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Between Disciplines and Methods: In Search of an Object of Art Studies at the Academy of Artistic Sciences (1921–1930), Moscow

Abstract: This article examines the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN, 1921–1930) as an institutional and theoretical project that sought to establish a scientific foundation for art studies through the concept of artistic form. Rather than deriving form from individual artworks, GAKhN scholars constructed a third object through the spatialisation of elements, projections across disciplines, and intersections of methods embedded in institutional design. Drawing on archival materials from the *Dictionary of Artistic Terms* and texts by authors such as Nikolai Brunov, Vasilii Zubov, and Nikolai Zhinkin, the article shows how phenomenology interacted with art-historical materials in the effort to articulate a theory of art. As I argue, despite the strongly spatial and volumetric character of artistic form as a model of inquiry, its most productive legacy lies in a logic of projections and overlaps through which the autonomy of the object of art studies was sought within a materially bounded environment. Although the historical conditions of the GAKhN project can no longer persist as a distinct program, the article situates the Academy as a genealogy of contemporary interdisciplinary art studies and of the enduring institutional tensions that continue to shape the ontology of art today mainly by representatives of the visual arts, who were dissatisfied with the state of terminology in art theory.

Keywords: art history, art studies, phenomenology, Russia, history of humanities

1. Introduction

This article examines the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, GAKhN, 1921–1930) in Moscow as an institution that sought to reorganise scientificity in the humanities. This

ambition was shared with German art historians and philosophers associated with *Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* as a key reference (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2021). In the intellectual climate of the early twentieth century, the humanities were seen as lacking objective methods and lagging behind the natural sciences. Scholars turned to philosophy to establish a rational and objective science of the arts. As Gustav Shpet (1926: 5), phenomenologist and head of GAKhN's Philosophy Department, noted, the emergence of art studies as a correlative theory to empirical (historical) sciences was a long-standing task. The article examines how this correlation was constructed and how philosophy was brought into interaction with art-historical disciplines and their core definitions to produce a scientific model for art studies.

As a starting point, I argue that, rather than asking what art is, GAKhN scholars sought to determine the object that would make art studies possible as science. In this pursuit, they followed thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and Georg Simmel. Husserl reflected on the systematic formation of new disciplines through the coordination of mathematics and emerging empirical sciences into self-evident structures (Husserl 1969 [1914]: 14–15; 1970 [1936]: 62–70), while Simmel employed the category of mood – neither attributable to the artwork nor to the viewer – to analyze how infinite nature is transformed into landscape as a bounded aesthetic object (2007 [1913]). At GAKhN, the construction of such a knowable object – termed artistic form – proceeded through systematic engagement with art-historical disciplines. It was conceived neither as the visible configuration of an artwork nor as an abstract concept, but as a relational third object produced through spatial, disciplinary, and institutional operations. This correlation, structured as a “neither–nor”, is visible across the activities through which artistic form was traced: elements, disciplines, and the positionality of experts. As I show in the conclusion, when read topologically within the tradition of late phenomenology, a persistent tension between the relational position of the art object and the localisation of knowledge continues to structure the field, albeit in dispersed form; at GAKhN, this conjunction was more explicit, making it possible to grasp the tension as a unified inquiry into the ontology of art.

1.1. Scholarship on GAKhN's Methodology in Arts

Scholarship has most productively focused on GAKhN's search for objectivity through artistic form – the core analytical entity of art studies. Plotnikov (2010, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), Plotnikov/Podzemskaia (2017), Gidini (2010), Grüber (2010), and others identified philosophy – especially phenomenology – as the main vehicle for formulating artistic form as a particular linguistic and epistemic paradigm beyond descriptive aesthetics.

In contrast, within art studies and art-historical methodologies, GAKhN's legacy is often regarded as incomplete or even a failure. Beyond the formal incompleteness caused by the Academy's forced liquidation (Poleva 1998), scholars have increasingly attributed this failure to tensions in how phenomenological methods interacted with art-historical disciplines. Igor' Chubarov characterised the project as both utopian (2010) and unsuccessful in producing a synthesis capable of operating at sociological, psychoanalytical, or meta-physical levels (2014: 291). Hansen-Löve and Obermayr (2022) emphasised the synthetic character of GAKhN's methods, based on the intertwining of mediating forms, but argued that this synthesis lacked the analytical rigor of formalism. Nikita Sazonov and Anke Hennig (2021) frame GAKhN within a post-disciplinary tradition, describing it as an early instance of "methodological communism", in which heterogeneous methods and media coexisted without disciplinary unity; as Hennig argues, the discussions themselves functioned as the scientific model (ibid.: 153). My own research (Silina 2021) extends this line of inquiry by showing that the specific organisation and subordination of departments and units were structurally designed to facilitate the research model of new artistic sciences, rather than merely to enable forms of multi- and interdisciplinarity as understood today. More recently, Flack (2023) has called for closer attention to the "cracks" between GAKhN's declared philosophical objectives and its systematic ambitions, demonstrating that phenomenology did not merely confer conceptual legitimacy but operated through borrowed elements from the empirical sciences, generating a model of objectivity dependent on material and technical practices of the arts and, as I would add, on short-term disciplinary conventions.

