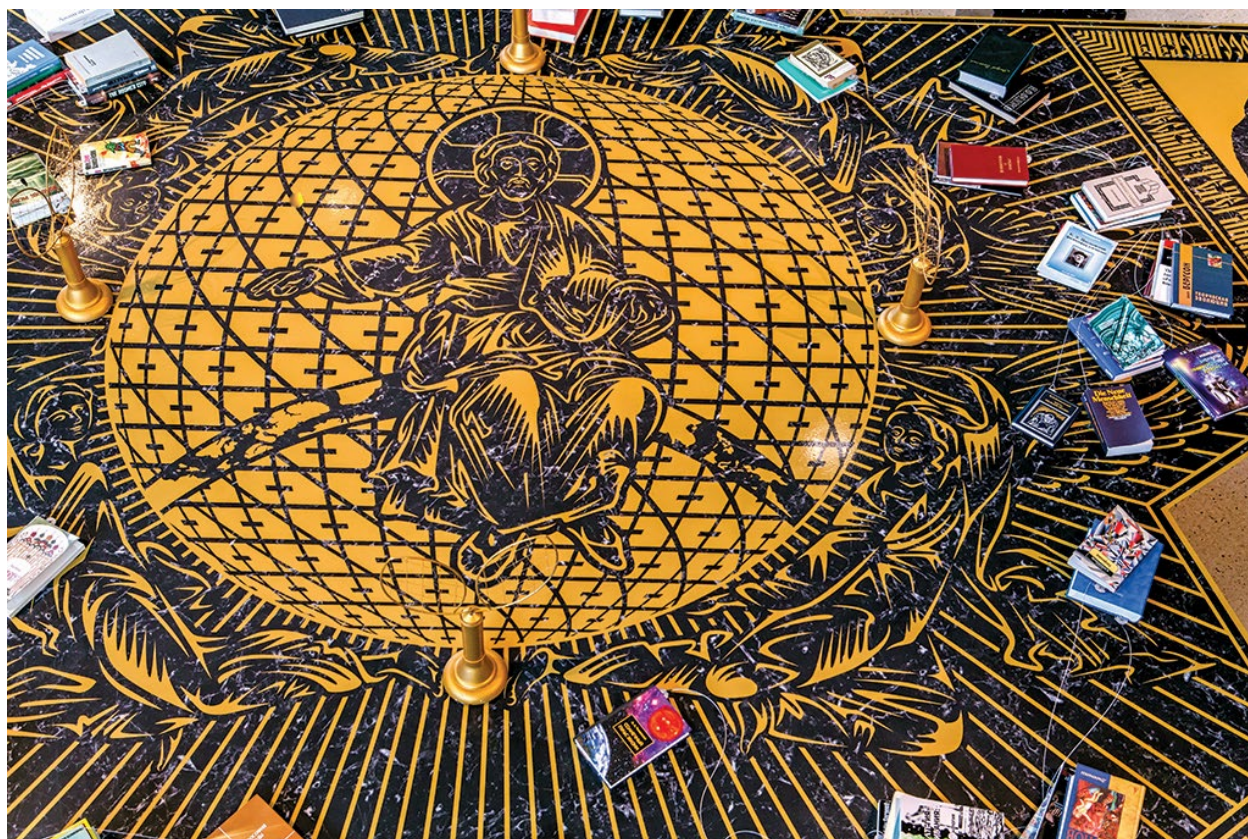


COSMIST RAYS: THE RISE OF COSMISM

MOLLY NESBIT ON THE RISE OF COSMISM



Arseny Zhilyaev, *Intergalactic Mobile Fedorov Museum-Library, Berlin* (detail), 2017, fiberboard, vinyl print, chairs, books, ionization lamps. Installation view, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. Photo: Laura Fiorio.

IF ONLY HE COULD WAKE UP, Nikolai Fedorov would be very surprised. He has gone from being merely an unknown writer; the illegitimate son of a Russian prince; a man drawn back again and again to the stark landscape of the steppes; a minor librarian with a magisterial command of Moscow's greatest library, the Rumyantsev Museum; a nineteenth-century Russian about whom any number of novels might have been written—he has gone from a life lived in relative obscurity to a place in history. Today, he, Fedorov, is being celebrated as the father of cosmism.

