

e-flux journal

**Art without Death:
Conversations on Russian
Cosmism**

SternbergPress 

Contents

- 5 **Introduction**
- 9 Hito Steyerl and Anton Vidokle
**Cosmic Catwalk and the Production
of Time**
- 41 Elena Shaposhnikova and Arseny Zhilyaev
Art without Death
- 57 Anton Vidokle and Arseny Zhilyaev
Factories of Resurrection
- 73 Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Anton Vidokle
Chaos and Cosmos
- 93 Boris Groys and Arseny Zhilyaev
**Contemporary Art Is the Theology
of the Museum**
- 109 Marina Simakova, Anton Vidokle, and
Arseny Zhilyaev
Cosmic Doubts
- 133 Bart De Baere, Arseny Zhilyaev, and
Esther Zonsheim
Wahlverwandtschaft

Introduction

For those who still benefit from colonial wealth, the indigenous lifeworlds destroyed by the steamroller of modernity are always somewhere far away. It is important that they remain so. It is important that the centers of power remain places where healthy state infrastructure and decent industry produce forward-thinking and empowered individuals with enough energy in their bodies and money in the bank to believe all of it had to be for the best. After all, progress always comes at a price. The heroes of modernity can never be allowed to waver in this, for they have learned the important lesson that triumphalism can be the only entry to the modern. And their job is to give life to those poor souls whose histories were usurped, who can only traffic in death, whose victimhood disallows ever reimagining their own conditions. But what if the heroes of modernity are also paying the price? What if, behind the veneer of triumphalism and pity—pity for others, pity for oneself—we have all lost? What if we are all victims, not only of modernity's great redistribution of wealth, but of its wholesale reformatting of life in relation to death?

But what if another kind of modernity had been developed which was even more radical—so much so that its forward arrow actually sought to conserve and preserve previous lifeworlds against the ravages not of vanguardist reforms but of time itself? And reanimate those worlds. It would project a different kind of modernity altogether, beyond right or wrong sides of history, without victors and victims. Our families have all been the victims of destruction or death, as we will be in time, and the labor of living comes in overcoming this loss—not in denying its existence or projecting it onto other

continents. The ravages of modernity are inside each of our bodies, embedded in the banks and institutions of colonial capitals, in the walls of religious shrines and family cemeteries, on the streets and in the homes of the colonies. The task of progress would then be to care for and preserve the lifeworlds of history, not replace them. But such a modernity could not be a polite or deferential one, for its mission could only be to intervene into the mechanism of the great equalizer—death—in order to redistribute the only really precious resource that exists, the force that animates time itself: life. This is the debt we already carry, and the one we must always continuously pay.

First, death must be understood differently. Similar to understanding the soul as being present in spite of having exited the body, death can be understood as a change in a human's material state. According to the teachings of Nikolai Fedorov—nineteenth-century librarian, Orthodox philosopher, and progenitor of Russian cosmism—our ethical obligation to use reason and knowledge to care for the sick extends to curing the dead of their terminal status. The dead must be brought back to life using means of advanced technology—that is, resurrected not as souls in heaven, but in material form, in this world, with all their memories and knowledge.

The philosophy of the Common Task's call to redistribute vital forces resembles what Foucault famously called biopolitics. However, Foucault was mainly concerned with the administration of life in terms of the limits and allowances surrounding it, and as a technique of governance. In the neo-liberal era, the biopolitical frame has been crucial for understanding how policing structures have responded to the animating capacities of money

and capital, by installing methods of internalizing laws and limits through varying degrees of self-governance and relative autonomy over one's own thought and action. But the substance of life for citizens or economic subjects is not the same as for historical subjects. Historical subjectivity cannot be reduced to the laws of the state or its administrative machinations, and is often defined by culture—by human suffering and the loss or denial of culture, even (and especially) within nation-states that celebrate a history of conquest and achievement. Curiously, if this mode of being is emerging in a new light as part of a late stage of Foucauldian biopolitical reality, then perhaps the embrace of dictatorial strongmen, from Duterte to Trump, can be understood as a denial of that pain. In contrast to Foucault's political realism, however, Fedorov was wildly imaginative in his emancipatory ambition, even advocating the conquest of outer space as the territory of immortal life and infinite resources, where all resurrected generations of humans, animals, and all other previously living substance on our planet could eventually live.

Today, Fedorov's vision may appear arcane in its mystical panpsychism and eccentric in its embrace of realities that exist only in science fiction or certain diabolical strains of Silicon Valley techno-utopian ideology. It can be difficult to grasp how it actually directly influenced the thinking behind a generation of young revolutionary anarchist and Marxist thinkers who incorporated Fedorov's ideas under their own brand of biocosmism before the 1917 Russian Revolution, even giving rise to the origins of the Soviet space program. This book of interviews and conversations with artists and thinkers seeks to address the contemporary relevance of Russian cosmism and biocosmism in light of its

influence on the Russian artistic and political vanguard, as well as on today's art-historical apparatuses, weird materialisms, extinction narratives, and historical and temporal politics. As a whole, the collection of exchanges asks how such an encompassing and imaginative, unapologetically humanist and anthropocentric strain of thinking could have been so historically and politically influential, especially when placed alongside the politically inconsequential—but in some sense equally encompassing—apocalypticism of contemporary realist imaginaries.

Today, many of us can remember the disappeared indigenous cosmologies as parts of ourselves, lost to colonialism, industrialization, communist revolutions, and capitalist wars. Many names have been given to ideological or historical grand narratives to soothe the pain of loss, to register those losses and render them searchable, but these memorializing mechanisms still fail to register the pain of losing something much larger that cannot be named—a deep relation to the world, to the cosmos, and to ourselves that gives us strength and sovereignty without need for any other earthly power of right or dominion. Perhaps our own family members were perpetrators, victims, or both perpetrator and victim. And perhaps the progress we wanted was not the one that would erase all losses, but that would register them and invite them back into life.

—Brian Kuan Wood



Hito Steyerl and Anton Vidokle

Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time

This conversation appeared in *e-flux journal*, no. 82 (May 2017).

A painting by Klee called Angelus Novus depicts an angel moving backwards, away from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. This is how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment to awaken the dead and piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, towards which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Anton Vidokle I have been thinking about Benjamin’s passage on Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*—the Angel of History. For Benjamin, what the angel sees as he looks backward is a pile of rubble: death, destruction, failure. Everyone dies, all projects fail in the end, cities and empires collapse and become ruins and dust. History is a graveyard, a genocide. It’s hard to argue with this sublime spectacle: time conquers and kills all. Yet there is a very different view on history, on the past, developed in the nineteenth century by a little-known Russian philosopher, Nikolai Fedorov. Fedorov believed that death is not natural and is more like a flaw in our design. Like a disease, death is something to be fixed, cured, and overcome by technological, scientific means. This becomes the central point of his

philosophy of the Common Task: a total reorganization of social relations, productive forces, economy, and politics for a single goal of achieving physical immortality and material resurrection. Fedorov felt that we cannot consider anyone really dead or gone until we have exhausted every possibility of reviving them. For him the dead are not truly dead but merely wounded or ill, and we have an ethical obligation to use our faculty of reason to develop the necessary knowledge, science, and technology to rescue them from the disease of death, to bring them back to life. From this point of view history and the past is a field full of potential: nothing is finished and everyone and everything will come back, not as souls in heaven, but in material form, in this world, with all their subjectivities, memories, and knowledge. What appears to be a graveyard is in fact a field full of amazing potential.

Hito Steyerl As a German person it’s a bit hard for me to imagine a scenario in which all the old Nazis are brought back to life. There are enough new ones as it stands. Also, at what point would they be resuscitated? Would they walk around with a bullet in their heads? Okay, let’s imagine everyone they killed is alive too. That’s a plus. But what is the point one would bring them back to? Say, maybe 1932? But then the next batch, at which point would they be reanimated? 1943? How do we guarantee the Nazis don’t just continue trying to kill everyone?

Probably these are technicalities. But the more general reason for my skepticism of the past’s potential is that it keeps repeating anyways. Not in the same form, obviously, but in a different, sneaky form. Take Deutsche Bank. It is not the Aryanized entity of the 1930s, which financed the Nazi regime. It is a conglomerate consisting of German and

American banks plus Goldman Sachs and Qatari money. It financed the Trump campaign, which obviously is not a 1930s fascist entity either. Trump's "America First" slogan is not the same "America First" slogan that it was in the 1940s. But from my point of view none of these entities needed to be rearticulated in the present at all—not even differently. I would very much prefer it if they hadn't been reincarnated—even imperfectly—and instead had remained in the past. As for Benjamin's angel: I think that the storm is no longer coming from the past. Today the storm is blowing from a future that has been depleted of resources and hope and it is driving people back into the past. People are driven toward the womb—or their assumed origins—not the grave. All these old people trying to look young and jaded are a sign that the storm is blowing from collapsing futures toward a fragmented past.

Benjamin also wrote something else. He said: "Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy hasn't stopped winning." I had to think about this as the Turkish army bombarded my friend's grave in Turkish Kurdistan. They had already killed her twenty years ago. So this is her second death—because the civil war itself has been revived. How often can a person get "killed"? If anyone tried to reanimate her, she wouldn't be "herself" anymore, but all mixed up with the other guys in the grave. After all, these were her comrades. They would be a collective body, not individuals anymore. Maybe as such they are alive anyway.

On the other hand, the future offers no refuge either. It's been depleted and sucked dry. You have to forgive me for being uncharacteristically pessimistic. There is too much past around these days and it is strong, smooth, and brutal. Let's keep trying.

AV At first glance, having Hitler, Stalin, Attila the Hun, or other mass murderers revived does sound absurd, and a more selective resurrection could be appealing. Yet I think I understand Fedorov's conviction that nobody can be left behind in death, not even the monsters, because a universal project of this nature cannot be curated selectively, and present generations do not have the right to be such a curator. It's either everybody or nobody. There are several reasons for this.

First, nobody is evil from birth. This is what one can become under certain conditions over time, but no one is born a murderer. There is a really amazing document I came across recently, an eyewitness account of the execution of Eugenia Yaroslavsky-Markon in a labor camp in the early 1930s. She was married to one of the leading cosmist poets and tried to help her husband escape.¹ The attempt failed, and she was caught and sentenced to be shot. The commander of the camp wanted to kill her personally, because she was defiant and had publicly embarrassed him previously. But for some reason on the day of the execution he could not bring himself to shoot her and broke down. This event is described in detail in the diary of a camp guard who witnessed the executions. The guard writes that the commander had a nervous breakdown and could not pull the trigger, because even a person as evil as him was not a monster all of his life. In this way, perhaps nobody with a capacity for thought, memory, and feeling is totally beyond redemption?

Second, and to your point about technicalities, certainly a significant social restructuring has to take place before a project of universal immortality and resurrection can become possible. Technologically, scientifically, and economically, such a restructuring would result in a society in

which historical villains could not do any damage. It would certainly not be a capitalist society, simply because the market economy is not efficient enough to generate the resources necessary for a task as enormous as resurrection for all. It would also not be a society of separate nation-states because all the resources of the planet and all productive forces will need to be pooled together in a kind of a planetary union. There will be no competition, no private property, no hierarchies, probably no ethnic or gender differences: nothing that can produce strife or war. Besides, everyone will be immortal, so you couldn't kill anyone even if you wanted to.

On the other hand, what is worrisome is that if a certain form of biological longevity or digital immortality becomes possible much sooner, in the current state of society, then we may end up with the worst kind of oppression of all: an elite of immortal billionaires staying perpetually alive at the expense of enslaving everyone else. Interestingly, Peter Thiel is already using some type of blood transfusion from teenagers to keep himself rejuvenated physically and mentally. Apparently, the technique is effective and there is a commercial clinic in California offering this very expensive treatment to the very rich. In the mid-1920s Alexander Bogdanov set up an institute in Moscow to do precisely this, not as a commercial venture but as a plan for rejuvenating blood banks to be set up throughout the U.S.S.R., for the entire population. Ironically or otherwise, he accidentally killed himself when he exchanged blood with one of his students who was sick with malaria.

I understand what you say about the past entering the present and the future in damaging ways, but there are two kinds of pasts: a mythologized past that all sorts of despots and fascists

tend to evoke, the golden age that never really happened—a fabricated, whitewashed, curated fantasy designed to capitalize on today's fears; and the actual past—the lives of people that came before us, with all their pain, disappointment, and suffering as much as joy, hope, and love. Now, if all these people suddenly started coming back with their knowledge and memories, the mythical past would have no chance because we would begin to know what really happened. Interestingly, Fedorov does not locate utopia in the past. For him it's clearly in the future, but a future that somehow manages to fully recuperate the totality of past lives.

Your question as to which historical period the resurrected people will enter—this is interesting. It's something I've spoken about with Arseny Zhilyaev a number of times, because of his interest in museology.² Obviously, someone who lived in AD 1275 or 634 BC is going to have a rather difficult time if they are brought back in 2037: they may find it stressful, alienating, incomprehensible, and so forth. The evolved humans capable of technological resurrection may have already changed significantly from what we accept as the human form: they may have different bodies, entirely different ways of communication, no gender distinction or differentiation, and so forth. Fedorov does not write much about this aspect of things, but he does advocate space exploration and the settlement of other planets to house resurrected people, because Earth is simply not big enough to sustain such an enormous population. Arseny thinks that the solution may be in setting up these other planets as period-type reconstructions, essentially planetary museums, so that, for example, a resurrected Parthian peasant family would be housed on a planet that would

reproduce the reality of their original time. And the whole thing can be managed by artificial intelligence. When Arseny was talking about this, I had a thought that perhaps we are already living on one of these museum planets.

Regarding bodies with bullet holes, diseases, and other traumas—clearly it would be very cruel to bring people back in such a shape, and if there is going to be a technology to resurrect individuals who died hundreds and thousands of years ago, it will be sufficiently advanced to repair their bodies as well. The real question may be that, since the human form will continue evolving and changing, what body exactly is being resurrected—the old human or the contemporary one? In the writings of Fedorov and other cosmists, there are indications that we do need to evolve our bodies, at the very least to make the body strong enough to survive and live in space without oxygen and at extremely low temperatures. Some of the other ideas point to plant life as a better form, because plants are able to regenerate leaves, branches, and so forth, while we cannot regrow an arm or a leg. Yet other thinkers from this circle suggest that we should become self-feeding, so as not to kill and consume other organisms to stay alive—like some types of plankton that can derive sufficient energy from sunlight without the need to consume anything else. I think if I was resurrected as algae, I would be really shocked, because we are all so attached to our physical form. So it is an open question, how all these different forms of humans—the older ones and the future ones—could coexist and interact. There is a funny short story by Sorokin, a contemporary Russian writer that is influenced by cosmism, in which something goes wrong and people are being resurrected partly as household appliances: so

someone is part human but they've got a fragment of a coffeemaker stuck in their new body. That is also a possibility ...

As for Benjamin's fears for the dead if the enemy wins, for me this means that if the enemy wins there will be no resurrection. The dead are already unsafe because they don't have any rights in our society: they don't communicate, consume, or vote and so they are not political subjects. Their remains are removed further and further from the cities, where most of the living reside. Culturally, the dead are now largely pathetic comical figures: zombies in movies.

When we were filming the large ionizer dish in the cemetery in Kazakhstan, one of the workers jokingly suggested that we should also build a big wall around us, because if we turned this device on, maybe it would make the dead rise from their graves and they would attack us like cinematic zombies. I was thinking that they would probably just want to go home, to their families and stuff. Financial capitalism does not care about the dead because they do not produce or consume. Fascism only uses them as a mythical proof of sacrifice. Communism also is indifferent to the dead because only the generation that achieves communism will benefit from it; everyone who died on the way gets nothing. It seems that only indigenous cultures at this point keep some reverence for the dead. Fedorov writes that a true religion is a cult of ancestors.

HS I think we are getting to a place where a lot of this intersects in interesting ways with current mythology around AI, but also accelerationist lore—and this harks back to Peter Thiel, eventually. I think everything can be drawn from this paragraph:

It would also not be a society of separate nation-states because all the resources of the planet and all productive forces will need to be pooled together in a kind of a planetary union. There will be no competition, no private property, no hierarchies, probably no ethnic or gender differences: nothing that can produce strife or war. Besides, everyone will be immortal so you couldn't kill anyone even if you wanted to.³

So, the dangers emanating from the dead will be contained by a noncapitalist, nonnational society? First one has to produce this society, and only afterward can one proceed to resurrect the dead because only at this point has one created the conditions to do it without further hardship for everyone. If this process is accelerated or bypassed, one will end up with a Peter Thiel-style vampire oligarchic resurrection, which will further exacerbate social inequality and tension.

This intersects with thought experiments to contain the dangers of artificial general intelligence (AGI). People think AGI could be dangerous and override human control and even extinguish humans. Like the dead, AGIs are seen as potentially dangerous creatures and there are questions of timing or containment.

Within the AGI debate, several "solutions" have been suggested: first, to program the AGI so it will not harm humans, or, on the alt-right/fascist end of the spectrum, to just accelerate extreme capitalism's tendency to exterminate humans and resurrect rich people as some sort of high-net-worth robot race.

These eugenicist ideas are already being implemented: cryogenics and blood transfusions for the rich get the headlines, but the breakdown

of health care in particular—and sustenance in general—for poor people is literally shortening the lives of millions, curtailing the possibility for them to pass on their genes. Negating, preventing, or destroying social health care programs is the most important accelerationist policy, and it has already been underway for some time.

There is another aspect to this: the maintenance and reproduction of life is of course a very gendered technology—and control over this is a social battleground. Reactionaries try to grab control over life's production and reproduction by any means: religious, economic, legal, and scientific. This affects women's rights on the one hand, and, on the other, it spawns fantasies of reproduction wrested from female control: in labs, via genetic engineering, etc. If the reproduction and maintenance of life is already a cosmist activity, then one has to recognize its strong connection to reproductive labor and so-called domestic activities. Caretakers, parents, nurses, nurturers, cooks, and cleaners are the first cosmists.

In the present reactionary backlash, oligarchic and neoreactionary eugenics are in full swing, with few attempts being made to contain or limit the impact on the living. The consequences of this are clear: the focus needs to be on the living first and foremost. Because if we don't sort out society—create noncapitalist abundance and so forth—the dead cannot be resurrected safely (or, by extension, AGI cannot be implemented without exterminating humankind or only preserving its most privileged parts).

The vital part of sorting out society is minimized in AGI mythology. People try to hastily accelerate in order to bypass it, thinking that there will be some sort of technological solution—for example, just getting rid of humankind by way of eugenic

selection. But this is where the real technological challenge resides: How to create a just and abundant society? If the living want to offer it to the dead, then they should be able to create it for themselves. This is an immense technological challenge and this technology has nothing to do with computation or machines but with getting people to agree and collaborate with one another. It's not about the hardware but the programming. This indeed is an intractable problem which has never been solved by deploying technology in the narrow sense. Most people thought that the industrial revolution would have already enabled a much more equitable society, but again, hardware outpaced software. I think that this is where the most urgent technological challenge lies. If this is solved, then everything else is a minor problem—for example, whether to resurrect Nazis on the same planet as techno-eugenicists without washing machines.

My question is: Why didn't it happen already? As far as I understand it, the project of Soviet socialism was supposed to create these foundations. At what point did the technology fail? Which parts would need to be developed to create the necessary social technology? Is cooking (or other so-called reproductive activities) potentially the more advanced technology in this respect?

AV Soviet socialism failed for a number of different reasons. Most importantly, all the major capitalist countries wanted it to fail and actively worked to undermine it. But there were also deep contradictions internally. Certain people, like Alexander Bogdanov for example, who was very close to Lenin from the start, acknowledged very early on that a violent insurrection and a militant attempt to seize power would only lead away from the possibility of

socialism and communism. He stepped away from the Bolshevik party as it was just being formed precisely over the use of force, because he felt that it was like cheating, a kind of violent acceleration of politics and social organization, whereas for him one could arrive at communism only through emancipation, education, cultural means, and so forth—not by forcing or killing people. Of course he was also a cosmist ...

Yet another side of this was human corruption: desire for power over others, desire for material goods, for privilege. By the late 1950s it became clear to some scientists and political leaders in the U.S.S.R. that they would not reach communism while economic decisions were made by humans who made mistakes and had ulterior motives. A Soviet computer scientist, Viktor Glushkov, embarked on the construction of a vast interconnected network of computers distributed across the entire country, which would regulate all production and distribution of goods, food, energy, and everything else—a cybernetic control system.⁴ Interestingly, some of the core principles of cybernetics are apparently inspired by a book written by Alexander Bogdanov around 1918, called *Tektology*. This was Bogdanov's attempt to develop a science of sciences that would organize and synthesize all scientific knowledge into very basic principles of interaction between systems. *Tektology* was translated into German and came to the attention of John von Neumann and Norbert Wiener, who later developed cybernetics and systems theory and all that. So in the 1960s Glushkov tried to apply principles of cybernetics to enable computers to run the Soviet economy. While this was not precisely artificial intelligence in the contemporary sense, it was a pretty close approximation. By the 1970s

the system was apparently fully developed and was nearly ready to be implemented, but was canceled at the last moment because of certain political disagreements within the politburo. I don't really know if it would have propelled the U.S.S.R. and the world into communism, or resulted in a complete disaster that would have crashed an already flawed economic system. In the end this computer system was utilized to regulate Soviet gas and oil pipelines and is still in use apparently. So probably your apartment in Berlin is literally connected to this network.

The main principle of materialism—and both cosmism and socialism are deeply materialist ways of thinking—is that everything is matter and all phenomena are a result of material interactions, be it interactions of atoms or neurons or pixels or numbers, etc. It's a kind of a monism (and in keeping with the rest of this conversation, naturally the main philosophical book by Bogdanov is titled *Empiriomonism*, 1904–6—which Lenin attacked in his 1909 *Materialism and Empiro-criticism*), which is why I think that a lot of contemporary post-humanists and all these people hoping for some form of digital immortality are probably as off-track as the Catholic Church was in the sense that they think they can separate consciousness from the body and transfer it into a different machine. Perhaps this is not very different from believing that the soul goes to heaven after death.

HS So can we agree that to bring this into the present—or even into the future—one needs to start by creating an abundant, peaceful, nonviolent society? Because if the living can't do it, how could the revived?

The problem to solve first is how to keep humans from killing one another and making each

other miserable. The explanations we get for this situation are very dull and unsatisfactory: the Right says that it is human nature and the Left says it is a result of unfortunate circumstances. So, what if one does not want to accept either? What does one need to look into? Are social physics a sort of alienating device that could help understand what this is about? How about social simulations with a wide range of possible outcomes? Cooking and game playing? How does one reprogram social dynamics?

AV What Fedorov suggests as a model for such a society is the divine family: the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I am not a Christian, so for me the Triune God is a really weird concept that is difficult to get my head around. From what I understand, the three divine entities are not identical and can act independently, yet there is a total union and there are no disagreements among them. They are immortal and what binds them together is love. Can one model society on this? What kind of script do we need to game a model like that?

