses my discourse. He stated that Cherkashins' art is "a memorial to a memorial."[340] The concept of memory is central in *The End of an Epoch* for what the artists essentially tried to do was to remind us not to forget. On the wave of a profound renewal in which the categorical imperative was to get rid of everything in order to rebuild from scratch, Valera and Natasha challenged Viktor Erofeev's idea for which Russian thought consists of traces in the sand. And *The End of an Epoch* challenged Erofeev's idea through the museification of the historical ruins of Soviet past.

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[339] Ibi, p. 72-73.
[340] V. Patsykov, in V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 96.

> In the Metropolitan Museum, the new and the old, growing at an equal rate, appear to become one, creating a museum-like sense of peace, approaching the zero point of time, the realm of the eternal present […], presenting eschatology not as the cessation of history, but as the highest degree of historicity; like the passage of history at a speed close to the speed of light.[341]

Valera and Natasha's eschatology is not utopian. Their eschatology is headed towards their yet to be non-utopian past only to be truly able to go towards the future. Bearing in mind Jameson and Boym, the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum

> appears to us as […] the modernity of all times, as history unfolding itself, and as a chronotope, where a revolutionary peasant […] can meet and create a union of love with an ordinary woman from our time, one radiating youth and brimming with the pathos of the future […].[342]

The End of an Epoch is a testament that speaks of hope for a future which has not forgotten who has tried in every way to hinder that very same future. For only in this way the latter can truly begin.

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[341] Ibid.
[342] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

My research aimed to shed light on the former peripheral history of Valera and Natasha Cherkashin. By analysing their practice, I sought to examine the phenomenon of Self-Historicization through which Valera and Natasha "[…] search[ed] for their own historical/interpretive context."[343]

Having argued that the historical events following the birth of the Soviet Union – causing a sharp and dualistic opposition consisting of official art on one side and unofficial art on the other – were the original causes eventually creating a fertile ground for the phenomenon of Self-Historicization to spur, drawing on Valera first and on the artist couple's work with Natasha later, I challenged the general idea which deems all art from former Eastern European countries as politically engaged whether official or unofficial it might be[344]. That is why, if it is true that Self-Historicization did arise from the general conditions outlined in the first chapter, still it should not be considered exclusively as politically reactionary. Rather, Valera and Natasha's Self-Historicization was first a reaction to an external solicitation[345], then a mature awareness of their own art with the latter's consequent self-institutionalization, lastly it took place as the artists' questioning their historical condition as post-communist subject. In none of these three junctures, just as it was confirmed by the interview with the artists, there is trace of a political reaction, at least not directly and not voluntarily. As evidence for the latter, when I asked them about their involvement in the Moscow art movement of APTART in the 1980s after Valera's move to Moscow in 1980, the artists stated that they were not even aware of such term. Although they participated to apartment exhibitions more than once, they revealed that they did not exhibit there themselves but sometimes did their own exhibitions and poetry readings at their home.[346] Broadly translated my findings indicate that the history of Valera and Natasha

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[343] Z. Badovinac, *Self-Historicization Artist Archives in Eastern Europe*, in *What Will Be Already Exists, Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond,* cit., p. 84.

[344] If it may seem strange to say that even official artists may not be truly politically involved, Andrei Erofeev's words clears any doubts in this sense: "Within the framework of one's domestic, private existence, an individual was freed from playing the hierarchical and ideological role assigned to him or her in the public 'performance' staged by the authorities. […] the 1960s were noted for 'double-thinking' […]." In A. Erofeev, *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*, cit., p. 22-24.

[345] On such account see M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit.

[346] See Appendix, Written Interview, Question no. 3. It is useful here to deliver Jameson's reasoning on the ambiguity of the process which sees secondary narratives - as that of APTART – trying to put an

Cherkashin is essentially a history of freedom and innovation whatever one may say. It is a history of "reaction [instead of revolution] as "an [art] peripheral practice". The latter, as stated by Bertelé, "should be understood as neither a political statement, a conservative act or restoration, nor as a subversive counteraction, but as an essentially physical response to an outer stimulus [...]."[347] My study corroborated Bertelé's statement which remains valid – though to different extent – even for the more mature practice of the Cherkashins. Similar to Shklovsky's theory on the Knight's move, Valera and Natasha's move is "[o]blique, diagonal, and zigzag", revealing "the play of human freedom vis-à-vis political teleologies and ideologies that follows the march of revolutionary progress, development, or the invisible hand of the market."[348] As for the latter my study has highlighted how Valera and Natasha have not followed the rules of the art market either. This was partly due to the absence of a real and well-structured art market in Soviet Union and after, but above all to the artists' indifference towards the economic sphere of their work. This aspect further substantiates the thesis for which Valera and Natasha felt free within their space of activity.

