Inverted Ekphrasis: Viewing and Reading Andrei Monastyrsky’s Elementary Poetry No. 2—Atlas
The early works of Andrei Monastyrski, a seminal Soviet conceptualist, are too often overshadowed by his more famous collaborative work, such as the art of the Collective Actions group (CA), for which he was one of the founders and has remained its leader.¹ Several recent major exhibitions and publications about the CA actions have significantly elaborated our understanding of Moscow Conceptualism, particularly the first generation, and the art collective itself. Scholarship has demonstrated the pioneering features of CA art by analyzing the self-reflective nature of their projects, a complex relationship between spatiotemporal experience and the abundant documentation of the actions, the “emptying” function of their perplexing scenarios, and unstable status of the viewer-participant, among others.² The importance of the CA art is hard to overestimate. Yet, what anticipated these original artworks was no less innovative experimentation with a number of comparable ideas tested just before the first CA action took

¹ The group and Monastyrski’s figure have been under international attention since the early 2010s. In particular, the Russian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 increased attention and led to a series of exhibitions, publications, and translations of primary documents. The Collective Actions group (CA) is still active, with 147 actions held thus far. Documentation related to the actions have been organized into several volumes, edited by Monastyrski and other CA members, and partially published recently in Russia. See Kollektivnye deistviia, Poezdki za gorod, Tom 1 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011); Poezdki za gorod, Tom 2–3 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2011); Poezdki za gorod, Tom 6–11 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2009); and Poezdki za gorod, Tom 4–5, 11–13 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2016). Andrei Monastyrski’s art objects both related to CA and independent from it are located in his private collection and other private and public collections in Russia and abroad. For his theoretical writings, as well as poetry, fiction writings, and memoirs, see Andrei Monastyrski, Esteticheskie issledovaniia (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2010); Poeticheskii sbornik (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2010); Poeticheskii Mir (Moscow: NLO, 2007); and Dnevnik 1981–1984 (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2014). For key texts on CA and Andrei Monastyrski, see Octavian Eșanu, Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013); Boris Groys, “Andrei Monastyrski: Living in Art,” in History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 145–52; Ekaterina Degot, “Ethereal Works and Earthly Labours of Andrei Monastyrski (Two Fragments on Earthworks),” in Andrei Monastyrski (Moscow: Ad Marginem Press, 2014), 49–67; Elena Kalinsky, trans. and ed., Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1981 (Chicago: Soberscove Press, 2012); and Elena Kalinsky, “Drowning in Documents: Action, Documentation, and Factography in Early Work by the Collective Actions Group,” ARTMargins 2, no. 1 (February 2013): 82–105; among others.

place in 1976. It was an extraordinarily prolific and inventive year in 1975 when Monastyrski produced several poetic texts, artist books, and installations, testing some of the key strategies which were later implemented in CA’s art projects, and which have gained Monastyrski his current status. Among these works is an artist book—a fifty-eight-page visual poem titled *Elementary Poetry No. 2—Atlas*—probably his most extravagant and evasive work of 1975. It gives a fascinating picture of how the ideas of self-reflection, description, and emptiness first originated on the level of an individual, even intimate, process of reading and viewing. Some art historians have already shown how Moscow Conceptualists’ early poetic experiments actually led to the performative format of their art. Yet, being more than just a vital key to Monastyrski’s later practice, *Atlas*, as I will argue, is a unique work of conceptual, poetic, visual, and performative work on its own—unfairly overlooked so far.

Together with a few other artist books, *Atlas* launched a series of works called *Elementary Poetry* in 1975. The series as a whole is complex due to its multimediacy (it also includes several interactive objects and one action) and flexibility (Monastyrski has been continuously taking certain projects into and out from the series). The name *Elementary Poetry*, according to Monastyrski, refers to the “poetization of elementary fundamental levels of human existence,” through which “the dynamics of the world are revealed to us.” None of the *Elementary Poetry* artist books have ever been translated, and not all of them have been published even in Russian, probably not in the least due to their esoteric language and intricate interweavement of the visual and the verbal. The *Atlas* is, probably, the most elaborate, and therefore, the most fascinating of them all.

*Atlas*, as well as other artist books of the series, was primarily typewritten on blank regular paper, with inclusions of Monastyrski’s handwritten and drawn details, and self-bound in a medium format book (approximately 20 by 15 cm, Fig. 1). Most of the *Atlas* (fifty-five out of its 1975 when

---

3 The mid-1970s was a flourishing period for the Moscow Conceptualist artists. The year of 1975 became especially important as it ultimately divided the unofficial circle of artists into dissidents and what became known as the Moscow conceptuallist circle. See a brief history of the event in Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Garde* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 136–39.

4 See Ekaterina Bobrinskaia’s brief overview of the development of the Moscow Conceptualist art in “Moscow Conceptualist Performance Art in the 1970s,” in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 155. Bobrinskaia argued that by experimenting with the mechanics of performing a poetic text, Moscow Conceptualists developed a performative genre of art.

5 The end of the series is also ambiguous because different texts written or edited by Monastyrski name different objects from 1980s as part of the series. In a recent personal correspondence, Monastyrski referred to one of his recent videos as “a new type of *Elementary Poetry*,” which makes the entire series an ongoing project. Andrei Monastyrski, *Titrovanie Stavrovo*, published on November 2017, YouTube video, 7:33, https://youtu.be/WCYvpL- JlwU. The series *Elementary Poetry* as a whole still requires close scholarly attention.

6 Conversation with the author, September 5, 2017. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

7 According to Monastyrski, the only copy that ever existed of *Elementary Poetry No. 2—Atlas* was sold by him to the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa archive in Bremen in the early 1990s. However, the archive still does not have the copy registered in their files, suggesting its possible location in their unregistered materials. The only available copy

---
fifty-eight pages) is a description of a pseudo-astronomical chart, the so-called *Map of Elements*,
given on one of the first pages.\(^8\) It presents a cluster of celestial bodies numbered 1–55 (Fig. 2). The descriptive analysis of the *Map* on the following pages is overwhelming and exhausting; it includes innumerable diagrams and calculations of spatial correlation between the elements, as well as references to science, famous novels and plays, visual art and music, and several poems of Monastyrski’s own composing, therefore suggesting that the astronomical space is not the only one where the descriptive narrative unfolds. The immense content is accompanied by manifold, often contradicting instructions on how to read the book, which make the reading process deliberate and quite strenuous. By examining the ways in which the viewer-reader experiences the *Atlas*, I will argue that it not only shifts their attention from *what* is written to *how* it should be viewed/read, but also that this shift of the viewer-reader’s attention towards self-reflective practice is the very subject of the *Atlas*. By focusing on certain strategies that Monastyrski uses to structure his book, I will argue that the book functions as an ekphrastic text which refers to and imitates nothing but itself. *Atlas* shares with ekphrasis several major features, such as a descriptive mode, referentiality, and a strive for precision, often spiced with academicist rhetoric. To this, *Atlas* adds a certain viewing-reading experience demanded from the audience. By analyzing each of these ekphrastic strategies as implemented in the *Atlas*, I hope to determine the mechanisms of relentless semantic production of the many layers of the book, and therefore, emphasize its idiosyncratic and innovative features.

Fig. 1 Andrei Monastyrski, *Elementary Poetry No. 2—Atlas*, Moscow 1975. A photocopy of the cover page of the original book, early 1990s

closest to the original book today is Monastyrski’s own photocopy of it made before the original was sent to Bremen. In the late 1990s, using CorelDRAW, Monastyrski made an electronic version of *Atlas*, which was published in the anthology of his writings *Esteticheskie issledovaniia* in 2010, 379–440. In the current text, I will use images from both photocopy of the original and its electronic version. The latter comes with my translation.

