

Nikolaj Plotnikov

Knowledge Utopia in the Archive. GAKhN's "Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology" as a Document of Scholarly Practice. Introduction

In Memory of Michela Venditti

The Idea of the Encyclopedia in Its Institutional and Theoretical Context

The history of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences in Moscow (RAKhN/GAKhN, 1921–1930)¹ is uniquely bound up with the project of the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology*. Under changing titles – “Encyclopedia of Art Studies”, “Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology”, “Dictionary of Artistic Terms” – this undertaking condensed the Academy’s epistemic ambition: to connect art, scholarship, and philosophy within a shared methodological horizon. The Encyclopedia was conceived not as a mere reference work but as a constitutive medium of a new art studies.

The first institutional steps can be dated precisely (Plotnikov 2023a; Plotnikov 2023b). On 1 November 1922, the Presidium of the Academy resolved to include in the work plan of the Philosophical Department the “work on the investigation and establishment of *modern artistic terminology* with

1 The Russian term “khudozhestvennye nauki” (literally “artistic sciences”) resists straightforward English translation. Unlike “humanities” (often used for *Geisteswissenschaften*), it deliberately evokes rigorous, systematic knowledge production – including specialized art studies (*Kunstwissenschaften*), philosophical/general theory of art (*Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*), and practice-based artistic research – aiming to integrate art with exact scientific methods. (cf. Plotnikov 2023a). The full name, “Gosudarstvennaia Akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk”, has appeared in English as “State Academy of Artistic Sciences,” “State Academy of Artistic Research,” “Academy for the Study of Arts,” and similar variants. For consistency in this issue we adopt *State Academy of Artistic Sciences* (GAKhN) throughout. Alternative renderings may appear in quoted sources or when authors wish to highlight a particular aspect of the Academy’s project.

the aim of creating a dictionary”;² on 6 November, this task was officially incorporated into the program. At the same time, the individual divisions – Literature, Music, Spatial Arts, Theater, Applied Art – were asked to undertake preparatory terminological work. From the outset, the project was thus structured in a dual manner: as a “theoretical” dictionary within the Philosophical Department and as a series of specialised terminologies within the respective art divisions.

This organisational decision reflected a fundamental problem: the plurality of the languages of art. For the agents of GAKhN, art did not primarily appear as the object of normative aesthetics but as a complex linguistic formation – a system of modes of expression, perception, and the production of meaning. At the same time, different descriptive languages were available: the technical terminology of artistic production, historical and philological discourses, psychological and sociological explanatory models, and philosophical reflection. No self-evident coherence existed between these levels. The Encyclopedia was not meant to eliminate this heterogeneity but to mediate it systematically.

Already in Wassily Kandinsky’s early programmatic reflections – he was one of the co-founders of GAKhN – the idea of a “special lexicon” had been formulated as a precondition for a future “new science of art.” Terminological precision appeared to him as a condition of scholarly objectivity in the understanding of art. Yet the project that took institutional shape from 1922 onward acquired a decisive theoretical turn only through Gustav Shpet. In his lecture “On the Dictionary of Artistic Terms” of 25 September 1923, he emphasised that, since the early nineteenth century, no systematic collection and reflection of modern art-studies terminology had taken place. A dictionary, he argued, must newly record and organise the “theoretical and principled terminology” of art studies – not merely catalogue technical terms.

The explicit distinction between a theoretical dictionary under the responsibility of the Philosophical Department and specialised terminological work in the art divisions also goes back to Shpet. In doing so, he contradicted Kandinsky’s idea of a single, comprehensive encyclopedia understood as a mere

2 «Работа по изучению и установлению *современной художественной терминологии*, имеющая своей конечной целью создание словаря современной художественной терминологии» (Pravleniju Rossijskoj akademii khudozhestvennykh nauk 1/XI 1922. RGALI. F. 941. Op. 1. Ed. khr. 8. L. 51).

accumulation of knowledge. For Shpet, what mattered instead was the methodological determination of the levels on which art is discussed. The Encyclopedia was intended to establish connections between

- a. philosophical discourse on art – explicitly distancing itself from a metaphysical or normative aesthetics of the Beautiful,
- b. competing explanatory models (sociological, psychological, cultural-theoretical),
- c. the technical conceptual apparatuses of the individual arts, and
- d. the increasingly differentiated disciplines of art studies – from art history and literary studies to newly emerging fields such as theater studies or dance research.

