

---

**Cosmism: Anton Vidokle  
and Arseny Zhilyaev  
at Tensta konsthall  
30.10 2018–13.1 2019**

**Norra Sidan**

**Tensta konsthall**

**Cosmism: Anton Vidokle  
and Arseny Zhilyaev  
at Tensta konsthall  
30.10 2018–13.1 2019**

Three poetic films by artist Anton Vidokle play on the connections between nineteenth-century Orthodox Christian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov's (1829-1903) ideas of resurrection of all the dead, capitalist and socialist cosmic expansion, flows of energy and contemporary transhumanist theories. The trilogy weaves together the life of post-Soviet citizens and the futurological projects of Russian Cosmism to emphasize that the goal of the early Soviet breakthroughs aimed at the conquest of outer space was not so much technical acceleration, but the common cause of humankind in their struggle against the limitations of earthly life. The exhibition also includes a new installation by artist Arseny Zhilyaev whose work takes a more fictional approach to cosmism. A large circular table displays a wide range of publications on cosmism to date. Architects Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller have designed the exhibition space.

Cosmism is the eccentric theory of universal emancipation translated into eternal life for all human beings who have ever lived. According to cosmism, death is a mistake that should be overcome. If the achievement of true social equality is the goal, then eternal life must be given all. Like energy, human life should be indestructible and always evolving. More space will be needed and new living conditions must be considered for the vast amounts of individuals: those who have lived before, those who are alive now and those who will be born in the future. Spaceships and other planets will be necessary for this expansion. Here, the energy of love will flourish, as the expected overcoming of sexual distinctions will mean a tremendous release of energy. A sort of unification will then take place with God, the creator of "the cosmos."

It is not the holistic, Christian mysticism mixed with transcendental materialism that makes cosmism curiously interesting at this moment; rather it is the idea that at the same time as some things change dramatically, others remain constant. Perhaps today we can think of it in terms of the significant difference between the bursting kind of energy that Russia experienced in the years around 1918 and a sort of "slow" energy. Slow energy is dispersed— it seeps and trickles rather than gushes forth. Nowadays the former can be discerned in engaged, localised work done by all kinds of people, ranging from activists and academics to workers and artists, who in many places seem to move towards soft mobilization, alliances and other ways of interlinking.

The institution of the museum also played a central role in Russian Cosmism, as the remains needed for the resurrection of individuals would have to be preserved there. Fyodorov, like the painter and founder of Suprematism, Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), believed that after the death of God, the museum would be the only place where a transhistorical union beyond the grave was possible. Another fascination of the cosmists was with science, technology and outer space. Their theories became a major influence on Soviet space research and exploration.

Arseny Zhilyaev's new installation is a museological altar of sorts, used by a future space sect. The title, *Laborer of the Sun*, refers to the replacement of icons by solar panels and the condensation of Malevich's Black Square into the black crystals of these solar panels. It also represents a holy communion with the beginnings of the universe. In this speculative future, humans have spread into outer space, abandoning Earth. However, humans occasionally return to visit museums where the historical archives of humanity's past are preserved. Drawing from research on museological motifs of the Russian artistic avant-garde at the turn of the last century, Zhilyaev parodies the institution of the future while

---

considering ideas put forth in Russian Cosmism by Fyodorov. Zhilyaev is the editor of a volume on radical museology of the early years of the Soviet Union, including texts by Fyodorov and other influential voices active at that time.

In his project **Immortality for All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism**, Anton Vidokle probes cosmism's influence on the twentieth century and suggests its relevance to the present day. In part one he returns to the foundations of cosmist thought (**This Is Cosmos**, 2014). Part two explores the links between cosmology and politics (**The Communist Revolution Was Caused By The Sun**, 2015) and part three restages the museum as a site of resurrection, a central cosmist idea (**Immortality and Resurrection for All!**, 2017). Combining essay, documentary, and performance, Vidokle quotes from the writings of cosmism's founder Nikolai Fyodorov and other philosophers and poets. His wandering camera searches for traces of cosmist influence in the remains of Soviet-era art, architecture and engineering, moving from the steppes of Kazakhstan to the museums of Moscow. Music by John Cale and Éliane Radigue accompanies these haunting images, conjuring up the yearning for connectedness, social equality, material transformation and immortality at the heart of cosmist thought.

