

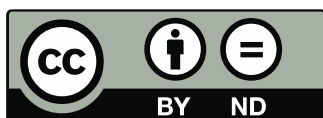
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Das Wissen der Arbeit und das Wissen der Künste

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ARBEIT UND KÜNSTLERISCHES WISSEN

VADIM ZAKHAROV

BOOK DESIGNER, PUBLISHER, ARCHIVIST,
COLLECTOR: THE FORMATION OF MY ARTISTIC
PRACTICE

The primary framework of this contribution is the interrelation of 'Art – Knowledge – Labour/Work', and its content is directly connected to the question of the independence of the artist in the contemporary art system and the mode of its resolution. In my opinion, this is one of the most important questions today.

It seems to me that the presupposition, which underlies the expression 'freedom of the author', has long been transformed into the illusion 'I am an artist and I do as I please'. There is something infantile about the assumption that one is liberated by the limitlessness of possibilities. On the one hand the author wants to be free to do what he or she wants, and on the other hand, the author expects praise from his or her elders. It could be argued that this supplicating position is the norm for artists these days. I believe that being an artist in this sense of the word is a weak position and the presupposed freedom is very fragile and even questionable. Clearly, it is impossible to ignore the prevailing system, and this contribution is not aiming to do so. Rather, the aim is to discuss the possibilities and limits of a reasonable balance between the real freedom of the artist and the limitations, which the existing art system produces. It seems to me that artists are faced today with strong commercial and entertainment demands. However, I am certain that artistic practices, more specifically practices not inscribed into the given system of value and demand, are indispensable for the culture at large. An artist has to develop new methods of working, which do not directly answer to the requirements of galleries and collectors. I would like to argue that an artistic practice that aims beyond the limits of the conventional 'artist-artwork-sales' system will allow the artist to obtain the freedom to make independent decisions in culture. But which methods and artistic strategies exist, that allow the artist to remain independent? One possible strategy is to make a living and to function in territories other than, but parallel to the main artistic practice.

My own example is sufficiently vivid to show the possibility of the kind of multi-faceted path an artist can take. Over the course of many years I have been attempting to balance several professional platforms: being an artist, archivist, publisher, collector, and book designer. Since 1978, I have also been working in collaboration with other artists: Igor Lutz, Viktor Skersis, Nadezhda Stolpovskaya, Sergey Anufriev and Pavel Pepperstein, Ivan Chuikov, Anton Ganopolsky, the composer Ivan Sokolov, and finally the German artist Niklas Nitschke, with whom I have been collaborating for four years. To get to the substance and

the origin of such a multi-faceted practice, we will have to return to the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, in Moscow.

I began to work as an artist at the age of 19, in 1978. Almost immediately I found myself in a circle of Russian artists who, as time would show, would become some of the best ones. All the artists in that circle were at odds with the official art system having problems with the KGB and with earning money. We were prohibited artists and had no opportunities to show our work in official venues or in museums. The only possible way for us to exhibit was in private apartments or small workshops. However, it was impossible to make a living from our artistic practice. There were no critics, no sales, and no income of artworks that were not part of the official art production. You could also add the fear of various measures the KGB could take against non-official artists. Despite all this, this micro-cultural model of working survived for thirty years and gave way to, from my point of view, some noticeable artists. A lot of what was done in the 1970s and 1980s has gone down in history – one-day apartment exhibitions, for example, or actions, which were attended only by a handful of people. This model of art making might seem absurd, and yet this is a phenomenon to be reckoned with and taken seriously by art historians. The situation was paradoxical: while there was an absence of external freedom at the same time there was a colossal internal freedom. It is, however, this paradox, which gave birth to the figure of the multi-faceted author. Due to this situation artists did not feel any pressure to make art in order to make a living, to exhibit their work, to publish critical essays or other materials. There was no pressure to distribute one's work, and it was often enough to produce three or five copies. It could be argued that the practices of collecting art were guided by different objectives. Not the gallery owners, curators or critics were central figures in the formation of this micro-culture, but the artists, poets, writers and composers themselves.