The innovation aspect, instead, is detectable in Valera's early photographic activity, a part of which has been discussed in the first chapter. In the words of the art historian Mikhail Sidlin Valera "was not a part of the amateur photographers' movement. [... his] different photography is subjective because above all it tells the story of the author."[349] That is Valera's early Self-Historicization which I presented by discussing performances *Narcissus* (1965), *Bodybuilding in the USSR* (1963) as well as *I am a Soviet Athlete* (1962). Moreover, the innovative aspect, which grounded on the playful feature of Valera's practice, is linked with that previously mentioned of freedom because "for him this game was the only way to escape reality, the only possible form of freedom."[350]

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end on grand narratives – as that official culture. "[...] the very refusal and repudiation of narratives calls up a kind of narrative return of the repressed and tends in spite of itself to justify its anti-narrative position by way of yet another narrative the argument has every interest in decently concealing." In Jameson*, A Singular Modernity Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, cit., pp. 5-6.
[347] M. Bertelé, *Reaction as an Art Practice: The Art and Life of Valera Cherkashin in the Sixties*, cit. pp. 217-218.
[348] S. Boym, *The Off-Modern*, cit., p. 4.
[349] M. Sidlin, *Playing Photographers*, in V. Cherkashin, N. Cherkashina, *Night with a Pioneer Leader Actions, Happenings, Art Performances and Ideas 1962-2015*, cit., p. 14.
[350] Ibid.

Ultimately, throughout the second and third chapter, the key word of my analysis continued to be *self-appropriation*. With the formation of their Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum and the cycle *The End of an Epoch* (1990-1993), I argued that the artists were working within a transitional period in which they self-appropriated Moscow Metro station to self-institutionalize themselves. By acting upon such ideological space, the artists were claiming their place at both an institutional and macro-historical level as post-communist subjects. "The transitional stage was the period when artists focused on monuments. In the art of the early 90s we find many heroic-comic attempts on the part of artists to erect themselves on the sites of absent or discredited monuments."[351] Cherkashins' *The End of an Epoch* consisted in self-appropriating one of such discredited monuments, namely Moscow Metro Station, to precisely erect themselves on a former place of power which in the 1990s was reclaimed by the artists in the name of their institutionalization. "All [*The End of an Epoch*'s] actions involved the abandoned 'apex' of a space understood hierarchically, as a pyramid of power."[352] Such power was that which Valera and Natasha appropriated to complete their institutionalization.

At present, my study joins the already broader one on the phenomenon of Self-Historicization, however bringing to the attention a story that has not been considered properly for too long. A story which speaks of freedom starting from a context that never missed an opportunity to limit and repress such freedom. It is also a story of self-commitment for the love of expression and artistic research in a historiographical and artistic field – that which deals with former Eastern European art – that too often came with misconceptions and overgeneralizations. Ultimately a story which practically proves that "[w]hen an artist works sincerely, deeply and does not think about his place on the art scene and, if he has talent, he organically takes a place on the art scene on merit."[353]

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[351] E. Degot, E. Sorokina, *The Uninhabited Spaces of Democracies*, in *Impossible Spaces*, in "chtodelat", no. 12, 2006. https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-62/the-uninhabited-spaces-of-democracy/ [last access on 10/06/2023]

[352] Ibid.