\(^8\) To number the pages of his book, Monastyrski used an elaborate system and called the pages *listy* (“folios”). For example, the *Map of Elements* is marked as the first folio, while in fact it is the fourth page of the book. For convenience, I will use my own numbering by referring to each sheet of the book as a “page” according to their sequence (i.e. 58 pages total featuring original folios 1–31).
Pseudo-Scientific Descriptive Mode

The astronomical nature of the *Atlas* manifests itself in the explanations of the elements throughout the book. For example, black dots are defined as stars, the hallow circles stand for planets, a crossed circle (element No. 54) designates the planet Saturn, and three parallel lines (No. 51) signify nebula. Some numbers, like 41 or 42, do not mark anything, while 5–12 seem to refer to the sections of the central circle, in which they are located. Besides being organized according to North-South and West-East axes, which establish a solid horizontal and vertical orientation and emphasize a more or less even dispersion of numbers on the page, the sequence of numbers develops clockwise along several circles (Fig. 3). My diagram suggests a variation of connecting the numbers as it would be performed in a children’s dot-to-dot game. The last two circles could be defined as such, only because they pertain an overall clockwise movement, although they actually progress along chaotic zig-zag trajectories and incorporate several repeating numbers (two 42s, two 44s, four 45s, etc.). Progression in these last two circles stumbles over misalignments and repetitions.
Inverted Ekphrasis

The description of the Map of Elements throughout the book evolves according to the sequence of the celestial bodies grouped in these circles. The structure could be roughly described as follows: the first two circles (elements 1–4 and 5–12) deal with the Map’s layout and present some repetitive motifs (pp. 7–12 of the Atlas); the third circle’s elements (13–20) undergo complex calculations while introducing multifold references to Stendhal’s novel The Red and the Black (pp. 13–33); the fourth circle (elements 21–28) presents eight constellations (pp. 35–46); elements of the fifth circle (29–36) are collected in an enigmatic graphics on a single page (p. 48); the sixth circle’s elements (37–44) undergo linguistic/mathematical analysis (pp. 49–56), and the elements of the last, seventh, circle (45–55) are listed on the last page of the book (p. 58).

The overflow of the calculations, charts, and instructions throughout Atlas creates an impression of an analytical, methodical and precise project. Yet, most of these scientific devices trick the viewer-reader with mismatches, overlaps, or contradicting instructions. For example, the very first diagram following the Map of Elements (p. 5, Fig. 4) demonstrates the measurement of two distances—eight centimeters between the elements 6 and 8 (at the top of the page) and six

Fig. 3 A diagram showing the succession of numbers along several circles as they appear on the Map of Elements. The first number in each circle is marked for convenience of tracking down each new sequence (Graphics by the author. Monastyrski did not have them in Atlas)
centimeters between the elements 7 and 11 (at the top left). What these numbers-elements (6, 8, 7, and 11) stand for in the Map of Elements is ambiguous: if they mark the sections of the central circle (Fig. 2), it is unclear how the measurement between the adjacent segments could be conducted. Does the distance refer to the alignment of numbers on the page rather than segments? Or is the Map flattening a more complex three-dimensional alignment of the elements? Precision of measurements as a pseudo-scientific device here creates more questions than clarifications.

![Diagram of elements](image)

**Fig. 4 Atlas, p. 5 (fol. 2–1).**

The same fifth page also features an instruction “see folio 25” at the lower right. However, the referred folio presents other no less deliberate and confusing diagrams, as well as additional twenty-one references to other pages. These too raise additional questions, rather than explain anything about our fifth page. Even if a diligent viewer-reader decides to scrutinize sedulously the 25th folio and follow all of its references, most of them would bring up pages with many new references, while others would refer, mockingly, back to the fifth page. Endless referentiality or circular logic are, therefore, suggested as resolutions for the Atlas’ deliberate pseudo-scientism.

---

9 The electronic version has 8 cm between elements 7 and 11. My change of the distance to the original 6 cm in the illustration is for the reader’s convenience, although the “inaccurate” translation of the book into the electronic version is worth attention on its own, which I will touch on later in the text.
Furthermore, what does the reference “see folio 25” itself imply? Does it mean to explain the entire fifth page? Or the semi-red sphere in it? Or the numbers presented inside the sphere?

Pseudo-scientism frequently appears in the art of the Moscow Conceptualists. It creates an illusion of a serious credible undertaking, often undermined with pitfalls and traps. A similar overflow of instructions can be found in the poem *The New Intermission*, written by another Moscow Conceptualist and Monastyrski’s friend Lev Rubinstein in the same year that *Atlas* was produced (1975). Seemingly objective and clear imperatives, such as “turn the page,” “read and listen,” “think about something,” “see next,” and others, could yet be hardly realized precisely because of their inexplicit content. As Boris Groys suggested, the only function of these “Romantic instructions” is to make the reader continue reading.\(^\text{10}\) *Atlas*’ instructions are primarily reduced to references to other pages of the *Map* (“see folio such and such” or “see the Map”), making illusory connections between different parts of the book’s content. Yet, since there are about 130 of them throughout the book—an overwhelming number—and since most of them fail, what is left is the exhaustion resulting from the unceasing process of leafing through the pages, going back and forth between them.

Another example of pseudo-scientific impulse also comes from 1975. An art group called “Nest” organized an interactive performance titled *Hatching a Spirit* in the VDNKh pavilion.\(^\text{11}\) The artists sat on a pile of hay and the sign “Hatch eggs!” next to them invited the viewers to join the process of spiritually charged sitting. Being performed in the VDNKh, one of the major sites of state propaganda, the pseudo-scientific experiment embraced irony and, as Mary A. Nicholas suggests, played on “platitudes about artistic inspiration and sacred mission.”\(^\text{12}\) For many of their palpable differences, both works could be considered ironic responses to the status of science in the state propaganda. Although Monastyrski has famously rejected any political connotations of his and the Collective Actions’ art, *Atlas*’ overall astronomic nature demands political context. While the Space Race started to dwindle by the mid 1970s, the Soviet space program was still ongoing. In July 1975, just around the time Monastyrski was working on *Atlas*, a historical test project of Apollo-Soyuz took place, symbolizing a reload of the Soviet-American relationship. In the context of the Nuclear Arms race, the elementary maps could also refer to the visualization of atomic structures and both the excitement and fears associated with them.\(^\text{13}\) Even if *Atlas* comments on the symbol of space and nuclear power in a similar way the Nest’s performance referred to the symbol of economic and agricultural power, it tries to outdo this reference by seamlessly interweaving it with other allusions which burst into the book’s planetary/atomic universe. The viewer-reader is thrown into a chaos of absurdist calculations, diagrams and contradictory references that seem carefully constructed. *Atlas*’ microcosm unfolds in the process

---

\(^{\text{10}}\) Groys, “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” in *History Becomes Form*, 42.

\(^{\text{11}}\) VDNKh stands for the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy.


\(^{\text{13}}\) Several treaties between the countries significantly reduced nuclear-related costs as well as the risk of nuclear war. The Cold War entered a period of reduced conflict, although both countries actually continued to grow their arsenals.
of individual engagement, as opposed to the interactive nature of the Nest’s performance meant for a public ideologically charged space. And on this level—the level of intimate experience of reading—what Atlas particularly tests as a scientific project is not so much space and nuclear engineering as linguistics and philology.

In a convoluted passage on the sixth page, Atlas interrogates the problem of the semiosis process by distinguishing between the written text as a number of lines of visual signs on the plane of the page and the text’s meaning generated by the relationship of these signs. The passage again utilizes scientific rhetoric, which yet appears vague in its overdone academicism (Fig. 5). It considers the physical aspects of the book, such as the borders of its pages, the white plane of the sheet, as well as the mechanics of reading as fundamental origins of the semiosis process. What the passage designates as “semantic inceptive part[s] of the text” corresponds to another frequent element of the book—the so-called vnetekstovoi element (“extratextual element”). There are more than 150 mentions of various extratextual elements throughout the book. They include various signs which refer to an environment outside of the text (the prefix vne- means “outside”).

