

Alessandra Franetovich  
**Cosmic  
Thoughts: The  
Paradigm of  
Space in  
Moscow  
Conceptualism**

e-flux journal #99 — april 2019 Alessandra Franetovich  
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With a political territory that covers two continents, the topic of space has always played a fundamental role in Russian culture. The country's vastness, together with its inhabitants' perception of belonging to a land far from Western cultural centers, has long ensured the centrality of spatiality to the construction of Russian identity. Consequently, it also became an important biopolitical point of reference for the Soviet regime.

While official Soviet propaganda occupied both public and private space, the horizontal reach of the Russian territory ceased to be the unique focal point of identity-building. In these decades, the national horizontal fixation came to be accompanied by a new way of devising and imagining spatiality: verticality. Undoubtedly this cognitive shift can be read as a consequence of the space race. At the same time, however, it reveals a more metaphysical recollection of the utopian projection developed between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Russian and Soviet cultures. This phenomenon of reconfiguring space was largely addressed by Soviet production realized in the sphere of visual culture, beginning in the latter half of the 1950s, and even more so during the 1960s. The latter decade was deeply marked by the first satellite launches, and the first successful space mission by cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. He soon became a national hero and, together with Sputnik 1 and Laika, the subject of mass-produced public monuments, furniture, and objects such as alarm clocks, pens, cigarette packs, and much more. These three images of man, dog, and satellite were transformed into official effigies of modern communication, and were thus used as vehicles for developing a biopolitical strategy to systematically construct a visual universe for the Soviet citizen to consume the modern and secular myth built around the Soviet space program.

Soviet propaganda posters – which still bounce around during the holidays to spread generic, *ostalgie*-like wishes depicted in young dreamers' enthusiastic smiles – made a substantial contribution to diffusing politicized visual culture. Their positive, active, and rose-tinted imagery was more of a projection than reality, and had its roots in the official story of a Soviet society committed to collectivization, industrialization, and particularly, the drive towards reaching cosmic space. All of these reunited under the impetus of a common dream: the construction of an egalitarian society. However, universalistic views of the future based on a redefinition of the concept of spatiality had already been developed in prerevolutionary Russia, especially as theorized at the end of the nineteenth century by Nikolai Fedorov, founder of



Erik Bulatov, *Red Horizon*, 1971–72. Oil on canvas, 140 x 180cm.

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Photo of the space rocket featured in a leaflet. Courtesy of Andora.

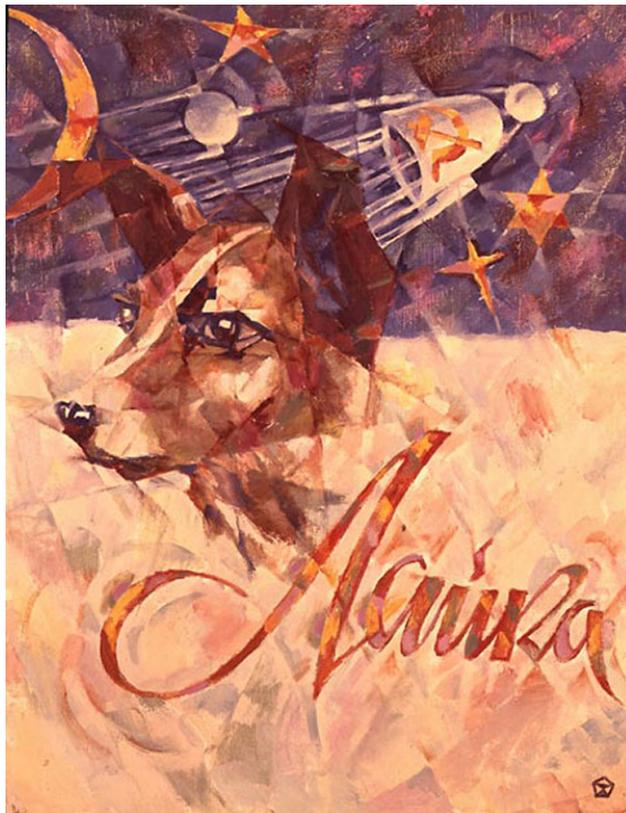
cosmist philosophy, whose vision of overcoming the human limitation of death influenced generations of intellectuals, artists, and scientists including Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. In his *Philosophy of the Common Task*, Fedorov discussed spatial problems such as the fight against private property, but also argued for the pivotal role of time in shaping a new society, and clearly stated that it would only be possible to create an egalitarian society if every previous generation who had struggled for that dream could be resurrected to enjoy such a society when it was finally realized. Although space and time remained closed categories, in the future, when technology would enable the resurrection of everyone who had ever lived, it would also become necessary to deal with earth's overpopulation by transporting many people to other planets. Reflecting on this issue, the engineer, scientist, and cosmist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky founded the Soviet space industry, with studies and projects on rockets, spaceflight, and a space elevator.

Since then, the relationship between artistic production and the cosmos in Russia has been the object of extensive research, albeit with evident discontinuities, due of course to the specific complications of Russian politics over

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the ensuing century. However, at present this link is being reactivated via historical investigations and reconsiderations, particularly through the lens of Russian cosmism, most recently in the emergence of studies, publications, and exhibitions developed by Boris Groys, Anton Vidokle, and Arseny Zhilyaev, as well as in work by Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich, and Pavel Pepperstein, to name just a few. Along with these more recent artistic practices, reflections on the relationship between artistic production and the cosmos in Russia can also be found in the work of Moscow conceptualist artists active between the 1970s and 1990s, particularly Ilya Kabakov. What exactly happened in the capital of the USSR during this period?