In December 1923, Shpet presented a list of 586 terms. This sheer number indicates the project's ambition to encompass the entire conceptual field of art research. By 1929, the list had been reduced to approximately 300 central entries, while the planned size of the volume increased – an indication that the aim was not lexical completeness but conceptual condensation. The selection of terms itself became the object of methodological debates: Which terms are “theoretical”? Which belong to technical nomenclature? Where does the boundary run between aesthetic category and art-historical classificatory concept?

Thus the question of the object of art studies moved to the center. The Encyclopedia was not intended to describe individual works but to clarify the conditions of their scholarly apprehension. In place of the classical aesthetics of the Beautiful emerged the search for a general concept of art that was neither metaphysically grounded nor reduced to subjective judgments of taste. This general concept of art functioned as a horizon within which individual disciplines – as well as artists' own self-interpretations – could be situated. In this sense, the project bore the mark of a “new objectivity”: art was to be analysed by scholarly means without collapsing into positivist reduction.

Between 1926 and 1928, work intensified within the divisions. In the Division of Spatial Arts, an extensive catalogue of approximately 4,000 terms was reviewed and systematically grouped; in the Music and Theater Divisions, special terminological commissions were formed; the Literature Division and the Division of Applied Art also developed corresponding programs. At this

point, the Encyclopedia was no longer the project of a single department but a laboratory spanning the entire Academy. Discussions of individual articles were linked to fundamental questions concerning the coherence of methods, the relation between technical and philosophical terminology, and the historical self-reflection of aesthetic concepts since the beginning of the modern period.

From the outset, the project was conceived as an experimental field. It was not intended merely to systematise existing knowledge but to establish new criteria of scholarly validity and to problematise the very determination of the object of art studies. Interdisciplinarity was not simply an organisational principle but an epistemic demand. Precisely in the interweaving of hermeneutic analysis of meaning, phenomenological object-determination, sociological contextualisation, and technical terminological work GAKhN formulated a design that reached far beyond the institutional limits of the 1920s.

The Encyclopedia in the Context of Soviet Enlightenment

The project of the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology* did not arise in an institutional vacuum. It must be understood within the broader encyclopedic surge of the 1920s as part of Soviet cultural policy. In the early Soviet Union, a specific constellation emerged that may be described as a form of “Soviet Enlightenment”: the conviction that the socialist state could generate a new cultural public through the systematic production and distribution of knowledge.

In this context, large-scale projects such as the *Bolshaia sovetskaia ènsiklopediia* (BSE), the *Malaia sovetskaia ènsiklopediia*, the *Literaturnaia ènsiklopediia*, and numerous specialised compendia in pedagogy, psychology, technology, and art came into being. These undertakings pursued a dual aim: they systematised existing knowledge and reordered it within a Marxist worldview; at the same time, they rendered it “intelligible” and “accessible” in order to contribute to the education of a new, socialist-oriented readership. Scholarship and popularisation appeared as complementary elements of a socio-pedagogical program (Kassof 2005).

GAKhN’s Encyclopedia nominally shared these objectives. Here, too, one finds references to “popularity” and “intelligibility”, and the intended readership was not restricted to a narrow circle of specialists. The terminological articles were to be written in clear language, provide orientation for students

and teachers, and supply a conceptual instrumentarium for academic instruction. In this respect, the project integrated itself into the broader discourse of Soviet Enlightenment.