I also feel that maybe the reason why both the Left and the Right have sort of accepted killing as part of human nature has something to do with how powerful the death drive is. Our bodies are programmed to die on a genetic level, as is almost all other living matter on this planet. Unlike other living matter, humans are capable of a certain type of reflection, and yet we are for the most part resigned to death. We do not question it. We are like farm animals: we are okay with being slaughtered as long as we get some time to live, feed, play a little, feel affection, reproduce, etc. What were the most popular song lyrics with teenagers you found—"hell," "fuck," "die"? We see others being slaughtered but

rationalize this as something natural because it seems unavoidable and because nobody escapes it in the end. I think if one is resigned to the inevitability of death, killing can be accepted as just another part of the package—painful and tragic, but somehow natural.

So maybe the first step has to be a movement toward a worldview within which death is not natural, where it is an enemy that has to be resisted and fought collectively. There needs to be a rebellion against death. This cannot be done by force, but through education, through ideas, through conversation, through literature, cinema, art, and so forth—in other words, by cultural means. I guess this is what I am working on.

It takes a really long time to change people's views of the world, but I think it is not entirely hopeless. Humans largely overcame slavery, even if this took many thousands of years. Gender and racial rights are gradually moving toward equality, even if this movement is more a zigzag than a straight line. The idea of representative politics has more or less become the norm in most places, even if it is imperfect and is being challenged and subverted by the elites, by the oligarchs, by fascists. I think it is possible that our views on death will change and that the right to rejuvenation, immortality, and resurrection will one day be recognized as an inherent right of all living beings and everyone who came before them. Biocosmists wanted to inscribe this into the Soviet constitution. They did not succeed at that time but this does not mean that this will not succeed eventually. For many centuries the notion of democracy existed solely as passages in obscure manuscripts preserved in monasteries, and it was inconceivable as a viable political system. Then suddenly it comes out from the pages of old books

and is embraced as the dominant model of social organization. It is very strange how certain ideas play out over time.

HS This takes us into a tangle of complex and contradictory ideas about the economy, excess, the gift, and mortality, pioneered by Bataille and others.

Let's start with this proposition: "Death is capital" (or "Capital is death").

This can have many implications: death can be managed using capital as a kind of fake immortality. But death in the form of giving your life is also the only form of currency many otherwise deprived people have. It can be a gift, a release of energy, a foundation for all sorts of community, including the fascist community. Death has a function in the cosmic circulation of energy, it can be a form of generosity or gluttony, a violent spending spree.

The energy and especially the fear of death has been "managed" by a lot of different economies: fascist ones tend to identify surplus energy with surplus people and try to kill them off. Many people argue that the current US government is a result of rising mortality rates for a segment of the white population that was until now comparatively shielded against the risk of premature death. They basically "invest" in a scheme that tells them that actually other people "deserve" to die instead as a form of "terror management." There is no mystery in this kind of process—the consequences are clear.

Economies of heroism work differently in that they are about giving your own life as an act of "generosity," leading to some form of immortality in circulation. Interestingly, there is also the opposite form of "hero" whose appeal relies on retention: on not giving, on being able to accumulate endlessly without choking—like Midas, who could

even digest gold—or not even needing to eat, thus already being immortal.

But according to Bataille, death and especially the death of others is not the only process by which excess energy is managed. The art world, design, fashion, sex, and so on are different schemes by which surplus energy/capital is redistributed and “wasted.” According to this, we can make sense of why contemporary art markets have been so inflated in recent decades. The worse or rather the more “worthless” the art, the higher the gratuitous expenditure. A part of excess capital is “wasted” in auctions, dinners, philanthropy, and, to a much lesser extent, in biennials and so on. Art thus becomes a part of so-called terror management, a means to channel death drives.

Essentially, this is neither pro-death nor anti-death. It shows the different functions of death in material economies. But the return of these discussions—which originally culminated around the time of European fascism—not only comes at a time when fascist forces are winning out once more, but is also accompanied by many of the aesthetic/artistic concerns of that time, especially a resurgence of surrealist and animist tendencies. The digital surrealism of recent years (“data as dada”) is just one very scattered example. We can add to this a new emphasis on ritual, sorcery, transgression, and meme magic. In a way, a lot of the ingredients of 1930s Surrealism are present once again in the cultural debate; historically, we know that some Surrealists went toward supporting communism and others toward supporting fascism, and others again went to the library. This is happening today as we speak within contemporary forms of surrealism, where a similar fracturing is starting to happen. Ten percent of post-internet artists go bro-fascist,

another 10 percent go *nouvelle gauche* (left identitarian ethnoculturalist), 20 percent go communist, and the rest go into ceramics, fermentation, and art fairs.

However, I would like to focus on the aspects that are new in relation to the 1930s: digital disruption and another historical push for globalization and circulation. What kinds of new elements do they bring into the picture?

And very clearly I have never been very much attracted by the bombastic and baroque aspects of Bataille’s ideas and style, nor by their continuation in—let’s call it nihilist and postmodern media theory, in Baudrillard, etc. It’s way overproduced. Too many synth violins and too much death metal.

A very different document from these times that I think is valid today is George Orwell’s 1938 *Homage to Catalonia*, which is a sober documentary account about both the struggle against fascism and persecution by Stalinism. Why is it relevant? Because it is actually about lived experience. It is lived experience. It is life plus, very essentially, form—the contrary of the entropy and spending spree of death. To me it feels luxurious, both in relation to a bare life that is deprived of any choice regarding its own form, but also in relation to the baroque formlessness of death spending. Perhaps the luxury lies in being able to spend one’s life rather than spending one’s death (or more likely, the deaths of others).

So, basically, to apply this back to our question: the fight against death. Today, to fight death first means to fight new fascisms.

AV This is interesting. *The Accursed Share* (1949)—Bataille’s last book, where he speaks about surplus energy, the sun, death, and so forth—is one of my favorite books of his.

It's the one where he comes very close to the worldview of cosmists in the sense that life on Earth is very much shaped and controlled to some extent by celestial, cosmic forces, specifically the effect of the sun on our planet. The sun is super generous in the sense that it gives Earth an incredible abundance of energy, more than we can actually use safely. Energy in the form of sunlight is converted to plant life, animal life, and, through the death of all this living substance, into coal, oil, gas—all these fossil fuels, which are essentially sunlight trapped below Earth's surface. The surplus of this energy needs to be spent through extravagant activities that require expenditures of huge amounts of energy: violence, war, sexuality, and so forth. Bataille sees art as one of the ways to expend this surplus energy nonviolently.

Fedorov's conception is similar and slightly different: he sees the entire surface of our planet, the biosphere in which we live and the planet's organic layer, the soil, as a kind of enormous cemetery where everything is made up of the remains of people, animals, plants—all the living matter that has died. We live in these remains, we literally eat, drink, breathe our ancestors, we are completely surrounded and entrapped in death and the remains it leaves behind. It is a horrific vision. So for Fedorov, the fight against death is a fight to liberate ourselves from the cycle of consuming the dead and being consumed ourselves, from being stuck in this swamp of dead bodies and misery.

Certainly, the fight against death has to start with a fight against militarism, fascism, racism, and sexism, because they kill and keep killing. But I am not sure that fascism is winning. To me it looks like the Alamo—a kind of a last stand before its final obliteration. For decades it was able to exist

in a veiled way and now it has come out in the open, largely because it feels it will not have another chance. But what has come out is kind of ridiculous, amateur, buffoon-like. I was just reading an interview in *Der Spiegel* with the older brother of Geert Wilders. It's really interesting what an isolated, solitary, pathetic figure Wilders is—someone completely removed from contact with the “people” on whose behalf he claims to speak, someone whose main talent is coming up with short provocative slogans that circulate widely but contain no real plan or program. It's very similar to Trump and many of the other figures that have emerged on the Right. It's entirely desperate. I don't want to just dismiss this or be too optimistic, because it's nasty and will take time and a lot of fighting to defeat. But it will be defeated, and then we are still in the cemetery eating the remains of our fathers and mothers ... So, how to really move forward?

Death is capital quite literally, because everything we accumulate—food, energy, raw material, etc.—these are all products of death. But there is something else which seems to be fully in the realm of the living—labor, reason, love. I think maybe if the digital disruption you mention could be directed to amplify the latter and reduce dependence on the former, then this could be a step in the right direction. One of the scientists in the cosmist movement was Vladimir Vernadsky, a geologist who developed the notion of the noosphere in the decades before and up through the middle of the Second World War. It's a profoundly optimistic theory of how life on the planet will be transformed by an emerging sphere of reason and communication whose relationship to life will be similar to the relationship that the biosphere has to the geosphere.⁵ Arseny says that noospheric theory is like an optimistic version of Anthropocene theory.

HS Buffoons kill. Being ridiculous unfortunately does not inhibit an autocrat's efficiency. Look at all the people recently killed in Turkey's new civil war. So unfortunately, the autocrats will not somehow implode or just go away. There are very strong organizational formations behind these movements: religious, commercial, military. And just as we see everything changing, fascism too is undergoing major mutations. One of the most important—besides its traditional infatuation with death—is its creation of updated fascist versions of the life sciences and also of digital communication. We can observe an impoverished form of the noosphere in social media, whose fascist potentials are rapidly being expanded: divisiveness, fragmentation, the exploitation of affect, etc. This is definitely not to say that it is not necessary to keep striving for different forms of mediated consciousness, but only that this is just another arena where the fight against fascism needs to take place.

Speaking of the biosphere—and changing topics—there is an example that keeps fascinating me: Steve Bannon actually managed the Biosphere 2 experiment for a while. People were locked into a greenhouse sphere and had to be completely self-sustaining, including the production of food and atmosphere. It was an oligarch-funded experiment, a test for space colonization. Could they produce oxygen? Sustenance? Social bonds? The answer is that it all failed and that cockroaches and ants were the species that turned out to be best adapted to the oligarch space colony. Oxygen dropped to dangerous levels. The climate was completely fucked up. I think it's a great metaphor for techno-fascism. That's what happens if you try to breed a superior race—say, storm troopers with tentacles for faces. You get a lot of cockroaches, which actually in terms

of Darwinist survival abilities are probably one of the most superior species on Earth. You actually get cockroaches in a huge filtered bubble—the perfect isolationist master race.

(Perhaps I need to apologize to the ants and cockroaches. The ants especially had really great social tactics—they practiced a form of cross-colony solidarity, which made them very resilient. The humans just divided and fell out; of course the ants won.)

It would be easy to keep gloating over this outcome, but since I am not a cockroach, the results are not encouraging. So one needs to go back and look at how to actually get it right, right from the foundations, minus the extreme capital techno-eugenics advocated by alt-right forces. These guys have already started to seal the windows of the country they are running. The climate is changing ever faster. There seems to have been an uprising against Bannon and the oxygen ban he imposed back then. At a certain point the windows were opened by some renegade scientists. Other windows were even broken. The woman that led the revolt was later threatened by Bannon. She more or less said that it was her ethical duty to protect her fellow scientists from becoming human guinea pigs for bankers. So this episode is an interesting precedent for how to combat financialized techno-eugenics.

AV Cosmism is biopolitics because it is concerned with the administration of life, rejuvenation, and even resurrection. Furthermore, it is a radicalized form of biopolitics because its goals are ahead of the current normative expectations and extend even to the deceased. It is a commonly acknowledged view that political power makes a biopolitical turn from simply exercising the sovereign right to kill its

subjects without being responsible for their health or life, to governments accepting the obligation to care for the health and welfare of their citizens, to extend their life by administering health services and medical care, securing food supplies, maintaining clean water and air, and so forth. This has been an enormous shift—from the administration of punishment and death to the administration of biological life, upon which the consent to be governed is founded. The next logical step would appear to be for society to guarantee perpetual life for its members and then to extend this to the dead: parents and grandparents and so forth—basically everyone.

The technological development necessary to accomplish all these goals may have less to do with the industrial production of devices, machines, and all sorts of stuff that is reliant on the exploitation of raw materials, carbon energy, and so forth, and more to do with certain modifications of our biological bodies. One way to prevent hunger is to produce a lot of food, but another way is to adapt the body to not require food, to be self-feeding somehow. Similarly, one way to solve housing shortages is to build a lot of housing, but a more advanced way is to make the body stronger in such a way that it does not require shelter at all—like most other animals. I do not mean some type of a Terminator-type armored body, but the biological organic body we already have, only made better and stronger. Other life-forms on our planet suggest interesting possibilities in this respect. There are organisms that simply don't die—like the immortal jellyfish that reverses its life cycle perpetually, or those miniscule tardigrades, or “water bears,” who apparently are able to live even in outer space on the surfaces of satellites and other orbiting space craft. Or even common houseplants that are able to derive energy

from photosynthesis. We share some of the genetic code with all this life and I do not think it is completely impossible to adopt some of their amazing abilities to our basic biology. I realize all this sounds like sci-fi, but our capacity for thought enables a lot of possibilities.

HS I completely agree about the biopolitics part. Yesterday I talked to TSC, the protagonist from my work *Factory of the Sun* (2015), about this. He had two very interesting comments.

First, he argued that humans actually do not have enough body surface to be able to photosynthesize sufficient energy. They would need leaf extensions of some kind to provide that kind of surface. (He also said that lobsters are technically immortal already, due to some genetic features, but they die anyway because of accidents.)

The other point he made was also extremely interesting. He said that future developments hinge on one factor: What will we achieve first, superintelligence or the resurrection of the dead?

Because the resurrection of everyone would force a major slowing down of research. All these people with old or even ancient worldviews would cause a major cultural slowdown that would make the current exponential increase in technical knowledge unlikely. So most probably, if immortality was first, superintelligence would be much delayed or even not happen at all. On the other hand, if superintelligence was developed first, it would have its own agenda. And that would probably not necessarily include the immortality or even survival of humankind, so that would maybe be delayed or not happen. A fascinating aporia. What happens if neither happens or something completely different happens, which is the likeliest

outcome? Will the ants take over? Or will someone smash the locked windows?

AV We can imagine solutions for the lack of surface area: either by designing a more efficient form of photosynthesis or growing some type of folding extensions. Wings could work very nicely and could also enable one to fly.

The question of superintelligence is interesting. I think the singularity people and various post-humanists are very concerned with this. They are also obsessed with transferring human consciousness into computers and resurrecting the dead through the use of something like interpellation algorithms, etc. But this may be on the wrong track because many of these ideas are based on thinking about intelligence, consciousness, memory, and thought, as immaterial phenomena that can be programmed into various types of hardware, like the religious idea that there is a material body and an immaterial soul that can exist separately from the body, enter other things, and so forth. These kinds of divisions between matter and spirit create a lot of confusion. Boris Groys thinks that this is a kind of medieval thinking that shows how young the field of computer science is and that it has not yet reached the contemporary level of reflection.⁶

I have not found detailed descriptions of exactly how cosmists imagined resurrection technology would work. Fedorov writes a lot about museums using their techniques for preservation, conservation, and restoration to not just maintain and repair artifacts, but to radicalize this technology to bring people back to life. He does not elaborate on how. One possible reference to a method that I came across is in a small book by Valerian Muravyov about the production of time.

Muravyov was a theorist, a social democrat, and was part of the February Revolution. After the October Revolution he was immediately arrested by Bolsheviks and sentenced to be executed. Apparently Leon Trotsky visited him in his jail cell, where they had an overnight discussion, as a result of which he was released and given a job as a researcher with the ministry of labor. In his treatise about the production of time (which he means literally), he talks about how events and phenomena recur when the same conditions are reconstructed: for example, water always boils when the temperature of 99.98°C is reached. It transforms into vapor and can condense into water again when the temperature is lowered. He wonders if water produced by the condensation of vaporized water can be regarded as the same water. He suggests that it is the same and this seems to imply to him that a recreation of certain conditions can result in the recreation of more complex systems, even humans who “evaporated” in the past. He sees this as the control and production of time. He also makes a point of differentiating this from shamanism, which believes that the reproduction of certain sounds, movements, utterances, or mixtures of ingredients can result in the production of unrelated actions or objects elsewhere. He stays more on the scientific side of things.

Oh, and I would not worry so much about bringing back people with “ancient” thinking. It seems discriminatory and presumptuous to think that we are now, or will be in the future, smarter than Socrates or Aristotle and so many others ... but separate museum planets are a must!

I think Bannon was brought in on the second attempt to live in the Biosphere in 1994. The original experiment in 1991 also ended badly—apparently a love triangle among participants in the dome

resulted in a stabbing and the experiment had to be stopped. I did not know that there was an earlier Soviet experiment like this, but it makes sense because of the space program and the obsession with control over complex systems and so on. It may have been successful because people in the Soviet Union were a bit more patient and used to putting up with much more discomfort than probably most American scientists in the 1990s. I am sure it was just as miserable though.

HS The other interesting detail is that *Big Brother*, arguably the first reality TV show, was based on Biosphere 2 (which already had a large entertainment component, including live broadcasts and the Theatre of All Possibilities, from which crew members were drawn, etc.). Probably one could say that a lot of contemporary politics is modeled on similar aesthetic forms, starting from Berlusconi's emergence out of trash television. Certainly Trump is nothing without *Celebrity Apprentice*. So this was basically bred in the Biosphere as an unforeseen side effect in the wider noosphere. Even if the sphere would have been perfectly sealed, this effect would still have escaped. One wonders what kind of "thing" will "escape" from AI labs, and which unforeseen side effects this will have on the cosmosphere.

But also, most people agree that after the premises of Biosphere were taken over by different universities, very interesting research took place, mostly about the effects of climate change. One didn't need to rely on computer simulations, since one could create micro-atmospheres and study the effects. And interestingly, as climates change outside, in the future some species might have better living conditions inside than outside ...

In the last few days I was reminded of Gayatri Spivak's idea of "strategic essentialism," a tactical politics of identity for oppressed people in a colonial or postcolonial context, sort of like an identity politics in brackets. Now, in many places the brackets have come off and minority identity politics have been appropriated by reactionaries of different kinds in the form of men's rights, white separatism, and extreme religion. All of these groups pretend to be oppressed minorities in a takeover of 1980s leftist identity politics. So, while in the '80s strategic essentialism may have been a progressive strategy for some (or not), now it definitely isn't.

I think that right now one might need to reverse this term—with full respect to its original inventor—and call for a *strategic universalism*, no brackets necessary. Everyone should be considered equal, period, even though we know that of course everyone is different. And of course, the term "universalism" has been attacked many times as deficient, incomplete, Western-biased, and so on. Actually, as far as I know cosmism too has been described as a very culturally specific set of ideas, tied to the Eurasian movement, with its ideologically dubious and Duginist offspring.

So, let's confront this. Universalism refers to the universe and cosmism to the cosmos. Neither of them is tied to any specific human cultural identity per se.

How to create a set of positions that claims that everyone is an equal and constituent part of the universe/cosmos, not only humans but also other elements and different spheres of the cosmos? Connected, transindividual minds, as well as all the other strata of universal matter? A biopolitics that understands life as anchored in material

and energetic processes that go beyond what is currently understood as such. Is this a way to re-deploy cosmism as an answer to current pressing problems?

By the way, did you know that “cosmos” also relates to women’s fashion? The Greek *kosmos*, meaning order or adornment, becomes the French *cosmetique*, which finally becomes cosmetics in the seventeenth century! This is wonderful! It connects all the dots! We have to think of cosmism (or strategic universalism) as consisting of advanced experiments in reproductive activities. By this I do not mean genetics, even though it could eventually form some part of it. I mean, for example, the whole range of reproductive labor, which recreates and rejuvenates humanity. It is the labor of life, of creating society and relations, in contrast to the labor of death of the soldier and banker. The labor of love, obviously. And of course these activities were domesticated, feminized, relegated to slaves, etc. So these are the high-end technologies we need to build on. Actually cooking is the only technology in human history that literally changed—or really created the human body as we know it. Cooking provided the calories needed to sustain the brain size of our present species. It precedes our current form. Humans are a by-product of cooking. And fashion, dressmaking, food preparation, childcare, etc., could be a huge part of another push to transform human existence into something way more pleasurable and sustainable; whether this involves bodily transformation or not. So, basically, cosmist fashion is a pleonasm. Fashion (as a shortcut term for all these activities) is a high-tech enterprise to recreate and reprogram the living, their relations and their shared minds. It is egalitarian and allows for everybody, including, if need be, winged ones.

I mean, fuck artificial intelligence when you can have artificial elegance!

AV Yes, “cosmos” means beauty in ancient Greek. It also means harmony. Fedorov and his circle were keenly aware of this and constantly referred to the cosmos in opposition to chaos. I guess the name for this movement could have been harmonism rather than cosmism ... Also, the Russian word for universe literally means “populated” or “settled”—the emphasis is on people rather than just place or space. “Universal” was also the title of the orthodox patriarch in Constantinople—a religious claim to the totality of the universe, to all people. The Russian Orthodox Church thinks that it inherited this claim after the fall of Constantinople. This is partly why some right-wingers, since the fall of communism and its particular universalism, have become interested in cosmism, like the Duginists and so forth. It seems to me that they are aware of the gaps in their belief system, which is no match for Marxism, so they try to borrow something to fill the holes, like the Nazis did with Nietzsche.

What you say about reproductive labor is extremely important. It is by far the most potent, powerful, existential force—more potent than anything else humanity, and possibly the whole planet, the biosphere, has. It is life, it is also love. Because of love, we must resurrect our ancestors: from cosmic particles, as minerals, as animated plants, solar, self-feeding, collectively conscious, immortal, transsexual, on Earth, on spaceships, on space stations, and on other planets. So, is your next film going to be *Biosphere 3*?

HS Yessir! And it’s going to have a long catwalk!

1

See Evgeniya Yaroslavskaya-Marcon, "Kl'janus' otomstit' slovom i krov'ju ...," published with notes by Irina Flige, *Zvezda*, 2008, <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2008/1/ma11.html>.

2

See Arseny Zhilyaev, "Tracing Avant-Garde Museology," and Oleksiy Radynski, "The Great Accelerator: Notes for a Film," *e-flux journal*, no. 82 (May 2017).

3

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 203.