A series of pages (50 to 57) focus specifically on the examination of the structure of verbal and mathematical sign systems. Each page deals with elements 37–44 correspondingly. In the Map of Elements, they comprise the sixth, irregular, circle (see Fig. 3). The analysis of each element considers the number as a mathematical sign (such as “39”, Fig. 6), translated into its verbal equivalent and inspected as a number of verbal signs (“t-h-i-r-t-y n-i-n-e”). The dashes disperse the letters, revealing the semantic emptiness of the phrase as a number of conventional signs and,
simultaneously, its semantic potential hidden in the dashes-as-connections. On certain pages, these dispersed signs undergo calculation of spatial relationship between them as if dashes-as-connections stand for some physical environment. Furthermore, each page has a lower section, something like an “explanatory table,” in which the empty verbal signs are restructured again and enumerated in order to generate new semantic sequences. For example, “t--h” (the first two letters of “t-h-i-r-t-y n-i-n-e”) stand for “see ‘Book for Idiots’. F. 2-2. M.E.E. No. 25.” An attempt to decipher abbreviations and follow references will only create a new circle of ambiguity: “Book for Idiots” is an unclear reference, “Folio 2-2” is the page with the elaborate passage about the semiosis process (Fig. 5), “M.E.E.” stands for “major extratextual element.” What looks like a definition or explanation of “t--h” in this explanatory table (as well as the rest of the sixteen entries) proves that it ought not to be approached as nomenclature, but as a complex, even cumbersome, net of relationships.¹⁴

A series of these pages conflate mathematical exercises and philological undertakings via the distribution, rotation, alternation, and positioning of signs. In Soviet linguistics interactions

---

between mathematics and semiotics took place after the fascination with cybernetics and information theory in the post-Stalin period. Adapting mathematical or scientific jargon not only allowed linguists to escape the ideologization of academic life, but also led them to believe in the existence of a universal scholarly method applicable to explaining multiple natural phenomena, beyond language *per se*. Ideas of structuralist analysis were popularized among the Soviet intelligentsia in the 1960s and 70s. Monastyrski’s version of Jakobson’s “poetry of grammar” in *Atlas* could be seen as an experiment in the popular linguistic theories. He was aware of Soviet semiotic trends: in 1975 he was finishing the first year in the Philology program at the Moscow State University (graduating in 1979). His wife’s father, Issai Nakhov, worked there as a professor of classical philology. With Issai’s assistance, Monastyrski also became employed as a staff member at the Moscow Literature Museum in 1974, where he worked for the next sixteen years. He was long-time friends with Lev Rubinstein; they would read their poetry at the apartment gatherings where many other artists, poets, and critics would attend. An important influence was poet and theorist Elizaveta Mnatsakanova; she made Monastyrski acquainted with principal poets of the time such as Genrikh Sapgir and Igor Kholin. Later, he would gain more friends in poetic and philological circles, since Moscow Conceptualism integrated tight relationships between theorists and practitioners of both visual and verbal culture.

Seen as a metalanguage capable of explaining numerous cultural phenomena, structuralist methodology relied on various types of systematization of signs. For Monastyrski, systematization has been an important epistemological tool for exploring the world since his early years. He remembered: “Systematization was vital for me since I was a child. I would re-write systematic tables and charts from books about bugs or make astronomical atlases myself. Blowing out long series and beading separate events onto them—that’s what I have always been doing.” An example of such a list is the constellation *Thyrididae* on page 39, which enumerates ten biological

---


16 About the vibrant underground life of 1970s and its common practice of apartment gatherings and seminars, see, for example, Georgy Kiesewalter, ed., *Eti strannye semidesyatye, ili poteriya nevinnosti: Esse, interv’iu, vospominaniia* (Moscow: NLO, 2010).

17 Elizaveta Mnatsakanova is a Russian poet, translator, essayist, musicologist, and a professor of Russian Literature at the University of Vienna. Monastyrski has often expressed the importance of these encounters; for example, in his unpublished autobiographical manuscript *Zapisi 2013 goda*, p. 50.

18 From the late 1970s, for example, Sergey Romashko (later Professor of Philology at the Moscow State University), Ilya Kabakov’s wife Viktoriia Mochalova (philologist and a researcher at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences), Boris Groys (then a researcher at the Institute of Structural and Applied Linguistics at the Moscow State University), and others were frequent participants of the CA actions.

19 Conversation with the author, September 5, 2017.
species of the moth’s family. (The constellation itself, however, operates as an exception in a group of eight constellations, all of which otherwise refer to literature and arts.)

*Atlas* heavily relies on systematization of information while practicing its various types, but the overall effect of this meticulous and overdone method seems to undermine the *Atlas*’ (planetary or atomic) universalism by endlessly revealing multiple inconsistencies and exclusions. In fact, as a result of exhausting fascination with structuralist method by the mid-1970s, Moscow Conceptualists often parodied the semioticians’ aspiration for the universal methodology. Such parody could be found in Ilya Kabakov’s album *Mathematic Gorsky* from his famous series *Ten Characters*, 1972–1976. It explores the problem of structural thinking by overwhelming the viewer-reader with seriality. As Mathew J. Jackson noticed, the viewer finds themselves desperately searching for structural repetition within the album’s absurd long repetitive patterns, but “every exception to the rule covertly enforces a rule in an alternate system” potentially converting it into an endless process of futile systematization.\(^\text{20}\) By comparing the album’s obsession with systematization to Levi-Strauss’ structural tables via grid structure, Jackson concludes that Kabakov, as other Moscow Conceptualists, responded sarcastically to the failure of structuralist methods to generate a universal metalanguage.\(^\text{21}\)

Like Kabakov’s album which could be imagined through a (futile) grid structure, Monastyrski’s *Atlas* demythologizes Levi-Strauss’ structural table, but it synchronizes the elements in an original way—via the sequence developed clockwise along several circles (see Fig. 3). The vertical, horizontal, and diagonal axes of the *Map of Elements* coordinate the synchronization. Some parts of *Atlas* indeed draw connections between the elements within a singular section outlined by the axes, thus performing something like a synchronic analysis and suggesting its controversies with a diachronic one. Interestingly, although the *Map of Elements* has the center (the cross of the axes), it does not correspond to the beginning of the movement (number 1—the first element of the sequence—is in the middle of the upper part of the page). The circling pattern expands spatially, as if the sequence speeds up in the beginning and by reaching a centrifugal impulse, it liberates from the gravitational center and obtains a more chaotic and diffused motion towards the outside of the *Map*’s edges.

The pattern of circling can also be found in Viktor Pivovarov’s paintings from the cycle *Projects for a Lonely Person*, also 1975. By commenting on the commonplace and ideologically prescribed patterns of behavior and thinking, Pivovarov presents a Soviet citizen as a lonely person locked in the seclusion of his or her private apartment and reveals inescapability from the daily routine of Soviet life. In the *Day Regimen for a Lonely Person*, a big clock marks out a strict schedule where both working and relaxing activities are equally regulated. Pivovarov’s *Project of Dreams for a Lonely Person* presents a collection of seven available or prescribed dreams according to the days of the week. Yet, as many scholars have noticed, for Pivovarov, such

\(^{20}\) Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 156.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 163.
loneliness seems to be not only desirable, but also honorable and joyful. Loneliness as invertedness into the inner microworld allows for an introspection and meditative existence. As Pavel Pepperstein has noted, such private rooms were originally developed by Dostoyevsky, but in the Soviet Union they reappeared after the boom of apartment building construction which reached its peak by the mid-1970s. Unlike Kabakov’s communal apartment, Pivovarov’s room is a private enclosed space which is potentially a metaphysical space. Monastyrski’s Atlas invites for individual pilgrimage through the book, whether it be anticlimactic, with moves and turns, and yet predisposed for unhurried careful and reflective reading guided by the author. Interestingly, it is during Monastyrski’s work on Atlas (late spring to summer 1975), when he and his wife Irina Nakhova, another Moscow Conceptualist artist, moved from a room in the communal apartment on Bolshoi Ovchinnikovsky side street to their “luxurious one-bedroom apartment” of a newly-built building on Malaya Gruzinskaya street.