At precisely this point, however, a fundamental difference becomes visible. The major encyclopedic enterprises of the 1920s primarily aimed at the didactic mediation of already consolidated knowledge. The BSE presented itself as an instrument for the systematic exposition of scientific progress within Marxism; the *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia* classified authors, works, and literary movements within a historical-materialist scheme. Encyclopedic work here largely meant canonisation and ideological framing.

By contrast, the GAKhN Encyclopedia pursued a more epistemically risky program. Its aim was not to secure and popularise an already established body of knowledge but to render visible new modes of knowledge about art and to constitute its object conceptually. In fields such as applied art, theater, or dance, a differentiated technical terminology of practice existed; a fully developed theoretical conceptuality, however, was largely absent. Terminological work thus assumed the task of constituting the object itself – within the medium of linguistic reflection.

The struggle over terminology within the discussions of the various departments – such as the Theater Division or the Philosophical Department – makes this ambition clear. When concepts such as “style”, “form”, “theater”, “rhythm” or “movement” were debated, the methodological foundation of new disciplines was at stake. Terminological precision functioned as an instrument for object-determination and for clarifying methodological approaches.

In another respect as well, the Encyclopedia project cut across the major enterprises of Soviet cultural policy. Although the authors of GAKhN nominally declared their adherence to Marxism and Soviet ideology, they saw no reason to adapt their undertaking to shifting ideological directives or to relinquish the claim of scholarly autonomy. Since no canonised Marxist theory of art yet existed at this time, terminological work remained open to diverse theoretical impulses (Plotnikov 2013).

With the consolidation of cultural policy in the second half of the 1920s, this conflict intensified. The Communist Academy claimed a leading role in the theoretical determination of the sciences, while Glavlit tightened control over publication projects. Under these conditions, the terminological encyclo-

pedia of GAKhN increasingly appeared as an “idealist” and methodologically unreliable undertaking.

The abrupt end of the project can be dated as precisely as its beginning. On 22 April 1929, Glavlit demanded the removal of the word “Encyclopedia” from the title and the dismissal of Gustav Shpet as editor. This intervention occurred within the framework of a broader ideological campaign against GAKhN, which was denounced as “reactionary” and “influenced by bourgeois philosophy”. Terminological work effectively ceased in the summer of 1929; in 1931, the Academy was reorganised into a new institution.

Thus, the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology* emerged from the horizon of Soviet Enlightenment but did not exhaust itself in its pedagogical program. It combined the demand for intelligibility with a radical problematisation of its own conceptual foundations. In the tension between pedagogical mission and epistemic autonomy, the project acquired its historical signature.

Archive, Torso, Edition

What remains of the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology* today does not appear as a closed work but as a torso. The work carried out between 1922 and 1929 in the various departments of GAKhN remained unfinished. What has been preserved are word lists, individual articles, unorganised bundles, and minutes of discussions.

This archival situation places the question of edition at the forefront. The Encyclopedia does not exist as a finished book but as an ensemble of manuscripts, typescripts, conceptual lists, drafts, and institutional documents. It constitutes what Sergei Gindin has termed a “nadtekstovaia edinita”: a supra-textual unit that does not exhaust itself in individual articles but is constituted in the interplay of planning, discussion, revision, and institutional framing (Gindin 2006).

An editorial presentation cannot therefore aim at reconstructing a monument from these fragments. Rather, the Encyclopedia must be read as a document of scholarly-artistic practice. What must be made visible is not only the corpus of articles but also the process of their emergence: debates within the divisions, competing conceptual determinations, shifts in the word lists, institutional interventions, and finally the politically enforced interruption.

Earlier editorial attempts brought the importance of this project to light but also revealed structural problems. A bundle of articles from the RGALI archive was published together with additional materials as a supposedly closed Encyclopedia (Chubarov 2005). This pioneering effort drew attention to the project and was internationally received (Chubarov 2017; Hennig 2010; Hansen-Löve/Obermayr 2022); however, closer analysis shows that this edition exhibits significant methodological and editorial deficiencies. Apart from numerous errors, misreadings, and misattributions, it becomes clear that without reconstructing the planned structure, the different volumes, and the documented word lists, neither the internal organisation nor the authorship of many articles can be adequately determined.

