



e-flux journal

issue #89

03 / 2018

*e-flux Journal* is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

**Editors**

Julieta Aranda  
Brian Kuan Wood  
Anton Vidokle

**Editor-in-Chief**

Kaye Cain-Nielsen

**Managing & Copy Editor**

Mike Andrews

**Art Director**

Mariana Silva

**Editorial Intern**

Andreas Petrossiants

**Graphic Design**

Jeff Ramsey

**Layout Generator**

Adam Florin

**PDF Design**

Mengyi Qian

**PDF Generator**

Keyian Vafai

For further information, contact [journal@e-flux.com](mailto:journal@e-flux.com)

[www.e-flux.com/journal](http://www.e-flux.com/journal)

pg. 1

## Editorial

pg. 3 Tam Donner

## Homeland Security Stylesheet: Incest Font

pg. 10 Dena Yago

## Content Industrial Complex

pg. 19 Ben Davis

## Three Tendencies of Future Art

pg. 29 Marco Baravalle

## Art Populism and the Alter-Institutional Turn

pg. 39 Natalya Serkova

## Learning from Machines, Seeing with a Thousand Eyes: On the Relevance of Russian Cosmism

pg. 47 Anastasia Gacheva

## Art as the Overcoming of Death: From Nikolai Fedorov to the Cosmists of the 1920s

pg. 58 Travis Diehl

## Soylent Beige: The Middle Gray of Taste

pg. 66 Alexander R. Galloway

## 21 Paragraphs on Badiou

“The end justifies the means. But what if there never is an end? All we have is means.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*, 1971

## Editorial

In Ursula Le Guin’s 1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven*, a seemingly unassuming young white male begins effective dreaming. Desperate to stop altering realities by night, George Orr borrows other people’s pharmacy cards (the world is overpopulated, resources heavily rationed) to obtain more than his share of dexedrine and barbiturates. Landing himself in the hands of an oneirologist, he becomes a tool—a proxy to make the doctor’s megalomaniacal utilitarian fantasies real. The doctor suggests, and George dreams. “This was the way he had to go; he had no choice. He had never had any choice. He was only a dreamer.”

Whose effective dreams are we living in now: A hoaxter, broker, autocrat, or warrior? A meal-replacement entrepreneur, or a pedophilic sculptor of language and form? A gentleman farmer, almanac full of pop-up weather events; a scientist who dreams of not detonating the germ bombs that he goes on crafting anyway? Maybe we’re caught in the dreams of somebody much more benign, or much more terrifying: cannibal, gallerist, curator, class warrior, populist, physicist, philosopher, artist, capitalist. Just wondering what phase of ideology’s public trade on the subconscious (art) market we’re in now.

It’s been said that talking about dreams is incredibly boring to the person who has to listen. But dreams bear repeating as reality shifts under the weight of them (some more than others). Surely the officially registered daydreams of certain ancestors resemble almost exactly the night terrors and centuries-long waking atrocities of others. Yanomami spokesperson and shaman Davi Kopenawa explains, “The white people, they do not dream as far as we do. They sleep a lot but only dream of themselves.”

There are no concepts without consequences. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, Orr’s psychologist, mad with power, commands the dreamer under augmented hypnosis to erase racial tensions. Twisted by Orr’s subconscious, this directive turns everyone’s skin dull, gray. Maybe soylent green is soylent gray—gray people. Travis Diehl pours into this issue the fact of soylent as rebranded substance, like so much science of former fiction, in the techno-creative-class present. Liquid removes the inconvenience of taste: gray, beige.

The present threatens to make hungry ghosts of anyone



who survives to see the future. Certainly not all humans have had such luck. Whoever's dreams we—the dead, the outsiders, the cosmists, the content producers' content producers, artists—collectively find ourselves caught in, perhaps we can agree to enter tomorrow's nightmare, this time more lucid.

If so, to what end? All we have is means.

Let's take a look at the state of the influencer's union. "Today, everyone is a culture-producer, producing culture for every other culture-producer," Dena Yago tells us in this issue of *e-flux journal*. But being an influencer doesn't pay, so please don't forget to tip. Yago suggests that we must demand payment for any content created for a brand. We assume this includes #museums (12,933,587 hashtagged posts on Instagram). There are 3,292 posts hashtagged #curatorfindme. None tagged #curatorpayme. 52,834 #museumselfies, plus 15,700 #museumselfieday. Curator fin(e)d me indeed.

Also in this issue, Ben Davis's found document from 2027, a classic of art futurology by the presumable 2100s, predicts a future art when "the 'aestheticization of capitalism' is complete." At this point, "cultural life has largely migrated into various mediated and virtual platforms, all controlled by quasi-monopolistic corporations. The market for new singular art objects craters, as interior decorating trends favor the ultra-minimalism that best serves as a background for various forms of customizable augmented reality experiences." Contemporary artists live on only for "bespoke mythmaking," decorating daydreams of the ultrarich.

But maybe it doesn't, or didn't, have to be this way.

Tam Donner—who, along with Le Guin, inspired this short reflection on dreaming—"nightdreams of people dismantling a fascist state"; then she "nightmares" that the end of human time has already come, making that dream impossible. Donner brings to this issue a vital vision, a searing history—both a dream and a lucid waking account of the present.

Anastasia Gacheva details the transformative strategies devised by Nikolai Fedorov and his fellow cosmists for overcoming death through art. Natalya Serkova maps cosmism's extended life through body modification and fusion with machines, to the point where a "hybrid, mutuating cosmist project" will bring into the sunlight the "cosmist worm with a thousand eyes."

In another mode, Alexander R. Galloway reaches into the future pages of the third volume in Badiou's Being and Event series, *Being and Event 3: The Immanence of Truths*.

Marco Baravalle also offers something on which we can all

focus our energies: "alter-institutions" that can help build multiple new "art worlds" outside and despite the neoliberal realities under which the current one operates. "In short," he says, "we need to associate the word 'art' with different forms of life."

X

Consider Eric Gill, the English stone carver, typographer, sculptor—and progenitor of the typeface Gill Sans. A different Gill typeface, Joanna Nova, is the official font of the United States Department of Homeland Security, named after the only daughter (of three) that Gill did not sexually assault. Despite selecting the typeface dedicated to Gill's only untouched daughter, the Department of Homeland Security is befouled by association—befouled because all of Gill's typefaces feel impure after one reads excerpts from the typographer's diaries, where Gill makes fastidious record of molesting his servants, his sister, some children, the family dog.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Gill's typefaces persist in public:

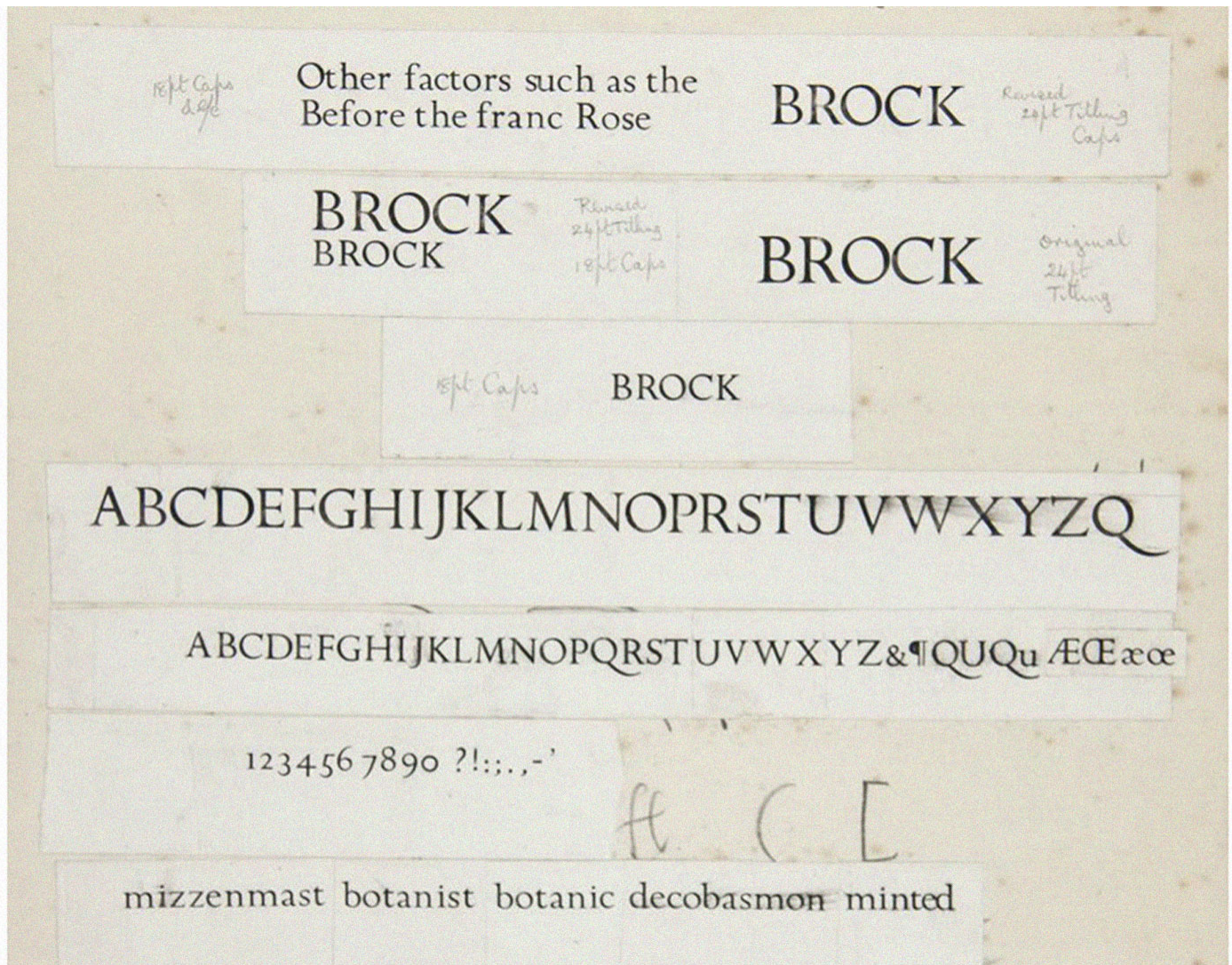
Saab Automobile deploys Gill Sans. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, for sure.  
The US Department of Homeland Security, natch.  
Save the Children, ditto.  
Tommy Hilfiger also.

But some British designers, by way of internet declarations, have sworn off Gill Sans. They will not stuff (commercial) content into a contaminating form. Currently, the name of the font doesn't reflect its mutating brand identity. I want the font to molt; let's rechristen MS Gill Sans. At this moment, my fingers are typing in what I will now dub "Digital DaddyCock Sans." But long after I've read the internet declarations from the British designers, the contrails of the incesting father persist; filthy crystals are the speech bubbles of quiet daughters. Homogenitus as declaritive human genitals.<sup>2</sup>

Once established, the history of the font is embedded, and designers cannot simply excise it in hopes of miraculously restoring their pleasure at the control and spaciousness of DaddyCock Sans. The original events surrounding the typeface's crafting become the substance of the font; this substance crowds and confuses the intended linguistic meaning of words encased in the font. Can a person—me, you—selectively refuse, as an act of resistance, to cognitively process a text executed in a specific font? DaddyCock Sans is the Spanish government's official typeface on all public signage. Say a woman is driving through the mountains of Asturias, an area that long provided shelter to anarchist guerilla forces, and she suddenly finds herself psychologically incapable of reading all official signage in Spanish. She blows through a stop sign. At this point, she, the refuser, finds "ALTO" (Spanish for "HALT") unintelligible in DaddyCock Sans. She misses road signs marked "Galicia"—where US nuclear submarines used to roost. She can't read "Policia" either, as it too is encased in Daddycock Sans. This happens because she has totalized an ethos of resistance. Perhaps emergency illiteracy might be a temporary tactic for refusing the state melding of form and

Tam Donner

# Homeland Security Stylesheet: Incest Font



Eric Gill, Smoke Proof, date unknown. To test the punch, the punchcutter makes an imprint on a piece of paper after coating the punch with soot from an open flame. The soot left by the flame acts like ink to create an image on the paper (a smoke proof). Photo: Clark Library, UCLA

male authority.

James C. Scott, political scientist and anthropologist, suggests that certain forms of elective nonliteracy, when practiced collectively, can function as a “positive medium of cultural life as opposed to a deficiency.”<sup>3</sup> He asserts that historically, marginalized peoples retreated from farming and written language in order to flee emerging nation-states. He focuses on Zomia, the name for a series of alpine terrains stretching across southeast Asia defined by “runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.”<sup>4</sup> Considered alongside the productive nonliteracy of Zomia, the abolition of select typefaces is an action for those who choose to remain within the nation-state.

Gill's typefaces are so habitual and spare as to make them seem invisible; they sheath the moral decay of the maker and the corruption of the user. MS Joanna Nova, operating as an official font, provides a stylized interface with the US Department of Homeland Security—an entity that also mishandles human bodies, but on a institutional scale. Some instructional materials on design urge government officials to select a typeface that “achieves a level of harmony and *legibility* in print.”<sup>5</sup> “Legibility” here pertains only to the kerning, layout, or thickness of the font—obviously it does not include making legible the fact that institutional bodies hold up and hole up specific human bodies. The web page is bright and simple, its whiteness internally lit by a digital sun; it suggests that the government’s hold on detainees is light, temporary, unremarkable. Additionally, some web visitors will have internalized the commercial history of the typeface—including the cover of the 1965 Penguin Modern Classics edition of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New*

*World*.<sup>6</sup> They might experientially slide between categories: reader and witness, citizen and suspect. This is the design surface of US fascism.

See dhs.gov. Nested within the site is the home page of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), responsible for the forced deportation of undocumented immigrants. When I logged on to the ICE home page in October 2017, a phrase in MS Joanna Nova floated above each image in the “Photos” section.

ENFORCEMENT AND REMOVAL—when in MS Joanna Nova — is easily received by the user’s eye. It is emblazoned above an image of an alleged child rapist, flanked by ICE officers, on a set of airstairs. Since this appears on a web page, the eye consolidates the inflammatory title and caption and the dull photograph into a unified image; this amalgam contains data without analysis, and competing traumas (rape and deportation) severed from context. The inherent banality of institutional websites paired with the evident boredom of the ICE cameraman eliminates the uncanny as a category of experience for this image. By March 2018, I don’t remember the shapes of the heads of the people in the image or the color of their clothing, so much as the casualness of the shot: a composition that could not locate its register (photojournalism or archival document or...).

Above the next image: ENFORCEMENT AND REMOVAL. In bright sunlight, a figure, bald and with glasses, enters a white van; he is charged with the sex trafficking of minors. Again, MS Joanna Nova. Under the snapshot, the caption reads: “Phoenix, Arizona,” in MS Joanna Nova. The sophisticated typeface is in tension with the artlessness of the composition. This half-hearted attention to style while documenting state power is its own style. Let’s dub it “American Bro,” because American violence, formal and informal, has often aimed to appear casual, effortless, masculine, normal, naturalized. I’m supposed to forget that power could ever be any other way.

Each user of the DHS website—grade-school teachers, businesswomen, DREAMers, cyberattack victims, job seekers, and me—is anonymous to one another. But together we users use in MS Joanna Nova; I use it to determine how the intentions of the state are visualized. In the ICE section, I note thick hands and holsters acting out narratives of white chivalry<sup>7</sup> upon a collateral body of characters specified as rapists and pimps. A border economy based on captives and captors is dependent on feminine victims, actual or conjured. The feminine victim as political commodity also articulates itself in other contemporary ways, oblique and direct, ranging from the reproduction and circulation of images of physically-wasted children as a fundraising tool, to more recent instrumentalizations of conflict-related sexual violence to justify invasions.<sup>8</sup>

For centuries, novelists and artists have recycled images of the female victim. See *Beatrice* (1866), for example, by Julia Margaret Cameron. For this photograph, Cameron worked with a thirteen-year-old model, May Prinsep. May has been instructed to channel sixteenth-century Beatrice Cenci, in the period after Beatrice’s rape at the hands of her father but before her beheading as ordered by the court. Beatrice and her brothers were executed for hiring assassins to kill their father in Florence, Italy. The sculptor Harriet Hosmer offered her own portrayal of Cenci in 1857. Cameron and Hosmer were attracted to the task of depicting a female victim who suffers twice over: once in the privacy of the home, and once at the hands of the state. Perhaps Hosmer—who, as a lesbian, was subject to a certain kind of erasure by the state—was hoping her prone marble Beatrice was covertly instructing: “You too can kill the father.”

Joanna Gill, the font’s muse, unofficially operates as ICE’s muse—an unmolested Anglo daughter. The use of a font created by Eric Gill, when Gill was never punished for his own crimes, feels ironic. Do my fella users *feel* that too? Feelings about Petra Gill, molested daughter ... Indeterminate feelings about *Petra’s Jersey* (1922) by Eric Gill, a light sketch of a “clothed partial torso and arm.” The image floats on the surface of the viewer’s mind. It’s a relief not to see the face or skin of Petra, the middle daughter, just the slump of fabric. Human escaped. It is my fantasy that Petra unfurls the jersey like the Invisible Man’s bandages and vanishes into the air, reaching the edge of the exosphere, four hundred miles above the earth’s crust. Spare but prurient wood engravings by Gill—titled *Girl in Bath I* (1922), *Girl in Bath II* (1923), and *Hair Combing* (1922)—do not name teenage Petra as their subject. The totality of Gill’s personal papers were not acquired by UCLA until the 1950s. It is only decades later that the details of Gill’s abuses, as recorded in his archived diaries, are published in mainstream biographies. Petra’s image is only then transformed from the artist’s daughter to an actual victim of the artist. My daydream that Petra gets free persists, her perp stranded on the continental crust.

Be it rape victim, victimized worker, raped worker, or worker raped while traversing the desert towards work, I wish to dodge the narrative orbit that places assault, née human sacrifice, as the whole of representation and the totality of a person’s end. Likewise, the bodies held by the Department of Homeland Security often get fed into a sentimental framework (a liberal reflex) that generates such volumes of emotion that emotion becomes the end experience of the witness as opposed to sparking actual structural change. The MS Joanna Nova typeface circuitously participates in the detention of force-fed bodies,<sup>9</sup> restrained bodies in our private prisons, because it organizes the forward-facing end of the entity and thus conceals assault; it is designed to communicate that the organization is clean and “free of fancy business” (Gill). Do



you suspect that I'm advocating for the DHS to replace MS Joanna Nova with MS Antiqua, a font celebrated by the Nazi Party? That I'm urging the adaptation of a font that provides a truer reflection of the DHS's aims and feelings? I'm not. I only aim to expose unwitting alliances ... and to dissolve phallic technique. Duh.

Grid Example 11" x 17" — Newsletter Interior Spread

Example of an 11" x 17" newsletter interior spread using 4- and 1-column grids.



The Department of Homeland Security Style Guide, downloaded November, 2017.

Is there a spell that can do that? What font is it in?

If I restricted myself to other typefaces roughly coeval with Gill's, I would choose Doves Press font. Although Gill's typefaces and Doves Press both emerged from the Arts and Crafts Movement, the social origins and physical end of Doves Press font differ from Gill's typefaces. While Doves Press was financed by a militant suffragette, Anne Cobden-Sanderson, Gill's best-remembered public engagement with women's suffrage was his 1910 sculpture *Votes For Women, I Don't Think*, purchased by economist John Maynard Keynes. Doves Press font predates Gill's typography (1926) by twenty-seven years. But by 1919, the entirety of Doves Press font was sunk. In his diary, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, the husband of Anne, records that the alphabet was "bequeathed to the sea." T. J. wrapped the punches and matrices in paper parcels and over 105 visits threw the typeface over the Hammersmith, a suspension bridge spanning the Thames. One hundred fifty-one of its metal sorts were recovered from by the Port of London Authority's diving team in November 2014. Some were moved along by the current and dredging; others were possibly destroyed in two IRA bombings of the bridge. It is not just T. J. Cobden-Sanderson's suturing of his wife's name to his own or the feminist bankrolling of the initial endeavor that makes Doves Press font the right typeface for a radical spell; it is that T. J.'s gesture was a furious and poetic hex on his former business partner,

Emery Walker. What is a hex? The witches of the Susan B. Anthony coven once wrote that they were not circling in order to bake cupcakes. Their work was to curse. To not lament sexual assault but to extinguish its henchman's momentum, because they rape so frequently and viciously. With what was this font imbued by being drowned, bombed, dredged, and resurrected? Maybe it can be repurposed to refuse abusive literacy, or to destroy it in kind.

But a typeface with a history of wizardly erasure is not casually purchased at Michaels craft emporium. Online, I make contact with a stencil service, which says I can special order Doves Press font at a price. Also online, former colleagues write to inquire about sexual harassment in one of the many art schools I have taught at; female students are confiding: male faculty members have made sexual overtures. The students decline to file reports. Surfing, I notice that a nontraditional undergraduate that I reported for sexually harassing students is now an adjunct professor at the same school. A secretly shared MS spreadsheet lists perpetrators working in the art field. I mentally note who has been listed and who has not. Three days later, the file disappears. Another Gchat window opens up; a friend talks about the article she is writing on sexual predators in the art world. Offline, my partner and I coolly discuss the named perpetrators while doing chores. Run faucet. "Dickie's name was on it." Wipe counter. "Not surprised." Offline, outside of my home, is an abandoned black BMW. It isn't mine. It belongs to a former resident of the building we live in. He, a pediatrician, is now in prison for possessing the largest stash of child pornography the cops have ever uncovered in the area. When we walk by the Beamer, my kid occasionally asks, "Why it is that car here?" "Oh, it's a junker," I say. "It's for parts." Next, I quip to the leaf blowers, who may also be in the know: "Can you please bury that in leaves?"

Tonight, I run the mouse over the Wi-Fi icon.

Router names pop up, including the pedophile's router. I read his surname in MS Helvetica, and MS Helvetica transmogrifies—a default font for child molesters.

Helvetica, initially Neue Haas Grotesk, was designed by Swiss typographer Max Miedinger in 1957. Miedinger explains: "We designers are sellers of subliminal details that the average viewer does not see, but they do feel."

Dear Viewer, I felt DaddyCock Sans; now we feel Helvetica. The local pedophile is scheduled to be released this year. He will come to fetch his mail, his Beamer, his router.

Recall again that Miedinger said: "We designers are sellers of subliminal details that the average viewer does not see, but they do feel. The message is somehow warmer, more memorable."



Wi-Fi Router first accessed 09/01/2016, 12:12 p.m. Wi-Fi Router list last accessed 01/03/2018, 6:07 p.m.

I scroll past the pedophile's router name in Helvetica. It is memorable, but not warmer. I feel it. My self as a cultural isolate ... as if the violence of the state and the violent sentimentality of capitalism both fall away from me and the ghost-router. This is not possible. My feelings have produced a political bio-fiction: a pedophile as autotroph, producing his own nutrients, operating within a closed system where he climaxes only to photographs of his child self.

01/05/2018, p.m.: After the dog shits and I bag it, I photograph the pedophile's abandoned Beamer in our shared driveway because the snow plows have further buried it. The snow lips the window. The car cannot back out. I'm afraid the neighbors are watching me photograph the disappearing car. As a cover, I snap a picture of the abandoned basketball hoop ... the clear blue sky ... when to stop? ... a beheaded lantern with a duct-taped nub ... the copper beech with a sawn-off limb.

To daydream a law based on pedophiles as autotrophs.

(I realize I'm dreaming of punishment.)

A disassembled homeland security. A rudderless rapist. A self-cannibalized pedophile. A dead fascist?

To sleepwalk around the riot?

White supremacists run free here. The Southern Poverty Law Center lists 724 US hate groups with some ideological stake in white supremacy. Some casual protesters fear that a physical confrontation with white supremacists will result in their own death. All summer there was white hand-wringing: Could a white one who chooses personal safety over resistance still regard itself as a moral being? *Our whelp!!!* was many Family Unit's public justification, their tender excuse. Was it also mine? There seemed to be scant middle class identification with the Bread and Roses Strike (1912) and the ways in which strikers' children were mobilized. There was little mainstream knowledge of the Battle of Hayes Pond (1958), where members of the indigenous Lumbee tribe—including fathers, uncles, and cousins—disrupted a Klu Klux Klan rally. Outnumbering the Klan, the Lumbee cut off the Klan's light source, absconded with their sound system, and stomped on their abandoned banners while the Klan fled. The Lumbee provide an alternative family model. In these times, can middle-class family reunions be organized as marches against white supremacy?

By winter, the energy of resistance seemed to be redirected. Neo-Nazis swapped for Hollywood sexual predators and ivory-tower sexual predators and politician sexual predators. It is plausible that some pursue and pursued (longstanding) sexual predators in the workplace,

at this juncture, because they have equated the pursuit of white supremacists with their own personal unrecoverable harm. The piggie Alabaman with a stiff "pinkie" (or his Hollywood counterpart or his NYC cosmopolitan brethren) are not perceived as murderous, despite public policies that prove otherwise (see their votes on policing, health, foreign policy).

It is possible that the majority of white people claiming to be anti-racist will never physically confront white supremacy because they can only imagine defeat. Perhaps some of their reluctance stems from a failure to imagine victory; they have little sense of what an anti-racist land feels like.

Towards *a sort of sanit y*, I look backward online.<sup>10</sup> I'm seeking an image to reassure me that fascism ends. The image: a dead fascist woman dangles from a meat hook. Her feet are bare and she is upside down. Attached to her corpse is a placard with her name. Ghoulishly, I ask: What font? Bathetically, I ask: Is this what the end of an ideology looks like? But this public desecration didn't stop the form; the dismembered parts of this far-right belief system have reassembled. When our current iteration of fascism goes dormant again, will the beginning of its hibernation include its governing bodies being strung up ... on a slowed internet? I am asking if a gory documentation of the political cycle will load sluggishly. To my own grotesque debasement *and* relief.