Détournements of the Literary and Artistic Allusions
The multidirectional and anticlimactic narrative that Atlas offers to the viewer-reader via its pseudo-scientific language is also evident in literary and artistic references throughout the book. Among literary allusions that Atlas presents, Stendhal’s novel The Red and The Black (1830) appears most frequently. As an example of French realist literature, with its progressive narrative and culminating dénouement, it opposesthe reading and viewing experience that Atlas presents. The novel portrays a talented and ambitious young man, Julien Sorel, who was born to a carpenter and who aspired to break through the social hierarchy by various means, including clergy, diplomacy, military, and, most prominently, passionate romances with women of powerful families. In spite of his success to rise above his working-class background, he knew well that the upper classes would never accept him as equal regardless of the title he acquires. Julien’s career ends abruptly when in a fear of jealousy his former lover betrays him; he eventually gets executed.

References to Stendhal abound on the level of both language and semiotics, for example, by playing with the signification of red and black and presenting the two colors as either an indexical sign or as a verbal denotation on pages 5 and 48. But most of the references to Stendhal’s novel appear in relation to the Map’s elements No. 13–20, which comprise the third circle. On these pages, the novel’s two main characters—Julien Sorel and Mathilde de la Mole—appear along with some arbitrary details of certain episodes, such as Mathilde’s comb or a “copper spherical knob on the back of Mathilde’s bed.” One of the most frequently repeating elements throughout the book is the ladder, which serves Julien to climb to his lover’s private suits. In Atlas, it appears again, both as a word and as an image. Interestingly, however, as an image, the elevating symbol frequently adapts a horizontal position which makes it look more like a railroad, affirming a

horizontal rather than a vertical movement and commenting on the inescapability of Julien’s social position. As an impotent ladder (or a railroad), it sometimes also appears without one of the side rails and with a caption “Mathilde’s comb,” which highlights the erotic connotation of the nightly affairs of the characters. In addition to these playful mimetic metamorphoses of the ladder, a large passage from *The Red and the Black* is quoted in full on pages 23 and 24, in which Julien and Mathilde during one of their secret meetings discuss how to hide the ladder that Julien just climbed up. Each word “LADDER” in its various grammatical cases is capitalized in this passage. So are all the forms of the word ‘SHE’ that stands for it (the word “ladder” in Russian has a female grammatical gender): “In a few moments he had IT [HER in Russian] under control and put IT [HER] up against Mathilde’s window…” Such capitalization collides the image of the ladder with that of Julien’s lover, further elaborating on Julien’s aspirations and passions.

The anti-sequential compilation of motifs from the novel subverts the cumulative nature of its narrative. The most prominent among them, the leitmotif of the ladder, acquires multiple meanings by going through different modifications, and eventually becomes an impuissant symbol of progression. It functions as a synecdoche, responsible for representing the original Stendhal text, as well as the third circle of the *Map of Elements*, and even the entire *Atlas* since its epigraph on page 2 also comes from the novel: “What shall we do with this enormous ladder? she asked her lover; Where to hide it?” Both the ladder and its modification in the form of a railroad often appear in Monastyrski’s art. In CA actions, for example, ladders and railroads feature as visual symbols or sound effects of trains and Moscow subway, etc. CA’s practice of walking and contemplation unfolded the vastness of the large open spaces in both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The very trip to the countryside often included a railroad ride. The origin of the significance of these signs may go as far back as to Monastyrski’s childhood; his grandfather was a train-engineer and the family lived by the railroad for a long time, while his father was a pilot. For Monastyrski, both means of transportation—a train and a plane—became associated with vast open spaces calling for vertical and horizontal exploration.

In quoting the passage about Mathilde burying Julien’s head after his execution, Monastyrski replaced the word “head” with capitalized “LADDER” and added his name to the author’s one (Fig. 7):

“Left alone with Fouqué, she insisted on burying her lover’s LADDER with her own hands. Fouqué narrowly avoided losing his mind with grief.”

25 In Monastyrski’s own art later on, both symbols often adapt Orthodox Christian or Buddhist connotation.
26 Conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.
Monastyrski commented on the character’s tragic fate in an absurd and sarcastic way, replacing the tragic dénouement with an ambiguous episode which possibly leaves Julien’s story line open. Challenging the authorship of the text might indicate enthusiasm of the young poet-artist about entering the world of literature and arts with his ambitious experimental project.

Several other literary and artistic allusions also disrupt progressive story-telling, as most of them refer to avant-garde modernist works and acquire unusual positions in the Map of Elements. These allusions gather in eight constellations related to the elements 21 through 28 correspondingly (the fourth circle). These constellations are The Magic Mountain (named after Thomas Mann’s novel from 1924), Wild Strawberries (Ingmar Bergman’s film from 1957), Music for Duchamp (John Cage’s musical piece from 1947), Thyrididae (one of the families of moths), Black Square (Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist painting, 1915 original), Cherry Orchard (Anton Chekhov’s play from 1903), XIX century (a constellation related to Fyodor Tiutchev’s poem from 1850), and Polygraphic Constellation (related to Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio’s 1508 painting Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist, Saint Sebastian and Donor Bassiano Da Ponte). Each constellation has about 10 to 20 stars, all of which feature names related directly or contextually to the corresponding constellation’s name. The only exception is the constellation Cherry Orchard, which includes stars like “Didi” and “Gogo,” referring to the play by Samuel Becket Waiting for Godot (1953), and “Josef K.,” the main character of Franz Kafka’s novel The Trial (1915).
Inverted Ekphrasis

At first sight, such a combination of works and one biological index drastically different from each other in terms of genre, chronology, style, and content, seems too arbitrary. Their collage-like juxtaposition, however, not only reveals the absurdity and dynamics peculiar to the Atlas’ nature itself, but also brings to light further dimensions of its unfolding descriptive narrative.

Mann’s novel The Magic Mountain which is the name of the first constellation, presents the small introspective world of the sanatorium, where the main character Hans Castorp arrives for just a few weeks, though eventually stays for several years. The monotonous life of the sanatorium unfolds in a poignant collision of life and death, health and illness, laughter and melancholy. Time there reveals its elusive and subjective nature. As opposed to Stendhal’s ladder, the (impotent) elevating symbol, which operates in the common horizontal social order, the magic effect of the mountain elevates one into the introspective self-contained microcosm of the sanatorium with its decelerated perception of time. In Cherry Orchard’s conflict between the old world of aristocracy, helpless in the face of change, and the new pragmatic world of the bourgeoisie, no one triumphs. It resolves on the side of the latter—a new, capitalist, man—but the skepticism of the play and its tragicomic tone leaves the narrative unresolved, suggesting a different resolution to the history, which proved itself in a bit more than a decade after the play was written. In Beckett’s play, time stops completely as two main characters are waiting for a mysterious third member, who never arrives. As opposed to the charming and ephemeral blossom of the Cherry trees, a poignant symbol of inevitable change towards the unknown, a dry willow tree in Beckett’s play is an uncanny symbol of unchanging stability and existential crisis. It looks simultaneously as a tree, a shrub, and a bush; it is already dead; it is an object to hang oneself on, however, action never takes place in this play. The narrative gets stuck in circulations and becomes progressively static, revealing the characters’ fractured memory and fractured sense of time and self.

