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Samizdat as a means of survival for unofficial Soviet artists

In the milieu of Soviet writers and dissidents, samizdat stemmed and spread a long time ago. The first underground handwritten magazine, *Phoenix*, is believed to have appeared around 1959, but the real samizdat started in around 1966 and became popular in the late sixties. However, artists traditionally did not have any need for this medium due to the banal reason of the non-verbal nature of their work. Besides, even if we consider the most ironic and sarcastic Sots Art artists' gestures, it would be hard to call their actions samizdat, to say nothing of the process of making regular drawings or prints with an edition of a dozen.

That is why the emergence of actual samizdat in the unofficial artistic environment of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Moscow is, in my opinion, an unexpected and unique phenomenon.

As is well known, the 1970s passed for Soviet intelligentsia under the sign of potential emigration, and indeed resulted in the departure of a significant number of artists, not to mention writers, actors, translators, etc., to the West. Those who lacked the will or conviction remained in Russia (the so-called *zdesidenty*, i.e. ‘those-who-sit-here’, an ironic evolution of the Russian word *dissidenty*, ‘dissidents’), but by the 1980s they found themselves, as it were, behind a closed gate in a deserted courtyard. Many creative people fell into a relentless depression because of the insoluble psychological contradictions (to leave or not to leave? – that was the question…) – they could no longer see any prospects for development of the situation with unofficial art, or, in a broader sense, with free creativity in their own country. The Moscow city committee of graphic artists (the only place with a license for exhibiting the unofficial artists) had already become a banal art salon with predominantly tacky paintings. There was no ideological need for the presence of nonconformists, and the authorities openly stated this. Although those who had emigrated to the West were often in an even worse situation, as so vividly described by Eduard Limonov in his book *It’s Me, Eddie*, the *zdesidenty* began to fear that they would disappear from the face of the Earth and the territory of art without any objective traces left behind them due to the total lack of opportunities to show their work.

This fear, which is barely comprehensible in the 21st century, forced many artists of the post-conceptual circle close ranks in the most literal sense — a close communion of artists of visually different trends, united by their interest in contemporary Western art and philosophy, had been gradually growing since the mid-1970s in Moscow (and also, to a certain extent, in Tallinn and Leningrad). These artists began to document their activities with the help of limited self-published editions, intended primarily for in-house use. In late 1980, as a harbinger, the performance group *Collective Actions* published the first volume of its materials, and the next year the first MANI\(^1\) portfolio appeared. The artists began to write articles and essays for a

\(^{1}\) Moscow Archive of New Art. In Russian the abbreviation is MANI (From this point on, footnotes are the author’s).
narrow circle of like-minded people, collect other artists’ work and, when possible, send those collections and materials to the West, where, as the artists saw it from Moscow, there were at least some opportunities for publication or public exposure. In this manner, the artists tried to save their work for the future. All these processes ran parallel to one another, while the collection of creative materials in makeshift archives was a logical consequence of the hopeless accumulation of such materials in studios and desks.

The MANI portfolios comprised envelopes with photographic reproductions of paintings, objects and drawings, photo documentation and descriptive texts of various actions and performances, theoretical texts by the artists, critical essays, translated materials, collections of poems, transcripts of conversations and discussions, etc. I remember going to the first organizational meeting of the artists at the very end of 1980, when the formal editorial board of the future archives—with Boris Groys as accountable for criticism, Lev Rubinstein for poetry, and Nikita Alekseev for visual arts—was elected. None of these people would later participate in the archival work. Various Moscow poets and artists took turns collecting materials for the archive issues. Thus, the first MANI issue was collected by Andrei Monastyrsky, the second by Vadim Zakharov and Viktor Skersis, the third by Elena Elagina and Georgy Kiesewalter (all three appeared in 1981), the fourth by the tandem of Natalia Abalakova and Anatoly Zhigalov (1982). The fifth issue was started in 1983 by the *Fly Agaric (Mukhomor)* group of young artists, but soon thereafter they all were hastily conscripted to the army. The process was put on hold.

The reason for this gradual downturn was that, over the period of four years described above, the situation was constantly changing. In the early years, the archives fulfilled their function perfectly: the portfolios and the contents of their envelopes were perused by all visitors, who passed the information on to their friends and colleagues, igniting curiosity and creating in others the desire to experiment. Eventually a very informative and properly designed magazine, *A-Ya*, published in Paris by the Russian émigré artist Igor Shelkovsky and a couple of other people in Moscow and the United States, began to appear in Moscow. It turned out to be an unwitting rival of MANI as the latter lost out to *A-Ya* both in circulation and readability.