I nightdream, awake in the dark, of people dismantling a fascist state, couple by couple, decoupled, bone by bone, my bone. But my problem is compiling a workable to-do list of actions that will allow me to cross over the shape of the family unit. Guy Hocquenghem refers to this unit as "The Couple," which includes both heterosexual and homosexual couples; as a form, The Couple has been produced by a millenium of patriarchy and centuries of capitalism. In my nightdream, there are millions of households that go beyond The Couple, that enfold not only mommies, dormies, unckies, but also junkies, roomies, furies, hubbies ... generating and sustaining a structure suspended between where we shelter and where we love and rage with strangers. We sleep walkers are also sleep talkers—incoherence is our cover and our pleasure. This nocturnal orality happens in lieu of the waking texts recorded by security forces, We, woozily, operate outside of a passion for hierarchy; exterior reality as it exists today buckles under the flow of beings that cannot meet its passions.

Then I nightmare that you and I are belated, the Capitolocene being the end of our human time.

X

**Tam Donner** is an American artist and writer.

1

The Gill papers are housed at UCLA's Clark Library, thousands of miles away from England, where Gill, as a cultural product, means so much more. Why the distance?

2

In November 2017, an EA-18G Growler jet, part of Electronic Attack Squadron 130, rendered a phallus in the air in north-central Washington State, on the western edge of the Colville Indian Reservation. The area lies under the expansive Okanogan Military Operating Area (MOA). See <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2017/11/17/navy-grounds-two-aviators-behind-penis-skydrawing/> and <http://www.krem.com/mobile/article/news/local/okanogan-county/graphic-navy-admits-to-being-involved-in-obscene-sky-drawings-spotted-in-okanogan-co/293-492496113>. In September 2017, a Royal Air Force pilot drew a thirty-five-mile-long penis over Lincolnshire. See <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/news/4445994/raf-pilot-draws-penis-lincolnshire-raf-comringsby/>. In November 2014, the Royal Air Force denied that a fighter's contrails floating over Moray, Scotland were an intentional skydrawing of a penis, claiming: "People sometimes look into the sky and see all sorts of things." See <http://metro.co.uk/2014/11/08/rude-arrows-raf-pilot-denies-leaving-giant-penis-vapour-trail-in-sky-4940461/?ito=cbshare>.

3

James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009), 221.

4

Ibid., ix.

5

Tom F. Richardson, *Public Relations in Local Government* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1988). Emphasis added.

6

The cover of this edition employs Joanna Nova font. See <https://fontsinuse.com/uses/3462/brave-new-world-1965-penguin-edition>.

7

For recent scholarship on "white chivalry," see Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Harvard University Press, 2009). For the "purity movement," the white slave campaign of 1906,

and the white "southern rape complex," see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (Columbia University Press, 1993). In the preface, Hall writes: "The 'false chivalry' of lynching cast (white) women as Christ-like symbols of racial purity and regional identity and translated every sign of black self-assertion into a metaphor for rape" (xxi).

8

"The process of securitization produces fetishization in relation to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence." See Sara Meger, *Rape Loot Pillage: The Political Economy of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 20.

9

In April 2014, the ACLU of Washington State sued ICE for putting hunger strikers in solitary confinement at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington. Last year, a federal court authorized officials at the Stewart Detention Center, run by private prison company Corrections Corporation of America/CoreCivic, to restrain and force-feed a hunger-striking immigration detainee. According to reports, the hunger striker is Vitaly Novikov, a refugee from the former Soviet Union who is protesting ICE's plans to deport him to the Ukraine. See <https://www.aclu.org/news/aclu-sues-expose-treatment-hunger-strikers-ice-detention>.

10

To April 29, 1945, Piazzale Loreto, Milan.

*A Brief History*

An image familiar to anyone in the twentieth century: the ear-to-ear grin of a celebrity, white teeth gleaming, providing a raving endorsement for a product. The image recalls a time when power was centralized and authority laid claim to authenticity—a time when opinion was taken as fact if delivered from the top down. Another image from this era: “real people, not actors” testifying to the incredible benefits a product or service has had on their lives. This kind of customer endorsement aimed to reach a potential buyer on their own terms. While the celebrity-image is aspirational, the customer-image builds confidence and trust. Both thrived and succeeded when television and print advertisements were the dominant form of marketing. Today, while stars still lounge in their Calvins on city billboards, an oft-cited maxim in marketing departments is that consumers seek authenticity—albeit crafted, drafted, and filtered by social-media platforms. Consumers trust the recommendation of a friend over a celebrity, and they increasingly consider “influencers” their friends. Which they are, if by being friends we mean the connective monads from which contemporary social media is assembled, piece by aspirational piece.

Dena Yago

# Content Industrial Complex

Many influencers fall under the category of “creators”—paraprofessional creatives who post highly personal, confessional content of the kind that moves easily from “I’m feeling sad about my cat’s herpes,” to “I love this CBD water, I can’t help it,” to “#metoo.” Social-media celebrity is always already pitched somewhere between the inaccessible and the local; it exists in some virtual elsewhere that could stand in for anyone’s hometown or living room. Importantly, many of these videos are recorded within domestic spaces. They also land on a spectrum between specificity and generality, with their main appeal being the increasingly particular moments that make them “so relatable.” This relatability resonates particularly with kids and teens who annually convene by the tens of thousands at conventions such as VidCon to meet their friends and idols, shrieking in droves across the Anaheim Convention Center, whipping innocent bystanders with their plush tails and the tassels of their knitted animal hats, knocking down the occasional Minion mascot—all to capture a selfie with someone named FaZe Rug.

Two events in 2017 shifted the course of this embryonic industry. Influencer marketing took a hit with the Fyre Festival, a weekend of music and partying in the Bahamas organized with the help of rapper Ja Rule, which ended with attendees paying between \$5,000 and \$250,000 to eat Kraft Singles on a slice of Wonder Bread in FEMA-style emergency relief tents. Then, the YouTube vlogger and Team 10 member Logan Paul took a misguided trip to Aokigahara, also known as Japan’s Suicide Forest, eventually encountering a dead body, laughing it off, and posting a video of the excursion for all of his fifteen million



A visitor waits outside VidCon, an annual multi-genre online video conference, held in the Anaheim Convention Center, Southern California.

subscribers to see. In response, there has been an industry-wide turn from macro influencers, who have millions of followers and command high fees, to lower-liability micro influencers—especially from the cultural sphere—who have fewer followers but offer higher-quality engagement and content. This tactic aims to expand a brand's audience by relying on an influencer's appeal to authenticity and legitimacy within a particular community—be it fourteen-year-olds, or artists. In the past, art and the artist's identity were largely incongruous with such relatability; but then the contemporary precariat emerged, whose lives and livelihoods are oh-so-relatable to those of "the artist."

Never entirely innocent, the role of the artist in these negotiations has shifted radically towards complicity. Producing content in the form of artworks and social-media posts, the cultural influencer functions as a highly valued asset for brands. As brands increasingly turn towards the cultural sphere and seek out the validation and collaboration of artists, it is critical to gain an understanding of the way that our artwork and action on social media is being perceived on the other side of the feed. We must recognize how our work—be it the photos

we post, the artwork we create that includes the names and images of brands in the work itself, and the network of people, places, and things that are revealed through our social activity—is quantified and instrumentalized. It is only then that we can create alternative models that pay for our labor, content, and engagement, or identify strategies and tactics of resistance.

When an influencer endorses a brand or product, there is often a promised or assumed quantifiable return-on-investment for the brand in the form of increased sales, engagement, and a share of the conversation on social media. There are also more nebulous, unquantifiable metrics, such as brand awareness and cultural relevance. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, artists as influencers—and more generally, artists as users—add value both to brands and to the platforms themselves.

Still largely unregulated, the content produced by these artist-influencers can take many forms—from a single image or tweet to highly produced testimonial videos or even feature-length films and documentaries. "Branded content" is designed to resemble the distinctive editorial



voice native to the publication or platform on which it appears. According to the Federal Trade Commission, branded content should always come with a disclaimer identifying it as an “advertisement,” “ad,” “promoted,” “sponsored,” “sponsored by [brand],” “presented by [brand],” “featured partner,” “in partnership with [brand],” or “suggested post.” Of course, things fall through the cracks. Branded content merges the advertisement with the content itself: that’s the point. The brand or product is secondary to the content, though it accrues cultural capital by building associations between product and brand, brand and cultural production.

While twentieth-century mass-cultural celebrity signaled fame, beauty, and success, and social-media stars signify trust and authenticity, endorsements from artists imply that the consumption and use of a product or service is integral to the “secret sauce” of creative inspiration and production. This is not new; there have been commercials featuring Joseph Beuys hawking Japanese whiskey, Marcel Broodthaers hawking Van Laack shirts, and Helen Frankenthaler hawking Rolex watches—no doubt the history of the relationship between artists and luxury-goods advertising warrants its own essay. Still, the traditional separation of advertising and content at least made for a relatively clearly defined exchange: money for the labor of endorsement, such as it is. To state what is already known: the advent and proliferation of social media has irreparably transformed these modes of exchange, resulting in an epidemic of unpaid digital labor. Today we are all Krusty the Clown after his TV show is cancelled: standing by the highway with a sign reading “WILL DROP PANTS FOR FOOD,” only to learn that someone else is already dropping their pants for free.

### *UGC Hegemony*

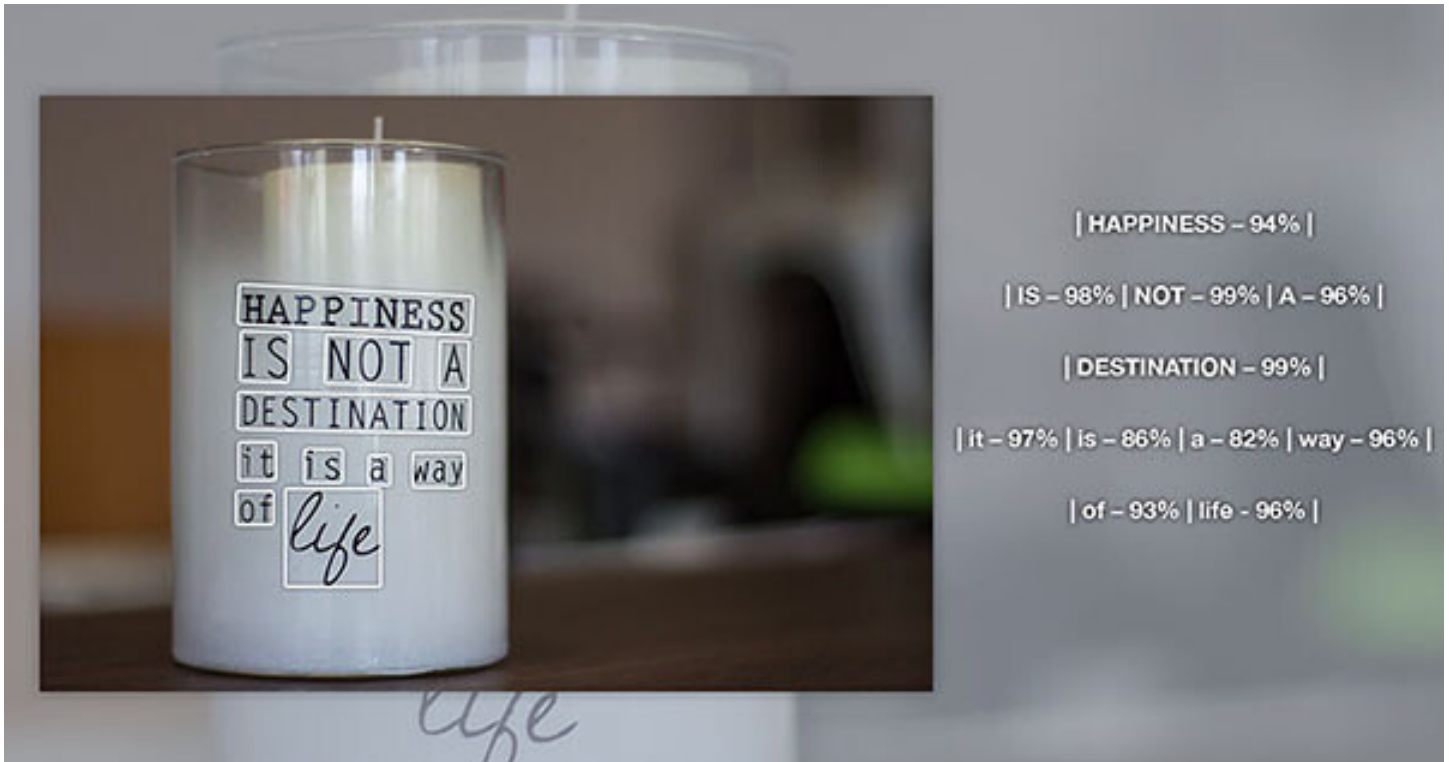
The primary way in which users provide unpaid labor is through the production of “user-generated content,” or UGC. This blanket term refers to images or videos that are posted by users and that feature a product or brand, or that are created at a specific location or event. While UGC is produced en masse and at will, a company’s marketing plan may include a UGC campaign that broadcasts a call to action, or “CTA,” designed to provoke an immediate response. In the realm of social media, this response is often the creation of more content—the posting of selfies, photos, and videos. Content then begets content, the snake of social media eating its own tail. Brands will often include UGC in their own advertisements, reposting content from users without permission or compensation. Brands will also look to the volume of UGC produced as a metric for their own success—in which case your UGC is directly generating value for the brand while you walk away empty handed, save for some immaterial likes. Often UGC is aggregated via a dedicated hashtag, though it can also be pulled from geolocational check-ins. UGC can also be gathered by social listening tools like NetBase, which

uses natural-language processing; such tools trawl for posts that @-mention a brand or product, or that include the name of a brand or product without the use of an indexable mention or hashtag. Even untagged content can be indexed by deep-learning image-recognition tools like Clarifai, Amazon’s Rekognition, and IBM Watson’s Visual Recognition. All of these use machine learning and neural networks to recognize objects and images within images.

As methods for content aggregation, these tools have many uses beyond brand analytics, such as police and military surveillance and facial recognition. The algorithms that drive these tools are only as useful as the data sets they comb through to establish associations and pathways—data which is often supplied willingly by social-media users in the form of posted content. These photos and videos constitute a growing body of content housed in the cloud, which comprises centralized server networks in the American prairies of Ohio, Virginia, and Oregon, as well as in Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Frankfurt, Ireland, and elsewhere. The assumption that you can avoid playing into the hands of corporations by posting a photo but not using a hashtag, or using a hashtag improperly as an attempt to flood the signals with noise à la 1990s culture jamming, is baseless. Any image and any text is indexable, with or without attached language and tags, and can and will be decontextualized to serve another master. The creation of UGC and the varied levels of user engagement rely on just that—the user, in other words, a person who has agency to choose whether or not to engage. Users have the capacity to question the institutions asking for their uploads, as surely as they can question their own predilection to produce and post content in the first place. As a term, “user” resonates unambiguously with the language of addiction. Users include those who shudder at any accusation of complicity, as well as those who would trade anything for a shot at complicity with something larger than themselves.

### *Exhibition as Content Farm*

Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrored Room—The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles currently has over forty-four thousand hashtagged posts on Instagram under the tag #infinityroom. A more granular tag, #infinitymirroredroom, has over thirteen thousand posts. Kusama’s installation dominates even the general #mirrorroom tag, in spite of the noise emanating from the unrelated documentation of everyday mirrored rooms around the world. Beyond the work-specific hashtags, a deeper dig would surely reveal countless other posts bearing the location tag of the Broad Museum, others that include Kusama’s name, and others without tags at all. Kusama’s installation exemplifies a widespread shift in art towards the exhibition as content farm. Along these lines, successful art is whatever begets the most UGC. Beyond mere likes and engagement,



exhibitions encourage gallery- and museumgoers to produce their own unique content, which is then posted to social media. Pipilotti Rist's "Pixel Forest" exhibition at the New Museum in 2016, or Anne Imhof's *Faust* installation at the 2017 Venice Biennale—this art spams our feeds, as if its ability to demand attention not only within the white cube but outside it proves its very status as art. Escaping once and for all their designated playpen within Bourdieu's restricted field of cultural production—where artists produce culture for other professional culture-producers, in contrast to the nonrestricted field of mass culture—these artists seek to compete with and triumph over cat memes, creating viable content for social media at large.

And why not? Today, everyone is a culture-producer, producing culture for every other culture-producer. This breakdown in the cultural division of labor is reflected in the emphasis not on images of artworks themselves, but on images (especially selfies) of *people posing in front of* artworks, proving both the authenticity and presence of the photographed person—think of artworks-as-backdrops such as Random International's *Rain Room* (2012), or anything at all by James Turrell. People pose beneath Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* (2012) at LACMA as if they're bearing its weight, Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa style. They lock eyes with their infinitely repeating selves in Kusama's *Infinity Room*. These tactics have even made their way onto billboards, as with Calvin Klein's fall 2017 campaign featuring models standing in front of large-scale works by Sterling Ruby and Richard Prince.<sup>1</sup> On dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr, photos of people posing against art backdrops

form their own subgenre. We can thus thank artists for generating thousands of likes for both institutions and individuals, as well as for getting people laid. But why are large-scale works usually used as backdrops rather than smaller-scale paintings or sculptures by the same artists? Perhaps it's because the large works are spectacular, providing cultural capital and excellent lighting, while wholly removing the subject from any worldly context. One could say that a similar effect is provided by the iPhone's portrait mode, which blocks out any reference to the world.

The transformation of artworks and installations into attractions has increased ticket sales for art institutions, while democratizing access to a certain type of spectacular, installation-based art. The Broad in Los Angeles epitomizes the exhibition as content farm. But while The Broad may democratize access to the private collection of a major real-estate developer, it has arguably de-democratized the surrounding neighborhood by accelerating gentrification. Additionally, corporate and luxury brands have started to open their own "museums" in an effort to counter the decline of brick-and-mortar retail sales; these lavish, often temporary spaces are dedicated more to experiential marketing than moving product. Borrowing from the language of art and curatorial practice, places like the Museum of Broken Relationships (in Zagreb and Los Angeles), 29Rooms (in Brooklyn), and Color Factory (in San Francisco) help brands establish themselves as creatively minded, while appealing to a cultural class that exists at the intersection of marketing, design, and social media. Most of these "museums" charge Whitney-level admission fees and tout month-long





Deidre Behar takes a selfie in a pool of sprinkles at the Museum of Ice Cream, a pop-up art installation in Los Angeles. Photo: Glenn Koenig / Los Angeles Times

wait lists. All leverage the democratization of art and access afforded by social media, while using words like “exhibition,” “pop-up,” and “experience” interchangeably to describe themselves. Often housed in new real-estate developments or old industrial spaces, these places exist alongside more traditional, less transient art spaces at the frontlines of gentrification. What better way to promote a future co-working space than to temporarily fill it with curated art and eager 1099ers posting selfies taken in high-ceilinged rooms painted in garish pastels? Emulating the social-media strategies of “real” museums, places like Color Factory provide large-scale, dream-like scenery that begs to be used as the backdrop for selfies and Instagram posts. In this way, these pop-up, limited-time-only spaces extend their lifespan through our social feeds.

#### *Diegetic Advertising*

As large-scale, spectacular artworks become backdrops for social-media content production, other contemporary artworks become the physical platforms for brands and

thus a form of diegetic advertising. Drawing from the legacy of pop art, appropriation, and situationist *détournement*, among other art historical approaches to consumerist and capitalist critique, artists include the logo or name of a brand in the work itself. This is done as an act of criticism, irony, or post-ironic sincerity, this last of which is often compounded with a sense of indignation along the lines of “So what if I love Doritos and Mountain Dew?” This embrace of mass-produced brands also serves to critique the implicit or explicit classism and racism of those who snobbishly reject them. As with Anne Imhof’s use of Pepsi, Marlboro cigarettes, Marshall guitar amps, and Gillette shaving gel in her performance *Angst II* (2016), brands and products are used as shorthand for an attitude or identity that the artist aims to embody or critique. This is an efficient metonymic approach in which the brand or product, with its coherent narrative and identity, bears a lot of the conceptual load for an artist communicating a position to their audience. *Angst II*, a three-part operatic marriage of text, music, dance, performance, technology, and bodies, hinges on the tension between disparate elements coalescing into pure atmosphere and atomizing into irreconcilable fragments. Performers move



Image from "Introducing the Calvin Klein Campaign: American Classics" In this advertisement is accompanied by the following caption: "Ricard Prince, I Changed My Name, 1988. Copyright: Richard Prince Acrylic and screenprint on canvas (142.5cm x 198.7cm) Calvin Klein: Classic Demin Shirt (Calvin Klein Jeans Est. 1978) Photographed at Rubell Family Collection, Miami

throughout the piece with blank stares, better to serve as empty canvases for the audience's own projections, or to be filled in with the narrative of the surrounding products and objects: an artist-slash-Balenciaga model, a drone, cans of Pepsi, a razor, cigarettes.

Once an image of such a work is posted to social media and flattened into the content terrain, the artist must acknowledge that their position will be rendered illegible. When seen on the other side of the feed, viewers may not account for the nuances of artistic critique present in a work that includes FedEx boxes, SmartWater, or any other brand name or product as a shorthand for capitalist critique. The work is viewed by social media managers and strategists on the other side of the feed as an homage to the brand, or as genuine "brand love." If the brand reaches out to the artist to encourage further engagement, and the artist refuses, the brand will incorporate the artist's approach in a future campaign anyway. The artist might bring an intellectual property suit against the brand, and might win, but the practice will continue unless there is a structural overhaul of intellectual property law that favors artists over corporate interests. While this may not be new, the onus is on artists to understand how their critique can easily be decontextualized and repurposed towards pro-corporate

ends. Realizing this is made even more urgent by the speed at which images circulate and are recuperated today.

Post-ironic sincerity and the celebration of brands can also be found in another form of unpaid creative labor: fan fiction. Increasingly, the term "fan fiction" is being adopted by artists, designers, and other creatives as an alternative to appropriation. Emerging from the passionate fan cultures surrounding media franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, fan fiction allows audiences to use the brand and all of its elements as creative material. It also allows for alternative story outcomes and the challenging of cultural narratives that have historically erased female, minority, POC, and LGBTQI voices. In this sense, fan fiction functions as a participatory tactic for community building and structural change.

The narrative around artistic integrity and selling out has dissolved as young artists negotiate crippling student debt, an art market that favors established work, and the defunding of public cultural institutions. Meanwhile, on social media we are increasingly milked for unpaid time, labor, and cultural capital in exchange for an invitation, an open bar, and exposure. My feed is increasingly filled with posts linking to artists' Venmo addresses or crowdfunding



pages on Patreon and GoFundMe. Unsurprisingly, these artists are primarily female, trans, queer, and/or POC. They are also often artists working primarily in social media through memes, photography, video, and performance. The requests are less about the completion of a specific project than about funding their basic life expenses, and more importantly, their time. This funding strategy keeps an artist independent from corporate or institutional support, but relies on the generosity of a social network that may also be working with similarly limited resources.

When it is a brand instead of peers funding an artist, there are codified ways in which the brand engages with the artist, which go beyond a traditional exchange of cash for content. In these exchanges, the brand takes on one of the following roles: brand as lifestyle bait, which involves a mutual exchange of aspiration between artist and brand; brand as platform, where the brand provides the artist access to a much larger audience; and brand as rainmaker, in which the brand sponsors or commissions works of a scale and production budget that the artist otherwise couldn't access. This last model luckily still exists in the form of grants such as the Tiffany Foundation or Pollock Krasner grants, although an alternative for these funds is increasingly provided by brands looking to invest in cultural partnerships.

We've all seen brand-as-lifestyle-bait ads before: a curator driving a luxury car along a California hillside (Jens Hoffmann for Lexus #NotSurprised); an artist couple featured in a branded editorial platform for an upscale Scandinavian design-focused subsidiary of H&M. You've shouted at your screen: "*What the actual fuck?*" You've asked yourself how much they had to get paid to do that. Or were they just *that vain*? You've asked yourself who set up the deal. Did they need the cash? Did they get paid in oversized sweaters and button-down shirts? A free Lexus? What were the terms of the agreement? Are they even on Instagram? These "advertorials"—a portmanteau of "advertising" and "editorial"—invite artists to be featured in a brand's editorial content, whether a video, blog, independent magazine, etc. These advertorials further the notion that it is the brand that facilitates creative production—Lexus as an essential ingredient of the artistic secret sauce.

An advanced version of the lifestyle advertorial is what could be called "snout-to-tail marketing," wherein a specialized agency serves up a creative influencer who will both act as spokesperson in an advertisement, and also contribute artistically to the brand's editorial platform. This contribution could take the form of creating a textile design for a home goods brand, for example. This marketing model can be seen in the activities of agencies such as the female-centered talent agency Pool Represents, or Imprint Projects.

The "brand as platform" marketing tactic relies on the artist's belief in and willingness to be identified with the

brand. In the wake of the "We Are Not Surprised" campaign,<sup>2</sup> Gucci recently produced, in partnership with Artsy, a video series on gender inequality in the arts entitled *Artists for Gender Equality*. The videos feature three generations of artists divided into sections past, present, and future: Lynn Hershman Leeson and Barbara Kruger, Miranda July and Marilyn Minter, and Petra Collins and Narcissister respectively. The question here is less whether these respected artists are compromising their integrity, morality, or authenticity in exchange for cash or personal gain, and more whether they are selling out their cause in exchange for a platform and access to the audience that Artsy and Gucci can provide. This raises the question of why these two organizations, particularly Gucci, are invested in gender inequality in the arts and not, say, in the fashion industry. They insert themselves into an existing cultural conversation and gain favor with a target audience they want to reach—if not as customers, then as ambassadors who will share this content on social media.

