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Venice-Bound Monastyrsky Now at MMOMA

By Claudia Arozqueta

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Monastyrsky was a co-founder of the Collective Actions Group in the 1970s, which was considered the cutting edge of contemporary art at the time.

Artist Andrei Monastyrsky, a pioneer of Russian conceptualism, is one of the most prominent figures in Russian contemporary art. He will represent Russia at the Venice Biennale this summer, but Muscovites can look at his work at a retrospective of 35 years of his art currently on at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibit includes videos, installations, objects, texts, audio, poetry and documentation of various actions Monastyrsky has been involved in over the years.

"Art is to create a third space where the participant experiences the situation of being in the borderline between art and life. This is an unknown space. It is not really life, and it is not art either. It's something between the two that cannot be defined," Monastyrsky said in an interview.

One piece on show at the museum is “Goethe,” a work made up of two panels that deals with the relationship between cause and effect. One panel is at the start of the exhibition where visitors are invited to ring a doorbell. The effect of that action can only be appreciated at a second panel located four rooms away. The title refers to the famous German writer and the two periods of creation in his work: one romantic and the other classical, but both existential.

“Fountain,” from 2007, recreates the Friendship of Nations Fountain from the All-Russia Exhibition Center. In Monastyrsky’s version, the 16 female sculptures have their backs turned to the spectators, symbolizing that they do not look to the present. In the center of the fountain there is not wheat as in the original, but processed flour.

In 1976, Monastyrsky co-founded the Collective Actions Group with artists Nikolai Panitkov, Igor Makarevich, Yelena Yelagina, Sergei Romashko and Sabine Haensgen. This group challenged the accepted way of producing art in the Soviet period and the traditional boundaries between spectators, spaces and traditional art.

Part of the exhibition draws on the art group’s archives. “Trips Out of Town” is made up of 125 performances that the group made from 1979 to 2010. These usually involved taking participants to an unknown place on the outskirts of Moscow with the aim of creating an enigmatic participatory experience. In the show, these short journeys can be seen in two rooms with different channels of perception: one with 22 videos and another where visitors can hear the sound of all videos in one single speaker.

“The work can be equally treated as literature, visual arts and music. The process has always been and remains much more important for us than the result. Space and time are main characters, rather than the viewers, the authors or the organizers,” he said.

Andrei Monastyrsky is on at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art till Jan. 27. 10 Gogolevsky Bulvar, Metro Kropotkinskaya. Tel. 694-2890, www.mmoma.ru

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