[353] Appendix, Written Interview, Question no. 1.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *I Am a Soviet Athlete,* 1962, Scan of the negative

2. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Bodybuilding in The USSR,* 1963, Scan of the negative

3. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Narcissus,* 1965, Scan of the negative

4. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Gladiator,* 1966, Scan of the negative

5. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: Doubts,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credit to the artists

5a. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: The Week of Hair-Cutting,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credit to the artists

5b. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Self-portrait*, 1972, credits to the artists

5c. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The End of a Hippie: The Joy of Accomplishment,* 1972, Scan of the negative, credit to the artists

6. Ion Grigorescu, *Boxing,* 1977, 8mm film transferred to 16mm film (black & white, silent)

7. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Jaw. Acting in A Hospital,* 1966, Scan of the negative

8. Opening of the Presentation of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum exhibition in Municipal Gallery A3, Moscow, 1992, Photograph, credits to the artists

9. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Subbotnik. Caring for Our Privatized Statues*. 22 February 1992, Photograph, credit to the artists

10. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Privatization of Sculptures: Lyudmila Bredikhina with a privatized student*, 28 November 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

11. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Privatization of Sculptures: Natasha Kolodzey with a privatized border gard*, 28 November 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

12. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Marina Izyumskaja searches for the solution*, December 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

13. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, Klim notes down the results of the experiment, December 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

15. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The Long-Awaited Meeting*, 1993, Gelatine silver print with drawing and watercolour, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of David C. and Sarajean Ruttemberg

16. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin*, Underground Wedding: Marriage Ceremony at The Metro Station*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

17. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Wedding: Marriage Ceremony at The Metro Station*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

18.Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Underground Wedding: Afterword*, 31 January 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

19. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Kissing or Quarrelling*, 1990, Photograph, credits to the artists

20.Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *The Russian national method of drawing of drawing head portraits. Valentin Mishaktin*, 19 April 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

21. Valera and Natasha Cherkashin, *Drawing profile portraits of our compatriots*, 19 April 1993, Photograph, credits to the artists

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APPENDIX

1. Video Call Interview transcription: 10 February 2023

- **According to your early phase of your career, starting from the 1980s, you performed as curators and archivists: do you perceive yourselves as curators and archivists or is that something that happened to you for different reasons?**

   In the 1980s we had to be our own curators because at that time in Russia there was not much experience. We did not have commercial galleries at all, we have some state galleries, with that meaning exhibition spaces rather than galleries which can sell your artworks, and we have very few art collectors. Mostly artists gave their works as gifts or sometimes they sold artworks at a very low price. Sometimes foreigners, that is to say diplomats, they bought unofficial artworks and that was funny because the size of the artworks they bought was that of a suitcase, not bigger. It was called Suitcase Art. We sold some of our smaller works in this way, but at that time we mostly did big installations, and we did not sell them. In general our idea was not to sell but to create and to exhibit. However, we sold quite few works of ours.

- **Can we say, therefore, that selling was not the primary thing for you?**

   Yes, exactly.

- **During my research I met this very interesting notion of the Cherkashin Conceptual Metropolitan Museum. Can you tell me about it?**

   We announced our Conceptual Museum through a big exhibition in 1992. There was even a TV program at that time which reported about this exhibition. At that period, with perestroika, we were experiencing the end of Soviet life and the beginning of something unknown. During that time many organisations named themselves institutions: for example some universities named themselves academies, there were people who proclaimed themselves presidents of companies even if they were only in two. It was a strange time. So we wondered: "why not creating something of ours also?" "Why don't we create a Conceptual Museum?" So, we named this museum after Moscow

Metro Subway because we worked a lot with subways. Also, we met for the first time in the subway.

- **I read on your books about the idea "How to get to museums around the world" in 1993. You wrote about leaving your signed works in museums by finding small places in which they could have fitted but could have not pulled out, in order for you to say that some of your artworks are in this or that museum.**

We did not really do this because many museums in the US really acquired our artworks. That was just a conceptual idea. Sometimes ideas come and we think that ideas themselves can already be considered pieces of art, not matter if we actually realize them eventually, for us just the ideas are valuable…

- **So, it is just about the concept.**

Yes, that is why we set up a Conceptual Museum. If one had written about an idea, in a way, this idea is realized anyway. It exists on paper at least; the text is self-sufficient.