Interestingly, all three writers—Mann, Chekhov, and Beckett—never perceived their texts as solely tragedies, but ascribed comic or even farcical sense to them. So did Kafka in relation to his novel The Trial. The storyline of Joseph K. similarly ends abruptly before the mystery of the plot (the real charge of Joseph K.) gets resolved. This absurdist and dystopian novel makes the reader endlessly and futilely wait for the answer.

It is hard to escape generalizations in an attempt to relate these texts to each other and to Atlas. Yet, all of them describe mundane affairs of characters who are paralyzed by their circumstances, which they do not overcome. It seems that the viewer-reader’s engagement with Atlas follows a comparable trajectory of being transfixed by the ambiguous nature of the book with its similarly anticlimactic narrative. Even though Atlas initiates an active engagement with the viewer-reader, it does so by continually delaying the resolution of its many tensions. The structure of Atlas holds the audience’s attention by intriguing them with hints of meaning and baffling with explanations, exciting with familiar data and confounding with dead-ends, teasing with consistent patterns and perplexing with miscalculations. Atlas operates as the agent that initiates and orchestrates the interaction by giving the viewer-readers certain options and/or asking them to perform certain acts, which the viewer may or may not take up. While the discussion of
the Map of Elements evolves, references to the Map, other folios, and outside sources multiply, each time making the viewer-reader rethink their strategies of approaching the book. In Waiting for Godot, the characters are waiting for the action to begin which actually describes the viewers of the play exactly, and this is precisely how Atlas operates too. “Meaning is not happening in the place where it should be happening,” as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit commented on the play. Instead, it resides precisely in the audience’s experience of and reaction to it.

Two other constellations—XIX century and Polygraphic Constellation—continue playing on the varieties of the viewer-reader’s response. Tiutchev’s Romantic poem “The Feast is Over…” quoted in full on page 43, contrasts symbols of the eternity of the macrocosm and the finality of human life by describing the end of the feast and the departing guests who in the darkness of the night observe the “light of clear stars” which “respond to the [guests’] mortal gazes.” The stars of the Map of Elements could easily be imagined as looking back at the viewer-reader who is puzzled by their emanating stream of narrative, interwoven with their enigmatic self-enclosed life. The poem’s distinct rhythm and rigid symmetry (earthly delights of the feast in the first ten lines and the night scenery in the last ten lines) is playfully reverberated in the names of the constellation’s twenty stars: each name is formed by the last word of each line of the poem, e.g. the rhyming words. The XIX century, thus, collides the formal qualities of the poetic text with the ephemerality of the effects they produce.

A similar collision happens in Polygraphic Constellation, which translates a painting, namely Boltraffio’s Madonna and Child, 1508, (Fig. 9) into a map of its formal qualities by presenting a diagram with colorful planets and stars. The latter are named according to the painting’s composition, such as Celestial Blue Star which corresponds to the representation of the sky in the painting, or Nebula “Red Sleeves” according to the red sleeves of the donor’s garment in the foreground. Even though the map of the constellation registers strictly formal elements of the painting, the spatial configuration of the stars is not precise (for example, the map compresses the vertical format of the painting into a horizontal one). Such a translation rejects strictly factual, machine-like recording in favor of the human perception which attunes to deeper ephemeral connotations behind the formal qualities. These three pages which feature Polygraphic Constellation themselves constitute an example of emotional potential of color—they are the only three colorful pages in the principally black and white book. After the exhausting study of forty-four pages preceding the Polygraphic Constellation, these colorful pages generate a miraculous effect of treatment by color by presenting something finally suitable for pleasurable contemplation.

29 In his later oeuvre, Monastyrski has drawn similar patterns on different surfaces (photographs, objects, etc.) but the dots and lines have become golden.
30 Boltraffio’s painting was restored c. 2008–12, when several elements were removed as later additions (for example, a lily flower in the foreground), while others were revealed (for instance, the vegetation on the rock in the background). In 1975, Monastyrski mapped the old version of the painting. Hungarian Restaurator’s Association website about the restoration “G. A. Boltraffio, Lodi Madonna 1508,” accessed February 2, 2018, http://www.restauratorkamara.hu/portfolio/megjelenito.php?id=1046&show_user_id=518.
The viewer-reader’s experience of the book relies on its many unresolved tensions. Such an experience is comparable to what Monastyrski later described as “unresolved anticipation” in relation to the art of the Collective Actions. In the “Preface” to the first volume of CA actions, he described the notion of *anticipation* in detail, making it almost the central concept of early CA work. The actions were usually based on simple activities, such as walking, lying on the ground, pulling a rope, looking into binoculars, etc. And yet, choreographed primarily by Monastyrski, the CA scenarios were often puzzling and attempting to “trick” the viewer’s anticipations, for example, by ending an action abruptly. Monastyrski wrote that the goal of CA is not “showing” “something to the viewer-participants… [but] preserving the impression of anticipation as of an important, significant event.”

That means that scenario functioned just as an instrument: actual movements and objects were just the means “by which consciousness [was] drawn into the event’s construction.” It was precisely the anticipation that constituted the event, rather than anything that was expected to be seen or heard, therefore making the audiences’ perception the subject of the action’s demonstration. *Atlas* plays with the viewer’s anticipation in a similar way. It transfers their attention from what is happening in the book to how they mentally engage with it, i.e., to the mechanisms of cognition.

---


32 Ibid., 11. Translation Ibid, 103. Kalinsky in her article “Drowning in Documents” argues that in CA art the relationship of empty action to the existential essence is indexical: “empty action is both the visible sign and the actual mechanism by which an action’s existential essence is experienced by the viewer.”, 102.

33 Thus, a complex notion of the audience of the CA actions, as well as the *Atlas*. The term “viewer-reader” that I have been using so far, which indicates varying modes of perception, is elaborated from Monastyrski’s own writings in which the “viewers” (spectators) and “participants” have often been interchangeable. The format of involvement—whether observing the action, or participating in it, or reading a book, or viewing it, or just paging through—delegated its essential significance to a more global aim—to hold the audience’s attention via anticipation.
inevitably involves “non-understanding” or “incorrect understanding” to which Monastyrski ascribed strategic roles since they were making the viewer engaged to the fullest.34

Complex temporality of anticipation emerges from its leap over the present moment towards the future. The Atlas’ second constellation refers to Ingmar Bergman’s Wild Strawberries, which explores, amongst other things, the ephemerality of time dependent on subjective perception. On a long car ride from Stockholm to Lund for his honoring ceremony, Professor Isaak Borg becomes overwhelmed by the recollections of his life, which now seem to him to have passed so quickly. At the same time, time literally stretches out while Dr. Borg spends the day full of various deflections and détournements: encounters, visits, adventures, and solitude recollections. Atlas’ own multiple deflections and détournements create a sense of irregularity and discontinuity. From the very first pages, the choices of approaching the book grow in geometric progression: whether it is tracing numbers, calculating distances, counting letters, or hunting for frequent motifs (like Julien’s ladders or extratextual elements). One might also want to leave the Atlas for a while and switch to the sources cited in it in order to refresh the story lines, or at least to find out if the quotes from The Red and the Black are real (and, as we now know, not all of them are). Atlas very much invites us to explore all of these trajectories, although never fully resolves any of them precisely in order to hold the audience’s attention in the anticipation mode.