Of course, at the time, artists saw the situation very differently. Many felt that even the most brilliant alternative methods of operating in culture were limited in the end, insofar as they were isolated from international tendencies in art. That is why a lot of artists, looking for more freedom, emigrated in the mid-to-late 1970s. For instance, in the 1970s Igor Shelkovsky, Mikhail Roginsky, Oskar Rabin, Leonid Sokov, Alexander Kosolapov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Mikhail Chernyshev, Rimma and Valeriy Gerlovin, Mikhail Grobman, and many others left. Those who stayed needed to keep figuring out how to operate in culture, developing methods and strategies of cultural survival in a tiny domain. Without wanting to sound nostalgic, it can be said that we were placed into very particular circumstances of survival, using minimal resources for artistic activity. The fear of imprisonment, the destruction of an exhibition, or a summons from the KGB was omnipresent. At some point this fear just became part of the atmosphere, like bad weather, it turned into a general negative background. It is clear to us today, speaking about Russian art, that the isolation from Western culture did not prove to be catastrophic. There was a lot of activity within this barely-living micro-culture. I really do not wish to return to that situation and those times, but

given how the official situation in Russia is progressing, we seem to be going into another phase of isolation from Western culture, and could easily end up behind the Iron Curtain again. Then, it will again become necessary to develop new possible methods and forms of working, which might take many years.

Almost none of the Moscow non-official artists over three generations made a living with their art.¹ Sometimes, artists from the older generation of Moscow artists succeeded in selling a few pieces to diplomats or collectors, such as George Costakis. However, these were sold for ridiculously low prices. Most of the artists made a living with designing children's playgrounds, propaganda stands, and so forth. Boris Orlov, Dmitri Prigov and Rostislav Lebedev, for example, did that kind of work with irony, half-heartedly, and often referred to it as 'hackwork' or 'skive' (*khaltura*). Others quietly worked in libraries and museums, such as, for example, Andrei Monastyrski and Lev Rubinstein. Still others worked in publishing houses. In fact, the main part of the Moscow artists, such as Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasiliev, Viktor Pivovarov, and Irina Nakhova, were illustrating and designing children's books. They created, perhaps unintentionally, a particular style of children's book. Many of us, including me, Yuri Albert and, Viktor Skersis, became book designers.²

Designing books and having at the same time an active practice in the field of contemporary art was a great combination. Artists would earn money in one domain and spend it in another, buying canvases, paint, or cameras for their autonomous artistic practice. From my perspective, this parallel official occupation constituted a space for critical distance and contemplation, allowing you to evaluate and improve your artistic practice. I will draw attention here to my own situation. For example, before the Perestroika in Moscow, I sometimes worked as a security guard or as a street sweeper. It was a temporary and irregular employment, which had some advantages. I would be given the key of a building and stayed there from 8 p. m. until 7 a. m. It was common to invite some friends over and have a small sit in; we would spend time together, have discussions, and were being paid at the same time. Together with Igor Lutz I made several artistic ac-

1 The first of the three generations at stake were the so-called non-conformists, or the "Sixties" (*Shestidesyatniki*) artists and poets, which included the so-called Lionosovo group (Genrikh Sapgir, Igor Kholin, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Oskar Rabin, Lidia Masterkova, Vladimir Nemukhin, Evgeny, and Lev Kropivnistky) and the Sretensky Boulevard group (Ilya Kabakov, Hulot Sooster, Ernst Neizvestny, Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasiliev, Vladimir Yankilevsky, Viktor Pivovarov, and Ivan Chuikov). The second generation includes Andrei Monastyrski, Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich, Nikita Alexeev, and Collective Actions. The third generation, also referred to as the second generation of Moscow Conceptualism, includes Vadim Zakharov, Yuri Albert, and Victor Skersis. Editor's note: In this article the transliteration of Russian follows BSI (British Standards Institution). Exceptions are names of individuals.