4

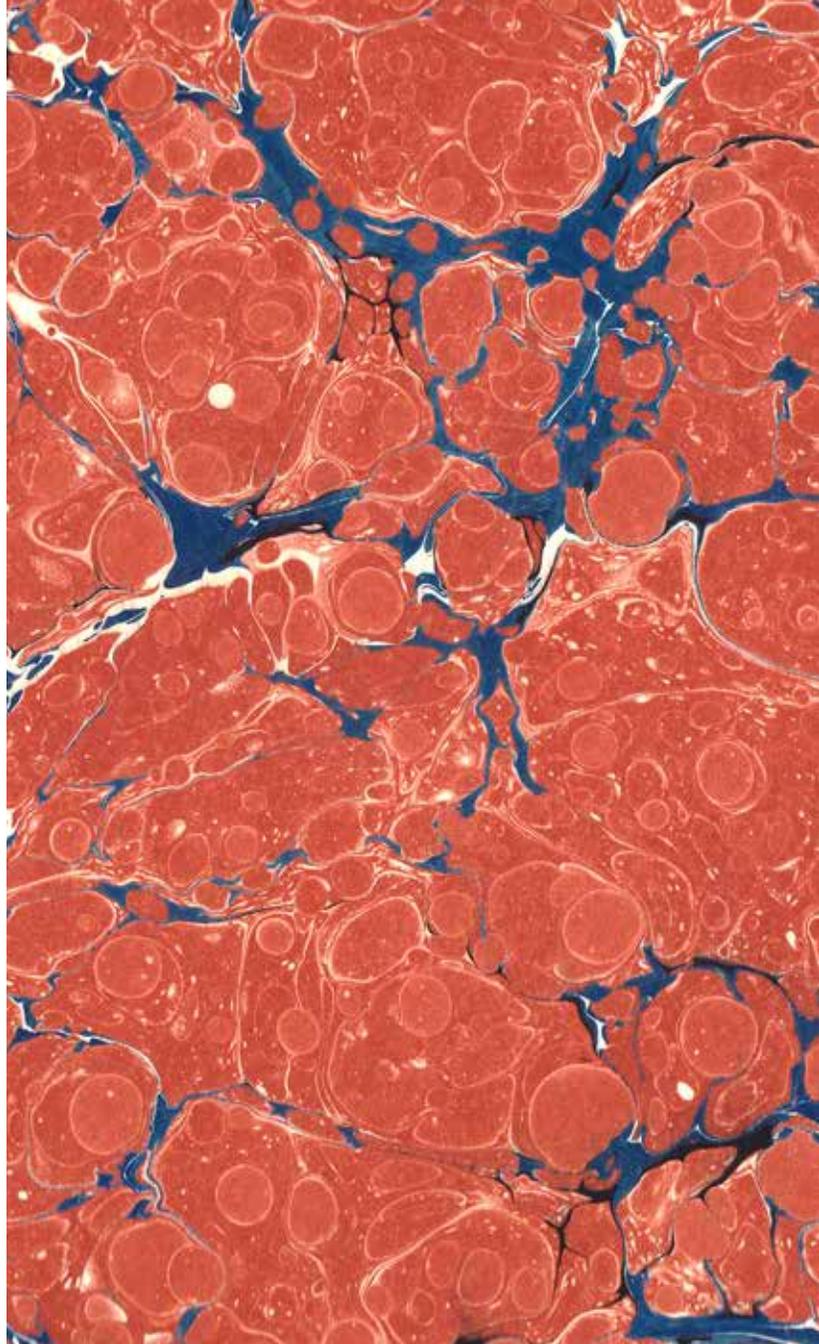
See Radynski, "The Great Accelerator."

5

From a geological point of view, the biosphere (the part of the planet in which life can exist) is minuscule compared to the geosphere (the solid earth, as distinguished from the atmosphere and hydrosphere). Yet the biosphere has developed to such an extent that it has a controlling relationship over the geomass of the planet, including the ability to destroy it.

6

See Boris Groys, "Art, Technology, and Humanism," *e-flux journal*, no. 82 (May 2017).



Elena Shaposhnikova and Arseny Zhilyaev
Art without Death

A similar conversation appeared in *Superhumanity*, a project by *e-flux Architecture*, on January 6, 2017.

Elena Shaposhnikova When Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley (the curators of the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial) told me the subject of their show—the question “Are We Human?”—I immediately thought of the writings of Nikolai Fedorov and other Russian biocosmists, and their ideas about the unfinished state of human evolution.

Starting with Nikolai Fedorov, Russian cosmists—whose ranks included numerous philosophers, novelists, poets, avant-garde artists, scientists, medical doctors, activists, revolutionaries, and many others—believed that the evolutionary development of humanity is far from complete, and that our main task is to evolve further, using our faculty of reason so as to become immortal ourselves and also to return all of our dead ancestors to life. Since the capacity of Earth to support this enormous resurrected and immortal population will be insufficient, cosmists advocated the development of space travel, colonization of other planets, and human expansion throughout the universe.

Biocosmists advocated a complete reconstruction of society and human relations, as well as a metabolic reconstruction of our biological body in such a way that it can regenerate limbs and organs, exist without oxygen, derive energy directly from the sun like plants do, and also become androgynous or transsexual in the sense that the need for distinct genders and sexual reproduction would end once immortality and the resurrection of all previous generations became possible.

If the question “Are we human?” were posed to Fedorov or any other cosmist, they would probably say no, because we have not yet perfected our design and have not overcome death.

Arseny Zhilyaev Asking this question today is similar to asking whether we still live under capitalism, or rather under something more horrible. In both cases, if we speak in nineteenth-century terms it is possible to say: “No, we are not human in Fedorov’s terms, and we don’t live under capitalism as it was described by Marx.” One popular argument is to define humans as inherently insane creatures who want to violently impose their identity and limitations onto the rest of universe, and thus claim it is better for us to find altogether nonhuman ways of thinking and operating. In other words, the argument insists that we try to avoid being human altogether. But in my mind, this is a really tricky claim, not to mention endeavor. There is an interesting case, again from the nineteenth century, involving Russian revolutionary activists from the *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will) movement, the vast majority of whom came from affluent, aristocratic backgrounds and were extremely well educated, yet nevertheless wanted to act on behalf of peasants and workers. Leaders of the People’s Will advised their members to “go to the people” in order to promote revolutionary ideas of liberation, which meant to live and work as members of the ordinary, oppressed classes. Their attempts failed completely. Peasants didn’t trust them and ended up helping the police arrest them. It seems to me that when artists today try to give voice to oppressed plants or try to act as nonhuman agents, they are being as naive as those activists of the nineteenth century.

I think that it is only within our nature as thinking animals, with all our limitations, that it becomes possible to reach what could be called “real will” and a universal voice. This doesn’t mean that we should preserve human superstition, but rather the opposite: we should consciously plan

to overcome the natural, social, sexual, and other limitations of our species. Fedorov was one of the first thinkers to advocate for this. For me, the main question here is who will take responsibility for this transition, for this permanent overcoming? To state intelligence services and corporations, we humans probably look like houseplants in need of cultivation and regulation. Because of this reality, I'd like to go back to Fedorov and develop more personal, or more properly human ways of speaking about our transformations.

For me one of the most intriguing questions for the contemporary artist who works with Russian cosmism, or one who has an interest in reaching a nonhuman condition in art, is: Do you personally want to be immortal? Because for me, as a conscious event, death is one of the most crucial points of humanity. Can you personally imagine your artistic life without death or aging at all?

ES I was recently watching a TV program in which a five-year-old Chinese girl was able to put animals to sleep merely by talking to them. All sorts of animals: a rabbit, a lizard, different types of birds, cats, dogs, and so forth. It was absolutely mesmerizing to watch. I've heard about similar abilities that some shamans are supposed to have, but I had never seen this before. Perhaps it was just a TV trick, but in any case talking to plants or even speaking on behalf of unhappy plants may not be as futile as it seems. At least plants and animals won't report you to the police!

But to answer your question: I think everything depends on what we mean by artistic life, and how we imagine it. On the one hand, an image of a zombified artist painting *crapstractions* for all of eternity is rather tedious. Fedorov, however,

had a much more complex conception of art than simply the production of aesthetic or conceptual objects. The kind of eschatology, the horizon of life he outlines in his writings, seems to suggest that the ultimate work of art is to work toward the spiritualization of inanimate matter: a kind of vast, animistic project of teaching the matter that makes up the universe to perceive, to feel, to think. Fedorov believed that the most unusual and significant quality of human beings is our capacity to feel, to understand, to think and to be conscious, and that this capacity has to be shared with all the matter that does not already possess it. I am not sure where this desire to animate the world comes from, but it's not entirely unique to Fedorov. There is a kind of shamanistic sensibility to the entire geographical region from Japan to Scandinavia, and Russia is very much a part of that tradition. So Fedorov, despite being devoutly Orthodox, felt it was our evolutionary responsibility to teach the cosmos reason, and that precisely this activity is the real work of art. How long would a work like that take? Probably an eternity ... So from that perspective, immortality becomes a necessity and we should begin working on it immediately.

I was reading something recently about the fact that there is a lot less difference between organic and inorganic matter than we tend to presume. Ultimately all matter, living or inert, is subject to the same cycle of organization and decay, even if the speed at which these processes occur is vastly different. In this sense planets, stars, galaxies—and arguably the entire universe—are not so different than our bodies. So maybe it's not impossible to somehow learn from the longevity of stone while teaching it our ability to be conscious, self-aware, and intelligent.

I guess this all may sound a bit new age, but we have to keep in mind that we are speaking of a very different sensibility—one that comes forward at the end of the Russian Empire, continues through the Communist Revolution and a number of wars, and actually results in manned space flight and all that. So this is not like having a pet rock and hallucinating on peyote; it's a kind of materialist delirium that is both ultrarational and totally fantastical.

AZ I agree with you about the role of humans in the universe and that it shouldn't be overvalued. In Russian cosmism, and especially in the ideas of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, there is a strong intuition of a radical materialistic unity of “thinking creatures” and matter itself. He wrote, for example, about an eternal liberation that starts at the moment of death, when the decomposition of our body releases atoms and molecules into the cosmos. He suggested that these liberated particles are overjoyed, ecstatic to be released, and that in this sense death is a joyous event. But at the same time, according to Tsiolkovsky, humans should ultimately be transformed into immaterial organisms capable of acting on a universal level. For me, the supreme position of our species is one of the problematic points in Fedorov's thought. On the one hand, you can feel the misery of human beings with all their limits: weakness, aggression, pretense, naivety, incommensurability with universal processes, really pathetic things that need to be overcome ... And on the other hand, Fedorov emphasized the resurrection of human beings in their extant material forms, with all their flaws, weaknesses, and ailments, while of course considering the potential for further transformations.

I once discussed the ideas of Russian cosmism and resurrection with an artist friend, who was really resistant to them. “Why should I like the idea of resurrecting my father?” he asked. “There is nothing good in resurrection for all. Sometimes death is better than being alive.” Here is one more problem with Fedorov's vision: Should we resurrect criminals like Hitler, or people who were simply tired of life and who may not want to return? And after all, how would old fashioned people feel after meeting people from a much more advanced species, with immaterial or transformed bodies? Will those older humans be able to find purpose in their new, resurrected lives?

ES Clearly we can imagine many problems in mixing the older resurrected generations and their later, more evolved peers. How would a medieval butcher from Venice, for example, react to a future generation of human who may be more plantlike, genderless, self-feeding, and so forth ...? I think one solution to this problem could be exactly what you recently suggested in Moscow—that various planets could be set up like period rooms in museums; there could be a planet populated by generations of people from the twelfth century, another planet for people from the early capitalist period, a Stone Age planet, and so forth ... a population management system where people's sensibilities are not invaded by sensibilities incomprehensible to them. The whole thing could be managed by artificial intelligence and everyone would be happy. Or it could be a total nightmare. When you described this type of organization, my initial thought was that we actually may already be living in this system now, and that the earth is just one big period room within a universe-scale museum.

AZ Yes, it's possible to imagine an artificial intelligence in charge of universal life development, but why would it need humans? Maybe it's much more interested in revitalizing stars with black holes instead. I see one possible answer being an artistic or museological vision; to assemble people within their epochs in totalizing installations that can cover entire planets in outer space. But not everyone wants to be an object in a museum. Boris Groys speaks about Russian cosmism as a curatorial project.¹ If you can't resurrect everyone at the same time, you will have to make choices, effectively forcing you to be a curator. I remember that once in discussion with you, Boris said that he is not against his own resurrection by future generations. But you have a more controversial relation to such a perspective, don't you?

ES Sometimes I also run into a certain degree of rejection or even hostility to the idea of immortality, particularly from younger people. A few years ago I organized a lengthy seminar around Fedorov's *Philosophy of the Common Task* with an international group of young artists in Beirut. In private, many of the participants told me that in fact, they found the idea of living forever abhorrent. It seems that for them immortality meant suffering without end or at best infinite boredom. I was really surprised by this reaction. Personally, I have always perceived the idea of immortality as something very positive and desirable. At first I thought that maybe this was simply an age thing: when you are young, unless you are very ill, inured, live in a violent situation, or have lost someone you loved, death seems to be a rather abstract concept; you read about it and see images of it, but it's something that seems to only happen to others. It seems that the body

does not really feel its own mortality until entropy starts setting in. On the other hand, as Boris Groys has written elsewhere, since we can detect radiation from the birth of the universe, from the big bang, it is possible that there are signals approaching us from its future end.² In this sense, maybe our bodies can already faintly register the energy from the death of the sun four and a half billion years from now. In any case, the death drive is incredibly strong in our psyche.

But maybe the more interesting side of this is not biological or psychological, but a certain insufficiency of imagination (which is particularly important because we are talking about artists—apparently the most imaginative part of society). It seems to me that most of us tend to sublimate our current life conditions and all its problems, tragedies, and inequities, and project this into future scenarios. You can see this in many popular futuristic books and films: they most often stay on the level of the technological imaginary, while projecting the problems of our current society into the future. So while it's easy to imagine and represent life in a society without money and with intergalactic travel, the plot invariably defaults to essentialist conflicts of power, heroism, betrayal, revenge, or something along these lines. I wonder what it would take to imagine things being really different. I suspect that most likely it would register as some type of madness. Actually, for all Fedorov's pragmatism and religious orthodoxy, I do sense a certain mad quality in his thinking.

AZ I agree that we have a crucial point here for the interpretation of Fedorov's legacy. And your story about students who don't accept immortality makes me think about the general fear of socialism.

The majority of people associate this term with the Soviet project, or *real socialism*, and then mainly with its unification of everyday life, narrow political spectrum, unattractive cultural production, etc., that started with Stalin in the 1930s. But according to Marx, or even Lenin, socialism as a goal is associated with something else—with opportunities of unlimited plurality and playful creativity, wider than those offered by capitalism.³ Now consider Fedorov's concept of immortality, his idea of the universal museum producing eternal life and resurrection for all as the last necessary step for establishing social justice. What do we have in the twenty-first century? We have intelligence services and corporations that collect personal data to make money and perpetuate injustices. For some reason it seems that people associate immortality with real socialism, and capitalism with bright life and possible death, whereas really it's more the other way around.

Another important thinker who appeared in this context is Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who was strongly influenced by Nikolai Fedorov, and even wrote one of his most famous novels, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in order to test the Fedorovian notion that ancestors have an inherent value in a world without God. Dostoyevsky tried to depict the same situation that was problematic for the artist friend I mentioned earlier: "Why should I like the idea of resurrecting my father if he was not a good person?" In the novel the son kills his father after a discussion with his rational, atheist brother. The father was a very bad, controversial, even criminal person. Dostoyevsky does not just depict possible conclusions to resurrection, but also identifies an unconditional love for our creator that doesn't require any metaphysical guarantee or obligation. So resurrection itself is not a solution for Dostoyevsky. If we

take one step back, I think that it can be a very fruitful task for contemporary artists to test the possible consequences of real immortality and resurrection in the contemporary art scene. What scenario could that lead to? The first thing that comes to my mind is that we can imagine the final transformation of famous artists into brands, like in fashion when brand names live on after the death of their eponym. We have that exact situation in the film industry today, too, where it is more economically risky to try something new than to continue on with the same title or series. The popularity of TV or movie serials is comparable with the popularity of the novel in the nineteenth century (and actually Dostoyevsky, like a typical novelist of that time, often wrote his masterpieces for money as newspaper or journal serials). On the one hand, it is easy to imagine how most popular twentieth-century artists from the top 100 list, according to auction price indexes, would be very effective as franchises. On the other, a dead artist's legacy is probably more profitable for a speculative market than the unstable, perpetually unfinished career of an immortal artist.

If we consider immortality and resurrection as additional pieces of a social order based on equality, as Fedorov did, art and creativity will be transformed into the art of re-creation. Even the most radical Soviet Constructivists and Productivists thought that traditional artistic media would continue to exist in communist society, because traditional art is based on traumas and social contradictions (the inequality between rich and poor, gender, national identity, race, etc.), and that even after resolving all social contradictions, we would still have our bodies and their main properties, like sexual desire and death. In the case of the art of Russian cosmism, we are almost beyond death and

physical sexual desire. But then what would this society be? I guess its final goal would be to reconnect or redesign billions of independent pieces of previous lives into new constellations; a radical hybridity. This is a very Greenbergian notion: that the final goal of art is to give voice to yourself as a specific material or medium. When life is your artistic medium—from the big bang to immortality—there is enormous potential as an artist or curator. This would definitely raise new questions on old topics, like that of the spectator (how can we observe art pieces the size of the universe from within the same universe?) and institutional critique (how can we change the physical laws of artworks, determined as they are by the universe, themselves?). According to contemporary science, universes outside the one we inhabit exist. Our world, which appeared with the big bang, is only one possible constellation, and we may be able to access alternative ones via black holes. In the context of art, this gives enough distance to observe a universal art installation and to view it critically, while at the same time opening space to reflect on the medium. In this respect, what do you think about contemporary artistic attempts to overcome physical or mental human limits? Do we need limits at all?

ES I think artists are already at least potentially immortal. Similar to kings who are said to have both a physical body that can age, get sick, and die, and a political one that is indestructible and immortal (The King is dead, long live the King!), artists probably also inhabit two different bodies. In this sense one could say that Duchamp or Dostoyevsky are as alive now as they have ever been, because their living presence in society extends beyond the death of their physical bodies. So in this way the artistic

process is always an attempt to overcome physical, mental, or temporal limits; it is an attempt that does not succeed most of the time, but always holds the potential of overcoming death.

This is not exactly the kind of immortality that Fedorov had in mind. But I think the potential for immortal life through art is precisely one of the reasons that art is so central to his thinking and why he refers to art so much in his writing—more than any other philosopher I know. Almost everything we know about the past is given to us through preserved artifacts: works of literature, poems, sculptures, drawings and paintings, decorative objects, architectural remnants, and so on. Inevitably this is what forms the contents of most museums. Fedorov's universal museum, where he thinks resurrection will take place, is simply a radicalized, expanded, and more inclusive version of the museums we have now.

As you say, the closest thing we have to a universal museum—a museum that preserves everything—is the internet, which also doubles as an enormous data collector used for anything from commerce to government surveillance. From this perspective, immortality or resurrection made possible through a vast surveillance mechanism sounds sinister. But I also think oppressive structures, like intelligence and security agencies, often don't really realize the long-term ramifications of what they are doing. The CIA thought they were resisting the Soviet Union by funding religious schools in Afghanistan, but instead they helped to create militant Islamism that later turned around and attacked the United States. So the NSA may think that they are collecting data to fight terrorism or control a population, but at a later time it may turn out that they were actually building an elaborate museum archive that will be used to resurrect people.

The Mormon church also performs a vast information collection project. They have built a huge archive of personal records located deep inside a mountain in Utah with more than two billion names, birth dates, etc., because their religion suggests that they can baptize dead people and convert all who ever lived to Christianity in anticipation of the return of Jesus. While I do not share their beliefs, it is kind of comforting that someone is gathering and preserving all this information. In this sense, it's interesting that so many art institutions insist on listing dates of birth of artists next to their names. I always ask them to keep the birthday out, but there is usually a lot of pressure to include this information, which goes into all the printed matter and gets archived.

Recently I asked a friend who has done a lot of research on the history of exhibitions if he knew when the practice started, and as far as he could tell, it began with an important exhibition—the Sonderbund—of modern art in Cologne, Germany, in 1912. In a way this makes sense, because generational acceleration in art is very much rooted in modernism, and at this stage every decade is expected to produce a new and different type of art. Of course this makes the duration of any one artistic project very short; it is difficult for me personally to imagine working on something for more than five or ten years at most. To some extent this must affect the degree of complexity of the projects people tend to undertake. I would be very curious to imagine what a work that requires several hundred years to make would be like, not merely in appearance but in conceptual scope. A historical precedent for something like this could be found in church architecture, which at a certain point required several generations to complete. Incidentally, church architecture is a model for a perfect, integrated artwork for Fedorov.

Arseny, if you had a few hundred years to dedicate to an art project, what would you do?

AZ It is almost impossible for me, too, to imagine such a long project. I consider my practice as one that focuses on making experimental models that work to test possible political, aesthetic, and historical scenarios by way of the viewer's experience. Each new project has its own visual and conceptual language; they are completely different from one another. Of course retrospectively you can draw a logical line between them, but it needs a particular, deeper optic than the average spectator has. As far as I know, Elena, your projects can be interpreted in a similar way. They have a straight conceptual frame or corpus that fixes the field of possible artistic interventions, for better or worse. Maybe it is too conservative, but I would say that artists only work on one single artwork throughout their entire life. But then I think that time is just the effect of the specificity of our universal setting. There is a new theory proposed by Australian scientist Joan Vaccaro that speculates about the origin of time. According to her research, "T violation, or a violation of time reversal (T) symmetry, is forcing the universe and us in it, into the future."⁴ A universe without this violation should be symmetrical in space and time, which means absent of temporal flow, of coherence. In such a world, time can be used in the same manner as space; each thing can only be in one place at one time. If you impose this model on art history, you would achieve the historical avant-garde's demand for the radical independence of artwork from previous forms or even art history itself, a demand that consciously or unconsciously limits the production of even the most radical anti-narrative experiments. If scientists can make such models, why do we

as artists limit our imagination to the historically known world of art?

Another answer to the same problem is the exact opposite of this: the decision to preserve all possible directions of time and its potential transformation of matter; all possible scenarios that our life and our world can have. This is what we have in the case of Fedorov's project of total preservation; or, with regard to time as an important part of the artistic project, there are Roman Opatka's conceptual paintings, in which one gets the sense of a sublime feeling of monumentality in time, similar to that in space.

But I feel that there is a serious tension between existing in both a space and time that forces humanity to go onward in its development, and the possibility that we could just get tired and give up. In this case even the short life of contemporary art projects can be too long. What do you prefer: to have all the time in the universe to do everything, or to have a limited time to do nothing?

ES I prefer art without death ...

1

Boris Groys, "Cosmic Anxiety: The Russian Case," *e-flux journal*, no. 65—"Supercommunity" (May 9, 2015).

