

Anton
Vidokle

Boris
Groys

Arseny
Zhilyaev

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ART WITHOUT DEATH RUSSIAN COSMISM

Russian cosmism called for physical immortality for the living, material resurrection of the dead, and travel to outer space.

Its tenets—combining Western Enlightenment and Eastern philosophy, Russian Orthodox traditions and Marxism, with an enthusiasm for science and technology—inspired many key Soviet thinkers until they fell victim to Stalinist repression. The exhibition *Art without Death: Russian Cosmism* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) looks at this daring utopia and its echoes in art, science, and politics in Russia and beyond.

Russian cosmism opens new perspectives on the Russian avant-garde as well as the ideology and politics of Russia from the nineteenth century to the present day. For example, in his influential writings, Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903) demanded that the ultimate goal of technology must be to overcome death; all people who had ever lived on Earth must be brought back to life. The cosmists were also visionary pioneers of space travel. Fedorov, for instance, thought the colonization of other planets would become inevitable as a result of the lack of space after the resurrection of the dead. The institution of the museum also played a central role in Russian cosmism, as it was believed that the human remains needed for the

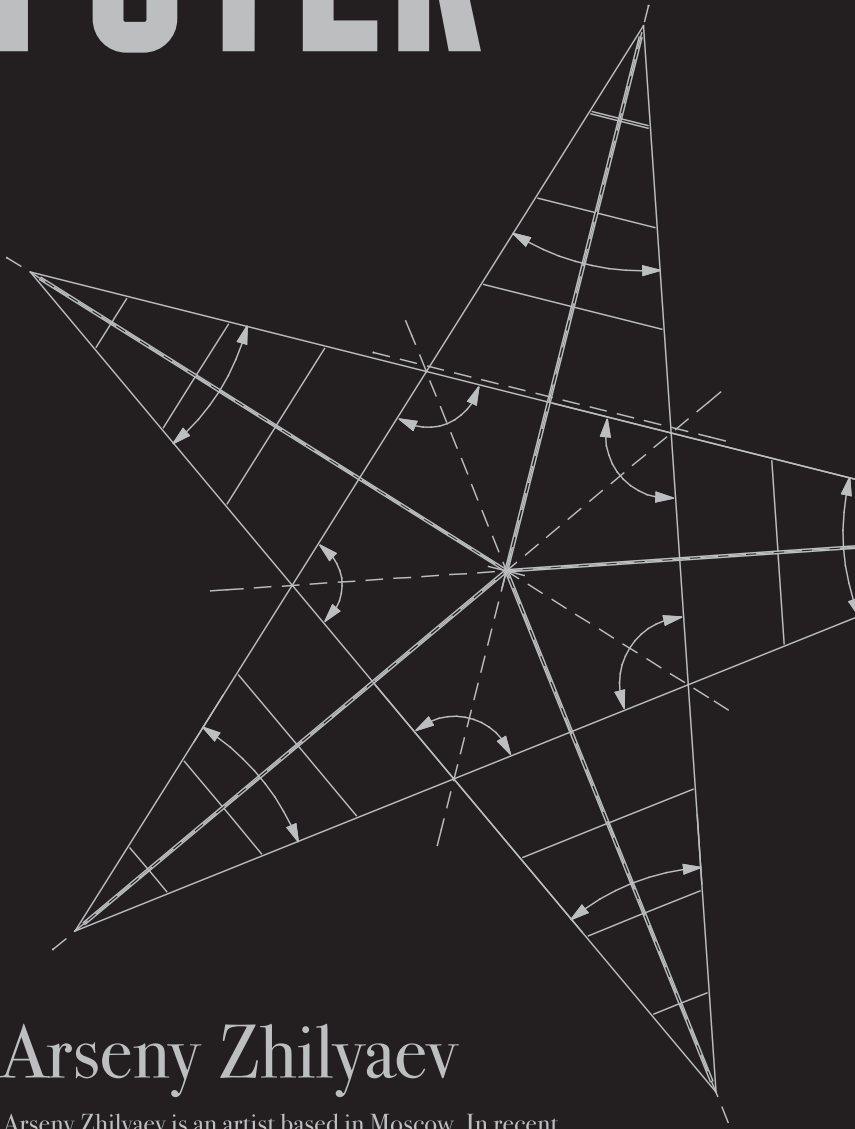
resurrection of individuals would have to be preserved there. Fedorov, like the painter and founder of Suprematism Kazimir Malevich, believed that after the death of God, the museum would be the only place where a trans-historical union beyond the grave was possible.

