

“Geography of Art”: an interdisciplinary project in the long term.

The Northern Dimension

Olga Lavrenova

*Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences
Russian Academy of Sciences (INION RAN)*

Abstract

The *Geography of Art* project, initiated in 1994 by geographer Yu. A. Vedenin and subsequently developed by philosopher and cultural critic O.A. Lavrenova, explores the complex interrelationship between culture, art, and geographical space. The project published its inaugural collection of articles in the same year and held its first scientific conference in 2008. Its research scope encompasses a broad spectrum of topics, including the spatial distribution of artworks, the historical evolution of artistic styles, and the distinctive artistic representations of localities, regions, and both real and virtual spaces. Furthermore, the project examines the semiotic processes through which art inscribes meaning onto space and its role in the construction of cultural landscapes.

Keywords

"Geography of Art" Project, art, space, cultural landscape

Introduction

The "Geography of Art" is a long-term interdisciplinary project that has been evolving in Russia for over a quarter-century. It was initiated by Yuri Vedenin, a renowned geographer, scholar of the Russian estate, and founder and former director of the D.S. Likhachev Institute of Cultural and Natural Heritage. Vedenin's concept of the multifaceted interaction between art and the cultural landscape [Vedenin 1997, Vedenin 1988] laid the theoretical groundwork for the project, informing the initial collections published by the Institute of Heritage [Geography of Art, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005]. Initially conceived as a publishing initiative, the project brought together contributions from geographers, art historians, literary critics, cultural scientists, philosophers, and scholars from other disciplines.

In 2008, growing interest in the project led to its first scientific conference, held at the Institute of Heritage. The project subsequently

expanded, hosting its second conference at RSUH in 2013, which convened a small but dedicated group of researchers. By 2016, the project experienced a resurgence, with a new collection published at INION RAS [Geography of Art, 2016]. It soon gained prominence as an interdisciplinary platform, leading to annual international conferences from 2017 onward under the auspices of INION RAS, the Russian Academy of Arts, the Institute of Cinema and Television (GITR), and RSUH. Subsequent collections [Geography of Art, 2018, 2019, 2020] further solidified its status as a significant scholarly endeavor.

The thematic scope of the conferences and publications is extensive, encompassing territorial dimensions of culture and art, the depiction of geographical spaces in artistic and literary works, and the influence of geographical factors on the development of artistic schools and styles. The discussions also explore the transformative role of art in reshaping cultural landscapes. While the project's original focus was the study of spatial concepts within works of art, its trajectory has broadened to include analyses of virtual "subspaces," connecting artistic and scientific representations of reality.

This convergence of research directions reflects broader trends, including the "spatial turn" in the humanities and the "humanistic turn" in geography, necessitating deeper conceptual and philosophical inquiry. Under the influence of art, space reveals itself in novel and intricate forms, shaping the rules governing artistic expression. This interplay contributes to the formation of a cultural "metacode," which is often deciphered not through science alone but through art. As Kedrov observes, "It was the painting of the twentieth century, poetry in its most intricate forms, that came closest to unveiling this mystery. It was in the borderlands between art and science that the most significant discoveries were made" [Kedrov 2004: 290].

The "Geography of Art" operates on two principal theoretical premises. First, it posits that art provides a lens for examining landscapes and geographical spaces. Second, it asserts that spatial and landscape categories offer a framework for investigating cultural mentalities and stereotypes. These premises underpin the project's interdisciplinary approach, bridging artistic and scientific perspectives in the study of space and culture:

Interdisciplinarity of the research field

The interdisciplinarity of this research field aligns closely with the noospheric and semiotic frameworks of the cultural landscape, developed within humanitarian geography and the semiotics of space. The cultural landscape represents the dynamic interaction between humanity and nature, encompassing not only anthropogenic transformations of the environment but also its semiotization.

Through the processes of comprehension and signification, humans "domesticate" their surroundings, at least symbolically. Artistic imagery plays a pivotal role in this dynamic, from ancient petroglyphs to the earliest "proto-maps," where rudimentary dashes depicted terrain outlines (e.g., cartographic representations of routes and surroundings found in the Czech Republic, dating to approximately 25,000 BCE). In the case of petroglyphs, the landscape is directly transformed, imbued with new structures and meanings, while proto-maps reflect the existence of spatial concepts that crystallize through these primitive lines, ultimately evolving into artistic forms over millennia.