Building on these debates, the article shifts the focus from methodological (in)coherence to philosophy's role within art-historical disciplines, asking how art has been enacted as a theoretical activity.

1.2. Content and Object of This Study

My analysis draws on materials related to the *Slovar' khudozhestvennykh terminov* (*Dictionary of Artistic Terms*), an unfinished GAKhN project that generated extensive archival records. These include dictionary entries by Nikolai Brunov for the Spatial Arts Department on space and surface, among others, as well as preparatory materials by Vasilii Zubov such as his text on Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (*Metod i put' izucheniiia khromatiki Gete*, 1924) and on the hermeneutics of scientific terminology (*Genezis nauchnoi terminologii*, 1924). Nikolai Zhinkin's essay on portraiture (1927) is examined to clarify the objective grounding and autonomy of the new science.

The final section addresses the historical afterlives of the GAKhN model – its enduring tension between epistemic structure and institutional embeddedness. I argue that the relational framework through which GAKhN produced the object of art studies reappears in postwar interdisciplinary theory and in museums, which continue to hold open the gap between institutionally located art and art history.

2. Spatiality as the Language of Science

As Aleksei Sidorov, the chronicler of GAKhN, noted in describing the task of creating a new science of art from the perspective of institutional design, the aim was not the exhaustive historical study of artworks, but the identification of regularities that unified them through technique (Sidorov 2017 [1924]: 74). In this context, the term *tekhnika* (technique) carried a specific meaning: the historical arts were described as “technical”.¹ It came to denote the defining principle of each art form – such as space in the spatial arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. In GAKhN's practice, this emphasis on the technical foregrounded the concrete and functional character of the visual arts while rendering their elements operable, extractable, and instrumental.

Crucially, basic elements were not defined through the isolation of essence in concise formulae. Instead, analysis operated in two directions: elements were first understood as part of space and then reconnected to it through psychophysiological speculation and historical hermeneutics, while space itself

1 RGALI. F. 941. Op. 14. Ed. khr. 11. L. 27–29.

was conceived as a bounded yet potentially infinite locus – object-led and object-defined – and approached in art studies and art history as spatiality.

2.1. Surface and Plane as Spatial Elements

Although a plane is defined as a two-dimensional entity, Nikolai Brunov, then an emerging historian of architecture, emphasised in his entry for the *Dictionary of Artistic Sciences* that its “flatness” operated through thickness, such as that of a wall, which actively marked spatial differentiation (Chubarov 2005: 318–319). In painting, this understanding produced motifs of “pushing through” or “piercing” the plane, since painting generated illusory space: the plane functioned either as a material support or was intensified through painterly texture and representational techniques that evoked depth. Brunov situated these terms within the broader concept of spatiality, which manifested differently in architecture and painting. The same logic applied to the concept of surface (ibid.: 319), which, like the plane, related to space through volume and mass and characterised the physical properties of mass. Both elements were analytically reconstructed as volumetric-spatial ones, and extracting their essence from technical definitions meant revealing relationships articulated in spatial terms.

Only Brunov’s definition of space, developed in a subsequent entry (Chubarov 2017: 96–100), clarifies why all other elements – seemingly flat and autonomous – were nevertheless defined as space-related: voluminous, stereometric, and interconnected. According to Brunov, space is not directly given in art; rather, the spatial arts exist to reveal spatiality. He distinguished three aspects of space: the “means of spatial construction” (line, surface, light and shade, colour); types of space defined by different modes of visual articulation, including background “empty space” and illusory infinity; and the relationship between humans and space, articulated through visual and motor faculties and their expressive effects. Space was experienced as environment or place – confronting or enveloping the body, diminishing it, or harmonizing bodily movement and presence. Its defining property lay in its connectedness to other elements: geometric or stereometric models, bodily projections, and visual or motor representations.