What is an artist to do? With an understanding of how our content, identities, and influence are valuable to and instrumentalized by brands and marketers, we can find space for resistance and refusal, or we can actively engage with existing models in an effort to ameliorate them. While it might seem like the only options are to ramp up your posting with accelerationist fervor, or delete your account, there are tactics to be learned from internet trolls, the alt-right, and institutional critique that can open space for effective critique and resistance. These tactics can include "shitposting," the posting of unrelated material that ultimately derails conversations on forums and threads. Or you can make institutional critique in the age of social media more than a court jester by revealing the inner functioning of institutions and broadcasting this to broader audiences, rather than to an audience of those already perpetrating the crimes. Create subversive fan fiction that undermines the intention of a brand. If making work that includes a recognizable product or brand, realize that this work may be viewed and used as UGC. If the work is meant to function as critique, render the work unusable and directly offensive to the brand. Demand payment for digital labor instead of mere exposure, and threaten to sick your followers on brands that don't comply. Monitor brands to determine if they are illegally using UGC in ad campaigns, including reposts without attribution. Brands that use UGC in paid advertisements should compensate users. Redirect funds from corporate media outlets to community-led platforms. Redirect funds to get your friends paid. Know that whatever you ask for as an artist is probably lower than the "going rate." Currently, there are no industry standards dictating compensation for social-media content or influencer marketing. And while the amount you can ask for hinges on the size of your social-media following and broader cultural influence, you should be compensated for any content you post on behalf of a brand. While the brand can always go to someone else who doesn't ask for payment and is satisfied with exposure alone, the more that cultural



influencers outline specific terms of engagement, the closer we will get to a fair exchange. You can refuse to work with an agency that is clearly instrumentalizing your community, and you can self-represent instead. Realize that when you provide free digital labor—engaging and posting at will—you undermine anyone else trying to survive in that field. You can make the rules because there aren't any, and anyone who says otherwise is lying.

**X**

**Dena Yago** is an artist who was born in 1988. She has had numerous gallery and museum exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and at Bodega in New York.

1

See [https://cdn.businessoffashion.com/uploads/media/bof\\_album\\_image/0002/60/e7513ee22c293f687c14721e90790f8bb10c548e.jpeg](https://cdn.businessoffashion.com/uploads/media/bof_album_image/0002/60/e7513ee22c293f687c14721e90790f8bb10c548e.jpeg) .

2

See <http://www.not-surprised.org/home/> .

# Ben Davis

## Three Tendencies of Future Art

*The following predictions were from a 2027 report of the Future Arts Alliance, entitled “3 Mind-Melting Facts About the Future of Art.” They have proved a classic of art futurology in the intervening decades, despite all the dislocations caused by years of civil conflict and ecological displacement, largely because of their accurate assumptions about these larger motivating political and economic forces.*

*The document is reproduced here unaltered, its scattered inaccuracies, exaggerations, and now-archaic terminology left unchanged.*

By the mid-twenty-first century, we predict that it will become clear that what used to be called “visual art” has essentially split into three disparate but well-defined tendencies.

By this time, what media theorists and sociologists referred to as the “aestheticization of capitalism” is complete. Cultural life has largely migrated into various mediated and virtual platforms, all controlled by quasi-monopolistic corporations.

The market for new singular art objects craters as interior decorating trends favor the ultra-minimalism that best serves as a background for various forms of customizable augmented reality experiences.

Examples of old-fashioned 2-D and 3-D arts, created in artisanal traditions, are relegated to specialist historical research societies rather than public-facing institutions. “Art” in the Romantic sense of the expression of heroic individuality becomes anachronistic, an object of appreciation much the way ancient ruins or historical sites are appreciated today.

That is, such an artistic tradition is considered historically important, with the pathos of representing the life-form of a superseded age of culture—but without a connection to continuing vernacular forms of creative expression.

In the relentlessly presentist society, museums transform themselves. Art institutions mutate into purveyors of contemporary adult theme-park attractions (so-called “Big Fun Art”), integrated into an increasingly fluid and mobile world of “experience”-based leisure.

Practically, this means a sidelining of questions of authorship in favor of the demands of interactivity in the mid-twenty-first-century cultural sphere. It will matter little to the audience of a future kunsthalle *who* did something or the *personal* or *social symbolism* involved, outside of how it competes for their dollar as an attraction, and gratifies an appetite for in-person personalizable entertainment.

The latest feat of maximalist installation by an artist



Via hologram, the art critic Ben Davis reminisces about contemporary art. Video still from the exhibition "William Powhida: After the Contemporary" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Image courtesy: William Powhida.

becomes conceptually indistinguishable, in the eyes of the future cultural consumer, from a pop-up environment wholly sponsored by a corporation as an advertisement. Successful individual artists persist, in this period, but as the figureheads of event and experience empires, much the way individually named fashion designers persist today at the head of apparel conglomerates.

In essence, just as the nineteenth century advent of photography gradually displaced painting's basis as a privileged mode of representing the world, the twenty-first century gradually dissolves any connection of something distinctive called "art" to pleasurable leisure experience, in general.

This is Tendency A.

All other tendencies in what used to be called visual or contemporary art define themselves against Tendency A, since the latter represents the fully capitalist, profit-oriented cultural mainstream of a capitalist, profit-oriented world.

We predict, however, two additional tendencies, though both are self-defined by their minority status relative to Tendency A.

As spatial segregation becomes almost complete in the twenty-first-century nation, the wealthy wall themselves off in hyper-policed gated zones. The lavish entertainment spectacles of Big Fun Art may provide more than enough on the entertainment level for both the tiny ruling class and its proximate servant class. But they do not fulfill the classical art object's other remaining purpose: symbolizing, through its uniqueness, a ruling class's unique status atop the social pyramid of society.

The individual contemporary artist, therefore, lives on, but more in the mode of aesthetic lifestyle coaching and bespoke mythmaking. A small number of artists—very small indeed next to the industrialized armies employed in the intricate spectacles of Tendency A—assume a new place, woven into the private life of the upper echelon of a mainly self-isolated ruling class.

Having a unique personal artist becomes a service similar to having a personal trainer or chef.

Their meaning-making services function as a balm for lingering self-doubt about the fragmented form society has taken. The old-fashioned artisanal status-object even lives on, alongside various forms of meditation and mindfulness practice, as a curious hobby. In its secret preservation among the wealthy, art reminds the ultrarich



Tendency A of Future Arts Alliance's 2027 report: "Examples of old-fashioned 2-D and 3-D arts, created in artisanal traditions, are relegated to specialist historical research societies rather than public-facing institutions"

of their unique centeredness and humanity in the decentered and inhumane world that they have secured for themselves, and, through its shared codes provides the basis for status networks to cement a common ruling-class identity.

Exclusivity itself becomes the medium. Occasionally, images of this clandestine cultural network leak out, either unintentionally in an exposé of its excesses or intentionally as PR, flickering across the greater public consciousness. But it remains principally the symbolic property of an impenetrable leisure class. Secret rituals and private emblems, inaccessible to a broad public so as to reanimate the sense of personal destiny for the privileged—artists live on in this way.

This is Tendency B.

There remains, finally, the role of the artist beyond the walls of this new world's gilded citadels, in the blasted and blighted suburbs of the divided world, beset by civil war, social dysfunction, and environmental breakdown. The same cadre of artists who break one way, becoming jesters and color-for-hire to the private clubs and pop-up speakeasies of Tendency B, may also reject that world, and find their destiny in the restive outlands of the empire.

Early twenty-first-century cultural discourse had already prepared the way for this, with a vogue for various forms of "Politically Engaged Art" (PEA). However, with the wealthy in uncontested command of the levers of state power, the social basis of socially engaged art erodes. The titans of the future simply do not need to patronize, through direct or indirect funding, art that pretends to heal the divides of society—at least not outside of their heavily policed enclaves.



Tendency B of Future Arts Alliance's 2027 report: A film still from MOCA Gala 2011's promotional video which featured Marina Abramović as the guest artist. "Secret rituals and private emblems, inaccessible to a broad public so as to reanimate the sense of personal destiny for the privileged"

Thus, the last frontier for artists is what becomes ironically called "Politically Disengaged Art" (PDA)—"disengaged," that is, from the pretense of healing society's divides. Instead, art frankly acknowledges those divides. The professional artist has a role here, as the Cultural Officer of the various revolutionary organizations, organizing in the invisible underground of the forgotten hinterlands.

For those large portions of the population written off as disposable in this period, various forms of subculture surge up, as do various forms of messianic belief. Propaganda from the cities projects the power of the elite as fearsome and unassailable, while the glittering spectacles of cosmopolitan leisure entertainment linger as an ideal, albeit one inaccessible to masses reduced to subsistence, with no real disposable income.

Artists focus on the task of building the totems of oppositional culture that can draw people closer to their respective political factions, to provide the dissident cultural foci that symbolize actual social dissidence.

It is a culture of closely guarded passwords and underground concerts. A ghostly mirror of the private spectacles of privilege within Tendency B, the culture engineered by this cadre of artists defines a practice by nature militantly opposed to visibility, indivisible from the guerilla world that gave birth to it.

For a "mainstream" public, the signs of this art surge to the surface only at moments of insurgency, when the entire subterranean world of pageantry that has fused together blocs of would-be revolutionaries into a like-minded movement shoots to the surface, like lava.

Once the uprising is defeated, the heretofore secret art forms of PDA become available for co-option by the respective art worlds of middlebrow spectacle and private luxury art. These attempt to co-opt the trappings of scrappy underground art practices, mainly to give some





"the fully capitalist, profit-oriented cultural mainstream of a capitalist, profit-oriented world"

semblance of integral meaning to the arid order of a segregated milieu, incorporating the neutralized cultural forms of the exotically oppressed Outside.

Individual dissident art-makers, seen as more pliable than actual dissident political leaders, may become hot commodities in this period, targeted with lavish promises of amnesty and personal gain if they abandon their comrades. Some go down with their movements, brutally executed for sticking to the foundational principles of oppositional art; some cash in.

Culture can only reform once again in secret, in coalition with a fresh cadre of the oppressed, keeping the memory of the broken struggles for justice alive. Artists begin to invent anew, despite the unsparing spectacle of repression.

This is Tendency C.



Tendency C of Future Arts Alliance's 2027 report: stands by the Gramsci Monument "Early twenty-first-century cultural discourse had already prepared the way for this, with a vogue for various forms of "Politically Engaged Art"



"The latest feat of maximalist installation by an artist becomes conceptually indistinguishable, in the eyes of the future cultural consumer, from a pop-up environment wholly sponsored by a corporation as an advertisement"



"A small number of artists—very small indeed next to the industrialized armies employed in the intricate spectacles of Tendency A—assume a new place, woven into the private life of the upper echelon of a mainly self-isolated ruling class."



"Having a unique personal artist becomes a service similar to having a personal trainer or chef."



"Palante," the paper of the Young Lords, the cultural officer of revolutionary organizations. "The professional artist has a role here, as the Cultural Officer of the various revolutionary organizations, organizing in the invisible underground of the forgotten hinterlands."



An example of subvertising, or, subverting advertisement. "the glittering spectacles of cosmopolitan leisure entertainment linger as an ideal, albeit one inaccessible to masses reduced to subsistence, with no real disposable income"





A situationist reference in an institutional context. "Individual dissident art-makers, seen as more pliable than actual dissident political leaders, may become hot commodities in this period."

## X

This text was written for the exhibition "William Powhida: After the Contemporary" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

**Ben Davis** is an art critic living in New York. A book of his essays, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, was published last year by Haymarket.

Marco Baravalle

# Art Populism and the Alter-Institutional Turn

In 1965 the Operaist stance enters the Italian literary debate thanks to critic Alberto Asor Rosa's *The Writer and the People*. The book's main targets, besides well-known literary critics of the time, encompass writers like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino, Vasco Pratolini, Cesare Pavese, and Elio Vittorini, whose works embodied the Communist Party's hegemony over literary production—a hegemony based on the legacy of the Resistance on one hand, and on a populist political and cultural vision on the other. Asor Rosa's main thesis, which he frames as an urgent political matter of his time, is a harsh critique of Antonio Gramsci's concept of the “national-popular.”

From the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century to the post–World War II period, Italian literature exhibited pronounced populist tendencies. This tendency steadily grew stronger throughout the pre-fascist and fascist periods, and finally became completely dominant in the wake of the wartime Italian resistance movement, in compliance with Communist Party's cultural directives. In the 1960s, as Asor Rosa was writing his book, the populist literary genre was going into decline.

Now that populism is once again at the center of public debate, how can *The Writer and the People* be useful to us today?<sup>1</sup>

Since Asor Rosa's book was first published, the globe has changed radically, from the fall of the Soviet Union and globalization to the financialization of the economy and major shifts in the geopolitical balance of power. Furthermore, *The Writer and the People* was so deeply rooted in the author's time that it got stuck; in order to be absolutely coherent, accurate, and polemically rigorous, Asor Rosa refused to write things that had a simplistically universal or trans-historical significance. But if outdatedness is the cornerstone of contemporaneity, then *The Writer and the People* may still have something important to teach the readers of today.

Of course, some preliminary considerations are necessary: we should look beyond the limits of the historical debate that Asor Rosa's work took part in; at the same time, we need to shift his concepts from the literary context to art criticism. Nevertheless, if we treat the word “people” as an empty signifier, the essay can provide us with an interpretational diagram, a starting point for addressing issues that are critical to today's debate on the relationship between art and populism. Furthermore, the Operaist matrix of the book clarifies the terms of another crucial debate that is far from being concluded, between what we could call heretical Marxism on one side, and leftist populism on the other.

According to Asor Rosa, a work can be describe as “populist” “whenever the literary discourse contains a positive evaluation of the people, in ideological, historical, social, or ethical terms. Populism implies that the people is presented as a model.”<sup>2</sup>



Installation view of the exhibition "Dark Matter Super Collider, Dark Matter Games," S.a.L.E. Docks, 2017. Photo: Veronica Badolin.

In view of this argument, we can define as populist those literary works that choose "the people" as their narrative object and aim to represent them. It is not a merely formal matter; that is to say, a plot taking place in a bourgeois environment doesn't qualify as populist literature. However, independently from the political stance of the author (liberal, progressive, anarchist, communist, or fascist), in Italy this peculiar literary genre presents some recurring features: first, a certain hostility towards cosmopolitanism and a preference for the national space; second, an adherence to traditional formal models and an aversion to avant-garde experimentation; and third, sociological realism and a hint of "bourgeois intellectualism."

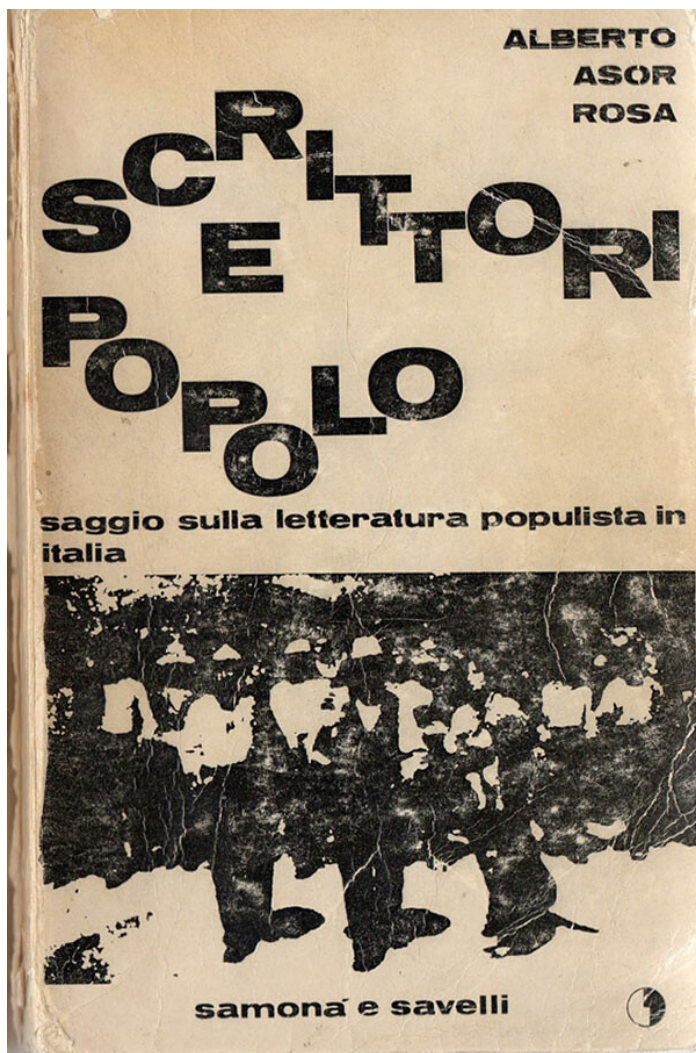
This tendency gained traction between the end of World War II and the 1960s, largely due to the Communist Party's hegemonic position and its application of lessons from Gramsci (sometimes in a misleading way, according to Asor Rosa). Built around the idea of revolution as a "revolution of the people," populist literature was supposed to mobilize, through the love of country, different sectors of the population far beyond the proletariat. A national and popular culture that was

supposed to include even bourgeois and progressive positions was an essential instrument for this purpose.

Here Asor Rosa's critique reveals its core: the writer claims that the construction of "the people" as a *dispositif*, imposed pervasively even through literature, is a substantial obstacle to the revolution of the working class, the only subject that is inherently political, according to Marx. What is at stake here is the dispute between *the people* and *the class*, i.e., between the party's structures and aligned intellectuals, who try to shape the former, on one hand; and on the other, the dissident intellectuals, who try to organize the latter towards radical social transformation, including the self-organization of production and an end to any nationalist temptation.

Now that Asor Rosa's arguments have been laid out, we can use his interpretative framework to determine if a tension similar to that found in the literary populism influenced by Gramsci can be detected in the contemporary visual arts. Considering the abovementioned historical shift, there won't be many cases that exactly meet the criteria outlined by Asor Rosa, but some approximate examples arise.





Cover of the Italian edition of Alberto Asor Rosa's book *Scrittori e popolo*.

One of these takes the form of three documentaries by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini on the Bolivarian Revolution in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela: *Venezuela from Below* (2004), *5 Factories: Worker Control in Venezuela* (2006), and *Comuna Under Construction* (2010). The films focus mostly on the subaltern strata of the population and, in Ernesto Laclau's terms, on their transformation from *plebs* to *populous*.<sup>3</sup> As envisaged by the Bolivarian apparatus, the lower levels of the population cease representing only a part of society and become a totality: the socialist people of Venezuela. The intent here is neither to judge these documentaries on a political level, nor oversimplify Azzellini and Ressler's work, which deals with crucial issues encompassing democratic participation, political organization, and workers' self-management. The point is rather to outline particular aspects of the films that refer to the idea of cultural populism as presented above: 1) They abstain from using the meta-documentary format, which tends to question the documented narration as an objective narration of the facts, a legitimate representation of reality, and the

recovery of a stable and permanent memory. On the contrary, Azzellini and Ressler's documentaries are presented quite openly as means for diffusing and affirming the Bolivarian discourse without any effort to deconstruct it, although they never succumb to propaganda. The authors live-filmed an historical process without any *a posteriori* analysis, so that it's not possible to use the prefix "post-" to describe the documentaries' aesthetic features. 2) This tendency affects the formal choices made by the directors, who prefer linear narration and who have a pedagogical intent, eschewing any ostentatious experimentation. 3) The documentaries deal with a national revolution, limited to the space of the nation-state. 4) As Ressler recently wrote to me in an email conversation, even if *Comuna Under Construction* "shows an increasing split between the basis (activists, workers, students) and the government of the Bolivarian Process," generally in this series of films the connection between cultural products and the Bolivarian political apparatus is crystal clear. This connection doesn't pertain exclusively to populist governments, and it can emerge in different forms, either positive or negative, but it is for sure a prerogative of any populist *program*, as the documentaries in question clarify.

But we should delve deeper into the question: Is populist art limited to artworks that depict populism? In her well-known critique of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop thinks not.<sup>4</sup> Bishop criticizes the idea that all artworks that fall under the category of relational aesthetics are immediately political and emancipatory thanks to their proclivity for intersubjectivity rather than contemplation and objectivity (I have already written on this topic in the past, so I won't elaborate further in this context<sup>5</sup>). She points to other artists who in her view realize a more effective relational model in political terms. In this context, Bishop refers to the concept of antagonism as used by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where they combine Gramsci's discourse on hegemony with Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity, aiming to suggest new paths towards radically democratic social models. Laclau and Mouffe take Lacan's theory of subjectivity—which frames the subject as an incomplete, decentralized entity—and attempt to raise it to the political level. Why incomplete? Because the presence of the other (the antagonist) will always prevent me from being totally myself. As a consequence, my relationship to the other is not one that involves settled entities; rather, it entails the impossibility of any settlement. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the political and social body work in the same way: antagonism and conflict don't indicate weakness in a democratic system. On the contrary, they are indispensable, and even prevent the rise of authoritarianism and the fossilization of the status quo. In contrast to this notion of antagonism stands the theory of deliberative democracy, which relies on the weakening of passions in order to reach rational consensus. Borrowing Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism<sup>6</sup> and

translating it to the art field, Bishop criticizes relational practices for excluding antagonism from the social relationships they aim to build and for deceptively depicting the social sphere as an “immanent togetherness.”

Bishop goes on to argue that some artists, like Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra, follow an opposite logic. Concerning Sierra, Bishop writes that in his well-known works the artist uses an antagonistic strategy to bring to light the presence of the other in a self-centered art system. This provokes discomfort in the audience, who should then be able to question their certainty and identity. Sierra makes injustice visible through art, without trying to bring about an impossible reconciliation between opposing parties.

It would be ridiculous to accuse Santiago Sierra of nationalism. However, in my opinion his work presents what could be called a “populist differential,” calling to mind the definition of populism employed by Asor Rosa as well as Laclau and Mouffe. Sierra hires performers from the working classes to complete his works. These popular figures (the poor, the marginalized, prostitutes, drug addicts) recall characters from the work of Pasolini. It must be said that fortunately, Sierra’s work resembles Pasolini’s brutality, as displayed in the movie *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom*, more than his edifying examples, as found in a novel like *A Violent Life*. The staging of impoverished people and global proletarians who sell their labor to the artist (often at minimum wage) gives rise to an almost mystical vision, fed by violent corporality, ascetic cruelty, and inexplicable sacrifice. This aspect of Sierra’s work is enhanced by the black-and-white photos that document the performances and that hint at 1970s conceptualism. “The people” embody redemption: as brutalized victims of capital, they have no ability to cooperate, nor impulse for rebellion or organization. Art becomes the liturgy for their suffering. Like Pasolini and Asor Rosa before him, Sierra is an interpreter of a long-term crisis of populism, where the people are represented as a defective model, nonetheless taking center stage.

Obviously, these two examples—Asor Rosa and Santiago Sierra—don’t provide us with an exhaustive definition of populist art. However, if we compare them to relational practices, a polarity stands out. Quoting Laclau:

In order to have the people of populism we need something more: we need a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus*—that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community ... In the case of an institutionalist discourse, we have seen that differentiability claims to be the only legitimate equivalent: all differences are considered equally valid within a wider totality. In the case of populism, this symmetry is broken: there is a part which identifies itself with the whole.<sup>7</sup>

Within the framework of this definition, we can say that

relational practices correspond to the institutionalist pole, while antagonistic practices correspond to the populist pole. Like institutionalist discourse, relational aesthetics accepts the idea that differentiability is “the only legitimate equivalent,” so relationships involve sharing, acceptance, and inclusion. We should spotlight the social model that such relations allude to. A society in which relationships are necessarily harmonious will be characterized by a structural lack of conflict—in other words, an acceptance of established social powers, which is only illusorily interrupted in the protected space of the artwork. If relational aesthetics really aimed to transform reality, then it would tell us to “live in” the artwork rather than “dissolve” art into life. In this light, relational art practices look like a perfect product of what Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism.”

The second pole, corresponding to populist art, should be addressed with a certain caution, bearing in mind that we are reasoning at a structural level. It is evidently not possible to claim that every artwork that disregards theories of relational aesthetics is therefore populist. However, it is true that individual artworks are commonly regarded as a synecdoche—a partiality that takes on the role of a totality.

We previously considered Ressler and Azzellini’s documentaries as useful tools for understanding certain overlooked aspects of the Bolivarian revolution. These documentaries employ formal techniques that can be defined as populist. When art is embedded in populism, however, it risks sacrificing a lot for the sake of affirmation. Documentary is a useful instrument for questioning people’s memory rather than for celebrating the rebirth of “the people” in a nationalistic way, progressive intentions notwithstanding.

I am not an expert on the subject, so I won’t superficially debate the experiences that made the development of twenty-first century socialism possible in Latin America. However, I am among those who are worried about the possibility of the rise of a new left-wing populism to oppose reactionary populists, since this would also be based on nationalism, sovereignty, identitarian rhetoric, and the autonomy of the political. After all, it is pointless to reduce the terms of the debate to binary oppositions: horizontality or verticality, globalization or the nation, multitude or the people. Any fitting answer for the difficult times we are going through must be found in a “secular” interpretation of the above-mentioned elements. Institutionalism on one hand, populism on the other.

Where can we find artistic practices that break this dichotomy? Practices that envisage intersubjectivity as a terrain for necessary conflict and, at the same time, for the creation of new social bonds? Such art must be different in substantial ways from the examples discussed above: 1) It must express a different idea of sociality than the immanent togetherness affirmed by relational aesthetics,

which can be seen as an artistic *dispositif* in service to neoliberal capture. 2) It must have a different stance on the autonomy of the artwork, opposing the idea of an defined artwork that brings to light the undefined nature of subjectivity, but without trying to intervene at the social level. 3) Its attitude must be different from populist affirmation, which risks succumbing to the adulation of power and the narration of reality as it should be, a typical characteristic of socialist realism.

These kinds of artistic practices invest in the creation of social relationships that are on the side of the commons and against neoliberal dictates and reactionary populism (which are only apparently in opposition). When art chooses this side, it doesn't adhere to an ideology; rather, it questions emerging ideological tendencies and operates according to a materialistic logic in order to realize the *common* through the free distribution of knowledge and means of production, as well as through the creation of new algorithms and the reinvention of institutional infrastructures. Beyond neoliberal capture and against populist recruitment.