The constellations themselves could be seen as literal deflections that play with time. The very trajectory of the Map’s elements which develops clockwise directly alludes to clocks’ mechanism of time count. However, the constellations which relate to the third circle undermine the progressive pace of the Map’s numbers. First, the constellations are not depicted on the Map of Elements—they only come into sight in relation to the elements 21–28 on pages 35–46. Second, each of these pages features the right column with the numbers 45–54 correspondingly to which presumably each constellation is also related (Fig. 8). This set of numbers (45–54) comprises the last, irregular, circle. The constellations thus indicate certain environment where the third and the seventh circles are related beyond what is depicted on the Map of Elements. Furthermore, the stars in the constellations are numbered in order starting from 56—a subsequent number after the Map’s last element No. 55, as if continuing the Map beyond its visibility (which might bring into mind the handless clocks from Bergman’s film). The constellations’ elements go through 139, its last number, therefore comprising even more elements than those presented on the Map (84 in the constellations vs. 55 on the Map). Thus, in the description of the Map of Elements, the circling not only never stops since the inner and the outer circles (the third and the seventh ones) interconnect, but also manifests a weighty importance of these détournements which expand into large, invisible, and imaginary spaces.

34 Monastyrski describes how the participant of the action “intensely does not understand” or “incorrectly understands” the action. Monastyrski, “Predislovie” 11. Translated by Kalinsky in Collective Actions: Audience Recollections, 104.
In this context, the constellation *Music for Duchamp* expands beyond the visible via intervals and repetitions in music. John Cage originally wrote *Music for Duchamp* for Marcel Duchamp’s part of Hans Richter’s film *Dream That Money Can Buy* (1947). In his video, Duchamp used *Music for Duchamp* as a soundtrack for the main character’s dream which consisted of spinning and overlapping disc illusions, alternated with an image of a female nude descending a staircase. This visual narrative, according to the film’s scenario, was meant to hypnotize and relax the dreamer. The description of the expanding and contracting circles of the *Map of Elements* does not necessarily produce a comparable effect of relaxation, but it does induce a slowed-down progression throughout the book. Although Monastyrski did not know about Richter’s film when working on *Atlas* back in 1975, he was already a big fan of John Cage’s musical experimentations. *Music for Duchamp* captivated him by its meditative effect based on repetition and particular use of intervals and silence.\(^{35}\) The stars of the constellation arrange into a sequence of identical rectangles, while the stars’ names are formed by sequential repetition of Cage and Duchamp’s last names. The streams of repetition expose the *Atlas*’ meditative mode in which intervals generate clearings and empty zones.

\(^{35}\) Correspondence with the author, March 1, 2018. Quoted with permission.
In Moscow Conceptualism, the concept of emptiness (pustota in Russian) plays a critical role and tends to come up in relation to the issue of affect, although different artists ascribed various connotations to it. In the context of the Collective Actions, Monastyrski used the term to describe the specific spatiotemporal effect of anticipation. It was defined phenomenologically (pustota of the empty field) and psychologically (the experience of anticipation presumably had a liberating effect on consciousness by freeing it from mundane routine). Upon the participants’ arrival to the field, its emptiness dovetailed with the emptiness of the “field of consciousness,” thus making the latter (the “field of consciousness”) the very substance of the action.36

One of the first artists to use the term emptiness was Ilya Kabakov. In his Ten Characters cycle, each of the ten stories ended in the character’s disappearance in the whiteness of the last blank page, which manifested his or her real or symbolic death. For Kabakov, emptiness had an existential dimension; it meant a clearing, a non-space and non-existence, into which a character escaped from his or her loneliness induced by a specific mode of Soviet everyday life. Although Monastyrski had not yet known Kabakov in person when working on Atlas, they eventually realized many shared aesthetic principles after they met and the CA work began.37 Similarly to the Kabakovian characters’ escapes into extraterrestrial zones, Atlas offers transcendence into the inner landscapes, which later in the art of the CA materialized in the field actions. Yet, for Monastyrski, it takes up a slightly different angle. As a book for individual reading, Atlas explores mental expanses and performs spatiализation of consciousness. Constellations-deflections located in the invisible space of the Map (in its empty zone) attempt to visualize this spatiализation of consciousness, its extending mental landscapes. According to Monastyrski, extraordinary aesthetic findings and innovative strategies in the early Moscow Conceptualist circle were often described as prodvinutyye (“advanced”)—the word’s connotation of forward movement emphasizes the expanding impulse.38

The effect of the Atlas’ viewing-reading experience is ambiguous; Monastyrski does not necessarily want to bore or tire the viewer-reader (like Kabakov meant to during his long sessions of reading out loud his albums to the audience), but neither does he seeks to facilitate a necessarily positive effect. Even if one gathers patience and diligence and attempts to approach Atlas as a continuous narrative, its circular and overlapping structure (as opposed to the linear one of Kabakov’s albums, for example) will soon prove such attempt impracticable. Monastyrski’s teasing-and-tricking strategy reveals Atlas’ subtle irony. The phrase “Book for Idiots” which appears twice in the book possibly suggests that any reader is doomed to feel themselves an idiot when reading it. Although it is not clear what book this phrase refers to (if any), according to Monastyrski, it describes the Atlas itself.39 The phrase could also be seen as a pun at the classical narrative of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel The Idiot, which is never mentioned in the Atlas directly.
Inverted Ekphrasis

Yet, such an allusion might ironize the dream about Atlas ever revealing its covert coherence and mysterious truth to a good, open-hearted and diligent reader. Elena Kalinsky has argued that artists of Kabakov’s circle, including the Collective Actions group, used subtle irony as an aesthetic strategy to clear up space for metaphysical issues. Instead of potentially psychopathologic earnest circling after the Map’s manifold trajectories, Atlas invites for meditative, ironic, and self-reflective experience of viewing and reading.

The social and political context of the mid-1970s, when Atlas was produced, is most vividly captured in the Black Square Constellation. The stars of the Black Square refer to the revolutionary icon as it was perceived in two different periods—in its own time and during Atlas’ time. The name of one of the constellation’s stars is “Visual sukhotka” in which sukhotka, in common use, refers to “emaciation.” It reveals the bad irony of the Black Square’s victory over the sun which turned out as a prediction of the opaque, badly visible future as revealed some sixty years after Malevich created the painting. Planet “ Sovdepia” characterizes the “long seventies” during which the Atlas was made (sovdepia is a neologism common during the late Soviet period; it gave a disparaging tone to the name of the country or, more generally, to the social, political and economic life in the Soviet Union). The name of another star, “White Frame,” alludes to the margins, the emptiness, and the underground where life had often taken place in the 1970s, while the black square itself had become what the constellation indicates as “Metaphysical Nebula” rather than a confident symbol of the new world. As Alexei Yurchak has evocatively argued, life in late Socialism unfolded at the tenuous terrain between the so-called official and unofficial cultures, revealing the paradoxes of their co-existence. Not only the Black Square constellation comments on this, but also the entire Atlas with its paradoxical intertwinement of the eternal narrative and its slowed-down pace, continual inconsistencies and the promise of resolution, the author’s authoritative guidance and the encouraged imagination of the viewer-reader.

The Self-Reflectivity of Atlas as an Inverted Ekphrasis

Atlas flirts with, but ultimately resists multiple styles and genres: poetry, conceptualism, performance, and the genre of albums. One of the challenges in defining the specificity of Atlas’ artistic nature is a puzzling relationship between the Map of Elements and its description. While the latter strives for precision and expressiveness, it nevertheless leaves the actual subject of its account in mystery and itself becomes an eloquent poetic text which overweighs its subject. Such a descriptive mode echoes ekphrastic texts, which originated as a rhetorical exercise that celebrated

---

42 The format of albums swamped Moscow Conceptualism in 1975, becoming as artists themselves and many scholars had argued, an independent genre.
another artwork by attempting to “outdo” its aesthetic impact. The striving for vividness in *Elementary Poetry No. 2—Atlas* obscures more than it explains, pointing to the renowned pitfall of the literal ambition to ever meet the visual. Yet, it tries to leap over that gap by interweaving the verbal and the visual within the analysis. Moreover, Monastyrski’s own six poems in the *Atlas* which are almost indiscernible from other charts or lists equate poetry and pseudo-scientific analysis in the face of descriptive process.