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Cosmism is on the march. Lately it has been transmitting waves of fresh, though somewhat oblique, signals from the wreckage of Soviet modernity.

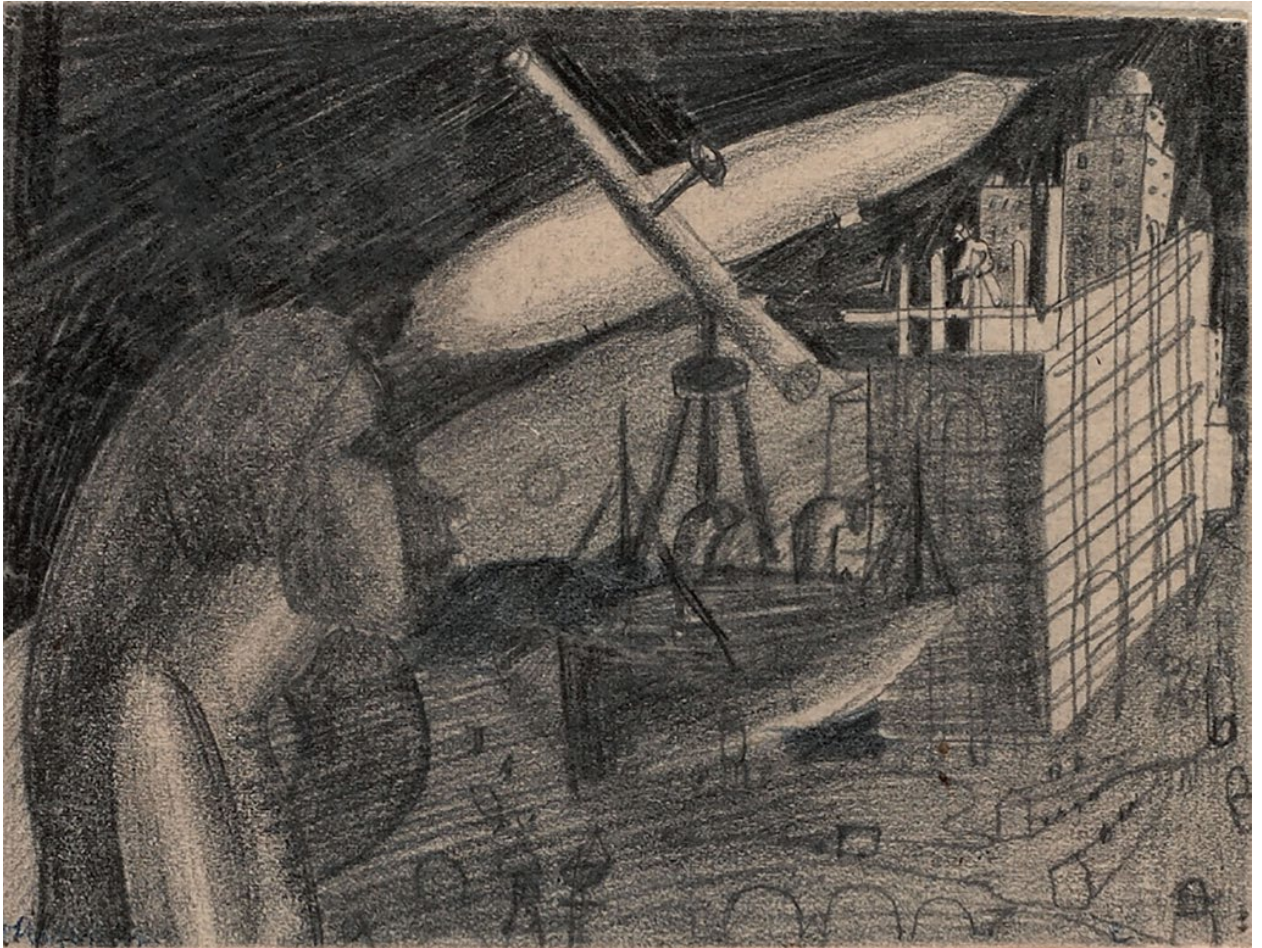
Since it was never a truly coherent movement, in some sense these fragments ring true to the nature of the phenomenon. Cosmism will not become a picture. Best to think of this cosmism as a spray of cosmisms that collect and disperse a strange energy field. Something like Lucy in the sky with diamonds.