At the end of 2015, the magazine *Afterall* published two articles on a rapidly spreading artistic phenomenon that we could define as the "alter-institutional turn." Authors Sven Lütticken and Ekaterina Degot detected a growing trend that identifies artistic practice with the establishment of new para-institutions, alter-institutions, and institutions of the common, which work in opposition to "monster institutions," to use Gerald Raunig's term. The articles focused on projects such as *The Silent University* by Ahmet Ogüt, *The New World Summit* and *Artist Organisations International* by Jonas Staal; and *The Immigrant Movement International* by Tania Bruguera.<sup>8</sup>

Two key elements emerge from Degot's report on a meeting of the *Artist Organisations International* in Berlin, which brought together twenty organizations founded by artists, all characterized by a progressive social and political agenda. Firstly, there was a disenchantment about the potential results of the project—a disenchantment that appears to have been legitimate considering the lack of any follow-up to the 2015 meeting. Secondly, the meeting exhibited an emerging tendency among artists to act like "directors." The title of Degot's article, "The Artist As Director," was a provocative turning-of-the-page after the time of "the artist as curator." What is at stake here is a sort of *dé tournement* of the art manager's role. On one hand, artists are increasingly appropriating this role, in a literal interpretation of management *as art*; on the other, they are pushing it towards experimentation with non-liberal models. Lütticken, in his article, argues that these practices highlight an evolution of institutional critique, where the center of attention shifts from the critique of existing institutions to the invention of new ones. These projects, although different, share certain characteristics: 1) A pedagogical intent responding to the urgency of providing

access to knowledge; for instance, Ogüt's *The Silent University* is organized as a platform for knowledge exchange, where migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are both students and teachers. 2) These alter-institutions often prioritize the visibility of people who have been rendered socially invisible, such as migrants without residency permits—people excluded from systems of social welfare and silenced in the sphere of public debate. 3) These projects often employ new communication technologies in a consciously critical fashion, seeking to end the divide between humanistic and digital approaches.

The alter-institutional turn goes beyond a certain impasse typical of relational aesthetics, as it grasps the imbalance in power relationships within society. It also addresses the problem of rebalancing these relationship, without embracing populist ideology. However, these new institutions are limited by the fact that they are often conceived as artworks by a single artist, and their autonomy depends on the artist's capacity to economically sustain the work and devote considerable time to its development. In this sense, these institutions can't create or take part in any real process of organization, and are unlikely put down roots after their initial realization.

Would it be possible to make them grow? I believe so, if they can be connected to movements, activist groups, and solidarity networks practicing constituent forms of conflict, such as anti-gentrification occupations, the provision of shelter and hospitality for migrants, opposition to the rise of neofascism, and experiments with institutional models based on the commons and mutualism.

It isn't surprising that Lütticken compares these artistic projects to the 2015 occupation at Amsterdam University, which protested cuts to public education and the planned conversion of a key university building into a luxury hotel. Lütticken writes that on the night before the occupation was evicted, a group of students sent a request to the Van Abbemuseum to use Ahmet Ogüt's *Bakunin's Barricade* (2014) for self-defense. *Bakunin's Barricade* is a reconstruction of a barricade decorated with artworks from the museum collection. A clause in Ogüt's contract with the museum, inserted by the artist, requires the artwork to be loaned to activists whenever they ask for it. Eventually, the eviction of the protesters made the loan impossible. Still, this story is useful for introducing some fundamental aspects of the alter-institutional turn.

Firstly, alter-institutional practices should produce a deterritorialization within existing art institutions. Pushing museums to look beyond the mere conservation and valorization of "national treasures," alter-institutional practices compel museums to reimagine themselves as spaces for critical social debate and the support of activist movements and independent cultural producers. Of



course, this is not an easy or linear process; it involves negotiation and conflict with entrenched financial and cultural interests. Still, there are, at in least in Europe, well-know examples of established art institutions opening themselves up to alter-institutional practices.

L'Internationale network is one. Six major museums (Reina Sofia, Van Abbemuseum, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Moderna Galerija, MACBA, and SALT) have for years now been critically reflecting on their social and political role, and have been developing relationships with social movements that go beyond simply representing their stances. This proves that protagonists of the alter-institutional turn can be found not only among artists, but also among museum and gallery directors and managers.

Secondly, alter-institutions should invent new institutional architectures in response to the urgent need to radically democratize the basic structures of social life. This leads to a crucial question: How does an alter-institution work? What qualifies it as “alter-”? I will try to answer this question by exploring three examples: *The Cooperativist Society*, *Debtfair*, and S.a.L.E. Docks.

*The Cooperativist Society* is a largely unrealized project that was part of the public program of the controversial Documenta 14. One of the members of the collective that organized the project told me that he looks at this project as “an interesting failure.” Originally, *The Cooperativist Society* was formed because Documenta called on a group of people working with alternative currencies to suggest ways to critically examine and reform the financial infrastructure of the exhibition. All the initial proposals were rejected and the project, excluded from the main exhibition, finally found a home in the public program curated by Paul Preciado. However, apart from a lecture delivered in Athens, the project was ultimately cancelled, mainly due to budget shortfalls.

The story of the problematic relationship between this work and Documenta clearly shows how large-scale exhibitions need to mobilize progressive content, but are ultimately resistant to being modified by this content. The affair of the alleged bankruptcy and public bailout of Documenta, and its seeming transformation from a space for experimentation to a more corporate event, only represent the worsening of a series of preexisting structural problems. Why did the exhibition staff wait until after the emergence of negative news coverage and the involvement of local politicians to raise questions about the scale of biennials, their role in the global economy, and the “exploitative working conditions” endured by many biennial workers?<sup>9</sup> These are not the results of a “state of exception”; they are rather the basic premises, the default conditions faced by anyone curating this type of exhibition. The fate of *The Cooperativist Society*, its differential inclusion, proves that neoliberal governance has more subtle ways to perpetuate itself through art and cultural industries than staging a theatrical “political takeover” of

the most influential biennial in the world.

The working group composed of hackers, artists, and activists that organized *The Cooperativist Society* aimed to use the visibility of Documenta to redirect some of the economic activity generated by the show towards solidarity networks and cooperative economies in Greece. At the same time, they aimed to build a laboratory in Athens for the design of new artistic models characterized by horizontality and sharing. The idea was that Documenta visitors could buy a prepaid card at the exhibition gates, which could be topped up with Fair Coins, a cryptocurrency designed to meet certain environmental, social, and democratic standards and to support cooperative and ethical production practices. Visitors could then use the card loaded with Fair Coins at a network of independent, self-organized shops.

Other projects similar to *The Cooperativist Society* include Dyne.org, Robin Hood Coop, Freedom Coop, and many others, all characterized by a mixing of disciplines (artists, hackers, and researchers) in activist spaces. (In Italy, a good example of a similar project is Macao in Milan, an independent space for artistic production born out of an occupation). While these projects certainly haven't transformed the field of finance, they are trying to invent new, more cooperative financial instruments. They all aim to create new means of production and new institutional models oriented toward the commons instead of capitalist accumulation. And they largely avoid the pitfalls of “network culture,” so fashionable a few decades ago, since they are keenly aware capital's ability to capture horizontal practices. They understand that automation is not the enemy, but insist that it must incorporate human relationships to be effective for something beyond capitalist valorization. Consciously operating in a space defined by existing power structures, these projects attempts to create new social bonds founded on irreducible multiplicity. In this respect, they eschew both populist reductionism and the institutionalism of relational aesthetics.

*Debtfair* is a project of Occupy Museums, a collective born during the Zuccotti Park occupation in New York. An installation version of *Debtfair* was part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. One aspect of *Debtfair* is an online survey that collects information from artists and aims to make visible the effects of personal debt on American cultural producers. *Debtfair* exposes a hidden part of the American economy—such as the debt accrued by art students—that is nonetheless structurally necessary for the sustainability of the American art sector, often to the detriment of the most vulnerable art producers. *Debtfair* analyzes the economics of debt, along with its racial, gender, and colonial aspects, in order to map the institutions at the heart of the credit economy. The project also catalogues and exhibits work by indebted artists. For example, a 2015 exhibition at Art League Houston featured holes in the gallery walls where artworks could

be inserted. The artworks were never displayed individually; instead, they were grouped according to the financial institutions that held the debt of the artists. Some of the works, for example, were grouped by a particular relationship to the Puerto Rican debt crisis.

*Debtfair* and *The Cooperativist Society* wrestle with the dialectic between visible and invisible. *Debtfair* aims to unveil invisible debt and overturn its subjugating aspects, while *The Cooperativist Society* seeks to uncover the abstract algorithms that control our financial lives. But what are the limits of this alter-institutional turn?

The fact is that these kinds of alter-institutional practices are largely encouraged by many art institutions and mostly developed through traditional roles like the artist, the curator, and the audience. They employ traditional devices like the large-scale exhibition, the museum, and the art festival. This means that they often end up adhering to the function that the neoliberal apparatus assigns to art, namely, the economic valorization of critical and subversive thought and imagery.

How, then, can we free this alter-institutional potential from the established art apparatus? Or, to put it in Gregory Sholette's terms, how can we autonomously organize the socially creative "dark matter" of art?<sup>10</sup> Artists seem to face two unsavory alternatives: being condemned to invisibility, or being a pillar of the mainstream art world, with no possibility of interfering with its relationships of money and power. How can we avoid both fates?

Answers to these questions can be found by experimenting with assemblages that connect artists and art workers to social movements, grassroots organizations, and radical cooperatives. This is the most effective way to realize new subjective possibilities for artists, curators, and cultural workers in general—subjectivities not shaped by the model of the entrepreneur of the self, not chained to a mobility that forces alter-institutions to fade out too quickly, not indebted and precarious for life, not wedded to the idea of creation as a private act in an era when it is instead the result of structural cooperation, not fueled by the adrenaline of market competition, and at the same time, not domesticated by the increasingly rare privilege of welfare-state benefits. In short, we need to associate the word "art" with different forms of life.

Seen in this light, the construction of alter-institutions cannot be reduced to the latest trend in the contemporary art-event economy. Instead, it must become a way to structurally empower different "art worlds." A new infrastructure is needed—a new physical, digital, linguistic, and economic infrastructure—in order for art to face the challenge of continuing financialization, rising reactionary politics, and the ongoing transformation of the art world into an event economy.

These are some of the concerns that, eleven years ago, led a group of Venice-based cultural workers, artists, and activists (including myself) to occupy S.a.L.E. Docks, originally an ancient salt-storage warehouse.

We opened S.a.L.E. Docks in 2007 as a kind of action/exhibition/research center. Our idea was, and still is, to experiment with a type of art institution that functions as a concrete critique of the neoliberal art *dispositif*. We have investigated how the Venice Biennale and the events associated with it work as an engine of gentrification in an already hyper-gentrified environment like the historical city of Venice. We organize actions against the precarity of cultural work and the massive use of unpaid labor, both in Venice and around the globe (I'm referring here to our collaboration with the Gulf Labor campaign). We also host well-known artists, curators, and museum directors, but we always try to make our space and resources available to local artists and cultural producers. Our collective takes active part in social struggles in the city; for example, in September 2017 we hosted an assembly organized by the Committee Against Big Cruise Ships, welcoming more than two hundred environmental activists from all over Europe. For a few years we developed a peculiar exhibition format in which the production process was completely open; titled *Open*, this project involved hundreds of artists, students, and cultural workers, and pushed the boundaries of the exhibition format. In May 2017 we organized a three-day program of roundtables and interventions throughout Venice, titled *Dark Matter Games* in homage to Gregory Sholette's book *Dark Matter*. Sholette uses the astrophysics concept of "dark matter" as a metaphor for the vast and variegated creative social intellect that sustains the comparatively small world of art professionals. This dark matter includes very different types of people: indebted students, aspiring professional artists, amateurs, and museumgoers, but also those (often collective) experiences in between art and activism that sometimes opt for invisibility as a form of refusal to play by the rules. Today, new technological and cultural conditions are making this dark matter much more visible than in the past. The question is, what should we do with this visibility?

*Dark Matter Games* aimed to be a model of a possible autonomous organization for creative dark matter, where the word "autonomous" points to a need for the arts (especially those concerned with social engagement) to work according to different productive, social, and economic logics than those of ruling neoliberal institutions. But it must be made clear that these alter-institutions do not occupy a nonexistent "outside" of the capitalist world. Neoliberal capture involves valorization through the continuous expropriation of social creation. Christian Marazzi has even argued that under present capitalist conditions, innovation (classically described by Joseph Schumpeter as the "destructive



Gregory Sholette, *Decolonize This Place, AMNH*, 2016. Drawing. Courtesy of the artist

creation” unleashed when entrepreneurs recombine preexisting productive elements) has become deeply entwined with invention.<sup>11</sup> This is to say that innovation as an driving economic force works by *necessarily* annexing the (big and small) inventions that are created within the social field, outside the space of the economy.

If, then, alter-institutions as exceptions to neoliberal rule are more than ever endangered by annexation, they have to find ways to effectively work against the continuous pressure of the official art world, an art world eager to colonize those ever narrowing spaces in our cities not already taken over by privatization and gentrification, and those collective subjects that, in one way or another, occupy subaltern positions—collective subjects like “the community,” “the neighborhood,” “the camp,” “locals,” “migrants,” “grassroots activists,” “the poor,” “workers,” “women,” “indigenous people,” “queer people,” etc.

If we broaden our horizon to the general situation of today’s world, there are few reasons to be optimistic: the

rise of neofascism and reactionary politics seems to suggest that the new visibility granted by technology mostly contributes to a feeling of widespread anger and helps realize our worst backwards drives. We shouldn’t delude ourselves. But we also need to understand the importance of artistic practices that, in different ways, give visibility to the dark matter trying to create new autonomous forms, beyond the neoliberal model and in opposition to identity-based populism.

## X

**Marco Baravalle** is a central figure at S.a.L.E. Docks, an independent space for visual arts, activism, and experimental theater located in a former salt-storage facility in Dorsoduro, Venice. Founded in 2007, its programming includes activist meetings, exhibitions, screenings, and actions. In addition to managing the

diverse programming at S.a.L.E. Docks, Baravalle is also a research fellow. He researches art and activism, creative labor, gentrification, and how art is positioned within neoliberal economics.

1

In 2015, to celebrate *The Writer and the People*'s fiftieth anniversary, the publishing house Einaudi printed a new edition of the book, which included the late unreleased essay "Scrittori e Masse" (The Writer and the Masses). I mention this for the sake of completeness, since Asor Rosa's late writings are not of much interest for this article. In "Scrittori e Masse" he declares, perhaps too hastily, the disappearance of "the people," instead of undertaking a cultural and political investigation into what he calls "the masses." With this latter term he seems to indicate a growing lack of cohesion within "the people"—a crumbling of the unity that paradoxically emerged from different regionalisms and localisms.

2

Alberto Asor Rosa, *The Writer and The People* (Seagull Books, 2016).

3

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

4

Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004).

5

Marco Baravalle, "Curare e Governare. Bourriaud e Obrist, la svolta relazionale della curatela," *Opera Viva*, December 19, 2016 <http://pdf.e-flux-systems.com/opera-viva.info/curare-e-governare>.

6

After 1985 Chantal Mouffe specified that the core of politics has to be found in the transformation of antagonism (a clash between enemies that could resolve itself in a hopeless clash of identities) into agonism, i.e. "struggle between adversaries." Mouffe explains that "an adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality" Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Reihe Politikwissenschaft* (Political Science Series), Christine Neuhold and Gertrud Hafner, eds., (Vienna: Department of Political Science, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), 2000)

7

Laclau, *On Populist Reason*,

81–82.

8

Sven Lütticken, "Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art," *Afterall* 40 (Autumn–Winter 2015); Ekaterina Degot, "The Artist As Director: Artist Organisation International and its Contradictions," *ibid*.

9

See "Statement by the Artistic Director and curatorial team of documenta 14," *e-flux conversations*, September 2017 <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-by-the-artistic-director-and-curatorial-team-of-documenta-14/7013>.

10

Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2006).

11

Christian Marazzi, "La dislessia del manager," in *Il Comunismo del Capitale. Finanziarizzazione, biopolitiche del lavoro e crisi globale* (Ombre Corte, 2010).



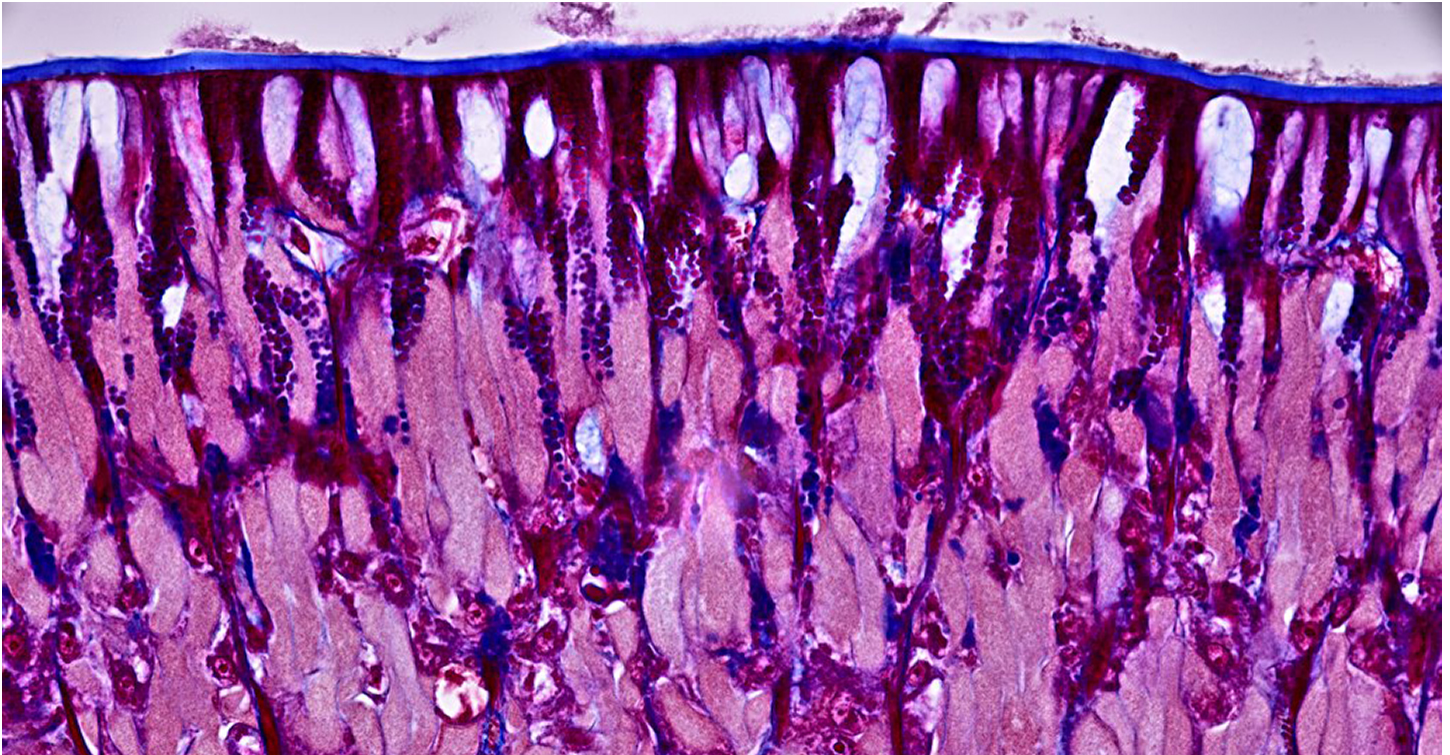
Natalya Serkova

# Learning from Machines, Seeing with a Thousand Eyes: On the Relevance of Russian Cosmism

You might be slightly irritated when you first dip into the writings of the Russian cosmists. Your irritation could be provoked by the fact that most of the movement's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists based their futuristic projects on grounds that by now have been thoroughly eroded. The first outdated basis I have in mind is Christianity, with its rigid ethical and gender stances, insistence on divine providence, and linear timeline with an obligatory eschatological end. Two of its logical consequences are an unquestionably anthropocentric viewpoint and a so-called upright posture, which gave human beings imaginary dominion over the planet. Finally, there is cosmism's universalist sentiment—the idea that all nations must unite to defeat death, gravity, nature, and life itself as it is currently understood—which might force you to postpone looking deeper into the works of the Russian cosmists until happier, spacier times. Because of these qualities, the movement itself can resemble less a rocket ship headed towards interstellar horizons, and more a ponderous and, ultimately, irrelevant episode in the history of Russian philosophy and science. In this sense, the archival approach favored by heavyweight exhibitions dealing with cosmism, such as “Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism” at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (September 1–October 3, 2017), could scare you off altogether.

Your irritation might seem justified when, doubled over, you unearth a potentially interesting dusty artifact from a pile of similarly dusty artifacts, unsure that it exists at all. And yet if we remove this pile of junk from the room—that is, remove it from consideration—we shall see the brilliance of what remains in the room and how it can help us understand the present. No longer constrained by a religious ethic and an anthropocentric model of the world, cosmist thinking is ready to be relaunched in an updated set of coordinates.

The cosmists' own way of thinking facilitates this approach. In reading their essays and books, it's clear how constrained the cosmists, from Nikolai Fedorov to Alexander Chizhevsky, felt by the concepts on which they based their theories. Cosmist philosophy is sufficiently insane to affirm the idea of the globe as a unity while simultaneously looking for ways to escape its closed bubble. Some cosmists were deeply pious Russian Orthodox believers who preached full equality between man and God, arguing it was the latter's obligation to create new beings and worlds. Others insisted on the primacy of the human mind in the universe while speculating as to how people could be turned into improved insects in order to better explore outer space. The cosmists did not contradict themselves when they tried to prove the wholly scientific possibility of physical resurrection and human immortality. The cosmists' own day and age proved too stuffy for their ideas to thrive. They were like fertile pollen, but the pollen was scattered in their own time, not in another time. If we want to follow them, we should not shuffle in time's wake, but let time



An axial section of an earthworm under the microscope. Photo: Discomorphella

follow us.

This means that we should see cosmist discourse as not occurring within time, but running parallel to it, along its own time-space trajectory—a trajectory resembling a spring whose spirals come in different shapes and sizes, rather than a line. Some of the spirals expand and make titanic leaps forward, while others stretch back into the past, sinking their hooks into distant parts of human history and prehistory, such as the time of Adam and the New Testament. Because its parts are so enormously uneven, this cosmist spring must have a rather ugly structure, but it must also be extremely flexible. In order to continuously detect changes and react to them, its spirals are constantly stretched and compressed, expanding and shrinking in all directions. If the cosmists, devoted to their futuristic ideas, were to suddenly find themselves in the present, they perhaps would be the first to apply this springy flexibility to remodel their ideas, adapting them to current intellectual movements. At the same time, the cosmists' deliberations, balanced on the swaying sides of the spirals, now and then encountered obstacles insurmountable in their own time. In keeping with the spring's perpetual mobility, we can assume that, after crossing at some point in the 1900s, the sides of the spirals no longer intersect at the same point in 2018. This means that, at the junctures where cosmist thinking was previously halted, we can now take it further without encountering the same obstacles.

Despite the different tendencies within cosmism, we can

speaking of the entire movement's main project: the extension of human life, including the attainment of physical immortality, and the idea of using—and even mutating—all the energies of the human body in the service of the conquest of terrestrial and cosmic disasters. Liberating the intellect from the shackles of a still largely animal human nature was to play a key part in achieving this dominion over natural forces. The cosmists argued that man was the only creature on earth endowed with intelligence and the capacity to set and achieve goals, but he was still imprisoned by lust and sexual instinct. Even after standing upright, a posture that made it possible to grab hold of the first tools and look at the sky, man was not freed from the pull of chthonic forces. Moreover, the cosmists posited, our bodies have never fully resigned themselves to this vertical drive. Nikolai Fedorov, one of the principal and earliest proponents of the movement, refers to notes made by the physician Vikenty Veresayev in which the latter claims, "Human organs and their placement have still not adapted to the vertical position, especially among women. Uterine displacement is a quite common ailment. Yet many of these displacements would never have happened if women walked on all fours." This leads Fedorov to conclude that the process of biological birth was never physically intrinsic to man.<sup>1</sup>

Fedorov argues that horizontality is a synonym for everything dead, for death itself, while upwardly directed verticality is a symbol of reason and spirit, of "wakefulness, life, [and] resurrection."<sup>2</sup> Humans can and must acknowledge that their bodies still adhere to completely

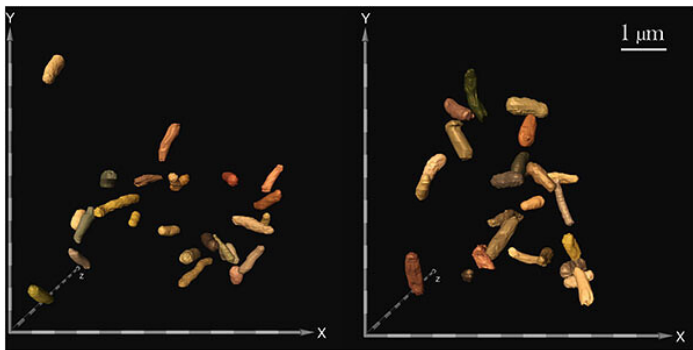


Skoptsy was a heresy sect within the Russian Orthodox Church for in Tsarist Russia. It is best known for practicing castration of men and the mastectomy of women in accordance with their teachings against sexual lust.



different goals than their upwardly directed intellect. Women, Fedorov goes on to argue, conceive and give birth to children in a horizontal position. Reproducing this cycle over and over, he says, we further approximate animals. Biological life thus becomes synonymous with death, and the process of conceiving new generations is turned into a bad infinity, a moribund existence.

