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Curatorial Authority and Construction of Public(s):

Moscow Curatorial School 1974-1993

The current research project offers a history of exhibitions in Moscow in the period from 1974 until the early 1990s. It investigates preconditions, emergence and development of curatorial practices and the models developed within specific artistic, social and political conditions of late-Soviet Russia. The project argues for unique characteristics of these practices, which makes it possible to regard them as a single coherent school, which I propose to call the Moscow Curatorial School. The Moscow Curatorial School emerged at the intersection of the private and public realms. It is the product of the creation of a “shadow” Soviet semi-private, semi-public area.

The project straddles late-Soviet social history and art history as well as international curatorial studies. It is primarily concerned with the potential that focus on curating can offer for re-examining late-Soviet art. In the existing, but insufficient, accounts of the curatorial projects of late-Soviet Russia, researchers traditionally see them as developing within the boundaries of the so-called “unofficial” art world, while “official” exhibitions are deemed as over-bureaucratized and controlled, and thus not worth attention. Such split between official and unofficial cultures has been challenged by a number of scholars, who have investigated the diverse and potentially subversive practices within the official Soviet institutions. In the light of this recent scholarship, I argue that curatorial models in Moscow stemmed from both official and unofficial artistic practices, or rather their intersection, and that the boundary dividing those two camps was not rigid and fixed, but rather characterised by numerous crossovers and interconnections.

The project also argues that models developed within the Moscow Curatorial School can offer a new perspective on the issue of curatorial authority and the role of curator in creating and addressing publics. Tracking formation and development of such models enables us to situate the Moscow Curatorial School within a wider international context. Such avenue of enquire offers a new insight into ongoing debate on the relation of art institutions and their audiences.

The methodology of the project is developed from the survey of existing literature in the field and is based on critique of dichotomous understanding of late-Soviet artistic and social life. Already during the Cold War period, alternative narratives of the practices of everyday life in the Soviet Union assigned a significant role to the informal or 'shadow' realm of society, questioning applicability of traditional Western dichotomy of public and private. Since the break up of the Soviet Union, this subject has gathered a lot of attention from a growing number of researchers. I use the opposition of the official and the unofficial art as a way to further problematize this discussion. This split has dominated the histories of art in the Soviet Union as well as exhibition practices for much of the last five decades. However, as I argue such a dichotomous approach cannot be sufficient. Thus, the methodology employs post-structuralist thinking and its critique of binary oppositions and fundamental polarities fixed within society. In my presentation I would like to expand this idea and focus on how taking a curatorial approach can offer a new perspective on late-Soviet history.