A historical-critical edition must therefore begin with the surviving word lists and the documented plans of the individual sections. Only on this basis can the structure of the projected volumes – the philosophical part and the volumes devoted to the individual arts – be reconstructed. Only in the interplay of articles, word lists, and minutes of discussions do the contours of the Encyclopedia project become recognizable as such a supra-textual unit.

The editorial reconstruction of this project will appear in a separate special volume of the *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*. The present thematic issue pursues a different aim. It does not primarily approach the Encyclopedia as a textual corpus to be edited but as an epistemic event in the history of European art theory.

About This Issue

The following contributions approach the GAKhN Encyclopedia project from different perspectives and reconstruct it as an undertaking that may be regarded in the history of art studies as a kind of *instauratio magna*: an attempt to redefine the foundations of the discipline and to clarify its conceptual pre-suppositions systematically.

The focus is not on the question of success or failure but on the project's productive force. The Encyclopedia functions as a crystallisation point for the methodological self-reflection of art studies in the 1920s. Within it, debates concerning the object of art research, the coherence of its methods, the relation between technical and philosophical terminology, and the possibility of cross-disciplinary concept formation converged.

They reconstruct the various intellectual milieus, institutional constellations, and theoretical programs that entered into the Encyclopedia. They show that it was not an isolated lexicographical project but a central medium of self-reflection for a newly forming art studies – both as a knowledge utopia and as scholarly practice.

The contribution by *Nadia Podzemskaia* reconstructs the genesis of GAKhN's encyclopedic project from the perspective of Wassily Kandinsky's early theoretical and institutional activities. It argues that Kandinsky's work on artistic terminology between 1918 and 1921 was conceived as a fundamental precondition for a scientifically reflected artistic practice. The lack of precise concepts for describing compositional processes was diagnosed as a structural deficit of contemporary art theory and practice.

This problem reaches back to Kandinsky's theoretical work before the First World War. Already in his Munich years, he developed the need for a precise conceptual language of painting that went beyond metaphorical descriptions. Music theory – especially counterpoint – served as a model of a developed professional terminology for analysing formal relations. The parallel completion of his works in German and Russian intensified this reflection: translation functioned here as a methodological instrument of conceptual precision, for instance, in differentiating colour, materiality, form, and drawing.

Within the institutional context of the early Soviet period, this terminological sensitivity was translated into concrete forms of work in the commissions of IZO, INKhUK, and later RAKhN/GAKhN. The link between terminological work and research on the “elements of the arts” makes clear that the aim was not standardisation but the creation of a shared language for interdisciplinary communication among artists, art historians, and philosophers.

In their contribution, *Maria Silina* examines the work of the GAKhN as an attempt to found art studies upon a new object. The central issue is not the question “What is art?” but the determination of that object which makes art studies possible as a discipline. This object is neither the individual artwork nor the metaphysical idea of art but artistic form as the discipline's “third object”.

Artistic form is not a given entity but an object constituted through disciplinary and institutional operations. In the works of Nikolai Brunov, Vasilii Zubov, and Nikolai Zhinkin, it unfolds as a relational configuration that emerges through projections between philosophy, art history, psychophysiol-

ogy, and sociology. It is understood as a configuration of “inner forms” whose intersections generate an autonomous, intentionally structured object.

This becomes particularly evident in the analysis of central elements such as space, surface, or colour. These do not appear as isolable properties but as relational structures that can be grasped only in the interplay of perception, corporeality, and historical orders of knowledge. Artistic form is interpreted as a visible structure in space and at the same time articulated as a configuration of meaning that is constituted in processes of interpretation.

