In the origins of this project lies a very simple consideration, namely that conceptual art deals primarily with ideas (and most often with ideas of relations) and not with the world of objects and its long-established paradigms of naming. The world of ideas (especially the ideas of relations and the relations among ideas) is in a certain sense “nonexistent,” therefore the methods of “reproducing” it – if one makes use of an analogy with what we habitually say about the world of “existing” objects – are significantly different from the methods used or accepted in the so-called “everyday world.” But let us not dwell too long on the general features and the specifics of conceptualism as an artistic direction. It should suffice to say that in the aesthetics of conceptualism (as in the philosophical aesthetics that corresponds to it) there is a constant attempt to “reproduce” those structures of consciousness that in some form or another are nevertheless “present” in the world; moreover, to reproduce these structures as they perceive themselves within this world, in their endless acts of self-conscious reproduction.

In Moscow Conceptualism, as it is presented here in this dictionary, what takes place is not only the naming of some “mental worlds” and of their “inhabitants” – for the most part one witnesses a process of continual research and the construction of an aesthetic discourse, with its methods and principles, which I believe is the central motive of conceptualism. Of course, one also encounters in this dictionary such terms as “Rotten Pinocchios” (gnilykh buratin), but from the strangeness of such terms and from their character it is easily understood that they are mere products of ironic fancy. However, such fancies and fantasies are completely natural for conceptualism as a direction in art (but not in philosophy). Here, in contrast to philosophy, we are dealing with the poiesis of notions. If there is such a phenomenon as “philosophical poetics” then it is conceptualism (at least, in the “theoretical” aspect that this dictionary presents) that emphasizes the poetics: as the emphatically nonexistent that from the beginning requires an unwarranted credulity, and only after that, understanding. So – conceptualism as the poesis of philosophy. It is precisely this, in my opinion, that the reader is dealing with here. And it is precisely from this perspective that Moscow Conceptualism is presented in this book.

The dictionary is assembled according to the following principle: it contains, first, the general or the main section, where the terms are introduced together with their definitions. All the definitions (except in specified cases) are written by the authors of the “terms” (or “words and phrases,” since many readers would hardly agree with the choice of “term” for most of the words presented here). For this section I had to make some restrictions, first of all with regard to myself and to Pavel Pepperstein. It turned out that both of us had too many terms, and if we had brought all our terms into the main section then the presentation of the authors would have been imbalanced. Some authors have just one term. In Pepperstein’s and my own case it is very easy to explain this seemingly boundless pleonasm. This is because he and I, we are both members of artists’ groups; he is a member of Medgerminevtika (MG) and I of the Collective Actions group (KD). We had – in a certain sense – to “lead,” to construct the ideologies and the discourses of these two groups, and maybe it is because both of us are “poetically oriented”. I came to conceptualism from poetry, and Pavel is still writing poetry and prose. Every group is connected by one (or by several) ideas. If such shared ideas do not exist, or if they are quickly exhausted, then the group is falling apart. When an artist group begins its aesthetic journey it has two kind of maps (this is what sets it apart from a tourist group): one is of the usual and “objective kind,” as it consists of artistic gestures, commercial purposes, and so forth. An aesthetic journey is a journey in between “the sky and the earth,” and the second “sky” map must be continually updated during the trip. Initially this map consists entirely of white spaces. In addition, on this map one must preliminarily spot some “interesting places” towards which the group is moving – the map must also simply be, it must exist and contain already some of the most basic and fundamental features: the scale, the division into rectangles, the elements of landscape (tradition), and so forth. Besides tradition, which provides this preliminary pre-mapping, there is also the system-building introduction of new concepts; this also has sufficient inertia to keep the “running mechanism” (the travelers) moving by themselves, mechanically, so that at some point there is the possibility for something interesting to emerge. At this point mechanical inertia turns into inspiration. This is to say that on this map there must be outlined the distinctive contours of the aesthetic system (or even systems), there must be drawn the aesthetic ideology of the group, so that the group can continue to exist. Since the groups KD and MG have been active for quite a long time, it may be said that they have their “celestial” maps with many marks already drawn on them (judging by the number of terms introduced by Pepperstein and myself). But everything has its reasonable limits. I had to make “Appendix 2,” in order to add terms by other authors. In the section entitled “Additional Dictionaries” there takes place a certain deciphering of the principal terms from the main list. The terms by S. Anufriev and P. Pepperstein were actually included in the “Additional Dictionaries” in order to extend such notions of MG as “individual psychedelic practices,” and so forth. These are the “interesting places” on the aesthetic map of MG. For my part, I included here terms related to the “theory” of demonstration/exposition semiotic fields (these are, so to speak, the technical details or the partitioning into squares of KD’s aesthetic map) and to the schizoanalytical texts. It is interesting to notice that the purely technical impetus that initially conditioned me to create the section “Additional Dictionaries” out of “sheer necessity” turned out to be a very fruitful idea, as this part became an independent genre within the main dictionary. Y. Leiderman, who initially contributed with a concise list of terms for the main section of the dictionary, later composed his own “Additional Dictionary,” which is very interesting in my view, because it possesses all the features of a poetic-philosophical work – compositional integrity of words and their definitions, interrelationship among the constituent elements.

We have been talking about the “journeys” of two groups – KD and MG. However, we should not forget that the basic content of the dictionary constitutes the discourse of the Moscow conceptualist school. The latter also has its big map, in the construction of which all the authors of this dictionary took part. And on this level, that of the big general map, it is not important how many terms each author has contributed. Perhaps the presence (or absence) of one single term, which at first glance may even seem unimportant, has accounted for the very existence of the entire aesthetic map of Moscow conceptualism during almost thirty years. Unfortunately, for various (mostly technical) reasons, this dictionary was elaborated without the participation of Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasiliev, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, Nikita Alexeev – artists and poets without whom it would be very difficult to imagine Moscow Conceptualism.

A. Monastyrsky,  28 December, 1998.