Solomon Nikritin, *Ovale komposition, innen* (Oval Composition, Interior), ca. 1920s, ink, gouache, and watercolor on paper, 10 3/8 × 7 7/8".

It could be seen beneath the surface of the “Super- community” project that *e-flux journal* put together in 2015 for Okwui Enwezor’s Venice Biennale. Some have sensed it in the afterglow of Hito Steyerl’s video installation of that same year, *Factory of the Sun*. Also in 2015, e-flux Classics organized the translation and publication of a thick red volume, edited by Arseny Zhilyaev, of cosmist texts, titled, very simply, *Avant-Garde Museology*, which collects the cosmists’ evolving ideas of what museums should do and be. Curators around the world have been taking note.

Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin picked up the relay this past September, when, as part of a four-year-long project on historical utopias, 100 Years of Now, Anselm Franke invited Anton Vidokle, Boris Groys, and Zhilyaev to assemble “Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism.” For this occasion, Zhilyaev made a great library table in the shape of a star to symbolize the orders of wisdom emanating from Fedorov’s recommendations; on it sat stacks of cosmist books in many languages, awaiting future readers. There was a scholars’ conference. An exhibition of Russian avant-garde works from the first years of the revolution, selected by Groys from the Costakis Collection at the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece, allowed the legacy of the 1913 Russian Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* to show its connections and lend its prestige. In the main hall, sunk in darkness, was *Immortality for All!*, 2014–17, a newly completed trilogy of films by Anton Vidokle, each part housed in a differently faceted black structure that evoked a village seen dimly in the dead of night. These recalled, too, something of the idiosyncratic mausoleums located in the Muslim cemetery in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, where a later cosmist, the heliobiologist Alexander Chizhevsky, was imprisoned in 1942. He continued his science experiments anyway and posited direct causal links between activity on the sun’s surface and twists in the course of human civilization. Much thought was given to the way the history of this cosmism was presented and framed. What was historical never seemed academic; knowledge took many different forms. The concept for *Immortality*’s black-tomb installation came from Steyerl and was realized as a design by Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller. A book of new conversations on Russian cosmism among Vidokle, Steyerl, Groys, Zhilyaev, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, and others appeared for the occasion to lay out the terrain.¹ Groys is publishing *Russian Cosmism*, another anthology of translations, with MIT Press this year.



Solomon Nikritin, *Komposition mit teleskop* (Composition with Telescope), ca. 1920s, pencil on paper, 3 1/2 × 4 3/4".

THE IRONIES WOULD NOT have been lost on Fedorov. Whether he would recognize all his many progeny is another matter. Today's cosmism presents itself as a garden of forking but broken paths. Not all of its later ideas can be attached to Fedorov's project, and vice versa. Some of the results have been produced by the finest empirically driven minds in the Russian scientific community; some bask unashamedly in their status as nonformal knowledge. Fedorov's initial groundwork explains the unusual characteristics of this spread. He wanted, all at once, to rewrite the New Testament's Book of Revelation, improve the living conditions of humanity entire, and harness the latest scientific discoveries to solve mankind's greatest existential problems—to eliminate hunger, stop the desecration of the Earth's natural resources, achieve universal harmony, and raise the dead from their graves. This last effort, to triumph over death, brought these disparate projects together in his mind into what he called a "Common Task."