**Anton Vidokle**  
**This Is Cosmos**  
2014, 28:10 min

Russian and with English subtitles  
Shot in Siberia and Kazakhstan, as well as Moscow and Archangelsk regions, the first film in the trilogy on Russian Cosmism comprises of a collage of ideas from the movement's diverse protagonists, including founding philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov. Fyodorov, among others, believed that death was a mistake – a flaw in the overall design of the human, “because the energy of cosmos is indestructible, because true religion is a cult of ancestors, because true social equality is immortality for all.” For the Russian Cosmists, the definition of

cosmos was not limited to outer space: rather, they set out to create “cosmos,” or harmonious and eternal life, on Earth. The ultimate goal, as illuminated in the short film, was “to construct a new reality, free of hunger, disease, violence, death, need, and inequality – like communism.”

**Anton Vidokle**  
**The Communist Revolution Was Caused By The Sun**  
2015, 33:36 min

Russian with English subtitles  
The second part of the trilogy looks at the poetic dimension of solar cosmology of Soviet biophysicist, Alexander Chizhevsky (1897-1964). Shot in Kazakhstan, where Chizhevsky was imprisoned and later exiled, the film introduces Chizhevsky's research into the impact of solar emissions on human sociology, psychology, politics and economics in the form of wars, revolutions, epidemics and other upheavals. The film aligns the life of post-Soviet rural residents and the futurological projects of Russian Cosmism to emphasize that the goal of the early Soviet breakthroughs aimed at the conquest of outer space was not so much technical acceleration, but the common cause of humankind in their struggle against limitations of earthly life.

**Anton Vidokle**  
**Immortality and Resurrection for All!**  
2017, 34:17 min

Russian with English subtitles  
The trilogy's last part is a meditation on a museum as the site of resurrection – a central idea for many Cosmist thinkers, scientists and avant-garde artists. Filmed at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow Zoological Museum, the Lenin Library and the Museum of Revolution, the film looks at museological and archival techniques of collection, restoration and conservation as a means of the material restoration of life following an essay penned by Nikolai Fyodorov on this subject in 1880s. The film follows a cast comprised of present-day followers

of Fyodorov, several actors, artists and a Pharaoh Hound that playfully enact a resurrection of a mummy, a close examination of Malevich's Black Square, Alexander Rodchenko's (1891-1956) spatial constructions, taxidermied animals, artifacts of the Russian Revolution, skeletons and mannequins in tableau vivant-like scenes in order to create a contemporary visualization for the poetry implicit in Fyodorov's theories.

**Arseny Zhilyaev**

**The Laborer of the Sun**

**Solar panels, wallpaper**

Arseny Zhilyaev's installation is a fictionalized museum reconstruction of an altar by a space sect from the not so distant future. Such sects arose in remote space colonies and lost space ships. Often instead of icons they used solar panels called the "laborers of the sun." According to the legend, through the absorption of visible light and the transformation of it into energy, the "laborer" performed a ritual of communion with the divine beginning of the universe. As in most of Zhilyaev's works, The Laborer of the Sun represents an imagined art of the future, which in this case, distinctively has its roots in modernism. Malevich's radical reduction in the Black Square is brought to its limit in the black crystals of solar panels. Light and visibility do not reflect from the surface, but are rather absorbed and reformatted. The installation can be interpreted as a critical statement on the closedness of contemporary art: that is, that it may only absorb its own recycled and limited light.

**A conversation with Anton Vidokle, Arseny Zhilyaev and Maria Lind**

**Maria Lind:** Cosmism can be described as an almost forgotten Russian philosophy, which has had a significant impact on culture and society in both Russia and the Soviet Union. What is your elevator pitch on this complex theory?