Ekphrastic texts demand more than just literal understanding, however authoritative the author might be in guiding the reader. *Atlas* too, invites imagination and unending interpretation via different ways of perception.

And yet, the questions remain: what is it that the *Map of Elements* represents (or imagines)? Why does the book describe it? Or why does the *Map* have to be described? The referent of the *Map* remains a mystery, even though so much of it is dedicated to its explanation. One of the possible answers would be that the *Map* represents a complex geography of literary and artistic worlds seen through varying historical perspectives, which Monastyrski as a young artist and poet was imagining to enter with his ambitious poetic experiment. *Poem No. 2* on page 33 describes the geography of the aesthetic styles and waves according to the cardinal direction (Fig. 10). It draws an intricate and mathematically precise picture of their relationships and influences. The poem connects these styles and waves to the elements 13–20, which on the *Map*, mark semi-arches similar to waves. Each of the elements 13–20 has its own explanatory page in the book (pp. 13–33). Thus, a diagram with North-Western style on page 30 (Fig. 7), which is marked with “Rosa” and “Benoni,” two novels by Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, seems to be reasonable. Yet, the lack of other explicit references and scattered references to Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* throughout the entire circle undermine such a straightforward interpretation. (The constellations with allusions to arts and literature mismatch this scheme of aesthetic geography too.) As always, *Atlas* teases with clues but the inconsistencies undo the academicist impulse for totalizing pictures.

---

43 Literature on ekphrasis is vast. Being more than just a mimetic description, ekphrasis embraces various functions, which were promoted or developed at different periods of history: from informing the reader and guiding them through the work, to sharing the emotional or spiritual experience, to providing imaginative reach to the artwork, to competing in rhetoric (literary ambition), and finally to posing questions about the nature of art. Among major works, see, for example, James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); among others.

Another important link to the origin of the Map is the Atlas’ preceding book from the Elementary Poetry series, namely the very first one, Elementary Poetry No. 1. On Statics, created a month or two before Atlas (February–March 1975). The book has a similar format and style and consists of 56 pages divided into four sections. One of its repeating motifs is a wheel with eight spokes, while the compositional center of the Map of Elements looks as a similar circle with eight sections formed by the crossing of four axes (North–South, East–West, and two diagonal ones). The axes radiate from the circle and organize elements in space. In the Statics the wheel appears on the very first page as a single element and opens up a twelve-page section called Elements. In the next section Introductory Sonorii (28 pages), the wheel travels through minimalist diagrammatic landscapes which feature a hill, a pit, and a road. The diagrams are altered with Monastyrski’s minimalist poems, which through their repetitive motifs and sounds of a moving wheel create a sense of the wheel’s determined motion. In the Epilogue (8 pages) the landscape diagrams combine to form various geometric shapes, inside or outside of which the wheel appears, now less active. The last section Dreams consists of five diagrams which become progressively more and more complex via the cluster of multiple graphic elements, including the wheel.45 Like

45 The complex and enigmatic book, which has also never been published or translated, deserves its own thorough scholarly attention, which is impossible here due to the formal and thematic limits of this article. Briefly, the section on Dreams is especially elaborate and calls for psychoanalytical approach, amongst other methodologies.
in *Atlas*, the wheel in *Statics* also organizes space and time throughout the book—from movement in its travelling phase to static all-encompassing diagrams. However, *Atlas* unfolds in an opposite direction: it starts with a static scheme of the *Map of Elements* and unravels the descriptive narrative into a multidirectional, vigorous performance of the viewer-reader’s dynamic interaction with the book accompanied by continuing interpretation. In *Statics*, the initial dynamics of the world, as symbolized by the wheel, generate the concluding diagrams that claim for totalizing pictures. Conversely, a reinvented wheel in the second book of the series organizes space for the elements and makes the “universal” picture of the *Map of Elements* unfold into the being-in-the-world via the viewer-reader’s elaborate engagement with it.

Martin Heidegger’s idea of *being-in-the-world* refers to one’s fundamental *thrownness* into a world as a web of meaning, i.e. as our essential involvement in multiple contexts. Monastyrski’s experimental descriptive exercise attempted to reinvent visual and literal vocabularies in order to illuminate his own dwelling among various read, heard, seen, and experienced fascinating things. Such a translation of non-cognitive dwelling into a descriptive project might seem to be a failure from the very beginning as being at stake of falling into the Cartesian conceptualization. But Monastyrski escaped rigid structures by illuminating the circling paths of his own continuous thoughts, interpretations, and insights. He did not mind including inconsistencies of such a descriptive narrative, since they corresponded to the always elusive essential experience of *Being*. This is also why the book is able to operate as an agent illuminating *Dasein* not only for the author, but for the viewer-reader too. The book does not exist as a static device. In other words, it never closes upon itself as a rigid structure of paths, but each and every time one views and reads the book it provides new reflections and détournements for thought. It presents such a circling pattern through the totality of references which at any new present moment engages in new interpretations. In fact, Monastyrski himself experienced this flexibility of the *Atlas*’ effect. He stated that no part of *Atlas* was arbitrary and every detail made clear sense to him when he was working on *Atlas* initially. However, Monastyrski also admitted that by 1997, when he started to translate *Atlas* into a digital version, he had forgotten most of the ideas and intentions behind specific details and had to submerge himself into a principally new project. Interestingly, he also claimed to find several “mistakes” in his original book, which he “gladly” corrected in the digital version; he also changed the picture and the stars of the *Polygraphic Constellation*.47

The viewer-reader’s physical and cognitive engagement with *Atlas* is its ultimate goal, while the book itself is only a tool for it. The excess of descriptive language with its tensions

---


47 Conversation with the author, September 5, 2017. The “corrected mistake” was a sequence of numbers, which slipped over one count on page 42 of the original book and which was evened by Monastyrski in the electronic version. He also changed some textual parts and added remarks throughout the book. The painting of the *Polygraphic Constellation* in the electronic version is a detail of the *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1504. The digital version of the *Elementary Poetry No. 2*—*Atlas* was published in Monastyrski, *Esteticheskie issledovaniia*, 379–440.
between different modes of representation and overlapping narratives make the viewer-reader constantly rethink their strategies of approaching the book. Eventually they find themselves focused on their own tactics of viewing and reading the Atlas.\textsuperscript{48} Such engagement with the variety of contexts transfers the aesthetic weight from the object or scenario onto the audience’s self-reflective interaction with it (as practiced in CA actions later, too). The problem of context and its relationship with subject is the main theme of the third artist book of the series Elementary Poetry No. 3. Paraformal Complex (1975). Paraform (paraforma in Russian) is Monastyrski’s neologism which refers to “something around the form”, i.e. to the multiple contexts which diffuse text, artwork, or any subject.\textsuperscript{49} Every paraform is unique since the contexts are infinitely diverse. While Atlas performs the diffusion of the text in multiple contexts, Paraformal Complex focuses on the effect of such diffusion by interweaving a comparable performative format of the book with an extensive pseudo-academic deliberation on the question (the entire text is nothing but 198 questions with correlated answers). The last Elementary Poetry book of the series vigorously reinforces the idea that the main subject of the artwork takes place in the audience’s perception of it via interpretation of multiple contexts.\textsuperscript{50}

We now got closer to the key question of the referent of the Map of Elements. Since the Atlas’ ultimate subject is the reader’s experience of viewing and reading the book, the Map directly relates to the patterns of this engagement. The progression of numbers in the Map of Elements displays certain dynamics and temporality. With the last two irregular circles, the progression breaks through the regularity of the previous even circles and obtains an increasingly chaotic and diffused movement, as if spinning in the beginning and bursting forth from the heavy gravitational pull of the center to a free flight towards the edges. This movement, from a more or less orderly and rational pattern to a defused state of random excitation, corresponds to the viewer-reader’s experience of Atlas; in the very beginning of reading the book, the Map of Elements seems to promise legibility but its further discussion obscures the Map more than explaining it. Thus, an elaborate engagement with the book—repetitive and potentially rational in the beginning and chaotic in the end—is what Map of Elements schematically represents. Monastyrski attempted to

\textsuperscript{48} The Atlas’s instrumental role, revealed in the audience’s overwhelming physical and cognitive engagement with the text, is characteristic of conceptual art in general, which stresses ephemerality of the idea unfolded in the audience perception at the expense of the materiality of the artwork’s traditional format.