The passage of these two decades marked the disappearance of the unofficial Soviet art scene and the emergence of so-called post-Soviet or Russian contemporary art, produced by artists who gradually found the freedom to express and spread their artistic vision worldwide, beyond the bounds of the USSR. However, their nonconformist attitude from the Soviet years was not easy to erase, and it continued to define their art production in the 1990s. As part of the unofficial Soviet art scene, Moscow conceptualists worked at the margins of



Komar & Melamid, *Laika Cigarette Box*, 1972. Oil on canvas.

society, in secrecy and isolation, and in a self-referential context characterized by autonomy and self-production, exhibiting their artworks in private houses while discussing art in small circles, composed mostly of artists and friends. As they worked without government support or wider social recognition, and outside the official art market, they mostly exchanged or gifted their works among friends. Unlike official Soviet artists, nonconformists were not interested in working in the style of Socialist Realism to realize historical and political paintings or propaganda posters. In general, they preferred to work with prohibited and marginal topics and styles, looking for a confrontation with coeval and international artistic research. This, however, should not be interpreted as a form of political dissidence, at least not in all cases. Some nonconformist artists of the period were more prone to the creation of individual “microworlds” in which time and space were articulated around personal reflections as well as a desire to connect with other parts of the world in which the art system was not dependent on political contingencies. In nonconformist work, space was reconstituted as an inner and private universe – a way out of a society that asked its citizens to share all aspects of their lives: houses, dreams, expectations, work, and even free time. This private spaces served as a vital, if limited, arena of freedom, even as it was also a source of anguish; Victor Tupitsyn has used the term “ghetto as paradise” to describe this condition, the counterpart to the idyllic “*civitas solis*” (city of the sun) constructed by the Soviet system.<sup>1</sup> As Boris Groys has written, the perceived lapse in state control following the death of Stalin sparked the privatization of artists own psyches, as an answer to the regime’s domination of their will and actions.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of unofficial Soviet art, the Moscow conceptualists widened the tendency towards self-referential attitudes and concentrated on marginal topics compared to those typical of the dominant, state-sanctioned visual culture of the time. Today, to argue that their work directly addressed Soviet narratives of cosmic space and the space race, or openly embraced Russian cosmism as an influence, would be historical revisionism and fabrication. Instead, my analysis aims to shed light on the common social and cultural background absorbed by any person (including the Moscow conceptualists) living in late-Soviet Russia, and from which any individual reflection could have departed in order to give birth to a process of internalization. I want to highlight and analyze elements of the work of Moscow conceptualists that unquestionably exhibit the influence of Russian ideas of cosmic space, which I would

like to better define in terms of “cosmic thought.” With its admittedly nebulous meaning, “cosmic thought” can encompass the plurality of reflections on the topic without creating or referring to specific and closed canons.

The pictorial works of Ilya Kabakov and Erik Bulatov made in the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by tropes from Soviet visual culture. In these works, symbols of Soviet power are commonly included in daily scenes, but are represented in unusual combinations. This results in images that hint at the existence of an inner and hidden dimension, a chaos that surreptitiously reveals a form of nonconformism toward the regime’s dogma, disguised in a familiar background. In the same period, the artist duo Komar & Melamid also worked with common propagandistic imagery in their “Sots Art,” a style that combined Soviet visual culture with Pop Art. This communist version of one of the most famous international artistic movements was based on the transformation of subjects of serial reproduction into unique artworks. But Komar & Melamid confronted a different system than the Pop artists – not one marked by capitalist art consumption and the American star artist system, but rather one in which aesthetics and art were pervasive tools of government propaganda. This is clearly the case in *Laika* (1972), the very first Sots Art work: a painting that depicts the famous space dog and employs a modern icon used on the packaging of a popular cigarette brand, turning the latter into a critique perhaps, or at least into something different.

While Kabakov and Bulatov engaged the concept of space in personal and idiosyncratic ways, they also interpreted it as a fundamental concern for art and aesthetics. For Bulatov, space is a concept that treats artworks as physical entities (i.e., objects) that are part and parcel of the reality that surrounds them. In his writing, Bulatov defines space in terms of “social space,” by which he means the area surrounding the canvas. The mutual relationship between the canvas and its environment gives birth to the proper and complete artwork. Visually speaking, most of Bulatov’s paintings are constructed around a peculiar interpretation of space in which the canvas’s surface hosts intersections of different levels and elements derived from the imagery of Soviet visual culture. It is exactly through the unusual juxtaposition of Soviet symbols and realistic backgrounds full of common things, such as people, words, and clothing, that Bulatov creates new and enigmatic correspondences. This is clearly visible, for example, in his well-known work *Horizon* (1971–72). In this painting, a sea landscape serves as the background for a bizarre image. A

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group of people with their backs to the spectator move toward a thick border between sky and sea, formed by the red and gold ribbon from the order of Lenin, the most important honor that could be given to civil servants in the USSR. In Soviet times, political obligation replaced private pursuits such as enjoying romantic landscapes; the connections between earth and sky, and all other elements, ceased to be a private affair, instead falling under the remit of the Soviet regime. In the painting, Bulatov sows doubts about reality, about what seems to be real versus what actually is. The painting is not just an object to observe, but rather an instrument that reveals to the observer the hidden mechanics used by authoritarian systems to control populations.

Reflecting on the intentions behind his work, Bulatov writes:

Through my paintings I wanted to express that reality and life we were submerged into. The space we inhabited was entirely deformed by our frighteningly aggressive ideology. But because people had lived all their lives in this space, they had begun to perceive it as normal, as natural. I personally wanted to show the abnormality