**Anton Vidokle:** Cosmism advocates technological immortality for all, material resurrection of everyone who has ever lived, and travel and life in cosmos. I think revisiting its ideas is tremendously important now, because with all the advances in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, genetics, robotics and so forth, some form of extreme longevity or perhaps even immortality appears now to be on the horizon of technological possibilities. However, an extremely individualistic and neoliberal model currently shapes contemporary thinking about this, and if successful it will probably result in a kind of elite class of immortal billionaires, while the rest of humanity will live with deteriorating conditions and shrinking life spans. This would mean immortality for the few and more misery for the rest of us.

Similarly, contemporary space research is more and more privatized, and its leading protagonists these days, people like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, view space exploration largely as a search for lucrative natural resources in space rather than a spiritual quest towards the evolution of humanity. So it seems to me that it is extremely important and urgent right now to revisit the more socially and spiritually concerned goals that dominated cosmist discourse in Russia and the Soviet Union before and right after the revolution.

**Arseny Zhilyaev:** In my opinion, cosmism gives a positive interpretation of what we call today the Anthropocene. The geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) wrote about human's crucial role in the geological transformations of Earth in first half of the 20th century, calling it the noosphere. But for him

---

it was not a problem; rather, it was a question of taking responsibility for a geology that is littered with our own biological species. If geological processes are determined by human activity, and moreover out intellectual activity, this does not necessarily mean there is a problem. Nature as a constant given never existed. This is just a construct that is convenient for humans. As such, we – as part of nature and part of life – are in a constant, mutual transformation.

Cosmism speaks of the ethics and responsibilities of the ultimate technological development – an ethics that goes beyond human boundaries. In the 60s there was even a special term in the USSR: cosmocentrism. It emphasized the need to take into account the complete dependence of life on cosmic processes in both thinking and acting. What makes the ideas of Russian cosmism current today is the courage of their intellectual constructions and their consistent defense of the materialist position.

**ML:** Anton, whereas the first film in your trilogy, *This is Cosmos*, is an introduction to this deeply existential and wildly imaginative philosophy, the second film, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun*, looks closer at its relationship to physics, biochemistry and space exploration. What is the relevance of this today?

**AV:** If we accept that we are not merely terrestrial creatures who exist solely inside the bubble of Earth's biosphere, but that we live in the cosmos, then we should consider the effect that cosmos and its planets, stars, and galaxies exert on us. For example, we live right next to a star that is many times bigger than our planet. Its radiation and other forces shaped our planet and whatever life developed on it. These forces and emissions continue affecting conditions on Earth and as such, influence our life not only by way of weather conditions, but also in more subtle ways – possibly affecting our psychological state and mental activity. The film explores the

research of Alexander Chizhevsky (1897-1964), a Soviet biophysicist who studied the relationship between the sun and human society and history.

**ML:** Arseny, your art works have a different relationship to cosmism, operating through a large dose of fiction. What happens in this encounter between cosmism and your fiction?

**AZ:** Since the beginning of my artistic practice, I have used the exhibition as a medium for speculations about potential futures of art and humanity. My method is something like the science fiction of contemporary art, so cosmism very organically fits into this methodology. The first project I did using the ideas of Fyodorov, was about a rocket and space corporation created by ufologists in my hometown of Voronezh. Fyodorov lived there for several years before his death. He inspired one local artist to open the "Resurrection Museum" and even made several curatorial projects.

So I have always speculated about a world where the ideas of cosmism are relevant, but they are realized under conditions different from those described by theorists. Such a dystopic version of the theory of "common task" is very close to our own time, that is, a turn to a kind of critical realism through fiction.

**ML:** Can you please describe the "common task?"

**AZ:** The common task in cosmism implies the unification of all people in the struggle against death. To this end, all wars and all social and personal conflicts must be abandoned. The budgets that are spent on the maintenance of the army and the production of weapons should be redistributed to the needs of science. The church should extend its institution of immortality to other social institutions. Science and art should be combined inside the museum for universal resurrection. Instead of producing works of art, artists should begin the reproduction of life itself or resurrection. And when the dead return

resurrection. And when the dead return to the world, we must begin settling them in outer space. Gradually, the universe turns into a single organism transformed by creative effort.

