Collective Actions
Ten Appearances//1981

The five-person Collective Actions group, working in Moscow from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, represent a particularly poetic and cerebral approach to participation. Ten Appearances is typical of their work in taking place in fields outside the city, with a small number of participants who took an active part in the action and then contributed to its analysis. These gestures differ from Western equivalents of this period in being preoccupied with art’s internal reception and circulation, rather than in its relationship to social institutions.

In the middle of a large, snowed-over field surrounded by a forest, together with the action’s organizers strode ten participants, knowing neither the name of that in which they were about to participate, nor what was to happen.

Ten spools on vertical nails were affixed to a board (60 x 90 cm) which was laid upon the snow. Each of the spools was wound with two to three hundred metres of strong, white thread. Each of the participants was required to take the end of a thread from one of the spools and, unravelling the thread from the spool, move in a straight line into the forest surrounding the field. Thus the ten participants were to have dispersed from the centre of the field in the following directions:
The participants were instructed to move in a straight line as far as the forest and then, entering the forest, to continue on into the depths of the forest for about another fifty to one hundred metres, or to the point where the field could no longer be seen. Each of the participants travelled three to four hundred metres. Walking in the field and forest entailed a considerable physical effort, as the snow ranged from half a metre to a metre in depth. Having completed his trek, each participant (also according to prior instructions) was to pull to himself the other end of the thread (which was not attached to the spool), to which a piece of paper with factographic text (the last names of the organizers, time and place of the action) was affixed.

In so far as no further instructions had been given, each participant, having extracted his factography, was left to his own discretion as to further action; they could return to the field’s centre, where the organizers remained, or, not returning, leave this place behind, moving on further through the forest.

Eight participants came back to the centre of the field within an hour; moreover, seven of them returned along their own paths, and one (N. Kozlov) along a neighbour’s path. Two participants – V. Nekrasov and A. Zhigalov – did not return.

The returning participants received photographs (30 x 40 cm), glued to cardboard, from the organizers. Each photograph depicted the portion of the forest into which the participant receiving that photo had walked at the beginning of the action, and the scarcely distinguishable figure of a man emerging from the forest. The photographs were outfitted with label/signatures upon which were written the last names of the action’s authors, the action’s name Ten Appearances, and the event ‘represented’ in the photograph; for example, ‘The appearance of I. Chuikov on the first of February, 1981’, and so on. These photographs were taken within the week before the action: the action’s organizers photographed in a ‘zone of indifferentiation’ in the very same directions in which the participants had been directed and from whence they had returned.

Thus the name of the action and its full significance became clear to the participants only at the moment when they received the photographs, and not when they pulled the factographic documents, which signified only the completion of the first stage of the action – the distancing of the participants into portions of the forest visually isolated one from another (at the terminal points of their paths out from the centre of the field, in the depths of the forest, the participants could not see each other, as the interstices between these points measured no less than four hundred metres). During the action, photographs were taken of the actual appearances from the forest. These photographs could be distinguished from those handed to the participants at the conclusion of the action by the differing conditions of the forest (snow which had covered the branches of the trees a week before the action had melted away), and by the absence of the quotation marks, which on the first photographs had been placed around the names of the events depicted on them, i.e., in the given circumstances the simple appearance of I. Chuikov, I. Kabakov, I. Pivovarova and so on. The figures of the participants emerging from the forest were practically indistinguishable from the figures in the first ‘metaphorical’ photographs, owing to the fact that they were taken from equal distances (in the ‘zone of indifferentiation’). The function of these ‘metaphorical’ photographs was, in the case of the participants’ return, to indicate only the fact of their return (which was utterly volitional, as
no instruction to return had been given), without adding any supplementary meaning to their prior acts of walking off and dispersing into the depths of the forest. At the same time these ‘metaphorical’ photographs were signs of time extrademonstrational (for the participants) to the event and were included in the structure of the action and served as its ‘empty act’. In other words, they were signs of the time between the ‘end’ of the action and the moment when they were handed the photographs indicating their appearance (or return) from the forest, which the participants did not recognize and could not have recognized as the signified and culminating event in the structure of the action.

The fact that of the ten possible appearances only eight, and not all ten, came to pass, represents in our view not a failing of the action but, on the contrary, underscores the realization of zones of psychic experience of the action as aesthetically sufficient on the plane of the demonstrational field of the action as a whole. This is to say that the planned appearance in reality turned out to lie entirely in the extrademonstrational time of the event – the participant appeared from a non-artistic, non-artificially-constructed space.