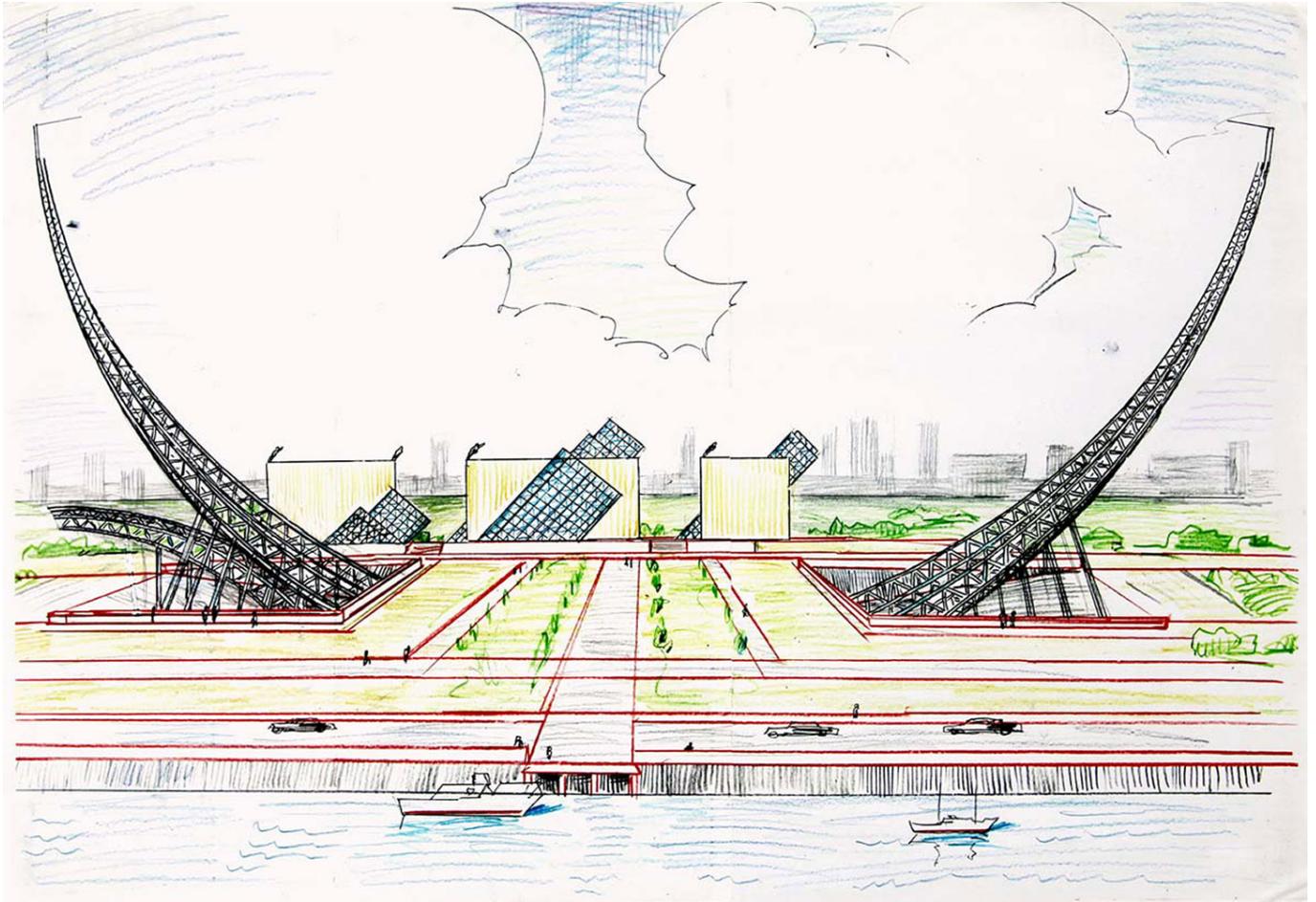
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and unnaturalness of this normal space.<sup>3</sup>

His aim is to highlight how the system changed, and subsequently how its symbols turned into imagery. One of his more provocative works, *Soviet Cosmos* (1977), follows this model. Here, the term “cosmos” is meant to emphasize the central role played by politics in shaping humankind.<sup>4</sup> In the painting, Leonid Brezhnev is depicted as the protagonist of a contemporary propaganda poster. He stands in front of a cosmos composed of key Soviet symbols: the gold coat of arms of the USSR, the flags of the Republics, and sheaves of golden wheat. The coat of arms, positioned in the center, stands for the sun. The sheaves are golden rays, and the flags are the orbiting planets. Altogether, the symbols represent a complete, self-contained system. Brezhnev stands in front of one of the flags in the lower part of this cosmos, slightly obscuring it, in order to remain the most important element in the ensemble. This prominent position suggests his fundamental role in the functioning of the system. At the core of the painting is the cult of the leader, a theme that was crucial in Soviet society. However, the rapid process of de-Stalinization in the wake of the iron-fisted ruler’s death demonstrated just

Favorsky, cover for Florensky’s book *Imaginary Points in Geometry* (1922).





Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Center of Cosmic Energy*, 2007. Drawing. Collection of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

how short-lived the memory of a leader could be. It is possible, then, to interpret the presence of Brezhnev in the painting a different way: as a reflection on the temporary nature of power, destined to fade away, while the cosmos (i.e., the Soviet system as a whole) outlives all leaders, ultimately lasting forever. (In the period when Bulatov made this painting, nobody could have imagined that the USSR would collapse just a decade later.)

From where did Bulatov's cosmic reference spring? While there's no evidence that Bulatov ever mentioned cosmism directly, he did state that his theory of the spatiality of the canvas was deeply influenced by Vladimir Favorsky. An artist and theoretician active in the avant-garde era, from 1920 to 1926 Favorsky was the director of VKhUTEMAS, an artistic institute where the philosopher and mathematician Pavel Florensky also worked. The latter's connection to cosmism has recently been an object of debate. Florensky taught in VKhUTEMAS's Poligraphy Institute, giving lessons on the "analysis of space" from 1923 to 1924. During the same period, Favorsky was lecturing on composition and geometry. For art historian Nicoletta Misler, it is reasonable to conclude that these two courses were meant to be complementary.<sup>5</sup> Collaboration between Florensky and Favorsky is also evidenced by the cover of Florensky's book *Imaginary Points in Geometry* (1922), which features a wood engraving designed and realized by Favorsky. Florensky found the engraving so compelling that he later wrote a new chapter for the book that explained the engraving theoretically.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Favorsky was very close to the artist Vasily Chekrygin, whose two unrealized frescoes (entitled *The Resurrection* and *The Resettlement of People in the Cosmos*, for which he made several sketches) were both explicitly inspired by Fedorov's cosmist theory. In 1920 Chekrygin also prepared a set of still-unreleased lectures for a course on the philosophy of art at VKhUTEMAS.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Chekrygin's book *The Beginning of the Cosmic Era* included an essay, entitled "On the Art of the Future: Music, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and the Word," dedicated to the memory of Fedorov. Along with Favorsky and Florensky, he took part in the Makovets artistic group and wrote texts for its eponymous journal. Beyond demonstrating any clear and direct influence that cosmism had on Bulatov, this tracing of an intellectual lineage highlights certain *correspondences* between his interests and those of his teacher, Favorsky. Cosmic thought was part of the men's common cultural background, as it was for the wider Soviet society at that time.