**ML:** The third film, *Immortality and Resurrection for All!* focuses on museums as places for resurrection and the importance of art for the cosmists. In fact, museums are absolutely central to their thinking in which death is considered a mistake, or as is mentioned in the film, “the museum is not a collection of things but a gathering of faces.” How would you relate this to museums in our day and age?

**AV:** Museums seem to be the only institution in contemporary human society that is dedicated to the conservation of the past. While every other aspect of contemporary life is geared towards the replacement of the old by the new, in keeping with the capitalist cycles of production as well as human reproduction, museums developed technologies for conservation, preservation and restoration of artifacts that are usually simply discarded, like broken ceramics for example. For the cosmist project of immortality and resurrection, the museum is a key institution in the sense that its technologies of preservation and restoration can be redirected or radicalized to preserve and restore life.

**ML:** Arseny, you have edited an impressive volume on avant-garde museology – in which cosmist museology is central – with a variety of texts from around the turn of the last century. Could you elaborate on the relevance of this body of thought for museum practice today?

**AZ:** I consider cosmism as an important part of the historical avant-garde. If we speak about radical museological experiments of the first part of the 20th century, the ideas of Fyodorov may look like an image of a very possible future. But in my opinion, artists keep very archaic positions in relation to institutions today. For instance,

the fear of a bureaucratization and industrialization of artistic practice by artificial intelligence or mass culture led to the atomization and reinforcement of the role of the human. Instead of fighting for an art of a socialist future we have been fighting for medieval, pre-capitalistic conditions of creative production. I believe that in order to advance we need to help current institutional practices so that museums can be strong enough to act as independent producers of art – ideally in the service of the “common task.”

**ML:** Anton, conceived as essay films with a montage-like structure mixing old and new footage, various kinds of sound and voice over, as well as changing rhythms, your trilogy has been likened to educational films. Apparently, there was also a genre in the Soviet Union called something like “Scientific Popular.” Can you speak about the formal articulation of the films?

**AV:** Yes sure, that was a very unusual genre that does not quite have a parallel in the West. The scientific-popular films were not for children and not always meant as something educational. Sometimes they were wildly expressionistic, experimental and very complex. Usually in short format, they were not subject to the same kind of a political scrutiny as feature films made at major studios. This offered a little bit more opportunities for unconventional filmmakers. There is some relationship to the genre of essay films, but most often they were more speculative and/or poetic and didn’t necessarily illustrate a specific thesis. In some sense all of this probably also applies to my films.

**ML:** The trilogy was shown in an exhibition format in 2017 at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, including works by Arseny and a historical art exhibition curated by theoretician Boris Groys. Like at Tensta konsthall, the spatial presentation was designed by architect Nikolaus Hirsch. Can you tell me what the collaboration with these peers has entailed?

---

**AV:** This has been a very long-standing collaboration that actually preceded my work on cosmism. I have been collaborating with Boris Groys since 2004 on a range of curatorial, publishing and discursive projects. Similarly, Nikolaus Hirsch has designed space and architecture for various projects I worked on since about roughly the same time, starting with the unitednationsplaza in Berlin. With Arseny, we published a very substantial book on avant-garde museology: a 600 page volume of historical text on early experimental exhibitions in the Soviet Union, translated to English for the first time. So all these have been extremely long term and multi-faceted collaborations, which are ongoing.

#### **Self-presentations**

**Anton Vidokle** (b. Moscow) is an artist based in New York and Berlin. As founder of e-flux and e-flux journal, he has developed projects such as the Martha Rosler Library (2005-2007), unitednationsplaza (2006-09) and Time/Bank (2010-12). Vidokle's work has been exhibited internationally at Documenta 13 and the 56th Venice Biennale. Since 2012 he has been working on a series of films on the philosophy of Russian Cosmism. His films have been presented at Bergen Assembly; Shanghai Biennale; Istanbul Biennial; Witte de With, Rotterdam; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; Berlinale International Film Festival; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Gwangju Biennale; Locarno Festival; Centre Pompidou; Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt (HKW); Tate Modern; and the National Gallery, Washington DC, among others. Vidokle has most recently opened Bar Laika in Brooklyn.