The institutional organisation of GAKhN – with its vertical (methodological) and horizontal (disciplinary) axes – functioned as a model of this object-constitution. The autonomy of art studies emerged not through separation from other disciplines but through projections and overlaps among them. The “third object” thus designates an epistemic construction in which art becomes scientifically graspable as intentionally structured form.

Within the work on the planned *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terminology*, this construction of the object acquired a concrete editorial form. The systematic elaboration and interlinking of concepts functioned as the medium in which the “third object” of art studies could be articulated at all.

In her contribution, *Alina Avanesian* reconstructs the role of the circle around Gustav Shpet in the encyclopedic project. The Encyclopedia appears here not as a neutral reference work but as a theoretically motivated space in which a specific approach to the art object was articulated. Although the articles by GAKhN authors such as Zhinkin, Boris Gornung, Aleksei Akhmanov, and Apollinariia Solov’eva do not form a closed system, a shared conceptual orientation can be discerned, rooted in Shpet’s programmatic guidelines and concepts.

Central is the connection between phenomenological, hermeneutic, and semiotic approaches. The phenomenological dimension manifests itself in the methodological priority of description over explanation: against psychologising models of impression or empathy, the intentional givenness of the aesthetic object is emphasised. Concepts such as contemplation, imagination, or myth are developed as modes of intentional constitution that allow aesthetic worlds to be analysed as internally coherent structures of meaning without reducing them to subjective states or causal explanations.

From a hermeneutic perspective, art appears as a configuration of meaning embedded in historical horizons of interpretation. Categories such as

“influence” are understood not in genetic-causal terms but as horizons of intelligibility: a work becomes intelligible within historically formed interpretive contexts. In this framework, Shpet’s concept of “inner form” acquires particular significance. It denotes not a metaphysical essence but the immanent organisation of meaning through which a work becomes experienceable as a unity – a structure mediating between formal articulation and the formation of meaning.

Semiotic analyses of sign, meaning, and sense stabilised the methodological claim of the Encyclopedia. The differentiation between sign and sense served to determine the aesthetic object as an intentionally structured entity whose meaning does not dissolve into reference or psychological effect. In the interweaving of these three approaches, a methodologically flexible yet conceptually clearly oriented model of art studies emerged: the Encyclopedia functioned as the site where the conditions of the constitution of meaning in art were systematically reflected and terminologically fixed.

The contribution by *Ekaterina Ivanova* is devoted to Nikolai Tarabukin and focuses on his redefinition of the concept of style. While Tarabukin is primarily known in art history as a theorist of Productivism, his work at the Academy reveals a significant shift: the concept of style becomes the methodological key to a general art studies.

Drawing on debates concerning the problem of style within the Philosophical Department of GAKhN, Tarabukin engaged both the art-historical tradition of Riegl and Wölfflin and the link between style and worldview in Dilthey, Nohl, and Spengler. Style no longer appeared as a merely formal feature of individual works or epochs but as the expression of an “artistic worldview”. Thus, style became the interface between visible form and historically determined structures of meaning.

In his conception of “formal-stylistic categories” – landscape, portrait, genre, and still life – Tarabukin shifted traditional genre classifications into a methodological order. These categories designate not thematic classes but modes of world-interpretation articulated in specific formal dispositions. Style thus became an instrument that allowed the diversity of artistic phenomena to be systematised under general, cross-disciplinary perspectives.

It is precisely in this methodological intensification of the concept of style that Tarabukin’s contribution to the encyclopedic project of GAKhN resides. The work on terminological articles devoted to landscape, portrait, or still life

did not stand apart from his theory but constituted its practical implementation. Style functioned as a central category of a general art studies whose aim was to lead the “diversity of reality to an intelligible unity” and thereby to reestablish the autonomy and systematicity of art studies.