Other key contemporaries of Bulatov were well-versed in cosmic thought. In recent years,

Ilya Kabakov has said that during the 1970s he read cosmist philosophy texts.<sup>8</sup> Even if it's not possible to identify in Kabakov's work the direct influence of cosmism, his interest in outer space has been evident from the very beginning of his oeuvre. While working as an illustrator of Soviet children's books, Kabakov conceived the series of drawings *Ten Characters* (1972–75), one of his first works dedicated to investigating the private life of *Homo sovieticus*. To express his personal ideas about the Soviet way of life, Kabakov composed ten different illustrated narratives of varying lengths, designed as a literary collection of stories about private life in the USSR. Each story revolves around one fictional character who, through a series of ordinary events, displays some important facet of humanity, usually left unexpressed and tucked into the quiet folds of banality. Among these stories is "The Flying Komarov," about a boy who decides to leave his house and fly up into the sky, which is full of other flying people. However, rather than joining this group of flying people – a clear metaphor for Soviet collectivity – he chooses to go beyond them, continuing his flight straight into space, alone. The collective dream is thus turned into a solitary nightmare – individual man alone in the universe. What's striking is that the boy's name is very similar to that of Vladimir Mikhaylovich Komarov, the Soviet cosmonaut and fourteenth person to venture into space (who sadly went down in history as the first man to die on a space flight, the victim of an accident on Soyuz 1 on April 24, 1967).

An important aspect of *Ten Characters* is that the pages of each story are collected in a special box, one for each story. The boxes thus form part of the artwork. The same goes for a music stand on which Kabakov used to place the pages while reading the stories aloud. The artist would read the stories to the small circle of friends and artists who visited him in his studio on Sretensky Boulevard in Moscow, enacting a moment of sociality that recognized the passing of time as a fundamental part of the artwork itself.

Even if there's not enough tangible evidence to permit a mapping of the diffusion of cosmism among Moscow conceptualists, there's a reasonable likelihood that they encountered Fedorov's writings, or at least writings about Fedorov. In 1982 the Moscow publishing house Mysl' issued the volume *Fedorov: Sochineniia* (Fedorov: Writing), a collection of extracts from the philosopher's oeuvre alongside selected letters and articles. The volume was not a complete edition of Fedorov's work, but its 709 pages undoubtedly played a role in the circulation of his theories throughout Moscow. In the previous decade, a few other articles about



Vadim Zakharov, *An Exchange of Information with the Sun*, 1978. Photo: Yuri Albert. Courtesy Vadim Zakharov.



SZ (Victor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov), *Logical Organization of the Urination of Dogs*, 1980. Courtesy Victor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov.

his philosophy had been published in specialized magazines.<sup>9</sup> The *Mysl* volume was part of well-known book series called “Filosofskoe Nasledie” (Philosophical Heritage), which, starting in 1963, published 121 original books on philosophy under the auspices of the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR/Russia. This points to the possibility that the Moscow conceptualists could have encountered the philosophy of cosmism in the form of a more general attention to meta-thought on space travel.

Moreover, Kabakov revisited the story of the flying boy Komarov in his installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (1985). This installation consisted of a bedroom whose walls were completely covered by official Soviet posters about the space race. In the middle of the room is a catapult built from a bed, to be used for reaching outer space, as suggested by a hole in the ceiling. The theme of the cosmos reappears here, but also the broken dream of collectivity. Like Komarov, the nameless protagonist of the installation gives up on the dream of terrestrial collectivity, instead launching himself into the cosmos to embrace the individualist ideal. In this way, the space of the room becomes a litmus test to identify the impact of biopolitics on everyone’s public and private life. If in this work the connection to the Soviet narrative of the cosmos is subtle but undeniable, the 2006 publication of Boris Groys’s book *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* – an extensive study of Kabakov’s installation – made the connection explicit. In this book cosmism, along with the Soviet space race, became key to interpreting the installation. Just the previous year Groys had published, together with Michael Hagemeister, the anthology *Die Neue Menschheit: Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (The New Humanity: Biopolitical Utopias in Russia at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century). While Hagemeister had previously done research on cosmism and Fedorov, it was probably Groys who played the largest role in spreading cosmism to Russian artists.<sup>10</sup>

Groys’s critical reconstruction of Kabakov’s installation within the framework of cosmism should also be read in connection with the exhibition “The Center of Cosmic Energy,” presented by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov at Tufts University in 2007.<sup>11</sup> Even if the exhibition was realized the year after the publication of Groys’s study, the project was actually conceived as part of “The Utopian City,” a series of texts and images by the Kabakovs published by Mike Karstens Graphic in 2001. The exhibition catalogue for “The Center of Cosmic Energy”

contains references to Vladimir Vernadsky, a scientist whose research was developed in close contact with Russian cosmism. Vernadsky’s influence is clearly demonstrated by the Kabakovs’ interpretation of the scientist’s theory of the “Noosphere,” which was translated into their notion of cosmic “total installation.” Consisting of several rooms, “The Center of Cosmic Energy” was a “total installation” designed to immerse participants in an alternative world. Moving through the installation, visitors discovered unusual archaeological objects resembling antennas installed on the pathway, together with drawings that depicted the same items. The artists provided a fictitious historical background for this archaeological environment, declaring that the site of the installation was selected for its sacred connections to cosmic energy. The fictitious story tells of energy that fell to earth long ago at a precise angle of sixty degrees, and was used by humans in ancient times to build pyramids and ziggurats. The antennas in the installation receive this energy, which is stored in the main room to create a site for taking in the cosmic energy. The strange combination of cosmic energy and its sixty-degree angle of arrival to earth is the basis on which the Kabakovs create an association between ancient monuments and avant-garde works by artists such as El Lissitzky and Malevich. The installation also features a diagram mapping this genealogy, demonstrating the Kabakovs’ desire to belong to an avant-garde heritage that is less commonly known. Considering “The Center of Cosmic Energy” alongside *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (the installation), Ilya Kabakov’s approach to the theme of cosmos can therefore be interpreted as part of a wider interest in his own culture, which takes the form of a reconstruction of his own story through the creation and diffusion of fictitious figures and events. It is as if he is trying to unveil a hidden reality by digging up what was buried during the Soviet era, to unearth information and to finally bring to light contradictory and forgotten layers of his own culture through a post-historical process of reappropriation, which inevitably takes the shape of his own personal viewpoint.