- **One of your actions consisted in walking with figures made of newspaper in San Francisco Modern Museum together with some students from San Francisco State University. In trying to convince those students who, being invited to do a performance, were afraid to be arrested, Valera said: "Museum is for artists, not the other way round!". How do you interpret the role of the museum and its authority to dictate what is art and what is not?**

In any case, any museum has an influential structure and usually the museum is the last organisation which recognizes an artist. If all major museums would acquire artworks of an artist, then he or she can do whatever he or she wishes. There is a funny story with a San Francisco art gallerist. We showed him some our works and the latter said: "I like your artworks, but in the US first artists should find an agent, then a gallery, then work for a long time with this gallery and finally they can sell their artworks to a museum. You are strange Russian artists because you started from the museum. Now I don't know what to do with you." Eventually he did not work with us.

- **So, these are the normal stages that an artist must go through to achieve notoriety.**

  Normally yes, but we are not normal (laughs). We do not drink, we do not smoke, we are inspired by our life…

- **Ideas come from anywhere, so there is no need to chase after them in any way…**

  (Valera speaking) I was born already drunk (laughs). When we are with people who drink we feel as them and we behave accordingly. Life is like a theatre, like a play, if you are surrounded by drunk people, you should act as a drunk person as well. But if you are a good actor you don't need to drink.

- **Regarding the concept of archive, by studying the phenomenon of self-historicization I realized that archives play a crucial role in historicizing artists. How do you conceive the concept of archive?**

  In general, not the artist himself but maybe some organisations should make his archive. Only few artists can do that on their own, but artists can forget and loose things, most of them do not bother themselves with this stuff, they just like to create. For many years we waited and expected somebody to get interested in what we have done. But then we understood that in Russia we don't have serious organisations, we didn't have this tradition. Very often, when an artist died, even his family could throw away all his materials as if it was garbage. Very few artists had people who worked on their archives. Sometimes they did act as their own archivists, sometimes they didn't. Eventually we understood that if it was not for us, nobody would have done it for us.

- **So it ended up being a necessity?**

  Yes, but at the same time we realized that it was an interesting necessity for us, even from an organizational point of view. When we finished our first book, we showed it to Aleksandra Shatskikh, art historian and one of the most important researchers of Malevich. When she saw our big book and touched it, she said: "thank you, with this book you did our work and with it, it can be done lots of PhD thesis". We have recently published the fifth volume, but overall we planned ten of them.

In order to have the most comprehensive answers to further questions, as requested by the artists, the following answers were provided via email at a later stage.

2. Written Interview: 4 March 2023

1. Since the main topic of my dissertation focuses on the concept of self-historization, my first question is related to the idea of the artists as the ones who try to find their own place within the art scene of a specific time and place. Do you relate to this concept?

We constantly feel what is happening around us and what is important at the moment, we are looking for a form of expression in our art in order to fix it and convey it to people. When an artist works sincerely, deeply and does not think about his place on the art scene and, if he has talent, he organically takes a place on the art scene on merit.

2. In 1981 Mr. Valera you were in Moscow and met various artists. In your book you tell the time in which you enter Ilya Kabakov's studio and the two of you happened to be approached by three policemen who asked for your passports. After proving that you were members of the Union of Artists, they went away. With respect to those years, can I ask you how would you define art making in those years?

Details about this case are in the book, you remember it not very correct, I have not been a member of the Union of Artists at that time and for a long time after. I showed them my passport) At the beginning of the 80s, I already had the experience of independent work in art since 1962. Since the late 70s, I have been looking for opportunities to communicate with artists beyond Kharkov. I traveled to Leningrad, to meet artists working in the tradition of the Russian avant-garde. There I found the Sterligov Group, which was led by Vladimir Sterligov, a student of Malevich and Tatiana Glebova, a student of Pavel Filonov. And since 1980 I moved to Moscow, and already there I found artists who were inscribed in the art of the world, at least those who knew what was happening in the world: Ilya Kabakov, Francisco Infante, Vladimir Nemukhin, Mikhail Shvartsman and others. Before the beginning of perestroika, I was

engaged in my internal process of understanding and mastering contemporary art forms at that time. I have experienced my own way from the Russian avant-garde to the modern moment, studied, mastered different styles and tried to develop them. I chose the path of individual study and officially did not have a document on art education, which gave me a fairly free form of expression, but created serious difficulties for admission to the Union of Artists of the USSR. I have not been accepted for 10 years, since 1980-1990.