2

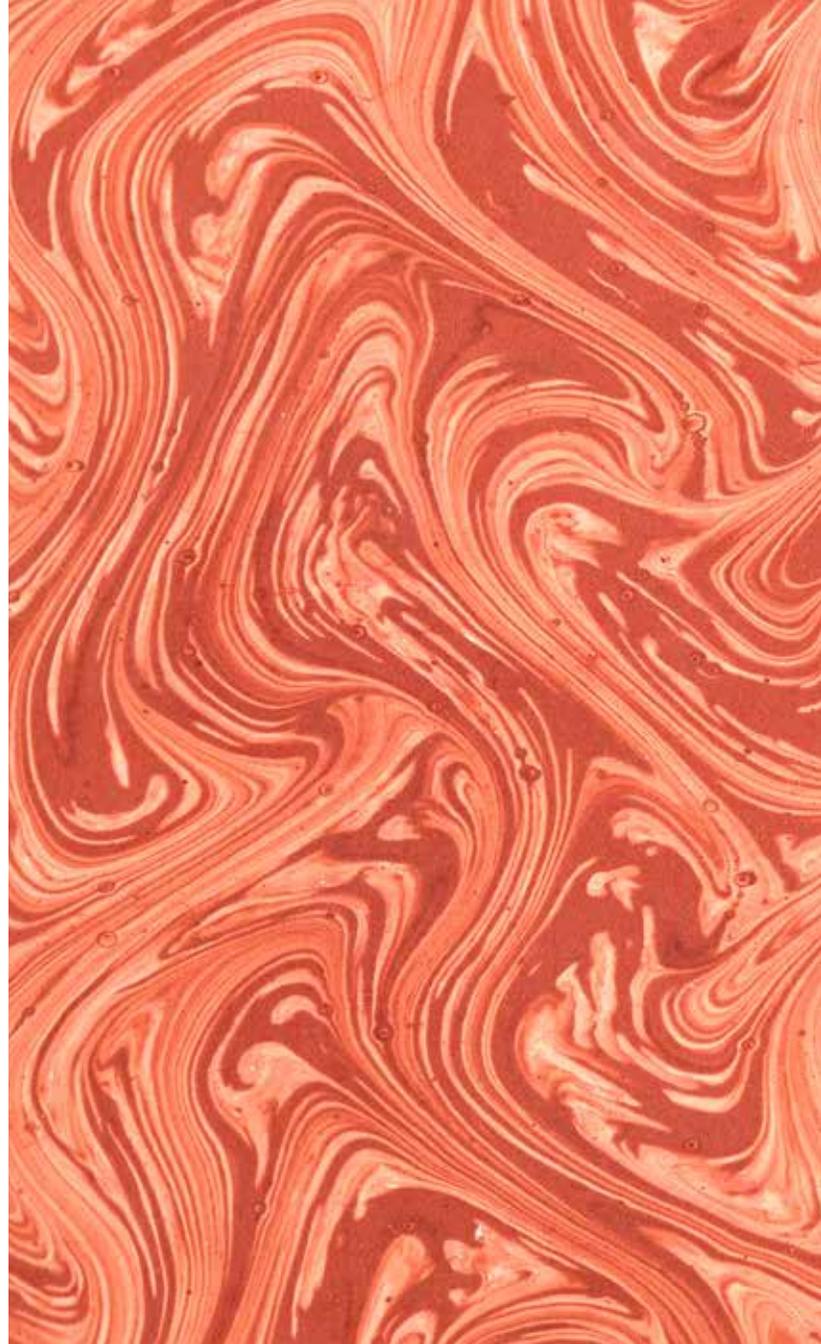
Boris Groys, "Self-Design, or Productive Narcissism," *e-flux Architecture* (September 22, 2016).

3

Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845) (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 53.

4

Joan A. Vaccaro, "Quantum Asymmetry between Time and Space," *Proceedings of the Royal Society A* 472, no. 2185 (January 2016).



Anton Vidokle and Arseny Zhilyaev
Factories of Resurrection

“Factories of Resurrection” appeared in *e-flux journal*, no. 71 (March 2016). The film *Immortality and Resurrection for All* (2017) has since been completed.

Arseny Zhilyaev Your recent films, which deal with the problematic of Russian cosmism, may come across as strange or even exotic. I know that your initial encounter with this topic was rather unusual. How did you start to work with this subject?

Anton Vidokle About ten years ago, Boris Groys told me about a very strange movement in Russia around the time of the revolution. His description of it sounded so macabre and vampiric that I thought he had invented it. The story was too good to be real: the resurrection of the dead on spaceships, blood transfusions to suspend aging, and so on. It sounded like a science-fiction novel. He said he had published a book on this in Germany, but unfortunately I do not speak German, so I didn't pursue it. Then a few years ago I was doing an interview with Ilya Kabakov when he started talking about the same thing. I realized that it was not just Groys's invention, so I looked it up.

What I found was Fedorov's book *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, which was so intensely beautiful that it hooked me immediately. Also useful was *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (2012) by George Young, who has been researching this topic since the late seventies. I slowly discovered that this is actually a very massive layer of Russian and Soviet culture that I knew nothing about, and which seemed to explain certain inexplicable things about the motives and thoughts of the avant-garde, which has always interested me.

AZ Can you tell me more about the origins of your film *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun* (2015)? Where did the idea come from? How did you develop the work? You chose to shoot the film in

Karaganda, Kazakhstan, a rather unusual location. The landscape, with its Soviet industrial architecture and Muslim cemeteries, looks very weird even to Russians.

AV At first, my plan was to make one feature-length film about cosmism. But as I started doing research, then filming and editing material, I realized that a single feature film would be impossible: the topic is just too vast, because there are so many different dimensions to this movement, from art to literature, poetry, theater, film, architecture, design, science and technology, medicine, philosophy, politics, social organization, and so forth.

So I decided to make a series of shorter films, about half an hour each. The first film, *This Is Cosmos* (2014), dealt with the general ethos of cosmism: a collage of ideas from the movement's diverse protagonists. In a sense it's a kind of introduction, with subsequent films addressing specific manifestations and ideas in depth.

The second film, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun* is based on the work and ideas of Alexander Chizhevsky, a biophysicist who was exiled to Karaganda, which was a city populated primarily by political prisoners who were released from camps and prisons, but who were not allowed to return to Moscow or other central cities.

Kazakhstan was the site of a very large network of labor camps known as Karlag, similar to the better-known Gulag. It was also the key site of the Soviet space program, with most of the rockets launching from Baikonur and landing in the steppe surrounding Karaganda. Sort of like the American city of Houston, in Texas, the city was both an enormous prison and one of the first spaceports. Architecturally, it is dominated by vast coal mines,

most of which are now shut down, as well as enormous cemeteries which evolved a very particular architectural style that I have not seen elsewhere: they look like miniature cities full of manifold mausoleum structures quoting various Islamic traditional styles, albeit all made from cheap, Soviet-era materials. It's a very unusual place.

AZ Did you ever come across Chizhevsky's ionizer lamps when you were growing up in Moscow? I seem to remember that even in the nineties, hospitals and schools always had them installed. These days they are not produced in their classical, Soviet version, though there are many other commercial types of ionizers available. However, I heard that they do not seem to have the therapeutic effect that the device designed by Chizhevsky was supposed to have. The device in the film is probably one of the few authentic ones that exist. What will happen to it? Will it be used for treatment?

AV I have some vague memories of something like these ionizer lamps. I was sickly as a child and my mother used to try various remedies to improve my health—for example, *mumiyo*, which is a black, tar-like substance from Altai, which apparently is petrified honey. You drink it with hot milk. It tastes disgusting, but it's supposed to cure all sorts of ailments. From that time, I also remember something about the benefits of negatively charged ions of oxygen. But it's a very vague memory: I'm not really sure if I ever actually saw these devices.

Ionizer lamps were very popular in the seventies and later. Many types have been produced: from things that look like Constructivist sculptures to devices disguised as painted porcelain vases or artificial palm trees, to blend better with the decor

of your home. Most of these do not work, because they were not made according to Chizhevsky's original designs. Basically, it's a fairly simple device that creates an electric field, which changes the charge of particles in the air from positive to negative. It also cleans the air. This, in turn, helps the circulation of blood, which is supposed to produce rejuvenating effects in humans and animals. In nature, this happens on mountaintops, by the sea, and in forests. This phenomenon is related to the effect of solar particles on the ionosphere of our planet. Chizhevsky basically created a device that would reproduce this process indoors.

Ionizers are rather common these days. Many Japanese air conditioners include an ionization function, but the type Chizhevsky invented is hard to find. So for the film we had to build one ourselves. By incredible luck or coincidence we actually found the only industrial manufacturer who has worked with these devices, in Karaganda. It's a small experimental factory, which developed original designs and modified them to be used as air purification machines for factory chimneys. Apparently, this works to remove nearly all the carbon from polluted air and to release pure oxygen into the atmosphere.

The owner of the company is hoping that these devices will be adopted by all carbon-producing factories on the planet, because they are very economical and consume hardly any energy. According to him, this would drastically reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and return Earth to the climate conditions that existed before the effects of human activity. As a result, he thinks that the climate will improve and plants that have been extinct for many millennia will return, and Earth will become the Garden of Eden again: people

will not need clothing anymore and we will all walk around naked, prehistoric plants and trees will grow plentiful fruit and we will not have to work for food, and so forth. So he is lobbying the office of the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nayarbayev, to include this device in the World's Fair that will take place in the capital city, Astana, next year.

He was excited we were making a film about Chizhevsky and built a giant version of this lamp, which we then installed and tested at a local cemetery. After filming we donated it to the local museum of science and technology. They wanted it as a kind of alternative monument to Chizhevsky: a functional monument. Hopefully it has been reinstalled there by now.

AZ In the first two films in this trilogy you use elements associated with psychotherapy. You speak of the effect of color on the human body, and use strategies of hypnosis. This emphasis on the utilitarian aspect of art, simultaneously sincere and critical, tests the limits of our belief in the transformative power of art. At the same time I feel as though you genuinely prefer utility over aesthesis or poesis. Most often, utility in art brings to mind certain socially engaged practices, which refer to politics or relational aesthetics in one way or another. It seems to me that you are trying to approach this on an entirely different level: through a direct, material influence—material determinism. The notion of the communist revolution—a complex social phenomenon—as an event that could have been produced by the purely material, physical influence of the sun dovetails with this thinking. Tell me about your relationship to utility in art and to materialism in the context of your projects.

AV Utility in art is something that probably needs to be described carefully right now: it seems to me that there is a tendency these days to put a lot of emphasis on the “usefulness” of some types of artistic projects. It still remains to be seen if these works are really useful or are merely an expression of insecurity about the elusive nature and value of art, or of a reluctance on the part of some public institutions to fund activities that do not appear to have immediate and direct benefits for their constituencies, that are difficult to understand or appreciate. What I have been observing is that over the past few years, cuts in cultural funding are slowly forcing art organizations and some artists to adopt a certain stance that makes it easier to rationalize or justify their activities to government officials, sponsors, patrons, and politicians, and utility or usefulness are very instrumental terms here. While I do not believe that art should or could be completely autonomous from society, I do find this tendency simplistic.

With my films I want to come a little bit closer to the ethos behind cosmism, which is basically the desire to contribute directly and literally to the impossibly difficult project of immortality and resurrection for all, by any means possible, including art. It's interesting that many cosmists saw medicine as a field where the project of immortality, in the sense of the prolongation of life, could be most immediately deployed. It's not an accident that someone like Chizhevsky, who was really a physicist and not a physician, did most of his research in areas that could immediately improve human health, cure ailments, and in this way postpone death. Alexander Bogdanov was also a doctor—a psychiatrist, by education—and one of his most interesting projects was research into blood

transfusion, through which he hoped to slow down aging and delay death.

So when I was editing the first film, it occurred to me that I did not want to make a mere documentary about the history of cosmism, and that in order to transmit its ideas more accurately, I needed to somehow express its central desire, which is simply to prolong life. Essentially, film is light, color, and sound, and all of these means can produce a therapeutic effect on the human organism. We all know about light therapy for children and people who live in places lacking in sunlight. Color therapy has been practiced since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Sound also appears to have various medical uses. So basically the structural elements that make up a film can also be used for preventative or other types of treatment.

In the first film in the series, I used red screens because of a red-light treatment system developed by NASA to speed up the healing of skin wounds. They discovered this accidentally, while looking for a way to heal cuts and abrasions in conditions of zero gravity, where the body heals very slowly. They found that red LED light, of a certain frequency, accelerates healing. At the same time, video projectors these days often use an LED light source, and the usage of HD LED screens is becoming more affordable and common each year. So I hope that in the near future, when this film is screened on an LED screen at some museum, it can be calibrated to also produce a prophylactic and therapeutic effect on the viewer. Even if you don't like the film, it can have a positive effect on your body, on your cells and organs.

Similarly, the second film uses elements of clinical hypnosis that are commonly employed to break addictions. I try to use a hypnosis script at

the beginning and the end of the film to break the addiction to mortality—the death drive. In the next film I plan to use a sound technique that has been used clinically to alter memory, which appears to be one of the reasons for drug and alcohol addictions and other self-destructive behavior. This is not to say that the main value of my work is medical. That would be charlatanism. But I use these techniques to express the desire implicit in cosmism to rejuvenate, cure, heal, improve health, and delay death for as long as possible and by any means possible.

AZ In your films there are many references to works by members of the Moscow conceptual school. In one way or another Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys, and Andrei Monastyrski with Collective Actions Group are all present in these films. Can you tell me more about your relationship to this tradition? Do you think of yourself as belonging to it artistically?

AV Well, this project was largely started through a conversation with Kabakov. However, Ilya has a very negative relationship to cosmism; for him it's as "evil" as communism, which he despises. Basically, his take on it is that it reduces humanity to a speck in the vastness of the cosmos, and in this way human existence becomes very marginal. He illustrates this idea very literally in some of his paintings, where tiny human figures form a kind of a thin border around the edges of the canvas, while the center is filled with a giant white void. I love these paintings, although I suspect that he misreads cosmism entirely. It seems to me that Ilya is very much a humanist, and while humanism never totally leaves the project of cosmism, it is a very hybrid version of humanism, which probably makes Ilya uncomfortable.

Andrei Monastyrski is a very different figure. When I started working on this project, I asked one of the researchers who was helping me gather material, a young artist named Anastasia Ryabova, to ask Andrei about Fedorov and cosmism. At the time, he said that it had nothing to do with his work. But just a couple of months ago, I spoke with him again and this time around he told me that he was actually reading Fedorov in the late seventies, and that some of the ideas did influence him.

I refer to both Ilya's and Andrei's work in the first film, and will actually restage a version of one of Monastyrski's actions from 1979 in the next film in the series, with his consent. I admire these artists, but I really do not think that I belong to the Moscow conceptual tradition in any way. Most of it is rather hermetic and based on post-structuralism, the analysis of language and systems, and so forth. I think I come from something else artistically, although I am not exactly sure what that is.

AZ You may have heard that during the past couple of years there has been quite a public discussion of cosmism in Russia. This started when the entire editorial team of an independent political web journal, *Russian Planet*, was fired, having been accused rather facetiously of being “weak cosmists.” Subsequently, the label “weak cosmist” went viral, and is now usually used as a derogatory term. I have heard numerous sarcastic remarks about cosmism, mainly from the liberal intelligentsia, regarding the Soviet space program as well as the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov and his followers. For them, cosmism is synonymous with obscurantism and charlatanism. On the other hand, there is clearly a renewed interest in the cosmos as evidenced both by statements from the Russian government and by Russian

culture at large. For example, the most successful Russian cartoon of the last few years, which has been nominated for an Oscar this year, is called *We Can't Live without Cosmos*. I guess this is not only a Russian phenomenon, as the success of movies like *Interstellar* suggests. I am curious about how your projects on the cosmos and Russian cosmism are perceived in a more international context.

AV I have not encountered anything particularly dismissive or hostile yet. Just perhaps a bit of disbelief. Like: this story is too strange to be true. Immortality and resurrection are very ancient topics and have always provoked controversy. It seems that it's very ingrained in almost all cultures that the desire for immortality is a sin, a transgression against nature, god, the essence of humanity, and so forth. So people are often ambivalent about this. And the cosmos is also something that most people view with a bit of fear. Just think of all the popular movies about something horrible coming from outer space to destroy Earth and humanity: all sorts of meteorites, monsters, aliens, and so forth. Furthermore, there is a certain degree of suspicion of things that are Russian. In Europe and America, where I spend most of my time, leftists dislike Russia because they think it ruined the possibility of communism, while people on the Right suspect that all things Russian are still secretly communist. There isn't really all that much sympathy from either ideological camp, and the current political situation across the world does not help this.

But I do feel that many people respond to the kind of poetry and wild imaginative power that permeates Fedorov's ideas and cosmism in general. So there is quite a bit of curiosity.

AZ Your films about cosmism make me think of Situationist experiments and the French New Wave. Firstly, this is because of the collage-like structure of the content of your films, and the emphasis you put on research. It's also because of your rejection of mimetic acting, your use of estrangement in the Brechtian sense and the direct address to the audience. And finally, it's because of the way you combine nearly abstract images (for example, landscapes shot from a great height) with a rather complex narrative about theoretical and scientific questions. On the other hand, having watched Russian television in the eighties and nineties, as well as Soviet science-fiction films, I can't avoid mentioning works by Pavel Klushantsev in the context of your films. Klushantsev was one of the first directors to make films about the exploration of space. Many people think that his film *Road to the Stars* influenced Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas. Another one of his films, *Planet of the Storms*, went on to become an international hit under different titles—*The Planet of Prehistoric Women* and *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet*—and without mention of its original author. Apparently, Klushantsev was the first director to use special effects in cinema, and some of the techniques he invented are still used in contemporary cinema, in a more technologically advanced way. Unfortunately, as was often the case in the U.S.S.R., his international success backfired and he was banned from making feature films; he was only allowed to make educational documentaries. But he went on to make more than one hundred film essays about the cosmos and various scientific problems, which despite the ban still feel more artistic than educational or documentary. I feel there is a similarity between your films and these documentary films by Klushantsev. Can you tell me

more about who you feel affinity with in terms of the history of cinema? Who did you learn from?

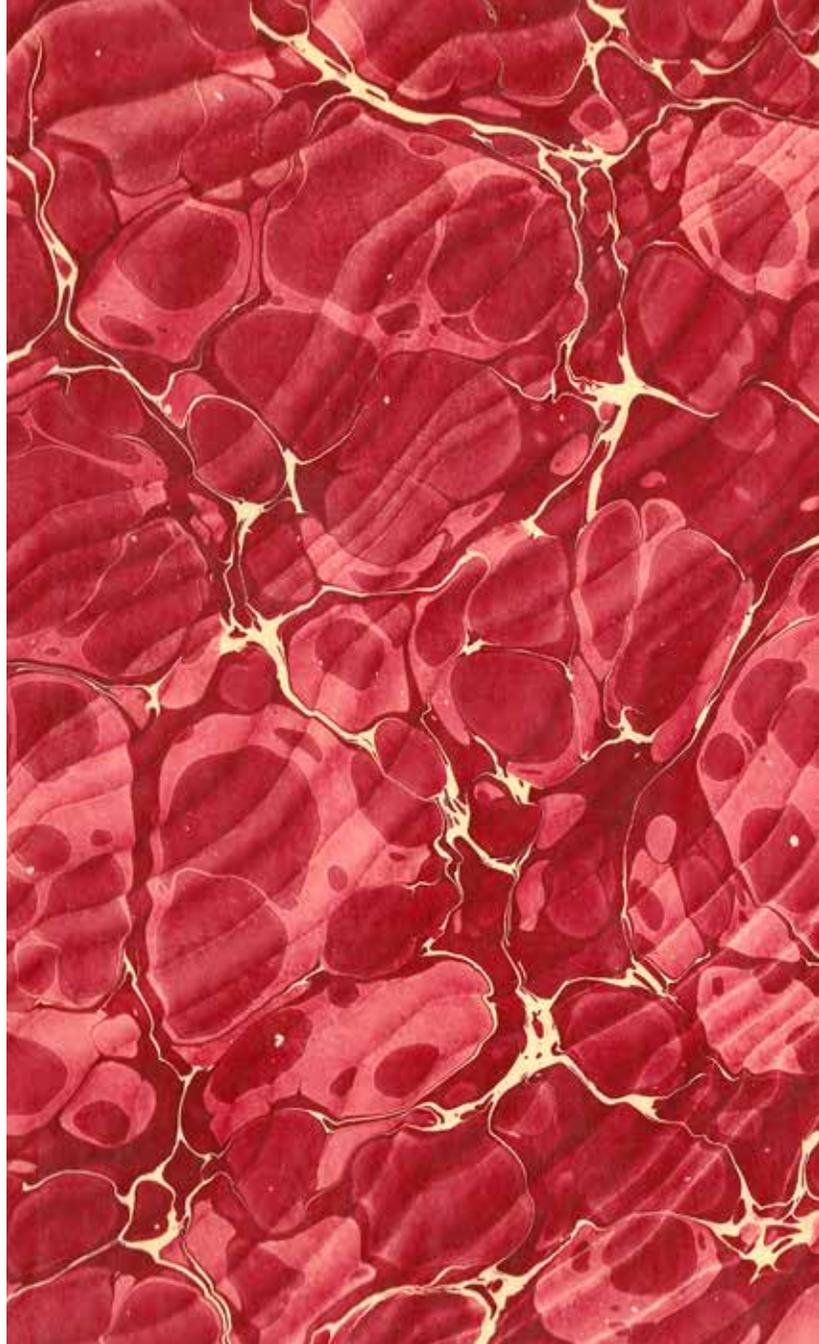
AV I think the films I make accidentally fall into the genre that used to be called “scientific-popular films,” something unique to the Soviet film industry, which does not quite have a parallel in American or European cinema. These films were a bit different from the sci-fi genre, which was really embraced and highly developed in the U.S.S.R. Similar to what you say about Klushantsev, these scientific/educational films for mass audiences were a kind of a refuge for certain filmmakers who could not get permission or support to develop their ideas within the feature-film studios, like Mosfilm or Lenfilm, but were able to work at special studios set up for the production of this type of educational material. Perhaps because this was perceived as a lesser genre, it was not subject to the same kind of scrutiny from the censors as feature films. So certain filmmakers, like Felix Sobolev for example, were able to make wildly experimental, expressionistic essay films, which would have never been allowed otherwise.

To be honest, I actually do not really remember seeing them when I was growing up in the Soviet Union, and I only discovered them recently because certain colleagues said that they have similarities with my work. So I looked them up. None of them are really “great” films in the sense of the history of cinema, and they do not compare to Pasolini or Godard or Tarkovsky, but they are remarkably imaginative and really interesting to watch. What is particularly interesting for me is that these films do not fall within the documentary or journalistic genre, while at the same time they are not fiction. They are a little bit of both. A lot of times, these films address a theoretical or philosophical topic that is difficult to

reduce to the kind of story one needs for a narrative film, yet they are narrative and communicate very interesting, complex, abstract ideas. Usually, they are not feature length, but short—twenty to thirty minutes. In this sense, the format of these films is actually very suitable for the kind of films that work well within art exhibitions.

AZ One last question about the future. If I understand correctly, you are planning to shoot the next film in this series in Moscow, and it will be about museums. Is that true?

AV Yes, the next film will be shot in Moscow, at the Museum of the Revolution, the Museum of Zoology, and the modern collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery. The film will be called *Immortality and Resurrection for All*, and it is based on passages from Fedorov's essay about museums. For Fedorov, the museum is a key institution in society, unique insofar as it's the only place that does not produce progress (which for him implies an erasure of the past), but rather cares for the past. He felt that museums needed to be radicalized such that they would not merely collect and preserve artifacts and images, but also preserve and recover life itself—resurrect the past. In this sense, museums should become factories of resurrection.



Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Anton Vidokle
Chaos and Cosmos

Anton Vidokle We could start our conversation on cosmism by talking about chaos, since chaos appears to be overtaking the world right now ... cosmism is actually a bit of a misnomer, in the sense that most people, particularly in the West, take it to refer to outer space—to be merely a territorial notion pointing away from this planet. So a lot of times when I speak about Russian cosmism, people expect me to talk about rockets and space travel, and are maybe slightly disappointed when this turns out to be more about immortality, resurrection, social organization—essentially biopolitics. I remember in your book *The Soul at Work* (2009) there is a very beautiful passage where you describe movement at very high speed, when everything—time, space, distinct objects and subjects—turns into an undifferentiated muddy blur, which is chaos. Chaos is death, war, decomposition, obliteration. The opposite of chaos is cosmos. Like cosmetics, cosmos means beauty and harmony. For Fedorov and many Russian cosmists that followed him, the project was to achieve cosmos on Earth through art, science, poetry, social organization, politics, and so forth: to build a harmonious society where there are no more wars and killing, no hunger, no disease, no aging, and no death. In this sense it strikes me as something as relevant now as it may have been at the end of the nineteenth century.

Franco "Bifo" Berardi The Russian vanguard, in all its forms, has a strange barbarian flavor if compared with the Italian or French vanguard of the beginning of the twentieth century. In the poetic works of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, but also in the artworks of Malevich, you always perceive a transhistorical sensibility. The history of men, in

its violence and its brightness, always has to be compared with the background of natural evolution. In his poetry, Khlebnikov names himself "King of Time" and "President of the Planet Earth" because his trans-linguistic delirium is not only based on contemporaneity, but is also rooted in the deep stratifications of a thousand years of language evolution. Asia and Europe meet not only in the historical dimension of war and revolution, but also in the protohistorical dimension of the origins of language: this is the precondition of *Zaum*.¹ Russian Symbolism was more earthbound than French Symbolism, and Russian Futurism was more barbarian but also more farsighted than Italian Futurism of the same epoch.

This is why a cosmist sensibility is perceivable all over the Russian cultural and artistic landscape before and immediately after the revolution. The cosmist sensibility, however, has much larger and deeper implications than may appear at first glance.

Actually the (osmotic) relation between "Cosmic Breath" and "Historical Breath," scarcely observed by the political and philosophical thinkers of the century, surfaces in artistic and poetic awareness, particularly in Russia, and emerges in the philosophical discourse when Guattari, the philosopher who was also a mechanic and a pharmacist, sketches the concept of "chaosmose." Osmosis is the spontaneous movement of solvent molecules through a semipermeable membrane into a region of higher solute concentration, in the direction that tends to equalize the solute concentrations on the two sides. This is a vital process in biological systems, as biological membranes are semipermeable. Therefore osmosis refers to the process of recomposition that chaotic fragments undergo when trying to overcome the painful

effects that chaos provokes in the conscious and sensible organism.

What is chaos, by the way? Chaos is the last theme that Deleuze and Guattari developed, in their last book, *What Is Philosophy?* (1995). In the book's conclusion, they speak of the experience of aging. They have never done this before, to my knowledge; they do it now, and in speaking of aging they introduce the subject of chaos. The title of the chapter is "From Chaos to the Brain," one of their most beautiful texts.

We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. These are infinite variabilities, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. This is the instant of which we do not know whether it is too long or too short for time. We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas.²

The aging philosophers want to be protected. Protected from what? They want to be protected from the chaotic perception of the world that is not only chaining in itself, but also and most drastically in its relationship with the brain. The brain is the agent of chaos, because the brain is growing slower and less precise. The aging brain's neuronal geometry is losing its definition, and it projects this loss on the surrounding world. While the average human brain is growing older, the amount of info-nervous stimuli is exploding.

In past centuries growing old was such a rare experience that an elderly person was considered wise by default. But now the pyramid of age is almost totally squared, and old people are so common that it's getting more and more difficult to care for them, and about the expanding sphere of dementia, loss of memory, Alzheimer's, and ... and chaos. Aging is a distinctive mark of the postmodern age: loss of energy, loss of speed, mental confusion. Chaos is essentially a problem of tempo. When we say "chaos" we mean that the surrounding environment (particularly the information that invades our attention sphere) is too fast: too fast to decipher, too fast for our ability to decode and remember. No one has better expressed the sentiment of being overwhelmed by chaos than Shakespeare, of course.

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.³

Chaos implies sound and fury, but it also implies a special relationship with signification. Life (and history, by the way) is a tale told by an idiot, who does intend to signify in the proper sense of structured meaning. But the idiot is possibly speaking of something that is not translatable in the language we know. The idiot may be saying something that goes beyond our understanding, only because his noise and his fury require a different system of interpretation, a different language, a different rhythm. Certainly now, in the second decade of the first century of the third millennium, the human brain as a whole and the individual brain of each of us seems

to be overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of the surrounding universe. That means only that the human brain (system) is outpaced by the rhythm of the surrounding environment.

When we say chaos, then, we mean two different complimentary movements: we refer to the exorbitation of the surrounding semiotic flows that we receive as if they were "sound and fury." But we also refer to the attempts of reconciliation between the encompassing environmental rhythm and our intimate rhythm of interpretation. The concept of chaos has been at the center of a widespread elaboration in the last decades, from James Gleick to Ilja Prigogine: physicists and philosophers have tried to define the concept with divergent outcomes. According to Gleick's 1987 book *Chaos*, sometimes events become chaotic because their interior order is unable to control the perturbations that spread everywhere in the system. Chaos happens inside a system, when the relations within the system grow unable to interact with the surrounding environment because of the internal acceleration of the external (environmental) information, and because of the inability of the internal (systemic) structure to interpret the incoming information. Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (authors of various books about chaos theory and dissipative structures) have a different approach: they do not see chaos as a dispersion of meaning; they prefer to see chaos as the prodrome and the condition of a new order, of a new configuration of meaning. They calculate that in systems far from equilibrium, entropy is so high that local decreases in entry can take place without violating the second law of thermodynamics, up to the point of allowing a system to engage in spontaneous self-organization. N. Katherine Hayles edited a book about chaos

and order in literature and science, where two different visions of chaos are outlined: chaos as dispersion versus chaos as a restructuration of the system in its attempt to find a new balance with the environment.⁴

In their texts, Deleuze and Guattari are simultaneously defining chaos as an enemy and as a friend, as a perturbation and as the condition for a new equilibrium. "The struggle against chaos does not take place without an affinity with the enemy," they say.⁵ When we feel that our mind is unable to follow the rhythm of what is happening, our reaction can be one of panic, of painful disorientation, but it may change into an attitude of re-syntonzation, of a search for a new rhythm of our respiration. Art may be viewed as a technique for re-syntonzation, as a composition of chaos.

Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes, as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos—neither foreseen nor preconceived. [...] Art takes a bit of chaos in a frame in order to form a composed chaos that becomes sensory, or from which it extracts a chaoid sensation as variety; but science takes a bit of chaos in a system of coordinates and forms a referenced chaos that becomes Nature, and from which it extracts an aleatory function and chaoid variables.⁶

The same applies to philosophy, as the activity of concept creation. Etymologically speaking, a concept (*conceptum*, a form of *coepere*) can be considered a captor (from *cum-capere*, which means "taking together")—of both material and purely intellectual entities.

A concept is a chaoid state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought, mental chaosmos. And what would thinking be if it did not constantly confront chaos? We call Chaoids the realities produced on the planes that cut through the chaos in different ways. The brain is the junction, not the unity, of the three planes.⁷

Cosmos is the background of this process of recomposition that happens at the existential and the historical level. Cosmos, in fact, is the order and simultaneously is the dimension that exceeds human history and individual existence. Chaosmosis, the term coined by Guattari and the title of his last book, is the opening of the ordered system to chaotic flows and the osmotic vibration of the organism that looks for a rhythm tuned on the cosmic environment.

In a violently poetic text, Lawrence describes what produces poetry: people are constantly putting up an umbrella that shelters them and on the underside of which they draw a firmament and write their conventions and opinions. But poets, artists, make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision.⁸

Reading these lines, I cannot keep away from thinking about a famous sentence by Wittgenstein, who writes in the *Tractatus*: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world."

People are constantly sheltering themselves under the umbrella of their limited language, and their world is written on the underside of the umbrella. Poets are cutting the tissue of the

umbrella and their cutting action discloses the unbearable vision of the true firmament. Their action is literally apocalyptic, and it is the beginning of the unchaining (or disentanglement) of the hidden possibilities (lying there since the beginning—since the cosmic primeval conditions of human history).

AV Yes, art can be a kind of cut in the umbrella, but I suspect it can also be a kind of medicine. I've been fantasizing about a rejuvenating film. Let me explain: for example, you mention Alzheimer's—it seems there is now a technology to treat symptoms of Alzheimer's with sound and light. It's something researchers at MIT have been working on: apparently vibration produced by sound and/or light in the 40 Hz frequency spectrum—a kind of flicker—helps reduce the blockage that occurs in a sick or aging brain that prevents neurons from making contact. So this light flicker and sound resonance result in improvements in brain functions, memory, and so forth. There are other therapies that make use of different types of light and color to treat various ailments: for example, a certain type of red light can apparently rejuvenate skin, heal wounds, etc. Ultraviolet light helps the body produce necessary vitamins. It's actually quite amazing how much light and sound can do to our bodies. Formally, film is basically light and sound, and from this perspective it might be possible to develop a kind of film that will actually work on the body: on your cells and organs. In principal this could work as a prophylactic or an actual therapy. The gallery or the museum then becomes something of a clinic or hospital to heal and rejuvenate people. Everyone would need to be naked. Fedorov felt that this is precisely what museums should do: rather than merely preserve

and restore artifacts and images, they should be radicalized to preserve and restore life.

FB I agree on the idea that art may be intended as a therapeutic practice. Not only in the literal sense that you mention: light and sound helping to relieve symptoms of Alzheimer's or rejuvenate an organism, but in a broader sense. The problem of healing concerns the relation between the individual organism and the surrounding environment, and the cosmic respiration, which Indians call prana. The osmosis between atman (individual breathing) and prana (cosmic respiration) is the background of illness and suffering. Disease is in fact the effect of a disorder in the relation between one's atman and the cosmic prana— an asymmetry in the rhythm of the organism in relation to the cosmic rhythm. It's all a problem of breathing, and asthma is the template for every kind of physical disorder. Interestingly Guattari speaks of chaosmic spasms in his last text, *Chaosmosis*—the 1992 book that precedes his death in the same year.

AV What you describe is similar to views held by Alexander Chizhevsky, a Soviet scientist who worshiped the sun. However, rather than breath in particular, he was concerned with blood circulation (which is connected to breathing of course), as well as the effect of solar and cosmic rays on the human psyche. He developed a rather elaborate theory around this research, and built specific therapeutic devices to improve circulation and breathing: these ionizers were like artificial suns—chandeliers that produced negatively charged ions of oxygen. He built them for miners in penal colonies, who were largely political prisoners in Stalin's camps and were constantly dying. He also wrote about the

effects of solar radiation on human history, which was triggered by his insight during the First World War that when sun spots, flares, and coronal eruptions appeared, fighting intensified on many fronts. He was a teenager when he first studied these correlations, but was already very friendly with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, so he had a small telescope for astronomical observations. His father was an officer in the Russian army, so he also followed the war news very closely. In the thesis and papers he later wrote, he outlines certain psychosocial phases that appear to be in sync with the cyclical activity of the sun, one of which he thought caused "psychotic epidemics." Chizhevsky felt that these epidemics could be prevented by building a network of special sun shelters worldwide, and he also devised a kind of sensor that would alert us to psychologically harmful solar emanations. This sensor worked using milk: apparently milk goes sour immediately when harmful particles are on their way to Earth.

FB I would say that the common problem is the relation between matter and psychic energy—the influx that cosmic flows have on the history of humanity. In the media age that we inhabit, cosmic flows materialize into the electronic and digital fluxes that are currently reformatting the human mind. My starting point is here: the penetration of the media into the psychosphere is provoking a painful mutation, and our problem (as artists and as engineers) is how to heal the contemporary psychosphere—how to inject flows of harmonic rhythm into the social psychosphere.

The relationship between semiosis and rhythm has to be emphasized here. It's well known that music has an influence on the body. It can provoke unease, panic, mental disconnection. And it

can also be a way of reactivating bodily energy, to slow the acceleration of panic, and find a syntonic correspondence between the organism and the cosmos. The Symbolist experience, both in France and in Russia, has been marked by the consciousness of this proximity of poetry and respiration, which is not only metaphorical, but is deeply inscribed in the psycho-physical rhythm of breathing. Baudelaire spoke of "correspondence," referring to this relation between poetic forms and rhythm and the natural sphere of the surrounding cosmos. And Mallarmé clearly conceives of the poetic word as a rhythmic transformer—a key to the inmost tempo of the universe.

In Russian Symbolism, this correspondence is emphasized up to a point of mystical spiritualism, but in some cases (as in the case of Khlebnikov and Krucenich) it is grounded in scientific (or pseudo-scientific) imagination. The concept of *Zaum*, whimsical as it may be when considered in terms of semiotic science, is based on the consciousness that language amounts to a search for the correspondence between deep-rooted prelinguistic emotions and the sound of words. I think that the Russian vanguard is remarkably consistent at this level: Futurism and Symbolism may appear quite different from the point of view of their aesthetic choices, of their atmospheres if you want, but they start from the same philosophical concept of poetry as verbal matter whose vibration is essentially aimed at searching for meaning. Meaning comes from the oscillation of the poetic word that you may call ambiguousness, and actually is the polysemicity of the poetic sign.

AV I also think there can be a certain physiological therapeutic impact on the level of narrative content. You write about futurist poetry as witchcraft,

as spells or incantations. I agree with this in the sense of people like Khlebnikov and Krucenich. Khlebnikov was a mathematician by education, which is also quite magical in origin, and claimed to have devised a mathematical system for predicting the future. I've seen some of his drawings that illustrate this system, and they do look very much like modernist spells—they are really beautiful. I guess the closest we come to spells in rational language is hypnosis, particularly the type of clinical hypnotic scripts used to break harmful addictions like alcoholism, drugs, smoking, and so on. I once went to a hypnotist to try to quit smoking. It was a very small office in Miami recommended by an artist friend, for whom the treatment was successful. My friend warned me to try to suspend my disbelief, which was a bit hard to do at first because the office was full of stuffed-animal toys and all sorts of trinkets. So I was rather skeptical. Then suddenly the hypnotist said that she knows that I do not believe this will work, but it does not matter what I think or believe because she is not addressing my conscious mind, but is communicating with my unconscious, which I am not aware of at all. This was so blunt that it really took me by surprise. I did not smoke for about two weeks without any effort. So I can imagine a kind of hypnotic script for a film that could work in a therapeutic way: it does not matter if you find it interesting, if it produces any particular feelings or thoughts in your conscious mind, but it could communicate directly with your unconscious, which regulates many of your body's functions.

FB My present questioning is about the possibility of deciphering and navigating chaos. As you can understand it is a very political questioning, because the present landscape of the world is essentially

chaotic, in the precise sense of being too fast for the mind to elaborate. Analytical investigation cannot determine nor predict the direction in which social segments will go, and the next combinations of social cells, because variables are too numerous, and the speed of information circulating is too fast. In such a situation, as you can verify reading newspapers about the daily business of the current political catastrophe, no prediction is trustworthy, no analysis is exhaustive, and political science has lost credibility and interest. Should we accept the conclusion that the human mind has grown unable to extract meaning and to produce an imagination of the future? Well, yes and no. Yes, political theory based on linear predictions is unable to grasp the radical indetermination of the hypercomplex process of the contemporary heterogeneity (or heterogenesis) of ends. Every subject is pursuing his/her aims, so the outcome will not be linear with any individual project. Furthermore every subject is no longer individual, but a combination of different impulses and expectations. What should we do in a similar irreducible complexity of projects and actuations?

My answer is that we need a post-political methodology for investigating this social becoming. While political theory was based on the presumption that intentions are essentially conscious, and their actualization rational and predictable, in the age of globalization we must acknowledge that intentions are influenced by countless media flows and dwell essentially with the unconscious dimension. Furthermore their actualization is affected by too many distant conflicting events that we cannot know before they explode in our sphere of action. For these reasons I think that politics as an art and a technique has turned useless, and political analysis is unable to understand what happens in the depth

of social becoming or to imagine something of the possible future.

I think that we need a new art—a new technique for navigating social transformations and imagining what is happening next. I call this art “social psychomancy.” Social psychomancy (*psychomanteia*) is not a science, it’s just a game that I play from time to time in order to inspect the ongoing history of humankind from the point of view of the rhizomatic unconscious of crowds that behave more and more as swarms: compounds of pulsating organisms and techno-linguistic automatisms. So don’t take me too seriously. Social psychomancy is a random methodology for interpretation of a random sphere of events: mental events evoked by the flows of imagination that roam the social psychosphere and organized by the forces of attraction and repulsion. Psychomancy is the art of mapping the collective mind: fears, expectations, desires, and resentments dwell in that sphere. The political history of the world cannot be fully grasped if we do not understand what happens there: shared meaning, rational goals, and conscious motivations are continuously disrupted and reshaped by the immaterial substances that social psychomancy tries to survey.

AV Of course I take you extremely seriously, Franco! Hito Steyerl speaks about how analysts are basically at a loss as to how to understand and interpret the enormous amounts of data being recorded and collected. More and more they are using pattern recognition as a way to make sense of all this information, because otherwise the sheer volume makes it all appear to be noise. In other words, they are using an approach to understanding things that was common pre-Renaissance: if something looks like a bird, it must have something

to do with birds, even if it's just a cloud formation or a bird-shaped shadow or a stone. In this worldview very diverse things are connected through a complex web of similitudes. It's nearly schizophrenic from a rational perspective, yet apparently the NSA is using this form of thinking to identify and find terrorists, and Wall Street firms use it to predict stock-market fluctuations. From this point of view psychomancy makes perfect sense.

FB I think that we are shifting fast from the web 2.0 dimension—the dimension of acceleration and flyover—to the web 3.0 dimension: the immersive web in which duration will take the place of flyover. The digital net allowed the condition of continuous flyover: the subject cannot fully experience the entire field of knowledge, and flies over it in such a way that the more we get close, the more the field enlarges and escapes away. The acceleration of the informational cycle produced by the net has started an affect of continuously running after: the user remains a spectator to a flow that is faster and faster, so he is always feeling late, in an endless cycle of chasing after the elusive flurry of information. The current production of interfaces for the creation of simulated environments is going to pervade the psychosphere of a large portion of humans who enjoy the privilege of accessing the digital net. Web 2.0 enabled access to a boundless infosphere allowing interaction. Web 3.0 will likely be an accessible archive of simulated experiences in full sinaesthesia: immersion in perceptual universes.

Twenty-five years of increasing pervasiveness of the digital network has produced a mutation of the format of enunciation-reception-interpretation among conscious and sensitive organisms. The connective mode has penetrated and reshaped every

semiotic line of exchange up to the point of making social molecules unable to conjoin, incompatible with sensuous conjunction.

After the wave of penetration of the digital net in the nervous system of human communication, we are now entering into a new phase of digital mutation: cognitive activity and sensorium are attracted by computational environments which simulate experience. Broadband and the fast web puts us in a persistent condition of being out of sync. The imminent immersive net of web 3.0 is going to stop this acceleration and will oblige the user to go back to the present, even if a replicable present, inscribed in the software.

Having been thrown into an environment of purely functional impulses, the agent of language has undergone a sensorial deprivation, a psychological impoverishment of affective reactivity. Grown in a digital environment, accustomed to react to discreet changes of states of a numerical nature, the individual tends to lose sensitivity to existential nuances and to the ambiguity of conjunctive communication. So the experience of the erotic body turns precarious and often painful.

Actually, precarious connective existence leads more and more to loneliness, as the bodily experience is deserted. The immersive web gives way to sinaesthetic experiences and to the shared projection of perceptual environments. In the immersive web we can now access virtual environments of shared simulated experience. Here experience as a singular adventure of an organism that perceives and projects is thrown into conceptual question. Can we experience experience? Can we live the life that we are unable to live and not even to imagine, but that has been imagined for us by computer engineers and life designers?

AV I think that whatever circumstances people actually live in are usually an outcome of some form of design, whether it's architectural, political, social, or economic, etc. We are already living in an engineered, designed world and probably have been living in this condition since the beginning of recorded history, maybe even before. I think in some sense we may actually be used to this. Maybe the problem is not so much that life is designed: after all, this is already a fact and we are still breathing and are able to have at least a little bit of happiness. Perhaps the question is of what kind of design: What kind of architecture, what kind of assembly, what kind of music?

We should also keep in mind that usually nothing goes according to plan: all designs eventually fail, deviate from their goals, are derailed or corrupted, or simply get so complex that they implode. A lot of times they also produce completely unexpected results. This is probably the reality we inhabit: a space shaped by failed plans, unrealized projects, and designs that produce something other than what was intended. In this sense Russian cosmism is also something that advocates for the design and engineering of society, nature, and the human body on a universal scale, and it too remains largely unrealized for the moment, with the exception of space travel. Maybe human life exists precisely in the space between someone's design, an attempt at engineering, and how it actually plays out over time?

What you say also makes me think more about the issue of mental health. I agree that this conversion of reality into the terms of a game will produce more and more psychotic disorders and pain—more chaos. And here I think the medicinal, therapeutic potential of art could become really

urgent. Perhaps in addition to the physical rejuvenation films that I suggested earlier, we need artworks capable of performing as a psychic prophylactic for organisms that perceive and project. Maybe such art could be like a ritornello that all can sing when afraid and in the dark, to create a spark of courage and good humor.

1
Zaum are the linguistic experiments in sound symbolism and language creation carried out by Russian Futurist poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Krucenich. —Ed.

2
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 201.