During the 1970s, the Moscow conceptualists developed a different attitude towards “space,” turning their focus to their own immediate surroundings – presumably because of their growing awareness of being a more firmly rooted artistic group. This awareness was evidenced by a new wave of artistic production among the conceptualists, characterized by a shift away from concerns such as the “reality” of the Soviet system, and towards self-reflection on the circle’s own realities and surroundings. In

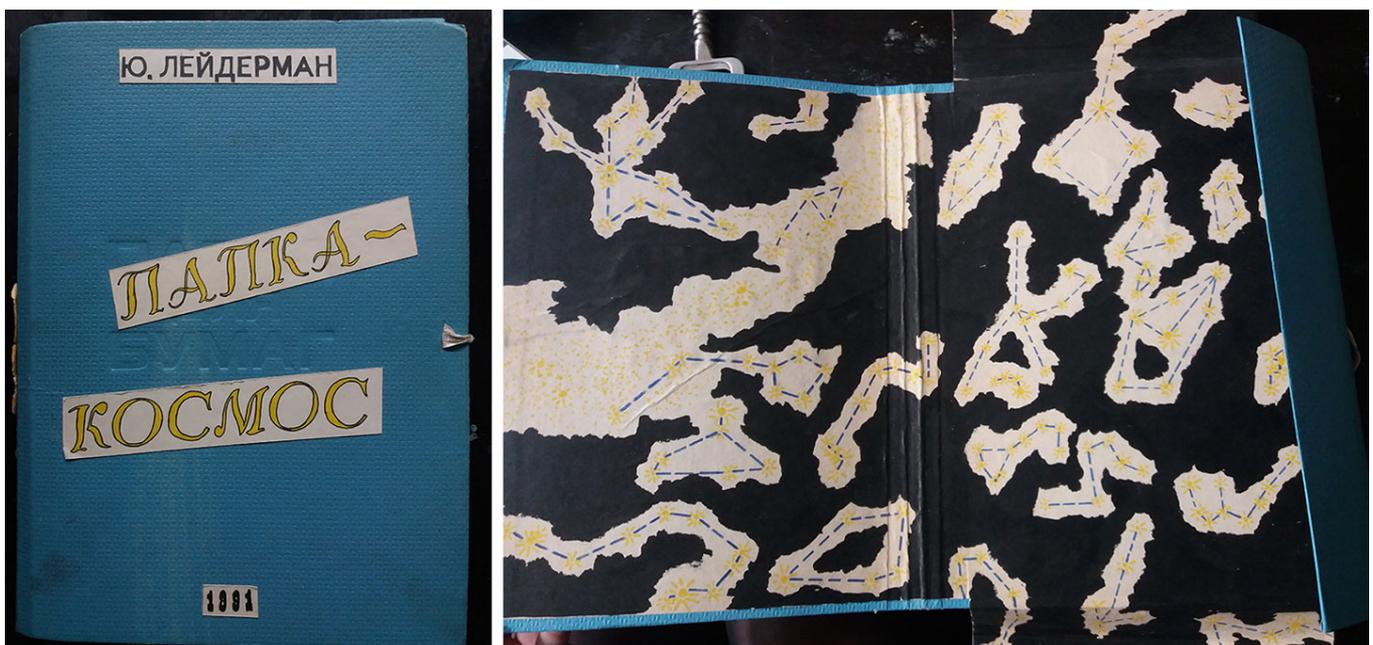
these new artistic strategies, both public and private space acquired new roles, becoming the backdrop for performances or the venue for exhibitions and events, which took place in spaces as varied as apartments, country homes (*dachas*), and empty fields. While the conceptualist group Collective Actions famously began realizing performances on the outskirts of Moscow in 1976, the group Nest had already begun realizing actions in the streets of Moscow and in private apartments the year before.<sup>12</sup> These conceptualist groups arose during an era characterized by innovative forms of art; they contributed, to different degrees, to the development of new approaches to authorship, resulting in collective artistic practices. These groups also had a strong influence on the next generation of Moscow conceptualists. This later generation never actually formed a cohesive group, constituting instead a fragmented scene united mainly by a shared Moscow origin and a conception of the artwork as idea.

Thus, for the conceptualists space was not just a blank slate to fill, the *tabula rasa* at the beginning of the creative process. Nor was it the “space” of artistic work, as in the studio or exhibition site. Rather, space was a prism through which to examine their own practices and their role as artists in Soviet society. The innovative changes in production mentioned above prefigured a drastic transformation in conceptualist practices at the beginning of the 1980s. While unofficial artists continued to work in isolation and without any form of government

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support, the conceptualists began to self-institutionalize and self-historicize their own activity. This was the motivation behind the creation of the samizdat publications *MANI Papki* (MANI Folios, 1981–82) and *Po Masterskim* (In the Studio, 1981–83), which were a cross between art catalogues and collective artworks.<sup>13</sup> Similar motivations were also behind various exhibitions organized in private apartments, such as those that Nikita Alexeev hosted in his apartment under the rubric of “APT-ART.”

Hence space came to be understood by the Moscow conceptualists as a distinct concern that could add various meanings to a work, but also as a kind of counterpart to the artist – i.e., another perspective through which to develop different understandings of the discourses of art and the artist’s self-perception. The vastness of outer space as a challenge to the limitations of human life is a theme in the performance *An Exchange of Information with the Sun* (1978), the first artwork realized by Vadim Zakharov. For this action, Zakharov stood in the street carrying a small portable mirror, on which he had put his fingerprint. He directed the mirror towards the sun, letting its rays become a medium of encounter between himself and the sun. Photographed by friends documenting the event, Zakharov’s face shows a desire to get in touch with a superior order – with the cosmos that will watch over the limited existence of humans and ultimately outlast us. In the link Zakharov created with the sun, it is also possible to read



Yuri Leiderman, *Papka Kosmos*, 1991. Courtesy Yuri Leiderman.

an ironic conception of space travel: he remains safely on the ground while cognitively traveling 150 million kilometers away from his body, using one of the most common and effective means of human identification (a mirror). As for the fingerprint, it clearly evokes the idea of social control in a repressive society. This suggests that the action could also be interpreted as a rejection of the Soviet political structure, symbolically elevating the awesome reality of the sun above mere political aspirations to travel to space. However, this meager challenge to the state's authority was not meant as a form of dissidence, but rather as a symbolic overcoming of official power in order to assert self-ownership and the autonomy of artistic practice.