3. Following the previous question, in the 1980s exhibitions of unofficial art were held in apartments of artists or collectors, making up the so-called phenomenon of APTART. Consisting of self-organized and secret exhibitions did you ever exhibit your smaller works in such a manner during those years or attend some similar events?

At that time, I mostly tried to do my personal exhibitions in exhibition halls, and since 1982 I have been able to do it. Before that, I actually had no exhibitions, and there was no desire to do them either. I thought it was necessary to prepare well and then go out to the audience. At that time, I was mastering drawing and painting, in its almost traditional sense, I was drawn to a professional approach to art. Even the term Aptart was not known to me until today. Although we have been to apartment exhibitions more than once, we have not exhibited there ourselves. Though sometimes we did our own exhibitions and poetry readings at our home. A few people came to us, but now, we can say that the chosen ones. Actually, those with whom we closely communicated at that time: the artists Kabakov, Infante, Gorokhovsky Eduard, Nemukhin, Yankilevsky ... the poets Prigov, Nekrasov, Kholin, Shcherbina… We arranged a personal show and talked about the works, in fact, these were our first performances, which later resulted in our meetings at many universities, such as Harvard, Columbia, Maryland, and so on.

4. Mr. Cherkashin in one of your publications you stated that in your early career, you never felt cut off from the artistic scene of that times. How would describe the access and exchange of information during your early work?

During the USSR, it was possible to get information about what was happening in the world, with little effort, which many artists of that time used. I didn't try to learn much. I felt that I had my own program inside me, which I kept to. Sometimes artists did friendly shows of works to each other in their studios, it also helped to learn.**2**

5. "Consciously or unconsciously, everyone wants to be known. This interferes with the creative process. An artist who has achieved this is known only to a certain circle of people. The rest either don't know this person, or don't need to. The need for fame is a vital necessity for a creator. My vital necessity: please consider me a famous artist." Back in the 1982, you distributed tickets with this inscription and later, Mr. Cherkashin, you stated that you grew bored of becoming a famous artist. Were you saying here that there is a kind of unsolvable conflict between being recognized as artists and being truthful to one's own art?

Recognition comes to an artist with time, sometimes with delay, but this is how life works, so I focused more on my work. Perhaps this performance with the card I spread around, helped me to understand this and after that I did not bother much with the desire to become a famous artist. It helped me to save energy for my work and not to waste it on trifles, such as external fame or envy.

6. Your artworks often dealt with the idea of past and future, such as the exhibitions of *The End of an Epoch* program. What are your interpretations of history and epochs in the broadest sense?

All this can be traced in our art works with Natasha. Actually, everything started seriously in our art after our meeting in 1982. And as Alexandra Shatskih wrote, one can trace the history judging by our works, now or later.

7. By studying your story, I believe that your resourcefulness played a crucial role in making your art always more visible in the early stage of your career. If you were to say some external key element which supported you and contributed to the process of awareness-raising towards your art at the initial phase, what would that be?

I can't answer that question. The early period of creativity was not noticeable at all, and that was not task then. Natasha and I were creating, not paying attention to whether our work will noticed at the exhibition, or whether it will be sold... These tasks were not important for us. The joy was to create and to express our ideas.

For the first time we showed the early art of the 1960-1970s at exhibitions very late, in 2006. Before that no one knew about it. And even now, not all periods of our work are known to the public, and even to specialists. So much has been done, and is being done, that we decided to collect and organize everything ourselves in several volumes of our encyclopedia.

8. Can we say that your Conceptual Museum had two phases? Started as a physical place, namely Moscow Metro Station, in which in the 1990s took place your performances *Underground Privatisation*, *Underground Subbotnik*, *The People's Love of Art for the People*, *Engagement*, *The Underground Wedding* and *The Underground Beauty Contest, Miss '38*, and subsequently it became your personal institution which represents you and all your artworks?

It's actually a very good question. Valera decided to write a text about it. But in general our museum ever had any specific location. It always was and is virtual. It's a process of our work: happenings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, research and so on. Moscow Metro Station was one of many other locations, of course an important one at that period, but not the only one.