3
William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5.

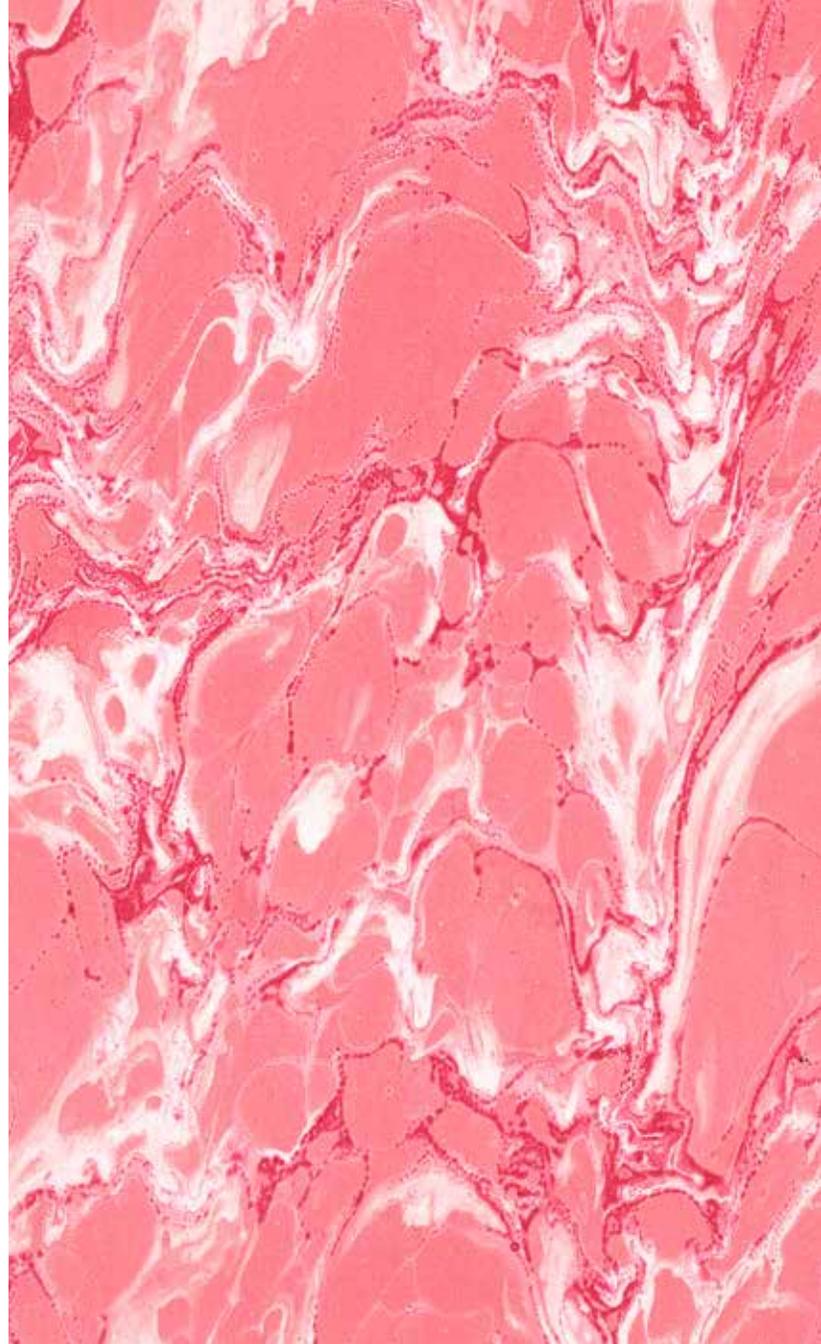
4
N. Katherine Hayles, ed., *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

5
Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 204.

6
Ibid., 204, 206.

7
Ibid., 208.

8
Ibid., 203.



Boris Groys and Arseny Zhilyaev

Contemporary Art Is the Theology of the Museum

This dialogue, published on *e-flux Conversations*, June 13, 2016, first took place as part of the *Center for Experimental Museology*, a collaborative project between Colta.ru and the V-A-C Foundation, Moscow.

Arseny Zhilyaev I would like to start our conversation with a question about the relationship of artists of the historical avant-garde to the museum—specifically the relationship laid out in Kazimir Malevich’s famous text from 1919, “On the Museum.” As we know, in this text the artist calls for museums to be burned down, leaving the right to judge whether this or that artwork from the past should be saved to life itself. The only possibility for the work of a dead artist, then, is to find some relevance within the current context—that is, to be compressed into a didactic pill of powdered ash, which can then be given out on request to active cultural workers. In his own work, Malevich himself took on the role of a kind of prophet-arsonist, creating not only an image of the absence of an image, but also, as you have noted in your own writing on the artist, an image of the permanent destruction of the image. That is to say, an image that is able to survive any negation. While the artist’s less radical colleagues may not have been calling for the total destruction of the art of the past, they were advocating for the creation of a museum that was maximally open to change. This is why Nikolai Punin, in the discussions leading up to the “First All-Russian Museological Conference,” argued for the creation of a flexible “museum on hinges.” Osip Brik suggested launching a series of exhibition halls, modeled after the libraries of scientific institutions, where each artwork could be checked out to use for research purposes, just like a book. Picking up on this, I wanted to ask your thoughts on the contemporary museum. It would seem that, with the advent of the internet and its assumption of the role of an international archive, or even, in some sense, of the dematerializing crematorium, the museum actually has increasingly positioned itself as a place for

organizing educational or discursive activities, all the more enshrining the status of the work of the past to how Malevich described it.

Boris Groys Here I need to say, first and foremost, that the project of the avant-garde—or, let’s say, more specifically, of Futurism and Suprematism—would have been impossible without the tradition of historicism, which was given form in museum displays as they had evolved by the end of the nineteenth century. These museum displays were constructed on a simple principle: each historic epoch had its own persona, its own artistic style—antiquity, medieval art, the Renaissance, Baroque, and so on. This is where we get those famous formulations like “we are the face of our times” or “the future of the world is written on our hands.” Malevich himself repeatedly described the genealogy of contemporary (to him) art and Suprematism as the result of a gradual transition from Cézanne through Cubism and Futurism. If all the art in museums had actually been cremated, then the historical originality of the avant-garde would have lost its visibility. The history of art, as it is shown in European museums, is precisely the history of breaks with the past. Without this history, the avant-garde is simply no longer able to be perceived as such. This is where artists, including artists from the radical avant-garde, get their fear that museums might disappear without a trace—the same way their own art might also disappear or, to a lesser degree, lose its ability to be understood. In this sense, Malevich’s proposal to burn down all the art of the past should be thought of more as a kind of consolation. After all, Malevich even says that, in this scenario, the museum could be replaced with an installation from the ashes remaining after the art was cremated. It

is no accident that he compares this installation to a pharmacy. What we are talking about here is medication for the excessive despair brought on by the prospect of the total disappearance of art, and, if anything, of all culture in the future. But such a remedy seems most plausible only if you maintain a consistently materialist view of things.

If we are talking about the internet, then yes, today it plays the role of the main medium for the archiving of art. But the internet's ability to stabilize cultural memory remains problematic. On the one hand, it is an accepted idea that computers never forget anything, but on the other hand, recovering and restoring lost data is possible only in instances when the hardware is still relatively intact.

At the same time, museum objects preserve their value even after catastrophes—if they are lying in the ground, they will be excavated. With the internet, the only things left in this kind of situation are cables and other equipment. Future generations will treat these things the way we treat Roman aqueducts, where water no longer flows. But even if the belief in museum conservation as a means of achieving this worldly, secular immortality is entirely eradicated, museums will retain their appeal as a place to visit. Museums today act as organizers for film screenings, poetry readings, lectures, performances, and so on. This transformation of the museum into a club echoes the transformation of the church into a club. In general, the trajectory of art is reminiscent of the trajectory of historical Christianity: the loss of hope for a soul's salvation (or art as a product of bodily creativity) leads to an interest in good deeds, care for one's neighbors, social responsibility, and political engagement.

AZ In one of your recent curatorial projects, “Specters of Communism,” you propose the term “postconceptual realism” to describe Russian art of the first decade of the 2000s. Unlike the realism of the nineteenth century, which was structured more as passive reflection, the contemporary version suggests the possibility of active intervention, its subsequent documentation, and the representation of changes made in response to it. This kind of understanding of art comes close to the conceptual practices of artists from the 1970s to '80s, who started to use the space of the art installation to analyze the specific features of the production process of art, as well as the context of the social relations that make this process possible. Contemporary art does the same thing, but for the institutional boundaries assigned to it, which precipitate the use of the document as the primary material carrier of the artist's message, in turn making the documentary installation the most frequently applied medium of “post-conceptual realism.” In my opinion, the prototype for this can be found in museums of a nonartistic focus or, in the post-Soviet artistic context, the Museum of Revolution.

The first time I encountered an attempt to find terminology to link conceptualism with realism was in Ekaterina Degot's text for her exhibition “Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art between Trotsky and Stalin” (2008). By drawing on the concept of “conceptual realism,” the curator was able to describe the self-reflexive practices of painters from the 1920s, the second wave of the Russian avant-garde, as well as their experience creating didactic exhibitions. As I see it, this term remains more suited to the description of the experimental Marxist museologists, particularly Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov and his “Experimental Complex Marxist Exhibition,”

created at the beginning of the 1930s. In its structure, it is closest to the future critical practice of conceptualism and institutional critique. Quite importantly, Fedorov-Davydov's installation refused a strict allegiance to the medium of painting, instead mobilizing a maximum spectrum of artistic media, as well as documents reflecting their place in reality.

It is obvious that Degot's argument is focused on a particular historical period and its specific features—"conceptual realism" as a precursor to conceptualism. In the case of "postconceptual realism," you actualize aspects characteristic of the production of contemporary art. Could you draw a line tracing the possible relationship between "conceptual realism" and "postconceptual realism"? That is, the relationship between the practice of the creators of Marxist exhibitions, whether in the Museum of Revolution or the State Tretyakov Gallery, and the artistic practices of today—if such a relationship even exists?

BG We shouldn't forget that the avant-garde artists considered themselves to be realists. The avant-garde insisted that the work of art is first and foremost a material object, which directly manifests its real presence in the world. A work of art is every bit as real as a rock or a tree. Or as a tractor, or an airplane. In this sense, the avant-garde artists positioned their realism and materialism in contrast to the illusionism of the art of the past; the traditional artwork—for instance, a painted canvas—presents itself not as what it is, which is a piece of cloth smeared with paint, but as something else entirely, for instance a portrait or a landscape. This explains the sympathy of avant-garde artists toward the communist materialist ideology. However, it is clear that by the end of the 1920s in the Soviet Union,

things began to be displaced by ideological signs. This is why the avant-garde started to be replaced by socialist realism, which presented itself precisely as this kind of symbolic system. Back in his day, Andrei Bely had already observed that in Russia the triumph of materialism would lead to the disappearance of matter. Of course, he meant this in regard to the Soviet stores, but it could also be applied to the sphere of art. This replacement of the avant-garde object with the ideological symbol crystallized in the art of socialist realism. In recent years in Russia, the concept of "socialist realism" has almost entirely fallen out of use. It apparently seems to be too toxic and is instead substituted with shame-faced synonyms like "conceptual realism" or "romantic realism." However, these synonyms only obscure the real crux of the matter.

As for those Marxist (or, as they said back then, "vulgar sociological") exhibitions at the beginning of the 1930s, they interpreted the avant-garde object as a sign, or rather, as a symptom of certain class-determined ideologies shared by the artists. These exhibitions are sometimes compared to the infamous exhibition "Degenerate Art," organized by the Nazis in Munich in 1937, in which modernism and the avant-garde were presented in terms of racial characteristics. Of course, Soviet exhibitions were not on the same level of incriminating exposé as the Nazi "Degenerate Art" shows, but all the same, their titles—for instance, "Art in the Epoch of Imperialism"—sound problematic. In these exhibition halls, one could find text along the lines of "Anarchism is the flip side of the bourgeoisie." These exhibitions inscribed the avant-garde within the sphere of bourgeois art—what's more, to its imperialist stage. Understandably, in the ideological atmosphere of those years, these kinds of characteristics

did not promise anything good. Historically, these exhibitions preceded the final ousting of the avant-garde from Soviet art, taking the vulgar sociological school with it.

The issue with these exhibitions is not that the position of the curators did not coincide with the position of the artist, but that the artist was denied the right to have a position altogether: his art was shown only as an indirect manifestation of his class- or race-determined nature—like the burrows of a mole, or the tail of a peacock.

AZ The debate around the delineation between the artist's position and the curator's is one of the most pressing questions in contemporary art. You also make frequent reference to this division. In particular, in your seminal text, "The Curator as Iconoclast" (2006), you argue that the contemporary curator assumes the role of the "iconoclast" in relation to the "iconophilic" position of the artist: through the inclusion of this or that artwork within the curator's narrative, he produces the work through decontextualization and demystification. I have often referred to another of your statements, which is important in this context, about the difference between the curatorial installation and the artistic; the former is a manifestation of institutional freedom, the latter a type of sovereign freedom. Art history has examples of breaching—or, at the very least, attempts to breach—these boundaries from both sides.

If we want to talk more about the Soviet curatorial experience, then we can single out Fedorov-Davydov's "Experimental Complex Marxist Exhibition" of '31. As an example of a breach from the artist's side, we have to mention Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *Alternative History of Art* (2005). In the

contemporary context, you can find no shortage of similar examples, pointing to an increasingly present trend of unifying the curatorial and artistic positions. But at the end of the 1920s, the discussion in the U.S.S.R. centered on the attempt to model exhibition practice after the role played by the proletariat following the revolution—that is, the real overthrow of the boundaries of bourgeois democracy as part of the dictatorship of a proletariat ultimately striving for a classless society that is extremely free in all its manifestations. As for the Kabakovs' project, it involves taking a critical stance on the ideological system providing the framework for representing art history. In the contemporary context, however, we see the opposite tendency.

Let me give you an example. Quite recently, I came across a phenomenon that was new for me—the unprecedented institutional activity of a museum pretending to present freedom of expression in the guise of an "artwork." Not too long ago in the center of Kiev, there was an exhibition called "Presence," which presented its audience with military equipment of Russian origin, which had been captured in Donbass and Lugansk. I'm not going to presume the authority to judge political matters, I just want to draw attention to the observation that in order to prove the authenticity of certain artifacts, the Kiev officials needed to put together a, shall we say, curatorial installation, which, taken to an extreme, combined the Constructivist aesthetic with fact. In some sense, this was a symmetrical response to a similar Russian exhibition, "Material Evidence: Donbass, 365 Days," which opened about a year ago in the Ukrainian pavilion at VDNKh (Exhibition of achievements of the national economy). It's true, unlike the Kiev exhibition, which took the form of a street intervention, built from a solemn

series of readymades, the Moscow display—in a nod to the Soviet museology of the 1920s to '30s—made use of the theatrical effects of the dioramic staged scenes seen in Museums of the Revolution. Both examples can be understood as deviations, simultaneously drawing on both the sovereign freedom of the artwork and the legitimizing power of the curatorial installation, not to undermine the dominant ideological system, but, on the contrary, to reinforce it. In this context, what do you think: What kind of prospects are there for mutations of the curatorial and artistic positions in today's contemporary art?

BG It goes without saying that any curatorial project reduces individual artistic practices and individual artworks to mere examples illustrating the curator's own position. There's no way to get around this. But if the curator is working in the sphere of art, then he inevitably must assume that his exhibition has a distinct aesthetic value, relative to how that exhibition compares with other curatorial projects in terms of the organization of space, the viewing time, the use of various media, etc. But as for exhibitions like that Ukrainian one and Russian one you mentioned, then more likely than not, the curators weren't comparing their exhibitions with those of Harald Szeemann or their installations with those of Ilya Kabakov or Thomas Hirschhorn. What mattered to them was simply to say what they wanted to say. So the question here is: What did they want to say? Artistic space should not be used for the distribution of official propaganda, which has other options for reaching its audience. The political significance of art lies primarily in the fact that it provides the opportunity to formulate and present positions that have no chance of reaching mass-media outlets. Affirmational art, in other words just repeating what

can already be seen and heard without any artistic intervention, does not make any sense.

Returning to the Kabakovs' *Alternative History of Art*, it is critical not so much in its approach to a type of artist exhibition, as in its approach to canonical art history. For the Kabakovs, it is fairly typical to shift the focus from artistic practices to the figure of the artist himself. It is this figure of the artist that is described and reflected in the Kabakovs' albums and installations. And it is this figure that always seems to be hiding, disappearing, or slipping away from description—to be, in fact, fictitious. The fictional quality of the figure of the artist reveals the problematic nature of traditional art history, which asserts that we know who the artists “really were,” what they wanted, how they worked, etc.

AZ I was struck by your interpretation of Fedorov's idea of resurrection as a kind of curating. But if we were to go further, in this instance an interest in the cosmos—particularly in the creation of an observatory on the foundation of museums—could be understood as a reflection of the relationship to the artistic medium, similar to the practices of institutional critique or conceptualism. After all, the study of celestial bodies and their movements, which was developed for the purpose of selecting potential sites for the eventual relocation of the resurrected (i.e., the results of true creativity, according to Fedorov), gives way to speculation as the topic of a possible exhibition context and its features. In a certain sense, this type of naturalization of conceptual reflections can bring the contemporary tendency to its limits, subjecting the cultural aspect of contemporary art to a harsh critique—particularly for being too human, too paternalistic in its relation to the natural world. At the same time, Fedorov's

proposal undoubtedly preserves the role of man as an agent of the changes taking place in the universe.

It seems to me that there is a contradiction inherent in the very philosophy of the common task. On the one hand, Fedorov insists on mankind's leading role in the eventual transformation of the universe, thus preserving his place as the crown in creation, while still referring to the inevitability of continued evolution, which should eventually result in supplanting anthropocentrism. Complications also arise with resurrection itself, which, contrary to the promises of religion, should actually happen in the earthly world and should offer a restoration both of the soul and of the physical body. But what do we do with the claims regarding the necessity of overcoming the human body in the form that it exists today? That is, how will it feel for resurrected fathers to encounter the significantly different, upgraded bodies of their sons? This question can be put in the context of Fedorov's aesthetics as a question of future shock, the combination of works of art from extremely distant eras—for instance, the coexistence in one contemporaneity of paintings in the style of both Rococo and Conceptualism. What answer would you propose? Or what role, in your opinion, should the contemporary human play in the future universe's Museum of Russian cosmism?

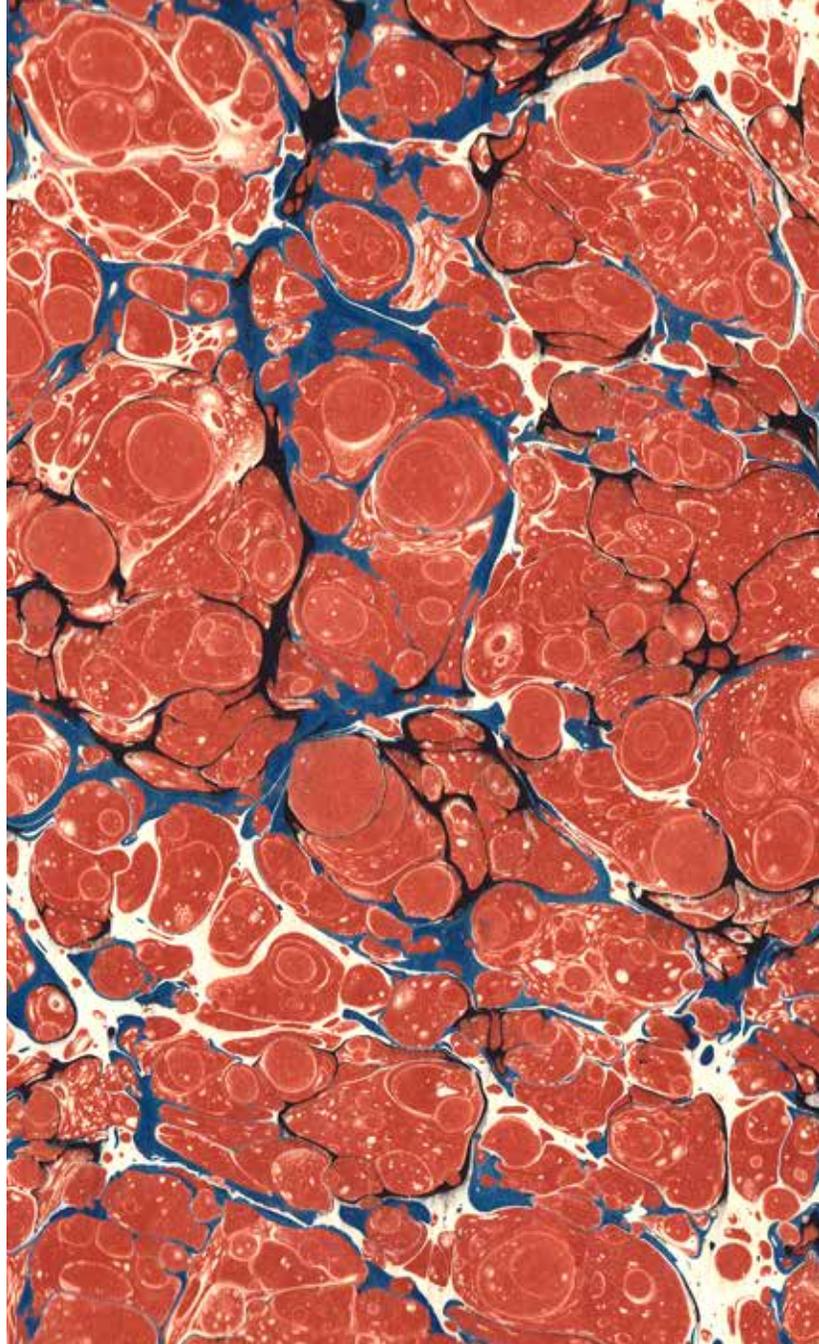
BG The main problem of art in the New Era is its inevitable role in the technological progress that determines the motion and rhythm of our time. The central feature of the contemporary understanding of progress is this: over the course of the twentieth century, it has lost all its purpose. I think we need to recognize how new the experience of progress without purpose is for mankind. If we look back at the understanding of time in different epochs of

human civilization, it was either cyclical or linear. Living in cyclical time, as practically all of humanity did until the emergence of biblical linear time, was quite comfortable; a man knew that in his lifetime he would experience all that could be experienced in life, since everything in that life would be repeated. Nostalgia for those times was aptly described by Nietzsche in his myth of the eternal return. Biblical religions severed cyclical time, offering instead the promise of universal, transhistorical reunification of all living beings in the end times—life after and beyond time. Modern technological civilization held onto this concept of linear time, but discarded all of the promises related to it, including even the communist ones. What is left is an absurd, meaningless movement from nowhere to nowhere. In some ways, this resembles the Chinese principle of Tao, but without any chance of escaping it.

For acute minds like Fedorov or Malevich—if we are speaking about Russian traditions—the radical novelty of this situation was apparent quite early on. They also recognized early on that after the death of God, the museum remains the only place for transhistorical reunification beyond the grave—there the mummy of the Pharaoh can meet with Duchamp's urinal beyond the boundaries that separate their historical eras. In describing the novel as the ideal place for such encounters, Bakhtin finds a clever metaphor in Dostoyevsky's "Bobok," which centers around conversations between different rotting corpses in a cemetery. Over the course of the tale, the syntactical structure of their dialogue also rots and decomposes. Of course, this comparison between the museum exhibition and the novel is not accidental. In his day, Friedrich Schlegel defined the novel as the genre of genres, dominating over all other genres precisely because it can accommodate

all others within it. In our time, the museum installation plays the same role as the novel in the nineteenth century. An installation can accommodate all media: painting, sculpture, film, video, photography, interactive internet installations, etc. And at the same time, an installation can include a body in different phases of its historically conditioned decay—from ancient sculptures with their noses and arms broken off up to the rotting chocolate sculptures of Dieter Roth.

If we were to return to the medieval texts describing earthly resurrection following the end times, we would encounter the numerous paradoxes of corporeality in the afterlife that produced such great despair for the authors of these writings. Several of these paradoxes have been addressed by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Open* (2004). For instance, he raises the question of how to resolve the problem of defecation in heaven; wouldn't heaven, over the course of eternity, become a repository of an infinite mass of feces, as one of the holy fathers wrote? Or what happens to children born after the end of history, if sexual organs are to be preserved in the resurrected bodies, and so on? It is not surprising that Fedorov, as well as his readers, would encounter similar problems. Here we are talking not so much about the realization of modern and contemporary obsessions, as about the site where they are projected. And at this point, yes, you could say that both in the New Era and in our time, the site of those projections has become the museum. In fact, contemporary art is the theology of the museum. And, with few exceptions, we mean a negative theology (or, to put it another way, institutional critique). But, of course, negative theology remains theology.