With the growing interest in optics and psychophysics, the bodily dimension entered art-historical analysis through vision, tactility, and especially *Einfühlung* (empathy), a concept introduced by Robert Vischer in the 1870s

(Payne 2012: 116–128). Spatiality as a form of interactions and impressions, understood from the perspective of bodily movement and its coordination with visual volumetric forms, was elaborated in the most straightforward manner by the German professor of architecture August Schmarsow. For Schmarsow, architecture as a true – that is, free – art (rather than an engineering or applied discipline) was to be developed as an object of aesthetic enjoyment. Architectural form, in this sense, constituted an object whose analysis was guided by what he termed an *Ästhetik von innen* – an “aesthetics from within” (Schmarsow 1894: 3–4). Schmarsow’s works were not translated into Russian, and further research is required to determine precisely how they were read and discussed in Russia. Nevertheless, they were clearly circulating among GAKhN scholars as part of the broader tradition of *Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Colleberg-Plotnikov 2021: 142–161). Within this framework, the dictionary introduced the concept of “Architectural Forms” (Chubarov 2005: 65–68), in which Brunov elaborated effects such as massiveness, painterliness, and rhythms of movement inside and outside, articulated through architectural surfaces and their optical, kinetic, and tactile interrelations. The aesthetic effects of plane and surface thus operated through flatness in relation to space – via rhythm, contact, volume, or illusion. Beyond the importance of thinking in forms as a dynamic relational entity, it is crucial that architectural form functioned as a “carrier of architectural experience”: neither a concrete building nor pure architecture, but a third object – a projected model that rendered explicit the relations between the human body, movement, and sensory effects.

2.2. Colours

Vasilii Zubov’s essay on Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* demonstrates that colour was also placed within spatial relations to reveal the operation of artistic form. Unpublished during Zubov’s lifetime, the essay was discussed at GAKhN on two occasions in 1924 (Sidorov 1926: 22). Zubov approached Goethe’s colour theory not as a literary or philosophical system, but as the work of a thinker engaged in empirical inquiry (Dobrokhotoy 2010: 123). His central question was how Goethe actually saw colours, or more precisely, what colours were as scientific objects at the time Goethe examined them. According to Zubov, Goethe was concerned neither with physical or chemical explanations of

colour nor with psychological perception, but with colour as an object: the colours of clouds, effects produced by substances such as water or stone, and colours “without me” («без меня»; Zubov 2004: 110).

To reveal the object-based understanding of colors in Goethe's work, Zubov linked colour to the tasks of ancient optics, which addressed *begrenzt-Gesehenes* (bounded and visible) and *Bild* (images), never colour or light in abstraction, but always a coloured or illuminated body (ibid.: 114). Colour was thus inseparable from the spatial and material conditions of visibility. To grasp colour as visible objects historically – from antiquity to the nineteenth century – Zubov analyzed them along two axes. On the one hand, he treated optics as the science of visible objects, defining its categories and modes of analysis (ibid.: 113); on the other, he approached vision itself as an object of inquiry distributed across multiple disciplines. This vertical (disciplinary) and horizontal (subject-based) analysis closely mirrored the institutional organisation of GAKhN, as I will discuss later in the article.

Zubov's hermeneutic analysis of colour proceeds in two directions simultaneously. Its first aim is to clarify colour as objecthood within the study of vision. To this end, Zubov turns to Aristotle and the Stoic tradition, in which inquiry addressed not only what is sensorially visible but also objects of vision that convey knowledge through cognition rather than sensation alone. He illustrates this with examples such as “the son of Robert”, “a Frenchman”, or “someone born in Paris at one o'clock in the morning” – attributes not perceived sensorially yet nonetheless seen when one looks at a person (ibid.: 118). These are objects of vision, including colours, apprehended indirectly, through something else.

Zubov's demonstration of the overlap between the notion of colour and its objecthood does not stop at the categories of vision but, secondly, extends to the historical differentiation of the sciences that study colour as a visible object. He reminds the reader that in ancient optics, for example, works such as Roger Bacon's *Perspectiva* in the *Opus Maius* treated optics simultaneously as geometrical analysis, physical theory, anatomical and physiological accounts of the eye, and early psychological approaches to the senses (ibid.: 115). The intersection of object-based inquiry and disciplinary organisation thus generated composite categories such as density, shadow, darkness, beauty, ugliness, similarity, and difference, pointing to a more fundamental problem: colour as a question of the separability and inseparability of colour and light as qualities

of form and place (*ibid.*: 121). What is key in Zubov's method is not the claim that colours are analytically separable in different contexts, but that the very operation of separation is itself historically rich and potentially inexhaustible. The horizontal and vertical operations of analysis thus worked together to produce an epistemic ontology of colour, understood both as an object of knowledge and as a component of scientific practice. In this way, colour ceased to be a perceptual quality and became a relational construct within a spatial and disciplinary network – precisely the condition that allowed it to participate in the formation of artistic form as a third object of art studies.

