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The archive as device to artistic self-institutionalisation: Vadim Zakharov and the archive of Moscow Conceptualism

The aim of the dissertation project is to study the archive of Moscow Conceptualism owned by the artist Vadim Zakharov, in order to investigate its influence on Zakharov's artistic production and to evaluate its role as device to artistic self-institutionalisation.

Zakharov developed his artistic practice in the frame of Soviet non conformist culture, after joining the circle of Moscow Conceptualists at the end of the 1970's. A few years later he began his private archive, collecting artworks, textual and photographic documents from artists and events organized in this artistic context. As part of the Soviet non-conformist culture, this artistic movement had been characterized by the loss of an institutional interest and the consequent reality of isolation, autarchy and self-handling. With the aim to claim the existence of a movement, whose chances of being recognized in the international art system seemed to be quite low, some artists started to reflect on and put into action strategies of self-institutionalisation as the creation of archives and textual and photographic documentation.

In June 1982 Zakharov participated to the realization of the *MANI* folder with the artist Victor Skersis, and between 1982 and 1983 he accomplished the folder *Po Masterskim* together with the artist Georgy Kizeval'ter, collecting interviews and photographic documentation about the artists, their artworks and their studios in Moscow. After moving to Germany, at the end of the 1980's, he added a video section into the archive. The attitude of archiving was then further strengthened both with the creation of several artworks concerning the theme of archive, among others *Fountain aqua sacra* (1992), *The Flight of Zechariah* (1992), *History of Russian Art from the Avant-garde to the Moscow Conceptual School* (2003-2004), and projects like the publishing house Pastor Zond and the self-produced and self-published magazine *Pastor* (1992-2002), that aimed to be an archive of Moscow conceptualists after their emigration from USSR.

For Zakharov, the archive is a physical place and also a conceptual frame in which he makes thoughts on the state of art and art history, some of them emerge in his texts *Shiva's method* (2003),

The archive as alien (2009) and *Postscript after r.i.p* (2015). In these writings he realizes a literary narrative that expresses the idea of the art world as a quintessential archive, therefore to be part of it the artists have to be selected, that culminates in the concept of “killer archive”. According to his writings, Zakharov has a dual relationship with his archive and it can be positive, when the archive gives him power (as subject of interest in the art system and market), or negative, for the responsibilities and obligation that it causes to the owner (updating, checking and archiving new and old documents) who has less time for his artistic production. This narrative ended in the installation *Postscript after r.i.p* realized at the Garage museum in Moscow, that represents his last archival project.

With this investigation I want to outline the history of this specific archive, also concerning Zakharov's artistic production, and to analyse the theoretical aspects that characterized this relationship. In my opinion, between “archiviophilia and archiviophobia” (S. Spieker), Zakharov actualizes “one of the most accomplished attempt of art autonomy” (B. Groys), being one of the first Russian artist to call into question the limits of art history and historiography in relation to his experience, in advance to the process of rewriting art history that is active in the Russian and in the Eastern Europe art critic, as in the case of the theory of horizontal art history expressed by the art historian Piotr Piotrowski.