"Moribund, somnolent, voluptuous life" are the words another proponent of the movement, Vladimir Solovyov, uses to describe man's natural environment and the creatures populating it. Solovyov feels genuine aversion to mollusks, worms, and other such ideal embodiments of horizontality. Worms, writes Solovyov, "feed with their whole being, the entire surface of their bodies, through endosmosis (absorption), and thus present no organs other than sexual organs. In terms of their strong development and complex structure, the latter provide a striking contrast to the extreme simplicity of the other organs."<sup>3</sup> The worm, covered entirely in mucous tissue, amounts to a sexual organ, driven only by reproduction—a function it performs with tremendous virtuosity. Its ceaselessly sucking, porous, slippery tissue, in contrast with the shell, which protects the absent mind from irritation, is a perfectly constructed membrane designed to engage in the constant interchange of organic compounds within the worm's habitat.



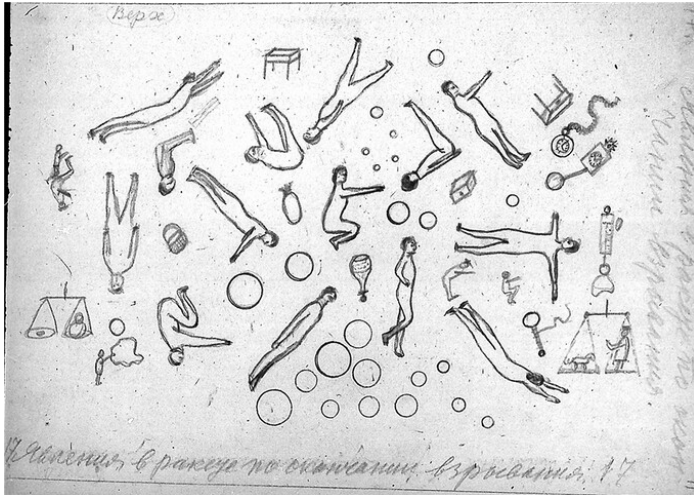
Samples of the bacteria *E. Colli* dosed with the gentamicin antibiotic, with spaceflight bacteria on the left and Earth control on the right. Image: Zea et al.

Unlike worms, humans have evolved to a state in which the genitals, although capable of influencing thoughts and behavior, are physically concentrated in a specific corporeal location, instead of evenly covering the body with a slippery, vibrating slime endlessly seeking out copulation. For the cosmists, sexual drive was, like death, something to be overcome by the human race. One could argue that a person's external and internal sexual organs are so self-sufficient and superfluous that they could be completely separated from the body without damaging the latter's vital functions. There were those in Russia who tested this hypothesis in recent centuries. Through surgical procedures, both male and female members of an

eighteenth- through twentieth-century religious movement known as the Skoptsy rid themselves of their external genital organs; women also removed both breasts. Judging by group photos of the castrates, both the women and men acquired facial features distinguished, among other things, by an expressive calm. While evoking the practices of the Skoptsy, the cosmists still could not regard the religious group as sufficient exemplars of their own theories: despite the fact they had completely severed their reproductive instincts, the Skoptsy achieved neither immortality nor perceptible longevity compared with ordinary people. Although they were radical to a certain extent, their practices could not satisfy the requirements of a total victory of immortal mind over body. Fedorovian writer Alexander K. Gorsky argued, along this line of thinking, that the singular location of men's genitals on the body was a disadvantage. Inspired by Freud's theories, Gorsky largely adopted the opposite stance in discussions of the female body's overflowing sexual excess, which Gorsky explained in terms of "the large, moist, mucous-covered area of the [female] genitals," capable of powerful "emission[s] of energy."<sup>4</sup> Whereas the male genitalia have a definite, clearly distinguishable shape—which means, according to Gorsky's thinking, that we can always speak of their insufficiency—the female genitalia are "deeply hidden inside" women and constantly produce strong "radiations," indicative of the entire body's nonstop expansion and outward growth.<sup>5</sup> Gorsky imagines this growth as a key factor in mastering one's own body and, through it, the successful functioning of man on earth and, subsequently, in space. If this energy were radiated not only by organs directly bound up with reproduction, but by the human body's entire surface, this would make, according to Gorsky, the whole body emerge as an erogenous zone, meaning its hypersensitivity could be freed from serving sexual instinct and directed towards intensive interaction with the world. Thanks to "extra-genital sexuality," the human body would stop being an insulator, instead becoming a conductor for all kinds of energies and currents. It would become possible to speak of "mucocutaneous and muscular eroticism," emancipated from sexual instinct.<sup>6</sup>

According to Gorsky, a new mucous membrane would be photosensitive, restoring the body's evolutionarily forfeited ability to see with its entire surface. Citing the experience of French writer Jules Romains, Gorsky writes of the possibility of paroptic vision, meaning that thousands of tiny eyes would open all over the human body, while ordinary optical vision would atrophy due to the paucity of its powers. Covered with these rudimentary eyes, the body's surface would be capable of perceiving and analyzing the environment without the need for rest and sleep. Since "all the skin would become a full-fledged erogenous zone, the erection of the genital organs would spread evenly to all other organs, and they would fulfill (consciously, that is, in coordination with each other) the functions of reproduction [and] the reprocessing ... of

inorganic matter into organic matter, dead matter into living matter.”<sup>7</sup> The impact of external stimuli on the skin and the skin’s instantaneous production not just of nervous and muscular reactions, but of various organic products, would be a vital stage towards the emergence of a new type of human being, capable of “mastering the atmosphere and, perhaps, interplanetary space.”<sup>8</sup>



Drawing from Tsiolkovsky's 1933 paper "Album of Space Travel," page 11.

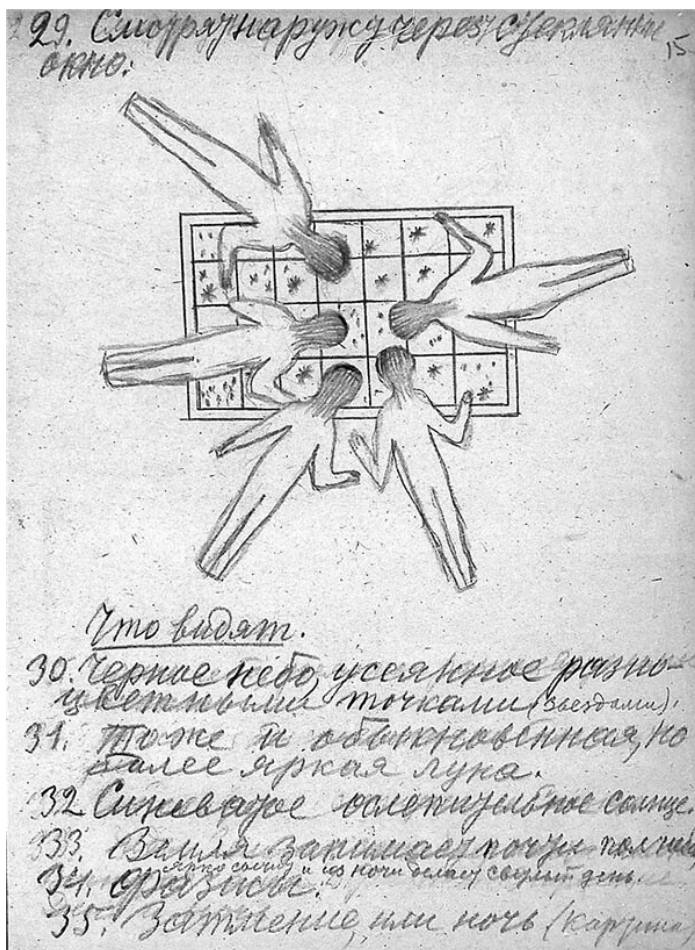
Gorsky's man of the future is a kind of advanced outer-space worm, armed with reason, but also equipped with capacities sloughed off during evolution. Gorsky, who was active in the early twentieth century—that is, half a century later than Fedorov and Solovyov—worked on “turning” the vertical toward the horizontal plane, the realm of worms and all manner of living mucus. Yet the intuition that the border between the living and the dead was permeable, that the vertical and horizontal axes were mutually aligned, had already been voiced by Solovyov. “Organic bodies are mere transformations of inorganic matter, in the exact same ... ways that St. Isaac’s Cathedral [in Petersburg] is a transformation of granite, and the Venus de Milo is a transformation of marble.”<sup>9</sup> Solovyov hints at the need to inspire the granite and marble with the spirits of their creators, but what matters more in this instance is Solovyov’s paradigm, in which even the religious cosmists found support. Living and dead entities are organically identical, and therefore they are fundamentally and utterly mutually convertible. This opens the way for yet another cosmist insight, so-called organ projection: the cultivation of new, more sophisticated organs on the human body, relying on the functioning of inorganic matter.

Compared with reptiles, birds, and mammals, the human is quite a young species on earth, which means, strictly speaking, that evolution has only begun. This view, shared in one shape or another by all the cosmists, was

expressed in specific projects for accelerating human evolution. Whereas Gorsky left his ideas abstract, Pavel Florensky and Konstantin Tsiolkovsky specified concrete steps on the road to bodily transformation. In 1919, Florensky would write about the deep link between the body’s organs and the tools devised by human beings. If tools are extensions of our body parts—just as the first stick, employed towards reasonable ends, was a more efficient extension of the arm—the reverse is also true. The adaptations we have already devised and employed can show us the way to analogously functioning organs in our own bodies. “Tools,” writes Florensky, “are generated by life in its depth, rather than superficial specialization, and each of us in our depths potentially has many different organs that have not been manifested in our bodies, but which could, however, be manifested in technical projections. ... Life can technically implement the projection of an organ earlier than we discover it anatomically and physiologically.”<sup>10</sup> By studying our machines, we can identify unknown, forgotten, dormant organs inside our bodies, or organs in an embryonic or atrophied state, like Gorsky’s thousands of eyes. Ultimately, this way of thinking finds its apogee in the complete fusion of humans and machines, since to understand the work of the latter most fruitfully, man must learn to think and live like a machine. Gorsky’s worm man is combined with inanimate tools, designed to awaken skills still dormant in the worm.

Finally, another cosmist thinker, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who identified himself as a pure materialist, advocated perhaps the most radical changes in the human body. Where Solovyov only gently hints at the permeability of the frontier between the living and the dead, Tsiolkovsky is forthright: “Every particle of the universe is responsive ... It is a continuous ladder. It does not end even at the frontier of living matter, because there is no such frontier. It is artificial, like all borders.”<sup>11</sup> Tsiolkovsky is extremely pragmatic in his arguments about the bodily transformations necessary for man to conquer outer space. By means of “exercise, selection, crossbreeding, operations, and other methods,” a creature perfectly suited to life on other planets and interplanetary travel could be produced.<sup>12</sup> It would be able to subsist on solar energy alone due to its possession of chlorophyll, the pigment that enables plants to process solar energy into nutritious chemical compounds. Waste products would not be released from the body: undergoing the next cycle of processing, these products would further nourish the creature. The creature would be formed from an ovum. As it grew, it would “gradually transform (like a caterpillar into a pupa and butterfly), shedding sweat glands, lungs, [and] digestive organs, and be covered with an impenetrable skin ... It would subsist only on the sun’s rays. Its mass would not change, but it would continue to think and live as a mortal or immortal being.”<sup>13</sup> In this case, the creature’s body would be designed to facilitate space travel. Its considerable life span, impenetrable shell, and need to feed only on the light of the stars would enable it





Drawing from Tsiolkovsky's 1933 manuscript "Album of Space Travel," page 43.

to travel long distances and render distant planets and galaxies inhabitable.

Tellingly, Tsiolkovsky no longer calls the creature a human being, while, however, endowing it with an intelligence more perfect than human intelligence. Yet he does not fundamentally distinguish between human beings and these improved beings. Tsiolkovsky leaves the matter open. His writings do not make it clear where human beings end and this immortal, self-feeding, armored creature begins. At this point, a difficulty arises that the other cosmists tried to ignore. How can we be sure that the beings they describe will ultimately remain human? We can no longer rely on the religious principle of vertical movement, since the very discourse of Christianity underwent considerable transformations in the twentieth century. The vertical no longer guides us to God, since the very place where God dwells seems to be a separate issue. Nor can we speak of the possession of intelligence and speech as characteristically human. Nowadays, both are human prerogatives, due to our limited knowledge of the world rather than for objective reasons. All that is "truly human" has dissipated in all directions, forcing us to

reflect on a global turn of the cross on which the God-man was once crucified.

The cosmist movement had almost completely ceased to exist by the mid-twentieth century, at a time when its radicalism had just begun to gain momentum in Western intellectual culture. For example, Samuel Beckett's literary characters, who emerged during the period, were meant to shake up principles that were already in a critical condition, and in a certain sense they embodied the premises of the cosmists in the way they behaved. Some of them, resembling blind worms, crawl along the damp, bubbling earth, plugging their whole bodies into a process of intense feeling. Other characters tightly and intricately attach themselves to various tools like bicycles and chairs, literally merging with them. Thanks to this connection, they extend their bodies outward and successfully alter their states of consciousness. Still others have confused the boundaries between living and dying, generating an environment in which life and death have succeeded in permeating each other. Beckett's posthumanism more than rhymed with the moods of the postwar period, while the cosmist impulse was ultimately doomed to a dramatic false start. This and other factors led to an almost complete neglect of cosmism for many decades. Today, when the concepts voiced by the cosmists do not cause a shock, but rather seem more than timely, the cosmist stamp on these concepts is almost indistinguishable. The idea of the human body's radical transformation and the barely perceptible doubt of cosmism itself in the humanity of transfigured beings are ubiquitously echoed a hundred years later, while the exceptionally creative nature of the cosmist movement has been intricately twisted in the mirror of a speculative present.

That such a false start occurred probably means that the cosmist spring was stuck on the wrong points on the historical-temporal axis. Hidden simultaneously in the distant past and still vaguely discernible future, the spring lags too far behind the axis of the present. In this sense, the archival nature of exhibitions dealing with cosmism takes on a new dimension in bringing parts of the spring closer to the elusive present. These projects seemingly aspire to slam on the brakes so that cosmism's body flies ahead and thus catches up with and, perhaps, overtakes the present moment. This slamming always forces the parts of the spring stuck in the past to expand rapidly. If they expand too far, they can snap, generating new spirals and new linkages in our immediate vicinity. At the same time, with the cosmist body's headlong flight into the here-and-now, the ruptured, severed spiral ends falling on our heads could be fruitful, supplying new viable shoots, coupled with the germs of the speculative present: the spring's mobility would nicely facilitate hybridization. In the end, only a hybrid, constantly mutating cosmist project can maintain its momentum. The cosmist worm with a thousand eyes shall finally emerge from the soil to catch a sunbeam and reflect it off its shiny skin.

**X**

*Translated from the Russian by Thomas Campbell.  
Drawings by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky.*

**Natalya Serkova** is a writer, art theorist, and co-founder  
of **TZVETNIK**.

- 1  
N. F. Fedorov, "Gorizonta'l'noe polozenie i vertika'l'noe" (The horizontal position and the vertical), in *Sochineniia* (Works) (Mysl', 1982), 516.
- 2  
Ibid., 520.
- 3  
V. S. Solov'ev, "Krasota v prirode" (Beauty in nature), in *Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Works in two volumes), vol. 2 (Mysl', 1990), 378–79.
- 4  
A. K. Gorskii, "Ogromnyi ocherk" (Large essay), in *Sochineniia* (Works) (Raritet, 1995) 212.
- 5  
Ibid., 222.
- 6  
Ibid., 238.
- 7  
Ibid., 259.
- 8  
Ibid., 259.
- 9  
Solov'ev, "Krasota v prirode," 371.
- 10  
P. A. Florenskii, "Organoproektsiia" (Organ projection), in *Russkii kosmizm: antologiiia filosofskoi mysli* (Russian cosmism: an anthology of philosophical thought), eds. S. G. Semenova and A. G. Gacheva (Pedagogika-Press, 1993), 161.
- 11  
K. E. Tsiolkovskii, "Monizm Vselennoi" (The monism of the universe), in *Russkii kosmizm*, 265.
- 12  
K. E. Tsiolkovskii, "Zhivye sushchestva v kosmose" (Living beings in space), in *Put' k zvezdam* (The way to the stars) (Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1960), 302.
- 13  
Ibid., 306.

Anastasia Gacheva

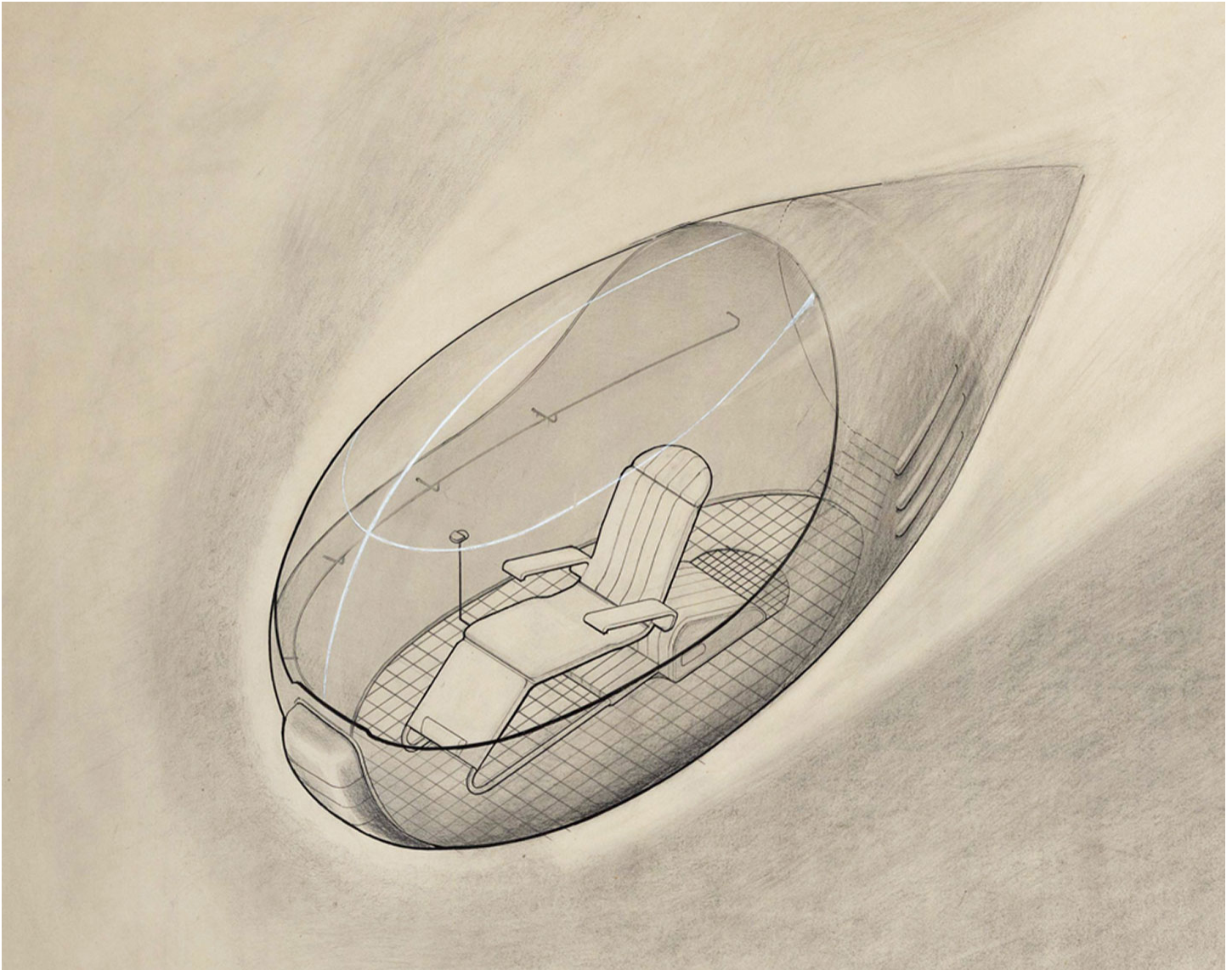
# Art as the Overcoming of Death: From Nikolai Fedorov to the Cosmists of the 1920s

Russian cosmism—a trend in Russian philosophical thought of the second half of the nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century—is one of the original variations of international cosmism. Its founder is Nikolai Fedorov, the author of *The Philosophy of the Common Task*. We can distinguish two of its main branches: a natural-scientific (Sergei Podolinsky, Nikolai Umov, Vladimir Vernadsky, Alexander Chizhevsky, N. G. Holodnyi, V. F. Kuprevich) and a religious-philosophical one. The latter includes not only Fedorov's followers of the 1920s through the 1930s (Alexander Gorsky, Nikolai Setnitsky, and Valerian Muravyov), but also such major figures of Russian religious philosophy as Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Pavel Florensky. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's cosmist philosophy and the "Vsemir" (Allworld) teachings of Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin occupy a special place in the cosmist "family of ideas."

Russian cosmism regards the interrelations between humankind and cosmos, microcosm, and macrocosm in a projective, active-creative sense. Humankind, according to this school of thought, is not just a *spectator* of the world, of earth's vast expanse, of the majestic panorama of the starry sky, but also an *active participant* in the process of the world's creation. A human is a creature on whom the fates of history and the final destinies of the universe alike depend. As Fedorov puts it, "Born by the tiny earth, a *spectator* of the boundless space, a spectator of the different worlds which are part of this space, must become their resident and *master*."<sup>1</sup>

The cosmist aesthetic is closely bound with the theme of immortality. By pronouncing that "life is good, and death is evil,"<sup>2</sup> that "immortal life is the true good, while death is the true evil,"<sup>3</sup> Fedorov not only unites the category of good with the category of life, as well as ethics with ontology; he also interprets life as striving to ascend towards immortality, as participating in what Vladimir Solovyov, in one of his later articles, would call "a cosmic growth." Fedorov invites us to "imagine the great joy of those who are resurrecting and those who are resurrected, a joy in which goodness, truth, and beauty are present in their full unity and perfection."<sup>4</sup> In this way Fedorov completes the trinomial of Alexander Baumgarten, the famous father of aesthetics. Baumgarten's "truth"—"goodness"—"beauty" in Fedorov are complemented with a fourth category of "perfection." The same image of elevating being to a perfect state is found in Pavel Florensky:

The image of Sophia is Mother, Bride, and Wife of the image of Christ-Man. She is his equal, she awaits his care, caress and impregnation by spirit. Man-Husband ought to love the World-Wife, to be united with her, to cultivate her and to tend to her, to rule her and to direct her toward enlightenment and spirituality, to guide her elemental might and chaotic drives towards creativity, so that her creaturely nature may give birth



Universal booth for transportation (1928) by Georgi Tichonowitsch Krutikow. Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow. Image from the book „Architektur für die russische Raumfahrt,” (DOM Publishers, 2013). Copyright: Philipp Meuser

to the primordial cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

Man's relation to the world here appears as an aesthetic relation. This is not a passive “contemplation” of the beauty of being, but a *cosmicization* of the world: a creative act that consists of overcoming the dark, chaotic elements of nature—that shapeless monstrosity—which is a trait of its “fallen” state and which manifests itself in death, decomposition, devouring, displacement.

Nikolai Fedorov and Sergei Bulgakov held that the task of human creativity is to assist in “restoring the world to the splendor of incorruptibility it had before the Fall.”<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Nikolai Setnitsky, and Valerian Muravyov were developing the idea of “continuous

creation.” This idea became a religious-philosophical counterpart to the notion of active, directed evolution that was developed by cosmism of the natural-scientific bent. The act of divine creation here exceeds the first seven days and extends to the entire process of the world's development, from the initial Edenic state in which the world is imbued with the potentiality for a benevolent maturation and strives for an absolute (its ideal program, so to speak), to the transfiguration of the entire universe into a Divine Kingdom. History is understood as the “eighth day of creation,” in which the active role is given to humankind.

Beauty in the philosophy of cosmism is not an aesthetic category, but an ontological one. Beauty is a measure of creation's perfection, its spirituality, goodness, and fullness. It is one of the crucial characteristics of the divine





Theophanes the Greek's fresco in the Church of the Transfiguration of the Savior on Ilyina street in Novgorod, 1378.

plan of being. Fedorov, Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky all agreed on that. Solovyov defines beauty as a complete union between idea and form, between spirit and flesh. Beauty for Solovyov is “spiritual flesh” that restores and gives new life to the classical ideal of *kalokagathia*. He paints the development of the world as a “gradual and persistent” process of the embodiment of the divine spark in chaotic and formless matter: first in the nonorganic sphere (water, rocks, minerals), then in plants and animals (a process that is accompanied by unavoidable sufferings and the dead ends of “unfinished sketches of unsuccessful creations”), and, finally, in humankind, who becomes an absolute form for being and spirit.<sup>7</sup> The world’s ascent toward perfection from now on should move along the line from humanity to divine-humanity and from matter to divine-matter, from the “cruel life” of postlapsarian nature, with its “double impenetrability” of things and phenomena (they cannot simultaneously occupy the same point in space and supersede each other in time), toward the state of the “absolute unity” and “universal syzygy.”