Taken together, Nikolai Brunov's use of psychophysiology to expand the core definitions of art studies through spatial, bodily, and kinetic dimensions and Zubov's hermeneutic effort to achieve a comparable spatialisation reveal a broader methodological logic at work within GAKhN. Elements that had come to appear analytically separable – through the hard-won developments of the art-historical formal school – were discursively volumised and reintegrated in heterogeneous relationships in the inhabited space. As the following sections will show, this operation made it possible to construct form as a rational structure of potential interactions in space, as well as across other forms, including entire disciplines.

3. Projections between Disciplines, Institutional Units, and Vocabularies

It was intentionality – understood as connections, correlations, and modes of linkage – that ultimately grounded the claim to objectivity in the project of constructing a science of art. As this section argues, the object of art studies was projected beyond the boundaries of established disciplines and methods, thus constituting an autonomous object and language.

At this juncture, it becomes difficult to distinguish where spatiality and volumetric visualisation function as representations of a scientific model of the object of study, and where the construction of spatiality itself operates as an objective method – one that grounds relations to produce meaning. As this section will show, one reason for this difficulty lies in the absence of stable scales and fixed reference points that held these visualisations of the artistic form. Instead, the framework was defined by socially constituted structures that are now historical: disciplines, the institutional organisation of GAKhN

itself, and scientific language in its relation to other types of language, conceived as relatively closed or stabilised systems.

3.1. Autonomous Object and Existing Disciplines

Nikolai Zhinkin's essay "Portretnye formy" ("Portraiture Forms"), published in *Iskusstvo portreta (The Art of Portraiture)* in 1927, was a key outcome of GAKhN's attempt to formulate an objective method. It developed a theory of portrait forms as intersections of multiple disciplinary fields – psychology of personality, social typology, and painting understood as a historical and cultural type – to construct an autonomous ontological form corresponding to a specific object: the portrait in art.

This task echoes earlier efforts, most notably Georg Simmel's "The Philosophy of Landscape", which sought to identify the "form" that transforms nature into landscape as a coherent artistic whole (Simmel 2007 [1913]; Plotnikov/ Podzemskaya: I, 190–223). For Simmel, the idea of landscape exists nowhere as such; it is a mood, something added to nature, which is infinite and without boundaries, yet becomes bounded through human experience of contemplation and inhabitation. Crucially, Simmel described this transformation as a detachment: an objectifying act (optical, aesthetic, or mood-centered) that converts the infinity of nature into a landscape as an image (*Bild*) (Simmel 2007 [1913]: 21). At GAKhN, Zhinkin's method consisted in the scrupulous overlapping of disciplines, projecting pathways through existing fields to locate such detachment for the art of portraiture by objective means. What in Simmel appeared as a unifying intuition thus became, at GAKhN, a rational procedure of moving across and between heterogeneous forms.

Zhinkin formulated his task as the analysis of the "content and structure of the object through the intersection of different forms in their relationships"² (1927: 16). Each of these forms was heterogeneous, had its own original "carrier", and yet participated in the production of new forms no longer directly tied to those carriers. This approach closely corresponds to Gustav Shpet's concept of internal forms, one of the central categories in GAKhN aesthetics, whose intersections generated artistic form as an autonomous entity. Zhinkin sought portrait forms that could not be defined through nominal classifications of

2 «[...] содержание и структуру предмета через пересечение разных форм в их взаимоотношениях».

portraiture (ibid.: 12), the presence of “essential features” (*существенных признаков*, 1927: 14), or formalism understood as schematic reduction capable of producing only “the scheme of a single category of forms” (*схему какой-либо одной категории форм*, ibid.: 16). Not every image of a human figure or body constitutes a portrait (ibid.: 18, 20), nor does every portrait require resemblance to an “original”. Rather than functioning as an analog or *doppelgänger*, the portrait produces identity: it is self-contained and generates a “portrait personality”. What appears at first glance as a negative operation – often emphasised by commentators (Chubarov 2014: 287) – is in fact Zhinkin’s method for constructing these internal forms. By rejecting numerous modes as proper portrait forms, Zhinkin nonetheless affirmed them as intersections that participate in the constitution of the portrait.

