

While The Vertebrae Of Time Continue To Spin, Group Show
Gillian Brett, Taisia Korotkova, Arseny Zhilyaev

Curated by & Critical Essay by Alessandra Franetovich

While the Vertebrae of Time Continue to Spin

*My beast, my age, who will try
to look you in the eye,
and weld the vertebrae
of century to century,
with blood?*

....

In 1922, the poet Osip Mandelstam wrote *Vek* (The Century), a dense and visionary poem exploring the relationship between humankind and time. It is a poem established on an enigmatic foundation, with layers of meaning that leave the reader with a sense of indefiniteness. Within the flow of words, Mandelstam narrates the passage from one century to another and reflects on one's role in the context of a specific era using imaginative and powerful verbal constructions. In *Vek*, the burden that the poet, and by extension, the artist, bears in creating parallel and alternative worlds to harsh reality is personified in the form of the vertebrae of time. Body and flesh become intertwined with one's destiny as a narrator and builder grappling with the challenge of bringing the past, present, and future together in a single, cohesive narrative.

Taking the unresolved contact between eras as a starting point, the exhibition presents an investigation into artistic research that is structured around the increasingly close relationship between humanity, technology, and nature. It looks to re-evaluate aesthetics and stories from the recent past by situating them in the context of the present—'art is thought from the future' after all, according to Timothy Morton (*Dark Ecologies: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 2016). Exactly one century has passed since the writing of *Vek*, yet the significance of Mandelstam's words remain just as relevant today. Through them, we can observe and discover ourselves within a world not only surrounding us but of which we are one element, capable of influencing flows, energies, and thoughts.

We see ourselves as agents and parts of a whole that is difficult to define because the dimensions, whether planetary or microscopic, are in constant flux. At the same time, new sensibilities raise questions about the possibility of making categorizations and canonizations more fluid, sometimes even demolishing such modes of designation entirely. These processes have already begun, cyclically returning in the light of shifts in meaning and research that extend beyond what is already known.

In Mandelstam's poetic reflections, we discern elusive hints of déjà vu, and through the mirrored surface of *While the Vertebrae of Time Continue to Spin*, we are transported to the present day. Here, we find ourselves as observers and witnesses to the resurgence of themes and aesthetics reminiscent of the post-World War II era. These include representations of terror stemming from the Cold War and nuclear risks on one hand, and the fascination with interstellar travel on the other.

While the exploration of the cosmos has been fraught with tension arising from geopolitical competition, it has also given rise to science fiction, a cultural phenomenon whose products have been enjoyed on both sides of the Cold War, promoting a message not only of conquest and colonization but also of unity in the vast universe.

As a new space age dawns, nations and private companies are vying for ascendancy in the race for interstellar supremacy, while at the same time, the first forms of space tourism are taking shape. Consequently, the imagery associated with the cosmos and the aerospace industry is reemerging in visual culture. Telescopes in orbit and live Earth footage from cameras on the International Space Station (ISS) are readily shared by space agencies on private platforms. Billionaires are now offering their services to research institutes and hosting guests on their launches. This has led to a form of privatization of knowledge and the commercialization of extraterrestrial imagery, as we become accustomed to viewing decoded fragments on backlit screens, amongst which a profusion of logos, announcements, and advertisements.

Gillian Brett's screens offer a critical examination of the role of technology in limiting our perception of the world. These works deliberately embrace techno-luddism, breaking the surfaces of devices to resemble the images captured by the Hubble Space Telescope, launched into orbit in 1990 and still active. By closely examining both the artwork and the images of space it replicates, viewers are prompted to reflect on the mechanisms that shape our observation and understanding of the world. These experiences are mediated by intricate processes of image manipulation and synthesis, designed for easy usability and constrained by a single temporal context.

This process extends to the artistic production itself, as the devices transformed into artworks disrupt the cycle of waste from technological obsolescence. Instead of sending these discarded devices to disadvantaged geographical areas, they are repurposed and sold as functional, low-cost goods. In her works, including the series featuring *Amaranthus Palmeri* plants, Brett dismantles the exploitation mechanisms inherent in extreme consumerism. This critical analysis also extends to the English university education system in the artistic field in which the artist was trained. Despite the system's promise of providing constant upgrades to students' learning aids, it renders recently acquired tools obsolete. This contrast highlights the hypocrisies within the art system, which often promotes projects on ecological and post-colonial themes without effectively implementing the lessons it offers.