The theory about the ontology of beauty, about its being “as much of an absolute foundation of the world as Logos,”<sup>8</sup> was comprehensively developed in the sophiology of Sergei Bulgakov. In *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (1912) he defines Sophia (Divine Wisdom) as a composite ideal image of the world and humankind—an image that is eternally contained in God, in beauty, in glory, and in imperishability. Divine wisdom “soars” over the world, illuminating it with divine light and connecting it with a living thread to God.<sup>9</sup> It doesn’t abandon the created world even after the original sin and continues to guide humankind and nature towards the restoration of lost unity. Bulgakov holds that art is most receptive to the “sophiological foundation of the world.” By creating in beauty, by aiming to realize magnificent images, the artist becomes a conduit for the light of divine wisdom and illuminates matter through it, “revealing creation in the light of transfiguration.”<sup>10</sup>

Cosmists of the natural-scientific orientation also tend to regard beauty as a kind of entelechy of the world, as an ideal that imparts a necessary initial impulse to the cosmogonic process and then continues to sustain it, keeping it on the necessary course. Nikolai Umov, a physicist and a philosopher, defined beauty as a visible manifestation of a fundamental property of the living matter that he called harmony (*stroinost’*). According to Umov, a human being is the highest embodiment of such harmony. Acutely sensitive to every instance of disharmony, striving to increase harmony in all spheres of life, humankind imparts the name “beauty” to all instances of harmony. A sense of beauty is a regulator of human behavior in the world; it guides people towards the realization of their evolutionary purpose: to conquer chaos, death, and entropy, to be *cosmisators* of a boundless universe, to become true “apostles of light.”<sup>11</sup>

Fedorov, who gave a comprehensive description of

cosmist aesthetics in *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, strove to understand the ultimate problems and aims of art by turning to its origins, to primordial antiquity, to the dawn of humankind. He was convinced: the principle impetus to what we call art was given by the awareness of mortality, by the feeling of loss and longing for the deceased. Art, according to Fedorov, is born by the grave; the creative impulse begins with grief. Through physical necessity, humans who bury their dead give them new life in the shape of monuments, and aim to recreate them through painting or sculpture—to restore them to existence, if only through representation. Fedorov emphasizes that art, in its origins, is an attempt at “artificial resurrection”: by following a genuine heartfelt emotion, it restores what through “a physical necessity” was buried in the ground.

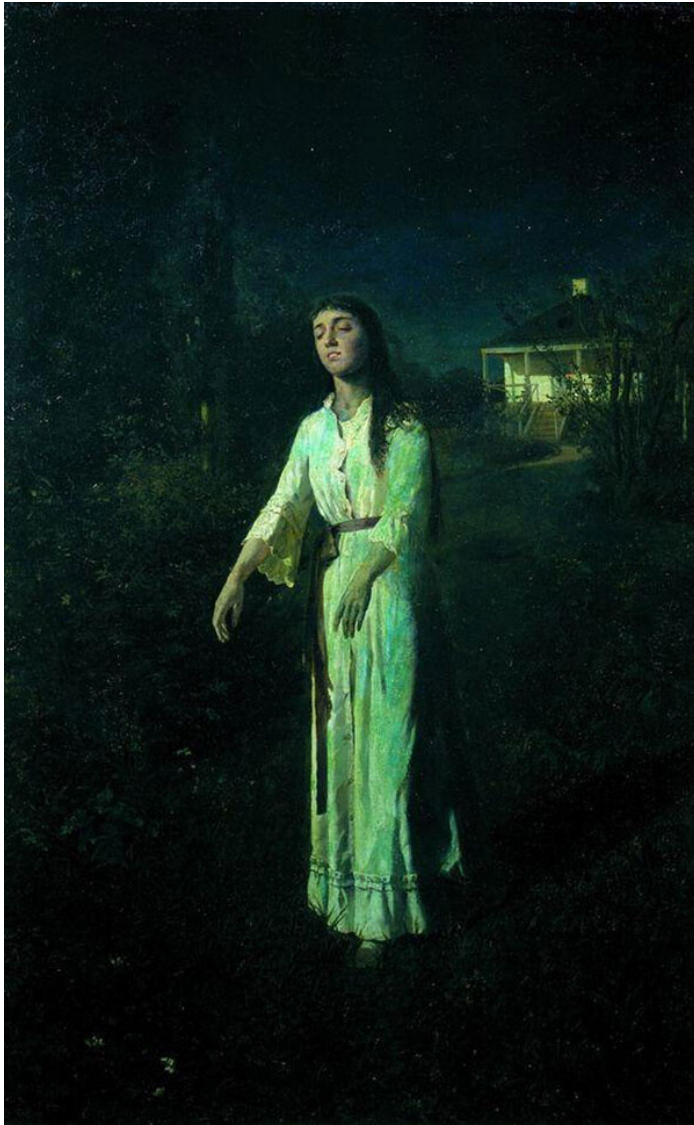
The protest against mortality, the hunger for immortality and resurrection, bestowed an initial impulse to human creativity. Fedorov remarks that it was out of a feeling of loss, out of protest against death that the first artistic monuments appeared. They were intended to recreate the image of the deceased through painting or sculpture, to restore his or her likeness at least as a representation.

Among the diverse, always aphoristic and figurative definitions that Fedorov gives to art, there is the following: art as “a countermeasure against the Fall.” Fedorov illustrates this definition with the example of architecture. Its creations are extended vertically, visibly demonstrating defiance of the law of gravity. This law embodies for Fedorov the force of nature’s necessity, which leads all organic and inorganic bodies towards decay, sin, and death. Architecture gathers and artistically organizes natural matter and creates out of it a new, perfect, and harmonious world. Architectural space is ruled by different laws—the laws developed and applied by humankind itself.

In this way, the aesthetics of cosmism emphasize a projective, transformative property of art. Art realizes in a small-scale, preliminary, and “experimental” manner the principle of *regulation* that, Fedorov was convinced, should become the foundation for human activity in the world. This principle is radically opposed to the consumerist attitude toward the world, to the exploitation of earth’s resources, which distorts nature rather than bringing harmony into it. Present-day art for Fedorov should be an experimental antecedent to the future universal creativity that will truly transform life. We find a similar thought in Vladimir Solovyov. He stresses the prefigurative quality of artistic reality: it has the power to reveal the image of the future world, a world in which the “dark force” currently ruling “material reality” would be overcome. Art is called to become a “prophecy” about the future Heavenly Kingdom, a “transitional link between the beauty of nature and the beauty of the future life.”<sup>12</sup>

The transformative, regulatory property of art is most





Ivan Kramskoy, *Somnambulant (Сомнамбула)*, 1871. Oil on canvas.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

distinct in “sacred” religious art. Here it adopts the necessary power and directional force and is wholly oriented toward the higher goal. Fedorov writes a lot about the symbolism of the temple. It embodies a religious and artistic model for the transfiguration of the universe; it is “a project of the world as it must be, that is, a project of the new earth and the new sky, filled with a force that is neither destructive nor mortifying, but all-constructive and life-building.”<sup>13</sup> Fedorov regards the liturgy that takes place within its walls—the holy communion of believers, united in a collective prayer for the dead—as a model for the future liturgy that will take place outside of church, for the universal collective task of transfigured humanity that will restore life to those “from whom it received life.”<sup>14</sup>

Using the example of art to demonstrate the principle of regulation—the *mature*, truly creative attitude toward and ability to act in the world—Fedorov points out art’s double

orientation. It is directed not only outside, toward surrounding life, but also inward, toward the nature of humankind itself.

Humans, for Fedorov, are not only creative but also self-creating creatures. And “the first act” of his self-invention is to adopt a vertical position.<sup>15</sup> Thus, long before the erection of monuments, temples, and architectural constructions, humankind marked its arrival into the world by a radical opposition to the force of gravity—a force that aims to drive every creature into prostration, that does not allow anyone to rise above prescribed limitations—and declared itself above any animal fate. Religious, devout striving toward the sky, toward the universe and God, became humankind’s first artistic impulse and act. This artistic act was not aimed at creating a second reality; it was not an attempt at symbolic resurrection. Instead, it was an act of self- and life-creation: “In assuming a vertical position, as with every act of self-overcoming, a man or the son of man becomes an artist and an artwork—he becomes a temple ... This is the aesthetic interpretation of life and creation. Moreover, not only is it aesthetic, it is also sacred. Our life is an act of aesthetic creativity.”<sup>16</sup>

The religious act of rebellion, of the overcoming of the self, opens a long history of human artistic self-creation. Its apogee, according to Fedorov, should be a complete, not only moral, but also physical transformation of a person, the acquisition of a new and immortal nature (“a spiritual body,” to use St. Paul’s definition). This for Fedorov is the most important part of Christian activity in the world; it fully reveals the divine plan for humankind to become a creator, a being who is good, conscious, and free. (Fedorov repeatedly emphasizes that “only a self-created creature may be free.”)<sup>17</sup> This is the highest form of art; this is the art of a divine transfigured humanity, or, as Fedorov writes, of a “theoanthropourgical” humanity. This art “consists in God creating man through man himself.”<sup>18</sup>

Humans, therefore, are not only the subjects of artistic creativity, but also objects to which artistic energies are applied. Already in the 1920s this thesis would receive special attention from Vasily Chekrygin, a Russian avant-garde artist who was close in spirit to the Russian cosmists. Chekrygin is the author of “Resurrection: A Migration of People into Space,” a series of graphic works, sketches for the future frescoes of the Cathedral-Museum of the Common Task. Chekrygin, like Fedorov, places humankind at the center of the new synthetic art—universal in its intended scope and scale—the purpose of which would be to “build Paradise.”<sup>19</sup> A human being for Chekrygin is both a subject and an object of art. In Chekrygin’s terms, he is a creation and, simultaneously, a creator. He is an embodiment of the “highest synthesis of the living arts,” “a living painting, sculpture, architecture, and music.”<sup>20</sup> He is a living, albeit so far incomplete and imperfect, artistic creation, who is destined to overcome himself and to become a regulator

and a creator of his own still mortal nature. In the end, humankind is bound to become a builder and helmsman of the entirety of creation.

Achieving “complete symphonicity,” immortality, restoration from death—all these are the composite parts of the “art of reality.” According to Fedorov, the art of reality should replace the then-current “art of representations,” which Fedorov reduced to something capable only of creating a “second,” artistic “reality.” Such art of representations can overcome entropy and death only on the scale of an “immortal masterpiece.” It freezes time not in the real duration of being and history, but in the space of a painting. It resurrects the likeness of the deceased not in the living flesh, but only in language, sculpture, or on a canvas. To remain on the level of the creativity of “dead representations” would mean to castrate art, to hobble it, to profane its true task, to turn it into an aesthetic folly, into a mere *pastime* that does not commit anyone to anything. However, if we deeply ponder a myth that contains all of humanity’s innermost desires—for instance, the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, so beloved by the artists of the modernist epoch—then it will become clear that the creation of this second reality, no matter how perfect it may be, no matter how much aesthetic admiration it might elicit, is not the genuine goal of art. Its goal is life itself—a perfect life, built according to the laws of beauty and harmony, a transfigured and incorruptible life not wounded by the sting of death.

Some time later, while analyzing the essence of a creative act and the meaning of inspiration, Alexander Gorsky, a philosopher-cosmist, would emphasize that a creator of an artistic image is striving to project and to fix in reality a vision and intuition of a “new perfect nature,” which is “better and fuller than the one we are chained to,” which doesn’t satisfy us.<sup>21</sup> And we mustn’t stop with anticipations and intuitions alone. We must be reborn, we must shroud ourselves with this new image and rebuild our mortal body in accordance with it.

Thus, the theme of art as life-creation enters the aesthetics of cosmism. Its sphere is no longer the world of imagination and fantasy, but the entire universe, all “celestial and now soulless starry worlds, which regard us coldly and almost sorrowfully.”<sup>22</sup> Cosmists believe that art should “embody the absolute ideal not in imagination alone, but in reality. It must spiritualize and transform our real life.”<sup>23</sup>

In his *Supramoralism*, Fedorov gives the following picture of the cosmic art of the future: the “sons of man” having, at last, reached “the age of Christ,” having mastered the laws of the structure and function of matter, having learned to overcome the forces of decay, will transform these worlds, will unite them “into an artistic whole, into an artwork, the collective composite author of which will be, in the likeness of the Holy Trinity, the entirety of humankind as the composite of all resurrected and

recreated generations.”<sup>24</sup> Art would then truly resurrect and restore the image of the deceased—not on wood, stone, or canvas, but already in reality, in the indestructibility of the union of spirit, soul, and the physical body. The human body itself—now imperfect, not self-sufficient, and mortal in principle—will be the new object of art.

The main thesis of Russian cosmism is the following: the laws of artistic creativity, which produce the world of perfect, beautiful forms, should become the laws of reality itself; they must actively create life. Fedorov writes that “aesthetics is a science about the restoration of all sentient beings who used to populate the tiny earth (this drop that has reflected itself in the entire universe and that has reflected the whole of the universe in itself), so that they can spiritualize (and govern) all enormous celestial worlds, which are now devoid of rational beings.”<sup>25</sup>

However, this enormous task cannot be accomplished by means of a present-day art that is nothing but a *plaything*. Achieving this task would require overcoming the limitations of art, creating art with a new kind of integrity and capacity for harmonious and synthetic activity. Such an art would be simultaneously world-building and expressive; it would influence reality at the very same time as it dresses it up in wonderful forms.

The most important stage on art’s path towards achieving a new mature state is its close collaboration with scientific thought. Science, unlike art with its whimsical fantasy, does not produce ideal images. Instead science studies the properties of the real world, deeply examines reality, while organizing and systematizing humanity’s labor according to the laws that it has uncovered. Fedorov asserts that without the fastidious labor of learning that science takes upon itself, the artistic management of the world would be impossible.

However, to get fully united with art, science itself must be radically broadened and morally transformed. It must advance beyond isolated tests and experiments conducted in the confines of a laboratory and instead begin an exploration on a new truly universal scale. It must work not in the service of mutual destruction, not in the name of the ideals of the society of consumption, not for the profit of a select few, but for the salvation and regulation of life. It will befall science to chart the paths toward realizing the project of the perfect world that is revealed in the highest instances of art.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Fedorov’s followers, such as Gorsky, Setnitsky, and Muravyov, continued to develop the idea of synthesizing science and art, knowledge and creativity. Such a synthesis felt especially relevant to the people of that epoch, who experienced world and civil wars, postrevolutionary devastation, and hunger. All of these thinkers posed the question of whether art and science had the right to focus exclusively on theoretical







and aesthetic activity at the time when humanity faced global, planetary, and cosmic problems and tasks.

While emphasizing idealized collaboration between science and art, cosmists of the 1920s also wished to add labor and religion to this equation. Religion rules, for it is the creativity of the ideal. Art that is founded on an ideal organizes science effectively and dynamically, while “coordinating, systematizing, and guiding all the analytical, research, and experimental activity of humankind.” Science, in turn, imparts real organization to “all human labor” and guides it toward the “transfiguration and humanization of nature,” resurrection, and life-creation.<sup>26</sup>

The philosophical and aesthetic views of Valerian Muravyov developed in the context of life-creationist aesthetics. He conceptualized future culture as a cumulative, synthetic activity, the aim of which was to conquer space and time and to establish the “cosmocracy and pantocracy” of the human kind. Muravyov believed that overcoming the existing divide between the types of activities which enact a “symbolic” transformation of reality (literature, painting, music, architecture), and those “which change the world around us in actuality and not just in thought or imagination,” to be the first step toward this culture. Among the latter activities he counted “economy, industry, agriculture, technology, medicine, eugenics, practical biology, pedagogy,” etc. Muravyov was convinced that both symbolic and practical cultures must be united and organized within a unified plan of cosmic construction.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Muravyov particularly emphasized those directions of applied science which deal with “the question of the biological enhancement of man,” and with “the transformation and rejuvenation” of his physical nature. In the future, Muravyov argued, it would be these trends that would give rise to “a special kind of art of enhanced anthropology—anthropotechnology or even anthropourgy.”<sup>28</sup> Such an art would be capable of putting to active use the accomplishments of medicine, chemistry, and genetics in order to creatively transform people’s physical constitutions.

Perhaps, in the future, new constitutions would be invented, which would be absolutely free from the negative aspects of organic matter today. New bodies would be created, which would possess far greater plasticity, might, agility. They would move at great speed without any external devices, they would sustain themselves through photosynthesis and would not be affected by the laws of gravity to the extent that they affect physical bodies today. At the same time, they would think, feel, sense, and be able to act remotely.<sup>29</sup>

In his daring dream, Muravyov even anticipated the possibility of humanity cultivating a new kind of life, ushering into the world sentient, thinking creatures not through “unconscious birth,” but through a collective effort of “symphonic” creativity: “Just as musicians in an

orchestra attune and harmonize with each other and just as symphonic unity gradually emerges through a combination of inspiration, temperament, and technique, so should the creators of a new man unite in a single harmonious pursuit of the new human ideal.”<sup>30</sup>

The aesthetics of cosmism, with its demands for the integrity of art and the synthesis of science and art in the name of the common task, were significantly different from the trends of the Russian avant-garde, which also insisted on the artistic transformation of life. Avant-garde artists envisioned this transformation happening either along an artistic—and *only* an artistic—path, or along a scientific and technological path. They likened the work of an artist to that of an engineer or designer, and art to production. Alexander Gorsky, while criticizing symbolism’s theurgic utopia, was right to point out the fantastic and utopian nature of the desire to surpass reality through individual, instantaneous, Promethean drives, to overcome the curse of illness through art alone. At the same time, Russian cosmists emphasized that the problem of “life and art” could not be resolved merely by calling for the unity of art and production. For art’s most important and specific quality—its transformation and immortalization of reality, its ability to represent ideals of world and humankind in an image—disappears once art is reduced to mere craft, to the manufacturing of things. Vasily Chekrygin understood this well. By defending, in a discussion with fellow artists, the nature of the creative act, he drew attention to yet another particularity of art: unlike technology, it does not build or construct, but rather constantly gives birth to its creations. Art is not mechanistic, but organic. Masterpieces of engineering genius—the most sophisticated, precise instruments and machines, monumental constructions, and clever devices—astonish us with their “ugly, unnatural constructiveness.” “Technical construction (of contemporary instrumental weaponized technology) does not carry within itself the traces of artistic construction”—a construction that, while embodying in itself new qualities previously not found in nature, still preserves natural plasticity, elegance, and beauty.<sup>31</sup>

For this reason, cosmist thinkers founded the *Organizatsiya mirovozdeistviya* (Organization of world-transformation), which was meant to encompass all types of creative human activity, all spheres of theoretical and practical application—on the creative principle found in art. Art opens before humanity an opportunity to move away from the present instrumental, technical progress, which acts upon nature only from outside, by use of mechanisms and machines, to a new, mature type of progress that would be organic, that would transform and spiritualize the world through a living, non-mediated touch.

In conjunction with this last point, it is impossible not to mention Alexander Gorsky’s ideas, expressed in his tractatus on aesthetics, entitled “An enormous sketch” (1924) and further developed in his letters from the late



Deviant art user Anestazy's illustration in honor of Tsiolkovskiy The Dreamer from Kalugaby (date unknown).

1930s and early 1940s. By turning toward the study of the artistic process and by drawing on concepts from psychoanalysis, as well as from various spheres of art (primarily music and literature), Gorsky came to the conclusion that a profound connection and psycho-physiological proximity exists between creative and erotic arousal. Gorsky described the particular autoeroticism of an artist. This autoeroticism is nourished by a deep-seated striving for perfection and integrity. It carries within itself "a dream of a new body," of harmony, beauty, and spirituality. The work of artistic imagination is directed by an "erotic admiration of one's own body in its totality," by a desire "to see a different ... more attractive image of oneself, an image that would contain the best elements of the earlier appearance now supplemented by the new and previously missing ones."<sup>32</sup>

The eros of enhancement, of transfiguration and elevation, this passionate striving toward an ideal, is present within the artistic drive on an unconscious, profoundly intuitive level. However, its role in art is tremendous. It is this very eros of enhancement that is the source of that mysterious "lyrical excitement" which is so different from "everyday"

arousal in its purposefulness and regulatory and constructive force. Gorsky believed that a new type of eroticism is born through transformations stimulated by this excitement. This eroticism is magnetic and dispersed. Arousal isn't limited to the sexual sphere, but spreads throughout the entire organism. It forms around itself a powerful, energetically charged atmosphere, a "magnetic force field" of sorts. This erotic cloud surrounding the body gives rise to a feeling of wholeness, completion, and joyful omnipotence, and soon the artist's entire being is alight with a striving for creativity. Through this creativity, life-transmitting energy finds release.

Eros in art constructs not only bodies; it also constructs the world. It is directed toward the harmonization of the spiritual and physical appearances of humankind as well as its natural and cosmic environment. The creative act opens, "for an organism, the possibility to limitlessly expand the sphere of its vibrations by freely emanating into space and boldly shaping and transforming the finest structural nets of the surrounding matter by its waves."<sup>33</sup> Gorsky admits that this possibility is still only embryonic at the (then-)current stage of art, but stresses that its evolution is advancing steadily from an indirect and mechanical to an immediate, organic, and "miraculous" influence: "so that the creative act ... will resemble the birth of a new living being," so that artistic images will appear on nature's canvas independently, without the assistance of hands and instruments, so that diverse natural elements and forces will compose a harmonious whole under the influence of smooth streams of energy directed by the creative will.<sup>34</sup>

Inspired by Plato's teachings on the cosmogenic force of eros, Fedorov's idea of "positive chastity," and the ideas expressed in Vladimir Solovyov's *The Meaning of Love*, Gorsky places before art the task of regulating erotic energy. Until now, this energy has either been squandered in sexual acts and reproducing through childbirth short-lived mortal life, or in searching for sublimation in artistic creativity, which can create only dead albeit beautiful things. Gorsky, on the other hand, demands that an unconscious, chaotically boiling sexual energy be introduced into consciousness. His reasoning is partially based in the teachings of yoga. However, his main inspiration (which he boldly transcends) is the experience of the Christian wanderers. Gorsky believes that self-control, the labor of attention, sobriety, and spiritual concentration—all those elements which are at the core of hesychastic "intelligent action"—shouldn't block erotic centers, but, on the contrary, must illuminate them with the light gained through prayer. It must direct the mighty forces of eros toward constructive, resurrective, and "body-building" goals.

The metamorphosis of erotic energy, according to Gorsky, is one of the main stages that humanity must pass through to achieve integral, perfect nature—"a new body," in which nothing unconscious or blind remains, but everything is

spiritualized and subjugated to reason and moral sensibility. This erotic energy is, at the same time, a necessary condition for art's transition from the stage of anticipation and prophecy towards actual comprehensive life-creation. By achieving a quality of full "organicism" (Fedorov's term), by mastering all of its living forces and energies, humanity as a whole, and each person individually, will be able to multiply life in reality and not just symbolically, to reproduce it "by means different from those of unconscious animality."<sup>35</sup>

The philosophy of cosmism, in its theoretical ideas and views on art, had a significant impact on the culture—and in particular Russian culture—of the twentieth century. The influence of Fedorov's speculations about resurrection, Tsiolkovsky's cosmist ideas, and Vernadsky's notion of the noosphere can be traced in the works of Valery Briusov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Kliuev and Sergei Yesenin, Velemir Khlebnikov and Nikolai Zabolotsky, the poets of the "Smithy" and "cosmist" groups, the biocosmists, Mikhail Prishvin and Maxim Gorky, Andrei Platonov and Boris Pasternak, Chinghiz Aimatov, Anatoli Kim, and others. The aesthetics of Russian cosmism infused the artistic strivings of the Russian avant-garde (Andrei Belyi, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Chekrygin, Pavel Filonov, and others). However, this is a topic for a separate conversation.

## X

*Translated from the Russian by Anastasiya Osipova.*

**Anastasia Gacheva** is a philologist and Chief Research Associate at the Gorky Institute of World Literature at the Russian Academy of Sciences. She is coeditor of the complete works of Nikolai Fedorov and the anthologies *Der russische Kosmismus* (1993) and *N.F. Fedorov: pro et contra* (2004–08). Gacheva is in charge of the literary and philosophical estate for several cosmist thinkers from the 1920s and 1930s. She has published widely on the intellectual and creative dialogs between Fedorov, Dostoyevsky, and Solovyov. She has also written about Russian cosmism's historiography and aesthetics, as well as migration movements in the postrevolutionary era.

- 1  
N. F. Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), vol. 4, t.T.2 (M., 1995), 243.
- 2  
Ibid., 136.
- 3  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), vol. 4, t.T.1 (M., 1995), 390.
- 4  
Ibid., 136.
- 5  
P. A. Florensky, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 4, t. T. 3(1) (M., 2000), 440.
- 6  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), vol. 4, t.T.1 (M., 1995), 401.
- 7  
V. S. Solovyov, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 2, t.T.2 (M., 1988), 358 and others.
- 8  
S. N. Bulgakov, *Svet nevecherny: Sozertsanya i umozrenya* (The light of the unknown: Contemplation and speculation) (M., 1994), 219.
- 9  
S. N. Bulgakov, *Filosofya hoziaistva* ; Bulgakov, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 2, t.T.1 (M., 1993), 158.
- 10  
Bulgakov, *Svet nevecherny* (The light of the unknown), 306.
- 11  
N. A. Umov, *Evolutsya fizicheskikh nauk i ee ideinoe znachenye* (The evolution of the physical sciences and their ideological significance); Umov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), T.3. (M., 1916), 517.
- 12  
Solovyov, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 2, t.T.2, 398.
- 13  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), vol. 4, t.T.1, 159.
- 14  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), vol. 4, t.T.1 (M., 1995), 401, 297.
- 15  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works) , T.2, 249.
- 16  
Ibid., 116.
- 17  
Ibid., 229.
- 18  
Ibid.
- 19  
V. N. Chekrygin to N. N. Punin, February 7, 1922; *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* (Soviet art studies), 1976, vol. 2, 330.
- 20  
Ibid.
- 21  
A. K. Gorsky, "Ogromnyi ocherk" (An enormous sketch); Gorsky and N. A. Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works) (M., 1995), 242.
- 22  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works) , T.2, 202.
- 23  
Ibid., 404.
- 24  
Fedorov, *Sobranie sochineny* (Collected works), T.1, 401.
- 25  
Ibid., T.2., 231.
- 26  
A. K. Gorsky, *Organizatsiya mirovozdeistviya* (Organization of world-transformation); Gorsky and Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works), 166, 179.
- 27  
V. N. Muravyov, *Vseobshaia proizvoditel'naia matematika* (Universal productive mathematics); Muravyov, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 2, book 2 (M., 2011), 133.
- 28  
Ibid., 137, 138.
- 29  
V. N., Muravyov, *Kul'tura budushego* (Culture of the future); Muravyov, *Sochinenya* (Works), vol. 2, book 2, 177.
- 30  
Ibid., 175.
- 31  
Gorsky, *Organizatsiya mirovozdeistviya* (Organization of world-transformation); Gorsky and Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works), 164.
- 32  
Gorsky, "Ogromnyi ocherk" (An enormous sketch); Gorsky and Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works), 200, 204.
- 33  
Ibid., 193–94.
- 34  
Gorsky and Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works), 200, 277.
- 35  
Gorsky, *Organizatsiya mirovozdeistviya* (Organization of world-transformation); Gorsky and Setnitsky, *Sochinenya* (Works), 153.