Art without Death delves into philosophical, scientific, artistic concepts and ideas of Russian cosmism by intertwining historical works and contemporary reflection. The exhibition presents the film trilogy *Immortality for All!* (2014–17) by artist Anton Vidokle in HKW's Exhibition Hall 1, in an architectural setting inspired by Muslim cemeteries in Kazakhstan, where several of the film scenes were shot. Combining essay, documentary, and performance, Vidokle quotes from the writings of cosmism's protagonists. The wandering camera searches for traces of cosmist influence in the remnants of Soviet-era art, architecture, and engineering, moving from the steppes of Kazakhstan to the museums of Moscow.

The historical component of *Art without Death* is an exhibition in HKW's Exhibition Hall 2, curated by Boris Groys and titled *Cosmic Imagination: Artists of the Russian Avant-Garde*. This show presents a selection of works from the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki, the largest collection of artworks of the Russian avant-garde outside Russia. These were inspired by the biopolitics of immortality and life in the cosmos, enabling re-readings against their cosmist backdrop, which has often been overlooked. The exhibition includes works by Vasily Chekrygin, Ksenia Ender, Maria Ender, Ivan Kliun, Gustav Klutis, Ivan Kudriashev, Solomon Nikritin, Kliment Redko, Alexander Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova and Aleksei Kruchenykh, among others.

Arseny Zhilyaev's installation—*Intergalactic Mobile Fedorov Museum-Library, Berlin* (2017)—a futuristic star-shaped reading space in HKW's foyer, makes available a wide range of key books by the Russian cosmists, including science, poetry, and fiction, and presents them under the rejuvenating rays of ionization lamps of Soviet design.

FOYER



Arseny Zhilyaev

Arseny Zhilyaev is an artist based in Moscow. In recent works he has examined the legacy of Soviet museology and the museum in Russian cosmism. Among others, he has published articles in *e-flux journal*. Zhilyaev is editor of *Avant-Garde Museology* (2015). His works have been shown at the Gwangju Biennale, Liverpool Biennale, and at the Ljubljana Triennale as well as at exhibitions including at the Centre Pompidou and Palais de Tokyo, Paris; De Appel, Amsterdam; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris and San Francisco; and at the V-A-C Foundation in Moscow.

INTERGALACTIC MOBILE FEDOROV MUSEUM—LIBRARY, BERLIN

Arseny Zhilyaev's installation at HKW, produced for this exhibition, uses an imaginary institution as a framework for creative expression. The artist addresses Nikolai Fedorov's idea that the library should be considered a research platform connecting the museum and the scientific laboratory with one unified goal: material resurrection. In his late nineteenth-century essay "The Author's Debt and the Bylaws of the Museum-Library," Fedorov wrote: "If a repository may be compared to a grave, then reading, or more precisely research, is a kind of exhumation, while an exhibition is, as it were, a resurrection." By constructing a library named after Fedorov, Zhilyaev reflects on the roles of artist, curator, and spectator in relation to the production of knowledge and also of life.

In this installation, visitors have the opportunity to encounter a multilingual collection of books on Russian cosmism. The volumes cover the major topics associated with the movement: immortality, space travel, evolution, and a new social order based on love, peace, and regulation of the climate, among others. Inside the library one can read rare and out-of-print works by Nikolai Fedorov, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Alexander Chizhevsky, Vladimir Vernadsky, Pavel Florensky, Alexander Bogdanov, Alexander Gorsky, and the poetic group of biocosmists, while being irradiated by Alexander Chizhevsky's lamps. Chizhevsky invented these devices in the 1920s for prophylactic treatment achieved through exposure to air negatively charged with ions. Today, the same scientific principles are used in commercial ionizers. Authentic Soviet examples of this invention appear in the *Intergalactic Mobile Fedorov Museum-Library, Berlin*.

This new work is a continuation of several earlier projects by the artist, such as the *Russian Cosmic Federation*—an imaginary intergalactic empire that has appeared within the context of Zhilyaev's prior installations and in works such as *MIR: Polite Guests from the Future* (2014) and *Cradle of Humankind* (2015). In keeping with these earlier works, the *Fedorov Museum-Library* is formed in the shape of a five-pointed star that also resembles a flying saucer or spaceship. The political and economic order of the *Russian Cosmic Federation* is not expressed literally. However, one may arrive at the conclusion that this political order is one variant of a dystopian society wherein highly-developed capitalistic tendencies coexist with socialistic and religious decor. Reflecting both the optimism of the Russian cosmist imagination and the critical tradition of socialist science fiction, the *Intergalactic Mobile Fedorov Museum-Library, Berlin* reintroduces nineteenth-century utopian ideas within the context of contemporary political realities.