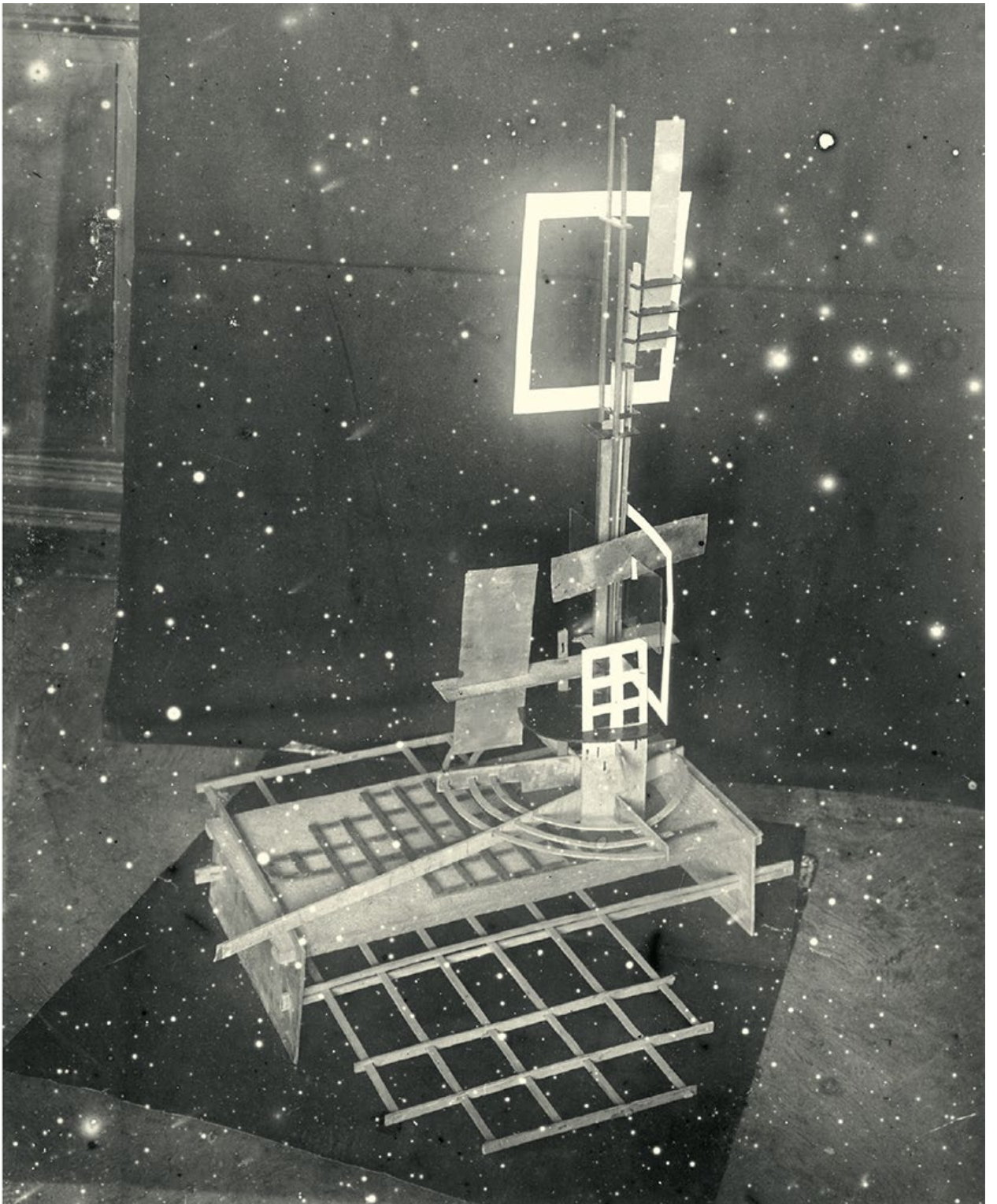
Cosmism is on the march. Lately it has been transmitting waves of fresh signals from the wreckage of Soviet modernity.

Already in the mid-nineteenth century, Fedorov could see that the resources of the planet were finite and would eventually be insufficient for supporting all the life on earth. He foresaw the need to launch humanity into outer space

and rejoin the heavens, the totality of the cosmos, in a future that he tried to envision spiritually, concretely, and literally. In short, he undertook to bring the power of scientific reason to the Book of Revelation. Fedorov was in point of fact a realist. While waiting for the scientists to come up with techniques for achieving survival and immortality, he developed a set of interim plans. Here, the museum was asked to play a significant role. Fedorov saw its duty as to preserve not just the memory but the life of each one of our ancestors. He made it hold all of time, and he expected it to evolve:

The purpose of the museum can be nothing other than the purpose of the circle dance and the ancestral temple, into which the round dance was transformed, i.e., the sun-path, returning the sun for the summer, awakening life in all that had faded in winter. The difference here is only in the means of action that had no real power in the round dance and temple; the action of a museum must have power that really returns, gives. This will be, when the museum returns to ashes itself and creates tools that regulate the destructive lethal forces of nature that control it.²

These tools would transform the museum as we know it, and they would enable each person who ever lived to be physically reborn in the future. Finally, death would be thwarted and life would be never-ending.