We'll let you guys prophesy  
We gon' see the future first  
—Frank Ocean, "Nikes"

1.0

The first shot of *Chef's Table* finds chef Grant Achatz standing before an abstract painting. "We would go to art galleries," he says in voice-over, "and you would see these giant-scale pieces of art, and I would always say, 'Why can't we plate on *that*?' " Cut to a top-down shot of a dinner table. A rubbery cloth unrolls, left to right. Violins chime and arms clad in chef's whites dip spoons into little ceramic pots of sauce, brown and white and yellow, trailing skeins across the tabletop.<sup>1</sup> A version of this Pollock-like "splatter plating" serves as the opening title for the second and third seasons of *Chef's Table*, as if to telegraph through this widely legible gesture a notion of creative genius: food can be art, too, and chefs artists.

Jack the Dripper of haute cuisine? Yes, and no. A star in the world of molecular gastronomy, Achatz is a particularly granular sort of chef. His restaurant Alinea features chemically inflected dishes engineered to produce beguiling effects. In his kitchen—which, the critics note, looks like a lab—Achatz and his crew realize such visions as floating candy balloons, white beans served on pillows of nutmeg-scented air, and mini piles of edible rubble made of mushrooms and herbs and spritzed, graffiti-style, with carrot juice.

Nods to fine-art and street-art formalism aren't what make Achatz's dishes art; rather, it's the touches of genius that the auteur chef gives to edible matter that allow him to invoke a mélange of artistic lineages. Art here is an abstract added value—an unnamable quality of being-art, not immediately accounted for by the chemistry of the dishes and so requiring some supplementary and unsubtle signification. Achatz's work is an extreme case of the dynamic characterizing most haute cuisine wherein the artistry and experience of the meal wildly exceed its nutritional value. Even the most perfect tomato won't sell for \$400, points out Abigail Fuller, one *Chef's Table* director. But purée that same tomato, press and freeze it in the shape of a strawberry, and you can charge whatever you want.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, such a tastefully constituted strawberry still "tastes" (is flavored) like tomato. Achatz and his peers animate the opposition between *flavor* and *taste* that organizes so much aesthetic debate. Flavor is the brute recipe, the chemicals that so prosaically trigger our tongues and noses in order to produce the more ephemeral, rarefied quality called taste. What is tasteful is often derided as flavorless, minimal, and austere, while

Travis Diehl

# Soylent Beige: The Middle Gray of Taste





Film still from the promotional video Soylent 2.0: Now Shipping.

excessive or obvious flavoring (neon-orange cheese, “blue”- and “purple”-flavored drinks) is a sure sign of tastelessness, commonness, and vulgarity. Burping, farting, or eating Fritos in public are tasteless because they represent a capitulation to the body and its collection of instincts, and a corresponding betrayal of the social. Displays of taste, by contrast, reinforce the social against the bodily instincts that would deny its presence. Alongside Greenberg’s heroic Pollock is Pollock the cook, Pollock the dancer, and Pollock the alcoholic.

If the body, and by extension, eating is a problem, haute cuisine proposes to solve this problem by refashioning the rote task of nutrition as a pleasurable, aesthetic experience. The instinctual, antisocial body is a source of unfreedom from which the steady cultivation of taste promises a flavorless escape. The vulgar necessity of food is not so much denied as transformed, patronized, and adorned to the extent that flavor is once again woven up inextricably with taste.

This is not the only solution. In 2014, Rosa Foods released the first commercial version of the nourishing beige powder called Soylent. The solution it offers is the opposite of haute cuisine: instead of maximizing the aesthetic potential in food, it minimizes how much thought we devote to eating. Soylent, says the copy next to its panel of nutritional information, is a product that is “not intended to replace every meal” but that “can replace any

meal.” For roughly \$3 per four hundred calories, Soylent succinctly fulfills the nutritional role of food, leaving you free to enjoy only *meaningful* cuisine. In other words, only tasteful meals need be concerned with flavor; for everything else, there’s Soylent.

The triumph of taste is written into Soylent’s founding myth. Tired of subsisting on ramen noodles and kale while his killer app floundered at famed start-up incubator Y Combinator, Rob Rhinehart applied an engineer’s approach to the problem of nutrition. The sci-fi dream of complete, compact meals was rediscovered, not in pill form, exactly, but as a blend of pulverized nutrients. Mix with water, drink, repeat. After four weeks of consuming nothing but Soylent, Rhinehart reported that his “quantitative” health had improved across the board, from body mass index to cholesterol to lipid counts. The qualitative results were more dramatic:

My mental performance is higher. My inbox and to-do list quickly emptied. I “get” new concepts in my reading faster than before and can read my textbooks twice as long without mental fatigue. I read a book on Number Theory in one sitting, a Differential Geometry book in a weekend, filling up a notebook in the process. Mathematical notation that used to look obtuse is now beautiful. My working memory is noticeably better. I can grasp larger software projects

and longer and more complex scientific papers more effectively. My awareness is higher. I find music more enjoyable. I notice beauty and art around me that I never did before. The people around me seem sluggish. There are fewer “ums” and pauses in my spoken sentences. My reflexes are improved. I walk faster, feel lighter on my feet, spend less time analyzing and performing basic tasks and rely on my phone less for navigation. I sleep better, wake up more refreshed and alert and never feel drowsy during the day. I still drink coffee occasionally, but I no longer need it, which is nice.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside boasts of increased focus and productivity, Rhinehart's self-assessment emphasizes an appreciation for the beauty of math equations and a heightened sense of the art of the everyday. Peeling back and optimizing low-level tasks, like nuking quesadillas, allows for higher-order cognition—math, music, art; culture. Against the dystopian vision of a foodless life, where workers gulp down four hundred calories without leaving their cubicles, Soylent presents itself as a product that lets you prioritize what you enjoy—including food. Official product shots for the first premixed Soylent, called Drink, feature people jogging, hiking, and listening to music. In one, a woman squeezes paint onto a palette on her desk, near small canvases dotted with abstract forms like heavenly bodies in a void. Among her paints and brushes is a bottle of Soylent. During the 2017 Major League Hackathon tour, Soylent encouraged coders to decorate their Soylent bottles and post their art with the hashtag #soylentcanvas.



Still from Netflix's *Chef's Table* (Season 2, Episode 1), with American chef and restaurateur Grant Achatz.

Cliché or not, Soylent's invocation of art and creativity manages to repackage the pairing of total abstraction and high taste for the new millennium. (The questions, corpse-like, return: Is abstraction tasteful? Does it have a flavor? Does it take us out of our bodies or deeper inside them?) The Coffiest Cafe, an immersive brand experience promoting a new caffeinated variant of Soylent, occupied a Los Angeles Arts District storefront for a few days in 2016.

Styled like a smokeless tech incubator, the Coffiest Cafe nevertheless aspired to the clubhouses where the last century's creatives gathered for face time—Parisian cafés and SoHo lofts. Anchoring the decor was *RockGrowth 350* by Arik Levy, a big chrome piece of neo-modernist plop art, like several silver Judds tossed into a starburst.<sup>4</sup> To one side, a bank of commercial refrigerators rose behind a bar resembling the black-over-white Coffiest bottle extruded into a sculpture by Anne Truitt. To the other stood a few chairs and round tables, the café furniture of a bygone era. An unfinished brick wall was dutifully decorated with—not coffee shop art, exactly, but Coffiest art: the two-tone bottle pictured among roasted beans and designer mugs.

Beyond invoking the aura of abstract art, the company has also employed actual artists. The design/marketing firm OkFocus, cofounded by artist Ryder Ripps, developed the original visual identity for Soylent.<sup>5</sup> In addition to Abigail Fuller, panelists at Coffiest Cafe included Kibum Kim, a dealer/gallerist and an instructor at Sotheby's Institute; Samantha Culp and Andrea Hill of Paloma Powers, an art- and artist-driven marketing agency; and Sean Raspet, a contemporary artist specializing in scent- and flavor-based artworks. At the time of the Coffiest Cafe in September 2016, Raspet was in fact employed by Soylent's parent brand Rosa Foods as a flavorist.

Like Achatz, Raspet appeals to smell and taste—the so-called chemical senses—as much as to sight. For the work *(-)* (2012–15), Raspet reverse engineered the formula for Coca-Cola, then reconstituted it with enantiomeric versions of the molecules—a kind of chemical bootlegging, in which asymmetrical molecules are mirrored, like backwards Nike swooshes. Another piece, *Phantom Ringtone* (2013), is a “Fragrance formulation and propylene glycol in HDPE container on steel wall mount; 4.5 Litre bottle” that tastes like the sensation of thinking your phone is buzzing when it isn't. Other works from the same period, like *Ester Vector* (2014), consist of molecules selected for their structure, not their scent—recalling systems-based conceptualism as much as all-over abstraction. Raspet notes that the language for tastes and scents is far less developed than that for sight or sound.<sup>6</sup> This indicates the way perfumes and flavorings tend to mimic nature, or are derived directly from plants and animals. This also indicates the wide-open territory of chemical-based abstract art.

Raspet's experiments led him to Soylent. In 2015 he became an employee of Rosa Foods, working both from their offices and from his own studio. His booth at Frieze New York in 2016 created a stir: instead of art, glass-doored fridges full of Soylent 2.0 lined the walls. In promo shots, models in futuristic gray Soylent jumpsuits posed with bottles and boxes.<sup>7</sup> “My motivations for working with them had to do with having the formulations that I was making circulate in a larger quantity and in a larger cross-section of society,” says Raspet. “Also, [I was

interested in] making an artwork that is a commercial product and is involved with the processes of production, rather than making art that was simply ‘commenting on’ these kinds of things without participating in them.”<sup>8</sup> For Soylent it was a PR coup, and an introduction to a new subset of time-starved “creatives.” For Raspet it was a declaration that he was willing to work within the corporate sector, with tech start-ups, and even *for* them—to envelop his brand in theirs. Raspet’s prototype Pentagon 2.4 flavor debuted at Frieze, in the form of an algal paste; his Nectar variant was available to taste-test at the Coffiest pop-up, and in 2017 became his first commercially available flavor.

Raspet’s first Soylent artworks, *Technical Food* and *Technical Milk* (both 2015), comprise Soylent augmented with flavorful compounds characteristic of “food” and “milk”; an edition in powdered form is packaged in signed, numbered canisters.<sup>9</sup> The project appeared as part of the Swiss Institute’s exhibition “Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau: A 21st-Century Show Home,” a chroma-key green living space furnished with 3-D-printed plastics, meant to “update” Corbusier’s infamous 1925 test home.<sup>10</sup> Two dispensers near the entrance supplied Raspet’s milk- and food-flavored Soylents. There was no kitchen. In the opulent age of Art Deco, Corbusier’s factory-inspired interior was dismissed—like Soylent today—as alien, joyless, and dystopian; maybe so, but it was also the future.



Film still from the opening sequence of *American Psycho* (2000), directed by Mary Harron.

## 2.0

A rich assembly of life’s most essential nutrients, the understated shade of PANTONE 14-1120, Apricot Illusion reflects the very essence of Soylent™. Open and transparent in its packaging and premise, dense and creamy in its appearance and taste, PANTONE 14-1120, Apricot Illusion and Soylent™ are inevitably connected to the classic tastes of simple and healthy eating. Soft and smooth, its inherent warmth and subtle complexity has a layered and expansive, yet thoroughly neutral presence. A color that is as old as time itself, and still completely modern in outlook and

perspective, PANTONE 14-1120, Apricot Illusion speaks eloquently of Soylent™ and our continuing desire for foods that are both efficient and nourishing. If we are the continual servants of our own precarious metabolic pathways, PANTONE 14-1120, Apricot Illusion is our risk and our reward.<sup>11</sup>

What is the middle gray of taste? Rosa Foods describes Soylent’s flavor as “deliciously neutral.” Blog posts announcing updates to the formula note efforts to “provide the most neutral flavor profile possible.”<sup>12</sup> Early versions even used, like Raspet’s *Milk* and *Food*, trace flavorings to enhance its “nonspecific” taste.<sup>13</sup> “We were happy to discover,” wrote Rosa Foods, “that various Soylent 1.4 formula changes resulted in a flavor profile that met our neutrality standards without any artificial flavors. We have removed artificial flavors from the Soylent 1.4 formula entirely.”<sup>14</sup>

Like Raspet’s concept of an abstract chemical art, Soylent pairs a rigorous technological specificity with the opacity of a black box. “I think one of the areas where material becomes both exceedingly abstract and exceedingly concrete and specific,” says Raspet, “is at the level of molecules and purified chemical compounds.”<sup>15</sup> A company that serves “food” in the most generalized, neutralized sense possible also touts the precision of its formula. The ingredients are listed on the various packages and enumerated on the website—along with their sources, from soybeans and sunflowers to algae and beets. Almost comically, Soylent boasts a “20% daily value” of two dozen micronutrients.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, before launching Rosa Foods (as Rosa Labs), Rhinehart developed Soylent as “open source” via online forums, like the software many of its early adopters code for a living.<sup>17</sup> Its products are numbered like release versions: Soylent Drink is 2.0, and Powder is currently 1.8. As with a good piece of software, Soylent’s back-end tweaking underlies a product meant to be frictionless—meant, in other words, to just work. Soylent users needn’t worry about how. In fact Soylent, in its efficient neutrality, aims for a kind of ubiquity and autonomy—an abstraction, a total formalism of food—that would transcend its physical substrate, even to the point of denial. Soylent’s slogan: Free Your Body.

In their minutely calibrated abstraction, both Raspet’s chemical works and Rhinehart’s Soylent resurrect a conversation familiar to abstraction and abstract art of the middle of the twentieth century—the bend in art history where abstract expressionism turned to color field and minimalism, then out into conceptualism and postmodern plurality. This narrative links Grant Achatz’s tablecloth to Pollock’s drop cloth to Raspet’s fridgesful of Drink. As Raspet and Soylent explore the territory left open by the dearth of chemical-sense terminology and theory, they pick up where Clement Greenberg and his acolytes left off.



Where Greenberg's formalism tried to resolve the paradox of materiality and abstraction through devices such as "opticality," Raspet and Soylent maintain this paradox in suspension. This to the point of claiming a degree of neutrality for, or autonomy from, the "support"—in this case not canvases and stretcher bars but bottles and tanks, the ready-made containers of industrial chemistry. It's remarkable how little Raspet and his critics discuss his work's most visually obvious elements, the canisters of gas and grids of plastic jugs that contain his ephemeral compounds. Soylent obviously pays attention to its packaging, but it downplays it in a way few brands do. Its black-and-white minimalism signals a clean, utilitarian neutrality that would disappear if it could, the way a canvas would disappear. "At the time, the best option was to use existing, off-the-shelf stock bottles," writes John Zelek on the Soylent blog. "After all, the innovation was inside the bottle, and the bottle was just a bottle."<sup>18</sup>

As Greenberg puts it in his essay "Modern Art," the modernist sensibility doesn't critique from without, but from within—from an immanent position, the way Kant undertook a logical critique of logic.<sup>19</sup> Rather than remain an objective observer, the modernist participates. Thus Raspet's entries into the art world and his work for Soylent/Rosa Foods are largely coextensive. Indeed, Raspet is more deeply imbricated than his peers who are investigating a similar slice of the Venn diagram between an artist's brand and a corporate one. The 9th Berlin Biennial in 2016, for example, for which Raspet produced a limited edition package of the Pentagon 2.4-flavored, algae-based, Soylent prototype (Soylent Paste 0.10),<sup>20</sup> also featured projects from Deborah Delmar Corp. (an "actual" green-juice bar and coffee shop), and Christopher Kulendran Thomas (the New Eelam housing subscription app, which applies neoliberal entrepreneurship to the egalitarian utopia that Sri Lankan Marxists failed to gain by force).<sup>21</sup> The biennial was curated by the four members of DIS, ambiguously positioned between a magazine, an art collective, a marketing firm, a fashion label—and, as of this writing, newly relaunched as an online edutainment channel. At the heart of such ventures is the question of corporate structure—corporate from *corpus*, meaning *body*. If corporations seem tasteless to us, perhaps this is because they do not sufficiently camouflage their embodiedness, but instead publicly, materialistically flaunt their corpses.

Raspet left Soylent in September 2016. His latest venture is a company called Nonfood that will sell algae-based nutrient bars.<sup>22</sup> In late 2017, the group participated in the Food-X food-tech accelerator, and also shipped their first prototype. In this respect, Raspet can credibly claim to be independent of the art system—an artist-driven brand, without being art. The difference may simply be that Raspet has a company, a corporate structure, a body, while others only have galleries.

Does the artist change the corporation—or does the

corporation change the artist? K-HOLE, a collective of artists, designers, and other creatives, got their start releasing free trend reports as PDFs. As founding member Dena Yago writes, "The project grew out of a frustration with an attitude common among Gen X artists, who liked to neg on younger artists for not keeping their distance from the inner workings of capitalism—for 'selling out' ... With K-HOLE," she continues, "we were not interested in taking on the role of ethnographer or performer; we were interested in the total collapse that comes with being the thing itself."<sup>23</sup> The reason for this was the renewed awareness of bodily needs experienced in precarity. Yago writes, of those who accused K-HOLE and their cohort of shilling, "They acted as if our decision to engage was motivated by anything other than awareness of the immediacy of recuperation, survivalism, and the deep-rooted anxiety brought on by the recession and student debt." Their interests led to possibilities of corporate engagement as contractors to real companies. Sean Monahan, another K-HOLE alumnus, later created an actual advertisement for Casper Mattresses, a web-based disruptor in their field. The subject of the website Monahan produced was not bedding, but its abstraction: sleep itself.



Film still from the promotional video Soylent 2.0: Now Shipping by Burning Film Productions.

Alas, Casper sells mattresses. Even Nike, say—Naomi Klein's exemplar of abstracted, brand-based value—still sells shoes. The physical product haunts these brands; as much as they might outsource their production, becoming image-managers rather than manufacturers, the substrate returns abjectly in container-ship wrecks and sweatshop fires. Likewise, tech entrepreneurs do all they can to conceal any physical infrastructure behind the product's front-end interface. And the more insubstantial the back-end, the better—the more fully imbricated they can become—tending toward the ultimate goal of brand without substance—the pure product. Here again, Soylent is more like a tech company than a food company, in that its fixation on the body, such as it is, predicates the forgetting ("freeing") of the body. "I'd rather focus on

entities that can be consumed and provide a metabolic function,” says Raspet, “rather than a kind of artwork that is a static object and needs to be stored.”<sup>24</sup>

This non-object status, or preference for transcendent effects over the necessary substrate, is crucial to the projects under discussion here—Achatz, Soylent, and Raspet alike. It’s crucial, moreover, for them to locate their artistry not in the base matter they manipulate, but in the temporary effects it produces. Yet the process of eating, too, remains woefully physical—even where food has been abstracted. Sarat Maharaj aligns the notion of artistic research—of the Achatz or Raspet kind—with “digestion,” through a particular wordplay of Joyce, by which he etymologically collapses the lowly tongue along with the more refined eye and ear into a sort of sensate wad:

By knowledge production I do not mean something conceived—Cartesian fashion—as “strictly” mental but as spasms and episodes of the mind-body continuum. Joyce’s “false-meaning” etymological chain dramatizes the point:

Gyana  
Gnosis—gnoseology  
Knowledge  
Visible-audible-noseable-edible.

The Sanskrit word “Gyana” or “Knowledge” retains the link with the physical through “gyana-yoga” practices. With “Gnosis,” knowledge is inflected as a more hived-off, mental affair—something Joyce trips up with his pun on “nose”: “knowing” takes place through the smell-organ and olfactory sensation, “lowest” of the faculties. “Knowing via the nose” cuts across Cartesian mind/body divisions and dualisms. With brain muscle-mind circuits, Joyce telescopes eye-ear-mouth in a single digestive conveyor belt.<sup>25</sup>

Add this to Joyce’s famous passages detailing the sense of a frying kidney and, at the other end, a trip to the outhouse. Maharaj argues that Joyce offers information to all of the senses in a way that “cuts across” the mind/body dualism. Artistic research is located not in digestion itself but in an overlying wordplay; language turned against language. Such research is immanent in the artist, physically and abstractly, the way food is immanent within the body—and the way an artist like Raspet is immanent within a corporation like Soylent. Or the way art is immanent not in the can of shit but in the artist’s (say, Manzoni) signing such a can.

This immanent critique occurs less in the physical product than in its overarching abstract form—the brand itself. Branding is the medium at stake, approached with a certain good faith historically reserved for abstract

painting. To the notion of a detached “opticality,” we can add the brand—as pure a product as one can imagine: a dream of content without substance, abstraction without concreteness, image without substrate, idea without object ... mind without body. This pure brand is the insubstantial magic that the artist brings to brute matter—from the pureed tomatoes at Alinea, to the mass-produced chemical variants that travel by boat from China to Raspet’s studio, to the powders and extracts ingeniously combined in each bottle of Soylent ready-to-drink food. The artist (researcher, engineer, entrepreneur) imbricates a brand with hidden value. As Barthes might have phrased it, the artist flavors the world.

The trajectory of material to immaterial restates the directionality of the historical avant-garde’s increasing abstraction, increasing autonomy, and increasing denial. Like the Greenbergian modernist, the artist-entrepreneur does not critique the system in order to destroy it but uses the characteristics of their medium to shore up its preeminence, to progress, to take their chosen form into the future. Faith in technology or tech-driven brands replaces faith in art. In lieu of an avant-garde in the classic modernist sense, we now have an avant-garde in the mold of Silicon Valley. Apple, Uber, Soylent—artists in this avant-garde emulate the start-up model, they participate in it, they willfully use it and are willfully used by it. Entrepreneurs, not artists, will see the future, but artist-entrepreneurs can come along.

The potential for real social change in something as socially imbricated as food is as exciting as any space program. At least one writer has noted that Raspet’s interest in a modernist sense of progress is perhaps closer to that of the Bauhaus and the “designed life” than to the cloistered discourse of Greenbergian high modernism.<sup>26</sup> And yet this interpretation smudges the elisions of applied modernism’s faith in abstraction, in purity, and in ubiquity. As Eunsong Kim and Maya Mackrandilal write of the self-styled neutral subject, “He insists on the freedom to be abstract—the freedom to be *clean* and *naïve*.”<sup>27</sup> The one-food-for-all approach, when it does look back, looks at the mess of cultures and cuisines and sees edible rubble, graffitied with carrot puree. Soylent imagines a future without history.

Science fiction has given us memorable figurations of capitalism as an unchecked, motile cancer. Mark Fisher points to John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982); Steven Shaviri ends his primer on accelerationism with a vision of post-human parasites learning to survive in the “monstrous” body of capital.<sup>28</sup> Rather than actively malignant enemies, such corpses are better defined as metabolisms with an alien, inscrutable, even passionless logic. These metabolisms, like our own peristalsis—the coordinated contractions of the esophagus, stomach, and intestinal walls—propel material in one direction only: “futureward.” Such an unsightly motor works best when masked by a tasteful abstraction. Taste folds into flavor;





Still from a YouTube compilation of The Most Satisfying Video In The World.

the abstract appears concrete. The brand collapses into the corporation, their difference harder and harder to discern. The avant-garde contracts, becomes *de rigueur*; successive normalizations of the avant-garde propel the bolus and chyme and feces of culture ... This is the action Soylent accomplishes by its twin appeals to specific chemistry and abstract nutrition. Soylent outpaces its dystopian reputation, as if it were *never* “people.”

“Flavor,” the raw stuff; “taste,” the art. Jackson Pollock was a foodie, but not a gourmand. According to one collection of his and Lee Krasner’s recipes, the painter favored traditional American dishes like meat loaf and apple pie.<sup>29</sup> The avant-guardist who famously pissed in the fireplace of the patron who, among an elite few, recognized Pollock’s genius in the raw material is now as prosaic as that story. In this metabolism, the artist, consumed by and consumer of the corporation, is not only digested, but provides the calories that fuel the digestive organs. The self-aware avant-guardist recognizes, and does not escape, their bacterial role.<sup>30</sup>

Through such a “telescoped” mind-body continuum, the Soylent brand renders its “corpus” as natural as an ideology. Proceeding from the middle gray of taste, the “user” becomes if not an artist, then a “creative”; the white bottle, like the white cube, promises an autonomy that can be re-specified to taste—resisted, added to, expressed on. Where food is involved, it collapses this separation between, as it were, the canvas and the art—telescopes the distance between the substrate and the sign. The result is a new neutral, a new self-evidence—the staple food of the future. Thus Rhinehart and Raspet make the case for the efficiency, even the sustainability, of their respective foods. An aesthetic purity distilled with no waste—what you need, no more and no less: Is this truly anticapitalist capitalism? These corporations seek a way out of (or through) postmodern constipation; and while this too is a process most tastefully concealed—and while Rhinehart hedges on this question in his blog posts—the result remains: yes, you still shit.

Soylent by Rosa Foods, Inc., a nutritionally complete ready-to-drink meal, is made largely from the main protein found in soybeans. Rosa Foods wants you to know exactly what your food is made of. They make no secret of the fact that they use GMO ingredients where possible, since the benefits in efficiency and environmentalism outweigh the risks of harmful mutation. In the Harry Harrison pulp novel *Make Room, Make Room!* (1966), the earth is overcrowded and the seas are dead; Soylent is a desperate ration made from soy and lentils. In the 1973 film adaptation, *Soylent Green*, even though the earth is overcrowded and the seas are dead, the Soylent Corporation claims its product is made from “plankton.” Rhinehart named his product after the former, not the latter, although he relishes this dystopian echo.<sup>31</sup> Corporations aren’t people so much as bodies—bodies that metabolize without living. Corporations are people in the way that Soylent Green is people.