Similar thinking characterized *Logical Organization of the Urination of Dogs* (1980), performed on the streets of Moscow by Zakharov and Victor Skersis, who at that time worked jointly as the duo SZ. The action was conceived to connect the streets of the capital city to the positions of stars in the sky, an intent that might sound poetic were it not for its mode of realization. Seen by passersby, this action probably looked like nothing more than the quotidian activity of walking a dog, but it was in fact highly structured. The elements used to realize the work included the two artists, a dog named Fedya, and scraps of rugs on which the dog had urinated. The scraps were carefully placed in public spaces, mainly hanging on trees. If they were overlaid on a Moscow city map, the relative placement of the scraps would have resembled the constellation Canis Major. Scraps were installed near the Kropotkinskaya and Kolchoznaya subway stations, the Kievskii train station, the Leningradskaya Hotel, and on the riverfront near the Udarnik movie theater. Described by the artists as a chance to bring order to the urination of dogs, the action created novel combinations of objects, animals, and humans by means of analogy with the cosmos. In so doing, it recalled ancient forms of divination and magic based on astrology and the celestial bodies.

All the works analyzed up to this point, realized in the 1970s and 1980s, appear to exhibit an instinctive, intuitive approach to the theme of the cosmos; through their own personal styles and concerns, these artists investigated notions of the cosmos in a raw, unmediated way. While cosmic imagery and ideas were part of the daily lives of these artists during this period, the subject had not yet been theorized in a way that would provide some historical perspective on it. It is only near the end of the Soviet Union, with the exhibition "Mamka Kosmos" (Mother Cosmos), that it is possible to find an explicit attempt to interrogate the impact of the imagery

of space travel. Curated by the poet and artist Ilya Kitup, the exhibition was held at Moscow's Propeller Gallery from November 30 to December 22, 1991.<sup>14</sup> For the occasion, Kitup collected artworks created by ex-nonconformist artists and took an innovative approach to a topic (the cosmos) that had been prominent in Soviet propaganda. The exhibition brought together more than twenty artists active in Moscow at the time, including conceptualists Sergey Anufriev, Pavel Pepperstein, and Yuri Leiderman.<sup>15</sup> The three texts in the accompanying exhibition catalogue – printed as a limited-run booklet made of orange cardboard – frame the concept of the cosmos as a mother, i.e., as the origin of life and a counterpart to Mother Earth. But above all, the exhibition emphasized the investigation of a key ideological category constructed by the Soviet regime during the space race, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. This had both positive and negative connotations in the exhibition – the curatorial idea being to not give clear directions to the artists, but to rather encourage discussion around a topic that was at once extremely common yet somehow largely unanalyzed. The Soviet narrative of the cosmos – promulgated in sci-fi novels, children's books, propaganda posters, public monuments, and even paintings made by cosmonauts – was never a main subject of official Soviet painting. It was neither at the top of the official artistic hierarchy, nor a main topic in unofficial art discourse. In a conversation among Anufriev, Pepperstein, and Dmitry Gutov printed in the catalogue, Pepperstein historically contextualized the topic of the cosmos within Soviet Marxism, offering an interesting point of view when seen in retrospect:

We have repeatedly said (it's a well-known thing) that within the ideology of Marxism, in terms of its implementation in Russia, there were many local parasite ideologies. These were extremely barbaric and dangerous ideas in the sense of dilettantism, such as, for example, Fedorov's ideology, which added to Marxism a monstrous background noise (or static), not to mention Tsiolkovsky, who was Fedorov's student and started it all (this already became rather boring: a discussion of the influence of Fedorov's ideology on Soviet affairs, etc.)<sup>16</sup>

With this comment, Pepperstein undoubtedly confirms that cosmism was a well-known topic among Moscow conceptualists, even as he dismisses it with a derogatory adjective and accusations of dilettantism. Later the discussion references works by Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrski that demonstrate a concern with

the cosmos, however sporadic, among Moscow conceptualists. Anufriev mentions Kabakov's installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* and his concept of "mother-communality"; according to Anufriev, this concept is connected to the "Kommunalki" period of collective living in the USSR, when several families were forced to live together in communal apartments, sharing common spaces and bathroom facilities. For Anufriev, a major shift in living conditions happened with the passage from "Kommunalki" to "Khrushchyovki." This coincided not only with the ascension of Khrushchev to the position of Soviet leader, but also and especially with the development of a new concept of "mother" in the Soviet imaginary: the concept of "Mother Cosmos." Anufriev elevated this concept to a symbol for a new decade, the 1960s, the decade of "post-communal disintegration."<sup>17</sup> Anufriev also mentions the fact that Monastirsky studied at the VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy), but doesn't specify his exact course of study; Anufriev is perhaps alluding to Monastirsky's 1986 text "VDNHk, the Capital of the World" (which was recently translated and published in the volume *Cosmic Shift: Russian Contemporary Art Writing*).<sup>18</sup> Critical

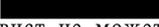
interpretations of the conceptualists are hampered by overidentifying "Noma" (another name for the Moscow conceptualist) with one specific conception of cosmos.<sup>19</sup> The "Mamka Kosmos" exhibition catalogue describes Noma as "very much like space research, because it is a closed experimental laboratory activity that usually occurs after a great defeat"; this reference embodies the 1970s vision of cosmic space as a hostile place.<sup>20</sup> In this decade, social and political fears took aesthetic form in stories about aliens and humanoid creatures, and the depths of outer space were associated with human psychopathology.