Gustavs Klucis, *Vertical Construction*, 1921, gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 × 8 1/8".

During his own lifetime, Fedorov developed his thoughts as he sat at his desk in the library. He read voraciously on all topics and then, as needed, rose to bring the patrons the books they requested. This basic condition of his daily work enabled him to develop an extraordinary intellectual range. For him, knowledge seemed to be an energy that scattered productively; it could and did take him to the stars. None of it was meant to live on as theory. His inquiry began and ended as a search for truth that continued to follow the procedures of the librarian: Knowledge was to be given to others and put into action. It is

said that he lived like an early Christian in deliberate poverty: He barely ate, he seemed to live for his ideas, he was kind. He developed spontaneous dialogues with the readers who came his way, suggesting further reading and sharing his own ideas. Since the readers in Rumyantsev Museum included many of the great intellectuals of the day, Fedorov's story intersects with those of Tolstoy and the young Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, progenitor of the Russian space program. Dostoyevsky got wind of Fedorov's ideas and wrote to a mutual friend, "I read them as if they were my own."

In this way, Fedorov saw the life of the mind as tied irrevocably to life itself. He worked on his ideas each day without trying to yoke them together into a system. He openly disdained Kant and the positivists. He mostly turned away from Europe and the ways of the city and toward the world of the steppes. He tried to rethink everything from the ground up, toward the sky; he had great faith in the sheer ability of sharp scientific reason and experimental method. Science and technology were to provide everyone collectively with direct access to the order of existence that could be called the cosmic. Cosmos would overcome modernity and chaos. Because his own research ranged in every direction through the stacks of his library, his knowledge was not particularly specialized. His thought was—and is—an unusual combination of ideas, yearning, and unyielding conviction. Its scale is much larger than is customary in more formal work. Perhaps for that reason, Fedorov avoided thinking of himself as an intellectual; he insisted that he did his work as an unlearned man.



Anton Vidokle, *This Is Cosmos*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 28 minutes 10 seconds. From *Immortality for All!*, 2014–17.

After Fedorov's death in 1903, the vast scatter of his research was brought together and published under the title *The Philosophy of the Common Task* in

two volumes, one in 1906 and the other in 1913. Fedorov had been reluctant to publish much during his lifetime, both because his ideas on resurrection would be heretical in the eyes of the Eastern Orthodox Church and because they were unfinished. Even by today's standards, his thinking astonishes. After these publications, the unconventional, extra-academic transmission of his concepts continued to grow, as did the audience for them. Religious thinkers, artists, poets, utopians, and research scientists picked up various elements of his corpus and used them as the basis for their own ideas. In the 1920s, some of his followers would identify themselves as cosmists or even biocosmists; others became involved in the formulation of proletcult, part of the revolution's effort to reset the organization of the arts. And it's true that the Common Task had many components suited to the construction of scientific communism. But Fedorov's own idea of social order and justice went far beyond the dream of a political state. This led to trouble.

The futuristic charge in these ideas remained palpable well after the Soviets began to officially suppress them during the Stalin years. Cosmist thought would be forced to gather in the back channels of the Soviet space program or to live in drawers dedicated to unpublished manuscripts. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, various threads began to reemerge in public discourse; the name reappeared as well. The push to draw the threads together into a long-lost alternative genealogy began. Cosmism is now remembered as a unity, like a lost civilization, one whose secrets might help Russians and non-Russians alike confront the new orders of endgame.



Still from Anton Vidokle's *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 34 minutes. From *Immortality for All!*, 2014–17.

Which brings us back to the march of the cosmists and Vidokle's three films: *This Is Cosmos*, 2014, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun*, 2015, and *Immortality and Resurrection for All!*, 2017. Each film has its own focus, but in this context it seems most important to speak about them collectively, for Vidokle has invented a new means of transport for the cosmists' ideas, one that somehow presents both the trees and the forest clearly. The ideas provide the trilogy with a script, but they have been arranged to make a discontinuous narrative and a flitting weave of changing scenes in which cosmist ideas are shown and told.