“A human is not only a terrestrial being, but a cosmic one, connected by all molecules and particles of the body with the cosmos: with cosmic rays, its flows and fields.”

ALEXANDER CHIZHEVSKY

EXHIBITION HALL 01

Anton Vidokle

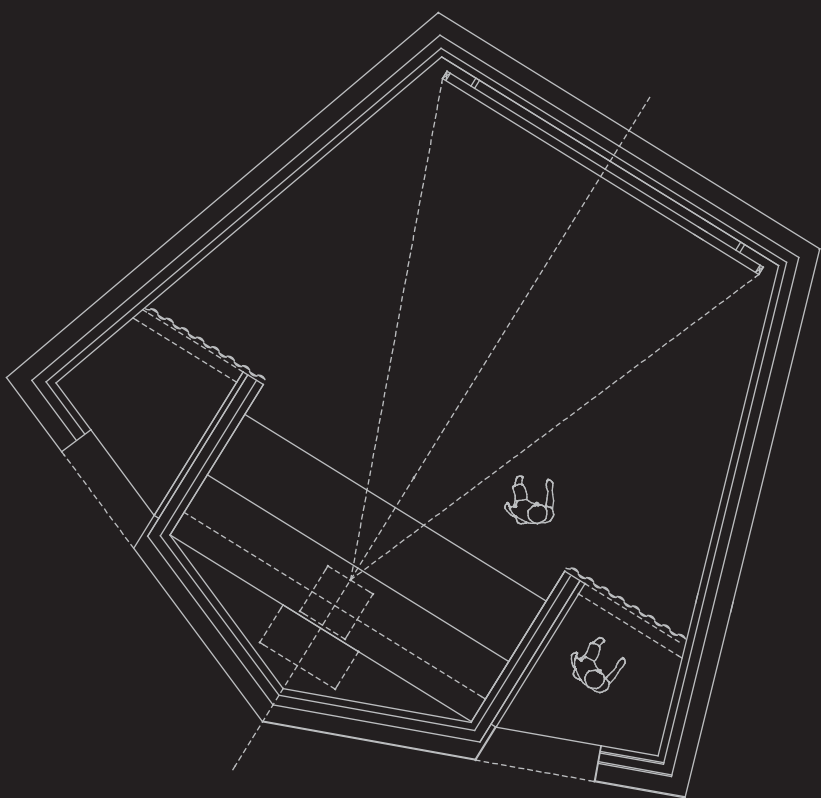
Anton Vidokle is an artist and editor of *e-flux journal*. He was born in Moscow and lives in New York and Berlin. Vidokle's work has been exhibited internationally at dOCUMENTA 13 and at the 56th Venice Biennale. His films have been presented at Bergen Assembly; Shanghai Biennale; the 65th and 66th Berlinale International Film Festivals' Forum Expanded; Gwangju Biennale; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Garage Museum, Moscow; Istanbul Biennial, among others.

IMMORTALITY FOR ALL! A FILM TRILOGY ON RUSSIAN COSMISM

In this three-part film project, artist Anton Vidokle probes cosmism's influence on the twentieth century and suggests its relevance to the present day.

In Part One, Vidokle 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 re-stages 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 Fedorov and other philosophers and poets. His wandering camera searches for traces of cosmist influence in the remnants 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.



THIS IS COSMOS

2014
28' 10"
Russian with
English subtitles

Shot in Siberia and Kazakhstan, as well as in Moscow and Arkhangelsk, the first film in the trilogy on Russian cosmism comprises a collage of ideas from the movement's diverse protagonists, including founding philosopher Nikolai Fedorov. Fedorov, 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, inequality—like communism.”

THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION WAS CAUSED BY THE SUN

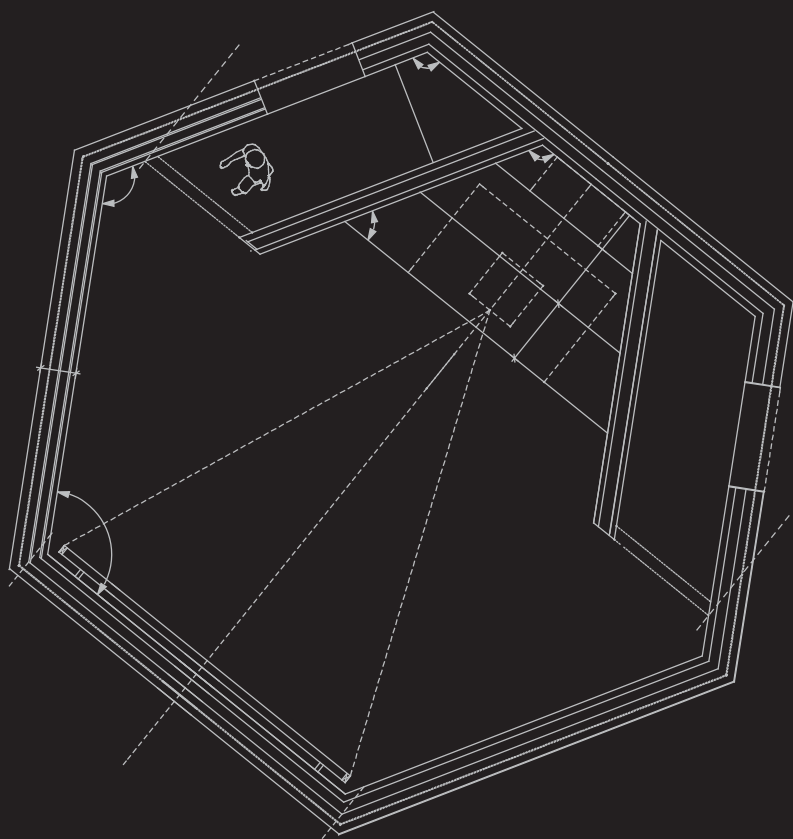
2015

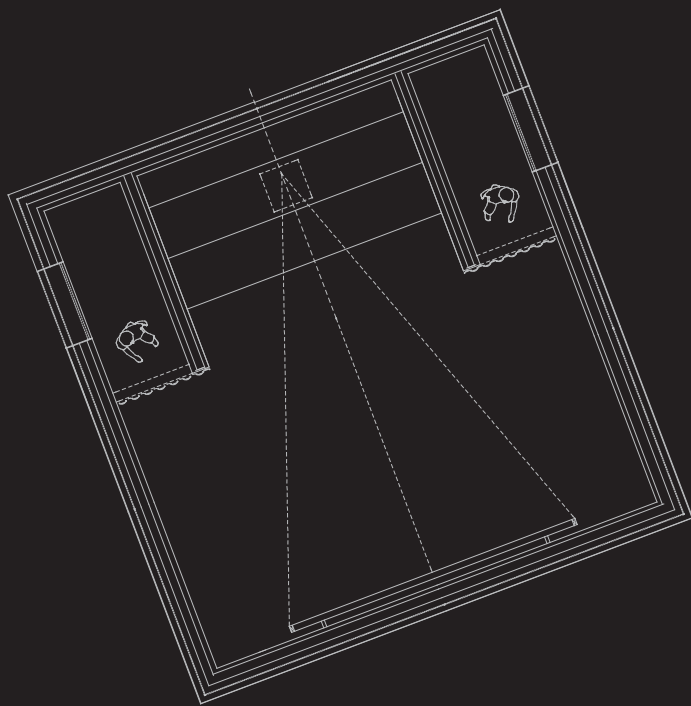
33' 36"

Russian with

English subtitles

The second part of the trilogy looks at the poetic dimension of solar cosmology of Soviet biophysicist, Alexander Chizhevsky. Shot in Kazakhstan, where he was imprisoned and later exiled, the film introduces his 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 its struggle against the limitations of earthly life.





IMMORTALITY AND RESURRECTION FOR ALL!

2017
34' 17"
Russian with
English subtitles

The final part of the trilogy is a meditation on the museum as the site of resurrection—a central idea for many cosmist thinkers, scientists, and avant-garde artists. Filmed at Moscow institutions—the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow Zoological Museum, the Lenin Library (now the Russian State Library), and the Revolution Museum (now the Museum of Contemporary Russian History), the film looks at museological and archival techniques of collection, restoration, and conservation as means of attaining the material restoration of life, following an essay penned by Nikolai Fedorov on this subject in the 1880s. The film follows a cast comprised of present-day followers of Fedorov, actors, artists, and a Pharaoh Hound, which playfully enact the resurrection of a mummy, a close examination of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, Alexander Rodchenko's spatial constructions, taxidermied animals, artifacts of the Russian Revolution, skeletons, mannequins in tableau vivant-like scenes, in order to create a contemporary visualization for the poetry implicit in Fedorov's writings.

