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Moscow Kinetic and Op Art: Legacy and New Forms in the Works of The Movement Group

The “global turn” in art history that took place at the end of the 1980s has been defining the discipline since. Contemporary research and exhibition projects call for a more thorough investigation of how local cultures are included in international networks. Important twentieth century movements, such as geometric abstraction, pop, and conceptual art, are represented today from a multinational perspective. However, the methodology applied for researching a particular movement cannot be similar for every region. Cases such as experimental culture of the USSR require new research approaches that deal with socioeconomic and political conditions of the specific regions. This dissertation follows the trend for creating a more advanced map of twentieth century art with a particular focus on the kinetic, op, and cybernetic movements that turned into a global phenomenon in the late 1950s and 60s.

The research subject of the dissertation is the Moscow experimental kinetic group called Dvizhenie or The Movement, which was active between the 1960s and 70s. The group was formed in the period of The Khrushchev Thaw. Young artists started their practice by creating optical illusions and moving mechanized objects. Inspired by N. Gabo and K. Malevich’s avant-garde theories on the autonomy of form, The Movement reinterpreted the legacy of geometric abstraction and constructivism of the 1920s from the more nostalgic, retro-avant-garde position of the 60s. What makes The Movement a unique case is that unlike other experimental artists from the same region and generation, the group managed to continue working even in the first years of Brezhnev’s rule. The group’s prominent activities require research attention because this can contribute to a more full perception of the mechanisms underlying art and state collaborations in the USSR, as well as the understanding of the 1960s trends in culture. The research work on the subject is built around three key objectives. The first is to reconstruct defining points in the history of the group’s development through analyzing archival materials and conducting interviews. The second is to consider the existing global framework of kinetic art style, its origins, ideas, and examples, and then to analyze how The Movement’s practices reflect or differ from these. The third objective is to study the period of the 1960s in the USSR from the perspective of political and socioeconomic reforms and analyze how they influenced cultural development and The Movement’s practices. The methodology applied in the project includes approaches of social art theory, cultural studies, and discourse analysis.

At the same time, The Movement established professional connections not only with the state system, but also with foreign curators and art historians. The group's leader, Lev Nussberg (b.1937) managed to incorporate his works into several international exhibitions, including the New Tendencies 2nd show (1963 in Zagreb) and Documenta IV (1968 in Kassel). Through personal communication with German artist Klaus Groh and Czech art critic Dušan Konečný, The Movement was regularly featured in the foreign press. And it was therefore featured in the wider context of other kinetic collectives, such as the Neo-Concrete Movement (1959–1961) in Brazil, the Zero group (1957–1966) from Dusseldorf, and Le Grav (1960–1968) from Paris.

The materials for the project were gathered from the museum collection at the State Tretyakov Gallery, the Russian Art Archive at the Garage museum (both in Moscow), and the Eastern European Archive at Bremen University. Personal interviews with the group members Lev Nussberg (USA) and Fransisco Infante-Arana (Russia), as well as working experience on the exhibition "Russian Avant-Garde: Pioneers and Direct Descendants," organized by the State Tretyakov Gallery in Qatar Museums in 2018, also provide a unique informational basis for the dissertation.