2 Cf. the special issue of the journal *Pastor*, "Nasha Poligrafiya" (Our Polygraphy), 1993, where I published examples of illustrations, book covers, and also articles and interviews with artists who were making a living by working for publishing houses.

tions around that time, such as *Patrol of Moscow River* or *Making Moscow Green – Planting Trees* (1978–1980). Those involved activities such as patrolling or gardening, which at the time were considered as socially useful, voluntary activities.³ Only after 1983 I started working in publishing as an artistic editor and book designer. I designed a number of books for large publishers like Mir and Kniga, where the main illustrators were Maxim Zhukov and Arkady Troyanker, who made marvellous books. Because I had studied at the pedagogical institute, I did not have any professional artistic or design training when I came to this job. Everything I needed to know about book design I learned directly from Zhukov, who taught me typography then and there. Thus, I was learning by doing, rather than drawing on systematic knowledge. Starting in the early 1980s, this long-term employment as a book designer had a great influence on me as an artist. Later, my engagement with publication design and typography found an alternative expression, namely in my own, private publishing project, *Pastor Zond Edition*, which I founded in Cologne in 1992 and which still exists today. The beginning of this small press was the journal *Pastor* – a thematic journal of Moscow Conceptualists, published from 1992 to 2001 (fig. 1). The publishing of *Pastor* coincided with the rise of Western interest in contemporary art from Russia. At that time there were numerous international exhibitions, most of which were, in my view, superficial and one-sided on the one hand, and perplexing the Western viewer due to the absence of context on the other hand. The main idea of publishing the *Pastor* journal was the attempt to maintain the context of Moscow Conceptualism in new circumstances. Furthermore, I tried to bring back together those artists who had already begun to dissipate during the late 1980s and 1990s, as a result of emigration, or as a consequence of the overwhelming new tasks and activities around their individual careers. I took the role of the main editor and compiler, and my wife Maria Porudominskaya was the compositor, assistant editor and proofreader. I directly approached artists from different generations whom I knew well. Thus, it was not difficult to get materials from them. The journal reflects an important period of Russian Conceptual art: the decade following the Perestroika, in the West. This editing project enabled me to control the whole production process. When I was employed as a designer, I was only responsible for the form, but with *Pastor* I was able to determine the content, too. The journal issues are organised around specific themes, such as “Names” (1992), “Geography” (1993), “Our Polygraphy” (1993), “Our Future” (1994), “Emigration and Wanderers” (1995), “How I Became an Artist” (1997), “Pathology and Norm” (1999), “Eastern Tradition in the Moscow Conceptual School” (2001) (fig. 2). Each was an attempt to address the Moscow Conceptualist circle through a specific question, with the purpose of producing new perspectives and insights on Moscow Conceptualism and contemporary art. I commissioned artists, poets, philosophers and theorists.⁴ (Later

3 Editor's note: See Sergey Letov's contribution in this publication.

4 Cf. *conceptualism-moscow.org*, ed. by Vadim Zakharov, URL: <http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org/page?id=161&lang=en> (last access: 19 April 2015).

