

We Should Live as Particles of the Sun. Traces of Cosmist Philosophy in Space Inspired Art

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WE SHOULD LIVE AS PARTICLES OF THE SUN. TRACES OF COSMIST PHILOSOPHY IN SPACE INSPIRED ART

Cristina Moraru

The earth is not a prison. Although, in our times, people appear caught up in their everyday life, depending fervently on their social milieu and its structure, along with their political principles, their cultural beliefs and their economic stratagems, they also nurture a cosmic anxiety, a fear of the unknown, a disquietude concerning anything beyond their regulated sphere. Human beings have a fascination for the cosmos that never seems to diminish. The Cosmos may offer an answer to any concern about life, time or death, it could reveal the absolute truth, help us escape our human condition and allow us to remediate the biggest “flaw in our design:”¹ mortality.

Since the 19th century, humans have searched for possibilities of achieving immortality—whether for the soul, as in the Christian conviction that God will rescue our soul and we will continue to live on in another world; or for the body, as in the myth of Dracula in which the body is rejuvenated through blood interchange—this tendency to believe in mystical or magical power to resurrect life was characteristic of pre-modern humans. However, in our contemporary world, technological enterprises have replaced mystical practices, the “modern, post-spiritual man no longer believes in the immortality [...] of the soul”² and the persuasive power of various industries, promoting their products to produce a better way of life, has taken over belief in a magical force that can save humankind.

Arseny Zhilyaev, *Cradle of Humankind*,
2015. Installation detail, mixed media.
Courtesy of the artist and V-A-C
Foundation. Photo: Alex Maguire.





Arseny Zhilyaev, *Treugli 737* and *Treugli 2*.
Installation detail of *Cradle of Humankind*,
woven tapestry, 2000 x 1400 m.
Courtesy of the artist and V-A-C
Foundation. Photo: Alex Maguire.

In this context, Cosmist philosophy endorses the idea that art should take the place of technology, because art, unlike technology, cannot become obsolete. Art can be restored, while technology is replaceable. An art object is cared for, increasing in value over time, while a technological object is replaced and devalues in time. Thus, summing up the thought paradigm of Russian Cosmist philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, art can incorporate and extend technological means in order to achieve humanity's compelling and fundamental need for immortality. We should trust in art's capacity to improve life, rather than in industries, promising a better life through technological means, given that an artwork in a museum can become "an extension of the human body—towards technically produced immortality."³ An artwork can do anything for us: it can extend our life, reinvent our bodies, resurrect us from death, make us immortal, self-sustainable and it can offer us the possibility of exploring the entire universe.

Cosmist philosophy identifies the need to search, using all our technological means and methods of investigation in all our fields

of scientific research – including art, for ways to make our bodies evolve and adapt to life in outer space. How can we live without oxygen and become self-sufficient "like some types of plankton that can derive sufficient energy from sunlight without the need to consume anything else."⁴ In other words, we should renounce our human condition; we should abjure our devotion to the physical body and learn to live like a plant or an object. Nikolai Fedorov takes this idea even further and envisions a world in which we would disavow our existence as subjects and choose to be objects – not technological objects that are used and devalued through time, but art objects, which are cared for and are not replaceable: objects that can be restored – animated, but are immortal objects.

Contemporary art theory has developed multiples approaches to the subject of becoming, and becoming an object does not imply a Heideggerian perspective on being objectified, on becoming a resource, a commodity made to be used. For Heidegger, human beings can be "regarded as resources, as human capital, as a collection of energies



Arseny Zhilyaev, *Cradle of Humankind*, 2015. Installation detail, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist and V-A-C Foundation. Photo: Alex Maguire.

[...and] only art can save man from this denigration⁵ because art is an envisagement, not a thing, it is “a revelation of the way we use things.”⁶ In this paradigm, Nikolai Fedorov envisions a cosmical reconfiguration of a future society as an art museum in which the government will act as an art curator and the citizens will be artworks, contemplated as objects of revelation.

Russian artist Arseny Zhilyaev explores this idea in his work *Cradle of Humankind* (2015), producing a four-room installation in which the whole of humanity—past and present—is reconstructed as a museum of the future, dedicated to the history of human life. The work is based on the Cosmist utopian scenario in which an unlimited production of time could be established once we discover a cure for the universally spreading disease, which is death. Antonio Negri differentiates between two different forms of time: a time of measure, of order, of norms and authorities, of efficiency and accountability, and a subsequent, alternative time, constituted as “a substance of our collective nature”⁷—productive and creative, a time withdrawn from capital and perceived as proximity.

This subsequent time will allow us to reconfigure the entire society, to rethink political power, to redistribute productive forces and to reorganize socio-economic relations. This reconfiguration is a necessary condition for the cosmist project to resurrect past civilizations and integrate them into an immortal Cosmic world.

The first exhibition room explores the visual aesthetics of a serene Cosmic landscape, investigating how life appeared on planet Earth. The exhibition display conserves the monumentalism of Soviet premodern museum architecture, exhibiting paintings of an imaginary Cosmic world made by a group of fictionally resurrected artists inspired by the Soviet Space Program. The statue of Nikolai Fedorov—placed at the entrance to the room—attests to the artist’s interests in Cosmist philosophy, while the golden sphere—resembling a prehistoric spaceship—makes a clear reference to “Buckminster Fuller’s spaceship earth, an important symbol for Soviet kinetic artists, who tried to continue the tradition of Russian Cosmism.”⁸



Arseny Zhilyaev, Tsiolkovsky, Second Advents, 2016.
Mixed media. Gazprombank Collection.
Photo: New Holland.