An unseen narrator is joined by a changing group of actors, who come forward as scientific assistants, librarians, museum visitors, and people living more or less traditionally in the countryside, all of them speaking Russian. By and large they are quoting from Fedorov's nineteenth-century prose, though occasionally they relate the work of later cosmists such as Chizhevsky or Vladimir Solovyov. Both the learned and the unlearned utter the Fedorovian cadences, but no expert comes in to speak from the top. In this way, digressing and returning to the ups and downs in a spray of cosmist points, the film puts cosmist ideas forward one by one, solemnly, slowly, almost ritually, implying but not stating a politics. This approach gives the viewer time to listen and take in the concepts. The ideas keep wandering back and forth across the lines between life and death; past, present, and future. The time of the film expands into zones that do and do not seem biblical. The voices seem to be transmitting ancient wisdom, some of it Egyptian, problems from time immemorial. They come as messengers. After all is said and done, there is no single point of view. Fedorov's ideas no longer belong just to him.

The net result can be summed up by a particular passage written by Vidokle and repeated in each film, the thrust of the cosmists' proposal:

Because the energy of the cosmos is indestructible
Because true religion is a cult of the ancestors
Because true social equality means immortality for all
Because of love, we must resurrect our ancestors from cosmic particles
As minerals
As animated plants
Solar
Self-feeding
Collectively conscious
Immortal
Transsexual
On Earth,
On spaceships,
On space stations
On other planets.



Still from Anton Vidokle's *The Communist Revolution Was Caused by the Sun*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 34 minutes. From *Immortality for All!*, 2014–17.

THE FILMS TAKE US TO PLACES where cosmists actually lived and worked—to Karaganda, to Crimea, to the plain of Pamir, and to the museums and libraries of Moscow. The material work of the cosmists is presented as pieces, only parts, of ongoing research. Wisdom never comes entire. An idea appears in its granular beauty as a particle, as matter that matters, as something we still cannot fathom, whether nineteenth-century or modern. The idea is here as a humble ideal, something toward which to strive. In this, Vidokle is reproducing something in Fedorov the librarian's behavior: He has brought us ideas that we did not know yet from elsewhere and given them away.

Today's cosmism presents itself as a garden of forking but broken paths.

As for the kindness that came with Fedorov's thinking, it is being communicated too, viscerally, through the films' frequencies of sound and color and light. White strobe effects, a new medical treatment to help jar the memory, part of a hedge against Alzheimer's disease, become punctuation. Incantations from hypnosis therapy for drug addiction reset the story, pull us to the plane of the cosmists, and bring us home again. Baths of red light provide us with unsuspected benefits. The films take inspiration from Chizhevsky's aero-ionization chandelier, an invention that sent electrically charged ions out into the atmosphere, where they could then act on a person

and imperceptibly improve the circulation of the body's blood. In the second film, we see one of the chandeliers being constructed under a blazing sun. The sun shines on this cosmism. This cosmism soaks up the sun. Or is it the reverse—that the sun soaks up the cosmism? Is this a foretaste of eternity itself?

The films do not attempt to answer questions like these. They simply let the physical point of the ideas find new delivery routes into the mind and body of each viewer so that the Common Task might be felt personally as a high order of solidarity or brotherly love. It will be there when we watch the sky go through its motions, as if for us, but never really for us alone. It will help us see these things with ancient eyes. Its full embrace of technology will be useful going forward. The art world has long needed an alternative to its obsession with markets. But whether cosmism exists as an alternative to the dictatorship of capital or that of the proletariat, one thing is clear: The cosmists' ideas are being brought to us by actual people, fellow travelers, some living, some in limbo, some dead, no strings attached. They only want to help us refocus. The question of our collective purpose has been put on the table again.

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NOTES

1. Arseny Zhilyaev, ed., *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York: e-flux Classics, 2015); Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Stephen Squibb, Anton Vidokle, eds., *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017). For Fedorov, see especially: Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task: Selected Works*, trans. Elizabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto (London: Honeyglen Publishing; Lausanne, Switzerland: L'Age d'Homme, 1990), and George M. Young Jr., *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
2. Nikolai Fedorov, "The Museum, Its Meaning and Mission," in *Avant-Garde Museology*, 66.