Another reason was that from late 1983 to early 1985, there was a period of reaction, when the homes of some artists and other underground activists were searched by the KGB and the police. People were often summoned for talks at the Lubyanka, where they were required to sign various letters and documents. All hid in their burrows: most people were simply scared. Finally, as of late 1985, quite different phenomena started to emerge: due to a certain liberalization\(^2\) of the stagnant and stifling cultural atmosphere, the artists again became interested in quasi-official exhibitions, which would be held occasionally in the halls of the Moscow Union of Artists under cover of guild secrecy, or in Estonia, or at the embassies. Slowly and cautiously, art emissaries from the West began to arrive and paint fantastic mirages of future success for the nonconformists. Only a chosen few were, in reality, preparing for future exhibits in the West. Others, naturally, could feel the waves. No one remembered the archives any longer.

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\(^2\) In fact, it was the same seesaw principle—an endless ideological game of the party top brass with the liberals—as earlier in the 1960s.
Moreover, the intimidated “fly agarics” who had just returned from the army, refused even to think of "leftist" art. So, not to lose the collected materials, I had to finish their issue myself in 1985, after their return, and was able to make just one copy\(^3\) of the issue, although the first four issues were made in five copies and distributed in such a way that the portfolios would land in the most frequently visited houses or studios. I had to take envelopes that had lain on the shelf for more than a year, add materials from some recent events, and quickly arrange everything in one portfolio. With that issue, MANI came to an end.

In fact, due to all those controversial circumstances, even until late everyone would think that only four issues of MANI had been made, because very few people had actually seen the fifth issue.

In those years, I endlessly visited artists' studios, collecting materials and photographing the works for our archive, because there were not so many photographers in our midst. The artists trusted me more than anyone else as I was engaged in similar activities. Eventually I began to want to elucidate in more detail—to museumify—the infrastructure of the busy creative life of the time. Thus appeared a number of artist’s books or albums that were actually series of photographs with accompanying texts. Among these works are the albums *Artists’ Studios* in two volumes (1982-85), *Artists’ Rooms* (1985), a series of conceptual portraits of artists and writers entitled *Love Me, Love My Umbrella* (1984), and others. The first volume of *Artists’ Studios* (co-authored with Vadim Zakharov) was made in 12 copies, the second in only three, as I knew already from previous experience that to make it in many copies all alone and without any financial support would present a serious challenge.

As of 1986, Andrei Monastyrsky continued the tradition of collecting the materials of post-conceptualist artists in the so-called *MANI subject collections*, which looked like traditional self-published books with cardboard or cloth binding, with texts on a particular theme and photocopies of photographs of the artists' works. However, the faster the artistic situation in the Soviet Union evolved at the end of the decade after the "opening of the Iron Curtain to the public" at the 17th Young Artists' Show in Moscow at the turn of 1986-87, the less interest such samizdat publications aroused in the artistic milieu. After 1989, with the departure of most of the former unofficial artists to the West, they completely lost their meaning and significance as new media and signs of success eventually substituted the old ones.

As a result, the main samizdat of the eighties was our first archive, the MANI portfolios, which served as an organizing, inspiring and unifying element for many Moscow artists, and not only them. In a certain sense, the portfolios became a space for experiment for many artists working in Moscow at that time, but who are hardly by anyone remembered today as they ceased to experiment thereafter. The fame of this archive among Moscow's intelligentsia contributed to the emergence of such a term as the *MANI circle*, which essentially implied the circle of conceptually-oriented artists who later were called by art critics *the Moscow conceptual school*.

\(^3\) I could feel that nobody was actually interested in the archive any longer.
In fact, this term is equivalent to the expression *the Sretensky Boulevard Group* that sprang up, as is well known, in the late sixties thanks to the good graces of the Czech art historian Jindřich Chalupecký, while in reality it was just a group of friends and book illustrators whose studios were not far from one another in a Moscow downtown district, rather than a creative association. However, on the basis of the MANI circle, at the end of the 1980s, the MANI Museum emerged at Nikolai Panitkov's unpretentious country house, where a collection of works of the above-mentioned artists would quickly be put together.

This is how, in those years, valuable artistic material was collected, allowing current researchers to study the scope of interests and discourses of the Moscow unofficial art community and track the timeline of visual and theoretical production delivered to the public.

One might ask whether the MANI issues or other archives of this sort managed to fulfill their mission in a historical context. Is there anyone currently studying or referring to this material, which gives an overview of the trends and the range of issues covered by Soviet unofficial artists in those years?

The answer, in my opinion, is banal—both yes and no. There is the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in the United States, which organizes and systematizes archive materials donated by the collector Norton Dodge, who was deeply interested in Soviet unofficial art. There are also some archive collectors in Russia, but within the academic circle of researchers, so far, such materials have been of practically no interest, nor have they been published. If there is no demand among art historians, no work will be done. It is probably not yet the time for a serious study of that era, and there are, as yet, no art historians in Russia capable of conducting an impartial comparative analysis. As to the primary mission of these archives in those years, I believe, they fulfilled it with honor and created a lot of interest in the artistic circles of Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities, as well as among Western journalists and scholars who happened to visit the Soviet Union then.

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**Bibliography**


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