

Avant-garde in the archive

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For the unofficial culture, which emerged in Soviet Russia during the 1960s, access to and knowledge of the early Russian avant-garde was limited. As a consequence, the avant-garde gained an almost mythical status in the self-understanding of this culture. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, a new experimental art and literature emerged, which questioned this mythical status. This meant the rise of what Boris Groys has named, an “anti-avant-garde avant-garde”. One way of expressing this relationship to the avant-garde was through an extensive direct or indirect use of the archive as a figure, concept, and idea. It is the purpose of this paper to analyse the use of the archive in the works of the Russian conceptualist artist Vadim Zakharov in order to show how this use of the archive represents a relationship to the past in general and to the early Russian avant-garde specifically.

Vadim Zakharov entered the Moscow conceptualist art scene in the late 1970s and soon became an obsessive archivist and collector. Through different media (printing, photography, installation, and video), this archival material was used and reused in his later works. Thus, his early works documented the Moscow art scene and performances with photographs and interviews, while in recent works, 3-meter-tall archive files invite viewers to experience Russian Art History presented inside on video screens, reproductions and photographs. In all the works, cataloguing, listing, and filing play a significant role.

With an outset in the index as a figure of the archive and the concept of performativity inherent in recent memory theories, I will show how a certain kind of ambiguity or play is created in Zakharov’s works between the physical form and the ideal content, between the past and the present. Through this play, the idealist Russian cultural tradition as well as the propositions of the unofficial culture is questioned.