Taisia Korotkova's 2023 series of watercolors on paper, titled *Imagined Destinations*, embraces futuristic scenarios of coexistence between different species, representing a radical departure from the decadent imagery associated with the remnants of the aerospace and nuclear industries that have characterized her work for years. In *Imagined Destinations*, animals, plants, minerals, and microorganisms are depicted in fantastical settings that incorporate recognizable elements from the contemporary technological landscape. The orbiting James Webb telescope, the Tokamak reactor, and the Biosphere 2 experiment seamlessly blend into these constructions, producing an effect reminiscent of science fiction aesthetics and retrofuturism—between the eyes of flies, fungi, microbes, the prospective image of clean energy extracted from the heliocentrism of sunflowers. For Korotkova, this comparison with the cosmos serves as a primary source for conceptualizing a model of interspecies coexistence. This model aligns with a historical period in which recent publications and entire editorial series explore non-human forms of intelligence, whether animals, material entities, or digital constructs. Within this framework, existence takes on forms of radical collectivism, potentially achievable in a hypothetical future.

This vision of the world stands in stark contrast to the themes explored in Korotkova's previous series of paintings centred on humanoid robots, where *Philip Dick Robot* serves as a portrait of a machine fashioned in the likeness of the renowned science fiction writer—albeit decephalized and in a state of neglect. The works prompts a reflection on the role of human body care: should it follow paths of standardization and cloning or embrace posthuman ideals that blur the line between humans and machines, all while remaining open to a diverse range of existences?

The complexity of scenarios expressed through art prompts a comparison with presentism, yet Arseny Zhilyaev's work evades this comparison, steeped as it is in temporal superimpositions. At the core of *The Monotony of the Pattern Recognizer* lies a process of speculation, wherein possible futures are constructed through simulation, within the realm of fiction.

In an era marked by the ongoing dialogue between humanity and machines facilitated by artificial intelligence, the foundation of this 'historical' narrative revolves around the recovery of the TENET cargo spaceship. This spacecraft, lost in an uncertain future, drifts aimlessly for 10,000 years under the guidance of AI. It is discovered by members of the para-institution, the Institute for the Mastery of Time, an organization founded by Zhilyaev himself. Upon exploration, an intriguing 'archaeology of the future' exhibition is uncovered within the vessel's chambers. Each room of the spacecraft displays works created by artificial intelligence, inspired by the rich history of human art. These creations are carefully arranged in accordance with recognized artistic styles. The creation of this museum, set in an indefinite time, is a response to the AI's need to escape the isolation and loss of functionality.

The Monotony of the Pattern Recognizer adopts the familiar layout used by Kazimir Malevich when presenting Suprematism and the *Black Square* painting during the 1915 *Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10* at the Nadezhda Dobychina's gallery in St. Petersburg. The canvases were crafted using an embroidery technique executed by machines, with designs established through a dialogue between the artist and image generators, including ASCII and AI code. The resulting works feature forms of a hypothetical language that resist easy codification. Drawing inspiration from the era of verbo-visual poetry, characterized by critical commentary on post-World War II society, Zhilyaev's canvases unfold through errors and information extracted from data banks. They give rise to an unfamiliar language that narrates new mythologies and futurologies. In light of the journey undertaken, one can see how the cosmic and interplanetary imagination distorts our perception of time, leaving us with a fragmented sense of the past, present, and future. It enables the speculative discourse within the exhibited works to promptly assert a position: countering the presumed impartiality of technology, challenging positivist progressivism, and confronting the subtle forms of propaganda that often entrust essential services to corporations and generate new desires driven solely by capitalistic motives. Along this horizon, the role of art emerges in tandem with the vertebrae described by Mandelstam, as it endeavours to unravel the mysteries of temporal existence. In this context, the works magnify the notions of interspecies coexistence. Rather than offering images of comfort, however, they engage in critical analyses of the disparities between eras, conjuring visions of futures rooted in the rediscovery of historical passages—a lens through which to contemplate the present.

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