Arseny Zhilyaev, Reconstruction of Tsiolkovsky's rocket, plastic, 2016. Gazprombank Collection.
Photo: New Holland.

The second room includes a series of tapestries in which a triangular element is present—the same one used in the logo of the Russian Cosmic Federation. Each piece is a map representing a different area of the Universe, and is disposed around a central work in the room: the model of an artificial body, exhibited as a tribute to Alexander Grosky's Cosmist philosophy. In his work, "Phallic Pupil," Grosky envisioned a human body that has evolved without any internal organs, which would enable him to defy gravity and fly into space. The body, having only two external organs—the pupil and the phallus—, would be very receptive to the environment and responsive to sunlight, deriving enough energy from the sun so as not to be constrained to consume anything else.

The third room is dedicated to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, an initiator of the Russian Space Program, presenting his personal belongings and a series of new drawings that Tsiolkovsky allegedly made after the "Great Sons of Secret Service" resurrected him. The last room makes an analogy between modernism and postmodernism, juxtaposing dynamic, postmodern Asian *maneki-nekos*, kitschy cat figurines, with a series of static, but meaningful copies of Kazimir Malevich's

Black Square. The metaphor he creates refers to the stagnation and inevitable death of capitalism, represented here as the repetitive movement of commercially manufactured commodities about to be absorbed into the black square.

For Arseny Zhilyaev, the actual structure of our society cannot sustain the Cosmist project. Our capitalist market economy does not have sufficient resources to ensure the resurrection of all past lives and our geo-political structure does not allow the necessary circulation of productive forces to establish a global, undivided, borderless, immortal world. His installation metaphorically interconnects all the stages of humanity in a structure that does not allow the configuration of separate nation states, not even the constitution of separated planets; here all people are equal, working together in a Cosmic union. The artist starts with the presumption that in the future humanity will abandon the earth, which has "turned into a museum of corporations that flamboyantly combines the conservative function of museology with entertainment."⁹ A museum of capitalism is all that will remain of the earth, and it will resemble a cemetery where there is no resurrection.





Arseny Zhilyaev, *Tsiolkovsky, Second Advents*, 2016.
Mixed media. Gazprombank Collection.
Photo: New Holland.

Boris Groys makes this analogy between museums and cemeteries, comparing curators with gravediggers that “aestheticize the material corpse as [...] a testimony to the impossibility of resurrection, [...] institutionalizing a truly radical, atheistic, revolutionary violence which demonstrates the past as incurably dead [...] a purely materialistic death, without return.”¹⁰

Thus, resurrecting all humans on earth would be impossible, because our socio-political past has shown us that none of our organising systems can implement the Cosmist project. Both communism, and capitalism have failed to assure the greater good of humanity—one by its utopian imagination, the other by its over-pragmatic implementation. As long as the dead do “not produce or consume, financial capitalism does not care about resurrecting all humans. 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,”¹¹ and since their utopian project failed, it is becoming harder to acknowledge a project that is more utopian than the communist one.

However, contemporary artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl contested the utopian nature of the Cosmist project, arguing that if all the human lives could be restored, then we would bring back all the Nazis: “How do we guarantee the Nazis don’t just continue trying to kill everyone?”¹² And how could the people who lost their lives in 1940 manage to adapt to the needs and demands of our current society? Artist Arseniy Zhilyaev gives this answer with his future planetary museum in which he proposes to reconstruct the socio-cultural context of every generation on each planet, so that our ancestors would not be forced to adapt to the technological and social-cultural evolutions of our reality. Moreover, since everyone will be immortal, there will be no crimes—even if you were a Nazi, it will be impossible to kill someone. There will be no conflicts, no wars and no gender, race or status inequalities, just a desire to discover outer space and to evolve.

This evolving refers not only to our psyche, but also to our physical body—many of the Cosmist philosophers attested to the need to strengthen our bodies as the main condition for populating outer space. As Alexander Grosky suggested, we should learn to self-nourish, live like the “Phallic Pupil” that Arseniy Zhilyaev integrated into his museum of the future and try to survive at extremely low temperatures. We should learn to regenerate our bodies, following, for example, the biological pattern of plants, which “are able to regenerate leaves, branches [...] while we cannot regrow an arm or a leg.”¹³ We should become self-sustainable—a necessary condition given that all other living organisms will become immortal and it will be impossible to kill for consumption. We should live only with energy derived from the sun, we should move closer to the sun, we should live as particles of the sun.

1. Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl, “Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time” in *e-flux journal* #82, May 2017, 1.
2. Boris Groys, “Art, Technology, and Humanism” in *e-flux journal* #82, May 2017, 8.
3. Ibidem, 5.
4. Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl, Idem, 6.
5. Boris Groys, Idem, 1.
6. Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, apud Ibidem, 1.
7. Antonio Negri, *La costituzione del tempo: prolegomeni*, Manifestolibri, 1997.
8. Link: <https://arsenyzhilyaev.art/en/cradle-of-humankind>.
9. Marina Simakova, “No Man’s Space: On Russian Cosmism” in *e-flux journal* #74, June 2016, 8.
10. Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, Verso Books, London, New York, 2016, 44.
11. Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl, Idem, 6.
12. Ibidem, 3.

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