EXHIBITION HALL 02

Boris Groys

Boris Groys is a philosopher, essayist, and media theorist. Having taught in Philadelphia, Münster, and Los Angeles, he became in 1994 Professor of Art History, Philosophy and Media Theory at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. In 2009, he was appointed Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. He has published widely on the subject of the Russian avant-garde and was curator, with Max Hollein, of the exhibition *Dream Factory Communism* at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in 2003–04. In 2005, he and Michael Hagemeister edited *Die neue Menschheit* in which the principal texts of the Russian cosmists were made available in the German language.

COSMIC IMAGINATION: ARTISTS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

The artists of the Russian avant-garde saw themselves as prophets of a new age in the history of mankind—the Age of Cosmic Mankind, when humans would leave the Earth and conquer cosmic space. The very first manifestation of the Russian avant-garde was seen in the opera *Victory over the Sun*, which was staged in St. Petersburg in 1913. The scenography was by Kazimir Malevich. It was the first time Malevich's famous *Black Square* appeared—as a symbol of the dark cosmic space, which revealed itself after the Sun of traditional culture met its demise and was imprisoned. Throughout his artistic career Malevich dreamed of the possibility of cosmic flight, artificial cities beyond gravity, and the ability to travel through the black infinity of cosmic space. The influence of Malevich's *Black Square* can also be seen in the works of a later generation of Russian avant-garde artists who are presented in this exhibition. These works are selected from the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki. Originally this collection formed part of a larger one comprising works of the Russian avant-garde owned by George Costakis, who had formed the collection over years spent in the Soviet Union. After he left the Soviet Union in 1977 the greater part of his collection remained in Moscow. However, a small part of the collection is now kept in the State Museum, Thessaloniki and contains many excellent and historically important works. This part of the collection is especially interesting because it documents the importance of the cosmic imagination for the Russian artists of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s. Thus, in the exhibition *Cosmic Imagination* in HKW's

Exhibition Hall 2 as part of *Art without Death*, the earlier works by Gustav Klutsis are presented that carry further the cosmic impulse produced by the first wave of the Russian avant-garde. One of Klutsis's *Constructions* (1921) includes a reproduction of Malevich's *Black Square*. Some of the other images present visions of planets drifting through cosmic space. Especially interesting here is a lithograph showing buildings reminiscent of New York skyscrapers, but in which the structures project in six different directions from a common foundation to form a cube—a good illustration of the utopia of architecture beyond gravity. It is interesting that this image was produced by Klutsis to illustrate a book by Alexei Kruchenykh, *Four phonetic novels* (1927)—Kruchenykh being also the author of the libretto and main text for the opera *Victory over the Sun*. In the exhibition one can also see a series of illustrations by Olga Rozanova for another book by Kruchenykh, *The Universal War* (1916). The illustrations lack an immediate reference to cosmic space, but they produce an effect of free-floating, infinitely drifting forms—an effect that is characteristic of many Suprematist compositions by Malevich.

References to Malevich's *Black Square* can be found in the work of Solomon Nikritin as well—one of the most interesting and versatile artists of that time. His artistic strategy is already postmodern or at least post avant-garde. He twice appropriates the *Black Square*, but also experiments with all possible forms of non-geometric, “organic,” fluid abstraction. But even more importantly he combines radical abstraction with figuration. His figurative images celebrate technical progress, while at the same time they reflect the emergence of the new industrial “deserts”—abandoned, desolate, disfigured landscapes. The same ambivalence characterizes Nikritin's attitude toward another important tradition to which some of his works refer—that of pictorial representations of resurrection and immortality. This tradition is especially important in the framework of the exhibition

Art without Death. The project of a technologically produced resurrection of all the previous generations was formulated by the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the early disciples of Fedorov was the artist Vasily Chekrygin. His painting *Resurrection* (1918) can also be seen in this exhibition. Even if Fedorov conceived the work of resurrection as a social and technological practice, in his painting, Chekrygin celebrates the Christian, ecstatic experience of being reborn into a new, immortal life. Some of Nikritin's paintings repeat this image of ecstasy in a celebratory but also ironic way. A good example is his *Resurrection of a Registration Clerk* (1924). Here, the resurrected woman holds in one of her hands an additional leg that probably did not quite fit her artificially, technologically resurrected body. Some of the other images by Nikritin also demonstrate the protean, potentially decentered, and deconstructed character of the human body. Here the age of anthropotechnics and biological experiments has already been announced by pictorial means.

These works anticipate the unstable, porous character of the dividing line between abstraction and figuration in the Russian avant-garde of the post-revolutionary

ART WITHOUT DEATH : RUSSIAN COSMISM

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