Beyond the philosophical layer (what a portrait is) and the socio-psychological layer (what personality is), Zhinkin (1927: 22) turned to painting as a historical type of portrait. He proceeded from the premise that painting is a spatial art grounded in surface, which is itself a spatial phenomenon – a position consistent with Nikolai Brunov’s understanding of surface. As Zhinkin described it, the figure emerges through the interaction of surface, colour, and plane. Visibility does not precede form but is produced through light and colour, which operate primarily at the level of surface rather than depth. The figure is thus not a pre-given entity but the result of a dynamic process in which plane and colour mutually define each other. This process unfolds through tension among colour, light, and surface and their numerous transitions that range from chromatic indeterminacy to clear figural articulation and separation from the surrounding field (ibid.: 23–24). This argument brings together motifs discussed earlier: the construction of spatial form through the recombination of analytically distinct elements and the emergence of unity through relational interaction rather than isolated properties. The pictorial surface functions as a topological space defined by optical boundaries, yet this painterly surface alone does not constitute portraiture. Instead, it operates as one internal form among others, entering conjunctions that make the portrait possible as an autonomous artistic form.

One such form that, as Zhinkin stressed, is crucial for portrait forms is gesture (ibid.: 28). It is the kind of detachment described by Simmel, transforming something potentially unbounded into artistic form. Gesture, as a portrait form, most fully satisfied Zhinkin’s phenomenologically oriented

analysis, focused on objecthood and intentionality. Gesture always implies meaning; it humanises, operates simultaneously on social and typological levels, and functions as a rhetorical device. For classificatory clarity, Zhinkin distinguished “characteristic” forms from “expressive” ones – those interpreted through social or cultural context. Crucially, gestures – of the sitter, the artist, and broader formations of worldview – were analyzed in combination, forming sequences of forms. By passing through these sequences, Zhinkin traced the projection of portrait form emerging at their intersections. He understood this task as methodological: to identify ever more intersections of forms and layers to integrate portrait analysis into the analysis of worldviews (*ibid.*: 50). He ultimately halted this project, noting that no theory of personality in art yet existed, since the necessary ontological links to personality had not been established.

The conception of objecthood and objectivity within art studies is decisive here. Autonomy was achieved through rejection of existing disciplinary frameworks: fields such as psychology intersected with the object of study, yet analysis projected the object beyond them – their relationship was interdependent but no way hierarchical. At the same time, this search for autonomy remained inseparable from disciplines understood as socially established and materially grounded realities rather than pure methodologies. Zhinkin did not synthesise psychological concepts such as psychopathic personality or expressivity; instead, he exposed psychology’s tasks – most notably the characteristic nature of gesture – as connective problems enabling the identification of further objectifying forms. Thus caricature, for example, with its exaggerated depiction of character, appears as a moral allegory that exceeds the autonomy of the artistic image (*ibid.*: 38–39). The autonomy of the object of art studies was therefore produced through projection across materially grounded, almost naturalistically conceived disciplines treated as immediate objective reality.

3.2. Between Institutional Units

The ability to project specific forms of portraiture beyond established disciplines and thereby construct an autonomous object of study echoed the institutional environment of GAKhN. It reflected a shared spatial visualisation of scientific practice.

At GAKhN, art studies were conceived in explicitly spatial terms, including, in a very concrete sense, the positioning of the sciences within the institutional environment itself. When describing the structure of knowledge, GAKhN scholars employed vertical and horizontal terminology to visualise the organisation of subjects and their relation to methodologies. As Aleksei Sidorov noted, analytical groups could “quite correctly be thought of as lines of horizontal sections constructed at right angles to the work of the departments”³ (Sidorov 2017 [1924]: 64). The Philosophy, Psychophysiology, and Sociology departments each represented a distinct methodology of inquiry and were conceived as vertical dissections of the object of study.

This spatial model of interaction between art-historical objects – painting, colour, portraiture – and disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and psychophysiology depended on treating disciplines as productive, rather than descriptive, operations that constituted the object of study within a relational intersection. Study groups, in turn, functioned as typological and disciplinary units in which painting, sculpture, or perspective, as components of the spatial arts, were examined through multiple methods. Accordingly, the structure of meetings and working sessions at GAKhN followed a twofold logic. Scholars from the Philosophy, Psychology, or Sociology departments could be convened to analyze painting as a distinct type from three different perspectives (normally two). In another scenario, philosophers or experimental psychologists provided readings of elements understood as common to all arts. Collaboration thus took the form of an intersection between a particular method and a disciplinary subject. For example, psychophysiology examined the perception of different art forms – painting, theater, and others – in separate sessions or working groups. This dual orientation toward disciplines and methods was embedded in the institutional environment as part of the research design. A rational and methodologically coherent organisation was thus seen as a guarantee of the effectiveness of the research program.