\textsuperscript{49} The term, according to Monastyrski was not successful and did not become popular in the conceptualist circles, but his later term expositional semiotic field (ekspozicionnoe znakovoe pole) bears close meaning. Conversation with the author, October 7, 2017. Andrei Monastyrski, ed., Slovar’ Terminov Moskovskoi Kontseptual’noi Shkoly (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999). Also available in translation in Eșanu, Transition in Post-Soviet Art, 326.

\textsuperscript{50} The book has only been published in Russian recently, but has never been translated. See Andrei Monastyrski, Poeticheskii sbornik (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2010), 266–331. Elementary Poetry No. 3. Paraformal Complex also deserves a separate thorough scholarly analysis, which is not possible here. Particularly, a close examination in relation to Jacques Derrida’s idea of dissemination could be fruitful, especially because Monastyrski did not know about the philosopher and the deconstruction method until around 1979–80, when through the correspondence with an art critic Viktor Tupitsyn he got acquainted with key works and concepts of contemporary thought. See Viktor Agamov-Tupitsyn, Tet-a-Tet: Perepiska, Dialogi, Interpretatsiia, Faktografiia (Vologda, Russia: BMK, 2013).
visualize the viewing/reading or, more broadly, thinking process as a continual circling-layering, in other words as a sort of uneven synchronization of the semiosis process that develops via rotation. Every new layer of information superimposes onto the previous knowledge and experience, dovetailing with familiar points, but also expanding outwards with unfitting information.

In 1985, Monastyrski orchestrated a CA series of five actions Perspectives of Speech Space, which developed in a comparable trajectory. The series started as an investigation of peripheral vision and tested physical and psychological limits of human perception, eventually becoming an extraordinary experiment in continuous production of the descriptive self-referential narrative. After the last action of the series, Monastyrski visualized them in a diagram which depicts a convoluted multilayered discourse produced by the series’ endless reflection and repetition (Fig. 11). It contests evolutionary model of epistemology and, instead, exemplifies what Monastyrski calls “expanding circles of reflection.” The diagram’s circles radiating from the center echoes that of the Map of Elements: the expansion of the circles towards unexplored mental spaces is potentially everlasting. Even though the Perspectives series was based on collaborative discursive practice, while Atlas was meant for individual viewing and reading, both artworks sprang from the fundamental ontological roots of description.

Fig. 11 Interrelation of demonstrative fields in the series of CA actions Perspectives of Speech Space. Andrei Monastyrski, series Perspectives of Speech Space, diagram, 1985 (reconstructed)

51 Documentation for the series include sixteen audio recordings, at least five analytical texts written by Monastyrski, ten art objects and three serial structures, created by Monastyrski specifically for the actions, hundreds of photographs and two slide-films based on them, five hours of collaborative musical improvisations, about fifteen note-books with the viewers’ on-site notes, among other productions.

52 Monastyrski called the collaborative discursive practice of the Perspectives series recheniye, which is another neologism translated as “speaching.” Andrei Monastyrski, “Predislovi k tret’emu tomu,” in Poeziki za gorod, Tom 2–3, 228–37.

53 Correspondence with the author, February 23, 2018. Quoted with permission.
The self-reflectivity of Atlas is twofold. On the one hand, the book describes one of its own pages and produces a unique type of self-ekphrastic text. On the other hand, the effect of the Atlas is self-reflection of the viewer-reader in terms of their own approaches to the book. The paradox of the Map of Elements as a representation of the audience’s engagement with the book is that the Map exists before the engagement happens. In other words, Map of Elements predicts the engagement of the viewer-reader with itself and at the same time also generates this engagement by means of its own description. Such complex combination of self-referentiality and descriptive mode is what produces the Atlas’ puzzling effect. From this perspective Atlas’ ekphrastic nature is more than just a description of the Map of Elements—it is also twofold. The book functions as an inverted ekphrasis: the descriptive text exists before the actual artwork unfolds. It is only upon encounter with the Atlas that the descriptive mode activates.

Map of Elements represents something that only will happen or have potential of happening, but upon happening (when the viewer starts to view and read the book) the Map itself becomes the subject of description. The process of semiosis always eludes direct perception: it unfolds as the process, which is hard to spotlight other than by registering it post-factum but at that point it becomes conceptualized. Interestingly, the nature of any ekphrastic text leaves the original object of description unreachable, even if the artwork is not lost or imagined but exists and is accessible.

Historically, ekphrasis had different functions, one of which gave birth to art criticism, which grew out of descriptive practice and has since then proved to be a larger project of interrogation into the nature of art. From this perspective, Atlas might be interpreted as Monastyrski’s speculation about the nature of art—what it is and, even more importantly, how it is perceived—which later became central to the practice of Collective Actions. The group has

---

54 As Dennis Ioffe suggested in “Andrei Monastyrski’s Post-Semiosis,” the entire body of abundant descriptive documentation of CA actions could be defined as ekphrastic text, without which all the CA actions, historically, and semantically, could be seriously questioned. Although the actions were generating interpretation during the action, they were aiming at the very process of questioning and advancing into the new zones, while the production of meaning happened after the event took place. Ioffe wrote: “That which is not described, does not seem to exist. Visibility which is not fixed in some sort of reflective description cannot claim for cultural significance and any kind of role in the art world” (218). Thus, in Ioffe’s examination, description is analyzed only as what Monastyrski and Tupitsin in one of their dialogs called post-semiosis, i.e. post-factum reflection on art in the form of overwhelming documentation process, while that which happens on the field is “pre-textual,” “non-discursive.” See Viktor Tupitsin and Andrei Monastyrski, “Razgovor v Moskve, 1989” in Tupitsin, Tet-a-Tet, 233–55. Atlas, however, emphasizes a different side of this important descriptive mode, i.e. that which takes place while the artwork is happening.

55 Dennis Ioffe suggested an idea of an inverted ekphrasis in relation to Ilya Kabakov’s art. According to Ioffe, Kabakov’s total installations with embedded fragments of speech of the Soviet communal living exemplifies the instant when the visual describes the discursive practice. The inversion in this case is medial, while the inverted ekphrasis of Atlas, as I argue, manifests temporal inversion: when the description precedes and generates its own subject of description. Ioffe, “Andrei Monastyrski’s Post-Semiosis,” 259.

56 Regarding the relationship of ekphrasis and art criticism, other literary writings, and intermediality, see John Hollander, The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Peter Wagner, ed., Icons-Text-Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality (New York: W. de Gruyter,
been especially interested in what the perception of art does to the viewer/reader/participant. The temporal inversion of the Atlas’ ekphrasis sets the tone to the entire practice of Monastyrski’s art and the CA by formulating and performing key aesthetic strategies and foreseeing the ephemerality of spatiotemporal field actions. Entering the world of visual arts from a literary perspective sets Monastyrski apart from most of his European and American peers and sheds more light on the importance of descriptive exercise (whether in speech, or writing, or representing visually) in the context of Moscow Conceptualism. Atlas is Monastyrski’s earliest and probably the most eloquent manifestation of this. More broadly, it also provides some deep insights into the renowned Moscow Conceptualism’s literary dimension which, in the form of descriptive practice, revealed an elaborate interrelation between the visual, the verbal, and the performative, as an interrogation into fundamentally ontological matters.

Bibliography


Rosenfeld, Alla, ed. in *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2011.