In her contribution, *Irina Sirotkina* shows that the planned but unrealised articles on dance, ballet, choreography, and choreology in the first (philosophical) volume of the Encyclopedia are by no means marginal but point to a substantial institutional and theoretical development within GAKhN. The decision to include these terms in the project documents the ambition to establish “movement” as an autonomous field within a general art studies.

Starting from Wassily Kandinsky’s program of a synthetic art, in which movement appears as a constitutive element of artistic design, the contribution reconstructs the emergence of the Choreological Laboratory under the direction of Aleksei Sidorov. Dance was understood not as a subgenre of the theatrical but as “organised movement” in space and time. The decisive attempt was not only to describe movement aesthetically but to analyse it scientifically – through photographic series, film recordings, systems of notation, and psycho-physiological experiments.

At the center stood the elaboration of a scientific terminology of dance research. Sidorov and his collaborators sought to determine elementary categories of movement, to systematise poses and transitions, and to develop procedures for recording movement. The project of a “kinemology” aimed at creating a comprehensive science of movement linking dance, film, and rhythmic bodily practice. Even though this project failed institutionally, it demonstrates the ambition to translate the language of dance practice into a terminologically precise conceptuality capable of interdisciplinary integration.

The non-realisation of the Encyclopedia articles on dance and choreology thus does not mark a marginal omission but points to a structural problem: the difficulty of integrating subjective movement experience, perception, and semiotic analysis within a unified conceptual framework. Precisely in the attempt to develop a scientific terminology of movement, the epistemic horizon of the Encyclopedia becomes visible – as a project that sought to transgress the limits of established art studies.

Finally, the contribution by *Olesya Bobrik* examines the work of the Musical Division on a separate “Musical Encyclopedia”, conceived as the musical

part of the overall project. It reconstructs both the institutional chronology and the conceptual profile of this undertaking. *The Musical Encyclopedia* appears as an attempt to systematise musicological knowledge of the 1920s while simultaneously grounding it terminologically in new ways.

Central here is the tension between historical factography and systematic conceptual clarification. While many articles were strongly historically oriented, the programmatic understanding – especially in the horizon of the Academy's leadership – aimed at establishing a modern aesthetic terminology. Music was not to be described merely as a succession of styles or biographical data but as a structured field within a general art studies.

This tension culminated in debates on the concept of style, particularly in the dispute between Konstantin Kuznetsov and Aleksei Losev. Style was conceived, on the one hand, as a historically dialectical category explaining musical phenomena in their social determination, and on the other hand, as an inner structure not reducible to mere feature analysis. In this controversy, the methodological problem of the *Musical Encyclopedia* can be condensed into: how can musical form be analysed formally, situated historically, and interpreted sociologically at the same time?

The conceptual achievement of the project thus lies less in the surviving individual articles than in the systematic effort to determine music as the object of a terminologically precise, interdisciplinary science. *The Musical Encyclopedia* appears as a laboratory of a general art studies in which historical musicology, style theory, and Marxist-inspired social analysis were to be placed in conceptual relation – an ambition that was institutionally curtailed but that clearly marks the epistemic horizon of GAKhN.

Against this background, the GAKhN Encyclopedia project may also be read productively for contemporary artistic research and academic art studies. It makes visible that scholarly rigor is not secured by the stability of its concepts but by the capacity for conceptual self-examination. In historical moments of rupture – and the 1920s constituted such a moment – it is not sufficient to adhere to existing categories and merely explicate them didactically; what becomes necessary is a methodologically reflected remeasurement of the object. The present, too, is marked by profound shifts in artistic practice: art moves between market, activism, and digital transformation. Under these

conditions, art research can maintain its social and epistemic position only if it understands its terminology as a historically adjustable infrastructure of thought. In this sense, the GAKhN Encyclopedia appears less as a historical monument than as a model of institutionally anchored conceptual work that repeatedly redetermines its own object. It is precisely the project's unfinished and fragmentary character that renders it modern: it shows that scholarly knowledge does not arise in a completed system but in the process of its critical revision.

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