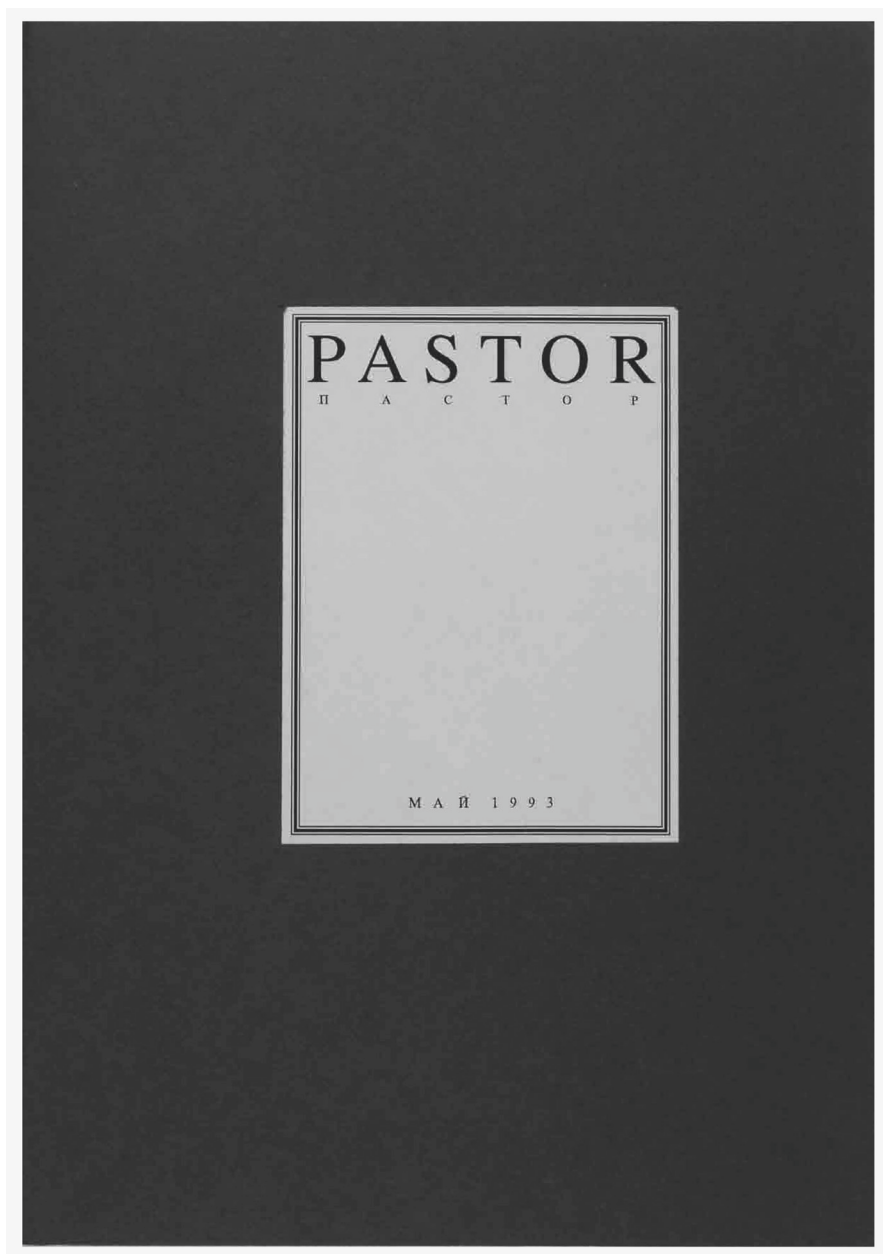


fig. 1: Vadim Zakharov: *Pastor no. 3 cover*, 1993, DIN A4 page.
Source for this and the following images: private archive of the author.

DIE ACHETE AUSGABE
DER ZEITSCHRIFT <PASTOR>
IST DEM THEMA
DIE ÖSTLICHE TRADITION UND MOSKAUER
KONZEPTUELLE SCHULE
GEWIDMET

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fig. 2: Vadim Zakharov: *Pastor no. 8 contents*, 2001, DIN A4 page.

the figure of the Pastor-editor was transformed into an artistic character of the Foolish and Funny Pastor who would travel to different places, such as Japan, Crimea, La Mancha in Spain, etc., subjecting himself to idiotic adventures.)⁵

I presented the first issue of the *Pastor* journal at Galerie Sophia Ungers in Cologne in 1992. The exhibition was called “Pastors Schleuse” and was one of my first attempts to place my work as a publication designer and publisher in the context of my artistic ideas. Also in 1992, I had an exhibition in Moscow called “Alexander Pushkin the Book Publisher”.⁶ The title echoed the name of one of the books I designed in 1987. The book publisher Kniga used to produce facsimiles, i. e. reproductions of the original publications, including the book by Sergei Yakovlevich Gessen, *Alexander Pushkin the Book Publisher* from 1930. I designed the supplement to this book, which contained commentaries, as well as the sleeve that covered both volumes. Alongside the published facsimile edition, the supplement and the envelope, the exhibition “Alexander Pushkin the Book Publisher” contained my sketches, working drawings, prints and typefaces (fig. 3).