A revealing example is Nikolai Tarabukin’s talk “Rhythm and Composition in Ancient Russian Painting”, delivered in December 1925.⁴ Tarabukin, a prolific art historian and critic, argued that rhythm and composition were

3 «Их вполне правильно мыслить как линии горизонтальных сечений, построенных под прямым углом к работе отделений».

4 RGALI. F. 941. Op. 3. Ed. khr. 53.

the defining features that identified an object as art. To demonstrate how these elements produced different types of artistic statements, he conducted a formal analysis of several icons. The group in which he presented his paper was dedicated to the study of the evolution of artistic form (*Gruppa évoliut-sii khudozhestvennoi formy*). It examined the national development of Russian art through the identification and comparison of elements, including detailed consideration of neighboring regions such as the Caucasus, Western Europe, and Eastern Asia within the framework of the *Völkerwanderung* tradition. Back then, the history of migration and the study of related cultures were closely aligned with psychology, including ethnic psychology and its dependence on climate, among other factors. Although Tarabukin's talk was delivered and discussed at the group's session, with minutes preserved in the archives, it was ultimately excluded from the group's report.⁵ The reason lay in a methodological mismatch with the group's research design. Tarabukin's approach penetrated the formal foundations of painting but did so without coordinating this analysis with a historical examination of stylistic evolution shaped by factors such as climate and ethnic history.

This case is one among many that illustrate the strong conviction at GAKhN that scientific inquiry possessed a specific objectuality extending from speculative methods to concrete institutional spaces. It reveals a distinctive logic of projecting the object of study through a rational and methodologically structured environment in which institutional departments and research groups – defined either by methodology or by subject – functioned as integral components of the scientific model itself. As with disciplines, institutional boundaries were treated in a distinctly materialist manner as tools of thought that create the locality of knowledge production.

3.3. Expertise and Scientific Terminology In-Between

Since his admission to GAKhN in 1923, Vasili Zubov was tasked with work on artistic terminology, a project that shaped his later career in the history of science. Zubov's work shows that the object of art studies at GAKhN was constituted not only spatially and institutionally, but also through practices that approached ontology as a reconstruction of objecthood within knowl-

5 RGALI. F. 941. Op. 3. Ed. khr. 39. L. 5–9 ob.

edge. This involved both the question of language and that of disciplines, both entrusted to the competence of an expert charged with developing theory as a distinct activity.

In this 1924 text on scientific terminology (Zubov 2004: 277–297), Zubov examined a tripartite relation between the logical language of science and the ontology of its objects of inquiry. He identified discrepancies among these layers through ideographic notation – graphical signs and spatial representations of the object – and further divergence in what he termed “scholastic” scientific language, shaped by historical borrowing and semantic drift within disciplines. As he noted, every scientific term – even those that later appear abstract or “fictional” – once corresponded to an ontological unity grounded in concrete historical, social, and epistemic conditions.⁶ For Zubov, the key issue was not semantic change or relativism as such, but the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory strata of meaning that together produce intelligibility. The spatial dimension of terms – their dual linguistic and visual form – allowed him to visualise these non-coincidences among words, definitions, and things.

xZubov's way of indicating or visualising the gap between sign and referent, a question that looms large across the humanities, together with his attraction to the tropic qualities of language and to visual terminology, situates him within a broader phenomenological tradition in art theory. His colleague at GAKhN Aleksandr Gabrichevskii observed that, while poetic theory was historically grounded in linguistics and grammar, the science of spatial arts had not even posed the question of the signifying material constituting the visual object (Gabrichevskii 2002: 32–33). Maurice Merleau-Ponty further complicated the issue by noting that “Comme la parole ne ressemble pas à ce qu'elle désigne, la peinture n'est pas un trompe-l'œil” (Merleau-Ponty 1966 [1945]: 25).⁷ Most importantly, although Zubov was aware of the possibility of interpreting definitional mismatches as socially conditioned historical developments (Zubov 2004: 289), he chose instead to mobilise hermeneutic knowledge – alongside a range of visual, textual, and disciplinary shifts – to

6 RGALI. F. 941. Op. 14. Ed. khr. 24. L. 1.

7 “Just as speech does not resemble what it designates, painting is not a trompe-l'œil”. Translation is mine; M. S.

address the unity of perception and knowledge prior to disciplinary division: our ability to know what we see and to see what we know (ibid.: 59).