Moscow conceptualist Yuri Leiderman also participated in the "Mamka Kosmos" exhibition, contributing his work *Papka Kosmos* (Cosmos Folio). With its title clearly playing on the title of the exhibition itself, this piece consisted of a common blue archival folder. On its cover was a handmade label bearing the title of the work, and on the interior was glued a drawing of cosmic space. A folder, an object that connotes bureaucracy, utility, and rationality, is reimaged as a portal to an extraordinary path – one leading into the cosmos. This path leaves behind the "clarifying" zone of common Soviet life, venturing instead towards the fascinating obscurity of the

Константин Циолковский  
Монизм Вселенной. Предисловие.  
( Оформление Вадима Захарова )

В мои годы умирают, и я боюсь, что вы уйдете из этой жизни с горестью в сердце, не узнав от меня (из чистого источника знания), что вас ожидает непрерывная радость.   
Вот почему я пишу это резюме, не окончив еще многочисленных основных работы.   
Мне хочется, чтобы эта жизнь ваша была светлой мечтой будущего, никогда не кончающегося счастья.   
Моя проповедь в моих глазах даже не мечта, а строго математический вывод из точного знания.   
хочу привести вас в восторг от созерцания Вселенной, от ожидающей всех судьбы, от чудесной истории прошедшего и будущего каждого атома. Это увеличит

Иллюстрации на заданную тему

Ваше здоровье, удлинит жизнь и даст силу терпеть превратности судьбы. Вы будете умирать с радостью и в убеждении, что вас ожидает счастье, совершенство, беспредельность и субъективная непрерывность богатой органической жизни.   
Мои выводы более утешительны, чем обещания самых жизнелюбивших религий.   
Ни один позитивист не может быть трезвее меня. Даже Спиноза в сравнении со мной мистик Если и опьяняет мое вино, то все же оно натуральное.   
Чтобы понять меня, вы должны совершенно отрешиться от всего неясного, вроде оккультизма, спиритизма, темных философий, от всех авторитетов, кроме авторитета точной науки, т.е. математики, геометрии, механики физики, химии биологии и их приложений.

universe. In this way, the folder loses its usual utility to store documents. The act of opening it transforms a typical bureaucratic object into a metaphysical door opening onto a wider, imaginative, and nonlinear concept of space and time. In addition to this shift from the closed and limited to the wide and infinite, the work also exemplifies the “poetics of the archive,” a term introduced a few years later by Victor Misiano when he was writing about Leiderman’s 1994 solo exhibition “La Route Jura–Paris, Fragments” at Galerie Michel Rein in Paris. Misiano identified two primary approaches used by Leiderman in his work: “the poetics of the archive” and “the poetics of reality.” The first was marked by tradition and the past, while the second concerned the actual conditions of living in meaninglessness. It is interesting that Misiano associates the “archival drive” with Moscow conceptualism. Leiderman’s decision to make an artwork in the form of a common folder and to give it a mocking title suggests an intention to create a short circuit between the end of the USSR and the beginning of a new and unclear era.

In 1992 Leiderman created what probably remains the most radical artistic interpretation of cosmist philosophy to date. The previous year, the German artist Andora had invited Leiderman to participate in the project “The Space Expedition Andora.” Leiderman was asked to create a work that would be printed on a Proton rocket, which would be launched into the cosmos for an intergalactic advertising campaign that also aimed to be an artistic project. The rocket was launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, in what is now southern Kazakhstan; built during the 1950s and still active today, this is the oldest and largest spaceport in the world. The sponsor of Andora’s project was the German cigarette company West, which at the time advertised mainly on Formula 1 race cars but wanted to enter the emerging market of the former Soviet Union.

At that time, Leiderman devoted most of his attention to the topic of death and to reading Fedorov’s philosophical texts. The work he proposed to West was an elaboration of a project he’d already been developing. It consisted mainly of photographs taken at the Donskoy Cemetery and Crematorium in Moscow. These photographs depicted niches bearing the names, photos, and birth and death dates of people interred there. As stated in his proposal to West (which referenced Fedorov’s theories), Leiderman’s idea was to present a work that combined the themes of resurrection and space exploration. As absurd as it sounds, cosmism thus became part of an advertising campaign, which was entitled “West in Space.” Leiderman’s piece was launched into

space, together with a work by Andorra that was hand-painted directly on the surface of the missile, and a text by the Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov. Inside the rocket was a selection of messages for outer space collected from participants in a contest announced in the pages of the tabloid newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Komsomol Truth). Taken together, Andora’s joyful imagery and Aitmatov’s poignant text expressed a wish for peace and love for humanity at the end of the Cold war – a theme also expressed, albeit differently, by Leiderman’s work. His photographs were printed on a plastic film that was applied to the upper part of the rocket, which, after exiting the earth’s exosphere, burned up. The incineration represented the connection between the ashes of the dead and the cosmos, prefiguring their forthcoming resurrection. Instead of approaching cosmism only in a metaphorical way, Leiderman realized a concrete cosmist action motivated by a love for humanity.

In his own description of the project, Leiderman said:

The topic of overcoming physical death turns out to be the main engine of technical progress. All living and temporarily departed from this world are pushing humanity into space. The fire of all ever-former cremations merges in a single flame of rocket love. The rocket seems to be filled with human dust, carried away into space for the subsequent resurrection.<sup>21</sup>

Another explicit reference to cosmism in the context of 1990s Moscow conceptualism appeared in Zakharov’s contribution to the fourth issue of the magazine *Pastor*. In 1992, after having moved to Cologne, Zakharov founded the publishing house Pastor Zond Edition and the artistic project and collective artwork *Pastor*, a magazine published in eight issues from 1992 to 2001. As Zakharov put it, *Pastor* aimed to be an archive rather than a recollection of Moscow conceptualists, since many of them had left the USSR and moved to the West. It was published only in Russian and was conceived as a reenactment of the samizdat self-production and circulation methods typical of the unofficial Soviet art system. The principal aim of the project was to create a platform for discussing common themes; each issue was dedicated to one subject, but all of them contributed to maintaining the conceptual, self-referential attitude typical of the circle. In 1994, in the issue devoted to the topic “Our future,” Zakharov presented his visual reinterpretation of the foreword to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky’s book *Monism of the Universe*, which he reprinted on

two pages. In his artistic reinterpretation of Tsiolkovsky's words, Zakharov played with the typographic design of the page by literally filling the void – the blank spaces left in the page between sentences and around punctuation marks. The areas of the page that were once white were instead covered with four black rectangles and three stretched images: photographs taken in Zakharov's apartment, where he created both the magazine and the contribution. The stretching effect recalled the concept of prolongation that Tsiolkovsky attributed to human life, and also made the images difficult to identify. However, it is possible to recognize certain figures and elements. The first photo depicts Zakharov himself; the second shows the computer he used to create the magazine; and the third depicts the artist Sven Gundlach demonstrating computer games to Zakharov. In "filling the void," he replaced the white of the blank spaces with the black and greyish tones of the photos, changing the palate and visual construction of the pages. He filled out the micro-universe of the page, starting from the areas left void by Tsiolkovsky himself. Zakharov embraced the positivist attitude expressed by the scientist in his hymn to the joy that will be reached through cosmism:

My conclusions are more consoling than the promises of the most cheerful religions. No other positivist can be more sober than I. Even Spinoza is a mystic compared to me. If my wine is intoxicating, it is still natural. To understand me, you must completely discard every obscure rite, every dark philosophy from all authorities except the authority of exact science, i.e., mathematics, geometry, physics, chemistry, biology, and their applications.<sup>22</sup>

Tsiolkovsky's endeavor to demonstrate the "scientific" fundamentals of his thinking led to questions about the correlation between art and science that remain open to this day. One such question is posed by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of the Space*, a lengthy analysis of the concept of space from a phenomenological perspective. Bachelard investigates universal concepts such as the "house" and examines countless extracts from literary texts to find an answer to the fundamental question of whether human poetics can be influenced by physical space. Through space, writes Bachelard, imagination and consciousness are merged together: "When a familiar image grows to the dimensions of the sky, one is suddenly struck by the impression that, correlatively, familiar objects become the miniatures of a world. Macrocosm and microcosm are correlated."<sup>23</sup>

1  
Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (MIT Press, 2009), 20.

2  
Boris Groys, Sabine Vogel, and Branislav Dimitrijević, *Privatisierungen: Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Osteuropa* (Revolver Verlag, 2004).

3  
See [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/erik\\_bulatov\\_breaking\\_the\\_ice.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/erik_bulatov_breaking_the_ice.htm).

4  
Erik Bulatov, *Espace de Liberté: Écrits* (Nouvelles Éditions Place, 2017).

5  
Nicoletta Misler, "Postfazione" (Afterward) to Pavel Florensky, *Lo Spazio e il Tempo nell'Arte* (Adelphi, 2007), 367–402.

6  
"The key concept was the thought that composition is a way of organizing time. The function of time in geometry comes under close study in Florensky's work, also." Kirill Sokolov and Auril Pyman, "Father Pavel Florensky and Vladimir Favorsky: Mutual Insights into the Perception of Space," *Leonardo* 22, no. 2 (April 1989): 237.

7  
E. A. Nekrasova, "The Life, Writings and Art of Vasilii Chekrygin," *Leonardo* 17, no. 2 (April 1984): 119–23.

8  
See Arseny Zhilyaev, "Factories of Resurrection: Interview with Anton Vidokle," *e-flux journal* 71 (March 2016) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/71/60539/factories-of-resurrection-interview-with-anton-vidokle/>.

9  
*Russian Thought After Communism: The Rediscovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, ed. James P. Scanlan (Routledge, 1994), 30n3.

10  
Groys's influence on Russian contemporary art in general deserves detailed study. He was in touch with the Moscow art scene starting in the 1970s and went on to write important texts on its protagonists. He later participated actively in the scene as a curator and scholar, and in sporadic cases even as an artist.

11  
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, who are also partners in life, have worked together and jointly sign their works.

12  
Collective Actions was founded by Andrei Monastyrski, Nikolai Panitkov, Nikita Alexeev, and Georgy Kiesewalter. They were

later joined by Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina, Sergei Romashko, and Sabine Hänsgen. Alexeev left the group in 1983, and Kiesewalter left in 1989. With a different composition, the group is still active in Moscow today under the supervision of Monastyrski. Nest consisted of Mikhail Roshal, Victor Skersis, and Gennady Donskoi.

13  
Following the idea of Andrei Monastyrski, the first editor of the project, *MANI Papki* ("MANI" was an acronym for "Moskovskiy Arkhiv Novogo Iskusstva," or "Archive of Moscow New Art") was conceived as a folio containing photographs, texts, and artworks. Other editors would go on to release four more issues of *MANI Papki*. Their vision was to create a platform for the exchange of ideas, as well as to preserve a history that no institution was recording. Victor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov (as the duo "SZ") realized the second issue of *MANI Papki*. Later, Zakharov and Georgy Kiesewalter published *Po Masterskim*, collecting interviews and photographs about Moscow artists, their works, and their studios.

14  
Kitup was running the space at the time. That same year he also published a book of poetry titled *Mamka Kosmos*.

15  
The three artists also founded the art group Inspection Medical Hermeneutics in 1987. They worked together until some months before the exhibition's opening.

16  
"Мы неоднократно говорили о том (это известная вещь), что внутри идеологии марксизма в плане его реализации в России присутствовало в качестве идеологий-паразитов множество местных вещей. Вещей крайне варварских и опасных в смысле дилетантизма, как, например, федоровская идеология, которая чувшевишно фонила, не говоря о Циолковском, который был прямым учеником Федорова и все это начал (это уже достаточно навязло в зубах: обсуждение влияния идеологии Федорова на советские дела и т.п.)." Sergey Anufriev, Dmitry Gutov, and Pavel Pepperstein, "Пожилые иллюстрации на черном холодце," in *Mamka Kosmos*, ed. Ilya Kitup (1991).

17  
"Если для Кабакова коммунальность была мамкой, то мамка-космос есть фигура посткоммунального распада." Anufriev, Gutov, and Pepperstein, "Пожилые иллюстрации на черном холодце," in *Mamka Kosmos*.

18  
*Cosmic Shift: Russian*

*Contemporary Art Writing*, eds. Elena Zaytseva and Alex Anikina (ZED, 2017), 69–90.

19  
"Noma" was just one of many invented names used by the Moscow conceptualists throughout the decades. Others included "MANI" and "Moksha" (short for "the Moscow conceptual School.") *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*, ed. Andrei Monastyrski (Ad Marginem, 1999).

20  
"Можно даже сказать, что ному в не котором смысле очень похо ка на космические исследования, потому что это закрытая экспериментальная лабораторная деятельность, которая обычно возникает после великого поражения." *Mamka Kosmos*.

21  
"Таким образом тема преодоления физической смерти оказывается главной движущей силой технического прогресса. Все жившие и временно ушедшие из этого мира подталкивают человечество в космос. Огонь всех когда-либо бывших кремаций сливается в едином пламени ракетных люб. Ракета как бы оказывается наполнена человеческим прахом, уносящимся в космос для последующего воскрешения." Typewritten text on a piece of paper from Leiderman's project, 1991.

22  
Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, *Monism of the Universe*. Quoted in an untitled work by Zakharov published in *Pastor* no. 4 (1994).

23  
Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin, 2014), 187.