Over time, the semiotics of the cultural landscape is enriched through the accumulation of artistic, documentary, and scientific images and texts. These representations both reflect and shape cultural mentalities, perpetually evolving through dynamic interaction with their environments.

Substantiality of Cultural and Semiotic Space

A complementary theoretical perspective emphasizes the substantial nature of cultural and semiotic space. Each cultural meaning associated with geographical space—despite its apparent abstraction—possesses a specific localization. This connection often manifests through toponyms or the implicit recognition that the proto-image of the meaning derives from either a particular or generalized landscape and its elements. Consequently, cultural meanings are materialized in sign systems, such as toponyms, geographic objects, or landscapes as signs. Even in the case of highly abstract artistic spatial concepts, these representations adhere to the fundamental principles of real space-time.

From this perspective, the artistic interpretation of geographical space can be understood as a derivative of the "modeling code of culture" [Lotman, 1998: 444], where the cultural code functions as a system of representations that governs everyday practices. Such a framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how art and spatial structures co-create

meanings, revealing their deep entanglement with cultural processes and their manifestation in physical and symbolic geographies.

Philosophy of Art vs. Philosophy of Space: Counter-Trends in an Interdisciplinary Context

The intersection of the philosophy of art and the philosophy of space within the interdisciplinary framework of the "Geography of Art" project reveals complex methodological challenges. These discussions explore the cultural existence and significance of the landscape, delving into its ontological and aesthetic universals and associated cognitive theories. As Zamyatin observes, "Every spatiality, imagined and perceived, reproduced and expanded in any works of art, has its own iconic and symbolic markers" [Zamyatin 2018: 69]. Creativity is thus viewed as co-creation with a specific place, landscape, city, or environment, where the unique perspective of the observer shapes the perception and generates a plurality of discourses. These discourses, in turn, establish the "rules of engagement" with space.

The diverse themes of the "Geography of Art" project can be organized into principal areas of inquiry, methodological frameworks, and thematic clusters. Increasingly, discussions in these collections center on Northern and Arctic topics—a logical focus given that much of Russia lies within the circumpolar zone.

The North as a Conceptual and Cultural Frontier

The North occupies a distinct position as a conceptual frontier—a space beyond the boundaries of the Western world. It is not merely a geographical location but a spatial and cultural construct, serving as both a metaphor and a label for Russia as a whole when viewed externally. As Chartier notes, "The West preferred to consider the North as a territory outside the *Ecumene* [...] and, consequently, removed from the system of knowledge. In addition, the West did not know (first out of ignorance, then intentionally) the discourse of those who live there (Innuites, Sami, Cree, etc.) [...] This North, originating from imagination, from representations and perception, can historically be considered as a human and cultural construct, mainly created by the British, German, French, and later American cultures" (Chartier 2018: 17). Consequently, Russia, often conflated with the idea of the North, is frequently depicted as being outside the "civilized" world in many global narratives.

Illustration 1



*Trofimov V.V. The spring cyclone over Mount Barkova. 1977.
(Paper, watercolor. 71x79)*

The Northern Imaginary in Russian Culture

In Russia, the artistic exploration of the North began with early travelers who documented their journeys through detailed travelogues, pencil sketches, and colorful illustrations. The Northern Territories were initially portrayed as realms of both danger and romance, evoking freedom—a concept rooted in the fact that these lands were historically untouched by serfdom. Over time, the artistic and literary representations of the North have diversified significantly.

The cultural image of the North in Russia has been shaped by various sources, including books, the animated film *Umka* (about the friendship between a young polar bear and a Chukchi boy), news of heroic

Arctic expeditions, and reports on advancements in icebreaker technology. The reading of local cultural landscapes often draws on the methodology of V.N. Toporov, who established the concept of "texts" tied to specific cities and regions, such as the "St. Petersburg text." Analogous "texts" have since been developed for Moscow, Perm, Crimea, and other areas.

During the Soviet era, numerous writers and artists turned their attention to the North. Among them were notable representatives of traditional Northern cultures, such as the Chukchi writer Yuri Rytkeu, who became a key figure in the "Chukchi text," and the geologist and writer Oleg Kuvaev, the principal author of the "Kolyma text."

