

**P**ROJECT *DICTIONARY OF THE CAUCASUS*: FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO CONCEPTUALIST EXHIBITION.  
*Summary*

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What is the genre of the *Dictionary of the Caucasus* exhibition (Tsaritsyno Museum, Moscow, 2012) that brought together artifacts from seventeen public institutions in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Makhachkala, from private collections and the studios of contemporary artists, and whose catalog contained over 1,500 illustrations? Why were Ivan Aivazovskii's paintings displayed next to archaeological artifacts and weapons, and ethnographic costumes next to contemporary art installations? Why was this vast and varied material assembled together—and why was it presented neither by region or local traditions nor in chronological order, but alphabetically: by keywords with which the Caucasus is associated in Russian culture? How, if at all, does this illustrate ethnographic conceptualism, the subject of this special issue?

This article comprises the reflections of a museum curator on the possibilities of using traditional exhibition material to create a conceptualist project. Conceptualism (from the Latin *conceptus*—thought, idea) was a trend in contemporary art that started in the 1960s. Conceptual art suggests that art is an intellectual concept—an author's intellectual gesture. Conceptual artists negate traditional forms of artistic expression and declare the impossibility of expressing an art idea through artwork and material objects, including art exhibitions. It is unlikely that this conceptualist rigor can be directly extrapolated from this exhibition's field of interest, which is to visualize a particular regional and historical experience. But it is, in my view, applicable to this project in the broader sense of conceptualist work through "text"—through exhibition and scientific practice, art, ideology, everyday life, and material objects. But what does it mean to call this *ethnographic* conceptualism?

This project engaged with ethnographic categories and materials by using the toolkit of contemporary art. My curatorial goal was to explore the notion of the Caucasus as a *region*, renowned for its ethnic and linguistic diversity, and to present a unified cultural and historical space. But the key to the linking of ethnography and conceptualism, as well as the key to the novelty of this project, was to show the Caucasus through the concept of the dictionary, in which I follow Serbian writer Milorad Pavić and his "lexicon novel of 100,000 words," the *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984). Three "pillars" support this project. The first one was the idea of the *dictionary*

as a compendium of concepts which form a kind of a verbal frame, a skeleton of the “culture of the peoples of the Caucasus.” Second, *conceptualism* helps to visualize this idea through a clear contrast with exhibition as a narrative series of objects. Third, the method of *ethnographic* conceptualism allowed me to engage with the traditional ethnographic visions of this region that dominate museum practice in Russia. In doing so, this project calls into question exactly what is an “ethnographic object.” The exhibition suggests that the object itself (whether movie, photograph, artisan craft, costume, pictorial art, or media art) is not as important as the semantic frame created by the curator, artist, or researcher. The object does not have to be ethnographic in any given accepted academic sense—Russian, Western, ethnological, social anthropological, and so on. It is the context of the exhibition that provides it with ethnographic meaning. But this particular project also displaced the “ethnographic” from its widely accepted meaning in Russia and in the Caucasus—referring either to “traditional culture” or “ethnicity.” Ethnography itself became a site of conceptualist experimentation.

A kaleidoscope of showpieces, from ancient archaeological artifacts to photographs, newsreel and video installations by modern artists, paintings of classical Russian and Soviet art, rare works of applied art, ritual masks, and an authentic supporting pillar of a highland *saklia* (dwelling) were exhibited in eleven halls of Tsaritsyno’s Grand Palace. The exhibition-dictionary featured more than 1,420 exhibits, including 1,394 original artifacts and about one hundred photographic prints, fifteen video scenes, and audio design. All this diversity had to work to form a single picture. The concept of the dictionary became a curatorial Ariadne’s thread. Exhibits worked as items of visual “translation” of familiar as well as little-known words and notions that consolidated “the Caucasus” in Russian tradition and mentality.

The theoretical focus of this project is the idea of translation—the transfer of concepts, terms, and images from one cultural context into another. Translation, of course, can never fully reproduce the meaning of the original. In this case, words which are usually perceived as typically “Caucasian” are often really not. *Aul* (village), *aksakal* (elder), *abrek* (bandit), *dzhigit* (noble warrior), *saklia* (dwelling), *shashlyk* (shish kebab), *kunak* (relative, friend)—none of these words originate in Caucasian languages. Many have Turkic roots, and many are not indigenous to the Caucasus, and if—and when—they circulate in everyday speech, they do so in a peculiar mixture of Russian and Caucasian languages. The source for most of these words is the Russian vocabulary of the nineteenth century, particularly of the era of the Caucasian War (1817–1864), where they appeared through Crimean Tatars who frequently worked as interpreters. Having settled in Russian romantic literature through these translations and Russian Orientalism, these words gradually became tools of understanding and interpretation of the Caucasus among scholars, writers, travelers, as well as in Russian everyday consciousness. It is important to note that this is not a “bad” translation from Caucasian languages into Russian but part of a new cultural reality—the *Russian-Caucasian space*. This is the reality we explore in this exhibition project.

Other words—like mountain, tower, tillage, fireplace, horseman, water spring, man—were picked out as the most significant for Caucasian life. Another sequence—

war, raid, bullet, captivity, memory—unfolded through the events of the dramatic and complicated history of the region, such as the Caucasian War, terrorism, slavery, and the like. This method allowed us to return the traditional ethnographic and artistic material to the viewer as a new conceptualist object. The world of the Caucasus opened up before the audience in an unusual manner—not as a set of ethnographic loci but as a heterogeneous space filled with various meanings.