## X

**Travis Diehl** is a writer, editor, and critic. He has lived in Los Angeles since 2009. His work appears in *The Guardian*, *Frieze*, *Art-Agenda*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Flash Art*, *Art Papers*, *Affidavit*, *Objektiv*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Garage*, *WAX*, *X-TRA*, *CARLA*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *East of Borneo*, *Even*, *Salon*, *P&Co*, and *Prism of Reality*. He is a 2013 recipient of the Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.

- 1 The title sequence for Mary Harron's 2000 film *American Psycho* —a blood-like sauce drizzling onto white plates—neatly triangulates the abstract corporate appetites under discussion here. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKase0wsvno>.
- 2 Abigail Fuller made comments to this effect while participating in a panel at the Coffie Cafe in downtown Los Angeles, September 25, 2016.
- 3 Rob Rhinehart, "How I Stopped Eating Food," *Mostly Harmless*, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20141229190818/http://robbrhinehart.com:80/?p=298>.
- 4 See Arik Levy's website [https://www.ariklevy.fr/art/rockgrowth-scultures/rockgrowth-350#.WZoQ\\_caZPEY](https://www.ariklevy.fr/art/rockgrowth-scultures/rockgrowth-350#.WZoQ_caZPEY).
- 5 OkFocus has also done website work for Nike and an online/Tumblr-based art auction for Phillips, among dozens of other branding projects. See Karen Archey, "Review: Ryder Ripps," *Frieze* 170, April 2015 <http://frieze.com/article/ryder-ripps>.
- 6 With the exception of a handful of hunter-gatherer microcultures. See Sean Raspet interviewed by Anicka Yi, "Why I Drool," *The Lonely Samurai Podcast*, May 28, 2014 <http://lonelysamurai.com/episodes/why-i-drool>. See also "Scents and sensibility," *The Economist*, January 18, 2018 <https://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21735010-scents-and-sensibility-how-people-name-sensations-depends-those-sensations>.
- 7 The uniforms, designed for the occasion by Nhu Duong, resembled space suits as much as work wear.
- 8 Quoted in Joel Kuennen, "The Matter of Molecular Practice: An Interview with Sean Raspet," *Artslant*, June 23, 2016 <https://www.artslant.com/sf/articles/show/46112-the-matter-of-molecular-practice-an-interview-with-sean-raspet>.
- 9 Molecules meant to "represent" abstract ideas of food and milk, the bases of adult and infant life, were "provided at approximately 0.1% in Soylent™ vehicle." See the Swiss Institute press release <https://www.swissinstitute.net/sean-raspet-x-soylent-x-pantone-x-si/>.
- 10 See Lucy Chinen, "Corbusier's Kitchen" <https://www.swissinstitute.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Corbusier%E2%80%99s-Kitchen.pdf>.
- 11 Copy by Laurie Pressman, vice president of Pantone, printed on the base of a limited edition of one hundred *Technical Milk* and *Technical Food* canisters.
- 12 "Soylent 1.5 Has Arrived," *Soylent Blog* <http://blog.soylent.com/post/120465411252/soylent-15-has-arrived>.
- 13 Rob Rhinehart interviewed by Steven Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, June 11, 2014 <http://www.w.cc.com/video-clips/2kgoki/the-colbert-report-rob-rhinehart>.
- 14 "Soylent 1.4 Begins Shipping Today," *Soylent Blog* <http://blog.soylent.com/post/112067551237/soylent-14-begins-shipping-today>.
- 15 "Sean Raspet in conversation with Ceci Moss," *Cura* 24 <http://curamagazine.com/contents/cura-24-sean-raspet-in-conversation-with-ceci-moss/>.
- 16 See the macronutrient overview on the Soylent website <http://blog.soylent.com/post/68180382810/soylent-10-macronutrient-overview>.
- 17 The formula remains open source. See <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14uNjheBeYJOpoQjEwKE5wCHAHGKE9PTXU7CaNjEnaz0/edit#gid=1156432057> and <https://faq.soylent.com/hc/en-us/articles/115002690663-Powder-Formula>.
- 18 John Zelek, "How to Design a Bottle," *Soylent Blog* <http://blog.soylent.com/post/163186012757/how-to-design-a-bottle>.
- 19 "I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist. The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 1960. Available at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>.
- 20 See Sean Raspet's artist page for the 9th Berlin Biennale <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/formulation-0-10/>.
- 21 See <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/kulendran/>.
- 22 Cofounded with Lucy Chinen, Mariliis Holm, and Dennis Oliver Schroer. See <https://eatnonfood.com/>.
- 23 Dena Yago, "On Ketamine and Added Value," *e-flux journal* 82 (May 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/133913/on-ketamine-and-added-value/>.
- 24 "Sean Raspet in conversation with Ceci Moss," *Cura* 24 <http://curamagazine.com/contents/cura-24-sean-raspet-in-conversation-with-ceci-moss/>.
- 25 Sarat Maharaj, "Unfinishable Sketch of 'An Unknown Object in 4D': Scenes of Artistic Research," *L&B (Lier en Boog) Volume 18: Artistic Research*, eds. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (Rodopi, 2004), section 0014.
- 26 A. E. Benenson, "More of Less," *Art in America*, February 2017 <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/more-of-less/>.
- 27 Eunsong Kim and Maya Mackrandilal, "The Freedom to Oppress," *contemporary*, April 19, 2016 <http://contemporary.org/the-freedom-to-oppress/>.
- 28 Mark Fisher, "SF Capital," *Transmat: Resources in Transcendent Materialism* (2001); Steven Shavero, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 29 See Julie Earle-Levine, "In the Kitchen with Jackson Pollock," *T Magazine*, March 24, 2015 <https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/24/jackson-pollock-cookbook/>.
- 30 And yet a 2018 web ad for Soylent reads: "Gyms have germs. Soylent has nutrients."
- 31 See the Soylent FAQ <https://soylent.com/pages/about-the-company>.

Alexander R. Galloway

# Twenty-One Paragraphs on Badiou

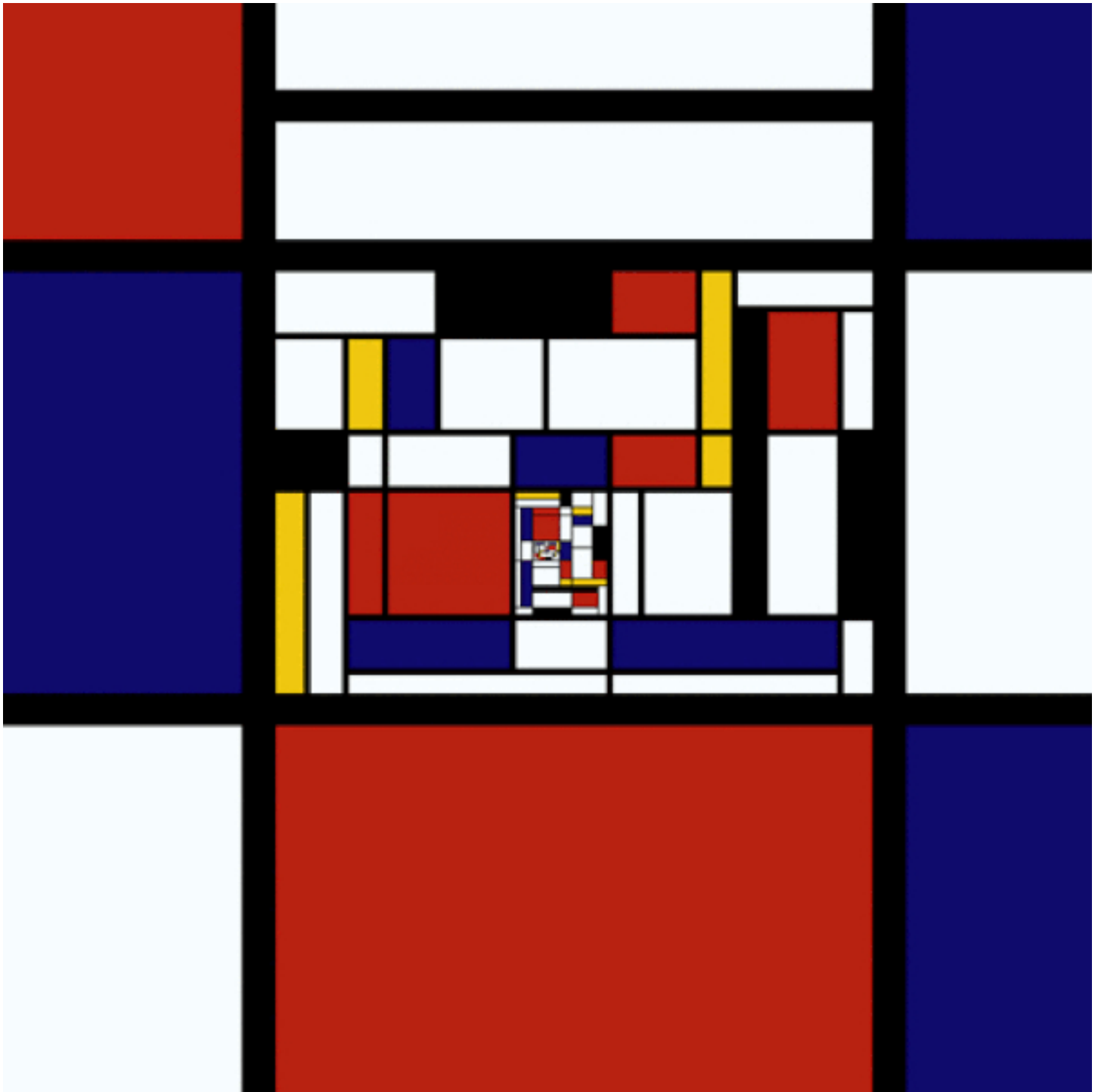
Following in the spirit of book reviews written about books that do not exist, I offer here—no doubt at my own peril—a series of observations in anticipation of Alain Badiou's forthcoming *Being and Event 3: The Immanence of Truths*, a book that does not yet exist but will exist at some point in the future.

1. Alain Badiou has been interested in poetry and literature throughout his long career. Yet in recent years he seems to be turning more closely to poetry. Such a turn presents something of a problem for Badiou, a Platonist, given Plato's skepticism toward poetry and concomitant preference for mathematics. But what is poetry? And what is math? For Badiou poetry is a marker for the event, for life, for the real, for what Jacques Lacan called "the impossible." By contrast, mathematics is the space of the precise letter, of argument, of proof, of learning and training (after the original Greek meaning of *mathēsis*), of formal abstraction in its most rigorous articulation. Already notorious for his defense of mathematics as ontology, Badiou has become a bit more evenhanded on the question of the matheme versus the poem, preferring instead to describe philosophy as poised "between" poetry and mathematics, not simply privileging the latter.

2. In its essence, poetry is an attempt to touch the real continuum of life. And, as Badiou argues, there is no poem that does not in some basic way describe an event. While at the same time mathematics is an attempt to abstract away from the real continuum into the realm of consistency, name, rule, and identity. Still, the contrast is perhaps overstated. Poetry is impossible to define in its totality without reference to rule and rhythm, figuration and abstraction. Likewise mathematics spans both domains. There has existed since the ancients a mathematics of the real continuum as well as a mathematics of the proper name and rule. The former is a mathematics of pure difference while the latter a mathematics of pure identity; the former a math of time—indeed directly *in* time—while the latter formalizes time to a sufficient degree as to be able to purge it entirely, replacing time with space.

3. "Geometry" is the name given to the mathematics of real difference. Geometry deals directly with the pure continuum of the world, and thus appears most commonly as continuity in line or curve. Geometry trades in magnitudes and proportions, figures and shapes. Geometry produces *images* and constitutes a kind of *image-thinking*. At the same time, geometry suspends the number and thus puts abstraction into question (as negative or subtractive abstraction). The contemporary name for geometry is "analogicity."

4. "Arithmetic" is the name given to the mathematics of simple identity. Arithmetic starts with numbers and counting, and thus relies on a fundamental individuation of entities under some rule of identity. Arithmetic proceeds under the sign of the letter and thus tends toward a kind of



*text-thinking* aiming at the production of *texts*. Arithmetic transcends the real continuum and thus constitutes both the act and living body of abstraction (i.e., positive or additive abstraction). A common synonym for arithmetic today is “digitality.”

5. There are many mixtures of geometry and arithmetic. Some of the most interesting mathematical developments have come from the digitization of geometry, or indeed the rendering of arithmetic through pure continuity. And,

further, geometry and arithmetic, when they appear, both tend to appear together. At the point where geometry seems most prevalent, one will surely find arithmetic artifacts. Likewise the most highly evolved arithmetic will tend to invert into pure geometry.

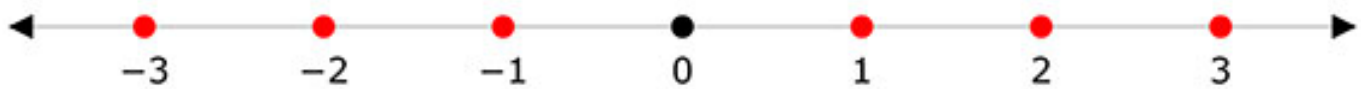
6. Historically speaking, geometry is the first mode of mathematics, arithmetic the second. Yet that belies the basic bias of geometry: to prioritize time, and hence to have prioritized itself. Indeed, considered from the

**Natural,  $\mathbb{N}$** 

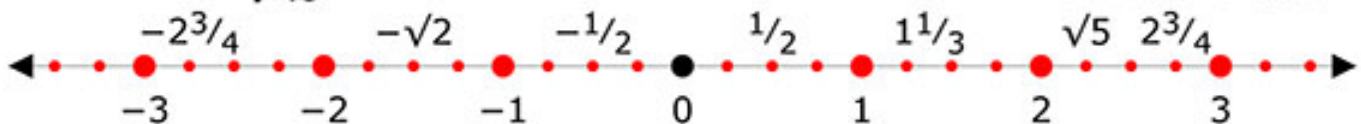
Start with the counting numbers (zero may be included).

**Integer,  $\mathbb{Z}$** 

Extend the line backward to include the negatives.

**Rational,  $\mathbb{Q}$** 

Insert all the fractions. Insert all the roots.

**Real,  $\mathbb{R}$** 

Fill in all the numbers to make a continuous line.



This illustration depicts a geometrical representation of natural, integer, rational, and real numbers.

perspective of structure, arithmetic is the first mode of mathematics (with geometry now relegated to second), given how difference may only spring from a prior identity. Which story to believe, genesis or structure? The answer will reveal much about who is speaking.

7. One may map poetry and mathematics onto these two domains. Poetry comes to signify the continuum, the analogical branches of mathematics (like calculus or topology), what number theorists call the real number system, and hence comes to signify geometry in the old Greek sense outlined here. By contrast, mathematics comes to signify, in fact, a *subset* of mathematics: numerical discretization, the integers and digits (and the digital branches of mathematics), what number theorists call the rational number system—that is, it comes to signify arithmetic in the classical sense.

8. In other words, there seems to be a mathematics of the poetic real (the second or real infinity of Georg Cantor, the indiscernible of Paul Cohen) just as much as there is a mathematics that is more, as it were, faithfully mathematical (Cantor's first or natural infinity, Kurt Gödel and the concept of the constructible set, but also in a way set theory overall with its affection for counting and the "count-as-one"). The mathematics of the poetic real gestures outward from discrete number to continuous

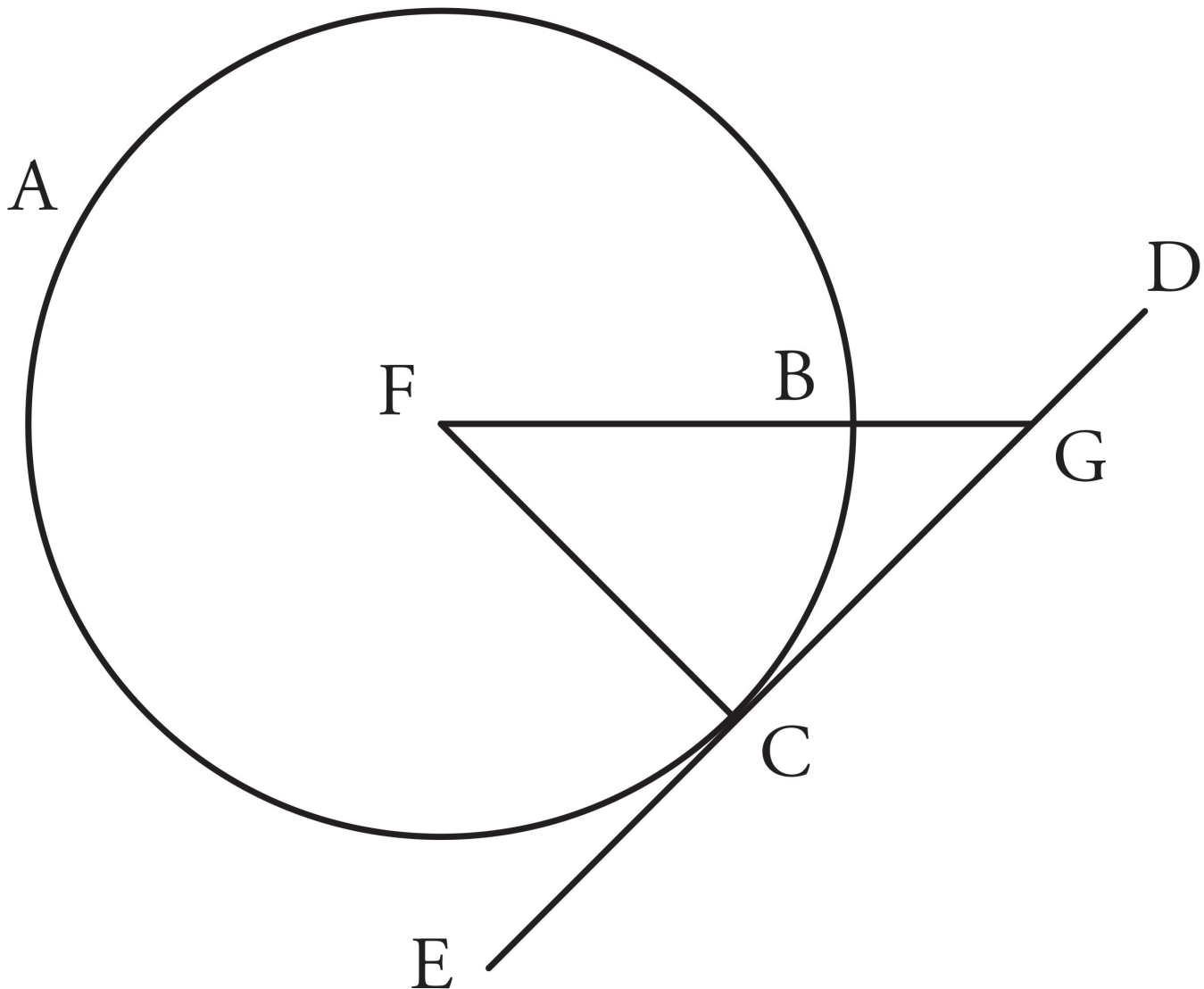
curve. The rest is a more directly math-oriented mathematics that focuses on the strict lucidity and utility of circumscribable blocks, the integers.

9. Recall the fabled inscription at Plato's Academy: "Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here." But for Badiou it has always been *arithmetic*, not geometry—that is: the number, the count, the theory of points. Recall how Brian Massumi once wrote an essay in homage to Gilles Deleuze called "On the Superiority of the Analogue." For Badiou it would have to be the reverse, as each of his many treatises secretly bear the hidden subtitle "On the Superiority of the Digital," the digital defined as arithmetic and discrete number.

10. Badiou is a digital thinker in an age dominated by analog philosophy. Let me explain. Labeling him a "digital thinker" is not to suggest that Badiou has written about computers (he hasn't), nor that he is somehow allied with the school known as Digital Philosophy (he isn't). The moniker is also not meant as a backhanded insult—formal similarities between set theory and info-capitalism notwithstanding. Rather it is meant as a characterization of a general tendency of thinking.

11. Which is one way of interpreting Badiou's fidelity to Maoism. The Maoist interpretation of the dialectic favored





On the perpendicularity of the tangent line (based on Euclid, Elements, Book 3, Proposition 18).

the moment of analysis, when the one divides into two. And the moment of analysis (1→2) is nothing else than the moment of the digital, of the integers, of arithmetic as a whole. (And indeed many of the mathematical fields that come under the heading “analysis” reveal their fundamentally anti-real bias by rendering pure continuity via digital techniques such as the differential, the cut, or the singularity point.)

12. Yet while Badiou is an arithmetical and digital thinker first and foremost—not a geometrical thinker like Deleuze—mere number has never been Badiou’s ultimate desire. The *Being and Event* trilogy is organized around a fundamental choice: either a predictable, rational, constructible universe, or an indiscernible universe of the generic real. Either the state or the event. And sometimes the choice finds two specific avatars: Gödel or Cohen? Constructible or generic? Badiou’s answer is emphatic: /

choose Cohen.

13. Plato’s *mathemè* may have interrupted the old Homeric poem. But in the twentieth century, the *generic* seems to have interrupted the old *mathemè*, leading to a new kind of pseudo-poetry of the indiscernible real. What makes Badiou so interesting, and what differentiates him from the more romantic partisans of the real, is that Badiou arrives there strictly within mathematics. He never “cheats” by exiting mathematics. Discovering the real in the Vale of Chamouni is a feat of poetic mastery. But Badiou discovers it within pure number.

14. How to interpret Badiou’s current interest in poetry and the absolute? Or—if we may be so presumptuous as to speculate about a book not yet published—what can be anticipated in *Being and Event 3: The Immanence of Truths*? Badiou seems to be cultivating a strange new

vocabulary. I do not mean terms like “infinity” or the “absolute”—admittedly alienating to me, a Marxist—but “immanence,” as in the “immanence of truths.” If in the past Badiou was faithful to the Chinese Marxist tradition, he now appears more Russian, favoring the moment of *synthesis*, the operation of “the two integrating as one” ( $2 \rightarrow 1$ ), a fitting definition of real analogicity.

15. Immanence has a special lineage of course, as in the traditions of Spinoza and Deleuze, or in a different way with Michel Henry and François Laruelle. And the Hegelians will also claim the term, albeit in a manner nearly unrecognizable to me. So why immanence? We know that immanence is a way for philosophers to think of a generic identity (not an abstract one), an “indiscernible” real (not a symbolic one). It is no different for Badiou, and in this new volume he will finally address generic identity directly. However, Badiou still breaks with the poetic tradition, which claims that the real can only be addressed through *finitude*. Looking beyond what he calls the “pathos of finitude,” *Being and Event 3* is devoted to the concept of *infinity*, continuing on from the long sections in part three of the first volume of *Being and Event*. So while other thinkers might arrive at the generic through finitude, Badiou does the reverse by approaching the generic through infinity.

16. Curiously, the two kinds of math, when defined separately and rigorously, furnish something rather odd, nothing less than a definition of mathematics as such. For if *mathēsis* is the cultivation of abstraction, and if abstraction is defined as the gap between the real and the rational—literally between the real numbers and the rational numbers—then mathematics itself is nothing more than a spanning of that gap. To understand the continuum and to understand how *logos* departs from the continuum is to enter mathematics. In other words, Badiou’s story is not just a story about two *kinds* of mathematics (a cataloging of types); his story also provides a *definition* of mathematics itself through the identification of a formal relation: mathematics means understanding the difference between the real and the rational. And thus, through similar logic, mathematics means understanding the difference between math and poetry. This is not simply to endorse the banality that “math is different from poetry” or that “poetry is different from math,” a difference accentuated all too frequently by Romantic poets and positivistic scientists alike. Rather, the stress ought to fall on the difference itself: whatever gap there might be between poetry and mathematics, such an epistemological gap is mathematics as such. Here one might christen a kind of Badiou’s Principle: mathematics is defined as the difference between the real numbers and the rational numbers.

17. Badiou’s forthcoming volume is also explicitly about *works*. Yes, Badiou will be talking about poets and poetic works, but he has always done that. Consider rather the final two sections of the projected volume devoted to

works both as objects and as sites of becoming. In other words, *Being and Event 3* will address the “immanence of truths” not simply in subjects, or worlds, but in *works*. And so while Badiou describes the trilogy in terms of a progression from universal, to particular, to absolute, one might also conceive a parallel progression from subject, to world, to work (and perhaps also beyond toward the real).

18. Through all of this Badiou has become less *polemical* against his former antagonists, bringing them closer into a kind of intimate relation of thinking. Badiou seems to be bringing Deleuze closer for instance, addressing the real continuum directly, albeit only through the concept of large cardinals and transfinite numbers, not Deleuze’s favorite themes such as affect, sensation, experience, intensity, or vitality.

19. Badiou seems to be bringing Martin Heidegger closer too, admitting the poetic site of the real into his system, albeit still rejecting Heidegger’s poetic ontology in the strict sense. Badiou has begun to speak of an infinitude that is covered or concealed, and must therefore be revealed through a kind of unconcealing of truth.

20. And, surprisingly, Badiou seems to be bringing Laruelle closer, not just through the language of immanence, which Laruelle shares with Deleuze, but specifically through the concept of identity used to great effect by Laruelle. Indeed, Laruelle’s definition of generic identity as “One-in-One” bears some similarity to Badiou’s discussion of the absolute as “V in V”—V being mathematical shorthand for the absolute universe of the von Neumann hierarchy of sets.

21. So while Badiou should probably be characterized as an arithmetical thinker first and foremost, I suspect that with *Being and Event 3* he finally will have written his treatise on geometry. And he will then be able to utter with confidence: *Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here*. The arithmetical path and the geometrical path, while both beckoning in the first two volumes, will ultimately converge into a single enterprise in the third. A strict formalization of sublime infinity will provide a picture of the immanent, generic real.

## X

**Alexander R. Galloway** is author, most recently, of *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age* (2021).