At an exhibition in a Belgian gallery, I showed copies of *Pastor* under the curious title of “The Provincial Bubbles of Cologne Pastor”.⁷ Between 1992 and 1993 I was asking authors of the journal, including Nikita Alexeev, Yuri Albert, Andrei Monastyrski, Ilya Kabakov and Sabine Hänsen, to produce DIN A4 drawings for the covers of the original copies of *Pastor*. Then in 1994, these drawings were enlarged and printed onto red coloured paper. Each of the enlarged drawings was then hung next to the original copies of *Pastor* with the respective cover drawing along two walls of the gallery space. A table with a chair was placed in the middle of the space. On top of the table was an installation, a miniature ‘Pastor’s hut’, and in it an old, bubble-producing apparatus (fig. 4).

In 1994, I had a show at the Galerie Sophia Ungers entitled “Typographic Uprising” which was also directly related to my publishing practice.⁸ The exhibition was arranged over five floors, and each floor was dedicated to one specific publication project: “Supplement to N. V. Gogol’s Second Volume of *Dead Souls*”, “Four Nights with the King”, “Children’s Pastor Library”, “Zacharias’ Flight”, and “Typographic Uprising”. These projects were not commissioned or made for some publisher, but were, in some way, artistic-fictitious publication projects. From this perspective, this exhibition departs further from the professional context of my job at the publishing house, insofar as I did not use the actual material from work, such as the sketches and the final product. However, all the stages

5 Cf. Vadim Zakharov, “Funny and Sad Adventures of the Foolish Pastor. Project 1996–1998” (*Smeshnyye i Grusnyye Priklucheniya Glupogo Pastora. Proyekt 1996–1998*).

6 “Alexander Pushkin the Book Publisher. Vadim Zakharov” (*Knigoizdatel’ Aleksandr Pushkin. Vadim Zakharov*), 06–20 March 1992, Gallery “L”, Moscow.

7 “Provincial Bubbles of Cologne Pastor. Vadim Zakharov”, 29 August–04 October 1992, Deweer Art Gallery, Otegem.

8 “Typographic Uprising. Vadim Zakharov. Five Editions of the Cologne Pastor. Installation on Five Levels”, 09 November–17 December 1994, Galerie Sophia Ungers, Cologne.



fig. 3: Vadim Zakharov: *Alexander Pushkin the Book Publisher*, 1992, installation display, Gallery "L", Moscow, 1992.



fig. 4: Vadim Zakharov: *The Provincial Bubbles of Cologne Pastor*, 1992, installation display, Deweer Art Gallery, Otegem, 1992.

of production of my work at the publisher were represented in this exhibition: cover designs, illustrations, layout formats, frames, fonts, drawings, and sketches. The viewer could explore these works as part of an expanded installation, which contained various different, idiosyncratic arrangements of elements. In this way, my work as a publisher became an important element of a multi-faceted display. The idiosyncrasy of my installations, the inclusion of loosely related or completely unrelated objects, is oriented towards producing an 'experience of quotation'⁹. I describe it as a method of emptying out, which produces experiences that can be compared to the experience of sitting on the train, the fast and shimmering passing of trees, houses or turnpikes; or to the experience of perceiving leaflets or advertising, or any kind of 'printer's waste', before putting them swiftly into the dust bin.

