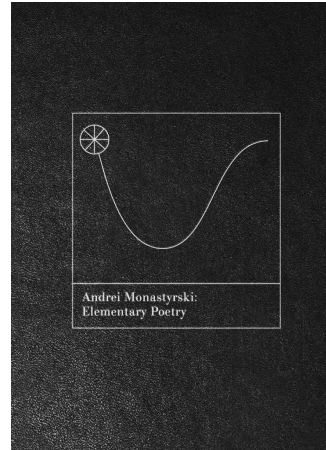


# Books

***Elementary Poetry.*** By Andrei Monastyrski. Edited and translated by Yelena Kalinsky and Brian Droitcour. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019; 329 pp. \$28.00 paper.

In the 1970s and '80s, Andrei Monastyrski (b. 1949 as Andrei Sumnin) was one of the most prominent members of the group of underground poets and artists who became known as the Moscow Conceptualists, the moniker coined by their friend and frequent collaborator Boris Groys (who wrote a nice preface for this volume). In the mid-1970s, together with several friends, Monastyrski established Collective Actions, a group that organized a series of performances, most of which took place in isolated rural areas outside of Moscow. During the Soviet period Monastyrski's poetry appeared in the government-suppressed self-published samizdat and Collective Actions Group performances were done clandestinely, but after 1989 he was recognized as one of the most influential artists in Russia. His work has been exhibited in some of the most prestigious venues in Russia, such as Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, and he represented Russia at the Venice Biennale in 2011. Several younger members of Collective Actions launched successful artistic careers of their own. Still, Monastyrski does not have the place he deserves in the history of performance art outside of Russia.



Not that he has been completely unknown in the West. Margarita Tupitsyn wrote about Collective Actions in an article on underground performance in the Soviet Union published in *High Performance* (Tupitsyn 1981), and Monastyrski received an honorary mention in the catalog of the landmark 1998 exhibit *Out of Actions* (Klocker 1998). On the occasion of the Venice Biennale, Groys edited the volume *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions* (2011), which offered to Western readers an informative survey of Monastyrski's long career. If the article in *High Performance* presented Collective Actions more or less as a curiosity, Groys's catalogue seemed suspended in midair, as if it were a report on a long-lost performance practice. What was missing all along was the presence of the work itself. *Elementary Poetry*, a selection of Monastyrski's conceptual poetry and action works, finally fills that gap. Together with Yelena Kalinsky's excellent selection and translation of performance documentation *Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1981* (2012), there is now a sufficient amount of English-language material to offer a more comprehensive picture of this important development in the history of performance art in Eastern Europe.

*Elementary Poetry* brings together a selection of Monastyrski's conceptual poems from the early 1970s and "Elementary Poetry" projects from the mid-decade. Interspersed among them are descriptions and photographic documentation of "action objects," which he produced between 1973 and 1985. The result is an impressive selection of works that provides unprecedented insight into a formative period of Monastyrski's poetic and performance practice. Central to this volume are compendia Monastyrski referred to as "Elementary Poetry." While this translation features four of the five "Elementary Poetry" collections, the editors' goal was

not to translate and publish all of them. As Kalinsky explains, that would be impossible because Monastyrski “applied the title inconsistently, and he himself does not remember the nature or whereabouts of ‘Elementary Poetry No. 4’” (xii). Since his samizdat days, Monastyrski has published several volumes of poetry and theoretical writings from this period. It was fascinating to learn that “Elementary Poetry No. 1,” as well as the early poems “I/We” and “Excessive Tension,” have never been published before, in any language. This alone could make this volume an exceptional publication, and it has so much more to offer.