Marina Simakova, Anton Vidokle,
and Arseny Zhilyaev

Cosmic Doubts

Anton Vidokle Marina, last time we spoke about Russian cosmism, you mentioned to me that as it has started circulating outside of Russia, particularly in Western Europe, you felt that some of its paradoxical and delirious qualities were being flattened and oversimplified, and that this was a serious worry for you. Did I understand you correctly and can you please elaborate on this?

Marina Simakova Yes, I have the impression that, although remaining a marginal philosophical current, Russian cosmism has recently started to evoke suspicious exuberance. For years there has been a view that modern Russian philosophy is subordinate to the Western philosophical tradition, representing nothing but religious or quasi-religious thought. Nowadays both a decolonial turn in the humanities and a recent trend of “glocality” encourage people across the planet to praise their cultural heritage, celebrating its uniqueness and contribution to cultural diversity. Generally, this situation seems to be reasonably good, but I still find it quite problematic: when power is distributed unevenly, any kind of empowerment has a side effect, and in this case it is the exoticization of ideas. In the Western world, touching upon the subject of Russian cosmism may still be driven by one’s desire to “sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts.” Perhaps this is a forceful statement, but there are particular concerns behind it. Embracing cosmism for what it appears to be on first approximation, for looking “strange” and whimsical, is superficial, but it is quite an expected reaction—an intellectual affect. However, affects can be channeled differently and can serve different purposes. Some ideas are versatile and potent, and we have to treat them with care. I do not say

“with caution” since I do not think this way; when it comes to theory, I definitely believe that we have to be brave, daring, inventive, and so on. But we have to be careful with what is happening to certain discoveries (and rediscoveries) after they have been made. This is especially relevant for retro-futuristic projects that presuppose a radical transformation of the world and establish a peculiar link between tradition and progress. This wariness is not only about the fact that exoticization promotes cultural appropriation, commodifies ideas, and sells them. My primary concerns are real political interests and socioeconomic forces: Who would possibly sell these ideas, to whom, under what plea, and for what purpose?

This is why I find it necessary to stop treating Russian cosmism as something native and autochthon. It is important to keep in mind the synthetic nature of cosmist philosophy, tracing each of its contradictory elements as embedded both in the Western and Russian intellectual junctures of those times. At the same time, in order to do this, one has to look at the history of philosophical thought as a whole. It is a vicious circle, really, or a theoretical challenge, if you like. To put it into more instrumental terms, the task is to carefully translate Russian cosmism into the language of contemporaneity—an allegedly global language that, unfortunately, inherits the hegemonic language of Western modernity. Yet, to successfully undertake this translation, one has to realize that Russian cosmism itself was born out of international dialogue and exchange, and in a sense was an extremely creative translation of Western modernity into the Russian context. So interpreting Russian cosmism in our era can be seen as an operation of careful reverse translation.

AV I agree with you to a large extent. But I think that maybe because I am an artist, for me the initial attraction to Russian cosmism was not so much a search for new theoretical or philosophical ideas, but rather something that specifically relates to art. There was always something oblique for me about the avant-garde and modern art, something that is not addressed by the canonical history of art—a history largely written by MoMA and other North American institutions and historians. For example this history contains very few references to the occult, spiritualism, and mysticism of the nineteenth century, all of which were extremely influential on the production of Western European artists. I am really unsure why this is. Some of this influence is extremely blatant, because arguably abstraction in art comes from a very specific set of influences directly related to theosophy and so forth. It's strange that while historically so much of art is deeply intertwined with religion, art historians and museum curators seem very reluctant to explore this dimension of modern and contemporary art. Similarly, there are no references to Russian cosmism in the analysis of the art of the Russian or Soviet avant-garde. So when I came across writings of Fedorov, Bogdanov, Svyatogor, and others, I felt like for the first time I could start to make sense of what could have possibly motivated some of the artists whose work I most care about.

The other thing I want to mention is a tendency to curate historical material in such a way that you pick and choose only that which relates to or reflects your present-day concerns. I think there is even a name for this tendency: presentism. With cosmism the temptation to do this is very strong, because in some ways it's so futuristic and progressive. One wants to overlook all the misogynistic and

anti-Semitic passages, or other reactionary views that are quite common for authors of that period. It's also very tempting to remove all the religious references and translate all this as simply a different, more inventive version of a secular, socialist line of thought. When I started making my films based on cosmist material, the first two scripts were more of a collage of passages from various authors, selected to present a particular side of cosmism—perhaps focusing more on its progressive implications. In the last film I used whole passages from Fedorov without as much filtering, and one of the immediate criticisms was an opinion that the film does not sufficiently translate Fedorov as a leftist critic of modernity. On the one hand I do not want to amplify the Slavic nationalism or monarchist leanings that Fedorov had, but on the other hand it would be a bit strange to present this complex figure as only a leftist critic of modernity. Marina, Arseny, how do you deal with this aspect of cosmism in your work?

Arseny Zhilyaev The contemporary reception of cosmism and its internal contradictions is a very important and rather sensitive question. I agree with Marina that ideally all of its complexity should be included and reflected on. An attempt to whitewash its “vices” will only lead to severing its connections to the present historical moment, which probably determines our contemporary interest in this peculiar part of the Russian philosophical heritage. It's very important to try to understand why cosmism is becoming visible again at this time after nearly disappearing for half a century or more. And it seems to me the reason for this renewed interest cannot be due only to “glocality” or a decolonial turn, because both interpretations are imposed by the point of view of Western epistemology.

There is a famous article written by Lenin in which he speaks of Lev Tolstoy as a mirror of the Russian Revolution. Lenin writes that despite the particular class background of Tolstoy, as well as his many ideological doubts and a lack of understanding of the essence of political transformation in 1917, it is precisely Tolstoy's oeuvre that describes this transformation most faithfully. Why? Because only an honest image of the totality of both the progressive and reactionary sentiments within Russian reality could produce a truthful representation of such a comprehensive event, which the more partisan or one-sided descriptions simply failed to grasp. Cosmism, with all of its seeming inconsistencies, can be perceived in a similar vein, particularly because the poetic and literary qualities of this body of texts bring it in proximity to the field of theoretical fiction.

One of the first attempts to include Fedorov in the Western intellectual context that happened recently positions him as a forerunner of accelerationist thinking, and by now this has become a popular reading of his legacy. This interpretation deserves to be taken seriously: it falls within frameworks of the discourse that are criticized and yet accepted by the Left. Nevertheless, a closer reading shows that Fedorov's actual position is closer to the critique of accelerationism, and similar in spirit to the thinking of Benjamin Noys. For Noys, progress cannot be a goal in itself, which solves the problem we call capitalism. Noys refers to Walter Benjamin's take on history in which technological progress is like a freight train speeding toward the abyss, which only the revolution is able to stop. If we replace "revolution" with "resurrection," then we arrive at Fedorov's actual position.

In Fedorov's project of the Common Task, the highest form of the creation of the new is the most

complete resurrection of the past, of all that has died. Here we have an example of how an exclusion of conservative aspects of Russian cosmism, in the service of leftist intellectual standards, can flatten and strip the specificity of both the theory and actual discursiveness inherent to these intellectual standards themselves.

In general, it seems to me that contemporary speculations about the future and its technological and political dimensions are lacking many forgotten voices from the past.

In times of crisis such voices are usually much quieter than the loud demands of radicals of all political persuasions. This problem is not limited to reading cosmism in the international context: something similar occurs in the thirty-year project of artist Dmitry Gutov, which recuperates the intellectual legacy of the Soviet Marxist theoretician Mikhail Lifshitz, whose entire life's work was devoted to the project of a reconstruction of Marxist aesthetics. Lifshitz, having studied at VKhUTEMAS (the Soviet state higher art and technical school), articulated a leftist critique of both the modernist avant-garde, with its petty bourgeois arrogance and negation, and the deterioration of the realist tradition in the genre of socialist realism. If viewed superficially from the Left, such a position appears too conservative, but in order to be appropriated by the Right it has to be severed from its connection to Marxism and its commitment to the communist ideal. I feel that something similar happens with the reception of Russian cosmism.

Marina, can I ask you to articulate your view on the possibility of productive philosophical or political work with cosmism's contradictions? It seems to me that this is one of the responsibilities that come with this territory: without an open

discussion of the political complexity of our subject, it is difficult to avoid the kind of simplification, exoticism, or slide into a leftist techno-utopianism/religious mysticism that you worry about at the beginning of this conversation.

MS I like your comparison with Lifshitz, whose life and work present a unique example of thinking that has always been at odds with the repressive apparatus of the new Soviet canon, as well as with all sets of reactionary attitudes. This is what I personally like about cosmism, too: it seems to contain a serious antidote against dogmatism of any kind—a grain of potential cultural insurgency. But it did not work: despite the whole cast of authors united under the cosmist umbrella afterward, there is no such thing as cosmist theory in a strict sense (a Theory with a capital T, using Althusser’s words). There has never been any method of cosmist speculation, or a cosmist movement. Even though some of Tsiolkovsky’s ideas significantly influenced cosmonautics and space technologies, the latter rendered the cosmist project a space race resulting from a concept of progress conceived in a pragmatic, down-to-earth way and mixed with political technologies of the Cold War era. We have never been cosmists, to paraphrase Bruno Latour—although human subjects did manage to enter space. In fact, we do not usually define what is meant by “space” when someone uses this word—whether an artist, an astrophysicist, or a politician. I would dare claim that we have never even thought the way a cosmist should probably think—none of us, including those who are driven by the idea of space exploration or fully immersed in sci-fi culture.

So for me, there are three sets of questions to be posed here. The first set can be broadly defined

as cosmist thinking, or even cosmist epistemology. What does it mean to think as a cosmist? If it is just a speculative fiction, as you call it, can we reconstruct theoretical grounds behind it, or deduce a comprehensive theory from it—a theory that somehow explains, substantiates, or even sublates all of these contradictions? Or should we treat Russian cosmism as a collective art project as such, as different modes of utopian fiction, a grand fantasy deriving from different theoretical approaches and referring to practices of (quasi-)scientific research, artistic work, or political activism?

The second set of questions is related to our history in a very general sense—from social and political history to the trajectory of the development of our futuristic/memorial imagination taken in a historical perspective. For instance, I propose to shift the focus from the question of why cosmism failed, or was bound to fail, to the question “What does it mean for us that cosmism failed, and what was this failure exactly?” I believe this is a very productive way of approaching any kind of futurist culture, and I suppose that such an approach may be promising in the domain of contemporary art. I can give you an example: Let us take Pavel Zaltsman, an artist from Philonov’s analytical school. Apart from being a painter, Zaltsman was also a writer; his prose and poems have been just recently discovered (they were never published during his lifetime). These literary writings are indeed remarkable: a unique combination of naivety and depth with a slight touch of cruel absurdity. In his exaggeratedly naturalistic manner, Zaltsman describes the world where cosmism failed: inhuman, full of mundane violence and rage. Yet, unlike other authors, he never seems to give a simple explanation for why life has gone through such a monstrous metamorphosis,

and he blames no one. Not only civil war or hunger have altered the way people live and treat each other. Another force is responsible: a catastrophe that nobody noticed, a shipwreck of all hopes. Although he does not state this explicitly, this is what one experiences while reading Zaltsman's works. I guess when we look at cosmism through Zaltsman and vice versa, we can see the cosmist project (and its failure) as an integral part of history, which is very important. This is probably partially related to what you, Anton, are saying about your initial interest in cosmism as a powerful source for the Soviet avant-garde artists.

The third set of questions is probably the most obvious. I think it is necessary to study how elements of cosmists' utopian visions have been turned into reality, which of them have become a part of our practice today and which have not, how these elements were transformed (or even perverted), and why. I'm not talking about people who consider themselves to be cosmists and attempt to synthesize an elixir of immortality (by the way, I'm sure such people exist, and talking to them could be interesting). But foremost I mean researchers, artists, and everyone who might be totally unaware of Russian cosmism but who eventually turn out to be working with relevant themes. The transhumanist movement, new materialism in philosophy and social studies, so-called post-secularism, and even advocates of technological singularity in Silicon Valley—all of this can be seen as somehow related to cosmism. But is it really so? How much cosmism could be found in these theories and practices, if any? These questions have to be answered carefully in order to avoid reducing cosmism to a "general theory of everything" that randomly blends such subjects as the future of humanity, spirituality,

and technological progress. To my mind, these are paramount considerations for artists, too: instead of taking cosmism as an unambiguous theoretical framework fitting any kind of project that deals with tech-savvy scientific art, or with contemporary speculation on religious phenomena, it is necessary to present a strong argument of what cosmism is, and what it is not.

AV We should probably keep in mind that the name "cosmism," similarly to most names of movements, has been coined after the fact and by people other than the actual protagonists of this intellectual tradition. I seriously doubt that Fedorov would refer to himself or his circle as "cosmists." The name starts to be used deliberately several decades later, by biocosmists in the 1920s. These were primarily futurist poets and artists, many of whom were also extremely unstable people living on the margins of society, comprising a kind of a socialist bohemia—not disciplined members of academia or a well-organized political movement. It also seems to me that the cosmos itself is not the primary goal, which is instead immortality and resurrection—so "cosmism" is a bit of a misnomer. Movement in cosmic space, exploration of other planets, and so forth, are rather more like solutions to a practical problem of overpopulation that would present itself if and when the dead are resurrected. My feeling is that the cosmos is very important, but somehow secondary to the primary goal.

I am also pretty sure that none of the "cosmists" expected to start resurrecting people in their own lifetime. While this was an aspiration, it seems to me that most cosmists realized that the technological development necessary for such a thing would take a long time. Some experimented with

different ways of trying to increase life span, to slow aging, and so forth, through “white marriages” and abstinence from sex, through special diets, through blood transfusions, through irradiation by negatively charged ions of oxygen, and so on, but I doubt that anyone of the first or second generation of cosmists really expected to become immortal themselves or resurrect another human being. They merely tried to delay death and probably hoped to be resurrected by future generations. It’s interesting that the secondary goal—space travel—was actually the one that was achieved. But look, I think technologically it’s probably the easier one of the two.

I also always had an issue with formulations like “the failure of modernism.” Who failed and how: Mondrian? Kandinsky? Malevich? Failed in what sense? (I am primarily speaking of modernism in art here.) I do not think that developing a whole new language for pictorial expression that makes the world look different is a failure in any sense. Similarly with cosmism: granted they did not literally raise the dead, but they produced amazing poetry, literature, art, cinema, scientific inventions, medical techniques, and a certain type of political imaginary—this is not a failure by any means ...

AZ I disagree with both of you. On the one hand, we can probably speak about cosmism as an unrealized project. I am not sure we can call it a failed project, at least not in the sense of a certain finality. We probably can’t even say this about the project of communism ... However, there is a specific reason that makes me want to characterize cosmism as lacking a practical success, at least at this time: despite all of the poetic quality of his writings, Fedorov was adamant about a literal, urgent, and activist reading of his ideas about the fight against

death and a material resurrection for all. Art, in his opinion, is born from the reaction to the impossibility of returning a dead person to material form. Art is forced to make do with fictional likenesses or representations, until there is a technology that would enable it to transcend its mimetic status and become a creation of life: art should become a resurrection. This desire continues the tradition of life creation implicit in Russian religious philosophy, which later also entered the artistic production of the avant-garde.

So while artistic insights and inspiration are clearly of great importance, they must be followed by an actual realization. In this sense Fedorov is very close to Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

An example of this can be the criticism of a certain type of dilution in poetic images of a much more pragmatic, literal, and practical quality of the project of the Common Task that can be found in writings of the religious philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, as is the case in his book *The Meaning of Love* (1893). Solov’ev, who considered himself a spiritual disciple of Fedorov, reiterates Fedorov’s insight about the necessity to overcome distinct genders and sexual relations, which he thought narrowed the full potential of love. Instead, love as the foundation of the divine connection between people, transcending the egoism of individuated bodies, should develop into something greater: it should become the basis for brotherly and sisterly relations and finally lead to a collective, creative labor of resurrection. However, it is commonly held that while Solov’ev reiterates Fedorov’s ideas, he strips them of their literal meaning and intent, and transforms them into a mystical providence. In this sense,

modernism can be considered realized to some extent, while the avant-garde, with its ambition to reorganize the totality of life—as well as cosmism, in terms of its activist component—both appear to have failed.

But here I have a second objection: If we look at the world we are living in now, don't we see numerous examples of realized aspects of Fedorov's ideas? How can we speak of this as a failure even if we are speaking about an applied, practical realization of the Common Task? Examples of this that I usually cite are IT corporations and secret services which accumulate massive amounts of information about nearly every living person every second. This data includes everything from visual images to biometric information. As medical services and healthcare are gradually becoming successfully automated, perhaps in the near future, instead of smileys and likes, we will be using the internet to disseminate information about our bodies. What could be more similar to Fedorov's conception of museums collecting the myriad things of the world than networks of data centers? In this context it's also reasonable to consider the relationship of folks from Silicon Valley to cosmism. While direct references may be difficult to find, we can speculate on what cosmism could contribute to this particular situation. This question is very interesting for me artistically, because it seems that cosmism could alter the nature of our relations with this field which is currently largely shaped by corporations making a profit through the "total museum" that is the internet, or from security services using it as a tool of surveillance and control. To think as a cosmist implies to me ideas about actual, contemporary tendencies from the perspective of ethics and justice, and a certain type of unconditional, limitless

morality that surpasses the boundaries of humanity. If this is not an attempt to map cosmism positively as a certain perspective on life, then I don't know what other arguments could do this.

MS Going back to the terminology: yes, it is true that Fedorov himself did not use the word "cosmism." Most of the authors included in the cast of Russian cosmists had never thought of naming themselves as cosmists, except for biocosmists, as you mentioned. Some of them would have been really surprised if they were to find out that they are described that way, and especially that the authors of different backgrounds, lifestyles, and attitudes have been voluntarily united in one circle. However, I do not quite agree that the word "cosmos" is a misnomer since the origins of the term show that the word fits just right—as it is known, cosmos is a universal order, a totality of relations organized in a certain harmonious way as an opposite to chaos. Of course, any cosmist had his own idea of what kind of order should be established, especially when it came to social and political ideas, but what still unites them is the intention to propose their own project of change of the dominant order. Although current usage of the word may be misleading, its meaning proves the opposite.

AZ By the way, I know a pretty interesting story regarding the name "Russian cosmism." At this time we don't actually know who came up with it and under what circumstances; this subject requires separate research. According to the director of the Fedorov Library, Anastasia Gacheva, there are several different versions of what happened. Based on documents she found, the first usage of the word combination "Russian" and "cosmism" appears in an

article by R. A. Galtseva about Vladimir Vernadsky in the *Soviet Philosophical Encyclopedia*, published in 1970. It is likely that this umbrella term became popular in connection with the success of the Soviet space program of the 1960s. It is possible that given the politics of that time, the cosmos was more convenient as a certain ideological meeting point than immortality and resurrection, which could raise suspicions of religiosity or a certain lack in the accomplishments of the revolution. Although Gacheva suggests that the development of space technology went hand in hand with research on immortality, it seems to me that the circle of philosophers interested in cosmism was very narrow. In any case, as it happened: even the term itself reflects optimism and a belief in the unlimited creative potential of humanity. Boris Groys writes something rather similar, if indirectly, when he says that cosmism is an answer to the nihilistic crisis of Western philosophy caused by the death of God. This is yet another of the potentially problematic or “unfashionable” characteristics of the topic we are discussing, because the mainstream of cultural production is by definition dark, pessimistic, catastrophic, etc. For example, one of the main differences between the noosphere—a concept developed by Vladimir Vernadsky between the 1920s and '40s that reflected geological changes to the earth caused by human activity—and the currently popular concept of the Anthropocene, is precisely the positive view Vernadsky had of these transformations.¹ This change of perspective, which on the one hand suggests a refusal of the neutral scientific position in favor of an active intervention in life, and on the other hand suggests a refusal of philosophical judgment of such an intervention, is yet another important characteristic of Russian cosmism.

MS I totally agree with Anton's view on resurrection. This is one of the things that people usually ask me about Russian cosmists: Were they really that crazy that they wanted to resurrect their ancestors? What would they do with them? How would they help their Fathers adapt to a new kind of reality? I'm most certain that resurrection served Fedorov as a regulative idea—an idea that guides and justifies the development of humanity; it was also needed to configure human attitudes toward the past and future as a bridge across the universe of time connecting two celestial bodies: the one of tradition and the other of progress. As for other cosmists, they went on thinking about different life-forms and experimenting with life regulation. Describing it in a more contemporary fashion, these people were early thinkers and makers of biopolitics, but conceived of it in an optimistic way, without any tones of conspiracy or paranoia. What is striking here is a certain radicalism in their thoughts and experiments driven by an interest so intense and a commitment so fierce that sometimes it resembles moral obligation (just think of Bogdanov's conviction in the good of blood transfusion, and his experiments, in which he was both the subject and the object). Such an attitude is definitely absent in all these bio startups and companies promoting and promising exclusive access to creobody-modification technologies. Any expressions of the so-called libertarian transhumanism popular among young tech-entrepreneurs are totally incompatible with the heritage of cosmism. I recently came across a funny biocosmist poem called “Immortality Shop.” Dedicated to the bourgeoisie of Vienna, it contemplates a moment when immortality is for sale, so the dominant classes can live forever. I think this is closer to the transhumanist talks we witness today than the cosmist philosophy as such.

As for failure, the latter is a strong word, of course, but I'll clarify why I'm suggesting it. When you oppose the fact of failure that I insist on, you are pointing out different objects of culture, or those remarkable styles in literature and art—the language that was invented and those experiments that were conducted under the influence of cosmism—that is, to its aftermath. This is all true, and by no means do I want to underestimate the effect cosmism had on people who worked in culture and science. But is there a person on Earth who truly believes at least half of what any of the cosmists believed, even in a new, modernized way? I seriously doubt it. Early Christianity was successful. Lutheranism was successful. Marxism was successful. Psychoanalysis was successful. Post-structuralism was successful. These traditions are all very much alive. And cosmism is not. So when I say psychoanalysis was successful I do not mean its impact on Surrealist art, neither its contribution to a whole industry of psychological consulting services. I mean that psychoanalysis represents an unfolding and uninterrupted project that includes various theories and authors; it is an approach to comprehend our reality—an approach shared by many although used in different modes. Its key ideas are being developed and realized. There are many people who are adherents of psychoanalysis, and it is exactly their adherence that makes them go on and transform it as a project. In this sense cosmism is very different: it did not become a project that unfolded in history, but was interrupted at some point (or its diffusion into practice became so intense and subtle that we could no longer trace it). Cosmism “failed” in terms of a set of theories for the future (or fantasies, if you like) that one could strongly identify with, and make it both the

subject of interest and the platform upon which to build one's own project. I find it necessary to speak of cosmism not only as a source of inspiration or a source of affect, but also as an ethical, political, and scientific program—a program that had different versions and different amendments but a program nonetheless—an outline of the Common Task. This resonates with what you are saying, Arseny. Also, I suppose that the lens of “failure” will enable us to better understand these inner “contradictions”—that it will enable us to comprehend cosmism together with its discontents. Besides, it does not mean that the cosmist legacy would remain in its interrupted state. On the contrary, it is possible to overcome this rupture in its history—to connect the constitutive elements of cosmism as a program with its practical implications and contemporary reminiscences of it. This would be a challenging and incredibly interesting task.