The theoretical articulation of the mismatch between meaning and language – especially figurative or tropic language, which is closest to the visual – came later. In *The Resistance to Theory* (1982), Paul de Man asked what “theory” was and answered that it consisted in grasping the difference between literary history and the possibilities of interpretation, a tension that in the twentieth century revolved around the definition of “literariness” and literature as such. De Man looked beneath grammatical and logical structures to apprehend the bodily, processual, and rhetorical character of reading. He thus defined literature as a practice of reading, treating literariness and the history of reading as fields through which divergences among grammatical, ideational, and rhetorical levels can be analyzed. De Man ultimately juxtaposed the questions of essence (“what is literature?”) and history to explain what theory does. He defined theory as the gap between history and interpretation and, most importantly, identified this gap as a model of inquiry in its own right. De Man posed what was deliberately framed as a naïve question in 1982, after the rise of literary studies shaped by formalism and poststructuralism. Yet what distinguishes a GAKhN that operated half a century earlier was the way this gap – and the bodily position of the abstract “reader” – became operative through the mediations created by the third object. If later theory locates the gap in the act of reading, GAKhN locates it in a trained institutional position. What theory retrospectively names as tension was, at GAKhN, enacted as an expert position. The expert’s role was that of a knowing body who not only reconstructed objectual terminology but related it – before and after any divide – to a concrete ontological unity of art as sense-making, creativity, and visual domain. The expert thus occupied a third position analogous to the intermediary location of artistic form itself: neither the artist who creates the work nor the isolated viewer, whose position always invoked the dilemma of (dis)interested judgment and its limits. In this sense, GAKhN did not merely theorise mediation; it institutionalised it as a condition of inquiry.

This marks the juncture crucial for understanding GAKhN’s project. At GAKhN, theory was already institutionalised as the in-between location of every inquiry – analytical, objective, and embodied by the expert – through the complex projection of artistic form as a third object. Within this methodological and institutional framework, GAKhN scholars never needed to ask

about any essence such as what art or space is “as such”. They already operated within in-between spaces, neither approaching “art” as “pure” art nor reducing it to art history (Plotnikov/Podzemskaia 2017: II, 115–120). Artistic form functioned as a correlative model in which the relation between theory and history was itself practiced as theory, embedded in institutional design as its only material – and therefore fragile – coordinates, yet always open to further overlaps in its inquiry into the ontology of art.

4. Historical Outlook of the Artistic Form and Its Afterlife

Artistic form, understood as a volumetric object that anchors material reality while enabling further projection, is readily recognisable within the broader visual culture of movements such as Constructivism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Within this shared field, the object functioned simultaneously as objective reality and as the visualisation of that objectivity through spatial, optical, and stereometric articulation. Yet this form was inherently fragile: its spatially driven objecthood depended on larger material and institutional structures. Bodily and disciplinary distinctions, together with their intersections, were projected onto a surface that visualised sense-making itself, producing both openness and an optical instability of meaning. The intellectual ambitions of the era intensified this fragility. Emerging at a moment when systemic philosophy sought to provide the humanities with rational and objective foundations, GAKhN’s pursuit of objectivity bordered on abstract categorisation and, through its reliance on projection, extended inquiry toward an ever-receding horizon.

The best way to grasp both its fragility and its strongly form-oriented model, along with its legacies, is to approach it topologically – a perspective informed by later phenomenological thought. Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) turned to topology to address boundaries, interconnectedness, and place as an ontological mode of inquiry. Thomas-Fogiel (2008: 154) points to a paradox in which Merleau-Ponty sought a form of topological situatedness capable of grasping a pre-existing “there is”, moving beyond disciplinary divisions within a mental space firmly demarcated by them – much as in the case of GAKhN. Read in this light, GAKhN does not appear as a failed synthesis of disciplines but as a historically situated configuration of relations. Brunov’s spatial elements, Zhinkin’s disciplinary crossings, and Zubov’s embodied expertise each constitute local articulations within such

a configuration. What has often appeared as fragmentation or inconsistency in GAKhN's legacy can instead be understood as the structural condition of a model that sustained unity through relational locality rather than through cumbersome totalisation.