In her very useful introduction, Kalinsky writes that already as a teenage poet, Monastyrski—together with a few friends—decided to stage public poetry readings in front of the statue of Nikolai Gogol in central Moscow, which were quickly shut down by the KGB (x). This, however, does not mean that his live art comes from what is usually referred to as “performance poetry.” It was not the acoustic and gestural aspects of poetry that became foundational for his performance practice, but a unique sense of spatiality. The importance of the inclusion within this collection of his early poems “Excessive Tension” and “I/We” (1973) is their graphic dimension. In this interplay between the discursive and the nondiscursive, the page becomes the field of action. That relationship dominates “Elementary Poetry No. 1,” and completely takes over “Elementary Poetry No. 2,” which consists entirely of a series of complex diagrams. It is plain to see how it carries over into *Collective Actions* performances. For example, there is a striking visual continuity between the blankness of pages covered with words and diagrams, and the glowing whiteness of snow-covered landscapes turned into performance spaces. As evidenced in the *Collective Actions* book, the most prominent aspects of these performances were spatial and durational. Conceived and staged in relative isolation from international art circuits, these Soviet performances were not attempts to emulate Western performance art. Instead, they developed as a parallel and independent practice. To put it somewhat schematically, if Allan Kaprow’s work in the late 1950s and early 1960s evolved through a projection of the canvas into three-dimensional space—from the surface of the painting, to collage, to assemblage, to environment, to the space of Happenings populated by human bodies—Monastyrski’s actions progressed through a similar process of spatial and temporal extension of poetry. Monastyrski’s live art is not performed poetry, but poetry in action. For him, poetry is a set of relationships: of the words on the page, of images and words, lines and letters; of the reader and text, and on from there: between the beholder and an object, between performance-makers and their audience, among audience members themselves, and back, between audience and performance.

*Elementary Poetry* offers not only insights into the poetic sources of *Collective Actions* performances, but also Monastyrski’s theorization of this practice. Some of these theoretical inquiries pop up in the second half of “Elementary Poetry No. 3: The Paraformal Complex,” which comprises 198 questions and answers. For example, question #78 reads: “Why does paraform in this composition give us the opportunity to return to the idea of distance?” (286); and #144: “If the overture, preamble, and preface are illusions of paraformality in process-based and time-based art, then can paraformality also be said to exist in the static arts?” (290). The questions and answers are grouped into two distinct sections, and I could have thumbed my way to answer #78 and #144. However, I was stopped in my tracks by the broader implications of these questions, and of the very idea of *paraform*. The prefix “para-” comes from the ancient Greek, meaning “next to,” “alongside,” or “like.” For example, in the 1970s Jerzy Grotowski referred to his performances as “paratheatre”: theatre, but not exactly. This is different. Performance scholars often point out the etymological source of the word performance in the French *parfournir*, meaning “to furnish forth” or “to complete.” This sits oddly with the general recognition about the essential ephemerality of performance art. If *performance* pertains to a completion or execution of a form, Monastyrski’s inquiry into paraform opens the question of *paraformance* as an unstable and ever-expanding set of spatial relations. Irreducible to any finished form, *paraformance* is always alongside and next to it.

This insistence on relationality lends a performative—or should I say paraformative—dimension to Monastyrski's printed works. For example, "Elementary Poetry No. 3" is divided into visual and language-based sections. While the latter comes in the form of the questionnaire, the former consists entirely of photographs taken from a popular Soviet cookbook, depicting the carving of meat, fish, and poultry. In addition to its pictorial and discursive halves, the handmade version of this volume also included an action element in the form of an inserted sheet of sandpaper. In *Elementary Poetry*, this segment has been transposed into a bookmark. I find that appropriate: the strip of sandpaper is an object that sits alongside the page and rubs against it, thus giving it an ephemeral quality in its own right. This one detail speaks volumes about the excellence with which this volume has been designed and produced. These days, this is a rare feat, and a testament to the dedication of Ugly Duckling Presse, one of the leading small publishers in the country, which in recent years brought out a series of books by Moscow conceptualist poets. *Elementary Poetry* is a crown jewel in that series.

—Branislav Jakovljević

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## *Dans l'œil du désastre: Créer avec Fukushima.*

Edited by Michaël Ferrier. Paris: Éditions Thierry Marchaisse, 2021; 272 pp.; illustrations. €29.00 paper, e-book available.

In *Fukushima, récit d'un désastre* (2012) Michaël Ferrier, a French academic and writer based in Tokyo, recounts his experience of the triple catastrophe of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe that shook the Tōhoku region of Japan on 11 March 2011. After having experienced the earthquake in Tokyo, he traveled to the site of the disaster to aid in the recovery effort. Since then, he has devoted great efforts to try and grasp these momentous events and militate against the outdated nuclear policies of Japan, most recently in *Dans l'œil du désastre*, a collective volume of interviews with Japanese and French artists concerned with the catastrophe. Such a densely documented and illustrated volume can hardly be summarized, so a few emblematic examples must suffice.

In "L'inesthétique," his postface to the volume, philosopher Hervé Couchot—echoing Paul Klee's claim that "Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible"—demands "an aesthetic understood not as the conception of art but as the tangible [Fr: *sensible*] restitution of an event