Generally speaking, I think the three of us are trying to address one and the same issue here: at this moment we don't know exactly where cosmism can be found, and what might be the most appropriate—or an alternative—name for it now. This uncertainty would be bewildering for anyone. The rationale of this enterprise should probably be the starting point in this journey of “resurrecting” cosmist ideas.

AV Marina, of course you are right: cosmos means beauty and harmony, and in that sense Fedorov would have probably liked the name. Painters around Ivan Kudryashev, though, definitely had outer space in mind—if you look at the titles of his paintings from this period, it's all about planets and galaxies, and so on. I think it is a similar situation with bio-cosmism—there too it's probably less about universal harmony and more about physical space travel.

This may have been the effect of Tsiolkovsky's cultural influence and Bogdanov's sci-fi novels, among other things ...

But I want to speak more about failure. Parallel to this conversation we are doing another one with Hito Steyerl around the same topics, and at the risk of repeating myself, if you think about the longer-term effect of certain ideas on the development of society, things look a lot less linear: for example democracy—following its defeat in ancient Athens several thousand years ago, the concept of democracy lay dormant as passages in manuscripts preserved in isolated monasteries. Probably if you would have asked anyone in the ninth or fourteenth centuries if democracy was a viable political concept, they would have laughed at you—it must have seemed like a total utopia, and had already been a failure historically. Then, in a strange turn, it actually becomes the dominant system of social organization, the normative system. Many people talk about the failure of Marxism but personally I am not so sure that given certain conditions it will not manifest as a normative system in some country or perhaps the whole planet at some point. We are sort of seeing something like a return of fascism at the moment—who would have expected this after its total defeat in the last world war? It seems ideas have a kind of a tenacity, for better or worse. And specifically in terms of cosmism: as you say it was interrupted—suppressed by Stalin's government in the 1930s. Almost all its protagonists ended up in labor camps or in front of firing squads; books and art were taken out of circulation; manuscripts were confiscated and destroyed. The destruction was very comprehensive, and it's really a wonder that we have anything left to consider at all. We can only speculate about what could have

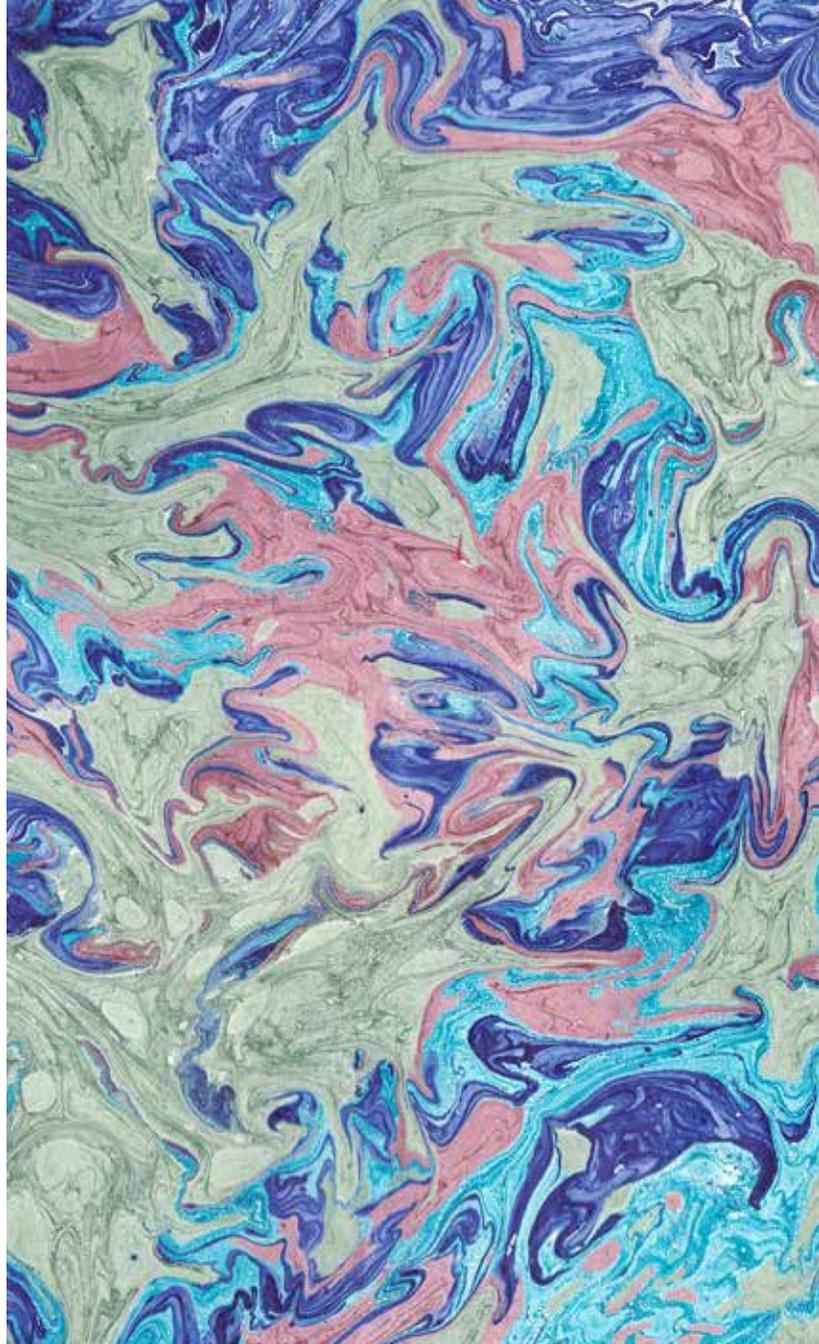
been accomplished had cosmism been allowed to develop as, for example, psychoanalysis has.

Because of this long interruption, cosmism suffers serious handicaps: its relationship to science, which is important as one of the principal paradigms for its concepts, needs a significant update. Much of the scientific ideas it bases various arguments on are outdated or have been disproven. Being an artist, I cannot help much with this. I also think it has not developed sufficiently as a social or political theory: there is not a sufficient description of how existing power structures need to be confronted in order to reorganize society to achieve cosmist aims. Its most developed aspect in my opinion—poetic, literary, and pictorial languages, while amazing and transformative for the early twentieth century—are too historicized to be transformative in the present. Having said this, I do think that the central premise: a universal fight for the abolition of death, is an idea I can believe in. And I don't think I am the only person on Earth who has this belief.

1

The term was proposed by the French mathematician Édouard Le Roy, along with the Catholic

philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, on the basis of lectures on geochemistry that Vernadsky gave at the Sorbonne in 1923–24.



Bart De Baere, Arseny Zhilyaev, and
Esther Zonsheim

Wahlverwandtschaft

A version of this interview appeared in the book *How to Gather*, jointly published in 2017 by M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp; V-A-C Foundation, Moscow; Witte de With, Rotterdam; and Kunsthalle Wien. © the authors

Bart De Baere In public announcements you speak of a long-term cooperation between the two of you. This seems to be not so much a conclusion of a past trajectory as a declaration of a future intent. What is it based upon? Can it be seen in terms of what the German language calls *Wahlverwandtschaft*?¹ If so, what are the basic aspirations you share?

Esther Zonsheim I first met Arseny in the summer of 2012, albeit very briefly. At that time I was in Moscow working on an e-flux project, *Time/Bank* (2009), which was basically a network where people in the arts could exchange labor using a time-based currency that we issued. To jump start this time-based economy, we set up a temporary restaurant in a gallery, where it was possible to pay for food with time. We also organized a series of daily lectures, discussions, and presentations at this restaurant with numerous artists and theorists from Moscow and beyond. At the same time Arseny was doing his *Pedagogical Poem* project, which was also an artwork in the form of a discursive structure at the Presnya Historical Memorial Museum. Many people told me that I should go and see his project, but it was impossible for me to get away from the kitchen. Nevertheless, I was very intrigued with his activity.

A year or so later we were introduced by a mutual friend, and Arseny told me about his idea for a book about avant-garde museology, which was to include writings by Nikolai Fedorov, the founder of cosmism. Having just made my first film that dealt with Fedorov's ideas, I was fascinated by Arseny's research and proposed that e-flux publish this collection as the first title in a new series of largely historical books on aesthetic theory. What was very interesting to me, in addition to the actual content, was the fact that an artist was doing a certain type

of serious historical and editorial work, which is something rare in our field these days. So I really wanted e-flux to support this. The collaboration on this book, which is now in print, led to many conversations and exchanges with Arseny, which, in turn, produced more ideas for new projects, such as a new film we are now planning based on writings of Alexander Svyatogor—a futurist poet, anarchist, and founder of biocosmism and a radical new religion: the Free Labor Church.

Arseny Zhilyaev Naturally, I had seen a number of projects Esther was engaged in even before we met in person ... I guess the first time was in 2007 or so, when I moved from Voronezh to Moscow. I attended a conference where Keti Chukhrov mentioned e-flux several times and talked about the project *A Crime against Art* (2007), showing screenshots of the mock trial. For someone who had just moved from a small Russian town with no trace of contemporary art life, such stories sounded like something happening on another planet.

Much later, I met Esther in Moscow. I knew she had been working on Russian cosmism for a year or two by then, but no specifics. The last thing I had seen at that time was *Time/Bank* at documenta 13 in Kassel—the project was not directly relevant to cosmism, but was in line with its basic instincts. Later on, when I went deeper into the history of what Esther created, I realized the cosmic impetus had been there all the time. I am tempted to say “the utopian impetus,” but that wouldn't be absolutely true. Just as any cosmist or historical avant-gardist, Esther holds a very constructivist attitude toward art. Her approach may seem too radical, impossible in the existing context—but is always seeking realization, always implying a materialist, critical, and

even pragmatic perspective of her own prospects. And I feel totally comfortable with such an attitude toward the common goal.

In my case, my interest in cosmism came from doing research on the museum and its role in the transformation of life. Originally, my projects were inspired, in particular, by Marxist museology and speculations on the future of this institution. At some point, I realized that in Russian cosmism the museum was the quintessence of the hopes that the avant-garde pinned on the arts. What's more, Fedorov's project went drastically beyond the then-accepted limit of art's ambitions. Actually, the situation has not changed too much over these hundred-plus years. Anyway, by the day we met, I had been preparing a collection of works on avant-garde museology for publication and I had been already involved in a project on Fedorov's curatorship, which I was connected to by the funny twist of his life with my home city of Voronezh.

Then we had a lengthy collaboration on the book, and it took off from there. I think we are both positively disposed by our nature to engage in collaborative projects, and a deep interest in Russian cosmism bolstered this disposition with a lot of energy. I watch Esther's creative intuition with a keen interest. We have initiated a number of joint projects so far, and I do hope this is just the beginning.

BB An unexpected question that emerged from the 6th Moscow Biennial in 2015—at which your work on cosmism was very present—was the notion of the dual. Some of the most fruitful gatherings were gatherings of two people. Europeans have a tendency to approach dualism negatively, in a Manichaeian way. A basic operation of European culture is the use of polarizing antagonism as a

productive combustion engine, through the thesis/antithesis/synthesis triad. Several languages though, such as Arabic or Slovenian, have two plural forms with one expressing “us, the two of us.” And cultures may, as apparently many Amazonian cultures do, think of “two (man and woman)” as the basis from which to address the world, rather than the individual. Do you feel the dual to be preferable over the singular? If so, why?

AZ Yes, indeed, the prevailing Western model of bourgeois democracy based on rivalry and competition is probably at odds with Russian democratic traditions and individual philosophical ideas, which aim to eliminate oppositions and establish unity. For instance, the theory of “rational egoism” is elaborated in Nikolay Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?*, a pivotal book for Leninism and free thinking in Russia. The theory implies that people inherently act in their own self-interest, but at some point their personal well-being begins to depend on common interests. This principle lies behind the famous “prisoner's dilemma” used by Jacques Lacan, among others. That is, we cannot maximize our profit without regard to common interests, even if we are mathematically guided solely by our own self-interest. Rational egoism is an egoism that considers and supports others.

Interestingly and unexpectedly, this story gets an American spinoff. Ayn Rand (Russian national Alisa Rosenbaum, before her immigration to the United States), one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, who contributed a lot to the ideology of the American dream, developed her theory largely using Chernyshevsky as a negative example. She refused to agree that rational egoism should consider common interests, and described a

strike of the ruling class who could no longer afford supporting the submerged tenth, etc. She argued that strong people should go all the way and stop at no end. In fact, this libertarian viewpoint predetermined the excesses of neoliberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Russian cosmism renders this logic terminal by outlining the horizons of a prospective unity between mankind and the universe in their spatial and temporal coordinates.

EZ I am not sure that the dialectical method always has to be antagonistic, and I am also not sure antagonism is always productive. Some people seem to think that antagonism is a prerequisite for democracy, but I really hesitate to agree with this. Another model is the Divine Family—the Holy Trinity, in which there is no antagonism and no disagreement between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are individuated entities, yet remain a kind of singularity. I am not a Christian, but I think that this is a very interesting and inspiring model of how to be together. I also do not think that communist society will hold such antagonism: while religions tend to identify love as the means of coexistence, similarly in communism it's the emancipated quality of life without alienation, and thus no externality from which such antagonism may arise. It's interesting to think about this ...

Regarding Ayn Rand, when I was an art student in New York, one of my teachers—a kind of postmodern, neoclassical sculptor—invited me to attend a small reading group in his studio dedicated to the discussion of Rand's ideas. It was apparently a sign of appreciation: he thought I was a promising student, so he invited me to join his cult. I have to say that this was a rather pathetic gathering

of people as mediocre as Rand's simplistic writing. That's why I was enormously surprised when I learned much later how great an influence her books had on the American political and economic elite: the novels are basically written on the level of teenage heroic fantasies of omnipotence, and are full of grudge. So it's still pretty incredible to me that such mediocre writing had this toxic effect on several generations of people who came to occupy key corporate and government positions. It's as though the President of the United States is being secretly guided by Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (which is arguably a far better book than *The Fountainhead*).

I would note that Rand's cult of selfishness is antithetical to Fedorov's ideas, who specifically implored that one should live *with and for everyone*. In his thinking, there is no ethical possibility to abandon the weak, the old—even those who have already died. His project of the Common Task is all-inclusive, arguably even extending to animals and aliens.

BB Fabrice Hyber and Honoré d'O experimented with telepathic drawing during the 6th Moscow Biennial, with remarkable effects, which they documented. Do you feel telepathy holds potential in the future?

AZ We can never be absolutely sure something is impossible. Many inventions familiar to us today—like the telephone, radio, and TV, let alone the internet, 3-D printers, and space flights—would be pure magic in the eyes of previous generations. I guess the most immediate application of telepathy will be military cyborgs interconnected by a wireless network. I'm pretty sure the relevant prototypes have already been created.

EZ It depends on what you mean by telepathy. I was just reading an article about the first transmission of thoughts and images between two people in different parts of the world via computer-encoded brain waves. Apparently it was a successful scientific experiment and a transfer of information actually took place. This was several months ago. So, technologically speaking, some type of telepathy actually seems possible. If you mean magical telepathy, I really don't know.

Vladimir Vernadsky was already writing about the noosphere in the 1930s and '40s, and felt that the emergence of the informational, telepathic sphere of reason would transform this planet. Some people feel that such a phenomenon is already starting to happen with the invention of the internet, wireless communications, and so forth. A digital telepathy ...

BB Historically Eurasianism had a tense relation with cosmism. When focusing on the origin of Eurasianism in the interbellum, and especially the desperately refined attempts of Prince Nicolai Trubetzkoy to think of an alternative for his space of origin to both the Tsarist and Bolshevik empires, the question arises as to whether there is a conceivable alternative that may cultivate a localized diversity and yet transcend national borders. Is this where we should go? Can cosmism help us?

EZ You remember my reservations about Eurasianism. It's not much of an ideology in my opinion, and has more dangers than benefits. I think we should just leapfrog over issues of national boundaries and aim for the cosmos. The universe is immeasurable and we are all in it, so it's a bit absurd to conceive of territoriality and geopolitics based on a sliver of surface on one small planet.

AZ I agree with Esther here. Eurasianism today is an instance of radical protofascism, which, besides, has already been successfully appropriated by the Russian government. In its extreme, cosmism proceeds from overcoming the problem of territory and national states as such, since the size of the universe makes any territorial dispute solvable.

BB The Irish thinker Edmund Burke had an extended view on constituencies, encompassing everyone who ever lived, everyone who is now living, and everyone who will ever live. Even the government, in that case, is only a caretaker of its institutions. The film *Immortality and Resurrection for All* (2017) by Anton Vidokle evokes the task of the museum as the resurrection by the living of the fathers, with reason not as an abstraction but as a seeking out of the fathers. Cosmism may be a project about future life, but is future life itself not excluded from this equation?

EZ For Fedorov, the past is the future. Where most thinkers see the past and history as a series of failures—with every construction, organism, empire, ideology, destroyed by time—Fedorov looks back and sees a field of potential. Nobody has truly died until we have exhausted reason, science, technology, art, social organizations, and every other conceivable tool to bring back the past ... to bring back our ancestors. In this sense they are not dead, but merely wounded, and for Fedorov it is our responsibility to not leave them behind. So it's not about production of the new, but rather a rescuing of all that has been laid to waste by time.

AZ Yes, Fedorov has a very interesting understanding of history, somehow close to that of Walter

Benjamin, who believed that history only began with revolution. Revolution, in its turn, is sort of an emergency brake of progress—a locomotive rushing backward. Similar patterns can be found in Fedorov’s philosophy, which is an overwhelming mix of radical techno-utopianism and conservatism. We shouldn’t forget that Russian cosmism was largely inspired by the theory of evolution and faith in the endless transformational capabilities of human beings. The path to future life will open when mankind admits evolution does not stop here and will continue. Before we achieve universal resurrection, we have to solve a heap of problems, which are not restricted to overcoming the social and corporal conflicts within our species. This was already pointed out by Fedorov. If the cosmos becomes the place for settling resurrected generations, a key question is: What will be the ratio of one generation to another? Will each planet be confined to a historical period of its own? What will happen to plants and animals, which obviously contributed to the evolution of Homo sapiens? And, most importantly, how will the people of the past, with all their corporal inhibitions, match up with the people of the future, who may be bodiless or have light-powered phallic pupils, as envisaged by the cosmist Alexander Gorsky? Thus, there is plenty of space for future life with all of its contingencies in Russian cosmism, and this is also true in terms of contemporary art. The mechanism of resurrection is unable to evolve without artistic or, if you prefer, a curator’s vision. This was described, in particular, by Boris Groys. On the whole, Fedorov’s ideas seem more optimistic to me than the existing inhumanistic theories, at least when it comes to the human being.

BB When Alevtina Kakhidze interviewed the curators of the Moscow Biennial during her *Present News* broadcast (2015), she asked whether animals and plants had also been invited. Should they be included in the notion of constituencies and if so, why and how?

EZ Absolutely. As soon as we learn to be self-feeding, we will stop consuming other forms of life for energy. Plankton already do that: they generate the energy they need for their life processes directly from sunlight. We should learn from plankton.

AZ I would add that if we implement Fedorov’s resurrection project consistently, it should be extended to involve animals, plants, bacteria, and all other molecular compounds too. We should definitely raise the question of the evolution of technical equipment, software, computer viruses, and so on. Ideally, time and the history of the whole universe will be resurrected, including gods, beginning with those who were partly human in nature. This is also about the logic of resurrection, although it has never been articulated clearly before. If we talk about Christianity, mankind should be able to pay their debt to Christ and redeem his sacrifice by resurrecting and bringing him back to the mundane world.

BB In a recent interview, the ethos behind cosmism was formulated as “the desire to contribute directly and literally to the impossibly difficult project of immortality and resurrection for all, by any means possible, including art.” *Immortality and Resurrection for All*, featuring Arseny, states that “there is no art that does not produce a certain action, a certain transformation of life.” Should all matter be included into the notion of constituencies,

or is it rather the “human world,” as Hannah Arendt calls it, that should be empowered again?

EZ Yes. This is precisely the eschatology of cosmism. Once we achieve immortality, resurrect all who ever lived, and learn to live in the cosmos, our activity will consist in making all the matter that makes up the universe conscious: teaching it ways to feel, think, perceive, etc. For Fedorov this is also the main role and function of art, so as immortal beings we will all be artists with the cosmos as our artwork. And when the entirety of the universe becomes conscious, we will be selfsame with God. It’s a very ambitious project that he came up with ...

BB In his book *After Nature* (2015), Jedediah Purdy argues that visions of nature and political set-ups have been strongly linked for a long time. Which political preferences does cosmism suggest? And may an orientation toward the future prefer certain political forms over others?

EZ Cosmism is a materialist philosophy that is essentially anticapitalist, primarily because of the wasteful nature of market economy, the unfairness of uneven distribution of resources, the triviality of consumer commodity production, and so forth. In this sense it echoes the Marxist critique of capitalism. On the other hand, Fedorov was expressly critical of socialism, primarily because he saw it as godless and not based on love. It can be argued that despite this, Fedorov is a true socialist because he deeply believes in radical social equality that extends even to the dead.

AZ There is an opinion that Fedorov was “a Marx for the poor,” expressing ideas similar to what was

later advocated in liberation theology. However, as Esther has already mentioned, Fedorov did not accept Marxism because of its revolutionary violence, despite his anticapitalist orientation. The philosopher believed that real social transformation could only be achieved through love, respect for the ancestors, enlightenment, and hard work toward the common goal. Fedorov’s ideas held plenty of contradictions with what concerned the authorities of his time, whether religious or secular. I have no doubt that if he lived today, he would soon find himself in Snowden’s position. The father of cosmism advocated for freedom of knowledge and the distribution of information. There would be nothing more appalling for him than to see present-day big data being used to make money and hold power instead of pursuing the common goal of resurrection and social development.

1

The term *Wahlverwandtschaft* translates as “elective affinity.” —Ed.

Bart De Baere

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Art without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism

ISBN 978-3-95679-352-3

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Publisher

Sternberg Press

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Printer

BUD Potsdam

Cover photograph:

Malachite, Katanga Province, Democratic Republic of Congo.
Detail, 24 × 15 × 10 cm. Part of the rock and mineral display at the
Teck Suite of Galleries, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
Photo: Tony Hisgett, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-2.0, 2012.

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Caroline Schneider
Karl-Marx-Allee 78
D-10243 Berlin
www.sternberg-press.com