From a topological perspective, artistic form appears remarkably resilient, remaining consistent with subsequent developments in art studies and visual creativity. Although the artistic form projected within its original institutional framework was dissolved, the later trajectory of art studies shows that the model itself – grounded in the idea that the object of art requires overlaps and intersections as its ontological horizon – proved persistent. At GAKhN, the almost obsessive movement between disciplines, together with heterogeneous forms such as languages and spatialised elements, functioned as the means through which artistic form was projected as a whole. Today, as the narrative of disciplinary crisis continues to shape art history, the response consistently takes the form of inter-, multi-, or post-disciplinary approaches to the ontology of art. This tendency appears across debates on art-historical education (Rérat 2023; Elkins 2004), *Bildwissenschaft* (Bredenkamp 2011) and cultural analysis (Bal 2002), as well as in the flourishing field of artistic research, where unity is sought in the figure of the artist-thinker capable of mobilizing heterogeneous visual references and topologies (Borgdorff 2012). Despite their differences, these approaches share a common premise: they all affirm art's position between disciplines, rather than within a single bounded field, as a response to disciplinary crisis (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2011: 13–16). In this sense, the logic of artistic form as an ontological inquiry into art remains valid, as art and its study continue to develop through mediation, intersection, and overlap.

Even more importantly, GAKhN's method, conceived as a third object foregrounding multiple relations, was structurally coherent and, when viewed genealogically, allows objectuality to be understood as a model that reveals the embedded character of knowledge production as locality. After GAKhN was dissolved, the experts' positionality within the in-between spaces of practicing theory changed: Vasilii Zubov became a historian of science, Nikolai Zhinkin a linguist, and Nikolai Brunov a prominent historian of architecture. Today, few seem concerned with what portraiture might contribute ontologically to knowledge about the human, as Zhinkin once proposed; the theory that once functioned as a correlate to art history in completing the ontol-

ogy of art can no longer be located. Yet this very correlation – the complex relationality among the object of study, the expert's embedded position, and institutionalised theoretical practice – persisted in other sites engaged with art. Museum history reveals similar historical tendencies in negotiating the relation between practice and theory and, most importantly, unlike GAKhN, still sustains institutionally the epistemological tension that GAKhN articulated through the notion of the third object.

In the interwar period, a wide range of experimental approaches to museum theory emerged, themselves forming a kind of third object of knowledge. These experiments spread across Europe. In Germany, at the *Provinzial-museum* (now the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum) in Hanover, Alexander Dorner, who directed the museum from 1925 to 1937, sought to transform it into a site of lived historical experience (Blythe et al. 2018); in Soviet Russia, comparable ambitions most successfully had been developed under the premises of Marxist scholarship. At the Tretyakov Gallery, curators planned to restructure the institution as a museum of art studies to demonstrate that the museum framework was not neutral (Fedorov-Davydov 1933: 57–59). Without adhering to phenomenology or any single systematic philosophy, curators working within diverse intellectual contexts attempted to articulate a specifically museal ontology grounded in the relations among objects, narratives, and institutional space. In Hanover, the museum was conceived as a site capable of activating affects that functioned similar to collective memories. At the Tretyakov Gallery, ideological superstructures were rendered visible through display of art-critical production alongside with paintings and objects. These projects were not, strictly speaking, attempts to establish a museum science in which definitions and observations formed within museums would later be displaced and decontextualised into universal and abstract art history or ethnography. Nor were they equivalent to what later became museum studies, a field often concerned with modes of display while remaining largely indifferent to the ontological relation between objects and the institution's own intentional structure. Rather, these projects produced a paradox comparable to the historical case of GAKhN and its practice of theory within a concrete institution ostensibly conceived as a neutral container of research. Museums likewise became singular and difficult to reproduce, as each re-emerged as the bearer of a specific intentional structure, even while the theoretical frameworks guiding their formation claimed objectivity and quasi-transcend-

dental validity. As I have shown elsewhere (Silina 2025: 179–180), in the case of museums, the complexity of such experimental displays – and the forms of expertise they required – were soon abandoned in favor of the functional neutrality of the white cube: an object-indifferent spatial model capable of transforming any object into art while suppressing memory, discourse, and institutional mediation. Museums were thus tasked primarily with displaying art in its variety rather than materializing their additional epistemic functions. Today, however, this neutrality has itself become the target of renewed critical inquiry into museum epistemologies, classificatory systems, and decolonial infrastructures of knowledge (Deliss 2020: 18; Schorch 2023; Miller 2021: 1–25; Azoulay 2019). Such inquiries expose the unresolved institutional status of art theory as a discipline elusive in its location – precisely the condition that the historical moment examined in this article sought to overcome.

Seen from this perspective, the third object reconstructed here through the historical case of GAKhN reveals a continuing search for the ontology and locality of art, now manifest in interdisciplinary formations and in the historical foundations of public institutions that continue to mediate artistic knowledge.

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