There is another important characteristic of this exhibition-dictionary. A traditional exhibition requires the exhibits to have a label with a brief commentary that clarifies what the spectator is looking at. The *Dictionary of the Caucasus* suggests a reversal of this logic. Things and their annotations trade places—the material objects turn into visual “texts” to comment on the words and concepts. Here one can make a parallel with methods of conceptual art which actively employed texts that created new art forms—albums, wall newspapers (Ilya Kabakov), spatial text (Dmitrii Prigov), literary commentary on the performance such as those of the “Collective Actions” (Kollektivnye deistviia) group—together with material objects.

Let me note that this approach allows us to bring together the diverse, multicolored, and multilingual Caucasus into something holistic—to represent the Caucasus without dividing the material according to ethnicity, religion, history, or “culture.” But in doing so we, ironically, did not have to face the challenge of showing “the whole” Caucasus. It is obvious that one project is not enough for this difficult task and this is also something we aimed to show. As conceptualists might say: “There is a real Caucasus—go travel there.” We aimed at the *idea* of the “whole Caucasus” that can be seen through each part, that is, through each individual entry in the dictionary. The first exhibition hall introduced the viewer to this concept—*literally* suggesting that they enter the world of the Caucasus through a three-meter-high installation entitled *Caucasus as a Mountain of Languages*. The phrase “Welcome,” handwritten in different Caucasian languages, was projected at the installation.

The whole exhibition, in a sense, could be read as an entertaining intellectual installation. It was intentionally entertaining because ethnographic conceptualism, as well as “classic conceptualism,” faces the challenge of transcending commonplace knowledge of the object and renouncing passive consumption of facts. The concept of a dictionary brought in an element of playfulness and inadvertence in “recognizing” the Caucasus. The space was built up according to the arbitrary logic of a set of “Caucasian” words from A to Z, which differed from the positivist hierarchy of scholarly concepts and definitions of Caucasian ethnography and historical chronology.

Yet, like any other dictionary, the exhibition paid great attention to scholarly usage. It combined the knowledge and enthusiasm of twenty-seven authors. Among them were university-based researchers (Bruce Grant, Vladimir Bobrovnikov, and others), researchers from the Russian Academy of Sciences (Iurii Karpov), historians and art critics from many Russian museums that had objects from Caucasian cultures, presented at our exhibition, in their collections. With the help of these people, a unique space of meanings was created in which the world of material objects was professionally “inscribed” into the concept of the dictionary. *Dictionary of the Caucasus* consolidated the commentary of researchers, classic ethnographic texts

(books, maps, ethnographic notes, typologies of Caucasians), and various artistic texts (graphic and pictorial images, as well as works of modern artists).

Attention to the authors' texts and commentaries is the distinguishing feature of conceptualism. Ilya Kabakov inserted in his works some fictive characters who would comment on the represented objects, and Marcel Duchamp would just replace objects with telegram texts. Conceptualism challenged a distinction between artwork and commentary, as well as between a literary text and a scholarly text. Conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s deployed communicative and nonartistic forms, operating with words, formulas, designs, and so on. Conceptualism obviously prefers interdisciplinarity to the purity of artistic language, creating a meeting point of artistic and scientific forms of knowledge and creativity. Thus, it is possible to extrapolate conceptualism to ethnography. But what are implications of this for ethnography? Conceptualism in art emerged as a project of total political freedom and as a declaration of the end of art as a distinct activity. Why has conceptualism advanced into the field of ethnography? Does ethnographic conceptualism declare the end of ethnography and ethnology as scholarly disciplines, as conceptual art did with regard to art?

I am not an anthropologist, and my answer to this question comes from the analogy with classical forms of art that conceptualism negates and, in doing so, makes into historical heritage of sorts. But conceptualism is grounded not just in an aggressive denial of this past but also in the aspiration to make this historical heritage "alive" and relevant for the contemporary audience—to look at the history of art in a new, "contemporary" way. A conceptualist exhibition on an historical theme or on an area such as the Caucasus in this sense is not a simple illustration of conventional knowledge about the past or about a region. In relationship with anthropology, history, and the history of art, conceptualism creates an installation of the modern scholarly idea of the subject matter of these disciplines. In doing so, its main objective is to create *a new space of meanings*, to make historical or ethnographic heritage contemporary—to retain as well as modify the ethnographic.

But if I argued for a conceptualist view of the Caucasus as an object and a means of translation, how might such a project highlight this novelty? After all, a dictionary is a means of translating what is already there. Here it was important to create a solution, a conceptual solution which is also a curatorial solution in a given museum space. I suggested to the designer of this exhibition space, the artist Mila Vvedenskaia, the image of a labyrinth. Labyrinths were a characteristic feature of the Caucasian cultural landscape. They were carved on the walls of houses and temples and used as an ornamental motif for kitchen utensils and in clothing embroidery. But for this exhibition, the idea of the labyrinth points to difficulties of finding one's way—even with the help of a dictionary—out of contradictions and dead ends, balancing between the extremities of confrontation and dialogue, education and faith, war and peace, death and memory.

*Translated from Russian by Asja Voronkova*