**Arseny Zhilyaev** is an artist based in Moscow and Venice. His projects examine the legacy of Soviet museology and the museum in the philosophy of Russian Cosmism while often using the exhibition as medium. His works have been shown in multiple biennales including Gwangju, Liverpool, Lyon and the Ljubljana Triennale, as well as in exhibitions at Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, Paris; de Appel, Amsterdam; HKW, Berlin; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris and San Francisco; V-a-c

Foundation, Moscow and Venice amongst others. Zhilyaev graduated from Voronezh State University, Philosophical Faculty (2006); Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art (2008); MA International Programs, Valand School of Fine Arts, Goteborg, Sweden (2010). Zhilyaev has published articles in e-flux journal, Idea, Moscow Art Magazine and others. He is an editor of an anthology Avant-Garde Museology (e-flux, University of Minnesota Press, V-a-c Press, 2015). Recent accolades include Russian awards in the sphere of contemporary art, and a nomination for the Visible Award in 2013.

**Nikolaus Hirsch** is a Frankfurt-based architect, editor and educator. He was the director of Städelschule and Portikus in Frankfurt and currently teaches at Columbia University in New York. His architectural work includes the award-winning Dresden Synagogue (2001), Bockenheimer Depot Theater (with William Forsythe), unitednationsplaza (with Anton Vidokle), European Kunsthalle, Cybermohalla Hub (Delhi, 2012), a pavilion at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City (2016), and an artist residency at The Land. Current projects include a new masterplan for the Fundacio Tapies in Barcelona, Bar Laika in New York, and a mobile art studio for the Land of Hessen (2018).

Hirsch's work has been shown in exhibitions such as Indian Highway at the Serpentine Gallery (London, 2008), Louisiana Museum (Copenhagen, 2011), Chicago Architecture Biennale (2015), and Do We Dream Under The Same Sky (Art Basel, 2015, Luma Foundation, 2018). Hirsch has curated ErsatzStadt at Volksbühne Berlin (2005), Cultural Agencies (Istanbul, 2009/10), numerous exhibitions at the Portikus, the Folly project for the Gwangju Biennale (2013), and Housing Question at the HKW in Berlin (2015). He is the author of the books On Boundaries (2007), Institution Building (2009), Cybermohalla Hub (2012), and co-editor of e-flux architecture and the Critical Spatial Practice series by Sternberg Press.

**Maria Lind** is the director of Tensta konsthall.

**Dates:**

**Tuesday 30.10, 17:00–20:00**

Opening of Cosmism: Anton Vidokle  
and Arseny Zhilyaev

**Thursday 1.11, 14:00**

A public conversation on the exhibition  
Cosmism with Anton Vidokle, Arseny  
Zhilyaev and Maria Lind.

**Thursdays and Saturdays, 14:00**

Public introduction to the current  
exhibitions and projects

**Tensta konsthall staff**

**Ailin Moaf Mirlashari**

host

**Didem Yildirim**

production coordinator

**Fahyma Alnablsi**

reception and Language Café

**Fredda Berg**

host

**Hanna Nordell**

producer

**Henny Josefsson**

host

**Isabella Tjäder**

communication

**Makda Embaie**

assistant

**Maria Lind**

director

**Muna Al Yaqoobi**

assistant Womens Café

**Nawroz Zakholy**

assistant

**Nina Svensson**

mediation

**Paulina Sokolow**

communications and press

**Rasmus Sjöbeck**

host

**Interns:**

**Ockie Basgül Dogan**

**Aya Urhammer**

**Installation:**

**Johan Wahlgren**

**Ingrid Jansson**

**Mario Fjell**