If at first, in the 1980s, I was an artist who was also working as a book designer, in the 1990s it became more and more natural for me to combine these two activities or identities. The profession of 'artistic book designer' was held in high esteem and was *exceptionally* well paid in Soviet Russia. It was not valued less than being a 'real artist' and it offered good career prospects. It was an integral, specialised field where professional skills were valued. In the West a book artist has a different status as a professional. After I moved to Germany I attempted to continue working in publishing houses, and I designed many books for Hatje Cantz, DuMont, and other publishers. But there, the combination of two professions – artist-designer and contemporary artist – was not welcome. It is expected to focus on merely one activity, to 'specialise' oneself in one domain: one is either an artist or a book designer, but being both at the same time seems to question the authenticity of one's commitment and identity. Furthermore, the book designer is considered service personnel in relation to the artist – almost like a waiter to a patron in a café or restaurant. Thus, working as a designer on a book series by the Flick Collection, I found myself 'in the service' of different artists such as Thomas Schütte, Pipilotti Rist or Rodney Graham. Going beyond the limits of identifying myself solely as an artist resonated with my previous work experiences in the Soviet times. However, this time it involved new aspects, namely a stricter division between being an artist and being a book designer, and a more hierarchical relation between the two. However, interestingly, I did not acquire needless complexes 'serving' these other artists. On the contrary, the descent from the position of 'I, artist' to 'I, servant' dramatised the division between my artistic practice and my primarily non-artistic design job, which gave me a tremendous quantity of energy. I began to see my artistic activity in a new light, which was a very important experience for me. I was pleased to be able to see myself from two positions at the same time. I could move and be aware that I was moving in a wider artistic latitude than the 'artists-specialists'. However, there was no irony or sarcasm in my relationship to these artists. They remained interesting artists for me.

9 In German: *erlebtes Zitat*.

The liberating experience of such a clean division between being an artist and being a book designer encouraged me to explore other non-artistic activities. In addition to the activity of a book designer, I also became the archivist of the Moscow Conceptualist School. Here, I also found myself in the role of the ‘servant’: I would document other artists’ exhibitions or produce video recordings of their press conferences and readings. At first, my activity as a chronicler was considered in terms of an eccentric amateur who had just acquired a video camera (I had bought my first camera at the end of 1988). Eventually, however, people started to realise that it was more serious than that and stopped asking stupid questions like “Aren’t you bored yet”? Now, I have been documenting for 26 years, and in result I have accumulated a unique archive of video recordings of exhibitions of Moscow contemporary artists in the West since 1989. However, this was not an exclusive activity; the artist inside me always reminded me that he was also there. In response to the call of my inner artist, I started to include the archival practice into my artistic exhibitions. For example, my work *The History of Russian Art – From Avant-Garde to Moscow Conceptual School* (2003) is an installation of a massive walk-in file folder. Recently, for an exhibition at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow (2015), I developed another installation:¹⁰ It consisted of 24 huge black file folders, which were arranged in rows on artificial lawn. The folders were standing with their back up, containing a little window which allowed to watch footage from over 180 shows of Moscow Conceptualists which I recorded on video since 1989 (figs. 5 and 6). Just to watch one loop from one folder was taking far over an hour, and given that there were 25 of them, the viewer was not able to see all the material in one exhibition visit. This overwhelming character of the installation resonates with my experience with the massive scale of this archived footage. I would like to stress that such installations and exhibitions, which thematically or formally involve the subject matter of the archive, are to be distinguished from the actual archival practice. Making installations and organising exhibitions is one thing, while the process of developing an archive, its systematisation and organisation, is another – that requires time and money. In other words, my archival activity is not carried out ‘artistically’, but precisely in a non-artistic way; that is, guided by rules and forms that are internal to archival work. My ‘archival’ exhibitions are, on the other hand, an opportunity to bring together what does not necessarily belong – the serious, tedious and bureaucratic work on the archive as such and my artistic practice. This routine of archival work sometimes threatens to stifle and overpower the artist in me. As a consequence, I came up with the term ‘killer archive’. Therefore, with the exhibition at the Garage in 2015, I decided to mark the end of my archival activity, before it exhausted the artist completely. I wrote a manifesto, or, a certain kind of ‘obituary’ for the archivist in me:

10 “Vadim Zakharov. Postscript after R. I. P.: A Video Archive of Moscow Artists’ Exhibitions (1989–2014)”, 24 August–25 October 2015, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.



fig. 5: Vadim Zakharov: *Postscript after R.I.P.: A Video Archive of Moscow Artists' Exhibitions (1989-2014)*, 2015, installation display, Garage Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, 2015.

fig. 6: Vadim Zakharov: *Postscript after R.I.P.: A Video Archive of Moscow Artists' Exhibitions (1989-2014)*, 2015, installation display, Garage Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, 2015.



The Archive was what I resorted to in moments of a looming depression and to cope with the difficulties of life, similar to the simple, routine tasks offered to patients in an asylum – something to do when you can't do anything or even think. But the weight of the expanding collection has become overwhelming. The 'killer archive', as I have come to call it, was controlling my life and my thoughts. [...] My schizophrenic personalities were hovering over my body, grinning. Finally, they got what they wanted: the artist's self-esteem was below zero. But I rose, as I

was, with my 55-year-old body exposed to the public. Yes, I returned to being an artist [...].¹¹

It remained, however, ambiguous how exactly the artist in me survived this. Some perceived the installation as a graveyard.

My other serious activity, which always ran parallel to the artistic one, is collecting art. As the archival activity, collecting and conserving art is a sphere with its own specificities. There is nothing new about being a collector and an artist, but it should not be underestimated how much time it can take looking after a collection, loaning works for exhibitions etc.; all these tasks take time away from the artist. Before collecting turned into an obsession for me, a bulk of the works in my collection were given to me as a gift by the artists themselves. In some ways, being part of a circle of artists, whether you want it or not, you necessarily start collecting works – the apartment and studio get crowded with works of fellow artists. However, I would like to distinguish my method of collecting from collecting as ‘the accumulation of garbage’, insofar as I am actively involved in serving this collection.¹²

I showed part of my collection at the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin in 2003–2004,¹³ and in 2009 a significant part of it in Moscow.¹⁴ In May 2014, in the exhibition “Paper Museum: Moscow Conceptualism in Transit” at John Hansard Gallery in Southampton, there were a lot of works from my collection.¹⁵ What was important for me is that I was performing there in all my incarnations: artist, publisher of the journal *Pastor*, collector and editor of an anthology well known in Russia, MANI (1981). This was an unforgettable experience of polyphony, where none of the roles interfered with another, but all together they created an atmosphere of multi-sided freedom for the personality in culture.

Designing books, publishing, archiving and collecting – I am not carrying out these activities as an artist. The artist has some time off when I am doing all these things. But at the same time, being a non-artist in these instances is an important moment for me – it shapes my specific identity as an artist, enabling me to rethink what an artist is or can be.

Translated by Marina Vishmidt and Marina Gerber.

11 Vadim Zakharov, “P. S.”, 2015, printed on the walls of the exhibition, cf. fn. 10.

12 Editor’s note: Cf. Vadim Zakharov, “The Shiva Method: Archive, Collection, Publisher, Artist”, in: *Collection Archive*. By Vadim Zakharov, exhibition catalogue, ed. by idem, Annual International Festival of Collections of Contemporary Art, Moscow, 27 July–17 September 2009 (unpaginated).

13 “Moskauer Konzeptualismus. Sammlung Haralampi G. Oroschakoff & Sammlung-Verlag-Archiv Vadim Zakharov”, 28 November 2003–18 April 2004, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.

14 Annual International Festival of Collections of Contemporary Art, Moscow, 27 July–17 September 2009.

15 “Paper Museums: Moscow Conceptualism in Transit”, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 27 May 2014–19 July 2014.