The North in Global and Soviet Contexts

The perception of the North from outside Russia often reflects themes of isolation and confrontation with nature. Jack London, a writer popular in Soviet Russia, captured this essence in his story *White Silence*, evoking the stark struggle between humans and the cold, indifferent world. Decades later, Soviet poet and bard Vladimir Vysotsky imbued the phrase "White Silence" with different connotations, describing the North as a land of freedom, boundlessness, and purity:

*The North, freedom, a country without borders,
snow without mud, like a long life without lies.*

While Soviet depictions of the North combined heroic and colonial discourses, the development of the Arctic and circumpolar regions often came at a significant cost. The natural landscape was irreversibly altered, geocultural spaces were homogenized, and traditional practices of sustainable resource management, cultivated over centuries, were abandoned. This duality—a region celebrated for its freedom and possibilities but marked by ecological and cultural upheaval—continues to define the discourse on the North in Russian art and culture.

The concept of landscape is explored both as a genre and a philosophical category. Its creation is viewed as the spatial unfolding of the multidimensional meanings it embodies, including visual and sacred elements. In the cities of Siberia and the Far East, there are preserved landscapes of circumpolar territories created during the industrial development of these regions, often painted in the style of socialist realism.

Additionally, a significant body of work exists by indigenous Northern artists. For instance, the city of Khanty-Mansiysk houses a

museum dedicated to the art of Khanty artist Gennady Raishev, whose landscapes blend natural imagery with the mythological essence of the geocultural space. These works are also explored within the framework of the *Geography of Art* project.

Illustration 2



*Astashev S.S. "Goodbye, the Arctic!". 1989.
(Canvas, oil. 80,3x90)*

In the 20th century, documentary and feature films emerged as vital forms of artistic expression. Initially, Soviet films reflected the themes of virgin land development, but in post-perestroika Russia, indigenous directors began portraying the North through its traditional geocultural lens.

These films offer an authentic perspective on the indigenous worldview, contributing to a new philosophy of the North's cultural landscape. This

philosophy holds potential to become a meaningful element in the global geocultural discourse, fostering a structural evolution of the semiosphere.

The multifaceted meanings of landscapes suggest the use of the research metaphor "landscape as a text," where the "text" is continually evolving. Past "messages" embedded in landscapes through centuries of cultural layering are reinterpreted and recontextualized, sometimes through installations that alter the perception of established cultural monuments.

Travelogues, a unique form of localized text, have historically been prominent among Russian explorers of the North. These narratives document the interaction of individuals with the landscape, and their cultural impact often grows in relation to the prominence of the author. Examining cultural landscapes and heritage through a historical lens highlights their role as materializations of time and meaning in space. This perspective aligns art and space as a unified chronotope. The evolving ontology of art involves creating new spaces and materializing images, whether on canvas or through other mediums. Artistic representations of space frequently depict abstracted geographical concepts or "other worlds." This includes symbolic interpretations, such as those found in icons, folk patterns, or the shamanic tambourines of Northern peoples.

A special theme in Russian art dedicated to the North is flashbacks on the theme of the GULAG, the camps operated throughout the North from West to East until 1954.

Illustration 3



Verbovskaya S.A. Solovki. O. Pavel Florensky. 2021.
The central part of the polyptych. (Oil on canvas).

Conclusion

At the *Geography of Art* conferences, broad conceptual frameworks are frequently synthesized under the term *Geopoetics*. As a transdisciplinary construct, geopoetics encompasses intellectual and aesthetic engagements with geographical territories, landscapes, and topographical sites. It examines their symbolic representations, mythologies, and spatial dimensions across artistic, literary, and scientific discourses, thereby elucidating the intricate relationship between geography and art. This conceptual approach is exemplified through diverse case studies that highlight the dynamic interplay among art, culture, and space, demonstrating their profound interconnectedness and multifaceted interactions.

The geography of art is an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between artistic phenomena and geographical space. It combines the methods of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to reveal how place, landscape, and cultural context influence the creation, distribution, and perception of art. This approach allows us to analyze art not only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also as a tool for shaping the identity of territories, reflecting environmental problems and global cultural interactions.

The geography of art is based on the concept of a "cultural landscape". In an artistic context, this is reflected in the creation of monuments, architectural ensembles and street murals that mark the space, giving it a symbolic meaning. The geography of art demonstrates that artistic practices are inseparable from the spatial context. They record changes in the environment, construct collective memory, and offer alternative models of human interaction with the world.

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